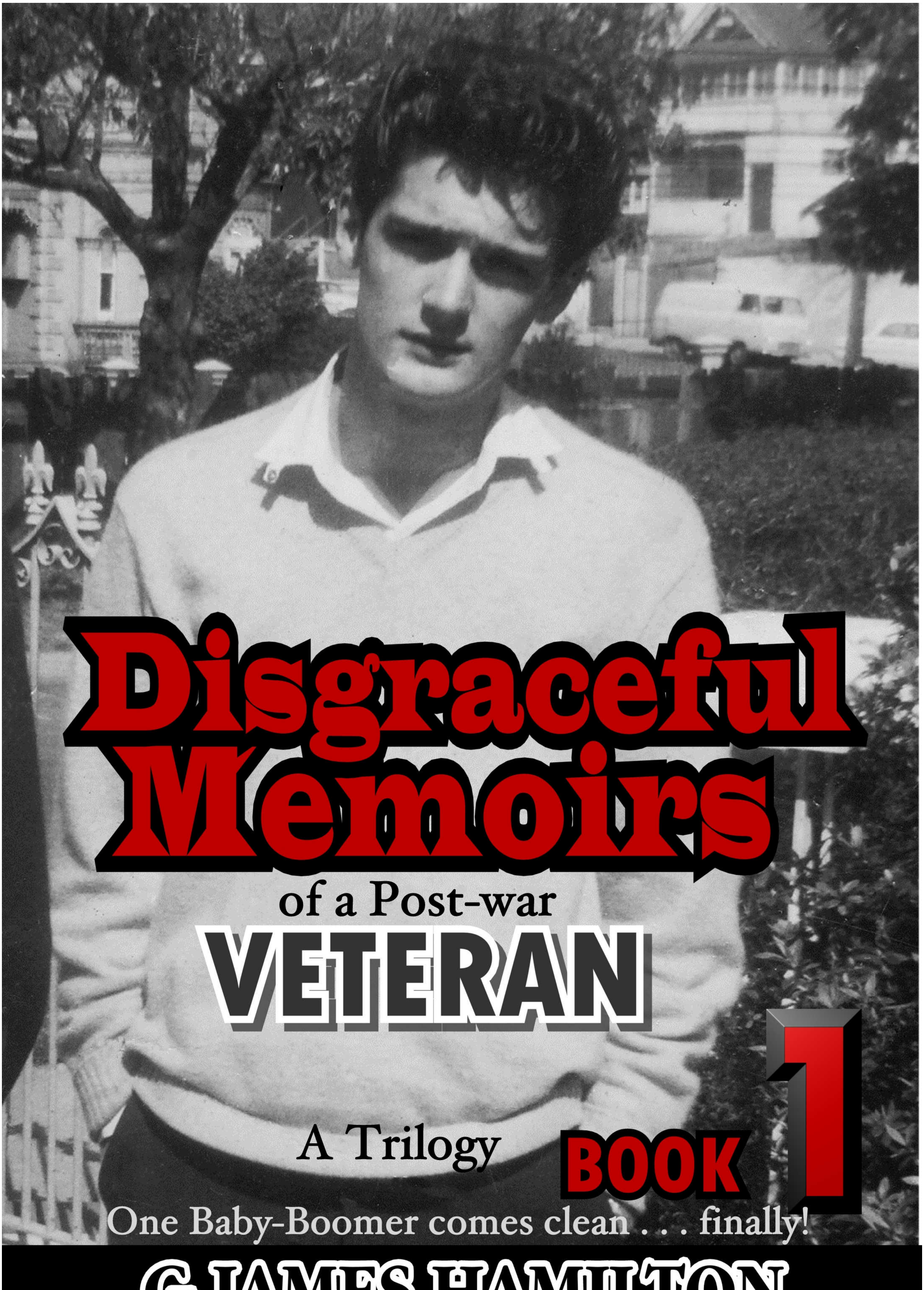

Disgraceful Memoirs

of a Post-war VETERAN

A Trilogy

BOOK 1

One Baby-Boomer comes clean . . . finally!

G.JAMES HAMILTON

Disgraceful Memoirs
of a Post-war Veteran

'A child is a curly, dimpled lunatic.'
Ralph Waldo Emerson
(1803 – 1882)

'All children are essentially criminal.'
Denis Diderot (1713-1784)

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Disgraceful Memoirs
of a Post-war Veteran

G.James Hamilton

Phoenix

What the famous have said about this book:

'In '1984' I predicted that bullshit would be accepted as truth from that time forth. It's been largely vindicated with the exception of this little tome by Hamilton. He slipped through the net.'
– George Orwell

'I'd just like to send a cheerio call to my Mom.' - Woody Allen

'Nobody ever committed suicide by just innocently reading a book. Not so far, but this could be a first.' - Robert F. Burns

'Don't talk to me about a man's being able to talk sense. Everyone and anyone can talk sense. The thing is: can he talk nonsense?!' - William Pitt the Elder

'This book talks the talk and porks the pig. A splendid job!'
- William Pitt the Elder

'G.James Hamilton suffers from a delusion. He actually believes he's G.James Hamilton. There simply is no known cure for an affliction of that severity.' - Sigmund Freud

'The covers of this book aren't anywhere near close enough together. They should at least be touching.' Bob Hawk, Canberra.

'We used to hiss the villain once. Now we're expected to buy the rotter's autobiography?' - Tony Blair

'If genius is hereditary, my old man should have been a helluva lot brighter than the old buzzard let on.'
- G.James Hamilton

'You know your kids are growing up when they start asking questions that show they need a bloody good hiding far more than an answer that doesn't spring immediately to mind.'
- William Hamilton the Elder

Acknowledgements

I'm indebted to a number of causes for the rot I endured in order to get this far. Wrinkly old medieval-minded men in red party hats who made the in-absentia rules that governed our family via the local priestly caste; several American stand-up comics who mysteriously got tenure of the White House and made Harding and Coolidge look like statesmen by comparison, making the world unsafe for young Catholic recalcitrants and everybody else to boot; a family that ungraciously accepted me as their in-house non-leper pariah; a town that lacked self-confidence or something vital like that; three schools that were shameless travesties of education, religion and the defence of the human cause; a father who miraculously escaped the attention of the psychiatric profession and Interpol, and a host of other things too terrible to mention so I haven't, probably.

My classmates all had fathers who bored the paint off a panelled door. Not my father W.Henry (Bill). You had to be on constant guard, always expecting the unexpected. He showed me what it took to treat life when you're bulletproof – code for immortal. I've never met anyone else who had that quality. It might have been self-delusion on his part, but I doubt it. In any event, the doubt element changed nothing: the effect was the same. It was a roller coaster ride to only God knew where. He thought politicians were boofheads and priests liars (or was it the other way round – or both?) I learned much wisdom from him, offset occasionally by some of the biggest loads of crap I've ever had dumped on me by an allegedly mentally competent person. Fittingly, the inscription on his headstone reads: 'Life was too short to even begin to take it seriously.' The old bugger knew the secret alright. May he rest in peace despite the intense heat over there.

G.J.H.

MASTER SAUCIER'S APPRENTICE

"I was so naive when I was a kid I used to sneak down behind the Gas Works and do stuff normal people brazenly did out in the open."

G.James Hamilton

'Abraham's son Isaac was a teenager when God suggested that he cut his mongrel little throat. God understood. It wouldn't have been a bloody sacrifice so much as bloody natural justice."

W.Henry Hamilton

Probably all education is but two things: first, the parrying of the ignorant childrens' impetuous assault on the truth, and second, the gentle, imperceptible step-by-step initiation of the humiliated children into the lie.

Franz Kafka

'The gamble is being yourself.'
Greg Dening - Historian (1931-2008)

'We all do time in the Gulag. There are no dispensations – not even for Catholics.'
Greg Hamilton - Historian (1947- still going)

Lamentation One

Had it been left up to me, my youth wouldn't have been such a waste of time or anywhere near such a stuff-up job. A misspent youth is normally confined to pool rooms and debauched activities that deplete the soul, involving booze, cigarettes and a cantilevered greasy hairstyle. That's not what I intend here. My early life was misspent because I was too stupid to know what was going on or even to enquire into same. I know that's what made the 1950's and 1960's so sort-of well you-know *special*, but it was a wasted, futile youth in so many ways. The Fifties were all about submitting to the social conformism in vogue then, while the sixties were about the waking up to yourself process, and neither worked out. The education I was getting—at home and at school—was about as crackpot and worthless as it gets. Nobody in my entourage had a clue what we were supposed to be doing here (on Earth) so they made up all this puerile nonsense to fill the void and make it all look respectable and 'nice'. Honestly, they needn't have bothered, for all the unhappiness and evil it unleashed. I'm not complaining, mind you—as I remind myself and readers in the appendices here in a discussion of my school experience—even though I knew humiliation and despair from a very tender age (like in the birth canal). I didn't know this particular psychosis had a name. That's probably what saved my bacon. And, as we all know, until something has a name, it can't possibly exist. Like with the word 'God': once we'd settled on the name, the rest was easy-peasy; just a matter of mindless self-delusion and white picket fences. None of us had a clue what the word signified, but we still managed to make our lives a misery in veneration of the mystery and the superstition it fed off. Don't get me wrong. I'm not anti-religion. Hey, I've written about five books on the subject, advocating *real* religion. What I'm against in this tome is the codswallop I was fed when I was at my most vulnerable and impressionable. If they were so confident in the quality and value of their product, why couldn't they wait till the customer was old enough to choose it for himself?

When they say that youth is squandered on the young, I'm sure they mean that when you're young, you are by nature air-headed and brainless; a virtually empty, singlecell life form of the barnacle family governed by the groin and mouth. Thinking is anathema to a youth. Life has to be lived spontaneously without making any connections of the sort that make for coherence and understanding. It's only when you've got your midlife crisis (in my case *crises*) under your belt in your forties (in my case forties, fifties and sixties) that you begin to see a need to join the dots so you can leave the world without the proverbial strip of stained toilet paper hanging out the back of your trousers. Some people—especially shy and sensitive types like my good self—tend to overdo the turn-around in consciousness that accompanies belated maturity. There's a certain art to life—a style, if you like—that consists in not taking it so seriously that you make others uncomfortable about their slap-dash approach to life in general; that you don't make them squirm by reminding them daily that they've sold out and joined the enslaved and the crushed. It was a big ask for me; too big as it turned out.

Correct me if I'm wrong, but I had this worm of an idea in my brain that adults were supposed to know what was what, and kids, like little monkeys, got to hear about it all as they grew up and prepared to go out into the jungle on their own. When I was kicked out of the nest at fifteen, I knew bugger all, after a decade and a half of being led around the garden by blind people with crutches. But as I said, I'm not bitter about it. In trying to be honest, I suspect that if I'd been born into a family of well-balanced, intelligent, considerate, sensitive, and decent human beings, I would have made them believe in early euthanasia as it applied to me. It's possible. On the other hand, my distinctly snotty instinctive attitude to family and teachers may have been due to an inbuilt resentment that I drew the short straw at birth and things turned out so badly as a consequence. My expectations took a giant kick in the guts, is what I mean.

But you know, if it really was as bad as I thought at the time, I doubt that I'd be writing about it now, having shot myself long ago to end the misery. There were some gems to be spotted in the muck that lined the floor and walls of the pigsty, so to speak. Not every kid is blessed with a father who is 'a character', a clown dressed in civvies with wedding tackle that showed through. He's the sort of bloke people remembered, in the way they remembered Frank Spencer of 'Some Mums Do 'Ave 'Em' fame, except the *pater senis* (that's the old man) never wore a beret or underpants. The laughs he provided, many of them recounted here, made up in good part for the robotic nature of human existence in those days. I still remember the syrupy strains of 'Hi-Lili-Hi-Lo' on the radio as though it was only yesterday. Then there was the ultra-inane 'How much is that Doggy In The Window'. Only for the fact it was my heart-throb Doris Day doing the singing I would have probably sent off for a mail order DIY hara-kiri kit. You can judge an historic era by its music, you know, and mine stood condemned, Doris notwithstanding.

It only occurred to me late in life that sometimes, when I was punished for 'obvious' transgressions as a kid, it was because the bigger picture idea I was focussed on wasn't appreciated by my dad, my teachers, the local policeman or that mongrel who used to go around with a torch at the Theatre Royal trying to see who had an erection with a girl's hand on it. Hence I got a walloping instead of the praise and encouragement I yearned for. What was obvious to him and the de la Salle Brothers wasn't obvious to me—and vice versa. Here's an instance of what I mean. Remember that I was three when this happened, and I hadn't heard of Jean Baudrillard, or his observation about kid's toys: *'If there is a species that is more maltreated than children, then it must be their toys, which they handle in an incredibly off-hand manner. Toys are thus the end point in that long chain in which all the conditions of despotic high-handedness are in play which enchain beings one to another, from one species to another—cruel divinities to their sacrificial victims, from masters to slaves, from adults to children, and from children to their objects.'*

A Xmas present I got when I was three years old was a painted pressed tin ladybird bug. You wound it up with a key and it would crawl around the place a bit and then stop. I did that four, maybe five times, and thought, well, that's very interesting. I even took it in to show Mum and Dad at 5.13am that morning to share my moderate excitement. I wound the key, put the bug on the floor and it wandered around the place a bit then stopped. Dad said: 'That's great, mate, now take it outside and play with it. Dad wants to talk to Mum in private.' So out I went. Whatever Dad was talking to Mum about was evidently disturbed by the banging I made with the hammer on the concrete path at the back of our house at Lowther in the Blue Mountains of New South Wales, on the northern rim of the majestic Kanimbla Valley. He came out in his pyjamas, annoyed, to see me bent over the tortured remains of the ladybird with hammer in hand. I think it was the first time in my life that I realised that fathers, when overcome by a deep sense of outrage, start on a series of stupid questions they have no genuine desire to have answered.

'What do you think you're doing with that hammer?' I was only three, but it was clear enough to me what I was doing with it – or had done with it. What I didn't know was that you could pry open the ladybird with a screwdriver simply by bending a few metal tabs on his belly. That way you'd have been able to put it back together after you've found out what the key went into and how the spring and the little spikey cogs made the wheels under the bug turn. Dad never offered the information about the screwdriver, so who was at fault here? In fact, I don't think he even realised that a kid might want to know how the toy worked.

'Why did you have to wreck it, you little bugger?' Again, even at my tender age, it was obvious: to unlock a mystery. Did such things become more arcane as one aged? Dad was only thirty-two, mind, and it was no longer clear to him that to find out what makes something work, you have to be able to pull it apart and see what's inside.

'Wasn't the toy Santy brought good enough for you then, you ungrateful little mongrel? Come and look what he's done, Laura.' Of course it was good enough, Dad, but after I saw what happened on the outside, my interest was ... well ... flagging. It was what the key did to make that bug move that was of interest to me. What Dad didn't seem to realise was that he could have pre-empted this scenario by offering to take it apart with me, so I wouldn't have to resort to the hammer, and the destruction of the toy. But I was prepared to lose the toy just to find out what made it tick. It was expendable, to me. But not to him, even though from six that morning, it was mine. Dad felt obliged to paddle my backside to instil the message or principles he wanted to convey.

The signals he was sending me confused me. Like 'it was better to have for keeps a boring toy you didn't know anything about than a temporary one that gave you fresh insights into man-made things and the principles of engineering and mechanical motion.' Or, just as bad, that 'when you become the legal owner of a toy, it suddenly ceases to be yours at any time that you choose to take a hammer in your hand and use it on the said toy.' It undermined the whole free-enterprise private property system Dad had spent four years in the jungle fighting to protect. But I will say this for him: compared to most dads, he was only a minor offender, for, in the main, as I got older, he let me do things that were dangerous where nobody else would. He knew that if it was dangerous, it was interesting, and if it was interesting, it was fun. And, of course, if it was fun, it was living to the full. The tank story coming up shortly is a case in point. People say: 'My, how irresponsible he was to risk your little lives in that way.'

Baloney! I consider that 'irresponsible experience' one of the highlights of my life, not just because of the excitement and unconventionality of it, but because it taught me that unless we're fearless, our lives are reduced to mere existences (enter drugs, stage left). And I'd quote Christ to Christians on this subject: *He that clings to life shall lose it.* The meaning isn't so obscure we can argue over it. It means take risks, live dangerously, or be dead standing up. Risk has to be learnt, like riding a bike. Courage has to be rehearsed often: life is a play!

The paddling I got at three years old over the sacrifice of the ladybird did little to change my attitude to the process of deconstruction, or reverse engineering. It's the most fundamental instructor we have at our disposal. I didn't know that what I did instinctively at the age of three in 1950 would be taken up in the 1980s by French intellectuals and made into Deconstructionism: a 'breakthrough in educational philosophy'. What they made of it was a load of cobblers but that's not my fault. Although cruel on those who made the gift, the sacrifice of the ladybird was positive and productive from various points of view. It showed that I was more attracted to the spiritual attributes of the gift than the material – meaning the unseen or mind matters at the heart of that toy. And, at three, I learned that the dominant values of the society I was born into were not compatible with those I'd brought into the world with me. It's a vital step in the process of self-realisation and maturity. This experience was the real 'confirmation' of my status as a black sheep – not the ritual confirmation I later went through in church. It's better to learn these things sooner rather than later, so you can become tolerant, especially of the fact that it's inevitably the blind who get charged with the task of leading the half-blind.

Some pretty strange things happened in the 1940s. And it's not all that difficult to see why. We forget today that the First World War knocked the clacker out of most people. We forget that it was followed up by economic collapse in the hapless Calvin Coolidge's beautifully orchestrated Great Depression, and ended only with a repeat of the Great War – three decades of violent turbulence, misery and a collapse of faith in ourselves as a species. It's no wonder then that Dad agreed to become a Catholic in order to marry the girl he wanted. (I develop this aspect of their story later because it became so important as time went by). He was your classic no-religion type whose instincts served brilliantly as his religion. Had Dad grown a beard, he would have been the dead spit of Abe Lincoln from Springfield Illinois. You see, Abe shared Dad's religion: 'When I do right, I feel good; when I do wrong, I feel bad. That's my religion,' Abe said. My Dad's was very similar, with only minor modifications to the wording.

You don't convert a man like that to a Catholicism in which fine instincts are to be made subservient to superficial legalistic doctrine. It was only a matter of time before all the work done by the priests to prepare Dad for marriage to a Catholic came unstuck. It lasted a few weeks short of a decade, and only then because he was a man of his word. He wasn't a quitter, so he gave it his best shot. The irony is that it took a priest to undo all the work the earlier priests did to prepare him for conversion – which, with him, could only be nominal at best. You can't put stripes on a leopard, even when he's just eaten and in a good mood. If you insist anyway, they'll only come off the next time it rains. It was only a mile or two drive down the Jenolan Caves Road from our farm house to Lowther Catholic church, a small, rectangular, white-washed, corrugated iron clad building. It stood in a paddock on the northern downhill slope just off the road. The paddock served as a car park for the thirty or so big, old, long-nosed Dodges and Buicks—and the odd sulky—that turned up on Sunday mornings. The church housed no more than a dozen central pews. People came from near and far to hear the visiting priest from Lithgow. As a toddler there that day, I felt good amongst so much adult company, all smelling of exotic fragrances that ranged from stale beer through nicotine to Californian Poppy after-shave and some feminine scent amongst the ladies. It made it a proper and very formal occasion. I saw other people acting out life, and it were grand.

The priest was Irish, as so many of them were, and solid of build with a red nose and cheeks under his horn-rim spectacles. He wasn't the usual one sent, and he didn't know his congregation, or they him. So it was without thinking that he made the mistake that was going to lose the Church one of its faithful for life. He gave his very ordinary sermon at the usual point in the mass and, a little later, the plate was passed around. Judging by his frown, and the way his red face got noticeably redder, he looked pretty unimpressed. It seemed he was underwhelmed by the amount that came in from the collection plate. So unimpressed, it seemed to us, that he felt the urgent need to address all duly gathered. You always get questionable items on the plate, from Tongan shillings to ferry tokens and what look like cash cheques but tend to be blank on the inside as well as the outside. But this was more serious than that.

It's not what was on the plate but what wasn't on it that seemed to irk the good reverend. Solemnly, he went over to the right side of the altar podium where the sermons were given, at a lectern on a post, and put his hands in his sleeves across his middle. You knew something stiff was coming when a priest does that. And you can know it for sure when he feels obliged to undo his hands and hang onto the sides of the lectern to keep himself grounded, from flapping his arms about in anger.

'So dis is the valyou you plairce on the fella who sairs the Muss fer yeh tedair, is it?' He glared panoramically about at as many of his victims as he could in the twenty three seconds he took to let his disappointment sink in. 'Dis ... is it, den?!!' he said, gesturing at the plate, sitting forlorn on a side bench with a single fly seeming to take an interest in the miserable offering. Several of the men not paying much attention up till now jumped in their pews at his last query. Then the reverend proceeded to berate them for their stinginess and lack of commitment to the church and to the faith, and the apparent weakness of their desire for the salvation of their shabby immortal souls. Had he just woofed it up them, and then got on with the Mass, things may well have turned out differently. History as we know it may well have gone off in a completely different direction, and for the better – who knows?

But he could see that he had some of the weaker spirits squirming in their pews, and it induced him to pour a little more fuel onto the flames. He was on a roll, as they say. I was only four and a half years of age, but I could tell that the emotion in the church was rising. I looked up at Dad's face and wasn't all that surprised to see that he was smarting with suppressed anger, and looking around to see if he was alone in that feeling. I doubt that he felt assured, as the priest bellowed from the altar. Most people will submit to this sort of thing rather than resist. Dad never did. Most people will go out of their way to avoid a fuss. Dad wouldn't. He stood up and eyeballed the railing priest. People there knew Dad as a straight shooter, and one who suffered fools badly. The priest's words trailed off at his surprise that a parishioner would dare stand up while he was speaking. I can't remember Dad's exact words, but I do remember the electrical charge they developed in that church. He wasn't the most eloquent of men at the best of times, but his purpose lent him both the courage and the words to sit this upstart priest flat on his backside. I recall that he protested and Dad shut him up with another blast.

'Don't you come out here amongst struggling country people and tell us what we owe you! If owing there is, you owe us!' – that was the basic message he thundered back at the altar and which reverberated around the church, causing a lot of discomfort and a little pleasure amongst those present. And with that, he grabbed the hands of the three kids he'd brought along, and said: 'Come on Laura, we're leaving.' Mum was mortified. To her way of thinking, you don't talk to priests like that. Worse, you don't stop a mass like that. Worse still, you don't make a public spectacle in a church of all places like that. And calamity of calamities, you don't walk out halfway through mass in such an insulting spectacle! She was frozen so rigidly to her pew that she looked immovable. And this was before the invention of super-glue. Dad had to repeat himself:

'Laura, we're leaving!' Oh God! The utter shame of it. What would they all be thinking? Dad let our hands go and grabbed Mum's. I wouldn't say he dragged her, but he did move her against her will, and led us quickly out of the church. The priest and the congregation watched with their mouths stuck open in fly-catcher mode. As a kid, you don't understand all of what's going on in a situation like this. But as I grew older and began to understand more, I took my father's side. Entirely. I could see no redeeming features on the other. And I suspect that if Jesus Christ himself had been in the congregation that day, he would have asked Dad if he could leave the building with him, for the very same reasons.

The men in the district told Dad later that they thought he did well to put the cranky priest back in his place. Some of the women thought Dad was the upstart, but most admired his stand, since he was defending all those who could put little or nothing on the plate because it was all they had. You just can't please everybody, but ultimately, the person Dad had to please was himself. He was the one who had to live with himself. I was keenly observing and learning. It was his time to teach me. My time to return the favour would come. That's how life works. It was the last time Dad set foot inside a church for mass. And he rarely went into a church for a funeral or a christening after that experience; just the eight weddings of his daughters. If my mother was on the record for venerating her religion to the point of imposing it on my father and his progeny, he was too big a man to respond in kind just because of this run-in with the priest. He tolerated her continued attendance at mass, providing he no longer had to accompany her to the church. He allowed his children to be educated and indoctrinated as she saw fit. It was part of the marriage agreement, and he was a man of his word. There are some times, though, when a man's word ought to be broken – for the greater good of mankind.

'Running is an unnatural act,
except from enemies and to
the toilet.' Anon

(Lamentation or) Chapter Two

I thought I was strange, but if the old man got half a chance to get up to something questionable, something unusual—even something dangerous—he wouldn't let the opportunity pass lightly. He knew in the gut that life was a blank sheet of paper, and you could write stuff all over it, or leave it blank. He considered leaving it blank to be a form of treachery. As a WW2 vet, he knew what a Stuart tank looked like—from a distance. When a neighbour wanted to buy two of them for use as land-clearers, he said he knew how to drive one. So he volunteered to drive one of the two this chap bought all the way back from Albury—a distance of around 480 miles by road. He knew he'd have to learn how to drive it when he got there. It can't be all that difficult for an aircraft fitter and a fellow who gone some way to mastering the top half of a saxophone. And so it came to pass that he and another driver brought them back, wearing out a set of tracks en route per tank. They got a spare set to fit when they got home. Of course the turret and cannon were removed as a condition of sale. The authorities didn't want private individuals settling scores with the help of armoured artillery. Sometimes, it can turn nasty. What bureaucratic humbug.

It weighed eleven tons after the operation to remove roof and turret. At the back of the tank was a radial aircraft engine, and down the sides of the engine were two steel sponson boxes for storage. The boxes seemed to be specially designed to take one skinny lad of about five to six years of age each. Being open at the top, it was like sitting in a big open sports car with an overpowering smell of heavy grease. The driver sat on the left, separated by the drive shaft which went from the engine at the back to the drive wheels at the front end of the tracks. It had grunt that the local hoons couldn't imagine in their wildest fantasies. The declared purpose for buying the tank was for 'snigging' or dragging logs out of the bush, and other farm bulldozer and tractor duties. The whole idea was inspired, really, because not only was it cheap and practical, bit it looked like being fun as well, the perfect combination. When you drove about in the bush in this beauty, you made your own roads. Only the larger trees offered convincing obstacles to your passage. It was the perfect fun-work vehicle. No one could have guessed just how wrong things could go. Even today we still cannot believe what happened.

It all started when Dad got a call from a neighbour that a bulldozer was bogged in a bush gully down-hill from Biddy's Pinch, a steep piece of road that ran off the

Jenolan Caves Road at the start of Rydal Road at Hampton, south-west of Lithgow in the Blue Mountains of New South Wales. This very spot was right on the highest point of the Great Divide that separated the coastal plain from the vast inland. It was only a mile or so from our place. As for the bogged bulldozer, no matter what you did with it, it just wouldn't budge. It was stuck so fast it couldn't even winch itself out. That was tried, and failed.

The tank before they made adjustments to it in Albury

To Dad, it seemed a reasonable idea to go in with the tank and pull the fellow out. For one thing, it provided a service to a fellow human being, an opportunity my Dad was incapable of missing out on. And, as a bonus, it afforded an ideal occasion for a bit of showing off, as the 7th Cavalry came in to pull out this naughty bulldozer that got bogged.

Bulldozers are built lighter than army tanks, because by not being exposed to bombs and artillery fire, they have no armour. I don't think it occurred to Dad that if the bulldozer got stuck in the bush, and couldn't get out, a heavier vehicle might have at least as much trouble getting around, and out – if not a whole lot more. Whatever the truth of all that might have been, the bugle sounded, and the rescue team went into action. Because the tank had hard rubber slats on its steel tracks, Dad took it to the site along the side of the road and sometimes on the road where he knew it wouldn't do any damage, such as straight flat stretches where little turning was required. Turning the tank ripped up the ground, or road, as the case may be. All the roads around here were gravel of course in those days, the early fifties. My brother Paul and I travelled with him in the main belly of the tank from the farm up Caves Road towards Biddy's Pinch, our hair fluttering in the gentle autumn breeze. We were as pleased as Punch, knowing we had some-one competent and trustworthy at the levers, and on our way to the adventure of a lifetime.

I got to thinking: how many dads out there go to all this trouble to fit their kids out with some real-life Boy's Own adventure? Fair question or what? It would probably have been better to ask how many dads out there were living for the first time the childhood they'd missed during the terrible Great Depression. In retrospect, it would have seemed the more relevant question.

Strategy was discussed prior to execution using a hand-drawn map of the area, with all the appropriate pointing and waving about of arms and things that go with planning of such military operations. The cunning rescue plan consisted of descending a steep bank right down to the bottom of the gully where the bulldozer lay stranded. It was the direct way. The messy indirect way was to have gone in the same way the dozer did, along the bottom of the gully. There was a great deal of faith that this tank would 'bloody-well go anywhere.' To look at it, and to listen to it, you'd think that was right. To make sure we two kids didn't fall all about the inside of the tank, Dad slid us into the rear ammo boxes, one on either side of the big roaring engine. Happy that we were secure, he hopped back into his seat – no seatbelts, mind you—and grappled with the big steering levers with his skinny arms and hands, and foot pedals with his skinny legs and feet.

He gunned the engine with the clutch in, sending off a flock of galahs parked in a nearby Yellow Box tree. A massive plume of acrid black smoke billowed around the tank and blocked our vision for a moment. A bout of coughing followed from the tank occupants. Then another, and my God the noise was murderous. Slowly, Dad let out the clutch, easing the front of the tank to cantilever out over the bank. Then, with a tilt when the physics were right, it flopped over the top edge, taking the wind out of our stomachs as it dropped. When the tracks had made contact with the inclined ground below, it seemed as though the giant machine was going to do a somersault end over end. Rather, it slid and slithered some of the way steering directly down the hill. It took engine work only to steer as it crashed downward through the undergrowth, knocking over eucalypt saplings on its way down, with Dad steering madly to avoid the larger tree trunks that littered the hillside then. It must have been the sheer weight of the tank, and the loose shale ground that lay under a thin coat of topsoil on the scrub-covered bank that caused the instability. It was estimated by the commanders of this mission that the combined efforts of tank and dozer engines, linked by steel chains, would see the dozer out and free.

When all the pull chains were set up, the tank and the dozer fired up, and slowly jockeyed about getting into position to move out horizontally initially, then at an angle along the gully floor. After a decent initial effort, the dozer had been extracted from the bog, and it was possible for it to operate on its own steam. So the chains were taken off, and the dozer went on its way around the gully to where it had started out from a few days before, shamefaced but free as a bird. Dad called on me and Paul to get back into the ammo boxes. We were going up the hill, and home, the way we came. At about age five and six, we were the right size to fit snugly into the ammo cases, with just our eyes peeking over the top. When Dad revved the engine, the whole hillside rang with the sound of radial aeroplane pistons firing with a 'silencer system' that was no more than two straight vertical pipes on either side of the engine, adjacent to our shafts. Next to the engine, the sound was deafening. That was about fifty five years ago now, and I wonder to this day how much that experience contributed to my industrial deafness all three of us experienced in later life.

The tank grabbed its way beautifully up the steep incline. Dad was up the front at the controls, and we were in our privileged boxes down the back. There was a magic feel to having such a command over nature, defying gravity in this way. I wasn't absolutely sure we weren't gliding between galaxies in the great depths of the universe, so good did it feel. At a point about half way up the incline, the shale ground gave way, and the tracks started to lose their grip under tons of steel. If one track moves at a different speed to the other, the tank veers to one side—the side of the slower track. Before Dad realised what was happening, the tank had slewed sideways on the slope, and began sliding back down again—sideways. It's not certain whether he intended it to hit the low stump in our downward path in order to stop the slide, or whether it just happened that way, but when the tank's downhill track connected with it, it bucked the tank upward on the uphill side. With the bang it made, our view from the tops of the ammo boxes slowed considerably, and all noise died down. It was the warning sign that alerts our subconscious that our lives were on the line. Time slows down in the same measure that your awareness is heightened. It was dreamlike: the few seconds that followed were stretched out to long minutes.

The floor of the ammo cases thundered up rapidly under our feet, catapulting us skyward. Instinctively, we fattened out like frogs to wedge ourselves in the cases as the tank rose on its unexpected path off the ground. The bush around us swirled into a slow blur, and the sky disappeared completely. We could feel that we were moving in a most unusual way, like a roller-coaster ride in slow motion, in deep space. Where one minute it was sunny and light, it gradually went dark, and we were off the ground, upside down. I craned my neck to look straight down at the ground that was coming up at me with conviction. It kept coming until it crashed into us with an almighty crunch of steel against stone and rubble. Frightened out of our wits, it was only our automated instincts that assured we retracted the exposed part of our heads on impact, so that when the tank hit the ground upside down, it was the top of the ammo cases that bore the brunt at the rear. On impact, the engine spluttered a little then conked out, starved of fuel most likely. We slid in our boxes and hit the ground just as the tank lurched a second time. The tank had rolled over the stump onto its open top, and was rising again on the uphill side to complete a full 360 degree roll.

Again, without thinking, our little bodies responded by expanding to provide as much friction on the sides of the steel boxes as possible, to prevent being flicked out at high speed as the tank arced into the second half of the sideways downward roll. An explosion of light replaced the shadowy murk, and the blurred trees and scrub around us came back into view. Our heads emerged from the top of the ammo boxes, our bodies thrust downhill by the lurching tank. We couldn't see what had happened to Dad. He'd hit the ground under the rolling tank, and stayed there as its bulk bucked off him and kept moving into the second roll, over and away from him. We two kids had a modicum of spare room around us in the ammo boxes, but instinct was sufficient to ensure we applied the right pressure with knees, buttocks or hips, arms, elbows and chest. There was no relaxing going on in those two ammo cases at this crucial moment.

I could hear Dad's cries of woe as he no doubt imagined that he'd thrown the lives of his boys away. Or he was possibly injured and was bellowing in pain. In the driver's position, he was surrounded by sharp steel implements, like the steering levers, various pedal controls, steel projections, tool boxes and other loose stuff that wasn't lashed down. In that position, he was far more exposed to injury in a roll than we were, 'safe and snug' in our ammo cases up the back. After the tank crashed onto the inclined ground, we could feel the breath being squeezed from our lungs again as the tank tilted on its downhill edge and the top side began its curved trajectory down into the gully. We got a full blast of a blazing blue sky that whirled and soon gave way to the grey-green blur of the bush. This time, we were right way up, so we couldn't see the ground rushing up to meet us anew. But we knew it was coming, and braced ourselves accordingly so we wouldn't be propelled violently against the bottom of our steel coffins.

With a violent crash, the tank landed back on its tracks with a bounce, and, as we anticipated, we did get thrust against the bottom of the ammo cases. I wriggled upward to look out over the top of the case I was in. It was the downhill one of the two. I saw the shaly ground slipping away under me as the tank slid downhill on its tracks, still sideways to the incline. It veered onto a small section of flatter ground, a fold in the ground leading down to the gully—and stopped, motionless under a shower of gum leaves and sticks stripped from their branches. The engine, too, had stopped dead. There was nothing but an eerie silence as the time scale began to resume normality and shaken people looked about them stunned. As sound too resumed normality, we heard grunting noises coming from just above us. We two boys were still in the ammo boxes, in shock from the swirling trees, sky and banging and crashing of the tank's roll. Dad had recovered his composure and came down the bank to reach the now motionless tank. He scrambled up onto the superstructure and leant over the back to see two little blackened faces smiling not very confidently to show they had come to no harm.

We were too young of course to make any objective note of Dad's reaction to the accident. Thinking about it now, he was probably in shock too, judging by his subdued actions and emotions. We walked a mile home in silence. Of course, what could have happened to all three of us was as plain as the noses on our faces. An innocent bush outing to do a neighbour a favour had turned into a near tragedy. The fact that he never went back to the tank after that roll says a lot about his feelings that day. He was probably just grateful that he got out of the experience lightly, and simply turned his back on his big new noisy toy in order to show his gratitude. Like the war, he never discussed it very much, so I can't say for sure what his reasons were. I asked my mother recently why he never went back. All she would offer was they 'he seemed to have lost interest in it after that day.'

Many decades later, as young men, we returned to the scene to see if we could find the tank. We had a rough idea of where it might be. We scrambled about in the scrub with no luck at first. It was deeper down than we thought. Finally, one of us yelled with excitement. 'I found it! I found it!!' The smell of grease and oil was strong at the time of that outing, and it was what eventually led us to where the old girl still lay, in exactly the same spot where she landed after that roll, overgrown with scrub and bush. We look up the hill to try to recreate the action that transpired here all those years ago. This big greasy machine actually looked at home in the Australian bush, camouflaged the way time and nature had arranged. The ammo cases seemed so small it's hard to believe we fitted into them. But post-war food rationing still applied in parts at the time, so kids were naturally skinny. That tank was my first experience with something heavy and formidable that men play with and use for devious means, like war.

Many years later again, we heard that someone had retrieved the tank to use it at a mine. It was great to hear it was back in business, and is at work even still. General Jeb Stuart would be bloody proud.

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Chapter Three

Dad had no ambitions of becoming a millionaire; not the first year, anyway. He was a modest man in most respects, with the possible exception of his reproductive behaviour, having sired eleven offspring in just over a decade. But he was always on the lookout for a good solid business opportunity – you know, a bit on the side so to speak, apart from the usual nine to five. The vibrant post-war times demanded a fresh approach, being marked as they were by a revival of interest in doing things the easy way with the help of machines. When the Americans saved Australia's bacon from the Nip menace in WW2, it was possible in good part because of their obsession with and ability to churn out machines. Dad must have been part American I think, because not only did he think Mack trucks were an expression of divinity, and Ford motorcars only just marginally inferior (there's no telling for taste), he shared their passion for machinery.

You couldn't keep him out of a machine, as the tank story, his remodelling of the Perc dry cleaning machine, and his fleet of Morris Minors testify. So it was not surprising that he turned to machines in this instance. But, as we all know by now, if effort and good intentions were faithfully rewarded in this world, he would have been a millionaire many times over. But there's bad luck, bad timing, bad feet, bad language, bad blood and a host of other bad influences that intervene uninvited to afflict and penalise the innocent, the naïve and the unsuspecting. Whatever happened to be the deep psychological reasons lurking below the dark murky waters of this rather disappointing venture in 1956, he decided, for better or worse, for richer or poorer, to invest in the vending machine business. The glass fish-bowl model of peanut machine made by the Columbus Vending Machine Coy of Ohio USA attracted his eye of the many available at the time. It sat neatly on a pipe stand and base. It was perfection itself.

All you had to do to get a handful of peanuts was to put a six-penny coin in the slot, and pull the lever sideways with your right hand as your left hand waited at the chute. It was as simple as falling off a log, you'd think. Wouldn't you? That's what Dad thought, and what he thought the people who sold them to him thought. He knows now, with the benefit of hindsight, that life isn't as neat and tidy as all that, being subject to the cucumber factor (where one minute you have it in your hand, and the next it's inserted in your bottom). He knows now that if you want to make some easy money, aliens – or somebody – have organized things so that you get far more dis's (disasters and disappointments) than actual cash profits or job satisfaction. Dad's plan was quite simple. He bought twenty of the machines, instead of leasing them to see how the business went – or just buying one and testing it in the market. He figured that the profits would be higher if he actually owned the machines outright, and as many of them as possible.

The theory sounds sound, you have to admit. He was cutting out one of the middlemen – the one who made the most out of it. He had to make agreements with the managers of various grog outlets where people assemble in numbers and would be likely to get a bit peckish. The best formula he could imagine was salted peanuts, in places where men drank beer. It was a winning formula, he thought. The more they drank, the more they'd like a peanut; the more peanuts they ate, the thirstier they got. Again, the theory is sound. Any psychologist will confirm it – that once humans and chimps start on something pleasurable, it will take a lot more than a preacher or politician to talk them down from it.

Alright, he'd have to pay the club premises owner 15% of his pre-tax earnings, but that was fair enough, since he needed to be in a pub or a club, not a parking lot or a back lane.

So he ordered the machines, and they turned up at home in their neat boxes. They only needed to be mounted on their stands, filled with salted peanuts and delivered to the various locations, which was mainly the pubs in the main street. From then on, he just needed to keep an eye on them to top them up as required. What he hadn't allowed for was the fact that rats would be constantly attacking his stored peanut supply at home, which reduced his profits substantially. Big rats, with hands the size of a ... well, of a kid, say; lots of kids, to be precise. The peanuts were delivered to him in big sugar bags, and the rats got to them up high, not down low, as you'd expect.

The other thing he hadn't allowed for is that when a machine jams – and anything mechanical is likely to fail frequently even when properly maintained – the customer who wants his peanuts, or his coin back, will tend not to just walk away saying 'easy come, easy go.' Generally, he's had a few beers already, and he's not as cautious or prudent as he was a half an hour ago. You have to bear in mind too that when Dad went into this venture, he did so in the years before the liquor laws were liberalized. So the pubs had to close at 6.00pm of an evening. It was called the six o'clock swill, and only a country run by wowsers like Australia could have come up with such a brain-dead scheme to achieve such a lousy result.

It gave most husbands, fathers, grand-dads, uncles and boyfriends only an hour of drinking time if they worked at the pub, and if they didn't, which was largely the case, you had to deduct travel time from where they worked, which in Lithgow averaged about ten minutes by car, twenty minutes by pushbike, and about an hour on foot. Say you had a car: that left fifty minutes in which to get pissed, which meant a lot of hurry and recklessness was involved - and anger, meanness, violence and danger. So, given the pressure your vending machine customer is under – plus the worry of a nagging wife at home saying Arthur, you're pissed again you mongrel! – it can hardly be surprising that, having passed on the option of saying fack it, I've just lost my sixpence, I'll go and chat with the fellas, he starts tapping the side of the machine with the ball of his hand to release the handful of peanuts he's paid for. And all the time, he's worried sick about hearing 'Time Please Gentlemen!!', even if he still has twenty minutes of drinking time left.

And you have to factor in the psychological pressures eating away at him as he looks for a place where he can safely put down his glass of beer so no bastard will steal it. He knows that the government deliberately organized drinking times so that everyone will guzzle it down in the short time available and get so sozzled that they'll run the gauntlet of the cops on the way home, generating much-needed revenue for the state coffers and filling the local hospital emergency wards and cemeteries. It makes him angry, as does the knowledge that even if he votes for the other mob next time, they won't change the drinking laws. Shit, someone else has put sixpence in the machine while he wasn't looking, and he still hasn't found a place to put his glass down after having spilt half of his beer.

'Hey mate!' he says. 'I've already put money in that. It's stuck.'

'Oh yeah? I've heard that one before. Pull the other one.' Then he finds out that the bloke wasn't trying a fast one on him at all. So he too taps it gently at first to release his lot of peanuts. Nothing. So he looks for a place to put down his beer. The tension is mounting as time is frittering away and there's no advance on the peanut front. They sit in their glass bowl glaring out at the poor customers, gloating over the fact that they're a shilling in front, that we know of. How many other poor sods went away in disgust, not having a penchant for brutality?

'Hey, mate! I'll hold your beer while you try to get the peanuts out.'

'Good idea. Here. Tah.' Then he taps it again. Nothing. He looks over at the barman who's so busy by now that he can't even look up from the beer gun he's using to fill fifty glasses with a single pull. He then gives the machine a good whack with his fist. That doesn't work either, so he grabs it by the pipe stand and shakes it violently, pretending it's his missus just after she nagged him about coming home under the weather. Practice never goes astray. One peanut has been caught in the chute from the last successful customer. It is dislodged by the violent shaking. There's a difference of opinion now as to which of the two customers should get it. That only increases the tension and the anger level.

Over in the corner, there's a big bloke who's been watching this with great interest. He goes over to them. They see him coming and try to fob him off.

'Sorry mate, but you'll have to wait your turn. We got here before you.' No sooner had they said that when this big bloke uses his fist to bang on the top metal disc of the glass bowl containing the peanuts. The glass bowl bursts and 4lbs of peanuts go everywhere, along with the shards of curved glass. In the chaos generated by this unexpected helping hand, or fist, the stand topples and crashes onto the tiled floor, and all the sixpenny coins come spewing out of the guts of the machine. In a civilised venue, the coins at least would have been salvaged for the owner of the machine.

On nearly all occasions, the victims of the machines deemed that compensation was due for all the farting around they were put to (in legal terms 'pain and suffering') – a principle often upheld by the common law. In fourteen other pubs, and five registered clubs, including the Workies, Dad's machines were subject to this same strict but unfair regime. He couldn't keep up the supply of peanuts or glass bowls. And the rat problem at home was getting progressively worse with the recent addition of yet another child. Realising he was not only not making any money out of the machines, but was losing it as well – hand over fist of peanuts – he decided to sell the machines that were still in working order, and took the rest to the dump, a broken man. The business did have sure potential, but not under the conditions that prevailed. His timing was wrong. He said he'd have another go at it (a) when the pubs were allowed to stay open longer; (b) when men lost that nasty streak in them that's made worse by booze, and (c) when wives stopped nagging their hubbies and putting undue pressure on their drinking habits. Only condition (a) had been realized when he got recalled back to the factory at age seventy-two in November 1989.

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Chapter Four

The family moved from the farm into the township of Lithgow in 1952. The move opened up whole new vistas for us kids, including vistas for vice, our pastime *de preference*. We could walk one short block to school instead of a forty-five minute bus ride on a winding dirt road up hill and down dale with fistfights down the back and the usual mayhem, as we'd done for the first year I'd gone to St Pat's. For a start, in town, you got to go to the pictures every week. It only cost nine-pence if you went to the Saturday matinee. Of the 'Saturday Shilling' Dad gave us, nine pennies went on getting in, and the other three on stuff to rot your teeth once inside. On a Saturday afternoon, the only kids who weren't at the Royal downtown, or either at the Trades Hall or Union theatres uptown, were kids who were being punished for some infraction or another. At the pictures (this is way before movies came out) you got every opportunity to re-live the picture you saw for hours after you got out into the fresh air and daylight. And, in town, you had far greater choice of kids to re-live it with. And a special bonus was that you actually got to know kids who didn't go to your school, which was new for us. They were all heathens, mostly, or Presbyterians, but we didn't want to feel superior, so we tried to ignore the fact they weren't Catholics.

The first kids we got to know lived in the houses around ours on Main Street. Leslie McNabb's dad was a wandering boxing tent manager, always on the road going to the various agricultural fairs around the state. Then there was Johnny Shepley, who lived three vegie patches away from ours, up the back in the street facing the railway line. Johnny and I formed a gang, and enlisted some other kids who used to hang around with nothing better to do. They were a ragged bunch, but we got 'em into shape pretty quick. Peter Perkins was the youngest, and a bit of a sickly sort of fellow. He wasn't quite the material I was looking for, but he had a good looking sister, about my age, so we let him join with the rank of corporal. Then there was Edgar the Kraut.

Eddy had white hair and real smooth skin with not a single freckle on it. For some reason, he always smelt of California Poppy with a slight hint of Californian Poppy 'men's scent'. His family had left Germany straight after the war and they were vegetarians. For years afterwards, I thought all Lutherans were vegetarians and wore scent.

Hugh ‘Hug’ Wallace was of Scots manufacture or origin like myself, but a far more recent import, so he still had the grime and the killer instinct from the gutters of Glasgow. He became our lead stone pitcher, the deadliest weapon in our arsenal. Brian Toohey was a bit effeminate, but his Mum became part of our supply base with drinks, lollies and a new thing called Paddle Pops, so we let him in under the bar while looking the other way. And there was Paddy, another Catholic kid, from Belfast. Paddy was a real scrapper, handy with his fists. He always carried matches, setting fire to little tufts of dried grass and little piles of rubbish. He said he’d be a pilot one day. Decades later I read a news report that a pilot of that name had died in a crash landing at Da Nang airbase in Viet-Nam, in 1974. Patrick Paul O’Rourke, age 27. It had to be him.

END OF SAMPLE

Book 1 contains 337 pages

Thank you for reading.