

Relations

My Aunt Miriam is a seamstress. Whenever I ask her about it, she says that she had no choice. She is an orphan; one of three siblings, the other two being my father Lew and my uncle Neil. Their parents died when they were young and they were adopted by their mother's brother, Arthur, who became commonly known as 'Uncle Art', and his wife Emily or 'Em'.

"Em was a seamstress, you be a seamstress too," was reportedly what Miriam was told by Arthur.

Dutifully, she set out to work at Harold's Haberdashers. She hated it, of course. The bosses were too strict. The lunch breaks were too short. No seam could ever be straight enough. She was good at her job, though, and when she was in her late thirties she went into business working for herself, taking in sewing at home. Well-off Auckland women would bring their daughters around to her house to be fitted for their ball-gowns.

"Don't fuss Charlotte," became a catchphrase we stole from one of these posh women.

She had used those words to reprimand her daughter. We used those same words to reprimand one another when we 'fussed' – saying that this or that seat in the theatre wasn't good enough or this slice of cake wasn't big enough or that dinner plate wasn't heated properly.

Miriam and her husband Eric would take her children (my cousins) and me away on their boat for holidays on Great Barrier Island. One time I put my hand over the side of the boat to catch a pretty floating jellyfish with clear limbs and a bright red centre. It stung me and I came up in spots, as if I had the hives. Miriam and Eric didn't fight all the time, but when they fought it could go on for hours. Eric was an ex-Navy man and he liked to drink and smoke. Miriam was firmly anti-smoking and would make him go outside to light up. Eric snored like a donkey – this problem was particularly exacerbated when we were away on the boat together, as his snores would reverberate around the launch making it difficult for everybody else to get to sleep.

Miriam's two sons, Stefan and Kent, grew older and left home. Stefan, who has always wanted to be wealthy, went into corporate banking and is now high up in Citigroup – married with two children. Kent married a woman much older than himself, who died of kidney failure, and now he works in I.T. in Nelson and is re-married with one step-daughter. My sister had a good career as a scientist, working for Fonterra, but quit to run her own real estate business when she had children.

Of all six cousins, everybody except me has children. Some of them, like Kate, bred early, up the duff at sixteen, producing six children, all of whom she home schooled. Others, like Greg, who didn't marry until he was in his forties, produced late. It's no great loss to me. I can barely look after myself, let alone a baby. I would drop it, lose it, poison it by accident.

I know it's not Hiroshima, but Eric was at Christmas Island when the Valient dropped the H-bomb. The crew were instructed by the officers to turn their backs to the bomb and to cover their eyes with their hands. The explosion was so bright that the crew could see right through the skin and flesh of their hands to the bone, like an X-ray. Their skeletons lit up. Moments later, they were told to rise to their feet and turn to face the blast. A mushroom cloud gathered on the far horizon. Some people were knocked to the ground. Birds lost their eyesight. Panes shattered. Trees lost their leaves.

Many of the servicemen developed cancer and other ailments such as diabetes. Claims were made to the government and widows who were down on their luck were paid a small pension – not enough to compensate them for the loss of their husbands but still, it was something. My uncle died early; aged fifty-five. There could have been other factors involved in his death, of course – his heavy smoking and drinking, his steady diet of fish and chips.

It's an image I can't shake from my mind – the skin covering the hands and the eyelids becoming transparent. The five fingers of the hand, white and skeletal, outlined against the sky - the blast much brighter than the sun.