

A Kirribilli Kid



Carlene Winch-Dummett Ph.D.

A Kirribilli Kid

soldiers, sailors and strawberry ice cream

a memoir 1942-1948

by

Carlene Winch-Dummett Ph.D.

Copyright © Carlene Winch-Dummett

Published by Viewpoint Publishing 2022

PART ONE - THE BEGINNING

It began exactly one week after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Except that it was a Monday. And it was Sydney, Australia. I opened my eyes to the world. And screamed. As loud as my mother had screamed a minute or two earlier. Three weeks later my nervous parents took me home to the house they rented in Kirribilli on Sydney Harbour.

And, so began a childhood which bore little resemblance to that of my later school friends who lived in the outer suburbs. This were no Californian bungalows, rotary clothesline, kids' sports, Saturday afternoon movies, or even Holden cars and lawn motors which are all depicted as somehow evidence of growing up in the 1940's and 50's. Essentially it was a quiet, safe world within an outer world of chaos and terror. I lived my first months in that quiet world until 31 May 1942 when my mother again screamed as she awoke to a brilliant flash of blue light that lit up her bedroom. The shocking light was immediately followed by a terrible noise – the torpedoing of the Sydney Harbour ferry *Kattabul* at Garden Island just opposite Kirribilli on the south side of the harbour by Japanese mini-sub, sinking it, and killing 21 Australian sailors.

Our flat was, in reality, half of a very nice modern house divided into two flats, the other flat inhabited by the owner, a Mrs Beattie, and her two adult children. The house, at 14 Peel Street, could be entered by a side lane or by a front gate leading to an earthen overgrown path that twisted through tangled bushes and tree roots to the back door because along the front of the house facing Peel Street ran a verandah that was enclosed at adult's waist high. Above the half wall of the verandah was an open area that could be closed, notably without complete success, dependent on the force of a southerly wind or easterly rain, by drop-down canvas blinds. This verandah was high enough from the street to offer beautiful views on a sunny day - and there seemed to be many sunny days - across the harbour to Rose Bay in the south-east, Taronga Park Zoo in the east, and beyond to an infinity of seas of variable blues, turquoises and greens.

In the straggling weedy remnants of a garden at the front of the house was an unkempt mulberry tree, the branches weighted down with fruit that stained the lips and fingertips deep purple, that brushed the scruffy remnants of a garden with mottled, rough textured dried fruit, and provided a shady hiding place. Peel Street was lined with huge canopies of trees of the native fig type that dropped curvy, boat-like brown pods to sail, tumble and toss in the rippling streams of rain water flowing down the street gutters. It was a magic river for children to sail their boats to unknown and mysterious lands beyond the farthest waters of the harbour. The

position of the house with the uninterrupted view to the east allowed a vista over the harbour from Taronga Park Zoo to Fort Denison. It was glorious with all those brilliant shades of cobalt, azure, mauves, pinks and dark green, with silver flashes and sparkling ripples under a wide, brilliant blue sky that even today is such an appealing vision of Sydney Harbour. For me it was a world of boats, small and large, ferries and warships, of brilliant yellow days and dark, dark nights when house and street lights were concealed behind brown paper glued on the glass behind drawn curtains.

It was a glorious world to be born into despite the fears and sorrows of the war which, during the first few weeks of my life, changed from a nebulous, dark, cloud somewhere in foreign lands, to a real threat, a terrible, foreboding danger, dark and menacing, always lurking somewhere around the harbour. Kirribilli was a world not only of brilliant blues, golds, startling whites and myriad shades of greens foliage, it was also a wonderful world of sounds, of sights and smells, even though to an adult these sensory experiences might sometimes have caused tension and restlessness.

It was a still, quiet world except for some noticeable soft sounds and others of rasping discord. At night the silence was broken by fog horns from large ships humming softly on the harbour; and the slap, slap of small waves disturbed by a ship's motion lapping gently against the pylons on the wharves. Long, silent search lights bounced off the clouds on overcast evenings or were hidden during the clear, star-studded nights. During the day the clip-clop of horses

could be heard but rarely a vehicle. Rubber was needed for the war and horse and carts replaced trucks and cars unless they were necessary for business. Eventually Dad bought a ute for work but in the streets of Kirribilli horse and cart brought milk, bread, clothes props for holding up the lines of washing, or the rabbit-oh with his skinned rabbits tied to the inside of his covered cart. But at my grand-parents terrace house in Jeffrey Street Milsons Point, adjacent to Kirribilli, the rattle made by trams crossing the Sydney Harbour Bridge to the city was a raucous cacophony every few minutes it seemed, often accompanied by the rhythmic thumps of an accompanying electric train.

A short walk from our house took us along the street near St Aloysius College, past my grand-parents' terraces in Jeffery Street, across the park under the Sydney Harbour Bridge, down to the harbour wall and there! There! the great smiling mouth with huge shining dentures of Luna Park! And the noise of screams of happy terror from the various rides; the music of the merry-go-round; the voices calling and enticing the crowds from loudspeakers; the laughter of sailors with their new girl friends; locals and visitors enjoying the bright lights when they were permitted.

In our shared house Mrs B (the land-lady) tuned her radio to the ABC (Australian Broadcasting Commission) every afternoon and there seems to have been a surfeit of Tchaikovsky because I was familiar with the music from the ballets from early childhood. Then, in the evenings when her son and daughter, who were probably in

their late teens, brought American sailors or Australian soldiers home, the house almost shook with constant repetitions of Ethel Merman screaming *There's No Business Like Show Business* or The Andrew Sisters, or other more poignant songs like *Don't Fence Me In*. Actually, I never ever saw these visitors because the entrance to the house was a living room with a long heavy brocade curtain separating the room into a passage leading to the interior of the house and providing a room with a certain amount of privacy. But I always knew when the visitors arrived because they left numerous pairs of big army boots on the floor outside of the curtain. To a small child, these boots were absolutely enormous and took up a large area of the 'passage'.

The radio was also an important possession for my grandparents although generally their programs provided little interest to a child. They listened to a few radio serials in the morning such as their favourite *Mrs 'Obbs*, (the only serial that interested me because there was a child in the series known as Blossom) and my grandfather, who had an English background, enjoyed any of the British comedians, such as George Formby and Tommy Trinder, especially when they performed at the Tivoli theatre in Sydney. At other times the radio, or actually the wireless as the device was described, would be serious and we were silenced as the World War 2 progressed in Europe and the Pacific. I remember names like Menzies and Curtin but little else. The wireless itself was a huge part of the furniture with a polished golden timber console decorated in art deco lines and

shapes. On the mantel piece near the wireless was an art deco lamp in the form of a naked woman leaning backwards and holding a white ball, the lampshade, over her head.

But it was what I could smell that had a strong connection with my memories of my surroundings. On the wharves of Circular Quay, Milsons Point and Kirribilli there was always a strong, salty, marine green weedy whiff sometimes mixed with whatever fuel was used by the ferry. The trams smelled of dust and trains were musty. But the aromas wafting from my grandparents' terrace house were a mixture of furniture polish, smoked haddock, disinfectant, lamb or rabbit stew, and curried sausages. Nana was the landlady and she kept a clean building but she was no cook! The odours of Keen's curry and smoked haddock seemed to be the only hint of culinary activity in her living room (although it might be that I remember these foods so clearly because, with the cabbage and white sauces she used, I found them detestable).

Nan cooked in a kitchen built into a strange wooden addition attached to the outside brick wall at the back of the dining room facing the west and the sun in the afternoon, overlooking the long shadows of the Harbour Bridge. It seemed always hot, and noisy from the rattle of trams as they approached the bridge just a stone's throw away. I was discouraged from going into that small annex with threats of apparently extreme barbarism so it conveyed a mystery swamped in oppressive humidity. On the other hand, I

enjoyed the tempting smells of stewed rabbit or lamb that permeated the rest of the building from late morning or early evening.

Under the stairs leading from the first floor to the second floor of the building there was a gas ring. It was like a circular iron ring attached to a gas pipe and there were holes for the gas to exit and the flames to be lit around that ring. A large saucepan of meat and vegetables would simmer on the gas ring. It was a kitchen alternative used by an elderly couple who rented a single room whose door was opposite the staircase. The food smelt infinitely better than Nan's! Nan and Pa seemed to enjoy their curries and haddock in white sauce but I was fed a similar sauce on fried brains or tripe garnished with parsley, junket, and blancmange. All white. Again, I can't remember any other food that I was offered as a child in Kirribilli probably, again, because I found it infinitely unappealing!

Nan was a busy landlady who managed the financial books, the maintenance of the building, the laundry which was below the first floor, and the duty of Mrs A, the laundress. Nana also did voluntary work with the VAD (Voluntary Aid Detachment) who were trained by the Red Cross during the War for emergency assistance. She was a member of the garden club, the Sunshine Club, and the NSW Tramways Institute Social Club. In all of these she participated with extravagant enthusiasm. Most of these interests had little impact on me except - horror of horrors - the VAD! Nana wore a little uniform and a sort of pinafore, tied her hair into a tight bun and carried a

black Red Cross bag. Whether she was encouraged by her Red Cross course or a desire to try out her new skills is not clear but since I was the only subject that could not escape her zeal, I suffered a variety of medicines, antiseptics and lotions that were awful. So, if I had a hint of constipation my mother would hold my head tight and squeeze my nose while Nan poured castor oil into my squealing mouth! If I had 'the runs' the same exercise was applied with milk of magnesia. If I had an infection in any part of my body, in particular wooden splinters under the skin were her specialty, she would recommend that the area be dipped into almost scalding water over and over again until the surrounding skin was as red as the infection. Next step was the application of a stinging antiseptic such as Gentian Violet, or anything else that would burn the 'germ' to oblivion. For fear this treatment might not have the desired effect, a poultice was made of castor oil on sugar and bound tightly to the wound with torn sheet.

Pa was a tram driver. A couple of years after I was born he retired with a silver medal for long service. He received a citation for managing a major accident in Oxford Square, Sydney. He was a kind and gentle grandfather. But, my early memories are of him sitting in the dining room with his feet propped up on the table, head buried in a newspaper, wafts of smoke from his pipe floating in little clouds from behind the newspaper towards the ceiling. Occasionally they would appear as little white halos because Pa enjoyed a doing little tricks like hiding a penny at the back of his hand or apparently

up his sleeve and retrieving it from behind his ear. Sometimes, after he retired from the Tramways, he would put on a sports coat and his hat and take a neat little leather suitcase to go to North Sydney. I never saw inside the suitcase but it was probably a bottle or two of wine for dinner. Like Nan, Pa enjoyed the Tramways Institute and entertained the audience with monologues, magic tricks, soft shoe dancing while Nan played the piano and sang with more gusto and enjoyment than talent. In fact., I think there was a little rivalry between them! They had a vibrant social life.

PART 2: LIVING IN KIRRABILLI

Have you ever been to the Circus and watched the grand parade of human performers in all their guises and colourful costumes, their coloured hair and brilliant shiny or patterned hats? If you can, imagine those faces, beautiful or ugly, laughing or scowling, circling you in all their varieties each day of your introduction into the world of people from many walks of life, maybe struggling, but always cheerful and kindly towards a small child. I suppose small children in reality only see the faces and perhaps the lower legs of adults who always seem to bend over, almost pushing their large faces into the face of the child, because these big people cannot reach the level of the child other than by bending or squatting. Nowhere could I have encountered such a rich variety of humanity. This was not your socially homogenous suburban clubs and cliques. This was a world of fascinating individuals all with their own special identities and stories. These were the faces of Kirribilli. They were glorious!

Nan and Pa's terrace house, with its traditional one front window and doorway to both a long hall and a set of stairs to the upper level, was at street level with a little area outside the window bordered by the footpath and fenced with elegant wrought iron rather like a battalion of spears in formation ready to deter thieves. Opposite the window and across the street there was a sort of a retaining wall of a street where St Aloysius College was situated. Every morning when I stayed with Nan and Pa, I rushed to the front window to watch, what to me, was an extraordinary sight. Every morning, at

the same time each day, seemingly endless groups of figures wearing the same clothes and funny straw hats with flat crowns and rims would walk towards the building which was obscured to me by the retaining wall. Every afternoon these same numerous groups of figures wearing the same clothes and hats would walk in the opposite direction. They reminded me of the blue and yellow soldier crabs that came out onto the golden sand at low tide and then marched together only to dig new holes and disappear as the tide inched back up the beach. I don't think I recognised the figures as real people – just one of those unexplained phenomena in my life.

Similarly, one day my mother took me to a little florist shop in Kirribilli. Mum and Dad had owned a florist shop when they were first married and they enjoyed fresh flowers in the house. There, to my terror, two creatures covered in brown from their heads to their feet with their faces popping out on top of their shapeless figures, entered the shop. My mother, who had been educated by the St Joseph Sisters of North Sydney, was delighted to meet them but their friendly manner didn't fool me! To make it worse after they moved on my mother cheerfully told me that they would be my teachers one day! I don't think that I thought they were people like other humans. I don't think I understood what they were until I was several years older and even then, when we went on a school excursion to see the film *Miracle of Our Lady of Fatima* (1952), I was astonished when two of the sisters lined up with the other women and girls to visit the toilets!

In those days friends often dropped in for a visit for afternoon tea even if there was no official invitation. But there were strict practices of etiquette. If the visitor dropped in unexpectedly for a cup of tea, then a table cloth, cups and saucers, milk and tea with a plate of biscuits was offered. If they were invited for lunch then the guest would bring a cake to share – and leave any left over. Very few people had phones and friendships were valued so manners were not just an affectation but a means to promote (or discourage) drop-ins. My mother always had a jar of anchovy fish paste that she slathered on toast for drop-ins. I am not sure whether there was a meta message there!

So occasionally we would make a straggly pilgrimage of Nan, Mum and me in a pram ambling to the house or flat of some friend, relative or person with a hazy connection to the family. Nan rarely ambled but her efficient leadership was restrained by having a restless child in tow. Nan, having been born to an Irish father and Scottish mother was a mixture of the religious confusions and rejections of the mysteries of a Catholic education and the dour moral attitudes of the Wesleyans. But she would belt out Irish songs on the piano and sing at the top of her raucous voice. She broke into music and singing at every opportunity so that part of her heritage I enjoyed – but not her rigid authority.

Nan and Pa's house was in Jeffrey Street that led down the short hill to Milson's Point Wharf. Nana had some Irish friends who lived about a half hour's walk away in a large house with an untidy

garden that rolled down to Lavender Bay. Mostly, these visits for me seemed just a case of waiting around until the tedious conversations were over but, one day, eavesdropping paid off! To my astonishment and delight it seems that the father or grandfather of this huge Irish family had a wooden leg. The cause of this disability, whether it was the war or otherwise, was not explained but one afternoon while he was asleep his son decided to tie the shoelaces of the wooden leg to the leg of the bed. Of course, 'there was all hell to pay' when the elder male rose from his bed and attempted to walk to the toilet or wherever and found himself flat on his face.

Mum and Nan would chat to neighbours or tradesmen who came to the house, or relatives who would mostly arrive by tram or train at Milson Point Station. Mum had a friend who lived in a tiny flat overlooking the harbour at Milsons Point. She was one of many women living alone at the time, working in Sydney while their husbands served overseas in the war, or just because they filled in to vacancies left by the men. This lady, I will call Marge, had a job in a kiosk at Luna Park. American sailors lined up in their white uniforms and Gob caps at Marge's kiosk for a chance of winning a prize by dunking a mermaid into a pond. The mermaid, in fact a pretty girl sitting on a rock in a sort of cage, was dunked when a ball was thrown a target somewhere inside the cage! So, Mum and Marge would gossip together oblivious to the fate of the mermaid who literally had to fish herself out of the water and scramble back

onto the rock after each successful dunking. Of course, I can't remember how much she was immersed or if at all but the fantasy was played out numerous times each night. My joy was simple – riding the pretty prancing horses on the merry-go-round or licking strawberry flavoured ice cream cones.

At some point of time in the middle war years Nan's Uncle Matt returned from the US where he had been described as a *persona non grata* and sent back to Sydney. Uncle Matt had been working on the banana boats that carried cargo from the Caribbean to Canada before the war. His parents had settled in Australia from Mayo, Ireland as non-assisted immigrants to Tasmania in the 1860's and subsequently opened a haberdashery in Melbourne in the 1880's where he was born – a sibling to Nan's father. Uncle Matt would arrive at Nan's house without advance notice on a Sunday afternoon, leave philosophical readings, maybe a book by Morris West, have afternoon tea, and then disappear for weeks although he lived in Milsons Point somewhere. He continued this habit for another 20 years or more even when the family moved to the suburbs. He was conspicuous with his black Homburg, black bow tie, white curly hair and bright blue eyes. I never saw him without that hat so maybe he had it for the 27 years that he visited us.

So, although there were many interesting folk there were very few children in the early 1940's. As well as some seven cousins of roughly my own age, whom we saw from time to time, there were very few children for company. One occasional companion was a

wonderful older boy with Down's Syndrome who would play hide and seek with the younger children in the next-door building – and we hid! He was very big and a little clumsy so it was imperative to find a secluded spot where he would not accidentally knock you over! There was an older girl across the road but she was vague. 'They' said someone dropped her on her head when she was a baby! And later, when I was about two years of age, there was my little friend who, unknown to her own mother, had wandered down Jeffrey Street and was found floating lifeless under the Milsons Point wharf.

Mrs A was Nan's laundress for the building. Her white hair was tied into an untidy bun on top of her head. Her home was a rent-free cupboard in a tiny alcove under the stairs where the building opened into to a large laundry with another door leading to the narrow back yard. The laundry had a couple of wash tubs and copper built around with bricks with an area underneath to light a wood-fire to heat the water. The little bedroom of Mrs A was so tiny it held only her bed under the sloping lining of the stairs. There was a narrow shelf on the opposite wall where she kept pictures cut from magazines; a small mirror; and her hairbrush and hairpins. She also had a ball made of silver paper from chocolate wrappings. The ball grew slowly larger as she acquired each new chocolate!

Mrs A was a caretaker, nanny and friend to me. She often took me for morning or afternoon strolls along the harbour to paddle in the wavelets from passing boats, or to build little mounds and dig holes

in the thin ribbon of sand just outside the harbour wall. In her laundry she would place a wooden cover over the top opening of the copper where I would stand like Shirley Temple and sing songs. Given I am tone deaf that must have truly been a labour of love - or else a desperate attempt to keep me amused when she had the task of baby-sitting.

Amongst my mother's numerous bright and interesting friends was a lively lady who had some association with the management of Kirribilli House. I remember having my 4th birthday party in Kirribilli House but most of the children were unknown to me. We children enjoyed rolling down the lawns that sloped toward the harbour more than the party itself. I looked forward to our visits to Kirribilli House because it was so pretty. It was painted a creamy shade that shone in the sunshine, and had gables and filagree work. Indoors there was a huge room with a polished floor where we played. Sometimes we went outside to the sort of cloistered verandah where we could sit on the grass and could see over to Fort Denison, a little island in Sydney Harbour with a Mallory tower which I longed to visit.

So, in that glittering harbour-side village that seemed to wrap around me like some warm, familiar blanket splashed with sunbeams and sparkles from the surrounding ripples and waves, there was only one fear that intruded into this dreamy world. It came from Taronga Park Zoo. After the arrival of my baby brother my bed was moved onto an open verandah and situated

immediately under the window of my parent's bedroom which had only enough room for their bed and a baby's cot. A mosquito net hung over my small bed and a canvas blind was lowered to the half-wall separating the verandah from the garden below. Despite the occasional splattering of rain on my face, the only fear I had was of the lions at Taronga Park Zoo. In the evenings they would growl and it seemed they were complaining grumpily. Their roars of discontent carried across the harbour to the nearby point of Kirribilli. Even now in my later age I still have nightmares of lions following me and, what's more, I can be absolutely sure that when I visit a zoo anywhere if a lion sees me - it will stalk me!

PART 3 – STRAYING BEYOND KIRRIBILLI

Of all the friends and relatives, my favourite was Betsy. Betsy was my parents' bull-dog. She seemed to have a constant head cold because she snuffled and snored, and enjoyed dog biscuits. Betsy followed me everywhere and although she was known to force the Bottle-O to stand against the fence when he arrived unannounced to collect used bottles, she was the kindest of souls to me and would generously, although reluctantly, share her dog biscuits with me. She was loving and loyal and she let me do as I pleased!

One glorious sunny day when I was little more than two years old, she discovered that the front gate, beside the mulberry tree, and leading into Peel Street, was ajar. She nudged it with her little, flat nose and realizing that she was on the brink of experiencing all manner of new scents, she set off for adventure. Of course, I followed her! I still remember that first delicious sense of freedom, of independence, of enthusiasm to explore, as I set off after her. We were so happy! We potted down Peel Street, and turned left into Carabella Street – all very familiar. But then my chubby guide soon turned left and we were in unexplored territory. So, I squatted down in front of a house to watch a man gardening. Betsy continued to sniff around and I enjoyed my leisure resting in the sun. And then it was over! A large dark shape loomed up and blocked out the sun! There was Nan! Now, Mum, who was a strong advocate the philosophy that crime deserves punishment, offered no welcome home – just a spanking!

For the young and the fit Kirribilli was within walking distance of the city of Sydney by way of the Sydney Harbour Bridge. But the usual transport was tram, train or ferry. The city was not called Sydney by the locals – it was called *Town*. This term probably predates to the early days of the settlement of Sydney when it was known as Sydney Town. Probably until the 1980's people went to *Town* and they dressed accordingly, just as they would when visiting local towns in the rural areas. In the early 1940's women wore hats, gloves, furs, their best shoes, carried handbags and were often photographed by street photographers who were part of the city landscape. For men hats were *de riguer* and usually sports coats, collars and ties. *Town* was serious stuff! That was where the professionals worked – lawyers, physicians, newspaper publishers. The buildings were splendid with sculptures above the doorways or pediments, finely and artistically shaped sandstone, beautiful architecture such as Sydney First Government House, Hyde Park Barracks, St James Church and The Sydney Town Hall.

Nan had a real fur coat that looked like it was previously owned by a lion because it was a mixture of straggly orange and brown fur. But, more alarmingly, she proudly displayed a golden fox fur around her shoulders on her visits to *Town* or other social activities. The fox fur had a magnificent tail but, worryingly, a head with beads for eyes. So, to a wondrous child it was not alive but since I had no concept of death it was real but inert. A strange creature! Of course, Nan was the height of fashion. Mum too wore a fur for

evening warmth. It was a small, white fur cape that she kept all of her life even when the skin became stiff and hard - a sort of creature suffering delayed *rigor mortis!*

One of the more worrying matters for women visiting *Town* was the shortage of rubber due to the Japanese invasion of Malaya. While that might seem fanciful in fact it was an emergency! Women could not buy elastic. And elastic is essential to holding a lady's nickers in place! The alternative was a button and button hole which was not always reliable. So after this weakness became obvious women walking in *Town* were advised that should their nickers fall down in public they should step out them and carry on walking to avoid drawing attention to their embarrassment!

Town not only had businesses with elegant edifices but the theatres and stores were also designed to offer a sense of opulence. Our trips to *Town* usually took in the huge and popular department stores of Anthony Hordern's, Farmer's, and David Jones. Most buildings only reached five storeys in height.

Lunch or morning tea at David Jones was a treat. But, more interesting to children, and no doubt potentially dangerous in retrospect, was the Xray machine in the shoe department. A small cabinet with a step for children offered the novelty of putting a foot in a cavity at floor level and, if they stretched up and peered through a small window at the top of the cabinet, they could observe their foot bones within the shoe! This device gave children a merry

diversion as adults tried on shoes brought to them in little boxes for choice. But another source of delight to kids was the elevator attendants. Dressed in sort of bell-boy uniforms they pressed the buttons to activate the elevator, commonly known as 'lifts', and travelled with the elevators announcing a list of items for sale at each floor.

The more serious business outings taken by Nan and Mum were to North Sydney, a one stop tram ride from Milsons Point. It was always noisy and dusty with only a couple of diversions for me. One was the apothecary where two enormous glass apothecary bottles of different colours could be seen through to the grimy street window. The other place of interest was the *Dolls' Hospital*. In those days dolls were made of stuffed cotton except the head hands and feet. Which were of a sort of crockery material – breakable!

Later, I attended St Francis Xavier School at Lavender Bay. I had endured many trips to North Sydney by tram so decided to make a solo trip. I was about five years old. On this occasion an older girl who was paid to walk with me to and from school was absent from school, so I decided to catch the tram. My main fear was when I left the tram at Milson Point that my uncle or grandparents might see me at the station and I knew there could be trouble! But no one ever learned of my adventure and I gained more confidence as a result. My walk with Betsy and my journey on the tram were the start of a life-time of excursions to satisfy my curiosity.

PART 4 - DARKNESS AND LIGHT

It was a glorious evening. The sky was the deep translucent blue of sapphire. Sparkling stars confettied the heaven and a golden moon swung above us as we walked happily from Nan and Pa's home to our flat in Peel Street. Mum, Dad and I were so happy. We chased our shadows until they disappeared into the deeper shadows clinging to walls; and we watched a possum skipping from a stone wall into the dark. We laughed and sang, and Dad tossed me up onto his shoulders making our shadow even grander as we enjoyed our time together. I cannot be sure whether this was just one evening or a bunch of similar evenings but it was not to last for long. But I remember it so well because it could never happen again. I was only two years old.

One night Dad didn't come home. Dad suffered a terrible injury when a truck rolled back on him at work and crushed the back of his thigh into the sharp edge of a steel girder, crushing two inches of bone into a compound fracture. Briefly, Dad spent six months in South Sydney hospital with complications. Then he suffered septicemia. He returned home but the bone was shattered and affecting the nerve. At the Mater Hospital the surgeon accidentally severed the nerve so that Dad was left with a drop foot and a leg that was about an inch shorter because of the loss of bone. I was sent to spend daytime with Nan and Pa. The days and weeks grew longer during his absence.

The first time I saw him was very disturbing. My big, strong Dad was lying on white sheets, with his leg sticking up above the bedclothes and with white mosquito nets around him. He was on the verandah of the South Sydney Hospital with his leg in traction.

Later, when I recalled Dad's injuries, I also remembered the men on the tram and train platforms. Some had legs missing. Some had their arms in slings, or had large crutches - just like the crutches Dad had when he returned from hospital. The crutches were placed against the kitchen wall at home and were taller than me. Some men had iron calipers on their legs like those on Dad. Many were smoking cigarettes. I heard the groans of pain in the hospital and from the make-shift bed set up for Dad in Nan's lounge room. And the new musical sounds that drifted around me were from harmonicas. Harmonicas captured the sadness people endured. No-one had guitars in those days.

So, on the days when we did not visit the hospital Mum returned to her dressmaking. She had trained in dressmaking at technical college and had worked for businesses that made clothes to measure for the clients, much as men had suits made to measure. On one spectacular occasion she decided to make a dummy of herself so that she could do her own fittings without arranging for someone to pin the dress or other garment on her.

Now, first of all, I have to explain that having a mother who is a dressmaker is a mixed bag. Occasionally there was a nice frock but many of my play clothes were made from the cut-downs of dresses

discarded by some older person. And that's just the way they looked! The patterns were ugly! Moreover, the whole exercise of a 'fitting' was little more than torture as pins were stuck under my armpits, or anywhere where flesh was exposed, especially if I moved. Any complaints seemed to be met with even more patches on my body where pins could pierce! When the hem was measured and pinned in place, the pins took turns in jabbing and catching pieces of skin behind my knees as I circled while Mum measured the length of the skirt from the floor.

So, the day of the 'dummy making' came. Clearly my grandparents were involved with Nan being a sort of messenger and Pa doing the production. It went like this:

To begin with, Mum stripped down to her vest and nickers. Pa had procured what must have been an enormous amount of those rolls of narrow brown paper with glue on one side for sticking any broken cardboard together or sealing cardboard boxes - the predecessor of clear plastic sticky tape. I am not sure where on Mum's body Pa commenced with this tape but he gradually encircled her body with brown sticky tape around and around just like an Egyptian mummy. The strips overlapped so that they eventually produced a sort of coat of armour rather like that of a bee. Pa then smoothed the tape with his hands and began to seal it with layers of varnish painted over the carapace. Mum stood still with only her head and neck, outstretched arms, and spindly legs visible – a bit like a scarecrow. This took quite a long time as each layer of varnish dried and was

replaced with another. At some point in this long process Pa said that the armour was complete and was now strong enough to be a model for Mum's body for future dressmaking,

Now came the biggest challenge – removing either the armour or Mum! She uttered something like “I'm stuck!”. I screamed and Mum wobbled her outstretched arms around in small, useless circles as she attempted to console me. My grandparents realized that it was time to extract Mum, so Pa took a sharp implement and cut down the sides of the armour and removed the two halves from Mum's reddened body. But everyone was jubilant – it worked! Pa made a support stand rather like you would see at a dressmaker's workroom today, and then he joined the two sides of the armour together so that Mum now had her own personal dummy!

After about 18 months Dad's hospitalization were over. He returned home with a badly damaged leg and dropped foot. Dad would never allow disability or pain as an excuse not to work or participate in any reasonable activity. After many years he played golf, but immediately on return home he needed time for the muscles to strengthen so he began carpentry and making rocking airplanes for little boys – rather like a rocking horse but in the shape of an airplane with the wings forming a table to the front airplane. They were very popular. During the months when Dad made airplane rockers, he used the off cuts to make little boats that he would paint in bright colours for me to pretend to sail in the garden. We enjoyed those times.

As his leg grew stronger, he took up stone masonry and took great pride in creating beautiful work. Even today his work can be seen in the stone wall of the prize-winning Rose Cottage - designed and owned by well-known Sydney architect, Harry Seidler. We were all so chuffed when he had his own stationery printed with his name *A.C. Dummett*. He took Mum, Michael and me to visit the cottage when it was almost complete. It was situated in bushland on the North Shore of Sydney. The bush was important to me because I knew that a little bird lived out there out who talked to Dad and would let him know if I had behaved myself during the day!

Later, when we moved to the suburbs Dad would take my little brother and me out to a friend's property, where Macquarie University is situated today, to blast sand-stone for his work. So, after he had made his selection of stone, Michael and I would be told to go down to the creek, put our fingers in our ears, and curl up tightly in a sheltered spot until the powder was lit, exploded and smoke had curled into the air! Stone masonry led to Dad making friends in various special occupations like monumental masonry, carpentry, medicine, and various hobbies, who often gave him gifts 'for the kids.'

Among these gifts some were a little problematic to me as a child. One was a large box of ribbons given to him by someone who worked at Northern Suburbs Crematorium (or the cemetery, I cannot be sure) but, since I had plaits, my mother was delighted. The concern for me was that there were no red ribbons, or pink

ribbons, or in fact any brightly coloured ribbons – only white, cream, purple, mauve and black except for just one occasion - a blue ribbon! Can I say more?

But best of all was the gift from Peter, the Dutch immigrant, who was a painter – of houses not art! He gave me a pair of real clogs and described his homeland, Holland. The clogs were adult-size but he promised I would grow into them. I did - and I still have them! Peter was inspirational to my interest in cultures and anthropology which have informed my academic research throughout three post-graduate degrees!

PART FIVE - 1948

One August day in 1945 Mum did a most unexpected and odd thing! She dragged a chair across the kitchen to the bench where the kitchen sink was situated. Above the sink was a window. She pushed the chair close to the bench and climbed up on it. She stretched her arms over her head and proceeded to rip brown paper of the glass of the windows. For all of my short life the windows had been covered with brown paper to conceal the light in the house. The War was over! From thereon the sun shone bright, the stars twinkled, and the moon shone a soft glow in the kitchen!

People were excited. Dad wanted to take me to Town to see the big ships but I had developed a fear of the water dark water at Kirribilli wharf. Nan took many photos of the tickertape parade with people hanging out of the windows in Town, all smiling and waving. Sometime about then there was fireworks display on the Harbour which we watched from a nearby wall.

In the autumn of 1948 it came out of the blue! We were about to leave Kirribilli to live in our very own house further up the Parramatta River, about 8 miles away. My wonderful, rich, magic childhood in Kirribilli was about to end. I learned this in the most unexpected way.

On one otherwise normal day a tall truck arrived at the back entrance to our house in Peel Street which opened to a lane. I followed Mum out and we stood at the back of the truck which was

tall but not very wide. The driver swung open the back doors of the van and reached inside. I was astonished when he handed Mum what appeared to be two large cups or soup bowls, one considerably larger than the other. Both were made of metal – the large one was a sort of silver colour and the small one was painted a mottled blue. Mum tucked them under her apron and hurried into the house.

Adults didn't feel the need to explain things to kids in those days so it was not until we eventually moved to our own house that the purpose of the objects became known. Apparently for many suburbs within less than 10 miles from Sydney the sewerage system was archaic, to put it politely!

It was mid-1948. We moved to our own house further west, a short walk from the Parramatta River. The war had been over for three years. The post-war baby boom was underway. It was a time of social optimism and a focus on family life. My childhood in Kirribilli had been unique, precious with experience, a brilliant colourful mosaic of sea, sky, and the myriad of interesting people all framed by the brilliance, as well as the dark foreboding shadows, of the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

