



A BIOGRAPHY OF OUR
GREATEST WAR HEROINE
1912-2011

Nancy Wake

PETER FITZSIMONS

THE No.1 BESTSELLER — REVISED AND UPDATED

Dedication

To my late parents, who proudly served Australia in the Second World War, as Lieutenant Peter McCloy FitzSimons, 2nd/4th Light Anti Aircraft of the Ninth Division, AIF (North Africa [El Alamein] New Guinea [Finchaven and Dumpu]) and Lieutenant Beatrice Helen Booth OAM (A Physiotherapist in Darwin and Bougainville). And to all the brave men and women who served with them. We dips our lids.

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PREFACE

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One hour of life, crowded to the full with glorious action, and filled with noble risks, is worth whole years of those mean observances of paltry decorum.

WALTER SCOTT

During the mid-1980s, while living and playing rugby in *la France profonde* — at the tiny village Donzenac, in *la Corrèze* — I often used to have a drink at Madame Salesse's café with my aged friend Martin, the local garage proprietor. A fairly meek and mild bloke he might have been when I knew him, but not during World War II. Then, his *nom de guerre* had been 'Tin-Tin' and, as one of the most ferocious fighters of the local Resistance movement, he had been the scourge of the Germans.

'*Et l'Australienne, Nonc-eeee Wake, Peterrrr,*' he asked me once, early in our friendship. '*Tu connais?*'

No, I didn't know Nancy Wake, or at least I had never met her. But Martin knew a lot about her. She was a legend, he said, one of the hardest fighters the partisans had ever had, a leader, a great organiser, fearless, fantastic. And also '*très belle*', he mentioned with a twinkle, even all those years ago. He had not fought with her side-by-side, he said, as she was with the partisans in the neighbouring region of Auvergne, but her fame knew no borders, and he had been very proud to meet her once at a 'safe house' in Aurillac, about one hundred kilometres away.

From time to time over the next four years, I would hear her name from the old ones — the amazing Australian woman who, to the locals, went by her own *nom de guerre* of 'Madame Andrée'. She had been in this region four decades before me and had covered herself in so much glory, that I would always walk a little taller that my countrywoman had acquitted herself so well and was remembered so fondly. Yet, even when working back in Australia as a journalist for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, I never came across her, though I do remember hearing somewhere that she was living quietly up in Port Macquarie on the New South Wales north coast. One day, I thought, I'd really like to meet her if the opportunity ever presented itself ...

More than a decade passed. Then, a phone call to me at the *Herald* out of the blue from my old rugby coach, Peter Fenton — the coach, incidentally, of the Sydney team with whom I first landed in France in 1984. Did I remember Bob Cowley, he wanted to know, who once scored a famous intercept try against Northern Suburbs for Parramatta?

'No.'

Oh, well anyway, Bob had a brother called Jim who lived in Port Macquarie and he was a very close friend and keen supporter of Nancy Wake, the most decorated heroine of the Second World War. Jim wanted to know if I would give him a call, because he wanted to talk to me about Nancy, and about a possible story for my newspaper. On my way, chief!

I indeed met the woman in question in her Port Macquarie apartment, and conducted the interview for a *Herald* story for Anzac Day. But that was not all ... so impressed had I been when I met her, so riveted by even the barest rudiments of her life story, that even as I was about to embark from Port Macquarie airport that afternoon for the last flight to Sydney I called my commissioning editor at HarperCollins, Alison Urquhart, and said: 'I'm going to write a book on Nancy, and you're going to publish it'.

I did, they did, and here it is ... At its conclusion, my chief hope is that I have done her story

justice.

A Cry in the Night ...

The good stars met in your horoscope,
Made you of spirit and fire and dew.

ROBERT BROWNING

Quoted on the title page of Nancy Wake's favourite book,
Anne of Green Gables, by Lucy Maud Montgomery.

In a dingy little room at the back of a modest weatherboard home in the suburb of Roseneath, the air was thick with exhaustion, the sheets and floor nearby lightly spattered with blood and wetness. On the bed, a woman was just starting to recover from the searing waves of pain that had been washing over her during the supreme effort of giving birth. Even though this was her sixth child — yet her first for eight years — it never seemed to get any easier, only ever made her progressively more tired. In the gusty heights of windy Wellington, on the thirtieth day of August 1912, the timeless scene of human birth had just taken place and Ella Wake lay back exhausted, totally spent. A woman hovered close — a *tapuhi*, the Maori word for midwife — and she was positively beaming with happiness. Cradling the baby's head in the crook of her bountiful arms, she pointed to the thin veil of skin which covered the top part of the infant's head, known in English as 'a caul'.

'This,' she said softly tracing a gentle finger across the fold of extra membrane, 'is what we call a *kahu* and it means your baby will always be lucky. Wherever she goes, whatever she does, the good spirits will look after her.'

The mother groaned and lay back in the bed.

If so, so be it. At that particular time Ella was simply too tired to care and had room only for relief that her exhausting effort was over — though she would at least tell her daughter the story of the Maori midwife's predictions many times for years afterwards.

Ella Rosieur Wake came from an interesting ethnic mix, her genetic pool bubbling with material from the Huguenots, the French Protestants who had famously fled France so they could pursue their religion freely, and Maori, as her English great-grandmother had been a Maori maiden by the name of Pourewa. She had been the first of her race to marry a white man, in the person of Nancy's English great-grandfather Charles Cossell, and they were wed by the Reverend William Williams at Waimata Mission Station on 26 October, 1836. Legend has it that the great Maori chieftain, Hone Hoke, had loved Pourewa himself, and had sworn death to them both, but had been killed in the Maori Wars before fulfilling his threat.

In sum, Ella's people went a long, long way back in New Zealand, and physically she was like the land itself, rustically beautiful. As to personality though, the least that can be said is that she seemed to have inherited very little of the famous French *joie de vivre* — or perhaps it had simply been drained out of her over the long, hard years of child-raising. Rather, she always seemed to project a kind of long-suffering religious rectitude, a dowdy air that life was duty and duty was hard; hard work and her lot and lots of children made it harder still.

Young Nancy's father, Charles, however, was of solid English stock and was an entirely different sort of person. An extremely good-looking, tall man of easy, extroverted charisma and enormous

warmth, he was a journalist/editor by trade, then working on a Wellington newspaper. He was a dapper dresser who never seemed to have a worry in the world, and there must have been some wonder from others how such a different pair as he and Ella could have managed to marry and make it, but the large brood seemed testament to the commitment they had to each other.

True, Nancy cannot remember her parents ever showing affection for each other, but that may well have been because she could simply never see past the affection her father showed *her*. In her young life, she loved nothing better than sitting on her father's lap in his big easy chair, with him either reading stories to her, or dancing around the room to the sound of an ancient gramophone, or just cuddling and chatting gaily. In her memory at least, the two would laugh and joke and carry on for hours on end, and just as she instinctively felt that she was her father's favourite, she also had a vague sense that her other brothers and sisters, not to mention her own mother, resented her for it. Not a worry, life was too good to care.

With Charles Wake's journalistic career going so well he was receiving offers of employment from far afield, the whole family moved from the heights of Wellington to the lower North Shore of Sydney and — at an age when Nancy was still a toddler — established themselves in a rambling solid brick residence in High Street, North Sydney. It was a house quite large enough to accommodate the equally rambling Wake family, with a sixteen year age range separating the first-born Gladys, down through Charles, Hazel, Stanley and Ruby to the youngest by a breezy country mile, Nancy.

Sydney pleased all of them. One of the jewels of the South Pacific, it may have been right on the edges of the British Empire, but as a town of 750,000 people — and three times the size of Wellington — none of them could get over the sheer *size* of it, the number of people crowding on the streets on a busy day. It might have started out as a convict colony, with people brought there in chains against their will, but something about it had drawn an awful lot of people there ever since.

The Wakes settled in quickly, even mother Ella, who had been initially very reluctant to leave her large extended family in New Zealand. Every day, father Charles went off to work, catching the ferry from Milsons Point across the harbour to his job in the city, and every afternoon Nancy — specifically Nancy — would be waiting for him at the gate when he returned home, simply because as she says 'He was lovely to me and I loved him ... we adored each other.'

But then one day he didn't come home. Not that night. Nor the next day. Nor even the one after that. He just didn't come home. He'd gone on a trip, Nancy's mother told her. To America, she said. Was he trying to get something going in this new thing everyone was talking about called 'the movies'. He'd gone there with an idea to make a movie about the Maori culture in his native New Zealand and he would be back in about three months. Nancy patiently waited. And waited some more. But still he didn't come home, and still she received no word, no letter, no postcard, nothing. Where was Daddy?

Where indeed. One day, Nancy noticed that her parents' wedding photo which used to stand on her mother's dresser was not there any more, and that was that. Typically, it was not discussed — a fact that deepened the youngest child's confusion and sense of abandonment over her father. Never in her whole life would Nancy be quite sure of what had happened to him, but it was obvious that wherever he was, whatever he was doing, he simply would never again come waltzing Matilda up the garden path like he used to do. She would never sit in his lap again. He would never more read her stories. He really *wasn't* coming back. Perhaps her mother had received a letter to this effect, or even had known it all along, for although she never definitively told the children that their father had deserted them, nor did she ever give any indication that she feared for his safety.

The clearest sign that something *definitive* had changed, and that they were not going back to New Zealand as had been briefly discussed, was that just a few months after he disappeared they had

to move to the adjoining suburb of Neutral Bay to a far less spacious residence. The reason — she would later find out — was that her beloved father had more or less sold the North Sydney house off from under them. Their ‘new’ house, the one that would subsequently be the one of Nancy’s childhood, was the second on the left up leafy Holdsworth Street running roughly parallel to Ben Boyd Road with its backyard running all the way through to Spruson Street. It was a weatherboard house set on the classic Australian ‘quarter-acre block’, just a stone’s throw from one of the little sparkling fingers of Sydney Harbour that pushed deeply into the suburb. Typical of the time it came complete with an outside ‘dunny’, and a clothing line of ropes strung between two posts dominating the backyard. As to the house proper, it had a large verandah, a whole rabbit-warren of bedrooms, a tiny kitchen and a ramshackle living room.

Without Nancy’s father there as the breadwinner, things were a lot tighter financially for the whole Wake brood, though with the help of Nancy’s older siblings, who were now earning a wage, and the rent paid by a long-term lodger from Tasmania, the family were just able to make ends meet. There were no second helpings of apple pie, but at least there were plenty of potatoes; no new clothes to speak of for Nancy, but lots of hand-me-downs that served their purpose; no room of your own, but everyone got a bed of some sort, with Nancy quickly taking over the abandoned spot left in the marital bed by her departed father (which would remain her sleeping place for the next ten years of her life). This increased physical closeness with her mother did not transform itself into any kind of emotional closeness. ‘There was barely a kiss goodnight,’ says Nancy flatly, ‘though I at least remember that for some reason she liked to read to me in bed, which I loved.’

Of the siblings, far and away the biggest contributor to the family’s finances was Nancy’s brother Stanley, good ol’ Stanley! Whatever part of a young girl’s soul that needed a father-like figure to love and cherish had, in all probability, transferred its affections from Nancy’s absent father to this warm-hearted and generous man — placing Stanley in her memory as a secular saint — and she loved him like no other.

‘Charles,’ she says of her oldest brother, ‘was a scoundrel who would come to a bad end, and would never really get on with the rest of them, but Stanley was always wonderful to me. He was in the navy ...’

This latter part of the 1910–1920 decade was a proud time for anyone to be in military service, at least for those who survived the Great War, as Stanley had. Even though he had seen only a small slice of action, it was still the family’s pride that he had served — and one of Nancy’s first compelling memories was tied up with it. She was six years old, and dressed in the very best hand-me-downs she could muster. As she remembers the episode, the sun had just barely come up and yet there were lots of people gathered in Sydney’s Martin Place with their heads bowed, lots of soldiers standing up ramrod straight with the butts of their gleaming rifles positioned right by their shining boots, and the minister of the church was intoning something ... Something about ... *Gallipoli* ... and how ... *of those men who there gave their lives so that we might live in freedom ... and that ... they will never be forgotten*. Now let us pray ...

There was a lot more praying, and hymn singing, and sometimes someone standing out the front of those soldiers would start shouting and then all the men in their uniforms would start twirling their rifles around at once before clunking them all down at once and then the man would shout some more and then they would do it again ... And the whole thing was ever so exciting!

And sad. For even through her amazement at so much colour and movement all at once, she knew enough to realise that something terrible had happened just a little while before, some kind of armistice action where as many as ten thousand Australian and New Zealand soldiers had died in some place called ‘Gliply’ or something. Well, she was both an Australian *and* a New Zealander, so it all seemed doubly important. And anyway they had sacrificed their lives for the good of their nations and

everyone still living should always give thanks on this day that they had done so. Nancy's family certainly did.

Having attended the first dawn Anzac Ceremony at Martin Place, the family attended every one thereafter, always giving thanks that those men had so bravely given their lives, and more particularly that the life of her own beloved brother Stan had been spared. Year by year, as the growing Nancy stood smack-bang in the middle of the sometimes weeping crowd, she would come to learn and understand more about Gallipoli; appreciate just why so very many floral wreaths were being laid; and be enormously impressed by such bravery and sacrifice for the country.

Never did it occur to young Nancy, nor to her friends, nor to the adult world around her, that they might question why so many young Australians and New Zealanders should have died in a foreign land essentially to serve the interests of faraway Britain. That was just the way things were back then. As a matter of fact, during that first Anzac Day ceremony that Nancy had attended, the Governor of New South Wales had read a message from the King, which had created quite a stir. (The King himself! Sending us a message!)

'Tell my people of Australia,' the Governor had intoned through the morning mist, 'that today I am joining with them in their solemn tribute to the memorial of their heroes who died in Gallipoli.'

'They gave their lives for a supreme cause in gallant comradeship with the rest of my sailors and soldiers who fought and died with them. Their value and fortitude have shed fresh lustre on the British coat of arms. May those who mourn their loss find comfort in the conviction that they did not die in vain, but that their sacrifice has drawn our peoples more closely together, and added strength and glory to the Empire.'¹

Before the Great War in which those men had died, the soon-to-be Australian Prime Minister Andrew Fisher had declared that Australia would fight on Britain's side 'to the last man and the last shilling', and had been widely acclaimed for it. Britain was the mother country, Australia and New Zealand her proud and strapping sons ready to do their bit to defend her.

'That,' says Nancy, 'was simply the way it was. I was brought up in a family where, although we were from New Zealand and living in Australia, we were "of" Great Britain, and we were loyal to whoever was on the throne. It was never something you questioned.'

Back in Holdsworth Street, life went on. Nancy's older siblings never seemed to talk about the absence of their father one way or another, and simply got on with their lives. Their mother meanwhile, would never quite recover from the humiliation of her husband leaving her — it is possible she had some kind of nervous breakdown at one point under the terrible strain of it all — but at least she seemed to draw great strength from devoting tremendous energy to reading her Bible. Every day and always. When Nancy got up in the morning, her mother would be sitting there in the corner reading and reciting passages. At noon the same. In the late afternoon she'd still be at it and on in the evening. Even when Ella Wake wasn't reading her Bible, she was quoting vast slabs from memory back and forth, forth and back. 'And Moses said come forth', always with an admonitory finger to show what God had in store for those who did not follow His way, by which, it often seemed to her youngest, she meant specifically *Nancy*.

Perhaps it was merely childhood perception, but it always seemed to Nancy that just as her father had always had a special place in his heart for her, her mother had no place at all and was always promising that the eternal damnation of God would come down upon her, and she would be cast into the flames of Hell.

'My mother used to tell me,' Nancy recalls, 'that God would punish me if I didn't pray to Him every night and fear Him, but I just couldn't bring myself to do it. She was never physically cruel

me or beat me or anything like that, but she gave me no affection, no affection at all. I am convinced she hated to even look at me, and I also suspect that I was an unwanted child by her — that my father came home late one night and had his way, but that she never wanted more children. She used to tell me that my eyebrows were too thick and too close together, that I was ugly, and that maybe that was part of God's punishment for me, but there would no doubt be a lot more punishment to come. I literally lived in fear of God and what he would do to me.' To her childish fancy, it seemed even the crack of lightning, every roll of thunder was just a harbinger of what Hell had in store for her. Not for her next sister up, Ruby, or the one up again, Hazel, or any of the boys, just *her*. God — big as a steam train and coming right at her.

Partly in an effort to forestall this dreadful collision of God's will and her own manifested naughtiness and unworthiness, Nancy worked as hard as she could in the home.

'Even from an early age,' she says, 'I would cook, put the washing out before I went to school, bring it in after I came home, sweep the kitchen, the verandah, and make the beds. I did everything because my mother was useless and she told me God would get me if I didn't.'

Childish fancy or not, Nancy's perception of those very early days in Neutral Bay is that she had only three true friends — the galah, the cat and the dog.

'They were my friends and I used to talk to them,' she remembers. 'I couldn't really play with my sisters, because there was such a big age gap between me and them — and besides which most of my siblings had started to move out of home from when I was about six — so that was all I was left with.'

Clearly, not everyone in the world was so ill-used. *Some* people, she could see, were very well looked after. Like that nice Mrs King, living across the street in the house with all the jacaranda trees. She was getting very, very fat indeed, now that she was in something called 'the pudding club', going to have a baby, and there was always a lot of fuss made about her, everyone looking after her all the time and asking if there was anything they could do to help her. That looked very, very nice indeed.

'How are you this morning, Mrs King? Now you look after yourself ...'

'Everything okay, Mrs King? Can I help you with your shopping bags?'

'Cheerio, Mrs King! You go inside now and have a nice cup of tea and a lie-down, okay?'

Okay. All of that looked very nice indeed and ...

And on this morning the young Nancy pulled the thin woollen blanket up around her chin and declared that she wouldn't get up to go to school. Wouldn't. Wouldn't. *Wouldn't*. Told her mother she was simply too sick, felt absolutely terrible, and she simply must stay in bed until the doctor came. The doctor did come, kindly Dr Studdie. He turned up in his horse and cart, tethered the beast to the tree across the road, and was ushered to Nancy's bedside.

'Now, Nancy,' the doctor said, as he opened his bag and got out his stethoscope. 'What seems to be the problem?'

'Do you promise you won't tell Mummy?'

'That depends, but I promise you can trust me.'

'I'm going to have a baby,' she whispered gravely. With which, she pulled the bedclothes covering her torso downwards, to reveal the enormous lump on her belly, clearly visible beneath her jim-jams. The doctor paused, looked down at her, and gently proffered the next question.

'What makes you think you are going to have a baby, Nance?'

No answer.

'What makes you think you are going to have a baby, Nance?'

Still no answer. Gently, gently then, the doctor continued his examination of her distended belly, and quickly formed his considered professional diagnosis. She wasn't going to have a baby at all, but she did have a cushion tucked away beneath her pyjama top. This doctor of compassion, though l

would certainly have had a right to some irritation for her having so wasted his time, simply laughed lightly and asked her why she had done such a thing.

‘Well Mrs King’s got a big tummy,’ Nancy replied unhappily, ‘and she’s going to have a baby, and everyone is nice to her, so I want one too. Please don’t tell Mumma.’

Amazingly, Dr Studdie didn’t — or at least Nancy never got into trouble from her mother for the ruse, which makes her think that he kept his promise. After the doctor told her that she shouldn’t do such things and that he was sure things would turn out all right, he encouraged her to get up, get dressed, and he would drop her off to school himself. What he told Mrs Wake is unknown, but Nancy would ever afterwards appreciate the fact that he had never betrayed her.

‘I think,’ Nancy says, ‘Dr Studdie knew that I was an unhappy little child and that all I needed was a little kindness.’

Others might have detected the same. In Holdsworth Street, the butcher used to come twice a week on Tuesday and Friday afternoons, also with a horse and cart, and he was always happy for Nancy to sit up beside him as he completed his rounds to his customers, chatting away as they were, allowing her to sometimes hold the reins and say *giddup, giddup*, to the plodding beast that made the gravel-crunching wheels of the cart slowly turn.

‘I’d go all over Neutral Bay and sometimes have to walk a long way back,’ Nancy remembers, ‘but was happy just to do anything to get a ride with the horse and cart and be able to have a good talk with him. He was a lovely old bloke, Mr Van Den Burg, with a great big straw hat, and I’m sure would have looked quite the pair. I got on with all the visiting tradespeople like that — the ice-man, milkman, rabbitohs and so on — and they were all lovely. They looked after me, they were absolutely wonderful to me.’

For all that, it was not as if Nancy grew up *entirely* without other children to rouse about with. Far from it. In her street she ran with a pack of five others — three boys and two girls — who would spend lots of time together playing such things as hop-scotch and marbles out and about on the footpaths and in each other’s backyards. They would often congregate beneath the Beal’s house which stood on stilts next to the Wake residence. This would happen most particularly during the summer holidays when it was hot and steamy outside. Under the house the cool earth and welcome shade provided not only great relief, but also a good hiding place from parents who all too often would be wanting them to do their chores.

‘Then when we wanted to spend a penny,’ Nancy says, ‘we couldn’t go to the lavatory because they’d see us, so we used to have a wee-wee down there, and then one of us, Adeline Beal, decided we’d have a peeing match and the boys won. Then I said “Oh it’s not fair, you’ve got a little thing we don’t have, you’ve got to take a handicap”; so we handicapped them — the boys having to start further back behind the line in the sand — and they never won another time.’

Such activities, while fine fun for a time, are locked in Nancy’s memory as no more than sometimes happy diversions from what was generally an unhappy time for her. Mostly, she says, she simply didn’t feel a part of the family at all. Nor did she actually feel like she was meant to live and grow up in the archly conservative territory of the lower North Shore of Sydney. Lennie Lower wrote of the nearby suburb of Chatswood at around this time, as a place ‘where respectability stalks abroad adorned with starched linen and surrounded by mortgages’.²

There was, in short, a particularly hazy, lazy kind of lassitude in the air which, for whatever reason, was not pleasing to Nancy’s natural spirit. All through her childhood, there seemed to be a pervasively stifling sense of stuffiness, at least for her. Others around her didn’t necessarily feel it, but she did. As she recalls, it was a little like being in a small room on a summer’s day with the windows closed, longing to be outside where the air was fresh, flowers of colour grew, and where she could *breathe*. Hell, she sometimes thought in a supremely unladylike fashion, that she’d actually rather be

outside in a full-blown *storm* than inside where all was so damn still and unmoving.

~~In sum, from a very young age, the urge to be elsewhere was always very strong in Nancy Wak~~ Specifically, she wanted to go to New York, London and Paris, the three cities that seemed to be most often mentioned in the same breath as ‘glamour’. Whenever she could, Nancy would bury herself in the magazines that her sisters sometimes left around, hoping to find articles or photos about the cities, as she conjured up what it would be like to one day make landfall in such places. Helping to sustain this fertile imagination was a great love of reading generally, and two books in particular:

‘I loved *Anne of Green Gables*, and its sequel *Anne of the Island*,’ Nancy recalls. ‘Loved them, loved them. I wouldn’t say those books were as big an influence on me as the Bible was on my mother, but in a way they were my own sort of Bible.’

The series of ‘Anne’ books was written in the early twentieth century by Lucy Maud Montgomery, and detailed the adventures of a fiery and adventurous red-haired orphan girl called Anne Shirley who ends up on Prince Edward Island off the east coast of Canada. She grows up in a house called Green Gables, and from there goes full tilt at everything to launch herself on the world. Montgomery described her as ‘a young girl who speaks her mind, often to her detriment’. Anne was forthright, feisty and fun, and though born into difficult circumstances which among other things included doing all the housework, went on to live a marvellous childhood. One of its features was that the adults in Anne’s wonderful world — Marilla and Matthew who took her in — need her just as much as she needs them, and weren’t remote omnipotent adults at all but deeply involved with her. Such bliss!

In *Anne of the Island*, the heroine flies entirely in the face of conventional behaviour for a young woman of her generation. Instead of immediately getting married and raising children, Anne leaves the home of her foster parents and goes away to university. Great romance follows, with wonderful times by the bucket-load. Which is more or less what Nancy always planned to do, though she was never conscious that with a starting point as far away as Australia, her own ticket to ride was always going to cost a lot more than Anne’s ever did. So, ever since she was a little, she’d set about saving up. At the age of about eight, she started to look around for ways of raising capital.

One day while wandering past the local greengrocer, Creeneys up on Military Road, she noticed he was selling chokos, not at all unlike the chokos her mother grew on the fence in their own backyard.

‘How much are the chokos?’ she casually enquired of the grocer.

‘Threepence.’

‘My mother is very poor, and we have a choko vine, lovely chokos. If I bring you some will you give me a penny?’

The grocer looked her up and down, wondering if this young girl was on the up and up, but decided in the end that it didn’t really matter — if she could deliver — and nodded assent. The next day, he had a bucket of chokos and Nancy could hear the delicious jingle of silver coins in her pocket for the first time. No more trying to live off brass razors! This all worked extremely well for a few months, until one day when her mother was passing by the same grocery store and, noting the excellence of the chokos, commented on them to the proprietor.

‘Yes,’ replied the grocer, beaming. ‘It’s a dear little girl, her mother is very poor and she grows them in the backyard and brings them to us for extra money.’

And that, of course, was the end of Nancy’s choko venture.

But by this time she had the bug. Encouraged by the success of this entrepreneurial venture, Nancy tried another one. Overhearing a conversation between her mother and her oldest sister Gladys to the effect that the eggs at the grocer’s were often far from fresh, and it would be worth paying extra to get freshly laid ones, the sudden light of inspiration went on in Nancy’s head. Shortly thereafter

she went to her mother and said she would be happy to organise the buying of the eggs from Mrs Breckenbridge who lived on the other side of Spruson Street, if her mother would give her the money. Her mother agreed, and gave her the money. That was one more chore for Nancy, one less for her, and that was fine. Nancy meanwhile went up to the grocer's, who by this time had become her friend, and carefully selected the eggs that still had feathers and chook poo attached to them — the ones that most *looked* like they were freshly laid. She bought them, took them back to her mother on the assurance that they were freshly laid from Mrs Breckenbridge's backyard, and pocketed the difference.

The scheme could only work of course on the reckoning that Mother Wake and Mrs Breckenbridge would never chat about the eggs and compare notes, but on that count Nancy had little doubt. Her mother didn't have a social bone in her body, and would have crossed the street to avoid having even minor pleasantries with a neighbour who was known to be not just a smoker, but also a *(sniff)* to frequent public bars! Nancy knew that Mrs Breckenbridge may as well have spoken Swahili for all the chance that she would ever have a meaningful conversation with her mother.

'The whole thing,' Nancy says, 'taught me a lesson. Presentation is very important.'

Yet another way that Nancy found to raise regular money came via her sister — Hazel, she of the frizzy fair hair and even frizzier nature. Frequently, while Mrs Wake went off shopping or the like, Hazel would be given quasi babysitting duties over her young sister, with strict instructions not to let Nancy out of her sight. Hazel always had other ideas, wanting to use the time to be with her boyfriend on her own, while her mother was out of the picture.

'So,' Nancy remembers, 'Hazel would take me for a walk with her boyfriend and they would give me threepence to get rid of me because they wanted to be off courting together. She'd dump me anywhere and I'd go to the beach at Manly or somewhere, it didn't worry me. They could court — it didn't give a damn. It was threepence every time!'

Finally helping to extend her tiny income was money from another source ... 'I used to steal from my mother,' Nancy recalls without remorse. 'If she had given me threepence a week I would not have done it, but she didn't give me a cracker.'

All up, it started to add up to a tidy sum in her special Commonwealth Bank moneybox which she kept under her bed, getting close to the magical sum she was after — one pound. With one pound, she knew, she would be able to open a formal savings account at the Commonwealth Bank itself, attracting *interest* and everything! Once that account was opened, she felt she'd already have one foot on the gangplank leading onto one of those luxury liners she often spied on Sydney Harbour, one that would take her away to New York, London and Paris. On misty mornings when she might be sweeping the back verandah, she could even hear their massive foghorns blaring warning to each other or passing ferries, and she would dream of the day when she would be on one, taking her leave. Certainly she would have had the one pound a lot quicker had she not occasionally spent some of her money getting milkshakes and ice-creams from 'Tony the Greek', who ran the milk bar near the fire station. And then there were those amazing rides at passing travelling fairs — she loved those rides — but still, month by month, that ol' moneybox got heavier. Then, alas, disaster.

One Sunday, the whole family, bar the eldest brother Charles, went on a day trip on a boisterous choofing steam train to the sparkling seaside town of Woy Woy. It was a rare treat for Nancy, and she remembers the unbridled joy with which she saw all the gum trees and water passing backwards in the sunshine. But when they got back that evening Nancy got a nasty, jolting surprise.

'My moneybox was empty,' she recalls, 'just lying there discarded on the floor!' Obviously, her brother Charles had simply helped himself to the money and had probably already spent it with his mates at the pub. Nancy can vaguely remember crying as if her heart would break, and more clearly recalls her blessed second eldest brother Stanley Herbert Kitchener Wake furiously fighting Charles in the backyard, either in an effort to punish him or to get him to give it back, she can't recollect.

‘But I do remember,’ she says, ‘feeling very glad that Stan was sticking up for me, and sorry that I wasn’t strong enough to have a whack myself, because I was very, very angry.’

If that frustrating feeling of powerlessness in the face of injustice was one she would come to know again at a later point in life, so too would another episode have echoes in another age. It occurred while she was in Year 4 at Neutral Bay Intermediate, her primary school, which was up the hill on the corner of Ben Boyd Road and Yeo Street.

Jenny, one of her best friends, told her a rhyme that made her nearly split her sides with laughter, the essence of which was: ‘Isn’t it funny to see a little bunny/ waiting for her Mummy to come and wipe her bummy’. Nancy wrote it down, the better to memorise it, and left it in the pocket of the same school tunic that her mother came across that night. When Mrs Wake discovered the ribald rhyme she informed the ten-year-old Nancy that she was more certain than ever that she’d be going straight to Hell, and did something else besides. That is, she took Nancy by the ear the following morning to her teacher and *demand*ed that she be roundly punished. The teacher set out to do just that, and in the face of such twin fury from parent and teacher, Nancy panicked and crumpled.

‘I pointed at the dear friend who had taught me the poem in the first place and tried to deflect the blame on to her.’

The result was that both girls were punished severely. It put a serious strain on the friendship between the two — the other girl quite rightly feeling betrayed — and caused the completely devastated Nancy to make a vow to herself.

‘I swore,’ she recalls, ‘that no matter what, *no matter what*, I would never dob anyone in again.’

And she meant it too. The look in the eyes of Jenny, the friend betrayed, would stay with Nancy for a long time to come.

Another friend from those days was Barbara Bowering, who lived just around in Cranbrook Avenue. The two often sat together in class, and played together in the playground. Even eighty years on, Barbara would remember Nancy well.

‘She was a great and very loyal friend,’ she says, ‘who was very clever at everything. I think in some ways she was too clever for most people, but if I was ever up the front of the class with the teacher asking me questions Nancy always mouthed to me the answers. What I most remember about her was how protective she was. I was probably a lot smaller than most of the kids in my class, but Nancy was always there. She absolutely hated teasing and bullying, and she had no fear of boys or teachers.’

‘We had a teacher called Fanny Menlove, and I remember once when she was out of the room Nancy went up to the blackboard and wrote it backward — Menlove Fanny — and we all fell around laughing. She got into big trouble, but she didn’t seem to mind. She had *no fear*.’

And this, as it happened, was a point of pride with Nancy. For if what had most appalled her about the dobbing-in Jenny episode was that she had lacked moral courage — even if at that age she didn’t have the words to describe it — there was no doubt that the youngest of the Wake brood had ample physical courage. She always maintained that she was every bit as brave as the boys, and was always happy to prove it. On one occasion, when she was about seven, Stanley was back on leave from the navy and playfully dared her to jump off the roof, never thinking she actually would ...

This time, the trip by Dr Studdie was worthwhile, because he actually had some genuine injuries to look at. Abrasions, bruises, an extremely sore little girl, but happily no broken leg. Why had Nancy jumped he had enquired.

‘Because he *dared* me,’ Nancy says simply, ‘and I always took up a dare. I never allowed myself to dwell on the possible consequences of taking up a dare — because that way, I knew I might be

scared off — so I usually just did it.’

~~From Neutral Bay Intermediate, Nancy went to her secondary education at North Sydney Girls Domestic Science School, also up the hill from where she lived. As a matter of fact, just about everything in her young life was ‘up the hill’, as her home on Holdsworth Street was situated at the bottom of a small natural valley. This at least made for the formation of very strong legs on her part. One or two of the other girls were lucky enough to get dropped off in cars, but the Wakes didn’t even know anyone who had a car, let alone dream of having one themselves.~~

A high-spirited girl such as young Nancy attending such a rigorously disciplined establishment was not necessarily a match made in heaven. For this was a school which did not aim merely to turn out educated adults, as some did, nor simply young *ladies*, as did some other girls’ schools. This school was *specifically* devoted to turning out wives and mothers of conspicuous excellence, young women trained up to a sophisticated subservience to their men which would see such men prosper throughout their lives. Together with the standard subjects of mathematics, English and science, there was also a whole slew of special subjects including cooking, home decorating and needlework. This simply wasn’t Nancy’s cup of tea — tea which, incidentally, should be made by pouring the boiling water into a pot that had been pre-heated, and served with the jug of milk and sugar always moving around the table *together*. Remember girls, because it’s important.

Whatever. Nancy knew she was never going to turn into one of those rich married women who really cared about such things, but her preferences were irrelevant. As with so many other things, she felt she had no choice in the matter. Until school was over, she simply had to put up with it. In the meantime she at least took pleasure in subjects such as English and geography, where she could pursue both her passion for reading and for dreaming about other parts of the world that she felt sure she would one day visit.

If her thoughts were often far away as she fantasised about adventures in distant lands, she was not, in herself, one who escaped attention, for the scrawny black-stockinged tomboy schoolgirl who had been such a familiar figure around Neutral Bay — the same one who had been gravely informed by her mother that she was ugly as a punishment from God (for sins unknown) — had by the time her mid-teens blossomed into an extremely beautiful young woman. With a perfectly symmetric oval face set off by long brunette hair, and a handsomely curvaceous silhouette from there, she may not have been at all well-versed in the ways of the opposite sex, yet she was aware that they were attracted to her ...

‘I knew,’ she says, ‘by the way they would hover around and try to get me talking, but I was very naïve about all that sort of stuff, and really had no interest.’

Besides which, at the absolute insistence of her mother who had always taken her to church every Sabbath, at the age of fourteen she had become a Sunday school teacher at St Augustine, Neutral Bay, and it was conduct unbecoming to be running around with boys like that, as had her sisters.

Admittedly, she wasn’t a *great* Sunday school teacher, but she found she at least loved singing hymns with the kids, such as ‘Jesus Loves Me This I Know’ and ‘Onward Christian Soldiers’. Nor was she a particularly great teller of parables and stories from the Bible, as she was meant to be, preferring to tell the kids stories from films she might have seen the night before at the Cremorne Orpheum. But one way or another, neither she nor Reverend Mr Pearce could help noticing that his classes became very popular, meaning he was happy and so was she!

‘The film that affected me most back then,’ she says, ‘was *The Sheik of Araby* with Ramon Novarro, and I used to absolutely love the song of that name, which I would often sing to myself and even the Sunday school kids: “Well I’m the Sheik of Araby/ Your love belongs to me/ Well at night when you’re asleep,/ Into your tent I’ll creep./ The stars that shine above/ Will light our way to love/ You’ll rule this world with me,/ I’m the Sheik of Araby.”’

While Nancy's Sunday school involvement pleased her mother, it remained about the only thing that ~~did, for just about everything else Nancy did seemed to irritate Mrs Wake, and to avoid the~~ constant clashing on the weekend, the young woman would let her independent spirit have its head and leave the house as often as possible to find amusement elsewhere in the city. Anything, *anything* to get out of a house that her mother liked to keep with the windows closed, the blinds drawn and the lace curtains pulled together — a house that often seemed to be suffocating for lack of air. No matter how hard and often Nancy cleaned the place, it always seemed to have the stale smell of boiled cabbage, about it, of dirty laundry, of air that for too long had not seen sunlight.

Often she would walk the couple of miles it took to go down to the scenic North Sydney baths nestled right on Sydney Harbour and do a few laps, just as she would also occasionally get the ferry from Neutral Bay wharf across to Rose Bay and then make her way to Bondi Beach, where she would participate in the new rage of body-surfing. Sometimes she would go with friends, sometimes alone, it didn't really matter. She just loved the thrill of swimming hard with a wave and then that wonderful *whooooooosh* as it broke beneath her and swept her to the shore.

When she felt like sticking closer to home, she would make a trip to Taronga Park Zoo in the nearby suburb of Mosman, where she always found herself drawn to the sleek powerful tigers, or go down to the delightful Balmoral Beach, where she could sashay along the Esplanade, or sit 'neath the shade of the huge Moreton Bay figs and watch others do the same. Hers was not a classically happy childhood by any means — the early abandonment by her father and ongoing cold relationship with her mother always meant it was out of kilter — but it was manageable, and she was able to get through by nourishing the constant hope that things would get better for her. Just as Anne of Green Gables had discovered, Nancy sensed that there was a world beyond her immediate experience, a wonderful world just waiting to be discovered.

• —

Bon Voyage

Out of the night that covers me, black as the
pitch from pole to pole,
I thank whatever Gods may be, for my
unconquerable soul.

W.E. HENLEY

And at last it happened. At around the age of fifteen, Nancy achieved her dearest wish of travelling overseas when just she and her mother travelled on a big boat past Taronga Park Zoo on the left, Royal Botanic Bay on the right, through Sydney Heads, and kept going all the way to New Zealand! The wind in her hair, the sun on her back, nothing could be finer, and she didn't even mind the fact that her mother spent most of the trip with her head buried in her Bible. They were going back on a six-week trip to see Nancy's maternal grandmother on her farm in the spectacular Kiwi country of Mangonui, in the deep north of the north island of New Zealand. It was a revelation. Not just for the fact that New Zealand proved to be very much to her liking — full of friendly people, it seemed, for whom she was slightly exotic because of her 'Australianness' — but also because 'Grannie Rosieur', as she called her, was so warm and loving in her own right. It scarcely seemed credible that her mother's mother could be so extraordinarily different from Nancy's own mother, but there it was.

'She was lovely,' Nancy recalls, 'and we got on wonderfully well right from the moment she greeted me in the farmhouse kitchen with a huge hug.'

This stark contrast with Ella Wake didn't just come down to Grannie Rosieur's affectionate nature or her far more bountiful form. For Grannie Rosieur also liked Nancy to eat and have those around her eat! (Maybe, Nancy thought at one point, Granpa Rosieur had gone to an early grave because he had simply burst?) Morning, noon and night, Grannie plied young Nancy with wonderful meals from the New Zealand fare that abounded in the rich agricultural region, meals that were so very different from the bland bangers-and-mash with cabbage that had the life boiled out of it that the young girl was used to.

In the company of some of her newly-met cousins, with whom she got on well, Nancy soon got into the rhythm of it that she was even able to manage some extracurricular eating as well ...

'At one point,' Nancy says, 'I went out into the barn and hanging up there were twelve Christmas puddings. Oh boy! So I get up there and I get one down and I eat the bloody lot. And then of course I've got to do something about it — so I fill it up with mud and stones and put it back up there, nice and fat. Unfortunately I made it too fat and when they went out on Christmas morning to choose their pudding they chose mine — and they put it in the water. And what happened? The whole ruse was explained. My mother wanted to give me a hiding, but Grannie wouldn't let her ...'

Grannie was a good stick all right, and she would live long in her youngest granddaughter's affection. Generally, this good New Zealand woman was such a happy soul it was a pleasure to be around her, not that she hadn't had her fair share of unhappiness. One of these unhappinesses, Nancy found out, was when Grannie's eldest daughter Hinamoa had run off with a whaling captain who was

already married. This was pretty much the first that Nancy had heard of it as her mother had never mentioned this older sister or what she had done. Fascinated, Nancy tried to get as many details as she could about her wayward aunt, but with little success. Neither her mother nor grandmother seemed to want to talk about it, though one of her mother's other sisters who was still quietly in contact with Hinamoa was at least able to fill out the sketch a little. Always the wild-child of the family, Hinamoa had simply followed her heart without ever considering the consequences. She was, apparently, one of those who always lived for the moment, for whom the moral mores of the day were nought but nonsense.

Again, the contrast with Nancy's own mother on such matters couldn't have been greater. Still, it was funny for the teenager to see her mother like this, back in her natural habitat as it were. After a few weeks she even seemed a little more natural — as she relaxed just that little bit and was even able to *laugh* from time to time — and Nancy reflected how hard it must have been for her mother to have been abandoned by a husband to whom she had borne six children and to have been forced to bring the youngest of them up on her own. As it happened, Nancy thought less and less of her father these days in the sense of both frequency *and* affection. From being the sun around which her life had revolved, he was now no more than a distant planet and a very cold, lifeless one at that.

The whole New Zealand exercise had been a pleasant sojourn for Nancy — and she would eventually afterwards keep in touch with her grandmother. It was also the first dipping of her toe into overseas travel and she returned to school impatient for her studies to be over. More than ever she wanted to go out into the big wide world on her own, to make her own way, and *go* her own way. Finally then, it was with a mixture of relief and at least some trepidation that she left the halls of her high school for the last time. Relief because she felt she had been a square peg in a round hole for quite long enough, trepidation because she wasn't quite sure just where the 'square hole' that she could fit into was anyway, or even if such a thing existed. And there was the rub.

'I just had *no* idea what I was intended for,' she remembers. 'I didn't quite know which way to go. I still had my ambition to go overseas, but of course I didn't have the money necessary to do so and would need to get a job to get that money together ...'

But what job? What was she really cut out for? Some of her friends from school had decided on clerical careers, others had already secured jobs in shops, one was going on to university, another was studying physiotherapy, but Nancy didn't have a clue. As a matter of fact she didn't even know where to start looking, and so just continued to live at home listening to the constant *tick-tock tick-tock* of the old clock on the mantelpiece while waiting for something to break.

Something did break. Her relationship with her mother. Now sixteen years old, Nancy had fought a running battle with her mother all through her childhood and teenage years on a dozen different fronts at once, their momentary *rapprochement* in New Zealand notwithstanding. The younger woman was strong-willed, tempestuous, flighty, and didn't mind a scrap — while the older woman had very clear ideas about the proper subservience that should be displayed by daughters towards their mother and what's more she knew she had God on her side. It was a situation tailor-made for a climactic moment one way or another, and on a hot December day in 1928 that moment came.

Nancy, red in the face with fury, stood toe-to-toe with her mother in the dingy, musty hallway of their home, telling her she was 'going out'. Her mother, equally resolute, and with Bible in hand for added authority, stood directly in front of the door and *strictly* forbade it, do you hear me, Nancy?!?!'

'If you don't get out of the way,' Nancy returned, 'I will simply go out the window!'

Ella Wake stood her ground, bristling with righteous anger. Nancy went out the window. From the ledge, she vaulted over the garden bed and over the fence and was at last out into the open air. It felt good, felt *great*, not just for the physical fact that she had escaped the strictures of a house that felt

too long had pressed in on her, but more importantly she had escaped the strictures of her too-tight life as well.

‘Somehow,’ says Nancy, ‘I knew instinctively that I had just crossed a line into another phase of my life, a phase where I would no longer have to answer to my mother, and would instead be in charge of my own destiny. I was leaving my mother, I was going out into the world and I was happy.’

As luck would have it, Nancy was no sooner on Ben Boyd Road than she ran into her sister-in-law Lily, now the widow of her brother Charles, a woman who Nancy had always got along well with despite her association with *that bastard*. Charles, after all, had put Lily in ‘the pudding club’ when they had just started going out, and in those days there really wasn’t much else you could do but make do in that situation, and that is what they had done. That Charles had subsequently come to a sorry death — either jumping or being pushed from a window in the city, it was never clear — only heightened the affection that Nancy had always felt for Lily.

That day, noticing Nancy’s obvious distress, Lily had enquired if everything was all right, and Nancy had let her have it. All of it. How she simply couldn’t stand being at home any more; how her mother was driving her up the wall; how she had just five minutes ago climbed out the window with the solemn promise that she was never going to return; how she actually had no idea what she was going to do now ... Her sister-in-law, taking pity on her, made a snap decision.

‘Well,’ she said carefully, ‘you can come back to my house if you like, and stay under the house during the day in case they come looking for you, and then up into the house to sleep when it’s all safe at night.’

Nancy could have kissed her.

‘It was just such a wonderful thing for her to have done,’ she recalls. ‘She could see how distressed I was and wanted to help, even though because I was still under eighteen she must have known that the police would shortly be looking for me.’

And that is exactly what happened. That afternoon, the police did indeed come looking for Nancy at many houses in the neighbourhood — particularly those where Nancy had some acquaintance, like the Beals and the Kings — but when they turned up at her sister-in-law’s, she was safely under the stilted house. She could even see their blue uniformed legs on approach, hear the conversation above, hear the tramp of booted feet on the floorboards, and then see those same blue legs receding down the garden path. Not long afterwards, either by coincidence or otherwise, she also saw the legs of her mother, heard her familiar step on the floorboards above, the low rumble of her voice, and then she too receded.

What a wonderful thing, she remembers reflecting at the time, to have a place of refuge when you were in trouble. Several days later when it came time to leave, when things had calmed down somewhat — through an intermediary she had at least been able to communicate to her mother that she was quite all right but that she wasn’t coming home — she couldn’t thank her sister-in-law enough for her kindness.

But it was time to make plans to leave. Taking the car-punt across the harbour into the city — because it only cost twopence and that was all she had, as opposed to threepence for the ferry — she went to an employment agency in Pitt Street. There, at last, things went right for her. Given that she had no interest in any of the retail trades, nursing was an obvious starting point — her sister Hazel by this time was a fully qualified nurse at Kogarah. There was the problem, though, that one of the conditions of being a nurse in Sydney was that one had to start with newly purchased uniforms and she simply didn’t have the money to buy them.

‘So I agreed,’ Nancy remembers, ‘to start with another scheme where you would be a nurse in the country somewhere and then they would supply your uniforms and you could pay it back as you went along.’

And actually, there was one other problem. That was, she couldn't use her real name of Nancy Wake because the police were still looking for her, and she had to give the employment agency a false name. That, at least, was easy as she came up with 'Shirley Anne Kennedy' on the spot. 'Kennedy' was the name of a woman who had once been kind to her, while 'Anne Shirley' was of course the full name of the heroine of *Anne of Green Gables* — Nancy's own heroine, who had often daydreamed about bravely nursing people through dangerous illnesses — so it was perfect! Yes, it was a bit weird to be using false names while having the authorities looking for her, but, hey, at least she knew that a lot of that was just a once-off, that it wasn't as if she was going to be making a life out of that kind of caper ...

The main thing was that she got the job, or at least the promise of the job. With still three weeks to go before taking up her position as a nurse near Mudgee, she secured a brief domestic job at thirty-five shillings a week at a house in the Sydney suburb of Northbridge. This involved facing the routine eternal of ironing, washing and housework and was conducive to making her realise that while that sort of stuff was okay to do before and after school, it was most definitely *not* something she wanted to do for a living.

Life. She learned a lot about it up Mudgee way. Away from her family, and left entirely to her own devices while still at the tender age of sixteen, she had her first serious job, smoked her first cigarette and got drunk for the first time. And she loved it all, even if the job wasn't quite what she had expected. Calling the premises a 'hospital' was probably going a bit far. Set on the edge of what was essentially a gold mining shanty town, it was really a glorified bungalow with a couple of wards for patients — usually miners who had had accidents — and a kitchen to cook some food for them. Apart from that, just about nothing. There was precious little specialised equipment, no doctors, no matron, just a nursing sister and two trainee nurses in Nancy and another girl called Claire.

'But we were happy,' says Nancy. 'Claire was a runaway like me, and for both of us the whole thing was a great adventure. We were earning enough to pay off our nice crisp white uniforms, plus have a little bit of spending money, and maybe even save a little every week too, so what more did you want at the age of sixteen or so?'

Not much. Nancy herself had always been a good mixer with people from all walks of life — most particularly with rag-tag men for some reason — and both she and Claire were delighted to find the miners friendly to a fault and fun to be around. Not only that, the two young women found the sister tolerable, and the work itself sometimes even interesting. Over the nearly two years they were there, Nancy and Claire learned how to set broken limbs, clean weeping wounds, put salve on burns so that the patient wasn't screaming in pain, and informed themselves on many other minor medical matters besides. All that, and the buxom duo got to go to the little cinema in the village every Saturday night for free!

Not that there weren't serious medical problems to contend with from time to time though. On one notable occasion, when the sister was away getting her hair done in town one Saturday afternoon, old Mr Smith just up and *died* on them, just like that.

'There was nothing we could do for him,' Nancy remembers, 'and it wasn't actually surprising because he was very old and very worn out, but for both of us so young it was still tremendously upsetting.'

At least they had sufficient experience to know what their first duty was. That was, without making too much of a fuss in front of the other patients — most of whom were having their afternoon nap anyway — to pull the sheet up over him. This was not only respect for the dead, but it also avoided having to look at those unseeing eyes. Then — following what was apparently a hallowed

strand of tradition among young nurses at that time in dealing with such matters — they retired to the kitchen to drink themselves pie-eyed with whatever alcohol they could get their hands on. In this case all they could find were alcoholic hospital spirits, but they judged this sufficient for them to work up the Dutch courage they needed to do what had to be done next. For it was one thing of course simply to pull the sheet up over the head of a corpse without actually *touching* it, but it was something else again to manhandle the corpse onto a stretcher, take it out the door, down the corridor, through the exit, and then across the extremely muddy patch of ground to the mining-town morgue. Just the thought of it gave them both the *creeps*, so much so that when they had knocked off the remains of the first bottle of hospital spirits they quickly searched out another, figuring they didn't quite have the requisite amount of nerve yet. Luckily, sister still wasn't due back for another couple of hours, so they figured they had the time.

At last, at last, it was time. Mr Smith could wait no longer and other patients were just starting to stir from their afternoon nap. Swaying their way back down the corridor and into the ward, Nancy and Claire bumped heavily into the door jamb as they went, then they placed the stretcher beside the bed and slowly, slowly drew back the covers ... and nearly collapsed. What lay before them wasn't just the deathly pallor of a man now gone to God. It wasn't that one of the eyes they had closed seemed now to be staring back at them. For one of those things they were expecting and the other they still couldn't maybe have coped with. What they simply couldn't get over was what was now emerging from the folds of Mr Smith's pyjamas. It was ... was ... was ...

'The biggest penis I have ever seen,' says Nancy flatly. 'Actually at that point it was the only [adult] penis I'd ever laid eyes on. And it was *totally* erect.'

It may have been that this curious erection was due to rigor mortis setting in after the death, but neither of them could quite get over how such a small man could possibly have such a large protuberance. Trying not to look and yet still being mesmerised in spite of themselves, they at least got him on to the stretcher, put a sheet over him — which promptly resembled a circus tent in the middle — and drunkenly lurched their way out the door. Nancy still thinks they might have made it had it not been for the rain which had started to fall heavily, but ...

'But when we got out into the middle of the field that lay between the hospital and the morgue we were not only too drunk to keep our balance, but the mud was incredibly slippery, and first me and then Claire kept slipping.'

The inevitable happened. Suddenly, they both slipped over together, and Mr Smith went flying and landing deep in the mud.

'You have never seen anything like it,' Nancy says with some certainty, 'this man lying with the great prick sticking up covered with mud. Well, there we were, the sister due back shortly, a dead body in the mud, both of us rolling drunk, and our uniforms covered in muck, as were we.'

They survived, just. They got Mr Smith into the morgue, and while Claire did her best to clean him up — including with great embarrassment, she would later recount, his massive penis — Nancy took both their uniforms quickly into town to get laundered by their friendly Chinese laundryman who had always done their laundry for free. 'And they never found out. They never found out,' Nancy chortles, some seventy years after the event.

In September of 1930, shortly after Nancy turned eighteen — meaning it was now safe to return to Sydney without any problems from the police — she said goodbye to Claire, to the mining town, to the hospital, the life of a nurse, the lot.

'It had been wonderful,' she says, 'but I just knew it was time to get back.'

Alighting at Central Railway Station from the train which had brought her from near Mudge

she took the tram to Circular Quay on the southern side of the harbour, and by chance looked out the west when ... she saw it. At that point it was almost the most extraordinary thing she'd seen in her young life. This of course was the famous Sydney Harbour Bridge, the structure that they had been building when she left Sydney two years previously. Things had moved on amazingly since last she was here. The two massive spans had reached out to join each other in wonderful embrace!

All of which was in great contrast to Nancy's mother who was certainly not yearning to embrace her after such a long separation. Though the word soon spread that Nancy was back — after she'd popped in on friends and went to visit her brother Stanley — her mother never sent word that she wanted to see her. Nor did Nancy make any effort to make contact herself.

'That part of my life was over,' she says firmly, 'and I wasn't going back to it.'

She had left Sydney a girl, but had returned a woman, a woman who knew she could never even pretend to submit to her mother's rule again. Instead, she rented a room in Rushcutters Bay on the other side of the harbour, taking a lodging in one of the old tenement houses that abounded there, at a cost of sixteen shillings a week.

Although at this time Sydney town was nearing the heights of the Depression and the streets were filled with people down on their luck or looking for work in the big city — often between visits to soup kitchens — Nancy was fortunate enough to quickly secure a clerical job with a Dutch shipping company based in Bridge Street. With a salary just above the basic wage, she quickly settled down to being a tiny cog organising the movements of massive ships that came to Sydney bearing cargo and passengers from such places as Amsterdam and Java.

Even while Nancy organised the passage of ships back and forth to all parts of the world, her thoughts inevitably wandered to her own dreams of travelling, of discovering New York, London and Paris as she'd always promised herself she would. That would of course take a lot of money, and she still wasn't any closer to having any, but not to worry. For some reason she was never quite sure of it, she always felt confident something would turn up ...

In the meantime there were plenty of pleasures to pursue, plenty of growing up to do, new things to thrill to. She revelled still in being free of her mother and being able to do anything she damn well pleased, and her passion of the moment was the famous American actress Tallulah Bankhead, whose films Nancy simply devoured. With Tallulah as a model, Nancy delighted in spending a large portion of her small salary each month on having her hair tinted platinum blonde and closely cut in what they called an Eton Crop, just like Tallulah had it. She also loved buying and wearing slightly mannish clothes and ties just like Tallulah, or imperiously smoking cigarettes in long holders just like ... yeah, Tallulah.

'When I imitated her,' Nancy says, 'I thought I was Christmas. It made me feel good, because I simply adored her.'

Nancy was, as a matter of fact, dressed just like her idol on the sparkling morning of 19 March 1932, while on one of her company's Dutch ships heading beneath the just completed Sydney Harbour Bridge as part of the celebrations of its official opening. Above them at that very moment, Nancy and her friends and colleagues knew, the Premier of New South Wales, Jack Lang, and many other dignitaries were making speeches. Their gaily bedecked vessel was sitting in close behind a British ship that was leading the aquatic parade, when they suddenly heard an enormous commotion from above, shouts, screams, the lot ... What on *earth* was going on?!

They found out shortly afterwards when they docked. A Protestant Irishman, Captain Francis O'Groot, of the paramilitary group the New Guard, had raced forward on his horse and with his sabre had slashed the blue ribbon that the Premier had been about to cut, declaring the bridge open in the name of 'the decent citizens of New South Wales!'

Sydney was agog with it for days, weeks, afterwards, amazed at such a public act of civ

disobedience. Nancy too.

‘In my limited experience,’ she says, ‘things like that just didn’t happen. The government was the government, and that was that. You did what they said, and you most certainly didn’t take matters into your own hands like de Groot had done, whatever you might have felt about it. I was quite shocked.’

It was around this time — appropriately enough, given her line of work — that her own shock came in, metaphorically at least. One evening after work, she arrived home to her Rushcutters Bay abode to find a letter redirected to her from her mother’s place. It was a letter that would change her life. It was from her Auntie Hinamoa. This was, of course, the older sister of her mother who — just as Nancy had ‘disgraced the family’ by running away — had herself run off with the married captain of a whaling ship off the north coast of New Zealand.

Hinamoa had done well, and the upshot of the letter was that she advised Nancy she would shortly be telegraphing her the extraordinary sum of two hundred pounds to do with what she liked. ‘I’ve been thinking of you always and I hope this can help you,’ the letter said, among other things. Nancy, stunned at her good fortune, was some time in believing that it had actually happened. Things like this happened only in novels, and she was never quite clear how her aunt had formed such a deep affection for her.

‘I mean,’ she says, ‘this aunt was the shame of the family. Personally I would never listen to anything wrong about her, I was not a nasty person, but I think that she probably sympathised with me because she knew how my mother used to treat me.’

When the money actually came through — meaning the whole thing was not a cruel ruse as she had half suspected — she knew immediately what she wanted to do. She wanted to *move, move, move* to get away from Sydney and her cloistered life there.

Within a week of receiving the money she had booked herself a first class passage on an outward bound ocean liner, at the princely price of one hundred pounds, still leaving her the other hundred pounds for spending money — a tiny portion of which she spent on a Tallulah Bankhead-type ticket which she had long coveted from an expensive shop called Richard Hunt’s in Sydney’s Pitt Street.

‘It cost me 17/6d,’ she recalls, ‘but it was worth every penny.’

If it was against the norm of the day for a young woman to turn her back on the prospect of marriage and babies and to set off on her own to discover the world then, as far as Nancy was concerned, that was just too damned bad. Anne of Green Gables had never followed convention, and neither did Nancy feel any compunction about breaking the mould. Perhaps in deference to the blessed Anne, Nancy’s initial destination on that luxury liner — after brief stopovers in Auckland and Suva — was Vancouver, Canada, Anne’s homeland.

There remained a problem, however, before Nancy could physically take her place on the liner. She was still under the legal age of twenty-one, the old passport she used to go to New Zealand was out of date, and there was no way known that her mother would ever sign the necessary documents to get her a new passport to get overseas. But there were other ways around that problem. (Nancy had learnt all through her life to date, that there were always ways around any problem.) In this case the pertinent point was that in the absence of a parent or legal guardian affirming that an applicant was twenty-one years old, it was acceptable for the family doctor to do so. So Nancy went to see her old friend Dr Studdie, presented the papers to him, saying that unfortunately her mother had gone away to the country for a month, and would he mind signing right here? The doctor, still kindly, and by then in the twilight of his career, looked at her a little puzzled and said ‘Oh Nancy, I would have thought you were only eighteen!’.

‘Doctor!’ Nancy playfully replied, mock-shocked, ‘I’m twenty-one!’

‘Doesn’t time pass!’ the doctor replied with a laugh, and signed right where she’d indicated.

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