

# THE CAT'S WHISKER

- Adrian M<sup>c</sup>Glinchey

**I** <sup>66</sup>WONDER if I'll ever find that missing socket-wrench," Allen muttered under his breath, as he commenced the task of tidying up his tool shed.

He pottered about for a few hours, sifting and sorting through the clutter, hanging the good items in their rightful places on the shadow-boards, or putting them neatly away into drawers and cupboards. In fact, some cabinets were so messy he had to empty them entirely of their contents to sweep them clean from the inside out, spraying a blizzard of sawdust, old rusty nails, and washers out onto the floor. He had almost finished sweeping one compartment when his brush struck an object right at the back.

"Hmm, I must have missed something," he said.

Hooking the object out with the hand brush, Alan could see that it was some kind of electronic device wrapped up in a clear polythene bag as a dustcover. The object in question appeared to have suffered extensive damage; its outer plastic case had been smashed to pieces and the inner workings were severely crushed.

Alan moved closer to the window for more light, and squinted to identify each component inside the package. He took out the pieces and held them up closer to the light. '*I'll be darned if I can remember where this came from!*' he mused, even though he recognised the object as some kind of old pocket radio. Alan was no electrician, but he knew what capacitors, transistors and inductor coils looked like. Then it all started to come back to him.

"Father and Son's Day!" he said softly under his breath. "That's it!"

As Alan withdrew into his innermost thoughts, he recalled his father once taking him to a Company BBQ. The firm that his father worked for would host social occasions for employees and their families. *Father and Son's Day* was one such event. Alan was just a boy of only nine or ten years at the time... it all seemed to be another lifetime away.

Each child was given a small gift. Alan received a pocket Crystal Radio. It was a very basic portable battery-operated transistor that had a loose wire extending from the plastic case. The wire ended in an alligator clip that you attached to an

earthed metal post. This served as an *aerial*. The reception was poor with constant fizzing and crackling, but to a boy Allan's age it was quite a marvel when he brought in some rock-'n-roll or country music from the airways. He had only ever heard this on the bigger radios that people had in their homes.

Later that evening, Allan's father told him stories about the days of earliest radio, when they used large clumsy valves, instead of the silicon transistor chips that allow *modern* radios to be more compact. His father also described how the simplest radios worked by moving a wire back and forth across an iron rod to bring in the various radio waves. This was why old radios were sometimes referred to as '*The Cat's Whisker*', after the thin whisker-like wire brushing against the metal receptor rod.

A cloud of depression slowly descended upon him as the memories became too painful. Not many things in Alan's childhood had happy endings. For some weeks he was proud to carry his pocket radio with him wherever he went, and would gladly show it to his best friends, letting them each have turn at tuning the station dial. Then came that unpleasant afternoon at Mick Doyle's place.

Allan and Mick were kicking the football around in the back yard when Mister Doyle arrived home from work, in one of his customary foul moods.

"Mick, get inside! Your tea's ready, the man growled ferociously."

Mister Doyle picked up the pocket radio and held it to his sweaty blue singlet as he fiddled with the dials. He was vexed by the technology. Alan had left his boyish possession aside on the veranda, while he played ball with his friend. As Mick scampered inside, Mr Doyle threw the radio down hard onto the concrete paving slab, as he foot-stomped on it at the same instant the alien contraption hit the ground.

"You'd better get yerself home, boy," he yelled at Alan.

Terrified, Alan grabbed what was left of the mangled radio, and fled without offering any argument.

The discomfort of the situation made Alan return to his senses; he was once more a man of forty-five.

He carefully placed the damaged radio back into its plastic bag, laid it on top of the rubbish heap, and reverently draped an old dust rag over it, almost as if he were burying a deceased family pet. He then proceeded to transfer the mound of rubbish into a large dustbin, ready for the next garbage collection. Closing the door behind him as he left the shed, Alan realised that he had also closed the bag on a lifetime of memories.