

## Viaduct

I wagged school when I was 13 and nearly died. It was 1966, and a beautiful Spring day.

Tired of the tedium, monotony, discipline and boredom school offered, my mate, John, and I were off for an adventure. We had no set plans at first: just a walk up 'Monastery Hill' and over the farmland on the plateau and then John suggested we explore the viaduct.

On the previous day I arranged to meet John after the start of school, so we weren't spotted by friends or teachers. John lived around the corner from me, and it was on the way to our adventure. We didn't think about lunch or drinks, and it was the days before suncream. A day's adventure was an exciting prospect, so we didn't dally, and made a 'beeline' for the massive, 19<sup>th</sup> century steel structure.

We traipsed through paddocks toward Monastery Hill. Navigating between recently bailed hay our senses were enveloped by moist, sweet odour of freshly cut grass. Monastery Hill was steep and a popular 'torture track' for our school cross country runs. Half-way up the hill

a small gate, just large enough for pedestrians to enter, gave access to the monastery. Adjacent to the neglected, overgrown path, just inside the gate, sat a lonely grave and headstone. Experiencing an



eerie feeling, we crossed the road. Just a quiet stroll to the top made the heart race, sweat form, and legs ache, but as we passed the gate, a spine-tingling shiver of fear increased our pace of ascent.

I learned later that Monastery Hill was named after the Novitiate Monastery, built at the top of the hill for the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate.

Pausing at the top of the hill, on Bluestone Bridge Road, we recovered our breath and gazed at the magnificent view. Paddocks and houses stretched across the plain toward Corio Bay. Our elevation amplified the constant drone of impatient motor vehicles below.

Directly ahead the narrow, undeveloped, ‘farmer’s track’ beckoned. Now on the plateau, walking was easy, and our pace quickened. In the valley, a short distance to our left, Cowie’s creek meandered. In between the creek and our path was a railway line. Direct as an arrow, the line pursued a slight uphill gradient to our destination. We decided our route was better. It also offered potential for exploring and was away from the critical gaze of railway employees.

A short distance ahead, our path met the railway line, and we walked past a small, old bluestone railway bridge, that spanned a small creek. We had explored a similar bridge closer to home on another one of our adventures, so we hurried on toward our



main objective: the Viaduct. We needed to get home just before school finished. Neither John, nor I had a watch, such a luxurious adornment was beyond my family’s means.

From the old bluestone bridge the old Moorabool Railway Station (originally Steiglitz Road Station) came into view. We thought it was occupied, so had to be careful passing it. The station was a magnificent, but neglected, two storey bluestone building. John said it might be haunted prompting me to imagine spending a cold, dark winter’s night in the station. The

thought made my spine tingle. The possible presence of a ghost or ghoul raised our excitement and strengthened our endeavour to pass unseen.



Stealthily, and with trepidation, we crept past the station by entering a paddock abutting the railway property. Trying to avoid scrutiny, our constant gaze was on the building's upper windows. We took

protection behind bushes and looked for any prying faces from human, supernatural or ghoulish residents. That was part of the fun and the challenge we sought.

Moorabool station's position and size seemed incongruous to its need. There it stood in the middle of farmlands with little or no use to anyone. I doubt if a train ever stopped there. Its purpose was as mysterious as its location, and there were no railway line switch points to change or railway gates to open.

Beyond the station was a dirt track parallel to the railway line. Just when we thought we were in the clear we were viciously attacked...by a nesting magpie. Our only shelter was the dilapidated farm fence that separated the railway line from a paddock. After a short time, the swooping ceased, either due to the bird's fatigue or the fact it had given us a clear message.

A little farther down the track we achieved our objective. What a magnificent sight befell us as we stood at the edge of a valley at the beginning of the viaduct. Far below, the Moorabool Valley stretched before us, illuminated by the soft spring sunlight. To the left of the viaduct a patchwork of well-tended, manicured, market gardens stretched to the highway. New growth sprang from recently tilled soil, and fresh blossom clung tenuously to orchards of fruit trees.

To our right, open paddocks spread beyond our vision, dotted with generously spaced sheep. Below us, and meandering through the verdant valley, the sleepy Moorabool River was outlined by ancient river gums.



Ahead, the majestic viaduct stood: old, strong, tempting, tantalising and spacious. Its vast size enticed us to explore and examine. A strong deck was supported by huge basalt piers. More than 30 metres high, the deck gave us a commanding view of the fertile valley it spanned.

The railway line was located on the left side of the wide bridge deck and a huge space on the right made provision for future lines. Warily, we walked adjacent to the rail line and to our surprise and delight, an opening was revealed between the rails. It was a manhole with the tubular, steel ladder inviting us to descend; and who were we to reject that invitation?

Carefully, we climbed down one rung at a time to reach the suspended platform a few metres below. We discovered a small, secret chamber that was now our special hideout. This was what we came for: excitement, fun, exploration. Narrow and rectangular, the wooden platform was a safe haven from any prying eyes above, but our presence would be obvious and exposed to those viewing from afar.

Ascending the ladder, we returned to the viaduct's deck, and I made my way to the wider side. Peering over the edge I could see the Moorabool River snaking lazily through the paddocks. A gentle, warm zephyr from the north, combined with the sight of a precipitous drop below, raised the goosebumps on my bare, pale forearms. It was peaceful and serene. I reflected on the tranquillity of the setting and how my schoolmates were coping with the drudgery of lessons. My musings were abruptly interrupted by a fearsome sound. It was a train whistle from the nearby level crossing! Concealed behind the bend, no more than 300 metres away, the train was powering on and ignorant of our presence.

Where was I to go? John was close to the railway line and made his escape down the manhole. I was at least 30 to 40 metres away and stranded. I had a dilemma: it was try to disappear down the manhole, or stand exposed on the viaduct and be seen by the driver. I took my chance with the manhole, knowing the option of aborting was available if I couldn't make it.

A chill ran down my spine. Hairs stood erect on my exposed arms. Adrenaline pumped through my sympathetic nervous system. I sprinted toward the narrow opening. Was this opening my salvation or a lure to my death? No opportunity or time was available to debate either proposition. I arrived at the door as the train approached. Oblivious to my presence the train's engine powered relentlessly onward. Would it claim me as its unintended passenger? My previous descent had informed me about ladder's direction. I headed for the right side of the entrance. My back faced the advancing train. Its proximity could be judged only by the escalating engine roar of powerful diesels. On my previous descent I had the luxury of taking one cautious step at a time, but this time the descent was different. No time was afforded for procrastination, caution or careful foot placement. All I could do was drop...

Providence, serendipity or some miraculous occurrence found me standing on a rung of the ladder half-way down to the platform. My head was well clear of the opening and by some automated, intuitive, response I found that my hands grasped the side rails to prevent further descent. I hugged the ladder tightly, pressing against the cold, steel rungs for security. A split second later the train thundered a few metres above, shaking my ladder, deafening my ears and vibrating through my rigid body. Pulsating violently, the diesel engine proceeded first, followed by the rhythmic clickety-clack, clickety-clack of carriages. Frightened, but safe, I clung to the ladder until the train past and the noise receded. My narrow escape left me exhausted and shaking. Fear and relief replaced adventure and excitement. I wanted safety and security.

*“That was fun.”*

John quipped seated on the timber platform below me, but I didn't appreciate his sardonic humour. My only urge was to leave, and I told John:

*“I'm going home.”*

John was unimpressed. He wanted to stay and explore, but I was adamant. He had no choice but to agree. We made our way past the swooping magpie, not incurring her wrath, and bypassed the station the way we came. I was half expecting its occupant to be on the lookout. We retraced our route and I returned home by mid-afternoon. No time was spent exploring. John was angry and sullen about our early departure and we seldom spoke, but *he* wasn't the one who could have been the train's next passenger.

Mum returned from work that evening. She accepted my sickness story and wrote an absence note. I didn't tell her, or my school mates, about my day's adventure.

Events in one's life can change your future. That manhole *was* my salvation, and that event was my closest encounter with death. It was an event that gave me an understanding of how

precious life is and how easily it can be extinguished. The viaduct for me was more than a bridge: it was a turning point. Instead of shunning school, I embraced it. I pursued future adventure and interests within the school. I found that involvement in sport and extra-curricular activities overcame the tedium, monotony, and boredom I once tried to avoid. On reflection, my experience at the viaduct was a bridge to a different life.

John and I had no further adventures together. He was one year older than me and left school the following year. I never saw him again.