

You'll probably get it today. There's quite a lot in it about Renwick. I have had two personal associations with children's homes: as a child I was sent for a two week holiday to Stewart House Preventorium in South Curl Curl, NSW, which is financially supported by the staff and pupils of NSW public schools. This was the greatest time of my childhood, my very best memories. The other institution was Reiby Home for (Delinquent) Girls, Airds NSW, where I worked as a cottage supervisor for about seven months. After every shift, I used to write down an account of the shift and can email it to you, if it's of any interest. It was quite an experience!

Oh, and I worked as a (public primary school) teacher with abused children from Raith and Lark Hill, Campbelltown for about a year. Same sad sad stories about the lives of those kids. One of them still keeps in (intermittent) touch with me, and that was about 20 years ago.

Best wishes,
Di
Dianne (Di) Bates

GIRLS ON THE INSIDE

An insider's view of life in Reiby Training School, a NSW juvenile detention centre

REIBY TRAINING SCHOOL

Tuesday, November 25

"Don't ever forget this is an institution."

These are the first words of advice the Superintendent gives me, brandishing his keys like a sword. "Tie them to your belt and never forget this is an institution."

Reiby Training School has called me on the phone this afternoon to say I have the job as youth worker. The interview was over a week ago and I'm surprised they called me. I'd thought the interview was a disaster.

"What are your qualifications for working in a residential institution?" they asked me. I have none. My Diploma of Teaching another zero. Three years' training for nothing. I can't even get a teaching position! But surprise, surprise, here I am, being escorted around my new workplace. Not on duty yet, just checking out the scene.

In the staff kitchen I am introduced to Deputy Matron, Heavers, who is assigned to show me the ropes. Mrs Heavers is straight-backed and neat. She has been here ever since the doors opened to receive girls under committal from the courts, she tells, later adding that she makes it a practice never to call any of the Reiby staff by their Christian name.

As we make our way around the institution, she addresses children. Theresa, sweep up that mess will you?"

A surly fifteen year old is moping around the storeroom area. Her blue tunic signals her as a recent absconder. Reluctantly she stirs and seeks out a broom.

Out of earshot, Mrs Heavers tells me Theresa has muttered under her breath, "You give me the shits" but I did not hear her. Is Mrs Heavers paranoid or am I deaf to undertones? Perhaps if I had Mrs Heaver's eight years' experience, I, too, would have heard.

After the storeroom, Mrs Heavers shows me the punishment block. A foyer leads into three windowless rooms with heavy iron doors. The cells are empty, no mattresses or pillows or blankets. This is where delinquent inmates go for 24 hour punishment. Summer or Winter, they are put into the rooms naked. It is hard on them in Winter, Mrs Heavers says. This is the only time she shows any compassion. I wouldn't say she is a cruel woman, only hardened, experienced. I wonder, if I had worked for eight years in this place, would I be as cynical?

The deputy superintendent I meet during this introductory tour, tells me I should be intimidated by the children, they are not the same as "ordinary" children. The two youth workers I meet in the boys' block intimate the same message. One of these workers has mild cerebral palsy. I imagine the boys make fun of him, of the odd, stumbling way in which he walks. How would he ever handle a physical attack from one of his charges?

In the kitchen I meet an aboriginal woman. She is coring apples for dinner.

Will you stuff them with dried fruit?" I ask.

The woman smiles at me. Her teeth are very white, her smile genuine, and I realise she is the only person I have seen smile in this place since I arrived on shift two hours earlier.

In the block - or cottages (Mathers, Parry, Kennedy, Whitton) - Mrs Heavers explains the night-time procedure. The night worker must sit in a room behind a panel of glass overlooking the dormitory. The control room light is on all night, dimmed only when the girls have settled into sleep, turned up if there is a disturbance. When there is trouble, such as a girl missing in the adjoining toilets for too long, the night worker must flash a light from her control panel onto the outside verandah. This signals the senior officer who comes over with the nightwatchman. They isolate the guilty party in a punishment cell for the night.

In the control room, the night worker is totally separated from her charges. If the girls want to go to the toilet, they must walk up to the glass partition and speak through a tiny hole. There is no physical contact between detainee and worker.

Mrs Heavers now takes me across the central, grassed quadrangle past the swimming pool and auditorium. One of the girls who has been helping the nurse in the dispensary is suspected of passing on drugs to the others. Mrs Heavers stops her as she walks past.

I don't want it happening, Gaylene," she cautions.

Gaylene casts guilty eyes to the ground. Mrs Heavers searches the girl's pockets, runs a hand around her bra. "This is where they are most likely to hide contrabandit," she tells me. "Or in the corners of dress hems."

None of the inmates wears uniforms. On entering Reiby, they are issued with street clothes. Long shifts that hide mostly womanly figures. The jumpers, though, are all the same - bottle green, school issue.

I notice the girls are coming out of school. They walk with an exaggerated slouch of boredom. Or perhaps it is their way of feigning indifference. A noticeable percentage are aborigines. The boys are held in a separate area. Mrs Heavers tells me that the majority of kids here come from country areas: Cootamundra, Wagga Wagga, Grafton. I am surprised for I thought city children got into more strife with the Law than country kids.

Earlier, Mr Knight the Superintendent, tells me that most of the detainees are aged between 10 and 15 years. Some are older, only months short of prison age. I wonder why I am a little nervous of taking on the responsibility of youth worker, why I feel intimidated by these children. Perhaps it is that they have nothing to lose. They are society's outcasts. How can I, or anyone else, ever establish a relationship with them if there are physical barriers - glass partitions in dormitories, brick walls, locked doors, barred windows? Even the greenery in the quadrangle landscape is designed so that everyone can be seen from any direction. The shrubs, planted in geometric pattern, are short and sparse. There are no flowers blooming, nor can I see any seedlings planted. Perhaps this is the theme of all institutions: isolation and barrenness.

When I leave for home, Mrs Heavers escorts me to the front door. She unlocks it as I pass out, then she locks it behind me. I step into space and let out a long breath of institutional air. Suddenly, desperately, I need the comfort of my family.

November 26

Morning. On the other side of the world, in Italy, a major earthquake has killed over 3,000 people. Outside, in my garden, a flock of crows, calling as if in grief, remind me of mourners. I lay in bed and contemplate Reiby. It must, I think, be a comfort to wail a grief publicly. I wonder how people in institutions, separated from loved ones, express their sorrow. Do they cry into the darkness at night, or is their grief so deep and private they have no outward expression of it? Does this account for the masks of boredom and indifference I witnessed yesterday? DAY 1

I am eight minutes early. These eight minutes matter. They must be recorded exactly on the signing-in book. Date of Entry: November 27. Time: 9.52am. This is my first lesson. All time must be recorded exactly. Rising time, shower time, breakfast, muster, school, recess and so on.

In the Admissions' Office, I am assigned to Miss Crawford. She is the senior officer for Kennedy Cottage. A slight woman, five foot two, with an exaggerated manner, she swaggers about the office, flourishes her pen, yells into the phone and snaps commands at staff and children alike. Two new girls have arrived with escorts in a taxi. One is a world-wise, cocksure 14-year old aboriginal, Mary; the other, Margaret, nearly 17, seems half-frightened to death. Mary leans back in the office chair and boldly surveys the room. Margaret clutches a pathetic plastic bag containing her effects and sneaks an occasional look around the office from under the overgrown fringe of her blonde hair.

Miss Crawford is lecturing Mary on The Chip On Your Shoulder. It is a lecture Mary has heard a dozen times before, I'm sure.

"What is your father's name, Mary?"

"George."

"Mother's name?"

"Barbara."

"Address?"

"Kempsey West."

"Where would you like to go when you leave here?"

"Sister's place."

"Where?"

"Greenacre."

"Where were you before you were committed?"

"Uncle's place."

"Are you sure your sister wants you to stay with her?"

Mary rolls her wide brown, white-framed eyeballs around their sockets, looks out of the window.

"Yair."

"You don't seem very enthusiastic."

"She wants me."

And you know instinctively that no-one really wants this half-woman child as a responsibility. Perhaps Wayne cares. He is carved for eternity on her brown arm; an amateur tattoo job.

Now it is Margaret's turn to be interviewed. She shuffles forward, a heavy-breasted, overweight, self-conscious girl. Blue eyes peep out from under the blonde fringe.

"Do you have any aboriginal blood?" Miss Crawford asks, pen poised over the recording sheet that reads "Abo. or Non-Abo."

"No."

Margaret is from Port Macquarie.

"No."

"Mother?"

"Yes."

"Father?"

"Died 25th February, three years ago."

Margaret's eyes water. She looks at me. I look away.

Miss Crawford's eyes are on her form.

Mary is reading on the wall the list of children currently housed at Reiby.

"Donna Joliffe is here," she informs Margaret.

Miss Crawford ignores the chatter. I am surprised, expecting them to be reprimanded for talking without permission.

Outside in the courtyard a dark girl, of Mediterranean appearance attracts Mary's attention. Mary grins broadly at her. Margaret sees the girl and smiles. They are recognising familiar faces as the other girls assemble for morning break.

In the dispensary, Miss Crawford supervises the showers. Each girl shampoos her hair, then combs de-lousing liquid through it. Both have had nits at Minda, the remand shelter, they tell us.

"You know the Matron there, she's just like a man, eh!" Mary says. "She wears a wig."

How would you know?" Miss Crawford answers.

Some girls they grabbed it orf her head, eh!" Mary laughs at the memory.

While she is undressing, I say to sombre-faced Margaret, "Homesick?" She nods, her eyes redden. In the shower later, I hear her crying. Low, private moans. I think of the crows and wailing relatives.

Across the quadrangle we tread, the girls in their storeroom issue of nighties and brunchcoats. The Reiby psychologist whisks them away for preliminary assessment. I hope Margaret will be in Kennedy where I have been assigned; she seems a nice kid.

Joan Kavanagh appears shortly after lunch. She is Kennedy senior officer for the day. An attractive woman in her mid-fifties, she reminds me of a barmaid with her bright lipstick pencilled in, mascara, eyeliner. Gold trinkets around her neck. She's been around, this woman, I could learn a great deal from her. She knows just how far to go with the girls, and they with her. No matter how relaxed she may appear, she is always observant, jotting down details in her ever-present record book.

Before the girls arrive back from camp where most have been for several days, she is friendly towards me, tells me that she has a daughter Dianne, the same name as me. And a son, Steve. Dianne is getting married soon, and Steve is coming home. Joan is excited about these domestic tidings., I feel pleased for her. However, when the girls stream in, sunburnt and full of camp news, she shuts off, becomes the impersonal officer. We escort the girls to the pool where she positions herself at one end, motioning me to the other. Stand, don't sit, she commands.

It is boring watching the girls swimming.

Margaret and Mary have been allocated Kennedy Cottage. They sit in the shade alongside the pool, forbidden from swimming because of the de-louse lotion in their hair. Mary has palled up with another aboriginal girl. She asks about drink.

- Do youse get cordial?
- No.
- No cordial?
- Nup.
- Not even with dinner?
- No.

- What do you get to drink. Can you get a drink when you like? No cordial?

I feel like sending her for a drink, she seems so thirsty. I'm parched. It is hot work standing in the sun, watching girls splashing in cool water.

Later I ask Kav when an officer can go to the toilet, or have a drink.

- You can't, she says.

- When can you?

- Only when a senior officer comes to relieve you, she answers. Only sometimes they forget.

I have a weak bladder at the best of times. It bothers me that I can't even go to the toilet when I need to. The guard, it seems, becomes prisoner of the institution's rules.

None of the girls have taken much interest in me. I smile at Margaret.

- OK now? I ask.

She nods. She must pass on to the others that I am all right because now they see me. A new girl, Joanne, asks me to help with spelling in a letter she is writing to her father. Joanne is overweight, looks about forty. She tells me she won't ever need to know how to spell when she leaves Reiby because she is going to work in a carnival. Joanne has a tattoo of Tweedy Pie on her right shoulder.

Sandra interests me. Her tattoo reads Popeye. I met her yesterday when she worked as the dispensary assistant. She is one of the "Smokers". Girls over the age of 16 are allowed to smoke. One fag after breakfast, then another at lunch and dinner. Sandra looks thirteen. She is desperate for a friend. At the poolside she talks continually to Mary. Later, in the locker room, she kneels on the floor to fasten Mary's buckle sandals.

- Let Mary do up her own shoes. My first command.

Mary shrugs her shoulders.

Dinnertime. Theresa sets the tables. She is the absconder I encountered yesterday with Mrs Heavers as we did the rounds. Something about Theresa makes me vigilant; there's an air of hostility about her, though she does what she is told willingly enough.

At dinner I sit at a table with a part-Maori girl, Donna, and spotty-faced Sandra. I ask questions, they answer politely. Sandra appears suspicious of me, Donna is friendly. I am aware that I should trust neither of them. So far I have looked at two files only. Both girls were committed for assault. Perhaps this is why Kav has suggested I wear clothes with pockets, rather than belts.

I would like to understand more of the psychology of these girls, what to expect, to know more of the security measures, and the necessity for them. Kav hands me a list of expectations of the girls. These contain minor and major breaches. A system of points is designed to keep them in order. When three points are deducted, a black "O" follows which means loss of privileges. A red "O" means Big Trouble. Sandra has earned a black "O" the previous day. I wonder if it is because she was suspected of smuggling Serapax into Reiby.

In the dining room tonight, the girls are talking animatedly. Jacky, the most vocal - an aborigine - gabbles on about the camp. She tells a dirty joke out of Kav's hearing, but I catch it. And ignore it. The others interject, especially Donna and Ingrid, who is "Bay 3" or privileged. Ingrid and Leeane (who is sunburnt from camp) are the top girls.

At two minutes to six, as the girls leave the dining room into the lounge to play records and watch television, Kav unlocks the door and I leave for the office to sign off. My first day on the job.

Day 3

Extremely hot weather. Arriving on the pm shift, I know I will have to work eight hours to finish at 10pm. Matron Hickey assigns me a locker and a key. It's my first key responsibility. Keys are important in this place where everything is locked. Every door needs a key.

I am taken to a meeting for Robinson and Parry cottages to listen to a discussion about leave for the boy inmates. There, the officers consult tally sheets which indicate whether their charges are eligible for promotion. Promotion means greater privileges, including day or weekend leave. No-one is allowed on leave until they've been here for at least two months, no matter how they have behaved. Each boy's merits are discussed before decisions are made. If week-end leave is granted, the boy must sign a declaration not to drink alcohol, take drugs, or drive a motor vehicle.

Miss Crawford is concerned as to whether a trail bike is classified as a motor vehicle. The superintendent says not. Eight men attend this meeting: they all seem decent and concerned about the boys' welfare. All that is, except for one sitting at the head of the table. He is a cynic, making racist and sexist jokes, a handsome man with dark, attractive eyes. One of the men, Colin, asks if he can take one of the boys on day leave. Thin and tanned, he shows much concern for the boy who has had no family visits since coming to Reiby over two months ago. Leave is granted.

Later I ask Kav about taking the children on day leave. She says she does it occasionally, but is always concerned that they might abscond while they are with her. The men are a varied lot. There's an Englishman with a walrus moustache who's a former ex-Army officer, a serious Aussie who looks quiet and contemplative - an ex-police officer - and another introduced simply as "Bernie" who looks Spanish. One point of discussion which particularly interests me relates to the use of female inmates as house-maids in the boys' quarters. Mrs Mullaley, a senior officer whom I like very much, defends the girls' rights, saying they "tend to become work-horses." The ex-cop disagrees, says they have a "quietening influence" on the boys. Then he complains about the lack of domestic staff in the cottages. - We can't keep the place ship-shape without them, you know, he comments to the Superintendent.

Mr Knight, the Super, chuckles. A pregnant pause. The officer looks perplexed. - Not so long ago, we wouldn't have had this discussion, Mr Knight explains. The boys did all the domestic work. - However, he adds, I do appreciate your problem. It's just that we are short-staffed at the moment. As an after-thought he adds, you can put up your Christmas decorations next week, if you wish. But no sticky tape is to be used, or pins of any description.

Then follows an informal discussion about Mr Knight's horse which is roaming the grounds. The Cynic relates a blue story about horses' toilet habits and the discussion degenerates into banalities.

Kav has arrived back from Escort. One of the girls had a doctor's appointment. Back in the locker room at Kennedy, the girls are dressing for the pool. They greet Kav enthusiastically, but she doesn't respond. Nor, I notice at bedtime, does she say good-night. In other ways, though, she allows a good measure of familiarity. Today she has brought a cassette in for the girls to play on the stereo. Crude tunes, the girls love them. One of the songs is about playing with a "ding-a-ling." The girls pick up on the lyric's suggestiveness. - It's not about that, Kav insists. It's about a toy, a ding-a-ling.

Teresa won't have that. - I know what this ding-a-ling is, she says, tossing back her mane of black hair and laughing wickedly. She simulates a man masturbating. Kav ignores her. Theresa's suggestive mood continues. She shows Kav a drawing someone - probably she - has done of two animals mating. Kav feigns disinterest. Soon the drawing is forgotten. Theresa sketches an exotic heart garlanded with greenery, speared by an arrow. The heart is embellished with the name "MARY P." Mary P is a Reiby youth worker. - She's a real spunky, eh? Theresa grins, looking for a response. - What will Mr P think? Kav asks.

Teresa laughs. - I don't care. She touches Kav on the arm and neck, as if in play. Kav ignores her. - You a spunky, too, Theresa adds.

Kav looks the other way. Later, away from the others, I overhear her reminding Theresa about "body contact", one of the institution rules, which, if broken, can result in loss of points. Theresa appears not to hear, but I note that she then acts in a more restrained manner.

Margaret and Mary are noticeably withdrawn, separate from the others. Margaret seems depressed, eyes cast down and face drawn. However, it seems the pool offers her some solace. Reluctant to wear the gaudy swimming costumes allocated to her, she is finally persuaded by Donna who says she will only swim if Margaret does so too. Donna is embarrassed by her pimply chest and small breasts. Margaret's embarrassment is her large bust. Mary, looking at herself in the mirror, giggles at her new costume.

The pool offers comfort. Margaret dives in first, curling below the surface of the water. Underwater, she flips. Emerges. Laughs. It is her first show of laughter. She and Donna pace one another up and down the pool. Up and down.

Poolside, Mary is talking and laughing with another aboriginal girl from Patterson Cottage. I cannot understand why they isolate her from her own people as there is doubtless a strong bond there. Kav, with her dark skin, is often taken for one of their kind. They call her "sister". The wind blows fiercely, and complaints about it from the girls force us back to the cottage.

Inside, the ironing is sorted. Jacky attacks a pile of clothing worn at the camp. Each girl must iron her own. Earlier Kav has sent me to the laundry with Jacky and Ingrid to fetch the ironing. Ingrid has been waiting for her mother to arrive so she can take

her on week-end leave. At the laundry, we meet with a locked door. - I'll get it from the seniors' office, says Jacky, moving off. - No, Ingrid will fetch it, I say, remembering that Kav had specified Ingrid.

Ingrid sees an opportunity for confronting the new officer. No, I won't, she snaps. Yes, you will, I reply.

Ingrid glares at me with pure malice. I read her mind. You Shit Head, it reads. Telling me what to do, she mouths, soundlessly. Across the yard she calls for the keys. - Hey, Mrs Mullaley, bring the keys up, will you?

Mrs Mullaley, bless her, stands her ground, backs me up. - You come down here, young lady.

Ingrid plods off, muttering. Soon she is back with Mrs Mullaley. Jacky helps Ingrid pull out the baskets of laundry packed on the sorting tables. A pile of clothes falls to the ground.

- Pick that up, will ya? Ingrid says to me.

- No, pick it up yourself. Once again, I am determined to stand my ground.

Mrs Mullaley intervenes.

- Pick it up, Ingrid, she commands.

- But she's closest!

- Ingrid...

Ingrid stoops, snatches it up and mutters under her breath all the while as she stomps back to the cottage with her load of baskets. I report her insolence immediately.

- Ingrid, come here. Kav calls her into hallway. - I knew she would, Ingrid murmurs to Jacky. For once, Jacky holds her tongue.

Kav lectures Ingrid on good manners.

Ingrid tosses her head about in a begrudging apology.

- That's not good enough, Ingrid, Kav retorts.

- You know, Mrs Bates, she continues, this girl has the loveliest parents. A beautiful mother. She should be a wonderful girl. She prattles on. Ingrid begins to look repentant. Perhaps she is thinking her leave might be cancelled if she doesn't apologise. She looks me directly in the eye. - I'm sorry, Miss Bates. Clearly she is embarrassed at having backed down.

I nod, and she is dismissed into the lounge room. Later she walks towards me on her way to the locker-room. She looks straight at me in the face without animosity or insolence. I am glad I have reported her; it will be easier next time.

I have also had to report Mary.

- Carry my towel to the pool, Miss, she commanded me.

- You carry it yourself, Mary.

- Fuck! Mary declares loudly as she brushes past me.

At the end of the hall she stands poking her tongue at me. I am about to reprimand her when she suddenly thinks better of it.

- No, she says, you my friend.

Kav deducts points from her total for impolite speech. Mary shrugs. What would she care?

Ingrid has lost three points. Over the next few days she will be especially well-behaved as she expects to be released on Wednesday. Even a few points lost can delay release.

I wonder if our school system should perhaps work on a points' system like this at Reiby. It results in improved behaviour for these girls. In school it would mean better application in class. But what could schools use as incentives and as punishment?

I have been on shift four hours now. At dinner I tried to strike up a conversation with Sandra. As she did yesterday, she replies to questions politely, but does not initiate conversation. As we lined up for dinner, Margaret says, loud enough for me to hear:

- If I was an officer here, I'd let everyone out. I'd just unlock the door and say, "Go on, get yourselves outa here."
- I'd charge them all fifty cents for going, volunteers Donna. Donna is on a forge, utter and steal charge. She is from Killarney Heights. On the North Shore, she reminds me several times.

In the lounge after dinner, Donna initiates a stint of colouring-in. The art lesson for tonight is designing tattoos. Invariably, the tattoos are of hearts with boys' names inscribed.

- Do you like this, Miss? she asks me. Ron is the lucky boy.
- I'm going to have it tattooed on my shoulder.
- What if you don't like Ron two years from now? Wouldn't your other boyfriends be jealous? I ask.
- That's their problem.

Joanne watches Dave Allen on the colour television. Sitting at the back of the room where I can survey all, I laugh at a comedy sketch - Dave Allen, the minister, falling into the baptismal font. The girls turn, sombre-faced, to look at me. It has taken them these four hours to acknowledge my presence. Most of the time, if they are walking towards me, they do so as if I am invisible. As if no-one or nothing is standing there watching them. They rarely talk about the officers in our presence. Although Gillian mutters darkly about the place being like a prison when I stand guard in the locker room, for the most part they ignore me.

Gillian is a strange girl. They are all strange in their own ways, but I suspect Gillian is much more intelligent than the others. She has a quiet disdain for the officers, is never overtly rude, nor is she familiar. It surprises me how easily the girls mix with one another. I would have thought, being locked together 24 hours night and day, and coming as they mostly do, from lawless backgrounds, that there would be more in-fighting, and disagreements about television or property, but as yet I have seen no evidence of this.

During recreation time, most girls seem to keep their separate distances, although there is some interaction. Jacky is sulking because she has been re-assigned duties as a result of some trouble on camp. Sandra stares at me when she thinks I am not aware of her. Theresa makes lewd comments about "spunkies". The new inmate, Judy,

seems to be contemplating something deeply, probably her approaching court appearance. The others draw or watch television. Leanne is on weekend leave, and Donna, the part-Maori girl, is in the hospital block with Scabies. The girls all complain of itching. Donna J. displays a ringworm, the others tell her off for scratching it. - Don't you give it to me, Jacky threatens.

At 9.30pm, the cottage is lined up, single-file, outside the dormitory for bedtime. Theresa sets a cassette ready for play, then saunters to bed, hitching her nightie about her waist, displaying her underpants for all to see.

Lights out. The music is soft, tasteful, a change from the raucous tunes they normally play, volume at top pitch. Kav and I stand still in the dorm, listening for sleep. Outside, the black blanket of cloud weeps.

The fresh smell of sodden earth assails my senses when I step outside shortly afterwards to sign off for the night. Driving home, I feel fifty, exhausted, and aching. Three hours' hard work earlier in the day have tired me. Kav and I went there with Jacky while the rest of the cottages watched a film - Spiderman Strikes Back - in the assembly hall.

Jacky, an energetic worker, takes her duties seriously. - Don't talk much, do you Jacky? I ask, escorting her with the laundry, to the boys' quarters. - Can't miss, not while I'm working, she answers grimly.

She knows these places inside out from years of incarceration. From her I learn where the mops are kept, the doors to open and close, the baskets Kav uses, where to go, where to find whatever it is I need. We walk back and forth from laundry to cottage, cottage to laundry, laundry to cottage with clean clothes and empty baskets. I try to engage Jacky in conversation, but she is tight-lipped.

- You must have been around for a long time, I say.

- Yep.

- My husband was brought up in boys' homes, I say.

She expresses interest.

- He is very tidy from living in places like Reiby.

- Was he ever in prison? she asks. It is her first direct question or contribution to my previously one-sided conversation. I fall straight into the trap of my own making, nod my head. - Where?

My heart sinks, I realise my folly, but it is too late.

- Oh, he's been around, I say. Come on, let's get back to the laundry.

All the way back I am bombarding my mind with questions like "why?", reprimands ("You idiot, they'll take advantage!") While my tongue engages in other chatter, I am thinking that Jacky knows I regret my indiscretion. Still, what is done is done. The regrets and explanations will come later, when the word is passed around, as invariably it will be.

Day 4

Glass eyes were the subject of discussion at the dinner table tonight. Jacky is fascinated by a new boy in Whitton Cottage who has a glass eye. Of course the boy,

keen to be accepted, has been playing tricks with it ever since admission, including removing the eye and brandishing it about for examination.

- All white stuff comes out of his eye, Miss, Jacky beams across the dining table.

- Jacky, Kav cautions.

- But it does! He took it out in the boys' dining room and it nearly fell into the slop bucket.

Kav cautions again. Jacky falls silent. The cutlery has been counted and locked up, the washing and drying completed. The smokers, girl aged 16 and over mass, like vultures, around the officers' table waiting for their cigarette ration. Joanne and Judy ask if they can sit with me. Both have been very friendly today, talking about home and family and other matters that preoccupy them. Judy refers again to the glass eye.

- My dad, he got drunk one night and vomited all over his pillow, and in the morning he had to find his false teeth in the vomit, she says.

- Yuk! exclaims Joanne. This morning I read the girls' files and discovered Joanne is the only child of divorced parents. She totally rejects her mother's new de facto husband and blames her troubles on him. She informs me she is "spoiled rotten" by her "real" parents. The other girls don't like her much; they accuse her of boasting - which she does - and of talking too much. I am worried that they will ostracise her for acting in such a friendly manner towards an officer.

At bedtime, just before lights out, Margaret says "goodnight miss", then Judy, Donna, Joanne, then (surprisingly) Jacky, call across the dormitory to me, "Goodnight Miss Bates." Jacky's acceptance of me encourages me a great deal to feel that maybe I can help some of these girls. All her life she has been ping-ponged from family to family, institution to institution. With this kind of instability, she still takes time to accept and seemingly to trust strangers. I feel touched - and flattered - by her gesture.

It was a good shift. Nobody lost points although Theresa apparently played up this morning, refusing to undertake assigned tasks. She is expected to be released on Wednesday or Thursday.

Sue McKuen, the Kennedy Cottage supervisor, has asked me to swap shifts of Wednesday in order to accompany Kav and Joanne to court on a charge of breaking probation. It seems that while on remand Joanne was involved in a car stealing escapade, the car crashed and she was injured, a steel plate inserted in her arm.

No swimming today, the weather overcast and cool. Instead, the girls lolled about watching television. A few comedies were playing which relaxed the girls. Listening to Judy complaining of putting on weight while in Reiby, I showed her an exercise book from the paltry cottage library.

- Will you teach us some exercise, Miss? Donna looks up from her crochet which she likes doing to help pass the time.

- Sure, I say.

Matron and the senior officer, Mrs Mullaly are visiting. Both are pleased with this new development. We are to have exercises after supper (ironically, chocolate cake and milk), but the comedies on TV take precedence. I don't mind; the offer is still there, and the girls know it. Many of the Reiby girls are overweight, not just those in Kennedy cottage. Institution diet, of course, accounts for it. But there appears to be no exercise, except for swimming, which is optional.

I suggest to Judy that she cut down on her intake of baked potatoes.

- Are potatoes fattening, Miss? she asks, wide-eyed.

There is much ignorance in these world-worn girls whose parents are often only parents in name, whose schools are too large and anonymous to worry about their truanting. I am sure many of our school problems could be solved by making classes smaller and having more caring personal development programs, more emphasis on the individual and her problems. Even as a teacher in a large school I have sometimes felt insignificant, of no account, so how must maladjusted children suffer?

The girls' record files, some with scant information, others detailed, reveal terrible injustices. Leanne, who has been on extended leave this week, was one girl whose file left me aching with its history of rejection, rape, break-down of relationships. Why do all bad things seem to happen to some individuals? Leanne is a friendly, shy sort of kid, just 14, who has lived through traumatic experiences that most people could not comprehend, yet she presents a smiling face to the world.

One thing which surprises me as I read the files is the number of only children who are committed. Perhaps much is to be said for a denying a child, for sparing the rod and spoiling the child. Mary has lived a solitary, confused life, a street child living in derelict houses, perhaps to escape her large - 13 children - family. This evening I phoned Gabbi Hollows to see if we could get someone out to visit Mary, to give her some evidence that someone cares about her. Tomorrow I will also ring Naomi Myers of the Aboriginal Medical Centre, to see if she can help. Mary's files appeal to officers to watch her carefully in case she attempts to abscond; she has a history of escaping. The file reveals, too, that Mary only recently turned 13. She is girl who has assaulted, stolen, lived off her wits, sniffed petrol, glue, gotten drunk - god knows what else. She is close-mouthed about her activities - perhaps she has been raped, abused, who knows? Life at Kempsey West with her family of fifteen must have been hellish for her to take to the streets of Redfern.

Kav got onto Mary's case tonight. The girl has been going into the shower recess, turning on the water and not washing. Kav threatened to go in and "do it" herself. - I want to see the soap bubbles running down your legs, she calls, peering under the shower door.

Tonight, as I signed off at 10pm, I had a hot shower in the officer's locker room. It was wonderful to emerge feeling clean and warm, then to walk in the cool to the car park. Jacky says the best thing about Reiby is having a shower at night. Water washes away the accumulated mess of the day. It's a pity there wasn't a shower which could wash away trauma, human frailties, and memory.

Day 5

The girls have remembered my offer to conduct exercise class. A few cluster around me in brunch boats and pyjama tops and black gym pants, ready to battle against the Reiby bulge. Overweight and unfit, I feel stupid. What have I let myself in for? My knowledge of exercises is confined to warm-up squats and touch-toes with primary school-aged kids. However, I get into the swing of things with a one-two-touch-your-toes-three-four-do-some-more routine. Exercising is contagious. Now Gaylene joins

in, then Judy, Donna, even Margaret and Joanne. They lie on the floor, heaving thick thighs airwards, then lower heavy legs to the floor. They complain loudly of stretched muscles.

Jacky and Donna McI sit out, scorn etched on their faces, though I suspect each would be participating if it wasn't for the presence of the other. Mary is not taking part, either. She is sketching a witch, copying it from one of the comics I brought in today. It is the first activity - apart from swimming - which she has willingly participated in. Usually she just flips through a magazine from the library, or glances, disinterestedly, at the television. Mostly she turns in to herself, eyes cast on the floor or out of the window. She doesn't look people in the eye.

Tonight, at dinner, she sparkled, memories of her tribal life flashing back to her when we talked of favourite foods. Without prodding, she volunteered the story of her people on an island off the coast near Darwin, hunting for kangaroos. - Do you like kangaroo meat, Mary? I ask. - Oh yes, miss, she says, pushing a heap of mashed potato to one side of her plate.

- And the snake, lovely. Yum! We gotta the big goanna up there, Miss. Goes like this...

Her elbows bend, hands flat on the table, head swaying from side to side. Her hands dance, running across the plains of the table. It's a huge goanna running for his life from the black men, the gins, the piccaninnies. Mary has come to life, the Word is speaking to her. Dreamtime. Friends. The tropical heat. The chase... - Cutlery needs counting, Miss Bates, Kav reminds me.

The goanna suddenly dies and Reiby becomes the reality. Mary retreats into herself again.

I go count cutlery, make sure no-one has stolen knives to cut wrists or make tattoos. Reiby dinner knives are blunt; I'm convinced they would never serve a suicidal attempt.

The exercises are over, the girls are blowing hard, they are rubbing overworked muscles. Now it is television time. A model family flits across the screen. How happy they are with one another! There's plenty to eat, nice clothes, they speak politely to one another. They present themselves as Fantasy Family, all that the Reiby girls might want for themselves.

The girls unwind, relax, as they do only at dinner time or in sleep. These are the best times to try to communicate with them. Tonight, just before Lights Out, Judy is tucking Margaret into bed.

- Don't do that, Kav says. If you want to be tucked in, I'll do it.
- Will you tuck me into bed, Miss? pleads Fearless Joanne of the Streets.

Kav, surrogate mum, obliges, dims the lights, then tiptoes about the dorm from one bed to another.

- You big sooks, I laugh, tactless as all out.

Later, when we stand in the dark, listening to the calm breathing of the girls settling into sleep, Kav whispers to me. - Don't ever call them sooks, even in fun. They like to

be tucked in. Sometimes when they think no-one is looking as you tuck them in, they give you a little kiss in the dark.

I feel petty for making light of the girls' fears and needs, and stupid for not comprehending until now their Dark Secret. I resolve to be far more aware and caring. I want to give so much to these child-women, these frightened creatures with their armour-plating of swagger. Even as I leave, half an hour later, I still feel ashamed of the damage my loose tongue may have inflicted.

Day 6

This is the day when I am to go to the Supreme Court for the first time. Kav is escorting Joanne, and I am to go along for the experience. However, at the last moment, the Superintendent, changes his mind. I have to stay behind and help out. I am disappointed. So too, is Joanne, who was hoping for as many familiar faces as possible.

I feel lost without the reassuring presence of Kav. Nancy Nelson is to be my mentor for today. I find her in the cottage, supervising the before school clean-up and polish. She is standing over Donna J who is half-heartedly polishing the dining room floor. - Do it again, Donna, she commands. You've missed half of it.

Donna mutters about it not being fair, but drags the polishing machine back to start over again.

A third time she is told to go back and do what she has again missed. The third time sees the floor polished. I can see that some girls need to be pushed, even quite outwardly stable girls like Donna. For some of the inmates, Reiby is their first taste of domestic discipline, perhaps because they have been so long living on the streets, or because they have been over-indulged by parents as Donna has been.

A trainee District Officer visits Reiby this morning. He has recently graduated from the Social Work course at Milperra, and is investigating the institution to which he will be recommending delinquents assigned to his case. Looking self-conscious, he hangs about. Judy brushes up against him. - Guess what, Sir? Nurse put me on the Pill.

I am convinced she even winks as she slinks away, practising her womanly charms. The would-be District Officer's face reddens.

In the night office, I show him the girls' court reports and admission cards. He asks me to point out the girls.

- The lass sweeping out the dormitory, I say, is Donna McL. She attends AA and AlTeen.

He cannot believe that such a young girl is an alcoholic. I cannot believe that he is so naive, especially given that he's spent years training and is now being launched on the Big Wide World of delinquency. - There are three girls here eligible for AA, George, I continue, but they can't go to meetings until they've been here longer. We also have girls here - the majority, actually - who've experimented with drugs, have been prostitutes, have been gang-raped, and/or are incest survivors.

He does not believe me until he has read a few files.

Colin, one of the youth workers from Robinson, the boys' cottage, hauls a sullen twelve-year-old into the night office. - He's to go into a single room, Colin says, grim-faced and trying to control anger. - Get in there, he snaps at the boy.

Covered with biro, a fresh tattoo on his right arm, the boy moves into the adjoining single room. Colin slams shut the thick wooden door. - He was swearing. Filthy language, he explains. I let the language pass last time, and they took advantage of me. This time I grabbed him immediately.

He is still bubbling with anger. I suspect if it was me, I would be in tears. I want to reach out and stroke him. Settle him back into calmness. He has taken the boy's behaviour personally. George walks away, without a word. I wonder if he's disgusted at the boy's incarceration. I understand the need to segregate and lock in uncontrollable youngsters. but I think George is too new at his job to realise that isolation is sometimes necessary for time-out when the kid can cool down sufficiently so he or she can think and behave rationally.

By now the girls have gone to school. Mrs Hartley, recently appointed Senior Officer, is fussing about. She suggests I take a pile of mending to the shoe room, and get to work on the industrial sewing machine. Within minutes, however, I have broken the machine needle and return to her office. No more needles are available, so she sends me, with annoyance in her voice and manner, back to Mrs Nelson in the cottage.

A shipment of clothing and shoes for the Reiby state wards has arrived. Mrs Nelson and I ogle at the outfits, wishing we could afford such quality. Mrs Nelson tries on all the shoes. They are fashionable, with heels, and mostly made of suede and calves' leather. Only girls who have reached Bay 3 - or privileged - position, are allowed to wear wards' clothing, or girls who are going to court or out on day leave.

The clothing unpacked, we sit in the night office, talking about the girls. Mrs Nelson dwells on Gillian's past, and a horrific past it is too. Gillian has been prostituting herself on Kings Cross streets since she was twelve, her father having sexually molested her and her younger sister, Sylvie, since they were three. She has been involved in drink and drugs. Mrs Nelson is unsympathetic: this is because Gillian is hoping to be reunited with her father when he is released from Cessnock Prison. Reiby social workers and seniors have been trying hard to get Gillian established in a girls' hostel so she can make a life for herself and Sylvie. They've taken her to eight different hostels, but she's rejected each one. Recently, having been taught typing and office procedure at Reiby, Gillian had a job arranged for her. - She was there, Mrs Nelson tells me, for a week. Until payday. Then she shot through leaving a trail of forged cheques.

Picked up by police, Gillian is now serving eight months at Reiby, far longer than normal. Partly this is because she has proved she cannot be trusted, but also because the court has ordered her to stay away from her father.

Earlier, I had talked with Gillian about her future. I asked her if she had ever considered being fostered. - Let's face it, she said, with all the maturity of a fifteen year old going on fifty, who would want someone my age?

Gillian's sister and older brother are both in homes. An eighteen year old girl is waiting on the outside to marry Father on his release. I begin to see the Catch 22 situation, and cannot, like Gillian, see any solutions. Who should be responsible for this teenager? Who wants her, where should she go?

Judy's file is delivered to the night office. We read of incest from her natural father, also her step-father, her mother's de facto. The fact that Judy, the victim, is behind brick walls, infuriates me. She has committed no crime, is simply here for her "own protection," because she has nowhere else to go. Now Judy is threatening to withdraw the allegations against the step-father. This is probably due to pressure from her mother who has agreed to "throw him out." Judy's sister took the man to court on the same complaint of incest, but the case was dismissed. Even if Judy proceeded with court charges, who's to say the same won't happen to her?

Kav returns in the afternoon. Joanne's case is to be heard on Friday. Joanne has been telling everyone for days that Reiby had the wrong date, but no-one has listened to her.

Kennedy Cottage supervisor, Sue McKuen, Kav, Mrs Nelson and senior officer Mrs Mullen and I meet today for the weekly cottage review. We discuss leave - granted to Jacky and Donna McI - then move on to SRT. This, I learn, is Social Relationship Training. Each girl is allocated a task for the week which aims to improve one aspect of her character. Sandra, who last night sat in a corner alone feeding on crisps and chocolates she brought in from weekend leave, is to "join in with a group." To date, Sandra has happily shared everyone else's food parcels, and last night's selfishness has annoyed the girls. Joanne's task is not to brag but to take an interest in other's achievements, Donna J is to undertake her tasks in a willing manner, Mary is to join in with the other girls and not sit by herself. The girls, it seems, are challenged by these tasks, and, if they fulfil them, they are rewarded with a weekly telephone call.

This afternoon, too, we have the union Annual General Meeting. The Health and Research Union, which embraces cooks, gardeners and groundsmen, also includes youth workers. For the ninth year in Reiby, Kav is elected union steward.

Day 7

Saturday. I wake at 4am and find it impossible to get back to sleep. By 5.30am, I am hurtling back to Reiby to face my first experience of "Scrub Up." Kav is away on holidays, replaced by Mrs Dean whom I met briefly last week when she took over on night shift. A friendly woman, in her late forties, she asks me to call her Shirley.

At 6.30am, the dorm lights are switched on, the flock is awakened. They are not a happy lot this morning. They moan and swear under their breaths as they stretch and yawn. It doesn't take me long to realise that Scrub Up is not popular.

In the equipment room, Cherylynn, the new eleven-year-old sent over from Parry Cottage, is distributing buckets, mops and brooms. Joanne and Margaret are assigned the dormitory. It is a big job to sweep, dust, mop, spread wax, and polish. All are openly resentful. I suspect they have never faced such a big job in their young lives. It is probably the first time the only-child Joanne, for example, has ever been

expected to labour, having run rough-shed over her mother. - We're not frigging slaves! Margaret yells across the room.

I try the now-let's-be-reasonable-about-this approach, appeal to her better nature.
- Come on, Marg, the other girls are working too. You're not the only ones.

Margaret doesn't have a better nature. She curses under her breath, roars aloud, "unfair", followed by "we're being treated like prisoners." (Which of course, they are!)

Today Joanne presents another facet of the jovial self we've seen before. Yesterday she lost her appeal in the Supreme Court and is now facing a four-month stretch. She moans and curses too, though not with the same degree of churlishness Margaret displays. Each of them eggs the other on. Believing discretion is the better part of diplomacy, I leave the dormitory, but later when I return, they are even more resentful and hostile, the dormitory in disarray.

Judy, having finished her locker-room cleaning job, joins them. But now there are three and this means another voice of rebel. I try to jolly them along, but Margaret, in particular, continues to snarl. I threaten her with loss of points. - I don't care, she screams at me.

Finally I punish her, scribbling in my notebook Impolite Speech, Negative Interaction.
- You think you're bloody great, just because you're new, she snarls.

I depart, hoping to dispel antagonism.

Now they are arguing with Mrs Dean. She too leaves them to cool down. Joanne suddenly bellows, her voice resounding throughout the cottage. In the dormitory, I find her sprawled on the floor, swearing. - Come with me Joanne, I say.

She grumbles, but follows. In the foyer, I point to the cottage rules displayed on the wall. - Do your work without grumbling or arguing, I read. It's a rule, Joanne.
- But I wasn't...

I refuse to listen.

- You are now on silence, I say as we enter the dormitory.

Silence seems to do the trick. Margaret, having lost her stooge in the "We Hate Them" act, settles, finally, to her task. She heaves herself behind the wayward floor polisher and acts out her aggression on it. I hate Scrub Day, too, girls. Having to check every corner and ledge for dust, picking faults with floors not properly washed, looking for scuffs on polished linoleum. Mrs Dean drives me on; she is meticulous. - Matron will inspect, she tells me, and I'll be chipped if it's anything less than perfect.

Stuff Matron, I think, pouring out my feelings of aggression towards the girls on the principal authority figure. Of course I'm aware that I am regarding her in the same way in which the girls regard us, the cottage officers. I understand only too well that they make us the scapegoats for their pent-up hostilities towards their parents.

I wonder why the girls seem suddenly to have changed attitudes towards me. Last week, when I was with Kav, they were friendly towards and communicative with me;

now they are openly aggressive or passively indifferent. They have their reasons, I deduce. Firstly, Mrs Dean, night officer for the past three weeks, is today meeting most of these girls for the first time. They are testing how far she will go. Doubtless, too, they miss Kav whom they obviously like and respect. Then there are the keys which were issued to me today; they give me an authority I didn't have before. Perhaps my past two days' leave from the cottage routine means the girls have to readjust to my presence. We two officers, Mrs Dean and I, are authority figures, two too many, one too many at the best of times.

After Scrub Up, we line the girls up outside the cottage while Inspection is undertaken. Mr Halliday is The Critical Eye. Each girl escorts him to her work area where he awards points. I am amazed that Margaret and Joanne, who have given so much trouble, are keen to gain top points for their dormitory labours. Nine and a half points out of the maximum ten pleases them. - I'm gunna get ten next week, Margaret boasts.

By hand-off time at 2pm, I am well and truly ready to leave. As usual, I breath a sigh of freedom as I step into the Outside World.

Day 8

Today I have learned a lesson in the need for absolute vigilance. _ Miss, can I have a needle and cotton to sew a button on my blouse, Gaylene asks, all innocence. In the Rec room I kneel in front of the sewing cupboard, insert my new key in the lock and search among the equipment. Needles, scissors and other sharp equipment which might be used as weapons against others, or in self-mutilation or tattooing, are kept here under lock and key. When dispensing them, officers are warned to keep a strict eye on the user until they are returned to the cupboard.

Seconds later, I find cotton and needle, hand them to Gaylene, swing back the doors. Discover that not only are the keys missing, but the lock too. I've been there, centimetres from them the whole time but have not seen even a suggestion of movement, let alone tampering!

It's an emergency. I take Mrs Dean aside, whisper into her ear, watch her pupils expand with horror. She nods, then efficiently, without undue noise or fuss, herds all the girls into the room and lines them up in single file against the window. They grumble at this disturbance to their Sunday morning routine. Mrs Dean speaks firmly, her voice low-key and controlled. - I want the lock. Right now. She doesn't mention the keys. - Loose your keys, Miss? Joanne mutters to me out of the corner of her mouth. Immediately I suspect her. Three girls have stood near me while I looked in the cupboard: Gaylene, Cherylynne and Joanne. Cherylynne, as I recall, was closest, was in the most advantageous position.

Today is Visitors' Day. The girls slouch in their line, faces scowling; they want to get back to showering, making up their faces, grooming their hair. We are wasting their precious time, yet no-one is forthcoming with the missing lock and key.

In the staff dining room, my stomach burbling with anxiety, my heart thrumming, I find the senior, Mrs Mullaley. - God no, she pants. This could lead to a mass break-out.

She conveys the urgency of the situation to the Deputy Superintendent, Mr H and the other seniors. All swing into action. - This is now a closed cottage, Mrs Mullaly states to the still-assembled girls. No-one is to come in or go out. This means no visitors this afternoon. No-one. Not until the lock and the key are both returned. -

It's not fair! moans petulant Gaylene, whose file reads "Socially Maladjusted", and who expects a visit from her family today. - It's her fault, she adds, pointing at Mrs Dean, as though accusing her of losing the keys. Mrs Mullaly looks more serious than I have ever seen her. - I repeat, she says, no-one will come or go out of or into this cottage until the keys are found and returned. - We'll start with this room, she says. The girls drift about the room, searching. Or pretending to. I watch Cherylynne, whom I think is the real culprit. She moves towards the door. Mrs Mullaly sees her too. - We are searching this room first, she insists.

At that very moment Margaret exclaims, Here it is. It was in the cupboard.

The cupboard has been searched thoroughly twice before now. It was not there. But someone has slipped the lock and key to Margaret, the last person to suspect of the theft - for she was in the laundry at the time they disappeared. The sigh of relief from most of the assembled hits the room, is audible. The tension dissipates, the seniors leave. And I am left feeling a fool, resolving never again to get caught. Never. Never.

Mrs Dean empathises with me. She relates to me her first "dreadful" three months at Reiby, six years ago. Her peanut butter story soon has me laughing. - Every morning the girls would ask if they were having peanut butter, she says. In those days it was served in a small dish, not in individual serves such as we have these days. I thought how nice the girls enjoyed their peanut butter, until one day I happened to glance at the ceiling to discover little pats of the stuff decorating it. The girls had been flipping it up on the ends of their knives. I'm sure they had a bet going as to who could score the most pats!

I feel better now. In the Understatement of the Century, she says - They'll try you.

Now, despite the disturbance, the girls seem settled, but later in the dining room, as I watch them cluster around a table during Smoko, I know they are collaborating, probably against the common enemy - us. Joanne, Judy, Mary and Cherylynne have chummed up. This week's Joanne is a different Joanne who last week awaited her court appearances. Gone is the confiding deference, her jovial comradeship with the officers. In its place is an anti-authoritarian vigilance and open resentment. She has conned us all into preparing a favourable observation report for the court. Thank you for the lesson, Joanne. Good thing the court took no notice.

In the assembly hall, I meet the "Rock 'n Rollin' Rev." Rev Carmon is assigned by the Department of Youth and Community to visit and act as chaplain in Training Institutions. Some of the girls here have already met him in Minda, the Lidcombe Remand Centre. This is a man who believes in Discipline. The children, he tells me, should be marched from place to place. I wonder what his Kennedy Cottage converts would think if they could hear him talk like this. And I wonder what he says to the girls about how he thinks youth workers should behave.

Today, Sunday, only Mary and Cherylynne feel spiritual enough to go to Carmon's service; the rest are more concerned with applying mascara and lipstick. Donna T

was going to, but changed her mind at the last minute. Her record arrived this morning. I read of a strict Italian father, of her rebellion, her "sugar daddy" up at the Cross, and of her recent pregnancy termination. Although isolated on the very first day due to gross infringement of rules, she has since been co-operative. She keeps to herself, but when help is needed, she volunteers.

Today I take her and Sandra outdoors to the central quadrangle roller skating as a reward for good behaviour. They are both skilled skaters. Donna swirls and twirls, a thin, attractive girl with a pinched face, and sad, sad eyes. Later Mary and Margaret join us. Margaret has never been on skates. She is concerned that people are laughing at her as she stumbles about. Always she is conscious of other people's reactions to her; she is here in Rebiy because she assaulted a girl who called her names. A deep well of anger and frustration resides in Margaret. I think she could well be capable of murder, and wonder why she is not receiving psychiatric attention. Like some of the others, her file records her as being "Socially Maladjusted."

Jacky is angry with me today and scowls at me through the serving window from her food-serving job in the kitchen. Yesterday I discovered texta-coloured initials "TD" on her wrists and asked her to scrub them off. Today they are still there, so I mark her with an "O", putting her at risk of losing her privileged position for the week.

Only one girl - Donna J, the North Shore forger - has behaved in a consistent, pleasant manner towards me and treated me with respect since day one. The others do not like her because they think she is bossy and supercilious. Yesterday I heard Mary telling another girl she would punch Donna "in the nose" if she tried to boss her. Mary would just do that. She is here for mugging an old lady and then assaulting the arresting police-officer. Mary's anger is the anger of two hundred years of white Australian occupation. She too, I'm convinced, could kill if provoked sufficiently.

Day 9

Humility is my second name today after yesterday's key loss disgrace. My partner makes me a lanyard which will ensure keys never leave me. I wear a belt to which the lanyard, with the keys firmly clipped on the other end, are attached. When the keys are not in use, they are tucked into the belt.

At 6.30am, I watch Mrs Dean switch on the dormitory lights and greet each girl individually. Leanne H is back from extended leave and Donna McI has also returned from a weekend with her parents. After yesterday's disaster, I am expecting repercussions, but they do not eventuate. The girls, for the moment, are subdued. Waking them up is a dicey business, it is best not to be jovial, or too demanding. Gillian, Cherylynne and Gaylene seem to suffer most from being dragged from sleep.

Today is Gaylene's day for making a scene. Without any obvious provocation, except for a mild rebuke from Mrs Dean for taking so long to get out of bed, she launches into a frenzy of verbal abuse. - You can go to hell you fucking bitch! You give me the shits! she screams, storming into the locker room.

Mrs Dean pounces immediately. - I won't have that sort of thing in my cottage, she states firmly. - I don't fucking care, Gaylene hurls back.

In the dormitory the girls have made their beds without fuss and

are sitting, quietly on the seats by their bedside lockers, watching and waiting for Mrs Dean's next move.

Gaylene reappears and throws down the gauntlet. - I'm not gunna wear these pants, she yells. - They have your number on them, Gaylene, Mrs Dean counters quietly. - Well I'm not gunna bloody well wear them, she retorts.

Mrs Dean heads off to fetch the senior. Mrs Mullaly is here within minutes. She takes Gaylene aside. Gaylene can be heard loudly sobbing and answering back. None of the girls speaks.

Breakfast is a sombre affair. Gaylene returns. At the breakfast table she weeps, stabbing her toast with her knife. Thank god it is blunt! She looks ready to knife the nearest body. Joanne asks her to pass the milk. - Fuck off, Gaylene snarls at her.

Mrs Deans tells her to leave the room. Gaylene resists. Mrs Mullaly, getting her breakfast at the kitchen counter, appears not to hear. Mrs Dean repeats her instruction.

Gaylene moves, reluctantly, with toast in hand. - Leave your breakfast on the table, Gaylene. You can eat it later, Mrs Dean says. - No. Gaylene moves to the foyer where she dumps herself onto a seat, chomping toast. Mrs Dean departs and approaches her. Gaylene shouts at her.

Mrs Dean returns, gestures to Mrs Mullaly who leaves the dining room to talk with the girl. Gaylene is getting her glorious attention. Her punishment, I think, is pathetic. She is merely to loose her lunchtime cigarette and the rest of her breakfast. I think a good hour in the separate room at the back of the night office might have left her in a more amiable frame of mind. How the girls can believe the minor loss of privileges for such a major disturbance is punishment, I cannot know. If I was one of them, I would be every bit as defiant whenever I could, if the consequence was such.

Jacky and Leanne are going to Sydney today with Mrs Dean to the ward stores in George Street. It is an indication that both - state wards - are soon to be released. Every six months the Department of Youth and Community Affairs issues a set of summer or winter clothing to its charges, also another set whenever they leave an institution. Both girls tell me they will throw the clothes out as soon as they are released. Their lack of respect for what I, as a tax-payer, contributes to, angers me, but I hold my tongue.

While Mrs Dean is absent, I polish the night office floor and occupy the rest of my time with helping out in the kitchen. Two cooks are absent and two buckets of potatoes have to be washed and peeled. It is quiet working in the kitchen, and Pommy Bill, the head cook whom I'm helping, is friendly. He tells me about his numerous jobs as cook in places as far afield as Tasmania, New Zealand and the Cocos Islands.

After lunch when the girls are out from school and business studies, I relieve on playground duty, calculating that we officers have only a 40 minute break all day, which includes dashes to the loo whenever the senior remembers to relieve us. Some of the old hands talk of years ago, before the advent of cooks or laundresses, when

youth workers did these jobs. Teachers, I'm sure, never realise how easy they have it, compared to us. After my harrowing experiences at Reiby, I'm sure I'll treasure any teaching job I'm ever lucky to get.

Day 10

Today the chopper falls. Mrs Dean and I are working in the night office, having gotten the girls off to school after a fairly easy morning when Matron approaches. - How do you feel about taking over the cottage tomorrow, Mrs Bates? she beams.

I feel trepidation. Probably not trepidation, but outright Fear. - Righto, I beam back.

She eyes me, trying to gauge my true feelings. I back down somewhat. - You haven't heard about my key episode, obviously, I blurt out, trying to sound flippant, but vigilant as to her reaction. It all seems like a gigantic game of action and reaction in this place. - What episode? She is genuinely surprised.

I relate it all. - What did you learn from it? she asks.

I tug at my lanyard.

- Are your keys securely fastened now? I nodded vigorously.

- Yes!

- Okay then, she says. Tomorrow.

Mrs Dean has also been promoted to Acting Senior Officer for Kennedy and will be "around" when needed. As Matron walks away, I release a stream of air slowly from my tight lungs. I'm packing it! There is so much I don't yet know. What if? What if? My mind switches into chaotic what if, where, when, oh my god, how will I ever manage on my own mode.

At recess, Mrs Mullaly calls me over. - Dianne... For the first time, my first name is used. - Do you think you can manage it? she asks, softly, sounding concerned.

I nod. I like Mrs Mullaly. There is something soft and attractive about her under her senior's stern veneer. She has expressive eyes that see everything; she never appears put out. However, this may change as our relationship develops, after all, she is my senior. For the time being I have to trust her, and hope that trust is justified. She offers me words of advice and encouragement for which I am grateful. Between morning tea and lunch break I think of Mrs Mullaly, also tomorrow's added responsibility as I iron clothes in the night office.

Mrs Dean is in the clothing store, sorting out bundles, awaiting the new admission. Everything seems to be going smoothly until lunchtime. I am reconciling myself with the idea of being thrown into the deep end after such a short training period - instead of the usual four weeks - when I run into trouble which demoralises me.

It is playground duty time again and I patrol the grass compound, alert to the lurching inmates. They gather about the picnic tables, arguing about boyfriends and mutual dislikes of officers, parents and anyone else who represents Authority. Sandra approaches me with Leanne H. Both regard me with suspicion, or is it defiance? Sandra provides the ammunition. - Sandra, I say, please unroll your T-shirt sleeves, that's not the way to wear your shirt. (Am I being petty, I think, trying too hard to be

"the tough guy"?)

Sandra refuses point blank. I repeat my order, politely. She continues to test me. I tell her I wouldn't like to take points from her. - I don't care, she challenges. Leanne looks on with the supercilious smile of hers which can be so irritating. - You asked for it, I say.

I write "Care of Clothing" and "Following Instructions" in my report book. Two points lost.

Sandra slowly, casually, unrolls her sleeves. I am prepared to forget the incident, but I cannot restore the two lost points. - Thank you, Sandra, I say.

Within minutes, she has re-rolled the sleeves. It all seems so petty, but it's the principle of acceptance of authority, of community - or in this case - Reiby rules. I approach her and ask her once again to unroll her sleeves. Sandra refuses, accuses me angrily, loudly, of "picking on" her. - OK, then, I say, you know have a red "O."
- You can't do that! she roars. - We'll say, I say, moving away.

I resume my position in the shade under the verandah. Now Sandra is moving about the compound, enlisting sympathy and mutiny against the "bloody new officer who thinks she can throw her weight around." Donna J moves over to me to stoutly defend Sandra against her red "O." - You can't give her a red "O" during lunch, the others bellow at me.

I act non-plussed, casting my eyes around the compound, careful not to look at their indignant faces. They send Cherylynn up to bat. - You can't give her a red "O" during lunch, Miss.

I ignore her. She repeats the protest again. Twice. - Do you want something, Cherylynn, I ask, finally acknowledging her presence. - You can't give a red "O" during lunch, she insists.

She repeats this again, like a bugged record, but I continue to act as if unmoved till eventually she takes the hint and moves away. It is obvious now that I can't give a red "O" during the lunchbreak and I am really annoyed that no-one in authority has explained the special lunchtime rules to me. I am also annoyed with myself for going off the deep end over such a trivial matter, especially on the day before I'm to take charge. All this power, and it seems it's gone to my head! There is enough resentment already among the girls towards the officers without my adding to it.

Mrs Mullen ("without the 's'," she informs me when we first meet) calls me over. Gaylene has whinged to her, and it seems, so has every other inmate. She tells me once, this annoying woman with a whining voice, she tells me ten times that you do not give a red "O" during lunch. I feel like wrapping the frigging red "O" around someone's neck (preferably Sandra's). Mrs Mullen, does, however, have a good perspective on the dishing out of points which I take careful note of, and that is to hand out lots of points for various offences, rather than one red "O". That bloody red "O" is only to be used as a last resort.

Meanwhile, Mullens continues, you can deduct points all over the place for Interaction, Polite Speech, Co-Operation, Care of Clothing, etc. There are far more

points deducted this way, whereas only three are taken for a red "O" and you have closed all doors to the girl.

It is sound advice and I will heed it.

Finally, half an hour of ear-bashing later, I escape from Mrs Mullen. I have now entered the am points, a normal duty of the cottage officer, so I have officially assumed her mantle. It is a heavy, onerous mantle, and I feel much weighed down by it. Driving home, I am wild with passions.

Day 13

It is my third day on duty by myself as cottage officer, and it's a job proving quite an experience. The first day was testing, with the girls determined to exert their power, and I equally as determine to exert mine. Sandra was the first obstacle, the guinea pig egged on by the others. From the moment she awoke, she was loud and defiant. I laid points on her for Interaction, Polite Speech and Co-operation. I recorded points against the others too, most especially Leanne, for rocking the boat. Later, in the dining room at breakfast time, the girls whined. - They've only got them points the bloody officers, without them they wouldn't know what to do, I overhear. - You'd all be scared of us if youse didn't have the points, Margaret challenges openly. - There's only one thing I'm frightened of, Margaret, I declare.

They silence, waiting for my admission. - Bats, I say. - Bats! Hah, who's scared of them silly things, Margaret replies.

Somehow I get through the first morning before dismissing the girls into the teachers' hands. I then spend the rest of the day attending to less demanding activities such as scrubbing, polishing, ironing, sewing and so on.

Today, my 13th, is Scrub Up, and I am doubly tense, knowing what the pressures of work demands do to these basically lazy girls who have avoided domesticity all their lives. Things get off to an easy start. Although it's Friday, not the usual Saturday Scrub Up, they are expecting the chore, and arise without too much grumbling.

I have read in the hand-over book that Mary and Cherylynne are warring and that the other girls are on Mary's side, so I'm prepared for the worst. However, it's herylynne, not Mary, who the girls pick on. - Look at her, she's still in bed, someone says.

Despite the fact everyone else is out of bed, and talking and moving about, Cherylynne is slumbering. Or at least her eyes are closed. - Come on Cherylynne, I caution. Wake up!

Cherylynne is twice daily dosed with a tranquilizer, so I do sympathise with her for the effort it must take for her to rouse herself from heavy sleep. But I am determined not to grant favours. Cherylynne rouses and arises, but she is in a Bad Mood; of all the girls, she most hates Scrub Up.

Now the equipment is handed out, the labour proceeds. Some girls have been granted permission to finish sewing projects this morning, so they hurry to finish cleaning. Mary is not included among them. She is alone now in the Rec room while the others are working, plopped down in an armchair, a magazine open on her lap. - Come on Mary, I say, you can read after the work is done.

Mary does not want to work. She appears not to have heard me, does not move a muscle.

I leave her alone, hoping she will get started without me standing over her. Mrs Dean is coming and going, keeping an ear open outside the toilet block in case of trouble. She, too, tells Mary to get on with her work. Mary, stubborn, remains seated. We both leave her alone for a while and turn our attention to the others. The dormitory workers, Donna T, Donna McI and Judy are working well together, unlike last week's crew. Judy seems to have changed overnight. Gone is the girl who chatted so freely to me; in its place is a sullen-face creature. Nothing I say cheers her, she snaps at me, even when I ignore her. I decide to withdraw from her too.

Cherylynnne is putting on a turn about "bloody having to do all this work", but Sandra is busy in the dining room, hoping to get another top mark for her cleaning as she did last week. When I make suggestions re scullery duties, she snaps at me, but I stand my ground. - I will leave you to your work, I say, but I will check on you every now and again. If you're doing a good job, I won't say a word, but if not, expect me to comment.

Still muttering under her breath, she accepts this, and, in the end, does an outstanding job. It is a shame that, later on, she loses a mark on the previous week's effort, with the result she is dispirited and angry. I return to Mary, nose still buried in a magazine. - Put it away, Mary, I insist. - I finished my work, she says, head down. - I'm sorry, but you have not finished. You have to vacuum around the edges of the room, also you must dust. - Fuck off! She throws the magazine on the carpet and saunters to the sideboard, checking out other magazines. - I won't have that language, Mary, I say. You have just lost a point for Polite Speech. Now get on with your work immediately or you will lose another for not following instructions.

Mary tells me in no uncertain manner what to do with my points. I seek out Mrs Dean and ask her opinion. Mrs Dean speaks with Mary who abuses her, as she abused me. Mrs Dean gives her a red "O" for Polite Speech. It means absolutely nothing to Mary. Foul-mouthed and yelling, she spits on the floor and walls, grabs a handful of magazines and flops down to look at them. We leave her to herself in the Rec room while Mrs Dean reports her behaviour to the senior. Mary's is punished by having all her privileges - swimming and roller skating, which she was looking forward to - withdrawn until 2pm. - Can I go roller skating after I do my chores, she asks me.

- Not this morning, I reply. -Ah! fuck you! she repeats.

I leave her alone.

Now Donna McI asks if she can go outside to clean the girls' sandals. I tell her I will check with the senior if it's okay. - I'm allowed to, she says. - I'll still check, it won't take a moment.

Donna unceremoniously dumps the shoes at my feet and marches off to the Rec room. I try explaining to her that, being new, I don't know the rules, and she will only have to wait a short time.

Sure enough, when I ask, Bay 3 - or privileged - girls are allowed outside to clean shoes. When I go to the Rec room to tell Donna, I find her agitated and looking out of the window. - I told you, you fucking bitch. You don't ever listen to me... . She storms in a rage out to the locker room.

Back to the phone I go, ring through to the seniors' office. - I'm having trouble with Donna McI, could I have a senior over, please?

Poor Mrs Dean gallops to my rescue again. She talks for a long while to Donna who has hidden in a change cubicle. Later, when she emerges, she threatens to "chuck one" if she is refused the week-end leave due to her today, tomorrow and Sunday. Due to her outburst, it is refused. Feeling she has absolutely no control over her anger, she asks to be isolated in a single room. - Before I do something, she explains.

Now Mary and Donna both are segregated in single rooms. And I feel that I have lost control. The sewing girls have lone departed to the school block, Gaylene is working at the centre's medical clinic, Donna T is at the dentists'. Now there are only six girls left to clean the cottage, and they are seething with having all these extra chores to do. Joanne is the only girl who has continued with her work without comment, without fuss. She does extra tasks, for which I am grateful. even when she becomes loud-mouthed with complaints towards the end of the shift.

As the girls line up outside the cottage, awaiting inspection, I feel close to tears at the way things have gone. We don't do too bad overall, but I rate the girls an eight and a half out of ten for Co-operation. Probably far too high. Sandra, though, whinges about my low mark. They all blame me for Mary's being in the single room. - Be quiet, I say. You don't know the full story.

We sit for a while in the sun, then I take the girls for a swim. Mary comes with us, but is forced to stand out. She is still hostile, calls me "white trash." She is prejudiced against whites: earlier, when I insisted on her getting on with her work, she accused me of treating her "like a black slave." Her loud obscenities here outside near the pool earn her another period of loss of privileges - until 10pm - so she still hostile when I escort her back to the cottage when the others depart to the film down in the hall.

I leave her - thank goodness - with Mrs Nelson in the staff kitchen where she has been assigned cleaning up duties. Appropriately. Mrs Mullen screams at her and she never gets out of line with her. Perhaps that is the only treatment she understands.

At 2pm, after my eight hour shift, I am well and truly ready for my four days' leave.
Day 14

It is my first day back after a very restful leave: I feel ready for anything! "Anything" arrives in the form of Mrs Mullen, the English officer who has decided to make a list of all my shortcomings as an officer. She has, she informs me, the moment she lays eyes on me as a sign on, "checked" with Mrs McEwen, the cottage supervisor, and Matron to see if it is all right to tell me that I did a lousy job on Friday's Scrub Up. She confronts me with the list and I nod my acceptance of her criticisms, though I feel scorched inside at her presumptuousness.

At the staff meeting which follows this "Professional Insight" session, Mrs Mullen angers me even further. During discussion of the Kennedy girls, the question of Mary's personal hygiene arises. - It's a black smell. I know. They all smell the same those blacks, she announces.

Mrs Dean, Sue McKewen and Nancy Nelson say nothing, but I can't resist the challenge. - I have black friends and they don't smell any different from you or me, I say.

No-one comments, but Mrs Mullen won't be silenced. - It's a black smell.

Nasty woman.

When I collect the girls from their school lines at three thirty, the reception is far from flattering. - Oh no, it's her! Joanne booms from the head of the line.

Various groans of rejection ripple down the line. Regardless, I smile cheerfully.

Two new girls have been admitted since I last worked. Cheryl is a tall, attractive girl, without - and she is a rare exception - tattoos. Billi-Jean seems to pale in comparison: she is dull-looking and overweight, her only visible asset her startlingly blue eyes. Eyes like Margaret's.

Since last week, Mary has been visited by her brother, Wayne. Apparently this is the first time she has met him. At 14, a year or two younger, he is going through an identity crisis, and wanted to meet her. I have no report on how their meeting fared. The Aboriginal Medical Centre in Redfern has also been in touch with Mary, sending her a small parcel, with Alice, the Aboriginal District Officer from Liverpool, has also made contact. I feel delighted with all of this, having had made contact during my days off - and without the knowledge of the Reiby authorities - contacted the Liverpool office which has followed through. I've also consulted a literature consultant about children's books featuring aboriginal protagonists to lend to Mary, as she can, and does read.

Afternoon shift today - as usual - is much easier sailing than morning shift. At this time there are no work pressures on the girls, no cottage duties except for those whose turn it is at waitressing in the dining room, or working in the laundry. Weekday afternoons are the time for relaxation and for personal ironing.

After dinner - the usual meat, gravy and three veg, and desert (tonight, apple sponge pudding and thick custard) - the Bay 3 girls - those on privilege for consistent, good behaviour - are allowed to choose three new outfits of clothing for the week. Donna McI has apparently forgiven me for our run-in which cost her week-end leave, for she plants a kiss on my cheek in the course of the evening. After much deliberation, she chooses a strapless dress, hoping she can obtain a suitable bra to wear with it. Leanne, again in Bay 3, is due for release on Friday, though she does not yet know this. Poor kid is suffering a heavy head cold and asks for an early night.

Tonight the girls are so much more pleasant. After the ironing is completed, we go outside for a game of cricket with a few of the other cottages, including the (younger) boys. Later, when we've come indoors, Matron arrives with a box of Christmas decorations. Margaret announces she wants to put them up, and is joined with some

of the others. I notice those eligible for day leave, who are hoping for Christmas Day with their families, don't volunteer.

The tinsel and pretties are strung with care, the cottage seems happier somehow. In the foyer, Cherylynne, who is now chatting to, and calling me "Batesy", lavishes care on the Christmas tree before coming over and dropping a peck on my cheek. Wonder of wonders! The authorities have decided to leave Cherylynne in our cottage now as she is getting on quite well with the others. Only Donna McI is narky towards her, this harkening back to when Cherylynne arrived from Minda Remand Centre declaring Donna was "a lesbian". Donna is affectionate, but she has shown no sign of being gay. She keeps her distance from Cherylynne, though becomes snarly when she thinks the younger girl is encroaching on her territory.

In the Rec room, Donna has assembled some of the girls and is lecturing them on careers in the Royal Australian Army. Her father is in the service, and she is aiming to enter it herself on discharge from Reiby. The girls, especially Joanne in her loud, booming voice, are full of questions.

- Can you have tattoos?
- What's the sex life like?
- Can you get drunk?
- Can you swear?
- What time do you get up in the morning?

This latter question is from Gaylene, who drags the chain every morning. - Revelry is... begins Donna. - What's that? Sandra interrupts. - Getting up time. It's 6.30 am.

Gaylene loses interest. The Army sounds too much like Reiby for her liking.

A question of vital interest to the girls is whether or not their past misdemeanours are held against them. - No, says, Donna. Not juvenile records.

A positive point in favour of the Army.

I had another slip-up in my security surveillance today. During the cricket match, Sandra has approached me with a sheepish look on her face. - You forgot me, she says.

It seems that when Mrs Dean and I had lined the girls up for cricket and marched them outside, we'd left Sandra snoozing on the lounge room floor in the private space alongside the record player. Embarrassed, but nevertheless relieved that Sandra hasn't gotten up to mischief while alone in the cottage, I report my mistake to Mrs Mullaly. No fuss is made about the incident, but I have learnt another valuable lesson: always count the girls when you move them from area to area.

During dinner Mary acts in a silly manner and is corrected several times. Finally I am forced to take a point for polite mealtime behaviour. It makes no difference. The second time I deduct points, she verbally abuses me. Fortunately, Mrs Dean is dining with us. - Leave the room, Mary, she commands.

Mary turns on her, swearing, and is punished with a red zero. Within minutes, the Supervisor, Mr Knight, is contacted, and Mary is taken away to be put into Isolation

for the night. the girls are subdued, but don't seem to blame me. In fact, during Smoko, Margaret, who has been unusually subdued tonight, comments
- This is the first time you haven't slammed us with points, Miss.
- It's the first time you haven't all treated me like a moron, I retort.

This is digested silently. I take advantage of the lull. - I told you the first day I was on by myself, that I would treat you all politely and with respect. And if you wanted to treat me the same way, good, but if not, that you must be prepared to suffer the consequences.

Again they listen quietly and without comment. Perhaps I'm getting through at last?

One thing I learn tonight from Margaret is the need to be firm with the girls. Margaret relates an incident at today's Vacation Play Centre where she lost points for telling a teacher to "shut up." - Why did you say that to her, Margaret? I ask. - She said we could take our macrame back to the cottage. Then she said we couldn't, then she changed her mind again. So I got fed up with her and told her to "shut up," Margaret says.

The lesson for me is to be quick to make - and stick - to a decision. It is not always easy in this place, of course, when you have to think through consequences of your decisions; the girls are equally as quick to take advantage, to manipulate what you say.

After dinner, it is again peaceful. Girls crochet, spreading their long granny shawls over their knees, as they listen to records, or to Donna lecturing, occasionally glancing up as Margaret, Donna T and Cherylynne put the finishing touches on the Christmas decorating. Billi-Jean, the new girl, is trying to take up the hem on her dress and is making an awkward job of it. - Have you hemmed before? I ask.

She shakes her head. - Nobody ever taught me how to sew, she says.

I give her a rudimentary lesson and wonder why she is in Kennedy Cottage with the older, brighter girls, and not in Parry with the duller girls.

At lights-out, the girls bid friendly goodnights to me, with a special farewell I note from Margaret, still subdued. I think she is probably missing Judy who has transferred to Minda Remand Centre on appeal. Judy has withdrawn her allegations about sexual interference from her step-father, and should be absent for the whole of the holiday period.

It is quiet in the dorm, the overhead fans whirring softly in the warm night. The now repaired cassette player issues forth soft, soothing music. We depart, leaving the girls in their separate cocoons of silence.

Gillian and Donna McL, Bay 3 girls, have been granted special permission to sit up late watching television. Gillian has asked to see me "privately."
- I'm concerned, she says, adjusting her face to Serious, at the way in which the girls are treating you.
- Oh? I commented, my face - I hope - a blank mask.
- You must learn to trust them more, she confides, leaning forward, mimicking, I'm sure, the manner of social workers, many of whom she must

have encountered over the years.

I know she is trying to manipulate them for her own purposes, but I listen, eyes locked to hers, before thanking her for her concern. Tomorrow, her fifteenth birthday, she is leaving us to go and live with her sister, Sylvie, in an open institution for state wards. I wish her luck, and suggest she apply the same maturity and intelligence she has demonstrated to me, to her "new life." I have a feeling we will see her again, but hope sincerely that we will not.

Kath McKuen relieves me at ten o'clock, and I sign off feeling pleased with the way in which things went during the shift, but sorry nevertheless, for Mary, locked up for the night in Isolation. I wonder how she is, how she will be in the morning? Week Four

On the Christmas Eve pm shift, I have a pleasant time with the girls, enjoying my first taste of being Miscellaneous Officer. Joan Mullen is the cottage officer today and I am her off-sider. Being Miscellaneous means I can talk more casually with the girls, not having to meet the demands for trivial matters such as granting permission to go to the toilet, or to the dormitory and so on.

The girls today are engaged in making pillow cases. Cheryl, who proves to be both intelligent and artistic, designs patterns on the slips which the others colour-in with Hobbytex. Some of their efforts are commendable, and it is gratifying to see them actually engrossed in and enjoying a hobby. Time drags for them in Reiby; none show an interest in studying, few in reading, and television is a mere diversion. The only activity - other than swimming - which seems to interest them, is crotcheting granny squares. They've even taught me to crochet!

Later this evening, five girls including Cathy who was admitted today, go with me to Whitten Cottage where the seniors have organised carol singing. A cassette tape plays traditional carols, backed by "oldies" like Bing Crosby's rendition of "White Christmas": we moan along, out of tune, but feeling contented, under the open sky. Clouds hang heavy obscuring the stars. We look for, but cannot find the star of Bethlehem. We chomp into supper, then go into the cottage to look at the beautiful gingerbread house that Mrs Neilson, one of the officers has made them as a Christmas treat. Before returning to Kennedy, we stage an impromptu square dance on the grass, swinging partners, and laughing merrily.

Back at the cottage the others are sombre-faced around the television. Moments later, I am ready to leave for the night and my two days' leave. Then, surprise, surprise, the girls are clustered about me, ready with Christmas kisses. Only the two new girls - and Mary - keep their seats, so I make a special point of wishing each of them a happy Christmas. New Year

This morning, Saturday, is Scrub Up. I have slept badly, worrying about this day that I hate. It means having to stand over the girls as they do their cottage duties. Not only that, but Reiby rules require that they clean meticulously. I know this from having had to listen to complaints from the supervisor who double-checks every nook and cranny when he or she inspects the finished job, and allocates points for the inter-cottage competition.

In the night office, before waking the girls, I read the hand-over book and discover that once again Mary is in isolation, this time for striking Billi-Jean. Points are deducted against other girls for poor interaction with Billi. I smell Big Trouble brewing.

In the dormitory I greet the girls, but the trouble I suspected is reflected on their unresponsive faces. They snap at Billi-Jean from the moment of wakening, blaming her for Mary's being in isolation. I try to break up the conspiracy before it assumes greater proportions.

Belinda is a new girl, transferred from Matthews, one of the other Reiby cottages. She is reluctant to answer my questions as to why she is with us - there having been nothing recorded in the hand-over book. I suspect she may be a trouble-maker when she informs me that a Matthews' cottage officer was attacked last night. An aboriginal girl, Robyn, was charged with the assault, and Belinda, it seems, was threatened with the charge, but for some reason it didn't proceed. I keep my eye on her all morning.

Now the girls move into their assigned work areas, reluctant, as always, this time making snide remarks about Billi-Jean. Cherylynne, usually at the bottom of the pecking order, is the worst offender, with Gaylene being especially bitchy. Jacky is causing trouble. She continually whinges at me for not carrying out Scrub Up supervision as the "other officers" do. Then she outright refuses to complete her job, scrubbing out the shower cubicles. I call her back three times, and she loses as many points for polite speech, interaction and following instructions.

Donna T is working well by herself, cleaning out the Rec room while I've left Donna J and Cheryl secure in the knowledge I can trust them to do a good job in the Dining room. Margaret is happy working alone in the kitchen.

Suddenly a commotion breaks out in the dormitory where Cherylynne, Billi-Jean and Belinda are working. They are name-calling and generally being disruptive. I intervene, suggest they each take an area of responsibility if they cannot work well together. Throughout the four hours of Scrub Up (excluding breakfast), I am in and out of the dormitory, breaking up arguments.

Cherylynne is being particularly troublesome today. She moves in and out of her work area, the locker room, time and again, refusing to follow instructions, then she swears at me repeatedly when I correct her. Mrs Mullaly, the senior, arrives in response to my plea for help and talks to Cherylynne, but when she leaves, the verbal abuses continue. I record three red zeroes against her. When Mr Dwyer, the Deputy Superintendent, pays a visit, I ask him that she be Unprivileged. He backs me up and punishes her with 24 hours with privileges. Within the hour, Cherylynne has struck Cathy on the chest and stomach even as I stand directly in front of them. I report this later to the office as I go off duty.

The seniors are in a quandry. What can we do with this intractable eleven year old who is legally three years too young for Isolation? Mr Dwyer suggests that Cherylynne be put on work roster while the films are on, but this is playing into her hands; whatever her reason, this is just what she is hoping for. Mrs Dean suggests that Cherylynne be made aware that the Superintendent is informed of her delinquencies; another suggestion is that she be put in the single room for the duration

of the movie. Both suggestions are well received and acted upon after I leave off my shift. Personally, I would like to flog Cherylynne, she is more trouble than all of the girls put together. Not that physical abuse is my solution for all problems, it's just that nothing seems to work for this girl.

Meantime, Scrub Up, fraught with its many stresses, continues. After breakfast, Billi-Jean comes to me in tears. - I just can't work in there, Miss, she stammers.

I send her into the Rec room to cool down for a while, and to give me time to think what to do. Earlier I had spoken to the senior, Mrs Mullaly, about the problems with Billi. I decide to phone her again and she is up again in minutes. She moves about the cottage, gauging the atmosphere, while I am talking to Billi. - Now tell me what the real problem is, Billi, I say.

Unexpectedly, Billi, in tears, embraces me, sobs into my shoulder. At that moment Cherylynne enters the room from the hall where she has been stood out for foul language and not following instructions. - Sucko Billi, she yells across the room.

Poor Billi, it is difficult not to feel sorry for her. Mrs Mullaly finds a job for her in the staff kitchen away from the cottage bullies. Later, when the girls have finished their duties and are waiting in the Rec room for inspection, I ask them, as a group, to explain to me what the problem is with Billi. To a person they tell me she behaves perfectly around the officers, but is spiteful and physically abusive behind our backs. - Are you perhaps all picking on her, I ask. - No Miss, they chorus.

Remembering that Billi has a history of troubles with peers in previous hostels, also at the Minda Remand Centre, I am inclined to believe them. I also suspect that while she may give them ammunition for their retaliation, there is also an element of undeserved bullying. I suggest to the girls that they try to ignore Billi if they are unable to interact pleasantly with her, but ask them at the same time to try to be a little more tolerant.

Mr Dwyer carries out today's cottage inspection. Team by team, he calls the girls into their work areas to allocate points for the cleanliness of their area. The rest line up outside, convinced our cottage will not win the inter-cottage Scrub Up competition. As each worker reports back from the inspection, she moans about an "8", or even the odd "9". I add an eight and a half for attitude, probably too high. - We'll never win, Sandra groans. The others concur.

Finally Inspection is over, and the girls file back in to get changed and tidied up for lunch. Half an hour later, Mr Dwyer announces that we have won cottage clean from nearest rivals Matthews, the current title holders. Jubilation! Matron calls by to check the result. She has promised the cottage an LP of the girls' choice if they can win three Scrub Ups in a row. This has been round one, and I have fought all the way to win it. I can't say I feel the girls deserve it, but Mrs Mullaly tells me there are problems galore in Matthews today after yesterday's assault, so we had an advantage.

Gillian returns from her fortnight away at Renwick in Mittagong where she has been on extended leave with her sister, Sylvie. It is good to have her back as she backs me up, pointing out things to the girls I have told them already. They are more inclined to listen to one of their own. If you have Gillian, or indeed any of the girls, on side, it

makes for a much easier life. As soon as she walks through the door, she thanks me for the letter and Christmas card I sent her at Renwick. I'm pleased it meant so much to her.

Four hours after I start today's shift, Donna J remembers the chocolates I left the girls as a gift, which they distributed on Christmas Day. A few half-hearted "thank you's" follow. It makes me feel good that I can in any way help these girls feel less isolated and uncared for.

Donna T is now acting in a less aggressive manner towards me than she has in the past. I hope I have broken through her armour plating of sullenness and defiance with my concern and consistence. I shall miss Margaret in the cottage when she leaves, as it seems she will soon; usually she is ever defensive of me, but just lately she seems to have come over to my side. Today she is withdrawn and quiet, obviously anxious about an anticipated visit tomorrow from her mother. This will be her first visitor in a month, although she has received quite a few letters.

At 2pm, change-over time, Mrs Mullen tells me I am writing far too much in the hand-over book. I defend myself, saying Mrs Dean is satisfied. Later, in the seniors' office, I ask if it is too much. Mrs Mullaly and the others seem surprised that I ask such a thing. I say that I have just been told I wasn't doing it correctly, insinuating that Mrs Mullen is on my back again. I really don't know why the woman has taken a set against me; I have tried my utmost to be consistently pleasant and professional in my dealings with her.

Driving home, I remember I haven't filled out the task sheets and know that Mrs Mullen will verbally report me for it, or at least comment about it in the hand-over book for others to read. Early January

The new year has ushered in numerous problems with my charges, it having been a long and difficult week on morning shift, waking each day at 4.45am to report to work by six, and then arriving home in the afternoon, exhausted and ready for nothing but sleep. At the moment I am on four days' leave, taking stock of what I am doing wrong.

The most recent problem seems to be with Sandra, the friction between her and I rubbing off onto the others. Sandra has a bee in her bonnet, believing that I am "picking" on her. I examine my conscience and finally conclude that she is simply the victim of her own making. I have no grudge against the girl, I believe I treat her just as fairly as I try to treat them all. The girls I seem to find the most difficult to deal with are Cherylynn and Mary. So what can I do to appease her, make her see that I am truly treating her no differently from anyone else in the cottage? If anyone else was as demanding and abusive of me as she currently is, I would treat them no differently than how I treat her.

This week she is the dining room waitress, responsible for setting the tables and issuing us with necessities such as sugar, salt and margarine. Yet she has been behaving in a silly fashion, slopping tea on the table, spilling sugar, then giggling at her mistakes. New Year's Day was disastrous for her, and for me. She ranted and raved when I tried to correct her, then stormed out of the dining room, throwing her tea towel on the floor in disgust. When I recorded three red zeros against her, she sat in the hall yelling, "I don't care!" In between times, she sang "Talk to me", a song on

the current hit parade. She refused to talk to me, and when Mr Dwyer, the Deputy Superintendent sent for her, she was loud and defiant towards him too.

Now she sits in the corridor, dejected, moaning about her fate. I think she is on the edge of a mental break-down, but nothing I try to do seems right to ease her troubled mind. I offered to take her shopping - she receives no mail or visits from her parents who live in Queanbeyan - yet she says "no." Earlier this week she asked to go out on weekend leave with Gaylene and her grandparents, but of course that was denied. The Reiby powers-that-be worry she may abscond if I - or anyone - takes her on any outing, so there she sits, largely the victim of her own making. And there is nothing I can do.

Today at breakfast during smoko, Cheryl hides her face, red with stress, in her hands as the girls quarrel. I talk to her in the hallway and suggest that as she is finding it difficult to cope with the continual tension in the cottage and with her own problems, that she might think about writing or drawing as a means of relieving her stress. She seems pleased with the idea, and surprised when I tell her she has rated highly in intelligence tests.

Cheryl is friendly with Cathy who is also finding events in her life overwhelming. In Cathy's reports I read that recently for the first time in thirteen years her father has been in contact with her; until two years ago she always believed her step-father to be her natural father. Cathy is happy about this new turn of events in her life, but is troubled by a pending court appearance for assault.

Assault is a word on the tongues of Reiby staff at the moment. A new officer in Matthews Cottage was this week struck on the head by a fourteen year old aboriginal girl, and was treated for concussion. The girl, Robyn, appeared in court for the offence but only received a three months' sentence to run concurrently with her present term. She is, of course, being punished no more than she would have been for her original offence - also an assault - but what has angered the staff is the fact that the Deputy Superintendent, Mr Dwyer, asked the magistrate for leniency for Robyn. I feel very angry that he would not defend the rights of one of his staff, and now find it difficult to speak civilly towards him: I by-pass him, if possible.

Billi-Jean Lovelace skips across the compound. Skips is a light word to use in describing such a cumbersome child as Billi. Her womanly figure is short and dumpy, her breasts sag in an ill-fitting bra. For today, Billi is happy: she has found friends and her glee at this is reflected in the way she follows them so blithely across the playground. It is the first time since she came here over three weeks ago that she has formed a liasion with any of the girls. Donna McI and Jacky have decided to "adopt" her. Each of them has a sophistication that Billi lacks. Poor child, there is a pathetic quality about her that makes her the butt of fun, the weak one in the herd that causes others to harrass her, to mess up her locker and then stand innocently-faced by while she pleads for assistance. They think she is stupid. She stands in front of me now, her blue eyes brimful of tears, stammering, "But I'm not stupid, Miss, I'm not, I'm not...".

Poor Billi, I know ther are wrong, and you, in that emotionally confused brain that has seen you through so many muddles in your young life, know too that they are wrong. I've read your file: I know you have spent years nursing your alcoholic mother, that you have sought refuge in youth hostels, that you have been turfed out of

them for promiscuous behaviour. How a man could desire you, overweight and dishevelled, your clothes unkempt, your hair uncombed, I do not know. But they look at you for their own carnal desires, and you take the moments of intimacy they offer, seeking a love that has probably eluded you right through childhood, and now into your adolescence. I see you hiding in corners pretending to read books or fill in crossword puzzles, and know that you are all too aware of the gossip and belligerent stares of others, Billi, your life is like a crossword puzzle, full of emptiness and potential, and, like the words you seek in dictionaries, the answers you choose do not always fit the clues given. I suspect your life will always be like a puzzle and you will always be seeking answers.

Today I am on afternoon shift. It has been a difficult shift so far, but now the girls have settled in front of the television and are watching a Western movie. Cowboys and Indians on horses charged across the screen. During a lull, Jacky and Belinda, both aborigines, begin a conversation. Jacky: I'd love to be a Red Indian ... I'd scalp people. Belinda: I'd scalp all white people. Jacky: Oh, I wouldn't scalp all the white people... (Here, she turns to look at me, sitting quietly near the door)... just some people. Belinda: Oh, I'd scalp all the white people.

Margaret, white and blonde, butts in aggressively. Margaret: What are you, black or something... Belinda: No, I said... Margaret: What would you kill all the white people for, then? Belinda: I said if I was a Red Indian, I'd scalp all the white men.

Sandra, whose nickname among the girls is Dopey, now joins in: Sandra: What colour are Red Indians? Jacky: Red! Margaret: They are not! Sandra: What are they then? Margaret: They're human beings... SPASTIC!

No, I could never have invented that dialogue! Late January

This is to be my last day at Reiby. I was not even slightly aware of this until late yesterday afternoon when a telegram arrived offering me a teaching position with the Department of Education. After waiting unsuccessfully for three years for a position, I am staggered by the offer. I make a dozen phone calls, trying to ascertain my position. Can I transfer from the Department of Youth and Community to the Department of Education, or will I be forced to resign? Not able to get a clear answer, I speak to Paul Rawlings, one of Reiby's three deputy superintendents. He refers me to Mr Halliday. It seems I will have to resign.

In the dormitory the girls are quiet and moody. It is Friday, and a long weekend looms. Those who have extended leave (until Tuesday afternoon) are extra careful not to get involved in trouble, but those who have no leave feel they have nothing to lose. Tension has been building up in Donna T all week. She is resentful that last weekend, instead of visiting her, her family chose to go swimming. Billi-Jean, too, is on tenderhooks: she is hoping to get day leave with her mother. No-one has yet told her that the District Officer does not want her home with her super-critical mother.

Within minutes, Donna, the week's dining room waitress, and Billi, her assistant, are fighting. It seems Donna has been riding roughshod over Billi this past week, bossing her around. I break up the argument and set them back on task. During the morning, Donna continues her surliness, snapping again and again at Billi-Jean and the others, then at me when I challenge her with loss of points if she continues. Finally, she settles down but when she comes to me for her breakfast cigarette and I tell her she

has forfeited it because of her behaviour, she blows her stack, swearing at me then rushing from the room.

Belinda, too, is aggressive this morning, loud-mouthing and answering back every time I attempt to speak to her. My favourite senior, Mrs Mullaly, is gravely ill, so I send for the senior, Mrs Dupont, her replacement. Mrs Dupont seems ultra lenient with the girls, she checks the cottage far less often than Mrs Mullaly. For now, Mrs Dupont speaks for a while up the hall with Donna: when she returns I am amazed that she criticises me for taking Donna's cigarette. I defend myself, saying that it is normal practice with other cottage officers to withdraw cigarettes if the girl has been rude. She tells me I should have given Donna a choice of punishments. I acquiesce, but still feel her criticism is unjustified.

Later Mrs Dupont complains to Mr Halliday about the matter, but he sides with me. "Dupie", as the girls call her, is still not satisfied, and threatens to take the matter further. I have told her that I feel that as the smokers are older, they should therefore be expected to behave in a more mature fashion, and more able to accept the consequences of their unacceptable behaviour. Obviously she did not like me telling her this.

This morning, being my last, I am looking about the cottage for books from my personal library which I have loaned the girls over the last few months. Gaylene, who likes to read of drug offences of prominent people - has my Book of Lists in her bedside locker, so I begin to check through other lockers. Today Belinda and Cheryl are the dormitory girls - their offsider, Cherylynnne, was discharged yesterday. As I am checking, I see and hear Belinda leaning out through the dormitory door, calling to someone: - She's in here. Where's Cathy?

I call Belinda to come back into the dormitory, but she ignores me and continues her conversation until eventually she withdraws. I have checked all the lockers and the dormitory tidiness, and dismiss Cheryl and Belinda from the dormitory. As I follow them through the hallway that leads into the shower room, I approach Cathy who has her back to me, just as she calls: - Don't forget to jump her!

I brush past Cathy, who looks at me with a surprised grin.

Mary jumps away from the shower door entrance. - Mary Ward! I yell.

Mary darts into a toilet cubicle. - Mary Ward, you come out of here right this minute, do you hear?

Mary takes a few moments, during which she calls: - All right! All right!

The toilet flushes, she flounces out.

- Can't even go to the toilet, she says, brushing past me into the Rec room.

- Get up the hall, Cathy Byron, I command.

- What did I do? Cathy protests loudly.

I search for Belinda. All innocence, she is in the Rec room.

- Miss, can I get changed?

- No.

- Why not?

- Cheryl, I say, you may get changed.

Cheryl quickly departs. Belinda demands attention, Cathy is calling out: - But what did I do?

Mary hides in the corner playing jacks. All the other girls know what is going on, but they pretend ignorance. I am furious they did not come to my defence. They would certainly have known what was going on. I telephone Mrs Dupont and report the incident immediately. She moves post-haste to the cottage. Because of the fuss, I am late getting the girls ready for school line-up. I herd them together quickly, tell Donna, Belinda and Cathy to report for standing out punishments at recess.

As the girls move down towards the school room, Mrs Dupont turns them back, criticising their poor mobility. They try again. Donna T has another dig at Billi-Jean who snaps back. I correct both of them. Billi pulls free of the lines, and angrily questions my judgement.

- You just don't understand. You always pick on me...

- Get back into the line this minute, I say. Black zero for mobility. You will also stand out at recess.

I know Billi is being victimised, but much of it is because of her own stupidity at being drawn into arguments and not attempting to side-step them. Besides, I know if I don't punish her in the face of her disobedience in front of her peers, they will resent her even more and accuse me of favouritism. Already they suspect - and rightly so, though I have denied it - that I sent Billi a parcel a couple of weeks ago. I felt so sorry for the girl, but I know now I was wrong to care that much.

During the recess break, I see Mr Halliday in his office about my resignation. He is, surprisingly, sympathetic about my dilemma. He allows me to back-date my resignation, freeing me to leave today so that I can take up the position next Monday.

Delighted, I return to the compound where Donna, Billi and Belinda are already standing out on the walkway.

- Here she comes, the old bat. Where's she been, she's late the old bat. Donna yells this across the compound for all to hear.

I by-pass her and go straight to the school administration building where I speak to the school administrator, Mr Parrot.

- Would you please see Donna T, I say, she has been abusing me verbally in the playground.

Back on the walkway, I address Donna:

- Mr Parrot wants to see you.

-What for? she bellows.

Mr Parrot is nearby.

- Just come here.

Begrudgingly, she approaches him.

Cathy demands to know why she has been stood out. I call her aside.

- You were out to get me this morning, weren't you, Cathy? I accuse.

- Is that what you think? she splutters. I just said to Mary, don't forget your jumper.

- That's not true, I reply, and refuse to listen further. Even if I had entertained any doubts - which I haven't - Cathy has just incriminated herself. I didn't say anything about being jumped. She has merely surmised this is what it is all about. I send her back to her place of detention, and then have to contend with Belinda who is yelling at me. I put the three of them on Silence. Cathy ignores me, calling out:
- You're stupid, if that's what you think.

I stand her further up the walkway away from Belinda where she slouches, sulking.

The staff at talking of the possibility of sending Belinda to Kambala, an institution for grossly delinquent girls. Belinda has already been involved in the other incident in Matthews' Cottage where she was supposed to have egged someone off to assault an officer. When the officer asked other girls to go for help from the senior, Belinda laughed and refused to budge. All the seniors feel she is malicious, managing to stay behind the scenes, but responsible for mischief.

During lunch recess when I stand alone watching the usual cricket match the boys play, some Kennedy girls come up to talk to me: Margaret, Donna J and Gaylene. Donna T, on the outer edge, keeps her distance. Donna J is waiting for her brother to take her out on extended leave. They're headed for Gosford, he's late and she's annoyed. The girls make small talk and I am tempted to tell them that I'm leaving permanently, but decide not to say anything: they have enough distractions and disappointments ahead with the disturbance of the holiday weekend.

When they turn to respond to the school bell, they call "Bye Miss Bates," little realising it may be the last time they will ever see me. I have decided to offer to write to them if they would like to write, and I'll visit them also, if they are enthusiastic about taking up my offer.

At 2pm, as I prepare to leave, I make my farewell rounds. All the staff are pleased for me, pleased that I am getting a better paid job. Matron wishes me well, tells me that she is sorry to be losing me.

In the seniors' office, I hand in my master and locker keys, and am just ready to depart when a piercing siren curses the air, a red light flashes on a board in the office.

- Emergency, emergency, yells a senior, Mrs Smith. The hospital block!

At least eight adults suddenly materialise and race for the hospital block. I stand, dumbfounded. Matron rushes across the office.

- Turn of the siren, she screeches.

Within a matter of moments, the siren abated, admin people and seniors return to their posts. It has been a false alarm. One of the boys, leaving the block after seeing the doctor or dentist, has found a switch, and, tempted, pressed it.

What amazes me is that I have never, until now, been told about the emergency PANIC BUTTON in every cottage which is to be used only in cases of riot, fire and any other emergency. I have never seen such a button, wouldn't even know where to begin looking for it. Trust a little boy to find it!

The last person I see before I am off the grounds is Mick, the handman's offsider. Mick, a good-looking 17 year old, tells me he has been forbidden from working inside the Reiby compound. The Kennedy girls have made improper suggestions to him, and have asked him for cigarettes and other contraband.

- They're not all bad, he observes.

- You have to be careful, I caution.

Then I tell him Mrs Hever's story about one girl, who, as she was talking to the worker out of sight of the others, started yelling, "Don't hit me please, you're hurting!" when no such thing was happening.

- Oh, but there's some nice little kids in there, Mick says. You know that real little girl...

- Shirley? I ask.

Mick smiles.

- Yes, that's her.

I grin back.

- It was Shirley who played the game with Mrs Hevers, I say.

He shrugs, lesson learned.

- Little bastards, they should all be thrashed.

THE END