Sand in my Hair

J G T Sneyd

Cover Picture: Cricket at Victoria Avenue

Me batting, James fielding.

The bat is tied up with string. You could not get new bats during the war.

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Foreword

Sometimes I envy Proust his madeleines. Smells are very evocative and the smell of laundry powder always used to bring back the memory of boiling the copper on washday at Takapuna. But now that my sense of smell has gone I have lost a valuable doorway to the past.

Photographs, too, can jog one's memory. My mother and grandmother had a number of family photograph albums going back to before I was born but these have disappeared.

When I was at primary school I was given quite a good camera for a birthday, and over the years I took many photographs. Initially I had them developed and printed at the local chemist but after a few years I developed and printed them all myself. They were no great works of art but valuable to me nevertheless. These too have disappeared and I have had to rely on a few photographs from cousin Brian to help me remember.

Despite this I still have many vivid memories of my childhood. My visual memories are also helped by the way I read. When I read a story I nearly always place it somewhere I remember from childhood and the visual memory of the childhood setting can be quite detailed. Not that I ignore the description of the setting in the story but this is superimposed on a familiar background.

The Hobbit begins in the tennis pavilion at Victoria Avenue which is the background for Bilbo Baggins' house. The encounter with the Trolls takes

place in the orchard at Victoria Avenue and the death of Smaug and the battle of the five armies in the back garden at Stirling Street. In Treasure Island the Admiral Benbow Inn is in the drive at Ewen Street, Jim Hawkins' discovery in the apple barrel takes place in the front room at Victoria Avenue and Treasure Island itself is once again in the garden at Stirling Street. This does not apply only to books I first read as a child. I have just finished a novel by Colm Toibin and this again is set in the garden at Stirling Street. I have always assumed this to be a universal experience but I have never seen it described and when I have mentioned it to one or two people they have been at a loss.

The other thing that occasionally brings back memories is being called Graham. All my childhood I was called Graham and it was not until I started University, well after the time of this memoir, that I got my nickname of Sam.

Early Years at my Grandmother's

My earliest memories are of my grandmother's house in Victoria Avenue in Remuera. Victoria Avenue was, and still is, one of the more fashionable streets in Auckland. My maternal grandfather, James Bond, had been mayor of Hamilton and when he retired the family moved to Auckland. My grandmother had been used to having everything as a child and young woman at Edmond Castle and I am sure she would never have lived in an unfashionable area—it must have been bad enough living in the Colonies. When I was born my parents were living there with my grandmother. I don't remember my father being there much because he was in the Merchant Navy and later in the RNZNVR. As far as I can remember my Aunt Nell and Uncle Clive and Brian were living there as well for at least some of the time.

148 Victoria Avenue was a big rambling wooden house with a large garden. On the street frontage there was a high (to me) hedge and a lawn with a dovecote and a guava bush with small red fruit which made the most marvellous jelly. The driveway to the garage ran down one side and I think there was a circular driveway in front. On the other side of the house there was a rose garden, an orchard and at the back of the house a tennis court which I don't remember ever being used and then

behind the tennis court a “jungle” which was just a narrow strip of uncared for garden. I remember a fig tree and a large quince. We gorged ourselves with figs when they were ripe. I am very vague about the geography of the interior of the house. There was some sort of living area at the front and my grandmother's study opened out of this. On the other side of the front door was the drawing room which housed a piano and was reserved for special occasions. Then a large kitchen, and a hall with the dining room and bedrooms opening off it. I don't remember if the back of the house was two stories high. I have a vague impression that the bedrooms there were quite high but I am far from sure. At the end of the hall was a door with panes of glass. I distinguished myself when I was about five by running down the hall in some game with (I think) James and putting my arm through one of the panes. Absolute consternation. The damage was minor although enough to frighten my mother. Whenever she spoke of it afterwards she remembered that she could see the layer of fat under the skin. It must have been a superficial cut although it was quite long. The GP did not even stitch it up but cobbled the edges together with butterfly plasters and I still have an impressive scar.

The other great drama at Victoria Avenue was my tonsillectomy. I had no idea what was going on. The operation was carried out on the kitchen table by the family general practitioner and I think the anaesthetic was chloroform. I still remember my vivid dream of a yellow submarine as I went under. I woke with a very sore throat and was given ice cream. I must have become constipated because I was given castor oil—a

tablespoonful with a little orange juice on top to disguise the taste. It didn't.

I resented being told essentially nothing of what was going on. The only information I had came from Brian a day or two before the operation. "They would put me to sleep" he said "and then take out my eyes and put them back."

The house must have been packed with three families living there but I don't remember much family friction although I might not have recognized it. I have no memory of my brother James being born—in fact he seemed to play only a minor role in my memories of Victoria Avenue. I think I spent more time playing with cousin Brian who was a few months older than me.

I must have been a horrible child. I remember my first haircut—I screamed and screamed and could not be pacified with soft toys by the barber or even my grandmother. I suppose my hair was finally cut; I can't remember. Then there was the time I put a layer of salt on top of the sugar in the sugar basin. It worked beautifully. Aunt Nell came storming out of the house after putting a good spoonful in her coffee but we kids all acted innocent and no one was punished.

Behind the house was an aviary with a number of budgies. It is said that Pop smuggled the budgies in from Australia by hiding them in his hat but I can't vouch for the truth of the story. James and I would jump from the roof of the aviary which was a great height to us and was strictly forbidden but we were never caught.

A couple of other memories have stuck. I was allowed to stay home from school one morning to watch a monarch butterfly hatch out of its chrysalis. I

remember Mother reading stories to us in the orchard from Kingsley's Greek heroes and the great excitement when there was snow on the Waitakeres in 1939.

I started school when I was at Victoria Ave. I think I must have gone to a kindergarten for a short while before starting school. I went with James and flatly refused to take part in any of the activities. James followed my example until in the last five minutes he took scissors to a piece of paper and then claimed that he had joined in everything whereas I hadn't. I don't think I ever went back.

School itself was horrid at first. We wore blue caps with RDS embroidered on the front for Remuera District School. The children who went to other less fashionable schools would chant at us "Remuera Donkey Show, Remuera Donkey Show". We went to school by tram to the top of Victoria Avenue (I think the fare was a penny) and walked from there. The real interest was the journey home. The tram conductor had to switch points so the tram could turn from Remuera Road into Victoria Ave. This entailed pulling a lever on a lamppost with what appeared to be all his strength until the tram had turned. With any luck the pole would come off the overhead wires in a shower of blue sparks and curses from the conductor who had to get the pole back on.

I can't remember the names of my teachers but the primer 1 teacher was a real dragon (or so I thought). I remember being bawled out because I could not draw an e on the blackboard. She was insistent that the e should come to a point—she meant on the right. I somehow got it into my head that the tail had to end in a point and drew beautiful pointed tails on my e's which only seemed

to infuriate her more.

School was much better after I got out of Primer 1. I enjoyed learning and the teachers were quite reasonable women. I think it was my Primer 2 teacher I fell in love with and insisted that she be invited to afternoon tea after school. The poor girl was overwhelmed by the fashionable house and address. Aunt Nell was getting tea and as she came into the room from the kitchen she slipped and the tea tray and its contents went everywhere. I was mortified. I don't remember any more of this visit.

It was accepted that we were Christian, specifically C of E. This was the fashionable sect and we (or rather my mother and grandmother) were condescending towards the Methodists and Presbyterians and scornful of the ridiculous beliefs of the Roman Catholics. Every evening I had to kneel at my mother's knee and say prayers—or rather she said prayers and I listened. One of her favourites was Gentle Jesus, meek and mild. I could recite the whole prayer even now although I have discovered that Mother had only a hazy memory of the original by Charles Wesley and the prayer she used was rather different. This prayer and the whole performance of praying confused me. One verse went:

O supply my every want
Feed the young and tender plant
Day by day my keeper be
Every moment watch o'er me.

The first line was curious. I wanted for very little except

the occasional tin of green paint. Line two was little better. Feed the young at least made sense but why were we making such a request? We were never short of food. What was a tender? How did you plant it? In the third line I had visions of a large striped bumble bee buzzing round but could not understand why I should keep a bee, and why day by day? The last line of the verse was the worst. I heard it as "watch all me" and had visions of a stern God looking down on me lying naked on my bed looking out for any wicked actions or even thoughts. I was not only confused but frightened.

Sunday School was even worse. We were sent up the road about a hundred yards to Sunday School in Audrey Road, past the Tiger Tea sign on the store. The Tiger Tea brand was then new and I wondered why tigers were associated with tea. (I was quite sure beer was made from lions; why else would the brewery have a large lion on it?) I suspect the Sunday School was Methodist but convenience over-rode theology. I was terrified by the depiction of Hell and how you got there. How did you choose the narrow road leading to Heaven and avoid the broad road leading to Hell? I saw the broad road in colours of deep purple, dark red and bright green. I think I must have got these colours from a tract we were given at Sunday School. When Christianity is presented as an obvious truth to a child it is hard to shake off belief later in life. I was well into my teens before I realized that I believed none of it, and had not believed it for years. I was simply afraid to admit to myself that I didn't believe.

The only other thing I remember about Sunday School in Remuera was the end-of-year concert. Brother

James sang “All Things Bright and Beautiful” but got hiccups in the middle. It came out: All things hic bright and beau-hic-tiful, All hic creatures great hic and small. Yet I didn't laugh—I thought he did very well under the circumstances.

Then of course there was the war. I had little idea of what was happening but the first thing I noticed was that chocolate fish disappeared from the shops. Apart from that we hardly seemed to be affected. I remember going with my grandmother to some sloppy war-time movie, and she cried when the boy-next-door went off to be a sailor leaving his girl sobbing on the dock.

We had air raid drills at school although I can only remember one. Some poor teacher had to take about 20 children and escort each one home. We were last and it took us nearly two hours to get home. I suspect these drills were abandoned when they were clearly little more than a farce.

The war was more intrusive after we moved to Takapuna but I do remember my grandmother listening to the BBC news each evening (we were not allowed to). And there was one awful trip to Wellington by train to say goodbye to Pop who must have been off to sea in the Monowai. Mother and Pop tried to hide their worry—they bought us balloons and chocolate—but their upset was too obvious for us not to be affected. James finally went to sleep with his chocolate, now melted, in his hand.

Of course there were few new books to be had and even fewer children's books during the war. We did have a copy of the Just So Stories which I read to myself when I could. I had one difficulty though—the first letter of each story was illuminated and I could never make out

what it was. I could not read any further until an adult had deciphered the first letter.

But there was a good library at the top of Victoria Avenue. I was taken with books of fairy stories, I think those by E Nesbitt. And I found a marvellous book about adventures, dragons, trolls and heroes but when I was a bit older could never find it again. It was not until I was in my thirties that I came across the Hobbit again and realized this was it.

When I was older I went through a phase of reading comics. The heroes were soccer players or boxers (Rockfist Rogan, RAF) and there must have been school stories as well, the usual rubbish about life at an English public school. The accounts of soccer matches were very confusing as I did not even know the game existed—I had been brought up on rugby and rugby league. At least they played rugby in the stories of public school life.

I think I was my grandmother's favourite. The only time I remember her getting furious with me was the time I spilt green paint. For some reason I had set my heart on getting a tin of green paint and Granny was foolish enough to get one for me. I was throwing it up into the air and catching it again until I dropped it. The lid came off and there was a puddle of green enamel paint in the centre of one of Granny's best Persian carpets.

I learnt to swim when we were living at Victoria Avenue. Victoria Avenue runs down to Hobson Bay where there was a poor apology for a beach; mainly mud and shells and a little sand and swimmable only at high tide. The main sewer ran across Hobson Bay and came

close to shore where we swam. James and I would run along the sewer jumping over bird shit until one day James slipped and fell in. I remember a man on the beach saying “In he goes, pants and all”. Mother jumped in and pulled James out, He had no trouble staying afloat and was not at all perturbed—this was the first sign of his ability in the water.

Stirling Street

I think my grandmother must have finally tired of having two married daughters and their offspring staying with her. She sold the house in Victoria Avenue and bought a much smaller place in Stirling Street—also in Remuera. I think Nell and Clive had bought a place in Meadowbank before the move but we went to Stirling Street with Granny.

Two memories of the move are still quite vivid. The first was the loss of the piano in the drawing room. I had always played with the piano to hear the lions and tigers in the bass and the fairies in the treble. No one else ever touched it. I kept sneaking into the drawing room to convince myself it had really gone. And there was the bonfire of books. I still can't understand this. I suspect many of the books had come from Edmond Castle—I vaguely remember some leather bound books —and even though there was no room for them in Stirling Street surely somewhere could have been found for them.

The new place at Stirling Street was small; much too small for two families although I don't remember Pop being there much of the time. I imagine it was built in the

1930s and had quite a large lawn at the back with a few apple trees. Over the back fence was a primary school, although not the one we went to. James and I shared a bedroom and the other two were for Granny and my parents. The most interesting feature of Granny's bedroom was the commode which I remember from Victoria Avenue as well. It was most interesting when she took De Witt's pills because they turned her urine dark green (this showed they were working) and we would find a chamber-pot-full in the morning. We used to play battledore and shuttlecock over her bed with extra points if you hit the portrait of James Bond on the wall.

The drawing room was in the front of the house and it was here that my grandmother entertained. She played bridge regularly with some of her elderly friends but every so often one would die and I was called upon to make up the four until a suitable replacement could be found. I learnt my bridge in a hard school.

There was a garage in the basement with room for a ping-pong table. James and I played there a lot when we were older.

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I don't think we can have stayed at Stirling Street very long—it was small and crowded and I suspect the hard word was put on us to move. This was easier said than done during the war with Pop away in the Navy but my parents bought a beach house in Ewen Street, Takapuna. We had spent a holiday at Takapuna the previous summer in Beacholm Road and the official story was that we loved it so much that we decided to buy there. Moving to Takapuna was a terrible comedown. Takapuna is now a fashionable (and expensive) suburb but then it was simply a collection of seaside baches, our house being one of many. And the people! And the way they spoke! Instead of going to Remuera District School we went to Takapuna primary with the local boys. My poor mother tried to preserve out "English" accents but to no avail. It was more than one's life was worth to speak with a "posh" accent at school. We were not encouraged to make friends at school. If we were brave enough to bring a friend home after school or at the weekend he was given the treatment. Not many were prepared to put up with this.

Although the move to Takapuna was a great comedown for my mother it was the start of the most memorable part of my childhood. Life was dominated by

the beach and the sea and from that time on I had sand in my hair. The barber did not approve of my antics on the beach, and many a time I was sent home when I went to get a haircut because Mr Jensen claimed the sand would blunt his clippers.

Some of my memories mirror those of Bruce Mason in “The End of the Golden Weather”; for instance the King and Queen rocks just past the end of Takapuna beach although I can no longer remember which was which and one has been almost totally destroyed in a storm and is now just a jumble of stones. I walked past these rocks on the way to Clifton to fish, and at high tide we would sometimes dive from them. At the other end of the beach were the cable markers opposite the Strand. Only the bravest of us would dive from the cable markers, certainly not me, and one of my school friends later broke his neck diving and became paraplegic.

Our house was a typical seaside bach. There was a big room at the front with a sloping painted wooden floor which opened on to a flight of wooden steps. I remember three bedrooms, a rather primitive kitchen and bathroom and a separate laundry with a copper and a hand wringer. A garage and a small workshop were attached to the laundry. It always seemed to be my job to light the copper with newspaper and kindling and get the water boiling but I don't think I can have done so during school terms. Clothes were boiled for three minutes and stirred with a wooden pole. They were then put through a hand wringer and rinsed in a concrete tub. They were usually rinsed only once, all that Mother thought necessary, and then hung up to dry on the line which was propped up with a forked stick. This may sound

primitive but it was very effective because the line could be raised or lowered easily. Later we graduated to an electric wringer and a rotary clothes line.

In those days we relied on rain water. This was rarely a problem with Auckland's high rainfall and I don't remember ever having to have water shipped in, although in a dry summer we had to economize on baths. There always seemed to be mosquito larvae swimming round in the corrugated iron storage tank. No wonder we were plagued by mosquitoes all summer. Some time later Takapuna got its water supply from Lake Pupuke. This was better than tank water but had its own problems. At the best of times the water smelt, but in a dry summer things got worse. Lake Pupuke grew a lot of weed and when the lake was low the weed died and stank. And so did our drinking water. Even boiling it had little effect and at times the whole house would smell.

Water for the bath was heated in a gas califont although I think we had a separate hot water cylinder as well. There was no shower of course.

Although living at Takapuna had disadvantages these were more than made up for by the beach and the sea. I remember the weather as being good most of the time—I think everyone's memories of the weather in childhood are the same—but it could be wet at times, particularly during a northeasterly storm. A storm usually lasted for 3 days and then the wind would drop for a short time and swing to the southwest and the weather would turn cooler. This was the time to go surfing. When the northeasterly was blowing the sea was too choppy for good surfing although a lot of fun for swimming. When the wind swung round we got a few

hours of good rollers coming in, ideal for surfing. Not surfing as it is done now but we body surfed or used big, clumsy wooden boards. The main problem with the boards was the nose tended to dip and then the board would stop suddenly and thump you hard in the stomach. We gave up trying to catch big waves with these boards —they were far too dangerous. Instead we usually surfed without a board and James became an expert at body surfing. The big boards had another use. At low tide there was often a stretch of shallow, flat water at the edge of the sea. We threw the boards so that they skimmed along the shallow water and then ran after them and jumped on. This could give you a good ride.

After a good northeasterly there was always a certain amount of debris washed up on to the beach. Seaweed of course and sometimes scallops and once even a gangway, lost from a ship in the channel.

We always had the beach to play on—cricket, football, looking for shrimps and anemones and tube worms in the rock pools or just messing about. We even learned to ride our bikes on the beach which made for a soft landing but we had to clean the bikes carefully afterwards to get rid of the salt.

We flew kites on the beach when there was enough wind. Although we could buy kites from a shop at Hall's Corner the best ones were the ones we made ourselves. The frame was of split bamboo (we had a clump of bamboo at the bottom of the garden) and was covered with brown paper pasted into place.The kites had long tails for stability made of strips of rag tied at intervals along a string. The kites were heavy but flew well if there was enough wind. Our object was to get

them as high as possible—none of the fancy nonsense you see now with a lot of swooping and diving.

Bamboo was also good for making bows and arrows which we would shoot at home or on the beach. One morning I shot an arrow into the air and hit a man who was going down for his morning swim. He was furious and pointed out the drop of blood on his wrist where I had hit him.

I caught my first fish when I was quite small from Uncle Frank's launch. I don't know where we were but I remember the adults all went below decks to drink gin and left me minding the fishing line. I hooked a good snapper but had to yell for help to get it in.

At Takapuna we had no boat for some years and my fishing was confined to fishing from the rocks for pakiti (spotties) and piper (garfish). We used rods and floats made of bamboo from the garden and light lines and hooks that we bought at a shop at Hall's Corner. Some time later I was given a proper bought rod with a fancy float and line but it really worked no better than the ones we made from bamboo. I caught my first pakiti from the concrete wall halfway between Takapuna and Milford. I remember coming home very excited with my line in a complete tangle. But the fishing at Clifton turned out to be much better. If the tide was right I walked along the beach, past the King and the Queen to the rocks at the other end of Clifton beach. Sometimes we might even see a kingfish or two swimming slowly past the rocks—great green fish with bright yellow tails. For bait I used pipis which could be picked up very easily en route. Occasionally if the tide was not going to be right for collecting pipis I would get them the day before

and keep them in a bucket of seawater. Piper were much more prized than pakiti and occasionally we caught something bigger which I was never sure about identifying. But none of these fish were edible—piper were full of small bones, pakiti tasted horrible and the occasional other fish we were never game to try. It didn't help that Mother hated fish and made little attempt to make it appetizing.

Pipis were a good bait, much better than limpets which we used only out of desperation, but the best bait of all was maggots. Some of the bigger boys bred maggots at home for bait and I was desperately jealous of them. I tried breeding maggots at home using a pakiti I had caught, but after a very promising start the maggot farm was discovered by my mother and destroyed, much to my disgust. She complained of a plague of flies but I knew she was just being unreasonable.

We were finally allowed a boat after we were able to swim half a mile. It was a little dinghy, 8ft 6 I think but pretty sound and stable. Of course there was no motor. Now we could really fish. I say we but James was never keen on fishing and Pop could not often come with me. In those days you didn't have to row out far to catch snapper and we rowed all round Takapuna beach and well out to Rangitoto. I don't remember if we actually rowed all the way to Rangitoto but I suspect we did. I became quite expert at judging what the weather would do and whether it was safe to take the boat out. One of the best indicators was the top leaf on the flowering gum which I could see from my bedroom window. I could nearly always judge if the wind was going to turn sou-westerly and make boating impossible.

Launching the boat was simple if you didn't mind getting wet although the bigger boat we had later needed the car to pull it up from the beach.

Our fishing gear was not fancy; braided cotton lines wound on to a stick with a bit of old iron as a sinker. No nylon traces or anything like that. Half the fun of fishing to me was to get out on the water, away from everyone and have the day to myself. There might be big schools of kahawai with their grey-green bodies just under the surface as they chased little fish which would leap clear of the water to escape. Only once did I see a little fish caught in mid-air by a white-fronted tern as he escaped the carnage below. The terns (we usually called them kahawai birds) usually caught their fish by diving, so when a big school of kahawai was active there were the splashes of the fish and different splashes of the terns. Other birds also came—red-billed gulls who fed on the scraps, petrels and black backed gulls and many varieties of shearwaters which I never learnt to distinguish. Kahawai were easy to catch. A bit of red or white rag on a hook worked quite well but bought metal lures were more deadly. We never considered kahawai worth eating but they made excellent bait for snapper.

We always prized snapper the most and I really think it was the best eating fish despite what Mother did to it. We never considered eating gurnard or trevally or terakahi.

With the birds round the schools of kahawai we sometimes saw white-faced storm petrels. These small birds skip along the top of the water. We called them frog-hoppers but the common name is Jesus Christ birds (or JC birds) because they do look as if they are walking

on water. Blue penguins too were quite common. It was also common enough to see a blue penguin chased by a mako shark. The shark was much faster than the penguin but the penguin could turn on a much smaller radius and the dodging would go on for some minutes until the shark tired of it. I never actually saw a penguin caught.

We caught sharks and sometimes stingrays from our little boat. Mainly school sharks which are pretty inoffensive but from time to time we caught small hammerheads. School sharks were easy to deal with but I was always nervous of stingrays and did not like to bring them into the boat. On one occasion a large mako shark was cruising round the boat. I threw out a lump of bait on a hook which the mako took and was off like a rocket. A couple of runs and be broke the line which was just as well because I don't know how I would have dealt with him.

Some years later my grandmother bought us a somewhat bigger boat with an outboard. This let us venture further afield although generally not much further than Rangitoto or Rakino. We discovered (along with many other people) an excellent fishing spot round the rubbish boat. The rubbish boat collected all the food scraps from the ships in harbour and once a day dumped it just off Rangitoto. It attracted hundreds of fish of all sorts and all you had to do was put out a line and put up with the smell. Once a huge stingray came to the surface just by the boat. It looked the size of our dining room table and I was just about to throw out a line when Mother who was with us for once, screamed and frightened him off.

With the bigger boat we could make regular trips

to Rangitoto, generally not for anything in particular but because it was a nice place to take a break from fishing if you knew where to land. Rangitoto in those days was even barer than it is now, a lot of it being bare scoria. There were even a few wallabies although they were difficult to spot. There was always a lot of driftwood on the beach which we sometimes collected for the fire. On one trip to collect firewood we blew a cylinder head gasket just as we left Rangitoto and had to row all the way back to Takapuna. It took us a while.

We discovered a black-backed gull colony a couple of hundred yards inland from the beach where we often stopped. We could follow the development of the chicks from the egg until they were big enough to leave the nest. The nests themselves were rather crude constructions of twigs and grasses on the scoria although over the years there was so much accumulated bird shit that it was much easier to walk on than the scoria itself. You could get right up to the nesting site only after all the chicks had gone, and the adults had abandoned it for the season. When the eggs or chicks were there the adult birds dive bombed you as you approached and it was difficult to get within 100 meters of the nesting sites. I don't know of anyone being hit by a black back but they came close enough to frighten me off.

I believe the black-back colony is no more. When the Harbour Board developed a better system for disposing of rubbish and the rubbish boat was no longer used, the birds lost their major source of food.

Many years later when my parents had bought a place at Laing's beach we hauled the boat along to the end of the beach where there were a few fishermen's

shacks. We could launch the boat from there in the shelter of a headland and the fishing was better than at Takapuna which was by now beginning to be over-fished. We caught the usual snapper, porae (a variety of tarakahi) and maomao. Maomao are small blue fish and beautiful eating, especially barbecued. We caught so many snapper Pop had to build a smokehouse. Pop caught the family's biggest snapper. When we got it back to shore one of the fisherman from the huts weighed it for us. He was obviously jealous of Pop's success and grudgingly made it out to be 19 and a half pounds. I am sure it was over 20 but had no way of proving it.

The War

The war impinged more on us at Takapuna, partly I suppose because we were older. Yet we never really worried too much about Pop. We knew he was off in the Monowai fighting the Japanese and it never occurred to us that he might be killed. It was very different for Mother who must have been desperately worried about Pop and the advance of the Japanese through the Pacific.

With the threat of a Japanese invasion the beaches were barricaded with barbed wire—enough to hold up an invasion for a minute or two perhaps. There were great gaps left in the barbed wire so that people could still get down to swim. We had to have a trench in the garden in case we were bombed by the Japanese. Pop spent the best part of a day digging one and then James and I made slides down the sides and knocked a lot of earth back in. I was beaten. The house had to be blacked out at night with shutters and black curtains. An air raid warden

came round to be sure there were no chinks of light to attract bombs.

Auckland was used as a rest and recreation location for US troops and as the war in the Pacific went on we got used to the sight of American marines. Some of them attracted a great crowd of boys and played games of baseball on the beach. Perhaps because we had heard a little of the savagery of the war in the Pacific we were more worried about the American marines than we ever were about Pop. We enjoyed the gunnery practice from the coastal batteries. A plane towed a target behind it and the ack ack guns fired at the target. We sat in the front room and watched the shells bursting in the air, always hoping one would hit the plane instead of the target. Sometimes there was gunnery practice at sea with a small boat towing a target and the guns at Northcote firing at it. If anything this was more spectacular than the ack ack fire as the shells made huge splashes as they hit the water and exploded.

On one memorable occasion gunnery practice went wrong. The Monowai (with Pop on board) steamed out one morning but an hour or two later came back up the Rangitoto channel at high speed. The rumour went round that the Japanese Navy had been spotted and that an invasion was imminent. In fact one of the Monowai's guns had exploded at gunnery practice and several crew had been killed and wounded.

I was about 10 when the war ended. I still recall the headlines **Atomic Bomb Exploded over Japan** and the cartoon in the Herald with Emperor Hirohito struggling in a bomb crater with the Russian bear snarling at him from the rim.

To celebrate, James and I biked through the countryside to Albany. I wouldn't try biking to Albany now.

Takapuna as it Was

Takapuna has changed almost beyond recognition and day to day life then was very different from now. Takapuna was semi-rural. There was practically no traffic (there was no petrol) and the main road, Lake Road, had a strip of concrete down the centre with barely enough room for two cars to pass, and loose gravel on either side. What strikes me now more than anything else is the huge increase in population. When I was small, Takapuna was isolated and to get into town you had to take the ferry from Devonport or Bayswater. If you wanted to drive to town there was a car ferry or if desperate you could drive round the head of the harbour. In summer there were often long queues for the car ferry and you might have to wait a couple of hours or more. Once the bridge was opened in 1959 there was a great population explosion and what we then thought of as country is heavily built over with houses or factories.

Even after the war ended there was very little petrol for private cars and it was almost impossible to buy a new car. We did have a little Austin 7 but could not use it much although we managed to save up enough petrol for a trip to Rotorua. We had our name down on a waiting list for a new car for years before we finally got

one and then only because Mother bumped into an old acquaintance from Victoria Avenue days who happened to own one of the big car agencies.

There was no such thing as a supermarket. We bought our groceries from Mr Bright who lived opposite us in Ewen Street but whose shop was on the other side of Halls Corner, opposite the Mon Desir hotel. You never helped yourself. Mr Bright weighed out the flour or sugar or whatever into brown paper bags. We would trudge home with the groceries or occasionally they were delivered by a boy on a bicycle. Meat came from the butcher at Hauraki and was always cut to request. The butcher's shop had a big wooden chopping board and sawdust on the floor and the butchers wore traditional striped aprons. There was no refrigeration in the butcher's and for many years we had none either. Butter and meat were stored in a meat safe on the shady side of the house. In theory it was screened against flies but this didn't always work. Fruit and vegetables came from the greengrocer's at Hauraki or a better one at Halls Corner. Again you never chose your own fruit and vegetables—they were picked out by the greengrocer. We did grow a few vegetables at home and there were always lemons and tree tomatoes. One lot of neighbours had a choko vine and the neighbour the other side had a persimmon. I still hate chokos—prickly, watery marrows—and I have never liked tree tomatoes or persimmons.

During the war many things were rationed. I remember butter, meat, clothes, sugar, tea and cigarettes and there could have well been other things. We never ran short of tea because friends who were heavy smokers would swap their tea coupons for our cigarette coupons

but we were often “butterupt” and had to eat bread and dripping.

Milk was delivered each morning by the milkman in a horse-drawn float. We put the billy out with a note as to how much milk we wanted and the milkman measured it out of the can on his float with a pint dipper and tip it into the billy. I can't remember if we left money out or if we were sent a bill at the end of the month. It was said that the milkman owned a racehorse which he used to pull the float on occasion. The horse nearly always ran like a goat—or was induced to do so—but when it was going to try to win the milkman let Mother and Pop know so they could bet on it. I have always had my doubts about the truth of this story; it has the ring of one of Mother's romances.

Bread could sometimes be a problem. Mother very occasionally baked but we nearly always bought bread from the dairy. Bread had to be ordered and if you ran out you went to the dairy to see they had any “spare bread”. The baker at Halls Corner made beautiful bread in an old wood-fired brick oven. On Sunday night you could see flames shooting out of his chimney as he fired up the oven for Monday's bread. His bread was so good that he made a lot of money and replaced his wood-fired oven with an electric oven. His bread was never the same again.

Primary School

School at Takapuna, or at least primary school was pretty boring. A lot of rote learning—tables, spelling but little of much interest. For a short time I was teased or even

bullied a little at primary school. I finally took to the main tormentor, gave him a bloody nose and was never bothered again.

The only so-called Science we had at primary school was a sort of watered down Natural History which I found dead boring although I enjoyed Granny's book on Natural History because of the illustrations. The frontispiece was of a crocodile attacking a tiger and there were a few more illustrations in the same vein. One scientific problem did worry me. In a moving car when the speed is changing can you say that at a given moment the car is doing such and such a speed The difficulty is the obvious one—at any instant the car has travelled no distance in no time. I finally decided on rather specious grounds that you *could* say the car had a definite speed (I had no concept of velocity) at any instant. The car's speedometer always pointed to a particular spot on the dial and this was the instantaneous speed. Well..... perhaps.

Perhaps the best part of school was the walk there and back. We never wore shoes to school and always rather dreaded going to grammar where you had to wear shoes. We walked along the beach as far as we could, then through Hall's Corner usually stopping off at the blacksmith's if there was anything of interest going on. At playtime we played football or cricket of a sort but there were also marbles and tops. The marbles had very complicated rules and chants which I hardly remember now. Then suddenly marbles were out and tops were in. We always used bought wooden tops with a metal spike at the bottom. The most skillful players could spin their top on top of another and usually split it in two. It was

not done to complain if this happened to your top.

Most of the stuff we did was dead easy but one class I really hated was woodwork. We went to a school in Devonport once a week where there was a workshop of sorts and I would try to make things out of wood. They were all terrible and usually covered in bloodstains. Perhaps my eyesight was to blame—at least that is a good excuse. I don't know that I ever managed to finish a piece well enough to take home.

I had the same problem with model aeroplanes. For a time there was a craze for making model aeroplanes out of balsa wood and very thin paper. Cousin Brian made the most elegant aeroplanes which flew beautifully. I usually ended up with a pile of smashed balsa wood and glue all over my fingers. I did succeed once, and when I tried out my rather inelegant model plane in the Auckland Domain it flew magnificently, beating all the more sophisticated constructions.

We had no music at school or at home for that matter. Mother was tone deaf and if you played a couple of notes a fifth apart I doubt if she could have told you which was higher. And yet she always claimed that she had a sensitive ear which was why she could not stand the violin. I am no singer but her attempts at "Happy Birthday" made me sound like Pavarotti. Pop would whistle a bit but that was it. Granny had an old wind-up gramophone exactly like the one in the HMV logo. I remember only 2 records; "Shine Little Glowworm" and Caruso singing *"Salut demeure chaste et pure"*. I played this over and over. I was sent along to piano lessons for a while when I was about 12. The teacher

was an elderly woman whom I found a total bore but worst of all, the lessons interfered with football practice so the piano had to go.

I had little curiosity about music until I was in my teens when I thought I really should try listening to the Concert Programme (the YC network in those days). Perhaps the music on the Concert Programme might turn out not to be as dull as I had always imagined—a lot of people apparently listened to it—so one day I tuned the radio into 1YC . I was amazed. Not only was it far from dull but it was so much more interesting than the rubbish on the other stations. From that day I was converted. I even made the effort to hear the National Orchestra on occasion, and it was an effort as it entailed traipsing into town by myself by bus and ferry, but it was worth it.

The only things that really interested me at school were football (rugby of course in those days), cricket and tennis. I must have started playing rugby when I was about nine, first for the school and later for the Takapuna club. I was slow although big for my age so I always played in the forwards, usually as lock or hooker. The football club held its practices in a shed in Taharoto Road, opposite the park. A typical rugby shed—a barn of a place with sawdust on the floor and a few grotty changing rooms. Training was always in the evening and we never trained very hard—it was really more of a social occasion than anything else. I must have gone to practice with James because I remember biking home together in the dark after practice. It was quite safe as there was practically no traffic but it would be suicidal now. Club games were always on Saturday and all round Auckland. Mother and Pop came to watch me play most

of the time.

I played a little cricket. I always liked to field in the slips and I practised my slip catching by throwing a tennis ball against the stone wall facing the beach at the end of Ewen Street. The ball came off at unpredictable angles and I could dive for it and land in the sand with no fear of getting hurt. We also played gum nut cricket on the drive. We used gum nuts from the flowering gum instead of balls and these would break sharply which made for great concentration if you were batting.

I concentrated more on tennis than cricket and used to hit a tennis ball against the garage door for hours at a time. I was never a world beater but good enough to be the school champion at primary school. Later at Takapuna Grammar I captained the tennis team when we won the Auckland schools' championship but I was far from the best player on the team. I always tended to be a bash and hope player—I hit a lot of winners but made a lot of unforced errors as well.

As well as school James and I had to go to Sunday School—every child did in those days. Initially we were sent to the Methodist Sunday School at the top of the road but later to St Peters which was then where the movie theatre is now. I was once thrown out of Sunday School for being a stir—I never told my parents. One of the problems with Sunday school was the people who took it. They were mostly spinsters but one man I found rather weird. He had his little favourites among the boys and courted them assiduously. His idea of the Christmas treat for the Sunday School class was to take all the boys to Helensville on the train where everyone swam naked in one of the hot pools. I never went. Now

of course I can see what his motives were but at the time I just thought him odd and rather repulsive.

One thing I was spared at school was the School Dental Service (the torture house) but Mr Buxton at Halls Corner was a torturer in his own right. Our teeth were bad. I don't know if the wartime diet was to blame or the absence of fluoride from the drinking water but sugary drinks or lots of sweets were not. I remember several bad bouts of toothache which made a visit to the dentist almost the lesser evil. Mr Buxton had a slow, foot-driven drill and took forever to clean out a cavity. All this without local anaesthetic so it is little wonder I developed a phobia about dentists. One one occasion I had some milk teeth removed by Mr Buxton under nitrous oxide anaesthesia (nitrous oxide asphyxia really). Mr Buxton himself administered the nitrous oxide without assistance. This would be considered criminal negligence now.

Apart from problems with our teeth we all suffered from what we thought of as the inevitable childhood diseases; measles, mumps and chicken pox but none of us was ever really ill. I don't remember diphtheria or whooping cough or tetanus and I think we must have been immunized. The most dangerous were the bacterial infections . I remember a badly infected finger which was finally lanced by the GP at Takapuna. I didn't need antibiotics which is just as well because there weren't any. And James had at least one bout of croup which he recovered from without antibiotics. “Summer sickness” came round each summer. This was an attack of acute diarrhoea and vomiting which lasted for a couple of days. The disease disappeared like magic

when we got our first refrigerator.

In 1947—48 there was an epidemic of poliomyelitis or infantile paralysis as it was called then. Very little was known about the epidemiology and the measures taken to halt the epidemic were well-nigh useless. The town beaches and some of the North Shore beaches were closed for swimming and if we wanted to swim we had to drive to Mairangi Bay. Movie theatres were closed and the opening of school was delayed for some weeks. I don't remember how many cases there were or how many deaths but we never considered ourselves at risk. Years later, when I was a final year medical student in Auckland I spent some time as a stand-in house surgeon on the infectious diseases ward. Even then there were a number of young men and women, whose muscles of breathing had been paralyzed in the epidemic, spending their life in iron lungs.

Boils were quite common and Mother suffered from recurrent boils for a year or more. She attributed it to the strain of looking after Granny after an operation but I suspect that her bathing habits were to blame. Although by then we had a shower she liked to soak for ages in a hot bath. I can't think of a better way of spreading staphylococci round the skin. Boils were treated with poultices of kaolin (Antiphlogistine) or a mixture of Epsom salts and glycerine. We boys also suffered from “stone bruises”. These were foot abscesses popularly supposed to result from standing on a stone in bare feet.

Still we survived; I guess a lot didn't.

Granny

For all practical purposes I had only one grandmother, my maternal grandmother or Granny. My over-riding memory of her is that she was always old and even in the few remaining photographs she looks old. I suppose this is hardly surprising in that she was nearly 70 when I was born. She was quite short and had bowed legs, presumably caused by rickets which must have been prevalent in the North of England and I imagine more common in ladies who rarely ventured outside. And yet in Auckland she was quite an outside person. She enjoyed picnics although there was little scope for such frivolities during the war and at Takapuna she even swam on occasion. For this she wore a top to toe, or top to knees really, bathing suit and sand shoes. She swam a sort of sidestroke and was reasonably happy in the sea.

She was still very attached to England and her sisters Nona and Decima (her parents obviously ran out of inspiration for children's names). We were fed stories of Aunt Nona wading through waist-deep snow to get to church on Christmas day. We sent food parcels to them during the war and for some time afterwards when rationing was still bad in England. The great aunts reciprocated by sending us stuff that was not obtainable in the colonies—lavatory paper, the shiny non-absorbent

stuff and copies of the Daily Sketch, one of the worst tabloids.

Granny ruled the roost at Victoria Avenue although quietly. She knew she was a lady and didn't have to put on airs to prove it. My Mother's position was much more precarious and her marriage to Pop must have had a lot do do with it. Pop was very much in awe of Granny and I think he was surprised that she accepted him into the family without fuss. Well, perhaps she did but I imagine things may have been a little difficult at first. Granny had a set of ancient (to me) women friends who met regularly to play bridge and complain of the evils of the Labour Party. "That terrible man Mr Nash".

She was no cook. I remember soggy steamed puddings but little else. She often made cocoa for us boys, that is me, James and Brian, but it was usually full of lumps, rather like Mother's chocolate blancmange. Once at Stirling Street Brian tipped his cocoa out of the window, not so much because it was lumpy but in an attempt to show off. This was all very well but it left a big brown stain down the outside of the house which Granny discovered the next day. Brian had left by then but we did not get cocoa made for us for a long time afterwards.

The other thing I remember about Granny is the monstrosity she and her husband were given when Aunt Nell was born. James Bond was then mayor of Hamilton and apparently it was customary to give some sort of gift to the mayor on the birth of a child. It was a silver cradle on a slab of greenstone with a silver kiwi and flax and what was said to be a nikau palm (although it looked

more like a tree fern to me) all under a glass dome. It sat in Granny's drawing room for as long as I can remember. It is now in the Hamilton Museum where I saw it recently (2011).

Granny was was wedded to the beliefs and customs with which she had been brought up. She always did her housework in the morning because "no lady works in the afternoon". She was Church of England of course although I don't remember her ever going to church. Instead, when she was staying at Takapuna which happened quite frequently, she listened to the church service on the wireless at 10 a.m. while drinking tea and eating bread and butter prepared by Mother. We were brought up with some dreadful Victorian and Edwardian children's books and annuals, glorifying the part of England in the Boer War and first World War. Her reading was not always so conservative, and she giggled over Boswell's London Journal (we were not allowed to look).

I have often told the story of Granny and Darwin. She sometimes went on about "that wicked man Mr Darwin". To a 12 year old this could mean only one of two things—Darwin was writing about sex or religion. About this time I was given a prize for the most improved rugby player (no laughter) – The Wonders of Nature or some such title. There was a chapter on evolution and I dived on it thinking all the mysteries of sex and religion would be revealed by Darwin. What did I find? A pedantic account of the development of the horse's hoof, a pseudo-explanation of why peacocks have fancy tails, but nothing of the slightest interest to a 12 year old boy. I have resented Darwin ever since and I

think “The Origin of Species” is the dullest book I have ever read.

At one time James was having trouble with reading. Granny sat down with him for hours, ignoring his tears, trying to help him read Alice in Wonderland. I doubt if James can stomach this book now.

When I was in about the fourth form Granny had some sort of urgent surgery. We children were never told what it was for but I do remember being worried that she would die. She didn't, and once out of hospital she made a tremendous effort to get back some strength. She walked, with help, down the drive and insisted on doing one more step each day. She kept telling us that she remembered a distant aunt who took to her bed and remained bed-ridden for years. This was not going to happen to her and it didn't. Within a month or two she was back physically to where she had been.

Yet with all this I don't seem to have caught the essence of Granny. I was very fond of her, and we always looked forward to her visits. she never seemed to get cross with us.

Pop

Sadly I hardly knew my father until I was nearly nine. He was away at sea in the Merchant Navy when I was small and then on the Monowai as engineer during the war. All this time he was a distant although rather romantic figure, and having a father in Navy officer's uniform when he did come home was worth a lot at school. I think he finally came home in August 1943 on the day Alfred was born. I was going up the road to do some shopping for Mother when I met Pop coming down. He gave me sixpence (or whatever) to buy an ice cream and I dashed off in great excitement—not because of the ice cream but because Pop was back.

We always called him Pop. Mother didn't like the name but it stuck. I don't remember where it came from but I have an idea it was from a comic strip in the paper—The Katzenjammer Kids. Anyway he was always Pop to us.

Pop found it difficult to find a good job after coming home. I thought there would have been plenty of openings with so many men away but he still struggled. And this brought some shouting matches with Mother as he kept being turned down. I was terrified they would separate but all passed off in time. Pop worked as an engineer on the harbour ferries for a time and it was

always a great treat to be taken down to the engine-room although I never got over my apprehension of slipping on the gratings. Strangely I had forgotten completely about Pop working on the ferries until last year (2010) when we were in Queenstown for a medical class reunion. We went to Walter Peak on the Earnslaw and looking down into the engine-room brought it back. Later Pop worked as engineer on the harbour board tugs for some time before finally getting a job at Turners and Growers which suited him much better. He always told one story about his time on the tugs. The tug was sent to pull off a ship that was drifting on to a lee shore north of Auckland in a north easterly storm. The tow rope was fastened all right but as the tug was beginning to pull, the engine stopped. There was Pop trying to get the engine restarted as the tug and the other ship were drifting on to rocks but he managed or he and a lot of others would probably have drowned. He said it was the only time he was ever sea-sick.

Pop often took me to the football most weekends in the winter and at half-time he always bought a bag of Minties. To this day Minties remind me of football games at Carlaw Park and Eden Park. We went to rugby league at first because this had been his game but we then switched to rugby when I started to play. Pop must have been a good player himself. He played half-back but the only time his mother came to watch him play he was knocked out cold and had to be carried off on a stretcher. Or so he claimed. Later when I played rugby he and Mother nearly always came to watch and cheer from the sidelines.

The other thing I did regularly with Pop was fish.

Despite all his years at sea Pop was not interested in boating and he was never interested in getting a yacht. To him only power boats counted and it was incomprehensible that anyone could go out in a boat unless it was to fish. We did fish a lot from our little boats at Takapuna and later at Waipu.

Pop was extremely conservative. He would never even think of questioning the doctrines of the Church of England but was surprised rather than upset when I gave up all ties with religion. Church was an important facet of life for both Mother and Pop. They both attended St Peter's regularly where Pop became a church warden. Pop was a Mason and rose to be Master of the Lodge or some such title. I found one of his masonic books once and found the whole idea of Masonry laughable. I was never asked to join.

Pop joined the Navy at the outbreak of war because this was what the New Zealand government told him to do. He could never have been a conscientious objector. When the Rainbow Warrior was bombed in Auckland harbour he thought the bombers were perfectly justified as they were acting under orders.

Pop was extremely good natured and got on with nearly everyone except when Mother decided he shouldn't. He was also very modest. Although he was a very good engineer and a good mathematician he never thought this counted for much and he was much more impressed with Mother's bad French and her sketchy knowledge of English literature. I think this stemmed in part from his awe of Granny's background and of course it was fostered by Mother. She was innumerate and had not the faintest conception of science so her French and

literature were all she had to use as a stick to beat Pop with. And later some money she inherited from Granny and her (Granny's) sisters. Such money was sacrosanct and was so much more valuable than anything one could earn.

Pop's Family

From time to time we visited Pop's mother at Mangere. It was quite clear she was not up to scratch or at least not good enough for Mother. Pop's sister Tots was often there with her two children Joy and Jim; they may even have lived there for all I knew. Tots' husband had long gone and was never spoken of.

I have only the vaguest memories of Granny Sneyd. She cooked an apple pie nearly every time we were there for midday dinner which was a great treat. After dinner we would be sent out to play which usually meant climbing to the top of Mangere Mountain which was just behind the house and playing in the old Maori fortifications.

The place at Mangere had a beautiful vegetable garden behind the house. Mother would never attribute the success of the garden to anything Granny Sneyd did —it was the volcanic soil that explained everything. I don't remember when Granny Sneyd died. I have no memory of visiting her when she was dying or of going to the funeral. Perhaps I did; I simply don't remember.

We saw very little of Pop's family. Uncle Trev, his younger brother was taken prisoner of war in Greece or Crete, I forget which, and spent the rest of the war in a prisoner-of-war camp in Germany. At least some of the

time the conditions were not too bad. The prisoners were set to work in a sugar beet factory and they managed to steal enough sugar to ferment and make a rather crude alcoholic drink. They were able to supply this to the guards in exchange for small privileges.

After the war ended I remember going to meet the troopship which brought Trev home and being driven somewhere with him, perhaps Mangere, by a young woman in uniform.

Trev was determined to find someone to marry to make up for all the years lost to the war. He married Rene and I think it was a happy although childless marriage. A pity because I think they would have been good parents. For some time they came to visit us in Takapuna about once a week. Trev drank beer with Pop and Mother drank gin. I don't think Rene drank. As Mother drank more and more gin she became more and more condescending to Rene in particular. I don't know how Trev and Rene put up with it.

Despite Mother's dislike of Trev and Rene we did have one memorable holiday with them at a camping ground at Mercury Bay. Mother went on ahead of us and Pop took us boys down a couple of days later.

It was not a great success. Pop had a bad cold which made him short-tempered and Mother made no attempt to hide her dislike of Trev and Rene. Even so, Trev was very good to James and me and took us out floundering in the evening with a lantern and crude spears. I forget what occasioned it but on one of these expeditions Trev and James and I got convulsed with laughter and could barely stand.

The final rupture with Trev and Rene came at Laing's beach. Trev had given Mother and Pop some old chairs for the bach but Mother decided they were not good enough and she, with Alfred's help, set fire to them. Trev happened to come by and caught them. I don't think anything was said but Mother never forgave Trev and from that time on the family were forbidden to have anything to do with Trev or Rene. I was always fond of Trev and Rene and in later years Rosalie and I always visited them when we were in Auckland. This was a sin against the Holy Ghost—it infuriated Mother, and Pop was too cowed to take Trev's part.

Mother

I find it difficult to write dispassionately about my mother. She did not want me to marry and just before we married, I was told that if I dumped Rosalie, Mother would pay for me to go to Cambridge (the holy of holies), but if I married I would not get another penny. She never welcomed Rosalie which made any relationship with Mother difficult from the time I was in my twenties

I suspect I called her "Mum" when I was small but as far back as I can remember I called her "Mother"; anything less formal seemed inappropriate.

Mother's best days must have been when she was young. Her father was mayor of Hamilton and her mother had been born and brought up at Edmond Castle. It was his second marriage and he already had 9 children from his first marriage and he must have been over 50 when Mother was born. The family was clearly very well off. They lived in a large house in a fashionable street in Auckland and the two girls went to Diocesan. Mother often talked of her trip "Home", that is to England, and a brief visit to Paris when she was about 18. All this must have changed when she married Pop, then a motor mechanic in Mangere, one of the least fashionable suburbs and I don't think she ever got over this sudden

change in fortune. She seemed to think of herself as a wealthy Englishwoman who had fallen on bad times in the Colonies. We had the English relatives and to a lesser extent the Royal Family rammed down our throats until we were heartily sick of them. This combination of a wealthy background and marriage to a motor mechanic made it difficult for Mother to relax in company. She was condescending to her perceived social inferiors and obsequious to anyone with money or position.

I have few vivid memories of Mother when I was small. At Victoria Avenue and Stirling Street it was Granny who ruled the roost but even after we moved to Takapuna she left little to remember. She always valued education and did her best for us three boys. I remember her reading Greek myths to me at Victoria Avenue and during the war at Takapuna she read Walter Scott's novels to us by candlelight during power cuts. But although she valued education she had very little idea of what a University education entailed. In those days it was generally accepted that "bright boys did medicine" and when it was obvious I was not retarded this was the path mapped out for me. I knew no better and if I had my time over I would probably opt for a degree in physics, chemistry and maths.

Mother did finally make it to University when she was about 50 and graduated with an MA in English—no mean achievement. She took many of the same courses as Alfred which must have made University life difficult for him.

Despite her MA (or perhaps not surprisingly) she had a blank for mathematics and science, although she did of course know a great deal about medicine having

once done a short course in First Aid.

I know the war years at Takapuna must have been a very anxious time for her with Pop away in the Navy and very little money to live on which probably went a long way to explaining her fits of bad temper.

Mother was very controlling. Pop was bullied mercilessly but I resisted as best I could. She was even controlling in family prayers. "Please God, make Graham a better boy" almost made me get up and storm out of the room but my courage failed. I knew full well that a walkout would have resulted in weeks of bad temper and recriminations.

Mother was never wrong and when she made an e*x cathedra* statement there was no more to be said on the subject. "Takapuna is always 5 degrees warmer than Auckland". "I have a very sensitive ear which is why I cannot tolerate the violin" and so on.

Unlike Matilda's Aunt she did not have a strict regard for truth although in most cases I think her stories were embroidered to add a touch of verisimilitude rather than being complete fabrications. I have always wondered about the story that I once hit her over the head with a spade and nearly knocked her out. As she told the story I did it in a spirit of scientific enquiry to see what would happen. The curious thing is that I have no memory of this event and I find it hard to believe I would have forgotten anything so dramatic. Perhaps the story was not a complete fabrication but was a minor episode suitably embroidered to make a great drama.

Of course Mother was never to blame for any mishap. One instance will suffice. She parked the car in the drive at Stirling Street and must have forgotten to put

the brake on because shortly afterwards the car rolled down the drive and across the road, fortunately without doing any damage. This was not her fault. What must have happened is that I knocked the car into gear when I got out.

Neighbours

When we first came to Takapuna Mr and Mrs Hogg lived in the house next door, the one between us and the beach where the Gregorys live now. They seemed very old to me but I remember little else about them except for one drama. They had no phone and when they were expecting their first grandchild they made arrangements for their son to telephone us when the baby was born and we would run next door and get them. This sort of arrangement was very common at the time. The phone call duly came and Mrs Hogg came dashing over in great excitement; she even jumped the fence between our sections instead of going the long way round. She spoke on the phone for a moment or two and her excitement turned to dismay and she nearly collapsed. Pop ran off to get brandy. I remember clearly her saying "He's lost them both". The labour took place in a small provincial hospital and was allowed to go on too long and both mother and baby died. The Hoggs never seemed to recover.

When the Hoggs left they were replaced by the Coups. We were never close. Mr Coup I think had some sort of office job in a Government department and was a grey, colourless man. Mrs Coup was much the same. They were Methodists (first black mark) and they neither

drank nor bet (black marks 2 and 3).

My most persistent memory of Mrs Coup is of her scraping the toast. She must have burnt the toast every morning because I often woke to the sound of her scraping the toast outside the back door. Many years later when we were living in Kuching I once again woke to something that sounded exactly like Mrs Coup and her toast. It turned out to be the maid next door scrubbing the washing on a washboard. The Coups had one daughter, Valerie, who was a little younger than Alfred and hence beneath my notice. She told us not long ago that she remembered Mother regularly calling out to us boys "Luncheon is served" in her best Remuera voice.

The Coups were there for many years and ended up dying only about a year apart. Valerie, now married, moved into the house.

The flat in front of our place had a much faster turnover of people. I can only remember a few but no names. There was an old couple living with a middle-aged, unmarried (and unmarriageable) daughter. The daughter was desperately shy and her life was devoted to caring for her parents and going to church. They always referred to Pop as "Commander"; his rank during the war was lieutenant commander.

The only other tenants I remember from the early days were another couple whose names too I have forgotten. He worked on a fishing boat and from time to time brought us John Dory, a fish that Mother would eat. A great scandal erupted when it was discovered he was having an affair. The marriage broke up, he left the flat and, horror of horrors, was expelled from the lodge.

Over the road were the Jacobis. He had made a lot of money in the importing business, or so the rumour went, but he hardly ever went in to the office while we knew him. He was an alcoholic and most mornings he walked along the beach apparently trying to get rid of a hangover. On Christmas Day and occasionally at other times he drank whisky and milk with the milkman as he was doing his rounds. I don't know what finally killed him but it was one of the complications of alcoholism. Mrs Jacobi too was an alcoholic. We saw more of her than we did of him and she came over to our place from time to time to drink gin with Mother and Pop. After a few gins she became quite maudlin. She once found what she thought was a bottle of lime juice in the garage and was about to add some to her gin when Pop spotted what she was doing. He stored kerosene in that bottle and was able to stop her in time. Like her husband she died of her alcoholism but in a somewhat different manner. She went to sleep in an alcoholic stupour and set fire to the bed and herself with a cigarette. There was not much damage done to the house.

The Jacobis had two children, a son whose name I forget and a daughter Kristen. They were both a good deal older than me. Kristen was a very good swimmer and I think a NZ champion over 100 yards. She occasionally trained with James when he swam up and down the beach although she could never keep up with him.

During the war one of her boyfriends was a pilot in the air-force and on one occasion he flew low over our place and dropped a parcel attached to a crude parachute to Kristen. It missed their place and landed in the middle

of the road. James and I were sure it was a bomb and hid in the hydrangeas—a lot of good that would have done.

Further up the road were the Brights. Mr Bright was our grocer (John Bright serves you right) although his shop was past Halls Corner, quite a way when we effectively had no car. He was completely bald but I remember little else about him. Mrs Bright was cheerful but again left no lasting impression although I believe she left a lasting impression on Mr Bright. She was doing the ironing one day and decided to give Mr Bright a fright and put the iron on his bottom. He jumped the wrong way and was badly burned and could hardly sit down for weeks. There were two girls older than us and Jim who was about our age—mainly a friend of James but we played together a lot. We used to build huts in the gum tree in our garden but one Good Friday Jim fell out of the tree and broke his arm badly, a supracondylar fracture which took months to heal properly.

Then above the Brights were the Becks. He was an advertising man (Dormer Beck may ring a bell) and a very good photographer. When I was given my first camera for Christmas he was the person I asked about films and exposures and so forth and he also helped me build an enlarger from an old camera of his. Helped me is not very accurate. In fact he did practically everything and I did little more than watch. For a long time I developed and printed my photographs and enlarged many of them. I blacked out the wash-house as well as I could to make a darkroom but it was far from a professional job and I had to do my developing and printing at night. I also made up my own developers and other solutions—this was later on when I was at

Grammar. One of the transient neighbours in the flats was manager of the Auckland branch of Wilton's, the chemical supply company, and I could get all the stuff I wanted from him. Sadly all the photographs I took have gone. They must have been thrown out, because there was no trace of them when we cleaned out the house after Pop died. I suspect Mother was responsible but that is only a guess.

I also mowed the Beck's lawns for many years to make a little pocket money. They had two daughters and a son and later I fell desperately in love with one of the girls who was a little younger than me but I was too shy to do anything about it.

Such are the memories of my childhood. It was a happy time even though we had no money for luxuries. We never felt deprived and were rarely if ever bored. There was not the obvious disparity in wealth that you see now and there were few very poor and few very rich (or perhaps they were careful not to display their wealth). Sure we had no TV or computers or even record players, and sex didn't exist (officially) but we had the beach, the sea, tennis, cricket and rugby. It was a wonderful time.