

Careers Advice

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When I was sixteen no one told me that you could make a living as a textile artist or a violet liqueur maker. No one suggested I become a music producer or comic book writer, or try my hand at curing venison or breaking in horses on a ranch in Kentucky. The options presented by the Careers Advisor at school were: doctor, dentist, lawyer, librarian, nurse, police officer, lab technician, administrator. And teacher, of course.

The Careers Advice room was just a large walk-in cupboard and Mrs Jeffries was the Careers Advisor. In fifth year everyone had to make an appointment with her to discuss The Future. Teachers were always mentioning The Future. In my mind it was a grey, cloudy sort of land, full of signposted paths with different objects at the end - houses, cars, power suits and designer handbags. But take a wrong turning and all sorts of unknown hells awaited: unemployment, poverty, drug addiction. I wasn't looking forward to The Future, it didn't seem like my kind of place.

On the day of my appointment I knocked on the door and Mrs Jeffries called me in. I sat down at a narrow table and looked around. There were no windows, just a bare lightbulb and an ugly wooden bookcase full of pamphlet boxes.

'Hello, Carly, good to see you,' said Mrs Jeffries. 'Now, do you have any idea what you might like to do when you leave school this summer?'

My heart started to race. I knew I was going to tell her something she didn't want to hear. 'I want to be a singer,' I told her.

She tapped her pen on the desk. 'Yes, but what do you want to do as a career?'

'Sing,' I repeated. I tried to say it firmly, though there was a definite wobble in my voice.

She sighed. 'That's not a job, Carly. It's something you do for fun.' She rummaged through the pamphlet boxes and thrust some badly photocopied information sheets at me. 'You're bright enough for university. Read these and come back next week when you've had a think.'

I looked at the selection of jobs she'd chosen for me. Doctor, dentist, nurse, lab technician, teacher.

'I hear you're a science person. That's good, there are lots of interesting careers in the sciences.' She smiled and there was a touch sympathy in it. 'There's nothing to worry about, Carly. It's just time to grow up and think about The Future.'

On the way home from school I cut across the park. The flowerbeds were packed with daffodils and I could smell their sweetness on the breeze. I began to sing, just a tune I made up on the spot, with whatever words came into my head. *The sunshine's pouring down on me, on me-eee. The sunshine's pouring down but I don't know who I want to be-eee.*

Ahead of me, on a bench, were two nuns. They were sitting side by side, their eyes closed, the sun on their pale, wrinkled faces. As I passed, one of them said, 'You've got a lovely voice, dear.'

'Thanks.' I wanted to say something else but I didn't know what you said to nuns. Being a nun would be an okay sort of life. Lots of singing. I knew that because I'd seen *Sister Act* when I was younger. There would probably be praying, scrubbing floors and ministering to the poor, whatever 'ministering' meant. But at least people wouldn't go on about The Future. I liked the idea of a nun's cell too - a narrow bed with crisp white sheets, maybe a small chest of drawers and a wooden crucifix on the wall. Clean and neat and plain. Nothing like the chaos of my room at home, which I had to share with my younger sister. No posters of boybands peeling off the wall, no dirty clothes piled up, hiding an old peach quietly rotting into the carpet.

No hair grips under the bed that blocked the Hoover, or abandoned mugs of tea developing a blue layer. Just quiet calm, a ray of yellow light pouring through the window onto the swept floorboards, and hours and hours of singing.

The next week I went to see Mrs Jeffries again.

'I know what I want to be,' I told her confidently.

'Excellent news, Carly, What have you decided?'

'I want to be a nun.' It seemed like a very clever answer. I was sure she wouldn't have a photocopied factsheet on becoming a nun. I thought she'd be at a loss as to what to say. Instead her eyes lit up.

'Is that so?' she said. 'I know just the person you can talk to.'

I sat there, stunned, waiting for her to continue.

'My sister's a nun. Sister Catherine.'

I was intrigued despite myself. 'Does she live in a convent?' I asked, imagining her sitting in a stone cloister, looking out onto a courtyard full of flowers.

'No, strictly speaking she's a religious sister rather than a nun. She lives and works in the community. At St Theresa's, you've probably heard of it - the shelter for vulnerable women in town.'

I'd walked past it often enough, and sometimes seen a woman perched on the steps smoking, but I didn't know much about it.

'I'll speak to her and ask if she'll have a chat with you. I think she'd be delighted, there are very few young people turning to the religious life these days.'

The following Saturday I met Sister Catherine in a café. It was a surprisingly trendy choice for a nun - I went there with my friends sometimes. The café served tea in unmatched vintage tea services, and the walls were covered with framed

drawings from Victorian children's books. Sister Catherine was sitting in a booth surrounded by pictures from Alice in Wonderland. She was easy to spot in her black habit.

'Carly?' She stood up to shake my hand. 'Lovely to meet you.'

I squeezed onto one of the maroon leather benches. It was a bit like being in the Careers Advice room again, facing her over the narrow table. I tried not to stare, but I'd not seen many nuns close up before. She had very high cheekbones and a strong chin, and without her headdress she would have been quite glamorous. Rather like Mrs Jeffries, I realised. I didn't usually think about my teachers as real people.

'What would you like to have? This is one of my favourite cafes, it has such good cakes.'

I glanced at the menu and the waitress came to take our order.

'Cinnamon toast and a hot chocolate, please,' I said. It was what I always had when I came here.

'And I'll have a raspberry meringue and a pot of breakfast tea, thank you.'

I sat and waited to see what Sister Catherine would say. I expected her to talk about God, but instead she said, 'My sister says you're very good at sciences. You've got a logical mind.'

I nodded.

'That's a great blessing, a good mind. But I hear you're doubly blessed - you have a wonderful singing voice too.'

I shrugged, suddenly embarrassed. 'I like singing,' I admitted.

'I like singing too, but my voice is terrible. The other sisters complain if they have to stand near me during services.'

I wasn't sure if she was joking or not, so I just smiled.

Our order arrived. Sister Catherine's meringue was a huge cloud, tinged with pink, the sort of thing God stands on in kitsch religious postcards. My squares of

toast, dusted with cinnamon sugar, looked austere in comparison. Sister Catherine took a large bite and the pink cloud disintegrated.

‘The best part about having a meringue is making a mess,’ she said, sweeping a few chunks off the tablecloth and putting them on her plate. ‘Praise God for whoever invented meringues.’

I crunched my toast and looked at the pictures on the wall. One was of Alice holding a bottle that said ‘Drink Me’. I’d always thought Alice was a bit ridiculous - what sort of person drinks from a strange bottle, just because it says ‘Drink Me’ on its label?

‘Are you a Catholic?’ she asked me.

‘I was confirmed when I was thirteen,’ I said, hedging slightly.

‘Yes, but do you believe in God?’

I decided to be honest. ‘I try to.’

‘Excellent,’ she said. ‘That’s all any of us can do. Everyone brought up in the faith struggles with it, especially at your age. An intelligent young person should be questioning everything they’ve been told.’

This was unexpected.

‘Is that enough though?’ I asked. ‘To try to believe?’

‘More than enough. Most people don’t even do that. They say they’re Christian but they give no thought to their faith, they put no time into their relationship with God. And then one day they realise they can’t hear God anymore, they’re so out of practice at listening.’

I was surprised at how hard her words sounded.

‘Sometimes I’m not sure if *I* believe,’ she added. ‘But other days it seems that it’s the only possible answer to why we’re here.’

‘Why we exist at all, you mean?’ I asked.

‘Exactly. Of course, I believe in the Big Bang and all of that - but it doesn’t explain *why* it happened. Science is wonderful, it has helped us think through lots of ideas about how things came to be. But science can never tell us why. Why

something and not nothing? When it comes to that question, believing in God can seem like the most rational response.'

I sipped my hot chocolate and wondered what to say. I wasn't used to having this kind of conversation. 'What do you do at St Theresa's?' I asked.

'I cook, mostly. Poor women! I do my best. Soups and stews, anything cheap and healthy. I stay overnight twice a week and give company to those who want it. Often they like someone to talk to, or just to be near them. Many of the women are prostitutes, but a few are victims of domestic violence with nowhere else to go. Some of the women are very young, hardly older than you.'

She ate the last few pieces of meringue, and I noticed her cheek was dusted with sugar. When she'd finished eating she brushed her face with a napkin.

'I'm such a messy eater. When I was a novice I was always getting into trouble.'

'I imagined nuns being very tidy,' I blurted.

She laughed. 'There are a lot of mistaken ideas about nuns.' She looked at me more seriously. 'You don't have to decide yet, Carly. It's important to take your time over big decisions. Being a singer would be a wonderful career. You'd get to meet all sorts of people, maybe travel the world.'

'I'd like that,' I said. I imagined standing under a spotlight in a simple black dress, singing *The sunshine's pouring down on me, on me-eee*.

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I met up with Sister Catherine a few more times. Always at the same café, where I had cinnamon toast and she worked her way through large slices of Sachertorte, coffee and walnut cake, fruit slices and more cloud-like meringues. I didn't tell my parents I was meeting her. Even though my family was Catholic in name, we rarely attended church, and my mother had a deep suspicion of nuns. She said they were running away from the realities of life. But I don't think she'd ever met a nun like

Sister Catherine. She suggested things for me to read, from Charles Darwin and Stephen Hawking to Edgar Allan Poe and St Augustine. We talked a lot about mystery and the creation of the universe and a bit about singing.

'I know my sister's worried about how you'd make a living as a singer. It might not be easy, especially at first.'

'She's worried about me?'

'She cares about all her students. She just wants you to be prepared for the world and to be happy. That's all.'

I wondered if Mrs Jeffries was happy.

The last time we met I told Sister Catherine I'd decided to apply to university to study physics.

'A physicist!' she said. 'I'm impressed.'

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I didn't see Sister Catherine for several years after that. I finished school, went to Sixth Form College and started a degree in physics. It's hard to explain why I gave up on singing - perhaps it had something to do with Sister Catherine giving me permission to sing if I wanted.

One evening, in my second year, my mobile rang. A woman introduced herself as 'Deborah Jeffries' but I only twigged who she was when she mentioned her sister. She told me that Sister Catherine had recently been attacked by someone at St Theresa's Hostel and she was in hospital.

I bought a bunch of flowers from the florist outside the hospital and felt oddly nervous as I made my way to the ward. It was shocking to see her without her headdress. Her face was bruised and she had oxygen tubes in her nostrils.

'Hello,' I said. 'It's Carly.' I sat down on the green plasticky armchair and put the flowers on the end of the bed.

'Carly,' she murmured. She struggled to sit up. 'Ouch. How wonderful to see you.'

'How are you feeling?'

'Rotten. Just talk to me. About anything. Tell me what you've been doing.'

I wasn't sure where to start, so I started rambling about my studies. She lay back and closed her eyes. I told her that what I loved about physics was the way that the more I learned, the more I realised how much was a mystery - and perhaps always would be. I told her about the Large Hadron Collider in Geneva and how faulty soldering had set the work back months. I told her that when Yuri Gagarin went into space all those years ago he'd said, 'I don't see any God up here,' but now physicists were talking about finding the God Particle. She smiled at that.

A nurse came with a vase and told Sister Catherine that she seemed tired.

'Don't stay too long,' the nurse said to me, before disappearing again.

'My sister was furious with me, you know,' Sister Catherine said suddenly.

'She said you had a wonderful voice. You sang a solo at the Leaver's assembly and had most of the teachers crying.'

'Why was she furious with you? I thought she wanted me to have a sensible career?'

'She did and she didn't. She wanted you to be sure about the singing. She thought talking to me would help, but we got a bit carried away with the physics.'

'I guess you knew I didn't really want to be a nun. It's funny though - sometimes the lab feels like a nun's cell: the order, the cleanliness, the rules. I think that's what I like about it. Maybe I'd have made a good nun.'

'Maybe you would.'

I said goodbye and promised to visit again. Outside the ward Mrs Jeffries was waiting for me.

'How did she seem?' she asked.

'Tired,' I said.

'It's awful to see her without her usual buzz. I'm not used to it.'

'What happened? She didn't seem to want to talk about it.'

'A boyfriend of one of the inmates - sorry, I'm not meant to call them that. One of the 'guests' of the hostel, turned up. He started hitting his girlfriend and Catherine decided into interfere rather than call the police. She took a few thumps herself, and one of them sent her down the stairs.'

'She's very brave.'

Mrs Jeffries laughed. 'That's one word for it. But yes, you're right, she *is* very brave. I hope this incident won't dent her confidence too much. Anyway, I want to hear what you've been up to since your left us. Do you have time for a coffee?'

We went to the hospital café. The walls were covered with bright canvases of deckchairs and beach huts. We had tea and some greasy cupcakes with too much buttercream.

'What's next for you, Carly?' Mrs Jeffries asked.

She was still looking to The Future, I noticed.

'I'm not sure. It's early days, I'm only a second year. But I might do a masters and a PhD.'

She nodded approvingly. 'You seem to know what you want.'

'I guess,' I said. 'But who knows what the future holds.'

Afterwards, as I walked out into the afternoon, a song came into my head, one I'd not sung for years. *The sunshine's pouring down on me, on me-eee. The sunshine's pouring down but I don't know who I want to be-eee.* The Future. I felt myself rushing forward to greet it.