

# My Story

By Gloria Bracken

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## Toothless Terror

I am sitting in the gutter, waiting for the police to come. It is 1936, and I am seven years old. I have lost my front teeth, and have been christened “Toothless Terror” by my siblings and the neighbour’s kids, and I have had enough. Jackie Norton in particular, has been making my life a misery. There is a police call box on the corner of our street, so I lift the receiver.

“Hello” says a voice.

“Hello” I say, “there’s a boy tormenting me, and I want you to come and get him”.

“How old are you?” asks the voice.

“I’m seven”.

“Did you say seventeen?”

“No, seven!”

“Very well, we’ll send a police car right away”.

I sit and wait. And wait. My tormentor passes by.

“Hello, toothless terror, what are you doing there?”

“Don’t you call me toothless terror, Jackie Norton, I’m waiting for the police to come and get you”.

Jackie Norton takes off. I wait and wait. Eventually I go home to the little terrace house where we are, for the present, living. We are my mother and father, my sister Dawn and my brother Rex. Well, they aren’t somehow my proper sister and brother because my father is not their father.

Glebe Street Edgecliff, Sydney, is a lot better than the house where we lived before. It was one of the Royal’s cottages where we had no chairs, but sat on butter boxes. My Uncle Ted, whose favourite I am decidedly not, gave us a mattress. When we knew he was coming to visit us in the Royal’s cottages, I lay in wait for him outside. As soon as I saw him coming I sang out:

“Thanks for the Christmas present”.

He came close. “What Christmas present?”

“Bugs!” I answer, and run off before he can give me a clip round the ear, which I undoubtedly deserve, as I am a rather precocious brat. At the age of three I could recite passages from *The Sentimental Bloke*, coached by my father, who spoiled me rotten. But, back to Uncle Ted, who cut off chooks’ heads and laughed as they ran around the year, blood gushing, until they finally fell over. He, it was, who taught me to swear, well, to say ‘bloody’.

We had lived for a while with Uncle Ted, my mother’s brother, and Aunt Sophie, at Catherine Hill Bay, just one of our many moves, for in the Great Depression we kept moving, depending, I suppose, on whether we could pay the rent. We seemed to gravitate to the King’s Cross area - Darlinghurst, Rushcutter’s Bay. But in Catherine Hill Bay I had a confrontation with Uncle Ted, which no doubt did not endear me to him. Although times were hard, they were much harder for a really poor family who lived down the road, and whose children had contracted chicken-pox.

“Serve them right” commented Uncle Ted, “They’re a lot of dirty, useless buggers”.

At the tender age of five and a half I had a sense of outrage, so I hauled off and kicked him in the shins, which bled and had to be bandaged. For punishment my mother dragged me off to the garage, shut the door and stood me on my head. What this was supposed to achieve I don’t know, but I was

quite unrepentant. I felt I had paid Uncle Ted back for all those chook beheadings, and for terrifying me with a ride in the side car of his motorbike up and down and around the hills.

Though I had learned to say 'bloody' my sister Dawn would not let this dreadful word past her lips. Uncle Ted christened her 'The Reverend Mother'. She would have been all of eight years old. After the shin-kicking episode it wasn't long before we were back in Sydney and installed in the Royal's Cottages, with the butter-box chairs and a prolific choko vine growing on the fence.

My father was an English officer who had served in the Queen Victoria Rifles in England, and wherever else. I knew that he had served in Rabaul in the First World War, because he had told me that while he was there he had experienced an earthquake. As for his family, I'd never heard him speak of them. He had joined the Australian army at the outbreak of the First World War. He was a generation older than my mother. When we kids were being cheeky we would sing at him "Go back to England, Jack Court". But he never chastised us. My mother's temper was fearsome to experience.

My earliest memories are in New South Head Road. In that house I can briefly recall my maternal grandmother, Frances Allwell. I cannot see her face; just a long black dress and black shoes, and the fact that I had to fetch her a chamber pot. She was with us for a very short time, and then she died. Her body was sent back to Inverell for burial. Recently I found an old cutting from an Inverell paper about her funeral.

When we lived in New South Head Road our favourite place to play was Rushcutter's Bay Park which was just across the road. We used to slide down the hill, which in reality was just a slope, on a piece of tin or whatever we could find. Sometimes my father would take me to see the Celluloid Man in the Rushcutter's Bay Naval Reserve. The Celluloid Man was really a figurehead of Admiral Nelson, but to my five-year old eyes he looked like a gigantic brightly painted celluloid doll. I looked in vain for the Celluloid Man when I was in Sydney some years ago, but on a subsequent visit there he was in all his glory at the Powerhouse Museum. Of course the old house opposite Rushcutter's Bay Park is no more, demolished to make way for the Eastern Suburbs' Railway. But I digress.

At the age of four and a bit I had been sent to St Canice's convent school in Elizabeth Bay. There we heard the poem 'The Little Tin Soldier' and I can remember it even now, with its theme of the toys belonging to a little child. I didn't last long at school "because I learned too quickly".

Lots of things happened when we lived in New South Head Road. King George V died and we were all sad, I suppose because everyone around us was and we thought it was the done thing. While we lived there I was sent to the butcher's and came home without the change. There was a fearful to-do and I was sent back to reclaim it, in spite of my protests that I didn't want to. The people behind the counter were quite nice, but said they couldn't give me any money, but they were quite prepared to give me some more meat. They must have been rather non-plussed at my reply: "We don't want your bloody meat! We want our money!" This from a pint-sized waif. I ran home again with my story and luckily I didn't have to face the butcher again.

On one occasion I saw a man come off his motorbike. He was sitting on the kerb, waiting, I suppose, for an ambulance. He was covered in blood, and I was very frightened. I hadn't ever seen anyone like that before. Uncle Ted's shins had nothing on him.

## The getting of wisdom

Well, now I am six. We are living in Glebe Street, Edgecliff, and I have started real school. The first day we are given a writing pad, a pencil and a copybook, and told to practise the letters. Being a perfectionist, I keep rubbing out until the whole page is a dirty grey and I am quite disgusted. I'm surprised when the teacher tells me it is very good. She is amazed when she discovers that I can read, so she dispatches me up to the 'big girls' in sixth class to read 'Abu ben Adhem' to them. No doubt they all loved that!

I can't remember ever having been taught to read; it was just something that I could do. My mother or father always read to me when I went to bed, and as I was a pretty sickly child that was quite often. Somehow I always associate wheatmeal biscuits with being read to. I suppose it was because my mother would have these biscuits with her cup of tea at night before I went to bed. No doubt these were the cheapest, or perhaps they were among the broken biscuits we would beg from the grocer. When we paid the bill the grocer would give us a small bag of boiled lollies, or, sometimes the broken biscuits.

When we were living in Edgecliff, a block of flats was being built not far from the church. Bits of scrap timber were strewn about the site, and my sister Dawn used one of these for a head covering. Entering church bareheaded was forbidden, that is, if you were a female. We were taught to 'pay a visit' each time we passed a church, that is, to enter the church and pray, however briefly. Dawn, being on her way past the church, picked up a piece of wood, as she had no hat, held it on her head and paid a visit. She wasn't called Reverend Mother for nothing.

When I was six I made my First Confession and First Holy Communion. After months of preparation the great day dawned. Fasting from midnight was the rule in those days; not even a drop of water was permitted before receiving Communion. I was up early in the morning, and somehow that dreadful word 'bloody' escaped my lips. Was I in a state of mortal sin? If I went to Communion would I go to hell for committing a sacrilege? Would it be a sacrilege? I was on the horns of a dilemma. Terrified though I was, I made my First Communion and hoped it would be all right. As I came out of the church in my white dress and veil my face must have been the same colour, for one of the teachers put her arm around me and took me to the Communion breakfast, which was very splendid.

That same year there was a children's debutante ball. Dawn and I had long white dresses, made by our mother, and posies of sweet peas. My partner was a small boy who could not get the hang of the dance. Exasperated, I said loudly

"If you don't hold me properly I'm going to smack your face!"

I think the poor creature was quite convinced I'd carry out my threat. Dawn, however, quite eclipsed me. At the supper she declared to all and sundry,

"I'm going to shove this down my guts".

Needless to say, our mother was quite underwhelmed by the behaviour of her angelic-looking offspring.

I think my father must have had some kind of employment at this time. He did get some kind of allowance from England. This could have been a military pension, but I didn't and still don't know. He was the Honorary Secretary of the local branch of the UAP - United Australia Party. The rooms were in a basement somewhere in King's Cross; he would sometimes take me with him. The smell of bacon lingered in the air. It must have come from an adjoining shop.

Our favourite treats were penny ice-creams: friscos, which were a cross between an ice-block and an ice-cream, served in a square cone, and ice-blocks from the fruit shop. These were full of fruit and had a stick through the middle. Lollies could be bought by the penny and half-penny - chocolate sunbuds, freckles, which were chocolate circles covered in hundreds and thousands; aniseed balls, and a great variety of all kinds of sweets, which were usually in big glass jars. When we went to the Pictures, it cost sixpence to get in. Rex and Dawn, being enterprising, would wrap me in a shawl and carry me in as a baby, thereby having sixpence to spend. King's Cross in those days was a magical place, with shops selling wonderful things. Even the fruit shops were beautiful to behold. The Minerva Theatre was located there, and of course, the Picture show.

One Christmas Rex's present was a scooter. That supplanted the billy-cart for a while. I had begged for a ride in the billy-cart for a long time, and when finally Rex said yes, I was thrilled to bits. The deal was that he would push me all the way. Of course, after I got in he pushed and then let go, and I

careered down the hill, screaming in terror, finally crashing into the gutter. Needless to say, there were no more billy-cart rides for the Toothless Terror, who managed to fall off a low wall and cut her chin, thus earning another title of “One Stitch” after said chin had to be stitched at St. Vincent’s hospital, accompanied by much crying and discomfort. I should really have been called “Two Stitch” as sometime later I cut my foot at Seven Shilling Beach on some broken glass, which was obscured by the water. I was often sick, the most common complaint being “gastric flu”, which was treated with orange juice and castor oil.

During these childhood crises, our mother went to work, domestic work being in demand by those who could afford to pay for it. Mum worked as a general dogsbody for a Miss Fraser, who was a socialite, and lived in a beautiful house with a lovely garden, where, for the first time, I saw alyssum growing, and was fascinated by the profusion of tiny flowers. Fraser, as Mum referred to her, was a kind employer, and gave Mum her cast-off clothes, which helped her to dress quite well.

Sometimes we would prepare our own school lunch; one spectacular effort was a jar of red jelly, accompanied by a bottle of red cordial - this had rather devastating results. If we had lunch money we could buy a salad roll at the little corner shop. This was run by a small Italian named Gino. One day, when we were ordering our lunch, Dawn asked Gino for some extra filling, and would he mind? “No”, says the Toothless Terror, “Gino won’t mind, because he’s a nice little Dago”. I had no idea that “Dago” was an insulting term, but Gino thought otherwise, and we made a hasty retreat, never venturing into the shop again.

One shop we loved going to was “Flake’s Cakes”, and as an extra special treat, we would be sent to order little lemon cheese tarts. They were the stuff of which dreams are made.

## Blackie

We had a cat named Blackie, for obvious reasons. I adored this cat, and used to take it to bed with me. But the sad day dawned when we had to leave Glebe Street and Blackie and her kittens. “What will happen to Blackie, Mum?” I asked tearfully. “Who will look after her?” Mum reassured me that all would be well, but for a long time, I worried about Blackie. In fact, whenever I saw a cat in the street I would be most anxious as to its home life. But the die was cast. I was off to Newcastle; Rex was going to the Westmead Boys’ Home, and Mum and Dawn were off to Wollongong where Mum had a housekeeping job lined up at a boy’s boarding school. One child was stretching the terms of employment a bit, but two were definitely not welcome. Where my father was going was a mystery.

Why was I going to Newcastle? Because that was where Madge’s mother lived, and eventually Madge herself. Madge was one of my mother’s good friends. They had lived in the same block of flats when I was born, and evidently Madge took a fancy to me, and to Mum of course. Madge had married, but it hadn’t worked out, so she divorced and later remarried - twice. When things were really desperate for us, she persuaded her mother to take me for a while. Her mother must have been a really good sort because she had taken Dawn some time previously. I must have been a thorn in her side. She was fiercely pro-Labor, and I made that mistake of saying “I hate Jack Lang”, not having the faintest idea who Jack Lang was. I must have picked that up from some of the UAP meetings. However, at seven years of age I wasn’t really much of a threat. Madge’s mother dosed me up on water that had been boiled with prickly pear. I don’t know what this was meant to do, but I wasn’t sick while I lived with her at Stockton.

## My Relatives

Before I continue my story of life with Madge at Newcastle, I have to say something about our maternal relatives. We didn’t see them very often, apart from an occasional visit from Uncle Ted or Uncle Con - he was christened Conrad - and was the closest in age to Mum. He was as tall and handsome as all the male members of the clan, and had married young. He had quite a few children, but eventually had the wanderlust, divorced, and remarried. That seemed to be the norm for quite a few of Mum’s siblings.

Uncle Con had several jobs, one of which was as a warder at Long Bay Gaol. He didn't much like that job, but it was a case of take what you could get in the Depression days. King Conrad was the name of one of Grandfather's mines in Howell, near Inverell in New South Wales, and I'm not sure if the mine was named after Con or vice versa. I suppose, in some respects, the Second World War was a godsend to Uncle Con and thousands like him. It meant regular employment and pay, however meagre. So Con joined up and went to Singapore, and after that debacle found himself in Changi prison. After the war he returned to Australia looking like a skeleton. He had been a big man, but weighed about seven stone when he was freed.

Auntie Ann, Mum's eldest sister, who was widowed, and kept house for an elderly grazier in Tamworth would visit infrequently. I'm forgetting Uncle George who lived at Harbord. We didn't see much of him: he died of miner's respiratory disease, when I was very young. I don't ever remember my Auntie Josie or Auntie Kit, both of whom lived in Melbourne. It wasn't until 1950, after I was married, that I met Auntie Josie, and by then Auntie Kit had died. But then I also met my cousin Leila, Kit's daughter, and came to know and love her as a sister. When she died some years ago, it left a great gap in my life. She was great fun, and we were on the same wavelength.

## Newcastle

Back to Stockton with Madge's mother. I didn't have a room to myself, but shared a bed with one of her grown-up daughters, who used to read in bed, and kept a box of chocolates on the bedside table. One night I couldn't contain my craving for a chocolate with a nut on it, and when my bed-mate came in and looked at the chocolates she knew at once that I had taken one. She gave me a suspicious look and asked had I taken one, but I looked innocent and I lied. And that was the end of the matter. She was another really good sort.

Among my memories of that time are of empty beaches, ginger ale and chocolate roughs, and the discovery of Arthur Mee's Children's Encyclopaedia. Madge's family had a friend who had the entire set of these magical books, and I had a great time going to that house whenever I liked, to sit on the floor and bury myself in Arthur Mee. I learned all sorts of interesting things, particularly legends and fables, like the Holy Thorn at Glastonbury Abbey, which happens to be a real tree.

I had been sent to Newcastle on the bus, with a packet of licorice cigarettes as a treat. On the way I ate the lot; although this made me sick, it probably did me a good turn. Even now I can't stand the sight of licorice.

At the time of my installation into Madge's care, I had a new royal blue coat and beret. Now, a whole lifetime away, I wonder how this was paid for, given the hard economic times, but then, of course, I didn't give it a thought. I hadn't been long with Madge when she took me shopping. We got into a crowded lift, which became stuck between floors. This was not a pleasant experience, and panic was setting in when at last the lift moved again and stopped at the right floor. There was a positive stampede for the doors, and in the crush my new beret disappeared and was never seen again. This was quite a blow.

In Newcastle, Madge had by this time taken unto herself a second husband named George. George was a young man in his early twenties, tall and slender and sensitive, and who gave spiritual readings. Both he and Madge were really into this spiritualism business. They attended séances, could see "auras" and took the whole thing very seriously. I didn't know what an aura was, for I only knew "ora pro nobis" from the Latin mass. It was all very mysterious. However, the three of us got on very well together, rising late, going visiting, and quite often, to the pictures. Madge was a cradle Catholic who had, as we used to say "lapsed". She didn't bother to send me to school for the twelve months I was with her, but she did show me where the church was, and I went to Mass on my own.

The flat was on the top floor, on the side of a hilly street Madge had a canary in a cage, which was hung outside the window. It was a sad day when the support gave way and canary and cage went crashing to the ground. Neither survived.

Madge was a good cook: her specialty was waterless cookery. She had a three-level arrangement of saucepans on top of the stove, and could cook an entire meal with one gas jet. Pickled pork with accompanying vegetables was her favourite. Occasionally she would send me down to the fish shop, and I loved to dawdle in front of the windows and see the water running continually down the glass. When we came home at night from visiting or going to the pictures, there always seemed to be cats in the streets. Ever mindful of Blackie, left behind in Edgecliff, I used to ask Madge if these cats had homes to go to. Of course, she always reassured me that they had.

Madge taught me to knit. I had spent one whole afternoon trying to master the intricacies of wool and needles, without success. I went to bed in a very cranky mood, but as soon as I woke in the morning I reached for the implements of torture, and to my surprise, I was able to knit. For my eighth birthday Madge had knitted me a dusty pink wool dress, trimmed with pom-poms and white angora wool. I thought I was really something in that dress.

Madge and George thought that I had possibilities in the spiritualist world, and made overtures to Mum to see if she would let them adopt me. I wouldn't have minded staying in Newcastle with them, but alarm bells rang in Mum's head, and it was goodbye to the cushy life I'd been leading, and hello Wollongong.

Sometime later George came to grief. He was giving a spiritualist reading to a woman client - by appointment of course. During the reading he told the woman that he felt he was sitting on the edge of a volcano. How right he was. The woman was a police officer, and George was given three months in gaol for "fortune telling", which at that time was deemed to be illegal. It was hard to imagine how this affected the kind, sensitive man who had helped to care for me.

## Wollongong

In Wollongong with Mum and Dawn, Mum was always busy and her temper, when it erupted, was as fearsome as ever. She was really pushing her luck having two children in her quarters at the boarding school, but at the time she had no alternative. After I'd been there a while, Dawn and I got fed up and decided that we'd run away and walk to Sydney to see my father. If we'd had grandparents we might have made for them, but as my grandfather had died before I was born, and my grandmother when I was five, we had only one place to aim for.

My grandfather was an Irishman from County Cavan. He had been sent to Australia at the age of sixteen to work for a relative in Melbourne. As he was one of eight children, no doubt it was considered expedient for him to leave the family home, which was not big enough to support a large family. The relative in Melbourne was bitten by the gold bug, and so, apparently, was the young Peter Allwell, who subsequently went to Queenstown in New Zealand; the Palmer River in North Queensland, and eventually striking it rich in Howell, where he made a fortune in tin, during the Boer War. He met and married my grandmother when his fortunes were on the rise. On one occasion he took her to Melbourne to see the Melbourne Cup horse race. She had bought a dress which did not meet with his approval, so he took care of that by throwing it out the hotel window.

The eldest sons were sent to a Catholic boarding school in Sydney, but ran away. The eldest daughter, Auntie Ann, went to Monte St. Angelo, a posh girls' school in Sydney. She stayed until the money ran out. My grandmother had to resort to running a boarding house, when things were really tight, so it's no wonder she wasn't exactly thrilled when my mother was born - especially as grandmother preferred sons. Edna Georgina, named after Edward and George, seems to have had the rough end of the pineapple, in more ways than one.

When Dawn and I started to walk to Sydney we had no idea of how far it was. We had each packed a little bag - mine had my blue felt hat, white shoes, and a pair of undies. That Dawn had, I did not know, but off we set, when Mum was busy, to walk along the railway line until Sydney hove into view. On the way we picked up an enamel mug and filled it with water from a tap, because we knew we could die of thirst if we didn't drink; we knew we could manage without food. So there we were, eight and ten years old, trudging along the railway line, heading for the Big Smoke. It says something for our endurance that we got as far as the next station, when we realised that we just weren't going to make it. The sun was starting to dip down when we turned back. Fortunately, by this time a search party was out looking for us, so we didn't have to walk all the way back. When we were returned to our distraught mother, I was put to bed, but poor Dawn copped a hiding, in spite of the fact the running away was really my idea.

## Back in Sydney

It wasn't long before we all returned to Sydney, once more to live with my father, with the exception of Rex, who was still at Westmead, although he came home at weekends now and again. This time, we were in a half house at Waverley. Once again Mum had a job at the nearby boys' boarding school. Dawn and I were at school run by the Poor Clares, a Franciscan order of nuns. My class had to write a story for homework, so I turned mine in and was then asked if I wrote it myself. I answered yes, but to see if I was making it up, I was told to write one there and then. So I did, and had just got past the first paragraph when the teacher was quite satisfied. I was told later that the nuns considered me for a bursary, whatever that was.

But there were more exciting things happening. For one thing, my ninth birthday was coming up, and I was getting a real sleeping doll. I was going to call her Mary, and we were paying her off, a bit at a time, and then I would get to keep her. Dawn and I had a teddy bear between us, and we would sometimes pinch my father's razor and give him a shave, so the poor thing ended up nearly bald. At that time, our faith in Santa Claus was really shaken, for one day we stood on a chair and looked on the top of a wardrobe - and there were our Christmas presents!

This was the year that the Disney film Snow White was on at the pictures. We went to see it and were entranced. Then, there was a fancy dress ball for the children, and I was Snow White herself, with a flame coloured bodice and blue velvet skirt, and a black wig. I am naturally very pale, and no-one recognised me! Bliss. Dawn and I were really into comics, and found a pile of coins in a tin on the mantelpiece. We couldn't believe it, and were sure the fairies must have left it, so off we went and splurged on comics, only to find that this money belonged to Rex, and we were really in trouble.

## The Dart

But as it turned out, worse was to come. One day, Mum took us out to Leichhardt, to see some nuns. Mum stayed inside talking to the head nun while we looked round the garden. Then a few days later, we came home from school to find our bags packed, and we were put into a taxi, and taken to Leichhardt, where we were told we had to stay with the nuns. We were taken into the refectory, which was a large room with a table for nuns at the top, and other tables where lots of girls were ready to have their tea. This consisted of slices of bread and jam and a cup of tea. Not a promising start, as we were used to a proper meal in the evening.

After tea, we were taken to a dormitory, and shown where we were to sleep. "Does she wet the bed?" a nun asked Dawn (she being me). "No" said Dawn. I was mortified to think that a girl my age would be suspected of such a thing. "You'll have had a bath before you came" says the nun, "so you'll only need to wash your face and hands and clean your teeth before you go to bed". We weren't game to contradict her, and went to bed feeling shop-soiled and miserable. At least we slept side by side for the first few nights, and then Dawn was moved to another dormitory for the Big Girls.

It didn't take long for us to get used to the routine at The Dart, as we came to call our new home. This was short for Dartmoor Prison. How we knew about Dartmoor, I can't imagine, but I suppose it must have been something we'd seen at the pictures. We soon settled into our new routine. We were given our allotted jobs, as well as school, and mine was to dust the skirting boards, and help to clean the silverware at weekends, when we'd clean and polish and make patterns out of it. I can't remember if daily Mass was on the agenda, but I daresay it was. I do remember, however, how Confession was freely available, and I was always going as often as possible, thereby developing an over-blown case of scruples.

Dawn's job was to work in the kitchen, where she was able, from time to time, to pinch some food, which she generally hid and then ate in the bath. Having secreted half a loaf of bread, she took a half pound of butter and hid it on the ledge just under the oven. Sister came looking for the butter, and immediately suspected Dawn, who was of course, all innocence. Having conducted a search and found nothing, Sister left and Dawn rescued the butter, just before it started to melt. On another occasion, it was half a pound of cheese, which was quite a bit to eat in one setting, but she managed it. One morning, after finishing her jobs in the kitchen, she arrived late for school, and found the door locked. After being admitted she was chastised for being late and was given a smack on the face for her pains.

Once a week we had a bath, which we had to clean after leaving it. I had my bath, got out and cleaned it, but Sister came and said I hadn't done it. "But I have, Sister I mightn't have done it too good, but I have done it". I wondered why she turned her head away. We used to clean our teeth with tooth powder, toothpaste being a novelty. The powder was in a small round container, and we didn't much like it.

The Big Girls had different jobs, and some of the really big ones worked in the sewing room where our going out uniforms were made. These were black dresses, with white collars. One day when we were on an outing with my father, we were in the city in Martin Place, and a friend of my father's came up and asked if there had been a death in the family! Dawn and I wondered why he had asked that.

Food at the Dart was predictable - porridge at breakfast, meat and veg at lunch, with some sort of custard pudding, and bread and jam at teatime. Every second Saturday we had to have a dose of Epsom salts, which would send me running to the lavatory non-stop, and then I'd have to go to bed. One time I asked Sister if I could rinse my cup, which had the dreaded salts in it, and got away with this. I didn't try it again. I didn't want to push my luck.

Meals were taken in the Refectory. Nuns at the top table, and children in varying stages right to the end of the room. My table was at the very bottom, and on one occasion Sister at the top table was saying something which I didn't hear. Perhaps I wasn't paying much attention. When she finished speaking I banged the salt cellar on the table, as the salt wasn't coming out. A deathly silence fell on the room. "Stand up the girl who made that noise", said Sister in a voice that struck terror into my heart. Up I stood, in fear and trembling. "From now on you will eat your meals standing up". Later I learned that the very crime I had committed was what she had been talking about. There I stood, in full view of all the room and ate all my meals for at least a fortnight near the kitchen door. From then on I was a marked criminal.

Next transgression - I was at my desk in the schoolroom, and the girl behind me kept leaning over and scribbling in my book. I told her to stop. She didn't, so I said "If you do that one more time I'll put your plait in the inkwell". Her hair was blonde and the ink was dark blue. So she did it one more time and I carried out my threat. The end of the blonde plait turned green, and my tormentor began to sob pitifully. Of course, Sister came over and I was the one in the wrong. My punishment this time was to kneel on the floor, and I was drummed out of the Holy Angels Sodality. This was a bit of a blow because I loved the red cloak and white veil which went with the membership, when we went to Mass so arrayed.

When Sister told me to pull my socks up I did just that, not knowing it wasn't meant to be taken literally. Another time in the playground, it must have been a Saturday as there was no school, some girls were having a little concert amongst themselves, so I and some others decided we'd have one too. Group one accused us of mimicking them, and though we were innocent, naturally yours truly got the blame, and punishment this time was that I was not allowed to see my father when he came to visit.

Another big drama at the Dart was contracting head lice. The treatment was kerosene rubbed into the head, and then a fine tooth comb was used. To their credit, the nuns didn't insist I have my hair cut - it was long and plaited, and no doubt was a lot of work for them. Contracting scabies was worse, because I had to be isolated, and when Mum came to see me I could only call out to her from the verandah. I was very upset, and no doubt so was she. However, a lovely kind young nun looked after me so it wasn't all bad.

1938, the year of our incarceration, was the sequi-centenary of the first settlement of Australia. We found out that meant 150 years since 1788. There was a big demonstration of physical culture in the Showground by hundreds of schoolchildren, and we all wore different coloured school tunics, white blouses, and sandshoes. The Big Girls must have made the outfits. My tunic was green, but the sandshoes had to be paid for. They cost three and six (in today's money, 35 cents), so I was to pay them off every time I had some money, which was generally when Mum or Dad came and gave me sixpence. At that rate it was taking quite a time. I still owed quite a bit when the debt was wiped.

Mum had a job as a maid of all work in a big house in Double Bay. They were rich people who had two daughters about the same age as Dawn and me. Sometimes we were allowed out at the weekend and could stay with Mum in the house, as it was a live-in job. I was horrified when those girls called my mother Edna, as everyone knew you called grown-ups by their title. The girls had beautiful brown velvet dresses with lace collars, and turned up their noses at me in my dress, which I was out growing. "Don't you have any other clothes?" they asked, and I was really mortified.

At one time we were told that Mum was in hospital. We were scared that she would die, and we were taken to Lewisham hospital to see her. She had pneumonia, and was looked after by nun who wore blue, and looked lovely. Of course, eventually she got better, and we were relieved. What would happen if we had no mother? She was the one who we were always with, out times of all living together were very few.

We'd never seen anyone dead until one of the nuns at the Dart died, and her coffin, with the lid off, was placed in the chapel and we all had to file past and kiss her. That was pretty scary, and I think I gave the kissing bit a miss.

We didn't go home for the Christmas holidays, but we had a pretty good time in spite of that. There weren't so many girls and the nuns saw to it that we had a good Christmas dinner, and even some presents. I think it was the summer of 1939 when it was very hot, and one day the sun was like a big red ball. There must have been a water shortage, because we couldn't flush the lavatory unless it was absolutely necessary.

In the same year I turned ten, and for my birthday Mum took me to Farmer's store in the city for morning tea. I had a cream jumper and a cream pleated skirt, and I'd wanted a handbag, but I got two, so I gave one to Mum.

During the winter of 1939, I had the job of sweeping the yard at the Dart, and it was pretty cold, and I had chilblain on my hands which weren't improved by being outside in the icy weather.

Meanwhile, Mum had another job as a priest's housekeeper at Thirroul, and one Easter I was allowed to go to her for the weekend. Someone had bought me a really big Easter present - a chocolate slipper, and I ate the lot. I must have been a bit of a pig.

In August we were told there was a war on. We were pretty scared and wondered what it was all about. We discovered that Uncle Con had joined the army. Closer to home there was a big drama about to unfold.

I didn't see a great deal of Dawn, because we were in different classes, and dormitories, and had different jobs. As her work was in the kitchen, I suspect that she helped bring in the bread when the baker called, and sometimes managed to take some on the sly. She somehow got to know an old lady who lived nearby.

I had been given a big box of lollies for my birthday, and kept it in a special drawer, and would go and have one or two when I was feeling the need. I did give some to Dawn, until one fatal day I went to my store and found none. Dawn only laughed at me, but I was really enraged, especially when she admitted she and one of her pals had done the deed.

Fast forward to 1940. One morning Sister came looking for me, asking where Dawn was. I had no idea, and was told that she had run away, and where was she likely to go? I could think of only one place, and that was in Bondi, where a friend of Mum's, Gwen, lived. So the nuns summoned up a lady who took me to Gwen's - but no Dawn was there. Panic stations. Mum was contacted, and Dawn was found at Gwen's. She was cunning enough to lie low at the friendly lady's place, and then high tail it to Bondi.

## A night out

It wasn't long before I was taken from the Dart, and we were installed, with Mum and Rex, at Mrs King's boarding house in Camperdown. Rex by now was doing an apprenticeship as a fitter and turner, so it was quite a change from our previous existence. It was there I discovered the work of Georgette Heyer, and would read in bed even after the light was turned out, with the aid of a candle. It would have been trouble if I'd been found out.

By this time, Dawn was going on fourteen, and looked quite grown-up. One Saturday, she and I went to visit my father. Mum had been in one of her moods, and it was a good idea for us to go. So we visited my Dad, thinking we could stay the night after we had been to the pictures, but that wasn't possible as he only had one room. However, he gave us some money for the pictures, and we stayed in for two sessions. Then we decided, since Mum has been so cranky, and obviously didn't want us, that we'd stay the night in the Ladies' room at Central Railway station. So we sit in there, but a cleaner came in and wanted to know what we were doing. "Waiting for someone", Dawn answers. "Well you can't stay here, I'm going to lock up". Plan A is down the gurgler, so Plan B was to make for St Mary's Cathedral, and wait there until Sunday.

There were a lot of soldiers about, and one of them was giving Dawn the eye, so we made a pretty fast getaway and were walking quickly along the darkened streets towards the Cathedral. We noticed a big car driving slowly in our direction, and suddenly Dawn sang out, "Run Glor! It's bad men!" Glor took off like a rocket, and then heard "Come back Glor. It's all right". Glor went back: to Dawn and two policemen, who wanted to know what two kids were doing in Sydney late at night. They put us in the car and took us to the police station, where there was a lady and her luggage. She told us she had nowhere to stay. We, at that moment, were in much the same boat, but not for long. After some time, because Dawn had spilled the beans, we were taken back to Mrs. King's. This time there were no fireworks. Many years later Dawn told me that the policemen said to Mum that if it happened once more, she would never see her children again.

No doubt Mrs King wasn't too keen to have a police car turn up late at night, so other arrangements are made, and we are in for another move. Mum gets Dawn a job at the Jeldi factory, as she happened to know the owner, and arranges for Dawn to board with a lady in the neighbourhood. Mum and I went to a furnished room in Stanmore, and I attended the local convent school, where I invited trouble. I sent a little story to the newspaper, and based it on the poem "An Australian Sunrise". I received a certificate

for this effort, and my name was published in the children's section of the paper. Of course, my classmates saw this in the paper, and tackled me about it. When I told them I based it on the poem, they called me a cheat and my name was mud, as far as they were concerned. I didn't feel that was just. But what's new?

While we were at Stanmore, we visited Uncle Ted and Auntie Sophie's daughter, who was very beautiful. There was a wedding photo of her in a lovely dress, and she was carrying a big bunch of lilies. She was seventeen when she married, and had a little boy. What she didn't know was that she had married a bigamist, and the police found out and carted him off to gaol. So she was on her own. Later, she met and married an American soldier, moved to America with her son, and had another family.

While at Stanmore, I contracted whooping cough, and had to visit the local hospital as an outpatient. Around this time, Rex went to hospital with appendicitis, and we went to visit him. You had to pay to visit a hospital patient in those days, I can't remember exactly how much, but it was probably about a shilling.

## Confirmation

It was time for another move. Mum told me she had a job in Queensland, and would be going up there for a while. I was to go and stay with Gwen at Bondi. I was not too thrilled with this, but I was only a kid and had to do what I was told. So it was another new school, where I would soon be old enough to be confirmed. This entailed learning a fair bit more about the Commandments, and the Bible, and Church laws. I also had to take the Pledge that I wouldn't touch alcohol until I was twenty-one.

We had to pick a saint's name for Confirmation. I thought Dolores was a rather wonderful name, but I wasn't allowed to have it. So it was to be Magdalen. My full title would be Gloria Mary Magdalen! There was just one snag - I didn't have a white dress and veil. The good sisters, however, solved the problem. A kind lady would lend me one. This turned out to be a white jumper and skirt, plus veil, of course. The great day dawned. Archbishop Kelly would be doing the confirming. We approached in file, were duly confirmed, and given a slight tap on the cheek to signify that we must expect to suffer if we are to be followers of Our Lord, and then it was all over.

Meanwhile the school was raising money for some good cause - I forget which - but more than likely it was for black babies. This is another name for the Missions, which look after the poor in Africa. Our class had to make toffees, and sell them at school. I told Gwen about this, and she agreed to make the toffees, which I took to school to sell. However, Gwen didn't cotton on that I must take the money back to school, and she kept it. I was scared stiff as to what would happen if the nuns find out. Fortunately, Mum reappeared on the scene, and we were going to Queensland.

## Leaving

Mum gave me a bit of a shock. She told me that she was getting married. "But you are already married to my father!" "Oh", says Mum, "We weren't married in the Church, so it's all right". The twelve year old concedes that this is indeed the Church Law. And so the die was cast, and preparations were made.

I got a new dress, chosen from the Grace Brothers' catalogue. It was printed with little flowers, and had a white collar. I also received a new pair of black patent leather shoes, with bows on the toes. In no time at all, we had our train tickets, said our goodbyes, and we were off. We would travel all night and the next day we would arrive at the South Brisbane Station. I was too excited to realise that I would be leaving behind everything familiar, and that it was the beginning of the end of my childhood.

## The end

It will be another two years before we pay a visit to Sydney to see my father, who was very ill in hospital. We went to see him, and I was very unhappy. We stayed with Madge, who had a flat in

Kirribilli. During the night, Mum was summoned to the hospital. Madge and I were on our own in the flat, and suddenly, Madge said “Your father has just passed over”. I didn’t know what to think, but when Mum returned, she told us that my father had died at that very time. How did Madge know? Spiritualism?