

Growing up in Surrey Hills: Summer



Gill Bell

To be once more a little child

For one bright summer day. Lewis Carroll

The summer air was already warm when I tiptoed out of the bedroom I shared with my brother and sister and made my way outside. Bees were buzzing about the flowering bean plants and the white clover on the lawn. My bare feet tingled with the remembered pain of a recent sting.

The summer garden was heavy with fruit. The blood plums hung like Christmas baubles on the gnarled plum tree, and figs were slowly turning purple with the promise of sweetness. The hens crooned softly in their cages.

It was the start of the school holidays, and the whole of summer stretched before me. I perched on the garden swing and opened my book. I was just finishing *We of the Never Never* and had been immersed in the scrub and red earth of the faraway Northern Territory. I was fascinated by tales of Aboriginal people and their almost supernatural powers of tracking. I had a secret project to make my feet as tough as theirs. I had been practising walking on footpaths baked by the midday sun and on prickly grass, but my feet remained stubbornly tender.

I said a sad farewell to Elsey Station and closed the book. Inside at the breakfast table my sisters and brother were already eating their cornflakes sprinkled with sugar and topped with full-cream milk from the floral jug. Dad had already left for work.

I was full of delicious anticipation at the thought of my reading for the morning. I had a treasure heap of books from the Box Hill travelling library, which lumbered along Riversdale Rd to Wattle Park on Thursday afternoons. I would browse through the shelves, sniffing the exciting odour of the books. I had recently graduated from Enid Blyton to Edith Nesbitt, and this morning I was about to enter the exotic world of the *Phoenix and the Carpet*.

Dishes dried and bed made, I headed outside again, book in hand, to my very favourite spot to read: the oak tree. This was my own faraway tree, a threshold to magic. I swung up to my reading branch and settled my back against the trunk. I

gazed up at the scalloped edges of the soft green leaves, bobbing gently in the warm breeze. Inside the house Mum would be closing windows and drawing blinds against the first real heat of summer.

We children moved easily through the heat but our mother fought it, becoming flushed and irritable with the effort. Gus, our black and white cocker spaniel, would spend hot days sprawled on the cool concrete floor of the outside laundry.

Lunch was a simple meal of bread - slices cut from the white loaf delivered that morning - and Kraft cheese or peanut butter.

In the afternoon my older sister and I played stilts in the street. Dad had attached footrests to two simple wooden poles and we practised walking tall like the grown-ups. The day was growing steadily warmer and my skin became flushed and prickly, but there was no thought of sunscreen or of taking shelter.

In those far-off days the neighbours were extended family. As five o'clock approached I trotted into the Longs' house to watch the wonder of a flickering black and white TV. My favourite shows were Whirlybirds, starring law enforcers in a helicopter, and Superman, starring a chunky-looking Clark Kent. Kind Mrs Long never complained about the extra children underfoot while she was trying to get dinner.

Our evening meal made little concession to the heat. Tonight, it was golden salted cod in a cheese sauce with mashed potatoes, and apple crumble for dessert.

In the long evening I took Mum's old bicycle and rode dreamily up and down the street. In all my activities that day I had been rehearsing adulthood: growing taller, travelling away and finding adventures. Now my heart yearns for that golden day.

The cicadas started their shrill call as dusk fell and lights came on in the neighbouring houses. I wheeled the bike into the garage and said goodnight to the setting sun. Another exquisite day of my childhood had passed.