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Jay Mains sat at her mother's bedside

by Nancy Bertenshaw

Jay Mains sat at her mother's bedside, musing about her childhood influences. Being a 'convert' to Catholicism Mummy might have wanted a priest to administer 'last rites'. But, her mother had, long ago, given up church. Jay was, also, what Catholics called, 'a lapsed catholic'.

Jay cast her mind back to the beginning, as she saw it. The whole religious thing had started when Great Aunt Lucy, Granny Mains' sister, came to live with them.

Once, 6 year old Jay had been taken to a Protestant church by Granny Mains! But not regularly. Nor did Jay's Daddy go to church; except, maybe at Easter. But, he participated. There was that little, black and white photo of him and Jay, at her first holy communion, aged 7. She was dressed all in white, including white plimsolls, Daddy in tweeds. Jay still had the little, white missal, a present from Aunty Lucy, to mark the occasion. Jay was looking at it, in the photo.

She had boarded for a week, at that convent. Mummy had lost the baby she was carrying. She went into hospital. She had never talked about the whole experience, but now Jay was a mother herself, she understood the trauma. Did being religious at such a time help?

Aunty Lucy, a World War I nurse, had witnessed horrors and experienced loss. Perhaps that had made her a staunch believer. What else was there for her? Events in Lucy's life Jay had found out later. She had volunteered Lucy's details to someone researching the subject.

So, Aunty Lucy had brought religion to the Mains family. It was Lucy who had knocked on Jay's bedroom door each Sunday morning, so that they wouldn't be late for Mass.

It was Lucy who made sure they observed Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday, Easter Sunday, Christmas ...and all the rest. Jay yawned at the thought of it; the room was warm.

Jay had been a boarder at yet another convent and hated it. The censorship of letters out and in; Holy Hour, chapel, rosary, confession, early morning mass; the strait-jacket of life then. When her father died, Jay made a bid for home. A third convent received her, as senior, day girl. Aunty Lucy was still on the scene, rounding up the religious contingent.

Till one Sunday, aged 16, Jay had had enough. She did not answer the knock on the bedroom door. She lay quietly, feigning sleep. Muttering, Aunty Lucy had returned to her own room. Yes, that's what had happened, thought Jay. But, she told herself, it is far harder to kill a phantom than a reality.

She had often thought about this church-ridden upbringing. Now, thankfully, gone; but the ghostly influence remained. Believers were all around in different religions. How many of her friends were related to vicars by marriage; daughters of vicars; husbands of lady vicars; had a son who was a vicar? Didn't she love the smell of incense at benediction; sung masses in Latin? To visit old churches for their architecture; the brilliance of the carving of misericords and the variety of the stone or wooden bosses in the vaulted ceilings; the stained glass windows, with their vibrant colours, all that was a joy, a private pilgrimage. The glorious paintings and beautiful music that religion had wrought was all enveloping.

Her mother stirred Jay out of her reveries. Some things go, others remain, she thought.