

Saturday, 13 December 1941

Mum came home with some hot gossip today. An official telegram came through overnight from Canberra ordering the evacuation of women and children plus anyone who's old or sick. I asked her if 'children' included me but she assured me that she wouldn't let anyone take me away.

'I'm Superwoman!' she reminded me. 'I have powers.' Dad said that when he told the blokes at work that we were going to dig a slit trench, they laughed. They're not going to dig one even though the government is encouraging everyone to do so. It's not because they're lazy; Dad reckons they're just too laidback and don't believe Darwin's under any threat.

'They're confident our boys can handle them. I pointed out to them that that's unlikely. There are no planes or warships in Darwin and the few gun emplacements are manned by kids. No offence to their fighting ability, but that's what those young soldiers are, kids!'

I rode to the Darwin oval this morning to have a closer look at the slit trenches along the cliff top. We walked past them the other night during the air-raid warning. The soldiers stationed there were very friendly. Dad's right. Most of them are only a few years older than I am.

They were playing cricket on the oval when I arrived. I introduced myself to those sitting in the grandstand and asked them if they'd tell me how to dig a slit trench. 'It's easy, lad. Get a shovel, push downwards with the blade then lift upwards with the handle, then repeat endlessly!'

They all laughed. 'And they're not called slit trenches by those of us who are in the know, they're funk holes.'

I don't think I could use that name. Mum would tell me off for using bad language.

Someone told me not to take any notice of Nippy. They said he's always joking.

'The most important thing, son, is not to throw away your dirt. Put it into bags and then stack those around the trench for protection from Daisy Cutters.'

'What are they?'

They explained to me that there are lots of different types of bombs.

'Big ones that blow the hell out of everything, incendiary bombs that start fires and Daisy Cutters that explode at ground level and blast thousands of pieces of shrapnel sideways. They do some damage to buildings but make one heck of a mess of human beings. So make sure you fill lots of sandbags, Tommy. They could save your life.'

'Wing, I've heard there's a Chinese temple here somewhere.'

Yes. Go down there then turn left. You can visit but you must show respect. Take your shoes off at the door, okay?'

We found the temple easily. Two large stone dragons guarded the entrance. The light inside was quite dim but the decorations were very colourful. It wasn't like one of our churches. Most of the wall decorations were red with gold or black Chinese lettering on them. There were tables where incense was burning and altars where people had left gifts of rice. Dad was amazed that with so many burning incense sticks and candles, the whole place hadn't burnt down years ago.

As we walked around I noticed some old men in a small side room. They were lying in a circle with their heads in the middle. On the way home I asked Dad if they were performing some sort of religious ceremony. He smiled and said, 'Sort of. They're opium users. Who knows what sort of religious experiences they have!'

I was shocked. Had I been in an opium den? I didn't think such places were real. I thought they only existed in movies and books. And if it was a real den, wasn't it illegal? Dad didn't know the answer. 'Darwin's different,

son. They have their own way of doing things up here.'

After we got home Dad and I did some digging on my trench. We worked really hard for quite a long time. When we stopped for a drink, he smiled and said with a Chinese accent, 'If we keep digging this fast we'll soon dig through to China. Do you believe?' He laughed. He thought he was really funny.

Monday, 15 December 1941

Mum was right. An evacuation has been ordered. Every house got a leaflet today. Mum was shocked by how few belongings people are allowed to take with them.

'One suitcase, a blanket, a plate and a mug. Boy scouts can take more than that on a jamboree! And you should read what it says about pets. "Shoot dogs and cats, free birds and leave poultry for military use." How cruel!'

If she'd heard Mr Wings' description of how the Japanese tortured prisoners in China, she wouldn't have thought killing cats and dogs was so bad.

Some evacuees will be flown south and some will be sent by ship. Dad says the last thing the port needs at the moment is a civilian evacuation.

'We're flat out already and if the Japs keep bombing ports to our north, more and more ships will be forced

to come here. I've heard the Yanks are going to use Darwin because of the damage done to their base in the Philippines.'

Dad works hard but the wharfies here have been criticised recently for working too slowly and not allowing the troops to help. Dad says the reason loading and unloading takes longer in Darwin than down south is partly because of the weather but mostly because the equipment is old and the design of the wharf is 'woeful'. 'Whoever designed it ought to be shot. After we winch the cargo out of a ship and sling it over the side, it has to be loaded into railway trucks, pushed to a turntable, then turned around two at a time so the trucks can be hooked onto a locomotive and towed into town.

And then there's the confounded tide. It rises and falls six or seven yards every day and some ships haven't got cranes that reach as high as the jetty. If we don't get them unloaded when the tide's in, we can't do anything with them for another twelve hours. The government's just taking the easy way out—blame the wharfies!

A soldier abused Dad's work-gang yesterday and called them 'mongrels' and other names Dad wouldn't repeat. That started a big fight. Dad reckons the soldiers are angry because they only earn about eight pounds a

month whereas the wharfies get twenty or thirty pounds a week.

Dad can see why that makes them angry but says soldiers get food, board, uniform and travel on top of their wage, 'which is worth a hell of a lot nowadays'.

Tuesday, 16 December 1941

The slit trench is going well. Dad brought home some empty sandbags so I've been able to have a break from digging and build some walls. The Wet makes it easy to dig the soil but it also means the trench is always partly flooded.

I didn't really enjoy digging the trench at school but here it's different because it's my trench. Mum's really proud of my efforts. She says I can start work digging her vegie garden as soon as I finish this job. And Herb, the neighbour, says I can start on his trench after that and he says he'll pay me. Looks like I've got work for the rest of the school holidays.

Wednesday, 17 December 1941

Another day of digging and bagging. We had several heavy showers this morning. After each one I had to bucket out my trench so I could continue digging. Mum

wants to know what happens if there's a bombing raid immediately after a downpour. She reckons there's likely to be dozens of casualties, a few from the bombs but most from drowning! Very funny!! I sat under the house when the worst showers fell, and watched the clouds. They're not storm clouds like we got down south, they're monsoon clouds. I never imagined the sky could be so spectacular.

Thursday, 18 December 1941

There are some locals who want to be evacuated but Mumm's heard that lots don't want to go because they don't believe Darwin will ever be attacked. They're more worried about looters robbing their house if they leave it empty. Normally security's not a problem in Darwin. Everyone knows everyone so nothing ever gets pinched. I heard Ernie tell Dad that the problem is that there are a lot of armed forces blokes up here at the moment and you can't trust out-of-towners, Jack.

Dad told him it was crazy to think that way. The military's here to protect us and our belongings, not to rob us, Ernie! But Ernie wasn't convinced.

Mr Abbott, the Chief Administrator, has told everyone that their possessions will be safe because they'll be

protected by the police and the Provos (the military police). He's also said that he has the power under the National Security Emergency Control regulations to evacuate civilians'. (I copied that from a leaflet.) Ernie said people up here aren't used to being pushed around by government. Lots of them moved here to get away from all the rules and regulations down south. He doesn't think many people will evacuate without being forced to.

Friday, 19 December 1941

Dad saw lots of teary farewells today as the first women and children were shipped south. Four shiploads were evacuated. Nearly two thousand people! Some were angry because they were only given twenty-four hours' notice to pack a few precious things and say goodbye to friends.

Mumm's been told she won't be evacuated because she's doing an essential job. They had a meeting at her work and issued everyone with a gas mask and a steel helmet. They have to carry them to work every day in case there's an air raid. The staff were also told a slit trench will be dug behind the post office for their protection.

As a joke, the women in her section all put their masks and helmets on while their boss Mr Bald was out of the office. When he returned he looked at them and laughed. He said the Japanese would get back in their landing craft and leave if they were greeted on the beach by such a frightening sight.

Saturday, 20 December 1941

Apparently the premier of South Australia, Mr Playford, is worried that some of the evacuees being sent south are Aborigines and Asians. He says it won't be easy to find accommodation down south for them. Dad was furious when he heard that.

The Prime Minister's been telling us we're all Australians and we have to make sacrifices for the country as a whole. Surely that includes coloured Australians too? What a damned awful Christmas it'll be for those people if they travel two thousand miles south and find they're not wanted!

It's Christmas Day next Thursday, which only leaves me four days to buy presents. Christmas in Darwin will certainly be different from down south. There, we always had the midday meal with Dad's family and dinner with Mums. This year there'll be just the three of us.

Sunday, 21 December 1941

The whole family was home all day today, which hasn't happened since Mum and Dad both started working. We sat under the house and had a barbecue lunch while the rain crashed down. It was so loud it was difficult to hear each other speak. Mum said she'd like to go out for a meal on Christmas Eve to celebrate our shift north, so Dad told us we had three choices: the three pubs. There's no way Mum will go to the Don and I don't blame her. The locals call it 'the bloodhouse' because on Friday and Saturday nights men drink their week's pay in a one-night binge and then fight.

Lots of the blokes from work drink there. They're good blokes when they're sober but crazy as hell when they've been on the grog. Dad told us. He occasionally drinks there with his mates from work but gets out before the fights start.

Dad told us a funny story about the Don that his workmate George told him. There was a crowd of soldiers in the Don one Friday night and one of the regulars couldn't get to the bar so he went to his truck and brought back a small saltwater crocodile. He left its legs tied but freed its jaws. When he came back into the pub he held it in front of him and the soldiers quickly

cleared a path to the bar. He left the croc on the bar all night to make sure he had plenty of drinking room.

That story only confirmed Mum's opinion of the Don, which left her with a choice of the Darwin Hotel or the Vic for our night out. Mum said she'd like to try the Darwin, which is where the local 'toffs' drink, but Dad said he'd feel uncomfortable there because he'd have to get too dressed up. He never enjoys himself in places that are too 'toffy'. So they decided on the Vic. Mum said she'd make the booking.

Monday, 22 December 1941

Dad heard two rumours today. Firstly, the government's moving all the cattle in the Territory south so there won't be any fresh meat for the Japs if they invade. Secondly, the government's planning to blow up the meat works in Wyrndham for the same reason. Who knows if either rumour is true or not, but they've convinced lots of people that the government thinks the Japs are coming. If they are going to attack, it's quite frightening. Everyone says they don't take prisoners. They behead everyone!

Mum and I hope they don't attack during one of Dad's shifts. He's on night shift at the moment so he should be safe. Apparently it's true that planes from aircraft

carriers can't take off in the dark, so they can only attack during the day. But what happens if the Japanese capture Timor? That's very close to here. They'll be able to take off anytime and the wharf where Dad works will be right in the firing line. He'd be a sitting duck. Dad knows that but it doesn't scare him. It scares Mum though.

Tuesday, 23 December 1941

I heard on the evening news that the Yanks are coming. The first troops landed in Brisbane today. Mum says that's good for the country's morale. America's such a powerful country that its troops will be able to stop the Japs if they try to attack us.

An American song, 'The Boogie-Woogie Bugle Boy', is a popular song at the moment. Dad doesn't like it because he says he doesn't like Americans.

He says Americans are brash. When I asked him what brash meant, he said 'loud and showy'. Dad doesn't like them because they wouldn't help us fight Hitler.

Mum says we need the Yanks now whether Dad likes it or not. She says with England and America on our side, the Japanese haven't got a hope of winning the war. We've got better trained soldiers and better made equipment.

Later
Bad news. We heard on the wireless that American troops have been forced to retreat in the Philippines and one hundred thousand of them are trapped. The Japanese are still a long way from Darwin but Dad looked worried by the news.

Wednesday, 24 December 1941

Mum and I went on a big Christmas shopping spree this morning.

'What a pity I have to work!' was Dad's only comment as we headed off. He was joking; he didn't really want to come.

Ernie told Mum that although Darwin people appeared easy-going, there are three social classes in town, each with their own shopping street. Cavenagh Street is for the poor whites and the Asians, Smith Street is for your average Australians and Mitchell Street is for the 'silvertails'. (The silvertails are the wealthy people, the Big Bosses that Dad's often rude about.)

The first shop we went to was called Fang Chong Loong's (I think I spelled that correctly) because Mum wanted to look at ladies' stuff. She said the Asiatic materials and gowns on display had the most beautiful

embroidery she'd ever seen. I looked at men's work clothes. There were things that town blokes like Dad wear (singlets and shorts) but there was also cowboy gear (hats and boots) that the cattle workers wear. The cowboy shirts were just like they wear in the movies.

Mum bought a few 'necessities' as we walked around. We took it in turns to carry her cane shopping basket as it got heavier. When we stopped for a break, Mum laughed. 'If we were silvertails, Tom, we wouldn't have to carry our own shopping,' she said. 'We'd place our order then wait for it to be delivered. The ladies living on the esplanade don't dash around between showers of rain carrying heavy baskets.'

Our last stop was a treat for Mum. Mrs Bleser's shop sells fancy dresses and it specialises in sporting 'requisites' (what a fancy word) for the rich ladies who play golf and tennis. Mum says she couldn't afford a tennis racquet or golf club, let alone fashion clothing to go with them. She had a long look at the frocks. She said she'd love to have something smart to wear for Christmas but we couldn't afford anything despite the 'Southern prices'. Mum always puts the family's needs ahead of luxuries for herself.

Late

Tonight we had our family meal at the Vic, just as Mum had planned. Dad dressed up in his best clothes, wearing things he hadn't worn since we came up north, and Mum wore silk stockings and a hat. She hasn't been wearing stockings because of the heat.

After we'd eaten, Dad had a couple of beers in the front bar while Mum stayed in the lounge bar with me and talked to some women from work. They each had a few shandies. When Dad got back he knew she'd had more to drink than usual because she was laughing and talking non-stop.

When we got home Dad suggested we let Mum sleep in in the morning in case she was hung-over. She told him not to be silly. She had to be up early because she has a leg of beef to cook for Christmas Mince. Beef's one of the few things up here that's cheaper than down south. That's because there's thousands of head of cattle in the Territory.

Thursday, 25 December 1941

Christmas Day started with a huge thunderstorm, sheet lightning as well as forked lightning and three inches of rain in an hour. Mum had no hope of sleeping in.

The noise on the iron roof was deafening! I lay in bed watching and listening. When I finally went out to the kitchen Mum was working but Dad was still in bed. I reminded her that it was supposed to be the other way around but she laughed and joked about being Superwoman.

After lunch we unwrapped presents. The funniest one was the pith helmet we bought Dad. He was a bit funny about wearing it, saying he'd look like 'a flaring Pommy explorer in Africa'. He put it on reluctantly and Mum and I called him Doctor Livingstone for the rest of the day. He called her Stanley.

The best present was one Dad gave Mum. It was soft and she guessed it was either tea towels or a bathroom towel. But when she unwrapped it she got a huge surprise. Dad had been to Mrs Bleeser's and bought her one of the frocks she'd admired in the window. It was one of the latest designs. Mum couldn't believe he'd bought it.

'If it doesn't fit, Mrs Bleeser will take it back. Or if you don't like the colours you can swap it.' Dad explained, but Mum was over the moon and half crying, saying, 'It's beautiful, it's beautiful', and holding it in front of her as she waltzed around.

Dad and I said it suited her and we meant it. Just then she went quiet. She said she loved it and the thought of Dad going into a frock shop to buy it for her made her cry. She threw her arms around him.

'It's the least I could do,' he said, 'after bringing you to this place just as a war's starting.'

'You don't need to apologise for that, Jack. I love it here, war or no war. I don't want to be anywhere else. I love the weather, I love the people, I love the place and I love being with my family and no Japanese army can take that away from me.'

Mum wore the dress for the rest of the day, even when we went next door to Herb's for Christmas drinks and a barbecue. She got lots of compliments. She did look good.

Friday, 26 December 1941

The news this morning is that the Japanese captured Hong Kong yesterday. Dad wasn't too surprised. 'It's a trade centre full of businessmen and civilians. Hardly a match for a Japanese army in full war cry. Singapore won't be so easy to take.'

I rode with Dad to the wharf. We saw soldiers stringing out barbed wire entanglements around all the

government buildings. As Dad said, 'The barbed wire's not there to catch bombs! The government has to be expecting an invasion.'

Saturday, 27 December 1941

I did more digging and sand-bagging this afternoon. Dad helped me when he got home from work. He thought everyone in Darwin must be hung-over. The only activity he saw in town again today was the soldiers erecting more barbed wire barricades.

Sunday, 28 December 1941

A quiet day again except for the rain. It pelted down. There was no way I could dig. I'd have been working in a foot of water. After today I realise that I'll have to build a roof over the deep end and sand-bag a step across the trench to stop water flowing into it. There's no point being saved from the bombs if we drown while sheltering.

Monday, 29 December 1941

I helped Mum do the washing today because it was too wet to dig. We hung the clothes on a line under the house. Things dry quickly if they're under cover.

Mum's lucky that Dad has a labouring job and doesn't need to change his clothes during the day or there would be more washing. Men in the banks and government offices around where she works change their clothes every lunchtime because they get so sweaty.

There are only a few offices with fans in Darwin, even though electricity is available in the main part of town. The room where Mum works at the post office doesn't have fans. She says it's quite cool in the mornings but unbearable by the end of the day. She's been told that she'll get used to the humidity once she's lived through a couple of Wet seasons.

The single men go home at lunchtime to change their clothes and one of them always brings back some cool water from his ice chest. Mum really appreciates that. The only other drinking water is a waterbag hanging on the back verandah.

9.00 pm

Mum's working an evening shift tonight because one of the regulars is ill. Dad and I had to get our own meal. He's just left to meet her and walk her home. He won't let her walk alone after dark.

Tuesday, 30 December 1941

Dad and I had cold meat for tea last night, the last of the leftovers from Christmas. The ice chest has done a great job to keep the meat from going off during the past six days. We get a block of ice delivered every day. We wrap it in newspaper or brown paper, whatever's handy. The paper stops the ice melting too quickly. In Adelaide our ice melted quickly in the summer but would last two or three days in winter.

Wednesday, 31 December 1941

NEW YEAR'S EVE! Mum has to work till eight tonight but as soon as she knocks off Dad and I will meet her with a picnic tea. It'll be strange not seeing fireworks on New Year's Eve. Because of the blackout there won't be any house lights or streetlights either. One of the Provos even made Dad unhook the generator on his bike because bicycle lights are considered a possible enemy target!

'They'd have to be a pretty good shot to hit me on my treadly from a few miles out to sea,' Dad joked.

He and I prepared the picnic this afternoon then did some work on his bike. Herbie told us what the locals do to carry beers and keep them cool. Wash out an old kero tin, fill it with ice and strap it onto the back of your bike. So that's what we did.

Thursday, 1 January 1942

We had an exciting time last night. Despite the blackout someone managed to fire off a few skyrockets and penny bangers. Dad said the Chinese were the inventors of the firecracker so it's not surprising that a few whizz bangs were let off. The locals don't like the restrictions imposed on them by the military. Dad says letting off the fireworks was probably someone's way of sticking it up the army bosses.

It didn't rain last night so lots of other families brought in the new year under the night sky. People up here spend a lot of time outside.

Mum proposed a toast at midnight and said she had one wish, 'An end to all wars.'

Not long after midnight, when people were still hooting and hollering, the air-raid siren went off. Dad told us to leave everything and get down to Lammaroo Beach. Despite some moonlight, it was a tricky walk. Barbed wire entanglements were all around the cliff-top and hard to see. We lifted one another over them and helped unhook each other's clothes from the bars.

Quite a few others had gathered on the beach but, listening to the amount of singing and shouting coming from the town, there were plenty of revellers ignoring the siren.

After two hours the All Clear was sounded and we were able to collect our things and go home. It had been a false alarm but those who ignored the siren didn't know that. Mum said they were probably too drunk to care.

Dad heard that the Provos tried to make the drunks move to safety but they refused and fights broke out. He also heard that an enemy submarine was detected last night at the boom net. Imagine, a submarine full of Japanese sailors only a couple of miles off-shore! They could have been watching us last night through their periscope and we wouldn't have known. Mum said they probably laughed at us huddled on the beach thinking the enemy was in the air when it was really in the water. Dad says they would have been spying on the shipping in the harbour and not worried about small fry like us.

Friday, 2 January 1942

More bad news today. The Japanese have captured Manila and trapped the Americans near there on the Bataan Peninsula. Dad and I looked up those places in my atlas. They're in the Philippines.

The report said the Japs are shelling them from the land and the sea. Mum says she wouldn't want her son there and she felt sorry for the tens of thousands

of American mothers whose sons were caught in the bombardment.

'War is such a cruel thing. It destroys people and families. Cities can be rebuilt but families can't.'

Saturday, 3 January 1942

There was another submarine sighted near Darwin today. This time it was seen in daylight. So the rumour of a sub at the net on New Year's Eve was probably correct. It upsets Mum to think that the enemy is lurking so close. She doesn't understand war or what makes one nation want to attack another.

Sunday, 4 January 1942

I worked all day on the slit trench. It's almost finished. Mum filled the sandbags as I dug. We got a lot done. Another day or two and it will be finished.

We had sweat pouring off us. I really wanted to have a swim to cool down but it's too dangerous at this time of the year because of box jellyfish. One sting and you're dead. Mum says she's never lived near so many deadly creatures: crocodiles in the rivers, sharks and jellyfish in the sea and snakes on the land. Dad tried to tell her that not all of the snakes are poisonous. The pythons are

perfectly safe. 'Sure. Unless they get around your neck and strangle you.' She laughed but I could tell she was half serious too.

Monday, 5 January 1942

I would've finished the trench today if we hadn't had four inches of rain!! That's how much rain Adelaide gets in the wettest month of the year but we had it in about two hours. Because of the improvements I made to the trench only the open section filled with water. The sheltered section was fairly waterproof. I was proud of that.

At tea tonight Mum suggested we have a Grand Opening of the trench the next time she and Dad get a day off together. They're going to check their rosters.

Tuesday, 6 January 1942

It's finished. I stacked the last sandbag in place this morning, made some lunch, then sat in the shelter and ate it. I've put some wooden boxes in there to sit on because the ground is very damp. When I dropped down the hessian flap that acts as a door I started to sweat like crazy. My little shelter is a natural sauna.

By the time I'd finished eating I needed to get out. If we're ever bombed I hope it's a short raid. People will

faint if they're stuck behind the hessian too long. I must remember to grab the waterbag from under the house if we ever have to dash for the shelter or we'll die of dehydration long before the Japs get us.

Later

Saturday's the Grand Opening. Mum and Dad are both free on that day. We're going to invite the neighbours over as well as a couple of people from Mum's work.

Wednesday, 7 January 1942

I spent some time in the town library today. It's near Mum's work so we walked into town together. I'm the only one in the family who reads much. Mum and Dad only read newspapers but they're not easy to get now because of wartime restrictions on newsprint. To save paper, the printer pins a copy of the latest newspaper up on a notice-board in the main street. Dad's union boss also pins one up in the smoko shed on the wharf. That way everyone can keep up to date with what's happening down south, as well as in the wars against Germany and Japan. We're very isolated up here in Darwin so news is important.

Being inside the library must be just like being in Mum's office. Hot and humid. I borrowed a couple

of books to read then left as soon as I could. Some of the pages are mouldy. Paper obviously doesn't like the humidity either.

I sat under the house at home to read. It was the first time since I finished school in November that I'd picked up a book. I'd forgotten how much I enjoy reading.

I feel tired and slightly achy. I think the hard work I did to finish the trench has caught up with me. It's funny. I ache in places I didn't know I even had muscles.

Thursday, 8 January 1942

At last! Some good news from the war front. The Russian Army has begun to push back Hitler's forces. Hitler's troops have been unbearable until now. After two and a half years of defeats and retreats perhaps the German war is turning our way. But how do we stop the Japanese? Because we live up north we're more worried about the Japanese war, rather than the German one. That war's very close to us.

I still feel slightly tired and have an aching back. Mum says I should sit in my shelter 'sauna' and sweat it out. Heat is supposed to be good for aching muscles.

Friday, 9 January 1942

I rode to work with Dad this morning. I'm not allowed on the wharf. A sign says it's off-limits to unauthorised personnel. Dad explained that the regulation is to do with wartime security.

They don't want civilians to know what's in the ships that come and go in case one of them's a spy. There are Jap subs in these waters just waiting for a juicy target to torpedo. I used to think the sailor's life was romantic but I wouldn't swap places with one of them now for anything. Those supply ships are sitting ducks. They're slow-moving, heavily laden and have nothing to protect themselves with. I don't know what merchant seamen are paid, but I hope it's a lot.

He suspected it wasn't, however, as many of the crews were from Singapore and Malaya. He suspected they were being exploited because they weren't in a strong union.

I said goodbye to Dad then rode to Brogan's bike shop. I needed new tyres and tubes but I couldn't get them. They told me rubber was now very scarce because it was needed for military vehicles. They suggested I either repair my tyres and tubes with patches or replace them with rolled up newspaper held in place with wire ties! If I get desperate I'll try that.

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As I left Brogan's to ride to the library it started to pour so I sheltered under the Tree of Knowledge. A sign under the tree said it was a banyan tree, also known as an Indian fig tree. The only people out in the rain were Chinese men carrying kerosene tins full of fresh vegetables. They didn't carry the tins in their hands but balanced them on their shoulders with a long bamboo pole. One tin hung in front and the other behind. The bamboo bobbed up and down in time with their footsteps. I couldn't believe it didn't break under the weight.

When the rain stopped I rode to the library. I looked up banyan tree in an encyclopaedia. It said that the branches of banyan trees put down many shoots. When they hit the ground they take root and start to grow like new trunks. They're called pillar roots and one tree can have hundreds of trunks and cover a vast amount of ground. It is believed that banyan trees came from India originally. The encyclopaedia didn't tell me whether they're all known as Trees of Knowledge. Maybe they're not. Maybe ours is the only one that's special. I should ask a local and see if I can find out.

I slept for two hours when I got home. My legs are really aching from riding the bike through the mud and slush on the roads.

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Saturday, 10 January 1942

Our French Opening party is on tonight. Mum's invited Eileen and Jean from the post office, Herbie, Alice, Gwen and Des, Ernie and Doreen and old George. Mum joked about pairing 'up either Eileen or Jean with George, which made Dad laugh.

'Apart from the age difference there's the matter of style. Eileen and Jean are ladies. They're not silvertails but if they married the right bloke they could be. They live in the Vic but would be just as much at home in the Darwin Club. George is a Don man. He may not get involved in the fights but he's always in the front row to watch them.'

1.30 pm, Sunday

I've come up to my room because I'm feeling tired. My calf and back muscles ache. I don't think I'm cut out to be a labourer. Pushing a pen is what I'm best suited to. The party's still going strong downstairs but I've had enough for one day. I'll write a few things in my diary then hit the sack.

I'm sure everyone enjoyed the party. We couldn't afford champagne to spray over the shelter when it was declared open but Dad shook up a bottle of beer and

sprayed it along the trench and onto the roof of the shelter after Mum had said a few words.

She started by saying, 'Ladies and gentlemen,' but Ernie called out, 'There's no gentlemen here, love.' She laughed and continued.

She thanked me for all my hard work and said she was proud of me. 'I've always thought of my son as a bookworm but with this job he's proved he's quite practical too and I'm very proud of him.'

'I'll be proud of him too after he finishes my shelter,' Herbie shouted. 'So don't anyone else try to poach the lad. My backyard's next in line.'

Mum proposed a toast to me and the shelter, then invited 'ladies first' to inspect it. She teased that she wouldn't allow George into the shelter while there were women present.

'We can handle George,' Eileen replied so he rushed to join them in the shelter. There were squeals and hysterical laughter from the women and shouts of encouragement from the men.

'If there's a raid you'd be safer out here with the bombs than in there with George,' someone called out.

Monday, 19 January 1942

A lot has happened since I last wrote. I've been ill. I'd been tired and aching for a few days and Dad said I probably had mild heat exhaustion. He pointed out that I'd worked hard to finish the bomb shelter and wasn't used to labouring or tropical heat. He could have been right, but he wasn't.

I had dengue fever. The doctor explained it's a tropical disease carried by mosquitoes. I don't feel too bad today but I've been told not to read or write much.

Tuesday, 20 January 1942

I'm improving every day. The fever has totally gone and so have the aches in my back and legs but I've lost my appetite. Doc Fenton says that's because the fever causes a rash on the tongue that makes food taste awful. He says some patients complain of an unpleasant metallic taste and others of a soapy taste. My taste is bitter. I guess you could call it metallic.

I got sick very suddenly. I came down for breakfast on the morning after the party, but before I'd finished eating I got a booming headache. My head felt like it was burning up but my body felt chilled. I started shaking and Mum had to help me to bed because my legs went weak.

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When she saw the colour of my tongue (bright scarlet) and a rash on my forehead she knew I was ill. My symptoms made her think I had scarlet fever. She placed an iced compress on my forehead, woke Dad and sent him off on his pushbike to get a doctor.

Wednesday, 21 January 1942

Mum's back at work today. She took last week off to look after me. The doctor told her I wouldn't die but that I'd need nursing for a week to keep my temperature down. He was right.

I don't remember much about last week except that I felt very ill. Mum says on Monday and Tuesday I had a temperature of 104 degrees and mumbled quite a lot, as if I was sleep-talking. She kept compresses on my forehead and sponged my body day and night. She couldn't have had much sleep.

Apparently my temperature dropped on Wednesday but then rose again a day or so later. Mum was worried when I relapsed but Doc Fenton said it was typical of dengue fever.

Dengue's like a cyclone. It comes with a burst, followed by a calm, then another burst. That's not true for every patient but it is a fairly common experience.

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