



**Rod Moss** grew up in Melbourne, completing his schooling in Boronia and gaining qualifications to teach art at secondary level. Moss was invited to teach in the avant garde, experimental Brinsley Road School founded in Melbourne during the early 1970s. After a year's interlude in West Virginia, teaching at John G Bennett's school following the principles of Armenian philosopher, George Gurdjieff, Moss relocated to central Australia, where he has lived since 1984. Moss lectured, in Art at the southern campus of Charles Darwin

University in Alice Springs until his retirement in 2008.

Moss is an award-winning artist and writer. His first memoir, *The Hard Light of Day*, received the Prime Minister's Literary Award for Non-Fiction and the Northern Territory Book of the Year. His second, *A Thousand Cuts*, won the 2014 Chief Minister's Northern Territory Book of the Year Award. Moss exhibits in Alice Springs, Brisbane, Melbourne and the USA.

## PRAISE FOR *CROSSING THE GREAT DIVIDE*

*Crossing the Great Divide* is a monumental achievement. Epic in scope, it encompasses a life journey recorded in luminous detail, driven by an unwavering intellectual curiosity, and graced by unsparing self-reflection and humanity. It is both a portrait of a young man as aspiring artist, working his way towards his calling, and the reflections of the mature artist, who has truly crossed the divide between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, and found a way to express his findings, and his vision, as a painter, craftsman, lateral thinker and writer.

— Arnold Zable, author

When I read Rod Moss's masterpiece *The Hard Light of Day*, I marvelled at the wonderful goodness and profound humanism of the man who wrote it. Ditto when I read *One Thousand Cuts*. Where could such a man come from, I wondered. Many readers who felt as I did will look eagerly for answers in *Crossing the Great Divide*. They won't be surprised that Moss' rich life confirms the ancient insight that wisdom comes only to people who were neither wise nor prudent when they were young. In his early and middle years, Moss's ferocious hunger for experience—physical, intellectual, artistic and spiritual, in their many forms—was tempered by a sense of humanity as it existed in himself and others that went deep even then. The idiosyncratic, gritty but sensuous, realism of Moss's paintings shows also in his prose, enlivening while disciplining its attention to the details of events, persons and places he describes. I know of no one like him.

— Raimond Gaita, philosopher, author

The writing of Rod Moss has already opened a unique gate into Central Australia: his *The Hard Light of Day* and *One Thousand Cuts* were revelatory of the landscape and those dwelling in its tissues of tragedy and love. What made this writing possible? How did Moss's goodness of heart and his intelligent eye so come together as to produce these unique contributions to Australian art-making? This gritty memoir, both prosaic and textured, is a good place to tackle the mystery. It is vivid with detail, open-hearted, redolent with drollery and authenticity as the author draws himself back into his originations.

— Barry Hill, author

Rod Moss's memoir takes us all over the thriving world, and his eye sees everything. But his story is not a travelogue, far more the quest of a great writer and artist to deepen his experience of life. This is what it means to retain a curiosity about the world, and the skill to thrill the reader.

— Robert Hillman, award-winning author.

# CROSSING THE GREAT DIVIDE

MEMOIR OF AN ARTIST

ROD MOSS



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Basking in my partner Gloria Morales’s generosity I found the freedom to expose my many follies. For that I am grateful.

The world desires illusion, either the illusion antecedent to reason, which is poetry, or the illusion subsequent to reason, which is religion.

The world must be as Don Quixote wishes it to be, and inns must be castles, and he will fight with it and will, to all appearances, be vanquished, but he will triumph by making himself ridiculous. And he will triumph by laughing at himself and making himself the object of his own laughter.

Miguel de Unamuno, *The Tragic Sense of Life*

For Gloria, Raffi, Ronja and Anjou



# 1

## From fern tree gullies, I came



*Animal in Botanic*, Rod Moss, 1982.

Without multistoried buildings and air pollutants the skies of Alice Springs give freely of their monumental displays. Out west this afternoon, a cape of checked cloud was being towed to the horizon, broad above and tapering to its apex on the rim. As the sun slipped from sight it singed the checks copper and purple. Fifteen minutes of luminosity, beauty by its other name, reminded me of Swiss miniaturist, Paul Klee, who floated his shimmering patches in the decades separating the twentieth century's great wars. I cite Klee as he played another small role. His wish, 'to be as though new born, knowing nothing' was my mantra as Central Australia laid claims on me.

## From fern tree gullies, I came

My previous memoirs were about being in Alice Springs, raising a family, teaching and making art. Rear vision reveals a road signposted with people, events, literature and cinema leading to the centre of Australia. I am no more an autonomous individual than anyone else, being constituted by parents, authority figures, peers, and rivals whom I've internalised as models and become the unconscious basis of my desires.

As children, my siblings and I played, unfettered, in the bush next to our home. We lived in the foothills of the Dandenong Ranges. Whichever way you looked from our place, trees dominated the skyline. Indeed, much of our time was spent climbing them. I've been hooked on bush ever since. Though Central Australia's climate and biota were foreign, that childhood immersion was essential preparation for embracing its incomparable and boundless beauty.

Whatever conscience and aesthetics generated from those bushy beginnings, these were enlarged and deepened through relationships, work and travel. How I developed an interest in the First People of Australia is, necessarily, party to my story. Its momentum was slow, and nuanced. While the decision to relocate in the Territory was clear, I knew not where it would lead, other than it would present relationships with Aboriginals. I hadn't the faintest intent of making art about those relationships.

Revising the determinants binding me to Alice Springs through writing, gives the illusion of a steady, linear track. The conundrum of which was nature and which nurture, even from this vantage, I can't distinguish. Painting and writing are valiant attempts at clearing the ground for myself. In Central Australia my abiding interests in art and in our First People coincided. I taught art, confided in it, and enduring friendships were nurtured through it.

## 2

# Set adrift



*Journal, Rod Moss, 1985.*

**B**oronia, in foothills east of Melbourne, was where I took my first footsteps, and from where I came and went for twenty years. It's no longer a village. Nor is its community comprised of orchardists and horticulturists. That sense of community no longer attends. Our home and mum's mothers are the lone pre-1950s survivors of the street: hers, a weatherboard built by husband, Oswald, in 1922 with help from men from the newly established nearby Church of Christ. He was a joiner and had a furniture factory in Glenferrie until he fell and injured his spine in the backyard. It got infected and he died when mum was five.

While dad was building our weatherboard next door, I lived with older brother, Ian, and my parents at grandma's. Dad had bought the uncleared

block from Oswald's sister for 50 pounds. I adored grandma and her kitchen with its animated wood-fired stove, the cords of yellow-box stacked in her shed where the axe and saws hung above the cutting jig, and orange lichen swarmed across its exterior walls.

Behind home Chandler's daffodil farm stretched to the base of the One Tree Hill, looming large in hazy blue. Nearby lay the more imposing *Corhanwarrabul*, we called Mt Dandenong, crowned with TV towers since the mid-1950s. Our village name proclaimed the flowers those daffodils supplanted. Over the ranges the sun emerged, stirring birdsong, tickling leaves and grasses. Our sloping backyard was groomed with native trees while freshly planted exotics—elms, maples and liquid ambers—slowly matured. These were fertile grounds for the deafening summer chorus of cicadas whose stridulations passed to crickets at sunset.

On the other side of our house were woodlands: striated stringybarks weathered grey in winter, salmon pink in spring; yellowbox and peppermint gum; the corded, peach-grey messmates; the festooning, amber sap of black wattles, wadded for masticating; the fluffy dogwood flowers mum said caused rashes; the sweet, dry fruit of cherry fir and nut grasses. We formed whistles from the rampant sword grass, snapping and laying a blade between clamped thumbs, and gently blowing. Filled with Blyton's fictions, I chose a twisted white box with footholds as my *Faraway Tree* and spent hours in its upper forks, fantasising the cloud lands that might attach to its canopy. Had possum hunters, long ago, notched these steps in the tree's fleshy underparts?

The rear boundary of our backyard was hedged with pittosporums whose sticky fruits exuded a pungent perfume. Autumn rain promoted Slippery Jacks and Saffron Cap mushrooms beneath this hedge. We picked and peeled the white tops whose pink or chocolate flesh had an earthy tang for mum to fry in butter and parsley. 'Don't you boys eat red stuff from the bush,' mum warned. Red meant danger, especially red-back spiders. Not so for rosellas who'd settle on the self-sown cotoneaster in the front yard, squabbling and scoffing berry clusters.

There were flowers mum planted which we were to avoid—the trumpet shaped datura lily and foxgloves. Blackberries were edible, and the lower side of our street was infested with them. Scratches and the occasional tiger or black snake were worth the bounty, and Ian and I filled billycans mum turned into jam. Grandma lent her woven wire snake rod, but we'd drop it as soon as we were out of sight. Unless it rained, we were in the bush from breakfast to dusk.

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Dad fixed a swing to the low bough of an apple box for us. The same branch served as perch for a kookaburra couple that seem to command the rising sun. Nearby was the poultry yard. Though I never befriended chooks or ducks, I liked herding them around and nestling in the hay of their laying box, munching handfuls of wheat and pollard. Ant industry fascinated me. I'd pester orange sugar ants into frenzied defence of their minced mounds when I ruined them. They'd rally as one to re-build after initial confusion fashioning breathing holes in the earth. They foraged alone, but formed communal chains to ferry goods back home, or paired up to lug iridescent beetles and wasps. Unlike black jumping ants and plum-coloured bull ants, their bites were inoffensive. I couldn't locate the nests of bull-ants or jumping ants that dawdled through solitary days. I'd prod bull ants until they reared into action; and stirred jumping ants to compete in hopping challenges. Hordes of small black ants, with acidic stench, trod daily to and from the garden. In warm weather they formed long lines to the kitchen sink.

The whereabouts of a tea-tree glade, with water seeping through a sponge of mossy turf, I kept secret. In spring the canopy was alive with small white flowers and crowded with bees. Pollen in blossom and piled on their hind legs intoxicated. Were they destined to honeyfie dad's hive, tucked beneath our fledgling almond tree? My admiring fingers stroked the velvet that when punctured revealed peat-dark aggregate. Cress flourished. I peopled the place with imaginary friends and the benign powers of plants, egg-and-bacon creepers, sarsaparilla, and green-hooded orchids. At dusk boisterous possums shook the branches. Ever rarer was the gentle rustle of bandicoots. And once I came upon a bettong fretting midst this moss-lime baize.

I saw too a blue-tongued lizard, old and still as a rock, encased in shiny plated skin grinning thoughtlessly, unnerved by my presence. It looked to have been there forever and would be there when I'd gone. Immaculately groomed, eyes unblinking and obdurate, its slow pulse visible beneath the skin at the base of its skull. Small black ants swarmed across its face. It waited for them to venture lip-wards whereupon its dart-like tongue made of them an instant meal. Dad told me not to prod blue-tongue lizards as they deterred snakes. But I had not been alone in my observations. The skink was no more immortal than the ants. As I turned my back to walk and report my findings, a kookaburra made a clean sweep and had it back on his branch, dashing it this way and that, pulping it to digestibility.

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I was little more than a toddler when the splendid green and gold Jubilee Train, celebrating fifty years of nationhood, rolled into town. We wandered with dad through the carriages, admiring exhibits. Dad poured over the Snowy Mountain Hydro-Electric Scheme exhibit, the post-war engineering triumph that attracted male migrants from southern Europe, some of who'd subsequently found employment at his workplace. We regrouped at the rail crossing to witness it lumber towards the Upper Ferntree Gully terminal, me astride dad's shoulders, waving at this glistening beast's trail of billowing plumes, thrilled at its hissing underparts. Dad said that before the war he'd served his boilermakers apprenticeship at the Newport Railway Workshops. Were trains like this what boilermakers made? This monstrous steaming steel thing, was it a boiler?

Lighter metals were aloft. Aircraft were a novelty in our skies. If engines whirled above, dad would call us from play. They flew low enough for him to identify the make from their shape and sound. He elaborated on these at the Essendon Aerodrome once, taking us by train to watch the arrival and departure of a dozen or so planes. His aeronautic fascination started at Flemington Racetrack during Melbourne's Centennial celebrations in 1934, where he witnessed participants of the London to Melbourne Air Race, touchdown. The crash of the *Kyeema* in 1938 on nearby Mt Dandenong was also writ large in his mind.

With Ian at school I'd track past grandma's woodshed and watch her scrub feet, clip nails, and tend the corns and bunions of old women taxied to her front gate. One woman forever walked. Goosey Kitty Chandler everywhere she wandered. Her friendship with grandma formed back in 1920s church days. Whatever the weather, she was garbed in coat and cloche hat, her chin set determinedly against its vagaries. The others I escorted up and back the winding concrete path, fringed with dancing fuchsias and smiling pansies. The ramp to her surgery was crowded with blue hydrangeas whose ferrous whiff was triggered by the women's heavy coats as they brushed by.

These dark woollen garments hung like separate selves on a hook behind the door. Walking sticks were stacked nearby. The room reeked of Wintergreen and Dettol. Those white legs shocked me when thick brown stockings were peeled and fell lifeless to the floor; ankles lost in fatty rolls, veins of various blues and purples mapping the pale flesh as they soaked their feet in her tawny china basin. I sat nearby in silence. Gentle patter was exchanged until five shillings was tendered and the garments re-fitted.

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As far as I was concerned grandma was loving kindness incarnate except in springtime when, to control their population, she'd lean her stepladder against the spouting and grope in sparrow nests for eggs which she summarily crushed.

Grandma bought me a colouring book whose blank images I needed only hold to the outlines while brushing with water for them to spring to limpid life. She also made a gollywog, floppy and black with vermilion lips, white button eyes, and crinkly wool hair. His blue-and-white striped shorts were strapped over his shoulders. He was my bedmate but lacked mum's warmth. When worn beyond repair, mum bought a fleecy, gold teddy bear that I'd tuck underarm as I wandered to her bedside after a troubled sleep. Though I requested the kitchen door be left ajar for a comforting sliver of light to pierce the gloom, I was a frequent bed-wetter. Often, I dreamt I was outside the front of the house peeing on my parent's bedroom wall. I'd wake in a flood. As the warmth diminished I'd peel out of bed and dawdle the length of the house and tentatively whisper, 'Mum, here I am'. There'd be a groan and request to strip my pyjama pants before snuggling beside her. That was good. I was still her scrumptious, 'Scrumpy', whatever my impositions.

There were Victorian heirlooms in our house that felt like they belonged more at Grandma's: a black oval papier mâché tray, copal-varnished with mother-of-pearl inlay formed into cyclamen, butterflies and birds. I marvelled over the gilded rim's weave of leaves. They were accompanied by a set of four small plates. There was also a wind-up music box and C19th nautilus brought back from the Isle of Man by mum's paternal grandfather from a visit to his birthplace. The nacreous setting enhanced its delicate Chinese landscape, the figures ghosting in and out of vision with a twist of the wrist. A cruder carved tortoise shell kept it company on the mantelpiece. The rarity and skill of these artefacts was not shared by contemporary knick knacks displayed on kitchen and lounge-room shelves.

Grandma's goat, having butted her, earned the appellation, 'Hitler', for his aggressions. His excretions permeated the grass circles he chomped throughout her large backyard. Like his namesake, his life was terminated with poison. The circumference of his final tethering overlapped the rubbish dump. He fixed on some torch batteries, died painfully, and was composted on the site of his indiscretion. Was the goat stupid? Dad thought so. Whenever I broke something, or got instructions confused, he called me a stupid goat, and Hitler's bloated body flashed before me.

Grandma's outside toilet was emptied weekly by Mr Chipperfield in his green truck. 'Night soil' was what dad called the cans of shit Chipperfield shouldered to his truck. He sniggered at Chipperfield's euphemistic job title, 'sanitary engineer'. He wasn't needed at our place as dad had shovelled a deep pit and concreted the walls for a septic tank concealed on the bush side of the house.

Dad was an engineer for the State Electricity Commission and took the train every day to the Richmond substation in Church Street, next to the Yarra River. In the main it was used to supplement peak demand and avert power shortages. He did three shifts, day, afternoon and night so that two weeks out of three he was absent from supper. I sometimes wondered who the visitor at our meal table was, especially if he was angry. When he was home there was 'no monkey business' or turning up noses at unappealing foods.

Sunday mornings our parents strolled us through the bush to sit on a bench and gaze over daffodil expanses. Sometimes we took longer walks beyond Blind Creek to Ferntree Gully. Mum would have a leg of lamb in the oven and the spuds and pumpkin would be ready by the time we returned. There might be peas, or worse, bitter Brussels sprouts. For reasons mum kept to herself, she insisted our soup bowls had to be tilted away from our bodies and the spoon scooped accordingly. Never did I see anyone else doing likewise.

Dad relished carving with the bone-handled knife and fork with retractable safety lever. He sharpened the knife on a finely fluted steel rod. As each plate was passed around the table, dad reminded us that though his grandfather did the same, we would skip the sententious grace. The lamb was sliced and served cold on Mondays. Some Tuesdays there was enough to convert to patties. I hungered for the bone to suck, its remnant fat and marrow. The jelled blood captured below frozen lard was a treat on fresh bread. The shank's knucklebone was salvaged to play jacks though these became redundant with the advent of plastic replicas. Sausages, lambs fry, tripe and sheep brains rounded out our meaty diet.

My greatest challenges were the congealed blood sausage of black pudding and smoked cod. Objections to these were met with threats to pack us off to the nearby Salvation Army Boys' Home huddling in the lush valley of The Basin below Mt Dandenong. The Home, established in 1897 as a reformatory institution for wayward or orphaned youths, had been purchased from early settler, David Dobson. Threats of having food recycled the following meal, or being sent to the Boys' Home, had us grudgingly finish even the least appetising fare. When baulking certain offerings, we were enjoined to consider starving



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Africans, though the brightly robed black people in our National Geographic magazines didn't validate mum's plea.

Desserts were a mixed blessing. Though invariably sweet, the texture of jelly, junkets and custards disgusted me. Ice sat in a semi-transparent glaze above the milk in most of mum's attempts at ice cream. Ground rice and sago were challenging. Two stood apart. Cake time I'd hover round the kitchen bench to lick the mixing bowl, no matter the make. Date loaf, baked in a cylindrical tin, was attractive. But heading the list were golden dumplings that floated in incomparably rich syrup.

Before supper, our washed hands and legs had to pass inspection. 'Rodney, you haven't washed behind your knees,' mum would say, to which I'd lamely protest, 'But no one sees back there,' before returning to the bathroom and removing offending dirt. Having finished eating, we placed our fork and knife in parallel in the middle of the plate, and were instructed to say we'd 'had an elegant sufficiency' and to ask, 'May I leave the table, please?' 'Please' and 'thank you' were essential manners and of paramount importance on the rare occasions we ate at the 'aunts'.

Mealtimes, dad used as occasions for correcting expression. 'You two, not youse. Ewes are sheep.' 'I, myself' need only be 'I.' 'Those people' not, 'them people'. It grieved him to hear the superfluity of 'those ones', 'the honest truth', and 'in actual fact'. A thing couldn't be 'terribly good' but either 'terrible' or 'good'. When he sat at the table, all other voices were subjugated. No one countered his opinions, and at the slightest ruckus he threatened to 'spifficate' us. Mum sometimes interjected. I'd gaze at the cloudy green laminated table as he belittled her, fingering the wisps of fleece that marbled the surface of a distant fertile planet. Her pain was my pain.

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Marilyn was born in 1952. While I doted on her, Ian teased her unmercifully about her slightly knocked knees, or prominent incisors—a feature we shared with her. He felt she didn't share the pressure to finish meals and, exempt from punishment, was our parent's favourite. She amused us as we waited for supper, sitting in her high chair beating her spoon in sync to *She Wears Red Feathers* and *How Much is That Doggie in the Window*, playing on the kitchen radio. Ian delighted in the Animal Fair ditty, emphasising *the big baboon, by the light of the moon, was combing her auburn hair*, deriding her luxurious hair. Marilyn's shuffling around the house struck an odd note. Whereas we boys did the usual crawling thing prior to walking, she

propelled herself by sitting cross-legged, tilting slightly forward, and with her weight centred at her axis, dragged her butt along the ground.

In dad's absence, Ian taunted us with inventive put-downs. He'd wrestle me to the floor, pin my arms and dribble on my chest. One of his favourite stunts was to slip out of our bedroom undetected and re-emerge at the window, face flattened against the glass, he would roll back his eyes and utter odd birdlike sounds. He was the bane of my existence, the cause of nightmares and likely, the bed-wetting. Despite mum's claim to the contrary, names hurt. He called me 'half-caste'. We didn't realise at the time that this referred to part-Aboriginality, but I knew it meant not being whole, that I didn't belong. I was Other. Repeated often enough, his fantasy gained credibility and he knew its venom grieved me.

Mum's attempts at discipline were futile. As her frustration rose she'd tell us she was 'floating' and reported our antics when dad made his 6 o'clock phone call. A leather strap was kept in the drawer below the cutlery. We knew its warmth too well. Ian was routinely woken and belted by dad on his 10 o'clock. return. I, too, was occasionally belted, but nothing like Ian, who was the inevitable perpetrator. If dad was on night shift, the strapping was after breakfast, on our hamstrings, as hands were needed for schoolwork. We'd loosen our school shorts to hide the welts from other kids. Thus shamed, I never asked classmates if they were punished. Perhaps it was normal? And though mum was clearly complicit in this and pleaded from the kitchen not to be too hard, she avoided our blame by cuddling us later in the day.

The routine didn't disrupt Ian's sleep, but I often lay awake anticipating his strapping. If I felt trapped, weather permitting, I'd slip out the back door and sit for 15 or so minutes amongst the trees in the backyard. There I was at home. The fresh air calmed and steadied me sufficiently to re-enter the house and crawl beneath welcoming blankets.

Some Saturdays we boarded the narrow-gauge Puffing Billy at Upper Ferntree Gully to visit aunts in Belgrave. The line had opened in 1900 primarily to serve Carl Nobelius's Emerald and Gembrook nurseries. We perched on the sills of the open-sided wooden carriages, braving the flecks of ash floating in coke-filled clouds and waving back to families gathered in backyards to greet us as we passed. We sat quietly inside those cramped gloomy lounge rooms, bored with adult talk. But several times we journeyed to the end of the line to stroll the nursery and test the waters of nearby Emerald Lake with kids from another branch of the Chandler family who farmed at Avonsleigh. Percy and Gwen Chandler had been school friends of mum's. These were big days

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out as we romped amongst hay bales in their shed, or squatted on the tractor pretending to drive, with energetic guttural grunts.

Another of mum's friends offered to drive us for a holiday at her beach house in the tiny fishing village of Rhyll on Phillip Island. Mum was pregnant with her fourth and desperate for a break. We squeezed into the Ford Prefect, my first substantial car trip. We crossed San Remo Bridge and passed strange wooden kilns which dad reckoned were where the chicory we drank was roasted. We could see French Island which served as a prison and where chicory also grew. Dad said it was named by French explorers. What were they doing in our country so long ago?

I nursed my Christmas present, a three-funnelled plastic model of the 1930s ocean liner, Queen Mary. At water's edge I carved passage through the jungle of putrid weed and set the boat on its maiden voyage. The first wave sucked it beyond reach and I watched in disappointment as it sailed further into Westernport Bay, perhaps returning to Mother England. The next day we set out to catch the morning ferry to the larger town of Cowes. I sprinted downhill after Ian when we heard the ferry's horn and tripped over a barbed wire fence ripping the underside of my arm. Mum staunched the bleeding with handkerchiefs and our Cowes focus shifted to the island's sole medical help.

The town's tawdry resort atmosphere was garnished with sea-front palms. The clinic was shut Sundays. We hurried uphill past the shops in search of the doctor's home. He answered dad's rapping on his flyscreen door, inviting us to sit in the lounge. As he pumped me with tetanus, he said I'd have to contend without anaesthetic as he has none at home. Taking a suturing needle from his drawer he made six, what he termed, double stitches, with sturdy twine. 'You've been a brave boy not crying,' he said reassuringly. Back home, the stitches itched as the wound healed. Mum re-dressed them daily and when the twine was removed I bore the scar's shiny statement as a record of bravery.

Dad brought a tin off-cut from work, undercoated it pale cream, then, following carefully pencilled letters, and painted 'Hastings Ave' in black gloss enamel, hammered it to the lamppost on the corner of Boronia Road. I thought he'd personally proclaimed Hastings Avenue. He said it acknowledged the Battle of Hastings in 1066, and the town was the birthplace of Boronia's first postmaster. The Norman's victory, he added, introduced French words to our Anglo-Saxon language. Mum's book of the 1930's movie, *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, with its stills of Errol Flynn and angelic Olivia de Havilland, that summed up my knowledge of those distant times. I had no idea of invasions, or people fighting to possess other people's land. And for that matter, that

Australia commenced as an English penal colony, and had been vigorously defended by its prior occupants.

Ours was the last house on the street. Where it finished, a root-rutted track wove 50 metres through bush and bracken and opened on an orchard of plums and apples. Adjoining its lower acres was a high, corrugated burgundy fence enclosing cottages of ancient nuns of the Good Shepherd's Order. Though built only a decade prior to my birth it seemed to have existed forever. On warm days small groups of this sisterhood sat inanimate beneath the shade of the trees. Ian and I assumed it was their fruit and crouched in the bush until they retired. Their severe black habits and ground-length white dresses rendered them exotics we daren't disturb. Three goats, tethered to stakes, grazed the surrounding grass. With the disappearance of the silent procession we'd warily skirt the goats, clamber the trees, wedge into a fork and feast.

From Ian's daily tormenting and competitive jousting, I found no escape. For better and worse we were thrown together. Yet complicity in these adventures was the upside of the relationship so that when he started school, I was often miserable and resorted to the kitchen, hanging out with mum as she endlessly cleaned, washed, cooked and shopped.

One day, with him at school and thinking 'plum', I dared enter the orchard alone. The big shaggy-bearded Billy forbade me entering the gate and told me to go straight home. 'You can't come in here little boy,' or so I explained to mum on my return, adding that he'd tossed me back over the gate on his large horns when I tried to pass. She advised against fibbing and that eating unripe plums was bound to cause a bellyache. For lying I would have to go the bedroom and miss lunch. Who was I attempting to deceive? Had I lied? I had no memory of eating plums, or the happy meeting of fruit and fingers. What lingered were images of the terrible troll and the urinous stench of the Billygoat Gruffs from bedtime readings.

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How isolated were we in those car-less 1950s? There were three houses other than ours, all occupied by elderly, childless couples. Houses on the lower side fronted Turner Avenue so what we saw between scrub and trees was backyard fencing. We kids were our own company. Our dirt street lacked lighting save for a single-bulbed lamppost at its entrance peering down on dad's sign. Twice a year a slim man of solemn countenance pedalled to the corner of our property. There he'd dismount and raise a concrete lid exposing a steel pipe. Beneath his coat he wore a set of navy bib and braces

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and matching cotton drill cap. He'd unhitch a massive spanner from his crossbar and loosen the lid, releasing torrents of water. Dad said he was the 'mains man'. He'd stand studying the wild grass, bullied flat beneath the tide of water as it spent itself in the sword grass and onion weed, rewarding his endeavours with a rolled cigarette before disappearing back to town. Apart from geriatric Mrs Moorcroft, drizzle of grey hair on her upper lip hobbling with cane in one hand shopping jeep in the other to and fro the shops, no one tramped that track.

No men presented in the dim houses of the old we visited: neither the two maids tucked away behind our back hedge of pittosporums, nor those we had to call 'aunt'. I knew we had no actual aunts or uncles as both parents lacked siblings. Dad's mum died from septicaemia after his birth. His father abandoned him to his grandmother and his unmarried sister, our great 'aunt' Gwen. Those dark interiors were the abode of women in black. The houses exuded halitosis to which their shuffling occupants seemed oblivious. Shelves, dressers and sideboards were decked with photos of progeny and the missing men, glass, and china figurines. In the cabinets were bowls, dishes, and prized porcelain. On the walls were gold-framed reproductions of seascapes and flower arrangements.

A long driveway fed from Boronia Road's cliffs to the old maids' cottage. The mulchy underfoot suggested no vehicle had disturbed the lane in the half century since its construction. It had an aura of mystery. The cane-clutching ancients seemed housebound. Though intruders in the lane, it was our conduit to church and an orchard of prized blood plums, and we sensed surreptitious ownership of this dark corridor. Totally embowered with tall trees, it was something of a time tunnel; to go forward was to go back. Traversing its hundred metres in dappled light and encountering their dwelling clothed splendidly in hydrangea and rose arbours, was a window on another era. Surrounding their cottage, clumps of agapanthus proliferated, lilac-coloured blooms nodding on ungainly stems. The jasmine-latticed frame clinging to the brick chimney, the lichen-encrusted pavers, the rake and pruning shears left by the barrow in the garden crowded with quince, loquat, cumquat and crabapple, possessed a dense immobility absent from our block, and whose scents in fruiting season we carried into their home, sometimes returning with jars of their preserved sugary contents.

Miss Thomas and Miss Niven had an organ jammed behind their front door. Stretching on the wall above most of its length was the intimidating image of *The Charge of the Light Brigade*. Rows of white horses with flaring

nostrils and terrified eyes, red-jacketed fusiliers with sabres drawn, thundered towards the crest of the organ. What this battle was about I hadn't a clue. Maybe the old women had fathers or uncles on those mounts? On the wall by their kitchen was a slender white-robed man rapping at a door just like theirs. He held a lamp by his thigh and a full moon surrounded his sad head. He sported a fulsome red beard and effeminate shoulder-length hair. Mum whispered that this was Jesus. So here was the guy I'd recently heard about at Sunday school, the gentle man, meek and mild, in whose name we dedicated coins when the wooden collection plate was passed along our pew.

Dad had no time for religion, regarding its devotees as wishful thinkers. He found more useful things to do on weekends. The hour's train ride to the city was a treat and, with Marilyn in her stroller, we took the 'red rattler', as dad dubbed the train, to Royal Park Zoo. It was stifling and our pants stuck to the green artificial leather benches with each vehicular jolt. At Box hill, halfway to the city was a huge hoarding representing handsome personnel of the Army, Navy and Air Force. Elsewhere were advertisements for *Griffiths Bros. Tea*, marking by the mile our advance upon the city. We never drank tea. Chicory was our hot beverage. Mostly we had water, sometimes flavoured with lemon or orange saline.

Once inside the zoo gates we bought peanuts for the voracious monkeys. 'You're looking at your ancestors there,' quipped dad. They even squabbled over the shells they impishly snatched from one another, and then readily dispatched. The bison's mournful eye suggested abandonment from its ancestors great, roaming herds. Fly hordes thrived around its long eyelashes, nostrils, and the few remaining islands of shaggy winter fur. Its solitary confinement haunted me. Zoos were prisons. The giraffe, whose height could be estimated by numerals painted on the wall next to his rubbly stable, looked lost and pitiful. Like the nearby zebra, its patterned coat painted with miraculous perfection, contrasted with its undignified enclosure. A cluster of kids clinging to parents tittered as a series of small dark pellets issued from its anus.

An elephant carted queues of children in a tidy, circular enclosure, its deeply creased hide seemingly the result of this tiresome duty. Another group of kids did a larger adjacent circuit in a miniature train. The dishevelled jungle king languished with his two queens looking profoundly disinterested, as well they might so far from the Serengeti. Other than the slightest flick of the tail at fly traffic, they were dormant.

A pair of Wildebeests and their calf grazed nonchalantly, indifferent to the sparrows sporting on their backs. The calf dropped on its front knees to

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access its mother's milk. The nipped world; I started looking for nipples on other beasts. Nearby a polar bear lay in the limited shade of its faux cave. Its painted white concrete rocks fooled no one. None of these exotics seemed to enjoy our inspection other than the otters and seals whose pools offered relief. The hippo's concrete tub was no substitute for wallowing in luxurious mud. There were so many species from so many countries housed in unrelated proximity to each other. The general desolation compromised the surprise of first sightings. The animals were both larger than life per depictions in our *National Geographics*, yet drastically diminished.

At the exit gate a grating, 'hello' startled us. We scanned the aviary where a sulphur-crested cockatoo fluttered to the front of the cage, gripping the bars and training its anthracitic eye on us. It had been an arduous day and we welcomed its interest. 'I've come a long way to see you,' jabbered Ian who, barely pausing, offered his name and address for future communications. It was a unique interactive pleasure given the universal muteness that repaid our day's voyeurism.

Just as rare an event as the zoo was the sight of a pregnant woman in the streets, at least one well advanced. As we passed a woman waddling from the grocery one morning, I asked mum what was wrong with her. She dismissed my query and whispered to look away. Though she, too, was showing the baby she'd begun to grow, in the midst of our post-war baby boom there endured some stigma about flaunting evidence of sexual activity. My errand-running no doubt helped maintain her 'confinement'. Just as unusual was an encounter with women smoking. When I saw a woman with short-cropped hair, pants, fag in mouth exit the bakery, I told mum I'd seen a man-lady. That aroused a fit of laughter.

I couldn't wait to terminate my lonely days and start school. There was no kindergarten before I commenced the same Boronia State mum had attended a few years after its construction in 1923. Its few acres of playground sloped gently to the single-platform station. Some kids wept as their mothers abandoned them at the school gate. Not me. I was impatient to be where Ian had boasted of grand events. Soon after enrolling, our family joined the queue of kids at the Progress Hall for inoculation jabs. The scourge of polio was near extinct, though one girl in class with callipers strapped to a mangled leg was a reminder of its crippling power. For all that, we were still visited by mumps, measles, chickenpox, and unsightly scabs of impetigo.

Each Monday morning assembly monitors hoisted Australia's flag. We repeated an oath to serve god, honour the queen and her country, and

cheerfully obey our parents, teachers, and the law. I knew the queen existed as we'd attended her Coronation Parade in Swanston Street; she with stiff half-smile and white-gloved mitt raised as we waved national flags on sticks at her passing limousine. Country was the backyard and bush next door, extending up *One Tree Hill*. God remained a mystery.

No one wore hats. Now and then on hot days at assembly a kid fainted, and a teacher assisted him or her to the sick bay. Announcements were made by silver-haired, Miss Neil. At Rangeview Road School, where we graduated to third grade, Jenkins did the talking, occasionally relieved by balding headmaster, Maddocks, whose name honoured the new limestone school hall. Talk done, the blare of a recorded brass band made scratchy entry onto the address system to assist our marching to class.

We began days standing by our desks, singing the alphabet, followed by the times table up to twelve, without recourse to the printout on the back of our Vana exercise books. There were over 40 students in class, sitting at green wooden desks in pairs of girls and boys. Etched names from previous generations were discernible beneath the paint. Such was our unquestioning compliance, teachers had no difficulty maintaining order amongst what now would be regarded as impossible numbers. Chalked art was drawn on small blackboards, swiftly erased and stashed in desks at the conclusion of sessions.

Teacher's steady lettering covered the top of the blackboard with the alphabet in upper and lower case. Below were the date and the board sectioned in spelling, numbers, and Nature Study. We'd strike a margin on the left side of our exercise books with red pencil and copy the date and subject up top, following Miss Hutchison's script. On either side of the blackboard hung maps printed on canvas. The world was to the left declaring the pink estates of Empire. On the right was our colonised country, with its rigid state boundaries. We each had plastic templates of mainland Australia with which we'd replicate our coastline throughout the next decade, belatedly acknowledging Tasmania.

School was unproblematic for me. Reading, Numbers and Spelling came easily, though some things made little sense. Explanations of homographs like 'our' and 'hour', 'blew' and 'blue', 'ate' and 'eight', I took on trust from the teacher. Likewise, with homonyms like 'date', 'leaves, or 'bark', this last exemplified by a dog pursuing a cat and barking up the wrong tree. The biggest challenge came from Grade 2 teacher, Miss Allen, a Scottish woman bent on imparting her homeland's dances. She insisted that once a week we boys don kilts and jig about the quadrangle with the girls we otherwise kept at a distance. The half-hour walk to and from school in a tartan kilt with its great chrome safety



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pin shamed me, and I did my best to keep from sight, dodging behind trees and back lanes from imagined observers. If formal lessons concluded a few minutes before lunch we were treated with five minutes of game time, 'Simon Says', or Allen, tapping a student shoulder to leave the room while our eyes were shut, would ask us to open them and identify the absentee.

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Dad re-lined our bedroom with pine panels and inserted a shelf to house a Astor Mickey radio. The world beyond Boronia flared to life. After school I snuggled beneath blankets to listen to serials: *The Sea Hound*, *Superman*, *Hop Harrigan*, and *Tarzan*. Keith Smith's *Pied Piper* had me struggling to remember jokes heard from Smith's *Pocket-money Riddle Round-up* to amuse school buddies. 'Did you hear about the man who had his left leg cut off? He's all right now.' 'What did the sea say to the boat? Nothing. It just waved.' Mum would sit on my bed after *Tarzan's* curtain call and read for a few minutes then whisper sweet nothings in my ear or play, *Can You Keep A Secret* or tap my toes while reciting, *This Little Piggy Went To Market*. Then she'd pump the green Mortein canister, bringing pesky mosquitoes to ground, before wish us 'little darlings', sweet dreams.

Redex Car Rallies around Australia fed images as I lay in bed co-driving with 'Gelignite' Jack Murray or Jack Davey. They battled outback dirt roads, and I'd slide beneath the blankets of my 'rally car' asking my imaginary co-driver if he needed relief at the wheel, food, or drink as we negotiated exotic Kalgoorlie, Camooweal, Meekatharra and Alice Springs. Broadcasts of boxing matches were also transfixing. And Sunday's police reports of overnight car crashes piqued my morbid curiosity.

Grieg's enchanting *Peer Gynt* suite transported me to lofty mountain realms; further than I'd ever travelled from home. There were stories such as *Bambi* and Danny Kaye's multi-voiced, *Tubby The Tuba* and the strange tale of *Gossamer Wump*. Gossamer sought mastery of the triangle. Together with his 27 peanut butter sandwiches and dog, George, in a suitcase, he packed off for a 10-year apprenticeship with Professor Cutty Nutty Dump. Several more attempts were made at the big-time before he resigned himself to the signifying notes of the local ice cream van. Whatever the moral about thwarted ambition, the sad fate of George's decade-long suitcase internment was baffling.

Wump's exploits emboldened me to ask mum to opt for the newly marketed crunchy peanut butter in my school lunches—I'd not wanted to offend her by voicing displeasure with the blackberry jam sandwiches that crystallised the

bread by midday. We munched our sandwiches in gender-specific shelter sheds. Play was impermissible until the last crumb was swallowed. Then on wet days we'd stand on the benches to play 'pussy-in-the-corner' with the corners serving as safety zones from the tagger.

I was in Grade 2 when Colin was born, a brown-eyed handsome fellow, exciting us while wearing mum thin with his suckling. Misunderstanding the word 'caul' crowning Colin's scalp, I proudly informed my teacher of the good luck 'cow' on his head. 'He can't drown,' I repeated what mum had confided, imagining the mythic swimming prowess of cows. Little more than a vapour of fluff graced his scalp for close to two years during which dad called him the Bald Iggle, a character in Al Capp's *Lil' Abner* cartoon.

That year, Marie Street, which marked the perimeter of Chandler's property, was upgraded with bitumen. The daffodil fields were subdivided and an acre sold to form a Lawn Bowls Club. The launch of the clubhouse was celebrated with a screening of W C Field's *Hurry Hurry*. Mishearing often provided entertainment at my expense. Lumbering Harry Lovett presided over the evening. I thought he'd introduced himself as 'Hurry' the film's star, Fields, who'd graced us with a guest appearance and faked an Australian accent. After all Lovett, too, was a fat-jowled old grouch.

Such mishearing had no repercussions compared to classmate Jones's incident. For reasons escaping me, the freckle-faced boy was nicknamed 'Bluey'. He reminded me of comic-book character Ginger Megs, not only for his unruly spray of hair and piebald eyes. As if working from Meg's script, Jones's daily hi-jinx tested classroom protocols. Most memorably, when elected as milk-monitor, Jones absented himself and ran after the delivery van with his helper some paces behind. Some of us could see through the open door his failed leap at the rear of the moving vehicle. In one instant, his grip on the top crate of milk brought the stash, with him, to earth. The van came to a sudden halt. Jones was on his feet inspecting gravel-rashed palms and knees when the driver approached to assess damage. Milk and glass shards littered the track. And Jones's pluck took a severe hit, being relegated to standing in the corner of our classroom until lunchtime. The upside was that we missed the day's free milk. Whatever its alleged health benefits, it often soured sitting an hour outside the class door in the sun.

Our social life was augmented when mum's friend, Joyce Barker and husband Bill boarded with us for several months while their house was built. Together with their two children, they crammed into Marilyn's bedroom, while she shared with mum and dad. I thought Joyce rivalled mum's charm

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and beauty but disliked Bill who sometimes disciplined me in dad's absence. He sent me back to my room as I crept towards mum's bed after a nightmare. 'You're not my father,' I cried at this fellow, who looked like comic-strip hero, *Mandrake*, and possibly possessed kindred powers. Dapper Bill's Brylcreemed black hair was combed back in a single sweep to the right. He had cold, green goat's eyes and a pencil moustache that grimaced when grinning. He was a drummer but preserved the sense not to practice at our place.

When they moved, their eldest child, Doug, a little older than Ian, continued playing with us on weekends. Doug and Ian conspired to surprise his sister Carol on her birthday. We gathered caterpillars, leaf-rolling spiders, millipedes, and armadillo bugs, which we pummelled to gravy, and housed in a tobacco tin. Doug wrapped it up and called Carol from our kitchen. Her shriek before those carapaces floating midst their vile grey sea rewarded our labour as we ran beyond reach of our reproachful mothers.

We'd break into sides for games, each of us hoping for the advantage of Doug's partnership. Once a teenager who shacked up with his older brother on the far side of the bush, asked to join us. We'd no cause to ever speak before. He had a slug gun, so given his seniority and weapon, we all wanted to side with him; but he wished to go it alone. We ran and hid behind trees from this Andrew Harcourt. Then we heard gun reports. He disappeared as Doug yelled. A slug was wedged in the side of his nose and his eyes glistened. The game was over and Doug, though once or twice fishing and eeling the creeks with Ian, never again joined our bush amusements. Nor did Harcourt, who I hoped had secure residency at the Salvation Boys' Home.

Grandma visited the Royal Melbourne Show and returned with the showbag of liquorice I'd requested. Greed gripped me. To share my guilt the following afternoon, I invited Jeff Nicholls to duck school. Between rounds of Cowboys and Indians we worked through the bag in the neighbouring bush with delicious gluttony and dire gastronomic consequences. Mum knew what I'd been up to the instant I rushed to the toilet then fronted her with my partially cleansed chops. Tilting her head and fixing me with an enquiring gaze she said, nothing escaped her attention. This, I believed.

A few months later I heard grandma tapping on the kitchen window. I'd never seen her at our place before. She told mum she was about to go to hospital for a gall bladder operation. 'I'm going, now' she called. 'Is Geoff there?' Dad sloped off up the hallway as mum beckoned him to the kitchen, muttering that he hoped she'd die. His reaction confused me as I watched my precious grandma turn and disappear, weary and hurt. Something was wrong. I knew

## Set adrift

he'd once or twice locked mum out of the house at night, having threatened to do so if she went next door to wish her mother goodnight. We'd heard her weeping in our dog's kennel but had been too afraid to help her.

Arriving home from school the next week I found mum cradling Colin, rocking and weeping as she sat on the low brick holding wall bordering the path leading to her mother's. Between sobs she repeated, 'Mum's dead, darling. Mum's dead. I don't know what to do.' I couldn't believe this, and wrapped my arm over her shoulders telling her not to cry. 'You'll be okay,' I consoled. I didn't know this word 'aneurysm' that caused her passing. A chasm had opened for us. She must have felt terror with her loss. No parents or siblings, and a husband whose shift work made for irregular contact.

Grandma was buried next to her husband in a Box Hill grave, unmarked and unvisited. A recurring dream had me stretching the limits of the town's known geography on a bare hill to the west. Standing there, leafless, in a paddock was an old grey gumtree. Unrecognisable houses surrounded it. I wanted to go to the tree but couldn't reach it or even duck through the fence. I'd wake alone, weeping. Was it her?