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# IT'S A BIG WORLD

MUM AND I NEVER really spoke much about my dwarfism but as I got older and wanted to do more, I found that reminders were everywhere. It was the simple tasks that got really frustrating – like not being able to reach the ice-cream at the back of the freezer or the prized biscuit barrel that lived on the floating shelf above the kitchen bench. Eventually, I learned how to haul myself onto the countertop and manoeuvre myself under the shelf like a Russian gymnast, so I could score myself a treat. The biggest annoyance of all was not being able to reach the door handles. I was just too short. Whenever I needed to go into the bathroom or my bedroom, I'd have to holler for someone to come and open the door for me. This was particularly stressful when I was busting to go to the toilet.

Thankfully, Mr Lathey, our next-door neighbour, resident handyman and suburban motor mechanic, came to our rescue. He was a thin older man with grey curly hair, a weathered face and hands that were callused from years of tinkering. His backyard could have come straight out of the British sitcom *Steptoe and Son* – old car bodies and piles of clutter were strewn across it. Smack bang in the centre of the garage floor were some railway sleepers that covered a cavernous hole. They could be

easily moved to enable Mr Lathey to inspect the underbelly of any car he happened to be working on at the time. The garage was a veritable treasure trove of thingamy bobits and whatsits – crap, basically. His greasy grimy workbench was covered with tools: spanners, hammers, pliers, screwdrivers – you name it. If you needed to fix it, Mr Lathey would've had the tool to do it. On the perimeter of the garage were empty pet food tins filled to the brim with nuts, bolts, screws and washers – things he'd been collecting for years – fascinating for a kid who loved making stuff.

These days, they'd call Mr Lathey a hoarder and he'd probably feature on one of those professional organising shows looking glum as he parted ways with the odds and sods that had been part of his life for so long. And it had indeed been a long life. By the time I met Mr Lathey, he was in his seventies and was living alone. His ability to create and recycle stuff was extraordinary.

One day, Mr Lathey came up with a brilliant solution for our door dilemma. It's possible my parents approached him as he was the kind of guy who loved solving problems and helping people. He cut lengths of garden hose shorter than the levered door handle, fed dressing gown cord through it and tied a knot to keep the cord from slipping back through the hose. This contraption was pushed onto every door handle in our house and the length of cord that hung down was what I'd pull on to open all the doors. Genius! This served me well until I was about eight and could open the doors without any assistance.

As a wee tacker, a constant frustration for me was not being able to do everything my brother did – not because I was a dwarf but because Mark was so much older than me. On weekends, I'd stand on the sidelines and watch him and his friends make bilycarts from scratch and then go tearing down the hill in them. I have vivid memories of sitting on Mark's lap as we hurtled down the hill on our street. Travelling at that speed was exhilarating, and luckily for me, I was too little to help lug the cart all the way

back up to the top of the hill, so I got the easy job of just being the passenger.

One weekend, I asked if I could have a go by myself. No amount of pouting, whining or stamping my foot would convince Mark to let me be singularly in control. It was simply too dangerous for someone as young as me. In the end, I hopped on his lap again and off we went.

Well, I think we hit warp speed – oh yes, these things went fast – when Mark, the billycart and I parted ways. I don't remember much about the crash itself, but I do remember Mark hightailing back up the driveway carrying me in his arms, screaming at the top of his lungs, '*Muuuuuum!*'

Blood was gushing from my wound, which meant I had to keep my eyes tightly shut. Mum promptly whisked me off to Dr Grimes, our local doctor, who had to give me several stiches. I think that was necessary to prevent my large brain from seeping through the gash!

I brandish with pride the resultant scar on my forehead. It serves as a reminder of our billycart days, of fun times with my big brother. And I've dubbed that moment, 'A scar is born.'

Mum held my hand tightly as we trudged up the long drive towards the local preschool. Ever since the first conversation with Dr Spence, she'd fretted about this day. To make sure my transition to preschool went smoothly, Mum had met with the teacher to discuss my dwarfism. She made it clear that I was not to be 'mollycoddled', and as the meeting finished, her parting words were, 'I just want my son to fit in.'

But fitting in wasn't going to be easy. Our arrival on that first day of preschool was met with unbridled curiosity. Kids pointed and stared at me. I was overwhelmed by all the attention from boys and girls I didn't even know. At home, I was treated just like my brother and sisters, so in my eyes I wasn't that different.

As we walked through the doors to the centre, Mum gripped my hand tighter, leaned down and whispered, 'It's going to be okay, Ianee. You'll be fine.'

I blinked and looked around. I'd never seen so many kids in one place. Nor had I seen such awesome play equipment. The preschool playground was much more exciting than our backyard. Apart from Mum's much-loved flower garden, a crab-apple tree, the obligatory Hills Hoist clothesline and a shed, there wasn't much to spark the imagination. My brother and sisters, being significantly older than me, never wanted to play, and the little girl next door cried a lot, which meant playtimes nearly always ended in tears.

Preschool would have been perfect if I'd been left alone and allowed to just play, but of course the sight of a small boy with short arms and legs and a larger than usual head was too much for curious children. On that first week of preschool, they buzzed around me, brazen with their comments.

'Why is your head so fat?'

'Why are you so short?'

After naptime, a skinny girl with bobbed blonde hair screwed up her face and tilted her head to the side. 'What's wrong with you?'

I squirmed and said nothing. I didn't really know what to say to all this and I was pretty sure Mum wouldn't want me to be rude. Eventually, the comments and the sniggers stopped and I became just like everybody else. Unabashed curiosity turned to friendship and friendship to camaraderie. And by the middle of the year, everyone at preschool was my friend and preschool would forever be etched into my heart as a magical place, perfect for a child with an active imagination.

There was a red climbing frame and a massive sandpit, plus a child-sized wooden workbench, complete with blocks of wood and hammers, ideal for a little kid who loved making stuff. Another picture in our family album is of me standing at

a miniature workbench hammering a block of wood, with my tongue hanging out for added concentration. I was probably attempting to make a billycart like Mark. If my brother could do all this cool stuff, I could, too.

One of my least favourite activities was story-time, when we'd gather on the mat. As my legs were short and stumpy, I couldn't cross them like all the other kids. It was like trying to cross tree stumps: my limbs were almost as inflexible. Sitting with your legs straight out in front of you is tiring, and not supportive of your back. I'd wriggle and squirm and shuffle about trying to find a comfortable place. I used to sit on the outside of the mat as this gave me room to manoeuvre and change positions when required.

Despite that discomfort, I loved everything about preschool. It was where I got to escape into this fantastical world – of finger painting with vivid colours and imagining, equally as vividly, I was Superman, Batman or my brother.

If there's a smell that reminds me of weekends, it's bacon. Sometimes Dad would surface at the crack of dawn on a Saturday to create a magnificent fry-up for both him and Mark before they headed to work – Dad as a commercial cleaner and Mark as his assistant.

Puttering into the kitchen bleary-eyed, wearing my blue flannel dressing gown, I'd hop up onto my step stool and watch as Dad prepared a feast: bacon, fried eggs and black pudding – a sure-fire way to cure a hangover. Mark would be sitting at our laminate table, and the two of them would be chatting happily.

Other mornings, when Dad wasn't cooking, he'd be hovering over the local paper, *The Examiner*, which had been delivered to our door by the paperboy. He'd be doing the crossword.

One of my happiest childhood memories is of me peering over the top of Dad's shoulder watching him thoughtfully filling in the blank squares. If he was in a good mood, he'd point out the

words and patiently explain what they meant. When I got older, Dad would invite me to sit next to him and we'd solve the puzzle together.

I liked spending time with Dad and I have a few prized memories. One Saturday morning Dad said, 'Come on, son, let's go to the show.'

I loved the show and going with Dad was particularly special. The skies had cleared after several preceding rainy days and as we stood in line at the turnstiles, all seemed right with the world, despite the mud.

Dad and I traipsed from pavilion to pavilion, checking out all the exhibits, with me gripping his hand so as not to get separated and lost in the bustling crowd. It's funny, you know, I don't recall ever being self-conscious about my dwarfism when I was with Dad. I guess he did a pretty good job of distracting me.

The wood-chopping interested us both. As we waited for the chips to fly – literally – we munched on pies and chatted.

'I hope we see the Foster brothers, Dad.'

'Me too, son.'

The Fosters were a well-known and accomplished family of axe men who often blitzed these events.

When the hulking competitors started swinging their axes, such was their precision and power that the wood flew off the blocks in all directions – it was like watching a chef chopping through a pile of potatoes.

Later, visiting Sideshow Alley, which for me was the highlight of the day, Dad stood behind the barricade waving as I went on different rides. He was not a fan.

While Dad might not have been willing to go on the Sideshow Alley rides, he was always up for a challenge when it came to maintaining things around the house. And I would always tag along.

One Saturday morning, Mum was at work, and the toilet had backed up. Dad went on a mission to see what was wrong

with the pipes and, if possible, fix them or at least make it easier for the plumber, should he be summoned. Mum says this was a recurring theme – Dad attempting to save money by tackling the handyman jobs. Plumbing is not something you can teach yourself but that wasn't going to deter my father. Confident he knew the layout of the underground pipework, out the back door and into the yard he marched to investigate the dodgy clay pipes, armed with the pickaxe and shovel. I was watching through the kitchen window.

Dad had only been outside for a few minutes when, all of a sudden – whooshka – he struck the somewhat brittle clay pipe. Given all the pressure that had built up because of the blockage, the slightest tap would have had an effect; but this was the shovel. Well, the shit started to fly. It sprang out of its newfound pressure release like steam from a geyser. I gasped.

Now covered from head to toe in crap – and God knows what else might have been festering at the site of the blockage – and with shreds of toilet paper dangling from his fedora, Dad trudged towards the back door. He looked like something from the legendary 1950s horror film *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, which I was never allowed to watch because it was scary.

It appeared Dad thought he might come inside and clean himself up, but Mark, who had witnessed the unfolding drama, beat Dad to it and locked the back door.

‘Let me in,’ Dad bellowed.

‘No way, Dad,’ Mark said. ‘Use the laundry to clean yourself up. You're not dragging all that shit through the house.’

It was a standoff. Dad thumped on the door but Mark continued to deny him access. That's when Dad changed tack.

‘Ian,’ he said firmly, knowing I was right there. ‘Open the door!’

What should I do? I looked over at Mark, who was shaking his head and mouthing, ‘Ian, no!’ I was torn and scared all at once. I didn't want to be in the bad books with either one of

them – or with Mum if she came home and found sewage through the house.

After a few minutes of argy bargy, it was Mark who prevailed, and Dad went back into the yard to hose himself off.

Now Mark reached for the phone and called Mum at *The Examiner*. He was laughing so hard he couldn't get the story out, so he handed the phone to me. Being only five or six years old and not one for small talk, I kept it to the facts and nothing but the facts.

I'll never forget hearing Mum roaring with laughter on the other end of the phone.

The same year, one of my sisters took me to a friend's house so I could write a letter to Santa. Top of my wish list that year was a Tonka truck. I'd been pestering Mum and Dad to buy me one.

Kneeling on the floor and leaning on the coffee table, I carefully crafted Santa's letter, using coloured pencils to attract his attention. I adorned the envelope with big bold colourful lettering so my request would not get lost in the hundreds of letters Santa got from kids all over the world. I didn't know what thousands or millions were. A hundred seemed like an incredible number back then.

Once this fine example of penmanship, or in this case 'pencilmanship', was complete, the envelope was sealed and it was time to post it.

'Here, give me the letter,' said my sister, hopping up from the floor.

In the loungeroom of this friend's house was one of those terrific mid-century modern stereo consoles. If you grew up in the 1960s and 1970s, you'd remember these units. They were a work of art, with their highly polished wooden exterior and a lid that doubled as a tabletop that, when lifted, would reveal the record player.

To my surprise, Santa had done some kind of deal with the manufacturers of these cleverly crafted pieces of furniture. At the bottom of the cabinet was a louvre door, which probably allowed air to circulate around the high-tech equipment to keep it cool. My sister and her friend told me these slots could be used to post letters to Santa. Once dispatched, instead of ending up on top of your prized record collection, these letters with their incredibly important information would breach the time-space continuum and magically end up at the North Pole, or so I was led to believe. Lots of people had these record cabinets; so to this somewhat naïve child, it seemed as though Santa's letterboxes were everywhere.

Incredibly, so was Santa. A few weeks before Christmas, Mum thought it would be a good idea to take me to the mall to get my photo taken with one of the Santas on shift that day. She said I could let Santa know what I'd like for Christmas, so I decided to make sure he'd got the message about the Tonka truck. We lined up for ages behind kids of all shapes and sizes waiting patiently to tell Santa what they wanted for Christmas. As we inched our way to the front of the queue, I got really restless. I didn't like the look of Santa and didn't want to sit on his knee.

If you've ever observed one of these rituals, you'll know that kids are either totally willing to sit on Santa's lap or they're totally unwilling. More often than not, parents push their kids so they can add a happy Christmas snap to the family album. You'll also note that the year is always prominently displayed above Santa's head. Later, this serves as a reminder of all the things on your wish list and how adorable you were. Conversely, the picture can help pinpoint the exact time in your life you were traumatised beyond belief. This information can be used in therapy sessions in years to come.

When it was my turn, the man in the big red suit beckoned me forward. 'It's okay, son,' he said, smiling and motioning to me with his white-gloved hands. *No way, man. I don't want to come*

*anywhere near you, I thought. I wrote you a letter – can't you just read that? What more do you want? Besides, I've changed my mind. I think we'll just give Christmas a miss this year.*

I think Mum sensed my fears but pushed me forward anyway, so there was nothing left for me to do but cry. I'm told I howled. I was genuinely frightened of this bearded, bespectacled man with the twinkling eyes. I think we have the photo somewhere to prove it.

Although I was too upset to utter my request, I must have been a really good boy that year. Christmas Day rolled around, and under our sparse Christmas tree, with its tinsel branches festooned with coloured baubles and craftwork courtesy of me and my siblings, was a very big box with my name on it. I can remember waking early that Christmas Day and seeing the brightly wrapped box. *Was this the truck I'd asked Santa for?* I didn't want to get my hopes up.

Christmas was never a brilliant time for our family. More often than not, there would be no money for nice presents. We never spoke about it, but Dad's gambling was the issue. On the one hand, this was the culture of the day: men would gather at the pub or at the track and have a bit of a flutter over a beer or several and copious cigarettes. On the other hand, Dad's penchant for gambling, smoking and drinking was in a different league. This was well known to his own family; Mum suspects that's why they were keen to offload him onto an unsuspecting wife.

Most Saturday mornings, I'd wake to the sound of 7EX's 'Talking Turf' on the radio in the kitchen, blaring out the punters' pick for the day. 'Race 6 at Moonee Valley,' the nasally commentator would begin. 'Our pick is number 4.' While this could have been the beginning of my interest in radio, it wasn't. It came to represent countless unhappy times with Dad. As a child, I often accompanied him to the racetrack, where he typically squandered all his money on a hunch. I wasn't allowed in the betting ring so I'd have to hang around, bored to tears, while

he placed his bet. Afterwards, Dad and I would stand at the fence and watch the race unfold. The result would determine his mood – either good or bad.

On the drive home, no matter which way it went, Dad would give me clear instructions: ‘Whatever you do, Ian, don’t tell your mother.’

When questioned about money, Dad would become belligerent and change the subject. His *modus operandi* under Mum’s interrogation about our finances was that of Sergeant Shultz in *Hogan’s Heroes*: ‘I see nothing! I know nothing!’ He’d never admit he had a problem and poor Mum would be left to juggle the family budget on her own.

For some reason, I felt more optimism about the Christmas at the end of my first year at preschool – even though I’d just been lumbered with the news that I would never grow up to be tall. Clutching the big box with both hands, I attempted to guess the contents. Glancing around to make sure the coast was clear, I felt around the outside of the box before giving it a good shake. Nope, couldn’t work it out.

Frustratingly, I’d have to wait for what seemed like an eternity for the family to all wake up and come into the loungeroom. Upon hearing the kettle, I pushed my present back under the tree, making sure it was in exactly the same position. Mum shuffled into the room, wiping the sleep from her eyes. ‘Merry Christmas, Ianee,’ she said, stifling a yawn.

‘Can we open our presents, *please?*’

‘What about “Good morning, Mum”? ... No, Ian, you’ll have to wait until after breakfast.’

‘Ooooooh!’ I whined as Mum headed into the kitchen. Realising it was hopeless, I trudged after her to have my bowl of cornflakes. I knew that once brekkie was out of the way, Mum, Mark, Louise, Jill and I would carry our mugs of Milo into the loungeroom in readiness for the present opening ceremony. To my surprise, Dad graced us with his presence; even if it was because

the pubs were shut on Christmas Day, it was good to have the whole family together.

‘Okay, Ian,’ Mum said finally. ‘You can open your present now.’

‘Yay!’ Shrieking with excitement, I ripped off all the wrapping in two seconds flat, flinging it away so I could prise open my gift. It was the very toy I had asked Santa for: the yellow Tonka truck.

I often wonder if this was an attempt to compensate for the painful news I’d received that year from Dr Spence.

Every January, our family would pack up the green and white FB Holden – or whatever car we had at the time – and drive to one of many popular holiday destinations in the state, like Bicheno, Bridport or Scamander. We might book a holiday house, hire a caravan or set up a family-sized tent.

On camping trips, the campfires at night were fantastic. Under a clear black sky littered with stars, our family and others would sit on logs in front of a roaring fire, swapping stories and jokes. The men would bond over bottles of beer – or in Dad’s case, a brandy. The women, terry towelling dresses draped over their sodden swimsuits, favoured sweet moselle or perhaps a shandy – a mixture of beer and lemonade. Most of the adults would be smoking. As darkness fell, we would roast marshmallows impaled on burned-out sticks and then suck on the gooey remains. When Mum gave the order, ‘Teeth and bed!’, it was always met with sighs and, ‘Ohhhh ... how come [so and so] gets to stay up late?’

In the mornings, I’d wake early and clamber out of our tent bleary-eyed. Dad, wearing his yellow polyester shirt, brown slacks and his trademark hat, would be kneeling over the dead embers trying to fan life back into them so he could boil the billy for tea. Later, when everyone else had surfaced, we’d stand over the now roaring fire, holding bread on the end of long campfire forks – bread would be magically transformed into toast.

Provided Dad was sober – usually in the mornings – he was pleasant to be around and good-natured. But his addictions would inevitably rear their ugly head. Two or three days into the camping trip, Dad would leave the family and make his way to the pub.

‘Oh my God, Donald,’ Mum would say. ‘Can’t you go one day without having a drink?’

Years later, I would understand.

I can rarely recall seeing my dad without a drink in his hand.

Mum says that when the two of them met, Dad was a social drinker. Over time, however, the occasional drink turned into a destructive habit, and by the time I reached the age of five, Dad was at the pub most nights. On weekends, he’d sit in the loungeroom watching the cricket or the football and polish off an entire bottle of port in one sitting. I can picture my dad slouched cross-legged on our white vinyl lounge chair, in front of the television, with a drink in one hand and cigarette in the other. He resembled the Irish comedian Dave Allen, but with all his fingers intact.

On these days, Jill and I would become his attendants. ‘Go and get me another drink, please,’ Dad would say, eyes glued to the screen and holding out his empty tumbler. Dutifully and often reluctantly, one of us would collect his glass, go into the kitchen, and then refill it with the port that sat on the kitchen bench.

One Saturday, my sister thought it would be a good idea to switch the port with vinegar. With her best poker face, Jill, who was probably ten, handed the drink back to Dad, who hadn’t noticed its contents until he raised the glass to his mouth. At that exact moment, he paused to watch a passage of play before copping a whiff of the odious acidic liquid. He looked down into his glass and recoiled.

*Jill!* What the bloody hell is this?’

Red-faced, Jill bit back, protesting about being his on-call waitress. I watched wide-eyed and scared from the sidelines and didn't dare say a word, but I thought this was a pretty good trick.

Minutes later, Dad asked me to get him another drink, as Jill could no longer be trusted. I dragged my step stool over to the kitchen bench and carefully measured out what would be a nip. Then I took it into the lounge room, stood next to Dad's chair and handed him the glass.

Without acknowledging my presence, he took a sip and gagged.

'*Don't you ever do that again, Ian,*' he snapped, still holding his glass and pointing at me with his long thin nicotine-stained finger. 'You hear me, Ian? *Never ... again.*'

'Ssss-sorry, Dad,' I stammered, taking the glass from his hand, scuttling into the kitchen and emptying the contents of the red wine vinegar down the sink. After rinsing out the glass and filling it up again with port, I delivered it back to Dad with trembling hands. I couldn't understand why he was so mad at me. It was only a joke.

How come Jill had got away with it and I hadn't? Why had Dad found it easier to boss me around? Was he picking on me because I was different? These were the questions bubbling around in my pint-sized brain. I truly didn't know the answer to them and I sure as hell wasn't going to ask. I think I ran into my bedroom, hugged Ted and cried.

From then on, every time Dad called out, 'Ian, get me a drink', I did exactly as I was told. I didn't want to be at the receiving end of Dad's anger again.

When I was about to start grade 1, Mum took me school-uniform shopping in town. What a challenge. The main street in Launceston was stocked with pretty much everything you could find on the mainland – unless, of course, you happened to be me or the other short-statured guy who lived in town.

If you had a standard foot size, great, but I didn't. Shoes for short broad feet with a high instep were simply not available in our pocket of the world. I found myself sitting on a vinyl chair in the downtown shoe shop, legs dangling as the salesman knelt down and measured my feet. 'Hmm,' he murmured, frowning over the measurements. 'Let me check out the back and see what I've got.'

Mum and I waited hopefully as the salesman did his disappearing act into that mystical place out the back. A few minutes later he emerged carrying several boxes. As he knelt down and pulled out the first pair of school shoes, my face dropped. It didn't look promising.

'Just try them, love.'

As soon as I stood up, I nearly tumbled over. The shoes were wide all right, but way too long. It might have been comical if I wasn't so self-conscious about my appearance. I clomped around the shoe store like a clown, tripping over my own feet.

After visiting several other shoe shops and having no luck, we finally found a pair in All Goods, a store that sold everything from camping gear to school supplies and all and sundry in between. This place was a veritable Aladdin's cave. It also stocked uniforms. But therein lay another challenge. Because of my short arms and legs, Mum could never simply buy clothing off the rack. T-shirts would be like long-sleeve or three-quarter-length tees on me. Shorts would go past my knees, and jeans legs had to be cut in half in order to work. Even though I didn't have a penchant for high fashion, it still bothered me that everything I put on made me look ridiculous – another reminder of my uniqueness.

You know that label 'One size fits all'? Every item of 'standard size' clothing Mum purchased for me had to be altered to fit. Mum hunched over her Singer sewing machine late into the night, painstakingly altering my clothes to ensure I was dressed properly for school.

These alterations were never a chore to Mum, though. It was her aim to make sure I looked the same as everyone else. But the

problem was that I didn't look like everyone else, and every time we went out in public I was fair game.

Kids have no filters. They'd walk past and make snide remarks about my height. 'Look at that short kid,' they'd say and point. If I was lucky, I'd notice mothers giving their kids that 'Stop it!' glare. Frequently I'd catch adults stealing a peek at me and then quickly looking away or elbowing their friend as they walked past. In those moments, I'd inch closer to Mum.

She did her best to shield me from such behaviour and I'm sure many times she felt like slapping the offenders. Any kid within earshot of my mother who made a nasty remark about my appearance would be greeted with a death stare. Her death stare was a double-barrel one: one for the child and the other for the parent. As far as she was concerned, these snotty-nosed brats – my words, not Mum's; sorry, I mean 'little darlings' – and their parents were no different. It took me a while to work out the look on those adults' faces was one of, 'Ohhhh. Right now I wish the ground would open up and swallow me ... anywhere has got to be more comfortable than this.'

As I got older and more anxious and sensitive, I became more aware of the stares and whispers of strangers. It made me angry, and I hated God for making me like this. I developed a chip on my shoulder and a growing sense of hopelessness – knowing that nothing would ever change, even if I were to challenge any one of them. My tormentors were so much bigger than I was, and besides, just like the carnival sideshow where you shoot duck silhouettes, as soon as you knock one down, dozens more are right there.

You'd think it would only be people who didn't know you or love you who would make you feel bad about yourself, right? Wrong. In my case, it was strangers ... and Nana.

Earlier, I mentioned Nana had wanted me to be sent to some kind of institution or at the very least hidden away behind closed doors at home and never allowed out in public. Put simply, she

was mean. For a kid dealing with the ramifications of dwarfism, having a mean nana was almost too much to bear at times. I have a couple of especially unpleasant memories when it comes to Nana, and even though we are told not to speak ill of the dead, these stories may help explain my insecurities.

I'm not sure how old I was but one time our family, including Nana, went on a road trip to Devonport, a city on the north-west coast of Tasmania about an hour's drive from Launceston. It must have been a Sunday because the shops were shut. After lunch, as a family, we strolled the streets and passed a jeweller's store. That's when Nana stopped dead in her tracks and squealed with delight. 'Oh, this would be perfect for Jill,' she exclaimed, pointing to a necklace in the window. Undeterred by the 'Closed' sign, Nana pulled out her chequebook, wrote a cheque for the exact amount and slipped it under the door with a forwarding address and instructions.

My heart sank. Nana never once considered buying me a special gift like this. While I was happy for Jill, I felt as though I wasn't worthy of Nana's love.

Other times Nana would visit and she would often reach into her purse, whip out a \$2, \$5, \$10 or \$20 note and hand it to Jill. Now, keep in mind this was the 1970s and that \$10 or \$20 was a lot of money back then, especially to a kid. 'Here you go, Jill,' she'd say brightly, 'some pocket money.' Then she would wheel around, her eyes narrowing, and give me 10 or 20 cents.

'You don't need money like your sister does,' she'd say, flashing me a look of disapproval.

'Thank you, Nana,' I'd say politely, as I had been taught by Mum. But then I'd walk away from the exchange feeling heavy and sad, wondering why my sister got more money than I did. Why? What made her worth so much more than me?

When I told my parents how I was feeling, they brushed it off.

'Oh, don't worry, Ianee,' they would say. 'Nana doesn't mean anything by it.' But deep down, I was sure she did and, whether

she knew it or not, Nana's subtle put-downs throughout my childhood reinforced what I learned to believe about myself – that I was a second-class citizen.

After Pop died and Nana moved into a nursing home, Mum and Dad would often collect Nana and take her out for the day. As the youngest member of the family, I was never allowed to stay home alone, so I'd have to endure the ride with her. I hated climbing in the back with Nana. She would literally sprawl across the back seat, taking up as much room as she possibly could. The only way I got any real estate was to press hard up against the door and fasten my seatbelt so as not to be ejected into the cold. Once on the road, Nana would barely acknowledge my presence. In her eyes, I didn't seem to exist; certainly, my needs didn't matter to her.

Nana's visits always meant we had to watch our Ps and Qs and pander to her. She'd bluster into the house, collapse into one of the most comfortable armchairs and wait to be served. Obediently, I would attend to her.

'Would you like a cup of tea, Nana?' I'd ask ever so politely before serving English Breakfast tea in one of our best floral china cups; it was the same cup she would later use as a receptacle for her dentures when she stayed the night.

There is, however, one story about Nana and her selfishness that always brings a smile to my face.

At one stage, Jill was dating a really nice guy by the name of Andrew, who Nana insisted on calling Arty. And it wasn't just his first name she got wrong either. For Christmas, Nana gave Andrew a lovely gift box.

On opening the seemingly thoughtful gift, Andrew found a used cake of soap with a pubic hair stuck to it!