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PUBERTY DEEP COLOUR BLUE: INTELLECTUAL SUB-COMMITTEE

Intellectual sub-committee sitting

Until about a decade ago, one of Triple F's head sub-committees would hold an annual meeting in which a segment of her life was deconstructed, scrutinised and reconstructed. This remains an integral working group as intellectualising continues to be used by Francine as her careers suit these members well.

Reasoning and thinking served as a means of cutting off her feelings and disconnecting from stressful occurrences that took place. The Founder and Chair of the sub-committee is Henry, who role-modelled reverence for the rational. However, given today's program, which involves analytically deconstructing Triple F's early adolescence, Henry has chosen not to attend.

There is consensus amongst the intellectuals and religious representatives on the intelligentsia sub-group that this time period is particularly challenging for many pubescent individuals, and perhaps even more so for Triple F. Daddy's little girl was in trouble. Getting bigger and growing pubic hair. Triple F sat in the bathroom with some scissors and tried to destroy the signs

of impending maturity. Can't be a little girl anymore. Then what will save her from Henry?

'They're in limbo. Child or adult? Part of Frankie felt like she wanted the former, but another part desperately sought adult status. Why are Western industrial societies unable to recognise how torturous they make this time period and learn from their "less developed" counterparts?' These words are spoken by the personification of all the anthropology professors Francine was mentored by and whose voices she has internalised.

The sociology mentors disagree: 'That wouldn't work because twelve- and thirteen-year-old children need to be kept out of the labour market.'

One eclectic social scientist offers a suggestion: 'As a community, we need a ritual, like a *bar mitzvah* or an aboriginal initiation rite, to mark the passage from childhood into adolescence. Part of the induction process would include clarity concerning the expectations and role of adolescents. The goal here is to reduce the current ambiguity and its resulting stress.'

Richard's case study of a tween

Richard, who is the principal speaker, has prepared an abbreviated version of a case study of Triple F's tween years. As he is constitutionally unable to complete a project on time (unless there are inflexible deadlines), the narrative (inevitably) contains both brilliant insights and omissions.

'I'd like to begin by acknowledging that what I am presenting today is drawn from the stories that Francine has shared with me over the years. Hmm, OK well, more often in the early part of our relationship when she was the object of my ADHD hyper-focus.

'Corresponding with this awkward time in a child's life, there was a family relocation from Canada to the midwest of the United States. Henry and Miriam found a house to rent in an

elite suburb. This location proved problematic. The neighbourhood had an unwritten policy: no Blacks, Asians, Hispanics, or Jews. The family had slipped through since no one suspected the Commanding Officer of the near-by air force base of being “one of those”. However, word did get out; likely when Henry, at Miriam’s behest, attempted to join the country club. That organisation not only had the unprinted guidelines, but they included a question on their application form. Lying was not an option in Henry’s ethical handbook. The family was blackballed. Over time, the neighbours must have heard that there were non-Christians in their goyim ghetto. The result was ostracism. I understand that Frankie’s underlying (and unfelt) sense of not belonging and being different became exacerbated.

‘This was further aggravated by educational differences between Canada and the US. Having taken years three and four in one year, Frankie was already the youngest in the eighth grade. However, as she had studied French since kindergarten and was several years ahead in the Midwest mathematics curriculum, she was unable to attend the local middle school, which only offered grades seven and eight. Consequently, she was sent to the large Junior High that was situated in the blue-collar part of the city since it had a Senior High School in the same building. This physical arrangement meant that Frankie could attend tenth grade mathematics and eleventh grade French.

‘Being twelve years old and placed with students four and five years older would likely be challenging for anyone. Being undeveloped made it more herculean. Although she had been unsuccessful in her battle with pubic hair, Triple F had yet to proceed through the other stages of puberty (except for much increased perspiration). Therefore, what we have here is a physically immature person – riddled with insecurities – thrust into the hard-core teenagers’ realm. A few may have regarded her as

a mascot, but the majority treated her as an annoyance on the rare occasions that she spoke up in class.

‘Unfortunately, Frankie was also having difficulties with the academic work. She felt as though she had peaked at the age of eleven and was heading down the slippery slope of failure.²⁷ Her French learning had been mostly conversational. In the eleventh-grade French class, the students had learned the grammar rules.

‘From ease and a dearth of challenges, school had become another site for head committee members’ messages of inadequacy and inferiority to reverberate. Henry articulated the view (both inside and outside her head) that mathematics was on an equal par with the meaning of life itself. To fail in that subject (which meant anything less than a B) was therefore quite incomprehensible to him – an act of insubordination. Frankie’s scholarly descent was a further contributor to her unsuitability as a princess, along with her onset of puberty. It was during these two years that their relationship began to change. The walks upon Henry’s return from work became less frequent as did the daily chats. Their companionship diminished, soon to disappear.’

Entertainer extraordinaire

‘Among her fellow eighth graders, Frankie was seen as different. Homogeneity is a desired aim for tweens and teens. Most Southside students were from lower income areas; however, Frankie lived in *the* affluent area – strike one. She spoke with a Canadian accent, markedly distinct from the locality’s nasal twang with its rounding out of consonants and dragging out of

²⁷ The feeling of having peaked early is not exceptional, although Frankie’s experience was befittingly earlier than the norm. She felt the onset of her academic descent aged twelve. The more common phenomenon is to feel a failure to live up to one’s potential, which was reached or set in secondary school.

vowels – strike two. The third strike was attending the Senior High twice a day. This was not only atypical behaviour, but it violated other rules too. Seemingly, “tall poppies” were not acceptable in American middle schools.

‘It is evident that Frankie was not winning popularity contests. Yet, this was only the backdrop to the principal event – the nadir of her life at Southside Junior High School.’

Richard slowly turns to a label in the folder marked ‘Nadir – age 12’. He then opens a diagram on Keynote. Richard’s academic presentations generally include elaborate figures with multiple dimensions, numerous boxes, words, hues, and complex feedback systems. All eyes turn to the screen scrutinising the columns, rows, arrows and colours.

‘As you can see, the various pathways derived from Frankie’s personality and her life circumstances contributed to this incident.’

Was the clarity that Richard saw and intended to convey in the illustration experienced by those in attendance? With erudite audiences, there is a negative correlation between incomprehension and frequency of questions. There is a positive correlation between incomprehension and head nodding or the appearance of comprehension.

‘About the fourth week of eighth grade, all seventh through ninth grade students gathered for a special assembly with an entertainer on stage singing, dancing, and telling jokes. Near the end of the performance, he called for volunteers to join him: two boys and two girls. As the variables in the diagram show, their inevitable intersection culminated in Frankie raising her hand.

‘In seconds, she was on stage with the other three volunteers. The four were advised quickly what their roles involved. Each was to sing a verse of the traditional spiritual, “*He’s got*

the whole world in his hands.” Triple F was the last to perform. Those preceding her were ill at ease with trembling voices. She moved to centre stage and belted out her lines as if she were in an African American Baptist church. Swaying slightly to the rhythm of the music, Frankie sang with expression; after all, she was Miriam’s, the expressive reader’s, daughter, wasn’t she? She experienced a rush of adrenalin flowing through her brain and body – euphoria that has generally accompanied performance for her.

‘The man acknowledged Frankie’s participation as “marvelous” and told her that she “ought to go to Hollywood.”

‘Walking back to her seat, she thought, “I’ve done well. Now they’ll like me.”

‘As Frankie sat down, the girl who was sitting next to her spoke quite loudly; “You’ve embarrassed the entire eighth grade.”

‘Frankie’s thoughts went into overdrive.

“What? Wait a minute. This is supposed to be my free pass to popularity. What’s going on here? Once again, I thought I knew the rules and thought I knew what *they* would like. And I got it wrong. My hyper-vigilant radar let me down.”

‘Others muttered as the assembly ended and students returned to their classrooms.

“How embarrassing.” “Why *don’t* you go to Hollywood? You don’t fit here.” “Can I have your autograph?” This verbal barrage continued relentlessly over the next two years, as this age group is unforgiving. A haunting refrain: “Can I have your autograph?”

‘Frankie was susceptible to being tormented as I have shown in the figure. I refer you to the various personality pathways coded red that contribute to this vulnerability. Some examples: a tendency to reveal hurt; over-reliance upon external referents; giving away one’s power by caring what others think. She was unable to mask the pain; tormentors continued to heckle and

ostracize as their efforts were effective. Sent to Coventry with a one-way ticket.'

Richard breaks his hyper-focus and looks at the audience. He can see that someone has raised her hand. 'Yes, do you have a question? Concerning the diagram?'

The female English teacher shakes her head and says, 'Not a question but a comment. I am feeling Frankie's pain. I found her in the girl's toilet one time crying her heart out. When I asked her what was wrong, she told me what they were saying and how awful it felt. I comforted her with the view that these other students were acting out of jealousy: her performance had been outstanding, and they couldn't cope with that. Someone being good at what they were unable to do.'

'I guess my words may have helped. It seemed to me though that she was like a pressure cooker. Whatever had gone before was now added to the mixture cooking inside. Hopefully, I was able to open the valve and allow some steam to come out. It seems that life for the two years at Southside Junior High were the absolute pits for her. Add the usual struggles of puberty with these facts, and with her personality, and her defence mechanisms must have been fully functioning. We know that even in the best of circumstances these years can be extraordinarily difficult.'

'Indeed, it was so,' responds Richard, adding, 'Two years of almost total ostracism, further exacerbated by her isolation and lack of a confidante. However, she did tell me that her experience with you, Ms Hill, was her first lesson in the value of sharing and being heard. You were kind and you listened, but you couldn't make it go away. And it didn't.'

'Frankie was unable to disclose to Miriam or Henry, constrained by her beliefs that the importance of maintaining the illusion of being the popular daughter, the one who was an

extrovert and made friends easily, outweighed approaching them for emotional support. These were her affirmative labels, and she could not afford to lose them because the negative ones were indelible.'

Stomach and sweat

Richard now changes the slide: a four-circle multi-coloured Venn diagram fills the screen.

'Aside from the assembly debacle, as you can see in this figure, there were a series of minor incidents. The diagram shows how these factors were contributing to her increasing inner hatred.

'Any daydream of control was waning. Stomach rumbling and sweaty armpits were signs of her inability to contain her bodily functions. Straining to understand the intricacies of geometry in a classroom with people five years older, into the silence came the sounds of ... could it be a marching band? No, it was the rumblings of Frankie's 10:30 tummy. Her discomfort grew, which translated into increased perspiration.

'As you all are aware, Frankie chronically compared her insides to other people's outsides resulting in a view of herself as inadequate. However, in this situation she compared her outsides – wet and clammy clothing with underarm rings – with others' outsides – their seemingly dry blouses. Her underarm secretions increased in direct proportion with her awareness of the dampness appearing on the fabric of the blouses that Miriam purchased for her. Frankie was unable to discuss body parts and secretions with Miriam.

'This situation was further complicated by the need to wear white blouses (which showed perspiration) to allow a bra, which all of her female peers wore, to be seen. The bra that didn't need to be there in the first place. Because as you know, Frankie was

a late developer. One of Mother Nature's jokes. She could have stayed Daddy's little girl longer. Didn't bleed until aged fourteen and no breasts until she was sixteen.

'The result was not pretty, as the intersectional area of the Venn diagram's four circles illustrates.'

The breasts that got away

'Her lack of bosom development contributed to Triple F's self-consciousness and almost led to serious ramifications. Requiring a physical examination, Henry took Frankie to the nearby army base where medical services were free for military family members. The male doctor was young (even through the eyes of a thirteen-year-old). He asked her to remove her shirt. Taking off that piece of clothing and revealing a flat chest was torturous as indicated by the persistent visceral response she experiences when recalling the experience. And there were somatic responses, as her blood pressure, recorded after the top was removed, was dangerously high.

'Henry and Miriam discussed it when they thought no one was in earshot. The doctor had advised that their daughter should not return to school until further tests were conducted. Frankie was ambivalent. Euphoric thoughts of escaping from Southside were offset by fears of her imminent demise. As Figure 2 indicates, this latter affect was the effect of Triple F's catastrophising, which also manifested in her dire predictions about her future as she was still convinced, at this point, that she would be dead before the age of eighteen.

'In order to check the reliability of the reading, Frankie was taken to a private practitioner who appeared to be an octogenarian. Her blood pressure plummeted to within the normal range. This dramatic drop is illustrative of at least two factors: the interplay of mind and body, and Frankie's ill ease with her

own body. The latter remained an issue through adolescence and early adulthood.

'A lack of breasts could be concealed in regular daytime clothing. Swimming gear, however, proved problematic. Miriam had bought her youngest a two-piece bathing suit with no attached padded cups in the top. Atypically, Frankie talked to her mother about needing plastic push-up pads that would provide a deceptive image of a well-endowed female. Miriam purchased two such cups. There was no adhesive or means of attaching them to the bathers.²⁸

'Frankie admired her reflection in the mirror – excited about showing off her *new* body at the lake where a group of kids from school were gathering. Unfortunately, it is not clear in this narrative how or why she had been included in a social activity by her peers. They might have had an inkling that she would provide a modicum of entertainment. In any case, she did.

'Initially, the atmosphere seemed positive. Frankie felt the semblance of confidence, which translated into friendly chatter and some freedom from her customary ill ease and awkwardness. Then, as she was jumping around in the water, one girl shouted, "Hey Frankie, you've lost something!"

'This was another of the incidents in Triple F's life that occurred in slow motion – at least in recollection. Looking around her, a bobbing white object came into view. It took her a while to realise that the item moving up and down in the water was one of her new breasts (so to speak). Looking down, she confirmed the sighting since her chest was now flat on one side and well-endowed on the other.

28 Both the swimsuit and padding were likely cheap. Miriam was raised to make her own window cleaner, re-use paper bags, and to spend the least amount of money possible for anything and everything.

'Everyone was staring and laughing. Boys and girls shouted, "Hey Frankie, your boob's floating away," and other jokes and comments along the same lines.

'She grabbed the cup and, kneeling below the lake's surface, tried to stuff it back in. She stood up and was greeted by more laughter since she had managed to dislodge both.

'I asked her during a reminiscing conversation why she reacted in this way. She replied, "I don't know why I kept trying to get them in. Why didn't I just cut my losses and run off in the first instance? I don't know."

'She never wore the swimmers again. Miriam asked her why, but Frankie was unable to share the mortification. If you're the popular child, the one whom everybody likes, how can you admit that people laughed and ridiculed you? She couldn't.'

(Not) dancing the night away

'To complete my critique of these two particularly problematic years, I will examine Frankie's experiences with the North American phenomenon at time: the junior high school dance. The terminology used to label the get-together was a *social*, which had a degree of irony as she continued to be treated as a foreigner or an intruder.'

At this point, Richard is interrupted by the social scientist cohort who contribute their shared perspective through a spokesperson, a well-published sociologist with whom Frankie had studied the sociology of youth.

'We have observed that these preliminary quasi-mating ceremonies may further reinforce insider/outsider status within the group. In addition, both their placement and participants' behaviours reflect the individuals' position within the informal institutional hierarchy and their membership, if any, in

sub-groups. For example, cheerleader females and male athletes (the football players) form the innermost circle – literally and metaphorically. These people are homogeneous: Anglo, blonde, thoughts seemingly unconcerned with the environment, poverty, or the dangers of war. This circle is closed with their discourse and dancing limited to those in the “in-crowd.” Some students like Frankie, who do not fit within any of the few existing categories, stood alone – (again) literally and metaphorically – on the outer perimeter. Consequently, these occasions can be painful ordeals for fringe-dwellers – particularly for those who are approval-seeking and externally referenced. In Senior High School, there are additional groups, which prove more suited for Frankie’s membership or affiliation: “delinquents,” “druggies,” “drunks,” “iconoclasts,” “hippies/pacifists” and other “rebels.”

Richard resumes speaking.

‘Indeed, Frankie was such an individual. She hid her angst, though, behind a mask of stiffness and hauteur. The boys did not come near. I’ve examined photos of her taken before one of these dances and, although it certainly wasn’t the best of times for her beauty-wise, she wasn’t *that* bad. Not bad enough to merit the status of wallflower along with the geeks and nerds that inhabited the outside edge. Is it possible that, by virtue of her accelerated academic path or her Assembly performance, she was considered to be a nerd? One wonders if nerds know that they’re nerds?’

Richard, as a public speaker, is renowned both for complex diagrams and a tendency to become distracted and meander from the topic. Today, he is determined not to do the latter, saying, ‘I cannot respond to that question. However, the philosopher members of our sub-committee could undoubtedly ponder this

important issue. It could serve as the basis for a publishable essay.

‘Frankie would stand on the periphery trying to look “cool” in the clothing that Miriam had selected, which inevitably was not “cool.” Waiting for some handsome lad to be her Sir Galahad and rescue her. And, in her case, there was the ghost of Mr Johnson, which contributed to a stiffness and awkwardness with boys – no doubt even more so than the unmolested child. This is purely hypothetical, as there is no scientific literature that I am aware of that has compared these two groups and their early tween and teen experiences with the opposite sex. Identifying a control group would be problematic given the silence and repression which may be the effect or sign of childhood sexual victimisation.’

One can observe Richard visibly stopping himself from further discussing other experimental design issues such as controlling for potential intervening variables. He returns to Frankie’s search for her male rescuer:

‘This action, by the way, was a precursor for how the teenage and young adult Triple F awaited an idealised man in shining (or slightly rusted metal by the end of the period) armour; although, latterly as a staunch feminist, denying that she had that expectation.

‘Waiting for the phone to ring; for the doorbell to ring; for the man to look or speak to her. Waiting. Could be that the *teacher* was saying that it is patience Triple F needs. And still does, evidently, as the lessons continue.

‘Again, she couldn’t discuss her ignominious experiences with Miriam or Henry. How could the popular child fail to dance the night away? Instead, she’d report success as the belle of the ball. They nodded their heads in contentment since their labeling system was proving to be accurate.’

Transitioning to rebel

Richard is reaching the end of his brief overview of the life and times of the twelve- to fourteen-year-old Frankie.

'As we leave this part of her life, we should acknowledge that ill treatment by peers and the slow erosion of her position as Daddy's little girl has translated into her next metamorphosis: the princess egg turning into rebel larva. Henry stood for war; therefore, she advocated for peace. Miriam represented materialism and upward mobility. Frankie responded by articulating socialistic views, although she did not yet have the language or understanding. These mindsets further isolated her. If there were other novice Flower Children at Southside Junior High School, they were closeted.

'This time period terminated with another transfer for Henry. When told about yet another family movement to the southwest, about 1,000 miles from this antipathetic place, she was overjoyed. However, there was a sadness too as Sandra was not a part of the relocation as she was beginning her university studies the following month. Jake had already left home the year before, aged sixteen, to travel the first of numerous career pathways.

'Therefore, only Henry, Miriam, and Frankie moved to New Mexico. It was there in Albuquerque that the nascent rebel became more radicalised, no doubt contributing to Triple F's activism and advocacy.

'Speaking of New Mexico does remind me that Albuquerque was the city that Henry and Miriam chose as their home base when the colonel retired, aged fifty.

'Once every two months, first as the caretaker for Miriam when she was dying of cancer and then Henry who was in care after a series of mini strokes, Sandra, who never left the small Midwest town she moved to after graduation, would drive the

same 1,600 kilometres that Henry, Miriam, and Frankie had travelled years before. Her choice, however, was to do the trip (each way) in one sixteen-hour go. I did wonder if, like Lisa Nowak, she wore a nappy to avoid toilet breaks.²⁹ Certainly, my impression of Sandy is that, in addition to her dedication to her father, she had a similar intensity and singularity of purpose.

'Yes, the preceding was a slight digression but the importance of conveying this image of Sandy outweighs the need for me to stay on track.'

²⁹ In 2007, Lisa Nowak, then a NASA astronaut, when making a fourteen-hour road trip in order to confront her ex-partner's lover, allegedly wore a diaper in order to avoid taking time for toilet pit stops.