

CHAPTER ONE

Tallygaroopna and Shepparton – 1921 to November 1943

Lester Dudley, whose parents gave him the unusual middle name of Zane, was born on 9 June, 1921, into a poor family which became even poorer as the years went by. He was the sixth and last child born to William and Elizabeth Dudley who lived in the small Victorian country town of Tallygaroopna, north of Shepparton.

Lester's brother-in-law, Tom Mann, often laughingly referred to the 'damn Dudleys' all of whom were gifted with a lively intelligence and an often peculiar sense of humour. Lester's father William, who was called Charlie, and his mother, Elizabeth nee Canet, who known as Lily, were an oddly matched couple who had a mutual love of reading which was passed down to all their children. Charlie had an ugly temper but he was a hard worker, a contractor, who tried his hand at a variety of jobs from work on the council, to labouring on local farms. Lily was simply always odd. Wearing a mob cap at a time when such items had long been out of fashion, she thought nothing of walking miles through the paddocks. This was a useful skill in the days when the family lacked money for regular transport, but when she began to suffer from the family curse of senile dementia, it meant she could be miles away before any one realised she had wandered off.

Lester had four older siblings, Valerie, Daisy, Merlyn (whose twin was stillborn), and Ulva. The Dudleys, who were descended from Methodist and Presbyterian stock, were strict teetotallers. It was therefore ironic that Lily, in choosing a name for her first born son, should see it on a glass and, not knowing the letters, U.L.V.A. stood for United Licensed Victuallers Association, would call him Ulva. In later years when the truth was realised the story was changed and it was said she chose the name from the poem by Sir Walter Scott.

When Lester was seven, a polio epidemic, which swept Australia, added Lester and two of his cousins to the toll. On the night of July 15 1928 Lester, a previously active youngster, fell ill at night and remained bedridden until nine months later when, on March 8, 1929, he was taken by his parents on the long trip to Melbourne and became a patient at the Children's Hospital (later the Royal Children's Hospital). This date was imprinted on his memory and fifty years later he commented on it in his diary. Lester spent three years in Melbourne at the Children's and Austin hospitals, and at the Yooralla Home for Crippled Children. Because his family was poor and lived more than 300 kilometres away, he rarely saw them during the years he spent in hospital.

When eleven year old Lester went home to Tallygaroopna he was on crutches, one leg was badly wasted and the other leg was useless. He returned to regular schooling at Tallygaroopna State School which was across the road from his home. In line with his siblings he left school at 14 but, unlike his brother and sisters, he continued his education by correspondence with the Napier Street Fitzroy School. He passed the Intermediate Examination in 1937 and his Leaving Pass the following year.

As a teenager he led an isolated existence and, according to his writings, he was very lonely. For a time he worked as a weighbridge keeper during the wheat season but he had to be helped by relatives and soon had to give up the job.

His life was filled with study and writing and in April 1941 he sat for the first night of his Intermediate accountancy exam, and recollected it to the day when he was in Antwerp 38 years later. During the same month he took third place in both the Australia-wide accountancy and law exams run by the Australian Association of Accountants.

Lester was a serious young man with an odd sense of humour who described himself, according to later diary entries, as ‘addicted to morbid spasms’. When he was 19 he listed some of the books he was reading and they included *Martin Chuzzlewit* by Charles Dickens, essays by Hazlitt, and a book of essays by Walter Murdoch. In one essay Murdoch discussed whiskers and Lester wrote an entry in his diary

I even remember my sense of disappointment when Andrea’s death in War and Peace was complicated by the introduction of a moustache which he twirled as he lay dying. My enjoyment of a modern novel is invariably marred till I can forget the hero’s neat moustache. And as for whiskers.

A few paragraphs later he writes

I am a creative “artist”. This is the chief reason which gives me a hope that I may play a part in literature, especially in this ebb tide age.

When he was 20, and his face became swollen, Lester prepared to die

Within the next few minutes I must speak on one of the things on which I have been silent for five and a half years. And on my mother’s birthday. I can’t keep silent now for it has swollen my left cheek and though I have taken the opportunity to write these words, the swelling must soon be seen, so I must speak of it first. It’s not the thought of learning the truth that frightens me now, but the thought of explaining to Mum, and the worry to which she will be put. Once I began to keep silence I had to keep silence, and the longer I went the more impossible it was to speak, and the worse worry it would be to Mum when I ultimately did speak.

I thought if I could only hide it till I got a job in town and went to a doctor myself, it would not be quite as bad breaking the news to her after, but now I must tell her first and she must wait till I have seen the doctor. I find it hard to believe I will be told I am going to die, especially as I have gone so long, but the way this secondary growth has swelled up and the way my teeth growths get irritated, I am afraid some of them are pretty likely to be malignant. I have lived with that fear for years.at the moment my worst fear is the horror I will so soon cause Mum, who is reading in a chair by the fire, reading, and apparently in an easy state of mind. How can I bring myself to speak? But it is impossible to hide it.

The abscess that had caused his face to swell was not life-threatening but Lester, having lived with a distorted body, and with pain for much of his life due to the effects of poliomyelitis, was prepared to face the worst. After speaking with his mother, and realising he didn't have cancer, Lester was able to relax.

He was a young man who wanted to be in love, and often was, but his hyper sensitivity regarding the 'correct' way to act meant his rare interactions with the opposite sex never went further than conversation and, on reading some diary entries, very stilted conversation at that.

Although the early fragments of diary entries are very serious, and one feels he may have had an eye on posterity, as he grew older Lester relaxed and the entries became more conversational often showing flashes of his sometimes black humour.

When the main diary begins, in the early years of the First World War, Lester is boarding in Shepparton, but he returns to Tallygaroopna every weekend to stay with his parents. At this time his oldest sister, Valerie, lives interstate, and is with the

WRAAF; Daisy lives with her two sons Maurice and Sidney in the next township, Wunghnu; and Merlyn is in Melbourne working on her wartime occupation as a tram conductress. Her husband, Tom Mann, is with the RAAF ground crew on Horn Island. Lester's brother Ulva (also known as Dud or Neil), is with the RAAF and is training as a pilot.

Lester worked at the Ardmona Cannery at Mooroopna, 'did the books' on Saturdays for Cec Thompson's, a timber business in Shepparton, and studied accountancy at night. His social life, apart from time with his family in Tallygaroopna, was non-existent.

The great delights of his life were his two nephews, Maurice and Sidney Roughsedge. The boys were 12 and 13 years younger than Lester but he happily took part in their games and, despite the impediment of the crutches and his wasted legs, went with them on their walks through the rough paddocks around Tallygaroopna.

From the time he began work, Lester divided his pay into sections, for living expenses, recreation, and for charity, and he financially supported his parents from the time he began work until their deaths. He was very exact about his finances and became upset if he went over the limit in any area. He donated to charities all his life and sent money overseas for numerous foster children with whom he communicated on a regular basis.

After years of scribbling Lester began regular diaries in 1942 the week before his 23rd birthday when he was living in a boarding house at Shepparton run by Bill and Josephine Foley. Life in the boarding house gave him a new understanding of the way other people lived. He was well-used to poverty, but Lester had never seen the effects of drinking before. While his rabidly teetotaler father had a temper, Lester had

never lived in a house where alcohol was consumed daily and routinely followed by arguments and violence.

A Mr and Mrs Frank Dunnett and their four year old daughter Irene, were also tenants in the house, and the Dunnetts and Foleys were a fiery combination. Both Bill Foley and Frank Dunnett were professional jockeys and it was during this time that Lester gained an interest in horse racing.

Lester, who moved to Shepparton in January 1942, initially had a curtained bed on an enclosed verandah but in May 1943 he moved into a vacant room in the Foley household where he enjoyed being able to shut the door to enclose his world and shut out the mayhem that regularly erupted.

He had left his family home in Tallygaroopna after gaining employment in the accounting section at the Ardmona cannery at Mooroopna which was far closer to Shepparton than it was to Tally. Lester reached the cannery using a combination of taxis and trains which, as it was wartime, could not always be relied upon. In his spare time he continued to study accountancy by correspondence. In 1942, a few months before his 21st birthday he achieved first place in both the final accountancy and law exams held by the Association of Accountants of Australia. He took the examinations in Shepparton and on 12 August of the same year he was admitted as an Associate of the Australian Society of Certified Practising Accountants, number 176562. Lester made no comments about his success in his diaries.

Although Lester was finally living away from home, he visited his parents almost every weekend and on holidays. He implemented his regular income from the cannery by working Saturday mornings at Cec Thompson's timber yard. After he finished his work there he took the train for the brief journey from Shepparton to Tallygaroopna where he would spend the remainder of the weekend.

A brief note in an exercise book mentioned Lester saw one film, *Dive Bomber*, during 1942, however during the following year he began regular visits to cinemas. Never one just to enjoy himself, Lester also wrote intense criticisms of each film which included the actors, scripts, and any musical scenes.

He always maintained high standards for himself although he readily forgave and forgot flaws in others and always looked for the good in people. He expected personal perfection and frequently castigated himself in his diary for being physically clumsy, for failing to write up his diary every day, for failing to conduct conversations the right way, and for causing minor offense to people.

His first regular diary entry, on June 1, 1942 began with his move to his new room - *There was the glow of a fire kindly lit all ready for me. It was a minute or two before I saw a glow over the mantelpiece, and realised my books were now behind the sliding doors of the case there, instead of in the wardrobe, a welcome surprise, though some of the books are too tall for any of the shelves and must lie down. I must put my H and R texts on the highest shelf, to stand them up, though I hope the remoteness of their position there will not make reference still more infrequent.*

Of course I had some misadventures with the fire during the evening. The fire, in fact, at one stage, was quite put out about it, but long suffering Mrs Foley got it going again, and with the bucket of chips I kept it bright.

Two months passed before Lester wrote again on August 3 - *I have decided to strictly enforce the original idea with which I started this book – a daily write up. There will be some use to me in these memories – they will fix a few things on paper. It sometimes frightens me when I think how little I have to remember, and how badly I remember it. I had the first thirty odd destroyers lost off by heart and now I don't know whether we've lost 100 or 200. The very fact that I remembered this is not*

merely my affection for destroyers, but the fact that I had so few things worth remembering. This will be something to re-read, there will be some things in it to recall with gladness – if it survives.

True to his desire to write every day, Lester's entry for August 4 began with a description of the weather and - *When I got out at the station somebody held the door open for me. It was Mr Brown, the auditor, bluffly smiling. A few months more and he will once again be slashing green ink through my ineradicable erasures and reproducing my altered figures in green. Poor damned me.*

This morning Mrs Foley took me into June's room and suggested I move into it. As usual my mind took flight and all I could say was that it was out of doors – that is my only objection, the uncomfortable cold-catching treks to the bathroom and the meal table in all weathers, only I didn't manage to explain that. She was disappointed, she must have been counting on putting two people into my room. I suppose I'll end up paying more for it. It's worth it, to have the room to myself. Only, I wish that room of June's was connected with the house. It's nice and quiet.

Lester frequently wrote sentences fashioned with future fame in mind as on August 11 when he wrote *'the frost claws every blade of grass, and cakes the posts. I notice more and more wattles every day, on the train going to Mooroopna, and from the bus coming home. There is something inexpressibly gladsome in the way wattles smile out as you come on them.'*

The Second World War was well underway but there are relatively few mentions of it. Occasionally Lester wrote of supply trains, many of which transported motor vehicles. There were comments about servicemen in trains and he gave numerous paragraphs to low flights overhead by Wirraways. In September he wrote of Cecil (Joe) Brown, a former Ardmona wages clerk, who – *gave Mooroopna one of*

its periodical goings over in his Wirraway. Actually, just about all he did was keep flying over very low, to the great perturbation of Leo and the rage of the townswomen. He did once make me a little anxious when he did a slow roll (only he was a good 500 feet up) and cut his motor momentarily on coming out of it.

It was well for Cecil's fame he came over when he did for on Friday at 11.20 the Lancaster was to pass. Somewhat after that time we heard a strong drone approaching steadily. Down throught the foreground trees showed the great lifted wings with their four engines. I think I never thrilled to the sight of an aeroplane before. I wished I was up on the silo where a few happy people had been watching its paradiings over Tatura and Kyabram. It came over as low as Cecil had, its greatness making it look still nearer curving easily away as it passed close to the cannery office and floated away over the town.

Lester wrote about three sailors who visited the cannery, spruiking for war bonds. He found their conversation entertaining, particularly on the subject of Australian canned vegetables which *'might just as well be thrown away the moment they're produced.'*

He continued with his weekday work at the cannery, with Saturday mornings at the timberyard, and with Saturdays and Sundays at Tallygaroopna. He read a great deal and obviously did a great deal more study than he wrote about as he continued to top Australia in the accountancy exams. The only drawback to his existence were the regular drinking sessions.

Last night Mrs Dummett brought a friend in for tea. During the evening she apparently collected another friend or two, and from her room came increasingly loud laughter and talk, mixed up with the sound of four year old Irene hopping and thumping about. They flocked out about nine o'clock. I

hoped they had gone for the night, and that Mrs Dummett would only come home in the wee small hours, to bed. But about eleven o'clock they tramped in, and for an age they made merry.

They didn't disturb me all the time, it was the occasional upsurge of their voices, their clumsy movements, that kept me from going to sleep or roused me from the down grade to a doze. At such times I would wonder that Mrs Foley tolerated it. Once I tried to imagine her in the other room, feeding a covered fire of impatience, with the fluctuating noise from the room across the corridor, till that powder-barrel Irish temper should suddenly flash off, as I had so often seen it.

This morning, when I was finishing packing my case, Mrs Dummett knocked on Mrs Foley's door, and apparently began the reconciliation. They're queer creatures these racing people and their women, imitation volcanoes that a night's sleep can douse.

A few nights later Lester writes again of a 'beer-up' and quotes some of the language which he heard. Lester never swore in public and the rare occasions when he used strong language in diary entries in later years showed how deeply he felt about various matters. *Listening to them, I feel glad that I was brought up to look on drink as an evil, and that reason has always given me an aversion to it which, no matter what the arguments for it in moderation, will keep me from ever touching it at all. I would very much like to see drinking die out, which it won't, or die down to a moderation which can offend no one, - that people didn't drink at all would please me much better than their moderation. However, since it won't die out it's a case of live and let live. They're welcome while they don't break in upon me. They're adults.*

The following day Lester arrived home from a night out at the cinema to find Bill Foley and his wife in the midst of a violent argument with Bill using *'his very filtheist profanity'*

Lester wrote *'She apologised to me this morning, which she needn't have, for in almost any quarrel, whatever rubs her own hot temper may have given, Bill turns so foully abusive and violent I lose any sympathy for him. Yet it would take a long long while for me to get to dislike him, for, like Mrs Foley, he gives me a very good spin. It's difficult not to warm to him as he diligently does out the house of a Saturday morning, though in an hour or two the probability is he will be on another soul-scarring binge, and the peace of Poor Mrs Foley will be shattered for the best part of another weekend. And when he comes in to set the kindling alight when I am dressing after my shower, with his companionable "How's Lester," then follows it up with the coke, how could I feel a really hard spot for him? He just looks a still tough, time-battered, slightly cynical mouthed little jockey. However, the effect of his drinking is showing now more perceptibly.'*

In September Lester's sister Valerie arrived home from her placement with the WRAAFs at Gosford in New South Wales. The same day, his brother, Ulva, whom Lester tended to call Dud, also arrived. Ulva was now a flight sergeant who was engaged to Cynthia who worked in South Australia. *We spent the time till he had to leave for the train yarning in front of the fire. He finished by giving me three gruesome accidents – in two fatal "prangs" he had been only eye-witness and in another crash, not fatal, the chief eye-witness. One of the crashes was a collision, and he related the whole thing in such vivid detail that I won't set it down, as I won't forget it. [Lester noted years later, "I have, thank God."]. The other death was night flying, on a pitch black rainy night, and the fact that he told it almost as a joke only*

heightened the sense of the tragedy of it. A young trainee after over-shooting twice, went straight in. Dud ran into the O.C's office (and said) "Young Barnwell's down." "Thank heaven for that." "He's down for keeps."

Lester and Ulva had a close relationship and they wrote frequently to each other during Ulva's training as a fighter pilot and when he was posted to New Guinea. Every time Ulva came back to Tallygaroopna he made sure to visit Lester in Shepparton. The week after Ulva's visit, Lester made an appointment with a Shepparton doctor. *The subject of the call was sordid and unhappy. I have been disturbed for long enough by an itching that must have been piles, and occasionally, led by the soreness to look at the paper, saw it flecked with blood. I'm not enjoying the idea of suffering from piles, quite apart from the seriousness of the ailment. Too too frightfully infra dig.* His use of the term, *infra dig*, was a joke.

Lester continued to read widely. His sister, Val, had lent him the newly published *Pea Pickers* by Eve Langley and Lester was appalled by the 'strange self-confessing lyrical wisdom' although he felt much of it was genuine poetry. *Some of it I'd like to have written, rather, I'd like to be able to throw the shackles off my lyric feelings in the same way. I can read this book again inspite of the laceration of my sensitive nerve of embarrassment.*

By late September Lester was becoming weary of the constant drunken binges by the other inhabitants of the household. He had a huge amount of study to undertake for his accountancy examinations and found the constant yelling and arguments depressing. *'God, I'm tired of it all. Bugger everything and I can't even turn it into a poem in the manner of old.'* Lester had spent much of his teenage years trying to write poetry. Much of it was angst-ridden reflecting his loneliness and isolation. However it

was a hobby which he pursued during all his young years and he was devastated, in his twenties, to discover he had lost the ability to write in that fashion.

The final straw was the sale of the house. Mrs Foley had looked for alternative accommodation for Lester but he felt that if he was to leave he might as well move to Melbourne with the hopes of furthering his career. His immediate intention to leave was thwarted when he realised his going would mean a fellow worker would miss out on a much-longed for holiday with his wife. Lester agreed to move in with the man's parents and board with them and he then continued working until his colleagues holiday was over.

On his way home to Tallygaroopna one weekend Lester met his sister, Merlyn, on the train. *She is on 'sick leave'. She doesn't look sick, but she has had enough. Since July last year she's worked 13 days a fortnight, with a weeks break for measles and three weeks to settle Tom's father's affairs. Her doctor told her she should take a full month off and rush straight up the country. I think Merl's practically made up her mind she's had the trams. She banking pretty heavily on Tom being posted down here when he gets his leave.'*

At the end of October Lester wrote about a level crossing smash in which Mrs Dunnett and Irene had been killed. *Now and then I try to picture them as corpses, undisfigured, but it won't work. Their faces keep the heavy lidded aliveness. When my mind goes back to them a few weeks ago, it seems funny that the shadow did not fall. But I think it almost never does – to anyone unconcerned, certainly. I hope Irene was asleep.*

He went by train to the next township, Wunghnu, to stay with his sister, Daisy, and her sons, Maurice and Sid. *The station is prettily planted with flowers and Wunghnu, which I haven't been in since I was a little boy, is a collection of ancient*

dilapidated houses spread along several streets besides the Tocumwal road, which is called Carlisle Street. Daisy's house was once a bakery, and before that a granary or mill, and is drab, old cemented or grey painted brick, red tin roofed. Such as it is, it is one of the best in Wunghnu, and has electricity, something she didn't have in Tally. But she hates the house and Wunghnu.

Lester lived briefly at home in Tallygaroopna until he left for Melbourne. He worried about clothing coupons, he had 53, but he needed extra clothing for his move. His mother was agitated because she hadn't heard from Merl since she had returned to Melbourne after her sick leave. *'Anything you say merely aggravates matters when they're like that. I try to say nothing and wish to Christ I could hear nothing.'* Lily Dudley continued in an agitated frame of mind until Lester left for Melbourne. Lily, who had been a seamstress, insisted on sewing repairs on some of Lester's clothing but her eyes and general health were not good and Lester didn't want her to worry herself over it. Lily also rubbed up Daisy the wrong way, and in general Lily and her three daughters rarely saw eye to eye, although Val, Daisy and Merlyn continued to do their best for their parents. Lester, who disliked confrontation, rarely disagreed with his mother but his heart ached for his sisters who were trapped in an unending circle of disagreements. None of the family was aware that Lily's behaviour had much to do with the fact that she was becoming senile.

CHAPTER TWO

Melbourne – A Job and the End of the War

December 8 1943 to September 18 1945

Lester planned to move to Melbourne after he had found a place to live and a job to go to, instead, at 22, he arrived in Melbourne without a job and his only choice of accommodation was a house full of women. Elizabeth Canet, his 86 year old maternal grandmother, who suffered from dementia, was cared for by her middle aged daughters Jessie (*Jessie Grace Canet, 1898-1974*), Pauline Isabelle (*known as Belle, 1898-2001*), and Honorine (*Honorine Renee Gardiner nee Canet, 1893-1978*). Renee's daughter, Pauline, then 20, also lived there.

A month after Lester's move he wrote of his arrival at 53 Burnell Street, Brunswick - *Grandma was lying down, unwell, but before dinner she came out and greeted us cheerfully. We knew what to expect, she has forgotten my identity and even the fact that I am staying here, many times in the past four weeks. That is the kind of fog she lives in, that causes her to do things and undo them straight after; to bring in washing others have just hung out, and hang out what they have just brought in; to tell you the same – or else something quite different – over and over; to live in a kind of twilight of forgetfulness that Grandad is dead, that has caused constant repetition of the comforting phrase 'The menfolk are all away working in the country' to serve instead of the news that he was dead that used to come every time as a bitter shock; to keep forgetting she belongs here and insisting she must go home, and setting out on those treks which so quickly exhaust her, to be brought home by her daughters after a time as though she had just been out on any work, or was coming back after being away, or was just arriving on a visit, as circumstances dictated. Yet no matter what*

muddles she causes, or how many times she repeats something, or has to be told something else, they always speak to her in the same gentle – almost too gentle, in Belle's case, often – tone of voice, and behave in the same patient and kindly manner.

Lester no longer had a room of his own, he slept on a couch in the lounge room which had to be folded up and the linen cleared away every morning. He could only go to sleep when the last person had gone to bed and he was frequently woken during the night by his grandmother who wandered and who failed to recognise Lester as a member of the family. The family was vegetarian which suited Lester as salads were his favourite meal.

More than two months passed before Lester received a job interview. Those weeks must have been a frightening time for him and he referred to his disability as a further hindrance. On January 14 1944 he had an interview which involved much tramping around Melbourne streets but this came to nothing. The hilly concrete streets in the heart of Melbourne were not easy for someone on crutches, and climbing on and off trams, with their very high steps, was dangerous unless proper attention was paid to the task.

He wrote of his time in the waiting room as a time of despair. *I sat in the same corner and listened to the same weary complaints about the manpower. Eventually he [a man who was also waiting] disclosed that he had stopped a whole heap of shrapnel. He hadn't a bladder, only an affair of wire and rubber tubes and cotton wool; he hadn't pissed for 32 days after his wounding; yet he would be classed A one and ordered back to sea because he was a seaman – if he was only a soldier he wouldn't be class B. He would have to be dodging the U boats for the sake of this tribe of bludgers, and here he came back to his diatribe against the national service,*

now partnered in a minor key by a dark skinned young man who sat where the one armed man had sat.

Three days later Lester was interviewed by members of the Audit Office and began work with the Meat Control Accounts Section of the public service. He worked in Reliance House, Little Collins Street with a Mr Kerr as his immediate superior.

Lester was warned his position was only a war time appointment *I dissembled a mighty resolve to get hold of another job before peace, and worry a release out of my employers. Uppermost however, is coming the intent that out of my fitful imagination, uncertain perception and undependable observation, I must weave the payable stories I have so long dreamed of. How I would love to be the worst money grub in Grub Street, provided I did grub pay dirt.*

An auditors life at the moment is a solitary one, though that doesn't worry me much, but I know definitely now that I would never enjoy auditing whether public service or otherwise. Tram travel has not been difficult. Going in I have twice been resigned a seat (and once found an empty one).

Life at Burnell Street included numerous visitors, not only his sister, Daisy, with her sons, Maurice and Sid, but also his cousin, Robert Canet, [1915-1979], Robert's wife [Ivy Irene nee Crowley, died 1948], Robert's mother [Gertrude Catherine nee Easton, 1886-1969], and Lester's uncle, Robert George Canet [1886-1956] and his daughter, Mavis [*Mavis Noel Thomas, nee Canet, 1918-1976*] and her daughter Patricia.

Lester's grandmother was prone to bad moods and Lester wrote, soon after he arrived - *For the very first time I am in the gun – Belle with me, but that is almost a daily occurrence. I came into it about an hour after it had started, when Grandma, coming in on me where I was writing a letter home in the kitchen, got an impression*

that I was some importunate cavalier calling on her girls and making himself a nuisance generally. I soon filled my fountain pen and sneaked into the lounge to finish the letter. I am still there in two minds whether to leave my shave till the morning or to risk running into her when I ask for some hot water.

A week later Merl, who worked as a conductress on the trams while her husband Tom was at Horn Island as a ground crew member of the RAAF, told Lester she knew of a room not far from her own lodgings in Caulfield. Lester moved into 10 Kambrook Road, North Caulfield, with Mrs Agnes Niddrie and her daughter, Leslie. A son, Ian, a year younger than Lester, had enlisted in the army on 3 October 1941 and occasionally came home. The Niddries and Lester formed such a close bond that when Lester bought his own home in Railway Parade, Chadstone, thirteen years later in 1956, Agnes, Leslie, and Ian all moved into it with him.

On Monday, February 7, Lester wrote a lengthy diary entry about a film he had seen during the weekend, and about leaving Burnell Street. *On Saturday I went to see 'The Foreman went to France' and 'Rhythm Parade'. 'Rhythm Parade' was better than I expected. Ninety percent floor show, it didn't waste time having a story, and the few little scenes that tied the acts together were often comical. That wicked, dumb, little blonde who led the ballet. I'd like to have my boots under her bed.*

I shaved rather mournfully and packed all I could, leaving Merl to fit in as much of the rest as possible. Going to a new home is a lot worse than going to a new job. I then wrote an envelope 'THANK YUH' (it looks sillier and sillier by repetition, as I told Dad and Mum in a letter home to-night) and put two fivers in. That left me enough to pay a fortnights' board in advance and about thirty shillings over.

[On the train] *Merl drifted into conversation on meat rationing with a middle aged woman. I remained in silent admiration of the utter and unrelieved ugliness of railway stations, this one being noway improved by the dullness of the day and the grime of the atmosphere.*

Mrs Niddrie's house, number 10 [Kambrook Road, Caulfield], is about four houses up. She answered our ring and revealed herself a short plump middle aged woman, with glasses, serious eyes, and straight short hair. Round a twisting passage, she showed me my room, a large one, with a broad double window, a little fire place, with girls' photos over it, a small green painted slightly time-worn dressing-table with a good mirror to affect the lack of handles to one and a half of the drawers and a tendency to rock, a nice light brown wardrobe that had a half-length mirror in front of it, but again was defective in the matter of a handle, a sewing machine (for somewhere to keep it, the rooms being large, as I said), two wicker chairs and a dark leather wooden-armed chair and a little octagonal table or stand, a good big carpet almost as large as the square of lino it lay on, and a towel rail with two towels on it. How do I remember all this? I'm sitting on the arm chair, writing at the little stand under the light, and inventorying it all.

Lester began regular visits to Merl who boarded with a Mrs Russell in Chloris Crescent, South Caulfield, not far from Lester's place and next to the South Caulfield Tram Depot where Merl, and later Tom, worked. Lester continued to write regularly to Valerie, who was in Gosford, to Daisy in Wunghnu, and to Ulva, who had been posted to Parkes and was teaching pilots to fly kitty hawks.

On February 14 he wrote - *What a futile thing this diary really is. How few and how faint glimpses I've given to the wonderful days (in retrospect) I have passed, and the vividness of the most vapid person I ever met. Not one glimpse*

of the wild bloodshot eye and flushed loose face of Bill Foley drunk, of the worn small features of Mrs Foley crumpling with the emotion that tears shreds out of her voice; to name only two of the people of the days when I first started keeping the diary, let alone all those who had passed out of my life before it. This all came to me the other night, when Mrs Niddrie talked to me at some length. She can hold her end up, in fact talk for both of us quite willingly, but not interminably, like some jockeys – her daughter [Sylvia] is married to one, Peacock, over in India – with, one of her little weaknesses, a tendency to intrude, in passing.

Ian Niddrie [Mrs Niddrie's son, Ian Stanley Niddrie, who was in the army] was home over the weekend. I saw him at one meal and spoke to him twice during it. He is very small.

Leslie Niddrie [Mrs Niddrie's daughter, also known as Jean] and Joan Reed [Mrs Niddrie's niece] got home last night. I saw them (without my glasses) when they were completing their breakfast; I sat opposite Joan at tea; I said hullo to Leslie when she came in, later. I haven't had time to size them up, if I ever do. I was over at Merl's for tea yesterday. Tom was home. He gets his discharge and a fortnight's leave tomorrow. They go up to Lexton [Lexton, near Ballarat, Victoria, where Tom grew up] on Tuesday, come back Monday, and go up to Daisy's on Tuesday next. Tom's nerve doctor is going to try and get him a Melbourne posting, and he won't go north any more. So his tummy should settle down bye and bye.

Lester worked five and a half day weeks, mostly on meat canning accounts on mutton for canning and dehydration. Almost every day there was something over which, 'if I cannot pass the buck to Mr Kerr, I must wrestle with one of my two

mortal terrors, the dread of having to ask for things, and the dread of having to ask about things.'

He began regular visits to the cinema and one afternoon, at the Capitol, he was reminded of a visit made in 1932 with a Miss Vance, possibly a staff member with the Children's Hospital, and with fellow patient Hugh Iskov [1916-1997]. They had seen *Congorilla*, shot by Martin and Osa Johnson in late 1929, which was the first film, shot in Africa, which had sound. When booking the tickets Miss Vance had spoken to one of the attendants who carried Lester up the steps, and after the show the attendant carried him out again from his cinema seat to the car.

Lester, who spent almost 70 years on crutches, was wary of all kinds of steps, *'there are those awful tram steps, which used to pervade my sleep when I first came down, till the handles of my crutches were fixed, and I gained the confidence in getting in and especially out.'* During his lifetime Lester travelled constantly on public transport, not only on trams, but also trains and buses, and had numerous falls both getting on and getting off them, however he rarely mentioned these in his diary. And he refused to be housebound.

In Melbourne Lester continued to read enthusiastically and covered most of his early purchases with greaseproof paper to protect the books. In March he wrote *'I bought Charles Dickens and Other Victorians by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, which I have now completed. Dickens, to me, is the style of styles. I was especially delighted to find he too loved Little Dorrit, which remains, and probably will remain, my favourite Dickens book, and so, my favourite of all books.'*

Little Dorrit not only remained a favourite, he read it every year for 60 years, and at his death the two copies in his possession had been so well-read their covers were worn almost through.

Lester hated being embarrassed and one incident in March rankled. *On Friday night I went over to Merl's. A little idiot came round the corner with a soldier's hat and khaki jumper, and a big boy's short navy trousers reaching down to his knees. He said 'Heil Hitler' and sat down on the seat by me. As unostentatiously as I could I got up and pretended to look for the tram, and talked to him while standing. His speech was a thick voiced series of trite questions about what was wrong with me, and why I didn't try exercise to make my leg stiff, and he concluded with the information that he had just come back from New Guinea. Other people came along then to divert his slightly embarrassing and very tedious attentions.*

The ways of the defence office personnel were often mysterious. Lester wrote his brother-in-law Tom had been sent, under cover of a document marked 'Secret', to go to the Records Office, Chapel Street, Prahran where he discovered most of the other Horn Island airforce men had also arrived, each subpoenaed in the same way. *The whisper spread among them that if they weren't complaisant at the interview, they would be bunged back to Horn Island. So as each man went in and the Flight Lieutenant asked him would he be willing to work as a stores clerk at Chapel Street, he answered 'yes' though often, as in Tom's case, most reluctantly. For all his eagerness to come back to town, he is certain he could not succeed as a stores clerk, any clerical labour being the last thing in his opinion for which he is fitted, a strange sort of trade to set him to after two years as a general hand when he joined up eager to learn some kind of aircraft work. And all this under a document marked 'secret', paid fares and a meal ticket, when each man could so easily have been asked through his C.O. With Tom's health as it is, and Merl's as hers is, he is now hoping fervently for a discharge and return to the trams, as happened in the last few weeks with a B class friend of his.*

Ulva spent some leave at Merl's place and Lester visited to spend time with him. Ulva had been posted to Mildura to undertake fighter operational training. From Caulfield he went to Victor Harbour in South Australia to spend time with his fiancée, Cynthia Bartlett.

As part of his work with Food Control, Lester was involved with the public issue and replacement of ration books, an exhausting business which continued for many hours. *At 9 am we quickly had a queue and thereafter for almost six hours we were wearing out our eyesight on identity cards and ration books in every condition. Some looked as though they'd been issued yesterday and never touched by hand, the vast majority looked more or less depreciated and a number were in very bad condition. Identity cards torn in half, identity cards with the change of address pasted over the name of the person, books that had fallen into every sort of grease or tried to flutter into confetti when you touched them, and one identity card and book steeped in sugar.*

The relievers were not well managed, and as it neared three we still hadn't had lunch, while, more important, my bladder was full and complaining. [Lester had written 'frantic' and then crossed it out] Mr Kerr then stood on the end of our queue and diverted the traffic and we finished it with our 278th issue.

In early June Lester 'discovered' Myer's bookshop which became one of his regular haunts for the remainder of his life – as did every other bookshop in Melbourne. No hill was too steep to climb if he thought he might find that special book at the top. *I was delighted with a lavish display of Collin's pocket classics, and bought Great Expectations [Charles Dickens] though I'm buying them faster than I'm reading them. Result – a host of partly read books. I was particularly glad to get this book – however, nothing thrills me like getting an Everyman's I really want.*

Lester went home to Tallygaroopna and was there for his 23rd birthday on June 9 1944. He enjoyed walking the paddocks with his nephews Maurice and Sid and spent a lot of time with Daisy and with his parents.

On his return to Melbourne he continued to see films and was pleased with *Pride and Prejudice* but felt he would have enjoyed the film more if he hadn't read the book. *Greer Garson was a lovable Elizabeth, though another Elizabeth, still a lovable Elizabeth. Laurence Olivier I went prepared to dislike, and disliked. Apart from the fact that he wasn't my Darcy, and I didn't care for his face, his Vivien Leigh publicity predisposed me to dislike him. When a man and woman betray the spouse of one of them in the next street it is sordid adultery.*

Lester was meticulous about his personal accounts and each pay saw the amount divided into specific amounts, some for his parents, for travel, for living, for charity, and for entertainment. He was perturbed if he exceeded any amount. He gave money to his parents from the first time he gained employment until their deaths. But although he was exact with money he found certain mundane necessities something which he would endeavour to put off for as long as possible – especially haircuts. *I need a hair cut. That's another thing I've been putting off from night to night. Each time the lighted door of Boardman's swings into view as the tram turns into Balaclava Road I think to myself 'It's too late' or 'It's too cold and windy' or 'It's too dull' or 'It's too frosty' and I trudge home with a sense of relief and guilt.*

He continued his regular visits to Merl who was pregnant with her first child. Val, who was with the WRAAF at Bankstown, stayed with Merl whenever she had leave, and in late July Ulva arrived for his period of leave.

He turns out to have topped his course at Mildura – the course comprising 60 odd men. He only missed Spitfires because he topped the bombing – the Kitty's of

course being used extensively as fighter bombers. Still he is very fond of the Kitty's, and thinks he has more chance of seeing action in them. He made a belly landing his first time up in a Kitty when the motor cut out. He didn't dare put down the wheels as he couldn't judge his approach properly the first time up. He made a Wirra satellite, hitting a ridge of dirt just after he landed which put the plane half on its nose and tore off the windscoop and most of the belly, and he shot along for a considerable distance in a blind cloud of dust. The Wirra instructors were complimenting him on his landing when the C.F.I. arrived and roared the daylights out of him for not putting his wheels down. 'That's another plane to the Japs,' he said. However the instructors came to his rescue, one saying that if he had put his wheels down he probably wouldn't've made the field, and another that if he had been on wheels when he hit the ridge of dirt he'd probably have turned the plane over.

We then went downtown and I waited outside Dunklings [jewellers] while Dud went in to chose a ring from the display – stocks to be available October, November.

In August Lester considered the idea of writing a mock solemn story 'composed entirely of the contents of a fictitious file, but can't think of a suitable commodity as practically everything I think of is under some form of control or has contracts for it too conspicuously routed through Food Control or Supply and Shipping.'

In October Lester became an uncle to his first niece, Diana, the first child for Merl and Tom. He made several visits to Dunklings, the jewellers, to sort out Ulva's engagement ring for Cynthia. Lester and Merl worked together, in the difficult wartime conditions to put together a parcel for Ulva which included numerous basics, as well as tomato soup, shaving cream and condensed milk.

In early November Lester wrote - *Tomorrow's a holiday – 'Cup Day'. The first Tuesday in November being a standard gazettal, it matters not that Cup Day is now on a Saturday, and that anyway this is war time. However, it's all right by me.*

I just had an interlude then while I dipped my forefinger through a jagged rent in a tin of condensed milk. I must have looked very silly. On Saturday night after we came home from the pictures my thoughts once more tended to the three surviving tins of condensed milk I had bought in looking out things for Dud. I picked out a tin of Croft's and tried to open it with everything I had rather than borrow Mrs Niddries' tin opener. Razor blades and what not, and I finally made two tiny holes with a broken trouser press. I sucked through one, Dud-fashion, and found the strife had cost me my appetite. Next morning I joined the two holes in that ragged tear, by using my back door key as a lever. Appetite still gone. Determination to buy a tin-opener, rather than be chuckled at, borrowing Mrs Niddries'.

Tonight I prised the tear a little wider, dipped in my fore finger, and feasted a while, picking out one little bit of metal that had fallen in (the others must have sunk – I must drain the tin before the milk is contaminated). Then I put the tin back in the wardrobe with a piece of brown paper over it to keep fluff off but allow the air to circulate, and resolved to pilfer Mrs Niddrie's tin opener when she's gone to work tomorrow.

Sunday afternoon and night I wrote Vain Nostalgia an idea I got a few days before while saying over some of my old verse to myself as a change from thinking of women. I'm not sure whether it's verse or poetry. The quality's very uneven.

Tuesday November 7

I did the dirty with the tin opener.

In November Lester said goodbye to Merl and Diana who went to stay with Daisy and the boys at Wunghnu. Val, also on leave, went to stay with friends in the country but didn't want her parents to know she was in Melbourne. Ulva was at Milne Bay in New Guinea flying kitty hawks and dropping bombs on enemy shipping. Two days before Christmas Lester braved the crowds and caught the train home to Tallygaroopna.

I found myself on the outside of a frantic throng, held back by a big blue coated woman, who made no headway whatever, while people either side pressed on past, tangling with each others' cases of which my crutches fell so foul I had no hope, even if that woman hadn't been bobbing back against me. I was dead anxious to see how I'd get on and I was in despair. The result of course was that I was almost last in, as at Easter. Another time I'll bore in from the side with 'manners towards none'.

On Friday December 29, Lester wrote: *The sands of the year, and of my holiday, ('and of Ulva's life – though we didn't know it')* [A comment added many years later by Lester] *are running out. How have I spent my holiday? I have never in my year or so of diary writing taken a straight long look at my home. I'll try now.*

'The wracked and faded house' of a triple sonnet now over 2 years old grows more wracked and still more faded. The 'dining room', our meal room, living room, entrance hall and my bedroom – Mum's when I'm not here – is worse worn as to lino, dustier than ever this dry summer, and still seldom quite tidy, due to Mum's chronic inclination to destroy what her children impatiently look on as rubbish or what, due to her lapses of health, lack of physical endurance and preoccupation with whatever work she feels forced to give priority to (and a flower garden is little enough compensation for the years of ill-health and worry) and lack of space elsewhere (already cluttered up) to shift things to, inevitably becomes rubbish as a plant out of

place becomes a weed. Dad doesn't help with his time-weary bringing back of books and magazines that had been stowed away, but Dad is too frail and shaky and through his 33 years of married life has retained much of a bachelor's indifference – no doubt accentuated by the amount of camp life he has had during the years. However, I didn't set out on this to criticise Mum and Dad; anything I've written has been merely in explanation of the reasons for what I am describing.

My meals are all I miss of Melbourne – the lovely fresh fruit and fresh vegetables, and even the cooked vegetables. Dad and Mum, lacking their own supplies, without any fruiterer calling, seldom eat vegetables save potatoes and onions – seldom have these, because they seldom have a cooked meal – and have got too apathetic to seek to restore what they badly need to their diet. But, there, I'm back on that subject.

During the morning I lie on my bed-cum-couch or sit on the old low chair chasing tunes on the wireless or curl in the big easy chair. In the afternoon it's as the morning.

In the evening with variations. The variations chiefly consist in sauntering – if you can saunter on crutches – in the vicinity of Mum as she works at the planting of the lawn in the cool shade; watching Liberators drone seemingly slowly overhead; their lights as yet dimmer than their great dark shapes, their 4 engines, twin fins, narrow fuselage and 'high aspect radio' distinctive wings; strolling over to the dam and wishing there was something to row on it, strolling round the rec [recreation ground] with Mum in last night's moonlight; this evening sitting in the back yard first with Mum's company then with Dad's. Yet I'm very content, and will be sorry to go back. This is home. That's all there is to it.

Lester continued with his auditing job and spent time at the Farmers' Debts Board where he did six monthly Commonwealth audits. *I concluded the audit neatly at lunch time with a very little Brockle-ising of a few cards. (Mr Pearce's term for taking the minutes as read, after the practice of an old time auditor Brocklehurst, who was wont to say, when passing things in a hurry 'It's a hundred to one it's right'.)*

On Saturday January 6, 1944, while resting at Mrs Niddries, Lester had a visitor. *Mrs Niddrie showed in Uncle Charlie. With my mind flying to the goods and chattels still not picked up from Grandma's, I exchanged the usual conversational preliminaries with him.*

He sat down and said 'I'm afraid I haven't very good news for you' (that won't mean definitely killed, is it injured (I hope) or missing?) 'though there's still hope' (missing – where?) 'Ulva's been brought down by ack-ack fire over the Celebes. They were strafing the Jap positions.' (Strafing – low level – and a quick plunge into earth or sea.) He didn't try to hold out extravagant hopes, but wasn't inclined to be pessimistic. Darrell [Darrell Canet, son of Charlie and Kitty] was posted missing for 14 months before they got word he was a prisoner of the Japs. But Darrell was an infantryman, one of the many thousands taken together in Malaya. It didn't do to place too devout a faith in the chances of a fighter pilot strafing enemy positions, probably hit at a low level, or of a single airman falling into the hands of the men (and Japanaese at that, though I have heard account of our own men in similar cases) whom he has just been strafing. And through all the confident hopes expressed by Tom, by Merl, by Auntie Daisy [Hoarey], by Mrs Niddrie, by Leslie, and the hopes which my thoughts have necessarily woven into their examination of the multiplicity of things that could have happened, that single liklihood has ever recurred as a sober probability to be faced.

Hit at low level, and a quick plunge into earth or water. If only the engine or propeller was hit, being a good pilot, and veteran of two low-level crash landings, he would have a good chance of getting down, whether or not he was properly treated afterwards. But a wing or the tail-unit may have been shot off, or the controls smashed, or himself hit. And then would come the crash, the explosion and the fire. His body – well, that's immaterial if the life is gone, which pray God it hasn't – and will always picture him in the garb of his tall browned keen good-looking body and face. One can't help thinking out fantastic tales of escape, even capture, and I suppose it does little harm, if one keeps squarely in mind that most likely of events, and facts that probability that Ulva is now a memory. [Ulva's body was never found but his family also never gave up hope.]

The telegram copied out by Mum in a letter I received today reads –
'410222 Flying Officer U. N. Dudley missing.
'Regret inform you that your son Flying Officer Ulva Neil Dudley is missing as result air operations on 4th January 1945. (Last Thursday – what were we doing on Thursday – what was I thinking and feeling? I probably shut my eyes on several of those half-frightened prayers for both Ulva and Darrell that I say silently day after day – but there was no premonition).

'Known details are: he was pilot of Kittyhawk aircraft detailed for strafing against the enemy which was apparently hit by enemy ack-ack fire near Lake Tandans in the Celebes and failed to return to base. The Minister for Air join with Air Board in expressing sincere sympathy in your anxiety. When any further information is received it will be conveyed to you immediately.

Airforce. 391 Little Collins Street, Melbourne.'

Mum has subjoined 'Above is exactly what came, tho portion of it looks badly put.' Maybe she was referring to the relative clauses in the sentence giving the known details, or to the fact that 'join' was written instead of 'joins' (which may be her or the post-office's mistake.)

The word 'apparently' gives room for belief that his plane was not seen to crash, which vastly widens the possible area wherein he may have come down, still without wiping out the worst liklihood.

Uncle Charlie said Daisy had rung Grandma's with the news the previous night. He also said that Auntie Daisy and Jessie were coming out during the afternoon to his place, I gave him Merl's address. However they went first to Mrs Niddries', who directed them as best she could, and at the Depot a trammie directed them to the actual address and locality.

After a couple of minutes chat with Tom and Merl and Diana I rather bluntly gave the news. I couldn't use Uncle Charlie's words, because they were at once too painful and too important a memory. I think I said 'Uncle Charlie called in to see me before – after lunch – when he was on his way home.' Then raising my eyes to Merl's I said 'Ulva's missing.' They were both shocked, of course, but inclined from the first to look on the brighter side. Tom in fact was very confident of the chances of making a crash landing, rating them far more highly than I could. Like me, they had had a letter within the past several days, and we were glad he had got some of the parcels. As both letters were dated about a week before Christmas there was a possibility that in the ensuing fortnight and odd days more had reached him. His letter to Merl contained a suggestion – my letter, had been sealed before it came to him – that he

and I club together for electric light for home. In his letter to me he mentioned again his and Cynthia's plans for wedding on his leave, which he expected in February. In both letters he mentioned a bracelet of shillings he was making for Cynthia, so if it is ultimately sent home among his effects we will see that she gets it.

Merl decided, in case no one else had done it, that she should write to Cynthia's mother, and it is good that she did, as Mum's letter today requested that I write a letter to her father and get some man to write the envelope. Merl worded her letter well. She printed the envelope and marked the top corner 'private'. Not knowing Mrs Bartlett's initials, she addressed it to Mrs Barlett, c/- Miss C Bartlett. All these circumstances, combined, on reflection leave me with little hope that there will be no foreboding roused in Cynthia's mind when in her post office job she sees the letter.

Yesterday I went out to Grandma's though I had little wish to go. (I rang up on Saturday morning to say I'd be out as usual. Belle's tones were markedly different – a mixture of gentleness, absence and disinterested reserve, but I didn't remotely connect them with Ulva. There is no sensitive awareness about me.)

Later Daisy told me Dad and Mum had taken it wonderfully, and were 'quite sure he would come back'. (God grant it.) I think they had steeled themselves from the first to meet such news. They had sent or were sending a telegram to Valerie's adjutant to give the news to her in the gentlest manner possible. I think Valerie will be very worried, but she had probably thought often enough of the possibility herself to face up to it.

The heavy heartedness has gradually lifted since the first cold contraction, and since the afternoon when calmly with open eyes and shut mouth I now and then prayed 'God rest him.' Now I'm praying 'God save him,' and occasionally 'Thy will

be done' that little utterance with which I tried to fortify myself against the too likely bad news in the news sessions of 1940-1941, in the days when I lived home. The heavy-heartedness has lifted, but the sense of something having gone out of the day lingers and most likely will persist a long time. It clouds everything to which I would normally look forward with interest or mild enjoyment in the course of a day or night. Sunshine – shade – a meal – a rest – a read – a meeting – a talk. I don't have to try and forget the anxiety – inevitably my thoughts turn to other things, and as inevitably return. That's as it should be. Memory will not fret and mar itself on a thing like this; one's mind will recreate itself, but it will not become forgetting.

Lester travelled to Tallygaroopna toward the end of January. He was met by Val and Maurice. Val, who had been home for a week, was due to leave the following morning but had been granted an extra seven days due to her father's illness. Following the news about Ulva, Charlie Dudley had sat in a chair for three days. Neighbour Doug Canet, (later to marry Valerie – she had been engaged to his brother Ivan who was also killed in the war), took Val and Lester to Mooroopna Hospital where Charlie was lying looking weak and shaky. Val had thoughts of putting in for a discharge from the WRAAF on the grounds of her parents health and as radar girls were no longer needed she had a good chance of achieving this. Charlie came home from hospital to a heat wave.

Restless nights with Dad feeling the heat very badly, even when it wasn't noticeably hot; the house falling back day by day into its wonted untidiness and dirty floors, though I did what I could to help poor Mum – dusting and even sweeping; visits from Daisy, Sid and Maurice on Saturday, and from Sid on Sunday, when he and I went for a walk. Dad carried my case up to the station where I consigned it through to Caulfield. Though tolerably crowded, the train made excellent time and

was in about 5 past 1. After lunch I went to the Tatler, chiefly to see a newsreel Daisy had spoken of – Island Target. Though I watched the Kittyhawk pilots' faces to the best of my ability, I couldn't find Dud among them.

In mid February Agnes Niddrie went on holiday, and Tom, Merl and their four month old daughter, Diana, moved into the house at Kambrook Road to help look after Lester, and Leslie and Ian Niddrie. On Wednesday, February 28, Lester wrote briefly in his diary: *'Tomorrow is Ulva's birthday. I wonder is it. He would be 26.'*

In mid March Valerie received her discharge from the WRAAFs and several weeks later Lester once more caught the train to spend time with his parents at Tallygaroopna.

Dad was at the platform gate. He is stooped and gaunt and frail as before. He cannot sit or lie in one place more than a few minutes. Some evenings, much of the daytime, he is not still for ten minutes, I might say five minutes. He more often than not needs help to get up, and sometimes to get down into the right place. His getting to bed at night among all his cushions is a protracted and painful job of much trial and error. His speaking voice, which was never clear, has dwindled down to a husk of itself, and as Mum was never good at distinguishing what he said, he is now more provoked by her inability to get what he is saying right at once. His consciousness of his all round frailty – inability to hold a paper still enough to read with ease, defective eyesight into the bargain, defective hearing, difficulty of speech, and inability to get properly comfortable in or out of bed, makes life a day after day dreariness for him, and does not tend to improve his temper, especially with Mum's shocking memory. The wireless is practically his only form of recreation, and aside from the matter of programmes, there are only three stations that come over very well at night – 3AR, 3LO and 3SR.

Lester was a loyal son. He spent all his holidays with his parents and in addition to providing constant financial support, he did his best to be peacemaker between his ailing parents, and between his mother and Val, Daisy and Merl. His mother's shocking meory was a precursor to her senility. She was 65 and although a sprightly woman who could walk for miles, she was totally disorganised and constantly forgot everything she was told.

While Lester was on this holiday, Daisy and her sons, Maurie and Sid, came to visit for the Easter period. Lester continued to be involved with them however one time he went for a walk on his own and while moving through the bush he thought he heard a bird which later turned out to be his nephews. He later made a note in his diary that he should '*be very circumspect in making water in a timber paddock*'.

Back in Melbourne Lester continued at his auditing work and spent many of his spare hours writing short stories which he regularly sent off to magazines. He was saddened by life, by his inability to write poetry, and by the continued rejections he received for his stories.

There was a time not a decade ago, when if I had cast my thoughts forward to this year as distinct from another, it would have seemed a remote and happily inapproachable period. If that bygone time was one of the hypochondriac age, there would have been questions on my chances of survival – or my epitaphs. My horizons dared extend only a little way ahead – into each new year I advanced any frontiers just a hazy space. But however I would have thought of it it would have seemed remote and unapproachable across a space of years teeming with action, fecundity of invention, self-glorification, and love.

Now I have crossed those years and seen my facility and volume of expression dwindle and so fall away so that my brief daily personal record is almost my only

means of expression left. What I have done with those years I have often wondered. And 1945 is here.

In September 1939, I was ragged, and had far more pimples and blackheads than I have now. I lived home as an invalid pensioner. At the time in our poverty I was studying nothing but self expression. I passed my days in dreams only a little more immature and no more unsatisfied than the dreams of today. I could write, tempered as I was by defects of rhythm, by queer notions of necessity of qualifying words to obtain preciseness in any given remark or description, by queer notions that my verse would not suffer by some self conscious would-be humourous whimsy tacked onto a straightforward rhyme.

My writings began to dwindle, their force spent, as much of itself as of the onset of war, and the later onset of study. My themes changed to preoccupation with war itself. For nearly two years I was an avid reader and writer on the war, and much as I wrote, seemed to miss innumerable subjects that craved to be talked of (in my usual disgruntled tones). Then, came the onset of the work day world. In 1942 I went out into the world of a boarding house, more peopled but even narrower in a mental sense than my own world, where the impact of new personalities gave me little chance to sort out ideas of people, and far less chance than before to collect my thoughts on the war, in which I had reached the nadir of my belief, not in victory, but in our cause. I went through 1942 and 1943, not unhappy; better fed and housed and clothed, and probably with far more pleasures than I had known home. Yet because I was no longer writing copiously, each year, as I was living it, and still more, after it was done, seemed to have slipped away in a barren succession of days, and was gone nowhere. I forgot, what I dimly remember now, that even the years from 1937 to 1940, while I was passing through them, seemed in immediate retrospect barren

stretches of days and hours between writings, that there was always the sense of reach exceeding grasp. Even now, when I have at least this imperfect record to preserve some of my hours, to look through it, as I have often done, is to get anew a sense of all that was unwritten.

A few days later Lester, while travelling to work, looked at the faces of passersby but saw no signs that the war in Europe had finished. He wondered about those families who were still wondering about the fate of loved ones in the European theatre, would they now know, one way or another, of what had happened. One of the few signs of the ending of the war in Europe was a *'wide and profuse carpet of torn coloured paper and streamers, on both sides of Elizabeth Street'*.

In June 1945 Lester wrote that he had fallen getting into a tram when he lost his balance and a night later he fell again, this time on the train. *'My right armpit missed the crutch and I fell forward on my hands onto somebody's knees. Not a disastrous fall, but embarrassing and infuriating.'* Lester's birthday was celebrated at his grandmother's house where *'there was a flickering light from 24 candles on a small substantial cake baked by Pauline, and not iced (since I don't eat icing) but decorated with rosettes and some lolly decoration in the middle. I blew all the candles out in one breath. By my plate was an envelope and when I opened it it held a striped tie. 'Blimey' I said, and they all burst out laughing. Someone lifted the decoration off the cake and underneath was a little oval of paper with BLIMEY pencilled on it.'*

In late June Lester visited Tallygaroopna where Val's presence was much in evidence as the house was cleaner than usual. *'But of course the place continues to suffer from the junk Mum will hoard up till she dies – when Val will most likely burn it without looking at it. This is one of the worst bones of contention, and main causes of Vals dissatisfaction with being home. The worst is the electric light. Val has doubts*

enough whether the S.E.C. (if they ever come out) will ok the home for wiring, but on top of that Mum is averse to the whole idea of the intrusion of workmen into the house, and contends there is no need for a light anywhere but the dining room and maybe kitchen, while as for points! She even has some quaint idea that the electric light we have in Tally isn't as good as that in Melbourne. It's chiefly for this reason that Val didn't come back with me and go up to Waubra to the Molloy's – she dreaded the S.E.C. might turn up in her absence and Mum either kybosh the whole idea or very severely curtail it.

However there is one very good outcome of Val's return. Dad is decidedly improved, his speech is easier (having some measure of suction now), his movements easier, he's not nearly so helpless – he was alarmingly frail at Easter, having to be helped to change position, and change position again and again, and fed every meal. Now and then when his hands get shakier, he still has to be fed. But the improvement is heartening.'

Lily's angst about the connection of electricity showed her increasingly demented way of thinking. Her paranoia increased and she refused to listen to reason. Valerie, Daisy, Merlyn and Lester conferred frequently, mostly by mail, about the problem.

Toward the end of June Lester had a brief encounter with Bill Foley, his former landlord when he lived in Shepparton. He learned the Foleys were still together and he was not surprised by the meeting as his home with the Niddries at Kambrook Road was just around the corner from the Caulfield Racecourse. Add the fact that Bill was a jockey, and a meeting at some time was inevitable. *'I liked them both, in spite of the hectic life.'* Lester was never one to hold a grudge and he willed himself to always see the best in people.

At this time Lester was told by Merl, following a letter from Val, that his mother absolutely refused to get the electricity connected. Val, who was forced to live in the Tally house with only lamp light, went to bed early every night. Lester felt for her and felt too that his mother was being more inconsiderate than ever to her daughter.

I had a letter from Mum. Over several pages she revealed the root of her objection to the money Dad borrowed from Auntie Nellie – between £50 and £100 with interest – many years ago, though why couldn't she have said so when the scheme was first mooted? If I could only win even a hundred in Tatt's I'd send every damn penny of it home and Mum would have no excuse – if she doesn't dig up another personal debt – against the electricity. In any case her reason still doesn't hold good for Val, and she doesn't seem to have considered Val in connection with it at all.

Lester, whose comments on the war had been surprising rare, certainly took time to write about the bombing of Hiroshima. *'Of course my life suffered an impact. So did 2,000,000,000 other peoples'. Endless speculative vistas opened of sudden economic dislocations as industries and the world are repowered, of staggering unforeseeable disasters when research misses its footing, of calculated disasters when warped minds out of some schoolboy thriller take to piracy and levy toll of the world, of insidious, unknown horrors that may affect the bodies of millions before the full implications of the radioactivity being unloosed can be grasped and methods of control created. In other words, a succession of doubts and fears rather than hopes. A feeling at 24 of being in the world geared to move infinitely faster than my mind cares to contemplate, or my will craves to live. Strange to think I read almost with*

disinterest and with definite disbelief not long ago in an article of the speculations of the possibility of the atom bomb.

Actually, I don't feel that such fuels need to be rendered obsolete and that the world of science will go on unleashing the forces in uranium for ever. I feel that when science has advanced a bit the mere plebeian arrangements that make up the atoms of lesser substances will be used more widely and safely.

I wasn't surprised in the morning when Mrs Niddrie said 'The war's over,' though I didn't take it literally. Joan who had been to see a friend over St Kilda way came home on a fuller tram said the people were wildly excited. It has been progressively anticlimatic since then.'

CHAPTER THREE

After the War -1945 to 16 June 1948

On August 15, 1945, Lester was at work when one of his supervisors came in to say work was over as peace had been declared. Lester then became aware of the high pitch of voices in other rooms and of the sound of scurrying feet. *Through it, a vaguer but insistent sound, came the stir of excitement outside the walls. Looking through the window of Mr Kerr's room we saw torn paper descending from the Australian [Hotel] and other buildings and people turning on the plastered damp pavement to look out of the lane into Elizabeth Street. The shrill sound of voices was pierced again by whirring and ringing noises and tootings that were not just traffic warnings. Presently we heard that so far Mr Chifley had made no announcement but that Mr Attlee had definitely announced it. As we talked it over we kept wondering what would happen about the pay, as the head office told us it was in process of being made up, that having been the arrangement in case the VP days were Thursday and Friday. Mr Pearce got onto Mr Kerr once but it soon became impossible to phone anywhere. About 10 we learnt Mr Chifley was speaking and decided that after morning tea we would go home. Mr Kerr came in then and said that the pay was being held over till Friday.*

During the hour of waiting Mr Dunbar and I went out once and stood in the light rain at the mouth of the lane. People were not thronging to any extent, except on the footpaths, and cars and trams continued to run. But paper was incessantly fluttering down and opposite on the verandah roof of White's Shoe Store a dozen or more brightly clad girls leaned against the wall cheering and waving.

Lester, who had never been part of the war effort due to his polio, nevertheless felt part of it through Ulva and Valerie, through his brother-in-law Tom, and through his numerous cousins, several of whom had lost their lives overseas. During the early years his interest had been intense but following the news about Ulva, the truth about war had sunk home and Lester turned his interests to peace and to pacifism.

After leaving his office, he went out into the Melbourne streets determined to see something of the celebrations for the end of the war. Shops were shut and the crowds continued to increase in size.

I became aware of small crocodiles of boys bending low and bursting through people. Round and round me they weaved, while the eddies they caused pushed at me from all sides. Foolishly, I let myself be carried on instead of turning back. I still think I could have extricated myself. But at that moment two soldiers by me were saying 'We better get him out of this, over to the footpath'. As I turned away from them towards the footpath one had me by both elbows and then one arm. To it he clung grimly thereafter. Even when he got me to the far footpath, he and his mate, who was trailing up, kept with me to the mouth of the lane. He dropped his hand on my shoulder and we went our ways. I went mine deeply touched by their consideration, but furious with myself for not having got out in time, and with a face streaming with sweat.

At 6 platform there was a thick crowd and I decided to go to the front entrance and cool off if possible, and then maybe take a tram to Merl's. At the front entrance the noise was even more feverish – a hectic hilarity that sounded as though people were trying to work themselves into the same undirected excitement the adolescents were so easily achieving. There was a sense of disorganised, quite aimless jubilation,

at once bewildering and itself bewildered, so that one had a frustrated feeling that it was impossible to look anywhere in the mass and find anything to remember.

I went back to the relative emptiness of Princes Bridge. Others too were making their way over it to the trams that were shunting at City Road. More were coming in, mostly long rows of youths or girls arm in arm, often blowing cardboard trumpets. Their individual noises sounded as loud as the incessant uproar of the city, which in its very vastness had been vague and far away.

As depressed and dull as the sky I skirmished along the banked trams. Ten minutes afterwards an East Brighton came to me, and though I knew the next would be a Carnegie which would take me right to the depot, I got on the East Brighton, as owing to the continual reshuffle on the shunt, the Carnegie coming up might not have stopped near me.

All the children of St Kilda and Caulfield must have been armed with chalk, for the trams were soon scrawled over. Still as dreary I walked slowly from the junction to Merl's. I could still feel that city pulsating 7 miles away, and knew I could not be of it, even if I went in again. I had not even been more than mildly amused by girls playing ring a rosy around and between two policemen at City Road, for every sight came home to myself.

When Lester reached Merl's place he was greeted by Val who had fought her way through the city crowds with far more ease than had Lester. The following day he accompanied Agnes Niddrie into Melbourne in the afternoon to see the celebrations in the city.

As we crossed the bridge [Princes Bridge] we were passed by several brilliantly decorated children on small brilliantly decorated bikes. We looked for a moment at an impromptu band under the station's eastern veranda (well surrounded)

and went on up Swanston Street. It was a sightseeing throng right to Collins Street, not a reveller's throng. People, girls anyway, still blew little cardboard trumpets, but it was with a lincensed well established air, not an impromptu gaiety. Over everything was spread an air of general happiness and curiosity, and still an air that there was nothing you could point to and say 'These are the celebrations'.

As some sailors passed us one, his face daubed with lipstick, clapped me on the shoulder and asked how I was. I think he was a little drunk, for that was the only greeting that passed between my unengaging face and any other in the city save Mrs Niddries.

Lester was only a young man and, in spite of his disability, he was desperate to return to the city that evening to become part of the celebration. Unfortunately Mrs Niddrie did not want to return and instead they babysat Diana so Merl and Tom could see something of the end of the war events in Melbourne. Lester wrote that, as always, he was isolated and left out.

Soon after the end of the war Merl, Tom and Diana moved to their own home at 4 Flowers Street, South Caulfield, a welcome change after living in a boarding house with a small child. The move was only two blocks away which meant Tom could easily walk to work at the South Caulfield Tram Depot. Prior to the move Lester and Val walked from Chloris Crescent, where the Mann's boarding house was, to look at the house in Flowers Street. *'The house is old and unattractive behind a high hedge but the large yard, the freedom from Mrs Russell (than whom the old man who will be retaining a room could not be worse) the scope for Diana – their hearts are high.*

Mrs Russell had been the landlady from hell to the extent that Merl had hidden her pregnancy for many months. Tom and Merl bought the house from a Mr Dando

who remained living in the house for a further five years. His niece lived next door and became a good friend for Merl.

By mid September lists of released prisoners of war began to appear and on it was that of Lester's cousin, Darrell Canet, whose father, Charlie, had broken the news to Lester about Ulva.

I look, less intensively for Don Strang, Don Trewin, and the Tremellen boys still living. I look, without any expectation, in both likely and unlikely columns for 410222 F/O Dudley U.N. I had a letter from poor Cynthia tonight. She has her hopes and fears – maybe more fears than hopes, especially since atrocity revelations are flooding in. Poor Mum. How she must feel, reading them.

Lester, who hated his job with the public service, continued writing short stories in the hope he would be published, earn money, and be able to leave work. He wrote of frequent rejections and the 'woes of the indigent'. He read the newspapers, paying particular attention to any mention of prisoners of war. One afternoon he visited his grandmother to find the family had been listening to a broadcast home by his cousin Darrell in a Dunlop Rubber-sponsored session. Darrell, who was in a prison of war camp, had had 43 attacks of malaria, although none for the preceding six weeks and he hoped to be home for his 22nd birthday in December.

Mum is pretty well resigned to not seeing Ulva again. Like me, she had little hope from the start. Dad, she is sure, never had any. Merl has lost most of hers. Tom went in with enquiries the other day, and due to knowing a chap from Horn Island, was shown the files on Ulva. As I expected there'll be no step to presume him dead till a thorough investigation has been made by the special personnel going to the Celebes and other islands.

Processions of returned servicemen became a regular sight in the streets of Melbourne. The men were greeted with enthusiasm and were hailed as heroes.

The crowd either side of the route pressing on the streamered and paper-spattered cars, was not vociferous, but was enthusiastic from head to toe. Every here and there someone, usually a girl, was recognising a soldier and riding on the running board for a short distance as the car slowly forged ahead. The other side trams were banked up with heads craning from them, and afterwards when I went outside before the procession had finished there was a vast bank of trams up the Russell Street hill.

The procession was very slow moving in my Collins Street section, as airmen hurrying out of Phairs' with glasses of beer – one in each hand – halted every car. Sometimes the glasses were recovered a chain or so further on. I hope none was lost, as it was a generous gesture, even if 'publicans can afford it', and even though a cynic might call it a boost to the goodwill. It's a troubled world, and it was good to see such a happy welcome and the pleasure of men returning to a peaceful life – for how long?

In mid-October Darrell Canet arrived home in Caulfield after three and three quarter years as a prisoner of war in Singapore. Darrell's brother, Gavan, visited Mrs Niddrie to give Lester the news and to suggest he visit the family. The Canet house was awash, not only with relatives, but also with friends and Lester wrote that Darrell spent the evening with one arm around his mother and the other about his girl, Joyce Swift, whom he married the following year.

Darrell had been in a procession of POWs through Melbourne and Valerie, who had taken a sickie from her work at the Hilliers chocolate factory, was photographed and her photo appeared in the Sun. Merl and Diana were about to leave

to stay with Daisy at Wunghnu and Valerie was going to Tallygaroopna for the summer. As Lester wrote: *'She'll have a lovely time of it. No electricity. No fresh water. No nothing. New stove not even in.'*

For years Lester had carried his 49 war savings certificates wadded tightly inside the lining of his coat and finally, in late October of 1945, he was able to lodge them. The end of the war came with various celebrations including a pyrotechnics display at Point Ormond, a few miles from where the Manns lived at Caulfield. Tom and Lester went down and joined huge crowds near the beach.

Along with the end of the war came Lester's expectation that he would lose his job as it had only been a wartime posting. He applied for various jobs outside the public service but never heard back from anyone. *'I have little I can put on paper, bar exam qualifications with two small institutes, and lack both the ability and the inclination to puff it up. That permanently on crutches will always scare an industrial firm too.'* Despite his forebodings, Lester retained his job with the public service.

Just before Christmas 1945, Lester made his annual train trek home to Tallygaroopna. *Dad, stooped and shaking, awaited me. So did 257 flies. We didn't wait for my suitcase, but took my little case, the flies, and a dull headache home. Val went up [to the station] during the afternoon and returned with the case, but the tin hadn't arrived. It arrived on Monday. Four green bananas had become one black ooze, which drooled over oranges, lemons, apples, a parsnip, carrots, and a packet of jelly crystals (which it spoilt. A packet of coffee was untouched, and of course the tinned pudding knew nothing about it.)*

The weather was dry heat, usually without much wind. Dad and Mum felt it severely. (On Friday December 14, it had been 110, and muggy, killing 5 of the chooks, all but one of the boys's ferrets, and scores of chooks belonging to other

people.). I scrapped coat, shirt and socks, and wasn't unduly uncomfortable, except that heat and limited fare (no fresh vegetables or fruit except rarely) didn't induce appetite, and smallness of appetite reduced energy. That is what hampers Mum, and particularly Dad.

Eleven year old Sid Roughsedge spent January 1946 with Merl, Tom and Diana. Lester, who had returned to Melbourne after his holiday break with his parents, went out of his way to take Sid around with visits to the museum and the beach. Lester was pleased to take part in the excursions as he had found a flaw with living at Kambrook Road, as both Agnes and Leslie adored popular radio programs which they played very loudly, the music causing Lester, who preferred classical music, much anguish and, for him, unusual anger.

I can hear a succession of bastard inkspots and bughouse bawlers and music makers whose charms have been blotted out by three hours' continuity of wireless, including one loud volumed Amateur Hour in which I finished my book with my fingers wagging in my ears. Now Bing Crosby moos with perceptible increase in volume and now once again I forlornly seek solace by recoinng that speech I'll never make to Mrs Niddrie, 'When I'm leaving, if post war wireesses are out in the market and you're thinking of buying one, maybe I'll make you an offer for yours and then what happens to it will be the concern of nobody but myself and the wireless, and mallett. The three of us will go to some vacant allotment, and the mallet and I will return together – alone.'

As usual, when the source of the pain is removed, I now feel a little contrite at my bellyaching and muttered 'bloody bitches' (too, too, distressingly frequent.) But if Leslie puts that wireless on again, even softly, my rage would return and redouble.

Toward the end of January Daisy came down to Melbourne with Maurice and they joined Tom, Merl, Diana and Sid. The Dudleys continued to be a close knit family and the four remaining siblings remained in constant contact. When Daisy and boys went back home to Wunghnu on February 1, 1946, Lester went with them. In April, when reading the Argus, Lester found a story about his former landlord and jockey, Bill Foley, who had fallen from his horse and died. *'I liked Bill, waster and bad-egg as he was. I found silly tears moistening my eyes, which suggests the regret is sentimental rather than otherwise. I felt depressed all day, and kept thinking of Bill and Mrs Foley. A cynical doctor might have said my heavy depression was indigestion or a cold coming on.'*

In mid April Lester and the Meat Control Accounts Section shifted from 339 Collins Street to the 7th floor of 401 Collins Street (the Trustees Executors Building). Soon after he took a train trip in a different direction and went to Ballarat where he was met by Merl and Diana. After shopping, the three of them caught a bus to Lexton where Tom was the owner of his childhood home which had been left to him by his father upon his death a few years before.

Round timber uprights and rafters, as good as when first put up fifty years ago, were all that remained of the front rooms. Merl had wondered at Tom not being at the road to meet us. Now she knew he had not got home from the cemetery (where he had been bricking up his parents' grave). She got the keys out of the low spouting (it's a very low set house, I could touch the ceiling without stretching my arm, and I'm short) and soon showed me that the inside was snug.

There was a back shed, a lavatory (of course) and a small shed in which Maurice milked his cow at the end of 1939 when the Roughies went there after their 3 months stay with us (beginning with the outbreak of war).

What terrible paper, and this little table (!) I am writing on it beside my first fire at 9 pm on Saturday. It's too small and it won't keep still. If I go on stretching this narrative out it will be like Tristram Shandy taking years to write of days. Our baby had grown rather spoilt during her bad-cold days, on their first arrival, and at any check, inside or outside, would bawl broken-heartedly. Her heart broke and mended two score times a day, chiefly indoors where she was into everything, especially when it was time to lay the table. Merl was far too inclined to give in to her and Tom too inclined to nag Merl about it and bounce Diana, who would invariably cry to Merl for comfort and sometimes succeed. It is a pity to see dispute over a baby and will be more of a pity if entertained later on, when she understands even quicker.

Next day we made a long tour of the cemetery. Diana followed up at a distance, lingering at every built up grave, fascinated and content. She had brought a little bottle and oddly enough left it on her grandparent's grave. It was my first visit to a cemetery, and unadmiring of the polished stone modern graves, and pitiful of the decrepit wooden and iron railings, and defaced headstones, I tried instead, but with little success, to grasp that once living breathing people lay below.

In June Lester was told his audit job would continue for a further two years and although he would be one of the last to go, the day would eventually arrive and with that in mind his boss, Mr Kerr, said he had put in a good word to the head of the Wood Board. By this time Lester, who had been reading the professional engagements for 18 months, had written away for four jobs and had not received a single reply, not even one of acknowledgement. He was depressed and unhappy as he knew his parents depended upon him for regular financial help. He also wondered what he had achieved during his time in Melbourne.

Also during June Lester received an OHMS letter from the Kit Repository Store in West Melbourne. *It told me, briefly, that as my brother's registered next-of-kin, the Department of Air, which was closing down the stores due to demobilisation, would release to me my brother's personal effects. The letter concluded 'It is desired to point out, however, that the release of your brother's personal effects should not be interpreted as a decision that his death has been established or presumed'.*

The inventory comprised his wood suitcase containing – 2 pilot's badges, 1 set of carpentering plans, 2 F/O epaulettes, 1 pyjama coat, 1 wallet, 2 prs khaki shorts, 1 New Testament, 1 clothes brush, 2 photographs and frames, 1 shoe polisher, 1 nail file, 1 writing tablet, 1 pr cuff links, 1 Golden Platinum fountain pen, 1 tie pin, 2

studs, 1 box containing 1 tin talc powder, 1 bottle Mitcham Lavender, 1 writing wallet.

Ulva's case was delivered by the RAAF last Monday, July 8. I didn't think about the contents till I went to open it, then I found I didn't want to open it. I left it for 20 minutes, till everybody was out of the house. Then I slit the green tapes between the seals, cut the twine, undid the catch, and removed the brown-paper, naphthalene-scented packing till the small brown parcel was revealed containing his effects. I carefully checked them with the inventory and receipted one copy, then replaced everything as it was. The wallet I gave him hadn't weathered the climate well – I wished again I had given him the dearer one. His money wallet was in better condition. The photos were both of Cynthia, one holding a little baby. A letter from Mum on Thursday night mentioned how sorry she and Dad were that they had not been the first to unpack and touch Ulva's things.

In early August Lester posted off his '*latest forlorn hope, The Unknown Yank a 4000 worder*' to the *Australasian Post*. Within days the manuscript had been returned. On August 13 Lester wrote: '*The Unknown Yank awaited me when I arrived home last night. With Eliza Doolittle I cry, 'What's to become of me?'* As I had been in a mood of depression all day, it only needed that. *I'm okay today, except that suddenly I have nothing to dream about. I'm eschewing women – till fantasy born of longing reconquers me.*'

Tom was briefly a patient at Heidelberg Repatriation Hospital with, as Lester described it, his functional dyspepsia. Many years later Lester wondered if this was connected with the stomach cancer with which Tom was diagnosed a few months before his death. Tom made a dolls pram for Diana during this time. In late September Lester discovered he had been to the cinema 111 times since July 1944. He kept

meticulous cash books and could track everything happening in his life through the cash books, his diaries, and through the detailed criticisms he kept firstly of films and later of ballets, concerts and plays.

Lester took gifts to celebrate Diana's second birthday. He described the pram Tom had made as *'large handsome, properly sprung, wheeled, unholstered and hooded'* and said Diana had been delighted, however she was soon heard *'moaning and talking in aggrieved tones. It went on so long she was asked what was the matter. 'No mudguards,' she said. Having got it off her chest, she was satisfied. However, when Val came home she said 'Vo, dook (look),' and patted the naked wheel. She must have gone over it point by point seeing how it sized up with her own pram.'*

On December 20 Lester took the train to Tallygaroopna. His father had been hospitalised and his mother was suffering with severe headaches due to high blood pressure. Valerie, who had been to help her parents, had been rebuffed by her mother and had returned to Melbourne. In February Lester, Merl, Tom and Diana went by ferry for a visit to Tasmania. Lester went into great detail about this visit which was his first real holiday.

On 1 August 1947 Lester was admitted as an Associate to the Chartered Institute of Secretaries, member number 28266. Although he mentioned exams in passing, he never wrote of his successes in his diary and he often passed 6 June each year with never a mention of his birthday. He continually ignored his personal successes while always commenting upon his supposed failures. He often mentioned specific anniversaries including the date Ulva went missing, the day he caught polio, and the date he went to Melbourne to be hospitalised.

Following the Tasmanian trip there is a gap in his diaries and more than a year passes before Lester once more takes up his pen. On June 16, 1948, in capital letters he wrote across his diary – ‘*Abandoned to the Underwriters*’.

CHAPTER FOUR

30 January 1949 -

Lester began regular diaries again on January 30, 1949 beginning with his usual visit to Merl and her family at Flowers Street. For a time Lester, in his quest for riches to be able to leave the public service, became a racing addict. As Sylvia Niddrie was married to a jockey, and as Ian Niddrie visited Caulfield Racecourse regularly, he was

in good company. As always Lester maintained a careful record of all his outgoings and of his few wins and finally realised betting would never make his fortune.

During the period when Lester did not keep diaries, his maternal grandmother, Elizabeth Canet, had died however Lester continued to visit his three aunts on a regular basis for many years until their deaths of Jessie in 1974 and Renee in 1978. Lester predeceased Pauline who died, at the age of 101, in 2001 following many years of dementia.

Finally in late February, 1949, at Lester, Daisy and Val's insistence, their mother gave in and finally allowed the electricity to be connected to the house at Tallygaroopna. On March 8 he commented it was 20 years since he had gone to the Children's Hospital, the start of a three year exile in Melbourne for a very young boy.

His consuming interest in live theatre began during 1949 when he became a member of the Australian Dramatic Art and Education Guild. *The plays at the Princess are by no means gaining the public support they deserve and which too many writers, crying out about the city's lack of theatre and alleging public hunger for theatre, have claimed such plays would get. The public's appetite is for the Oklahoma kind of production (not but that I'd like to see that too, though, Mrs Niddrie, Les and Bill, who went last night were only mildly enthusiastic – when Mrs Niddrie is disappointed in something, she continually repeats that it is very nice and just as continually adds a 'but'). When it goes for a bit of 'colcher' it's because of the presence of glamorised Oliviers in the cast.*

In March, 1949, Lester visited Tom and Merl's tiny holiday house at Clematis in the nearby Dandenongs. Tom had bought the piece of land several years previously and had spent his spare time building the house. Although the land was very steep Lester moved around on his crutches without mishap. He used a giant rock on the

property on which to sun himself and enjoyed winter days when a nearby paddock was filled with daffodils in blossom. He was invariably accompanied, on his walks, by his four year old niece, Diana.

Lester was an eccentric supporter of charities. As he had a pass to the Australian Industrial Fair at the Exhibition Building he decided to visit the fair although it was not his normal sort of interest. On discovering the proceeds were to go to the Red Cross, he decided not to use his pass, but to pay for his admission.

In April, on Saturday 2, Lester went to the races for the last time. *'Today dealt the crowning blow in my inept betting career. I felt like weeping, and I impotently invoked the Holy Trinity over and over (there were no women near).'* His trip home in early April coincided with a visit to Tallygaroopna by Merl and Diana. *'The lights were a welcome improvement – but the ceilings look terribly smoky [from years of wood fires]. Dad seemed much the same as at Christmas. He walks very slowly, and mostly has to be helped up out of the chair. He seemed not too good – relatively – on Easter Monday.'*

Lester continued to avidly collect books and wrote in September – *'Fell (deliberately) among Penguins at lunch time – and was badly pecked. The Life of William Hazlitt P P Howe, Early Victorian Novelists Lord David Cecil, and Penguin New Writing No 38, the first costing 4s, the others 2s each.'*

Lester's body was twisted, polio had caused scoliosis of the spine and his organs were displaced. He suffered from what he called 'spinals' which were probably migraines but rarely took more than aspirin for the pain. He rarely took time off work for his major health issues, but he was a happy hypochondriac where small problems were concerned.

Last night I decided – well over two years after I should have – that I would have to consult a doctor about the unhealed chillblain sore on my left instep. Thoughts of cancer go through my mind every time I think of it – which is many times a day, as every time I sit down I untie the boot to ease the pressure, and even then have often to massage the surrounding skin surfaces and sinews as a soothing – or exhausting may be the fact – effort to the continual smarting. When I am standing about or walking I am at its mercy, and it's just too bad if it happens to be hurting. The foot, too, has no static temperature between overheated and very cold. It's always on the way from one to the other and of the two – in spite of the discomfort – otherwise – very cold suits the sore best. If I should say when the foot heats up after I go to bed, it gives me larry dooley for anything up to an hour – some bad nights it is hours, and it seems to me on reflection a remarkable thing that I could so turn my mind from the torment between its onslaughts as to keep deciding against a visit to a doctor, and hoping to heal it up with peroxide or some ointment.

In December Lester returned to Tallygaroopna to a mother who was agitated about her sore mouth – ‘... which nothing this side of the grave will convince her is not some ghastly infection (it was VD at one stage, due to a rash Dad had, and poor Dad suffered countless infuriating harangues before he went to hospital in June. At least there he has some peace, in spite of the monotony.) The doctor says its anaemia. Anyway, after a dozen false starts (almost literally) during which she several times asked me for money to pay the doctor if Uncle Robert took her to see one and was freshly hurt every time by my insistence that whoever the doctor might be, he could send me the account, she set out for Montgomeries' unwashed, with ancient shoes on, a nighty in a newspaper parcel in case she was admitted to hospital, and a purse with some money in it, ultimately leaving behind the coat she at first carried.

We were not surprised when soon after the night train had gone, she landed in, but she was carrying two tins of fruit which some strange man had forced upon her, and which 'Myra and Mag' had told her was 'quite all right, as they do that at this time of year.' Some man had tried to get fresh ('forward') also. Myra told Daisy this morning that the 'forward man' had been Paddy O'Keefe, concerned probably, to see her on Shep station. She had bought the fruit at Tally Post Office and at Shep left it on a seat, and the man who ultimately forced it on her was a porter. God knows whether she got to Mooroopna, or if she was given a lift any part of the journey.'

Despite the increasing evidence that Lily was well on the way to being senile, little could be done to alleviate the situation. Lily managed to get food on the table but it was only through the help of her visiting daughters that the house did not deteriorate into total chaos.

Lester's sister, Val, who had been engaged to Ivan Carnegie who was killed in the war, was now married to Ivan's brother, Doug. They lived at nearby Shepparton and could provide occasional assistance although Lily invariably crossed Valerie. Daisy remained on her own with her sons. For a time she lived in Melbourne and ran a shop and later returned to live in Wunghnu the next small town after Tallygaroopna. Val and Doug, who had a car, collected Lester and took him to visit his father at Mooroopna Hospital.

We spent nearly two hours with him. He did not look well, he needed a shave, his eyes were mattery and weeping and he was far from talkative. He had been included in the 3SR Christmas messages – from patients (recorded Friday, somebody spoke for him, due to his extreme difficulty in talking) and making himself understood) but when we turned them on Sunday morning we were too late for his message.

So far this week Mum has not set off to see him (she went in by train Saturday night – Christmas Eve). Probably the increased heat has told on her. For the first time latterly I have found myself conceding (though still non-committal if anyone says it aloud) that it would be a terrible thing if they passed many more years like this, even if they didn't grow worse, which it is certain they would, Dad physically and Mum mentally, with her combination of memory failure and stubbornness which are between them in some respects at least a kind of insanity. And with the thought – still rejecting the crude and cruel phrase 'better dead' – is the vain bitter regret that as I grow at least more (financially) able to do things for them, they have got past being made happier by material well doing. In fact, it often makes Mum disturbed and still more confused to do anything for her which involves a departure from the things to which she is accustomed. One would think her chests of drawers etc would not hold all the garments (to say nothing of the pair of towels I gave her the other day) which have vanished into their wildernesses.

Lester's diaries cease once more at this point. By 1950 he was working for the Repatriation Department and remained in that section until his retirement from his position as internal auditor when he was 60 in 1981. Numerous aunts and uncles on both sides of his family died and in April 1950 Lester's father, Charlie, died following a long illness, he had suffered from Parkinson's disease for many years.

On 1 January 1953 Lester was admitted as an Associate of the Australian Society of Accountants, member number 1496.

There were many events which happened during the missing years. His sister, Valerie, married George Carnegie, always called Doug, whose brother, Ivan, had been killed during the war. They lived in Shepparton and had three children, Judy, John

and Ivan, and Merl and Tom had a son, Dale. Lester now had two nieces and seven nephews and was always a part of their lives.

A few diary fragments remain. The one below, written in July 1950, when Lester was 29, shows his despair at his inability to write.

If only I could write even this kind of verse now [written under a poem dated May 1939]. To think that over eleven years later, not only has all the poetry gone from me (over half a decade) but I have accomplished nothing in the literary world, completed no prose save a few (three or four) unsaleable essays, and half a dozen rejected short stories. It all sheets home to the same old thing – I have not even begun to live, and deliberately abusing my waking time with the dream with which I console myself for being unalive, I have lost such power of observation as I once had and the application of which enabled me to write hundreds of these descriptive verses. Every day as I walk along Flinders Street on my way to 401 Collins Street I mean to look about me for the length of my journey, but after a few yards my dim eyes give up and turn inward again.

Between June 12 1951 and January 1958 Lester kept a bird diary which also included odd bits of information. It began when he was staying at Wunghnu with Daisy and their mother.

Friday and Saturday were both fine and much of the time I spent lounging outside (where Mum was usually seated) straining my weak eyes for identification glimpses of birds, simple enjoyment of those with which I am more or less familiar. With my much-loved mudlarks, I was able to satisfy myself I was viewing the female, (by the white forehead and throat). These birds largely figured under the 'simple enjoyment of familiar birds' heading. They constantly call at Wunghnu (as at Caulfield) and though I no longer can claim their call is musical (it is rather strident)

no other familiar call except those of the grey-crowned babbler gives me such constant pleasure.

In November of the same year he wrote of a visit to the Caulfield Gardens where he watched out for birds. *'A willi wagtail I had been watching and listening to from my seat, had an exciting spiral chase after a butterfly or moth.'*

Lester may have been on crutches but this never precluded him for lengthy walks, both up at Tallygaroopna, in Wunghnu, and in Melbourne.

To record the sad fact that my mudlark's nest has vanished. There is no mistake as to the tree, and the nests being so strong I suppose the wind blew the branch down and the wreckage has been removed, smashed eggs (or dead nestlings) and all. Went to the Botanical Gardens after 3.15 and did too much walking, to the detriment of toes and toenails (I bunch them up in the boot) and after entering at the Park Street (north east) corner I at length almost circumnavigated the gardens and came out near the Shrine, which left me with a long walk to the city.

In February 1952 Lester, who had long been fascinated by the subject of royalty, mainly through his private history studies wrote: *Royalty – or the loyalty thereto – is one of those things outside the domain of logic. There is really no logical basis for it in a modern democracy, and one cannot help wondering, on the accession of a new sovereign, whether her son will live to be king of the people in whose hearts the monarchy seems more than ever permanently enthroned. The hard light of reason has no soft beams to shed on this ancient institution, and in the future, as man grows more and more rational and unsentimental, the end of monarchy would seem to be certain.*

At present rational man, compiling statistics of the continuing effects of Hiroshima, is still achieving refinements of the atom bomb, though it has not yet

apparently produced his first practicable hydrogen bomb. Perhaps the latter is the way in which he will end monarchy – and everything else. Perhaps in some sweeter saner way, the succession of sovereigns will be done with. It will be done with sweetly and sanely if we have previously done with hydrogen bombs, dictatorships and the other darkneses of our minds.

It is clear from a notation made in the bird diary, on 1 February 1955, that Lester had continued with daily diaries although as he wrote in later years, he planned to destroy all his diaries but lethargy got too much for him and 47 remained. The lost diaries would have covered many years of anguish and perhaps this is why he destroyed this particular batch.

At this time, in 1955, he had bought a Hillman Minx car which had been especially fitted out to enable him to drive, and ferry his mother, deep in dementia, between his three sisters in Melbourne, Shepparton and Wunghnu. He wrote about one trip which terrified him.

At the Bendigo turnoff past Kilmore I picked up a naval trainee named Gale, who sang in the Shepparton Methodist performance of the Messiah. At Tallarook the [railway] gates were closed. I was first there, and as they opened to let me onto the hill the sky opened. I chugged uphill in a thunderous deluge which left me little but the white line to see by, while the other headlights faded behind me and I began to wonder if I was rash going on.

I wondered still more when we were over the several rises and on the descending part of the straight stretch to the bends near Puckapunyal turn off. But though the road was so blurred and water was leaking in behind the right hand glove box and as I was thinking of flex perishing and shorting, I kept on, because the rain water was streaming so fast across the road that I had visions of a flood. It was this

principally that kept me going each of the several times thereafter that I wondered whether to stop now and wait. I can't remember just where they all were, as the rain lightened and intensified again and again.

I remember that past Seymour on the switchback straight road I passed a car and floundered horribly in a sheet of water that had gathered in the right hand half of the road. That near Nagambie we crawled miserably behind a Humber Hawk and something else, till the Humber pulled up in the town. Now I decided I should pull up when we reached the last 'hill' before the straight to Warring, but again kept going, possibly because it had 'lightened' to heavy rain. I said to the boy 'If I get to Murchison East alive I'm pulling up.'

As his mother descended further into dementia, the family affliction, she lived in turn with her three daughters. She would spend three weeks with Merlyn and Tom in Melbourne then Lester, driving his car, would take her to stay with Daisy in Wunghnu. After three more weeks she would be taken to Valerie and Doug in Shepparton. By this time Lily didn't recognise any of her children, let alone their families, her memories were all of her youth, and she would recite the list of her twelve brothers and sisters.

In 1955 Lester took Diana to her first live theatre performance, the Borovansky Ballet production of Nutcracker Suite with Peggy Sager. During the following eight years he took her to see performances by the Kirov Ballet, Maly, New York City Ballet, the Royal Ballet and to every season of the Australian Ballet. In addition rarely a week went by when Lester did not attend a concert or a drama performance and as a result of the latter, he turned his hand to writing plays.

On July 8, 1955 Lester, driving his Hillman Minx, collected Lily from Merl's and began the long drive north. Near Seymour he began to overtake a truck which

pulled out to overtake the truck in front catapulting Lester's car into a tree. Lily was thrown through the windscreen and died instantly. Lester was in hospital in Melbourne for many months. His left leg was amputated and although he was offered a prosthesis he declined. He spent weeks recuperating with Merl and Tom before returning to work. He never drove again but returned to train travel for his numerous holidays at Wunghnu with Daisy. One of the first letters he wrote after his accident was to return his licence to the appropriate authority.

On November 26 1955, four months after his mother died, Lester wrote the following few lines.

Only roads of unreturningness

Only a grave by which I have not stood

Only the same regret I knew before

Confronts my thoughts and dares them to advance.

No hope for evermore

To still with kindness, gentleness, our lives' mischance.

Daisy's older son, Maurice, married his cousin, Betty Graham, toward the end of 1956. Their first child, Suzanne Joy Roughsedge, was born April 12, 1958. Sid married Doris Latham November 24 1956 and their first child, also a daughter, Janet Kaye Roughsedge, was born June 18 1958. Suzanne and Janet were the first of Lester's 22 greatnieces and greatnephews. Not only did he always remember the birthdays of his seven nieces and nephews, he also sent gifts for all the great nieces and nephews.

Lester thought frequently of his brother Ulva but the tragedy which really touched him was the death of Suzanne Joy, on January 18 1959, aged 9 months. He found it difficult to come to terms with such a young death and it was the turning

point for him. His dislike of organised religion intensified and he turned his back on any thoughts of the existence of God.