

PARADISE HEIGHTS



CDH Cooper

Paradise Heights

C.D.H. Cooper

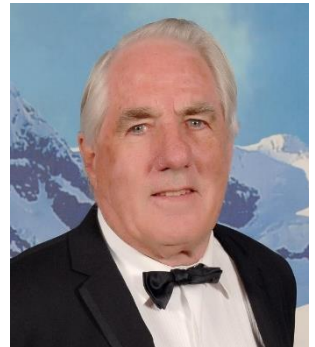
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BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS

Like *Jane Eyre*, *Paradise Heights* is an autobiography by proxy, but it is very loosely based on *Wuthering Heights*. It is the story of Cathy, a farmer's daughter in the New England area of NSW and Cliff, an Aboriginal boy. There is a patina of nostalgia for some older readers as it is set in NSW in the middle of the twentieth century. The story begins on an isolated farm in the New England area and continues to Greater Sydney, particularly the areas of Kings Cross, Kirribilli, Stanwell Park, Katoomba and the Hawkesbury.

Incidents in the story are inspired either by those in my own life or actual historical events. The central theme is that of relationships. Cliff develops a classification of P, Q and R relationships between a man and a woman, where P stands for Platonic and R is Romantic. The middle category of Q-relationships contain those that are somewhere in between, relationships that are intimate but are a union of minds and souls rather than a union of bodies. It bears some similarities to the Medieval courtly love. Other themes that seem to have crept in while I wasn't looking are Aboriginality and the Catholic Church.

I grew up in Sydney in the 1940s and 1950s, attending Canterbury Boys'



High and Sydney University – both get a leading role in this story. I became a Mathematics lecturer at Macquarie University, but I have tried to keep mathematics out of this story, unlike my other novel *Alison's Axioms*. However the countless Brontë references stem from my twenty years in the Australian Brontë Association. I am a lay preacher in the Eastwood Uniting Church and have several good friends in the local Catholic Church.

Christopher Cooper

EDITOR'S NOTES

This journal was compiled by three members of two interconnected families over a period of forty years, from 1940 to 1980. It was not intended for publication, but rather for the benefit of subsequent generations of those families.

The chapters have been written at various times throughout this period and have not been revised in the light of later events.

I have checked the historical references and have found them to be substantially correct. Where I have found small discrepancies I have not corrected them. As far as the personal accounts are concerned I am unable to comment.

Finally I would like to thank Cathy Stubbs who began this memoir, and was its principal author, for allowing me to make this available to the public in the hope that it will publicise the PQR theory of relationships. She would also like to bring to the attention of the readers of this book to her excellent series of children's books about Trevor, the tram.

Christopher Cooper

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

There are some Dutch names and words in the book. Here is a guide to the pronunciation of the more difficult words. Note that the ‘**ch**’ in the pronunciation guide has no equivalent in English. It is a distinctively Dutch guttural sound, formed at the back of the throat. It is a bit like the sound made immediately before one spits, as the saliva is collected at the back of the throat. The English equivalents are provided in parentheses.

Liesje – Leesha

Marijke – Maraykah

Schrevningen – **Schrayvnichen**

oom – ohm (uncle)

tante – tuntah (aunt)

meisje – maysher (girl)

stroopwafel – strohpvarfel

(a wafer sandwich with a caramel filling)

poffetje – poffetyah (a very small, puffy pancake)

gesellig – **chezellich**

(an adjective that has no English equivalent – the nearest would be a mixture of cosy, homely, pleasant and friendly)

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1. THE GARDEN OF EDEN

I was born in Paradise, but it wasn't at all like the Paradise they kept talking about in Sunday School. Paradise was the name the Aborigines gave to the area where our farm is located – but in the Danggadi language, of course. It seems that their word means 'paradise' in English.

It certainly is a beautiful part of the country with its rugged, steep hills and its deep gorges with many waterfalls. My Dad's property, of four thousand acres, is some miles out of Walcha. That's in the New England Ranges of northern New South Wales. A paradise for Aborigines, no doubt, but a hard, remote place for us white fellas.



Our house – no, 'house' is too grand a word for the makeshift shack we lived in – was thrown together by the first white farmer who lived there. He must have used whatever sheets of corrugated iron he could find in the back paddock of his neighbour's property. The sheets were all of different sizes. Some were rusty, some were painted. They all hung together somehow – except for the odd sheet that blew off whenever the winds swept over the hill. But that was easily nailed back.

Once the whole front porch was picked up by a particularly strong wind and was blown right over the house to the back. We got a couple of the neighbouring farmers to pick it up and put it on a dray to bring it back to the front. They were happy with the two slabs of beer we gave them for their pains.

Inside the shack the floors were mostly packed earth, though in what you might call the “kitchen area” the floor was a slab of imperfectly laid cement. The original occupant had slapped it down without the benefit of a level or the necessary experience.

Of course we cooked on an open fire and a makeshift shower was rigged up at the back. Hot showers were limited to the time it took for a watering can of hot water, heated over the fire, to dribble through the nozzle. At night we tried to read by the light of two hurricane lamps.

My family are great readers. I say “are”, but Dad has now gone to the real Paradise that I learnt about at Sunday School. He only ever read one book in his whole life. It was Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*. It was his Bible. He wasn’t a fast reader, and it took him several months to finish it but, as soon as he reached the ‘unquiet slumbers’, he would start all over again.

I suppose you could say that our house was a sort of *Wuthering Heights* itself. Being on a small plateau at the top of a hill, the wind would blow up from the valley, or from across the next hill.

Now Mum was a keen listener to the epic radio serial *Blue Hills*. It was a marvel of electronic engineering that we were able to pick up the ABC at all. I suppose the fact that we were at the top of a hill helped, but we were a long way from Armidale where the signal would come from. Dad had to rig up a huge aerial stretching from the windmill that pumped water from the dam, to a big tree and then on to the roof, to pick up the signal as it blew past. He was very good at erecting this aerial, because he had to do it every few weeks, after the winds blew the wires down.

Dad had a state-of-the-art generator, which we only used for the radio. Lights at night were hurricane lamps, and hot water was heated over an open fire. But to Dad, the radio was second in importance to his cattle, or perhaps third, because probably Mum came in at number two.

I’d like to say that Dad had installed the generator and antenna so that Mum could listen to her *Blue Hills*, but it was primarily so that *he* could listen to *Dad and Dave*.

He allowed me to use the huge apparatus to listen to the Children’s Session on the ABC. At 5 o’clock every evening, after school,

I would start the generator and tune into the ABC, eagerly waiting for the theme song:

Come Old Mother Hubbard and Jack and Jill
And Tom the Piper's son.
Leave your cupboard forget your spill,
We're going to have some fun.
The wireless says to hurry and run
To leave your games and toys;
The wireless says the time has come
For all the girls and boys.
So, come with a hop, a skip and a run,
It's time for the Session, it's time for the fun.

“Why on earth are you hiding in the cupboard under the sink?” Mum once asked me. I told her what the words said. Children tend to take things literally. I thought I was supposed to wait in the cupboard until I was told to ‘come with a hop, a skip and a run’. However, I soon grew out of that, and just curled up on the mat in front of that other huge cupboard, the one that housed all the glowing valves and the loudspeaker.

The *Children's Session* included a segment devoted to the Argonaut's Club. I had joined up as an argonaut, and I was a ‘rower’ on the ship *Cadena 3* but I never managed to reach the order of the Dragon's Tooth. I still remember the Argonauts song:

But bend with all your might
As you sail into the night
And wrong will bow to right.



The other program I listened to was *The Search For The Golden Boomerang*. It was broadcast on 2UW, through a relay station, but it was later repeated on the ABC Children's Session.

Mum wanted to call our house 'Blue Hills'. Dad got an old board that said 'FOR SALE' and turned it over. With some red paint he found in a shed, he painted 'BLU HILLS'. Mum was at him for weeks to spell 'blue' properly, but I could see what he had in mind. One morning Mum woke up and, on going outside, she discovered that he'd completed the sign. It now read "BLUSTERIN HILLS"!

I suppose I'd better introduce you to the whole family. My name is Cathy. Yes, Dad loved *Wuthering Heights* so much that when I was born I *had* to be Cathy, though I'm not at all like either of the Cathys in *Wuthering Heights*. I didn't like my second name, Madeleine, so I stuck with Cathy.

I have a younger brother – two years younger than me. Mum had to talk Dad out of calling him Hindley. Thank goodness! I often wondered how much of the story of *Wuthering Heights* Dad had absorbed, despite his constant reading. Imagine naming his son after a cruel, wasteful drunkard! Mum said that because he got his way with calling me Cathy, she should be allowed to choose her son's name. So, Darcy he became.

I should have said that Mum was a Jane Austen fan. Had Darcy been a girl she would have been called Emma. Mum had read all of Miss Austen's books multiple times, but not as many times as Dad read his WH. Mum read quite widely, which wasn't surprising because she had a degree in English literature. You might wonder how a cultured girl ever got to marry a down-to-earth farmer. I might tell you about that some other time.

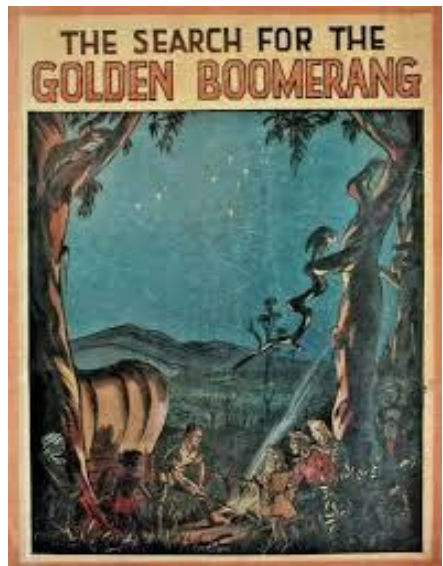
There were often fights – well, heated discussions – as to who was the better author, Emily Brontë or Jane Austen. Dad had never read any Jane Austen, so how was he entitled to comment, you may ask. Well he'd heard about her and felt that this was sufficient. He was able to make firm decisions about things on the flimsiest of evidence.

“Jane Austen was a wimp,” he used to say, “with all her tea parties and balls. I bet she never rode a horse in all her life”. I don’t think Emily had ever ridden a horse either, but then she *did* go for walks across the moors in her Dad’s duds (by that I mean ‘trousers’) so she was probably the sort of woman Dad dreamt about. Mum was a bit of a disappointment there. She preferred home comforts and only put up with living such a primitive life because she loved Dad. And, don’t get me wrong. He loved her too. If only she wasn’t so ... well ... dainty.

So, there you have it: Mum, Dad, me and Darcy. Oh. and I mustn’t forget Bluey, the cattle dog. Of course, he was named after Mum’s favourite serial. Mum and Dad slept in a section of the downstairs, curtained off for privacy. Darcy and I had to climb a ladder to the loft where Joseph would have slept if we’d had a servant called Joseph, which we didn’t. Being the 1930s, like most people, we didn’t have a servant. Not unless you count Cliff. But he didn’t live with us, not like Heathcliff did with the Earnshaws.

Cliff was about my age. Of course, his real name wasn’t Cliff. I think his Mum had called him Bunjawindi, but Dad insisted on calling him Cliff. Mum had vetoed the name ‘Heathcliff’, which is what Dad wanted to call him just because he is black. So ‘Cliff’ it had to be. I’m sure that Dad would have liked it if our family name had been Earnshaw, but he was stuck with Stubbs. Poor Dad, that’s about the most un-Wuthering Heights name you can get.

There was a small tribe of Aborigines living on our property. I say “our” property because we were the ‘white-fella owners’ with title deeds and all that. But the Aborigines had been living there for thousands of years and considered it theirs. They didn’t live in grass huts, though. They had small humpies and



wore proper clothes. But *Blusterin Hills* was a mansion compared to the way they lived. By law we could have evicted them, but it suited us to have them around.

I used to identify Cliff a little bit with Tuckonie, the Aboriginal boy in the serial *The Search For The Golden Boomerang*. However Cliff was a pretty normal Aboriginal boy while, in my imagination, Tuckonie was almost superhuman. Whenever I went out riding on my own, I would imagine Tuckonie as my imaginary friend, running along beside me. Even if I broke into a gallop, he was able to keep up. But when I went riding with Cliff, my *real* friend, I didn't think about Tuckonie at all. He was just someone I could bring out whenever I was alone, so that I never felt lonely.

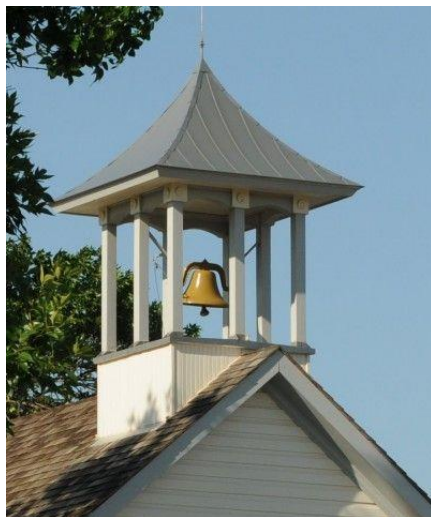
When he turned twelve, Cliff was employed by Dad to ride a horse to round up the cattle. He wasn't ill-treated by Darcy, as Heathcliff was by Hindley, because Darcy was only ten at the time and he was, to use Dad's words, "a bit of a wimp". Like Cathy and Heathcliff, Cliff and I used to spend a lot of time roaming around the hills and we enjoyed each other's company. Of course, I had much less time to do this than Heathcliff's Cathy because I had to go to school. Cliff didn't go to school because, back then, Aborigines weren't considered to be proper people. When asked about his farm Dad would say, "four thousand acres, 128 head of cattle, and 24 blackfellas".

School was in Walcha and there was no school bus. In any case no bus, or car for that matter, could have negotiated the last fifteen miles of track that led to our house. The only way in and out of our property was by horse. When necessary, a bullock dray was able to reach our farm, but with some difficulty.

Of course I was too young to ride when I was only five, so Mum home-schooled me until I was eight. I then started school, going into 3rd class. I found that I could read better than most of the other children, but I was a little bit behind with my mathematics.

2. BELL MONITOR

The school at Walcha was a typical country school – a wooden building with two classrooms, and a bell that was rung each morning at ten to nine. It was a great honour to be allowed to ring this bell and, when I was in third class, I really wanted to become the bell monitor. When I say “third class” I mean that was my grade, but from 3rd class right up to 6th class, we were all taught in the one room by Miss Peterson. Sometimes we were all taught the same lesson, such as in Geography, but for Mathematics the three of us in 3rd class had to be taught separately at the back of the classroom while the others did their sums out of their respective textbooks. It must have been a real juggling act for Miss Peterson to have to teach all those grades in the same room.



The bell monitor had to be someone from the senior classes, which meant 5th or 6th class. But I was keen to become bell monitor from the day I started at the school.

“I’m really very strong, Miss, and I’m tall enough to reach the rope,” I told her. Like Emily Brontë I was quite tall for my age and I was sure that I would be able to cope. But Miss said that because I lived so far away, and had to ride in on my horse, I might sometimes get to school late.

“I think Judith would be better. You know she just lives across the road from the school, so she’s bound to always get here on time.”

I was disappointed but, as it happens when someone lives close to their school, they are often late. Judith would often not wake up till half past eight, and she wasn’t the fastest at getting ready. So even though she often skipped breakfast she would be seen running over the road just

after the bell rang at ten to nine, On these frequent occasions it was Miss Peterson who had to ring the bell.

She came to me one day and said, “Oh Cathy, I’ve been thinking. Perhaps it would be better if you took over as bell monitor. I’ve noticed that you’re always here at eight o’clock when I arrive to unlock the school. I’ll make Judith the blackboard monitor instead so she won’t be disappointed.”

Blackboard monitor had to wash down the blackboards thoroughly after school, while Miss was packing up. This meant staying back after school for twenty minutes, which was no burden for Judith who only lived across the road from the school.

So, bell monitor I became. I asked Miss Peterson if we could have a few more bells so that I could do change ringing like I’d heard once at the Armidale Cathedral. I hadn’t realised that change ringing meant not only much bigger bells, but a separate person for each bell. Besides the fact that the cost would have used up our school budget for the next five hundred years, it would have meant giving over the small classroom to become the ringing chamber. I only discovered the sense of these objections when, some years later, I was allowed to go up to the ringing chamber at the Armidale Cathedral.

Miss Peterson skipped over all these objections and pointed out the main reason why we couldn’t have a full peal of bells.

“You know Mrs Tuttle who lives next door to the school. She’s already complained about the *one* bell ringing for three minutes every morning. Imagine if we rang a quarter peal on eight bells. That takes 45 minutes, you know, and she’d go ballistic!”

So, I had to be content with ‘ringing rounds’ on one bell, which is really not very interesting, but it made me feel quite important. Second to being the teacher it was the most important job in the school. Far better than being blackboard monitor!

My best friend at school was Joe. Well, his real name was Tom but after the notorious school pageant at the end of 5th class, everyone called him Joseph because that’s the role he played. And that’s why those who were at school with me called me Mary all through 6th class.

I had to fight hard to become Mary. Judith really wanted the part and felt that since I'd ousted her as bell monitor I should allow her to be Mary. The only trouble was that Mary had to ride on a donkey. Yes, Miss had managed to borrow an actual donkey. (It was to be an outdoor pageant, of course.) Judith had never ridden a horse, let alone a donkey which, surprisingly, is rather more difficult. How the real Mary managed I'll never know.



So Mary I became and Tom became Joseph. Despite my extensive experience at riding horses I found riding a donkey a little frustrating.

“How do you make this beast go any faster?” I asked Miss during the rehearsal. Joseph was trying to lead it, but it insisted on taking one step every five seconds. In between steps it was nibbling the grass.

“I suppose the problem is that his tank is nearly empty. We must give him a good feed just before the performance on Friday.”

There was great excitement in the school in the weeks leading up to the pageant. It was to be held in the yard of a small property on the edge of town, where there was an old wooden shed that was starting to collapse. It looked just the part. The audience was to be seated on a bank of grass just outside the shed. As well as the donkey, Miss Peterson had managed to get a camel for the evening, so when the three wise men arrived, at least one of them was seated on a camel. Miss had given the animals a good feed before the performance, but she discovered that she had to quickly appoint a ‘poo monitor’ to discretely sweep up the manure.

The script was straight out of the Gospel of Luke. Well, that’s where it started. Miss chose Gerry, who was pretty good with words, to

rewrite it in language that seemed more natural to school kids in an Australian country town. The end product was pretty strange in parts, but Gerry had managed to get the gist of it. The only stipulation was that he had to take out any mention of ‘virgin’ or any suggestion that Mary wasn’t married. She didn’t want to have to answer embarrassing questions about what a ‘virgin’ was. But he did have to include the word ‘betrothed’. None of us knew what that word meant. We thought it was just another word for ‘married’ and, as you’ll see, therein lay the problem. Gerry was to be the narrator.

I’ve decided to give you the actual script in case you should want to use it for a Christmas pageant some day.

Narrator: God sent this angel, called Gabby, to the town of Nazareth Crossing in the highlands, to a young girl called Mary. She was *betrothed* to a man called Joe, whose great, great grandad was a king, called Dave. The angel went up to her and said:

Angel: Hi Mary! I hear you’re *betrothed* to Joe. Congratulations! I’m here to tell you that God has given you a really important job to do – much more important than being bell monitor.

Mary: Gee, I wonder what it could be.

Angel: Don’t be scared, Mary. God really likes you a lot. You’re going to get a baby. That’s OK ‘cause you’re *betrothed*. It’ll be a baby boy and you’ve got to call him Jesus. God says so. He’ll grow up and become a king. But unlike George the Sixth, his kingdom will go on for ever and ever, to infinity and beyond.

Mary: Hey, how’s he going to do that. I’m not even 18.

Angel: Don’t worry, kid. God will look after all that stuff.

Mary: Well I guess if that's what the Lord wants, I'll leave it up to him.

The angel goes off.

Mary (*singing*):

I'm so happy. God is so good to me.

He's remembered what I am

Just a poor country girl

Betrothed to Joe.

But now everyone will think I've won the lottery

Because God has done great things for me —

God is his name.

He's kind to those who are scared of him,

To grandkids and great grandkids

He's done great stuff with his strong arms and feet

He's scared off those who are stuck up

He's pushed kings from off their thrones

But he's lifted up the little kids in his arms.

He's put on a great barbecue for the hungry

But he told the rich to get lost.

Narrator: In those days Mr Caesar Augustus made a law that they should count everyone living in the Roman Empire. This was the first time they'd done this for a long time. Everyone went to where they grew up to get counted. So Joe went to a little country town called Bethlehem, near Uralla. He was going to stay in David's house, because that's where he lived when he was a boy. He took Mary, his *betrothed*, and her tummy was already pretty big because she was going to have a baby soon. Well, no sooner did they get to Bethlehem than she started getting these things called 'contractions'. The house of David was all full up, so they had to go round the back to where the horses were put. And it was here where Jesus was born. Mary wrapped the baby up in some horse cloths that they used to put on the backs of horses to keep them warm in

winter. Being December though, it was summer, so the horses didn't need them. And, because there was no cot, she had to stick him in the trough where the horses ate from.

Now there were these stockmen who were out in the paddocks just out of town. They'd been rounding up their cattle, mostly Poll Herefords. But now they were sitting down by a camp-fire while their border collies were making sure that none of the cattle got away. Then an angel suddenly came down out of the sky. Although it was ten o'clock at night the angel switched on his light and there was this stuff called 'glory' that lit up the whole place. Now, of course the stockmen were trembling with fear. They'd never seen anything like this before. But the angel said to them:

Angel: Hey guys, don't be so trembly. It's OK! I've got some great news to tell you. This evening, over there in the town, a baby's been born. And he's come straight from God. You'll find this baby all wrapped in some horse cloths and lying in a trough.

Narrator: Suddenly a great army of these angels came riding over the hill, singing this song, over and over.

Chorus: Glory to God up there. Peace on earth down under.

Narrator: The angels then scooted off and the stockmen looked at each other.

Stockman: How's about if we go into Bethlehem and see what's what?

Narrator: So, they got on their horses and rode off. They found Mary and Joe, and the baby who was lying in the horse trough. Then after they'd gone off to tell everyone what they'd seen, Mary sat down and had a long think.

In the rehearsals I'd had no trouble with the script, but at the actual performance I really *did* have a bit of a think, instead of just pretending to. It suddenly hit me what 'betrothed' meant. I now remembered what my Sunday School teacher had explained to me two years before. 'Betrothed' meant 'engaged'. So, Mary wasn't married. I was playing the part of an unmarried mother! I went red with embarrassment. The pondering went on for a long time and the audience started to murmur amongst themselves. Then I departed from the script and asked, "So was Mary an unmarried mother?"

You could have heard a pin drop, except probably you wouldn't have because the audience were all sitting on the grass. There was a long silence. The wise men were anxiously waiting to be summoned onto the 'stage' and the camel was starting to get a bit restless. Finally Gerry announced the wise men and the pageant continued without further incident.

Miss never said anything about it afterwards, and I never repeated my question. But my acting career was over. Never again would I volunteer to take part in a play, in case I was given the part of someone who'd embarrass me. I did once ask Miss Peterson about the script, because I felt that Gerry had departed a bit from the biblical account, and she said that he had mostly captured the spirit of the story even if he got one or two of his facts wrong.

"The only bit I had to edit out," she said, "was the bit about the flight into Egypt, where Gerry had the Holy Family on the night flight on Nazareth Air and he had the announcement from the cockpit 'this is Pontius the Pilate announcing that everyone should wash their hands. But it did make me laugh. Gerry will go far as a script writer.'"

3. THROSSCRUSH GRANGE

Dad could never get it right. There was a house exactly four miles from *Blusterin Hills*, called *Gorge House*. Mum called it the “gorgeous” house, and it really was a grand house – the house of a gentleman farmer. But, of course, Dad *had* to give it a *Wuthering Heights* name and, because it was four miles from our mean shack, it just had to be *Thrushcross Grange*. Except that Dad could never pronounce it properly and called it “Throsscrush”. Mrs Malaprop would be pleased! At first I thought he was making a joke, but when he persisted on calling it “Throsscrush” I realised that that’s what he really thought it was in Emily’s novel.

I remember one day – it was during the school holidays following the disastrous Christmas pageant – Cliff and I decided to ride over to Gorge House to see what was going on. I’d heard that there were two kids living there, about our ages.

I call him Cliff because that’s what Dad called him. In any case his real name, which was Bunjawindi, was too difficult for me to pronounce. He didn’t seem to mind being called Cliff.

We got on really well together and we both loved riding. You know, I think he might have been an even better horseman than I was. We often talked about ‘things’. Not while we were riding, of course, but when we stopped and laid down on the grass, and looked up at the benign sky, our respective imaginations went on a dance together.

One of our favourite spots was down at the Appsley River where, as well as looking up at the sky, we could look up the steep sides of the gorge. Another was Penistone Crag. Well there was such a place in *Wuthering Heights* and we called it that to amuse Dad. “Where ‘ave you kids been all morning?” “Oh, just to Penistone Crag.”

It was a rocky outcrop at the top of a mountain where it was downhill in whichever direction you looked. We felt that we were on the very top of the world. Another favourite was a heap of large boulders, piled on top of one another. It looked as though it might collapse if you even breathed too heavily on it. But we clambered over it and it showed no sign of moving. Nature is wonderful in being able to create these

wonders by blowing away the dirt over years of erosion, so that the pile of rocks was undisturbed. It reminded me a bit of playing fiddlesticks.

Now Cliff wasn't stupid. He'd only been to school for two years in his whole life, but then so had Emily Brontë. I suppose the difference was that she came from a much better educated household than Cliff, but he had a natural intelligence and was keen to learn. So, he taught me about wildflowers and which plants could be eaten, while I told him about *Wuthering Heights* and the fact that 2 plus 2 equals 4. He seemed to be fascinated with it all, and he remembered everything I told him. I made sure he learnt what 'betrothed' meant in case it should embarrass him if he thought it meant 'married'.

He could read, and I lent him Dad's copy of *Wuthering Heights*. I told him that he could only keep it for a few days because Dad had just come to the end, and he'd probably be starting it all over again before long. He gave it back to me after only three days and, although I've read it twice, Cliff remembered the plot better than I did.

I remember he once said, "if you're Cathy and I'm Heathcliff then you'll marry someone else and I'll be devastated and you'll die in childbirth and I'll die of a broken heart." But I said, "what if I'm the *young* Cathy, and you're Hareton. Well, I didn't have to teach you to read but I *do* tell you about things I've learnt, like Cathy did with Hareton."

This seemed to make Cliff happy. "So I'll end up marrying you one day. But first you'll marry that sickly Linton, so I'll have to wait till he dies. But I won't mind. I've worked out that there are three types of love – P, Q and R. Now, P stands for platonic love and R is romantic love."

I was surprised that he knew the word 'platonic'. I wondered who else had been giving him books to read.

"What's Q stand for?"

"I can't think of a word for it that starts with Q, but it's a love that's between P and R."

"So, what's it like?"

"It's like the love between you and me. Our love is more than platonic, but it isn't romantic. In one way it's between the two, but in another way it's a deeper love than either of them. It's the love between

Cathy and Heathcliff. So, I guess you'll end up marrying some white guy, but don't think my world will fall to pieces. You and I will still love each other in a Q sort of way."

One day in January Cliff and I rode over to *Gorge House*, alias *Throsscrush Grange*. It was the school holidays, so I was free and Cliff ... well, he didn't go to school any more. He didn't *have* to because he was Aboriginal. We hid amongst the bushes near the house to see what the children there were doing.

"Watch that they don't set their dogs on us," said Cliff. "You know, like the Lintons did to Cathy and Heathcliff."

"Don't forget that their name isn't Linton. They're the Wards. I don't think history will repeat itself."

"It's not history anyway. That was just a made-up story."

Well, history certainly didn't repeat itself. We crept up to one of the windows and peered in, when we heard a voice behind us.

"Just what we need," said the voice, who later identified itself as the voice of a boy called Richard. "Me and sis were playing cricket, but she can't bowl for nuts. How's about you two join the game? Can you bowl?"

Sis came up and she was much younger. It's no wonder she couldn't bowl.

"This is Wendy, but she's only six. I say, can either of you bowl?"

"I'm sure Cliff can. He's always throwing things like rocks and boomerangs!"

The four of us played cricket, with a couple of old kerosene cans as wickets. I scored 14 runs before I got out.

"LBW," Richard shouted as I rubbed my shin.

"What does that mean," I asked. "Is it 'ladies bowl well'?"

"Naw, it's legs before wicket," he replied. "If your leg wasn't in the way my ball would've hit the wicket."

When Richard took the bat, and Cliff bowled, the sound of the ball hitting the tin wicket echoed over the whole valley.

“Struth,” said Richard, “you sure know how to bowl. Where did you learn?”

“My dad taught me how to chuck a rock at a wallaby to bring him down.”

I shrank back in horror. “You mean you throw rocks at the poor wallabies?”

“How else are we going to make wallaby stew? We have to eat, and we can’t go to the shops ‘cause we’ve got no money.”

“Perhaps Dad can give you a job,” I said. “You ride well, and you could help him round up the cattle.”

Richard was puzzled. “If you’ve got no money, how could you buy a horse?”

“It’s a brumby – you know, a wild horse. We just found it wandering around with a few others and we caught it. I found an old saddle in one of Mr Stubbs’s sheds. I knew he wouldn’t mind. It’d be too small for him anyway. I think it must be a lady’s saddle. Probably belonged to the missis of the farmer who sold the farm to Cathy’s dad.

So I asked Dad about hiring Cliff, and he said, “Maybe. How old is he?”

“Twelve in June, I think.”

“Tell him to come back when he’s twelve. You say he’s got his own horse?”

“Yes, it’s a brumby that he and his dad found in the gully. They broke him and he now does whatever Cliff says.”

“And a saddle?”

“He borrowed a lady’s saddle he found in one of our sheds. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Tell him I’ll buy him a new saddle when he’s twelve.”

That’s how Cliff came to work for Dad. I often wondered why Dad hadn’t employed one of the grown-up Aborigines before this. I asked Dad and he said, “well, as you know, I’ve only just bought that extra land over to the west. I plan to buy a lot more head – besides I figure I’d need

to pay Cliff a whole lot less than a grown-up Aboriginal. How does a pound a week sound?"

Well, the going rate for a stockman at that time was £3 a week, but then Cliff had to be trained. "I s'pose that's alright. Can he live here?"

"Not on your Nelly," Dad shot back. "I'm not having no blackfella living here. No, he can stay with his mob over in the next gully."

Like most of the farmers around where we lived, Dad believed that the Aborigines were only at a slightly higher level than the cattle. Still, he treated the cattle like they were part of the family, so I felt that he'd be fair and kindly towards Cliff.

"How come I haven't seen either of you at school?" I asked Richard. "Are you like the Aborigines and don't have to go?"

"No, I go to TAS. That's The Armidale School. Wendy started at NEGS last year. We only come home for holidays."

"What's it like at boarding school?"

"It's great! We play cricket in the summer, and footie in the winter. And, of course we do lessons like everyone else."

"What do you do after school?" asked Cliff. "Is there a lot of bush where you can muck around?"

"No time for that. After school we do prep. That's doing homework. And on Saturdays we play sport and on Sundays we have to go to chapel. The only time I can really play is when I come here in the holidays. But I get bored. Having a sister is OK but she's only six. Hey? Can I hang around with you guys when I'm home in the hols?"

"Sure, sometimes we can come here and play cricket, and other stuff. And you can ride over to our farm."

"Actually I don't ride. I once climbed onto the back of a horse and it sat down on its hind legs and I slid off the back, and hurt my bum. I've not been on a horse since."

"What do you do in the holidays apart from playing cricket with Wendy?"

"I read a lot, and I paint."

“So do I, read that is. What do you read? Have you read *Wuthering Heights*?”

“Never heard of that. Is it by Enid Blyton?”

“No, who’s she?”

“She’s a new writer. She wrote *The Secret Island* last year. Riveting stuff. And I love the Biggles books. I’ve just finished *Biggles Goes to War*. They say there’s going to be a war soon. Say, I can lend it to you if you’re interested.”

4. CLIFF RESCUE

It was September 1939. War had just broken out in Europe. Australia decided to send some troops, but it all seemed very remote from Paradise. Dad said he was thinking of signing up, but Mum didn't really want Dad to go. As it happened it never came to that. He failed his medical big time!

"Who's going to look after the farm if you go to war?" Mum asked Dad.

"I'll get Woody's father. He's retired but he's had a lot of experience with cattle. Remember he helped me when I was off with scarlet fever a few years ago."

Woody was Mr Wordsworth Ward of *Gorge House*. He was a descendent of Captain Thunderbolt, the notorious bushranger whose real name was also Wordsworth Ward. Dad could have called him 'Wordy' but 'Woody' seemed to roll off his tongue much more easily. Mr Ward senior lived with his son.

One day, early in 1940, Dad went out at dawn on Potty, his horse. Now I know you'll think that he must have been called that because he was a stupid horse, because that's what 'potty' usually means. But in fact, 'Potty' was short for 'Potamus'. Yes, it's a pretty funny name for a horse but Dad once heard that 'hippopotamus' meant 'river horse'. Of course, he always got things the wrong way round and he thought that 'hippo' meant 'river' and 'potamus' meant 'horse'!

"Have you seen your father today?" Mum asked me as it started to get dark.

"Not since he left this morning on Potty."

"He should be back by now for his supper. I hope he's alright."

"Mum, you worry too much. He's probably had a problem with one of the bulls. He'll be back soon."

But he wasn't. When nine o'clock came and Dad's supper was spoiled from having to be kept warm for so long, Mum said, "I really think he's come to some harm. What if he's fallen off his horse and broken a leg?"

“Then Potty would have come back on his own and raised the alarm.”

“Still I’m quite worried. I’d better go out and look for him.”

Now Mum *did* ride a horse, but she wasn’t that good at it. I was better, but the task of finding Dad in the dark in such a large area, was daunting.

“I’ll take Snowbell and ride over to the abo’s camp,” I said. “Cliff would be, by far, the best person to find him. He’s learnt tracking from his father.”

“Take Bluey with you. He can go with Cliff. But mind, when you’ve set Cliff and Bluey off on their search, I want you to come straight home.”

“Alright.” So, I set off. It took nearly an hour to reach the Aboriginal settlement. I got lost three times. Although I knew the route quite well by day, by night everything looked quite different.

“Dad’s gone off and hasn’t come back,” I said breathlessly as soon as I found Cliff. “Mum’s real worried – thinks he might have been thrown.”

“Potamus would never do that,” Cliff reassured me. “He’s probably just got lost.”

“Not Dad. He knows the property like the back of his hand.”

“And how many freckles are there on the back of your hand?” Most people don’t know the back of their hand all that well and, if they had to get from their wrist to their thumb in the dark – assuming they were a tiny bed bug or something – they’d be sure to get lost. You can’t navigate by freckles, you know. Each one looks just like the rest.”

Cliff had a big grin on his face. “You know what I mean,” I snapped back at him. “I’m really starting to worry, myself.”

“Where was he going?” he asked.

“I think he was going to fix the fence down by the river.”

So, Cliff and Bluey set off to find Dad, while I returned home. I sat up with Mum, waiting for news until 1 o’clock in the morning. Finally, Cliff came to the door.

“Has he come back?” he asked us.

“No sign of him, or of Potty,” I answered.

“We’ll have to wait till sunrise. Is it OK if I bunk down somewhere?”

“Oh dear,” said Mum. “I suppose you can. Yes, there’s a spare bed next to Darcy. Make sure you don’t wake him. When we do find Dad don’t tell him you stayed over. He’d have a fit!”

So, we went off to our respective beds, but I couldn’t sleep. Nor could Mum, but by the sound of the snoring in the next room, Cliff slept very soundly. As the sky started to become light I heard Cliff get up and go out to resume his search.

It was about ten o’clock when Cliff returned. “Bad news I’m afraid. He’s gone over the cliff.”

Mum screamed and I went pale. “You m-mean ...” I stammered.

“Dead as a squashed fly,” he said. Mum fainted. I managed not to faint, so I heard the rest. “Yes, poor Potty’s gone. Lucky your Dad landed on top of him. The horse broke his fall. Your Dad’s alright though, just a couple of broken legs, and his right arm doesn’t look too wonderful.”

“What shall we do?” I asked as I poured cold water over Mum.

“I’ll ride over to *Gorge House* and get Woody to come with me down to the river, and to bring a spare horse. The two of us should be able to lift your father onto that horse and tie him on proper. And I’ll tell Mrs Ward to ring for the ambulance. It can make it as far as *Gorge House*, with a little trouble. We’ll take your Dad straight there.”

“Off you go then. When Mum comes to, we’ll ride over to *Gorge House* and meet you there. Mum can go with Dad to the hospital in the ambulance.”

Just then Mum started to revive and proceeded to burst into tears. I reassured her that it was Potty who was squashed like a swatted fly and that Dad would be alright ... eventually. It was noon when we reached the Ward’s and Mrs Ward gave us some lunch. Not that we were that hungry, but it gave us something to do while we waited what seemed to be a lifetime.

At about three o'clock in the afternoon the party returned – Woody, Cliff and Dad. Dad was strung over a horse, face down – tied to the saddle with rope. We carefully lifted him off and laid him on the ground. All Dad could say was, “careful of my back.” I was worried that he might have had some spinal injury so we were very careful.

It was another hour before we heard the jingle of the bell of the ambulance. I thought it was pretty silly for them to ring the bell to warn the traffic on the road. Traffic? I bet they hadn't passed a single car on that lonely road. Mum got into the ambulance and it went off to Armidale Hospital, still ringing the bell.

I asked Cliff what we should do about poor Potty. “I've taken care of him. Once I got your Dad off him, I was able to drag Potty to the river's edge and shoved him in. So now Potty's a *real* hippopotamus – a river horse!

Cliff had forgotten that the spot where he'd dragged the remains of Potamus was the spot where we go swimming. And, every year, between Christmas and New Year, Dad let all the neighbouring families camp there. It wouldn't do to have a squashed horse in the water. So some time later Mr Ward got the remains of poor Potamus out of the river and gave him a decent Christian burial.

Dad had to stay in hospital for three weeks. Back then it was a small hospital, with four maternity beds and only one general bed. That general bed was occupied by an old man who'd had a heart attack and so Dad suffered the indignity of having to go into the Maternity Ward. He was so embarrassed. “Don't you dare get any of my mates to come and visit me. Tell them I'm at death's door and can't have any visitors!”

After a week the old man in the general bed recovered and was sent home to recuperate. Dad was transferred, much to his relief. “I couldn't get no sleep with those babies crying in the middle of the night.”

After Dad came home, and was able to ride again, he bought a new horse. In memory of Potty, he called his new horse Hippocrates. It seems that while in hospital someone told him that it was ‘hippo’ that meant ‘horse’ and someone else had mentioned the name Hippocrates.

“Is he one of the visiting doctors?” Dad had asked.

“No,” the nurse explained, “he lived a long time ago and he invented the Hippocratic oath.”

Dad asked the nurse what the oath was, so that he could use it to swear at Cliff next time he needed to but, when the nurse told him it was all about “doing no harm”, he thought it wasn’t such a useful oath after all.

Anyway he still called his new horse Hippocrates. The problem was that he insisted on pronouncing it so that it rhymed with ‘mates’!

Until Dad was well enough to ride Hippocrates, Woody’s father continued to manage our farm. Luckily Dad’s back was only bruised, but it was bad enough for him to fail his medical. So, the war in Europe, and later in the Pacific, had to somehow manage without the benefit of Dad’s special talents and he continued to raise cattle on our farm.

5. ROAST WALLABY

While the end of the world seemed to be about to take place in Europe, the end of *my* world seemed to be about to happen in Paradise. It was during January 1941, and I would soon be going to school at PLC in Armidale. No, that wasn't the end of my world – in fact it was to be the start of a whole new world, but more of that later.

No, the Armageddon that I'm referring to took place at Paradise Heights two weeks before school began. It had been an extremely hot and windy day. The temperature reached 104 degrees on our front porch. I had all the doors and windows closed, because, as hot as it was inside our tin shack, it was even hotter outside. I had stripped to my underclothes, and had a wet towel over me, as I lay on the rug in front of the wireless.

I was listening to the *Children's Session* on the ABC and, after it was over, I thought I'd leave the generator running till the seven o'clock news. It was here that I heard that a bushfire had broken out to the east of our property. I told Dad and we went outside. There was a glow in the east.

"It almost looks like it's morning already," I said to Dad.

"Looks bad. We'd better get out."

Now there was no way we could even think of fighting the fire. Our tank was only half full, and even so, the puny little hose that was connected to it would have been useless. Nor could we rely on the town fire-brigade. They could drive their cranky old fire truck as far as *Gorge House*, but never up the narrow, rutted track that came on to our place. Luckily we'd rounded up our cattle the day before, in preparation for taking them to the market, and the paddock they were in was flat and had no trees.

"We'll have to leave the cattle and hope for the best. I'll leave them some feed. Goodness knows when we'll be able to get back. Get the horses Cathy, and Mum, can you quickly make some eye masks for them."

"What on earth for?" I asked.

"Horses are extremely scared of fire. If they see flames they'll either freeze, or more likely, they'll bolt in the opposite direction."

“But how will they know which way to go?”

“That’ll be up to you. They’ll be OK if you’ll just talk to them quietly and guide them with the reins. If necessary you’ll have to get off and lead them and if they need to step over a fallen log just tap their front leg.”

Mum came back ten minutes later with four eye masks, which we fitted to our respective horses. We packed a few precious items in our saddle bags and went off, with Bluey running along beside.

We went down the track towards *Gorge House*. Dad thought we might be a little safer there, and if not, Woody had a few vehicles that could take us all to Walcha. Of course, if the wind changed, it wouldn’t even be safe there. But the closer we got to civilization the safer we’d be. The wind had dropped a little, but although we couldn’t see the glow through the undergrowth, we could hear a distant roar. That was the fire!

After about twenty minutes the roar had become louder. Then we became aware of hot cinders dropping on our heads. They were coming from in front of us. We were slowed down by having to open the gate every so often. But we saved a bit of time by not bothering to shut them. Our cattle were shut up in our top paddock and, if any neighbour’s cattle got out they’d probably be better off with the gates being left open.

We’d descended a couple of hundred feet, but the bush was pretty dense on either side of the track. Every so often we’d see a couple of frightened wallabies hopping across in front of us, not knowing in which direction to go.

By now we began to smell the smoke. Then, as we turned a corner, we could see that the trees, on either side of the track, were well alight. It would be madness to try to get through. Going back was also just as stupid.

“Dad! What are we going to do?”

“There’s a small track off to the left just back there. I remember finding it once when a big tree fell over and blocked the road. I seem to remember that it ends up at Woody’s farm.”

So, we went back and followed Dad into the bush. We were so lucky that there was a full moon, otherwise I think we would all have got lost. It was hard work riding through the bush, but because the faint track

was occasionally used by stockmen, it wasn't quite like dense jungle. Soon we became aware of a glow through the trees, on our left. Up ahead, a few yards to the left of the track, was a large tree, well alight. The trees near it were unaffected. It must have been ignited by flying embers that had gone ahead of the front. This must have happened at least an hour before, because the trunk had been hollowed out by the fire.

We stopped. "I've never seen anything like it," said Dad, who'd experienced several bushfires when he was young. "For a tree to be set alight so far ahead of the rest is most unusual."

Just then we heard an almighty crash. The tree fell across the track, setting fire to the grass and bushes where it landed. If we hadn't stopped some of us would have been crushed by the tree.

"We'll have to get off the horses and lead them around the tree." We did so, and even though we made a wide berth, through the dense undergrowth, we could feel the heat. Already the grass was burning furiously and appeared to be chasing us. We eventually passed the tree and made our way back to the narrow track, where we remounted our horses. In the distance we could hear a bell ahead of us.

"That must be the Walcha fire truck going to Woody's farm," said Dad. We must be getting close."

Indeed we were, and in about ten minutes Bluey started to bark as he began to smell the dogs at *Gorge House*. We came out into a cleared paddock and, there ahead of us, were the lights of the farmhouse.

The fire truck had just arrived, but there was nothing to do. The fire hadn't yet reached the farm. As we sat around waiting, I said, "I hope Cliff and his mob will be alright. Their settlement would be right in the thick of it."

I didn't use the word 'mob' disrespectfully, as in a 'mob of gangsters', but rather because that's how Cliff referred to his extended family.

"They'll be OK," Dad assured me. "They're used to bushfires. They've probably lost their humpies, but they're easily built again."

Eventually we could see the flames coming close to the house. The firemen drenched the roof with their water cannon. Mr Ward had a

couple of extra water tanks and so they were able to refill the fire truck when necessary.

The battle to save the house was a mere skirmish. At no time did we think it would go up, but on the other hand, if the firemen weren't there, the burning embers would almost certainly have set the house on fire. I wondered how *our* poor house would fare – abandoned as it was.

The next day Dad tried to get back home, but the fire, although it was dying down, forced him back. On the Sunday he made it through and came back in the late afternoon with the following report.

“*Blusterin House* somehow managed to escape with only minor damage, but we lost a lot of the outbuildings. The cattle survived, thank God. But Grace is gone, together with all her wires. The tree that also supported the aerial is quite charred, but it still stands. I'm afraid you won't be listening to *Blue Hills* or the *Children's Session* till I can rebuild the windmill and fix the aerial.”

“And Cliff? Is he safe?”

“Oh, yes, the abos all got out safely. Their humpies are all gone, but they got out. The Methodist Church in Uralla is putting them up in the Sunday School Hall.”

“Thank God!” I cried out with relief. “What are our plans?”

“Well, we'll go back home tomorrow and try to clean up the place.”

We made our way back, through all the charred bushland. Our progress was slow because not only did we close all the gates that we'd left open, but Dad had to chop up the trees that had fallen across the road. That is, just the small and medium-size ones. Mr Ward had lent him an axe for this purpose.

A couple of very large trees couldn't be disposed of so easily. We had to detour round them. Dad would have to get help to remove them later. Everywhere we went there was the stench of roast wallaby, some of their bodies still resting on glowing embers.

“I'll have to tell Cliff,” joked Dad. “There's the makings of plenty of wallaby stew here!”

I later learnt that, indeed, there was nothing left of the Aboriginals' simple dwellings. Some of them went to Moree where they were resettled by the Aboriginal Welfare Board. Cliff, his family and a few other families came back to Paradise Heights. Dad bought them a whole lot of new corrugated iron sheets and timber posts. They were able to build much better huts than they'd had before. In fact, Mum wondered whether Dad had gone a bit over the top and that the Aborigines ended up with better houses than ours! He even bought them a generator.

6. PRETTY LITTLE CUPCAKES

I reached the age of eleven in 1940. War was still raging overseas. So many eighteen and nineteen-year-olds from the New England area had enlisted and some of their parents had received those tragic black-bordered telegrams, but for the rest of us life went on as before. Except, as I was now approaching my twelfth birthday in January 1941, I had to enlist as a boarder at the Presbyterian Ladies College in Armidale.

I would have preferred to go to NEGS. That's the New England Girls School. I'd heard that the PLC girls were a bit stuck up. The NEGS girls called them "Pretty Little Cupcakes". They think they're above everyone else – proper little ladies. In return the PLC 'ladies' call the NEGS girls 'Nags' because they were the horsey girls who knew what



real life on a farm is like. They say that if you want to *be* a doctor you go to PLC. If you want to *marry* a doctor you go to NEGS.

Dad insisted I go to PLC because he'd heard that it had the reputation of being more academic. He had great plans for my future.

I was taken up to Armidale, with my luggage, in a buggy that Dad had borrowed from Mr Ward. It was a nice school, with plenty of grounds, but it was just grass – all flat and only a few trees. I was assigned to share a room with Betty, Shirley and Harriet. Betty was from Glen Innis up north, Shirley came from Sydney and Harriet's folks lived in Armidale. They thought that it would be nicer for her to be a boarder because the boarders at PLC were a class above the day girls. At least Harriet got to go home every weekend. The rest of us only went home in the holidays, though Betty and I did go home for long weekends during term.

They were nice girls I suppose – not my type though. But they made me feel welcome. Betty and Shirley had been at the school before, but Harriet, like me, was new. The ‘old’ girls showed us around and we soon felt more or less at home. Being wartime a couple of the younger male teachers had enlisted and so a couple of ‘dinosaurs’, who’d long since retired, were brought out, dusted off, and hired to take their place.

Madame Fournier taught French. She was French and her accent sounded really authentic. We had old Mr Shaw for Maths, Miss Eddington for History and some others whose names I can no longer recall.

Of course, midnight feasts were an important, though informal, part of our curriculum. The main items to be consumed on these occasions was fizz and cup-cakes. I couldn’t decide whether this was why the NEGS girls called us ‘cupcakes’ or because they thought we were much more interested in genteel afternoon teas, where cupcakes might be served, instead of real bush tucker.

We used these opportunities to gossip about the other girls, and especially the teachers. We also, from time to time, shared our experiences at home, and even reached the intimacy of telling each other how much our little breasts had grown! ‘Telling’ mind you. There was no showing. We were very private in the way we got dressed and undressed.

“Did you hear what Eliza Dalrymple called Madame Fournier in the corridor? In French too, would you believe! I had to look up the words. She thought Madame couldn’t hear but she has the ears of a ... well she has very acute hearing. Boy, did Eliza cop it.”

“I heard a few of the girls from 4th year snuck out and visited TAS. They did it as a dare that some boys from TAS had made. Jenny Jones saw one of the boys walking past the school and noticed that he had tossed a tennis ball over the fence. She found it had been cut open, and a note was stuffed inside. It said TO THE 4th YEAR GIRLS at PLC. THE BOYS AT TAS REQUEST THE PLEASURE OF YOUR COMPANY AT MIDNIGHT ON THURSDAY NEXT. The note said which gate to go in by and finished by saying that ‘some boys would be eagerly waiting for you’.”

“So, what happened?”

“They set their alarms and arrived at the gate exactly at midnight – but there was no-one there!”

“You mean the boys stood them up?”

“That’s what they thought. The problem was that midnight on Thursday is a bit ambiguous because midnight is neither one day nor the next. The boys were waiting for them the next night. Of course there were no girls then, and the boys thought that the girls had snubbed them. Our girls only realised their mistake after it was too late.”

“I wonder why they were 4th year boys who did this. You’d think that 5th years would be even more keen to meet girls.”

“Oh no, by the time they get to 5th year they’re all too busy swatting up for the Leaving Certificate.”

“I say, why don’t we try to do the same to the 1st year boys at TAS. Not that I particularly want to meet any, but it would be a lark! And we’d show those 4th years how to do it properly.”

“Yes, we should ask the boys to come at one minute past midnight so there’d be no doubt as to the day.”

It was agreed that we’d put a note in the same tennis ball and, when the day boys from TAS walked past on their way home from school, we could pretend to be playing ball, and just happen to accidentally throw it over the fence. Of course the note stipulated that it had to be given to 1st year boarders because the day boys might have trouble slipping out at night.

The assignation was made for one minute past twelve on the next Tuesday. We even wrote the date so that there’d be no misunderstanding as to which Tuesday was next. So, straight after school we gathered near the fence where the day boys would be walking past. We tossed the ball back and forth to each other and, just as a group of TAS boys walked past, whoever had the ball threw it over the head of the girl she was supposedly throwing it to, and the ball went right over the fence. It was retrieved by one of the boys from TAS and was instantly thrown back! We had to try it several times, with several bunches of boys, before one

of them looked at the ball and saw the note stuffed inside and walked off with it.

On the Monday night we climbed out of a window shortly before midnight so that we'd be at the meeting place precisely at one minute past midnight on the Tuesday. We were so focussed on looking out for the boys we didn't see Madame creep up behind us!

"Zo, vee 'ave ze rendezvous *mes enfants*. A beautiful French word is 'rendezvous' but not for my girls!"

When the boys heard this they ran off, while we girls stood frozen to the spot. "You vill go now and report to me *demain matin*."

We all got detention for the rest of the week. Later, we found out that the boy who'd picked up our ball, gave it to his French teacher at TAS and he contacted Madame from PLC. Still undaunted, we cooked up another scheme.

Every Wednesday afternoon, as last lesson, we would go to the town library as a class. Now we knew that on Thursday afternoons the pupils from TAS did the same. All we had to do was to conceal our note inside a Biggles book, and some boy, probably a 1st year one, would be bound to see it. Because it might take a few weeks for them to find it, we asked that they would reply to the message and the meeting would be at five past midnight on the following Thursday morning. All we had to do was to check the book each Wednesday afternoon and, once we found the reply, we'd know to meet just after midnight the following morning. It couldn't fail!

Several weeks went by, and our note remained undisturbed. Then, one Wednesday to our great delight, we discovered that our note had gone and in its place was a reply, confirming the meeting just after midnight.

It was with great excitement that we four girls crept out and waited by the gate. Of course, the gate was locked, but the boys would have no trouble climbing over. At exactly five past midnight we saw a face peep over the fence, and then an arm and a leg. While this was happening, Betty had been put on guard in case Madame should creep up

on us again. This time there was no Madame. Nor were there any other boys.

“What are *you* doing here?” I gasped, for it was Richard. I’d forgotten that he was a boarder at TAS and I’d also forgotten that he was an avid Biggles reader.

“I got this note.”

“Yes, I know. But where are the others?”

“What others? I thought the note was meant just for me.” Of course, in English, ‘you’ can be singular or plural. How much more civilised is French!

Well, the plan had worked, but meeting a boy I knew well wasn’t all that exciting. In any case, I could meet him at any time I wanted to, at home during the holidays. There was no need for midnight assignations.

“You know him?” asked Harriet. “Why didn’t you tell us that all this was simply to meet your boyfriend. Why drag us along?”

“He’s *not* my boyfriend – just a neighbour’s kid, and anyway how was I to know that he’d be the one to get the note. How was I to know that he’d come alone?”

So, we snuck back to bed. We found out later that he’d been spotted climbing back into TAS and was in real trouble, but I’ll say this for him. He was a real brick and didn’t dob us in.

7. THE BIG SMOKE

The next few years at PLC were pretty uneventful. I saw quite a bit of Richard at weekends but never at midnight. I was never all that fussed about meeting boys – certainly not when I was in 1st year. I went home in the holidays and caught up with Cliff. We had a lot of minor adventures, but none worth talking about. However, when I went home at the end of third year, I found that Cliff was nowhere around. Dad had hired another Aboriginal stockman.

“Where’s Cliff? Have you sacked him?”

“Oh, it’s not that – he’s a bright kid. He could do far better than just being a stockman. No, Reverend Matthews, the Uralla Methodist minister, got to know him and thought, like me, that he could go far. So, he’s taken him off to the manse at Uralla and he’s teaching him there – setting him up for the Leaving Certificate.”

The war eventually ended and we went onto rationing. It wasn’t too bad for those of us who had farms. We already had one of our cows assigned to domestic milk production and we had quite a number of chooks. We had a fair-sized vegetable garden, so we were pretty self-sufficient. Meat was always a bit of a problem. It wasn’t feasible to slaughter our own cattle because we had no refrigeration. It was much easier to transport them to market on the hoof rather than as a carcass. We had some pigs which we occasionally slaughtered. What we couldn’t eat in two days we passed on to the Wards. We mainly relied on our chickens for protein. Oh, and occasionally Dad would catch a fish in the Appsley. But we never ate wallaby. That was ‘abo food’ in Dad’s eyes.

Clothes might have been a problem, but Mum was pretty handy with the pedal Singer sewing machine. She made my school uniforms and they were indistinguishable from the bought ones. Shoes were about the only things we needed clothes coupons for.

The time came for me to go to university. I loved my life on the farm, but I couldn’t see myself taking over after Dad went. With Mum’s influence I wanted to study English. They had recently established a

college of the University of Sydney up here in Armidale, but Dad said it would be better to go to the real thing. So, I enrolled at Sydney University, doing Arts – English and Mathematics.

“What do you want to do boring old Maths for,” asked Richard. “English I can understand. You can use your imagination in English, but Maths is just black and white – no imagination required.”

“I don’t agree. Both English and Maths are all about telling stories.”

“Don’t be silly. Maths is about *facts* – there’s nothing made up there.”

“I don’t agree. Have you ever seen an infinitely long line with zero width?”

“Well, no, but ...”

“Of course, such things don’t exist in the real world, but in the imagination of a mathematician ...”

“But mathematics is the language of Science – of the *real* world.”

“Scientists are welcome to make use of any mathematics they find useful – which they do. But mathematics exists independently of the material universe. Have you ever seen the number 2?”

“Of course not. I’ve seen two people, you and me – and I’ve got two hands.”

“But in mathematics we talk about the number two as if it existed on its own. The fact that $5 + 5 = 10$ has nothing to do with our hands. If we were horses there’d be no such things as hands, but 5 plus 5 would still be 10.”

“Well, Wendy’s horse is 15 hands high!”

“Do you think that, if there were no humans, horses would be measured in hands? If the world consisted of just cats and horses, that horse might be 60 paws high.”

“I think you’re just talking nonsense.”

“And I think you lack imagination. Let me ask you. Do parallel lines meet?”

“Of course not.”

“Yet that drawing of yours I saw last week, the one with the Armidale mail in the distance – you drew the parallel railway lines meeting on the horizon.”

“Stupid girl, that’s called ‘perspective’.”

“Well there’s a type of geometry called projective geometry where every two lines actually meet at a point.”

“But that’s not true.”

“In mathematics there’s no such thing as true. It’s all just made-up stories. Euclid made up a story where there are lines that don’t meet. That appears to fit the real world. But someone else made up a perfectly valid geometry where *all* pairs of lines meet. That fits the world on your canvas. I read about a mathematician who said something like ‘we mathematicians are the great story tellers of the scientific world – but they need us more than we need them.’ What do you say to that?”

“I say that I’m going to miss our interesting discussions when you go off to university. And you’ll be so clever, when you get back, I won’t be able to talk to you.”

Mum and Dad discussed where I should board in Sydney. There was to be no more institutional boarding for me. My five years at PLC were enough. Mum said she’d write to Auntie Susan to see if I could live with her and Uncle George. They had a two-roomed flat in Kings Cross. It was very central, and it didn’t take long to get to Sydney University by tram.

Uni didn’t start till the middle of March, but I was keen to get used to my new life in a big city, so on 22nd December 1945 I was taken to Uralla station and boarded the train to Sydney. I was so excited because I’d never been on a train before. I was in a first class carriage (Mum said it was worth paying the extra so I didn’t have to sit with rough farm labourers). A gentleman got in after me. With his help I got my luggage up onto the brass luggage rack.

The seats were very comfortable leather ones – much more comfortable than those on Mr Ward’s buggy. Above the window was a flagon of water and a couple of glasses. Next to it was a chain that you

could pull if there was an emergency – £2 fine “FOR IMPROPER USE” it said. As I looked around, I examined the photographs from the New England Area above the seats.

“That looks like the waterfall on our property,” I said to the gentleman. He had a Father Christmas sort of beard, not at all like a bushranger’s one. Not that I’d ever met a bushranger, so far as I knew. But I’d heard at school about Captain Thunderbolt, our own local bushranger and, in pictures of him that I saw in a book, he had a jet black beard. This gentleman’s beard was snowy white.



“Oh, where are you from?” he asked.

“Paradise.”

He looked at me strangely for a moment, but then I added, “It’s a property out past Walcha.” He seemed to have heard about it. “There’s a settlement of Aborigines out there I believe.”

“Yes, Cliff is my friend. He lives out there. That’s not his real name, it’s just the name Dad gave him. At least he used to live on our property but I heard he’d moved into Uralla and is living with the Methodist minister. Apparently he’s giving Cliff private lessons.”

“Oh yes, I’ve heard about him. I’m Methodist – not that I go to church much. But I heard that this native boy is really sharp. He’s only had two years of school but he taught himself to read and Reverend Matthews has taken him under his wing and is tutoring him. I didn’t know that Aborigines could be so smart. I was told that they had small brains.”

“Well I don’t know about Aborigines in general – but I suspect we don’t recognise their native intelligence because of their different lifestyle. But what I *do* know is that Cliff is ten times more clever than I am. So, do you live in Uralla?”

“Yes, I’m a pharmacist and I’m off to Sydney to do a refresher course. My son is also a qualified pharmacist, so he’ll be able to manage while I’m away.”

“Will you be doing that at the university?” I knew that Sydney Uni had a pharmacy department.

“Yes, they’re running this refresher course during January, while the students are in recess. I’m going down early to spend Christmas with my daughter. She lives in Neutral Bay. She writes books for children, you know.”

“I don’t suppose you’re Mr Gibbs, by any chance?”

“No, no. You must mean Cecilia’s father. He died a few years ago. No, my daughter, Felicity, isn’t as well known as Cecilia May Gibbs of the Gumnut Babies, but my Felicity lives near her and they’re quite good friends. Say, why don’t you come and visit us some time after Christmas, while I’m still there, and you could meet Cecilia. You just get a ferry from Circular Quay and it’s only a short walk from the Neutral Bay wharf. I’m Mr Potts and I’ll write the address and telephone number. Give me a ring on the 26th and I’ll know better what we’re doing.”

We sat back into our own thoughts. I looked out of the window at the changing scenery. In my imagination I could see Tuckonie running alongside the train to keep me company. Whenever we got to a river, the



train went over a bridge and Tuckonie had to make a giant leap to get to the other side. When the train went through a tunnel I imagined Tuckonie having to run over the top of the hill. But he would always be there when we got to the other end. It’s interesting that he only

seems to be present when I'm travelling. Lying in bed at night I never give him a thought.

I arrived at Central Station, where Uncle George was waiting for me. I introduced him to Mr Potts. Then we went to Roslyn Street, where Uncle George and Aunt Susan lived. They didn't have any children and they lived in a two bedroom flat in a block of four. Aunty Susan greeted me when we arrived and showed me to my room.

"How's your Mum," she asked. "We haven't seen her for three years."

"Oh, she and Dad are doing alright. Dad's still got a bit of a back problem after his accident. But he manages."

"I've never seen your place. I understand, from letters your Mum has written me, that it's sort of ..."

"Primitive? Still we live much better than the Aborigines up there."

"Well they're used to that sort of life. I could never get used to it. The last time I saw Merle was when she had to come to Sydney three years ago to get her teeth fixed."

"It's beautiful country up there," I said, standing up for my home. "The house may not be much but the country's wonderful – and so quiet. I don't think I could get used to all the noise of a big city."

"A week of living here and you won't notice it any more. Now, you're welcome to go for a walk after lunch to get your bearings. Actually I'll come with you. But promise never to go out on your own after dark. It's a perfectly safe suburb by day, but it's a bit dangerous for a girl on her own at night."

I later discovered that there are two Kings Crosses. The day version was lively and interesting, but quite safe. All the sleaze were sleeping it off after the night before. But when the sun went down they started to come out of the woodwork, like cockroaches in an old house. By about eleven o'clock all the respectable people were indoors, while the prostitutes, drug dealers and petty criminals took over the streets.

By day, the many strip clubs were closed and the red lights were turned off. After ten o'clock the strip clubs opened their doors and the

passers-by were invited in by the dodgy-looking men at the doors. Everywhere you looked there were red lights in upper windows, and scantily clad women leaning up against lamp-posts. You probably want to know how I knew about the nocturnal Kings Cross if I wasn't allowed out at night. Well you don't think a PLC girl, who snuck out at night to meet boys for a lark, wouldn't be curious to find out why I wasn't allowed to go out at night. Not that I wanted to meet men – far from it. At heart I was a PLC girl who, almost always, did what she was told.

I'm sure that Mum never knew about this nocturnal version. Whenever she stayed there, Aunt Susan was careful to keep her in at night. If Mum had known about the reputation of the Cross she would never have let me live there. Or, perhaps she did have an inkling of what it was like but trusted her sister to protect me.

St Canice's Catholic Church was a bit further down the road from us, and on Sunday we went to Mass – well Uncle George stayed home to catch up with the Sunday papers, so it was just Aunt Susan and me. Aunt was a devout Catholic and she was able to tell me when to stand, when to sit, and when to kneel. It was all very confusing! She also told me that, because I wasn't a Catholic, I couldn't go out the front with her to get a wafer.

I understood this but what I found really difficult to understand was that only the priest was allowed to drink the blood of Jesus. After all, Jesus commanded us all to eat his body and drink his blood in remembrance of him. At St Andrews in Walcha we were all able to eat the bits of bread and drink from the silver chalice, but, each to their own.

Being Christmas Eve, they announced that there would be a midnight Mass, starting at eleven o'clock that night. It would finish at twelve, with everyone wishing each other "Happy Christmas" on the fledgling Christmas day. I asked Aunt Susan if we could go. She said she got too tired at night, and Uncle George doesn't go to church.

"I could go on my own. It's only a hundred yards from home."

At first she was reluctant, but then she thought that God would protect me if I was going to midnight Mass – and, besides, it wasn't far. Most of the dangerous activity took place on Macleay Street.

“I suppose it’s alright. I’ll give you a key because your uncle and I sleep like logs. But, mind, you must come straight home afterwards. And, most importantly, you’re not to go up front for a wafer.”

8. CHRIS CROSS

I rolled up at 11pm when the service was due to start. The church was packed with a motley collection of characters. There were well-dressed respectable people, homeless people who were there only for the supper afterwards, some drunks and a couple of pretty shady looking gangster types.

Several women, judging by the way they were dressed, were prostitutes – just fitting the Mass in between clients. Down the front were five female impersonators, dressed in diamond encrusted dresses and feathers as if they had just stepped off the stage, which they had! This form of cross-dressing entertainment was new to the Cross. A couple of decades later there was a venue called *Les Girls*, but the forerunner, where these girls worked, was much seamier. The performers there were a mixture of men dressed in furs and spangles and high heels and women who stripped and danced around a pole.

The service at St Canice's was quite lively. The singing of the Christmas Carols was very enthusiastic, especially by the drunks. Father Chris Murphy, who was a young, good-looking Irishman, just arrived from Ireland, led the singing. He had a really superb voice. If he hadn't gone into the Church he could have made a living in one of the local night-clubs here.

He was dressed in magnificent vestments that even the Pope, if he'd worn them, would have felt over-dressed. I found out later that Father Murphy had only just taken over the parish and, as a welcoming gift, one of the ladies had made him these magnificent robes.

After the service, one of the 'girls' went up to Father and said in a loud, flamboyant voice, "Geez father, I love your dress! Can I borrow it some time?"

Father Murphy was lost for words. Of course the answer must be "no" but he didn't want to offend these 'lost souls'.

Another ‘girl’, who I later found out called herself Dora, said, “Hey Father. We’ve come to your gig. How’s about coming to ours. We’ve got another show at half past two.”

Father ignored the question about lending his vestments, and he looked a bit uncomfortable at the request to return the favour. On the one hand he wanted to reach out in friendship to them. On the other hand he was worried that if he went, word might get back to Archbishop Gilroy. He didn’t want to be defrocked – not with those wonderful vestments he’d been given!

In the end, after looking around to make sure that the Archbishop hadn’t slipped into the back row without him noticing, he said, “Sure, why not. Tell me where to go.”



I was intrigued by this exchange and decided to go to that next show to see if Father would turn up. Now this was in direct contravention of Aunt Susan’s instructions, but I was after a bit of excitement. However, I decided that it wouldn’t be safe to hang around for a couple of hours, so I went back home, shutting the door noisily so that Aunt and Uncle would hear me come in. I didn’t get undressed and sat up reading until two o’clock.

At the appointed hour I quietly let myself out of the flat and walked to Macleay Street where I soon found the establishment where the ‘girls’ worked. The man out the front stared at me as I entered. Clearly, I was not one of the typical clientele, but he let me through. I had about 20 minutes to wait, so I decided to sit up at the back so that I could see Father Murphy arrive, if he chose to come as he said he would.

I had my doubts though, which increased greatly when the show started and there was no sign of the priest. It seemed that he’d got cold

feet. But, ten minutes later, when all eyes were on the stage, Father Murphy came in – in civvies, jeans and T-shirt, and no dog collar. He slipped into the back row next to me, hoping to look inconspicuous.

Alas! No sooner had he sat down, when the spotlight swung around towards the back row and glory shone around Father Murphy! Dora, one of the ‘girls’ who’d been at the Mass, called out into his microphone, “hey, there’s Father Murphy. He’s got a wonderful voice, you know. Come on up here, Father, and lead us in a few carols to get us into the Christmas spirit.” Everyone turned around and all eyes were on Father.

Like a good sport he went on up onto the stage and led the singing. After about ten minutes of this, the next act began. It was a strip-tease with feathers and balloons. Father Murphy slipped out, and I followed him.

“Good on you Father,” I said. “You showed them that a man of God isn’t afraid to mix with publicans and sinners.” For a split-second he thought I might be saying this sarcastically, but he quickly realised that I really meant it.

“Thank you,” he said quickly, but he was peeved that someone had recognised him. He prayed to God that this wouldn’t get back to the Archbishop.

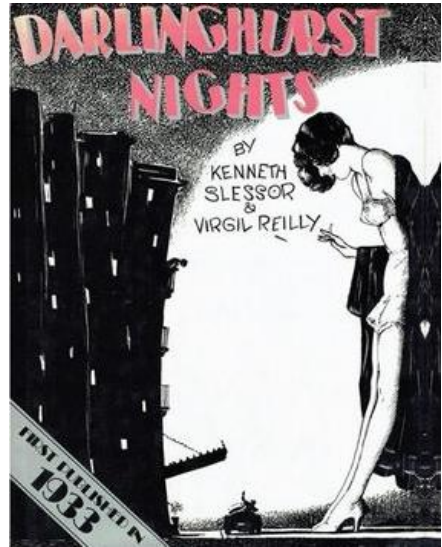
Although I’m not a Catholic I often went to Mass at St Canice’s and got to know Father Murphy well. I think I was a little bit in love with him, but of course I knew he’d taken the vow of celibacy. However, I felt a special connection to him in the fact that we shared a common secret. Of course the ‘girls’ also knew about it but they kept quiet.

I often saw some of them at Mass. A year later Father told me, confidentially, that because of his friendship he’d been able to turn around the lives of two of them. They were now working with the Salvation Army with the local homeless. Of the rest, unfortunately one committed suicide a few months later, one died after being attacked in the street and one died of an overdose.

I felt very much at home in Kings Cross. Life was so very different to living in Walcha, but there was a vitality that I found stimulating. I bought a book by Kenneth Slessor, called *Darlinghurst Nights* from the bookshop in Macleay Street. It described itself as being “47 strange sights observed from the eleventh storey in a land of cream puffs and crime”. I thought it described the place I’d come to love, really well. I was particularly struck by *Gardens In The Sky*. I could picture the scene of crocus blowing down to William Street.

There's a golden hocus-pocus
Where the buried people eat,
For the air is full of crocus
Blowing down to William Street.

Oh, behold the Roman candles
Of the window-boxes burst,
As the fairies tap their sandals
On the Alps of Darlinghurst!



Everywhere, everywhere, flowers are fleeting in the air,
Lovers greeting, poets meeting, flowers are fleeting everywhere.

Where the stars are lit by Neon,
Where the fried potato fumes,
And the ghost of Mr. Villon
Still inhabits single rooms,

And the girls lean out from heaven
Over lightwells, thumping mops,
While the gent in 57
Cooks his pound of mutton chops-

Even there, even there, flowers are floating in the air;
Eyes are gloating, boarders doting, flowers are floating even
there.

I had to work out my budget very carefully. Dad paid for the lecture fees which amounted to £24 15s per year, plus the general service fee of £3 15s. He sent me £3 per week for living, and other expenses. I had to pay Aunt Susan £2 per week so that only left me £1 per week for fares, books and everything else.

I had to take two trams to university, at 2d each. That's 4d each way, and 8d per day – 3s 4d per week. Every Sunday I put 3d in the plate at church, and the rest had to be spent on textbooks, toothpaste and other necessities. I couldn't afford to eat at the Refectory so I took sandwiches from home.

9. GUMNUT BABIES

On Boxing Day I rang Mr Potts and arranged to visit him and Felicity on Saturday 6th January. I took the tram down to Circular Quay, caught the Neutral Bay ferry and then walked up the hill to Felicity's house. They were both pleased to see me and I was asked to stay for lunch.

"How are you liking it in Pott's Point?" he asked. "You mean Kings Cross," I replied.

"It's pretty much the same. Pott's Point is the lower end of Kings Cross and it's a lot more well-behaved than the Cross itself – thankfully. My great-great grandfather, or possibly one more 'great', was Joe Potts, after whom Pott's Point gets its name. He was the head accountant, or something like that, at the Bank of New South Wales."

I told them about my experiences in the early morning of Christmas Day, at the strip-club called *Feathered Friends*. They both had to laugh.

"So, tell me about your books," I asked Felicity. "Are they for children?"

"Yes, instead of magic puddings, or banksia men, I write about horses – wild horses – they're called 'brumbies'. There's a lot of them down at the Snowy River."

"Oh, I know all about brumbies. We've got some on our property up north."

"Then you'll know that they're very intelligent and independent horses. There's no way you can ever tame them."

"My friend Cliff trained one. He's an Aboriginal and he has a way with native animals."

"Well I wouldn't call them 'native'. Horses weren't here before Captain Cook. The English brought out horses for the colony, and some of them escaped and became wild. They bred in the bush and aren't used to human beings. I'm surprised that your friend managed to tame one."

"What are some the names of your books? I might have heard of them."

“You probably wouldn’t. I don’t sell near as many copies as May Gibbs or Dorothy Wall. I’ll go and get you one.”

She went off and came back with a small number of illustrated books.

“This one is *Brenda the Brave Brumby*. And here’s *Galloping Through the Gorges*. Of course the hero of that second book is a farmer called George! I have some Aborigines in my stories but none of them have ever been able to tame a brumby. What did you say your friend’s name was?”

“It’s Cliff. Well, that’s what Dad calls him. His real name is Bunjawindi.”

“That’s handy, starting with B. Perhaps my next book will be *Bunjawindi and the Brumbies*.”

I’d started to look through the books she’d handed me. “Do you do your own illustrations?”

“Of course, do you think Cecilia – I mean May Gibbs – would let anyone but herself illustrate her *Snugglepoot and Cuddlepoot*? I’m the same.”

“Can I meet May Gibbs? I’ve read practically all her books.”

“Of course, meeting me is not as special as meeting May Gibbs,” she laughed. “I understand. Perhaps I’ll be as famous as her one day. She’s been doing it much longer than I have. Let me ring her. How would next Saturday suit you?”

“Sure, I’m not doing much till uni starts.”

She went away, and came back a few minutes later. “She’d love to meet you. She said she’ll even bake you some gumnut scones. I’m not sure whether they’re made from gumnuts or whether they’re just shaped like them. Come here by half past two and we’ll walk over. It’s not far.”

“What else do you do, apart from writing books?”

“Do you mean, do I make a living from it? Well, not really. Not yet. I used to work for Mark Foys. I still do, at Christmas time. Actually I’ve just finished doing a month in Ladies Lingerie. For some unknown reason the sales of flimsy bras and pants always goes up at Christmas time. They must be a popular Christmas gift. Personally, I find them

uncomfortable. Give me Bonds pants and Berlei bras any day instead of these imported flimsies.”

“I’m the same. Mum once gave me a pair of silk undies, but they soon got holes in them with all that sitting on horses that I did. Do you ride?”

“Oh yes. You know, I once had a job modelling Berlei bras. My sister used to be their model but once she was asked to model on the back of a horse. She was so scared of horses that she simply couldn’t do it. I happened to be there as moral support, because she’d been awake all night before worrying about how she was going to cope. At the last minute she got cold feet. Yes, I don’t know what difference that should make. It’s not as if you wear bras on your feet! Anyway I offered to do the modelling that day, in her place, and after that I often got to model for them. Especially when it was an outdoor scene.”

“It’s so much fun riding a horse.”

“My word. I’ve been riding them since I was eight. I only came to Sydney a few years ago. Before that I lived on a property near the Snowy Mountains. That’s where I got to know about brumbies.”

“But you don’t ride any more?”

“No, and I don’t model bras any more. But I do freelance illustrating for books, and also for advertisements.”



The following Saturday afternoon I was back in Neutral Bay. I had some great news to tell Felicity and her father. During the week my Leaving Certificate results had come out. I’d waited outside the Herald

offices until three o'clock in the morning, when the first edition rolled off the presses. There were about fifty of us there and we bought the very first copies, before the ink had properly dried.

"I got my Leaving Certificate results, I announced. I've matriculated."

"So what did you get?" Mr Potts asked.

"I got First Class Honours for English, Second Class Honours for Maths I and Maths II, and an A in History and an A in Geography."

"So, you only did five subjects. Isn't it normally six?"

"When you do three honours subjects you're allowed to drop one subject in 5th year. I dropped French."

"Wow, I bet you were Dux of your school."

"Almost, I came second. PLC in Armidale gets very high results. So, unfortunately, my name won't go up in gold letters on the board as Dux Of School."

"Never mind, you've done really well. Let's go round to meet Cecilia."

It was only about two hundred yards to her house. It's called *Nutcote* and it's a lovely house, where the gardens go down to the water's edge. There was a lot of wood panelling inside, and a stone fireplace. The balcony at the back looks out over the harbour and it has three arches which give it a Mediterranean appearance.

It was a warm afternoon, but not too hot. The balcony faces west so we were getting a lot of sun. We sat out there and had tea and scones.

"I've read nearly all your books," I gushed to my hostess.

"What about Felicity's books? They're very good too, you know."

"Yes, but I only heard about them last Saturday. I'll save up and buy one."

"I wouldn't bother," said Felicity. When we go back home I'll give you one."

"I'd rather like to write a children's book, but all of the good ideas have been taken. You've done gumnuts, and you've done brumbies. Then there's *The Muddleheaded Wombat*, *Dot and the Kangaroo* and *Blinkey*

Bill. I think an Australian writer should draw on distinctly Australian characters. Do you think *Reggie the Redback Spider* would go well?"

"Maybe not, but what about *Gus The Wise Old Gum Tree*?"

"But *you* 've done gum trees," I said to May Gibbs.

"Gum *nuts*, not trees. I think trees, as living beings, are worth exploring."

"But you can't have trees talking, and they don't move around. How can they do anything, except grow or burn down?"

"It would take a lot of imagination. Perhaps trees *do* talk, but so slowly that it just sounds like creaking in the wind to our ears."

"Well every book has to have goodies and baddies. As far as the baddies go, you've got the banksia men and you, Felicity, have ..."

"The bushrangers. No, the baddies in your story could be the farmers who cut down all the trees."

"Yes, but they're not really all that bad. They're just ignorant. They don't realise what destroying forests will do in the long run."

"Well," said May Gibbs, "evil and ignorance are very similar in some ways. Now I don't want to be seen trying to downplay the evil of Adolf Hitler but ..."

We were very sensitive about Hitler because stories about the Holocaust had not so long ago spread around the world. For most of the war they were just rumours, but since the concentration camps were opened up, the bestiality that was committed by the Nazis was plain for all to see.

"There are three sorts of evil in the world," she continued. There's the sort that could be called corruption, where the perpetrator is motivated by greed. Some corrupt dictators have managed to stay in power but eventually they're overthrown. The reason why they hold onto power for so long is because the people are scared of opposing them."

"The second evil is the principled sort, and it's definitely the worst. Hitler didn't kill the Jews because of what he'd get out of it personally – certainly not in the material sense. Oh, he did all right, but some of his cronies got much more. But Hitler believed, in a horribly twisted way, that what he was doing was for the good of the German people. His evil was motivated by an ideology and, since so many

otherwise good Germans were hoodwinked into believing this evil ideology, it took a world war to stop it.”

“And the third type of evil?”

“It’s the evil of ignorance and short-sightedness. Farmers who chop down more trees than they really need to, don’t do it out of rampant greed. They want to make a good life for their family and they believe that land clearing will improve their productivity. It probably does in the short term. In the long term it degrades the soil and interferes with the natural balance that the Aborigines have kept for thousands of years. So let your heroes be Mr and Mrs Gum Tree and your baddies be the short-sighted farmers.”

When we got back to Felicity’s house I asked her about May Gibbs. Felicity told me that she was born near London and her parents were both artists. The family came to Australia when she was very young and, at first, they lived in South Australia and then in Western Australia.

“When she was eight she was given a pony,” continued Felicity.

“That’s just like you and me,” I cried, “except mine was a proper horse.”

“Well Cecilia went back to England to study art. There’s a children’s fantasy about chimneys that she illustrated. When she came back to Australia, at the age of 36, she lived in Neutral Bay – but not the house you saw. She did some freelance illustrating, including this book.” She reached over to a book lying on the table.

“It’s *The Missing Button* by Ethel Turner. See, on the front cover is her very first picture of gumnut babies.”

10. SPIRES AND GARGOYLES

I decided to enrol in English: Language and Literature, History, Mathematics: Pure and Applied. As my fourth subject I'd have liked to have done Philosophy because I'd heard so much about the charismatic John Anderson, the Professor of Philosophy, but the timetables clashed. True, I could have done it at night but Aunt Susan, not surprisingly, vetoed that. And, in any case, John Anderson wasn't taking the evening lectures. So, for my fourth subject, I chose Geography.

I chose English clearly because of my Mum's influence and I had a real interest in literature. I was disappointed there were no Brontë novels on the reading list that year. *Wuthering Heights* was studied in second year, but by the time I got to second year it was replaced by another novel. Still, I developed a deep interest in Anglo Saxon and early English and found myself reading books like *Canterbury Tales*, *Beowulf* and *Piers Plowman*.

History interested me, though in first year we concentrated on Ancient History and Medieval History. It seems that at Sydney University you had to study things in chronological order. This makes sense for mathematics, where later maths builds on top of earlier maths. But I would have thought that English and History would have been better if they'd gone from the more recent, and more accessible, and left the earlier stuff to third year.

Maths might seem an unusual choice for an arts student, but it's equally at home in an Arts Degree as in a Science Degree. I've always thought of Mathematics as being an elaborate story, like the Odyssey. It all exists in the human imagination and, just because scientists find it useful, doesn't make it a science. I mean, if scientists had invented Pythagoras' Theorem they would have measured thousands of right-angled triangles and decided that the square on the hypotenuse is the sum of the squares on the other two sides – at least up to so many decimal places. But Pythagoras didn't have to measure a single triangle. He proved it using only logic. That's what I like about mathematics. You don't have to get your hands dirty by doing experiments. Besides, I loved

maths at school, and got Second Class Honours in Mathematics I and II at the Leaving Certificate.

Geography? Well, that appealed to my love of the outdoors. There's a practical component and this involves excursions into the country, instead of something like Chemistry where you're cooped up in a stuffy, smelly, laboratory.

You might be interested in seeing my timetable for Lent Term.

	MON	TUES	WED	THUR	FRI
9		Geog		Geog	
10	Maths	Maths	Maths	Maths	Maths
11		History	History	History	
12	English		English		English

My first day was 18th March 1946. I said goodbye to Aunt Susan and caught the tram to Central and changed to the Balmain tram that ran along Broadway. This was a toast-rack type, where there were no corridors. The conductor had to walk up and down the running board on the edge of the tram to collect the fares.

Sitting opposite me that morning was a boy about my own age. He had an interesting face that made me want to get to know him. You know what it's like when you can look right into a person's soul and you like what you see. I tried to glance at him for a split second and then look away before he looked at me. It appeared that he was trying to do the same. I was wondering what I must do to avoid the embarrassment of both our gazes meeting? The conductor came and asked for our fares. Both our gazes turned to face him, and for a few seconds we were safe. The conductor moved on and the problem returned.

Now, how did I get talking to Mr Potts on the train? Oh yes, I made a very natural comment on the pictures above the seats. No use on a tram! Could I ask this boy if he was going to Sydney University? That would be a very natural remark and it would've established a link between us. Not at all. Probably most young people travelling along

Paramatta Rd towards the university at ten minutes to the hour would be going to Sydney University and it seemed silly to ask the question.

He reached into his satchel and took something out. As he did so I caught sight of a book in his bag and, wonder of wonders, it was *Wuthering Heights*! At least I saw ‘Wuther’ and I could think of no other possibility.



“Are you doing English II by any chance?” He was surprised.

“Yes, but how did you know? Do I have an English II sort of look on my face?”

“I couldn’t help noticing the book in your bag. It’s *Wuthering Heights* isn’t it? Or is there some branch of engineering called ‘wuthering machinery’? Perhaps it’s *Wuthering For Engineers*.” I blushed because I could tell I was talking nonsense.

“So you must be in English II as well. I’ll look out for you.”

“Oh no, I’m doing first year English and I noticed from the Calendar that I’ll have *Wuthering Heights* as one of my books next year. That’s how ...”

“Forget it. They change the novels every year. You’ll probably get Jane Austen or George Eliot.”

“Oh dear.”

“Have you read *Wuthering Heights* then?”

“Oh, yes, many times. It’s my favourite book.”

“I’ve only read a few chapters. I say, that Lockwood chap’s a bit of a dill – thinking those dead rabbits were Cathy’s favourite kittens. I have a feeling it’s going to be an hilarious read. But, here we are. We get off next stop. See you around.”

With that he got up and stood on the running board, ready to jump off as soon as the tram stopped. I looked out for him on subsequent days, but didn’t see him until the following Monday.

My first lecture was Mathematics. The lecturer was Chinese. I consulted my copy of the Calendar, where it listed the mathematics staff, and decided that it must be Mr F. Chong. But when he started the lecture he spoke such beautiful English, with no hint of a foreign accent, I concluded that he must have been Australian born. The lecture was a quick revision of the calculus that we'd learnt at school and Mr Chong did a beautiful job of it. Not a word too little, not a word too much. It was an amazingly polished performance. There were four pairs of blackboards in the theatre that one could pull up and down, making eight boards in all. The amazing thing was that, when the lecture finished at ten to eleven, he'd just finished writing on the bottom right-hand corner of board number eight. He never had to rub anything out and he never had to cramp up a line to squeeze something in. You could have taken photos of all eight boards and published them as the first chapter of a textbook.

The Chong lectures were to be Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, doing calculus. The Tuesday and Thursday lectures were to be taken by Mr Smith-White, on other aspects of the syllabus. He was a good lecturer, but lacked the highly polished qualities of Mr Chong.

The professor of mathematics was Professor T.G. Room. He was on leave. I heard many years later that, during the war, he led a secret unit that decoded the Japanese codes. Although the war had ended, he was obviously still useful to the military. I was told that his lectures were so highly polished that they were incomprehensible to all but the brightest students.

He had the theory that everything should be expressed compactly – in symbols if at all possible. I was told that he would write T for 'Theorem' and P for 'Proof'. When he taught affine geometry he would write ' $P \in u$ ' for 'the point P lies on the line u'. No wonder he was good at codes!

After maths I had an hour's break. I went off to the Maclaurin building to find out where the library was. I looked around at all the wonderful sandstone architecture with admiration. I noticed all the

grotesque gargoyles and looked to see if I could see any shameful little boys, as in the opening scene of *Wuthering Heights*. I couldn't find any.

Then, at noon, I filed into the lecture hall where my English lecture was to be held. The lecture was by Dr A.G. Mitchell. He spoke about the origins of English, and mentioned his special interest in Australian pronunciation.

I suppose all this is very boring. I can't give a detailed account of every lecture I attended. I bet you're dying to know if I ever met this mysterious English II student again. Well, as a matter of fact, by sheer coincidence, I did – the very next Monday morning. Of course one has to help fate along a little, and I sat at the tram stop on Broadway from half past nine. After waiting for about fifteen minutes I saw him walking from Central station to the tram stop, just as the tram was coming. He jumped aboard and I managed to run over and scramble into his compartment. The tram was more crowded this week and I couldn't sit opposite him, or next to him. He saw me and called over the heads of several other passengers, "You nearly missed it!"

Of course conversation, over two or three intervening heads, was impossible. As we got off, he seemed to be in a little less of a hurry, and I was able to ask him what he thought of Mr Earnshaw.

"Oh, a kind old chap. He's just gone off to Liverpool. I can't see why Emily Brontë has to tell the story through so many layers. First there's Nelly Dean, who tells Lockwood, who tells the reader. It seems a bit clumsy to me. I have to dash. Bye!"

After that I saw him every Monday morning throughout the term. Each time the tram was crowded and we could only manage one brief exchange about the book each time. He was reading it slowly – only one or two chapters a week, because the lectures on that book were not going to be given until Trinity term.

When I first read *Wuthering Heights* I almost read it at a single sitting, so it was odd to hear comments from someone who was reading it bit by bit. At first, he felt very sorry for Heathcliff, and the way he was treated. Then, when a few weeks later he'd read of Heathcliff having

returned from who knows where, he said he wondered what sort of beast could treat Isabel that way.

We never got to the end of the novel. The last time I saw him he'd just read of young Cathy warming to Hareton. Lent term ended and that was the last I saw of him. I never even got to find out his name!

11. CHANGES IN MY LIFE

I attended St Canice's most Sundays, usually with Aunt Susan. Father Murphy asked me once if I'd like to become a Catholic. I said I felt very much at home at St Canice's and everyone was lovely. I'd made a good friend, Sally, and we often went to the pictures together. But there were some of the teachings of the Catholic Church that I couldn't get my head around. I mentioned this to Father Murphy.

"What sort of teachings?" he asked.

"Well, Transubstantiation for a start. I can't see how ordinary bread and wine can magically turn in to the actual body and blood of Jesus. Symbols I can accept but not a chemical transformation!"

"With God, everything is possible."

"Yes, I know. It's not that I don't believe that he *could* do it. But I don't see why he *would* do it – not like that. Take, for example, the Last Supper. Jesus took bread and said, 'This is my body'. Clearly it wasn't, because his flesh was still intact. Surely he meant 'This *represents* my body'. The same thing with the wine."

"But it's more than a symbol."

"Maybe, but it's not supposed to be taken literally. He said, 'This is my blood which was shed for you.' It wasn't until the next day that his body would be broken and his blood spilt – not on that night."

"Is that your only difficulty?"

"No, there's this Mary bit." I had it in for her after the Christmas pageant but I'd since come to terms with her being an unmarried mother. It was God's way of doing things and I could accept that she hadn't had sex with Joseph until after Jesus was born. Catholics seemed to place her on a pedestal. Well they did – right up the front of every Catholic Church!

"I'm sure she was a good mother, but where was she at the Crucifixion? What did she do in the early church? We hear of James, the brother of Jesus, being active among the early Christians. Why don't we pray to Jesus through him?"

"If you undertake some confirmation classes I can explain all these things."

"And, if I don't, will you stop me coming to church?"

“Not at all. Even if you never become a Catholic, God still loves you, and so do I. Remember Dora? Well that was her stage name. He’s now gone back to being John and he does good work with the Salvation Army around the Cross.”

So, a Catholic I would never be but I still continued to go to St Canice’s. One Sunday morning Father announced that St Mary’s Cathedral, just down the road, was looking for bell ringers. They had practices on Monday nights and they were willing to train people.

“Why don’t we go and see what it’s like?” I said to Sally after the service. “I’ve always wanted to be a bell ringer – ever since I was bell monitor at Walcha.”

“I don’t think I’d be strong enough. I’m told those bells are very heavy to swing around. They’re probably looking for big strong wharfies.”

Sally worked as a typist for David Jones and she didn’t look particularly strong. I decided that there must be a technique that takes all the hard yakka out of ringing those bells. When I was allowed to go up into the tower in Armidale Cathedral, I saw a slight thirteen-year-old girl handling her bell with no effort.

“They’ll probably give you one of the smaller bells,” I said.

“Oh well, I’ll try anything once!”

The next evening we reported for duty at St Mary’s Cathedral. Our instructions were to find a door on the east side of the cathedral. It was always left open on Monday evenings.

“A hundred and eight, a hundred and nine,” I said as I counted the steps. “A hundred and ten, a hundred and eleven.” We reached the top of the circular stairs where there was a walkway along the roof. The view from up there was amazing. We could see the city lights spread out below us. A few more steps took us to the door of the bell tower. We gingerly went in and saw eight ringers, each pulling a brightly coloured rope – well, the ropes had a section of brightly coloured ribbon, a bit like a barber’s pole.

“Ropes went up and down and we could hear the bells above making their noisy notes. I noticed that the ringers would pull down on the coloured ribbon section of the rope. The next time, they pulled on the very end of the rope.

A middle-aged lady came over and sat down next to us. “Are you also a potential ringer?” I asked.

“Oh, no. I’ve been ringing for many years. My name’s Margaret.”

“Nice to meet you. This is Sally, and I’m Cathy.”

“I hope you don’t mind bobbing up and down all the time.” She grinned as she looked at Sally



We didn’t know what she meant, but it was obviously a joke. The lady explained, “The ‘sallies’ are those coloured bits of ribbon that are a few feet above the ends of the ropes.”

After that I often teased Sally about bobbing up and down. On one occasion she said, “Pity your name isn’t Bob, otherwise I could get my own back”.

At one stage Sally whispered, “I thought the noise would be deafening.”

“The bells are above us, and there’s soundproofing,” said Margaret. She pointed to a ladder in the corner that went up to a closed trapdoor in the ceiling. “If we opened that, it would be so much louder.”

“And if you went up there while they were ringing I bet it would kill you. I read this book ...”

“Ah yes, *The Nine Tailors*. Perhaps if you were stuck there for three hours it might.”

“You mean you’re going to ring for *three* hours?”

“That’s a full peal on eight bells. They don’t do that very often. More commonly they do a quarter peal which is 45 minutes. But at practices, and on Sundays, we only ring for a few minutes at a time.”

“Stand!” called out the man who was obviously in charge. Terry, a fairly new ringer, was learning to ring rounds. This is where all the bells ring in turn, from the lightest to the heaviest, over and over. When they ring a ‘method’ they vary this slightly by two bells swapping places every so often. I mean they swap places in the ringing order – if the ringers themselves swapped places, the ropes would get really tangled! With pairs of bells swapping from time to time the order of the bells soon sounded quite random.

“Welcome to St Mary’s,” said the leader of the band. If it was an orchestra, you might call him the ‘conductor’, but bell ringers call their leader the ‘captain’. But the captain doesn’t stand in the middle with a baton. He rings one of the bells.

“My name is Hugh. Have you two come to learn bell ringing?”

We nodded, “yes, I’m Cathy and this is Sally, and we’ve already heard the joke about sallies.” They smiled and then proceeded to call out their names. I suppose this was a bit like ringing rounds, because, from the lightest bell, around the circle to the heaviest, they called out their name instead of ringing their bell.

“Nancy, George, Michael, Imogen, Terry, Peter, Jenny, Thomas.” “And,” said Hugh, “you’ve met Margaret. I’m Hugh”.

“Now the first thing to learn is that we’re bell ringers, not campanologists. If you tell your friends that you ring bells they won’t be able to stop themselves from showing off that they know the word ‘campanologist’. But the minute someone uses that word you’ll know they’re not bell ringers!”

All the other ringer sat down while Hugh motioned me to the lightest bell, called the ‘treble’. He showed me how to hold the rope and said he was going to get me to pull it. Having rung the bell at Walcha school I thought I knew how to pull a bell rope.

“Not yet!” he called out. “It’s not like ringing a school bell. You have to keep the tension on the rope at all times. At the moment your bell is upside down. What you’re about to do is to pull the bell down from its resting place around a full 360 degrees. The bell is resting against a piece of wood, called a ‘stay’. Your rope goes around that wheel so when you pull, it tips over and, if you don’t keep the tension on your rope you won’t be able to control the bell. The rope will flap around wildly and could do damage. When you pull, you have to try to get the bell to be lip uppermost again, and balancing.”



“What if I pull too hard?”

“You could break the stay.”

“And if I don’t pull hard enough?”

“That’s not so bad, except if you’re ringing with other ringers because your bell might sound in the wrong place. The idea is to keep it balanced, upside down, until it’s your turn again.”

I pulled the rope, but Hugh had to grab it to give the bell a bit more speed. The bell gave out its note. He continued to apply tension to the rope, while it balanced, instead of resting back on its stay.

“You see, I can hold the bell like this indefinitely. Now Cathy, pull your bell.” This time I pulled that little bit harder and he stood poised to grab the rope, but he didn’t have to intervene. After half a dozen rings I began to get the hang of it. I was able to picture what was happening upstairs by the tension in the rope. He took hold of my rope and held the bell in its balanced position.

“Now this time, when I call out ‘stand’ I want you to pull just a tiny bit harder so that your bell goes beyond the vertical position and rests on its stay. Not too hard, mind you, otherwise you’ll break your stay.”

I’d heard of stays that ladies wore in Victorian times to control their shape. I had visions of a buxom Victorian lady breaking her stays and all that voluminous flesh breaking out all over the place. I wondered what would happen if I broke my stay.

“Go to!” I pulled and rang a few more times, when Hugh called out “stand!” I pulled a little bit harder, and I felt my bell go slightly beyond its equilibrium position and rest back on its stay. I could now release the tension and the bell remained safely upturned.

It was now Sally’s turn. She took a little longer to get the hang of it, but then she’d never been bell monitor.

They were a friendly band. Jenny was mostly on the second heaviest bell but she was not much older than me, and didn’t look at all a beefy sort of girl. Yes, strength is not what’s required, but fine muscular control.

Over the next few months I learnt to control my bell. I mostly rang on St Benedict, one of the lighter bells, but sometimes on the tenor. I even rang a quarter peal on the tenor. This is the easiest bell to ring in change ringing because, while the other seven are weaving in and out of each other in terms of their position, the tenor always rings last, as a sort of punctuation mark.

It was hard work for the first ten minutes but after that I went into a sort of trance, and the ringing seemed to become automatic. The method was Grandsire Triples, which meant the other ringers had to use a basic method of going from one sequence to the next. Every so often Hugh would call out ‘bob’, or some such command, and this meant that there was some small variation in the method that would take us off on a branch line, as if Hugh had switched the points. This is necessary because the fundamental principle of change ringing is that no sequence should ever be repeated. Every method will always repeat after ten or twenty rounds without these ‘bobs’ and ‘singles’, and so these commands were necessary for this Fundamental Law of Bell Ringing to be observed.

Of course, none of this affected me. I only had to count to seven because I rang after each of the other seven bells were heard. The only command that mattered to me was “stand”, which meant we had finished.

It was a couple of months after this that I discovered what it means to break a stay. Luckily it wasn’t me who did it – sorry, it wasn’t I. I was standing next to Sally, ringing something or other when I heard

a crack from above, and I saw Sally being dragged up to the ceiling by the rope. Well, she only got about six feet off the ground before she had the sense to let go. She came down with a thump – fortunately she only scored a few bruises. Everyone else stood their bell, and all you could hear was her bell plaintively ringing as it descended. I don't mean it crashed through the roof but, with no-one pulling the rope, it just swung back and forth until the sound became softer and softer and the rope swung around less and less, until all was silent.

Hugh had to go up into the bell chamber to replace the stay. Every bell-tower keeps a supply of these because breaking a stay is not that infrequent. Then the bell had to be rung up, which is a delicate operation, making it swing in wider and wider arcs until it was again resting on the new stay.

Apart from Monday practice night I rang at the eleven o'clock Mass on Sundays. I also offered to ring for weddings on some Saturdays. We'd ring for about ten minutes before the service. Then we'd go down to the gallery that overlooks the cathedral. We'd look down as the bride made her entrance and followed the service.

It was always fun to notice, by peering over the railing, what the wedding party down below were wearing. Once I was surprised to see the groom wearing a white suit, while the bride was completely in black!

If it was a full nuptial Mass we'd get bored and spend the time back up in the ringing chamber, chatting and having morning or afternoon tea.

We'd get a signal that the service was over and the happy couple were just about to walk back down the aisle. So, we stood poised, holding our ropes in readiness, and as the buzzer went off again, we began ringing while the wedding party processed out of the church. We continued for another fifteen or twenty minutes, by which time all the guests had left for the wedding breakfast. This job was a useful supplement to my income. We'd normally get ten shillings a rope.

12. AN OLD FRIEND

The year wore on. It was now the start of Michaelmas term. One week was pretty much like the next, except that the exams were getting uncomfortably close. I was enjoying my courses and learning lots of new and interesting things. I never saw my mysterious friend from English II. Maybe he'd dropped out.

It was the first week of term and I'd decided to treat myself to lunch at the *Buttery*. This was a place where you could get lunch in the Students' Union. As I was staring into my pie and chips, thinking about my life in Walcha and wondering how Mum and Dad were getting on, I became aware of somebody quietly sitting down beside me – and I almost fell off my chair.

“Why Cliff, what on earth are you doing here?”

“Same as you I suppose, I'm a student.”

“Oh, yes, I'd heard that you'd been studying with Reverend Matthews. Did you do the Leaving Certificate then?”

“Yes, last year. Six A's. Not bad for a kid who's only done two years of school in my whole life!”

“What are you studying?”

“Vet Science. I want to specialise in animal genetics. There are exciting new developments in that area.”

“Where do you live?”

“This year I'm in St Johns College. Reverend Matthews put up the money. I'm going to pay him back one day. What about you?”

“I'm doing Arts – English, History, Maths and Geography. I live in Kings Cross with my aunt and uncle.”

“Wow, I've heard of the Cross. I've never been there but I'm told that it's a pretty rough place.”

“It is at night, but it's not a bad place to live. You can get everywhere very easily from there.”

“I thought I might try to rent a place at North Sydney next year. I'm doing some maths coaching for students at North Sydney Boys high school and I earn quite a bit of money.”

I hadn't thought of coaching. My expertise in Maths and English would make this an ideal way to earn some money. Still, I was managing on Dad's allowance.

"You must come and meet Aunt Susan and Uncle George. During the day if you'd prefer it. Why not next Saturday?"

"Oh no, I tutor on Saturdays. What about Sunday?"

"Well, I usually go to Mass on Sundays but I suppose ..."

"Great, I'll come with you to Mass, and perhaps your aunt would let me stay for lunch."

"Are you sure. I've never thought that an Aboriginal could be a Catholic. You've got your Dreamtime legends."

"I'm not a Catholic, and nor are you unless you've converted recently. But the Dreamtime stories are just another facet of our search for God, and the meaning in life. Actually I go to chapel every week at St Johns."

I asked my aunt and uncle if Cliff could come to lunch. Aunt Susan said, "of course dear". Uncle George just grunted and said, "he'd better be wearing a clean loin cloth!" The general view of Aborigines in those days was similar to Dad's and uncle George's. They're not quite human, but like a stockman's horse they can be quite useful, and smart at what they do.

But when I told Uncle George that he was studying to be a vet he was startled, but then he couldn't help himself saying something as ungracious as, "yes, I've heard there's a scheme for letting the abos into university on much lower marks."

"But he got six A's in the Leaving Certificate." Uncle George had no answer to that. Especially as *he'd* left school only with an Intermediate Certificate.

I met Cliff at the St Canice's morning Mass and, afterwards, I introduced him to Father Murphy.

"Where are you from?"

"Up near Walcha."

“I haven’t heard of that place. I only came from Ireland a year ago. So, you want to be a vet – looking after the sheep, like the Good Shepherd.”

“Actually I want to breed cattle.”

“I’ve got lots of Biblical stories to tell about sowing wheat and lost sheep. But I’m not sure there are many cattle stories in the Bible,” he laughed.

“Well, there’s the fatted calf in the parable of the Prodigal Son,” said Cliff.

“Whoops, I forgot that,” he said as he smiled sheepishly.

We chatted for a few more minutes and then Father said, “would you like to come back to the presbytery for a spot of lunch now. Mrs O’ Mallory, my housekeeper, would be able to rustle something up. Not ‘rustle’ as in cattle rustling – you know what I mean.” And he roared with laughter at what he thought was a clever play on words.

We explained that we were expected at home for lunch. “Perhaps another time,” he said.

As we walked back Cliff asked, “how are your P, Q and R’s? Any white fella come onto the scene to sweep you off your feet?”

I explained that I’d been too busy with my studies, but added, “there was this chap I used to meet on the tram. He was reading *Wuthering Heights* and we’d talk about it.” I made out that we’d had long and meaningful discussions, instead of those rather shallow and brief exchanges.

“Well I reckon some day you’ll marry some white fella, like Richard. Then you’ll die in childbirth and I’ll go mad, like Heathcliff!”

“But just because you’re black doesn’t make you a loser, like Heathcliff. What if I’m the young Cathy and you’re Hareton?”

“Then Woody will lock you up and force you to marry Richard. And, like Linton in *Wuthering Heights*, Richard will get sick and die. Or maybe you’ll be the one to get sick – sick of him, and divorce him. Then you’ll marry me!

“I can’t see that happening. I mean, a forced marriage in this day and age? Why do you only want to marry me as a widow? Anyway Q-partners don’t get married.”

When we arrived home I introduced Cliff to aunt and uncle. “This is Cliff, and these are my aunty and uncle.”

“Doesn’t sound like an Aboriginal name to me.”

“No, my Aboriginal name is Bunjawindi, but Cathy’s dad called me Cliff and the name has stuck.”

“And what’s your surname?”

“We Aborigines don’t have proper surnames like you, but I needed one when I enrolled at university, so I chose de Groot.”

“That’s a French name,” said uncle, “why did you choose that?”

“I read about this fellow who once...”

“I thought I’d heard that name before. Wasn’t he the rascal who cut the ribbon at the opening of the harbour bridge back in ’32?”

“Yes, Francis de Groot. I just liked the sound of it.”

This was the first time I’d heard about his surname. I’d never needed to use it before. I was now convinced that I could never marry Cliff. Fancy my being called Catherine de Groot!

Cliff seemed to make a good impression at lunch. Even uncle took him seriously and he managed to refrain from coming out with some ‘abo’ comment. In fact, no reference was made to his race or colour. Cliff seemed to be able to talk on most things and, once it became clear that his political views were very similar to uncle’s, they got on like the proverbial domestic conflagration!

13. DAD HAS A FALL FROM GRACE

Towards the end of 1946 I got a telegram from Mum. Dad had had a terrible accident and she would be on the next train from Armidale to explain. I had visions of Dad having gone over the cliff again and wondered which horse he'd squashed this time! But it proved to be worse than that. Dad was dead. I knew that as soon as I met Mum off the train. She was wearing black.

"How did it happen?" I asked as we travelled by taxi to Aunt Susan's. She answered, "you know how he was always going up and down Grace."

To anyone else this might have sounded rather scandalous, and they would have wondered who Grace was. But I knew that that's what he called his windmill tower to which he'd attached his antenna. He called it Grace after the radio station 2GB. Having been started by the local branch of the Theosophical Society, they chose the letters GB after the Italian philosopher Giordano Bruno. But Dad, who always got things wrong, thought they'd named it after the department store Grace Brothers. So, his nick-name for the tower was Grace. He rather liked the somewhat risqué overtones when he'd say to Mum, "I'm just going to shin up Grace."

Well, one morning he said this, and they were the last words he ever uttered. He lost his footing and, this time, there was no Potamus to break his fall. He was, himself, as squashed as Potamus was in the previous accident.

Mum discovered him an hour later when she went out to hang up the washing. There was obviously no urgency in getting help because he was well and truly dead. Darcy was at school in Armidale and Mum was nervous about riding a horse.

So, she put a blanket over Dad and waited till the Aboriginal stockman arrived. He was sent off to get help from Mr Ward. Mr Ward arrived an hour later with two horses and, again, Dad went off, tied face down to one of the horses – never to return.

I had to go back with Mum on the next morning's train to get ready for the funeral. It was a quiet affair at the Uralla Methodist Church. Reverend Matthews conducted the service. I went back to Sydney two days later, while Mum stayed back for a few more months to wind up her affairs and to sell the farm. Mum had decided that she would sell the farm and come to Sydney with Darcy.

It was just before Christmas when Mum arrived in Sydney. It was arranged that she'd stay with us at Aunt Susan's, and a second bed was rigged up in my room. Darcy had a friend, Chris, who was a good friend from TAS. Chris's parents lived in Sydney, and since it was the holidays, Chris was at home from school, so Darcy stayed there. It was at Pymont, which wasn't that far from Mum and me.

We went to St Canice's on Christmas Day. Mum had wanted to go to midnight Mass the night before, but I talked her out of it. I was sure that some of the 'girls' from *The Feathered Friend* would be there. Since that episode with Father Murphy, I'd seen them at church from time to time, and they knew me by name. Imagine my embarrassment if they'd called out, in their sparkling costumes, "hey Cathy, nice to see you!" Mum would have had a fit! However I was sure that they wouldn't be at the Christmas morning service after their early show that morning.

I introduced Mum to Sally. Mum had been brought up a Catholic and, although thoroughly lapsed, she still knew when to kneel, when to sit and when to cross herself. After the service I introduced her to Father Murphy.

She said she'd decided that Kings Cross wasn't such a desirable place for us to live in, with all its fleshpots. It might be okay for a well-behaved daughter like me, but the temptations might be too strong for a teenage boy. I suggested that Neutral Bay might be a good place for us to find a flat, so I arranged with Felicity for us to visit her. That way Mum could get a feel for the neighbourhood.

It was early in January when we visited the Felicity. "Nice to meet you, Mrs Stubbs. Your daughter and I have become good friends."

"Do you live here by yourself?"

“Yes, I’m a spinster lady. But Dad’s down here for Christmas. He’s staying with me for the week. He’ll be in soon. He comes from up your way. He and my brother run the pharmacy in Uralla.”

“Cathy tells me this is a nice neighbourhood. Do you know of any flats that might be for rent?”

“As a matter of fact there’s one that’s just become available a couple of doors from Cecilia’s.”

“That’s May Gibbs, Mum. Like Felicity she writes books for children.”

“You don’t mean the Snugglepot lady?”

“Yes Mum, and don’t forget Cuddlepie.”

“I’d be very interested to meet her. I’m very interested in literature – especially children’s literature.”

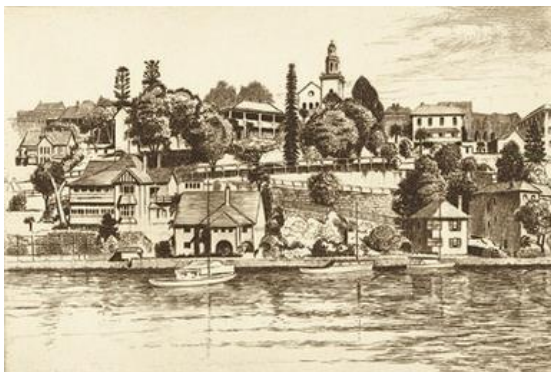
I’d often wondered why Mum had never tried writing herself. I must get my creative streak from somewhere, and it certainly wasn’t from Dad!

“So, what are you going to do, now that you haven’t got a farm to look after?” Cecilia asked her.

“I wondered if I might try teaching again. I did a couple of years in a girl’s school before I got married, but once I met my husband it was out of the question. The farm was just too far away from any high school.”

“Well you won’t have that problem here. There’s the Loreto School in Kirribilli for a start. I heard they were advertising for an English-History teacher. Here, I’ve got a print of the school hanging up in the next room. I’ll get it for you.”

May Gibbs went into the dining room and brought back a signed print. “I met Austin Platt at Cedric



Emanuel's studio some years ago. Austin specialises in making prints of school buildings. I only just bought this a few months back."

Mum took the framed print and looked at it closely. "It looks like a lovely school."

"Indeed it is. It has a beautiful outlook over the harbour. Why don't you go there and see if the job is still available."

Just then Mr Potts arrived home. After he was introduced to Mum he said, "I believe you come from up near Uralla."

"Out beyond Walcha, actually. But I sometimes went into church at Uralla – the Methodist Church."

"Oh, that's Reverend Matthews. I'm a Methodist, but I confess I'm one of those backsliders who only go to church for Christmas and Easter. And I'm usually here with Felicity at Christmas."

"I thought I recognised you from last year's Good Friday service."

"Yes, indeed, I was there with my son."

Later in January Mum went for an interview with Sister Farrell. I'm so proud of Mum – she got the job and started teaching at the beginning of the 1947 school year.

"How come they accepted you," I asked, "you're not even a Catholic."

"Yes I am, I was baptised as a Catholic, remember. I know when to sit and when to kneel. I can even do a rosary if I put my mind to it."

The next job was to find a flat. The one in Neutral Bay had been let by the time we enquired, but we found one in Hipwood Street in Kirribilli. Well, technically it was North Sydney, but it was only a couple of hundred yards from the boundary with Kirribilli, so we always referred to it as such.

Mum said it would be nice to be living in the same suburb as Prince Henry, Duke of Gloucester. He was the NSW governor at the time and he lived at Admiralty House. Not that Prince Henry was often there. He and his wife seemed to spend most of their time gadding about Australia in their private aeroplane.

14. THE TEARS OF THUNDERBOLT

It was early in January 1947 when I received my results. Mum was so proud – Distinction in Mathematics, High Distinction in English and Credits in both History and Geography. In second year I would only be doing three subjects, so I decided to drop Geography.

When I started lectures in March I was disappointed to see that *Wuthering Heights* was not one of the English II texts. Instead the novels were Samuel Butler's *The Way Of All Flesh* and Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse*. There was a lot of poetry, including Australian poetry, and those of us in the Honours stream had to do a lot of Anglo Saxon.

I was also disappointed to find that my favourite lecturer, Freddy Chong, had been sent to the University College in Armidale. Of course I wasn't on first-name terms with my lecturers, but word got around among the second-year students and, between ourselves, we referred to them as if they were on our level.

Professor T.G. Room was back from his wartime secondment. He had a bald head that reminded me of Humpty Dumpty and always wore a white laboratory jacket. He was a good lecturer, if you could keep up with him. No-one at the time seemed to know what the T.G. stood for, so we simply called him Tiggy. It wasn't until many years later that I learnt that he was Thomas Gerald.

A new lecturer was Harry Mulhall. He was a careful, but somewhat diffident, lecturer. He lacked the outgoing showmanship of Freddy Chong, but he *did* give good notes. He must have had a hearing problem because he was always fiddling with his hearing aid.

I saw a fair bit of Cliff. He was doing Vet Science II. We'd often sit in the quad, under the jacaranda tree and talk about life, and love. He renewed our discussion on the P, Q and R forms of love. Having read about courtly love from the 1300s I asked him whether that sort of love was Q.

I explained, "in those days, a knight would choose a paramour – usually a married woman. They would meet secretly and, in exchange for words of his courtly love, she gave him a token – some item, such as a

handkerchief or a brooch – that she'd touched. When he went away to fight in the crusades, this token of her love would give him courage. He would be fighting for *her*."

"So they never ... you know what I mean. Was there any sexual element to it?"

"Well, all courtly love was erotic to some extent," I replied. "Troubadours would speak of the beauty of their ladies and they'd go on about the feelings of desire that were aroused."

"So perhaps it's close to being a Q sort of love. Hey, perhaps I can call Q-love 'Quartly Love' – 'Quartly' with a Q."

"Good one. The knights would also write poetry extolling the physical and spiritual virtues of their paramour."

"Then perhaps I should write poems about my Quartly love for you, my darling paramour."

"But I'm not a married woman, and there's nothing secret about our relationship. Why I haven't even given you a love token," I laughed. "Here's my copy of *The Waste Land*, which I offer you as a token of my Quartly love. Do thou go and do battle with Vet Science II, and in thy extreme moments, read it and remember me." Cliff took the book and, opening it at random, read these words:

The Chair she sat in, like a burnished throne,
Glowed on the marble, where the glass
Held up by standards wrought with fruited vines
From which a golden Cupidon peeped out
(Another hid his eyes behind his wing)
Doubled the flames of sevenbranched candelabra
Reflecting light upon the table as
The glitter of her jewels rose to meet it,

"I can see that Eliot had never heard of the full stop!" He turned the page and continued reading.

Under the firelight, under the brush, her hair
Spread out in fiery points

Glowed into words, then would be savagely still.

"My nerves are bad tonight. Yes, bad. Stay with me.

"Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak.

"What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?

"I never know what you are thinking. Think."

"That's you and I, for sure. I never know what you're thinking," he said.

"That's easy. I'm thinking it's ten minutes to eleven and I have an English lecture at eleven. See you tomorrow."

We had an unusual relationship, Cliff and I. It was definitely more than platonic, but I didn't feel as though he swept me off my feet. I remembered a poem by W.H. Auden, called *Tell Me The Truth About Love*.

Some say love's a little boy,
And some say it's a bird,
Some say it makes the world go around,
Some say that's absurd,
And when I asked the man next-door,
Who looked as if he knew,
His wife got very cross indeed,
And said it wouldn't do.

My sentiments entirely. I'd heard so much about love, I'd read even more about love – the romantic type, that is. But I'd never felt it. Will I know when it really comes? If so I expect it will come in a very ordinary manner, just like Auden suggests.

When it comes, will it come without warning
Just as I'm picking my nose?
Will it knock on my door in the morning,
Or tread in the bus on my toes?
Will it come like a change in the weather?

Will its greeting be courteous or rough?
Will it alter my life altogether?
O tell me the truth about love.

It was in July 1947 that a most disturbing incident occurred. It was about eleven o'clock at night. Mum had gone to bed early and I was lying awake in bed, with the many knights of love jousting in my mind. Was Cliff's 'quartly' love the same as 'courtly'? Would I ever experience the deepest emotions that love poetry extolls? I wonder if Mum ever loved Dad *passionately*.

I heard a noise coming from the bathroom – a sort of scraping noise. And then, an almighty thump. I ran into the bathroom and switched on the light.

The window was wide open, and in the middle of the floor was a dark-clothed body sprawled on the floor.

"What's going on? Are you a burglar?" I asked. The sprawled body sat up, and the attached head looked up.

"Richard! What on earth? Are you trying to emulate your great-great grandfather?" I was probably one or two 'great's short, but it was indeed my childhood friend, Richard Ward from *Gorge House* – Thunderbolt the fifth or sixth. The minute he saw me Richard burst into tears.

"Don't be so pathetic. What would Thunderbolt be thinking? If you're going to burgle, please do it properly."

"I tripped, getting through the window."

At this point I heard Mum's footsteps in the corridor. I quickly shut the bathroom door.

"What was that noise?" she asked.

"Sorry, I just bumped into the clothes basket."

"It sounded louder than that."

"It probably sounded loud because you've just woken up." I knew there was no logic behind my explanation, but it seemed to satisfy Mum because I heard her footsteps going back to bed.

When I heard her door close, I confronted Richard. "What's going on?"

“Honestly I had no idea it was you and your Mum who lived here. It’s all a big mistake.”

“So you intended to burgle some harmless old lady, did you?”

“No, yes, I don’t know ... I’m desperate!”

“So why do you need to burgle at all?”

“I’m living across the road in that run-down boarding house and my rent is due tomorrow and I don’t have any money.”

“What about your father? Couldn’t you have asked him? He’s rich.”

“Dad wouldn’t send me any money. He’s angry with me because he wants me to help him with the farm, but instead I came to Sydney to learn to paint. I’m studying at Julian Ashton’s. He refused to send me any money and all my little savings have gone into the first term’s fees.”

“Well, you can’t stay here. We’ve only got two bedrooms. How much is your week’s rent?”

“Two guineas.”

“Wait here.”

I went quietly to my bedroom and came back with three pounds. “Here, this should keep you going for the next week, and I’ll try to sort something out after that. By the way, how’s your sister?”

“Oh, Wendy’s at NEGS with all the horsey girls. Perhaps she’ll marry a farmer one day. They say that farmers, as well as doctors, look for wives among the NEGS girls, while the university crowd prefer the proper little ... you know. Anyway, she’s coming down to visit me during the school holidays.

I gave him the proceeds of all the money I’d saved from ringing for weddings for the last couple of months. “Now get back out the window – and mind, don’t you dare make any noise. If Mum hears you, we’re both in hot water.

On the weekend I visited Felicity and asked if she knew of any paid work that a budding artist might be able to do.

“As a matter of a fact I could get him to colour some drawings I’ve sketched out for my new book. I just haven’t had time to do them myself. It’s not very exciting work I’m afraid.”

“It’ll do.”

So not only did I capture the notorious young Thunderbolt, I saved him from a life of crime! I chuckled when I remembered that Cliff had said I’d probably marry Richard one day. How could I possibly marry such a pathetic individual? It would be like marrying Branwell Brontë. At least Branwell could tell a good story! Perhaps Richard was more of a Linton Heathcliff.

15. ROTTEN ROW

It was bound to happen. I'd arranged for both Cliff and Richard to come with me to visit Felicity, primarily to introduce Richard to Felicity, so she could talk to him about the job. But, almost before we sat down, Cliff and Felicity had concocted a plan for all of us to go on a horse riding outing in Centennial Park. Of course I was invited too.

"My, you're a lucky young woman to be escorted by *two beaus!*" said Felicity. Now, I didn't mind being teased about Cliff because, although he wasn't my boyfriend, I would have felt quite comfortable if I'd ended up being married to him some day. Richard, on the other hand, was quite a different matter! If he was the last man left in the world ... Don't get me wrong. I quite liked him as a person, in a funny sort of way, but not as a man! I thought that Cliff needed to extend his scale to O-relationships to include Richard and I, but I couldn't think of a suitable word starting with O. Oddball, perhaps?

"Your friend Cliff has proposed that we should all go for a ride at Centennial Park next Sunday. I promise I'll be fully dressed!" The boys looked at her, wondering what she meant. They hadn't heard the story about her once modelling a Berlei bra on horseback!

"I'll give it a miss," said Richard. "I haven't ridden since I was a boy. Once a horse that I was attempting to ride bare-back sat down and I slid off and hurt my posterior. But my sister might like to come, if that's alright."

The outing to Centennial Park took place on the following Sunday. We hired some horses at a nearby stables. The whole of Sydney appeared to be there, mostly picnicking, but some were riding, or cycling around the circuit. There were even a few who drove – slowly so as not to frighten the horses.



I called the track Rotten Row. Of course that's not its real name. But I'd read about a similar track in London's Hyde Park, where the upper-middle class would take the air every Sunday, to see and be seen – usually in carriages.

Although only a narrow strip of water separates England from France, the English are notoriously hopeless with the French language. The track was originally called *Route du Roi* by William of Orange who had it built. Being Dutch, his French was much better than that of his English subjects. The English soon corrupted *Route du Roi* to 'Rotten Row'.

So, there we were, Felicity, Cliff and myself, riding around the dirt track. Oh, I nearly forgot. Wendy, Richard's sister, came too. She'd come down to Sydney to visit Richard during the holidays. Wendy had really blossomed since she was six. She was now thirteen and had become tall and beautiful, with emerald green eyes and long golden hair. Well, I guess she had those wonderful green eyes back then, but who looks at the eyes of a six-year old, except perhaps her mother.

Felicity was riding a little ahead of the rest of us when a bright red sports car came along behind us, at rather more than the required ten miles per hour. It was followed by a cloud of dust and our horses reared in fright. Then, to our horror, as it passed Felicity, her horse bolted.

"Wait here," said Cliff as he rode off at full speed after Felicity and her horse. I watched the two horses in the distance and, as Cliff came close to her, her horse threw her onto the ground.

I could see him pick her up and put her back on her horse, which was a lot calmer after Cliff had spoken to it gently. Felicity was clearly conscious, because I could see her sitting back on her horse, rather than being unceremoniously tied face down like Dad.

Slowly he led her horse back to where we were standing. Felicity was shaken, and probably quite bruised. But she seemed to have sustained no broken limbs and, more importantly, she hadn't hit her head. That was the end of that Sunday's outing. We returned the horses and got the tram and ferry back home.

Cliff proposed that we go for a ride in Centennial Park the following Sunday – on cycles this time. Whatever might happen on a bicycle it would never bolt because of a stupid sports car.



This time Mum decided to come too. She'd learnt to ride a bike when she was young and, although she hadn't ridden one in years, she thought she'd give it a go. Richard decided to come too, and so did Wendy.

The following Sunday saw us on bicycles, riding around Rotten Row. Felicity, Cliff, Wendy and I were quite confident. Mum and Richard rather less so. Richard and Mum only managed to ride around the circuit twice during the whole afternoon. Every time the rest of us passed them, which happened many times, we'd ring our bells loudly. Fortunately there were no mishaps this time.

After an hour or so we sat down on the grass for a picnic. I asked Wendy how she was getting on at NEGS.

"Not bad. I'm in 2nd year now. I say, do you remember the French teacher called Miss Fournier at PLC?"

"Of course I do. It was she who copped us meeting up with the boys for a midnight party. She said, 'Zo, vee 'ave ze rendezvous *mes enfants*. A beautiful French word is 'rendezvous' but not for my girls!'" I laughed, trying to imitate her accent.

"Well, she eloped with one of the French lecturers at NEGS. One Monday morning she just didn't turn up for her classes at PLC and Mr Franks was absent at NEGS."

"They wouldn't need to elope," I said. "They were old enough to make up their own minds. Did they run off to Gretna Green?" I laughed.

Wendy had never heard of the reputation of that Scottish village, and said, "I don't know. Where's that?"

“I think it’s in Tasmania,” said Richard, “near Mount Field National Park.”

“No I meant the one in Scotland.”

“Why would they go off to Scotland to get married?”

“Never mind,” I said, wishing I hadn’t tried to make a joke that fell flat as a spoiled soufflé.

“So Armidale was suddenly two teachers down. They had to bring old Mrs Simpson out of retirement to teach the senior classes at both schools while some of the other teachers at each school had to cover the junior classes. You know, one of the girls at PLC told me that she’d noticed that Miss Fournier had been putting on weight. I bet she’s pregnant!”

“How’s Richard getting on with your colouring?” I asked Felicity.

“Good, but I managed to get him some illustration work with the *Sunday Sun* in their advertising department. He has to draw ladies in bathing costumes for Jantzen.”

“It’s not high art,” said Richard, “but it’ll help me pay my fees at Julian Ashton’s.” I was grateful that Richard no longer needed to burgle to make ends meet.

“Yes, Richard’s been drawing since he was a kid,” added Wendy. “He wants to make a living from his art, but Dad’s cross that he doesn’t want to take over the farm.”

“What about you?” Felicity asked, jokingly. “Don’t you know any boys you could marry who’d be happy to take over the farm?”

“Not me, I want to be a nurse.”



We got onto the subject of love. Felicity asked Mum how she had met Dad. “I went to school in Armidale – PLC, same as Cathy. Cecil was the son of a farm mechanic, but he had a friend who was at The Armidale School, and he invited Cecil to the end-of-year dance. I met him there.”

“And, how did he propose?”

“Not what you’d call the most romantic of proposals, well not in the traditional sense of ‘romantic’. He didn’t kneel to declare his eternal love, but then he was up a tree at the time. We were at the Apsley Falls – at the lookout. He decided to climb a tree to get a better view. It had been raining for many weeks and a torrent of water was pouring over the edge. ‘You know, Merle,’ he shouted down to me, ‘that huge lot of water reminds me of how much I’ve come to love you. I think we should get hitched.’ I could barely hear him.”

“Not, ‘would you like to be my wife?’”

“I could barely hear his words over the boom of the falls. If he did ask ‘will you marry me?’ the wind must have blown those words down into the gorge. I got the impression that he’d made up his mind and I had no choice. After a few minutes he climbed down and that gave me time to compose myself and decide on an answer. When the question arrived at ground level it was ‘well, Merle, what do you think?’”

“And did you say ‘yes’ straight away?”

“Of course. But we recreated the scene some months later after we’d chosen the engagement ring. This time, instead of climbing the tree, he knelt in the traditional way and asked, ‘will you marry me?’ And this time, because he knew what the answer would be, he wasn’t as shy as he’d been on the previous occasion. I’m sure he’d climbed that tree because he was so nervous about ‘popping the question’.”

I was curious about Felicity’s love life. “Have you ever had a boyfriend?”

“Oh, yes, I once lived for two years with a man called Roy, who I’d met at art school. He was about ten years older than me, and very Bohemian, but it turned out he couldn’t keep his hands off the young models he employed.”

“I’m surprised you haven’t been snapped up by now,” said Richard. “If I was ten years older ...”

“That’s sweet, Richard, but I’m in no hurry. My little dog Ruffles satisfies my maternal instincts. What about you two boys?”

Cliff went first “Well I suppose you’d call Cathy my childhood sweetheart. We did a lot of adventurous stuff together when we were young.”

Embarrassingly, Felicity put our names together and said, “so were you like Cathy and Heathcliff then, roaming about on the moors?”

“There were no moors up there – more like gorge country.” I’d hoped to steer the conversation more towards the New England geography, but Cliff kept me in the spotlight.

“No, I’m more like Hareton and Cathy is the young Cathy of *Wuthering Heights*. But, as I said to her, before we can get married she has to marry a Linton, and then after he dies I can make my move!” The expression on his face suggested that he was trying to keep his tongue in his cheek, metaphorically, but I’m sure he really meant it.

“What about you Richard?” asked his sister. Are you the Linton who’ll be her first husband?”

“What, and die young? No thanks!” Fortunately Richard had never read *Wuthering Heights* and didn’t realise the deeper implications of that suggestion. More than suggesting that he might die young, it was an insult to identify him with the whining, sickly, selfish Linton. But neither had Wendy read *Wuthering Heights* and so she meant no insult.

“I have a theory that there are three types of love – P, Q and R.” Cliff went on to explain his ideas about the various forms of love.

“There’s Platonic Love, Romantic Love and something in-between that Cathy and I have come to call ‘quartly’ love, because it’s a bit like medieval courtly love.”

I pointed out that what I understood about Q-love was that it wasn’t *between* P and R, but it was off in a different dimension. I’d often thought of it like an imaginary number in mathematics – not because it didn’t really exist but because it was on a different axis. But, of course, no-one else in our group knew about such numbers and so I couldn’t properly describe this analogy.

Cliff did his best to explain. “Platonic love is where two people love the same things. They’re not obsessed about each other. Romantic love is about bodies, and the chemistry – at least at the beginning. Nature

stirs up the hormones. Quarty love is more about a union of souls than of bodies.”

“My, this is deep stuff, said Felicity. “I remember reading about courtly love in a book by C.S. Lewis. It was called *The Allegory of Love*. From what I remember, courtly love wasn’t really about a union of souls. I mean the knight knew very little about his lady love’s innermost thoughts. She was somebody else’s wife, and if, they managed to steal an occasional night together, they certainly weren’t going to waste their time talking about the deeper things in life!”

I don’t know what sort of ‘heights’ we were on at this stage, but we soon came back down to earth when Mum, as practical as ever, suggested that if we had to get our bikes back to the hire place by four o’clock then we’d better get a move on.

16. CANTERBURY TALES

The next few years were pretty uneventful. I guess, in some way, my whole life has been pretty unremarkable, probably no more interesting than yours. I was never an orphan brought up by a cruel stepmother. I never led a life of crime, or solved a murder. I was never a famous opera singer, but I have this theory that *anybody's* life can be interesting, because everybody's life is different.

You must surely agree with my philosophy because you've made it so far in my story. But if I proceed at the same pace you may indeed become bored. So, let me skip over the next few years. Mum and I continued to live in Kirribilli. There was a large boarding house, *Addistone House*, across the road, and the owner sold off some of its land and a block of flats was built by a family called the Virgonas. But, although it fronted Addistone Avenue, it retained its access to Hipwood Street by a laneway that ran down beside the new flats.

Mum was always worried by the disreputable-looking residents of the boarding house. (That didn't include Richard because he'd moved to London.) They'd often linger in that laneway, smoking and possibly making drug-deals in the semi-darkness. Mum was convinced that a brothel operated in *Addistone House*. To think we'd escaped from Kings Cross to get away from all this!

We saw a lot of Felicity, and even met up with her father whenever he came down to visit her. We also saw May Gibbs from time to time.

The biggest change came in 1950. The two boys in my life, fast becoming young gentlemen, had moved out of Sydney. Richard had finished up at the Julian Ashton art school and went to London to pursue his artistic career. Cliff finished his Vet Science degree and moved back to the New England area where he joined a large-animal practice. Not a large animal-practice, but a small practice that focussed on large animals. I did see Cliff a couple of times when he occasionally came to Sydney, and I wrote to Richard every so often, but on the whole they were 'off stage' as far as my life was concerned.

It seemed that Cliff's theory, that my love life would proceed along the lines of young Cathy in *Wuthering Heights*, was most unlikely to come true. His prediction that I would be forced to marry Richard, who would conveniently get sick and die, seemed ridiculous, to say the least! I could never understand why Cliff only ever wanted me as a widow. I wasn't exactly in love with him but, if he'd pleaded his case, I might have said "yes".

There were only two men who had ever made my heart race and stirred up my hormones. And both were impossible. Father Murphy, because he was wedded to the Church, and the unknown boy on the tram, because he'd moved out of my life completely.

Well, so I thought. Mum had continued to teach at Loreto and, after the first day of school in 1952, she came home with the news that the school had appointed a male teacher, something unprecedented in the history of the school.

Traditionally the teachers were drawn from the field of Sisters of one or other order of Catholic nuns, but of late they'd been forced to look wider afield. Mum was one of the first lay teachers at the school, but now there was to be a man!

"He's an English teacher, no less, so I'll be seeing a lot of him."

"What's he like, Mum?"

"He's so interesting to talk to, and he's really good looking ..."

I wondered whether Mum and he might possibly strike up a friendship one day. It was now some years since Dad had died, and Mum still had a lot of life left in her.

"... and he's quite young – just a year or two older than you."

OK, so I wasn't going to have a step-father some time in the near future, but maybe a husband?

"Would you believe it? His favourite novel is *Wuthering Heights*. Your father would have been pleased. He said that when he was doing his BA he used to talk to this young girl on the tram about the novel. She really opened his eyes to it."

My head began to swim. This must be my mystery boy – the one I used to meet on the tram – the boy who'd made my heart flutter every time I met him.

"Perhaps, er maybe, I mean, it might be nice if you could (*cough*) well, why don't you invite him to dinner some time? What's his name?"

"Leonard ..." For a split second I fantasised about being married to a man called Leonard.

"Yes, Brother Leonard."

"You mean ...?"

"Yes, he's a de la Salle Brother. After his arts degree he went into the seminary."

My dreams just popped like a soap bubble. His vow of chastity suddenly rose up between us like the drawbridge of a castle.

"On second thoughts," I said, "it probably wouldn't be wise. People might begin to talk."

"Well, of course, they only appointed Leonard because he was a Brother. Imagine a handsome young man being a teacher in an all girls' school if he was eligible!"

So, I never met Leonard. Why was it, I thought, that the only men who made my heart go boom, were men who'd taken the vow of celibacy. It almost made me want to become a nun, except I don't think I could have coped with all that praying. I was religious, but Catholicism wasn't my natural home.

My career proceeded along predictable lines. I had completed my BA and I chose not to do honours. Instead I decided to do a Dip Ed so that I had the choice of teaching in state schools. My first appointment was to a country central school in Eugowra, but, after a few years, I managed to get a transfer to Sydney. In 1954 I was appointed to teach English and History at Canterbury Boys' High School in the inner western suburbs.

It was a selective high school, so I had to be on my toes. In 1954 the school made a break with tradition. Not only did they appoint a female teacher for the first time – they appointed two! The other was Miss

O'Brien, a Latin teacher. Not surprisingly, Eileen and I became very close. We were like two sheep in a den of wolves!

"What's the other female teacher like?" asked Mum. What's her name?"

"Eileen. She's lovely. But a bit too gentle for a boys' school. They muck up on her without mercy. Most lessons she ends up in tears. I heard from one of the boys that there's a competition going, to see who can in each lesson, make her burst into tears first. I feel so sorry for her."

"Well, how do *you* cope?"

"Somehow I manage not to dissolve into tears, but I often come close. I find that a good tactic is to focus on one of the trouble-makers and go overboard, praising them.

"You mean like saying, 'oh, that's a nice tie you're wearing'?"

"Hardly – they all wear the same, of course!"

"What *do* you say, then?"

"Well, when one of the inevitable paper aeroplanes landed on my desk I asked, 'who threw this?' Of course no-one would own up, but I knew it was one of the difficult boys. Then I examined it closely and said, 'whoever made it, is a genius. He should go into aeronautical engineering.' I stared at the boy who I knew had thrown it."

"So, did he own up?"

"Of course not, but I could see by the look on his face he was secretly pleased, and he gave a thumbs up to his mates sitting near him. Then I threw it back. Now, you know how good I was at paper aeroplanes at school. The secret is only partly in the construction. The way you throw it is just as important, and I can throw even a poorly made paper aeroplane so that it does amazing things. So, I threw his plane back to him and it landed on his very desk!"

"What else?" asked Mum, proud of my classroom skills.

"Well, once a boy called out a certain four-letter-word. I said, 'now that's an interesting word. It was used by Geoffrey Chaucer in his *Canterbury Tales*. I suppose you boys have all read *Canterbury Tales*.' I then proceeded to tell that particular story and explained the word in context."

Poor Eileen. After the holidays following first term she never returned and we teachers had to fill in till they could find a replacement. For the first-year classes anybody could do it because the first-year boys had learnt nothing and so we started Latin from scratch. Her second-year class was taken by one of the Latin masters. The librarian, James Kentley, helped out too because he'd taught Latin before becoming the librarian.

Jim had class discipline down to a T. His secret was to be extremely eccentric in the classroom. I never witnessed one of his classes but I had a pretty fair idea of what he was like from the many 'Slim Jim' impersonations I saw when I was on playground duty. One boy would go up to another with his two middle fingers curled around a pencil. The outside fingers pointed to another boy and the first boy, in a crackling voice, would snarl, "stand still or I'll nail you!"

His extremely frayed and dirty shirt collar was frequently laughed at. The funny thing was that I once met him at some social occasion and he was immaculately dressed!

Discipline in his class was perfect. No-one dared to even snigger quietly when another boy was threatened with being 'nailed'. All such laughter was saved up for the playground.

I found Jim to be a kind and well-read gentleman in the staff-room. When I told him of some of the dramas I'd had with the boys, he said, "Catherine, the secret is to act the part of an eccentric. I used to do amateur dramatics when I was young. So, when I walk into a classroom I put on a persona, as if I'm playing Shylock."

It was good advice. I developed a particular persona – one that was a bit over the top. The boys never knew what was going to happen next. If I was teaching *Pride and Prejudice* I'd become Mr Collins.

When I taught Browning's poem *How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix* I acted it out. My chair became my trusty steed and I sat on it in a Christine Keeler pose.

I sprang to the stirrup, and Joris, and he;
I gallop'd, Dirck gallop'd, we gallop'd all three;
'Good speed!' cried the watch, as the gate-bolts undrew;

‘Speed!’ echoed the wall to us galloping through;
Behind shut the postern, the lights sank to rest,
And into the midnight we gallop’d abreast ...

Then I told them that this poem was the very first poem ever to be recorded on a machine. I told them all about the Edison phonograph, with its cylindrical records and how, in 1889, Browning was at a dinner party where his host had such a device and his guest recited his poem from memory into the trumpet.

I started to dress eccentrically, in clothes that were either ahead of their time or, mostly, clothes that were well out of date. I picked these up at a St Vincent de Paul shop in Hurlstone Park. I wore heaps of jewellery and often would illustrate something in English language or literature with one of these items.

Occasionally, when it related to something we were studying, I would burst into song. I have a good voice, though I don’t use it much. The boys always referred to me as Dame Nelly!

Another teacher who adopted similar principles, though they manifested themselves somewhat differently, was one of the Latin teachers. It was he who made up the nicknames for many of the first-year boys – names that stuck for the rest of their schooling and long after. I remember that he called a boy Mons, because his surname was Mountain. Another boy he called Vulpes, because his surname was Fox. Yet another was called Morty, because his surname incorporated the word Kill. Where he couldn’t do anything with the surname he twisted the boy’s first name, so Christopher became Stopher.

He also had temporary acronyms for jobs that were assigned to particular boys. The incumbents of these high offices changed daily, but the jobs were constant. BBGB meant ‘Board Boy Get Busy’ – the blackboard needed cleaning, and WBGB stood for ‘Window Boy Get Busy’ meaning the windows had to be opened or closed.

17. RICHARD RETURNS

Life continued without much incident. I stopped going to St Canice's when Mum and I moved to Kirribilli. I transferred my allegiance to St Andrews Cathedral in the city. I was never really at home with the Catholic tradition, probably because I wasn't brought up as a Catholic. I still rang at St Marys from time to time, but I began to ring more and more at St Andrews.

It was just before Christmas 1955 that I got a telegram from Richard: RETURNING SYDNEY SEE YOU END JAN. A strange thing happened when I read that brief message. My heart fluttered! I was really looking forward to seeing Richard again.

Richard sailed in on 24th January. I was there on the wharf, ready to greet him. I had written to him every two or three months, but the letters were such as I might send to a pen-friend. I had no expectation of ever seeing him again.

Our relationship was certainly on the P-level. We exchanged news about what was happening in our respective lives but we said nothing about our innermost thoughts – certainly nothing about our love lives.

Now Richard, in a single moment, had leap-frogged over Cliff and my heart was registering R on its dial. To think that I could fall in love with a boy who had once tried to burgle our flat! Luckily Mum didn't know anything about that night, but Richard seemed to have outgrown all of that. Our first outing, just after his return, was to Manly, and he filled me in on some details of his time in London. I heard about a girl, Maisie from Norfolk, to whom he became engaged before she ran off with an older man from Scotland. It had cut him up badly at the time, but now he was well over it.

While we were on the ferry back to Circular Quay, Richard invited me to visit him the following Thursday night, after school. "There are some nice walks by the river before it gets dark, and you can meet Eric," he said. "He's a great cook."

“Who’s Eric?” I asked.

“Oh, he’s the friend I met in London last year. Remember I told you about him, Eric Knight. He’s that portrait artist. He came back to Sydney last November and I’m staying with him at the moment – in Milperra.”

On Thursday I went straight from school to Amiens Avenue where Richard was staying. I had to get a taxi from Bankstown station.

“This area used to be a soldiers settlement after World War I,” said Eric. “That’s why this street is called Amiens Avenue – you know, after the Battle of Amiens in August 1918.” I didn’t know. My World War I history wasn’t up to scratch. Eric told me that a lot of the streets round here are named after famous battles. He said there’s Flanders Avenue, for example, a few streets away.”

Richard greeted me with an umbrella as I emerged from the taxi. “It looks like we won’t be doing any walking before dinner,” he said. I knew that because it had been raining heavily for more than a day.

“Never mind,” said Eric. “You can have a look at some of my paintings instead.”

He took me out to his garage, that he’d set up as an improvised studio. It had a rusty iron roof and there were several buckets on the floor because the roof leaked. I was worried that his paintings might be damaged but he didn’t seem to be concerned. In one corner, fortunately where there were no leaks, was an easel with a half-finished portrait.

“It’s Olaf Ruhen. He sat for me a few times, but now I’m finishing it from some photos.”

“Who’s he?” I asked.

“He’s a writer. Not very well known yet, but I think he has promise. I met him in a bar, in Surry Hills.”

“Eric plans to put it in the Archibald,” explained Richard. I’d heard of this prestigious portrait prize. In fact a couple of years previously, Mum and I had gone to see the finalists. That year the winning portrait was of the current Prime Minister, Sir Robert Menzies.

With the rain pounding on the iron roof of the garage we could hardly hear ourselves talk. After an hour of looking at his paintings, we

went back into the house. In that short time the water had become ankle deep in the garden. We had to drain our shoes once we got back inside. The rain was coming down in sheets, but fortunately the tile roof of the house didn't leak.

"You were lucky to get a taxi in all this rain," said Richard.

"And you'll be even luckier to get one to take you back to the station," added Eric.

"You might even have to stay the night," said Richard hopefully.

By nine o'clock dinner was over. Eric looked outside. "It's worse than I thought," he said. The water's nearly up to the front door!" The land sloped gently down to the front fence, so the road would be now well under water.

"No taxi is going to be able to get here tonight," said Eric. "Looks like you're stuck till the morning."

Despite the fact that this is what he had hoped, Richard had a worried look on his face. "If the water keeps rising it's not going to be too comfortable. We might have to climb up onto the dining room table."

"You and Cathy can have that. I'll take the table in the kitchen."

I rang Mum to tell her I was alright, but that I wouldn't be home till the morning.

"I don't suppose you have any large tubs we can tie to the ceiling, do you?" I asked, tongue in cheek. Then if the water rises too high we can just cut the ropes and float away!"

"I see you've read Chaucer's *Miller's Tale*," said Eric. "No, the only tub I've got is the bathtub. You're welcome to it if you can dislodge it!"

We cleared the tables and made ourselves comfortable on top. But half an hour later the water was already half-way up to the table-tops. I began to get really worried. Up till now it had seemed to be a bit of a lark – an adventure to tell Mum about when I eventually got home. But I now thought that it could possibly end in tragedy. Eric got down into the water and waded through to fetch each of us a chair that we could sit on if necessary, or even, God forbid, stand on them!

We stayed awake all night, sitting on our respective chairs, with our ankles dangling into the water. We amused ourselves by telling each other stories. The rain had eased, and the water had stopped rising. By three o'clock the water had even gone down a little.

But as day broke we noticed that the rain had become heavier and the water level had started to rise again. Eric got down from his perch and waded out to the front door to switch off the power from the mains.

"If the water reaches the ceiling it will soak the electrics and we could all be electrocuted," he said.

"If the water reaches the ceiling we'll all be drowned," I replied.

"Not necessarily, Eric reassured us as he dived back into the water. He swam away somewhere and returned with an axe. He handed this to Richard and said, "Richard, can you use this to cut a hole in the ceiling plaster above you. Then we can all climb up into the roof space."

Richard did this and, having made a hole between the rafters, he climbed up. I followed and Eric came soon after, bringing the axe with him. It was so nice to be high and dry, with the water well below us. Richard used the axe to make a hole in the tiled roof. Of course this let the rain in, but it meant that we could put our heads out to see what was going on outside. One by one we looked out and surveyed the scene. It was as if we were in the middle of a huge lake. Apart from a few roofs sticking up, it was water as far as we could see!

The hole we'd made in the tiled roof had become a makeshift window. I was reminded of the many uses for windows in *Wuthering Heights*. They were not just used for looking through, they were often used for escaping out of. Other uses were looking out to see what the weather was like, letting the warm sunshine in, or allowing the fragrance of the flowers to drift inside. Windows were also used to provide light to read by during the day and even for knowing whether somebody was at home at night. They also provided a means of communication between someone outside and someone inside the room.

The day wore on, and the water continued to rise. Fortunately the rain had now almost stopped. We decided to climb out through the hole and down onto the flat roof of the kitchen so that, if a boat came past, we would be ready to call out. We looked up at the pitched tile roof. This

was our last chance if things got worse. We could crawl up the tiles to the highest point. That would give us a few more feet. After that we'd have to try to swim!

Fortunately it didn't come to that. In the middle of the afternoon we spotted a small boat coming towards us. "I can only take two people," the rower shouted out. "The lady, and one of the gentlemen. But I'll be back shortly for the other one. Do you have any animals? Cats? Dogs?"

"No," I shouted back. "Just us."

We decide that Richard should accompany me. We went off to high ground and waited for Eric to join us. Then a car took us to the R.A.A.F. base at Bankstown. We joined hundreds of other people in one of the hangers. We were given something to eat and drink, and each of us was provided with a mattress. "Sorry, no pillows or blankets I'm afraid."

Pillows were a luxury we could dispense with under the circumstances and, being February, it wasn't too cold. The following day the water level went down as fast as it had risen. By the end of the day we were able to walk back to the house. It was a real mess! There was mud all over the floors, and in the bathroom were two dead fish. We grabbed a few soggy blankets and returned to the shelter in the hangar. The blankets would be too wet to be any use that night, but we thought they might dry by the next night, if we had to stay that long. Fortunately they had managed to get some dry blankets to give us, so that wasn't necessary.

By the next morning we were able to be transported to Bankstown station. Eric had a friend he could stay with, while Richard came with me to our flat in Hipwood Street. We only had two bedrooms, so he had to sleep on the couch.

I went back to school on the Monday morning, having missed only one day of school. At the assembly before period 1, Mr Watson the headmaster, said that the school was lucky that I was there and how I had nearly drowned. All my classes that day were spent in my telling the story of the rescue. But I took the opportunity of weaving in some literary

references to floods. I told them a suitably bowdlerised version of the *Millers Tale*, and the flood scene from *The Mill On The Floss*.

This year I had taken on the responsibility of looking after the Debating Club at Canterbury. There was a boy in fifth year who was particularly good. I remember asking him what he wanted to do when he left school. He said, with a mischievous grin, that he hadn't quite made up his mind. His ambition was to take over his father's motor garage, or maybe he'd become Prime Minister! You'll know, dear Reader, which of these he ended up doing.

Richard and I became very intimate – in the Jane Austen sense, of course. It's so interesting how words have changed, if not their fundamental meaning, but certainly their intensity. Every time the word 'intercourse' came up in one of Jane Austen's novels, I had the problem of explaining its original meaning to a classroom full of sniggering boys! We once studied *Persuasion* and I had one of the boys read out a certain paragraph, forgetting what word it contained.

They had no conversation together, no intercourse but what the commonest civility required.

Richard never went back to Milperra. It took over a month for the house to be habitable. He moved into a flat in Surry Hills. I'm not sure where Eric moved to. I didn't see him till January 1957 when, at his invitation, I went to see his portrait of Olaf Ruhen, hanging in the Archibald Exhibition at the NSW Art Gallery. He didn't win the prize, but even to be chosen for the exhibition was a great honour. The first prize, of £682 13s 8d, was awarded to William Dargie for his portrait of the Aboriginal artist Albert Namatijira. Richard didn't come with us. He was in Melbourne, but that's a story for later.

Throughout 1956 Richard and I saw a lot of each other. We often went bush-walking in the Royal National Park, and several times we went to the opera at the Elizabethan Theatre. I remember seeing *The Force of*

Destiny and wondered what *Destiny* had in store for Richard and I. I never guessed how things would turn out. We often went on outings with Felicity and Wendy. I don't think I told you that Wendy had come to Sydney to train as a nurse at St George Hospital in Kogarah.

Now 1956 was not only a leap year where, according to tradition, I could propose marriage to Richard. It was also the year of the Melbourne Olympics and Richard proposed ... though not marriage. He proposed that we should go to Melbourne to attend the Games. I put in for leave, which was pretty tricky because I'd only been at Canterbury a couple of years. Luckily Mum had told me that Brother Leonard had resigned from Loreto at the end of Term 2 and was looking for another school. I later found out that there'd been a bit of a scandal with one of the girls. She had been going through some crisis in her life and Leonard had reached out to her and had once been careless enough to be seen giving her a hug. This had been misinterpreted as an inappropriate relationship and he was asked to resign. So, even though he didn't have a Dip Ed, I managed to arrange for him to fill in for me at Canterbury for a few weeks at the end of term 3.

Another difficulty was the matter of accommodation. It wasn't just a simple matter of organizing a hotel. For a start they were probably all booked out. More importantly, Mum would never have agreed to her daughter spending a few weeks in a hotel with a man who wasn't her husband. It might have been alright for Mary and Joseph, but not for her own daughter!

It's true that Mum liked Richard, but that wasn't enough. And I must admit that I wouldn't have been happy with such an arrangement. In many ways I was an old-fashioned girl. Fortunately, I had an aunt who lived in Fitzroy. She was happy to put us both up for the week – separate rooms, of course.

18. FUN AND GAMES IN MELBOURNE

Richard and I took the train to Melbourne in early November. This was an adventure in itself. We left about midday and arrived at Albury in the middle of the night. Then we had to get off and wait on the opposite platform for the Melbourne train. This was because of the different gauges of the NSW and Victorian rail systems.

We stayed with Dad's widowed elder sister, in her house in Fitzroy. It was a large house and there was no difficulty in her giving Richard and I separate bedrooms at opposite ends of the house!

Aunt Brigid was a staunch Catholic, even more so than Auntie Susan. Of course, she would be, with a name like that! I never found out if she chose to live in York Place mainly because it was just around the corner from St Brigid's – it was certainly convenient because she went to Mass practically every day. I remember Dad telling me that she was more Catholic than Pope Pius himself!

The day we arrived in Melbourne, on 9th November, the Olympic flame had just landed in Cairns. It had first touched down on Australian soil in Darwin, but it was flown to Cairns rather than relayed. I don't suppose there would have been many volunteer runners to cross the mainly uninhabited territory between Darwin and Cairns.

We followed the progress of the torch down the coast, by the reports in *The Age*. When it reached Sydney we were amused by the story of the hoax.

A Vet Science student, by the name of Larkin, planned to make a protest against the Olympic torch relay. He had the help of eight other students at St John's College in the University of Sydney. They were protesting against the fact that it was the Nazis who introduced the relay at the 1936 Games.

They planned for one of them to be dressed in white shorts, and a white top, and to carry a fake torch. This torch was made of a wooden chair leg painted silver, on top of which was a plum-pudding can. An old

pair of underpants was put inside the can and was soaked in kerosene. The underpants were set on fire. Another student, dressed in an air-force reserve uniform, rode beside on a motorcycle as police escort.

The real torch was to be carried to the Sydney Town Hall by a certain Harry Dillon. He would present it to the Lord Mayor of Sydney, Pat Hills, who would then make a speech. Before Dillon arrived at the last change-over point, a fake runner emerged from the crowd, carrying the fake torch.

When he started his run, the people lining the route saw it as a stunt and even the police laughed at him. Then the underpants fell out of the torch because he was swinging his arms too hard. He panicked and ran away. Barry Larkin picked up the torch and continued to run the last leg.



As he neared the Sydney Town Hall he was protected by police who thought he was Dillon. The Lord Mayor was putting on his mayoral robes when he was told that the runner was early. He went out, with his vestments incomplete,

and Larkin then presented the torch. Pat Hills didn't look at the torch and immediately began his speech. Larkin walked quietly away and the mayor didn't realise that the torch was a fake until someone whispered in his ear. He made the quip to the crowd that it was just a practice run and went back inside to complete his dressing.

When Dillon arrived a few minutes later, with the real torch, the crowd wondered whether it might be another hoax and the mayor had to calm them down. The police had to clear a path to allow Dillon to get through.

When Larkin returned to university, he was given a standing ovation by his fellow students as he turned up for an exam later that

morning. Larkin went on to become a successful, and respected, veterinary surgeon. I wrote an account of the story to Cliff, and teased him that it might have been him in disguise. He wrote back telling me that in fact he *had* run a section of the relay – as a legitimate runner – when the torch passed through Armidale.

We had tickets to the Opening Ceremony at the MCG. Richard had managed to get us tickets for every event we wanted to see – well, all except the equestrian events that had been held in Stockholm in June because of Australia's strict quarantine laws. But we had tickets for practically everything else. I think it was something to do with his uncle being on the Australian Olympic Committee.

Not all countries were competing. Egypt, Iraq, Cambodia and Lebanon boycotted the Games because of the Suez crisis. The Netherlands, Spain and Switzerland boycotted the event in protest at the USSR competing, in the light of their recent crushing of the Hungarian Revolution. The People's Republic of China chose to boycott because Taiwan had been allowed to compete. The Germans, on the other hand, put politics behind them with athletes, from both East and West Germany, competing as a combined team.

The Opening Ceremony was spectacular. We didn't know until later, that when Ron Clarke lit the cauldron he was burnt on the arm.

We applauded Betty Cuthbert who won the 100 and 200 metre races. And it was so exciting in the final of the women's 4 × 100 relay, when Britain was in the lead, for Betty to overtake the British runner and win the event for Australia.

Shirley Strickland repeated her 1952 win in the 80 metre hurdles and was also part of the winning 4 × 100 relay team, bringing her Olympic medal total to seven.

Australia did really well in swimming, collecting a total of eight gold, four silver and two bronze medals. Dawn Fraser won two gold medals.

We were there, watching the men's 3000 metre steeplechase, when the British runner, Chris Brasher, finished well ahead of the others. However the judges disqualified him for interfering with the Norwegian runner on a corner. They announced the Hungarian competitor as the winner.

Brasher appealed, and he was supported by both the Norwegian and the Hungarian runners. The decision was reversed the next day and Brasher became the first Briton to win a gold medal in track and field since 1936.

Every time the Hungarians competed they were cheered by spectators from many countries – but not the Soviets! We watched the water polo match when the Hungarians played the Soviet Union. There was bad blood between the Hungarians and the Soviets because of the Russian invasion of Hungary a few weeks before.

The game became rough. One of the Hungarians had to leave the pool with a bleeding wound above his eye. A riot almost broke out, but the police restored order and the game was terminated, with Hungary leading 4 - 0. They went on to win the gold medal.

The Closing Ceremony was particularly memorable. A few days before, an anonymous letter was sent to the organizing committee. It suggested that, instead of marching as national teams, the athletes should mingle together as they paraded into and around the arena for their final appearance. This suggestion was taken up and it made the Melbourne Games the friendliest games ever. In the end, Australia came third, with 35 medals, following the Soviet Union with 98 and the USA with 74.

We decided to stay on for a week following the closure of the Games. We little realised how many lives would be affected by that decision.

19. FIRE!

I woke up smelling smoke. My room and Aunt Brigid's room were at the front of the house. Richard's room was at the back and the fire seemed to be coming from there. I woke up Aunt Brigid. She screamed, "Jesus, Joseph and Mary! Go downstairs and ring for the fire-brigade."

I did, but the phone was dead. I found out later that a rat had found its way into the box where the phone came into the house and short-circuited the wiring. This had started the fire and, of course, put the phone out of action.

Should I go back up and warn Richard? No, Aunt Brigid was probably doing that. I went next door in my nightie and raised the alarm. Mr Neville rang the fire-brigade and, by the time I got back to our house and up the stairs, I could hear the fire siren. I found Aunt Brigid kneeling in front of her personal altar, praying.

"What about Richard?" I screamed.

"I tried, but the flames were too strong. Oh, God please save Richard!"

"What happened?"

"I tried to reach him, but I had no success. I called out, at the top of my voice, 'Richard! Wake Up.' He called back, 'I'm here, but I can't make it through. I'll have to try and get out of a back window.' So all I could think of was to pray for God to protect him."

"It might have been better to have gone downstairs to alert the firemen that he needed to be rescued from the back."

Just then I heard a noise on the stairs. Thank goodness I had the presence of mind to leave the front door wide open. I walked to the top of the stairs.

"Come on Miss. Leave it to us. You'd best be getting outside."

"My Aunt's in the next room, but my friend is in a room at the back and he can't get through. He's going to try to jump out of a back window."

I ran downstairs, and the fireman came down a moment later, with my aunt. When I got out the front of the house I heard that some of the firemen had taken a ladder round to the back to try to rescue Richard.

Meanwhile an ambulance had arrived. Moments went by and there was still no sign of Richard. Then, after what seemed an eternity, a fireman came round from the back with a seemingly lifeless body slumped over his shoulder. I remembered Dad being rescued after his first accident, slumped over Potamus.

“Is he ..?” I asked. “He’s badly burnt but I think he’ll pull through.” Richard was put down on a stretcher and covered with a blanket. It was a relief to see that the blanket didn’t extend over his face although, what I could see of his face was badly burnt. I accompanied Richard to the hospital, while Aunt Brigid was taken care of by the Neville’s.

I had to ride in the front as we raced to the Alfred. Two paramedics travelled with him in the back. Instead of following Emily’s novel, my fate appeared to be now following the plot of *Jane Eyre*. All I could think, as the ambulance raced through the Melbourne streets to the hospital, was “My poor Rochester. Please God, let him not become blind!” When we got to Emergency he was whisked off, so it was three o’clock in the morning before I could see him in the ward. His face, and one arm, were swathed in bandages.

“Oh Richard, are you in pain?” I asked.

“Not much now. They’ve given me some morphine.”

“How long do they say you’ll be in hospital?”

“A week or two. They have to do some skin grafts.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll put off my return to Sydney.” We were due to travel back three days after the accident.

“No, you go back. They say that when I get out of here I’ll have to go to Rehab. Then I’ll be back and forth to hospital for the next few months while they do more grafts. I can’t have you being away from your mother for that length of time. Besides, Mum and Dad are coming down from the farm as soon as they can. The hospital rang them while I was in theatre.”

“But Richard, I can’t leave you like this!”

“No, honestly. Stick around for a couple of days, but then go back. I’ll have Mum and Dad to be with me, and Wendy might come down from Sydney. You’ll be back at school in a few weeks. Honestly, I’ll be back with you before you know it.”

So I decided to go home for Christmas. But I promised to come back for the week just before school resumed at the end of January. He started to doze and I sat there looking at his bandaged face, wondering what was underneath. I could only see his eyes, his nostrils and his mouth. The nurses did their rounds and after the doctor saw him the next morning I said my goodbyes and went back to York Place.

The Nevilles had given Aunt Brigid a bed that night but, by the time I returned in the morning, I found that she’d been given the all-clear to return to her own house. The back half was badly damaged, and was boarded up, but the front only suffered smoke and water damage. The Neville’s were there, helping her to clean up.

I think this must have been the first day in many months that Auntie had missed her morning Mass. Father Thomas came around later, worried that her unusual absence had meant disaster – which indeed it had.

Over the next two days I visited Richard as often as I could. On the day before I was due to return to Sydney I met Mr Wordsworth Ward, and his wife, at Richard’s bedside. She was, as I remembered her all those years ago, a mousey little woman who, whenever she was asked a question, looked to her husband for permission to answer. Wendy was due to arrive that evening.

At one stage we had to leave the room while the nurses changed the bandages on his face. I sneaked a glimpse through the window of the door and felt sick when I saw the damage that the fire had done to his face. He would never be handsome again. But, praise God, his eyesight wasn’t affected. For an artist, that was really important.

Mr Ward still hadn’t faced up to the fact that Richard would never be taking over the farm at *Gorge House*. He persisted in believing that Richard’s art was just a hobby and that he’d come to his senses one day. Naturally he assumed that, when Richard was able to be moved, he’d be returning to Walcha. But Richard had no intention of doing so.

That evening Wendy arrived. She told us about her new boyfriend, George. "You'd like him Cathy," she said. He knows a lot about literature and art."

Richard told us about a new gallery in Melbourne that was started, some months before, by Anne and Tom Purves. Richard said that, as soon as he was allowed out of hospital he was going to visit that gallery, especially as it featured contemporary Australian art.

Christmas was approaching and Richard was out of hospital, but he had to go to a convalescent hospital, while awaiting further skin grafts. He would be in Melbourne for several months. His father agreed to stay on till the new year. So, I felt I could go back to Mum. I said I'd come back in January, but he said he'd be alright. So, I would be home for Christmas.

I returned to Sydney and felt more alone than I'd ever been in my whole life. Still, it was nice to get back to Mum. We had Christmas at Felicity's, and Mr Potts was there, having come down from Uralla.

20. THE BOHEMIAN LIFE

I didn't go back to Melbourne in January. Of course I wrote to Richard and kept up with his progress. In the rehab hospital he was allowed day leave, and he used this opportunity to immerse himself into the Melbourne art scene. So, it was no surprise to me that he announced in March that he wasn't coming back to Sydney at all. Melbourne in his opinion was, by far, the art capital of Australia.

I felt a bit guilty that people might think that I'd dumped him because he was no longer good-looking and had deep scars, but it was because we just grew apart. I'd never felt that he was my soul-mate, the way Cliff and I were. Besides, he seemed to put his artistic career ahead of his relationship with me and, in any case, we were never actually betrothed.

I went back to Canterbury Boys but, in the middle of 1958 an opportunity arose for me to join Mum at Loreto. It was great with both of us being in the same department. Of course, it was a bit confusing for the students and other teachers. "Do you mean *Miss Stubbs* or *Mrs Stubbs*?"

I kept writing to Richard. He was really becoming a bohemian, as many artists do. I became more and more aware that it would have been a huge mistake if I'd married him. His view of women was that of a consumable – something to be enjoyed for a time but also something to be discarded when it was no longer meeting his needs.

I lost count of the number of women he'd lived with. Some were models – the younger the better. Others were fellow artists, usually more mature women, and these liaisons lasted a bit longer, but it seemed that he boasted that each new woman gave him fresh inspiration for his painting.

He became part of the Heide Artist's Colony, which centred on a house of that name, out near Heidelberg. It was a large weatherboard house owned by Sunday and John Reed. Sunday had planted a large rose garden and apparently it was very picturesque.

Many artists lived or stayed at the house, including Sidney Nolan, Charles Blackman and Arthur Boyd. Other artists that were in the circle were Gerty Anshel and Joy Hester. Richard never actually stayed there, but he set up a studio nearby, so he was a constant visitor.

He frequently mentioned Gerty in his letters, though she was never one of his constantly changing, rotating, amours. Instead he described his relationship with her as a Q-love. Richard had remembered Cliff's system of P, Q and R relationships, from having heard Cliff and I discuss it endlessly. Gerty, he said, was his Q-Love. Among his female contacts he had very few P's and countless R's, but just one Q. Apparently, he and Gerty had that unique sort of relationship, where each of them bared their souls rather than their bodies. Personally, I would extend Cliff's classification to S – sexual liaisons. It might be that his encounters with female artists could be called romantic, but they were more down the S end of the spectrum!

Richard would discuss with Gerty the state of his current love-life and she would discuss hers. She changed partners only a couple of times while he seemed to change them as regularly as his underpants. She would always know, well before it happened, that his current relationship, was coming to the end of its term, and the current partner would be pushed off the carousel – often even before Richard realised it himself.

Of course their peculiar relationship was a well-kept secret. It wouldn't do for his current woman to know how close he was to Gerty.

It seemed that the relationship with each of his models was simply a one-painting relationship – lasting just until he'd completed his painting of her – he mainly painted nudes.

He told me that Gerty would often say, "Richard, I really think you should get rid of so and so. She's really a flighty empty-head. You could do much better." He would reply, "Oh, I know, but I don't worship her for her brain! But what a body! Just let me finish my painting."

If his current love was an artist, Gerty might say, "Richard, you're so much better than she is. I think she's just sucking out your talent. You could do much better." He would reply, "Oh, I know, but I'm learning a

thing or two about her painting. Just let me wait until I've mastered her gouache technique."

All his women seemed to accept the fact that their time was up, without resentment. After all, that's how things worked in the merry-go-round bohemian environment in which they lived. They just moved on to the next partner. But the one time he took on a female gallery owner, things were very different – and almost led to fatal consequences!

Gerty warned him that it would come to a sticky end. "Richard, get rid of Rosemary as fast as you can, before you get too deeply involved. I think you won't get rid of her easily even now, and if you wait any longer she might do you real harm when you decide to let her go."

Richard's reply was uncannily prophetic. "I'll take what I want. Never mind if I have to pay for it!"

I'll report the incident in Richard's own words. The fact that I can do so will inform you that he survived.

It happened one warm December Sunday at Heide. I was in the rose garden, painting Phoebe. Rosemary was in the house. I wanted to recreate a painting by George Frederic Watts, called "Hope". It was not going to be an exact copy, but Watts's painting intrigued me. I found a large copper urn in the house that was used for storing coal. I turned it upside down and placed Rosemary on top and got her to adopt a similar pose to the girl in Watts's painting. She was wearing rather less than Watts's model, though she wasn't completely naked. I bound her eyes with a white scarf, suggesting that she was blind. And, in her hands, I placed a small harp.



Now the harp in Watts's painting had only one string. I suppose that the blind girl had the hope that, even with just one string, she could still play sublime music. Since I'd borrowed the harp from Gerald I couldn't remove all the other strings. Besides I wanted to express something different.

We'd been at it for some time, and Phoebe was getting restless. So, I asked her to go inside and get me a beer. She returned, I drank, and continued painting. Phoebe then asked to be excused as she had to go to the Ladies. Even goddesses have to perform bodily functions. I often fantasise about some Hollywood goddess, picking her nose, or wiping her bottom. I wondered if I might paint Phoebe doing something mundane like that some day.

I said, "fine, I'll just touch up the folds in your gown while you're away".

I sat there, sipping my beer and applying my brush here and there. The sun was warm and I felt drowsy. Then the next thing I knew was waking up in hospital! Phoebe had returned to find me senseless, but alive. An ambulance was called and I recovered in hospital. Rosemary confessed to having put some drug in my beer before handing the glass to Phoebe to bring to me. She said she knew that Phoebe was about to displace her and she hoped that I'd die and Phoebe would be arrested for my murder.

As it was, the police weren't called and the incident was hushed up. Now I don't know whether you've read Agatha Christie's book *Murder in Retrospect*. Something rather similar happens there, though with tragic consequences. I wonder whether that book might have given Rosemary the idea of doing away with me in that way. I also wonder how many *real* murders have been inspired by Miss Christie's books!

Anyway, I'm making a good recovery. My exhibition will be opening next month. Perhaps you and your mother would like to come down for the opening. It was to have been at Rosemary's gallery, but I've transferred it to the Mirka Café for obvious reasons.

Years later I read that book, but under the later title of *Five Little Pigs*. Poor Richard, he seems to be always getting himself into trouble. I was often amazed that he could find it so easy to attract women, with his disfigurement but, when Mum and I went down for his exhibition, I began to see why. I hadn't seen him since just after the fire, when his seared flesh was freshly roasted. His disfigurement had since faded to a certain extent and, although you'd never call him handsome, he had a rugged face that had a certain attraction.

It wasn't something that attracted *me* – not like when he first returned from London – but I could see that some women might find him attractive. It's so unfair that a man is judged by his personality and achievements, while a woman is judged mainly on her appearance. Apart from the fact that Richard's world view repelled me – take what you want and pay for it if you have to – I felt no flutter of the heart in meeting him again. Alas I felt I was destined to remain one who would spend her life as a spinster, but I hoped that like Agatha Christie, I might yet be famous for my ability to spin a yarn!

21. *TREVOR, THE TOASTRACK TRAM*

It was in 1958 that I decided to write a series of children's books about trams. For the last ten years they'd been disappearing from the Sydney scene at an alarming rate. Soon there would be no trams left in Sydney and young children would grow up without the exhilarating experience of travelling on them.

For some years I had racked my brains to find a theme for a series of children's books. I wanted to make them distinctly Australian, but all the distinctly Australian animals had been appropriated by successful authors. Then I came across the Reverend Awdrey's series *Thomas The Tank Engine*, and I thought, why not write some children's books where the characters are Sydney trams?

The most distinctive Sydney tram was the 'toast-rack' tram, so named because its structure was reminiscent of a rack for placing toast. The seats were in eight separate compartments, each with a door on either side of the tram. The seats ran from side to side. There was no central aisle, and so the conductor had to walk on a 'running board', along the sides, to collect the fares, calling out "fez pliz". Also the paper boys would jump on the tram, and move along the running-board calling out "payur".

On some later versions the four central compartments were for the ladies and they had doors. The two front and two back compartments were for smokers and had no doors, though there were blinds that could be pulled down on rainy days. Most of the trams to Bondi beach were of this type, but by 1957 they had disappeared.

So, Trevor was the hero of my books. I got Felicity to illustrate them and sent them to Angus and Robertson, but they sent my manuscripts back. As the Brontës discovered, it's not easy to get a book published.

One story was about how a tram, down to the Taronga Park Wharf, lost control of his brakes. Trevor had gone down a minute before

and, when he saw the impending disaster behind him, he backed up. When he got close to the runaway-tram he started going down again, adjusting his speed to that of the other tram so that he could slow it down using his own brakes. He probably saved many lives, but when he got back to the depot that night he was ticked off by the controller for having scratched the paint on his back end!

In another story, Trevor noticed a bogus conductor operating down one of his sides while the real one was doing his job on the other side. Of course the money that the fake conductor collected was never going to go to the Tram Company. He'd finished the whole tram before the real one had reached the second compartment – what with all the arguing. "I've already paid my fare to that bloke on the other side." "Nice one," said the real conductor." It soon dawned on him what was going on, but before he could do anything about it, the fake conductor had hopped off and was running to the tram in front. That tram went through the intersection and, before Trevor could follow, the traffic policeman had put up his hand.

By the time Trevor had explained what was going on, and the policeman let them through, the other tram was well ahead. Trevor picked up speed, hoping to catch the other tram at the next stop. But the bogus conductor had an accomplice, who knocked the driver over the head and became the bogus tram driver. Both trams ran past several tram stops, leaving puzzled travellers wondering why, not just one, but two half-empty trams ran by without stopping. Eventually Trevor caught up with the front tram at an intersection and rammed him so hard his pantotechnicon jumped off the overhead wires. The traffic policeman was told what had happened and, with the help of the two real conductors, they managed to apprehend the culprits.

Felicity produced the most delightful illustrations. She put a face on the front of Trevor that made him look a bit like Richard.

I saw Wendy from time to time. Because of the age difference we'd had very little to do with each other when we were both on our respective farms, but now that we were older, and both living in Sydney, it was different. She had been living with some nursing friends in a flat

in Brighton-Le-Sands. When her nursing friends moved out Wendy decided to move her boyfriend, George, in to take their place. The flat, in Bay Street, was right opposite the old tram sheds. There used to be a service from Rockdale to Brighton-Le-Sands that ran out of those sheds. In fact there was still an old tram there and I included him in my next book – *Freddie, the Forgotten Tram*.

George was an interesting man – somewhat older than Wendy. I thought perhaps he might be a little too old for her, but they both seemed happy enough. He had a dark, bushy beard with a couple of penetrating eyes looking out over the top. I remember thinking that whenever I get married it won't be to a man with a bushranger's beard. Imagine having to kiss him. It would be like kissing a rough dish-cloth, with the remnants of yesterday's meal clinging to its fibres.

He was interesting, and knowledgeable on many topics, such as literature and art and even music. People who work in bookshops are usually quite widely read. Oh, I forgot to mention that this was how he made a living. I asked Wendy about his job.

"He works in a bookshop. It's Tyrell's bookshop in George Street down near Circular Quay."

I knew that bookshop. I passed, through my mind, the images of the assistants I'd spoken to while browsing there to see if any of them matched George's description. None did.

"Has he been there long?"

"About twelve months."

I'd been there several times in the last year, so I thought I should be able to remember him, but no. Perhaps he worked behind the scenes.

"How's Richard these days?" I asked. "Still with that Melanie woman?"

"Oh no, he's had two since her. I can't seem to keep up with them. Dad is very distressed at the way his life has become, but I told her that at least they weren't other *men*."

"Much better to be true to another man than play around with countless women," said George. "I have a male friend who's in a stable and loving relationship with another man and I think God would approve."

Mind you, the archbishop didn't. Ian was training to be a priest and the archbishop soon put an end to that!"

I don't think Wendy shared his views. She looked daggers at him, but said nothing.

Later, after George had gone out, I asked Wendy about him. She seemed to know very little about his friends and family. She didn't know much about what he did before he got the job at Tyrells. Whenever she asked such questions, he just laughed and cleverly changed the subject.

"You don't think he's been in prison?"

"I mightn't know much about his past, but I know *him*. He's a good, and kind man – not like a criminal at all. He hasn't any family because his parents died in a plane accident some years ago and he has no brothers and sisters. He says he's got a cousin somewhere, but he's lost touch with her."

I was worried for Wendy. For all she knew he might have come from a family of bushrangers. He might be a communist, or an anarchist who was planning to blow up the governor. He might have had a carousel of relationships, like Richard, and she'll be flung off when he chooses to stop the music!

"Of course, it's not up to me," I said, "but whenever I marry a man – *if* I ever do – I'll have to know absolutely everything about him before I utter the words, 'yes, I'll marry you'."

Some months went by, and one Sunday I went to lunch with Wendy in Brighton-Le-Sands. The table was set for two.

"Isn't George eating with us," I asked.

"I'm not with George any more. We decided to go our separate ways. We seemed to disagree about everything – especially about homosexuality."

Now I don't think I told you that Wendy had become a Pentecostalist of the most extreme variety. Among her very strong beliefs was the fact that homosexuals are headed for the fiery furnace. George, on the other hand, while not being gay himself, had several gay friends.

"So you believe ..."

"That it's an abomination. The Bible clearly says so."

“And George?”

“He says that God made both gay and straight people and we should accept them – even love them. I’m afraid I can’t.”

I was surprised at the strong terms in which she expressed her beliefs. I knew that she’d joined the *Shepherd’s Flock Pentecostal Church* in Arncliffe, but I hadn’t realized how much that had changed her.

“What do *you* think?” she asked me.

I realised that I had to be very careful. I didn’t know any gay people personally, and I had the same prejudices that most people in this situation have. If Darcy had come to me one day, and said, “sis, I’m coming out of the closet. I’ve met Tony and I’m deeply in love with him”, I would have felt uncomfortable. On the other hand I believed that Jesus would have been quite happy to go and have dinner with such a couple. I’m a great believer in acceptance, but if I’d expressed this to Wendy she might have thrown me out of her flat – such was her vehemence.

“I’m so sorry for you both,” I said, trying to dodge the issue. “I know they say that opposites attract but ...”

“Not when it comes to things like that. If I didn’t know better I’d believe that George was gay himself. You have to be careful with whom you associate.”

“Well, didn’t Jesus associate with publicans and sinners.” I could see from the black look on Wendy’s face that I’d overstepped the mark, so I added, “but then, He was Jesus.”

Wendy’s face softened a little. I think she was thinking that I was on her side and was saying that Jesus, being the Son of God could get away with it, but *we* have to shun sinners, but that’s not what I meant. In fact I see homosexuals as just being different, not sinners. If God made them so that they are attracted to the same sex then who are we to condemn God. Perhaps I should have said so to Wendy. On the other hand, perhaps I did the right thing in keeping quiet.

“Any way. I’ve met Simon at the *Flock*, and he sees things the way I do. He’ll be popping in later and you can meet him.”

Simon arrived after lunch and I discovered that, although he followed the official *Shepherd’s Flock* line, he seemed to be able to inject

a little bit of love into the matter. “God hates the sin, but loves the sinner,” was his mantra. I didn’t quite agree that a committed homosexual relationship was a sin, but at least Simon wasn’t as hard line as Wendy. I wished to be able to say, as George had once done, “God would be happier with a gay couple who lived their life true to their partner in a truly loving relationship than a heterosexual who lived like Richard, moving from flower to flower like a bumble bee!” However I thought I’d said enough.

22. L.G. & F.A. POTTS, PUBLISHERS

One Sunday evening in 1959 I was having dinner with Felicity and Cecilia in Neutral Bay. Felicity told me that she was going into business with her cousin. It was to be a small publishing firm in the city.

“I won’t be working there nine to five,” she said. “I’ve put up some of the capital and, when it gets established, Lenny says he’ll give me some illustrating work. He plans to publish religious books and children’s books. I thought that you should show him your *Trevor The Tram* books. I’m sure there’s a market for them out there. Here’s the address. It’s in a small office down in Miller’s Point.” She wrote out the address and handed it to me. “Tell him that Felicity sent you.”

That night my head was swimming. Soon I might be a published author, like Felicity Potts and May Gibbs. I turned over in my mind how my name should appear. Catherine Stubbs, or Cathy Stubbs. Perhaps I should use my second name, like May Gibbs. How would Madeleine Stubbs sound? Or Maddy Stubbs? I know I said I didn’t like the name ‘Madeleine’ when I was young, but it seems to suit a published author, and has the right number of syllables. So, I settled on Madeleine Stubbs as my *nom-de-plume*.

The next day was Monday and, as it was in the school holidays, I was free to go exploring in the Rocks. This is the oldest part of Sydney, where the first settlement took place. Going west up Argyle Street, I came across the Garrison Church. It was open, and I looked inside. As I walked down the aisle, I fantasised that I was a bride. I had no idea who the groom might be, but I decided that if I ever got married, this is the church I’d choose.

I saw the observatory up on the hill, as I found my way to Windmill Street. This is where the offices of L.G. & F.A. Potts, Publishers, were located. Well, perhaps ‘offices’ was a little too grand a word for this fledgling publishing house. There was a shiny new brass plate that announced that L.G. & F.A. Publishers were to be found on the 2nd floor.

I climbed the narrow, creaky stairs and found a door with a hurriedly made sign “L.G. & F.A. Publishers PLEASE ENTER.” I pushed open the door and saw a clean-shaven young man who seemed barely older than I was.

“Mr Potts, at your service. How can I help you?”

“My friend, Felicity, sent me. I have a couple of manuscripts I’d like you to look at.”

“Oh, Filly sent you did she? Sit down and let me have a look at them. Are they theological treatises?” He looked at me and decided otherwise. “No, let me guess. They’re children’s books.”

I handed the manuscripts to him, wondering whether I should have had them typed. Then I showed him the illustrations that Felicity had made.

“They’re about a tram that has adventures, a bit like ...”

“... *Thomas The Tank Engine*,” continued Mr Potts. “Yes, it’s an interesting concept, especially now that the trams have gone. That adds to the nostalgia factor.”

“So perhaps you could read them and let me know if you might see your way to publishing them.”

“I certainly will. Children’s books do really sell well, especially around Christmas time. We have to thank Mr Dickens for that, with his Christmas Carol and other Christmas books. Single-handedly, he established the Christmas genre. Of course we’re a small market here in Australia, but we should be able to sell them in Great Britain too. After all, our children love Thomas so English children might take to trams. I won’t read them properly now, but give me a few minutes to look through them.”

I sat there, while he slowly turned over the pages. I looked at his face, trying to guess his age and what manner of man he was. His face looked a little familiar. Of course he was Felicity’s cousin so I could see the family likeness. There seemed to be something in his eyes that suggested a depth of feeling. Of course, I could only see these eyes when he looked up from time to time.

I wondered why his business specialised in such opposite genres – Theology and Children’s Books. What manner of man would have an

interest in such opposite poles? I thought of George Macdonald, who wrote children's books, but with a strong religious flavour.

"Of course," I said to myself. "C.S. Lewis wrote popular theology and, recently, the Narnia books – a series of books for children, with a religious undertone."

The more I thought, the more convinced I became, that fantasy and theology, were the sort of opposites that really go together, like mathematics and literature.

"Very good, very good," Mr Potts said at last. "Leave them with me and I'll have a closer look at them. Felicity probably told you that we've only just started this business. If I publish your *Trevor The Tram* books they'll be my first titles. By the way, you don't know anyone who might have written something on theology?"

"Not really."

"Never mind. Well, give me a week to have a really good think about your books. Can you come back next Monday morning?"

"Not really. School starts back next week."

"Never mind. I tell you what. I'll invite you and me to tea with Filly on Sunday evening. Then we can discuss terms and conditions and royalties. You'll have both partners in the one place."

As I walked back to the ferry, my head was whirling around. He wouldn't have made those arrangements for next Sunday if he thought there was any chance of him rejecting my books. No, I will soon be a published author! Of course I'd overlooked the fact that Mr Potts had no track record in publishing. He was as much a novice as I was. We might, together, make a magnificent failure!

Next Sunday I could have walked to Felicity's, but I found it more fun to catch the ferry, even though it was only a five minute cruise! The young Mr Potts had not yet arrived. I asked Felicity about him.

"He did a BA in English and History. So, he's always been interested in literature."

"And I suppose that you steered him towards children's books."

“Well I hadn’t seen that much of him for years, until the last six months. I think he loved children’s books well before he reconnected with me.”

“And where did his interest in theology come from?”

“Oh, that. He used to be a de la Salle Brother, but it didn’t suit him.”

Something began to stir in my brain. “I don’t suppose he ever taught at Loreto.”

“Oh yes, your mother probably knows him.”

“Let me guess. His favourite book is *Wuthering Heights*.”

“Well yes, it is. Did he tell you that when you took your manuscripts to him?”

“No, I think he’s the same boy I used to meet on the tram going to uni. We used to talk a lot about Cathy and Heathcliff.”

“What a coincidence. Of course, he didn’t have a beard back then.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, when he left the brotherhood he almost had a nervous breakdown. He grew a beard and put on a lot of weight. I guess he felt his big change in life was very stressful and these are ways some people respond to stress. I hardly recognised him. He even started calling himself by his second name, George. He was creating a new identity. He didn’t refer to his past life in the Church for a long time.

At Luna Park they have these automata that come to life when you put a penny in the slot. That’s why we say, “the penny dropped”. It surely did on this occasion. The initials L.G. stood for Leonard George. L stood for Leonard, Brother Leonard. G stood for George, who was Wendy’s boyfriend after he left the order. L.G. was Mr Potts, Filly’s young cousin and business partner. And L.G. Potts was the anonymous young man who’d made my heart flutter in my university days. They were all the same person!

23. BY GEORGE. IT'S HIM!

Now I think I should come clean with you, dear Reader. I had recognised George behind his beard when I met him at Wendy's. But he seemed not to recognise me, so I thought he must have had his reasons and I pretended I didn't know him. I've since found out that he had done the same!

The minute I entered the office of L.G & F.A. Potts, I knew it was my Leonard, beard or no beard. Those eyes gave it away but, because he showed no sign of knowing me, I kept quiet.

Now before you accuse me of being deceptive, let me remind you of a certain Lucy Snowe in *Villette*. An author, particularly if she's writing about her own life, is entitled to a certain privacy. We're not required to blurt out everything we think or feel!

What's that you say, dear Reader? In chapter 10 I told you that I never again saw that mysterious boy on the tram. Well I admit that wasn't true. I wanted you to believe it so that you'd get more of a surprise when I did meet up with him again!

So now I've unburdened myself. You know all about me, at least up to this point in my story. It should come as no surprise to you that the flutter in my heart was reciprocated and, over time, a steady R-relationship developed between George and I. In time it developed into an S, but not before we were married. As I said, I'm an old-fashioned girl. I don't believe that sex before marriage is wrong. It's just not for me.

Of course, George and I were married at the Garrison Church in Argyle Street in the Rocks. I would have liked to have had Wendy as my bridesmaid but, well, that might have been a bit awkward.

So, I chose Sally. I first asked Felicity, but she said she thought she was a bit too old for that honour. I would have liked to have had Cliff as the best man but, of course, it was George's call. He chose Brendan, a priest he'd met in the seminary and kept up with.

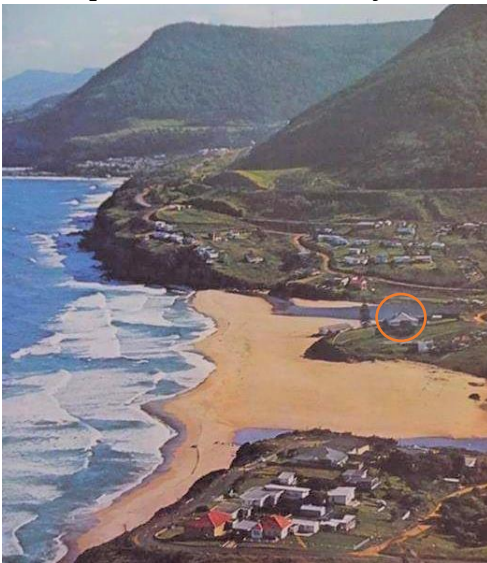
I had asked Mum to give me away in lieu of Dad. However she had twisted her ankle a few days before. She suggested Cliff. He had come down from Armidale a few days before.

“It has to be someone who knew Dad,” she said. “I can’t think of anyone else who qualifies.” I wondered what Dad would have thought, being represented by an ‘abo’. Dad really liked Cliff, and respected him but he had the old-world prejudices of his generation. Too bad.

It seemed strange, walking down the aisle with Cliff. I suppose it was like being given away by a brother. Yet the Brother, or should I say ex-Brother, was there at the front, waiting for me to join him in holy matrimony.

As I looked left and right I saw so many people who’d meant a lot to me. On the right was Mr Potts, with Felicity. On the left was Mr Ward, Mrs Ward, Richard and Wendy. A few of my ringing friends from St Marys and St Andrews were there. It was such a pity that the church has no bells. A few teacher friends came, including Eileen O’Brien.

George and I honeymooned at a small place, south of Sydney, called Stanwell Park. It was a flat in a large house, right on the point that separates the two beaches. We had decided to have an extended holiday there – three weeks of doing nothing much, and then we’d stay on for a year. George said I should stop work, and concentrate on my writing. He went up to the office each day on the train.



For those first three weeks we did very little. Most days we stayed in bed till after lunch – not just doing what one is supposed to do on one’s honeymoon, but we did a lot of talking, and a lot of reading.

A very embarrassing incident was one afternoon at about one thirty. There was a knock at the door. I opened it in my flimsy negligee and there was Father William come to welcome us into the parish! It seems Aunt Susan had told

Father Murphy that we would be living down at Stanwell Park, and he contacted Father William of the parish of St Michael in Thirroul.

I had to explain that we were still in bed, being on our honeymoon. He gave a wink, apologised for disturbing us, and left, but not before he gave us a copy of the church bulletin, with the times of the Masses. Aunt Susan had noticed that I'd drifted away from the Catholic Church and thought a new beginning might bring me back into the fold.

When the three weeks were up, George went back to work, travelling up on the train. It meant an early start, which I didn't mind, because when he left at six o'clock, I went for a swim in one of the two lagoons. After that I worked on some book-editing for George.

The first few months went by without incident. George's business had started to do well. He'd signed up a couple of reasonably well-known authors – well-known, at least in the field of theology, or devotional aids. He also published Felicity's later Brumby books as well as books by another writer for teenage girls.

As I said, the first few months went by without incident. While George was at work I would swim or go for walks. Then, one night, I said to George, "is that smoke I can smell?" In retrospect that's a silly question, and he could have replied, "My dear, it's physically impossible for me to know *what* you can smell!" But instead, good husband that he was, he translated the question from woman-talk to man-talk and arrived at the question, "can you smell smoke?", to which he replied, "I think I can."

He went outside and called out, "I can not only *smell* smoke but I can see flames." I joined him and, as we looked towards the escarpment, we could see a glow.

"Seems to be coming from near the station," he said. "We should go and see if we can help." We ran to the highway, where there were dozens of people and a couple of fire engines. They fitted us with water tanks that we could wear on our backs and showed us how to direct the nozzle.

The fire wasn't a gigantic one, but it was important that we put it all out in case it got out of control. We skirted around the edge, putting out spot fires. I was reminded of the time when we were running for our lives in the bushfire at Paradise. At least this time we were relatively safe.

"Look at the full moon," said George as he stopped to wipe the perspiration from his brow. It's almost got the colour of honey!"

"It's probably got nothing to do with the fire. It's out over the ocean," I said. Then it hit me what he meant. We were still on our honeymoon!

By about three o'clock in the morning we'd subdued the fire. While the firemen checked to see that it was safe to go, the locals, who'd come to help, stood around drinking tea or hot cocoa, courtesy of the station-master's wife. Her house was the only one that was under threat and she wanted to show her gratitude. No-one seemed anxious to get back to bed and we took the opportunity of getting to know some of our neighbours.

Towards the end of the year we began to make plans to find a house in Sydney. George's business had done sufficiently well that we could get a loan, so the prospect of buying a house seemed realistic, but fate had something else in mind!

It had been raining heavily for a week and George announced one morning that he wasn't going up to Sydney. He had to go down to Kangaroo Valley to visit one of his new authors and get them to sign a contract.

"It's a nice trip down to Wollongong on the train," I said.

"But then how do I get up to Kangaroo Valley from there? No, I'll have to take the Austin. Lucky I got the windscreen wipers fixed. It's pouring."

Indeed it was. No swimming for me that day. I'd hardly been out of doors for a week. "Would you like me to come too?" I asked.

"No, you can just enjoy looking out over the wild ocean. Besides, you've got to finish those illustrations by tomorrow."

We had the front flat and, from the sitting room, there was a wonderful view of the pounding waves. So I agreed to stay behind, to keep the home fires burning, as they say. I turned over in my mind what I'd cook for lunch. "What time do you expect to get back?"

"Probably no later than one o'clock. I could perhaps get back earlier, but I'll have to drive slowly in all this rain."

So I cooked a lamb stew, and had it simmering at one o'clock. But by one-thirty there was still no sign of him. The weather must be really foul, I thought. I'm glad he's taking his time.

By two o'clock there was still no sign of him. I'd long since turned off the stew. Perhaps the car's broken down.

We had no phone in the flat, but if he rang Mrs Morgan she'd get a message to me. Mrs Morgan was the landlady, who lived in the back part of the house. But then I remembered that Tuesday afternoons she played Bingo in the community hall. She didn't drive, but the hall wasn't that far. Still, it showed her devotion to Bingo to go even that short distance in the storm.

At three o'clock there was a knock at the door. My first thought was that George had rung, and this was Mrs Morgan coming to give me his message. My heart fell when I looked through the glass pane in the door. Mrs Morgan didn't wear a policeman's hat.

"Are you Mrs Potts?"

"Y-yes,". I could barely get the words out.

"I'm afraid there's been a terrible accident."

"You'd better come in." As I ushered him into the sitting room my mind went over his choice of words. Not just 'accident', but 'terrible accident'.

As he sat down, the rain dripping from his clothes, I heard those fateful words "I'm afraid ..."

I didn't faint, but I don't remember hearing the words "your husband is dead". I just knew that's what they would be.

My next words were quite predictable. I'm sure you can guess what they were. "How did it happen?"

“There was a landslide on the road between here and Coledale. It must have happened this morning, but it’s taken all this time to reach the body.”

I’d always thought that this stretch of road was treacherous. For quite a distance the road had the steep cliff down to the ocean on one side, and the steep cliff up to the escarpment on the other. It was a miracle that there was a road there at all. There was a sign as you entered this section ‘BEWARE OF FALLING ROCKS!’ I often wondered why there wasn’t also a sign ‘BEWARE OF POSSIBLE LANDSLIPS’.



I had done a bit of casual teaching at the Thirroul Primary School and once, when I was driving down to the school there had been a small landslip and a policeman was directing the traffic. I had to go completely onto the other side of the road.

“It would seem that the road must have collapsed as he was driving over it. Otherwise, even though there was reduced visibility because of the rain, he would have seen it and had time to stop. It was a freak accident.”

“So how did you recover my husband’s body?”

“That was a logistical nightmare,” said the policeman. “The man who found the landslide – he must have been coming up from the Wollongong side – had to reverse nearly half a mile before he could turn around. He rang the police in Wollongong. They sent someone to investigate and when they got there the first thing he had to do was to sort out the mess of all these reversing cars. Once he got to the landslip he saw that the road was blocked in both directions.”

“By the way, I’m Constable Perkins from Helensburgh. We were notified and we sent some men to sort things out from our side. We had

to shout to each other across the chasm because it was too dangerous to even walk across.”

“How far down was the car?”

“Right down into the sea. That was the problem. We could have sent someone down on a rope, but the car was so badly crushed it was obvious that it would be a recovery operation and not a rescue. We needed a fair amount of equipment to cut the car open and reach what was left of the body.” I winced at the words, “what was left of”.

“When can I see my husband?”

“Well the rescue was done from the Wollongong side. So once they winched him up in a body bag, they took him to Coledale Hospital.” They’ll keep him there till the coroner arrives. In the mean-time I can take you there.”

My first reaction was to say that I was capable of driving myself, but then I realised that the only car that would have been at my disposal was at the bottom of the cliff!

“Thanks,” was all I could say.

“It will be a long journey I’m afraid. We have to go back up to the highway just past Helensburgh, along the highway to Bulli Pass and then back up the coast road to Coledale. The coroner’s coming from Sydney, so he’ll have the same roundabout trip.”

Just then there was a knock at the door. It was Mrs Morgan, just back from Bingo. She’d heard of the landslide on the radio.

“Have you heard the news?” She was always pleased to be the first one to relay some news, or any other gossip. Of course she had no idea it was George.”

“They don’t know who the poor ...” Then she caught sight of Constable Perkins, and stopped. “Oh, no ... it’s not ...”

“Yes, I’m afraid it was George. I’m just on my way to see his body.”

“Oh dear, I’m so sorry. If there’s anything I can do.” People always say that, and there’s never really anything they *can* do in a situation like this. But it’s an expression of emotional support, and I appreciated it. Of course I could have asked her to cook my dinner, and

she would have gladly done so. But there was still that stew, waiting for George and I!

It took well over an hour to get to Coledale. I viewed the body. Fortunately his head only seemed to have a few scratches, and this is all they ever show you. I said my farewells and left. Constable Perkins had been waiting to drive me back.

I had rung Mum from Mrs Morgan's phone before I left for Coledale and she came straight down on the train. So she was there when I got back.



“Oh, Mum, what am I going to do?” I cried. It was such a comfort to have her there. “Cliffs seem to have played such a big part in my life. First Dad went over a cliff, and now George. What is it about me that I seem to experience fires and cliff falls.”

“By the way, how is he, Cliff I mean?” Mum asked.

I hadn't given Cliff a thought until now. It suddenly came back to me that he'd predicted that he'd marry me as a widow! He had this thing that his life and mine would follow the story of Hareton and Cathy in the second half of *Wuthering Heights*! But George wasn't a pathetic, sickly young man whom I'd been forced to marry, not like Linton. More importantly, unlike Hareton, Cliff was well and truly married with two children.

Those who read a lot tend to see their own lives through the lens of their books. It's as if the author is in control, not just of her characters' lives, but of real people's lives as well.

Dear Reader ... I say that because that's how Charlotte Brontë sometimes addressed her readers, but then she had her eye on publication, while I'm writing my life story just for you, my dear children whoever you may be. Never mind, what was I going to say?

Oh yes. Have you ever had the thought that you are just a character in somebody's book? Your whole life is controlled by the author, although I've heard it said that authors find their characters seem to have a mind of their own, and the novel turns out rather differently to what the author intended.

Perhaps the author of our lives is God – but perhaps there's another layer. Perhaps God created a whole hierarchy of authors, each creating the characters at the next level, till ultimately some author has created you and me.

Two days later I got a visit from Father William to offer his condolences. I was grateful for his thoughtfulness. He gave the old "if there's anything I can do ..." line. I had to restrain from laughing. You see I was severely tempted to reply, "well, yes. You could stand on your head."

You see, I couldn't get the words of Lewis Carroll's poem out of my head. For the hair of Father William of the Thirroul Parish, was rather white, and he *had* grown uncommonly fat.

"You are old, Father William," the young man said,
"And your hair has become very white;
And yet you incessantly stand on your head —
Do you think, at your age, it is right?"

"In my youth," Father William replied to his son,
"I feared it might injure the brain;
But now that I'm perfectly sure I have none,
Why, I do it again and again."

24. LIFE AFTER DEATH

There are two types of ‘life after death’. There’s the theological question of what happens to us when we die. The second is the more practical question of what happens to those we leave behind.

For a start, there’s the question of coming to terms with grief. For some people grief throws them on their back, like a cockroach with its legs crawling helplessly in the air. For some there’s a railing against God for allowing it to happen. I felt none of these. I was desperately in love with George, and felt a great numbness when he’d gone. But the practical business of dealing with his affairs – *our* affairs – kept me from thinking too deeply about the state of widowhood.

Of course the first decision to be made was where to bury George. A couple of months previously George and I had visited the delightful little country churchyard out at Ebenezer near the Hawkesbury. George commented that it was such a beautiful place, whenever he died he wanted to be buried there.



“But George, it’s miles from where we live at Stanwell Park.”

“We’ll only be there for a few more months.”

“Yes, but when we buy our own house I can’t imagine it being anywhere round here. I won’t be able to visit you easily.”

“I won’t be in the ground, only my rotting body. I don’t expect you to visit that. And besides, by then you’ll probably be locked away in a nursing home and won’t be able to visit my grave anyway.”

It was rather a macabre discussion to be having on a picnic. “Let’s talk of something more cheerful.” I never gave it another thought ... until the day after the funeral. So inconvenient as it might be I was determined to follow George’s wishes and bury him at Ebenezer. Little did I realise that in a few short years I would be living there.

I moved back with Mum and in 1961 we moved to Holbrook Avenue. We bought a flat right at the Kirribilli Wharf. It was a lovely old-fashioned building with leaded glass windows. There were four bedrooms, some with a view looking out over the harbour. It even had the old-fashioned servant’s bells – or at least a board marked ‘Bedroom 1’, ‘Maid’s Room’ etcetera. Because we had so much space Darcy was able to move in with us, and we still had a spare room for guests. You may be wondering what happened to Darcy. Well he decided to go to university to study medicine.

There were trips to solicitors, and documents to sign. Verily, I say unto you that I’ve signed my name as Catherine Potts more times than ever I signed myself as Catherine Stubbs – well, on legal documents, that is.

There was the question of who should take over the publishing business, or whether we should wind it up. This brought me into numerous discussions with Felicity, the surviving partner.

“I assume that I get to inherit George’s role in the partnership, if that’s how they do this,” I said to Felicity.

“I’m not sure if you can bequeath a partnership, but even if you can’t I’m happy to go into partnership with you.”

“The trouble is, George was into theology. I can’t see that either of us can make any sound judgements about manuscripts in this area,” I said.

“I don’t know of anyone who could, and I’m not prepared to take on someone we don’t know.”

“So, we’ll drop theology. What else can we publish to complement the children’s books?”

“Well, George once said that, once the business got going, he’d like to get into art books. The technology for reproducing colour has improved remarkably in the last few years.”

“I think I have the answer,” I replied. “Richard wrote to me recently. He’s coming back to Sydney.”

I showed Felicity the letter. For your benefit, here’s an extract.

Dear Cathy, sad to hear your news. My news is that I’m sick of my bohemian life-style. If I ever meet another model I’ll scream. They’re a bunch of parasites. Would you believe it, for the first time in years, I’m my own person! I’ve realised that I can survive without a woman. And, although it’s becoming quite common in the artistic circle, I can’t imagine having a relationship with a man either.

I’m chucking it all in and coming to Sydney. I don’t know what I’ll do there, but I might find something. If I can find the capital I’d like to open a gallery.

“Why don’t we invite Richard to join us?”

“As a partner?”

“No, as an employee.”

“Is he trustworthy?”

This was a difficult question to answer. I still remembered the night he attempted to burgle our flat. Nevertheless I thought he’d grown up a lot since then. Of course, I didn’t think much of his lifestyle, but I believed him when he said he’s put that behind him.

“He’s a really energetic worker. And he has a lot of contacts in the art world. We could feature work by Australian artists.”

I had neatly dodged the question. But I didn't believe he would embezzle money. Besides, Felicity looked after the books – the financial ones, I mean. I honestly thought that we should give him a go. If he had trouble getting a job in Sydney, who knows what he might get up to!

“Perhaps you and he might get back together,” suggested Felicity.

“Not a chance! I still like him, but he and I are so different.”

“Don't they say that opposites attract?”

“There's a limit to how opposite one can be. In magnetism, opposite poles attract – but not if they're fifty yards apart!”

We offered Richard the job, and he accepted it enthusiastically. He came to Sydney and, until he had scraped together enough to be able to rent a place, he stayed with Mum and I in Holbrook Avenue. With its four bedrooms we certainly had the space.

It was curious to be living with Richard under the same roof again. And this time he wasn't at the far end of the house, as in Aunt Brigid's house. His room was just next to mine. At least, in case of fire, he would be much easier to rescue!

Mum liked him. She even made subtle jokes about us as a couple. But we'd done that and, although I could see that Richard had changed, I could still see that it wouldn't work. So, although I was no longer an old maid, I was a widow after a very brief marriage, which was almost the same thing. I decided that I would never remarry.

There should be a phrase for such a woman for she's in a quite different position to a normal widow. A widow who's lost her husband after fifty years has all those shared memories to fall back on – shared plans and shared dreams aren't the same. A woman who's a widow after murdering her husband is referred to as a 'black widow' so why shouldn't there be a special term for widows whose marriage had been tragically cut short?

Perhaps we could be called 'paper widows' since we never get to enjoy our first wedding anniversary – traditionally called the 'paper anniversary'. Talking of 'paper' I remember the day when George explained to me what 'widow' means in the printing industry. A 'widow line' is a fragment of text at the end of a paragraph that spills over to the

next page – a thing to be avoided at all costs.

With Richard's help, the business flourished. He managed to secure a number of manuscripts from his friends in Melbourne, and these were published in large, lavishly illustrated editions. He even curated one or two books himself.

On the children's book front we continued to publish titles in the Brumby series, and Trevor continued his adventures. We published a series of adventure books that had been sent to us. They were along the lines of Enid Blyton's *Adventurous Four*, *Famous Five* and *Secret Seven*. Like Blyton's successful series they were set in a world where adults were on the fringe. The first two were *Annie's Adventures in Africa*, and *Belinda's Belligerent Bull*. This seemed to guarantee a successful run of twenty-six books, although I could see difficulties when the author got towards the end of the alphabet!

After three months Richard moved out of Holbrook Avenue but, as he moved nearby to Neutral Bay, I still saw a lot of him.

At the end of that year I was surprised to hear that Rosemary had moved to Sydney and was opening a gallery in Surry Hills. What surprised me even more was that Richard was helping her get established. Richard couldn't help her financially, but he'd kept in touch with the Sydney art scene and so he had many useful contacts. Anyway she had the money from the sale of her gallery in Melbourne.

"You'd better watch out that she doesn't try to poison you again," I teased Richard.

"I'll be more careful this time," he quipped back.

I didn't really believe that she would make another attempt to kill him. That incident struck me as a once in a lifetime aberration, just like Richard's attempted burglary. But I couldn't help thinking, wouldn't it be ironic if they got back together – the would-be murderer and the would-be thief!

25. ANOTHER CLIFF FALL

I don't know what it is about the people in my life falling from great heights. Twice my Humpty Dumpty of a father 'had a great fall' and, unfortunately, the second time all the king's horses couldn't put him together again. Then it was my darling George, and now it had happened again.

This time it was Cliff who'd had the fall. Fortunately, it wasn't from a great height. My precious father seemed to have the monopoly on that! No, Cliff simply fell off his horse, or rather he was thrown from his horse.

He wasn't greatly injured, but it did something to his left knee. He had surgery, but it was never quite right. As a result, he found it uncomfortable to mount his horse. Traditionally most horse-riders mount from the right side of the horse – that is, the right side looking from the back of the horse. This is because once your sword was on your left side and mounting from the right meant that it didn't get in your way when you swung your leg over the saddle.

I suppose Cliff, since he never wore a sword, could have practised mounting from the left! But, whatever the logic, it caused Cliff to make a momentous decision. Let me tell you in his own words.

Dear Cathy, Don't laugh. I've had a fall from Firefly and busted my knee. I can still ride, but I find it very uncomfortable getting off and on. So I've decided to give up my large animal practice up here and come to Sydney to a general vet practice in Dural. I've had an offer from a vet called Barry Larkin. I'll still be able to do some cattle and sheep, and I'll get around in my Austin A40. But most of my work will be poodles and moggies. I'll be down in July and I'd like to visit you and stir up old memories.

I remembered the story about Barry Larkin, and his fake Olympic Torch. To think that Cliff would be working with such a famous person.

It was October when Cliff finally came to Sydney with Lisbeth and their two kids, Liesje and Marijke. He and I had been constantly in touch by letter all these years, but it was ages since we'd seen each other. During my ups and downs with Richard I'd written constantly to Cliff, pouring out my heart to him, as a Q-mate does. Conversely, he revealed all the intimate details of his courtship, and ultimate marriage, to Lisbeth. When I became reconnected with my mysterious man-on-the-tram I wrote to Cliff, revealing my deepest thoughts.

I often agonised over the morality of this arrangement. I suppose there was a certain disloyalty to our own partners – secretly sharing our personal feelings about them to a third person. But I reasoned that what I revealed to Cliff was no more than I would have told to a close sister, if I had one. Oh, yes I had my own brother but if I'd revealed my soul to Darcy, he would have laughed in my face. Yes, that's it. It was no more than having a surrogate sister, except that she was a man, and not one related to me.

Cliff, on the other hand, if he'd had a brother, or a sister for that matter, would never have opened his heart to him or her. Men don't do that. There *is* something different in a Q-relationship. So, I followed Cliff's progress, in his courtship with Lisbeth, remotely. In fact, had it not been for me, he never would have got to propose to her. Little did she realise but she owed her successful marriage to me!

I remember him writing to me about these friends of his, Lisbeth and Stephen, whose relationship was like a ship in a storm. Oh, yes, we discussed other people's relationships as well as our own. Now I could see, from what Cliff told me, that there was no future in that relationship. Lisbeth and Stephen were totally unsuited.

Once I went to Uralla to visit Cliff, and he introduced me to Lisbeth and Steve. All at once I could see, from the nuances of the conversation and their body language that, not only were they heading for the rocks, but that Lisbeth and Cliff were the natural Sun and Moon – a partnership made in heaven (if you'll excuse my mixed metaphors).

Cliff had never realised the fact. I mean Steve was a good friend and men don't start eyeing their friend's girlfriend. Women might – in reverse – but men and women are built differently. Lisbeth never realised

the potential that Cliff represented. They were good friends, Lisbeth and Cliff, but Lisbeth was going out with Steve. There's a certain inertia in relationships.

Cliff and I had a long talk where I revealed my findings. He said he'd think about it, and certainly his eyes were opened but he was reluctant to make a move on his friend's girlfriend.

I spoke to Lisbeth. Here, I had to be very subtle. We talked about Cliff and, in time, she saw him with fresh eyes. In the end, it was Lisbeth who broke up with Steve. Once that happened, Cliff didn't know how quickly to make a move. The result was a perfect marriage and two lovely kids. And, don't feel sorry for Stephen. Within a year he was married to Estelle, with more or less successful results.

Lisbeth, as you may have guessed, was Dutch. She had migrated to Australia, on her own, in 1951. Her parents remained in Utrecht. She was proud of her Dutch ancestry and was grateful to Cliff for having chosen the name de Groot. Of course she insisted on Dutch names for her girls – Liesje was the eldest and Marijke was a year younger.

Cliff and Lisbeth lived out in Kenthurst. They had five acres. I suppose you could call it a farm, but it was nothing like the 4,000 acres he and I had known up in Paradise. They had only one cow, nine sheep and one Aboriginal!

Cliff often told me all the funny experiences he'd encountered in his work. I don't know what it is about poodles and moggies, and their owners, that makes for comedy. He often said to me, as a sort of endpiece to one of his stories, "it could only happen to a vet!"

I suggested he write them out as a book, but he said, "oh nobody would be interested in vet stories". So he never got around to it. Then about ten years later I came across the books by the Yorkshire vet, James Wight *If Only They Could Talk* and *It Shouldn't Happen To A Vet*. "There you are," I joked, "if you'd listened to my advice you would have published your first book, *It Could Only Happen To A Vet* ten years ago and, who knows, you might have been able to retire by now with a dozen books under your belt!"

He replied, “I don’t want to retire, and besides, a dozen books under my belt would be very uncomfortable.”

When the film *All Creatures Great And Small* came out, and a little later the TV series, and James Herriot became a household word, I teased Cliff again. This time I enlisted Lisbeth in poking fun at his missed opportunities.

I often visited the de Groot house, in Kenthurst and became very good friends with Lisbeth, as well as Liesje and Marijke. Having known Cliff as a young boy, I was able to fill them in with stories about their father. Then, when he drove me back to Pennant Hills station, he and I would do our Q-talk. I poured out my heart to him about how much I missed George, and he would tell me about the little ups and downs with Lisbeth – mostly ups. I felt proud that I’d been the one who’d brought these two together.

26. THE HIGH COUNTRY

The High Country. That's what they called the New England Area, where I grew up. Tablelands are flat areas where there's no sign of a mountain, yet you're two or three thousand feet above sea-level, but every so often you come across a gorge that drops a thousand feet or more.

My life has been like that. The high points didn't seem high – just normal. Those happy times seemed really happy when I looked back from the perspective of later tragic events, but at the time they seemed delightfully normal.

I wonder if the Brontë sisters felt like that. They had more than their fair share of tragedy, but there was that period after their older sisters died, and before Branwell set off another rock-slide, when life was on a plateau – something that could be described as 'sunlit uplands'.

This was my life after I'd come to terms with my loss of George. Well, his death is not something I ever completely got over, but mostly I could think of George with pleasure as I remembered the good times, without the pain of asking why it had to be so short.

So, dear Reader, in this chapter of my life there are no shocks. Just blessings that are too numerous to count. I became like an aunt to Liesje and Marijke, and a good friend to Lisbeth. I began to get very close to Lisbeth. Jane Austen might have said 'intimate' but it was nothing like the modern-day meaning of the word. It was a bit like a Q-relationship, but different. With a Q-relationship, like I had with Cliff, there was a sexual element – not with a big S, in terms of bodies, but in the gender sense of 'sexual'. Cliff is male, and I am female, and though I'm happy being female, there's a delight in being able to glimpse the world through a male pair of eyes.

With Lisbeth that aspect was missing. Yet we became very close as she was the sister I never had. I began to think that Cliff's system of P, Q and R was beginning to fall apart. Where would I plot the bond between Lisbeth and I? On the negative Q-axis? No, the mathematical analogy just collapsed. There's an infinite variety of relationships and it's hopeless to try to classify them.

Among the many things Lisbeth and I discussed were the tiny ups and downs in her relationship with Cliff. I was privileged to be able to see things from both sides of the fence. Some people might say that I had no right to invade their privacy, but they were both glad to have a third person to talk to. Of course neither knew that I was able to see things from their partner's point of view. But I had brought this marriage into being, it was a good marriage, and I was damned if I was going to let it founder.

Not that it was ever in serious trouble. I don't want to sound like I was the only thing that kept them together. If I told you some of the petty things that upset them from time to time, you'd laugh. All marriages have their little bumps, and I'm certain that if I hadn't been around they would have sorted things out on their own. Still, with a little of my help, this sorting out went more smoothly.

We often went on holidays together. One of our favourite destinations was Katoomba, in the Blue Mountains. It was high country, but not like in the New England. At Echo Point the land drops away a couple of thousand feet to a more or less flat valley floor that extended almost as far as the eye could see. It was a sight that took my breath away!

In the 60s, Katoomba was full of family guest houses. The one we used to stay at was *Wykehurst*. It's not there any more. It was run by an elderly couple, Mr and Mrs Bartrop, as a Christian guest-house.

The girls loved going on the Scenic Railway. It's a left-over from a coal railway. They used to mine coal in the cliff-face, many hundreds of feet below the top of the cliff, and they brought it up on this near-vertical track. Of course, the



coal-trucks had been replaced by carriages, where the seats were tilted back. When you get in you are almost looking up to the sky. Then, a few seconds after leaving the station, you go over the edge and are now looking straight ahead.

The train is on a cable, and it doesn't go particularly fast, but the excitement of going over the cliff, and into a narrow crevice, always



brings squeals of excitement from the passengers. Once you get to the station, several hundred feet below the top but still well above the valley floor, you get out and go for a walk. There is abandoned machinery, entrances to mines, and old miners' huts.

We went for lots of bush walks. A favourite was the short walk out to Anne. That's my made-up name for the only one of the Three Sisters that was accessible. Emily shunned social occasions and Charlotte was always awkward in company. Only Anne was normal socially.

The Three Sisters are three outcrops of rock, not far from the lookout. Cliff related the Aboriginal story that ended in three sisters being turned into stone by a witch-doctor. He did this to protect them because they were in danger of being abducted. However, before he could reverse the spell, he was killed and so the sisters remained stone columns for eternity.

"The names of the sisters," said Cliff, "were Meehni, Wimlah and Gunnedoo. But you have your own names for them, don't you Cathy?"

"Yes, I do. To me they remind me of the Brontë sisters," I explained. "The nearest one is



Anne. She was the most accessible in her day – the most normal one. The second, and largest one, is Charlotte, because she made the biggest name in the literary world, and Emily is the furthest one. She was always the remote one who never made any friends.”

“You realise that there are really *five sisters*?” said Lisbeth. “If you look closely you’ll see that, out beyond Emily, there are two small outcrops.”

I hadn’t noticed them before, but it hit me in an instant. “Obviously they’re Maria and Elizabeth – the ones who died of cholera at school when they were about eleven.”

We went on some longer walks, including the Devil’s Staircase that takes you right down to the valley floor. That one took Lisbeth and I the whole day. Cliff said that his knee was playing up, and so he chose to browse around the bookshops.



Liesje and Marijke said that they wanted to go looking for mountain devils. These are little nut-like things that grow on a certain plant. They’re shaped a bit like devils’ heads, with two pointed bits, like horns. They were all the rage at the time. Several shops sold packets of pipe cleaners. You attached the pipe cleaners to make the bodies, legs and a tail, and the finished product became a little ornament you could put up on a mantle-piece.

So, it was just Lisbeth and I who put on our heaviest shoes and took a packed lunch. Now I know that my friends and relatives have a propensity for falling off cliffs, but Lisbeth and I returned late that afternoon, with no worse injuries than a bit of sunburn and blistered feet.

Cliff would tell me stories about funny incidents that have happened to him in his work as a vet. A particularly memorable story was the following.

You want me to tell you one of the funny things that have happened to me as a vet? Well there was old Mrs Pimpleton. She rang up and said that her pet mouse wasn't eating. People *do* keep mice as pets, but they never bring them to vets. But as I treated her son's horse I thought I should go along with it. "OK, bring it to the surgery," I said.

She replied, "but you advertise home visits, and you always come out to Thomas's horse. It would be more convenient ..."

I replied, politely but firmly, "horses are home visits, mice have to be brought to the surgery". So next day she brought a shoe box with holes in the lid. I opened the box and found, not a little mouse, but a large rat that looked as if it was dead! I said, "you realise that's not a mouse don't you? Do you want me to dispose of it?" I carried the box towards the rubbish bin.



Whereupon Mrs Pimpleton whimpered, "do you think it's serious? Tabitha will be most upset. Isn't there anything you can do?"

I stopped, and asked, "who's Tabitha?"

She replied, "it's my cat – she's adopted little Mickey and sleeps with him every night. They curl up together." I'd heard of strange relationships between animals. There was once a cat and a chicken who were inseparable – but a cat and a rat?

I asked her, "what have you been feeding the ...
er ... the ... Mickey?"

She told me that Mickey ate what the cat ate. I looked at the rat more closely and detected some sign of life. "Leave it with me," I said, and ushered her out. Well I managed to nurse the rat back to health and tried to find out what a rat should eat. Certainly cat food isn't an appropriate diet for a rat.

When she eventually came to collect her revived rat, she asked me how much she owed. This was a problem. The schedule of fees was

organised under animal type. If Mickey had been a horse I should have charged her three guineas. If he was a cat it would have been ten shillings and sixpence, but there was no list for rats!

"Have it on me this time," I said. "If you have further trouble I suggest you take him to Mr Schneider in Windsor. He's an expert on rats!" I never found out whether Mrs Pimpleton ever consulted him about her rat because I never saw her, or her son, again.

I could tell you dozens of other stories that Cliff told me, but I won't, in case I eventually succeed in getting him to write them up as *It Could Only Happen To A Vet*.

One day, on our frequent walks in the Cattai National Park, Lisbeth confided to me that she was pregnant again. This was a surprise because her two girls were already in their teens. She'd found out the day before, and had told Cliff that night.

"I'm so happy for you both. Perhaps it will be a boy this time."

"Poor boy, if it is one. He'll be bossed around by his two big sisters," she laughed.

"They don't seem too bossy to me," I said.

"Just wait till they have someone much younger they can boss. Liesje has a reputation at school for being bossy."

This wasn't the only big change in their lives. Cliff had given in his notice to Mr Larkin and was in the process of buying a property at Ebenezer on the western side of the Hawkesbury. The idea was to move to the larger property before the baby came. There he would set up his own practice.

He was proud of the sign that he placed near his front fence: "CLIFF de GROOT, VETERINARY SURGEON". At the time, the western side of the Hawkesbury had hardly any other vets and people who lived there usually had to go all the way into Windsor. Cliff saw this as a great opportunity. Mr Larkin was sorry to see Cliff go but he recognised that he had the qualities to build up his own practice. Exciting times were ahead, or so we thought!

27. A TRAGIC TWIST

O God! Why does tragedy always seem to follow me – my family and my friends. First it was Dad, and then George, both falling from great heights. Then Richard almost died twice. And now it was Lisbeth! She died suddenly from a rare condition called ‘ileosigmoid knotting’, a twist in the bowel that causes an obstruction. A likely contributing factor, in Lisbeth’s case, was her pregnancy.

She’d had some abdominal symptoms a few days before, but this condition is very hard to diagnose in pregnant women. One night, when the pain became unbearable, Cliff rushed her to hospital. But her bowel had become gangrenous and she died after only three days.

Of course, she lost the baby. It was a boy. At least he would be spared from having to cope with bossy older sisters, but I don’t think that would have been a problem. Why is it, when tragedy strikes, it’s in our nature to try to find compensating tiny positives in all the negative? People say, “Oh, it’s a tragedy, but at least ...” – but it doesn’t work. A tragedy like this is an utter tragedy. There were really *no* compensating factors in Lisbeth’s case.

For those three days, Cliff was at Lisbeth’s bedside, and I looked after the two girls. Cliff was a mess. I was a mess. We really needed someone, who was a little less affected by the tragedy, to look after all of us. That person, of course, was Mum. Good old Mum, always there to help out. Lisbeth’s own family lived in Holland, and they were on their way. Cliff wasn’t very close to his own family. Their only contribution was to send a sympathy card.

So I had to help organise another funeral. Naturally this was to be at the little Presbyterian Church at Ebenezer where I buried George. It’s a lovely old church – the oldest continuously operating church in Australia, with its own little graveyard on the side, nestling among the trees.

Mr Larkin waived the three months notice and was happy to get a locum until he could find a replacement for Cliff. Meanwhile I had to let Felicity and Richard manage the Potts publishing business on their

own while I helped look after the girls until Lisbeth's parents arrived from Holland.

People often say, "that was a lovely funeral". No funeral can be called 'lovely' in my opinion – certainly not when someone dies young – certainly not when someone dies of a condition that most people recover from. Given the condition, it was probably inevitable that Lisbeth had to lose the baby, but why did she have to die herself? Cliff tortured himself with the thought that *if* he'd got her to hospital earlier she might still be alive.

I don't blame Cliff. I don't even blame the doctor. It's a rare condition, and can be very hard to diagnose. Cliff had acted as promptly as he could be expected to and, had the twisting been less severe, the gangrene wouldn't have set in. There was no negligence. It was simply 'an act of God'.

That's a pretty silly phrase, isn't it. If you can't blame anyone else you have to blame God. I suppose it's natural for anyone, with even a shred of a belief in God to cry, "why did you make it happen"? But that's not how things work. I can't picture a God who sits up there on his throne, having 'fun' playing with people's lives. "Today, what can I do to amuse me? I know, I'll make Lisbeth die. It will be fun to see what happens!"

The belief that God is all powerful leads us to think that when something goes wrong, it's a deliberate act of God that's brought it about. The Problem of Pain is one that theologians have wrestled with for centuries. I'm no theologian but I think it has something to do with free will. God not only gave humans free will, I believe he gave the whole physical universe a sort of free will. I've read how quantum physics says that tiny particles have a randomness which, in a way, is like having free will. I don't suppose we'll ever really understand.

The writer C.S. Lewis lost his wife to bone cancer after only a few years of marriage. He wrote a sort of a diary as a therapy, recording his thoughts in the weeks following her death. He nearly lost his faith but, like Job, he recovered the strength to cope. God might not send tragedy, but I do believe that He can give us inner strength to cope with it.

Anyway, Lewis was persuaded to publish this work, *A Grief Observed*, anonymously. When it appeared, many of his friends bought

copies to give to him. “Jack, (that was the name his friends knew him by) this book might help you to come to terms with your grief over the death of Joy.” Of course, he hadn’t the heart to tell them, “you’re wasting your time – *I wrote it*”. So he accepted the books graciously, and ended up with over a dozen copies of his own book!

Now I know what you might be thinking. “At last Cliff and I can get together.” Is this the silver lining to the dark clouds? Cliff’s prediction that he would marry me as a widow, was now possible but that’s not always how things work.

Patrick Brontë’s wife died of stomach cancer, leaving him with six, very young, children, including the three who went on to write those famous novels. Maria Brontë’s illness was prolonged, and extremely painful. At least Lisbeth’s illness was mercifully brief, and she had the benefit of modern pain-killers.

There I go, down the track of “at least ...” but it’s an inevitable part of coming to terms with grief. Anyway, Patrick Brontë’s sister-in-law, Elizabeth Branwell, came to help him cope, and ended up staying in Haworth the rest of her life to look after the children.

But Mr Brontë didn’t look to her as Maria’s successor, and nor did Aunt Branwell see this as an opportunity to escape spinsterhood. No, Patrick looked elsewhere for a possible second wife, though he was unsuccessful. Anyway, there’s no way I *could* marry Cliff, even if I’d wanted to. Imagine having the name Catherine de Groot! I was no empress!

After some weeks Lisbeth’s parents arrived from England, and I was able to get back to Sydney, and live back with Mum. It was nice to resume my activities at the publishing house. Felicity and Richard had built it up so that there were now six of us employed. We had to find a larger office. Richard had really found his niche in life. He continued to paint, and even brought out an edition of his own paintings, but it seemed that art publishing had now become his passion. He used to say, “people in rural and remote Australia can’t easily get to see great art in galleries, while I’m helping to bring art to the most remote places”. He was

particularly proud of an edition of art by a newly emerging Aboriginal artist.

Lisbeth's parents stayed for six months, but they had other children and grandchildren back in The Netherlands. So, I did an Aunt Branwell, and went back to Ebenezer to look after the children. Cliff had set up his practice and, although it was slow at first, it slowly picked up. Gradually people living there heard that they didn't have to take their sick animals all the way into Windsor. Besides, more and more people were coming to live along these river flats.

It was not an area for farm animals. Most farms there grew crops. There were several turf farms, but grass never needs the attention of a vet. There was one dairy, with about sixty cows, and quite a few horses, but most of Cliff's work dealt with domestic animals – cats and dogs and the occasional budgerigar. Oh, and once a small child brought in his pet mouse, but never, again, a rat!

One of Cliff's clients was Wendy, Richard's sister. She was now nursing at Windsor Hospital and so she had moved from Brighton-Le-Sands out to Cattai, quite near the National Park. She was able to have a horse and Cliff, of course, had become her vet. I often visited her on her days off, which involves crossing the river by the Sackville car ferry. It's such a delightful way to travel. Even though the crossing only takes four to five minutes, on really nice days it's like going on a mini-cruise. I just sat there in my car, looked at the river and the birds and felt that all was right with the world.

Meanwhile Potts Publishers was doing very well. We managed to sign up one of Australia's top poets. I had finished my *Trevor the Tram* series after only a few books. They sold moderately well but they were never a household word like *Cuddlepot* and *Snugglepie*, or is it *Snugglepote* and *Cuddlepier*? Note to self – check this. I think, as I get older, I'm developing Dad's bad habit of confusing things!

I managed to get into Sydney every couple of weeks. Cliff bought himself a new car and passed his little Austin on to me. I could never

have done it by public transport and, even with my little car, it took nearly two hours each way.

Every month I was able to bring Mum out to visit. She usually stayed the whole weekend. I'd drive down on a Friday, work in the office, and drive back with Mum in the evening. She'd spend the weekend with the family and then I'd drive her back on the Sunday evening. I'd stay the night with her at Holbrook Avenue, spend the morning in the office and drive back early on the Monday afternoon.

Whenever I was in the office I noticed that Felicity and Richard seemed to be getting on really well. I'd often catch them laughing at each other's jokes. I wonder ...? No, he's much too young for her!

28. THE RUNAWAY FERRIES

When businesses evolve, and their name is no longer accurate, they still tend to keep their original name. In 1886, George Robertson and David Angus formed a publishing company, known as *Angus and Robertson*. But when Mr Angus pulled out of the partnership, due to ill health in 1900, the business name remained the same, and has done so for well over a hundred years.

So, when my husband Leonard George Potts, formed a partnership with his cousin, Felicity Anne Potts, the company was registered as *L.G. and F.A. Potts*. On my marriage I became Catherine Potts, but on taking over as a partner after George's death, the initials L.G. remained.

Felicity and I had decided to make Richard a partner and, technically, the company should have become *F.A. & C.M. Potts and R.W. Ward, Publishers*, but we kept the old name. However a new development warranted a further name change, to *F.A. & R.W. Ward and C.M. Potts*. You can guess the reason for this. Richard and Felicity got married. True, she was 15 years older than he was, but it didn't seem to matter to them, so why should it matter to me. Anyway we kept the original name.

Dear Richard. I had come to love him over the years. But, except for that one year of aberration when I thought we were R-partners, it was only ever in the P-sense. He became like a brother to me, and there wasn't the faintest bit of jealousy between me and Felicity, any more than there had been between Lisbeth and I.

Well, if I'm to be truthful, at the wedding I *did* feel some pain of jealousy. I was jealous, or perhaps the correct word is 'envious', of Felicity, not because she was marrying Richard, but because the wedding took place in the same church in the Rocks where years ago George and I had been married. Happy as I was for them both, I couldn't help being a little envious of the fact that she had decades of marriage to look forward to while I'd had just one year, and that was long gone. There's

very little difference between a widow after one year of marriage, and a spinster.

What about Cliff and me? Was there yet another wedding to come? Will I be announcing, on a later page, “READER I MARRIED HIM”? Sorry to disappoint you. I continued to live with Cliff and his family, but as a housekeeper. I could even say, *our* family because, although I was never his wife, I was a mother to Liesje and Marijke in the true sense of the word.

Ever since the Christmas pageant I’d always compared myself to Mary. Mary was technically an unmarried mother at the time that Jesus was born. Of course, I’d long ceased associating that with shame, because I realised that she’d had a job to do and she did it really well. I was, also, technically an unmarried mother, though the man I was living with was not my husband, like the woman that Jesus encountered at the well. I had children in the true sense of the word, even though I hadn’t given birth to either of them.

I was living with Cliff in the same sense that Aunt Branwell lived with Patrick Brontë. Cliff and I had separate bedrooms, but at least, unlike at Haworth, we ate meals together. We often talked about getting married – for practical reasons. It was embarrassing to be called Mrs de Groot by the teachers at the Ebenezer school but, to their credit, they came to accept the rather anomalous situation without enquiring whether Cliff and I ever slept together. So we kept putting it off, until the girls were old enough for it not to matter any more.

It’s true that I loved Cliff dearly. Not sexually – that part of my heart was still reserved for the memory of my dear departed George. But there’s a strong spiritual bond between us – not one that bordered on madness, like Cathy and Heathcliff. I could never say, “Nelly, I *am* Cliff – he’s always in my mind – not as a pleasure ... but as my own being!”.

The Q-relationship that we have between us, still to this day, is something rather unique. Well, perhaps it isn’t. I believe that many married couples, as they get older, drift from R to Q, with a little bit of S on the side. How many couples who’ve celebrated their tenth wedding anniversary are still passionate with each other in the way they were on

day 1, in the sense that they get butterflies in their stomach when they so much as shake hands. How many married men would keep one of their wife's handkerchiefs in their bottom drawer, to drool over? These are perfectly normal in a courting couple, in an engaged couple, even in a newly married couple. But a truly loving marriage progresses beyond these adolescent phenomena. Even sexual activity, though it might remain important throughout a life together, becomes less important as a deeper love, based on years of shared experiences, takes over.

Of course, you'll say, "how does she know these things – unless she's talking from experience?" I was with George for too short a time to know, first-hand, how a marriage develops, and my relationship with Cliff was never a true marriage.

I guess I'm speaking from observing married couples, and reading about them in literature. I can offer the same justification as the priest when he pontificates about marriage, or children. He says, "one doesn't have to be a criminal to have opinions about penal reform." Perhaps you think that all this talk about P, Q and R is just nonsense, but there I *am* speaking from experience. Never mind, let's talk of other things.

Of shoes, and ships and sealing wax, I have very little to say. Of disasters, I have just a little more to tell. Don't be worried. Fortunately, to the time of my writing this in 1979, there have been no further tragedies in my little family, or among my friends. But last year we *did* have some excitement.

You see, it rained heavily for days around Easter time. The Hawkesbury flood plains are particularly vulnerable and there have been some pretty bad floods in the area, over the years. Well, we watched the water rise in the river. Warragamba dam, which was built in the 60s, was full and overflowing.

Our house in Ebenezer was on high enough ground that we weren't under threat, though if we ever get another flood like the one in June 1867, we could be affected. There were three days of continual

heavy rain. With floodwaters from several rivers that flow into the Hawkesbury, the water began to rise at Ebenezer.

I was on my way back from visiting Wendy in Cattai. It was quite late, probably about half-past nine, when I approached the Sackville ferry. It was the proverbial 'dark and stormy night' and I could barely see a few yards in front of the car. As I turned a corner, going quite slowly, I suddenly found myself ploughing into the water. The engine cut out, and I stopped as quickly as I could, but my feet were already wet. I tried to restart the car but the ignition coil must have got wet.

I had visions of having to get up on the roof, but when I opened the door, I found that there wasn't a strong current. I fetched the torch from the glove box and stepped out. I soon gave up any idea of walking to the ferry, and in any case I realised that with this amount of water the ferry wouldn't be operating.

I'd heard that, when the river reached a certain height over the Windsor bridge, the ferries along this stretch of the river were taken off their cables and allowed to float free. The Sackville ferry was secured, so that it could rise with the water, but wouldn't be washed away.



I later heard that a couple of the ferries at Wiseman's Ferry had been lashed together and tied to a mooring. The force of the water was so great that they broke free and started being carried at great speed down the river, with the two ferrymen aboard. These ferries collided with

another ferry that had broken free and so all three of them were lashed together. The brave ferrymen aboard were hopeful of somehow directing this little 'armada' to a safe place, but the water rushing down the river had waves a couple of feet high and the ferries were travelling at about 18 knots.

Downstream there were no more ferries – only the Brooklyn Bridge. The worry was that, if the combined weight of the ferries hit the bridge, it could do serious damage. So, two tugs were brought up from Church Point in an attempt to control them. They managed to bring the ferries to safety at Peat Island, just before the Brooklyn Bridge.

Several men stayed on Peat Island to repair the ferries and tow them back up the river after the flood receded. A week later the Sackville ferry, as well as the Wisemans and Webbs Creek ferry services, were back to normal.

Meanwhile, I was left stranded on one side of the river and I had to get home to Ebenezer on the other. I started walking back, in the pouring rain. I realised that my best plan was somehow to get back to Wendy's house in Cattai.

After about ten minutes I saw approaching headlights. I stood in the middle of the road and waved the car down. A young woman was driving.

"If you're headed for the ferry, I doubt if it's still running. I had to leave my car a quarter of a mile away and the water was already up to the floor of my car."

"Hop in! You're soaking," she said. After I sat down in the passenger seat, dripping water all over the floor, she asked my advice. "Are there any other ferries along the river?"

"There's Lower Portland, and Wiseman's ferry, but my guess is that they won't be running either."

"Then I suppose I'll have to go back and cross the Windsor Bridge. Can I give you a lift anywhere?"

"Windsor will be no good. If the river's this high in Ebenezer, it will definitely be over the road at the Windsor bridge.

"What then?"

"The only way I can think of is to cross over on the Brooklyn Bridge, but that'll mean going via Hornsby which would take a couple of hours. Of course, I didn't realise then how close Brooklyn Bridge would come to being closed."

"Oh dear!" she said.

“If you’re happy to drive me to my friend’s place in Cattai, I’m sure she’ll be willing to put you up until morning. Mind you, getting there may not be easy.”

We drove along the Sackville Ferry Road and then onto the Wisemans Ferry Road. The rain had eased a little. When we reached the bridge over Cattai Creek we found that it was covered with water. There were a couple of abandoned vehicles there.

We were within a couple of miles of Wendy’s house and so I said, “I think we’ll have to leave your car here and go the rest of the way on foot. Are you up to it?”

“Won’t we get swept away crossing the river?”

“It’s not that deep and it’s not flowing that quickly. You can just see the top of the rails just above the water. If we hang onto them we should be OK.”

So we did that. The water was quite cold but, walking across the bridge, it was never above our waists. After we reached the other side there was the dreary, soggy, walk up from the river. When we reached the little Cattai Public School we turned left. It was about three o’clock in the morning when we found ourselves knocking on Wendy’s door. At first she wasn’t going to open it.

“Wendy. It’s me. I couldn’t get home because of the floods.”

She opened the door and I introduced her to Penny, my driver. “Could we bunk down for the night?”

“Sure, but you’d better get your wet clothes off and have a nice warm shower. How did you get so wet?”

“I had to abandon my car at the Sackville Ferry and I met Penny who drove me, until we had to abandon *her* car at the Cattai Creek bridge. We walked from there.”

Wendy gave me a warm dressing gown and made me a hot cup of cocoa with some Tia Maria in it, while Penny was warming up in the shower. Then, while I showered, Penny, now warm on the outside, drank cocoa and Tia Maria to warm herself from within.

Penny told Wendy that she’d been staying with some friends in Ebenezer. I knew the McDonalds because they had a couple of horses which Cliff attended to whenever they had an injury.

“I think the first thing we should do,” I said, “is to ring Cliff to stop him worrying, and then the MacDonald’s.”

“I’m afraid the phone is out of order. I think the storm must have blown down the phone lines.”

There was nothing for it. Cliff would have to worry that I’d had an accident. We got a little sleep for the remaining couple of hours that night.

Cliff *had* worried. When I hadn’t come home, he drove to the Ebenezer side of the Sackville Ferry. Finding nothing untoward along the way, he deduced that I hadn’t been able to cross and would have gone back to Wendy’s.

At first light he borrowed a pushbike, from one of his clients who lived near the Sackville ferry. He saw the ferry, securely tied to some moorings. The cables couldn’t be seen, but he realised that the ferry had been detached from them and that they were still there under the water. He managed to wade across, with one hand holding the bike and the other holding the cable.

Fortunately, he knew the way to Wendy’s. Reaching the Cattai Creek Bridge he waded across as we had done the night before. He dragged the bike through the water with one hand while he clung to the railing with the other.

Despite all the effort that it took him to get there, he was at Wendy’s door by eight o’clock next morning. We were having breakfast and discussing how we could get news through to him. He was so relieved that I was alright.

Not far from Wendy’s, in Reedy Road, there was another one of Cliff’s patients. Well, his pigs were. Cliff was able to ring from there and put the McDonald’s mind at rest. He also rang home. Luckily Liesje and Marijke were now old enough to look after themselves for a time.

It was the school holidays and they were so disappointed that this hadn’t happened during term time, because there would have been no way to reach their school. No matter how much one enjoys school, the prospect of an unexpected week off is always delightful – much more precious than scheduled school holidays.

I won't bore you with the logistics of how we all got our derailed lives back onto their proper tracks. Cliff returned to Ebenezer the way he'd come while I stayed with Penny and Wendy.

The ferries would take a week to resume operation. Luckily the Windsor Bridge was reopened after two days. So we were Wendy's unexpected guests for that time. She wasn't able to get to work at the Windsor Hospital and so we all had a good time doing nothing. Then, once the bridge reopened, she drove us home. There's nothing so nice as being back in one's own home.

Well, Reader, I've come to the end of my story, though I hope there will be much more to tell in the future. I write 'dear Reader' but, of course, the only people who will ever read this account of a fairly ordinary life will be you, my dear girls, Liesje and Marijke. I'll let your father read it, and Mum and Richard and Felicity, because it's about them too. I hope that, when you have your own children, they may find it interesting to read about my life and trust that they will regard me as their grandmother.

But we've come to that point in my life where any future events will be as much in *your* memories as in *mine* and, if you ever write your memoirs, you'll give your own version of those events.

I'll finish with a brief account of a recent event that you'll remember just as vividly as I do. I refer, of course, to the marriage of your uncle Darcy and his life-long friend, though it would be pushing it to say 'childhood sweetheart', that is my dear friend Wendy. Who would have thought that, when we played that game of cricket all those years ago, the little girl who struggled to hold a cricket bat, would end up marrying my brother.

Their marriage took place in that delightful old church at Ebenezer. My darling George, at peace in the graveyard, was a silent witness to the festivities, as was Lisbeth. A year ago, Darcy had become an intern at Windsor Hospital, and there he'd renewed his acquaintanceship with Wendy. He no longer saw her as that little urchin

with a runny nose who was hopeless at cricket. She had blossomed into an attractive young woman.

Acquaintanceship became friendship and friendship became courtship, and all three ships sailed into Ebenezer Harbour on that memorable day. You two girls were the junior bridesmaids. We had a marquee erected in the grounds and, following the banquet, a jazz band entertained us under the stars. Fireworks were set off down by the river. Once the evening had come to an end, I wandered through the churchyard, visiting your uncle George's grave. Although he hardly knew you, and although you won't remember him, I hope I can call him that.

To paraphrase the last words of *Wuthering Heights*, I lingered around George's grave, under that benign sky: watched the moths fluttering among the gum trees, and listened to the soft wind breathing through the grass, and wondered if he was enjoying quiet slumbers in that quiet earth.

Until you girls get married, as I hope you will, I don't expect there will be any more marriages among those who've played a part in my life. Mum, Cecilia and I are all widows who've had a happy marriage but who see no need to marry again.



29. A DUTCH ABORIGINAL

I've just read Cathy's memoirs, which comprise the previous twenty-eight chapters. I don't think I could have coped with living on that farm, called 'Paradise' and I take my hat off to her for enduring those hardships.

I suppose there are very few girls who have such a weird mixture of genes as I have. Aboriginal and Dutch! The Dutch visited these shores long before the English, and, if they had settled, I suppose a Dutch-Aboriginal mixture might have been quite common. But, as it is, a Dutch-Aboriginal heritage is quite exotic.

How do I feel about my racial mix? Well I must confess that I feel much more Dutch than Aboriginal. Father has left his Aboriginal roots far behind and I've never met any of his relatives, not even my Aboriginal grandparents. They send me birthday cards every year, and keep promising to visit us, but they never seem to get around to it. I feel sorry for what Australians did to the Aboriginals in previous generations, but I



don't feel any personal guilt about it because I'm Dutch. When the Dutch were in the East Indies, they treated their native servants really well. I can't understand why the Indonesians, as they are now called, forced us out.

But the Netherlands is a wonderful place. Mother took us to visit my Dutch Oma and Opa and my Tantes and Ooms and cousins some years ago and I loved the country. Such wonderful food! Poffertjes and Stroopwafels. I even developed a taste for raw herring. They take out the bones and you just hold up the fillet above your mouth and let it slide down your throat! The other thing that I learnt is that the proper way to eat hot chips is with a lacing of mayonnaise.

The countryside in the Netherlands is so fascinating, with all the canals and dikes and windmills. I find the Australian outback to be so boring, with just miles and miles of dry scrub, and the only trees are the Eucalyptus. Not that I've been to the outback, but I've seen pictures. But the Netherlands – I think I'd like to go and live there one day. I could cope with the cold. Dutch houses are so gezellig. That means cosy, and warm and full of all sorts of interesting nic-nacs. They even leave the blinds on their front rooms up at night so everyone walking past can see how nice it is inside.

We went there for Christmas in a particularly cold winter. The canal outside Oma's house was frozen over and my cousins showed me how to ice-skate. Marijke didn't like it as much, because she had the bad luck to skate over one section in the middle, where the ice was thin. She fell through the ice and had to be fished out, shivering with cold.

My aunts and uncles all spoke fairly good English but it must



have been somewhat of an effort. Whenever they weren't talking to me or Marijke, they dropped back into Dutch. I'd hear all this unintelligible guttural gabble but every so often I'd hear the words "Liesje" or "Marijke". I quickly picked up enough basic Dutch to be able to discover what they

were saying about us! It turned out that they were just saying pretty tame things like the fact that we seemed to be enjoying the food.

When we returned from our two-month holiday, Mother would often speak to us in Dutch. I have a good ear and I picked it up quite well. Marijke struggled a bit with it, but then she is a year younger. I'm glad Father never attempted to speak Aboriginal. Well, he never had anybody around him who could speak his particular Aboriginal language. But the few times I heard it I didn't like the sound. I love the guttural Dutch sounds that come from the back of your throat. I can even pronounce the name of the seaside town, Scheveningen, with the 'sch' sounding just like a Dutch girl would say it.

Since Mother died, I have come to love Cathy as if she was my own mother. Of course no-one will ever replace Lisbeth, and I'm grateful that Cathy had the good sense not to marry Father – so we girls were spared having a wicked step-mother. But I'm glad that Father has had the support of Cathy. I think I can understand this business of Q-relationships that Father often talks about.

I can't understand all this fuss about *Wuthering Heights*. Cathy's memoirs are full of references to it. I tried to read the novel once and found it most peculiar. It's just too much over the top. What with a waif-like girl banging on the window, and that demon of a Lockwood rubbing her wrists on the broken glass – I think he was worse than Heathcliff! My taste is more like Cathy's mother who prefers Jane Austen. I feel sorry for Cathy having had such an uneducated father.

I know Felicity and Richard quite well. They often come here and visit us, together with their adopted daughter. I love Felicity, but I can't stand Richard. He's too opinionated for my taste. I think she could have done so much better. I was horrified when I read about the dissolute life he led in Melbourne. He says he's reformed, but being a descendent of Captain Thunderbolt I doubt if that's possible. What really worries me is that he's still friends with Rosemary, the woman who tried to poison him! I'm not worried about her making another attempt. It's Felicity I'm

worried about. What if Rosemary and Richard are keeping their relationship sizzling on the back-burner?

I'm half Aboriginal, which I don't mind in principle. People say that Aboriginals are less intelligent than other people but I can't agree. I'm sure it has a lot to do with opportunities. If Reverend Matthews hadn't taken Father under his wing back then Dad might still be living in a humpy and working as a stockman.

Cathy told me once about Patrick Brontë, the father of the Brontë sisters, being born in Irish poverty and living in a hovel. It was through a Presbyterian minister who recognised his abilities, and put him through university, that he became a well-respected clergyman. But I said to Cathy, "that might be so, but why do you have to drag the Brontë family into everything?" She apologised and said she had grown up on a literary Yorkshire moor and couldn't help it.

Anyway, Mother once told me that she had done some genealogical research, with the help of her aunts, and they discovered that I was one-eighth Indonesian. Dutchmen often went to the Dutch East Indies and worked for the East India Company, and many of them married native women. Apparently one of my great grandfathers did just that. One of Mother's aunts sent her an old photograph of my great grandmother, and she looked really pretty, but she had dark skin. I guess this makes me five-eighths native! Of course it's possible that Father wasn't full-blooded Aboriginal. He says that both his parents are Aboriginal, but they may not have been full-blooded because his skin isn't really all that dark.

I'm not racist and the thought of having so much non-European blood flowing through my veins doesn't worry me except ... my skin colour is darker than Father's and I've had to endure taunts at school about my being Aboriginal. I suppose my broad nose doesn't help. Marijke, on the other hand, has a Roman nose, and has the fair skin of a Dutch girl and she wouldn't be taken for an Aboriginal if it wasn't for the fact that she's my sister.

When I was twelve I took up singing lessons with a teacher in Richmond who had once taught singing at the Sydney Conservatorium. I am somewhere between a mezzo soprano and a contralto and Marijke says that my deep voice is because I am half Aboriginal, but that's silly. That's the first I've ever heard that Aboriginals are supposed to have deep voices. I mean, Kiri te Kanawa is a soprano isn't she. Well, she's half Maori, not Aboriginal, but you get the idea. Anyway Marijke is just as half-Aboriginal as I am and she has a sweet soprano voice.

I've often thought that she might do well as a singer but she's not the least bit interested in music. She's the artist in the family. She loves painting – mainly landscapes. She says the Australian countryside is full of infinite variety. Personally I can't see it. Once she told me that she had a dream that she was in heaven and she was in tears wanting to return to the Australian bush. Then the angels got so angry they flung her out into the middle of Cattai National Park and she says she awoke sobbing for joy!

When I told Cathy she said, "pooh, that was no dream she's had. She's just quoted something out of *Wuthering Heights* and changed it to suit her Aboriginal love of country." That annoys me about Marijke. She seems to think that *Wuthering Heights* is the ant's pants. I must finish reading it some day so that I can tell when she's merely quoting that Brontë woman and not expressing her own ideas.

I remember Uncle George – well we called him 'uncle'. It was so unfair that he had to die before he was able to celebrate his first wedding anniversary. He had a great sense of humour and was a great teller of stories. I once asked him why he left the de la Salle order. He said that he felt that he came to the realisation that the church, and not just the Catholic branch, had moved away from the fundamental principle of everyone being equal in the sight of God. He became disillusioned with the hierarchical nature of the organised Church.

I like Darcy and Wendy, although I have learnt to steer clear of certain topics, such as homosexuality, when talking to them. They are radical fundamentalists. In their eyes the Bible is the sole source of truth – not just any old version but the King James version. And they believe

that only their very literal interpretation is the correct one. They ridicule Biblical scholarship that tries to put the Bible in its historical context and has to wrestle with the many, slightly differing, manuscripts. No, their mantra is, “God has spoken to us in plain English,”. And, of course, what they mean by ‘plain English’ is the Elizabethan variety of the Authorised version.

30. *EVER ONWARD*

“Ever Onward”. That is the motto of Ebenezer Primary School, the little school Marijke and I went to. It was a tiny school with a one-roomed sandstone building that was built in 1902. When I went there were two classes – kindergarten to 2nd class in the old building and 3rd class to 6th class in a demountable. It even had a bell, but it had rusted and couldn’t be used, so unfortunately I couldn’t be bell monitor like Cathy.

I am very proud to have attended that historic school. It wasn’t always in the building from 1902 where I attended. No, the first school doubled as a church. Ebenezer church is the oldest church in Australia that is still in use.

I did some research when I was in 6th class, for a school project. There were some free settlers who came to Australia in 1802 on the ship *Coromandel*. There were 128 male convicts aboard and ten free settlers and their families. These mainly came from the Borders in Scotland and they knew each other and asked to be settled together. They were induced to come to Australia by a free voyage and the promise of a grant of a hundred acres on arriving in Sydney. The ship left Portsmouth on 8th February 1802 and met up with the *Perseus* at Spithead before sailing west.

The voyage on the *Coromandel* was unusual in that it was the first non-stop voyage to Australia, though the accompanying *Perseus* did have a need to call in at Rio. Yes, you may ask. Why did they go via America? I have no idea. There was no Panama Canal back then, so they would have had to go via Cape Horn. The journey took four months and one day. Whether the fact that they performed the voyage non-stop



had anything to do with it, they only had one death on board during the whole voyage, quite a remarkable feat.

On arrival in Port Jackson, Governor King observed a grey-haired old man, John Turnbull. He asked him why he had chosen to uproot himself at his time of life. “Old man, you’ve got one foot in the grave and the other out of it – what brought you here?” Well he may have seemed to be at death’s door, but in fact he was only 52. He married somewhat late in life and, having a young family – his youngest was only 19 months when the *Coromandel* arrived – may have contributed to his longevity. In fact it was Governor King who was first to have two feet in the grave. He died six years later at the age of 49, while Turnbull lived to the grand old age of 86.

I was particularly drawn to the name of William Stubbs, one of the free settlers on the *Coromandel*, Stubbs being Cathy’s maiden name. I remember her telling me that her father had the notion that he was descended from a convict, but I traced the descendants of William Stubbs and I’m fairly certain that Cathy is one of them!

The first residents met for worship under a eucalyptus tree that still stands today. The church was built near this tree in 1808 and 1809. The sandstone building was multi-purpose, being a church on Sundays and a school on the other six days. In 1817, next door to the church, a cottage for the headmaster was built, a building that serves as a small museum today.

The school began in 1810 and operated in the church until the 1880’s when a purpose-built school was constructed nearby. But this building burnt down and the school had to go back to the church. Then in the early 1900’s a new school was built on the previous site, and this building still stands today.

I used to get teased about my Aboriginal heritage. Once in primary school, as we sat out in the playground at lunch time, one girl asked, “whatcha got for lunch, Liesje, witchety grubs?” There were no Aboriginals in the school, just ‘white fellas’, and one Chinese boy, Harry Lim. The teacher nicknamed him The Third Boy, but I have no idea why.

Harry's ancestors had come to Australia during the gold-rush in the 1860s and so he considered himself as fully Australian. Once he said to me out of the blue, "why don't you go back to your own country, you blackie?" I wasn't offended because it was so ridiculous. I just burst out laughing. "It'd be a bit hard now that Australia is an island – sixty thousand years ago we just walked here! Or do you mean 'go back to Holland'. I'm half Dutch, you know."

On the whole such taunts were rare and I got on really well with my fellow students, even Harry. Once we had to do a project on Aboriginal culture and he asked me for help. Unfortunately I knew no more about Aboriginal culture than he did of Chinese culture.

One day stands out in my memory. We were going on an outing to the Taronga Park Zoo. For a few of the pupils this would be the first time they had been outside the Hawkesbury region in their lives. We had a bus to take us to Richmond Station, then a motor rail took us to Riverstone, and an electric train to Central, another electric train to Circular Quay and then a ferry to Taronga Park. It was an epic journey.

At the Zoo we began with an introductory talk in a room. In those days there was no school uniform at our school and we must have looked a scruffy lot because the lecturer asked our teacher which orphanage we came from. The very next year school uniforms were introduced!

One of the out-of-school activities was marching. We competed in the local marching competitions and won first prize on several occasions.

When I was in 5th class I began to get very excited about being kind to animals. Being the daughter of a vet I guess this was second nature, but for me it extended to farm animals. I stopped eating meat, and even refused to eat eggs. I knew what terrible conditions the hens were subjected to just so we could have eggs for breakfast. Harry Lim agreed with me, and so did Rebecca Turnbull. We formed a little club that we called the Animal Suffrage Society and we called ourselves 'animal suffragettes'. Of course we didn't know the proper meaning of suffragette. The fact that one third of our little group was male

contradicted that term and, anyway, we weren't really asking for votes for chickens!

We became quite militant. Harry suggested going into the little grocery store and smashing the eggs.

"I'll keep Mr Jones talking so that you two can sneak behind the counter with spoons. Don't smash the eggs – just tap them to make them crack. No-one will buy them and Mr Jones will stop keeping eggs and that will be one in the eye for the Steiner Egg Company."

"But most people round here have their own hens. Jonsey sells very few eggs," I protested. The best place to smash eggs is closer in to Sydney."

Rebecca had a better idea. "Breaking eggs means that all that hard work that the hens have to do would be for nothing. Why don't we creep into the Steiner farm and let all the hens out."

"Great idea," said Harry. "Let's liberate the hens. They can then fly to wherever they want to go, eat whatever they like and they can hatch their eggs and become proper mothers."

"So can you two come over on your bike early tomorrow morning?" I asked the other conspirators.

"How early?"

"Let's see. The chickens will be waking up as soon as the sun rises but we'd better go well before that while it's still quite dark. How about three o'clock?"

"OK, I'll set my alarm," said Harry. "When I get to your house I'll tap on the window to wake you up."

"Don't forget I'm upstairs." We lived in a flood-prone area and our house, though on higher ground, was built on stilts, like most in the river flats. The downstairs area was merely the garage and storage area.

"Listen, nearby there are a couple of fir trees that we're growing for Christmas. Break off a branch and use it to tap on my window. Are you sure you know which is my window? We can't have you waking up Dad or Cathy."

"Yes, I think so."

That night I was woken by Marijke coming into my room in a terrible state. "There's a hand tapping at my window. I think it's a ghost trying to get in."

"What do you mean a ghost?"

"I'm sure it's Cathy trying to get in."

"Do you mean she's locked herself out? Anyway, she's not a ghost!"

"Not *our* Cathy. I mean the Cathy in *Wuthering Heights*."

"What nonsense. The trouble with reading books is that it gives you the willies in the middle of the night. It will only be Harry, waking me up."

"Why does he want to wake you up in the middle of the night? Are you two going to elope?"

"Don't be so stupid – elope with Harry? Oh, well, I suppose I'll have to tell you. But wait till I've shown him I'm awake and will be down soon."

I opened my window and called out quietly, "I thought you knew which was my window. Now you've woken up my sister."

"Sorry," he whispered back.

"I'll be down in a minute. Can you fetch the ladder from under the house?"

"So if you're not eloping, what are you doing?"

"We're going to do something much more exciting than eloping. We're going to let the hens out of their cages at the egg farm in Wilberforce."

"What on earth for?"

"They're slaves, locked up in a prison. We're going to liberate them."

"Oh, is that all? William will be pleased."

"Who's William?"

"William Wilberforce you silly." With that she went back to bed. I jumped up to the window-sill and climbed down the ladder that Harry had set up for me.

I joined Harry and fetched my bike from under the house. I scolded him for getting the wrong window. "It's a good thing you tapped on Marijke's window. She thought you must have been a ghost from one of her silly books. If you'd picked the window on the other side of my room you would have woken Cathy and then we would have had some explaining to do!"

We rode off in silence and met up with Rebecca. Soon we found ourselves in Wilberforce, at the egg farm in George Road. There was no security surrounding the farm and so we were able to creep up to one of the barns where the hens were fast asleep.

"Do you think the hens will mind being liberated?" Rebecca asked. Harry didn't think so. "Nah! They might be cross to be woken up in the middle of the night, but they'll soon get used to their freedom."

The door had a padlock, but the hasp and staple were starting to come loose from the rotting timber. All it needed was a strong thump and the door could be opened. We crept in. There were rows and rows of metal cages, one stacked on the other. Each cage had a door that was closed, but not locked. The doors were designed to keep the hens in and they were too stupid to open their doors, but we could easily let them out.

Harry kept watch by the barn door, while Rebecca and I ran down the aisles, opening door after door. We had to leave the top row because we couldn't reach those doors. At first the sleepy hens just stirred. One or two of the more adventurous ones left the safety of their cage and wandered about on the cement floor, looking for corn. We spent about twenty minutes trying to shoo them out but, by the time we left, over three quarters of the hens were still in their cages and most of the remaining quarter just wallowed in the freedom to walk on concrete. Only two of them actually ventured outside the barn.

"We'd better get back or we'll be missed," said Harry. If we leave all the doors wide open the others will work out that they can escape when morning comes."

So we went back to our bikes and returned to our respective homes. I made a small amount of noise climbing back through my window but Cathy, in the next room, called out, "is that you Liesje?"

"Yes, I just had to go to the toilet." Soon all was again quiet.



The next day was Sunday, and nobody got up till about eight o'clock. We went off to the Ebenezer Presbyterian Church at eleven o'clock. After church there was a buzz of excitement.

"Did you hear about the break-in at the Steiner Farm in Wilberforce?" announced Mrs Phillips.

"No," I said putting on my most innocent face. "Did they catch them?"

"Do you mean the intruders or the hens?"

"Both." I knew the answer to one of these questions but had to pretend that I knew nothing.

"Well," said the reliable source, Mrs Phillips from Wilberforce, "they didn't catch the intruders." I knew that. I was more interested in how many hens had escaped. "And the hens?"

"Luckily most of them stayed in their cages. A few were walking around the barn. Probably a dozen had got out into the yard."

"Were they happy to be put back into their cages?" I asked.

"The one or two that were still alive seemed happy enough. But the rest had been gotten by foxes. They must have had a field day – or

field evening I suppose. There was blood and feathers and mangled bodies all over the grass.”

I felt sick. I had been responsible for the cruel deaths of almost a dozen hens. I looked over at Harry, who was also at church, with an expression of anguish that screamed, “what have we done?” Fortunately the scream was silent. Harry looked the other way, in case someone saw us looking at each other.

“They think it was kids,” said Mrs Phillips, making the most of being the centre of attention. I froze. I wanted to ask, “how do they know that?” but felt it was better to say nothing. Fortunately I wasn’t the only one who wanted to know.

“How do they know?” asked Mr Thompson.

“Well they opened the doors on the bottom three rows but it seems they couldn’t reach the top row.”

“They could have been midgets?” said Tommy with a big grin, “escaped from the circus.”

“I wonder if they thought they was doin’ a kindness to them poor devils. Probably didn’t know what the foxes would do,” said Mrs Johnson.

In the week that followed there was a half-hearted enquiry at the school. None of us owned up and the matter was dropped. That was the end of our little Animal Suffrage Society. We felt as though we’d lived up to our acronym. Instead we followed the motto of our school: “EVER ONWARD” and dreamed up another cause that we could engage in.

31. *DOMUM PULLAM*

It was then that I hit upon the idea of not trying to liberate all chickens, but to raise some of my own – with all the liberties and fraternities that any French chicken would be proud to raise the flag to and sing *La Marseille*.

Now, I always do things properly, and in the proper order. Before I could raise chickens in the manner to which they ought to be accustomed I needed a chicken house – with all the space, both indoor and outdoor, that chickens should have. And before I could build such a temple to poultry-hood I needed plans, and before I could draw up plans I needed a proper drawing board. So, for Christmas, in the year before I started high school, I asked for a drawing board on a pedestal, where I could raise or lower the board or tilt it to any desired angle. I decided that I would become an architect. Imagine – my career having hatched from an egg.

This magnificent edifice was going to be the most superb chicken house ever constructed. It would be shaped like a house with a gable roof, and would have six roosts, suitably spaced – light and airy, yet safe from foxes. An outdoor area at the back was to be suitably netted – again to keep out foxes and eagles. Some of this was to be shaded and some was always in the sun.

Marijke thought the idea was marvellous and she asked for certain improvements of her own. She wanted to include space for our bees. I wasn't sure how well bees and chickens got on together but I designed the construction in such a way that they could be reasonably separate. Then Cathy asked if the outdoor area could include a netted enclosure for vegetables. Finally Father asked if the design could include a small greenhouse for his orchids.

After three months I had the plans approved by the council – not the Hawkesbury Council, but the council that consisted of all four family members. Then the construction began.

We all assisted as best we could. Father was in charge of laying the concrete floor. I learnt the rudiments of carpentry and constructed the walls and frame. Cathy became the glazier for the greenhouse. Marijke undertook the cutting out and erection of the netting. Harry even helped as a labourer and general dogsbody.



By the time the edifice was completed it was Spring – an ideal time of the year to get chickens and plant vegetables. We named it *Domum Pullam*, which is Latin for ‘chicken house’. Cathy said, “what about the vegetables?” and I said, rather cleverly if I say so myself, “that’s the ‘pullam’ part”, as I had visions of pulling the cabbages and carrots out of the ground. Of course that name left out the bees and the orchids, but I wasn’t clever enough to include those without the name becoming cumbersome.

The results were all that we could desire. The chickens laid. The vegetables grew and the bees stocked up for Winter. It took a little longer for us to get some really nice orchids.

Now my vegan principles had relaxed somewhat in the time that it took to build the hen-house. I had decided that, so long as we allowed a few of the eggs to hatch, there was nothing ethically wrong with eating the rest. My sex education was a little vague, and when I announced my new plan to Father he pointed out that, in that case, we needed a rooster.

So he bought us one, and I was so pleased at being able to improve the sex lives of my chickens. We incubated a few fertilised eggs but there were so many left over that we decided to sell the excess. Likewise I felt that in removing honey from the hives we weren't robbing the bees. We made sure that we left enough for their own purposes. So I transformed myself from a vegan to a humane vegetarian.

We sold the eggs we didn't need, and the excess vegetables, to Mr Jones. And once the honey started flowing we couldn't keep up with it. Mr Jones could only take so much and we had to find other outlets. Our 'promised land' was flowing with milk and honey.

The only cloud on that horizon was the Great Egg Heist. We noticed that the hens suddenly stopped laying in the middle of the laying season. We didn't lock the hen-house at night because I'd rigged up a system of cords and pulleys so that we could close the door remotely from the house after dark and open it up when the sun rose. We didn't have to go outside to shut them in or let them out.

It was obvious to me that someone was creeping into our *domum pullam* in the early morning and was stealing the eggs. I considered staging a stake-out, but then I had a better idea. I would construct a booby trap. To steal the eggs you had to go right inside the building and I drew up plans for a system where if you stood on a certain board the door slammed shut. I removed the handle so that once inside there was no way of getting out. We would catch the culprit red-handed.

I built the contraption and the next night I primed it. We would open the door the next morning to confront the thief. That night, at about half-past three we heard some shouting coming from the hen-house. We decided to wait until morning to release the culprit and so went back to sleep.

In the morning all seemed quiet. Father and Cathy came with me as I opened the door of the hen house in case the culprit made a dash for freedom. But nobody ran out.

Cathy said, “look in the penetralium.”

“What in heaven is that?”

“It means the innermost part of the building.” I don’t know where she came across this word, but I can guess.

I went inside and saw a body curled up inside, either dead or perhaps just asleep. A yawn revealed that it was the latter, and as the face turned to my direction I was startled by the distinctive eyes – I’m not allowed to say ‘slanty’ – of my friend Harry. I remembered Cathy confronting Richard in the middle of the night when he tried to burgle her flat. So my friend was the thief!

“Hi Liesje, I couldn’t seem to get the door open.” What cheek. He didn’t seem at all remorseful.

“That’s because I set a trap. But I never expected for you to be the thief!”

“Thief? No you’ve got it wrong. I decided to stage a stake-out. But the door slammed and locked itself after I was inside and someone had taken off the handle so there was no way I could get out.”

“You might have told me you were going to do the stake-out.”

“I wanted it to be a surprise.”

“Did anyone else come?”

“Yeah, at one stage I saw the door quietly open a little and a nose poked itself in the gap – probably some eyes too. It was dark so I can’t be sure. Then the door closed again and locked itself.”

“Oh, you poor boy. You’re the only boy I know who’s been to a hen’s party.” That used to be the Australian name for a party for the bride that was only attended by the female family and friends – the counterpart to the buck’s party. I thought that was a funny quip at the time, but looking back on it now it doesn’t seem all that funny. Certainly Harry wasn’t laughing.

“Was it cold?”

“No, but as soon as the sun came up I was woken up with all their cackling. I couldn’t get back to sleep until they quietened down.”

After Cathy and Father went back to the house I made further plans with Harry.

“We’ve got to catch the thief. You and I will carry out a stake-out tonight.”

“Do you think he’ll be back?”

“We can only try.”

“But I don’t want to spend another night cooped up like that.”

I looked at Harry. He wasn’t quick with words – not like me – and I wasn’t sure whether he used the word ‘coop’ because it was a chicken coop. No, I decided, it was just an accident that it came out like that.

“No, we’ll reset the trap but tonight we’ll be waiting outside under that tree. As soon as we hear the door slam we’ll confront him. Can you bring a torch?”

We’d read lots of Enid Blyton books and so it was natural for us to arrange an owl hoot as a signal.

“Don’t you think an owl hoot is a little unnatural,” I said. “There aren’t any owls in Australia.”

“Yes there are. We had one of our chickens taken by one last year.”

“Well an owl hoot might frighten the hens.”

“What are you suggesting? A kookaburra laugh? Koo, koo, kaa, kaa? They never do that in the middle of the night.”

“I suppose not. We’ll stick to the owl.”

I’m not sure why we needed a secret call because we both knew where the tree was that we had appointed as our meeting place.

I crept out of my bed that night and went to look for Harry. I made the proverbial ‘owl hoot’ as we had arranged and a second owl responded. Of course the sound came from the tree and I would have found him without all the theatrics.

I had brought a warm blanket and so we snuggled up together and waited. Harry dived in and out of sleep, and so did I. Whenever I woke he was snoring. Probably I was fast asleep whenever he woke. I made a

mental note never to get married to him. I couldn't stand being married to someone who snored!

We were woken up by the noise of the door slamming shut. I looked at my luminous watch and saw that it was about ten past four. The booby trap had worked. This time the prisoner didn't call out like Harry had done the night before. We went up to the door and opened it. There was no sound. Harry shone his torch and we saw, hiding underneath the coops, a boy.

"Robert Bushell," I called out. "What do you think you're doing?"

"I'm just borrowing a few eggs."

"Borrow? I suppose you mean to bring back the empty shells. You know you can do that without breaking the shell. You make a small hole at each end and you blow the contents out, leaving the shell substantially intact."

Harry was getting impatient. "This is no time to be giving him cooking lessons. Come on Robert, get out. If we catch you here again we'll tell your Mum."

We knew Robert from school. Harry and I were in 6th class and Robert was in 4th but, being a small school, we were all in the same room. He told us that, whenever he had to go on an errand to buy eggs from Mr Jones, Robert kept the money and gave her ones he'd stolen from us.

One day at school he gave me a small bag of coins. "I was saving up to buy Mum a birthday present. But here's the money for the three dozen eggs I pinched."

I counted it out and it came to 72 cents. "Well we only charge 10 cents a dozen, much cheaper than Mr Jones." So I took three of the ten cent coins and gave him back the rest. "If you come to us for more eggs we'll only charge you 10 cents a dozen and you can keep the other 14 cents towards your Mum's present. But don't come every day. We need eggs too, you know. Just come on Saturday mornings and we'll have a dozen eggs ready for you."

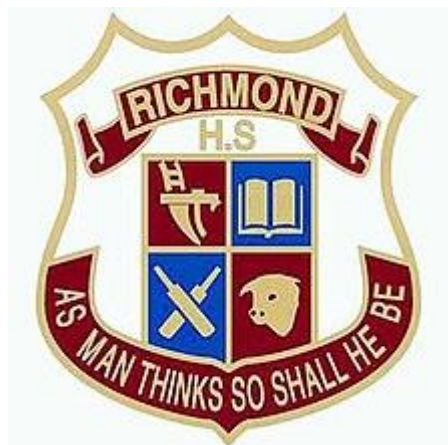
I wondered about the ethics of this arrangement. Shouldn't Mrs Bushell benefit from our lower prices? But the difference was going to her present so she'd benefit in the end.

32. AS WOMAN THINKS SO SHALL SHE BE

In 1966 I started at Richmond High School, about 20 kilometres from Ebenezer. To get there I had to catch a school bus into Windsor, then a motor-rail to East Richmond and finally another bus to the school. Apparently, as buses were not allowed to compete with trains, there couldn't be a bus that would take me all the way from Ebenezer to the Richmond school. I worked out that I could have cycled there in the same time, but I would have been exhausted when I got to school. Besides it

was nice socialising with friends on the bus.

The motto of the school is "as man thinks so shall he be", which is from the book of Proverbs. I always thought that this was a dumb motto for a co-educational school. But I believe in the truth of the statement, provided 'man' is interpreted as 'human'. We are what we think. In other words we should all be activists – standing up for what we believe. That's what I



attempted to do with the chickens.

Well in 1965 Australia started sending troops to Vietnam, most of them conscripts, to defend the south against the Communist north. But lots of people said we shouldn't be getting involved, especially as our soldiers were getting killed. In May 1970 there was a huge anti-war Moratorium March all round Australia.

Now I was in favour of supporting the South Vietnamese. They were the chickens who were in danger of becoming battery hens under the communists. Most Australians thought that our country shouldn't be involved. Those of us who supported our military involvement were in the minority. They formed a tiny section of the 20,000 strong crowd that

surged around the Sydney Town Hall. I would have loved to have been there, waving my banner, but I was only thirteen. I had to be content to watch it on television. I was particularly impressed by the short speech given by a Castle Hill schoolgirl, Helen Voysey, but it didn't make me change my mind. The South Vietnamese should have their freedom.

A second moratorium was planned for September that year. I talked over the possibility of escaping from school with Harry.

"It's only a Friday," I said. "It won't matter if we miss school. We'll get the bus to Windsor as usual, but instead of getting the motor rail to East Richmond we'll catch it in the opposite direction to Riverstone and from there we get an electric train into the city. Have you got any money?"

"Enough."

So that's how we got there. As it happened, coming back was quite a different matter. I had a poster that read "DEFEND THE SOUTH VIETNAMESE" and I made one for Harry that said "DOWN WITH THE COMMUNISTS". We had to make them at school because there would have been questions asked if we had them on the bus. We took the materials to school on the Wednesday and at lunch time we snuck behind the toilet block to do the writing. Then on our way home we hid them in a secret spot at Windsor Station. So on the Friday we got off the bus at Windsor with just our school bags and swapped them for the posters.

We tried not to look too conspicuous on the train, but one old lady spotted them and said, "I agree with you dear, this anti-war stuff is getting out of hand."

We got to George Street and mingled with the crowd. But no sooner had we raised our banners than they were ripped out of our hands and were trampled on. Harry was knocked to the ground, but wasn't too hurt. Once we no longer had our banners everyone assumed we were anti-war. But Harry grabbed one of the anti-war posters from a young boy with the intention of breaking it up. There was a scuffle and the next thing we knew we were grabbed by the police and bundled into a van. We were taken to a police station and kept in a smelly room for a couple of hours. When a policeman came in to question us he was shocked at how young we were.

“I can’t arrest you – you’re too young!”

Technically he could have, and we might have been taken to a juvenile centre. “How did you kids get mixed up in this anti-war business? Are your parents communists?”

“No, but we’re not anti-war – we wanted to speak up for the poor Vietnamese who are about to be over-run by their communist cousins from the north.”

“Oh, I see. No wonder you got yourself into a fight. But why aren’t you at school? I could have you up for truancy.”

“Fridays are pretty boring days. Two lessons of Science and one of Maths in the morning,” explained Harry. “And Chemistry Prac in the afternoon.”



“Well I’d better see about getting you back to your folks. Where do you live?”

“Ebenezer,” I replied.

“Struth, where’s that when it’s at home? Out past woop, woop?”

“No, it’s out past Windsor.”

“Oh, is that where it is. I’ve never heard of it. It somehow reminds me of Scrooge McDuck in the Donald Duck comics. Just a moment.”

Harry seemed mystified about the connection. “What’s Donald Duck got to do with where we live?”

“There’s a famous story, written by Charles Dickens, about a miser called Ebenezer Scrooge. And Disney appropriated the name for a character in his Donald Duck comics.”

“OK smarty-pants. And where’s Woop Woop? Sounds like an Aboriginal name. You should know.”

I knew he was just teasing me about my sensitivity to being half-Aboriginal so I didn’t take the bait. “I haven’t the faintest idea. Probably it’s out beyond the black stump.”

The sergeant returned a few minutes later. “As it happens Constable Peters lives out near Windsor and she’s agreed to take you home.”

That was good news in that it would save us a lot of trouble, but it meant that our parents would see us pulling up in a police car. We were driven straight home, so our schoolbags would have to be picked up later. Harry was the first to be dropped off. It was after the school bus so his parents had begun to be worried. They had rung Mother and she too was worried. They rang Miss Miller, the deputy, and she said she had wondered why two good friends happened to be sick on the same day, but coincidences *do* happen.

So when a police car drove up to the Lim’s house, his mother ran out.

“Have you had an accident my Harry?” she asked.

“Relax, Mrs Lim,” said the Constable, getting out of the car. “He’s alright. Just got caught up with a bit of mischief at the Moratorium.”

By now Harry had got out of the car, and was standing, sheepishly, on the driveway. “It’s alright Mum. Me and Liesje went off to put our views to the Moratorium.”

But Mrs Lim wasn’t interested in politics. “Who’s idea was it? Has that girl been leading you astray?”

I sunk into the seat, knowing that it had really been my idea. But Harry was a brick. “No Mum, we thought it up together.”

“I’d better get the girl back to her family,” said the Constable and we drove off.

Cathy was already waiting out on the street when we arrived. Mrs Lim had rung her to let her know I was safe. I think if it had been Mother I would have copped an earful but Cathy, as you will have discovered, had got up to many of her own pranks in her youth. We went inside and she wanted to know every detail of the ‘adventure’ as she called it. Then we worked out how we could put it to Father when he got home from the surgery. He was very quiet as I told the story, and Cathy provided a commentary, with background information about the war, and its effect on the poor South Vietnamese. All he could think of saying was the mundane practical repercussion of the whole day. “Come on Liesje, we’d better go back to Windsor Station and pick up those bags.”

33. MY MOBS

I've taken over from my sister so, Marijke Lisbeth de Groot is now the author of this story. Of course I've read what both Aunt Cathy and Liesje have written. Interesting! I can't say that I agree with everything they've written. Though I must say I agree with the Richmond High motto, suitably feminised. *What woman thinks so shall she be.*

Liesje and I share the same genes so we're both half Aboriginal and half Dutch. The ironic thing is that, while Liesje looks Aboriginal she identifies with her Dutch background while I, who looks Dutch, feels that I'm Aboriginal. And as I think, so I shall be. Dutch culture is all very well in its way, but it's too ... civilised. And Jane Austen's characters are all 'pretty little cupcakes' to give Cathy's words. I prefer the primeval qualities of the Dreamtime stories!

Of course, that's why I love *Wuthering Heights*. I can understand the feeling that Cathy has for nature and for her country. It might be quite a different country to that of my Aboriginal forbears but it had the same emotional and spiritual pull on her as the Australian outback has to my people.

I loved my Mum, but in a funny sort of way I feel that Cathy was my real mother. Her upbringing at Paradise Heights is the sort of life I think I would have liked. I suppose Ebenezer could be called country but it's not wild, untamed country. Yes, to quote my Aboriginal grandmother, Cathy is 'one of my mobs'.

Oh yes, I've met Granny up at Uralla. Liesje gave the impression that Dad's family couldn't care about us, but that's not true. They take a great interest in us and, despite what Liesje said, they *have* visited us here in Ebenezer – once. It was school holidays and Liesje was away, visiting Felicity and Richard in the city. So she didn't meet Bob and Edna, Dad's folks. But I can't understand why she has forgotten that they came. It was no secret and we talked about it with her afterwards. I think she would rather forget her Aboriginality. Dad too. He's got where he is by stepping out of his world into the 'white fellas' world and I think he feels that if he acknowledges his heritage he might somehow slip back.

There you go, I'm slipping into the prejudice of thinking that Aborigines are a lesser culture than the European. By western standards it is less civilised, of course. But when the English were running around Wessex covering themselves with woad I think they were the uncivilised ones. There is much more complexity in Aboriginal culture than non-Aborigines acknowledge. I think much of the ignorance of Aboriginal culture arises from the fact that they seem to have no written history. I wonder why they never saw fit to invent a written language. Don't tell me they were not smart enough. Somehow they never felt the need to do it.

My maths teacher at Richmond High showed me a paper in the *American Mathematical Monthly* which discusses the marriage rules of the Walpiri Aborigines. The rules divided the tribe into eight groups. A woman in one of these groups could only marry a husband from a certain other group. And the rules dictated which group their children were in. Now the paper analysed these rules and discovered that they followed the pattern of something in advanced mathematics called the 'dihedral group of order 8'. I bet you've never heard of it! I hadn't, till I read the paper. I don't quite understand it, but Group Theory as such wasn't invented until the nineteenth century, and yet we Aborigines had been subconsciously using it for tens of thousands of years.

I get on really well with Richard and Rosemary, especially Rosemary. She's taught me how to paint. Richard has given me one or two tips, but what little painting he does these days is life drawing – you know, nude bodies. I prefer landscapes. I love our country. The colours are so subtle. I think it must be the Aboriginal blood in me that does it. Mind you I don't attempt to paint in the Aboriginal style. I think that should be left to the *real* Aborigines.

I don't agree with sis that Richard and Rosemary are a dangerous combination. I can't see her ever trying to do away with him again. That was a mad *one-off*. Richard has settled down now and I don't think he's tempted to trade Rosemary in for a younger model. People *do* change, you know. I think their marriage is just as wonderful as Mum and Dad's were. Oh why did God have to take her away so soon?

Now when I was thirteen I innocently created a major scandal in the family. You see I was visiting Richard and Felicity for a week during the school holidays. Richard asked me if I'd like to pose for him. Of course I knew that with Richard this meant a nude painting. I suppose I should have checked with Dad first but Richard was like an uncle to me, so I said, "sure". I took off all my clothes and lay on a *chaise longue* like one of the classical paintings I'd seen in a book. That day he merely sketched the outlines, but over the next few days he completed the painting in oils.



Of course he behaved like the perfect gentleman, as any uncle should towards his niece. Besides, Felicity was often in and out of the studio and commented on the progress. My breasts were small and Richard said, that's what he liked. He said he hated the Rubens nudes with their over-blown bosoms.

Now Darcy and Wendy would no doubt have considered Richard to be a paedophile if they'd seen the painting. But I thought Dad and Cathy would understand. I told them that Richard had painted my

portrait, and they said, “that’s nice dear.” I didn’t think of telling them that I was in the all-together. I mean Dad had a small statue of Venus in his study with no more clothes than I had.

Richard entered the painting in the Windsor Art Show and won first prize. We all went to the grand opening of the exhibition of the prize-winners and the runners up. Dad and Cathy and Liesje came too, but I was careful not to mention it to Darcy and Wendy. When she saw the first-prize painting Liesje giggled. Cathy said, “that’s nice dear – he’s done a great job” but Dad was absolutely furious. He bundled us all into the car and took us straight home.

Cathy said I should have asked Dad first, and I suppose she was right. But she said it was tastefully done and that it was not at all sexual. Liesje reminded us about Lewis Carroll taking a naked photograph of fourteen-year old Lorina Liddell, the older sister of Alice Liddell who inspired *Alice in Wonderland*.

“What would her parents have said?” asked Dad, “did they know?”

Liesje explained that he had her parents’ permission.

“They must have been rather a dissolute family.”

“I don’t think so. Reverend Liddell was the ecclesiastical Dean of Christ Church, Oxford.”

For a hundred years Charles Dodgson, to give him his real name, has been held to have been a paedophile by many commentators. But modern-day critics have come to the conclusion that we’re seeing through contemporary eyes, something that was considered to be quite normal in Victorian times.

By the time we got home Dad had calmed down a bit. I admitted that Richard should have known better and should have asked Dad first. But Richard was always a bit impulsive. He didn’t have kids of his own and uppermost in his mind were his artistic desires. He had no more thought of needing to ask Dad’s permission for me to pose than needing to ask the side-board’s permission to paint the vase of flowers that stood upon it.

Finally, Dad said, “next time he asks you to pose naked, make sure he asks me first”. In fact Richard never did ask me again, not because he felt that he’d done something wrong, but because he was always moving on to some new idea. His next nude painting was of a woman of eighty-three!

Rosemary took me to Sydney to view the Archibald exhibition, once in 1968 and again in 1969. I really enjoyed the portraits but I preferred the Wynne Prize entries. They’re landscapes and that’s more in my line. I particularly loved the Margaret Coen watercolour called *Dry Summer*. The colours really reflected the Australian bush. Many years later I was amused to read that she had once “convinced her strict Catholic family that drawing from the nude was not immoral”. I showed it to Dad and he had to laugh.

As much as I love walking around seeing the paintings, I also like to sit on one of those benches in the middle of the room and observe the other people looking at the paintings. I’m fascinated by observing people, especially women. I do enjoy a good nude painting but I much prefer ones with clothes. I’m fascinated by the personality of the clothes, and especially the shoes. Liesje once accused me of having a ‘shoe fetish’.

I’m particular attracted to women, and not just the young pretty ones. With their backs facing me I can’t see their faces until they turn round and I try to imagine what they’re like from their hair and what they’re wearing.

I pay particular attention to the shoes. I love sandals, but they have to have a strap around the ankles. I think a woman’s foot can be one of the most attractive parts of her anatomy, but heels can be ugly. However, add an ankle strap and the eye doesn’t notice the ugliness of the heel. Wedge sandals are particularly gross. And thongs, even up-market ones encrusted with sparkling fake diamonds are the worst.

Really high heels are out as far as I am concerned. Low, delicate heels can be quite becoming. Court shoes can be very attractive, but I really like them with a narrow ankle strap. I think ankle straps really turn me on, as do ribbons around the neck. On the whole, boots are not my

favourite, though some tight-fitting boots with fairly low heels can be attractive.

Let me tell you of something I've really noticed as a recent fashion, particularly among young Chinese women. Culturally, Chinese women are supposed to have tiny feet and I used to see Chinese girls wearing simple court shoes that made their feet look small. But in the last few years I've noticed that so many Chinese girls now wear heavy work shoes – you know, the ones they call 'clodhoppers'. It's as if they're making a statement and are rejecting the tiny feet culture that has been part of Chinese fashion for centuries. Even the most petite Chinese girl, with nice slender legs, will put them into large clodhoppers!

I also observe individual idiosyncrasies of the way women walk. Some take short, mincing steps. Others walk almost on tip-toes, with their toes touching the ground first, as if they are ballet dancers. Perhaps some of them are. With some the feet are turned outwards as they walk. A few have one foot that goes parallel to the direction in which they are walking with the other going out at an angle. I'm not talking about women who have some obvious podiatric disability. We all walk in different ways. No wonder Sherlock Holmes was able to identify criminals from their footprints.

When I was fourteen I begged Dad to let me go up to Uralla to visit Granny Enid and Papa Bob in Uralla. Dad couldn't get away from his practice, but he trusted me to go by myself. Cathy took me to Central station and put me on the train. Then Granny and Pop were there in Uralla to meet me. They had an old Holden that seemed to have been made back in Dreamtime. It chugged along at a respectable pace but, before I knew it, we had parked outside their house. You wouldn't call it a



mansion, but nor would you call it a humpy. It was a neat, modest, timber house – like most others in Uralla.

The house was full of black faces, young and old. I met my aunties, and uncles, and what seemed to be hundreds of cousins, all with gleaming white teeth in broad smiles. Here I was, with my mob!

Now I expect you to think that they initiated me into the mysteries of the boomerang and that we had witchetty grubs for dinner. What stereotypes we have of other races. True, Uncle Fred did show me a boomerang and got me to throw it. I picked up the skill very quickly.

“Geez Mary, you throws that better’n my two kids. Where didja learn?” I should point out that they all called me Mary. The name ‘Marijke’ was a difficult one for them to get their tongues around.

“I’m in the net ball team at school. Perhaps there’s something in common between net ball and boomerangs,” I replied.

And, in case you make the mistake of believing that all Aborigines speak fractured English, and have no concept of grammar, let me assure you that lots of ‘white fellas’ in Uralla spoke like that. And Uncle George, who was the chief policeman in town, spoke perfect English.

For dinner we had goanna stew with mashed breadfruit. Ha! Ha! Of course not. Lamb chops and vegetables, and a wonderful apple crumble for dessert. I felt really at home. After dinner Granny told some Dreamtime stories. I told her the one about the Three Sisters in Katoomba and she told me that that story was just made up for the tourists. She then told me the ‘true’ story. I felt a fool, pretending to know something about Aboriginal culture only to find that what I thought was the truth was rubbish. I realised then that I was only half-Aboriginal and, as much as they embraced me, I would always be a bit of an outsider.

I told them the main story of *Wuthering Heights*. They’d never heard about it, but it resonated with them. I was really in my element, with them hanging onto my every word.

“You don’t suppose that Heathcliff was an Aboriginal. I heard that some abos were taken off to England in those days. Somebody told me about Bennelong, one of the Koori people. He was taken to England with Governor Phillip in 1792. Heathcliff might have been his son.”

“I doubt it Uncle George,” said cousin James, “I heard that he came back to Sydney in 1795. He wrote to Governor Phillip and his wife, back in England, thanking them for their hospitality while he was there.”

“Yes,” added Teresa, “my teacher said it was the first time an Aboriginal had written anything in English.”

“Well that Heathercliff fella could’ve been a Darug who’d also gone there,” said Papa Bob. “You don’t know.”

“It’s possible,” I said. “There’s no proper answer. Some say he was a gypsy, from India.”

My cousins couldn’t get enough of the story. I told them about the ghost of Cathy trying to get into the window and there was shocked silence. I thought that they were in awe about ghosts. Granny took me aside and whispered, “Mary, you’re not supposed to talk about dead people.” Well, when you think about it there’s an awful lot of dead people in *Wuthering Heights* so I had to resort to making things up.

“Well Heathcliff learnt to read and write, like Bennelong, and he became a school-teacher. He got a job in a girl’s school in Brussels. There was this girl, called Lucy Snow, who was also a teacher and she fell in love with Monsieur Heathcliff.”

I scoured the whole of English literature for incidents that I could attribute to Heathcliff. He had a mad woman in the attic. He was a proud man who was prejudiced against a family of five sisters. Heathcliff was in charge of a mill in Yorkshire and a mob of frame-breakers smashed his new equipment that they thought would do them out of a job. He later had a large mill in Manchester and fell in love with Maggie, the daughter of an out-of-work minister. But, before he was found in Liverpool by Mr Earnshaw he had been part of a gang of pick-pocketers in London but he escaped and walked all the way to Liverpool, where he got a job with an undertaker – opening and closing the shutters and moving the ... boxes around. I wasn’t sure whether the word ‘coffin’ was off limits.

When I mentioned the time when he ran off as a ragged boy, and returned three years later as a rich gentleman, I said he had been kidnapped by a gang of pirates, but he managed to work his way up to

become second in charge to Captain Hook, and narrowly missed having his arm taken off by a crocodile, like his boss. When he decided to leave that life, and go back to Cathy, he was a rich man.

I thoroughly enjoyed my week basking in my Aboriginality. But there was no possibility of me going bush like Bennelong. Of course that's such a silly thing to say. My Granny and Pop and all my aunts and uncles and cousins – gee there were so many of them – lived like most other Australians. They bought their groceries at the little supermarket that had just opened – no hunting and gathering. They lived in proper, well-kept houses with neat lawns and brightly coloured flowers – not humpies like the one Dad had grown up in. I often wondered if Granny and Pop had wished for the old life. Had we Europeans (here I was putting on my Dutch hat) spoiled their life by bringing them into the modern world? I asked Granny once, what they thought of Europeans having appropriated their country.

“Oh, dear,” she sighed, “it is what it is. Of course they had no right to come into our country as if it was *terra nullis*. It would have been better if they'd negotiated a treaty like in New Zealand. But our relationship with the English wasn't completely bad. There were terrible atrocities, of course, but some of the English respected us and our culture. Take Bennelong and the Phillips for example.”

My eyes opened. Granny's answer was well-thought out – you might even call it an educated response. Like Dad she's had very little formal schooling but she knew a thing or two!”

“Of course the English were such fools in treating us officially as animals – possessions not people. But don't forget that a hundred years before the English treated their women in much the same way.”

She saw the look of amazement come over my face. “I may not be learned, but I've learnt to read and I've read lots of books from the local library. I know a bit about history. Funnily enough I know more about English history than I know about the history of my own people. Reading is one of the valuable things that the English have given us.”

“So you think their culture is better than ours?”

“Good heavens Mary, whatever gave you that idea? No, although they have this thing they call ‘religion’ most of them have no concept of spirituality. We run rings around them there. You see they seem to think that religion is all about architecture and rules and rituals. Yet I’ve found a spirituality in their Bible that most of them miss. Not as deep as our Dreamtime stories perhaps, but there are hints of real spirituality here and there.”

“Such as?”

“Well Jesus said ‘consider the lilies of the fields’. Of course we don’t have lilies growing wild in this country but you can substitute the word ‘spinifax’. Spirituality is all around us – you don’t get it from books. I once found a dried flower that someone had pressed between the leaves of a book I’d borrowed from the library. I thought they’d dried all the spirituality out of it. What’s wrong with treasuring flowers that are still growing?”

“And the stolen generation?”

“My dear, that happened to me when I was your age, or a little younger. I was taken from my Mum and my brothers and sisters. It was like a living hell! But you have to remember that they thought they were doing good for us – some of them anyway. Bring us up like little English domestic servants was, they thought, better than us living in those primitive conditions. Sure, it improved us on the outside, but many of us shrivelled up on the inside.”

“Did you ever catch up with your family again?”

“I was one of the lucky ones. Many didn’t. You know Aunt Betty you met the first day you arrived?”

“Oh, yes, the old lady wearing blue?”

“Yes, well, she’s not really your aunty – she’s my sister which makes her ...”

“My great aunt?”

“Something like that. She got taken to a different family from me. I was lucky. The family I was sent to were kind. But Betty’s family used to beat her.”

“But you’re not bitter about the way Aboriginals have been treated?”

“What’s the point of being bitter? There’s no doubt we were treated very badly, but what nation doesn’t suffer when they get invaded? The Britons suffered under the Norman Conquest and were treated as inferior riff-raff by the Normans. Things have improved greatly for us but there’s still a long way to go. It’s like the treatment of women. European women got the vote in Australia over sixty years ago but they’re still not equal to men in all respects.”

“What about how long it took for Aboriginals to get the vote? Doesn’t that make you angry?”

“Actually, my dear, Aboriginal men got the vote in South Australia in 1856, and Aboriginal women in 1894. Of course, Federation took all that away. In 1962 Aboriginals were allowed to vote for the Federal Parliament but it was not compulsory. In fact we were actively discouraged from voting. It wasn’t until 1984 that we were required to vote, just like everyone else. But even today only about 80% of Aboriginals and Torres Strait islanders are on the electoral roll.”

“Is that because they’re too lazy to register?”

“There we go, the old stereotype that all Aboriginals are lazy. Mind you many of us are, particularly the men. The worst thing the English did for us was to introduce us to alcohol and there’s no doubt that a drunken man is lazy. But no, the real reason is that it’s rather difficult for Aborigines in remote communities to register.”

“Wow, I never knew all that.”

34. EASTER EGGS

In 1973 I began studying at Sydney University. I enrolled in the Faculty of Arts, studying English, Mathematics and ... Now I know that Cathy gave a detailed description of her university days but I found that part of her memoirs rather boring. I'll just say that none of the lecturers that Cathy spoke about were still there in 1973.

At the end of the year I decided to switch to a Bachelor of Divinity. I don't think I told you about my Christian faith. Of course our whole family are Christians but for me it has become the central part of my life, just as the Brontë sisters were all Christians, yes even Emily, but Anne seemed to take her faith more seriously than the others. When I was twelve I set aside ten minutes every evening to read my Bible, and pray. Liesje couldn't understand why I did that and she used to say that she'd heard the Bible read out so many times in Church that she didn't need to read it herself.

"But sis, I get something fresh out of the passages each time I read them. I find that it refreshes my soul. Do you think that once you've heard a piece of music you don't need to ever hear it again?"

"Of course not. Each time you hear a piece you notice something different."

"Well, that's how it is with me reading the Bible."

"And what about your prayer time? I *do* pray, but I pray silently when I'm sitting on the ferry. I thank God for the wonderful harbour and ask Him to help me concentrate on my lectures. And I pray that Dad and Cathy will be kept safe. I don't feel the need to kneel at the foot of my bed each night like Christopher Robin."

"Each to her own."

When I was sixteen I started teaching Sunday School at the Ebenezer Presbyterian Church which was within walking distance from our house. Darcy and Wendy were religious too, but their brand of religion was completely foreign to me. They seem to always have black and white answers to every question. For me the Christian faith is a mystery. I'm not saying that there are no such things as answers to the

deep things in life. There are partial answers but the full truth seems to always be just out of reach. I'm much more at home with stories than with carefully written creeds. It might be my Aboriginality coming through. There are truths that arise out of the Dreamtime Stories that Granny told me. I think there is no conflict between Aboriginal spirituality and Christian spirituality. They seem to me to complement each other.

Of course Richard is a card-carrying atheist. He's just as narrow-minded as Darcy and Wendy – just at the opposite end of some spectrum. It's so clear to him that there is no God.

"I've never seen him," he once said. "If there is a God and he wants me to believe that he exists why doesn't he send me a sign." And he started stomping around the room, holding his hands up to heaven saying, "God, if you really exist, give me a sign! God, where are you?"

"God is much more subtle than that. He's not a magician who performs tricks whenever he's asked."

"But isn't Jesus supposed to have performed miracles?"

"He used his powers sparingly. He said that any fool would believe if he said abracadabra and disappeared in a cloud of smoke. He said 'blessed are those who do not see and yet believe'."

I suppose that I shouldn't be surprised that Richard's like that. It seems to me that a lot of artists are atheists. They believe so much in their own creativity they can't understand that their creativity has come from the great Creator himself. They think it's all their own creativity. Perhaps they resent the possibility of a being far more creative than they are. I wonder how Felicity puts up with him.

Felicity is a devout Catholic, the exception to my mantra that all artists are atheists. I don't agree with everything the Catholic Church teaches but she and I do have a lot in common when it comes to religion. In fact she, too, doesn't agree with everything that the Catholic Church teaches. It seems to me that, on the whole, Catholics treat their Church like their own mother. They don't agree with everything they're taught but they love their Church all the same. Protestants who disagree with their church are only too happy to go off and start their own.

I'll say this for the Catholic Church, they've been through some rough times, especially at the time of the Reformation, but they've slowly reformed themselves over the centuries. Protestants, on the other hand, just kept splitting off. Martin Luther was a Catholic priest, and remained so until he was ex-communicated. John Wesley was an Anglican minister till the day he died, and was loyal to the Church of England. But his followers weren't patient enough to reform the Church of England from within and so they started the Methodist Church. Then William Booth was a Methodist who tried to change his own church from the inside, but when he died his followers had to create the Salvation Army as a separate church.

When I switched to Divinity I joined the Student Christian Movement and benefited greatly from talking to some of its members. It was there that I met Frank. He introduced me to the writings of C.S. Lewis.

"Do you go to church regularly?" I asked him.

"Indeed I do. I lead the Christian Endeavour there."

"So which church is that?"

"It's the Windsor Methodist Church. It used to be called Windsor Wesleyan Church."

"Wow, what a coincidence! I live out at Ebenezer, which is not that far away."

"It must take you forever to get to uni every day."

"Oh, no, I live with my aunt during the week. I only go home on weekends."

"Well, why don't you come to church next Sunday night. We start at five o'clock with pizzas and church is at six."

"That works out well. I can still go to my Ebenezer church in the morning."

"Shall I pick you up?"

"No I can borrow Dad's car."

I went to Windsor Methodist the following Sunday, and the next. And because they were short of a Sunday School teacher I gave notice at

Ebenezer Presbyterian and started at Windsor Methodist. As a result I started to see quite a lot of Frank.

Actually I found John Wesley's theology more to my liking than John Knox's grim pre-destination. And at Ebenezer we mostly sang the Psalms, set to rather gloomy music, but I really love the stirring hymns of Charles Wesley.

It was the end of October and I was racking my brains for a suitable item for my class to perform at the Sunday School Christmas Concert. Then I hit upon a great idea. Do you remember the play that young Gerry wrote for the Walcha Christmas Pageant? If you've forgotten, Cathy wrote it out in chapter two. But she didn't record the end of the script after the 'betrothed' word had embarrassed her. All I had to do was to finish it myself in the style of Gerry. I tried to keep the spirit of Gerry's account but, like Miss Peterson, I had to leave out the bit about a flight by aeroplane and Pontius, the pilot.

Narrator: After this kid called Jesus was born, some very clever Aboriginal trackers came to visit the king, all the way from Alice Springs. Their names were Jasper, Barry and Malcolm.

Jasper: Mr Herod, we've heard that a new king has been born. Any idea where he is? We've got some stuff for him as a christening present.

Herod: Oh dear, I don't know anything about it. I'd better check with my secret police.

A secret policeman comes up and he and Herod have a whispered conference.

Herod: Apparently there's an old Christmas Carol called 'O Little Town of Bethlehem'. I'm told that's where you should look. (*With a menacing voice*) But if you find him be sure to report back so that I can ... so that I

can ... *(he relaxes into a sickly smile)* so that I can ... er ... go and worship him.

Narrator: The wise trackers went off and found the house where the child was now living with his Mum.

Mary comes out onto the veranda, holding Jesus in her arms. The three trackers bow down before them.

Jasper: Hey little kunga I've got something for you to use when you get bigger. I know I'm supposed to give you gold, but instead here's a pan for panning gold. You'll need an awful lot of gold if you're going to be a king. When you're bigger I'll take you to a river and show you how to do it.

Barry: I've got some Old Spice after shave. It smells real good. Mary, keep it till he's old enough to shave.

Malcolm: And here's a tube of Dencorub. When you grow up and go out into the wilderness all day, preachifying, your legs will ache somethin' bad. This stuff will soothe the muscles.

Narrator: After the trackers left, Joe had a dream.

Joe: Hey Mary, I had a dream last night and I dreamt that Herod is out to get our boy and do him in. We'd best go off to Egypt.

Narrator: So they found some people smugglers who would take them by boat to Egypt. They had to swim the last bit because, as usual with people smugglers, the boat sank. When they got there they were put in a Detention Centre while their case for being refugees was being determined. After a couple of years they lost their case and were deported back to Israel. But luckily Herod had just died so they were OK. The End.

As you can imagine the audience were in stitches. I felt very pleased with myself, even though Liesje told me afterwards that she thought it was pretty stupid and Darcy said it was disrespectful to alter Luke's words like that. "You can't go about changing the words of the Bible," he said. Oh well, you can't please everybody.

When I completed my Bachelor of Divinity I decided that I was going to become a Methodist minister. But this was never to be. By the time I had finished my training the Uniting Church had swallowed up virtually the entire Methodist Church in Australia, most of the Congregational Church and about half of the Presbyterian Church. So I was ordained a Minister of the Word in the Uniting Church.

Frank and I began to grow very close to one another. We had progressed beyond the P and the Q stages and were well into the R phase. Towards the end of the year he proposed and, as I said "yes", he slipped a ring onto my finger. Reader, I was betrothed!

Although our relationship had been growing steadily it still took me by surprise. I could call it a 'bombshell', but I'll reserve that word for two more bombshells that really deserve that name.

About six months after our engagement Frank announced that he had decided to embrace the Catholic faith. Unbeknown to me he had been secretly taking lessons in Catholicism and, when he eventually told me, it was to invite me to be present at his first communion. Well, of course it wasn't really his first communion. He had been 'doing this in remembrance of me' for years in the Methodist and then the Uniting churches. But this, he said, was different. The Catholic Mass is rather more than the Protestants' version which he said, 'is pale by comparison'.

Oh, if only he had lived up to his name and taken me into his confidence. I had no objection being married to a Catholic though I'd like to see a Catholic priest try to make me become a Catholic too. Even to expect me to bring up our future children as Catholics was a mighty big ask of a Uniting Church minister! Still, I got over the shock. I was wounded but could still walk. Somehow we'd work things out.

I later said to Frank, “the Catholic Church and the Protestant churches do have a lot in common. It’s only a difference in emphasis. In the Protestant Church the centrepiece of the service is the MESSAGE while in the Catholic Church it’s the MESSAGE.”

He looked horrified. “What on earth do you mean by MESSAGE in the Catholic Church?”

“What else would you call the experience of taking the MASS?” I thought that this was a clever play on words, but Frank was in no mood to appreciate my wit.

The second bombshell came six months later, and it really knocked me off my feet. He announced to me that he had decided that he wanted to go into the priesthood! Of course, that meant the end of our engagement.

Had the Catholic Church been enlightened enough to allow priests to marry, as in the Orthodox Church, I suppose we could have married but it would have been a pretty strange union – a Uniting Church minister married to a Catholic Priest! But as it was, even such a bizarre event could not be contemplated. Celibacy had won. We had gone from P to Q to R – never, I’m happy to say to S – and now our relationship had retracted back to Q, or perhaps even towards P.

So I didn’t get beyond the stage of being betrothed. In my dreams I offered myself to the Lord. I said that if He wanted to come back as a baby again I was willing to undergo a virgin birth. But, of course, God is so creative that He never repeats Himself. That’s why He promised Noah that He would never again wipe out the world by water. But that still leaves the other three elements: earth-quakes, tornados and fire.

I had to accept that Frank felt that God was calling him in that direction, as I had felt the call in the other direction. We remained good friends and I often came across him in ecumenical gatherings because we served our respective churches in the same area. In fact we sometimes go to the ballet together! Yes, it sounds a little naughty for a Catholic priest

to be going out on a date with a Uniting Church minister. Isn't that taking ecumenicism a little too far? We didn't think so.

The role of the priest can be very lonely. Yes, he's constantly mixing with people, perhaps rather too much for his mental well-being. But it's always focussed on *their* problems, not his *own*. To whom can he unload his own problems? His Bishop you might say. But I really don't think that works nearly as well as two equals, neither having a position of power over the other, pouring out their hearts to one another.

I suppose I'm lucky in that, in theory, I am permitted to marry while Frank is not. But where could I find someone like Frank where we are on the same wave-length? Is there a dating agency for single ministers? Don't forget that many of the day-to-day problems that I encounter in the Uniting Church are not all that different from those Frank has in the Catholic Church. He has his, sometimes unsympathetic, Bishop to contend with while I have my, sometimes, difficult Presbytery to do battle with.

At times I feel a bit like Mary Magdalene. She is supposed to have been a loose woman but many scholars say that she didn't deserve that reputation. Here am I, a Uniting Church minister who once posed naked for a painting and who goes out with a Catholic priest. I'm not perfect but I don't think these activities make me a loose woman. I'm still a virgin – Lord, I'm still available if you change your mind!

So we are an odd trio, Dad, Cathy and I all living in the same house – Liesje has moved in with Harry. We are a widow, a widower and a single woman, once betrothed. We will have to look to Liesje and Harry for the next generation, though they will be Lims not de Groot. Still, that name was only one that Dad chose for himself, so nothing is lost if it doesn't continue. I have thought of calling myself by Dad's Aboriginal name but I was never able to pronounce it.

I must tell you of a sermon that I preached many years later. It was on Easter Sunday and I preached on the Resurrection. I began by holding up a large crucifix that I'd borrowed from Frank. "Is this a symbol of the Resurrection?" I asked. Of course everybody shook their heads. Our Lord was still hanging on the Cross.

Then I held up a Protestant Cross – one with no Jesus hanging there. “Is *this* a symbol of the Resurrection?” One or two people again shook their heads, but the overwhelming majority nodded, indicating that they thought it was.

“No,” I said. “That’s what the cross looked like at the end of Good Friday when Jesus was taken down and placed in the tomb. It’s still just a symbol of the crucified Christ. So how can we represent the risen Lord?”

Everyone looked puzzled, as I’d hoped they would be. At this point I handed round brightly coloured Easter Eggs of many different colours. “Now look at the colour of your egg and compare it with the colours of the eggs all around you. This symbolises the fact that we are all different. Not just different coloured skin, but different genders, different sexual orientation and so on.”

Then I went on to say, “now I want everybody to carefully take the coloured foil off your egg.” Being Easter Sunday it was school holidays and so there was no Sunday School. You can imagine the excitement of the young children. They didn’t care that they couldn’t see what I was driving at, but most of the adults were puzzled. “So, under the skin we are all the same.”

“Now I want you, very carefully, to make a hole at one end. You can knock the egg gently on the pew in front of you.” A few of the eggs exploded into many pieces, but most remained intact, with just a jagged hole at one end.

“Now look inside the egg, and what do you see?” Everyone peered inside and, of course, saw nothing. “You are holding in your hand a true symbol of the Resurrection – the empty tomb!”



Smiles of gradual understanding spread across the adults' faces, while the children concentrated on eating the bits that they had broken off. "Jesus is risen – he is risen indeed! But there is more we can learn from our Easter eggs. Eggs are symbols of birth – of new life." And I proceeded to reflect on the subject of being born again.

"Now there is another meaning to the word Easter egg. In the world of computing the phrase 'easter egg' has a specific meaning. Computers had become fairly common, though not to the extent that they are today, so I had to tread carefully and not assume that everyone was conversant with computer programs.

"When you run a computer program the effect is supposed to be quite predictable. If you type some words you expect the letters, corresponding to those whose keys you pressed, to appear on the screen.



But the programmers sometimes secretly build a little joke into the program where the effect of typing a certain phrase causes a most unexpected effect – you could call it a miracle, because it defies the laws that one believes must always hold."

"For example, there's one program that's called a 'search engine' where, if you type a word or phrase it takes you to a list of appropriate web sites. But if you type in the phrase 'do a barrel roll' the words on the screen slowly rotate a full three hundred and sixty degrees. It is a miracle, and that's why they call these little jokes 'easter eggs' – because Easter is all about a great miracle!"

This sermon went over very well, and I felt very pleased with myself until, some days later, I was hauled up before the Church Council and was told that the cleaners had an almighty job afterwards, cleaning up pieces of melted chocolate that had been trodden into the carpet!

Liesje said she thought it was a good sermon (she doesn't often praise me) but added that I'd missed a further point that could have been made.

"Sis, when they took off all that glitzy foil, what colour was underneath?"

"Chocolate brown."

"Right – the colour of the First People of this land – *my* skin colour in fact. I would have thought that you, with your love of your Aboriginal heritage, would have noticed that."

35. *NOYE'S FLUDDE*

Well, dear Reader, it's back to me, Liesje de Groot. I have read what my younger sister has written about the Aborigines. But I have one question for her. "Why did they never develop a written language?" I accept that they may have had a complex culture back when Europeans were cave men but, so far as we know, they never seemed to have progressed beyond that.

Theirs is an oral culture, which is all very well, but it's the written word that makes for an advanced culture. I'm sure it's not that they were not clever enough to invent the written word. The real break-through was spoken language, and that they achieved. Why didn't they choose to write it down? They had the materials. Certain types of eucalyptus bark can be made into a sort of paper so they could have developed a written language if they had chosen to. I'm sure if they had, we might have been reading the works of Aboriginal philosophers along with Socrates and Plato.

But let me talk of other things. As I told you I had planned to become an architect, and in 1972 I enrolled in Architecture at Sydney University. Of course Ebenezer was too far to commute from so I stayed with Aunty Merle, Cathy's Mum in Holbrook Avenue. I suppose I should have called her Granny Merle, because Cathy was a sort of mother to me. But we always called her Aunty.

It was very convenient because her flat is right at the Kirribilli wharf. I could just catch the ferry to Circular Quay and then a bus to the university. However I decided that it wasn't for me. Instead I decided to pursue my singing career by attending the Opera School at the Sydney Conservatorium. Marijke was starting an Arts degree that year at Sydney University, so we both stayed in Kirribilli. It was even more convenient for me because it is only a short walk from the Quay to the Con.

During these two years I entered lots of Eisteddfods, not just in Sydney but in Canberra, Bathurst, Wollongong and even Melbourne. Harry always came with me. He became a sort of manager for me. I could tell you countless funny stories about the Eisteddfod circuit, but none of

them are sufficiently dramatic to interest you, dear Reader. They seemed odd, or funny at the time but unless you'd had similar experiences they would mean nothing to you.

But I must tell you about a particularly memorable concert at which I performed. It was early in 1977 and Benjamin Britten had died the previous December. As a tribute to this wonderful composer's life the concert consisted only of works that he had composed. The first half was the one-act opera *Noyes Fludde* based on a 15th century miracle play that told the story of Noah. After interval I was to perform some of Britten's songs.

The main purpose of the concert, however, was to raise money for the church's roof appeal. It was an old church and the slate roof was badly in need of repair. For some reason a plaster ceiling had been installed many years before and brown water stains were beginning to show. However the performance was to have been in the church hall, not the church, so the fact that it had been raining for many days did not raise any concerns.

The opera included a number of children from the local school. I sang the part of Noah's wife. We couldn't manage an orchestra but we were blessed to have in the congregation a very able pianist. Miss Archibold had taught the piano at the Conservatorium but had been retired for quite some time. She had had some health issues, but her mind was as sharp as ever and her fingers had escaped the ravages of arthritis and were almost as nimble as they were in her hey-day.

The problem was that nobody had checked the piano until the day of the performance and it was found to be hopelessly out of tune. It hadn't been played for a couple of years and the previous summer had been exceedingly hot. I'm not about to lay blame for this oversight, but in case you might think that Miss Archibold was at fault I refrain from identifying the church. In her defence, she had asked the minister what



condition the piano was in and he had assured her that it played beautifully, which it had the last time it had been played.

“What are we to do?” Miss Archibold asked the Reverend MacDonald.

“We’ll have to relocate the concert to the church and make do with the organ.” It must be said that Reverend MacDonald had very little knowledge of music and thought that an organ was a satisfactory substitute for a piano. For singing hymns this was no doubt true, but for an opera it was a different matter. He had great confidence in Miss Archibold’s ability to play the organ because she had been the regular organist for nearly two years.

When I heard that this was to be the only possible Plan B I was not at all pleased. Some of the cabaret songs were a bit sexy, and they would sound rather ridiculous on an organ. But what could I do? I had an idea.

“Well we rehearsed the opera at the school, using the school’s piano. Can’t we bring the school piano into the church hall?”

It was already two o’clock in the afternoon and the school was five kilometres away. To move a piano needs specialist removers and where could we find them at short notice? Besides the piano would need retuning after such a move anyway.

“Well, what about relocating the concert to the school hall?” I asked helpfully.

“Can’t,” said Miss Archibold. It’s being used by the scouts tonight. “You know how difficult the scoutmaster can be if anyone tries to change his arrangements. In any case we couldn’t contact everyone involved in time. I don’t suppose the church would be willing to hire a couple of buses?”

Well Reverend MacDonald wasn’t having half the money he was hoping to raise on bus hire. “People will understand if it’s not quite perfect.”

So we relocated the concert into the church. “Thank goodness it’s stopped raining,” I thought. But there was another problem. Did I tell you that the organ was one of those old pedal organs? No, I don’t think I did.

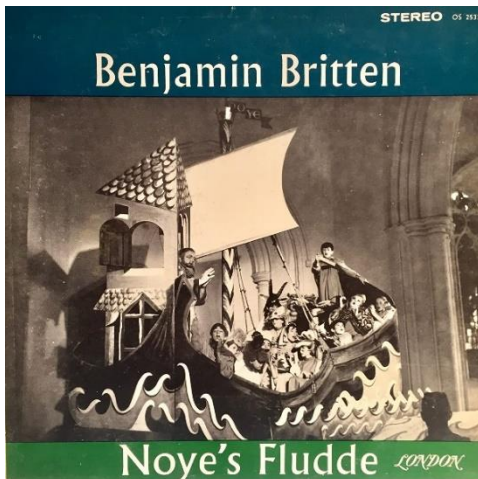
Poor Miss Archibold would need to pedal to create the air to operate the organ as well as play the music. But didn't I say that she played regularly for the Sunday services, so what's the problem? The problem was that in church she could recover her breath after pedalling each hymn before she had to play the next one. The opera was non-stop.

Reverend MacDonald came up with a solution. With the opera being based on a biblical story he could interpolate some commentary a couple of times to give Miss Archibold some recovery time.

"And after each of your songs you can explain to the audience what the next one is about."

I wasn't sure whether this would give Miss Archibold enough time for her leg muscles to recover, but one had to hope for the best. One thing I was sure of was that with all the explanatory interpolations the whole concert would finish much later than it was supposed to.

The singers arrived and we had a short warm-up – not too long because we didn't want to tire out Miss Archibold's legs before the concert had even begun. Then the audience arrived. The church was packed. There's no surer way to get a good audience than to involve children in the performance. You were assured of Mums and Dads and brothers and sisters and doting grandmothers.



The minute the concert began the skies opened and there was a torrential downpour. Just the weather for *Noah's Flood*! "Luckily the plaster ceiling is deadening the noise a bit," I thought.

We got almost through the whole opera quite well. The children sang wonderfully and I was in good voice. Trevor who sang Noah himself sang wonderfully. Even the sound of

the rain just added the sufficient atmosphere to the work. It was a great performance ... until ...

I'd better explain what we later discovered. The water from the previous downpours hadn't gone away. It had made a pool between the rafters under the cracked slate. It was a miracle that the ceiling could hold all that water ... until ...

Well there is such a thing as the straw that was supposed to have broken the camel's back. The rain had stopped, both in the opera, and locally. We were listening to the account of the dove having discovered dry land. Finally the ceiling gave way – not the whole ceiling, no no. The audience remained dry. The children were unaffected. Even Miss Archibold and her organ were able to continue. No it was just a three-foot square directly above where I was standing! I was absolutely drenched!

Of course the opera had to stop. But then we had all but finished anyway. I thought that Reverend MacDonald would announce that the rest of the evening would be cancelled. No, he is one of those who believe that “the show must go on”.

“Friends, the Lord in his providence has caused the rain to cease.” Indeed I could no longer hear the sound of the rain belting down. “We can go across to the church hall where a magnificent supper has been laid out for us. And while we are gone a few of the gentlemen will mop up the water here at the front. But God has spoken and laid upon your hearts the need for us to raise the money to repair our roof. Open your hearts, and your wallets, to go the extra mile so that we can replace the ceiling as well.”

I should have pointed out that the admission was by donation only, and that would be collected after the entire concert had run its course. And the second half was up to me. Of course I couldn't sing, sodden as I was. I had to ask Father to run me home to get changed. I indicated to Reverend MacDonald that this could take some time and he should extend the time allocated for supper. It was going to be a late night indeed.

I had never seen Father drive so quickly as we went home for me to change into dry clothes. I would have loved a nice hot shower but that would have to wait. Just off with the wet clothes, a quick dry with a towel, and back on with dry clothes.

Meanwhile Reverend MacDonald had foreseen that, because of the time, most of the children and their families, would probably go home after the supper and not return for part two. He would have to collect the donations at the supper, and that necessitated a short speech.

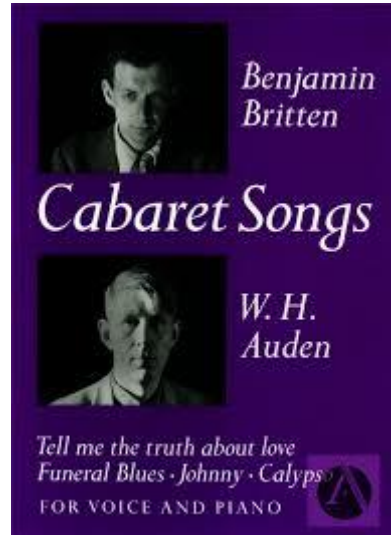
He didn't have to say too much about the pressing need for the repair. That was pretty obvious! Then he passed the plate around as if it was yet another dish of dainty edibles.

From being drenched to standing up again in dry clothes, took barely forty minutes. I noticed that the church was now only half full, but then I had expected that. Miss Archibold seemed fully rested, and so the second half of the evening began.

I took my hat off to Miss Archibold. She made that organ sing as if it been a piano-accordion. The slow pieces sounded just as good as if she'd been playing the piano. The plaintive *Tell Me The Truth About Love* sounded a bit strange on a church organ, but so what? When I sang the

words "It wasn't in the chicken run" I saw Harry wink at me and it was all I could do to stop laughing.

The only song that really suffered, and fortunately it was my last, was *Calypso* where I am telling a New York cab driver to drive faster and faster. I got to



Grand Central Station well before poor Miss Archbold could possibly manage it. It was as if I was on a Harley Davidson and she was trying to keep up with me on a steam-roller! Nevertheless we both got a standing ovation. Of course we had a good sleep that night. And on the following Sunday Reverend MacDonald announced, with a grin on his face, that we had raised not only enough to get the roof repaired, but there would be enough left over to remove the plaster ceiling completely, so to this day we can admire the lofty heights of the nineteenth-century beams.

36. WILD ABOUT HARRY

Harry and I had been good friends ever since he called me an ‘abo’ and told me to go back to my own country. Marijke teased me about it and asked whether my relationship with him was P, Q or R.

I replied, “I think Dad’s PQR classification is a bit simplistic, don’t you? I mean every relationship is unique and it’s silly to try and classify them. All I can tell you is that it’s not S!”

“But you and Harry were great mates throughout school. Adopting Dad’s classification doesn’t that make it a Q-relationship?”

“You mean like the courtly love of the Middle Ages? That’s complete nonsense. Imagine Harry worshipping the ground I stood on, or carrying round a handkerchief that I happened to have blown my nose on!”

Nevertheless our relationship became a connection of minds and spirits. We weren’t at all ‘in love’. Well that is, not until the night of the Opera School Ball. Call it hormones if you like, but something happened that night. I saw him in a new light. He was no longer just a kid I mucked around with. He was a man and a desire to be part of him, spiritually and physically, welled up within me!

History was repeating itself. Dad was the Aboriginal who married a Dutch girl. And now I was an Aboriginal-Dutch girl who was planning to marry a Chinese-Australian boy (I think he said he was only three-quarter Chinese). Our children will be a hopelessly mixed-up conglomeration of the cultures of three continents. But that’s what it is to be Australian.



As I said, we were often travelling together going around to Eisteddfods and concerts. Whenever I sang he was in the audience and afterwards we'd discuss my performance. I never managed to become a professional singer, but I did get a lot of work on the semi-professional scene. I didn't mind. To sing with the Australian Opera one usually needed to establish an international reputation first, unless you were happy to just sing in the chorus, and I didn't want to go to all that trouble. So to make a living I worked with Dad as a veterinary nurse.

I did sing in lots of amateur operas and musical comedies, usually in leading roles. I once sang in the Sydney Opera Company's production of *Mephistopheles*. It sounds great on my CV because people confuse the semi-professional *Sydney Opera Company* with the much better known and professional *Australian Opera*. I sang the role of Marta. The set consisted of two circular ramps that crossed over in the middle of the stage and this involved some quite sophisticated geometry. Harry, who is a Maths teacher, did the design.

One very exciting experience was meeting the famous conductor Richard Bonyng, husband of Dame Joan Sutherland. I don't know what the connection was between that world-famous conductor and the little-known amateur opera company. Somebody must have known somebody. It may have been the director of the company, Evelyn Klopfer. But there we were, all ten of the main cast members of *Mephistopheles* having lunch with Richard!

I haven't said much about Harry's talents, beyond being able to liberate chickens and design sets. Harry studied Maths at Sydney University and became a high-school Maths teacher. He said that Maths runs in his family. He has two cousins who are Maths teachers and his dad's cousin is a professor at one of the universities.

I was distressed for Marijke when she broke up with Frank. They were so well-suited to one another – almost like soul-mates. But religion is always interfering in people's lives. I can't understand why the Catholic Church insists on celibacy for their priests. It wasn't like that in the early church. It isn't like that in the Orthodox or Protestant churches.

I must say if it had been possible for them to marry it would have been very interesting for their children when they explained to their friends what their parents did.

“What sort of work does your father do?”

“Oh, he’s Father Frank at the St Francis of Assisi Church.”

“And does your mother work?”

“Yes, she’s the minister at St Andrews Uniting Church.”

I don’t think sis will ever get married. But she has remained very good friends with Father Frank. They even go to the ballet and concerts together. Mind you it does raise some eyebrows but Marijke was always one for raising eyebrows. And the Catholic Church can’t complain. It lost a Brother when George left the de la Salles, but it has gained a Priest in Father Frank.

When Harry finally asked me to marry him I answered, “I will, but on one condition.”

“What’s that?”

“You must promise to never become a celibate Brother or Father in the Catholic Church.”

“I can assure you of that, dear Liesje”, he said as he dropped onto one knee.

We planned our wedding for the following year. Of course we had to marry in the oldest church in Australia, our own Ebenezer Uniting Church. The reception was to be at a golf club in the area. Having booked these, the next job was to draw up a guest list.

Harry said we should invite all Father’s relatives from Walcha. I must admit I hadn’t thought of them because I’d seen so little of them. Marijke used to visit them every year and a couple of the younger ones came a couple of times to visit. Marijke used to call them her ‘mobs’ but to me they were just acquaintances. Still, I agreed with Harry that it was only proper to invite them.

I often wondered why Father had so little contact with them. Cathy said that Patrick Brontë, the father of the Brontë sisters, never returned to Ireland after he left there in his teens. He wrote occasionally

but he seemed to treat them as distant relatives, even his own brother. I think that in both cases there was some subconscious shame at their respective roots in poverty when they had gone on to do so well.

With Marijke's help we listed the 'mob'. The list came to thirty-three. We wondered, if they all came, whether we could accommodate them.

"Couldn't we hire a few tents and set them up on our property?" I suggested. "They must be used to that sort of accommodation."

Marijke was horrified. "They're not bush natives, you know! They live in small, but perfectly decent houses up there in Uralla. All of the adults have got jobs and, apart from one or two, they've never gone walkabout."

"So we can't put witchety grubs and possum stew on the menu?" I looked at Marijke to see the horrified look on her face. Then she smiled, as she could see that I was just winding her up.

"There's that motel just out of Richmond. And before you freak out at how much it's going to cost, I'm sure they'll all be able to pay for themselves."

Harry came up with an excellent idea. "Why don't you and I go up to Uralla for a week and get to know them? Marijke, you can come with us."

"What a wonderful idea," she said, "of course I'll come. I could introduce you to them and explain how everyone is related. You know, Liesje, I think you're a little scared of them because you think their culture is foreign to you. But they're Australians just like us, and don't forget that you're half Aboriginal. In fact, you'll really fit in because you look like one of them." I winced. I was always a bit embarrassed that I looked so much more Aboriginal than Marijke. But then I thought that visiting them might help me to get over that silly embarrassment.

The visit turned out to be a great success. The couple of times I had seen some of them in Ebenezer they were rather awkward and seemed to be a bit out of their depth. Not because they were Aboriginal but because they were country people who had very little experience of city life. But now that we were visiting them in their own environment I

began to see what warm and lovely people they were. They fell over themselves trying to make us feel at home. There again it wasn't so much their Aboriginal culture as the fact that they were country people and country folk seem to be particularly hospitable, black or white.

They took us to the Appsley Falls lookout and we did quite a bit of bushwalking. While most of them lived in the small towns of Walcha or Uralla, some of them had farms in the gorge country. In fact, one of Cliff's uncles had bought the farm that Cathy had grown up on – the one that Cathy called *Paradise Heights* but which her father had insisted on calling *Blustering Hills*. Uncle Ted called it *Paradise Farm*.

It was wonderful to see where Cathy and Darcy had lived as children. The old shack had been demolished some years ago and had been replaced by a comfortable weatherboard home – with proper plumbing. There wasn't any sign of corrugated iron to be seen. Even the water tank was plastic! They were not connected to mains water or electricity, but they had plenty of solar panels. And an up-to-date septic tank catered for the three toilets – all of them indoors.

“Wait till Aunt Merle gets to hear of this,” I said to Marijke. “It's a pity she's not here. We'll have to get her and Cathy as well as Father to come and see how different it is to what it was when they were here.”

We got married in the delightful sandstone Uniting church at Ebenezer. It was a wonderful time of renewing old friendships and making new ones. Because they had come from such a distance, the mob from Uralla stayed for a week. Father really reconnected with his mother whom he hadn't seen since his youth. Unfortunately his father had died many years before. The miracle was that, in the space of a week, he rediscovered his Aboriginal roots. A few months later he and Cathy travelled up to Uralla and he's kept in touch with his birth family ever since.

Five years later Harry and I have four children – four children under five! It's a lot of work, but as each one arrives the extra work seems to be less. Four children is twice as much as one, not four times as much.

Genetics is wonderful isn't it? Our four children look a bit like the United Nations with the Aboriginal, Chinese, Dutch and English

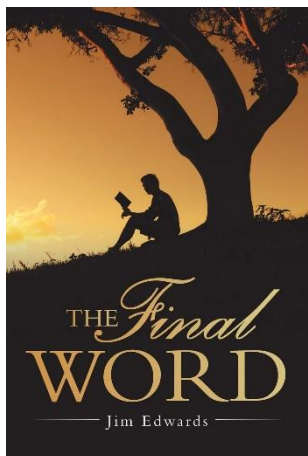
genes all combining in different proportions. One is as dark as I am, two look Mediterranean and the youngest – she is as blonde as a typical Dutch *meisje*.

I continued to work for Cliff as a veterinary assistant. It's so much easier to combine a career with raising a family when you work for your father. Cathy works in the business too, keeping the books.

I continued my singing, though as a hobby. Good as I am you need a considerable amount of talent to break into the professional world of opera, and even more luck. However I still manage to sing in at least one amateur opera every year and give two or three recitals.

So, dear Readers, you of the following generation will have your own adventures. Perhaps you can add your own chapters but, as this account of two generations is getting to be somewhat lengthy, your contributions will have to become part of Volume II.

37. THE FINAL WORD



It is only fitting that I, Cathy, who opened this story should have the final word. I don't know what Liesje means by saying that this is getting to be rather long. I did a word count and it's considerably shorter than *Wuthering Heights* which is considered to be a short novel. Never mind, I've typed it all out on my word processor and printed off copies for all the family.

So childless widow that I am I now have four lovely grandchildren. (Remember that I think of Cliff's children as my own.) And Cliff is a grandfather four times over. His hair, is starting to go grey here and there, as the ageing process takes hold. I have my hair coloured regularly so that Cliff doesn't realise how grey my natural hair has become.

For a number of years we were a household of singles – widower, widow and spinster. But then Marijke moved to become the Uniting Church minister in, of all places, Uralla and so she ministers to some of her own family. This just leaves Cliff and I in the house. We are as close as any old married couple, but we still have separate bedrooms. We might get married one day, but I doubt it. We are perfectly comfortable as we are.

I'm sorry to report that Darcy and Wendy have split up, leaving three children. No, it wasn't because Darcy wanted to become a Catholic priest, but their diverging religious views had something to do with it. Wendy is as Pentecostal as ever while Darcy has become an Anglican. Not a Sydney Anglican, mind you. He has moved to Bathurst and enjoys the broader perspective of that parish. What's more, he has become a bell-ringer there. Whenever I visit him he gets me to ring with him and the rest of the band. I've forgotten most of my methods. I can ring Plain Bob Doubles and nothing more – and rounds, of course. Still I find that my muscles haven't forgotten how to handle a bell.

Being so far from Wendy, who lives in Cronulla, it is difficult for them to share the children. So the arrangement is that she has full custody, but they stay with Darcy every term school holiday plus half the summer holidays. He and Wendy remain on quite amicable terms, and he calls her his best friend, even though she has since remarried. Darcy and Colin, Wendy's new husband, get on well together. We often joke that Wendy, like Elizabeth Bennett, has moved on from Mr Darcy to Colin.

Felicity and Richard – I haven't said much about them for many chapters – they continue to do well. Felicity was unable to fall pregnant, but they adopted a little Vietnamese girl. Mr Potts is still alive and going strong, but he's now in a retirement village. And Mum still lives in Holbrook Avenue with her two cats and comes to see us in Ebenezer very often. And there you have it. Not as dramatic – and not as harrowing – as *Wuthering Heights*. Just the story of a family and others who've come into contact with them. A story of ups and downs. More than anything it's a story of relationships.

There are many types of relationship, and not just P, Q and R. The bond between Cliff and I is either a Q+ or an R–, though certainly not an S. The relationship between Marijke and Frank is certainly not an R. It might be a Q– or even a Q.



I'm like a mother to my girls, even though they remember Lisbeth with great fondness. Richard is married to Felicity in what is no doubt an S relationship, but Richard remains good friends with his one-time lover, and one-time poisoner, Rosemary. Darcy and Wendy have broken up but, as I said, remain good friends.

At one stage Cliff almost denied that he was Aboriginal and for many years had very little contact with his family. But thanks to Marijke, and to the wedding of Liesje and Harry, that distancing was reversed and, though far apart in geographical distance, the relationship is quite close.

And finally, there is the ongoing relationship between George and I, though we are separated by the grave. I look forward to being reunited with him one day in the next life. Our relationship was well and truly an S one for those brief months, but I know that sex will be absent in heaven.

Yet I believe that we won't miss it. A union of souls is surely a Q relationship, and as St Paul might have said, "P, Q and R abide, but the greatest of these is Q."

You may remember me quoting the final words of *Wuthering Heights* at the end of chapter 28. I had assumed that these would be the final words of this chronicle, but my girls insisted on adding their own stories. So now that I am again closing the book, I must repeat Emily's final words, suitably modified.

And so, as I sit opposite George's tombstone in the Ebenezer graveyard, pencilling these words, I can't resist writing:

I lingered round the gravestone, under that benign sky, watched the butterflies fluttering among the grass and listened to the soft wind breathing through the gums, and poured out my heart to my beloved George.

POSTSCRIPT

This book is similar to *Jane Eyre*, in that it's a sort of autobiography by proxy. I got the inspiration for the book when I spent a couple of nights on my friends' farm in the gorge country out of Walcha. I don't know whether any descendants of the local bushranger, Captain Thunderbolt, were still living in the area, but the unlikely name Frederick Wordsworth Ward was, indeed, the bushranger's real name.

I picked up a few pointers about PLC in Armidale from a friend who teaches there. Of course, the teachers, and the midnight antics, are purely fictional.

The story about the female impersonators who attended the Christmas Eve Mass in King's Cross is factual, although it actually occurred a couple of decades later, when the 'girls' came from *Les Girls*. It was one of Father Leonard's personal memories that he related in one of his inspiring talks at St Kevin's in Eastwood.

Kirribilli is an area well known to me, since my sister-in-law, Maria-Louise, bought a unit in that very block, in Hipwood Street, that has the lane coming down from the old boarding house behind. The unit in Holbrook Avenue is one that my wife and I inspected when it was up for sale decades ago.

Although Felicity Potts is fictional, her friend and neighbour, Cecilia May Gibbs, certainly *did* live in Neutral Bay in that wonderful house called *Nutcote*.

I attended Canterbury Boys High from 1954 to 1958, and in 1954 we had only one female teacher. I am embarrassed to confess that, though I didn't actively take part myself, our class were merciless in our treatment of Miss O'Brien. If she's still alive, or her family get to read this, let me offer, on behalf of 1A, our sincere apologies.

I attended Sydney University from 1959, thirteen years after the fictional Cathy. I got some very useful detailed information from the University Calendars and I was delighted to see that certain staff-members in the Mathematics department in 1946 were ones who'd taught

me all those years later. So, I was able to put my own observations about their lecturing style into Cathy's inkwell.

Of particular interest to me was the fact that, in 1946, Freddy Chong, was one of the junior lecturers. I remember him well, not as a student, for he was no longer there in 1959, but as my professor when I took up a position at Macquarie University in 1969.

For a few years I rang bells at St Mary's Cathedral. My daughter lives at Cattai and I often attend her Uniting Church in Pitt Town, the sister church to the one at Ebenezer.

Wendy's flat, opposite the old Brighton-Le-Sands tram shed, was the home of my grandparents. *Wykehurst* in Katoomba, was the guest-house where I met my wife, Elisabeth and, some months later, I proposed to her on Anne, the nearest of the three sisters.

The iconic house in Stanwell Park, on the headland that separates the two lagoons, contained a flat that my parents rented for our family for several Christmas holidays in the 1950s. After Elisabeth and I got married in 1965 we lived at Stanwell Park, though not in that large house, but in a much smaller cottage. Elisabeth worked as a midwife at Coledale Hospital and, as she drove back and forth, she saw a couple of times that the road was partially closed because of a landslide.

The story of the priest catching Cathy and George, still in bed in the afternoon, was true for Elisabeth and I, except that he was the local Methodist minister. The account of the fire, that Cathy and George helped to extinguish up near the station, is a more or less accurate account of an incident that happened to us.

I didn't attend the Melbourne Olympics. The details about those games I obtained from the internet. The story about Barry Larkin, and the fake Olympic torch, is true. Barry was indeed a vet in Dural for many years, though I don't think he ever employed an Aboriginal man by the name of Cliff de Groot.

The story of the incident with the ferries during the 1978 floods is true. It was inspired by my running into floodwaters during the 2020 floods, though, with a mobile phone at my disposal, I was able to summon help and didn't have to wade through floodwaters.

My late sister-in-law, whom the family often called Loesje, had a singing career that roughly paralleled that of Liesje. She did meet Richard Bonynghe under the circumstances described, but she never got drenched in Noah's flood!

My late wife was Dutch and so I have long been acquainted with all things Dutch. My rather sketchy knowledge of Aboriginal culture comes either from books or has been acquired in conversations with friends.

To sum up, the major characters are all fictional but many of the minor characters are real. Let me finish by thanking my good friends, Annette and Graham Harman, for allowing me to stay on their farm, an experience that inspired this book.

