

Never on a Sunday

Beach Saturday was the high point of the week for all of us - including, I suspect, my father, if only for the relative peace it gave him.

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... it was one of the few places you could light a fire in the sand.

That my loathing of Sundays has lingered for over fifty years might be surprising, but for my first seventeen years, Sundays were a by-word for boredom and guilt. Following the dreary church ritual, came a heavy, bland and greasy roast meal, usually lamb (which I still cannot stand the smell of). Father snored the afternoon away in front of soporific television sports commentators droning on mindlessly about who-cares-what. For Mother, far from a “day of rest”, Sunday was the day to labour noisily over some especially unpleasant chore, aimed at shaming anyone who had a less disagreeable activity planned, regardless of how much they had washed up, vacuumed and clipped hedges during the week. Any complaints would be met with a withering reminder that you had had plenty of fun on Saturday. Friends, if they ever visited, did so only once. By Sunday evening, you were looking forward to getting back to school.

Well, I reasoned: if I were going to made suffer all Sunday for having enjoyed myself on Saturday, I'd better do so. And so, Summer Saturdays, which were nearly always spent at the beach, were by far the high point of my week. Worth every bit of the mind-bogglingly complex logistics and planning, they entailed.

The cast comprised Mother, her sister-in-law, Nancy, our two cousins, Geoff and Colin, aged about the same as my brother, Chris and me. My father was also involved, in an absent sort of way: never accompanying us, but enjoying Saturdays every bit as much as we did, if only for the relative peace it gave him.

My mother was the long-suffering, abstemious, devoted wife. Her *leitmotif* was to do everything the Hard Way. Nancy, her sister-in-law, was a Wronged Woman: wronged, as it turns out, by my mother's elder brother, Ernie, who had walked out one day and never returned. Both women worked hard on their victim-hood. They were morally irreproachable, endlessly self-sacrificing and hard-working for their children and their self-image. Beach Saturdays were part of this narrative.

We took everything with us: food, drink, plates, plastic mugs, cups, saucers, cutlery, a billy-can to brew the tea in, tablecloths, dish-cloths, soap to shower with and clean clothes to come home in. Everything. The only things that were bought were bus, train and ferry tickets and hot water for the after-lunch cup of tea. Nancy typically packed sandwiches, while my mother, who did not work outside the house, could do much of the preparation on Friday: salads, cold meats, boiled eggs and any left-overs from the week's meals. Each mother would make a cake or, in my mother's case, an apple pie. Plastic bottles filled with cordial

avoided buying soft drinks. All would be meticulously arranged in giant rectangular plastic baskets.



Nancy, Geoff and Colin lived in Hurstville, a nondescript suburb a few kilometres south of Kingsford Smith Airport. In the early days we lived in Belfield, an even less-descript suburb about ten kilometres west of Hurstville, but in 1964 moved up in the world, to Hurstville.

While the mothers preferred Bronte, with its vast lawn and neat picnic cabins, we preferred

Manly, with its amazing array of beaches and the best body surfing you can find anywhere. Add to that the excitement of the ferry ride: on the old ferries, where you could stand at the bow and get drenched with spray from the waves buffeting the old ship as it cut through the warm, blue water.



In fact, the journey from home to beach was part of the fun - well, the last part of it was. To get to the fun bit, we would walk five or ten minutes to the bus at Belfield to take us the mile and a half to Belmore station. There we would take the train to Central, if we were going to Bronte, or Circular Quay if heading to Manly. From Central, a half-hour bus ride would take us down the steep, windy road to the beach at Bronte, where we would lay claim to a picnic cabin facing toward the beach. From Circular Quay, a half-hour ferry ride would take us to Manly harbour pier and pool, from where we would walk fifteen minutes or so along the Corso to South Steyne. There we would set up on one of the picnic tables under the Norfolk pines on the promenade facing the beach. From Hurstville, things were simpler, as it had a railway station, obviating the bus transfer to Belmore Station. Having left home at about 8.30, we generally arrived at the beach at about 10.30.



While mothers set up the picnic and gossiped we shed our shorts and tee-shirts and, in our swim-suits, made a bee-line for the surf, where we stayed until lunch time. After lunch, one or two of us would then be assigned to have the billy filled with hot water from one of the nearby take-away food shops. Otherwise, the four of us ran around, swam and surfed, returning to the picnic table only when hungry.



We each had some sort of beach gizmo in addition to the beach towels given us at Christmas by the local RSL club. Chris had flippers, goggles and snorkel. My pride and joy was a surf-o-plane, an inflatable rubber fore-runner to a boogieboard. Impossible to get bored riding the nearly endless, perfect pipelines that Manly is so good at, though the surf at Bronte is more capricious. I had been given the smallest, most basic model, which suited me, as none of the boys ever wanted to use it. Small but indestructible, which was just as well, given the beating I gave it. But at the end of the day, I would carefully deflate it, wash it

in fresh water and dry it, then fold it in four and secure it with a giant elastic to carry it home by its two handles. It served me for many years.

Both Bronte and Manly are astonishingly beautiful by just about any standard, and both had other interesting things to do apart from swimming and surfing. At Bronte, we could explore its expansive parkland and occasionally venture north along the road to Tamarama, the next beach along. There was also the pool, though you had to pay to get in - about five cents, I think, which put it out of bounds for us. Manly was much better. First of all, it was huge: three kilometres long, compared to Bronte's 250 metres. You could walk northwards to North Steyne and back, which would take the best part of an hour. But there was also Fairy Bower, with its little (free) pool, and Shelley Beach, which boasted excellent snorkelling, as well as interesting headland, complete with WWII bunkers for spotting Japanese submarines and gun turrets for shooting at them.



The two elder boys were a bit eccentric in their ways: Geoff would chase seagulls on the water's edge, while my brother dug holes in the sand. As the afternoons wore on, people began to drift home and we had the beach largely to ourselves, Chris' holes would get bigger and deeper. We helped him dig for treasure: coins, jewellery, make-up. Interesting became serious when one afternoon he dug up a builder's shovel and a week or so later, an old wire-mesh bed base. The four of us now operated a systematic sand-sifting enterprise, keeping track of which areas had been dug up and filtered, with shovel and bed-base re-buried at the end of the evening, ready for the next week's prospecting.

Apart from the lucrative digging, Manly was the strong preference for another reason: we were much more likely to stop there for dinner than we were at Bronte, though I'm not sure why. For dinner, the mothers mostly preferred the Harbour Pool, which was sheltered from the wind. The attraction for us were a long boardwalk and three pontoons you could swim out to, with diving boards, diving wheels and slippery dips into the water. You could also walk along the picturesque foreshore.



But Shelley Beach was my favourite. Although an ocean beach, it was protected from wind and currents, one reason it was so good for snorkelling. It was one of the few places you could light a fire in the sand and occasionally, we'd buy a fish from one of the fish shops and barbeque it, though more often, we'd just toast what was left of the bread to go with the left-overs from lunch.

It was so peaceful, and the six of us would generally not leave to come home until 20.30 or even 21.00, staggering exhausted to the last ferry, falling asleep on the train and bus.

Trying to forget that the following day was Sunday