The Carpet Child

Jo Parnell, BEd (UG1), BA (Hons)

Thesis submitted for the degree of Master of Philosophy in English

The University of Newcastle NSW.

March 2010
This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other
Degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my
knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another
person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to this
copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library**, being made available
for loan and photocopying subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

**Unless an Embargo has been approved for a determined period.
Table of Contents

I       Introduction
       I.2   Critical Review of Recent Work in the Field
       I.3   The Chosen Books

II      Charles Dickens: *Oliver Twist*

III     James Joyce: *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

IV      Catherine Cookson: *Our Kate*

V       Frank McCourt: *Angela’s Ashes*

VI      Conclusion

Works Cited
Part 2

Memoir

The Carpet Child
The Damaging Childhood in Fiction and Non-fiction.

1

Introduction.

This exegesis is intended as a preparation for my memoir, The Carpet Child. My memoir centres on an Anglo-Australian child and involves dispossession, displacement, hardship and abuse which are not racially motivated. By implication The Carpet Child is also the story of thousands of other Anglo-Australian children who were placed in ‘care’ in the early to mid twentieth century. The Carpet Child is not an act of catharsis or self-pity, but written in the hope that it will, in some way, help other survivors of damaging childhoods, and also help to create awareness and bring about an understanding of the damaging childhood in those who have not had that kind of experience.

The 2004 Senate Inquiry report into the maltreatment of children in care in Australia says: “It is not just the impact that tragic childhood experiences have had for the care leavers. Their children and families have also felt the impact, which can then flow through to future generations” (xv). In writing The Carpet Child my plan is to take a literary perspective of the damaging childhood in order to highlight a social issue pertinent to our nation and expose the implications of this issue for our society—in particular, for the children past, present, and future—by placing the story in the historical context and relating it to the socio-economic climates and attitudes of the times. My intention is to assist in bringing about social change for the better. The Carpet Child takes a reflective stance and also gives the damaged child’s point of view in order to keep the child in the reader’s focus and show a rounded picture of the child’s
agon and the horrors of the damaging childhood. As well, my interest lays in bringing the reader’s attention to the “Forgotten Australians”.

The term “Forgotten Australians” was coined by the Senate Inquiry into the maltreatment of children in care in Australia, and was used to define non-offending Anglo-Australian children who were placed in Homes and foster care in the years between 1920 and 1975: “In undertaking this reference the committee is to direct its inquiries primarily to those affected children who were not covered by the 2001 report . . . inquiring into child migrants . . . and the 1997 report inquiring into Aboriginal children” and Torres Strait Islander Children (2005, 2). The governments, churches, and charitable organisations of the time saw this as a socially acceptable answer to the problem of what to do with children whose parents did not want them or were unable to cope. Most of the paper-work on these children was destroyed as unnecessary to keep. A small number of care-leavers have been successful in tracing a record of sorts through the Department of Community Services archives under the Children and Young People’s Protection Care Act section 68, legislated in 1989. The 2004 Senate Inquiry found that in Australia, up until the late 1980s, the files of children in ‘care’ were “randomly selected and destroyed”; and, as well, many more children’s files were destroyed “because of a prevailing philosophy and community concern at the time that it was inappropriate for the Government to hold files containing personal information about citizens” (262-63). Thus as Joanna Penglase finds, and as I also discovered from my own experience, many care-leavers’ childhood records “no longer exist” (41-5). Penglase says:

To understand the significance of these records to care-leavers, we must remember that they are sometimes the only information they
will ever have about their childhood: there is often—perhaps even usually—nobody in their lives they can ask to fill them in on what happened in their childhood. (42)

Things are beginning to change. The premier Nathan Rees made a public apology to the “Forgotten Australians” of NSW on the 17th September, 2009. On the 16th November, 2009, the Australian Federal Government and the Opposition issued a public apology to all the “Forgotten Australians”; this apology included the “Forgotten Children”—the so-called British Child Migrants; not only were they raised as Australians in Australian institutions, but their experiences were similar to those of the “Forgotten Australians”.

Other things have not changed. Child abuse and neglect are still on-going issues. Shurlee Swain, in her review of After the Orphanage: Life Beyond the Children’s Home points out that although these Homes are a thing of the past in Australia, the problems still exist. Children in ‘care’ today face the same dilemmas as did the “Forgotten Australians”. The 2004 Senate Inquiry reports that: “the Committee . . . have received many reports that abuse is still occurring among Australian out-of-home care children” (26).

The Carpet Child is my true story. It is written from personal experience, and, so, contains the truths of the matter of my damaging childhood as I see it. It is strongly supported by photographic and documented evidence, and personal research previously undertaken. Key theorists Paul John Eakin and Margaretta Jolly define life-writing as an umbrella term. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson Smith describe the fifty-two genres of life-writing as adopted by the
International Auto/Biography Association, and link four of these genres, memoir, survivor narrative, trauma narrative, and witnessing to narratives of damaging childhoods. Smith and Watson describe memoir as narrative in which the writer records personal memories that “historically situates the subject in a social environment” (198). They describe trauma narrative as writing in which the narrator attempts to make sense of personal traumatic experiences, and witnessing as life-writing which gives testimony as “an act addressed to another . . . getting beyond the repetition of trauma to a more humane ethically informed future” (206-207). Smith and Watson say that life-writing and testimonials can illuminate history at personal and affective levels: in survivor narratives the victims are remade by “telling their stories in ways that move beyond a concentration of personal feelings to testimony that critiques larger cultural forces” (207). Penglase quotes American scholar Peter Lyman: the way in which we learn from history is “not from the formal chronicle of events, but from the subjective thoughts and feelings with which we experience the events of our everyday lives” (41).

I situate The Carpet Child in the interstices of memoir, trauma narrative, survivor narrative, and witnessing by placing my story in the historical context and relating it to the socio-economic climates and attitudes of the times. I theoretically underpin my statements of intention in writing by bearing witness in my memoir, and by stating in both works that The Carpet Child is a testimony to my childhood. In The Carpet Child I engage with the traumatic aspects of my childhood and endeavour to make sense of that experience through using the reflective voice.
Kate Douglas links studies of childhood and autobiography and uses the terms 'autobiography', 'memoir', 'life writing' and 'life narrative' interchangeably (3). In this exegetical discussion I will follow Douglas’s example and use the terms memoir and autobiography somewhat interchangeably (3). In the memoir I will use capitals for the ‘Child Welfare’ when referring to the department; and in certain instances I will capitalise certain words—such as ‘Choice’ and ‘Lady’, for example—for effect. In both documents I will use Penglase’s system to differentiate between Children’s Homes and family homes:

I will use a capital ‘H’ when speaking of ‘Homes’ because I think it is important to differentiate the word irrevocably from ‘home’. Although the word ‘orphanage’ was generally replaced in the post-war period by the term ‘Children’s Home’, little else changed. A Home, like an ‘orphanage’, was an institution characterised by the absence of all that life within a family home implies. (39)

If fairy stories such as those created by the Brothers Grimm or Hans Christian Anderson are taken into consideration, then it can be seen that writers have included stories of damaging childhods in their work for some hundreds of years. In more recent times many writers of fiction and non-fiction have written about the damaging childhood for a variety of reasons. Monica Flegel reveals that there are many philosophical writings by significant reformers, journalists, novelists, and poets on the subject of child abuse as a matter of legal and social concern in England, and which had implications for the representation for the damaging childhood in nineteenth century literature. Flegel points out that these genres were supplanted by new professions such as social work and child
protection as voices of authority on the solutions to social ills. The perspective Flegel takes in her work differs from that of mine in *The Carpet Child*, and hence from that of mine in this exegesis which is intended as a preparation for the memoir.

In her autobiographical memoir, *Our Kate*, Catherine Cookson asks: “How do you assess the agonies of childhood? How do you go about putting them over?” (81). In order to write *The Carpet Child* I needed to find out how others handled the subject of the damaging childhood.

1.2. Critical Review of Recent Work in the Field.

Before beginning to write my book I made a thorough search for stories that focus on the childhood which was damaging due to external causes. As evidenced by many writers (Rosamund Dalziell, to give but one example), since the 1900s there has been a growing body of published narratives and studies by adults who have experienced the traumatic childhood. In this exegesis I concentrated on books written by or about children of Anglo-Saxon heritage because it seemed to be the best possible preparation for my own story, *The Carpet Child*; and I looked for creative works by literary authors that have been commercially published. But because I am one of the “Forgotten Australians”, my initial search involved looking at published works by, or about, other “Forgotten Australians”.

The 2004 Senate Inquiry report into the maltreatment of children in care in Australia says: “Upwards of, and possibly more than 500 000 Australians experienced care in an orphanage, Home or other out-of-home care during the
last century” (xv). Penglase is reported in the Daily Telegraph, 4th February, 2004, as having said she believes that there are “more than 100 000” older “Forgotten Australians” who “make up a lost generation”, and who have never disclosed (13). Since the National Apology there are a growing number of “Forgotten Australians” who are willing to share their stories. Even so, it is evident from the numbers mentioned above that only a very few of these stories have ever been told. In her book Penglase finds that “in recent years more and more care-leavers have written their own accounts—but most of the latter are self-published and therefore not available in bookshops” (45).

In this exegesis I am referring to the published works of literate authors when I say the subject of the damaging childhood which is due to social conditions and attitudes, and as experienced by thousands of Anglo-Australian children at the hands of the system, written from a literary perspective and taken from the focus of the damaged child and its subjective thoughts and feelings and experiences, and which also uses the reflective adult voice, has been largely avoided by creative writers, and as I have already mentioned, comparatively few survivors—“Forgotten Australians”—tell their stories. The reason for this may be that little is known about that kind of damaging childhood by those who have not had the experience, or who have not had close contact with someone who has had the experience, and most survivors have a fear of retribution. As well, survivors of damaging childhoods carry feelings of guilt and shame about what happened to them. A few recent works that use different lenses to focus on the subject of the damaging childhood are of value in their field.

My search produced several books written by, or for, people who merely ‘tell’ about what happened. Two examples of this type of book are Tell Me
Why, Mummy: A little boy’s struggle to survive; A mother’s shameful secret by David Thomas, and Salvation: the true story of Rod Braybon’s fight for justice, by Vikki Petraitis. Such works take a personal perspective, and through the personal give a smattering of historical information, but do not offer the reader an understanding of the damaging childhood. The authors of these books recount what happened to the child, but do not use the reflective voice when writing their story; and hence their works offer no insight on the part of the author. Jane Taylor McDonnell says: “the reflective voice is so important to memoir because self-revelation without reflection or understanding is merely self-exposure” (quoted in James Phelan, 66). These types of works did highlight the importance of the reflective voice in autobiography and memoir. (Frank McCourt’s memoir, which is used in this exegesis, is an exception. His work brings understanding on both a personal and affective level, through his use of the art of indirection.) These books made me aware that when writing about the damaging childhood elements such as boasting, bitterness, revenge, anger, self-pity, and ‘telling’ merely for the sake of telling, can alienate the reader. James Pennebaker says: “disclosure involves revealing the deepest thoughts, and involves trust. While the teller may improve, the listener can feel worse” (8).

The Senate Committee Report on children in institutional or out-of-home-care is in two volumes; Forgotten Australians published in 2004, and Protecting vulnerable children: a National Challenge published in 2005. These reports look at the damaging childhood from a political-social-historical perspective for political purposes. Compiled from work done by CLAN—Care Leavers Australia Network—and its members (past care leavers), in conjunction with the Community Affairs References Committee, the Health Care Services, the
medical fraternity, and the welfare services, these documents show written evidence of the Senate Inquiry’s investigations, and were used in this exegesis, and as background information to the creative work.

Orphans of the Living: Growing up in ‘care’ in twentieth-century Australia, written by Penglase and published as recently as 2007, grew from Penglase’s 1999 doctoral thesis and was written from an attempt to understand her own experience of growing up in a Children’s Home in Australia. The book is historical and social reportage, written from the perspective of a social worker who has a background as a documentary television researcher and interviewer. Like the Senate Reports it was useful background reading, and is used to make certain points in this exegetical discussion.

The biography When Innocence Trembles: A Survivor’s Story by Kate Davies was published in 2004. The subject is Davies’ husband, Karl, who spent his childhood in an Australian orphanage run by the Catholic Church. The topic is his damaging childhood but includes the stories of some other children as well. The biographer’s treatment of a damaging childhood shows this abused child as feeling exceptionally pleased with his acts of breaking, entering, and stealing, rather than being secretly fearful and acting from desperation or sheer bravado as one would expect. The author breaks into the story to express her disgust that her husband had, at fourteen years of age, been sentenced to serve a further four years in an institution, “all for a lousy eight bob” (83). This book focuses on a sociological concern—the corruption of some children at the hands of the system. This story added to my awareness of the lack of role models for institutionalised children.
David Hill’s book, *The Forgotten Children: Fairbridge Farm School and its Betrayal of Britain’s Child Migrants to Australia*, published in 2007, is a calmly narrated but moving account of the hardships and abuse suffered by himself and other British children under the Fairbridge Scheme. Hill’s account has authenticity and makes interesting reading. It is a documentary account that covers a group rather than an individual, and was useful background reading to my memoir.

Ray Willich’s book, *Shadows of a Childhood: reflections of a maltreated child*, published in 1978, is a type of memoir-autobiography. Willich, an Australian social worker, was raised at home by his parents but suffered greatly at their hands. Willich reflects a little on his past. He recounts his struggles to educate himself, tells of his academic successes, and admits that he has on-going anger problems. At the end of his story he writes that he can only hope he has outgrown the worst of his dangerous outbursts, and that he hasn’t “caused too much harm” (131). By implication the author shows that he is guilt-ridden, and, at times, self-pitying. He blames his personality defects on his damaging childhood; he says, “I must have received barely sufficient love” (90). This work is significant in its own field as a sociological study of children raised in dysfunctional families.

One article proved to be useful background reading to my exegetical discussion of Cookson’s memoir; and when writing my book, alerted me to the dangers of expressing myself in an overly emotive way. “Survivor Discourse: Transgression or Recuperation”, written by Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray and published in 1993, takes a feminist stance and is concerned with the “unsilencing” of victims of sexual abuse—that is, of empowering those victims
by giving them a voice. Alcoff and Gray discuss the exploitation and intimidation of victims by the media and judiciary as well as sensationalism hence trivialisation by the media, and the attitudes of Western male-orientated societies towards those victims who do speak out. This article also warns of the dangers to victims of appearing to be less than reliable because using overly emotional speech when telling their stories (285).

Another article, “Going Public: A Decade of Australian Autobiography” by David McCooey, published in the Australian Book Review, 2006, is used in my exegesis. McCooey says autobiography is “a form of extremely necessary, and urgent, public speech” (8). He argues that once a personal experience is written into autobiography that experience becomes the property of the public domain. This argument supported my exegesis argument that Cookson’s memoir brought to the public arena, and hence opened for discussion, issues previously held as taboo.

I kept these two articles in mind when writing my book The Carpet Child, and hence was aware of the potential benefits and dangers of disclosure, and the handling of those areas when writing.

James Phelan’s chapter “Unreliable Narration, restricted Narration, and the Implied Author in Memoir: Angela’s Ashes and (a Glance at) ‘Tis” in his book Living to Tell about It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration, is a critical discussion used in my exegesis. Phelan’s chapter is a comprehensive and valuable critical discussion of McCourt’s technique of the art of indirection and his humorous approach in his treatment of the damaging childhood. Phelan shows that the author of Angela’s Ashes, McCourt, “is sophisticated and clear-visioned, able to guide his audience to an understanding of his former self with
both a sense of humor and a sense of the horrible reality that Frankie remains oblivious to” (71). Phelan’s chapter, and McCourt’s book, made me aware that it was all right to inject an element of humour when writing about a subject as serious as the damaging childhood.

1.3. The Chosen Books.

I chose four significant literary works for discussion in this exegesis: Oliver Twist, a novel by Charles Dickens; Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, an autobiographical novel by James Joyce; Our Kate, an autobiography by Catherine Cookson; and Angela’s Ashes, a memoir by Frank McCourt. These four books were chosen because, as an aspiring writer, I considered them to be valuable as models for writing my memoir about my damaging childhood.

Charles Dickens’ Oliver Twist was chosen as a model for the writing of The Carpet Child because it has the vivid quality of pathos and the startling effect of nightmare within dream, that is, it upsets the reader’s own psychology. In his 1867 Preface Dickens’ states that his purpose in writing Oliver Twist is to create within the reader an awareness of the social disasters being born from the inherent evil in the Benthamite ideologies of the then ruling parliamentary party (13-16). The Carpet Child takes a lesson from Oliver Twist. In order to bring the reader to full awareness of the horrors and effects of a damaging childhood which is due to external causes, and hence to a fuller awareness of relevant social issues and topical subjects, The Carpet Child seeks to upset the reader’s own psychology by vividly realising the child’s nightmare world within the dream. In respect to material, The Carpet Child does not look to any other
author’s work. Nor is it written in the style of any other than mine; but it does take lessons from the four works chosen as models for the writing of my memoir.

Each of the four works chosen as models for the writing of my memoir focuses on the damaged child’s subjective thoughts and feelings and experiences—this is also the focus in The Carpet Child. This is not to suggest that The Carpet Child is the literary equal to any one of these four chosen works. Each of these works uses the damaged child as the focal point in the writing, and each deals with the childhood which, because of external causes and social conditions, is potentially damaging to the child in its formative years. Each of the authors creates a literary landscape which the reader can enter.

These four significant literary works differ one from the other in genre and writing technique; but they show that it is the duty of the author who writes a narrative of the damaging childhood to give to the reader a literary experience which is honest to the experience but enjoyable and moving because vividly realised and convincing.

What Dickens, Joyce, Cookson, and McCourt all do, is create a formal picture of the accepted but inadequate practices of their times in combination with the subjective thoughts and feelings and personal experiences of the suffering child; and in so doing give a rounded picture of the horrors of the damaging childhood within a social context. These works create a sense of history. As an aspiring writer, I felt that these books not only offered me a valuable tool-box of unusual methods and a wide range of techniques from which to choose, but also created within me an awareness of the potential problems when writing about the damaging childhood. For instance, there is the
problem of how to avoid alienating the reader with the damaged child’s self-pity; and then there is the problem of how to convey the damaging childhood narrative from a child’s perspective whilst yet maintaining the vision of a mature author. Another problem is how to attach to the reader’s own reality whilst keeping the young, innocent and suffering child as the focal point in the writing. These writers created within me an awareness that the subject of the damaging childhood could weigh heavily upon the reader. So in this exegesis I studied how each of these authors wrote about the damaging childhood, how they treated it, and in so doing learnt things to do, and things not to do, when writing about my own childhood.

In this exegesis Dickens’ novel and Joyce’s autobiographical novel may well be considered to be foundation works on the damaging childhood. In his book, Dickens uses the damaging childhood to urge social reform, and Joyce uses it as a means by which to demonstrate his aesthetic theories and create a “new” kind of creative writing. Cookson uses the story of her own damaging childhood to create an awareness of the plight of the illegitimate child and urge law reform, and McCourt uses the story of his terrible childhood to expose the horrific conditions under which he was forced to live as a child in the Irish slums. By implication, McCourt’s book creates awareness in the reader that being raised in a slum environment is potentially damaging to any child in its formative years.

Cookson’s and McCourt’s books are both memoirs and hence closer to the perspective taken by myself of the damaging childhood.
Charles Dickens: *Oliver Twist*.

Charles Dickens is possibly the first English novelist to deal with the connections between the damaging underprivileged childhood and society. *Oliver Twist* involves a reformist agenda. Dickens states that his purpose in writing *Oliver Twist* is to entertain his readers and at the same time expose the truths about the miserable lives and the criminal types and associations of the lower classes, and show how these conditions impacted on the poor children and were denied by the authorities of Victorian England. He said that do this “would be to attempt a something which was needed, and which would be a service to society” (Preface 13). Stephen Gill says that the legislators of the 1834 New Poor Laws recommended “the imposition of strictly controlled dietary regulations; the determination to make workhouses so forbidding that they became places of last resort” to satisfy “rate-payers in mutiny against the ever-increasing cost of the existing system of Poor Relief”; and he adds: “Dickens exposes them all through the simple device of showing how they bear upon a child” (xi). Fred Kaplan says that in the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 “the burden to the state . . . of illegitimate children in one-parent households was an important aspect of the debate” (xi). Nancy K. Hill writes that in order “to bring about reform, Dickens knew he had to alter his readers’ perception and such alteration required visual imagery of considerable power” (2).

Ultimately, *Oliver Twist* is an experiment in writing about the damaging childhood from the point of view of an author who is at once a social reformist
and a Victorian novelist whose unifying techniques in writing are based on this
dichotomy—a paradox which is intrinsic to, and hence inseparable from, the
writing of Oliver Twist. Dickens might not have succeeded in finding a realistic
solution to Oliver’s problems, but for any writer who is writing about the
damaging childhood Oliver Twist offers an impressive repertoire of novelistic
approaches and devices.

Dickens follows several narrative voices, and hence ends up writing on a
number of different levels. The first third of the novel is on one hand a satire on
the 1834 Poor Laws from a reformist adult’s point of view in which he lambasts
the ‘philosophers’ of the day, and on the other hand an absorbing story about
Oliver and his damaging childhood in which the third person omniscient narrator
speaks on behalf of the child, and takes the damaging childhood from an adult’s
point of view. In the second third of the novel, Dickens continues with the story-
line but focuses on the lower-class criminal elements by realistically and
strongly portraying characters such as Nancy, Sikes, and Fagin. These characters
are criminal by nature, and hence their stories have little to do with the 1834
New Poor Laws. From Oliver’s first meeting with Fagin there are shifts of focus
within the narrative from Oliver to these criminal characters. Gill notes that
“elements in the construction of the narrative are clearly awkward” and marks
these shifts as structural flaws in the plot (vii-viii). These focal shifts are
precipitated by Dickens’ attempts to portray the criminal associations of the
lower classes, and translate Oliver’s damaging childhood into this wider picture
of social horror in order to show how this element impacted on the poor children
who lived on the streets of London. But Oliver really has nothing to do with the
innate criminality of the other principal characters. For example, take Fagin on
“death row”: “he began to think of all the men he had known who had died upon the scaffold, some of them through his means. They rose up in such quick succession that he could hardly count them” (366); or take the young prostitute, Nancy, whose refusal to abandon the criminal Bill Sykes results in her murder (280, 328). These other principal characters compete with Oliver as the focal point in the writing and hence could stand without Oliver—but that would require a different story. Kaplan says that “the novel pivots on an idealised vision of the possibility of virtue and beauty; but it also pivots on the powerful, almost pervasive horror of criminality, prostitution, child abuse, poverty, violence, and the brutalization that urbanization has made a fulcrum of modern life” (ix). In the last third of the novel the tone changes to sentimental Victorian idealism, and Oliver as a character becomes increasingly unrealistic. Thus, what begins as social reform propaganda grows into something entirely different and the child protagonist who begins the book as a victim of the system and carries the title of the book, fades away into Dickens’ ideas of virtue and mercy and hence does not develop into a strong character.

Dickens uses satire and irony and, at times, nauseating sentimentality, and a third person omniscient narrative point of view to highlight the harsh realities faced by poor, underprivileged children. Through the all-knowing, all-seeing external narrator, first the reader learns that the workhouse children “suffered the torture of slow starvation” at the hands of the appointed authorities; next, the reader learns that Oliver is elected by his peers to bring the children’s plight to notice, an action which in turn brings the wrath of the well-fed authorities down upon his head: “There was a general start. Horror was depicted on every countenance. ‘For more!’ said Mr. Limbkins. ‘Compose yourself, Bumble . . .
Do I understand that he asked for more, after he had eaten the supper allocated by the dietary?" (26-7). David Paroissien says that “in a literal sense Dickens wildly overstates the Government-issued dietaries . . . but nevertheless captures the punitive spirit behind the reforms implemented in 1834” (57). But Horne notes that “Dickens’ harsh, rapid, sardonic manner, his note of charged understatement . . . insists on the shocking plausibility of such injustice in an England that makes scant provision for those without friends in high places or funds” (xiv). Thus, Dickens exaggerates his characters and the relevant social issues to make them larger than life, but he does so in a controlled manner in order to heighten the mimetic, emotional and ethical components within the narrative which in turn draws on the reader’s emotional and ethical responses.

Brian De Palma points out that “People don’t see the world before their eyes until it’s put into a narrative mode” (quoted in Porter Abbott 6). Throughout Oliver Twist Dickens builds images that heighten the quality of pathos in the narrative. These images put the realities of the situation in which poor, innocent children like Oliver are placed, in front of the reader’s eyes, as it were. One example of this is where Oliver receives a week’s solitary confinement after asking for “more” food:

He only cried bitterly all day; and when the long dismal night came on, he spread his little hands before his eyes to shut out the darkness, and crouching in the corner, tried to sleep; ever and anon waking with a start and tremble, and drawing himself closer and closer to the wall, as if to feel even its cold hard surface were a protection in the gloom and loneliness which surrounded him. (28)
Dickens use of heavy irony, satire, imagery, and melodramatic presentation enhance his use of third person omniscient narrative and cause the reader to feel Oliver’s extreme fear and pain: “desperate with hunger, and reckless with misery”, Oliver “advances to the master” and utters one simple childish plea: “‘Please, sir, I want some more.’” The master, a fat, healthy man, turned very pale. He gazed in stupefied astonishment on the small rebel . . . then clung for support to the copper” (26). Since ‘food’ is necessary to life and also a repetitive theme in *Oliver Twist*, Dickens’ presentation of the philosophers’ reactions to a starving child’s request for “more” builds on, and conveys, the escalating horror and tension of Oliver’s situation to the reader. Arnold Kettle’s words on *Oliver Twist* in general could apply to this scene: “There is no sentimentality here, only horror . . . the blurring of the line between reality and nightmare” (“Dickens: Oliver Twist” 259). Towards the end of the story when Oliver’s physical and spiritual needs are fulfilled by true Christian gentle-folk who have been brought to a full awareness of his predicament, tension eases and the need for ‘food’ becomes less immediate: “Truth to tell, the supper had been waiting a most unreasonable time. Neither Mrs. Maylie, nor Harry, nor Rose (who all came in together) could offer a word in extenuation” (363). Thus ‘food’ is at once the catalyst for Oliver’s change of circumstances, and Dickens’ symbol to his readers that the inhumane practices of Victorian England’s flawed social system can be abolished by a cooperative class of Christian-minded gentle-people who have been made aware of the dire situation in which children such as Oliver are placed.

There is a comic aspect to Dickens’ presentation of an otherwise serious situation. Gill says “brilliant linguistic comedy is wrested from the miserable
realities of Oliver’s plight” (xi). Each time Oliver’s “more” is echoed by other characters within the story it gains momentum until it reverberates throughout the system: Oliver’s terrified peers fall back in fear; the flabbergasted master staggers back in “stupefied astonishment”; his staff recoil in shocked wonder at Oliver’s “temerity”; the overly-excited master repeats Oliver’s demand to the board who are even more shocked and horrified; Mr. Limbkins in the “high chair” exhibits even greater horror, shock and indignation than the board; the shocked “gentleman in the white waistcoat” passes moral judgement on Oliver, and Oliver is first imprisoned then subjected to on-going trauma (26-7). Gill says these “philosophers”—that is, Mr. Limbkins and the workhouse board—are representations of the legislators of the 1834 New Poor Laws which imposed great hardship on the innocents caught up in the system (vii). Paroissien writes: “The comic over-reaction to Oliver’s request also captures” the general hysteria which “accompanied the introduction of the 1834 policies” and gave rise to “partial riots and attempts to burn down workhouses” (59). In Oliver Twist, Dickens explains his method thus: “it is the custom . . . in all good murderous melodramas, to present the tragic and the comic scenes in as regular alternation as the layers in red and white in a side of streaky, well-cured bacon” (120). In fact, Dickens breaks with this custom. He does not alternate the tragic and the comic, rather he rolls the comic into the tragic as intrinsic to the whole. But he does use the accepted custom of sudden shifts in scene. Dickens explains: that these “sudden shiftings of the scene and rapid changes of time and place” are by many “considered as the great art of authorship—an author’s skill in his craft being . . . chiefly estimated with the relation to the dilemmas in which he leaves his characters at the end of every chapter” (121). Dickens claims that his
technique is different, that in his story “sudden shiftings in the scene, and rapid changes of time and place” have definite purposes that will be revealed in due course: “the reader taking it for granted that there are good and substantial reasons” (120-1). This is Dickens’ signal that Oliver’s situation will be happily resolved.

By opening his novel in first person narrative in a style reminiscent of the oral tradition Dickens gives the reader notice that he is embarking upon an enjoyable story that involves serious subjects: “Among other buildings in a certain town . . . there is one anciently common to most towns . . . and in this workhouse was born, on a day which I need not trouble myself to repeat . . . the item of mortality whose name is prefixed to the head of this chapter” (17). After a brief introduction Dickens effortlessly glides into third person omniscient narrative, then, without pause, ends the first chapter with an authorial intrusion that forms part of the story: the “parish child—the orphan of the workhouse” is “despised by all, and pitied by none” (19). This technique allows Dickens to provide some distancing between the first person story-teller and the intrusive author and the third person omniscient narrator, while at the same time showing happy agreement between the three entities to enhance the illusion of truth; that is, the story flows smoothly from one to the other. This perspective gives Dickens the opportunity to intervene at will in the narrative in his own voice in order to further convince the reader that his story has literal truth (41, 90, 120-1, 374). George P. Landow likens the Dickensian method to that used by Samuel Johnson and George Eliot and describes it as “Wisdom Speaking”: “a mode [which] creates credibility for the authorial voice within the text” (1). However, there is a marked difference between this literary mode as used by Johnson and
that used by Eliot, and between the methods employed by those authors and Dickens. Distinguishing between these three approaches helps to show more clearly how Dickens brings the reader to an awareness of the damaging childhood. For instance, in his fictional work The History of Rasselas, Johnson embeds his ‘wisdom writing’ within a character’s narration. He has Nekayah comment on private life and the type of psychology peculiar to all families (657-9). There is nothing new in life in Nekayah’s generalised observations: they are merely widely accepted truths of the human condition. In Middlemarch Eliot expands somewhat on Johnson’s technique to gain the allegiance of her readers; she does much of her ‘wisdom speaking’ through her characters’ psychological make-up. For example, by his reasoning and actions, young Dr. Lydgate shows himself to be a shallow fellow—he sets his sights on Rosamund Vincy as a future wife, and bases his decision on nothing other than her pleasing physical appearance, his personal gain and aggrandisement, and the belief that in contracting such a marriage, his position in life, in the town and society, will be assured: “For who of any consequence in Middlemarch was not connected or at least acquainted with the Vincy’s?” (121-3). Thus, Eliot gives her readers an insight into the psychology of human nature. Unlike Eliot, Dickens, in the interests of social reform, takes a rounded approach inasmuch that he allows his omniscient narrator hence the actions and words of the characters and the story itself to do most of his ‘wisdom speaking’.

On one occasion Dickens uses an authorial intrusion in which he employs personal pronouns in an unusual type of second person narrative, ‘we’ and ‘us’—implying ‘you’, in order to build the quality of pathos in the narrative and hence gain the reader’s sympathy for Oliver, who is all “alone in a strange place;
and we all know how chilled and desolate the best of us will sometimes feel in such a situation” (42). In this instance intrusion is brief and woven into the melodramatic story. The way in which Dickens uses these narrative devices is different to that of Eliot. For instance, at one point in The Mill on the Floss Eliot breaks the third person omniscient narrative to address the reader in her own voice and draw an analogy between the “dismal ruins” to be seen while “journeying down the Rhone” and the village in which her story is set (269-70). In this instance she involves the reader by using a stylish version of second person narrative point of view, indicated by the use of personal pronouns ‘me’, ‘you’, ‘I’, ‘we’: these “villages in the Rhone oppress me . . . this oppressive feeling may have weighed upon you . . . I share with you this sense of oppressive narrowness; but it is necessary that we should feel it, if we care to understand how it acted on the lives of Tom and Maggie—how it acted on the lives of young natures in many generations” (270). Thus, Eliot links the reader to geographical atmospheres and the arts and to human nature and hence to her characters, siblings Tom and Maggie, whom she binds together in nature: “Even in their death they were not divided” (511). Thus, Eliot’s art merely lays bare to the reader elements of the individual human psyche, and family and social relationships in relation to middle-class child rearing practices which, unacknowledged and unaltered, appear to be potentially damaging to the children raised within those homes. Dickens’ reformist art is didactic, and it is judgemental towards the authorities, criminals, and philosophers of his day. Both Johnson’s and Eliot’s art and ‘wisdom speaking’ differ from that of Dickens, who uses his authorial voice to create awareness of the truly damaging
childhood, and advise his readers to show Christian “mercy to others” (374). Dickens’ technique is implicit in the story as a whole.

Dickens uses a small amount of third person objective point of view as covert authorial intrusion to draw the reader into the story. For example, he opens chapter 50 with a short but comprehensive description of sleazy slum conditions in London and likens that to conditions in Jacob’s Island. He then uses the Jacob’s Island setting to glide smoothly into third person omniscient narrative to continue the story from the angle of the doings of the criminal characters, and which bode ill for Oliver (344-6). In this way, Dickens lets the reader know which characters are trustworthy, and which are not; and passes on the social truths arising from his portrayal of neglected, abused childhood. To aid these narrative devices, and hence assist the reader to consider a flawed social structure more deeply, Dickens occasionally follows up with exquisite satire, delivered by the omniscient narrator, in which he embeds authorial intrusion in delicious irony: the external, omniscient narrator reveals that the criminal Dodger and “his accomplished friend Master Bates”, “were actuated by a very laudable and becoming regard for themselves”; so, says Dickens the author, “I need hardly beg the reader to observe that this action should tend to exalt them in the opinion of all public and patriotic men” (89-90). Thus, Dickens takes an encyclopaedic approach in Oliver Twist; he employs his authorial intrusions, his narrators, his characters, the story line and—to borrow Porter Abbott for discussion on Dickens—other “major rhetorical devices”, to reveal the conflict and evil within the Benthamite ideologies of England’s authorities (37).
In his Preface (dated 1867) a serious Dickens implies that the poverty, squalor, and hardships in slums such as Jacob’s Island are fostered by the ideologies of the ruling parliamentary party, and denied by those in power (16). By implication, Dickens expresses his serious views on the dangers of utilitarianism through the ironic sentiment behind the words of the characters in the story. For example, the unconscionable Mr. Bumble, one of the so-called “authorities” appointed by the systems “philosophers” and a chief perpetrator of Oliver’s misery, declares: “If parliament don’t take their abominable courses under consideration, this country’s ruined” (191). Thus Dickens avoids the pitfall of becoming too distanced as an external narrator by aligning his views on the legislators’ Utilitarian philosophies with Oliver’s point of view: “Although Oliver had been brought up by philosophers, he was not theoretically acquainted with the beautiful axiom that self-preservation is the first law of nature. If he had been, perhaps he would have been more prepared for this” (74).

In accordance with Dickens’ social theories, Oliver’s promotion from a dreadful, lower-class existence to a privileged middle-class life is not a reward for virtuous action. Gill notes “there can be no negotiation for Oliver between the worlds of Oliver Twist”; he is caught by the “onslaught” of “the massed powers of Good and Evil” (xiii). Thus, what happens to Oliver is beyond Oliver’s control; as a poor, underprivileged workhouse orphan, he has a damaging childhood thrust upon him by ‘philosophical’ authorities. In spite of his damaging upbringing, Oliver proves to be incorruptible. Paroissien finds that Oliver, “as the unwavering embodiment of goodness . . . stands in direct opposition to . . . Utilitarian Radicals” and their Benthamite philosophy that places “emphasis on selfishness as the defining characteristic of human
behaviour” (19, 42). The orphaned Nancy, who has been corrupted by her life on
the streets where she has lived since childhood, also stands in opposition to
Utilitarian philosophy. Self-interest is not a consideration in her attempt to save
Oliver; she refuses Rose’s help to better her circumstances (281-2). In proving to
be innately ‘good’ Nancy partially redeems herself; but because she is unwilling
to leave Sikes she brings about her own murder (328). Thus, Nancy is too
psychologically damaged by her upbringing to be saved. Paroissien provides
ample evidence to show that London’s street-children, and young women such
as Nancy, did attach to undesirable and criminal characters, and hence were
subject to the psychologically damaging aspects and life-threatening dangers of
the conditions under which they were forced to live (93, 98, 236).

Nevertheless, there are a number of instances in Oliver Twist to indicate
that Dickens is aware that whether an unfortunate childhood is truly damaging
depends much on the nature of the child. For example, the street-children in
Fagin’s den who seem to enjoy the criminal life-style simply fade out of the
story: “all the hopeful pupils of the merry old gentleman . . . went to supper”
(65-6). Conversely, young Charley Bates repents his earlier life of crime and
“having a contented disposition, and a good purpose, succeeded in the end” in
becoming “the merriest young grazier in all Northamptonshire” (373). But Noah
Claypole, another street child, is only concerned for his own neck; so he gives
up his criminal life to realise a “genteel subsistence” even though, true to his
nature, he stays barely within the law (373). Even so, in his novel Dickens
implies that poor orphaned children are intrinsically ‘good’ but that street-
children are both psychologically damaged whereas workhouse children are
disadvantaged and physically damaged. This is evidenced by the brief existence
of “porchial” Dick, Oliver’s “little friend and playmate” in the “branch-workhouse” (19, 59, 123). Dick, glimpsed briefly in a garden, smiles faintly and tells Oliver, “I heard the doctor tell them I was dying . . . I dream of Heaven, and Angels, and kind faces that I never see when I am awake” (59). Dick could be seen as Dickens’ symbol for the death of innocence at the hands of the system and hence Dickens’ jab at the philosophers and their Benthamite ideology: Dick makes no mistakes, and learns nothing other than he is going to die; he asks Mr. Bumble to tell Oliver that “I was glad to die when I was very young; for, perhaps, if I had lived . . . my little sister, who is in heaven, might forget me . . . it would be so much happier if we were both children there together” (123-4).

Thus, as a character in the novel the ideal child Dick is not very interesting, merely a little touch of sugar-sweet Victorian sentimentality: “Goodbye, dear! God bless you!” (59).

Oliver is portrayed very differently to Dick. Oliver is at once an individual and a representative figure. His experiences are those of other children in the workhouses and slums of Victorian England—he could be any child whatsoever: “he might have been the child of a nobleman or beggar” (19). Other than when the criminal types take the focal point in the writing, the other characters in the story are sometimes seen through Oliver’s focalisation by way of the third person omniscient narrator, and at all times enlarged upon by this narrator for Oliver’s sake. The narrator causes the reader to look through Oliver at the other characters and their actions; this factor, together with the assistance of the narrator’s omniscience, builds a rounded picture of Oliver’s tragic circumstances, and the events that bring about change. In one way Oliver seems to be character in a fairy story—a middle-class virtuous cast adrift in the streets
of London—and hence a little unrealistic. Because Dickens’ third person omniscient narrator helps the reader to see things through Oliver’s eyes, this entity takes an almost child-like, innocent view of the various characters and events; and in giving those views expression the narrator promotes Oliver as a child of a tender sensibility and hence excites the reader’s emotional and ethical responses. Being a young child, Oliver relies on his instincts, he is unable to express himself articulately; thus, this external narrator who speaks for Oliver imbues the narrative with a sense of innocence and nightmare: Oliver sobbed, “I am only a very little boy, sir . . .”; “The child . . . looked into his companion’s face with tears of real agony” (39-40). Thus, the reader gains knowledge of the various characters’ personalities indirectly; that is, the narrator employs satire and irony and sentimentality, and builds the story’s aura of pathos, horror, and sentiment in order to highlight Oliver’s plight. Porter Abbott points out: “It is no exaggeration . . . to call narrative an instrument of power, and in fact many exceptionally powerful narratives reflect upon this power” (36).

Still, for the greater part of the novel Dickens portrays Oliver reasonably realistically as an individual. Like any real life child caught in desperate circumstances Oliver suffers when hungry, knows what it is to experience misery, and feels fear and great loneliness: “he burst into an agony of childish grief as the cottage-gate closed after him . . . and a sense of his loneliness in the great wide world sank into the child’s heart for the first time” (23-4). Dickens further assists the reader to ‘see’ Oliver as a real life child by associating him with popular psychology. At Rose Maylie’s Oliver feels safe and falls into a peculiar waking sleep only to catch a glimpse of Monks and Fagin at the window. At first he thinks he is trapped in a nightmare, but the terror is
“impressed upon his memory as if it had been . . . set before him from his birth”, and he wakes suddenly and realises it was not a dream (238-9). Paroissien says Oliver’s experience is Dickens’ oblique reference to a Dr. Robert Macnish, a well-known and highly respected Victorian doctor who delved into the psychology of dreams and first described this type of sleep phenomenon (101, 217). Dickens breaks into Oliver’s story to give a very precise description of this type of dream state; his narrator then resumes the story and Oliver experiences the sleep Dickens has just described (238-9). In giving Oliver this type of experience Dickens not only links him by covert means to a well-known and respected real life doctor and a real life experience with which his early readers would have been conversant, he also perpetuates the mimetic illusion of horror; the nightmare of Oliver’s old life intrudes into what he instinctively feels is a safe haven.

Oliver’s dream experience marks a turning point in the story. It heralds the plot involving Monks and which Dickens has not as yet revealed to the reader (238-9). So Monks does not appear until quite late in the story, but his inclusion allows Dickens to clarify the situation (227, 238, 356-9). Kindly Mr. Brownlow pressures the reluctant Monks to reveal the family relationships, the truths of inheritances and the reasons behind Oliver’s predicament and the truth behind Oliver’s plight (362). Mr. Brownlow deals with Monks and restores Oliver to his rightful inheritance (372-4). Dickens implies that once Monks reveals his part in Oliver’s plight, the reader should have instinctively known that there was something more to Oliver’s dire circumstances than merely being born into the workhouse. Monks’ sudden inclusion could be seen as an afterthought by Dickens. As Gill rightly points out, this factor and “the bewildering and complex
reasons for Monks’ hatred of Oliver” are structural flaws in the narrative (viii). In fact, the narrative is flawed by frequent omissions, late inclusions and other inconsistencies in the plot. As Gill says, the novel which began as “a topical satire on the workhouse system and the role of the 1834 New Poor Law . . . became a moral fable about the survival of good, a romance in which a cheated orphan is restored to his inheritance” (ix).

According to John Waller, Dickens contributed to the view that “illegitimate offspring of gentle folk deserved greater esteem than the legitimate children of hardened parish paupers” (76). Dickens’ third person omniscient narrator reveals that Oliver is indeed quality by birth, but Dickens also reminds his readers that to be human is to be flawed—Oliver is illegitimate (18, 356-60, 372, 374). Oliver’s illegitimacy seems of little moment. Mr. Brownlow, an old middle-class gentleman, recognises “something” in Oliver’s face “that touches and interests” him (78). The gentle, middle-class, young woman Rose Maylie announces Oliver is “a child of a noble nature and a warm heart” (285). Although he is raised in the uneducated lower classes and has no-one of middle-class quality on which to model himself, Oliver’s diction and manners are, from the first, curiously that of an educated young man (69, 72). Waller finds Oliver is “a delicate and high-minded . . . with the manners of a son of a most distinguished gentleman” (246). Thus, Dickens implies that quality is goodness, and that quality will out. Waller says that “the theme of noble ancestry underpinned the entire plot of the novel. For it was Oliver’s decent parentage that made it believable for both Dickens and his readers that a low-down work’us boy could have resisted the blandishments of Fagin’s clan of pickpockets and thieves” (246). Kaplan says that in the “strongly patriarchal, Bible-
driven culture” of Dickens’ era, “economics and morality neatly dovetailed” (xi). The implication is that in Dickens’ era the middle classes, being economically sound, were also considered to be morally sound.

Kaplan writes that what actually saves Oliver “is a Victorian novelist’s and his culture’s residual faith in the ultimate triumph of goodness on earth and in heaven”; and he adds that in Oliver Twist, as in all Dickens’ novels, “vice is punished and virtue is rewarded” (ix). Thus, Dickens kills off the evil criminals and attempts an ideal solution to Oliver’s problems, but the picture he creates is lacking in substance. Strangely, Monks proves to be Oliver’s half-brother and the merciful Rose proves to be the long lost sister of Oliver’s dead mother, Agnes, who was “weak and erring” (374). When Mr. Brownlow and the reluctant Monks reveal the truths of these relationships, “a father, sister, and mother were gained and lost, in that one moment” (361-2). True to his unifying techniques Dickens makes the sisters two sides of a whole; but the virtuous Rose is allowed to live happily and glorifies the memory of her fallen sister: “Within the altar of the old village church there stands a white marble tablet, which bears as yet one word—‘Agnes!’ ” (374). In a sense, the sisters are united in Oliver—he is the off-spring of one and the blood nephew of the other with whom he is also united in merciful, Christian love for the memory of his dead mother. Towards the end of the novel Oliver’s manner becomes increasingly un-childlike: Oliver throws “his arms about Rose’s neck” and declares “I’ll never call her aunt . . . that something taught my heart to love so dearly from the first! Rose, dear, darling Rose!” (361-2). Now, Oliver seems strangely adult: he “relinquishes” “Mr. Brownlow’s hand” and says to Fagin who is on death-row, “Let us say a prayer . . . upon your knees with me, and we will talk to morning”
Oliver is strangely Dickens himself, but in this instance his authorial intrusion is somewhat covert: “Oh! God forgive this wretched man!” (371).

Kaplan also says that “any satisfaction the modern reader may feel in the rescue of a small boy and the restoration of a moral balance is likely to be undercut by the reader’s sense throughout that what threatens Oliver is far more powerful and real than what saves him” (ix). The further Oliver is distanced from his damaging childhood, the more unrealistic he appears and the more realistically the evil Fagin is portrayed; thus, the uneasy dichotomy between the unrealistic and the realistic aspects in the narrative become increasingly noticeable. In this last third of the novel Oliver fades into Dickens’ romantic idea of the social ideal and becomes an aesthetic type, and hence loses his representational value. Likewise, the evil Fagin’s London world—Oliver’s old unhappy world—is realistically portrayed, but Oliver’s new happy world with Rose Maylie and Mr. Brownlow is idealised. All Dickens does is move Oliver in space from the streets of London to a comfortable but dream-like middle-class existence. Thus, in spite of the apparent ease of life for those in the middle classes, the workhouses and the streets of London and hence the problems of the lower classes and the damaging childhoods continue to exist, even if Oliver has escaped them.

John Bayley suggests that “Fagin’s world and that of Rose Maylie and Mr. Brownlow” are not intended by Dickens to represent “two real places that exist separately in life”, but, rather, two places that “co-exist in consciousness: they are twin sides of the same coin of fantasy” (quoted in Horne xl-xli). David Malouf points out that “reading is an interiorising activity”; “it is one of the ways . . . by which we come . . . into full possession of a place . . . in the
imagination” (36, 39). Thus, *Oliver Twist* is one world that consists of nightmare and dream—a literary landscape which belongs to the reader’s imagination. It could be suggested that by exercising his unifying techniques Dickens keeps his 1867 Preface promise to break the romantic illusion created by previous literature but at the same time explodes his own romantic idea of the social ‘ideal’: “all [Oliver’s] recent life had been but a happy dream” (355). G. K. Chesterton says: “As a nightmare, the work is really admirable. Characters which are not very clearly conceived as regards their own psychology are yet, at certain moments, managed so as to shake to its foundations our own psychology” (quoted in Horne xli).

James Joyce: *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

Joyce’s stream of consciousness novel *Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man*, uses the thought stream of a single character, Stephen Dedalus. Through Stephen, Joyce shows the relationship between the damaging childhood and the practices of 20th century Catholic Ireland, and exposes the Irish religion, language, and nationality as oppressive forces that restrain the young, aspiring artist. Morris Beja reports that Joyce said he hoped, in writing the novel, to become “one of the writers of this generation who are perhaps creating at last a conscience in the soul of this wretched race” (18). Joyce’s novel called for a change in the way literature was viewed and for modernisation in the nation’s
thinking and interpretation of education. Harry Levin says that Joyce’s book is a pedagogical novel (“The Artist” 86). In his collection of responses to Joyce’s work, in the beginning of his casebook Beja includes early criticisms of Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man: it “insists on aspects of life which are not ordinarily mentioned” (20); it represents “a joyless projection of adolescent agonies and morbidities” (21); it is “formless, unrestrained, and ugly things, ugly words . . . it is too ‘unconventional’ ” (74); “the irreverent treatment of religion in the story must be condemned” (77). Joyce’s book broke taboos and brought accepted practices into question. Beja says Joyce’s work “is still dangerous and revolutionary, and is likely to remain so” (29). Literary tradition, Ireland, and the Church rejected Joyce’s novel, and in so doing refused to acknowledge Stephen and his damaging childhood.

In accordance with his aesthetic theories, Joyce’s book allows three distinct yet progressive stages—Stephen the baby grows into the boy who grows into the young man. Joyce says that “the past assuredly implies a fluid succession of presents” and that the artist seeks “to liberate . . . that which is their individuating rhythm, the first or formal relation of their parts” (quoted in Beja 41). Thus, in one respect, the work is Joyce’s demonstration of his aesthetic theories; he gives his theories substance by embodying them in Stephen who develops as an individual and as an aspiring poet. Thus, Joyce writes his novel on two levels, the Bildungsroman and the Kunstlerroman; and attempts to combine them in a single character. However, in the first half of the novel the Bildungsroman is more in evidence than the Kunstlerroman, and as the story continues the Kunstlerroman takes over and the Bildungsroman element weakens until the presentation of Stephen as a flesh-and-blood boy, and the
realism of his damaging childhood, is replaced with a young romantic idealist. In a covert way, Joyce works his aesthetic philosophies into the Christmas passage where Stephen is left sitting terror-stricken in front of the beauty of the fire and the setting. At this stage, Stephen is unaware of his aesthetic potential; hence Joyce makes Stephen’s artistic development implicit by employing orthodox symbols that fit happily with the scene and with what is happening to carry the novel’s deeper themes of aesthetic philosophy and artistic development. In this way, Joyce brings the causes of Stephen’s damaging childhood into sharp focus and colours the entire story. Joyce moves his modernist text away from the traditional linearity by relying heavily on the structural support of a series of recurring motifs that act as linking devices which carry the story and its themes forward in an unusual stream of consciousness writing which involves a variety of techniques, devices, disparate elements, and shifts in stylistic form. By doing this, Joyce creates wide gaps in the narrative which disrupt the narrative flow of his text. Erwin R. Steinberg says that the “emphasis on ‘the teeming multiplicity of objects and relations’ in the stream of consciousness raises many problems” (Stream of Consciousness and Beyond 17). Joyce’s methods make it necessary for even the most literate reader to peruse the novel two or more times in order to gain some understanding. Robert S. Ryf says “symbolist literature needs to be reread” because “with each new reading, new awarenesses produce new meanings” (13). Ultimately, Joyce does not bring either the Bildungsroman or the Kunstlerroman to fruition; Stephen is an aesthete who merely contemplates artistic freedom. He does not actually develop into a creative artist, and hence never actually escapes his damaging childhood. Hugh Kenner says: “Country, church, and mission are an inextricable unity, and in rejecting” that which seems
“to hamper him, [Stephen] rejects also the one on which he has his heart set” (“The Portrait in Perspective” 134). Thus, Joyce leaves his reader with the sense that the work and Stephen are ‘unfinished’. For the writer who aspires to craft a work that is rich in meaning and based on the damaging childhood, Joyce’s stream of consciousness novel can be used as a model in that it sets precedents—unusual techniques and speech conventions, and the combining of diverse elements and genres, for instance—and offers a treasure trove of methods from which to choose. But to fully adopt Joyce’s methods, and attempt to bring together differing genres and so many diversified components and elements and present them as a supposedly unified whole in a single entity, could result in a work that sits awkwardly with the reader.

Joyce’s innovative techniques make it difficult to place his modernistic novel. Early critics are undecided: some say it is “pseudo-autobiography” (quoted in Beja 75-9). Levin, a more recent critic, says Joyce’s novel is a thinly disguised “literal transcript of the first twenty years of Joyce’s life” but that it is “more candid than other autobiographies . . . distinguished from them by its emphasis on the emotional and intellectual adventures of its protagonist” (“The Artist” 86). Beja stresses that Stephen Dedalus is not James Joyce, but says that Stephen and Joyce share a great many attitudes and experiences (25-6). Levin says that “the theme of the novel is the formation of character . . . and it falls into that category which has been distinguished . . . as the Bildungsroman. The novel of development, when it confines itself to the professional sphere of the novelist, becomes a novel of the artist, a Kunstlerroman” (83); he finds that the Kunstlerroman “is the only conception of the novel that is specialized enough to include” Joyce’s stream of consciousness book (84).
According to Porter Abbott, stream of consciousness writing was new to the literary world in Joyce’s time, and was used by other modernist writers; one of whom was Virginia Woolf (71-2). Brief consideration of Woolf’s approaches and her Freudian perceptions of potentially damaging phases possible in a child’s developing psyche may help to distinguish Joyce’s handling of the damaging childhood. In Woolf’s To the Lighthouse, focalisation and voice shift readily from one character to another. Woolf colours her characters’ thoughts with a dream-like quality and uses her art to create an impressionistic picture of life. Thus Lily Briscoe’s thoughts show that, to her, modern impressionist art depicts life as a blurred canvas and a vision (191-2). Just as the characters in the book peer over Lily’s shoulder to observe her symbolic painting, so too does the reader observe the characters and listen to their thoughts as they symbolically drift through life. Steinberg says Oscar Wilde once wrote that “The artist is the creator of beautiful things. To reveal art, and conceal the artist is art’s aim” (Stream of Consciousness and Beyond 258). The only artists actually revealed in Woolf’s novel are those characters who are by nature themselves artistic; yet one is aware of Woolf herself as she brings the reader to sense the inherent darkness within the human psychology and the complexities of family relationships. In the novel Lily Briscoe senses a shadow over Mrs. Ramsay and her little son and feels the need to paint it into her painting (51-3). The implication is that there is something very dark and ugly within the Ramsay family’s private lives, within each of their psyches (177-8). The reader discerns that these dark shadows are damaging to a child’s psychological formation, but also learns that resolution is achieved naturally by the child’s growing psychological maturity. For example, from the age of six James wants to kill his father for coming between himself
and his mother (9-10, 38); at sixteen years of age James has the sudden
realisation that it was not his father he wanted to kill but rather the “black
shadow” in his own mind—shades of being united with his mother in hatred of
his father (170-6, 189-90). Thus, true to Woolf’s Freudian psychology, without
being consciously aware of his Oedipus Complex James naturally resolves his
conflicts in late childhood. This is not the type of damaging childhood that
Joyce’s Stephen experiences. Joyce’s concerns are with external forces; namely,
the damage that the oppressive Irish system inflicts upon the child and the
developing artist and his creativity. Unlike Woolf’s characters, Joyce’s Stephen
does not symbolically drift through life; in accordance with his aesthetic theories
Joyce makes Stephen’s presence immediate and physical. Levin quotes Joyce:
“The simplest epical form is seen emerging out of lyrical literature when the
artist prolongs and broods upon himself as the centre of an epical event”
(Essential 27-8). From the very beginning of the novel Stephen broods upon
himself and his own predicament. He is weighed down under the damaging
extremes of religious pseudo-morality (34-6, 43-4); he struggles against the God
of his religion (97-9); and finally, he rejects the call of his religion in favour of
his dream to be an artist (228). Stephen says: “When the soul of a man is born in
this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight . . . nationality,
language, and religion. I shall try to fly by those nets” (184).

Joyce says that “the features of infancy are not commonly reproduced in
adolescent portrait” for “we cannot or will not conceive the past in any other
than its iron memorial aspect”; however, in a passage partially quoted above,
Joyce explains that the artist, in perceiving that the past “implies a fluid
succession of presents, the development of an entity of which our actual present
is a phase only”, seeks “to liberate from the personalised lumps of matter that which is the individuating rhythm”; thus, “a portrait is not an indentificative paper but rather the curve of an emotion” (quoted in Beja 41). Thus Joyce’s Stephen is the developing poet whose physical development—the baby within the boy within the man—can be likened to his and Joyce’s aesthetic theories of the formal relationship of part to parts in artistic development; what Joyce calls the lyrical in the epical in the dramatic—a critical theory which Levin says Joyce formed by adding personal touches to the “critical theory of Aristotle and Aquinas” (“The Artist” 85). Stephen never achieves the dramatic stage; nevertheless, because he develops as an artistic individual, he symbolises Joyce’s aesthetic theories. Joyce, says Steinberg, “gives what is perhaps the best description of his method when . . . he describes the dramatic artist as one whom, ‘like the God of creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork’ ” (Stream of Consciousness Technique 17). So, even though Stephen is not Joyce, Joyce and Stephen are at once the ‘artist’ mentioned in the title; together, they are the developing artist who experiences a damaging childhood under Ireland’s oppression, and the consummate artist trying to break away from old traditions in order to gain the right to develop creative art in a new direction.

Joyce’s use of person in narrative complements each stage of Stephen’s physical and spiritual development. In order to impress upon the reader the subjectivity of baby Stephen’s perceptions of himself and the world, Joyce introduces Stephen’s world in third person narrative which nevertheless contains an implied element of first person and a small degree of second person: “When you wet the bed, first it is warm, then it gets cold. His mother put on the oilsheet.
That had the queer smell” (7); at this stage Stephen is not yet able to see himself as a separate entity. On the second page of the narrative, when Stephen has grown into a little boy, Joyce smoothly elevates the element of first person in the third person to indicate Stephen’s growing awareness of his own entity. As Stephen continues to develop Joyce gradually increases his use of first person to elevate the Kunstlerroman. At the end of the novel Joyce uses the first person point of view for Stephen’s diarised thoughts which are a form of abstraction. Prior to this, Stephen says: “the personality of the artist passes into the narration itself . . . impersonalizes itself” (194). Herein lies a paradox: through his innovative use of language and Stephen’s artistic development Joyce attempts to give his aesthetic theories concrete form, and hence, through his diarised thoughts Stephen’s personality does “pass into the narration itself”; yet, at the same time, Stephen’s diarised thoughts apply only to himself, and hence his personality does not “impersonalize itself”. About the novelist of the realistic novel Levin says: “The forces which make him an outsider focus his observation upon himself. He becomes his own hero” and “the background takes on a new importance for the influence on his own character” (“The Artist” 83).

Joyce’s stream of consciousness techniques allow him to hold the reader close to Stephen and his damaging childhood, and at the same time provide the distance which Porter Abbott says is necessary because it “affects the extent to which we trust the information we get from the narrator” (189). By giving Stephen the symbolic surname Dedalus, Joyce associates Stephen with myth and the obscure arts, and with flight from oppression; thus Stephen’s name at once implies great distance and aesthetic development, and is, therefore, symbolic of the action necessary for Stephen to escape Ireland and hence the ‘damaging
Yet, at the same time, Joyce limits the reader to one perspective, one thought stream—Stephen’s. Even though the voice shifts at times, as in the priest’s long monologue, focalization and point of view does not shift throughout the narrative; Joyce makes all the voices ultimately relate only to Stephen’s point of view. Thus, in determining that his story can only be seen and heard from one angle Joyce forces the reader to climb inside the mind of a single person who experiences a damaging childhood which impacts upon the protagonist psychologically.

Levin points out that Joyce’s inclusion of differing genres allows him to use the novelist’s “more normal procedure of applying the methods of art to the subject of reality”, and the Kunstleroman procedure of applying “the methods of realism to the subject of art” (“The Artist” 84). In fact, Joyce uses these procedures together to the point where it is almost as if the reader is involved in a type of film action wherein the reader is a private inner ‘ear’ on Stephen’s thought stream, and sees events through Stephen at the moment of happening. What Porter Abbott says about narration on screen and stage, could, in a sense, be applied to Joyce’s methods: the “narration is most frequently voice-over narration in which” a narrating voice is “heard in tandem with imagery which is often conveying in its own way incidents of the story” (72). In Joyce’s novel, as with dramatic action which uses ‘voice-over’, the narrating voice fades from the viewer’s awareness as a separate voice because it shares, to use Porter Abbott’s words, “the sensory arena with the visual” (72). The difference is that in film the narrating voice is heard by the viewer’s ‘outer’ ear whilst at the same time being absorbed along with the visual stimuli into the viewer’s consciousness, and in Joyce’s novel the narrating voice is read by the reader’s ‘inner’ ear whilst
being unified in the consciousness with the verbal imagery and processed at once in the imagination. Thus, by using techniques normally reserved for autobiography together with novelists’ techniques, Joyce increases the mimetic illusion that Stephen and his damaging childhood are real.

Cookson asks: “How do you assess the agonies of childhood? How do you go about putting them over? . . . as a child you have as yet acquired no words to fit the pain . . . All you can do . . . is feel and protest through tears” (81). In Joyce’s novel the very young Stephen battles his feelings and tries to hold his tears in check; he has not as yet developed the skills for reasoning and expression that will enable him to put his fears or his pain into words (12). Joyce does not try to discuss or describe or assess Stephen’s pain. Rather he uses Stephen’s thought stream and childish utterances to build a picture of his agony, and because Stephen is the centre of his own universe the reader accompanies him on his experiences. Joyce’s use of language creates rhythms, word pictures, the illusion of sensory and visual stimuli, and vivid images that convey a sense of the young child’s confusion and fear; in this way Joyce heightens the quality of pathos and the emotive and ethical elements within the narrative and draws upon the reader’s emotional responses. The reader learns that Stephen is an individual who does the things normal to many small children: “he heard the noise of the refectory every time he opened the flaps of his of his ears. It made a roar like a train at night. And when he closed the flaps the roar was shut off like a train going into a tunnel” (12). Through Stephen’s thought stream and focalisation the reader hears the ‘pick-pack-pock-puck’ of the cricket ball and the ‘swish’ of the descending pandybat (38, 46). Levin says “Joyce’s treatment of childhood is unrelieved in its sadness” (“The Artist” 84).
The damaging childhood narrative inevitably brings with it the problem of the inarticulate suffering child’s self-pity which can alienate the reader. Joyce’s stream of consciousness techniques offer solutions. By taking the reader into Stephen’s immediate thought stream, Joyce causes his reader to accompany the growing Stephen in his questioning of traditions and values, keep pace with his developing powers to reason and articulate, and travel with him on his journey into aesthetics; that is, by developing the growing Stephen as a serious young aesthete, and showing that Stephen’s sole interest is to become an artist at any cost, Joyce replaces Stephen’s damaging childhood and hence the damaged child’s self-pity with a romantic idealist—Joyce uses Stephen as a literary demonstration of his own aesthetic philosophies. At the same time, the reader experiences the lyricism and the various rhythms in Joyce’s narrative and becomes aware of Stephen’s innate creativity long before Stephen is conscious of it himself. When he is a young boy Stephen’s language follows a conventional speech pattern, and his meanings are clear; for example, unable to do his lessons because his glasses are broken, he is unfairly punished and complains to the rector: “But I told him I broke them, sir, and he [still] pandied me” (52). Then, as he grows, Stephen’s developing maturity is marked by his diarised thoughts in which his thought stream language is ambiguous: “21 March, night: Free. Soulfree and fancyfree. Let the dead bury the dead. Ay. And let the dead marry the dead” (224). The reader is privy to these diarised thoughts which are, in one sense, innovative languages new to Stephen and new to literature, and which challenged the accepted traditions of Joyce’s time. In this way, the inarticulate suffering child is outgrown and left behind in favour of a new, creative form of ‘thought’ language that ‘grows’ from Stephen’s
developing maturity and which now assumes the focal point in the writing. Thus, Joyce overcomes the problem of the damaged child as the focal point in the writing and simultaneously deals with the problem of the self-pitying child which might otherwise alienate the reader. The more mature Stephen’s diarised thought stream reveals that, through the creativity of art, many problems are resolved: “16 April: Away! . . .” ; “26 April . . . Welcome, O life!” (227-8).

It could be asked whether the novel is a reformist version of the damaging childhood narrative, that is, whether Joyce aims to induce indignation and a desire for social change in the reader. But as Levin points out, Joyce is commonly remembered not as the “uncreated conscience of his race”, but as “a winged figure poised for a break with the dominating forces in his background” (Essential 10). Levin also points out that Stephen’s “cry, ‘non serviam!’ is his protest against Ireland’s condition of servitude”, and that “with the self-dedication of the priest Stephen took the vows of the artist” (13). Thus, Joyce is not a socio-political reformist as was Dickens, rather he is an innovative modernist who favours stream of consciousness writing as a method to free himself as an artist, and hence his reader, from the restraints of tradition. It could be argued that this makes Joyce a champion of individual self-enfranchisement. Levin finds that Stephen battles “against the squalor of his life and against the riot of his mind” at school, and at home is baffled by “his own futile isolation” and “feels that he stands to his parents and siblings ‘rather in the mystical kinship of fosterage, foster child and foster brother’ ” (“The Artist” 89, 92). Stephen is confused by his family. He returns from school to discover that they are living in reduced circumstances and spends his prize money on their needs; but after accepting his ‘gifts’, Stephen’s mother berates him for squandering his
money (89-90). Levin also finds that Stephen’s father is the “embodiment of Dublin”: “Like Sean O’Casey’s Paycock, with all his amiable failings, he is Ireland itself” (“The Artist” 92). Levin then adds that “the misrule and confusion of his father’s house”, symbolised by a “series of moving vans” and poverty, “comes to stand in Stephen’s mind for the plight of Ireland” (87, 92). If, as Levin suggests, Stephen’s ‘father’s house’ symbolises the ‘plight of Ireland’, then the way in which his mother treats him is symbolic of Ireland’s treatment of modern, creative art and the artist behind that art. As he grows Stephen becomes increasingly aware that the expectations placed upon him by others are soul-destroying, and will destroy him as a writer; so he determines his own path in life: “I will not serve that in which I no longer believe whether it call itself my home, my fatherland, or my church: and I will try to express myself in some mode . . . as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defence the only arms I allow myself to use—silence, exile, and cunning” (222). Thus, by the end of the book Stephen’s objectivity, an escape hard won from the child’s suffocating subjectivity, can serve as an ideal for all young aspiring Irish creative artists. Thus, Stephen brings the reader to an understanding that Joyce’s novel is focused on the need for a creative consciousness and is not a reformist version of the damaging childhood narrative. Levin says that Joyce’s “original mode of expression . . . can help us grasp a new phase of experience” (Essential 9).

Joyce uses orthodox symbols as recurring motifs that act as linking devices. On the first page of the novel, the very young Stephen notes that Dante owns two brushes which reside together in her press. One is red for Michael Davit, and the other is green for Parnell (7). Thus, these two brushes, the red and
the green, at once symbolise art and the opposing forces in Ireland. On the same page of the narrative, Stephen misbehaves, and unable as yet to articulate his fear, he hides under a table and is told to apologise; “if not”, sings Dante, “the eagles will come and pull out his eyes . . . Apologize, / Apologize, / . . . ” (7-8). Thus, Joyce uses complementary opposite colours as symbols that link Stephen’s fear and the underlying cause—Ireland’s religious-political-national stance—with the beauty of high art. These entangled themes are brought to the fore when Stephen attends his first Christmas dinner with the adults and notes the ivy which has been cut from the vine and intertwined in the chandelier (25). Ivy is the colour of the brush for the disgraced and exiled Parnell, and hence, in one aspect, a symbol for division and separation. The light in which the ivy is intertwined could be seen as a symbol for enlightenment; looked at in this way, the two objects together form a symbol which foreshadows Stephen’s developing creativity, and his later consciousness of the need to escape Ireland’s oppressive influences in order to fulfil his calling as a creative artist. In the same breath as noting the ivied light, Stephen notes the “great fire, banked high and red”, which “flamed in the grate” (25). Joyce implies that this fire is beautiful and symbolises the good things in a boy’s life: “the warm heavy smell of turkey and ham and celery rose from the plates . . . and the great fire was banked high and red in the grate and the green ivy and red holly made you feel so happy” (28). But over Christmas dinner a terrible fight about Ireland’s religious-political matters breaks out between his father and Dante—the owner of the red and green brushes—and leaves Stephen terror-stricken (25-37). Thus, the Christmas passage links art and beauty and terror together, clarifies the Irish factor as the root cause of Stephen’s damaging childhood, and foreshadows the more mature
Stephen’s artistic intentions. The Christmas passage elevates the narrative’s pervading atmospheres of beauty and poignancy and fear to the point where everything that happens to Stephen both before and after seems to take its cue from this one incident.

Joyce’s imagery and symbolism link the Christmas fire with a much earlier fire which, even though it features in the first part of the novel, does not gain full meaning until the Christmas passage is read. In the earlier passage, as the young Stephen lies ill in the school infirmary at Clongowes Wood his fevered mind connects the leaping reflections of the infirmary’s fire with the rhythm of waves; this picture dissolves into his fear of dying and becomes mixed with his nightmare about Dante in a green and maroon velvet dress and the death of Parnell (24-5). The implied rhythm in the fire’s reflections is picked up by the lyricism of the narrative and Stephen’s thoughts; this word picture symbolises the young Stephen’s natural talents for poetry and foreshadows his calling to creative art, and carries forward the novel’s theme of beauty-fear. Joyce repeats this motif in the final third of the book when the almost grown Stephen is at university; the Dean acknowledges that Stephen is an artist, and after saying that the “object of the artist is the creation of the beautiful” questions Stephen on “what the beautiful is”: “This fire before us . . . will be pleasing to the eye. Will it therefore be beautiful?”, and Stephen answers “In so far as it is apprehended by the sight, which I suppose here means esthetic intellec tion, it will be beautiful . . . In hell however it is an evil” (169). In this instance, Joyce links the theme of beauty-fear with aesthetic philosophy. The symbolism in this third and final fire is given impetus because it is prefigured by the two preceding fires; but it is the central fire which provides the link between the first and third fire and hence the
novel’s themes of the damaging childhood and the developing artist, and hence the theme of beauty-fear. Kenner says that in Joyce’s novel “the controlling emotion is fear” (“The Portrait in Perspective” 137). The more mature Stephen comes to understand that he fears not the tangible but the intangible, and says: “I fear many things . . . I imagine . . . that there is a malevolent reality behind those things I say I fear” (219). At the close of the novel Stephen is still fearful, but his fear has changed to a fear of the future as an artist (228). Thus, this controlling emotion colours the entire novel with a sense of impending doom and hence is inseparable from the damaging childhood and the lyricism in the writing of the novel and, therefore, from Stephen as a developing artist and hence Joyce’s aesthetics. Frank O’Connor says Joyce’s aesthetic theories relate “the development of the senses to the development of the arts” (“Joyce and Dissociated Metaphor” 120). Thus, the Christmas passage forms the central pivot of the novel.

Stephen does not consciously know that he is an artist until he reaches late adolescence. As a baby he feels the rhythm in his mother’s music and responds by dancing and singing; but behind the joy is the presence of his father and fear (7). When he is a small frightened boy lying ill in the school’s infirmary the lyricism in his thoughts parallels the rhythms of the fire’s reflections (24-5). Going by Joyce’s theories, these incidents could be seen as poetry in its most basic form. Then, when he is almost grown and has expressed his aesthetic theories, “the verses passed from his mind to his lips, and murmuring them over, he felt the rhythmic movement of a villanelle pass through them” (197). But there is fear, here, too. Stephen becomes confused and stops: “The heart’s cry was broken” and Stephen is fearful of failing to capture the moment and “losing
all” (197). At this point in the narrative the tone goes slightly over the top—what Levin would call “purple passage” (“The Artist” 89-90)—and escalates until it reaches new heights and becomes recognisable as poetry: “A bell beat faintly far away. A bird twittered; two birds, three. The bell and the bird ceased: and the dull white light spread itself east and west, covering the world, covering the roselight in his heart” (197). Earlier, Stephen says rhythm “is the first formal esthetic relation of part to part in any esthetic whole or of an esthetic whole to its part or parts or of any part to the esthetic whole of which it is a part” (187). He explains that “Beauty expressed by the artist’ awakens or induces an esthetic stasis, an ideal pity or an ideal terror, a stasis called forth . . . by what I call the rhythm of beauty”; and he says that art is an artist’s attempt to express “an image of the beauty we have come to understand” (187). Thus, Joyce delivers his theories of literary form through Stephen’s thoughts and mouth as poetry in the making (193).

Joyce makes a number of shifts in stylistic form in the writing of the novel, and in so doing creates gaps in the narrative which create difficulties for the reader. Porter Abbott says these wide gaps “are often a distinguishing feature of modernist” texts which, in the “movement away from the traditional linearity”, rely heavily on “the structural support of motifs” (92). Sometimes Joyce’s narrative takes the stylistic form of staged action—as in the football game in the playground of Clongowes (9); sometimes the narrative takes the form of prose—as in when the family are on the move for the first time in Stephen’s awareness (60); sometimes the lyricism in Joyce’s novel reaches new heights through Stephen’s thoughts and becomes recognisable as poetry (197, 202); and sometimes the writing takes the formal tone of a lecture—as in when Stephen
delivers his aesthetic theories (192-4). These shifts in style invoke atmospheres that lend a sense of mystery to the narrative. One example is the conversation between the adolescent Stephen and his peers wherein Stephen expounds his aesthetic hypotheses. This conversation invokes a sense of the mysteries of the spirit of beauty in art but carries the atmosphere of a courtroom rather than the jovial atmosphere of a conversation between school friends (215-23). Almost before the reader is fully aware that this ‘conversation’ has ended, Joyce cuts to Stephen’s diarised thoughts (223). Then there are the priests’ long gloomy monologues (100-14, 117-24). The superior style of the first sermon is delivered in holier-than-thou tones and creates a threatening atmosphere which chops suddenly into the lighter tone of schoolboy banter: “-Shut up, will you. Don’t make such a bally noise” (98); and the heavy, depressing atmosphere created by the priest’s admonishing tone in the second sermon plays against the prose style of the sinner-confessor and the poignant atmosphere created by Stephen’s agonising (124). Levin says that “Joyce’s two masters in prose were Newman and Pater. Their alternating influence would account for the oscillations of style” in Joyce’s novel (“The Artist” 89-90).

Since the novel is at once a Bildungsroman and a Kunstlerroman Joyce’s “oscillations in style” could be a personal part of his stream of consciousness techniques. Joyce’s narrative styles keep pace with Stephen’s physical and spiritual development: as a baby, he is simply “baby tuckoo” (7); as a small boy incarcerated in boarding school, his short answers are unembellished as are those of any small hurt child who is unable to communicate fluently (8-16, 49). Sometimes Joyce uses quoted stream of consciousness which includes interior monologue; Stephen, the damaged, confused, but imaginative child sits at his
desk and thinks “God could call him now . . . before he had time to be conscious of the summons. God had called him. Yes? What? Yes?” (115). Just as frequently, Stephen’s inner struggles are conveyed in narrated stream of consciousness: “He strode down the hill amid the tumult of sudden-risen vapours of wounded pride and fallen hope and baffled desire” and slowly breathed in “the rank and heavy air. –That is horse piss and rotted straw, he thought” (80). Later, Joyce introduces Latin to parallel Stephen’s aesthetic development: “Contrahit orator, variant in carmine vates” (162). This is further evidence that Joyce’s shifts in stylistic form could be intentional because, according to Don Gifford’s annotations, Stephen’s Latin loosely translates as, “The orator summarises; the poet-prophets transform [elaborate] in their verses” (228).

When Stephen matures Joyce adopts the stylistic form of diarising his inner language. Levin says that “When . . . the creative process began, the metaphor was calculated to change. For the irreducible substances out of which Joyce created . . . [were] nationality, religion and language” (Essential 10). Stephen’s diarised thoughts are sophisticated and delivered in elliptical sentences; thus the reader gains the impression that this thought stream is immediate. Stephen’s creator does not at first appear to mediate in his silent diarised thoughts; however, because the diarised thoughts carry some punctuation and a small element of third person, Stephen seems to think or see his thoughts as a thought stream narrative. Are Stephen’s thoughts actually being transcribed from the abstract to the concrete by him, is he transferring them from his mind to paper, and hence, are his thoughts to some extent distanced both physically and in time? If the answer is no, then Stephen’s creator is evident since the diarised thoughts are dated. Yet because parts of his diarised thoughts
are delivered in short snippets as interior monologue, it would seem as if
Stephen’s thoughts are their own internal narrator hence creator: “6 April: . . .
The past is consumed in the present and the present is living only because it
brings forth the future” (226). Thus, it would seem that Stephen is his own
creator and has emerged into independence. However, on the point of leaving
his old religion and Ireland and hence his damaging childhood, Stephen seems
confused, he prays to his old God who is also his new God: “27 April: Old
father, old artificer, stand by me now and ever in good stead” (228). Thus,
because he is not fully developed, Stephen never really escapes his damaging
childhood.

1V

Catherine Cookson: Our Kate.

Whereas there is abundant critical work to be considered on Oliver Twist and
Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, there has been no critical work published
on the third text to be considered here, Catherine Cookson’s Our Kate. To date,
there has been little or no critical work done on Catherine Cookson, and, as far
as can be determined, none at all on the perspective of the damaging childhood
in her writing.¹

¹ Professor Julie Taddeo of Maryland University, U.S.A., is attempting to put together
a book of essays on Cookson’s life and work (personal communication 30/1/2009).
Cookson’s *Our Kate* is a non-fiction work which deals with the author’s difficult and painful childhood. It also follows the development of herself as an artist, yet it would be misleading to call the work a *Kunstlerroman*. The book announces itself as an autobiography but nevertheless shares much with memoir. Judith Barrington says that in memoir “the voice is conversational” and retrospection is essential; memoir is a “hybrid form with both elements of fiction and essay” (20-2). Cookson employs the techniques of the novelist in order to heighten the quality of pathos and emotive content in the text, and hence make the work more appealing to the reader. Kathleen Jones comments: “Autobiography of any kind must always be suspect. It is a species of fiction—*Our Kate* more than usually so . . .” [Cookson] freely confessed that she had ‘used her novelist’s guile” (4). To use Porter Abbott’s words and apply them to Cookson’s work, *Our Kate* is “structured on the commonest of autobiographical masterplots: the effort to realize one’s identity” (137). The ‘Kate’ in the title is not Cookson herself but her mother; Cookson cleverly brings the younger Kate into focus whilst making ostensible use of the older Kate. By inviting the reader to consider the title and focus on ‘our’ Kate, and to a lesser extent on other characters whilst yet referring to herself in first person and by claiming ownership—‘I’, ‘me’, ‘our’ Kate, ‘me’ Granda, for example,—Cookson makes ‘our’ Kate’s story her own: “I was born when Kate was twenty-four and the life she was made to endure because of me would have driven anyone less strong . . . into the madhouse” (16-17). Cookson reveals that she was illegitimate and born into poverty in the lower classes in the early 20th century: she faced educational, legal, occupational, and religious barriers (130, 153-7, 180-1); and, in the community in which she lived, she suffered the agonies of social exclusion (52,
Cookson’s autobiography is deceptive. The apparent linearity of the storyline contains circular movements arising from her memories, and a series of pivots which are based on her crises of identity, and which keep the work’s three intertwined strands, the sources of the power of the writing, in the reader’s focus. The first source is the sense of enduring shame. The highly-strung, sensitive child’s consuming sense of shame pervades the entire work. Second, is Cookson’s use of the temporal. The book is coloured by her technique of centring the most damaging aspects of childhood on a highly imaginative child placed at about seven or eight years of age—all memories appear to radiate from, or be prompted by, the damaging incidents placed around that time. Third, is the regional aspect. Throughout the book the reader is mindful of the impressionable child’s emerging consciousness of region or place. It is necessary to attempt to tease out the strands one from the other in order to discuss how Cookson writes her memoir, but because these three strands are inextricably linked it is hard to avoid some crossing over. As a model for the writing of autobiography, Our Kate is a hybrid which offers a difficult challenge in that Cookson’s techniques make a complex work appear simple.

Our Kate is a powerful work in which the damaged child is forever within the narrator. Cookson writes that in adulthood: “I [suddenly] realised that a great deal of my mental trouble was that I was over sorry for this child . . . Yet the pity for her was embedded in my system and I couldn’t eradicate it just by willing it so, it would have to be worked out” by writing (222-3). Jones says Cookson was once asked if writing “autobiography was similar to writing fiction”; Cookson
replied: “No book that I have ever written has taken so much out of me as Our Kate . . . it wasn’t a pleasure to write . . . First [it was] bent on retaliation; secondly there wasn’t one happy memory in it” (312). It would appear from this, that Our Kate is purely subjective. Even so, Cookson’s Our Kate is intersubjective on both an individual and a collective level; Cookson’s history is not uncommon in society and, therefore, Cookson’s experiences and feelings are not uncommon either. Once given a literary voice a damaging childhood cannot remain private or entirely subjective. Indeed, Cookson did not intend it to be so; in Our Kate she says that by writing her book she was “going to get rid of the fear . . . and in doing it . . . help others” (231). In her versified dedication to the work, Cookson asks for the sake of all innocent children “who own no name” and hence “hide the shame of sin”: “that this law/ That breeds a stigma / . . . / Be changed” (7). She says it is not the children’s fault that they “carry the weight of guilt of censure and law”; rather, it is a flaw within society and the “good men” “who make laws for bairns to keep” (7). In this verse Cookson also begs understanding for herself: “in her mind / She is still a bairn / And the flyblow of a system” (7). Cookson begins her story with the disclosure that all she ever wanted as a child was “to get married”, to be “called Mrs, because our Kate wasn’t” (10). Throughout the book Cookson keeps this desire for a legitimate identity alive; and in the final third of the work, she mentions her marriage: “As I stepped through the door I thought, Katie McMullen is dead. . . . Long live . . . Mrs. Catherine Cookson” (204). Cookson writes that in late middle-age she acknowledged the cause of her shame: “There, I had said it, aloud and in public, this frightening word . . . that had brought . . . shame into my life . . . Not bastard . . . but the dictionary word, illegitimate” (251). This is
the point at which Cookson makes the reader aware that her complex work is fulfilling its stated purpose of seeking forgiveness in order to realise her identity (252-3). Thus, in making her private life public, Cookson’s book gives delicate issues a voice; the work brings to the reader, and hence society, personal and social and legal issues hitherto regarded as being too probing, too shameful, and too uncomfortable for open discussion. On this public aspect of autobiography, David McCooey writes: “Relational models of the self suggest that autobiography is a kind of transaction, a telling of others’ stories as much as one’s own” (1).

Cookson writes Our Kate in first person but includes some third person narrative. She employs a number of voices but focalisation does not shift. Everything that is said, everything that happens, is filtered through the eyes of the narrator, Katie McMullen-Cookson. The reader hears only the voice of Cookson relating chosen incidents that highlight the damaging impact of ‘our’ Kate’s adult actions on her childhood: “the hateful smell of whisky wafted from her . . . I wished she was dead” (49). In the book Cookson imagines a conversation between herself and the now dead Kate: “You always were fair, lass, always. And you haven’t put down half that happened . . . But because you’ve learned to forgive things will settle in you now” (252). A few pages earlier, Cookson says she needed Kate’s spoken forgiveness in order to forgive herself: “I, too, needed saving” (240).

Cookson’s autobiography gives the appearance that she is being honest, in seeming to reveal all as it happened, even though she imagines certain incidents or omits or alters certain facts. For example, the reader gains the impression that her grandmother, Rose, died when Cookson was about eight (109-113). Not so,
says Jones; Rose died when the child Katie was much older (81). Even so, since Cookson’s grandma did die when Cookson was a child, it seems feasible to use Porter Abbott’s words on an autobiography by W. N. P. Barbellion and say about Cookson’s ‘lie’ that “it is a falsehood which tells something of the truth” because, in the context within which it is used, “it reveals the intensity with which this autobiographer hoped to achieve some kind of tragic distinction” (135). The tragic distinction in this case is Katie McMullen-Cookson’s damaging childhood and feelings of loss of identity, both of which gave rise to her life-long feelings of shame. By being honest in one way, but by placing the child at the young age of about eight, Cookson’s memoir avoids alienating the reader as she might do if she used, say, an older, perhaps adolescent, more aware and self-pitying child. Cookson uses a number of methods to avoid alienating the reader; for instance, she sympathetically explains Kate’s actions as understandable, and, therefore, excusable, and also dwells on Kate’s good points (18-19, 25-8); and she begs the reader’s forgiveness by openly admitting that, without realising, she had indulged in self-pity over her damaging childhood—the implication here is that through her attitude she inadvertently invited added pain (222-3). By filtering her story and her agony of shame through ‘our’ Kate’s story and appearing to tell the ‘truth’ of the matter, she ties herself to Kate and hence makes their stories inseparable. To paraphrase Porter Abbott on autobiography and apply his words to Cookson, her narrative confirms the authenticity of the work “by keeping its narrative eye” focused on ‘our’ Kate and her actions as the direct cause of Katie McMullen-Cookson’s unhappiness: Kate “was bending down to me . . . she said, ‘Give us a kiss.’ . . . I . . . hissed at her, ‘I hate you. I do. I do’ ” (49). Possibly, Cookson’s purpose is to secure reader
understanding by binding her reality to the miserable life and poverty of the lower-class abandoned, unmarried mother and her illegitimate child; the fear of the workhouse was never far away: “Life in Harton Institution wasn’t, I think, far removed from the time of Dickens” (169). Further to this, Cookson wins reader pity for Katie McMullen because she has her speak and act just as would a small innocent child in the given circumstances. One example of this is the passage where a small, frightened Katie is being bullied and humiliated by a teacher in front of the class: Mass, she informs her teacher, was about a man called “Las-a-vis” [Lazarus]; Cookson writes: “My legs would at this point have a great desire to cross themselves because my bladder was answering my nerves. I would move from one foot to the other and rub my knees together” (71). The reader is led to take Cookson at her word and feel sympathy, distress even, for poor little illegitimate Katie McMullen. In these ways, Cookson shows the reader that she is a reliable narrator. David McCooey writes: “trust is an important feature of such autobiographical transactions. The element of trust required in a reader is also central” (1); and he quotes Gillian Whitlock to point out that this “production of truth and authority . . . is not so much an exercise in capturing the self as capturing the reader, and the notion of authority suggests a public domain within which to be authoritative” (2).

Katie McMullen-Cookson’s agony of shame is the most powerful element in Our Kate. As a small child, Cookson was ashamed of being born into a lower class family; the fighting, rowing McMullen family were “dominated by drink” and, hence, not respected in the community (22, 169). Even though there were other McMullen relatives who did not live in the same house as herself, Cookson says “I only felt responsibility for the people in our kitchen” (22). For Katie
McMullen-Cookson the kitchen was the “axis about which revolved the lives of those nearest me—my people, be what they may” (21). She says: “The kitchen was the hub of my life; it was the centre of the universe from which all pain and pleasure sprang” (79). It was the place in which she witnessed drinking and drunken brawls (48, 56, 99); the place where she experienced and witnessed unlawful sexual advances (41-2, 98); the place in which she asked about her illegitimacy: “What’s a bax . . . tard, Kate?” (62); the place where her battles with Kate ended in the shame and humiliation of being kept from school to fetch the drink or take things to the pawnshop (42-3, 79-82). Cookson writes of childhood that “nothing you can do at that age had the power to convey the feeling of being buried under a tremendous weight of fear, of humiliation and shame” (81). Thus, the kitchen locates and anchors Katie McMullen-Cookson’s feelings of shame. Throughout Our Kate, Cookson repeatedly turns her thoughts back to the kitchen—the place which, in the memoir, starts another run of memories.

Cookson adds weight to the work’s pervading sense of shame through the temporal aspect. She recalls that at three years of age, whenever she didn’t want to acknowledge someone or something, she imagined a picture on the wall—a picture which she never let go as she grew older (151, 154): “I would turn my face to a wall; and always I would see a picture, which became the focal point of my striving, because it presented to me a different way of life. It showed me a big house peopled by ladies and gentlemen . . . Of course, I was in the picture, dead centre” (13). In like fashion, she places herself in her autobiography at approximately seven or eight years of age, dead centre in her picture of the damaging incidents which marked her childhood: “Incidents in my childhood
keep moving in a circle round and round. When I focus on one and hold it I think it might have happened when I was seven and then I find it could only have happened when I was nine” (98). At each point of return to the child’s most damaging experiences, Cookson either implies or states the child’s age; for example, she says she was not aware of the shame surrounding Kate, and hence herself, until she was seven or eight years of age (12). At seven she was shocked to discover that ‘our’ Kate, whom she admits she adored, but who later made her “sick with apprehension”, drank: “[I comforted] myself with the thought that . . . she’s only our Kate, she’s not me ma, for I knew that the greatest disgrace in life was to have a ma who drank. . . . [it] made people talk about you” (29, 74). Then, “from when I was about eight there was scarcely a day of the week I didn’t go . . . for the beer . . . I became filled with shame at having to carry the grey hen . . . It was looked on in some quarters as a disgrace” (47). Thus, Cookson’s centring technique fixes the maximum damage to the impressionable child at a point in chronological time. At seven or eight years of age, even though she is not yet old enough to understand, Katie McMullen is not so young as to be unaware of what is going on (30-1, 62-3). With Cookson this appears to be the age of innocence, an age at which the highly strung, imaginative child is most vulnerable and therefore most easily damaged for life by adverse experiences. By using first person narrative and by keeping the narrative focus on ‘our’ Kate, Cookson makes her readers aware that they are dealing with living people. Certainly, a real-life situation which harms a young child is disturbing, uncomfortable, and unacceptable to society. Thus, since a child of seven or eight is young and innocent enough to have maximum impact on the reader’s sensibilities it would appear that Cookson intends to impress her reader
with a maximum sense of horror for the child’s situation. It does not matter if Cookson is vague about Katie’s true age; all that matters is that because of her centring technique, Cookson’s life-long feelings of shame reverberate throughout her book.

Each time Cookson’s narrative pulls the reader back to the kitchen or to the point of the young child’s stated or implied age the return prompts a new run of memories which reach out and expand in a circular movement to encompass the long-lasting effects of her damaging childhood. In this way, Cookson keeps the reader focused on Katie McMullen-Cookson’s damaging childhood and shame. Each of the memories centred in the kitchen or on the child’s stated age is particularly heart-rending and poignantly conveyed, and leads to reflection which then sparks further memories. For example, at seven years of age Katie McMullen learns from a playmate that: “your Kate’s your ma and she drinks, an’ . . . You haven’t GOT No DA, me ma says so” (30). About this, Cookson then says: “No one, unless he has been through a similar experience and has had the security of parents wrenched from him, can have any idea as to the force of this impact. How it shatters for always the whole world of childhood and reverberates through the rest of life” (30-1). Then, after describing what the sudden “feeling of fear of not belonging” does to a child, she returns to seven year old Katie McMullen’s feelings of rejection and a new type of shame: “This mad startling piece of news petrified me, yet sent my mind into a questioning dizzying strange world in which everybody’s name was changed. The feeling drove me into the lavatory . . . it was a wonderful place for musing” (30-4). Cookson recalls that here, in her “secret” world, she reasoned that “Our Kate couldn’t be me ma because she wasn’t married and you couldn’t be borned
without a da” (31-2). Next, she writes that as a child she filled in the gaps by playing a “pretence game” and creating a father for herself. She chose the family doctor: “He had brought me into this world” (33). This “game” eventually led to her being disgraced at school for telling lies (33-5). Cookson reflects that she must have chosen the local doctor because, she says, “he was a very attractive [youngish] man” and “he had a car and this . . . brought him into my picture on the wall” (33-4). Thus, Cookson’s centring of the temporal aspect has the effect of tying the narrative and the memoir’s central theme of shame together.

Cookson injects into Our Kate a penetrating atmosphere which reaches its zenith in a single incident. This incident marks the heart of the book. One Saturday afternoon when she was eight years old, Cookson says she found ‘our’ Kate in the kitchen and asked for her clean Sunday pinny; and, being only eight, she neither really understood nor questioned Kate’s quietly spoken “enigmatic” words: “It’s no use, you know, hinny” (117). Cookson says she did not wait for an explanation because “one of the girls in Phillipson Street was having a birthday party”; “I hadn’t been invited but I knew I would be . . . going to that party because hadn’t all my playmates been invited? There they were now . . . But . . . I might have been a brick wall for all the notice they took of me” (117). Determined to go to the party, little Katie McMullen refused to answer Kate’s call: “I went swiftly down the back lane . . . until I came opposite” the back door of the party house (117). Left outside alone, she tried to attract the attention of the party-goers: “I knew that if anyone saw me they would tell Mrs. X and she would . . . say, ‘Aw. Katie. Fancy me forgetting about you. Come on up, hinny.’” (118). Cookson writes that she thought she had been accidentally overlooked: however, she also implies that she knew she was being purposely ignored (116-
This contradiction gives rise to a sense of mystery. It would seem that little Katie somehow knew that she would not be accepted, and that she knowingly refused to acknowledge it. About Katie’s motives for wanting to go to the party, Cookson writes: “it was imperative I got into that party, because I had never been to a party except once when I was five” and “this party was different. It had been talked about for days . . . I had to get into that party” (117-118). Earlier, about another matter, Cookson said: “I wanted to be looked up to, respected, even envied” (13). The inference can be drawn that little Katie’s true reasons for wanting to go to the party were that she felt she could not be looked up and admired if she was not acknowledged and included.

Cookson makes her narrative at once specific and a mimetic presentation; that is, she does not limit herself and hence her reader to specific connections, she also allows a more generalised connection by commenting on children’s behaviour generally. Cookson says that when she was left standing outside the party house and ignored: “There descended on me a feeling of desolation, of aloneness, it wasn’t to borne” (118). Unable to express her needs in any other way, little Katie “ran across the back lane, pushed open the yard door, went up the stone steps to the staircase door and knocked” (118). The child whose party it was answered the door and said that her mother had forbidden Katie to join in because “Well, me ma says you haven’t got no da” (118). The reader is almost as winded by the party-child’s sudden pronouncement on the negative importance of Katie’s illegitimacy as was little Katie herself. Against her conscious will, eight year old Katie McMullen is brought to acknowledge hard reality: “I had been aware for some time that I had no da, but with that protective mechanism of childhood I had imagined that there was only me and our Kate
and the girls who had first enlightened me on this point in the secret” (119). Cookson does not forewarn her reader; along with Katie, the reader is shocked into awareness. Like Katie, the reader learns what is happening at the very moment it happens. Cookson writes: “I was no longer alone in my aloneness, for with me now was a concrete thing, it was hard and painful and its name was rejection and it was to gather to itself as time went on, shame, anxiety, remorse and bitterness” (118-119). Cookson immediately follows up the party-child’s cruel announcement with a brief reflection upon childhood in a broader sense: “Children need no preliminary lead-up to vital statements, they simply make them” (118). In this way, Cookson does not allow the reader to forget the stigma surrounding illegitimacy. Thus, Cookson uses the specific to draw her reader towards a more general connection. Robert Scholes and Robert Kellog say that “the autobiographer or historian seeks a pattern which drives him in the direction of generalization” (86).

The ‘pinny’ incident immediately gives rise to Cookson’s memory of herself as an aggressive older child and a moody adolescent. At this point in the narrative the poignant atmosphere suddenly collapses in the face of the older child’s self-pity which, says Cookson, “was developing fast a life of its own, an all-knowing desolate life, a negative life that told me there was nothing of any value, nothing worth striving for” (119-121). Here, Cookson allows an element of bitterness to creep into her narrative: “Kate did not know what my particular feeling was like. Whatever she had had her share of, it wasn’t the shame of having no da” (121). Thus, Cookson the articulate autobiographer instils her reader with a sense of the young child’s confusion and hurt then suddenly leaves the young child by translating her pain into the much older child’s
aggressiveness, and then translates that into the adolescent’s self-pitying outlook, and then rolls all that together into the young woman’s bitterness towards ‘our’ Kate. This is a prime example of Cookson’s centring technique.

Scholes and Kellog write: “In some narratives the author tries to control the reader’s response more fully than in others” (82). Cookson is certainly a controlling narrator. By using first person narrative in her highly sensitive, emotive memoir, Cookson engages her reader on a personal level. Cookson makes this interaction more possible because she uses ‘our’ Kate as a focus, and hence filters any of her own feelings or actions which could distance the reader. For example, in the ‘pinny’ incident: Cookson makes the reader party to the cruelty of the children with whom she grew up as she builds on the sense of poignancy in the narrative. True to her centring technique, by giving her illegitimacy as the reason for her exclusion from the party and tying the young child’s “riot of feelings” back to the earlier incident where an older girl first informed her that she was in fact illegitimate, Cookson ties the reader to her own awareness of shame, the cause of which is ‘our’ Kate’s actions, and the sense of which permeates the entire memoir. In a sense, Cookson controls her reader by creating Our Kate as a practical demonstration of how to assess, translate and convey the agonies of a damaging childhood; first, for each incident she creates a specific atmosphere—one that is most likely to cause the reader to react in a certain way; second, she limits the reader to one incident and its atmosphere at any one time; third, she causes each incident to give rise to the memory of a different incident with its own specific atmosphere. In this way, she manipulates the reader’s response to any given situation. The reader can only feel with little Katie, can only feel for the suffering child, can only absorb the atmospheres
which Cookson creates. Then, at the peak of the reader’s emotive response, Cookson presents the reader with a volte-face: she suddenly replaces the poignant atmosphere and hurt little child with the dark atmosphere of hopelessness of an aggressive older child, then replaces this with a self-pitying, whining adolescent, and then replaces that with a surly, bitter young woman (121). In this way, Cookson suddenly breaks the reader’s emotional attachment to the small sweetly-sad Katie by replacing her with a young woman whose attitude does not in any way invite or invoke reader sympathy; she suddenly replaces the reachable child with a young woman who is unreachable. Cookson writes: “this being had a kind of cold aloofness I couldn’t get at. It would not co-operate” (121). As well, wherever it is fitting, Cookson adds to each incident a small degree of highly pertinent adult reflection. Thus, Cookson hooks her readers in; then, when she has them exactly where she wants them and they are most unsuspecting, she pulls the rug out from under their feet. In this way, Cookson allows her readers to experience feelings similar to those experienced by little Katie; she controls her reader by holding back the punch-line, as it were. She does not tell her reader where she is going, she does not allow the reader to see what she leading up to; rather, she puts the reader through the process of experiencing swiftly changing highly-charged emotions and, at the same time, through the process of being suddenly cut adrift from innocent childhood, in order to bring the reader back full circle to ‘our’ Kate.

The third source of the power of the writing in Our Kate, regionality, ties the North of England to ‘our’ Kate and the masterplot—Cookson’s crisis of identity (133). Katie McMullen-Cookson undergoes a series of emotional crises because she cannot identify with her mother (22, 66, 220, 224, 229). Nor can she
identify with her unknown father other than in her imagination (18-19, 30-2, 48). Katie McMullen-Cookson’s crisis of identity is connected to every incident, and forms the basis of every memory; hence, crisis of identity sets the scene for the entire memoir. Cookson undergoes three agonising identity crises. The first is in childhood; at seven years of age Katie McMullen learns for the first time that she is ‘our’ Kate’s illegitimate daughter (30); and at eight years of age the horror of her illegitimacy and its accompanying rejection is brought home to her (118). This initial identity crisis sparks a second one; at thirteen or fourteen years of age Katie suffers a nervous breakdown, which, even though it coincides with a bout of physical illness, is itself precipitated by the shame of ‘our’ Kate and her own illegitimacy (132-6). Katie McMullen-Cookson suffers a third identity crisis in adulthood. This takes the form of recurring mental problems that stem from her childhood crises of identity, exacerbated by bouts of serious physical illness. Thus, the crisis that Cookson underwent in childhood gathered momentum in adolescence and precipitated a serious nervous breakdown in adult life: “Fear had been my companion since a tiny child. Hardly ever a day went past but I feared something, and the accumulation of all those fears was with me now” (214). She recovered, she says, because she openly and publically admitted to “being a Northerner and all this implied” (224, 251). Thus, Cookson’s crises of identity create three pivotal points in the memoir, all of which are temporally centred: one temporal centre plus one pivot for each of the three connecting stages of human life—childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. In this way, Cookson’s crisis of identity provides impetus for a narrative which stretches from early childhood to late adulthood. Every element and every character in Our Kate is connected in some way to Cookson’s damaging
childhood, so the dynamic, sequential elements in the narrative connect together to form the masterplot which drives the memoir. Cookson writes: “I had spent a lifetime trying to get away from my past, not realising the impossibility of getting away from oneself . . . through my early environment I was the epitome of the North” (244). Thus, regionality and the masterplot together confirm the narrative’s authenticity. At the beginning of her book Cookson writes: “I was born in Number 5 Leam Lane, at the bottom of Simonside Bank, Tyne Dock” (10). She draws vivid word pictures of the entire area, and recalls incidents involving several people who inhabited the place and whom she knew at first hand when she was a child (10-11); and, as well, she describes the ‘houses’ in which she lived (23-4, 10-26). Thus the aspect of region fixes and grounds Katie McMullen and her damaging childhood in the wider community of the North; hence, the aspect of region anchors the memoir’s pivotal elements and temporality and the child’s sense of ‘universe’ in place, and runs throughout the book on a parallel with shame. Cookson says that after her childhood piano lessons ceased because the instrument was returned “I went into words” (126). The desire to be a writer prompted her to seek an education (157, 185-6). She says: “I was born to write, [but] I knew that . . . I wouldn’t write a word that anyone would really want to read until I threw off the pseudo-lady and accepted my early environment, me granda, the pawn, the beer carrying, the cinder picking, Kate’s drinking, and of course my birth, for it was these things that had gone to make me” (224). Thus, the characters in her book speak in the dialect of the Geordie areas in which she grew up. Cookson explains how the poor worked the system by pawning goods, even something as essential as a “gully”, a bread knife, in order to live (22); that to be “mortallious” is to be rolling rotten with
drink (38); that “panhacklety” and “finnie-haddie” are dishes common to the northern areas—the smell and taste of which coloured her damaging childhood with a small sense of security (64); and she explains the Geordie differentiation between using the prefix ‘me’ to refer to those relatives living in the house, and ‘my’ to indicate relatives who live elsewhere (22). Porter Abbott says that when “passing back and forth between intentional and symptomatic modes of interpreting a text . . . the analysis serves the recovery of . . . the truth about the writer as she or he writes” (135). Our Kate clearly shows that the ‘truth’ about Cookson is that she is a ‘child’ of the North.

V

Frank McCourt: *Angela’s Ashes*.

*Angela’s Ashes*. McCourt’s memoir, is like Cookson’s autobiography only in that it seems to be straightforward but on a closer examination is quite complex in structure. The title indicates that the focus of the memoir is McCourt’s mother; but McCourt writes in such a way that causes the reader to see through the hardships suffered by Angela and focus on McCourt and his “miserable Irish Catholic childhood”. McCourt writes in a humorous tone, and after introducing the book from his present day self continues for the remainder of the work from the point of view of his younger, ever-growing self. The apparent linearity of the story-line is deceptive in that the book ends with the young adult McCourt docking in America and begins with an introduction by the older McCourt who
lives in America; thus, the story which ends with the author looking forward to a life of freedom from the damaging childhood, by implication turns back and meets up with the beginning in which the survivor McCourt introduces his damaging childhood. Thus, McCourt encapsulates his childhood—traps it in a bubble, as it were. In this way, McCourt cleverly conveys the truths of his childhood to his reader, and instils his reader with an understanding of existence in the Irish slums and a keen sense of horror for the miseries he personally endured as a child growing up in Ireland whilst at the same time distancing it from his present day reality by placing it in the past. Phelan says that McCourt conceived of memoir writing as involving the art of indirection rather than “the art of direct telling from author to audience”; and he adds that McCourt’s memoir has the “distinctive quality of the nonstandard technique” (67). Phelan further notes that in Angela’s Ashes “Identity and design are closely related . . . in part because of the technique. In one respect, the design of the narrative is a combination of memoir and Bildungsroman” (75). By incorporating the Bildungsroman into the design of his narrative, McCourt implies from the beginning that Frankie’s sufferings are part of a story of triumph.

McCourt, says Phelan, shows the miseries of a lower class Irish Catholic existence whilst yet revealing Frankie as a self-interested schoolboy: “the juxtaposition of Frankie’s explicit interpretations and evaluations and McCourt’s implicit ones . . . create a striking combination of comedy and pathos: we laugh at how much Frankie’s self-absorption distorts his understanding and evaluation, but we also recognize the horror of the conditions” (71). Phelan argues that Frankie’s “crossing from childhood to young adulthood” happens when he meets the terminally-ill Theresa Carmody “and has his first experience of sexual
“intercourse” which is also “his first experience of heterosexual love”: “Frankie’s pain when he perceives Theresa’s pain is empathetic and unselfish” (89-90). Thus, Phelan has it that Frankie’s relationship with the dying Theresa acts as the catalyst for his ability to empathise. Phelan also says that by channelling the narrative through Frankie’s focalisation, McCourt uses Frankie’s under-reporting, misreading, misregarding, and the unreliability in his straight-forward reporting to control “Frankie’s naïve narration” carefully but tacitly, and hence the reader’s interpretation and emotional response: “These signs of control suggest that . . . the implied author is sophisticated and clear-visioned, able to guide his audience to an understanding of his former self” and the horrific conditions under which he lived; and he adds that “the emotional and ethical effects of the [narrative] also depend on our awareness that we are reading memoir rather than fiction” (67-72). Phelan deals comprehensively with McCourt’s literary perspective of his childhood. It is not the intention here to repeat Phelan’s work, but to look at those areas which he either omits or gives only comparatively light treatment—McCourt’s use of symbols, and the causes of his agony, for instance—and to compare aspects of McCourt’s handling of the damaging childhood, such as the child’s feelings of guilt and shame, and loss of identity, to that of others dealt with in this paper.

_Angela’s Ashes_ reveals the root causes of the young Frankie’s agony to be, first, the extreme poverty suffered by himself and his family and by others living in like conditions; second, his growing awareness of the disgrace surrounding his family, and which later becomes a sense of shame; and third, the miseries that arise as a result of his mixed nationality, his religion, and his American-Irish accent. In _Angela’s Ashes_, McCourt’s childhood experiences are both like and
unlike those of the other children whose various damaging childhoods have been discussed in this paper. Both Dickens’ Oliver and McCourt’s Frankie experience life-threatening hunger, extreme poverty, and the lack of physical care—all those deprivations and hardships suffered by a poor child born and raised in the slums. Like all the children discussed previously, both are plagued with troubles beyond their control. But there is a marked mimetic difference between Dickens’ Oliver and McCourt’s Frankie. Compared to Frankie, Oliver as a character lacks conviction as a true-to-life child in today’s terms, rather he conforms more to a 19th century view of childhood—he is an unbelievably naturally good child who could only exist inside a fiction such as Oliver Twist. Conversely, like any real-life child, the young Frankie senses that certain events spell potential trouble for him, and he subconsciously tries to defend himself either by refusing to acknowledge his part in the trouble or by diverting attention away from himself, or by claiming to be confused as to why he should be punished. Like any small naïve child whose actions result in hurt to another, Frankie feels a sense of fear-induced guilt even though he is innocent of intentionally hurting another for hurt’s sake. One example of this is the playground incident where by his actions Frankie inadvertently hurts his brother Malachy and says, “Blood is bad. My mother will kill me” (19). By implication Frankie claims not to understand why he should be punished; he questions the lack of fairness in being sent to bed “in the middle of the day” (19). In another passage Frankie, child-like, tries to avoid having to apologise to ‘Freddie’ who, he implies, got his comeuppance because “He was trying to steal my Cuchulain story” (31-4). Frankie attempts to divert his parents’ attention away from the issue by leading them into a discussion on Freddie’s Jewish heritage (33). Somewhere between Frankie’s diversion tactics
and the frail “baby Margaret” the matter is forgotten, and Frankie happily goes
to talk to Freddie, not to apologise, but to satisfy his curiosity about a Jewish
Samson (34). At this stage Frankie only wants to avoid blame, and hence he has
a concept of guilt born from his instincts for self-preservation. Like McCourt’s
Frankie, Dickens’ fictional child, Oliver, is also concerned with self-
preservation. But not at any time does he experience feelings of guilt; he does
not know what blame or guilt is.

When McCourt’s Frankie is young, even though he experiences guilt, he
does not feel shame. Dickens’ Oliver does not feel shame either; in fact, Oliver
never develops a concept of shame. Everything that happens to Oliver is
external—thus he does not grow spiritually or emotionally. In Joyce’s novel the
child Stephen has a well-developed concept of shame: when he is sadistically
punished because his glasses are broken and he cannot read, Stephen cries “with
shame and agony and fear” and reasons that his treatment was cruel and unfair
(46-8). Joyce makes Stephen more believable as a ‘real-life’ child because he
instils him with the ability to feel shame. As well, because he has the power to
reason, Joyce’s Stephen grows spiritually (228). Cookson’s younger self, little
Katie McMullen, is weighed down by her feelings of shame but eventually
makes the decision to face her shame head-on. Thus, she, too, grows spiritually;
but being consumed by her overwhelming sense of self-pity, has to struggle to
do so (121, 252). In McCourt’s memoir, as Frankie grows he develops an
awareness of the shame surrounding his family’s poverty. Previously it has been
said that Phelan attributes Frankie’s spiritual development to his first sexual
relationship. This might be true in part. But from the perspective of the
damaging childhood it is Frankie’s growing awareness of the truth behind his
family’s impoverished circumstances and the resulting courses of action taken by his mother, which act as the main catalyst for Frankie’s inner growth.

The concept of shame in McCourt’s *Angela’s Ashes* is very different to that in Cookson’s *Our Kate*. The reader of Cookson’s memoir discerns that Katie, being overly sensitive, struggles to survive emotionally. McCourt’s Frankie unconsciously views his world with a certain type of humour. To a degree, he seems to be hardened by his outward circumstances but struggles to survive physically. Yet there is softness and gentleness within his make-up. This is evidenced by the overwhelming sadness in the scene where the body of little Eugene, who has just died as a result of slow starvation, lies alone in the bed: “It was dark in the room now except for the sliver of streetlight that fell on Eugene’s lovely soft silky hair” (84). Unlike Cookson’s Katie who feels deeply shamed by her illegitimacy, McCourt’s Frankie does not in any way feel shamed when he is informed by another boy that his too premature birth actually makes him a ‘bastard’ (254-255). Throughout McCourt’s memoir the notion of shame involves the character of the elder Malachy, but Frankie admires and loves his father despite the fact that he is an alcoholic and a ne’er-do-well (19). Never at any time is Frankie entirely unaware that his father is regarded as a disgrace: “Delia told him [the elder Malachy] he was a disgusting specimen but what could you expect from the North of Ireland” (18). Philomena, Frankie’s mother’s cousin writes to Frankie’s grandmother that Angela invited trouble by marrying the elder Malachy: “That shows you what can happen when you marry someone from the North for they have no control over themselves up there a bunch of Protestants that they are” (45). Frankie says: “Mam is telling Dad he’s a disgrace and why doesn’t he get out of the house altogether” (111). Then, when the
young Frankie is being made ready for his First Holy Communion his ‘Grandma’ spits on his hair, brushes it, and says: “You didn’t get that hair from my side of the family. That’s the North of Ireland hair you got from your father. That’s the kind of hair you see on Presbyterians. If your mother had married a proper decent Limerickman you wouldn’t have this standing up, North of Ireland, Presbyterian hair” (128). Implicit in Frankie’s grandma’s words is the biblical concept from Numbers 14:18 as echoed by Shakespeare in The Merchant of Venice: “the sins of the fathers are to be laid upon the children” (III.v.1-2). Earlier in the memoir Frankie reveals that the priest in Toome in Northern Ireland had said “he knew the McCourts, a fine family, good Catholics” (48). Thus, McCourt shows the reader how the Southern Irish view the Northern Irish; great as Malachy’s disgraceful behaviour is, his ‘sins’ are not so much his drinking and irresponsibility, rather his North of Ireland blood. To further this message, McCourt has Frankie note that his Aunt Aggie “pats the tears on her cheeks, and says, I don’t want nothing of Angela’s. I don’t want nothing that is half Limerick and half North of Ireland” (73). Frankie and his brother Malachy can no more understand the Northern Irish than they can the Southern Irish: they laugh at their Southern Irish grandmother’s ‘ye’ and are mystified by her devout Catholicism (49, 57-58, 74); and Frankie says of his Northern Irish father, “Dad frightens me with his och, och, och” (74). But he loves his father’s Northern Irish tales of Cuchulain and his mother’s Southern Irish songs (38, 54).

Each of the incidents that form McCourt’s damaging childhood can be seen as a symbolic reference to the Irish culture and religion as a whole; and, in turn, each of these elements can be seen as intrinsic to his damaging
childhood—take the Communion passage for an example (127-31). In using the Irish Catholic Church as a symbol of his damaging childhood McCourt also uses it as a symbol of physical need and a symbol of humbug—the bodily comfort the Irish seek is as non-existent as their apparent piety: “Limerick gained a reputation for piety, but we knew it was only the rain”; the church was the only dry place in city (12). McCourt’s humour highlights the irony of the situation. He shows how, in spite of the protection of the church, the cold and the damp and constant hunger were constant realities for Frankie and his brothers and the other children in the slums of Limerick. In one passage Frankie says Leamy’s National School provides the boys with a free lunch, a single small raisin bun, minus the raisins, and a small bottle of frozen milk so that they will not starve altogether (120); and in a later passage he says the men of the St. Vincent de Paul society sit under a larger than life crucifix and grudgingly give boots and useless medicines and miserly ration coupons to those who demean themselves by grovelling to them (230-234). In these ways, McCourt strongly links the Irish Catholic Church to his damaging childhood, and links that combination with the Irish slums as a symbol of the destruction of self-esteem and the soul, and hence keeps his damaging childhood in the reader’s focus.

When Frankie makes his First Holy Communion he says: “at last, I was a member of the True Church, an official sinner” (128). As he matures he ceases to look to the church. All it can do for him is to make him an official sinner—something which, once he has reached America, he discovers he can do for himself anyway: “Jesus I’m in heaven and there’s a knock on the door the priest Frank are you in there Frieda putting her finger to her lips . . . Father would you ever take a good running jump for yourself and oh God . . . I don’t give a
fiddler’s fart if the Pope himself knocked on this door and the whole College of Cardinals gathered gawking” (362). This soliloquy is preceded by one other; Frankie leaves for America and says: “I’m on the ship and there goes Ireland into the night and it’s foolish to be standing on this deck looking back and thinking of my family and Limerick and Malachy and my father in England and Roddy McCorley goes to die and Mam gasping Oh the days of the Kerry dancing with poor Mr. Clohessy hacking away in the bed” (359). Frankie McCourt’s soliloquies are reminiscent of Molly Bloom’s long interior monologue in Joyce’s Ulysses which Steinberg says uses a “thoroughly subjective . . . stream of consciousness technique” (Stream of Consciousness Technique 28). By adopting the speech convention of not using quotation marks in the memoir, and by making some concession to continuous thought stream pattern in Frankie’s soliloquies, McCourt allows the inference that he does indeed incorporate a variation of Joyce’s stream of consciousness into Angela’s Ashes. By introducing these sophisticated narrative devices into the last pages of his memoir to coincide with Frankie’s realisation of his dreams, McCourt indicates that his younger self has matured sufficiently to escape from the miseries of his Irish Catholic environment and has left his damaging childhood far behind—in fact, on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean (363-4). Frankie’s escape makes Angela’s Ashes a survivor’s cry. In the 1999 Angela’s Ashes film commentary McCourt says that he shared “the slum dwellers philosophy of life: you can survive anything, just do whatever it takes.”

In the book, Frankie McCourt is eleven years of age when his instinct for self-preservation begins to develop into a survivor’s vision. The catalyst for this initial development is his new awareness of shame. When he is eleven years old
Frankie first blames his mother’s initial shame on his father’s failure to realise his responsibilities as a family man, though without directing any bitterness of censure at the elder Malachy. McCourt uses a telegram boy to voice Frankie’s views of his own absent father’s failures: “He says he knows what ‘tis like to wait for the telegram because his own father is a drunken oul’ shit over in England that never sent a penny” (223). About the non-arrival of Malachy’s support money from England, Frankie says: “You don’t know what to do . . . when the first telegram doesn’t come . . . you’d be ashamed to stay out in the lane”; but to go on the public assistance is a desperate action: “Mam says that’s the worst thing that could happen to any family” (224). The missing support money finally drives Angela to seek public assistance: “if we meet anyone . . . we are not to tell them where we’re going. She feels ashamed enough without telling the whole world and wait until her own mother hears” (232). When his mother falls ill, eleven year old Frankie tries to provide for his destitute family as best he can. McCourt uses this desperate situation to show how Frankie and his brothers are now viewed by others. Guard Delaney says: “Look at this, a disgrace. You wouldn’t see the likes of this in Bombay or the Bowery of New York itself” (240); Frankie relays the reactions of his Grandma and Aunt Aggie: “They scream at me and tell me I’m filthy . . . barking at me and disgracing me on the streets . . . I try to explain . . . I’m worn out trying to make ends meet . . . There’s no use telling them about the nastiness of rich people and their maids” (240). Implicit in Frankie’s words are desperation, temporary loss of hope, and a disappointment in more fortunate people’s inability to sympathetically understand and empathise with the agony and misery of a damaging childhood.

In the 1999 *Angela’s Ashes* film commentary McCourt said: “we were all an
assembly line to hell”. McCourt uses his memoir to give his mature perspectives of the damaging childhood a voice.

The break between the eleven-year-old Frankie’s childish vision and the beginning of the more mature survivor’s perspective comes when he sees his mother at the priest’s door: “This is my own mother, begging. This is worse than the dole, the St. Vincent’s de Paul Society . . . It’s the worst kind of shame . . . if anyone from the lane or my school sees her the family will be disgraced entirely. My pals . . . will torment me” (250). Frankie’s shame manifests itself as feelings of disgust for his mother’s public disgrace. In Our Kate, eight-year-old Katie McMullen’s feelings of being ashamed of her mother reaches a new and mature level when her peers reject her socially then bluntly state the reasons for that rejection; thus Cookson uses the voices of other characters to render Katie McMullen’s shame concrete and hence inescapable (118-119). McCourt does not use the words of another character to make Frankie’s feeling ashamed of his mother concrete; rather he uses Frankie’s emotions and subconscious anger and actions to show that Frankie’s feelings have reached a new and mature level: “Mam tells us to go to bed . . . she climbs to the loft with Laman . . . I’m thirteen and I think they’re at the excitement up there” (291). By the time Frank says “I’m sixteen tomorrow, a man”, he is capable of voicing the fact that he feels ashamed of his sore, infected eyes (341, 344). Even so, as a ‘man’ of sixteen he is not yet able to put his shame on behalf of his mother into words or bring his reasoning to bear and reflect upon the fact that he is shamed by his mother’s act of prostituting herself: “I keep barking at her, Laman Griffin, Laman Griffin, till she pushes at me . . . and I slap her . . . I back away from her because there’s another sin on my long list and I’m ashamed of myself” (342). So, whereas with
Cookson’s Katie the pain associated with shame is a certain knowledge, with McCourt’s Frankie the pain of shame is more a realisation of what is happening between his mother and Laman Griffin and an associated sense guilt that he has added to his sins by slapping his mother. Thus, implicit in McCourt’s memoir is the cause and effect of Frank’s shame: first comes a change of attitude with his growing realisation that the elder Malachy has failed to take responsibility for his family’s well-being; next comes the realisation that the family will be disgraced because his mother resorts to certain courses of action to provide for her family and keep them together, and concomitant with this is being ashamed of his own appearance (272-7). Lastly, Frankie is ashamed of himself; and he finally puts this into words as he confesses to a priest (344).

By implication, this act of confession shows that Frankie has not as yet reached emotional and spiritual maturity; even though he is now a ‘man’ of sixteen, he still misreads and misjudges given situations. The evidence for this conclusion can be drawn from the end of Frankie’s full confession. In the lead-up to Frankie’s confession the reader discerns that Frankie’s main concern is with the guilt he feels over his part in endangering Theresa Carmody’s fornicating soul rather than with his shame: “I’ll tell [the priest] about Theresa Carmody and how I sent her to hell, and that will be the end of me, driven from the church” (330). After receiving absolution, Frankie says: the priest “blesses me again, asks me to pray for him, and I’m happy trotting through the rainy streets of Limerick knowing Theresa is in heaven” (344). McCourt indicates that at sixteen Frankie has a growing inner maturity, and at the same time reduces him to the six-year-old boy’s level of misreading and misunderstanding. It could be that McCourt does this because this type of uneven growth is normal in
adolescence in real-life. Or, perhaps, McCourt enfolds a strong hint of the younger Frankie’s perspective in the older Frankie’s vision in order to build onto and heighten the narrative’s mimetic component. Equally, this could apply to Cookson’s handling of Katie in Our Kate.

In Angela’s Ashes, it is evident from the confession scene that Frankie can accept absolution and hence forgive himself. But it is also evident he cannot forgive others. It can also be inferred that the elder Malachy does not bear the brunt of Frankie McCourt’s anger, Angela does: “I think we’re remembering the cause of all our troubles, Laman Griffin’s chamber pot” (352). Frankie sees his father as being no better or worse than many other Irish fathers, and does not regard drinking and failure to support the family as a sin (223, 234, 269). Frankie sees his mother’s act of prostitution as unforgivable: “It’s a sin when you’re wide awake” (291-292). Frankie tells his mother: “I’d rather be like my father than Laman Griffin” (341). It could be suggested that Frankie’s shame of Angela is the reason behind the title of the memoir, Angela’s Ashes: “I still want to tell her I’m sorry but if I do I’ll want to tell her she’s the cause of it all, that she should not have climbed to the loft that night” (342). In the 1999 Angela’s Ashes film commentary, McCourt says: “I know that we were both sorry for doing the things we couldn’t help, that is just the way of things”.

The third cause of the child Frankie’s agony—the miseries that arise as a result of his mixed nationality, his religion, and his American-Irish accent—is entangled with the aspect of regionality and identity and the struggle to become a survivor. From the very first page the memoir is a testimony to Frankie’s intention to escape Ireland and hence his damaging childhood and return to America, the land of promise and freedom. Throughout his memoir McCourt
builds Frankie’s case for leaving Ireland, for avoiding England, and for returning to America. He uses his various characters to voice arguments for and against Ireland and the Irish, England, and America. McCourt is careful to give credence to all the differing perspectives; thus, his reasons against remaining in Ireland are both explicitly and implicitly stated, and are too numerous to be quoted here. But take just a few examples: Ireland is plagued by rain and poverty and misery, and the entire place boasts “pompous priests” and “bullying schoolmasters” and Irishmen who tell woebegone stories about “the terrible things” the English “did to us for eight hundred long years” (11). Frankie says, “My mother’s troubles began the night she was born” in Limerick (13); he says, “My father . . . [was] like his father before, he grew up wild, in trouble with the English, or the Irish, or both” (12). In America the Italian owner of the grocery store says to Frankie: “Ya father? Well, ya know, he’s got the problem, the Irish thing” (32). The Jewish Mrs. Leibowitz says, “I thank God my husband don’ have no what you call it. . . It’s the Irish have the craving” (44). The owner of the American speakeasy says: “you Irish. Jeezoz! Trouble, trouble” (15). The Irish are intolerant and dislike each other and other races: one Irishman says that the ever-present fleas which were sent by the English to drive the Irish out of their minds “multiply faster than the Hindus” (61). Frankie says: “There are seven masters in Leamy’s National School and they all have leather straps, canes, blackthorn sticks . . . if you ever say anything good about Oliver Cromwell they’ll all hit you . . . [but] you must not cry. You’ll be a sissy” (80-81). Mr. Benson, Frankie’s teacher, hates all things American: “you have to remember to hate America or he’ll hit you”; he also hates England: “England is for traitors” (80). Frankie’s school-friend Paddy Clohessy doesn’t care, he just wants a way out of
the squalor and poverty in which he lives in Ireland; he wants to grow up, join the English army, and live a better life (120). The Irish see America as a country for misfits; his Limerick grandma says to his Irish-born mother: “You’re pure useless. Why don’t you go to America where there’s room for all sorts of uselessness?” (15). In the 1999 Angela’s Ashes film commentary McCourt says, “If you returned to Ireland from America, you were seen by all Irish, North and South, as a failure.”

Frankie and his brother Malachy find themselves trapped between worlds. Their mother, Angela, combines these territories in fact: Southern Irish herself, in America she marries a Northern Irish man and gives birth to Frankie and Malachy; later, their father goes to live in England. In America, Angela combines Ireland in song: “And Limerick town has no happier hearth / than mine has been with my man from the North” (134). So Frankie has a foot in both Irish camps and at the same time a soul in America and connections with England. According to Phelan, the passage where Frankie says “‘if I were in America I could say, I love you, Dad, the way do in films’, allows McCourt . . . both his idea of an American son and his idea of a Limerick one” (87). But it could be said that the passage allows Frankie to remain true to his American dream. It is Frankie’s accent which marks him out rather than his mixed heritage or nationality. In the 1999 Angela’s Ashes film commentary, McCourt says, “Accent is very important to the Irish . . . it’s what marks you out entirely—being Irish from the North of Ireland or from America was like being from Outer Mongolia and just as unacceptable.” In the memoir, Frankie and Malachy start school at Leamy’s National School; the master “asks us if we are good boys and when we say we are, he says, Good Lord, what’s this? Are they Yanks or
What?” (79). Frankie’s American accent labels him: a “big boy says, You’re . . . a stupid Yank”; then the school master canes Frankie for fighting and says: “Now say, I’m a bad Yank” (79). At six Frankie says, “I’m afraid of the master . . . I still don’t know what he’s talking about because I came from America” (106). Thus, McCourt makes an implicit statement: the Americans and the Irish do not understand each other—they live in opposite worlds.

As Frankie grows, so too does his desire to return to America. At barely five years of age he begins dreaming of escaping his miseries in Ireland and returning to America (51). When he is thirteen, his mother’s adultery causes him to make a firm decision to return to America as soon as it is possible. Determined to make his dream a reality, at fourteen Frankie begins to work and to save: “I start thinking about America and how I have to start saving money for my fare instead of squandering it on fish and chips . . . because if I don’t I’ll be in Limerick forever” (314). To sixteen-year-old Frankie, America symbolises freedom from poverty and the confines of the Irish traditions and life, and absolution from sins committed in Ireland (331). Determined to earn the money for his fare Frankie resorts to means his mother frowns upon: “Some of [Mrs. Finucane’s] customers fall behind and need threatening letters . . . I’m desperate for that job. I want to go to America” (331-2). Frankie justifies his actions: “I know that someday I’ll be a rich Yank . . . and my family will never have to worry about threatening letters again” (334). In the 1999 Angela’s Ashes film commentary, McCourt says: “I was so desperate to get . . . to America that I was ruthless.” In the memoir Frankie’s Uncle Pa says: “’Tis the beginning for Frankie McCourt” (358). McCourt’s narrative ends with a one word chapter:
'Tis (364). Thus, the end of *Angela’s Ashes* symbolises the beginning of promise for Frankie McCourt.

For Cookson and McCourt the writing of their memoirs was an act of catharsis. Cookson said she wrote *Our Kate* because she needed to work out her hurt and bitterness (quoted in Jones, 311-12). In the 1999 *Angela’s Ashes* film commentary McCourt says, “I wrote the book to get the stuff out of my system”:

People ask if the story is true . . . you bet your darned life it’s true. I lived it. Why would I make it up . . . how could I forget the misery and the poverty and the hunger at all? In the book I tried to stick to the truth of the thing entirely—why would I lie?—children don’t lie . . . I stayed quiet because if you don’t you think you’re going to get the shit beaten out of you. Besides, keeping quiet is insurance against the exposure of the past.

In one sense, the honesty with which McCourt writes his memoir also renders *Angela’s Ashes* an act of self-castigation. He leaves his family behind in Ireland and takes himself to America, to the land of hope and promise.

Throughout McCourt’s memoir there is an element of unquenchable hope and optimism. The characters in the book get on with the business of putting one foot in front of another and refusing to go under. Frankie’s family could very well be any one of the poverty-stricken families in the slums; they are all in the same boat. In the 1999 *Angela’s Ashes* film commentary McCourt says: “Our philosophy was simple—we were all beggars and beggars can’t be choosers.” In the book Frankie’s family and neighbours and acquaintances comfort themselves with stories and song. They reassure themselves that things will improve and
“surely our troubles will be over. Surely” (221). In the 1999 *Angela’s Ashes* film commentary McCourt says: “the thing about the poverty-stricken Irish is that we had dreams—we had nothing else at all except that and stubbornness, we just went on from day to day; so our dreams were important to us because we were so deprived, and with any child it’s the same—the more you’re deprived, the more intense the dreams become.”

There is an exceptionally personal element to McCourt’s book—partly this could be because he allows the child Frankie to tell his story in the first person and in the present tense. In part it could also be due to the honesty with which McCourt writes, in part to his use of Irish expression and humour and irony, and in part to the lyricism inherent in the Irish language; some examples of this are words and phrases such as: “before ye are all drowned entirely”; ‘tis’, ‘tisn’t’; “What’ll we do at all, at all” (183, 276). McCourt highlights the sense of poetry intrinsic in the narrative’s lyricism with passages naturally rich in imagery; one example of this, is the passage where Frankie is in the Confession Box: “I told a lie. I hit my brother. I took a penny from my mother’s purse. I said a curse . . . I listened to a story about Cuchulain and Emer” (126). “Who told you that story, my child?” asks the priest. Frankie says Mikey Molloy did, “He read it in a book.” The priest says, “Ah . . . Books can be dangerous for children, my child” (127).

The development of the narrative in McCourt’s book moves away from traditional linearity in that the narrative itself forms a circular movement—it begins with the adult Frankie’s voice saying that his parents “should have stayed in America”, and ends with the young adult Frank docking in America and acknowledging that it is “a great land altogether” (11, 363). This aspect of
McCourt’s book is reminiscent of the first ten lines of T.S. Eliot’s poem “The Waste Land” in that there is an antithesis between the beginning and the end of Angela’s Ashes; this circular movement of the memoir is an implied continuance of Frankie’s life and dreams—birth, death, and the promise of rebirth. Hence, in the memoir the sense of freedom and hope and promise overrides “the miserable Irish Catholic childhood”. In Cookson’s memoir the temporal aspect creates continual circular movements within the narrative and hence refers the reader back to Cookson as a small child of an impressionable age. Cookson takes an adult woman’s point of view of the world and looks backwards into the past to seek answers and forgiveness on all levels. Ultimately, even though they each take different routes, both Cookson’s Katie and McCourt’s Frankie gain a sense of identity, and hence a sense of freedom from their damaging childhoods.

Conclusion.

As models for writing, the four works discussed in this paper not only offer the aspiring writer a valuable range of techniques and methods from which to choose, they also reveal that the damaging childhood narrative inevitably brings with it a number of problems as mentioned in the introduction to this exegesis. One such problem is how to avoid alienating the reader with the damaged child’s self-pity. Another, is how to convey the damaging childhood narrative from a child’s perspective whilst yet maintaining the vision of a mature author. Yet another is how to make the transition in the narrative from the damaged child to the more mature survivor; and finally there is the problem of how to create a
literary landscape which the reader can enter. Dickens, Joyce, Cookson and McCourt each use an young innocent child who suffers a damaging childhood through external causes as the focal point in the writing; they each invite their reader's involvement and sympathetic response by building upon the pathos and the emotional, ethical, and mimetic content in their narratives; they each imbue their child with a degree of realism and use symbols that connect to their readers’ own actuality in some way; and they each bring their child to overcome the damaging childhood.

There are important differences as well. Dickens’ Oliver Twist contains inconsistencies and elemental flaws and Oliver is sacrificed as a believable character for Dickens’ romantic idealism. Dickens’ methods create shifts which lead to gaps in the narrative. He tries to cover up by making sudden inclusions which, nevertheless, highlight the elemental flaws within the narrative. Dickens removes Oliver from his damaging childhood but fails to provide a solution for the social problems of his times. Yet his genius exists in using a multitude of characters and shifting scenes to create a literary landscape that lives in the reader’s imagination. He leaves his reader with the sense that within the dream, nightmare exists.

In accordance with his aesthetic theories, in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man Joyce tries to present the Bildungsroman and the Kunstlerroman as a unified whole in the form of a single entity, Stephen Dedalus. Joyce’s modernist text relies heavily on the structural support of motifs. His stream of consciousness techniques create problems within his work. In one sense, Stephen never really escapes his damaging childhood—he does not actually become a creative artist. In another sense, Stephen does overcome his damaging
childhood: Joyce demonstrates Stephen’s growing maturity by changing the language to suit until finally Stephen’s thoughts are presented in a new kind of language which fits with Joyce’s own aesthetic theories.

Cookson makes it clear in Our Kate that her story is Kate’s and others in a like situation. By revealing how the stigma of being born illegitimate affected her personally, Cookson shows that she understands the situation. Her art of reflection makes her memoir much more complex than it first seems. Cookson uses non-standard and traditional techniques together and in an unorthodox way. She twins the memoir’s masterplot of crises of identity with the theme of shame, and then creates within this intertwined whole constant circular movements and hence a series of pivots; these are her centering techniques. Another of her tricks as a writer is her use of atmosphere. Cookson combines these techniques to force the reader to focus on the young child and her damaging childhood and the long-lasting effects that had on her mental health whilst simultaneously bringing the reader to experience and feel what Katie is experiencing and feeling at any one time.

In a similar way, the apparent linearity of the story-line in Angela’s Ashes is deceptive; the end of the story turns back and meets up with the beginning thus forming a circular movement. By ending the book with his young adult self docking in America and beginning it with an introduction by his older self who lives in America, McCourt encapsulates his childhood and indicates that he is a survivor. He adopts a humorous tone and practices the art of indirection through the unreliable narration of his younger self, Frankie. McCourt’s techniques show that as an author he is in control of the situation; he instils his reader with an understanding of the miseries he endured as a child growing up in Ireland, and
he distances that childhood from his present day reality by placing it in the past. McCourt’s honesty allows him to show that he was only one of many who struggled for existence in the Irish slums. The question of alienating his reader with the damaged child’s self-pity does not arise.

The four works discussed in this paper create the sense that the subject of the damaging childhood could weigh heavily upon the reader. It is the duty of the author who writes a narrative of the damaging childhood to give to the reader a literary experience which is honest to the experience but also enjoyable and moving because it is vividly realised and convincing. Clearly, for the aspiring writer it is a daunting task.
Works Cited.


---, *Oliver Twist*: The Shorter Novels of Charles Dickens. Ware: Wordsworth, 2005.


<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/dickens/chuzzlewit/narration1.html>


McCooey, David. “Going Public: A Decade of Australian Autobiography”.


<http://home.vicnet.net.au/~abr/May06/McCooey%20essay.htm>


Porter Abbott, H. The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative. Cambridge:


Thomas, David. Tell Me Why, Mummy: A little boy’s struggle to survive; A


THE CARPET CHILD
Jo Parnell

THE CARPET CHILD

A nation that does not care for and protect all of its children does not deserve to be called a nation.

Nelson Mandela.
This book is dedicated to my dear children,

Dimity, John, Stephanie, Melanie;

to my husband, Bob, who

encouraged me to speak out about my childhood;

and to all those people who suffered in ‘care’ when

they were little children.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This is a small thankyou to people with big hearts.

Jeannie Koop took me under her wing.

Leonie Sheedy and Dr. Joanna Penglase said, Write it all down.

Dr. John Goswell urged me to go back to university.

My husband, Bob, listened patiently as I struggled with my thoughts.

My supervisors, Professor Hugh Craig and Dr. Keri Glastonbury shed light on the way and encouraged me to keep working,

and in so doing gave me belief in myself.

Thankyou to John Morcombe of the Manly Daily, and to John MacRitchie of the Manly Library, for photos of Dalwood and Mr. Dalwood Snr.

Thankyou also to Pastor James Hogan and Andrew Buchan for their offer to help with photos.

Cover page photo, Jo Parnell aged 8: author’s photo.

Out of respect, some of the names of people in this book have been changed.
Part 2

Memoir

The Carpet Child
My ancestors, what is left of them, are in the box. Their remains are in the form of memorabilia—photos, documents, receipts, sympathy cards, and a purple, ribbon bow of someone’s long forgotten funeral wreath. These things are mine now. So are a few other bits and pieces: tape recordings of Aunt Thel relating snippets of my family’s history, three of my father’s drawings, Nanna’s violin, Pop’s pocket watch with the date and place of my father’s birth scratched on the back, half a dozen post-cards sent from foreign places by Uncle Don, and Aunt Thel’s straw gardening hat.

I remember how, on the day after Aunt Thel’s funeral, the solicitor had locked the house, pointed to the hat, and said:

- You sure you really want that thing? I’d say it’s had it, wouldn’t you?

Yes, the hat was old. But how I could have found the words to explain that it held my aunt’s presence I just don’t know. Now, eighteen years later, Aunt-in-her-hat lives in the cupboard in my back room. She lives on top of the cardboard fruit-box that holds the bits of my father’s family. My dark-haired, brown-eyed aunt has to stay there because she was the keeper of the family. She always said she didn’t want the pieces from the box separated and sent in different directions. Well they might be a long way from their original homes, but in my back cupboard the family all live together at least. Sometimes I take the fruit-box down and spend an hour or two with them.

* * *

In the box is a sepia photo of my paternal grandfather, Pop. It was taken immediately prior to his wedding on the 27th December, 1911. He sits there in his photo, all alone in the fashion of the day, handsome, clean-shaven, straight-backed, knees crossed, and stares straight into the camera with a slightly surprised look and no wonder. Back then the cameras were big awkward box-like affairs on legs. The photographer used to stoop over, pull a black cloth over his head and shoulders and peer through the camera lens. Pop would have seen a black hump and the photographer’s hand waving in the air. He would have heard the photographer’s muffled voice asking if he was ready, and then the photographer would have pressed the soft rubber bulb and pff!, a blue flash would have exploded in Pop’s eyes.

I have to leave Pop and his surprised look to his sepia photo—I’m probably not the best person to say what he was like. I only knew Pop as I knew him; he was my six-
foot five-and-a-half inch, bandy-legged hero. Everyone called him Bluey. He’d had red hair when he was young. The name had stuck. I remember when I’d asked him about these things he’d pushed his old battered Akubra hat to the back of his head, scratched at his snowy hair, pulled his hat forward over his forehead, and said:

- That sun gets strong outback, pet . . . you’ve got to watch it, burn the colour out of you in no time flat it will. My legs? Blowed if I know . . . I’d say riding horses did it, seems my legs just bent into a circle so I’d stay on.

In the photo his good hand curls over the other so you can’t see the missing fingers that got blown off when he was ten. It had happened, he once told me, when he and his brother were making fireworks and had rammed gunpowder into an old tree-stump with a crowbar. In the sepia photo it’s not possible to see the piercing blue of his eyes. He seemed to look right through to the centre of your soul. I wouldn’t have cared to have been the one who told this gentle old man from the bush a lie. Pop never lied to me, but he was a natural story-teller. When I was a child I thought that every word he uttered in his quiet voice was the wisest and truest thing ever spoken. My dear Pop died before I was mature enough to lose that hero worship kids are so good at; I still love the memory of him.

I can’t see Pop without picturing Nanna. They had the beautiful togetherness of couples who have been happily married for many years. In hindsight I would say that when I was a child my subconscious mind registered this element, and that this probably added to my illusions of security.

I remember when I was thirteen and they’d come to our house, just for the day. At the end of the visit I watched them walk hand in hand up the road to the bus-stop and cried because I wanted to go with them. I believed I was saying goodbye forever. As so often happens in life I was wrong; it was not forever, the next time was. I was over eighteen and had travelled up to the Central Coast to stay with them. Three days can feel like a long time or a short time, and I felt that I had to leave too soon. At the corner of the street I turned around for a final glimpse. I still carry the picture in my mind: there they are, standing ankle-deep in the lavender that grows in their front garden. They’re holding hands and waving to me with their free hand. The blue Brisbane Waters of the Central Coast sparkle behind them.
There’s Nanna and Pop’s formal wedding photo. He’s sitting, unsmiling; she’s standing straight-faced alongside him and holding an enormous bouquet. Holding hands wasn’t the done thing in formal photos.

I’d seen my grandparents less than a dozen times in my life, but I’d spun them into my dream that I had someone who had always just been there, someone who didn’t leave or move away, someone who was special in my childhood. I suppose I needed that sense of continuity and security even though I had to create it myself. When I look at their photos I feel this strong spiritual stirring—it’s almost as if I can reach out and touch their souls and they can touch mine. I wonder if it’s possible for the dead to commune with the living.

Nanna’s pre-wedding photo lives alongside that of Pop. I loved her almost as much as I loved him; but I couldn’t chat with her in the same way as I could with Pop. Nanna was interested in day to day living and in people’s doings. She told great tangled stories about the family’s mixed-up religious affairs and weddings and funerals. Pop talked about the deeper concerns of Jesuit pre-destination and the meaning of life and the universe itself. Nanna didn’t tell me stories about the bush. She could tat lace, paint fine water-colours, and play two musical instruments, but she didn’t do those things that Pop did. She didn’t teach me how to fish, or how to use an adze to smooth bush-timber, or how to plant chokoes, or how to chart a course by the stars. She didn’t imitate the call of the whip-bird or teach me how to whistle through my teeth and make the *crack* at the end. But, like Pop, she loved me, too.

Nanna had a code of healthy living and an old-fashioned morality; and she had her own views on how a lady should act. I can remember her saying:

- Joan-Annette, *alcool* turns good men into *bouffons* or beasts, and *tabac*—*pho*! No *sens* in *chimneys*. Don’t say ‘bloody’ Joan-Annette—it’s *grossièreté*. Keep the seams of your stockings straight, never discuss religion, don’t wear trousers and don’t cross your knees—that’s right dear, keep your knees together and cross your ankles.

  I didn’t wear stockings. I was only a kid in ankle socks.

In my fruit-box there’s another photo of Nanna. In this one she’s a lovely young girl of about eighteen. I can’t for the life of me imagine her swigging a whisky or puffing away on a cigarette. Yet I know this girl’s sister did, and she, too, looks straight-laced in *her* young photos. When I was young Nanna was no longer the tiny slim doll of 1910. She was a straight-laced old lavender-scented pudding who spoke...
French in accommodation with English and wore her soft grey hair neatly bundled into a hair-net. Her two thin, surprisingly shapely legs were set far apart. They seemed to grow down from the sides of her short dumpling body leaving a wide gap in the middle. I used to feel glad she didn’t wear slacks. I worried that I’d end up with her shape.

*   *   *   *

Here’s a black and white snapshot of Nanna and Pop’s old house. It’s a reminder that I spent five holidays with them there—two by the time I was three and a bit, one when I was eight, another when I was eleven and the last when I was twelve. They lived at the top of the hill at Wagstaffe Point on the headland of Broken Bay—some miles east, and slightly north of Woy-Woy. Pop had terraced the hillside around the house and put it all under garden. He’d cut the kitchen out of the living rock. If you walked through the kitchen past the black fuel stove and went down a step, you could open the wooden door and step out into the long alleyway that he’d channelled through the rock. At the end of the alleyway he’d carved out a set of stairs. If you climbed these you found yourself standing on the great wide boulder on the peak of Wagstaffe Hill looking down on Lobster Beach and the red roof of Dad’s boathouse. Then if you lifted your eyes you could look straight out to sea—I remember getting horribly seasick when Dad took us twelve miles out in that direction. We caught a lot of fish that day. If you sat on top of the old water tank at the front of the Wagstaffe house you could see across the bay to Ettalong Beach and Davistown. If you walked through the national park and the weather was fine you could see clean away in the direction where Lion Island should be; but you couldn’t see Gosford, Bouddi National Park stuck out and got in the way.

When I was a child I thought that if I were allowed to go and live with Nanna and Pop I’d be happy. I would lose myself in the life in the rock pools, and drink in the views while I fished and explored and felt safe just knowing that my grandparents were there waiting for me in the house on the top of the hill.

Wagstaffe was where I discovered that beautiful things like the bay, the mountains, or one of Pop’s roses, had an intense power. The thing I was looking at would suddenly emit an intangible beauty that filled the air for an instant before going back into the thing that had sent the radiance out. As a child I could only say it was a lump that lodged itself in my throat and made me cry inside. Now I’d say that it’s surely the
quintessence of beauty. Once I’ve seen it happen in a particular thing it can’t be recaptured as a separate entity or recalled at will because it becomes part of the original thing for all time. I first noticed it one night in my grandparents’ kitchen when I was eight.

It’s odd; even though I’m aware that there must have been others in the house at the time, I don’t actually remember anyone except Nanna, Pop and me being there. If I close my eyes right now I can go back to that night and smell the scent of lemony bees-wax furniture polish and linseedy harness oil and sweet-pea flowers, and taste the mouth-watering aroma of lamb stew and scones and home-made grape jam. Then when I do that, I can hear the rustle of Pop’s newspaper, and see the soft light from the Victorian-glass kerosene table lamps making flickering reflections in the brown snail-curls of Nanna’s gruesome tea-pot.

* * *

I’ve studied the photos in the box time and again, but I can’t see any family resemblance to myself. I’ve always carried the sense that I was, somehow, different from the others in my family. Somewhere along the way the idea slid itself into my mind that maybe I was adopted, or half adopted in some peculiar way. No-one has ever said I was, and no-one has ever said I wasn’t. The only thing I know for certain is that as a very small child I had a mother and a father, and an extended family on the paternal side, who truly loved me, and a big brother who put up with me because I was his sister. That was the case then, but Al and I love each other now—we are all we have left of the original family.

In the box there’s a beautiful photo of Al as a curly-haired baby. There’s no baby photo of me, and there’s no baby photo of my little sister, Camilla. The earliest photo of Camilla and me is a black and white snapshot taken of the three of us together when I was a miserable, angry seven-year-old. Camilla was not yet four and Al would have been almost nine. I’m the odd man out. Al and Camilla look alike—they’re fair-haired, thin, narrow-lipped and wide-mouthed, they have largish roman noses and bear a resemblance to our father. I have a small straight nose and am fat, short, smaller-mouthed, full-lipped, and have auburn hair. Their pale eyes are narrow; my wider, dark hazel eyes tilt ever so slightly upward. Their skin is light olive and mine is fair. Of
course, you can’t tell our colouring in the black and white photo, but compared to them I look foreign.

Before this photo was taken, other than once when she was about two and one other time when she wasn’t much older, I’d only seen Camilla a few times when she was a new baby. She was born when I was nearly three and a half. I have a distant memory of sitting on the bus beside my mother and trying to feed tiny baby Camilla from a glass, banana-shaped baby bottle that had a red rubber teat on either end.

*   *   *

When we were little Al loved his food almost more than playing with his mates or fighting with me over his dog Nippy; but most of all, he enjoyed pulling things apart. I think now that his pastime must have had a purpose because the adult Al knows how things come apart and tries to fix them. Al’s investigative streak didn’t worry me—unless the thing he broke belonged to me. I remember one day when I was not yet three and I’d carried my sleeping doll down to the play shed to put her to bed in her pram. The pram rested on its cane hood, upside down on the grass outside the shed. It had no wheels. Al was sitting on the floor of the shed making a billy-cart. The sound of my scream pierced the air like the shriek of a badly played tin whistle. Al looked up and covered his ears. I grabbed what was left of the wheels, and hit him over the head. He banged his fists up and down and cried. But then he jumped up and lunged at my doll.

NO! NO! I tugged my doll from his grasping fingers and shrieked again.

- Shuddup-shuddup-shuddup! Al yelled, and put his hand over my mouth.

I couldn’t breathe properly but I could still bite. He let go, sat back down on the floor, and whinged because I wouldn’t let him pull my sleeping dolly’s brown eyes out of her sweet head. This incident must have done something to my psychology: I have little patience for whingers. It’s funny how childhood incidents can affect you for life without you realising. I mean it’s not as if I’d said to myself, right; this will affect me forever in this particular way.

I remember another childhood incident; this, too, seemed to have left a lasting impression. I went looking for Al and found him squatting under the house digging holes. He waved a dirt-laden gum stick in my face, and said:
- No-o. This is *my* digger… I’m a man I gotta work, so go away. Go and sit back in your old barrow . . . *girl*.

I distinctly remember feeling like I wasn’t wanted, and I also remember climbing back into my father’s old, wooden-handled wheelbarrow and sitting there puzzling over how I could lean forward, grasp the handles, and wheel myself around. Of course I couldn’t do it. But at two and a half years of age I couldn’t see why. So I did what I always did when I was frustrated; I screamed.

Al reluctantly left his tunnels and crawled out from under the house, poked his face at me, said:

- You’re a *girl* . . . girls can’t lift barrows . . . men have barrows.

Al made me madder than I was already. I whacked him in the eye. He went whinging to our wild, red-headed father. Daddy ran his fingers through his curls and contemplated the weeds in his vegetable garden.

- Gee whiz Al serves you bloody right, said my father. She could lift the bloody barrow—Hell’s bells, she can do anything, any blasted thing at all—but y’see, it’s all about physics . . . the blooming problem is a thing called gravity . . . that’s what keeps everyone anchored to the earth. If it wasn’t for damn gravity we’d all be flying around in bloody space. Shit! What a bugger that’d be.

In my night dreams I was an angel without feathered wings. I could step up into the air and flap my arms, fly as high or as low as I wished, do aerial acrobatics, and walk above the ground. After my father had spoken, in my waking moments I truly believed it was possible, even probable, that I could fly. I left the wheelbarrow to gravity and attempted to make my dreams become reality.

Al had been under the house as usual. He’d left his excavations and crept out to ask:

- Why are you running and leaping and *flapping*?
- I’m a bird . . . I can fly.
- You’re dumb, said Al, everyone knows you can’t fly without wings and feathers and *things*.

He was right. I was unable to fly in the way I’d intended. Yet I now realise that when I was a child I did fly. I flew by means of my imagination.

*   *   *   *
After I discovered that I couldn’t fly like a bird I devised a plan and spent a full three weeks trying to coerce Al into diverting our mother’s attention so I’d be free to fly with the aid of my father’s large black umbrella.

In 1942, December seemed to me to be a good time of the year to fly; my mother was run off her feet, somewhere out of sight. She wasn’t around to stop me from realising my dream. I thought it was my right to give flying a go since everyone else was already doing it—even the men in their warplanes in the black and white propaganda war films at the Saturday afternoon movies.

On my good flying day there was a problem. Al wasn’t being a good sport. The sultry weather had turned him into a standover man. He’d stuck his face out, and said:


Al was skinny. Sometimes when we were playing he’d lie down on the ground and I’d take a stick, scratch a mark in the dirt at the top of his head, scratch another mark against his toes, and say straight away that he was long, but there wasn’t too much to him, not much more than a Redhead match-stick if you looked at him side-on, so my father said. I knew from experience that I could have easily punched the living daylights out of him, but on that occasion there wasn’t time to restore what I believed to be the natural order. So I gave in, and Al slunk out from inside the house trailing his white bed sheet saying:

- See, this here sheet’s bigger than my bed. It’ll catch lots of air and make a real parachute.

He’d shot me a triumphant look, climbed onto the veranda rails, and breathed in (in my mind’s eye I can still see his xylophone ribs) as he prepared himself for flight. The sheet parachute failed. I watched him fall like a heavy stone. I saw him plummet through my mother’s cosseted rose bush and crash-land on top of his sheet in the mud. My mother’s yellow Christmas roses hung broken and dejected from the top right side of the bush. Sadly, they had lost their yellow petal tutus, and the fairies I believed in were rendered forever homeless. For a moment Al lay there, right where he’d fallen. Then while I was grieving for the poor little fairies he waggled his long bony legs in the air and laughed his whinnying boy’s laugh.

- Gee that was great.

It was my turn next. My face changed, and the fairies were temporarily forgotten as I became a primitive, pre-comic batman. My father’s opened umbrella was a huge black bat. I held it tight as it hovered high above my head and joyfully launched myself
from the back veranda rails and out into space. Splat! Gravity, I discovered, does
indeed exist.

Three of the umbrella’s shiny steel-wire ribs were skew-whiff and widdershins. A
fourth rib was a different matter. Its knobbly end had released its tentative hold on the
stitching that held the umbrella’s black silk covering in place. That whole arm had
assumed an insanely injured air. Bent into an acute angle, it pointed its spiky self
straight upwards, and gave a finger to the frowning sky.

I lay spread-eagled on the ground alongside that traitorous umbrella. After what
seemed like forever, but which was certainly no more than a few minutes, the initial
shock wore off. I hated myself for having failed. I’d been quite certain a good black
umbrella would beat a stupid white sheet any day.

On that day anyone who had ears would have guessed that she and I were
mother and daughter; we were a duo of screamers. I was flat out on the ground
screaming, my mother was standing and screaming at the sight of her once clean sheet.
Her long black hair swirled wildly as she did an about face. She sucked her breath
through her teeth, and then let it go with a hiss:

- Sweet Mary! What are you two up to now—and will you just look at your
father’s best black silk umbrella.

She was good, my mother. She could use both hands at once. She pulled Al to
his feet and hung onto him, then stretched over to haul me up by my right arm and drag
me over next to Al. I guessed by the look on his face that he was expecting to get what
the grown-ups in those days said was a ‘good belting’—what children called ‘copping
it’. Al pulled his hand free and sat down and cried. My confused mother yelled at him:

- Will you get off that clean sheet at once! Are you listening to me, my good
man? Look at me when I speak to you. That sheet’s dirty enough now without making it
gutter filthy.

Al blubbered and shuffled his backside off the sheet. I started to sidle away. My
mother grabbed me by my left arm and swung me side-on into her front. I was
momentarily airborne but discovered I was not flying when I came up short against her
and my feet hit the ground. She shouted:

- For heavens’ sake, child, will come here and stand still while I belt you.

I remember saying that I didn’t want to. My mother ignored me. In those
halcyon days of my childhood, adults had not been educated to listen to children. She
raised her slapping hand and it came down hard and connected with my backside. Then
the insidious guilt trip business, in which all mothers of that era had been trained, was smoothly slipped into my programming. I didn’t even know it had happened.

- If it’s any consolation, said my misled mother, this is hurting me more far than it’s hurting you, my girl. Maybe you’ll think twice before you hurt your poor mother again.

We began to move. I circled her, she came after me; she pulled my arm up and swung her hand down. She missed because I’d judged the expected timing of the hand-backside connection correctly and tucked my backside in, then skipped forward around her as far as I could go in one hop. I yelled because that was what kids did under those circumstances. My mother yelled at me because that was what mothers did back then. Later that day Al told me his mate’s mothers said things like, just you wait until you father gets home—he’s going to kill you. Those poor children, most of them had a very long anxious wait because most of their fathers were servicemen away in the war. My mother was different from Al’s mates’ mothers. She didn’t say, just you wait. No, she believed in Carpe Diem.

Late in the afternoon of my flying day my artist father came home. I knew I was safe because he never, ever took his belt off to me. My mother told my father there was no need for his belt, that Al had been punished enough already. My father took himself out to the back veranda, tripped over his gardening boots, snickered – Bloody boots nearly got me, then looked down at his good black silk umbrella and laughed:

- Ain’t that bloody something . . . I’ll go get my blasted pencils.

My father’s drawing of his gardening boots, executed on my flying day in December, 1942.
My father’s drawing is in the box. But my mother is not in the box. Al and I wish she was; we wish we had a photo, just one photo, of poor Kate.

*     *     *     *

My mother, Kathlyne Mary (Kate, or Katey), was born in Newcastle-on-Tyne in England. Her stories of the England she knew, and the stories my father Hal spun of the England he never knew because he’d never been outside of Australia, influenced my thinking for the first few years of my life. In my three year old imagination England grew and flourished until it had become a phantasmic place. I thought that the people walked around wearing golden crowns, and King George VI, who’d become indistinguishable in my mind from Nanna’s spoken-of father George, sat on his throne and did absolutely nothing to stop bombs from falling on England. In my mind England was a place of mysterious mists and treacherous quick-sands. Most of all it was old, and therefore worthy. I waited for the day when I could sail to England and live in my castle. Whenever I told Al about England, he’d shrug his shoulders and say:

- Ahg, stupid baby.

I would have been almost three years of age when my father practised his Shakespeare on me. It couldn’t have been later because by the time I was three and two months things began to change in our household and my father stopped being fun. Whenever my father read Shakespeare he acted out all the parts, changing his voice to suit, expunging bits he thought unsuitable for my delicate ears, replacing certain words with his favourite expletive of the moment, ad-libbing madly as he played to an audience of three—me, my doll, and Al’s fox-terrier, Nippy. During my father’s Shakespeare sessions Al was never anywhere in sight—he said it was stupid stuff; my mother was busy somewhere else in the house, and Camilla had not been born. Al never knew what he was missing. He thought digging holes through to China was more fun.

My volatile mother was noted for her beautiful sewing. One time she fashioned me a long deep-blue velvet cape to add to my play-box. I would put the cloak on and strut around; and without the least idea of what it all meant, I’d shout:

- To be or not to be, that is the bloody question . . .
My Shakespeare did not please my father at all. He said my pacing wasn’t right, and he also said that practice makes perfect. So I kept strutting and strutting. But one day my father looked at me in disgust and threw his hands in the air, saying:

- That’s not what I bloody meant . . .

It seemed to me that nothing I said or did pleased my father. I told myself that when I was big I’d show him.

One Sunday morning he took me with him to the Bankstown swimming baths where he was on St. John’s Ambulance duty. I watched him take a long length of white gauze and snip it with his surgical scissors. He stuck his elbows out, grabbed the gauze between his bunched fists, and tore it into long strips. He was rolling the gauze into bandages when he said wistfully:

- Always wanted to go to university—be a doctor or something. Now look, just a bloody artist . . . Hmmph!—no blooming brains.

That was IT—the answer. In that one moment the decision was made for me; I would go to that place—whatever and wherever it was, and be something my father wasn’t. But before long events got in the way and I didn’t remember my secret promise until I was older. But at that stage I didn’t see how it would ever be possible.

*         *        *

The fact that my mother suffered from the galloping consumption, as tuberculosis was called in those days, hung dimly around the periphery of my young existence. I now know that my poor mother’s mental and physical suffering must have been extreme. Life must have been very difficult in those days. There were no modern labour-saving appliances then as there are now, and the war made everything hard to come by. Men were no help, either. In those days they didn’t help with the housework or the washing or the ironing or the cooking—that was women’s work. Sick as my mother was, our house and clothes were spotless, there was always a good dinner on the table, and she made every single item we wore bar the shoes on our feet.

In spite of her stories, I know very little of Kate’s family history. But I do remember the warm comfort of her arms as she sang her version of the ‘Irish Lullaby’ and rocked me in her lap:

Toora loora loora, Toora loora li
Toora loora loora, hush now don’t you cry . . .
I think her awful disease must have made her feel continuously cold because I quite often see her, summer and winter, sitting over the lounge-room fire and knitting. I remember the day she sat in front of the open fire, and said:

- Come here to me Joan-Annette. Listen carefully; I've something very important to tell you.

What was she was talking about? Wasn’t I already standing there alongside her? Looking at my mother’s face told me nothing. But young as I was, my female antenna had begun to sprout and was already in training. So I stopped fiddling with the tag-end of wool and turned towards her. She took both of my hands in hers and looked into my face.

- My mummy died from a thing called tuberculosis of the spine—the doctors called it Pott’s Abscess. She died when I was little, and after she died I thought of her with my heart so I’d never forget her—do you know what I mean?

I nodded because my mother seemed so terribly sad.

- I was so little when she died . . . and everyone told me I had to be strong because I didn’t have a Mummy.

On that day I learnt that people can think with their hearts as well as with their heads, and I learnt that Mummy had a dead mother; but I never once thought of my maternal grandmother as anything other than ‘Kate’s heart mother’.

My mother put her arms around herself and rocked to and fro:

- She came from the Silk Road in the Taklimakan Desert.

- What’s that coming from road, Mummy?

It’s funny how a piece of information you consider to be vital can slip the memory. I can’t remember everything my mother ever told me; but every now and then something long ago forgotten jumps into my head to surprise me. These sudden flashes either solve a puzzle or create a new enigma. I still don’t know exactly where my grandmother came from, and if I ever did I’ve forgotten. In fact, I forgot about it altogether until I was an adult and trying to make sense of my childhood. Perhaps I forgot because of what she said next.

- I had a step-mother—she was cruel. When I was five she hung me by my clothes to the big clothes-hook on the back of the door . . .

- Where’d she go—is she here?

- She’s dead . . .
- Mummy, you got a Daddy?
- Yes. He’s your grandfather—your English grandfather.

In my mind I relegated Mummy’s step-mother to the same category as Snow White’s wicked step-mother. Mummy sat gazing, unseeing, into the dragon-tongued flames, and I knew she had forgotten me and gone away inside herself, into her dreams, as she sometimes did. Young as I was, I knew that opportunity had to be grasped whenever it presented itself because it had an annoying habit of escaping. So I crept to the kitchen, sneaked the scissors, and began to cut Snow-white’s step-mother out of my colouring-in book. My mother came into the room and exploded:

- Sweet Mary! What possesses you child—why on earth are you chopping into that good book?
- She’s bloody bad, she’s a bloody wicked step-mother, I said as I clumsily mutilated the page with my mother’s kitchen scissors.

My apple-blossom-scented exotic mother did a dangerous thing. She swooped, and grabbed the book from under the scissors.
- What next! It’s only a story. And don’t be destructive. Don’t you know there’s a war going on?

Well of course I did. Everyone knew about the war. And I’d thought my mother was happy that her step-mother had expired. I didn’t know my English grandfather. I didn’t know if he was happy about it or not. I closed the chopped book, pushed it across the table, asked:

- Where’s Grandfather, then, is he here? Why can’t I see him?

When I try to capture my mother’s face in my mind the picture swims in and out of focus; but I have no vagueness at all about the look in her almond eyes. She seemed to look through me at something that wasn’t there. I very distinctly remember her sighing softly and saying:

- Your grandfather didn’t want me to marry your father. He said a . . . he said I married beneath myself. Anyway, he lives in England and couldn’t get here even if he wanted . . . there’s a mad war going on.

My mother kept looking through me as she told me that my English grandfather was an officer of note in the Royal Navy. She said he was high up and had his seat firmly planted in the House of Lords.
I found Al under the veranda we’d used as the December air-strip. He was digging dirt to make a dam. He had Mummy’s good green Depression-glass jug and it was full of water. I crept in beside him and said:

- Oom-aah! You’re going to cop it.

He gave my arm a horse-twist.

- Don’t you tell . . . , and he gave my arm another twist

- Ow, you’re hurting . . . kiss it better. Gimme the digger and I’ll tell you a secret.

- What. You tell first. No, no—nooo, I said tell first.

- Grandfather’s got his big bum stuck in a House of Lords. He’s mad because Mummy has Daddy and us to look after. Mummy told me he doesn’t like Daddy and us because we’re not high like him and Mummy.

Al stopped digging.

- What’s a Jesus place like?

I thought hard, and my ever-lurking imagination slunk into my thinking and took charge of my mouth.

- Umm, I said, Nanna’s old dunny—at her really old house. It’s bloody smelly and got lots of seats . . . and old men who yell. Mummy says it’s a monkey-house.

We had both been to Taronga; the monkey-house was satisfyingly noisy and littered with shit. My brother nodded. I nodded and snatched the digging-stick out of his hand. He had learnt something new; the House of Lords was a smelly old dunny.

*                                        *                                        *

I have a picture in my mind of me, sitting on the kitchen table, in a blue Shirley Temple dress. The dress goes with white Shirley Temple shoes and a pale blue hair ribbon tied in a bow. I remember pink candles; so I have this idea that it must have been my second or third birthday. I was sitting on the kitchen table watching my mother make a cake and thinking about the mixing spoon I would be given to lick once the cake was in the oven.

My mother was talking. I sat there, half-listening, waiting for the spoon. My mother creamed the butter and sugar; her hand flew back and forth. She folded the flour into the mix, and said:
-When we lived in England the doctors told my father—your English grandfather—I’d get better if he took me on a sea trip to a warm place like Australia.

She slid the cake into the oven, turned to wipe flour specks off the table, then handed me the spoon and said:

- So we came to Sydney for a holiday.

It was very fortunate that they did so, because even though it rained fairly solidly the cold summer of their arrival in Australia, she met my father. If she hadn’t met my father I might not have existed.

When we were small Al and I called our father Daddy, our mother mostly called him Darling. Later on, though, she called him ‘Bastard’ on a number of occasions. It must have been about then that Nanna said when my father was born they named him Halse for an eminent cousin of Pop’s, and he got Hal for short. So when I was three years of age I thought my father had a lot of names. Later on Nanna said my father’s correct name was on the certificate which could be obtained in extract form from the Births Deaths and Marriages Bureau. My father’s birth certificate isn’t in the fruit-box, but there are quite a few photos of him.

He wasn’t too bad looking, I suppose; but he was short, bandy-legged, and a bit barrel-chested. The black and white and sepia photos don’t show it, but he had cold blue eyes, a white-hot temper, and red-hair. That was what he looked like. My father was a man who loved his art; and he loved the sea and boats, and horses and dogs. He could ride with the best, throw a forty-foot yacht around the churning sea like it was a toy, catch fish when nobody else could find them, build a boat or a house, and work like a demon. But what was Daddy like really? In all truth, I don’t know. I can look back now and say that he was a young jazz-loving, bad-mouthed, shallow bohemian steeped in the fashions and life-style of his era. Or I could say he was just an energetic and clever young man who was very human in his needs and fears and failings, and that he got caught up in the tragedy that unfolded around him. But I can’t say what my father was like because when I was a child he drifted in and out of my life like a ghost. Apart from those too few happy times in my very early years his presence was rarely felt, hardly tangible. My father had a great many faces; and he proved not to be the person I’d thought.

I don’t know if anybody ever got the drop on my father. I don’t know if he even really knew himself. Yet for some reason, probably deeply psychological, when I was a very small child I admired him. I considered him to be a true master of the paint brush,
and an originator of the English language. He could alliterate better than any one I ever knew. He knew every slang word, every swear word, every expletive, every oath: he could blaspheme a blasphemer under the table. He knew all the C, G, B, D, W words, all the H words, and probably a few other letters as well, and he could string them all together without once stuttering. But the only F word he knew was ‘Flaming’. No-one else in the family knew any of Daddy’s words except Al and me; we knew ‘bloody’ and the occasional ‘bugger’. My mother used to turn on us frequently, and say:

- Lose the ‘bloody bugger’ or I’ll make certain sure you’ll see the inside of next week instantly.

So as a small child I knew that I had Hobson’s choice in the language department. I could forget the wonderful world of Daddy’s words that I suspected would stand me in good stead some time, and thus, by dint of forgetting, would end up severely disadvantaged in life. Or I could use his exclusive words and time-travel at the hands of my mother before time-travel had been invented, and end up in the future before I was ready. But as a small child I had a growing premonition that if I did either I wouldn’t live. For on one hand I was worried that some vicious kid or Al would get the better of me and that would kill me if I let it happen., and on the other hand I knew for certain that my mother would kill me.

In spite of all the thumping, I knew my mother loved me. Children are very good at sensing when they are genuinely loved and when they are not.

Apart from knowing that my mother loved me and the little that I can recall of her, I know so very little of Katey. But how do you ever really know another person? I suppose Kate was one thing to my father, another to us, and so on. Pop once took me aside and told me she was very beautiful. She was willowy and graceful, with the colouring and the sloe-eyes that bespoke her own mother’s Silk Road ancestry. She was blessed with a brilliant mind, but possessed a flash-flood temper that was mightier than Krakatoa in full force. Al and I didn’t often witness this phenomenon. There were times we found it prudent to be somewhere, anywhere that was nowhere near Kate.

*         *            *

When my parents married in 1937, my father bought a gentle Clydesdale horse, a milk-cart with shiny brass taps, a profitable milk-run, and a smart Randwick house with a cream and heritage-red bull-nosed veranda. Al was born six months later. The year I
was born the Second World War really swung into action. The Blitz began, and the bombs rained down on London. Of course, I don’t actually remember all this, Aunt Thel told me some years back. But I do have vague memories of the Randwick house. Years later, I told my father about my first memory. I remember him saying:

- Well I’ll be buggered! How in blue-blazes could you bloody know *that*?

My mother had opened the front door of our Randwick house and even though I could walk, I crawled full-pelt down the wide hall, through the front-door, across the black and white veranda tiles, and tumbled down the stairs to fall headlong into the sharp corner of the wooden gate post. My parents rushed to pick me up. I saw the palms outside the arched façade to the Royal Alexandria Children’s Hospital as it loomed into view. It seems I had a tiny fracture of the skull. Later in my childhood, much to my distress, this skull fracture came back against me when my step-mother informed me that I was cracked in the head.

My second memory is of a time when the world must have expanded slightly because I dimly remember Al’s presence. My father had some shopping in my mother’s string bag. He held me in his arms as we stood before an open-fronted hall somewhere in Sydney. The bright sunlight out in the street was blackly at odds with the underwater gloom inside the hall. The air was filled with the sound of harrumphs in men’s throats. We breathed in tobacco smells, body odour, sulphurous farts, and the pungent stink of warm horse manure and rotty cabbages. Hunger put me in a fractious mood.

I have a faint memory of uniformed soldiers and papery stacks, and a line of men slowly inching its way towards a row of wooden trestle tables. Cigarette butts littered the ground. When my father got to the top of the line he set me down and I crawled around gathering discarded cigarette butts. Tobacco proved a good remedy for hunger pains. This incident must have had some significance because the memory of cigarette butts resurfaced in later years and stood me in good stead when I was so hungry I would have eaten the laces out of my shoes if I’d had any.

*   *   *

My father once told me that the army threw him away. The muscles were missing from his upper right arm. At fifteen years of age he’d been left for dead on the side of a road, the victim of a hit-and-run. He said you had to be hale and hearty to go away to the war and get your arms and legs blown off. Daddy did the next best thing to soldiering and
became an air-raid warden, and then he sold the smart Randwick house, the milk-cart and run. I don’t know what happened to the horse, but I do know that there was a sheep property out west of Bathurst which my English grandfather had bought for my mother. It was on that property that my father was building a two-storey home. When I was a small child the knowledge of this property didn’t matter much, we never lived there. My mother’s tuberculosis dictated that we live closer to Sydney. When I was still a toddler my father moved us to the tiny hamlet of East Bankstown which, in the early 1940s, was out in the bush, or, as people used to say then, out in the sticks. I remember my father the unreliable prophet catching me up, tossing me in the air, and shouting:

- Whacko! We’re further away from the blasted bombs if Sydney cops it—and you mark my words, it damn-well will.

Our new home, set on a long rectangle of four acres, was a rambling old weather board house set slap bang between two other houses. Across the road at the front and all around was thick bush. Our top acre was the home paddock and vegetable garden. The acre behind was the chook run and the orchard; Daddy kept his white bee-boxes under the trees. The acre tacked onto the end of orchard was where the tennis courts were situated, and the last acre in the row was where our dry old cow, Buttermilk, lived in contented peace until she went belly-up with the bloat and became a Cow-angel. The Collins’ family lived directly behind us. Their fat, snotty-nosed blonde-headed kid was the plague of my life. He lived far enough away for me to ascertain that his doubtful company was simply irresistible, and near enough for me to fight with—I loved a good fight. I didn’t ever love the Collins’ kid. But I suppose his mother loved him. She was always whacking him. I whacked him, too, but that was different.

In our hamlet there were no more than nineteen or so homes scattered throughout the entire area. As well, there was Lynch’s corner grocery shop, Billie Christie’s butcher’s shop, St. Barnabas’s Church and an all sorts denominational church hall, and a rectangular two-storey brick school within walking distance. Twice a week the rattling bus trundled along the road at nine a.m., collected the shoppers, and then returned at three p.m. to dump them back home again. Most of the men rode hard-seated, bone-shaking push-bikes. My father, who by this time wore the title of Chief Sign-writer and Pictorial Artist to the NSW Government Railways, drove a big black Buick.

I can see me standing in our dirt driveway, late in 1942, making faces at myself in the mirrored sheen of Daddy’s black Buick. It must have been a hot day because the
windows of the house had been thrown wide open. My mother’s voice floated out the open window behind me:

- . . . Walt Disney’s *Bambi* . . .

I heard the note of frustration in my father’s tone:

- Well blast it woman we can’t . . . you know I don’t have any petrol coupons left.

Katey came out of the house and stood on the front veranda. She lifted her hair away from her neck and let it fall again as she called back over her shoulder:

- Mrs. Lynch gets extra because of the shop—maybe we could borrow some from her . . . I’m sure she wouldn’t mind.

Daddy’s voice floated back:

- Well write a blooming note and send Joan-Annette down with it.

When I came back from the shop Daddy was standing on the front veranda with my mother. Grinning broadly, he took the coupon, and said:

- O.K. Katey—let’s get the glad-rags on.

Then the good times stopped. We couldn’t get petrol for love or money. Suddenly, we had petrol again. That’s the way it went in the war years. One day you’d be a petrol pauper, and the next day you’d be a king of the road. Petrol became limited to essential services. My father put the car up on blocks in the garage, and said:

- Damn thing’s just got to stay there for the duration of this bloody war.

So Daddy rode his bone-shaker bicycle to work and became just like all the other men in our area. We didn’t really need the car anyway. Much to my delight we boarded the cinder-puffing steam-train my father called The Grand Old Lady, crossed the Hawkesbury River to Gosford, and caught the sturdy wooden green and cream painted Wagstaffe ferry to holiday with Nanna and Pop.

*    *    *

The day we arrived home from Wagstaffe, weedy little Billie Christie, who was our butcher and Daddy’s mate, walked through our back door trailing his big-boned lady cousin, Bertie, behind him. To me, Bertie looked enormous and seemed to dwarf my poor mother even though Katey was the taller of the two. My mother was very slender. It must have been this that gave me the impression that Bertie was a giant. After her first visit Bertie came alone to our house. Her visits were occasional, but they always
occurred on a night when my father was at home, and she always said the same thing, -
Hee-hee! Just popped in to see how you are, Kate. Daddy said she was being kind to
Mummy. Then, on one of these evenings, my father walked Bertie home as soon as it
grew dark.

When it was time for us to go to bed Al and I went to the lounge-room to kiss
our parents goodnight. Our mother sat there alone, huddled in front of the fire. She
seemed to have shrunk into herself. Her face wore a peculiar pallor. Al took me by my
hand and led me to my bed and tucked me up. He bent down and kissed me goodnight,
and said:

- Go to sleep Joey, Mummy’s sick and Daddy’s gone out to watch for bombs.

That night I had nightmares. The gas masks hanging on the back of the kitchen
door had watchful eyes, the snake-eating kookaburra painted into the enamel on the
front of our green and cream Kooka gas-cooker came to life. Stripey, my toy stuffed
tiger, leered at me and licked his lips. A huge poke-bonneted, aproned Mother Goose
bustled in and stood over me as I lay in my bed and I screamed and screamed. I woke
struggling, tangled in my sweaty sheets.

My father didn’t come running as he normally did. My mother came instead,
arms half in and half out as she battled with her dressing gown sleeves. She bent over
my bed and stroked my hair, and said:

- Shush now dear, it’s very late . . . shh, shh, go to sleep.

The slamming of the back door brought me awake. The translucence of a new
day filled my bed-room window. Suddenly, the air in house seemed to explode with the
sound of raised voices. I sobbed loudly. Al crept into my bed and gathered me in his
thin, little boy’s arms.

- It’s o.k. Joey, said Al. I think Daddy’s been a bloody bad-man. I’m going to
shoot him with my cap-gun.

The cap-gun didn’t work. Later that morning Al took the caps that hadn’t been
used out into the back garden. He placed the strips of red caps in neat rows on the
concrete path, and then hunted around for a small rock. He carried his rock back the
neat rows. He squatted down, and lifting his arm high, brought the rock down, and
down, and down—BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG!

*   *   *   *

21
That night the row began again. That was the start. I remember the rows so clearly. How could I ever forget? When I was a child I thought Al and I were the cause of those rows. Al thought so, too. Children always blame themselves when their parents’ marriages go terribly wrong.

After Al’s cap-gun failed Bertie came to our house more often. She would open the back door, giggle, and walk in as if she belonged. She only ever stayed for a few minutes. My father always walked her home. My mother introduced Al and me to hide-and-go-seek. There’d be the three of us after Daddy had left with Bertie, running around the house squealing and laughing until our mother would sink breathless onto a chair and cough bright spots of blood into her white hankie. In my mind the coughing and the blood got tangled up with Bertie and the rows and Al’s cap-gun, and settled in my middle as a feeling of dread. Al grew quiet and seemed to sink into himself; but in the way that some small children do, in between the rows and the coughing, the dread feeling in my middle grew distant, and to keep it away I sang and laughed a bit louder than I usually did.

My mother started calling my father Hal instead of Darling. I started calling him Hal in my mind. I don’t think Al bothered about his mind because he called him Hal outright.

*   *   *   *

The Saturday morning I heard my father’s footsteps stamp into the kitchen couldn’t have been too long after the first row because they go together in my memory. On this particular Saturday morning I heard my father’s muffled shout:

- That blasted kid is a bloody little fire bug. He had a fire going in the flaming hen-house—smoked stuffed chooks laying everywhere. We’ll be shit lucky to get any eggs for a damn week. Shit-shit-shit! Now there’s flaming smoke coming out of the blasted bottom of that bloody cabinet.

I heard my father’s footsteps run towards the kitchen cabinet. He reefed the door almost off its hinges, grabbed my arm and hauled me out of the cabinet where I’d been crouching, and pulled the box of dead Redheads out of my hand. My fiery pile of butter papers, one with melted butter still inside, made a beautiful little bonfire. How my father’s booted foot didn’t go through the charred floor of the cabinet as he stamped out my hard work was a miracle that not even an atheist could deny.
- It’s your blasted fault, Katey, yelled my father. Why aren’t you teaching these bloody little buggers better? Both the kids are flaming pyromaniacs.

My mother looked dazed. She pushed back against the porcelain kitchen sink and murmured:

- That was the last of the matches—how’ll we light the gas? And we don’t have any butter coupons left . . . oh, what in heaven’s name are we going to do . . .

Daddy was in one of his cold, white tempers. Brushing rudely past my mother, he stamped and huffed up and down the length of our narrow kitchen. Then he gritted his teeth and said in a deadly quiet measured voice:

- Katey . . . you . . . useless . . . bitch . . . for God’s sake send that bloody Joan-Annette down to blasted Lynch’s with one-and-six for under the damned counter.

So down I went on the long walk to Lynch’s corner shop with the pocket of my red, white-spotted dress full of coins for under-the-counter butter. When I was not quite half-way there it suddenly hit me. ‘Under the counter’ was the name everyone used for the black market. The black market was terribly expensive, and it was so illegal that if you got caught you went directly to gaol. My father said it was like playing a game of Monopoly. I stood stock still amongst the weeds growing on the narrow dirt path. My mind grappled with what Mummy had said to Daddy about petrol. She had shaken her head vigorously, then brushed the hair from her face and said:

- No—no. Definitely no black market petrol for us. Sweet Mary! We’d end up in goal . . . what on earth can you be thinking of, Hal.

My heart was beating and thumping in my chest, and the blood thrummed in my ears. Was butter like petrol? Would I go to gal? I crept nearer the thick scrub that grew along one side of the path, and tried to make myself invisible by flattening my back against the bush and walking along like a crab. I tried to hold my breath and prayed that the government ration man didn’t come along the road in his car. I told myself I would be safe once I was inside the shop and ran down the road praying out loud:

- Gentle Jesus meek and mild . . .

I pushed my way through the glass panelled doors and stood patiently by while Mrs. Lynch—God-mother Lynch—served the last customer bar me.

Why did I call Mrs. Lynch ‘god-mother’? I don’t know. It’s possible that the tag wore an official stamp. But it’s equally possible that it could have been a matter of my
own invention. I don’t remember being christened. But I do remember the fat glass balloons that sat in a row on the top of the counter.

One balloon held luscious lumps of chocolate-coated butter toffee. The spittle gathered in the corners of my mouth. I jingled the silver sixpences and threepenny bits in my pocket. Petrol and gaol and butter toffees were spinning around in my mind. Godmother looked down at my face, said – Mmm, then walked across to the large window at the front of the shop and pulled down the roller blind. Inside, the shop was dim. Godmother came around the counter, bent down towards me, and said:

- Yes dear? Have you got a note for me from Mummy . . . no? Look in your pocket dear.

I hunted amongst the money in the pocket of my red, cotton dress. No, no note. I stood still for a moment, thinking, and then suddenly remembered it was something to do with ‘butter’ and ‘six’. I felt relieved.

- Mummy wants six of those butter toffees, please, God-mother Lynch.

She pursed her mouth up tight like a cat’s bum, and looked me in the eye.

- Are you certain, Joan-Annette? Are you quite, quite certain, dear?

Yes, yes I was.

On the long walk home I thought about how surprised and pleased my mother would be to get change as well as butter toffee. Six lovely butter toffees—there was Mummy, Daddy, Al, and me, and Oh-oh! I counted on my fingers again. Two fingers left over! The bag was getting sticky. I popped a toffee into my mouth to even up the number, and then pushed in another so I wouldn’t look greedy by having three for me. I walked in the door with my jaws glued together and remembered the words ‘butter’ and ‘matches’. My mother fixed me with her eyes of slate, said:

- Spit it out at once!

- Mmmrrph . . .

I couldn’t dislodge that toffee. Mummy reefed it from my jaws and gave me a little shove.

- Get to bed!

My teeth hurt. I pulled the sheet over my head. The blood drummed in my ears. My father’s shouting was deafening:

- Now do you bloody see what I flaming mean, Kate? When the blue blazes are you going to bloody wake up and teach those buggers better? Blast you woman.
The back door banged. I heard my father’s boots scrunching on the driveway and my mother sobbing. I stuffed the sheet into my mouth and cried, too. It was my fault my mother was so unhappy. I should have remembered the words my mother told me to say to God-mother Lynch. I shouldn’t have looked at the toffees in the jar.

After this I was forever being sent to bed hungry. I got sent to bed hungry when I wanted Al’s new crystal set and cried then broke it because he wouldn’t let me have a go. I got sent to bed hungry when I cried and said my new three-wheeler pink wooden pedal-bike was no good, and punched Al for his big-boy’s red wooden scooter. I got sent to bed hungry when I cried and belted Al over the head for bursting the tar heat-bubbles I said were mine.

I must have known very well that I wasn’t sent to bed hungry because I’d cried. I must have known that it was punishment for having done the wrong thing. But the events that happened in the ensuing years somehow got themselves mixed around in my mind with this time, and until I was almost eleven years of age I believed that the crying was the thing that brought about being punished with hunger.

 *         *        *

Although I was only three years of age and no-one had said anything, I sensed that Bertie liked my father far too much. Young as I was, I didn’t see why my father had to walk Bertie home and make my mother cry. I felt very protective towards her. I didn’t feel protective towards my father. I was used to him walking away with Bertie. I didn’t know it then, but I placed my mother on a pedestal; and if I think about it I would say that as a small child I saw her as belonging to my father who didn’t any longer seem to belong to her. I don’t think I ever saw him as belonging to Al and me; I just saw him as a big, unreliable playmate that got a bit cranky with Al sometimes.

I’d never seen my mother even talking to a man other than Daddy. So it was quite a shock to come in from playing one afternoon to see her sitting on a stranger’s knee. Al glared at this tall, black-haired, blue-eyed man, and said through his teeth:

- Mummy, you just wait ‘til Daddy gets home—I’m telling.

My mother laughed and stood up, shook the creases out of her house apron, and said:

- For goodness’ sake Al this is my little brother Arki, so use you good manners. Now say hello nicely and come and kiss your Uncle.
I heard the suspicion in Al’s voice as he whispered hoarsely:

- You got a brother? Where’s he been, then . . . where’s his house.

- Africa—in Africa where he was born, we all lived there for a while.

All? Who was all? Al closed his mouth and swallowed. He eyed our Uncle Arki with suspicion. Shyness overwhelmed me. Head down, I stood sucking my thumb in spite of the bitter aloes my mother painted it with every day. My mother went out to the kitchen to put the kettle on the gas. Her best tea-cups rattled against their saucers as she came back into the lounge-room balancing a tray and saying:

- And I have a little sister, too. She’s your aunt and she lives in Ireland where she was born. So you’ve got an Irish aunt and an African uncle.

I can’t remember the name of my mother’s sister even though I know our mother told us; and I can’t work out if my mother also lived in Ireland for a while. I have often wondered about these things. I keep tugging at my mind because I know I know. But what I can remember about that time was that while he was on leave from the Royal Navy the strangely accented Uncle Arki sometimes brought us a whole pocketful of funny little balloons that came in many colours, and he came to our house every day. While Arki was on leave, Bertie was absent and Daddy’s bad mood increased as time went by.

I remember the sunny morning Al and I sat on the side steps blowing soapy bubbles from the bamboo bubble-pipes our father had made. Al blew a rainbow bubble. We watched it sail up and up and burst. Al blew another bubble, and said:

- Daddy told Mummy Uncle Arki can’t come here anymore.
- Why? Why can’t Daddy let him . . . he’s fun.
- Daddy told Mummy Uncle Arki’s a bloody pig—ooh, look at that big one Joey—he’s got condoms and the bugger ate all of Daddy’s tomato sauce.
- Does he feel bloody sick like me when I got chicken pox?
- Don’t know, said Al, and went on blowing bubbles.

I couldn’t ask the fat Collins’ kid. We’d had a fight. I’d lost. He was my enemy now. And I couldn’t ask Mummy, either.

The night after Daddy banished Uncle Arki for good, Bertie came swinging her wide, floral-covered hips through our back door.

*  *  *
Whenever we went to Wagstaffe Nanna would tell me the ‘christening story’. When my father was born, Nanna’s father wanted him brought up in the Baptist faith. Pop, who was a Jesuit-raised Roman Catholic, told Nanna she had his permission to have the baby christened in her faith. Nanna made the christening arrangements with the minister of the Church of England in Geurie. But she took so long to dress my baby father in his lace and ribbons that by the time she got to the church the minister had done an unheard of thing; he’d locked the church and gone home to a late dinner. So the Presbyterian minister took pity on her; he stopped pruning his beloved roses, took her up to his church, and christened my beribboned father. I remember the day my father rudely interrupted Nanna’s retelling of the christening story; he said:

- Buggered if I know Mother . . . no bloody wonder I always thought God was everywhere in every blooming thing—in that blasted bird up there, over there in that great gum-tree, in the bloody river with the flaming fish . . . in the legs of the kitchen table . . .

So I think it must have been because of my father’s belief in an omnipresent God, and my Catholic mother’s insistence on formal religious instruction, that every Sunday, on a rotating roster, Al and I were sent to Matins at the High Church of England, the Catholic Mass with God-mother Lynch, the Baptists’ Sunday-school, the Presbyterian morning service, and, for good measure, the Methodists’ fire and brimstone session. As well, Pop instructed me on Jesuit predestination, and Daddy instilled me and Al with a mystical Pantheistic idealism. Al and I were not certain what we were, but we were given sixpence for the poor box, and another sixpence for after-church lollies from Lynch’s—long, long black liquorice straps, round-bellied pink sugar-candy pigs, rainbow coloured gob-stoppers. Sixpence was a lot of money back then.

One Sunday Al and I returned home from Baptist Sunday School and heard our mother calling to us, and we hurried to the dining-room. Sitting with my mother was a straight-backed gentleman and a short, pleasant-faced round ball of a woman. My mother stopped stirring her tea, placed her spoon carefully on the saucer, and said gently:

- This is my father, your English grandfather, and his new wife.

My English grandfather: I can picture him still. He was tall, thin, fair-skinned, and had twinkly blue eyes. Near his left temple a deep round skin-covered hole was the starting point for the jagged scar which ran away across his cheek. What hair he had left
was a faded auburn sprinkled through with silver. We only possessed four wooden
dining-room chairs. Al sat on the spare chair. I sat on my English grandfather’s knee
and put my finger on the round hole near his temple. In a voice that Al later said was
‘bloody la-di-da’, he said:

- That was a musket ball m’dear, and the other was a sabre cut—Boer War,
don’t y’know.

I don’t know if this was true or not, but it sounded true to me. I like to think it
was. It’s romantic. On that day Grandfather reached under his chair and pulled out two
plain brown paper parcels. He placed one in my hands, said, - Careful now m’dear, and
laid the other parcel across Al’s lap. Bits of brown paper lay scattered across the floor.
Al held his grey, leaden warship aloft as if it were a trophy. My English grandfather
helped me with my brown paper. Ooh! There, in her nest of brown paper lay the
gorgeous blue-eyed, golden-ringleted Belinda-doll.

That night there was yet another shocking row. Sticking my head under my
pillow didn’t do anything to muffle the fury in Daddy’s voice:

- No way, Kate. Shit, you stupid bloody bitch. You’re out of your flaming mind
if you think I’d sign the damn papers to let him take them to England . . . Wha . . .? Oh,
you and your hoity-toity family! Jesus! Go to buggery.

That Sunday was the only time I ever saw my English grandfather. It’s a great
tragedy because I have the distinct feeling that we had a natural affinity, and I might
have grown up in England and missed out on the hell that became my life.

*        *          *

I next see my parents in the sun-room where I’d gone to see what all the noise was
about. My distraught mother, her long hair flying all about her face and the navel on
her great water-melon of a soon-to-become-Camilla belly sticking out, stands there in
her soft silky nightdress screaming at the top of her lungs:

- You bastard, Hal . . . she’s not going to have my babies. Do you hear me you
Bastard?

Oranges and apples leave the white fruit bowl on the sun-room table and find
their way into her hands, then leave her hands to fly at my father’s unbending back. He
stands, arms folded, staring fixedly into the apricot tree outside the bay window. Al
comes into the room, picks up a Granny Smith apple and throws it at my father’s head.
One week after the fruit throwing my mother pulled me up the road to Al’s school. I flattened my feet on the ground. My mother yanked on my arm. The dark olive skin of her thin face flushed with the effort. My feet skidded along. Black tar stuck to my black shoes. Why did I have to go to school? The fat Collins’ kid didn’t have to go to school and he was older than me. School was stupid. How could I do the hard sums Al did? I’d be in BIG trouble. My mother wasn’t listening; she was dragging me up the road.

I now know the school had made a special exemption for me to attend because my mother was, by that time, very ill, and my father was rarely at home. I don’t think that pre-schools or day-care were even thought of in those days unless it was Lady Gowrie’s over the other side of Sydney somewhere, and I’m not even certain of that. All I know is, that when my mother dragged me up the road to the school I could already recite poems about English gardens, write and say the alphabet, sing, and read; my mother had taught me all these things. My father had taught me quotes from Shakespeare, and how to mime, draw, make newspaper kites, and swear. I already learnt dancing. I could fight and bite and scratch with the best of the kids. After a month of trying to come to terms with my boredom and fears I still felt that I had no need to go to school, so I wagged it—and took half the class with me.

For a whole week we hid in the bush. At bell-times we’d go home as if we’d been at school. One morning I stuck my head out the bush, and jumped back. My heart beat erratically; there was a lady in linen frock standing across the road. It was my mother. She waited patiently at the bus stop, holding new baby Camilla in her arms. A girl, who was wagging it with me, poked her finger in my back and said in a sing-song tone:

- Scaredy-cat, Jo-Jo—scaredy-scaredy-scaredy.
- No I’m not—not-so!
- Double-dare you then, stick your head out again, said a boy who wore brown sandals on his dirty feet and flapped his hands when he walked.

In those days, to refuse a ‘dare’, especially a double one, was a heinous crime. What was I to do? Refuse a double-dare? Or, face my mother? It would never, ever, do to let anyone guess that my stomach was doing back-flips. So I stuck my head out of the bush in my mother’s direction, put my fingers in my eyes and mouth and tugged at my
face, poked my tongue out, then pulled my head quickly back into the bush and crossed my fingers behind my back. A small girl standing behind me sat down in the sandy dirt and released her breath and whispered:

- She’s gone on the bus.

I breathed easily. A few minutes later my mother the magician, minus baby Camilla, stepped out from behind a thick bush and stood before me in all her fury. She pounced, grabbed me by the arm, and hissed through her teeth at the other kids:

- Get to school.

She dragged me home, lifted me into the concrete wash-tub and belted me with my wooden sand-spade. I cried, I screamed, and couldn’t hold on.

- Get inside this instant and change your pants while I write a letter to your poor teacher, said Mummy.

I crept into the forbidden territory of Mummy’s and Daddy’s bed-room and inspected her beautiful silky brown white-spotted suit, looked at the smart white belt, picked up her stylish white high-heeled peep-toed shoes, and stuffed my wet knickers down amongst the lace in her underwear drawer. Funny thing, that; I remember I thought if my wet knickers were out of sight that they somehow wouldn’t be wet. Children get some peculiar ideas. I also remember that just after I’d stuffed my knickers into my mother’s drawer, I pulled my father’s drawer open. It was empty.

His neatly ironed white singlets and boxer shorts were folded into a rough, splintery wooden fruit-box standing in a dark corner of the room.

*   *   *

My memories of the morning my mother kept me home from school are so sharp I can even see the intricate pineapple and feather and fan patterning of Camilla’s white, hand-knitted baby shawl. I can go back there immediately:

My mother sits in the front seat of God-mother Lynch’s black car and nurses little baby Camilla. I can see a corner of the knitted lace edging of Camilla’s shawl from where Al and I sit in the back. We’re dressed in our best clothes. I wonder where we’re going.

- Don’t ask questions, says Mummy, and you’ll be told no lies.

God-mother Lynch shoots her a quick side-ways look, and says:
- Joan-Annette, you’re going on a holiday—a lovely, lovely holiday. But it’s a surprise dear . . . don’t ask anymore . . . you’ll see . . .

Why can’t I know? I hope we’re going to see Pop. I sing — holidays-holidays-holidays, over and over and run my hands down the front of my white, hail-stone muslin dress. The yoke is smocked in red; my white angora bolero is soft and fluffy. My pretty straw bonnet is trimmed with blue forget-me-nots, and my black strap-over shoes have silver buckles. Patrick Bear sits goodly beside me on the leather seat. I pat him on his green and brown felt head.

After a very long drive we pull into high wrought-iron gates and I gasp in amazement and delight at a beautiful sandstone castle. Worked into the great gates is the iron word ‘Dalwood’. I sound it out and roll it around on my tongue. It tastes like Robin Hood’s home in the green-woods of Sherwood. Is Pop waiting for me here? A lady, dressed just like the princess’s nun-nurse in one of my story books, comes out of the castle doors and stands talking to Mummy. She puts her hand on Mummy’s arm, and calls over to me and Al:

- Go over there and play, children.

Mummy doesn’t smile at us. She turns her head away. She walks into the castle with the nurse lady, in through the grand doors. God-mother Lynch sits over to one side on a bench.

- Go over there and play, she says in a tight voice. Is she angry? Why is she angry? Doesn’t she like being my god-mother anymore?

It’s shady under the trees. The wind makes a sighing noise. Al and I breathe in the clean sharp scent of the sky-touching pines. We shoot pine-cones at each other, and tight-rope walk the sunlit garden’s rocky edges; we scuff our best shoes in the pine-needle-strewn sandy soil. My senses delight in the wondrous salty tang of the sea. I forget about God-mother Lynch being angry. The lady comes out of the castle doors and calls me over. She tells Al to stay outside and play. I hold Patrick Bear by his green and brown felt ear and skip through the door, and the nun-lady-nurse says:

- Stop! Now walk.

I remember then that I’m a princess. I walk sedately into the wide polished hall and gaze about in rapturous wonder.

- Where’s my Mummy?

- Your mother’s busy. Come with me, she says.

I don’t move, I can’t move. Patrick Bear feels uneasy.
The great polished oak doors close behind me with a firm click, and the bright sunlight is snuffed out like a candle.

Dalwood Children’s Home in the 1940s

Photo courtesy of the Manly Library.

*   *   *

Wednesday February 4th 2004 was a perfect summer’s day. The blue sky was cloudless and the light breeze carried the scent of hay grass from the farm across the river. My husband walked in the back door, placed the paper down on the kitchen bench, positioned it precisely, and said:

- Jo. Have you seen this?

His soft voice had a peculiar edge. A frisson of fear ran through me. There’d been things talked about in the news lately—things I didn’t want to hear. I knew instinctively that ‘this’ would upset my world. Without glancing down, I said:

- Why, what am I supposed to see?

My husband tapped the paper and I said:

- What is this Bob . . . ? Oh, God!
Innocence Betrayed: . . . the courage of the now adults who yesterday shared their experiences in the NSW institutions from the 1920s to the 1970s, with the Senate Inquiry into children in institutional care . . . Dr. Joanna Penglase, president of CLAN (Care Leavers Australia Network) believes more than 100,000 people make up a ‘lost generation’, many permanently scarred by their experiences in care.

Up until this time I’d felt that my life was compartmentalised; I’d tried to lock whole sections of my past away in what I called my Pandora’s Boxes and bury them in the deep recesses of my mind. My husband knew some of my secrets; I believed it was my duty to tell him. Al knew a little more because up to point we had a shared history. My children only knew that I’d been in a Children’s Home. The subject was taboo. When they were little I was very protective of them, and felt that when they grew to maturity life would bring its own troubles. I didn’t want to burden them with the knowledge of my past. Above all, I wanted them to enjoy a happy childhood.

My children, my dear, dear children; I love to take a quiet moment and picture them in their growing years —there they are, running carefree across the hills, tumbling in play with their friends and their animals, and swinging far out from the hillside on their rope swing. They grew into normal, healthy adults who could stand on their own feet. I feel blessed. Five years ago I felt it was time to tell them about my life. Two of my children listened but didn’t want to talk about my past, and two didn’t want to know at all. My son, the self-appointed spokesman, summed it up:

- Mum, I love you greatly. I think you had a bad time; but I know you as I know you and that’s all that matters to me.

I find it odd that my grandchildren want to know—maybe, with them, my past is far enough removed from their reality.

Over the years I’d tried a few times to rid myself of my ghosts. I can see now that I wasn’t successful because I denied those evils to which they were inextricably linked. Rather I’d pushed them down so deeply that they’d inexorably rise to haunt my dreams, and in the immediate aftermath of the nightmarish turmoil, by dint of my waking memories of the dreams, the feelings they evoked would creep uninvited and unwanted into my daily life. I believed that if I consciously allowed daylight to illuminate even one thing from a Pandora’s Box, two or three other things from deeper down, and which I couldn’t handle, would escape and push my emotive self-destruct button. I battled deep feelings that I’d somehow caused, or deliberately and knowingly
invited, the terrible things that had happened to me when I was a child. So I tried to keep my past tightly under control; and the more tightly I tried to control my secrets for fear of anything leaching out, the greater became the fear that something would escape. It was a mad wheel; my secrets bred in me feelings of fear and shame and guilt and they all chased each other around in self-perpetuating circles.

I’d been feeling ill for some time and was sent to a medical specialist. He sat, pen in hand, looking at me over the top of his wire-framed glasses, saying:

- We find that illnesses quite often begin in childhood. So tell me about your childhood—were you a well child? And tell me about your parents . . . Oh they’re dead, are they. So what did they die of my dear. And grandparents . . . can you tell me about their health?

I answered his questions, and confided a few things to him. My misplaced trust rose up and slapped me in the face. He glanced from under his brows and pursed his lips. The expression on his face was disbelieving; and then he intimated that I had a few nuts and raisins thrown into my cake-mix. He was certain I was a few sandwiches short of a picnic. A flood of embarrassment swamped my senses and left me reeling, and my emotions got scrambled up with the feeling that by my own indiscretions I’d invited my own humiliation. He scribbled on his fine note pad, pulled an envelope out of a drawer in his desk, and said:

- I’d like you to go and see this psychiatrist. He’s a nice fellow. He’ll get you sorted out. Come back and see me in a couple of months if you think you’ve got any medical problems.

He pushed his chair back and walked me to the door. I couldn’t wait to get out of there. As I walked back to my car I told myself that if he thought I’d ever come back and see him he was quite, quite wrong.

Anger bit deeply. Why did the knowledge that a doctor didn’t believe me upset me that much? Or was it the fact that a medical specialist had thought I was mad? I see now that I was deathly afraid that I would be labelled as a liar, or, even worse, officially declared insane as my step-mother had assured me I was when I was a child. I recall asking the leading psychiatrist to whom I’d been referred:

- Am I mad?
- Do you think you are? He flashed back.

I thought about it, and said:
- Sometimes I wonder, but no, not really.
- No, he said, I don’t think you are, either. So relax. Want a cup of coffee?

An odd thing happened in this consultation. The psychiatrist was a pleasant man and a keen cook; he chatted on about recipes he’d tried and liked. He was reeling off the ingredients in a favourite dish of his when suddenly, without once altering his tone or pausing, he smoothly slipped a question into his recipe:
- Who brought you up?

Well! He caught me off guard. My mind was still on cooking. The quick answer fell out of my mouth and surprised me:
- No-one. I reared myself up.

Then as if he hadn’t asked the question and received a reply, as if he hadn’t heard or noted anything at all, he went on smoothly in the same tone, - and then I add the chillies, oh, about two—and green, not red . . .

In hindsight, I see that my reply probably holds some truth—the adults with whom I came into close contact in my childhood might have twanged quite a few chords in my make-up, but I followed my own path. Of course, I believe that Pop and Nanna and Wagstaffe and my memories of them were significant influences to the good in my growing years. But I saw so little of them, and had such little personal contact, that my grandparents probably never knew how they helped to shape my life. Their influence was mainly due to my own romanticising. It was all in my head. It’s amazing how little things, even small instances and fleeting moments, can have a profound effect on a child’s development. It seems to me that the human psyche is a delicate bloom, and that the human mind is a strange territory indeed.

Further investigation revealed that I was in fact very physically ill.

Some weeks later I sat in my G.P.s’ office. The acrid taste of bitterness filled my mouth. I bit my tongue to stop the words from flowing unchecked. Then I said in a tightly controlled voice:
- Dr. John, I feel so angry. That other doctor didn’t believe me. He thought I was a nut.
- Let it go, Jo. Anger and bitterness are soul-destroying emotions, said my wise G.P. soothingly.

His tone and words must have done something. My anger subsided. But there were questions, and I was searching for answers. I looked across at him and said:
- Dr. John. Did my childhood—all the starvation and ill-treatment, cause all this—my illnesses?
  
  He thought for a moment, then leant forward and said earnestly:
  
  - It would be too difficult to prove inconclusively at this distance, and a lot of your problems are genetic.
  
  - Well, I said thoughtfully, I don’t suppose you can fix things backwards anyway.

On that fateful February day when my husband pushed the paper towards me, I asked myself why he’d chosen to buy a paper that particular day when he didn’t normally buy one at all; and I wondered whether this was an instance of Pop’s Jesuit predestination or mere circumstance. Whatever it was, it wasn’t Choice. Who knows why these things happen?

After I’d read the article my husband had held the phone towards me and said:

- Jo, don’t you think it’s time?

Yes. Yes, of course it was. I read the helpline number given in the paper and pushed the buttons on the hands-free phone.

*   *   *

Five years on I can still recall the feel of Bob’s hand holding mine, and the nerves that twitched in my stomach when I first met Leonie Sheedy, co-founder of Care Leavers’ Australia Network. I sat in her Bankstown office on Saturday, February 17th 2004 and shifted nervously in my seat. I cleared my throat and asked myself, why am I here? I didn’t know what to say or where to start, and thought, what do I want for heavens’ sake, and what am I after—attention? Then Leonie leaned towards me, saying:

- It’s alright, Jo, I understand. You’re not alone anymore.

For me, that was an uncomfortable moment; but when she squatted down in front of me and took my hands in her own, then asked in which Home I’d been incarcerated, I lost it. I broke down. My reaction shocked me to the core. I was mortified. I felt like an old fool. She patted my arm, offered tissues, and said

- Jo, have you thought about writing it all down? No . . . ? Well, that’s helped us all. It’s cathartic, it helps put things into perspective and brings about reflection and understanding . . . let’s put it this way; it’s the beginning of the healing process.
D’you know Leonie, my husband said, that’s exactly what I’ve tried to tell her.

Oh no he didn’t, he said you should write a book. I couldn’t have written a book for the life of me. I couldn’t write anything. I wasn’t ready.

A week or so later Leonie called to say.

- Jo, hello. How’re you going? Look; what I’m ringing for is, there’s been a new development. It’s now possible to get hold of our official records. Maybe you could find out about yourself that way?

- To tell the truth Leonie, I did try to find out about myself in 1987—and for a couple of years after that . . .

I cradled the phone and listened, then said:

- Yes, yes Leonie . . . of course. Yes well, I suppose you’re right, this official thing does sound like a new approach—different from the family trail, anyway. I’m just scared, that’s all . . . Leonie, what if I discover something I don’t much like, something that’s been given permanent status because some official has written it into the records?

- Yes, I know . . . it’s scary, one of the others were upset because her records said she was a dummy—and she’s not, oh she’s definitely not.

We said goodbye, and rang off. I took a deep breath, dialled information for the number, and rang the Queenscliffe Community Health Centre. Could they send me a copy of my papers from 1943 to 1948, my records from Dalwood? Oh, no, they were very sorry but I had the wrong department. It seems I needed Dalwood itself. They were very sorry, too. Didn’t I know that the hospital had, by this time, been seconded Dalwood Children’s Homes to the Far West Children’s Scheme? It seems I needed to write a letter to the Medical Records Department of Manly Hospital.

Sheets of scrunched and torn writing paper littered the study floor. The pile of unfinished and discarded letters mounted. At the end of a long day I finally held the winner of the paper pile in my hand—a non-apologetic letter. In it, I explained that I wished to make sense of my childhood so I could put my life into perspective. I scratched around in the drawer of the desk and pulled out the cheque book; then I made out a cheque for the $33 they requested in payment for a records check, and folded it into the envelope with my letter. I felt grieved, and said silently:

- Really God, I’ll tell you something for nothing, this is just too much altogether.

In mid November the sound of the postman’s bike projected itself through my open study window and invaded my space. I put down the novel I was reading and
walked to the window. I watched the postie push a bundle of mail into our letter-box. Amongst the junk was a letter from Medical Records. In effect it read:

We are in receipt of your request for Dalwood records.

We regret to inform you that after an extensive search we are not in possession of the information that you have requested. Thus, we are unable to produce the documents.

Where could my official records be? Was I no-one? Crying and shaking with frustration didn’t solve a thing. I took myself out to the garden and tried to calm down. The birds were singing in the palms. The air was redolent with the sweet scent of orange jessamime. I told myself that there had to be more to life than getting upset and angry. The ringing of the phone disturbed my thoughts. The caller was an official who said:

- I just had to ring you Jo. I just wanted to tell you that when I read your letter I took it upon myself to go Dalwood Children’s Home personally and make a thorough search. I want to tell you I found a padlocked Records’ Room in the loft above the old stables—it seems no-one knew it was there. I must’ve turned over every square centimetre of that place. Oh, Jo, all those places were terrible but Dalwood was horrific. Jo, it isn’t good news I’m afraid. This is off the record by the way; all records for that period had been destroyed, and I’d say by Dalwood’s out-going staff in 1950—they would have had cause. Look; have you thought about hypno-therapy to help you remember things?

I felt sad, alone, powerless, frustrated and angry all at the same time—not with the official, though. About him I thought, what a lovely person, fancy chasing things up in his own time for a complete stranger. But, hypno-therapy? I already remembered all too clearly what had happened, I just wanted to make sense of the whole thing and put it into perspective.

- Besides, said a sneaky thought in my head, what if the hypno-therapist told you that you were barking mad?

Manly Hospital Medical Records Department voluntarily returned my cheque for $33. My husband was in the study, lying on the floor with his head stuck under the desk, fiddling with the computer connections. I held the returned cheque under the desk, and said:

- Bob, see this? Well I’ll say sorry now because there could be some hefty phone bills—I’m not giving up. I’m going to keep on searching until I find something . . . I’m not going to be left dead and buried on an official garbage-tip.
- Good for you, he answered from his spot under the desk.

I stomped through the house, picked up the hands-free phone, and rang Seaforth Public School.

- When? Oh, I’m very sorry, but I’m afraid that we don’t keep records that far back—all the records for the 1940s were destroyed many years ago.

I was riled, ready for a fight. I punched numbers into the phone at a furious rate, and in quick succession contacted the Department of Education; the State Records Department; and the Department of Community Services in relation to the old Child Welfare System. Nowhere at all were there any records. All had been destroyed many years before. Everyone was really very sorry, very, very sorry. By this stage I was starting to feel very sorry for myself. Officially, it seems that I hadn’t existed during those years, and my experiences, according to the official paper-trail, hadn’t occurred. Even though I felt frustrated and let down I didn’t want to give up without solving at least some of the puzzle. I took myself back into the study where my husband still lay with his head stuck under the desk fiddling with computer connections and mumbling:

- Fucking bloody thing.

- Never mind all that, I said. I want to go and have another look at Dalwood.

His head popped out from under the desk. He looked horrified, and he said:

- What, you mean right now? Oh, right—later. Thank God for that . . . Yes, well O.K., but I’m coming with you, and he took the phone from my hand and rang my daughter who lived in Sydney.

It was school holidays, and it was cold and raining. Dalwood had been locked up and deserted. I couldn’t enter the buildings. So for the second time in the years since I’d left Dalwood as a child, I walked the grounds and looked, and remembered what I dared. The cold rain drizzled down and grey ghosts rose up about me, crawled with their icy fingers over my skin and speared their destructive needles through my soul. I turned to my daughter, put my arms around her, and said:

- Oh, dear. I’m so sorry, love, but I’ve got to cut this visit short I’m afraid. I’ve just got to get out of here—as far away from Dalwood as I possibly can. I need, really need, to go home right now. Do you mind terribly . . . ? Say if you do.

At home, Bob and I sat eating our dinner of lamb chops and vegetables. I chewed thoughtfully, swallowed, and then said:
- Bob, I’ve decided . . . I give up. I’ve come to a dead end—that’s the second time I’ve tried, so no more chasing around for me. But now I’m ready to write my story for the CLAN support newsletter.

- Well, said Bob, helping himself to more vegetables, As Leonie said and as I’ve said, it will help you, Jo . . . and you never know—it might help others.

After dinner he took himself to the study. I heard drawers being opened and shut. He came back into the kitchen and placed a writing pad and pen on the bench in front of me. I craved solitude. He left me in peace. I wrote, took a short respite, and wrote some more; then when I’d finished I put down the pen and said:

- Oh Bobby, my brain is whirling. That was the hardest, the most painful thing I’ve ever done. I can’t ever do that ever again.

I needed peace. I needed time. I needed space. I found it in the garden. I knelt down on the freshly turned loam and made furrows and set bean seeds. There was no peace from the phone. Its insistent ringing brought me running inside to pick up. It was Leonie. I heard the excitement in her voice:

- Jo, the Senate Inquiry into children in institutional and out-of-home ‘care’ have just announced that they’re taking a second round of submissions from those of us who have written our stories . . Jo, it’s a way to make sure it never happens to kids again.

- Oh Leonie, I said I couldn’t ever write about it again . . .

When I thought about it later I was shocked to discover that writing my story for the newsletter had made me feel stronger, and I decided to write a submission for the inquiry. At the time I was eager for my brother to put his story into the Inquiry, too. I rang his number and said under my breath,

- Please, please be at home.

He answered the phone on the second ring. The words tumbled from my mouth.

- Al, have you heard of CLAN?

I told him who they were, and said:

- Al they think, and I do too, that if we all tell our stories it’ll help make people aware of what went on—of what happened to people like us, and stop it from ever happening again . . .

There was a stony silence at the other end of the line.

- Are you still there Al?

- Yes. Look, dear, I just want to forget what happened. I really don’t want to talk about the past, O.K.?
- But Al, writing it down does help, really—it’s helped me.
- Sorry Jo. I can’t. That’s the path to madness, said my brother.
- Al, don’t you see? If we all do this thing it might just help kids—what I mean is it might help carers to understand how vulnerable the children really are.

My brother sighed over the phone, and said wearily:
- Yes Jo. I know. But don’t you see that for people like us it’s a sort of two-sided deal? Look love, you know the first rule of safety—when you try to rescue someone don’t become the victim? And really, I don’t think it will help anyone if I go mad . . . that won’t help at all, I’ll just become another statistic.
- But perhaps by making our real-life experiences public we can show that the mistakes of the past are still being repeated?
- Jo, he said, I know all that—but I can’t handle it. I get these terrible nightmares, and I’m frightened that if I think about it, I will end up in the Looney-bin. So you do what you must, love, but just don’t tell me, O.K.?

It was no use. I’d been under the false impression that by appealing to Al I could get him to delve into his Pandora’s boxes, too. But now, after reflecting deeply on my own experiences I understand that I was quite wrong to pressure him. I see now that I had no right to intrude on his private affairs. Al and I each handled our horror in different ways. I accepted that what was right for me was not necessarily right for him.

Looking back I see that at that stage I still wasn’t able to reflect wisely upon my experiences—I was only beginning to take the first steps. But I was ready to gather my courage and write my submission to the Senate Inquiry. I sat down at the computer and went blank. Now I’d come this far, where, in heavens’ name, was I to start? I supposed the thing to do was to start by opening the boxes and revealing the truth. So the best thing for me to do was to pick up from the time when I was three and a half, with the day that my childhood ended—that day in October, 1943, when the supposedly protective doors of ‘Dalwood’ closed upon me and my childhood epitaph should have been:

\[ \textit{Come into my parlour,} \]
\[ \textit{said the spider to the fly.} \]

* * *
When I was three and a half and first entered Dalwood I soon discovered that it was neither the mysterious and fantastical English castle that I’d conjured up in my three year old imagination, nor the pretty picture castle in my story books. Once I was inside Dalwood ‘castle’ it changed and became spooky and scary. I remember feeling terrified, as if I was caught in a waking nightmare, as indeed I was. I felt so small and alone and instinctively knew that I was trapped.

A rear view of the 1920s Dalwood; this section had remained virtually unaltered by the 1940s.

In the 1940s the cot dormitory was behind the French doors on the second floor balcony.

*Photo courtesy of the Manly Library.*

I look around and see that it’s dark and gloomy in this castle. I don’t think Pop is here. I’m swimming underwater and I can’t breathe. I want Daddy and I want Mummy. Where is Mummy? Why did she bring me here? Have they killed her and thrown her into a dungeon or is this a new sort of game? Is she playing hide-and-go-seek with me? I see Mother Goose—she’s huge and threatening and she’s changed into a great starch-fronted Sister, a nun-nurse who stands before me and opens the gap in her face and booms:

- Come.
I feel so little and defenceless, but I know that St. George made himself stand up to a huge fire-breathing dragon. I’m St. George. I say in a wobbly voice:

- No thankyou, I’m waiting for Mummy.

The Sister’s great starched front billows out alarmingly. She says:

- Your mother is very busy signing papers.

I can hear the murmur of voices coming from behind a closed door on the right. I can hear my mother’s voice and know she’s not dead. I’m in a daze, but I walk over to the door to take my mother home. The Sister’s huge hand shoots out and grabs my bird-like wrist as I reach towards the door-knob. She pulls me down the hall. I don’t want to go. She hauls me into a cold white-tiled room. Against one wall stands a high narrow bed covered in a white sheet. She lifts me up onto it, saying:

- Lie down and keep quiet.

I know this nightmare lady is going to kill me. A doctor, dressed in a long white coat, comes into the room and says:

- Thank you Sister, we won’t need the needle; she’s had all those tests done.

Open your mouth wide, girlie.

He sticks a bandage-covered swab down my throat until I gag.

- We won’t need to remove the tonsils, it’s been fixed, he says over his shoulder to the sister.

While the tears of fear are still running down my cheeks, the Sister grabs my wrist, pulls me down off the high bed, and says:

- Come and have lunch with the children.

- But Mummy said she’s taking me home for my lunch.

- It’s lunch-time, now. You’ll be hungry, she says.

- But Mummy always, always, always makes my lunch. She likes to . . . she’ll be mad if I do . . . Mummy said I’m only allowed to eat her lunch.

In the dining-room unsmiling girls stare at me. The nurse lady pushes me into an empty chair and ties a white baby’s bib around my neck. She plonks a tin plate on the table in front of me. I look at the plate. Lumps of carrot and turnip and a piece of grey meat stuff swim in a blob of what looks like Nippy’s watery dog-sick.

- You’re the new girl, says a sad-faced girl sitting opposite.

- No, I’m waiting for my Mummy.

The silence is broken only by the scraping sounds of metal spoons on tin plates. A big girl rings a large hand-bell. Empty plates are passed along the tables and stacked
on a trolley. Another bell rings; the girls stand, put their hands together for prayer, bow their heads, and chant:

    Thankyou God and thankyou Jesus,
    We Dalwood’s thank you for the stew today.

The bell rings again. The girls file out in one long line, and leave. The Sister comes in, points to me, and says:

- Child . . . outside and play with the children.
- But . . . but . . . my Mummy won’t know where I am, I say in a tearful voice.

   All that long afternoon I run back and forth in my best shoes and peer in the doors. I creep into the dining-room and look into the hall. Two ladies in long dark blue dresses ask me what I want. I look at them and ask:

- Have you seen my Mummy? Does my Mummy know where I am?

   They don’t answer; they look sideways at each other and walk away. A long, long time later, another bell rings and the girls line up outside the dining-room doors. I stand off to one side; the Sister walks out the doors, says:

- Child. Get into line with the girls.
- No, no thankyou, I say politely. I don’t go in lines. Is Mummy coming?
- Not yet, soon. She’s still busy, says the Sister, and pushes me into the line.

   A bell rings. We file in and stand behind our chairs, bow our heads and say grace. We sit silent, hands in laps, and wait for the bell so we can start eating. A girl whispers from the side of her mouth:

- You’re number 23—I’m number 31.

   What does she mean? Half a slice of bread and blackberry jam is tossed onto the table in front of me. The 31 girl whispers under her breath,

- Thankyou God, and swipes it off the table and crams it into her mouth.

   There is nothing in front of me, only the dark green oil cloth that covers the table.

*   *   *

Upstairs, above the dining-room in Dalwood, there is a long room with closed French doors at one end. I stand on the cold brown lino and look at the row of white-painted steel babies’ cots.
- It’s late now. Have a sleep with us tonight, says the Sister.

- I’m not a baby, I say. I don’t sleep in a cot, my bed’s at home. Where’s my Mummy?

- Your mother has been held up, she’ll be here tomorrow, says the Sister.

She pulls a long rough white flannelette nightie over my head. She tells to me to kneel down with the other girls and pray:

```
Mathew, Mark, Luke and John,
Bless this bed that I lie on.
If I should die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take.
```

Then we say the Lord’s Prayer. *Amen.*

The Sister pushes me into the cramped cot and pulls up the side with a sharp click. Then she put out the light and leaves. I’m cold and I’m frightened. I cry:

- Mummy-mummy-mummy . . .

In the morning my clothes and Patrick Bear have gone. In their place is a boy’s white singlet and baggy, saggy navy bloomers that reach to my knees—the elastic hangs loose around my legs. I put on a shapeless short-sleeved navy cesarine tunic, a blue and white check pinny, and black laceless lace-up shoes, but no socks. Before breakfast Sister produces her scissors and chops my hair short before tying it with a big puffy white bow. I cry:

- Where’s my Mummy? Where’s Al? Where are Nanna and Pop? Where’s Patrick Bear? Is Daddy taking Bertie home? Can you tell Pop where I am, he needs me . . . please-please please!

- You won’t be seeing them again, says the Sister.

- WHY? WHY . . . I WANT them . . . I want to go HOME . . .

Tears of fear-fed temper run down my flushed cheeks. There is an awful feeling in my middle, my nose is stuffy and blocked from crying, and I’m scared of this place and this lady. The Sister smacks my arm and shoots me a nasty look and says:

- You can stop that right now miss. You can’t see them because they don’t love you anymore. They sent you here to live with us.

After breakfast the bigger girls leave for school, I watch them go out of the dining-room door, and there is a sick, empty feeling in my tummy. I call out:

- Wait for me—wait, WAIT, I go to school, too. Oh, oh, oh . . .
But I call into nothingness. My voice is a vacuum. I am nowhere. I am lost.

At lunch-time I sit in front of my plate of thin stew. After the final bell, two Sisters in starchy white aprons tell me to stay seated while they march the girls outside to play. Then they come back and walk over to me. One leans over and grabs my arms and holds them down. The other shoots out her hand and grabs my nose and pinches it shut, pinches off the scream in my throat, and forces my head back. I can’t breathe. I open my mouth and gasp for air. She pushes a spoonful of stew into my mouth, forces my head further back, and shoves her hand under my chin. I struggle for air, choke, and swallow. And then I vomit. It spurts out in a great gush; my insides feel like they are coming out through my mouth. Pieces of carotty sick land on the Sister’s fat starched chest, some bits dribble down my chin, down my throat, and down my white bib. The Mother Goose Sister smacks my face harder than Mummy ever smacked it, scoops my vomit up with the spoon and pushes it back down my throat. Tears roll down my face and mix with the sick. She forces more of the acrid vomit down my unreceptive throat. My voice bubbles as I scream:


*   *   *

Of course, my mother didn’t come to fetch me home; and I thought Pop couldn’t hear me—I told myself he was too far away. No-one came. I didn’t realise it then, but I had been abandoned. In fact, I didn’t put that name to it at all until a few years ago. Looking back, I think that subconsciously I felt that if I put the right name to it and called it ‘abandoned’ I would somehow at the same time lose the sense of having been well-loved by my family, and hence destroy the illusion of normality and security I so much wanted to create for myself. So as a small child in Dalwood, every day I ate the sick-making stew or number 31 ate it for me. One day I fished in the stew mess and found a piece of grey meat with its animal-fur still on it. I pushed it to one side and 31 swiftly reached across, grabbed it, and stuffed it into her face. My plate was always empty. My mind became empty. My heart was empty. I was a zombie.

The long Dalwood days dragged on, and on. And while I waited for my mother to come or Pop to find me, I learnt instructions and rules and bell-times I didn’t know existed.
My first name, I was told, was no longer Joan-Annette, it was ‘Joan’. Then I was told my last name was not Ryan—which had always been my last name before—but Brown. It seemed I had to answer to Brown. But in the dining-room, at roll-call, and bedtime, and many other times, my name was not Brown, I was number ‘23’. Yet, to the other girls, and whenever the Food for Babies’ Fund Ladies Committee and the men from The Good Samaritans paid a visit, I was plain ‘Joan’. I had so many different names I thought that no-one would ever know who to look for if they wanted me, and I asked myself, how will my Pop ever find me now?

I remember that after a few days when the initial shock was replaced with feelings of deep distress, the only person in the world I wanted was my Pop; I desperately wanted to go home with him to Wagstaffe. I told myself that there I would be safe and my mother couldn’t get me to take me away and leave me in strange and awful castles like Dalwood. I remember that I promised God that if I could go with Pop I wouldn’t cry when Daddy walked Bertie home, and I wouldn’t fight Al for his dog Nippy anymore. It was then that my longing to sail away to England and live in my English grandfather’s castle dissipated.

*   *   *   *

Every day in Dalwood, after the morning bell had rung, we draped our nighties over the ends of our cots, put on our boys’ singlets and fusty bloomers, marched single file to the wash-room, and used the flush toilet. The last girl got to pull the chain. We splashed our hands and washed our faces with ice-cold grey soap-scummed water and fought for a corner of the grey, washed-out towel that was already soaking wet. We brushed our teeth with communal tooth-brushes, grabbed for the community comb, and combed our hair with ice-cold water. We tied each others’ puffy white hair bows and pinched the girls who couldn’t tie right, then marched single file back into our cot dormitory, got dressed in our uniforms and pinnies, and made our cots to the satisfaction of Sister. A big girl stood at the door of our dormitory and lined us up, tied bibs around our necks, and ushered us, shortest to tallest, single file, down the great stairs to the dining-room.

- *No talking, no noise. Shh!*

We stood silently behind our chairs, heads down, hands behind our backs, said grace, obeyed the bell, and awaited the signal to start eating. Breakfast was always the same; stale bread and watery skim milk, or lumpy grey porridge and cold thick-skinned...
grey cocoa. Sugar and honey were unknown; they were things that belonged in my first life.

After breakfast, after the bell, after thankyou-grace, and after another bell, we lined up, shortest to tallest, and marched in a crocodile-line down to a six-foot-high-wire-enclosed area. The play-area officer ushered us through the high wired gates then padlocked them to keep us in. We were led into a portable army shed called the play-shed. Here, we took off our black shoes, polished them, and placed them on the shelves in the large open-fronted cupboards. Then we were pushed out into the six-foot-high-wire-enclosed compound and told to play.

In winter we wore thin navy pull-overs that welcomed the icy wind. Summer or winter, there were no hats. There were no toys. To me it seemed like there was no colour left in the world. It was a world of black and white, and grey and navy. Even the dark green pine trees looked black to my young eyes. There was, however, wonderful white sandy soil underfoot. We scuffed our bare feet in the pine-needle strewn sand-soil, and tried to play on the tubular steel and board play-ground equipment which was standard for the 1940s: a tilting, dippy, vertigo-inducing razzle-dazzle, a blister-making slippery dip, swings where I sat swinging and saying ‘Joan-Annette’ in my head so I wouldn’t forget my proper name, and singing:

*Give me land lots of land ’neath the starry skies above,*

*Don’t fence me in . . .*

The only other equipment in the play area was one set of monkey-bars to drop or hang upside-down from, and to shove each other off, one round-about on which to make ourselves giddy, and a see-saw on which to thump each other up-down, down-up, while we sang:

*See saw, Margery Daw,*

*Jack shall have a new master,*

*He shall . . .*

I have a clear memory of a girl I hung around with in the play-area. Her name was Peggy. One day Peggy produced a piece of wool she’d coaxed from her pull-over. She used it to teach me a game called ‘cat’s cradle’. We played and played until we were caught with the wool, and Peggy was thrashed for unravelling her pull-over. Peggy went cold after that.
We sat on opposite ends of a see-saw and sawed up-down up-down, screech-scritch, scritch-screech. Peggy sawed upwards and said:
- I’m going to run away from this old Dalwood, and I’ll have a new master.
- Can I come? I want a new master.
- No. I don’t need anybody, said Peggy, and sawed downwards. Nobody cares about me and I don’t care about anybody. I hate everybody, I even hate you.

She jumped off the see-saw. I fell down and hit my nose and got a nose-bleed.
- Serves you right, said the Sister. That’s what you get for being so rough.

I went back to the see-saw and played ‘new master’ with Peggy-who-didn’t-care.

Peggy’s nose began to run and run. She didn’t want to see-saw anymore. She sat on the swings with her head hanging down and wiped away the runny yellow snot with the back of her hand. She made whistling noises through her mouth.

Peggy went away to the Home’s infirmary.
She never came back.

*   *   *

Every day in Dalwood the bell rang for lunch lines. Our playground minder swiped at our faces and hands with a sopping wet communal wash-cloth, tied white babies’ bibs around our necks, placed grey and white newspaper sailors’ hats on the leaders’ heads and handed them little grey tin drums to bang in time to our singing

\textit{Onward Christian soldiers,}
\textit{Marching as to war . . .}

In our Dalwood gaol there was no music other than the songs and chants we sang ourselves; instead, there were orders, instructions and rules. Getting whacked across the head, or caned, or locked up in the cold dark amongst the spider webs in the isolation of the under-the-stairs cupboard if we back-answered, or if we were slow responding to instructions, or if we cried, became a fact of life.

I grasped a wooden-backed scrubbing brush in both of my tiny hands and knelt on the wooden kitchen table, and scrubbed the patch in front of me with monkey soap. The big girls scrubbing the table with me whispered in my ear:
- Joan, don’t cry, don’t ever cry, or they’ll punish you.
We cried with the pain in our hands and knees.

- Get over it, and stop your snivelling. Get here; we’ll give you something to really cry about, said our gaolers.

So I knew that if I cried I became truly vulnerable, yet at the same time, I felt that by not crying I had one over my adult tormenters. My tears turned to ice inside my heart. I learnt to hang my head down, I learnt to look nowhere. I tried to make myself invisible. But one night I forgot, and drew attention to myself. The oldest girls sat at Matron’s table and talked. I joined in. The room fell silent. Matron fixed me with her gimlet stare.

- 23, said Matron in a snappish voice, stand up! Stand behind your chair, hands behind your back, bow your head so everyone can see what a disgrace looks like. You don’t deserve this good food, you worthless, disgraceful, troublesome creature.

Another time not long after this, I’d eaten my half slice of butterless bread and blackberry jam, and looked across at Matron’s table. Spittle gathered and pooled in the corners of my mouth. I licked my lips and called out across the dining-room:

- Yum-yum-yum, salad and red jelly and custard.

- How DARE you, screeched Matron. You rude, rude child, you need to be taught manners.

To teach me manners the dining-room Sister dragged me to the box-cupboard, and pushed me into the spider-infested dark. I heard her key turn in the lock. I was alone in the cobwebs with the death-monsters and the ghosts of girls who haunted the dank hole. I slept fitfully on the cold floor and nightmared and screamed silently in my head, and could barely walk the next day for the pain in my legs.

After I was released from my cell I was placed on hunger punishment.

- Just so you will remember to behave, said my torturers.

That evening I was allowed back to the table. Without looking at me or even lifting her head, a girl whose number was ‘37’, quietly slid her piece of bread and blackberry jam down the table towards me.

Hilary was ‘37’s’ real name, I remember her as a quiet, dignified girl who never seemed to get into trouble. She sat at the top of my table in the dining-room, with her back to the black-out curtains. One night, she sat at the table and said quietly:

- I pray that a bomb doesn’t come through the window while I’m eating my bit of bread and jam. I pray it waits until I finish.
Out in the play area Hilary sat day-in, day-out, swinging up-down, up-down, on her swing. And as she swung, she said over and over:

- My name is Hilary. I’m Hilary. I have been here for two-hundred and ninety-five (and counting up) days. I live at 12 Mims Lane, in Beckford, NSW, Australia, the Southern Hemisphere, the World, the planet Earth, the Milky Way Galaxy, the Universe, in space. I am Hilary.

One day Hilary stopped her swinging, and said:

- I’m waiting for my father. He will come and take me home when I’ve been here for three-hundred and eleven days.

I think her father must have fetched her because she just seemed to disappear suddenly one day, and I never saw her again.

My memories of Hilary are linked to my memories of a girl called Shirley. Probably this is because I noticed that they both seemed to go missing at about the same time. Shirley was one of the big girls who sat at Matron’s table in the dining room. She was always being thrashed with the cane, always being locked away and forgotten in the dark cupboard under the stairs because she wouldn’t hang her head down but kept opening her mouth and back-answering. We girls called her ‘Shirley Zebra’. The backs of her legs were striped with deep, black gouges. New cuts appeared and filled with pus.

The big girls whispered that Shirley had died during the night, amongst the spiders and the monsters in the dark cupboard under the stairs.

*   *   *

I don’t know how I knew it was my fourth birthday, but I remember waking up one morning and saying to myself:

- Today I am number four.

I’d been incarcerated in Dalwood for six months. Matron put a long black coat on over her white starchly clothes and took her veil off. She put a little round hat on her head and put me in the back of her chauffeur-driven car and took me home to my mother. I wondered if the nightmare holiday was over. On the long drive back to my house I went into my mind and sang - I’m going home to Mummy and Al forever-forever-forever-forever-forever-forever-forever, FOREVER.

Matron walked me up the path, past the hated cabbage-like succulents, and knocked on our front door. I couldn’t understand what was happening. Why was I
waiting at our front door? I didn’t go to our front door. I lived here, didn’t I? I told myself that perhaps it was special because I was four today and I was coming home for good.

Matron turned at the front door as she was leaving, and said to my mother:
- Six days. Mrs. Ryan. I’ll be back on Saturday. Please have her dressed, ready and waiting.

My mother held baby Camilla in her arms and cried. I hung my head, said:
- Mummy, Mummy, I’m sorry, sorry Mummy . . . I’ll be good. Mummy can I go and live with Pop—please?

Al had gone. My mother didn’t tell me where. Daddy was nowhere. My mother said he was lost. Nippy had become a Dog-Angel, he was with the Cow-Angel. Mummy was very, very sick. Mrs. Lynch came to our house every afternoon and helped her until after I’d gone to bed. I no longer considered Mrs. Lynch to be my god-mother. In my now four-year-old mind everything stacked against her: she didn’t have a wand like Cinderella’s god-mother; she didn’t make Dalwood tunics into beautiful ball-gowns; she didn’t make Pop come and take me home with him; and she was wicked—she had taken Mummy and me to Dalwood where Mummy and Patrick Bear had got lost. One night when I was tucked up in my old bed at home I heard Mrs. Lynch whispering to my mother.

- Kate, did you tell her . . . Hal . . . ?

What about Hal? He went out of my mind because six days was an eternity and every day that week I went to my old school with the lunch Mrs. Lynch had packed.

I sat on the board seats against the school-house wall and shelled my hard-boiled egg. A girl I’d played with in the bush, a girl I’d known a long time before, a girl called Sandra, a girl who wore lacy socks and who knew her proper name, stood in front of me and said:

- Are you an English person? You speak funny. You say ‘baag’ instead of ‘bag’. Where you been, Joannie-Anne?

- Sort of. I don’t know. I’ve been in a Home, I said, and hung my head.

Kids bunched up in front of me, they danced around and squatted down and scratched under their arms pretending they were monkeys; and then they pointed.

- My mother says I’m not allowed to play with you. You’re mad—nah nah-nah nah nah . . . You’re a bad-girl—only bad girls go to Homes. Yuk! You stink. Quick! Get away from her everyone.
I couldn’t eat my egg. I didn’t cry. I squashed my egg between my fingers and it fell in bits on the playground asphalt.

I hated Sandra. I hated the other children. I hated squashed egg.

*   *   *

Back in Dalwood, just as I had done when I was three, I got down on my four-year-old hands and knees with the other girls, and polished the floors in the hall and the dining-room until I could see my face in the long strip where my cloth had been. When that floor was finished we were given large wooden-backed scrubbing brushes, metal buckets of very hot soapy water, and put to work scrubbing the kitchen floor. After this, we were made to do the washing up. We climbed onto wooden boxes to reach the concrete tubs, and we scrubbed pots that only two girls together could lift.

I began to mess the bed, and got the standard ‘treatment’. The Sister on duty would grab me by the hair at the back of my head, push my face into the soiled sheet, rub my face back and forth in my mess, then haul me upright by my hair and drape the sheet over my head and face. And there I had to remain until the other girls had gone to breakfast. Instead of eating breakfast I was sent to wash my dirty sheets in cold water at the outside concrete tubs. Then I was taken to the closed-in veranda of the Infirmary, my bloomers were hauled off, and I was shoved onto a rubber-sheeted bed and administered a soapy hot-water enema. Then that night, I was made to sleep on my bare rubber Mackintosh—no sheets, no blankets, no pillow, no nightdress. I knew only that I felt awful, really awful, and ashamed and guilty and dirty and cold.

Not many years ago, in 2005 to be exact, I suddenly became ill yet again. I required surgery, and was administered an enema before my operation. I realised it was very necessary, but a flood of shame and humiliation swamped my senses and left me reeling. The extreme embarrassment, self-disgust, and utter soul-destroying self-loathing I felt, made me recoil in horror. Once again I was a small child being punished; I was filled with feelings of guilt and became very apologetic. Realisation burst upon me: even though I’d gained maturity these deeply disturbing emotions and my reactions were triggered by my traumatic childhood experiences—and I thought I’d gotten over everything. I had to get a grip, put the incident into its proper perspective and shove the memories and the feelings aside. I wanted to live, and I wanted to live a normal life. For
me, it was best to avoid those situations or be prepared, and my best line of defence was to imagine the different scenarios that could crop up and think of ways in which to handle them calmly.

*   *   *   *

Our Dalwood cot-dormitory was situated directly over Matron’s flat. Libby, ‘24’, slept across the dormitory from me. Sometimes, after the current night-duty Sister had left us in the semi-dark, Libby would do hand-stands in her cot and come down with a thump. Matron would bang on her flat’s ceiling with her long cane, and the night-duty Sister would come in and flog Libby with the ‘rubber-doolakey’. The ‘rubber-doolakey’ was the thick rubber sole of a shoe: who knows where the shoe went. I think it must have been gone a long time because the bigger girls knew that the ‘rubber-doolakey’ had been around forever. The ‘rubber-doolakey’ hurt so much it scarred your soul without leaving a lasting mark on your body.

One night after being flogged, Libby wet the bed and got the ‘treatment’. She peeked from beneath her pissy sheet. I sent her a sympathetic glance. She pulled a face at me, stuck out her tongue, and said waspishly:

Sticky stare, icky stare,
Like a bear up in the air.

I’d committed the cardinal sin. Every Dalwood girl knew that you didn’t give sympathy openly. We all knew how embarrassing and degrading it was just to know that others were watching and had witnessed our humiliation. We all knew not to accept sympathy from others; to accept was tantamount to admitting defeat or showing softness. And didn’t we know full well that if we saw what was going on we might get a bit of the same ourselves?

In our dormitory tiny frail fair-haired Olive, ‘22’, occupied the cot alongside mine. One night she got ‘the treatment’ in the small dark hours. Some noise woke me and I could hear Olive thrashing around. I could see a Sister reaching into the cot; she seemed to stand there a long time. A terrible fear invaded my heart. I felt the shaking in the depths of my being. I slitted my eyes and pretended to be asleep.

After Sister had gone Olive’s shape lay facedown in the mess. In the morning there was nothing in her cot other than the rubber Mackintosh covered mattress. The big
girls didn’t mention Olive; they just cornered me outside the dining-room the next day, and whispered:

- Shut up, Joan. It was a bad dream. It was just a dream. You didn’t see anything. Don’t say anything.

It was a bad dream that wouldn’t go away. It was a bad dream that crept into my dreams. I dreamt there was a black monster standing alongside my cot, I dreamt that a thick black fog covered my mouth. I dreamt that no matter how hard I tried I couldn’t call out; I dreamt I didn’t have a voice.

The silent scream went on and on and on inside my dream-head.

*   *   *   *

I clearly remember that I didn’t want to stay in Dalwood. I wanted Pop to come and take me home to Nanna and Wagstaffe; and I decided that if he didn’t come and get me very soon I’d somehow free myself from fear, from hunger, from my shame. On Sunday afternoons the big girls were allowed to go for a walk, down by the bush tracks to Pickering Point which overlooked Sydney’s Middle Harbour. Sometimes they took along a younger girl who was in favour.

I loved to go to Pickering Point; there, the world regained its colour and the wind played in my short hair while I watched the ferries sailing by to places I did not know. The green frothy sea running its lace over the red and brown rocks far below beckoned to me; and it was there, when I was five years of age, that I determined I wouldn’t let the Lord take my soul before I woke. I would let myself fly forever free with the white gulls—out over the wide, wide world.

I remember the glorious Sunday afternoon I ran away, down through the wildflowers and the bush to a deserted Pickering Point. Sea-gulls wheeled and screamed against the never-ending expanse of clear blue sky as I leant forward, peered over the cliff edge and looked down at the curling sea and the periwinkled rocks, and felt an overwhelming sense of peace.

I spread my arms and prepared to jump. Someone grabbed the back of my pinny and jerked me backwards off my feet. I lay flat on my back on the grassy cliff edge, and looked up in amazement at two big girls. They sat me between them on the Point’s solitary wooden park bench, and squashed me up tight. There was a small warm glow in my middle. But the glow didn’t melt the ice tears in my heart.
I wish I could recall their names and say thankyou.

*   *   *

We all got nits. Our heads were combed with kerosene and wrapped in dirty grey kerosene cloths. Our skin and our heads itched and burnt. The nits went away. The rash left by the kerosene took longer. Some of my hair fell out.

Then we all got worms. On Saturday afternoon, our usual castor oil dose days, we were given extra castor oil. We lost our appetites. But before long the hunger came back.

I grew malnutrition sores all over my body; they crossed my face and scabbed up my arms. My skin looked like burnt orange and my stomach grew fat like my mother’s before-Camilla belly. I had Kwashiorkor’s Syndrome—there wasn’t enough protein in my diet. In Dalwood we didn’t get protein to eat; we didn’t get much of anything to eat.

One night after ‘lights out’, Wilma, number 26, sat up in her cot and pushed her legs through the bars. She swung her legs back and forth and called across to me: - Psst! Joan. C’mon I’ll show you how not to be hungry . . . Shh . . . if night-Sister catches you, just say you went to the toilet.

We quietly climbed out of our cots. We crept past the night-Sister’s room.

- She drinks stinky stuff . . . Shh! said Wilma.

In the wash-room Wilma took the lead toothpaste tube and sucked on the contents then passed the tube to me.

After this, I visited the toothpaste tube every night. But one night as I was quietly making my way back to my cot my heart almost stopped with fright. The intoxicated night-Sister jumped out of the shadows and landed the ‘rubber-doolakey’ on every part of my body, time and time again. I think this must have happened on a Saturday night because my mind seems to connect Saturdays with cures for hunger.

I remember one Saturday afternoon in particular; the big girls took me with them to the front fence to watch the soldiers tramping past. The soldiers threw pennies to us, and they threw their cigarette butts on the ground. The big girls grabbed the pennies and stored them up the legs of their bloomers. A buried memory surfaced, and I pushed my skinny arm through the black, iron bars of the fence, picked up the cigarette butts,
shovelled them into my mouth, called them gum, and chewed away like a cow chewing its cud. My ever-present hunger disappeared for a little while.

After this I went to the front fence as often as I could to scrabble around with my hand on the footpath and tuck cigarette butts up the legs of my fusty bloomers.

I think my memories of Nanna’s talks about tobacco got lost, somewhere in Dalwood.

*   *   *

Saturday nights in Dalwood were bath nights. It’s odd, but we were considered to be old enough to scrub floors, but too young to bathe or dry ourselves. We were being trained as the lowest of servants who performed only menial tasks and knew the value of their own invisibility; and at the same time we were being treated as pampered babies. After all this time I still find this dichotomy hard to grasp.

Every other day we put on a clean blue-and-white checked pinny. Once a month we were given a clean uniform dress, once a week we had a bath and donned a clean nightie and collected a clean boys’ singlet and clean baggy bloomers for the morning.

On bath nights we lined up, biggest to smallest, outside the bath-room, in our underwear, and went in four at a time. In the bath-room we stripped off and climbed into the high narrow bath-tubs, two children to a bath. The big girls bathed us in the same water that everyone else had used before us. Mostly, the bath girls were kindly. There were one or two big girls, though, who pulled the sand-papery towels roughly between our legs, high up, and chafed our tender places, and we walked straddled-legged because we were sore. One night a big girl said:

- Stand up, Joan, and spread your legs, I have to wash your dirty bits.

I screamed as she tried to shove the sliver of soap into my vagina. She smacked me a stinging blow across the head, and said:

- Shut up you! Sister said I had to make sure you’re clean—everywhere.

She shoved the soap roughly into my rectum. I screamed with the pain and opened my bowels into the bath. The other child in the bath clambered out in a hurry. The big girl smacked me across the head again, said:

- You dirty, bad, creature, pick up your shit and carry it across to the toilet—go on pig . . . stand outside in the hall with your hands on your head.
After everyone else had been bathed I was permitted to wash my dirty hands in water, no soap, don my clean nightie, pick up my clean underthings and go to the dormitory.

I was late, and I smelt of my own poo. Sister produced the brown ‘rubber-doolakey’.

*   *   *

I was four and almost half when I began school at Seaforth Primary School. I have a vague idea that we Dalwood girls called it Balgowlah even though it wasn’t. I don’t suppose that matters anyway, but what does matter is that every day before school I was sent to the Home’s kitchen to help the big girls stack our school lunches, baked bean and spaghetti butterless sandwiches, on sheets of newspaper. We tied the box-like newspaper bundle parcel-wise with coarse jute string. My job was to sit on the wooden kitchen table that had been scoured white with monkey-soap, and put my finger on the single knot while the big girls tied the string in a double knot to secure it. Two favoured girls led the crocodile-line to school, and carried the finger-cutting loop on the newspaper lunch-box between them.

The big girls sat in the all-weather shed and doled out our lunches: half a baked bean sandwich for infants’ girls, a whole baked bean sandwich for those in third and fourth class, one and a half baked bean sandwiches for fifth class kids, and pig-heaven for the girls in sixth class who had stock-piled sandwiches by under-cutting the younger girls. It’s funny what severe hunger can do to children’s natures.

A girl who wore pretty dresses and proper shoes, a girl who lived at home with her mummy and daddy, a girl who was not a Home girl, skipped up to me in the playground one day and asked me to jump rope with her. If I ate I didn’t have the time to play. I found it easy to skip my baked bean sandwich half. I still can’t eat baked beans. The very thought of them makes me feel sick. But back then, to me, jump rope took precedence because even though I was always hungry, friendship and acceptance meant far more than food.

Every day at school the headmaster stood on the steps of his sandstone office and faced the playground, put his hailing cone to his mouth, and called:

- Line up everyone, Dalwood inmates to the back. Right, forward into school—Dalwood last.
I remember the head-master. I have his picture in my head. He was a thin, stoop-shouldered man with a loud voice. He had sparse, sandy coloured hair and a wispy moustache to match. Every morning he kept us back in the playground after everyone else had gone into school to have a ‘pep’ talk. I can see him still, standing before us in his five-foot-nothing and brown, striped suit, saying:

- You Dalwood’s are a bunch of lazy, no-good dummies. You don’t apply yourselves, so you’re to be kept in and given extra spelling and arithmetic.

We Dalwood inmates were the last for everything—last to be released for recess, last to be released for lunch, last to be released of an afternoon, but mostly, first back into school after lunch by half an hour.

It was a mixed blessing. Going into school earlier gave me extra time amongst the beloved books. The teacher brought her own special supply of books and put them in the back corner of the room. There, I became invisible.

*   *   *

The local clergy and the priesthood came to the school on scripture days and brought stories of hell-fire, damnation, retribution and Salvation. On these days we learnt that our sins could be easily detected. I learnt that not all Protestants were equal, and that Protestants and Catholics were not equal in the sight of the Lord. Also, Protestants and Catholics discovered they were destined to reside, after death, in different zones in Heaven—that is, if you weren’t a Dalwood girl; everyone knew Dalwood inmates didn’t go to heaven. On scripture mornings the headmaster stood on his step in front of the assembled school and called through his cone:

- Line up in your denominations, Dalwood inmates to the back.

On my first scripture day at Seaforth Public School my past family’s stories got mixed around in my head and I didn’t know who or what I was, or where I was supposed to be, or what sort of a person I was. I didn’t know if I was a person at all. Was I Presbyterian, or Methodist, or Baptist, or High Church of England, or low Anglican, or Catholic? Was I a bit of this and a bit of that? Or was I something that was nothing? The non-Dalwood girl I jumped rope with at lunch-time, called in a loud whisper:

- Psst! Quick, Dalwood! Come and get into my line with me, into the Catholic line. You look like a Catholic.
In the class-room allocated to the local priest I stood when told, sat down when told, knelt when told, and I did this for two weeks. Then, one day, the priest pinned me to my wooden desk-seat with his narrow-eyed look. I felt hot in the face, sick in stomach, and upset in the head. Why was he glaring at me? I’d stood up and sat down and knelt on the splintery class-room floor when he’d said, hadn’t I? The Irish priest materialised before me, pointed his long bony finger between my eyes until they crossed themselves properly, and snarled:

- You get out of my sight, Dalwood heathen that you are, get out of my flock—you're a snake slithered in from the Garden of Eden, so you are. A Catholic you’re pretending to be, is it? You’re nought but the Devil’s child for sure. Begone, you pagan, so you are.

I scuffed my laceless shoes in the sandy soil under the play-ground pine-trees, and hung my head down and felt sad because God didn’t want me. Out came the headmaster.

- Get to your scripture class immediately! Don’t think you can skive off out here, Dalwood scum.

I took myself into the nearest class-room.

- Get out! Get out, Dalwood. You’re not Presbyterian.

I ran to the next class-room.

- Get out, Dalwood! What do mean by interrupting Church of England prayers?

In the next class-room, the Baptists were having a good time. They said:

- Get out!

Down behind the all-weather shed I pressed my face into the rough bark of a welcoming pine tree. Its clean healing scent invaded my soul. God was in a tree.

*   *   *

No-one in Dalwood ever said:

- Hello there; how was school? What did you do today . . . have you homework?

There was no recognition of our achievements, activities or struggles. Our school books stayed at school—but I think that might have been normal for those days. I don’t think children carted books back and forth between home and school like they do today. So no-one in Dalwood ever got to see the stars in my books.
We Home children were sent to school only because it was the law. But the law went begging just as soon as any Dalwood girl began secondary school. The big girls were kept back at the Home to work more often than not. Most Dalwood children were, to all intents and purposes, practically illiterate.

Every afternoon when we arrived back at Dalwood after school, a Sister stood beside the door and barked:
- Shoes off. Polish them and put them into the shoe cupboard.

And then she’d call the afternoon duty lists. Brown—kitchen duty; Smith—dining-room duty; Daley . . . *No talking!*

Shoes were black, laceless, down-at-heel, and communal property. Every day we each took a pair of shoes from the cupboard. Fit was pot-luck—if they fitted you wore them, and if they didn’t fit you wore them anyway. Rarely did anyone get the same pair of shoes two days running. Sometimes you didn’t even get a pair—you got two different shoes.

*   *   *   *

I spent five long years in Dalwood, yet I can only recall one Christmas. A large, live Christmas tree stood at the foot of the gracious winding staircase. Everything was special for the Ladies’ Committee, the Board, and the Good Samaritans to see.

After breakfast, the usual grey lumpy porridge, we were each handed three parcels. I sat down on the grass and quickly ripped mine open. We all had the same. In one was a colouring book, in the next was a small packet of coloured pencils, and in the last there was a glimmering rainbow of narrow satin ribbons. A big girl with rainbow ribbons in her short hair came skipping across the grass and took my new book. Another big girl, wearing her rainbow ribbons in a tie around her wrist, came skipping by and took my pencils and said they were hers, now. I hung onto my ribbons for dear life and ran in through the dining-room doors to stand near Matron. She was talking to a Committee Lady. The grand Lady handed Matron a pretty sleeping-eyes doll, smiled down at me through the net face-veil that descended from her hat, and said:
- There. Matron has a doll for you, dear.

Matron held the doll in her hands, smiled down at me over her great starched front, and said:
- Now Joan, dear. Thank kind Mrs. Dalwood nicely.
The Lady smiled at me again, excused herself to Matron, and walked outside.

- Go 23. Get yourself outside with the others. You can stop looking, this is not for you, said Matron, and turned away with the doll in her arms.

The bell rang for us to line up for Christmas dinner. I sat in my seat at the table, looked at the white linen tablecloth, gaped at the unusual sight flowers on the table, and craned my neck and looked up. Ticker tape streamers and chains hung down higgledy-piggledy from the dining-room ceiling. On my plate there was heaven: gravy, a chicken wing, and a small baked potato, a tiny piece of baked pumpkin, a spoonful of dark green, and a slice of unbuttered bread. I ate the chicken in two bites and crunched the bones and swallowed them as well. I pushed the dark green around my plate.

- What’s this yucky stuff? I asked.

- Spinach. Gimme it here, you won’t like it, said Number 31, and she forked it up with my pumpkin and the whole thing disappeared into her mouth and was gone.

I grabbed my bread and speared the potato before they disappeared too, and shoved them holus-bolus into my mouth. Then I put my head down and licked the gravy of my plate. I had eaten a grand dinner.

The committee ladies handed everyone a piece of cake and an orange. I never knew what sort of cake it was because I didn’t have time to find out. I just pushed it into my mouth and swallowed. A big girl ran past and lunged at my orange.

- Here, givus that you—a great big orange is too much for a little kid like you.

Some bigger girls were after my ribbons. I ran to the old, morning-glory-covered stables. The area was out-of-bounds. Inside, in a dark corner of the old building, stood a big old-fashioned laundry mangle, I used both hands and tried to turn the great iron handle. There was a noise behind me. I turned my head. The daylight was blocked by a large shape. It was the bogey-man. Suddenly, I couldn’t breathe, the bogey-man had his hand clamped over my mouth, and his hand was blocking my nose. Then there was pain, terrible pain, and nothingness.

I next remember that I found myself lying down on the empty potato sacks behind the mangle. I found my crumpled dusty bloomers on the ground beside me, and through the thrumming pain in my body and the pounding darkness in my head, I heard some big girls shouting:

- Joan, Joan . . . are you here Joan?
They helped me with my bloomers and took me back up the path to the Home. I walked straddle-legged. At the top of the path the big girls patted me on the head and took away my beautiful ribboned rainbow.

My nightmares grew an added dimension: a huge, dark monster was chasing and chasing me and I ran, and ran. In my night dreams I’d reach a building, run inside, and try to close the door. But, mostly, there was no door to close, and sometimes when there was a door it wouldn’t close because it was too small for the doorway. I screamed silently inside my head and never got to know what happened because I didn’t remember. I couldn’t remember. I still don’t remember.

On the Boxing Day we were taken by bus to visit the Children’s Home at Clontarf. There, we jumped on the bunk beds and tangled ourselves in the grey woollen army blankets, pillow-fought with the Clontarf boys and girls, screeched and yelled, whooped, ran, bounced, and played Cowboys and Indians. We played at bombs by diving off the top bunks onto anyone standing below. I was having such fun that the pain between my legs took second place.

A brave radio-microphone wielding man from 2HD talked to us through his thick walrus moustache and told us we were broadcasting to the troops. We sang songs for the troops, gave three cheers for the troops, and sent our child-messages to the troops. The man picked me out, he leant down and asked me to sing ‘I Love Aeroplane Jelly’ into his radio-microphone, and I believed for many years after that I had done the Aeroplane jelly advertisement.

But I was wrong, and I was right. I had sung the Aeroplane jelly song over the radio—that once, that one Christmas at Clontarf.

* * *

Normally, birthdays in Dalwood went unmarked; they were the same as any other day unless you were turning fifteen, and then your birthday was marked by your leaving Dalwood for good. Of the five birthdays I spent in Dalwood I can only remember two—somehow my fourth birthday, when I’d gone home to my mother for six days, didn’t seem to count as a Dalwood birthday. In Dalwood, on my fifth birthday, I received a parcel from my mother. Inside the plain brown paper wrapping was a lavender bag, and a pair of white hand-knitted, lace-patterned ankle socks—I remember I wore them until
they stank, rotted, turned green with mould, and fell of my feet. I held my lavender bag to my nose and thought of Pop as I swung back and forth on the swing in the wire-enclosed play area and sang:

\[
\begin{align*}
You & \text{ are my sunshine, my only sunshine,} \\
You & \text{ make me happy, when skies are grey,} \\
You & \text{ ’ll never know dear, how much I love you,} \\
\text{Please don’t take my sunshine away.}
\end{align*}
\]

A big girl pushed past the swing and snatched the lavender bag from my hands.

- Gimme that, she said. You’re sneezing . . . you’re allergic—no good for a little kid like you.

Just like everything else I’d ever had, I lost my lavender bag—somewhere in Dalwood.

Right up until 1997 I truly believed I was allergic to lavender. Then I worked it out. Lavender was growing in my garden. Now, there are great, fragrant bushes of lavender in my front garden. It grows between the tall palms, the cypress pines, the roses, the camellias, and a multitude of other flowers. It grows amongst cuttings of Pop’s favourite cerise-coloured pig-face; there is my lavender bag.

*   *   *

It was my sixth birthday. I walked through the hall at Dalwood and my name jumped out at me from the front of a brown-paper parcel on the hall table. I knew it was from my mother, she always called me Joan-Annette. It seems I had not forgotten my name after all. I took it and sat in the shrubbery that grew alongside the great front doors. Inside the parcel were two chocolate bars and a peanut brittle. I crammed them all into my mouth and chewed and crunched and swallowed. I almost choked when Matron tapped on her window. I shook uncontrollably as I stood on the carpet square in front of her desk. Matron drew herself up in her carved desk chair, fixed me with a piercing look, and said:

- 23. You are an extremely selfish, very greedy child. You should have offered those sweeties to me and the Sisters first, you should have shared.
I hung my head and felt bad, bad, bad. I was selfish, I was greedy, and I
deprived others by refusing to share. My face flushed with shame. The tips of my ears
felt like they were on fire. I knew better than to drop my eyes from Matron’s.

- My children are not permitted to have parcels unless I give my permission.

How did you get it?

- I took it, Matron. It had my name on it.

I was whipped. I was a thief. I was a disappointment. My twin feelings of guilt
and remorse left the beating for dead.

*   *   *

One Saturday morning, when I was still five, another girl and I were set to work dusting
the dining-room. She yanked my duster from my hands and said;

- Your brother’s dead. I heard. I saw. There was a coffin box.

Fresh sadness washed over me. I’d known for a long time that Al was dead, and
now he was dead all over again. But I couldn’t cry. Sadness was a lump of ice in my
heart. That afternoon, instead of going down to the front fence to shove cigarette butts
up the legs of my bloomers, I escaped to walk down near the hydrangeas. I looked into
the large purple-mauve flower-heads, peered into the dark green foliage, and found the
fairies. They whispered that they had Al. They whispered in Al’s hoarse voice:

- Psst! Joannie-Anne. Come over here—quick . . .

Al’s real live head stuck out from the hydrangeas, he crouched in the bushes, in
the dirt, on his knees.

- Joannie-Anne I heard you were dead. I come up here from the Boys’ Home as
often as I can to try and see if it’s true or not. Shh! Quick! Look out, here comes one of
the gardeners—run, don’t let him catch you. He hurt a big girl and got her sent away to
a really bad place where they give you babies.

Al’s head disappeared back into the hydrangeas. I ran to the front fence to push
myself amongst the big girls’ spiky elbows. I pushed my arm through the fence and
grabbed cigarette butts and shoved them up the legs of my fusty bloomers.

*   *   *
It’s impossible for me to know, at this distance, if the thing that happened next really did happen a few days after I’d discovered that Al was still alive, or if the hydrangeas are the key that link my memories of events so closely together. But I think it might have been only a matter of days after I’d seen Al in the hydrangeas when Home Sister stood before me, saying:

- Come, Brown. Your baby sister’s dying. She has tuberculosis.

Camilla? Little baby Camilla? What was she doing in Dalwood? She was at home with Mummy. Why was the Sister playing a joke on me?

The Sister took me near the hydrangeas, and led me over to a cane pram. Inside, strapped into the pram, her head lolling against the propped-up pillows lay a little fair-haired pale-faced girl. I’d never seen her before in my life. Where was little baby Camilla? I opened my mouth and words tumbled out to shock me:

- Why’s Camilla in a pram? She’s not a baby . . . she’s a whole two.

- Say goodbye to your baby sister, Brown, said the Home Sister, as she shot me a peculiar look.

I couldn’t cry. I knew what would happen if I did. Later, I heard Home Sister say to Matron:

- That Brown’s a cold, hard child, not even a tear.

Every night since my incarceration in Dalwood I had lain in my cot and dreamt up big blue butterflies as I lay waiting for sleep. I’d taught the other little girls how to dream the butterflies. Every night the cot-dormitory occupants flew to sleep on the wings of big blue butterflies. But on the day I said goodbye to Camilla, the big blue butterflies deserted me forever.

Sally and Mattie were twins. They were shy, and they slept next to each other in the far end of my cot-dormitory in Dalwood. They had a piece of hemp rope, about ten inches long, and they had tied a ribbon bow around it, a bit below its middle. The end of rope below the bow had unravelled, like the loose end of a plait. They called it their doll, and took turns in taking it to bed. One night Sally wet the bed, and after the ‘treatment’ night-sister took their ‘doll’ away. Sally and Mattie grew thinner, and sadder, and quieter. Matron told night-Sister to give their rope ‘doll’ back to them.

Sally was washing her face in the cold, grey water one morning when she put her head near mine and whispered:

- Mattie an’ me lost our big blue butterflies . . . they went away with the fairies . . .
By the time I was six and a bit I knew that Al and Camilla had died just after I’d seen them near the hydrangeas. Then one day Matron put on her hat and black coat, led me down the front stairs of Dalwood, and put me in the back of her chauffeured car where Al and Camilla were already sitting. She drove us to the Randwick Auxiliary Hospital to our mother.

I remember the hospital sister pulling the curtains around Mummy’s bed space, and Al and me standing there at the foot of the hospital bed with Matron. I remember Matron holding Camilla in her arms. But I can’t remember seeing my mother because she wasn’t there. In her bed lay a yellow skin-covered skeleton. The skull grinned horribly. There were no eyes, only burning black holes.

The yellow skeleton gasped and choked and rattled, and the skull croaked:
- I love . . . don’t . . . forget . . . heart-mother . . .

The skeleton’s trembling claw nudged a bag of lollies. Al grabbed the bag, and Matron smacked it out of his hand.

Hard-boiled black-and-white-striped humbug sweeties fell out of the bag and clattered across the floor.

Perhaps it was the weekend, or maybe there was a public holiday, or perhaps the schools were on term break—I don’t know, but on the day that the war officially ended in 1945, I was in the play area with the other small girls, and I was the child who was furthest from the play-shed. On that day, V-day, a plane droned overhead and dived down. The play-area Sister ran and ran, and picked me up under her arm and ran to the play-shed, screaming as she ran:
- Children, quickly! Duck down—we’re being strafed!

The plane soared upwards, and long, red, white, and blue ribbons streamed out from its tail and fanned the sky. The Sister dropped me down onto the veranda and I fell, face down, on the bare wooden boards. Then she put her hands over her face and howled and howled. We gathered in front of her and stood and stared. We Dalwood inmates all knew she should have known not to cry. Never, ever cry.
Some months after the war officially ended, for reasons not known to me, I was kept back from school and sent to the play area with some other small girls. About mid-morning Matron came into the wire play-enclosure and beckoned:

- Come, Betty, come Joan. Go into the play-shed and put on your shoes.

On the veranda of the play-shed stood a uniformed soldier and his pretty wife in her bright green dress. The soldier’s wife smiled, and said to Matron:

- Are these the only ones?
- These are the only five year olds up for fostering, replied Matron in her frosty voice.

- Pick me, please, please, please, pick me, I prayed under my breath.

I had a wonderful idea. I took a deep bow, and burst into song:

_ I’m looking over, a four-leaf clover,_

_That I’ve over-looked before,_

_One leaf is the sunshine . . . _

And as I sang I tapped with all my might and my laceless shoes flopped up and down on my feet and threatened to send me flying. I knew these nice people would see how bright and clever I was; I knew they would pick me—the girl who could dance, the girl who could sing, the girl who remembered almost everything. I would go home with a Mummy and new Daddy who wanted me. I would love them with all my heart, forever and ever and they would give me to my Pop. Then the soldier’s wife smiled at me, and pointed with her index finger.

- We’ll take that little girl, she said.

Sad-looking Betty with the runny nose and the skinny legs had been chosen over me. How I envied her. How I hated her. I told myself I didn’t care.

*   *   *

Seven, I was seven. My paternal aunts and uncle had disappeared from my mind. I could no longer see their faces or hear their voices. My father’s image was a far-away dream that belonged to terrifying rows and another life-time, and my memories of my mother fell back and took second place to my constant hunger. I knew the name Camilla but couldn’t give the name a face. The only faces and voices that stayed with me were Al’s and Nanna and Pop’s. Once again, I knew that Camilla and Al were dead.
Matron ushered me into the hall. There, standing beneath the roll of honour that hung on the wall, was Al. He was holding the hand of a fair-haired waif. I guessed it had to be Camilla. But who was the man, and who were the huge ladies standing with him? I’d never seen them before in my life, so why were they staring at me? Then one of the ladies giggled and Bertie swung into my mind. That’s when I knew that the man was my father.

My father the stranger didn’t reach for me, didn’t touch me, didn’t cuddle me, and didn’t smile. He stood there as if he’d rather be somewhere else. He said:

- G’day, I’ve brought Bertie and her mother, Ma Mitchie.

I don’t remember very much about my father’s visit. I suppose that over the years I’ve tried not to think much about it at all. As well, the memory of that visit is swamped by my memory of the Mitchies’ presence. Ma Mitchie and Bertie kept getting mixed around in my head—they seemed to me to be two halves of a very large whole.

One year later I once again discovered Al and Camilla were still alive when we were suddenly and unexpectedly released from Dalwood.

Whether our release was a good thing, or a bad thing, depends on the way I look at it: I think it might have been a case of six of one, and half a dozen of the other.

*    *    *

I have been into the fruit-box. I am holding three old black and white photos that were taken with the new Box Brownie camera my father had bought for Bertie. In one photo, Ma Mitchie and Bertie smile at the camera which must have been held by my father. Camilla, Al and I stand with the Mitchies. Camilla is sockless and smiling shyly. Al is sockless and grimacing. His brow is wrinkled. His hands are behind his back. I stand on the left in the straddle-legged pose of an abused child. I am sockless and unsmiling as I glare miserably, straight ahead, at the camera.

In another photo, we sit on a park bench. I don’t remember where it was, but I do remember that Matron told my father and the Mitchies that they couldn’t take us out of sight. In the photo, Daddy holds Camilla on his knee. They smile at the camera which is being controlled by Ma Mitchie. On my father’s left cowers Al, his head is down and he is frowning. He looks worried as he sits between my father and Bertie. She sits, smiling, almost squashing Al. I sit on the end, at the left, alongside Bertie. I am not smiling. I am glaring at the camera and Bertie’s handbag is digging into my side. I
study the photo and wonder what my father was thinking of: I look at Bertie and see a woman who is noticeably older than Hal. Her little head seems almost masculine, her domed forehead goes hairless for a long way back, her great hooked nose dominates her face and bends down to her small tight mouth, and her great tree-trunk legs seem to overtake her entire self. Then I look at my father and am shocked that I have never before noticed his bad-boy, laddo looks. In the third photo Ma Mitchie has taken Hal’s place, but apart from that it is much like the second photo.

I look down at my photos, and realise that they are the only extant material from the five years I spent in Dalwood. These three photos are the only material proof of the only time in those five years that I had visitors, the only time my father came to see us—the only time ever.

*    *    *    *

The food at the Mitchies’, into whose care we three children were released from Dalwood, was plentiful, plain, and well-cooked by the standards of those days. We ate what was called the Depression diet. Al detested the brains and tripe in parsley sauce. Whenever he flicked the bits of tripe off his plate Bertie whipped him with her willow stick for playing with his food. I hated the tiny black-eyed white-bait and white sauce. Bertie said it was a delicacy, so I treated each slimy little fish delicately and swallowed it whole. Al and I loathed the bottomless glasses of goat’s milk we were forced to swallow. We loved the fried scones and cocky’s joy (golden syrup) even though I felt bloated and reeled from the pains in my stomach after eating even one. Al said he liked the Weet-Bix we were given for breakfast. Camilla wouldn’t eat them. I discovered that the outside dunny was an ideal place after a meal; it was somewhere I was allowed to go without permission, it was quiet, it was isolated. The simple act of quietly sticking my fingers down my throat ensured that my fried scones or Weet-Bix left me in comparative peace. The toilet’s fibro walls kept my secrets safe.

We had been at the Mitchies’ for only one week when I saw Bertie hold Camilla by the nose and shove Weet-Bix mush down her throat. I saw Camilla’s tongue poke out, and then she threw up. I saw Bertie’s mouth slowly pinch up like a cat’s bum and knew straightaway that there was bad trouble ahead. I wasn’t wrong. I saw Bertie do to Camilla what the Sisters had done to me in Dalwood. Camilla’s face turned blue as she choked and sobbed. I felt panicky and wanted to pee; it ran down my legs and made a
small pool under my chair. Bertie glared, reached across the table and swiped at my face with her willow stick, and threw me outside. I heard Camilla’s high scream. I heard the retort of a sharp smack. I heard Bertie say:

- You bloody kids have been so starved in Dalwood that you don’t appreciate good food when you get it.

I suppose she was right; and I suppose she thought she was doing the right thing in trying to feed us up and get us healthy; and I suppose we three children should have been grateful after we had been brought near to death by starvation in Dalwood. Nevertheless, the greasy sausage mince which was fried, stewed, boiled, or, as my father would have said, ‘bashed and buggered’, was very hard to take. As well, we children were not used to vegetables; I guess that’s why we had no taste for them whatsoever. Perhaps we just got fussy because we were presented with better food than we’d been used to for some years.

In those post-war days there was not the variety of vegetables there is today; most Australians were unaware of anything much more than turnips, cabbages, cauliflowers (a special hate of Camilla’s), white spuds, peas and beans—that sort of thing, and it seemed that all Australians, to use my father’s terms, boiled the shit out of them. Fresh fruit was not on the Mitchies’ menu. Apples, plums, pears, peaches, and apricots were either stewed or tinned, and grapes and melons and lemons were reserved for making jams and jellies. I was unaware that other types of fruit were known to man. However, at the Mitchies’ I think that even Al the bottomless pit got enough to eat to fill him up.

The grown-ups ate differently to us children. Daddy ‘oohed’ and ‘aahed’ with enjoyment over thick beef-steaks, eggs and chops, and rich fruit cake. I used to feel my mouth water as I watched him, but I knew from my Dalwood training that I must not comment.

My father had changed. He seemed remote and secretive. He was unapproachable. Al and I were not allowed to talk to Hal at all, and we were never left alone with him for an instant, either. No matter what happened we were warned:

- Don’t tell your father . . . don’t you dare tell your father . . . don’t you ever bother your father . . . don’t you worry your father with your lies . . .

*   *   *   *
It seems to me that unhappiness and fear dominated my life during the Mitchie days. I suppose there must have been some pleasant moments, but if there were, then I either don’t remember them, or they were attached in some way to something very unpleasant that took precedence in my mind. If years have colours, then I can truly say that, for me, those years were as black as the bricks of the Mitchies’ Federation style bungalow which was situated a few miles from our old pre-Dalwood house.

After we three children arrived at the Mitchies’ dairy, the number of people who occupied the house was cut from unlucky thirteen to nine. We were told that we were lucky because in order to make room for us, seven foster children—three girls the Mitchies said told lies and caused trouble, and four boys who they said didn’t deserve a chance because they wouldn’t work hard enough to get ahead, had been returned to the institutions. Later, I discovered that the boys were a cheap source of slave labour. I also discovered that the girls’ story was very different to the one the Mitchies published abroad. The Mitchies had hung onto a boy called Alex. He was, they said, a good worker. He was, they said, ‘worthwhile’.

A few days after we arrived I was down on my knees polishing the hall floor when Bertie’s cousin, Billie Christie the butcher, came to the door to deliver the offal and detested sausage mince. They stood at the door. They bent their heads close together. Billie Christie’s hoarse whisper dipped up and down. My ears flapped. I caught a word here and there.

- ... hard ... be missing ... money ...

Bertie’s whisper was more audible; it floated back on the honeyed smell of bees-wax polish.

- ... Child Welfare money ... four foster kids ... better chance with him ...

What was Child Welfare money? And where were the four foster kids? There was only Al and Camilla and I and the ‘worthwhile’ boy called Alex.

It wasn’t long before I learnt that our father no longer had any say in us. We were fostered by the Mitchies through the Child Welfare. We were answerable to the Mitchies, and the Mitchies were answerable only to the Child Welfare who sent an inspector around twice in the first twelve months.

The Child Welfare inspector would sit in Ma and Pa Mitchie’s dining–room when Pa Mitchie was away from home and sip fine tea from delicate rose-patterned cups. Between his second and third cream biscuit, he would have us brought to the dining-room to be inspected. The inspection procedure always followed the same
pattern. I can see myself standing up straight in front of him while he made his observations. I see him ticking or crossing the form with his gold-tipped pen. I can hear his sticky-toffee voice:

- Stand up straight so I can see you. Mmm. Clean clothes (tick). Clean hair (tick). Plump—aah, enough to eat (tick). Religious instruction (tick). School attendance (tick). Happy are you? (Tick).

This over, the inspector would lift his hand in the air and I would be dismissed. Each time the inspector’s visit was due we were warned not to say anything other than everything was really, really good, and we were really, really happy. But I wasn’t. I didn’t really see Al to ask him if he was happy. It wasn’t the food, there was enough of that. I wanted Pop to come and take me away from the things that were happening.

*   *   *

To me, the Mitchies’ house seemed huge, but it only had three bed-rooms. Camilla and I were put into Bertie’s room where I slept behind the door on a narrow, back-breaking, horse-hair mattress. The prickly mattress, which I was told was good for me, kept me awake in spite of cuddling Patrick Bear whom I’d rediscovered upon leaving Dalwood.

Ma and Pa Mitchie had a room to themselves—I was only allowed in there to fetch the gazunda to empty it. The gazunda was the name used those days for the goes-under which was really a big white self-embossed china chamber pot. Not all chamber pots looked the same, but they were all made of china, all ornate, and all pissed in every night. It was my job to carry it carefully and toss the contents onto the paling fence to keep the white-ants at bay. Because of being peed on continuously, the fence was a peculiar and unnatural bright green colour that glowed with a subdued softness. I was told God help me if I dropped that bloody pot or didn’t wash it out properly after I’d emptied it. In the small but huge-looking Mitchie house, all the other males in the household slept in the third bed-room. There must have been a lounge-room, but I never once saw it in the entire time I lived there. I did see the formal dining-room where, because of Pa Mitchie’s drinking problem, he and Ma Mitchie sat together and silently chewed their way through every meal.

Pa Mitchie had keen hearing and easily offended sensibilities and a bad liver, and his black temper was triggered by any old thing at all. One night Bertie’s scruffy and pregnant ginger cat got the toe end of his boot when it looked up at him and
meowed. I wet myself in terror; and Bertie threw me into the dark outside loo and locked the door. The cat’s new-born kittens never opened their tiny eyes: whether Pa Mitchie’s boot was the cause or not, I wouldn’t know. Pa Mitchie’s nature made the rest of us eat in hushed silence in the breakfast-room on the other side of the house; but rarely did we all sit down together.

We three children met the surly, ginger-haired Alex on the night we arrived. We sat on the long backless bench that ran down one side of the table, and made ready to say grace. Ma Mitchie came out from the dining-room, pointed to Alex, and said:

- Right you three, this is your new brother, show bloody respect. When he says ‘jump’, you say ‘how high’ (I pictured Alex spinning around, twirling a skipping rope while he shouted ‘higher, higher’, and doubted if I could jump rope that quickly), and you there (she pointed at Al), you will work with him whenever you’re not in school.

A blind man could have seen that Alex didn’t like us. On school holidays, and on the occasional Saturday, I sometimes caught sight of him and Al hand-scything the long grass in the bottom paddock, or staggering under the weight of the old wooden barrows filled with the chook poo they had scraped from the chook sheds with their long-handled shovels, or chopping the wood for the coppers that were always kept on the boil. One Saturday I was set to work weeding the garden. I looked up and saw Alex punch Al in the head. Alex looked over and saw me watching, said:

- You tell and I’ll say you lied and the police will come and take you away, back to the Home—like they took the others. I really hate you brats, I was here first.

Alex went somewhere most weekends; I have a vague memory that he went to his unseen—by me, that is—father at these times. I remember that I was really scared of Alex; but I was more scared of getting sent back to Dalwood. Al must have been scared too, because he never told either. But shortly after we arrived at the Mitchies’, Alex turned fifteen and his welfare money stopped suddenly, and then he went away. When I was a child I liked to imagine that he was living happily with his mysterious father.

I mentioned Alex to Al not long ago. Al sniffed, said:

- Oh him! I felt sorry for him.

And that was that. Al had dealt with Alex.
I believe that my real education started at the Mitchies’: I discovered that, in reality, I was a Rip Van Winkle. I hadn’t seen the world for five long years. Everything looked new, and strange. Before Dalwood, the streets had been splattered with horse manure; now, the only manure strewn around came from the broken down nags belonging to the rag and bone man, the clothes-prop man, the rabbit-oh, and the genteel pony who pulled the sulky for the Rawleigh’s trilby-hated gentleman with his bag of ointments and liniments—said to be ‘good for everything’ from coughs and colds to dislocated hips. Before Dalwood, there had been rare buses and one grocery shop in the small community in which we lived. Now, only half a mile away from the Mitchies’, four buses a day rattled past the school and a new corner shop, where, in spite of the fact that some items were still rationed, bread could be bought for ten pence a large loaf, and a one pound tin of cocky’s joy was cheap at six pence. Back then, supermarkets were still a thing of the future, we relied on the corner shop. I also discovered that Camilla, who shared Ma Mitchie’s and Bertie’s world and was carried everywhere by them, was renamed and called The Baby; that Al mostly disappeared—I don’t know where; and that I was not allowed to keep company with the others because I had chores because Ma Mitchie said:

- Satan finds work for idle hands.

So, even though we three children were together under the same roof, we only saw each other sometimes at breakfast or tea-time during school holidays. Al was a jack-in-the-box; he appeared at the dinner table on Saturday nights, and every Saturday morning he took religious instruction with me. We each lived in vastly different worlds. Camilla had tuberculosis and was kept apart: she was cosseted, pampered, and, much to their credit, cured by the Mitchies in a day when, officially, there was no cure. How they did it, I don’t know. Al attended a boys’ school somewhere—I don’t know where, and he won’t say even now. I went to the girls’ school up the road from the Mitchies’. So I have no idea what life was like for either of my siblings: I only know that Al and Camilla existed. I never knew Camilla’s story, and Al’s story is unknown to me from the time I entered Dalwood. And even though we are now adults, he refuses point-blank to talk about the past. All I know is he was in the Dalwood Boys’ Home and at the Mitchies’. Last year when my brother was staying at my place for a few days, I sat out with him on the back patio in the shade, and said:

- Al, please, what is it. I mean, I know you feel that you can’t talk about your experiences, but you never want me to talk about mine, why?
- Well Jo, said Al, to tell you the truth I feel terribly guilty, and when I hear you talking about what happened to you I feel worse because I was the big brother and I should have looked after you—I didn’t protect you. Oh God, I’m so, so sorry dear.

I felt the tears scratch my eyes as I looked across at my brother, and said:

- Oh, Al. How could you have—a little boy, only twenty-two months older than me, and you were an abused, hurt child too . . . so please, don’t . . .

He got up and walked into the paddock. I watched as he brushed his hand across his eyes. I had never before seen my brother cry in his adult life.

*   *   *

Two years ago, Al told me one thing: he hated bath-times because he always felt dirty afterwards. Six inches of water in the bottom of the bath—that’s what we were allowed. Maybe there were water restrictions then, I don’t know. Anyway, Camilla and I were bathed by Bertie. It’s weird, but just as in Dalwood, at the Mitchies’ I was considered to be old enough to be treated as an unpaid servant fit only for the most menial tasks, but not old enough to be trusted to wash myself properly. Even when I was eight years of age the irony of the situation struck me—but back then, I didn’t think of it as ironical, I thought of it as plain stupid.

I remember that half an hour or so after Bertie had washed Camilla, she’d wash me in the by-now-cold water, then Al was made to get into the same bath water and, of course, he had to wash himself. I hated being bathed in Camilla’s bath-water. She always piddled in it, and I’d complain loudly about sitting in the yellow stain that was clouding the water. My very loud verbal protests alerted poor Al. He knew beyond a doubt he was washing in second hand piddle. No wonder he hated it.

Whenever Camilla and I were bathed together, Camilla hated it because of my fear of the plug-hole. I was convinced that if I sat on the plug it would somehow work its way loose, and I would go down the drain. So on those rare occasions when Camilla and I sat in the bath together, I made her sit on the hole-end, over the plug.

There was no way in this wide world that I, Joan-Annette, was going down the drain.

*   *   *
No one introduced us to Jack. I stumbled across his name by accident. The day we arrived at the Mitchies’ place his twisted shadow seemed to loom up out of nowhere and attach itself to Ma Mitchie. As I see it, Jack was one of the Mitchies’ worst kept ‘secrets’. He had his own shed where he’d rattle around all day amongst the funnel-web spiders and bags of chook food and his boxes of ‘treasures’—lengths of rope, wire, string and unnameable bits he’d scrounged from heaven only knows where.

Over the years I have worked hard to erase his stain from my memory. The only way I can find to describe him is to reach into the fruit-box and pull out the old black and white photos from the Mitchie days. I can hardly bear to look at him even now. He looked like Bertie, but in a screwed-up sort of way. Bertie-like, he had a high-domed, shiny forehead that went back forever to meet his thin, sparse hair. His pointed, jutting chin and thin, dribbling lips chumbled and ground against each other continuously, but their chumbling didn’t synchronise—they seemed to work in opposite directions to each other. His mouth disappeared altogether whenever his pointy chin suddenly and involuntarily slapped upwards to meet his long, hooked, perpetually dripping nose. Whereas Bertie’s small, suspicious eyes were brown, Jack’s eyes where tiny cold points of blue-grey which glinted from behind a pair of steel-rimmed bottle glasses. His crooked legs and arms jerked wildly like those of a badly managed string puppet, and he stood on the tip of his toes as half running, half lurching, he propelled himself forward in crab-like movements to get from one place to another; and whenever he rasped and croaked out words his face reddened, and the ropey veins and muscles of his thick neck strained and bulged with the effort. When I first met him, I asked:

- What’s he say? Why does he look like that?
- He says you’re very pretty and he wants to play with you. He was born with spastic paralysis . . . he’s my Cross . . . , said Ma Mitchie.
- What?

Don’t say ‘what’, only the Royal Family were allowed to say ‘what’, didn’t I know? Sorry, but what did she mean? I wasn’t to know, it wasn’t my business to know. Children should be seen and not heard. She turned and directed her words at Jack.

- No . . . you can’t play with her over in the bush. She’s got work to do.

If Jack didn’t get his own way instantly he became violent. He was so strong that no-one could control him; no-one could hold him or stop him from doing terrible damage. Ma Mitchie propped her meaty hands against her wide hips and said to Bertie:
- For God’s sake, if he wants her then let him have her—I can’t deal with his bloody business. Then she turned back to Jack and yelled at him, Jesus Christ, Jack, bloody take her. Al and Alex, go with them. No, Jack, they’re going too.

Over in the ti-tree scrub that day, I learnt how to listen to Jack’s special way of talking. He demanded hide-and-go-seek, but he only let me hide behind the next bush where he could see me. He came around the bush and groped at my chest and thighs with his hard, claw-like hands. I didn’t know then what he was doing, but I loathed the sight of his long dirty finger-nails. The way he grabbed at me made me feel sick and uncomfortable. I saw Alex come around the bush, look at Jack with disgust, then turn away towards the Mitchies’. After Alex left, Jack stopped grabbing at me because Al came over to join us. Then Al and I found the stunningly beautiful tin and opened it. Bits of paper flew everywhere.

- Wow, we’re rich! Al shouted, and ran around gathering up the paper money.

We ran back to the Mitchies’ place with Jack hollering and spitting and huffing and lurching across the road after us. Bertie grabbed the tin and hid it.

- If you kids say anything to anyone about the tin, she said, I’ll cut your rotten bloody tongues out.

Two gigantic men in dark suits came to the house and asked a lot of questions. Before they left they said to me and Al:

- Listen up, you two. You’ll be in big trouble if you say anything about this.
So you didn’t see anything or find anything, understand?

Then they took the Japanese occupation money away. But they didn’t find out about the beautiful tin.

*   *   *

Three weeks and five days after we arrived at the Mitchie’s, exactly two days before my eighth birthday, we three children sat on the long, backless bench in the breakfast-room while Bertie said:

- Sit up straight and listen well. Your mother died yesterday. You’re not going to the funeral. No use crying over spilt milk—that’s bloody done is done . . . if you cry I’ll bloody belt you one.

So Al and I didn’t dare cry, and, besides, people dying and then dying all over again seemed to me to be a fairly usual state of affairs. Years later I learned that dying
from tuberculosis can sometimes be a slow journey along a path filled with fiery peaks and dark valleys. But back then, after Bertie’s announcement, Camilla was picked up and cuddled and carried inside to be comforted and Ma Mitchie came out from inside and told Al and me to get back to work. While I scrubbed the laundry floor I thought about a yellow skeleton and remembered something about a heart-mother, and I felt nothing except the cold hardness of the concrete floor against my knobbly knees. It didn’t seem to matter; nothing mattered except that I’d cop a taste of the dog whip if I didn’t scrub the floor properly.

The dog whip was a length of sanded two by one that had planed corners; nailed to one end of the smooth timber were three, yard-long strips of knotted leather. Ma Mitchie wielded the whip with the grace of a professional bullocky. I had good reason for wanting to avoid a taste of the dog whip. Everyone hit kids in those days; the law said it was alright. Ma Mitchie was law-abiding, and she said:

- Spare the rod and spoil the child.

The whole time I was in Dalwood, for what seemed like an eternity, Mummy had been dead then alive then dead again on a rotating basis. Of course, later on it hit me hard, but back then I soon forgot because in the next couple of weeks after my mother’s final death, a number of things happened to make me forget that, this time, Mummy was really dead.

* * *

After my mother had died for the last time religion came into my life once again. Every Saturday morning after Al and I had finished our early jobs, and before we were allowed to eat breakfast, we sat on the backless bench in the breakfast-room and received God into what Bertie said were our Heathen souls. At the hands of Bertie God was given to us in a wild mix of Bible stories, readings from the King James Bible and the translated Torah because Ma Mitchie was Jewish. We recited the protestant version of the Lord’s prayer and followed up with Jewish chants and prayers; and we took instruction on Christadelphian conditional immortality because Bertie said she herself was Christadelphian which, she said, was Jewish by adoption. She said she couldn’t be a Jew like her mother because her father was a stinking bloody Gentile. She said we had to believe everything she said if we were to be saved.
I didn’t see how I was going to be saved. I couldn’t see how what Bertie said was right. One morning I must have looked as if I didn’t believe her because she made me stay on the bench and told me to look into her eyes. She leaned forward, her big breasts straining at the buttons that held the front of her shirt-waisted dress together. Her gimlet eyes bored into mine. She said she knew because she could see things. I wriggled my skinny bottom on the hard bench. I was going to die of tuberculosis before I was thirty if I didn’t wear a singlet, and if I ripped my knickers or my petticoats and left them unmended then, Oh dear! I’d meet with an accident and have to go to hospital to die. I’d bring bad luck for seven years if I broke a mirror and I mustn’t walk under a ladder for much the same reason. I was going six foot under in a wooden box when I died but my soul would have to fly around being punished forever because I wasn’t a Jew, or a Christadelphian, and I was a little half-breed bastard to boot.

It’s odd, how these things stick. Back then I knew instinctively what I consciously know now—nothing Bertie said held water; but how is it that I still shudder if I come close to breaking a mirror? Perhaps I had too many servings of Bertie’s ‘seven years’. Who me—superstitious? How ridiculous! But in respect to mirrors I can’t help myself and that is probably because Bertie used to grab me by the back of my neck, thrust my face towards the mirror and say:

- Look at yourself you bloody little bastard. My God you’re ugly.

I think a combination of factors kept me on an even keel of sorts. For one thing, I knew God was not up in the sky as Bertie said because in Dalwood I’d discovered God in a tree where He was reachable. Then for another thing, back in my early Mitchie days I didn’t understand a lot of what Bertie said, so I let it roll over my head whilst appearing to pay attention. And yet another thing, I had an innate ability to sneak around, get at banned reading material, and become invisible. Whenever I was sent to dust Ma Mitchie’s dining-room I quietly lifted the window-seat, pulled out the Women’s Weekly, and faded into the fleur-de-lis wallpaper. This is how at just eight years of age I got to read serialised versions of Mitchie-banned books like Heaven Knows Mr. Alison, the Dutch East Indies Affair, and Gone with the Wind. I got away with it for a while. They didn’t know that I could read and read well. One day I became so absorbed in my reading I didn’t hear them speaking to me. I didn’t know they were there until Ma Mitchie pounced and gave me a taste of the dog whip.

*   *   *   *
One week after my mother had really died, I was sent from the vegetable garden to fetch a rake from the garden-shed that adjoined Pa Mitchie’s recreation shed. Pa Mitchie leant on the low window sill, puffing at his cigar and gulping from his rum bottle. He looked straight at me and snarled:

- Mongrel-bred bastard — bloody git before I slit your throat.

Whatever made me do it? The sickness in my stomach and bad memories, probably: I remembered Mummy had called Daddy a bastard all those years ago, and Bertie called me a bastard all the time, and whatever a bastard was I felt it wasn’t good. But I also sensed that Hal and Pa Mitchie and I were all different sorts of bastards. I felt I needed to show him. So I came to a dead stop, stood still, and smiled nervously at him:

- Hello Pa, Pap, Puppy, Poppy.

His rum bottle few straight for my head and glanced off my temple with a stinging blow that made me drop where I stood. His red face turned purple. He let out a monstrous roar, jumped to his feet, and ran bellowing into the house. All I remember after this is the screaming and yelling—Bertie grabbing me as she ran past carrying Camilla and screaming for Al to come and for Alex to run; Daddy yelling as he ran from the house carrying a long, silver-handled carving knife and a hammer, then bundling Al, Camilla and me behind him into the corner of the big shed; Bertie grabbing her ladies’ push-bike and angling it in front of Daddy before placing herself on one side; Pa Mitchie storming into the shed and advancing purposefully towards us with a crow-bar and carving knife; Ma Mitchie hanging off his arm, screaming:

- Charlie! Charlie—NO! It isn’t worth it!

Daddy, white-faced, saying in a deadly voice that carried:

- Come on, come on you shitting bastard, come on you blasted mongrel soak and I’ll bloody carve you up.

Nothing actually happened in the end, but I had an egg-lump on my head and from that day forward I was deathly afraid of the drink. Looking back I realise that this incident must have affected me even more deeply than I realised because even though I’m now an elderly woman I can’t stand the drink. But I suppose many people feel that way. So, why, in my first marriage, did I end up marrying a man who loved the bottle?

Back when I was eight, the other thing that happened because of this incident was that from that day on, until I was ten, other than when I was doing housework or gardening whenever Pa Mitchie was out, I was locked in Jack’s shed with Jack and the
funnel-web spiders. All my meals were brought out to the shed. On the rare occasion Al was sent to join me for tea on Saturday nights, and on the still rarer occasion, Camilla, too.

So the day that I stirred up Pa Mitchie, was the day that marked the beginning of my second imprisonment, and while the triple blast of the air-raid sirens gave an occasional wail, and search-lights arced across the sky even though the Second World War was officially over, my personal war began.

I was the Mitchies’ prisoner of war, and I developed a sick dread of sharp knives—a dread that lasted for many years.

*   *   *

The day after Pa Mitchie’s turn I sat alone in Jack’s shed and watched the busy spiders shrouding their living prey. I was wondering what I could do to help the poor flies escape from their sticky tombs when Ma Mitchie unlocked the door of my prison. She stood in the open doorway, propped her hands on her wide hips, and said:

- Go, Jack wants you in the chip-paddock now. Hurry yourself up.

The chip-paddock was enclosed by a six-foot high paling fence. It was where Al and Alex chopped the wood. Around the wood-piles and chopping-blocks lay scatters of wood-chips. I was set to work picking up the chips and putting them in my tin bucket. Jack sat down on an up-ended wooden fruit-box, splayed his legs out to either side, unbuttoned his trousers, pulled a short ivory-handled knife from his top-pocket, and rasped thickly:

- Hoi—, ya bastard . . . get here . . .

Looking back, all I can say is that once I saw that knife I was like a terrified rabbit caught in the beam of a spot-light. But I knew at the time that I had to do whatever a grown-up said. I also knew I’d get the dog whip if I left Jack and the chip-paddock where Ma Mitchie had told me to go. So for those reasons I went to him and did as I was told while he held the knife to my throat, and since Jack’s hands perpetually shook, it’s a wonder he didn’t cut my throat. But that was one of the peculiar things about Jack; even though his hands continuously shook, in the final second of contact, his aim was true and he could complete any task that required fine motor skills and pin-point accuracy without any trouble whatsoever. Once he made
contact he could cut a straight line with the accuracy and confidence of a surgeon, or he could sharpen a pencil beautifully.

In the chip-paddock he pressed the knife against my neck while he did things that I instinctively knew were wrong and somehow dirty—awful things that hurt and made me cry. When he had done, he pushed the knife against my throat, lightly nicking the skin until a thin trickle of blood ran down onto my white peter-pan collar, and rasped in his hoarse sticky whisper:

- It’s a secret . . . tell ya bastard, an’ I’ll cut ya bloody throat . . . yeah, yeah . . . the police . . . take ya back to Dalwood.

Oh, there was no doubt about it, I wasn’t telling anyone. I was terrified of the police and Dalwood. Bertie terrified me, too. She belted me with the dog whip for fooling around with the wood-chips and getting blood on my clothes.

So, I discovered yet another hell, and I believed it was for wicked, dirty people such as me, and I lived in that hell everyday, sometimes twice a day, until I was ten and a half years old. I carried the shame and the guilt of my ‘dirty secret’ until 2004, when I confided in Leonie Sheedy of CLAN that I had been sexually abused as a little child.

Strangely though, even when I was much, much older, not once did I ever connect what Jack did to me with adult life or sex. As for love, well, that had nothing whatsoever to do with the matter. In spite of happened, when I was a child I didn’t know about such things as adult life or sex or romantic love. I didn’t know what it was that Jack was doing—I couldn’t give it a name.

*   *   *

Between them, Pa Mitchie and Jack must have done something to me. I began to talk and scream and walk in my sleep. Of course, I don’t actually recall walking in my sleep, I only know because I was told time and again; and I was told by the Mitchies that I was mental. A few days after I first began my nocturnal activities Bertie took Patrick Bear away, the green and brown felt teddy-bear Mummy had made for me long before Dalwood, and made me watch while she burnt him. Bertie stood in her cotton print dress alongside the cut-down forty-four gallon drum that was used for an incinerator and said:

- And you can top that sniffling you little mongrel—you’re not a baby anymore.
Baby or not, Patrick Bear’s horrible burning death was more real to me than Mummy’s off-and-on-again dead business. It was at this time that I saw a white photo album on top of the bed-room wardrobe. The album rang a distant bell, I asked about it, and the album disappeared. It was at this time, too, that I saw my old pre-Dalwood toys on a high shelf in the shed—I asked, and the toys disappeared.

I think Bertie must have burnt Al’s and my pre-Dalwood life. Perhaps she thought these things were contaminated with my dead mother’s tuberculosis germs, or perhaps she just wanted to erase the memories of anyone else who had been in Dad’s life, who knows. All I know is that when Bertie was on one of her cleansing programs nothing was safe, for soon after I saw the toys I walked past Hal as he stood in front of a tarpaulin-covered pile in the old fuel-stove lean-to at the back of the house. He stood staring at a board. I instantly recognised it as the one that was once screwed to the front of our old, pre-Dalwood house. On the board, beautifully sign-written, was the word ‘Katey’.

- Daddy, I asked, who’s Katey?

He turned white, walked silently around me, and went into the house. Bertie came out with the dog whip.

- Just so, she said as she raised her arm, you’ll bloody-well remember never to upset your father again.

A few years later, for no apparent reason at all that I can think of, this memory surfaced and I suddenly remembered that my mother’s name had been Katey. It is strange how memories can slip away unnoticed then surprise you when you least expect.

*       *     *       *

The night that Jack first abused me, and the next night and the one following that, I dirtied the bed. There wasn’t a fourth night because the dog whip saw to it at midnight on the third night. Ever since coming to the Mitchies, my nightmares had increased a thousand-fold. I dreaded going to sleep because I knew that once I closed my eyes the nightmares would start. On the third night after Jack first held the knife to my throat in the chip-paddock, someone began screaming in my nightmares, and that someone was me. I was screaming in reality because Ma Mitchie was lashing me out of my confused,
whirling sleep with the dog whip. Through my sobs I dimly heard Bertie in the hall, saying:

- Go back to bed, Hal dear. Nothing’s wrong—she’s had a nightmare . . . we’re just fixing her up.

Ma Mitchie pulled me from my shitty bed, and said:

- We had to do it for your own good. We rang Dalwood . . . the welfare psychiatrist told us to shock you.

From that night on, I never dirtied the bed again. But this is when I became invisible. I remember that I achieved invisibility by holding my head down at all times. I didn’t look up or speak unless the Mitchies spoke to me directly and required an answer of Yes, or No, Ma Mitchie, or Bertie, as the case might be, and at all times crept along quietly with my back to the wall or the fence. If I sat, I sat rigidly straight and looked down at the ground. In bed I lay on my horse-hair mattress, flat on my back in a rigidly straight line and tried not to breathe; and I swept and scrubbed and dusted and polished until the surface I was working on was immaculate.

Whether it was the shock of Jack, or the dog whip, or the fear of Dalwood which had by now gotten mixed together with a fear of the police and psychiatrists and being insane that made me attempt to become invisible, I don’t know. But it was then that I knew I had proof that I was totally mental. Bertie assured me I was, and she told me so on a continual basis until, one day, when I was twelve—and while I was sitting on top of Nanna and Pop’s water tank up at Wagstaffe—I figured it out for myself: I wasn’t. She was.

*    *    *    *

During the Mitchie years I liked Sundays because I could get away from Jack who was always in a bad mood because it was a Sunday. On Sunday mornings we were told to stay in bed, out of everyone’s way. As soon as I was told to get up I was given breakfast and sent about my chores. Then I was sat down alone to read the Bible or the Torah before being taken out into the garden to pick flowers. Everything ran by the clock—so many minutes for this, so many minutes for that. When the allocated time for picking flowers was up, I was taken inside to be taught how to set a table correctly for a formal Sunday dinner.
Our Sunday dinner of roast hogget, potatoes, and mashed turnip was eaten in silence in Ma Mitchie’s dining-room while classical music and Prime Minister Ben Chifley’s broadcast played over the radio. After lunch I was given a celluloid doll to hold on my knee while we went for a Sunday drive in Daddy’s car—still the big, black Buick. Where Al was during this time I don’t know, and if I ever did know, then I have forgotten. All I know is that once I was sat on the folding stool which was set sideways between all the knees in the back of the car, Ma Mitchie would point her finger at me and say:

- Look here, you get bloody car sick and look out—you’ll get the belting of your life when we get home.

So, for me, Sundays wound up with the belting of my life, but at least I had escaped Jack for the day. So, some things changed, but in between times I was still relegated to Jack’s shed with Jack and the spiders.

*   *   *

Christmas was the other time I could escape Jack. Christmas at the Mitchies’ meant a pillow-case on the foot of the bed. The pillow-case always held an orange, a hooked peppermint stick (I got a lot of enjoyment out of peppermint stick—I’d pretend to be little Bo-Peep, and every time I ‘hooked’ a sheep I’d reward myself with a tiny nibble), a cardboard-backed orange-mesh ‘stocking’ crammed with bits-n’-bobs (this item stopped the year I turned eleven and was replaced by a pair of waist-to-knee interlock bloomers), a book from Nanna and Pop, and one longed-for item—perhaps.

Christmas meant roast chicken and custard-covered pudding. It meant a free afternoon when I could crawl under the house to break pieces of cane from the old chairs that had been thrown there, and water the dust with the flat dregs from the three bottles of beer the adults bought once a year. I’d tell myself I was busy working and couldn’t come out where Jack could get me.

*   *   *

Three weeks after Jack first started abusing me, Pa Mitchie died in bed. Ma Mitchie came out in the morning wearing her white tent of a nightie, her short steel grey hair in tiny curlers under a hair-net, and said:
- Hah! See? The old mongrel had a bloody apoplectic fit—it’s God’s judgement.

The doctor came, the police came, and I threw up in the old out-side loo. At first, no-one noticed I was ill. But I knew I was sick because the police were at the house: I thought they were going to take me away, back to Dalwood, because of Jack. I wanted to die. I gathered a bunch of dock-weeds, which I believed were highly poisonous, then went out to the old loo and sat, cross-legged, on the cold concrete floor trying to catch a chill in my kidneys and die. I chewed and swallowed the dock-weeds and stuck my arm in a red-back spider’s web trying to get it to bite me. The spiders didn’t want to taste me, but I got the dog-whip for my troubles and couldn’t eat my dinner because I had an upset tummy. Bertie looked at my dinner plate, screwed her little eyes up into pinpoints, and said:

- We’ve got enough on our bloody plate without you deciding to turn it on bastard.

Ma Mitchie stood on the front veranda and whistled to celebrate Pa Mitchie’s death. Her whistling hurt my ears and grated on the fibres of my nerves, and embarrassed the life out of me. I got a chance to watch her without being seen myself and there I stood, staring at this enormously large, fat lady. Her hairy triple-decker chins wobbled and trembled in time with the exaggerated vibrato in her loud and awful whistling. The awful piercing noise seemed to hang visibly in the air. The Mitchie dogs ran around yelping and shrieking, and I saw them falling down and rolling on the ground as if they were in terrible pain.

I remember that during this time I learnt how to work my stomach and throw up at will. I did this partly for attention, partly because I wanted to sicken and die, and partly because I really did feel ill. I threw up everything I ate and turned an interesting shade of yellow. Even the whites of my eyes turned yellow. The Mitchies didn’t believe in doctors; they believed in the Rawleigh’s man in his trilby hat and spanking fine sulky, their own bush-medicine, and homeopathic cures. Ma Mitchie rolled goat droppings in icing sugar, and she and Bertie stood over me until I swallowed them. The goat pills must have done some good. I stopped vomiting, and began eating. But I still didn’t feel well, and the whites of my eyes stayed a beautiful shade of Indian yellow.

With Pa Mitchie out of the way for good I was brought into the open. Added to my housework was darning, mending, mucking out the milking shed, weeding all the gardens, and cleaning the Mitchies’ shoes. Now, Ma Mitchie ate her evening meal in the breakfast-room with us, and Al was brought in to join us on the occasional Friday night.
Ma Mitchie introduced pre-cooked pickled-pork trotters. Al hated them. He’d bite off a piece of pickled pork and swallow without chewing. I was frightened he’d choke to death. I wonder if the trotters are the reason that Al can’t eat pork even now that he is an adult. Anyway, Ma Mitchie liked the trotters. She said they were very good because it was against her religion to cook after sunset on Friday. The irony of a Jewess eating pickled-pork on a Friday night, or pork at all for that matter, didn’t occur to me until I reached my teens.

*   *   *

Three months after we went to live at the Mitchies’, Daddy drove everyone over to Nanna and Pop’s where Ma Mitchie and Bertie turned a reunion with our grandparents into a birthday party for Camilla. Al and I cried when Camilla received presents and we didn’t. I don’t know why Al cried, but I cried because I was jealous.

It must have been just after this that we three children went with Daddy and Bertie to holiday at Wagstaffe with Pop and Nanna. This holiday wore three special marks: my discovery of a special kind of beauty, Jack and Ma Mitchie’s wonderfully real absence, and the security and comfort of Nanna and Pop’s presence. I think Bertie must have tried hard to present her best side to my grandparents during this particular holiday because I have a distinct memory of her soft out-of-character lisping and her act of little-girl-sweetness which made me feel sick to my heart. I knew what she was really like. But at Nanna and Pop’s she never once called me a bastard.

For some reason that I can’t fathom, I didn’t tell my grandparents what was going on at the Mitchies’. Maybe children just don’t tell, or perhaps I was having too good a time to think about the Mitchies and what Jack was up to, or perhaps I was too intimidated by the Mitchies generally. Or perhaps I just didn’t have the words. But whatever the reason, it was not that I was worried I might get sent back to Dalwood from Wagstaffe. I felt safe with Nanna and Pop.

I think that this holiday precipitated the visit that came almost straight after. Our grandparents, and paternal aunts and their families, came to the Mitchies’ house for what must have been the shortest visit in history.

Bertie pointed one of my aunts to a rickety old chair that was so far removed from everyone else’s it was out on the back-door step. She handed Auntie a tin plate and mug instead of the fine china given to everyone else. Then she walked quickly inside
and washed her hands twice. As she passed the open doorway where Auntie sat on the step, she said in a loud voice:

- Well you see, you’ve got this funny little cough... you’ve got tuberculosis, so I’ll just burn that old chair and throw your plate and cup away after.

Pop stood up. He drew himself up to his whole six-foot five-and a-half inches. He signalled to his family to stand. Then he looked first at Bertie and then at Ma Mitchie. He stared them both in the eyes for a long minute, and said in a clear, carrying voice:

- Right, you great She-Bulls, none of us are welcome. We won’t be back. You can have them Hal.

I don’t remember any of my father’s relatives attending his and Bertie’s wedding in the November of the year I turned eight. But I know I cried inside for weeks because I knew Bertie had sent my Pop away out of my life.

*   *   *

In the fruit-box are the only two photos I have from the wedding. In one of these photos Al and Camilla are smiling; and in the other, I’m not. Whenever I compare these photos I’m stunned by how different I am in looks from Al and Camilla. It’s simply not possible to look at these photos and not know that I’m from a different nest; in part, at least.

At the wedding I finally realised that Mummy was really dead, and it hit me while the photos were being taken that now I would never escape the Mitchies or, worse still, Jack.

Bertie’s first order was issued that very night. She stood in front of the gladioli-filled stage in the hall, in her organza wedding dress, head and shoulders over my father, and said in ringing tones:

- Right—you’ll call me Mum. No more Bertie-this and Bertie-that business. And you’ll call your father Dad. No more bloody baby-talk.

Remembering this brings another memory of the newly married Bertie’s agenda. My father and Bertie arrived home from their two-week honey-moon on a Saturday afternoon. Half an hour after they arrived home Bertie walked me out to the back of the
house, told me to look her in the eye and straighten my back before she took a ruler to me, and said:

- You need to know why your birthdays are not noted. You can’t have a birthday at the time of the year that marks your mother’s death; and I’ll tell you this much you little bastard—her bloody funeral cost your poor father dearly.

But on my fifteenth birthday Bertie created a tradition and I don’t know why. She began to mark my birthdays by making a boiled fruit cake.

I had three fruit-cake birthdays in total—one when I turned fifteen, one when I turned sixteen, and the last one on my seventeenth birthday. In my fruit-box there are three photos of the cake-holding and cutting celebration—one photo for every year I had a fruit-cake birthday. My father loved fruit-cake. The closest I got to any birthday cake was to stand alongside Bertie while a photo was being taken of her holding the cake as I made the first cut.

But back when I was eight, when she was explaining why I couldn’t have a birthday, Bertie cleared up a lot of things. She told me that my mother was a terrible woman who had led my father a dreadful dance—she was a prostitute, a spendthrift, a husband-beater and a man-eater. At eight years of age I didn’t have a clue what any of that meant, but I guessed from Bertie’s tone that none of those things were very good. She told me that my father had not wanted Camilla; that my mother had Camilla on purpose because someone had told her that the tuberculosis would leave her body and pass out into the child at birth. She told me that my mother had reneged on payment for me at Dalwood and that I’d cost my father a lot of money he couldn’t afford—I was a terrible drain (I pictured the plug-hole in the bath). She told me that my mother and I were a disappointment to everyone, and she, Bertie, couldn’t understand why God allowed me on His good earth. Then she peered into my face and asked in an earnest tone:

- What good are you to anyone, you little bastard?

*    *    *

What good was I at all, really? I really had no idea. Escape became my top priority. I found escape by listening to the classical music on the radio while I house-worked, and in reading, hobbies, art, and school. The odd thing about the Mitchies was that after Bertie married Dad they actively encouraged my interests. Possibly, the reason was that
they felt it made them look good in the community because I can look back and say that, with the Mitchies, appearances were everything. Anyway, back then, Bertie encouraged my interest in music—probably because she was a violinist with a Sydney orchestra. Ma Mitchie allowed Nanna and Pop to send me the classics in literature—which I suspect they had sent anyway but which had been confiscated by the Mitchies and put away. Ma Mitchie kept me well supplied with art and craft and sewing materials; and when I showed a serious interest in philately and collecting insects it was a concerted effort by them both to keep me armed with the necessary equipment. As well, they actively encouraged my academic efforts at school—if I didn’t get placed in the top three students at any one time I got the dog whip, if I came third I was whipped because I didn’t come second, if I came second I was whipped because I didn’t come first; and if I came first, nothing was said and nothing happened. But whatever happened, I always had to do my homework—and that was placed before chores. I don’t suppose anybody is all bad; but in spite of all the supplies I still found life at the Mitchies’ pretty bad. So when I didn’t have homework, I said I did.

During my bogus homework sessions I copied works by Shakespeare, Blake, Shelley and Keats into an exercise book, and filled exercise book after exercise book with the stories I made up about everything from tales of the bush to stories of the sea to fantasies about dragons and witches, and painstakingly illustrated my efforts. I told the Mitchies it was very, very important schoolwork. They never guessed that I had one over them. They never knew that I was escaping by enjoying myself—for if they had I wouldn’t have gotten away with it.

*   *   *

We three children weren’t allowed to bring anyone home to play; and we weren’t allowed to go to anyone else’s place, either. We didn’t have playmates other than at school. I did well at school, but I came unstuck a few times. I played up in Miss Morris’ dance class and lied. I said:

- My step-mother forbids me to dance because my mother sent me to dance lessons and she was a prostitute, and my step-mother doesn’t want me to be a prostitutional, too.

I can’t remember now how long it was that I was made to sit outside the principal’s office.
Times tables didn’t do a thing for me, so in third class, much to my teacher Miss Davies’ disgust, I gave them up; but Miss Davies never gave up telling the class that neither Labour nor Liberal were any good, and in all innocence I told Bertie. Three plain clothes police came to the school. They questioned me and others in my class:

- Is Miss Davies a communist?

I had no idea what a communist was, but I thought about being made to learn the times tables.

- Yes, yes she is. She says they’re all good, I said, and crossed my fingers behind my back.

The plain clothes police walked into the class-room and led Miss Davies away; the times tables didn’t go away, nor did my guilty conscience.

At the end of third class, suddenly, and for no other reason than attention, I became highly excited and officially changed my name. At recess, another kid told me about a thing called deed poll. She said:

- My mother thinks my father used deed poll because he changed his name to a different one from ours, and now she can’t find him.

I thought about it at lunch-time. I ran back to school after lunch, bolted up to the teachers on playground duty, and announced:

- My step-mother just told me my name has been changed by deed poll. So I’m not Joan anymore—I’m called Marie-Antoinette . . . change the roll!

The teachers stood there laughing at me. I felt hot and uncomfortable and felt my face go red.

- Run off, Joan, they said.

I never got called Marie-Antoinette. Later on, in history lessons, I learnt that she’d gone to the guillotine and I felt very glad my teachers hadn’t changed the roll. I also discovered I’d made a fool of myself by requesting that particular name-change. More than anything, I knew that I’d been sprung—my teachers knew I was a fool, and I knew that teachers talked amongst themselves. And I knew that if the teachers were awake up to me, then after the history lesson my peers also knew, and I knew that they talked amongst themselves, too. Where I went to school, the girls didn’t seem to forget when another kid made an idiot of themselves—there was good mileage in that sort of thing.

* * *
The name Marie-Antoinette is linked to third class and third class is linked to a memory of falling in love with the pair of wet blue eyes I sometimes passed on my way to the shop to fetch the bread. But Tommy Williams, the owner of the eyes, didn’t know I was alive. So falling for blue eyes that have that wet look might sound romantic, but it was not a wise thing to do because it didn’t get me anywhere at all. Being in love with the name Marie-Antoinette was no wiser—that brought me shame and grief; and it wasn’t very wise being in love with fifth class, or, rather, with the teacher, either.

I fell head over heels with the very tall, very ugly, very strict Miss Carter. I spent the time when I should have been listening and getting ahead in class lolly-gagging out the class-room window. In my day-dreams I was Miss Carter’s little girl, she loved me; and each day we watered the pots of bright red geraniums (always red—I don’t know why, but probably because I thought they would look well against the deep black of her wiry hair,) that grew on the veranda of the house which my dream provided. In my day-dreams she would drive her dinky little blue Morris car to school with me sitting beside her in the front seat. When I look back I realise that falling in love with Miss Carter was a result of being shunned by Bertie. Probably, it wasn’t so much that I specifically wanted Bertie as Bertie to love me rather I wanted Bertie to change into a mother figure and give me a mother’s love. I was always trying to figure a way to gain her love and admiration.

For me, my fifth class fantasies were wonderful. But in reality, for me fifth class ended in utter humiliation.

We fifth class girls formed an exclusive, and supposedly secret, society called the ‘Find out Everything’ (FOE). Every recess we huddled in a ring under the oak tree in the playground. If any teacher came near we maintained silence until they had passed. If any girl came near who was not in the club, we chased them away and pelted them with acorns. Our sole purpose was to find out where babies came from, but I think we put more effort into deciding a suitable name for the club than researching our topic. The problem was that all we had to go on was guess-work. In those days you weren’t told about the facts of life, and you couldn’t just ask an adult. I remember that one girl said that babies came from the mother’s navel—it stretched, somehow. Another girl said that they came out the mother’s mouth because their cat had blood around her mouth after she’d had kittens. One lunch-time I saw the Mitchies’ cat giving birth and ran back to school. I stood in front of the group and announced breathlessly:
- I know. I saw. Babies come out of the mother’s bottom—truly.

Flushed with excitement, I stood there in my shining cloak of self-importance. For me, triumph was short-lived. As one, the entire group rounded on me.

- You’re a dirty thing, a liar. Get OUT! You’re NOT in our club anymore.

Sixth class proved to be a new start. I didn’t gain friends, but I had admirers. I drew pictures and sold them to the class ring-leaders for cash or favours. I hid the pennies up the leg of my white knee-length bloomers until I could transfer it to the stringy-haired cross-eyed Dorothy whom no-one played with because she wiped her snotty nose with the back of her hand. Dorothy was good, recesses were better. Recess was when we ate the lollies she bought with my money on her way to school. During the time of the lollies the sixth class teacher, Miss Hogan, discovered I had a talent for writing stories. But writing didn’t get me anywhere. Neither the other girls nor the Mitchies were at all interested. I didn’t get marks for my stories. The lack of marks didn’t mean much to me—creating stories was just something that I’d always done. In my schoolbag I had at least three exercise books full of my scribbling that I assured the Mitchies were very important pieces of homework, and whenever I ran out of paper I’d say Pop’s stories in my head.

*     *     *

On schooldays, I walked home for lunch every day and was given a sandwich and a glass of milk, a bath, and a clean afternoon dress before being sent back to school. One lunch-time I saw great clumps of pin-cushions flowers growing wild in a paddock. At that time I still believed in fairies and magic and there, right in front of me was a magnificent rainbow of fairy blooms. I told myself:

- I’ll take a great bunch home to Bertie, and say something to show her how clever I am.

So there I was, gathering a huge bunch of coloured magic and puzzling over what clever thing to say when I handed her my peace offering. The problem was solved by words painted on a telegraph pole—amazing words I’d never seen before. Bertie’s face lit up and softened as she accepted the flowers. There were tears in her eyes as she looked down at me. Smiling up at her, I opened my mouth to give my little speech that would, I believed, make her love me forever.
These fairy flowers are special magic for you, Mum... get fucked.

The thing that I’d so badly wanted when I was two years old was made easy. I fulfilled my old ambition and flew across the room. The problem was, it was with the aid of Bertie’s fist, and the tears in my eyes and the sickness in my stomach prevented me from seeing Bertie’s fist coming at me again.

The pain in my head seemed to grow and swell along with my face and the pain in my heart. I squinted through my tears and knew from the sharpness in Bertie’s hard little eyes that she didn’t love me, never had loved me, and never would love me after this. Why? At the time I had an uncomfortable feeling in my insides that it had something to do with me giving her a bunch of delicate lilac, white and mauve-y-pink fairy blooms. In my innocence I had followed a course that I had thought would make Bertie love me. How could she not? What was wrong with me? I should have known that I couldn’t have what I wanted just because I wanted it, no, not even love. Bertie might not have meant to do so, but she taught me a valuable life-lesson—you cannot make someone love you. One thing she didn’t do though was kill off my innate ability to love. I still love pin-cushion flowers, in my secret self I still think of them as ‘fairy blooms’.

I don’t know why Bertie treated me in the way that she did. Perhaps it was because she had problems: she had a mad, alcoholic father, and that would have driven any kid crazy—especially a Bertie-type person, and she had a mad mother who had the power to drive everyone crazy. Not only that, but she was in love with a bohemian artist who had two children—Al and me—whom she couldn’t love. It must have been hard wanting to have first place in Dad’s life and being aware that he’d already had another love in the first place. It must have been hard, too, trying to bring up children who needed special handling and extra love and a deep understanding because they’d been abandoned in a Home. But she seemed to hate me more than anyone and perhaps this is because of what Aunt Thel told me years later.

-Jo, said Aunt Thel, when I look at you I see your mother—your father loved your mother so much.

The funny thing is that even though my mother’s face and stature swims in and out of focus when I try to picture her, I remember enough to know that I look nothing like Katey whatsoever; I’m not tall and slender, I don’t have dark sloe eyes, I don’t have black hair, I don’t have beautiful classical features, and my skin isn’t olive. And, too, I can’t see that my father ever loved my mother—I remember the rows.
I was almost ten and a half when a part of my private hell came to an abrupt end. I was out in the garden where I had been sent to pull weeds. While I worked I thought about the Mitchie’s dog-whip. Then, in the middle of my daydream where the evil thing had taken on a life of its own and was wrapping itself around Ma Mitchie’s ankles, I heard Bertie’s strident voice yelling for me get inside THIS INSTANT.

She backed me up against the wall, fixed me with her eyes, and asked:

- What sort of monkey business are you and Jack up to down in the shed?

I felt a panicky need to defend myself. Bertie finally believed me, finally believed I wasn’t the instigator and the perpetuator. She pressed her fingers to her mouth. Tears filled her eyes. She lifted her hand from her mouth and whispered:

- No! The Baby . . . please tell me he didn’t touch The Baby.

After this, there was no more shed. Instead, I was kept under lock and key in the very tiny back veranda. There, when I wasn’t doing homework or my chores under strict supervision, Ma Mitchie handed me one piece after another of fine embroidery to complete by a set time because, she said, Satan had found work for my idle hands.

On the afternoon of the day of discovery Bertie dragged me down the yard and held my head between her hands as she brought me around to face Ma Mitchie and Jack. He was naked, chained and padlocked to the wild, citronella lemon tree. Ma Mitchie stood near him. She held the dog whip. The long brass-tipped willow snake rod lay on the ground beside her.

On that afternoon I heard Jack’s animal-like screams, I took those screams and put them in one of my Pandora’s boxes and locked it and pushed it out sight. I won’t open the box of screams. They can still be heard.

Late that night Ma Mitchie and Bertie pulled me out of bed. They took me into Ma Mitchie’s dining-room, said:

- Best forget it now . . . never, ever, talk of it to anyone. Never, ever, think of it again. You know justice has been done. Don’t tell your father . . . if you ever do that, we’ll say you’re a bloody liar.
One week later, on the day I needed to hurry back to school after lunch because an old man, a retired whaler, was coming to school with his model board and giving a talk about whaling in the southern seas, the thing I’d looked forward to for so long didn’t happen for me.

When I arrived home from school for lunch, full of excitement about the whaler’s talk, Bertie wouldn’t speak to me. Instead, she plonked my tomato sandwich in front of me on the oil-cloth covered table, and glared at me. I felt the malevolence in her stare, and became so nervous I choked as I tried to eat. Then, as she usually did, she stripped me off and put me in the bath where she tried to drown and strangle me in turns.

- Where did the sixpence in your slipper come from? Bertie asked, grasping me by my hair and yanking my head out of the water.

I choked and coughed and spluttered. I had no idea what she talking about. Her hands went around my neck and squeezed and her accusations became wilder.

- Did you take the money from Jack to let him touch you?
- No Mum, no, I gasped, and choked and spluttered.

- When, she asked, did you first start practising your foul prostitution? Then she added, - Don’t think you can bring your filthy Dalwood habits here and train my brother Jack and The Baby . . . did you intend starting on your father next? You filthy bloody bastard.

She held my head under the water until the kick had almost gone out of me. Ma Mitchie ran in and pulled her away, threw my morning dress at me, and said angrily:

- Get it on and get back to bloody school, now.

I arrived back at school in time to know that I’d missed all but the last words of the talk, and I couldn’t see the board through my swollen eyes. The teacher took one look at me and walked over to my desk, and asked:

- What are those red marks on your face and neck, Joan? What happened, tell me, why is your neck swollen? What has happened to you?

I shook my head, coughed, and put my face down into my hands. The teacher ran from the room. I was summoned to the headmaster’s office. Mr. Hazelet turned to the secretary and told her to leave and shut the door behind her. He asked what had happened to my neck. I told him that Bertie had tried to choke me to death because of what Jack had done to me. The balding Mr. Hazelet rang through to the secretary and
asked her to contact the welfare and I became agitated. He picked me up, put me on his knee, and said gently:

- There, there, pet. My wife and I would love to have a dear little girl like you.

Then, he grabbed my head and kissed me full on the mouth. I kicked in terror and for lack of breath. The secretary chose that moment to come in. Mr. Hazelet hastily pushed me roughly off his lap, and said in an accusing tone:

- There, there, Joan . . . no need for that nonsense . . . now run back to your class like a good girl.

As I reached the door I happened to look back over my shoulder, I saw him look at the secretary and lift his eyebrows in the way some adults did, and I heard him say:

- Some grateful children get a bit carried away . . .

Terrified at the thought of a visit from the welfare, and somehow aware of what he had tried to do, I looked directly at him:

- Please don’t ring the welfare Mr. Hazelet, sir.

Looking back, I wonder if he did ring the Mitchies, or if his own actions prevented him from saying anything to anyone. I will never know. But I do know that the welfare didn’t come, and I was never called to the headmaster’s office again. Why can’t I remember the name of that class teacher when I remember everything else so clearly?

On that afternoon, I worried all the way home from school. I was terrified of walking in the door. I needn’t have worried. Bertie was all smiles and gave me a piece of bread and cocky’s joy. I licked my sticky fingers. Ma Mitchie took me aside, and said:

- Forget about it now . . . it was all a mistake. The sixpence fell out of your mother’s apron pocket and landed in your slipper while she was making your bed. So, just forget about it now . . . it’s over. And don’t you dare say anything to your father.

Perhaps Bertie felt sorry for what she’d done but couldn’t bring herself to say sorry, or even talk about her mistake. Or, perhaps she just couldn’t admit she’d been wrong. I will never know the answer to these things. But one thing I do know is I can pin-point that day as the time when I determined to work hard at school and, somehow, escape from the Mitchies and my hell forever.

*   *   *   *

98
The events of the following Sunday afternoon provided added impetus to my determination to escape by gaining an education. My father drove everyone out to visit the Sky Pilot—a well-known, kind-hearted missionary who had gained his name from flying around the outback, taking the Bible and church aid to Anglo and Aboriginal Australians alike. I sat in the back seat, looked out the window, and let the conversation float around me. Ma Mitchie, Bertie, and my father spoke amongst themselves—they’d make good money, they said, from the church and the welfare by running a mission farm for Aboriginal children. On the drive home I sat in the back seat and looked out the window and listened in to a different conversation. The Mitchies’ mission farm money-making plans had been scrapped. Years later I came to the conclusion that during afternoon tea in the missionary’s house that afternoon, the Sky Pilot had inadvertently disillusioned them.

But on that particular Sunday there I was, dressed in my best clothes, complete with white velvet beret, white lacy cotton gloves and socks and white patent leather shoes and floral dress, sitting at afternoon tea in the missionary’s house being waited on by Aboriginal boys and girls who were shoeless. I realised right then that these children were my own age, and they were waiting on me as if I, a once Dalwood inmate and a Mitchie prisoner of war, was their superior. At the time, young as I was, I felt embarrassed and ashamed. I’ll never forget the unmistakable feelings of utter contempt that swept over me for the Mitchies and the system. This incident did go into a box, but it was never locked. I think that must have been the day when I became fully aware of what the Mitchies were, and of what my father had become.

In my reasoning capacity, I was not a child—the Mitchies had seen to that.

*   *   *

I distinctly remember the morning Ma Mitchie took us three children down the side path and out to the lattice fence. I can still smell the scent of the purpling patch of violets and picture the sunlight dapples on the white of the lattice. I can still see the yellow silk-curtained bubble glass of the front door, and Ma Mitchie as she stood alongside us. I can still picture Bertie as she stood on the other side of the fence. They were the beef-eater guards of the Tower of London. I had the urge to giggle. I wanted to pee. I crossed my legs and hung on and prayed I didn’t wet my pants.
Near Bertie stood a man in a Royal Navy commander’s uniform; the lady with him told us her name and said she was Mummy’s little sister from Ireland. Why can’t I remember her name? Because I just can’t: but I do remember very clearly that when I looked at her face it was as if I was looking in a mirror; I could see my own ugly face with its small full mouth, fair skin, hazel eyes and straight nose looking back at me except that the face in front of me was older than my own, and the eyes that looked at me were inclined to be almond-shaped and reminded me of my mother. This auburn-haired aunt, whom I had never met before, looked through the lattice at me and said in a voice that was strangely accented:

- Joan-Annette, I once had a little baby girl who would have been your age now. I lost her a long time ago, but she’d look just like you.

I don’t know if she said anything else because Ma Mitchie dug her fingers into my arm, dragged me across the yard, and locked me in the shed. I never saw my nameless aunt again.

Later that afternoon I was sweeping the path under the kitchen window and heard raised voices. I stopped sweeping and stared at the open window. I heard Bertie shouting:

- I want my own babies . . . not that bastard and some other bitch’s brat. If you don’t want her send her back to bloody Dalwood.

I heard Ma Mitchie’s voice yell back:

- That’s your punishment for fooling around with a married man and having an abortion—baby killer!

Then Dad’s voice joined in as he yelled:

- Send her back and I’ll leave.

Judging by the slam of the door, I think he went out. Bertie looked up, saw me staring at her, raced out, knocked me to the ground, and banged my head up and down on the concrete path.

* * *

How Ma Mitchie managed to wangle an invitation for her and Jack when we went to Wagstaffe for a holiday I wouldn’t know, but while we were there Jack renewed his demands that I come under the house with him. I was twelve now, and I ignored him and climbed up on top of Nanna and Pop’s house-water tank. Day after day I sat there
from one meal to the next, breathing in the salt air and drinking in the beauty and the soul-healing peace of the blue sweep of the Brisbane Waters until it was almost dark and I had to go inside.

Sitting there on top of the tank I did a great deal of deep thinking, and, un-childlike, consciously and knowingly gained a power. At last I knew Jack for what he was—a little, twisted man whose evil had almost destroyed me. And I also knew then that Jack hadn’t destroyed me, and that he would never wield power over me again. I thought about how I’d go to university when I left school and knew it wouldn’t be possible. So I sat on the tank and asked myself,

-Where would I live? How would I pay?

The thought flew into my head that when I was old enough I could go nursing and heal and comfort sick children. Nurses, I knew, lived-in; they were paid while they trained at the hospital. I told myself I’d think some more tomorrow. But that night I got toothache and must have whimpered in my sleep because I awoke to find Pop stroking my head and saying:

- Hush, love. Tell Pop.

I didn’t tell him anything. I knew by now that he could do nothing about my situation. I also knew that Bertie might kill me if I did say anything, and if she didn’t, then I would surely end up back at Dalwood and be forever doomed. The next morning I sat on my water-tank and heard the harshness in the raised voices. I heard Nanna saying something about lack of care and a dentist. We left Wagstaffe suddenly, and earlier than planned. When we arrived home Bertie turned to me, and said:

- This is your bloody fault. Thanks to you, you bastard, we won’t be having any more holidays.

We never did, either. And my face swelled until the abscess burst and my tooth fell out along with the pus.

* * *

I can’t remember exactly when we moved into the ‘new house’ next door to the Mitchie’s place, but I know it was after we returned from Wagstaffe and I know I was about twelve or thirteen. Ma Mitchie and Jack stayed in the black brick Federation house. Every day Bertie disappeared through a hole in the paling fence that divided the
two houses to spend time with her mother. I was still walking in my sleep. Every night Dad ran around padlocking the doors to keep me out of the moonlight. And just as I had been locked up at the Mitchies’ after Jack had been discovered, outside of school hours I was locked in the tiny back veranda attached to the ‘new house’. I was still denied friends. I still wasn’t allowed to play or talk with other children. But that didn’t stop me from making friends at school. I never talked about my home life, but one day one of my friends asked:

- What’s your step-mother’s real name?
  - Bertie Mitchie, I answered.
- Joannie! Guess—my other friends were their foster kids.
- What happened to them? I wanted to know.
- Mitchies sent them to Homes. Joannie, did you know Jack Mitchie is weird?

He did *that* to them, and Ma Mitchie and Bertie knew.

- Are you sure . . . you mean they really knew?
- Yes, said my friend. I think my friends got sent away because they said they were going to tell.

So I knew then; Ma Mitchie had known all along about Jack. I don’t know if my reasoning was right or wrong, but I figured that if Ma Mitchie had let it happen, then so had Bertie—for I saw them as two halves of a very large whole.

*   *   *

On Saturdays in the ‘new house’, Bertie cooked chips and mutton chops for lunch. Every Saturday after our chips and chops, Bertie washed the dishes and I wiped. Bertie had moods. I don’t know what triggered these moods or what they were exactly, but I do know that when one descended on her she’d go into over-drive. Everything had to be done at a furious rate, and little bits of foam would form and flicker at the corners of her mouth. One Saturday when she was in what I secretly called her ‘crazy paces’, Bertie slammed a wet plate down on the draining board, pushed her face into mine, and said:

- Listen to me, you bastard, I want you to walk down this side of the kitchen table, put the dried things on the far end of the table, and walk up the other side of the table to get back here and pick up the next thing. Now hurry and keep up.

I moved faster, then faster, and even faster. I ran around and around the table willing my legs to move, and praying under my breath, please please God don’t let me
drop anything; don’t let me bump the table. I had a dreadful fear of Bertie, and I could
guess what would happen if I did either of those things. All the time I was running and
praying my head was spinning and Bertie was shouting:

- Faster, you bastard! FASTER!

Then she dropped the pan she was holding into the soapy water, poked and
prodded a pointy hard finger into my upper arm, put her mouth against my ear and
screamed:

- Do you hear me, you bastard?

I heard her. How could I not? She was using my head as a megaphone. I have
had hearing problems on that side ever since. But on that day I know Bertie never knew
just how close she came to instant death. I know she didn’t know because I’m still here.
While she was poking me in the arm and yelling in my ear I had a soapy, wet carving
knife in my tea-towelled hand and a black-red fog swirling and swelling behind my
eyes. I will never know how I didn’t do what my mind was telling me to do. But I do
know that the incident and the way I felt on that day shocked and sickened me to the
depths of my being.

*   *   *

When I was in my second year at Bankstown Girls’ High, we were lined up in the hall
outside the school clinic and sent in, one a time, to have our eyes tested. The test was
basic—now Miss; read me the letters on the card hanging on the far wall—nothing!
You can’t read those letters?

The Department of Education sent a letter home. I can see Bertie standing in
front of the kerosene fridge in the kitchen of the ‘new house’: she reads the letter then
she waves it in my direction. She wants to know where these people think the money is
coming from to pay an optometrist. But since its official she supposes I have to be
taken to see an optometrist anyway. What a waste of good money! Who do these
people think they are? The very hide of them—indeed!

The optometrist pushed a card into my hand, darkened the room, and told me to
look at the lighted chart on the opposite wall. He directed me to hold the card first over
one eye, then over the other, and he kept asking:

- What can you see, lass?
That was easy to answer. Apart from a lot of indistinguishable blurred marks I couldn’t see anything much at all. He pushed back in his chair, and said to Bertie:

- She desperately needs glasses.

And how much would these glasses cost? WHAT! Where on earth did he think the money was coming from? Was he going to pay for the glasses? No! Well, that’s that. No glasses for you, you cross-eyed little bastard.

Back at home Bertie said I could wipe that look off my face before the wind changed and I stayed like it, or she’d take the greatest of pleasures in wiping my entire face off for me.

- You’ve either thought your bloody way into bad eye-sight, or you’re attention seeking again you bastard, said Bertie.

It seems I thought my way into a lot of painful and sickening things. Whenever I had a stomach ache, whenever I had a cold—both of which were fairly frequent—Ma Mitchie and Bertie grabbed me by the back of my neck and informed me that since I’d thought my way into it, I’d better think my way out of it before they personally took me out altogether.

At school I sat in the same place I always had—in the middle of the class-room. Whatever was written on the board had to figured out under my own brain power, and as for what was written on the side black-board on the easel, well, that was a blurred mystery. How I managed to get clear A’s for all my subjects bar mathematics, I’ll never understand.

I clearly remember sweet Matilda Kiddles. She didn’t need glasses, yet she sat in the front of the class. But that is not why I remember her so clearly. The reason is that I disliked her intensely, and I did so because everyone else loved her. Matilda caught the afternoon home bus that waited just in front of mine. Matilda was a happy child, and she had a mother she adored. I had never met her mother, but one afternoon I pulled poor Matilda off the bus step and as she fell I stood over her and said:

- You’re a cow, just like your nasty rotten cow of a mother.

Fighting words—the pre-arranged fight took place in the park near the bus stop. I kicked and bit and slapped and scratched and fought like a demon, it was a matter of ‘kill or be killed’, but all the time I was scared to death. Nevertheless, I won, and then I burst into tears.
In all probability I was really hitting back at Bertie whom I disliked a whole heap more than sweet Matilda, but I would never have dared tell Bertie that her mother was a ‘nasty rotten cow’.

*   *   *

I forgot about the fight with Matilda when I fell in love with a pimply-faced sixteen year old boy who served in the corner shop. Eddie Cosgrove set my heart on fire and tied my tongue in knots. The problem was that Eddie didn’t know he was my boyfriend. Eddie didn’t even know I existed even though in my day-dreams I had set us up in a house of our own and we had two children—a boy called Eddie, and a girl called any name bar Joan. A few months later I saw Eddie walking down the street past the school and I was amazed that at barely fourteen years of age I had overlooked the fact that he looked just like a pug dog, with pimples. Then I forgot all about Eddie, love flew out the window: I won a scholarship to attend the prestigious Fort Street Girls’ High.

- I’m not letting her travel on the train by herself. Besides she hasn’t got the bloody brains to amount to much, said Bertie.
- You’re only a bloody girl. It would be a bugger of a waste educating you, said my father.

My teacher came to the house to sort out Bertie and Hal. He begged:

- Let her take the scholarship. Let her be an art teacher . . . she’s gifted.

Dad, the bohemian artist, sorted the teacher; he said:

- Shit! Go to bloody hell. Over my flaming dead body . . . They’re a bloody bunch of blasted bohemians. She’s not getting involved with that blooming crowd.

My future decided, I left school and we all moved out west onto a property where I worked like a man. I remember that one of my jobs on the Mitchies’ new dairy was to make fence posts. I was given an axe and a bush-saw and told to get down the back—and God help you bastard if you don’t put your bloody back into it and hurry and chop down the marked gum trees and saw them into fence posts. I had to carry the finished posts to where they were to be set. I carried every one of those posts to their final resting place by balancing them over my shoulder.

*   *   *

105
I was fifteen and Al had just turned seventeen. He walked into the milking shed and shuffled his feet in the dirt on the floor. I sat on my milking stool squirting the creamy stream of new milk into the froth in my bucket. He ambled up to the line of cans and kicked. Two of the cans fell heavily. They knocked against others. Cans fell like dominoes. Rivers of fresh milk ran across the dirt floor of the shed. He looked down at the dirty milk and said:

- Goodbye Dad, I’m going. I’ve had enough of these mad bastards. See you when you’re bit older, Jo. I’m going to live with Aunt Thel.

Al and I had seen little of each other over the years, so why did his leaving make an empty hole in my heart? I longed for him to pop up somewhere as he done amongst the hydrangeas in Dalwood. I was too immature to realise that if he had stayed, he more than probably would have gone under.

*   *   *

A twister appeared out of nowhere one day; its great black funnel danced erratically across the paddocks. The narrow neck reached down the ground and plucked up anything that was in its path. It whirled bits and pieces up into its ever-widening cone, and flung them out to lie smashed and discarded on the ground behind it. I was seventeen at the time, and Al had been gone from the Mitchies’ farm for two years. He’d not only left emptiness inside me, he’d also left an overload of heavy work that was added to my chores.

When the twister came through, I was in the dairy bent low over the cooler, cleaning the pipes. Bertie stood behind me washing bottles at the sink when suddenly a loud noise like that of a steam-train had us both rushing to the door to peer out.

- Ho—ly Jesus, yelled Bertie, look at that! There goes some poor bugger’s roof!

It was ours. The great whirlwind had picked up the roof of our milking shed and tossed it into the heavens as if it were a mere gum leaf. Later that afternoon Dad and I climbed the long ladder to reattach the roof. We re-laid the sheets of corrugated tin and nailed them down with long, galvanised spikes. Dad looked at me with softened eyes and said:

- Ah, you should’ve been a bloody boy—you’d have made a damn fine son.

It didn’t matter one iota to me that I was a girl. My heart leapt with joy. I had pleased my father, for hadn’t he just praised me? Never mind that the praise was round
about. I told myself that now, at long last, I could talk to him. He would understand and comfort me. He would be my ally and my mainstay. So I told him about the things that had happened to me since I was eight years old, the things that the Mitchies had done, the things that Jack had done. My father listened. He looked at me with ice-chips in his blue eyes, and said in a cold, hard voice:

- You’re a bloody fucking liar . . . I’ve been warned about you, you bastard; and to think that you . . . after Bertie has been so bloody good to you, too.

White-lipped, he turned away and climbed down from the roof. After this the situation seemed to worsen. By the time I turned eighteen Bertie and Ma Mitchie had resurrected the dog whip and the snake rod. There was no eighteenth fruit-cake birthday. There was only a dog-whip at the ready.

* * *

I watched for Camilla’s fair head and trailed her movements with my eyes and ears until I managed to get her alone. We stood in the vines behind the outside toilet and I told her I was leaving as soon as I could. Her face paled, and she cried:

- Joannie, please don’t leave me here, please take me with you, Joannie. Please, please, please.

- Oh, Camilla, I can’t. I don’t know where I’m going. Besides, you’re not eighteen yet, you’re not quite fifteen, underage, and they’ll bring you back and things might be bad for you, too.

- But Al left and he wasn’t eighteen, she whimpered.

- Camilla, listen to me, Al is a man and he goes to work and has a safe place to live . . . just wait until I get a job and somewhere to live and I’ll get a message to you somehow, and take you away to live with me, I said, and turned away from the hurt look in her pale eyes.

One week later, after a particularly violent incident, I waited until Dad left for work and Bertie and Camilla had gone into the house for breakfast with Ma Mitchie and Jack. I left my usual job of cleaning up after milking and slipped into the big shed where I did most of my living.

I knew I needed clothes and money. Camilla was given clothes and money, I wasn’t. Apart from a change of underwear, a dress, and the clothes I stood up in, I had nothing. So I took Camilla’s port, put all her money and as many of her clothes as
would fit, then hurriedly put on all my own clothes and as many of Camilla’s clothes as would go over the top.

Carrying the case, and making sure I couldn’t be seen from the house, I dodged from building to building until I reached open farm land. Then, over-dressed and weighted down by Camilla’s suitcase, with my pulse hammering in my throat, I ran as quickly as I could for the tree-line and climbed over the back fence.

That was the 4th of July; and unknown to me at the time, that date marked American Independence Day.

*   *   *   *

Even though I don’t often think about it, I will never forget the day I literally escaped from the Mitchies. All day I walked and ran through the bush; and finally, in the late afternoon, I came to a road and hitched a lift. A middle-aged Dutch couple picked me up and drove me towards Penrith. That was where, when I was walking down the street one day, lolly-gagging in the shop windows, I heard my name being called. My heart missed a beat. Who, I wondered, knew me? There was only one answer—the Mitchies. I looked for somewhere to run, but there was nowhere to go except down the street past the shops. I ran until I couldn’t run anymore because two uniformed policemen were blocking my way. Did I know I’d been reported as missing? No. The Mitchies wanted me to return to the farm. Why, so they could murder me? I looked both policemen in the eye, first one and the other, and lifted my chin and said in a clear voice:

- I’m not going back.
- You’re over eighteen, you don’t have to. But we have to let someone know you’re alright, they said.

Oh my goodness yes, I was alright. A lovely Dutch couple had taken me in; they treated me like a long-lost daughter, and they welcomed Al when he knocked on their door a week after I’d been stopped by the police.

Later that afternoon Al carried his tea-cup to their kitchen, shook hands with my friends, thanked them, and said.

- Jo, come on, let’s go home to Aunt Thel—she’s got a baked dinner on and I promised we wouldn’t be late.

Al took me home to normality, to stay with him at Aunt Thel’s, and I applied for nursing. For the next few months, my wise old aunt soothed and healed my soul with

108
her sensible words. Then one day she walked in the door from work, dropped her bag on the floor, and said in a cheerful voice:

- Jo—I’ve put in a word and got you a job. Tuesday you’re starting at the small-goods factory.

But I didn’t, because on the day before, on the Monday, the papers arrived for me to begin my nurse training on the Thursday of that week.

Looking back, I don’t dare to wonder what might have happened to me had I been caught by the Mitchies—some things don’t bear dwelling upon. All that matters is that I got safely away and could move on with my life.

* * *

In the 1950s all nurses were trained in the hospital, on the job. Like every other trainee I had to live in the Nurses’ Home, and, other than when I had days off, I had to present myself at the nurses’ dining-room for every meal. Breakfast, which Matron said was the most important meal of the day, was unforgettable: cereal and fruit; never-ending stacks of thick, buttery toast and three different kinds of spreads; a choice of stewed tomato, baked beans, spaghetti bolognaise, sausages, grilled kidneys, bacon, or eggs done any which way. The atmosphere in the dining-room was congenial; it was far removed from that at the Mitchies’.

As a trainee, the rules I lived by were strict but fair. My life was ordered. I loved every minute of the long years of training even though there were times when my legs ached and my feet felt like they were screaming and my sore eyes poured water as I poured over my study-books. It was a wonderful life that sometimes brought heart-ache, sometimes laughter, and a deep sense of satisfaction. One of the wonderful things about it was that I was part of a team which pulled together to heal others. We were professionals. We were a community. We were a family. I felt secure and I knew who I was, and I knew why I’d been placed on this earth.

Why, during the time, did I call the Mitchies and ask if I could come home for a visit? Was it to show Dad and Bertie I was not useless, that I was a success after all? Or did I feel in a peculiar way that they were family? Or perhaps, having escaped and being happy I felt that they could no longer harm me, that I was mistress of my own life and could walk away whenever I wished. Or maybe it was to see Camilla. I don’t know; it’s too psychologically complex to unravel. To my surprise they welcomed me. I was
treated like royalty. I thought: how strange! I got Camilla aside and told her I could now take her away. She looked me in the face and said through her clenched teeth:

- You didn’t care about me before, you didn’t look after me. You were my big sister and you left me to Jack. Besides, if I leave they’ll have no-one.

I turned away, and left.

*   *   *

I married. Al, too, had married. We were both busy with our new lives, and in the way that such things happen, we lost touch with each other. I went to live out west. The red dirt country and the clear phthal blue of the skies and the profusion of wild-flowers and the scudding rains are stamped into my memory alongside the memories of a pedal-radio and never-ending, back-breaking work and the noisy generators. There were no such things as mobile phones or computers in those days; and, as far as I know, no such things as satellite phones, either. The place itself was great, but what was wrong with me that I had married a man who drank, and drank heavily? Whenever he was under the influence, Pa Mitchie was never far from my mind. I needed some escape from the feeling that there was a lump of lead in my stomach, and I needed an outlet from the never-ending work. I wrote stories in my head and took up painting in actuality.

Funny thing is I never gave a thought to Hal even though I probably wouldn’t have painted if it hadn’t been for his influence on my young childhood. Or would I have anyway?

*   *   *

If it hadn’t been for the severe droughts outback, the short time spent on a central coast orange orchard would probably never have happened. My headaches had increased with the years. While we lived on the orange orchard I took the opportunity to see an optometrist. The optometrist was business-like—all abrupt sentences and methodical movements. He finished his examination and turned away to write a careful note. Then he swivelled his chair around, handed me the letter, and said:

- You don’t need me, you need an ophthalmologist.

The eye specialist sat at his desk and twiddled with the knob on the end of his fountain pen and asked:
- Tell me, what’s your life like, Jo?

I looked at him blankly. Oh! Sorry—no, no, no, no. He meant did I do fine needlework; did I read, or paint—all that sort of thing? Well, yes. Yes I did. He put his pen down and looked at me, then in a matter-of-fact tone, said:

- Well, my dear. You will have to give all that up or you will be blind by the time you are fifty. In the meantime, I’m going to give you a prescription for glasses. You should have had glasses years ago. Make an appointment to see me in six months.

I thought about the Mitchies, about how they’d said – no glasses for you, you little cross-eyed bastard. Oh, yes, I said to myself, you’re having your glasses alright.

I had the prescription filled out, but I didn’t give up needle-work or painting or anything else, and I didn’t go back to see the optometrist, either. I couldn’t. We moved down to the south-west slopes of the Snowy Mountains almost straight away. There, in our sprawling weather-board home we had a wall phone. All you had to do to put a call through, was grab the little handle on the front of the box under the phone and wind like crazy until you thought your wrist was broken, lift the ear-piece which was shaped like a small trumpet, and ask for the operator to connect you. This took some time because she had a number of areas to look after; besides, I don’t suppose the equipment then was like it is now. Sometimes the lines were busy and you had to wait for the operator to ring back and say:

- The line is free now; just putting your call through. Hold the line please—connecting now.

But I remember it was always two or three minutes after you had begun your conversation before the operator would butt in and say:

- Are you right, now?

It seems to me that everyone knew everyone else’s business. But I would probably be wrong to think that the operator was a gossip. The phone was on a party-line. Whenever the hand-set was lifted in one house and the connection was made, the phone in everyone else’s house would give a ring, and I have heard it said that everybody—like the entire population of the area—would lift their phones and listen in.

The small population was scattered; people didn’t see each other all that often. But I had good reason to believe that when they did meet they talked and that rumour spiced up the facts. I used to think God help the person who farted whilst they were talking on the phone, because He didn’t help me when my drunken husband took to me one night, and accused me of running the district and spreading tales that he was a
violent man and a drunk. A drunk, was it? Couldn’t a hard working man have a little
drink every now and then to relax him? And violence was it? If I wanted violence I’d
get it. No, I’d never run the district or spread stories. But I’d rung a friend in Sydney
who had a similar relationship to mine. Unlike her though, I mostly wore my bruises
and abrasions under my clothes. The bush telegraph thrived but no-one ever asked:

- Are you alright? Would you like a friend to talk to?

No. There was an unspoken code of behaviour similar to that practised by the
Mitchies—you’ve made your bed, now lie in it.

Just as when we lived in the outback, down in the south-west we relied on
windmills—bore-water, and rain-water tanks; but, unlike in the outback, down there we
had the added bonus of a small stone church set in a grove of trees. I was determined
my kids would receive instruction in only one religion. So I took them to church every
Sunday and sat in the church in my new glasses. I gazed out through the arched
doorway of the little stone church and communed with the trees and gave thanks that I
was still ambulant after the bashing of the night before.

*   *   *

The move down south saw me back in a hospital job over ninety kilometres away in
town where there was also one doctor’s surgery. When I wasn’t working like a navvy
on the farm or working shifts in the hospital, I was lying in the doctor’s surgery being
stitched up or bound up or patched up from being bashed up. It took me some years to
wake up that I had chosen a life which, although it was not the same as that I’d been
given in Dalwood, and not the same as that I’d led at the hands of the Mitchies, it had
similarities to both those abusive lives I had lived in my childhood. Why did I choose to
stay? Why did I kid myself it wasn’t that bad? Why did I do that? It’s not as if I liked it.
Yet in some curious, twisted way, it spelled out the only type of family life that I’d ever
known after I had turned three. It was the type of life that gave me, in a peculiar, sick
way, a false sense of security and continuity. It was what I subconsciously expected for
myself in a family setting. Somehow nursing must not have counted in that sense,
because it wasn’t actually a true family grouping—especially a dysfunctional one.

I talked with a priest. Didn’t I understand, he had asked me, that marriage was
for better or for worse? Didn’t I know that my husband was the king of his castle and
that my duty was to obey? Didn’t I realise that my duty was to give and bring respect to my husband? If I didn’t understand all that, well then, I wasn’t a good Catholic woman.

What about respect, was that a male prerogative? I looked at the priest in disbelief. But I didn’t dare argue—no, not with a man of God, never. I could think of nothing more to say than:

- But Father, I’m not Catholic.

Oh yes I was, he told me, I was married to a Catholic and my mother had been a Catholic and my children were being raised as Catholics. What was I?

After what proved to be my final bashing, I talked with the doctor as he put the wire stitches in my scalp; he was a clever man who brought me to realise that Dalwood and then my life at the Mitchies’ place had conditioned me, that subconsciously I saw love and physical and emotional abuse as one and the same. So, even though it had taken me some years, I did wake up; I saw that in my abusive marriage I’d willingly played the victim. Under the protection of the police, I took my children and left that abusive relationship. Then I got in touch with Al and Aunt Thel. Al said:

- Jo, it was bloody awful. I thought you were dead—I searched everywhere, even hired a private detective who didn’t find a thing.

No, I was alive, but over the years I’d been too ashamed to contact him.

I followed up my general nursing with psychiatric nursing. I did this last for no other reason other than there was a psych facility close by to my new home, and the money was much better. I was the sole support for my kids.

*   *   *

I have very warm memories of my rented house in Penrith. The very day I moved in I met the elderly couple next door, Jeannie and Claude Koop. They both loved people and Jeannie had a special gift for ‘adopting’ people. It was once said to me that she was the closest thing I’d ever get to a mother. Looking back now, I can say yes, that would be true—if I had any idea what it was like to have a mother. I was to work shifts at the hospital and didn’t think I could because of the children. Jeannie asked if they could come to her whenever I had to work.

- But Jeannie, what about night-shift?

- You’re not to worry, Joannie, she said, I’d love to have them sleep at my place.
The children loved Jeannie and Claude, but they missed me; and they didn’t like me working nights but I couldn’t see how it could be helped. One day when we were talking Jeannie asked me if nursing was my dream job.

- No, no it wasn’t, I said. I always wanted to go to university and learn something that would help children. I’d love to work with them.
- What about teaching, said Jeannie.
- Yes, that would be ideal, but that would mean university and short money. And I’ve got the kids to think of.
- What’s wrong with the university up the road? I’ll help you look after the kids and the groceries. I’d really love to, Joannie. See, I couldn’t have any of my own, and I see you as my daughter. So please say yes, said Jeannie.

I agreed—on the condition that I pay her back. Four years later I received my teaching degree and walked across the auditorium towards her. In my mind I can still see the pride in her eyes. I can still see her smiling at me. Jeannie, Jeannie, why did you die before I had a chance to say goodbye?

*        *      *

The phone was ringing when I arrived home from school one day in late 1986. I ran up the stairs, dropped my bags on the floor, and picked up—Al was on the line.

- Jo, I’m sorry to tell you this, but Dad died.
- Oh, Al, when?
- Umm, oh, a couple of weeks or so ago.
- How did you find out?
- Umm, they rang me on the day he was buried.
- Al! You didn’t ring and let me know.
- Jo, I was just too upset. I was terribly upset. Anyway, they tell he died from a heart attack.

Al’s voice faded as Dad’s ghostly ‘ooohs’ and ‘aahs’ filled my ears; and plates laden with large beef-steaks and fried eggs and bacon, and massive slices of rich fruit cake floated past my eyes.

- Wha . . . what was that again? Where is he? I’ll go down to the grave.
- Well, that’s what I’m telling you, Jo, it’s too late now, better let the ground settle, said Al.
It struck me later. I was always the last to be told anything; why?

*   *   *

In mid 1987, Aunt Thel, my children, and I, stood in the cemetery and looked down at Dad’s head-stone. Carved in stone, after the bit about ‘Bertie’s loving husband’, was written, ‘Loving father of Al and Camilla’. I dropped the potted ‘Papa Mia’ roses I was holding. They fell onto Dad’s grave. I turned to Aunt Thel, saying:

- Oh, Aunt. My name is not on it.

Aunt looked at me with tears in her warm brown eyes. I’d never seen this oh-so-sensible woman cry before.

- Oh, Jo. I’m so sorry . . . said Aunt Thel.

- Aunt Thel. Who am I? Aunt Thel . . . who am I?

- Why, Jo, you’re you. You’re my niece.

Well, no. She didn’t remember me as a new baby. She said she was just a bit of a kid herself at the time, and besides, in those war days public transport was difficult, it was so slow and unreliable, and Hal and Katey lived in Sydney somewhere—and she didn’t really get on with Hal, he was spoilt rotten. Besides, he’d been living away from home for years, and she was working all hours of the day for the war effort. But she said she did remember me as an eleven-month-old baby; I’d pulled all the stitches off her kitting needle. She said she hadn’t the heart to re-knit the jacket from scratch. Could I even guess how long the damn thing had taken her? I said:

- Sorry, sorry, sorry for then, but Aunt, please tell me . . . was my mother my mother?

I can see the peculiar look on Aunt Thel’s face still:

- Jo, will you listen to what you just said?

I remember very distinctly the shock I felt when she put her arms around me; Aunt Thel was not, and never had been a demonstrative woman. It was the second shock of the day.

If at the time I’d been asked how I felt when I looked at Dad’s head-stone I couldn’t have answered. Looking back, all I can say is no-one knows quite how it feels to suddenly discover they don’t belong on the head-stone on which they have always believed they should one day belong, unless it happens to them. For me, the discovery seemed to make a lie out of my life yet at the same time it backed up the feeling of
being different, the feeling that I seemed to have been born with. If dying and leaving a loved one bereft is said to be the ultimate denial, then standing in front of my dead father’s grave-stone and seeing on it everyone else’s name but my own was the supreme ultimate, ultimate denial. I imagined myself standing in front of Moses and St. Peter as they moved over to block the Heavenly Gates and looked down at the stone tablets they held in their hands:

- Who did you say you were? Sorry, no record. You might be standing here in front of us, but you don’t exist . . .

Standing in front of Dad’s grave, I asked Aunt Thel to tell me the truth. She gave me a level look, said:

- Well, you know Jo, everyone sees the truth differently; and as for facts, well, the fact is you’re my niece. I don’t suppose this could have been Bertie’s doing?

I didn’t know. But one thing I knew for certain, I wasn’t about to ask Bertie—she’d smacked my face for the last time when I was eighteen and I wasn’t going to give her the chance to do it again. But my memories of her calling me a bastard made me wonder. No, I wouldn’t give Bertie the satisfaction; and she probably wouldn’t tell me the truth anyway. I couldn’t ask Pop and Nanna either—they’d died some years back. I looked at Dad’s head-stone again and remembered Nana and Pop, and I said to Dad’s head-stone:

- And you, Hal, you wouldn’t even go and see Nanna and Pop when they were dying in hospital.

The minister walked across the cemetery towards us and looked at the two ‘Papa Mia’ red roses. They lay where I’d dropped them on Dad’s grave half-in, half-out of their pots.

- Don’t know why you brought those, he said. You can’t plant them on the grave, you know. Better clean up your mess.

Apparently Bertie was the keeper of the grave and her word was law. She’d left strict directions that if anyone was seen at the grave they were not allowed to leave flowers or anything else—just remove themselves and their junk with them. Aunt Thel’s mouth made a straight line across her face. Her jaws looked like they were clamped together. Then she snapped her mouth open, and said:

- Can’t they go somewhere?

The minister cleared his throat.
- Oh, well, the committee are thinking of building a stone colonnade and planting roses and wisteria; but there’s no guarantee that your plants will be allowed. You don’t have any connection with the church or the deceased. So... Oh, I suppose I could plant them in the rectory garden.

   Years later, a month or so after Al and his wife had revisited the grave, Al said:
   - Jo. We saw the minister. The colonnade didn’t get built.
   - Did you see Dad’s ‘Papa Mia’ roses in his garden?
   - No, said Al. There were no roses in his garden, or anywhere else. By the way, Ma Mitchie and Bertie are dead and gone.

   I have never been back to Dad’s grave. Bertie is buried with him.

* * *

Where do you begin when you’re looking for yourself, I wonder? I supposed at the time it was best to begin with my parents and ask the two living members who remembered them—Aunt Thel and Uncle Don. No, grey-haired Uncle Don couldn’t tell me much. Hal was a grown man by the time he happened along. Yes, Aunt Thel knew a fair bit about my paternal side. She was, after-all, my father’s sister, the keeper of the family’s fruit-box, and she was attempting to research the family tree. The problem was her research was a bit erratic and rather unreliable because any name that was the same as my family name, and any old date that approximated the rough dates given in the family stories was IT. Bull’s-eye! However, on my behalf she delved into the fruit-box and came up with documents—some original, some photo-copies of an original. She produced an extract of Pop’s birth certificate. It said: Born somewhere near Dubbo. We fell around laughing.

   - Jo, said Aunt Thel, you mean your mother and her family? Well I don’t know a lot. I’ve forgotten. But I do know that you grandfather was born in England. So was your mother. Your grandfather spoke with a plum in his mouth. He was some kind of Lord. Oh, yes, and I remember him saying that your mother’s mother was some kind of a foreigner who died very young. Hang on, I remember, she came from the Silk Road—somewhere out in the Taklimakan Desert. And I remember Katey saying that she had a sister in Ireland. Oh, and I seem to remember a brother who had been born in Africa.

   Memories of Uncle Arki fell into my mind, and I remembered what Katey had told me years ago. I asked grey-haired Uncle Don. He only remembered how much he
liked Katey, and how sorry he’d felt for her. He said much the same as he’d done some time before when he had come to dinner at my place:

- You always knew just where you stood with Katey. She was a good friend to everyone, and she was straight—called a spade a spade.

I tried to cross-examine Uncle Don. His grey eyes looked at me in sorrow.

- Jo, he said. I feel so guilty but I can’t tell you anything, I don’t know anything. Look, I felt for you kids when Katey died, but what could I have done? I was only a bit of a kid myself.

I felt disappointed that no-one could, or would, tell me anything. In hindsight I can see that I should have known that my memories, and the images and pictures that floated through my mind like a patchwork quilt, told me more than anyone ever could.

*   *   *

Many years after Dad died Al managed to get Katey’s death certificate, and yes, she’d been born at Newcastle-on-Tyne in England. I scanned the writing in the column headed ‘occupation of father’. Al has always said that Katey had had a tendency to elaborate. But in this case she had not; and the information on her death certificate fitted with what I remember her telling me when I was about three, and what Aunt Thel had told me after Dad had died. Katey’s father was indeed very well connected, and he must have been highly educated.

Katey’s death certificate didn’t give her mother’s lineage, and her birth certificate had been lost in the war. But in 2005 Bob and I sat in my neurologist’s office and he smiled across his desk at me, then looked at Bob and said:

- Well, I can only confirm what your G.P. discovered; your wife has Bechet’s Disease. So, she has Silk Road ancestry.

Only last year, Professor John F—, finished the routine breast cancer examination, sat back and studied my face closely, then said:

- Ah, so you’ve got Bechet’s—the rogue gene from the Silk Road. So, you’re a little exotic, you have Persian blood in your veins, Jo.

- No Professor, I replied. Taklimakan Desert somewhere, I believe.

So now I knew that much, at least. I was connected to my mother’s family, somehow, but how?
The information on Katey’s death certificate didn’t help much; and in spite of my English grandfather’s obvious connections I didn’t see myself any differently. I told Al that I was still me, just Jo. He scratched behind his ear, gazed thoughtfully into some land of his own, then looked at me, said in an exaggerated drawl:

- Yeah . . . know what you mean. The old boy’s connections don’t do bloody much for me, neither. Nah! Reckon I’ll give it a miss— I ain’t prancing around all lah-di-dah amongst those toffs over there in Pommie-land. Imagine me, ‘G’day yer majesty’. I can’t talk like an uppity Pom. Bugger them. Australia will do me.

*                                        *                                         *

Back when Dad had died, his head-stone had done something to me. After I’d questioned Aunt Thel and Uncle Don I just couldn’t let it go—I felt I had to find out about myself. I felt that the only way I could find out was to visit the past in person. I thought of going to England, but knew I couldn’t afford the trip.

Aunt Thel reminded me that my father had been building a large two-storey house on the property out from Bathurst. She said she’d never actually seen it, but that she knew of it; she’d heard that my English grandfather had bought it for my mother. Aunt Thel said she remembered making my father an offer after Katey had died.

- What, to buy it off him? I asked.

- No, not that, said Aunt Thel. I asked him if we could all move into the house together—him and you three kids, and me and my husband and our two babies. I said I’d keep house for him and raise you three as my own. Hal said no.

- Well then, what about my grandparents? Why did they let my mother put us in Dalwood? Didn’t Nanna and Pop care about us—or at least about the others if not about me?

Aunt Thel said I wasn’t to think that way. It seems I had to understand that they’d wanted to take all three of us—it was just that Katey had said no, and grandparents had no rights at all. Twenty-four years after that conversation with Aunt Thel, I discovered that the Grandparents Act didn’t come into being until 7th December 2007. Before that time grandparents had no claim whatsoever on their grandchildren. After this discovery, I cast my mind back to 1987, when Aunt Thel had said that in the 1940s only Dalwood had claims on Al, me and Camilla because Katey had decided it was for the best. I realised then that my grandparents must have been heart-broken. In
my mind I went back to the house at Wagstaffe because that is where I thought Nanna’s
and Pop’s spirits might be, and I sent them my silent apologies. I asked myself why
Katey made the decision to have us incarcerated. Did she think we’d be happy in
Dalwood? Or was it to keep us out of Hal’s and Bertie’s clutches? But back in 1987 I
didn’t ask myself these questions, I just felt that after Aunt Thel had spoken it was time
to resume my search for my identity. Then I got sick. I went to see a specialist. He took
a very tiny piece from my insides and said:

- Something doesn’t look quite right, here. I’m sending this off to pathology—
it’s just the usual practice.

When the results came back I sat in the doctor’s office and answered various
questions and, yes, I suffered from stomach pains and other complaints, and I felt
cotton-woolly between the ears, at times. I said:

- But I’ve been like that since I was a kid—I’ve always been like it.

The specialist glanced down at the report:

- Yes. Well, no wonder. You have coeliac disease. So stop eating bread and
cereal, and eat rice. In fact, stick to a strict gluten free diet and you’ll feel better soon.
By the way, it’s a life-long condition.

My mind spun back to the Mitchie’s Weet-Bix and fried scones and the pains in
my stomach, and I told myself it was good to know that they had a real cause after all.

Even though the gluten free food range was fairly limited in those days Coeliac
disease didn’t disrupt my life to any great extent. I took a trip to Wagstaffe to look at
my grandparents’ old house. The hill at Wagstaffe was still steep, but not as steep as I’d
remembered it.

I suppose everything looks so much more to a child. I don’t know if this is a
good thing or a bad thing, I suppose it depends on the thing itself; is it possible that my
life at Dalwood and the Mitchies’ looked worse to me than it actually was? I didn’t
think so somehow.

*   *   *   *

Many things at Wagstaffe were not as I remembered them—the road up to my
grandparents’ house was tarred now, and trees had been chopped down to make way for
houses and more houses. I looked around and felt that it was all spoilt; and I couldn’t
marry the present actuality with my beautiful memories or I’d spoil those, too. So I
pushed aside the sight of the wounds that progress had inflicted on my beloved Wagstaffe Point and stood on the hillside and looked up at the house, and a feeling of great loss made a deep ache in my heart. I looked up at Pop’s terraced garden; it was still there. The present owners had kept it up in the same way Pop had—it was just as beautiful as I remembered. I looked at the old water tanks where at twelve years of age I’d sat all day to escape Jack and discovered him for what he was; and I remembered that this place and that time was where I’d decided to take charge of my own path in life.

I took photos, but I didn’t discover anything new other than that the old wind-up phone was still in the shop down by the jetty; it was kept as a museum piece. I knew I wouldn’t find any answers here, only memories. I glanced back at the Wagstaffe house and knew I’d already had all the answers this place could give. I left Wagstaffe, I left Pop and Nanna’s house, and took my memories away with me.

Some weeks later I took myself to Coogee to find my paternal great-grandmother’s old, grey brick house. I stood next to it and looked out over the sea just as Great-Grandmother must have done when she stood there scanning the sea as she waited for my father’s fishing boats to come in. No, the people who now owned my great-grandmother’s old, grey brick house didn’t know its history or anything of the original owners. Yes. I could take photos of the outside of the house. They matched the photos in the fruit-box Aunt Thel kept in her back cupboard.

*   *   *

Aunt Thel came back from a trip to Dubbo. The Dubbo council had produced the name ‘Wambongolong’, the property owned by one of my great-grandfathers. I remember that I was inspired. I felt that at last I was on my way to tracking down my family—past and, if they existed, present. I drove to Geurie and asked a lot of questions and took photos of the remains of the old homesteads and the church where my father’s parents had married, and a different church where my father had been christened. They matched the photos in Aunt Thel’s fruit-box.

I went to the Corner Country to see what I could find out about one of my great-grandfathers and his cattle station. I found out something alright—everything was gone. I looked for what had been the family property in Dubbo. There was nothing left. Land had been sectioned off, sold and renamed. I went to Wellington where my grand-people
had lived at one time, but the story was the same as at Dubbo. I went to Bathurst where Nanna had been born and where my mother’s sheep station had been; then I went back to Wellington.

Not at any of those places did anyone remember any of the family names. But one ninety-year-old lady at Guerie remembered that when she was younger she’d been told about two brothers, both brick-masters, who’d once lived out along Bushranger’s Lane at Wellington; she told me that the remains of the brick-kilns were still there. Her memories matched the stories told by my family. They’d owned the brick-works. I took photos of the ruins of my ancestor’s pride and joy.

I still had to discover who I was, and where I fitted in. I had to dig up something. But there wasn’t anything much left to dig up. All I had left were my memories of the family stories and Aunt Thel’s telling about her memories and the photos she kept in her fruit-box.

*   *   *   *

Looking back to the late 1980s I see myself rushing here, there, and everywhere trying to find something that would lead me to find my missing self. But back then, after discovering nothing new, I gave things some serious thought. There was only one thing left for me to do, I had to start at the place that swallowed my childhood. I knew I had to face my ghosts. Aunt Thel said she couldn’t bring herself to come with me on my first visit back to Dalwood. I hadn’t met and married Bob back then, so I went with one of my daughters. I knew that there amongst the ruins of my childhood I’d discover something.

I stood in front of Dalwood and looked and looked at the place that haunted me in my dreams. I knew then that for forty-odd years I’d carried in my heart the shame and the awful guilt felt by the child who’d been an inmate in this great stone edifice. I saw the outside, was given a tour of the inside. Dalwood, I was told, was now seconded to the Far West Children’s Scheme by the Manly Hospital. It still carried the name of Dalwood Children’s Home. Old Mr. A. E. Dalwood had made it over as a perpetual deed of gift to the Food for Babies Fund.

The guide led us around, pointing out this and pointing to that. I looked at the intricate carving, the magnificent structure, the soft patina of the beautiful old woodwork. I saw the room where I’d once slept in a baby’s cot. I saw the bath-room
with its twin baths. I thought of how I’d been made to lift my faeces in my bare hands, then stand with my hands on my head—hands which smelt of my own poo. I saw the old infirmary. I saw the old play area. I was shown the paddock where the donkey had lived—the donkey the kids all loved to ride, the donkey which was kept as the children’s’ pet. DONKEY? What donkey! You’ve got to be dreaming! There was never any donkey kept when I was in Dalwood. I’d have known if there was a donkey. Wild horses wouldn’t have kept me from a donkey or any other animal if I could get at it.

I distinctly remember that as I looked around I didn’t feel a thing, not even a single twinge, not even a jolt—until I glanced into the dining-room and saw the children sitting at the tables eating their lunches. I doubt they were eating the mucky stuff I was forced to eat when I was a Dalwood child. But, coward that I was, I didn’t wait to find out.

With my daughter and our guide I went on. I looked at the gold-leafed names on the Board of Honour hanging in the vestibule and wondered, as I often had when I was a small child in Dalwood, why the people whose names were on it thought it important to be put on a board. Mr. Dalwood’s name took a place of importance on the list. I’d met old Mr. Dalwood. He was only an old man in a funny long overcoat who thought he was doing some good for someone.
I looked at everything and I looked everywhere—except for the old laundry. That was beyond me. Later, when I thought about how I felt in regards to the old laundry I told myself that there were certain things in life that one never really gets over. It’s odd the way that memories can evoke feelings and emotions, and it’s odd the way sights and smells can evoke memories. Is the mind just like a fruit-box full of bits and pieces and old photos, I wonder?

Later, as we stood outside on the lawn together, our guide asked:

- So, what made you decide to visit now, after all this time? Did you see the ‘Home and Away’ episodes which featured the Dalwood of the 1950s?

- No, I said. I just thought it was time to lay some ghosts. Are there any records on the Dalwood children of the 1940s?

- That’s so brave, said our guide. No. I’m afraid there are no records. Of course, those bad old days have gone, now. It’s different, here. We keep the building in repair by donations, you know.

I reached into my bag and pulled out my purse. The official looked at me with horror.

- No! Never! We don’t take donations from ex-Dalwood children.

- Why?

- Because you, my dear, have already paid. You’ve paid and paid again. You’ve done time in Purgatory. You lived a living hell when you were an innocent small child.

I went red in the face. I could feel myself go hot. Oh, not because I was embarrassed, but because this woman’s voice touched me. See saw, Margery Daw and the image of a small Peggy-child in an unravelled jumper jumped itself into my mind, and I was afraid the tears I couldn’t cry might just happen to reach my eyes.

*   *   *

There were not a great many listings in the telephone directories that matched the maiden name given on Katey’s death certificate. Most of my calls were long-distance, but all the answers had sameness:
- No, sorry, not of our family, can’t help you. My grandfather (or great-grandfather) came from . . . He was a farmer (or a banker, or a merchant, or a . . . )

Eventually, the list of like names ran out and the number of ‘sorry’s’ equalled the number of names I’d marked out in the phone books. There was only one thing to do; I rang England. My mother, I explained to the voice on the other end of the line, was born in Newcastle-on-Tyne, and I would like a copy of her birth certificate. There was a pause on the other end, and the disembodied voice asked:

- Didn’t you know that Somersby House had been bombed during the Second World War?
- Is there no where else I could gain information? I asked the voice.
- Sorry, said the voice, but no birth, death, or marriage certificates survived the great fires.

I rang many places, and searched for answers. All I heard was:
- Sorry.

The number of times ‘sorry’ was said became dollar signs before my eyes. My eyes bulged when the mail arrived. There was no joy to be had. I was an adult now, and I had very large phone bill in my name to prove it; but, as a child, other than as a name on what was perhaps only a partly-true birth certificate, officially I had not existed. That’s when I gave up. I had run out of steam. I told myself it was no use running around in circles and searching because all I met were dead ends and there was no-one left alive who knew anything anyway. What on earth was I doing? I reminded myself that I had a family to look after, and that I had an over-load of school work to get through.

* * *

Perhaps it was my chasing around that started it, but Aunt Thel began to feel very nostalgic in 1991. She wanted, she said, to go back and look at Nanna and Pop’s old house at Wagstaffe.

- Jo, my dreams are here, said Aunt as she stood looking up at the house. This is where I spent the happiest days of my childhood—if I had the money I’d buy it back.
- Oh, I don’t know Aunt; how can you buy back dreams? I said.

At the invitation of the young couple who now owned the Wagstaffe house we climbed the ninety-nine stone steps Pop had carved and set into the hillside. We stood in
the house, Aunt Thel and I, looking around at our memories. All I could see was a quaint old Tudor-faced house that had been built by Pop and Hal during the Great Depression. But wait, there were the wooden doors Pop had made by hand. The door knobs had been changed—gone were the great lock fittings that took the large iron keys that nowadays live in the fruit-box in my back cupboard.

Later that afternoon Aunt Thel stood on the long wooden steps that ran up one side of the house. I took her photo. Digital cameras were still a thing of the future, so we sent the roll of film to be developed. When the photo came back Aunt Thel gave a funny little gasp:

- Oh, Jo, look! There I am, and standing just inside my image is the image of your great-grandmother.

I still have the photo with the double exposure. In Aunt Thel’s mind superstition battled common-sense for supremacy.

- Jo, said Aunt Thel, take a photo of me standing under the old acorn tree near the jetty. Just over there where your great-grandmother had her photo taken two weeks before she died. Here, I’ll strike the pose she took.

Two weeks later Al rang, and said:

- Jo, Jo . . . I don’t know how to tell you . . . I’m so sorry, but Aunt Thel wanted to walk to the top of Wagstaffe Hill—she looked down on Lobster Beach and said, this is Paradise and, oh Jo . . . then she dropped dead in my arms.

In 2003 I sat with my husband and opened the mail—two bills and half a dozen Christmas cards. I gazed at the cards, and said:

- You know, it’s a funny thing Bob, but Uncle Don hasn’t sent a Christmas card this year, and he never misses.

I rang his house. There was no answer.

- Well Bob, I said, I suppose he’s off around the world again—we’ll get a postcard from some unknown place, we always do.

Al rang a few weeks later—didn’t I think it strange that no-one had heard from Uncle Don?

- Oh, I said, he’ll be off somewhere on one of his trips. He’ll pop up soon and say, I’ve just flown in from Galapagos.

Another couple of weeks went by without word. A missing persons search was initiated. We buried him with Nana and Pop.
Al rang a couple of months later.
- Hi Jo. How are you going?

He didn’t wait for a reply, but continued:
- Jo, listen—now Uncle Don’s dead, with our lot there’s only you, me, and Camilla . . . if Camilla’s still alive. I wonder should we try and get in touch . . . perhaps we can all get together again.

- Al, I said, that’d be so good. I’m ready now. Do you remember I told you years ago that I’d seen her at the Penrith Show? She was standing in the judging ring walking one of her animals around. I just couldn’t bring myself to go over to her—I suffered a huge anxiety attack just seeing her . . . and I thought I was over things.

- I remember. Well, look, Jo . . . I’m going down south next week, so I’ll go and see Dad’s grave while I’m there. I thought if I leave a note tucked into the head-stone Camilla might see it. D’you want to write one, too?

A month later Al came walking in my back door; I looked up in surprise and wondered why he hadn’t let me know he was coming. He came across my kitchen floor towards me and cleared his throat. He gazed past me and contemplated the glass fruit in the bowl on the kitchen bench. He looked close to tears; it was evident to me that he was battling for control.

- Been down south, he said in a tight voice. Saw Dad’s grave. Our notes are still there . . . don’t look they’ve been touched.

I took him by the hand as if he was a child and led him to a chair. Over coffee Al calmed down. He suggested we both write letters to Camilla and lodge them with the minister. In my letter, of which I still have a carbon copy, I asked Camilla if she wanted contact, and I told her I was happily married and that I had a family, and that I was a school-teacher and had gone to university and obtained further degrees. I wrote the letter carefully, and voiced it so as not to cause any hurt of any kind, or so I believed. The minister rang, and said in a cold voice:

- How dare you write such a letter to Camilla? Have you ever stopped to think that other people might not have been as fortunate in their lives as you were?

Why did I apologise? I don’t know. But I do know that I felt guilty, and I said:

- I’m sorry; I didn’t mean it like that . . . I just thought it might be best if I tell her something about myself. Shall I write another simpler note just giving my phone number and saying I’ll leave it to her to contact me if she wants?

The answer came back via the minister: What are you after, money?
Al didn’t let it go; but I felt too disgusted to pursue it further. Al’s wife rang some time later, and said:

- We had an answer from the minister about five weeks ago. Camilla asked him to say—No hard feelings. Let bygones be bygones. No contact with anyone.
- Why didn’t Al ring and tell me when he heard? I asked.
- Why? Well, because . . . because he was too upset by Camilla’s reply—he’s heart-broken . . . she’s his sister. Oh, by the way, I had a go at the minister. I told him a few truths about things and I said—well, you know, we all have to live with ourselves.

Privately I was glad that she’d straightened out the minister, but I was also left wondering where I fitted in. Later, I came to realise that with Al, things cut much more deeply than I’d ever imagined, and he kept it all in. But at the time I didn’t stop to think about this, I just thanked his wife for letting me know and we went on to chat about other matters. Al rang a few days later and I said:

- Al why do you almost always never tell me things until days or weeks or months after? Why don’t you tell me at the time?
- Jo, he said in a gentle voice, you’re my little sister . . . I try to protect you as much as I can.
- Al, listen to me, I said quietly, I love you—but Al, I’m a grown woman, now.

Al and I reached the conclusion that there was nothing left to be done. It was best to leave Camilla where she was, just as she wanted. I closed that chapter of my life for good—but not before I thought about how Dalwood had ripped our family apart. And I knew then that what Dalwood had started, the Mitchies had finished. I realised that this is the legacy left to all children like Al and Camilla and me—the children who had been placed in ‘care’.

*    *    *    *

If it hadn’t been for Bob and his 2004 newspaper, we probably wouldn’t have been sitting in Bankstown R.S.L. on 23rd April 2005 at a meeting for people who’d been in ‘care’ as children. I told myself I didn’t want to be there. In hindsight I realise that the truth was I didn’t want to be associated with my past. I didn’t want to be in a place where I couldn’t hide from my memories and the feelings they evoked. I’d managed to succeed in my professional life, and was happy in my personal life. I was afraid it
would unravel if I mixed with these people. But when various people stood up to talk about their experiences, I realised that I was a ‘Homie’; but more than that, I was a survivor. I found their stories to be far more devastating than mine. One well-spoken, clean-cut gentleman had his address listed as ‘The Highways and Byways of Australia’. He had been so ill-treated in ‘care’, so confined and tortured, that he couldn’t stand anything other than wide open spaces. He apologised—he felt he had to leave the meeting, now. The open spaces called. My past slid into insignificance. I supposed that everything is comparative, nothing is absolute.

As I listened it struck me that although our stories differed a little in the detail, all our stories had an eerie sameness. None of us knew what it was like to have a childhood. We’d all had our innocence stripped away from us when we were very small. I began to question my sense of being ‘different’: was I really born with those feelings? Were they really ‘just there”? Or did they develop as a result of my environment and the situation, and my family impacting on my senses before I was old enough to have a sense of anything much? Or perhaps those feelings and that sense of being ‘different’ arose as a result of my mind playing on emotions evoked by my present memories of my past, or, perhaps, by my past memories playing on my present reality.

After the meeting we went for lunch. I ate fish and salad. I looked at the lettuce curling on my plate. I looked around at these people. From outward appearances there was no way of telling what they’d been through. They were normal people, going about their own affairs, minding their own business. No-one cried, no-one moaned, no-one gave in to emotion. But still I felt the weight of an invisible blanket of terrible sadness. It seemed to emanate from these people and hang in the air. The atmosphere was suffocating. All I wanted was to get out of there, away from being closeted with all this invisible sadness. I felt a flutter of panic beginning to beat in my chest, but I turned to Bob calmly, and said:

- Well, while we’re here in this area I’d dearly love to go and see the old house I lived in before I went into Dalwood.

First, though, there was one other thing to do. We drove to the Coogee-Randwick area. We looked at the house where I’d first lived.

- Yes, Bob, I can see that it must’ve been altered since 1940. Oh, look, Bob, the black and white tiled veranda is still there; that’s the veranda I remember crawling over just before I fell down the front steps and split my head open on the gate-post—I was a baby.
- Well how do you explain all this, then? Bob asked, and swept his hand in the air.

I couldn’t. The house, in which I’d lived as a baby, now belonged to the Anglican Church.

We drove to the black brick Federation house which used to belong to the Mitchies. Their dairy farm had gone. The house was surrounded by houses, houses, and more houses, and it was much smaller than I remembered. A yellow triangle on the front caught my eye. The Mitchie house of horrors was now marked as a ‘safe-house’ for children who felt they were in danger. Tears of laughter ran down my cheeks.

- No, no thanks Bob, I really don’t want to take photos of that—not the house, not the yellow triangle on the front.

I should’ve taken photos. I did take photos of the school I had attended at three years of age when my mother was so ill. The school had grown. Palm trees along the front fence gave it the look of some tropical paradise.

God-mother Lynch’s shop had not altered very much at all, except that from the outside it looked like a junk shop and wore a sign saying ‘Hardware’. I doubled up at the irony of that, too—‘hardware’. I wiped my eyes and was ready to see the house I had lived in until I was bundled off to Dalwood.

I turned my head away so that when I turned around I’d get the full impact of my happy childhood. I watched Bob’s face as he looked over at 122 Waterloo Rd. East Bankstown—Greenacre, as the area was now called. I watched his soft blue eyes widen. I saw his mouth drop open; I saw his face register shock. There, I thought, and felt total satisfaction.

- See? I said. I knew you’d get a nice surprise; it’s huge and it’s beautiful, isn’t it.

His voice held a peculiar edge:

- Ohm . . . You could say that.

Savouring the moment, I closed my eyes and turned my face towards the house. I opened my eyes, and choked up. The tears streamed down my face and my whole body shook. Bob pulled me into his arms.

- There, love, it’s alright, don’t cry, he said as he patted my back.

Suddenly he pushed me from him.

- What? You’re not crying—you’re laughing your head off!
I couldn’t get my breath to answer. My old house, the house that held my
childhood safe in its bosom, had gone. In its place, spread right across what used to be
our house paddock and our orchard stood the Church of Christ.

Katey had been buried in Rookwood Cemetery. Since we were already in
Sydney it made sense to visit her grave and view the magnificent shrine that my father
had erected to her memory. We couldn’t find her grave, but we did find the place where
she’d been buried—under the public footpath. Katey had been given a pauper’s burial.
It’d cost Hal the sum total of fifteen shillings—exactly. I remembered how Bertie had
said that in light of the great cost of Katey’s burial, they couldn’t afford to mark my
birthdays, and I thought about my three fruit-cake birthdays. I opened my diary and
began to write.

- *Now* what are you doing? Bob asked, as he tried to peer over my shoulder.
- I’m trying to work out the price of three fruit-cake birthdays . . . how much do
you reckon a lb. of mixed fruit would’ve cost back in the 1950s?

* * *

My poor brother was widowed in 2006. He said he was lonely. He said he didn’t want
us to drift apart. He began coming to stay with us more often. On one of these visits he
hunted crankily in my walk-in pantry for the peanut-butter that I don’t keep.
Disgruntled, he came out of the pantry and said:

- Bloody hell, Jo—you’ve got enough in there to set up a shop. Why do you *do*
that?

Why *did* I do that? I asked myself. Why did I feel the need to keep the pantry
and fridge filled; was it because when I was in Dalwood I never knew where my next
feed was coming from? Possibly. Why did I buy stuff that wasn’t on my shopping list;
was it because I’d been so hungry in Dalwood? Perhaps. I mulled it over and wondered
how much of a hand Dalwood had had in shaping me, and then I felt annoyed that I’d
been put on the spot over the contents of my healthy pantry. I plonked my glass of water
on the table, looked over at Al’s cranky face, and said:

- This isn’t a bloody hotel, you know. Have some blasted jam instead.

Determined to get to the bottom of the matter I began going to the shops by
myself for one or two items at a time. I stood in the check-out line. My basket held a
lettuce, a packet of bird-seed and three other items. A soft-eyed woman standing in the line next to mine smiled at me sheepishly.

- I’ve done it again, she said. Came in for milk, now look at all this.

We glanced down at her laden trolley. I pointed into my own basket, shrugged, said:

- Me too. Lettuce and bird-seed—that’s all I came in for; now look at this other stuff.

She gave a gusty sigh, and said:

- I’m so glad I’m not the only one.

Talking to women in the super-market reassured me that I wasn’t a freak, that many other women did it, regardless of their background and history. It was, after all, just a ‘woman thing’. Perhaps it’s the nesting instinct. Whatever, it doesn’t matter. What did matter was that the subconscious need to buy extra groceries was not limited to people who had been in ‘care’ as children. I was not so very ‘different’ after all.

Later that year we travelled up the coast to Al’s for a brief stay. We wandered down the gentle slope of his backyard and stood on the water’s edge. Then we strolled back to the house and ate breakfast on his patio while we watched the dolphins playing in the river.

- I’m getting myself another cup of tea, I said, and stood up to go inside to the kitchen.

- Will you grab the milk from the fridge while you’re there? Al asked.

Milk? Where on earth was the milk? I hunted and hunted in his fridge, it was crammed—it was a wonder he could close the door. I bit my tongue to stop myself from saying:

- Bloody hell, Al. You’ve got enough in here to start a shop.

During that visit Al said he wanted to show me something. He led me out to the back lawn. I stood there facing the river and gasped as I looked into an enormous hole—a hole that outshone any he had eve dug when he was a child in our pre-Dalwood days.

- I have to concrete it yet, he said, it’s the fish pond I’ve always wanted to build.

I could see it, how it would look: a fountain spraying mists of water onto lily pads, great gold and silver and black Koi carp surfacing to ripple the water in hopes of a stray insect, and Al sitting peacefully on the rock surrounds as he peered down into the water.
Two weeks before Christmas 2008, Al came to stay at our place. He sat at the breakfast bar in my kitchen, his elbows resting on the marble top. He propped his face in his hands, put his hands down again, cleared his throat, and said in a serious tone:

- O.K., Jo, let’s talk.

My alarm bells rang. My head jerked up. A prickling sensation ran through me. I looked straight at him. I was not conscious that I was holding my breath until my chest felt as if was on fire. The air escaped from my mouth in a rush of words:

- I don’t like the sound of this the last time you said that you told me you had prostate cancer.

I stopped gabbling and steeled myself, walked across the kitchen, pulled a chair back from the breakfast bar, and sat down opposite him. He put his cup of coffee down, drew a deep breath, said:

- Jo. You know how Katey was buried under a public footpath in Rookwood . . . well, um, I bought a plot in amongst the ‘B’s’—her maiden name began with ‘B’, and had her moved to it. So now she’s free of Hal, and she has a view and a lovely headstone which reads, In loving memory of our beloved mother . . . and then after that I put my name first, then yours, then Camilla’s because that’s the order we were born in, and that’s how she knew us.

Where other things had failed to bring me to serious tears, that announcement worked. I dried my eyes and felt that at long last things were falling into place and coming right.
Afterword.

In the mid twentieth century, life for thousands of destitute or unwanted Anglo-Australian children was harsh. Two world wars and the Great Depression took their toll on our western male-orientated society. Working and middle class families broke under the increasing financial and emotional strain. In that era, impoverished children who were not raised at home received scant provision; the poorest of food, the barest covering of clothes, the most basic education, a roof over their heads, and a bed of sorts to sleep in. Some of these children were subjected to overwhelming religious instruction. Love, tenderness, and care did not enter into the perceived needs of the impoverished child. Many of these children were subjected to physical, emotional and mental abuse. I was one of these children. I am one of those people who are now referred to as a “Forgotten Australian”.

The term “Forgotten Australians” was coined by the Senate Inquiry into the maltreatment of children in “care” in Australia. The term applied exclusively to non-offending Anglo-Australian children who were incarcerated in Children’s Homes (commonly called orphanages,) or placed in foster care by the Child Welfare in the years stretching from the 1920s to the 1970s. These Children’s Homes were Dickensian, and generally speaking foster ‘care’ was undesirable. Many people took foster children for financial gain or to be used as a form of slave labour. The Homes were funded by fees, donations, and charities. Some were privately run. The governments, churches, and charitable organisations of the time saw this as a socially acceptable answer to the problem of what to do with children whose parents did not want them or were unable to cope; and because this “solution” was deemed to be accepted by society, any paperwork on these children was later destroyed as unnecessary to keep. All these children suffered greatly. They suffered displacement, dispossession, hardship and abuse not racially motivated. This is history which has been kept hidden.

But things are beginning to change. In recent years a few churches have made some form of apology on their private websites to people who, as children, suffered at their hands. The premier Nathan Rees made a public apology to the “Forgotten Australians” of NSW on the 17th September, 2009. On the 16th November, 2009, the Australian Federal Government and the Opposition issued a public apology to all “Forgotten Australians”. This apology included the “Forgotten Children”—the so-called
British Child Migrants; they were raised as Australians in Australian institutions, hence their experiences were similar to those of the “Forgotten Australians”.

Other things have not changed. The charities involved have never apologised. The various churches have not offered apologies in the public arena for their past ill-treatment of innocent children. Child abuse and neglect are still on-going issues. If our society does not take lessons from the past, there is a danger of perpetuating a social problem.

The “Forgotten Australians” themselves hold diverse views of the public apologies made by the governments of Australia. Some feel vindicated. Some see the apologies as a way forward. Some feel that the apology serves no purpose. Some are undecided. I hold the view shared by many. The past cannot be undone; atrocities cannot be fixed backwards. Apologies alone cannot rectify the mistakes made by the governments of four and more decades ago. All that any government of today can do is attempt to ensure that they and future governments do not repeat the mistakes of the past. Such a task would require social and legal change, stricter policing, and raised public awareness. I believe that the Public Apologies did make a difference in that they publically acknowledged our existence and hence our pain. Acknowledgement implies permission to speak out and tell our stories.

It is my belief that the public have a right to a slice of Australian history which has, to date, been brushed aside by the churches, and swept under the carpet by the various governments and kept hidden from view. Here is one aspect of the meaning of the title of my autobiographical memoir. There is another slant to the title. As a child, like every other “Forgotten Australian”, I had no rights, no authority over my life. I was soft and innocent and walked over and abused by those who held the power. I was a little piece of carpet.

The Carpet Child is my true story as I remember it; it is a testimony to my childhood, but it is not written as an act of catharsis. It is written in the hope that it will, in some way, help other survivors of damaging childhoods, and also help to create awareness and bring about an understanding of the damaging childhood in those who have not had that kind of experience. My aim is to assist in bringing about social change for the better, for the children past, present, and future.
Dear

As you are aware, on 16 November 2009 the Prime Minister, the Hon Kevin Rudd MP, delivered an emotional and long overdue apology to the Forgotten Australians and former child migrants. This apology, for the first time, provided national and international acknowledgement of a period in our nation's history where the most vulnerable of our children did not receive the care they deserved.

The apology acknowledged that what happened in the past was both real and wrong. It has helped to ensure that a largely invisible part of our history is put firmly on the record and served as a reminder of what happened to many of these children - the loss of family, the loss of identity and, in the case of child migrants, the loss of their country. The words spoken by the Prime Minister conveyed a sincere hope that the national acknowledgement of the trauma experienced by these people would help to begin the healing process.

Around 900 people who spent time in out-of-home care travelled from across Australia to attend the event at Parliament House, as well as state and territory ministers, senators, members of Parliament and the general public. The event was an emotional coming-together and an opportunity to build new friendships and networks.

It is with pleasure I provide you with a copy of the apology motion and DVD as a reminder of the day. I sincerely hope, in line with the words of the Prime Minister, that this national apology to our Forgotten Australians and our Child Migrants is seen as a turning point for the future.

Yours sincerely

JENNY MACKLIN MP