

## WITH HIS GOOD EYES, I SAW

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*"His patient files included prime ministers, media barons, captains of industry, famous artists, clergy of all denominations, and the humble. He was beloved"*

Obituary, *The Age*: Sir Thomas A' Beckett Travers - Ophthalmologist

In 1953 when I was two, my parents said, dramatically, my eye "turned overnight". I imagined it had turned inside out or at least over, but as I could not see anything different, I presumed that if indeed it had turned it must have only been the once while I was asleep. Nonetheless they knew something had to be done. We lived on a farm at Boneo, in what I now recognise were humble circumstances, but we had access to connections.

My grandfather and uncle were fishermen at Blairgowrie, and my grandmother ran the fishshop on the Nepean Highway. In the Fifties it was the fish shop most frequented by those, we locals called, the Portsea Roaders. On the way to their sprawling limestone mansions on the cliffs at Portsea they stopped and bought their weekend feed of fish and crays, which my granddad boiled up out the back in a cast iron dreadnought copper. So, my grandmother, asked the wealthy fish eaters, who was the best eye doctor in Melbourne and they all said Mr. Thomas Travers in Collins Street.

And so I was taken to him, and this kindly gentle man who stooped on long legs like a concerned praying mantis and seemed immensely old to me then, became my Dr Travers. He told me and I told everyone else who cared to ask, that I was not cross eyed, I had a squint and a lazy eye, and he would fix them. He sent me back to the farm with a patch, an ellipse of flesh coloured plastic on the outside and all cool green on the inside with tiny pin prick holes in the top that was held on with a band of hat elastic and as I soon found, kept firmly in place so I could not peep down, with sticky band aids. I wore it every day for the next two years over my good eye and at appointed times did my eye exercises, which no doubt were many and various. However, not surprisingly, the only one I remember was the one where I sat on the kitchen floor with a plate of hundreds and thousands which I had to sort into their separate colours, and when they were all sorted, I was allowed to eat them off my sticky fingers.

Then in 1956 just before I was to start school I was booked into The Mercy for my eye op to correct the squint. The operation entailed a recovery period of six days with both eyes completely blindfolded. My parents were very concerned at the possible distress this might induce and they carefully prepared me for it and so well, that by the time I went to hospital I thought I was the luckiest girl in the world. My mother had made me beautiful new pyjamas in pale pink pique cotton bound with blue bias binding and what's more she had made my favourite doll a pair exactly the same as mine and a tiny red wool coat that also matched mine, and all of it packed into a little suitcase just like mine. My grandparents showered gifts on me; a red toy piano, a mouth organ, a xylophone and a merry-go-round music box.

To get so many new toys when it wasn't my birthday or Christmas and certainly without even asking seemed a miracle.

So I was rather nonplussed when as we arrived at the Mercy, and my mother who looked so worried said: "If only I could take your place, I wish it was me". I was naturally extremely pleased it was me. From then on things got better and better, after admission a dear old nun undressed me and put on my beautiful pyjamas and as I was looking out the window and engaging her in conversation, I asked her who lives down there and she told that was where God lived and from then until many years later I was quite confident God not only existed, but was thriving in a walled garden in East Melbourne. After my surgery I was sure I had entered Paradise. Every day for six whole days my mother came to my bedside, as soon as the nurses would let her in and stayed all day feeding me an endless supply of Peters' two-in-ones, when choc wedges had previously been the height of icecream excess, and read me story after story. Being by then the eldest of three, I had never before experienced so much luxury or remembered such undivided attention,

My operation was a success, my eye was still slightly turned but outward not inward, a cosmetically more appealing modification and I started school and no one teased me about my wonky eye and if anyone dared to mention it, I had a complete answer, given me by Dr Travers. In time my sister's eye did the same thing and she too went to Dr Travers and the Mercy and when he was dissatisfied with the results of her first operation he did a second one for free. And so we both made regular visits over the years for our check ups, my father and Dr Travers would discuss farming and fat lamb prices at Tanti market. My father always joked about how many acres of land at Arthurs Seat he had paid for, and although he was undoubtedly one, my father never disparaged Dr Travers as, a Collins Street cockie.

But Dr Travers didn't just fix my eyes he opened my eyes.

He was a connoisseur of Modern Art and in his rooms in Collins Street, I remember the pictures on the walls and the startling decor. A reproduction of Franz Marc's amazing prancing blue horses fascinated me. Later I always looked forward to going to his rooms in Grattan street and my anticipation grew as we drove to Melbourne past the Round House on Olivers Hill until we finally turned the corner where the glass skyscraper with the spiral stair case running the length of its glass spine was, I relished the distorted and distant view of the leafy street through the glass brick wall of his waiting room. I can still see the carpet and the chairs each one a different coloured leather, (or possibly high quality vinyl as then I could not spot the difference) pistachio green, watermelon pink, dove grey and butter yellow in a strange Sputnik shape, beautiful Grant Featherston *Contour* chairs that fitted your body perfectly. At the time I did not know what I was looking at only that I liked what I saw, so going to see Dr Travers was always a special occasion. He was always elegantly dressed in fine grey pinstriped wool suits, beautiful maroon waistcoats with a gold watch chain looping about his front and spit shiny leather brogues. He peered at me with his kind pale blue eyes over his little rimless half moons, always with a mischievous smile his hands were long and pale and just warm enough. He always made me feel that my eyes were special rather than a problem.

In my teens, I convinced my parents that something had happened to my eyes and I had to go back to Dr Travers. I had I begun experimenting with eye makeup, and as I stared into the mirror, intent on a sticking down a false eyelash or rolling on goops of Mary Quant mascara I could see how slowly my right eye moved back to the centre, I think I may also have thought that I could get some of those fab John Lennon granny glasses to go with my mod look. Dr Travers reassured me, nothing had changed and as always advised against glasses, not yet. Eventually when I was doing Matric and "studying very hard", I convinced him I needed reading glasses and so I got some smart round tortoiseshell ones but I soon found he was right and stopped using them, preferring to sit near the front at Uni lectures and slouch in the very front rows at the Palais during the endless sessions of the Film Festival.

I saw him last in my mid thirties when I was finally getting my driving licence and was advised by the testers that I needed glasses. This time, as I told him, I was sure my eyes had deteriorated, he examined me and announced quite firmly that my eyes had not changed one bit since he first saw me more than thirty years before, it was simply that my compensating mechanisms were slightly less efficient than they had been, and he added considering what God had given me I had done very well to avoid glasses for this long. He wrote me a new prescription, but urged me to try and pass my test without using them to avoid getting an endorsed licence. He still thought I didn't really need them but we agreed they would be desirable for night driving. By then he was truly old, he must have been in his eighties but he looked no different to me than he had looked when I first met him. Every optometrist who has tested my eyes since can't understand why I haven't been wearing glasses all the time, all my life. And now in advanced age when all of us have to have three pairs of glasses on the go or multifocals, My glasses use one eye for reading and the other for distance, an adjustment my brain was practiced in after all those hours with the sticky patch and the even stickier hundreds and thousands.

Reading his obituaries, I realised not only that I really did go to the best, but I also discovered his connection through his mother to the Boyds , which explains the things I saw in his consulting rooms. In 1971 I wrote my honours thesis across Grattan street at Melbourne Uni wearing my groovy glasses, on the expatriate Australian writer Martin Boyd, little knowing he was the cousin of my Dr Travers, and it was he who had advised young Tom to become a doctor.

SUZANNE SPUNNER

is a profoundly astigmatic playwright who also writes on art, and wears glasses for reading and driving and stands too close to people the rest of the time, and notwithstanding such an early and intense exposure to playing an in instrument nothing ever happened on the musical front.

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