

MY
MARIAN
YEAR

by
Robert Philip Bolton

Also by Robert Philip Bolton

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Preview file information

This preview file of *My Marian Year* contains the first chapter *January*. The complete book comprises twelve chapters, one for each month of 1954. This preview file and the complete text are protected by copyright owned by the author, Robert Philip Bolton.

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MY MARIAN YEAR

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For Stephen, Kelly and Daniel

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January

ON THE FIRST DAY OF JANUARY, AT THE VERY BEGINNING OF the Christian calendar, the Baby Jesus had his foreskin cut off. Evidently it was done on January the first because that's what Jews did to their baby boys seven days after they were born.

I didn't know that at the beginning of nineteen fifty-four, my Marian year. All I knew was that we — Mum and Dad, my Aunty Irene, me, and my little sister Tessa — had to get up and go to mass early on January the first because it was the feast of the circumcision, a holy day of obligation. I knew what a holy day of obligation was but I didn't know anything about circumcision. Nobody told me and I never heard it discussed even though every Catholic in the world — including every Catholic in our little parish of Saint Michael's — was obliged to go to mass to celebrate the mysterious event. If we didn't go to mass on a holy day of obligation Father Yeates and all the sisters at Saint Michael's said we would commit a Mortal Sin and go to hell.

So that's how my Marian year started: going to mass on the feast of the circumcision, a holy day of obligation, and worrying about going to hell if I didn't.

There were I think six other holy days of obligation. I used to know them all off by heart but now I'm not so sure. I know the other important ones, after the feast of the circumcision, were Good Friday, Christmas Day and the feast of the Assumption on August the fifteenth. Mum knew them all too plus she had a special Catholics-only calendar hanging on the wall by the safe in the kitchen to remind her of them, and of all the saints' days. Mum liked her Catholic calendar, especially at the beginning of a new month when she took it down, turned it over to a new page, immediately and superstitiously said 'white rabbits' three times

for luck, and then spent a few minutes studying that month's holy picture. Then she checked the month for her notes about birthdays and appointments and of course to remind herself about any holy days of obligation so she could make sure we all went to mass properly to avoid going to hell.

There were of course many other ways to go to hell, a place to which I really didn't want to go. 'Close your eyes now and imagine how much it hurts when you put just the tip of your finger into the flame of a candle,' said Sister Ursula during catechism which we had every day in the hungry half hour before lunch. 'Now,' she said, and she seemed to enjoy saying it, 'imagine your whole body being burned by a huge fire. The flames licking up your naked body and burning your tender young skin.' And I, who possessed a vivid imagination, imagined, and shuddered with genuine fear; and I noticed that some of the girls were sniffing and wiping their eyes.

'Imagine joining all the other evil sinners in hell and hearing all their horrible screams of pain for ever and ever without end,' she ended joyfully, failing to explain how a loving god could be so unforgiving and downright cruel to little kids. Then she crossed herself quickly. We all did.

I'm not sure why but we were always crossing ourselves then although, like genuflecting, I don't remember learning how to do it nor being taught. I just knew it. Perhaps I was born knowing it. And because I found both crossing and genuflecting easy and natural I always thought it was funny to see protestants, grown-ups and kids, make such a mess of them both. I also thought they, protestants, shouldn't even have tried to do the sign of the cross or to genuflect; that for them to do those Catholic-only things must have been a sin. I suppose there was a touch of sinful pride in this as there was in my secret pleasure of knowing when to sit, stand and kneel at mass, and when to bob my head for Jesus, when protestants, who I thought shouldn't even be at mass anyway, were obviously confused by the whole special ritual.

Of course there was more to my life than being a Catholic. But because the church's teachings and dogma were big influences on my family, especially on Mum, and because they frequently weighed heavily on my mind, they are the backdrop to the stage upon which I played out my Marian year.

So here's how we made the sign of the cross. First, the simple words: *In the name of the father, and of the son, and of the holy ghost, amen.* Not so simple were the hand actions. While you said the first bit, *In the name of...* you held your left hand limply

against your tummy, somewhere out of the way, while you sent your right hand — fingers together and slightly bent, the thumb held and hidden behind them — travelling smoothly upwards timed in such a way that when you said ...*the father*... it gently and briefly touched your forehead. Then you sent it south while saying ...*and of the*... to ensure that it touched your lower chest region just as you said ...*son*... then it went flying up and across towards your left (never your right) shoulder while you said ...*and of the*... ensuring that you said ...*holy*... just as you touched that shoulder; then it, your right hand, had to go rather awkwardly back across your chest to touch your right shoulder for the saying of ...*ghost*. Finally you sent it back to the centre of your chest where your fingers should have straightened, your thumb should have emerged from its hiding place, and your entire right hand should have come together with its opposite number which in the meantime should have stiffened and risen to its final position in anticipation of the meeting, for the saying of ...*amen*. Then your two hands should have been held stiffly together in the standard praying arrangement. For a less formal and more comfortable look you might have arranged your fingers so they were loosely bent and clasped together for the duration of whatever prayer might have followed the sign of the cross.

Once, later in the year when we were all saying the rosary, I made the sign of the cross by saying what Roger Machynlleth — one of the big boys from Milton Street — had taught me. ‘Spectacles, testicles, wallet and watch,’ I said as I put my right hand through its ritual paces. Dad laughed out loud but Mum clipped my ear with her fingers and said ‘Fraser!’ to Dad.

‘It’s an old joke, Leen,’ said Dad.

‘It’s blasphemy and I don’t like. And I don’t like you encouraging him.’

Dad didn’t say anything more but he gave me a secret wink and I was glad even though my ear was hot and sore.

Crossing was frequently done silently. I knew I always had to cross myself silently whenever I entered or left church by first dipping the tips of my fingers into one of the shell-shaped holy water fonts that were screwed to the wall at each side of the main church door and to the side of the two side doors. The water they contained was ‘holy’ because it had been blessed by Fat Pat but why I had to dip my fingers in it I didn’t know and was never told. Mum had a little glass holy water font screwed to the wall beside the kitchen door although where she got her holy water from I didn’t know. She used it frequently but Dad and I didn’t and Tessa couldn’t reach it.

Genuflecting, the other common, everyday but really important personal ritual, was performed in church whenever you moved, for whatever reason, across an invisible line drawn from the locked tabernacle, which held the communion hosts — Our Lord's body — and stood in the very centre of the altar at the front of the church, to the very centre of the back of the church. So most genuflections were made in the central aisle before you entered your pew, or as you left it before you turned your back on Our Lord to leave the church.

Like riding a bicycle, genuflecting was easy once you knew how, and once you knew how you never forgot. Here's how it worked. You placed your left foot forward of your upright body while you put the toe of your right foot behind you. Then you bent both knees and so lowered yourself until the right knee touched the floor at which time you raised yourself again bringing your right foot forward beside your left.

It sounds simple but in practice genuflecting at Saint Michael's came in an infinite variety of speeds and styles. Some people genuflected slowly, resting momentarily on their bended knee, adopting a deeply pious look, some even managing to cross themselves at the same time which I always thought was skiting. Kids naturally genuflected quickly and easily but the old, and even middle-aged people like Mum and Dad, often found it put demands on their legs and knees, their back and balance, which they were ill-equipped to meet, and so they used one hand or the other to steady themselves on the end of an adjacent pew.

Genuflection was meant to be a sort of curtsey, a mark of servility, of pious respect for Jesus who apparently lived in the tiny locked and dark tabernacle (actually a wooden cupboard with a brass knob) on the altar. But in practice, and like the sign of the cross, genuflecting was performed only casually by all but the most godly people at Saint Michael's most of whom were old ladies.

But let us return to January the first, the first day of the year and the first holy day of obligation of the year, the feast of the circumcision. Being obliged to attend mass early in the morning of January the first that year was especially hard for Dad because he and Mum had gone to a new year's eve party at Uncle Cliff and Auntie May's and got home real late. I was asleep then but Auntie Irene, that's Mum's sister who wasn't married, who stayed with me and Tessa, said that Dad got home a bit under the weather. Dad liked parties, and was often under the weather, and going to a party was always more important to him than going to mass.

But he went to mass that day because he said he was more afraid of Mum than he was of the fires of hell. ‘Your mother would kill me if I missed mass, Johnny Boy,’ he said to me once. But he wasn’t really afraid of Mum, he was just respectful and considerate of her much greater holiness. ‘She’s a bloody saint your mother, sometimes,’ said Dad sometimes. ‘You gotta thank your lucky stars for her.’

Dad was only nine years back from the war — where and when god only knows what he saw and did — so I knew he wasn’t afraid of anything. He sure as hell didn’t worry about hell or care even a bit about Fat Pat — that’s what he called Father Yeates, or sometimes The Dork from Cork — or his opinion and he certainly wasn’t afraid of him. Nor was he afraid, as I was, of Sister Ursula (who was about to become my Marian year teacher) whom he called Sister Worse-ula; once, later in the year, I even heard him call her The Old Bitch.

And so we walked to mass together that January the first morning all dressed in our Sunday best. Mum had on her best hat and Tessa and Aunty Irene wore berets because it was a sin for women and girls to go to church without something on their head. Just about anything would do and if a woman forgot to wear a hat, or had popped into church to pray on a day she wasn’t wearing a hat, she might simply open her handkerchief — providing it wasn’t snotty — and spread it over the top of her hair-do. Dad, too, was wearing a hat but he would have to remove it before he went into the church because while women *had* to wear a hat in church men mustn’t. Indeed it was sinful for a man to enter church with his head covered so the church porch was furnished with rows and rows of coat- and hat hooks. Woman must wear a hat. Men must not wear a hat. Like the god of Jews, Muslims and Sikhs, and no doubt the gods of many other small and obscure races, nations and sects, the Catholic god was evidently obsessed with what humans did to their hair and wore on their head.

As well as his new brown summer hat Dad was dressed in his Sunday-best brown double-breasted suit, pinstriped shirt, paisley tie and his best shiny brown shoes. He looked young and dashing, walking to church with us that sunny morning, but he was in fact far from well, his quiet submissiveness due in part to his thumping headache. For while Mum could shame him into going to mass on this holy day of obligation she couldn’t stop him eating and drinking after midnight the night before. We knew — Tessa and I — from when we were coached by Fat Pat for our first holy communion, that if you wanted to take holy communion at

mass you had to fast — no eating or drinking — from midnight the night before otherwise you'd commit a Mortal Sin and go to hell if you died before you went to confession.

It was also a Mortal Sin to go to communion when your soul was stained with any other sins, Venial or Mortal, although sins of either kind could be washed away by going to confession. But eating and drinking after midnight, and committing other sins, which I'm sure Dad did at Uncle Cliff's new year's eve party, meant there was no chance for him to go to confession before early mass which meant he couldn't go to communion that morning which meant Mum was mad at him; and ashamed. She knew — as I and everyone else did — that those people who didn't take communion at mass on new year's day, but remained in their seats for the duration, must have done something really bad the night before and were therefore silently judged by all present.

'Why hasn't Fraser Little gone up to take communion?' 'He must have committed a terrible, terrible sin at that party last night.' 'She's a martyr though.' 'I wonder what he did.' 'I bet it was drink.' 'He's a devil around women.' 'How does she put up with it?' 'It's disgraceful how he carries on.' 'Never knows when to stop.'

'You're a disgrace, Fraser,' said Mum as the five of us walked quickly to mass in the heat of the early morning sun. 'You make me feel ashamed.'

Dad said nothing but I felt him tighten his grip on my hand. It felt clammy and I wanted to pull it away but I didn't.

Fat Pat said mass. He was the only priest at Saint Michael's and so said all the masses that needed saying as well as conducting all the baptisms, funerals, weddings, and confirmations. Mass was said in Latin and he did the whole thing facing the altar, his back to us, turning only to walk to the pulpit for the sermon and, later, to the communion rail to serve communion.

Mum went up to the altar rail of course, and so did we, Tessa and I, even though I couldn't see the point and didn't believe the story that Fat Pat could change bits of bread — it wasn't even real bread but funny little, hard, flat white round things called hosts — and a little jug of port wine into the body and blood of Our Lord. But I knew what I had to do so I did it; I lined up in the aisle to take my turn kneeling at the altar rail beside Mum, tipping back my head and sticking out my tongue so the mumbling Fat Pat could put one of the white wafers on it with his sweaty and chubby finger and thumb. A bit of Jesus's body for me to eat — that's what they said — but only Fat Pat got to drink the blood. Then I returned to my place with my hands joined, my

head bowed, looking serious and sombre and holy but noticing that Dad wasn't the only man who didn't go to communion. Like the others he was sitting patiently in the pew, staring into space. He stood up to let me in and gave me a smile and a secret wink and I wondered what he was thinking about. I kneeled on the hard wooden kneelers, crossed myself and pretended like mad to pray and meditate until the silly little watery wafer had dissolved away and my stomach cramped slightly and made a gurgly noise. I was hungry.

Fat Pat said the mass but there were lots of important answering bits in Latin which were said on cue by the two attending altar boys; boys older than I who were in form two at Marist.

'They'll be priests, those boys, god willing,' Mum said. 'And won't their mothers be proud.' She said she hoped they wouldn't be brothers because brothers were only second-class priests who couldn't say mass or hear confessions.

They, the altar boys at work, wore black cassocks and white lacy surplices while Fat Pat wore ornate robes of pure white over which he hung his chasuble, a brightly coloured poncho-thing made of just one large piece of heavy fabric, intricately embroidered with silver and gold thread, with a hole in the middle for his fat, red, head which was bald but for his white hairy horseshoe. The chasuble's colour was a creamy-white that Friday but the colour changed according to the church calendar. Its colour, design and style were matched by the other altar bits and pieces of which there were many. I don't know how they decided on the mass colours but I knew from experience that purple was used during lent, black on Good Friday and for funerals, white on Christmas Day, Easter Sunday and for weddings, and green on the all-important Saint Patrick's day.

Mass that first day of the year was like all masses: an hour-long bore that made me yawn. I couldn't understand the Latin but I knew some of what was being said and done because not only did I learn all about it at school but like all Catholic kids I had my own missal. A missal was a floppy book in which the whole mass was printed out in Latin and English with descriptions of what Fat Pat should be doing, and other notes about the scriptural readings, which varied according to the season, printed in red. Missals were important. Mine had a limp, black, leather-looking cover with a dull gold cross stamped on the front. The pages were very thin, the thinnest pages I had ever seen or felt, and the edges were coloured red. Tessa's missal was made especially for girls with a rigid plastic cover that looked as if it were made from

mother-of-pearl. It had a simple cross embossed into the front and a tiny and elaborately engraved gold lock on the side. But the inside pages of Tessa's missal were exactly the same as mine — as far as I could see all missals were the same inside — and although she was especially proud of her hard-covered version I thought it was awfully sissy and could hardly bear to look at it or touch it.

I knew that people in protestant churches didn't use a missal, or even have their own version of a missal, but instead took a bible to church. Apart from what was taught from the bible at school — mostly the Christmas story, the Easter story, the parables, the beatitudes and the ten commandments — I didn't know much about the bible and it didn't seem very important. We didn't have one at home and I didn't know any Catholics who did.

Another thing that was different about Catholics at mass: unlike the protestants at their services, we didn't sing. But we did have singing at Sunday night benediction which Mum sometimes made me go to. The favourite hymn at benediction was called *Faith Of Our Fathers*, an Irish song of protest against the Church of England. Miss Fitzpatrick, Fat Pat's housekeeper, pressed out its rebellious notes and chords on a wheezy old organ and men especially seemed to enjoy singing lustily about their faith and being '...true to thee till death'. I don't know what benediction was all about; I hated having to go although I always liked the smell of the burning incense.

Anyway, early mass for the feast of the circumcision, on the morning of new year's day, a Friday, in nineteen fifty-four when I was nine and a half years old, was the start of my Marian year. Two days later, on Sunday, I had to go to early mass again. As usual on Sunday mornings I missed the first half of the kids' request session on the radio which was another thing I didn't like about being a Catholic.

During that first week of my Marian year, after having gone to mass on the Friday, for the feast of the circumcision, and the following Sunday, Mum and Dad took us to the beach for a picnic. Until then it didn't really feel like the summer holidays at all. School had finished a week before Christmas but Mum and Dad had been too busy getting ready for Christmas to take us to the beach. But once Christmas was over and the new year had started they relaxed properly to enjoy their own brief summer holiday and that included joining our aunts, uncles and cousins for an all-day picnic at the beach. My aunts, uncles and cousins from Mum's side of the family were all separately and together

central to my life. Without their knowing it they brought mostly happiness to me; fun, laughter and innocent joy from simple and shared sources common to all happy families. Little did I know then that a perfect and happy family is an illusion; that the grown-ups of my family, whom I loved, respected and admired so much, were, like the grown-ups of all families, less than perfect and deserving. They had their own share of human frailties, their own faults and vanities, fears and anxieties, worries and doubts, feuds and jealousies, all of which they concealed successfully from their children. Meanwhile I'm sure they enjoyed the family get-together at the beach that day as much as I did.

It was a perfect picnic. A long and perfect day during which the tide came and went and came again while my cousins and I played endlessly in warm shallow water, on the damp sand with our new long wooden spades and tin buckets printed with bright English-looking seaside scenes. We clambered over exposed rocks to explore the clear pools left by the ebbing tide, teasing and catching small crabs and imprisoning them in our slippery-sided buckets, closing the anemones with our wrinkled fingers, collecting hard starfish and catching slippery rock cods in our open hands.

The only drawback to me was that Mum made me wear a horrible hard sun hat because she and everybody then thought that kids who got too much hot sun on the head would get polio.

'Johnny Boy,' she said when I protested. 'You don't want to be like Michael.'

She didn't know, and could never guess, that lots of kids, including me, secretly envied Michael Sturgess for the attention and special treatment he received from grown-ups just because he had polio in one leg.

'I wouldn't mind,' I said.

'You wear your hat and be done with it,' said Mum sternly. 'You're not getting polio and that's that.'

Hat wearing didn't usually bother me but that summer there was a new hat fashion, the safari hat, and I had received one for Christmas. The safari hat was a hard, military-styled thing, somewhat like a policeman's helmet, moulded in the shape worn by nineteenth-century British soldiers in India and Africa, with a sloping brim, longer at the back than the front and sides, and coloured in a pale khaki. Safari hats — for men and boys — were made of cork, or some rigid cork-like material, and were heavy, hard, uncomfortable, and utterly impractical for playing in so we — my boy cousins and I — took them off whenever we could. And anyway they looked ridiculous and made our girl cousins laugh.

As we played on the beach, often with Dad and the uncles, Mum and my aunts sat on fringed tartan rugs spread out together under a tree on the grass, or on the sand itself against the stone wall, smoking, chatting about nothing I could imagine, laughing often, feeding the babies, changing nappies, or getting up to dangle babies, squealing and naked, in the shallows. There was plenty of food to be shared laid out on the middle of the rugs: cakes and biscuits for morning and afternoon tea; sandwiches, cold sausage rolls and mince pies, custard tarts and fruit for lunch; ham and luncheon sausage for tea with a simple salad of lettuce and tomatoes, celery, grated cheese and hard-boiled eggs covered with an easily-made salad cream. I often helped Mum prepare this family favourite dressing; it was made with a tin of *Highlander* brand sweetened condensed milk to which was added a big teaspoonful of powdered mustard, about half a cup of strong malt vinegar and some salt. The condensed milk — a standard item in every pantry — was especially sweet and sugary, yellow and sticky, and so condensed to be more viscous than engine oil, but the vinegar reduced it a more pourable consistency while the vinegar and mustard together served to counteract the sticky sweetness and so deliver a classic sweet and sour finish. I still think it's delicious.

An infinite supply of orange or lime cordial was on hand for us children. Mum made up ours at home, adding water to a sweet and sticky concentrate, and took it to the beach in bottles sealed with a cork wrapped in grease-proof paper. The men brought tall long-necked bottles of DB draught beer which they drank from plastic mugs during the course of the afternoon. Essential to the women's comfort especially was strong, hot tea and although they all took a thermos of hot water to the beach — making the tea properly with real tea leaves in a cheap and dented camping teapot — together with small bottles of milk that soon became warm and sour in the heat, and screw-top jars of sugar, they soon needed more hot water than they could ever have carried to make a pot of tea every couple of hours or so, or perhaps to heat up a baby's bottle. Then they sent off the older kids — including me — with a couple of the largest teapots, empty, to the beach tea rooms where boiling water was supplied free from a Zip water heater fixed to the wall.

As a reward we were given a few pennies to buy an ice cream from the little green kiosk under the trees. We stood together there, between the gnarled pine tree roots, littered with brown and slippery pine needles, and in the cool shade, in a long line of scantily-clad kids just like us, pushing and shoving, waiting

impatiently to be served.

Then, at last, when the still-hot sun was going down but the sea was still warm and the air still humid, we joined the hundreds of other families going home by car or tram or on foot. We didn't have a car so we split up to be taken home in separate cars. Tessa and I got in the back seat of Uncle Harry and Auntie Doreen's Vauxhall with our cousins Robert and Peter. We sat on wet towels in cold togs, our bottoms full of damp sand. We were cold and wet and tired and hardly able to talk or say goodbye when we got dropped off at forty-three. It was dark by then and Mum made us have a quick bath before bed to warm us up and wash away the salt and sand.

I loved it at the beach and had had a wonderful day there. And even though, before long, Dad and my uncles had to go back to work Mum managed to arrange other picnics with her sisters — my aunties — to help make the most of every day of the summer holidays. But I knew, even then, that nothing would last forever, that the big summer holidays would come to an end and that I'd have to go back to school and face the whole of my Marian year with nasty Sister Ursula.

Grandad Little had a big black American car, a Chevrolet, and on some Sundays that summer he and Gramma Little picked us up after lunch and took us for a Sunday drive. A Sunday drive was a popular way of filling empty hours at a time when the words Sunday and entertainment were never seen or heard together. But I thought a Sunday drive was boring; a waste of time. It seemed to me something that promised much but delivered nothing. I suppose Grandad Little meant well, and Mum and Dad seemed to enjoy themselves, but I didn't. I sat in the big back seat with Tessa and Mum on long and tedious journeys, feeling vaguely sick, to a series of places beyond the boundaries of my familiar world. I knew that a Sunday drive was a way for the grown-ups to fill an empty day but I resented it because, once mass was over, I planned Sundays that were far from empty.

The Scenic Drive through the Waitakeres was a favourite destination of the grown-ups although I thought it was strange to be on a road made dark and cool, even on a hot sunny summer's day, by the thick and overhanging bush. And when we stopped at a high lookout, to look down at Auckland so far away, and Dad pointed out where we lived, and the great landmarks of Mount Eden and One Tree Hill, Mount Albert and the lava flow from there that was the Meola reef, I was never quite sure what I was looking at although I said I did. I always recognised Rangitoto.

We went to Cornwall Park, the domain and up Mount Eden because they all had ‘nice tea rooms’ with a ‘nice outlook’. Such were the boring things that were important to grown-ups on a Sunday drive. I liked the domain best because there was a duck pond beside the tea rooms.

‘They’ve always got lovely lamingtons here,’ said Mum.

‘We don’t want to go in there,’ I said with Tessa standing beside me in solidarity. ‘It’s boring.’

‘Yes. Can we have an ice cream instead?’ asked Tessa so nicely.

‘I’ll get them an ice cream,’ said Grandad Little and he did.

And so we were allowed to sit with our ice creams on a cold hard scoria rock beside the brown pond watching people feeding the ducks while in the tea rooms our grown-ups watched us watch the ducks while they enjoyed their own tea and cakes and talk.

I liked the yachts around Tamaki Drive — long and sleek with deep keels and tall masts — standing in wooden cradles on the hard, many with men working on or under them, sanding and painting, with Rangitoto in the background. And as the big Chevrolet glided swiftly and smoothly around the curves I was fascinated by the flickering effect of bright light and dark shade on the road caused by the tall and overhanging pohutukawa. We went up to Bastion Point, to the grave of Michael Joseph Savage, where Mum and Dad stopped and looked and bowed their heads, and Mum crossed herself and said a silent prayer, although I didn’t know why, while Gramma and Grandad stood back a little with Tessa and me. And then, below, the remnants of the Ngati Whatua marae and the Orakei village at Okahu Bay, so close to downtown Auckland. There was a small, decrepit church there with a rusty corrugated iron roof, a graveyard, and a number of old and tumble-down houses. And there were Maori kids playing everywhere, even running unsupervised across the road and onto the beach.

‘They let them run wild,’ said Mum indignantly. ‘They act like they own the place.’

For some reason grown-ups found a Sunday drive — which amounted to nothing more than sitting in a comfortable car for hours doing nothing at all — awfully tiring which meant that soon after Grandad and Gramma dropped us home, our tea, which is what we called our evening meal, was always simple and easy. Soft boiled eggs perhaps, with buttered toast cut into thin strips called soldiers; or Wattie’s tinned spaghetti or baked beans on toast. Something simple and easy for Mum’s sake.

But that summer, whether returning from a long and tiring day at the beach or a long and boring drive in Grandad Little’s big

Chevrolet, I remember nothing of day's end but falling into a deep, long and dreamless sleep in a cool bed, secure in my own home with my own family in my own little world. I was only vaguely aware that no summer lasts forever, that all holidays must come to an end, that it would soon be February when I would be back at school for my last year at Saint Michael's, and that every carefree day spent in my own little world, whether winter or summer, at school, at the beach or in the big Chevrolet, with my family, my cousins or on my own, when added all together would one day be seen, only faintly and from a great distance in time, as the best years of my life.

Nor was I aware that, for my anxious mother, our family Sunday together was only a brief respite from the worry and fear that haunted her for the rest of the week. As I was being overcome by sleep she was sitting in the breakfast room with Dad, smoking a cigarette, silently worrying about money while he, apparently without a care in the world, smoked a cigarette — a *Grey's* — and finished the 8 o'clock, the Saturday night sports edition of *The Auckland Star*.

Was Mum right to worry? Were we poor?

Like most young couples then and now the hardest times for Mum and Dad came at the beginning of family life when their children were young. But although they didn't have much money they had their health, plenty of energy, and optimism about the future, and we kids had our own natural health, strength and resilience. So we may have been poor but not desperately so; not like the families who lived in the states, the nearby colony of state houses. True, our standard of living was low compared with standards taken for granted later that century but at the time it was more a matter of being 'hard up' as they said, plain financial hardship of the type and degree then being experienced by all working class families in post-war New Zealand.

We were a bit poor, but we were not alone, and the tight-fisted, penny-pinching stinginess that came naturally to Mum was essential to our little family's survival. Dad was only recently returned from war, had no savings and earned only low wages, but he shared his circumstances with thousands of other men of his generation. Indeed it took many years of shortages and struggle before New Zealand and its frugal working people recovered from the dreadful war that had come so soon after the economic depression referred to universally as The Slump. And the fear that The Slump would return, like a plague, as silently and mysteriously as it had arrived in nineteen-twenty-nine —

when Mum and Dad were themselves children — and bring with it more unemployment, hunger and degradation, haunted working class people in a way that made them more cautious than the times required and left them insecure, frightened, wary and unreasonably parsimonious for the rest of their lives.

And so were we poor? Not really. And should Mum have worried? Probably not. But she couldn't help it. Like all mothers she worried because she thought of nothing but the welfare of her children. She made economies in many ways and must have scrimped, saved and worked hard to provide nourishing meals. And she must have protected me and Tessa in ways that I will now never know. And if she *was* worried — and she must often have worried about the shortness of money, the health and welfare of her family, and her heavy responsibilities — then she mostly kept it to herself. But sometimes, often, during that year, usually at the end of the week, Tessa and I waited with her after school, watching helplessly, as she stood outside Easts' Four Square, her fingers groping hopelessly into an open but empty purse, unable to find the few coins she needed for some harmless little luxury.

'Mum. What's the matter?'

'Oh, it's nothing, Johnny Boy,' she said, wiping her eyes with her fingers. 'A wee bar of Cadbury's would be nice, wouldn't it.'

How could a ten-year-old boy comfort a weeping mother?

Despite my awareness of our general but not desperate neediness I personally never felt poor or disadvantaged. No doubt due to Mum's personal sacrifices, her cleverness and care, Tessa and I never experienced the hunger which she herself had experienced as a child of The Slump. But while I was aware of Mum's trials — because she was always at home, day and night, before and after school, when I was ill, and during the holidays — I didn't know what sacrifices if any Dad made to help his young, harassed and worried wife make ends meet. Perhaps he thought, as many men then did, that being the wage earner was sufficient a contribution to the family economics. Certainly he worked hard — working overtime twice a week and most Saturday mornings — but so did Mum work hard, physically hard, with two small children to care for, not enough money, a household to manage on her own, and no help from the machines and appliances which later generations took for granted.

Despite Mum's fears and worries we were in fact quite lucky. We lived in our own house in Winstone Street which was bought, during the war, by Grandad Little who seemed to me to be rich but was probably what was then called 'well off'. And although

Dad was repaying him by way of a mortgage, and the regular mortgage payments must sometimes have been hard to find, I knew that our house, number forty-three in a long street of privately-owned quality bungalows built in the nineteen-twenties and -thirties, not only provided a place to live but made us feel secure and somewhat superior to the more obviously poor rent-paying tenants in the drab streets of the states on the other side of the main road.

Grandad Little often helped out by buying little things — and sometimes not-so-little things — for me and Tessa. One Sunday in the summer holidays he and Gramma arrived for a Sunday drive with two brand new scooters. Tessa's was a standard little-girl thing, painted red with cream-coloured wheels, two at the back for the sake of stability, but mine was a much more modern and streamlined model, smarter than any I had seen before, with chromium trim, pneumatic tyres, sprung wheels and a better-than-normal brake which worked like a lever to press on the back tyre when pushed by the heel of the scooting foot. I don't know how or where Grandad Little found such a beautifully-styled scooter — I had never seen, nor ever saw, another like it except in American pictures — but I became especially proud of it and the way it attracted a lot of attention and envy from other kids. School was to start at the beginning of February and I think Grandad expected us to ride our scooters to school every day. Although many kids rode their bikes to school, and Saint Michael's had a spacious bike shed to shelter them, no one rode a scooter to school and I was not going to be the first.

While Mum was always grateful to Grandad Little for his help she was also vaguely uncomfortable about it. I wasn't told about all the things he bought, nor how else he contributed to our welfare, but I know he paid for many things Dad could never have afforded including the installation and rental of our telephone ostensibly so he and Gramma Little could more easily keep in touch with us. It turned out later that he had a dark and ulterior motive but Mum didn't know that then and she wept openly, with joy, when the new telephone — so big and black, hard and heavy, with a braided cord, a shiny chrome dial, and a loud ring from real bells — was installed at the end of January, just before school was due to start. I had often seen her weep quietly, but from sadness, outside the red phone box at the end of Winstone Street when she couldn't manage the two pennies she needed to telephone her mother, my Gramma Fahey. She tried to telephone Gramma Fahey whenever she went to the shops which was almost every day. If I were there, waiting outside the phone box,

bored and restless, chipping away idly at the brittle putty around the many windows of the little wooden building, I found these long phone calls tedious in the extreme. The one-sided conversation — which I could hardly hear anyway through the closed and soundproof door of the phone box — was of no interest to me yet there was nothing to be done but wait. Sometimes it seemed the talking would never end and I often had reason to silently thank a stranger whose arrival at the phone box, especially if he showed signs of impatience — foot tapping and sighing and pointedly looking at his wrist watch — obliged Mum to end her call. I therefore had my own reason to be grateful to Grandad Little for providing us with our own telephone.

Dear Gramma Little helped too. She was an expert tailor-dressmaker. She owned a Singer treadle sewing machine upon which she had, during The Slump, made clothes for her own two boys — Dad and Uncle Cliff — and was therefore, unlike most dressmakers, accustomed to making boys' clothes. And so she made me many handsome shirts and shorts when Mum could afford nothing more than my standard school uniform, as well as many frocks for the growing Tessa in a frilly and feminine style, which my tomboyish sister secretly despised, and many complicated pleated skirts and dresses of a more mature style for cousin Sandra, all of a style and quality which our respective parents would never have been able to afford.

Gramma Fahey too was skilled with her hands although not at sewing or anything else especially practical that could contribute to the welfare of her grandchildren. Her special skill was crochet for which she was widely admired. I was always amazed at how she could take a ball of white or brown string, manipulating it around a simple hooked needle, using crooked fingers on hands bent and crippled by arthritis, sometimes hardly looking, and quickly turn it into a delicately patterned and lacy round thing whose charm and daintiness varied only according to the coarseness of the chosen thread. The problem was that everything she made was round or was made of sewn-together separate pieces which were themselves round. I assumed that crocheted products had to be round by definition and thought that despite her skill and prodigality there must have been a natural limit to how many round things could be absorbed into even her large circle of family and friends. There was hardly a flat surface at forty-three which didn't sport a round doily — white in the bedrooms and brown elsewhere — once produced by Gramma Fahey with her crooked hands and hooked needle. But her products weren't all dainty and delicate. Everyone she knew,

including Mum, had one or two of her cleverly designed white string shopping bags which seemed capable of being stretched infinitely in every possible direction to accommodate more shopping by volume than anyone could ever possibly carry by weight.

Mum didn't sew or crochet but she was a good knitter. Unlike sewing and crochet, which both required concentration, knitting could be done almost anywhere at any time. And while wool — which was widely available in a vast variety of colours and weights — wasn't cheap it was a lot cheaper than buying the equivalent in a finished garment. It was bought in loose coils called skeins which had to be rolled by hand into a ball, about the size of a cricket ball, before it could be used.

I hated it when Mum drafted me to help her with perhaps the most boring task a boy could ever be asked to do: to stand in front of her — she was seated — and hold my flat hands vertically inside each end of the new skein, applying a gentle outward pressure to keep the skein reasonably taut, while she quickly and deftly drew off the yarn and rolled it into a few soft round balls with which to begin her knitting.

'Come on, Johnny Boy, keep your hands still,' she said, but it was hard for me to stand in one place for five minutes without moving my hands. And suddenly I developed unbearable itches in awkward places which I simply wasn't allowed to relieve with a scratch.

Mum could knit almost anything in the interest of producing warm if not particularly stylish clothes for herself and us. She went nowhere without her knitting kit, an old leather bag containing all her knitting accoutrements including the current printed pattern, a partly finished garment, a skein or two of wool and a soft partly-used ball with the two long knitting needles pushed through one of which held the current project by the last knitted row. So equipped she could sit anywhere — in the tram, in Grandad's big Chevrolet, by the fire, listening to the radio, at the beach, in a soft or hard chair at home or away — and seemingly engage in long and meaningful conversations while paying almost no attention to her handiwork. There may have been a brief pause at the end of each row, while she switched the knitting-on and knitting-off needles between hands, or if the yarn, emerging jerkily from the open top of her knitting kit, became snagged on something and had to be freed, but otherwise her knitting continued smoothly, without interruption, without effort and apparently without thought.

The pressure of home economics forced Mum to be more

practical with her knitting than she may have liked. Most of her time and effort went into the creation of bulky warm jumpers, cardigans, scarves and gloves for us all, and even my vain father didn't mind wearing one of her bulky warm sweaters on his winter bike rides to and from work. But she was less serious and sensible when she knitted numerous gaily-coloured pixie hats — woollen hats with a pointed top and a buttoned chin strap — which were then popular with small girls, and layettes of beautiful designs, with frivolous touches of pink and blue, and perhaps white, pink or blue satin ribbon, for the numberless nieces and nephews being produced by her five sisters.

While she enjoyed knitting, finding it pleasurable and therapeutic as well as productive, she definitely didn't enjoy darning. But because so many clothing items were made of wool darning was an essential homemaking skill as it was the only way to repair the wear-and-tear holes in the toes and heels of socks and the elbows of jumpers and cardigans. She was a good and tidy darning but it was a chore she always postponed, putting the holey garments aside in the darning basket — in fact a small and lidded wicker basket — until she could put off a darning session no longer. By then she would require two or three evenings of two or more hours each to painstakingly stretch each holed piece over a special piece of smooth wood with a handle below — a tool called, I think, a darning mushroom — and while she held the holey piece in place with her left hand, by gathering it tight around the handle below, she used a thick and slightly curved darning needle to bridge the hole with a matching thread of wool, backwards and forwards, and then again at right angles, alternately going over and under the crossed thread, basket-weave style, gradually filling the hole as neatly and smoothly as possible.

Despite her money-saving efforts there were still plenty of worries for Mum, and not only about money. Our health was a constant concern. Children's health was first judged by everyone, including teachers, doctors and nurses, by their physical appearance. So a fat baby was considered healthy and bonny, his weight signifying family affluence and excellent motherhood. But pale and thin children — like the Worboys twins, a boy and girl, who lived in Milton Street, went to the local primary school, and were naturally pale and thin — were considered the victims of anaemia, malnutrition and rickets, and therefore of poverty and neglect. They were taken from their parents for a few weeks and sent to Pigeon Mountain, a government health camp established for the health of the country's post-war children, to receive the

nourishment, fresh air and exercise they were deemed to need. I had heard about Pigeon Mountain from kids who had been there and dreaded being made to leave my own home and my own little world for even a few days in such a place. But many children — including the Worboys twins — sent to Pigeon Mountain for their own benefit were in fact naturally thin and actually became ill from being with genuinely sick children, and from chronic homesickness, and so were sent home early from the so-called health camp in worse condition than when they arrived.

It must have been hard for mothers who had their frail little ones compulsorily taken away to a health camp to have to admit to themselves, their family and friends, and to the authorities, that they couldn't afford to give their dear children the care and nourishment they needed as a foundation for a healthy life. And so Mum lived in fear that we were looking thin or pale or that our health would fail due to one of the many infectious diseases which were then common and to which children in particular were especially vulnerable. German measles (rubella), English measles, chicken pox, mumps and whooping cough were commonplace and could be dangerous. However most mothers were not exactly happy but somewhat relieved if their little girls contracted rubella, or their boys mumps, knowing that mild infections in childhood would provide valuable immunity in later life. Poliomyelitis, diphtheria and scarlet fever though were the greatest worries and mothers lived in constant dread of these diseases and their children's survival.

I had reasonably good health, and thought myself to be generally well, although I was plagued in the winter by tonsillitis and the painful earaches that came with it. Those earaches sometimes kept me awake for hours and left me — and Mum who stayed awake with me, fretting — exhausted, and unable to go to school. But happily, and almost certainly thanks to a careful and conscientious mother, I never came to the attention of the authorities for looking pale, thin or rickety.

Good food is the foundation of good health and children know from the moment they are born, when their tummies are first tweaked by hunger, that food is essential to their survival. They seek it instinctively, bawl if they don't get it, and when they do get it they soon want and need more.

I never knew real hunger, and if money were short, as it often was, Mum made sure we were never short of good food. There had been some food rationing in New Zealand during and after the war but it was an artificial shortage due only to sending so

much of our abundant output 'home' to Britain where post-war food shortages were real and the human suffering genuine. New Zealand was a remarkably efficient producer of quality food grown naturally. Meat — especially that from beef and sheep — was plentiful and cheap as were the vast quantities of butter, milk and cheese that came from our little country's hugely efficient dairy farms. Vegetables and fruit were also plentiful and cheap and produced naturally entirely in accordance with the seasons. The range and variety of available food — whether meat, dairy, vegetables or fruit — were limited not by the inadequacies of New Zealand production but by the very plain demands of the British market which bought most of our food production and therefore benignly dictated what should be produced. Happily and coincidentally the tastes and desires of New Zealand's people — largely British immigrants or the descendants of British immigrants — coincided exactly with those of their British customers. Inevitably Mum and Dad, more especially Mum, had inherited the simple tastes and plain-cooking recipes of Britain although in New Zealand the recipes had evolved a little to suit the circumstances, lifestyles and climate which were so different from those which ruled where and when the British preferences naturally arose.

So the foods and tastes with which I was familiar were plain and simple — and, it must be said now, bland and uninteresting — meaning that anything different or foreign, especially foods with strong or unfamiliar flavours, were spurned, not without a disparaging comment.

Mum's face assumed a look of utter disgust when for some reason she had been given some pickled herrings by Mrs Jansen, a Dutch immigrant neighbour.

'In Holland these we like very much, Mrs Little,' she said. 'You must try.'

'Oh, ta,' said Mum. 'I will. Later.'

And later, at home, she put one of the rolled up little grey things on a plate, picked it up tentatively with a fork and put it nervously to her mouth. Actually she never got past the smell of the brine to even taste the herring itself. She pulled her head away, made a horrid face at me, and dropped it fork and all to the plate before rushing to the toilet to make retching noises I could hear from the breakfast room.

She came back looking weak and pale.

'Do me a favour, Johnny Boy,' she said, wiping her screwed up mouth with her apron. 'Chuck 'em all in the rubbish bin.'

'Let me try,' I said but I was forbidden even a tiny taste on the

grounds that pickled herrings, enjoyed for hundreds of years by millions of Dutch people, were not only foreign and foul tasting but probably poisonous.

It was the same whenever she sampled or accidentally tasted something foreign including such harmless and common foods and tastes as garlic, capsicum, chilli, gherkins, olives, strong black coffee, dry wine, yoghurt, pasta sauce and lasagne, and salty liquorice. I don't know how or why these remarkably strange and exotic foodstuffs were even allowed over the threshold at forty-three but out they all went to add even more foulness to the large and always-foul rubbish bin — dented and misshapen, with an ill-fitting lid — which stood at the back of the house until Dad put it out for collection on Thursday mornings before he went to work.

And so our diet, while good and healthful, was plain and unadventurous. I started my day with a breakfast cereal. In the summer it was usually a plate of cornflakes or rice bubbles with milk and sugar. In the winter it was hot porridge. Mum used to use naturally coarse rolled oats for the porridge, which she had to soak overnight prior to cooking in the morning, but she had recently discovered a prepared and processed brand — the packet had a picture of a saluting boy scout signifying, I suppose, being prepared — which didn't need overnight soaking and produced a smoother porridge. I liked that porridge. I liked to put a big spoonful of butter in the middle of my serving which would melt, yellow and runny as an egg yolk, from the porridge's heat, before adding milk — preferably top-milk, the name used for the cream which always rose to the top of the milk bottle — fetched fresh from the gate that morning, and sprinkling heaps of brown sugar over the whole big dish.

Winter also brought ripe grapefruit to the table. A not-large tree stood at the end of our back yard together with a lemon tree. Despite its modest size its winter branches were laden and bent with bunches of the juicy but tart fruits, waxy, shiny and yellow, some almost as big as bowling balls. Just one half of one of these monstrous fruits was enough for me and it was best prepared the night before. Mum cut two grapefruits in half through the equator, sprinkled the exposed surfaces with white sugar, and left them overnight. By morning the pale and cool flesh, comprised of millions of tiny fibrous and transparent bags of juice, had absorbed the sugar's sweetness while the sugar itself had joined together to make two or three large and crunchy crystals. I ate the sugar first and then used a teaspoon to scoop out the cold, sweet and juicy flesh, one segment at a time, taking

pride in the neatness of my work and the symmetry of the empty case and its unbroken membranous walls.

There was always hot buttered toast for breakfast, winter or summer, made only with white bread cut by hand into thick slices directly from the loaf. Mum bought our bread fresh every day from the local bakery. It was always white, unwrapped and uncut. No one bought brown bread while the coarse, grainy and truly wholemeal breads of later years, or bread that was pre-cut and wrapped, simply didn't exist. Only two loaves were available from the bread shop: the Sydney flat, which made square slices, and a bread called a chub which Tessa and I secretly called bum bread because the top was divided into two rounded and raised humps quite like a pair of large and sunburned buttocks. Both these standard loaves were segmented in the middle meaning the baker could easily break the loaf in half by hand for customers who didn't need a full loaf. Having collected a loaf of fresh bread from the baker the temptation to break it in half and tear away layers of the warm, soft, white bread was more than could be resisted and caused many kids, including me, to get in for it with an angry mother. There was also a loaf called a Vienna which was also rounded on top but in one continuous end-to-end form, and the barracuda which was like a short and thick *baguette*, neither of which was segmented and so couldn't be broken in half. This should have made them proof against childish pilfering of their insides but many kids couldn't resist picking away, like hungry birds, at the crusts of any loaf. But Mum didn't buy the Vienna and barracuda loaves because they were more expensive.

'They're all made from the same dough anyway,' she said. 'I can't see the point.'

She was probably right.

Bakeries were small privately-owned local businesses. Our bakery, on the main road near the bottom of Winstone Street, stood in the middle of a large block of land and had a small stand-alone shop fronting the main road from which it supplied most of the neighbourhood. I went into the shop often enough, sometimes on my own, but what happened in the big windowless bakery behind the shop — with its tall and tapering chimney — was a mystery.

'There's a baker who spits in the dough,' said Anthony Hughes once. 'There are big machines kneading the dough for ages and ages and he gets bored and spits into the dough which gets mixed up by the machines.'

Anthony Hughes was a big boy who lived in Milton Street. We Winstone Street kids didn't believe him about the spitting — or

perhaps we didn't want to believe him — but we knew it might be true because his father really did work at the bakery.

Sometimes while walking past the bakery on the way to school I caught a distant glimpse of Mr Hughes and the other bakers standing smoking at an open door, dressed all in white, sometimes shirtless but in a white singlet, dusted with flour, and I wondered which of them was the spitter. I could see the big machines behind them, cream and pale green and chrome, and the hint of black and smoky ovens, but as all the baking was done at night, so that fresh bread would be available in the shop by morning, the men must have been at the end of their shift. I didn't tell Mum what Anthony Hughes said but I thought about the spit every time I had a sandwich.

Like most people we had a regular bread order which had to be collected each day. As Mum walked past the shop every day on her way to and from the shops — food shopping had to be done every day — it was easy enough to pick up the bread order on the way home. The unwrapped loaves stood, end out, on deep cream-painted shelves behind the counter. Bread reserved by regular order was labelled with the customer's name printed on a white card which was held in the grip of a small tight spiral of steel wire the other sharp end of which was stuck into the end of the reserved loaf. Spare bread, as it was called, was set aside from the ordered bread so that casual customers passing by, or customers who needed more than their regular order, could see at a glance what if any spare bread was available. 'Pop in and see if there's any spare bread, Johnny,' was an instruction I received when more bread was required at short notice and this arrangement saved the man in the shop having to answer the same question, 'Any spare bread?', from me and so many other customers.

The unwrapped bread was handed over, unceremoniously, by a bare hand, with no attempt to wrap or otherwise protect the loaf. Mum would take it and add it, unprotected, to her bag or trundler. If I were collecting it I'd simply carry it home in my hands or under my arm working hard at every step to resist the temptation to break it open or pick at the crust.

Bread was baked and available fresh only five days a week meaning that for the weekend we had to double our bread order on Fridays. But there was no way to keep bread fresh so a loaf or two of extra bread bought fresh on Friday became dry and stale over the weekend, awful for sandwiches and suitable only for toasting. Perhaps its only merit was that, compared with soft fresh loaves, it was easy to slice accurately and thinly without

losing its shape. This state of weekend bread affairs, even worse over a long holiday weekend, was accepted without question by passive and uncomplaining housewives like Mum who were conditioned to believe that everyone, including bakers, was entitled to a weekend without work. Later though some bakeries began baking on Saturday nights to provide hot, fresh bread on Sunday mornings although at a premium price. Fresh bread on a Sunday was such a luxurious novelty that people happily paid the few pennies more it cost and the term 'Sunday bread' was coined to denote warm, fresh, white bread that was somehow better than that available during the week.

But whether the bread was fresh or stale, week-days or weekends, it was always toasted and buttered while hot as a breakfast standard. Like most people I liked nothing better than the salty taste of Vegemite and melty butter on my hot breakfast toast. Some people preferred Marmite, an almost identical product but made by the Seventh Day Adventist church whose *Sanitarium* brand vegetarian products were avoided by my Catholic mother; she considered Adventists, and Mormans equally, to be nothing but evil devil-worshipping cultists.

'I open the door and make the sign of the cross to them and they always go away,' she said.

And they always did.

Marmalade was also popular at our breakfast table, especially if it were home made with plenty of coarse grapefruit and lemon peelings from Dad's own trees, although Mum preferred home-made sweet jams like strawberry, raspberry and plum.

At a time when refrigerators were a luxury and home freezers unknown many housewives were necessarily highly skilled at the traditional, demanding and time-consuming home-crafts of making jams and jellies and preserving fruits and vegetables in jars. And although Mum possessed the skills, and would have appreciated the savings and the luxury of being able to draw from a full larder, she lacked the necessary time and so depended on the generosity of friends and family for the wonderful home-made marmalade, jams and jellies she and we so enjoyed at the breakfast table. But at least she, or rather Dad, was able to contribute to the home economics by providing the makers with copious grapefruit, lemons, figs, apples, grapes and passion fruit from his back yard orchard.

Sunday breakfast was different. On Sundays, and only on Sundays, Mum prepared a big cooked breakfast when we got home from mass. Perhaps because it was the only day Dad never went to work, or perhaps because having fasted for communion

since midnight Saturday they were especially hungry, perhaps as a reward for their fasting, or perhaps because breakfast didn't have to be rushed and there was time to both prepare it and enjoy it, a cooked breakfast was a Sunday morning ritual. Mum started making it as soon as we returned from mass and she had changed out of her Sunday best. Dad, meanwhile, relaxed at the table with his 8 o'clock. It was a predictable and standard cooked breakfast, one that would now be called an English breakfast, of fried eggs, thick rashers of bacon with plenty of lean meat edged with fat and a crisp rind, delicious black pudding — made by Pellows, our butchers, to be dry and peppery with plenty of barley — tomatoes, and sometimes split bananas, all fried in a pan deep with dripping, and served with hot buttered toast. Sometimes the bread was fried instead of toasted and sometimes tinned baked beans or spaghetti was added to the side of the fried food. And sometimes there would even be liver or lamb chops. There was tea of course, and a second brew was inevitable. Meanwhile I chewed the fat from the bacon rinds left on other plates while Mum read the *Zealandia*, the Catholic newspaper which she bought from a stand in the church porch after mass every Sunday. Dad resumed his reading of the tabloid 8 o'clock which was an essential read for all men as all sports were played on a Saturday, and only during the day, never at night, and there were no Sunday newspapers to report the racing and sports results. The 8 o'clock filled a large gap in a man's weekend leisure.

Mum and Dad had plenty of time to read their papers because weekends were legally and officially set aside for family life. No shops except dairies were allowed to open on Saturday and Sunday while the law discouraged all but essential Saturday work by forcing employers to pay overtime rates. Saturday was the day for kids' and grown-ups' participation in and watching sports while the only spectator sport held at night was the noisy but exciting summer speedway at Western Springs.

While there was plenty of other grown-up entertainment available on Saturday nights, including picture theatres and dance halls, Sunday was an enforced day of rest; nothing was open and nothing happened. Commercial activities of any sort were not just frowned upon but were forbidden by law. The only people allowed to work on Sundays were those whose job was considered essential including — and this was necessarily spelled out in detail at school because working on Sundays, the Lord's day and a day of rest, was considered a sin — workers on trams, trains and buses, doctors and nurses, firemen and ambulance men. Advertising was banned and some of Saint Michael's high-

minded Catholic tradesmen, who used their van to go to mass, had canvas blinds, weighted at the bottom, fixed to the side panels of their vans which they could drop down on Sundays to cover the van's advertising sign which usually announced nothing more wicked than the owner's name and phone number.

The Auckland anniversary day holiday at the end of January brought me an unexpected treat. Aunty Irene had acquired a new boyfriend called Dennis who decided — or perhaps it was decided for him — that I should go with him and Aunty Irene to the carnival at Western Springs. Dennis was a lot of fun; he liked me and I liked him although I realise now that I was probably sent along as a chaperone. If that were the case then he showed no resentment but treated me kindly, generously and somewhat like a little brother. He was prepared to take Tessa too but Mum said no, it would be too much excitement for Tessa, and her little legs wouldn't be able to keep up, and I was secretly glad.

It was early evening when we got to the Springs. Dennis had his own car which he parked at the top of the Bullock Track and I noticed, as we made the steep descent to the Great North Road, looking down on the colourful circus, the grazing elephants and donkeys, the lions' cages, and all the lit up rides, blinking and flashing brightly in the dusk, and the shabby sideshow tents down one side, that Aunty Irene walked between me and Dennis, holding his hand as well as mine. And they walked around the fair together holding hands whenever they could.

'I even saw them kissing,' I told Tessa later.

Tessa grimaced. 'I wouldn't want to kiss him,' she said in disgust. She was nearly eight.

Dennis said I could have anything I wanted to eat and we could all have two rides and one side-show together, and I could choose. I had been to the carnival only once before, with Mum and Dad, but that time I was allowed only one ride, one candy floss and no side-shows. Now, unbelievably, thanks to Dennis, and no doubt his desire to impress Aunty Irene, I had an almost unlimited choice. My excitement must have shown because Dennis laughed and so did Aunty Irene and I felt special and spoiled. I had candy floss again, a big serving this time, pink and white mixed, and two battered sausage hot dogs dripping in tomato sauce, one when we got there and one when we were leaving, and I dripped tomato sauce on my school shirt and Aunty Irene said it didn't matter. For my rides I had *two* goes on the dodgems, one after the other. The first time I went to the carnival with Dad, and had a go on the dodgems, Dad did all the

steering and the fairgrounds man had to keep jumping on the back of our car, holding on to the power pole with one hand and steering with the other, to get us out of a traffic jam. But both times with Dennis he let *me* do all the steering and the fairgrounds man hardly ever jumped on the back.

It was hard to choose a sideshow from all those available. But Dennis said it was up to me so I had to make a decision by looking at the signs. Most of the sideshows featured a misfortunate man or woman with some sort of physical handicap or deformity. There were even grown-up Siamese twins.

‘It’s awful,’ said Aunty Irene.

I thought it was neat.

‘They’re freaks,’ said Dennis. ‘It’s the only way they can earn a living, going around the fairs and carnivals, letting people pay to look at them.’

It was amazing. Dennis was shouting and I was free to choose some strange freakish person to really and truly stare at as much as I liked. I looked at all the signs and murals that decorated the sideshow tents and advertised their strange performances, and Dennis, strolling around holding hands with Aunty Irene, gave me plenty of time to make up my mind. There was a bearded lady, a fat man, a hairy man, a strong man who could blow up hot water bottles, a tall man and a midget together, grown-up Siamese twins and the Half Man as well as a fortune teller, a hypnotist and a magician. Finally, after walking up and down the saw-dusty grass avenue of sideshow tents, with Aunty Irene and Dennis happily trailing along behind, I made my choice.

Dennis laughed.

‘Right,’ he said, ‘The Half Man it is.’

Inside the dimly-lighted tent we joined a small hushed audience seated on folding wooden chairs arranged on the saw-dust and grass around a small stage. In the middle of the stage, above our eye level, was a man — the Half Man — whose body ended a bit above where I thought his tummy button should be. He was there, his arms folded, his eyes closed. Silent. As still as a statue.

‘Is that him?’ I whispered to Aunty Irene.

‘Yes, Johnny. Shhh.’

‘But what’s happening? Why isn’t he moving?’

‘He’ll wait until there’s enough people.’

‘But how will he know?’

‘How will he know what?’

‘When there’s enough people.’

‘What?’

Grown-ups can be so dumb.

‘He’s got his eyes closed so *how* will he know when there’s enough people.’

‘I don’t know, Johnny,’ she said impatiently. She sounded just like Mum. ‘Just shush and wait and watch.’

And so I waited. And I stared. I stared at the still, silent Half Man with his eyes closed. I stared at his dark skin, his thick black hair and his black goatee beard. I stared at his red fez and his gold jacket; it was decorated with elaborate red and green brocade, threaded with beads and diamantes, and had fringed epaulettes on the shoulders like a soldier or something.

It was nearly dark in there and the underneath of the stage was covered in with a painted canvas skirt, dirty and crushed. It was my belief, shared by others I think, that we were being tricked; that the Half Man was simply a whole man standing in a hole in the stage, hiding the lower half of his body below stage level. Consequently there was a collective gasp — Auntie Irene even put her hand up to her mouth in shock — when someone behind the stage banged a tinny gong and the Half Man suddenly opened his eyes and looked about the tent at us; he stared at us staring at him. Then he put his long-fingered flat hands to the stage surface and lifted his half-body so that it hung between his long straight arms. And when he swung his little body forward I could see that his gold jacket ended underneath with a soft green velvet pad held in place by a gold draw string and that it was on this pad that he rested while talking.

The show lasted about twenty minutes during which time the Half Man talked to us in a strange accent about his life, being born a Half Boy in Turkey and working as a child in circuses all over Europe. He was, he said, even in a Hollywood picture. And while he spoke he showed us how he could walk around on his hands, up and down the steps of the stage. He could even run. It was amazing. The show ended with the Half Man answering questions from the audience — he sounded bored — although nobody asked him what I longed to know. So when we came out of the tent I plucked up the courage to ask Dennis. I never could have asked Auntie Irene.

‘You know what I wanted to know?’

‘What’s that, Johnny?’

I stopped and beckoned Dennis to bend to my level so I could whisper in his ear.

‘How does he go to the toilet?’

‘What?’

‘You know. Does he have a proper willy or what? And what

about number twos?’

Dennis laughed.

‘You know, mate,’ he said. ‘I wondered that too.’

‘Well?’

‘I don’t s’pose we’ll ever know,’ he said.

‘And where’s Turkey?’

‘What?’

‘Where’s Turkey?’ I asked again.

‘Why?’

‘That’s where he said he comes from.’

‘Did he?’ said Dennis.

‘Yes. That’s what he said,’ said Aunty Irene.

‘Oh,’ said Dennis. ‘I missed that.’

‘Well where is it?’ I asked yet again.

‘In Asia somewhere,’ said Dennis. ‘Near India I think.’

But I could tell he didn’t really know.

When, later, I told Dad and Mum and Tessa about the Half Man I was surprised that Mum seemed annoyed and somewhat disappointed that Aunty Irene had let Dennis take me to see such a thing and even more annoyed that I had spilled tomato sauce on my new school shirt. But Dad just laughed.

‘The poor bloke actually paid good money for that Half Man?’ he said. ‘Must be love.’

Tessa was just plain jealous.

It must have been an expensive outing for Dennis but evidently in vain as I never saw or heard of him again.

This is the end of the preview file of *My Marian Year*. Thank you for your interest and support. For complete buying information go to www.bolton.co.nz.

For any questions, comments or feedback don’t hesitate to email me at robert@bolton.co.nz. Thank you.