Perth Modern School

1957-1961

Barbara J. Tobin

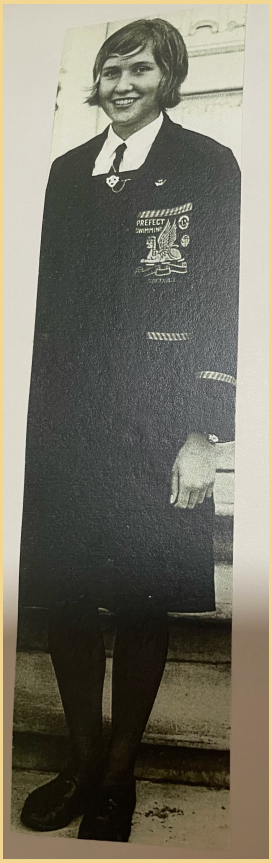
Cream of the crop,
One hundred best brains
Harvested each year from all corners
Of our far flung State;
Screened dispassionately
Through the filter of fierce competition,
The two-tiered entrance exam.
A terror for twelve year olds,
No longer carefree.
Breeding grounds
For some of our country's highest achievers,
Leading cancer surgeons, attorneys, professors,
Even a Prime Minister.
And me.

Me? Yes.
How?
No shining star,
No soaring IQ...
Just a moderate talent
From a literate home,
A conscientious worker,
And, most significantly,
A ruthless seventh grade teacher-of-the-test,
Relentlessly drilling us on past papers,
Taking selfish pride
In adding notches to his belt.
Seven scholarship winners this year!
Plus three "cancellations,"
Winners by default, on a second round offer.
That's me.
That's how.
Through the back door.

Oh, Modern School,
So stiff and formal;
Quaint old teachers
Quaint old rules.
Students separated by gender,
In the classroom
And on our grassy lunch arena.
An imaginary line divides us
Equator-like
Forcing clandestine meetings
In less public places.

A prefectorial system
Of deputized student power,
Each prefect allocated a "fag"
To fetch and carry and worship.
Vestigial remnants
Of the old British boarding school.
Don't enter the halls of learning with dusty shoes;
They'll send you back in shame
To the shoe-shine box.

Quaint old uniform
Navy box-pleated tunic,
School tie, blazer, gloves,
Panama hat,
And hot, heavy black stockings
With seams.
Laughing stock of our friends
As they saunter off in their bobby socks
To their ordinary high school,
Undisciplined, undecorated,
Skimmed of their cream.



Oh, Modern School,
Your elitism
Crushed so many of us fledgling scholars,
Insidiously stunting our intellectual growth,
Destroying our self-esteem.
We knew from the start
We weren't as smart
As those intellectual giants,
Males mostly,
In the "Science" stream.
We knew our place
And opted for the low-status "Arts" track.
Biology, geography, art.
We weren't up for the rigors of physics and chemistry.
So we thought.

Well, yes, we did have fun.
We broke those quaint rules,
We played on every sporting team,
We even earned the right to turn away the dirty shoes.
But we didn't believe in ourselves,
We never aspired to university.
Nursing School, maybe.
Teachers' College, yes.
But only elementary.

Well, come to think about it,
With thirty years of hindsight
That wasn't such a bad deal.
We did it the hard way.
It may have taken us two decades
To earn our doctorates
And self-respect
But we became master teachers,
Family practitioners, immigration authorities,
And, hey, Modern School,
I wouldn't change a thing.
I'm doing what I love best,
And, I'm doing it well!
It just takes a while
After a big shake-up,
For the cream to rise to the top.