

WAR BABIES

a memoir

Robert
Macklin



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WAR BABIES

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WAR BABIES

a memoir

Robert Macklin

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a photograph of Robert Macklin aged four.*

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*For Wendy
who put the pieces back together*



Hilda and Robert Macklin, 1942

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Remembering your past is a little like looking up to the night sky — pinpoints of light arrive at random from different eras. They illuminate some events but leave vast areas in darkness. Some lights are so strong that your eye keeps returning to them. Some clusters are more pleasant and engaging than others. The writer will seek a pattern, a narrative, in the arrangement whether justified or not.

Among those lights and within those limitations I have told the truth. It has been more difficult than I imagined, but more satisfying than I could have hoped.

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Robert Macklin
Canberra 2004

PART ONE

ONE

My grandmother had a brass lizard with ruby eyes. It sat on a doily on a stand in her shadowy lounge room when my mother and I visited. I was four at the time and my mother and I walked two miles together to visit Grandmother Macklin through the hot, moist Sunday afternoons. My father would not come even if he was home on leave from the war. He was afraid of his mother.

When we arrived at her home in Ruskin Street, Taringa, she would serve tea to my mother and cordial to me. We would take it in the lounge room with the lizard, which was the only semblance of an animal pet she would allow on her premises. And there was always tension in the air.

While I ate my shredded oatmeal biscuits with butter and Marmite, she and my mother would exchange words. When I registered their bitterness,

I would focus on the lizard. Those ruby eyes held mysteries. The solid little triangular head was filled with secret knowledge. I tried to commune with it but it was not easy. The lizard knew so much and I so little.

If I asked politely, my grandmother would let me take the lizard from the octagonal plinth and hold it. The metal was stiff and surprisingly cold because the gold of the brass looked warm. The eyes glowed in the soft light. If I wanted to leave the chair and walk outside to her verandah I had to leave the lizard behind, neatly on its stand.

Her verandah overlooked a chasm. The weather-board house was built on a steep hillside and the front garden was almost perpendicular. It fell to a gravel road and on the other side of the little valley the bush rose up the V, then rolled away toward Long Pocket where the dairy farmer, Mr Redhead, lived. There was always a breeze on the verandah and it cooled my face, which had been perspiring in the tense, dark room.

Grandmother Macklin was very slim but she held herself straight and when we arrived and departed I kissed her on the cheek. My lips and nose seemed to penetrate her soft, powdery flesh to the bones beneath. There was a strange, unnatural intimacy in kissing a person's bones, but it was not unpleasant. She had very thin lips and her hair was wound in a grey bun behind her stern face. She did not kiss me back but I think she liked me. There was a kindly tone to her voice when she spoke to me.

Once she took me and my cousin Elwyn to the Botanic Gardens where we looked at the monkeys. My

mother dressed me very carefully for the outing; she licked her fingers and pushed my hair aside, then put my little cap on firmly. Grandmother made me keep my cap on the whole day.

She was always angry with my mother. From the verandah I could hear the snap of the clipped sentences like a toy flag in a strong breeze. After we left my mother would hold my hand tightly and the perspiration would make it slippery.

Sometimes she would stop. Her hand would leave mine and go to her face. 'Why she takes it out on me I just don't know,' she would say. She would take her white handkerchief from her handbag and wipe away the tears as we stood in the empty gravel road, with bush on each side, heading to the Fiveways.

Then she would blow her nose, open her powder compact and say, 'Now look at me. Now look what you've done.'

But that last sentence was said with a smile because she knew that I knew she was beautiful. Then we'd set off again. 'Oh Robbie, I don't know. I really don't.'

Neither did I. I didn't even know why she went to see Grandma Macklin at all, except perhaps that her own parents had died 'many moons ago.' But when she was happy it didn't really matter.

It was a long way home to Sundridge Street but once we reached the Fiveways where all of the streets in the area intersected it was down hill. Invisible crickets were making noises in the lantana at the side of Indooroopilly Road and we passed the Glassop house which always made my mother smile.

Elsie Glassop had been a girlfriend of my father before he met my mother, but Elsie was a Catholic and insisted that my father accompany her to church. He had not been into a Catholic Church before and he knew that if his mother found out, there would be ructions. So he was looking nervously around and he didn't notice that Elsie had suddenly ducked down in front of him in a most elaborate genuflection.

My father went right over her head and sprawled in the aisle. Then he jumped up and ran away and never saw Elsie Glassop again. Except by accident.

I went to the Methodist Sunday School in Carmody Road, St Lucia, and when he was home on leave my father would pick me up afterwards on his pushbike and give me a doubler home. I would sit on the bar and when he held the upright handlebars his arms would enclose me. I would smell his sweat mixed with grass clippings from his push mower. It was a very beautiful smell. I would try to make conversation with him as we rode, but it was never successful. He had nothing to say to me.

I quite enjoyed Sunday school. I loved the stories — Joseph and his coat of many colours; Jacob and his mother Rebecca playing a trick on the father, Isaac, and Jacob's hairy brother, Esau, by putting goatskins on his hands and arms so the blind old father would think it was Esau. That was very exciting. But the one that fascinated me most was the story of Abraham, who took his son Isaac to the side of a mountain and to prove how much he loved God, offered to cut his son's throat.

There was a picture in the Sunday-school book of the old bearded man holding down the boy. His arm was

raised. His hand held a dagger. And if God had not intervened, he would have plunged it into the boy's throat.

Indooroopilly Road curved round to the right heading for the creek down the bottom. Seven Oaks Street veered off to the left, a divided street, upper and lower, with beautiful Jacarandas in the middle. My mother and I walked in the shade of the purple canopies past Brasted Street until we came to the top of Sundridge Street, our place.

We had lived in number 16 since I was born and she brought me home from Fermoy Private Hospital in Auchenflower, a nearby suburb. Heading down the hill, our house was on the right-hand side and we walked on the grassy footpath between the fences and the hibiscus bushes planted near the kerb.

We knew all the people in all the houses in the street. But we were particular friends with Mrs Lingard next door and the Wilsons across the road and Evvie Mae Gibbs down the end in number one. Mrs Lingard was very sad when Mr Lingard came home, terribly wounded. He had lost an arm; there was a plate in his head, my mother said, and he had a glass eye that never looked in quite the same direction as the other one no matter how hard he tried.

He got a job driving a lift but I didn't know this until one day I was at Allan and Stark's, riding up to a higher floor, and it was him in a blue uniform saying, 'Third floor — haberdashery, millinery and fancy goods ...'

'Look, it's Mr Lingard,' I said. 'Hello, Mr Lingard.' But he blushed beetroot red and my mother nudged me and said, 'Shush.'

I didn't understand why the adults found it embarrassing, and afterwards, when I went back on my own, we had quite good fun. He taught me to walk across the lift as it took off. It made my legs go wonky and gave a funny sensation in my stomach, like I was falling.

'That's terrific,' I said.

'I thought you'd like that.'

The Wilsons didn't go to the war. They were far too old. They had a lovely garden and a tennis court, and occasionally, while the war was on, my mother would go there to play tennis at the weekend. I was ballboy and that was huge fun, gathering the ball without a fumble, tossing it back to the server when she asked for it. Viv Jenkins, a very thin man who sometimes stayed with the Wilsons, played with my mother. When he was serving I threw the ball back to him really hard.

The Wilsons had a chook pen behind the tennis court, and once, when I was fooling around with tennis balls between sets, I bounced one into the pen. There was a big black rooster in there and I wasn't too happy about going inside, but Viv Jenkins said, 'Go orn, he won't hurtcha.' Mr Wilson said, 'The important thing is, don't show fear.'

That was the problem, I guess. The closer I got to the rooster the more enormous it seemed. I tried to talk to it but it bristled its neck feathers at me. I just stood still then, showing fear. And it attacked, pecking my inner thigh right through the skin and a vein beneath.

Blood everywhere.

Mr Wilson said he felt terrible; even Viv Jenkins seemed abashed. My mother was furious and fearful at the same time. She half carried me home and called Dr Fothergill, who came at once and put some stitches in it. Viv Jenkins came to see if I was all right, but my mother wouldn't let him in the house.

Evvie Mae Gibbs from number one also tried to play tennis but she was hopeless. She had nerves. When the air-raid siren went off she had hysterics. This was understandable in a way. The siren started like a low growl from a hilltop far away where they could see the Jap planes, but then it rose to a mighty scream, rose and fell and rose to a new high note, and I had to run inside, turn on the tap over the bath, put in the plug, then run as fast as I could to Evvie Mae Gibbs's house.

She had a Pomeranian dog and the combination of the siren and Mrs Gibbs's hysterics sometimes caused its bulging eyes to pop out of their sockets on to its scrunched-up little face. That made Evvie Mae worse. It was my job to put the eyes back in, then bring the two of them up to our air-raid shelter. It was a very busy time. My mother had her own duties, and by the time we were settled in the shelter under the back vegetable garden we were puffed.

The Japanese bombers never came to Brisbane. Just as well. If they had dropped a bomb near Sundridge Street, that would have been the end of Evvie Mae Gibbs.

Our neighbour on the other side from the Lingards was Mr Rupert Geddes, an older man who lived alone except occasionally, when his young wife

would come back with their little kids and they would argue and throw bottles. Mr Geddes was an alcoholic. There was a big mango tree just on their side of the fence between our two backyards and I had a cubby in it. I could see everything that happened in their backyard and I often saw Mr Geddes, who was just skin and bone beneath his old suit and shirt and tie, staggering about clasping a sherry bottle by the neck.

When Mrs Geddes screamed at him, my mother said, 'Just close your ears, dear.'

The little kids were in a terrible state. If my mother and I were sitting on a rug in our backyard having a picnic, these two filthy little faces would appear over the top of the fence and one would say, 'Hello, Midda Mackwyn.'

My mother would give them a sandwich each.

It was a beautiful street in those war days. There was always something happening. The iceman would come running in with a big block of ice held by a steel claw to a bag on his shoulder. He would twist it off and pop it into the ice chest in a single move. Then away he'd go, out the back door and down the steps in three big leaps.

The night man would come in the early morning to take the tin from the outdoor lav. He too had a bag on his shoulder and he had learned to run in a very smooth way so it wouldn't spill.

Except for the day I left my scooter in the grassy drive.

My mother got the wooden spoon out that day. It didn't hurt that much. I cried because she hit me. It wasn't the pain of the hits, just the fact of them.

Later she said, 'He was very nice about it. The poor man.'

They were ages cleaning it up but they did a very thorough job and put phenol and sawdust on it. I never liked the smell of phenol after that.

The clothes prop man would come by on his horse and cart calling, 'Clooooooze props; clooooooze props'. The trouble was, clothes props never wore out, even when you pushed them as high as they would go and the line came crashing over the other side. The line gave out before the prop. Another outing for the wooden spoon.

The Rawleighs man was another regular. He was too old for the war but his leather port contained so many layers of ointments and potions that I thought he should have been there to help heal the wounded soldiers. The suitcase smelled waxy and mysterious.

Sometimes my Aunty Jess would come to visit on the train from Sydney. She was married to Uncle Vic, my mother's favourite brother who was a Rat of Tobruk and who had played hockey for Queensland. Now he was in New Guinea, beating back the invaders.

'He went away a sergeant and came back a major,' my mother said, her voice filled with pride. She and Aunty Jess would natter from the moment they woke until they went to bed at night. They would natter to each other; they would natter to me; they would natter to just about anyone who ventured into Sundridge Street.

My mother seemed much more relaxed when Aunty Jess was there. Johnny Burns the milkman made himself scarce when she was about. The other times

he'd ask to come in for a drink of water or something and my mother would tell me to stay by her side, no matter what he said.

I stuck like glue.

Aunty Jess got gooseflesh. She was always getting gooseflesh on her legs. I couldn't believe how it would appear, then the skin would go back to normal. She wore glasses and had quite a penetrating voice but she was very loving and when I was young she helped with my splints.

After I was four I didn't have to wear them. There was nothing really wrong with my feet. But there was a Dr Foot (which is pretty amazing) who convinced lots of mothers in Brisbane that their children's feet were not quite right and he gave us all celluloid splints.

First came socks, then the splints, then more socks, then our boots. It was like carrying around a rock on each foot. When we were four we took them off and it was like we could fly. After that, hundreds of us never wanted to wear shoes again.

I certainly didn't.

When the siren went I could run to Mrs Gibbs's place in the twinkling of an eye.

When I was four I went to Miss Brown's kindergarten in Toowong. Each morning I would walk through the Wilsons' place, past the chook pen and through a hole in the fence to the McLucas house behind.

Mr McLucas was a big fat man, a teacher at Brisbane Boys' College, and his daughter Helen was the same age as me. He took us on the bus to Toowong,

then held our hands, one on each side of him, as we walked to Miss Brown's. Then he only had to go over the road and down a bit to BBC.

I loved kindy, especially the drawing. I once drew a boy with parsley thrown in his face and my mother showed everyone. They found it very amusing. We knitted socks for the soldiers with three needles for the heels. The only thing I couldn't get used to was the sleep after lunch on the little camp stretchers.

In the afternoons my mother would leave her dressmaking with her friends in the Taringa shopping centre to pick us up at kindy and we'd catch the bus home again. Then I would do my jobs, like feeding the chooks and setting the table for tea, and afterwards she would wash and I would dry and we both would sing songs about the war. She had a beautiful voice. And sometimes when she sang songs like 'Jealousy' or 'I Wonder Who's Kissing her Now?' she would get quite tearful and have to stop.

'I'm a bit teary tonight, dear,' she would say. But then we'd sing a happy song like 'You are my Sunshine' and she'd be fine again.

One time after Auntie Jess left my mother took in a young boarder named Mark Formby. He was a lovely young fellow and very shy. He wore thick horn-rimmed glasses and California poppy hair oil and he smelled like a hundred roses. Sometimes he let me put some on and he showed me how to part my hair and do a cowlick.

The first time we did it we went into the kitchen to show my mother, who smiled and said, 'You're both very handsome.'

Mark didn't know what to say. He was very embarrassed; he was only expecting to show me off, not himself.

A few nights after that, when Mark had been with us for only a fortnight, we learned that he was a sleepwalker. My mother came out to my bed on the verandah and woke me.

'Mark is walking in his sleep,' she said. 'He just walked down the back stairs. Come on.'

I jumped out of bed and we followed him. We had 10 steps leading down from our back door and Mark had walked right down in his long pyjamas without falling. He even had his leather slippers on.

'We mustn't wake him up,' my mother said. 'If you do, they get such a shock they have a heart attack.'

So we walked beside and behind him as he went along our driveway by the side of the house to the front gate, out the front gate and right down the middle of Sundridge Street. In his pyjamas!

'What are we going to do?' I said in a loud whisper. 'He might walk right down into the creek.'

'I don't know,' my mother said, half frightened and half giggling. Then she had an idea. She gently took him by the shoulders and turned him around. He started walking back to our house and then he woke up.

'How did I get here?' he said.

I held my breath, expecting that any moment he would drop dead with a heart attack.

My mother said, 'Don't worry, dear. You just went for a little walk in your sleep.'

‘I used to do that when I was a kid,’ Mark said. ‘It hasn’t happened for ages.’

For the next week, every time I went to bed I tried to imagine walking in my sleep so it would actually happen. I thought it would be wonderful to wake up in different places. But it never happened. And it only happened with Mark that once. My mother said he must have been over-excited when he went to bed. I imagined he was worried because his father had been captured by the Japs. But it wasn’t true. His father wasn’t even in the war. It was one of my imagination stories. My mother said, ‘Robbie, I don’t know where you get it from.’

I never worried about my father. I hardly knew him. And I didn’t know my grandfather at all. He had been a bugler at Gallipoli and Grandmother Macklin let me hold the bugle, but not blow it. It was dented from the shot and shell. It had a green silk lanyard with a tassel. He died a week after I was born. My father said he took one look at me, had a heart attack and died. But he was only joking.

During the war, the only men around our place were Mark and me. Mark made big model boats on our dining-room table and my mother made the sails on her sewing machine. Grandmother Macklin sometimes came to visit and even Mark would have to sit in the lounge room and drink tea and watch his Ps and Qs. This made him very nervous.

My mother was always changing the furniture around and Mark couldn’t get used to it. One day my mother brought the tea things in on the traymobile and

called Mark. When he came in to get his cup he bumped into a chair she'd rearranged and as he said, 'Good afternoon,' he backed off it into another one, spilled his boiling tea, squawked with the pain and ran out the wrong door. When Grandmother Macklin left, my mother laughed so much there were tears running down her cheeks.

Then the war ended and Mark left and the men came home and everything changed.

TWO

I suppose my father was the first to come home but I don't remember it happening. One day he was just there. No one made any fuss. He took off his dark blue RAAF uniform with the beret that sat like a triangle on the top of his head and we never saw him in it again.

Uncle Vic was something else. Aunty Jess came up from Sydney and we all went to Roma Street station and had to wait ages for the train to arrive. Everyone was very excited and tense because he might have been wounded in the last couple of days. My mother said, 'Robbie, if you can't stop fidgeting and getting on everyone's nerves, go for a walk.'

So I did. I walked right off the station, up towards New Guinea so I'd meet him first. Then a railway worker in a shiny black cap grabbed me and took me to the station master's office where they had a silver microphone. The man in the black cap said he couldn't

find my 'party', which seemed a bit strange, and while he was talking to his superiors I spoke on the microphone.

'The train is running very late,' I said, and my voice echoed all over the station. My mother said people outside started laughing and everyone became much more friendly.

Then the train came. It seemed like the longest train in the world. The engine had to go right past the end of the platform where we were so all the carriages would fit. Auntie Jess was in a state. She was quite a short person and she kept jumping up and dodging from side to side. Underneath her dress I was sure she had gooseflesh everywhere. Nothing surer.

My mother was just as bad – jumping and dodging all over the place. The problem was that all the men were in the same uniform so it was very hard to tell them apart. In fact they kept spotting Uncle Vic and he turned out to be someone else. Then my mother screamed and Auntie Jess screamed and their arms went up in the air as Uncle Vic pushed towards them.

My father was standing behind me and when I looked around even he was crying a bit. Then the three of them were all over us and Uncle Vic was pumping my father's hand and he picked me right up off the ground and said, 'G'day, Rusty. Aren't you a good-looking bloke.' And he gave me a kiss on the cheek. A man.

He called me Rusty because that was the colour of my hair, he said. My mother said it was auburn, like hers. I didn't mind. Actually, I liked Rusty a lot and Auntie Jess began calling me Rusty too. But no one

else did. My father didn't call me anything much. Sometimes he called me 'You.'

Everything about Uncle Vic was shiny — his boots, his belt buckle, his buttons, the medal on his cap, the bullet on the little cane he carried under his arm, even his scalp in the sunshine and the little bit of hair that curled about on top of it. He smelled of spit and polish, my mother said.

When we got home my father opened the Fourex beer for Uncle Vic and himself and the ladies had port wine and lemonade. I had just the lemonade but Uncle Vic clinked my glass with his and said, 'Here's to you, Rusty; you're the hope of the side.'

I showed him a few of my toys and the scooter I left in the grass. My mother told him about the night man falling over it, and the way she told it everyone laughed until they nearly cried. Then my Uncle Wally arrived with more beer. I had never seen him before but he was a very happy fellow with a crooked nose. He leaned back in his chair with his hat on the back of his head. He was the younger brother of Uncle Vic and my mother and he called her 'Luvvie.' She talked to him like he was much younger and he told a story about when he and Uncle Vic were at Taringa School, which was at the top of a very steep hill, and he took the tennis-court roller out and let it go down the hill. Then someone said I had to go outside and play and I could hear them laughing right down the end of the backyard.

I went through our hole in the fence to the Burtons' place and told Cecily, who was one year older than me, 'My Uncle Vic is home from the war.'

'I know,' she said, 'I saw you.'

'He went away a sergeant and came back a major,'
I said.

'So what?'

There wasn't any answer to that.

Cecily was full of things that stopped a conversation in its tracks. She had very short, dark hair and one time she invited me into her lav, which was just near the hole in the fence. She told me to pull up my pants leg to see my thing and she showed me hers.

I was very surprised. I didn't know what to think.

Uncle Vic didn't stay very long but he taught my mother to drive. My father had been teaching her in the little Austin 8 which could only just fit two people in the cabin. It was not a success. When she drove them round the block together she would get out of the car and slam the door and go inside. My father said she didn't understand the mechanics.

One time she drove round the block on her own and stopped on the road not far from our gate. We had a big double gate made of metal, one long part, one short, with a catch between them that looked a bit like a duck.

When she arrived, she beeped the squeaky horn and I ran out and opened both sides of the gate. I pushed the metal prong into the ground on one side to hold that part of the gate, then went to the other side and held it myself.

Just then my father came out from under the house to watch. There was miles of room on both sides of the little car but something must have distracted my

mother because she ran into the gatepost on the other side from me.

No one seemed to know what to say. Finally my mother got out, slammed the door and said, 'So there.' And burst into tears.

Anyway, when Uncle Vic taught her she became quite expert. She loved the car but my father said it was unreliable — which it was, it was always having flat tyres — and he sold it. Then we didn't have a car of our own because he became a traveller for King Tea and they gave him a van with the King Tea sign on one side and the Billy Tea sign on the other.

The smell of tea made me sick. 'It's only tea,' my father said. 'What's wrong with you?'

I didn't get sick very often but I did feel very bad one time when Uncle Vic was there. It was just before they left and my father had decided to kill a rooster for my mother to roast. I didn't mind him killing roosters, they were no friends of mine, but he tied it by its legs on a beam under our house where he usually parked the van. I didn't want to watch but he told me I should know the facts of life. I stood behind one of the stumps and when he told me to I just peeked around the side. The stumps were black with creosote to keep the white ants away and the smell of it went right into my head. He took the rooster's head in one hand and with a little knife in the other he cut it right off. Then he undid the rope and let the rooster go without its head.

Blood everywhere.

It ran in all directions, with the blood spurting out of its neck. I felt dizzy and had to sit down by the

tank-stand in the cool. Even Uncle Vic laughed a bit at the antics of the rooster, but then he came and sat beside me. My father put the rooster in the washing copper which was bubbling and steaming.

‘I’m not a sook,’ I said.

‘Course you’re not, Rusty,’ Uncle Vic said. ‘You’re the hope of the side.’

I felt better then. I even helped my father pluck the feathers out. They were quite hot. The rooster had gooseflesh just like Aunty Jess, only whiter.

Uncle Vic had better nursery rhymes than the real ones. He said, ‘Mary had a little lamb, it had a sooty foot; and into Mary’s bread and jam, his sooty foot he put!’ and ‘Little Jack Horner sat in the corner, eating his curds and whey; he put in his thumb and pulled out an apricot and said, “Wouldn’t it!”.’

When Uncle Vic and Aunty Jess left for Sydney it was like there was a big hole in the house. Then my father was transferred to the North Coast run and he only came home at the weekend.

It was almost like the war was on again except that now, my mother said, prosperity was just round the corner and everyone was putting on their glad rags and kicking up their heels.

Miss Crawford wasn’t. Miss Crawford was my Prep 1 teacher at Ironside School and she was a bit like my grandmother but with freckles and muscles. Her dresses came down almost to her ankles. The heels of her shoes were thick and hard and you could hear her walking down the wooden verandah of the Little School towards our classroom.

The first day, my mother walked with me. Cecily and her older sister Judith came with us, nattering to my mother all the way, up past the Fiveways, along Swann Road past the Lord Mayor, Mr Chandler's, mansion on the hill, then up the rise to the beginning of Carmody Road and Hawken Drive, then down Hawken Drive to Ironside State School.

It had been there for ages. My father even went there and he had a photo of the whole school when he was there, all in one small building. He wore a cloth hat that went over his ears and made him look very comical.

The building might have been our Little School but now there was a big brick building as well and they were even putting a second storey on that. In the Little School, which smelled like a hundred squashed bananas, there were kids everywhere and some of the girls were crying, especially Carollie Cox. She was bellowing and whimpering at the same time.

I wasn't sad exactly, I was quite excited, but there was an ache in my heart when my mother left, and my mouth felt dry.

Then Miss Crawford took over and we all had to sit up straight, hands on desks, eyes on the blackboard. Actually, the blackboard was green but it was not a good idea to correct Miss Crawford. She liked her class to be very quiet. The only sound she liked was slate pencils on slate.

Each morning two people gave out the slates and quite often I was one of them. It was actually work, giving out slates, but you didn't mind because Miss Crawford made it seem like an honour.

In Prep 1 the slates were just uneven slices of dark grey slate with lines scored into them. The slate pencils were thin and you had to keep them sharpened; they made light grey marks on the slate.

Then you had a wet cloth and a dry cloth to clean the slate. And when you dried it you had to rub lightly; if you flicked it dry with your dry cloth — which was really much quicker — it made a snapping sound which Miss Crawford did not like.

She gave you one warning and next time she called you out the front and gave you the whacks. Miss Crawford's whacks were famous. She put two rulers together and when they hit they pinched the skin of your leg. She only hit the boys and sometimes Carollie Cox who couldn't stop talking. But that was after about eight warnings. Then she wouldn't stop crying.

We would be reciting, 'A is for apple, a says "a"; b is for bat and ball, b says "b" ...' and Carollie would be blubbing and trying to say the recitation at the same time but couldn't keep up, so the whole thing turned into a mess.

Carollie had dark hair with big eyes and long eyelashes. She sat down the front where Miss Crawford could keep an eye on her. There were two classes in Prep 1 in our year and two in Prep 2; lots of war babies were arriving at Ironside. Miss Crawford was actually the head of Little School as well as being our teacher, so she was very busy.

Perhaps that's why she didn't notice that I was writing left-handed on my slate for a couple of weeks. Actually, I wasn't only writing left-handed, I was writing down the slate instead of across it.

‘Stop that, Robbie Macklin,’ she said. ‘Straighten your slate.’

I would straighten the slate.

‘And use your other hand.’

I would transfer the slate pencil to my right hand until she went away.

At 11 o’clock we had little lunch. Our building was surrounded by bush and we would get our little lunch out of our bags and satchels and sit under the trees to eat it. My mother would often put a surprise in — a lolly or something, along with the Vegemite sandwich and a biscuit — so it was always quite exciting to open up the brown paper bag and unwrap the greaseproof paper.

At big lunch we played around the school and often we watched the big kids playing footy and cricket on the oval. The men on relief made the oval during the Depression. My father was one of them. But the Depression ended before they put the topsoil on it so only a little fuzz of grass would grow during the Christmas holidays and that would be trampled to death in about two weeks after we came back to school. The surface was hard as granite and big kids were always bleeding from the knees and elbows. They were like wounded soldiers.

At 3 o’clock the bell would go for us little kids and then 10 minutes later another one would go for the big kids. That was Miss Crawford’s idea, I think, so we wouldn’t get trampled to death. We could be out the gate and heading up the hill before the big kids got out.

I usually walked home with Alastair Stone who lived in Seven Oaks Street and after he went in I had

just a little way to go before Sundridge Street and once I was there I felt I was home.

But that first week of school I went with Cecily and Judith in the morning and just Cecily in the afternoon because Judith was in Big School. I could have gone all the way with Cecily, down Brasted Street then through our hole in the fence, but I didn't want to do that. I wanted to be on my own for a while. So I left her at the top of Brasted Street and went along Seven Oaks Street to Sundridge Street and I could run all the way down the hill to our place, just by leaning forward, and my legs would go out in front to stop me falling on my face and soon I would be running like the wind.

The second day I was a bit late because Cecily was collecting clover and making a chain for a necklace and just as I started running I saw my mother heading down the hill in front of me, then turning into our house without looking back. And when I got home she was still puffing.

She pretended she hadn't been looking for me. 'I wasn't a bit worried,' she said. But then she laughed.

Next day was terrible. In Seven Oaks Street I found a stick on the footpath and I chucked it in front of me, then picked it up and chucked it again a few more times. When I turned into Sundridge Street I ran it against the palings of the fence and when I got to the Skinners' house, which was second from the top, I banged their tin letterbox. The next thing I knew, about a hundred wasps flew out of the letterbox and down the top of my shirt at the back and started stinging me as I ran down the hill towards our place. The pain was terrible.

My mother said I sounded just like the air-raid siren. People were opening their windows and running about. My mother met me at the gate and pulled my shirt and singlet off and carried me under the house to the washing tubs where she kept the Reckitts Blue.

She covered my whole back and my ears and neck in Reckitts Blue and it worked wonders. The pain went away and she telephoned Dr Fothergill who said I should just rest for a little while. So my mother washed my hands and face and feet with a warm washer and let me rest in her bed.

The sheets were very smooth and cool. She sang the piccaninny song — ‘Go to sleep, my little piccaninny; Mummy’s sure to smack you if you don’t; ‘Bye, ‘bye, husha bye, Mummy’s little baby; Mummy’s little Alla balla boo’ — and I just drifted off. When I woke up I was in my own bed and it was morning.

I didn’t sleep in my mother’s big bed very often. In fact the only other time I nearly died. It was all because of Janette Greenhalgh’s party where I went as an elf. I was invited to the party ages before it happened and that gave my mother lots of time to make a costume.

She was always doing dressmaking things on her Singer sewing machine, either for me or the girls she worked with in Taringa where they had a shop. The girls were always calling by for cups of tea and a good natter. Once they came before she was ready and I had to answer the door and tell them she was still putting on her face. They thought that was hilarious. In fact, they thought just about everything was amusing. When they

were gone my mother would often have a Bex or a Vincent's powder and a good lie-down.

Anyway, I'm sure it was when she was talking to the girls that she decided to make me an elf costume out of crepe paper. She had a pattern and she used a slice of hard chalk to mark the paper. Then she cut it out and I had to stand very still while she put it on me with about a hundred pins in it. Then she asked me to move around and half the pins stuck into me.

It took her ages to sew it together but when it was finished it fitted me perfectly. The paper was chocolate brown and forest green and it even went over my head. It had huge green ears that came to a point. The paper shoes were pointed too, but I wasn't allowed to put them on till the day of the party. If you just walked around normally it felt OK, but you couldn't run or the crepe paper would tear.

My mother was very proud of it. On the day of the party I had to go over the road to the Wilsons' place and show them. Mrs Wilson had a very big chest and it wobbled up and down when she laughed. 'Ooo, hoo-hoo,' she said, 'Len, come and look at Robbie, he's a pixie.'

'I'm an elf,' I said. But that only made her laugh more. Then I had to show Mrs Gibbs, but Mr Gibbs was back from the war and he came to the door. He had been in Europe flying bombers. Their place was very dark and quiet inside; the Pomeranian had disappeared. Mr Gibbs was tall and thin. He had a very soft voice. Mrs Gibbs wasn't a hundred per cent that day, he said, and he gave me two shillings. I didn't know what to say.

Then I had to show Mr and Mrs Lingard and Mr and Mrs Burton and Cecily. Cecily was not impressed but her parents thought it was very authentic.

Then my father drove me to the Greenhalghs' place which was miles away, in a little street almost at the end of Carmody Road. And at four o'clock when the party was over I had to wait for him on the corner.

It was quite a good party. We had a costume parade and everyone said nice things about us. Most of the girls were fairies except Carollie Cox, who came in her mother's dress. Nearly all the boys were cowboys. Don Wilkey wasn't anything, just himself. He ate so much he vomited.

Anyway, Mr Greenhalgh told me when it was four o'clock and I went down to the corner to meet my father. I waited and waited. All the kids went past me and I had to say goodbye to everyone all over again. Then we had a storm. I didn't know what to do — I didn't want to go back to the Greenhalghs' but I knew I shouldn't stand under a tree with all the lightning about, so I just got wet. It was like a hundred buckets of water being poured over me.

The dye ran out of the crepe paper, which got very soggy, and it was nearly dark when my father came. When I got inside the van the smell of tea was mixed with beer. He'd been to the rubbidy. He often went to the rubbidy-dub, which was his name for the Regatta Hotel, on a Saturday afternoon.

'I got trapped,' he told my mother when we got home. Bits of crepe paper fell off in the van and he had to go back outside and clean it up.

My mother started the chip heater and made me a good hot bath. Usually that was my father's job but this time she said, 'Don't come near me.'

I felt OK the next day. I went to Sunday school. But after lunch I was weary and there was a tickle in my throat. Next morning, after my father had gone off to the North Coast again, my mother put her hand on my forehead. 'You're burning up,' she said.

Dr Fothergill came in the afternoon and told us I might be getting pneumonia. My mother had to keep me wrapped up warmly and give me plenty of liquid. That's when she moved me into her big double bed with the soft pillows.

She tucked me up tightly and from the bed I was looking straight at her dressing table where she put on her face. It had three mirrors, the ones at the side turned inwards so that when you sat on the stool with the floral material on top you could see yourself from lots of different angles.

On one side of the table there was a photograph of her as a bride, standing on her own in a beautiful white dress that flowed over the floor around her feet. She had a nice smile on her face. On the other side my father was also in the picture wearing a white tie and black tails.

Every now and then my mother would come in and take my temperature. It was amazing the way she could flick the thermometer to get it down to normal without the little glass tube flying out of her hand. Then she would put it under my tongue and say, 'Keep it there. Don't chew it.'

She gave me water with glucose from a blue-and-white packet. It tasted sweet but very different from sugar. And because I had a headache she gave me two Aspros which were very bitter. If you chewed them they made their own saliva in your mouth.

Then I started drifting. It was the strangest sensation. I would know I was lying in the bed but I felt I was drifting around the room, particularly when it became dark. It seemed as though I was drifting into a black tunnel and I'd get almost to the entrance and I'd drift away. I talked a bit too. My mother's picture would drift up towards me and it was almost like we were dancing around each other.

She met my father at Cloudland. It was a famous dance hall in Brisbane and it was at the top of a hill. She told me they danced all night. He was very light on his feet, she said. And that's the way it seemed now; she and I were so light on our feet that we were drifting above the clouds.

Then the room would come into focus and I would be back in the bed. 'You're soaking wet' she said, and changed my pyjamas. Soon the new ones were just as bad. Dr Fothergill came. 'It's the fever,' he said. 'If the fever breaks, he'll be all right.'

Then my mother started crying and next time I saw her my grandmother was in the room. It was very late. Mrs Lingard came from next-door and Mr Burton put his shiny bald head in and said, 'He's on his way.' They had found my father on the North Coast.

I heard my grandmother tell my mother she should pray. She sounded quite angry, as though

everything was my mother's fault. Then I drifted away again.

When I woke up I felt very weak and thirsty, but I wasn't drifting any more. My mother seemed much happier. Everyone else had gone except my father. 'I thought we'd lost him,' she said.

I missed about a week of school and the morning I went back it was a bit like starting again. I had that small ache when I said goodbye to my mother and she gave me a note for Miss Crawford.

I told Cecily I nearly died but she only said, 'You're all right now, aren't you?' Apparently her father had to ring about a hundred people before he found my father.

Miss Crawford read the note and said, 'Well don't run around and overdo it, will you dear?'

I couldn't believe it. She called me dear. Luckily no one heard her. Actually, I did feel a bit weak at first but then my mother gave me a dose of Hypol each morning. It was white and it was made from fish. I think she got it from the Rawleighs man.

THREE

My grandmother said I was saved by the power of prayer. I thought that was probably true. Miss Guyatt said prayer was the most powerful thing in the world. It could move mountains. It was a very nice idea that God had listened to my mother's prayer and decided that I shouldn't die of pneumonia just yet.

Miss Guyatt was the superintendent of our Sunday school and she was almost as big as Mrs Wilson but she never laughed. She played the piano at Sunday school and the organ at church, which was just as well because if she didn't have to go to church she would have played the piano forever. One of the women usually had to come downstairs from the church and say, in a really sing-song voice, 'Miss Guy-att, it's ti-ime ...' and she would bang down the lid and leave. When she walked past you could hear her legs rubbing together underneath her dress.

When I told her God saved me from dying by the power of prayer she didn't say anything for a while, just looked at me. Then she said, 'Remember, Robbie Macklin, pride comes before a fall.'

I didn't know what to think.

She always started Sunday school with a hymn, usually 'Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world, red and yellow black and white, all are precious in his sight, Jesus loves the little children of the world.'

We would sing the same verse three or four times standing up, then she would tell us to sit down on the floor and she would tell us a Bible story. After that we would go in little groups to our teachers, who would read another story then ask us questions about it. This was the part I liked because we were allowed to ask questions too.

The teachers kept changing but they were all older girls and they all said the same sort of thing. They were very kind, and neat as new pins. Except once we had one I could hardly believe. We were talking about hell and I said, 'Why does God wait till we die to punish us?'

She said, 'He doesn't. You get punished all the time.'

'How?'

'Well,' she said, 'you know how you're always chewing grass?'

It wasn't just me; we all pulled out the long paspalum stalks and chewed them at the bottom; the juice was quite good.

‘Yes.’

‘Well, if you have done a sin, God will make sure that the grass you pull out has been peed on by a dog.’

Amazing. It was a revelation. Marilyn Coulter and her best friend Jennifer Payne couldn’t stop talking about it.

A lot of the same kids who were in my class at school were also at Sunday school, but the strange thing is that we would be quite friendly at Sunday school but we’d never talk at school. Marilyn Coulter and Jennifer Payne, for example, always went into my little class at Sunday school but they wouldn’t say boo to me at school; they would only hang around with other girls and they’d whisper in each other’s ears.

Lynette Brittan wasn’t like that. And neither was David Gough. Lynette didn’t talk to anyone much. She was darker than the rest of us — not an Aborigine or anything — and Mrs Brittan was much older than most mothers. Anyway, I would often see her on her own at school, though at the Sunday school she seemed much happier and in the Christmas play she was Mary and I was Joseph.

Goughie was a Wise Man whose beard looked comical; every time he tried to say his words it kept falling in front of his mouth. No one could understand what he was saying. Lynette and I got the giggles, then Goughie forgot what he was supposed to say so we couldn’t keep going and Miss Guyatt banged the piano lid down like a gun going off and baby Jesus — who was someone’s little brother — got a fright and started crying.

My mother was in the audience. They were sitting on really small chairs and when I looked at her she was rocking backwards and forwards with her white handkerchief up to her face. Afterwards, when she told my father, she had to keep stopping to laugh and we were laughing at her laughing.

'I wouldn't have missed it for the world,' she said and gave me a big hug.

Usually after Sunday school my father would pick me up in the King Tea van and I would hold my breath till we got going, then stick my head out the window so I wouldn't have to smell the tea.

But as soon as we turned into our drive it didn't matter — I would smell the roast. We had a joint for dinner nearly every Sunday. We called lunch dinner on Sundays because it was a really big meal with potatoes and pumpkin and sweet potatoes and carrots and beans and beautiful dark, smooth gravy. I was allowed to stir the gravy to keep it runny and to rub in any little bits of flour or Gravox or pieces of onion skin. I'd feel like eating forever.

My father would have a beer with his meal and afterwards he'd say, 'Ah, you're a good cook, Luv,' and give a huge burp. He could burp for ages; he could even make wow-wow sounds with it along the way.

'Bill, stop that,' she would say, but she wasn't cross at all. Then my father would have a spine bash and after that we might go for a drive, way out to Aspley to see Auntie Elsie and Uncle Wal Jenner. Auntie Elsie was my father's sister and her youngest child was my cousin Elwyn, who was a bit younger than me. She hardly said

anything but she was a very friendly girl. She was nearly as wide as she was high and if I said, 'Let's play cowboys and Indians,' she'd say, 'All right, how do you play it?'

Apparently her brothers never played anything with her. And when I explained the rules she was hopeless. When I shot her dead she stayed dead. I'd run around the house and be back to set an ambush near where I'd shot her and she'd still be lying there.

'You only have to count to 20,' I'd say.

Then the corpse would speak with its eyes closed. 'What comes after 10?'

Hopeless.

Sometimes we would go and see my grandmother. I would sit on the same chair, near the lizard with the ruby eyes. The tension was still in the air but it was different when my father was there. He sat on one chair looking at her. When he was nervous he did a funny thing with his tongue. Every little while he would push it up in his mouth like a chick clucking. He didn't know he was doing it. Everyone else knew but no one ever said a thing, not even my mother. I could tell he hated being there. He was always looking for some excuse to go for a walk. One time he said, 'I think I'll go and check the pawpaw,' and he went out to the back garden.

My grandmother said it was all right if I went outside to play. I could even take the lizard with me. I went to another part of her garden. It was full of tropical ferns and a *Moisterio delicioso*. The ground was always dark and damp. My father was nowhere near the pawpaws.

Mostly my mother bought the Sunday joint from Digger McAlpine, the butcher at the Fiveways. I loved going in there with her. Digger was like a swordfighter with his long knives in the scabbard on his belt. He'd take half a sheep out of the cold room, hang it up on a hook and make a kind of skip over to the counter where we were, sliding the last bit on the sawdust.

Then, if we wanted chops, say, he'd whip a knife out with his right hand, lift up his steel, which was also hanging on his belt with the other one, then lightly graze the blade over the steel. He'd take the uncut chops over to his huge block of wood like the stump of a tree, slap it down and make cuts on the meat between the bones. Then he'd take the chopper from its little hook on the block and chop exactly where he'd cut. He put his fingers so close to where he was chopping that one miss and he would have lost a finger.

In fact, he had a trick where he chopped, then said, 'Oh no,' and held up his hand with one finger hidden like it had been completely chopped off and everyone would moan and feel terrible. Then he'd laugh and skid around the place with the finger magically healed.

All the mothers went there. And they stayed for ages. If I went there on my own they'd always be saying, 'Oh no, serve Robbie first if you like.' Then they'd natter with Digger like it was some kind of radio show.

He had lots of jokes too.

I sold him our newspapers. I had a red trolley with a handle and I'd put our papers in it, then I'd go to the Burtons' and they would give me some, and sometimes

the Lingards.' Then I'd pull the trolley up Indooroopilly Road to the butcher's and Digger would weigh them and give me three pence a pound.

My mother said that was my pay for doing all my jobs. I got quite a lot of money, too, and put it all in a metal money box the shape of a bank. Sometimes, if my mother was desperate, she'd take some of it out with the thin flat knife she used for turning pikelets over. When my father came home with his pay packet she would show me her putting it back. I didn't tell her, but sometimes by then I'd forgotten she'd taken it out.

That happened a bit after she stopped going to Digger's and I got the meat order on my own. 'I'm just not up to it this afternoon,' she would say. 'And I think I'm getting veins.'

The next thing I knew we were driving her to the General Hospital and she was having a baby. By then, luckily, my father had left King Tea and joined Edwards Dunlop, the stationery people. They gave him an old grey Ford — a 1938 model, I think — with rusty stains around the back window. So we didn't have to smell tea on the way.

The baby had black hair like my father. It was completely straight, not wavy like my mother's or curly like mine (except when I put lots of water on it). He had very dark eyes too. My mother's were blue and mine were greeny brown. And he was fat.

I wasn't actually at the hospital when he was born. When we got there my father rang Uncle Tom Schofield who came in from the other side of town with Aunty Flo to collect me. They weren't real relatives. Uncle Tom

had been in the Air Force with my father and they were quite a bit older than my parents. He had red hair round the fringes and just a few little tufts on top. They didn't have any kids and everything in their house was exactly in its place. They were very friendly and Aunty Flo was a terrific cook. But you had to watch where you put every part of your body in case you knocked something over and you had to be careful not to use something that was precious, like a crystal glass to clean your teeth.

When they took me back to the hospital they showed me the baby in a cot beside about 10 others. I never would have picked him as my brother. When we went into my mother's room she looked very beautiful. She had a blue crocheted bed jacket, the same colour as her eyes. She had put on her face and brushed her hair and put a dab of perfume behind her ears. But when I got up on the bed and gave her a hug she smelled milky.

Then my father came in with the baby. Everyone started talking at once and Aunty Flo said, 'What do you think of your little brother, Robbie?'

I said, 'He's very nice.' But I didn't have the faintest idea what I thought of him. I didn't even know his name. It was only after that night that they decided to call him Brian Arthur Macklin. My father's older brother was Arthur. He lived miles away in Townsville but he had once saved my father from drowning in a creek when he was a boy.

My middle name was Victor.

After a while Uncle Tom and my father and I had to go outside while my mother fed the baby. When we came back in she was doing up her front. But as we were

passing the other rooms I saw mothers feeding their babies so I knew what happened. It made me a bit sick in the stomach to think about it.

Later, when the baby came home I got used to it, I found it very interesting actually. I told Cecily about it but of course she knew already.

On Saturday mornings my mother and I sometimes went into town on the bus. She would carry the baby in a blue canvas seat that went over her shoulder and let the baby sit near her hip. That way she could carry her purse and get the money out for the bus driver without putting the baby down or giving it to someone to mind.

When we got to King George Square we would walk up Adelaide Street window-shopping till we got to George Street where we'd go into McDonnell and East's. Ironside School had a uniform, and while my mother made all my shirts and shorts, McDonnell and East's were the only ones who sold the grey jumpers and socks with the two blue lines. Then we'd go down to Queen Street past Trittons, the furniture people, to Allan and Stark's, or we might catch a tram to the Valley where there were two big shops, T.C. Beirne's and McWhirters. I loved the trams, especially if we got a seat facing the way we were going. Then a beautiful breeze would blow in your face. Facing backwards made me feel a bit sick in the stomach.

The best thing about the shops was the way you paid the money.

At McDonnell and East you took your shopping to a few different places in the store and they wrapped the money and the docket in a little cylinder and put it

in a cage, then pulled a string with a handle on the end. The cage would zoom off on a wire to a man sitting up in a box. He would take the money and write out a receipt and put it and the change back in the cylinder. Then you could watch it coming all the way back to you.

Allan and Stark's system was even better. There they put the cylinder into a tube full of suction. They'd have to lift the lid of the tube and you could hear the wind being sucked past at terrific speed. Then in it would go, the lid would pop shut and you could hear your cylinder heading off to some mysterious place.

Next thing you knew, it was back again, dropping into a little wire box with a wooden bottom, and inside was your exact change.

When we finished shopping we'd go back to the City Hall, which was on one side of King George Square, and my mother would go to the Ladies' Lounge at the side of the big building to feed the baby. I always went in with her and there were lots of women sitting about feeding their babies. It was very luxurious.

But then one lady told my mother I shouldn't be there because I was a boy and I was too old. I could tell my mother thought she was being a bit silly but she asked me to wait outside. I didn't mind. It was the first time I'd ever been too old for anything.

FOUR

After my father joined Edwards Dunlop and we had the baby he was at home most of the time.

My mother and I still did the washing up together and we would sing as we did it so the time passed much quicker. We sang, *If You Were the Only Girl in the World*, and *I Was the Only Boy* and *My Blue Heaven*. That had beautiful words about whippoorwills, which were American birds. I would even hum it on my way to school sometimes.

We didn't always wait for my father to come home before we had tea. He had lots of friends at Edwards Dunlop and he was always getting trapped at the rubbidy. I thought it was very strange. My mother made the most beautiful meals — rissoles and gravy and creamy mashed potatoes and peas that I helped her to pod (we always put a pod into the saucepan for flavour); the world's most luscious stew with lots of kidneys and

dumplings; corned beef and cauliflower with cheese and fresh beans that we always cut on an angle because they tasted better; beautiful mince with onion chopped up in it; and for pudding we had prunes and cream or apple turnover or golden syrup dumplings or rice pudding that was lovely and brown on top and you could taste the cream, or sometimes the best of all: her own special 'lemon delish'. She made it with a whole tin of condensed milk and lemon juice with some of the peel grated into the bowl and poured into her pastry pie. You could taste it for about an hour after you finished eating. Who'd want to miss out on that!

If he wasn't home in time we put it in the oven. And when he was really late it got all dry. He ate it anyway. He stayed at the kitchen table while we went into the lounge and listened to the radio. The whole kitchen smelled like beer.

Sometimes he was away all week when he had to go to Ipswich and Toowoomba to sell the stationery. In fact, if you don't count the smell of tea, the best thing about his new job was all the notebooks and folders and pencils and other stationery he brought home. I played offices in our vestibule between the front verandah and the lounge room. That was my office and my mother put up the card table, which was my desk, with one of the dining room chairs behind it and my toy phone.

I played it for hours. My mother would be the customer and I would take her order in my order book, then I would ring up the warehouse to see if we had any in stock and if we did I would order it for her.

She ordered some amazing things — a fur coat, a hundred nappies, a case of Pears soap and a pound of peas, for example. Luckily, we had everything in our warehouse except when she got silly and ordered the Queen Mary or something. If she did that, and if the baby wasn't sleeping, I'd chase her through the house and she was always appearing at a doorway then zooming off and giving me a fright at another one till we were both laughing so much we couldn't get our breaths.

Playing offices was best before I learned to write. When I was just scribbling I could write all the orders at fantastic speed. When I knew how to write it took forever.

One time when my father was home he got sick of me wiggling my loose tooth at the bottom with my tongue and my finger. He said my big teeth would come up crooked unless it was pulled out and the best way was to tie it to the kitchen door handle and slam the door.

My mother didn't like the idea but he said it was so loose it would pop straight out. When he started tying the string around it he put his finger in my mouth and I heaved. My mother said I had a sensitive throat. If you put a finger anywhere near it I heaved and if it touched my tongue I nearly vomited.

Anyway, my father became impatient. The first time he tried it the string slipped off the tooth because the door handle was much higher than me. So the next time — after about an hour of my heaving — he tied it very tight and when he slammed it I fell over. But the tooth came out.

Blood everywhere.

The next thing I got constipated. I'd just sit there for ages in the lav down near the Burtons' fence until my mother would come near and say, 'Robbie, has anything happened yet?'

'No.'

'Are you concentrating?'

'Yes.'

Nothing. Even if I strained as hard as I could it didn't even feel as though there was anything there. My mother gave me a Laxette and when that didn't work my father said I had to have a tablespoon of castor oil, which smelled like dead fish.

I started heaving when he just took the top off the bottle. I wouldn't open my mouth and he put the tablespoon through my lips and pushed it against my teeth. I even cried and my mother said, 'I can't stand this,' and went into her bedroom so she couldn't hear.

He sat on my chest on the kitchen lino. 'It's for your own good' he said, and when I swallowed it he got up. I thought my chest was broken. But it wasn't, it was just bruised.

The next holiday we went down to see Uncle Vic and Auntie Jess and their new baby, Helen. She was a blue baby, my mother said. That meant her heart was not properly formed and there was almost nothing they could do. She got the most terrible eczema and they had to bathe her and put ointment on; in the summer it was just terrible.

But if you didn't think about Helen and eczema the holiday with Uncle Vic was fantastic. They had

bought a poultry farm, Lenneslands, in Lisadell Road at Medowie, care of Raymond Terrace, via Williamstown, New South Wales. That was the address we had to put on our letters. My mother wrote to them every week and she was always reading me bits from Auntie Jess's replies. She still called me Rusty.

We went on the train and had a sleeper with beautiful smooth white sheets tucked in so tightly that you could hardly pull them back to get in. I had the top bunk and my mother and the baby were down below.

It was wonderful, zooming through the night with the train rocking and the wheels clicking in time. I had a reading light and I brought some books and comics to read. But after a while I couldn't concentrate and I just lay there talking to my mother about anything that came into my mind. I loved it so much I tried to stay awake but my eyes had a mind of their own.

Uncle Vic looked much smaller without his uniform but he still marched everywhere. He had an old khaki beret on and a shirt with no arms, a pair of shorts and his Wellington boots, and he marched through puddles and over to the chook sheds where he talked to the chooks.

'Come on, you lazy loafers,' he would say. 'Drop those eggs between those legs.' And all the chooks would go 'Gorkle, gorkle' in reply. He had about a thousand of them in old army sheds and when he went in they would all look up and say 'Gorkle, gorkle.'

Auntie Jess gave me her boots and though they were a bit loose and it wasn't that easy to keep up with

Uncle Vic when he was marching, I wore them everywhere. I was his strong right hand.

Uncle Vic had porridge every morning. I had porridge too. With honey. Then we'd go and feed the chooks. Uncle Vic had his special mixture of bran and pollard and he mixed it in 44-gallon drums with his bare arms. He collected the eggs in buckets. He never stopped marching and when he wasn't talking to me he was whistling. He didn't whistle a tune, just a few notes, the same notes about a thousand times a day, one for each chook.

He worked from sunup to sundown and then some.

My mother mostly stayed inside with our baby and Auntie Jess and Helen. But everyone helped cleaning and sorting and packing the eggs. The lady with no teeth who lived up the road from Uncle Vic did most of it but Uncle Vic said once you got the knack of it you could get quite fast. My mother got the knack in about 10 seconds flat.

Uncle Vic had lots of plans for the farm. But he wasn't too happy with the Egg Board. He didn't like people telling him how many eggs he could sell. In fact, he didn't like being interfered with at all. That was not what he fought for in Tobruk and the jungles of New Guinea.

Not one bit of it. 'As the actress said to the bishop, not flippin' likely.' But he didn't get really angry and my mother always made him laugh. Then Auntie Jess would giggle and lift her big glasses off her nose a couple of times and say, 'I wish I had you round here a bit more

often, sweetie,' life'd be a darned sight easier, I can tell you.'

After dinner Uncle Vic and I would go into the lounge and play *The Warsaw Concerto* on his radiogram. Or listen to the cricket. That was best. He let me stay up really late once, just the two of us, listening to the cricket in England. My mother wanted me to go to bed but Auntie Jess said, 'He can't sleep anyway. They're company for each other.'

I think Uncle Vic was very worried about Helen, but he didn't talk about it. He didn't talk about the war either, except once he told me he had a good mate; they were called the Big Drip and the Little Drip. Uncle Vic was the Big Drip. The Little Drip got wounded.

We hadn't been back very long when we got the news that Helen had died. 'Her little heart just gave out,' my mother said. It was terribly sad. Even when I said she'd gone to heaven it didn't help. I was looking on the bright side but even though they agreed with me they didn't want to hear. It was very confusing; it was almost as though they said it about heaven but they didn't actually believe it.

I thought it might be because when she died she had eczema. Maybe they thought she would have eczema for eternity.

That year we had the best bonfire in the world and the worst cracker night ever. The bonfire was in Engles' paddock, which was on the other side of Westerham Street and the creek down the end of Sundridge Street and Brasted Street. The paddock was really the side of a hill and it had cows in it. And a

fierce bull. Cecily said if you walked past with a red handkerchief sticking out of your pocket the bull would see it and charge.

Anyway, they locked the bull up for about a month before Guy Fawkes Night, which was the fifth of November, 'gunpowder, treason and plot.' That meant we could take stuff through a gate in the barbed-wire fence, over the creek on a fallen gum tree and up to the bonfire. Everybody helped. Mr Wilson took his garden rubbish and the other families in the street took packing cases from under the house, and timber from bomb shelters they'd taken apart, and even old tyres. Everything got tossed on to the bonfire.

David Straughan, who lived on the other side of the Lingards' and was a few years older than me at Ironside, took some old comics down one day when my mother and I were there. That's when she invited him to come to our place after the bonfire. Mr Straughan didn't come back from the war so David and his mother were very poor. Mrs Straughan was completely round, just like a huge ball with legs. They only had the pension. I didn't like David much then. At school he was a big kid and he didn't even answer when I talked to him.

But I had been collecting fireworks for weeks and our backyard was going to be really something. My mother said it was OK to take 10 shillings out of my money box and I had been selling papers to Digger from nearly every house in Sundridge Street. I told them what I was saving up for and everybody was very helpful. Digger said he'd have to get another shop to store the papers.

I had Catherine Wheels I was going to put on the Burtons' fence. I had four huge rockets and my father said I could put the wooden tails in beer bottles and they'd go about a mile in the air. And there were about 10 smaller rockets that I could just stick into the vegetable garden and they'd easily go over the Burtons' house. I had Jumping Jacks that shot all over the place and chased people. They were great. I had sparklers. I had Roman candles that popped out the most beautiful balls of light that broke into little falling sparks and whistles. I had strings of Tom Thumbs and Red Devils which were the next size up and about 10 penny bungers and three huge crackers that sounded like a bomb exploding.

I could hardly wait. I kept everything in the lid of a cardboard box under my bed and every night before I went to sleep I'd arrange them in the order that I'd be letting them off. My mother would say from the kitchen, 'Are you in bed yet, Robbie?'

I'd quickly jump into bed. 'Yes, Mum.' Then I'd lean over the side and finish my arrangements.

'You'll wear them out before the night.'

At school we talked about it all the time. Everyone had a bonfire they were going to and some kids brought crackers to school — especially Throwdowns — and chucked them under people's feet till Mr Murray the headmaster banned them.

On the day the sun took forever to go down, but it was a beautiful night with no clouds or rain or wind. Just perfect. We all went to the bonfire where my mother had made the Guy out of hessian on her sewing machine

and stuffed it full of rags. Then she sewed on some shiny buttons for eyes and a big coat button for a nose and some felt for a mouth in the shape of a sad upside-down smile. We put one of my father's old hats on it and he tied it to a broken clothes prop and stuck it on the bonfire.

It took a while to catch fire and there was a terrific amount of smoke from Mr Wilson's grass. But then it really blazed. The Guy curled up like he was in terrible pain and the tyres made black smelly smoke.

Some people had brought their crackers to let off in the paddock and that was happening all around us. I just took a few Red Devils so I could be in the fun and we tossed them into the fire one by one. The Engles were there but they were too poor to have crackers. Everyone at school said Mary Engles had nits. Once Mary was sent home and when she came back no one would talk to her except Lynette Brittan. I would have except she was a girl and she was always angry.

Anyway, when the bonfire died down we all went back to our place where my father said he'd let off most of my crackers — like the big rockets and the Catherine Wheels — because they were dangerous. But my mother said I could decide which ones went off first.

We brought all the kitchen chairs out into the backyard and the Burtons came over and the Wilsons and the Lingards even brought their cat so she wouldn't panic. She could sit on Mrs Lingard's lap and she could comfort her. Even my grandmother was there.

I brought out my fireworks in the big lid and put it on the cement path between the back steps and the

lav. My father had put the beer bottles into the garden ready for the rockets and my mother said I had to give David Straughan some crackers to let off, so I gave him about five Red Devils and a packet of Throwdowns (which made a terrific bang on the cement) and my father gave him one of my precious Jumping Jacks.

He lit the Jumping Jack off a sparkler without even asking and threw it on the ground where it jumped in about four different directions and landed right in the middle of my fireworks.

Well, I could hardly believe it. Everything went off at the same time. Huge skyrockets went screaming round the backyard and one banged right into the door of the lav. Another one went under the house. Roman candles started shooting their coloured balls at the people in the chairs. Small rockets zoomed all over the place. The Lingards' cat lost its brain and stuck its claws into Mrs Lingard, then ran straight up the mango tree. The double bungers exploded and made our ears numb and everyone was amazed.

My father laughed so much he couldn't speak. But I didn't think it was funny at all. When I got over the shock I just cried like a baby. David Straughan ran home and didn't even say sorry.

When my father finally did speak he said it was the best fireworks display he'd ever seen.

My grandmother gave me 1/6, and because it was so early the Fiveways Store was still open, so I ran all the way but all they had left were some Red Devils and sparklers. I bought them anyway. But when I got home everyone had gone and there was just the family. I lit

the sparklers but I could hardly be bothered writing my name in the air.

When I went to bed my mother said, 'Don't worry, darling, it's a Guy Fawkes Night you'll never forget.'

FIVE

That Christmas holidays we went to Palm Beach down the South Coast past Surfers Paradise. We rented a fibro house just behind the sand dunes. When we walked out of our house and up the dunes, there it was, the entire Pacific Ocean.

I could hardly believe we had two whole weeks to play on the beach and in the water. I watched my father surfing the waves and he was terrific at it. He would push his head out the front and skid straight down the face of the wave. I tried that once in the shallow part but I didn't like the idea of my face being the first thing that hit something so I put my arms out in front. I could tell he thought I was being a sook, but no matter how hard I tried I couldn't keep my hands at my sides. They had a mind of their own.

Anyway, pretty soon when I got in front of a wave it could take me all the way to the beach and my hands would be out there ready to push me up so I could turn around and go back for more. I tried to explain that to him but he was too busy surfing.

My mother put some zinc cream on my nose and lips to protect them from the sun. And she rubbed some red liquid on to my back and shoulders that smelled just beautiful. 'Don't stay out too long' she said, and went off to do some shopping with the baby. By then my father had gone back to the house for a spine bash.

I went back in the water to practise my surfing and it was so beautiful and clean and cool that I stayed for ages. Then I had a rest on my striped beach towel. Actually, it was a cape my mother had made which tied around my shoulders like a swordfighter and when I took it off and laid it down on the sand it became a beach towel. Anyway, I must have had a little doze on it because suddenly my back and shoulders and even my legs were glowing like our radiator.

That night was agony. My mother put calamine lotion all over my back, right down to my heels. Even though she used cotton wool and hardly touched the skin, it was really painful. Then the calamine lotion caked and that hurt the skin. Finally, she moved my bed out on to the verandah and as I lay on my stomach the sea breeze blew gently over my back and I drifted off to sleep.

Next day I had blisters all over me. Hundreds of them. So my mother got out her sewing basket, threaded a needle, then put a bit of cotton in each blister so it soaked up the water inside. It took ages and there were tears running down my face.

'Be brave, darling,' she said. 'Nearly finished.'

For the next few days I had to stay inside and after that I had to wear a singlet when I went for a swim. Our togs were made of prickly material that really itched when it was drying. But in the water they were OK and by the end of the holiday, my mother said I was brown as a berry.

Actually I got freckles.

After six weeks away, going back to school was like starting again. I had that ache in the heart when I kissed my mother goodbye. But it was quite exciting because we moved out of Little School and some more babies moved in. We weren't babies any more.

We had a new teacher too — Mrs Lowe. And our slates had wooden borders on them. In fact, after a while we wrote on paper with our HB pencils. The only bad part of that was that Mrs Lowe wouldn't let me turn my paper on the side. She said, 'You'll go cross-eyed.' She put drawing pins in it to hold it on the desk.

I took them out with my ruler. She said if I did it again she would send me to Mr Murray. I did it anyway.

Mr Murray was the scariest man in the world. He had skin like a Chinaman but he was the tallest person I had ever seen. He had grey hair beautifully combed and parted, not a hair out of place. But the most amazing thing about him was his legs. They went from the ground right up to his armpits, just a short body on top of these amazing legs. In fact, his initials were J.L. and some people said they stood for 'Junior Legs Murray.' Others called him Daddy Long Legs.

He had quite a high-pitched voice and now we were in Big School we had to go to morning parade every day. Mr Murray would stand at the top of the steps in front of the vestibule that ran through the middle of the school and give orders: 'Attention! Stand at ease. Stand easy.'

Then he'd make the announcements and two big kids would pull the flag up the flagpole all folded up; at his signal they would jerk one of the ropes and the flag would magically unfold. At exactly the same time in his office — which ran off the vestibule — another kid put on a record of *God Save the King* and we stood to attention until it was over.

Mr Murray sang it in his high-pitched voice. It wasn't the slightest bit comical. After that we'd march into our classrooms and he'd go back into the vestibule with its big model of a steamship in a glass case and the honour board with the names of students who had brought honour to the school, either for sport or schoolwork.

But the best thing about going back to school was that my mother let me wear bare feet. Nearly all the big kids wore bare feet, except the girls, but a lot of them did too. They might wear shoes to school but when they got there they'd take them off and wouldn't put them back on till final bell. Some of the boys wore sandals. But bare feet were best. You could run fast, you could feel the grass, you could skid down the gutters and it didn't matter if it rained, there were no shoes to get wet. And your feet got really hard.

Don Wilkey's feet got so hard he could walk down the middle of the bitumen in the summer when it was

melting. In fact, he could stand on it without moving for ages. We had contests, standing on the bitumen road when it was melting all round our feet, and Don Wilkey won every time.

Sometimes when I got home my mother would be in the shadows of her bedroom in the middle of the house. That was when she began to get migraines. She would have them for three or four days and there was nothing Dr Forbes could do about them. He took over when Dr Fothergill died. She told him they made her sick in the stomach and she couldn't eat anything. The light hurt her eyes so she stayed in the dark.

When I came home I would go into her room and sit on her bed. I'd tell her what happened that day, very quietly, so I wouldn't wake the baby, then I'd go out to play. But she got up to make tea for my father and me. She tried to be happy but the pain was awful. She didn't even want to sing when we did the washing up.

But after a couple of days the migraines would stop and she would be herself again. Sometimes I would find her doing her roses in the front garden. When she pulled out the weeds I would take them round the back and feed some of them to the chooks, especially the cobbler's pegs. I was helping her with the roses one day when Pat Levy stopped and said hello. He had a black hat on and he lifted it when he spoke to my mother. He was a really big man with black hair and big muscles and he had moved into the house below the Rupert Geddes place with his wife Enid.

He did shift work at the railways and he had a wonderful way of talking. Everything he said sounded

interesting and he talked to my mother and me for quite a long time. Then their nephew Dale Bennett came to have a holiday with them and he was a terrific talker too. He never stopped. He was from a farm at Killarney, where I think he only had cows to talk to. Now he had people and the words just poured out of him. I was always going down there to Pat and Enid's place and once I walked into their kitchen and I could hardly believe my eyes. Enid was standing on the kitchen table with froth all over her legs and Pat was shaving them while she held her dress up.

I had never heard of such a thing. I just stared.

And one time I was in their back yard talking to Pat when I stepped backward into their garden. I was wearing bare feet and my heel went back against a big piece of glass in the dirt and it sliced right into my foot.

Blood everywhere.

Pat picked me up in his arms and ran with me up to our place where my father was. My father said it would probably be OK but Pat said it needed stitches. He put me straight into our car and they drove to Dr Forbes's surgery. He put about 10 stitches into it.

Dale said maybe he would come back after his holidays and live there and go to Ironside. I thought that would be great. He was a couple of years older than me but he didn't treat me like a little kid. We went yabbing in the creek at the bottom of Engles' paddock and one Saturday we rode his bike all the way to Toowong Creek, which was completely full of them.

My mother gave us some meat and we each tied lumps on to the end of a piece of string. We'd toss it into

the creek and in about half a minute there'd be a big green lobby on the end of it, hanging on with its pincers. Then the trick was getting it to the bank and into a net Dale had made. Once you got the knack it was easy and we got 32 lobbies. Dale said it was definitely a Queensland record. We even got two eels. Dale said their teeth were so sharp they could take your finger clean off in a single bite. We put them all in a sugar bag and I had to hang on to it as he gave me a doubler home. I could hear the lobbies clicking in the bag that was resting on my leg as we rode along. I nearly fell off about eight times. My father was away and we took it into the kitchen and called my mother who was bathing the baby.

Dale was so proud of our catch that he emptied all the lobbies and eels on to the kitchen lino and my mother squealed and shouted and jumped about as she tried to fill up a big saucepan and put it on the gas stove. Dale could hardly stand up he was laughing so much and we kept finding lobbies under the kitchen cabinet and climbing into the bread bin and under the new Silent Knight refrigerator.

Then we had to get them in the boiling water and that was even funnier because no one wanted to hold them for more than a second and they got on the stove and over the back. My mother put baby Brian in his high chair and we were making so much noise that he started to cry.

They tasted awful. We had to bury them in the vegetable garden.

Then one night when my father was away for the week, Pat Levy turned up at our back door. He was

bleeding from the lip and there was a graze on his nose. He smelled a bit of beer. He said he'd been in a fight and he wanted my mother to fix him up before he went home to Enid. He couldn't go home in that condition, he said.

I thought she would chase him away but she didn't. She invited him inside and got out the acriflavine and the cotton wool and nursed his wounds. He told us a terrific story about the fight. His enemies had tried to crush him between two carriages that were being shunted together and he'd only just escaped. That's why his pants were torn. The two steel buffers had just missed his legs but they'd ripped his pants. He was limping a bit but my mother helped him up. I had to go to bed then but she made him a cup of tea.

A couple of days later there were ructions. My father was still away and my mother was very nervous. When I came home from school I was just having my milk and a piece of cake when Dale arrived.

'Enid's packin' her port and panickin' , ' he said.

A bit later, after Dale left, my mother said she had a job for me. I had to run down to Enid's place and tell her my mother was terribly upset and crying and ask her to come up at once.

'But you're not crying,' I said.

'I will be,' she said. 'Just give me a minute to think of something sad.' And the next thing I knew she really was crying. It was awful. I'm sure it wasn't about Pat and Enid.

I ran like the wind.

Enid didn't want to come at first but when I thought about my mother crying I actually started crying myself and she changed her mind.

Dale and I stayed behind. He had made a whip out of bamboo and thick string with a piece of leather on the end and it made a terrific crack if you got it right. Then we played cricket. Dale was a good player and Pat had shown him how to keep a straight bat. Then he showed me.

We didn't see Pat and Enid so much after that but Dale did come back and stayed with them while he went to Ironside.

Dale had come back the day the brakes failed. By then my father had stopped riding the big bike he used to meet me with after Sunday school. Dale showed me how to ride it under the bar. You just put your foot on the pedal and instead of putting your leg over the bar — which was far too high for your foot to reach the other pedal — you put it through the middle, then balanced at an angle. You could only do it on free-wheeler bikes with handbrakes because you couldn't put any backward pressure on a footbrake. Anyway, that didn't matter with my father's Speedwell because it had a really good handbrake on the right handlebar.

It was easy when you got used to it and after a few busters I got really good at it. When I showed my father he was quite surprised and when I asked him if I could take it to Sunday school he said OK. He still liked to mow the lawn on Sunday mornings and then he'd have a yarn with Mr Burton over the back fence and probably duck through the hole and have a bottle of beer with him before lunch.

But on this day he was painting the house. He had everything you needed to paint houses. My grandfather

Macklin had a business as a house painter after he came back from Gallipoli and all the trestles and ladders were under my grandmother's house. When my father decided to paint the house white — after my mother said she was fed up with brown — he and his friends from Edwards Dunlop made a real party of it.

On Saturday everyone turned up in their painting clothes and they looked very comical, especially Bruce Dash whose eyes sparkled and who never stopped smiling and making jokes. His wife Stella came. Her eyebrows were just thin lines of hair. My mother said she plucked them. Bruce's brother Alf arrived with his wife Joan. She was really tiny. Alf made jokes too but his were the more serious kind. He had a deeper voice.

Then there was Alf Salisbury who my mother said was a confirmed bachelor. Alf was very handsome and he had a big nose. He was always dressed very neatly and he had an even deeper voice than the other Alf. He played the piano at their parties.

The other couple was the Behs — Merv and Laura. He was quite chubby and he had lots of jokes too but I couldn't understand them. Laura had olive skin and really coarse hair. She had very big white false teeth and she kept pushing her pink tongue against them. She never closed her mouth — you could always see the white teeth and the pink tongue in the middle.

Actually, everyone made jokes when they were together. They never had a minute when no one was speaking. All the men — and Laura — drank beer while they talked. And they all thought my father was

very witty. He didn't tell jokes, he made cracks as the conversation went along.

My mother was always laughing with them. And when she spoke they all listened and laughed and Bruce said in his funny high-pitched voice, 'Oh Hilly, you are a one!'

That was my mother's name — Hilda May.

She was inside cooking dinner the next day when I came back on the bike from Sunday school. I turned into Sundridge Street and pedalled a few times, really picking up speed, then as I passed the Straughans' place I squeezed the handbrake really hard. The wire just snapped and suddenly my speed was picking up and I couldn't turn. If I'd tried I would have crashed and been mangled up in the bike. I saw my father on the trestle between two ladders painting the house on his own and I screamed, 'The brake's broken!' and he looked around at me very fast and lost his balance. I saw him tipping off the trestle saying 'Ahhh!' just as I passed.

Then all I could think of was the barbed wire in front of the creek down the bottom of Westerham Street and holding on to the handlebars. Luckily there were no cars in the area and just before I got to the barbed wire the front wheel hit a log in the grass and I was thrown off.

My mother heard all the commotion and came running out of the kitchen in her apron and holding the wooden spoon. She said she didn't know which way to turn. My father was winded when he hit the ground and he couldn't get his breath for about an hour. But there wasn't any blood so she ran down the hill to the creek.

I skinned my knee and the pedal scraped the flesh off my other shin right to the bone. But I bent the front wheel, so when we got home my father took me under the house and belted me. Then he hit me on the side of my head and I couldn't hear. He told my mother he just gave me a clip under the ear.

That night my mother came and sat on my bed. I hated Sunday nights. So did my mother. We got all sad and teary for no reason at all. But when she sat on my bed I remembered I kept having the dream about Abraham and Isaac on the mountain side. I was always having that dream.

'He really does love you, darling,' she said. 'He just can't show it.' Then she pushed my hair off my forehead and left her hand there. 'One day,' she said, 'one day you'll know everything there is to know.'

Wouldn't that be good, I thought. And I went to sleep in about 10 seconds flat.

SIX

As we got bigger, Ironside got better. The school was changing nearly every year. First they finished the second storey on the Big School, then they built another school the size of Little School. Then they built a driveway up from the big brick gates to the main steps and around the new flagpole which was much higher than the old one. They put in some new tennis and basketball courts and they fenced the top of the oval. Next thing we knew there were two cricket nets made out of heavy wire.

They started a band and we learned to play the fife and the drum. Now we'd actually play 'God Save the King' while Mr Murray sang it. Then we'd play 'Cock o' the North' or some other Scottish tune as everyone marched into school. They just couldn't stop changing things. We didn't mind. We were having great fun.

Most of us, anyway.

In the class there were six of us in the back row, all trying to be top — Jan Blackburn, Ian Gzell, Janice Cribb, Peter Foster, Margie Low and me. Sometimes I was second, third or fourth and one exam I was first. But usually Jan Blackburn and Janice Cribb were first and second, then Peter, Ian and I would fight out the next few placings.

The trouble for Peter and me was that we played sport. Peter was the fastest runner in the class and I was the best at ball games. We always had important stuff to do in the afternoons when the girls were doing their homework and reading books and practising the piano. And once a week I had to go to Elocution. Miss Guyatt taught it in a classroom under the main school. ‘How now brown cow?’ we would say. ‘Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers.’ But that was easy stuff. We’d learn poems, breathe from our diaphragms, place our feet at a 45-degree angle and speak very clearly indeed. So e-v-e-r-y-o-n-e could h-e-a-r you r-i-g-h-t at the b-a-c-k of the c-l-a-s-s. My mother paid for me to go and while I complained to my mates I actually quite enjoyed it.

Ian Gzell had lots of things to do too. He played footy but sport wasn’t really his thing. He lived in Aston Street near Artie Fadden, the Treasurer of Australia, and Fraser East, whose father owned McDonnell and East. His room was full of amazing things, like a steam engine connected to a meccano set. He was an Argonaut and he studied drama.

Actually, his father and Jan Blackburn’s father were architects and they worked together until one day

they had a terrible argument and broke up the business and Ian wasn't supposed to talk to Jan. But that wasn't till much later.

Down the bottom in the front row was Carollie Cox, of course, and Don Wilkey. They sat next to each other till Carollie complained that he was pinching her. So the teacher moved her to sit next to David Stafford, but she said he stank. David Stafford reckoned he tied a penny bungler to a dog's tail and let it off and the dog flew through the air. But nobody saw it. So Carollie finished up sitting with Kay Kleimier, who was very small but could run as fast as a boy.

I had a sort of a gang — Peter Foster, Jeff East, Alastair Stone and me. We played together at lunchtime, and after school we sometimes did things together though Peter and Jeff lived one way up Central Avenue and Alastair and I went in the opposite direction.

On Saturday mornings the four of us played in the Sunday-school cricket competition organised by the Presbyterians at their church. My Methodist church didn't have a team so I joined up with them.

I loved playing cricket. Every afternoon when I got home I went out to the backyard where I had rigged up a cricket ball in one of my mother's old stockings tied to the wire washing line. David Straughan showed me how to rig it. He'd left Ironside by now and had gone to State High but he came around a bit. Like everyone else in Sundridge Street, he liked to talk to my mother. There was never a dull moment, she said.

Anyway, when I hit the ball with my bat it came back to me and I just kept hitting it, time and time

again, till I got sick of defensive prods and belted it. Then around it went and I had to jump out of the way before it conked me on the head.

Quite often Dale would come up for a game in our backyard. He'd be England and I'd be Australia. And if we were playing when David called by he'd bowl us fast leg breaks. The good thing about that was that it made the kids in the Sunday-school teams seem really easy. Dale didn't go to Sunday school. He said, 'I come from a long line of Calathumpians,' whatever that meant.

One holiday I went to his farm in Killarney on the Darling Downs. It wasn't much of a farm really, just a few cows and horses, run by his Uncle Trevor who took me for a ride on the back of his Red Indian motorbike which was scary and thrilling at the same time. Trevor told me about hoop snakes. The farm was full of them, he said. They were terribly dangerous — they'd grab their own tails and roll themselves into a hoop. Then they'd chase you down the hills and up the other side.

He was telling me this one morning while we were walking through a paddock and as we passed a little bush a snake reared up, its head about three feet off the ground. Trevor leapt backwards and squealed and fell over his own feet, then got up and ran around looking for a stick. He ran almost to the other side of the paddock before he found one.

By the time he got back the snake had disappeared. It wasn't a hoop snake. It was a tiger.

Evvie Mae Gibbs came around. She and Mr Gibbs arrived one afternoon with their Bibles to talk to my

mother. She made them a nice cup of tea and some lamingtons and they chatted for ages. Then Mr Gibbs left.

‘Are you coming, Evelyn?’ he said. ‘Are you?’

‘I’ll be along soon,’ Mrs Gibbs said. And he stamped out. It was the first time I knew her name was Evelyn. Anyway, she stayed for ages and when I ran in for a drink of water they were both smoking cigarettes.

My mother smoked about one Ardath cigarette a day. She didn’t do the drawback but she did have this little thing where she could hold the cigarette between two fingers and delicately pick a little piece of tobacco off the end of her tongue with her second finger and thumb. It looked like something a woman in a magazine would do.

She didn’t smoke when David Straughan or Judith Burton or Noela Jones came to chat. They were much younger but they all liked to talk to her. Noela was one of my Sunday-school teachers and the Jones family had been pioneers in the area like the Macklins. And she certainly didn’t smoke when Mrs Wilson dropped over. Mrs Wilson didn’t laugh so much after Mr Wilson died.

‘He was taken off before his time,’ she said. It was her main topic of conversation. My mother went to the funeral and made some sponge cakes and peanut biscuits for the people who came back to the Wilsons’ afterwards. I was glad she didn’t take all the peanut biscuits, only half. But after that Mrs Wilson came in to rest her bones two or three times a week.

‘I’m just taking the load off my feet, Robbie,’ she would say sadly as she drank tea with my mother at the kitchen table. ‘Don’t mind me.’

I didn't. I just ran into my room and got into my old clothes and went out again in about 10 seconds flat.

All the teachers at Ironsides were very good. Even Mr Leach who had shell shock. We had him in about Grade 4 after they had built yet another building, this time a modern version of the Little School, and we had the brand new classroom.

We were his first class at Ironside. Mrs Lowe told Wendy Philbrick, who was the biggest gossip in our class, that he had suffered a breakdown from the war. Wendy told me and a few others at the top of the class and we decided we should all be quiet and well behaved in case he had a fit. Jeff East, Alastair Stone and I told David Stafford that if he mucked up we'd belt him. We didn't tell Don Wilkey; he would only have made mad noises all day.

I tried to talk to Carolle. When I explained about the war she said, 'What do I have to do?'

'Just be normal,' I said.

'I am normal,' she said.

'Well, just be more normal.'

She thought I was cracked.

Anyway, nothing happened for a while. He seemed like a nice man. He was very thin and his hair was receding. He had a dark moustache that was going grey and was stained from his pipe. He spoke very softly and cleared his throat quite a bit.

Then about half an hour after the lesson began he suddenly stuck his hand down the back of his trousers and felt around. He kept talking. It was like his mouth didn't know what the rest of him was doing. But his

hand down the back of his pants was waving about like it was checking if something was missing.

Then out it came and grabbed a piece of chalk and wrote on the blackboard like nothing had happened. Lots of kids were writing at the time and didn't see. But Carolle looked around with her big eyes. I tried to signal her to shut up but it was useless. I saw her say to Kay Kleimier, 'What'd he do that for?'

Then Kay said, 'What?' And everyone down the front started talking and Mr Leach stopped writing and turned around. There was a silence. He looked a bit bemused.

'Everything all right?' he said.

'Yes, sir,' I said from up the back. I said it quite loudly.

'Good.'

He went back to his teaching and for the next 10 minutes no one did a thing but look at him. Then he did it again. Jeff East said, 'I think he's lost his balls.'

Mr Leach heard something. 'What was that?' he asked Jeff.

'Nothing, sir.' Jeff blushed. He didn't mean to say anything, it just slipped out.

At little lunch, David Stafford came over to where Jeff and I were. 'Did you say he'd lost his balls?' Stafford said with a grin.

Jeff said, 'What if he has? Anyway, shut up, Stafford, or we'll belt you.'

'Yeah,' I said.

He did it a couple more times that day and Don Wilkey made some mad noises but after that no one

cared. We hardly even noticed, except when the inspector came in with Mr Murray. He was heading towards Mr Leach, who was up on the little dais, and when Mr Leach suddenly stuck his hand down his pants the inspector got a big surprise, missed his footing and just got the edge of the dais and nearly fell on his face.

Nobody would have minded that we laughed that time.

Not even Jesus.

Actually, after school we laughed so much we nearly died. We just couldn't get out breaths.

One day my mother was terribly excited because we sponsored some relatives of hers to come to Australia from England — Sibyl and Bernie Goodship and their two children, John and Ginty. I didn't know anything about it until just a day or two before they turned up.

We had another baby by then — Jeffrey Ernest — who was named after my godfather Ernie Wagner the dentist. He went to Ironside School with my father. His father was the headmaster at the time. But it was quite complicated because actually Uncle Ernie was a friend of my mother. She told me he took her to Cloudland before she met my father.

She started to tell me other things too but my father got up and left the room. Uncle Ernie and Auntie Elsie hardly ever came round, though he always sent me some money on my birthday. My mother said they used to see a lot of them when they were first married but they had a big argument over a game of Monopoly. Apparently Uncle Ernie took it very seriously and

whenever they landed on his property he'd cackle and clap his hands.

My mother and I sometimes went to their place for afternoon tea. Auntie Elsie always had the good china out and she served bought cakes and biscuits on plates with little linen napkins, and you needed another hand to juggle everything.

One birthday Uncle Ernie took my mother and me to Lennons, the most glamorous and expensive hotel in the city. I had ham salad. But I couldn't quite reach and when I was cutting my meat the whole plate turned upside down on my lap. Auntie Elsie got very upset but she fussed so much my mother got the giggles and soon I was laughing too, even though I had creamy mayonnaise all over my legs and lap.

Their daughter Desley started at Ironside but then went to Somerville House. She said she hated Ironside. I couldn't believe it. They lived next to the Tickles, who were much richer than the Wagners, but Peter Tickle loved Ironside. He was in my class and my Sunday-school class. He got really fat.

Anyway, when the Goodships arrived I had to have my little brother Brian in with me and baby Jeffrey slept in my parents' bedroom; Bernie and Sibyl were in the spare bedroom and John and Ginty were on the verandah. It was awful. The whole thing was just terrible. Bernie hated Australia and Brisbane and Taringa and everything about the place. He had black hair and dark rings around his eyes. He wore his suit and tie the whole time, even though it was summer and really hot. And a couple of days after they arrived he started drinking sherry.

First he'd insult everybody in the house, then he'd take his sherry bottle and go and sit on the tank-stand. Actually, the first time he did it we lost him. Everyone was searching the backyard and under the house and up the mango tree, everywhere. Finally I found him under the tank-stand fast asleep. It was the shadiest place we had.

It was a good hiding place too. I knew it because I went there once when I decided to run away from home after I had an argument with my father. I took two shirts out of my top drawer so my mother would know I'd run away, then I hid under the tank-stand. But I forgot to take a book and after a while it got very boring. Then my mother walked by, saying, 'Oh I do hope he'll be all right. I do hope he'll come back.' So I snuck back to my room and put the shirts back.

She was very pleased to see me.

But no one was pleased to see Bernie except Sibyl — who looked a bit like a bigger, older version of my mother — and who blamed us when he got drunk. She even blamed our mosquitos.

I walked with John and Ginty to school. They both had beautiful pink-and-white faces and everybody said how good-looking they were. His hair was black and hers was red like her mother's. Their skins were like watered-down milk and their lips were dark red. John was a year ahead of me and Ginny was a year behind. But I tried to look after them in the playground and told everyone they were my cousins. They didn't say much. I think they were worried about Bernie.

After a while they found a house which was actually bigger than ours and they got their own friends at school. I wasn't sure if they were really relatives or not. The parents never talked about it while I was there.

After they moved into their own place we never saw Bernie and Sibyl again except once when my parents gave a party and invited all the people from Edwards Dunlop. It was a sort of hello and goodbye party for them.

My mother had a black dress with tiny green and red leaves; it was made from material that clung to her and it had shoulder pads. I had to go into her bedroom for something when she was just finishing putting on her face. She drew on her lipstick in a very expert way and pushed her lips together and around to spread it over them evenly. Then she tucked back a bit of hair and said, 'Well, what do you think? Will I do?'

'Yes,' I said. 'I think you're very beautiful.'

'Oh dear,' she said, and the next thing I knew she was having a little cry.

I was allowed to stay up quite late at that party. We had a piano in the lounge room which my mother was always about to learn to play and never did. But Alf Salisbury, the confirmed bachelor, could play pretty well and everyone sang very loudly. Someone — I think it was the Dashes — brought a gramophone and they danced and drank beer and made jokes. Sibyl jumped about like a big girl, legs everywhere. That was the first party the Liddles came to — Uncle Peter and Aunty Ikey Liddle had moved into the house above the

Straughans in Sundridge Street and almost at once they became very close friends.

Then my mother said to me, 'Where's Bernie?'

I knew straight away ... down by the tank-stand ...

Not long after they left we went to Hunchie, where Uncle Sid and Aunty Betty Rann had a dairy farm. Aunty Betty was Mum's bridesmaid and though she was just as cheery as Aunty Jess she had asthma nearly every day. The farm was up in the mountains west of Mooloolaba and it was the muddiest farm in the world.

It had mud so deep that you couldn't walk in it with Wellington boots — it would either spill over the top or it would suck the boots right off your feet. It was the colour of baby poo. In bare feet it squished up through your toes right up to your knees. But the mud was good for one thing, the slide that carried the big cream cans out to the front gate with us kids on board and Robin the old horse pulling like mad.

We all loved Robin. She was about 24 when we first went out there and anyone could ride her. All the Rann kids could anyway. Joan was a couple of years older than me; then there was Beverley who was a year younger and Mary who had blonde plaits, little Lyn and Harold who looked a lot like his father, even though he was only about five.

Uncle Sid looked like no one else in the world. He was really tall and he wore shorts and an old army singlet and he had hair sprouting from everywhere — his shoulders, his ears, his nose — and on top of his head it went straight up and made him look like he was

always surprised about something. His eyebrows were always halfway up his forehead and everything was funny. He laughed all the time and there were bits of froth at the corners of his mouth and around his false teeth that didn't quite fit. His voice was high and when some cow trod on his foot it got even higher.

He got up really early in the morning when it was still dark and so did I. There was a big wood stove in the kitchen and we put some chips on and soon had it going really well. 'It's perkin' along, Robbie,' he'd say. 'It's perkin' just the way I like it.'

There was even a tap on the stove itself that gave you really hot water, and we could toast our bread — great big chunks that Uncle Sid cut himself — straight on the fire. That was my job, toasting the bread, and Uncle Sid had made his own toasting fork out of wire.

He made his own butter too and he just covered the hot toast with it and he'd say, 'Whattaya think, young fella?' And I'd say, 'Scrumptious.'

He found that very amusing but I thought it was a perfect word. The Famous Five were always having food that was 'scrumptious'. And later in the day, after the milking, Auntie Betty would whip up a batch of scones and, with her own raspberry jam, we'd have 'lashings of cream', also like the Famous Five. But Julian and George and Dick and Anne never tasted Uncle Sid's homemade cream. I told Uncle Sid, they didn't know what scrumptious was.

But that came at the end of the milking. First we had to put the cows in the bales and tie the legope;

then wash their udders in warm water from a rag you dunked in a bucket. Then we had to stick the suckers on to the teats, and if you didn't get that right the cow would start bucking and kicking about.

It was quite difficult because every udder was different and there were four suckers to put on almost at once. The first few times I had a bit of a problem and once Clementine kicked my bucket practically out the door. Then she peed and slopped all over the place — hot, steaming slop. But once I got used to it I really enjoyed it. I loved the creamy smell of it.

After the suckers had done their job, Uncle Sid pulled up his little stool and 'stripped' the rest. He tried to teach me how — grabbing the teat and pushing upwards into the udder so some milk would come down into it, then squeezing and pulling downwards at the same time.

I could never quite get the knack of it. My forearms didn't seem strong enough. My mother said I had aristocratic wrists.

After the milking we did the separating and then we washed up the separator which had about 50 different parts to it. Then we'd go back to the house for breakfast and it was like half the day was over and it was still breakfast time.

After breakfast Uncle Sid and my father would go out to do some things with his crops. He planted lots of tomatoes or beans on the hillsides. It was very hilly because it was just down the mountain from Montville and you really had to ride a horse to explore it. We kids would go riding on Robin and the other horse, which

only Joan and Beverley could ride. I loved riding Robin once I got used to the height. From the ground Robin's back looked quite low but when you got up there it was like the top of a tall building, and once Uncle Sid persuaded my mother to have a ride.

She was just in her ordinary dress and when he let the reins go Robin did a little trot and a canter round the horse paddock and my mother squealed and giggled and hooted so much that Uncle Sid couldn't stand up, he was laughing so much. She laughed too and there were tears in her eyes. But next day I noticed the most terrible scarlet bruises on her legs where they'd been pinched between the saddle and the stirrup straps.

It must have been agony. 'I didn't want to make a fuss,' she said.

That afternoon Uncle Sid killed a calf for veal. It was a beautiful, soft little calf I'd been feeding with the separated milk. He sucked my fingers when I put milk on them. Uncle Sid hit him with a huge lump of wood. He collapsed into the baby-poo mud.

Blood everywhere.

'Don't worry, Robbie,' he said. 'He didn't know what hit him.'

SEVEN

Next year I told a lie. I was walking down Indooroopilly Road opposite Elsie Glassop's place when I realised I had done it. I had told my mother the day before that I'd been to Miss Guyatt's elocution class after school and I hadn't. I'd been playing cricket. My first lie.

My mother would know, because somehow she got to know everything, and Jesus would know because that's what Jesus did — he kept an eye on everyone and counted up the good things and the bad things and put them in a ledger book — like when I used to play offences — just in case you were hit by a car and finished up in the wrong place.

But it wasn't about being found out and punished that troubled me, it was actually telling the lie. I had never done it before and I told myself I would never do it again. It felt terrible. And I actually *enjoyed* elocution.

The poetry was easy to learn and it told beautiful stories about soldiers riding into the valley of death and animals talking like people, and some were even quite funny if you *expressed yourself with feeling* the way Miss Guyatt said.

‘There once was a fat little piggy,’ I said with feeling.

‘All perky, and proud, and gay,
 Who fell in love with a pussy,
 Who lived just over the way,
 So he took out his green umbrella
 And put on his Sunday hat,
 And trotted away, all perky and gay
 To call on Miss Pussy Cat ...’

I had always expressed myself with feeling and when I did, people stopped and listened. I liked that. I especially liked it when they chose me to be in a road-safety film and our whole class was in it and Ian Gzell told the director he should be the star because he did drama; I only did elocution.

Ian had a very good point because he’d even learned to act with his back. He showed me round at his place one afternoon; you could say lots of things just by moving your back.

Ian went to the First Toowong Scout Troop and I was pleased to see him when I joined. But the best thing about it was the Scout shop in town where my mother and I went on a Saturday morning to buy the uniform. It had a wonderful atmosphere of camping in the wilds by a mountain stream, a crackling campfire surrounded by neat little tents. And the uniforms were

terrific, especially the scarves and toggles and belts with metal buckles that slipped magically together.

I rode there on my father's bike and Arkela tried to teach us reef knots and first aid. We said, 'Ar-ke-la, we'll do our best,' but my best wasn't very good. My heart wasn't in it because the Scouts were also there and they bullied the cubs. Arkela was always trying to stop them hitting and pushing little kids and I got in a fight. Gadding, the scoutmaster, did nothing but teach knots like 'sheepshanks' and I could never get them right. He was the worst bully of all. He had a face like a skeleton.

Chariot races were fun. That's when we made a wooden frame from branches and leather bindings. One cub was the rider, hanging on to the reins while three or four others pulled it like galloping horses, down to a peg, around and back again. We did that on the camp too, but the camp was nothing like the pictures in the Scout shop. It was cold at night, the tents were all saggy, everything was greasy, the food was horrible and no one could sleep. People were going backwards and forwards all night and people's hands were coming under the tent and groping around. In the morning Arkela had a black eye. She said she walked into her tent pole but no one believed her. Gadding's eyes were all red around the edges.

Anyway, you didn't have to speak in the film, only act. You had to get off a bus and walk around the front and start to cross the road when a car came racing up Hawken Drive and almost bowled you over. You had to get a fright and run back to the footpath. Then you

had to do the same thing but go behind the bus this time with the same car racing down Hawken Drive. Another big fright and back to the footpath. Finally you had to wait till the bus cleared out, then look right, then left, then right again before walking smartly — not running — across the road to school. And the car went by behind you.

My mother and I and our entire class were invited to see it at the City Hall with Mr Murray the headmaster and lots of police and road safety people and it was very comical. It looked like the man driving the car had made up his mind to kill Robbie Macklin for absolutely no reason at all. Don Wilkey reckoned I should have waited till he got close and chucked a rock at his windscreen.

Carollie Cox thought I was very brave. And here's the strangest thing — when I finally got on the bus, the driver was Gadding!

I used to see him on the bus sometimes when I went into town with my mother. I always said 'Hello Gadding' when I paid but he pretended he didn't know me. Then my mother told me they put him in jail. She asked me if he came into my tent on the camp but he didn't and I never went back. We gave my cub uniform to the poor.

Anyway, while I really liked elocution, I liked cricket better.

So the day I told a lie I asked Marilyn Coulter and Jennifer Payne to tell Miss Guyatt I was sick and went off to play on the oval with the bigger kids. Trouble was, Marilyn Coulter and Jennifer Payne were not

trustworthy in such matters and they told Miss Guyatt exactly what I was doing and Miss Guyatt not only told my mother, she told Mr Murray too.

So I had not only told a lie that Jesus knew about for his private ledger of sins, but it was the main topic of conversation for half of Ironside and most of Taringa.

I promised my mother I wouldn't do it again and for some silly reason I cried. Then next day I went to Miss Guyatt's room and apologised to her. She was having singing lessons and she made me join in. It was OK but I was the only boy there and after a while she showed mercy and let me go.

Then I had to report to Mr Murray and that was really scary. He was sitting in his office with his huge long legs all over the place. He had horn-rimmed glasses and black eyes like a Chinaman and if he gave you the cuts on the hand he brought the cane down from somewhere near the ceiling. Don Wilkey peed on his hand to make the skin tougher. But I had never been given the cuts and Don said all I could do was make my fingers slope downwards so the cane glanced off them.

But he didn't hit me. He said, 'Miss Guyatt tells me you're her best pupil.'

I couldn't believe it. I thought Miss Guyatt hated me. I didn't know what to say.

'You know you've disappointed your mother, don't you?'

Oh dear. That made me teary. 'Yes,' I said. 'I promised her I wouldn't do it again.'

'Good.'

'I also told Jesus.'

Mr Murray looked at me for a while. Then he got a bit teary.

'Off you go then,' he said.

When I got outside, Don Wilkey and a few others were waiting at the bottom of the vestibule steps.

Don said, 'How many did you get?'

I shook my hand, flicking it like a person with a thermometer. 'A few,' I said.

Then I thought, 'Oh no; lie number two.'

God punished me a bit later with the world's biggest carbuncle on the knee. We thought it was just a boil and that morning when I went to school my mother put magnaplast on it to draw out the pus. But it hadn't broken yet and by lunchtime it was just agony. Mrs Lowe, who we had for the second time, said I should go home and ask my mother to call the doctor.

It seemed like a thousand miles. I could hardly put my right foot on the ground. It took forever to walk up the top of Hawken Drive to Swann Road and even though it was downhill for the next mile it seemed to get worse with each step. I had to pass Dr Forbes's office in the Fiveways but I only wanted to get home. Finally I was just blubbing and sobbing and when I got home I had no energy left.

My mother went into a panic when she saw me. She telephoned Dr Forbes but he was out on his rounds or at the hospital. And when she undid the bandage and saw the carbuncle she said, 'Oh my God.' It was the first time I'd heard her swear.

Then she ran into Mrs Lingard's, who came in to look after Brian and Jeffie, and my mother made me get

on her back and she piggy-backed me up the hills to Dr Forbes's surgery. Her back was very warm and I had to hold my arm down around her neck so I didn't choke her. She was only five feet one and a half inches tall and quite thin. I could feel her bones underneath my arms and at her hips. She stopped a few times when she was puffed and I tried to walk but I couldn't take a step. When we were nearly there Digger pulled up in his delivery truck and drove us the rest of the way.

'That leg'll definitely have to come off,' he said. My mother tried to laugh but we were both too upset.

We'd only been at Dr Forbes's for about one minute when he came in and he took us first. When he lanced the carbuncle I just about fainted. Not from the pain, just the horrible look of it. It had five heads.

St Lucia was growing so fast and so many new kids were coming into our class at Ironside that they divided it in two and we got Mr Kinnon. He was much younger than Mrs Lowe and Mr Murray and he was really dramatic. If we were all talking he'd take the huge blackboard set square and smack it face down on his table. It made a bang like a bomb going off and the first time it happened Carollie Cox jumped straight up and started crying. That was the only sound in the room. Then Mr Kinnon said very quietly, 'Sit down, Carol, and we'll all be still and quiet.' And just like magic, Carollie sat down and didn't even snuffle.

Mr Kinnon certainly knew how to get your attention. He knew how to keep it too when he did mental arithmetic around the class. He'd start off, 'Eight plus seven,' then point to someone and you'd have to

have the answer ready, 'minus four,' then he would point to someone else, 'plus 12, you, takeaway six, you, plus nine, plus nine again, you, wrong, you, no, up the back Ian Gzell, tell them ... ' And he'd keep it up for ages.

We got really good at it too and sometimes he'd only ask the good kids and we'd go for the record, 20 or 25 without a break. And he'd really speed up at the end. Ian was fantastic at it. I sometimes wondered if Mr Kinnon really knew all the answers himself but Ian said he was sure of it, he was never wrong. 'It's just a trick,' he said. 'It's not that hard once you know how.' I had to concentrate really hard but Mr Kinnon made it such fun that I enjoyed it.

Our reward for the record was a Bruce and Chigwegwie story. Bruce was a mate of Mr Kinnon's in South America and Chigwegwie was his black friend. Bruce rode a white horse and Chigwegwie would run along beside them, holding on to the stirrup strap. He could run for whole days at a time without pausing for rest. He could smell water from miles away and he knew all the edible fruits in the jungle. He and Bruce had the most exciting adventures battling smugglers and crooks who wanted to sell guns to the natives in exchange for their gold.

Chigwegwie could shoot blow darts and arrows with total accuracy. Once, when Bruce was captured, he shot an arrow into a tree, then shot another one into the end of the first one to make a hand hold for Bruce to lift himself to freedom. What a team. When Mr Kinnon told the stories everyone breathed very quietly.

He took us for football and cricket too. We played Aussie Rules at Ironside and he was terrific at stab kicks. In the cricket season he taught us the backward defensive stroke and the forward defensive stroke and the leg glance. I practised the defensive strokes in our backyard. I kept wearing out my mother's old silk stockings.

I practised the shots at our Sunday-school cricket matches too and Mr Kinnon was right — if you watched the ball on to the bat and you had your feet in the right position, you wouldn't get out. I was the opening bat and I was often still in when everyone else was out.

That birthday my father gave me a brand new bat. I could hardly wait to get out into the backyard to play with it. It was signed by someone named Lilywhite. My father didn't know him either; he thought he might have been captain of England but he was obviously a very good player. He said I had to wipe linseed oil on it with a clean rag and stand it in a saucer with more linseed oil. I knew all about that. I didn't mind at all. But when I got it outside and started to stroke the ball, I could hardly lift it.

Obviously, Mr Lilywhite didn't have aristocratic wrists. I always took it with me to cricket and I tried to use it once but it was hopeless. I tried to explain to my father but he got angry. I always asked him to come and watch the games but he never came.

Then we bought the shop at the Fiveways.

EIGHT

My mother was very serious. One night she came and sat on my bed. I was reading *The Coral Island*, which was miles better than the Famous Five books and Biggles. Actually I thought it was the best book ever written. 'You're 10 years old,' she said.

'Nearly 11,' I said. I really wanted to get back to the book. Jack and Pip were in terrible trouble from the pirates.

She said, 'So I want you to know what we've decided. I'll need all your help, Robbie. We're thinking about buying the corner store at the Fiveways.'

The South Sea adventurers suddenly seemed very far away.

I didn't know what to think. In a way, life was perfect. I loved school, and cricket was getting better all the time. Sure, at home things were not so happy. My father was always getting 'trapped' at the pub and he

even brought bottles of beer home with him. I heard my mother say he was 'going nowhere.'

But at the weekends we'd go to parties with the Dashes, the Behs and the other people from Edwards Dunlop. The men would stand around the keg of beer in someone's backyard and the women would natter among themselves until the men were 'ripe'; then they'd all join in and laugh and make jokes. I was much older than the other kids. I liked listening to the adults. Whenever he saw me my father would shoo me away. But it was all quite interesting.

Brian was four and Jeff, who was fair like our side of the family but with our father's dark eyes, was already one and a bit. He was a handful, Mum said. He was pernickety about his food.

During the week the Liddles from up the road — Uncle Peter and Auntie Ikey — would come to play canasta. Peter was the top salesman for National Cash Registers and Ikey was short like my mother but with curly dark hair, like George in the Famous Five. She had been a driver in the war. They didn't have any kids so they were quite well off. My mother said it was nice to have them around, but between the socialising and bringing up us kids and doing dressmaking to make ends meet it was all starting to add up. Her migraines were playing up. It was time for a change, time to make a break. This was our big chance.

But she couldn't do it without me. I had to pick up my things off the floor, tidy my room and do my jobs like setting the table without being asked. I had to look after the kids from time to time and generally be a help around the place.

'Which shop?' I asked since there were two side by side — Mac's Store on the high side, with a second storey above the shop; and the Fiveways Store which was smaller and had the house attached to the back of it. I hoped it was Mac's Store because some of the kids at school were calling me Macka instead of Robbie and it sounded quite grown up.

'The little one,' she said.

When we got there it didn't seem little at all. The front window had triangular display panels for fruit and vegetables. Inside, the counter ran along half of one side and behind it were shelves with the most common things people asked for — like sugar, flour, Vegemite, Aspros and cigarettes — while the other half was the ice-cream fridge with four metal wells filled with vanilla, strawberry, chocolate and chocolate brickle ice-cream; at the front were very tall glass jars of brightly coloured lollies.

Then there was a space and at right angles another fridge full of bacon and ham, Windsor sausage, garlic sausage, milk, cream and soft drinks. Behind the fridge was the door leading to the storeroom packed with groceries, and beyond that the house: kitchen, dining room, lounge room through to the verandah or down the hallway to the two big bedrooms, the bathroom, the laundry and then out the back landing to the yard with its own Hills Hoist.

It seemed huge. My bedroom was down the end of the louvred verandah on the western side facing Mt Coot-tha, where the storm clouds gathered in the afternoons. Outside was a beautiful frangipani tree.

I would smell its perfume in the evenings. I had a three-quarter bed all to myself.

There was even an area under the house. Mr Thompson, who was selling it to us, said, 'This is where I keep the bags of potatoes and onions. I try to have them weighed up and bagged in advance. It saves time.' My father thought that was a great idea. He had someone in mind instantly for that job.

I could hardly wait to get to school to tell everyone about it. But we didn't move in until the August holidays and when we did we discovered that Mr Thompson's figures didn't quite add up. The business had been allowed to run down and all the family's money went on restocking. And since my father no longer had a company car from Edwards Dunlop he had to buy one. All he could afford was a 1926 Chev with a black canvas roof. You had to start it with a crank handle, but once you got it going it went like a sewing machine. It was nice and airy in summer, but when it rained, water blew in on everyone, especially us kids in the back.

My mother had made him six new calico aprons, each with a bib and a tape round the neck as well as tapes round the middle. He looked the part. Each day except Sunday he'd put on a new one. On Sundays we opened only for two hours in the morning — 10 to 12 — and two in the afternoon — 4 to 6 — so he wore the Saturday one inside out. Grandmother Macklin, who now lived nearby, didn't approve of Sunday opening.

'It's an offence in the eyes of the Lord,' she said to my parents. 'You should be ashamed of yourselves. You should keep the Sabbath holy.'

My father left the room. 'We have to open for the papers,' my mother said. 'If we don't, they'll go next-door.'

The papers were important, especially the *Sunday-Mail*. Everybody bought a copy and those who didn't have it delivered came to our shop and always bought something else as well. If we didn't open, the newspaper company would take its business to Mac's Store which was owned by two Englishmen.

One was Mr Owens, the other was Mr Minter, and they were our deadly enemies. Their shop was like a big dark cave and when we first arrived the Owens lived on the top floor, though we hardly ever saw them. Mr Owens spoke very loudly through a wide mouth and with a strong English accent. 'Raaatherr!' he would say, when he really just meant 'Yes.'

'Do you reckon it's going to rain, Mr Owens?'

'Oh, raaaatherrr.'

Mr Minter was slightly younger and taller and had dark hair. When the Owens moved out to 'grander quarters,' Mr Minter lived on the top floor alone until he found a mail-order bride in a catalogue at the back of a magazine. She had dark hair too but you hardly noticed that because she wore very short shorts and had huge bosoms. She'd walk about on their top verandah smoking cigarettes while I was practising cricket on the Hills Hoist, which was even better than the old clothes line because when you wound it right down into the sprockets it didn't move around.

But that was a little later. When we were first there we hardly took any notice of the people next-door because we were so busy staying afloat. Twice a week my

father would take the old car to the markets in the city and buy fruit and vegetables. Then he would polish up the apples and arrange all the produce in the triangles behind the front window. He had plenty to keep him busy dealing with travellers and serving customers.

But that was really nothing compared to my mother's work. Many years later our old boarder, Mark Formby, wrote a story about my mother that he sent to a magazine. 'I suppose I must have been a pain in the neck to Hilda,' he wrote, 'but she never said so.

'She was without a doubt the best housekeeper I've ever known. That place [in Sundridge Street] was clean from front to back and in the hot Brisbane weather you change your clothes regularly. They didn't have time to hit the floor before Hilda had them washed and ironed and folded and back on your bed. Everything was clean.

'She did have one quirk: she would often change the furniture about without telling you and it was quite an experience if you came in late at night to negotiate your way around the house without knocking something over ...'

She brought that same dedication to cleanliness at the shop and the big house behind it. When we first moved in she put bright, colourful new lino in the shop and the kitchen, then she put a spotted scarf round her hair, filled the place with mops and buckets and feather dusters, took every single item off all the shelves and cleaned and scrubbed from the front door to the back. And whenever we'd slack she'd start up another song — 'She'll be coming round the mountain when she

comes/she'll be coming round the mountain when she comes ...

'She'll be riding six white horses ... '

Oh that song. It ran around my head for about a week till I pushed it out with an even worse song:

I've got a luvverly bunch of coconuts

There they are all standing in a row

Big ones, small ones, some as big as your head

Give them a twist, a flick of the wrist,

That's what the showman said ... oh ...

And away it would go again. Whoever made up that song should be shot.

Ikey Liddle came to help. She was a great friend. 'She worked like a Trojan,' my mother said. I thought she was very nice too. When she arrived and left she always kissed me right on the lips, just like a grown-up.

It took ages to get everything shipshape. But that was really just the beginning because every day everything changed. People walked dirt and dust into the shop, the packaging of new stock piled up, dishes and clothes got dirty and had to be washed, dried and ironed. Children had to be cared for. And while the customers weren't exactly busting down the door, my mother had to be always on hand to serve them when my father was away or when there was a rush on. Naturally, the rushes always occurred when my mother was the busiest on other things, like cooking dinner.

And every month they had to pay back the bank.

Things became grim. My father showed fear. He clucked his tongue like a chook. His eyes opened wide like a prisoner before a German firing squad. He started smoking.

We had a money drawer in the counter and when customers bought several items my mother or father would add up the total on a scratch pad, take the money and get the change from the drawer which was divided into round sections with metal bowls containing pennies and halfpennies, threepenny bits, sixpences, shillings and two-shilling pieces. The notes — 10 shillings, one pound, five pound and 10 pound — were in a separate compartment behind the bowls.

Peter Liddle tried to persuade them to buy a cash register but there was just no money to spare.

At first, my father didn't want me in the shop serving customers. My job was underneath the house in the gloom weighing up 4lb and 7lb paper bags of potatoes and 1lb and 2lb bags of onions. And once a day I had to take out the jumbled cases of soft-drink bottles that people had returned for their twopenny deposit and arrange them in their proper wooden boxes in the driveway between us and Mac's Store — Coca-cola in one set of boxes, Tristram's in another, Kirks in another and half-pint Golden Circle pineapple juice bottles in yet another.

Taking out the bottles was a really boring job. I did most of it before church on Sunday. I was the only one who went to church. I kept the Sabbath holy for the entire family.

I didn't mind. Instead of Sunday school with the little kids, we had fellowship. The system was quite similar — first Bible studies then Miss Guyatt would make us into a choir and we'd practice till we were note-perfect. I usually shared my hymn book with

Lynette Brittan and after fellowship we'd troop into the front of the church near the minister, Mr Wardlaw, and sing the hymns with feeling.

When it was time for the sermon we'd go down into the pews with everyone else so we'd get the full force of Mr Wardlaw's elocution. He was very interesting to listen to — not the actual words but the tuneful way he spoke them, the quick bits, the pauses, the serious frowning words, the long silences, the really loud parts followed by little whispers. No doubt about it, he'd have topped Miss Guyatt's elocution class any day.

The actual meaning of the words was sometimes hard to grasp. The Trinity, for example, made no sense to me. How could three things be one thing at the same time? It didn't add up. And I just couldn't picture the Holy Ghost no matter how hard I tried. Jesus was the best part. In my mind he was now like a much older brother. I welcomed him into my heart.

When I went back to school after the holidays I sometimes got a mate to help me with the bottles. By then Johnny Milczewski had arrived at Ironside and in a way he was my best mate because he hung around with me all the time. I had been friends for longer with Alastair Stone, Ian Gzell, Jeff East and Peter Foster. But only Alastair lived near me and his mother made him wear sandshoes and do his homework after school.

Johnny Milczewski lived farther along Swann Road, past Adsett Street where Wendy Philbrick lived, in fact almost to the end of it, then down to Keating Street. He didn't have a mother. He lived with his father and his grandmother who came from Poland, so

in a way he shared my mother with me. He'd come to our place every afternoon and she'd have two afternoon teas instead of one waiting for us on the kitchen table. We might do a few things, play a bit of cricket, pack a few bottles and then off we'd go.

He had total courage. One day we took my scooter to Victoria Street which ran off Swann Road like a huge slippery dip. It went down steeply then levelled off a bit, then you went over the Edge of Death. It was terrifying; the handles of my scooter vibrated like I was passing through the sound barrier. If you didn't hold really tight the wheel would twist around and you'd go right over into the rough bitumen and rip the skin off your body.

You could always turn off the road on to the grass footpath, and the first couple of times that's what we did. But then Johnny did the full trip, no turn-offs, at about a thousand miles an hour, and when he brought the scooter back to me at the top I knew I had no choice.

Victoria Street looked about as high as Mt Everest and it was ages before I got up the courage. Then away I went, nice and slow, one foot behind the other, both hands gripping the handlebar. The first slope was bad enough. I was really tempted to cruise over to the grass but I didn't, and suddenly I was over the Edge of Death and it was like Biggles in a power dive in his Spitfire with the canopy open and the wind roaring into my face like a cyclone. The handlebars bucked around and my fingers were painful from hanging on so hard. For one terrible second I thought

the wheel was going to bounce sideways out of control but then suddenly I was at the bottom and I could hear the world around me again. It was a beautiful sound.

But here's the mad thing. When I took the scooter back up, he jumped on it straightaway and pushed off with his foot and pushed again about four times till he was going at fantastic speed even before he reached the Edge of Death. The speed was unbelievable, and when he got to the bottom he was practically out of control and finished up on the grass. He didn't get hurt but I reckoned it was time to go home.

'Where did you get to?' my father said angrily.

I tried to tell him but he wasn't interested. He clucked his tongue.

My mother was in the kitchen feeding Jeffie his mashed up vegetables. 'Here, darling' she said, 'take over here and I'll give your father a hand.'

'OK.'

'Wash your hands first.'

Jeffie wasn't crazy about vegetables. I had to make the spoon into a plane zooming around then down into his mouth. Brian was playing with his blocks in the lounge. He was quite fat and we watched him carefully because one day at Sundridge Street when he was just a baby sitting on the window seat, he pulled himself up and fell out the window.

Everyone panicked. I heard my mother scream and my father ran down the front stairs and held him in his arms, and then Brian bawled really loudly. 'That's a good sign,' she said.

Dr Forbes said, 'Keep a close eye on him.'

My mother never forgave herself. 'You turn away for just a moment ...' she said about a hundred times. But there were no after-effects. He was perfectly fine.

Now that we were at the Fiveways, Dr Forbes was just over the road. And in the same area was Mr Kenny the dentist, and next-door Miss Chalmers the chemist. Digger McAlpine's butcher shop had been remodelled to make it much bigger and it was on the corner next to Miss Chalmers.

It was like a little village. Dr Forbes was an old family friend and Mr Kenny was a nice chap with ginger hair and a long nose. Noela Jones worked for Miss Chalmers and studied pharmacy at university. She was always popping in for a natter with my mother. Miss Chalmers herself was very smart with dark hair going slightly grey. She had been in a terrible car accident when she swerved to miss a dog and ran into a telegraph pole and was left with a scar on her cheek. My father said, 'You should never swerve to miss an animal.' But he was always quite nervous around Miss Chalmers. Perhaps that's why he lost his temper the day I chucked the onion.

I was under the house weighing up bags of potatoes and white onions and I'd found a really squishy rotten onion. I'd put it to one side and I wasn't even thinking about it when David Stafford walked by our fence and saw me through the palings under the house.

He used to go to Mac's Store for his mother. He said, 'Your place stinks.' It was just something he made up, but when he started carrying on that day I grabbed the onion and ran out and chucked it at him with a really whippy action. It sped right at him but he ducked

and it shot across the road; to my total horror it went straight as an arrow through Miss Chalmers' door.

I couldn't see inside but Noela Jones said later that it zoomed into the shop, hit something near the floor, just missed a customer and shot straight up to the ceiling where it stuck for a second, then plopped on to Miss Chalmers' counter. All I knew was that Miss Chalmers came to the door holding the rotten onion and David Stafford laughed like a looney and said, 'He did it; Robbie Macklin did it.'

Next thing she arrived in our shop still holding the onion and my father went completely berserk. He grabbed me in our backyard, took off his belt and just kept slashing it across my whole legs and back until he was completely puffed. Later my mother told me I should go and apologise to Miss Chalmers, and that was nearly as bad. But she was very nice and in the prescription area Noela got the giggles.

That was the year I got an onion in my Christmas stocking. I didn't know it until the day, but we had absolutely no money to buy me Christmas presents except for a little balsa model plane for about sixpence and some lollies from the shop. So to fill out my pillow slip my mother wrapped up some potatoes and onions in fancy paper.

She was trying to be kind but it didn't really work. I didn't understand.

NINE

Many years later, when I read Mark Formby's article I wondered about that little model plane. Mark wrote, 'In those days there was only the radio for entertainment so I decided to build a model boat which I proceeded to do on Hilda's dining room table. Much to her horror, I spread out sheets of paper and brought wood, glue, knives, razor blades and paint on to that beautiful polished table. I didn't have working plans and when it came to the sails Hilda volunteered to do the work. Unfortunately, they had to be very accurate and when they were starched and pressed it was found they had enlarged fractionally and so Hilda was there for many hours fixing the rigging.

'I took it back to Sydney on a visit to see my brother when he came back from the war and my next venture in model making — and thank goodness for Hilda's sake, my last endeavour on her dining room

table — was to build an aeroplane from cartridge paper.

‘The only good feature of it was that it had a cedar propeller and when it was finished we couldn’t give it to Hilda’s son to play with because it would have lasted five minutes, so it was hung from the ceiling ...’

We closed the shop on Christmas Day and Good Friday — Grandmother Macklin would have had a conniption otherwise — but we opened every other day and it wasn’t long before I was serving too. At first my father said I could only serve other kids because adults would be insulted if some kid served them. In fact, it was exactly the opposite. The kids hated being served by another kid but the adults didn’t mind at all.

He said I could never wear bare feet, which was a bit of a pain, but sandals were fair enough; and my mother said there were special things I had to say. At the start, for example, I had to address the customer directly and say either, ‘Can I help you?’ or ‘Yes, please?’ And after they had asked for various things I should never say, ‘Is that all?’ I had to say, ‘Is there something else?’

I didn’t mind, especially when my mother explained that they were all designed to make the customers happy and willing to buy more things they might have seen on the shelves but weren’t on their list. She made the customers happy just by being herself. She could natter and serve and have them laughing all at the same time.

It was most important, she said, that when we were all serving during a rush we were really nice to each other so the customers would feel comfortable.

Sometimes she even sang and the customers loved it. When my father wasn't there I sang with her. Quite soon the business really began to pick up.

At school we had Mr England for the first time. He knew everything. You could say any town in Australia and he could tell you instantly the name of the main street. When we couldn't think of any more towns he'd think of them himself and the name of the main street would be right on the tip of his tongue. It was one of the things he learned in the war when he was a prisoner of the Japs in Changi.

Johnny Milczewski and I reckoned he must have gone around the camp talking to the other prisoners and asking them where they came from. Then he'd ask what the main street was and he'd commit it to memory. No one could commit things to memory like Mr England. His first name was Clem and before the war he'd played Rugby Union for Queensland even though he was quite short and plump. He parted his hair almost in the middle and he always spoke softly.

Changi must have been terrible. Don Wilkey said he had his appendix cut out with a piece of galvanised iron. That's why he didn't get married and have kids. But then we heard he did get married. Mr Kinnon went to the wedding. And even though he was quite old, his wife had a child. It wasn't a miracle exactly but it was certainly something you'd write home about.

He called me Macklin and he never smiled. He gave me the feeling that he knew something awful about me that I didn't know myself. But the lessons were terrifically interesting and at the weekends he'd

give us a map to draw for homework, usually Australia or one of the states.

I always meant to do my map on Friday nights but I'd put it off and listen to the wireless — especially if there was a courtroom drama with clever cross-examinations. The lawyers were always brilliant and they spoke with beautiful accents. By Sunday night the thought of doing the map seemed to be pressing down on my head.

It took ages. First, you had to trace the coastline from an atlas and you'd have to put drawing pins in the corners to keep the tracing paper steady. Then you'd put the paper over a page in your map book and go over the coastline with a thicker pencil. After that — and this was the tricky bit — you'd have to follow the groove on the page with your pen dipped in black Indian ink.

If you were doing, say, the rivers of Australia, you'd include them in the tracing and do them in blue ink. But if you were doing railways you'd use red ink and you could also use red for mountain ranges. For the girls and some of the top kids that was just the beginning. They'd do a thick line of blue colouring pencil on the outside of the coastline, for example, and they'd put browns and greens and yellows in the inland to show geographical features. Some would even cut out pictures of wheat paddocks from magazines or little bunches of sultanas to stick in the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area.

Carollie Cox once cut out pictures of Princess Elizabeth and Princess Margaret and put them on her Northern Territory and in the Southern Ocean she had chubby whales with water spurting out of their spouts.

She was very proud of it. She showed it to me on Monday morning.

'It's really nice,' I said. But I knew Mr England would hate it.

He held it up in class and made her cry. It made me so angry I could feel my whole face going red with fire. I was going to talk to her at big lunch but I didn't see her and we had hardly any time to spare because that year we played Bedlam, which was the best game ever invented.

It was only for boys and you had two teams, the Runaways and the Catchers, and a big circle drawn in the playground dirt. We had eight or nine on each side. I was one captain and Kenny Swan was usually the other. Swanny was in about the middle of the class and he was very wiry. His big brother Jim was a star footy player and they lived in a huge house over near Aston Street. He always picked his gang — tough kids like Alan Lynch and Harold Thomas — and I'd pick mine. We'd start in the circle which was like a jail. The Runaways would clear out in all directions and after we counted to 20 we Catchers would run after them. We'd run in twos or threes at first and catch the slow ones, then bring them back to the circle. And when we captured three or four we'd have to leave some guards behind because if one of their team ran through the circle shouting 'Bedlam!' and didn't get caught, all the captives could run away and you'd have to start again.

Once you had them all captured, they'd become the Catchers and your team would be the Runaways. The best thing was when all your team was captured

except you and three or four Catchers were after you and you eluded them and raced through the circle and let everyone out of jail. You were the hero of the hour.

Mr Murray threatened to have Bedlam banned because some of the mothers complained that the boys were coming home with all the buttons ripped off their shirts. But I think Mr England and Mr Kinnon talked him out of it. They thought it was pretty good training for footy.

We played Aussie Rules at Ironside and our A Grade team was always one of the best in the competition. We played against Indooroopilly, Chelmer, Graceville, Sherwood and Corinda — all suburbs on the train line. We didn't play competitions on our oval because it had no grass. Instead, our A and B teams took the bus to Toowong station then caught the train to Graceville where there were about four ovals together.

That second year we had the shop I was too young to play in the teams but I went to practice after school anyway and if a ball came near me I'd mark it and kick it back to one of the big kids. The balls were always getting kicked off the oval and down the big slope so I'd be ready to run down after it and kick it back up. But I couldn't stay very long because of the orders. That was a plan of my father's — people could drop in their orders in the morning and by the time I came home after school three or four would be made up and packed into a canvas trolley with two wheels at the bottom. A layer of newspapers separated the orders.

I'd go racing off with it, up and down the hills, and at first it would be really heavy. But if the big orders were at the top it wasn't so bad. In fact, I'd often get them done quite quickly and then dawdle home, talking to people I met, and sometimes in the dusk when the cicadas went quiet, I'd talk to Jesus, more or less under my breath. Sometimes it would just pop out and I'd realise I was talking aloud.

He never really talked back. I knew I could answer my own questions and pretend it was Him. I actually did that once or twice. But I didn't fool myself for a second. I knew it was me. I didn't tell anyone about it. Not even my mother. And certainly not Johnny Milczewski. Johnny came to my birthday party at Gold Creek even though he wasn't really mates with my other friends. It was a beaut party; we had a fire and cooked some sausages on the creek bank and then we walked along the creek, some on one side, some on the other. There were lots of smooth pebbles and rocks beside the creek and soon we were throwing them into the water to splash the people on the other side. That was great until suddenly Alastair Stone fell with his hands around his head.

Blood everywhere.

I had never seen anyone bleed so much. My mother wrapped a towel around his head and it got completely soaked. She was very upset because one of the girls she worked with had a son who died when he was hit on the temple with a stone. But luckily, it only got Alastair on the top of the head where his hair met his forehead.

It needed about 10 stitches and he had a scar forever. No one confessed that he threw the rock but a few people said it was Johnny Milczewski. I asked him and he said it was a lie. He knew who did it, he said, but he would never tell. You could torture him with hot coals but he would go to his grave with his lips sealed.

I couldn't argue with that. So I changed the subject.

We didn't go away that Christmas, there was so much to do at the shop; so in the holidays I wrote a book. It was a novel called *Lead Us Not* and it was about a scoutmaster who was also a bus driver. His name was Godding, which I thought was pretty clever because pride came before his fall. He was tempted by the Devil and he became a slave of his bodily lusts and one day when he got to the terminus there was a girl still on board. She looked a lot like Carollie Cox. Godding advanced upon her but she escaped underneath the bus seats and out the back door.

He chased her down Victoria Street and through people's yards and even in their houses. He was just about to capture her when she saw a boy named Jack pushing a grocery trolley up the hill and she cried out to him. The boy flew to her rescue and struggled with Godding. But the scoutmaster was too strong and he overpowered him and tied them up with a sheepshank knot in a rope he carried in his pocket. He bundled them into the bus and took off. When they came to bus stops he drove right past and people became angry and someone telephoned the police.

They set up a roadblock at the Fiveways but Godding busted right through it, heading for Long

Pocket where he could escape into the bush. But Jack and the dark-haired girl with big eyes gradually undid the sheepshank knot and Jack leapt upon him. The bus hit the gutter and turned over. Godding was knocked out and when the police arrived Jack had tied him up with a reef knot. The girl said, 'Jack, I owe you my life.'

Jack said, 'That's OK,' but there was pride in his heart.

Then came the trial and Jack had to stand up to some fierce cross-examination in the witness box. Finally justice was done and Godding was led away to Boggo Road Jail, his face like a snarling skeleton.

I worked every day on the book and when it was finished it filled a whole exercise book. My mother thought it was wonderful. She read at least one book a week. I showed it to my father but he had more important things to do.

Next year we had Mr Kinnon again and it was terrific. He was always thinking up interesting new stuff. For example, he introduced a new twist to his mental arithmetic game — he'd have numbers already written out on big stones that he'd drawn in a rushing river on the blackboard. He'd use the pointer to indicate a new stone and call out your name — you had about half a second to add it up and if you got it wrong you fell into the water and were washed away.

Ian Gzell and I loved it but Swanny and his mates said it was dumb. They said we were sucking up to Mr Kinnon but that wasn't true. Just because he was a teacher didn't mean you had to hate him. In fact, when Mr Kinnon took cricket he was a really fast bowler.

After we'd all had a bat and a bowl on the concrete pitch, he would sometimes bowl to me and if I clipped him away he'd actually seem quite pleased. The next ball would be even faster.

I bowled as well and I enjoyed that too. I practised everything — fast, slow off breaks, leg breaks and even googlies — fielding, throwing, everything. Then one day he asked me if I'd like to be wicketkeeper and I loved that even more because you were involved in every single ball.

He said I was good at it. In fact, I heard him tell Mr England, 'He's amazing; he can catch the ball like he's picking flies out of the air.'

He picked me for the A Team that year, even though the rest of the team were in Grade 8, the scholarship year. And during the season he also picked Swanny, who was a pretty fast bowler, and Rod Campbell, who was taller than the rest of us and a very stylish batsman.

Then suddenly my mother was pregnant again. It came as a complete shock, she said. I didn't know what to think.

At school David Stafford had told everybody a joke:

When I was young and had no sense, I took my girl behind a fence,

*I gave her a penny, she wouldn't have any,
I gave her a pound, she lay on the ground
I gave her a zack, she opened her crack,
And then I planted the Union Jack.
Three months later all was not well*

*Six months later she began to swell
Nine months later oh bless my soul,
A wee little bugger jumped out of the hole.*

That about summed it up, we thought. Johnny Milczewski said the hole involved was the navel. But then there was a father-and-son night at the church and I really wanted to go. My mother thought it was a good idea too but on the night, my father said he was too busy, so I went on my own. Mr Wardlaw wasn't going to let me in but then Dave Gough arrived with his father and Mr Gough said I could sit with them. It was very embarrassing.

The film was like a cartoon. But the only things that moved were the little tadpoles that zoomed up the woman's passage in a race for the egg. The man's John Thomas didn't even get hard. There were lots of questions I wanted to ask but Mr Wardlaw said we should have a discussion with our fathers.

When I got home my father was listening to the radio. He hardly even looked at me. My mother was knitting the world's smallest booties. This time, she was sure, it would be a girl.

TEN

After a while my mother got too big to serve in the shop — we couldn't squeeze past her — and my grandmother thought it was wrong for her to be on public view. My mother didn't mind being on public view, but she got really tired. For the last few months we employed a really nice woman named Joy Mitchell. She was pleasant to the customers and she quickly learned the prices. In fact, she sometimes knew them better than I did because she was there when the travellers came in and they told her when something had gone up. I was quite proud of keeping the prices in my head and my father would get angry when I didn't consult the list on the counter.

'Always check your prices' he would say, even in front of the customers. Joy would say, 'I think that might have gone up today, Robbie,' in a really friendly tone and no one was embarrassed. Joy always had a smile.

She usually went home to her family after I got in from school because by now I was spending lots of time in the shop and we stayed open until 7.30 at night. Mum would make the tea and look after the house but I had to help there too, rounding up Brian and Jeff for their bath and taking in the washing from the Hills Hoist and about a million other things.

I got a surprise when Auntie Ikey told me Mum was over 40 so it was important that she had a lot of rest or she might lose the baby. They didn't say anything about that stuff in the father-and-son night. I didn't like to ask my mother about it. I didn't like to *think* about it.

Ikey helped out in the shop a bit too. By now Uncle Peter had sold us a cash register and though it did take up some precious counter space it was a big improvement on the drawer. They came around in the evening, especially at weekends, and Peter and my father both took up bowls at the Toowong Bowling Club.

They played competition on Saturdays and by the time my father came home he was pretty talkative, so I took over the shop till we closed. It wasn't always easy for my mother to keep him out of the shop, especially if one of his bowling mates came in. But one night he had a glass of beer in his hand when Grandmother Macklin walked in the door. She didn't say a word. She just looked at him then turned on her heel and left. He stared like a man in front of a firing squad and clucked his tongue.

My mother got her wish — the most beautiful little girl in the world. The day Julie was born a truck

ran into the shop. Some traveller backed his big van into a post holding up the awning with such force that it busted and groceries fell off their shelves and made a huge mess on the floor.

Next thing she had labour pains and my father had to drive her into the hospital while Joy looked after the shop. When I came home from school she was the only one there but my father arrived soon after and he was absolutely thrilled. 'It's a girl,' he said. 'Julie Anne.'

Joy kissed him. Everyone was laughing and happy. Grandmother Macklin came in and gave Brian and Jeff their tea while my father and I went to the hospital in the new car, an Austin A40 panel van. It even smelled new.

My mother had a room with only one other woman and little Julie was in a cot by the bed. She had the loveliest face with very short fair hair. She was the sort of baby that makes you feel like cuddling her.

My mother looked beautiful too. They made a lovely couple. She was tired so we didn't stay long and on the way home my father said, 'You're going to have to pull your weight without being told.'

It made me really angry. 'Jesus,' I said.

'... and don't blaspheme.'

Jesus.

When we got home, my grandmother had gone; Ikey and Peter were there along with Bruce and Stella Dash and soon there were bottles of beer all over the place. My father got stuck into it and he said, 'I've still got it! I've proved it!' And put his arm around Stella.

He said it about a hundred times.

I closed up the shop and Ikey helped me. She was holding a glass of beer in one hand and a cigarette in

the other. She had rings on both hands and her nails were painted bright red.

Her breath smelled of beer. 'You're growing up, Robbie,' she said. 'Have you got a girlfriend?'

'Not likely,' I said.

When my mother came home with Julie, Joy stayed on. She was a tower of strength. It meant that Mum only had to serve in the shop when there was a rush on. But by now the shop was doing so well that there was a rush on most of the time and my father had started going to bowls on Wednesdays as well as Saturdays.

She didn't mind at first. 'He needs the break,' she said. 'It's so constant.' But after a while, when he came home flushed and talkative and unable to serve in the shop — and he began getting asthma attacks from his smoking — she changed her mind.

He would try to jolly her up. 'Come on, Luvvie, give us a smile,' he'd say. But it was getting harder for her to make the effort.

He wanted her to join the bowling club. Ikey did. And my mother went one or two Saturdays and had a good chat with Uncle Ernie Wagner, my godfather who was the captain of the club. But it really wasn't her cup of tea.

'It's ridiculous,' she told him. 'As if I haven't got enough to do.'

Uncle Ernie's dental surgery was in town and because I was his godson he did my teeth for free. Going to the dentist was the worst thing that could happen to a person. They didn't have dentists when they wrote the Bible; but if Jesus had known about them He

wouldn't have talked about the fires of hell, He'd have said, 'The evildoers shall be consigned to the dentist's chair and for all eternity they shall suffer the drill without a needle.'

Fair dinkum, no one would ever have committed a sin, ever. Except, of course, that you don't think about hell most of the time. Even the dentist fades from your memory once you get out of the place. And it was worse for me because of my sensitive throat. I'd start heaving almost the moment he said, 'Open wide ... wi-dah,' and the second he touched my tongue I'd make a sound like the bathwater running out.

Then he'd give me about five needles and they didn't make a scrap of difference. When he started the drill, which he operated with his foot and never waited till it was full speed before he touched the tooth, my entire head and brain would vibrate and I'd grab the chair so tightly my arm muscles would seize up.

Afterwards, he'd say, 'You're not brushing your teeth properly,' and he'd demonstrate going up and down and round and round on the gums. I would swear to myself that I would do it exactly like that, three times a day — or even more — so that I never had to go through it again. But somehow after a few days I'd slip back into my old habits and when the next appointment time came around I wouldn't mention it to my mother because there would be something much more important to do at school or the shop. In fact, I would tell myself I really would prefer to go to the dentist but I had a duty to help my parents.

Sometimes I even believed it.

My father's asthma kept getting worse and one night he collapsed on to his bed. 'I'll be all right,' he said between gasps, but he kept getting worse. The sound of him straining to get air into his lungs was terrible. My heart went out to him.

About two o'clock in the morning my mother couldn't stand it any more. She telephoned Dr Forbes who came with his pants pulled over the top of his pyjamas with the ends sticking out the bottom. He was very gruff when he arrived but when he saw my father he changed. 'I'll have to get an oxygen tent,' he said. 'I can't move him, it's too dangerous.' He called an ambulance.

When the tent arrived he set it up on the bed. By then Brian and Jeffie were awake and Brian started to cry. In fact, we were all a bit tearful. Dr Forbes said he'd be back in the morning and we all tried to sleep. My mother got into my big bed and we talked for a while. Then I got out and knelt beside my father's bed. I prayed the way I used to when I was a little kid. Then I got back into my bed and drifted off. When I woke up my mother was gone. I found her sitting beside the tent. She said, 'I think he's worse.'

She called Dr Forbes again and he came at 8 o'clock. My father looked clammy and pale and the doctor hurriedly opened his black bag and took out the longest needle I had ever seen. Then he turned my father over on his side and stuck the needle into his back, right up to the hilt.

He waited for a while, but then had to leave. 'I'll be back shortly,' he said. I didn't know what to do. 'There's nothing you can do here, dear,' my mother said, 'you'd better go to school.'

In class I wasn't paying much attention and Mr Kinnon made me stand up because I hadn't done my homework. He was not pleased and made me feel I'd let him down. He did this quite a lot with people he liked — which was just about all of us — and it always worked. He made you feel so ashamed you'd almost start crying.

This morning I just said, 'I'm sorry, Mr Kinnon. I think my father's dying.' I could feel the tears running down my cheeks.

He changed completely. He took me outside and put his arm around my shoulders. Then I really did start crying. He took me down to the sick bay in the vestibule opposite Mr Murray's office and said I should lie down.

I did. In a little while Mr Murray himself came in. He had telephoned my mother. 'He's a lot better,' he said. 'You can rejoin your class or you can go home.' He said it as though I wasn't one of his pupils but an actual person.

I went back to class but at lunchtime I went home and helped in the shop, making up orders that I delivered in the afternoon. I went in to see my father. I thought about telling him I'd saved his life through the power of prayer but I didn't. I couldn't get that picture of Dr Forbes's needle out of my brain.

My father never smoked cigarettes again. But in a few days he was back at bowls and my mother said she dreaded Wednesday nights.

I came fourth in the exams that year, after Jan Blackburn, Janice Cribb and Ian Gzell. I was top in composition and social studies but no one could beat Jan Blackburn and Janice Cribb in arithmetic and Ian was good at everything.

I got a new bike for my birthday in September, a red-and-white Malvern Star and sometimes went over to Ian's place in the afternoon. Mrs Gzell was dark-haired and very cultured. Mr Gzell was big and Russian. He spoke straight at you, quite loudly, as though his was the only opinion that counted.

I had never seen anything like their house – the floors were all beautiful cool reddish-gold tiles and their lounge chairs were covered in animal skin. They even had a fireplace!

Ian was a bit taller than me but we were both growing quite quickly. My mother said, 'Oh dear, you used to fit under my wing. But you don't any more. Look.' And she'd have to lift her arm over my head to fit me underneath.

One night my mother took me to see *HMS Pinafore* at His Majesty's Theatre and it was absolutely entrancing. For the rest of the week we sang the songs together as we washed up. That weekend I went to Caloundra with Ian to stay at their beach house. Mr Gzell had designed it near the edge of a cliff and you could smell the beautiful timber. His old Russian parents lived there and his mother gave us some pastries with icing sugar when we arrived.

I had told Mr Gzell about *HMS Pinafore* on the trip up. I felt very cultured when I told him about it but he laughed scornfully. 'Gilbert and Sullivan ...' he said, 'you grow out of that.'

After school broke up Ian and Alastair Stone, Peter Foster, Jeff East and I went on a Young Australia League trip to Cairns. The YAL people had come to our

class and left some forms for us to take home. The trip went for about 10 days and it was quite expensive. But by now there was money aplenty at home; our second new cash register not only added up the totals for each customer, but did the daily return and showed that every week we were breaking records. Every afternoon it was all hands on deck and Fridays were bedlam. Anyway, my mother said I had earned it and when I told my mates I was going on the trip I think that helped them to talk their parents into it.

It was a fantastic adventure. The YAL people sent us a list of the clothes to take and my mother had to sew my name-tags on everything. Then on a Saturday morning we all assembled at Roma Street station and climbed on board *The Sunlander*. We kissed our mothers — and Ian kissed his father as well — then waved goodbye and the train couldn't leave soon enough.

We had an entire compartment to ourselves. It had racks for our ports on each side and really comfortable seats that faced each other. On the walls it had black-and-white photos of Queensland's pioneering days and a thick glass carafe of water in a metal clasp between the windows. Best of all, it was a diesel so, unlike the steam train that took us up to Graceville to play footy, we could open the windows without getting sooty cinders in our eyes all the time.

Our mothers had all made us snacks to take and almost as soon as the train left the station we pulled them out and stuffed ourselves. Then we watched the scenery and fooled around and Jeff said Alistair was jumping round like a hairy goat. It was such a funny

phrase that we kept saying it the whole trip and each time we'd start laughing. We had a thing where we'd grab each other unexpectedly by the nuts and give a quick squeeze: 'Gotcha!'

We stopped at Bundaberg for a meal and just before we got to Rockhampton we passed the girls' train coming back from Cairns where they had stayed at the camp we were heading for. Everybody waved like mad. Then we passed a sugar train and Jeff grabbed at it and caught the end of a piece of cane with the leaf still on — it ran through his hand and cut his fingers.

Blood everywhere.

Luckily Ian had a first-aid kit and we bandaged them up. At night we took the ports down from the metal racks and two of us climbed up with sleeping bags and slept on the racks.

The camp was a collection of huts where we had a stretcher each; we'd go to the dining room for breakfast and dinner and before leaving on the day's outing we'd collect a little cardboard lunch box. Each hut had its own supervisor, an older boy in a cap like Uncle Vic's. In fact, we had to call him Uncle Ron. We went up to the Atherton Tableland past the Barron Falls in a steam train and out to Green Island where they had an underwater observatory among the coral and glass-bottomed boats that travelled over the reefs.

Everything about it was terrific. Even the sugar factory which smelled so sickly sweet that as we were going over the metal walkway above the steaming vats Alistair vomited into the one containing molasses. After that, every time I sold a customer a green tin of

CSR treacle I wondered if it contained a piece of Alistair Stone's vomit.

When I got back, Joy and her husband Bill moved in for a week while the whole family of us went to the farm at Hunchie to stay with Uncle Sid and Auntie Betty. They hadn't changed a bit but the girls had all grown up and Beverley followed me wherever I went. She didn't say much but every time I turned around there she was. Joan, who was older, mostly stayed in her room reading. She was going away to boarding school in Nambour next year and had decided to be a teacher. She walked very upright and wore her hair in a long plait.

Beverley was a terrific helper. She helped me catch Robin and saddle her up. She had a pony of her own and had set up some jumps in the small area of the farm that was actually flat. We trotted around and did some jumps, then Joan came out in her jodhpurs and showed us how it should be done. Then Beverley dug her heels in to her horse's flanks and really sped over the jumps.

Next day we went for a long ride up the track to Montville at the top of the range. There wasn't much in Montville — a post office and general store, a community hall and a few houses — but we did see a notice outside the hall that on Friday night there would be a talent quest.

Coming back down there were whipbirds in the trees and flashing crimson mountain lowries. We practiced our cooees and when we got back and mentioned the talent quest my mother said I should be in it and I thought, 'Why not?' Johnny Ray was a big

favourite and I'd been practising singing like him in the shower, breaking my voice into a kind of sob when I sang 'Cry'.

*If your sa-weetheart, sends a lettah of goodbye-hy,
It's no sec-ret, you'd feel bettah, if you'd cry-
hy-hy ...*

However, for Montville I decided to do something more serious and touching, a Nat King Cole song: *Too Young*. So for the next couple of days I rode Robin down into a gully, tied her to a tree and practised.

*They try to tell us, we're too young,
Too young to really be in love,
They say that love's a word, a word
we've only heard
And can't begin to know the meaning of ...
And yet, we're not too young to know,
This love will last as years may go
And then some day they may recall,
We were not ... too young ... at all.*

Then I'd repeat the last two lines shooting up into a much higher key and at the same time getting down on one knee like Al Jolson, who was my absolute favourite singer. He really knew how to sing with feeling.

I thought I was pretty good. Sometimes when I hit the high note Robin would even stop eating grass and prick his ears. And Beverley was always around somewhere.

That Friday night we drove up to Montville in Uncle Sid's big khaki Ford ute with the men in the front and all us kids in the back like Ma and Pa Kettle.

Aunty Betty and my mother had to stay behind with Julie. The community hall was packed and we all had to sit in the front row. It was ages before it was my turn. I kept saying the words of 'Too Young' over softly in my brain so I wouldn't forget them.

Most of the other contestants had a guitar and sang cowboy songs or played 'Lady of Spain' on the piano accordion. A big woman who looked a bit like Miss Guyatt played the piano to accompany them on the side of the stage whether they wanted it or not.

When the bloke who was running it called my name and said what I was singing our family clapped and I had butterflies in my stomach as I climbed up the stairs to the stage. I had to go past the lady at the piano and she said, 'What key?'

I didn't know what to say. I just looked at her. Then she said, 'Never mind, love, I'll follow you.' That nearly put me off but I went to the centre of the stage and stood like Miss Guyatt taught me and started singing. The first couple of words were a bit shaky but then I got into it and by the time I reached the end of the first verse I was quite relaxed. Next verse — which was really the same again but repeating the last two lines with a big finish — I really let go and expressed myself with feeling. When I finished everyone clapped loudly. Beverley whistled with her fingers in her teeth. Even Joan cheered a bit.

That's when I should have left, but something came over me and when they stopped I started singing 'Cry' like Johnny Ray. But by now I was so excited by the whole experience that my voice filled every corner of the community hall.

*If your sa-weet-heart sends a letter of goodbye,
 It's no secret, you'll feel bettah, if you ca-r-ry-y ...
 Ii-if your-ah hear-at-ache, seems to hang around
 too long
 And your blues keep getting bluer with each song ...*

Then over again and working up to a big sob and,

*Just remember sunshine can be found,
 Behind a cloudy sky ... So let your hair down,
 Now real tears,
 And settle down ba-aaby and car-ry-yy ...*

Oh Al Jolson, oh Johnny Ray, oh washing up with Mum, it all came together in that moment of blissful glory. But when I opened my teary eyes expecting a hushed and adoring crowd I got the shock of my life. Everybody was laughing like mad. My father's face was actually purple. Uncle Sid's false teeth were jumping up and down off his gums and his flecks of spittle were popping everywhere. I was the only one who didn't think it was hilarious.

I just bowed and left the stage. Beverley and Joan banged me on the back and at the end they gave me the prize for The Most Humorous Item of the Night — a silver sugar bowl with a little attachment on the handle for the spoon to hang from.

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

When we got back to the farm I gave it to my mother. 'I will treasure it,' she said. 'I wish I could have been there.'

I couldn't get to sleep for ages.

ELEVEN

Suddenly it was Scholarship year and everything changed. We were all going to be 14 and any way you looked at it, we were the big kids.

Uncle Ernie sent me to the dental hospital to be fitted for a plate that would sit behind my top teeth and straighten the bottom ones. It was free and Brisbane's best dentists taught the students to do various things. Poor people went there for fillings but Uncle Ernie said they had the best orthodontists. They didn't drill or give needles, which was a relief, but they did something else just as bad — they took impressions.

The students filled up a horseshoe-shaped metal thing with sloppy pink gunk, and while a few of them stood around, one chap pushed it into your mouth and held it there till the gunk just about set. When he pulled it out he had an impression of your teeth. That was the theory anyway.

The trouble was that sensitive throat of mine. The moment they touched my tongue with the horseshoe I heaved and that made the students heave. The chap with the horseshoe would pull it out and the sloppy pink stuff would get all over the place and everyone would be making the sound of the bathwater running out the plughole.

This went on for ages. I apologised all the time. But it got so bad that even when the expert orthodontist took over he only had to approach me with the horseshoe and I'd start heaving and the students would come in like a chorus of heavers and we had sort of a bathwater Gilbert and Sullivan chorus.

Finally they got Mr Stone, Alistair's father, who was the head of the hospital. That really was embarrassing but he was very helpful. He suggested I think about something interesting, so I remembered the Test match I went to with Uncle Tom Schofield and my father. He didn't want to take me but my mother said, 'Bill, you couldn't,' and it was fantastic; Keith Miller hit Alf Valentine for six on to the roof of the grandstand. So I thought about that and we got through it.

With the plate in I could do a really piercing whistle. It was hard to say 's' for a while. It came out 'sh.' But when I got used to it you could hardly notice, except for the silver band that went across my front teeth to hold it in. I took it out for parties and other occasions when we were with the girls.

Actually we were with the girls a lot that year. There were about 50 kids in our class and at least half of us had birthday parties. They started almost the

moment we got back to school and went on all through the year. At first they were really embarrassing — the boys mucked around together and the girls talked to each other. But then we started playing games like Winks and that really livened things up. In Winks the girls all sat in a circle on a chair with a boy standing behind with his hands to his side; except one chair would be empty. The boy behind it would look casually around at the girls, then he would wink at one. She'd have to zip out of the chair before the boy behind her caught her and held her back.

This meant we were making physical contact with each other, and in the rush of the moment goodness knows what you might touch. And when the girls were behind the chair and the boys sitting down, that was even better, especially if you were grabbed from behind by someone you really liked.

The girls talked about parties the whole time. We did quite a lot, between other stuff, and it was amazing the way you'd get to really like someone for a while and after a few weeks you'd really like someone else. You'd let them know by telling Wendy Philbrick. You could tell Wendy something and in 12 seconds everyone in the entire school would know. So if you said, 'I really like Janice Cribb,' Janice would get the message and if she looked at you in a certain way in the playground you'd know she felt the same. That meant you could talk with her on the way home from school. Maybe you could even call by her house in the afternoon and she'd come out. Mostly you'd talk about the other kids and the teachers, but it was throbbingly exciting.

A lot of the girls didn't ask Carolle Cox to their parties. Marilyn Coulter and Jennifer Payne said this was because she was dumb, but that wasn't true. She just lived in her own world.

Don Wilkey didn't come back that year. He went to BBC and many years later he said, 'Mr Murray gave me a nervous breakdown. My father was the Treasurer of the P&C and I'd have to take the books over to the headmaster. He was nice as pie to me. But next day he'd give me six cuts again.' Just for running into people and making mad noises.

I never stopped running. I had my deliveries on Tuesdays and Thursdays, cricket practice on Wednesdays, weighing up spuds and onions, taking out the bottles, serving in the shop, homework, special study for scholarship and reading book after book after book. My mother went to the library each week and joined a book club that sent the latest bestsellers in the mail. I read them too and they were usually OK but then came *From Here To Eternity*.

My father said I was too young but I started it and then I wouldn't stop pestering them until they let me read it. I took it under the house with me and read it while weighing up the vegetables. I read it at the dinner table. As soon as I finished my homework I'd be back into it again. It was a huge book and the hero, Prewitt, was magnificent. He wouldn't box because he'd practically killed a man and they made his life hell in the army trying to break him and force him back into the ring. The scenes where he and Maggio went to the brothels in Honolulu were totally graphic. Maggio was a

little bloke and he loved ‘acres and acres’ of women’s bodies. I read it in bed till my eyes closed.

It was very exciting and one night I got really hard and as I touched my John Thomas a big sensation started to grow and grow like a volcano and suddenly in the dark I could feel all this warm fluid coming out.

‘Oh Jesus,’ I said, ‘I’m bleeding to death.’ I turned on the light expecting blood everywhere but instead there was warm milky goo. Scary for a moment but it wasn’t anything bad. Obvious when you thought about it: tadpoles. All those little wrigglers from the father-and-son night. But they never said one thing about how it felt. They kept that a total secret. Amazing. Just amazing.

So I did it again.

It was just at that time that I joined the OKs — the Order of Knights — at our church. It was a secret club with a special handshake and we met at night. There was even a special knock on the door — loud, soft, loud — and a password. The person inside would say ‘Faith’ and the one outside would say ‘Ful’ before the door was opened. (We were ‘faith-ful’ to the creed.)

Inside we had two sergeants at arms who carried staves with metal tips. Seven, the perfect number, was in a triangle on the tip. We all wore aprons and other regalia and each week we had a visitor — usually some minister passing through — who gave us a speech.

It was just as though God had been watching me in bed because the very next speech — from the Reverend Ivan Alcorn — was on ‘Mental Hygiene,’ which was another way of saying, ‘Masturbation is evil.’

It was caused by the devil, he said, and the only way you could overcome the temptations of the flesh was to call upon the help of Jesus.

Oh dear. Night after night I called upon Jesus, but to no avail. I surrendered to my evil nature. In fact, it got so confusing that after a while I only had to think about Jesus and I'd want to do it again.

I even did it during the day, and one Saturday my mother was suddenly in the room. 'What are you doing?' she asked. Blind terror; a flash of inspiration: 'Jumping round like a hairy goat,' I said. 'It's what we did on the YAL trip; see, Alistair Stone was jumping about in the carriage and Jeff East said he was a hairy goat and I was just remembering and ...'

'Oh. Well, you're wanted in the shop, dear. It's a madhouse out there.'

'Sure. Absolutely.' I bolted for the safety of the madhouse.

I think she knew.

One afternoon when I was giving Ian Gzell a doubler home on my bike his legs were dangling near the front wheel. We were zooming down Carmody Road when suddenly his shoe got caught in the spokes of the wheel and we had a terrible buster.

I went straight over the top of him and when I hit the ground somehow I just rolled and stood up. All I had was a scrape on the little finger of one hand. But Ian had been tangled in the bike and he went face down on to the bitumen road and it practically scraped his face off.

He looked just terrible. I raced into the nearest house, which was Jennifer Payne's, and Mrs Payne

called the ambulance and Mrs Gzell. We took Ian into the shade and tried to comfort him. He was shocked. But he didn't cry.

I felt terrible and when Mrs Gzell arrived it was worse. I tried to tell her about his shoe but she couldn't bear to listen to me. 'He could be scarred for life,' she said. Actually he wasn't. Everything healed up beautifully and you wouldn't know he'd even had an accident, but at the time I thought his whole life was ruined.

I was going to call by the shop and get my sandshoes the afternoon we had to go to Milton School for the selection trials for the Queensland cricket team. I was the captain of the Ironside team and all the practice was paying off. There were times when I was batting when I felt I'd never get out. Wicket-keeping had become a passion — diving for catches, whipping off the bails, directing the fielders, I loved it all. And when Mr England and Mr Kinnon said they had nominated me for the selection trials at Milton School where we did woodwork and metalwork I was overjoyed.

My father was too busy in the shop to drive me and when I rode there on my bike I was a bit late. I was still in bare feet. There were about 20 kids playing on the concrete pitch and I was shocked to discover they were all in whites and sandshoes. Westaway, the big fast bowler, even had cricket boots. But I ran on to the field where some teachers I didn't recognise were standing in a group at about mid-off. The tallest one, Mr Howes from Indooroopilly, ticked my name off the list. 'Wicket-keeping?' he said.

'I do everything,' I said, 'bat, bowl, keep wickets ...'

He looked at my feet. 'OK, put your gear on.' The cricket gear was lying around beneath a big Moreton Bay fig and I put on some pads and a box, grabbed some inners — made of soft chamois — and pulled the big wicket-keeping gloves over them.

When I got out to the pitch I recognised the little kid behind the stumps — Georgie Negus from Indooroopilly School. He looked very smart. He'd even brought his own pads and gloves.

'You have a bat now, George,' Mr Howes said. 'Macklin, you go behind the stumps.'

Georgie took block and Westaway raced in. The ball was outside the off stump going away and George nicked it. It shot toward slips. I dived and took the catch. 'Howzatt!!!'

There was no umpire. So we just settled down for another ball. It was also from a fast bowler and it just clipped George's glove and went left. I shot out a glove and it stuck. 'Howzatt!!!' I shouted. Two in a row. I could hardly believe it.

George turned around. 'It's only practice,' he said. 'So what?'

He was almost crying. Oh dear. Then Mr Howes shouted, 'No need to appeal. There's no umpire.' Hell. Westaway's turn again and it was swinging in and bouncing. It just clipped the top of the bat and flew towards leg slip and I took a step and a half then leapt with all my strength, my left hand stretched as far as it would go. Even before it struck the glove I knew I had him. And there was absolutely nothing I could do about

the appeal. It just roared out of my throat: 'Hooowwwzzzaattt!!!'

It seemed very quiet when I picked myself up. A few balls later Mr Howes said, 'OK, that'll do.' And it was my turn to bat.

I still had the wide wicket-keeping pads on but that was OK. I picked up a bat from behind the stumps and settled down for the first ball. Westaway again, a yorker spearing in to the crease. I put my left foot forward to the pitch of the ball and brought the bat down to block it. But at the last moment the top of the pad got in the way and the ball was on me. It smacked straight into my bare foot.

The pain shot straight up my leg. It burned like someone was holding a soldering iron on it. I couldn't catch my breath. Then George said, very quietly, 'How's that?'

The fielders who heard it laughed and I suddenly realised I was the bad guy. The pain slowly went away and I started to hit a few good shots but all too soon, Mr Howes said, 'That'll do. Who's next?'

I took off the pads and after a while went down to the bowler's end near the teachers. 'You bowl too, I suppose,' Mr Howes said. He sounded quite angry. But I picked up one of the balls, measured out my run, then ripped one down. It was a pretty good ball, middle stump and on a good length, but as I bowled my foot dragged on to the edge of the concrete pitch and lifted the nail of my big toe, which started to bleed.

I ignored it but one of the other teachers pointed it out. 'You'd better have that seen to,' he said.

'It's nothing.'

Mr Howes said, 'Do your parents know you're here?'

I didn't know what to say. Finally I said, 'Yes, sir, of course.' But I could see he had doubts. He thought they were too poor to buy me some sandshoes. I wanted to say, 'We're really quite rich,' but it seemed too dumb. And at the end, when he read out the names to come back on Saturday to play the Country team, mine wasn't among them.

I had failed. For the first time in my life I felt vulnerable. My life was out of my control. Riding home I wondered if Jesus had anything to do with it.

All those sins ...

A few weeks later Mr Murray called me up on morning parade and announced that I was Dux of the School. It wasn't just for scholastic ability but all-round achievement. Then I was joint school captain with Jan Blackburn for half the year and Swanny and I got picked in the Queensland football team.

We went to Adelaide and played in the carnival on the Adelaide Oval. What a thrill that was. Westaway was in that team too — he and Pud Warlow the ruck-rover were the stars — but Swanny and I did well enough. I played right half-forward and kicked the longest ball of my life to score a goal in the match that won our section of the carnival.

In the Ironside School vestibule I had my name on the Honour Board twice — Dux and Football. But I would have given them both back if I could have made that cricket team.

TWELVE

My mother noticed a lump on the outside of her left arm, just below the shoulder. She went to Dr Forbes. When she came home she went for a bit of a lie-down.

Cancer.

For three days ours was a house of torment. But then she went into hospital to have the lump taken out and tested. My father went to the hospital that night while I stayed home with the kids. As I waited I prayed on my knees beside my mother's bed. I offered God a deal: if he would make the cancer benign I would give my life to him and all his works. I meant every syllable. The bed was full of her soft perfume.

When my father's Austin A40 panel van pulled into the driveway by the cases of bottles I ran out. 'It's benign,' he said. And he cried like a young boy with an ugly face. I put my arm around his shoulders and for the

first time I realised that I was the taller. Then we went inside and he never referred to the moment again. He expunged it.

Soon after he was back at the bowling club, returning with bottles of beer and clucking his tongue like a chook. My mother became tired and despairing. The migraines returned and the tension in the place was terrible. It felt as though the world was about to shatter.

One night when he had gone to bed after a session at the club we were sitting at the kitchen table where I was studying for scholarship. 'If it wasn't for you,' she said, 'I would leave him.' I opened my mouth to respond but I didn't know what to say. It was too big to grasp. She had such a kind, open face — a wide forehead, soft blue eyes and quite a big nose with a slight arch. Her skin was white and her lips were always smiling and kindly and motherly but that night she seemed more like a woman than a mother. Later I lay awake for ages listening to the rumble of thunder over Mt Coot-tha; then the rain on our galvanised iron roof played a Queensland lullaby.

The next day she said, 'We're selling the shop.'

'Why? What will we do?'

My father lurked in the background. This was obviously not his idea. And by evening my mother seemed unsure. She said, 'What do you think?' I really thought change meant danger. I wanted us to be calm and happy and wealthy. I wanted my mother to sing again and my father to stop drinking. I wanted Scholarship to be over and to be enrolled at BBC where

Mr McLucas had once been the English master and where the rich kids from my class were going. I wanted Janice Cribb and Carollie Cox to find me irresistibly attractive. I wanted to make a hundred every time I went out to bat. But on the issue before me I felt out of my depth. I didn't have enough information. So I said, 'Would I still be able to go to BBC?'

My mother said, 'Yes.' And simultaneously my father said, 'No. You'll go to Brisbane Grammar.'

Oh. Actually I didn't mind. Just as long as it wasn't Indooroopilly High. That's where he really wanted me to go. Grammar was his compromise to get me on side. 'OK then,' I said. 'I think we should sell.' My mother was triumphant. My vote had settled the issue. The decision gave her a renewed sense of purpose but I was suddenly adrift in swirling currents.

Happily they didn't affect my concentration in the scholarship. We travelled to Taringa School for the exams. We were all keyed up. I hadn't been there before — it was the nearest school to us but they were in a different sporting group — and it was very strange to think that I might be sitting in the same classroom and maybe even on the same seat as my mother. Mr England had warned us about the trick questions in maths and we spotted them immediately. In fact, I got 100 per cent and I'm sure the whole Ironside back row did the same.

The shop sold almost immediately to a couple named Addison. The woman, Audrey, was blonde and looked a bit like June Allyson; Mr Addison had grey hair and seemed much older. But they were very pleasant and my mother and father spent a lot of time introducing them to the customers.

Then the whole family — except me — went to Noosaville for a holiday. I had to prepare for the football tour to Adelaide so I stayed with Norm and Lill Davies who lived behind us. Norm had a little boot-repair shop in Toowong. He always smelled of leather and had a joke to tell. Mrs Davies was a bit like my grandmother with her long grey hair pulled tight in a bun and absolutely no make-up on her face. They were Plymouth Brethren and they didn't believe in make-up. Mrs Davies said it was the work of the devil but she put it in such a calm way that it didn't seem loony at the time, just afterwards when you thought about it. When she said it Norm gave me a wink but he made quite sure she didn't catch him.

We played the curtain-raiser to the footy Grand Final at Perry Park against a much older team and we had a fantastic match. I played the best I'd ever hoped to — it was like a dream, I couldn't put a foot wrong, the ball just kept coming my way and I'd beat my marker and send it flying into the goal square. We won in the last quarter to a standing ovation.

Mr Kinnon was there but he was the only adult I knew. He came with us to South Australia and it was the best time ever. In fact, the only tricky occasion was on our return in the TAA Viscount — I got my thumb stuck in the little ashtray hole in the armrest of my seat and they had to dismantle the entire seat to get it out. It was embarrassing for a while but the airline people were very good-natured. The hostie said, 'This is one for the books.'

Norm Davies met me at the airport and took me back to his place. I was surprised. By then, I thought,

everybody would be back from Noosaville and we'd have a new house. But there was a letter for me from my mother. They were staying for a while, she said, and I should stay with the Davies and get my books and uniforms together for Grammar in the New Year.

'Is it OK if I stay with you, Mr Davies?' I asked. But it seemed that my mother had already written to him and they'd sorted it out. 'Not a worry in the world,' he said, and crinkled up his leathery face. When he grinned, his white false teeth stuck out like a horseshoe. Mrs Davies was also pleased to do her Christian duty and after church — they to theirs, me to mine — the three of us had Christmas dinner together with bonbons and paper hats. Mr Davies had very strong hands and he could crack the shells of Queensland nuts in an ordinary nutcracker. With one hand!

After Christmas they went camping with their Plymouth Brethren congregation and I stayed home. At the time they were minding a Vespa motor scooter for a friend and one afternoon when I had nothing else to do I took it for a little ride round the backyard. But it was such a tiny yard and I was going so well that I decided to try it on the road.

I would have been OK except that a car zoomed down through the Fiveways from St Lucia and I had to take evasive action. I revved the throttle on the handlebar and the scooter leapt forward. Before I could turn it I'd crashed into the kerb, then ricocheted across to the other side and bashed into that one too. The scooter ran up on to the footpath and I jumped off. It travelled another few feet, then fell over and just lay there.

I pushed it back into the Davies' garage and the moment they arrived next day I told them the story. Mrs Davies felt I would have to be punished severely. She said she would pray for guidance. In the meantime she wouldn't speak to me except to ask me to pass the butter or help with the drying up. I actually volunteered to wash and dry but she regarded me silently. Norm looked very stern for a while but he couldn't keep it up. His big horseshoe teeth kept breaking out.

The next day they had the solution. I had to earn the cost of the repairs by caddying at Indooroopilly Golf Club. What a terrific idea, I thought, but didn't say so in case they thought it wasn't proper punishment. Some of the kids from Ironside had been caddying for ages and they said you could make big money. So I shot down to the clubhouse on my bike the very next Wednesday afternoon.

It wasn't quite as easy as I expected. There was a pecking order at the pro shop where the great Queensland golfer Ozzie Walker ruled the roost and newcomers had to wait in line. Mr Walker was very particular about his caddies and we had to be neatly dressed and polite to the golfers. We weren't allowed to speak until spoken to. We must never volunteer advice about the proper club to use and never comment on a golfer's shot.

I had seen Mr Walker around. He lived near Ironside School and he sometimes came into the shop. But he didn't recognise me at first and I got stuck with the really mingy payers: everybody had to pay six shillings to the caddy for 18 holes but on top of that a

tip was expected. If you had to pull a buggy you'd only expect, say a four-shilling tip, but if you had to carry the bag on your back, six or even seven shillings was expected. Mr Gill, the club captain paid 10 shillings and he had a buggy!

It was terrifically hard work lugging the bags up and down the Indooroopilly hills and dales. And looking for players' balls. And picking up the tees after they just walked off and treated you like you didn't actually exist. The fairways were full of clover and it attracted the bees in summer, so those of us in bare feet got quite a few stings during a round. But after a while you'd hardly notice and our feet were so hard that half the stings probably didn't penetrate anyway.

I'd been caddying for two weeks when Mr Walker called me over to the driving range. 'I didn't recognise you,' he said. 'How did you go in Adelaide?'

'We won,' I said.

'Excellent. Why don't you nip down there and pick up the balls for me?'

He pointed across the gully to the wide practice fairway. I was delighted. This was easy money. I'd seen another kid doing it — standing near a tree, then walking out on to the fairway and picking up the ball from the player Mr Walker was teaching to drive.

But after a while I got bored standing under the tree and I started trying to catch the drives. Almost at once Mr Walker began to enjoy it. He called out, 'Don't get hurt,' and the challenge to race and catch each one was just fantastic.

He must have mentioned it to some of the regulars because next time it happened a few people gathered on the clubhouse terrace to watch. Time after time I made the catch. And when I caught a really difficult one, diving and rolling, I'd hear a little clicker of applause.

Joy. Absolute joy.

PART TWO

THIRTEEN

A long time later, it seemed, we had moved from the shop to another weatherboard house on high stumps in Maryvale Street, Toowong, the adjoining suburb. My grandmother had sold her house in Ruskin Street and moved right across Brisbane to Lutwyche. There she lived in half a house where she worked translating books into braille for the blind.

She was nearly 80 when she taught herself braille. She wore the same pair of glasses, with circular lenses and very thin rims, that she had always worn. She wasn't anticipating blindness herself. She was doing her duty for the less well off.

She took the lizard with the ruby eyes with her. In the new place it lived beside her radio. My father drove us to Lutwyche, my mother and I and the other children — Brian, Jeff and baby Julie — and while sometimes he actually came in, he could never sit still

and very soon he would find an excuse to leave, to take Brian for a walk around the block. There was still an air of tension between the two women and it was still mysterious to me.

My father had refused to leave Noosaville until all the money from the shop was gone. Every last penny. We were so poor that we had to board with the Jowetts whom we hardly knew. We'd met them through Val, Mr Kenny the dentist's receptionist and nurse. I joined them there from the Davies'. I went to Grammar from that horrible, ramshackle place with rotting floorboards on the verandah, down in a gully from Aston Street where Ian Gzell lived and went to BBC. My father had found a job in a company that sold law books and my mother went back to work as a dressmaker, taking little Julie with her to the Taringa shop where she was fussed over by the girls.

A few months later they bought the new/old house in Maryvale Street, Toowong. I hated it. When I was sitting down and my father walked by I could feel the vibrations from the floorboards. By then there wasn't enough work coming in to the girls to keep my mother going full-time so she worked at her dressmaking from this old/new home. Brian and Jeff changed schools and went to Toowong, which wasn't a patch on Ironside.

The good news was that Mr McLucas was the headmaster of Grammar and it was a pleasure to see him again. He had become quite fat but he was very friendly. 'I'll be keeping an eye on you,' he smiled, and it gave me a wonderful sense of belonging. I really needed it because the first few days at the new school were awe-

inspiring. The great stone-and-brick buildings, set on a hill above the city, breathed history and privilege. The honour boards were decorated with the names of former governors, premiers and sporting giants. The ovals were lush, the gymnasium Olympic-standard, the tennis courts neatly tended, the library stocked with classics, the Great Hall redolent with glorious tradition.

When he addressed us that first morning, standing at the microphone in his richly decorated academic gown and flanked by two rows of masters similarly endowed, Mr McLucas told us we were the leaders of the future.

I believed it implicitly.

Because of my Scholarship results I went straight into 3H, one of the top two scholastic forms of my year. And after a few weeks I was elected class captain. The work was quite challenging — eight subjects instead of three — and Mr Moriarty who taught us maths seemed to be speaking in tongues. But English was totally engaging; when we were asked to write an essay on some inanimate object, I began, to the delight of my classmates, ‘I am a pair of boots and I feel as though I am on my last legs.’ Sport was fantastic and I was soon in the Under-15 As in cricket and captain of the Bs in Rugby. A whole new world was opening up.

Then there came a Sunday when my father seemed very agitated. All day he had been pacing about, never settling, and when the front doorbell rang he told me to answer it. I had just turned 15. My mother was in the kitchen washing up after lunch.

When I opened the door there were two small people on the other side. The woman had a big, thin nose like a witch and she wore a black straw hat with glass grapes pinned to the side. The man also wore a hat, a grey felt number that looked quite expensive. His face was rather flat and shiny, as though he had shaved it very close. His skin was transparent; you could see the little red and blue veins beneath.

‘Can I help you?’ I asked, in my best Grammarian tones.

‘Hello Robbie,’ he said.

The woman said, ‘We are your grandparents. Can we speak to your mother?’

I smiled. ‘I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘My grandparents are dead.’ And they both burst into tears. I thought they were completely mad. ‘Excuse me,’ I said. I ran into the kitchen. ‘Mum, there’s two old people out there who say they’re my grandparents ... fair dinkum ...’

Then she burst into tears and ran out to the verandah and through the front door and flung herself into their arms.

My brother Brian said, ‘Who are they?’

I said, ‘They’re Mum’s parents.’

‘Where have they been?’

‘I don’t know.’

They had not been far away at all. In fact, they had been living only two or three kilometres from where we lived, but in 20 years they had never exchanged a word, not a sound, not a look, not a glimpse. Not in all that time ...

I knew instinctively, almost from that moment, that the true story of that estrangement was the central mystery of my life as well as that of my mother. There were times then and later when I almost grasped it. But it always slipped through my mental fingers to be replaced by another version, more dramatic or more prosaic as fancy took the teller, until none of them seemed quite real.

On one occasion my Uncle Vic travelled 500km for the express purpose of laying it out before me since by then — at 36 — I was ‘old enough to hear the truth’. Yet when I wrote of it a decade later he not only denied the essentials, he vowed in an awful rage never to speak to me again and to my immense distress died true to his vow.

My mother, it seems, was the true war baby.

She was born, it appeared, without a father — and perhaps without a state — somewhere on the high seas out from Aden. So she told me and she would not lie or willingly deceive. Yet the documentary evidence is contradictory. A birth certificate unearthed by my cousin Walter, a solicitor, says different.

Walter lived in Brisbane and until our 60th sixtieth years we never met beyond a fleeting glimpse one night when his father, Uncle Wally, arrived at the shop with a big newspaper parcel full of cooked prawns and two bottles of beer. Our memories of that meeting are vague but he has helped in the quest to unlock the mystery. For he too has been tossed in the wake of that liner plying between the antipodes some time in 1911 or 1912 when Hilda May gave her first faint cries. Or so we have believed.

One birth certificate says that she was born Hilda May Tutt on 12 January 1911 in Dover, Kent, to Annie Hilda Sinclair, of Swalecliffe, Kent, England, aged 19 years. But almost every element of the certificate is contradicted by other sources.

My mother celebrated her birthday each year on 12 June. A January date was never mentioned. The certificate was not issued in England, where there is no such record, but in Queensland, where the father's address is given as 'Houghton Street off Glennosa Road, Red Hill', a suburb of Brisbane. He is listed as the 'informant' of the occasion.

In our maternal grandmother's marriage certificate, also unearthed by cousin Walter, Annie Sinclair is described as a 'domestic' and the wedding itself did not take place until July 1912, some 13 months after the birth was registered. And it occurred not in Kent, but in Enoggera, a part of Brisbane distant from the home in Miskin Street, Toowong, where they spent the greater part of their married lives.

These fractured shards of information reflect a pattern that supports the version of the tale that first captured my mind in the shock of discovery when the grandparents dead these 'many moons' suddenly materialised on our doorstep. How much I was told in the days succeeding and how much I invented to fill the gaps I cannot say. Nor can I recall precisely how much my mother confirmed or smiled away, replacing the wonder of it with the simple facts of the matter. But slowly the story emerged of Annie Sinclair at 18, a bright and busy little person fated to spend her days below stairs. In the

course of her career she might well exchange a scrubbing brush for a wooden spoon and a mixing bowl. But in the stratified England of her day beggars could not be choosers; you learned your place and you kept it. Dreams were for those who could afford it.

And yet. There was a hard core to little Annie Sinclair with her trim figure and her strong nose and those clear, calculating eyes. She could set goals. She could gather her forces and pursue them. And more often than not she could achieve them. Her father Thomas Sinclair was an engine driver, a man of the moment, and he had stories to tell of distant parts. They fired a restlessness in Annie and in the hard slog of her daily chores she followed them and saw the way her life might change. No longer, perhaps, the endless nodding and bobbing to the *Quality* upstairs. A chance, perhaps, to meet life on its own terms, to be freed from the suffocation of class and station.

She had a basic education — enough to get along — and she had the kind of intelligence that men found attractive, a self-awareness that bespeaks collusion. A promise of things to come.

The object of her pursuit in this quest for a new life might well have been young Harold Tutt, a labourer from nearby Aldington who had come to the estate in an arrangement between the managers of the two big properties. Certainly he was a well-favoured young man, stocky and strong but with a gentle manner and a good sense of his own worth. He was the second son of a family that had been valued in the community for at least three centuries.

He too was unhappy with a social system that ensured he would never rise above the role of labourer and never taste the satisfaction of independence. But he had the means to do something about it. He had saved his pennies and had booked passage for Australia, the land of opportunity.

Annie was attracted to him and to his sense of a wide-open future without the artificial boundaries of caste. He in turn was stirred by the bright, determined lass with her manner that insinuated forbidden pleasures. So one Saturday afternoon in the summer of 1910 they contrived an assignation on the banks of a stream, the Dour, which ran through the estate.

She brought bread and cheese from the kitchen and a small cloth she had embroidered herself. He carried a pot of homemade beer sealed with a glass stopper and two pottery mugs. They settled themselves by the tumbling brook and through the afternoon between the warm sun and the soft grass they found and explored each other's private mysteries. In the gloaming they abandoned the last of their restraints and rejoiced in the sensual wonder of it.

To Harold, it was a memory of England he would take with him to that broad brown land across the sea. When he thought of home and the social prison he had escaped, the hard edge of it would be softened by the picture he carried of Annie Sinclair, the servant girl with her sweet and wicked ways.

Soon he was gone. And soon after that Annie discovered the little package he had left behind within

her. The choices confronting her were as stark as they were terrifying: to leave the big house and return home to a village that would flay her reputation to shreds, or to find a man — any man — prepared to wed her and give the child a name. Both were almost too horrifying to contemplate. There was a third, even more fearsome: to follow Harold to Australia, to seek him out wherever he may be in that vast continent and demand that he marry her and acknowledge the child.

In the event she chose the impossible. The young nation was desperately in need of women to balance the sexes and there was a scheme initiated half a century before by Caroline Chisholm that assisted respectable young women to make that journey into the unknown. The headquarters were in London and that was where she headed when her mother Caroline turned her out.

But at least she travelled on the train driven by Thomas Sinclair, the father who would farewell her on the platform at Euston Street with a rough hug and a brown envelope with all the banknotes he could quietly muster.

‘She told me she shed so many tears there were none left,’ my mother said.

The sea voyage was a nightmare, sick and fearful, crowded into steerage with the other young women heading for the unknown, some with positions ‘on probation’, others with family sponsors, still others like herself with their own private mission to pursue. She hid her condition for as long as possible, but then as they steamed slowly through the Mediterranean it became all too obvious and the ship’s surgeon ordered

rest and a special diet that included an extra helping of porridge. She swore by porridge for the rest of her life and passed the appetite down to her eldest son Victor. It soothed the inner turmoil as she prepared for the birth which took place at night far out in the Indian Ocean beyond Aden, the first and only child to be born on that long voyage and thus the pet of her companions and the gruff old matron in sick bay.

She called her Hilda May because that was the month in which she first met her father. She was a good baby. She slept and suckled and slept again. She rarely cried and her blue eyes danced when Annie and the others played with her. Life on the ocean wave had much to be desired.

Then they arrived in Melbourne and everything changed. The voyage terminated there and henceforth the search for Harold was her responsibility. The Caroline Chisholm Foundation provided temporary quarters for the young women in the scheme but there was no provision for children. They were prepared to assist her temporarily but she had not been honest in concealing her condition so there was no obligation on them to fulfil their part of the contract.

Annie Sinclair bridled at their attitude. They could keep their charity. She was young and strong and could turn her hand to most domestic pursuits. She had secured an address by stealth from Harold Tutt's family. His destination was the Queensland capital, so once in Australia she needed only to make her way there, and with its relatively small population the shopping district of Brisbane would soon yield up her man.

She was utterly unprepared for the vastness of it. From Melbourne to Brisbane was half a continent. Travel costs were exorbitant. Living costs were difficult to grasp — the food was cheap but the accommodation ridiculously expensive. The greatest impediment, however, was the child.

No household would employ a young woman and child. And no one seemed available to care for the baby when she sought a position in a shop or food market. She found a room in a boarding house but the child cried at night. It disturbed the other guests so she was asked to leave. Her small bank of currency from Thomas was quickly disappearing. Finally she found a 'semi-detached' room in the inner city — in reality little more than a Collingwood outhouse — and she found work scrubbing and washing in the grand houses of Toorak and South Yarra.

She wrote letters to the Brisbane civic authorities seeking the whereabouts of Harold Tutt. She wrote to the editor of the *Brisbane Courier* similarly worded. But there was no response. She had just saved enough for the journey north when the child took ill. The draughty little shed was unheated and because she couldn't leave her to go to work, the savings evaporated. In her mind the baby transformed itself from Hilda May to 'the child' to 'it', the thing that had dragged her across the world to this hard, inhospitable place and was now dragging her down to penury and worse.

She found night work in a sly-grog and gambling house run by one of the infamous John Wren's associates and the baby was allowed to sleep in the little attic off

the bedrooms where the high rollers played cards and had their other diversions best left unacknowledged. In the early hours she would carry the child back to the rough shed, feed her then try to grab a few hours sleep before her demands became too insistent to ignore.

There were tips to be had at the 'shop' and perhaps Annie was tempted, perhaps not. But there did come a time, some nine months after her arrival in Melbourne, when she had enough put away to make the journey north.

'I was two years old when I came to Brisbane,' my mother said. She was very precise. And when at last Annie Sinclair reached the big country town named for the amateur astronomer who became the sixth Governor of New South Wales less than 100 years earlier, she was not to be denied. Her dander was up. When she found him she presented Harold Tutt with his lovely daughter and made her demands. He took one look at the little girl and his heart melted.

They were married in the District Registrar's office, Red Hill, in the presence of R. H. Atherden and F. E. Bartholomew on 6 July 1912. Annie Sinclair had succeeded in her impossible quest. But in the process she had come to hate her firstborn with a passion that could never be fully controlled. It did not matter that Harold loved and doted on his daughter. On the contrary, that made it worse.

She tortured the girl. She was petty, hateful, vicious and physical. Hilda May would never have a moment's peace in her mother's house and when she was only 16 Annie flung her out on the street. By then

Harold's spirit had been broken and he simply turned away ...

I would like to say that this is exactly the way it was but there are ways to make the shards reflect a different story and there are people in the family who would prefer a kinder version ...

The dales of Kent, where the hops grows and where the young men at harvest time in the early years of the 20th century gathered to celebrate with hayrides and beer, provided the courting ground for Annie and Harold.

He was a shy young man, happier in the company of his fellows than the young ladies who joined the revelry. He was unskilled in the social arts whereas Annie had absorbed the ways of manoeuvre and manipulation from the beginning of her life. So once she set her cap for him there was little he could do to resist.

On the evening of the harvest moon in May 1910 the little party sang their songs, danced their dances in the open field and when his blood was high Annie led young Harold to the dark shadows of the old yew tree. There they kissed and he fumbled with her skirts until she took his hands away. 'Let me,' she said. And to his wonderment she briskly put aside all the impediments and welcomed him to a new world of the senses.

Harold was entranced. Day after day he contrived to meet her and at first she was just as willing. But then, it seemed, her ardour fell short of his and, on her part at least, the love-making became perfunctory, even dutiful.

'You should marry me,' she said.

Harold was just a boy. Marriage was no part of his plan and even if it were his parents would not hear of it, and certainly not to a servant girl from Swalecliff. He was destined for better things.

When she pressed, he said, 'I don't have a penny to my name.'

But Annie knew something that Harold did not — that first night after the hayride and the dancing a tiny life had begun within her. Soon the whole world would know. And that was no part of her plan either.

When finally she broke the news to him he was nonplussed. It took many days before he could assimilate a new picture of his future. It was just possible, he decided, that when he explained the situation to his parents they would come around. They would permit him to do the honourable thing. Indeed, they would insist on it.

He was mistaken. And if Annie believed that her mother would take her part in the matter, she was mistaken too. For the village of Swalecliffe in 1911 was still trapped in the fierce morality of an earlier time. The Londoners might be embracing Edwardian libertarianism but the Kentish towns were still in the thrall of the puritanical John Wesley and his Methodism. Annie had sinned. She was an abomination in the eyes of the Lord. Harold was the victim, Eve the eternal temptress who in her latest incarnation had taken the form of the servant girl. Every village eye condemned her; every day became another trial, another guilty verdict.

She willed the thing inside to leave her, to disappear, to die. But the child, unknowing, held on and grew. The pressure on Harold, from Annie and from his sense of decency, became intolerable. Australia was the only way out.

Their leaving Kent for the other side of the world was an act of voluntary banishment. Harold tried to put the best light on it. At least in Australia they were unknown and could begin with a clean slate. Annie took a different view. From the moment she stepped aboard the ship at Portsmouth for the long voyage into the unknown her bitterness grew. She bought a ring to pretend she was married. But everyone knew, she was sure of it. When other passengers spoke to her she turned away. Harold turned with her and tried to comfort her but she spurned him too. She stayed in her cabin and ventured on deck only when the rough seas sent the other passengers below. She cursed the world she had left behind, cursed the one she was heading for, but saved her most vicious curses for the cause of it all inside her.

The child ripped her as she fought her way out. Annie's screams filled the tiny cabin as the midwife struggled to protect the infant from her thrashing limbs. It was yet another offence to be filed away and in the fulness of time to be avenged.

'She told me she shed so many tears there were none left,' my mother said.

When the ship docked in Melbourne they found a small flat and Harold looked for work. His skills at picking hops were useless so he worked at odd jobs and

in time found a position on the tramways. But Annie was not happy and she complained that when Harold was away the little girl — it — fretted and whined. They moved north to Sydney and finally to the big sprawling town of Brisbane which was just getting its own tramway system and looking for men with some experience. Harold filled the bill.

‘I was two years old when I came to Brisbane,’ my mother said.

Once Harold had a job, he and Annie married. Then he registered the birth of Hilda May. He took the little girl with him, leaving Annie behind in their wooden house on stilts. Hilda May clung to him. She much preferred to be with her Dad. He chose a date 13 months earlier. No one but he knew why. Indeed, no one knew that he had done it for more than 90 years until a grandson, Walter, combed the records ...

There is a third story and perhaps a fourth that also meet the requirements of the reflective shards. These need but a tiny turn of the kaleidoscope so that only a single shard changes position; it is the one labelled, ‘Father’s identity’. Each of the earlier scenarios remain in play. The added factor occurs in the big house where Annie works and where at the weekends a hearty, boisterous crowd arrives to celebrate the good fortune of their high birth and glorious prosperity. Below stairs it’s all hands on deck these weekends and above it’s high jinx and rippling laughter, an island of gay Edwardians in a sea of Victorian prudes.

Young Annie Sinclair with her lowered lashes and feisty chin is torn between the delicious pleasure of

propinquity with the glittering young women and their rowdy escorts and the sharp pain of exclusion. So when one of the young men, a regular who drank more than was good for him but whose dashing looks were like an invitation to the dance, just happened to catch her eye, Annie was ready for him. In the language of flirtation her glance was a promise. And later that night when the sounds of revelry faded a tap at her door signalled his desire to collect. Her bedside candle threw a warm light on her auburn hair shining from the 100 brushes she had given it in anticipation. He crossed the tiny room, ducking his head as the ceiling angled down to the bed.

‘Hello,’ she said.

‘Hello, Annie.’

He knew her name. It was enough.

FOURTEEN

There is a photograph of my mother as a little girl of perhaps four in the company of her mother and her brothers Victor and Wally, who is a babe on his mother's knee. It provides a graphic insight into the lives portrayed. My mother is as far from her mother as it is possible to be. She rests a hand on the knee of a man. The photographer has miscalculated the distance because the rest of the man is out of the shot.

Is it her father, Harold Tutt? That would be the natural assumption but another mystery intrudes. The story my mother told me is quite unequivocal — he served at Gallipoli like Grandfather Macklin and he was gassed at the Somme. In fact, she said, in a phrase that because of its illogicality has been indelibly imprinted: 'He was gassed in the knee.'

The picture I carried is of young Harold Tutt in a muddy trench in France during a lull in the battle. He is squatting down and rolling a smoke, his Lee Enfield rifle propped up beside him, when there's a sudden resumption of hostilities and a gas canister flies in from the German lines and smashes him on the knee.

But that cannot be the knee little Hilda May rests her hand upon. Because cousin Walter has unearthed another document, his father's birth certificate that reveals another shocking complication. Uncle Wally (Walter Thomas) was born, it states, on 22 October 1915 at Edgar Street, Newmarket, a Brisbane suburb. While that might well allow for his father to have landed at Anzac Cove in April or later that year, he could not have gone on to fight at the Somme in 1916 and be present for a family photograph at home in Brisbane in the interim. However, the real shock is to be found in that section of the certificate recording 'Other issue — living and deceased' from the parents Harold and Annie.

'Living' is Victor Harold. 'Deceased' is '1 Female'.

She is unnamed and Hilda May is nowhere mentioned. Yet there she is in the photograph and the expression on her face is more eloquent than any words. Her eyes are haunted by fear. It is a face that cannot smile. The mother is also unsmiling but her expression is belligerent and snappy, and beneath that brittle veneer is a deep sense of pain and suffering.

Another document adds a further shard to the pattern, though it too is more indicative than definitive: the death certificate of Harold at 80 in 1971.

He died, it states, of lung cancer at the Rosemount Repatriation Hospital, where the beds are reserved for ex-servicemen.

So, he did go to war and though Uncle Wally is long gone, his wife Margaret and his son Walter have provided yet another supporting exhibit: an old black-and-white picture of Uncle Wally as a chubby baby just able to stand. It is accompanied by an 'international' postcard — most likely sent to a serving soldier overseas — and the 'Communication' is clearly from Annie to Harold. There is resentment in every letter of the scrawl. There is no salutation. It reads, 'Does He look neglected. Or starved. With best love. Wallie. 12 months. It is a good Photo of Him. How would you like to carry him about.'

Margaret and Walter were also in no doubt that Harold served overseas in the Great War. But when and where were always cloaked in mystery. Indeed, I often felt that the solutions to these conundrums were locked away in an earlier time and in a place as impenetrable as that triangular brass head behind the lizard's ruby eyes. It was not until the writing of these lines that the resolution formed to revisit the places in Kent where they were born and bred to seek some way through the family labyrinth.

At the time, when the two little old people appeared at the front door, it was simply a wonderment. When they all stopped crying they sat about drinking tea and eating my mother's scones. There were years to catch up on. They hardly knew where to start.

Amazingly, we had another set of cousins we'd never heard of — in 1926, a decade and a half after my

mother's birth, Uncle Les had come along. Now he was married to Auntie Jean and they had three children about the same ages as Brian, Jeff and little Julie who was now two.

There were photographs from our big albums and chatter and even happy laughter from my mother. There was only one awkward moment; amidst the cheerful trivia, Annie's sharp voice interposed. 'You're too thin,' she said to my mother. It was an accusation and in the silence that followed it seemed to echo back across the years to a place where she could do nothing right, ever.

A long time later Walter's mother Margaret said, 'She was vicious and hateful to poor Hilda. She even put water in her make-up to destroy it.'

That was the least of it. There was never a moment of peace for the girl. There were slaps, pinches that left terrible bruises, shocking, incredible accusations, angry shouts, the withholding of food and finally the horrible word: 'bastard'. As though it were somehow all her fault.

In another it might well have resulted in a twisted mind and blighted personality but with Hilda it had the opposite effect. The more hateful her mother was to her the more open and caring Hilda became to both friends and family. Vic and Wally adored her. And when, at 16, her mother flung her out on the street, she walked around the corner to the Athertons — her parents' best friends, the witnesses at their Australian wedding — who took her in and cared for her, even though it meant they would go to their graves without ever speaking to Harold and Annie again.

She became an expert dressmaker and with the group of girls she met in class she became truly happy for the first time in her life. They went dancing and on picnics, swimming and singing around their pianos and pianolas. Many boys and men trailed after her but she erected a barrier, and as her girlfriends swooned into lovers' arms and married the men of their dreams — or the next best thing — she remained apart.

She had a shameful secret.

It was not until she was 27 — by her own reckoning — that she met Bill Macklin one night at Cloudland. He was shy but had a quick wit and a ready laugh. He was no leader of men; on the contrary, he was only really happy when part of a crowd. He too was somewhat old to be still single and she learned why when she met his mother with her thin, whippet-like build and her pious ways. In the first few moments she realised: he was a mother's boy.

In a way, that suited her. He made no importunate demands. He let her set the pace of their courtship and he proposed only after she had decided the time was right. It was then that Annie Tutt played her final, hateful card. She refused to go to the wedding.

How to explain it to her prospective in-laws? Hilda had no choice. She mustered her courage and went alone to that shadowed lounge room in Ruskin Street the week before the ceremony was to take place. Grandmother Macklin was cordial enough to begin with. She shoed her husband out and the two women spoke. Hilda began to tell her what she knew of her beginnings. But the more she stammered in her

ignorance the more impatient the older woman became. Finally, as the tears flowed, there was nothing left but to say it: 'I am illegitimate. I am a ...' The place was Brisbane, Australia, in 1938. It might as well have been England in the days of Cromwell's puritans, the Ironsides.

Grandmother Macklin permitted the union to take place. Thereafter every imperfection in young Bill's life would have an in-built and obvious cause: the shameful nature of his wife's unholy genesis. It would never be articulated. There was no need. It was simply there. Naturally, she declined to attend the ceremony and her husband, the bugler hero of Gallipoli, like his counterpart on the maternal side, meekly followed suit. It was a wedding innocent of parental favour. Hilda's larrikin brother Wally gave her away. Aunty Betty Rann — one of the girls — was her only bridesmaid.

But in the riotous afternoon of reunion the moment quickly passed. The tea flowed and the stories followed in a never-ending stream. And somehow, it seemed, I was the culmination, the Dux of Ironside, the new Grammarian, the young sportsman, except: 'My Vic played for Queensland too,' the old woman said. 'He played hockey.'

We knew.

After a while my father drove them home. As my mother washed up the afternoon tea things I sat in the kitchen with her and she said, 'She had a little heart attack. She wanted to make her peace.'

Harold was retired — he had been in the tramways most of his working life, rising through the

officer ranks of inspector to district inspector to the exalted heights of depot commander. I wondered how many times I had shown him my ticket.

‘Did you ever see him on the tram?’ I asked.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘Once or twice.’

‘Did he say hello?’

‘Yes.’

Then she really cried. I gave her a hug and I felt her tears wetting my shirt on the shoulder. ‘Oh dear,’ she sniffled into a little hanky. ‘I must look a mess.’

‘No you don’t,’ I said. Suddenly the mother I’d known so well and for so long was someone else, a figure of mystery, a person with a past that was totally denied me, a whole world of experience that was both foreign and vaguely threatening.

For the next few months, almost every weekend, it seemed, we were out in the car to visit them at their neat little home in Kallangur, a distant suburb of Brisbane. The grass was always cut and the edges trimmed. He had a big shed and he wanted us to call him ‘Pop’. The kids happily complied but I could never manage it. There was too much distance between us and as time passed and little hints of the pain my mother had suffered slipped through the curtain of silence I instinctively withdrew from him. But I really had no idea of the intensity of feeling that played beneath the surface. Nor did I understand why they never spoke or met with Grandmother Macklin.

I played cricket with my brothers in their big backyard, but that wasn’t much fun because the boys were so much younger. In fact, the whole thing became

a trial and when I was able to discover some excuse to avoid the visits I grabbed it with both hands. Once again, sport was my salvation. I developed a passion for any and every sporting event involving Grammar and even BBC, whose ovals were within walking distance of our new/old place. And I soon made friends at both schools — starting with Andy Anderssen at Grammar and John McMinn at BBC.

Andy and I just clicked. His people had a grand house in Clayfield and his brother Bill was two years ahead of us at Grammar. His father was a solicitor with his own practice and Andy's future in the firm had already been decided. He was short, stocky and fair with a big, devilish grin. Though we were in different classes — his being 3G, the other top academic group — we were soon the best of mates, sharing confidences, drinking illicit beer, going to parties together and even family holidays at Mooloolaba or the Gold Coast.

Andy liked to sing too and on his first visit home joined my mother in an impromptu concert of old favourites in the kitchen. Instantly they were the best of friends. Even my father liked him. When Andy stayed with us at our rented Mooloolaba holiday house, the Dashes turned up for a few days and Andy fitted right in. 'He's got no airs and graces,' my father said (unlike his eldest son).

John McMinn was in the Queensland Aussie Rules team with me and we caught up at Rugby matches and parties. In the dizzyingly incestuous nature of Brisbane's GPS society at the time, the circles kept widening and overlapping. John was friends with Bill

Richards (son of the beloved newspaper columnist Arthur Richards) at BBC but Bill was also a childhood friend of Andy's. Bill had a face as round as the sun and a smile to match. The impish Francois Roberts, also from BBC, was another of the Clayfield Cowboys who became an instant lifelong friend. Gary Evans, who had the appearance of a perpetually unmade bed and a laugh that would loosen fillings, was another.

Some of the BBC boarders came to the Methodist church at the end of Maryvale Street where I had become a Sunday-school teacher under the firm hand and gimlet eye of Arnold Bennett. The boarders were mostly from properties in the far west and they were all good fun, especially Peter Pownall, whose people had a cattle station near Springsure, and John Michael, who looked like an angel. His folk were from even farther west and he told wild stories of the outback where men were struck blind with 'sandy blight' and young fellows (like him) were 'broken in' to the world of sex by eager black gins who just couldn't get enough of him. And all in a voice that wavered between base and falsetto like an unhinged yodeller.

I was fascinated by — and slightly afraid of — Arnold Bennett, a famous Queensland lawyer who at the time was leader of the Bar. Mr Bennett would soon be Sir Arnold and was always as neat as a new pin, with silver hair and beautifully tailored three-piece suits, even in summer. He seemed to have a penetrating intelligence and this, combined with his air of total authority, made him the most formidable person I had met. More so even than Mr Gzell with his high Russian culture.

'Good job,' he said once after sitting in on my Sunday-school class as I told the story of Abraham preparing to slash the throat of his young son Isaac to prove his faith until God took mercy and stayed his hand. 'But we don't want to frighten the little ones too much, do we.'

I blushed. I had certainly expressed myself with feeling. But the real reason for my embarrassment was that something unexpected was happening to my religious faith. It was running against the rocks of reason.

The big cracks opened, I think, when the Rev Alan Walker came to OKs to give us a talk about our mission in life. He was even more exalted than the Rev Ivan Alcorn who had advised us about masturbation with such disastrous effect. So I anticipated the event with some trepidation. Actually it was quite an exciting time in the Methodist Church because Billy Graham, the American evangelist, was drawing huge crowds all round Australia and he was headed for Brisbane. By then I had become the leader of our OKs chapter and when Mr Walker arrived with our minister, the Reverend Brimblecombe, they sat on either side of me while we finished the formal business, all dressed in our knightly regalia.

Mr Brimblecombe also lived in Maryvale Street and I often waved to him as I headed off to Grammar. He had a permanently blocked nose which made it just about impossible for him to say his own name. He was not a sonorous preacher and not only because of the blocked nose; it was more that he really didn't have anything to

say, just ritual words with no actual meaning. The BBC boarders thought he was hopeless too and joined the choir so they could sit with the girl singers. Angelic John Michael said he copped a feel during a hymn.

Anyway I introduced our visitors to the Round Table. 'Thank you, Sir Knight,' the Rev Walker said, and I nodded judicially from my place of honour, 'I am here tonight to talk about faith.' There were some inward groans from my fellow knights but I was all ears. Faith seemed to be when you believed something that was totally illogical. But that meant you had to deny the reasoning of your mind; so if you denied your mind then what exactly did you believe *with*?

The Rev Alan Walker leapt right over that one. 'Faith is a wonderful gift,' he said, 'simply *because* it defies our human powers of reasoning.' While we were pondering that he said something that shocked me to the quick. 'The Catholics have a different set of beliefs to ours but that doesn't mean they are wrong. Our beliefs may be different but our faith is the same.'

Wow, I thought, what a tangle. Afterwards he invited questions and for ages there was dead silence. So I said, 'We believe the truth and the Catholics believe something else. So why don't we just tell them they're wrong?'

The Rev Alan Walker said, 'They have faith. That's the important thing. You should know that.' It was the tone that struck me. There was no room for discussion. The man was a bully.

I walked home very slowly that night. I was half inclined to give the whole thing away. Mr Walker had

anticipated that in his talk. He said, 'From time to time you will be tested. You will have doubts; that happens to everyone. It is part of God's plan. He is testing you. He wants to know if you are strong enough to overcome them.'

Mr Brimblecombe said, 'You can always rely on the power of prayer.' But it came out, 'the bower of brayer' and you couldn't help but wonder if he had 'brayed' for a 'dew dose'. But what troubled me most was that Arnold Bennett, one of the most intelligent men in Queensland, actually believed. What did he know that I didn't? What was I lacking?

I felt the gathering of a mental storm; it seemed as though I was being swept up and spun about, torn between the safety of belief and the unknown path of reason. Half of me felt that it was all a lie, an old story with no connection to real life. Church people parroted Jesus's words and they preached humility and selflessness but they acted no differently from anyone else. If anything, they were more petty, more willing to condemn and to disparage. But if it was all untrue, how was I to know for sure? There was no one, I felt, to whom I could turn for advice, no guiding star, no book, no wise mentor, not even my mother. I walked right past our house, all the way up the hill of Explorer Street, along Ascog Terrace and into Miskin Street, then down through the shadowed valley of Woodstock Road and back to Maryvale Street.

'You're late, dear,' my mother said. 'Did you have a nice time?' She was sewing a little dress for Julie on her machine.

'It was OK,' I said.

She smiled. 'Very good.' She meant my pun. I hadn't meant to make it but I took the credit anyway. I had actually decided to put my faith to the test. I was definitely going to the Billy Graham crusade at the exhibition grounds. I would open my heart to a sign from God.

I withheld this decision from my classmates at Grammar. It would have been greeted with bemusement or sniggers and that would not do. Our great passions were the cricket and *The Goons* on radio every Monday night. Tuesday mornings before class we would stand around recreating every moment of the show — in all the voices — and laughing more than we had the night before.

My father hated it. It was bad enough if I chuckled, but if my mother joined in he would stalk from the room, taking his crossword with him. Then I'd really let go. Trouble was, you couldn't laugh too much or you'd miss the next bit.

The Billy Graham extravaganza was on a Sunday afternoon and we all went in a bus from the church. The boarders would do anything to get away from school so they all turned up but when we got there the whole place crackled with excitement. There was a tremendous build-up to the arrival of Billy Graham — songs from the choir on stage, powerful oratory from his associates — and when he appeared it seemed that a special sunbeam had been reserved for him. He glowed.

He started very quietly, telling stories, talking about sin (he was a sinner himself but wouldn't tell us exactly how he'd transgressed beyond 'pride') but then along came Jesus, his personal saviour who had died for

us. He faced the audience and held up his hand. 'They put a nail in this hand,' he cried, and then he held up his other hand and said: 'Then they put a nail in this hand.' It was very theatrical, very dramatic, and we were stunned into silence. You could practically see the blood dripping down his arms.

This was the Jesus who could be the personal saviour of every single one of us. All we had to do was open our hearts, listen to the voice inside, then rise from our seats and walk down to the stage where we would make witness and give our lives back to the Lord Jesus Christ.

It was a big temptation. John Michael yodelled, 'I wouldn't want to miss this,' and started down to where people were giving their lives to Jesus while Billy blessed them on His behalf.

Peter Pownall said, 'Nah, I don't think so,' and I wrestled with the contending forces — the delicious anticipation of being part of a wondrous emotional experience versus the certain knowledge that it would double and redouble the conflict inside. I stood and then I sat and took the strain. I felt as if I were in a contest in which there were no prizes for the winner, only pain for the loser. I waited for a sign but none was forthcoming. The little voice inside me had nothing to say.

Afterwards I told my mother. She didn't say much, just patted my hand.

At the end of second term, the friendly traditionalist Mr McLucas suddenly left to become headmaster of Scots College. It was a devastating blow and when followed by the promotion of his deputy, the

big, awkward 'Shorty' Newell in his place, it was a full-scale disaster.

Shorty was immensely tall and hawked at the back of his throat, then expelled a series of quick bursts through his great nose like a rampant rhino. He took us for chemistry and our sense of mutual antipathy was both immediate and uncompromising.

He quickly moved into the boarding house and we were stunned to see the diminutive and not unattractive Mrs Newell about the place in her nightie and dressing gown as late as mid-morning. Soon a wild and totally unsubstantiated rumour flashed around the school that the popular sportsmaster, 'Reggie' Hubbard, was having assignations with her. With the encouragement of some of the senior boys I organised a team of spies from 3H who followed the two supposed lovers about and reported back to me. I passed the 'intelligence' on to a prefect, the great Kirkpatrick, and found myself a minor celebrity in the senior school.

While 3H was one of the two top academic classes, taking Latin and French, our behaviour was anything but scholarly. By third term as class captain I led the pranks designed to drive our masters insane — orchestrating the sudden shedding of our ties or dropping of pencils or a cannonade of spitballs on to the ceiling when the master turned to the blackboard. 'Creep' Neill, the English and Latin master, was our favourite victim. A former priest who always seemed half dazed, he was the recipient of some of our more riotous behaviour and several times Shorty had to come in to restore peace and order. The class captain was his

focal point and our hatred bloomed, fuelled no doubt by his counter-intelligence that revealed the existence of my spy network.

Gradually that sense of joyous, mutual exploration of the world of knowledge I had shared with Mr Kinnon and Mr England at Ironside was replaced by a devilish desire to rebel. It added to the larger turmoil and I felt as though the last firm connection to the world of honour-bright conscientiousness had slipped its moorings and I was adrift in the swirling currents. It had happened so quickly, this collusive, spontaneous spurning of authority, that it was like changing from Dr Jekyll to Mr Hyde.

Yet at the same time I gave everything to the sporting and social side of school activities. I revelled in the Grammar milieu where the place had split into the nouveau, oafish Newellists and the debonair traditionalists of the McLucas 'old school'. We rallied to the flag in spite of the temporary incumbent and gripped it the harder because of him. We gave unwonted haircuts to upstarts who lowered the tone with their 'bodgie' hairstyles. We led the war cries at football matches and at Head of the River. We congregated at the Saturday-morning dance studios on the riverbank and brought a touch of flair (or so we believed) to the gypsy tap. And we (well, I) laughed in the teeth of plummeting test results in all subjects but English where my only competition was red-haired Peter Thompson who had already decided he wanted to be a journalist and was writing little sports stories for the Saturday *Telegraph*.

It was no way to develop a school career and at the beginning of fourth form a terrible blow descended. We had a new form master — J. S. D. Edwards — and I was re-elected unanimously as class captain. But when the election was reported to the head's office a message was instantly conveyed back to the class. The form master read it aloud: 'Macklin is not acceptable to the school.'

Outraged, I rose in my seat. 'Sir, what reasons did he give?'

Edwards: 'That's the whole message.'

Honour demanded that I confront the rhino on his own ground. The class agreed, but as he had a fearsome physical reputation (and to provide myself with an academic air) I borrowed Melvyn Tipper's glasses. Tipper was a gentle, kindly chap, very brainy but one of nature's followers. He was also a committed Christian who played the organ at the Rev Alan Walker's church. The lenses were very thick and I had to look over the top of them when I entered the head's office.

'I would like to know why I am unacceptable to the school,' I said as I sat opposite him.

He was ready for me. 'You marked some boys present when they were absent,' he said, referring to the captain's daily task of keeping the roll. It came as a total surprise. In fact, I had delegated the job to my deputy, Dave Linklater, and as far as I knew there had never been a question of irregularity. However, I couldn't do Dave.

'This is the first I've heard of it,' I said. 'Who was involved? When did it happen?'

'It's a fact,' he said. 'In any case, it's my decision.' He rose, all six-foot-seven of him. There was no court of appeal. I turned on my heel and left. There was, however, one small gesture of defiance remaining. 'OK,' I said when I got back, 'he says it's his decision and there's nothing we can do about it. So I nominate Tipper for Class Captain. Hands up if you agree.' The vote was joyous and unanimous. Even Melvyn enjoyed it when I gave him back his glasses. J. S. D. 'Deadhead' Edwards watched the pantomime with an expression flickering from alarm to bemusement but declined to intervene.

Sport aside, it was all downhill from there.

FIFTEEN

I was selected for the First XI in my junior year. This was not unprecedented but it was rare. I had scored lots of runs in the first season in the Under-15s and my wicket-keeping continued to improve. But it was still a great surprise to see my name on the noticeboard and a thrill to join the team at the nets for practice.

The coach was 'Ollie' Bell, a member of the 'old school' who had played at representative level himself. He took me aside after my turn at the crease — where I'd faced a hostile spell from the great Curnow and had survived with my wicket intact — and said, 'Just take it one step at a time. You'll be fine.'

I wasn't sure what he meant but it was wonderful to feel a sense of belonging. When I opened in the next match against Churchie I made a creditable 35 against a powerful attack. I lifted my bat to acknowledge the applause as I returned to the Grammar pavilion, and

Bradman after a double century at Lords could not have been more proud.

Then I had a series of quick dismissals and was dropped back to the Under-16s for a match against Nudgee College. When I opened the batting it was like playing my younger brothers in the backyard. I knew where each ball would land the moment it left the bowler's hand; I knew precisely where to strike it to bisect the field. It was a glorious feeling. I passed my half-century with a cracking square cut and was caught on the boundary for 75. Next week I was back in the Firsts.

I was beginning to feel comfortable in the team and when we were invited to play a Wanderers XI at the 'Gabba it seemed that anything was possible. I practised at school and against a stone wall at home every day until I was exhausted or the sun set behind Mt Coot-tha or both. My brother Brian threw impossible slip catches to me and I dived this way and that, fingers stretched to gather them in. On the clothesline I was wearing out my mother's stockings faster than she was throwing them away.

On the day itself the world took on a special glow as we left school in a bus for the famous cricket ground where I'd seen Keith Miller lift Alf Valentine on to the grandstand for a six, where I'd watched Graham Hole slash his amazing square cuts to the boundary, where Norm O'Neill had hit the ball so hard that the sound of it reached us just as it crashed into the fence. Or so it seemed. Lindsay Hassett had played there; Don Bradman and Bill Ponsford had hit mammoth scores.

Ray Lindwall had glided over the turf and his mighty right arm had scythed through the air, rocketing the ball towards bemused Englishmen at the crease.

The Wanderers was a scratch team of former and current state players, rising stars of the grade competition and cricket loyalists who wanted to encourage youngsters to enter the lists for Queensland Colt selection and then, perhaps, to make a run for the big time. The captain was Jack McLaughlin, a Queensland selector and all-rounder who set the tone with a cracking half-century before taking the long handle and getting himself caught on the boundary.

I had taken two catches in their innings and was feeling pleased with myself when called to the wicket after my mate and fellow fourth former Graeme Bizzell got tangled up by the speedy leg-spinner who was making a name for himself in the Sheffield Shield competition.

As we passed he said, 'If it's outside the off-stump it's probably a wrong 'un'. I took block from the umpire in his black pants and white coat and hat. McLaughlin was taking a turn behind the stumps. 'What's your name, son?' he asked. For a moment I couldn't remember. Then I told him and he said, 'Well, good luck, Bob,' and when I looked up the spinner was running in to bowl. Sure enough, the first ball I received looked like a leg break as it left his hand but spun viciously back from the off and I was only just able to keep it out.

The next ball, with the same action, was on the off stump and again I moved forward to cover my stumps. But this one spun from the leg and just touched the edge of

the bat. It went through to the keeper and for a moment it stuck in the centre of his glove. But then it fell out.

'OK,' McLaughlin said with a little grin. 'That's the first and last favour you'll ever get at the 'Gabba.' Then to the team he shouted, 'Come on lads, let's get rid of this bloke; he won't give us much trouble,' and gestured his fieldsmen to come closer.

I felt the gorge rise. It was a calculated insult. And when the next ball was directed to middle stump I jumped straight into it and drove it back along the pitch past his outstretched hand. Oh, the joy of it. My feet barely touched the ground as I ran three, then had a spell while Dougie Madden at the other end muscled his shots through the field.

Barry Fischer, the opening bowler for the state side who had modelled his action on Lindwall's, came on the from the Vulture Street end and as I played him the ball started to hit the centre of the bat and I felt my confidence rising. I played a leg glide to the boundary, just the way I'd seen the great Bill Brown play it on the newsreels and as I'd played it a thousand times in the backyard with David Straughan and Dale Bennett or in the nets at Ironside and Grammar. It simply flew across the turf and rattled the pickets.

Then, astonishingly, I was out. I had clipped a ball through the covers — or so I'd believed — when from nowhere the man at cover point, Des Houston, dived and snapped it up only an inch or two from the ground. I was stunned. I'd already added two to my mental total and was halfway down the pitch when suddenly I wasn't a factor any more. I was out. I was yesterday's news. I was a statistic.

Still, it was a wondrous day and when I told the story the family hung on every word. Even my father seemed impressed. The next day Newell struck again. An embarrassed Ollie Bell sent for me at lunchtime. He had a note from the head. Recent test results had shown that I was neglecting my studies. Until I got my marks up I couldn't play for the Firsts.

The injustice was breathtaking. I was paralysed. There was simply nothing to say beyond, 'Thank you Mr Bell.' If I'd tried I would have wept.

'He can't do it,' Andy said. But he knew he could. 'Fuck him.'

I made a resolution to crack the books and get myself back in the academic running, but it didn't last. I was so far behind in maths, chemistry and Latin that the task was beyond me. I threw myself into a reading program that engulfed not just the set novels and plays — *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Vanity Fair*, *Wuthering Heights*, *As You Like It* and *MacBeth* — but I also discovered Dostoyevsky and was swept up by *Crime and Punishment* and overwhelmed by *The Brothers Karamazov*. I took to my room each evening to study and always began with high resolution. But after 15 minutes the Latin declensions would pall and a hand would reach out of its own accord to the wild Russian romantic.

In third form I had joined the cadets and took some pleasure in the parades and the sense of order. Now it became the very symbol of a resented authority and I transferred to the band where Graham Strachan, who was also in my class, played the drums. At our first cadet camp his rendition of the Buddy Rich break in

'Golden Wedding' became the leitmotif of our rebellion. I played kettle drum and base and in junior year we welcomed a visiting American warship with a rousing bracket of military numbers. Another band member, Sandy Nall, and I stayed behind and we swapped our slouch hats for a couple of gob caps and Lucky Strike cigarettes. Then we rolled up to parade in the gob caps and found ourselves on report to the commandant, Captain Smith.

Smithy was a rough diamond. 'You stupid buggers,' he said. 'Go and get two new hats from the quartermaster. Bring the money next week or get out of the Corps.' I never returned. Instead, I fought an undeclared war of the disenchanting.

We were the maquis in the darkest days of the Nazi occupation; we were the anarchists of Moscow plotting against the Czarist oppressors; we wouldn't crack on pain of death or the threat of Shorty's fearsome cane. No quarter would be asked and none given.

During the day in the clash of combat it was all feverishly exciting. But at other times when I contemplated the future — in the hot frangipanni scented nights when sleep would not come; in the darkness of a city cinema as I wagged a maths test and watched Rock Hudson and Jennifer Jones in *The Magnificent Obsession* for the third time before emerging in time to catch the bus home — it was impossible to avoid the rolling waves of depression. Suddenly, it seemed, there was nowhere to go.

A terrible headache sent me into the isolation ward of the Brisbane General Hospital in an ambulance

with suspected meningitis. Two nurses pressed me into a foetal position to give the woman doctor the best shot at a lumbar puncture to withdraw fluid from the brain. But she couldn't find the small entrance to the spine and the agony was almost beyond bearing. Then another doctor passed the door and saw all the combatants in tears. In a trice he slipped the needle into the spinal aperture and I drifted away.

I awoke to the vision of an angel at my window. We were on the second floor yet there it was, a creature bathed in white light with a delicate halo. 'Hello,' it said, and as it jumped down into the room the shadows gave it form. It was a little boy of nine or 10 who had lost his hair and the regrowth was a white fuzz. He was in pyjamas.

'Where did you come from?'

He smiled. 'There's a ledge.'

'Isn't it dangerous?'

'Yeah,' he grinned.

The nurse arrived and he ducked under my bed.

'Come out, Albert, you little bugger.'

He surrendered tamely enough. She took him by the ear. 'What have I told you, eh?'

'Don't remember.'

'Yes you do. Stay put. In your own little room. OK?'

'Yeah.'

'And stay off the ledge.'

She picked him up in her beefy arms and bore him off. Later she said, 'He's not going to be with us much longer ... Leukemia.'

I visited him a few times via the ledge. It was nearly half a metre wide. But I never saw him out of bed again and he died just before I was released. One day his bed was empty. The nurses on our floor were red-eyed from weeping.

When I was discharged the doctor gave me repeat prescriptions for phenobarb to help me sleep and to treat my nerves. I found that if I took a couple before school the day flew by in a giddy roundabout.

Andy could talk to girls. He could natter away about absolutely nothing; in no time they'd be chuckling and the next thing you knew he'd be heading off with the pick of the bunch. When he left, the conversation would stumble and die. And you'd find some desperate excuse to leave.

'How do you do it?' I asked.

He grinned. 'Nothing to it.'

It took me ages to figure out. Andy had an older sister in Cleone and a slightly younger one in Meredith. He talked to them, understood them. We who had grown up sisterless saw them only as objects of sexual desire. It didn't matter that we'd joshed around with girls at Ironside for years. That was another world. Even Carollie Cox had become Carol and when I glimpsed her on a bus or in the street she was tall and gracious and it was said that she did modelling after school. When we talked to these alien creatures it was merely to camouflage a naked need, and no natural words came trippingly to the tongue.

Andy's small talk was a kind of code. The words themselves had no meaning, they were just soothing background noise, the same principle that I would later learn worked so well on horses. Andy was a Girl Whisperer.

Fortunately the parties we went to were usually hosted by Clayfield girls who had banished their indulgent parents for the night and who happily broke out the beer from Daddy's stock. Two or three Fourxes, I discovered could help the verbal flow, and soon I was entwined in a web of flirtation and fiercely controlled petting. I became keenly aware of the underlying madness — we were *able* to have sex as early as 13 but not *permitted* to until we were married. Who designed that little number? The Christians. Another mighty good reason for bidding farewell to Arnold Bennett and my knightly band of brothers.

One morning after church I found him in the grounds making small talk. 'I won't be coming to Sunday school next week,' I said.

'Oh. Are you going away?'

'No,' I said. 'I'm having a crisis of faith.'

'I see,' he said. And he did. He knew — and he knew I knew he knew — that I would never be coming back. He turned away without a word.

Almost at once I met Jill Smallbone and while we didn't actually have sex, we laughed a lot. She told jokes and did impressions and giggled at people who made small talk or put on airs. And she laughed at my jokes. She was no deathless beauty. She was skinny and coltish with sharp elbows and short blonde hair. She was also a

year older than me and went to Girls' Grammar. We met on the trolley bus heading up from the city and at the Saturday-morning dance classes where we slipped away and smoked cigarettes on the bank of the river. We caused a scandal when she joined me at a class outing in the Albert Street Methodist Church Hall for an amateur performance of *As You Like It*.

We sat on our own, way up the back kissing and fondling till one of the masters, the pedantic 'Buster' Bevan, pointedly left the class, climbed to the gods and planted himself right behind us. As he arrived Will Shakespeare provided the perfect description of 'Buster' with the sixth of his seven ages, which 'shifts into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon, with spectacles on nose and pouch on side; his youthful hose, well sav'd, a world too wide for his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice, turning again toward childish treble, pipes and whistles in his sound ...'

The row of seats shook with our giggles.

Among the legendary characters of the GPS crowd at the time was Johnny Adam at BBC who on a cadet camp was credited with firing his .303 through a line of tents, fortunately missing the 60 potential manslaughter victims along the way. Gary Evans was another. At the annual St Margaret's dance Evvos leapt on a supper table and led the crowd in a rendition of *Hairy Mary*. The lyrics were innocuous enough:

Hairy Mary had a little Indian
Hairy Mary had a little Indian
Hairy Mary had a little Indian,
One little Indian boy ...

*One little, two little, three little Indians
Four little, five little, six little Indians
Seven little, eight little, nine little Indians
Ten little Indian boys ...*

There was, however, a thrilling subtext. The head of St Margaret's was Sister Mary and she arrived mid-verse. In his enthusiasm Gary's buttons burst, giving his rendition the air of an involuntary striptease to the huge delight of the assembly. Sister Mary's purple outrage was a sight to behold. Three Churchie boys hauled him down and a melee developed. St Margaret's annual dance was banned the following year and required the better part of a decade to recover its social *éclat*.

Both Adam and Evans were at least two years ahead of me and neither, it seemed, gave a toss for academic results; so when the full measure of my scholarly collapse became evident in the pre-Junior tests I took some comfort in their examples. The handsome, dashing Johnny Adam, for example had headed west to be a jackaroo trailing clouds of glory. Gary was plugging on at BBC — a lantern-jawed hooker in a First XV that included the legendary Norbury Rogers at centre three-quarters — but a walking disaster in the classroom. And they were just the most prominent of a loose fraternity of excitingly naughty boys.

However, their mothers were not doing dressmaking day and night to pay their school fees. So at a rare round-table conversation at Maryvale Street I was faced with three options: take a teacher's

scholarship that would pay for the last two years at Grammar but with a bond to remain a teacher for five years after graduation; return to school for the senior years unencumbered by scholarships and supported by my mother; or leave school and seek either a job or a trade (my father's preference) 'to fall back on.'

'I don't mind working,' my mother said. 'Really. It's up to you.'

He bridled. 'It's pointless unless you're prepared to take a pull at yourself.'

'It's all pretty pointless anyway,' I said. My secret fear was that in my neglected subjects I had passed the point of no return. He misunderstood. He jumped up and began walking about the house opening and closing doors and raising his voice.

'Please don't upset him,' she said.

'Don't speak to me,' he shouted from a distance. 'I don't want to hear another word out of you. Ever.'

I said nothing.

'Did you hear me!' he cried.

It should have been funny but it wasn't. She looked away.

I took a holiday job while we waited for the results to be printed in the *Courier-Mail*. Perhaps by some miracle my free translation of Caesar's decision to cross the Rubicon would strike a literary chord with the examiner. Certainly I'd be fine with English; David Malouf had been briefly our English master and was a delightful character who dressed in beautifully tailored cream suits. However, he gave no hint of the literary splendour to come. His classes were a barely contained

riot and he lasted less than a year. But I was entranced by the written word and enraptured by ideas. And there were so many ways to express them, so many forms to explore.

History was also manageable, though my causes of the French Revolution drew more heavily on *A Tale of Two Cities* than the history textbook. Physics would be OK; but chemistry, Maths A and Maths B had become worlds beyond all understanding. So until the results arrived I became an office boy and dipped my toe in the cordial waters of Mynor Products. It was enormous fun. I never stopped running.

The office was attached to the factory which was a big hangar with women dotted all around the production lines for the various fruit juices and the famous G I lime. In its pure state G I was British racing green but when mixed with seven-eighths icy water was instantly transformed into the perfect thirst-quencher. Everyone seemed happy in their tasks under the benign dictatorship of Mr Norman Myer (hence My-nor) who visited from his Sydney operation every couple of weeks.

I had met a few Mynor drivers at our shop and they always seemed to have a supply problem. I'd been at the headquarters only a week when I saw why: urgent orders would arrive by telephone during the day and we might well have a truck able to make a delivery later that day. But there was no way to contact the driver. This meant the shopkeeper might have to wait a week till the truck was back on its regular round.

I'd recently been at a cadet camp where we'd used army two-way radios and it occurred to me that this

might well provide a solution. 'Why don't you tell Mr Myer,' my mother said. 'I'm sure he be pleased.'

I asked his secretary for an appointment. She hummed and hawed. A few minutes later I was summoned to Mr Hely, the accountant. 'What did you want to see Mr Myer for?' he asked. I told him and he nodded slowly.

'Leave it with me,' he said.

In the factory the half-dozen men were outnumbered 10 to one by the women and girls — mostly new migrants from Middle Europe — and Roy, the lively, dark-haired production manager, was the happiest man in Brisbane. The place was a sexual extravaganza. A never-ending stream of new candidates vied for Roy's attentions. He just couldn't stop smiling and whistling. In the heady sensual atmosphere thick with Queensland humidity and the sweet cordial perfumes, his offsidiers joined in the happy coupling. It was like a giant heaving bordello with people popping in and out of storerooms and landing bays in a daze of sexual wonderment.

Alas, newly arrived 16-year-old office boys were not part of the club, but the girls on the elevated production lines whistled, laughed and raised their skirts whenever I made one of my loping dashes through the hangar on a mission for Mr Hely.

One day I travelled home in the bus with one of them and we smiled a lot. Her English was almost non-existent. When we reached her stop she mimed an invitation. My heart leapt but my feet would not respond and she gave me a naughty wave as she

rounded the back of the bus. I cursed myself for days afterwards.

Then I spotted a better paying job in the paper: cadet trainee at Wunderlich, the roofing and planking supplier, and with an enthusiastic reference from Mr Hely (who never did tell me how Mr Myer responded to the two-way radio idea) I secured one of the two jobs on offer. The other, I was delighted to discover, went to Geoff Jones, a BBC boarder who used to come to church and who I'd met a few times on the playing field.

He was built like a good Rugby forward — stocky and low to the ground — and though we were the same age he seemed older and vastly more experienced in the ways of the world. He too was waiting for the junior results with a certain trepidation, and when they arrived there were no miraculous reprieves for either of us. We passed, but despite my A in English it was a near run thing.

Our cadetships required us to attend technical drawing and other useful classes at the tech college near the Botanic Gardens one night a week. The first time we went we passed an open door with a nude class hard at work. 'Wow,' Jeff said when he spotted the model. 'Can't miss this.' He walked right in and began sketching.

The next time we didn't quite make it. To reach the tech we had to walk past Charlotte Street, which boasted the best of Brisbane's brothels. They were illegal but the police turned a blind eye and the ladies were sitting on the verandah at street level fetchingly attired in baby-doll pyjamas. The air of raw sexuality

was spoiled somewhat by their knitting, all three of them, as they chatted among themselves. As usual, we were almost broke but Geoff was undeterred. 'Can't miss this.' He boldly entered the front gate and engaged the ladies in jocular banter. In a trice he'd selected one of the knitters and they'd entered the hallway leading to the land of forbidden delights.

'What about you, luv?' said a dark-haired lady furiously purling and plaining.

'No, I'll just wait.'

'OK dear, take the load off,' she said indicating the wicker chair just vacated by Geoff's charmer. I sat. It was a moment of total embarrassment. Not only was I on illegal premises, not only was I exposed to the gaze of passersby in the glow of lamplight, I was in the presence of brazen, unequivocal sexuality. A record inside played Pat Boone singing 'April Love'.

Fortunately the eternal moment ended with a sharp cry behind me, 'Hit the kick!' followed by the sudden return of Geoff, who went right past with his curly blonde lady in pursuit. They reached the gate and he kept going. 'G'wan,' she cried, 'Gitoutavit!'

I made my excuses and hurriedly followed. When I reached the curly blonde at the gate she wheeled on me, 'Tell him to bring his money next time.'

'Yes, of course,' I said. 'Sorry.'

'Get fucked.'

When I caught up with him Geoff said, 'I just wanted to see the merchandise first.'

'But you didn't have the money anyway.'

'That's beside the point.'

He had enough to buy me a beer, then another, at the Bellevue Hotel. 'Is he twenty-one?' the barmaid asked.

'Twenty-three actually,' said Geoff.

'Oh yeah.' But she served us anyway.

Sixteen was a terrible age. The world didn't fit. It was filled with unseen protrusions. Every time I moved I mentally barked my shin or hit my funny bone. But there were occasional compensations. At Wunderlich I worked with a pleasant man named Ray New who smoked in a peculiar manner. He'd draw on the cigarette, then push the smoke out of his mouth while he breathed in through the nose; then, after taking it into his lungs he'd blow it out his mouth. I thought it a remarkable achievement and when I could afford to buy a packet of cigarettes I would practise it.

Ray made me Manager of Metal Ceilings. This was not an arduous task in 1958 since the heyday of metal ceilings with their fancy patterns and cornices had been in the 1890s, but occasionally those big timber Queensland homes would require a thorough renovation and there were still one or two architects who favoured them. So each week I would get a call from an architect's office seeking our brochure of patterns followed by telephoned requests for drawings and quotes.

Courtesy of Miss Guyatt's elocution class I was easily able to persuade the architects that they were talking to a mature and responsible 'manager'. I took special pleasure — as did Ray at the next desk — in assuring the architect that the drawings were done and I'd send 'the lad' uptown with them.

On arrival at the swish architects' offices I'd announce, 'Mr Macklin says he hopes you're happy with the quote and could you give him a ring in about half an hour.' Then I'd race back on the tram to await the call when I'd inquire whether the lad had behaved himself.

'Seemed like a fine lad,' I'd tell Ray, who would splutter in his smoke.

Home, alas, became a place of endless bickering. One Sunday evening my mother said, 'If you two don't stop I think I'll go mad.' The next day I bought a copy of the *Land* newspaper and looked up jobs for jackaroos. The following week Winchcome Carson, the stock and station agents, called me for an interview. I dressed carefully in the uniform of the day — brown desert boots, grey slacks, light-blue, button-down shirt, striped tie and yachting jacket. I went in my lunch hour and in the manager's office met a plump, well-dressed, middle-aged woman with a lovely smile and a soft voice. The manager introduced us and left. Her name was Miss Schwennesen.

We were friends from the first moment. When she asked why I wanted to go west I said, 'My father thinks it will make a man of me.' I don't know why I said it but she liked it. She chuckled. She said she had to interview someone else but asked how soon I could start. I said, 'Tomorrow.'

'Well,' she said, 'We'll see.' But I knew.

That night I told my mother, 'I'm going away.'

I'm sure that part of her said, 'Thank goodness; perhaps there will be some peace around here.' But she looked so anxious I could hardly meet her eyes.

When the job was confirmed my father said, 'You won't last three months.' Had he not said it, I probably wouldn't have.

SIXTEEN

Roma Street station was a flurry of emotion as the morning train prepared to leave for Toowoomba and points north and west. As we hurried down the platform the great black steam engine seemed to paw the ground with a staccato burst of steam and smoke. My mother travelled with me in the taxi from home and she carried on her lap the thin cardboard box containing the double-decker sponge cake. Then she passed it to me and I juggled it between my huge port and an overnight bag.

She had always made wonderful sponges — light as air with real whipped cream in the middle and lemon icing with passionfruit on top. I didn't really want to take it with me but by then she'd learned that Amy Schwennesen's property, Beechwood, near the tiny western town of Glenmorgan, was peopled entirely by men. There was a manager, John McTaggart — a bachelor

in his early 30s — and two other jackaroos named Neil and Dave. ‘They’ll appreciate a cake,’ she said. ‘You just see.’

I couldn’t argue. In fact, I couldn’t say much of anything when it was time to say goodbye. I hugged her and she felt small and brave.

‘I think it’s for the best,’ she said, but she didn’t sound convinced. ‘It’s for the best all round.’ She adjusted my yellow paisley cravat. I’d teamed it with my GPS ‘uniform’ of white shirt, slacks and desert boots and I thought I looked pretty spiffing. ‘You look very nice,’ she said. ‘But please be careful, won’t you?’

‘Yes, Mum.’

I climbed aboard and found my compartment. I called out to her through the window and she turned with her handkerchief ready to wave as the train pulled away. We moved and she walked a couple of steps in the same direction, then stopped and put her hand to her eyes, weeping uncontrollably. For half a second I wanted to leap from the train but then it gathered speed and she seemed to recover. She waved the white hanky and I leaned farther and farther out of the window to see her. Then she was gone.

I was alone in the compartment. I looked out the window and soon we were travelling along the line that took the Ironside football and cricket teams to our Friday afternoon matches — Toowong, Taringa, Indooroopilly, Chelmer, Graceville, Sherwood, Corinda — then through unknown territory to Ipswich and beyond to Toowoomba. At first it was like revisiting a familiar country. Trials and triumphs flooded in and

mixed the sadness of leaving home with the tingle of adventure. For the first time in my life I was alone against the world.

I took out my book — *The Third Eye*, by Lobsang Rampa — and was soon engrossed in the adventures of the boy lama and the romance of his spiritual quest in the high mountains of Tibet. Perhaps if I saved my jackaroo's wage I could in time move on to the subcontinent whence the Dalai Lama had fled and join the battle to retake Tibet. It was a glorious thought and I revelled in it.

Lobsang Rampa was being trained in the art of astral travelling and I followed the process with absolute concentration. Soon I could feel myself soaring free of my body, out of the train, swooping over continents through space and time to the place of impenetrable mystery and perfect enlightenment. I swept through fearsome spiritual caverns; I rose to the very peak of the stratosphere; I plunged into the depths beyond all measurement and returned to the Toowoomba train just in time for our first stop at Ipswich. I had a pie and peas. Absolutely delicious.

But I also acquired a companion — a roughly dressed young bloke about my age but friendly to a fault. Lobsang Rampa had to give way to a conversation about shearing and pub brawls in which he'd taken a leading role. When he learned I was about to become a jackaroo he said, 'You'll be OK ... as long as you learn to handle yourself in a punch up.'

My boxing skills were minimal. While at Wunderlich I had enrolled in a nearby class where the instructor, a bullet-headed ex-commando, promised to

teach a particularly deadly version of unarmed combat called 'Killer Karate'. The 'gymnasium' was a room under his house where he had a few weights and some rubber mats. He also provided a uniform — white pants and top — but they were his cast-offs and were so big I kept getting tangled up in them.

His holds and jabs were excruciatingly painful — and no doubt lethal if applied with full force — but he seemed to take an unnatural pleasure in inflicting pain and after a couple of months I'd had enough. In any case, I figured if I really did drive the heel of my palm upward into a person's nose, thereby spearing his nasal bones into the brain, I'd be left with a corpse that was very difficult to explain.

So I was interested to hear of my travelling companion's adventures and more than willing to participate when he offered a few pointers in the manly art. But a Queensland train was not the ideal venue for a boxing lesson and when he stepped back to avoid my straight right lead (I was a 'southpaw' he told me) it coincided with a shudder and a swerve on the tracks and we nearly lost him out the window. After that he lapsed into silence and I returned to my astral travelling.

At Toowomba I gathered my luggage, wedging the thin cardboard box with its precious sponge cake between my hip and the arm carrying the overnight bag and trying desperately not to crush it. I sought the connecting train that would take me west into the great unknown. I discovered it on a branch line, a tiny two-carriage rail motor, and dragged my worldly possessions aboard. I was just in time; the driver, who sat up front in

full view of his passengers, blew the penetrating horn and headed out.

The lush Darling Downs with its green wheat and lucerne crops in black-soil paddocks stretched on and on through Oakey and beyond, where to my utter astonishment I saw a koala on a wooden telegraph pole. The rail-motor driver saw it too and blew the horn but the koala ignored him. We stopped briefly at Meandara for tea, then on to Tara as the sun went down, and finally to Glenmorgan, the end of the line. The darkness on the platform was palpable. Only one other passenger had made it this far — a bloke in a big battered hat, the kind I'd seen on buckjump riders at the Ekka. I gathered my luggage and looked for the driver but he had disappeared into the night. The silent buckjumper also seemed a bit uncertain where to go when a figure loomed from the impenetrable depths. 'G'day,' he said to me as I juggled my sponge cake. 'I'm the postman; you going to Beechwood?'

I adjusted my cravat. 'Yes.'

'I'll take you out in the morning. Tonight you better stay at the pub.'

'Where's that?'

He gestured vaguely. 'Just up the road.'

Then he disappeared. The buckjumper bounded away while I rearranged the port and the overnight bag and the bloody cake and followed in his wake, stopping every hundred metres or so to rest and re-settle my load. Fortunately there was only one road.

The two-storeyed Glenmorgan Hotel loomed from the blackness and I staggered up the three

concrete steps and across the verandah into the lobby where I dumped the bags. There was light and noise from the bar through an open doorway on my right and as I entered, the group of locals fell silent. The barman approached. 'What'll yer have?'

'A room please.'

'What, straight?'

The locals haw-hawed and turned back to their beer.

I followed his instructions up the three flights of stairs to my room. There were two single beds separated by a small table. There I placed the cake box and noticed that the cardboard had darkened in places where the cream had escaped. A bare bulb hung from a cord in the ceiling. I stripped and fell into bed, and despite the hundreds of famished fleas, sleep overwhelmed me, at least for an hour until I jerked awake to the light of the naked bulb and an equally naked man at my bedside.

'Don't worry,' he said, 'I'm the Vacuum Oil man,' and climbed into the other bunk. When next I awoke it was morning and he was gone.

I rose and dressed in one of the two new sets of riding britches and my high-heeled riding boots, had breakfast in the dining room with the monosyllabic buckjumper and an old bloke called Fred who hadn't shaved or changed his clothes in a month. When we'd finished our bacon and eggs Fred collected everyone's plates, took them outside and ate the rinds and crusts of toast.

The mailman, I learned, wasn't heading out until 10 o'clock so I went for a walk to explore the town. The

street was wide enough to turn a rail motor and there were two houses and the Memorial Hall on one side, two houses and a general store on the other. I picked up a stick and swished it through the grass beside the dusty footpath as I made my way back to the pub. It was only a short journey but I felt — no doubt under the influence of Lobsang Rampa — that I had been mystically inhabited by the soul of a bushman. I was strangely at home in my surroundings. As I reached the pub, I noticed some three-toed tracks in the dust. I was studying them as bushmen do and flicking them with my stick when the buckjumper emerged.

‘What?’ he asked.

‘Just seeing where these ’roo tracks lead to,’ I said.

‘Haw,’ he said, grinning his broken teeth at me, ‘they’re bloody chooks!’

Suddenly the bushman’s soul went missing.

Ivan Brennan the postman turned up on time and I slung my bags on the back of his truck with the mailbags and, still carrying the cardboard cake box, went to join him in the cabin. But the passenger’s seat was occupied with ‘fragiles’ so I was banished to the back with the mail and the dust that swirled up from the dirt track and the corrugations as we roared off the 60km toward Beechwood. We did not go by the direct route. We called by every single property along the way and some of the homesteads were set 10km back from the road. This meant at least three gates per property there and back to the road, and after about 40 I lost count of the number of times I jumped off the back and struggled with some wildly complex arrangement of

wires and sticks. No two seemed the same. Clearly the people of the area prized originality above efficiency and after a while I understood the old joke about the swaggie who's trudging along a bush track when a grazier in a Rolls-Royce stops and offers him a lift.

'No fear,' says the swaggie, 'You open your own bloody gates.'

Finally at about four o'clock we reached the horse yards by the road and the neat little homestead of Beechwood a couple of hundred metres beyond. Then about the same distance further up the paddock past a big dam were the sheep yards and on either side of them the shearing shed and the shearers' quarters. A much smaller house stood on the other side of the road. All the main buildings were painted white with a green trim and the property looked very neat and settled.

Mr Brennan drove by the house and up to the yards where there was great activity. Shearing was in full cry and the dust rose, dogs yapped and men whistled. A very tall, thin man broke away from the activity and loped over to the truck. Mr Brennan gave him a mailbag and they chatted briefly before he approached me with his hand extended.

He had big hands but a very soft handshake, a square, pockmarked face and the whitest teeth I had seen. 'I'm John McTaggart,' he said.

I told him I was Bob Macklin — 'Bob' seemed right for the bush: a bit rough and ready but a friend to all — and when the postman left, John drove me in his Holden ute back across the road to the smaller house.

'When you're ready,' he said, 'come up to the yards.'

'OK,' I said. I took the moment to hand over my battered, stained cardboard box. 'I brought you a cake,' I said. 'My mother made it.'

He opened the box and smiled. 'Very nice,' he said.

'She makes a terrific sponge.'

'Does she? Yes, I see.' He took it with him, holding the disintegrating box with both hands till he reached the car. Then he placed it carefully on the seat I had vacated and drove away. I watched it leave in its cloud of dust.

My little house had two bedrooms and a small kitchen with a covered verandah on the northern side. I carried my luggage into the bigger bedroom and dumped it on the three-quarter bed. Then I extracted the squashed Grammar hat I'd brought with me and ripped off the band. I was anxious to get to the yards so tossed my dusty jacket on the bed and set out.

The high-heeled riding boots were not made for walking and it took me ages to cover the 500 metres to the sheep yards where Neil McTaggart, John's younger cousin, was working on foot while the much smaller jackaroo, Dave, rode a horse taking the shorn sheep away to a holding paddock. Neil seemed a friendly fellow; Dave just nodded and returned to his task which was clearly much more important than saying g'day to a new workmate.

The shearers were knocking off, traipsing back from the shed past the yards to their quarters carrying their towels and their canvas waterbags. John McTaggart indicated the half-dozen sheep in a small yard.

‘Grab one of them, Bob,’ he said, ‘and bring him over to the gallows.’ It was then I noticed the cement slab with an upright pole and another joining it at an angle and extending half a metre. Hanging from its end was a metal rod shaped like a cupid’s bow.

It was not easy grabbing a sheep in my riding boots — particularly since they seemed anxious not to be grabbed — but Neil helped and we wrestled him over the top rail to the gallows. There John settled him on his side and picked up a big gleaming knife from where it lay with a sharpening steel and another much thinner knife.

‘Watch carefully,’ he said and he thrust the knife into its throat as near as possible to the backbone, then cut outwards while at the same time reefing its head back with his left hand to break the neck. He cut through the neck and tossed the head aside.

I gaped. I swallowed. I held on fast as he took the thinner blade and began skinning the sheep — front legs first, then back, then punching the skin away from the ribs before pulling down the cupid’s bow and setting the ends in the tendons of the back legs. Then he raised it and slipped the bottom end of the angled pole beneath a chock and pulled off the rest of the skin and hung it on the top rail. Turning back, he sliced down the belly and tumbled out the guts. They flopped on the ground and he whipped off the liver for his dog Skipper. He took the big knife and cut down the brisket, then said, ‘OK,’ to Neil, who slipped the carcass on to his shoulder and headed for the meat room beyond the shearers’ quarters.

John looked at me. 'Follow that all right?'

'Sure,' I croaked.

'Good,' he said. 'It'll be your job tomorrow.'

I barely slept. I thought, 'Thou shalt not kill.'

Rising was at 6am during shearing. There was lots to do before the first run started — bringing in the horses, milking the two cows, penning the sheep brought into the big yards and under the shed in case of rain the night before — and the first morning it was all strange.

The night horse was hobbled in the little paddock surrounding my hut, a quiet old bloke only used to round up the 10 to 15 horses in the 100-acre horse paddock near the homestead. The first morning Neil and Dave came over from neighbouring Palmerston which was owned by Amy's younger sister, Roma Hodgson, and which was run in conjunction with Beechwood. Neil, who came from a dairy farm near Beaudesert, caught the night horse and set out across the paddock while I walked over to the homestead where John gave me a bucket and said, 'I s'pose you *can* milk.'

I considered explaining about my delicate, aristocratic wrists but figured it wasn't quite the time. I trundled out with the bucket, leg-roped the big shorthorn and set to with a will. This was no milker like Uncle Sid's. Giving up the fruits of her udder was not her preferred option and she fought me every inch of the way. I tried the other cow but she was no more cooperative. After half an hour John called, 'Breakfast's ready,' and I went in with a miserable dribble of milk at the bottom of the bucket.

'I'm sure I'll get the hang of it,' I said, but he looked doubtful and put four chops and a fried egg in front of me. Then Neil arrived and John gave him the bucket. A softly spoken chap, Neil headed quietly out to the milkers.

Pushing the sheep up into the pens was not hard once you lost the natural inhibition about shouting 'Haaaw' and 'yaaarrrr' to the animals, though again the high-heeled boots were no great asset. But once the pens were full we could get on with the real business of the day — taking the shorn sheep from the holding paddock back to one of the big grazing paddocks and mustering another mob.

That meant a trip to the big horse yards where Dave was waiting with his two bright little black-and-white sheep dogs and his own personal horse, a massive chestnut creature called King. Dave was only 18 but his ambitions to be a jockey had been thwarted and the experience had soured him. He was not really comfortable in the role of jackaroo, eating with the family and socialising with the grazing fraternity. In time he'd probably become a station hand on full wages but in this part of the country the jackaroo came cheap and for the moment it was the best he could do.

'You *can* ride?' John said doubtfully.

'Oh yes,' I said. 'I can ride better than I can milk.' Just how much better I was suddenly unsure. Old Robin on Uncle Sid's farm hadn't whinnied and pawed the ground like some of these horses in the Beechwood yards.

'Why don'tcha give him Solomon,' Dave said helpfully.

John pointed him out — a sleek chestnut with a small head. ‘He’s in from a spell,’ John said. ‘He might pigroot a bit.’

‘No problem,’ I said.

‘And if he gets the bit between the teeth ...’

I was determined to restore my standing. ‘I’ll have a go at him. No problem.’

‘OK.’

John handed me the bridle and I ventured among the pounding hooves to catch him. He wouldn’t be caught — I went one way, he the other; I talked to him and he reared back; I cornered him and he snorted and went right by me.

‘Give us a go,’ John said and walked right up to him, popped his head into the bridle and set the bit in his mouth. How did he do it? It seemed so easy, so natural. He saddled him and fitted a crupper over his tail to prevent the saddle from slipping forward over his small withers. Then he handed me the reins.

I stepped up and tried to get my foot in the stirrup but Solomon backed away. And when I finally did get the toe in he backed even faster so I was hopping madly towards him to avoid the splits. Dave found this hugely amusing and even Neil was chuckling, but again John came to my rescue and showed me how to loop the reins over the horse’s head and hold them tightly in the left hand while easing up along his flank into the saddle.

Suddenly I was there, bolt upright and unnaturally far above the ground. Solomon snorted and put his head down. ‘Hold him up,’ John shouted, but he was a strong young horse and I was damned if I could

raise it. Then he started pigrooting. Not bucking exactly, just bouncing straight up and down with his head between his hooves like some lunatic splay-footed pogo stick. The boys found it hilarious. I was less amused but at least I hung on and after a while he stopped and raised his head.

'Should be right now,' John said. 'Take him for a trot to calm him down.' He opened the gate to let us out. When Solomon saw the opening he became a horse possessed. He fired himself through it like a cannonball and in three strides we were in a gallop heading out across the wide paddock with its fallen logs and green suckers and little gullies. He took them all in his stride while I hauled with all my might on the reins. The bit, however, was firmly between his teeth and it remained there until he jumped a log and I went sideways, dropping the reins and grabbing his neck with both arms for about 20 metres, then crashing into the ground.

'You bastard!' I cried as I staggered to my feet. 'Bloody bastard, bloody bastard ...'

By now the saddle had parted from the crupper and slipped all the way under his belly and he stopped. John arrived on Jane, his big grey mare, and grabbed Solomon's reins. 'I'll give you a ride if you like,' he said, indicating Jane's rump. But I declined. Instead we righted the saddle on Solomon and I rode him back. He walked smartly, head up, happy in the service. He had made his point.

I wasn't hurt in the buster though my new britches were ripped. Dave was still laughing but Neil only grinned sympathetically. I thought, 'He'll be a good mate.'

Mustering had its own perils, not least when Solomon picked up speed through the patches of brigalow as we tried to round a breakaway mob of sheep. But that first day I kept a very tight rein and we barely raised a canter. By the time we yarded the mob in the afternoon I could feel the stiffness in my thighs and shoulders and the small of my back. But the physical discomfort was incidental to the fear I'd harboured all day of the evening butchery. When John sent Dave to bring in the killers I felt a momentary surge of relief — maybe he'd been merciful and given the job to Dave — but in almost the same breath he sent me down to the house for the knives.

Dave had trouble getting them in. They'd been through the routine before and each time one of their number had departed. Dave seemed to enjoy it; he wheeled his great horse back and forth, cooeing and whooping till they entered the pen of doom and he slammed the gate shut from atop his steed.

John said, 'I'll be back in a minute,' and went into the shearing shed to talk to the overseer, Ritchie Jack, about the day's shearing. By now the shearers had returned to their quarters and were resting on the verandah which overlooked the gallows and the big-house dam.

John seemed to take ages so I climbed into the pen and grabbed a big shorn wether. It was quite a struggle to get him over the fence and as I did I was suddenly aware of the warm life within him. I felt my composure slipping but I held him down on his side exactly as I'd seen John do the previous day. Still he

didn't emerge from the shearing shed and I could bear it no longer. My hands were trembling. I took the big knife in my right fist, suddenly slippery from sweat and lanolin, and plunged it into the sheep's throat. The big wether gave a terrible gargling sound, wriggled, jerked and rose on his four feet with the knife projecting from the throat. I grabbed a leg as he made off and slipped in the bloody dirt around the gallows. He pulled free and headed for the dam. I staggered to my feet and set off in pursuit. By now the shearers had noticed. 'Ten to one the sheep ... I'll have two quid on the wether ... Ch shit, come and have a look at this ... Have a go at this poor bastard ... hoo-hoo-hoo ...'

High-heeled boots notwithstanding, I overtook the wether just as he reached the dam and tackled him like a Rugby winger. We went down together in a flurry of limbs. The knife was useless; it came away in my hands. Sobbing with fear, anger, horror and humiliation I held him down and grabbed a nearby rock. I crashed it down on the poor thing's head but it was all bone and horn and it merely gargled the louder. Then suddenly one of the shearers was beside me and he took the knife, sliced through the backbone and the sheep went limp. I looked up at him through wet eyes and puffed my thanks. I have an image of him as Jack Thompson in his epic performance as Foley in *Sunday Too Far Away*.

'First time?' he said.

'Yeah.'

'You'll be right.'

He loaded the carcass on my shoulders and I carried it back to the gallows. I'd have signed up then as his slave for life. Happily John and Richie Jack had

missed the drama and they strolled over to the gallows where John talked me through the butchering. It took forever.

That evening the overseer joined us for dinner — roast leg of mutton — and I discovered I knew his daughter Margie from GPS parties. She was at Clayfield College where Roma Hodgson's daughters Mary, Julie and Ruth were boarders. John, who came from the small holdings around Beaudesert, seemed a bit miffed but at the time I was barely conscious of it. Ritchie Jack had a habit of taking a phrase and repeating it in a sing-song voice an infinite number of times. This first night of our acquaintance he chortled, 'Lot to learn, young Macklin. Oh yes, lot to learn, lot to learn, lot to learn ...' He sang the phrase as he trundled off to bed. It haunted me as I staggered over to my hut and fell on to the cot. In the morning I discovered I was still in my clothes. I'd managed to take one boot off before I passed out.

Beechwood was 35,000 acres of sandalwood, box, belah and brigalow country — well watered by a creek on the flats and with dams in the outer paddocks, each of which had a name like Moonlight or Christmas Creek. In fact the latter was about 9000 acres of ironbark ridges and tough acacia so dense in parts that you had to lead a horse through it.

The property carried 5500 sheep and about 500 cattle. Palmerston was slightly smaller but had a greater carrying capacity. Until recently it had been run by Fletcher Hodgson, a much older man than his wife Roma, but now they were permanently separated. During the wool boom they had lived the high life with

racehorses and Mercedes cars, overseas trips and flowing champagne. But since then prices had tumbled and while they still made a very good living Roma had decided to pull in her horns a little and return to the property with her four girls. She'd built a big airy homestead with a breezeway running through the centre, a tennis court in front, a huge house dam that doubled as a swimming pool, and spacious sheds out the back.

Neil and Dave bunked down at one end of the house while the family quarters were up the other, which could be enclosed and private when required. Roma lived there permanently but at the time she was making one of her many business trips to Brisbane and the eldest daughter, Denise, was running the show.

At 19, Denise was just back home from Frensham, the exclusive finishing school near Bowral on the NSW Southern Tablelands, and she had brought all her opinions with her. A strong-boned woman with the typically square Schwennesen face, brown shoulder-length hair and a wide mouth, she seemed oddly proportioned. Her long, thin legs, oversized bust and elbows that protruded in several directions gave the impression of a body made from spare parts. On first meeting, the second night I was there, she was thoroughly charming but there was a curious undercurrent of aggression against John.

She talked about 'social' Brisbane families, some of whose members I'd met at school, and I felt myself being used as a foil in some kind of power play with the older man. And when she heard I enjoyed singing she

wouldn't rest until I'd performed to her accompaniment at the baby grand in the breezeway. John, Neil and Dave did not sing a note between them. Neil applauded with his big dairy farmer's hands at my rendition of 'We'll Gather Lilacs' in the mode of Richard Tauber but John's praise sounded forced. Dave left the room. I was hugely relieved when we departed, and on the way back John said, 'Well, you *can* sing.'

Actually, I could. In the previous months my voice had altered gradually — the high notes remained but they were joined by a lower register that kept me in the shower for ages, testing the range and exploring the heights. I could follow Mario Lanza up the scale and there were times when even the great Tauber's high notes seemed within my grasp. But after that first experience with Denise I resisted all public performance, at least until Julie arrived. 'Oh, you'll love Julie,' she said. 'You'll fall for Julie.'

But for the moment I was struggling to come to terms with the demands of the paddock and the shed. Happily, I soon discovered that Solomon was the most cantankerous of my string of horses. The others assigned to me were two white ponies, Belle and Billy (who could turn on a sixpence); The Donkey, who was also small and nimble but pitch black and with outsized ears; and Hurricane, whom I shared with Neil, a great hard-mouthed creature who tried to brush us off on passing trees. But my favourite was Budge, a beautiful chestnut with a fair mane and a lovely easy stride. We were instantly in harmony and he was good company in the long, hot, solitary days. Though he was no longer young

he could still outpace most of the other horses. And after we'd taken a mob of sheep to an outer paddock, if John wasn't around we'd race down the fence lines on the way home.

I had lots of busters. John reckoned you had to fall off seven times before you could count yourself a good rider. When I passed seven he said 13 and after that he just shook his head. But I always bounced back and I never once had a buster off Budge.

The place was full of snakes and we had a rule: if you saw a snake when riding alone you had to get off your horse and kill it. It was a matter of honour. We carried rolled lengths of No 8 wire that went flat to the ground when we whipped it down on the snake's back. Skipper, John's brown bitzer, often found them and he'd bark and dance about till we came along. Dave reckoned the wire lengths were for pansies; his favourite method was grabbing them by the tail and cracking their heads off. The way he told it, Beechwood's paddocks were strewn with headless brown snakes after he'd been through, but I never actually saw him do it. One time we were branding calves and we had a big dead one we were planning to roast on the fire. Dave took it by the tail and swung it way round his head and Neil just touched the back of his neck with a hot stick. Dave let the snake go like a boomerang, grabbed his neck with both hands and jumped about. 'He bit me!' he cried. We hooted and fell about and when he realised what had happened Dave went for the branding iron and waved it about. 'You bastards don't realise,' he said, 'if a snake's dead the poison is even more poisonous.'

We thought he was going to cry so we stopped laughing. Dave threw the iron down and sulked for the rest of the day.

My mother wrote every week and I responded, at first with very long letters. I wrote in the evenings on the verandah of my hut, then later I discovered a quiet and beautiful place. When the tanks were full or when a high wind was coming I'd have to climb the windmill by the house dam, put it out of gear and tether the sails. There was a solid little platform where one could sit in the evening calm and look across the horse paddock and down to the big gully on the other side of the house where North-west, the holding paddock, began.

I would take my mother's letters up the windmill and re-read them. Within the chatty images of family life was the warmth of love that often had me brushing away tears. I would send her messages of the mind through the dusty summer sunsets and later on the verandah I'd try to translate them into words on the page. They were never as good. Soon I found myself torn between telling the stories as new experiences piled on day after day and travelling with them as they caught me and flung me along. I devoured her letters but I could no longer respond as the boy who wept at the fluttering white hanky on Roma Street station. I was finding my place in another world.

Much of it was unexpected. The social life was a total surprise — once shearing was over there was tennis each Saturday at a different property; church at Glenmorgan as a nice excuse for drinks through the back door of the pub where the local copper usually

joined us; cricket or polocrosse on a nearby oval when we could rake up a couple of teams; and on Wednesday evenings play readings at various homesteads, organised by the ladies but with the enthusiastic support of the men.

Denise was the driving force of the district drama group and I soon found myself cast in the title role of *Master Dudley*, an English melodrama she was preparing for the Goondiwindi Festival of Plays. *Master Dudley* was a thoroughly bad egg, like Ray Milland in Hitchcock's *Dial M for Murder*. He planned to do away with his fiancée played by Leah, the governess at Canmaroo, Humphrey Killen's place adjoining Beechwood to the north. The key to the performance was to make him charming and good-natured while plotting his evil deed. This made for a surprise ending when his true wickedness was revealed.

We rehearsed under Denise's somewhat erratic direction (she could scream and simper in a single sentence) at the Palmerston homestead where big, awkward Neil stood in for the fiancée's part and once a week at the Glenmorgan Memorial Hall. Diana Warby, who was about Denise's age, was in charge of make-up and costumes; her younger brother Alan was the good guy who shot me in the end, and we became close mates. In fact, everyone had a rollicking time at rehearsal and every week Leah threatened to walk out and never come back if Denise yelled at her one more time.

Amy Schwennesen drove out from her Brisbane home in Highgate Hill where she looked after her

father Lesley, the patriarch who had bought vast tracts of nearly worthless prickly pear land in the 1920s. At that time his three boys, Les Jr, Stuart and Talbot, and their older sister Amy spent their days as labourers hacking away and poisoning the great stands of cactus that crowded out the grasses. They hated their lives with a passion; and they cursed the old bastard who had condemned them to this hell on Earth. Then came the *cactoblastis* and suddenly the world was transformed. The little South American insect fed on the pear that rotted in the fields and fertilised the topsoil. Great flocks of sheep could be grazed on the sweet grasses and suddenly the Old Man was a visionary; the phrase 'land baron' entered the family lexicon and gained true currency as his acquisitions made them practically drought-proof.

But with wealth came rivalry; sniping and pique became ill-will and umbrage. By the time I arrived the Schwennesen clan was riven by conflict and since we were so often thrown together it took some deft footwork to avoid being trapped in the cross-fire.

The situation was complicated by the big age difference between Amy, the eldest, and Roma, the youngest, whose natures could hardly have been more different – Amy soft, shy and sentimental, the younger woman aggressive, bold and almost manic in her denial of the ageing process, resenting even her daughters as rivals within her sexual orbit. When Amy arrived at the property in her sedate Rover she moved into the big bedroom in the homestead and happily took over the cooking. When Roma returned to Palmerston it was in

a flash Ford Customline which she drove with one hand on the white steering wheel, the other holding a cigarette between red-tipped fingers.

Each took pleasure in telling me of the mythical Julie's wondrous charms, for the moment casting their glow over the staff and students of Clayfield College. 'Oh, you'll fall for her,' Amy chuckled, and she asked me to call her 'Aunt'.

Roma — whom I called Mrs Hodgson — and John McTaggart played Denise and me in the round-robin tennis comp the first weekend and Roma was a formidable stroke-maker. In her presence the atmosphere crackled with sexual tension. Doug Warby, Alan's uncle, played while holding a glass of rum. His wife didn't play. In the evening I came upon him and Roma alone in a lounge room. They stepped apart. Roma said later, 'He's a devil, that Doug Warby.'

The days in the paddocks followed a pleasing pattern — by now I had mastered the early rise and the catching of the night horse near my hut. I'd saddle him and set out across the horse paddock, bringing in the mob from which we'd later select our mounts for the day. John had abandoned hope that I would ever become a competent milker and did it himself. It was a mark against me and I tried to make up for it by feeding the chooks and the pig, and rubbing neatsfoot oil into the leather saddlery to preserve its suppleness. It gave the saddle shed by the horse yards a special smell that I came to associate with those crisp mornings.

When the sun was rising and the white frost in the gullies was melting slowly into the red earth and the

silver-eyes and the magpies were trilling their messages on the morning air there was a sense of being part of the real Australia. I touched the mottled grey bark of the box trees and brushed away the silvery cobwebs between them; broke off switches of sandalwood and smelled the exotic perfume of the sap. The horses were always lively in the mornings; the dust stayed moist on the ground and the flies bided their time in the shade.

We chatted as we rode and when we reached the back of the paddock to be mustered around 10 o'clock we split up and took strips, the jackaroos zigzagging down, pushing the sheep we discovered toward the fence line where John drove them quietly towards home.

After 10 o'clock the dust was dry and rose on any breeze; flies matted our backs and the sandalwood switch, replaced a dozen times in a morning, kept them off our faces. The horses' heads lowered and they had to be kicked into action. Dave used spurs but only on his personal mounts; John banned them on station horses. Usually we met at a central dam for lunch — mutton sandwiches we'd packed into our saddlebags and tea in quart pots boiled by an open fire. Then after a spell in the shade we'd round up the sheep and move them on through the paddock towards the home gate.

I came to love the solitude. And as my riding improved I exalted in the chase through timber, especially on Budge or Solomon when we seemed to meld into a single unit. With the pressure of my knees and the movement of my weight in the saddle we would thread our way through the trees in perfect harmony,

the excitement rising as the speed of our progress increased to round the leaders and turn them back.

On our return when the sheep were yarded for drenching or dipping next day we'd often go shooting, bouncing along the fence lines in the truck or the back of the Land Rover just taking the kangaroo legs as feed for the dogs.

At the gallows I made amends. After the horror of the first kill I pressed Neil into a tutor's role and after a couple of weeks I could handle it well enough. Then I volunteered to do it all and steeled myself to the task twice or three times a week. Soon it became bearable if I concentrated on the speed of the kill and the neatness of the butchery. There even came a time, when I was selecting one of the killers for dispatch, that I felt imbued with the power of life and death. It frightened me. Several times I started to share the thought with one or other of my workmates but the words caught in my throat.

Julie arrived when school broke up a few days before the gala premiere of *Master Dudley* at the Glenmorgan Memorial Hall. We had come in from mustering and the big Customline was parked outside the Beechwood homestead. Neil had mentioned in the morning that they might be arriving that afternoon and all through the day I'd felt little surges of excitement at the prospect. The two other daughters — Mary, a year older, and Ruth, a couple of years younger — were pleasant enough but all the talk was of Julie. Even John McTaggart joined the chorus: 'She'll knock you for six,' he said.

We reached the horse yards where the others unsaddled and I headed out to round up the milkers when John said, 'You'd better come and meet them ... get it over with.'

'OK.' I walked over to the homestead with him and tied my horse Billy to the side gate. Inside the back verandah we pulled off our boots and hung up our hats. Luckily, I noticed, there were no holes in that pair of socks. I suddenly wished I'd gone home and had a shower first. John went ahead to the front verandah where Aunt Amy was serving tea to Denise and another who was hidden behind a chair. I ducked into the bathroom, washed my face and did my hair with John's comb. When I finally reached the verandah all eyes turned my way. Julie was seated near the side table with the tea things. She looked up with the sweetest smile and dancing dimples.

'Hello Bob' she said, when Denise introduced us. 'Would you like some tea? I'll be mother.'

'Yes, please.'

'I thought you'd be about eight feet tall,' she said, smiling. She held out the teacup to me. She had wavy brown hair framing a lovely face and there was even a smile in her voice.

'Sorry about that,' I said.

'That's all right.'

The others might have said something — I was vaguely conscious of Aunt's chuckles — but I heard and saw nothing except Julie's little moues as we made the kind of contact that swept your breath away. The tension mounted inside me. She said, 'I've heard you're the star of the play.'

For the moment I'd forgotten all about it.

'Master Dudley,' Aunt said, 'Hoo-hoo-hoo.'

I had to escape. 'I'd better get the cows in,' I said. I practically ran out the door, dragged my boots on, mounted Billy and careered off at a gallop across the horse paddock, intensely conscious that I could be seen from the front verandah where the tea drinkers remained. I turned back to look and Billy took this as a signal to spin left on a sixpence. I shot straight out of the saddle and sprawled on the ground.

Oh Christ. I jumped up as quickly as I could. Billy stood nearby looking smug. 'You bastard,' I told him quietly. 'You are an absolute bastard.' I extended a trembling hand and took a rein. He threatened to rear back but I said, 'If you make it worse I will kill you. I will track you down to the ends of the Earth and kill you.'

He stood still. I climbed aboard. I ventured a look to the homestead. Julie was standing with the screen door half open. I waved and took off for the far horizon. But not before I glimpsed her little wave back.

Master Dudley was a triumph. The clans had gathered — Schwennesens, Warbys, McCormacks and Killens — and with the staff and townies the Memorial Hall was bursting at the seams. I was nervous for the first couple of minutes, especially after Diana Warby used lipstick to 'bring up' my lips just before the curtain rose, but then it all flowed magically and afterwards everyone crowded round on stage and said, 'Bloody fantastic.'

Denise was in a theatrical transport of delight. She waved her arms and tried to embrace the whole

world. The audience clapped and cooed and overnight I found myself a little bit famous. The problem was that some of them thought I wasn't really acting. Big larrikin John Schwennesen said, 'So that's the sorta sneaky bastard you are, eh?' and he more or less meant it.

Aunt said, 'Oh dear. Oh Robert. Who would have thought that underneath ...'

'No, honestly,' I cried, 'I was just pretending.'

Julie knew. She came to the cast party afterwards and before the night was over we had kissed. It was simply delicious.

SEVENTEEN

Three months later I nearly drowned in my own blood. John was away on holidays, Julie and the other girls were back at school and Aunt Amy had come out again to cook for me. This time she brought her father, old Les, a gentle, silver-haired man with a voice like a harmonica and four wooden clubs that he twirled around his head and shoulders each morning on the front verandah to exercise his heart. He was very adept with the clubs and could carry on a conversation while following his complicated routine. Only once did I see him lose his timing and that was when Amy walked by taking a sheet to the washer and it tangled around his legs. The clubs clicked and clashed then flew out of his hands in all directions while he cried, 'Bless me!' But no one was hurt and we fixed the flyscreen that afternoon.

John had left instructions to muster a paddock and shift all the sheep to fresh pasture on the other side of the property. Neil and Dave had separate work to do on Palmerston so I followed the usual routine. Skipper worked well with me and I set out on The Donkey early in the morning to clear the paddock and drive them along the road to the fresh feed in Sandalwood. About half a mile from the house while I was closing a gate the mob suddenly split in two and I sent Skipper 'Awaayback!' down one side while I began a dash through a stand of brigalow to head the others.

I liked riding The Donkey. In thick scrub our sense of harmony was second only to that I enjoyed with Budge and he had a really sharp turn of speed over 100 metres. The hard brigalow trunks flew by, first to the left, then to the right, left again, right again, then nothing ...

Old Les Schwennesen was taking his post-prandial constitutional when he noticed the horse return riderless to the big gate near the horse yards. When he returned to the house he mentioned it to Amy, who hurried to the Rover and set out along the road where a mob of sheep wandered aimlessly and Skipper sat panting. I lay at the base of the tree, my head in a blood-filled hollow, breathing and choking. My face was split down the middle and blood poured from a deep gash between my eyes.

'If I hadn't come along when I did ...' she said later. She put her hand over her forehead and then both hands to the side of her face. 'Oh dear, oh dear, it doesn't bear thinking about.'

Somehow she dragged me into the back seat of the car and drove home, then pulled me out and half-carried and half-dragged me into the spare bedroom.

She called the doctor in Surat, 90km away, then held my face together until he arrived. By then I had regained consciousness. My face was still numb so he didn't bother with anaesthetic, simply sewed it together again. Then he held up a mirror. 'There goes your Hollywood career,' he said. The face was black and big as a pumpkin. 'That's the worst it's going to be,' he said. 'The only thing is whether you've fractured your skull.'

The ambulance arrived and I passed out. By then Amy was on the phone to my mother. 'We *think* he'll live,' she said. 'It depends on the skull fracture.'

My mother called in the neighbours to look after the kids, got my father home from work and jumped in their blue Austin A90. When I awoke early the next morning I had a terrible headache but the x-rays showed no fracture. The Surat hospital was very informal and my mother walked straight into my room. When she saw me swathed in bandages she burst into tears. The nurse put her arm around her and said, 'Don't worry dear, you couldn't kill him with an axe. He'll be right as rain in no time.'

My father said, 'She wouldn't let me stop.' There had been two tyre punctures and something wrong with the 'carbide' between Dalby and Oakey. My lips were so swollen I found it hard to speak but there wasn't much I wanted to say. I was content to listen to her.

A few weeks later Julie was due back from her final term at school. Her role in life, she had decided,

was that of the perfect wife and mother and the exemplary hostess. Her formal education had gone quite far enough. There was a touch of Jane Austen about her. She loved dressing up, playing the piano for guests and organising parties. She liked frilly things, sweet perfumes, chocolates, and dancing.

She wrote me a letter from school about my accident and I could sense that she was being brave. Even if I were horribly disfigured her romantic soul demanded that she bear up and put the very best face (as it were) on the tragedy. This only added to my nervousness, but the truth was that I had healed remarkably. The nose was a little crooked and the scars were visible between the eyes and on the top lip but every day saw a further improvement.

Aunt said, 'We've put our brand on you.'

When Julie finally arrived we were out in the paddocks and she went straight to Palmerston. John and I drove over that evening for dinner. I hung back a little and took a deep breath before following him into the breezeway where they were waiting.

Her relief was palpable. 'That's nothing,' she laughed. 'Now you look rugged.'

At first it was wonderful having her so close at hand. But at 17 I was caught up in the social whirl of the district with its astonishing preponderance of young women. There were temptations on every quarter. It was actually a relief when she decided to spend some time with her father Fletcher on the coast.

Just before she left there was a crisis in the paddocks. Neil, Dave and I were taking a mob of sheep

into a back paddock on Palmerston when one of Dave's little black-and-white sheepdogs ran into a gateway as we tried to push them through. The sheep scattered and Dave lost his temper. He dismounted and called the cringing little dog to him. It obviously knew it had done wrong and whimpered in fear and sorrow as he approached. He grabbed it by the collar, held it down and stamped it to death with the heel of his riding boot.

Neil was well to the rear of the mob but I was no more than 10 metres away. 'Hey! Don't!' I yelled, but it was too late. For a moment I was paralysed by shock. But then he said, 'It's my dog. You stay out of it.'

I had no choice. I climbed off the horse walked over and knocked him down. He went for his stock whip that he kept on a leather holder by his saddle. I took it off him and hit him again. He grabbed a stick and brandished it.

By then Neil had ridden up and I told him what had happened. 'Nothing to do with you,' Dave shouted. 'My fucking dog; I can do what I fucking like.'

Neil said, 'Come on; let's get the sheep through and talk about it then.' But after we finished with the sheep no one wanted to raise the subject. Dave had a big swelling on the side of his head where I'd hit him. 'You could be charged with assault,' he said.

Back at Beechwood I debated whether to tell John. In the evenings we played table tennis on the front verandah and it was always a good contest. This evening I had a swollen hand and he noticed. When I told him what happened he slept, on it then next morning when Dave arrived to saddle up for the day

John told him to pack his bags. Dave cried like a baby. I felt terrible till he said, 'One day I'll get you, you bastard.'

Then everything seemed to happen at once. John and Denise announced their engagement. He showed me the ring, a huge rock, before he drove over to propose. I could hardly believe it; they always seemed to be squabbling yet she said 'yes' immediately and John couldn't wipe the grin off his face.

Then John hired a family, the Fitzgeralds, to take Dave's place and they needed my hut to accommodate Ron and his wife and his Aboriginal father Pat, a lovely old man who took over the milking and other jobs around the homestead and was available in a pinch for the big musters. So I moved into a spare room in the homestead.

It was there in a quiet time after a visit to Palmerston where Julie and I sang all the songs from *My Fair Lady* that a possible pattern for the future emerged. Maybe I could make a life on the land. Maybe I could eventually marry Julie and run Palmerston or take up a block of our own in the brigalow country to the north where the government was running ballots to encourage new settlers ...

I have often walked, down this street before
 But the pavement always stayed beneath my feet
 before

All at once am I, several storeys high,
 As I walk down the street where you live ...

I even sang it on Budge as we rode through the gullies and across the ridges. When I thought of her

I seemed to glow inside. But did I really want to be a grazier? Did I really want to be an attachment to the Hodgson/Schwennesen clan?

Some holidays were due and Aunt Amy drove Julie and me to Brisbane. When we arrived at Maryvale Street my mother had the tea things ready and within a heartbeat she and Julie were the best of friends. It was astonishing. Aunt and I looked at each other in amazement as they chatted like boon companions. Then Aunt joined in and I felt a bit like an intruder. I took my little sister for a walk.

When the visitors left my mother said, 'She's just lovely.'

Julie telephoned when she arrived at Aunt's and said, 'She's just lovely.'

They would never meet again.

When I returned to the property it was John's turn for a holiday. I had spent most of mine with Andy at Mooloolaba where we'd surfed and water-skied and drunk beer and rum and gloried in an endless round of parties with the old GPS crowd. The Queensland Governor's daughter, Elizabeth Abel-Smith, arrived at one of them with two gormless pommies in tow. They were wearing navy-blue suits and sandals. 'Meet my aides,' she said when Andy shook her hand. 'Really?' he said. 'What, does one aide the other?' We laughed like mad but Elizabeth was not amused. In fact, when Gary Evans stood on the second-storey balcony and announced, 'I can fly,' she barely sniffed.

So he did. There was some debate afterwards just how many loop-the-loops he accomplished before the

three-point landing in the flower garden. But it was unquestionably a feat of personal aviation rarely equalled and never bettered in Queensland history.

The next night I lost my virginity in the sandhills of Mooloolaba and I was astonished to discover that it was absolutely all it was cracked up to be. In fact, it was so wonderful I was suddenly amazed that everyone wasn't doing it all the time. I told Andy I'd decided to do it as often as possible.

'Great idea, Bob,' he said.

But the real effect of the holiday was a growing realisation that whether I went on the land or not I needed to complete my education. There was simply no future without it, yet there was no way I could do so from the property. As I kissed my mother goodbye once again on the platform of Roma Street station I carried the struggle for decision into the compartment with me like that damn sponge cake whose presence wouldn't be denied. By the time I reached Glenmorgan, where Neil met me with the Land Rover, nothing had been resolved.

Anyway, there was nothing to be done for the moment. Shearing was coming up and there was a big mustering program ahead. With John away, Neil, Ron Fitzgerald and I — with the help of his dad — would have our hands full.

We lost old Pat in the 3,000-acre Moonlight. It was a warm day and he was riding The Donkey. We started at the back dam and swept down the paddock to meet at the home gate where we'd put together the mobs each of us had mustered and drive them steadily

into a much smaller holding paddock. When I arrived Ron and Neil were there already but there was no sign of Pat.

We waited half an hour, then Ron rode home to see if the old man had gone ahead; Neil pushed the sheep towards home and I went back into the paddock to see if he'd been delayed or fallen from the horse. I searched till dark and by then Ron had returned in the Land Rover. He drove around the fence lines while I went back to the homestead and talked with Amy.

'I think he's lost,' I said. 'We'd better call the neighbours.'

Amy commandeered the party line and soon Humphrey Killen and Boyd Tomlinson arrived from the next-door properties in their four-wheel drives. Denise and Julie joined Aunt and began making great pots of tea and sandwiches to feed the searchers who were beginning to arrive from around the district.

We searched all night, driving around the fences, stopping every few hundred metres to cooe into the silent bush. The next day we rode back and forth through Moonlight. Our greatest fear was that Pat had gone through the cocky's gate into Christmas Creek, 9,000 acres of ridge, gully and almost impenetrable wattle scrub. About mid-afternoon we found his tracks. They led us directly to the cocky's gate, and through.

We laced the tea with rum to keep us going. Had he been thrown from his horse? Was he lying injured and unable to move somewhere in that vast acreage? Was he sun-struck? Reluctantly Ron volunteered that he'd had a breakdown before this when his wife died. No one knew what to think.

Then on the third morning just after dawn as I walked out to catch the night horse I was astonished to see 18 riders — a small army — cantering up to the wide gate by the saddle shed. The rising sun glinted on their harness; the horses' hooves were like mighty drumbeats on the hard dirt road. Many of them had ridden all night. The invisible bush telegraph had carried the news right down the Moonie, where the Fitzgeralds had spent their lives, that old Pat was lost.

First through the gate was May Belle, said to be the prettiest girl in Flinton in her day, now a horse-breaker and drover with a face like the map of Australia. The legendary O'Toole boys were there — Bernie killed wild pigs by diving on their backs with a knife from a galloping horse. Everyone gathered on the front verandah for an army-style briefing from Boyd Tomlinson. There were now nearly 50 men in the field. Today we had to find him.

We found nothing. Amy and the girls made an enormous mutton stew in a washing copper and that night the searchers stayed in the shearers' quarters or simply hobbled their horses, dug a hip-hole and camped under the stars.

He turned up three days later more than 50km away in the bush at the side of the main road to Surat. He'd seen us looking for him but had become confused and hidden whenever we came close. He'd gone through paddock after paddock, stopping at the occasional waterhole and gathering wheat heads for food. He had lost 12 kilos in six days. When we took the saddle off The Donkey the hide came away with it. He had not been unsaddled the whole time.

The searchers went as quickly and as quietly as they'd come. Ron was very defensive about his father and a rift had opened between us. I still hadn't mustered Moonlight for shearing. Boyd Tomlinson stayed on and gave me a hand.

EIGHTEEN

Richie Jack eased me off the horns of my dilemma. John was held up in Brisbane and the legendary boss of the board was a tremendous help as I flogged myself to keep the sheep up to his shearers, even lending me a couple of roustabouts to help yard them before I returned once again to the paddocks to bring in the stragglers. But when I joined him after work one day and talked about finishing school he said, 'Money, Macklin, that's your problem, money, money, money.'

'Well, in a way ...'

'In every way. Get some money; go back to Brisbane; get your Senior. There it is. Done.'

I nodded. 'Well ...'

'Come up north with me —12 weeks in the sheds, save 30 pounds a week, go back and bludge on your poor, long-suffering parents, you unthankful bastard, and get the job done. Understand? Get me?'

‘Sure, but ...’

‘Hughenden. Start in two months. Job in the team — roustabout, wool rolling, picking-up, do you the world of good, get you some money! Root of all evil. Can’t do without it.’

So, there it was: a plan. And once it began to take root everything conspired to make it seem the more attractive. The new living and working arrangements at Beechwood were no longer the easygoing bachelor simplicities of the previous year. Ron wanted to give the orders in the paddock. John and Denise’s relationship became stormy. Aunt Amy had agreed to extend the Beechwood homestead and two carpenters arrived with their wives and lived in the shearers’ quarters while they did the job. One weekend they had a fight with their wives and cleared out into Glenmorgan for three days, leaving the women behind.

Neil and I were bringing in some sheep past the shearing shed on the Saturday afternoon when the women — the blonde one in a tiny pair of shorts, the other in a transparent skirt — came out and asked us to help them with the wood stove. After we yarded the sheep we went over and found them drinking *crème de menthe* in the kitchen. The wood stove seemed fine. They pressed a tumbler of the green liquor on each of us and the blonde in tiny shorts said there was a problem in her room and took me to see. In a trice we were on the bed gasping for breath. She squealed and jumped like she’d touched an electric wire. Her finger-nails sliced my back.

After we left Neil said, ‘Do you think they’ll say anything?’

‘Cripes, I hope not.’ But next thing we knew one of the carpenters had gone down the creek with some razor blades and a bottle of rum and was threatening to kill himself. Luckily, his wife found me before anyone else heard and I walked down to the creek. He was a mess but by the time I arrived the rum had almost won out over the blades and after we talked he came back tamely enough. Nothing was said, but in a small community suspicions travel through the ether without need of a medium and women have in-built antennae to pick up the signals. The time had come for a big gesture.

‘I have to go,’ I told Julie. We were sitting in our favourite spot in Sandalwood overlooking a beautiful valley between two high bluffs. The Land Rover was parked nearby. She was fighting back tears. ‘You spend almost as much time in Brisbane as you do out here,’ I said. ‘When I get back from the sheds we’ll see each other nearly as much. Anyway, it’s not for long.’

‘It’s forever.’

Hughenden in 1959 still bore the scars of the shearers’ strike four years earlier. There was a ‘white’ pub and a ‘black’ one that served either the shearers who went on strike or those who scabbed. Everyone remembered the time a hundred tough men from each side met to fight it out in the main intersection. As they advanced on each other two police cars drove between them, but when the men kept coming the coppers withdrew to the sidelines and let them fight it out. There were still

unsolved murders — two bodies of known ringleaders were found floating in dams.

Our team was made up of strikers — ‘whites’ — so we occupied the moral high ground. I say ‘we’ but at first I was anything but part of the team. I was friendly with the overseer who among shearers was known as ‘Sack ’em Jack’ because he instantly sacked anyone who stepped out of line. He was a notorious ‘boss’s man’, which was nearly as bad as being ‘black’. And I talked like a toff. All Miss Guyatt’s work on the rounded vowels returned to haunt me. When they spoke to me at all they called me The Plum.

‘Fuck ’em,’ said Sack ’em Jack when I asked his advice. ‘Fuck ’em, fuck ’em, forget ’em. You’re better off. Mix with ’em and you’ll drink all your money away. Oh no, Macklin. No, no, no. Fuck ’em. Forget ’em.’

Easy for him to say. We were staying at Hughenden’s Great Western Hotel and after we’d all signed on in an upstairs room the boys went to the bar. Richie Jack was organising the season and I was in my room reading. Raucous laughter drifted up from the bar. I couldn’t concentrate on the book. I put it aside and went for a walk round the town, but that took 10 minutes and then I was back at the pub. I took a deep breath, went into the bar and ordered a small beer. A knot from our team was nearby: a dark-haired muscular bloke of about 25 with a big hooked nose, Alan Blunt, the presser; Gary Hill, the gun shearer in the team, a big man with oily hair and a wide grin of false teeth; Little Trevor, another fast shearer who included the barmaid in all his conversations; and wo

New Zealanders, Dougie and Ray McMillan. Dougie was a shearer, young Ray the other picker-up. In theory Ray and I were a team within a team but we had an instant chemical repulsion. Ray had a broad back but a concave chest, a small mouth and green between his teeth. 'How do you do,' he said, rounding all the vowels.

'G'day.'

'How do you know the old bastard?'

'Where I was jackarooing ...'

'Oh, jack-aar-roo-ing. He's a jack-aar-roo. And where was that, may I ask?'

'Glenmorgan.'

No one knew Glenmorgan. I started to explain but he pointedly lost interest. I finished my beer and left.

That night I ate at the hotel with Mr Jack. We had planned to drive in his car out to the first shed on the Sunday but I'd decided that was not a good idea. 'It's not going to work out,' I said. 'You're not very popular.'

'I should hope not. Fuck 'em. Bastards the lot of 'em.'

'I'm afraid the cops'll find my body floating in a dam.'

'Whoof! Oh dear. Whoof, whoof!'

There was a glint in his eye that gave me pause. I wondered if he hadn't been in the sheds too long. When I finished I went back to the bar with my book, an old copy of *The Brothers Karamazov* I'd picked up from home. Ray and the group hadn't moved from their

part of the bar but they had not been idle. Ray's eyes were glazed as he made his way over to me.

'So,' he said loudly, 'what is it we're reading? What have we here.'

He grabbed the book. 'The Brothers ... shit what's that ... Kram-o-zov. What's that about?'

'Give it back.'

He held it close to his face and riffled the pages. 'Shit, it goes on forever, what's this ...' He began to read aloud and I moved to take it back. I felt the tingle of blood rising. I reached out to get it with my left hand and bunched the right. I took hold of the book; he resisted and I prepared to throw a punch when my arm was clasped from behind and pinned to my side. 'Bad idea,' Alan Blunt said. 'He's pissed. Wouldn't be a fair fight.'

Ray staggered a little and focused on his surroundings. 'What? Fight? I'll knock his fuckin' block off.'

The presser shouldered his way between us. 'Piss off, Ray.' His brother took him from behind and led him back to the group. 'Come on, you silly bugger.'

'So,' said Alan Blunt, settling in, 'you're a Dostoyevsky man.'

By the end of the evening we had become friends for life. Blunty, I discovered, was a man of aspiration. It was not enough that he was the middleweight champion of Julia Creek — the toughest town on the northern line — not enough that he could press for a six-stand shed and have time to practise his classical guitar between runs — nor even that he could live off the land like an Aboriginal warrior though his forebears were as Irish as paddy's pigs. Ah no, these were mere

frivolities beside the vaulting ambition that pulsed like a giant drum at the heart of the man: to write!

He saw himself in a future literary canon somewhere between Henry Lawson and the great Jack London. He sought the true heart of primal experience — the wilderness of the soul made green and fruitful by the blistering power of the elements or the love of a good woman. He had started with poems and short stories but he was closing in on the magnificent adventure, a novel of such breadth and depth that it drew the reader into its close embrace and relinquished him utterly transformed.

‘London had it,’ he said. ‘In *The Iron Heel* Jack touched greatness. Henry glimpsed it, but only through a glass darkly. Oh yes, the demon drink took Henry by the throat and squeezed the breath out of him. Steinbeck was almost there. *The Grapes of Wrath* is pure genius but he couldn’t sustain it ...’

‘*East of Eden?*’

‘Not in the same class.’

The barmaid interrupted. ‘You bullshitting again, Blunty? What’ll yer have, luv? Two more?’

He nodded.

I travelled with him in his green VW with Zulu, his blue heeler in the back, along with the tent, the camp oven, the guitar, the rifle, the ammunition, the books, the chess set, the portable typewriter, the jerrycans of water and petrol, the boxing gloves and the inflatable punching bag. ‘Everything a man needs,’ he said, ‘except a good woman.’

It soon became clear that this was a perennial problem for Blunty. Good women were not exactly

thick on the ground in that frontier country and while he was always making complicated assignations with the others — barmaids — they rarely turned up and when they did he was at the laughing stage of the night and treated them like little sisters. This threw them into confusion and Dougie McMillan, with his round face, curly hair and hooded blue eyes, invariably slipped away with them while Alan was theorising on the great issues of life and literature.

When we reached the first shed Blunty demanded a room to himself. No one argued; in any case, once he'd unloaded the car there was no room for anyone else. Then he went about the routine he followed in each new shed. Over at the wool-press area he'd blow up the punching ball and attach the rubber straps to the floor and the timber-roofing joist, leaving the ball at about shoulder height. Then he'd blow up a pair of his inflatable boxing gloves and pound away in the heat.

His two boxing idols were Sugar Ray Robinson, 'pound-for-pound the greatest fighter who ever lived', and Gene Tunney, the 'intellectual' heavyweight who out-thought and out-punched the great Jack Dempsey.

'He was a great man, Gene,' he'd say. 'He knew fear. Unlike Jack who just charged in and demolished his opponent, Gene knew fear. But he used it as a tool to sharpen his reflexes and give him that edge. Ah yes, a great man.'

In the evening he'd slip into the cookhouse with the little Olivetti with its splayed keys that stuck to each other and the ribbon that kept tangling and turning half his creation red. There he'd set himself at a

long pine table and belt away at a short story or a character study for the novel until someone at the station turned off the electric generator and we were swept into darkness. I could hear him cursing the darkness and the cocky whose parsimony caused it as he returned to his room at the end of the quarters. Then he'd give Zulu a drink, light a kerosene lantern and read Zane Grey, Sinclair Lewis or the immortal Jack London into the small hours.

I bunked with Bert, the old wool-roller, a thin man with beady black eyes who wore a grey dustcoat to work to protect his clothes from the dirt and lanolin in the wool. He stood opposite Richie Jack at the classing table and when either Ray or I threw a fleece, he skirted half the short, burry wool at the edges while the classer did the other side before folding it into a bundle and deciding which of the four or five bins it should occupy before Alan pressed it into bales. In theory, Bert should have taken his turn on the board with Ray and me, picking up the fleeces as the shearers completed each sheep, running to the table and throwing them so they settled over the length and breadth of the table, then running back to sweep up the locks of wool that were detached from the fleece. But Bert, a reformed alcoholic, complained of stiffness in the joints and Richie Jack was happy enough for him to stay on the table. In fact, the shearers reckoned he was the overseer's spy who kept the boss informed of all the gossip of the board.

The first week was hard work. We were up at 6.30 for breakfast and started in the shed at 7.30 when the

'expert' — Richie Jack's 2-I-C who looked after the engine and sharpened the shearers' blades — banged the triangular gong. We had eight shearers in the first team, which meant Ray and I had four each to look after on the board.

Normally it would have been easy enough, but it was Ray's first shed too and he remained determined to have as little as possible to do with me. This meant that he didn't share the load, so if two of my shearers finished sheep at the same time he would stand by while I raced to the table and back before the second shearer arrived with a new sheep from his pen and kicked the previous fleece down the chute (rather than waste precious seconds waiting for it to be cleared). The situation became more complicated if Bert and Richie Jack hadn't finished their job when I arrived at the table with the fleece. In that case I'd have to leave it on the floor and race back to the board leaving Bert to throw it out across the table. Bert was peeved, Richie wasn't happy and I was getting hot under the collar.

After a couple of days Alan said, 'Feel like a spar?'

We'd finished on the board at 5.30 and he'd spent another half-hour on the Ferrier press, ramming the wool into the corners with his legs, then pounding down the heavy ratchet handle until the hessian bale was fit to burst. Back at the quarters I was just heading to the showers.

'Now?'

'Yeah.'

I thought of Ray. 'Yeah, OK,' I said, and we walked back to the shed and arranged the bales in the

shape of a square ring. Alan blew up the four inflatable gloves and we pushed them on and started circling. We were roughly the same height but Alan was much broader and far more muscular. I popped out a tentative right lead; he took it on the gloves and moved me into a corner where he threw a combination of punches finishing with a left to the face. It didn't hurt particularly but I felt the warmth of blood trickling from my nose. I wiped it on the back of my arm.

'You OK?'

'Yeah.' I backed away and now he dominated the centre of the ring, moving towards me, trying to block my escape left or right. But as we settled down the fear departed. I realised that I had him for speed. More than that, it was almost as though we were a different species. I could see his punches nearly as soon as he conceived them; when they finally headed my way it was like watching a film in slow motion. I could duck, skip to the side, retreat or simply sway back and let them pass by. This did not mean, however, that I always avoided them. He was not the middleweight champion of Julia Creek for nothing. In the corners there was no escape. In fact, for the next three weeks — the length of that first shed — my nose bled every night and my ribs ached all day. He was completely unmarked.

But I persisted and towards the end I looked forward to it. He was a natural teacher and we worked on defence, footwork, combinations and particularly my one solid punch, the right hook delivered from just above the waist, rolling the whole shoulder and back into the follow-through as the fist powered into the

opponent's jaw. I practised it hour upon hour on the punching ball and on a bale of wool he'd set at the proper height.

Naturally, he was always waiting for it in our sparring sessions and the inflatable gloves cushioned all the blows ... until that one glorious afternoon when I felt the air escaping from the right hand. I waited, holding it behind the left as much as I could until the perfect moment arrived. I feinted with a right jab, threw a regulation left to the body and as his guard came down to block it I let go with the right hook. It caught him absolutely flush and he sat straight down on his bum. In an instant I had my gloves off. 'That'll do for today,' I said. He jumped up and grinned. 'You bastard.' He threw an arm around my shoulders. He couldn't have been happier if he'd been on the other end of the punch.

But writing was the great passion that came to unite us. Alan had left school young and he attacked the mighty escarpment of creative writing like a miner with a pick and shovel. If he didn't have the tools to climb it, he'd hack the whole edifice down and wrest its treasure with his bare hands. He sweated more fiercely over that rattletrap Olivetti than the wool press in the high summer of the north Queensland outback. But the perfect phrase, the well-turned sentence, was elusive, always just that fingertip out of reach. And the novel was always changing in its focus as the world of experience and exploration swept him along on a floodtide.

I was caught up in it. The effect first showed itself in my letters home to my mother. Her weekly chats followed me all through that season, forwarded by the

Grazcos office in Hughenden as we went to Winton, Richmond, Julia Creek, Dajarra, Cloncurry and finally out to Urandangi on the Northern Territory border where we joined other teams in the 23-stand shed at Carandotta.

I began to write to her of 'the Namatjira purple of the hills around Cloncurry and the small herds of goats that jingle bells on the outskirts of the towns.' I set the letters in time and place and wove in the incidents and the characters of the team. At one of the towns I bought a big Spirex notebook and soon filled it. Then I wrote a poem called *The Shearer* and showed it to Alan:

*The simple shearer walks to the stand
Takes his handpiece in a hard-knuckled hand
Removes the comb, brushes the sand.
Is that what you see when you look down the line?
Or ten men working their minds intent
On the job; their backs are bent
There's sheep in their pens, so they're content.
Yes, that's what you see when you look down the line.
You don't see the sweat that's stinging their eyes
Nor the air round their faces infested with flies
And you don't see the boils on their tortured thighs.
No, you don't see that when you look down the line,
Yes, they're bawdy, ungainly, uncultured men
Who would never excel with palette or pen
But they're men, yes my friend, all of them, men.*

'Bloody ripper,' he said, and that evening on the verandah of the shearers' quarters he read it to the team.

'Bloody good,' said Gary Hill the ringer. 'Who wrote that?'

'The Plum.'

'Bullshit,' said Ray. 'He read it in a book.' But he gained no support and from that evening I was accepted. In fact, I was no longer The Plum. When they went to town at the weekends I was asked along. In the bar they laughed at my jokes. And though Ray remained aloof I was astonished and moved by the power of the written word.

But not all the effects were positive. In the towns we went straight to the pub and spent all our money on beer and betting. We'd bet on a darts match or an arm wrestle and once, I swear, on two flies crawling up a wall. I'd made an arrangement with Richie Jack that he retain all but a few pounds of my pay until the end of the season but that was no longer feasible and I cornered him one Friday after a shed cut-out.

'Mad bugger, Macklin,' he said. 'Not worth a bumper; wasting your chance; throwing it all away. Take it, take it; couldn't care less.'

What the hell. We drank and were merry. I was part of a team.

The money just floated away. Alan and I spent Christmas Eve between sheds in a pub in Cloncurry. By the end of the night we were too broke to pay for a room so slept under the stars on the banks of the Thomson River. In the morning we went for a swim, then counted up our change — 2/6 between us. We found a baker, banged on the door and bought half a loaf of yesterday's bread; then we happened upon

a Chinese fruiterer selling his produce from the back of a little van. We paid sixpence for an apple and an onion. That left 1/6 — just enough for two small beers. We sat on the verandah of the pub and divided the spoils — no Christmas dinner had ever tasted as good. Then we lit out for the Territory border and the vast unknown.

Carandotta was one of the great sheds of Queensland, a huge galvanised iron building that each year became a gathering place for the best shearers in the country. To ring the shed with the biggest tally was to put your name up there with the immortals. The great Jackie Howe had done it with blades in the 1880s and again with the machine handpiece in the 1890s. The competitive spirit was undiminished and not just on the shearing stand — three pressers pounded away at the great machines, each seeking to outdo the other. They were paid by the bale but that wasn't the point — the 'gun' presser bestrode the landscape like Ozymandias.

Gary Hill, our best shearer, was a quick starter and after two weeks he'd established a handy lead. Blunty was just the opposite. He started slow; there were pains in the back, twisted muscles over the rib cage. Snowy Hardacre, the other top presser, was slowly moving ahead. 'I don't feel right,' Alan said. 'I can't find my focus. The body's letting me down.'

The novel was going badly. It towered above him, its half-formed characters crying to be released from their creative prison. We no longer sparred; instead we set up the punching ball on the verandah of the quarters and worked out on it when we could. But it

became a magnet for every man in the place, most of whom walked up, belted it and found themselves whacked in the face when it bounced back. One of them complained it was a health hazard at night so finally we took it down.

Then one weekend we went out with the rifle looking for plain turkeys. We'd shot two at a shed outside Winton where they gathered in the Mitchell grass and the cook had stuffed and roasted them for the team. The taste lingered for days. But Carandotta was very different country — red earth and spinifex and the silence of the moon. We had left the car and were walking round a rocky knoll when Alan put out a hand. There in a flat arena were two brolgas and as we watched, the giant birds began to perform a hypnotically beautiful dance. We crouched in the rocks utterly entranced. Finally they were done and as we were returning quietly to the car we saw a lone rider heading our way, and waited by the fence line till he reached us. He was an Aboriginal and we told him about the brolgas and began to yarn. His face bore the scars of booze and fighting. He'd lost teeth but he had a kind of wild dignity. After a while he leaned painfully back in the saddle, took a foot out of the stirrup and crossed his leg over his horse's neck. He seemed filled with pain. This was 'his' country, he said, and though he worked only as a stockman we knew what he meant. He was more worldly than I expected and when I introduced myself I learned why. 'I am Robert Tudawali,' he said.

We knew the name instantly. In 1955 he had starred in the film *Jedda* which had made a fortune at

the box office. On screen he had been lithe and beautifully proportioned; now he was lost and broken, working for his keep and a few bob of pocket money. He'd only seen the film once — at the premiere when they'd flown him and the girl who played Jedda to Sydney and made a fuss over them. He didn't like it. He didn't like her. She was from a different people. The money was OK but he drank it all away and lost his people. He'd done some other TV stuff but now he was alone in this vast open space. Back with the brolgas.

As we walked back to the car Alan said, 'And we think we've got it tough.'

After that he seemed to pull himself together. A whole new dimension had presented itself for the novel and he barely noticed the pain as he encircled great armloads of wool, dumped them into the bale, stamped it down, then pounded away at the infernal machine that seemed to become part of him, the great lever an extra limb that rose and fell like a giant, remorseless metronome.

At the end of it he was the gun. Gary had faded in the straight but Blunty took the figurative olive wreath and wore it with careless pride. We roistered our way back to Hughenden and when we reached the Great Western I had saved all of 50 pounds to finance my two-year mission to get my Senior at Hubbards, a Brisbane teaching academy that provided extra lessons for school students and full courses for adults.

It was the end of the season and the town was filled with shearers whose pockets overflowed with their hard-earned pay. They drank it, gambled it or showered

the barmaids with it. Usually they did all three. My choices were obvious — to sign up for another season, this time really resolving to save every penny; to head for the cane fields where some made really good money as cutters; or to go home with my tail between my legs.

I had a few beers to think about it and late in the evening found myself in the back room of another pub where they had draped a sheet over a billiard table and were playing ‘sudden-death’ two-up using three pennies so there was always a win for heads or tails. The room was packed and it took some time before I reached the side of the table and dragged out a few pounds from my wallet. Bets were laid against other individuals standing round the table, some betting heads or tails each time, others changing their bets as the fancy took them.

A bloke opposite in a yellow shirt caught my eye. ‘Heads,’ he said. ‘A fiver on heads.’

‘OK, tails.’ I put down my money.

Tails. Great. He pushed the money over to me. Then another bloke along on my left said, ‘Heads a fiver,’ and I bet against him in the next toss and lost. So I went back to the first better, won against him then lost it just as quickly to the man on my left. The effect of the beers was wearing off. ‘I’m just the go-between,’ I thought. ‘I’ve got to change the pattern.’ So I ignored the bloke on my left and concentrated on Yellow Shirt.

It was eerie. We became locked in a contest of wills and it didn’t matter whether he bet heads or tails, I won every time. When I turned my attention elsewhere he won against other players; when I turned back he was waiting and the result was the same. I couldn’t go wrong.

It was magic. In two hours I had won 150 pounds. I stuffed it in my pockets and cleared out.

I found Blunty at the Great Western where, at long last, he had met a good woman. Fay was a qualified psychiatric nurse on a working holiday round Australia, a redhead with a flashing wit and a steady eye. Alan was besotted. I showed him my winnings. It took a moment to register.

'Shit, you better not carry that around,' he said. He beckoned Fay over. 'What do you reckon?'

'Why don't you talk to the manager,' she said. 'He might let you keep it in the safe.'

He was reluctant but finally agreed. I kept my original 50 and returned to the game. In half an hour I lost it. But in my room that night I made a plan — the school year started in three weeks so I had two to spare before I had to catch the plane back to Brisbane. There was a permanent pontoon game in the saloon bar of the Great Western. In the sheds we'd played it for hours betting with change, and Mr Kinnon's mental arithmetic training helped me count the cards and so get ahead of the odds. I hadn't won much but I'd never lost. Then there was the two-up every night in the back room of the pub. That was riskier but if I stayed off the beer I had a 50-50 chance of winning. What the hell, I thought, might as well give it a go. What have I got to lose?

Bert the wool roller from our team ran the pontoon game and he was happy enough for me to join in. 'The more the merrier,' he said. The other players floated in and out — at times we pushed four tables

together to accommodate them — but Bert and I were the only two to stay the distance. And once I settled in I found Lady Luck working her wonders. Pontoon — an ace and a court card — came my way with an amazing regularity and as banker I had the chance to make big money, especially from the shearers who arrived half cut. Invariably they bet wildly, seeking five-unders from impossible positions or splitting pairs when they could have sat on 20. Money for jam; no mercy shown.

Bert was a harder nut to crack. He was a parsimonious better, twisting or flipping at every opportunity. But as the days went by he lost his edge and I could feel myself getting stronger.

By the Friday I had a bank of 400 pounds and I chanced upon Kevin Torkey, a little dark-haired shearer who used to run a book in our sheds taking bets on Brisbane races with a 10-1 limit. He had an astonishing mental agility and was able to keep the book in his head. In Hughenden he was in trouble because he loved the demon drink and he'd get confused and muck up the odds. In fact he'd lost so much that he didn't want to leave his room for fear of running into a creditor. I promised that if he stayed there all day Saturday and calculated the odds I'd pay his most pressing debt and put up half the stake needed for a book on the Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne races.

'You're on,' he said. And it worked. I stayed in the bar, took the bets and reported regularly to Kevin upstairs. When a favourite became too risky he rang a mate and layed off a little. But with the maximum odds

at 10/1 we were relatively safe provided he stayed off the grog. As it happened, it was a day of outsiders and when the last race was run we calculated the winnings. I was stunned. We'd cleared 450 pounds.

I tucked my share away in the hotel safe and returned to the two-up game. Sleep seemed irrelevant. Adrenalin was a wonderful substitute. In the second week word had flashed around that I was on a winning streak and the pontoon players lined up. I paced myself — 2am was my deadline whether I was winning or losing and I never started playing before midday.

The second Saturday was not as successful as the first but we still came out well ahead. The two-up was variable but after the big wins of the first week I stayed well ahead of the card. Pontoon was the icing on the cake — by the end we were down to the hard core; Bert was visiting his bank for more funds nearly every day; I rarely put a foot wrong.

Then the town began to empty. It was nearly time to go. Blunty and I were taking a break in the front bar of the Great Western, a chess-board set between us and the game at a delicate stage when Ray 'accidentally' backed into it and set the pieces flying. Alan took it calmly enough but for me it was the last straw. I lunged for him and the bar erupted.

'Come on, you bastard,' he shouted as his brother grabbed him. 'Come on, have a go!'

I wanted nothing more, but once again Blunty and the others decided he was too drunk. 'First thing in the morning,' Alan said. 'Down at the quarry where the cops won't see us. OK?'

'You bet,' I said.

'You'll get yours,' said Ray as he staggered off to another pub and Blunty replaced the chess pieces. I went to bed early to be fresh for the morning. But I couldn't sleep. Time and time again I rehearsed the fight. I ducked and weaved, threw lightning combinations, absorbed his best shots, shattered his jaw, stood over his prostrate figure, magnificently triumphant. The blood pounded in my veins. I got up and walked the floor. I went out on the verandah and took deep breaths. I tried to think of other things — Julie, cards, two-up, anything — but nothing worked. Finally I sat in a big squatter's chair on the pub verandah and watched the sun rise. Then I woke Blunty and we walked down the back of the town to the excavation called the quarry.

'The things I do for a mate,' he said.

We waited for an hour past the appointed time. Still he didn't show. When we found him later in the day, pissed again, he said he had forgotten.

Fuck him.

I withdrew my winnings from the hotel safe and we headed for the airport in the VW. I had over a thousand pounds in my pocket. Alan and I shook hands. 'With the upward look,' he said. It was his signature phrase. I climbed into the plane and as we rose I swore I'd never gamble again.

We did the milk run down the Queensland coast — Townsville, Mackay, Bundaberg, Brisbane. We touched down at Eagle Farm in the evening and I took a taxi home. When my mother saw me she cried. Then I did too.

NINETEEN

She was terribly thin. She was not yet 50 but the flesh of her beautiful face seemed to have lost its tension, to have come away from the bones a little. When she smiled it was fine. Her eyes sparkled and her cheeks became nicely rounded. But when she relaxed the glow faded and she became older.

'Are you all right?' I asked.

'I'm fine,' she said. 'I'm just a bit anaemic. I have to get more iron in my blood. I have some pills from the doctor.'

In the first few days I worried but then I got used to it and she seemed quite lively, particularly when Jack Mitchell was around. Jack was a big surprise. She had mentioned in a letter that my father had brought home a boarder from his work, but I was unprepared for Jack.

He was tall and carried himself erect. He had a florid complexion, an Errol Flynn moustache and

habitually wore bow ties which he tied himself. His suits and jackets were beautifully tailored but had seen better days; some of his shirt cuffs were a little frayed. He was a heavy drinker but never lost the courtliness that seemed to come from a privileged background.

At first I resented his presence. And I was outraged when I learned that he had read my letters home with their poems, character studies and adventure stories from the outback. But that vanished the moment he said, 'You have a remarkable talent. You have the potential to make your mother very proud.'

He had been a newspaper cartoonist; he had drawn a comic strip in the *Sydney Telegraph*; he knew Kenneth Slessor when he was on *The Bulletin*; he knew William Dobell whom we cherished as a relative of Aunty Jess. He often drew cartoons as we talked. He made up stories to tell little Julie and did drawings to illustrate them.

He had fought in the Greek campaign in World War II in hand-to-hand combat with the Germans and after a few drinks he told vivid stories of that desperate time. One image haunted him. His unit had clashed with a German patrol; machine-gun and rifle fire shattered the stillness of the afternoon in the lightly timbered farmland. Captain Mitchell took cover behind a hedge; there was a sound — perhaps of a small animal — on the other side and with his pistol in his right hand he slowly rose above the hedge to investigate. As he did so a German soldier, his rifle to his shoulder, rose on the other side. For a long, long moment they looked into each other's eyes. Then, as one, they subsided and crawled away.

‘We were enemies,’ he said, ‘but at that moment we knew the greater enemy that we had in common: death.’

We were gripped. There was a long silence. My mother and I had almost forgotten to breathe.

I fleshed out the notes from my Spirex book and showed him the result. When he criticised the writing — however piercingly — there was always a measure of praise. There was just one evening when I saw the rage in him. It was after dinner and he was sipping his Scotch at the table with my mother and me. He said, ‘The most beautiful writer in the English language is Oscar Wilde.’

‘Really?’ I laughed, ‘I thought he was a pommy poofter who wrote plays.’

He coloured. ‘And that is a measure of your disgraceful ignorance,’ he said. ‘You’re barely fit to speak his name, let alone pass an opinion on his work.’

I was stunned by the vehemence. Neither my mother nor I said a word as he rose from the table, left the room and returned with a big green hardback: *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*. He placed it in front of me. He was still angry. ‘When you’ve finished we can talk again.’

I began it that night. It started with the children’s stories *The Sky Rocket* and *The Happy Prince* and I was immediately entranced. Over the next several weeks I went on to the poems, the stories, the essays, the plays, a cornucopia of wondrous writing that flowed and danced before my eyes. Such thoughts, such wit, such writing!

Jack thought *De Profundis* the most beautiful piece of writing in the language and when I reached it I readily agreed. I was overwhelmed by the anguish. By then I had entered a world quite different from anything I had known previously and found it so congenial that I wanted never to leave.

I was immersed in my studies at Hubbard's and with a private tutor, Mr Squires, who coached me in ancient history. And I had decided to encapsulate the two-year course into one. That decision had been taken partly at Jack's urging. 'Test yourself,' he said. 'Forget the easy way. Step out of the crowd. Fight the system. The easy targets are for spineless wonders. Have the guts to knock the policeman's cap off.'

Mr Hubbard was not quite as radical but just as supportive. 'It's simply a matter of application,' he said at our first interview. 'We'll give you the tools; what you do with them is entirely up to you.'

He was a big, warm, kindly man who seemed to live under a light coating of chalk dust. He not only ran the college in a set of down-at-heel rooms in South Brisbane, he taught one of my subjects: logic. It dealt with syllogisms, and was regarded as a basic tool for the study of philosophy. But Mr Hubbard had the gift. In his hands it was the foundation of all learning and the key to an ordered society. For once we understood that when politicians and preachers corrupted the rules of logic we would have the means to reject their appeals to emotion. We could see through their flim-flam to the fallacy beneath.

‘The Bible is the word of God,’ he said. ‘The word of God cannot be doubted, and the Bible states that the Bible is true. Therefore the Bible must be true. What do you say to that?’

‘Literacy rates have steadily declined since the advent of television. Clearly television viewing impedes learning. What do you say to that?’ Unravelling the assertions and detecting the fallacies was utterly absorbing.

Similarly in English, Mr Daniels, a short, portly man in a baggy blue suit, brought an impish humour to his deep love of literature. In his class *MacBeth* was laid bare, the old crones came alive; their oracular assurances to the murderer became wonderful riddles to be solved on the great stage of our imagination. Essays became adventures, the real goal his gently charming words of praise.

Jack left us after a few weeks. He had fallen in love with my mother. Blind Freddie could have seen it. I was aware of the undercurrents but they never surfaced beyond my father’s false laughter and the fraught silences. Their relationship was never physical, though in his courtliness he occasionally (and very publicly) kissed her hand. But he had nothing to offer her and she could never be parted from the family she had created. For a man of honour there was only one proper course.

She was sad when he left. I wondered later if she were ever truly happy thereafter. I missed him too, even though it meant I could have my old room back. Jack went to a boarding house in the Valley and not long

afterwards my father said he'd been fired after giving the sales manager a piece of his mind. He went back to Sydney and we never heard from him again. My mother kept the drawings and the cartoons.

When I asked about her parents, my mother seemed sadly resigned. Once again all contact had been broken off. 'It was impossible,' she said. 'She couldn't control herself.'

She missed her father. She pitied him, not because he had to live with the woman in his declining years but because he had surrendered to her. 'There was almost nothing left of him,' she said, 'nothing inside.'

Brian, Jeff and Julie were all at Toowong School and in the warm afternoons when I was home we played cricket and other games in the backyard. They lived in a world that seemed both familiar and foreign in equal parts. Lush, subtropical Brisbane with its warm shadows, its fevered, emotional peaks and glades was the world of my childhood and I was at home there. But I had seen other landscapes and I was anxious to move on to an even bigger world. And the alienation from my father had become part of the grammar and the syntax of our family life.

However, that year was by no means a grim one. On the contrary, my mother always had some amusing or unlikely mission to pursue — like the Great Possum Hunt. 'Bill,' she said one evening at dinner, 'I'm putting my foot down. I want the possums out of the roof this weekend.'

'We'll help,' said Jeffie, sensing adventure. He was 10 and took great delight in terrifying her by climbing

to the topmost branches of the enormous camphor laurel tree in the backyard. In fact, the camphor laurel was a big part of the problem. A pair of possums used it as a springboard to jump on to the roof and slip under the eaves into the ceiling. There they vigorously exercised their conjugal rights in the small hours of the morning. In their enthusiasm they banged and thumped the ceiling above my parents' bed, and while my father snored blissfully on, my mother was unnerved by it.

So my father and Brian made a plan. They knew where the possums came and went each night — the hole in the eaves near the camphor laurel. So the trick was to chase them out and be waiting for them at the exit suitably armed. Luckily we still had Grandfather Macklin's big ladders from his house-painting days so we put one on full extension and it just reached the roof near the camphor laurel branch. My job was to climb through the manhole into the ceiling from inside the house with a torch and a hammer which I would bang on the ceiling joists; then Jeff would start banging on the galvanised iron roof from above (despite my mother's protests) and set them running for the exit. When they emerged they would find my father waiting with a big waddy ready to clout them on the head and stun them. Brian was at the foot of the ladder with the cricket bat ready to finish them off.

Beaut plan. But when I entered through the manhole and flashed the torch around, my father was still climbing up and positioning himself. And when my torch illuminated these fierce red eyes almost within leaping distance of my throat I dropped the hammer

which thumped on the ceiling. Jeff thought that was the signal to start banging and chasing. He set up a holy racket on the roof and the possums turned and fled in terror for the hole in the eaves. One of them shot out on to my father's chest just as he raised the waddy and buried its claws in his neck. My father gave a startled yelp and slipped on the ladder. Another projectile of claw and fur landed on his head and animal screams rent the air. 'What's happening?' I cried in the darkness of the ceiling.

'They've got Dad,' Jeffie said.

My father gave a despairing howl as he slipped farther down the ladder tearing possums from his person while Brian began to flail the cricket bat in the fading light, more than once coming uncomfortably close to his parent.

Little Julie and my mother watched from the back steps, alternately squealing with excitement, anguish, fear and finally uncontrolled laughter as the possums raced across the yard, up the trunk of the camphor laurel tree, over the fence, then just kept going, through and over Miss Patterson's tennis court without breaking stride.

Jeff stayed up on the roof until my father cooled down.

I often went to see Aunt Amy in her lovely home in Highgate Hill overlooking the river and the university beyond. Our friendship deepened and she took great pleasure in playing the matchmaker when Julie came down from the bush to stay with her.

We were instantly young lovers again. But there was a new tone to the relationship: as I immersed myself

in the studies for Senior, that world across the Great Divide became slightly unreal. Julie gloried in it while I could suddenly see its obsessions with wealth and position, its prejudices of race and religion and its sexual and alcoholic stereotypes. It was a closed society that resisted change, glorified the physical and mocked the intellectual. I thought of the characters within it with great affection but they seemed to be actors in a play that ran each night for evermore.

‘Oh Bob,’ Julie said, ‘you always want to be different.’

Alan Blunt came to visit his parents in West End twice that year and both times we went to each other’s homes and put a face to the stories each had told. We drank lots of beer, laughed till it hurt and promised to send each other our poems and stories. Then he was gone and I returned to my textbooks.

At the weekends I went to parties with Andy and a group that had become a solid core — smiling Bill Richards, impish Francois Roberts, saturnine Bruce Wilson and dishevelled Gary Evans chief among them. In the slightly snobbish GPS milieu of the day I was somewhat *de trop* at first because of my early departure from Grammar, but the country connection seemed to compensate and the close friendship with Andy, the very model of the Clayfield Cowboy, was the sealer.

We enjoyed parties, beer, rum, rugby and jazz in roughly that order. We often gathered in Bill’s little flat under the Richards’ house in Bonney Avenue, Clayfield. Bill had discovered Nina Simone and Miles Davis and we played their records till the grooves

surrendered. Bill had been born in America when Arthur had been New York correspondent for the Herald Group and later in San Francisco where he'd covered the creation of the United Nations.

By then Bill, Gary, Bruce and Peter Thompson from my Grammar class had all joined the *Courier-Mail* as cadets, and as the exams approached — and provided I passed — I was faced with a choice between law and the more exciting but less prestigious career of journalism. Neither was guaranteed. I had taken enough subjects to matriculate if I passed them all but the legal profession was something of an Old Boys club and cadetships on the *Courier-Mail* or the *Telegraph* drew hundreds of applications. But this was the only place I could go where they actually taught you to write. Hemingway had been a journalist; so had Paul Gallico and John Steinbeck.

I had a chat with Bill Richards. 'I'll talk to Dad,' he said. 'He's not in the executive mainstream but he does seem to have some influence around the place.'

'Thanks, Bill.'

'Hey, no trouble at all,' he said, grinning like a split melon, 'I'm really glad. I hope it happens. It's a lot of fun.'

Arthur smoked a pipe and when I arrived at the third floor of the *Courier-Mail* building in Queen Street opposite the GPO he seemed the very picture of the wise, avuncular newspaperman. We had passed a few convivial words at his home but this was the first chance I'd had to talk with the man and within the first five minutes I knew I wanted to be part of his world.

We covered my time in the bush, the part-time university course I'd have to do as part of a cadetship. 'It's not a bad life,' he said. 'Even if you don't get beyond a B grade, you still earn pretty good money.' He mentioned a figure. It was bigger than my father had ever earned. Then he took me for a walk around the newsroom with its battered desks with upturned typewriters awaiting the arrival of reporters, most of whom didn't start work until 2.30 in the afternoon. The few scattered about were speaking earnestly into big black telephones and all seemed engrossed in some urgent mission. The library with its massed files of cuttings was peopled by half a dozen young women who smiled at Arthur and his young visitor. In the teletype room three machines delivered an endless stream of news from Australia and overseas on wide rolls of paper. Bells rang. The keys chattered: 'URGENT, URGENT, URGENT.'

It felt like the centre of the world. Suddenly I didn't want to leave.

Walking down Queen Street to the bus depot I was filled to the brim with gaiety and fear and anticipation. When I arrived home, my mother was shelling peas at the kitchen table. 'Was he nice?' she asked.

'Yes.'

She smiled. 'I knew he would be.'

TWENTY

I watched her die. It took a year. I have tried to remember that time in some coherent way but it is beyond me. I am blessed and cursed, like other writers, with the capacity to recall the events, the sights, the sounds and even the smells of my early life with a fierce clarity. But that year defeats me.

It began with such joy, such wild exaltation as first the Senior results put me in the top 10 per cent and gave me a scholarship to university, then the editor of the *Courier-Mail*, Ted Bray, offered me one of four cadetships from more than 200 applicants. I was swept into the world of journalism and it was far more thrilling than I had anticipated. Even the mandatory market round — where we wrote daily reports on the fruit and vegetable prices at the Roma Street markets — or the shipping column — where we simply recorded the ships passing through Brisbane's port — were part of

a bigger picture, a vantage point from which we had a privileged view of the world and its doings.

We rubbed shoulders with the dashing police roundsmen — Jim ‘The Count’ Crawford and sloe-eyed Winston Coates — who entranced us with their tales of crime and corruption. We drank nextdoor in The Royal with the massive silver-haired chief reporter, Kevin O’Donoghue, in whose veins ran ‘the blood of Irish Kings,’ some of which occasionally splattered the walls of the back bar when another bullocky reporter, Mal Crowley crossed him.

We took tea and the occasional nip of Scotch with the poet David Rowbotham (‘Ah, that is agreeable. As life becomes more complicated, dear boy, we invent these little assistances to see us through’) after he had composed the daily editorial with the mysterious Mr Holmes in their eyrie on the fourth floor.

We listened entranced as Arthur Richards told us of the great stream of journalistic history which began with Daniel Defoe and his little scandal sheet gathered from sources on the London docks, broadened to a mighty river with *The Times* as flagship taking the journalistic creed of truth without fear or favour to the far corners of the Earth. Now we were a part of it, the latest standard-bearers in the great crusade.

It was intoxicating.

So too was Natasha Antonieff, the beautiful young actress whom I met at one of Bill’s parties. She was everything that Julie wasn’t — passionate, aggressive, sardonic, tantalising, challenging and intellectual. She would be possessed by no man but we

had times together when she surrendered all her defences and the world dissolved; form and substance disappeared until there was nothing in the universe but us two. We walked hand in hand through graveyards. We discovered Jean-Paul Sartre and Dave Brubeck, revelled in the MJQ and Jack Kerouac. We drowned ourselves in the glorious melancholy of Ingmar Bergman movies, became fanatical about *My Word* on the radio. We lingered endlessly over our espressos in *Le Primitif*, Brisbane's first coffee lounge.

She had been going with a clarinet player when we met and from time to time he'd make a return appearance. The result was always dramatic and one night after a blazing row I raged out the door followed by her older sister who led me to her place. It was a dark and thunderous night and driving home in my father's car the rage returned — the rage and the rough red wine — and next I knew I was in hospital. The car had been cut in half by a telegraph pole.

Blood everywhere.

I had broken three vertebrae, smashed a collarbone and collected another scar near the eye. It was three days later when I awoke and my mother was beside the bed. 'You'll be the death of me,' she said.

It was a terrible irony. At the time she believed that her 'cancer of the blood' — now the official designation of her former anaemia — was controllable. All she needed was to take it a little easier, swallow the pills the doctor prescribed and from time to time slip into hospital for a blood transfusion that would halt the progress of the disease and give her a whole new lease on life.

Or so she told us.

But soon after I left the hospital, she took my place.

And there the cogency of memory runs out. All I can find are flickering scenes and haunting tableaux. I remember walking along Maryvale Street towards our home, hurrying to reach her to tell of the fabulous events of the day at the paper, then stopping dead, terrified at having to face her as she withered away. I willed myself forward, one step after another.

I remember her face lighting up as I reached her bedroom door and the joy in her smile as I sat beside her, the pleasure in some tyro triumph.

I remember her lovely blue eyes, heavy with exhaustion, and her struggle to keep them open. 'Keep going, darling, don't mind me. I love hearing it ...'

At first there were remissions. I'd have a late start and would be home alone with her when suddenly she'd be up and about. From the kitchen I'd hear her singing her favourite song, one we had sung a thousand times together.

*When whippoorwills call, and evening is nigh,
I'll take you to my blue heaven
A turn to the right, a little white light
Will lead you to my blue heaven ...*

I joined in from my bedroom.

*You'll see a shining face, a quiet place, a cosy room
A little nest that nestles where the roses bloom.
We met in the hall
Just Molly and me, and baby makes three
We're happy in my, blue heaven.*

We hugged and laughed and cried.

At the paper Peter Thompson was already a star. His specialty was subediting, his headlines bright and sharp and his capacity to mould a rough report into a hard-hitting story unparalleled. A controversy had erupted over a so-called 'colour bar' where Aboriginal men and women were refused service in some raffish South Brisbane pubs. The letters columns exploded. Peter sat on a corner of my desk in the General Room. 'Why don't we show them up?' he said. 'Let's go to the schools in the area and ask the kids what they think of the colour bar.'

Next morning before our regular shifts we were at the South Brisbane schools talking with the teachers and the kids. Some wonderful responses sent us scurrying back to the office. 'Little Brisbane has its own answer to the colour bar,' we opened. 'Adults admit the problem ... children fight it with friendship.'

We ended it with seven-year-old Peter running up, hot and bothered, from the football field.

"What's going on?"

"What is the colour problem, Peter?"

"It's when you can't tell green from red on the traffic lights," he said.

And that's the colour bar — as simple as a little boy's mistake.'

Stunned by our own brilliance, we confronted the features editor, the formidable Alexander Nall. Cadets on the features page? Unthinkable.

We threatened to take it to the editor himself.

'No, no, leave it with me,' he growled through his moustache.

Next day we approached Beryl Jenkins, the editor's secretary. 'Is it going in?'

'Could be.' Her eyes twinkled.

Peter was subbing that night so was on hand when the presses rolled at 12.30. I stayed back. As they started up on the first floor, the rumble rose and the building trembled a little. We were waiting as that first edition skidded along the rollers to the binders. There it was — our first by-lines.

The ambulance men who took her off for her transfusions fell in love with her. She had them laughing from the moment they arrived. 'This is our favourite job,' said Mal, a kindly middle-aged bloke with massive hands. 'Come on, darling,' he said to my mother as he eased her on to the trolley with the head raised so she didn't have to lie prone.

'I feel like a queen,' she said.

In the good times Peter and Bill and Andy spent time with us and and, as ever, she adopted them. When I finally hustled them out to go partying, her glow stayed with us and faded only gradually.

The periods between remissions lengthened. In the back bar of The Royal on pay night I drank myself insensible.

The Rev Brimblecombe came uninvited with his troubled adenoids. I wanted no part of him.

'Poor man,' she said, 'don't be hard on him. He does his best.'

I found him distressed on the front steps after being with her. 'I'b afraid she was cobforting be,' he said.

Casseroles appeared from everywhere, some from neighbours, others from widows like Laura Beh whose husband Merv had died from a heart attack a couple of years earlier. My father took over the cooking for the kids and tried desperately to stay in control. I worked from 2pm until 10.30pm and crept in quietly so as not to wake her. I was never successful. Sometimes my little sister Julie, sometimes Jeff, sometimes both, came into my bed and we whispered quietly until they slept.

Her parents were nowhere to be found. Uncle Wally came once or twice and Uncle Vic and Auntie Jess arrived from Medowie. By now the poultry farm was long gone. Vic was working in a nearby factory making plasterboard. He seemed much shorter. Jess kept a brave face when she and my mother nattered, then wiped away tears from behind her thick glasses as we drank tea in the kitchen.

In the last days they gave her morphine. My father left the double bed. In his anguish he had held her tight and her ribs had broken. It was too painful for him to share the bed and cause the mattress to move.

One night when I came home she said, 'Come in darling.'

I sat gently on the bed. That was the day, I think, that she had decided not to fight any more.

She said, 'You'll be all right now.'

I held her hand and wept until there were no tears left.

A few days later she began to drift in and out of consciousness. Towards the end her breath came in terrible rasps and there was a silence between each one that seemed endless. I didn't know which was worse, the rasping or the silence.

Early evening, I went for a walk around the block. I was away no more than 15 minutes. When I came back she was gone. She was there but she was gone.

And the world ended.

Later that night, after they took her body away, I was in my room where a poem about her simply wrote itself I just held the pen. Every syllable, every letter, came out complete and unchangeable.

Some people came, friends of my father and mother. One of them was Laura Beh. They drank beer and they became noisy.

When I could stand it no longer I confronted them. They left soon after and it was quiet.

As we entered the funeral home in Adelaide Street my friends were standing around the door — Bill, Peter, Bruce, Francois — and we shook hands. Inside Aunt Amy and Julie were among the mourners.

Uncle Vic spoke of his sister with tears streaming down his cheeks. Her parents were nowhere to be seen.

We rode in the big black car to the crematorium. Passers-by on the roadside doffed their hats as we passed. A driver roared up beside us and, seeing the cortege, fell back embarrassed.

Inside the crematorium words were said, then the coffin containing my mother's body began to move

through the curtained window to the furnace behind. The image burned itself on to my inner eye, never to leave.

The next day or the next week — I can't remember — I went away. For a long time things happened around me and to me but a big part of me was somewhere else.

Many years later I chanced upon the article from Mark Formby, who had stayed with us in Sundridge Street.

'... While I was living in Taringa,' he wrote, 'the war in Europe came to an end and I was told to move to Central Queensland to assist on some surveying work. I moved around Queensland quite a lot, and whenever I passed through Brisbane I always stayed at Taringa.

'When you're that age you're always looking for tomorrow and it was only later in life that I looked back and realised how little appreciation I showed for the kindness she extended to me.

'Years later I was sent to Burleigh Heads on a job and my mother had told me that Hilda was very ill and she would love me to ring up. Looking back on that conversation it must have been a very simple, 'Hello, how are you?' I do remember going back down and sitting on the beach looking out across the water and thinking back on those times I spent in Brisbane.

'Some time later when I was at my home in Asquith I received a call to say that Hilda had passed away. What motivates people to do things under these conditions I don't know but that afternoon I took out the model sailing boat I had made with her all those years ago, stood it in the centre of the yard and set fire to it.'

EPILOGUE

It is January 2004 and at last I have reached the two-storeyed terrace house at 22 River Street, Dover. It has little to distinguish itself from its fellows in the quiet street but for its newly painted blue door. It looks solid and slightly forbidding. It has been a long journey but with the help of British relatives I have found the key to the scandal surrounding my mother's birth. It is in this place.

My own family — my wife Wendy and our two sons Rob and Ben — are with me. The boys have joined us from Sydney and Paris to be at the end of the quest. At last the story is clear. And it is more remarkable than even I, the writer of novels and films and other men's biographies, could possibly have imagined.

In the years since she died so much has happened. I have written for the best newspapers in the world, made documentary films in many countries of Asia and

the South Pacific, published 10 books, travelled half a dozen times round the globe and to its most fascinating corners. Yet in this quiet place a different level of existence is at play. Meaning and memory are intertwined; faces from the past impose themselves; time collapses.

Aunty Jess is with us in spirit, sharp and chatty, at once sprightly and bent with age. My brother Brian has had an air force career that has taken him to far places. Jeffie never recovered from the loss of his mother and in his early 30s committed suicide. Little Julie has married and she and her husband Peter have prospered with a company that paints the giant machinery of the nation's coalmines. She is more like her mother every day. They are all with me.

Childhood friends have scattered, though Justice Ian Gzell of the NSW Supreme Court remains a firm friend; Carollie Cox in her 50s came to an Ironside reunion, tall and elegant but just as fey and vulnerable as ever; Don Wilkey lives as I do in Canberra and we often meet. He has been the secretary to succeeding Indonesian ambassadors; he has compelling, if idiosyncratic, research projects and haunts the National Library in his lunch hours. They too are stirring just below the surface of the mind.

Andy Anderssen has taken over the family law firm and is a leader of the Brisbane tribe. Peter Thompson and I have now written four major books together. Impish Francois Roberts has made a fortune in advertising and has joined me in a writing project. Bill Richards is a mover and shaker at the National Maritime Museum in Sydney. They too are close.

Blunty and I share long, rambling phone calls. The great novel still eludes him but tomorrow he could surprise us all. Meantime he entertains tourists to Longreach with tales of the sheds and his 'pomes' of bush life. David Malouf and I have reacquainted. He has become wise and kind. Julie Hodgson has died, of cancer, and I have learned of it only a week ago. Natasha lives; she teaches.

When my mother died my father was rudderless. First he made a disastrous liaison with Audrey Addison who had been widowed not long after she and her husband bought the shop from us. Financially, it wiped him out. Then he married Laura Beh, a strong woman whose own children took precedence over his. We met ever less frequently and in later years he drifted into senility. But he too will not be denied a place in that delicate but insistent world we call memory as I approach the blue door. Inside, I have learned, is the room where my mother was born.

Yes, the story she told me of her birth on the ship to Australia somewhere east of Aden — which I have no doubt she believed — was not true. It served to fill a gap and to put an end to questions. But the family chronicler, Frederick Tutt, has journeyed from his home in northern Kent to be with us today. For the last several months he has been investigating this little branch of ours. The result has surprised even him.

For when Annie Sinclair gave birth at 22 River Street to the little girl who would become Hilda May and who would draw all about her into the warmth of her orbit, she was replaying a tragedy that had afflicted her own mother. Annie herself, it seems, was

'illegitimate'. Her mother was a Miss Goldfinch who gave birth to her in 1891 just before she married Thomas Sinclair. But it doesn't end there. Miss Goldfinch was herself born without benefit of wedlock, and in an unexpected twist she, like Grandfather Harold Tutt's mother, Leah Diamond, is descended from the Jewish diaspora that reached the Kentish towns in the wake of the Restoration of the British monarchy in 1660. So on both sides my mother is the product of that exotic Hebrew world of the Chosen People. And if she is Jewish — and the inheritance flows down the female line — then I too am the recipient of its troubled legacy.

It is this thought with many others that I carry up the stairs in 22 River Street to the front room where the birth took place. The house has passed to strangers but they have kindly allowed me to enter. The front room is not much changed, shadowy beneath the leaden skies of an English winter.

Caroline and Thomas Sinclair have moved here from the village of Swalecliff since he has become an engine driver. Nineteen-year-old Annie, their daughter the servant girl, has come home from the big house with her shame. She cries out in agony as the thing inside her struggles for life. Her mother holds back the words of anger and despair. The time for recriminations will come later. Now, with a final rending cry, Annie gives birth. And in that moment 85 years after the little child came into the world, it happens once again. I can see it. I am sweating in my overcoat. My eyes are watering and I brush the tears away.

By now Harold Tutt, the father, is gone to Australia. Annie is faced with the terrible choices of the time — she chooses to follow him across the world. She hopes, perhaps, to leave the sense of shame behind in a place where religious puritanism is rampant, where the small city of 38,000 boasts a fearsome array of Wesleyan and Baptist chapels and a panoply of communal institutions. The Congregationalists command the High Street church; the Unitarians offer the Band of Hope; the Baptists the Adult Total Abstinence Society. The Dover Railways Mission is a few doors away and just down the road lives the Rabbi Isidore Barnstein with his synagogue in nearby Northampton Street.

There is also a Home for the Aged and The Good Shepherd Refuge for Fallen Women ...

Annie Sinclair with her little bundle Hilda May is certainly a 'fallen woman' but she is not about to stay in Dover's shadows of shame. Instead, after registering the child with her own name — father unknown — she begins that long and terrible journey and nothing we have found is able to shake the story of her struggle to reunite with Harold; not the unreasoning hatred she came to bear for the little girl.

The searing family photograph with the girl's hand on the man's knee is also explained. The Australian Archives have revealed Harold's war record and the knee is undoubtedly his. He enlisted on 5 January 1916, two weeks after the photo was taken and, following training in Egypt, he spent much of the war in the 2nd Machine Gun Battalion in France. It was here that he

was wounded in action — by a gas shell that struck the same knee the little girl was touching.

The day before the armistice on 11 November, 1918, he took leave in London; before he could be demobbed he was struck down by influenza and placed on the Dangerously Ill list. He returned home in April the following year. My mother, who was by then seven years old, had been without his love and protection for three terrible years ...

The tortures that Hilda endured were long past when I knew her. I had the best of her — the love and the warmth, the laughter and the melody — and now that the mystery of her birth is resolved I feel a wonderful sense of completeness.

The next day we catch the train back to London. We have a compartment to ourselves and Rob teaches us a new card game — Hearts — which he wins among the laughter and joshing that families do best.

At the end of the game, as we speed through the pretty fields of Kent toward Waterloo Station — where the boys will depart for Paris — I remember the words my mother used as I sat on her bed during that terrible final year. I fancy she says them again and tears start to my eyes as I hear them, clear as a bell.

‘You’ll be all right now.’

It is a curious sensation to discover at 62 that I am a Jew. For the first few days I revel in it. When my friend and co-author, Peter Thompson, takes me to lunch in London with the legendary showbiz writer Donald Zec — himself a Russian Jew — we instantly become fast friends. He takes my hand ‘You’ll get used

to it,' he says. In Paris we tour the Jewish quarter of the Marais and at Jo Goldenberg's kosher restaurant I take a wild delight in being among 'my people'.

But the truth is that nothing has changed. I am the same aggressively agnostic Australian I have been since the day I walked away from Billy Graham's mindless tent show. I have no way of knowing whether my two great grandmothers, Leah Diamond and Caroline Goldfinch, held to or abandoned the Hebrew heritage that had once defined their families. There was no suggestion that my grandmother followed the Jewish faith. And while my mother had insisted on my circumcision — and had made a fine chicken soup — these were simply part of the ordinary Australian life of the time.

I feel the same sympathy with the Jews of the Holocaust that I have always felt and the same anger and impatience towards their Zionist descendants in Israel who are oppressing the Palestinians.

But most powerfully I feel the sense of unity within diversity. It seems that as you peel back the generations you quickly come to realise that we are all interconnected in a glorious mosaic that surrounds and enriches our planet. Our blood is everywhere and everywhere the same. We are all Jews, all Palestinians. We are all Africans, all Asians, Europeans, Australians and Americans. There is only one race — the human race — and we should rejoice in the wonder of it. Yet in our ignorance and short-sightedness we are all touched by the divisiveness of religion and ethnicity and social taboo. In the end, we are all war babies.

Occasionally some among us rise above the battle and within their love and their laughter, their generosity and their warmth, the things that divide us simply melt away.

Hilda May was one such but I suspect they are more numerous than we credit.

They are our treasures.

They are the hope of the side.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



After beginning his journalistic career at the Brisbane *Courier-Mail*, Robert Macklin later wrote for *The Age*, *The Bulletin* and *The Canberra Times* — where he was associate editor until 2002.

He was press Secretary to Sir John McEwen during his time as Australia's Prime Minister. Later he wrote and directed documentary films in 32 countries of Asia and the South Pacific.

He has become one of Australia's most exciting and wide-ranging authors with novels (*The Queenslander*, *The Paper Castle*, *Juryman*) and non-fiction works, (*The Secret Life of Jesus*, *100 Great Australians* and, with co-author Peter Thompson, *The Man Who Died Twice*, *The Battle of Brisbane*, *Kill the Tiger* and *Keep Off the Skyline*).

He is the writer/producer of a six-part television series, *Bushranger Country*, and has major screenplays in development for the Australian and international market. He lives in Canberra where he divides his time between writing books and films.

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Childhood and early manhood, seen through a haze of blood spilt, castor-oil consumed and sporting triumphs, is one version of autobiographical truth. In *War Babies*, Robert Macklin is amusingly true to the absurd comedy of growing up. But this is only a single dimension of what is ultimately a moving and representative story that conveys the unique uncertainties and insecurities of the generation born in the shadow of World War II.

Set in suburban Brisbane in the 40s and 50s, Macklin's memoir is located in family yet ranges affectionately across the city of his youth, the sporting preoccupations of the post-war years and the social mores that influenced his relationships. Compelling in its exploration of the intense bond between mother and son, *War Babies* draws to an intriguing conclusion that speaks to every family with unexplained histories.

Robert Macklin is one of Australia's most exciting and wide-ranging authors with novels (*The Queenslander*; *The Paper Castle*) and non-fiction works *100 Great Australians* and (with co-author Peter Thompson) *Keep Off the Skyline* and *The Man Who Died Twice* to his credit. He now lives in Canberra where he divides his time between books and screenwriting.

'With great narrative gusto — and no small investigative skill — Robert Macklin brings mid-20th century Australia to vivid life in this poignant and revealing memoir.'

— Robert Drewe



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