

# MY FIRST HOLIDAY

By

Reg. A. Watson

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Reg with Black Bob at the Bothwell football.

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I was somewhat a peculiar lad. I was fifteen when an offer came to spend a weekend in the midlands historic town of Bothwell. I grabbed it. Even though it was winter, (June school holidays) it did not seem to perturb me in the least. Anyone who knows Bothwell and the Highland area is well aware that June/July can be brutally cold, foggy, drizzly and plenty of sleet.

I say “peculiar”, as I have always loved history and even as a very young boy when we went family picnicking, the first thing I would search out would be the local cemetery to read the tombstones. To spend time at old Bothwell among the ruins, cemeteries, old churches and houses, let alone roam alone among the remote paddocks, sounded like paradise to me. That none of my few friends felt the same way did not in the least appear to me to be a strange thing. I was happy in my peculiarity and that was that.

I had never been away from home up until that time. To spend a week separated from the family was somewhat of a challenge at first. I was a quiet, shy lad, very reserved and very conservative. Being amongst strangers gave me an uneasy feeling and it usually took some time for me to warm to them. Nonetheless, the opportunity to visit this somewhat remote village was all too tempting, which I accepted when my mother placed it before me. The family who were to host me was related by marriage to my mother, but I had not met them and whereas they were related to my mother, they were not to me. My mother’s first husband had been killed in an accident and she married secondly to my father. I also was aware that my father did not like mother’s first husband’s family, so going to spend some time with them was a touchy affair. It was strange too, as I had a half brother and two half sisters, who would be nephew and nieces to the couple at Bothwell, so why was the invitation extended to me? Mother must have known what I was pondering on as all she said was that she knew “*I liked history*” and because “*I was not of that line, it would be good for me to get to know them*”. Despite being apprehensive over this dubious justification my eagerness to stop in the countryside of Bothwell overrode any opposition that I may have felt at the time. I had just started a new high school during that year and it had taken some months for me to settle down into the strange environment. It was a small church school and quite different to anything that I had experienced in my limited life. Nonetheless, settled down I had, but it was mid year holidays so a week of the fortnight would be filled in by something ‘different’. I had envisaged myself one day becoming a writer and I was an ardent reader, so packing several books into my bag, such as (the only one I can remember) “Devil Water” by Anya Seton – a marvellous historic novel of the Jacobite period – (remembering I was only 15 years) I was taken into the city of Hobart, by my mother to the bus depot, from whence I would be transported to Bothwell by coach.

Motor coaches in those days left from Murray Street and were somewhat ill kept vehicles particularly those on the country route. I was leaving on the Friday, the 3 pm trip, and it would take an hour and a half at least. Most of the passengers were quite young returning for the weekend from boarding school, but by memory there were a good number of seats vacant and it was not long before I had found a

window seat and was glad to be off. Mother had packed for me, so no doubt there were plenty of underwear, hankies, clean shirts and the like, besides singlets (“*you must always keep your chest warm*”).

The trip was a slow affair, the bus not in the best repair and in essence it was a long one. Once over the Bridgwater Bridge we hit the Midland Highway, turning off at Melton Mowbray to the climb and then finally opening up on the long stretch to Bothwell. As we neared an apprehension came over me. My enthusiasm subsided and I began to have a foreboding. After all, just who were these people? I’ve never met them. They were no relatives of mine, perhaps they would be unkind to me; no, they would not have invited me otherwise. Where did they live? In the village or on a farm? In what type of house? Did they have television, which was a big thing then, as it had not long arrived in Tasmania? Black and white it may have been, but it was jolly entertaining.

The bus slowly pulled into the dim town of Bothwell. Inspired by historic atmosphere I may have been, but even to my mind, it was a depressing sight. It was about 5pm before we did and it was drizzling, but ever so dark and cold. Outside Bothwell’s Castle Hotel the vehicle stopped, the door opened by a not interested bus driver and the passengers disembarked, me somewhere at the end. I stepped out and followed the driver to the side panel where he began passing out the bags. At the same time I looked for my hosts, but found no one waiting for me. I had neither hat nor umbrella. I was too young to go into the hotel, so I just stood there after taking delivery of my bag, waiting. By now the other passengers had been picked up by vehicles or scampered away somewhere.

“*Anyone here to meet you lad?*” asked the driver.

“*I-I thought so. I hope they haven’t forgotten,*” I answered, starting to shiver for I had worn a smart pair of trousers, an open-neck white shirt, with a v-collar grey jumper.

“*Who are to meet you son? What’s their name?*”

For a moment I had forgotten, not taking particular attention to anything mentioned by my mother. I naturally thought they would be there to greet me asking me by name. This unexpected development in such foul weather, quite threw me. My brain raced, “*I...dunno...I mean, I think Rob...Robinson...no, that’s not it, Robertsons, yes, that’s it Robertson, the Robertsons.*”

“*Old Jock Robertson and his missus going to pick you up,*” he said as a statement given with surprise rather than a question. He now began to raise his voice as one does above the rain.

“*Well I don’t see them here yet, best you get back on the bus for awhile, I don’t have to go just for a tick, going inside the hotel for a ...well, anyway, I will lever the door open and you can sit inside.*”

I gave him my thanks and re-entered the warm, dry safe interior of the bus, but my mind was fretting. What if they don’t turn up and why haven’t they? Was it all a nasty mistake? Had they or I got the wrong date? Did mum?

I waited and waited and then I saw the bus driver return. It was still raining and it was darker then ever. He popped his head inside, “*Well son, I dunno what to do with you.*” I could smell the odour of beer on his breath, “*I’m off home now, and the misses will have made tea. Maybe best to just stand inside the foyer of the pub until old Jock Robertson comes along and picks you. I’ll tell Pete, the barman that you’ll be hangin’ around a bit.*”

“*Say if he’s forgotten?*” I asked sensing a man with some concern over my welfare.

*“Well, you can’t ring them, he’s got no phone on. Maybe phone back home if he doesn’t turn up soon.”*

There was no alternative, so following the bus-driver I entered the cold, dark foyer. He left me there and returned after telling Pete that I was in the foyer and may have to use the phone later on, if Jock didn’t come *“to pick me up”*. He tapped me on the shoulder, wished me the best and ran off to the bus. Before long he was gone. I was alone and by this time, near 6pm I was somewhat more than peeved. Voices of laughter came from within the bar of the hotel, a place of warmth and friendliness, and a place where I was barred because of my age. I told myself if they did not come, I would ring home at 7pm, stop the night at the hotel and then take off home tomorrow on the next returning bus, if one was running. Having settled with this alternative and back-up plan I was a little more contented.

D-Day time was approaching. 7pm. I put my hand in my pocket looking for the necessary two shillings to make the public call home, but as I did a vehicle pulled up. I looked out barely able to make the details in this shocking weather. The vehicle was old; in fact it was a small lorry, an old Ford, with a front cabin and a tray at its back. The lights went off and a man jumped out wearing a large weather beaten hat. He walked, not ran, towards the hotel and entered. He saw me waiting. *“You Reg?”* he inquired. My eyes opened wide, *“yes,”* I said quietly.

*“I’m Jock.”* There was no apology for being late or explanation.

*“Hhm,”* he uttered looking me up and down. *“Wait here, I’m just going to have a quick drink before we head back home.”*

There was no suggestion of *‘get in the lorry’* or *‘did you have a good trip’* or anything of that nature. I waited and waited and thought, if he is to be that much longer, I’m going to go home the first thing next morning. Finally he returned, with a *“let’s go”*. I followed him, jumping in the other side. Without a further word we were off and not a word was said between us. We sped out of the village along the road, to a place called Hollow Tree. Somewhere about four miles distant from the village, we pulled off the road and faced a paddock gate. Then he spoke, *“Open the gate for us, will ya?”* I was not a country boy, so when I tackled opening the thing it took me some minutes to learn how to do so with it still raining. I pulled back the gate and went through, he shouting to me to shut it after him. I did so, alighted the lorry once more and again we sped off over a bumpy country road. Then there was a second gate, and later a third gate, which I had to open and shut. After about another four miles in from the main road I saw that we were approaching a two storey sand stone dwelling. This must be the house at long last. By now, I was absolutely drenched.

The vehicle stopped and the lights went off. He jumped out and walked towards the house. I did not know what to do; was this where I was to stay for the next week? Or was he just visiting someone on the way home? Realizing I had not followed, he quickly turned to me and yelled, *“Well come on.”* I grabbed my bag, jumped from the lorry and walked towards the door where he had entered before me, not waiting. When I did so, I was peering at a number of strange faces, which was a very unsettling experience for a boy of fifteen or at any age for that matter. However, at least the room was warm and sheltered. A lady approached,

*“Reg me boy,”* she placed her arm around my wet shoulder. Here was some comfort. *“My you’re drenched. Come closer to the fire and change clothes in a minute. Now, Reg, as far as I am concerned, you are one of us (meaning I was not really related) so while you are here, I look upon you as family”*. I muttered something like *‘thanks’* and tried to smile, but it was not altogether a good introduction.

Jock's wife, my mother's sister-in-law was 'Flo' and, if you like, took a shine to me. She introduced me to the others, names skipped around me, it all too fast for me to catch on. There were four. The eldest was a girl about 16 years, who it was clear, took no interest in me, perhaps apprising that I was just another junior boy, something to be held in contempt. The second oldest was a boy my age, but it was also clear that he considered me a bit of a 'dandy'. He reminded me of the artful dodger from the story *Oliver Twist*, country-wise and tough. The other two were a boy about eight years and a girl about six. While Aunt Flo, as she insisted that I call her, was fair, Jock who spoke only in gruff terms, was dark, although with deep blue eyes, with mainly the children taking after the father, particularly the eldest boy, whose name ended up being Robert (Bob) the other boy Glenn with the eldest girl Glenda, the younger being Carol.

*"Now change those clothes dear before you get the death of a cold. Bob take Reg to his room and show him where he sleeps. We'll have tea when you're finished,"* Aunt Flo said.

Bob grunted sulkily and juttied out his jaw, which meant *'follow me'*. I did so carrying my bag with me. Once we left the main kitchen/dining area, into the passage it was bitterly cold, then into his bedroom. He flicked the light switch on. It was small and cluttered. *"Over there,"* he pointed, clearly not taking much pleasure in having me in his domain. I dropped my bag on to the bed and opened it, looking for dry suitable clothes. I took off my soaking shirt and singlet, looking around for something to dry my hair and myself. *"Is there a towel I could use?"* I asked. He groaned and disappeared, leaving me wondering whether my request was to be answered. In a second or two he returned and threw a well-used and a thin multi-stripped towel to me. I caught it in the process and rubbed myself vigorously. I then knew I would have to take off my trousers and even my underwear and not being used to getting undressed in front of anyone I turned to see if he was still there, which he was. I did not know how to proceed; wait until he got the hint and stand there shivering in completely wet trousers and underpants (as we called them in those days) or go to it. Unable to stand being uncomfortable any longer I undid my belt and unzipped my trousers and began to take my strides off. With this he departed, much to my relief. After he had gone, I dried my body. I dressed and returned to the kitchen/dining room where we were going to eat.

*"Now Bob, have you shown Reg where to wash up?"* Flo asked. Bob groaned some more and pursed his lips, giving the impression that all was an ordeal. Again, he led the way and showed me into an incredibly cold and old bathroom with an equally old toilet with a chain overhanging its bowl. *"This is where you wash up and what we use as a shit house,"* he said. I was shocked at the expression; it was just something we did not use at home. Mother would be appalled. I said nothing, having distinct feelings that my holiday in the country was to be more of a pain than a time of enjoyment. I washed my hands and returned for tea.

I being the youngest of my family, the baby so to speak, there was no doubt I was somewhat spoilt. In this regard, I was fussy with my eating habits and vegetables were not one of my favourites. Usually my likes and dislikes were catered for by my doting mother, with the understanding, which I knew even at an early age, she had the distinct belief that *"Reg could do no wrong"*.

Tea was served at the Robertsons on a long laminex red table with Jock naturally at the head of the table, the children to either side and Flo opposite Jock. The eldest girl helped serve and there was no doubt she also helped cook, together with Carol. Whether they went to school or not, at this stage, I did not know. To me

it all seemed to be out of a page of the dark ages, even though there was blaring in the background a wireless (as the radio was called then). The station was on ABC as I learnt afterwards the commercial stations from Hobart, the more popular ones such as 7HO and 7HT, could not be picked up on the set. I could not see a television anywhere, nor as I was told, a phone. The plates were big as were the meals that came steaming hot, but much to my chagrin, plenty of vegetables. Not wanting to give a wrong impression at this early stage, I thought I'd better not be selective in what to eat, but eat exactly as the others did. Jock ignored me during the whole meal. I got the sense that to him, I did not exist. The children acted as though also I was not there, although Bob kept looking in my direction from time to time to see if I was still there or if I was real. It was only Flo who spoke to me, asking me about my mother, my home, my school life and that she hoped I would enjoy it while I was there at the farm. I found that the family were fast eaters, including Flo as I was only half way through when I looked up and they had all finished and were looking at me.

*"It's all right dear, take your time,"* Flo said. I was uncomfortable, plodding along eating while they all watched and waited. It seemed like hours before I had finished. Normally I would not have eaten so much and I felt bloated. I hoped there would be no desserts and there wasn't nor a hot drink. We were given something like watered cordial. As there was no television the night was spent with the other children, (I feeling terribly left out), yelling until it was time to go to bed at about 10pm. It was an embarrassing situation for one who had led such a sheltered and private life. There was one toilet and everyone took his or her turn. I was the last and took my turn, turning off the bathroom light fumbling my way to the bedroom. Bob was already in bed reading a comic book, *The Phantom* I recall, but even though the room was shockingly cold he wore only a short-sleeved singlet covering his upper half. The beds were close together so I had the embarrassing situation where I had to change from my clothes to my pyjamas. The question again was, as I was undressing, should I take off my underpants in front of Bob or not? I chose not to and slipped on my Pyjama bottoms and jumped into bed. It was absolutely freezing. The sheets, at least there were sheets, acted like icicles and it seemed to take ages for the bed to eventually warm up. I thought back on the day. I really wished not to have come. I was unaware of course, what lay ahead.

The following morning was Saturday. Bob roused first, waking me. My sleep had been fitful and I turned, watching him as he rose. He was stocky, tall and well proportioned. My first thought was, that I would hate to get into a fight with him. He had farmer's hands, large, and one could see by his arms that they were powerful for a boy of 15 years. Even though he wore just a short sleeved singlet and white underpants (as we did in those days) he didn't shiver with the cold, but dressed quickly into a pair of jeans, woollen shirt and an old frayed jumper. He turned to me, *"well you gittin' up or you're going to stay there all day?"*

I pulled myself up on one elbow and parted the curtain behind me, which covered a window. I peered out, the rain had stopped, but the mist was thick and everything was grey. *"Yeah sure I'm getting up,"* I replied while looking outside, but something took my attention. I squinted and looked with greater effort. *"What's that out there?"* I asked.

*"Wot's wot?"* he barked.

At a distance of some tens of yards, a shadowy figure blending in with the thick, haunting mist appeared, almost an apparition. *"That figure there; it's a woman, what's she doing out there on a morning like this?"*

For some unknown reason this brought a terse and excited response from Bob. *“Wot are you talking about, there’s nothin’ there!”*

*“Yes, there is, look. She’s peering at us, it’s quite strange really, very peculiar. The way she’s dressed...”*

*“I tell ya there’s no one there, you silly coot!”* And with that he bounded on to my bed and drew the curtains. I was naturally surprised by his action and sensed that he was almost afraid. And why would he be re-acting so oddly because of someone being outside? He left the bedroom and once gone, I looked out the window again, but whoever it was, had gone too. I was puzzled. It was indeed a ladies’ face, but it looked strained, as though, yes, she had a look of horror. *I must ask Aunt Flo*, I said to myself.

I dressed quickly. Again, it was bitterly cold. I entered the passageway, with its high ceilings and seeing the bathroom/toilet was free, instantly took the opportunity to use it before someone else captured it. I then made my way to the kitchen, where I was greeted by Aunt Flo, with the others momentarily looking up at me when I entered, but then continued eating their breakfast.

I conversed with Aunt Flo, after saying *‘good morning’* to Uncle Jock, who did the usual grunt. I nodded to the others. Our talk was about normal stuff, how cold it was and did you have a good sleep and all that. Aunt Flo said that seeing that it was Saturday, after Bob finished his morning chores, (*“perhaps you can give him a hand Reg, and you’ll be able to see the farm better that way”*) he could take me to the local football match at Bothwell. Bob looked up and sighed. Then I asked,

*“Aunt Flo when I woke up this morning, I looked out the window and saw this lady, some distance away, looking at me.”*

All stopped eating. Flo turned to look at me. I, in turn looked at them, knowing that whatever I said had grabbed their attention. Even Jock stopped eating his weatbix. Flo regained herself, *“I’m sure you’re mistaken dear, no doubt the mist played tricks on your eyes.”*

*“No, there was definitely...”*

*“Now Reg, I don’t want to hear another word about it. As I said, I am sure it was all a mistake on your part. More toast?”*

I sensed that Aunt Flo was very kind, but even at the age of 15 years I thought she was a bit simple, not in a mental way, but not a deep thinker.

*“Finish up your breakfast and go with Bob. You’ll like that.”*

I was not too sure whether I would or would not. Certainly Bob gave the impression he did not want me around. Where were my history inspections, walks and tours? And I did see a lady outside, no matter what everyone thinks.

We finished our breakfast, I in silence, but learning a lot. The house was old, the only heating, thank goodness, was a blazing fire in the kitchen/dining room area. The walls were painted white and I kept on looking at the high ceilings, as I had never seen such in all my life. It seemed that Uncle Jock did not own the farm, but was the farm manager of the property, which was owned by the locals of Hollow Tree, the Hallett family.

As duly ordered I followed Bob outside and like a puppy did so wherever he went. I tried to start conversation, but all I got was a grunt. There were many chores for him to do, feed the animals and clean up after them. In an effort to break the ice, so to speak, I helped, by grabbing a spade and shoving the horse manure wherever he was shoving it. But it did no good. I was not welcomed and that was that. How I was going to survive a whole week was what I was concerned about. It is not easy being fifteen years. One is between that age of being totally depended upon adults and

not being not totally independent of them. At fifteen, one simply could not get in his car and scoot off, putting everything down to a bad mistake, nor could I just say “tough titties” and hitch-hike a ride back to Hobart. No, like it or not, I was destined to stay for another six days.

The mist had now lifted and although it was still wet, the sun had actually decided to make an appearance and while it was welcomed, there was little warmth in it. I had dressed snugly and with all the physical work I had undertaken, I actually took off my woollen jumper.

The morning went swiftly, however and we returned to the large two-storey, colonial sand stone house for dinner. (now a-days we call it ‘lunch’). Flo had meat pies for us and about 1pm Jock asked whether we were ready. I was not too sure for what, but Bob said he was and as I was supposed to accompany him, I tagged along. Into the old lorry we sat, all on the front seat of the cabin, which in normal circumstances would have been rather snug. Given the present situation, it was more than uncomfortable. Jock said nothing during the course of the bumpy trip into Bothwell, Bob sat there scowling and I, being on the edge of the seat had to open the three gates leading to the main road.

Once at Bothwell, Jock parked the vehicle with all three of us then entering the football ground, after paying some nominal fee the privilege to do so. I paid for myself. Jock left us and I had the distinct belief he headed straight to the beer pavilion. Bob walked on and by this time I had enough of following him like a dog, so I dropped back, letting him go. I don’t mind football and being by myself gave me a respite from his sullenness and downright rudeness. I can’t remember who Bothwell was playing, after all it was many years ago. After a while as I was watching the match leaning against the rail, I saw Bob come along with a number of his friends. They were smoking and after spying me headed in my direction. I turned around and greeted him by saying, “*Bob.*” I think he and his cobbles had somehow got hold of some liquor and obviously as youths do, consumed quite a bit.

“*Black Bob, so this is your pansy friend you told us about,*” said one of his mates, meaning me.

I wondered why he called him ‘Black’ Bob, but I did not have time to ponder on this aspect as the speaker started pushing my shoulder. There were two others locals besides Bob. “*He ain’t a friend of mine, not even a cousin He’s only stoppin’ with us.*”

I was not sure why Bob had taken a dislike to me, as I had never met the chap before in my life. I can only say that he considered me ‘*different*’ which was a real cause to show contempt towards me and that my appearance was perhaps not ‘*country-fied*’ enough for him. In anycase I was to be considered easy prey.

The chap who shoved me did so again. He was a big boy and obviously strong. The other three, which included Bob, jeered me and encouraged each other on. In the event he actually knocked me down and seeing that he had the upper-hand pounced on me, no doubt with the intention of giving me a thorough thrashing which will show once and for all who is superior, the Bothwell boys or not? Well, I was not tall nor was I, what could be called, well built. However, I was surprisingly strong and I knew it. In this respect I was very much like my father, who though only about 5’6” was also strong, if not powerful. And whilst I was rather quiet in my manner, keeping to myself and very reserved, if not shy I always believed in self-defence - like my father, I also had a very bad temper inherited from my father. Once this fellow was upon me, my immediate reaction was to fight back and with a great thrust, much to his surprise and to no doubt everyone’s else’s, I threw him off and after doing so,

actually got the better of him, to such an extent that he called it off. It was quite apparent that I was not to be the push-over they thought I was going to be. The four went off, laughing, with Bob looking back at me with an expression of bewilderment.

The rest of the afternoon I was left alone and kept my eye on Jock to see when he was to make a move to take off home. The game finished and I espied Jock, bit worse for wear, heading towards the lorry. This was my cue, so I followed him. He got in the cabin as I did. *"Where's Bob?"* he asked. Just as he said this, Bob jumped in too.

We arrived home just as it was getting dark, after Bob, who was last in the cabin, had the chore of opening the three gates. Flo told Bob to feed the animals before having tea and that perhaps I could give him a hand. I walked side by side with him on the way to the chook pen.

*"You gave Titch a run for his money,"* he said.

*"Who?"* I asked.

*"Titch. The fellow who was bullying you."*

*"Oh that. No big deal."*

*"Still you gave him something to think about. I'd be lying to say that I was not expecting it. You did well."*

I felt flattered that he would think so and sensed a change in his attitude towards me. *"Why did he call you 'black' bob?"* I asked.

*"He reckons I'm tarred with the black brush."*

I did not have a clue to what he was referring to, so I said, *"What's that mean?"*

*"That I have abbo blood in me. I reckon I do, I think it comes from dad's side. Bit of the old aborigine. So they call me 'black' bob"*

*"Oh,"* was I said, not very interested. The main thing was that the ice had been broken and from that moment on, Bob was my friend.

The following day, Sunday, was a day off for everyone. The Robertsons were not a church going family, so Bob had decided to take me exploring. Being Sunday we slept a little longer than normal and by the time I had arisen the sun was high in the sky, even though the morning was chilly. I had forgotten all about the strange experience I had the previous morning.

*"Did you know Reg that Martin Cash held up this house at one time?"* said Flo.

*"The bushranger?"* I asked, my eyes lighting up.

*"Yep. Sure did. Held up the family with his gang and stole things. No one got hurt. In this very house."*

I was absolutely dumbfounded. This was what I wanted to experience. To actually be and live in where history took place. Imagine Martin Cash sticking up this house. I grieved for not living in those days, everything is so tame now a days.

*"Lots of history around these parts, anyway, Bob will show you around."*

We gulped down our breakfast and before long Bob was leading me, who knows where? Over paddocks through gates, across streams. By now we were on the best of terms...*"take ya huntin' and fishin' the next few days,"* he said.

Being a city boy, I'd never fired a gun in my life, but didn't want to say so.

*"Good,"* I replied.

*"Ever been fishin' and huntin'?"*

*"Not hunting, no. Fishing I have. I remember I fished off the jetty at Triabunna once and got five flathead."*

*“Well we’ll fish in the Clyde River, might get some trout. Plenty of eels there. Shoot a wallaby or two or maybe a great grey kangaroo. Plenty of rabbits and hares about. Damn nuisance.”*

So we talked, walked and rested. He asked me many things of my life and it was clear that he was warming to me and I in turn to this boy of the bush; this boy who was in the full sense of the word a complete boy. He was the type they would send to war, become a hero, return with a leg off and be expected to bear it.

*“Have you a girl friend?”*

I thought about it. *“No, not really,”* I said rather melancholy. I was in love with Vicki, a girl from school, but it was one of those loves from ‘afar’ and was not returned.

*“What about you?”* I asked.

*“Oh, I have had many a romp in the hay with the village girls,”* he replied.

I looked at him, not sure whether he was ‘pulling me leg’ or not, as the expression goes. The he said...

*“I was up at Elendale the other day with dad walking along the road, when this car went slowly passed and this girl sang out to me, ‘you have a nice bum’.”*

I spontaneously laughed at this, again not sure whether he was telling me the truth or not. He changed the subject rather quickly,

*“Been horse ridin’?”*

*“Never.”*

*“Well, we’ll put that on the programme as well.”*

It was also quite clear that he was becoming protective of me. He was in his world, this was where he was dominant and I, who was so green and obviously so naïve, would need guidance.

Eventually we began making our way back to the house by another route. It wasn’t long before we came across, what was to me with my historical bent, an amazing find; a house in ruins. It was a large bungalow, clearly colonial and quite substantial. We walked inside where hunters and campers had been. Walls had been written on and what must have been wonderful French doors were smashed. Where once impressive chandeliers hung were now gaping holes in the ceilings. I moved from room to room in awe. The single story structure had at one time a veranda all around it, but the floorboards had disintegrated. *“Who owned this?”* I asked Bob.

*“Dunno, mum will tell ya.”*

When we left the ruined home and continued, we came upon another great find, situated in the middle of nowhere. A sand stone chapel. Clearly Bob had seen it a thousand times and showed no interest whatsoever. I walked up to it, enthralled and read the sign, *“St James”*. Walking further to the door, I found to my delight that it opened. I walked inside. The chapel was a functioning chapel as it was reasonably well kept. I looked at Bob, who seemed to be somewhat bored, but he knew what I was going to ask... *“Mum will tell ya about it.”*

I looked to the ceiling and found pigeons flying around and in different locations of the loft one could see a massive build-up of their dung. *Half used, half neglected,* I mused.

We did return to the house and immediately I asked Aunt Flo the history of what we discovered. It turned out that early pioneer, Captain Langdon, built the bungalow and it was he who called the property *Montacute*. The church or chapel, *St James*, was also built by the captain and was still used on occasions for services, a wedding or christening by the Hallett family or those associated with them in some way.

"I'd like to go into Bothwell soon, Aunt Flo and take a good look at the village," I said.

"Tomorrow Reg. Do it tomorrow, Jock goes in every Monday for a couple of hours, so go with him and look around while he's busy."

I looked at Bob. "All right our huntin' and fishin' can leave off until Tuesday," he said.

On the Monday I did go into Bothwell village with Jock. Bob stayed at home, having seen Bothwell a million times. Once in the village Bob left me to do my own thing and said he'd be back in a couple of hours. I was not sure what he was to do, see some people, I suppose, although when I eventually met up with him to return, the smell of beer was again strong on his breath. In the meantime, I was left alone. This allowed me to wander about as I wished, visiting the old Presbyterian Church and its cemetery then wander down to the Church of England church, St Michael's and All Angels and explore that. It was a large beautiful church, well kept. After that it was lunch time, so I walked over to the corner shop next to the hotel and brought a National Pie, taking it to the central park, sat down at the bench and ate it. It was all very peaceful. Though chilly, it was sunny and without any breeze. I was in my element, strange I suspect most would think for a 15 year old boy.

After lunch I visited the local library in Elizabeth Street and loving books I searched its shelves. I primarily went to the Tasmania section, seeking out material on the local district. There were several and after scanning them, I pulled out one, which I thought was the best, and took it to a table and read. I think it was simply called "*The History of Bothwell and District*" –can't remember by who – and it was a stapled soft cover of about 100 or so pages. It was all very interesting, giving a brief history of the major buildings, houses, farms and families, including little episodes which happened in the colonial period, like a duel in the old cemetery, between the original Presbyterian Minister and my friend, the late Captain Langdon of Montacute. I found that interesting. Then what caught my eye was a bit on where I was staying, *Sherwood House*. The usual thing, when it was built, and yes, indeed bushranger, Martin Cash and his gang, Jones and Kavanah, held it up. Then there was a tit-bit, which really caught my eye and made the hairs on my neck rise. "*There is a tale given by the old pioneers of a ghost which appears on cold misty mornings,*" so the book said. "*The ghost it seems is that of Catherine Morgan who was a daughter of one of the leading settlers of the society. Morgan being her married name. Her husband, a man who had served the army in India retired to Van Diemen's Land and had settled at Clyde River, near his wife's parents.*" All this was most interesting...it continued..."*It would seem that the said gentleman was prone to drink and when drunk was violently jealous of his pretty young wife. On this occasion he believed his wife, rightly or wrongly, had committed adultery with someone within the village. Even though she denied the accusation, he plunged the point of his sabre into her back. Her scream of pain and shock echoed throughout the valley, bringing out the residents of Sherwood to see what was going on. By the time they got to the young lady, she was already dead. Despite extensive searches for the culprit, her husband was never found. Thus the crime goes unpunished. Catherine Morgan is buried in the local cemetery. It is said that when the atmospheric conditions are right, her image is manifested and a look of sheer horror can be seen on her tragic countenance. So it goes. Whether it is true or not I will leave it up to the reader to decide.*" Then the work went on to another aspect of the local history.

I put the book down. This is exactly what I saw on the first morning I was there. But why had the others denied it? I had seen an apparition; a ghost. The thing

looked at me, as though still alive, looking direct into my eyes as though pleading. What was it all about? While fascinated with the tale, I was also un-nerved by it. After all, such things just don't happen and to be frank, it was all very creepy. I left the library, walking back to the cemetery in an attempt to find Catherine's tombstone. Look as hard as I did, I did not find it. I surmised the crime occurred about 120 years previously, making it during the 1840s. I left the burial yard puzzled and when walking back to the park I saw Jock waiting for me. It was time to go. I jumped up on the cabin seat without a word, not even looking at him, totally absorbed in my thoughts. Jock was far from being a talkative one and it was clear he had been drinking, even so, when asked to open the gates I did mechanically. I once saw him looking with a furrowed brow, wondering perhaps what was ailing me. I was very quiet for the rest of the afternoon and evening. Bob and I had a game of draughts, which I was good at, and it was a tussle to see who was to eventually win after playing three games all. I promised him that next time we met I would teach him chess. It was unfortunate that no chess was available within the house. We finally went to bed.

I sat up on the bed on one elbow and said, "*Bob you know the other morning when I said I thought I saw something outside the window here, well, today in the library I read this book, see, and it described exactly what I saw. Don't you think that strange and more than a coincidence?*"

I looked at Bob. I tried to develop conversation, but it was evident that he was not interested. He told me to go to sleep once again and getting the hint, I went quiet.

The next few days were jems. I began to blend in well and slowly the family warmed to me. Bob and I became best of friends. There were times where he had to attend to his farm chores, during which I helped. On another occasion he did indeed take me shooting, giving me a single shot bolt action .22. These were the glorious free days before licences were required by the now ever present interfering and greedy government. I shot at things, like rabbits mainly, but never hit anything. Nonetheless, it was fun. Bob was a good shot and bagged a few rabbits and a hare. He also took me fishing and got a number of eels. Over all it was all jolly good fun. Most days we roamed the country with complete abandonment, he knowing exactly where to go. The weather was good, although towards the end of the week, clouds gathered promising bad weather. I never spoke of my discovery at the library again either to Bob or to other members of the family. It was clear to me that it was a subject not to be mentioned. It was all very strange.

Aunt Flo was always her merry, friendly self and treated me like a son. Sullen, brooding Jock was even moved to say '*good morning*' to me at one time, a development I took as progressive. At night we would play cards, draughts and board games. As said there was no television, but as night followed night it did not seem to matter. There was always a blazing fire and while the rest of the house was cold, one adapted very quickly to the environment.

On the Friday the weather did indeed deteriorate. Grey thick clouds made it dark at four o'clock and a burst of rain sent us indoors. It poured and poured and lying in bed I heard it pelt furiously on the roof. It is always a good feeling listening to rain at night while lying warm in bed. One more night and I would be leaving. In time I fell asleep only to be awoken in the morning when the house stirred. I listened. The rain had stopped. Bob got out of bed first as he always did and always in singlet and underpants. I suppose he wondered about me all the time wearing pyjamas. Perhaps he thought I was soft or that's what they did in the suburbs. He left the room. I rose and looked out the window to see what type of day it was. It had indeed

stopped raining, but it was still grey and grim, a typical winter's day in the highlands. The mist again rose spookily as though from a page torn from years ago, from another era. It was then that I saw the apparition, the same that I had seen nearly a week ago. The terrible look of horror upon the face which in turn was looking at me. It was as though it was beckoning me. I watched fascinated. The face was that of a young woman and then I saw it, the sabre fall down upon her putting an end to her young life and I actually heard her scream, powerful and piecing. I looked around. Bob had re-entered the room, his face ashen. *"You heard it too!"* I exclaimed. *"Can you see her?"* He did not reply. I looked again, but the spectre had gone. *"Tell me you saw and heard it too,"* I asked.

*"All right, all right, I saw her or it, or whatever it is and heard the creature's scream."*

*"Then why did you not tell me before?"* I pleaded.

*"The whole thing gives me the creeps, it is evil."* I saw him tremble and found it difficult to equate this robust boy who seemed to be afraid of nothing, in fear of the scene played before us. He knew my thoughts, *"How would you like this thing outside your window every time it gets misty? A murder enacted, having to put up with that horrific scream, not knowing why or whenever it is going to end. It's all right for you with your romantic nature and tomorrow you'll be gone, but I've...we've got to live with it, sometimes day after day, month after month, year after year, perhaps forever."*

It was all very confusing to me. Ghosts just do not exist, yet, I have seen one and indeed heard its tragic scream and Bob has admitted that he saw it too, not just once, but many times.

*"All right,"* he said. *"I'll tell mum what has happened."*

I dressed quickly and entered the kitchen with Bob. They all looked at me, including Jock. I guessed that they all heard the scream. Flo spoke, *"Yes Reg we heard it as you did and I dare say you saw it, whatever it was and is. I suppose you are wondering why we made out it did not exist. All I can say is this, we have to live with it and for our own sanity we try to ignore it as much as we can. Glenn and Carol are petrified of it, Glenda and Bob have chosen to live with it the best they can."*

Jock grunted in agreement.

*"Her husband – and I take it the ghost is of the murdered Morgan girl – was never found after killing her?"* I asked.

Flo sighed. *"It's a grisly tale happened so many years ago. I don't know the full story, it gives me the creeps, only that, as I understand it, no he was never found and what happened to him I just don't know."*

*"I suppose that is why she has never moved on, her spirit I mean. Because he was never brought to justice for her murder,"* I commented.

The greatest surprise was when Jock spoke. *"Old Mr Hallett says the man took to the bush, making his way to Hobart Town. Old folks say he made his way back to England aboard one of the many vessels in Hobart in those days. I don't know for sure. In anycase it is a sad bad business and evil."*

There was no doubting that. *"Let's forget about it and have breakfast,"* Jock added.

It was Saturday and I was to return on the 11am bus to Hobart the following day. Bob had his Saturday morning chores to do and I accompanied him. I was quiet most of the time, thinking about the peculiar happenings. Bob knew that and kept looking at me. *"Bob,"* I said, *"let's go where the murder took place and explore around after dinner"* (which in those days meant, as I said, today is known as

‘lunch’). I could see Bob was not too happy about the prospect and here again, I was perplexed by the reluctance of this masculine stockily-built boy to do something, which I considered reasonably tame. “*Wot you want to do that for?*” he replied while sweeping in the hay-shed.

*“Well one never knows what one may find to help solve the mystery.”*

*“Mystery? There’s no mystery. She was murdered by her husband that’s all and he got away. Every so often her ghost appears, like a play being acted out ever so often, like a film being shown over and over. Always the same old thing. I don’t know wot it will achieve, that’s all.”*

*“Still, I’d like to have a good look...and Bob, if you don’t want to come with me that’s all right, I know you have your football this afternoon and...”* I said it sincerely, but I was cut off.

*“Why wouldn’t I want to come with ya? Do you think I’m afraid or sumthin’? Anyway, the footy’s over at Campbell Town this afternoon and Bothwell should thrash them so I don’t particularly want to go in anycase.”*

*“Good, well that will give us the rest of the day to scout around,”* I said.

Dinner came and went. We told Jock we did not want to go the football, who went off anyway to Campbell Town, but I suspect it was a chance to meet up with his friends to have more than one drink rather than watch the football. Saturday really was the only time poor old Jock had a social life. Most of the time was spent working long hours and Sunday was indeed a day of rest for him, when opportunity presented itself he slept. But even on Sundays there was work to be done. The farm did not stand still on Sundays. By then the day had become pleasant with the sun high in the sky and not a cloud to be seen. No breeze was present, even though it was still somewhat chilly. Bob and I wandered over to the site.

*“This was where it happened,”* Bob said. *“Mum told me a long time ago. She would have been killed just about here. She was running with ‘im chasin’ ‘er. He caught up and slashed ‘er down through the back of the skull down to ‘er back. She fell, bleeding horribly, screaming as she did. Then later she died. He took off and as mum said never to be seen again.”*

I listened transfixed. Here certainly was history in its most brutal form. I looked around, but there was nothing to be found. I really don’t know what I was looking for, a clue, an item, something that would highlight the crime, but I found nothing. It was so long ago.

*“Come on,”* Bob said after awhile and reluctantly I realised that there was no point any longer lingering at the scene of the crime and we took off, heading to the bush and paddocks, like small school boys, exploring, seeking adventure, imagining. On our way back we once again passed the derelict Montacute and St James’s Chapel and I knew my holiday was coming to an end. For a moment I felt sorry that it was. I gained a new friend in Bob and was not over all disappointed with Bothwell. I had also encountered a mystery that of the poor girl’s ghost. I reflected on the two times I saw the apparition and was saddened. I could not help the poor unfortunate creature. Would she forever be tormented? I could do nothing to ease her pain.

It was Sunday morning. I awoke and the first thing I did was to check outside my window, but there was nothing to see. Bob was rousing and looked over to me. *“Morning,”* he said. He seemed reticent. *“Nothing,”* I said. *“There’s nothing to be seen.”*

*“Oh,”* he commented.

“*Time to get up,*” I said. Normally Bob was first up, bouncing around. I waited, but he did not budge. I rose. “*Something the matter?*” I asked. “*No.*” Then he said slowly, as though reluctant to say it, “*you’re leaving this morning.*”

“*Yes, today is the day.*”

“*So wot you think?*”

“*About what?*” I asked.

“*Comin’ ‘ere.*”

I sat back on to the bed and seriously reflected, much too seriously for a 15-year-old, but then again, I was, what adults used to say, ‘old fashion’ for my age’. “*I’m glad I came,*” I began. “*I’ve enjoyed it. I wondered at first, because it was all so strange and meeting people who I had never met were hard too, but in summing it up, no – it’s been good.*”

The suddenly he said, “*It’s been good having you,*” and turned back around in his bed to face the wall, as though he was embarrassed to say it.

I was touched by this comment from Bob. He was not a boy to vent his feelings or express his thoughts. I took it as a compliment. I changed and left the room. Bob joined us soon in the kitchen. After breakfast it was time for Uncle Jock (as I got to call him) to take us, me and Bob, into Bothwell to catch the 11 o’clock bus into Hobart.

Aunt Flo embraced me heartily as I left. “*Be sure to come again and say hello to your mum for me,*” – no reference to my father; indeed it just occurred to me that he had never been mentioned throughout the whole week. She then gave a hard kiss upon my cheek. I jumped up into the cabin of the lorry with Bob and Jock drove us in. I waved to the family as I left and felt sorrow for leaving. I enjoyed it. It was indeed different.

We journeyed into the village of Bothwell and it being Sunday the pub was closed, so Jock sat with us while we waited until the bus came. Eventually it did and I alighted from the vehicle with my belongings. “*Well youngin’*” said Jock, which came as a surprise to me as he rarely spoke, “*it was good to see ya and as Flo said, come again.*”

“*I will,*” I replied.

Bob jumped down with me and escorted me to the bus. “*Got ya ticket?*” asked the bus driver, the same that drove me a little more than a week before. He had recognised me. “*Ah, I see all went well then.*”

“*Yes.*” I said with a smile.

“*Get aboard lad, nearly time. Find yourself a seat.*”

I turned to Bob, “*Well, must be gone. Thanks Bob for your all your help and friendship.*” Bob said nothing. I extended my hand, which he took and we shook.

“*See ya,*” he finally said. “*Come again next holidays?*” he asked.

“*Sure, if your mum and dad will have me.*”

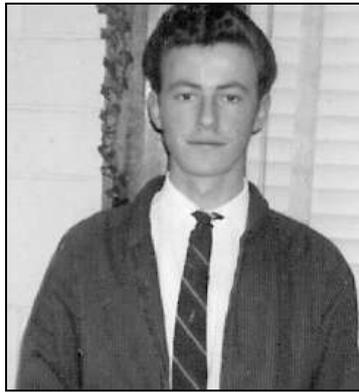
“*Can’t see any problem there,*” he said.

I took my seat and through the window I waved at the stockily built, black-haired youth that I had come to know as a friend and perhaps had come to love.

Over the next couple of years I visited Sherwood on two more occasions and had a wonderful time. Once Bob visited me, then when I left school, I got a job, eventually married, had a family and a career, I lost contact with Aunt Flo. I later learnt that the whole family left Bothwell, after Uncle Jock got a job with the CSIRO in Canberra. He soon died un-expectantly (some say the old drink was the cause). Bob I heard was called up to do conscription (I was not) for the army and went to

Vietnam. There he lost his life, when he stepped on a mine. I have fond memories of the boy and think of him every Anzac Day.

And as for the ghost? The two occasions, on which I returned, I never saw the apparition. I considered that the atmospheric conditions have to be exactly right for it to appear. As far as I know the poor tragic soul still is haunted and I have no doubt in believing it still appears at Bothwell to this day. Sadly, Bob never did take me *ridin'* as he would say.



Reg at 15 years

“

*“My First Holiday”* - written: September 2008.

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