ONE

My grandmother had a brass lizard with ruby eyes. It sat on a doily on a stand in her shadowy lounge room when my mother and I visited. I was four at the time and my mother and I walked two miles together to visit Grandmother Macklin through the hot, moist Sunday afternoons. My father would not come even if he was home on leave from the war. He was afraid of his mother.

When we arrived at her home in Ruskin Street, Taringa, she would serve tea to my mother and cordial to me. We would take it in the lounge room with the lizard, which was the only semblance of an animal pet she would allow on her premises. And there was always tension in the air.

While I ate my shredded oatmeal biscuits with butter and Marmite, she and my mother would exchange words. When I registered their bitterness,

I would focus on the lizard. Those ruby eyes held mysteries. The solid little triangular head was filled with secret knowledge. I tried to commune with it but it was not easy. The lizard knew so much and I so little.

If I asked politely, my grandmother would let me take the lizard from the octagonal plinth and hold it. The metal was stiff and surprisingly cold because the gold of the brass looked warm. The eyes glowed in the soft light. If I wanted to leave the chair and walk outside to her verandah I had to leave the lizard behind, neatly on its stand.

Her verandah overlooked a chasm. The weatherboard house was built on a steep hillside and the front garden was almost perpendicular. It fell to a gravel road and on the other side of the little valley the bush rose up the V, then rolled away toward Long Pocket where the dairy farmer, Mr Redhead, lived. There was always a breeze on the verandah and it cooled my face, which had been perspiring in the tense, dark room.

Grandmother Macklin was very slim but she held herself straight and when we arrived and departed I kissed her on the cheek. My lips and nose seemed to penetrate her soft, powdery flesh to the bones beneath. There was a strange, unnatural intimacy in kissing a person's bones, but it was not unpleasant. She had very thin lips and her hair was wound in a grey bun behind her stern face. She did not kiss me back but I think she liked me. There was a kindly tone to her voice when she spoke to me.

Once she took me and my cousin Elwyn to the Botanic Gardens where we looked at the monkeys. My

mother dressed me very carefully for the outing; she licked her fingers and pushed my hair aside, then put my little cap on firmly. Grandmother made me keep my cap on the whole day.

She was always angry with my mother. From the verandah I could hear the snap of the clipped sentences like a toy flag in a strong breeze. After we left my mother would hold my hand tightly and the perspiration would make it slippery.

Sometimes she would stop. Her hand would leave mine and go to her face. 'Why she takes it out on me I just don't know,' she would say. She would take her white handkerchief from her handbag and wipe away the tears as we stood in the empty gravel road, with bush on each side, heading to the Fiveways.

Then she would blow her nose, open her powder compact and say, 'Now look at me. Now look what you've done.'

But that last sentence was said with a smile because she knew that I knew she was beautiful. Then we'd set off again. 'Oh Robbie, I don't know. I really don't.'

Neither did I. I didn't even know why she went to see Grandma Macklin at all, except perhaps that her own parents had died 'many moons ago.' But when she was happy it didn't really matter.

It was a long way home to Sundridge Street but once we reached the Fiveways where all of the streets in the area intersected it was down hill. Invisible crickets were making noises in the lantana at the side of Indooroopilly Road and we passed the Glassop house which always made my mother smile.

Elsie Glassop had been a girlfriend of my father before he met my mother, but Elsie was a Catholic and insisted that my father accompany her to church. He had not been into a Catholic Church before and he knew that if his mother found out, there would be ructions. So he was looking nervously around and he didn't notice that Elsie had suddenly ducked down in front of him in a most elaborate genuflection.

My father went right over her head and sprawled in the aisle. Then he jumped up and ran away and never saw Elsie Glassop again. Except by accident.

I went to the Methodist Sunday School in Carmody Road, St Lucia, and when he was home on leave my father would pick me up afterwards on his pushbike and give me a doubler home. I would sit on the bar and when he held the upright handlebars his arms would enclose me. I would smell his sweat mixed with grass clippings from his push mower. It was a very beautiful smell. I would try to make conversation with him as we rode, but it was never successful. He had nothing to say to me.

I quite enjoyed Sunday school. I loved the stories — Joseph and his coat of many colours; Jacob and his mother Rebecca playing a trick on the father, Isaac, and Jacob's hairy brother, Esau, by putting goatskins on his hands and arms so the blind old father would think it was Esau. That was very exciting. But the one that fascinated me most was the story of Abraham, who took his son Isaac to the side of a mountain and to prove how much he loved God, offered to cut his son's throat.

There was a picture in the Sunday-school book of the old bearded man holding down the boy. His arm was

raised. His hand held a dagger. And if God had not intervened, he would have plunged it into the boy's throat.

Indooroopilly Road curved round to the right heading for the creek down the bottom. Seven Oaks Street veered off to the left, a divided street, upper and lower, with beautiful Jacarandas in the middle. My mother and I walked in the shade of the purple canopies past Brasted Street until we came to the top of Sundridge Street, our place.

We had lived in number 16 since I was born and she brought me home from Fermoy Private Hospital in Auchenflower, a nearby suburb. Heading down the hill, our house was on the right-hand side and we walked on the grassy footpath between the fences and the hibiscus bushes planted near the kerb.

We knew all the people in all the houses in the street. But we were particular friends with Mrs Lingard next door and the Wilsons across the road and Evvie Mae Gibbs down the end in number one. Mrs Lingard was very sad when Mr Lingard came home, terribly wounded. He had lost an arm; there was a plate in his head, my mother said, and he had a glass eye that never looked in quite the same direction as the other one no matter how hard he tried.

He got a job driving a lift but I didn't know this until one day I was at Allan and Stark's, riding up to a higher floor, and it was him in a blue uniform saying, 'Third floor — haberdashery, millinery and fancy goods …'

'Look, it's Mr Lingard,' I said. 'Hello, Mr Lingard.' But he blushed beetroot red and my mother nudged me and said, 'Shush.'

I didn't understand why the adults found it embarrassing, and afterwards, when I went back on my own, we had quite good fun. He taught me to walk across the lift as it took off. It made my legs go wonky and gave a funny sensation in my stomach, like I was falling.

'That's terrific,' I said.

'I thought you'd like that.'

The Wilsons didn't go to the war. They were far too old. They had a lovely garden and a tennis court, and occasionally, while the war was on, my mother would go there to play tennis at the weekend. I was ballboy and that was huge fun, gathering the ball without a fumble, tossing it back to the server when she asked for it. Viv Jenkins, a very thin man who sometimes stayed with the Wilsons, played with my mother. When he was serving I threw the ball back to him really hard.

The Wilsons had a chook pen behind the tennis court, and once, when I was fooling around with tennis balls between sets, I bounced one into the pen. There was a big black rooster in there and I wasn't too happy about going inside, but Viv Jenkins said, 'Go orn, he won't hurtcha.' Mr Wilson said, 'The important thing is, don't show fear.'

That was the problem, I guess. The closer I got to the rooster the more enormous it seemed. I tried to talk to it but it bristled its neck feathers at me. I just stood still then, showing fear. And it attacked, pecking my inner thigh right through the skin and a vein beneath.

Blood everywhere.

Mr Wilson said he felt terrible; even Viv Jenkins seemed abashed. My mother was furious and fearful at the same time. She half carried me home and called Dr Fothergill, who came at once and put some stitches in it. Viv Jenkins came to see if I was all right, but my mother wouldn't let him in the house.

Evvie Mae Gibbs from number one also tried to play tennis but she was hopeless. She had nerves. When the air-raid siren went off she had hysterics. This was understandable in a way. The siren started like a low growl from a hilltop far away where they could see the Jap planes, but then it rose to a mighty scream, rose and fell and rose to a new high note, and I had to run inside, turn on the tap over the bath, put in the plug, then run as fast as I could to Evvie Mae Gibbs's house.

She had a Pomeranian dog and the combination of the siren and Mrs Gibbs's hysterics sometimes caused its bulging eyes to pop out of their sockets on to its scrunched-up little face. That made Evvie Mae worse. It was my job to put the eyes back in, then bring the two of them up to our air-raid shelter. It was a very busy time. My mother had her own duties, and by the time we were settled in the shelter under the back vegetable garden we were puffed.

The Japanese bombers never came to Brisbane. Just as well. If they had dropped a bomb near Sundridge Street, that would have been the end of Evvie Mae Gibbs.

Our neighbour on the other side from the Lingards was Mr Rupert Geddes, an older man who lived alone except occasionally, when his young wife

would come back with their little kids and they would argue and throw bottles. Mr Geddes was an alcoholic. There was a big mango tree just on their side of the fence between our two backyards and I had a cubby in it. I could see everything that happened in their backyard and I often saw Mr Geddes, who was just skin and bone beneath his old suit and shirt and tie, staggering about clasping a sherry bottle by the neck.

When Mrs Geddes screamed at him, my mother said, 'Just close your ears, dear.'

The little kids were in a terrible state. If my mother and I were sitting on a rug in our backyard having a picnic, these two filthy little faces would appear over the top of the fence and one would say, 'Hello, Midda Mackwyn.'

My mother would give them a sandwich each.

It was a beautiful street in those war days. There was always something happening. The iceman would come running in with a big block of ice held by a steel claw to a bag on his shoulder. He would twist it off and pop it into the ice chest in a single move. Then away he'd go, out the back door and down the steps in three big leaps.

The night man would come in the early morning to take the tin from the outdoor lav. He too had a bag on his shoulder and he had learned to run in a very smooth way so it wouldn't spill.

Except for the day I left my scooter in the grassy drive.

My mother got the wooden spoon out that day. It didn't hurt that much. I cried because she hit me. It wasn't the pain of the hits, just the fact of them.

Later she said, 'He was very nice about it. The poor man.'

They were ages cleaning it up but they did a very thorough job and put phenol and sawdust on it. I never liked the smell of phenol after that.

The clothes prop man would come by on his horse and cart calling, 'Clooooooze props; clooooooze props'. The trouble was, clothes props never wore out, even when you pushed them as high as they would go and the line came crashing over the other side. The line gave out before the prop. Another outing for the wooden spoon.

The Rawleighs man was another regular. He was too old for the war but his leather port contained so many layers of ointments and potions that I thought he should have been there to help heal the wounded soldiers. The suitcase smelled waxy and mysterious.

Sometimes my Aunty Jess would come to visit on the train from Sydney. She was married to Uncle Vic, my mother's favourite brother who was a Rat of Tobruk and who had played hockey for Queensland. Now he was in New Guinea, beating back the invaders.

'He went away a sergeant and came back a major,' my mother said, her voice filled with pride. She and Aunty Jess would natter from the moment they woke until they went to bed at night. They would natter to each other; they would natter to me; they would natter to just about anyone who ventured into Sundridge Street.

My mother seemed much more relaxed when Aunty Jess was there. Johnny Burns the milkman made himself scarce when she was about. The other times

he'd ask to come in for a drink of water or something and my mother would tell me to stay by her side, no matter what he said.

I stuck like glue.

Aunty Jess got gooseflesh. She was always getting gooseflesh on her legs. I couldn't believe how it would appear, then the skin would go back to normal. She wore glasses and had quite a penetrating voice but she was very loving and when I was young she helped with my splints.

After I was four I didn't have to wear them. There was nothing really wrong with my feet. But there was a Dr Foot (which is pretty amazing) who convinced lots of mothers in Brisbane that their children's feet were not quite right and he gave us all celluloid splints.

First came socks, then the splints, then more socks, then our boots. It was like carrying around a rock on each foot. When we were four we took them off and it was like we could fly. After that, hundreds of us never wanted to wear shoes again.

I certainly didn't.

When the siren went I could run to Mrs Gibbs's place in the twinkling of an eye.

When I was four I went to Miss Brown's kindergarten in Toowong. Each morning I would walk through the Wilsons' place, past the chook pen and through a hole in the fence to the McLucas house behind.

Mr McLucas was a big fat man, a teacher at Brisbane Boys' College, and his daughter Helen was the same age as me. He took us on the bus to Toowong,

then held our hands, one on each side of him, as we walked to Miss Brown's. Then he only had to go over the road and down a bit to BBC.

I loved kindy, especially the drawing. I once drew a boy with parsley thrown in his face and my mother showed everyone. They found it very amusing. We knitted socks for the soldiers with three needles for the heels. The only thing I couldn't get used to was the sleep after lunch on the little camp stretchers.

In the afternoons my mother would leave her dressmaking with her friends in the Taringa shopping centre to pick us up at kindy and we'd catch the bus home again. Then I would do my jobs, like feeding the chooks and setting the table for tea, and afterwards she would wash and I would dry and we both would sing songs about the war. She had a beautiful voice. And sometimes when she sang songs like 'Jealousy' or 'I Wonder Who's Kissing her Now?' she would get quite tearful and have to stop.

'I'm a bit teary tonight, dear,' she would say. But then we'd sing a happy song like 'You are my Sunshine' and she'd be fine again.

One time after Aunty Jess left my mother took in a young boarder named Mark Formby. He was a lovely young fellow and very shy. He wore thick horn-rimmed glasses and California poppy hair oil and he smelled like a hundred roses. Sometimes he let me put some on and he showed me how to part my hair and do a cowlick.

The first time we did it we went into the kitchen to show my mother, who smiled and said, 'You're both very handsome.'

Mark didn’t know what to say. He was very embarrassed; he was only expecting to show me off, not himself.

A few nights after that, when Mark had been with us for only a fortnight, we learned that he was a sleepwalker. My mother came out to my bed on the verandah and woke me.

‘Mark is walking in his sleep,’ she said. ‘He just walked down the back stairs. Come on.’

I jumped out of bed and we followed him. We had 10 steps leading down from our back door and Mark had walked right down in his long pyjamas without falling. He even had his leather slippers on.

‘We mustn’t wake him up,’ my mother said. ‘If you do, they get such a shock they have a heart attack.’

So we walked beside and behind him as he went along our driveway by the side of the house to the front gate, out the front gate and right down the middle of Sundridge Street. In his pyjamas!

‘What are we going to do?’ I said in a loud whisper. ‘He might walk right down into the creek.’

‘I don’t know,’ my mother said, half frightened and half giggling. Then she had an idea. She gently took him by the shoulders and turned him around. He started walking back to our house and then he woke up.

‘How did I get here?’ he said.

I held my breath, expecting that any moment he would drop dead with a heart attack.

My mother said, ‘Don’t worry, dear. You just went for a little walk in your sleep.’

'I used to do that when I was a kid,' Mark said. 'It hasn't happened for ages.'

For the next week, every time I went to bed I tried to imagine walking in my sleep so it would actually happen. I thought it would be wonderful to wake up in different places. But it never happened. And it only happened with Mark that once. My mother said he must have been over-excited when he went to bed. I imagined he was worried because his father had been captured by the Japs. But it wasn't true. His father wasn't even in the war. It was one of my imagination stories. My mother said, 'Robbie, I don't know where you get it from.'

I never worried about my father. I hardly knew him. And I didn't know my grandfather at all. He had been a bugler at Gallipoli and Grandmother Macklin let me hold the bugle, but not blow it. It was dented from the shot and shell. It had a green silk lanyard with a tassel. He died a week after I was born. My father said he took one look at me, had a heart attack and died. But he was only joking.

During the war, the only men around our place were Mark and me. Mark made big model boats on our dining-room table and my mother made the sails on her sewing machine. Grandmother Macklin sometimes came to visit and even Mark would have to sit in the lounge room and drink tea and watch his Ps and Qs. This made him very nervous.

My mother was always changing the furniture around and Mark couldn't get used to it. One day my mother brought the tea things in on the traymobile and

called Mark. When he came in to get his cup he bumped into a chair she'd rearranged and as he said, 'Good afternoon,' he backed off it into another one, spilled his boiling tea, squawked with the pain and ran out the wrong door. When Grandmother Macklin left, my mother laughed so much there were tears running down her cheeks.

Then the war ended and Mark left and the men came home and everything changed.