

The Paradox of Being

By Gillian Long

THe Sydney Harbour Bridge has six million rivets, driven white-hot into 53,000 tonnes of steel. My grandfather told me that when I was just a little girl. He wasn't a real relative, but his friendship was the nearest I came to having family other than my foster mother Auntie Elsie, and at least he cared. When I was fifteen, he would take me with him on Sundays to marvel at the cherished coat hanger. I loved that time, but not because of the bridge. I loved it because it was just him and me eating ice cream as we walked the bridge length, and back again.

It's midnight now, the death hour, and my life flickers through my mind in cinematic screenshots, drawing random patterns that make more sense than they did to my once naïve, some might say gullible, younger self. The black void overhead reflects the city lights; orange swizzles in swirling waters, car headlights sweeping, beckoning a city into existence like a lighthouse in a swelling sea of darkness. Overhead streetlights buzz, blurry with moisture. Sydney at night is so unlike the daytime all blue and white and postcard perfect. The city in springtime exhibits the sky-blue and pure-white of the Virgin Mary's robes in the Catholic cathedral, a place that mesmerised my childhood. Granddad said it



wasn't for him to visit. Then, his brow creased and with eyebrows bristling like hairy caterpillars, he said.

“Why not?”

He took my hand, and we walked cautiously up the cathedral steps and into the vaulted cool, dim, and tranquil interior. There was no one about and warily we made our way along the nave, gazing up at the Stations of the Cross depicted in florid detail. Blood, scarlet and oozing pooled against alabaster skin, agonised tears glistening on rosy cheeks. Halfway through the

Stations, we stopped in a side chapel gazing at the beautiful robes of the Virgin Mary holding her baby, dressed only in a white cloth, which appeared to be unwinding in a messy trail across the floor. Auntie Elsie's disposable nappies are so much more efficient than the cloth ones the baby Jesus wore.

I felt the heavy warmth of Granddad's hand on my shoulder.

He said, "We must go," and hurried me out.

When I complained he said, "We should not transgress the sanctity of another's belief by making it an object of curiosity."

I didn't understand then, but that was Granddad, a mysterious, unknowable, homely and shuffling sanctuary of my belonging. How I long to go back to such days of innocence and happiness, but they have gone like the waters flowing beneath the bridge. The cinema reel in my head shows them swirling and eddying toward another destiny, another form. Like a life that transforms from sweet springs to an oily slick, to salt-laden spume, and eventually dispersing into nature, just as in the end do we humans, questioning the passions of a fleeting moment.

The steel mesh covering the walkway feels cold against my forehead as I gaze across to the Opera House. I know there is a camera watching me, but it is unmanned and at this time of night pedestrians are few and far between. No one is likely to disturb me. Earlier, I had thought to jump, but they make it impossible with all the barriers. Jumping would make it clean. There would be no mess to clean up in the morning;

instead, the sea would carry me away, to become a meal for fish or sharks. I'm sorry someone will have to find me here, but they shouldn't make it so impossible.

This place has always reminded me of death. Granddad said six million rivets; one for each of the victims. He laughed with the knowledge that he had no need for a riveted memorial, even one so far from his homeland in Germany. Guilt would then cloud his features and he would mourn his survival.

"It should have been someone else," he said.

"Then I wouldn't have known you," I complained selfishly.

Or perhaps I would have, in another form, a different one. It's too confusing. What makes us who we are? Is it our ancestry, the number of rivets in our memory, our genes, or perhaps there is a spirit, an essence of us that goes on into the future? What I really want to know is whether having a different past, knowing different people, doing different things, changes the patterns of our lives. With another social pattern, would my husband have stayed with me instead of sleeping with her when he went away to work?

He doesn't know I know. Will he wonder why I have done what I have done, when he hears the news? Will he feel my loss, or will he be glad I have freed him to do openly, what he now does secretly? I'll never know, but I am past caring. I feel light-hearted and rash, like I imagine, did the man who stole the opening ceremony of this bridge, so long ago and forgotten now like everything is in the end.

I'm glad Granddad never knew or we would not have set foot on this bridge. For he had no tolerance for fascism, and he warned me often that it was something against which even the weak and fearful must stand firm. Granddad told me it was his hero, Jack Lang, who opened the bridge back in 1932. That was a lie. Fascists stole the opening ceremony with a fantastical, imagined, Light Brigade style charge. Francis de Groot, dressed in paramilitary garb and riding a horse, slashed the ribbon with his sword, stealing history's moment. At the other end of the bridge, Alderman Primrose, another New Guardsman, apparently unaware of the chaos at the far end, cut his ribbon unmolested.

Granddad would rise from the ocean if he knew conservative, paramilitary nationalists opened this bridge. Men who avowed support for Franco, Mussolini and Hitler, the very men who brought misery and destruction to people like Granddad and his lost family. Like all iconic monuments, this one has its believers; those like my pretend grandfather who believed in the progressive goodness of humanity, and those whose beliefs are a testament to bigotry and fanaticism. But who am I to judge? Perhaps it's only history that remains the moral arbiter, but then, whose history would that be?—does the winner always take all? Winners like my husband. We fight in life for that which we believe has value, but in the end, all we achieve are faint traces of remembered deeds and even those turn into dust and disperse.

It's now my turn to create a small historical event, stealing the limelight from nature's timeline. Centre stage is not a place in which I find comfort or joy, but it is the competing beliefs in my life's continuing value, which has led me to watch the blood seep from my veins. It is not the same crimson on alabaster of the paintings in the cathedral, but rather it is black ooze in dim light, a sun-dark mole of blemished smudge. Like crude oil that leaks into the rivets to become indistinguishable; just one of six million lives lost. I watch it run into the cracks and drip through the bridge. I imagine it drop intermittently, plop by plop into the waters below, but my eyes grow hazy and I cannot see that far. I hope it follows Granddad's ashes into a different future. One perhaps where we might be together, leaving behind a shadow's trace of the people we once were. I hope perhaps you will remember, and if you squint carefully, perhaps you may imagine us walking side by side along the bridge, licking ice cream, just one human family.

Image: "[Sydney Harbour Bridge, Sydney, Australia](#)" (CC BY 2.0) by [juanalbortogarciaivera](#)