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## From the Window

by Malcolm Walker

From the window all that could be seen was the overarching wall. Unrelieved and unscalable, obliterating the view of the wharves and warehouses beyond. It was difficult, but not impossible, to detect the changing seasons. As a child the overwhelming gloom stimulated my childish imagination. Images of phantoms and gremlins abounded.

It was 1904 and I was but a child, one of six born in Wapping. My mother had given birth annually throughout my early years. Death was ever present. No sooner had I been told that I had yet another sister or brother than death would follow as night follows day.

We lived in a tenement block, four storeys high. Our ground floor accommodation had two bedrooms, one for our parents and one for the children. Poverty pervaded every aspect of our lives. As the eldest daughter I felt wholly responsible for my sister Kathleen whose fears were magnified as a consequence of that murky forbidding passage between our tenement and the dock wall.

My father, from whom I learned an enduring code of conduct steeped in honesty and duty, was a teetotaler and non-smoker. To be such at that time and in those circumstances was no mean feat. Alcohol was the stuff of life for so many. Perversely and paradoxically the only time I saw my father cry arose when he became unemployed. For some time I became aware of a surfeit of foodstuffs which appeared unexpectedly. It seemed to me that he must have stolen them from the ships in the neighbouring docks. It took me many weeks to summon the courage to confront him. His tears flowed as he explained that he had no other means to feed us. It was not long after that he secured a job as a casual labourer.

Even now after all these years I cannot comprehend how my mother coped. She it was who made us a family despite constant hunger, the unrelenting cold and ill health.

Her ability to cook something from nothing, her skill in adapting discarded clothing, not to mention her humanity and kindness rendered her a saint in my eyes.

The noises, the smells, the sights, the feelings evoked in those dank streets of Wapping entered my soul. A gas lamp some fifty yards beyond our bedroom window cast a dark shadow obscuring the drunken shenanigans each Saturday night.

It was not until I was sixteen that I became aware that another world existed not one hour's walk away. I felt a compulsion to explore the docks and wharve, which had formed the backdrop to my early years. I now work on the liners sailing from London to Australia.