

Shirley Compton married Sampson Collins in the Sydney Registry Office in 1936. There were no witnesses, unless you count an eight-year-old boy told to sit on a government-issue bench, be still and be quiet. I did as I was told but found some relief by picking the ladybird bug off the lily in the urn-like vase next to me. The delicate thing crawled over my fingers. Both of us were quite uninterested in the group of three huddled together in front of the big desk where a man in a shiny black coat droned away. Suddenly in that high-ceilinged room there was silence – the droning had stopped. I placed the ladybird back on the lily and looked up. My father had wrapped himself around Shirley and his mouth was pressed to hers. Agnes Compton's arms were folded tightly across her meagre chest. The clerk coughed meaningfully and the two broke apart. My father beckoned to me.

“Over here, Alan. Come and kiss your mum.” I did not move, so Agnes, for the first time ever, laid a scrawny hand on me.

“Do as your dad says,” she said, then for my hearing only, “Mum – I *don't* think.”

I stood up in my new clothes from Morry's market stall. I took a deep breath. What did Shirley smell of? The thought, once alerted, was irresistible. I ran to her thinking she would bend down to me but she stayed upright. My father lifted me up to her and thrust me at her. Her arms remained at her side. Those perky breasts bored into my chest, the flimsy fabric of her dress was dragged down by our clumsy contact. I drank in her smell deeply. It came from her modest cleavage where beads of perspiration mingled with her necklace of tiny glass beads. Probably from Woolworths where there was nothing over two and sixpence. The scent came from the cheap end of the perfume counter featuring the rage, Californian Poppy.

That was it. It gave off an intense sweetness that, had it been a food, would equate with golden syrup. I pulled back from her and my father let me down, rightly perceiving that there was no evidence of affection from either of us.

“Ah, don’t take any notice of him, Shirl, he’ll come around or I’ll want to know the reason why.” This last was thrown in to show his new wife who was boss around here.

The registrar came out from behind his desk and shepherded us all out into the corridor. “You’re a lucky young shaver,” he said, “new mum and all. Do as you’re told and everything will be right as rain.” He didn’t believe a bloody word of it. He went back inside, shaking his head at the folly of those who stood in front of him. I suppose he and the two clerks he had dragooned as witnesses had a lovely time comparing this drab little ceremony with others; perhaps the one difference was me – a skinny kid in itchy new market-stall clothes, defying the accepted view that Jewish kids were plump as saveloys.

The Ford tourer stood at the kerbside outside the Commercial Travellers’ Club; it was palpably weary from its last journey over the crude roads of western New South Wales. My father had done his final “sweep” of the state at the behest of McPherson Hotel Supplies. The publicans still had not recovered from the Depression and had no need of new glasses, were resigned to the heavy chipped crockery and the dwindling stock of cutlery pinched by down-and-outers. “Sorry, Sam old son, the missus ’d kill me if I bought so much as a bloody teaspoon.” The carpet snake my father had kept coiled up on the back seat of the open car as a deterrent to thieves had gone to Taronga Park Zoo. “*Ganef*” he called it, Yiddish for robber. Now the Ford, once the envy of the other commercial travellers, was up for sale. My father’s unused order book was now mine to scribble in. Lovely! It still had an unused sheet of carbon paper

in the back. I had found the book stuck in the back of the rear seat, slipped it under my jumper and said nothing.

Out in the street once more, stared at by the lunchtime office workers, I felt a hand like a claw on my coat collar. Ma Compton pulled me away from Sam and Shirley, who were posing for a photographer offering instant pictures for a shilling. The picture man's head was now under a black cloth and his flailing arms and muffled voice directed my father and new mother where he wished them to stand. A bulb on a cable was pressed, a little juggling under the cloth, dunking something in the billycans, withdrawing them like a stage magician and *voilà!* A shiny picture which this wonder-man deftly slipped into a cardboard frame. "Oh, luvverly sir and madam, yer the best pair o' lookers I've shot today. 'Ere, 'ave a look for yerselves." Sam came forward. The wonder-man reminded him that it would cost him a deener (one shilling) to look. My father fished the coin from his fob pocket. Shirley said, "Ask him for another for mum." The photo man went through his tricks and came up with another copy. Ma Compton's claw took it like a dirty dishcloth. Nobody bothered to show it to me. In fact I didn't see it for a long time after – thirty years after, when I raked together the remains of my father's life left in a Bondi rooming house.

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