

*School Days  
of a  
Methodist Lady*

*A journey through girlhood*

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To the young people in my family  
And those who lead them by the hand into the future

## *My Dear Reader,*

This book is about a girl, a school, and a family. The girl grew up in the Victorian country town of Kyabram in the 1950s and went to Methodist Ladies' College in Melbourne as a boarder. There she struggled and matured through discipline, rebellion, learning, grief, friendships and spiritual questing. The parents who took her to that venerable institution were fine people who loved and stood by her as best they could. The school—well, you'll find out all about the school.

Some time ago, my sister Margot came across our boarding-school letters in an old cardboard box. Unbeknown to us, Dad had carefully filed all the letters we had written home between 1958 and 1962. The letters are on yellowing sheets of MLC writing paper with its green star insignia in one corner. Margot's script is neat and well-formed while mine is spidery and at times indecipherable. When we read the letters together, we laughed and cried as long-forgotten incidents and feelings came to life.

The letters are like a telescope into the distant past, capturing small school and family scenes in fine detail. Through them I have gone back to my Kyabram and MLC childhoods and now understand more clearly who I was, who my parents and siblings were, and why things happened the way they did. Until finding them, I had thought little about boarding school. My MLC years had lain undigested in my psyche for five decades like a lump of old

stodge—too mundane and too conflicted to try to put into words. In my dreams I would go back to MLC's boarding house, re-living everyday scenes in a kind of ghostly half-light. But until now I have never properly told the story, not even to myself, of what happened and how I was shaped there.

In the 1950s and early 1960s, MLC provided a quality academic and cultural education underpinned by Methodist religious and social teachings. The boarding house was run on firm disciplinary lines reinforced by prefects, housemistresses and Dr Alfred Harold Wood, MLC's principal, pastor, and patriarch. Being an MLC boarder was a privilege (as adults would annoyingly remind us) but it was tough. Living conditions were primitive in comparison with today's standards; emotional care was lacking and some girls fell through the cracks.

In 1961, I wrote that life at MLC was 'revolting and terrific at the same time'. Over fifty years later, having sifted through my large pile of letters, and written and rewritten this memoir, I can now describe just what was revolting, what was terrific, and how the positives and negatives were closely intermeshed. I have untied some emotional knots and woven the threads into a new story. In the process, that lump of old stodge has crumbled away and I have made some important discoveries.

I wanted to write a book about it: for MLC students, teachers and Old Collegians, to feed their sense of history and their remembrances; for other one-time school boarders; for young people struggling to grow through life's complexities; and for myself, to venture into a dark and musty corner of my soul and give it an airing.

Others have joined me in my journey back to MLC and Kyabram. My sister, Margot Rosenbloom, has been a loyal collaborator: her letters and memories are part of my story. In a sense, this

is both our stories, although she would tell it differently. Along the way I have re-kindled friendships with erstwhile class and dormitory mates, most of whom are now grandmothers. Their stories are mixed in, so this is a collective as well as an individual memoir. When we get together we have as much fun as we did fifty years ago when we would lie awake in the dormitory after lights out, giggling and whispering confidences out of earshot of patrolling housemistresses.

This is my growing-up story. Perhaps you will find in it echoes of your own school, family and growing-up stories.

Good reading!

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jill". The signature is written in a dark ink and has a fluid, elegant style with a long, sweeping tail on the letter 'l'.

PS. I have used real names except in a few instances.

PPS. I apologise in advance if my memory of events does not accord at all times and in every way with that of other family members and MLC Old Collegians.

Perhaps the only point about autobiography is to remember a world which, by the time of writing, has changed so much as almost to vanish, and to record the succession of changes. But the kernel of the record—which has to be the recorder and the rememberer—has changed too. How to look back, not in anger but in reflection, is a problem I had to solve. For the small, enclosed world I began in had its concealments and anguishes as well as joys.

— Judith Wright, *Half a Lifetime*, 1999

‘Home is lovely, and I would rather be there than anywhere else; but if you and I live to be a hundred, we shall never be girls at boarding school again.’

— Susan Coolidge, *What Katy Did at School*, 1872

## *Prologue*

Spencer Street Station, Melbourne, early one morning in June 1951. An attractive young woman with light-brown hair drawn back into a bun, wearing a fitted velvet hat, high-heeled shoes and smart winter coat, is standing on the platform with her three small children.

A train arrives. They climb aboard and are carried north for three hours through Seymour en route to the Goulburn Valley. The train pulls in at a railway siding at Toolamba, seemingly in the middle of nowhere. They step down, wait with their pile of luggage, and then board a single-carriage diesel locomotive bound for Echuca. Thirty minutes later it hoots as it slows to a halt at Kyabram station. The children—a boy and two girls—leap out and are greeted by a dark-haired young man who is their father.

The war is over, and the young couple have sold their home in Sandringham and moved to the country to bring up their children and begin afresh. The children are ecstatic, having finally arrived at their promised rural paradise. Together they walk from the station to a large old corner shop that is to be their livelihood, their home and social centre for years to come: Sanguinetti's Newsagency.

# 1

## *Kyabram Dreaming*

Sick of being a prisoner of my childhood, I want to put it behind me. To do that, I have to remember what it was like. I hope I can dredge it all up again without sounding too pompous.

— Clive James, *Unreliable Memoirs*, 1980

Scenes of our first day in Kyabram shine in my memory: the train journey through yellow-grey hills and paddocks; the walk to the shop, the cornucopia inside it of books, papers, comics, greeting cards, toys and crockery; the shabby outside dunny; the empty packing cases piled in the yard; the tumbledown shed full of rats and cobwebbed junk. Richard was eight, I was six, and Margot was four.

Dad had made a home for us in the room at the back of the newsagency which stood in the centre of the town on the corner of Allan and Union Streets. The red-brick building had double shop windows, a wide verandah reaching to the street, and a concrete arch with '1914' embossed on it. At the front of the shop was a stand laden with crockery and a glass cabinet containing Bibles, fountain pens, desk sets and classy cigarette cases. Shelves of children's books and a bench stacked with comics were on one side.

The lending library was on the other side, consisting of high, dusty shelves packed with red, cloth-bound books: a choice of ‘Romance’, ‘Adventure’, ‘Western’, or ‘Crime’.

In the centre was an impressive cash register decorated with scrolled engravings. Newspapers and magazines—*The Sun*, *The Age*, *The Argus*, *The Herald*, *Truth*, *Women’s Weekly*, *Women’s Day*, *New Idea*, *Pix*, and *The Australasian Post*—were arranged in overlapping piles on the adjacent counter. At the far end was a wall of pigeon-holes where newspapers were reserved for farmers who didn’t come into town every day.

A back door opened into a passageway to the kitchen-cum-unpacking and storage area. Mum and Dad’s bed was hidden behind a curtain at one end. The passageway doubled as children’s bedrooms, so you had to squeeze past our beds to go between the shop and the back room. My bed was placed against a locked door with a peep-hole gouged into it so I could stand on the bed and check out what was happening in the shop at any time. I covered the door with red, blue and gold aluminium milk bottle tops arranged in an exotic design. Once a week we went across the road to McNamara’s hotel in our dressing-gowns for our weekly baths. Later, Dad put in a tiny bathroom behind the shop, with a wood chip hot water heater.

We crunched through stinging June frost on the way to school and made daisy chains on the way home. Soon after we arrived, bullies chased us down the road calling us ‘Abos’—our olive complexions and funny surname must have raised suspicions. But we were soon accepted and settled into a secure existence bounded by family, shop, school and church.



Mum and Dad worked long hours to build up a thriving business selling books, toys, china, stationery, cigarettes and school supplies

in addition to newspapers and magazines. Mum was in charge of buying and arranging the greeting cards, toys, and giftware, and would be up until ten o'clock arranging and marking the cards and other displays, restocking the shelves, and tidying. Dad looked after newspapers and magazines and did the accounting. He rose early every morning to pick up the papers from the delivery truck and organise the paperboys.

I loved the hustle and bustle, the cheerful energy of shop life. We three served in the shop as soon as we could read and add up, stretching full-length across the counter to take money and give change, and standing on tiptoes to work the cash register. After school, under Mum's direction, we would unpack crates of books, toys and crockery to be stacked on the kitchen table and priced. We were allowed to take down children's books from the shelves of the shop and read them, as long as we left no trace. Whenever the shop was shut we would stand at the counter reading the comics: *Donald Duck*, *Goofy*, *Tom and Jerry*, *Caspar the Ghost*, *Archie*, *Dagwood and Blondie*, *Tarzan* and the rest.

Rick recruited Margot and me as members of the Red Hand Gang, a secret society whose motto was 'Stamp Out All Crime'. Our gang of three had its own set of rules and a secret insignia: a mysterious red hand imprint that we would leave at crime scenes we had investigated. Rick would hang around outside the shop, writing down details of shady characters and suspicious vehicles in his notebook, while Margot and I kept an eye out for signs of criminal activity elsewhere in the town. We roamed Kyabram without restraint.

Around tea time, the aroma of freshly baked bread came wafting through our back door. This was the signal for one of us to run a few doors up for 'half a white high tin loaf' from the bakery; we watched the loaves being brought out of the ovens on

big wooden paddles and stacked for cooling. On the way home we would delicately peel off and savour thin slivers of fragrant, steaming bread. Dad disappeared to Madge McNamara's pub across the road for the six o'clock swill while Mum cleared away the shop debris to make space to cook our tea on her two primus stoves. When Dad came home he ceremoniously emptied the cash drawer onto the kitchen table before we all helped count the contents, folding pound and ten shilling notes and stacking the ha'pennies, pennies, thru'pences, sixpences, shillings and two-shilling coins into neat little piles.

Mum went to a lot of trouble with her meals which were standard 1950s fare: lamb chops, sausages dipped in vinegar and flour, oyster blade steak, corned beef with onion sauce, lamb's fry, and tripe or lambs' brains cooked in white parsley sauce. We took turns to say grace before meals:

*'Loving Father, for these and all thy blessings, we give thee thanks, Amen.'*

At 7 o'clock Dad would turn the wireless on and conduct the opening fanfare of the *ABC News* with his knife and fork, calling our attention to weighty affairs of the world as we ate. After tea we would huddle around the kerosene heater, playing board games or listening to favorite wireless programs: 'Take It from Here', Bob Dyer's 'Pick a Box' quiz show or the spine-chilling detective series 'D24'.

When King George VI's death was announced in February 1952, I stood outside the shop thinking, 'The King is dead. We have a new Queen. I can tie my own shoelaces and I'll soon be eight'. Already 1951 seemed dull and faded compared with 1952, which was fresh and exciting. I got my first bike—a green, second-hand Malvern Star—so I could pedal to school and anywhere else around the town. There was never a thought of danger as we

zipped helmetless around the streets of Kyabram or played raucous games in the streets on dark winter evenings.

The sun seemed to shine more brightly and hotly in Ky than in Melbourne. Air conditioning was unknown so to cool off we had to brave green slime and waterweeds in the decaying pool next to the lake, or else risk attack from giant leeches that lurked in irrigation channels and latched onto inner thighs to suck blood. Then the new, Olympic-sized Kyabram swimming-pool was built. After the grand 1953 opening, summer months came and went in an endless procession of wild, watery, sunburnt afternoons at the baths.

The Royal Tour, the first ever visit of a reigning monarch to Australia, was the great event of 1954. The Boy Scouts, Girl Guides, Cubs and Brownies went on a special train to Echuca to welcome the beautiful young Queen Elizabeth and her handsome prince. I polished my brass Brownie's badge to a high sheen that morning, and my heart leapt when I glimpsed the royal couple amidst the cheering crowds in the February heat.

With Mum's charm and Dad's genial, down-to-earth-manner, they were quickly welcomed into Kyabram society. Mum sang in the church choir, was a member of the Methodist Tennis Club and joined the Kyabram Music Club which organised Gilbert and Sullivan productions as well as performances by local musicians, in the town hall. Dad joined the Methodist cricket team, the Masonic Lodge, the Kyabram Fire Brigade, Rotary and later, became a Justice of the Peace.

The newsagency prospered, and after a few years Mum could afford to buy dresses from Pettifer's Ladies' Wear instead of making them on her Singer sewing-machine. But she sewed her own glamorous ball gowns, hemming, finishing, and stitching on sequins till the wee hours of the morning. Mrs Campbell, who

wore a wig and lived in Fenaughty Street, made summer and winter dresses for Margot and me.

Mum and Dad bought their first car—a second-hand green Austin A40 with leather seats and little levers that popped out to signal turning right or left. As car owners, they could take us on Sunday afternoon trips to friends' farms or beauty spots on the Goulburn or Murray Rivers, 30 or 50 kilometres away. We drove to Melbourne every few months to visit Mum and Dad's families. Mum, Margot and I would stay with Mama, Mum's mother who lived in Sandringham, while Dad and Rick stayed with Pop and Jan, Dad's parents who lived in Mentone.

Every year Dad bought cases of oranges, apples and stone fruits from surrounding orchards. Mum would press us into service on bottling days, peeling and stoning the apricots, plums, pears, and peaches, and packing them into Fowlers Vacola jars. Tomatoes had to be soaked in hot water before being peeled, then squashed tightly into jars to be served later on toast or added to Mum's famous spaghetti sauce. We had the bottled fruit every night for sweets, served with junket made with junket tablets, or Mum's ice cream made from sweetened condensed milk, gelatine and fresh cream. Rabbits, then in plague proportions, were bought from Joe Garrett, the butcher, or shot by Rick and Dad on rabbiting excursions. Mum transformed them into tasty stews or curries, all cooked on top of the primus stoves. Field mushrooms collected on family mushrooming expeditions were an autumn treat. Rick supplied us with delicious-tasting redfin he caught in irrigation channels.

Surrounding dairy farms and orchards were criss-crossed by irrigation channels and straight roads linking Kyabram to the sleepy country towns of Girgarre, Merrigum, Stanhope, Tatura, Wyuna and Tongala, and hamlets of Kyvalley, Lancaster and

Cooma. Divided into squares and lacking in hills or bushland, the landscape was a little monotonous. But friends' farms had a poetry about them: paddocks dotted with straggly gum trees, dilapidated barns and sheds, odd bits of abandoned, rusty farm machinery, grazing cattle, birdsong and rich, farmy smells. Every spring we made a pilgrimage to Doug and Sheilagh Anderson's orchard when their peach, apricot and pear trees were in flower: I gloried in the sweet-smelling pink and white blossoms festooning row upon row of trees, all abuzz with bees, with billions of petals floating in the breeze like snowflakes.<sup>1</sup>

Once a year Mum and Dad would pack the trailer with camping gear before we set off to the beach or hills in pursuit of nature and adventure. As we travelled, Mum would lead us in singing the hits of the day such as:

Put another nickel in,  
In the nickel-o-de-on, nickelodeon  
All I want is lovin' you,  
And music, music, music,<sup>2</sup>

We played word games, quarrelled and bonded as a family. Undercurrents of tension and conflict were deflected into humour as, led by Dad and Rick, we mimicked and teased each other. A family language of code words and joke references evolved, used only by the five of us.

Every year fireworks arrived from Hong Kong in woven bamboo packaging with stencilled Chinese characters on the outside and an exciting gunpowder smell. After Rick, Margot and I had unpacked, priced and laid them out, we would each choose our own ration to the value of one pound (£1). These were selected with painstaking care: Roman candles, Catherine wheels and sparklers for Margot and me; and more masculine rockets, double

bungers and jumping jacks for Rick.

The fireworks were saved for the Anderson's Guy Fawkes bonfire on the 5<sup>th</sup> November. Doug Anderson would douse his mountain of winter prunings with kerosene and throw in a match. The flames roared into a ferocious red tower and slowly died down while the fireworks were set off and unsold crackers from our shop were shared out. Each small fiery spectacle lasted only a moment or two, so you had to concentrate to get the maximum pleasure and hold onto the image for as long as possible. One night a stray rocket landed in my shoebox full of fireworks igniting a spectacular, potentially deadly explosion. The crackers streaked, zoomed and squiggled in all directions, but it was all part of the fun.

I loved the night skies in all their mystery and grandeur. Going to and from the backyard toilet at night, we would stop to take in the enigmatic man in the moon or the heavenly blaze of stars and planets. One night Mum caught sight of a bright light that streaked through the stars to the other side of the sky, stopped for a few seconds, then streaked off in another direction. She called us all outside and the five of us stood in the backyard for half an hour watching the light hover, flash to the other side of the sky, then hover again. We could think of no earthly explanation, but flying saucers were thought to be a fact of life in those days so not too much was made of it.

Rick led us in a series of crazes that absorbed Margot and I for days or weeks on end: catching yabbies in the irrigation channels for Mum to cook; hunting for gemstones amongst the pebbles supporting sleepers on the railway line; collecting insect specimens; selling worms or yabbies to fishermen; excavating an underground hideaway; or exploring the Kyabram Lake, which was really a swamp with ring-barked tree skeletons and lots of snakes.

A schoolfriend, Jane Galbraith, became my best friend the day

we discovered our seventh birthdays were a day apart. We decided there and then to be twins and do everything together, and we remain close to this day. Jane's parents were English migrants who lived with their seven children in a ramshackle mud-brick house on a pig farm near sand-hills and the Kyabram fruit cannery. On Saturdays, I would ride my bike a mile or so to their farm where we played all day long in the paddocks, sand cliffs and farm buildings; climbed trees and rode Trixie, their ill-tempered grey Shetland pony. The sickly smell of pig manure and pig feed—whey from the Stanhope cheese factory and rotten fruit from the cannery—hung in the air: for me, the perfume of farming, freedom and outdoor adventuring. I had a crush on Jane's handsome older brother, David, who would canter his horse to school along the main street like my cowboy heroes, Gene Autry and Hopalong Cassidy.

At the age of ten, Jane and I founded the Tree Climbers' Club (TCC), dedicated to locating climbable trees and climbing them. We made cardboard TCC badges, pinned them on with safety pins and allowed Margot to join as the third member. We also had a shared project: to get to the bottom of where babies *really* came from. We knew they grew in the mother's tummy and came out between her legs, but the crucial information about how they actually started was shrouded in mystery and adult silence. It had to have something to do with mothers' and fathers' seeds, as children usually resembled both parents. The father's seed must go into the mother somehow as that is where the baby grew, but what was the father's seed and how did it get inside the mother? The most likely explanation, I thought, was that when mothers and fathers decided to have a baby, the father would spit the seed into the mother's mouth, but I wasn't sure about it. Being a farm girl, Jane found out the answer first and told me one day when we were riding our bikes down Allan Street. She said that it was the same as when

stallions jump up on mares, or bulls jump up on cows. The bull puts his thing inside the cow and squirts the seed in that way, only with humans the man lies on top of the woman to do it. I was shocked. I knew *my* Mum and Dad would never do anything so weird and undignified even if they once did, since they already had their children.

We had a black Labrador mongrel of unknown origin called Tiger, who loved us with all his droll, doggie being and followed us all over the town. Tiger was never shut in the yard or put on a leash, and lived his own semi-independent life hanging around in the shop or patrolling Allan Street. He became notorious for whipping parcels of meat from ladies' shopping baskets and attacking men who wore khaki army greatcoats. We knew the attacks must be the result of cruelties perpetrated in the past by a returned soldier, so we thought they were fair enough. Whenever we set off for Melbourne he would chase the car up Allan Street, racing his little heart out, until we gathered speed on the outskirts of town and his black, still-pounding shape receded into the distance. I loved him as much or more than the human members of our family.

One day Tiger got skittled outside the shop in Union Street. We heard the bang but he had disappeared by the time we ran out. The next day we found him with a smashed leg lying in long grass at the back of McNamara's pub across the road, where he had crawled away to die. We put antibiotic powder on his leg and sat with him for hours, holding up his head so he could lap water from a bowl, and popping bits of mincemeat into his mouth. After a week he was bounding around on three legs and was soon back in business with a limp and an ugly scar.

In 1955 when I was in Grade 6, one breast popped out before the other. I went around in an agony of embarrassment with my single little peak clearly visible through the sides of a loose pinafore

dress Mum made me wear. One day, a male teacher whose identity escapes me led me into the headmaster's office, stood me side on to him to display my breast, and guffawed, 'What do you think of this?' I was mortified but it seemed too small and private a humiliation to think of mentioning it to Mum. Around that time she took me to Dr Bossence who poked the flat side and the pointy side and declared that the one would soon catch up with the other, which it did.

The family lived for six years cramped into the room behind the shop. We worked, played, laughed a lot and fought a lot—especially Mum and Dad. But they later looked back on those years as the happiest in their lives.



Mum and Dad's growing prosperity was triggered by a boom in the production and export of stone fruit. Kyabram, a town of 4000 people, 200 kilometres north of Melbourne, had a thriving economy centred around fruit and milk production—a fruit cannery, a can factory that made cans for the cannery, a butter factory, and a cheese factory at Girgarre. My parents had timed their move to Kyabram perfectly, benefiting also from the post-war boom and an upsurge in the production and availability of consumer products.

Ky was kind to us, but there were fringe-dwellers whom we felt sorry for. Some poor families living on small farms still came to town by horse and buggy, and a few homeless, alcoholic men, possibly war survivors, lived in shacks around the town. There were also a number of Aboriginal families, descendents of the 200 Yorta Yorta people who, I later learned, had walked off the Cummeragunja Aboriginal Reserve on the Murray River in 1939 in protest at their inhumane treatment. We would look out for dark-skinned people and tin humpies when we drove across the bridge that

crossed the Goulburn River between Mooroopna and Shepparton. Someone told us that Aboriginal people were not allowed into the swimming pool ‘because they might do poo in it’. I regarded them with a mixture of pity and fascination and tried not to stare at them in the street. They were outcasts—somehow an embarrassment—but I knew that Dad treated Aboriginal people with respect and kindness.



Mum and Dad saved up, bought a block of land on the corner of Fenaughty and Saunders Streets, over the road from the Bush Nursing Hospital (now the Kyabram Club) and started planning their dream home. I would pore over the builder’s blueprints, imagining what it would be like living in our triple-fronted cream brick veneer. I was eleven in 1956 when we finally moved out of the back of the shop into our new home, which was decorated in the latest 50s style with brightly painted feature walls, an open fireplace, a flight of china ducks in the hallway and glossy fish swimming up the bathroom wall. Now that Mum had a kitchen and an oven, her culinary skills flourished and she expanded her repertoire, experimenting with casseroles and exotic recipes from the *Women’s Weekly*. With a sophisticated electrical timer at her disposal, she would put on a roast of lamb or beef with potatoes, parsnip and pumpkin before we left for church so it would be cooked and ready to serve when we arrived home. She and Dad hosted leisurely, sometimes uproarious, barbeques in our garden, with its neat lawns and flowerbeds, cream brick barbeque, and white wrought-iron outdoor furniture. After school we would spend hours batting the ping pong ball to and fro on the table tennis table in the rumpus room, with its plum-coloured divan and matching feature wall.

That was the year television arrived in Kyabram and some

neighbours got small, black and white television sets with 10-metre-high aerials. I used to go to the house across the road to stare at moving images that could just be made out amidst the hiss and churn of snow. I knew even then, however, that the coming of television was momentous. It was also the year we bought our first record player and rock 'n roll records. Puberty was happening at an alarming rate. Suddenly I was at high school and almost a teenager.