

The Shoe-Horn Sonata

JOHN MISTO





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Playwright's Biography



JOHN MISTO has been a writer since 1981. Before this he worked as a solicitor. His first play *Sky*, had a successful season at the Ensemble Theatre and toured nationally. It was nominated for the 1993 Sydney Critics' Circle Award for Best New Play of the Year. His second play, *The Shoe-Horn Sonata*, won the 1996 Play Award, NSW Premier's Literary Awards and won the 1995 Australia Remembers National Play Competition – the largest play-writing prize ever offered in Australia. He donated both prizes to a fund for the building of a memorial to Australian nurses killed in war. He is the writer of the television series *The Damnation of Harvey McHugh* which won four AFI Awards. Other writing credits include *Mary McKillop* and *Gordon Bennett for Willesee's Australians*, tele-movies *Natural Causes*, *Sisters of War* and *Peter & Pompey* for the ABC, the highly acclaimed series *Palace of Dreams*, and the mini-series *The Last Frontier*, and *Dirtwater Dynasty*. Misto has won two AFI Awards (for *Harvey McHugh* and *Natural Causes*), two Writers' Guild Awards, a Penguin Award, and two Television Society Commendations.

The Shoe-Horn Sonata had its world premiere at the Ensemble Theatre in July 1995. It was also performed in Perth, and at the King's Head Theatre in London.

For the women who were there ...



Tangong, Singapore, 20 January 1942. Sisters of the Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS), 2/4th Casualty Clearing Station, 8th Division.

LEFT TO RIGHT:

(Back Row): E. Millie Dorsch (VIC), drowned 14 February 1942; B. Peggy Willmott (WA), shot Banka Island Beach 15 February 1942; Wilhelmina R. Raymont (SA), died Banka Island February 1945; Elaine Balfour-Ogilvy, shot Banka Island Beach 15 February 1942; Peggy Farmaner, shot Banka Island Beach 15 February 1942.

(Front row): Dora S. Gardam (TAS), died Banka Island April 1945; Irene M. Drummond, later Matron of 2/13th Australian General Hospital, shot Banka Island Beach 15 February 1942 and Elaine M. Hannah who survived. Four of these nurses were among the twenty one army nurses massacred by the Japanese on Banka Island after the SS Vyner Brooke sank off Sumatra. The photographer, Warrant Officer J. D. Emmett became a prisoner of war after the surrender at Singapore and buried the film for nine months. It was then handed to a Private Abbott who developed it in the X-Ray Room at the

Changi Hospital. After the war Warrant Officer Emmett recovered the film and had it printed. (Australian War Memorial Neg. No. A120518)

The Unacknowledged

Jan McCarthy

John Misto's *The Shoe-Horn Sonata* was first seen by audiences in 1995 during the year of *Australia Remembers*. The year when we remembered and thanked a generation who secured our freedom through the dark days of the Second World War. The play won the *Australia Remembers* National Playwriting Competition with a prize of \$20,000. As a young teenager, John Misto read *White Coolies* written by Betty Jeffrey, a member of the Australian Army Nursing Service who, with twenty-three of her colleagues, survived captivity in Sumatra and Malaya. The story obsessed him for a number of years until he finally wrote this play.

The play centres on two characters – one a down to earth Australian Army Nurse with a Catholic background and the other, a young civilian English girl who meet after their ships have been sunk while fleeing from Singapore in 1942. They form a friendship which survives three and a half years of captivity as Prisoners of the Japanese Emperor in Camps in Malaya and Sumatra. Fifty years later, with other former prisoners, they meet at a reunion organised by a documentary maker. Neither is sure where this friendship is at, as no contact was made during the post war years. They are wary of each other and of renewing their friendship.

The shoe-horn was given to the Army Nurse by her father, a former World War One soldier when the nurse joins the Army. This item becomes useful in the camps, ultimately used as a metronome by the Choral Society which was formed by the prisoners. This society survives until illness and death deprives it of its members. Undeterred, the two friends form a Sonata as they live day by day under the brutality of their captors. While food and medicine become almost non-existent, they find their music cannot be taken from them and for a time it releases them from captivity and sets them free. As the story unfolds, we become aware that one has paid a terrible price to save her friend who is unaware of this sacrifice.

In the dark days during the fall of Singapore, sixty-five members of the

Australian Army Nursing Service sailed under protest aboard the *Vyner Brooke* on 12 February 1942. Two days later this ship received several direct hits by Japanese aircraft and sank within half an hour. Twelve nurses were either killed or drowned in the water, others who swam or were in lifeboats made it to shore on Banka Island, Sumatra. One group of twenty-two nurses reached Radji beach together with some male survivors. After a time they gave themselves up to the Japanese who separated the men, marched them behind a bluff and on their return began cleaning their bayonets.

They then ordered the nurses to march into the sea and shot them in the back. One nurse survived, Vivien Bullwinkle, who managed to feign death and eventually escaped into the jungle where she met a male survivor. Together they survived in the jungle for several days eventually deciding to give themselves up to the Japanese.

The surviving thirty-two nurses were reunited after several days and spent the next three and a half years together with civilian women and children and British Army Nurses in camps throughout Sumatra and Malaya. The nurses were to lose another eight of their number before being repatriated and returning to Australia at the end of the war.

During their captivity they were deprived of food, medicine, often humiliated and beaten by their captors. Of the original sixty-five only twenty-four survived. Today those still alive remain a tightly knit group revered by soldiers, in particular those men of the 8th Division who themselves suffered under Japanese hands.

This play highlights a part of Australian military history that is not well known. Australian Army Nurses were Prisoners of War along with soldiers, sailors and airmen and suffered as did their male colleagues. All were deprived of basic comforts and the freedom which we take so much for granted in today's society. Some members of the audience were no doubt surprised to find this play was inspired by actual events.

The playwright donated his \$20,000 prize to the Royal College of Nursing, Australia, which has formed the Nurses' National Memorial Committee. This committee is working towards creating a Memorial to Military Nurses, who have 'served, suffered and died in the cause of humanity', on Anzac Parade, Canberra. This gesture has been greatly appreciated by all members of the nursing profession and former military nurses and stands as an inspiration in the fight towards recognition.

Jan McCarthy is a former Director, Nursing Services Army 1988-1992, Member of the Nurses' National Memorial Committee and currently Honorary Colonel and Representative Honorary Colonel, Royal Australian Army Nursing Corps.



Singapore, September 1945. Nurses from 2/10th and 2/13th Australian General Hospital and one survivor (Sister Mavis Hannah) from the 4th Casualty Clearing Station, aboard the Vyner Brooke when it sank. After three and a half years as prisoners of war of the Japanese they have arrived at the airfield by RAAF plane from Sumatra for repatriation. They wear their original uniforms, incomplete and oil-stained. (Australian War Memorial Neg. No. A44480)

Scores to be Settled

Vera Radó

John Misto's play *The Shoe-Horn Sonata* is as much the untold story of hundreds of thousands of women imprisoned by the Japanese in South East Asia as a ringing indictment against Australian indifference to the lot of these women. The internees, who included Australian Army nurses, are the forgotten war-trauma victims who were just left 'to get on with life'. Well-known are the tales about the Burma Railroad, the POWs of Changi, Sandakan and other places, but who has ever heard of Muntok, Belalau ('the camp nobody talks about'), Cideng, Adek or Tangerang? If the play goes beyond the familiar and comfortable, it is precisely the playwright's intention to startle his audience with unquestionable facts. This is no fiction. It is a slice of potent historical evidence!

In October 1994 I received a letter from John Misto, requesting an interview to enable him to write the play 'as honestly and accurately as possible'. I readily acceded. Having been a teenage prisoner of the Japanese during the Great War, I had begun a campaign a few years earlier, through letters to the major newspapers, to try and redirect the public outpourings of sympathy for the victims of Hiroshima by pointing out that there exists a large group of victims of the Japanese, who for years mouldered and died in prisons rife with disease and vermin. These women and children were not annihilated in one superblast, but went through years of hell. They were innocent, many of them were Australians, and they still continue to suffer.

The interview with John Misto, who traced me through one of my letters, left me quite elated. Here, at last, was someone who had recognised the injustice, and who was not only prepared to, but eminently capable of, addressing the imbalance in public perception. During our talks I learnt that successive Australian governments had ignored the right of female ex-prisoners for recognition and compassion. As Bridie remarks in the play: 'They told us we were on our own, just as they told us to keep smiling.' (Referring to a message 'to keep smiling' from Prime Minister Curtin,

conveyed by the Japanese guard to the starving, dying Army nurses).

John Misto proved to be an exceptionally sensitive, perceptive and discreet interviewer, whose questions showed a deep knowledge of his subject, the result of intensive research. They were directed less at my personal experiences than at how – without the benefit of modern de-traumatisation procedures – I ‘got on with life’. After some groping (I’d never thought about it), I found the answer in the words of the character Sheila in the play, ‘When something hurts you run away ... Or you dig a hole and bury it.’ Most survivors of trauma do both; they don’t want to talk about it and sweep unwelcome memories into some vast garbage bag below the level of consciousness. Sooner or later the repressed memories start to fester, translating themselves into physical pain which cannot be ignored without fatal consequences. You either haul them out and tell, or die slowly. Such unassisted cases of self-rehabilitation can take between thirty and fifty years, hence the recent spate of war stories from those who can finally tell.

In *The Shoe-Horn Sonata* (an aptly chosen title) the craft of the skilful playwright is demonstrated by the choice of a simple implement – a shoe-horn – to centre the plot. It unites both narrative and dialogue, and acts as catalyst for dramatic revelations. To one party the shoe-horn is a good-luck omen; to the other a symbol of fear, pain and degradation; to both – eventually – the means of reconciliation, when the shoe-horn is restored to its owner – ‘The war is over for us’. It plays a role in the prisoners’ survival: ‘Fifty voices and a shoe-horn set us free.’ It is indispensable for burying the dead, when a spade is the stuff of dreams along with juicy steaks, fresh fruit and soap.

There is pathos, friction, role-reversal and anguished introspection moving the two women. Who saved whose life? Who was whose keeper? The impartial interviewer (a disembodied voice) brings about a re-examination of values and truths fifty years on, leading to devastating insights. Would Bridie have saved Sheila’s life by selling her body for quinine? Rather than answering the question the other is reproached for not letting her die. But in the antiseptic world of the nursing sister such sacrifice is both repugnant and of an enormity beyond match.

The creative use of humour brings a freshness to the play which enables interest to be sustained; unrelieved misery would have created a feeling of depression. Humour defuses situations verging on the maudlin; it softens too-abrasive exchange; it highlights the comic aspects of painful incidents.

Setting the play in the present time, and working through the women's collective memories, was a brilliant idea. It is possible to laugh today at what was far from a laughing matter at the time it happened. Light banter is quite inconsistent with life-and-death situations, when even a smile would have set off the wrath of some Japanese guard.

Especially poignant is the women's shared reminiscence of their harrowing climb, whipped on by the enemy, to the top of a hill, where they expect to be executed. It is a fitting apotheosis of their endurance, their suffering and their final reconciliation. Fifty years of unexpressed grief, undeclared affection and unrevealed secrets are dissolved in their re-affirmation of a comradeship that has withstood time and the most lacerating of circumstances. This scene leaves very few dry eyes amongst the audience.

The Shoe-Horn Sonata opened at the Ensemble Theatre, Sydney, on 3 August 1995. I was privileged to be one of the invitees and – as John Misto put it – one of his most important critics. For me it was an overwhelming, even a cathartic, experience. It is not easy to live through those times again, to be transported through the agonies of starvation, deprivation of freedom, beatings and long stretches of dull despair, to experience again the undiluted terror of being delivered to a totally ruthless, brutish and brutal enemy with no protection from law or authorities. This is a fear that is inexpressible, incomprehensible to those who have never experienced it, a dread that strikes at the root of one's survival – an existential fear. It is what Bridie experiences when she is surrounded by Japanese tourists and flees from the store in utter panic.

The Shoe-Horn Sonata has to be classed as a first in calling public attention to the atrocities suffered by women at the hands of the Japanese. The voice of women is not heard often enough in a male-dominated society in general, and in professions such as the military, in particular. John Misto has whipped aside the curtain and revealed the unsuspected, little-known and sheer unbelievable acts of sadism and depravity committed against women in captivity. Far from making concessions because of gender, the Japanese treated women often more brutally even than men. This is not surprising when one reflects that in their hierarchically structured society women are at the bottom of the heap – just objects to be used at will.

The campaign for justice and compensation still goes on. The former Army nurses are still without a fitting memorial to their service during the war, their heroism and endurance during captivity. So far, Australian governments have

shown little inclination to give them and other ex-internees full recognition. Japanese governments have let their 'war heroes' get away with much more than simple murder. Instead of bringing them to justice as war criminals, they are being paid regular homage at their sacred shrine in Tokyo.

Today, more than fifty years after the end of World War II we have a situation where scores still remain to be settled. John Misto has brought this to our attention most dramatically.

July 1996

Vera Radó was imprisoned by the Japanese as young girl in Indonesia. She endured three years' captivity in several Japanese concentration camps.

Further Reading

The Forgotten Ones, Shirley Fenton-Huie, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1992.

You Can't Eat Grass, Eve ten Brummelaar, Image Desktop Publishing, 1996.

White Coolies, Betty Jeffrey, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1954.

In Japanese Hands, Jessie Elizabeth Simons, William Heinemann, Melbourne, 1954.

Captives, Catherine Kenny, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 1986.

Women Beyond the Wire, Lavinia Warner & John Sandilands, Michael Joseph, London, 1982.

The Fall of Singapore, Timothy Hall, Methuen, London, 1983.

Author's Note

Most teenagers do not expect to wake up and find themselves in a concentration camp. But this is exactly what happened to one hundred thousand school children in Asia and South East Asia in 1942. Overnight their countries were invaded and they were thrown without warning into Japanese prison camps.

When I was writing this play I spoke with many women who had been imprisoned in this way. In quiet Sydney homes on sunny afternoons, they poured tea and told me about bombings, shipwreck, massacres, torture, starvation, diseases and digging graves. They talked simply and calmly and without hate. There are several thousand of these women still living in Australia.

I would like to thank the following ladies for so generously sharing their wartime memories with me: Mrs Vera Harms, Mrs Pat Darling, Miss Patricia Kennedy, Mrs Pamela de Neumann, Mrs Catherine Spink, Mrs Elly Van Schie and Mrs Eve ten Brummelaar. I would also like to thank my friend and dramaturg, Heather Stewart, for her talent, faith and kindness.

When people ask why I wrote the play, this is what I tell them: In 1995 the United Nations announced that more civilians now die in war than soldiers. Yet they have no equivalent of Anzac Day on which their suffering is recognised. They are simply forgotten.

There is no national memorial to the many Australian nurses who perished in the war. At the time this play was first performed, the government had rejected all requests for one in Canberra.

I do not have the power to build a memorial. So I wrote a play instead. Although the characters of Bridie and Sheila are fictional, every incident they describe is true and occurred between 1942 and 1995.

There was even a shoe-horn...

The Shoe-Horn Sonata was first performed at the Ensemble Theatre on 3 August 1995, with the following cast:

BRIDIE	Maggie Kirkpatrick
SHEILA	Melissa Jaffer
VOICE OF RICK	Drayton Morley

Directed by Crispin Taylor
Sound design by Sarah De Jong
Lighting design by Alex Holver
Dramaturgy by Heather Stewart

Characters

BRIDIE
SHEILA

Setting

A television studio; a motel room in Melbourne.

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

Darkness. Out of the silence comes the voice of BRIDIE.

BRIDIE *[raising her hands, clapping them twice sternly]* When the guard cries out ‘Keirei!’ – the female stands at complete attention, then bends her upper-body – so.

BRIDIE stands in a spotlight. She bows stiffly from the waist, and remains in this position.

This kowtow is a tribute to the Emperor of Japan. Any bow that’s less than perfect is a blasphemy against him ... When the guard calls out ‘Naore!’ – the female straightens up again, without ever looking her master in the eye.

BRIDIE tries to straighten up, but her back is a little sore from this demonstration. An ‘On-Air’ sign becomes apparent.

[less formally] They’d make us stand like that for hours – in the afternoon sun – in the middle of the jungle. I’d stare at the dirt and ask myself why I’d ever left Chatswood in the first place.

And why did you?

M.
VOICE
BRIDIE

I guess I ... wanted to be like my Dad. He’d been a soldier. Fought in Egypt. He didn’t want me to enlist but I could tell that he was proud. The day I left for overseas, he gave me a present – *[Pulling a face.]* – a shoe-horn of all things! He cleared his throat, looked downwards and said – *[BRIDIE puts her hands behind her back, and looks at the ground.]* ‘There are three things every young soldier should know. Always use a shoe-horn *[Holding up an imaginary shoe-horn.]* – it’ll make your boots last longer. Don’t sit on a toilet till you’ve lined the seat with

paper. [*Awkwardly and rapidly.*] And never kiss a Pommie on the lips.' [*Fondly.*] Mum said he cried when my ship sailed off ... I'd never been out of Australia before. I'd never been further than Woy Woy. But I didn't have time to be homesick. As soon as we arrived we set up an army hospital – just north of Singapore. Johore Bahru – it wasn't like Sydney – that's for sure. There were chooks on the footpath – monkeys in the trees – and the smell of fish-oil everywhere. Sometimes we'd go dancing – all us nurses. It was hard to believe we were on the brink of war.

Sound: 'Fall in Brother' – a popular marching song of the period. On the screen behind BRIDIE are projected several 1940 posters for the Women's Army. These are followed by photographs of the Australian army nurses disembarking in Singapore. They look excited and quite happy.

BRIDIE sits in front of the screen. We realise she is sitting in a television studio where she is being interviewed for a documentary. There is a small table, with water, beside her.

BRIDIE

I remember I asked an Englishman once – a captain with a huge moustache – how dangerous the Japanese really were. 'My dear,' he said. 'They have slanty eyes. If they can't see properly, how can they shoot?' No one ever thought the Japs would get within coo-ee of us. So the English didn't bother to fortify the shore-lines. They said barbed wire would only spoil their beaches. They dispensed with blackouts too. All of Singapore's lights were fully ablaze when the Japanese bombers came. For a race that was myopic, their aim was surprisingly accurate. I can still see those Zeros flying over, hundreds of them – in V formations – their engines rattling our hospital windows. We ran out onto the lawn and watched. And I said to someone – a soldier I'd been nursing – 'I'm sure our planes will be waiting to greet them.' He looked at me sadly – and smiled. 'But sister, don't you know? We don't have a proper air-force. If the Japs can take Malaya, we'll be caught like rats in a trap.' For the first time in

months I started to long for quiet little Chatswood ...
How did the English react to the bombing?

M.
VOICE
BRIDIE

Like a personal insult. 'Drive those little blighters out!' the Governor told his troops. And off they went to do so ... But we were the ones who were driven out. Right out of Malaya. In a couple of weeks. The whole of our army was forced back to Singapore – where the Japs were bombing us day and night. Soon the hospitals were overflowing – there were wounded people everywhere – the halls, the stairs – even outside on the lawns. We all wore helmets – nurses and patients. And if a soldier didn't have one, we made him wear a bedpan. Towards the end – as the Japs got closer – some British officers held a meeting – to discuss the merits of shooting us. They promised we'd be buried with full military honours.

M.
VOICE
BRIDIE

You're not serious?

Oh yes. They'd heard that the Japs had been raping army nurses and they thought they'd be doing us a favour. They're very considerate like that – the British. But since bullets were scarce, they decided to evacuate us. We didn't want to leave our patients. But we had no choice. I said goodbye to every one of them. Then we left on a ferry – the *Vyner Brooke*. It was built to carry 12. But it sailed that day with 300 people. We stood on deck – sixty-five army nurses – and watched the city burn. [Sadly.] Singapore, Fortress of the Empire ...

M.
VOICE
BRIDIE

Wasn't that a bit unsafe – cramming so many people onto a ferry?

M.
VOICE
BRIDIE

Some of the other ships were even more crowded.

M.
VOICE
BRIDIE

Other ships?

There were forty-four all up.

M.
VOICE
BRIDIE

Forty-four ships times three hundred people – [Surprised.] there were thirteen thousand of you?

Probably more. The British had refused to evacuate civilians. They just couldn't believe that the Far East would fall. So they waited till the last – till the Japs had landed in Singapore. Then they threw their wives and children onto anything that would

float ... Just after we'd sailed the coastguard sent a telegram – warning the Navy to bring us all back. By the time someone decoded it, it was much too late for that. We were out in the middle of the South China Sea – thirteen thousand women and children – singing songs to pass the time. Well we mightn't have sung so loudly if we'd known about that telegram. What it said was very simple: some Japanese destroyers had been sighted in the area. [*Calmly.*] And our forty-four ships were heading straight for them. [*Very calmly.*] It was the thirteenth of February. Friday the thirteenth.

Darkness. Sound: very stirring chorus of 'Rule Britannia' – 'Britons never never never will be slaves'. Simultaneous projection of photographs of Singapore in 1942. They show a city at the height of its prosperity – and on the brink of a terrible catastrophe. We see its beautiful harbour; Raffles Hotel – the heart of the Empire; British matrons being waited on by Chinese servants – all the trappings of wealth and imperialism. Finally, as 'Rule Britannia' reaches its climax, we see a sign from 1941 – put up by the government in Singapore. It says: 'Don't Listen to Rumour'.

If only they had ...

SCENE TWO

Gradual lighting fades up to reveal a suggestion of a motel room – with a bar fridge. BRIDIE and SHEILA enter and stop in the doorway. They are lugging two suitcases. There is a slight but obvious tension between them. SHEILA is carrying a pair of gloves.

BRIDIE [*with effort*] This is you. Just here.

They remain in the doorway.

SHEILA [*looking at suitcase*] We should have left these for the porter.

BRIDIE [*disapprovingly*] And waste ten cents on a tip? We've carted bigger loads than this.

SHEILA [*protesting*] We were fifty years younger then.

BRIDIE Hah. It's all in the mind – [*Pulling back the curtain from the window.*] Look at this – mountains – city – water. Best view in Melbourne.

SHEILA [*concerned*] And the most expensive.

BRIDIE [*slightly surprised*] Didn't they tell you? Everything's paid for. Just don't steal the towels.

SHEILA Oh Bridie!

BRIDIE explores the bar area while SHEILA starts to unpack the smaller suitcase.

SHEILA So when do I start?

BRIDIE First thing after lunch.

SHEILA [*slightly dismayed*] So soon?

BRIDIE It's just an interview. Not open-heart surgery.

SHEILA But I've never been on TV before.

BRIDIE You'll look ten kilos larger and slightly retarded. Rick says everyone does.

SHEILA Rick?

BRIDIE The interviewer ... [*Fondly.*] Gee it's good to see you.

SHEILA, who has been unpacking, appears to ignore this remark.

SHEILA [*concerned*] He's not like Donahue, is he? Strutting around like a turkey on heat –

BRIDIE [*peevd, muttering*] And it's great to see you too, Bridie!

SHEILA [*looking at BRIDIE*] You say something then? You'll have to talk into the good ear.

BRIDIE Good ear? [*Notices the hearing aid and says quite loudly.*] How's that?

SHEILA No need to shout ...

BRIDIE You'd better tell Rick you have a slight hearing problem.

SHEILA Why?

BRIDIE For when he asks questions.

SHEILA [*with some concern*] What sort of questions is he asking?

BRIDIE He just wants to hear some stories from the camp. [*Knowing what SHEILA is alluding to.*] Don't worry. He's very tactful.

SHEILA He'd better be. If he's not I'll be turning this off. [*Indicating her hearing aid.*]

BRIDIE [*looking at SHEILA fondly as she unpacks*] Did you recognise me – just now – in the foyer?

SHEILA Who could ever forget that big walk of yours?

BRIDIE There was no mistaking you. No one else would carry gloves these days.

SHEILA [*ironic smile*] It's the sign of a lady. Mother always used to say that. She wore her best pair into Changi. [*Noticing BRIDIE's hand, with a hint of surprise.*] Gosh – that's a wedding ring!

BRIDIE [*smugly to SHEILA*] Who always used to say I'd end up an old maid?

SHEILA Show me.

BRIDIE [*letting SHEILA take her hand and look*] Dear Barnie. He's been gone for fifteen years now but I still miss him.

SHEILA Children?

BRIDIE Couldn't. [*Teasing.*] I suppose you've had a dozen.

SHEILA No. Never got round to marrying actually.

BRIDIE *looks up from the bar fridge, clearly astonished.*

[*indicating cashews BRIDIE is eating*] I hope that Rick is paying for those. They're \$3.50 a packet ... [*She continues unpacking.*]
Did many of the others come?

BRIDIE Myra. Joyce. And Irene.

SHEILA What about Ivy?

BRIDIE Dead for years.

SHEILA I'll always remember that voice of hers. [*Mimics.*] 'They can starve me till my bones poke out –'

BRIDIE [*joining in*] 'But I'll die without a fag, love.' Now that's a good story for Rick. Ivy and her smokes – those dried banana leaves she puffed on – God they had a terrible stink.

SHEILA She pulled pages of her Bible out for cigarette papers. When it was over I heard her telling a minister that she'd survived the war because of the Good Book.

BRIDIE Myra hasn't changed a bit. She still loves to gamble. She bet me

five dollars you wouldn't show up.

SHEILA

Really?

BRIDIE

She was sure you'd consider it – 'unrefined' – going on television – airing your feelings.

SHEILA

[starting to unpack] Well you've got to admit it's not very 'dignified'.

BRIDIE

So why did you come? *[Casually, trying to make light of it.]* And don't say you did it for the chance of seeing me. Not after fifty years of hiding – SHEILA I wasn't hiding.

BRIDIE

You told me in 1945 you were going home to England. And I find out all this time you've been lying low in Perth.

SHEILA

Fremantle.

BRIDIE

[almost casually – but not quite] You could have written, Sheila. I presume there's a post office over there where they sell those little bits of paper we call stamps?

SHEILA looks at BRIDIE with surprising intensity – but not with affection. BRIDIE looks back at SHEILA, desperately wanting her to say that she did come to see BRIDIE. A few seconds of silence. It is clear that something is still going on between these two women – even after fifty years' separation. SHEILA quickly turns to lift her suitcase onto the bed.

BRIDIE

[tersely] You'll wreck your spine.

SHEILA

[annoyed] I know how to lift a suitcase thank you.

BRIDIE

[taking charge – as usual] We'll do it like we used to – *[Muttering, thinking she won't be heard.]* if you can remember back that far?

SHEILA

That's the good ear, Bridie. *[Feeling she is being challenged.]* And there's nothing wrong with my memory.

BRIDIE

Let's see then – shall we? *[Reciting with some intensity.]* 'All womens will lift on the count of three. If you drop this coffin –'

SHEILA joins in.

BRIDIE

'No rice tonight!'

&

SHEILA

BRIDIE begins to count as she grabs one end of the suitcase.

BRIDIE Ichi –

SHEILA Ni –

BRIDIE San –

At the last second SHEILA rises to the challenge and grabs the case as well. And together they heave it onto the bed. As they do this, they look at each other confrontingly and emit the Japanese call of –

BRIDIE Ya-ta!!!

&
SHEILA

It sounds almost like a war cry. Blackout.

SCENE THREE

Soundtrack: Dinah Shore singing a wistfully sad song from 1940 – ‘Something to Remember You By’. The ‘On-Air’ Sign lights up.

SHEILA [v/o, nervously] Hello? Can you hear me?

Then we hear a hand touching a microphone – a loud, uncomfortable sound.

BRIDIE [v/o] Don’t fidget with it, girl.

SHEILA [v/o] Don’t call me ‘girl’!

M.
VOICE How long have you known Bridie?

BRIDIE You’ll have to speak up. She’s a little deaf.

SHEILA [to BRIDIE] I can hear him perfectly. [To RICK.] For fifty three years. We met the night our ships were sunk. In February, 1942.

M.
VOICE Don’t you think that your parents should have got you out sooner. They must have known for weeks that the Japanese were coming.

SHEILA I ... suppose they couldn’t believe it.

BRIDIE [not meaning to be rude] The British were a bit thick sometimes.

SHEILA [slightly annoyed] We were patriotic. We didn’t want to leave.

I remember mother saying, ‘Sheila, you and I are English women. We do not run away from a few Orientals ... ’
But you did in the end.

M.
VOICE
SHEILA

[*defensively*] We had no choice.

Slides are projected onto a screen at the rear of the stage – photographs of the evacuation of 13 February, 1942. Images of women and children boarding ships, clutching toys and waving goodbye. It is hard to believe from their happy smiles that they are soon to be the victims of history’s worst – and least known – massacre.

They put me on a boat for Brisbane. Mother insisted on staying behind –

BRIDIE
M.
VOICE
SHEILA

To stop the Japs looting her silver.
Were you worried?

Not at all. [*Smiles.*] It was quite a big adventure for a fifteen-year-old school girl.

BRIDIE
SHEILA
BRIDIE
SHEILA

Tell him what your mother said.

Bridie!

If you don’t, I will!

[*slightly embarrassed*] Before I left mother said to me, ‘You’ll be living with Colonials now, so set a good example. Always wear gloves – wherever you go. Don’t socialise with Catholics – unless they’re French or titled. And never kiss an Australian on the lips.’

This remark earns a grunt from BRIDIE.

I was on a small ship. It was called the *Giang Bee*. It sailed out of Singapore with three hundred people. We were told we’d be back in a couple of weeks – so it was rather fun really. Like a trip up river. We all slept on deck. Under the moon. I woke up suddenly – about 3 a.m. There were people running everywhere. I could see them quite clearly, the deck was so bright. But this wasn’t moonlight. The Japanese had found our ship and fixed a searchlight on it – to pin us in position. The strong, hard beams hit us square in the face. We lay flat on the deck and covered our eyes. But our sailors were yelling – ‘Get

up! Stand up! Let the Japanese see you're just women and children.'

SHEILA *stands, fixed by a very, very bright spotlight.*

SHEILA

So we all stood up for the Japanese. Some mothers clutched their children and cried. And we stared into the light. For a while nothing happened. Just the roar of the sea – and us, ghostly white on the deck. Then there were flashes – like sparks in the distance – and the sounds of crackers going off. Women were screaming and running about – and some lay groaning and being trod on. Then sailors were yelling 'Jump for it! Jump for it!' One of them asked if I knew how to swim. 'A bit,' I replied. So he picked me up and threw me over. Next thing I found myself splashing around. [*Calmly.*] And then there was this deafening noise. The whole of the ship rose up from the water – then crashed on its side. It lay there like a wounded animal, spilling oil instead of blood. [*Calmly.*] It took less than a minute for the *Giang Bee* to sink. I'm not quite sure what happened next. I grabbed some wood to buoy me up – I didn't have a life-belt. I remember these toys came drifting by – tiny boats that really sailed and dolls with eyes that opened and stared. I clung to the wood and called for my mother. [*Angry.*] Why did she have to stay behind? Who cared if the Japs took her beastly silver? Whenever I could I yelled for help. But the night was so dark and ... nobody came.

M.

VOICE

You must have been scared.

SHEILA

[*defensively*] Not really.

BRIDIE

Of course you were. She was petrified.

M.

VOICE

What were you feeling then?

Sound: the distant sound of lapping waves as SHEILA continues to speak.

SHEILA

Shock, I suppose ... and slimy from the oil. Oh I might have been nervous at first – when I realised I was all alone. But after a while a chill set in. It made me numb. And I didn't care. That's how the sea does it – that's how you drown. You can't think of anything but cocoa and a fire. My arms were aching

from clinging to the wood, and I knew I couldn't hang on much longer. I shut my eyes and sang a hymn ... so that Jesus would take me straight to Heaven. Though I'd have gone to Hell happily – provided it was warm.

Sound: YOUNG SHEILA whimpering a line or two from 'Jerusalem' – a very moving and stirring hymn about the greatness of England – God's chosen Empire.

Y.
SHEILA

[v/o] 'Bring me my bow of burning gold!/ Bring me my arrows of desire!'

Older SHEILA joins in.

Y.
SHEILA
&
SHEILA
SHEILA

'Bring me my spear! O clouds unfold! Bring me my chariot of fire.'

But I can't have sung loudly enough. No fiery chariot came down for me. [*Trying to smile.*] It was Friday night and there I was – drenched, without gloves, and alone on the sea. One week before I had been a schoolgirl. And I wasn't allowed out on a Friday night – not even with a chaperon.

Slides of Singapore Harbour are projected onto the screen – filled with burning ships. Clouds of smoke everywhere ...

BRIDIE

My ship sank as well. Some Japanese Zeros found us. They dropped twenty-eight bombs on the *Vyner Brooke*. And twenty-seven missed. The one that got us went clean down the funnel and blew the ship from beneath our feet. Then the Japs strafed the decks and shot up all the life boats. Every one was surprisingly calm – from sheer disbelief I suppose. We behaved more like we were hopping off a bus than fleeing from a sinking ship. But soon we discovered that it wasn't the Japs who posed the biggest danger. Before we'd sailed from Singapore, the navy had given us life-jackets. They weren't the standard issue, though. And nobody told us that they had to be tied in a different way to the normal ones. So when our ship was ablaze and sinking, some women started to leap from the deck. I was just about to do likewise when an Army sister

grabbed me. She waved and yelled, 'Bridie, don't jump!' Then she pointed down at the sea. Those women who'd jumped were floating quite well – but all of them were dead. They were killed the second they hit the water ... Their navy issue life jackets broke their necks ... We had no choice but to shimmy down ropes. Like most beginners I went too fast and burned my fingers raw.

M.
VOICE

What was going through your mind as you struggled in the sea?

BRIDIE

I was ... trying not to panic. I didn't know how to swim because my Dad had never taught me. 'No need,' he'd said. 'There's a mole on your neck. That means you'll never drown.' As I swallowed half the South China Sea, I hoped to God that Dad was right. But it's just like Sheila says. Drowning simply wears you out. I tried to say a rosary but I must have dozed off. Then a splashing sound woke me. I was sure it was a shark – till this little voice called out – 'Weather's turned a bit chilly for this time of year.'

SHEILA *laughs*.

BRIDIE

Then she added – so politely – 'I don't believe we've been introduced.'

SHEILA

[*almost indignant*] You can't remember what I said!

BRIDIE

I told her who I was and – she was just a bit standoffish.

SHEILA

Cartwright is an Irish name. Mother wouldn't have approved.

BRIDIE

'Another stuck up Pom,' I thought. But I talked to her anyway.

SHEILA

She wouldn't stop talking.

BRIDIE

I didn't have a choice. Sheila wasn't in a life-jacket – (she was) just clinging to some wood. And my hands were skinned so badly I couldn't hold her up. If she fell asleep, she'd have slipped away and drowned. So I asked her questions. Quizzed her on everything. Fashion – food – film stars. She liked Frank Sinatra. I preferred Bing Crosby.

SHEILA *sneers*.

Well we had a few words about that. But after a while she nodded-off anyway.

M.

VOICE So how did you keep her awake?

SHEILA She hit me. That's how.

BRIDIE Just a gentle tap. With my shoe-horn. I still had it in my pocket.

SHEILA Wham! Right here. [*Indicates nose.*] Every time I closed my eyes –

BRIDIE [*mimics hitting*] Tap – tap – tap –

SHEILA [*harsher*] Whack – whack – whack.

BRIDIE Well it woke you up. And you know what she said on the fifth or sixth go? 'Cut it out, you Catholic cow!'

SHEILA [*shocked*] That isn't true!

BRIDIE I was tempted to let her sink. But Christian Charity won the day. So I tapped her again – [*Grins.*] – just a little bit harder. Dad's shoe-horn came in very handy. I lost it – later in the war – otherwise I'd show you the best way to do it. But after a while I was too tired to hit her – even for the pleasure of it. A wave came up – caught us both unaware. It picked Sheila up and carried her off.

Once again we hear the sound of lapping waves which continues during BRIDIE's speech.

BRIDIE I called and called. There was no reply. And I knew the poor kid must have drowned. I was saying a prayer – for her departed soul – when I heard this raspy voice above the waves. I was sure I was going mad because it ... [*Amazed.*] sounded like 'Jerusalem' ... And there Sheila was – still clutching her wood ... I was so darn relieved I even joined in. My Dad would have killed me – behaving like a Protestant.

We hear YOUNG BRIDIE and YOUNG SHEILA singing a few (waterlogged) lines from 'Jerusalem'. OLDER BRIDIE and OLDER SHEILA join in, hesitantly.

ALL 'I will not cease from mental fight,/ Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand,/ Till we have built Jerusalem/ In England's green and pleasant land.'

M. VOICE How long did it take till you were washed-up on shore?

BRIDIE [ominously] We weren't washed-up. We got a lift – thanks to this one. [*Indicating SHEILA.*]

SHEILA Just after dawn – when my nose felt like Pinocchio's – a ship came out of nowhere.

BRIDIE Before I could stop her, she was yelling out and waving, 'Yoo-hoo, chaps. I say, Yoo-hoo!' [*Calmly.*] But by then I could see the ship's flag.

And now, on stage, we see a large Japanese flag, the blood-red rising sun, which is gradually and brilliantly illuminated as the scene continues.

M.
VOICE How did you feel – when you realised?

BRIDIE Too tired to care. And they didn't seem to notice us – as though we were rubbish that had drifted their way. We must have looked like rubbish too, bobbing about and covered in oil. Then one of them pointed – and yelled to his mates. Soon there were dozens of them lining the deck. And we could see that they were laughing at us.

SHEILA instinctively reaches out to take BRIDIE's hand. They hold hands. And once again they both look very vulnerable. We hear Japanese voices on the soundtrack.

SHEILA I wanted to cry. [*With resolution.*] But I reminded myself I was a Woman of the Empire. And it just wasn't done to show fear to the natives. [*Wistful smile.*] I could almost hear my mother saying: 'Chin up, gel! And where are your gloves?'

Gradual darkness. The final rousing chorus of 'Jerusalem'.

CHORUS 'Bring me my bow of burning gold!/ Bring me my arrows of desire!/ Bring me my spear! O clouds, unfold!/ Bring me my chariot of fire!/ I will not cease from mental fight,/ Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand,/ Till we have built Jerusalem/ in England's green and pleasant land.'/

As the chorus is sung, the Japanese flag fades and we see photographs of the Japanese invasion of Singapore – Japanese soldiers riding bicycles, a sky filled with parachutes; Japanese battalions marching through the

streets. As the song reaches its climax, we see hundreds of victorious Japanese soldiers, their arms raised in triumph, performing a Banzai! salute.

It is a most disturbing sight. For this photo has captured the very moment when the British Empire teetered and fell ...

SCENE FOUR

BRIDIE and SHEILA have just returned from the TV Studio. As they talk, BRIDIE studies the breakfast menu – a long strip of cardboard that has been left to hang on the door handle.

BRIDIE Went rather well I thought.

SHEILA [*in disbelief*] Rather well? I rambled on like a freight train. And you let me.

BRIDIE Don't be silly.

SHEILA I got a bit flustered. Those lights were so bright – and then this [*Indicates hearing-aid.*] started picking up static. I'll be the laughing-stock of WA.

BRIDIE [*calmly corrects her*] You mean 'Australia'. It's a national show. [*Looks at the menu, puzzled.*] 'Compost of fruit'?

SHEILA [*correcting her tersely*] 'Com-pote'. Get your eyes tested.

BRIDIE At least I can hear.

 BRIDIE *begins to look closely at SHEILA's face.*

SHEILA [*uneasily*] What are you doing?

BRIDIE [*calmly*] Looking for lice ... In camp when you were in a mood there was always something biting you.

SHEILA [*moodily*] I am not in a mood.

BRIDIE [*muttering*] You'd go around snapping and snarling for days. I haven't missed that – let me tell you ...

 BRIDIE *goes back to studying her breakfast menu. No, she does not study it. She ticks everything on offer.*

SHEILA

And there was no need to call the British ‘thick’.

BRIDIE *deliberately ignores SHEILA’s rising anger. Indeed, she holds up some little motel coffee sachets and looks at them.*

BRIDIE

I might ask the maid for a few more of these. They’re ten cents each at Franklins.

SHEILA

[*more insistent*] Bridie? Did you hear me?

BRIDIE

Well what was I supposed to say? It was a stroke of naval genius – sailing us straight into the Japanese fleet?

SHEILA

[*sternly*] You’re just like your former Prime Minister – any excuse to bash the Poms. Well at least he got his come-uppance.

Meanwhile BRIDIE casually picks up a glass that is in a ‘hygienic’ paper-seal bag. BRIDIE removes the paper, holds the glass up to the light, shakes her head in dismay, and goes off to wash it. Her conversation with SHEILA continues.

BRIDIE

That’s a side of you I’d forgotten. Sheila the Patriot.

[*Sarcastically.*] It must have been hard to live out here – when your heart was so firmly entrenched in England. I take it you’ve actually been there.

SHEILA

[*firmly*] One never stops being British. Nor does one want to.

BRIDIE

[*sarcastically*] God forbid.

SHEILA

Perhaps Singapore wasn’t our finest hour –

BRIDIE

[*with growing annoyance*] Not ‘our finest hour’! My dear girl –

SHEILA

Stop calling me that. I’m not a child now.

BRIDIE

[*ignoring this rebuke*] ... it was the biggest debacle since the Greeks took Troy. And I’ll bet you at Troy there was some British general’s forbear saying [*Mimics cruelly.*] ‘What a smashing wooden horse! I say chaps, wheel her in!’

SHEILA

You can snicker all you like – [*Struggling to explain.*] but at the very worst times in the camp – I’d remind myself I was part of an Empire – and if others could endure it, so could I.

BRIDIE *snorts.*

SHEILA

[*defensively*] It got me through the war.

BRIDIE

I got you through the war. Your Empire didn’t give a damn.

They left you to the Japs.

SHEILA [very upset] If you say that tomorrow, I'll go. I mean it. And I hope you choke on your compost of fruit.

BRIDIE [getting annoyed] Well that leaves me in a nice little fix. If I criticise the English, you'll pack up and depart. If I get stuck into the Nips, I'll be branded a racist. So what do I talk about from 1942? The weather?

As SHEILA is about to depart, BRIDIE calls her back.

BRIDIE [with both fear and anger showing] Don't you dare walk out on me again!

SHEILA stops, turns, and looks at BRIDIE.

BRIDIE [more placatory] It's hard – I know – your first time on camera ... At least have a nightcap before you go ... We shouldn't be wasting our time together fighting. We never did in camp.

SHEILA [astounded] We fought all the time. You were worse than my mother.

BRIDIE I could hardly sit back and let you run wild. You had to have guidance – from someone mature.

SHEILA Guidance? You mean a barrage of orders. [Mimics her.] 'Sheila – did you eat your grass? [Sternly.] Why haven't you drunk your charcoal water?' God how I hated that stuff.

BRIDIE It helped you keep your food down. And got rid of all those stomach pains.

SHEILA [softening a little – and teasing also] And as for 'mature' – [Accusingly.] – Who wasn't sure what a loincloth was?

BRIDIE Up till then I'd only seen boxer shorts.

SHEILA You spent ages working out which bit went where – and how the Japanese tied them on.

BRIDIE [slightly defensive] I had to know – to do the job. [She stops, suddenly inspired.] I could talk about that tomorrow – about our favourite pastime in camp.

SHEILA [shocked but amused] You wouldn't dare.

BRIDIE [as she pours the drinks] I'll look calmly at the camera and say 'During the war we made loin-cloths for the Japs.'

SHEILA [to imaginary camera] Bridie's knowledge of the male anatomy helped make them comfy for our lords and masters.

BRIDIE [to camera] While Sheila used her needlework skills to sew little daisies around the edges.
 [pouring drinks] And then – one wonderful morning – Lipstick Larry comes strutting out to *tenko* – wearing some of our handiwork beneath his baggy shorts ...

SHEILA Up goes the flag. He calls out Keirei! And everybody bows ... including Lipstick Larry. [To BRIDIE.] I'll never know how you managed to do it – stitch a rusty pin into his loin-cloth.

BRIDIE and SHEILA bow together. On the soundtrack we hear LIPSTICK LARRY yelling from a stab of excruciating pain. BRIDIE and SHEILA laugh. Then the angry voice of LIPSTICK LARRY shouting abuse in Japanese. Then we hear YOUNG BRIDIE's voice.

Y. BRIDIE [v/o] I'm sorry, sir. It's all my fault. I lost my glasses when the – [ship went down].

Another savage yell from LIPSTICK LARRY, followed by the ugly thumps of YOUNG BRIDIE being punched and hit. We hear a very YOUNG SHEILA.

Y. SHEILA [v/o] Bridie! Bridie!

Y. BRIDIE [v/o, very calmly] It's all right, dear. Get back in line.

As BRIDIE and SHEILA remember this, they cease laughing. Their attitude is now one of 'At least we got that bastard.'

SHEILA The look on his face – God that was funny!

BRIDIE Best moment of the war! [Raising her glass.] To needlework.

SHEILA And rusty pins.

BRIDIE [amicably as they clink glasses] Ya-ta!!

&
SHEILA Then BRIDIE and SHEILA drink. On the soundtrack we can still hear LIPSTICK LARRY beating BRIDIE. Blackout.

SCENE FIVE

Sound: 'Happy Times' by Jo Stafford as the 'On Air' sign lights up. BRIDIE and SHEILA are sitting side by side, being interviewed. BRIDIE hesitates and

looks at SHEILA.

BRIDIE [calmly] Twelve nurses didn't make it when the *Vyner Brooke* went down. They died from drowning or ... sharks or ... their life jackets. Twenty-two others struggled to shore – at Radji Beach on Banka Island. They were looking after wounded sailors when the Japanese found them. All the men were bayoneted. Then the Japs forced the nurses to march into the sea. One of the nurses said to her friend – 'Two things I hate most in this world are Japs and water. Now I've got them both. Well it couldn't get worse.'

The sounds of machine gun fire – and the cries of women – on the soundtrack.

BRIDIE There was one survivor, Vivien Bullwinkel ... My friends weren't a threat – they were only there to help people. I'll never understand why the Japs had to shoot them.

We see photographs of the women in Japanese prison camps – lining up for food, sleeping in barracks, carrying water. These photos are shown as SHEILA and BRIDIE continue to speak.

SHEILA Our Japs picked us up and took us to Sumatra. That's Indonesia now.

BRIDIE [still upset] He knows where it is.

SHEILA We were taken to a camp. It was really a few suburban streets hemmed in by barbed wire. Eight hundred of us – women and children packed into fourteen bungalows. There were nuns as well. And missionaries. I lived in a garage – with Bridie and the army nurses.

BRIDIE She kicked up a fuss, believe me. Said she wanted to 'flat' with some school chums. That's when I put my foot down. A child like her – unsupervised – with Japanese all around. She fought at first but she soon learned who was in charge.

M. VOICE Was this camp like a normal gaol?

BRIDIE [tersely] I've never been in a normal gaol.

SHEILA If you're sent to a gaol you know why you're there. But we

hadn't broken any law.

BRIDIE And most prisoners are told how long they'll be in for. We didn't have a clue. Months. Years. It was anyone's guess. Not knowing was the worst part.

SHEILA No – the toilets were the worst part. Filthy pits – dug out in the open. We weren't allowed privacy.

BRIDIE You had to squat – in front of everyone – even the guards. And they'd always watch. They wanted to humiliate us.

SHEILA I told myself I'd rather burst – then I'd try and hold off till dark ... but there was always a Jap standing by the latrine.

BRIDIE No toilet paper either.

M. So what did you use?

VOICE

BRIDIE Leaves. The trees were stripped in a couple of weeks ... And I don't mind saying that it got a bit awkward when a certain time of the month came round ...

SHEILA [*horrified, hissing*] Bridie!

BRIDIE [*defensively to SHEILA*] Well it happened ... But after a while we stopped. Thank goodness.

M. [*surprised*] You stopped menstruating? All of you?

VOICE

SHEILA Just the women.

BRIDIE We didn't start again till the war was over ... It was fear that did it. Fear and rotten food.

SHEILA Those first few weeks were a nightmare. Women sobbing for their husbands. Babies crying – always hungry. And the Japs'd come round and beat us for the fun of it. 'Useless Mouths' they used to call us.

On the screen we see a photograph – the face of a Japanese soldier, very much a warrior, fierce and terrifying. A few seconds' silence, then ...

M. Did the Japanese ever try to take advantage of you?

VOICE

SHEILA Not really.

M. In the whole of the war they never came near you? That's hard to believe after what you've been saying.

VOICE

SHEILA and BRIDIE look at each other awkwardly.

BRIDIE [uneasily] Oh they tried it once. The Japs had a house – an ‘officers’ club’. We nicknamed it ‘Lavender Street’ – after the red-light district in Singapore. They ordered the Australian nurses to be ‘hostesses’ there.

SHEILA They got the idea from a prisoner – an Australian – he set it up.

BRIDIE [annoyed] We don’t know for sure he did.

SHEILA [to camera] People blame the British for Singapore. There were Aussies too who were hardly saints.

BRIDIE [annoyed with SHEILA] Have you forgotten how many of the British collaborated? [To the camera.] The Japs wanted us because they knew they couldn’t have us. But they could pick and choose from amongst the Poms. Those women who’d lorded it over everyone at Raffles were selling themselves for a hard-boiled egg.

SHEILA They had no choice. They had children to feed. We didn’t judge. We accepted it.

BRIDIE [disgusted] I didn’t! To go with a Jap – to give him pleasure – how could you ever live with yourself?

M. VOICE [diplomatically] Well let’s try and get back to my original question. What exactly happened at Lavender Street?

BRIDIE Twelve army nurses were ordered to attend the opening night of this ... glorified brothel. We had no choice but to go. We spent hours getting ready – greasing our hair down – putting dirt under our nails. All of us were terrified – but we couldn’t let it show. If the Japs smelled fear, you were finished. Some Japanese officers were waiting with saké. Saké and biscuits. Soon they were getting drunk and gropey – and in no time at all we were fending them off. We knew what they’d done to other nurses – raped them and killed them – in Hong Kong and Singapore. So we smiled. We bowed. Then shook our heads. The Japs were getting fed up with this. They told everyone to go. [Ominously.] Except for four of the nurses.

M. VOICE Were you one of them?

BRIDIE [reluctantly] Yes ... At the Chatswood dances I’d always been a wallflower. Now here was this Jap giving me the eye. He thrust a glass of saké at me. [Bowing her head.] I said ‘Thank you, sir.