

A BLACK DAY

By Barbara Elliott

When you are seven years old and at Primary School, you learn to follow instructions. This particular day was very hot and everything smelled of smoke. 'Children you are to go straight home to your parents.' My teacher told us after lunch. I was pleased because it was so hot and Mum would let me run under the sprinkler hose to cool down. I was only five minutes from home and as I started walking I noticed the sky was black as if it was evening. Smoke swirled around like a fairy dancing on the wind. I was the only child who lived in this direction and I wondered where all the other children had disappeared to.

My mother was at the front door as I entered the gate, telling me to hurry along. 'Is it a special day,' I asked?

On the lounge room floor Mum had a large bed sheet spread out and on it were all sorts of items. Our photo Album, several photo frames with pictures of our family. The tongs Mum curled our hair with, curlers and our brush and comb. A pile of tea towels and a tablecloth our Nana had embroidered with pansies in pretty colors of mauve. A couple of saucepans we had just bought. Dad's tennis racket in a frame! My sister and my new Sunday best dresses folded neatly, adjacent to our black patent leather shoes and socks popped inside the shoes. Some pants for my sister and I, and overalls with our pretty cotton flowery blouses. Several of Dad's tennis trophies wrapped in newspaper. There were lots more of kitchen things and some food.

Mum decided she should try tying the sheet like a parcel. It only just reached and tied in a reef knot at the top followed by a second reef knot with the other ends. The wheelbarrow came in from the back garden and Mother attempted to lift her tied sheet into the wheelbarrow, to no avail. Down she went on the floor with a big bang and clatter. Her hands went on hips as she stood up, until she figured out that no way could she possibly lift all of the giant pudding. Sometime later with the sheet repacked and my sister and I changed into long legged overalls, blouse and jumper, we were ready to go through the back

fence over to Mrs. Johnson's. A pram greeted us piled high with lots of special items. Mrs. Johnson had had her top teeth removed that morning so her face was streaming blood, but it didn't stop her from yelling at her two boys and older daughter. On we went to Mrs. Brennan's further down the street. Suitcases greeted us on the footpath with yelling to her boys to turn the hose on. They had new carpet laid in the house a few weeks earlier, so while the house might burn, her carpet wouldn't if she ran water through the house.

We continued our trip down the road and to the swimming pool, a lake with a shallow end fenced off for the smaller children and a deeper area for swimmers. The pool sat below an embankment of grass. Mrs. Brennan misjudged the bank and we saw the pram take off on its own gaining speed as it got to the water. The pram contents flew into the water in all directions. It was so funny we children all laughed, our mother's controlling a smile on their faces.

'Children you can help by picking up all the wet things and put them on the grass please,' asked Mrs. Brennan.

By now everyone was hungry and thirsty. The ladies had their billy's and teapots filled by Mrs. Melbourne at the kiosk with boiling water. We children settled on the grass with flavoured ice block made by Mrs. Melbourne. They were yummy but resulted in red, yellow and green mouths on the children.

We were told to go in the pool with our shoes off but our clothes on. We all stood confused at this unusual request, but quickly ran in when we saw other children doing exactly this!

Trees some distance away, surrounding the pool were alight at the tops and we children all clapped our hands at the special sight. Fire trucks kept speeding up and down the road at the back of the pool where the trees were alight.

A fireman came to the pool to tell our mothers we should all go home as there was a Ammunition Dump at the rear of the pool and it may explode. What a panic as our mothers quickly packed everything, children's shoes replaced and wheelbarrows, prams, were pushed up the embankment with lots of tired children crying after such an exciting day.

My Mum had cinders in her eyes, so we had someone come and watch us at home while Mum went for treatment at the health centre.

Next day at school we learned that fires had destroyed many homes in nearby Hernes Oak. A number of people had died in and around their homes. It was a very sad time.

It was World War II time, and my Dad and many other Dads were away fighting the Japanese.