

## Eight days

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### Now

My grandmother's brain does not work like it used to. Sometimes when I visit her in her aged care home by the sea she seems so melancholy and *old*. I know she gets disorientated and confused in the rabbit warren like hallways of the place- and sometimes I think she is lost in happier memories of her past. Sometimes when I visit her she does not remember my face and instead asks me for water as if I was a nurse. But on other visits she has moments of such clarity and tells me stories that are so vivid and complete that I feel like her memories are my own.

Her stories will often be repeated, the moments and memories that have been strongly imprinted on her brain will be voiced many a time; like the day she married grandpa. But there are days, like today, when Granny surprises me with a new story that sweeps me back in a different time, to another day and age. I'm still in Cottesloe, I'm still a 15 year old girl but instead of 2014 it's 1942 and I'm watching the American troops disembark from their long journey.

### Then

Eight days before it happened, they arrived. Everyone walked down to Freo Port to see them. The Americans were here! Those handsome boys strode off that ship with as much swagger and pride as I'd ever seen. They looked very similar to the Australian troops, different uniform of course, but they were foreign and held an air of sophistication and mystery.

The Americans were only seen for a short while before they were taken off to the barracks. Myself and my girlfriends and I strolled back to our homes, gossiping about who was the best looking soldier and what we should do that night. We went back to Jarrad Street first, where my house was. A middle sized bungalow that had been built in the early 1900's. The wasn't anything spectacular about it only that it was situated next door to John Curtin's, the Prime Minister of Australia- not that he was home often.

We were all sweaty and hot because it was around 35 degrees outside, so we walked to Napoleon Street to get an icy pole. We paid tuppence each for a deliciously cool lemonade 'pole. The shops walls were littered with propaganda posters, they called upon women to make socks, men to enlist and families to pressure them into it. There were newspaper stands holding front pages such as: '*Allies invade Singapore*' and '*Our boys- HMAS Sydney*'. I read these with a curious interest as I licked my icy pole.

"Come on Annie!" one of my friends yelled, I dragged my eyes away from the words and just as I was about to head off I remembered my little brother, Peter, and how he loved his icy poles. I told the girls to go ahead as I raced back in to get him one.

As I was leaving for the second time, just putting my change back into my purse I walked slap bang into a man. I gasped and dropped my purple purse; it was like walking into a wooden post! My money went everywhere, how embarrassing! I rushed to grab it, in my hurry I didn't notice the man had also bent down and when I looked up our heads bashed together. God, I felt so clumsy and now I was dizzy as well.

"Oh gosh! I am so sorry, please let me buy you another one" an American accent greeted me.

I caught my first look at him, and he was a sight to behold. The Allies could win this war with just him!

"So, shall I go get one...?" he questioned. I was so struck by his looks that I had forgotten to reply.

"Oh, no really it's just for my brother Peter, he won't mind".

"Peter? Well that's my name, any lad with such a name surely deserves an icy pole" he laughed and then went straight on into the shop and bought one, what a gentleman!

Peter returned and then insisted he walk me home, after all I did have a bump to my head and I could easily collapse in this heat. I did concede, and as we walked back to my home on Burt Street (again, I just knew this...) we chatted. I asked how old he was.

"18 of course ma'am" he replied, and I would have been quite convinced, had his voice not cracked slightly half way through his sentence. I cracked a laugh.

"You don't have to lie to me Peter!" I nudged him, but judging by his facial expression he didn't find it so funny so I quickly asked him about America. He talked about his family and friends but soon enough Jarrad Street was upon us. Why did I have to live so close to Napoleon Street?

I could see my group of friends at my front gate and quickly walked back around the corner. What can I do to make sure I see Peter again? I don't know how long he will be around so I'd better organise something tonight.

"Will you come to the fun fair tonight? I'll bring some of my friends and you can bring some of yours?" fun fair? Where had that come from!

"I'd love to," Peter smiled, "but I have only been here for a few hours, I don't know where the fun fair is!" he laughed, but looked at me, expecting me to know where the fun fair is.

"Oh, it's right down near the beach, you'll see the bumper cars and probably hear them" I smiled.

"Sounds like a plan," he winked and smiled as he walked away. The sight of that smile made my heart flutter.

## Now

On one visit to my grandmother's we went down to Cottesloe beach and I wheeled her along the foot path. This was a day full of blue skies and new memories that Granny shared. She told me about the old fun Fair that used to be near the beach when she was my age. She talked about all the times her friends went there, in the school holidays and on the weekends. She even remembered the day when the blackout was implemented and it was shut down; a sad day for her group of friends. They spent the nights instead wandering the streets of Cottesloe and Peppermint Grove running away from any patrolling air-raid wardens who made sure the blackout was implemented. I had never known that Perth was at risk of being bombed before then.

I couldn't comprehend how my demure grandmother could break rules and be a teenager like me. I'm not sure what my Granny and her friends were planning on doing at a deserted and 'switched off' fun fair; but I knew what I would do.

## Then

The soldiers met us at the gates to the fun fair, accompanied by the constant sound of gun fire coming from the army base. We were all miffed as to where the lights were, but soon enough we all remembered the black out.

'If only the beach wasn't ruined by those horrible trenches and barbed wire, we could have had a lovely night swim' one of the girls, Susan, complained.

"Yeah, the beach would be bonza, but you know we can't go there Sue" Pat mused.

"Why don't we sneak in? That would be a gas" suggested one of Peter's friends, Richie.

We wandered through the deserted fair, all dark and quiet and nothing like its normal bright and gaudy self, and it was very strange and almost ghostly. Then, of course, we had to walk through the 'House of Horrors'. That was truly terrifying because some of the girls had gone in before and jumped out at us, I clung to Peter for dear life!

All too soon it was time to go. Peter walked me home and I remember the others were some way ahead of us. Did I already mention that he was such a gentleman? Well, he was. He walked me right up to my green picket fence he did. I gave him a peck on the cheek and told him I'd see him soon, and I did.

The next six days flew by and at the same time felt like forever! Peter visited whenever the soldiers had free time. I wasn't the only girl to be in love with an American boy – but it was wonderful! It was all so innocent - we ran around being silly and had a ball. He told me about America and I told him about my family and school, and he finally told me how old he was, only 17.

But of course it had to end. One afternoon he told me that he was being shipped out to fight the next day. He had only been here for eight days. It was so hard to say goodbye! What if he didn't come back? What if he went back to America and fell in love with someone else? Those last moments were full of anger and tears. I watched his unit march on to their ship through tears and

then I just ran away. I hid in our backyard bomb shelter for hours. I think it was the most use it had apart from the practice raids!

## Now

"So what happened to Peter?" I asked after a while.

Granny was staring out at the ocean once more. "Well," she sighed "it was difficult for me to find out anything. There was precious little information from the Australian Government about our troops, let alone the Americans." Granny paused and scratched her head, thinking, "I don't think I ever heard from Peter...but anyway, I got on with life- and what a wonderful one it's been, even if I can only remember snippets of it!" She smiled at me.

"But it was this day, 70 years ago that I said goodbye to my first true love. And I still can't help wondering...."

The Next days were very strange, I went to school and we talked more about World War 2, and I even had to hold back tears when Miss Faith told us the number of tragic deaths that occurred. I decided I was going to find out what had happened to Peter.

I went to the Grove library and looked in the history section, and scoured all the books I could find about war deaths and ships departing from Australia. In one book I found the ship that Peter must have sailed on, The *HMAS Perth* which was shot down in the Sunda Strait on the 29th of February 1942. The dates all work with Granny's story except one thing: Peter was there for eight days before it happened, it being when he left. But how could a 1940s ship sail halfway across the globe in one day? Maybe Peter was still out there after all...but then again maybe he's not.

I decided not to tell granny, for I was afraid her fragile body would not be able to handle the emotions that a true love's hope may bring back.