Denise Brooks tells a compelling and true story about a child who is raised in an all-girls orphanage during the 1950s and 60s. Emotional Release Counselling and many personal therapies have enabled her to draw from the voice dialogue of the ‘inner child’.

Having completed her Master of Professional Practice (Creative Writing) and previously a Master of Public Health, Denise is concerned about the ongoing public health effects of the victims of child abuse and children who grew up in ‘Care’. She is committed to telling this story to assist many who have been affected with similar backgrounds to enable support and intervention strategies. Denise captures the various characters to insightfully reflect the life of Jae-Dee, her experiences derived from the schizophrenic impact of mothers, catholic nuns and others who have influenced her fortitude and upbringing.

The names of the characters have been changed.

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Synopsis

Jae-Dee is an innocent three-year-old girl who was abandoned by her parents to an all-girls Orphanage and raised by catholic nuns. She’s a curious, cheeky, intelligent, sometimes defiant child who adapted to a life of abandonment, loss and grief. Her amazing life experiences are expressed from the voice of her ‘inner child’ until she grows older and strong enough to express her life in a more mature and perceptively insightful manner.

Her feelings of anxiety, loneliness and chronic bed wetting stem from abandonment, neglect and abuse. Jae-Dee’s parents suffered from alcoholism, drug abuse, financial and social poverty. They also lacked maturity to responsibly parent their three daughters who were all institutionalised. Sister Grace is a Catholic nun and Jae-Dee’s surrogate mother from hell. This woman’s hatred and inability to demonstrate compassion or nurturing towards her wards and needy children of God is depicted in her strong and sadistic character.

Jae-Dee survives an institutionalised, neglectful, physical, spiritually damaging, harsh and cruel environment. Jae-Dee captures the cultural history of post war families and depicts reflections of the South Australian social welfare system during the 1950s to mid-60s.

Chapter eight and nine: Jae-Dee leaves the orphanage to live with her parents in temporary South Australian Housing Trust Home. She learns more about her two younger sisters and bonds with them. Jae-Dee experiences home life with her mother and father and their addictions. She meets her grandparents and extended family members, but her family life starts to unravel.

Chapter 8

Going Home

A few years go by, until one day my dreams come true when I am aged about six and a half.

‘We have to pack you a suitcase of clothes; you are going home.’ Sister Grace says.

‘Are my parents taking me home for good?’

Sister Grace nods. She tries several outfits on me to make sure they fit okay. One of them is a pretty pink floral dress with lace to compliment some lovely black court shoes and white ankle socks. This will be my going home outfit. A brown cardboard suitcase is removed from the linen room closet and sits on the table out on the veranda. Sister stickly tapes a written list of the following clothing onto the brown tartan paper lined lid of the case.

‘Read it out aloud,’ she commands, ‘I will check them and pack them into the case.’

‘Three dresses
Five underpants
Five singlets
Five pairs of socks
Two jumpers
Two pairs of pyjamas
One pair of brown school shoes.’

Sister counts and layers the neatly folded clothes inside the case. She snaps the lock. The closing of the case signifies the end of my life in the orphanage. Final. Snap!

Mother Superior meets daddy in the front foyer. Sister Grace leads me and my suitcase into the beautiful reception area and leaves me there. I am leaving the orphanage from this beautiful room. It’s unbelievable!
Daddy takes my hand with one hand and the suitcase in the other to the car. He opens the door. He says, ‘you sit in there. I will put your case in the boot.’

I hear his shoes scrunch on the gravel, the creak of daddy opening the boot and slamming the boot shut. He walks around to the driver side of the car and opens it. The door creaks.

Mother Superior and Sister Grace smile and wave goodbye.

Mother Anastasia says, ‘God Bless you Jae-Dee, be a good girl.’ A lump rises in my throat because I have a soft spot for Mother Anastasia. I wave back at her with a tender wave and smile. Bye witch! To Sister Grace.

Daddy fumbles under his seat and locates a bent metal bar and saunters around to the front of the car. He sticks the bar in a hole in the front grill and starts cranking it.

Brrt, brrt, brrt, brrt, brrt.

It doesn’t start straight away.

He cranks the old Ford again. The smell of petrol is sickly, the engine splutters and loudly chugs and a thick black plume of smoke releases from the rear of the car. I shake side to side as the car engine builds momentum. At last, we can leave!

Daddy revs the engine and drives out the circular driveway.

I impatiently want to get home, wherever home is. The vibration of the engine farting along is exciting. The happiest day of my life ever. I am going home to be with mummy, daddy and my sisters, forever! The statue of Our Lord stands in the grass circle with his arms outstretched, hands open—he bids me farewell as a parting blessing from this terrible place. Freedom!

It’s great fun riding in my daddy’s car, but my excitement wanes because it takes a long time to get there. Daddy tells me about the scenery, and I do my best to memorise every part of the journey. Like a game. I recall Adelaide’s landmarks as we chug past the Southern Cross Church, the Goodwood Institute Hall, Greenhill Road, the West Terrace Cemetery, across a tram-line, along North Terrace and over a railway line. Daddy weaves past the West End Brewery, the Hindmarsh Catholic Church and further along, past the Meadowlea, Fauldings factories and Godfrey’s. Under the Port Adelaide railway bridge, along the bustling Port Road, past the church hall where mummy and daddy went dancing and around the chaotic Black Diamond Corner.

‘Are we nearly there, daddy?’ Soon... But not soon enough.

The mixed concoction of car, factory exhausts and smog are overwhelming. My eyes sting and I cough and wheeze.

We drive past the police station and the majestic courthouse. The footpaths near the Tobacconist Coles Emporium, picture theatre and shops are buzzing with people. A drunk man holds a bottle in a brown paper bag and leans against the tiled wall of the Globe Hotel across the road. Around another corner, until we reach a set of red flashing lights. Daddy stops the car with a jarring halt.

A black and white striped boom gate with red flashing lights drops down with a bounce. Half the road rises into the sky. The iron gears grind and creak.

‘This is the Birkenhead Bridge. It opens to let the tall boats go past.’

Daddy leaves the car running with the handbrake on. He comes around and opens the passenger door. ‘C’mon jump out.’ He takes my hand and leads me onto the footpath.

A busy shipbuilding yard is below. Forklifts and men scuttle around on the wharves. Workers are wearing heavy boots and move large pallets of boxes onto rail trolleys.

‘Look over this side, you can see the Port River and the tugboat,’ Daddy says.

It makes a wake in the water as it glides under the bridge. ‘The tugboat is called a pilot because it guides the bigger boats into the wharf.’ A large boat with a tall mast follows the tug under
the gaping bridge. Daddy points to the man in the concrete box high off the bridge.

‘See that man up there?’

‘Yes.’ I reply, amazed.

‘He operates the bridge.’

We watch the boats taxi through with fascination. The open road on each side starts to descend and meet in the middle. The car stops chugging, so daddy quickly cranks it again.

‘C’mon quick get back in the car, the traffic will move soon. We have to go.’

Clang, bounce, clang. The road joins together like magic, the boom gate rises and the red lights stop flashing. Daddy cautiously drives through the congested traffic over the re­joined now level road. I hold my breath and feel afraid that the road will pop open again when we are in the middle and plop us into the deep water below. I am relieved when we are safely off the bridge.

Off we go again and chug past more factories. Home is a simple rectangle house with a low pitched iron roof. Many reconstructed temporary Housing Trust homes built out of asbestos were under construction in the streets nearby. Located in a swampy industrial area on the Le Fevre Peninsula not far from the Port River.

I don’t remember this house from before the orphanage; it’s different from the house we lived in Lowana Terrace, Draper, I think as I wait for daddy to get my case out of the boot.

Daddy opens the back door with one hand and my suitcase in the other. I hesitate.

‘Go on in you go, this is home,’ daddy says smiling.

On my tippy toes, I enter the kitchen off the laundry. I don’t know what I imagined home to be like, but it smells of hot food, is noisy with children and busy in a different way than the orphanage dining room. The only noise present was Sister Magdalene talking to the girls, the din of knives and forks on porcelain plates. The crashing pots n’ pans, squeaky trolleys, clutter of dishes and the smell and puffs of steam in the institutional scullery.

My sisters are here and I feel strangely happy to be with my family in this small homely kitchen.

‘Ha, ha ha ha.’ Clare laughs, as she plays with a red, green and yellow metal spinning top. She pushes down the red ball until the silver spiral until the metal disappears into the round cylinder. It madly hums a spinning tune and spins ever so fast. Clang, it rattles and crashes to the thin orange and brown lino floor.

She reaches out her arm with her fingers stretched toward the spinning toy on the floor. ‘Mmmm, mmum, mum,’ she cries.

Mummy picks it up for her and puts the toy back on the kindy table. Mummy turns around, catches a glimpse of me, her face lightens and her blue eyes sparkle as she gives me a big cuddle.

‘Hello, Jae-Dee. You are finally home.’ I feel loved and embarrassed by such attention. But it doesn’t last long anyhow, because my little sisters are running amok. I am used to other kids interrupting and relieved the attention is diverted. I will perhaps get another time later to have time with mummy.

Daddy stands at the stove and lifts the lids on the pots boiling on the wood-fired stove and pokes the meat and veggies with a fork. Mummy grabs the oven mitt and lifts the smaller steamy pot by the handle onto the sink. She looks at daddy and says, ‘that one’s ready Les.’ They move around each other in the kitchen as they do on the dance floor, it’s beautiful.

Clare’s soft curly brown hair is knotted and frizzy. She sits at a kid-sized chipped blue wooden table and chair set with stickers of Snow White n’ the Seven Dwarfs, Donald Duck and Daisy’s nephews: Huey, Dewey and Loui. The three little ducks remind me of my two sisters and me.
Clare grabs the metal top by the handle and starts banging it in tune with Annie's spoon. Annie's thin blonde hair frizzes like string cotton wool and sticks up at the back. It softly flops over her ears at the sides. She's wearing a Mickey Mouse bib and sits in her red vinyl high chair made with a curved red marbled laminate tray. Snot runs out of her nose in bubbles which burst and drip like honey into her mouth.

Mummy says, 'please take the hanky out of my apron pocket,' as she swings her hip sideways toward me, 'and wipe her nose for me please Jae-Dee.'

I take the folded cotton hanky from her floral apron pocket and start to wipe Annie's nose. Sissy shakes her head and pushes my hands away. 'No, no!' Annie tosses her head around from side to side. She spreads the snot further over her cheeks. I follow her face with the hanky in my hand as she moves away. I wipe until her nose and mouth are clean. I dampen the hanky with my spit and press a little harder on her cheeks where the snot and boogers have dried. Annie retorts and bangs her spoon on the tray demanding, 'Din, din, din, din, din.' She bashes her tray up and down. The noise hurts my ears.

My two sisters start singing something repeatedly in a kid language that I don’t understand. It’s funny, cute and irritatingly noisy at the same time. ‘Antsa boney alee main, antsa boney alee main...’ and they laugh together, playing in their imaginary world. Somehow they understand each other.

Daddy moves the kid-size table, Clare's chair and Annie's high chair over to the bigger green marble laminate table covered with a cotton embroidered tablecloth with a crochet lace edge. The tablecloth adds a softness to the dinner table.

Mummy says, ‘Jae-Dee will you get the knives and forks out of the drawer over there.’ She points to a wooden kitchen cabinet against the far-right wall of the kitchen. Out of curiosity, I open a door with a latch and see metal lined breadbox to the right. I get a whiff of the fresh crusty bread and latch it again. I just wanted to see what was in that interesting cupboard door. *Now I know.*

'No not that one, the top drawer on that side.' Daddy points to the left of the cupboard drawers. I open the top drawer lined with floral patterned contact and notice kitchen utensils, big and small sharp knives. *Not that drawer either!*

I open the next drawer down, and it's also lined with contact but has four dividers in the drawer. *This is the right drawer.* There are creamy coloured, bone-handled knives, forks, tablespoons and a short divider across the front for the teaspoons, plastic kids spoons and rubber bands.

Annie pulls at the tablecloth as I set the table with three knives and forks, so I slide her chair just out of reach of destruction.

Daddy takes four dinner and three bread and butter plates out of the stained leadlight glass cupboard in the top of the cabinet and sets them out on the table, one empty plate in the middle and two plastic bowls. One green, one yellow and two plastic spoons n' forks for Annie and Clare. He returns to the cupboard and opens the plain wooden doors in the bottom section, lifts out a bottle of "Rosella Tomato a Sauce," butter in a cream floral covered dish, jam and sugar in matching crockery. He balances them in his arms and takes a couple of steps over to the table. ‘Jae-Dee will you pass me the serrated edge bread knife from the top drawer and the bread please.’ *I already know where to find these.* He plonks the bread on the plate in the middle of the table, and the knife rests on the plate.

Daddy serves our tea of lamb stew with chunky meat, potatoes and peas on the side. He cuts three thick slices of bread and spreads on thick lashings of butter and places a piece on each butter plate.

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Mummy chops and mashes up Annie’s dinner and daddy cuts up Clare’s. Clare hops into her food quickly, eating it by herself at the little table. Daddy says, ‘she loves her dinner.’ As he heavily sprinkles his dinner with heaps of salt and pepper, I don’t know how he can stand so much salt? He shakes too much salt on my dinner too. As I eat the salty stew, I watch mummy feed Annie. Baby sissy opens her mouth while mummy says, ‘open up wide, here comes the aeroplane,’ and spoons the food into Annie’s mouth. Annie starts rubbing her nose and mouth, tosses her head, grabs the spoon off mummy and starts to whimper. Mummy lets Annie hold her spoon and try to feed herself, while mummy grabs another spoon out of the drawer and feeds her spoonful’s of stew direct from her bowl. Success for a while until Annie chucks everywhere. Mummy grabs a tea towel and wipes the mess up and takes Annie into the bathroom.

I eat my stew and copy daddy wipe his plate with the bread to soak up the gravy. The bread relieves the salty taste, and the butter leaves a creamy taste in my mouth.

I rise out of the chair and realize there is no trolley to stack the plates, so I drop my plate in the sink of dishwater.

Mummy’s dinner still sits there uneaten.

Daddy quickly eats his tea, and she asks daddy; ‘Will you light the pilot to the bathroom heater.’

Clare and I follow him into the bathroom. ‘Poof,’ the gushing sound of fire in the heater blares away. I tremble as the whoosh of purple and yellow flames startle me.

Daddy says, ‘it’s okay. Tis just the gas water heater starting up.’

Hot water spurts from the tap into the white enamel bathtub on legs.

Mummy tests the water with her hand and mixes in some cold water. ‘That’s just right.’ She takes off Annie and Clare’s clothes and throws them into the laundry trough next to the bathroom. She lifts Annie in, then Clare. I stand there and I am allowed to watch them in the bath, but I am uncertain about what to do. My little sissies look so cute when they are wet with soapsuds on them. I feel the tremendous love in my heart.

Mummy says, ‘c’mon take your clothes off and hop in.
We must make use of the hot water.’

Sharing a bath with other girls feels strange because it was never allowed in the orphanage. Embarrassed, I take off my clothes put them in the laundry trough, hide my flat chest with my hands and jump in at the far end of the bath. My two sisters sit in-between my lanky legs.

Daddy starts roughly washing us with a warm flannel lathered with Pears soap and water. He washes my sisters first and rinses them off and mummy dries them. Daddy collects their warm pyjamas from the kitchen that were in front of the wood fire.

I lay back in the warm bathwater for a while, stretching out my legs and running the tap for the last bit of hot water in the tank. Uhm! Surely, I must have died and gone to heaven. Thank you, God.

Daddy returns to the bathtub. ‘C’mon sit up.’ He lathers my back and chest with his rough touch. I feel a bit shy but, it feels good. I shamefully like it.

‘Les will you watch Annie and Clare near the fire.’ Mummy wipes me down with a rough towel that looks like it has been washed with red jumpers. I shiver as she wipes my back n’ front and I jump as she starts to wipe near my thingamy.

‘Hah, ha, ha, mummy laughs that feels good, doesn’t it?’ I nod and smile. Mummy is not like Sister Grace or any of the other nuns. There is no shame or punishments for rudeness. She helps me get my arms into a fluffy pair of pyjamas and takes me into the bedroom.

My sister Annie nestles in her cot, sucking on a bottle of milk. Her eyelids drop to sleep; she has beautiful long eyelashes.
Clare’s bed is across from mine, and she clicks her tongue ‘l-tot, l-tot, l-tot’ as she drifts off to sleep rocking in a foetal position facing the wall.

My bed is a beautiful old brass bed with a colourful quilted cover. Mummy lifts the cover and whispers, ‘My Sister, your Aunty Mary, sewed this quilt for you.’ I quietly bounce into the bed, careful not to wake Annie and Clare.

Mummy whispers, ‘Goodnight darling.’ She pats the velvet patches of the quilt down over me with a special hug and kisses me on my forehead.

Daddy sneaks in too. His shoes creak on the floor. He gives me a sloppy kiss on the cheek. ‘Nitey nite, see ya in the mornin’.’

My eyes well up with tears of sheer joy. I wipe his juicy kiss off my cheek with the sheet.

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The grass needs cutting to stop the mosquitoes from breeding!

‘It’s too wet to cut properly,’ daddy says. He furiously forces the hand mower through the tough grass, back and forth. It’s grown thicker from the septic tank soakage trench. The mower gets stuck a few times and the grass hardly cuts at all and crushes the blades. Nevertheless, the grass smells fresh, but my nose itches. I rub it flat with the palm of my hand in a circle and sneeze, ‘Ah-choo, ah choo, ah choo!’

Later, daddy pushes the mower into the shed, slams the door shut, slides the bolt across and secures the large rusty padlock.

Many bright pink, orange and yellow pig face flowers with their fleshy leaves crawl across the salty swamp next to our backyard and open their smiling faces into the sunshine. Sadly, these beautiful flowers close as the day ends.

As it gets dark, the mosquitoes buzz around, I swat them away as they drive us crazy. The large soggy patch of buffalo grass in our backyard grows up the entire length of the rusty barbed wire fence bordering the swamp. Daddy doesn’t attempt to cut that patch of grass again. He leaves it a few days until the grass dries out.

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One hot day a blue tongue sleepy lizard dozes on the fence near the swamp and the stubborn grass is now brown and dry. My sisters and I watch daddy use his cigarette lighter to ignite pieces of kerosene-soaked newspaper crushed into clumps of dry grass. Puffs of thick grey smoke billow into the air. The sleepy lizard scuttles away among the pig face in the neighbouring swamp.

In a swift move, daddy grabs Annie’s pink dummy out of her mouth and throws it into the fire. The rubber teat flares into a flame and sizzles. The pink plastic bubbles and goes black. Then it’s all gone. Boof! Just like that, gone!

‘You’re too big for a dummy. They are filthy things,’ he says, leaving.

Annie stunned, she whimpers, but from today onward she never has a dummy again.

For hours we watch the fire crackling, throwing sparks and turning the grass into thin black spindles of crumpled charcoal. I love watching a fire. It’s fast, strong, beautiful and bright.

‘Get back from the fire,’ daddy says as we hold each other’s hands and shuffle back. The flames playfully jump around. I am mesmerised as flames flicker and dance onto a piece of damp grass.

Pop, crack, crackle, crackle.

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The ritual of my daily life is different now. One thing I love is heading to the local shops with mummy and my two sisters in the pram. I hold onto her hand or the handle of the pram. We pop into the butcher shop, it’s fun! Sawdust spread over the floor. It feels gunky on my shoes. A sawdust trail leads out the door and stops at the mat on the footpath.

The butcher smiles at mummy and me.
‘How are you lovely ladies today Edie-May and Snowball?’ the butcher banter.
‘Mummy, why does he call me Snowball?’
‘Because you have soft snow white fluffy hair. Like a snowball,’ I smile at the cute name he gives me, for I daren’t be rude to a man who is so friendly.
In a very excited manner, I chatter away telling him about my day.
‘My, my, you are a bit of magpie aren’t you? Here’s a slice of bung fritz.’ He hands me a delicious thick slice of fritz. I peel off the orange skin and bite into it.
‘Yum!’ I savour every mouthful.
‘I’ll have one pound of fritz, one pound of lambs’ brains and one pound of sausages, thanks,’ Mummy says.
The butcher wipes his hands on his blue and white striped meaty stained apron and whistles while he wraps the meat in white paper.

Next stop. The bakery. Mummy picks up a half loaf of fresh crusty bread wrapped in tissue paper stuck with a piece of sticky tape.

‘Now stay close to Jae-Dee and don’t talk to anybody, especially the bodgies and widgies.’ Mummy says as she moves her eyes in the direction of the street. I don’t know what they are, they sound like birds to me.

Teenage boys and girls pull up outside the shops on large noisy motorbikes. I cower when the young men dressed in black leathers and the young women with their teased up hair in their skin tight jeans, sloppy jo’s and leather jackets loiter around smoking and drinking Coca-Cola.

I hold the fresh warm bread and wait with the pram while mummy goes into the chemist. In later years I find out she buys ‘Bex powders’, ‘Relaxa –Tabs’ or medical scripts and shops around to feed her addiction.

I nervously peel thin layers of the soft part of the bread until I make quite a hole. ‘Oops,’ I hide it from mummy, by turning the hole to the back under my arm.

A fellow with a cigarette in his mouth revs his black motorbike loudly. His blonde girlfriend sits on the back seat, holding her arms around his waist. I admire their affection. They look like they have stepped out of a Johnny O Keefe music clip. Fear grips me when baby sissy starts crying while Clare looks on curiously. My protective instincts kick in for my sisters. Mummy rushes out of the chemist and puts the white paper bags into the storage bag hooked on the back of the pram.

‘C’mon we will go home for lunch.’ I look forward to having fritz and Rosella Tomato Sauce in fresh buttered bread for lunch.

The weeks pass, mummy gets sick, sleeps a lot and takes many tablets. Her hands shake when she holds her cup of tea. The clicking and scraping of the china cup when she puts it back on the saucer sends shivers down my spine. It’s as irritating as the sound of chalk squeaking on a blackboard.

Annie cries a lot and mummy leaves me to look after my sisters while she has a rest. When mummy falls asleep, I change Annie’s nappy, but I don’t know how to do it without sticking the pin into her belly. Her nappy falls off and she wees on the floor. I do the best I can, but when sissy stands up and runs, her nappy slips off. She trips up. By this time Clare has climbed onto her bed for an afternoon nap. I clean up the mess with the smelly wet mop from the laundry. I drag trailing muddy brown streaks and pieces of cotton string from the mop across the brown, green and orange patterned lino floor.

I wait for daddy to come home from work. Mummy wakes up, sits Clare at the kiddie table and Annie in her high chair. She starts peeling the potatoes.

I go outside and I smell the acrid exhaust from the Sulphuric Acid Plant where daddy works not far from our
house. Huge bilges of smoke and steam emitted from the tall chimney stacks. Then it stops. The knock-off-work siren blares through the air; Wrrr, Wrrr, Wrrr, Wrrrrrr, Wrrrrrrrr.

Daddy rides his rusty green bike to and from work every day. Even if he is on the night shift, he rides with his back reflector and front lights on. I run on the fine sandy gravel surface up the street to meet him. Daddy slows down his bike so that I can keep up with him. The rubber wheels crunch on the sand and gravel. The front wheel wobbles while he rides. He never falls off, balancing like a clown on a one-wheeled bicycle in a circus. He is very Clever.

I run as fast as I can next to him and I learn to sprint faster and faster as daddy accelerates. Sometimes he stops and lifts me onto the middle bar. I balance and try to ignore how my skinny bum bones hurt from the friction.

'Keep your feet away from the wheels.'

'Okay,' I reply as I balance carefully. When we arrive home daddy strides into the house and hugs mummy.

'Les, will you play with the girls outside while I cook tea and feed Annie?' Mummy lifts Annie into her high chair. Daddy lifts Clare onto his shoulders and we walk outside together. He carries her over to the shed at the far back corner of the yard. He stands her on top of the rickety old tin shed.

'C'mon jump,' Daddy beckons as he claps once and stretches his arms out wide in front of her.

I watch her bravely jump into his arms. He raises her back again and she joyfully jumps into his arms once more. A juicy kiss lands on her cheek from daddy.

'Good girl Clare! Now, Jae-Dee you do it.'

I hesitate.

His strong bony hands grip under my arms and around the sides of my chest. It hurts me. Daddy feels awkward and clumsy. He plonks me seated up onto the iron that digs into the backs of my legs.

'Stand up and jump!' he pleads.

'Daddy, I am too scared. I can't do it, I think it's too high.' I feel awkward and lanky as I crouch first. My knees tremble when I stand.

'Look, Jae-Dee, Clare can do it, She's not scared, go on jump! I will catch you.'

'I don't believe him; I don't believe he will catch me at all, what if he drops me?' Daddy plonks Clare up on the shed again with naïve trust. She has got more guts than me. She repeatedly jumps into daddy's arms; Daddy and Clare laugh together. I feel dizzy as I look down at the ground.

'Don't look down just jump!' daddy yells.

I squat again. This makes it harder to get back up on my feet. I look into daddy's blue eyes and see his arms outstretched asking me to trust him and jump. I still can't do it.

'Come on Jump, just jump. It's easy!'

My heart silently cries because I cannot do this for him or me. I love daddy with all my heart, and I know he wants me to be brave like my sister Clare and jump, but I still hold back. Clare is brave and I am jealous. Also secretly outraged at him even more, because he dares to put me up in such a high place and makes me feel scared. Then he wants me to show how brave and strong I can be by taking a leap of faith into his arms. I hate this scary feeling.

'Please daddy take me down, Daddy, daddy, daddddd h... h... yyyyy plea... se, take me downnnnnn...' Daddy gets angrier with me, 'If you don't jump, you can stay up on the shed, and not get any tea.' He carries Clare inside with him and leaves me here up on the roof, alone.

It starts to get dark and the mosquitoes buzz around and bite me. I cry. How do I get down? Climb across to the fence rails? The neighbours' huge Alsatian dog is vicious, I fear he might have a go at me.

We don't know our neighbours very well, but they have a couple of boys who throw rocks over the fence into the
swamp, a pale green FJ Holden car and a television aerial on their roof. These neighbours play a part in our future.

Mummy’s voice rises, ‘Now Les, take Jae-Dee off the roof. It’s getting cold.’

Daddy slams the flywire door and approaches the shed, reaches out his arms.

‘C’mon down you get,’ he says in a disheartened voice.

I have no choice but to lean down over the edge and jump the short distance into his big bony awkward hands and he carries me inside to be with mummy.

What a relief!

To please my father I felt I needed to perform athletic/sporty tasks. Mum told me dad wanted a boy first, not a girl! He wanted to name his first boy Dennis. My lack of trust in men begins. I think I always disappointed him being a girl and he disappointed me too. I carried that rage and I never forgave him from that moment forward! until a week before he died in September 2008.

Mummy and I shell the peas into a saucepan, and I eat some of the smaller sweet ones from the edge of the pod.

‘Don’t eat them all, leave some for tea.’ A pot of delicious smelling vegetable soup rattles. Daddy lifts the lid and drops in a big pinch of salt. Mummy fries crumbed lamb’s brains in dripping and boils potatoes on top of the green enamel, wood stove.

Daddy opens the flap to the front of the stove with a hooked steel poker, stokes the fire and adds more chopped wood. The hot sparks and flames leap out of the opening and singe’s my fringe and eyebrows.

‘Get back!’ Daddy grumps.

I jump back feeling my face burn hot from the heat.

He drains the boiled potatoes into the sink and mashes them with a fork, butter and milk. Yum! Daddy has strong hands for mashing potatoes and cutting the leg of mutton for Sunday roasts.

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In the orphanage, I never know when my birthday is and I have to guess how old I am.

Today is my seventh birthday.

‘I have a surprise for you,’ mummy says, ‘you need to sit here and listen to Radio 5KA.’

The radio announcer says, ‘now it’s time to wish some special children a very happy birthday today... ‘A very happy birthday to Jae-Dee.’

‘That’s me!’

He calls out a lot of other children’s names, but I don’t hear or remember because I am so excited about hearing my name called over the radio. I have never celebrated my birthday before.

‘Ha, ha that’s me, mummy he said Jae-Dee, that’s me isn’t it? It’s my seventh birthday today.’

I skip off to school in a very happy mood. Mummy and my sisters follow in the pusher. I look forward to telling my friends at school my name was called out on the radio.

After tea, mummy presented a sponge cake with whipped cream and chopped red jelly on top. Daddy lights up my seven birthday candles with his cigarette lighter one at a time.

‘Now Jae-Dee you have to take a big breath and blow out all the candles at once,’ mummy says.

I fill my mouth and lungs with as much air as I can. The jelly wiggles as I blow and I manage to blow out six candles in one go. Daddy helps me blow out the last one.

Mummy hands me the knife and daddy helps hold my hand steady and says as I dig into the middle of the cake, ‘You have to make a wish. And you are not allowed to tell anyone what it is otherwise it won’t come true.’

‘Uhm, what can I wish?’ I whisper. ‘That this happy moment lasts forever and ever.’ I glide the knife down the cake to make the first slice. Mummy takes out the candles and lays them on the side of the plate and I lick the cream off. Daddy
cuts the cake and the jelly wiggles, reminding me of the wiggly happy feeling inside my tummy.

Annie and Clare eat a small slice of cake each. Annie manages to spread the cream and jelly over her hands and rubs it into her hair and eyebrows. Clare has red jelly and cream around her mouth.

After the excitement of the day, I reluctantly take a bath and we go to bed. I clamber into my old brass bed; the dirty brass knobs are loose and make a clanging noise as I get into bed. This is the only birthday celebration I have in my entire childhood years, hence; I remember this celebration forever and vow to celebrate birthdays in my later years always, for everybody who is important in my life.

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We wake up early every morning and sometimes I still wet the bed—so do my two sisters.

When mummy and daddy are still asleep my sisters and I jump up and down on my bed and play scotch dancing. Daddy often works afternoon shift or night shift. He needs to sleep longer in bed. We take it in turns to bang the knobs on the end of the bed. I have always wanted to be a Scotchie like those I see at the John Martins Pageant in the city at Christmas. Happy moments, happy times, my fascination with Scottish and Irish dancing and culture doesn't manifest until I undertake a DNA test in my mid-sixties and find my heritage is a high percentage of Scottish and Irish, English and Western European. It makes me wonder how much our DNA plays a role in the development of our interests and who we become.

Sometimes we hear mummy and daddy play and laugh in bed. We are allowed to jump into bed with them and play pillow fights. It's such great fun and we tickle each other on our feet and under our chin and I cannot stop laughing.

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Other times mummy and daddy fight and yell at each other about money. So we stay in our room. I want them to stop. I need them to be happy together.

‘Please, mummy and daddy don’t fight I love you both,’ I say.

‘Go to the pub with your father,’ she says.

‘Alright, I’ll go then,’ as he slams the back wire door and storms off.

‘Daddy stop, please don’t go to the pub,’ I plead.

He yells back, ‘Be quiet. Children should be seen and not heard. I need you, girls, to behave yourselves. Otherwise I will put you back in the orphanage.’

Some evenings mummy has a few sips of Yellow Label sherry and daddy drinks three tall brown bottles of Carlton Bitter or Southwark beer nightly when he comes home from the pub. He keeps a schooner glass in the fridge, brings it out and pours the beer. Daddy puts the glass to his mouth and opens his throat. The beer goes down his gullet like soap suds down a sink.

Very quickly.

Sometimes when he is drunk, he sings songs and dances around with mummy in the kitchen. A couple of times he has kneeled on one knee and sings, ‘Mammy, mammy, mammy’s in love!...’

We all giggle together until our sides ache with laughter.

Daddy is very funny!

I sit on mummy’s lap to hug her after daddy has left for work. She takes Bex tablets and sings ‘Que Sera Sera...’ to me until I fall asleep in her arms.

One evening daddy comes home from the local pub with a bloody nose. I don’t mean to say a naughty swear word. Mummy and daddy have another big fight about all sorts of stuff—including money problems. I reluctantly sneak a peek from the bedroom door. Daddy lifts his hand and slaps mummy
across the face. A few times. She lowers her head and holds her face; her hair falls forward.

Mummy screams, 'You bloody bastard!' She runs out the back door and the fly-wire door slams with a loud shudder.

'Get back here,' Daddy bellows.

But mummy continues to run up the street.

I stand frozen still behind the open doorway to my bedroom afraid and worried. I stare at daddy, slouched on the chair at the kitchen table, drinking his beer straight from a tall frosted Carlton Bitter beer bottle.

Daddy looks at me with a strained face, 'Go to bed.'

I get the collywobbles as I lay on my bed. I fear that my happy family life might be over and I am afraid daddy will put us back in the orphanage.

A few hours later a blue flashing light beams through the curtains at the window. The police loudly knock on the door and follow mummy into the kitchen. They ask daddy some questions and he raises his voice at the policeman. One of the police officer’s handcuffs him and takes daddy away in a paddy wagon with them. I wondered what was happening to our beautiful family. It felt like it was unravelling, but I had hoped things would soon return to normal again.

Chapter 9

Train Ride to Melbourne

Mummy leaves home and takes all three girls with her by train from Draper to the Adelaide Railway station. We arrive at the platform and carefully disembark from the train. A girl screams. Mummy and I see her fall between the train and the platform; something I have always been afraid could happen to me. People mill around saying, ‘ohh and ah, what happened?’

I find the drama hard to comprehend. The station master ushers the crowd away.

Most of my life I thought this incident was in my imagination. I don’t know if she lives or dies.

It’s not until I obtain my mother’s mental health records from the Parkside Hospital in 1997, under the Freedom of Information Act (FOI) from the years of 1957/1958. I discovered my mother was severely traumatised by this incident and the psychiatrists report reveals my mother’s feelings, reaction and subsequent treatment received.

Mummy looks troubled, but we don’t talk much. She pulls the pusher with our suitcase straddled on top of the busy shop-lined bitumen slope to the top part of the station. Oldies struggle to walk up the steep incline with their walking sticks. The scrumptious aroma of the doughnuts cooking at the bakery stand is divine. I love it, I just love it! There are old people, children, workers and teens bustling around in the beautiful ornately designed old station. This iconic railway station has fond memories for many who lived or visited Adelaide. In my adult years, I frequented this station to go to work in the city. In 1985 the second storey and subsequent stories were transformed into the famous Adelaide Casino.

Workers dressed in suits and others overalls congregate near the cigarette butt trays chatting, eating their
pies and drinking Coca-Cola they purchased from the pie cart on North Terrace. They stamp the remaining cigarette butts on the bitumen. One man wearing a suit flicks their butt toward the ashtray and doesn’t bother to pick it up. A light puff of smoke hits my nostrils and I cough.

Mummy and daddy smoke too. I hate the smoke.

Sister Grace has said during previous religious instruction classes, ‘It is a mortal sin to smoke and drink alcohol before we are aged twenty-one.’ When we are undertaking our confirmation, we must make a promise to God not to smoke or drink alcohol until we are aged twenty-one and responsible adults.

Squashed butts, paper bags and drink bottles are strewn all over the place especially around the bins. Dog poo on the footpath makes it hard for mummy to navigate our loaded pram. A janitor wheels a waste cart to the disgraceful mess and sweeps up the rubbish with a long broom and long-handled dustpan.

I’m tickled pink by the sensory overload and I’d love to run off and explore everywhere I can. However, I stay next to mummy while my sisters are snuggled together asleep in the pram. I don’t want to lose them. I feel agitated and tired, yet curious about the heightened energy. I stare at the bright flashing lights and strange people; I am mesmerised.

Mummy uses a couple of pound notes to buy the tickets and receives a few shillings change from the station master behind the decorated bars of the ticket box. We walk from one end of the station to the baggage area. Our suitcase is weighed on large scales, ticketed and put on a trolley with others.

The station attendant says, ‘you have about three-quarters of an hour till you can board the train. You leave from station One.’

We approach the row of phone boxes with heavy wooden doors near the steep steps from North Terrace. Mummy awkwardly pulls open the door using all her strength. She brings me into the squishy box and holds open the door with the pusher on the brake and her foot. The bustling crowds stamp down the steps, their talking & screaming echoes through the building and are deafening. Mummy picks up the clunky black handset and puts several shillings into the slot. She dials a long number, Kuching, Kuching, Kuching - coins rapidly drop into the slot.

‘Hello, mum... hello... hello, are you there?’

A mumbled voice scratches at the end of the line. I cannot hear the details. But figure mummy is talking to nanna.

‘Yes I am at the railway station now. The train leaves at seven.’

Nanna responds, but I cannot decipher what she says.

‘Mum I can hardly hear you. What!?... No, he doesn’t know yet, he’s on the afternoon shift. I left a note, he won’t see it till he gets home from work.’ Mummy yells down the phone.

Nanna responds again.

Beeeep, beep, beep, beeeeeeep.

‘Mum, mum the phone is running out of money, I’ll see you when we get to Flinders Street Station.’ Clunk the last coin drops! The phone goes dead.

Mummy is perplexed and anxious. Her hands shake, but she takes us to the bustling railway station café. The chatter and noise is the familiar din of Coles and a mixture of the orphanage dining room. I don’t want to think about the orphanage: for the railway station is far more exciting.

Mummy picks out of the display cabinet wrapped sandwiches to share.

‘I will have a pot of tea for one, milk and two sugars please.’ Mummy requests from the lady filling the dinky silver teapots, milk, sugar. A thick white, yellow rimmed cup n’ saucer (institutional style) and a huge banana milkshake in a metallic ribbed cup arrive for me to share with my sisters.

Yum! Mummy downs a couple of Bex powders and tablets with her cuppa, she pulls a face as she tastes the bitter
powder. We tuck into a feeding frenzy and finish everything on the tray.

At 6.55 p.m. we approach the station. The whooshing noise of the train scares and excites me. *Did I see a girl fall between the station and the platform before?* Mummy lifts Annie and Clare out of the pram. She holds Annie wrapped in her favourite blankie with one arm and sits her on her hip. Clare stands on the ground next to her and wears a harness on a strap, held close and I also hold Clare’s hand to stop her wandering off. A Station hand assists mummy with folding the pusher and loads it into the baggage cart with the suitcases.

With tickets in hand, mummy says, ‘stand close next to me Jae-Dee. Don’t move!’

We cautiously embark the train carriage together and mindfully step over the gap, holding onto each other tightly. My family, without daddy, travel on the overnight train to Melbourne to visit Nanna and Pop. It’s my first time on an Interstate train ride that I can remember. Mummy tells me while my sisters are asleep; ‘You were born in Victoria and I brought you over to Adelaide on the train when you were 18 months old, to join daddy. He came to Adelaide first to find a job as a carpenter after the paper mill closed down in Traralgon. There was no work for him in Victoria anymore.’

We sleep on beds that fold back into seats in the morning. The train ride takes ages. ‘Are we there yet?’ I say. ‘No not yet,’ says mummy. ‘When?’ As I press my nose against the glass window and huff on the cold surface leaving lip kiss marks and look out at the dry scrub.

‘Soon,’ Mummy says. ‘Soon...’

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Nanna & Pop are waiting at the Melbourne station when we arrive. There are big hugs all around. Pop collects the baggage and Nanna sets up the pusher and together mummy and nanna put the young girls in together. We walk to their home only a few streets away from the station. The stone cottage blends with a row of others in a busy narrow street, each divided with a white picket fence and minimal front yard.

As we enter the front door, a red patterned runner reaches down the passage toward the back. Painted doors branch off to a various room on each side. We sit in the lounge room together and chat for a while. Mummy and nanna go to the bedroom to change my sister’s clothes and put her down for a nap. The women then venture down to the kitchen for a cup of tea and a private chat.

I stay in the cozy lounge room with poppy. The logs glow and flicker as he places more Mallee roots in the old fireplace and carefully positions the spark screen in front to prevent us from danger. A wooden mantle runs on top, a cuckoo clock and two large statues of piper boys at each end of the mantle. The lounge room floor and bedrooms have polished wooden floors covered with dusty patterned rugs. Pop sits in his favourite chair and fills his pipe with strings of tobacco and compresses it firmly with his fingers. He leaves a couple of loose strands to light up with Redhead matches.

Puff, puff—scented smoke billows into the air and I cough.

Despite my disdain of smoke, I love my poppy with his bald head. I sit on the armrest of his chair, next to him. He begins to nod off to sleep and press my face onto his head. It feels so lovely n’ smooth on my nose and lips as I give him a great big noisy sequence of kisses. I peek his head with my pursed lips to his pointy elfin ears and back, covering every inch of his scalp.

‘Ha, hah, ha,’ Poppy chuckles.

‘Poppy’s got no hair. Doggy ate it all up.’ I say with intent.

While we wait for a cuppa and scones poppy tells us stories about how his grandfather found gold around Maryborough in Victoria.
‘My father owned some land in Maryborough. He sold it too soon and somebody found heaps of gold on the property. That is the closest that our family came to be rich. You know Jae-Dee, there is gold under the Railway line in Maryborough and the government knows it exists. But nobody’s allowed to take gold from land belonging to the government.’

Nanna asks, ‘would you like to come for a walk to the Victoria markets with me Jae-Dee?’

‘Oh yes please, nanna, I would love to come with you!’

Nanna holds my hand with a couple of string bags in the other she leads me through the back lane and across the street to the joyous chatter of the markets to buy fruit, meat and veggies. She squeezes the quinces and says, ‘ooh they are lovely and ripe. I’ll have two pounds of those, a pound of onions, four carrots and a half-pound of peas please.’ She drops them into her string bag and goes to the butchers to buy some lamb. At the delicatessen, she buys a slab of cheese, two punnets of fresh cream and a crusty loaf of white bread. I help nanna by carrying the cheese and the cream in a brown paper bag with handles.

‘Thank you Jae-Dee for helping me. It gets a bit much for an old lady to carry by herself.’

I trail hand in hand behind nanna to a brightly lit caravan where she surprises me with something special. She buys me my first ever hot jam n’ sugar-coated doughnut! ‘Don’t tell your sisters, this is our secret.’

We sit on a nearby seat with our shopping beside us and sink our teeth into the beautiful round shaped, hot sweet raspberry jam, spicy cinnamon and sugared delight. Truly unforgettable!