

Conformity

Freya Berenyi

Sophie walked towards the science room, her stomach tingling with apprehension. She dreaded this class. The tables were in rows and the girls with whom she sat were one too many for a row. If she managed to get a seat and one of the more popular girls missed out, half the group would move to another row with her in collaboration. If she was left out, she would have to sit in another row, chair facing sideways, to indicate to the rest of the room her affiliation with those girls, signalling she was not actually sitting by herself. Prac classes also involved the division of the room into pairs. A skilful manoeuvre was required to ensure that you weren't humbly raising your hand to be matched with another, equally humiliated person. As soon pairs were suggested, faces would subtly turn to a chosen partner, eyes making a silent agreement. Sometimes, sitting beside a more popular girl, she had desperately attempted to catch her eye, but the girl remained steadfastly fixed upon the board, a blatant rejection. Today, she had strategically secured a seat next a girl without any definite friendship claims. The rest of the class would be tolerable now; the potential ordeal of social embarrassment had been overcome.

Lunch times seemed to stretch for an unnecessarily long time as her friends filled the silence with gossip. Recently, conversation was consumed with the vilification of Grace, a friend who had fallen rapidly down the social hierarchy after the group had sided with another girl during a disagreement. To stick up for the pariah would be to jeopardise your own place in the group; it was far safer to ensure that she remained

on the outer so that you did not become the target of the group's contempt. 'She, like, totally just gave me this look and kept walking. I mean, who does she think she is?' Fragments of conversations intruded upon Sophie's reflections, and she was required to establish her place by offering another example of the outcast's offences. The response had to be measured enough so that it would not be too damaging if Grace was forgiven and it was repeated to her, but still portray her in an unflattering manner and not be too sympathetic. 'Did you see the feature article in the *Miltown Times* about Grace? I bet her mother wrote it and sent it in. I mean it's horse riding. How many people even do it? She's probably the only one in the national team. I competed in the state tennis championships and I didn't get a big article. It's pathetic that she wants that much reassurance and needs to have her achievements publicised.' She hated that she joined in with the girls' malicious comments. It was addictive though, the more you thought about someone's faults the more numerous they seemed to become. The article had seemed sycophantic and had evoked a tinge of jealousy, if she was perfectly honest. But really, was it necessary to degrade other people's achievements to preserve her own self-esteem?

'Yeah, so true. I can't believe how racist Grace is. I mean, it's understandable about Asians, but black people ...' Sophie raised her eyebrows in disbelief, regretting her part in encouraging more antagonism. 'Yeah, I totally agree about the Asians. I hate that they just think they can come to our country and keep their old ways. I have no problem with them, as long as they assimilate.' Was there any point arguing against such assured bigotry? It wasn't as though a comment would change steadfast beliefs, but to remain silent implied agreement. 'I'm not being racist, but how do they even tell each other apart? They all look identical.' Sophie looked around at the acquiescent white faces, uniformly tinted orange, with long, straight peroxidized hair. She was always at a loss as to whether to accept the outrageous comments or to risk more as the girls tried to defend their points of view. Either way she would lose.

‘Anyway, did you hear Melissa’s pregnant?’ ‘No way. Melissa that works at the supermarket?’ ‘Yeah, she’s keeping it. Luke said he’d marry her if she did, or never speak to her again if she got rid of it.’ ‘Oh, that sucks. She’s living the Miltown dream though. Footballer marries a netballer. She works on the check-out, he’s a tradie.’ Sophie shuddered to imagine the rate at which the news would be spread throughout the country town. ‘My dad’s a tradie.’ She remarked, in an attempt to personally redeem herself for her participation in the conversation. ‘Oh, yeah, but it’s not like your parents were born here. That’s when it’s lame. Anyway, your dad’s, like, an educated tradie.’

People’s lack of sensitivity could be horrifying; they did not seem to have the ability to consider how their words may affect their listeners. Sophie recalled how, when she applied for a job at the Miltown Nursing Home, a nurse had explained as she stood beside a patient that ‘this is the final home for the residents, unless they get transferred to the hospital.’ As though the point needed further explanation, the nurse clarified that ‘they usually leave in a box’. Sophie was appalled to see the resident then ask for water. She had imagined, hoped, that the woman had not been lucid.

Sophie suddenly noticed that Ben, a popular footballer, had appeared beside her. ‘How do you stand sitting with these girls every day?’ He murmured. ‘Do they ever have nice conversations? I just wish they’d take a few hits and it would be over. You can’t even tell who they like, since they all claim to be best friends, then one leaves and she becomes the next victim.’ Sophie nodded in agreement, relieved that he had missed her contribution to the conversation. It seemed so much easier being a boy.



Freya Berenyi wrote this in 2010 when she was in Year 12 at Mansfield Secondary College in Victoria.