

Doing the Messages in Woolgoolga by Annette Johnson

[***Doing the messages*** is what we called doing the shopping in the olden days. The olden days are what my brother calls our childhood. He got it from our grandmother who called hers that too. Only I don't suppose ours are as old as our grandmother's.]

My legs have faint little scars. I got them doing the messages when I was little. Mainly from boxes and things poking through string bags. Later in a bike accident when the string bag caught in the front wheel.

I didn't *have* to use string bags. 'Take the basket' my mother used to say. But if you did the other kids knew that you were doing the messages for your mother. At least you can hide the string bag in a pocket. Then they wouldn't know. Going one way anyway.

Sometimes they didn't know both ways if you sneaked home the back way. Except you could meet old Albert. The track was a short cut to the pub. But he'd only nod. We were both good at keeping secrets.

The back way ran from behind our property all the way to the highway opposite the baker's shop. It was wide enough for a road. 'It'll be a main road one day' Nan used to say. But it never was. A new highway cut across it and people built houses on it. The only time it was used as a road was when my brother drove his 1924 Dodge along it. When he was fifteen he taught us all to drive. It didn't matter if you hit bushes and things.

Sometimes we used the back way to go to the pictures. But mostly we used it to take the billy cart to the bakers. My nan only ever wanted half a loaf. On the way home we ate the flaking soft bits off her half loaf. Once we put a stick in it to see if she would notice when she cut it. If she did she never said. She was that kind of nan.

But shopping wasn't all that bad. If nan needed something she always gave you threepence or sixpence. Sometimes it depended on who you were. My cousin Don and my brother Tom were her favourites. But she liked me a bit too. She made you feel special in your own way. She was like that. Not that mum or dad didn't have enough money to give us something for doing messages. They just didn't believe that kids should be spoiled. They treated us all the same. If one got into trouble we all did. My mother yelled at me louder. She said I was the ringleader or I should have known better.

It was because I was the only girl and I wasn't growing up like one. I was sent to my room a lot. Once it happened when my father came home after cricket. He sent me to my room. He wanted to talk men's talk to my brothers. My brothers still talk men's talk.

The main shop we went to was Richards. It was very big. It smelt of food. Stacked in sacks and boxes on the shiny, wooden floor. Johnny Richards used to slide up and down behind the big wooden counter. He was a very fast server and whistled and smiled.

I always wanted to grow up and have Johnny Richard's job. And a big white apron like he wore. You could eat all the broken biscuits. You could sneak some across the counter to kids the way he did. And there'd be all the smells. Another good thing was the library out the back. Miss Anderson ran that and the office. She was a spinster and was thin. My nan used to invite her to Christmas lunch. I

don't remember anything Miss Anderson ever said. I wonder where she went for Christmas when my nan died. Perhaps she died first.

Mr Richards was kind too. He slipped boiled sweets over the counter. He had a round voice that knew things. He was a man people turned to. My grandfather was his friend. They turned to each other.

My grandfather used words like 'old chap' when he wrote letters to my father when he was a boy. And sent him 'funds' to cover his expenses when he holidayed with his aunts in Brisbane. (Not spoiling children only started when my father had children.) My grandfather was a blackguard. He swept my nan off her feet and her father never spoke to her again. But when he died she had to go to Tasmania to get his body. Then she had to look after her mother until she died. My grandfather left my nan and went to live in Brisbane next to the river. He took most of the money. When he died he forgot to leave her any. He forgot to leave us some too. Probably because daddy had died. My uncle was his favourite ...

A basket might have saved my legs a bit. But not for sure. Harry Hines used to make them. Sometimes a bit of cane would stick out. Harry lived in the pumphouse beside our land. It was built between the creek and the old railway line. The train stopped running before I was born. It went up to the bush for logs. Then down to the mill. Then it went down to the jetty with the timber for the ships.

Harry used to turn the pump on to fill the tanks. There was one at the mill and one at our house. Sometimes he went to sleep and didn't turn it off. The tanks overflowed everywhere. The mill men swore. It was fun. But eventually one of us kids had to run across the paddock and wake Harry. My grandfather made up the idea of the water system. We had flush toilets and showers and a bath. He asked the town if it would like to share but they didn't want to pay money.

Harry died in the pumphouse. My brother Tom found him. He'd been dead a long time. Tom had to wait until the policeman came. The policeman asked Tom to help him carry the body. My brother was little then but he still remembers that ...

Billy carts were really the best way to carry the shopping. But I never had one. If my brother or cousin came we took theirs. I was mostly allowed to pull them home. I sometimes ended up with blisters.

A chemist came to our town. Just after I started to do the shopping. He was the first ever. He did not smile much. I loved going into his shop because of its clean smells. Were they better than the newspaper shop? At first I couldn't decide. But I guess the newspaper shop was best. I had a magazine on order. Every month from England. And I used to buy dad's pink *Bulletin* there. My brother got the *Phantom* comic.

I was hardly ever given a message to the chemist shop. My nan looked after our cuts and scratches. She bought medicine from the Rawleigh's man. He came in a van. My brother and cousins and I would gather around his open port full of pills and ointments. Reading the labels and smelling the smells while he and nan talked about the cures.

Nan used Mercurichrome or Acriflavine most of the time. After having adventures in the bush we had lots of yellow and red spots from her treatments. If they were bad she would put dressings on them. Sometimes we had poultices for drawing out. She knew symptoms of illnesses too. She knew if you drank too much water you probably had sugar diabetes. But she didn't tell us she had it.

If you went the back way to do the messages you could walk past the chemist shop before crossing to Richards'. You could smell its smell as you walked past and you could see all its pink and white things through the windows. It made me glad I'd washed my hands and scrubbed my knees before coming out.

The few times I went into the chemist he talked importantly, like Mr Richards but without the smile in his voice. But he didn't speak much. He hired Johnny Richards' sister to work for him and she did most of the talking. She had a white uniform which made her sound important too. She served and the chemist was mostly out the back mixing chemicals. You could see him through the dividing glass. The chemist shop smelled different the further you walked in. Like Waterbury's Compound near the back. The chemist wore a white coat with a stand up collar. The coat did up at the back. It was more medical looking than the uniform Johnny Richards' sister wore.

The chemist was the person people went to instead of the doctor or because there was no doctor. He fixed up cuts and scratches like my nan. He gave medicine for coughs and colds and babies. One weekend I cut my big toe on the lawn mower. I was taken to the chemist and he said I would have to wait for the doctor because we had one then. He and I waited in his dispensary for hours and talked a lot. He told me some me some of the things that kept the smile out of his voice. He already knew the things that kept the smile out of mine.

After that I became a friend of the chemist. When I got off the bus from school I would spend five minutes or so talking to him. On Saturdays I hung out in the dispensary. Making black coffee and counting pills. One Saturday morning I worked. I wore one of the chemist's coats with the stand up collar and I served people.

My mother used to worry that people would talk. That I would get a reputation because the chemist had become divorced. Reputations were things that people in our town gave you when they couldn't think of anything nice to say. But the chemist was an important friend. He lent me books and taught me aspects of driving my brother had overlooked.

The chemist had other friends too. They were the characters of the town. They would sit on his steps on Saturday mornings discussing the weather. The price of beef and bananas. Politics. People passing. One of the characters was Old Snow. Another was Old Frank. Another was my other grandfather. Old Frank was interesting because he was rich but he had holes in the soles of his shoes. My other grandfather once took him to a funeral and Old Frank complained about the bindi-eyes. Old Snow's surname was Hedwards and I always thought people who said that were trying to sound posh. I don't know a story about my other grandfather. He didn't like children or relatives. The chemist would come out between prescriptions to chat to the characters and laugh with them or at them.

The chemist is not the chemist anymore. He is a real estate agent. It was always his interest but he had to wait to find someone who would take over the chemist shop before he could do it full time.

The new chemist does not have to fill in for the doctor anymore. There are many doctors and many prescriptions. There aren't any simple illnesses anymore or simple remedies. But the old chemist, my friend, was always there when there were and when there weren't any doctors. He taught me a lot about loyalty and confidentiality. The most important thing that it is hardly ever two way ...

There were other shops in our town that we didn't go to for messages. They were right down near the beach. They just sold the things you buy when you forget. Dad or someone would have to go in the car. When my brother Tom got his bike he would go. When my dad died my uncle used to take us to one of them on the way home from the lake in his old brown jeep. It was the very bottom shop and sold different flavoured ice creams. I mostly liked the pale pink coconut ones but my memory now is of licking sand.

The furthest we ever walked on messages was to the post office. The wooden counter was very high. The postmaster wore his glasses down near the point of his nose and always looked very old. He had a reputation for forgetting things. Sometimes his wife. He left her behind when they went to Grafton shopping. He was supposed to have left her behind when they went to Lismore on their honeymoon. I couldn't see how you could forget the person you loved most. Or be forgotten. Life teaches you that this does happen.

Going to the post office wasn't too bad. If you didn't have to do other messages you could take the shortcut across two big paddocks both ways. Or even if you did have to you would come back the shortcut. The best part about the shortcut was that our other grandmother lived over one of the paddocks. She would always give us drinks and home made biscuits if our other grandfather wasn't there. Mostly he wasn't. He was a grazier and was mostly out doing that.

There was another shop just past the post office which was the school tuckshop. You could go there on weekends but it didn't seem right. Not that we ever went there much. We weren't allowed to spend much or order our lunch. How I envied those kids who'd roll up to the counter and order London-roll-and-pickle sandwiches. One day I was allowed to order mine. I rolled up to the counter and ordered a London-roll sandwich believing that to utter this shortened form in such a familiar way was sufficient. (I didn't know what London-roll was and didn't envisage it having a separate life to pickle.) It wasn't. There was no pickle. It taught me a lot about showing off but I didn't get much opportunity to put it into practice.

The tuckshop people used to make round flavoured ices on a stick. They called them jet bombers. My cousin used to eat them a lot. Then she would burp and say that it is the jet bomber repeating. I thought this was clever and knew I could've thought of it too if I'd had more experience with jet bombers.

The other butcher's shop was down that way too. We only went there if we were driven in the car. The men there smiled and laughed a lot and called ladies by their first names. They gave kids saveloys. The butcher we went to for the messages was near the chemist. He was never very cheerful. He was a gentleman my nan said. He always wore a tie and was very upright. His shop was full of sawdust and the meat was cut up on upended logs. The meat hung on hooks. The butcher wrote the price of everything on the wrapping paper with a thick pencil he kept behind his ear.

Now most of the shops are down the far end of town near the beach. The chemist started the idea and gradually everybody followed. I'm glad they weren't there in the olden days. It would have been too far to walk and carry all of the things home. More kids from school lived down that way and they would have poked more fun. Even the old post office with its pointed roof closed down and moved to a brick building with a low counter. It was after the old postmaster died which was just as well.

The new supermarkets mean you have to do your own serving and people like Johnny Richards have been replaced by checkout chicks. All the old smells have been trapped in tins and plastic and the only smell now is the salami in the delicatessen sections. (They don't have coffee grinders yet.)

The soul has gone out of the shops. The shop people all look the same. Characters are no longer drawn to steps because there are none. And there are no kids with string bags or billy carts doing the messages. And it's no wonder. No-one slips broken biscuits, lollies or saveloys over the counter anymore ...

When people died my nan used to say 'in the midst of life we are in death'. I feel a bit that way about the shops of my childhood. I will always remember Johnny Richards but the faces of 'checkout-chicks elude me.

I'm glad I lived in the olden days (as my brother calls them) ... in spite of the scars on my legs.

Annette Johnson 2004