Marriages, Microscopes and Missions: Three Women in Postwar Australia

Anne Gilmour Brown

BA (Hons I) University of Newcastle
BA (University of New England)
Diploma of Physiotherapy (Sydney)

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Discipline of Education and Arts
School of Humanities and Social Science
University of Newcastle
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I dedicate this thesis to my husband Graeme, our sons Matthew, Tim and Chris, Sally Vidler, our grandsons Finley and Angus, and to the loving memory of Helen Roberts, Peter Roberts and Jean Kimble.
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Abstract

This doctoral thesis is called “Marriages, Microscopes and Missions: Three Women in Postwar Australia.” It takes the form of three stories and a research essay. The stories examine the lives of three Australian women in the decades following the Second World War, while the research essay discusses those lives and the influences that guided and informed the creative writing process. The stories are set in times that encompassed the White Australia Policy, fear of Communism, the Vietnam War, the feminist movement, the sexual revolution and the recent Northern Territory “Intervention.”

After the war, women were expected to fit back into the roles prescribed for them before the war. “Populate or Perish” was the catchcry. A single woman was expected, because of her biology, to marry and start a family at a time when marriage often meant losing her job.

But the war had changed women. Those who had had wartime jobs or joined the armed forces remembered the freedom, the pay packet and the realisation that they could do the job as well as a man. The old stereotype of women as handmaidens to men seemed out of step with the way women now saw themselves. But with men still in charge there was bound to be conflict ahead.

The first story, “The Doctor’s Wife,” looks at a married woman in coastal New South Wales living the prescribed “dream.” The second, “The Drug Analyst,” shows a Sydney-based career woman attempting to live on her own terms. The third, “The Minister’s Maid,” explores the changing role of an Aboriginal woman in a remote semi-traditional Northern Territory community. As each story unfolds within its own culture, physical landscape and carrying its history of conflict, the pressures placed on each woman to conform to her society’s expectations, become apparent.

In one way or another, the women in these stories are part of my family. While they sometimes find their identities and self esteem under threat, each is sustained by her strong connection to family and community. At this time in our history, finding a sense of belonging is sometimes a difficult task for young people, both white and black Australians. Perhaps that is why family stories are important. They establish our identity and give us a place in history, a sense of belonging to an ongoing, unfolding narrative.
The history of men’s opposition to women’s emancipation is more interesting perhaps than the story of that emancipation itself.

Virginia Woolf
In Newcastle, a young wife is doing what she does every morning: hanging out a second load of nappies on the clothesline. It is 1946. She lives in a block of flats at the western end of Church Street in the centre of the city. Beyond the flat is the harbour with its coal-fired ships and ferries, the railway alongside, and the noise and smoke of steam trains. Through the smog to the north, flames leap and dance high into the air from industrial chimneys. When the one o’clock whistle screeches across the city from the BHP and her husband arrives home for lunch, the nappies will have dried a dull, industrial grey. After unpegging them from the small line on the balcony she will shake loose the soot from each one before folding it neatly and stepping back into the kitchen, her shoes crunching through the grit on the linoleum floor.

In Adelaide there was no grit. In Adelaide the air was clean and people dressed well and spoke properly. Her friends there held tennis parties on Sunday afternoons on grass courts in their leafy back gardens. And no one was descended from convicts.

The gritty nappies are mine and this is my mother.

My father was born in Newcastle in 1919, the year his father, newly returned from the Western Front, accepted the position of Superintendent at Newcastle Hospital. My father lived in Newcastle all his life.

My mother met him at an Air Force party during the Second World War. Doctors were in great demand in wartime, so my father, along with his fellow Sydney University medical students, was fast-tracked through his final year.

I remember three pictures, three images held in my mind since I was a child, which depicted my father’s war service in New Guinea. One was a photograph titled “Skin Parade,” showing a line of naked men waiting outside under the trees to see my father who is sitting fully clothed at a desk at the head of the line. Another is a signed pencil drawing he did of his accommodation, a ‘prefab’ hut with the caption: Bedside Manor, Port Moresby, 1944. In the third snap he is relaxing on Madang harbour aboard a small craft, constructed, it seems, by attaching a mast and sails to the recycled belly tank of an aircraft. There were other shots of him trading with the natives, socialising with the nurses, and parties in the Officers’ Mess, but for a child, that first photograph with those bare bottoms, was explanation enough. As my understanding grew I could imagine the tropical diseases, ulcers, insect bites and skin infections he must have treated.
At the end of the war he returned to Newcastle, married my mother and joined his father in general practice in Hunter Street. Later, when my grandfather moved up to Newcastle Hospital to work at as an orthopaedic surgeon, my father had the practice to himself.

After two years of marriage, my father secured a war-service loan and we moved into a house in Merewether, a few blocks away from his parents. It was built of white painted weatherboard on the corner of Hill and Janet Streets where, from our sunny glassed-in verandah, we could see over acres of red tiled rooftops, to a sparkling blue stripe of Pacific Ocean.
I spent my childhood on Merewether beach, my hair stiff with salt, and a thick white stripe of zinc cream across my nose. I recall sensations of my first swim: that shock of cold water, the tightening of the pores of my skin, and clinging frog-like to my father’s broad freckled back, squealing with excitement, my arms tight around his neck. And Mum paddling into the shallows, a towel across her outstretched arms to enfold me, blue and shivering, and hug me dry, while my father opened a large suitcase on the sand, propped the lid up with a stick, and sat me inside.

Did the lid ever come down? Did I stay there obediently? I can’t remember. I know only what I have been told when it comes to this earliest part of my life. But I can’t imagine myself staying in there. I grew into an active, obstinate child.

My parents were complete opposites, both in looks and temperament. Perhaps that was the attraction. Dad was tall, fair and outgoing, with a loud voice. Mum was of middling height with dark hair and the bluest eyes, and was quiet and thoughtful, a romantic at heart, who loved to lose herself in historical novels. Coming from Adelaide, she was unaccustomed to large waves and remained terrified of the surf.

My father, in his woollen trunks and old canvas gardening hat, was not one to sit and relax anywhere, least of all on the beach. I see him standing at the water’s edge beaming at the passers by, recognising some as his patients and greeting them like old friends. Then anxious for exercise, he heads off for a run along the sand to Bar Beach.
and back. I see my mother, on the other hand, stretched out on a towel in a stylish black one-piece costume, black-and-white check sunglasses and a wide-brimmed, black straw hat pulled well down at the front. And their first child in a suitcase on Merewether Beach.

I saw my father the other day in Beaumont Street. He was stepping off the kerb onto the pedestrian crossing. Of course, I stopped myself, remembered that he was dead. But for that moment, in the straight sweep of white hair, the tall, slim shape of the body, the purposeful, bent-kneed walk, he was there.

You think when they die that they’ll be gone. But they’re still here; they don’t go away altogether, those you’ve been closest to. They continue, even in death, to demand attention.

A friend taking her elderly mother shopping on Saturday morning brings on a vision of Mum as she might have been now: a little bent, slower moving, her brown hair turning to grey. Spectacles perhaps, though she never needed them. Unable to reach the upper shelves. Fumbling with her purse at the checkout. Needing a daughter’s help. That’s what you miss; now especially, when the children have grown up and left home, and you have the time. Time to talk. To remember. Time you didn’t have then.

I remember my father turning up at our house unexpectedly one evening, a few years before he died. It was to show off his new car, a pale blue station wagon. He’d just bought it, on impulse, at the previous year’s bargain price, after setting out for something completely different. He wanted my opinion—or was it approval?—on the colour, before he took it home. In the old days, when they were still together, any choice on colour was always left to my mother. With his red-green colour blindness he relied on Mum’s advice every morning especially when putting on a tie.

My brother David was born two years after me, in Woodlands Hospital, in the city. As a child, I imagined that a filthy westerly gale must have been blowing that day and filled his lungs with pollens and dust, because my brother’s chest was always wheezy and chock-full of phlegm. His itchy skin oozed a clear liquid that dried to a crust. They tied his arms down to the bars of his cot to stop him scratching.

Mum kept him by her side all day, talking to distract him from the terrible itching. He had blond ringlets and piercing blue eyes and took in every word. She was ironing
and describing the flowers she’d just placed in a vase on the kitchen table when my brother said his first word—gladioli—clear as a bell.

The asthma worsened as he grew older. There were days and nights with my brother fighting for breath. Sometimes I was sent across the road to neighbours until the danger had passed. If I stayed home I kept out of the way, crouched behind my bedroom door, listening to what was happening. I’d seen it before and couldn’t bear to see it again. When I heard the squeaky wheels of the oxygen cylinder I knew things were serious. Bottles of medicine rattled on their metal tray as my father prepared another injection to keep him breathing.

“Shouldn’t we take him to hospital?” There was strain in my mother’s voice. No response from Dad, too intent on the job at hand. I thought of the narrow chest, the hunched shoulders, the oxygen mask over the pale face, the wheezing, the exhaustion, the stink of those bed sheets soaked with sweat.

I stood there holding my breath to keep him alive.

My brother told me recently that he never once thought he would die. “Why would I?” he said. “I had my father there.”
I learned quite young that people could die from asthma. My father lost one of his best friends that way. The man was his patient, and he lost him. I remember him coming home that night and going straight to his study, my mother trying to comfort him. I’ve never seen a man so distraught.

Dad always put his patients first. We accepted that. We had to. He had a simple credo about diagnosis, “Listen to what the patient is saying. He is telling you what is wrong with him.” You could almost have called him a hypochondriac. He enjoyed ill health. It fascinated him. Friends have told me that my father’s identification with their ailment put them instantly at ease. This was not forced but entirely natural because, as he was quick to point out, he’d almost certainly, at one time or other, suffered the same thing himself.

“Ah yes, I’ve had an in-grown toenail. Bugger of a thing, isn’t it?” Then removing his own shoe and sock, he’d throw his foot up on the desk under the patient’s nose. “Look how it’s come good. Not a bad result, eh? Now, let me tell you how to fix it.”

Not that when it came to his health, he always did the right thing.

“I’ve broken a tooth, Helen,” I remember him saying to Mum one evening. “Just hold the mirror still, will you, so I can glue it back into place. This Araldite should do the job.”

“For goodness sake, Peter, get it done properly. Go and see Frank. It’s a dentist’s job. You’re doing an anaesthetic for him tomorrow morning.”

“I’ll have patients waiting. Just turn the mirror towards the light.”

For a holiday or even a weekend away, my father packed a miniature pharmacy. There were “opening” and “closing” mixtures to deal with tummy troubles, and an array of medications that would ward off anything from toothache to the plague. Tablets, powders, potions, ointments and capsules, that if the need arose, could be sucked, swallowed, sniffed, injected, rubbed on or pushed up the rear end.

Thus equipped we embarked on a weekend in a caravan by the beach at Camden Haven. The caravan was a light, flimsy affair, round in shape, common enough in the ’50s. I saw one recently, restored and on display in the Australian National Museum in Canberra.
I imagine that my father must have admired it on a house call, because a faithful Merewether patient, Clarrie Edwards, lent it to us. I remember my mother’s horror when Dad towed it up our driveway.

“There are five of us, Peter,” she said, holding our baby sister in her arms and surveying this thin-shelled egg on wheels.

We kids were over the moon with excitement. We had never been camping before. We drove up the Pacific Highway that Friday evening, my brother on my left, fingering his new fishing line, my three-year-old sister asleep on my right, and our rubber surf-o-planes taking up most of the room in the Holden’s boot.

The first night was magic. We’d never slept so close before. I’d had nightmares for years but had never been allowed in my parents’ bed. But here, cocooned in the little van, we were all snuggled together, just as I’d always imagined, warm and cosy like a litter of puppies in a box.

In the morning it was raining. It rained all day. And the more it rained, the more this lump—a sebaceous cyst my father called it—came up on my sister’s cheek. After countless games of snap, dominoes and snakes and ladders with the rain lashing the van, tempers began to fray. As my disc passed his on the final ladder, my brother, who had just started school, said, “Fuck,” and was sent straight to bed, grinning, because, as he said, he was already there. And all the while little Jen whimpered in pain.

Mum warned him not to do it. “A cyst will last until we get home,” she said firmly, as she cooked our dinner on the little stove. But Jenny wailed on, her face swollen and throbbing, and my father unpacked the swabs and scalpel.

My mother knew her husband better than to argue. He was a doctor. He didn’t take advice; he gave it. He didn’t discuss things; he lectured. I have studied doctors closely all my life and most are the same: the serious head, the stern tone, the unassailable air of authority.

“Only a nick,” he promised brightly, as if this were the highlight of his holiday. This phrase, I now realise, is the greatest understatement of the medical profession.

When at last my sister cried herself to sleep my father swung into action. My brother and I were huddled at the back of the double bed, our little padded bench beds next to the table having been taken over by the “operating theatre.” Jenny was lifted, still asleep on her little bench cushion, up onto the small breakfast table. Beside her on the sink was a shiny metal kidney dish holding the few instruments that Dad had boiled in the van’s saucepan.
With all the other vans in darkness as their occupants slept, ours glowed like a beacon. Mum’s instructions were simply to hold Jenny still. At the first “little nick,” my sister screamed and struggled. She kept on screaming and struggling. Our van lurched as Mum tried to hold her down. The vans around us lit up. As Dad worked away, torches beamed in our direction. Hideous faces, flattened and distorted, pressed against our wet windows.

When it was over and Jen was asleep with a dressing on her face, Mum said enough was enough and packed up our muddy clothes and sodden towels. David packed the unused fishing line back into its bag. Rain was still falling as we skulked out of that park before dawn. It was like leaving the scene of a crime.

It was a golden age for doctors. They were treated like gods. I still don’t know if Dad paid his patients for the bottles of sherry he carried in, the boxes of fruit and vegetables that arrived, the fox terrier pups he brought home, or the caravan we borrowed that disastrous weekend; or whether they were payment in kind. I suspect they were just gifts. But whatever they were he loved his job and the patients loved him. He ran a kind of health fund for his patients that his father had begun in the Depression. In 1952 a quarterly payment of one pound and five shillings covered a family for all consultations, including house-calls after hours. Only injections and confinements were extra. Being a sole practitioner was hard work, but I don’t remember him ever complaining. He was a doctor when doctors were king.

After dinner most evenings my father would do the washing up—because he liked to, and because none of us could do it well enough—and when I took him his cup of tea he was already sitting at his desk in the study where he remained for the rest the evening, engrossed in his medical journals.

People nowadays look back longingly to the 1950s. It was a time, they say misty-eyed, when you never had to lock the front door.

Well, at our place we did lock the front door. That was because hardly anyone used it. We were on a corner block and everyone came round the side to the back door. We didn’t lock the back door because Mum was six feet away in the kitchen cooking and cleaning, or just down the back steps in the laundry, stirring the copper with a stick and putting the blue bag through another load of whites. Besides, she’d leave the door ajar to listen for the baker. In khaki shorts and carrying a square cane basket, he’d leap
up our back steps three at a time. He’d have our fresh loaf in his bare hands, place it in the breadbox on the landing, collect his token and be off. Meanwhile, his old draught horse, knowing the route by heart, had already moved the cart down the road and was waiting for him at the next-door neighbour’s gate.

We didn’t even lock the back door at night. The milkman arrived at four am. On a hot night he might decide to step into our kitchen and pop the bottles of milk into the fridge.

I realise now that we had few possessions, and nothing worth stealing. No computers, mobile phones, sound systems or DVD players. It would have taken three men to lift our old radiogram and carry it out.

When Mum was pregnant with my sister Jenny, Dad arranged for the groceries to be delivered. This decision was prompted by an unfortunate altercation with our local grocer a block away on the corner.

With Mum in an advanced stage of pregnancy we had stopped there for some eggs on the way home. My brother and I went in with her and were greeted by the grocer, a large man with an enormous girth that not even his apron could disguise. He patted my brother, almost four years old, on the head and asked when the baby was due. David, looking up, responded brightly with, “Next week,” and then added, “but we’re only having one baby. I think you’re having twins.”

My mother apologised and dragged my brother from the shop, but nothing, it seemed, could soften the hurt in the man’s eyes or atone for the precocious tongue of a child. From then on, a man from the city firm, Lane and Trewartha, carried our weekly order up the back steps in a box on his shoulder and left it on the kitchen table.

Though we were relatively comfortably off in those days we weren’t rich. GPs were never wealthy. My father worked long hours consulting at the surgery and making house calls, since many families then did not own a car. He’d often dash off to assist one of the surgeons in the operating theatre and gave anaesthetics for dental procedures. Like most GPs he enjoyed obstetrics and offered his own tried and true advice to “his new mothers” on appropriate pre and post-natal exercises. Later, when I was a new physiotherapy graduate working with expectant mothers at Newcastle Hospital, I offered him the latest ideas on exercises. But he cut me short, saying, “I know what my girls need.”
I felt uncomfortable when my school friends and the neighbourhood kids, whose fathers happily answered to Mr Patching or Mr Williams, felt they had to call my father, “Doctor.” It was only a courtesy title, but if they slipped up and said “Mr Roberts,” they invariably apologised. There was a formality about names then that has gone out now. Even the couple next door addressed one another as Mr and Mrs Smith. I once caught my mother trying to gain an advantage from my father’s occupation. She was speaking on the phone to a sales assistant at Grace Brothers about a new washing machine. It seemed that a limited number were available at a low price so she pulled out all the stops and said, “It’s Mrs Dr Roberts here . . .”

We lived a modest life and rarely bought anything new. I was the last of my friends to own a bicycle. Even when one materialised one Christmas Day when I was ten, I recognised it as having belonged to Sara, the girl across the road, who had taught me to ride. Dad had bought it from her family and painted it up.

Mum made our clothes, darned the holes in my father’s socks and turned the worn collars on his favourite shirts. If something broke, Dad usually repaired it. If he couldn’t, he knew a patient who could. After work he always shovelled the manure from the baker’s horse off the road and onto his vegetable garden.

Our parents had been brought up in the Great Depression so were used to making do with what was at hand. These days, “recycling” is considered a relatively new concept. That’s nonsense. Our parents were raised on the idea. As a child, my father helped his own father build a greenhouse in their back yard. Glass was expensive then, so my grandfather, who worked in the Fracture Clinic at Newcastle Hospital, brought home a box of discarded X-Ray films. After a scrub with washing soda to remove the images of broken bones, he nailed them to a timber frame. He won prizes for the flowers he grew in that greenhouse.

My father spent his spare time in the garage down the back. One of his creations was a surfboard he designed and built out of plywood. It was hollow with hole at the front plugged with a cork from a port bottle that had to be removed briefly now and then to equalise the air pressure. He was immensely proud of this board, riding it in the surf at Merewether Beach, and afterwards repairing every scratch. Later, for convenience, he was able to leave it in a friend’s garage in John Parade, right opposite the beach. Fibreglass boards were coming in by then and his would have been considered out of date, but he still preferred his own handiwork. Before he died he sold it to a collector of boards in Islington who put it on display in his shop.
I discovered my mother’s favourite thing quite by accident. I came home from school one day to find her in tears in the sitting room, sweeping fragments of an ornament into a dustpan. It was the ashtray my father had made for her in New Guinea during the war. He had fashioned it from one half of a coconut shell, which he’d polished and decorated with pretty shells collected on the beach. My mother had accidentally knocked it off the coffee table with a duster.

It wasn’t that they were even regular smokers. Occasionally, sitting down after dinner with his tea or coffee, Dad would produce a packet of Craven A cigarettes, draw one out—only ever the one—light it, take a couple of puffs to get it going and pass it along to my mother. It was a time when almost everyone smoked, before people knew the dangers of it. My parents passed it back and forth between them like a joint, until it was finished. But they never used the ashtray from New Guinea. That was too precious.

The times were a-changing, and if there was one possession we all lusted after, it was a television set. Newcastle did not receive good TV reception until the ’60s, so we held off. At night you’d see people sitting on garbage bins in their overcoats watching the flickering screen through the plate glass windows of Rayfords Electrical Store in Hamilton. They always left a set switched on at night. But you had to lip-read as you couldn’t hear any sound.

We continued to entertain ourselves in the evening with Scrabble or the radio. While the Poms watched the Queen’s coronation on television we had to be content to listen to it on the radio. A week later we went to the Tatler Theatre in Hunter Street and saw it all on the Newsreel that ran continuously.

The radio was a lifeline for women at home. Mum listened to the serial *Blue Hills* every day at 12.50 pm as she prepared Dad’s lunch. And she’d take in a radio play during the afternoon while she was sewing. With a radio play, she said, you could get on with the housework with your mind somewhere else. In the evening, while Mum cooked our meal, Dad would take the stoppers off the glass decanters on the dining room chiffonier and pour two glasses of sherry: a dry for her and a sweet for himself. “Thanks Lovey,” she’d say. And he’d say, “Here’s luck, Darl,” and they’d clink the tiny glasses together. After dinner we’d look forward to tuning the radio into Bob Dyer’s *Pick a Box* and try to answer the quiz questions, and laugh at Jimmy Edwards, Dick Bentley and June Whitfield’s antics in *Take it from Here* on Sunday evenings.

There was nothing in our lives then that hinted that the marriage would not last.
When we eventually acquired a television set, we rented it. That seemed to my father to be the best deal. On reflection, our lives seemed simple, mostly healthy, and largely uncomplicated. My early morning swims with my father are some of my favourite memories. We went down to the Merewether ocean baths together as the sun was coming up and swam lengths, even if the water was freezing cold. Dad was a great believer in cold water to get the circulation going. He tried to encourage us to finish a shower at home with a cold one, as apparently he had been taught to do by his father. This Spartan streak was a pointer perhaps to the influence of his Calvinist grandfather, William Roberts, a Sydney tea merchant and Congregationalist lay-preacher who, on his second honeymoon to England with his family in 1909 encouraged his two sons, then aged thirteen and fifteen, to ride their bicycles the length of the country, camping along the way. And they dutifully complied.

Our Sydney cousins were nothing like us. They were the first in their street to buy a television set in 1956. Their house at Lane Cove had a direct line of sight to the television transmission towers at Gore Hill. Neighbours crowded into the house to gape at this wonder of technology, even when at that early stage, the only picture to be seen was the black and white test pattern.

Later, when there were actual programs to watch, we were invited down to their place for some proper viewing. Any visit to these cousins was entertaining. It was a casual, welcoming house where anything seemed possible. They had a menagerie of pets, all made to feel part of the family and all with the run of the house. There was a black collie called Prince, and a cat with a broken back whose rear end travelled on a small trolley. When they moved to Dover Heights they added a sheep, whose droppings, when they bounced loudly on the hallway linoleum, were fondly dismissed as “Biddy’s beans.” And after my cousin Vicki’s mare foaled in the backyard she too was allowed inside the house, but only as far as the kitchen.

Our lives in Newcastle seemed meagre by comparison. We’d had Tigger, an Australian terrier, who was banned from the house because of my brother’s allergies. We would play with him outside, bathe him in the sun under the clothesline, and lick tongues with him on the back steps until Dad caught us and threatened to get rid of him.

But, as it turned out, Tigger did himself in. He was a wanderer, and after he gobbled up some tasty, newly hatched chickens in a neighbour’s backyard he suddenly disappeared. My father told us he had “sent him to a farm.” I had spent hours training
him to jump through a hoop, but that wasn’t taken into account. Neither was the love we children had for that little dog.

When the Hunter River flooded and Maitland, upstream from Newcastle, was under water, Dad took us down to the harbour to see the debris surging past and out to sea on the wide brown torrent. I’d seen a photograph in that morning’s newspaper of a little dog just like Tigger, stranded alone in a car, his paws on the driver’s window as the floodwaters swirled around him. We watched trees and fence posts and bloated cattle being carried along and out past Nobbys to the sea, but I never saw Tigger or the car. And I shouldn’t have expected to. My father was in Rotary with our local vet, who would have put Tigger down. I was angry and upset for weeks after that. I hated my father for doing it and my mother for letting him.

When we arrived at Lane Cove for that first TV experience, our Uncle Rex welcomed us into the house with a smile that was always a mixture of surprise and delight. Of course we raced in to see the television set and gasped: it was an Admiral, the console model, top of the range.

“It’s very nice,” my mother said, and went to help my aunt Barbie with the tea. My mother had a keen eye for home furnishings and colour-co-ordination, and would decide to “lift” our living room from time to time with, say, the addition of the latest “apricot” shade in Thai silk cushions and a matching lampshade which she made herself at her decorating class. But these were not the concerns of my cousins’ family. They went to plays and pantomimes. They were even performers themselves. Uncle Rex’s sister Betty Suttor had played the role of the leading white woman in the film Jedda, and his mother had played parts in radio serials like The Lawsons and Blue Hills.
Cousin Vicki went to Pony Club and gymkhanas and Tony played the guitar and piano accordion. He would dress up in his Zorro suit and fly through the neighbourhood at dusk, placing a flourish of zeds in chalk on telegraph poles.

My father got some extra chairs from the dining room and pulled a sofa away from the wall to accommodate all of us closer to the set. We sat down with our cousins to watch our first program, Desmond Tester and the Channel Nine Pins.

It was still early days and the picture quality wasn’t wonderful, but now, looking back, I see it as a landmark experience. On the winding, sick-making drive home along the old Pacific Highway that night, my mother’s only comment on the television experience was, “If you ask me, they would have been better spending all that money on fixing up the house.” She had noticed, as I dreaded she would, that the paintwork behind the sofa, once Dad pulled it away from the wall, was a different colour from the rest of the room.

In 1959, halfway through my first year of high school, my father decided we were all going to England for a year so that he could study Paediatrics. That October we left Sydney Harbour in the P&O liner *Strathnaver* in the worst storm for years.

My father recorded the trip on a new 8mm movie camera. That crazy, wonderful film contains the only images I have now of my father and our complete family. He bought the camera duty-free, just before we set off. The early reels were experimental efforts. After processing, it became clear that he had problems with the viewfinder. He had trouble fitting his subject into the frame. There were headless but buxom young females playing deck tennis; headless but fetching young ladies winning at deck quoits; and headless females in beautiful saris standing on the sidelines. His shots of Mum on her hands and knees, bottom in the air, struggling through a net in the obstacle race, turned out fine. She was horizontal, grinning at the camera through gritted teeth, her dark wavy hair framing a forced grin, and her eyes rolled back as she sent up the stupidity of these games our father insisted she entered. Only when the film was processed did we find that you had to fit the subject into the small square in the viewfinder. My father, it seemed, had used that one for focussing.

When we were in the Red Sea approaching Suez my mother persuaded my father to take advantage of a side trip on offer to Cairo and the Pyramids. She was thrilled about it, saying she’d always had a fascination with Egypt since studying Ancient History at school. They left the three of us on board while the ship continued
through the canal with an Egyptian magician called the Gulli-Gulli man employed to entertain all the abandoned children with his tricks.

After a week in London at a private hotel we rented the top of a semi-detached house in Finchley, North London, where the water heater was so inefficient that we had to take turns with the bathwater. Dad started at Great Ormond Street Children’s Hospital while Mum organised us into schools.

Jenny and David found places immediately in the local primary school. Mum did some fast-talking to authorities to steer me past the Secondary Modern schools on offer and into a government Grammar School, albeit a Catholic one, that took in forty percent Protestants. The letter we had brought from my headmistress at Newcastle Girls’ High School helped, since that was a selective school.

Mum and I arrived by trolley bus for an interview at the school, St Michael’s Convent Grammar School and were shown into the Principal’s office. After a few moments, in swept the most beautiful young nun I had ever seen. Not that I’d seen many. My only personal encounter with a nun had been as a child in the Mater Hospital at Waratah when my brother and I had our tonsils removed. We hadn’t suffered from anything other than a mild sore throat, as I remember. But tonsillectomies were “the thing” in the ’50s and doctors’ children were at the front of the line. After the operation we both managed to bear the pain of swallowing because of the kindness of Sister Juliana and her ice-cream.

The pretty, smiling young nun introduced herself as Sister Angela, the School Principal, and showed us around the school, charming away any doubts my mother may have had about Catholics. Mum’s father, I knew, had been a Catholic. Sadly, he had been excommunicated when he married my grandmother and never spoke to his family again.

It was a time when nuns were still conspicuously dressed, covered from head to toe in a sturdy wimple and flowing black habit. This gorgeous creature (my mother’s words) could have been straight from central casting for The Sound of Music. She would have left Julie Andrews in the shade. She squeezed our hands in a warm welcome and invited us to sit down. She made us feel completely at ease. I knew my mother was impressed. More than that, she was captivated, mesmerized even, by this gracious young thing sitting before us. And so was I. All labels, chants and jokes about Catholics programmed into my Protestant upbringing were instantly forgotten. And I was careful, when she asked me about the schools I had attended in Newcastle, not to mention that
we “Publics” from Junction Primary had thrown stones at the “Tykes” from nearby St Josephs, and they at us, on a regular basis, on the way home from school.

I was enrolled to start at St Michael’s the following Monday. Latin was the only stumbling block. I was already a year ahead of this class. I would be behind everyone at home when I had to face the Intermediate Certificate.

“Never mind,” said my mother as we waited at the bus stop. “You can study Latin by correspondence from Australia. That’s easily arranged.” We took our seats on the trolley bus with my mother still thinking of the beautiful young nun and muttering, “What a waste, what a waste.”

While it was fun living in England, you missed certain things you were used to at home. Dad was homesick for the rotary clothesline. Not that he ever touched it—that was Mum’s domain. It was something he mowed around on weekends and admired.

“Not a Hills Hoist in sight,” he’d growl, as the train passed above rows of terrace houses with narrow parallel back gardens. “It’s just what they want in this bloody awful climate. And so compact for these small yards. Beats me why we haven’t sold ’em to the Poms.”

I suppose he liked the geometric perfection of the rotating pyramid. He was dyed in the wool practical, my father. He liked things in order—numbered, filed, balanced. Straight lines, square boxes, even spaces—nothing random, left to chance or blowin’ in the wind. He must have been delighted years later when they stuck a giant rotary clothesline atop the new Parliament House in Canberra.
My father had little inclination toward art although it could be said that it was inclined towards him. Perhaps his colour-blindness had something to do with it. He had an unsettling habit, when we were invited out for dinner, of walking into a house and seeking out the pictures on the walls. Not that he was about to appreciate them or even comment. He simply expected that anything hung up for display should hang straight. He looked for the tiniest lean one way or the other. Couldn’t stand anything “out of kilter.”

You braced yourself for the halt of Dad’s footsteps across a room, then the scrutinising stare, the crouching stance with head sliding side to side like a Balinese dancer as he sized up the tilt. You hardly breathed, feeling the host’s unease at the freckled arms reaching out to touch the sacred object, the manhandling of it back and forth, the sullying smudge of fingerprints on the glass, the wait while he stepped back a pace to crouch and slide his neck again, rechecking the levels. Then both hands would rise, Christ-like, as if to say, “That’s all it needed.”

Mum’s only problem was adjusting to queuing when she went shopping. At home in Newcastle there wasn’t much need for it. Somehow you just knew when we were at Darby’s Pie Shop, or at Walton’s haberdashery counter, approximately when it was your turn to be served. It was a kind of sixth sense. But in England they queued religiously, even if there were two customers waiting. In the end we were all knocked into shape the hard way, by the disapproving glances from men and the sharp-tongued remarks from women. My mother decided that anyone not toeing the line had long since been transported to New South Wales. Coming from South Australia she got away with jokes like that.

At the dinner table each evening we would share our stories.

David: I asked the landlady if I could play with my new ball in the backyard. But she said no, children and balls were banned, and that in England, if you don’t mind, it’s called a garden, not a yard.

Mum: I went to buy some Durex tape today at the newsagent and they sent me off to the chemist.

Jenny: They laughed at me at school when I talked about having to wear a singlet to keep warm. They said, “What do you mean a singlet? It’s a vest, you dummy.”

Me: Some sixth form girls pushed me against a railing so I was trapped.

“Go on,” they said, “speak Australian, we want to hear it, speak Australian.”
“Oodnadatta - Wagga Wagga - Gundagai.”

“Cor,” they said, and let me go.

Dad: I saw a little boy in the hospital ward today. He asked about my funny accent so I told him I come from Australia.

He said, “You don’t.”

I said, “I do.”

He said, “Nah, you don’t.”

I said, “I promise I do. I come from Australia.”

He said, “What, every mornin?”

That Easter of 1960 my father drove us in our Austin A40 van through France, Germany and Austria to Italy. Through the movie lens he captured the highlights: our hotel at the foot of the Zugspitze Mountain where Mum impressed the hosts at breakfast with her schoolgirl German: “Geben sie mir die Butter bitte”; a day on the ski slopes; the pigeons on our shoulders in St Marks Square in Venice; and in the Lido, the glistening glob of spit, delivered by a rude youth sitting on a high wall, that landed on my head.

It was the leaning tower of Pisa that presented my father with his greatest cinematic challenge. The best he could do was to have all four of us line up at a precise angle so that the film would show us trying to push it up straight.
That corny film has the touch of a Chevy Chace vacation movie about it. I was thirteen years old then and loved that trip. And my father must have, too, since he embarked on a remake twenty years later, albeit with a different leading lady. Except that on this second trip there would be no spitting and the boy at the Lido would steal his backpack.

After fifteen months in London, my father was awarded his Diploma of Child Health and Mum thought we’d all be off home. But suddenly he had the offer of a position as houseman in an Edinburgh hospital for another year and an opportunity for further study. There were anxious glances from Mum to us and Mum to him. In the end it was decided that she should get us home to our own schools after Christmas to start school at the end of January 1961.

I remember the ship pulling out from the wharf, Mum in tears as the streamer she and Dad held between them danced in the breeze, stretched and snapped. Suddenly our father was alone.

For the first couple of days at sea Mum hardly ate. I remember my brother coming down from morning tea in the dining room with cakes stuffed under his jumper. When he emptied them out onto her bed a smile spread over her face. “It’s silly really. I was just wondering which tie Dad is wearing today.” And we all laughed and went up on deck.

We learned a great deal about our mother, having her all to ourselves for a while. When we berthed in Naples she insisted we visit the ruins of old Pompeii.
She told us about the city having been “stopped in its tracks,” engulfed by lava and ash from the eruption of Mount Vesuvius. No one can prepare a child for the gruesome sight of body casts depicting people as they were as the horror struck.

We learned that Ancient History had been her best subject at school, especially the Egyptian Pharaohs, and that all through the course she’d had a tremendous crush on Tutankhamen, the boy king. He was eighteen when he died, a year older than she was then. She said that her tram had been involved in an accident on the way to the final exam. “My sister and I arrived with cuts and abrasions on our arms. At the end of my essay on Tutankhamen I wrote a note, explaining the reasons for my poor writing, and squeezed a drop of blood onto the page.” She and her twin sister came fifth and sixth in the state.

After nine months our father returned to Australia and normal family life resumed. We had sold our old house in Merewether by then and were renting a flat in Hamilton. Our parents bought a block of land in Merewether Heights and engaged an architect and a builder.

Dad was a fitness freak like his own father. When he and his brothers were young, his father made a bet that they would never beat him in a 440-yard race. And they never did. Perhaps this explains why, when I was seventeen, my father bailed up every unsuspecting male who came to our house for a competition in “step-ups” onto a special log he kept in the backyard.

“I beat a thirty-year-old today,” I remember him saying one day, after a run along the beach. And my mother’s dry reply, “Did he know it was a race, Peter Pan?” My mother’s passion was tennis but Dad never challenged her to a game. When she first came to Newcastle she joined a Wednesday tennis group. She played with those women for forty years. They became her loyal friends and confidantes. On Wednesday mornings, and later on Saturday afternoons as well, right up until the day she died, her Tennis Girls, as she called them, held my mother together when she seemed to be coming apart.

After she died I would occasionally go down to Reid Park for a game on a Saturday afternoon when the Tennis Girls were short of players. They were warm, wonderful women who, in the afternoon tea break, would say kind things like, “It’s just like having Helen back again,” and, “You’ve inherited her forehand drive.” It made me realise that I had never heard my father praise my mother’s accomplishments.
Mum and her twin sister Joan had played tennis for Woodlands School in Adelaide and later represented the University. In this photograph it’s my mother Helen on the right and Joan on the left. I imagine they got sick of people asking which was which.

After Junction Primary School, I’d gone off happily to the Newcastle Girls’ High School with my friends, and had my sister follow six years later. When my brother’s turn came we were just back from England and David was packed off to board at a private school, Knox Grammar, on Sydney’s North Shore. It was my father’s opinion that the air pollution from the BHP, close to the Newcastle Boys’ High School, was a hazard for asthmatics.

Mum was uneasy about it. I don’t think anyone asked David.

A hazard too, it turned out, was Knox Grammar School’s annual cross-country race, which was compulsory and “character building,” and every year my brother ended up in hospital. He was never happy as a boarder. We could all see that. He told me he would never send a child of his away like that.

On his few weekends at home, David’s favourite outdoor activity was fishing. He and Dad would take our boat out on Lake Macquarie. With no power tilt mechanism the motor was heavy to lift. To remedy this, David rigged up a system of poles and ropes that made lifting it easy from inside the boat. It also meant he could now manage the boat on his own. After he launched the boat at Carrington and was almost swamped taking it over the bar at Nobbys, Dad sold it. This was a terrible blow to David. Tempers
began to fray. There were words between David and Dad that turned physical with the two of them sprawled on the living room floor, fighting. My brother had my father’s competitive nature but not his stamina. Years later they were the best of friends, but in those days, while other sons brought glory to their fathers on the athletics track or the rugby field, David stood on the sidelines with the other boarders barracking for Knox till he had no voice left. There was value, he explained, in having a hoarse voice in the dining room on Saturday evenings. It didn’t rate as highly as bruises and bloody knees but it showed you’d done your bit for the team.

And while other sons crewed in the Croudace Bay sailing races with their fathers, David waved Dad off to the lake and spent his weekends at home in our garage inventing devices out of water pipes, firecrackers and fuses made from steel wool, that would have horrified my parents had they known. Suffice to say that there were many unexplained explosions and mysterious holes blown through the corrugated iron fence down the back.

He became interested in cars and spent one entire summer vacation at home in his room, trying to win one. The competition was run on the back of packets of Kellogg’s Corn Flakes. For the months leading up to the holidays, he’d collected hundreds of empty packets after breakfast from waste bins behind the school’s boarding house kitchen. When we met him at Broadmeadow Station that December, his sports bag was bulging, not with sports equipment but with six hundred entry forms.

For those seven weeks we hardly saw him. His pallid form would materialise at lunch and vanish again until dinner. He said he was going to win the new Ford Cortina pictured on the back of the packet. You had to list the twenty given attributes of the car in order of their importance and write a jingle.

At the beginning of February, with six hundred entries safely in the post, he hurried for the train that would take him back for another year of boarding school, this time with a little more spring in his step.

“Mum,” he said, standing small and slight on the platform alongside his robust, suntanned schoolmates, “just let me know when the letter from Kellogg arrives.” With the school year begun and everyone back into a routine we had all pretty well forgotten about Davis’s competition until I arrived home from school one day and saw Mum signalling wildly from our letterbox and waving something in her hand. It was that letter. The photograph in the Newcastle Morning Herald shows David standing outside
Klosters Ford showroom in King Street Newcastle with the car. The manager is handing him the keys.

David straightaway turned the car into cash, finding a ready buyer in the former Federal Minister for Defence, Mr Allen Fairhall, who was in Newcastle Rotary Club with my father. At fifteen years of age my brother was too young to drive.

While he was studying Science at university, David carried into our house the largest trophy we had ever seen. Finding it too tall to fit on a shelf, he placed it on the desk in Dad’s study. There it sat, dwarfing my father’s considerable collection of skiing and sailing cups that he’d gone to the trouble of having engraved. David’s trophy came already engraved. Intrigued, we all gathered to admire it, and to discover in which field of activity our brother had triumphed. And there it was on the plaque at the bottom: *University of Newcastle Snooker Champion, 1968.*

Dad didn’t make a fuss. After all, snooker was something you played in the smoke-filled back rooms of pubs and clubs. It hardly qualified as a sport. It was more of a game.

It was Mum who quietly observed to David, “With all those different coloured balls to be hit in the right order, and your father’s colour-blindness, he probably couldn’t have managed it.”

For some reason, Mum started to dig her heels in. I was married by this time and was over at their place one afternoon when she said, “I’m sorry to say this, but I’m not going to your father’s sailing races any more. The girls say they need me to play tennis on Saturday afternoons. I’ll still bake his Anzac biscuits for afternoon tea.”
It seemed like a weight off her mind. Up till now she had obeyed his instructions and driven out to the lake, once the races had started, with a thermos of afternoon tea and a snack to keep his energy up. Now there’d be no more sitting on her own in the biting wind waiting for the race to finish. Not that she even watched the race. She’d always take a novel, something historical from Eleanor Dark or Katharine Susannah Prichard and be away in the outback all afternoon or with the Aborigines on a cattle station in the Northwest.

We kids had refused years before to crew with Dad. “Captain Bligh,” we called him—always yelling at us to “balance the boat.” Mum said he’d always be scrounging around before the race to find some skinny young thing to be forward hand, “Someone light as a feather and deaf as a post.”

And whether she went or not, she wouldn’t escape the post-mortems over dinner at home. He was too tired to go out. Mum would have enjoyed a meal out with friends or a film once in a while; instead she had to listen to Dad: “You should have seen me overtake young Jason round that third buoy. The look on his face!”

In any case, Mum had to entertain Gran (Dad’s mother), who usually came over for afternoon tea on a Sunday while Dad was in the garden.

My father had just returned home from a ski club meeting and was over the moon about a new lodge being built at Perisher. He said he wanted to buy into the place. Even Mum thought it seemed good value, until she read the fine detail.

“I told him I don’t want to sleep in a dormitory. We’re in our fifties. We want some comfort on our holiday.”

It turned out it was for young people, singles mostly, who wanted a cheap holiday. Mum would be sleeping with young women half her age. My father could not resist a bargain.

He ignored her protests and bought in, giving himself two sacred weeks on the snow each year. Mum went with him the first few times but it wasn’t her thing. She said three years in the beginners’ class was enough. Skiing was never going to be as much fun as hitting a tennis ball. Neither was the après ski. She said the lodge was jumping until four am. The ladies bathroom was down the other end of the building. And she never knew what Dad was doing.

But she adored Anton the instructor, because, as she loved to tell us, he’d make everyone in the class stand and watch her, “the expert at the snow plough.”
“So down I’d go, foot out, weight over on it, ski tips pointing inward, in a smooth turn, finishing in a perfect stop.”

“Wonderful,” said Anton, and they’d all clap. “You see, Helen Darlink, You are too good for ziss class now. You must move up to ze next level.”

But Mum had decided to get out while she was on top.

My father announced his departure in bed one morning. For my mother it had started like any other Saturday morning. It was her turn to get up and make the tea. When she brought it into my father he was already sitting up reading the classifieds, putting circles in red biro on the page.

“Looking for a new car?” she asked lightly.

“No,” he said, not lifting his head. “I’m looking for somewhere to live. I’m leaving you.”

By that evening he was gone with all his things in a truck, including my mother’s beloved dining table brought from Adelaide and every photograph of himself in the house, even excising his image from the framed wedding picture he’d kept in his study.

The other woman was twenty-six years younger than Dad. My age. She skied and sailed, roller-bladed to work and had a full-time career as a dietician.

Mum didn’t see it coming. None of us did. We thought we were a happy family. This was something that happened to other families, not to ours. They’d been married for thirty years. I had never heard a serious argument between them. It seemed out of character. An aberration. A fling. Something he’d surely snap out of. We were numb with shock. Mum was never the same again. Something had broken inside her and, like her precious coconut-shell ashtray, could not be mended. In a sense we lost both parents in one day. My mother’s dying began at that moment. In ten years she was gone.

She had never, in all those years, taken her wedding ring off. “Bad luck,” she always said. But this worn and narrowed band was no more a lifebuoy for her marriage, as it turned out, than the eternity ring my father bought her in Singapore on their last holiday together, six months before he walked out. Perhaps he couldn’t face an eternity. Or perhaps, since his father and grandfather had developed early dementia, he felt he might not have much time.

We all remembered my grandfather’s dementia. Those calls from Gran came at any time of the day or night to say that Pop had left their Janet Street house on foot,
carrying his Gladstone bag containing some tools from his workshop, and was heading, as usual, for Newcastle Hospital on the 207 Bus. He had worked there as an orthopaedic surgeon until his retirement. Now, in his mind, he was on his way to work, with patients to see and a list of operations to get through. Invariably we would catch up with him along Mitchell Street near Townson Oval to find him continuing his journey on foot, the driver having put him off the bus for not having the fare.

When his condition worsened and my grandmother could no longer cope, Pop was moved into a nursing home at Allandale, near Cessnock. Perhaps he felt at home there. I like to think so, since the nurses reported that he took it upon himself to conduct his own ward round each day, going from bed to bed, talking to the other patients, and checking on their progress.

We didn’t see much of my father after he left Mum. He didn’t give her so much as a backward glance. No explanations to any of us; no sense of feeling our pain. He was a doctor for God’s sake, our doctor. But not any more. A giant hole had opened up in our lives. The lovely new house they had built together felt hollow and empty. It even sounded different, vacant, as if there had been a death, which was somehow true. We were certainly in mourning. Nothing could be the same again. My mother was so knocked about mentally you’d have thought she’d been hit by a train.

I told my father I wanted to see him. He called in and I asked him what he thought he was doing. Did he realise what a bastard he’d been? Did he know what Mum was going through?

His face was wooden as he replied: “Perhaps you can learn something from this.” And then he left.

Well-meaning friends told Mum they understood. They were widows left on their own, they said, and they had learned to cope. But Mum said they didn’t understand. Abandonment was different from the death of a partner. When a partner dies you still have happy memories, and a service of celebration of your life with that person—a huge stepping stone to moving on from grief. My mother was dealing with rejection. She felt bitter. And she still had a messy divorce ahead and a battle in court for a settlement.
We had two small boys by then, Matthew and Tim, my parents’ first grandchildren. Our third son Christopher was born three years later. As time went on, these little boys helped fill the emptiness in my mother’s life. They made her smile. They made her weep. They loved her and she loved them. She took them on bus rides into town, watched their Book Week parades at school, came to their birthday parties, music concerts and joined us for weekends away at the beach.

When she later took her mother, our Adelaide Gran, on a trip to England, she wrote to us every week, always addressing her postcards to the boys:

25/10/1979

Darling Grandsons,

Here I am in Scotland at a village called MONIAVE. It’s in a beautiful valley. Yesterday friends drove me around the countryside. Thank you Matthew, Tim and Chris for your lovely birthday card. It was such a fun card it made me laugh. I had a super birthday. I leave England on Nov 2nd and will see you all about the 9th. Tomorrow night we are going to a Ceildhi (a Scottish concert) where one is served tea and wee cakes.

Love Nanna.

This, I remember, brought howls of laughter from the boys at the idea of Nanna eating cakes “made from wee,” as she knew it would. My father, on the other hand, kept himself distant from his grandchildren, uninvolved, as if not ready for this new role, this confirmation of his advancing age.

While some cultures value seniority and see grey hair as a signifying wisdom and empowerment, Dad, white-haired by then,
voided the cloak of grandfatherhood as if it were a shroud. Any query as to his age was met with the stock reply: “I’m as old as my tongue and a little older than my teeth.”

He rarely called on us. When we called on him the boys were on their best behaviour. They knew instinctively that he was a significant figure in their lives, and that never changed. It was as if they understood the nature of things better than he. It was a special occasion, a privilege, to visit his new house opposite the beach. The tone of formality on these visits seemed forced and unnecessary. But then he was always a dignified man, even in his old gardening clothes. Our visits took on the air of an encounter with the local minister or an interview with a school principal.

“And how are your grades going this year, boys?”

There was always an edge of impatience in his voice, as if we were keeping him from something more important. Although the boys invited him to watch their football finals, and he accepted, he never quite made it, except once, on the day of Chris’s under 18s rugby final in which his team was victorious. He arrived just as the teams were walking off.

When Mum was in a reflective mood, she’d open up and talk about the past. She told me one day that she’d loved another man before she met my father. His name was Bill, Bill Bullock. He was killed in action in New Guinea in 1943. She would mention him now and again, and still had his photograph.

“He was in Army uniform,” recalls my sister Jenny. “He had a friendly, rather handsome face, not unlike Dean Martin in his younger day. And very white teeth. Yes, there was a note from him on the back of the photograph: I look like an ad for Colgate!”

Mum didn’t dwell on the matter, but her feelings for him were strong. I imagine she thought of him often. “That’s what it was like in war,” she said, “Everyone lost someone they loved.”

In his new marriage my father moved in a younger set, a generation younger. Suddenly, it seemed, he’d joined our peer group. Newcastle was a small place socially anyway, but now it had shrunk, it seemed, to the size of a village. His new friends were my age, friends of ours from the Bird Observers Group, friends of our neighbours. It was ridiculous. I knew he wasn’t the least bit interested in birds, well, not the feathered variety. It was strange. He was out of place. Not where he belonged at all. A white head amongst the blondes and brunettes. It was like a time warp. He belonged with my
mother. She’d made his life her life. Now here he was, out and about, while she was still sitting at home. I met a doctor friend of Dad’s in the street one day. He shook his head and said, “I just can’t understand your father leaving a beautiful woman like that.”

My mother couldn’t see what she’d done to deserve it. She had done what was expected of a woman of her generation, to the letter. She had been a classic postwar wife, mother and homemaker, who had cooked, cleaned, washed and sewn for a husband and three children, and would stand in, at a moment’s notice, as emergency secretary at my father’s surgery. At the end of the war she had done Prime Minister Curtin’s bidding. She had gone forth to “populate or perish.” And would end up doing both.

As her husband, my father must have suspected my mother would fall to pieces. As her doctor, how could he have let it happen? Isn’t there a clause in the Hippocratic Oath to cover this? What about, “First, do no harm?”

But my father wasn’t always acting as her doctor. I understand that now. He was treating himself. He was a middle-aged man feeling his own mortality and prescribing himself a cure. These were the ’60s and early ’70s. There was a sexual revolution. Youth and sex were synonymous. And now, with the contraceptive pill, sex was safe—safe that is, from pregnancy. There were still concerns in those early days about side effects, such as risk of increased blood pressure, thrombosis or migraine, but these, for most women, were outweighed by the advantages.

No longer was there the anxious wait each month. An extra pregnancy would bring increased expense and an on-going workload of domestic duties. Little wonder that those housewives welcomed modern washing machines and vacuum cleaners, tinned fruit, and other labour-saving appliances as keenly as they welcomed the Pill.

The image promoted in advertisements for these whitegoods was of the efficient little housewife at home, a contented, shapely figure in high heels whizzing effortlessly through the chores in no time flat thanks to the new “labour-saving devices” at her manicured fingertips.

There is no doubt, however, that modern vacuum cleaners and automatic washing machines did take the drudgery out of housework. When my mother finally dispensed with the old copper and wringer in our laundry and a new washing machine was installed in their place, I have to say she was thrilled. This modern technology halved the workload. I remember her pride in the thought that, as a young woman in Adelaide, she had played tennis at the homes of the wealthy manufacturers. She had
danced at parties with these demi-gods. It was as if the Simpson and Pope families had become the royalty of Adelaide and she felt almost related.

Without the worry of pregnancy, women could better enjoy sex. The younger women of my generation certainly did. But for middle-aged women like my mother, the Pill came too late. They were already in the throes of menopause. Having been valued by society chiefly for their child-bearing potential, these women of middle-age were made to feel invisible, not worth looking at, “past it.” As they started losing their looks, suddenly there was safer, younger sex to compete with on all sides. And while, as my mother always maintained, men had their “needs,” the younger, sexually active and “safe” women now made their needs clear. The Pill meant that both parties could now give themselves up to the pure pleasure of sex without the risk of conception. Suddenly women could enjoy the same freedom that men had always had.

A generation before, when our mothers’ anxieties about conception might have diminished their enthusiasm for sex and dampened their enjoyment of it, their men, whose wage had to stretch more thinly with every extra mouth to feed, were compelled to employ their own flawed methods. Less reliable than abstinence but more popular, was coitus interruptus, known in New South Wales as “getting off at Redfern.”

At first my mother blamed this new “permissive society” and “women’s lib” for her abandonment. She saw men in general, and doctors in particular, leaving their wives in droves. She imagined queues of liberated young women lining up for their doctor’s advice on the Pill, on sex, on different positions for intercourse, on improving their orgasms, to such an extent that a middle-aged male doctor might have felt he was missing out.

Once upon a time, if a man “strayed” it was usually a short-lived affair. The wife either didn’t find out, or turned a blind eye. While this seems like a double standard, there was also a certain moral and sexual Puritanism in Australia then that had kept our parents’ marriages intact. But when Oz magazine hit the scene, suddenly a new generation of young male satirists was raging against the Puritanical values of their parents. The message was fresh, exciting, subversive and anti-war.

Soon, Australian soldiers began fighting and dying alongside American troops in Vietnam. As reported in The Australian in April 1965, the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Menzies said, “We do not and must not overlook the point that our alliances, as well as providing guarantees and assurances for our security, make demands upon us. . . . The takeover of South Vietnam would be a direct military threat to Australia and all the
countries of South-East Asia. It must be seen as part of a thrust by Communist China between the Indian and Pacific Oceans.”

After the wars in the Pacific and in Korea, we seemed beholden to our Allies the Americans. Or were we still smarting from the Japanese bombing of Darwin twenty odd years before? “The Yellow Peril” was on the march south. We couldn’t afford to be complacent.

The then leader of the Opposition, Arthur Calwell, asked: with whom Australia was at war? Was it North Vietnam; was it China as well?

“If we are at war,” he said, “why has neither the parliament nor the people of Australia been told clearly and frankly why we are at war, what are the objectives of the war, and what sacrifices are expected of the nation?”

As it turned out, our nineteen-year old brothers, cousins and boyfriends, conscripted by ballot to fight alongside trained soldiers, would be the sacrifices. To have a marble with your birth date on it drawn out of a barrel was the last nineteenth birthday present anyone wanted. But while it was akin to receiving a death warrant, you were answering the nation’s call. Doing your duty to your country. Making your family proud. For those frightened boys, on the cusp of manhood, the pressure to conform was enormous. And you couldn’t just walk away. Conscientious objectors were pilloried for their beliefs, some within their own families. When one of my cousins evaded the draft, an uncle expressed his disgust.

Conscripts were dying by their twenty-first birthday. One was a boy who lived in our street. Having survived his first tour of duty, John joined the regular army and returned for a second tour but never came back. We had played together as children.

In Melbourne in 1971, seventy thousand Australians took to the streets in a moratorium to stop the war. By then the trickle of public opposition to the war had swelled to a torrent. The troops were brought home to a less than enthusiastic welcome.

After seven years of war it was time to live and love and sing, *Where have all the flowers gone?* The times, they were a-changing. Sex, drugs, rock and roll, and porn featured in songs, on posters, record covers and tee shirts.

Sitting opposite my mother and me in the dentist’s waiting room was a young man wearing a tee shirt with the message: *I choked Linda Lovelace.* A young couple, holding hands by the fish tank, were sniggering. My mother looked blank and whispered that she must have missed the joke.
When I first started going out with boys there was a message, written on my mother’s anxious expression that said, “Getting into trouble was a fate worse than death.” At least death would not bring shame on the family. We saw all around us what happened to “fast” or “cheap” girls.

If you were born upstairs in Hillcrest Maternity Hospital in Merewether with a view of the Pacific Ocean, you went home with your own parents. If you were born downstairs, below the beautifully polished cedar staircase, you were invariably adopted out. The Salvation Army ran the hospital, with the ground floor reserved for unmarried mothers. By a stroke of fate I was born upstairs, took my first breath of salt air, and went home with my natural parents.

A friend of my mother’s sheltered a pregnant teenage girl, the daughter of their Sydney friends, in her home for four months, until the birth of her baby at Hillcrest and its immediate adoption. In the final stages of labour a nurse held up a pillow to prevent her from seeing the baby. All contact between mother and baby was discouraged and hormones were administered to dry up the girl’s breast milk. It was to be “a clean break.” The girl then returned to her family from her “working holiday.” I had been to that house many times as a teenager, unaware that the girl was in there, hiding in her room.

At Newcastle Girls’ High School, a girl in the year ahead of me mysteriously disappeared. Rumours flew around that she had died after an illegal abortion. Our imaginations ran riot. All manner of ghoulish images filled our minds. Then the death notice appeared in the newspaper. It was a girls’ school but the subject of sex was never discussed, much less explained. The whole episode was hushed up. At a time when we were all led to believe that the worst thing that could happen to a single woman was to become pregnant, it was an opportunity lost.

Our teachers were mainly single middle-aged women. I ran into my English teacher on the escalator in Farmer’s department store in Sydney, the year after I left school. She asked me what I was doing. When I said I was studying Physiotherapy she looked aghast and said, “Whoever would have thought of such a thing?” I almost said, “Well, Miss —, at least I now know how the human body works.”

To be fair to my mother, she had made several attempts at talking to me about sex when I was a teenager. She would seem flustered and I was embarrassed too, and so I told her I had read some of the books in my father’s study, like the Kinsey Report, and so had a pretty fair idea.
One of my friends found herself cornered one morning by her mother for their “little talk.” They were in the dining room. Her mother pulled out a chair and asked her to sit down at the table. She then proceeded to remove the two pearl earrings she was wearing, and placed them together on the table’s polished surface. Still mystified, my friend watched as her mother took one of her husband’s golf tees out of her apron pocket and placed it upright just behind the two pearls. She stood back a moment to admire this sculpture and said, “This, my dear, is a man.” Then she left the room.

There was a flowering of the Arts under the new Whitlam Government. It was a time of Blue Poles, Germaine Greer and Jesus Christ Superstar. Suddenly education was free and so were unhappily married couples, once they had lived apart for one year.

We had married and lived overseas by then and had become accepting of alternative lifestyles. Back home in Australia, however, attitudes were slow to change.

A young man, a friend of our family, was back in town. He was a person we’d all grown up with. He’d had a two-year stint working in New York and we had invited him to a Christmas party. When he arrived at the door we embraced him. As the party got going and he started telling bawdy stories embellished by his newly acquired accent and mannerisms, it was clear to my father that this friend of ours now “batted for the other side.” Not that he put it so mildly. My father, who must have seen gay patients in the course of his working day and managed a professional detachment, was visibly shaken. A line had been crossed; this man was almost family. Dad pulled my husband aside in the kitchen and in language I’d never heard him use, said, “Christ, I can’t believe it. He’s turned into a fucking poofter.”

Mine was a mother who had waited for the pleasures of sex until all the vows and rituals were seen to. Until the ring was slipped on the finger, the witness statements signed, the speeches given. After a week’s honeymoon at The Entrance on the Central Coast, the last thought on her mind then was that these formalities might be repeated in a courtroom thirty years later, but in reverse, to undo the whole thing, with speeches by barristers, a divorce settlement signed, and the painful removal of the ring.

My brother attended every day in the Sydney court with Mum. “Don’t worry about your cedar dining table,” he said to her. “It’s unfair, sure, and you brought it with you from Adelaide, but look, in the end it’s just a piece of wood.” I suppose he was right. But from then on this “piece of wood” had pride of place in my father’s new
dining room, its rich patina—the songlines of our family life—now covered by a heavy blanket and a tablecloth. All that remained visible were the scuffmarks from our shoes on the table’s claw feet. And our mother was out shopping for a replacement.

You could say that death was in Mum’s shadow from the start. She was born in Adelaide, an identical twin, a genetic match to her sister, a freak of nature. A single egg from her mother Vera had divided spontaneously, miraculously, after fertilisation by a single sperm. She was squashed and under-weight, slipping out into the world twenty minutes before her more robust sister like a promo for the main feature.

A mere scrap of humanity, my mother might easily have stumbled and perished at this first hurdle. But her father Jack scooped her up in his strong arms and called her Helen Ketchil, *Ketchil* meaning *small* in Malay. He had learned the language while working alongside Malay labourers in the Cocos Islands, laying telephone cables across the ocean floor. He took Helen home, loved her, and she loved him back. And while life seemed in two minds about hanging on to her, she clung doggedly to it, and soon grew as strong as her sister.

The family lived in Leabrook, at the foot of the Adelaide Hills. Their mother sewed for the twins, dressing them alike in baby clothes and progressing to ballet outfits, tennis dresses and ball gowns. She sent them to university and waved them off to war. And she was pleased with the young men friends that her daughters brought home. When some mothers of the day were boasting that they would have their daughters married off by their twenty-first birthday, Vera found herself with another more pressing matter to deal with. Her husband Jack, tall, slim and a talented sportsman, died suddenly that year in front of his family. The girls were home on leave from Brisbane at the time. It was the first they knew of his heart condition.
After the war ended in 1945, Helen was the first to marry, followed soon after by Joan. While Vera could now boast a doctor and a dentist for the twins, it was her third daughter Anne, seven years younger than the twins, whose husband who would leave his mark. It was a time of Australia’s subservience to Britain, the Mother Country. I remember the first atom bomb we let the British drop on Maralinga in South Australia in 1956. It was the day after my tenth birthday and the navigator on the mission married my aunt.

That year my father drove us through December’s scorching heat to spend Christmas in Adelaide with our mother’s twin sister, our uncle and our three cousins. The journey took three days. We were sick of “I Spy” by the second day, so as we crossed the Hay plain my brother and I took out our glove puppets. Kneeling on the back seat with our heads out of sight, and using the back parcel shelf as a stage we gave puppet shows to any car travelling behind.

In Adelaide everyone was talking about the amazing sunsets since the bombs. Crimson lights flaring from the horizon. Raspberry ripple skies over backyard barbecues. Brilliant. Magical. And it went on for months

“From the dust,” they said.

“The mushroom cloud was the shape of an Aborigine’s head. I saw the picture in the paper.”

“Can you believe that?”

“Wow.”
“And the water at Glenelg Beach as the sun goes down. I kid you not; it’s the colour of blood.”

Politics didn’t enter my consciousness as a child. Neither religion nor politics was discussed at our house. We believed I suppose, like our father, that Mr Menzies would see us through.

Mum and Joan had fun perming each other’s hair. We’d come back from the beach for lunch and there they were, and just like the advertising jingle we’d heard on the radio, we’d say: Which twin has the Toni?

I recall disliking the way a perm changed these women. But can’t describe further my feelings as a child. Memory is not a video that can be rewound. When we tell a story after a long time has elapsed, we reinterpret it. If I were to describe now how they looked with that tight, foreign-looking hair, I would say it made their soft faces look hard, like men in drag.

Suddenly, in a phone call from Adelaide, came the news that my Mum’s twin sister Joan was dead, killed in a car accident. Mum was in Adelaide at the time, minding their house. At dusk on the first day of their holiday the car rolled just outside Mildura. Joan had been in the driver’s seat and when the roof caved in she died instantly. My uncle John, in the passenger seat, had only cuts and bruising. It was a terrible loss. They were devoted to one another.

Mum’s mother, my Adelaide Gran was by then in an Adelaide retirement home, and no longer in full control of her mind. When my mother tried to tell her the sad news my grandmother smiled and said that “God, in giving her identical twins, had given her a spare.” My mother wept.

Another layer shed. No longer the doctor’s wife, she now lost the mystical bond of her twin. Gone was her “other half” who had saved her skin at school more than once by saying, “No, it couldn’t have been Helen. I’m Helen and I’ve been here all the time.” Gone was the sparkling girl who, when they were dating, had swapped seats with her at the pictures, just for a lark, without the boys ever noticing. Gone was the bond that determined, when they met up every two years or so, that they would be wearing identical hairstyles, without the subject having been discussed; and gone too was that instinct, insane as it sounds, for knowing immediately, at a distance of a thousand miles, that the other one was pregnant.
A recollection takes me back. I am sixteen years old, helping my mother put up Christmas decorations. The postman has called with more cards to go up on the mantelpiece. Among them are two Christmas cards just for Dad that arrive every year, one from Canada and one from Scotland. Both are anonymous, but the one from Canada is the most intriguing. Its message is always the same: “To dearest Peter, all my love—” In place of a signature is a pen and ink drawing of a tortoise.

Each year Mum would place these cards alongside the others on the mantelpiece and point to them with a raise of the eyebrows to me, a shrug of her shoulders and a silly smile. Perhaps she thought she had won him back.

It was when she fell into the company of other embittered ex-wives that my mother read The Female Eunuch. Up until then, Germaine Greer, and feminism itself, were not for “nice” girls. Mum had always been a model of good manners and good grooming. As she said to one of my friends when we were teenagers, “My advice is to always look your best.” In her loneliness she continued to dress well but let her feelings out in her language, the odd swear word colouring her opinion of men. It was if she had grown a tougher shell and would not be intimidated anymore. Goodness, femininity and niceness had lost their gloss. She had lost her husband, and with it, her position in the town. And she had lost her twin, her soul mate. She told me, in no uncertain terms, that she had ordered a new identity. Next time, she said, she was coming back as a man.

As far as I know, my mother didn’t go out with other men after the divorce, though she was invited many times. She’d ring me and say, “I’ve just had another one of those phone calls. Why would I go out with him? He has a perfectly lovely wife sitting at home. And don’t think I’m going to clubs to find a man. I’m not as desperate as that.”

She didn’t fancy the pub or club scene. In her day, you didn’t speak to a man until you’d been introduced. But I suspect that her distrust of pubs and clubs had its origins elsewhere. As a girl she had lived for ten years with her family in a hotel. It was during the Great Depression when her father’s health was failing and her mother set about saving her family. She was a strong woman, a no-nonsense sort of woman, who said that people in a depression needed two things: a drink and a newspaper, so she bought a country pub and invested in shares in Adelaide Steamship, which owned the newspapers. They moved out of Leabrook and into their hotel in rural Eudunda. I didn’t
find out about the hotel until after my mother died. She never spoke if it. Neither did her twin. It was my Aunt Anne, their younger sister, who told me.

My grandmother served behind the bar and ran a book for punters on Saturday afternoons. At six o’clock closing each night she’d carry a bucket of slops outside and leave it for “the poor devils who couldn’t afford a drink.” It would be empty by morning.

While my grandmother ran the pub, my grandfather trained the three girls in tennis. He painted a white line across the brick wall at the side of the pub at the height of a tennis net. Every morning they stood in the car park and hit the ball just above that line one hundred times before school. At the age of nineteen, Anne became State Singles Champion.

The twins couldn’t wait to get out of Eudunda. The only stories I ever heard about her life in the country at that time were about being hit over the fingers with a ruler in primary school, and being able to keep a pet lamb called Louise. Mostly, they avoided any mention of the place. I only know that they adored the two years they spent as boarders at Woodlands School in Adelaide.

My Aunt Anne told me she suspected that a drunk might have wandered upstairs in the hotel one evening and into the wrong room, giving the girls a scare. But Joan’s widower John had a simpler explanation. When I asked him why the twins never spoke about the pub he said nothing, but with a lordly expression on his face, tipped his head back and pushed a finger up under his nose, pointing it into the air.
My father wasn’t a “club man” in my mother’s sense of the word. He was never much of a drinker. He joined clubs for skiing and sailing and went there for meetings.

It was at one of these meetings that my father had a run-in with a certain gentlemen’s club in the centre of Newcastle. He was treasurer of his medical association at the time and was due at the club this day to present his annual report at a lunchtime committee meeting.

While not a member of this club, my father knew something of the dress rules there, and with a stinking hot day forecast, had thrown a sports coat in the car that morning before starting his house calls. Running a little behind time, he jogged up the steps of the club, pressed the bell at the door, and waited. Eventually a doorman in starched white jacket and black trousers appeared and looked him up and down. The up half of him seemed to pass muster, but there was a problem with the down.

It wasn’t the shoes, as they had been polished as usual, that morning. He was fastidious when it came to shoes. It was the shorts and long socks. Or rather, the naked few inches of knee showing between them. In those days he was still married to my mother and these were still fine, respectable knees. It was only many years later that he had to have one of them replaced from wear and tear.

The knees as they were then had graced the bedsides of the sick and dying for decades without a murmur of complaint. They were athletic knees, knees that had carried him over the Snowy Mountains in cross-country ski races, winning silver cups that, once engraved with his name, filled the shelves of his study. They were clean knees, drenched in the salt spray of sailing races every Saturday afternoon on Lake Macquarie, while my mother waited on the shore with his afternoon tea and home-baked biscuits in a basket, turning the pages of her favourite writers.

Neither too hairy nor too knobbly, these knees supported a pair of strong, inoffensive thighs that, in their turn, held up the slim torso, neatly attired in a shirt, tie and jacket, that waited impatiently at the club’s half-open door.

My father’s fast metabolism, we all knew, demanded regular intakes of food. “Little and often,” was how he put it. But that morning he’d been too busy even for his usual cup of tea and two shortbread biscuits. The aroma of roast pork and the convivial clink of glasses coming from the dining room, barely a hop, step and a jump away, had started up a rumble in his stomach. After explaining to the doorman that he had a report to present at the meeting, my father was admitted.
He had not long settled into his seat with his meal placed before him when one of the club members, a ruddy-faced man in a well-cut suit and tie, strode into the dining room and stopped at my father’s chair. He was the plumber, my father noticed, who had fixed our leaking lavatory, just a fortnight before. The man crouched down, folded back the corner of the white starched tablecloth and peered under the table. He must have contacted the secretary-manager who soon arrived with his judgement: “No go, I’m afraid, Doctor. Standards must be maintained. I am sure you understand.”

My father rose to his feet and walked out, leaving a full plate of food. He went straight down the hill to Keith’s Kitchen in Pacific Street where, as he always said, the hamburgers were the best in town, he didn’t have to suffer any bullshit, and if the fish were biting, Joe Wellings the proprietor and one of nature’s gentlemen, would give him a bagful to take home.

After that snub, my father heard the story of Mark Twain’s visit to Newcastle early last century. It seemed to take some of the sting out of his experience. The American writer had apparently been taken to lunch at this same club on the hill, and afterwards made a tour of the city, including a two-mile ride along the length of Hunter Street. When he asked his hosts about the earthworks in progress at the western end near the Bank Corner he was told it was an old cemetery whose “residents” were being relocated to the larger facility at Sandgate on the Maitland Road. At the end of his stay a reporter asked for his impressions of the city. Twain is said to have replied, “It has a long main street with a cemetery at one end with no bodies in it, and a gentlemen’s club at the other end with no gentlemen in it.”

When my mother occasionally spoke of her wartime career it was with a passion in her voice and a gleam in her eye that I remember well, but never really picked up on, since Morse code, as far as we kids were concerned, was old hat.

Of course we were wrong. In the corner of any post office, when we were growing up, you could still see a telephonist at her radio, sending and receiving telegrams in Morse code. But this was the embarrassing part. We’d be in there with Mum to buy stamps or send a parcel, and she’d hear that sound, the dit da dit da of the tapper being pressed, and she’d go into a sort of trance, forget what she wanted at the counter, and stand there decoding the private sorrows or celebrations of our Merewether neighbours that were, at that moment, going down the line.
It wasn’t until the 1970s, when my parents’ marriage failed, that Mum started talking more about the war. More to the point, it was only then that we actually listened.

Mum and her twin sister had been in their second year of an Arts degree at Adelaide University when they left their studies to join the WAAAF. Perhaps it was their father’s experience in the Cocos Islands, laying telegraph cables across the ocean floor that drew them into wireless telegraphy. They studied Morse code in their own time to qualify for entry into Signals Training in Malvern, Victoria.

“We practised day and night,” my mother said, “until we could send and receive at the rate of twenty words per minute in code and plain language.”

At the end of their training the twins were pictured at their radios in the Adelaide newspaper, and on recruitment posters all over South Australia. My mother is in the foreground of the picture. It’s the only photograph I have that shows one of her two front teeth in the very centre. The other is to one side. Though no one else ever noticed it, as small children we needed to see that tooth to tell the twins apart. Luckily, they were always smiling so if we needed to be comforted we knew which twin was our mother.

The smile my mother had in those days was a real smile. A natural, spontaneous smile. After she was left on her own, a light went out. Her smile changed to a taut mechanical stretch of the lips as if she were checking her lipstick in front of a mirror.

Accompanying the photograph is a newspaper clipping carrying the headline *Maidens in Uniform*. Clearly, the sight of young women in uniform presented a new challenge to the gushing social reporter:
Publicised like a pair of visiting MsP, the Chamberlain twins, Helen and Joan, returned home from Melbourne on weekend leave from the WAAAF.

The trim Air Force uniforms were the first ones seen in town as the twins were the only South Aussies to pass out from the training depot in Victoria, and comments and curious stares followed them as though they were mannequins at a charity benefit. Not that this worried the Chamberlains. They’ve had three months to get used to it in Melbourne.

On Saturday afternoon most of their friends rang the Chamberlain front door bell. By the time dusk fell it might have been a meeting of the women’s forces.

Maybe there will yet be a time when it becomes a matter for shame for the younger women of the city to appear in civvies.

In reality, Helen and Joan were aircraftwomen with a serious job to do and were soon posted to Brisbane Air Force Station. It would be another three years before my father would finish his medical training and serve in the RAAF in New Guinea. I imagine he must have travelled to Brisbane in that time to see her. They certainly would have written letters, though none remain. The only photographs I have of my parents together are those in my wedding album, some snaps I took when we went away for a year and those movie films my father took on that same trip when we were children.

Mum said the war years were the best years of her life. “It was a responsible, exciting job, and the only time I received my own pay packet. It was two-thirds of the pay of the men in our section. Even so, we were having the time of our lives.”

By August 1941 there was a change of government and, despite the thousands of applications by women to join up, further recruitment met with disfavour. For months women were frustrated in their attempts to put their training into practice.

The twins held onto their jobs but it wasn’t all fun. There were horrors too.
“I was at my radio,” said Mum, “when a message came through that HMAS Sydney was missing, feared sunk “with total loss of personnel.” I had to take down that message and pass it on.”

She explained that it seemed that HMAS Sydney with her crew of 645 had encountered a German raider, HSK Kormoran, off the Western Australian coast. The German raider was disguised as a Dutch merchant vessel. Sydney had approached Kormoran closely to establish her identity. At a distance of one mile, Kormoran had hoisted her German colours and within seconds scored a hit on Sydney’s bridge. It is believed she blew up and sank quickly, but not before retaliating. According to the survivors of the Kormoran which was also lost, a few flames flickering on the horizon were the last they saw of the Sydney from their lifeboats.

Why were there no survivors from HMAS Sydney? That was the question everyone was asking.

In 1983 author Patsy Adam-Smith contacted my mother to ask her for a photograph of the twins in uniform for her book, Women at War. Mum happily obliged.

While having her photograph in that book gave her a boost, she still worried about the fate of HMAS Sydney. In her later years at home, my mother would open the book, and read from page 126:

“Dear God, we prayed, not those boys we had cheered as they marched through Sydney so few months ago? Not all those lovely boys? Not our cousin Bertie, not those golden boys who winked at us girls as they marched up the steps of Sydney Town Hall? Not that boy Nugent we went to school with at Warragul? But yes, they were gone; the sea had devoured their ship and we saw them no more.”

My mother, on top in the picture, from then on referred to the boys from HMAS Sydney as “those golden boys.”

Three weeks later, Japan attacked the American fleet at Hawaii and declared war on Britain and the USA. Suddenly Australia was under serious threat. It was all hands on deck. Overnight, working for a living became respectable for all Australian women. All previous excuses for not having women serve, like the risk of “undermining society’s moral
“fibre” and “women’s natural function” (as a wife and mother), were put on hold as single and married women were enlisted to help “turn the foe from the door.”

“The honeymoon is over,” broadcast Prime Minister Curtin. “It is war to the death.”

In September 1944 my mother and her sister gained their commissions. They had worked their way up through the ranks, becoming in turn corporals, sergeants, flight sergeants and under-officers, always working at the same Air Force Station and always promoted on the same day. They worked as section officers until the end of the war.

Women had broken through a barrier, but with the end of the war it went up again. “Populate or perish” was the new catchcry. My mother and Joan married their sweethearts. That was the end of their wartime identities, the end of the freedom and respect that comes with economic independence. It was back to housework and babies and playing handmaiden to the successful man. However women like my mother didn’t forget their short careers, even if sometimes their husbands did.

“Stop me if I’ve told you this,” said Mum one day, a wry smile on her face. “When we were first married your father used to ring me at home after hours, pretending to be a patient, just to test my telephone technique. I could pick his voice straight away. One day I said, for heaven’s sake Peter, I know it’s you. I was a wireless telegraphist in the Air Force for four years. I know how to take a message.”

The only person to get the better of my father was our Irish cleaning lady. Her name was Mrs McBride but for some reason we called her Mrs Mac. She was a stocky, matter-of-fact sort of woman in her late forties when she started with us. We were all a bit wary of her, even Dad. She had short wiry hair, sharp blue eyes and a mind of her own. Back in Ireland she’d missed out on a proper education, but, as she said, “I’ve been to the school of hard knocks and learned to sum people up.”

She summed up my father all right when he stood over her at the ironing board one day and tried to give her some pointers on pressing his shirts.

“Bloody Hell,” she said, sending a shot of steam towards his crotch. “Well, I don’t believe in doctors. Never have. I believe in a good walk every day and a drop of wine with dinner. Doctors were no use when my hubby collapsed and died and there I was, a widow at forty-three with four young mouths to feed and only the welfare to live on. And my hubby fought for this country, in the Air Force he was, but what did we get?”
Nothing. And all my family still back in Ireland poor as church mice, so I went out cleaning houses.”

As my father withdrew, her voice rose at his back, “And the rich are just as dirty as the poor, Doctor, believe me.”

From the moment she set foot in our place Mrs Mac took control. On a rainy Wednesday when tennis was called off, my mother followed Mrs Mac around the house like a puppy, listening to her stories and making her cups of tea, on account, I always thought, of her throat going dry with all that talking and breathing in the fumes from the Bon Ami. I can still see Mum’s face poking through the kitchen servery, listening to Mrs Mac while she mopped the sunroom floor. When the mop moved into the kitchen, Mum swapped to a stool in the sunroom. “Keep your feet up off the wet floor now,” continued the stream of words from the other side of the opening.

Mrs Mac said that at our place it was hard to get things done. One thing that was done was the establishment of her war widows’ pension. Dad made three trips to Sydney to sort it out. Finally the application was successful. She was devoted to him after that, but it didn’t mean she held her tongue.

At twelve-thirty my mother would start preparing my father’s lunch: a light meal of salmon patties and salad, or toasted tomato and cheese, or a tuna Mornay with boiled eggs. He expected it served every day on the sunroom table at one o’clock sharp. It was his refuelling break between morning consultations and afternoon house calls. As his car pulled up out the front and the music for *Blue Hills* started on the radio, Mrs Mac left to catch her two buses home to Birmingham Gardens. With a change in town it took her an hour and a half each way.

“I’m off now,” she’d call to Mum from the front door. And with a tilt of her head in Dad’s direction, she’d add a little quip, “His Nibs is too well looked after if you ask me.” With a wink and a grin she was gone, her words still hanging in the air as he came through.

After the divorce Mum couldn’t afford to keep Mrs Mac on. Without her, the house was never the same.

My mother continued to take courses in interior decorating and lampshade-making. She did voluntary work teaching English. One of her pupils was the wife of a Swedish Industrialist who, besides wanting to improve her English, needed to learn how to entertain BHP executives in the Australian style. I remember Mum cutting out food pictures and menus from magazines, demonstrating table settings on our dining table.
and offering her recipes for traditional, home-made desserts. These were the delicious
Australian desserts we all loved then and which are making a comeback now: lemon-
meringue pie, individual steamed puddings, rhubarb and apple crumble, pavlova with
tropical fruit salad, lemon self-saucing pudding, chocolate mousse and her special “no
bake” cheesecake. She served up a different one each night of the week.

My mother coped with the shame and loneliness of divorce by talking to friends
wherever she could find them. These people became her unofficial counsellors. I would
see her in street outside the supermarket, unburdening her woes to a poor woman whose
frozen peas and two litres of ice cream were melting in bags on the footpath.

I suggested many times that she talk to a grief counsellor or a psychiatrist about
ways of coping. She refused, reminding me that our father called psychiatrists “trick
cyclists” and that she wasn’t mad, and even if she were, they would all be friends of his.

My father readily admitted that he failed Psychiatry in his final year at
University. It was physical health that was required in wartime. The mind, apparently,
could wait. Returned men and women were expected not to dwell on the horrors, not to
talk about the painful stuff. But the memories and nightmares didn’t go away. They
were absorbed.

Every four years my Mum volunteered as a census collector. This turned out to be the
greatest therapy of all. “You think you know people, but you don’t,” she said. “You
can’t imagine what tangled lives people live until you do this job. Not that I set out to
pry. It’s just that people often need help filling in the forms.”

She never forgave Mr Justice Murphy when his “no fault divorce” bill was
passed in 1976. She said, “Of course he wants it to expedite his own divorce.” Suddenly
“irretrievable breakdown of marriage” was the sole basis for divorce. It was proved after
a couple’s separation of twelve months or more. Gone were the bad old days of being
caught in the act by private detectives eavesdropping in bushes or hiding in wardrobes.
My father joined the rush. My mother believed her marriage was retrievable.

“One year’s separation makes divorce too easy,” she said. “With five years there
was still time for people to change their minds, to think better of it.”

She was lonely. “People like to ask you out as a couple, not as a single person,”
she said. “Suddenly, the wives see you as a potential husband-snatcher.”

Despite her recriminations, I think my mother would have had Dad back. But it
was too late. The horse had bolted.
“Having something to fall back on” had been the motivation for my generation of women to study for a career. Did Dad remember that Mum had once had a career? All the young wives in Dad’s new set had careers, as did I. And now they were all starting to have babies.

A low hum was spreading through the bridge tables of the Victoria League. It leapt from elegant hat to elegant hat. The Dean’s wife was wearing, as usual, the broadest brim in the room. Gossip centred on the anticipated arrival of my father’s “love child.” My grandmother, Marjorie, not usually stuck for words, but trying to play the thing down, said she hadn’t the faintest idea how it happened. Her opponent on the left, a tiny, lizard-faced woman, peering over her cards at the rest of the gathering, replied instantly in a penetrating tone that she knew very well how it happened and went straight to game with a bid of four hearts.

Dad, fifty-eight years old, the guru of recycling, had recycled himself as a new-age father. Silver-haired by then, my father met the challenge of a new infant son as if his life depended on it, which, arguably, it did. In this marriage, however, he found that the rules had changed. Acquiring skills he had never needed when we were small as they were considered the duties of a wife, he juggled nappy bags and bottles of expressed milk on his days and weekends off, while his old friends, still happy with their wives and their grandchildren, looked on in horror and amazement.

Nine years after the divorce my mother died from a respiratory arrest during a sudden severe asthma attack. This mature-onset asthma was different from the asthma my brother had suffered as a child. It came on after Dad left and required strong medication that, if she was going out for the evening, I suspect she didn’t always take. She said it made her feel “woozy.”

Perhaps the trouble was that I took her out two days in a row. The first outing was to an evening presentation of the musical, *Call Me Madam*, staged at the Newcastle High School. It was a magnificent production that we both enjoyed immensely. On the way out she caught sight of her chest physician, and each waved to the other enthusiastically. I took her home straight afterwards but when we arrived at her place she said she wasn’t tired and asked if we could sit in the car and chat for a while.

She said again that she’d had a wonderful time and that she wanted us to know that she loved me and Graeme and the boys very, very much, and not to worry if one
day she wasn’t around. “I’m a lot happier now,” she said. “I think that from now on I’m going to be all right.”

“That’s great Mum,” I said, wondering what had brought this on. Then she leaned over and we kissed each other on the cheek. She got out of the car and I asked if she still wanted to come to the boys’ music concert the next afternoon. “Oh yes,” she said. “I don’t want to miss that,” and went into the house.

I picked her up the next afternoon and we went with the two younger boys, Tim and Chris, to their music teacher’s house, just around the corner. Mum had been to these concerts before and knew the teacher well. The concert got underway, each pupil playing their practised pieces in front of the small but adoring audience, my mother clapping loudly for our ten-year-old Tim’s rendition of Joplin’s “The Entertainer” on piano and seven-year-old Chris’s violin pieces by Mozart, played on a half-sized instrument.

After a small glass of wine and some afternoon tea the four of us walked together up a fairly steep driveway to the car. As we reached the car I heard Mum say, “I can’t breathe.” I opened the door and helped her into the front seat. She opened her mouth but could get no air. This same thing, I knew, had happened a year before, almost to the day. That day she had been out to dinner with friends who called an ambulance immediately. She only just survived. Left with broken ribs and a blood infection that kept her in hospital for weeks, she often said she no longer feared death and did not want to come back if it happened again. I drove her straight to her doctor who lived two hundred metres away, right opposite her house. She was already unconscious when we placed her on the lawn and commenced resuscitation. The boys, meanwhile, were minded by neighbours. The paramedics arrived and, together with the doctor, continued to work on her. It was another respiratory arrest, they said, arising from her asthma. They continued working on her for forty minutes but it was proving useless. She had a strong heart, they said, a very strong heart, but with no oxygen in her blood for so long she could not live. At a youthful sixty-three years of age and at peace, they took her away.
Helen, the first twin, the lively schoolgirl with the crush on Tutankhamen, the intervarsity tennis player, the signals officer at her Morse code radio, that loving mother and grandmother, was gone.

When I let myself into her house that evening I found her will, the deeds of the house, her share certificates and bankbooks, all neatly set out on the desk in the study. In light of her little speech the night before, it seemed she knew. She was ready.

After he retired from General Practice, my father continued to ski every year until he was seventy-eight and his shoulders and knees started to give him trouble. After that, he kept himself busy with household maintenance jobs and gardening.

One of his jobs was taking their little diabetic dog to the vet. A specialist was in town for the day, and their Jack Russell, almost blind from cataracts, had an appointment. My father remembered it only at the last minute, throwing the dog in the car and tearing off unshaven, with no time to change out of his old gardening clothes. At the end of the consultation as he took out his wallet, the nurse took him aside and whispered that the couple behind him in the waiting room had offered to pay his bill.

“Poor old chap,” they’d said. “Anyone can see he can’t afford to keep himself, let alone a dog.”

But odd jobs did not satisfy my father. Suddenly it was his turn to seek the solace that only Coles Supermarket could offer. I saw him there one morning as I was coming through the checkout. He was sitting on one of those handsome timber benches they have installed beyond the cash registers, and had a small bag of toiletries in his hand. I asked if he was waiting for someone. “Not exactly,” he said. “I come here often at this time. From here I see everyone coming through the checkout. If I recognise an old patient, I get up and have a chat. I miss them you know. I just want to see how they are getting on.”

Looking back to my childhood, I see that while our father could be stern and distant at times, we never doubted that he loved us and would do his utmost to keep us safe. If we walked only on the squares of footpath and not on the lines in between, then everything would be fine. Only once in a while did we fall through the cracks.

I was eleven years old and playing outside in a girlfriend’s yard. In those days children were taught to respect and obey their elders. So when this girl’s father, a good friend of our family, asked me to lie down on the grass behind his garage so he could
show me something, I did. I thought that perhaps there was a birds’ nest in the tree above, or a beautiful green tree frog like the one I used to watch in our fig tree in Hill Street. I was still looking up into the branches when he came down on top of me. I was pinned down under his weight for a minute or so, helpless, terrified, hardly able to breathe, and wondering what would happen if his daughter came back from getting a drink.

He rocked around a bit without speaking, then suddenly got up and went back into his garage as if nothing had happened.

I went home utterly confused, but sure that something bad had happened. After a few days I told my parents. My mother wept. My father was gentle and serious and took me aside. He asked some questions. He was clearly relieved that I had come to no physical harm.

The crucial thing was that my father listened, digested every detail and never doubted me for a moment, though this man was his friend. My father knew I was a dreamer, but he understood very well that this was real. I felt great warmth for him, a bond of trust and respect.

That evening he drove around to challenge the man. By all accounts, his poor wife fell faint on the floor. A few weeks later the family moved interstate. I never heard the word “paedophile” spoken. In those days, for better or worse, a lot of stuff was sorted “in-house.”

There were strange men, we were told, who had been damaged by war. I was a baby in my mother’s arms when a man in army uniform approached our car as we were driving through King Edward Park. He was brandishing a rifle and blocking our way. My father got out, grappled with him, until he eventually ran off. Guns were easy to get hold of then. For a long time my father’s surgery was located above Bill Gallagher’s gun shop at the top of Union Street. People could walk in off the street and buy a gun and ammunition. You didn’t need a licence. It’s a brothel now, my father’s old surgery. All pink curtains and purple hearts. That area of town has being turned over to real estate agencies and the sex industry.

Suddenly it was my father who needed protection. From the moment he first piddled blood into the bowl, he knew he was done for. There it was, written in red and white. Shut the gate. No way out. Tests merely confirmed his diagnosis: cancer of the bladder.
When I wanted to see my father I always went to his house. When he became ill I went more often. One day he was late getting his breakfast. As he carried the tray through onto the sunroom table I noticed he didn’t have a spoon for his cereal. I picked one out of the drawer and brought it out to him. He gave me a black look and sent me back to the kitchen. As I went through the door he closed it behind me and I heard the key turn in the lock. I waited a while and then left. When I called back a couple of hours later he apologised. I understood. The thought of losing his independence was more than he could bear.

I understood why his wife kept working full time. He was still able to get around. He wouldn’t have wanted a babysitter. She kept an eye on him nevertheless, aware of his need to maintain control. I worked part-time, so could drop in most days. When I arrived he was almost always alone.

I couldn’t help thinking, though it was futile to do so, that my mother, had they still been together, would have been there every day to care for him.

While he resented the difficulties brought about by his condition, my father maintained an intense academic interest in his cancer and its treatment. The illness became his last physical challenge, his final race up the beach, his final Paddy Pallin Cross-Country Classic, his final adventure.

His visits to Lingard Hospital’s Oncology Department and to his various specialists were as much occasions of a social nature as treatment sessions. They lifted his spirits. He’d always been fascinated by disease. I went with him on two such visits, and although each consultation confirmed the progression of his illness, my father was so animated in the company of these people who knew him well and cared about him, and to whom he had often referred patients in the past, it was almost as if he were discussing some other patient, some other case, not his at all.

One special visit was to a gerontologist friend who wrote to me later to say how good it was to see my father that last time. He said, “I had the feeling he was saying goodbye.” And it was true. It seemed he was performing his own farewells, one after the other, like Frank Sinatra, not quite ready for the final curtain.

The end, when it came, came quickly. Suddenly he was housebound. Energy flagging. Colour drained from his face. Needing a walking frame. He refused to go back into hospital and onto a drip, fearing, perhaps, that he’d never come out. In hospital he would have to obey instructions; at home he still had some clout. My father left his
mark in those last days. He finished shuffling papers in his study. His affairs, it seemed, were in order. He channelled what little strength he had left into manipulating his world from the sunroom. He had the chair raised. This made getting in and out of it easier and afforded a better view of the back garden. He could now see over his flowerbeds, painstakingly dug a few years before, their soil progressively sifted, through finer and finer mesh, to a rich powder; and the borders he’d concreted and squared off with perfect ninety-degree corners.

He felt cold. It was high summer but he shivered. He needed warmth. The sun filtering through the tall oleander hedge on the eastern boundary made tantalising flashes on his sunroom wall. He wouldn’t just rage about the dying of the light; he’d bloody well do something about it. He would cut the damned thing down. He’d always trimmed it himself in the past. But when the man in the yellow pages said he could chop it down to stumps right along the fence tomorrow and take everything away, he had a deal. My father rang me that morning, elated. He had something to look forward to. And he would conduct the process from his elevated chair.

Bit by bit, as the chainsaws shrieked and the bushes fell, he gained a metre or so of blue sky, some unsightly roofscape and precious extra minutes of soaking sunshine. He had lengthened his days.

The enraged neighbours on the other side of the stumps no longer used their glassed-in family room. My father had now broadened his view to include their back garden as well as his own and had the entire panorama to himself.

One day, sitting with the sun flooding in on his back, he seemed depressed. I looked out to the side patio to admire a red wattlebird drinking at the birdbath, its wattles, like crimson pendant earrings, catching the afternoon light. I ventured to suggest he might like to keep a bird list. My father reached over and hammered his fist on the window. As the bird flew off in fright my father said he had no interest in documenting anything that comes every day to shit on his balcony.

Another day I found him standing in the hall, running his hands over the pictures his wife had painted on the cupboards. “Lovely, aren’t they,” he said, smiling. There was a sense of wonder in his voice. He was feeling the texture of the brushstrokes under his fingers, as if awake to this sensation for the first time. “Such a clever girl.” He was living in the moment.

He stared into his mug of tea. He studied the plume of colour exploding silently from the Lipton’s bag, the kaleidoscopic swirl of sepia, the gradual softening of
contrasts, the mingling of hues, until the mixture became uniformly dark, to his taste, and it was time to remove the bag to its saucer, add his exact measurement of milk and two heaped teaspoons of sugar.

Having finished his tea, he began the meticulous separation of the teabag from the string. He laid out the string, its tag still attached, to dry on the edge of the saucer. It would be stored later in the canister of spare strings, hundreds of them, to be used after meals for flossing his teeth.

Another day I saw him looking out the window, counting the flowers in the garden. Over and over he counted them to make certain the number was correct. Then he took a dahlia from the vase on his table and counted the petals. Twice. I wondered if he was counting the days he had left.

Dad spent his last weekend with the family gathered together for Sunday lunch. My father insisted on getting up and sitting, propped up by pillows, at the head of the table. As the afternoon progressed he became animated and happy, happier and more relaxed than I had seen him for a long time, even joking with his grandchildren. My father ate only ice cream. In his last weeks he’d developed a passion for it.

He spent the afternoon in a euphoric state. All pain and frustration seemed to have abated. It was as if his soul were freeing itself from his ravaged body. As evening came on he became lighter, loving, and strangely calm. I believe he was finding peace. He died that night in his sleep, my sister Jenny on a makeshift bed on the floor beside him.

Our three sons stood up, moved forward with their cousin and the other men, to take their place beside their grandfather’s casket. At the sign, they lifted it high onto their strong young shoulders and bore it from the church. They were handsome, well dressed and purposeful. They were paying homage. I thought my throat would burst.

We sent him on his way to the strains of Frank Sinatra’s *My Way*. My father used to do crooning impersonations of Sinatra while convinced that the man couldn’t sing in key. Outside the church people chatted. Everything appeared normal, but for me it wasn’t. Something had been overlooked.

In all the words spoken at the service, not once did I hear my mother’s name.

I don’t blame anyone. The speakers knew and loved my mother. But they had all skirted around the mention of her name. It was strange. All through the service I listened for it. Were they trying to protect my stepmother? In the end I felt like jumping
up and shouting, “Hang on, have you all forgotten our mother’s name? Have you all forgotten our mother? She was Helen. They were married for thirty years. I wanted her remembered too.”

I needed to hear Helen spoken out loud, just once, as I am sure the Tennis Girls, Mum’s Merewether neighbours and all our friends did, too. My father had been present at her funeral, fifteen years before, sitting up the front. Now it appeared that she had no place at his. All I expected was public recognition of her existence in his life. She deserved that.

Today we have news that HMAS Sydney has been found. Sixty-six years after my mother received the message that the ship was missing, we know where her “golden boys” lie. Searchers using special underwater cameras have located the ship on the sea floor off the coast of Western Australia in water over two kilometres deep. I find myself standing in front of the unfolding television pictures, weeping with relief.
The Drug Analyst

She towered, fit person for a Queen
To lead those ancient Amazonian files;
Or ruling Bandit’s wife among the Grecian isles.

Wordsworth: Beggars

Note: Some names in the following story have been changed.
As the band pumped out “Gloria,” our wedding reception was in full swing. The woman with the high, rhubarb-coloured hair was on her feet again, this time dancing Dr Wilson across the floor. She was working her way, one by one, through the men at her table. And why not? It wasn’t every day she had such a selection of partners, and she was making the most of it, looking her best in a new outfit: a floaty two-piece number, floor-length in green chiffon with matching satin shoes.

After the usual two-hour Saturday morning session with her Dulwich Hill hairdresser, she had driven her mother up the Pacific Highway to Newcastle and checked into the Travelodge Motel by Newcastle Beach. Light drizzle at St Augustine’s Church had not affected anyone’s spirits, and her hair, teased and swirled up around her head like fairy floss had, despite the dampness of the air, maintained its gravity-defying shape. Tall and substantially built, and elevated on high heels, the woman towered over the diminutive form of her mild-mannered dance partner, her pearl-drop earrings, echoing six rows of pearls at her neck, swinging like pendulums above his sparse grey strands.

She seemed to be steering him in our direction, the gem-encrusted fingers arriving first, folded firmly over her partner’s hand. Then suddenly she cut in, releasing the poor man into my arms, and swept away across the floor with Graeme, my husband of two hours.

“Trust you to sit me next to a psychiatrist,” she bellowed at him and laughed, her cackle filling the room.

“Who is that whale of a woman?” asked my mother.

“That’s Graeme’s favourite aunt,” I said. “Miss Jean Kimble.”

I thought I glimpsed Auntie Jean in Sydney the other day. She was in a tide of shoppers crossing Elizabeth Street to David Jones. I stood stock-still as she came towards me, my heart racing in time with the boom boom boom of the pedestrian go-signal. Of course, even before she reached my side of the road, I stopped myself, realised, that of course, how ridiculous, it couldn’t possibly be Jean. But for that moment it was Jean. The mature figure, hair upswept, straight skirt to the knee, shapely calves and expensive high-heeled shoes.

The woman reached the kerb and wheeled towards me, a galleon under full sail. As she passed by me her face caught the light. It was a face shocking in its hard expression, its close-set eyes and over-painted lips. Nothing like Jean at all.
Now, it is as if Auntie Jean’s face has slipped out of focus. I can’t picture her clearly any more. Her image is distorted, a ghostly caricature, more like an ugly sister from a children’s pantomime than the smiling woman she was. Only now and then, in gusts of memory, can I glimpse the real Jean. Or from stories I’ve heard, or flashes from the newspaper: her grin in a cartoon, a crude effigy of her in a university parade, her name in a headline on a news-stand. And there’s this voice, the voice of my husband as boy. It’s a scene I play over and over in my mind because he’s told me the story so often:

Graeme is eight years old. It’s a crisp Sunday morning and his father is at the wheel of their Humber Hawk driving the family home along Vincent Street, Cessnock. As they pass the café the boy catches sight of a newspaper headline inside a wire frame resting against the window. THE JEAN KIMBLE STORY. “Hey look,” he says, “that’s Auntie Jean. Stop the car, Dad. We’ve got to buy that paper.” His mother sits stone-faced, staring straight ahead. “No, Harold,” she says. “It’s a rag. Drive on.”

Jean died in 1988. She was a collector, a hoarder. Her unit in Earlwood was cluttered with knick-knacks, memorabilia and mementoes, call them what you will, that occupied every shelf, drawer, cupboard and wall.

In her Will, Jean left everything she owned to her seven nieces and nephews whom she called her “Magnificent Seven.” Jean’s sudden death affected Graeme. She was a significant influence in his life. He had just finished putting up a new shed on our farm and the bills were coming in.

“We’ll call it the Jean Kimble Memorial Shed,” he said. “And put up a plaque.”

After the funeral a day was set for the seven cousins to meet for the clean-up at Jean’s. The time had come to sort out and disperse her possessions. Jean’s vast collection of stuff sat waiting and watching. Not just the myriad of frogs and teaspoons but enough cellophane-wrapped hankies to cope with a flu epidemic. And this was aside from the expected contents of cupboards, wardrobes, drawers and dressing tables. In the back bedroom, boxes were stacked half way to the ceiling. It was a crush to get in. As in the old Marrickville house, Jean had kept boxes of newspapers, theatre programs, letters, cards and invitations, and correspondence concerning her position as head of the Australian division of the women’s Christian organisation, The Order of the Eastern Star. Other boxes held hand-made covered coat hangers, tissue box holders, toilet roll covers, tea cosies and at least twenty cup, saucer and plate sets. While they were no
longer new, none of these items had ever been used. Perhaps she’d bought them at fêtes to support a good cause, or her father had won them at bowls. And there was the furniture from her parents’ home in Marrickville like the old lounge that she’d had recovered in the same velveteen fabric. Was this a legacy from the great Depression, this unwillingness to part with things that were still serviceable and might, in hard times, save the day? Or was it a symptom of her loneliness, an attempt to hold onto her parents in any way she could?

The clean-up wasn’t something the nieces and nephews looked forward to. There was the sheer enormity of the task ahead. But there was also something compelling, preordained, in facing up to such a task: the last chance to touch those objects, familiar and ordinary as they were, that were part of their world, that connected each of the cousins in a web of memory and belonging that reached back to past generations and out to foreign lands.

Jean was a generous aunt in her buying and her giving. Gifts and knick-knacks were her trademark. As they worked to sort out her stuff, the cousins remembered how they had always looked forward to her visits. They recalled the special gifts Jean had brought them from America, like the grass skirt for Jeanette that later caught fire at a barbecue; Harry’s Deputy Sheriff’s badge and Marilyn’s fabulous pencils, each with sections of different colours, that had made her the envy of her school friends.

On the appointed day, everything Jean had gathered over her seventy-two years was distributed or thrown out. From top to bottom, wall to wall, they emptied the place. Shelves and bench tops were dusted and wiped down, floors scrubbed. A certain ruthlessness was needed, especially with her “collections.” After all, with the collector gone, hadn’t the collection lost some of its significance? What was needed, everyone agreed, was a clean broom.

We’ve hardly seen the other six cousins since the cleanup, and that was nearly twenty years ago. It was Jean who used to keep us all in touch, ringing late, tipsy on the end of the line, filling up her glass as she talked, the hands on the clock going round and round, and as she drew breath to laugh at one of her own jokes you’d say, “Got to go, Jean,” but already she’d started another yarn.

Of course we didn’t see it then, but the warning signs were flashing in those late night calls. Jean needed us, needed our time, our company, our support, more than we were prepared to admit.
Perhaps it is my sense of guilt that prompts me to contact the Magnificent Seven. Graeme is tentative.

“I don’t know what sort of reception you’ll get. The Kimbles are a strange lot. You know, secretive.”

I know what he means. The first time I met his grandmother Nettie, a tiny, work-worn woman, and her husband Ossie, at their house in Marrickville, I asked her, in the course of a conversation, when she was married.

“Ah ha!” she said. “I’m awake to your game. You’re trying to find out how old I am.” And it wasn’t a joke.

I open the Sydney telephone book anyway, make a list of names and numbers and start dialling. Garry Kimble, Graeme’s eldest cousin, answers. After telling him who I am, I say I know this is a blast from the past, Garry, but Auntie Jean has been gone eighteen years now. I don’t know about you, but we’re losing the feel of her. I wonder if you’d be interested in sending me some of your memories of Jean: photographs, newspaper cuttings, anything at all. Perhaps we can put something together. He seems really interested and we exchange email addresses. Then I get on to the others.
Garry gets back almost immediately with an invitation to lunch at his place at Cambridge Park near Penrith. He says his father Jack was executor of Jean’s will, and in the same breath, as if wanting to get it off his chest, he explains that his mother Gwen gave Jean’s full-length mink coat away to her best friend Aileen McDonald, in Canberra. It was to stop any squabbling in the family.

He says I must talk to Aileen. And there’s Jean’s cousin Lesley Wickham in Lismore who knows everything about the family. She’ll tell me how to contact Aileen. Oh, and ask her about another woman, a friend of Jean’s in Sydney called Beryl.

Garry has a suitcase of Jean’s he’s hasn’t opened since the day he and his cousins cleaned out her unit in Earlwood.

“I’ll get it out of the garage and we’ll go through it when you’re here,” he says. “And I’ll see if my sister Frances can come.”

We set a date for lunch.

On the way to Penrith we call on Graeme’s uncle Les who lives at Pymble. He’s ninety-two and a bit deaf, but has no trouble remembering Jean. Here is a man who fought the Germans in the Middle East and the Japanese in Borneo yet flinches at the name Jean Kimble.

“Oh my goodness,” he says. “A big woman. Strong. When my twin brother Harold married Kath Kimble, Jean was a bridesmaid and I was best man. I had to walk down the aisle with Jean. You don’t forget something like that.”
Looking at the photograph of that wedding I can see that Jean, the bridesmaid on the right, though she was tall and wore a large, broad-brimmed hat, wasn’t a big woman. She was still young then, about twenty-three. I guess it’s easy for Les to think of her as big because, in her later years she was. And that’s the memory we all have. But here, in the photograph, she has a slim figure and a pretty face.

I press Les for more information.

“That’s all I can tell you about Jean,” he says, and smiles, “except that she liked whisky—and policemen. I’ve heard stories there, too, but I wouldn’t repeat them.”

It’s a fantastic day at Garry’s. With his sister Frances and my Graeme present, that’s three cousins, three of the Magnificent Seven. Garry’s wife Jeannie and daughter Anne make us a cup of tea. It’s a good start. At the kitchen table we empty the suitcase and start sifting through Jean’s papers: photos, letters, keepsakes, cartoons and telegrams.

First up is a card dated 17/4/53:

To Miss Jean Kimble,

Thank you for acting for a complete stranger on “Strike it Rich.” I am a mother of six children with another on the way. The money you won will be put to good use.”

Mrs E.M. Kennedy.

“It was a radio quiz show,” says Garry, with a sudden recollection. “Well-known people were contestants, answering questions to win money for needy people.

There are private letters from men and from women. Some are intensely personal. One is from her brother-in-law. What should we do with them? And photographs galore. One shows Jean and another young woman posing with two American servicemen.

In another picture, also untitled, a man is struggling to lift Jean from a small boat to the shore. The background is unmistakably Lord Howe Island.

Jeannie is calling us for lunch. We put aside a bundle of letters, papers and photographs. Frances kindly offers to make copies at work and send them to me.

It’s getting dark when we leave. As we pull away from the curb we’re still talking our heads off through the car window.
“Did you notice,” Graeme says after a few minutes, “that there were no newspaper cuttings amongst Garry’s papers?”

“Yes, and nobody mentioned the court case.”

“I don’t think they knew about it.”

“So why would that be?”

“It was too cold a night to be born,” Jean remarked every birthday, as if she should have been offered some choice in the matter. “I wanted to stay back in the warmth of my mother’s body. I’ve hated the cold ever since.”

But born she was, in mid-July 1916, safely into the waiting hands of a midwife as an icy wind rattled the windows of the stationmaster’s cottage by the Great Western Railway Line at Bathurst. Six weeks later, at the font at All Saints Anglican Cathedral, she was baptised Jean Annie Kimble.

Jean would be the youngest child of Ossie and Janette Kimble, the youngest of four. The four children, Frank, Jack, Kath and Jean, each in their turn, had entered the world at various country railway stations throughout New South Wales. Their birth certificates read like a family on the run. That was the way things happened when your father worked as stationmaster for the railways of New South Wales. You were moved around.

Mr Kimble, or Ossie to his friends, started out at thirteen years of age as a porter on Harris Park Station in Sydney. When he married Nettie Bowman he was transferred to the country. Each promotion meant a move to a busier station. The boys, Frank and Jack, arrived first, in 1911 and 1912 respectively at Togar, out of Scone, in the Upper Hunter. Togar consisted of two timber houses by the railway line, as it does today. It was such a remote place that Frank claimed to have been the first white man born there.

Kathleen emerged two years after Jack at Breadalbane Station near Goulburn. That was a bitter place in winter too, as bitter as Bathurst, but Kath, pencil-slim and of a quiet disposition, never complained.

Jean’s arrival at Bathurst in 1916 brought the tally to four.

“I hate the name Jean Annie,” she said to her mother at the age of five. “Especially the Annie part. I want to be called Kate. Kate would suit me better.”

But her mother held firm. Kate was too like her sister Kath’s name. It was already taken.
Baby Jean’s early days were divided up like a train timetable, her feeds and sleeps regulated by the clatter of wheels on the rails and the shriek of steam whistles. And gradually she adjusted, as her three siblings had done before her, to the comfortable, predictable rhythm of railway life. Except, that is, for the cold.

“Those winds that swept up from Blayney cut through the walls,” said Jean. “And the snow they carried from the mountains covered us every winter. You never adjusted to that.”

The children adored the visits made by their grandfather Bowman. He was their mother Nettie’s father, Joseph Francis Bowman. It made young Frank proud to know he’d been named after such an adventurer. Grandfather would sit baby Jean on his knee and tickle her ears with his long beard and tell the children stories.

Grandfather Bowman explained to the children that he was from Boston, Massachusetts, a Yankee who still carried with him a medal from the American Civil War. On cold nights by the fire, when baby Jean had fallen asleep and the children were sitting quietly, he would reach into the pocket of his waistcoat and slide out the small wooden case that contained the medal. The children would wait as he lifted it from the case and held it up for them to see—a five-pointed metal star that hung from a red and white striped ribbon with a blue square on one side. Covering the pin at the top was an eagle, its wings outstretched. Kath would look at both sides of it quickly, careful not to spike her slender fingers on the sharp point, and pass it to the impatient boys. She liked to watch the effect it had on her brothers: Frank holding it against his chest like a soldier returned victorious from battle; and Jack turning it over and over in his palm, studying it in a kind of wonder, until it was so warm from his touch that he placed it against his cold, pinched cheeks before passing it back, shiny and polished from the moisture in his skin.

In his soft lilting drawl Grandfather would tell them something of his perilous journey across the ocean from America in 1873. Of enormous walls of water breaking over the deck, and of two men washed over the side into the boiling sea unable to keep a hold on the rail.
“Sydney Harbour was a welcome sight. Sunny, warm, with blue, blue skies, oh, it was beautiful. And so, I might tell you, were the girls.” The children always smiled at the way Grandfather said girrrls. “I was a single man of thirty years of age, so I jumped ship, found myself a wife, and settled in the city. I was a turner and fitter by trade but got work right away as a boot maker.”

Sometimes, if the children went smartly to bed, Grandfather would promise to show them next morning how to fix a pair of boots. “I’ve brought some tools with me, and we can use your father’s boot last.” And shaking a finger at them as they ran up the stairs, he drawled, “Folks should never complain about wearin’ out shoe leather. It’s a sure sign of good health.”

As soon as the Kimble children were at school, their mother, ignoring Oscar Wilde’s advice: Don’t put your daughter on the stage, Mrs Worthington, set about putting her two daughters and two sons on the stage in an operetta. The idea came to her on the family’s move to the stationmaster’s house in Narromine. With the four youngsters off her hands at the Narromine School, and the housework done by ten o’clock, Nettie Kimble had the chance to reconnect with own needs. Her real passion was the theatre—plays, pantomimes and musicals. She loved them all. And as a trained seamstress, she could offer a hand in making the costumes.

There would be parts for each of her four children and their classmates.

The idea took off. When sixty children turned up to audition, Nettie met the challenge. There would be not one, but two operettas. Princess Tiny Tot, played by the younger children, would start the program, followed, after a short interval, by Soot and the Fairies, played by the older ones. And then dear Miss Wiseman, a local music teacher and pianist, stepped in to help with musical accompaniment.

Here is Kath Kimble aged seven in 1922, playing the title role of Princess Tiny Tot as quietly and efficiently as she played herself in real life. As she speaks her few lines without a slip, her affinity with language is already a pointer to a later teaching vocation and a skill in completing the Sydney Herald’s cryptic crossword daily, in her ten-minute morning tea break. And here is big brother Frank—the brother Kath would never speak to after the age of eighteen, playing Major Domo, the Lord High Chancellor. A foretaste, perhaps, of the military mantle he would adopt in a real war. Little Jean, still in the Infants School, but refusing to be left out, is already using that loud voice as a feisty Mistress Mary; early training perhaps for singing in church every
Sunday and for the rigours of cross-examination when she would later have to defend herself in a court of law.

Young Jack Kimble is saving himself for the second operetta, as a member of the Black Brigade. Is this an early pointer to school-teaching and his wartime army service, despite everyone’s insistence that he had all the natural gifts of a parson? Here too are sown the seeds of Jack’s Christmas performances, years later at Marrickville, as a ventriloquist, with his young nephew Graeme, sitting up close and searching for any movement of his uncle’s lips—tricky of course, when Uncle Jack seems to puff on his pipe whenever his Archie doll speaks.

After Narromine, the children moved in and out of schools in Young and Temora, before a move north took the family to the warm, lush climate of Lismore. There, in her high school English class, Kath would fall head-over-heels for the quiet boy with dark hair and glasses called Harold, though she would try to keep it a secret.
And, as if responding to the rich green growth around her, young Jean sprouted and grew.

Jean was half way through high school in Lismore when her father was transferred to Casino as Stationmaster, a move that didn’t suit his wife. Casino, said Nettie Kimble, would be a backward step for Jean’s education. There and then she made a decision. Ossie could go to Casino but she would not. She would go back to Sydney and take young Jean with her. Jack and Kath had already left home and were studying at Armidale Teachers’ College, while Frank, finding scant employment as an apprentice fitter and turner, was having a shot at a rugby career and thinking of moving to Sydney himself.

Jean and her mother moved down to stay with Jean’s cousin Lesley Kimble and her mother in Harris Park for a few weeks while they searched for a house in Sydney. Nettie was a strong-minded woman who usually got what she wanted. Sydney held no mysteries for her. She had worked as a seamstress at David Jones in her younger days. It was not long before she found just the place, a villa in Marrickville Road, Marrickville, and bought it in her own name.

It was all settled. Jean would continue her schooling to the Leaving Certificate at St George Girls’ High School. Frank could use the back bedroom while he was training in Sydney, and Ossie could stay working at Casino. He could come down by train to see his family on his rostered four days off in every ten.

When the war broke out Jean’s father was promoted to Broadmeadow Marshalling Yards in Newcastle. It was an important job with so many goods and people to be moved around efficiently by rail. From his lodgings in Newcastle Ossie got home to Marrickville quickly and often.

Nettie saw to it that her husband put his time at Marrickville to good use, growing vegetables, tomatoes, strawberries and carnations in borders around a healthy green lawn, and setting up a chook pen in the shade of a mulberry tree. It was a beautiful garden then. The chooks, as it turned out, were worth their weight, not in gold perhaps, but in diamonds. Coming inside after pegging out the washing one day Nettie discovered that the diamond was missing from her engagement ring. After weeks of searching the lawn area under the clothesline she had all but given up hope of recovering it. But one Sunday morning six months later, while preparing one of the birds for a roast dinner, she was cleaning out the gizzard when she saw something sparkle. Out came the diamond, as good as new.
In Sydney Jean continued to grow. Like a cuckoo chick, she grew taller than her siblings and twice the size of her parents, until there was only enough room in the nest for her.

“The other three all married and left in 1939,” said Jean. “I broke the mould and stayed.”

Jean was to be bridesmaid yet again, this time, for her cousin, Lesley Kimble. It was fortunate that the dress Nettie had made for Jean to be bridesmaid at Kath’s wedding still fitted, as did the broad-brimmed hat. It was 1940, wartime, and you’d never have picked up a dress as well made as this.

Jean and Lesley were only one year apart in age and had always been friends. Lesley was an only child and craved company. On her visits to Marrickville she fitted straight in, and was as rowdy as Jean and Frank. When Lesley told her mother she had a crush on Jean’s older brother, Frank, her mother shook her head. “Oh, don’t say that, Lesley. He’s hot-headed, like your father. I know the signs. And his mother tells me he’s taken up boxing. So he knows how to use his fists.”

Jean’s mother and Lesley’s mother, both staunch Church of England women, had married a pair of brothers, Oswald and Oliver Kimble. The boys had been raised as Catholics by their parents, John Kimble from Toronto in Canada and his Irish wife Annie née Beckett. But the brothers were forced by their strong-willed wives to renounce their religion. Then the brothers sealed the deal by becoming Freemasons.

On his daughter Lesley’s sixth birthday, Oliver suddenly disappeared. It happened while working as a salesman in Wagga. Instead of coming home from work to his daughter’s birthday tea, he left his work bag at the railway station and was last seen jumping on a train to a new life.

Seated in St John’s Church in Parramatta, Kath and her brothers wondered who would be giving the bride away. They had all heard the story about Uncle Oliver. Perhaps Ossie, sitting in the second row, spared a thought for his brother this day. He remembered the search for Oliver, listing him as a missing person, and the police drawing a blank at every turn. Even Jean, busy straightening Lesley’s train at the door of the church, couldn’t stop herself looking towards the gate on the off-chance that the missing father might materialise, step up to his responsibilities at last, and give his daughter away.
But the bride held out no such hopes. Neither did her mother. They had both
given up on him years ago. And he wasn’t going to ruin this day. As the organist
pumped out the opening chords of the Processional, Lesley, her pretty face framed with
dark curls, smiled up at her kindly maternal grandfather, who placed her arm on his and
led her into the church.

Hearing the clickety-click of high heels on the laboratory’s tallow wood floors, Arthur
looks up from his bench. He is smiling. “Hello, Jean. See anything in the Herald
classifieds on Saturday to take your fancy?”

Arthur looks forward to Monday mornings. He had taken a liking to this girl
straight away, when they both started work at Vickers Textile Mills after the war. She
was jolly, brightened the place up.

“Nothing in ‘Positions Vacant,’ if that’s what you’re getting at,” says Jean,
stowing her leather handbag under the bench. “What’s all this then? You seem in a
hurry to get rid of me.” She is smiling, teasing him. She knows he’s sweet on her.

Arthur watches, drinking in the scent of this young woman as she settles her tall
frame next to him. There is a presence about her—the broad open face, the rustle of her
stockings against her petticoat, the way her dark hair nestles in glossy curls on the collar
of her white coat. She is no nonsense, Jean; straight up, nothing “put on.” There might be prettier girls around, but this one will do him. This one makes him feel on top of the world.

He pushes his chair back and looks at her through his heavy, black framed glasses. “You must have seen the job going at Randwick. It’s made for you, Jean. Could be the challenge you’ve been looking for.”

“I didn’t see it. But it’s clear they don’t want a woman, Arthur, if it wasn’t advertised in ‘Women and Girls.’ Believe me, only maids, typists, nannies and waitresses are wanted this week. Nothing for an analytical chemist.”

“Okay, the position was listed in ‘Men and Boys.’ But don’t let that stop you. Here it is. I’ve kept it.” He slides the folded cutting carefully out of his trouser pocket and places it on the bench, smoothing it out flat with his fingers and reading aloud: Analyst required. Australian Jockey Club, Randwick. Experience with Alkaloids essential. You’d be your own boss, Jean. I won’t let you miss this chance. And when they see your qualifications, they won’t either.”

Jean reads the piece carefully. “Sounds interesting. So you’re asking me to change into a man?”

Arthur loves it when she tried to wind him up. He likes the way she can find a funny side to anything, but this is different. “Look, Jean, jokes aside, I’m just saying you’d be crazy not to apply for it.”

“It’s useless, Arthur. I’ve never been on a racecourse in my life. I hardly know one end of a horse from the other. And I’m female. The only thing going for me is that I’m single.” She turns away and reaches up to the shelf for a rack of test tubes.

“Yes, I know,” says Arthur. “And playing hard to get.”

Suddenly he feels stupid. Arthur is a shy man who usually hides his feelings in harmless banter. Balding, and short in stature, he knows he is no magnet to women. They usually give up on him. Jean turns to face him. Something in Arthur has opened up, peeled back. His eyes are gentle and earnest. She feels she is seeing through to the real man for the first time.

It is 1947 and Jean is thirty years old, old enough to have her family wondering if she’s left her run too late.

Jean feels she relates well to men, especially her fellow students at university. Having two older brothers, males hold no mystery for her. She is no shrinking violet in men’s company. At work she can hold her own with any man. Perhaps that’s the
trouble. When it comes down to it, most men in the market for a wife aren’t looking for equality. They expect obedience. And they expect you to cook the way their mothers did. She’s had enough encounters with men to know where she stands. For a start, she stands taller than most. And still likes to wear high heels. And her voice is a little too confident. But it’s when they find she has a university degree, that’s when she really loses them. That’s when she can’t see them for dust.

Now suddenly, right here in front of her is a man she knows and likes who is on her side for a change. Her voice softens.

“Thanks, Arthur.” She takes the cutting and slips it in the side pocket of her handbag. “I’ll think about it.”

Jean parked her new Standard Tourer under the trees in Alison Road. She smoothed down the skirt of her turquoise wool suit, adjusted her tan hat and matching gloves, and with briefcase in one hand and handbag in the other, made for the entrance gates ahead. To reach them she had to walk through damp grass and across a loop of tram track running by the side of the racecourse. The thought came to her—silly really, with so much on her mind—that the shoes had been a good choice. If anything could cope in a wet environment it was crocodile. As the square-shaped scales of leather sliced through the grass, she tried to keep her weight forward, and off her high heels, to stop them sinking through the soggy ground. The rear of the grandstands loomed. It was early morning, but with the races on later, officials were already bustling about.

As she sailed through the open gate Jean heard a voice cry out. “Not that way Madam. Don’t take another step.” The official approached, out of breath, his face ruddy and upset.

“Didn’t you see the sign, Madam? This entrance is for members only. You must wait outside for your husband.”

“No, I am on my way through to the laboratory.”

“I am sorry Madam. You will have to wait here for your husband. I take it he is a member?”

Jean took a deep breath and spoke slowly to the man. “I do not have a husband, nor am I a member. I simply wish to get in the gate to go to work. The laboratory where I am to work is just over there.” She pointed to a rooftop showing above the high fence.
“It is my job to know that ladies cannot be members, Madam. To get over there you would have to go through the members’ stand. You will, I’m afraid, have to go right around to the other gate.”

“I was told to park my car over this side. This, they said, is the entrance for those working at the lab.”

“You girls don’t take no for an answer, do you? No wonder they don’t let you across the yellow line. You’d make the bookies job a nightmare.”

“Right,” said Jean, pulling her kid gloves up firmly at the wrists and planting her reptilian feet slightly apart. There was an edge to her voice. “If you won’t let me in then please pass on this message to one of the committee members. Tell him that there is a woman at the members’ gate who says that unless she gets through here, this race meeting today will not go ahead.”

The official processed this information slowly as if trying to decipher a foreign language, then after closing and locking the gate behind him, he disappeared.

As Jean stood waiting at the gate, the smallest doubt about this job crept into her mind, a mind that rarely harboured doubts.

She thought back to the interview, a few weeks before. The course veterinary surgeon had been present and half a dozen committee members. The chairman had explained that the AJC had consulted with overseas racing clubs on ways to combat these banned substances and had decided to set up its own testing laboratory. Then she’d answered all their questions.

They’d quizzed her on her knowledge of drugs, the methods she would employ in their detection, and the facilities needed. They were interested particularly in the effects of morphine and other alkaloids when administered to animals. She’d pointed out that alkaloids could work as a stimulant in some animals and a depressant in others. It depended not only on the dose, but also on the species of animal. Give morphine to a cat and you pep it up. Give it to a human and you calm him down. And give it to a horse, well, it was similar to the effect in a cat, as strange as that may seem.

It was odd that after the success of that interview so much time had elapsed before they called her back. She was well qualified, better qualified, she suspected, than the other applicants, all of whom, as it turned out, were men.

If they had asked about her knowledge of horseracing she could understand. But they hadn’t quizzed her on that. Instead, they’d asked her about the secret project she’d worked on at Sydney University during the war. And she’d explained that it came about
because of the scarcity of narcotics in wartime, and that troop morale and effective medical treatment of casualties depended on sustained supplies of opium and its derivatives, like morphine and codeine; and that when the Japanese invaded the Philippines the supply of opium was cut off. That’s why she had been given a research grant to look at producing a cheaper, synthetic form of the drug. And that she had since developed her skills at the DHA laboratories and more recently at Vickers Mills, where alkaloids were used in the dying of textiles.

After two weeks had gone by the *Sydney Morning Herald* ran the advertisement again. As before, it appeared in the “Men and Boys” column only.

“They want a man, Jean,” her father had said that Saturday morning before bowls. “You’ve satisfied all the requirements but one, my girl. If you want my advice you’ll let the job go if they offer it.

The next week she had a letter saying the job was hers. And she took it.

The official was back at the gate. This time he showed her through, escorting her via the members’ area, across the lawn to the front door of the laboratory. By morning teatime Jean had made herself known to the painters, carpenters and electricians from the adjoining workshops. They invited her to have a beer with them after work and listened to her story. An extraordinary meeting of committee members had been hastily convened to pass a bylaw giving Miss Kimble permission to enter the racecourse via the members’ gate on her way to work each morning.

From then on Jean guided her green Standard Tourer in through the main entrance like everyone else, winked at Bernie on the gate, and parked in front of the new drug-testing laboratory at Randwick.

“Listen, Jean,” said Ray, one of the electricians, “you’ve come along to spoil their fun. And you’re a woman, a woman with power in a man’s world. Of course the trainers are going to hate you.”

“I’ve never had anything to do with racing. I had no idea people would react like this. Can’t they see I’m just doing my job?”

She was sitting having a quiet drink after work with the boys from the workshops adjacent to the lab. Ray had decided to ask her to join them, this woman, working alone in a world of men. He poured her a beer. “You need educating, Jean, if you don’t mind me saying.”
And Jean was the first to agree with him. You had to be brought up with the culture of racing to understand it, to understand its colour, its characters. The touts, the trainers, the jockeys, the tipsters. There was a slipperiness about all of them. She saw it in the satin sheen of the jockeys colours, the sleekness of the thoroughbred’s coat, an overly glossy exterior that, as an outsider, she didn’t quite trust. She’d seen in the Great Depression how gambling had been fuelled by poverty and unemployment. And how it piled misery upon misery. Their Church of England minister at Dulwich Hill often preached against gambling. And her mother went on about it at home. Funny really, because from what her father said, the Roman Catholics couldn’t get enough of it.

“You see, Jean,” said Ray, “come race day, there’d be something in the air; something that could lift that misery, just for a few hours, and turn it into hope.”

Behind the confident swagger of the men and women decked out in their best clothes and making their way in an eager tide up Alison Avenue, was the feeling that this would be their lucky day. As they paid at the turnstile, desperation dropped from their shoulders like a heavy cloak and they were reborn with new buoyancy, a lightness of step. Inside the gates was a wonderland of sweet, freshly mown grass, a parade of silk-clad jockeys astride their gleaming steeds, the thrill of the start, the thunder of hooves in the final straight. It was a colourful magical place, fenced off from the cruel world, where dreams could come true and men’s fortunes could change in the blink of an eye.

“So tell me, Ray,” said Jean, “tell me what I need to know. What was going on here before I arrived?”

From then on it became a habit. Over a few beers after work, Jean listened, quite at home in the company of these men, these painters and plumbers and electricians, all working men like her father, while they told her their racing stories: stories of race-fixing, ring-ins, cheating and doping that went back a hundred and fifty years.

“Look,” said Ray, “if a trainer can think of a way of making the horse go faster he’ll use it. That’s the reality. That’s the way it’s always been.”

After that, Jean and her family kept up to date with the racing industry. Jean featured often in the racing pages, picture and all, in the latest controversy over a positive swab. Her father bought four papers each day, read them from cover to cover and was known to his grandchildren as “the walking encyclopaedia.” “If you need to know anything,” Jean said to them, “just ask your grandfather.” And, as if fearful of losing his great knowledge, he never threw any newspapers out. Jean never had time to
read much in the papers other than the horoscope. A Cancerian, she couldn’t leave the house in the mornings until she’d read her stars. And at the end of each day, Nettie piled the newspapers into stacks along the hallway carpet where they stood like milestones, each a new chapter in Jean’s working life, while traffic moving past was slowed to single file.

Two large envelopes have arrived in the post, one from Graeme’s cousin Frances in Sydney, and the second from her brother Warren in Western Australia. I am sitting facing a pile of Jean’s letters, postcards and family photographs. Most of the photographs are loose and untitled. I’ll need to do some detective work. That’s what you are in this game, a detective, piecing together clues to someone’s life.

I phone both cousins to say thank you. Warren tells me he is hosting a two-hour radio jazz segment, *Saturday Jazz* every weekend on RTRFM in Perth. I promise to listen next Saturday online. As regards Jean Kimble, he says he blames her for an aversion to Pepsi Cola he’s had ever since he and his brother Garry visited her at the laboratory when they were children. Jean took them over to the fridge and opened it, offering the boys a drink.

“As I reached in for a bottle of Pepsi at the back of the shelf, my hand brushed against the beakers of urine. It was many years ago, I know, but I still can’t drink Pepsi. Still can’t shake the image of that yellow pee in the old Kelvinator.”

Jean’s funeral took place at the Anglican Church at Earlwood. Garry, the eldest of the Magnificent Seven, and an executor of Jean’s estate, stood before the substantial gathering and gave the Eulogy. The casket was carried out by the nephews, with Marilyn’s daughter Michelle following, holding her aunt’s OBE medallion on a cushion. Close family members then continued on to Rookwood Cemetery where the cremation service was held. There they found the niches containing the remains of their grandparents. Beside them was one empty niche, prepared and waiting for Jean.

Everyone went back to Jack and Gwen’s place at Bexley for the wake. Gwen and Frances brought out plates of sandwiches, cakes and slices to be washed down with a cup of tea. Not a drop of alcohol was on offer, Jack being a strict teetotaller. When the ranks had thinned a little, and Harold was in conversation with Jean’s friend, Don Dobie, Liberal member for the Federal seat of Cook, Jack rounded up the seven nieces and nephews and led them into a spare bedroom.
“After a dry wake,” says Graeme, his memory still clear on this matter, “it was impossible to ignore the fact that there, in boxes in the corner of the bedroom, were twenty or so unopened bottles of whisky that Jack had removed from Jean’s unit for safekeeping.”

Garry, Harry, Jeanette, Warren, Graeme, Marilyn and Frances filed in between the twin beds and sat down, three on one bed and four on the other. Jack stood between the ends of the beds, opened the envelope in his hand and read the will. All seven, it seems, were surprised and delighted to discover that they had an equal share their aunt’s estate. They left the wake with two or three bottles each of Jean’s whisky.

When the cousins met on the appointed day to clean up Jean’s unit, Garry’s mother Gwen let them in. Marilyn said straight away that she thought Auntie Lesley in Lismore should get the mink coat.

“She’s Jean’s only cousin, a great person, and mad as all get out.” But the words were hardly out of her mouth when Auntie Gwen turned and said, “I’m sorry, but the coat’s gone. I’ve given it to Aileen McDonald in Canberra.” And that was that.

Warren was well into the job of cleaning out Jean’s kitchen. At the back of the pantry he found a piece of Auntie Kath and Uncle Harold’s wedding cake still in its little silver box. It had survived since their marriage in 1939. Around it were tins of food, corroded or rusted through, their contents leaking onto the shelves.

To clean the fridge they switched it off and removed the rotting food stored in take-away containers. The freezer was a solid block of ice. Here and there, trapped in the ice, were the coloured corners of Tupperware containers and freezer bags, just visible through the frost like miniature climbers lost in an avalanche.

The bedrooms were another challenge. Jean’s wardrobe was jammed full of clothes and fur coats. Hidden under her bed were piles of well-thumbed Mills and Boon romance novels. At first they couldn’t open the door to the third bedroom. It was crammed full. Someone had to slide sideways through the narrow gap in the doorway and move boxes to get in. More boxes, piled to the ceiling, were full of plastic bags, newspapers and letters.

In the kitchen Warren selected a small side table. “I’ve always liked the tiled top,” he said. “I just hope we can get the cockroach smell out of it.”

Frances laid claim to the Queen Anne style stool from Jean’s bedroom. It was square in shape and padded in gold brocade. Once cleaned it would do nicely in her
bedroom. “I will sit on it every day to put on my shoes. Jean was my role model as I was growing up. She was a woman who did as she wanted.”

Marilyn picked up a few of Jean’s knick-knacks for her daughter, Michelle “As a child she loved to visit Jean’s unit. She’d say, ‘We’re going to the fairy castle.’ And Jean didn’t mind her bringing a friend along. They’d play on the floor with Jean’s frogs or ornaments or saucepans or Tupperware from the kitchen drawer. She let them play with anything they wanted.”

Jean had some striking pieces of jewellery including seven good rings. The nieces Jeanette, Marilyn and Frances chose one each, and left the other four to be divided amongst the nephews Garry, Warren, Harry and Graeme for their wives.

The handkerchiefs were dealt out like playing cards into seven piles. One hundred and twenty-seven embroidered linen handkerchiefs for each cousin, all individually wrapped in cellophane. Garry and Warren filled a small suitcase each with papers, letters and photographs. At the end of the day everyone took home a few mementoes, items that had once seemed so ordinary but now seemed almost sacred.

I must confess that Graeme and I didn’t get along to the clean-up. Graeme was required to work in Newcastle at his veterinary practice that weekend. He does however have a special painting that Jean gave him when he graduated. And I now have a glossy green frog from Jean’s collection that Graeme’s sister Jeanette kindly gave me the last time we had lunch together. It is tiny, about three centimetres tall, ceramic and mass-produced, with the marks of the mould still visible down each side. I have always liked frogs and am thrilled to have it by me now, grinning down from the bookshelf above my desk.

The AJC was sending Jean to America. She would represent them at the 1948 World Conference of Racing Chemists. There was a scurry of preparation for the journey: booking the trip on a Douglas DC-4, vaccination jabs and a will to be drawn up with solicitors Stephen Jaques & Stephen. Her first trip overseas. She was sick with excitement.

“I know the stops by heart,” she told her friends. “Fiji, Easter Island, Honolulu, Frisco, Los Angeles, St Louis and finally, to the meeting in New Orleans. And “Sleeperette” accommodation all the way. Did you know my two grandfathers came from North America? I feel as though I’m going home.”
A year later, in 1949, Jean was off again, this time to New York.

“Now take a hold, Jean,” said her friend Beryl, pouring Jean a steadying glass of whisky as they sat together at Marrickville on Jean’s bed. “Let’s check your itinerary again. I don’t want my letters to miss you this time.” Jean and Beryl had become the closest of friends since their student days at university.

The Kimble and Brown families came out again to Mascot to see Jean off. And this time, because school was out for the May holidays, the country nieces and nephews could be there too. Garry and Warren had come down from Kandos with their parents Jack and Gwen, and Kath and Harold arrived from Cessnock with Jeanette and Graeme. It was still something, then, to know an airline passenger, as most people still travelled long distances by ship.

Beryl arrived too, just in time to see Jean pull a fist full of telegrams and cards out of her handbag. One was from the Kurri Kurri branch of the Order of the Eastern Star with the words: “STANDING ON OUR HEADS FOR JOY GOOD LUCK FONDEST LOVE YOUR PALS AT KURRI KURRI.” Another was a card from her old workmate and admirer, Arthur, who had written a verse inside a drawing of a horseshoe: MANY A GOOD PILOT HAS GONE OFF HIS COURSE FOR A FAST WOMAN OR A GOOD HORSE.

Jeanette and Graeme were talking and laughing with the Kandos cousins, Garry, Warren and Frances, stopping every now and then to glance sidelong at Uncle Frank’s kids, Harry and Marilyn, who smiled back. Normally, they didn’t see Frank’s family. The rift between Uncle Frank and their mother Kath had been going on for years. Since Kath was eighteen. They never spoke. Harold and the children couldn’t get to the bottom of it and Kath refused to be drawn on the matter.

Also in Jean’s handbag that day was a note. Kath’s husband Harold had slipped it into Jean’s hand at the airport. It read:

To the American Traveller,

Wanted:

“The Naked and the Dead”, by Norman Mailer.

Judging by the write-up in the Herald today, it will definitely not be on sale in Australia. However, do not read it yourself—it might put bad ideas into your head. While you’re far away you will not have thoughts of your sister’s purity to keep you on the straight and narrow.

“If you can’t be … … …”

H.
PS I suggest if you get a copy of this, put another dust cover on it while you carry it off the plane.

This is clearly my father-in-law’s handwriting. I know it from the notes and birthday wishes tucked inside books he’s sent to me over the years. A gentle, scholarly man, Harold could quote a piece of poetry, it seemed, to suit any occasion. Here was my mild-mannered father-in-law defying our country’s strict censorship laws that objected to Mailer’s generous use of the “F” word. The word appears frequently, mainly in the speech of servicemen, as fug, fugged, fugger or fuggling. Harold was taking a chance to get hold of the American best seller based on Mailer’s experiences in the Second World War. A few years later, Eugene Goossens, conductor of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra would be forced to resign and would later leave Australia after importing what were judged to be indecent films and photographs.

Just as intriguing as Mailer’s language is Harold’s in his note, especially the phrase, “your sister’s purity.” He means his wife Kath’s. It is as if there is a private joke going on. I imagine Jean shared jokes with Harold, the sort of jokes she’d picked up at the university, or at the track after work while drinking with the tradesmen. Jean loved a good story. And Harold liked Jean. Like most men he enjoyed conversations with her, enjoyed her stories.

Harold’s wife Kath was quieter than Jean, and very much her husband’s intellectual equal. When she died in her fifties, from leukaemia, after a long illness, Harold was bereft. Jean said, “I’ve been expecting it.”

I remember that after my parents’ marriage broke up a few years later, Harold would call around to visit my mother when he was staying with us in Newcastle. They’d talk for hours. I used to worry she was telling him things about my father, personal details that were none of his business. And she probably was. She didn’t feel she could run my father down to us. And she couldn’t pour her heart out to her mother-in-law. She had no relatives nearby or men in her life, so she talked things over with friends and with Harold.

Letter to Jean from Beryl, Turramurra, 5.5.1949, 11.30 pm:

Kimble Dearest,
How are you? Did you arrive safely? Of course if you didn’t I am wasting precious sleep! Anyway, I do really and truly hope that you did have a good trip even for such an experienced air traveller.

Just as in your first trip, Darling, I shall follow you throughout your trip in thought and where possible with mail. Keep up last year’s good work and put it over those Yanks and Canadians. Hope the nightclubs of N.Y. are as hot as those of N.O.

Did I warn you to be good? Gosh, do they censor these? Anyway, your reputation was lost years ago wasn’t it?

Do look after yourself. I hope that you enjoy every moment, but please come back for good. And remember, no cutting out “Chicago” again.

Till the next time then Dearest,

All my love,

Beryl

It is interesting the way Beryl addresses Jean, first with the androgynous “Kimble,” then later “Darling” and “Dearest.” Jean constantly rebelled against her given name, preferring to be called “Kim,” or “Kimmy,” though her favourite was always “Kate.” Beryl’s affection for Jean is obvious, but a little odd for a married woman in her thirties. Her language seems girly and teasing, in the manner of a schoolgirl crush.

Throwing caution to the wind I dial Beryl’s Sydney number. It is likely that she has moved from the address on the envelope. It’s nearly sixty years since this letter was written. I don’t even know if she’s alive.

A voice answers, “Beryl here,” and my heart pounds.

She is understandably cautious at first until I introduce myself and explain my interest. She says straight away that she had an intense relationship with Jean.

For a few years, she explains, they were almost inseparable. They’d worked together at Sydney University during the war doing research on poisonous plants. Beryl went to Jean’s place a lot on weekends. There they’d be, sitting up on Jean’s bed, one at each end, talking. But when the weather was hot they’d go to the beach.

Jean went to Beryl’s place too. Beryl’s husband was quite happy for her to bring girlfriends home. He died four years ago. They had been married sixty years.

Jean had been a guest at that wedding, a fact Beryl recalls because of a moment of panic after the reception. It was a Saturday afternoon wedding at 3.15. Beryl wore a full-length white satin gown with a full skirt and long sleeves. It was elegant, she explained, since her mother had made it. The going-away-dress was a grey-toned jacket and skirt, in keeping with a departure on a golfing honeymoon. But when the time came to change into it Beryl couldn’t find the overnight bag. There was a frantic search. Jean
was wearing her long mink coat that day and offered to lend it to Beryl to wear away the honeymoon.

Beryl said, “Kimble, we’re going north to play golf. I hardly think a full-length fur coat is the go.” So there was more fuss until someone went back to the house and found the bag. And there was the outfit.

Beryl asks after the rest of Jean’s family, especially Frank. “I remember Jean worried about him during the war. He went down on the Voyager, didn’t he, or was it the Perth?”

I say I’m not sure. I believe he served on both ships.

Then I ask Beryl about the photograph I have of Jean and another young woman in the company of two American GIs.

“Oh yes,” she says. “I know that one. It’s me with Jean. It was taken during the war. We’d sometimes meet a couple of soldiers or sailors in the city and show them around for the day. That day we were taking those boys around the university buildings where Jean and I worked. The university was a second home to us.”

I look again at the photograph. It is winter as the girls are dressed in skirts and warm jackets, high-heeled shoes and stockings. Jean wears her hair in a bob. Beryl has hers pulled back. The shorter man is standing with his arm around Beryl, his hand resting on her shoulder. Jean is much taller than Beryl, around the height of the taller man, who has his arm around her back, but is barely touching her. Jean is slouching, and
bending her knees as if trying to appear shorter. They are all smiling for the camera but Jean looks shy and a little self-conscious.

Beryl’s body language gives the opposite message. She is playing the coquette: small and sensuous, she is more experienced with men. Here she is smiling and nestling into the boys’ shoulders. I cannot see whether or not she is wearing a wedding ring.

I recall my mother’s little ditty, “Oh yes, the Americans! They were overpaid, oversexed, and over here. Our boys couldn’t compete.”

For a long time, Beryl says, she and Jean didn’t see much of one another. Jean was a woman who needed close women friends. Beryl was married with a small son, and Jean was single. They drifted apart. It was a time, she says, when she couldn’t imagine Jean being interested in males.

“She led two parallel lives. Alongside her successful working life was her role in the OES, the Order of the Eastern Star. You know—the sisterhood of the Masons. Her mother had reached the top of that organisation and Jean was determined to get there too,” Beryl says.

“I suppose I ought to tell you this.” Beryl’s voice is suddenly serious. “I met up for lunch with Jean just two weeks before she died. We went to a club in the city. When it was time to go home I rang for a taxi. When Jean stood up to go I noticed she was unsteady. Then as she stepped from the doorway down to the street, she slipped and fell onto the pavement. Someone stopped and helped me get her up and into the cab. She insisted she’d be all right and went home on her own. That was the last time I saw her, waving through the window of that cab. I didn’t know that she had diabetes. She didn’t mention it.”

I cannot help being struck by the contrast between Jean’s life—the working life of the single career girl—and that of my mother, the typical home-based wife and dutiful mum. Jean, by all accounts was hardly ever home. With her OES and Soroptimists meetings in the evenings, their fund-raising activities, her involvement in Liberal Party meetings, and the responsibility of training new staff and running the laboratory at Randwick, it seems Jean hardly had a moment to spare. In the early days, though, she was coming home every evening to a mother who cooked and shopped for her, made all her clothes and, like a secretary, kept track of her appointments. And as she headed off to New York, it was clearly her career, with all its challenges, that came first.
Letter to Jean from Arthur, at DHA, Sydney, 6/5/1949:

Dear Jean,

If you have time and can make any contact with the Big Wigs in Dept of Agric over there I would be obliged if you could (if possible and weight permitting) bring back any or all information about Dairying—the milk production side. If you are too busy and can’t fit in my request don’t worry about it.

So all the best—have a good time and remember your Useless Mate—

Arthur.

The relationship between Jean and her friend Arthur, who still works at Drug Houses of Australia, seems to be run on Jean’s terms. It is as if she throws him a few crumbs from time to time, like burley, to keep him dangling. And she has a similar relationship with the press:

**A.J.C. DOPE ANALYST OFF TO U.S.**

*Sydney Morning Herald 6/5/1949*

A.J.C. analyst, Miss Jean Kimble, left Sydney last night by Pan-American clipper on a ‘secret’ mission to America. She refused to disclose the nature of her trip to America, her reason for going there, or how long she would be away.

‘Ring the A.J.C. office in the morning: they may tell you,’ she laughingly remarked.

Miss Kimble would not tell a Herald reporter whether her trip was a business or holiday journey.

But she was listed on the Pan-American passenger list as a traveller going on a business trip to New York, where she will be staying at the Commodore Hotel for two weeks.

It is understood that Miss Kimble will also visit Chicago whilst she is in the United States.

Miss Kimble’s only admission was that she would be returning at an ‘undisclosed date.’

The press is not easily put off. But neither is Jean put off by their questions:

**WOMAN ANALYST RETICENT**

*Daily Mirror World Cables 18/5/1949*

A stony silence was maintained by A.J.C. analyst Miss Jean Kimble when asked by the Daily Mirror for a comparison of Australian and American anti-doping methods.
Miss Kimble, who is attending a convention of official racing chemists, said that any information coming from her now would give tips to people who planned to dope horses in the future.

She added that any statements would be made by the A.J.C. after she had reported to that body.

Miss Kimble admitted that Australian methods were not as developed as American methods because the United States had initiated country-wide laboratory testing of horses’ saliva and urine in 1934, but Australia began only in December, 1947.

The Australian “swab queen” said she was not the only woman chemist in the racing business. There were several Americans as well as British.

She told the Daily Mirror she was aware of the unusual importance of her position, and the fact that she is a woman made it more unusual.

Saying she would return home on Saturday, Miss Kimble added that she was already cringing from the salvo of questions which will be fired when she returns.

When Jean ignores their demands, the press turn to parody, trotting out phrases like “swab queen,” ridiculing the idea of the ‘weaker’ sex doing a man’s job. In the 1960s, racing journalist Max Presnell would take it further. In his column in the Sydney Sun he would call the women analysts at Randwick, “Amazons.”

Letter to Jean in America from her mother, Marrickville, 20th May 1949:

My Dear Jean,

I received your letter sent from Honolulu, and of course, your cable from San Francisco.

I have had a couple of notes from Beryl to see how I was getting on. She also told me she was cutting the skit out of the paper to send you, of the university procession. I have it here for you.

We had a meeting of Rainbow Board members last Tuesday. Mrs Leske was away so I had to take the minutes. They seem to be having quite a big night for Mothers’ Day at Rainbow next Thursday. The board members are taking sandwiches so I suppose I had better take your share as well as mine.

You will be pleased to know that I finished your father’s cream pullover last night, also sewed up Jeanette’s Fair Isle one. I suppose I had better post it to her. I don’t see much hope of getting up to Cessnock till after you come home.

Remember me very kindly to Mrs Olsson-Seffer. Tell them we often think of them since they were out here.

Frank was over last Friday night to tea. I got him a nice wallet for his birthday and he seemed to like it.

Well, cheerio, best wishes and heaps of love,
from Mother xxxxxx

The interesting thing about Nettie Kimble’s frequent letters to Jean is the omission of any greeting from Mr Kimble. She mentions him only in passing, saying that she has finished knitting his cream pullover, one that he subsequently wore every day to bowls throughout the following winters. Of course she does mention son Frank and his
birthday tea, which he appears to have attended on his own. Frank does sound like the golden boy.

Naturally, the news to Jean is centred on the activities of the OES and its junior arm, the Rainbow Girls. She makes mention of Beryl, and Mrs Olssen-Seffer, an American dentist’s wife who, by all accounts, so captivated Jean with her French roll hairstyle that Jean copied it and wore it, dyed in various colours, for the rest of her days.

Above all, it is the fondness of the mother-daughter relationship that speaks to us here. Jean and her mother were in the Dulwich Hill OES together, Jean as treasurer and her mother as secretary. Jean drove her mother everywhere, to their Chapter meetings and their weekends away. No one could doubt that Jean was her mother’s special girl. No wonder Kath sometimes felt she was in Jean’s shadow.

Although she was a regular church-goer, Kath had no interest in joining the OES. After moving around NSW as a child, and again as a young teacher, she was content to be settled with Harold and their two children in Cessnock and to embrace the country life. She felt no need to go to work. Harold’s income was sufficient. And in any case she soon found herself involved in the local Country Women’s Association, the Red Cross, and the YWCA where she was secretary. She served in the women’s auxiliary at the children’s primary school. There were card parties and afternoon teas with her friend Jess Grice. On weekends the family might visit the home of Kath’s teaching friend, Marge Tulloch, or organise a tennis game on the court at the mine manager’s residence.

Kath and Harold loved living in Cessnock, that Cessnock of old, before the enormous expansion of the vineyards and its hordes of weekend visitors. It seemed strange to me, because when I was growing up in Newcastle I remember thinking Cessnock was a backwater, a dirty coal mining town, and much too far from our Mecca, the beach. I suppose I had the same cultural prejudice towards Cessnock as my Adelaide cousins had towards Newcastle.

The bedside clock shows three o’clock in the morning. Something—a voice, a squeal—has woken Nettie Kimble. She climbs out of bed and makes her way to the front door. Jean should have a key, she thinks, remembering that her daughter had gone out to a ball last night with a young man. A pleasant young man too. As a matter of fact Ossie told her when the car carried them away that he hoped that this might be the young man to take his daughter off his hands.
There are voices laughing—Jean’s and a man’s. What are they up to, making such a din at the door at this time of night?

“Look, you hold it, while I find the key.”

“My trousers are wet, Jean.” Stifled giggles from Jean.

“I think it’s going in. Yes, there we are.”

“Shhh. Don’t wake your mother.”

“Who turned the light on?”

“I did,” says Mrs Kimble, a sharp edge to her voice. “Keep your voices down. Do you know what time it is?” The light from the hall frames a tiny, but fearsome figure in a long white nightdress, a net cap covering her grey hair. “Get inside, Jean, and your friend can be getting off home.”

There is a whimper from the arms of the man. “You’d better take him, Jean.” Jean lifts the soft bundle into her arms as her mother closes the front door.

“You go to bed, Mother. I’ll deal with this.”

“What is it?”

“It’s a puppy, Mother, a Dalmation puppy. The cutest thing you’ve ever seen. I won it in a raffle.”

“Well it’s not staying here.”

Next morning with the dust settled, Togo, as Jean has decided to call him, is installed in her father’s garden.

She names him Togo after a dog owned by Nancy Drew, the crime-solving heroine of the Nancy Drew Mystery Stories. Jean read the books as a girl. It was Togo’s role in the stories to assist his intrepid mistress on assignments to catch crooks, usually swindlers and art thieves.

However, Jean’s Togo finds little scope for adventure in the backyard at Marrickville. No one in the family but young Graeme is much interested in the dog.

The women in the family are interested only in finding out the identity of the man who took Jean to the ball—the fellow Ossie was so taken with. But true to form, Nettie’s lips are sealed. Though Jean has a great fondness for Togo he is rarely walked, and for a Dalmation most at home balanced high on the back of a
speeding fire engine weaving through traffic en route to a blaze, Togo finds life behind a paling fence dreadfully dull. With his mistress at work all day he is left to his own devices. In a bid to enrich his surroundings, he departs from the ideals of law enforcement and joins the ranks of the petty criminal. Having developed an insatiable appetite for Ossie’s home-grown tomatoes and strawberries Togo bides his time, sniffing each one daily assessing the best moment for harvest, his nose twitching like that of a wine connoisseur until one by one, bit by bit, the ripe fruit disappears. There is no destruction of the plants, no signs of digging or vandalism. A case can never be proven against Togo as the evidence is purely circumstantial. It is assumed that the phantom fiend has developed a knack of plucking the ripe fruit cleanly off the vine with his sharp teeth while no one is looking.

The old house still stands at 383 Marrickville Road. It’s a busy area now popular with young couples and young families. Across the road is the nursing home where Jean’s father died. We pull up outside the nursing home and walk over to the house. A single-storey villa, it appears remarkably well-preserved. The garden, though, requires some attention and the bars on the windows are a recent addition.
“It’s just as I remember it,” says Graeme. “Look, there’s the dip in the tiles on the porch. Every time you went up the path to the front door, Nanna used to say, ‘Watch the puddle.’ She must have said it for thirty-five years.”

We walk down the driveway of the block of flats next door and come alongside the timber fence now bordering Ossie and Nettie’s old garden. “The garden looks so small,” says Graeme, peering between the palings. “It seemed much larger when I was five years old. I learned the meaning of the word boisterous, in this garden. ‘Togo’s grown too big and boisterous,’ Nanna said, ‘He’ll knock you over.’ He was too big for her too for that matter, and for Ossie. Only Jean was big enough to control him but she was never at home.”

From then on Graeme was banned from the backyard and made to stand on the verandah behind the gate. When Togo saw him he’d bound up and stand with his front paws on the top of the gate. That way, Graeme could just reach high enough to pat him on the head.

The household at Marrickville rose early. Whenever Kath or the children were staying the night they took part in the household’s morning rituals. Grandfather always made the tea and it was Graeme’s job to take it in on a tray to his Nanna who was sitting up in bed with a white cap covering her head. Then he would go into the bathroom especially to watch Grandfather shave. While his father Harold always used a Gillette safety razor, Grandfather preferred the traditional method with a cut-throat. It was a spectacle that intrigued the boy from the start. Grandfather would place his razor, brush and shaving mug on the shelf under the stained glass window. Stretching the strop out from its anchor point on the towel rail, he slapped the razor up and down its length in a vigorous sharpening action against the leather. From a tap on the gas heater over the bath, Ossie filled the mug with hot water, dipped his brush, and swirled it against the soap-stick, foaming up a lather. The boy hardly dared breathe as the murderous blade was guided in strokes down the cheek, along the jutted chin and down the soft, vulnerable neck to the Adam’s apple.

There were daily shopping expeditions with Nanna down Marrickville Road where she invariably bought him an ice-cream cone. Then it was off to the butcher for another load of horsemeat for Togo. Like his mistress, Togo liked large portions of food and soon grew to the size of a small pony.

We take some photographs of the house and the nursing home. Then, as we return to the car, a nurse from the home appears, quite annoyed, and asks what we are
doing. Graeme explains that his grandfather died in that nursing home. One day, it seemed, Ossie had had enough of life. With the help of Jean to hold him on one side, and his wife on the other, he walked out of his house, across the road and in the gate of the nursing home, where he stayed.

The nurse softens. It’s just that we should have asked their permission.

We drive on up the road past Jean and Nettie’s church, the Holy Trinity at Dulwich Hill. Notice boards on the wall in Asian and Arabic script inform local residents of the services available. Nearby, convivial Greek, Italian and Portuguese restaurants are serving wine and food to outdoor diners. The place is buzzing. We pull up around the corner outside the Petersham Bowling Club where Ossie, we are told, was secretary. Once he retired he spent every afternoon here. Perhaps his name is up in the clubhouse. Someone might remember him.

As we walk around to the entrance, there seems to be no one about. Then a large sign comes into view: NUDE BOWLING at twilight every Friday. I can’t believe my eyes. It’s no wonder Ossie Kimble spent so much time here.

Looking more closely at the sign there is a tiny no before the word nude. It’s a marketing ploy to attract new members, male and female. Bowls used to be considered a sport for oldies. Now hordes of young people are taking up the game. They say the older members are keen to help them, to lend them their bowls, and teach them the rules. Apart from that, bowling clubs have the cheapest beer around.
We approach a friendly gentleman at the club and ask if we might see the honour boards inside the clubhouse. He shows us through to a large room where the poker machines once stood and where, on “Family Nights,” Jean, unable to pass a one-armed-bandit without a flutter, would have sat, glass in hand, feeding it the change in her purse. We stand studying the columns of gold printing on the timber panels above our heads until we all agree that the name Ossie Kimble is not amongst them. We say we are sure he was secretary here. Then a player who has joined our discussion, remarks that Ossie must have been *match* secretary. Yes, that makes more sense. He always left the house early for bowls. He needed to be here early to arrange the draw for the afternoon’s play. A perfect excuse to escape from the women.

It is after school on a Monday when young Graeme first notices the publican from the Wentworth Hotel in Vincent Street carrying a carton of Tooheys Flag Ale up the steps and into the Cessnock Police Station. He is watching from Sternbeck’s Holden Garage, across the road, while his father fills up the Vauxhall.

> “Why are they taking beer into the Police Station, Dad?”

> “The publican probably does it every week,” his father explains, “as a kind of insurance against police raids on the pub on Saturday afternoons when SP bookies are taking bets out the back.”

From the park adjoining the hotel, a child can climb to the top of the slippery dip and watch these bookies at work. Or he can look through a hole in the fence at the back of the pub to see the crowds of men milling around to place bets. Graeme can tell the two SP bookmakers by the cars they drive. They are the flashiest cars in town. *SP*, his father says, stands for the starting price on a horse. One of the bookies is married a woman who serves with his mother on the YWCA committee. He drives a Chev Belair. But even without their cars you can tell the bookies by their expensive clothes.

Auntie Jean has friends in Sydney with flash cars. Sometimes she drives one to Cessnock to stay the weekend with Kath, Harold and the children—usually a Packard or a Buick. They go out on picnics down to the lake, or over to the Entrance or to Budgewoi and take some snapshots.
But the Browns never meet the owners of these cars. “They are just friends,” Jean says. But are they friends from Sydney, or work colleagues, or men who only need a car from Monday to Friday? In this coal-mining town, the arrival of a Packard in Northcote Street, Aberdare creates considerable interest from neighbours and some agitation in their front room curtains.

Whenever Jean goes north on holiday with her friends Aileen and Mac, Cessnock is the first stop. As dusk settles over the town there is blast of a horn and Mac’s car, towing a caravan, comes around the corner. Jean is shrieking through the back near-side window. Kath wishes her sister would tone it down a little. Must she always attract such attention to herself? Mac pulls up on the street under a tree for the night—Harold having already sent the starlings packing with tuppenny bungers tossed into the branches overhead. Then he hooks the van up to a power lead. With such a small van, goodness knows how the three of them fit into it. Once installed, they all come up to the house for a wash and some dinner.

Jess Grice and Kath Brown were good friends in Cessnock. Jess’s husband owned the cake shop in Vincent Street. Every year they went to Derby Day together. After a bus to Newcastle Railway Station they caught the Flyer to Sydney. They loved the races. Jess is in her nineties now and still living in Cessnock. She says, “You dressed up to the nines then: a new dress, hat and gloves. I still have a box of gloves at home, even a pair of leather driving gloves my mother gave me. I never wear any of them now.”
This day Jean met them at Randwick and took them over to the lab. She made a great fuss of them. Jess could see that Kath was quieter, more reserved than Jean. Inside the lab, Jean poured them all a whisky. Then she told them the glass beakers were used to hold horse urine. “I looked around,” said Jess, “but couldn’t see a sterilizer.”

Later that day Jess left Jean and Kath to meet up with her parents who were keen race-goers. “We were discussing the next race,” said Jess. “My mother wanted my father to back Darby Munro’s mount. She adored ‘Demon Darb’, the Aboriginal jockey. mother turned around to my father to say, ‘I told you so,’ but he had already gone, disappeared into the crowd.”

When it came time for Graeme to go to university, the Browns left Cessnock and moved to Sydney, to Harold’s parents’ house in Archbold Road, Lindfield. It seemed the sensible thing to do. Harold’s mother had recently died and his elderly father would now have some help in the house and in the upkeep of his garden. With Graeme’s sister Jeanette away teaching in Bomaderry, there was room enough for an extra three.

It was Jean who supported Graeme all the way in his decision to study Veterinary Science. His schoolteacher father Harold, a car buff and keen gardener, had suggested he might like to become a motor mechanic. But Graeme laughed off that idea. He’d done well in the Leaving Certificate and wanted to work with animals, even though he never had a dog of his own. “Dogs and gardens don’t mix,” said his father. “And who’s going to look after it when we go on holidays?” So in Cessnock, Graeme had to make do with Major, the red Kelpie from across the road, and the fox terrier from next door called Tigger, both brilliant fieldsmen in the cricket matches held in Harold’s back yard.

Jean was thrilled Graeme was planning on going to Sydney University. On the weekend, when she would drive her parents to Lindfield for afternoon tea, she’d tell him all about the place: the Union, the lecture theatres, the chemistry and physics buildings and the inspiring professors he was likely to meet. Some of her old professors were still there. So by the time Graeme got there, he felt quite at home. And if he was up at the Union he’d most likely run into his cousin Warren Kimble who was running the film society with Clive James.

When he got his driving license at seventeen, Graeme was already six months into the course. When at Lindfield, Jean asked him all about it. Then Graeme went outside and washed her car.
“Now you go and take it for a spin,” she’d say. “We’ll only be here gasbagging.” 
And she’d throw him the keys of her new FC Holden. At the end of his five years’ study 
Jean gave Graeme a beautiful painting of the Great Hall at Sydney University.

There was a fuss when his final year results came out in the Herald. Nettie 
Kimble noticed in the paper that her grandson would be receiving a prize at graduation. 
She spread it around the family that Graeme had won the university medal in Veterinary 
Science. It was really only a subject prize, a prize for Meat Inspection. But that was the 
Kimbles for you. They talked things up. And yet there were other times, when they 
talked things down. While Jean was working at Randwick she’d be constantly ridiculed 
in cartoons, interviewed in the newspapers over another doping scandal, or defending 
herself in court, and that’s when they’d go to ground. You couldn’t get any information 
out of them. It was as if they feared the Kimble name might be dragged through the 
mud.

The other cousins say their parents never discussed Jean’s difficulties in her job 
at Randwick. And Graeme says his mother would not discuss Jean’s appearances in 
court. Who, then, you might wonder, was giving Jean the support she needed in that 
high-pressure job?

Women Beat Racehorse Dopers with Science.
The Sun, 6/9/50

Three young Sydney women have crashed the racing game in a big—and unusual—way...The trio are engaged in a continuous battle in an anti-doping campaign which now extends over four states...And what is more, women appear certain to hold sway in this particular branch of a man’s sport for a long time to come.
Leading the work is the AJC Chief Chemist, Miss Jean Kimble, who, with three and a half years’ work behind her in the now unceasing war on doping gangs, has already seen the results of her work cut short the turf careers of some racing men and make big gaps in those of others.
Working under her are Misses Jean Miller, who has been on the job for 18 months, and Lesley Bancroft, who joined the laboratory staff a few months ago.

One positive result was obtained from a South Australian swab recently and, as a result, one of the best-known trainers in that state is now serving a 12 months enforced holiday from the racing game.
With all this publicity, the cartoonist Emile Mercier became a regular visitor to the lab. He’d draw a few lines in a matter of moments, hardly touching the paper, enjoy a couple of beakers of tea and some cake and out came the cartoon next day in *The Sun*.

In that same year, 1950, Jean and a group of women friends, including Aileen McDonald (right) and work colleague Jean Miller (left) from the laboratory took a holiday to Lord Howe Island.
Amongst Warren’s photographs is this one showing Jean being carried ashore. While the island looks interesting, it is not a flattering view of Jean. Her thighs, in long, wide-legged trousers, look large and heavy. The man’s mouth is open wide like an opera singer’s but he is not singing songs of love. His knees are almost buckling under her weight. Jean seems to be seeing the funny side. The other people, mainly women, watch from the boat, waiting, presumably, for their turn. The water is so shallow I wonder why they don’t simply take off their shoes and socks and wade ashore? Accompanying the photograph are telegrams and letters to Jean from an admirer called Ted. It seems from their contents that he is working on the island with visitors, perhaps in the hospitality industry.

TELEGRAM 7 Sept 1950.
LORD HOWE ISLAND
JEAN KIMBLE
MANY THANKS KEY POSTED RABBITS FOOT WITH ASPARAGUS
BAKDEN YER DEAR SOULE LETTER FollowS - - - TED

TELEGRAM 11 Sept 1950
LORD HOWE ISLAND
JEAN KIMBLE
DELIGHTED YOUR EFFORT MANY THANKS LOVE TED

TELEGRAM 27 Sept 1950
LORD HOWE ISLAND
JEAN KIMBLE
MALARIA AND A LOT OF WORK LETTER IN COURSE OF CONSTRUCTION LOVE TED

Letter to Jean at Marrickville from Ted Cohen at Lord Howe Island, 22/10/1950:

Dearest Kim,

Your letter with the news of your anticipated trip was of great interest. I await further details anxiously. I do hope for your sake that it eventuates, and that you see all of your Calif. friends and the Connecticut Yanks of the Eastern States.

We have had rotten weather for the past few weeks and haven’t been able to get outside. And great ...—I gashed my leg with a butcher’s knife and bloody nearly ‘hamstrung’ myself, which has rather cramped my movements.

Today is absolutely perfect and one feels the sun sinking in—how you would enjoy it—just the day for the beach and stripping off in the sun.
Thirteen women are due in tonight and another lot tomorrow. God knows what will happen—I hope my health doesn’t suffer.

Heard the broadcast and was most interested—but it wasn’t like having you here—even if I did make you mad. There was some consolation later. You’ll learn, Kim dear, when I do come over. We must be together a lot and try to work things out.

Kim dear, didn’t you give Jean Miller my message? If she doesn’t accept, Ail will still be my beloved and you know that will never do. Of course Ail can be Deputy Assistant Beloved, so don’t let her grieve too often.

All my love, dear. There is no news and I have some bills to pay and get in the mail.

Yours
Ted

Jean’s cousin Lesley Wickham and friend Aileen, have both spoken of Ted. He was Jean’s Lord Howe Island boyfriend. He was an American, and one imagines that might have suited Jean. He seems here to speak in riddles and play the hypochondriac. But for all that, he has a sense of humour. Here he’s trying to make her jealous, but in a playful way. He mentions Jean’s friend Aileen, and Jean Miller, who worked with Jean at the lab. He does sound stuck on Jean.

Jean has been buying clothes for Ted in Farmers Department store in Sydney. His surname is Cohen. I wonder what her mother would think if he turned out to be Jewish. Jean is posting the clothes over to him. There’s quite a list.

**Farmers Department Store (assistant-Mr Doweswell)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 sports coat</td>
<td></td>
<td>Size 42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 pairs grey flannels</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 wind jacket</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 pairs shorts</td>
<td></td>
<td>Size 34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 ties</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 pair braces</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Name: EP Cohen  
C/o Bank NSW  
King & Castlereagh  
Post LHI

Perhaps this is Ted (below), standing between Aileen on the left with the bandaged ankle and Jean in her pearls and high heels. He would be just about the right size to fit into the clothes on Jean’s list.
Tonight is New Years Eve. After a trip to her Dulwich Hill hairdresser, Jean picks up a dozen “gladdies” from the florist next door. She is decades ahead of Dame Edna in that respect. Actually, her favourite flowers are orchids. When they are in bloom the florist makes her up a spray every week. Always the nine. He grows the bulbs himself at home and keeps them, he says, just for her. Today the florist has been kind enough to wrap the gladdies in wet newspaper to stop them wilting on the trip to Canberra.

With her new gored skirt and striped top draped along the back seat and a new pair of strappy sandals packed in her suitcase with a bottle of Red Label, Jean heads off down the Hume Highway to Aileen’s annual New Year celebrations. This was something Aileen began years ago when she took a job at the police station and got to know the traffic cops. There were always new cops in town and she’d invite these friendly young fellows to the party. Her party has become a bit of a tradition with the Canberra boys in blue.

Jean is looking forward to tonight, to the thrill, at a minute or so before twelve o’clock, when you can hear the hum of the bikes in the distance, faint at first, then
growing louder, an advancing army of leather-booted, helmeted males, their testosterone levels in sync with the sirens that scream for the final few blocks, to bring them to a halt on the stroke of midnight. That’s when the party really gets going. Jean has a soft spot for those police. They like her sense of humour. And she likes their wild side.

Of course she can be the life of the party at OES members’ nights too. But that’s an all female audience, all close friends. One evening she got up on stage and did the dance of the seven veils. Said it was unplanned, that something just came over her, a feeling she had to break out. Got down to her bra and panties. Her mother was sitting there with an expression of feigned embarrassment on her face, but of course she adored it all the same. This was her Jean.

They wouldn’t do that sort of thing on visitors’ nights. It wouldn’t be right. Just a few weeks ago they’d had a visiting group from New Zealand to a meeting. Jean had assumed they’d be wearing white dresses. But they arrived dressed in black. It made you wonder. Here, in Australia, the white dresses symbolise purity. The five-pointed star on their badge represents the five virtues of women: loyalty, constancy, purity, hope and love. And there they were, those “All Blacks,” saying they felt like a flock of crows amongst the doves.

It feels good to be getting out of Sydney, with the pressure on her at work building with each positive swab. And she’s always in the newspapers. The trainers hate a woman having so much power. She’s lately been advised to have someone with her if she is working at the lab at night. They are putting bars up on the laboratory windows in the New Year.

Just last week a man approached her father at Petersham Bowling Club with a bribe. He would pay money, he said, and it was a considerable sum, if Ossie would persuade his daughter to give up the job at Randwick. Ossie told him to get lost. Said he’d never heard such rubbish in his life.

Ossie Kimble is nothing like Jean. They have different politics. It’s something they don’t discuss at home. She is secretary of the Earlwood Branch of the Liberal Party. He’s a great fan of Jack Lang. She’s a people person. Her father likes a quiet life. Even on the railway Ossie has always preferred goods to passengers. They’ve already offered him the state’s top job in Sydney—Stationmaster at Central Station—but he turned it down. It’s a ceremonial position, and the truth is that Ossie couldn’t see himself rigged out in frock coat and top hat on Platform One whenever the Royal Train
I am in Canberra to meet Jean’s friend Aileen. She has agreed to fit me into her busy schedule at eleven this morning after attending to some business to do with her position as secretary of her local branch of the Order of the Eastern Star.

A sprightly, smiling woman, well into her eighties but looking not a day over sixty, opens the door and shows me into her sitting room. Wearing a crisp floral dress nipped into a size ten waist, stockings and high heels, she could have stepped out of a ’50s advertisement for a Malleys Whirlpool. She sits me down and hands me photographs and postcards from Jean that she has set aside. Pointing to a timber cabinet on the wall containing a display of silver teaspoons, she says, “From Jean’s. My father made it for her. He worked with Ossie on the railway.”

Bringing in a tray of tea and biscuits, she says, “I never expected to get Jean’s mink coat, you know. It was Jack’s wife, Gwen, who gave it to me. When she rang I only asked for the collar and cuffs in Arctic Fox that went with Jean’s white crepe de Chine dress.” In the next breath Aileen offers to show me the mink coat. “It’s still in the wardrobe,” she says, starting to get up. But I decline the offer, later regretting the decision when I cannot find a photograph of it anywhere.

“The newspapers paid for that coat,” continues Aileen. “They did an article on her when she left Randwick. And they quoted her accurately too. Jean made sure of that.”

I cannot escape the thought that this neatly-built woman would have been swamped in Jean’s full-length fur coat. Perhaps she had it altered.
We decide to continue our chat over lunch. Aileen suggests an Italian restaurant nearby at Dickson. It’s a warm day and we find a table under an umbrella, order some food and open a cold bottle of wine. With a glass in her hand Aileen is unstoppable.

It was Randwick, she says, that killed Jean. After the court case, even though she’d been exonerated, they couldn’t get her blood pressure down. A woman’s place then was in the home as wife and mother. Jean didn’t fit that stereotype, and neither did Aileen. She and Mac weren’t able to have children. Only much later did they adopt two boys. They were just sixteen and fourteen when Mac died at fifty. Only eighteen years together. She gets upset when women complain that their husbands are retired and under their feet.

The affection Jean and Aileen had for one another is touching. I suspect that women’s groups like the OES flourished after the war because they provided a level of friendship, social interaction and support not always available from their men. If my mother had had a friend like Aileen, perhaps she might not have felt such a failure.

Our pizzas arrive as Aileen recalls Jean’s grief at the death of her friend, Arthur. They had worked together at DHA. He’d been the one to encourage her to apply for the job at Randwick. He developed cancer a few years after the war. Her friends thought she might have married Arthur. It was a terrible blow.

In those days, Jean, Aileen and her friends would go out together, arm in arm. They liked to attend the Anzac Day march in Sydney. This time, Lesley Jacob (right) from the lab and her husband Ted (second from the left), have joined in the fun.
For a weekend away, Mac and Aileen would hitch up the van, collect Jean and head off for a jaunt, calling in at race meetings along the way. On one of these trips, they called into a meeting at Kembla Grange, near Wollongong. They were walking in the gate when one of the local trainers caught sight of Jean—they’d seen her often enough in the newspaper to know who she was. Suddenly half the horses were scratched. They thought she was there to test the swabs but she’d just dropped in on holiday. When the scratchings were announced she smiled and said in a loud voice with her eyebrows raised, “How’s the guilty conscience, boys?”

And there was the trip the three of them took to Ayers Rock. Jean liked the outback. She was interested in Aboriginal people. Her favourite jockey at Randwick, Darby Munro, was Aboriginal. He always gave her a wave when he saw her at the track.

The three travellers set up camp at Ayers Rock. It was the year before Azaria Chamberlain was taken by a dingo. Later, when she heard the dreadful news on the radio, Jean rang Aileen straight away. “Oh, Ail,” she said. “To think we were there.”

Not long after that trip Jean was admitted to Canterbury hospital for a hysterectomy. Her tests had shown something amiss. When Aileen hadn’t heard anything, she rang Jean’s brother Jack, but it seemed she hadn’t told anyone. Aileen took the early morning train from Canberra and then a cab from the station to the hospital.

She was sitting up in bed smiling when Aileen went in. “I’m dying to tell someone,” Jean said. “The growths were benign: fibroids. But they’ve found I have diabetes.” After the operation Jean refused to take hormone replacement therapy. She grew facial hair. It was quite pronounced: a sparse moustache and wispy beard, like you might see on an adolescent boy. But it never seemed to worry her. In the end, she ignored it and everyone else got used to it.

Jean and Aileen often spoke about their losses. They were together when Aileen received news that her older boy Alan had been killed in an accident. Jean was his godmother.

It’s getting late and Aileen still hasn’t mentioned Jean’s friend, Ted, from Lord Howe Island. So I ask her about him.

It seems that Jean was keen on Ted for quite a while. He was an American. Jean met him when a group of them, including Aileen and Jean Miller from the lab, went to Lord Howe Island on holiday. At the end of the holiday, Jean and Ted wrote to one another and kept up the relationship for some time. Ted came out a few times to Sydney
to see her. She took him to the lab and to the races at Randwick. Then suddenly it ended.

Jean was upset. She phoned Aileen, saying she felt sick in the stomach. Aileen listened and said, “Come on, Jean, if I didn’t know you better I’d say you were suffering from morning sickness.” The next day, she rang back. She seemed brighter, back to her old self, and she said, “Anyway, Ail, he couldn’t have kept me in the manner to which I’ve become accustomed.”

They’d had fun while it lasted. Aileen remembers Jean coming to Canberra for an OES meeting. It was soon after one of Ted’s visits to Sydney. “Ail,” she said, “I don’t know if I should still be wearing a white dress to these meetings. I think I’ve turned a shade of grey.”

I drop Aileen off at home. She insists I keep the photographs and cards. A couple of weeks later I phone to thank her and to check up on some details. Her daughter-in-law answers. She says Aileen is in hospital. She collapsed four days ago. Tests show a brain tumour. She is not expected to regain consciousness. It’s hard to believe. When I ring back after three days, they tell me that Aileen is dead.

It is the 1953 AJC Autumn Carnival, one of the main events of Sydney’s racing calendar. A few days later the Newsreel picture theatres show the winning horses in action, with commentary:

**Tarien-Carioca Double takes £500,000 from Ring**

More than 75,000 people pack Randwick for Doncaster Day in perfect Easter weather. It’s a big field but all eyes are on the hot favourite Tarien, ridden by George Moore. There’s a fortune on her back. They’re off and a good start too with Hesdin, Pressman and Prelate first to show out. . . . But watch the favourite. Moore’s switched her three horses wide and she’s mowing them down. Iroquois is beaten and so is the fly-away Triclinium. Tarien’s not tarryin’. Moore doesn’t have to ride her out. What a champion this mare is. She’s just coasting home, but she equals the race record. It’s Tarien first, from Triclinium and Iroquois. The favourite’s home in the five thousand pound Doncaster.

Easter Monday. . . . The crowd’s tense and the 17 runners are off on the two mile race. A long way to go but already they’re jostling for positions on the rails. . . . Friendly Feeling and Maynard are following Carioca, which is rapidly going up to the leaders. This looks like a real thriller. The favourite will have to be good to win. But Carioca is too good. Cook settles down to drive him home and the favourite goes ahead with every stride. . . . The Tarien-Carioca double takes half a million pounds from the books. And Carioca, the 100 guinea yearling, takes the £10,000 Sydney Cup.
But this is not the end of the matter. The women in the laboratory at Randwick are about to make their most sensational bust.

Three winning horses this weekend have produced positive swabs. They are Tarien, winner of the Doncaster at Randwick in record time; Cromis, a Victorian horse, winner of the Sires Produce Stakes at Rosehill; and Culzean on the same track. All return positive swabs to the banned substance Coramine. It is a huge bust for the women at the lab. The punters have pocketed their winnings, but the connections of the horses have their prize money withheld. Incensed at the ruling, the Tarien and Cromis connections launch an appeal.

When Jean’s court case hits the headlines and her likeness in photographs and cartoons appear in the daily papers, her local minister starts avoiding her at church. He turns away when he sees her and speaks to someone else. She has worshipped at the Holy Trinity Church of England at Dulwich Hill since she was a teenager, holding the singing together every Sunday with her strong voice, but now he shuns her. She is very upset. It had been his habit, on his way to the shops, to walk by the Kimble’s door and wave, but now he crosses to the other side of Marrickville Road to avoid their front gate. Jean has a strong sense of her own identity: full-length mink coat, high heels and high hair, but she is not prepared for this.

John Frith, cartoonist for the Melbourne Herald, gets to work:
On one of her trips to America Jean had met a man in Boston, a lieutenant in the Boston Police force who worked part-time as a racing club drug analyst. He took her out a couple of times and showed her the ‘hard’ side of the city. When she asked him about the reliability of his drug-testing procedures, he shrugged his shoulders and said, “You don’t need to be one hundred percent sure, Jean.” Jean was shocked. She said, “Well, I do.”

While not everyone approves of a woman working with drugs, Jean is not without friends at Randwick. Mr. Justice Dovey, vice-chairman of the AJC, admires and supports her. In a telephone conversation I have with his daughter, now Margaret Whitlam, she tells me she remembers Jean. During the war they both served for a time with the Sydney University VADs (Voluntary Aid Detachment), working alongside nurses in Sydney’s hospitals. She remembers that her father had great respect for Jean. He thought she was marvellous.

With the appeal imminent, Mr Wilfred Dovey, who, along with Jean and others, will soon be called to give evidence in court, receives a letter of congratulations from Jean on his elevation to the position of Justice of the Supreme Court of New South Wales. He responds:

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Judges Chambers
Supreme Court
Sydney
3/4/53

Dear Miss Kimble,

Thank you very much for your kind message of congratulations and good wishes.
I shall shortly have to contact you for some good ‘sting’ to administer to slow moving Counsel!

With kind regards,
Sincerely
W. Dovey
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Clearly, the judge and Jean enjoy a good working relationship. That is fortunate, as Jean will need all the help she can get. Cromis, one of the horses in question, is part-owned by the Vice Chairman of the Victorian Racing Club.
The court case goes ahead. Jean’s methods are scrutinised, as is her evidence as an expert in the field of analysis. She remains outwardly calm and steady throughout rigorous cross-examination. The tabloids are full of it:

**Truth’s Court Reports, 26/7/1953**

**EXPERTS IN CONFLICT**

Doping probe by A.J.C.

The future of the A.J.C. doping detection system may depend on the result of the Tarien and Cromis appeals, which have occupied the A.J.C. Committee for 31 hours and are still not over.

**Analyst’s evidence**

Miss Jean Kimble, the A.J.C. analyst, told the committee that in the six years she had been with the club she had examined 3270 samples of saliva and about 3000 samples of urine from horses.

She was confident, she said, that the tests she had carried out were adequate. She used four methods in analysis – micro-crystalline, spectrophotometric, colour tests and paper chromatography.

She said that 70 samples she had tested were positive and 57 suspicious. She had diagnosed nikethamide [coramine] in eight of them.

**“Never left the horse”**

Neville Johnson, the stablehand who looks after Tarien said that he was with the mare from about 4.30 am on Doncaster day and apart from moving away from her a few feet to speak to his mother he never left her.

Johnson added that Smith, Tarien’s trainer, had instructed him to take Tarien to the stall before a race so she could urinate.

When he said he had been alone with Tarien in the swabbing stall for about a quarter of an hour committee members closely questioned him.

The committee adjourned until 10.30 a.m. tomorrow, when counsel will begin their addresses.

**2/8/1953**

A.J.C. Committee should again reprimand T.J. Smith.

This newspaper directs attention to the evidence given by Neville Johnson, a stablehand employed by No. 1 trainer T.J. Smith, who has prepared Tarien since she arrived from England.

Mr. Justice Dovey: On this day were you told by Smith to take Tarien to the stall immediately before the race?

Johnson: No, I was not told, but I knew if I hadn’t gone I would have been asked why.
Mr. J.W. Shand, Q.C. (assisting the committee): I am informed that other horses of Smith’s, with other boys, go to that stall and also other horses of other owners.

Mr. J.E. Cassidy, Q.C. (for the Tarien connections): When you got back into the stall did you ask someone to open it?

Johnson: Yes.

Mr. Cassidy: Do you remember who it was?

Johnson: I don’t remember who opened it.

Mr. Cassidy: Was it one of the officials?

Johnson: Yes.

To say the least, that evidence discloses an extraordinary state of affairs. It is the more extraordinary because a very strong warning about the laxity of supervision by trainers had previously been issued to Smith who trains Tarien.

Tarien’s trainer, TJ Smith, had been called before the stewards three years earlier, in 1950. It was in connection with the “Sunshine Express” doping case. Morphine was alleged to have been found in the horse’s urine. As a result of that inquiry, the filly was disqualified but the owners were exonerated. Mr Smith was disqualified for five years.

One of Smith’s closest friends was the Randwick Veterinary Surgeon. He and Smith used to travel overseas together. The Veterinary Surgeon tried to discredit Jean Kimble’s evidence in court. The finger, nevertheless, still pointed at the trainer, TJ Smith.

While the A.J.C. has its rules, they must be enforced, and it is to be hoped that the committee will not allow the removal of horses from their open stalls in any circumstances unless they are under proper supervision. That should be a general direction to all trainers.

23/8/1953

A.J.C. Anti-doping rules are right

The A.J.C. Committee has announced that it has dismissed the appeals of the connections of Tarien and Cromis against their disqualification as a result of saliva and urine tests, carried out by the A.J.C. analyst, proving positive.

It is hoped that the A.J.C. will continue its present fearless stand on this subject and not be stampeded into any breaking down of the very effective and praiseworthy campaign they are conducting.

After weeks in court and eight solid days of cross-examination, Jean is vindicated. However, behind the scenes at Randwick there are those still determined to catch Miss Kimble out. They set a trap. Without her knowledge, a draught horse used by the track
staff at Randwick is injected with a drug. A swab is taken from the horse, given a routine number, and placed in with laboratory samples for testing. Miss Kimble is required to analyse the samples. She does so, making this assessment of the swab from the draught horse: “This sample shows an unusually high dosage of (the drug used) but has been taken from a heavily-built horse that is accustomed to a heavy workload and definitely not a racing proposition.”

The voice on the end of the line sounds tired and fed up. Perhaps it’s not a good time. “No,” says Lesley Jacob, “it’s fine.” It turns out that she’s just back home after having a mammogram.

“That instrument,” she says, “is barbaric. A man must have invented it.”

A few weeks later I am sitting with Lesley and her husband Ted on the sunny verandah of Ted’s club in Lane Cove. We’ve all returned from a guided tour of the new drug-testing laboratory at Randwick. It has been an emotional day for Lesley who worked with Jean at the former laboratory, fifty years ago. The visit has stirred up this eighty-year-old’s memories of the place. Her small frame, seated in a wheelchair, belies a newfound energy. She seems fired up and eager to talk about her time at Randwick.

She says it was a few years after the war when she joined Jean at the lab. Randwick was still run by ex-military men. In those days, you arrived at the lab at eight-thirty and had to ring security and give your number to get in the door. Business was brisk; and soon Jean Miller arrived to make three women analysts. Lesley was still Lesley Bancroft then, before she married Ted Jacob. Another woman, Mrs. Darrock, cleaned the floors and did the washing up.

Once Lesley started work, Jean could get away to conferences overseas and holidays. She remembers Jean taking a trip with friends to Lord Howe Island. She came back head over heels in love. Couldn’t talk enough about this man. The staff at the lab said, “This is the one.”

She took him to the races and brought him out to the laboratory. They all met him. This was Mr Right. Then all of a sudden he wasn’t there. It was over.

It was Lesley who did the test on Tarien. It was big, she says, her eyes glinting with the memory of it, on that historic day. The slide lit up like a Christmas tree. There was no doubt in her mind. The women had never seen anything as big. They didn’t know what dire straits were ahead. The press, the public, the trainers, they all hated Jean Kimble.
At first she didn’t want to put it in. But Cromis, who won the Sires’ Produce Stakes, was caught the same day and so it had to go in. There was so much of the drug. It flooded every test.

People criticised Jean. She was a big woman who hogged the limelight. Women weren’t supposed to behave like that. But Jean had the responsibility. Microphones in her face every day and the worry of the court case. But she stepped up to the fight. She held her head high. Her ability to do her job was being challenged. In a sense Jean represented all women who wanted a career. It wasn’t the “done” thing then.

Jean always kept her sense of humour. Some of the counsel, Steven Jakes, and Steven and Eric Miller, came out to the lab to look around. When they arrived Jean offered them a cup of tea. There weren’t enough clean teacups to go round so she served the tea in 400ml Pyrex beakers. Then she said to them, all standing there in their suits and ties, those smooth legal fingers wrapped around a beaker, “All right now fellers, let’s see who can pick the difference. Is it unmilked tea or horse urine you’re drinking?” And that cackle of hers. Then she took them through the lab and showed them how the samples were tested.

Lesley says it was the only racing laboratory in the world that was an all women affair. Good friends, working well together. It was a happy ship. Anyone could see that. There were Saturday and Monday race meetings. The analysts went in on Sundays and Tuesdays to test the samples collected the day before. Swabs of saliva and urine had been taken from every race winner. They collected the saliva by giving the horse a wad of gauze to chew. That was easy. Collecting the urine was more difficult. There was much whistling and turning on taps and rustling of straw in the horse’s stall to get anything to happen.

All sorts of criticism went with this job. These were women doing what many thought was a man’s job. All previous women employees at Randwick had worked as cooks or cleaners.

“Women shouldn’t have been there on that course,” Lesley says, “purely because of their sex. A woman doing a man’s job was *persona non grata*. Men didn’t think women were up to it. Jean fought hard in court and won. Her integrity was intact.” Jean was always at the mercy of the press. She had her head up on a banner in a Sydney University Commemoration Day parade. The criticism continued for another decade. When Max Presnell labelled the analysts *The Amazons*, Lesley said she didn’t like the
connotations: “We weren’t anti-men or warriors cutting off our breasts; we were just women doing our job.”

But the fact remained that horses were still not coming up from Victoria to race at Randwick. It was affecting business. Finally, Jean was called into a committee meeting in the Bligh Street rooms. Lesley was asked along too. There it was announced that a man was being appointed to take charge. Jean would no longer be needed. It was a cold-blooded business. Jean was shocked, collapsed like a balloon. She’d always been so happy-go-lucky; now she could barely speak.

On her 1954 tour of Australia, Queen Elizabeth II pushed Jean off the front page of the newspapers. I remember the young Queen’s visit. She came to Newcastle. I was seven years old and standing with my family on the balcony of my father’s surgery waiting for the Queen to pass by along Hunter Street. We all waved flags at the black car as she appeared and was gone; British flags they were, Union Jacks. I remember it was a scorcher of a day and yet they took her, after she had been past us, over to see the blast furnaces in action at the BHP. She must have cooked.

With a man appointed over her, Jean found her position at Randwick untenable. She decided to resign. But she could not leave right away. As Lesley pointed out, Jean had to stay on long enough to train the new man. And that took some considerable time. Lesley soon formed the opinion that the new fellow didn’t like women.

“He said he’d like to clear all women out of the lab.”

A short report on Jean Kimble’s resignation appeared in The Herald. It finished with: “Miss Jean Kimble, controversial analyst at the AJC might have resigned, but at her new job with Johnson and Johnson, she’s still getting to the bottom of things.” At that time Johnson and Johnson’s most famous product was its Baby Powder.

There was a party when Jean left Randwick. It was held in the committee rooms in Bligh Street. The committee and the laboratory staff were there, and the plumbers, electricians and carpenters from the workshops. Jean had got along with all of them, all ranks. There must have been fifty people at least to bid her farewell and wish her luck in her new job with Johnson and Johnson. And they presented her with a parting gift.

“They were two beautiful new suitcases,” Jean explained afterwards. “They were wrapped in paper with only the handles poking out. I must say they were surprisingly heavy to lift. I had a struggle, at the end of the party, to carry them over to
the car. When I got them home and opened them, I found out why. They were full of empty beer bottles.”

“Did you find that insulting?” someone asked.

“Not really,” Jean said, and laughed. “It was a joke from my friends at the workshops—Ray and the others. They were remembering our good times after work. They were treating me as one of their own.”

The cartoonist Norm Mitchell captured her for southern readers:

It is a man in his sixties who meets me at Croydon station. Medium height, grey hair, sad eyes. The eyes light up as he smiles and holds out his hand. “I’m Harry. You must be Anne.” It’s my first ever meeting with Frank’s son.

When I suggest a café, he says no. I must come to his house just around the corner. He shows me in through the front gate. Two minutes later we are relaxing in the sitting room of his comfortable brick bungalow with the kettle murmuring on the kitchen stove. I wonder which one of us will mention the rift between Frank and Kath.

Such a pity, Harry says pouring the tea, that he and Marilyn never really got to know their cousins Graeme and Jeanette. He hasn’t seen either of them since Jean’s funeral. He misses Jean’s bulletins on the family. If it weren’t for her late night calls
he’d never have found out what the rest of the cousins were up to. She wanted to hear all the news and made it her business to keep everyone up to date.

Frank’s family avoided Marrickville on Christmas Day. They left it to Jack’s family and Kath’s. They’d see Jack’s in the evening, when they came over for tea. Anyway, Harry didn’t miss that dark lounge room at Marrickville. Even with the light turned on in mid-summer it was dark. The shade over the light seemed to be covered in a sort of waxy brown paper. Even at Christmas the place was just as dull; no Christmas decorations, not even a tree. Never a kiss from Grandma, not even a hug, and the children forbidden from touching anything in the house. They exchanged a few presents, and that was all. And there was no alcohol. That would have brought the wrath of God upon them all, Grandma being such a staunch member of the Temperance Society.

On a normal visit Harry would get out of his Grandma’s way and go straight out to the back room with Grandfather. He felt comfortable with him. All around the walls were shelves of books—westerns, mysteries, books on martial arts, and books about the sea. They’d start on the books about the railways, technical books mainly. And sit there for hours. Harry still has the medallion they gave Grandfather for his forty-five years service on the railways. He got that at the clean-up, after Jean died.

Harry has an image in his mind of his grandfather. He’s out in that back room showing Harry how to sharpen a pencil with a penknife. He’s whittling it down so smooth you’d swear it was done in a pencil sharpener. It’s an image that takes Harry back to his memories of the past.

It is 1945. Harry Kimble, four years old, is playing with his cars on the lounge room floor. His mother has gone out into the yard for a moment to hang washing on the line. Suddenly Harry hears the front door open, then close. He looks up expecting to see Auntie Jean, who often comes over on a Sunday, but it is not Auntie Jean. Standing staring at him is a man dressed in civvies with a bag over his shoulder. He swings the bag down onto a chair and speaks.

“You must be Harry,” says the man, holding out his hand. “I am your father.” The boy jumps to his feet and points to a framed photograph on the wall. It shows a young man in Naval uniform.

“No,” says Harry, “you’re not my father. That’s my father, up there.”
Harry holds his mother’s hand as they walk half a mile from their house in Evelyn Avenue Concord to the intersection of Parramatta and Burwood Roads where they climb aboard the 459 bus that takes them close to Concord Repatriation Hospital. Their father Frank is being treated there for TB. It’s been fifteen months now and he’s still not allowed home.

At first, Harry wasn’t allowed into his father’s hospital room. He and his mother had to be monitored first with chest X-Rays. Now they can go in. He wonders what his father will have made this week in his occupational therapy class. Another knee rug, perhaps, or a scarf. Or maybe even a basket. They say he’ll be weaving baskets soon. A basket will be more useful than a rug. He’ll be able to carry all his toy cars in a basket. But it will depend on his father’s strength. His mother Alice is more interested in her husband’s X-Ray results.

The nurse says their dad is very good with his hands. He enjoys weaving and shows the children the small loom he uses that can sit easily on his bed. One of his woven scarves won a prize last year in the handcrafts section at The Royal Easter Show.

It is 1949 and Auntie Jean is returning from her second trip to the US. Harry and his three-year-old sister Marilyn are at the airport to meet her. Harry is eight-years-old. Jean greets them with a bag bulging with presents. There is a set of magic pencils for Marilyn and for Harry a black plastic horse and a Deputy Sheriff Badge. The badge is a silver star with a gold shield in the middle. Pretty special. Harry’s mother Alice bends down and pins it carefully to his chest.

Frank has been released from hospital and is back at home. The doctors say his recovery will continue for some time. Harry has been helping his mother convert the back verandah to take a large, hand-operated loom for his father to continue to weave scarves and blankets.

It is Harry’s tenth birthday. He wakes early, jumps out of bed and finds his parents drinking tea at the kitchen table. There is a birthday present wrapped in red paper in front of his cereal bowl. He tears off the paper to reveal a new pair of boxing gloves. Seeing the boy’s delight, his father says, “Son, when you’re fourteen I’m going to knock you out cold, so you know there’s no shame in it.”

As he heads off to school with Marilyn, Harry wishes his father could be going to work like other fathers. His mother says he’s under her feet all day. She says a man
needs to work; work would make him feel like a proper man. Harry knows his dad has had his ups and downs. He’s heard the stories of how he’d been an apprentice fitter back in the Depression but was often out of work. So when he started playing rugby he moved out of Lismore and down to Sydney, to his mother’s place at Marrickville and started playing for Western Suburbs. To keep fit for rugby he took up boxing and soon found he had a talent for it. He knows his father was State Lightweight Champion once, even represented Australia against New Zealand. That was until he fractured his skull in a rugby game. And that was it. He was out of the ring for good.

Harry loves to look at his father’s ribbons and badges. It isn’t every kid at school who can say his father once boxed professionally. He tells his mates that “Bobby Evans” was his father’s professional name.

Harry’s mother says she’d go to work if Frank would allow it. She could help out at her father’s butcher shop in Croydon, even do the accounts. She’d enjoy that. Always was quick with figures. But Frank says if there’s anything worse for a man than not working it’s seeing his wife going to work to support him. His mum worries about his dad. Harry worries about them both.

When Harry’s mother has her first breakdown, he and his young sister Marilyn go to live at Kandos for a time with Uncle Jack’s family. They know their mother is a strong woman. At thirteen she’d had a brain tumour removed and recovered. She’ll recover from this breakdown. And the next. She says she’ll feel better if she can go to work. Says she doesn’t want to hang around the house all day, not when she has the skills to earn a decent income and they’d no longer have to rely just on Dad’s TPI pension.

Harry is a teenager when his mother puts her foot down and insists on going to work. They could do with the money. Now she gets her way. Harry feels proud of his mother, proud of the way she’s helping run the butcher shop and doing the books. Harry asks his father about the war. Frank tells him he’d started as a merchant seaman and worked his way up to engineer officer and then in 1934, he applied for a job in the navy.

“I was a commando in the war, Harry. I had to kill people. That’s why they called me ‘Killer Kimble.’” His sister Marilyn is spared these details. She will say later, if people ask, that she and Harry had different upbringings. It’s only Harry who had to stand up in the lounge room with a knife at his chest so his father could show him how he was trained to kill a man.
“There are two ways to do it, Harry. You shoot them, or you use a knife and knuckledusters.” He proceeds to show the boy the British way of killing. “First you use the knuckledusters, then you twist the knife that’s attached to them, like this, to stab the person.”

He tells Harry he was placed in what was called “the Special Services” and worked as an engine-room artificer on the cruiser HMAS Perth and later on the Voyager. While on the Perth in the Mediterranean he boarded and captured an Italian ship, killing the crew. Later he was dropped ashore on the Libyan coast from the destroyer HMAS Voyager, where he captured an enemy train, killing the driver and the guard and tearing the badges off their uniforms.

“I’ve got them in a drawer somewhere, Harry. I’ll show you later.”

On most Sundays after church, Jean collects Frank, Alice, Harry and Marilyn in her Austin A40 and they drive up to the Blue Mountains for the day. They go to the lookouts, do some short walks and look at antique shops before finding a café or teahouse in Leura for a light lunch before heading home. Frank doesn’t own a car. Like Ossie, their railwayman father, Frank and Jack never learned to drive. Their wives can drive, and so can their sisters, Jean and Kath.

Harry enjoys these day trips. He just wishes Auntie Jean wouldn’t come over to their house so often at night. Through the window he can see her car pulling up. AJK000. They’re her initials all right. It’ll be another night of heavy drinking with his father; another night of one-upmanship and raking over the past. They do get along, those two. They have lot of laughs. Jean understands his father better than anyone. They’re both yarn-spinners. Fire off one another; try and out-do one another. His mother has finished the washing up and gone to bed leaving the two alcoholics together, their voices raised. From his bed Harry can hearing his father’s voice in the next room.

“You know, Jean, a rugby selector once said to me, ‘Frank, if you’d been built like your sister Jean you’d have played for Australia.’” Raucous laughter from Jean.

But his father isn’t laughing. His father is more likely crying. He knows it’s the truth; he would have liked to be bigger, stronger, like his sister. Jean was a big woman, next to Kath who was always slim. Not that Harry ever saw Kath. But she sounded like a decent sort of person.

It was Kath who put out feelers early to Harry and Marilyn, through Jean, to say, “Look, this row is between Frank and me, no one else.” And Jean tried to mediate. But it didn’t work. Then when Kath died from leucaemia in her early fifties, Jean said,
“Frank, you get yourself along to Kath’s funeral.” And he went. They had not spoken a word to one another for thirty-five years.

Harry believes there was obstinacy on both sides. He reckons it probably started from one miserable sentence, before the war, when his father was out of work and Kath was studying at Teachers College. She came home one day to find Frank sitting around unemployed and called him a lazy loafer, something like that, some crack that would have set his father off. And Frank would have retaliated. Lashed out. There’s a strong sense of male identity tied up with employment. Harry’s mother Alice found that out.

Graeme’s mother Kath was dead. One of the neighbours across the road called in to check on her and found her unconscious on the bed. She called an ambulance and rang Harold, who came home from Normanhurst Boys’ High School.

Kath’s health problems began some years before, even before the family left Cessnock. She developed ulcers on the legs that would not heal. After investigations in a private hospital she came home, but was listless and weak and reluctant to exercise. The cause was not spelled out. Something was amiss with her blood counts.

Graeme’s sister Jeanette was contacted at the primary school in Nowra where she was teaching, and Graeme was on his way home from his veterinary job with the Pastures Protection Board in Scone. He would stop by in Newcastle to see me and have a meal.

Everyone was in shock. Just the previous weekend their mother was sitting up in a chair and swinging her legs to and fro saying she was pleased to have been well enough to enjoy Jeanette’s wedding, and Graeme’s twenty-first birthday party. Graeme had suggested to his mother that she try to get up and walk more. “A horse, Mum,” he said, “needs to be on its feet to pump the blood through its body, otherwise it will die.”

It was apparently a type of stroke. Her anaemic blood had become thickened. And no one had picked up the tumour on the thymus gland. Harold was stunned. He thought his wife was going to recover. The doctors had not told him she could die. Harold wondered if Kath had known but had not wanted him told.

A week after the funeral Harold answers the telephone at home. It is his mother-in-law Nettie at Marrickville. Would he be so good as to return Kath’s piano to them? And could he be persuaded to part with her piano stool? Its tapestry seat is surely one of the best examples of her needlework.
Harold is shocked and wounded. His Kath was the only one to play that piano. It was hers. She brought it with her when they were married and settled, twenty-six years ago. He still pictures her sitting there in the living room playing a piece from Mozart or Chopin. Their attitude seems strange to Harold. He’s lost count of the number of Sunday afternoons that he’s laboured at their house at Marrickville over the years, mowing the lawn and doing odd jobs in the garden, or up a ladder fixing the slates on the old roof.

Harold advertises the piano for sale in the local paper. But he can’t bring himself to sell the pretty stool. He writes a cheque for the piano and delivers it to Marrickville the following weekend with Kath’s tapestry-covered stool.

When his father Frank died, Harry was cross with Jean. She brought her friend, politician Don Dobie along to the funeral. He was Federal Liberal member for Cook and worked for the Bank of New South Wales. Don and Jean had worked together on polling booths at Cronulla. She came over to Harry that day, after the service, and said, “Harry, you must feel honoured that Don has come to your father’s funeral.”

Harry said, “Well, I didn’t invite him, Jean. He didn’t know Dad.” It looked like she was showing him off. He was her handbag.

We are in Brisbane staying with our son Matthew and his partner Sally. It’s a fine warm Anzac Day and we decide to catch the train into the city to watch the march. The ranks of World War II veterans are dwindling now. Their children, people now my age, are wearing their parents’ medals as a mark of respect. My parents are both dead, and though I remember my seeing my father’s medals, I can’t recall what happened to Mum’s. But I still have her officer’s cap, the one she is wearing in the book, Women at War. In a sense, my mother’s war never ended. There was her battle to fit into a new life in Newcastle, her battle to be considered a person in her own right, the battle of her divorce, her increasing battle with asthma, and her constant battle for identity.

The carriage is filling with young people, cadets mainly, in their Army, Air Force or Navy uniforms. My thoughts go back to Frank Kimble, and I wonder if Harry will march for his father in Sydney today. If he does, will it be with the men from the Perth or the men from the Voyager? Or is there a section for the Special Services? There is no doubt that he served on both ships. Then why does Frank’s name not appear on the list of the survivors from the Perth? Harry says that his father’s war service has
still not been officially recognised. Perhaps it has something to do with his missions in the Special Services.

On the train I ask my son Matthew if he remembers Auntie Jean.

“Auntie Jean? Of course I remember her. She was great.” So I ask him to explain.

“She came to our place. It must have been after Christmas in ’83, because we had just moved into our new house. I would have been almost eleven years old. It was a really hot day and I remember I was watching a one day cricket match against New Zealand on television downstairs with Tim and Chris while we waited for Auntie Jean to arrive. We’d never met her before.

“Dad heard her car outside and went out to escort Jean down to the front door. The front steps hadn’t been built at that stage and she would have had to step over some rubble. You told us she was an important visitor and we had to turn the TV off.

“But at that moment, the young NSW batsman, Steve Smith, was on ninety-eight, on his way to a debut century for Australia. So of course we didn’t turn it off.

“Suddenly Auntie Jean comes sailing in the door. She has a beehive hair-do in a reddish colour, and is wearing a patterned dress tied at the waist, stockings and high heels. We are sitting there on the edge of our seats. She looks straight at the screen, bends down beside us and whispers, ‘Has Smith scored his hundred yet, boys?’

“I thought she was magnificent.”

I am stunned at this memory. “Magnificent,” he called Jean. It is a hefty word in anyone’s language. I can imagine him using it to describe a perfect ride on a wave, or a winning try in a rugby final or the sight of chicks in a sea-eagles’ nest. But in Jean he was observing something indefinable: the spirit of the woman, and her ability to make a connection with a ten-year-old boy that still exists today. Jean knew all about connecting with people. It was she who had kept everyone in touch. It was she who called her nieces and nephews “the Magnificent Seven.” She understood the meaning of the word, and so did they.

At the age of eighty-seven Jean’s mother Nettie fell out of a double-decker bus onto Marrickville Road and was never the same again.

It happened one day on her regular journey to do the “messages.” Each weekday morning, for as long as anyone could remember, Nettie Kimble would take off her apron, put on her hat in front of the hall mirror and lock the door behind her before
popping the keys into her handbag and crossing the road to the bus stop. The bus would arrive and she would, in her turn, reach for the chrome rail at the back and hoist her small frame aboard. Regular as clockwork she would greet the conductor, take a seat and be carried safely to the Dulwich Hill shops. There she would alight, and begin her mission, first reaching into her handbag and withdrawing the trusty string bag that would expand with each purchase until it was full. Then, the shopping completed, she would return by the same route.

On this morning, however, the conductor was nowhere to be seen as she hauled herself up onto the back platform and, in that moment of reaching for another handhold the bus drove off, tipping her off her feet and backwards out onto the roadway, into the path of oncoming traffic. She bounced along the road before coming to rest in front of an ambulance, whose driver stopped, attended to her scratches and took her to hospital. After an X-ray showed no broken bones she insisted that no more time be wasted and demanded the hospital ring Jean, who came immediately from work and took her home.

Apparently neither the driver nor the conductor, who had been upstairs at the time, had seen this tiny woman in their mirrors and both assumed that no new passengers had boarded at the stop.

After a few months it was clear to Jean and the rest of the family that Nettie, whose mind had been razor-sharp before the accident, was not recovering her faculties as everyone had hoped, and if her forgetfulness and dare they say, dementia, continued, she could not safely continue to be alone during the day.

Finally the difficult decision was made and Jean found her mother a place in a nursing home at Lewisham. It might not have had the convenience of the nursing home opposite the house where her father had lived out his last days, but it was manageable. With her mother settled Jean arranged the sale of the Marrickville property and bought herself a home unit in Homer Street, Earlwood. From then on she made a habit of calling at the nursing home every evening on her way home from her job at Johnson and Johnson, arriving in time to feed her mother her evening meal. It was the least she could do for the mother who had done so much for her.

For the first time in her life Jean was living alone. She had few skills at housekeeping. Her mother had always kept house, shopping and cleaning and preparing the meals while Jean was at work. While she enjoyed cooking a roast dinner from time to time, it was easier during the week to eat out at Frank’s place or with friends. That way she didn’t notice the loneliness.
The day after her mother died Jean lost her way coming home from work. Up until then she’d always come via the nursing home in Lewisham. She didn’t know the direct route.

Marilyn is outside the window of the Kirribilli Cafe. I wave from our table. She is Harry’s sister whom I’ve never met but would know anywhere: the shape of the face, the nose, the smile. But for the hairstyle, she’s the image of Auntie Jean.

She bustles in, slides past people, we greet and she sits down. The waitress takes our order for coffee. Marilyn orders a latte. I can’t believe it. Even the voice is Jean’s. She laughs when I tell her. I like her instantly.

She says she doesn’t mind. Jean was a person who never seemed to get old. She always kept up with the latest trends. In the seventies Jean wore the big watches and colourful bangles. And high heels, even though they made her taller than most men. And she never shied away from colour. She wore a lot of red. Only later in her life did she stop dying her hair and let it go white. But she still wore it up high in a kind of French roll. Marilyn’s father Frank thought she wore too much make-up. He’d say to her, “Don’t wear that sticky blue stuff on your eyelids like Jean.”

Jean’s mink coat was designed by Stella Cornelius. Jean and Stella were in the Soroptimists together and became good friends. She wore that coat everywhere. It was full length. She’d wear it calling in on friends, or catching a train. She wore it even when the weather wasn’t cold. It made her larger than life. She liked to be noticed.

Marilyn says that she and Harry never heard about Jean and the AJC’s court case. Their parents kept it quiet. And it seems that Jean didn’t mention it when she came to visit.

Jean was there for Marilyn’s debut at an OES Ball at the Sydney Town Hall. A swarm of white-clad women and their dinner-suited partners were moving off trains, out of cars and away from railway exits, that evening, like white ants leaving the nest.

As Marilyn took her turn to walk, escorted by her partner up to the front of the hall, Jean, the queen of the swarm, was there waiting onstage to present each of the girls to the American Consul. She was in her element up there, draped like royalty in the white robes of Worthy Grand Matron with the diagonal blue sash and star-shaped badge. And with her hand held aloft to greet the debutantes she looked like the Statue of Liberty.
Marilyn had once thought of joining her local OES, but Jean, after looking into it, said, “Don’t, Marilyn. That branch near you is full of old women.”

When Jean is told she needs glasses for reading, she is mortified. At first she refuses to wear them. She decides to try contact lenses. The first time she loses them down the sink. But she sticks at it.

Once a month Marilyn collects her from her Earlwood unit and drives her to Balmain to have the lenses checked. Afterwards they go back to her flat and Jean puts the kettle on. Marilyn offers to make the tea but Jean insists on doing it herself. Then she brings it out on a tray: one cup of tea for Marilyn and her glass of milk. While she says it is “just a glass of milk,” you can smell the Scotch in it.

In her new unit Jean has created a different atmosphere from the dark old house at Marrickville. Here the place is full of light. Marilyn notices that Jean has placed her wedding photograph on the sideboard. She smiles. What a day. Her bridesmaids copied their dresses from a dress they’d seen in Woman’s Day: a slinky beaded evening gown, modelled in an advertisement for Modess Sanitary Napkins. At the time, she couldn’t see a problem with that. Those Modess advertisements always featured glamorous women in figure-hugging styles. If it was just the look the girls wanted, why not?

All the females in the Kimble families were on intimate terms with the Modess brand through Auntie Jean. After Randwick, Jean had taken a position at Johnson and Johnson. It was believed she was involved in the company’s research and development of Modess sanitary products. She often travelled to America for them. On her visits to her relatives she’d always bring a large brown paper bag of goodies: Tek toothbrushes to try out, “seconds” in Band Aids, and packets of Modess for the women to evaluate their absorbency.

Jean always included little books for the young nieces, Jeanette, Marilyn and Frances. These books were meant to prepare young girls for the female monthly cycle. Unfortunately, they never really did. This was a time in the ’50s when such subjects were avoided, or else hinted at, in euphemisms like: “that time of the month,” or more terrifyingly, “the curse.”

Marilyn remembers the little book: “There were pictures of nectar dripping from spring blooms, bees pollinating flowers and chickens emerging from eggs. It was still quite a leap for a child to connect any of this to the monthly cycle or the reproductive system of the human female.”
After Marilyn’s wedding Jean came up to her outside the church. She was grinning from ear to ear. “Marilyn,” she said, “your dress is beautiful, but I’ve just had six weeks in America marketing Modess, so you might appreciate that when I saw the bridesmaids, all I could see were two Modess pads walking down that aisle.”

Marilyn rang Jean the night before she died. Jean was excited about going to the lunch at Randwick.

“I’ve bought a new blue suit and arranged for the hairdresser to come to the house early in the morning,” she said. “It’s going to be a big day. And it will be interesting to see the new laboratory. You know, I haven’t been near that racecourse for thirty-four years. I want to look my best.”

At Jean’s funeral, Marilyn’s daughter Michelle carried Jean’s OBE and BEM medals on a cushion behind the casket. The awards had been announced on January 1st 1975 and presented later at a ceremony at Government House, attended by her brothers, their wives and a large group of friends. Don Dobie had recommended her for the award after the completion of a new nursing home that had been built from funds raised by the OES. Jean was elated. Standing in the grounds of Government House in the next photograph are (from left) Alice, Frank, Jean, Jack and Gwen.
Marilyn made it quite clear that she and Harry had different upbringings. Their father had huge expectations of Harry that he didn’t have of his daughter. Marilyn didn’t get the discipline and the old war stories.

“Harry did it tough,” she says.

She remembers one of her father’s mates from the Navy turning up, out of the blue, at their house one day when she and Harry were children.

“He walked in and Dad introduced him to Mum, Harry and me. The man looked the two of us up and down and said, ‘Only two shore leaves, Frank?’”

When you heard Jean talk about her job at Johnson and Johnson you’d have thought she owned the place. You had an image in your mind’s eye of an executive suite, a large desk, a secretary and couple of telephones. Graeme remembers being in his fourth year of Veterinary Science when he and his classmates made an excursion to J&J’s research section, Ethnor.

“We were to look at the manufacture of cat gut for suture material. While it was known as ‘cat gut,’ we soon discovered it was actually made from sheep’s intestines.”

As the students toured the building they discovered Jean’s office on the factory floor. She was there to meet them in her white coat, smiling with pride at seeing her nephew amongst the students.

“That’s when it dawned on me that Auntie Jean was no longer working in Research and Development. She’d been downgraded to Quality Control.”
Jean asked Graeme and me to visit her at Johnson and Johnson in 1971. We had been married for two years and had just returned from a working holiday overseas. She said she wanted to catch up. We arrived at the North Ryde laboratory and typically, she was generous with her time and effort in showing us around. I remember she took us to meet the Managing Director, a man younger than Jean, in his large timber-panelled office. They behaved like old buddies and I suppose they were. He had been one of her students in Pharmacy during the war. You could see then that Jean had the knack of connecting with people. As always, she was well groomed; there was never a hint that she used her sex to make her way. She was ethical, trying to make herself the equal of men by being articulate, intelligent and professional.

It was only in her late night phone conversations after she retired that Jean became less positive, wistful even. She gave the impression she was disappointed she hadn’t cracked through the male dominance at Johnson and Johnson. As she said, “I was above him once.” But no one disputed Jean’s dominance in the Order of the Eastern Star.

White dresses had always been the signature dress of the OES. They seemed to reflect the values of the organisation. But some years later, after several serious assaults on female members as they made their way in public to special evening events, it was decided to allow the women to wear less conspicuous clothing.

At the OES Grand Chapter Ball in 1982 Jean and her friend Aileen were snapped still in their finery.
In July 1985 Jean turned sixty-nine. She felt an irresistible urge to take a trip back to her roots in North America. She sent a postcard every few days to Aileen McDonald:

Received from Jean 8/7/85:

Ail Dear,
Guess where?
I am in Alaska. I do get around don’t I?
Four hour trip by sea plane, name Ketchikan—well worthwhile.
You’ll never keep touch.
Love Kate

Received 10/7/85 from Jean on MV Queen of the North, BC:

Ail My Dear,
Spent all day on this magnificent floating home—up 4am, at wharf 6am, sailed 7.25pm. Had all meals on board. Saw three films, arrived Prince Rupert 11.30pm. Slept like a log last night. Won’t tell you what I’m doing today till I’ve done it.
Love Kate

Received 10/7/85 from Jean at The Butchart Gardens, BC:

Ail Dear,
We went out here today. I should be able to see all the sights tomorrow now. Couldn’t write until arriving here in Victoria but should be OK from now in. Have just had a Scotch—dearest yet anywhere at $3.59 Canadian. I enjoyed it because it was the first one since arrival. Won’t have as much time to write here in Canada. We seem to keep moving.
Love Kate

Received 16/7/85 from Jean at Yosemite National Park, California:

Ail Dear,
I don’t get time to write. Too busy and always on the run. 4AM and 6AM calls, and for a few days NO eye. All is well again. Everyone is so good. Brian our manager is wonderful. The stick is a wonderful help. Will SEE you some day.
Love Kate

Received 18/7/85 from Jean at Niagara Falls:

Ail Dear,
Have been and gone and had a really lovely day. I have caught up with a very good group and we are living it up. Lovely dinners at night. All in all a very good crowd except for my roommate.
All for now
Love Kate

Received 22/7/85 from Jean at Lake Louise:
Ail Dear,

Saw Lake Louise last week but didn’t get a chance to send this off. We are certainly moving day and night but all is well. The company is very pleasant and we are a happy group. The scenery is spectacular. Managed to get my hair cut yesterday which is good. Out to do my important shopping here in Montreal at Hudson Bay Trading Co.

Love Kate

Received 22/7/85 from Jean in Montreal:

Ail Dear,

Mission completed here. Two more days in Canada in Quebec and then back to USA and thence home. We have been border-hopping a few times—everything still fine. We’ll never stop talking when I get home. I’m very pleased with myself today.

Love Kate

Received 23/7/85 from Jean at Plymouth, Massachusetts:

My Dear Ail,

Homeward bound—only just over a week to go. We are on American soil—Massachusetts where my roots grew. Having a wonderful time but as the song goes, “I still call Australia home.”

Love Kate

It seems clear from these cards that Jean’s health was failing. She admits to feeling rushed from one place to another, becoming increasingly dependent on a stick for walking, and most worrying of all, having periods of blindness in one eye. Her diabetes could be veering out of control.

Jack and Gwen finished their breakfast. It was a fine and sunny Saturday morning. Jack looked up at the clock on the kitchen dresser. Seven thirty. Time was getting on, he thought, and still no call from his sister. Jean rang every day at seven, sharp. That was the arrangement. Just to be on the safe side. They were neither of them getting any younger, and his Jean lived alone. It was something they’d started a few months before, at Jack’s insistence.

“It’s really quite unnecessary,” Jean had said, “but if you like I’ll just let the phone ring three times before hanging up. No need to pay for a call. Then you’ll know I’m fine.”

“Perhaps,” Jack said to Gwen, “she’s had a lie in after the big day at Randwick yesterday. Even so, it’s not like her.”
They’d answered her call yesterday morning to wish her well for the day. She’d sounded in high spirits. “I’ve splurged on an expensive new blue suit,” she said. “And the hairdresser is coming over first thing in the morning.”

“I wouldn’t blame her if she changed her mind and went somewhere else,” said Gwen. “Why would she want to go back to Randwick after what they put her through? Eight hours in a witness box, remember?”

“Yes, but that’s our Jean: forgive and forget.”

Jack left his cup of tea and went to check the phone. Dial tone was normal. He dialled Jean’s number and waited on. The call rang out.

“We’d better duck over and check her flat.”

As they were closing the door the telephone rang.

“That’ll be her now,” said Gwen, hurrying back down the hall. “I’ll get it.” Jack counted the rings—two, three, four, five, six, seven.

Gwen returned, anxious. “We’d better get going. That was someone from Randwick. Jean didn’t turn up yesterday for the luncheon. They said they tried to phone her at home but there was no answer.”

As Gwen drove from Bexley to Earlwood, Jack felt uneasy. It wasn’t like his sister to miss a social occasion, especially a luncheon with dignitaries present, and the wine flowing. He was a teetotaller himself. But Jean, she enjoyed a glass or two. And she’d likely have got to her feet to say a few words. Then she’d have been hard to stop. God knows what she might have come out with. Yes, he told himself. That’s it. She’s thought better of it. Gone out to lunch with a friend instead.

Gwen pulled up at the Homer Street units. They climbed the steps to the door and rang the bell. They waited, but there was no response. Jack turned his key in the lock and stuck his head in the door.

“Are you there, Jean?” His words sounded loud and hollow. Usually, he had to shout over the noise of the radio or the vibration from the washing machine, the shrill voice singing in the bathroom or the cackling laugh into the phone. The place hardly felt like Jean’s at all.

“I’ll go through, Jack,” said Gwen, knowing that her husband had lately been unwell. “You stay out here in the fresh air.”

Jack sat down on a small slatted chair on the landing and looked out over the street. Gwen made her way inside through the vestibule. On the wall to the left was the
familiar trio of china ducks, their wings spread in motionless flight. A multitude of frogs, frozen in the act of squatting or leaping, gazed sleepy-eyed from shelves.

She continued along the carpeted hallway, past the two Emile Mercier cartoons hanging in matching frames, and glanced in through her bedroom door. It was open. The single bed had been made and the lace bedspread pulled up. Pennants and photographs hung from the walls. Trinkets and knick-knacks covered the dressing table. Some clothes lay across the chair. On top of the bookcase in the corner stood a large wooden replica of a syringe. It was painted bright blue, the word DOPE printed in black along its barrel. Beside the bed were a couple of Mills and Boon romance novels.

Everything seemed in order in the second bedroom. But the place was stuffy. Gwen’s blouse was sticking to her skin. After a glance into the small laundry and bathroom to the left, she moved down the hall to the lounge.

With the glare from the window she didn’t see Jean at first. She was in shadow, sprawled forwards, half out of her chair, her legs splayed out onto the floor, her skirt pushed up almost to her waist. It was clear that she was dead. Her head was tilted to one side, her eyes staring straight ahead, the pupils dilated.

“Oh no, Jean. Oh dear God.” Gwen went back up the hall to get Jack. He came in and sat down in the chintz-covered chair near his sister, held his white head of hair in his hands and whispered a prayer. His wife dialled triple 0 for an ambulance. On a note pad by the telephone was written the number of a taxi company, and a time—11.15am. Nearby, propped up against a brass frog, was a gold-embossed invitation:

To Miss Jean Kimble
You are cordially invited to attend the Official Opening of the new Australian Racing Forensic Laboratory at
Royal Randwick Racecourse, Alison Road Randwick
on Friday 9th September 1988,
commencing on the lawn at 12 noon.
Hon. R.B. Rowland Smith MLC will perform the opening.
Afterwards, luncheon will be served in the Queen’s Room.

Jean was in her new blue suit, her make-up and nails done, and her long white hair swept back into a French roll. She had slid down in the chair causing her skirt to be pushed up around her waist. One of her shoes was on its side, the other still on her foot.
On the coffee table next to an empty bottle of whisky stood her snakeskin handbag, a pair of kid gloves draped neatly over the clasp. A whisky glass was on its side at her feet.

Jack was pale. As Gwen went to the kitchen to fetch him a glass of water, he rose to his feet, and crossed the room. He reached over the collection of teaspoons in the display cabinet, to slide open the window. Then he unlocked the adjoining door and stepped out onto the balcony.

The doorbell rang and Gwen went down the hall to let the paramedics in.

Leaning on the railing, Jack breathed in the cool air. People were crossing the park heading home for lunch. They had a spring in their step for the weekend ahead. Children’s voices rang out. He heard distant, thudding kicks of a football. The wattle was coming into bloom, splashes of gold in the morning sun. Jean always looked forward to the wattle.
Man today, stripped of myth, stands famished among all his pasts and must dig frantically for roots, be it among the most remote antiquities. What does our great historical hunger signify, our clutching about us of countless other cultures, our consuming desire for knowledge, if not the loss of myth, of a mythic home, the mythic womb?

Nietzsche

Note: The following story contains images of Aboriginal people, some of whom are now deceased. Some names in the story have been changed.
Our friendship began on my first trip to a remote Aboriginal community. The deal was that if I bought the frozen kangaroo tail and some aluminium foil from the community shop, Nangala would do the cooking. We sat together cross-legged on the ground in her front yard. It was early evening with a slight chill in the desert air, but we needed no jacket or rug to sit on. The mulga wood fire Nangala had lit earlier had burned down to glowing coals, and the red iron-rich earth beneath us still held the warmth of the day.

She started by holding the thawed tail, about seventy centimetres long, over a mulga wood fire to burn off the hair. Then, while she scraped the thick skin down smooth and clean with a knife, I tore off the required length of foil. With the tail wrapped in its silver envelope like an offering to the gods, Nangala scooped out a depression in the fire with a flat stone, placed the package inside and pushed a blanket of hot coals over it. Watching all this reminded me of the times when, as a child, I had dragged a chair over to the kitchen bench and climbed up to watch my mother use the Sunbeam Mixmaster to beat egg whites and sugar for a summer pavlova, looking forward to the moment when I could scrape out the bowl and lick the sweet mixture from the spoon.

Once cooked, unwrapped and cut into manageable portions, we each took a piece of tail in our fingers. The taste was truly delicious, rather like ox-tail soup. However, the fat around the meat made my hands so sticky that whatever I used to wipe them—tissues, paper, leaves—stuck fast to them. Clearly there was a knack to be learned as I noticed Nangala had no trouble at all. Nevertheless, the occasion was a real treat. I suspect it was Nangala’s way of thanking us for keeping her dogs healthy.

Traditional Aboriginal society works very much on the notion of reciprocity. One good turn deserves another. Perhaps this explains why, in the local Walpiri language, there are no words for please or thank you.
SUNDAY

Today we have returned to Alice Springs. As the luggage snakes around on the airport carousel like the spine of some reptilian dinosaur, trained sniffer dogs move from one piece to the next, heads down, their manner urgent, soft beagle noses hoovering in all directions, sometimes cutting back to check again before rushing to the next item. Even a lone pink toothbrush, lying naked and womanly on the conveyer belt between two enormous suitcases, gets the once-over. Two teenage girls struggle to haul the heavy bags onto a trolley, leaving the toothbrush to continue its journey alone.

In our rented four-wheel-drive, now packed with a box of supplies from the supermarket, we follow the dry bed of the Todd River as far as the pub on the corner where we turn left to meet the Stuart Highway. It is a balmy summer’s day with warm afternoon sunshine pouring in the windows.

In the front yard of a house a group of men are sitting on the ground in the shade of a rotary clothesline. Clotheslines at home are normally placed to catch the breeze and the sun, but here, as the mercury climbs to thirty-five degrees, four car bonnets in various colours are resting over the wires, one on each quarter of the clothesline, effectively blocking the sun. I can’t help thinking of my father’s fondness for the old Hills Hoist, and how he would have admired this indigenous ingenuity.

As we head northwest, the escarpments of the West MacDonnellls soon give way to a more open landscape with occasional boulder-topped outcrops and distant bluffs. This is red sand country, covered in stunted acacias, mulga trees, hakeas and spinifex grass, still damp from an overnight shower. Dodging sticky edges and water on unsealed parts of the road, we press on, enjoying sightings of a camel, emus, a group of wedge-tails on a bullock carcase, the occasional dead kangaroo and flocks of Major Mitchell cockatoos.

We are entering the Tanami Desert which, unlike the conventional images of the deserts of Asia and Africa, is green and shrubby with hardly a bare sand hill in sight. It is a straight road ahead as far as the eye can see.

After four hours, a notice on the grid ahead says Aboriginal lands. No Alcohol Past This Point. Below it, a flagon and some bottles lie in the red dirt. Minutes later a road forks off to the right. We turn off the highway into another world.

It’s a cool, peaceful time of day. The light in the sky is fading to a purple glow. To the west the clouds are fringed with pink. Around a bend and past Yuendumu’s
modern Police Station, the humpies of East Camp come into view. Today they seem oddly deserted. I look for Jack Jakamarra’s old yellow Kombi, always half hidden by a wall of corrugated iron, and the familiar plume of smoke, but then it hits me; of course it’s gone now, like Jakamarra, who died a few months back. At this time of day he would have been sitting alone in his chair by the fire, cooking his dinner, his white beard washed orange by the setting sun. Now, only his corrugated iron dunny still stands, its rusty tap dripping into the mud puddle where his two kelpie dogs used to drink. They were good dogs, clean and well-fed, unlike most of the dogs in this community. Jack and his brother Darby were senior men here and both famous painters. They set a good example to the younger men.

We swing out wide to avoid a car upturned at the side of the road resting on its roof. Behind a wire fence some women are sitting on the ground cooking on an open fire in front of their house. A dozen or so scrounging dogs hover close by. The women look up and wave. These are my Napaljarri “sisters.” We wave back but don’t stop. They will be expecting us first thing tomorrow to look at their dogs. The bush telegraph will have seen to that.

Dogs. Here you never get away from them. But then they are the reason we’re here. It’s only through our work with the dogs that we’ve got to know the people. And it all started quite by chance.

“You should come and check out these dogs,” said a friend, Barry Boettcher from Newcastle University who was working in the community twelve years ago. “They’re in a shocking state. Overrunning the place. They’ve never seen a vet. I’ll arrange your permits.”

We’ve been coming back every few months since then. Just the two of us: my husband Graeme the researcher-vet, with me serving as his well-trained “dog’s body.”

We drive on through the rusted metal archway that serves as an entrance to the community. People are sitting outside their houses in family groups preparing their evening meal, their cooking fires casting a soft light over children playing nearby on mattresses on the ground. Their dogs, maliki in the local Walpiri language, are making their way home for food. They are crossbreds, all shapes and sizes, mangy, lean and hungry, most with a touch of dingo. Unlike the pet dogs we know in the city, these mutts have never known a collar around their necks nor a fence that would keep them contained. They rarely feel the loving pat or the stroke of an owner’s hand along their backs or hear a kind word. Ranging freely in packs of four or five by day, they return to
their families at dusk, lured by the aromas of warm damper and meat juices from freshly caught game cooking and spitting in the flames. By inching in close enough the dogs provoke their owners into hitting them with a stick or flinging some food scraps and bones into the darkness.

In the fading light I look across to the old Mission House where, as a girl, Nangala used to work as a maid for the Baptist minister. Behind it stands the small laundry where she now lives with her two dogs. It’s a tiny place really, but roomy enough, for Nangala and her few possessions. Like the toothbrush on the airport carousel, this woman reminds us to live simply, to travel light. We will catch up with her tomorrow.

We must collect our keys for the guesthouse from Helen, the postmistress, but as it’s after five o’clock and her Post Office window at the end of the council office building is shut, we drive the few blocks to her house. Helen answers the door with a beaming smile. “Good to see you both,” she says, handing over our keys and some clean tea towels. “You’re in luck. You’ve got the place to yourselves for now.”

The guesthouse is a long low-slung brick building situated on the eastern side of the community, opposite the Central Land Council Office and next to the Women’s Centre. As we drive in the gate and pull up, the car headlights pick up a dog, a heavily pregnant kelpie bitch, hanging around the front door. She has a white tip on the tail, a sure sign of her dingo heritage. She knows from experience that whitefellas who stay here always bring plenty of food.

Inside the guesthouse are eight bedrooms, two bathrooms, a communal kitchen, and modest dining and lounge facilities. It was once the old council chambers, and now has practical red vinyl tile floors and basic furniture: two single beds and a chair in each room. Hardly flash, but adequate. Residents must bring their own bed linen and food and look after themselves. A spare room next to ours has a table and a power point, ideal for setting up the microscope. Every surface here is coated in a layer of fine red dust. It gets into everything, your hair, clothes, eyes and pores of the skin. You learn to live with it.

We unpack our supplies, enjoy a hot shower, and prepare an easy pasta dish for dinner. On our own for a change we can really relax. Not that we mind the company of others. Kitchen encounters out here can be fascinating. We’ve cooked meals alongside television producers, art dealers, housing project managers and university professors and their research students, schoolteachers, builders, roofing contractors, legal aid
lawyers and ministers of religion. They arrive, unload their swags, food, water and cooking utensils, and stay a few nights until their job is done.

At the end of each day, over the kitchen stove or sink, you hear their stories and ideas. And then the question, “What brings you out here?” I did draw the line at one builder, who never took his work boots off and left a trail of plaster and red mud up the hall and into the bathroom. And he never cleaned the toilet. He was there every time we came, for years it seemed, a lonely soul whose wife had turfed him out. He had nowhere else to go so he stayed on here building houses. I remember being told that “The Territory” was “full of missionaries, mercenaries and misfits.” I suppose we’ve joined the list.

After feeding our scraps to the mother-to-be still at the door, we clean up and retire for the evening. As I’m about to roll out my sheet and sleeping bag onto the bed, I wonder briefly at the body shape indented in the thin, cotton-covered foam mattress. Last night’s occupant, perhaps? I turn the mattress over and make up the bed.

Outside, as night comes on and a dry coldness creeps over the land, man, woman and beast will call a truce in the interest of mutual warmth and protection. They will nestle their bodies closely together on mattresses under the stars and sleep. The men might drift into dreams of the old life in the bush, while their women will pull their dogs in close for warmth and protection from sniffers, drunks, and the legendary *Kurdaitcha Man* who is believed to prey on unwary women at night. And all the while, the parasites on their skins are free to wander, explore and feed on the warm blood of their hosts.

There is a shout in the distance, a yelp, then silence.

Tomorrow we must talk to the people. Here everything takes time. Nothing is rushed. The men will talk to Graeme, whom they will address as Jakamarra. The women, I hope, will talk to me. Dogs are important to the women; they are largely women’s business. But we must tread carefully. Though they are mostly unloved and often vicious, the dogs play a significant role in the lives of the people.

In the old nomadic life, dogs were indispensable to small family groups always on the move. Just finding a new dog would mean creeping up on a dingo’s bush lair, stealing a pup from its littermates and, as it grew, taming and training it to clean up the camp, protect the family at night and retrieve game during hunting.

You see a different type of wanderer out here nowadays. The Aboriginal is largely sedentary now and it’s the whitefella who is on the move through this country: European backpackers in Toyota “troop-carriers” seeking a new cultural experience;
wealthy American tourists flying from community to community to buy up dot paintings from the Art Centres; and cashed up “grey nomads” on cruise-control, dropping in to refuel their snorkel-breathing four-wheel-drives.

And you can’t write off the dogs. After three and a half thousand years of domestication by Australian Aboriginals, the hunter-gatherer life is still in the blood of these descendants of the Asian wolf. Or seems to be, for by day and even by night, they are still on the move, stopping only to turn over a bin, scrounge some tucker and steal some sleep. Young or old, mangy or sleek, alone or in groups, they roam the community with such dignity of bearing and sense of purpose that one imagines they must have meetings to attend, appointments to keep, new deals to be settled.

MONDAY

There was a racket outside last night with dogs barking and fighting. After breakfast this morning I see why. Our garbage bin, full to the brim last night like others along the road, has been knocked over in the night by dogs scrounging for something to eat. Food tins, drink bottles, babies nappies are strewn everywhere, and plastic bags, blown by the wind are left clinging to the wire fences. We load the car with our box of medicines, vaccines and dried dog food, and drive out into the street. Above our heads, a pair of black and white striped football boots, laces tied together, dangles from overhead wires.

A tiny woman with a black and white beanie on her head has spotted us and waves us down as we reach the Women’s Centre. It is Nangala. Behind her, other women in the shade of a brushwood shelter are cooking a stew of fresh meat and
vegetables in a large wok over a fire. Nangala squeezes my hand. But today her eyes are
wet with tears. Pointing down to a small furry body on a blanket, she says she must get
rid of this new puppy because it follows her everywhere and dogs are forbidden around
food preparation areas. Would we take it away? As I accept this tiny thing, it nuzzles
immediately in between the buttons of my shirt. Then in a whisper, Nangala says,
“Come to my place soon. I show you something.”

She manages a smile and gets back to the business of cooking. By midday these women
will have packed individual meals into the Centre’s utility ready to be distributed the
erly people in the community who are being cared for at home by relatives. While
some of the old folk come daily to the Old People’s Centre across the road, many prefer
to keep their ageing parents at home.
One of the women is wearing a tee shirt displaying the message *NIGHT PATROL*. This serves as both a reminder and a warning of the evening job she shares with Nangala and the other women vigilantes. Dressed in special uniforms, complete with jackets and caps, and armed with heavy sticks or *nulla-nullas*, they patrol the haunts of drunks and petrol-sniffers after dark, bundling offenders into the back of their van and delivering them to the police lockup.

As we pull up at the CDEP office (Community Development Employment Program) TJ is waiting. Wearing a white shirt and new jeans he limps over to the car to say he has already organised his wife Yvonne to help us with the dog program today if we will collect her from home. Looking at the rubbish littering the ground in front of the office, he explains that the community’s garbage truck broke down two weeks ago. It may be another month before a mechanic comes out from Alice Springs to fix it.

“It’s no good,” he says, shaking his head. “There’s going to be a big funeral here later today with lots of visitors coming. And the place is a mess.”

He says that the funeral is for a church pastor and missionary who preached here in the 1970s. He died last week in Alice Springs. The man felt such attachment to the place that he left instructions to be buried here. His body will arrive any time now. This might explain the explosion of clean washing, especially white shirts, hanging over fences this morning throughout the community. I see that even Frank, who owns the mining store with his wife Wendy, is wearing a white shirt and proper shoes this morning, with clean trousers, the cuffs newly hemmed and no longer dragging in the dirt.

TJ is a *Walpiri* man and a member of the community council. His limp, he will tell you, is the result of poliomyelitis he had as a child. One leg was left wasted and shortened. He spent a lonely year recovering in hospital in Adelaide, far from his family. At the same time he learned to speak good English. Pointing to my husband’s head, he grins and says, “Wise old man now, eh?” Here grey hair signifies wisdom. No need for the Grecian 2000 or blue rinses here. While at home we might try to disguise the signs of ageing at the hairdresser or the beautician, here they are celebrated and bring respect. I feel a stab of shame at getting around with my fake blonde streaks.

TJ’s wife Yvonne greets us at her gate with a shy smile. Today she seems quiet, even withdrawn. She climbs into the car carrying Ruby, her baby daughter, on her hip. The child is whingeing and irritable. A thick nasal discharge runs down from each
nostril to her mouth. Against the black skin the green mucus forms an almost luminous “number 11” common in children here.

We are heading down the road towards my Napaljarri sisters on the corner, but must first stop by at the Art Gallery to collect some paint. It is a low brick structure with a sign at the front: Warlakurlangu Artists. After explaining our mission to the new girl, she shows us out the back to a shelf above the sink. There we fill a small plastic container with yellow acrylic paint. Outside the back door under a broad awning, some local painters are already settled cross-legged on the ground and working on their “dot” paintings. Their dogs are stretched out in the shade beside them, sleeping or scratching.

Men and women, most elderly, including old Paddy, who has to be lifted down from his wheelchair, come here most days to paint, from memory, their Dreaming stories and sacred journeys. Each has a distinctive style. These are stories the artists once drew with an index finger moving through the red sand. Now they paint them on canvas in coloured dots of thick acrylic paint using a tool like a matchstick, splayed at the end.

Some of Australia’s most famous Aboriginal painters are here, their dogs at their side. Two look up and nod to us, while others are too engrossed in their work. From time to time, when the dogs get up to scratch and shake and change position, loose hairs fall from their coats, drift down and attach themselves to the wet painting that will next week bring thousands of dollars at an up-market Sydney or Melbourne gallery.
I scatter dog biscuit at a small distance away out to attract our first customers into a tight group. As they wolf the food down, the dogs each receive a measured squirt of an anti-parasite medicine onto their backs from a plastic syringe. Then Yvonne, with Ruby on one hip, reaches over with a long paintbrush to put a large dab of yellow paint on the back of each one. I note down the dogs and their owners and a score out of five for each dog’s skin condition. Our aim is to have a yellow dot on the back of every dog in the community by the end of the week. This will guarantee these dogs a few months of protection from parasites such as mange mites, ticks and lice.

Around the corner we find my three Napaljarri “sisters” at home in their front yard where a billy is bubbling over a flame. Theirs is one of the newer houses here, pale green in colour, built from concrete blocks. It has a white corrugated iron roof.

“Napaljarri,” says Rita Napaljarri, a grey-haired woman, extending her welcoming hand to mine. She clambers to her bare feet, her large breasts ballooning under the question: GROG, WHO NEEDS IT? displayed on her tee-shirt. Six of her dogs lie nearby. The rest, she indicates with a wave to the west, have taken themselves off to the shop. Evelyn remains sitting on the ground but reaches her left hand up and I take it. She is paralysed on her right side from a stroke. Lois is still sitting on her bed, pulling on a cardigan against the freshness of the morning.

After examining a sick pup, we put its lutu (ticks and lice) in jars and take faecal swabs. Rita Napaljarri grabs each dog in its turn, patiently holding Bluey, Rusty, Nugget, Ringo and Lassie by the leg while we treat them and Yvonne awards the yellow dot.
It is alarming that their new house should already be harbouring ticks. There are grilles on the windows of the house. But grilles don’t keep out the ticks that, in hot humid weather, crawl off the dogs and up the cooler internal walls to lay their eggs. These houses are hot in summer and cold in winter. The Napaljarri women, all in their seventies, prefer the old custom of living under a traditional shelter in the front yard. They tend to sleep outside too, on beds set up in the fresh air. In summer they keep in the shade of a tree; in winter they shelter behind a windbreak near the warmth of an open fire. Only bad weather will keep them inside their houses, but not for long. The windows are set too high for them to see out when sitting on the floor or resting on a mattress. The people here rarely use chairs, and, like the rest of us, want an outlook. They like to see who is coming and going and what is happening up and down their street.

We have almost finished treating this group when suddenly one of the dogs makes a break for it.

“Maliki ka parnkami,” I say, trying out a phrase from our Walpiri language tapes, which is supposed to mean, “The dog is running.”

Have I said something hilarious? Or has the dog outwitted us? Either way, the women are giggling in high-pitched voices, and pointing at the large white dog now disappearing up the road.

“It’s Lover Boy,” they say, continuing to enjoy the fiasco, “Cheeky dog, that one. He breeds all the jijuju (puppies). Got away last time too. And he’s tricked you again.”

So Lover Boy is still top dog around here. He fathers most of the pups over the other side of the community too, at West Camp. Other males don’t get a look in. Before leaving I give my “sisters” a packet of fruit-and-nut mix to thank them for their co-operation.

I call these women my Napaljarri sisters, because I have been given their “skin” name. When Graeme was first called Jakamarra (a “brother” to our friend Barry Boettcher), it logically followed that I became Napaljarri, a Napaljarri woman being the most acceptable wife (out of all the eight female “skin” groups or family names) for a Jakamarra man. In our European system we refer to “sister,” “brother,” “mother,” “father,” only when there is a blood tie. Here, anyone from outside who is consistently involved in the community is given a “skin” name to fit them into the kinship system. In this way the people here can relate to you. And besides, it makes an outsider feel
welcome. You feel part of the place. And you have a host of instant “relatives” who will probably lean on you for a favour sooner or later in much the same way that we are asking them to cooperate with our dog program.

In traditional Aboriginal society, people married someone of the opposite moiety, or “skin” group. This prevented the union of couples closely related and kept the gene pool strong, minimising the likelihood of genetically inherited disorders like haemophilia. When you stop to think about it, these people, whose land was once labelled “Terra Nullius” by the British, might have taught the royal houses of Britain and Europe a thing or two about the dangers of marrying first cousins, had the white colonists stopped to examine their intricate kinship system.

Just as we are leaving, Rita Napaljarri takes me aside. She whispers that her grandson is very ill in Adelaide Children’s Hospital. The Flying Doctor Service flew him there last week after a petrol-sniffing accident. He was high on the stuff with friends when their campfire got away into the grass; so he threw the petrol he was holding onto it as if trying to put it out. He is badly burnt and the doctors have removed one foot. They hope to save the other. His fingers too may have to go. He is fifteen years old and worries that he might never be able to drive a car. Could we call and see him if ever we are in Adelaide? He is homesick and gets very few visitors.

“No, of course,” I say, understanding that along with the privilege of belonging to a “family” come certain responsibilities.

I would have liked to bring my mother here to see this Napaljarri single women’s camp. It’s a group of women living together; a haven of female solidarity. Few women in this community choose to live alone. Some are widows while others are women whose husbands have left them for one of their younger wives. There is no shame here in being without a husband. To band together in shared accommodation seems an altogether satisfactory arrangement. The first wife can still remain on good terms with the younger wife. It is just that both have moved on to another stage in their lives. And they still have their own identity in their names. They have not acquired the initials of their husbands. A Beverly Napaljarri Jones who marries a Terry Jakamarra Smith will always keep her “skin” name and be still known as Beverly or Napaljarri Jones not Mrs Terry Smith. Any letters that arrive for Beverly will have her name on the envelope. The title of “Mrs” is unheard of here. I am never addressed as Anne or Mrs Brown by these women; always Napaljarri.
The Napaljarris hunt together and share the shopping and cooking. Evelyn, since her stroke, uses a stick to walk while dragging her useless leg. These women laugh together, cry together and keep strong together. They don’t seem lonely. And they don’t take any nonsense from men. When a nephew of one of the women arrives with three male friends and starts “humbugging” her for money and food, the women shout and shake their fists and send them off with four or five “cheeky” dogs snapping at their heels.

There is an inner strength to these women. They are full of a kind of knowledge that, for all my years of education, I have no inkling of. And it seems to have something to do with their sense of belonging to a place. It is as if, at their conception, that sacred belonging place, that piece of ground where the father’s seed burrowed into the mother’s egg, is imprinted upon the child; even its landforms—trees, hills and rocks—are encoded in the psyche. Such knowledge grows in significance as the child grows and is celebrated in their women’s ceremonies and stories. I find this connection fascinating, knowing that nine years ago, my husband and I moved to a house just five doors along from the inner-city flat in Newcastle that was my parents’ first home and the place where I was most likely conceived.

The women at Yuendumu remind me of Jean Kimble who drew strength from her association with other women. Jean had her own “women’s camps” of sorts, in the Soroptimists and the Order of the Eastern Star. It seems that organisations like these fulfilled a need in women in postwar Australia. My mother had her tennis friends, all successful career housewives and mothers. They were women who had worked in the armed services during the war and who perhaps felt isolated in a suburban home and missed the companionship of those days and the support of their “sisters.”

While I can imagine my father, and many other western men accepting the notion of polygamy, I struggle to imagine my mother and a couple of her women friends ever deciding to move in together. On the surface it’s a sound idea: three ex-wives of doctors, deserted by their husbands, living like Rita, Evelyn and Lois Napaljarri, under the same roof. But what would the neighbours in Merewether Heights have thought? I can imagine the gossip around the Victoria League Bridge tables, at the Newcastle Rotary Club meetings, or even in the tennis clubhouse: three women bucking the system, daring to step over the line, even when it seems a practical solution to their loneliness.
In our western society, so much of our self-worth is bound up in unspoken social rules and norms that override common sense. Women sharing together would probably be branded as lesbians, or communists, or a coven of witches! And whose house would they live in? In a capitalist society a large part of our identity is tied to our possession of real estate and property. We are judged by our material worth. Here in Yuendumu things are quite different.

Some years ago, after the death of her older sister Tilo, we found Nangala living in a “sorry” camp. Tilo had been one of our first clients. Her much loved dog Rocky was ill with a sexually transmitted disease causing a pendulous growth on his genitals that dragged painfully along the ground. He was understandably wary of us, but we finally corralled him in a laundry and managed to sedate him. On a makeshift operating table in the CDEP office, Rocky’s surgery was successful and he recovered. Unfortunately, his owner’s heart condition was not so easily remedied. She felt she was too close to death to go to Adelaide for the surgery, far away from her sister and grandchildren. If she were to die there, her spirit would not find its way back to this place, her country. Tilo died in her little tin house in Yuendumu, Rocky beside her, and her traditional spears and artworks on the floor by the bed.

Nangala showed the depth of her sorrow at the loss of her sister by immediately giving away her possessions and abandoning her house. This behaviour is still common. After the death of a close relative one sees television sets, DVD players and other
household possessions left outside the house on the side of the road. By doing these things Nangala avoided the unwanted attentions of her dead sister’s spirit.

When we finally tracked her down in a humpy at the “sorry camp,” Nangala had lost weight and could only speak in a whisper. All she owned were the clothes she stood up in and a few sacred things, like her precious seed collection and some artefacts she had made. I now realise she was living in the true spirit of “sorry.” She was entering into her sister’s pain.

On the death of a relative in our culture almost the opposite happens. While there is deep and sincere grieving, there is also an urgency to locate the deceased’s will and perhaps a squabble amongst relatives over that person’s possessions. When Jean Kimble died there was the issue of her full-length mink coat. The fate of that coat was on everyone’s mind. And the subject has never really gone away.

As we leave the Napaljarris and climb back into the car, a convoy of white, mud-splattered 4WD vehicles including a Toyota troop-carrier acting as a hearse, streams past under the archway and into the community in the direction of the church.

Along the road south we recognise the son of one of the community elders on his verandah. Pulling up at the house, we see the man is bare to the waist, sitting up in a bed, his long hair secured by a red, gold and black headband running across his forehead. As one of the traditional owners of land to the north being mined for gold he is clearly entitled to be in bed at almost midday. He seems grumpy and put out by our arrival, and shouts orders at other members of the family to come outside and catch the mother dog and its pups. At the sound of his command the mother dives out of sight into a ragged hole in the back of an old lounge chair in the front yard and the pups are quick to follow. Other pups emerge from a hole in a nearby mattress to follow their littermates. We end up on our knees in the dirt dragging them out one by one and taking samples and swabs. After all are treated, Yvonne, her child still moaning, dabs on the yellow paint. Dog faeces, videos, deflated balls, babies’ nappies and empty food tins litter the ground in front of the house. While the young man remains sitting in bed, we try to explain the importance of burning the
nappies rather than leaving them on the ground where the dogs can get into them. He gives the impression of being well educated, yet the health message seems to escape him and he drifts back to sleep. At Yuendumu, like anywhere else, some are more equal than others.

We take away a weak, sick pup. It is covered in ticks and dies before we get it to the car.

After dropping Yvonne and her baby home, we are heading back to the guesthouse for a lunch break when we meet Lenny. He waves us down outside the Art Centre and grins in through the window.

“So you’re back again,” he says with a smile. “Do you know I’ve got a new dog?”

“What type of dog is it?”

“One of those, er, Jack Daniels dogs.”

“But Lenny has already seen the smiles spreading over our faces and we all collapse into laughter.

As his baby Ruby is still sick, TJ replaces Yvonne for the afternoon run to West Camp.

“Hear that?” he says, as a wailing sound starts up in the direction of the Baptist Church. “We have more problems.”

As he climbs aboard, TJ explains that there has been another breakdown. Having the garbage truck off the road is bad enough, but this afternoon it is the backhoe. One hundred visitors, many from out of town, are already assembling at the church for the funeral. The white Toyota containing the pastor’s casket has arrived but has had to be redirected to the local morgue, a small brick building in scrub at the back of the church. The backhoe, it seems, has lost a wheel and cannot be mended. The funeral must be postponed until a new wheel can be located and fitted and the grave at the cemetery can been dug.

We pass by the morgue on our way to the group of tin houses and humpies at West Camp. Seeing us emerge from the ute with our bags and bottles, a woman starts rounding up twenty or so dogs.

“Other maliki,” she says, “are over at the Art Centre with my husband Jangala.”

Explaining that we have already been there and treated them, we work quickly in the shade of her verandah, the dogs ravenous for the dog biscuit. Once TJ has finished with
the paintbrush on each dog, and my notes are complete, we continue on to an elegant older couple waiting patiently across the road with their two dogs.

They are sitting outside on chairs at a metal-framed table in the shade of a bean tree, enjoying a cup of tea. This is such a rare sight. Most people, old or young, tend to sit on the ground. The yard is neat and newly swept and in the red earth beneath our feet I see flashes of crimson. They are bean seeds, the small kidney-shaped seeds, or yinirinti, that Nangala collects and makes into necklaces. I pick up a few and ask the couple if I may keep them to add to my small collection at home. Bit by bit they are filling up the small pottery bowl on my hall table: one seed for each day we spend out here. The woman nods and smiles.

They are both clad for the funeral, she in a floral dress, her husband in a cowboy hat, jeans and high-heeled polished western-style riding boots. Like every other man today, he is wearing a crisp white shirt. As we treat their two healthy-looking dogs and take our swabs and samples, the man tells us he used to work as a stockman at the large cattle station over yonder. Without looking around he indicates the direction with an outstretched arm. I see the oily opaqueness of his eyes and their swollen, irritated lids and realise that the man is blind. But blindness from trachoma is no barrier to looking back to the past, to the good times riding high in the saddle, weeks out on a cattle muster with the other men, or rounding up and breaking in brumbies. “It was a good life, a healthy life,” he says. But a life, it seems, that ended for many when the Whitlam Government brought in equal pay. Up until then Aboriginal workers had been given rations only, and permission to live in humpies on station land. Suddenly Aboriginal stockmen were considered too expensive to keep on.

We leave the old couple to their mugs of tea and move on to the humpies where a woman is beckoning. “Big mob maliki here,” she says, pointing inside one of the low-slung shelters constructed from sheets of corrugated iron and branches of witchetty bush. There are four or so beds inside and pile of blankets on the ground. As we stoop to enter the first humpy, a large white male dog dashes out from under a bed followed closely by a female and three other dogs. As they push past me I see that the first two are joined together, in flagrante delicto. It’s Lover Boy from East Camp up to his old tricks. Before we can apply treatment they push past my legs and are away, stumbling and cavorting across the open ground like one drunken eight-legged beast in circles of slowly abating passion. Stepping back to regain my balance I tread on something that moves and groans under a pile of blankets. A shrivelled arm emerges. I know
immediately what I have done and feel ill. There is a murmur from the blankets, followed by a high-pitched wail.

“I’m sorry,” I say to a man sitting nearby in the shadows, knowing it can never be enough. He bends down and reaches under the blankets to reveal another arm and an old woman’s head. The woman is crying out. She is frail and confused. The man says she is fine, this is normal. He cradles her head in one hand and offers her sips of water from a plastic bottle with the other. She settles back to sleep.

“This is my mother,” he says tenderly, rocking her back and forth as if comforting a child. “She is a very wise old woman.”

The dogs get away, but it doesn’t matter much. They are healthy-looking mutts. Their coats are sleek and free of mange. We’ve noticed this before: the worst-affected dogs tend to come from the damp concrete-block houses. The dogs from these humpies, where the effect of the wind and sun is to sterilise the bedding and desiccate the excrement on the ground, seem healthier.

Returning to the office past the Youth Centre, we notice that the unofficial shrine by the side of the road is still well maintained. A white cross, plastic flowers in a vase, gifts and a faded photograph, all contained within a circle of painted stones still mark the spot where a young man died three years ago. Just nineteen years old, he was one of our best helpers in the dog program. His death was sudden and unexpected.

The mourning period, or “sorry business,” for this young man was long. In a sense, normal life for the whole community ground to a halt. Weeks went by while rituals were performed. Women bare to the waist, their faces and breasts painted in a
slurry of white ash, swung brooms made from tree branches, chanting and wailing as they swept his spirit from its usual haunts.

Out of respect for him, the young man’s name will not be spoken for months yet, perhaps years. He and any other man with the same Christian name will continue to be referred to as Kumunjayi, or “no name.”

There are whitefellas who say that “sorry business” paralyses communities. Relatives most affected down tools and move off to the bush to camp, sometimes for months. Any grieving relatives employed on a regular basis would need a very understanding boss, as long periods of “sorry” are hardly compatible with holding down a steady job in the city.

With the music starting up at the church we take TJ back to clock off. He is anxious to get a seat at the funeral. People are walking towards the church from all directions. As we pass it, the white troop carrier is pulled up at the back door. All signs are that the wheel on the backhoe has been fixed.

Before he gets out, TJ asks if we would like to have a barbecue with him and his family on Saturday, at Mission Creek. He wants to show us the place where
missionaries first baptised his people. It’s a nice gesture and a rare one. Kardiya (whitefellas) and yapa (Aboriginals) tend not to mix socially. We agree to meet on Saturday afternoon, hoping the baby will be better by then.

You feel a sense of the fragility of existence here, of people living precariously close to the edge. With so many funerals and so much “sorry,” death is a part of life. It is a remote place with a harsh climate, and living seems to be done with the prospect of dying in mind.

In western culture the tendency is to deny ageing and death. Here, in my temporary exile from the city, I think of the Aboriginal children stolen in the ’50s and ’60s from remote communities who were moved the other way; rounded up, sometimes with stockwhips, and sent to the city to be placed in orphanages or white suburban families where they were expected to adjust to a new mother, adapt to new ways, connect with a new life and be grateful for it.

I had a chance meeting at university some years ago with a young Aboriginal medical student studying in Newcastle. He was one of a family of thirteen children taken from their Aboriginal mother on the river bank in St George, in Queensland. A man of about thirty-five when I met him, Michael had driven taxis before winning the scholarship to the University of Newcastle. He wept as he told me he had managed to track down only two of his siblings. He was still searching, he said, for his mother, his father and ten brothers and sisters.

**TUESDAY**

It’s a new day with the promised forecast of a mild 30 degrees. I’m washing up after breakfast when the front door of the guesthouse swings open and five people bustle in and up the hall with their luggage. American accents. And English. And Australian. No doubt we’ll catch up with them tonight.

On a notice board at the CDEP office this morning is an advertisement for new traineeships on offer in Cultural Tourism, Fashion, and Art and Craft. In the past teachers have come up from Alice Springs if there is enough interest to fill a class. Now though, with the new Intervention policy taking effect and the Government Taskforce due here any day, there is talk of winding up CDEP. People are despondent. They fear a return of the old paternalism of fifty years ago and a loss of control over their lives. Just
this morning on breakfast radio Pat Dodson was saying that sending army and police personnel into remote communities is a misuse of government powers.

Around at the Women’s Centre, the first news of the proposed Intervention into indigenous communities sent the women into a spin. They were furious.

“It’s not right,” they said.
“We should act now.”
“Let’s march.”
“Yes, let’s march naked down the Tanami Road.”
“Let’s all calm down,” said Pam Malden, the co-ordinator.

Twelve years ago a screen printing workshop was operating here. It occupied a large empty building opposite the church and printed modern indigenous designs on cotton fabric. The fabric was then sewn into clothing and Manchester items like curtains and sheets and quilt covers. They were good quality, well-made items that sold well to the people passing through the community. A year later the business closed down. It seems that new ventures begin with enthusiasm but falter out of a lack of continuity. White people come to work out here, share their talents and get things up and running, but when they leave after a year or two it is difficult to find someone prepared to keep it going.

There is a telephone message at the CDEP office that we are needed at the Police Station. One of the officers there has a veterinary problem. As usual, after we’ve been here a few days, the kardiya (whitefellas) start to track us down and we are waylaid by requests for attention to their pets. However, since we have no helpers wanting work this morning, we head straight out of town just past the new women’s refuge, and turn into the Police Station next door. Once through the gate we see what must be fifty cars parked behind secure fencing. These are the impounded vehicles which will never be returned to their owners. Most are almost new, but each has been found bringing grog into the community. Eventually, when the yard is full, they will be sold.

Once through the main gate we reach the back of the station. Two dogs bound off the porch of the police residence and along the inside of a fence, barking. This time a white policeman appears, not the Aboriginal policeman we saw last time.

After a brief introduction he says, “Thanks for coming. I’ve been so worried. Follow me.” To our surprise, he leads us away from the house, in through the back door
of the station, and along a corridor past several open cell doors. “She’s in here,” he says, stopping in front of a closed door. He opens the small security window, and peers through.

“Can’t see her. Might have to use the monitor.” As we follow him into his office I’m wondering if an animal has collapsed behind the door. Or is it one of Nangala’s Night Patrol detainees? The Black Deaths in Custody enquiry flashes through my mind.

A black and white image flickers to life on the small screen. It shows the interior of the cell we have just passed. After watching for some minutes, the policeman says, “Here she is now. Look, isn’t she beautiful?”

A single domestic chook struts into view.

“Gorgeous. Has she a problem?”

“Yes, she won’t lay. Could you have a look at her?”

After dispensing advice to the grateful sergeant on his egg-bound hen, we are once again hailed in the street outside the Women’s Centre. A meeting under the trees is being interrupted by attempts to catch a large dark-coloured bird, a cormorant that, by all reports, has fallen from a branch of the tree above. It seems to have an injured wing. It has black webbed feet and a strong bill that has just clamped around my husband’s thumb. His resulting expletives are met by stifled giggles from the women, who stand back and wait for me to take over. Someone produces a towel which we wrap firmly around the bird, making it easier for me to carry it safely and to hold it on my lap while we drive it the short distance to the town dam. The bird remains motionless until we stop and get out of the car. It starts to struggle violently as we approach the water’s edge. I ease my grasp and the frightened thing flaps along for a couple of metres, flops onto the water, then duck-dives, surfaces and paddles away.

We return the towel to the Women’s Centre via the side door so as not to intrude further on the visiting kardiya woman who is talking to the yapa women about the proposed safe-house. There is quite a roll-up and they are listening intently.

“It is time to address the problem of domestic violence in our community,” she says. “We need more information in schools. Already we have the message on TV: ‘If you are angry, go away, cool down, sober up. Don’t react and be violent. There is too much grog coming into Yuendumu. Men are getting out of control . . .’”

Nangala is leaving the meeting to walk home. We offer her a lift. She climbs in saying, “Lost too many of my family because of grog.” She invites us to come into her house to see the painting she is working on.
We enter through the side gate behind the Mission House and are met by Nangala’s two dogs, Cindy and Whisky. We follow her cross a stretch of lawn to a small room that once served as a laundry for the Baptist Minister and his wife. The sight of a set of polished concrete laundry tubs near the doorway takes me back to my childhood in Merewether. I expect to see a “blue bag” perched on a soap dish behind the tubs, and a bleached old “copper stick” like the one my mother used for lifting the steaming washing from the copper across to the tubs. I can almost hear her voice saying, “Stand clear now.”

Nangala sits us down on the floor in the scrupulously tidy space. She reaches into the corner amongst paint tins, jars of bean seeds and half-carved artefacts, and lifts out a rolled canvas. She unrolls the canvas and stretches it out on the floor in front of us, placing a small rock on each corner. The painting is half completed in red, brown and white dots that dance wildly between thicker parallel strokes of black paint. The effect is at first expressionist, combined with a strong feeling of landscape. Nangala explains that it is her Fire Dreaming story, and points to the red and brown flame-shaped representations of the anthills of her traditional country.

“Next time you come,” says Nangala, smiling and rolling up the painting, “I will paint a Dog Program picture, just for you.”

Out of the corner of my eye I see a mouse skitter along the wall from the front door to the bedroom where Nangala’s mattress lies on the floor. With no lining to the walls, small creatures have easy access. Nangala seems not to worry about it. She picks up a postcard from the shelf beside her and turns to me.

“This card came yesterday,” she says. Could you read it for me?” She seems embarrassed to ask this favour and hangs her head, avoiding my eye. Perhaps I showed my surprise. I thought that the women of Nangala’s generation would have attended the mission school.

The glossy picture on the postcard shows a woman in African costume. Suddenly I realise it is Nangala. On the back it is postmarked in Niger with a message written in English. I read it aloud. It brings good wishes from her friends and some news: The acacia seeds we planted together are growing well. Wish you were here with us to celebrate.

Nangala seems brightened by the news, but then the sad expression returns.

“I wish I had learned to read,” she says.

“But Nangala,” I say, “It hasn’t stopped you doing this good work in Africa.”
“But I could have done much more for my people if I had learned.”

“So you didn’t go to the mission school?”

“I went to school. All the children had to go.”

She remembers going to school on the first day with her sister Tilo. Their family had only recently come into the community from the bush. The girls, already teenagers, were both dressed in the white uniforms their mother had sewn from old flour sacks. It was in the early days of the mission, just after the end of the war, and her father, who was a dingo hunter, was able to get extra rations of flour, tea and brown sugar at the mission store in exchange for the dingo scalps.

They marched into school that day in a line behind the other girls, their mother’s words still ringing in their heads: “Do everything Pastor Fleming and the teachers tell you, so you can learn to read and write.”

Nangala had been at school only a few days when the Baptist minister came into the classroom, spoke to the teacher and pointed at this shy girl sitting in the front row. The teacher asked her to stand, saying, “Yes, Pastor Fleming, this is Nangala, one of our brightest girls.”

Pastor Fleming took the girl with the shining eyes out of school that day to work for him as a maid in the Mission House. From then on he called her Rosie, Rosie Fleming. Rosie never returned to school. Her older sister Tilo, however, stayed on, eventually training as a nurse and serving as a Health Worker in remote communities.

“I watched my friends going past with their books,” said Nangala, “while I was inside, cooking and cleaning for him. I heard the children singing while I scrubbed his floors and dusted his shelves full of books,” she says, tears welling up in her eyes. “I feel angry now. I worked there long time. He growed me up, that man. He gave me his name but he never taught me to read and write.”

Nowadays Rosie Fleming prefers to be called by her “skin” name, Nangala. And she is again living behind the Mission House. She moved in a few years ago when her uncle, senior man Darby Jampijinpa, had to move into the care of relatives.

As we are leaving, Nangala points to the outside tubs. “I helped that minister’s wife make porridge here. A big job. We make it for the hungry people—bush people, big mob then—coming in looking for something to eat and drink. And we serve it up to the children too, sitting washed and dressed, waiting in a circle here on the grass. They came up one at a time to get their porridge. She was a kind woman, that Mrs Fleming.”
Pastor Fleming and his wife arrived at the Yuendumu mission after the war. After the fall of Singapore, Tom Fleming had spent time as a prisoner-of-war, first in Changi, and later in Borneo. Like many missionaries of their time, their methods are now seen as having being well-intentioned but paternalistic.

Back at the guesthouse, the kitchen is in full swing as the new residents we saw arriving this morning are cooking their evening meal. After a shower we get a turn at the stove and rustle up a stir fry. We meet Bob, a young pilot and find ourselves chatting comfortably together. He tells us he has brought four passengers here on the first leg of an art-buying tour of Western Desert communities. He introduces us to a middle-aged American couple from Martha’s Vineyard and two other smartly dressed women in the party. The Americans, it seems, are old hands at the business of acquiring Australian Aboriginal art.

“Yeah, we’ve been collecting for a long time,” says Mike, “and we like what we’ve seen today. Isn’t that right Laura?” His wife nods in agreement.

“Absolutely right. And we’re sure grateful to have the advice of experts Kay and Shirley here. They know all the up-and-coming artists to buy in these parts. We’ve put a hold on six paintings at the Art Centre here. The manager was not too happy about it. But I guess we have to keep our options open. This is only our first stop. Tomorrow we fly to Balgo.”

**WEDNESDAY**

Our fellow guests are leaving early this morning. Bob the pilot says it’s a long way to Balgo and he will need to refuel at the Granites Gold Mine on the way. Their bags are in the hall and Bob’s twin-engine Beechcraft Baron is waiting at the airstrip. We wish them well and head off early ourselves, to the teacher’s house around the corner, to treat her sick kitten before school. That done, we are just cutting back to the CDEP office to collect a helper when Francis Jupurrula stops us in street in his car and asks us to look at the dogs at his house. “A big mob,” he
says, “And ticks too.” He can’t stay as he’s on his way to a meeting in Alice Springs. This is the man who was so good to us on our first visit here. He showed us around, introduced us to the council members and was our first helper in the Dog Program. And he took us out to show us his country. An hour’s drive from the community we left the car and climbed high up over rugged terrain to reach his sacred “rock holes.” The holes in the rocks were not visible from below, as they were in shaded, secluded crevices that kept the water clean and cool, preventing too much evaporation. I remember we drank to quench our thirst as the air was hot and dry, and then we stood there, the three of us, on top of the world while he pointed out his bush plum Dreaming place, a nearby ridge of perfectly round boulders, formed, he said, “by the Ancestors as they travelled around creating the country.”

Jupurrula is a trained dental technician, but I suspect he now prefers to direct movies. His first “Bush Mechanics” film was produced by Yuendumu’s Walpiri Media Association in association with the Australian Film Commission. Shown on ABC Television, the film follows the journey of a group of Walpiri men driving through the desert in their clapped-out cars, inventing creative solutions to the breakdowns as they arise. It was a funny film, all the more interesting because we knew the men in it. Most of them had helped us in the Dog Program.

We collect today’s helper, Angela Nungarrayi, from the CDEP office and drive to Jupurrula’s house at West Camp. It is a large house, surrounded by shady verandahs and a well-watered lawn. Only four dogs are at home, the others having run away at our approach. Angela has helped us in the past and soon remembers the routine. After we collect their ticks and blood, Jupurrula’s young (juvenile) dogs bleed freely from the needle site; they are possibly already affected by the tick-borne disease, Ehrlichia. We are careful to keep the ticks alive in gauze-covered jars with moistened paper tissue inside. The female “brown dog” tick is enormously swollen with blood, while the male is miniscule and still attached in the act of mating, on her underside. It is a pity Jupurrula has gone into Alice Springs. He would have been interested in the drama unfolding in the jar. The sun is hot so we return to the guesthouse to photograph the ticks while they are fresh and to refrigerate the blood samples.

It seems that our art-collecting friends have not left for Balgo as planned. At the guesthouse Bob the pilot is pacing the floor in a sweat. He has been refused permission to land at the Granites Gold Mine to refuel. Security is tight there at present and unscheduled stops are forbidden. After looking at his maps, doing the calculations and
making phone calls, he says that with his present payload of passengers and luggage he will not have enough fuel to get everyone to Balgo in one hop. But he has hatched a plan. He proposes to take off early tomorrow, leaving the luggage behind. A fellow pilot in Alice Springs will be flying his empty plane to Balgo tomorrow to collect some charter passengers and fly them to Darwin. This pilot has offered to land his empty plane at Yuendumu on the way, collect the luggage and deliver it to Balgo.

“And by the way,” says Bob, “a woman came to the door with a letter for you. I’ve stuck it on your bedroom door.”

While Graeme deals with the specimens I open the envelope: “Please join us for dinner tonight. 7.00 pm. Third house along from the Old People’s Centre. And bring Mike and Laura with you. Cheers, Sandra from the Art Centre.

After a quick coffee we head down past the Women’s Centre. That is strange—Nangala and the other women are nowhere to be seen. Their fire has not even been lit. As we pass “the old ladies house” on the corner I expect to see three Napaljarri women up and about in the sunshine and a billy simmering over glowing coals. But this morning the fire is cold and there’s no one about. The beds in the yard are empty of blankets and pillows. The brushwood shelter is bereft of cooking pots and foodstuffs usually stashed on the roof out of reach of the dogs. And their dogs, those ten or twelve scrounging mutts always waiting in the shadows for scraps, where are they?

My first thought is sorry business. Perhaps there has been a death, and the women are in mourning, their breasts painted, sweeping away the spirit of the deceased. But we’ve heard no wailing. It’s the silence that speaks loudest. Where are the children, those high-spirited voices, making their way in dribs and drabs to school? Something is going on. It’s too calm. Like the lull before a desert storm. We continue over to the Art Centre to see Sandra and thank her for the invitation and offer to bring some food tonight.

“No need,” she says, “my husband Dennis is cooking. Just bring yourselves and Mike and Laura.” She shows me a handsome new hardcover book written by Liam Campbell on the life of Nangala’s uncle, Darby Jampijinpa. Liam used to work at the Art Centre and was close to old Darby who was one of the oldest and most famous painters and storytellers in the Western Desert until his death a few years ago. Inside the book I find a photograph of Nangala and her husband sitting either side of Pastor Tom Fleming and his wife. I buy a copy of the book to read later.
We come across Helen the postmistress walking to work. “Would you like to come and have dinner with us on Saturday night?” she asks. We are glad to accept. With two invitations in one morning our social life is looking up. Helen and Tony have been friends for many years. We always look forward to catching up with them, especially this time, as this is their last year here.

“You’ll notice the place has gone a bit quiet,” Helen says. “It’s this Federal Government Intervention. We’ve been told to expect the army and the police sometime today or tomorrow. The people are in a panic. Some of the old ladies have run away. And if you are looking for Nangala, she has cleared out too. They say she got a lift up to Lajamanu. And now, from all reports, she’s become lost in the bush.”

Nangala lost. It seems unthinkable. This woman would now be in her late seventies. Born out in the bush in drought time, she knows this country like the back of her hand. Perhaps that is where she is now, guarding her country. And it is her country, country rich in gold and uranium, for which she and the other traditional owners receive mining royalties. Now, with talk of Aboriginal lands being taken over, Nangala and her friends could be worried. Land is all they really own. Now she has run away into the bush where, for the moment at least, she might feel safe from the approaching army and police.

I suppose that Nangala must have her reasons to fear men in uniform. As a young woman she would have watched as the Government’s Aboriginal Welfare Officers came into the community and took the paler-skinned children away from the arms of their crying mothers.

She certainly remembers the occasions, before we started the Dog Program, when she would return from a big funeral in Lajamanu or Alice Springs to find her community littered with the dead bodies of dogs. Knowing the place to be almost empty for the day, the police had driven around shooting old or sick dogs without consultation with the people. Here, you soon learn that nothing can be achieved without discussion with the people. It is their community.

Even before the army arrives, the people here, especially the men, are already tainted. When our kind friend Francis Jupurrula walks through Alice Springs to his meeting today he will carry the stigma of unspeakable crimes with him. You can see it in the eyes and minds of a section of the white population: those visitors, travellers and locals who have read the newspaper headlines, seen the findings of the *Little Children*
are Sacred Report, watched the television news, and now point at the black man and judge.

We call at the shop to collect some cardboard boxes and see Pam, the co-ordinator of the Women’s Centre. She explains that government funding for the Women’s Centre and the Women’s Refuge ceased a few weeks ago. Any further funding has been held off until the taskforce arrives and appoints a new business manager to the community. If domestic violence and sexual abuse of children, as described in the recent report, are a reality in Aboriginal communities, then this decision is hard to fathom.

People are wondering what will happen now about the promised extension of the school curriculum, in this and several other large communities, to Year 12. It seems that there has been no follow-up since the announcement. As things stand, children here have to move to Alice Springs and board from Monday to Friday if they wish to continue beyond Year 9. Without equality in education, how can young people here hope to be trained for the “real jobs” that the government expects will materialise when they close CDEP to make way for Centrelink? The statement by Noel Pearson recently that “the dollar you earn yourself is worth more than the dollar you are given,” is well and good when there are jobs. But it appears that there are few real jobs here. At least with CDEP, people like Angela, TJ and Yvonne are up, out of bed and waiting at 8.00am to clock on. And they work for their dole money.

Graeme is to address the council meeting this morning. He intends to inform the meeting that his results show that the sickest dogs are those which are underfed and must share their food with a “big mob” of other dogs. He will suggest that two dogs per household would mean a healthier community. And he will explain that his study of the dogs here involves a link-up with the Territory Health doctors in Alice Springs to see if the parasites making the dogs sick might be also be causing disease in the people. He will say that blankets and other bedding must be washed often and hung in the sun to dry if the community wants to be free of these parasites.

Already community managers from other places are gathering at the front of the council building. A partition has been put in place down the centre of the council chambers to separate the men from the women. Women demand this so they can speak freely without incurring the disapproval of their husbands.
Back at the guesthouse I open the new book, *Darby*, and look again at the photograph of Nangala. Though she has told me many stories about him it is the first time I have seen his picture. I know that Jimija was much older than she, and passed away many years ago.

Nangala had been promised to Jimija as a child. When the war started she was a young teenager still living in the bush with her parents. That was a time when she and her young girlfriends were more interested in their first sighting of an aeroplane overhead than in thoughts of marriage. “Up in the sky,” they would squeal. “That terrible thing with two wings, that magical thing, is it going to attack us, that big bird?”

Jimija had enlisted with the Australian Army early in the war, as many Aboriginal men did. And he enjoyed the experience of wearing a uniform. It was the first time in his life that he felt included in the dominant culture of this country. Wartime was the first time since contact with whites that Aboriginal men found themselves sharing decent living and working conditions.

“Army time,” said Nangala, “was a time of *good* things: good food, clean living quarters, medicines and regular wages. But there were *bad* things too, like Aboriginal men tasting beer for the first time.”

It was something new to have Aboriginal recruits living side-by-side with white soldiers in white-style accommodation at Barrow Creek while they worked on the construction of the Stuart Highway. But when the war ended, so did the equality. Aboriginal men went back to their communities and cattle stations and back to a dependency on meagre rations. It was hard to get enough to eat.

Nangala had known Jimija before they married. She already had a friendly relationship with his first wife. Nangala was twenty-four when they married, older than most girls, as some married very young. A mother knew when her daughter was ready. Nangala’s mother knew. She watched with approval when her daughter picked up her blanket and swag of clothes and walked over to Jimija’s house and in through the door. That simple act confirmed to the community that she was Jimija’s wife.

“He was a good man, a strong man,” Nangala said. “He worked hard,”

When Jimija came home from the war he decided to stay on in Yuendumu and use his military training and skills in constructing buildings as the community expanded. Leading a team of Walpiri men he oversaw the building of the store, the Mission House, a new school and hospital.
Jimija had worn the Australian Army uniform in war and continued to work hard for his people, yet would not gain the right to vote in his own country for another twenty years. Even when equal wages came in for Aboriginales working on cattle stations, conditions were poor. It was another five or six years before they were given the same welfare benefits as other Australians. Only after that, said Nangala, did things improve. “No more rations of rotten meat, intestines for soup, and old bones to suck on. With ‘sit-down money’ people could buy decent food from the store.”

Good news from the council meeting. It was announced today that the swimming pool will go ahead. Approval has been given and a site marked out. Work is expected to start next week. For many here it can’t come quickly enough. After a shower of rain you see children sitting and splashing themselves in mud puddles in the middle of the road. And while this location is a desert, there is no shortage of underground, artesian water. In northern communities the “no school - no pool” policy has been successful in raising school attendance rates. Besides, doctors say a daily swim in chlorinated water would lessen the ear, nose and throat infections commonly seen in Aboriginal children. Meanwhile mothers cool their children down any way they can.

After a late afternoon run to west camp to treat the stragglers we missed before, we stop to treat some dogs gathered outside the supermarket, scrounging on dropped food and discarded takeaway containers. Then we head back to the guesthouse, past the modern
Child Care Centre where mothers are collecting their children. As we slow to a stop to let them pass the director tells us it has been a dreadful day.

“The mothers,” she says, “have been in a panic all day. Most kept their babies away. But those who did bring their children kept coming back three or four times during the day to bathe them, fearful that the army would arrive and find dirt on them.”

I think we have seen and heard enough. It is time to call it a day.

Sandra and her husband Dennis, a school teacher here, welcome the four of us into their house. They introduce us to two other teachers. Dennis is holding his three-year-old daughter Maryanne, who is saying goodnight before being put into bed. He apologises that he has a bedtime story to read before he can resume the cooking, but the leg of lamb it is looking after itself in the oven for now. Sandra hands around glasses of apple juice and some nibbles. I can’t help wondering if she is hoping to woo Mike and Laura into a last minute decision on the paintings that have been “set aside.” She is a good sales woman and I have always thought her prices fair. Besides, a painting means so much more when you have had the opportunity to get to know the artists and their community.

I remember a painting we bought years ago. The artist is now dead but she was so well-thought of at the time that she was invited to paint in New York. For a woman who grew up in the bush, New York must surely have had an effect on her. When she came home and was asked what she thought of it, she answered, “New York full of very sad people. I’m glad to be back in Yuendumu.”

The last time I saw her she was living in an old women’s camp where we happened to be treating the dogs. She looked unkempt and emaciated and seemed to be suffering from dementia. “You got medicine for me?” she asked us in a pleading voice, until another woman shrieked at her, “Don’t be so stupid, Maggie. That’s *maliki* (dog) medicine.”

The lamb roast is delicious. We sit eating and chatting around the large kitchen bench. These teachers have been working here for years. They are dedicated to the job. In such an isolated place, the ten percent of whitefellas (one hundred or so) seem to make their own fun. I used to think I would wilt here over a long time, not just from the heat but from the lack of cultural stimulation; it’s a four-hour drive to Alice Springs for the nearest library, theatre or restaurant. Up until now I have felt fortunate that we have
been able to do our work in short bursts of a week to ten days and return to our other life in the city.

**THURSDAY**

Our companions are airborne at last. Sipping coffee at the front door of the guesthouse, we watch their plane gaining height and heading west to Balgo.

We stop at the store this morning to collect some cardboard boxes. As grisly as it sounds, they make good coffins for unwanted dogs. As I wait in the vehicle the siren sounds across the road to signal the start of school classes. Two boys aged about ten and fourteen are lingering at the school gate looking my way. They hesitate for a moment, then approach the car with something in a box. I open the door and one of the boys lifts the lid off the box to reveal two down-covered chicks, light grey in colour, their eyes and beaks open, searching the air for food.

“Look,” they say, and start goading the poor things with a stick for my amusement. They could be small buzzards. They are wobbly and tired, and quite defenceless at the hands of their captors. They won’t last long at this rate.

“They look hungry,” I say. “Are you going to put them back in the nest?” The boys shake their heads and laugh, close the lid and run in through the school gate. Perhaps the teacher will persuade them.

This morning we are to follow Glen to the small community he manages, two hours north of here. He met Graeme at the council meeting yesterday and would like us
to look at the dogs. We pack some supplies for the day and follow him to Willowra. We pass through beautiful country, cattle country mostly, the dirt road taking us over dry river beds, their banks shaded by enormous River Red Gums. It is a pretty, tree-softened town that greets us as we pull up at Glen’s place for a cup of tea which he serves on his broad, fly-screened verandah. There are several houses here, he says, with very sick dogs that have never had treatment of any kind.

Four middle-aged women are waiting outside the first house when we arrive. Glen introduces us to Napangardi, the owner of the house. Behind her on the wide front porch, three beds covered in dirty foam mattresses are occupied exclusively by twelve or so filthy, mangy dogs. But for the moment it is not the dogs we have come to see, Glen says, but the inside of Napangardi’s house.

Praising her housekeeping skills, Glen asks Napangardi to show us her front room. Obliging, she sweeps the door open to reveal a long, rectangular space, completely empty, its concrete floor, walls and ceiling painted white and kept spotlessly clean. We find ourselves agreeing, while feeling uncomfortable and patronising, that yes, Napangardi, it is a beautifully clean room. A showpiece.

But like most showpieces, the room is not used. As the women round up twenty or so dogs for treatment, and we unload our medical supplies from the car, Glen explains that most of the women lack the skills required to keep a western house. When living traditionally in the open air they needed no more than a tree branch to sweep the ground around their living areas. Scrubbing the dirt off walls and stoves and cupboards, he says, is beyond them. It’s a habit that Aboriginals here have never been taught. Glen is new in the job and still coming to terms with the problems here.

“How will they ever integrate into the mainstream culture,” he says. “How can they hope to rent a house in town?”

“But Napangardi has learned,” I say. “And so has Nangala at Yuendumu.”

“Look,” says Glen, shaking his head, “They are the exceptions. I could show you what is left of a new stainless steel kitchen after a kangaroo was chopped up on the sink with an axe.”

After we have treated all the dogs and are about to leave, Napangardi comes over to the car. She says she has been talking to the women who share her house and they have come to the decision that they have too many dogs.

“It is not healthy,” says Napangardi. As she turns to speak to us her voice drops to a whisper, “Can you “finish” some of these sick ones?”
It has taken the women some time to come to this decision. It is a big step for them. The women point out the dogs they want put down. One of them sits on the bed and holds each dog in turn firmly but gently, caressing it and singing to it as you would to a comfort a child, as Graeme brings up the vein. We put down fourteen dogs in all and take them away in the ute to be buried in a special trench already prepared at the tip.

After a long morning’s work Glen takes us to his office where some sandwiches have been prepared. Over lunch he explains the secret to Napangardi’s clean front room. She had seen an advertisement on television for the cleaning product, Pine-O-Clean. On her next trip to the store, along with her groceries she bought a bottle of the “magic” liquid. When she first splashed it around the grubby concrete floor inside her front door, she waited, but nothing changed. The dirt on the walls and floors didn’t shift. Then remembering the finer points of the ad, she stood again in the centre of the wet floor in her bare feet, closed her eyes, waved an imaginary wand in the air and said, “Ding!” Still no transformation to glistening bench-tops and stainless steel appliances. “This trick,” she said, “must only work for whitefellas.” Then she got down on her hands and knees with a scrubbing brush and set to work.

Glen says that Napangardi’s front room is a model for the other women in the community. “It’s lifestyle education these women need.”

On the way back to Yuendumu I think of how houseproud my mother was. She employed a cleaning woman who came one morning a week to keep the place up to the standard expected in her set. She kept a comb and lipstick handy on the kitchen bench in case a visitor arrived unexpectedly at the back door. Appearances are important in the dominant western culture. We are judged by appearances.

In Yuendumu, their most senior yapa man could live in a filthy house and it would be of little concern to others. He is judged by his knowledge of Jukurrpa (Dreaming), a belief system that encompasses his religion and the creation of the Law. He keeps this knowledge in his head and passes it on in stories, songs and ceremonies that tell of the journeys of Ancestors and their creation of the landscape. The stories about Dreaming Ancestors are moral tales of good and evil, not unlike Bible stories. They help people to distinguish between right and wrong behaviour. The head man is a good storyteller who can make his narrative long and complex or short and simple according to the level of understanding in the listener. He is artist, teacher and spiritual leader rolled into one. But he is not the CEO of the community. The CEO is a white man appointed by the Council. He must make the decisions, but only after consultation
with elders and Council members. It is really about money. When funds are to be allocated to a project, they are in the CEO’s hands. The yapal people accept this. They know that if a yapal man were placed in charge of council money and his brother were to come to him for a loan, his traditional Law would say that he should help his brother in any way he can.

On our drive back to Yuendumu my thoughts turn to Jean Kimble. Like these community women, Jean spent little time inside her house. With her mother Nettie cooking and cleaning for her she never needed to. When left to fend for herself, however, Jean was still working five days a week and didn’t have time to waste on housework. Again, like my Napaljarri sisters, Jean was without a husband and so was drawn into the company of other women, many of them single. It was more fun to go out with the girls for lunch on weekends or to visit a church fête than to stay home and cook alone. She could always find company at the regular Chapter meetings of the OES, or the Soroptimists meetings where supper was served, or accept the invitation, every week or so, to Frank and Alice’s for dinner. And on weekends she could pick up a takeaway and wash it down with some Scotch. Like the women in Yuendumu, Jean always had a shop close by. Needing little exercise to find food, she packed on the pounds and, like many Aboriginal women, developed diabetes.

Before my first visit here, my impressions of an Aboriginal community had been formed in my childhood. In the early ’50s, our family holidays north of Newcastle took us along the Pacific Highway past the Purfleet Mission on the outskirts of Taree. Although I can’t remember us having any discussion as we drove by, I have a clear recollection of the place. Craning our necks from the back seat of the Holden, we would see those run-down houses with unkempt yards and the dark-skinned children running round half-clothed. Terms we had heard, like “abos,” “boongs” and “coons,” sprang to mind. And there was always a bad feeling about the place, a taint of otherness that spoke of shame. Whose shame it was, I was never quite sure. We were victims too, I now realise, of the stereotypes placed on indigenous people. We had never been taught the truth about the dispossession, the massacres, or the fact that Aboriginal travellers were obliged to report to police in every town they passed through. In the ’50s, that part of our country’s history was never aired in a school classroom. Instead, we heard stories of “lazy good-for-nothings” who “ripped out the floorboards of their houses to burn them on campfires,” and would “go off on ‘walkabout’ at the drop of a hat.” As we
travelled past Purfleet Mission we expected to see these things, and so they were there,
implied at least, perhaps even verified, by the dilapidated state of the place.

In our Christian culture, the colour white was equated with might and right and
purity. I wore white to my baptism, my confirmation and my wedding. And I think of
Auntie Jean, Worthy Grand Matron of the Order of the Eastern Star, in her dazzling
long white dress, sparkling five-point star and sash, on stage at a packed Sydney Town
Hall.

Black, on the other hand, was the colour of evil. In a ’50s movie you could
always tell the “baddie” from the “goodie.” In a western, the “baddie” was invariably
the cowboy in the black hat.

Twelve years ago, on our first trip to Central Australia, Yuendumu might well
have been on another planet. None of the familiar signifiers of our civilisation were in
evidence. No kerbing guttering, no lines on the road, no shopping centre, no public
transport, no road signs, no hotel or café. It was difficult to see anything past the boxes,
plastic bags and other rubbish littering the ground, and the skinny, skulking, scabby
dogs.

We had come to investigate the mangy camp dogs and sooner or later we would
be mixing with the locals whose ways seemed different from ours. On that first evening,
as the light drained out of the sky we felt vulnerable, out of place, aliens in a foreign
land. The cultural boot, you could say, had shifted to the other foot.

Now I am better informed. I understand now that when a boy over the age of
fourteen years refuses to look me in the eye he is not necessarily sullen or rude or
“shifty-eyed.” Neither is he a boy. As an initiated man, having received his circumcision
and the appropriate level of knowledge during the weeks, sometimes months of
ceremonies in the bush, his avoidance of a woman’s gaze is a sign of respect. I realise
too, when we approach a family group to check the dogs, and the men get up and leave,
that only the women will persist in holding onto the dogs while we examine and treat
them. The men soon shuffle off.

There may be an explanation for this behaviour. The men, we are told, feel a
spiritual affinity with dogs. Because the alignment of the sex organs of the male dog
closely resembles that of a human male, it is believed that they may share a common
origin. It is three and a half thousand years since the first Asian wolves made the
crossing to Australia, time enough for the dingo to have evolved and developed a
cultural and Dreaming significance. This is evident in the ancient drawings at Ubirr Rock to the north in Arnhem Land.

Thursday is pension day. As we drive through the community this afternoon people are breaking into small groups and settling down to play cards. Here they play cards like we in the city might play the stock market. We know better than to interrupt.

It’s a serious business. I remember we made the mistake of trying to treat the dogs at West Camp last year during a card game. All was well until a territorial scrap broke out between the dogs over the dog biscuit and everything went up in the air as if caught in a *willy-willy*. Fur flew in all directions. There were people yelling and dogs barking, and cards and twenty-dollar notes swirling in a cloud of red dust.

Driving back past the football field we are reminded that a young man died here last year. One of eighteen-year-old twins, he hanged himself at the end of this grandstand. It was a shocking thing. Yet the reality is that young men are an endangered species in remote communities. Deaths from car accidents, alcohol abuse, drugs and petrol sniffing are not uncommon. Are those the young man’s boots, I wonder, hanging over the wires outside our guesthouse?

Today a practice match is about to start and we pull over to watch. Our boys, the Magpies, are taking the field against a team from Willowra. It’s not unusual to have footy games late in the cool of a summer’s afternoon. Both teams are well turned out. The local team, in their crisp clean black and white strip, have huge support here, mainly from men and young families, and always from the dogs. We keep one eye on the match, but have really come to count the yellow dots on the backs of the dogs. The proportion of yellow dots on the dogs at the match gives us a rough estimate of the
proportion of dogs we have treated in the community overall. It’s a quick way to work out our coverage so far. Within a few weeks all treated mutts should be free of mange.

As the match gets underway more people arrive to shout support for their team. The players’ natural football ability is astounding, many kicking their boots off over the sidelines in the middle of the game because they are more accustomed to running and kicking barefoot. It is good to see that top AFL players from the southern states are now coming up to coach in remote northern communities and encourage the careers of promising young Indigenous players.

The final whistle blows and our Magpies have lost. Players and their families and dogs are starting to disperse. At least they lost fair and square. This time they didn’t resort to their “secret weapon.”

The secret weapon incident occurred on a mid-winter’s afternoon a few years back, so the story goes, with ten minutes remaining on the clock. Light was fading and the shadows were long. Our boys had just scored and moved into the lead by a couple of points in a final against Alice Springs. With such a narrow lead, one of the local boys decided it was time for some harmless gamesmanship. He whispered in earshot of one of the visitors that he’d just seen the devil-spirit, the legendary Kurdaitcha Man, lurking about behind the grandstand. News of this fearsome presence spread like wildfire and in a few minutes the city visitors had abandoned the field and driven off in a cloud of dust, leaving the locals to claim victory.
It was cooler last night. I thought of the families outside, snuggling up with their dogs to keep warm. This morning a cold breeze is keeping people in bed.

We slow down past the Women’s Centre as Pam comes over to the car. She says that we can all stop worrying about Nangala. She has been found and is on her way home. By all accounts she walked thirty kilometres across her country before making her way to the road and hailing a lift.

As I glance across to the corner house I notice a car pulling up. The doors open and out steps Nangala from the front passenger seat and my three Napaljarri “sisters” from the back. We discover that army and police representatives slipped into town for a meeting at the council chambers yesterday morning and left after an hour without incident. The two Norforce officers are to prepare a report.

On our first run of the day a man stops us and asks us to put down his sick old dog. It is suffering from an incurable, contagious and inherited form of mange. Now a “leatherback,” it has no hair left, just painful weeping skin with ulcerating tumours that no medicine will cure. But because of its pain the man points out that it is “cheeky” (vicious), and catching and holding it to administer the injection will be difficult. Dogs here will fight to the death against being held down. With the garbage truck off the road the dog has its nose in a pile of rubbish, including some used disposable nappies. As we try to corral the dog in a small bathroom, the man’s daughter appears, shrieking “lawa” (no), we must not do it. “This dog,” she says, her eyes ablaze, “is like my uncle, a very old man. You leave him alone.”

While there seems to be a correlation between these sick dogs and the spread of skin infections and gastroenteritis amongst the children, the traditional respect for old age prevents any action. We move on up the road and drive to West Camp where we missed some dogs yesterday.

As we turn to drive to the humpies at West Camp, I see a bare-breasted woman waving us away. She is Rita Napaljarri. A short distance behind her is a cluster of other women. One is Nangala who comes over and explains in a harsh whisper that there is women’s business happening over yonder. She should be resting at home from her ordeal in the bush, but here she is out teaching the young girls some traditional culture that men are forbidden to see. Graeme turns the car around and heads to the clinic where we will spin down the bloods in a centrifuge and pack up our samples.
Nangala worries that the stories and dances will not be passed on after her generation is gone. At the Sydney Olympics in 2000 she, along with other desert women, was painted up and danced on the world’s stage at the opening ceremony. Now in lessons after school she tries to teach the young girls their traditional culture. Young people, she says, are losing interest in the old ways. She is a bridge for the younger women here, a bridge back to the olden times, when people walked around their country, hunting kangaroo and emu, catching lizards and goannas, digging for yams and gathering berries and honey. It was thirsty work, she tells the girls. The people had to stop at soakages for water. They hunted kangaroo, rabbit, wild pussycat, and native dingo. No flour and sugar then, just bush tucker. “This,” she tells them, “is how we were grown up by our mothers and fathers and grandparents.”

_Nangala_ was a young girl in the war years. While my parents were writing love-letters in wartime, and wondering how long it would be before they could marry, Rosie Nangala was just a teenager, but already promised to a man. That was a time when life here was conducted in the traditional way.

Outside the community store we find Millie. She has a problem. Everywhere she goes in the community her twenty-two dogs go with her. That’s twenty-two dogs at the shop, twenty-two dogs at the post office, twenty-two dogs in church. Until now she has been living alone with the dogs but is now old and frail and needs care. Her nephew says she can move in with him at North Camp but not with all those mangy dogs. She persuades him to let her keep seven, saying that they protect her at night and make her feel safe. We go around to her place and put down the other fifteen. Millie is now a role model for other dog owners. She is posing (below) at the shop with her remaining dogs.
At North Camp this afternoon, a small boy is walking along holding a pup over his shoulder by one of its front legs. The pup seems unperturbed. The child calls us over to the verandah where the rest of the family are in bed. They want us to put a yellow dot on all the dogs and pups, but are worried about getting paint on the bedding. We explain that they will have to get out of bed to hold the dogs, one by one, for treatment and then yellow paint. Two of the women climb out of bed to help.

We have finished and are about to leave when a very sick, mangy “leatherback” dog slinks out from under some bedding.

“Cheeky dog, that one. You finish him?” one woman asks.

The woman holds the poor creature still while we fill the syringe and prepare to put him out of his misery. By this time, though, five or so young children have gathered round to watch. I feel a little uncomfortable about this as they draw in close. When the blood flows back into the syringe, the measured dose of “finishing medicine” is pumped into the vein and the sick old dog collapses gently to the ground. Our young onlookers squeal and jump in the air with delight, pointing and clapping at the “show”. Then they wait, looking up at us expectantly, down to the dog, and up at us again. It is as if we are magicians and will, any moment now, raise him up again.

The woman rummages under a mattress and offers up another four miserably ill bitches and their similarly afflicted pups. They understand that there is no cure for this painful, contagious form of mange called Demodex. Again and again we repeat the procedure, with the children laughing, their eyes sparkling at the spectacle of it.

At the end of this gruesome task, as we are placing the bodies into bags and loading them into boxes in the ute, the mother of the children calls them aside and whispers something. The children’s expressions are suddenly grave. They lean their forearms against the side of our vehicle, and with heads resting on their hands, begin to wail. Their mother says they are saying a prayer for the dogs who have gone safely to Heaven.

This afternoon six new heavy-duty washing machines have been delivered to the Women’s Centre. Most people now understand that skin problems from tick and mites can be reduced if clothes and bedding are regularly washed and hung to dry in the sun. Up until now this has not always been possible. The small, plastic washing machines originally installed into most of the new houses have not coped, their motors soon corroding from the high levels of calcium and uranium salts in the bore water.
Most whitefellas who come here to work in the community have their own water-softening units. These vastly improve the taste of the water. We bring large containers of water with us from Alice or buy them here at the shop. There’s still an unpleasant mineral taint to the local drop.

As we drive towards the shop, a car approaches us with something on its roof. As it draws closer I see there is a child’s inflated plastic swimming pool tied to its roof. But as the car passes by I see with some concern that the pool is actually not tied down. The only thing keeping it in place, as far as I can see, is the weight of the child sitting in it.

I am reminded of the hot summers of my childhood in Newcastle. It was the 1950s, and everyone cooling off at Merewether Beach was white. Well, not pure white exactly. We were pink and burnt from the sun, blotchy from the heat or a freckled leathery brown from years of exposure. Nobody was black. We never saw anyone black.

An exception occurred once a year in the summer school holidays when suddenly you would see Aboriginal children playing on Merewether Beach. They came from towns in western New South Wales to stay for a week or so at the Far West Children’s Home, a red brick hostel right opposite the beach. It was a startling sight. Their dark skins, more appropriate for the Australian climate than ours, were so black against the creamy white sand that, like the islanders of Ray Crooke’s paintings, their faces, even at a short distance, seemed featureless, as if always in shadow. I remember watching a group of new arrivals as they stepped onto the sand for the first time and gazed out into the infinity of the Pacific Ocean. And I recall their caution as they ventured to the water’s edge and danced around in the lapping fringe of foam, fearful of going further into the waves. I can still see the boldest of the group, a lanky, loose-limbed boy, urging the others on and venturing in past the froth to duck under a wave. I watched as his joy suddenly changed to anguish at the unexpected vile taste of salt water. He shot out of the water and ran to join the others, where he bent himself double, spitting and retching onto the sand.

We continue to work by ourselves in the cool of the evening, going from house to house. It is the best time to find people at home. Two young girls, about ten years old, stop us and ask if they can help. One of them opens her hand to offer me the honey ants she has found, their black abdomens swollen to the size of a child’s marble.

“Have one. They taste good.”
“Will it bite me?” I ask. She laughs, puts one on her tongue, and swallows.

“Ok,” I say, not sure I can really do it. I will be eating the ant alive. “I’ll try one.”

I tell myself that if I don’t eat it someone else will, a poor excuse for killing a fellow creature, I know. I pick it up in my fingers, this poor, doomed, pregnant-looking thing, and place it on my tongue. As it crushes against my palate, the honey sac explodes. I imagined I’d feel ill, and want to vomit, but I don’t. Somehow the delicious rush of sweetness overpowers the sickening deed.

The girls climb aboard and ask my name. “Napaljarri,” I say. “What’s yours?” They laugh and say, “Maureen,” and “Methuselah.” Are they having me on? They are a good team. The dogs in this area know them and come to them willingly, if only for the dog biscuit. And they let the girls hold onto them. We work quickly collecting blood, lice and ticks. At the end of the day Maureen asks about helping tomorrow. They are bright girls and keen to help. Some of our best helpers have been schoolchildren—schoolchildren and men fresh out of gaol.

I walk back to the guesthouse in the cool air. Nangala is in her yard behind the old Mission House. She calls me over.

“Come in,” she says, and beckons me to sit down on the ground behind her small dwelling. Then she asks how my family is, remembering, I think, that one of our sons came with us last year.

“All well. And you, Nangala,” I say, “Have you any children?”
I have never asked her this question and regret it instantly when she is suddenly downcast, shaking her head.

“Cannot speak,” she says. “Little girl. Too sad.” She is touching her hands now, and chopping at one wrist then the other, still shaking her head at a painful memory. A tear falls from her cheek into the dirt.

I have upset her. Was there something wrong with the child’s hands?

In the early days of the Mission, so I have been told, babies were born with serious deformities: missing limbs were common, perhaps a missing hand or foot. The mothers were told by Mission staff not to feed those babies, but to leave them to die. “They will be better dead,” they said. The deformities were due, it was believed, to the station owners’ practice of poisoning some of the waterholes during the drought to keep the blacks away. I would learn later that yes, this indeed was the fate of Nangala’s child. She was trying to tell me that her little girl was born with no hands, and that she was left to die.

Perhaps this explains the deep scar on Nangala’s scalp where no hair grows. It was common, on the death of a child, for the mother to gouge herself in the head as part of the grieving process.

I try to think of the clean clear water at Jupurrula’s sacred rock holes, a place that now holds new significance for me. And I try to imagine that the white cattlemen possibly never knew that those waterholes existed, and that perhaps other Aboriginal lives had been saved.

Nangala starts moving her long-nailed index finger through the sand in front of me. In a low hum, she begins to chant in her Walpiri tongue as she draws patterns in the red earth. Her voice rises to a thin wail, sustained for some minutes, before trailing away. She points with an outstretched arm to the country to the north that is her belonging place. This is her Dreaming story she is singing, her Jukurrpa.

It is a Fire Dreaming story, a long, involved and violent tale of two boys from the Jangala skin group (brothers to Nangalas) who play a wicked trick on their father, convincing him to eat his pet kangaroo. But little do they know that the kangaroo has been poisoned. Their actions end in tragedy when the two boys are engulfed in a bushfire. In the sand Nangala draws the Warlukurlangu landscape of her country, covered, as it is still today, with thousands of anthills, or termite mounds, each in the shape of a tongue of flame.
I recognise this type of country she is describing. We travelled through it yesterday on our trip to Willowra with Glen to see the dogs and to marvel at Napangardi’s front room. The country we passed through was beautiful: flat and green, crossed by dry riverbeds, their banks shaded by tall, white-barked river gums. We didn’t see a soul the whole journey, other than some magnificent brumbies and well-fed cattle drinking at a bore. And a feral cat, an enormous ginger Tom, peeping out at our car through a clump of spinifex looking as if he was dressed for the palace in an Elizabethan collar. When we reached the anthill country I felt I was being watched. The brown termite mounds might have looked like tongues of flame to Nangala, but to me they looked like people sitting on the ground. It was eerie. When we arrived, Glen warned us that the Willowra people might still be sad, still speaking in whispers, about a terrible happening, a recent tragedy.

Three weeks before, a party of men had returned to Willowra from a month-long ceremony of initiation, two hundred kilometres up country, only to discover that one man was missing. They had unknowingly left him—a deaf man—at a resting place on the return journey. After weeks of fruitless searching the man was found but he was already dead. At the funeral, the outpouring of grief was palpable with each mourner pausing to prostrate himself on top of the coffin for a few moments on his way past to ask the man’s spirit to look after him.

The Dreaming story Rosie Nangala has told me would have been told to her many times by her mother. Sadly, she has no daughter to pass it on to. Had her daughter lived, she would have had the skin name, Napaljarri. I feel honoured that Nangala has sung this mother’s song for me.

As I return to the guesthouse, Pam from the Women’s Centre is walking home past the gate. She says the new washing machines are getting a good workout. And the women are happier now that some of their needs are being addressed. They have calmed down. They even seem to be changing their views on the government’s Intervention. They are saying things like, “Why don’t we talk to these Norforce people and make the Intervention work for us?” And “Perhaps we might get a library with computers like they have at Ti Tree Community.” And “What about a gym so we can get fit? The men could have their days and we have ours.”

She says it’s a step forward. But libraries and gyms are one thing. Child sexual abuse is quite another. These women are not comfortable with interviews. They rarely
look you in the eye. They turn away from the camera when a photograph is taken for fear that their spirit will be captured. They are not ready to speak to strangers about child abuse. It is a subject that, in this culture, people don’t readily discuss, even with people they know and trust.

SATURDAY

The washing I hung out last night is parched and stiff this morning. Summer is well and truly here. Each day is hotter and drier than the one before. We are almost through the dog program; just another thirty or so dogs to go. I have taken to freezing our drinking water overnight, so it keeps cold in the daytime. Sunburned and dry-skinned, I am almost out of sunscreen and moisturiser. I am coming out in red blotches. White people should never have settled in this country. The women here never wear hats except beanies in winter, yet their dark skins stay smooth and supple.

Clark Gable has offered to help us today. Clark tends the gardens at the hospital, but today he is free. He is smartly turned out in clean blue linen trousers and a blue and white check shirt that appears to repel red dust. On this windy day every greying hair on his head remains in place. His name suits him well. In his younger day he could have charmed the southern belle, Scarlet O’Hara on the set of the movie, Gone with the Wind, and no one would have known the difference. Well, hardly; that was in the Deep South of America, and this Clark Gable is black.

There are some intriguing names in this community. In the early days of the Baptist Mission, the bush people who arrived here were given English names, aside from their “skin” names. These were names that officials could write down, names that the authorities could understand. Sometimes they were pleasant, decent names, but often they described an identifiable facial feature, in a rather cruel joke. If you had a round face or were thin on top you could be called “Mussolini”; a moustache could brand you “Hitler,” or with a nose like a camel you were saddled with “Nose-Peg.” This ridicule by early white officials is in sharp contrast to the generous spirit the Aboriginal people have shown to us, by giving us their “skin” names, thereby including us whitefellas as their kin, their “relatives.”

Clark Gable has an engaging smile. I can see why he has accumulated four wives. While it is polite not to eyeball people, this man has found the perfect
compromise. He has a kindly expression as he shakes my hand, looking, but at the same
time, not looking.

We have been working our way along the street at East Camp this morning and
arrive now at the house of a man who killed Clark’s son a few years ago in a brawl in
Alice Springs.

We are about to excuse him from working here when he goes straight inside the
house ahead of us. While he wouldn’t under any circumstances converse with his
mother in-law whom he must traditionally avoid, here he is speaking on friendly terms
with the family of the man who murdered his son. It is as if nothing ever happened. We
treat the dogs, Clark applying the paint meticulously to avoid any splashes onto his
clothes.

The community dealt with the murder by administering traditional punishment,
or “pay-back.” With the offender locked away in jail, his younger brother had to take a
spearing through the thigh. It was done in public on the football field, by a member of
the victim’s family, who had to be skilled enough to avoid piercing the femoral artery,
the major blood vessel in the thigh. We were here at the time and were invited along to
watch, but declined.

Clark Gable and his friend are still talking, and as it is almost mid-day we tell
him we have finished work today. Across the road is the piece of ground where old
Jakamarra used to camp in his yellow Kombi. The first time I met him he was in the Art
Centre wearing his red beret, its colour dulled to an earthy red from the bright red it was
when he acquired it in Paris two years before. He and Francis Jupurrula had been
commissioned to paint a mural in the Pompidou Centre.

With his Akubra on his head, Jakamarra walked each day from his camp to the Art Centre
with his dogs. He walked straight and tall, his hands behind his back like Prince Philip. As he
grew old and more frail he took to carrying a stick behind his back to ward off any “cheeky”
dogs. He could not say how old he was, just that
his family was still nomadic—“in my country”—
when he was a boy. He lived a simple, traditional
life, yet held a vast knowledge of his country. He knew exactly who he was, where he belonged, and how to live by the Law. Nothing was written down. He told me one day that he kept his stories and Dreamings in his head and put them down in his paintings. “That way I remember them,” he said.

One evening old Jakamarra asked us to sit with him at his campfire. We had finished treating his dogs on our last run of the day and he was in the mood for a chat. We asked him about the old life in the bush and those memories must have started him talking about his childhood and about the first time he saw a white man.

It was out Coniston way, he said, waving his hand to the northwest, where his people lived their traditional life long before the authorities rounded them up and brought them into the Baptist mission. The white man he saw was sitting up on a horse wearing a broad hat and holding a rifle.

Jakamarra was a small boy at the time—“no trousers then”—and had never seen a horse before, or a gun, and certainly not a white man. His first thought was that the white man and horse were one; that he was looking at one strange, giant animal.

He remembered his grandmother pulling him under a bush to hide, hearing the shots and screams and seeing the bleeding bodies of his family who, weak from thirst, had come to the waterhole to drink. The weather was hot and dry and they had travelled a long way because all the other waterholes were empty, their edges trampled down by the hard feet of the cattle. This white man on the horse had orders to guard the waterhole. In drought time water was precious and only cattle were to drink.
Jakamarra told this story without anger or recrimination. He still remembers that place today. They all do. It has left a scar on most families here, with gaps in their genealogy. Years later the skulls were still there, lying on the ground, he said, “Like paddy-melons. Big ones, little ones, women, kids, everyone.”

At the board of enquiry the seventy murders were found to have been justified.

Here was a quiet, modest man, his eyes almost blinded by trachoma, who, while he sat drawing patterns in the ashes of his fire, was telling us what life was like then. He was there.

The last time we saw Jakamarra he was showing off his new shoes: a pair of snowy white Dunlop Volleys he’d just bought from the community store. He seemed thrilled with his new purchase. As we said goodbye I noticed him reach up and give my Jakamarra husband a “brotherly” squeeze on the shoulder.

Walking back to the guesthouse I pass the Napaljarri women’s house on the corner and there on a wire mattress inside the fence is an astonishing sight: a copy of the Macquarie Dictionary. With its crisp lettering and wordy bulk, such a book seems wildly out of place here. You rarely see a book or anyone reading a book here, least of all an English dictionary. For that matter it is rare to find anyone wearing reading glasses. Then I realise, yes of course, that the dictionary must have belonged to Kay Napaljarri who did wear glasses for reading. She passed away a few years ago. She was one of Jakamarra’s wives and was often here visiting her Napaljarri “sisters.” Kay was
an educated woman who, as a light-skinned child, had been taken away by authorities, adopted by a white family and schooled in Adelaide. As an adult she could have gone anywhere but chose to come back here to find her mother. And here she stayed. She travelled with Rosie Nangala on her trips to Niger. Most of her time, however, she spent here at the school, teaching the Walpiri language to the children.

Rita waves and asks if we would like to go bush-food collecting this afternoon. Keeping in mind our dinner date at seven with Helen and Tony, we agree to a short trip and arrange to collect the three Napaljarris here after lunch.

With most of our fieldwork done, we do a last “depo” run to those families who want to postpone the breeding cycle of the female dogs for up to six months. Now that the people understand that a quick injection is all it takes, we are besieged with requests. Clark Gable chats to the men while we are engaged in this women’s business. Even without a desexing program for dogs here their population remains static. It is becoming clear that, not long after weaning, juveniles are under great stress from the effects of tick bites. Already in a weakened state and now having to compete for food with other larger dogs, many young dogs die from internal bleeding.

The Napaljarri “sisters” are waiting on the corner. They are carrying water, bread and heavy digging sticks like crowbars. It is agreed that Rita should sit in the front seat as the spotter. I take the back seat between Lois and Evelyn who, since her stroke, is nursing her paralysed arm and leg. With no vehicle of their own the sisters rely on others to take them out from the community to collect their bush foods and traditional medicines. In the past, the white schoolteachers used to drive them around, taking them hunting for witchetty grubs. The women became the teachers then, showing them which plant to gather and how they were used in bush medicine.

Today, they say, they are too old to go around on foot to collect wanakiji (bush tomatoes), yakajirri (bush raisins) and marnakii (bush sultanas) and fill their billy-cans and coolamons (food carriers). When they were young they used to go gathering and eating, hunting goannas in circles and catching them as they went. They would cook together in the shade, and carry the cooked meat back to their camps on foot. “We were healthy then,” they say.

The sisters direct us out of the town along the dirt road that leads to Willowra, Pine Creek and Mount Denison. Soon we take a right fork and continue until Rita, our spotter, sees fresh animal tracks in the dirt at the side of the road. We pull up and the
women jump out. They see a long tail disappear. It’s a lizard. Good tucker. But he has dived under a bush and is gone.

We drive on until we reach some yakajirri bushes where we stop and pick their sweet bush raisins. They are delicious. Then the women show us the bushes to dig beneath to find honey ants. They seem impressed to learn that I have already tried one.

After continuing our journey west for another half an hour and noting that the road has narrowed to a track, we ask, like children, “How much further?”

“How much further?” is the reply.

“How much longer,” I ask, anxious that we are at least thirty kilometres from the community.

“How much long time,” they say confidently. This CDEP ute we are using is only 2WD and we are concerned that the track is becoming sandy, but the women urge us ahead. They talk excitedly in their Walpiri language, pointing to small tufts of smoke rising in the distance.

We round the next bend and sink to the axles in fine, deep sand.

As we start digging holes behind the wheels and collecting branches to place there, our passengers seem unconcerned. They are in familiar country, the country of their people. One stands in the scrub with her legs apart, her long skirt lifted just above the ground, and relieves herself. Another takes her digging stick and searches for tucker. The paralysed woman sits down and rests in the shade. Graeme and I are in a sweat, digging, breaking branches and placing them along the sand, all the way back to the firmer part of the track. We have visions of staying the night here and missing the meal at Helen and Tony’s this evening, not to mention our plane home tomorrow. That’s if that fire ahead doesn’t get to us first. The sun is sinking fast. It will be dark in an hour.

We back the car gingerly a metre or so on the branches before it sinks again.

Suddenly a red Toyota Landcruiser appears in front. It has come from the direction of the smoke. The Napaljarri women, now fully rested, rise and wave the driver down. We see it is old Jakamarra’s nephew. He pulls up and explains that at this time every year the old man used to go out and burn his country. The job has passed to him now, he says, to renew the land for the old man. After a burn, the grass soon grows, the pasture is renewed and the fresh green pick attracts the kangaroos. It makes for easy hunting. “No need for whitefella fencing, eh?”

The sister’s nod happily. They saw the smoke. They’d worked out that he was out there and would be back soon. Just didn’t tell us. In a couple of minutes the
powerful Landcruiser has pushed our vehicle back onto the track. We thank the nephew, all jump in, turn around and head for home. We have been travelling for only ten minutes when the women indicate that they want to stop for a cup of tea. They have brought some bread and a billy and need to eat. We pull over to a pleasant open area with a grassy place to sit, but the women say, “This place no good.” So we press on until told to stop on bare ground beside a fallen tree where twigs and dead branches litter the ground. In minutes they have collected enough wood for a fire and have a billy of water heating over a flame. We sit on the ground around the fire sipping our tea from mugs and passing around bread and sweet biscuits.

Suddenly Rita seems agitated. She keeps turning her head like a bird and shooting anxious glances into the darkening shadows. She mutters something to Lois and Evelyn, who clamber to their feet and start packing up to leave.

“What’s wrong, Napaljarri?” I ask.


This time we don’t stop until we reach home. All the while I can’t shift the image I have of the terror in Rita’s eyes. I’ve read about this Kurdaitcha Man, this devil-spirit, visible only by dogs, who comes at night in silent shoes of emu feathers to frighten women and girls. I think again about my Napaljarri sisters, and what other motives these women might have for living together. I remember the shrieks in the night, the scars on the women’s heads where hair no longer grows. I remember the
female assistant at the Art Centre who left last year after being raped by an intruder in her house. Someone said she didn’t have a dog. All the white people here have dogs to guard their houses. Big dogs they are too. Cheeky dogs, I think of the cold desert nights and the women pulling the dogs in close to their bodies like blankets. And I think of the way Rita spoke of the Kurdaitcha Man with such a fearful look that one might easily suspect him to be real.

Back at the guesthouse the black and white mother dog is again in the headlights. She is thin now with engorged teats dripping with milk. I grab the torch and follow her next door where the president of the council lives. She jumps in through the open window of the derelict car that sits, minus its wheels, in the front yard. So that’s where she’s hidden them. The torch reveals ten pups living in the well in the front seat. Some are pure white: Lover Boy’s, by the look of it. We’d searched earlier in the week but couldn’t find them. Before we leave tomorrow I will drop our unused food, mainly bread and salami, on the ground next to the car.

Saturday has almost gone and there is no sign of our picnic companions, TJ and Yvonne. Perhaps they had a lift into Alice Springs to watch the big football final.

Helen has just served up dinner when Tony is called to the airport. There is to be an emergency medical evacuation. The food is put on hold as he takes us along in his ute.

In two minutes we are there. Tony switches on the runway lights and we drive up and down the strip to clear any kangaroos. Soon the Flying Doctor’s plane arrives and collects its passenger, a young, local woman with a threatened miscarriage who looks rather frightened and is led gingerly up the steps, accompanied by a nurse who carries her small bag. Once, childbirth was left in the hands of the experienced senior women with help, if necessary, from the local clinic. Now, all babies are delivered in Alice Springs Hospital. As we return to Helen, our meal and some lively conversation, the plane takes off into a light breeze, turns, and heads for Alice Springs Hospital.

On our last night here I lie on my bed and wonder could I adjust to life here. For the other “kardia” who live and work here permanently, life here has its attractions. They say it’s a chance to escape the rat race, to slow down and save money. And there is something about the landscape: the red soil, the ragged escarpments, the cool groves of soft green, all set against a wide clear sky, that have a calming effect on the mind. In this community of one thousand people there is no white noise. No traffic lights, no
buses, no trains, no shopping malls, no stairs, no escalators, no neon signs, no advertising billboards, no hype. But neither are there bookshops, cafes, restaurants, theatres, bars, or sports complexes.

Through my window a million stars are glittering in a black sky. It is easy to romanticise this place when the sun goes down and a cool breeze drifts over the land. But I am jolted out of my doze by dogs outside, barking, and squabbling at the bin. In the distance a woman screams. There is a fight; people yelling. I think of the scars on the women’s heads, Yvonne’s sick child, the boy with no foot, the babies left to die, the killing of Jakamarra’s family, and I am filled with shame.

SUNDAY

Saturday has come and gone and still no word from TJ about yesterday’s proposed barbecue at Mission Creek. Then I see Yvonne in the supermarket. She is very subdued. It turns out that their sick baby has been found to have a serious heart condition and is now in foster care with an Alice Springs family. They were visiting her there on Saturday and decided to stay on for the footy. She shows me Ruby’s photograph. She is carrying it around in an album to show friends, and to keep her close to her.

After a heavy shower last night, the potholes in the road near the church have turned into deep puddles. We have to steer the car around a group of small children bathing and playing in the muddy water. The children look very young, about three years old. One of them is riding a small bicycle through the water. I am often astonished by the agility of the children here, but this is amazing. The boy rides close by me again wearing a cheeky grin and I see he has his second teeth. He is not as young as I thought. Like many of the children here, he seems small and underweight for his age.

Something odd is going on this morning. As we drive past the football field, a hundred or so people are gathered there arguing and shouting and holding handmade spears. On our way back to the guesthouse we see a familiar figure walking ahead, struggling under the weight of a bundle of long branches. Seeing it is Nangala, we stop and offer to help. Graeme throws the branches in the back of the ute and opens the door for an exhausted Nangala.

“For firewood, Nangala?”

She shakes her head. “Lawa (No). I must make spears for the fight.”
After Graeme stows the timber safely at the back of the Mission House, Nangala asks if we could drop her at church. She is running late for the service. We decide to join the congregation. Here, women sit to the right, men to the left and dogs up the centre, but you wouldn't know it by the sparse attendance today. I slide into a pew on the right beside Nangala, while Graeme sits across the aisle to the left. Apart from four kardiya and two yapa, the pews are deserted. The minister, dressed in a cool open-necked shirt and cotton trousers welcomes us and acknowledges the poor turnout.

“Today,” he says, “God has to compete with a rival event taking place right now on the football field.” Family business, he calls it, apparently unperturbed.

After this welcome and a Bible reading there is much noise and commotion outside. Are we all to be speared right here in the church? About sixty people file in and take their places to the right and left. Not to be left out, more dogs, too, are arriving. As they stream up the centre aisle, I am proud to note that most are wearing their badge of good health, the yellow dot of paint. The place is suddenly full, standing room only. I don’t see any spears. All weapons, it seems, have been left at the door. The crisis, whatever it was, must have passed.

As the minister strums the first bars on his guitar, the congregation rises to its feet to sing the first hymn, in English to begin with, and then in Walpiri, with the words beamed up onto a screen in front of us. As we follow the pointer it feels somewhat akin to a karaoke night. Between the hymns, selected people are invited up the front to speak about their faith. The minister encourages others to speak unannounced, even from their seats. And they do, their traditional beliefs moving aside to make room for the Christian Trinity.
For some reason an image of Jean Kimble comes to mind. I imagine she would have loved the karaoke idea and, had she been here, would have been delighted to address the congregation. At the very least she would have helped the singing with her strong voice.

To avoid the minister’s eye I look over my left shoulder to a cluster of dogs at the back of the church that are suddenly restless.

Lover Boy, my Napaljarri sisters’ elusive alpha-male dog, is making his entrance. Hail-fellow, well met, he’s swanning up the aisle, sniffing out the talent in God’s house. His tail, deliberately I am sure, brushes against my knee. If only I had the syringe in my pocket I could squirt him from here. As the minister strikes the opening chords of “Onward Christian Soldiers,” Lover Boy’s nose is investigating the rear end of a brindle bitch. She stands for him. Heaven forbid that they should tie the knot in here.

But Lover Boy, charmed by this pied piper of a parson, does have a sense of the occasion. He lifts his head and saunters past temptation, down to the front of the church where a cool breeze is coming in through the side door. He circles around three times before settling finally at the feet of the minister, and with his head moving in time with the music, sweeps his tongue in long wet strokes over his testicles.

We’ll be back again soon, Lover Boy. You’ll keep.
The Essay

Crossing the Line

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...when from a long-distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after things are broken and scattered, taste and smell alone, more fragile but more enduring, more substantial, more persistent, more faithful, remain poised a long time, like souls, remembering, waiting, hoping, amid the ruins of all the rest: and bear unflinchingly, in the tiny and almost improbable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection.

Proust

INTRODUCTION

Some years ago my husband and our son Matthew attended a father-and-son dinner at one of the residential colleges in the grounds of Sydney University. Matthew was in his third year of study and thoroughly enjoying college life.

The College Principal welcomed the guests into the vast dining room; a student said the Latin Grace and the meal was served, along with a selection of fine wines. The evening was punctuated by the usual formalities. There was the traditional “piping in” of the haggis, a recitation of a Robert Burns poem, and a second speech of welcome to the hundred or so fathers present, delivered by the Senior Student.

The evening was well underway when the father of the Senior Student made a move to respond on behalf of all the fathers who by now were in a convivial state of male bonding and looking forward to the traditional but rather reckless climb to the top of the college bell tower. But now, with the speaker shuffling his notes and rising to his feet, another round of port was poured and the throng was hushed.

The man thanked the College Principal, his staff and the boys for their magnificent hospitality, and glanced down at his notes. “On this occasion,” he began, “I want to tell you a story that is intended to show that college life has changed for the better since I was a student here in the late 1950s and early ’60s.”

An uneasy calm spread over the room and anxious glances passed between some of the Old Boys on the rowdier tables up the back as the man continued. He went on to recall a social gathering that “was held every year in this very dining room, on what was termed (secretly by the boys) as ‘Beastie Night.’

“Each student,” he explained, “who invited a girl along, was in the running to
win a prize: a bottle of Scotch whisky. The prize would be awarded to the boy whom the committee determined had brought along the ugliest girl."

I am sure this story contained many more cringe-worthy details of “secret men’s business” than were passed on to me, but suffice to say that the man wound up his speech by saying, “Not only was I fortunate enough to win the Scotch that evening, but I am delighted to say that I have been married to that girl for twenty-five years.”

I laughed at the story, but it left an unsettling resonance. It spoke of Australian men and their attitudes to women in the ’50s and ’60s when I was growing up. I was taken back to memories of my childhood; to the dreadful “foundation” garments that Mum felt compelled to squeeze herself into while my father got around the garden at home in a comfortable old tee-shirt and gardening shorts. And I remembered parties when I was a teenager in the ’60s where certain young men referred to plain-looking girls and girls who had rejected their advances as dogs.

This was a time when the richest and most influential men in the land—media magnates and politicians—always seemed to marry top fashion models. Year in, year out, Australian women were fed, through the medium of *The Australian Women’s Weekly*, an unrelenting diet of the Miss Australia Quest, its contestants and their private lives, and the week-to-week development of the Sara quads of Bellingen, both issues bringing into sharp focus the chief duties of a postwar woman: to be attractive to men, to stay at home, and to breed. Each new season of the year brought to our doorstep “The David Jones Catalogue,” meaning that Mum could do most of her shopping, aside from groceries, without having to leave the house. There were, I soon realised, huge pressures placed on women like my mother, by advertisers, big business and governments—all run almost exclusively by men.

I am now the mother of three adult sons. I would like this generation of young people to learn from the mistakes of the past and understand that women have had to fight for the right to an identity beyond being handmaidens to men.

It seemed to me an exciting step to investigate this era for my PhD research project.

The title of my research thesis is *Marriages, Microscopes and Missions: Three Women in Postwar Australia*. It is a project that examines and discusses, through creative writing, the life journeys of three Australian women in the decades following the Second World War. This essay goes on to explore the writing process and the influences upon it, and looks at the value of life-writing in today’s world.
A Time Ripe for the Telling

Until recently I thought I had developed a sense of what it meant to be Australian. I am a sixth-generation Australian who grew up in the Hunter Valley in the 1950s and ’60s.

The people around us in Newcastle in those years were normal working folk, living in modest weatherboard houses, miners’ cottages and brick bungalows. Not every family owned a car. It was common to see the breadwinner of the family pedalling his bicycle each day to his job at the BHP. It was unusual for wives to go out to work. Most families managed on the husband’s income with the wife occupied by home duties and caring for the children. People were neighbourly but not nosy and tended their gardens at weekends, growing vegetables and often keeping a pen of chooks. As children, we were expected to play sport and, on hot summer weekends cooled off at the beach before sitting down with the family to enjoy a traditional Sunday roast.

To my child’s mind, it was a narrow, easy-going and comfortable postwar world with a focus on relationships within our family and close friends. Television and international politics seemed a world away, except for the “Reds” in Russia and the “Yellow Peril” in Korea and China who were depicted in newspaper cartoons as a bloodthirsty lot, already on the march south towards us.

My only direct contact with other customs and cultures came in the form of migrant children who started appearing in our primary school classrooms in the ’50s. They spoke other languages, ate weird food and looked different from us. It was these “New Australians,” refugees from war-ravaged Europe, who first jolted me into an awareness of Australia’s remoteness and isolation from the rest of the world.

The American Christian evangelist Billy Graham preached at showgrounds throughout the country, conducting mass conversions and dispensing hope of salvation to thousands of the fearful and faithful. Our family never attended these rallies. My father was agnostic in matters of religion, and never discussed politics, comfortable as he was in the belief that the postwar Prime Minister, Mr Menzies, would see us through.

Fifty years on, at the start of a new millennium and in reaction to a terrorist attack on the US mainland, western governments have again retreated into the politics of fear and self-interest, their leaders into apocalyptic ideas and fundamentalist Christian beliefs. Australians, whose initial response to a crisis might once have been a laconic “easy as you go,” or “she’ll be right, mate,” have been encouraged towards nationalism and taking up arms against Iraq.
In August 2005 a small article appeared in Newcastle’s Herald. And there, in black and white, under the heading: “Candid Don Put in Class of Own,” was this hard-line attitude articulated by one man. The man was Andrew Frazer, a university law professor in Sydney who, in these times of war in the Middle East, famine in Africa, terrorism and refugees, said he wanted to bring back some strategies of the 1950s. He recommended we reinstate the White Australia Policy. Australia, he suggested, “was becoming a third world economy by allowing non-white migration; African immigration increased crime and HSC results pointed to a ruling class of Asians. And Australia should withdraw from refugee conventions” (Candid Don 17).

I felt a tightening in the gut. Do we not include our migrant population when we speak of our national identity? It has just been announced that they are the most highly productive section of the Australian workforce. I believed that multiculturalism had been a success. And what of our Indigenous people? Was Australia not their land too? Another White Australia would take us back years.

Finally, to drive his point home, the professor wheeled out that old chestnut from the ’50s, the idyllic notion of “a safe and secure life in the suburbs where no one ever had to lock the front door.”

I was born in Australia, in Newcastle in 1946, a baby-boomer who now has had time to look back with an adult mind and examine what the ’50s were really like. And let me say that it was not all open front doors and billycart derbies. Australia had just been through a war, and those heroes, those “diggers” who had survived the horrors were home with their sweethearts and families. But, as this thesis will show, life was never going to be a bed of roses, particularly for women.

When the time came to find women subjects for the project, I took advice from Australian writer, Ian Irvine, to “write what you know.” Irvine is a writer of science fiction. I found myself sitting next to him at a writers’ conference dinner at Uralla in September, 2003. He explained that his characters function in alternative worlds. A trained ecologist, he said he knows that his “alternative geographical landforms and environments will stand up to scrutiny” (Irvine).

I wanted to write about postwar women, and that was fine, as long as I already knew enough about them to whet my appetite for discovering more. After my mother’s death, I became interested in the times in which she lived. There was a story here, a journey through the era not only of my mother, but of my aunts and of the mothers of
my friends; a story that would resonate with thousands, perhaps millions of women in this country. It was a story waiting to be told.

Thrilled and at the same time daunted by the job ahead, I looked for three Australian women I had known who had chosen different paths in life, women from different backgrounds who had one thing in common: the times in which they lived.

The three women I chose lived through the Second World War and the decades following it. I wanted to be able to compare their lives, the journeys they had taken and the choices they had made, and why; and to discover the ways in which they had adapted to, struggled against, or suffered from, the social expectations and stereotypes placed on women at that time. I also hoped that, in the course of telling these stories, unexpected connections, intersections and resonances would occur between these women’s journeys that might invite further exploration and discussion.

The first story, “The Doctor’s Wife,” is told as a memoir. This is my mother, a home-based wife and mother living in Newcastle. The choice to include my mother was one of logic and convenience. Both my parents were now dead and here was an opportunity to write down the memories while I could still recall them, the memories of a woman who did as women were expected to do: gave up her wartime job to marry and bring up a family.

In keeping with the title, “The Doctor’s Wife,” A good deal of my father is included in the story since he was the stereotypical male provider in what was then, as my mother often observed, “a man’s world,” and was an integral part of the rise and fall of my mother.

I did not realise at the outset how swiftly this first story would come forth. Once it found its channel, it ran urgently, relentlessly, like a river in flood finds its way to the sea. And the process felt immensely satisfying.

The second story, “The Drug Analyst,” deals with the life of Jean Kimble, a single career woman who happens to be my husband’s aunt. Jean is a woman who defies the wife and mother stereotype. She completed a Bachelor of Science degree at Sydney University before the war and stayed on as a researcher during the war, working to find a synthetic alternative to morphine. When she was appointed as drug analyst at Randwick racecourse and her swabs started to pick up drug cheats, Jean met intense opposition from that bastion of the male Establishment, the Australian Jockey Club.

For the third subject, I chose Rosie Nangala Fleming, an Aboriginal woman I have come to know over many years of involvement with a remote indigenous
community in the Northern Territory. She had little formal schooling, having been removed early from the classroom to work for the Baptist minister as a maid, but has gone on to become an outstanding role model and ambassador for her people.

The inclusion of Nangala, “The Minister’s Maid,” gives an important balance to the project. As a semi-traditional Aboriginal woman she is outside the mainstream culture. In this way she represents the struggle of minority groups to gain acceptance and understanding in this country. I could have chosen an immigrant subject, and that might well have been an easier path to follow, but I relished the prospect of casting light on the role of Aboriginal women in this country and at this time in our country’s history. It offered an opportunity to examine the difficulties and tragic ironies inherent in any discussion of our first Australians who, up until the referendum in 1967, had not been given legal citizenship of this country.

It was time to tune into the first subject, my mother. I am now sixty-one years old, two years younger than my mother when she died. I find it easier now to put myself in her place, see her point of view, and understand her thoughts and actions. Whether I have the right to do this, I do not know. They say that dead men tell no tales, so do I really have the right to put together a dead woman’s story, to analyse a lived life? Would I be happy to think of someone writing a story on my life when I am gone? Someone else’s version of my life?

Now that I have written my mother’s story, I feel a closer bond with this woman than I have ever felt. As I approach the age she was when she died I feel almost like a sister to her. While writing “The Doctor’s Wife” I found myself tuning into her, imagining at times that I was my mother. If I put lipstick on in the morning I could see her doing it. I would try to see things through her eyes, imagine her reaction to people in the news or to the style of a friend’s new hat or the colour the neighbours had painted their house. Memories came back, and there we all were, on our way to Adelaide in the Holden to spend Christmas at Somerton Park with Mum’s twin Joan and her family.

Only when we grow up do we really appreciate just how hard our mothers worked. And only when they are gone do we realise that we should have done more. I can stand back now and see that it was only when my mother stopped papering over the cracks and started to say no to my father that her empowerment began—when she decided on a game of tennis with her friends instead of sitting alone each Saturday afternoon on the lake’s edge, and again when she took a stand and refused to go with him
on his skiing weekends to his lodge at Perisher where they had to sleep in single-sex dormitories.

Writing about my mother awakened me to the strong sense of identity she derived from her war service. That was a time she looked back to with longing. We noticed this in the local post office when the telegraphist was working in the corner. Mum would forget what she had come for as she tuned into the *dit da dit da* of the Morse code and would stand there, decoding our neighbour’s telegrams as they were tapped down the line. For those few minutes she was the person she had once been: a person in her own right, a person still in charge of herself and her future.

If there is too much of my father in this story, it is because, as was the way with fathers of that era, he made his presence felt. Until he left home we could not have imagined a world without him. Our lives turned like a globe poised on the end of his finger.

When it came to writing the second story, “The Drug Analyst,” the task of tuning in to the person was more difficult. Here was a straight biography that could not be dependent on my meagre recall of events. There were no short cuts here or ESP. Of course I had met Jean Kimble many times but she was my husband’s aunt, not mine. I had to turn to her seven nieces and nephews for their stories. And they came forth willingly. It soon became clear that they had all loved her dearly, and as they were indeed beneficiaries of her estate, I worried they might paint her as being too saintly. But gradually, over lunches, phone calls and cups of coffee with each of the “Magnificent Seven,” as Jean called them, the flesh-and-blood Jean, the Mary Magdalene beneath the Madonna, came through, like a brass rubbing on a cathedral floor: “Marilyn offers to make the tea but Jean always insists on doing it herself. Then she brings it out on a tray: one cup of tea for Marilyn and her glass of milk. While she says it is “just a glass of milk,” you can smell the Scotch in it” (The Drug Analyst 121).

Far from being short of information, I struggled with the deluge: memories, letters, photographs and newspaper cuttings these cousins sent me. It wasn’t only Jean who held onto things. The whole family were hoarders. Some of the best anecdotes came from her friends and work colleagues. I wondered how to broach the question of her love life. I knew she had had one because I had read a swag of intimate letters she had kept from a man called Ted who lived on Lord Howe Island. As it turned out, I need not have worried. Her friend Aileen, and later her cousin Lesley Wickham from Lismore, each
volunteered the same stories concerning Jean’s love affair with Ted. It was as if these women were seeing to it that Jean was recorded accurately as having had a rich and full life and that, although she had a strong Christian faith, she would in no way have wanted to be stereotyped as a pious and funless spinster.

The label “Amazon,” given to the female analysts at the Randwick laboratory was coined by racing journalist Max Presnell in the 1960s. When I asked him about it he said he was talking about the power the women wielded, power that put them ahead of their time. Horseracing then was men’s business. Women weren’t expected to have an opinion on a horse, let alone know anything about betting. Their job was to dress up and talk to the other women. They were adornments, to be seen and not heard when it came to the serious business of betting. They could not have placed a bet, anyway. There was a yellow line painted on the ground in front of the bookies to keep the women away.

“Without that yellow line,” he said, “the women would have been fooling through their purses for a few shillings, holding everyone up, and still deciding on which horse to back when the horses came out of the starting gates. I didn’t know Jean, other than by reputation. She was there before I started in the ’60s as copy boy at fifteen years of age” (Presnell).

It was Lesley Jacob, the second analyst appointed to the laboratory, who hated the name “Amazon” because of its anti-men connotations. According to Jessica Salmonson’s *The Encyclopaedia of Amazons*, Amazon means: “any physically and/or intellectually powerful or superior woman” or more specifically, “any woman skilled at battle” (9). Jean Kimble, it was often said, was larger than life, physically and intellectually. I suspect, had she remained employed at Randwick, Jean might have enjoyed the label. She demonstrated these qualities both in her professional life and in the courtroom when she was called to give evidence in cases of doping. Her greatest battle, however, was waged in retaliation to the male Establishment-dominated Victorian Racing Club who tried to discredit her. The VRC took the AJC to court after three winning horses in the 1953 Sydney Autumn Carnival were tested for drugs and found to have been doped. One of these horses, Tarien, winner of the Doncaster at Randwick, was trained by TJ Smith. Another, Cromis, the winner of the Sires Produce Stakes at Rosehill, was a Victorian horse, part-owned by the vice-chairman of the VRC.

The first difficulty with writing this second story was that I did not know how to begin it. I struggled with this opening and that, and had the story half written before I hit upon the idea of a link from the first story to the second. I would open Jean’s story with a
scene in which my mother and Jean come face to face on my wedding day. This set the narrative style and tone of the piece and showed immediately, that here was a woman very different, in manner and appearance, from my mother.

Working on the third story, “The Minister’s Maid” meant tuning out of western ways and opening up to an Indigenous perspective, while always keeping an awareness of parallels and differences in the two cultures.

The story grew from a friendship over twelve years. In that time, Rosie Nangala Fleming, a senior woman there, has become a friend and advocate for our Dog Health Program. If there is an Amazon in the Australian outback, it is Nangala. Small in build but strong culturally and spiritually, Nangala works hard for her community, whether keeping the grog and petrol-sniffers at bay with the Women’s Night Patrol, dancing at the Olympic Games opening ceremony, or planting Australian acacia trees in Africa as a source of food in drought times. For a woman with no formal education in the western sense, she holds a wealth of traditional knowledge. And along with many indigenous women in remote Australia, she tries hard to keep the young people interested in their traditional ways. She remembers the old life in the bush, the simple hunting and gathering life, when people were always on the move and everyone, men and women and children, knew what their roles were. Now they are settled in the one place their roles are less clearly defined. There are pressures on young people from television and the Internet and the dominant white culture that threaten to tear traditional cultural values apart. Nangala’s generation could well be the last to keep up with traditional ways.

**Stereotyping and Oppression of Australian Women – a Long History**

Australia, in 1902, was the second country in the world to give women the vote. This was the one early glittering gain in this country’s history of social inequality for women.

As Jane Austen sat at her desk writing her Regency novels on English country life she was presenting, in delicate irony, not only the concerns and ambitions of the middle classes, but also a wealth of important and accurate detail of the social expectations placed on women at that time. This point is significant for Australian readers today, because, as the ink was flowing from Austen’s pen onto the page, women, as well as men, were being herded into ships for transportation to Australia as punishment for their criminal transgressions.

Along with the convicts were transported the morals, attitudes, stereotypes and
expected behaviours conferred on women by men who, when it came to “crimes of passion,” always seemed to be judged by a different set of rules. The “double standard,” it soon became clear, survived the long voyage.

Susannah Fullerton, in *Jane Austen & Crime*, analyses the symbolism and morality of crime and punishment in Austen’s novels. On the “crime” of adultery, Fullerton observes: “The laws of England in the Georgian period took a materialistic view, seeing adultery as a question of property, ownership and the breaking of a contract. Husbands such as Mr Rushworth [in *Mansfield Park*] could take their wives’ lovers to court and successfully sue for damages.” However, these lawsuits were for the benefit of men only. “Had Mrs Willoughby of *Sense and Sensibility* found that her husband continued to seduce young girls in Bath after marriage she would have had to endure it,” Fullerton explains. “The law favoured only the cuckolded husband, not the wronged wife” (66-67).

The Regency age was synonymous with the Age of Scandal, as Austen makes clear in her novel *Emma*, which she dedicated to His Royal Highness the Prince Regent. This was done at the Prince’s request, not, as Fullerton explains, out of any respect for the man himself, whom, as the brackets show, Austen dares not name:

“I hate [him].” Jane Austen wrote to her friend Martha Lloyd in 1813 when the Prince’s marital problems had reached a peak of notoriety and scandalous gossip. Jane Austen’s feelings were shared by a great number of the Prince’s subjects—his adulterous affairs, his illegal marriage, bastard children and the treatment of his wife had alienated and shocked the public (57-58).

One hundred and seventy years later, the double standard still exists, according to my first heroine, the doctor’s wife. The 1970s is considered an enlightened and modern age, but not by my mother. By the time she discovers her husband’s infidelity and his intention to leave her, the Australian divorce laws have been amended, requiring only that the married couple concerned be separated for twelve months. The wife’s problem here is that the decision to divorce was not a mutual one. It was his wish, not hers, to divorce. As she sees it, with the new no-fault divorce law of 1976, the transgressor gets what he wants: his freedom and a new life with a younger woman, while his faithful wife is left to fight in court for a settlement on which to exist.

Germaine Greer, in a recent essay “Pride and Perseverance,” says: “Austen’s
heroines are middle class heroes . . . who must deal with the common trials of every young woman’s life: bullying, disappointment, misunderstanding and . . . helplessness to influence the course of events. Though almost two centuries have passed since Austen’s death, women’s emotional lives still present the same challenges” (28-29). In the ’70s there was still shame in divorce. In my mother’s case, the abandoned housewife was made to feel it was she who had failed at her job. My father, when I asked him why he had left her, avoided the question completely, and said mysteriously, “Perhaps you can learn something from this.”

Philandering men, especially those with power and influence like the Prince Regent and more recently Presidents John Kennedy and Bill Clinton have been forgiven their indiscretions since it is considered natural for the female of any species to attract a strong and powerful mate who will maximise the survivability and future potency of her offspring. Indeed there was nary a flutter of concern in Merewether when my father decamped. His own father was already dead and, while none too pleased about the “wretched business,” his mother, who also lived in Merewether, had to swallow her pride and support her flesh and blood. My father’s medical practice seemed unaffected aside from a few patients who were my mother’s close friends or neighbours and who changed doctors. As just a man he might well have been censured in private, but as a professional man—the “good doctor” in charge of their health—most patients kept him on.

Dale Spender, in Women of Ideas and What Men have Done to Them, noted this prevailing quality of men in 1982: “Men are in charge in our society: not only do they hold the most influential positions and own most of the resources, but their positions and resources enable them to be the ‘experts’ who make pronouncements on what makes sense in society, on what is to be valued, indeed, even on what is to be considered real, and what is not” (5).

When Jean Kimble was appointed to run the drug testing laboratory at Randwick, the male stalwarts of the racing industry hated the idea of a woman in their midst wielding so much power. She might never have been on a racecourse in her life, but Miss Kimble had the expertise to do her job efficiently, expertise unmatched by any man at the time, and perhaps that was a reality they could not abide.

The long history in Australia of oppression and stereotyping of women began with the arrival at Port Jackson of female convicts who were treated as prostitutes. Carmel Shute, writing in Hecate magazine, quotes from a letter written by a settler to
England: “It will perhaps scarcely be believed that, on the arrival of a female convict ship, the custom has been to suffer the inhabitants of the colony each to select one at his pleasure, not only as servants but as avowed objects of intercourse . . . rendering the whole colony little better than an extensive brothel” (14). The reality was that any women, of good character or ill, might, through poverty, have been forced to steal. Any theft, even of a chicken, was a transportable offence.

In her study of women in Australian society, Damned Whores and God’s Police, Anne Summers writes: “When the British invaded the continent of Australia in 1788 they did more than colonize a continent and its Aboriginal inhabitants. They also colonized an entire sex—the female sex.” This is a powerful statement that, one could argue, still applied to the women of postwar Australia. Before the advent of the Pill, women were limited in expressing their sexuality for fear of unwanted pregnancy. There were demands on them by governments “to populate or perish” but only in the context of the family unit. And there was a strict cultural code of femininity imposed on women, with mostly male doctors to advise them, facilitating patriarchal control. Summers describes four major components of the ‘classical colonial situation’ as (1) the invasion and conquering of a territory; (2) the cultural domination of its inhabitants; (3) the securing of effective control of the inhabitants by creating divisions amongst them; (4) the extraction of profits from the colonized territory. “Colonization,” Summers says, “is accomplished by the brute force of invasion and by the partial or complete destruction of the native people’s culture” (243-44).

The truth of the latter assertion can be found in oral histories collected from Aboriginal women. One such history is Conflict at Yurrkuru (Brookes soak): a whitefella stole my grandmother, told by Rosie Nungarrayi:

At Yurrkuru, my grandfather killed a whitefella. He hit the whitefella because the whitefella stole his wife. That old lady was my grandmother, a Napurrula. She was frightened when that whitefella took her—that’s why the old man hit him. After that the old man ran up to the hills to hide. My grandfather was living in the hills in a cave. That’s what saved his life while the police were out looking for him. He stayed in the hills. They didn’t find him, because he was sitting in the cave (36).

This is one story in a book of over one hundred oral histories told by Walpiri women of
the Yuendumu/Willowra area and passed on down to their daughters. These stories have become an invaluable resource for my writing. They tell of growing up in the days before Europeans arrived, of learning about religious ceremony and social relationships, of the days of hunting and gathering with the older women; of early encounters with “whitefellas” and of the changes that have followed, up to the present day.

In naming this essay “Crossing the Line” I am referring not only to the yellow line painted on the ground at racecourses in the 1950s to keep women from having access to the bookmakers, but also to a more general line that was drawn between desirable and undesirable behaviours of women. Those making this distinction were most often men but the enforcers were, as often as not, other women.

Summers recognised this line when she named her study of women in Australian Society: Damned Whores and God’s Police. She was not beating around the bush. The title goes straight to the heart of the duality, the opposing stereotypes placed on women in this country that began with colonisation. She writes: “Women are divided according to whether or not they are prepared to uphold the colonial order . . . Adherence to the “God’s Police” role affords women status . . . and the psychological security which comes from conforming to majority values” (294). To behave outside these boundaries or social norms by adopting an alternative lifestyle, dressing in an unfeminine way, or digressing from accepted cultural behaviour, meant the woman was relegated to the “damned whores” category.

Any woman at Randwick who dared cross the yellow line painted in front of the bookmakers would have belonged to the “damned whores” category. It was not a woman’s place to be knowledgeable about racing, much less to mingle brazenly with the men and place a bet. In this context it is clear that Miss Kimble with all her scientific learning was well on the path to transgression, simply by occupying a position of power at Randwick Race course.

In the 1960s people hesitated to discuss alternative lifestyles, especially same-sex relationships. So great was my father’s shock on observing the changes in voice and mannerisms of a young friend who had returned from three years in New York, that he pulled my husband aside at a party to say, “I can’t believe it. He’s turned into a fucking poofter” (“The Doctor’s Wife” 34).

This level of language was almost unheard of in our family. I had never heard my father use the ‘F’ word before. And censorship was such, then, that it was rarely
seen in print, even in Australian academic writings, until the late 1980s.

When Jean Kimble did as her brother-in-law Harold had requested, and brought home a copy of Norman Mailer’s *The Naked and the Dead* from America in 1949, Harold saw exactly why the censors had banned the book in Australia. The ‘F’ word appeared on almost every page of this war story. Not that it really was the ‘F’ word. He used the phonetic substitute, *fug*. While Mailer’s widely reported reason was that his mother would have been horrified if her good little Jewish boy had used bad language, it is likely that he was aware of the strict censorship at the time. It is explained in Jonathon Green’s *Cassells Dictionary of Slang* simply that “Mailer had coined the euphemism *fug* as an all-purpose replacement for the taboo word” (457).

There was a line drawn too when it came to women’s discussion of unsavoury or taboo topics. If my mother had wanted to describe a man as being homosexual she would most likely have said, “He is not like other men,” or, even more mysteriously, and with eyebrows raised: “He’s one of those.” This turn of phrase, I suspect, revealed her ignorance of the subject as much as her detachment from it. Like many women of the time, she had an armoury of such euphemisms at her disposal. And they persist today. An aunt of mine recently described her male hairdresser as “being a little *pink*.” I had to stop for a moment and ask myself: is he gay, left-wing or sunburned from a day at the beach?

As a child, I do not recall any discussions at home on the subject of paedophilia abuse until I became a victim of it myself. People spoke of abduction and murder, like that in 1960 of little Graeme Thorne, held for ransom after his father won the Opera House Lottery. He was found dead months later in a cave at Seaforth. It was such a dreadful, drawn-out business that I have not forgotten any of it. But sexual predators were out there too, and not spoken about. Often, as in my case, the paedophile turned out to have been a friend of the family. This made my decision to speak out more difficult. When I eventually told my mother, she was distraught. As I was physically unharmed, my father dealt with the matter himself by confronting the man. The man and his family moved interstate in a matter of weeks and the incident was not mentioned again. I still think about it occasionally when I drive past that man’s house.

Out of interest, I canvassed a group of women friends of my age at a gathering one evening recently and asked if any had had a similar experience as a child. Four out of seven said yes. One reported that she was driven to her country primary school each day by a neighbour on his way to work. “The man insisted I sat on his lap in the car so I
could ‘get a better view’ as we bumped along” (Goninan).

In the ‘60s, even a discussion on a friend’s latest pregnancy demanded from my mother a sort of discrete Clayton’s language, the code you spoke in order to get your message across without actually saying what you meant. The word pregnant, though perfectly clear in its meaning was, it seemed, a little too explicit, too unambiguously vulgar in its sound and meaning. Voluminous smocks were worn by mothers-to-be to disguise their “shameful” condition. It was safer to say—and this was my mother’s choice—“Brenda’s on the way again,” or, according to our cleaning lady, “There’ll be the patter of little feet at the Jones’s by Christmas.”

This double-speak was used by women to shield them from the shame of mentioning the unmentionable, when what was desperately needed in the ’50s and ’60s was some straight talking: a factual, open discussion on topics like sex and pregnancy, especially with their teenage children. After all, pregnancy was, our mothers said, the worst fate that could befall a single woman. A fate worse than death.

Wendy McCarthy discusses this issue:

The absolutely worst thing that could happen to you was to get pregnant when you weren’t married, and the second worst thing was not to get married . . . there was no sense that your life could in any way be complete unless you were married. I married late in my peer group and I was twenty-three. That too is inconceivable for younger women. There was a view that it was good for a woman to have an education but it was because it meant you would be a better mother. It wasn’t about being a person in your own right. The sense of being an individual who counted, with an ability to create wealth, be a legislator, add value to the society in which you lived, was not a concept that existed in any part of my social world at that time (78).

Here McCarthy could be describing Jean Kimble’s world. Women were initially excluded and later discouraged from entering the male-dominated faculties of Science and Medicine. In any case, they were thought to be odd, or not real women at all, since it was believed that a real woman’s instincts would naturally direct her to homemaking and nurturing.

In her job as drug analyst at Randwick, Jean Kimble endured the name Swab Queen given her by the tabloid newspapers. The double standard was a feature of the times. A male would never be ridiculed as “Swab King.” Whether it is “Swab Queen”
or “Amazon,” there is a sense of: “Who do these women think they are?” Here, if ever there was one, was a female “tall poppy” to be cut down to size.

While the job of drug analyst was not considered a proper position of employment for a woman, Jean’s mother saw things differently. She saw to it that her daughter never had to cook or clean, even at home. Nettie Kimble, that tiny dynamo of a mother who had worked as a seamstress at David Jones before marriage, was immensely proud of Jean and nurtured her career. In that sense she too was a woman crossing boundaries ahead of her time.

It was common, even into the 1960s, for parents of pretty daughters to bring them up to their beauty, not their brains, and to encourage them to leave school at the earliest opportunity. I knew families who saw no use in a very bright girl continuing past the Intermediate Certificate at fifteen years of age, when her good looks guaranteed she would secure a fine husband.

Not only education, it seemed, was dispensable for a female. One of my school friends received a set of dentures for her twenty-first birthday. It was a gift from her loving parents, who reasoned that, after this last expense, she would never have to pay dental bills again. It was an unpleasant procedure, necessitating the removal of every one of her perfectly good teeth, and causing a lifetime of regret. I often wondered whether her brother was so blessed.

In *My Brilliant Career* Miles Franklin saw the difficulties faced by women of intelligence when it came to finding a suitable husband:

> Girls! Girls! Those of you who have hearts, and therefore a wish for happiness, homes, and husbands by and by, never develop a reputation for being clever. It will put you out of the matrimonial running as effectively as though it had been circulated that you had leprosy . . . Provided a woman is beautiful allowance will be made for all her short-comings (34).

In the second story, “The Drug Analyst,” Jean Kimble, like Franklin’s heroine, Sybylla, hardly fits the demure-but-helpless female stereotype. She is a self-sufficient young woman who, though a staunch Christian, refuses to be coerced into the “God’s Police” stereotype. However, while both women want to believe themselves capable of doing a job as well as a man, the reality in the late nineteenth century for women who chose not to marry was that there were few career choices open to them, other than acting, writing
and teaching. “Male” careers of the type offered to Jean Kimble at Randwick were not then open to women. For Sybylla, the stage is not seen as respectable enough, and she fails as a teacher at the McSwat’s, so falls back on her writing, which, by the end of the novel, appears to be going nowhere. Both women were criticised and ostracised for their achievements. Summers writes on this point:

While the early female university students established the right of women to an equal education with men they paid a high price for that right. Women who used their education in professional employment abdicated the right to marry. Their social world was ignored or ridiculed; they were pitied because they were childless and sexually frustrated, and were pointed out as a warning to younger girls who read too many books (377).

In Australia today, women who choose to follow a career are still ridiculed and publicly condemned for not obeying their biology and postponing, or even dismissing the idea of starting a family. Take Senator Bill Heffernan’s outburst in Parliament last year, regarding “barrenness.” And he was not referring this time to the drought in the south of the country. The remark was aimed squarely at the then Deputy Leader of the Opposition, now Deputy Prime Minister, Ms Julia Gillard.

In her wartime job as a wireless telegraphist and section officer, my mother proved for four years that she could do a man’s job. Women had been recruited into the services for that very reason, to release men for active duty. The irony was that it was only when she was married and unemployed, that a woman was, in the eyes of the Australian Prime Minister of the day, realising her full potential. But at what ultimate cost to her identity, her sense of self?

When McCarthy writes on this subject, she could be describing the Doctor’s Wife:

Part of the loneliness and alienation was that your definition was as somebody’s wife. Whoever you were before that was an interim phase and real life started when you were “X’s wife”. People would ask you things like, “What does your husband do?” For many women “marrying up” increased the loneliness because they were defined by their husband’s occupation. It defined where they lived, it defined their social life, who they entertained, where their children went to school. You put aside the person you were and reinvented yourself as someone else’s wife, and that is
where your real life started (79).

My mother became redefined as the doctor’s wife. That was her new identity immediately she left the WAAAF and married. I remember, as a teenager, bringing in the mail and noticing the way most of the letters addressed to my mother never actually bore her name. Anything arriving for my father, my brother, my sister, or me, for that matter, had our correct names on the envelope. It seemed that once marriage vows had been exchanged, women were their husband’s property, because most of my mother’s correspondence came addressed to a Mrs Peter Roberts. When I expressed my horror that this was my father’s name and not hers, my mother, in a resigned fashion, said, “Yes, I know, but that’s the correct way. It’s called etiquette.”

Even today, an invitation to the local annual Matrons’ Ball carries the name of its ten or so hostesses as: Mesdames GF Smith, FW Riddle, DN Short, and so on. These are their husbands’ initials. They give no real identity to the wives who have worked hard to arrange the function, and no guarantee that they will be the same women who hosted the event last year. Any new wife would have the same name.

“Only when her husband dies,” my mother later explained, as if it cleared up the matter, “does a woman go back to her own name.”

Daring to Defy the White Female Myth

Jean Kimble is a single woman who retains her name and enjoys a strong public identity through it. In that sense she defies the white female myth. Her sense of self, even early in her life, was fairly solid. While the doctor’s wife has her sense of self eroded by marriage Jean, in private correspondence with friends, rather enjoys the freedom of her single status. She mixes with all levels at Randwick, defends her professional integrity to the last and enjoys trying on other names: answering to the androgynous Kim or Kimble from Beryl, and signing her letters and cards to Aileen as Kate, her all-time favourite name.

It was obvious from the outset that the Australian Jockey Club at Randwick would have preferred to employ a male analyst. They had advertised the position in the “Men and Boys” section of the Herald’s “Positions Vacant” column, not in “Women and Girls.” Such a distinction would be unthinkable today, but fifty years ago there were clear divisions of work according to gender, and clear divisions of pay. Jean would
have received a lower rate of pay than the man who replaced her.

McCarthy discusses the sexism in the workplace that occurred in her time:

When I started work in 1962, there was not equal pay and if you worked in the Commonwealth Public Service you had to leave as soon as you got married. You could be at work with your fiancé on Friday and you could get married on Saturday and on Monday he had a job and you didn’t . . . At that time marriage was the ultimate goal for most women. There was no incentive to stay in the workforce after you were married (76-77).

The doctor’s wife keeps her marriage vows to the letter. But despite all the love, honour and obedience she can muster, at the end of her life she feels unfulfilled as a woman. McCarthy says: “Every woman in the world . . . wants to be in a loving relationship but she doesn’t need it for self-definition, she needs it for self-fulfilment” (83). I remember my mother saying, when she was suddenly abandoned and divorced after thirty years of marriage, that next time she was coming back as a man.

Nangala, on the other hand, has a rich life and a strong identity without a man in her life. Single again like many of her friends at Yuendumu, it seems that she finds support and friendship in the company of other single women. At almost eighty years of age she is too busy with her commitments to the Night Patrol, the Women’s Centre and the Old People’s Program to do more than the occasional painting these days. But she does keep her interest in traditional ceremonies, giving lessons in traditional dancing and singing to the young girls after school. She is a good dancer who, along with other desert women, danced in the Opening Ceremony at the Sydney Olympic Games. In her modest quarters behind the Mission House she keeps adding to her collection of *yinirnti* seeds, bright orange-red bean seeds that she will, when time permits, fashion into necklaces to be sold at the Art Centre. For her, work is synonymous with culture.

The western female stereotype continued well into the postwar period. It was reflected, perhaps even perpetuated, by Australian artists and writers of the day.

Ray Lawler, in his 1955 play, *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, sets out to analyse the myth of mateship. In doing so he initially presents the barmaid, Olive, as an immature, irrational female, dependent on the annual “honeymoon” fling in the “lay-off” with her man, Roo. However, late in the play, when it becomes clear that the “lay-
offs” are over, a distraught Olive refuses Roo’s offer of marriage and leaves the stage. The more moralistic Pearl, having earlier seen the writing on the wall, has already walked away from Barney. In the final scene, Roo smashes the seventeenth doll, its fragile celluloid and silk remnants littering an empty stage at the end of the play. In having rejected not only the entrapment of marriage and children but also the chance to become respectable, Olive is shown following Pearl in deciding to live the rest of her life on her own terms. This is an effective ending to the play that hints at hope for the future while the audience gains a glimpse, perhaps, of the women’s movement just around the corner.

A recent season of Joanna McClelland-Glass’s play, *Trying*, in Sydney, brought a breath of fresh air to the subject of female leads of the ’60s. It has taken a woman, a Canadian woman at that, to write a great part for an assertive, intelligent and ambitious twenty-five-year-old female of the ’60s. This two-hander is set in 1967, in the home study of Judge Francis Biddle, who was ex-Attorney General in the latter years of Roosevelt’s presidency. He is coming to terms with Sarah, yet another new secretary. All previous secretaries, it is revealed, have resigned in tears, brought on by the pernickety ways and bullying tactics of the ageing and irascible eighty-one-year-old Biddle. The charm and wit of the piece lies in the way these two, he a patrician American, and she from a humble farming family in the Canadian prairies, gradually come to an understanding of the other’s needs. Young Sarah’s future as a writer is still a distant dream as she types up the judge’s memoirs in the new “modern way.” Biddle’s future is bleak, as evident in his failing health and in his recurring assertion throughout the piece that he will be “ready when called,” and that “the door is ajar.”

The script reflects accurately the cultural stereotypes that continued into the ’60s when Biddle says: “Holding things in abeyance is a woman’s plight. Biology decided that.” This insight is not surprising when one discovers that the playwright, McClelland-Glass, was the real-life secretary to Judge Biddle in 1967, the last year of his life. While the play is set in the ’60s, it was not, however, written in the ’60s. It was written with the benefit of hindsight in 2003 and first performed in Chicago in 2004.

As a writer of memoir/biography, I was touched by the personal insights from Sarah when the two were discussing the meaning of success in a person’s life. When the illustrious judge (who lets us know that he attended boarding school with Roosevelt and was later chosen as the US judicial representative at the Nuremburg war trials), starts deriding Sarah’s humble background, she stands up for herself, accusing him of being a
bully like her alcoholic father. Later she turns on him and says that “it is not only the success of a person that should be taken into account, but the journey that person has made to get there.” Here, at least, is a determined and successful postwar heroine who stands her ground, even if it is the playwright herself (McClelland-Glass).

The play left me uplifted, and made me determined, when writing my characters, to keep in mind Sarah’s observations on “success” and its relationship to a person’s journey. This notion is relevant to the achievements of the women subjects of my stories, especially role models like Jean Kimble and Nangala, who, in their own ways, battled discrimination and dispossession.

For my mother the ’50s and ’60s was a time for girding the loins. A persistent form of oppression of women after the war was the expectation that they express their femininity. It was an imposition, both cultural and sculptural, by which a woman’s gender was displayed in a seductive and alluring manner. There was the removal of body hair, the application of makeup and nail varnish, the disguise of her normal smell with perfumes, hair styling, dying and perming. For the “decent” girl there were limits to the lengths one might go in these endeavours so as not to appear “cheap” or risk being labelled a “tart.” An industry centred on “foundation garments” blossomed.

When I was growing up, these terrifying trappings of womanhood were evident every washing day, flapping in the breeze on my mother’s Hills Hoist. There, for all to see, was the full gamut of mediaeval-looking devices that tightened around a woman’s body to mould it to an acceptable shape. There were boned brassieres for encasing and uplifting the breasts, and ribbed enclosures for the torso, called “step-ins” or “corsets,” which held in the waist and flattened the tummy and buttock regions, extending the pressure through to the thighs. There, suspenders were attached to clip onto the tops of stockings. These devices were apparently what good, God-fearing women wore. They displayed the female form seductively but acted also as a chest-to-thigh barrier so that nothing wobbled, fell out, or could yield too easily to the straying touch of a man. Here was the extension of the chastity belt, the female form as rigidly hourglass-shaped and stereotyped as any one of Ray Lawler’s seventeen celluloid kewpie dolls.

The terrifying thing was that other “God’s Police” were ready to pounce on their wayward sisters. Elaine Drysdale, the mother of a school friend of mine, worked as a doctor’s secretary while her two daughters were at school. They used to walk to the surgery after school and come home with their mother at five pm. Elaine told me that
after two or three months of this arrangement she received poison-pen letters in the mail, accusing her of being a bad and neglectful mother whose proper place was at home with her children. The letters upset her but she kept working. Years later she discovered that the letter-writer was a woman, the woman next door (Drysdale).

On this subject Summers says:

...the most ardent enforcers of this alien culture are other women...Rather than their oppressed state engendering a solidarity and mutual sympathy amongst women, the all-too-urgent need to attract male protectorship makes women competitive. They see each other as rivals and often become hostile to one another (287).

Perhaps we inherited this anxiety from our British heritage. An Italian friend, Nora Moelle, told me that, soon after moving to Australia with her husband in the 1960s, she was advised by a well-meaning female acquaintance that “Italian women with their rounded figures should get themselves along to a department store to be fitted for foundation garments.”

Nora was a tall slim woman from the north of Italy and, while she thanked the neighbour, decided to ignore her advice. “We didn’t have such contraptions in Italy,” she said. “Could you imagine Sophia Loren allowing herself to being harnessed into something like that?” Then she added, “Actually, I was quite surprised because here in Australia people don’t even look at each other in the street like they do it Italy. In Italy people are interested in other people. It is natural to look. In Australia I felt invisible. And that was uncomfortable” (Moelle).

Both the doctor’s wife and Jean Kimble, as well as most of their women friends, would have worn these devices. It has to be said that the professional fitting of these undergarments could be a humiliating ordeal. I recall being taken to a small shop down the western end of Hunter Street Newcastle to be fitted for my first bra. It was 1960. Behind the counter, was the robust form of Sister Simms, a woman renowned throughout the city for her skill and experience in fitting the Newcastle Girls’ Grammar School boarders with the necessary undergarments as their figures bloomed. Having been schooled privately in Adelaide for her final two years, my mother possibly made my appointment on the strength of this recommendation.

Had Sister remained behind the counter all would have been well, but she
invited herself into the tiny fitting room. After commenting that I “must have been behind the door when they were given out,” she planted her feet on the floor behind me and grasped my naked chest flesh with her sharp, painted talons, and began moving and stretching handfuls of it from here to there, red and stinging, into the shallow cups. An order was given to bend forwards and shake myself from side to side. In an instant she’d fastened the back and tightened the shoulder straps, and I straightened up, struggling to breathe. I had crossed a threshold, completed a rite of passage. I had been “lifted and separated” in my first “Cross-Your-Heart” bra.

The Role of Women in Society and Marriage

Women in society and marriage have been the subject of Australian female writers for well over a century. In the nineteenth century there were several notable contributions by women novelists to the debate.

Rosa Praed (1851-1935) was the first Australian-born novelist to enjoy international success and become self-supporting through her writing. In her novel, The Bond of Wedlock, Praed explores the role of women and marriage in London society of the late nineteenth century through her English heroine, Ariana Lomax.

The beautiful Ariana is disillusioned by her conventional marriage to an impecunious husband whom she detests. Having fallen in love with wealthy admirer Sir Leopold D’Acosta, Ariana becomes an unwitting victim of Leopold’s scheme to secure both her divorce and the settling of her family’s debts when Ariana’s gambler father virtually sells her to D’Acosta. The other heroine, the Bohemian Babette Steinbock, is in on the scheme. But she knowingly sells herself, declaring to D’Acosta that the bond of marriage is no longer for her:

You may take my word for it: if I had been a man I don’t believe I should have been an immoral man. The freedom that every man has would have been enough for me. But in this country, a woman can only really be free when she is immoral; and so I mean to take up with immorality again for the sake of my freedom, since I can’t have my freedom any other way (35).

In her introduction, Elizabeth Webby notes that, at the end of the story, Ariana “has merely exchanged one cage for another, rather more gilded, one” (iii). Babette,
however, is the moral survivor. Rejecting the hypocrisy she sees in the wealthy marriages around her, and espousing a more open, European approach to sexual relationships, she emerges the more independent and respected woman. Ariana, who so craves social respectability, finally marries up (to D’Acosta) but at the cost of living a lie: “‘We can be good friends on the outside,’” she says to him. ‘‘We need never be anything more’’” (114). These might be the “Naughty Nineties,” but this does not excuse the ruthlessness of the men in their manipulation of Ariana in this unlikely tale.

Miss Jean Kimble, it could be argued, tries to lead the life of a free woman. By society’s standards in the ’40s and ’50s she is an independent thinker, unafraid to push society’s boundaries. However, in her workplace at Randwick Racecourse, it seems that the men in charge have not evolved enough to respect her ability to do her job efficiently. As in The Bond of Wedlock, it is this same “boys club” mentality that threatens to overwhelm her.

Jean’s story derives its strength from the humanity of the woman and her struggle against inequality in the workplace. Despite Jean’s having been vindicated in the court case brought against the Australian Jockey Club, the Club makes her position untenable by appointing a man over her. Jean departs, however, with her integrity intact. As journalist Keith Robbins reports in the ABC Television series on the racing industry, The Track: “She was a strong woman and stood up for her principles and others disagreed with her. She was in a man’s world, racing was a man’s world and she got the heave-ho. See you later Jean, don’t bother coming in.”

The times were against Jean Kimble. “In the prevailing social climate,” observed The Track’s narrator, “her departure was perhaps more predictable than her appointment. In racing and everywhere else, women had their place” (The Track).

In the end, it was impossible in the ’40s and ’50s that Jean Kimble could be a free woman at Randwick; impossible that she could be free to get on with her job as a man would be allowed and expected to do; impossible that she could be free from the idea held by men that the biology of a woman was a defect that rendered her less reliable and less competent than a man. Summers points this out: “It is paramount that we know a woman’s marital and maternal status, and whatever else she may aspire to or have already achieved will be assessed against this basic barometer” (78).

Jean was a single woman loved by her nieces and nephews. She lived at a time when the term for an unmarried aunt was “maiden” aunt, a term that presupposed an asexual and unfulfilled life. While it was proper for clean-living spinsters to remain at
home to care for their ageing parents, Jean challenged the great white myth about women. She not only cared for her parents (and they for her) but also held down a responsible full-time job. She enjoyed close and fulfilling personal relationships with both men and women. And she was a pragmatist, a good churchgoer and member of the “whiter than white” Order of the Eastern Star while admitting to occasional lapses into “grey.”

While Jean’s experience and ability often outshone those of her male competitors, the times in which she lived dictated that she never made it to the top, never made so much as a crack in that “glass ceiling,” not even at Johnson and Johnson, where she had taken up a senior position after leaving Randwick and worked there until she retired. That she was demoted from “Research and Development” to “Quality Control” spoke volumes. She made this clear to her niece Marilyn, in the story, when she said of her boss, whom she had lectured at university, “I was above him once” (“The Drug Analyst” 124).

**Times Suited to the Heroic**

For the three women I write about, it was the Second World War and its social and political aftermath that would have the most impact and influence on their lives. They were, as Thomas Keneally notes in his novel, *The Widow and her Hero*, “times suited to the heroic” (3).

After the war, certain women’s magazines of the day tried to align themselves with the aspirations of women like my mother, but failed, becoming instead part of the domestication conspiracy. “*The Women’s Weekly,*” writes Anne Summers:

> began to prepare its readers for the postwar period when ‘the normal way of life’ would be resumed. In 1945 it expressed its delight that the serviceman’s ‘riches are being restored to him—children’s laughter and the sight of a small sleepy head upon a pillow—an armchair by the fire and clean sheets—tea in the kitchen and a woman’s tenderness no longer edged by unspoken fears  (465).

This, of course, was an expired reality, a reality that had existed before the war, when there had been little impetus for women to examine their roles critically. When the Japanese entered the war and Australia came under threat, many Australian women
were recruited by the armed forces to free men for active duty. The fact was that things had changed for these women and would never be the same again.

Despite women’s training and expertise in their wartime jobs, there was no question of their continuing to work, especially once they were married. Married women had to make way for returned men. Women were catapulted from paid wartime responsibilities that had brought them previously unimagined dignity and financial independence, into a dependent domestic role in an increasingly prosperous postwar society.

Advertisers of everything from foundation garments to washing machines had exploited a captive market. There is no doubt, however, that advances like these and the labour-saving inventions of modern vacuum cleaners and automatic washing machines did take the drudgery out of housework. When my mother finally dispensed with the old copper and wringer in our laundry and a new washing machine was installed in their place, I have to say she was thrilled. This modern technology halved the workload. I remember her pride in the thought that, as a young woman in Adelaide, she had played tennis at the homes of the wealthy manufacturers of these magical white-goods. She had danced at parties with these demi-gods. The slow watering-down of her previously hard-fought identity had begun in this new and mesmerising whirlpool of domesticated bliss. Neither was my father left out of this new consumer technology. He was enthralled whenever the latest Holden car came onto the market.

In writing about the pressures placed on postwar women, I do not for a moment deny that there were intense pressures on those men who returned home from the conflict. They had to somehow fit back into normal life. Almost every Australian family had been touched by war and had a hero: someone killed or a returned survivor to have the mantle of greatness thrust upon him. Some were damaged, emotionally, physically, or both, yet without counselling, were expected to fit back into family and society as, Breadwinner, Wage-earner, Father, Husband or Lover.

In our family’s case my father was the hero. He
had served overseas as a Medical Officer in New Guinea. There was a small album of black-and-white photographs to prove it. One striking image showed a line of naked men queuing to see my father who is sitting front-on and dressed in uniform at his desk, outdoors in broad daylight. The caption is “Skin Parade” and he is checking each of the men for tropical skin diseases—ulcers, tropical infections and goodness knows what else. It gave us, as children, a tangible image of what he had been doing. There were other photos too showing him enjoying his time off, partying and picnicking with nurses, and rigging up a sailing boat made from the flotation tanks of a crashed aircraft on Madang Harbour.

Our mother had evidence of his fond thoughts for her: the handsome ashtray he had made from half a coconut shell, polished and decorated with tiny shells and sent to her as an expression of his love. She, it seemed, had responded by sending him her photograph signed With love, Helen. Here were the perfect ingredients for a fairytale romance like those depicted in war movies. And we had something to say when our school friends asked, “What did your father do in the war?”

They never asked, “What did your mother do in the war?”

The facts of the matter were that by the time my father arrived in New Guinea in 1944, the Americans had entered the war and the crisis in the Pacific was all but over. The one casualty I heard him mention, and it was a tragedy, was a fellow medico and friend who was killed when a coconut fell on him. I happened to meet his son at university. He never knew his father.

My parents rarely talked about war. The information above is all I know of my father’s war service. Only later did we discover that our mother had served. She and her twin sister had left university to join the WAAAF in early 1941 and were pictured together on recruitment posters all over South Australia.

They were working at the Brisbane Signals Station in 1941 when my mother received a Morse code message on her radio that the Australian cruiser HMAS Sydney was overdue and presumed lost off the West Australian coast. There were 645 men on that ship and it had disappeared without trace. It was later revealed, when lifeboats containing German survivors turned up on beaches around Carnarvon, that Sydney had been seen ablaze and underway, heading for the coast when she disappeared. She had been sunk “with total loss of personnel” in an engagement with the German raider HSK Kormoran. Kormoran, also sunk, had been disguised as a Dutch merchant ship. A few weeks later Pearl Harbour in Hawaii was bombed by the Japanese. Then it was
Darwin’s turn, with raid after raid inflicting more fatalities than had occurred on Hawaii.

We had seen no photographs of our mother in her Air Force role until 1983, when she was contacted by author Patsy Adam-Smith who asked her permission to include a picture of my mother and her sister in their uniforms in her book, *Women at War* (231).

My mother had been serving as a wireless telegraphist for almost three years before my father took up his posting in New Guinea. While he had been granted his commission on entry into the RAAF, my mother and her sister had worked their way up through the ranks to become signals officers. But she hardly mentioned the war. And neither did my father. People did not speak of war then as much as they do now.

While I am sure my mother enjoyed her new life of motherhood, tennis mornings and having the status of the doctor’s wife, she had lost the esteem she had earned for herself in wartime. She was now defined as someone’s wife and someone’s mother. Having had the responsibility of sending and decoding top-secret Morse code messages, she now put up with her husband’s bogus calls as he tested her telephone technique. In some measure, her identity had begun to shrink. When she was abandoned after thirty years of service, three children and a constant fear of unwanted pregnancy, society had changed. The advent of the contraceptive Pill had heralded a sexual revolution that, while too late perhaps for a middle-aged wife, was snapped up by her husband who went out sailing and found himself a younger woman.

While my mother could be seen as an example of the domestic stultification of women of her time, I don’t believe my mother resented her housewifely image. As long as she remained the doctor’s wife she maintained an identity and a social position. The bitterness set in when she was dumped and superseded by a later model with racier lines who slept where she had once slept and took her place in society. It was at this point in her life that she harked back to her memories of her wartime job, a job that had made her feel worthy, a job she had won on her own merits and held in her own right.

In the second story, “The Drug Analyst,” it was Jean Kimble’s brother and soul mate, Frank, who wore the mantle of war hero in that family. Frank was the larrikin son, ladies’ man and war legend. Reports of his war service are mind-boggling: he served on two ships that went down, the *Perth* and the *Voyager*, and was trained in the Special Services as a commando. In the Mediterranean and in North Africa he used his skills as a boxer and rugby player on daring missions to eliminate crews of enemy ships. Despite
these reports an air of mystery remains around Frank. His name does not appear on the list of prisoners taken from the *Perth*, possibly because of the secret nature of his work. One thing is certain, however: he was in bad shape mentally and physically when he returned home to his wife and family.

In Tom Keneally’s novel, *The Widow and Her Hero*, it is Grace, the war widow, whose understanding dominates the last page: “I didn’t want a hero. A person is never married to a hero—the heroic pose is not designed for domesticity” (297). At the end of the war wives like Jean Kimble’s sister-in-law Alice had to take back the damaged goods. These wives were the rescuers of their families. Alice bore the brunt of Frank’s heroism, as did his son Harry, along with his father’s tuberculosis, his drinking, his war stories, and his inability to work. Frank was given a TPI pension.

The war had ended in France and the Pacific, but for some it continued on the home front. They may have been “times suited to the heroic,” but there were no medals given out to the wives or families.

Only a few weeks ago the wreck of HMAS *Sydney* was located in deep water off the West Australian coast. After writing “The Doctor’s Wife,” my emotional involvement with the mystery of the ship compelled me to travel to Sydney to attend the memorial service at St Andrews Cathedral. I felt I was there on behalf of my mother, who had worried about the *Sydney* and its crew since that day in November 1941 when she took down the message that the ship was missing.

I sat outside in a faint drizzle to watch the service on a large screen. While waiting for the service to start, I could observe the long lines of relatives whose loved ones has perished, having their invitations checked before being admitted into the cathedral through the side door. It took over an hour to get them seated inside and I was shocked to see the service begin while many were still waiting to enter. One would have thought that after they had waited sixty-six years for this day, the service (or more likely the media) might have waited for them for another twenty minutes.

Under the trees in the courtyard with me were many people without a family connection to the *Sydney*, but with their own reasons for being there. I was sitting beside a couple who had come down that morning from Bathurst. The gentleman told me that he had grown up next door to two young boys whose father had gone down with the ship. He remembered being taken at the age of six or seven, on a tour of the ship with the neighbour’s family. It was to be the *Sydney’s* last time in Sydney Harbour. He said he had never forgotten that day, or the family who suffered so terribly after losing their
father. “Those boys of his were never the same again,” he said. At the end of the service the man and his wife moved over to the crowd of relatives outside the church. “We lost touch in the ’70s when they moved away,” he said. “I’m hoping I can recognise one of them today” (Man at Memorial Service).

An Indigenous Perspective

The third subject, Nangala, the minister’s maid, is an outsider in the fullest sense as she does not belong to the dominant white culture of Australia. Along with all Aboriginal people she has suffered discrimination and dispossession. Most white Australians have never met, let alone spoken to, an Indigenous person, yet many hold strident views and make harsh judgements about them.

In her own society, Nangala is an independent woman and a dynamic force in the community. She was born in the Western Desert into a traditional hunter-gatherer way of life. After an eight-year drought, she and her family, along with many other Walpiri people at the point of starvation, moved into the newly established Baptist Mission at Yuendumu. This happened soon after the end of the Second World War when Nangala was a teenager. While she has lived at Yuendumu now for sixty years, her traditional culture and beliefs remain strong. She is also a devout Christian.

“The Minister’s Maid” is told in travel diary form, including my personal reflections of this place and its people. The story follows our Dog Health Program as it moves through the Yuendumu community. While writing up my diary each evening I am aware of those who have made similar journeys before me: the Baptist missionaries to Christianise the people, the anthropologists and ethnographers to document their “strange” ways, and the scientists to measure their physiognomy and judge their intelligence. And then there are writers like Robyn Davidson who travelled from Central Australia to the west coast on a camel, and Bruce Chatwin and Nicolas Rothwell, both travelling documenters of the dialogue between cultures and individuals in the Australian landscape. I identify with these writers as they travel, engaging and connecting with the people. They are crossing boundaries in this country; modern hunters and gatherers if you like, living off their stories, driven by their own faith in the journey and discovering themselves transformed in the process: “What makes Aboriginal song so hard to appreciate,” writes Chatwin in The Songlines, “is the endless accumulation of detail. Yet even a superficial reader can get a glimpse of a moral
universe—as moral as the New Testament—in which the structures of kinship reach out to all living men, to all his fellow creatures, and to the rivers, the rocks and the trees” (70).

In “The Minister’s Maid,” dogs are the most significant “fellow creatures” of the landscape. Over the past 10,000 years they have found themselves a niche in Aboriginal culture. As such they are significant characters in the story. In Yuendumu, their desolate state of health, especially in overcrowded conditions, is now found to be a risk to the health of the people. To some, these mongrels are outcasts; to others, especially women living alone, they are valued protectors. Puppies are revered and caressed. Older dogs are sometimes seen as relatives who deserve care. “That dog is like my uncle,” shouted one woman, after we had agreed to her husband’s request to put down their miserable, mangy dog. “He’s a very sick old man,” she said. “You leave him alone” (The Minister’s Maid 170).

Deborah Bird Rose in Dingo Makes us Human explains the close relationship of Aboriginal people to their dogs: “In [Yarralin] Dreaming, only the dingo walked then as he does now. He was shaped like a dog, he behaved like a dog, and dingo and human were one. It was the dingo who gave us our characteristic shape with respect to head and genitals, and our upright stance . . . They are what we would be if we were not what we are” (47).

Nangala, like my mother and Jean Kimble, is an ordinary woman in her world. While she is uneducated in the western sense, she holds a wealth of traditional knowledge and has extraordinary capabilities in passing this knowledge on. Her trips to drought affected Niger in Africa to plant acacia trees as a food source, will one day result in saving lives. Rosie Nangala and her friend Kay Napaljarri were invited to Niger to offer their strategies for desert survival. There they held “bush tucker” workshops on the use of the fast-growing Australian acacia trees for food, showing how the acacia nuts can be ground up and made into a tasty, nutritious porridge acceptable to both people and animals. Sydney Morning Herald writer, Matt Wade reports that since their first visit in 2005 “more than 60,000 acacia trees (acacia colei) have been planted in Niger” (Wade).

In these times of global warming with the resulting catastrophic droughts, perhaps it is the knowledge and understanding of hunter-gatherer societies that hold the key to our survival. Robyn Davidson explores this idea in her essay “No Fixed Address: Nomads and the Fate of the Planet”: “In all the time that whitefellas had lived among
blackfellas, it had not occurred to the former that they might have a great deal to learn from the latter. That was a thought it was impossible to have, because Aborigines were the children of the race of man, and you don’t take children’s reasoning seriously” (12). One thinks of the needless deaths of explorers Burke and Wills who perished from starvation, refusing to seek food from Aboriginal people nearby.

Rosie Nangala, by going on her rescue mission to Africa, challenges the negative stereotype placed on Aboriginal people. She needed nothing more than a digging stick to plant the Australian acacia trees in drought-affected Africa. She needed no schoolroom to learn to harvest nutritious food from the acacia tree. Her hunter-gatherer culture taught her the skills that we in the west are learning too late.

Davidson says one of the questions we need to ask, if we are to have a future, is: “Where, when and in what situations, did we cause less damage to ourselves, to our environment, and to our animal kin?” She answers: “When we were nomadic. It was when we settled that we became strangers in a strange land, and wandering took on the quality of banishment. Pilgrimages, religious or secular, remained as a relic of the hunting and foraging life” (48).

This is an engaging and romantic thought. However, scientists have found that nomadism is a lifestyle based not on choice, but on necessity. Jared Diamond in *Guns, Germs and Steel* writes: “Australia’s aridity, infertility, and climatic unpredictability limited its hunter-gatherer population to only a few hundred thousand people . . . the smallest and most isolated human population on any of the continents.” He adds that “metal tools, writing, and politically complex societies arose elsewhere only in populous and economically specialised societies of food producers.” Here were small ecological islands of people existing in a vast island continent, separated from one another by deserts, tropical rainforests and enormous distance. “Compared with the tens of millions of people in ancient China or Mesoamerica,” says Diamond, “Australia had far fewer potential inventors.” Indeed, history tells us that Tasmanians, when discovered by Europeans in 1642, had the simplest culture in the world: “When the [Bass] strait was flooded 10,000 years ago Tasmanian Aboriginals were cut off from the mainland. Having no watercraft capable of negotiating the strait, they remained in isolation from all other human on earth.” On the mainland the highest population densities of Aborigines were in the wettest and most productive regions: the Murray-Darling river system of the Southeast, the eastern and northern coasts, and the south-western corner.” Diamond explains: “From the first weeks of White settlement in these areas Aboriginals
succumbed to diseases like influenza and smallpox to which they lacked resistance. The reason we think of Aborigines as desert people is simply that Europeans killed them or drove them out of the most desirable areas” (310-12).

Within decades they were given little hope of survival. It was generally accepted as early as the 1850s that Aboriginals of the Australian mainland were dying out. By that time white colonists had taken control of most of the land suitable for grazing in southern and eastern Australia. It was a commonplace European colonisation theory that people of lowly economic status should be dispossessed and that their extinction was inevitable.

By the 1920s the government had all but given up on Aboriginals. Their strategy in dealing with the fate of these “unfortunates,” was often described as “smoothing the dying pillow.” To many at the time, this was justified and accepted as social Darwinism at work: Natural Selection. Yet it had all begun with such promise.

The anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner noted the changing attitudes of Europeans to Aborigines after 1788, when these indigenous people failed to live up to the idealised image, reminiscent of Rousseau’s “noble savage,” that the Europeans had expected. He documented this in *The History of Indifference thus Begins*: “In the early years of settlement insensibility towards the Aborigines’ human status hardened into contempt, derision and indifference. The romantic idealism, unable to stand the shock of experience drifted through dismay into pessimism about the natives’ capacity for civilisation” (145). It was as if the colonisers could not see past their own white cultural norms and standards, could not conceive of an alternative way of living with nature and belonging to the land in which acquisition of material goods and monument building were unimportant. Colonial women wore long flowing garments that covered most of the body. By comparison, Aboriginal women were almost naked. So great was the cultural and social divide between the two races that the British found it impossible to understand or respect the natives, much less learn from them. An opportunity to find common ground, to understand this country and learn to survive in it, was lost.

In his Boyer Lecture series in 1968, titled *After the Dreaming*, Stanner suggested that Australia’s Indigenous people were essentially unrecognised and unrepresented within Australia’s history. “They were left out,” he said, mentioned only as a “melancholy footnote.” This was but a “structural matter,” a deliberate attempt to exclude the “several hundred thousand Aborigines who lived and died between 1788 and 1938 . . . negative facts of history and, having been negative, were in no way
consequential for the modern period” (214). Perhaps this goes some way to explaining why children like me, growing up in the 1950s and ’60s, were never taught about the murders, massacres, and dispossession of Aboriginal people.

After successfully crossing the Australian continent from south to north, explorers Burke and Wills perished from starvation on the homeward journey. They had reached Cooper’s Creek, where Burke quarrelled with the natives and fired on them, the very people who could have directed them to food and water. Frank Clune shows their folly in *Dig: The Burke and Wills Saga*:

“We must keep friendly with the blacks, Mr Burke!” counselled Wills desperately. “They can live in this country and so can we. We merely have to study their customs and live as they live until rescue comes!”

“We are not blackfellows, my dear boy,” said Burke in a sepulchral voice, his chin sunk upon his breast in utter dejection (154).

Only the private soldier John King survived. He was found months later by a rescue party. This last man alive had accepted the Aboriginals’ food and assistance, and was living amongst these people who had saved his life and now treated him as one of their own.

Ross Gibson’s *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland* reminds me of my childhood impressions of Aboriginal settlements. Early in the book he writes:

Let’s say you’re driving there. Feeling like an alien, you skitter through thin light while the country conspires with your moods to make an emotional soundtrack for your journey. As you move through this setting, you sense fear as a bassline underscoring an air of tragedy, all the time you drive (and it takes several hours to get free of the place once it’s quickened your pulses), you are haunted by fear and tragedy (1).

Gibson’s haunting associations bring to mind the ignorant and negative attitudes we so easily formed on our family trips north from Newcastle. The Pacific Highway took us past the Purfleet Aboriginal Mission on the outskirts of Taree. We only looked at the run-down state of the place, and nothing was said as we drove by. These were the
“abos,” the “boongs,” the “savages” that knew no better. And neither did we know better. At school we had never been taught that part of our history, of the dispossession and institutionalised racism inflicted on these people. On my first trip to the Western Desert, Yuendumu might well have been Purfleet revisited. In the wake of recent accusations of domestic and child abuse in the Northern Territory, one fears that the communities there have already been tainted by the publicity and branded as “badlands.”

The Sanctity of Ordinary Things

In her small dwelling behind the mission house at Yuendumu Nangala has a single bed, some cooking utensils, a small amount of food, a pile of clothes, a painting she is working on, some paints, a box of cards and letters, a tin of tobacco and a container of bean seeds. It is a modest accumulation from a life of seventy-nine years. Meagre pickings when set alongside Jean Kimble’s life-time collection: those boxes in the back room crammed full of trinkets and gifts bought at fêtes; silver teaspoons whose badges speak of destinations abroad but will never stray from their display cabinet to stir a cup of tea; piles of handkerchiefs still wrapped in dusty cellophane; and hundreds of ornamental frogs waiting on her shelves, waiting like everything else, waiting like most of the women of that postwar era, waiting in a kind of limbo of social propriety for their true potential to be realised.

Nangala’s scarcity of possessions is not a conscious rejection of material goods but a reflection of a traditional bush lifestyle nourished by symbolism and simplicity. She has an awareness of the sacredness of simple everyday objects that connect her spirit to the natural world. She has no need to own anything to prop up her identity except for a connection to her land. It is as if her bare feet are the roots that draw strength from her country.

My mother, too, learns the value of a simple gift from nature as she grieves over the broken coconut shell ashtray, a handmade gift from her husband during the war, crafted from flotsam he collected on a beach. No mass-produced gift bought for cold cash in a department store could have replaced it. Its value in monetary terms is irrelevant. Like love, like homeland, like the intricate mysteries of nature, it is priceless.

In the Northern Territory Art Gallery and Museum in Darwin there is an exhibition of Aboriginal art and artefacts entitled The Sanctity of Ordinary Things. On
display are baskets and bags woven from grasses, string made from human hair, as well as ornaments and tools carved from wood and decorated with natural ochres. The label below explains that all things made from nature, even utilitarian things, have sacredness because they originate from the land, and that is sacred. This made me ponder on the lack of reverence and sanctity in western life, its “throwaway” society whose rampant production of consumer goods has warmed our planet, changed our climate and now threatens to destroy us.

David Suzuki and Peter Knudtson, in *Wisdom of the Elders*, examine “sacred ecologies,” or age-old wisdoms of indigenous peoples, alongside modern scientific theories:

Such tales are mere droplets in the vast global reservoir of traditional indigenous knowledge about the natural world . . . They remind us, however metaphorically, of the shared origins of all forms of life, the ecological integrity of natural systems, and the ancient bonds of kinship between humans and other species (3).

Australian Aboriginals moved on at regular intervals so as not to degrade their environment. Theirs was a society based on the idea of reciprocity. If you took something from a person or from the land, you were duty-bound to give something back. It is still the same today in Yuendumu. When we improve the health of the dogs the women are grateful. At the end of the week they invite us to go bush food collecting. And when they dig for bush potatoes they do not take all the roots. They leave enough for the plant to continue to grow and produce more food.

**Discrimination and Writers Speaking Out**

Australian women writers like Katharine Susannah Prichard wrote about the bush, identified with it and presented family life in the outback. Anne Summers observes:

Women in the bush could be strong characters but they were not allowed, in the literature as in life, to rival their husband’s monopolization of the national characteristics. If a woman wanted to write about an individual woman she had to be somehow separated from the norm: she had, for instance, as in Prichard’s *Coonardoo*, to be black (83).
This is, perhaps, a little unfair to Prichard because the other female protagonist in the story is Mrs Bessie, widow of the station owner, who has immense strength of character and wisdom and, for most of the book, runs the cattle station single-handed until cancer claims her, and her son Hugh takes over. By endowing the Aboriginal girl, Coonardoo, with intelligence, generosity and a caring nature, Prichard avoids the “whore” label that the white station-hands believe applies to Aboriginal girls, leaning instead towards the “noble savage,” and making the sexual relationship that Hugh has with her acceptable to her readers.

My mother was a keen reader of Prichard’s novels. Before heading off to my father’s sailing races on a Saturday afternoon she would tuck a slim volume into the lunch basket. Once beside the water she would find a sheltered corner, curl up on a rug and escape into another world, oblivious to the men in their boats. To conservative 1950s and ’60s housewives, Prichard’s titillating details of sexual relationships between Aboriginals and Europeans on a remote northern cattle station might have seemed irresistible. I don’t know if my mother ever spoke to an Aboriginal person, but I imagine that the following bet between two men in Coonardoo over “taking a gin” would have held her in greater thrall than whoever might be first round the buoy out on Lake Macquarie:

“What are you givin’ us, Youie?” Geary expostulated. “Have I got to mind my bloody p’s and q’s when I open me mouth on Wytaliba these days?”

“Too right you have,” Hugh assented.

“You’re one of these god-damned young heroes. No ‘black velvet’ for you, I suppose?”

“I’m goin’ to marry white and stick white,” Hugh said, obstinate lines settling on either side of his mouth.

Geary laughed.

“Oh, you are, are you?” he jeered. “What do you think of that, Bob? Well, I’ll bet you a new saddle you take a gin before a twelvemonth’s out—if ever you’re in this country on your own” (51).

Although Prichard’s portrayal of the Aboriginal heroine is a sensitive one, we see clearly the discriminatory attitudes of white male settlers towards Aboriginal women. While the white station workers in the story work side by side with Aboriginal stockmen whom they respect for their outstanding horsemanship, they have little respect
for the Aboriginal women who work as housemaids at the homestead. In Coonardoo they are there for the taking, by force if necessary.

In the Western Desert, discrimination against Aboriginal people has a long history. We were surprised to encounter it at a government level in Yuendumu on one of our early trips. Knowing that Nangala and her friends had been seeking treatment for their itching scabies sores, we were surprised, months later, to discover them still complaining bitterly of the itchiness. They had bandages over weeping areas on their arms and legs and were in danger of acquiring blood and kidney infections. This was hard to fathom, as the veterinary treatments we were administering to the dogs were proving very effective. The dogs had stopped scratching but their owners had not.

After making enquiries, we discovered that the clinic had been issued with an outdated and inefficient brand of scabies ointment that was so irritating to the people’s skin that sufferers refused to apply it.

We knew Lyclear to be the modern treatment of choice for scabies, but being available only by prescription, it had not been supplied to this clinic. The shelves were filled with the other product, Ascabiol, no longer used in hospitals in NSW because of the discomfort it causes. Our Federal MP in Newcastle, Allan Morris was on the Standing Committee for Indigenous Health at that time and had paid a visit to Yuendumu. When he commented in Parliament that the dogs in this community were better looked after than the people, suddenly the news broke nationwide on ABC Radio and supplies of Lyclear started arriving at remote clinics throughout the Northern Territory. The people’s scabies soon cleared.

Nangala’s story of being taken away from school is another example that the poor and marginalised sections of society are the most easily be exploited. But despite this setback, Nangala’s spirit has not been broken by invasion, dispossession or the neglect of the Baptist minister to educate her. In fact, her work for the community and her drought-relief missions abroad have shown her to be a resilient and determined ambassador for her people. Jakamarra too, while he lived, showed that his spirit and cultural connections survived beyond the massacre of his family members. He went on to teach the young men their Law and traditions, his sense of self enabling him to speak to us about the Coniston massacre with regret but without recrimination. “Years later the skulls were still there, lying on the ground, he said, ‘Like paddy-melons. Big ones, little ones, women, kids, everyone’” (“The Minister’s Maid” 180).
In the past months, the people of Yuendumu have lived in fear of another whitefella invasion: the Howard Government’s response to the recent *Little Children are Sacred Report of the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse*. In the spring of 2007 the community braced itself for the imminent arrival of the Howard government’s “Norforce,” a team of police and army officials led by Brigadier Chalmers. Frightened women fled to the bush in fear of another stolen generation of children. One of them was Nangala Fleming, who was feared lost. Terrified young mothers were arriving at the Childcare Centre three or four times a day to wash any new specks of dirt off their babies.

While the community would have welcomed skilled communicators, such as social workers, to mediate in the process, it was announced that highly paid Business Managers, now called Brokers, were to be appointed to remote communities. The people feared that there might be other agendas at work: a government grab for land, the quarantining of their pension payments, and the abolition of permits for people entering their lands. The people here maintained that unless strategies were worked out in consultation with the men and women of the community, the real problems would not be addressed. As one Yolnu woman said in the *Little Children are Sacred Report*: “Our communities are like a piece of broken string with women on one side and men on the other. These strings need to be twisted together and we will become strong again” (Wild and Anderson 59).

We have observed a division between men and women on many occasions, but have assumed it to be cultural. For example, in council meetings the sexes are separated: men on one side of the room and women on the other, a tall partition between them. The women say they want to feel they can speak and vote freely at meetings without judgement from their husbands. And in church it is the same, men in the left pews, women in the right. There is men’s business and women’s business; men’s and women’s ceremonies, men’s and women’s stories, men’s and women’s dances. But the Yolnu woman is not speaking of these issues. She is speaking about getting men and women together to address the serious social problems of alcohol, drugs, domestic violence and child abuse. That is where things are fraying and falling apart.

A writer concerned about abuse in remote Aboriginal communities is Louis Nowra. In *Bad Dreaming: Aboriginal Men’s Violence against Women and Children*, he speaks plainly:
The law has to change . . . there needs to be some sort of prison and juvenile justice centre rehabilitation program for Aboriginal men and boys prone to domestic violence and sexual abuse that is specifically orientated towards indigenous men and their culture . . . men are the problem and the solution . . . their behaviour is undermining Aboriginal culture . . . they are creating a generation of boys without good role models (90-93).

The words jolt me. I replay this part of “The Minister’s Maid” in my mind:

I think again about my Napaljarri sisters, and what other motives these women might have for living together. I remember the shrieks in the dead of night, the scars on the women’s heads where hair no longer grows. I remember the female assistant at the Art Centre who left last year after being raped by an intruder in her house. Someone said she didn’t have a dog. All the white people here have dogs to guard their houses. Big dogs they are too. Cheeky dogs. I think of the cold desert nights and the women pulling the dogs in closer to their bodies like blankets. And I think of the way they speak of the legendary Kurdaitcha man with such fear in their eyes that one might easily suspect him to be real (183-84).

If there is a problem action is needed. But I recall the words of a community manager: “The Walpiri women here are strong. If I hear a woman scream in the night, I feel sorry, not for that woman, but for the person on the receiving end of her nulla-nulla.”

Nowra argues: “In traditional life, women had an important place in Aboriginal culture, with their own rituals and ceremonies, and were keepers of lore and law. Once traditional society was undermined by Western culture, women’s role became hazy and undermined. If they participated in settler society it was generally as a maid or prostitute” (73-74).

Nangala feels angry that she was removed from her peer group at school to work for the Baptist Minister as a maid. She believes she was denied a proper education. These days she works in the Women’s Night Patrol. She is not afraid to take a stand against drugs and alcohol. And she helps keep the culture and ceremonies alive in the young girls. This is a remote community, a dry community. It is not like Alice Springs with a pub on every corner, yet many of the women here, including Nangala, will admit to having lost a son or a brother to “the grog.”

Pam Malden, co-ordinator of the Yuendumu Women’s Centre, speaks out in
defence of these women. She says, “Women’s Night Patrol works in close contact with both the Police and Men’s Night Patrol.” The aim is take any children home who are found out at night on the streets and diffuse any disputes which arise. In an interview recently she said, ‘They’re senior women. We always have senior women on board so they’re able to sit down and do some mediation. Irrespective of skin groups and family ties, the senior women can intervene and get in the middle of it . . . They get called out quite often to domestic violence and family disputes.” She adds that “ it’s a presence and everybody knows they’re there so if you’re going to smash cars up, you just never know when Night Patrol’s going to come around the corner and if those old women catch you, you’re going to cop it” (Lee interview).

One has to ask the question: when Nangala’s generation of women is gone, who will keep this community strong? And what about the subject of sexual abuse of children? Is it being addressed? It seems that the subject is rarely discussed within the community because it is taboo. It will therefore take the most skilled communicators much time spent gaining the trust of the men and women before anyone will feel comfortable about speaking out.

For the time being, Nangala, the Napaljarris and others at the Women’s Centre are coming together with ideas in response to the Federal Government’s Intervention. At first they were fearful and angry and wanted to protest. Someone suggested a naked march up the Tanami Road. A week later they had regrouped and were thinking more positively, “Why not make this opportunity work for us?” Now they are talking about social initiatives: the establishment of a library and extra reading classes, a gym to help them lose weight, and swimming lessons when the new swimming pool is completed.

A few weeks ago this optimism produced action. A group of young Yuendumu women were selected to train as lifeguards at the new Yuendumu swimming pool. They were enrolled in a course, and made the journey to Alice Springs to begin their lessons. As the group of sixteen were settling into the backpacker hostel booked for them by the Royal Lifesaving Society, they were asked to leave. When interviewed by ABC Local Radio reporter, Anne Barker, one of the women, Bethany Langdon, said, “When we booked in, the lady, the manager she gave us the keys to the rooms and we went in and put our clothes in there—our stuff in the rooms. We all went outside and the manager came out and told me that we weren’t suitable to stay there. . . They said because . . . like because you’re Aboriginal” (Barker).

Other accommodation was eventually arranged. It would have been most
disappointing if, just as the women had dared to feel some hope for training for real jobs, they had been denied that chance because of their race.

A Time of Religion, Politics and Fear

Arthur Miller’s landmark ’50s play, *The Crucible*, set in 1692, the time of the Salem Witch Trials, drew attention to the similarities between that era and his own—1950s America, commonly known as the McCarthy era. The McCarthy era saw the postwar rise of communism in Russia and China as evil. Communists, or anyone with sympathies for the so-called “Reds under the bed” or the “Yellow Peril” could be hunted down, placed under suspicion, persecuted, or used as a scapegoat. As in the play, people in ’50s America feared being possessed by the forces of evil and turned to the great white enforcers of Christian goodness. The assumption naturally followed that anyone other than white must be evil.

This era is portrayed well in the 2005 film, *Good Night and Good Luck*, in which journalists take a stand against what they see as a threat to freedom of speech. The use of black-and-white film and the seamless inclusion of actual footage of Senator McCarthy’s speeches give a convincing portrayal of the fear, racial prejudice and the subjugation of women.

The racist undercurrent in *The Crucible* brings to mind the Australian Government’s recent “intervention” in Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory. Fifty years on from the McCarthy era in America, are Aboriginal communities now seen as the new crucibles of evil? As the perpetrators of sexual abuse on children are supposedly being hunted down, could we be witnessing a witch-hunt? Or is all this a smokescreen for failed policy strategies in these communities where health problems, poor education outcomes and domestic violence have existed for decades? Surely, strategies are needed to improve the low self-esteem of Indigenous men, not to undermine it.

On rereading *The Crucible* one finds other parallels with the fears and prejudice existing not only in 1950s Australia but in contemporary Australia, in particular our fear and suspicion of immigrants from other cultures, races and religions, and the corresponding rise of Christian Fundamentalism and inflammatory political rhetoric.

Act 3 of *The Crucible* takes place in the Salem meeting house now serving as a court where Deputy Governor Danforth says to a witness: “But you must understand,
sir, that a person is either with this court or he must be counted against it, there be no road between. This is sharp time, now, a precise time—we live no longer in the dusty afternoon when evil mixed itself with good and befuddled the world” (85). There are familiar echoes here of the speeches coming from the United States Government urging Australia’s continued involvement in the war in Iraq.

The Australia we inhabited in the ’50s had been, since Prime Minister Deacon’s Immigration Restriction Bill in 1901, a White Australia. The Bill was in accordance with the wish of all political parties to prohibit the immigration of Asians and Pacific Islanders and to deport kanaka workers from the Queensland sugar industry. It appears that we did not stop to ask our Aboriginal people or our near neighbours how they felt about being labelled as outcasts because of the colour of their skin. Manning Clark, in A Short History of Australia, directs readers to an article in the Bulletin at the time, describing Australia as: “the only pure white nation to be found outside Europe . . . But the believers in the brotherhood of man and the equality of all in the sight of God were silent. So the men who believed that the unity of labour was the hope of the world united with the apostles of Christian civilization to preserve Australia for the white man” (176-177).

But the White Australia Policy continued, boosted by Australia’s wartime Prime Minister, John Curtin, in the face of Japanese attacks in the Pacific. He still saw Australia as a Southern bastion of the British race. However, as the Japanese advance continued down the Malay Peninsula and preparations were made to cross into Singapore, the mood of Australians turned to anxiety, even panic. Curtin told Australians in a New Year Message:

> Without any inhibitions of any kind, I make it quite clear that Australia looks to America, free of any pangs as to our traditional links or kinship with the United Kingdom. We know . . . that Australia can go and Britain can still hold on. We are, therefore, determined that Australia shall not go, and we shall exert all our energies towards the shaping of a plan, with the United States as its key-stone, which will give our country some confidence of being able to hold out until the tide of battle swings against the enemy (Clark 211).

As traditional patterns of thought were discarded, some were saying that it was suicidal and false to think British support less important than that of another country. But
Curtin’s new direction turned panic into hope. And while a new relationship had been forged for the future, the White Australia policy remained firmly in place. Our new relationship with the United States, however, did not mean we let go of the apron strings of the mother country. While Australia did its duty in welcoming the RAF to drop their atom bombs at Maralinga my Adelaide grandmother gained a new son-in-law.

At an exhibition at Sydney’s Museum of Contemporary Art a few years ago, the photo-journalist John Pilger told the story of the atomic tests at Maralinga in black-and-white photographs. I noted down the captions on some of the shots: “The Blacks Were Shooed Away Like Rabbits”; “Our Country Sick Country Now”; “The Celebration Party at Woomera”; “All These Airmen are Now Dead from Cancer” (Pilger). These airmen were colleagues of my uncle who was a navigator on those missions. I had a connection to these horrific events. It brought it all back. I had to put it in the first story.

Suddenly, here was almost an overlap: some of my mother’s story drifting to within a couple of hour’s drive of Nangala’s community, thrilling proof that the writer’s desk is a “Tardis” with infinite possibilities of travel through time and space. I felt sick with excitement.

My aunt met her future husband at a party at Woomera while she was working as a governess on a nearby sheep station. After living abroad for many years they moved to Australia. She’s dead now, but my Uncle Gordon, the navigator, still lives in their home in Maryborough, Queensland. He now teaches slow learners to read.

Looking back, it is interesting that the atomic tests at Maralinga occurred the year after Australia’s first feature film in colour, *Jedda*, was released. This was a story of a clash of White and Aboriginal cultures, filmed in Central and Northern Australia. I remember being particularly eager to see this film as the leading white woman, who adopts Jedda after her own baby dies, was played by Betty Suttor, an aunt on my father’s side. At eleven years of age it was something to have a film star almost in the family. But it seemed that the film had little effect on people’s awareness of the humanity of indigenous people. It was made at a time of white paternalism and ignorance of Aboriginal cultural sensitivities.

Sigmund Freud, however, recognised as early as 1913 that the Australian Aboriginals had a sophisticated kinship system. In *Totem and Taboo*, Chapter One, “The Horror of Incest,” he writes “We should certainly not expect that the sexual life of these poor naked cannibals would be moral in our sense . . . yet we find that they set before themselves with the most scrupulous care and the most painful severity the aims
of avoiding incestuous sexual relations (2).

In that same year, the anthropologist Baldwin Spencer tabled his recommendations for native welfare in the Northern Territory in Parliament: “In formulating any program,” he said, “the mental and moral characteristics of the Aborigines . . . must be understood and taken into account.” He described Aborigines as “a very curious mixture: mentally about the level of a child who has little control over his feelings . . . no sense of responsibility and, except in rare cases, no initiative” (Spencer). British ethnocentrism prevented Spencer from regarding the Aboriginals in a positive light. There were people more eager to exploit racial differences and oddities than to look for a shared humanity.

These negative attitudes persist today. I remember a Sydney friend talking about a young woman she knew who had been run down and killed by a drunken driver. “A drunken Aboriginal,” she said, as if a white drunken driver would have been more acceptable.

On one of our early trips to Central Australia I met a local white woman in a café in Alice Springs. Thinking I was a tourist, she took me aside and offered me a word of advice: “Just imagine you have blinkers on when you walk around this town.” Keeping her eyes straight ahead, she indicated a group of young Aboriginals to our left with a sweep of her hand. “That way you won’t notice the filth.” It was this woman’s comment that cemented my resolve to write “The Minister’s Maid.”

“The Minister’s Maid” tells the life of an Aboriginal woman, Rosie Nangala Fleming, in a remote Northern Territory Community. My aim is to tell the story through interaction with the people while my husband and I carry out a Dog Health Program. The story has the feel of a travel narrative, reminiscent in some ways of Bruce Chatwin’s approach in The Songlines, or Nicolas Rothwell’s in Another Country, but with a different focus. While these men are covering vast distances of the landscape in the Northern Territory, the action in my story is confined mainly to incidents taking place within the community northwest of Alice Springs. Our dog work involves dialogue with Indigenous women and the sharing of their stories and experiences. These experiences, especially those of Nangala and the Napaljarri women, spark light-hearted comparisons between the lives and values of these Aboriginal women and those of my mother and Jean Kimble.

The story spans a visit of ten days, the time it takes to treat the four hundred or
so camp dogs living in the community. In fact, some of the stories used here have been gathered over the twelve years of our “Healthy Dog - Healthy Community” program. To use a local turn of phrase, suffice to say that this story spans “a little bit long time.”

One of the stories Nangala tells is of being taken away from the Mission School as a girl. The Baptist Minister in charge of the school liked the look of her and took her for himself. He took her to his house to work as a maid, and she never returned to school: “I learned to cook and clean for him,” she says. “I scrubbed his floors, ironed his clothes, dusted his shelves full of books. I worked there for years. He grew me up. He gave me his name. But I never learned to read and write.” Nangala told me this with tears in her eyes. “The Flemings were kind to me,” she said. “But now I feel angry” (The Minister’s Maid 154).

Here was an old woman still feeling the hurt of the discrimination and paternalism that characterised the lives of Aboriginal people in the missions. This was a story I had not expected, nor asked for, but a story this woman needed to tell. For all the weight of facts one can pull from books on Aboriginal people, this was counterbalance, the personal stuff, the unknowable, indefinable human side of the woman, the accidental revelation, without which there would have been no development in the story.

**Communicating with Aboriginal People**

Interviews or conversations with Aboriginal people are difficult enough when there are no language problems. When there are cultural differences the problems are tenfold. I am talking here of conversing not with foreigners on the far side of the world, but of speaking with Australians, Aboriginal Australians in the Western Desert, for whom English is their third, fourth or fifth language.

I am reasonably well prepared. I have my Walpiri language tapes and accompanying grammar and phrase book. I know many words in Walpiri. But these do not prepare me for the differences in cultural mores, acceptable behaviours and nuances that govern conversations with semi-traditional people at Yuendumu.

When face to face with a white interviewer, Aboriginal people feel intimidated. The ethnographer, M. J. Meggitt, who lived with the Walpiri in the 1950s, explains this in *Desert People*: “The Walpiri are aware that, in terms of material possessions, power and prestige, they rank low in the hierarchy of social statuses in contemporary Northern Territory society.” He goes on to say that Yuendumu people see the “whitefellow” as
commanding almost unlimited wealth and power. The “whitefellow” has policemen ready to do as he commands, he can go where he likes freely, and “by moving symbols around on paper” he can force Aboriginals to act in ways unacceptable to them. A long way down come the “yellowfellows”—half-caste Aborigines, Afghans and other Asians. At the bottom of the ladder is the “blackfellow”, with few possessions, little money, power or prestige.

When mixing only with Aboriginals this class stereotype is forgotten and the strong, aggressive Walpiri identity comes to the fore. “There are two kinds of blackfellows,” they say. “We, who are the Walpiri, and those unfortunate people who are not” (34).

When conversing with the “whitefellow”, particularly when he is the subject of an interview, the Aboriginal person may, in deferring to the dominant culture, give the response that he feels the “whitefellow” expects, rather than his true answer. Richard Trudgen, in Why Warriors Lie Down and Die, points out that in each culture, particular communication mores are learned from birth. The differences in communication mores between the dominant Australian culture and the Aboriginal people can cause difficulties and unsatisfactory outcomes on both sides. Like the Yolnu people in Arnhem Land whom Trudgen describes, Rosie Nangala and her Walpiri friends tend to avoid eye contact when conversing. While accepted in the dominant culture, the assertiveness of “eyeballing” makes Aboriginals uncomfortable. Instead, they speak indirectly in what Trudgen describes as a “heart to heart and mind to mind communication, like hearing the inner soul of a person” (78).

This explains my early failed attempts at speaking with Yuendumu people. While I sought some eye contact, the men I was addressing usually turned their faces away as if preferring to address some distant hill. This gives a lie to the common stereotype applied to Aboriginals in the ’50s: they were often turned down for work because they were considered “shifty-eyed.”

Trudgen make the point that “active” and “reflective” listening, recently introduced as conflict resolution strategies into the dominant culture, were already established in Aboriginal communication. You do not reply until you have listened carefully to the other speaker and thought through your response. Interrupting a speaker is uncivil, and silences, for processing information, are normal.

The tone of voice, naturally, is important. If discussing a difficult subject the tone is quiet, even a whisper, while a loud voice might convey aggression or rudeness.
The dominant culture uses strong eye contact to indicate whether or not the speaker is telling the truth, while the Aboriginals assess the whole body language of the speaker in quick glances.

When I am invited to sit with Nangala at her house, she always indicates that I should sit beside her on the ground, not opposite. I am always made to feel relaxed and comfortable, and we can look out at the same view.

I believe it all comes down to respect and common sense. Nobody wants to be stared down. I think farmers are like Indigenous people in this respect. When the farmer up the road from us stops by for a chat over the gate, we both exchange pleasantries on the weather and on pasture growth and naturally look about the landscape—up to the sky for any hint of rain and down to the stock to assess their condition. Communication is a sharing thing. It is not, except perhaps in big business and politics, about gaining the upper hand.

That said, the task of gaining information first hand about Walpiri life in the past was initially difficult. It took a while to tune into Nangala’s good, but difficult-to-understand English. Had she continued at school things might have been different. Walpiri is her first language and she speaks it all day to her friends.

Clearly, I was never going to be able to dissect Nangala’s life as thoroughly as I had the lives of the other two women. Here was an old lady, generous in spirit and quietly spoken whose cultural and personal privacy I respected. We were in the community to do a dog program, so it seemed appropriate to write the story in diary format in much the same way as I wrote up my notes at the end of each working day.

I was relieved to find helpful books in Alice Springs and in Darwin. Two of these contained translations of stories told and recorded first hand in Walpiri, then translated and written down in both English and Walpiri. These texts are *Long Time Olden Time: Walpiri Men’s Stories*, and *Walpiri Women’s Voices*, which I have already mentioned. These publications contain a wealth of stories about Walpiri life in the bush before white contact and the changes that came with mission life. Their advantage is that they are honest, first-hand documentations of life as it was lived. The detailed descriptions and impressions of massacres, hunting, rationing, schools, army time, bush food gathering, equal rights and the start of welfare, gave me essential information that, in some cases filled the gaps, and in others gave a clearer background to the life of Nangala and her contemporaries before, during and after the war.
The Importance of Landscape

Landscape is an important element in these three stories. On one hand there is the Australian coastal cityscape of the first two stories, and on the other, the remote Western Desert region in the geographic centre of Australia of the third. Each location brings with it its own cultural mores and social structures. The first two stories are set on the east coast of New South Wales, in places of high population density: Newcastle and Sydney. Randwick racecourse, the setting for much of “The Drug Analyst,” is not far from Bondi Beach, a wealthy area and popular tourist destination. The whole of the NSW coast, with its abundance of marine life, agreeable climate and sandstone cliff and caves provided dwelling places for Aboriginal people for thousands of years until the settlement of white colonists. The people were then driven out or died from diseases brought by the white man. Anyone taking the Great North Walk between Sydney and Newcastle cannot fail to find evidence of Aboriginal occupation as they come across rock carvings and tread on middens, those mounds of discarded shells and bones of edible sea creatures built up over thousands of years.

The third story takes us to a remote community in the Western Desert country of Central Australia. Yuendumu is located in the geographical centre of the country, and as far as you can get from the coastline in any direction. As if to drive this point home, our youngest son Chris, when accompanying us there some years ago, posed by a signpost for a photograph wearing only his Cooks Hill Surf Club Speedos and life-saver’s cap. This desert community is a place off the radar of five-star comfort seekers, but offers those with simpler tastes close contact with remote desert country, its particular vegetation and native animals, its bush foods and a glimpse of a semi-traditional indigenous way of life.

Australian writers, it seems, have much in common with South African writers like J. M. Coetzee and Damon Galgut in their awareness of the landscape. In a recent newspaper article by Bron Sibree entitled Out of Africa, Galgut says: “I’m probably unnecessarily sensitive to the landscape. If I don’t have a strong sense of landscape in which to set a story there is no story . . . I actually think countries with a conflicted history bind you to them more tightly than countries with a placid past” (19).

While I believe this to be true, the circumstances of white colonialism also shape a country’s values and its writings. The first white South Africans chose to come as settlers, entrepreneurs and exploiters. The first white Australians were sent as convicts,
outcasts in chains, or came as colonial overseers. This different psychological baggage comes through in the writing.

It would have been impossible to write “The Minister’s Maid” without a first-hand awareness of the desert landscape. In Australia, once we leave the densely settled coastal strip we are sensitive to the vagaries of climate, the vast distances separating towns, and the importance of carrying adequate supplies of food, water and fuel. Beyond the Great Dividing Range are the western plains, their rich black soils ideally suited to the growing of crops and the grazing of cattle and sheep and watered by the broad arteries of the Murray-Darling River system. It is no surprise then that settlers seized this land and drove the Indigenous inhabitants further and further out until, by the 1850s, there were few Aboriginal people left in south-eastern Australia where green grass grew.

On my first trip to the Western Desert I was surprised by its brilliant colours. I had grown up with an awareness of the outback, or desert country “beyond the black stump,” as it was depicted in the paintings of Sidney Nolan and Russell Drysdale, and in American Westerns and Australian films like Mad Max and Crocodile Dundee. This consciousness I had acquired, of a dry landscape of bleached bones peopled by tormented, alienated characters, was immediately at odds with the vista spread out around me as we drove along the Tanami Highway.

In a recent radio interview about her essay, “Re-imagining Australia,” Chris Wallace suggests that “past perceptions of landscape reflected boundaries previously enforced because of gender, race and religion” (Wallace). If this is so, perhaps those losses at Gallipoli and the Western Front, the hardships of the Great Depression, the Second World War, our fear of Communism, the atomic tests at Maralinga, the massacres of Aboriginals and our White Australia Policy have taken their toll of the Australian psyche and influenced the dark, threatening way many of our artists interpreted the landscape.

I had to discard these old symbols and images that had dominated my childhood. The truth before my eyes was a vibrant place, a desert of red earth and fine-leafed trees, abundant bird and animal life and spectacular orange escarpments that turned blue in the evening light. And these colours I saw were reflected in the paintings done by the local Aboriginal people.

The landscape around Yuendumu is a place of striking climatic contrasts: intense heat in summer, intense cold in winter. Dusty roads are transformed after rain
into lakes. A plentiful supply of artesian water exists under the ground. The sun is now harnessed by solar mirrors standing open on the edge of town like giant umbrellas, to produce power.

Being in a remote Aboriginal Mission community brings an awareness of Australia’s troubled political past of racism, dispossession and paternalism. When writing in the Western Desert about the people it is easy to slip back into negative images—soil the colour of dried blood or rocks hard as flint. It is impossible to ignore the conflicts of the past, the suffering of the people or the topography. However, being welcomed here by these people who have worn clothes only in the last sixty years and who have witnessed everything from massacres by whitefellas to the recent “apology” on “Sorry Day,” and are now facing government intervention, one feels a sense of humility and a sense of privilege in having known them and this place.

**Constructing Identity through Storytelling**

“Narrative studies,” claims Australian social researcher, Richard Eckersley, “have demonstrated the power of stories to transport ideas across time and space, construct meaning and identity, shape communities, enrich social life, even put together shattered lives” (28-29).

With this hope in our hearts, what are the stories that we, in a modern Australian society, are telling each other?

It is autumn 2008, and if this morning’s national news broadcast was anything to go by, the answer is that fifty more civilians have died in Iraq; anti-terrorism measures in Sydney are to be stepped up; a cabinet minister has been found guilty of paedophilia; another elderly women has been found dead and uncared for at her home in Sydney; there are dire consequences for our planet if we fail to act on global warming; interest rates are rising; rates of obesity, depression and diabetes in young Australians are higher than ever, and there is official confirmation of the marriage break-up of another celebrity couple.

Nothing here, it seems, but bad news. Certainly nothing to bring us together. Nothing to lift our spirits or nurture our sense of wellbeing. If these are our nation’s interests and concerns, then our collective identity, the way we see our future, and ourselves, appears bleak.

In his essay “Don’t Panic—it’s Only the Apocalypse,” Eckersley suggests that
we should approach humanity’s problems with creativity: “Avoiding this [nightmare] fate will depend critically on the stories we create to make sense of what is happening and to frame our response. A key task is to ensure these stories reflect not the decadence and despair of nihilism or the dogma and rigidity of fundamentalism, but the hope and energy of activism.” If Eckersley is right, the first step to making sense of what is happening now is perhaps to understand what has happened in the past to bring us to this point. One way of doing this is to write stories that examine the journeys of those around us whose lives have shaped or inspired our own.

Eckersley goes on to suggest that “adaptability, being able to set goals and progress towards them, having goals that do not conflict, and viewing the world as comprehensible, manageable and meaningful are all associated with wellbeing” (28-29).

At Yuendumu, storytelling has long been an important tradition. A program to educate young people about petrol sniffing includes encouraging sniffers to tell their stories. The program began in 1994 and is regularly publicised under the title, “The Brain Story: Educating young people about petrol sniffing”:

It is night time . . . the disco and youth centre have closed . . . “Don’t be scared,” the workers say as they approach a group of six young people who are sniffing. Sitting down and bringing out a thermos of sweet milk and honey tea, the workers begin the conclusion of their day’s work. The young people put their petrol aside to take sips of the warm tea as it is passed around in a communal cup. The ceremony of sharing from one cup is an ancient one, it is a process of bonding, building rapport, and creating relationships. The stars above us are clear and bright.

“People think that I am a big man,” says one sniffer. “But really I am a sad man, that’s why I am sniffing tonight.”

We start to share stories, workers and sniffers together, stories of sadness, pain and hope. This is the beginning of our work.

“When we sniff, the dream is real, your dreams become real like life,” another sniffer tells us as he describes the experience of petrol induced hallucination.

“Do you want to know why that happens?” we ask. . . . “If you come by to our house tomorrow we can tell you that story. We have a painting that we can show you. The story will explain to you why petrol makes your dreams become real” (Stojanovski 1-5).
The following day “The Brain Story” continues through a resource booklet that illustrates in pictures the way petrol eats into the sniffer’s brain, making people sick and violent and unable to remember their stories.

This program is yielding excellent results. It was started fourteen years ago by Peggy Brown when she discovered her young son sniffing petrol after a car accident. Magistrates have no hesitation in referring young offenders into her care for three months isolation and education at the Mt Theo Outstation. Last year Peggy, along with her husband Johnny Miller and Youth Worker Andrew Stojanovski, received an Order of Australia for their work in turning young lives around.

In our modern western culture, dependent on instant communication, perhaps we are in danger of living, through the electronic media, a kind of virtual life while ignoring the rich deposit of memories and stories held by our families and communities.

While we might turn out on Anzac Day to watch the spectacle of the march, or enjoy a blockbuster film depicting the heroic actions of Australian soldiers in wartime, do we stop to ask Grandad or Grandma, or Uncle Bill, or Aunt Pamela what they learned from war? These are people with first-hand knowledge and experience. Shouldn’t we sit down with our parents or grandparents to find out how they survived the Great Depression or the Maitland floods or the Newcastle earthquake, before their stories are lost?

Perhaps we assume our relatives and neighbours to be too ordinary to be interesting, or too out of date. If information takes more than an instant to send and receive, are we too busy with the pressures of modern life to take the time? Perhaps, right now, as we devour lurid details of the latest Hollywood divorce on the Internet, Grandma is sitting alone in her green vinyl armchair in the nursing home pouring out her precious memories to a nurse.

The most uplifting stories come from ordinary people, as long as someone is prepared to listen. Perhaps we should tune in to our elders before it is too late and hear the adventures and beliefs that have shaped their lives. By listening to their wisdom we are valuing these folk who, in this rapidly changing world, often feel irrelevant and cast aside. And as Eckersley suggests, we might find a path through our own uncertainty, depression and fear towards valuing ourselves and understanding the journeys that have led us to why, where and who we are.
On my travels to the Western Desert, when I sit down in an Aboriginal Community with the old women and their dogs, I know I am in the presence of respected elders. By western standards their possessions are few. Many cannot read or write. But each woman owns her past, good and bad. She has been told the story of her family and of her people’s journey from the past nomadic life to the present. She knows her kinship obligations and her “women’s business,” and understands her connection and relationship to the land. And sometimes, with her index finger moving through the sand, she will sing her Dreaming story. Each telling of this story reaffirms her identity and connects her physically and spiritually with the world and the family around her.

Perhaps if we, in the mainstream western culture, can learn anything from Indigenous people it is that family stories are equally important for us. They establish our identity and give us a place in history, a sense of belonging to a continuing, unfolding narrative.

At this time in our history, finding a sense of belonging is a difficult task for young people, black and white Australians. The unfolding narrative for many of these young people is a continual loss of control of their lives. They feel disconnected, dispossessed and powerless. While alarming reports of suicide bombings overseas might preoccupy our thoughts, the truth is that here in Australia a high death rate has existed for years in white and Indigenous communities.

Nicolas Rothwell, in *Another Country*, describes the latest analysis of the problem in remote Indigenous communities: “It’s not just because Aborigines in remote Australia live in poverty that they sicken; it’s because they feel no mastery over their lives, lost as they are in little islands surrounded by an invasive world. It’s how they stand in relation to wider society that’s crucial, then; the disparities, the low self-esteem, are the things that do the psychological harm” (128). It seems that we have, here in our country, our own “suicide bombers”: promising young Aboriginals, potential leaders even, who have lost their sense of belonging and are self-destructing through drugs, alcohol, petrol-sniffing and kidney disease. Perhaps the “Sorry” speech given by our new Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, might be the first step towards a sense of inclusiveness for young Aboriginals, as we all move toward a better future together.

The interest my sons showed in the family story I wrote for my Honours Thesis confirmed to me that young people crave a sense of identity. It was a story about my father’s side of the family, starting with my great-great-grandmother in 1850 and finishing at the Second World War. In some ways this doctoral thesis is a continuation
of that acquisition of knowledge. Whenever they come home, my sons ask to read my latest chapters. Matthew, the eldest, now a father himself, brings his partner and young sons with him. He contributed an anecdote to the story about Jean Kimble.

The boys seem to find in these stories an anchor point, a feeling of cohesion, a sense of being a significant link in a continuous family history. As “The Doctor’s Wife” was their much loved grandmother, they are now reaching an understanding of her journey that they were too young to grasp when she died. These rewards are clear evidence that yes, we must tell stories, write stories, save those “lives” in order, perhaps, to save ourselves.

But is it only the subject’s story going down on the page? It has been suggested that whatever we write, one way or another, we tell our own story. People write about the past for different reasons, and in different ways, but always answering a need within themselves. Georges Perec, in his book, *W or the Memory of Childhood*, calls this need “the snares of writing” (7). Perec says he has a need to construct a past childhood he has lost.

While my childhood was real and still within reach of my memory, it was immensely satisfying to write about it in “The Doctor’s Wife.” The first-person narration felt so real and so natural I chose to continue it. I recalled events in my childhood that showed my mother and her relationship with my father. This was something that, as a child in a happy home, you do not think of at the time. The more I wrote, the more my mind connected to other memories. I was hungry to do this work. I was getting to know my mother again, her voice, her feel, her scent.

While “The Doctor’s Wife” is purely my story, “The Drug Analyst” is an arrangement of many anecdotes told to me by Jean Kimble’s friends and her “Magnificent Seven,” nieces and nephews. This too was a story I needed to tell. There were still mysteries to be solved including the long-standing feud between Jean’s sister Kath (my mother-in-law) and her brother Frank. I had to be completely impartial. I was mindful of Chekhov’s advice: “A writer must be objective as a chemist ... he must know that evil passions are as inherent in life as good ones.”

Were the Magnificent Seven thinking that I might take sides with Kath in the story? Would they trust me to remain neutral? These worries were dispelled early. They confided in me. They trusted me with their precious memories. Despite everyone’s awareness of the parent’s rift, it seems it was not passed on to the children. None tried to influence or direct my writing. In fact they have been incredibly supportive. The best
thing has been seeing Graeme getting to know Frank’s son and daughter, Harry and Marilyn. I have had my reward already just watching them all speaking, laughing and interacting together properly for the first time in fifty years.

It was difficult at first to find the right voice for this story. After rereading some of Jane Austen’s novels I decided to use third-person narration that slipped occasionally into indirect discourse to indicate Jean’s thoughts and opinions. Austen employs it here in *Emma*: “The hair was curled, and the maid sent away and Emma sat down to think and be miserable. It was a wretched business, indeed!—Such an overthrow of everything she had been wishing for!” (96). Here we feel Emma’s horror that her match between the vicar, Mr Elton, and young Harriet Smith has backfired, with the odious Mr Elton having made a declaration to Emma instead.

In “The Drug Analyst,” the device allowed the necessary access to Jean’s private musings, particularly on matters of the heart: “Now suddenly, right here in front of her was a man she knew and liked who was on her side for a change” (72). Thus a handy tool used for centuries by fiction writers is safely crossing the road into creative non-fiction.

**The Power of Non-Fiction**

In his short story, “Too True,” Blake Morrison defends non-fiction saying that “many readers, including those who enjoy fiction, do have a craving to believe. The growing interest in what has been called ‘narrative non-fiction’ is part of this need for authenticity, sincerity, credibility—the re-suspension of disbelief.” He adds that “writers and publishers have half-created this need, not merely met the demand” (5). It seems that in every bookshop nowadays memoir and biography are competing, more successfully than ever before, with fiction and other genres. Indeed, when our youngest son Chris was commissioned by Murdoch Press to write a guide for families on pets and their care, he was instructed to include, at the front of the book, a forty-page memoir of his own childhood. There is a clear trend to get inside the lives of characters, real and fictional, in books and television programs. Just witness the popularity of the ABC television program *Who Do You Think You Are?* as details of the forebears of well-known personalities are unearthed and explored with often amazing revelations. It seems we are now fascinated with digging up our ancestry whether it turns up convicts in chains or Hungarian royalty.

While it might be considered a timely exercise, the business of writing a story of
another person’s life is still a daunting prospect. In writing about my mother I draw on my memories of her. The resulting account is largely memoir. This genre seems to be gaining acceptance by readers and writers, though it was not always the case. The title of Patrick White’s self-portrait, *Flaws in the Glass,* suggests that White found fault with his own efforts at memoir in 1981. Yet fifty years before, having read Hugh Walpole’s memoir, Virginia Woolf had written in her “Letters,” Volume Five: “Only autobiography is literature. Novels are what we peel off, and come at last to the core, which is only you or me” (142).

Women, especially feminist writers, have always written of the inner angst. Drusilla Modjeska, in *Timepieces* says: “Writers like Helen Garner and Kate Jennings, both natural memoirists, wrote as novelist and poet; it wasn’t until the new sensibility came into memoir in the 1990s that they could write unambiguously of their own experience and not call it fiction” (165).

In the last decade a boundary has been crossed. The balance has shifted. Non-fiction is on the rise. Perhaps the daily horrors in Iraq and Afghanistan now seem like fictional images, images we no longer connect to. Is it more comforting then, to open a biography or memoir and accept the invitation to share the journey, thoughts and dreams of another’s life? It is no wonder that writers, defectors from fiction, are keen to write their own lives, or those of others, in their own voices on this now acceptable literary terrain. And it seems to sell. A glance today in our local bookshop window shows biography and memoir displayed in pole position.

I liken memoir writing to the construction of an intricate tapestry. There exists within this simile a myriad of choice: in the style of the work, its colour, texture, the foreground, the background, the past and the present, the contrasts, the nuances; and the effect or message, overt or covert, that the work will endeavour to communicate culturally or politically to the reader. The tapestry model does not demand the rigidity of a linear or time-line approach to the story, but a spontaneous, freehand, “cutting room” approach, in which one idea can spark another, thus weaving a journey of unexpected twists and turns, flashing back and forward, even at times appearing to create itself and producing connections, resonances and insights in the process.

While writing the lives of my characters, I cannot help but gain new insights into them as human beings. There are people I develop a fondness for, others whom I dislike. It might be tempting at times to put strong opinions and judgements into the text. When Rosemary Neill interviewed David Malouf on his writing, he stated: “A writer certainly
can’t afford to have strong opinions in the writing. I think opinion is pretty much the death of thinking. And it’s certainly the death of trying to understand how other people think and feel.” (Neill 4-5). Memoir and biography, I have come to realise, through trial and error and sheer embarrassment, depend for their success on illuminating the subject, not the narrator’s opinion. I have had to hold myself back at times. I am not here to judge these women but to observe and present them. The narrative voice is mine in “The Doctor’s Wife,” but it is always my mother we are looking at, listening to and getting to know. I hope that my observations and anecdotes are sufficient for the reader to reach an understanding of this woman in the context of her times, and to see some of her strengths.

There must have been many women like my mother who, after the war, again answered the country’s call and were subsumed and moulded into the domestic role. If the story makes her sound weak, then I have failed. One of the things I miss most about my mother is her sensible, reliable advice. And I have not tried to turn her into a feminist. She was not a feminist; she was a successful wife and mother. But she stood up for women. She particularly enjoyed Australian stories and historical novels, especially about women living the “outback” in contact with Aboriginal people. And she had the quality “empathy.” I can see her looking up from a page by Kylie Tennant, Eleanor Dark or Katharine Susannah Prichard and saying with a tear in her eye, “Poor devils. We don’t know how lucky we are.”

David Malouf has written about his formative years in Brisbane. In the interview by Neill already mentioned, he said: “If you’re a writer, that world that belongs to your childhood and to your adolescence, that’s the world where most of what happened to you was most intense” (4-5). When I look back, certain events in my childhood, while they seemed inconsequential at the time, now flash with new significance. I am thus in agreement with Malouf and with Drusilla Modjeska in Timepieces, when she asks: “Where you stand, wouldn’t you agree, alters what you see?” (149).

The mother-daughter relationship is always emotionally fraught. I would have written a different story had I been twenty-one and still living at home. Now, twenty-three years since her death, I have a broader view, a bigger picture. But even so, starting with a mother I knew intimately meant I was still hot-wired for emotional involvement and a surprisingly acute awareness of my childhood. Odd memories, small, unexpected things, struck me. They were feelings as much as anything. Like having to screw up my eyes and face against the intense glare of the outdoors and my mother’s voice warning me that I would “frizzle up in that sun without a hat,” and moreover, if I was “still frowning
when the wind changed,” I would be left “permanently wrinkled.” There was the chill, unspoken fear, which I now believe we all had, that my brother would die from an asthma attack; and nightmares, which required only the reassuring warmth of my parents’ bed, something never permitted; and the secret told in a whisper and still unconfirmed, that a distant teenage cousin had committed suicide over the realisation of his homosexuality. With these myths and mysteries in our lives, we had no fears of the horrors in *Grimm’s Fairy Tales*.

I rarely confided in my parents when I was young. They were better at the practical issues than the emotional. They were used to orders being given and obeyed. I put it down now to the fact that both had come, like many young couples at the war’s end, straight out of the armed forces and up to the altar. And within a year they were parents.

When I finished this first story, I realised that I had created something satisfying, something that would never have existed had I not set my mind to the task. It gave me the courage and exhilaration to continue.

**Biography and the Truth**

While the three women subjects I write about are from same the era, each is from a different background. I found that each story demanded a different approach.

I wrote “The Doctor’s Wife” as a series of vignettes. As I recalled an incident I wrote it down. One recollection had scarcely come to mind when it triggered another, with a similar or different resonance, often demanding further digression and enlisting my emotional response. It was like breaking the skin on milk. Once begun, this seemed the most natural and satisfying way to continue. While the stories flowed, reflections bubbled up into my mind and seemed to find their own way into the text as juxtapositions and associations, with the subsequent irony at the end of a piece often taking me by surprise.

Roland Barthes in his *Critical Essays* describes a similar technique that he calls “Structuralist Activity:”

We recompose the object in order to make certain functions appear, and it is, so to speak, the way that makes the work; this is why we must speak of the structuralist activity rather than the structuralist work. Structuralist activity involves two typical operations, dissection and articulation . . . Ultimately, one
might say that the object of structuralism is not man endowed with meanings but man fabricating meanings (213-18).

It was time for self-examination. Was I fabricating meanings? A story about my mother had to embrace her life with my father. And I must, one would think, be emotionally involved. When parents separate, the offspring are pushed away from that former centre of contentment, the functional family. For us then, that centre could no longer hold. Things had fallen apart. We were all displaced towards the periphery, where the view was altogether different. Since I was the only one of the brood married and still living in Newcastle, my parents and I formed a triangular relationship, like hapless planets around a dying sun. I could see one of them at a time, but never the two together, since they no longer spoke to, nor mentioned, each other by name. Neither parent would confide in me, fearing, I imagine, that I might pass information to the other. Instead, they would talk—my mother to me, my father to my sister—about their past lives, longings and adventures before they were married.

In my new position, away from the blinkered vortex of the family centre, I could now look both ways: inwards and outwards. I started to view my parents in a new light, objectively as well as subjectively, as individuals, as friends, as normal, flawed human beings. And after the signatures had dried on their divorce papers I came to realise that the bonds that tie us to our family must remain stronger than those forces that threaten to tear us apart.

But by the time it came to writing their story, thirty years had elapsed since their parting. The dust of their conflict had long settled, as I had, into acceptance. Besides, I am now the age my parents were then, and can see my parents with greater clarity and understanding. I have no reason to fabricate meanings. I have found a voice that can tell the story without bitterness or sticky sentiment. Any inventions on my part are made with the aim of presenting the emotional truth.

To be sure of my motives I sent copies of my latest story to my sister and brother for their approval. Sometimes they made minor corrections. More often I received their encouragement and a few helpful additional details.

Having written my mother’s story I now realise how little I knew her. Words have poured forth onto the page but is this really my mother? Perhaps, after my parents broke up, my mother became unreachable. Perhaps I allowed my father too much space, too much intrusion into her story, too much control, just as he had at home. But then I
feel sure, in a way, that without setting out to do so, I have captured him. Let him steal the show. And allowed my mother to escape.

Drusilla Modjeska in *Timepieces*, says: “To write of someone else, to write as biographer, to write as an act of remembrance, is to be like a lover, a perfect lover who can enter but never possess, who can know the one who is loved from the inside out, and yet allow her difference, her mystery.” These are reassuring words, especially when Modjeska goes on to discuss writing her mother’s story, *Poppy*: “. . . at the heart of what I had to write was a relationship that even as it formed me had blinded me. It took every word I wrote to understand this, right down to the last” (89-90).

I have not fully captured my mother, her softness, her decency, her frustration. I have let her down. I want to have her back again, to have those talks we missed out on, to tell her I should have done more to help her, and to show her how her little grandsons have grown up. Often I think of her when they are joking and mucking about together; young men now, tall and straight, independent and good friends. I try to look at them through her eyes and imagine her joy. That is when I do capture the truth of her, in remembering her love for her grandchildren, and theirs for her.

Hazel Rowley in her essay, “The Ups, the Downs: My Life as a Biographer,” says, “that individuals have a degree of choice, whatever the circumstances” is “the burning question at the core of biography” (52). Jean Kimble stood firm. She made the hard choices. My mother would have summoned up the fight had it been against an opponent in a tennis match. But the match she took on was a marriage; in the end it was unwinnable. These were her children. There was a lot at stake.

I accept that my mother, like most of her friends, was a woman of her time: a mother first and foremost. Her allegiance was to us. When we all left home, followed almost immediately by our father, my mother felt deeply disconnected. “People like to ask you to dinner as a couple,” she’d say. “On your own, the wives suddenly see you as a threat, a potential husband-snatcher” (“The Doctor’s Wife” 47).

In *The Invention of Solitude*, Paul Auster embarks on a seemingly impossible quest to know his father:

He was so implacably neutral on the surface, his behaviour was so flatly predictable, that everything he did came as a surprise. One could not believe there was such a man—who lacked feeling, who wanted so little from others. And if there was not such a man, that means there was another man, a man
hidden inside the man that was not there, and the trick of it, then, is to find him.
On the condition that he is there to be found (20).

Here Auster attempts to establish his father’s character, even as he admits that he was
the “man who was not there,” who was unknowable, and therefore “the essence of the
project is failure” (20). This begs the question: can one ever translate a life fully into
words, especially a parent? Virginia Woolf touches on this dilemma in “Granite and
Rainbow:”

On the one hand there is truth; on the other there is personality. And if we think
of truth as something of granite-like solidity and of personality as something of
rainbow-like intangibility and reflect that the aim of biography is to weld these
two into one seamless whole, we shall admit that the problem is a stiff one and
that we need not wonder if biographers have for the most part failed to solve it
(149).

While we might have a handle on some cold, hard facts in biography there is also an
inner life of the person that must be reached. But how do we gain entry to the minds of
parents when the success of intra-family relationships depends perhaps on keeping a
little bit back? Woolf suggests that “the biographer’s imagination is always being
stimulated to use the novelist’s art of arrangement, suggestion, dramatic effect to
expound the private life.” But if this is carried too far “he has neither the freedom of
fiction nor the substance of fact” (155).

There were times when my parents were the last people I would confide in, and
vice versa. We all get along better with a little space. In close contact we are apt to over-
react, take offence and harbour grudges. Up close we cannot always face the truth.
I found it difficult to sign off on that first story. No ending seemed to do my
mother justice. I suppose I wanted the impossible—some resurrection of her spirit,
some last word from her. Unlike Jean Kimble, my mother left no writings, no letters, no
clues to her inner thoughts or ambitions. I had some postcards she sent to the boys from
Scotland when she took her mother on a trip, but nothing else.

Then suddenly we heard that HMAS Sydney had been found off the West
Australian coast. It took me a couple of days to realise, wow, this is it, I have my
ending, an ending that would have pleased my mother. It was with a sense of relief
mixed with joy that I attended the Memorial Service at St Andrews Cathedral in Sydney for “those golden boys,” as my mother called them. I came home and wrote a short final paragraph.

I doubt now if I could know my parents better. The memories I have of them have long since been inscribed on my mind. My parents were wonderful, significant people. They did what they had to do. If writing about them has done anything, it has helped to make them easier to understand.

When writing non-fiction there is always a niggle in the back of the brain that says: “Am I keeping on track with the facts here?”

In the course of researching a life, the biographer gathers a multitude of photographs, letters, diaries, anecdotes and memories, each in its own way, rather like a piece of a jigsaw puzzle, offering a miniscule aspect of that person at a precise moment in their life. Each yields a small portion of the “truth” then, of that life.

But it is a truth that this biographer aims to present. Not the truth, perhaps, because there is no definitive truth. The truth I seek to present is one that will resonate faithfully and with integrity, with anyone who knew this person.

Michael Ondaatje puts it another way. In the Acknowledgments at the end of Running in the Family, he writes: “In Sri Lanka a well-told lie is worth a thousand facts” (206). One of his most effective “lies” then, is surely the description, in a free indirect style, of his grandmother Lalla’s death in swirling floodwaters: “Drifting slower she tried to hold onto things. A bicycle hit her across the knees. She saw the dead body of a human. She began to see the drowned dogs of the town. Cattle . . . and she went under for longer and longer . . . and there was the great blue ahead of her, like a sheaf of blue wheat, like a large eye that peered toward her, and she hit it and was dead” (129).

Like Jean Kimble, Lalla died alone. There would have been no evidence of her death, no final image for relatives (and readers) to take with them. Ondaatje’s storytelling skills fill that gap. His dream-like imagining of Lalla’s death takes readers with her on that final journey. It reads rather like Nangala’s Dreaming story that ends with the death of the two boys in a fire. Here are two essential elements in life: water and fire, evoked in death.

Clive James, in his second “unreliable memoir,” Falling Towards England, clearly sets out to entertain us, not by telling the truth, but evoking a kind of collective memory:
Usual does not mean ordinary. A butterfly’s compound eyes, which can see in the infra-red, are no less extraordinary because every other butterfly has them. The same applies to human memory. When I hold my hands as if in prayer and roll a pencil between them, I can smell the plasticine snakes I made in Class 1B at Kogarah Infants’ School. There is nothing ordinary about that (12-13).

James amuses us. Woolf’s “rainbows” are here in his images. His thoughts seem to jump about as if they have just landed in his mind but we hang on for the ride because his journey is essentially our journey. He reminds us of our Australianness, our larrikin heritage. His memories, whether or not they are true, have an emotional truth which can sometimes be more important than fact. He teaches us to laugh at ourselves and at the crazy world around us, to be capricious, inventive, and to look behind the ordinary to find the extraordinary. His is a lesson in the importance of entertaining the reader. Something told factually and to the letter might be lacking in interest.

When writing “The Drug Analyst” I needed the “intangibility” of some of Woolf’s “rainbows.” Jean’s nieces and nephews had swamped me with factual evidence: letters, cards, photographs and anecdotes. The truth about Jean’s brother Frank was not just interesting, it was riveting. But was it really the truth? Neither Frank’s son Harry nor I had been able to obtain documentary proof of Frank’s amazing account of his war service. He had been awarded service medals but was this evidence enough? Why was Frank not listed with the prisoners of war from the Perth?

I recalled a quote from my undergraduate Italian course. Pirandello once said: “The opposite of the truth is not a lie. It is the other person’s truth.” I felt a duty to the truth as much as to Harry. I met twice with Harry Kimble to discuss his father. Then I came across Andrea Barrett’s essay, “The Sea of Information,” in which she writes:

> Slowly I began to relearn something I’d once grasped but had lost sight of: that emotion—that central element of fiction—derives not from information or explanation, nor from a logical arrangement of facts, but specifically from powerful images and from the qualities of language: diction, rhythm, form, structure, association, metaphor (17).

Frank’s war stories were, after all, Harry’s truth about his father. And suddenly that was
it. I realised that Harry’s truth was the real story here. That “central element, emotion” resided in Harry’s mind: Harry as a child of four meeting his father for the first time; Harry grappling with the stories his father told, stories of the ships and trains he had boarded in the Mediterranean; Harry learning of the men his father had killed and how he had killed them; his father’s stories of the sinking of the *Perth* and the *Voyager,* and his father’s promise on Harry’s fourteenth birthday that he would knock him out cold, “just so you know there’s no shame in it” (“The Drug Analyst” 114).

When I read what David Lodge had to say in *Consciousness and the Novel,* I felt more confident in tackling Harry’s story:

> The kind of novel pioneered by Henry James, and carried forward . . . by Joseph Conrad, Ford Madox Ford, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and DH Lawrence, among others, manifested a general tendency to center [sic] narrative in the consciousness of its characters, and to *create* those characters through the representation of their subjective thoughts and feelings rather than describing them objectively (58).

I liked immediately the idea that reality is as valid in the perceptions of a person as in the hard factual and tangible world they inhabit. I decided to follow the advice of these early pioneers of novel writing and centre this section of the narrative in the third person through the consciousness of Harry. After all, I had used this a little with the character of Jean Kimble. The rainbows again emerged and there were Harry, Frank, his war, and his traumatised wife, not to mention Jean and her drinking problems, haemorrhaging onto the page.

**Writers as Collectors**

My three women had stories, I believed at the start, that would be accessible and worth telling. This was, I realise now, a huge leap of faith. Thinking of them in biographical terms was like starting a relationship over again. The rules of engagement had changed. But as I slowly got to know them again I began to care about them more and more; they were with me all the time; I grew terribly fond of them. I grew fond of them like you do someone who confides in you, trusts you as conserver of their secrets. And I grew fond of their friends and families who were entrusting me with their stories. I felt the weight of responsibility to do a good job. Beneath their outward presentation, their beauty,
bluster or shyness, these three women were as flawed and as humanly frail as any one of us. It was the flaws that gave them a roundedness of character, some vulnerability, problems to be confronted and solved, and the human weaknesses that we all recognise in ourselves.

I had to train myself to become a good listener. It can take time to get to the nub of the anecdote or memory. Often the seemingly trivial, by-the-way details are the most telling. I heard a friend of my mother’s remark, in casual conversation, that Mum always kept a lipstick and mirror at the end of her kitchen bench in case a visitor arrived at the back door. I had lived in that house for the first thirteen years of my life and never noticed.

That perhaps is the value of writing about an average life. One hopes to capture the extraordinary that hides behind the ordinary, a glimpse into the essence of a person.

In Borderlines Gunnthórun Gudmundsdóttir describes “the link between private memory and public events” (11). I thought of our son Matthew’s crisp recall of his first introduction to Jean Kimble. It was a day much like any other, so why did he remember so clearly that one visit Jean made to our house twenty-three years ago? Now I realise that this memory was tied to, what was for him, a significant moment in the history of Australian cricket when he was a boy of eleven. Jean Kimble was coming to visit us in Newcastle for the first time. I heard her car pulling up out the front and told Matthew to turn the television off. This did not go down well as NSW was playing New Zealand in a one day match, and a young rookie batsman, Steve Smith, was at the crease on ninety-eight. As I brought Jean into the room the TV was still on. Seeing the three boys on the edge of their seats watching it, Jean tip-toed in and whispered, “Has Smith scored his hundred yet, boys?” (“The Drug Analyst” 118).

I liked this story because it was truly “off the cuff.” I had not asked for a glowing report on this woman. Matthew had met her only once. That he chose, more than two decades later, to call her “magnificent” quite bowled me over. Here was a hefty word, an adjective whose colour and weight were as uncompromising as Jean herself. It was a word you might use to describe a beautiful cathedral, the moon landing, or the discovery of a cure for cancer. But Matthew, I realised, just eleven years of age at the time, had recognised something just as magnificent in Jean. He had recognised an essential quality in Jean: her spirit, and her ability to connect with another human being.

Perhaps then, this is the essence of biographical writing: the need for the writer to record not just a life’s journey but something special and deeper: the spirit that dwells
within that life and motivates it.

There was a curious resonance here with David Malouf’s *An Imaginary Life*. In this fictional biography, Malouf presents the last years of Ovid in his dispossession and cultural exile into a seemingly alien and barbarian wasteland. Malouf’s aging Ovid, stripped of any cultural and intellectual support, manages to keep going by linking up with a tribe of nomads and making it his life’s goal to establish some human contact, trust and communication with a wild “wolf-boy” who has been taken into his care:

> When I try to articulate what I know, I stumble suddenly on what, till that moment, I did not know. There are times when it comes so strongly upon me that *he* is the teacher, and that whatever comes new to the occasion is being led slowly, painfully, out of *me*. We are moving in opposite directions, I and the Child, though on the same path . . . (91).

This moving passage reminds us that engagement with another human being is a two-way street. Ovid’s need to connect with the boy and teach him language is nourishing his own humanity. Indeed, it is keeping him alive. Matthew, in his own way, had had a life-affirming encounter with Auntie Jean.

These successful encounters highlight the failures of our British forefathers in the early days of white settlement in Australia to find a shared humanity with the Aboriginal inhabitants. It was therefore significant that in his landmark “Sorry” speech in Parliament in February 2008, Australia’s new Prime Minister echoed the words of Paul Keating’s 1992 “Redfern” Speech: “It was we who did the dispossessing. We took the traditional lands and smashed the traditional way of life. . . It was our ignorance and prejudice. And our failure to imagine these things being done to us.”

Here was a real sense of connection between two men sharing their generosity of spirit with Aboriginal people and the rest of the nation. And while Mr Kevin Rudd was apologising for the pain and suffering of Aboriginal people, he was also telling us a story, an important, long overdue story that, as children, we were never told. It was the story of that pain and suffering of Aboriginal people and of our failure to do anything about it. It was a story that many people were hearing—and having the fact of it acknowledged—for the first time. It makes one stop and wonder if perhaps our conflicted past, our history and our culture have tended to suppress the generosity of spirit in our natures. And perhaps war and atrocities against our own kind are an
indication of the limits of our imagination in seeking peaceful solutions to problems. Now that these stories of the suffering of our Aboriginal people have been told, it is hoped that this knowledge will lead to greater respect for one another.

When it comes to research, my husband believes in the saying, “Fortune favours the prepared mind.” Two years ago at the Sydney Writers Festival, I heard Robert Drewe say something similar: “The prescience thing is eerie. Authors often remark that once you start a novel, your radar is so finely attuned that things start arriving that are exactly pertinent to what you are writing” (Drewe).

This was clearly the case with Newcastle’s Herald article that my radar picked up in August 2005 about the controversial university law professor banned from teaching for his racist comments, including a suggestion that Australia reinstate the White Australia Policy.

The article gave me the evidence I needed to link the current conservative attitudes that I felt were regressive, to the days of the White Australia Policy sixty years before. I now had a theme for an early presentation of this research project at a Symposium in October the same year. I named it “Back to the Future.” I was only weeks into the research, but already felt an incredible warmth and attachment to the three women, their unfolding stories and that postwar era of my childhood.

The hard labour of creating the work starts over again when the story is written. Hours of revising and editing are essential if the story is to work. It is painstaking, and heart-breaking, to remove paragraphs, sometimes pages which, when first set down made you glow with pride, but which in retrospect must be ditched in order to let the whole piece live. David Lodge suggests this is why “as readers, as critics, we are so interested in the genesis of works of literature, in author’s notebooks and draft manuscripts, and their comments on their work—it is a way of reconstructing and sharing the critical labour that is a part of creation” (107).

Writers, it seems, are inveterate collectors of pieces of information. My most valued piece is perhaps the tiny leather Letts’s Quikref Diary for 1916, kept by my grandfather while he was serving on the Western Front. He has jotted down a few lines every day, including the day he heard that his nineteen-year-old brother had been shot down and killed. They had met up the previous afternoon.

While my mother left virtually nothing behind in the way of notes, diaries or letters, Jean Kimble saved everything. She was an insatiable collector, a compulsive
hoarder. John Hughes writes about collecting in *The Idea of Home*. He writes, he says, in order to understand his mother’s obsession with collecting other people’s junk, junk she keeps stored in boxes under the house. She is a Ukrainian refugee haunted by atrocities she witnessed as a child in wartime. In the chapter, “My Mother’s House,” Hughes writes:

I used to think my mother’s hoarding of her Australian past was an attempt to compensate for the irretrievability of the past she had lost. I no longer believe this is the case. . . . The past is all too retrievable. My mother does not want to remember: the apparent randomness and clutter of her collecting signal the means by which she has tried to forget (63-64).

While Hughes is searching for his mother’s motives for collecting, it occurs to me that writers, too, are obsessive collectors. Perhaps this boxing up and storing away is a metaphor that can be applied to writing. Writers are hunters, gatherers, sorters, keepers and conservers of stories. Perhaps we write things down for the reasons Hughes’s mother collects: to allow ourselves to forget and move on. There is a constant anxiety when writing, as ideas fly in and out of the mind, of the need to hold onto thoughts before they are lost, to nail them down. How many scraps of paper have I scribbled on and lost containing gems of ideas? It feels good to set things down; to see our work on a computer page; and hear the sound of the printer spitting out reassuring pages of hard copy.

Jean Kimble, as we saw earlier, was a collector. Were her collections of hundreds of frogs, handkerchiefs, Mills and Boon romances, symptomatic of her loneliness or, as Hughes suggests in his mother’s case, a kind of insurance against death? “When we die,” says his grandmother, “Who’s going to look after all this rubbish?” Hughes also suggests that “the most distinctive trait of a collection is its intransmissibility, and that the phenomenon of collecting loses its meaning when the collection loses its owner. Collecting, in other words, is a reminder of death” (58).

When Jean Kimble died she left everything she had to her Magnificent Seven nieces and nephews. After the clean-up of her unit, each of these people felt compelled to take a few mementoes, some sacred last connections with their indomitable aunt. Those knick-knacks were, after all, part of their history too. Her nephews Garry and Warren thought to gather up a suitcase or two of her personal papers and family
photographs. And I am very glad they did.

When researching the past, whatever new knowledge comes to light becomes part of the present, the author’s present. You own it, good or bad. And like John Hughes’s mother you cannot throw it off. It becomes part of the person you are, of your life now, part of you. This new stuff—secrets, gossip and home truths unearthed from the past—sticks to you. Like the joys or wounds of an old love affair, it burrows into your being and takes up lodgings, transforming you like a metamorphosis until you are a different person from the person you once were. And then, helpless as a moth, you are hooked, forever seeking more light, because you can never go back to the darkness of not knowing, the way you were at the start.

In the second volume of Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*, the narrator concludes: “The dead annex the living who become their replicas and successors, the continuators of their interrupted life” (796-7). Do these lives relived in memories therefore extend the life of the dead? This would seem to be true in the case of Jean Kimble. Every niece and nephew came away from the “clean-up” with a bag of booty. And when you realise that much of Jean’s furniture came from her parents’ Marrickville house it would seem that several generations of past lives have thus been extended. This perhaps is a pointer to Jean’s obsession. She was holding on, by any means she could, to the parents she loved.

I try to apply Proust’s theory to the overseas trip my father took with his second wife in which they retraced the route my family, my mother included, had taken twenty years before. As I look at it I see that we must have been in our father’s thoughts along the way. I wonder what his new bride thought of this rerun. Did my father ever call her by my mother’s name? He probably did. He was terrible with names.

Flashes of my mother, I now realise, must have entered his new relationship. When he took away her precious dining table with our family life inscribed in its patina of scratches and scuff marks, he took a part of my mother with it. And although my father went out of his way to avoid her after that, I see now that she must, now and then, have made her presence felt.

**Conclusion**

Life-writing is a journey of adventure, an experience that brings a closer understanding and connection between human beings. Each time I sit at the desk there is a clean white
page ready for a new beginning, a new journey where anything is possible. Even a wrong turn now and then is sure to yield unexpected revelations.

Writing is an exciting learning process if we are open to the experiences and insights of other writers. In my case, there is satisfaction in confronting the ghosts of the past. Unlike John Hughes’s mother who stored her treasures in boxes, I have put my treasured memories on the page.

I am thankful to my family, the Kimble clan and the women at Yuendumu for giving me the opportunity to create these women’s stories. To illuminate their lives and times has been a compelling challenge and a true privilege. Their lives and experiences have enriched my own. As a woman of the baby-boomer generation who has been fortunate to enjoy a career and a family and to return to university years later to study Arts, I feel indebted to those Australian women writers like Anne Summers, Germaine Greer and Wendy McCarthy whose relentless activism made such choices possible. It is important now that we do not become complacent but remain vigilant and active in continuing to improve opportunities for women while preventing past gains from slipping from our grasp.

The final scene in the creative component of the thesis is devoted to the camp dogs at Yuendumu as they join the Sunday congregation up the centre aisle at the Baptist Church. These free-roaming bitsers must be the most unpretentious beings on the planet. Mangy, lousy and tick-ridden, they journey on, not knowing where their next meal will come from, yet they move with the easy grace and dignified bearing one sees in pilgrims, monks, and perhaps even in writers, content in the belief that it is better to travel in hope than to arrive.
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