

Seniors' Stories

Volume 6



FRONT COVER: ART OF AGEING 2020 EXHIBITION

Tayla Martin

Peter Driscoll b. 1935

Now in his 80's, Pete says, "I don't let getting older stop me, I just keep doing what I'm doing. It's going to happen regardless."

Acknowledgements

This collection of 100 stories is the sixth volume of *Seniors' Stories* written by seniors from throughout NSW. The theme of this year's edition was *Resilience*, and each story reflects this theme in its own unique and inspiring way. Most of the photographs in this edition are courtesy of past and present Art of Ageing exhibitions. These photographic exhibitions celebrate ageing and dispel the negative myths and stereotypes of getting older. NSW Seniors Card would like to thank the 100 authors whose stories are published in this volume, and the many other seniors who contributed to the overwhelming number and quality of stories we received. We would also like to thank Colleen Parker and the project team from the Fellowship of Australian Writers NSW Inc., including those involved in the design and printing of the book.





A message from the Premier

I am pleased to introduce the sixth edition of Seniors' Stories which is invaluable reading, both for its insights into lives of older Australians and the depth of creativity and literary talent in the NSW seniors community.

The theme of this edition, Resilience, is particularly apt for these times and, as the authors open up about their experiences, their true spirit, determination and adaptability shines through.

Storytelling has long been a means of passing knowledge from generation to generation. Seniors' Stories builds on this tradition, fostering connections between young and old.

Congratulations to everyone who contributed to this book. I encourage you all to read these stories and to write and share your own.

Gladys Berejiklian MP
Premier

A message from the Acting Minister



I am delighted to introduce the sixth instalment of Seniors' Stories and would like to congratulate each writer for their contribution.

During the past year, seniors in NSW were invited to contribute an original story based on the theme Resilience. Little did we realise how appropriate this would be for our 2020 edition, in the context of the challenges we have all gone on to face.

To that end, I found reading this year's stories particularly inspiring, and a real reminder of the remarkable strength of seniors in NSW.

We were once again overwhelmed by the sheer volume and the literary talent of seniors from across NSW. The 100 selected stories included in this book are truly extraordinary and we can all learn from the incredible tales of achievement, loss, creativity and connection.

This latest volume of Seniors' Stories is just one way of celebrating the experience of older people and giving younger generations an opportunity to relate and learn from our seniors.

Whatever your age, I hope you enjoy and are inspired by the stories featured!

The Hon Dr Geoff Lee MP

Acting Minister for Seniors



Foreword

One of my favourite childhood memories is sitting around a bonfire by the banks of the Goulburn river every New Year's eve with my parents, family members and friends, hearing yarns about all the years that had come before – or what us kids called 'the olden days.'

"Ah well, I suppose it hasn't been a bad year" they'd always say, whether there'd been too much or too little rain, bumper crops or none at all, accidents, tragedies, or good fortune.

I hale from resilient farming stock you see, and you were taught from a young age you just had to cop life on the chin.

I always loved my mother's recollections of riding her pony to school, caring for her blind mother who could still play the piano, and describing an era when the postman actually whistled as he delivered the mail on his bicycle, no matter how bad the news during World War 2. My father spoke of being thrilled to receive an orange and a book on his birthday during war time when such items were considered luxuries.

Simple anecdotes, to name just a few, but how I wish I'd stored away more before they died and the bonfires were no more.

Within us all, there are stories to tell and as we get older, it's even more important to put them on the record and preserve history for our families and future generations.

It's been my great privilege to capture some of them on my travels filming the ABC television series 'Back Roads'. There are so many seemingly ordinary characters in the country, towns and cities doing some truly extraordinary things. On one of our very first shoots in 2015, I met an 80- something year

old woman visiting Winton in outback western Queensland, to help dig for dinosaur bones. 'Why on earth not?!' she exclaimed. 'Write about it!' I replied. I wonder if she ever did.

On the New South Wales snowfields near Jindabyne, a local veteran Pat Edmondson saw nothing unusual about cross country ski-ing at the age of 90, and in Man from Snowy River high country, tough horsemen and women like Joan Sinclair in their 80s – who'd suffered their fair share of hardship - were still in the saddle rounding up cattle.

Right around the state, and indeed this vast country, lie tales of courage and resilience during hard times. These people are often the backbone of their communities, always on the lookout for anyone in need of a helping hand, yet they seldom seek thanks or recognition. Their experiences and stories, big and small, so deserve to be told, as you'll discover in the pages of this book.

Heather Ewart

Heather Ewart is a renowned Journalist and TV presenter, currently with the ABC Back Roads show. In 2019 she was awarded the Gold MACA Award for her notable contribution to the realistic portrayal of older people and the development of a community in which older people are valued and respected.





From the Editor

The theme this year in 2020 is RESILIENCE.

Little did we know the hardships we as a State were to face this year. How apt was our theme? It was appropriate that we received a large proportion of stories about our dreadful, heartbreaking bushfires.

The communities across the State, in fact the country, were all affected in some way from as minor as what I experienced travelling on a countrylink train returning from Sydney to Port Macquarie in November. At 2 hours into my 6 hour trip, the train stopped at Broadmeadow, the station which services Newcastle. The Attendant advised us that the train was cancelled because further up the line, a raging bushfire had crossed both the railway line and the Pacific Highway running parallel to it, near the township of Taree.

I had packed for just an overnight stay so when given the choice to leave the train there or return to Sydney to temporary lodgings at central I went into shock. To cut my story short there were no more trains for 7 days because of the danger that trees which had not felled in the bushfire, may drop across the track and the Highway so lots of clearing was needed.

I arranged accommodation, alternated my clothes each day but medications were extremely difficult. Thanks to my friend who lived about an hour away, with her complete support, I was safe. At the other extreme many lost their homes, their business, and their lives. Almost everyone was touched directly or indirectly in the most unusual bushfire season

we have experienced. The combination of lightning strikes, arsonists and the lack of clearing of the forest floors all contributed.

I feel strongly about the importance of sharing some of the stories about the bushfires in a memorial kind of way, so a change to the structure of Volume 6 keeps the bushfire stories together. The experiences were during the months of October 2019 until March 2020 which overlapped the COVID-19 virus with some stories submitted in March making mention of it. Submissions closed on March 30 so we didn't know at that stage what trials we still had to face for a few months longer. These events, as sad and as catastrophic as they are, make us a stronger society and bring forth our heroes and heroines.

I took the unique opportunity and witnessed much of the bushfire devastation. I drove west to Armidale and to Ballina via Casino then south through the Eurobodalla and Bateman's Bay areas to Merimbula conducting the Story Workshops to encourage your stories.

I thank these writers who shared their emotional tales of resilience of both nature's cycle of the environment and animal inhabitants and the extreme human torment. It was a privilege for me to read them and I proudly acknowledge your generosity in sharing for generations to come a record of the 2020 summer bushfires!

Enjoy!

Colleen Parker



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A Day I Will Never Forget

Caitlin LARBALSTIER

Gymea

Yes, it's a day I'll never forget. You heard it before you saw it, or smelt it, and before day turned to night. Each struggling breath we feared may be our last, the smoke and heat, unbearable.

The beast roared and shrieked as it tore through the peaceful valley destroying all in its path. Little did we know it was heading our way.

Our day started early like any other day, a quick cuppa, slice of toast and then out the door to check and feed our charges. Retired from our hectic jobs in the city we moved to our quiet half-acre rural plot to enjoy its peace and tranquillity. Our love of nature and animals soon saw us build a wildlife rehabilitation refuge. Here we take care of injured local native animals, before returning them to the wild. My husband Alex, volunteers at the local vet treating injured wildlife before bringing them home to be cared for by us.

For two years we had been working hard to turn our property into a safe haven for injured wildlife, to recuperate before being rehabilitated back to their natural bush habitats. When it's time they happily hop, waddle or fly out the back gate. Life seemed perfect.

We were aware of the dangers of bushfire and did everything possible to 'fireproof' our home and property and to keep it that way. However, there are times when the beast is too strong and too greedy that nothing stops it.

Having seen the reports on the devastation occurring up north our hearts went out to those effected and we prepared even more. We had an evacuation plan in place, just in case. It was stressful enough planning and preparing to evacuate our

home, carefully packing important documents, precious and sentimental items and securing it, hoping it will be there when it's all over. That's the easy part. How to prepare to evacuate animals and ensure those too large to take with us would be safe? It's a stressful task.

With Red the Wonder Dog and Harry Houdini the cat it is easy, they both knew the drill and happily snuggled into their travel crates. But how to transport four rather large wallabies and two feisty wombats, or more to the point, convince them to get into special crates for a road trip? The young ones were not a problem, they all have carry pouches and special boxes and happily go wherever we take them.

As part of our evacuation plan, we carried out some trial runs, so if the time came it would not be too stressful for any of us. Thank goodness we did.

That morning bulldozers appeared out of nowhere and cut an even larger fire break behind our property, things must be getting serious. We had heard reports of fires further south that had destroyed towns, but they were a long way from us. It's just an added precaution we thought. Until we started receiving text messages from the RFS; a new front had formed and was heading our way.

We watched, ever vigilant for the tell-tale signs, while continuing to prepare the house and our animals. We had made the decision not to stay and fight should the fire reach us; our priority was to save our animals and ourselves. Our home, our pride and joy for many years before our retirement, could always be rebuilt and new memories made, but our lives and those of our animals could not.

That afternoon we heard the roaring noise, suffocating smoke enveloped us, the sky turned black, the air heated and stilled. Evacuation orders came, not a drill this time. Our hearts pounded as we drove through the nightmare unfolding around us to friends thirty kilometres away, where we all thought we would be safe, but no, their home too came under threat from a different fire front and all too soon we were evacuated again to a community hall. Tired and dishevelled, unable to sleep, hungry but could not eat, we waited. In my 65 years I have never faced anything as daunting as this. I kept thinking it's not a bad dream, how will I cope when it is all over.

While safe at the evacuation centre, we were not immune to the powers of the beast, its smoke, its heat. Fear enveloped me, what would be left, how would we cope with the future? My fears and insecurities grew out of all proportion. When hearing of the deaths of two of our own, Alex and I held and comforted each other. How would I have managed and would I be too old to start over. Life would go on, but not in the same way.

Finally, the beast had had its way and we were free to return, return to what? Where to now, what to do, a sense of grief, anger, sorrow, despair, an empty void.

Returning home was a sad journey. Seeing the devastation, fear gripped me as we neared home. My heart broke to see our refuge totally destroyed, what would become of us and the animals? Would we stay, did we want to stay? Did we have the courage to begin again?

Our house survived, liveable and a little worse for wear, but we and our animals were safe. Soon three of our rehabilitated wallabies arrived on our doorstep, dishevelled, hungry and with minor burns. They had not given up on us so we won't either.

Nature didn't give up; she sent out new shoots of green to burst through the ashen ground and blackened tree bark.

Our endurance was stretched to its limit, but we didn't give up. Our friends, neighbours and the community have already begun to help us rebuild the refuge, now home many of the wildlife injured that day. They need us more than ever.

Courage, hope and help across all species make us a resilient bunch.

Delayed Reaction

Catharina Sheely

Broulee

"Are you going or staying?"

It's one of our neighbours. It's the doorbell at 7.30am on New Year's Eve 2019.

"Err?" I manage, brain not quite functional.

"We've been told to evacuate," he says. "Mogo is on fire and it's heading this way."

I looked up through the clear morning, somewhat unbelieving, then a rush to the phone for the Fire's Near Me app to find that yes, it was coming, and fast. I knew I should do something. Instead I stood stock still, unable to think, mind blank.

"Get dressed," said my husband as he gently lay a hand on my shoulder. "We'll pack the caravan, take it to Moruya. Get out of the way."

I dressed quickly then threw casual, easy-to-wear clothing in the van. Then drinking water, some of the cold stuff from the fridge, the coffee pod machine and milk. And the New Year sparkling wine. I was on autopilot. In an hour we were ready to go. I looked around my ten-year-old house. It was likely it would be gone sometime today. I'm an optimist but not today. In fact, I really couldn't feel anything. I picked up a few important mementos from over 60 years of living, we locked the doors and left.

Riverside Park in Moruya was already a gypsy camp of evacuees. We joined them along with friends living four doors down in our street. We watched in horror as, across the river, gigantic red fireballs flew high into the air. Somewhere I found a bit of concern for those in the path of the fire. After all, we were safe.

Then my husband decided to go back to fight for our house.

It was three hours before I heard from him again. I was tight with worry for his safety. When he returned he was pale and ash covered.

"We still have a house," he said as he dropped into a chair. "So do you," he tells our neighbours. They nod, relieved.

We returned home. My little car and I, along with our dogs, are allowed through the roadblocks after confirming our address via my driver's license. I drove into thick smoke. Trees are blackened sticks, small fires burn here and there – everything is black and bare. Apocalyptic. Still I felt no emotion and I wondered at the tears trickling down my face.

It's not till I got home and saw that our side fence buckled and scorched, the shed with our golf clubs and sporting gear gone, and the gardening shed in ashes. Our water tank looked like a Dali painting, melted and drooping, and a dreadful stench of burning. It was then I noticed the house, the eaves blackened, the wall streaked with ash. My mind told me what could have been. The two dogs stood quietly at my feet. They knew. I remained empty.

I walked into the street and swapped stories with neighbours. Some had run in fear from the fireball to the beach only to have the dunes lit by embers. A short video of the roar of the fire as it descended. How, along with the RFS, the most vulnerable house was saved by the locals.

Everyone pitched in to help.

Two men, a street back from ours, saw the flames of our sheds and rushed to fight the fire just as my husband arrived back. A water bomber dumped property-saving water on the other side of the fence. It halted the fire before it could hit two houses at our back.

Here we all were, dazed, sharing survival stories, talking as we walked between our still-standing homes and wondered how friends and relatives made out.

And still it felt unreal. I knew it was happening but I couldn't seem to stop this crazy mental split – logic but no emotion.

We camped in the house for two days with water, sewage and gas. No electricity and no communication with the outside world. The rumours were many and wild. But we survived. New Year's Day was a subdued barbecue with close friends.

Two days later we did it all over again; evacuate. Everyone in the street left this time. Still it was happening to someone else, I was an actor in the drama. It wasn't make-believe.

We settled into the Moruya Showground Evacuation Centre. Suddenly, I was too tired to move. I'd got dinner and we were sitting outside the van to eat. But I couldn't swallow. I started to cry. Great sobs that wouldn't stop. I remembered the look in the eye of an acquaintance who lost her house at Mogo and her brave smile. I saw the relief of one of our neighbours as he heard the news that the family business in Mogo was still standing. I knew my house was safe because the bush around it already burned.

Finally, the tears stopped. I looked at my husband. He rose and got one of the bottles of bubbly stashed in the little fridge. Whatever happened, we'd deal with it.

Then a friend and her 93-year-old father-in-law arrived intending to sleep in their car. We offered our annex, it was cozy and undercover. We found neighbours nearby and chatted with each. We offered help to those who'd lost everything and provided smiles and hugs to everyone.

We pulled together.

I didn't feel the danger or the horrible red monster as it bore down on things that could be replaced. Not the sense of loss. No, it was the sense of camaraderie. We were in this together and together we'd get through. It made me humble and awed. That we all pulled together. It was worth celebrating.

So we sat, neighbours, friends and pets as we toasted to resilience. We knew there would be trying times ahead but with everyone pulling together; it would get better.

I'm still tired and achy. My head thumped and not from the sparkling wine. The reaction had finally hit, after the event.

After we were spared.

Fire!

Gail Houghton

Coonabarabran

The horse's ears twitched, her eyes rolled and nostrils flared. I looked in the direction that she turned her head. I could see the wisp of smoke in the distance. Now I too could smell it ... fire. What to do?

Think ... think ... think ...

Decisions ... decisions ...

I picked up my daughter and ran inside, calling to our best dog, Mindy. I grabbed some toys and towels, placed them in the deep cast-iron bath and soaked them. I told Mindy to stay and mind Bronnie who was happily playing with her toys, unaware of the unfolding drama.

So far only the grass was at risk, but if the fire got to the sheds or the petrol bowser it would be catastrophic. The Black Pine forest was behind the house: the fire had to be stopped before it got there, once there, we were doomed.

I soaked as many chaff bags as I could handle and laid them over the front of the saddle. The horse was becoming agitated, twirling about, her nostrils quivering, eyes rolling. I tried to calm her with gentle soothing words telling her it would be alright, she can do it, we can do it. We had to do it! We had handled grass fires before; she knew the drill. It had to be stopped as a grass fire nibbling at dried Darby's Oats before it became a bush fire, consuming the scrubby bushes then grabbing hungrily at the tree trunks to reach the leaves.

We galloped towards the low flames that were creeping, devouring. We were like two armies about to battle. One lone rider facing an opponent of many twitching hungry flames racing towards me grabbing all in its path like a many-toothed mystical red beast.

I wrapped the reins around the saddle pommel and took my sodden bags, bending down right then left, beating and beating, trying to starve that many-toothed beast of oxygen, starving it enough to die. I was in a frenzy of beating and weaving like a berserker in battle. As I beat the flames from side to side, the dying flames were doing their utmost to live, scratching at the air with smoky fingers.

I was getting disorientated with the swirling smoke and the weaving back and forth. The horse began to whinny, almost scream; I was losing the battle.

I could hear a roar, there was so much smoke I didn't know which direction I was facing, was I near the pine forest? Had we turned so much we were close to the house? I decided all was lost and I had to retreat, get back to my daughter. I could grab her and perhaps we could skirt the fire to safety.

The roar intensified. Nothing is so terrible and fearsome as the noise of a fire crowning, those red hungry fingers of flame grabbing at the next tree in the canopy. Now the roar was all around me; deafening.

Doomed!

I wouldn't get a chance to return to the house.

The horse was whinnying relentlessly in terror, suddenly I heard an answering whinny.

Out of the smoke an apparition appeared, eerie black forms came shimmering from either side. The shapes took solid forms, horses and riders, each with sacks beating and beating. Beating that red monster until it was a subdued swirl of smoke, trying to be defiant but no match for the many who joined me in battle.

In the drama of the moment I mistook the roar of many horse hoofs for a crowning fire. The relief I felt when I realised the neighbours from around the district came to my aid was unspeakable. Tears of gratitude coursed down my cheeks, leaving channels on my blackened face.

With so many riders the grass fire was arrested before reaching the house, the pine forest and more importantly the petrol bowser. With blackened faces, burnt sacks and horses snorting and prancing we all converged to the house, making sure no sparks were left to grow into flames. Bronnie was still happily playing with her toys on the sodden towels, babbling to the ever-attentive Mindy, ignorant of the danger that had passed. Our bodies were exhausted. The horse's sides were heaving, sweat marks zig-zagged on their flanks. Stock horses are stoic, rallying to the touch of their trusted riders. It was almost as if each horse knew the part it needed to play in the danger that they were galloping towards when their riders saddled them, added the chaff bags and headed to that fearsome smoke and flame. Not one horse was reluctant to the task.

The horses were given much needed water and hay then allowed to wander in the holding paddock. The riders languished on the verandah with restorative cups of tea laced with sugar, the adrenaline still edging through the exhaustion. Eyes were still alert in the direction of the now spent terror. A puff of wind could feed a seemingly dormant fire in an instant. Fortunately, the air was still, not a blade of grass nor leaf stirred.

I scanned the neighbours as they began to recover. So grateful that unbidden they came to my aid. Some lived many kilometres away, yet they came. Nobody is too far when help is needed, especially when fire threatens. All our properties were rugged, if one had an uncontrolled fire all could be threatened. We were fortunate, it was just a grass fire. Speculation amongst the usually laconic neighbours on how it started seem to point to a cigarette butt thrown from a passing car. It did seem to start from the main road, so that was feasible. How it started now seemed insignificant; the land, animals and house were safe.

When the horses and men were recovered, the teapot emptied (several times) it was time to saddle up and return to their properties. A testimony to the Australian character, do the job, do it well, move on to the next task!

Firestorm

Lyn Dark

Maitland

With an illuminating flash and a quivering bang the disaster had begun. For centuries the red gum had stood proudly in the middle of the farming fields, giving shelter and protection to wildlife and cattle. Now it was in need of protection itself.

A bolt of lightning zig-zagged its way to earth, lashing the tallest tree. The strike so swift, that within milliseconds the electric rod had pierced the inner core of the gum, before exiting via an exposed root at its' base. With atomic force the bolt struck an ageing limb, severing it from the body of the tree. As the branch fell to the ground sparks emanated from its gaping wound.

Now with three ignition points the flames searched for a food source to feed the hungry fire dragon within them. Inside the trunk, flames seek out the fleshy pulp, the heat causing the gum resin to bubble. Insects who devour this sweet nectar now fleeing from their home, their attempt to escape is short lived. In their fight or flight confusion they run towards each other blocking their pathways, the boiling lava like substance quickly encasing their tiny bodies.

Parched grassy mounds wrapped around the gnarly tree roots, begin to smoulder where the bolt made its hasty exit. The base of the old gum has not seen moisture for years leaving its foundations vulnerable and the fire easily takes hold. With the flames now licking at the bark, the heat becomes unbearable. A nest secured on a branch has been abandoned by roosting magpies, leaving the unhatched offspring alone. The rising temperature too much and the young are poached within their shells. As the fire continues to rage in the belly of the gum, flames spit from the knots of the trunk. The tree finally succumbs to the vicious internal and external attack.

Before the drought the red gum stood by the banks of a deep flowing river, proudly displaying its crown of green, lanced-shaped leaves. The veins of the leaf bloated, with nourishing juices flowing through each one, the oil glands emitting the scent of eucalyptus on a summer breeze. Over years the river dried, no longer a source of water, these succulent tips all but deceased, void of the nourishment and now reduced to being fodder for the fire. Against the dark of night, their charred, curling remains glow like fireflies hanging from twigs. The heat causing seed pods to swell, split and expel their contents onto the hot ash covered ground below.

As a troublesome wind starts spreading rouge embers wildly across the field from the amputated limb, the trickle of flames quickly pick up speed and scamper across the arid ground in search of more combustible vegetation. It becomes ferocious, hunting down, injuring and killing defenceless animals in its path, the fire shows no mercy.

The mixture of dry pasture, no rain and the remoteness allows the beast to grow, taking on a life of its own. Sucking in oxygen and exhaling with a deafening roar. Talon-like flames stretching and clawing as the inferno drags itself across the field.

The amber light on the horizon against the ebony night sky and the odour of smoke in the air, the dread of any farmer.

As dawn breaks the true extent of the devastation is etched on the ashen faces of the farmers, firefighters and members of the community who fought the relentless demon. Many would say the firestorm from hell.

Slowly residents returned to where they call home. Sifting through damaged remains, looking for that one object to cling onto and is now their past. Picking up the remnants of a child's book, the title just visible under the veiled covering of soot. The picture showing happier times of a grandmother surrounded by smiling children listening to the nursery rhymes within. These bedtime stories will no longer be read from this book as the pages crumble and fall like black confetti. The mood of the residents is solemn as they inspect each item discovered before tossing it unceremoniously back onto the ground causing a fine puff of ash to rise into the air.

Days turn into weeks, much welcomed rain had mixed with many tears over this time. As the hum of bulldozers can be heard in the distance, clearing homes that once stood, life begins to return to the bush. Green tufts of lush vegetation re-sprout through the blackened soil. From beneath the bushfire-charred bark, the trees begin to display new supple, moisture-laden clusters of emerald green leaves. Surviving birds and insects seek out new dwellings as Mother Nature shows her resilience once more.

Great Name for a Calf

Judy Gillies

Quaama

We were hooked. It was October and the Carnarvon Gorge trip had whet our appetites. Another visit would be incorporated into our next Queensland sojourn we decided, as the NSW National Parks loomed ahead, their smoky tendrils rising as a warning in the distance. So much for camping all the way home to Quaama! Too dangerous!!

Checking 'Fires Near Me' became a daily routine. Fires ravaged nearly every state. Nothing unusual about that. This was Australia, 40 degree-plus heatwaves and drought coupled with electrical storms were a breeding ground for fires! Tomorrow would be New Year's Eve and the closest fire to us was about 37 kilometres away. Plenty of time to finish packing in the morning and the fire pumps could be set up first thing! Lights out at 10.30pm.

Telephone! Who is ringing at 1.30am? "Evacuate now!" was the recorded message that snapped us from our sleepy stupor. 'Fires Near Me' gave a frightening confirmation as we saw an arm of fire heading directly towards us just seven kilometres away.

Cows have the best possible chance if the paddock gates are left open water troughs filled. Important paperwork, four days of clothing and the Tommy Camper were packed and loaded into or onto the back of each car. An ominous red glow and smoke hid the sunrise.

As we watched the neighbouring dairy's paddock burn towards the road between us we acknowledged the fact that our property was definitely in the line of fire! (Excuse the pun).

We checked the house once more. Blackout!

A wall of heat blasted my face as I closed the driver's door of my car and followed the Ute, with our possible portable living quarters on top, knowing all we had built and created in the past 12 years may be gone when we returned.

It was 6.00am New Year's Eve!

The flames had jumped the highway! A paddock was burning, the grass and house engulfed by flames running like liquid mercury, separating and re-joining. Another casualty?

For those twelve residents who had chosen to stay that bit longer, the reality was we had compromised our safety, and, like the Christmas Story there was no room in the inn. The fire shed was being hosed to protect those sheltering inside as the fire devoured its surrounds. A policeman told us to follow and he led us 500 metres up the highway. He left. We watched from the relative safety of the truck stop, as the flames continued their rampage. Maybe 30 minutes before they would be upon us. The police car reappeared.

"The highway to Bega has reopened and the main fire has passed. If you are careful you will be okay!"

Our little convoy of twelve cars headed south.

We arrived in Bega at 7.30am and promptly rang our next door neighbour. Much to our relief he answered his mobile. "I saved my house". There was a pause, then he quietly told us that our house, three sheds and a container were gone. Three and a half minutes was all it took for the fire to consume everything. We had made the right decision to leave of that we were certain!

Returning to our property that afternoon we stood in silence looking at the crumpled steel, twisted and warped. Slowly our eyes scanned the surroundings and there at the fence stood our cows, unharmed but hungry. Our chickens were less fortunate and although not burned most had succumbed to the heat. Miraculously two of our five hens had survived along with two of our eight three-day-old chicks. We smiled. Our new life had begun!

There was no point looking back at what we had lost, there was work to do. Find food for our cows and bucket water to their troughs, an ongoing routine for the first week. Every day a new positive arose. We had been thinking of modifying the kitchen and both bathrooms. Now was our opportunity! Two 5,000 litre water tanks still in their plastic wrap and tied to the fence next to the garbage bins were all still intact. A borrowed hose and pump were quickly sourced and set up to transfer water from partly melted tanks and the cows now had water. No more buckets! Hooray!!

Friends rallied with drinking water containers and food. Buckets became bath tubs, a billy of hot water and washer were most refreshing!

We had solar panels on our camper and two deep cycle batteries, so lighting and refrigeration were possible and we were able to trial some of our ideas for our Simpson Desert holiday in July 2020.

Four of our 12 paddocks were still secure so the cows were safe! Most of the days after the fire reached the mid-20 degrees so we were comfortable, and, the promised March rains made

an early appearance. No roof to catch the rain but it was a start. The land began to turn green, trees began to sprout. We had seen the dark side of Mother Nature and now she was showing her gentle side, giving us hope with more rain. The drought was beginning to wane. Dams were full, pastures recovering. Three new calves were born and another grandson. New life! We saw the other side of people. Mostly good. Strangers generously donated items of clothing, food, drinking water and money from all over Australia and overseas.

A new house design has been chosen! Council has stepped up to the plate as have State and Federal Governments and many groups have shared their expertise in their chosen fields.

Life has changed! What we lost were possessions! We still have our memories and have gained the opportunity to look ahead and start our new life. Out of the ashes rises the Phoenix.

Mmm, what a *great name* for a calf!

It All Takes Time

Pat Allen

Springwood

Clouds of thick, black smoke on the near horizon alerted Kevin and Lisa as they talked over their boundary fence.

"It's here!" Kevin yelled and scurried through the gusting wind to start his fire pump at the swimming pool.

They'd heard that this fire was coming only 15 minutes before, had prepared as they were able, but the speed and ferocity of this bushfire was unprecedented. Fire erupted all around him such as Kevin had never experienced, pushed along by searing, powerful winds. Unoccupied land nearby had not been cleared and the leaf litter was dry and deep. So ready to burn.

Having lived in these mountains for almost 60 years, and prepared for fires since 1960, Kevin thought he understood the behaviour of the Australian bush. It was always necessary to keep the roof gutters and around his home clear. Be prepared. This time he would use the swimming pool water via a fire pump and hoses. Town water supply had failed in just such an emergency years ago.

Everyone had evacuated from Heather Glen Road. He'd seen the stream of neighbours' cars speeding by. Some residents were at school or away at work. Kevin and Pat would stay and defend their home. There were no helpers on hand with expertise and equipment. It was Kevin against this blaze. Minutes dragged by and still the help he had expected had not arrived.

"My house is on fire!" Lisa cried.

Her house was beside uncleared land. Again, she repeated the ominous warning that the blaze was closing in. As he manned his hose to defend his home, there was nothing Kevin could do for her, his beloved daughter and next-door neighbour. Her substantial brick house was soon subject to the gorging blaze.

Wind played havoc with the flames. Kevin watched it consume the lush green lawn. His perimeter of specially planted, fire retardant lilly-pilly trees exploded along with eucalypts and turpentines. The enveloping black smoke seeped into his lungs and stung his eyes, glowing embers pitted the cotton fabric of his shirt and jeans. He doused himself with the hose. He knew he could likely perish in this fight to save his home but he would keep fighting.

He had filled the gutters, had sprinklers on the roof and tried to slow the fire so close to the windows of his home. Spot fires caught in the mulch on his gardens and streaked up the turpentines, and ironbarks. The roar of the inferno was punctuated by exploding gas tanks and the petrol tanks of burning motor vehicles.

"Let me help save your place." Lisa was beside him.

Her house was well alight and blazing so strongly as to prevent her entering to grab anything. She took up a fire hose and was there to share the load. They did not speak. Each knew what to do. Five adjacent houses were soon alight but undefended. Through high temperatures and strong winds they continued to fight the maelstrom.

Eventually, a Rural Fire Service truck did stop at their driveway. "Get in the truck," was the order. Hoses were taken from their hands and thrown onto the burning lawn. As Pat reluctantly boarded the truck she heard the driver assure his base: "We're just collecting an elderly couple." Wondering who they could be, they were driven through the blazing street to a waiting ambulance and on to the Nepean hospital for assessment and treatment.

The night was cool and, strangely, some misty rain had begun to fall as they were discharged from hospital. That night was spent at the home of a friend. They felt that there would be no home still standing to welcome them in Heather Glen Road. More than half of the homes had gone and many were severely damaged. With tearful relief, this elderly couple embraced when they learned their home still stood, alone, amongst surrounding ash and black sticks.

Weeks passed, ash and soot settled and smouldering logs burned themselves out. Red shoots appeared through black eucalypt trunks and green shoots on seared banksia remnants. It was some more weeks before bird sounds broke the silence.

Kevin counted the cost of his destroyed fencing, citrus trees and the shed with its stored contents. He much regretted the loss of his four black Orpingtons as he passed the blackened stumps, all that remained of their coop.

"Will you rebuild?" Kevin asked as he surveyed the ruins next door.

"That will depend on Council demands and mandatory regulations," Lisa said, and then observed, "I guess we'll also have to wait and see what the Insurance Company will offer."

Their mental fog was lifting, and hope was rising in the hearts of Lisa's family. They'd lost their home with all their possessions, and family history. Theirs was one of the 200 houses burned down within one to two hours at Winmalee-Yellow Rock on 17th October, 2013. No one had perished.

Lisa had escaped with her life and what she was wearing. Her severely burned arm was healing. She and her family sifted through the ruins of their family home and cars. Her heirloom Sterling Silver toast-rack and silver tea-pot were now molten blobs, her wedding album was ash, and there was no trace of their prized art works. Their losses were as immense as their shock.

"I've lost all my history," Lisa observed to her parents.

Lisa already had ideas for a new kitchen with a butler's pantry and to overlook the front garden, and the girls had asked for large bedrooms, please.

Pat observed, "Your granny-flat would, of course, need a few changes and improvements."

Lisa was definite. "David is considering how he would design his new workshop".

They stood in companionable silence, each with their own thoughts.

"Will we have enough energy ...?" Her voice trailed off.

It would take time, patience and steely tenacity.

Just Another Sunday

Jenny Watts

Bowan Park

February 11th, 2017 SBS News:

'Parts of NSW face unprecedented and catastrophic fire conditions on Sunday, with residents urged to leave their homes... Sunday's tinder dry conditions are being likened to those in the lead-up to Victoria's Black Saturday blazes, which killed 173 people in 2009.'

Saturday evening:

8:30pm. The news for today was a deliberately lit fire next to the local RSPCA facility. It sparked an intense debate on Facebook about sticky beaks and pyromaniacs. But because it was in town, the blaze was controlled quickly. Many animals had to be rescued and as a result, some required veterinary treatment. We could only hope that a truck would arrive as quickly to our place. The local RFS truck was housed 500 metres away, so we could take some heart.

I checked on our dogs at the back of the house. Two are quite elderly and I worried about their safety. They would have to be released from their cages in the event of a fire. They were panting a little, but the night air was cooling off and they seemed to be okay under the circumstances. I decided to make up more containers of ice for their drinking water to keep it cool tomorrow. I could smell smoke from the fires at March and Cowra, but they posed no threat here.

*"Geez, it's hot," Allan said, pulling off his boots.
"Tomorrow will be worse."*

Sunday:

6:00am. The outside air had a hint of cool, and the sun was making its presence felt, even though it was not yet sunrise. No smoke. So far, so good.

9:00am. It was quiet – eerily quiet. Even on a Sunday, the road past the house was usually well patronised – the odd truck, long strings of motorbikes taking Sunday outings, utes loaded with household garbage or towing kids' ponies.

Today, nothing. More like Christmas Day, only less crisp. The relentless heat of the past weeks had turned any green to brown, allowed the dust to settle and dried off any natural vegetation. Even the birds were silent. The paddock of dried saffron thistles next to the house was a worry. They rattled unceasingly, inspired by the smallest hint of wind. Wind created by fire is an awesome and terrifying juggernaut. If a fire started over the hill behind us, the paddock would be engulfed in minutes – no time to fill buckets or hose things down.

"Geez, it's hot," Allan intoned, scanning the horizon for cloud relief. "No sign of rain."

I turned my attention to packing the evacuation kit. I had done it in my mind, many times, but couldn't bring myself to get it done. Somehow it felt like tempting fate. I collected a milk crate from the garage and began to toss in required objects. I printed off a list of useful items and determined to get to them.

A little past 10:30am, a lone motorbike crossed the bridge and headed up the hill toward the Cargo Road. It was quite thickly vegetated along the last few kilometres and an exposed rider could find himself in a tricky situation in the narrower parts.

11:45am. A few vehicles had ventured past, going in both directions, so I guessed the motorcyclist wouldn't be making headlines any time soon. Still we waited, breaths drawn, as the hottest part of the day and the wind, had not yet arrived. The family of magpies that flew in several times a day demanding cat food were squabbling on the back verandah. They were drinking from the cats' water bowls and ignored me. At least something was normal today.

After a quick 1:00pm inspection I took ice up to the dogs. Their water was surprisingly cool. As was their area under the acacia trees. I hoped the sheep had water, it was just too dangerous to start the diesel pump on the creek.

3:00pm. The sky was still clear, but the wind had picked up and was bringing down the temperature. The expected cool change now posed another threat.

Crack! A three metre limb crashed down from the old eucalypt in front of the house, breaking into the humid silence – enforcing the tree's 200 years as the dominant sentinel of the dry dam nearby. Message received.

5:00pm and although the air was thick with heat, I began to think we had avoided catastrophe in our tiny splinter of Australia, at least for the moment.

"Geez, it's hot," Allan rasped as he downed a cold one. "We were lucky though", he continued.

8:00pm. Still clear. Reports were coming in of areas not so lucky. Sir Ivan, in the Warrumbungle Shire was only one of many fires, but wreaked the most extreme damage. Devastation for many, with loss of homes, vehicles, sheds. Countless stock and wildlife, but thankfully, no humanity. A small mercy, but a mercy, nevertheless.

March, 2017

I could see the story on both sides of the road as we drove from Dubbo to the coast. The Sir Ivan fire took no prisoners – houses, sheds, machinery, livestock were all consumed. The lingering odour of smoke hung over the volunteers replacing fences to contain any surviving livestock. Livestock – an optimistic notion! Black ash ringed untouched buildings, while skeletons of burnt vehicles, machinery items and lonely chimneys offered clues to a past life, now gone, never coming back.

Six weeks on, and amid the ashes of burnt ground, buildings and trees I could see tiny patches of green. Sprigs of gum leaves sprouted from charred trunks; fragile spikes of grass grew between pieces of blackened machinery or indistinguishable building stumps. And a sense of calm – not ominous this time, but of quiet resilience – man, beast and nature in defiant survival.

The Sir Ivan's Fire burnt 55,000 hectares of prime agricultural land, 35 homes, 1,000 stock and pets, and untold wildlife. Three years later, and still challenging this force of nature called fire, Sir Ivan's residents are rebuilding lives, homes and properties.

New Year's Eve 2020, the Start

Bethia Mills

Merimbula

It's Monday the day before New Year's Eve.

Nothing unusual happening except I didn't go out to feed and ride the horses, as for their safety from the still threatening fire near Nelligan they are relocated. Some to Dunn's Road where there is good feed and some to East Lynne which has been deemed safe as that area was all burnt with the fires prior to Christmas.

Smoke has been blanketing our area for quite a few weeks, some days the sky glows red, and this afternoon, although only just after four, it has turned night-time black.

The birds are silent. Wind swirls black ash around blanketing the ground.

The roster from work has just come through, not working on New Year's Eve, nor New Year's Day. All shifts are pruned back, no tourist trade; the tourists were told to leave, there aren't enough resources to keep them safe as well as locals. Also the Clyde Mountain Road that the Canberrans' use, is still dangerous, and rumoured not to open 'til February. How will all the businesses in town survive? This is when the town is usually jumping, no parking space left, a half hour wait to cross the bridge and queues out the door at local cafes. Not happening this season; Batemans Bay is a ghost town.

I keep the house closed trying to keep the smoke and ash out.

"Kitty, do you want your dinner?" I say to my cat as I put her food down.

She meows a thank-you as she delicately licks at her meal. She'll eat a little bit, then leave it for later. I know her, she does that every night – funny cat.

Later I am curled up with Kitty on the lounge, television is on which I am half watching. A text comes through from Julie, she's worried about the horses in Dunn's Road. I tell her not to be concerned the fires are a long way back from there. But I too feel the prickle of worry as ash falls to the bathroom floor through the ceiling fan.

I'm abruptly wakened by loud banging and shouting. I must have fallen asleep on the lounge.

Stumbling to the door I find Jane from next door very distressed.

"Narelle," she talks hurriedly. "I think you should quickly pack a bag and evacuate. I'm leaving and so is Kevin next door. The people renting next to you left last night. The fire has gone through Mogo and coming our way. We need to leave."

I stare at her in disbelief, then an alert on my phone, "Surf Beach residents leave now."

I grab a few things, stuff them into a bag, put Kitty in her cage. I start the car, then I tremble and shake. I sit a minute, get myself back together chanting, it's all right we'll be safe.

So many people gathered on the beach, and although it is only 7.30 in the morning, it is so, so hot. Red flames, mixed with black smoke soaring and swirling on three sides, and as I turn and gaze at the water, swimming just a few metres out is a pod of dolphins. Mesmerised I watch as they surf the waves calmly playing while Mogo, Dunn's Road and Surf Beach burn.

One fire truck goes past, then a second one followed by a third.

"Why aren't they going up my street, can't they see the fire is there?"

Someone answers : "They need to get behind the fire to get on top of it, they know what they are doing."

The cafe on the beach is handing out bottles of water, I pour some into my cupped hand and offer Kitty a drink. She is panting with the heat, but laps at the water.

"We'll be alright Kitty," I say more to reassure myself.

I learn that during the night Julie got the horses to safety racing ahead of the fire and all are now safe at East Lynne.

It is all too much. I sink down on the sand and as I gaze out at the water I notice four surfers just hanging on their boards waiting for the right wave.

"For some people, it's just another day, and yes, I am safe."

It is five in the afternoon when we are told it is safe to go back. Our place has been saved but some houses at Ridge Road their owners are being redirected to another evacuation centre. They don't have a house to go home to.

I drive back, noticing the smoldering trees and blackened earth. The fence at the back is twisted and scorched, but thanks to the Firies, their wonderful efforts, our place is saved.

No power, no phone reception, it's dark but I do have a home.

Not the New Year's Eve I envisaged. Hopefully the rest of 2020 improves.

Forward March, week three.

I had been without power for twelve days, but gradually as electricity was restored, things began to return, not actually to normal, but there were signs of improvement. For many who lost their home it was devastating but for others we were trying to get back to living as we had previously. The cafe I work at had reopened and the highway from Canberra was open. Tourists were beginning to drive to the coast and the catch-cry was "visit the towns and bring an empty Esky."

Smiles were back and businesses were expecting a busy Easter period.

Then insidiously the Coronavirus crept into our lives.

The cafe, my workplace, is closed.

I am still tending the horses each morning, but for how long is uncertain. People are panicking, hoarding supplies. There are long lines at Centrelink like in the Great Depression.

Each day more restrictive living.

But the sun still rises every morning and even in isolation I feel lucky, with my cat for company in a house that hero firefighters saved.

Phoenix

Irene Buckler

Glenwood

I must sleep, but if I was to throw the bed covers back my fingers would leave dirty great big chimney-sweeper smudges on the pristine sheets. The pillows too, are so white that they glare. For the umpteenth time, I reach for eye drops to flush away the dryness. Abandoning my ruined clothing in a mucky heap, I head for the shower. A strategically placed notice in the bathroom reminds me that water restrictions apply. I hate the drought and I hate the fires!

The shower head pummels me with jets of water that mix with my tears to lift the sweat and grime from my skin. Grey water pools around my feet before it slides down the drain. Singed in places, my hair is thick with ash. My nostrils are blackened, and soot has settled in deep lines that criss-cross my face. I can use liberal applications of body wash and shampoo to clean myself but feeling safe is another matter.

Nothing feels safe anymore.

Though the bed is miraculously soft and cool to the touch, outside a suffocating heatwave holds sway. Flaming forests colour the night sky red. I cannot lick away the smoky taste from my lips nor expunge the sight and smell of charred fur, flesh and feathers from my thoughts.

Fire is a cruel and hungry monster that devours all in its path. There is no stopping it. I have given it my best. I am done but I am not defeated.

Lulled by the gentle hum of the air-conditioner mounted in the wall, I sleep.

When I wake, it begins again and I will be ready. The fight has only just begun.



Rebirth

Vivien Thomas

Curl Curl

She towered over her throng. This was her Empire which she had lived and ruled over for hundreds of years being considered the Matriarch of the family, although some would say she was like Master and Commander. They had gone through many experiences which made them adapt and recover over time and is what shaped them to who they are today.

Her distinctive scent permeated the environment and around her was a blue glow especially in the heat. Her tall slender body reached up to the sky and she truly did dominate the landscape.

Although she was the oldest and the wisest, she possessed a strength that everyone admired. Her torso was strong, solid and was a beautiful colour of honey and chestnut brown. Her beauty was admired by everyone. She possessed a colourful canopy which blew in the wind with ease and elegance giving off hints of gold and silver. The others around her were similar but quite different, some had rough sinewy looking skin and some had skin that peeled at certain times of the year, whilst others blossomed with colour.

Things started to change, she knew what was to come because this change had occurred periodically during her ancient life. This rough time meant she had to battle the elements as did all of them. The ground they lived on flourished from the rain, which became a haven for birds and koalas who felt protected in this environment as did the flora and fauna. From her previous experiences she knew some of these species would die. It would take many years of drought to affect them but that was not her biggest threat. The intense heat and lack of rain would initially sun bleach their tops then starve their bodies, their limbs becoming brittle and over time

intense winds, some would snap them off, falling to the ground in piles and staying there for years. This was the case right now. No one could get to them because of their remoteness.

Tragedy, was about to encompass them. Due to the intense heat over time, she knew fires had started in areas not far away from theirs. There was a golden glow in the sky and the smell of smoke started to permeate their surroundings and they were terrified for their lives. They had to stay strong and be prepared, the next few months would be really tough but she had handled this situation before and it wasn't easy.

She kept watch and saw on the horizon the wind direction had changed, she knew the strong winds would soon be heading in their direction, she told her people not to worry and they would survive. It was definitely a battle they could win. They could get damaged but most would recover. She thought it could take days before it reached them and they were prepared. The winds became stronger and the fire was getting closer, she prayed for it to change direction, but it didn't.

It was time for action. As a very effective leader like that of a military commander, she ordered everyone to stick together and that way they could hopefully protect some of the animals that lived beneath them. The fires raged and got closer and closer, there was nothing they could do but cling together, unfortunately their canopies were head to head which didn't help matters because she knew their heads would be attacked, they were so dry and prolific.

Then came the order, "Heads down, hold on and try to stay upright."

The wind speed increased and the fires raged and there was nothing they could do, it wiped them out, one after the other, jumping into their canopies without any time to protect themselves. They could do nothing except stand there still and silent and let the fire take them one by one in quick succession. There didn't seem to be an end to it, they were devastated. Some managed to stay upright but others were not so fortunate and fell to the ground without warning, their black shrivelled bodies no longer able to hold up their weight.

It took many days for the whirlwind to finish. When the survivors could eventually see they realised that many were lost but thousands survived. They praised their commander. Light beamed through to their bodies but what they really needed was rain. They waited and waited and eventually it arrived. She had prayed for this moment, the droplets cooling her body and giving her a new energy as it did to her troopers.

She realised they had help from outside sources because big machines had arrived and she could see small people on the ground removing the debris and cutting down ones that could not be rescued but proved to be a danger to them. She was eternally grateful to her allies, how could she ever thank them, these people were so brave.

To her surprise, one morning the rains started and it didn't stop for days the feeling on their bodies reignited the feeling of hope, they became invigorated and soon their black bodies started to sprout bit by bit until the green out shined the black, re-sprouting was happening, light made them glisten, she now knew they could survive for hundreds more years. This is what always happened.

"Comrades, I am so proud of you and our helpers, it was your resilience and strength of your bodies that got us through this time, again we have won another battle. Until the next time."

Life will continue as it always had.

Rebirth After the Fires

Rosemary Poole

Wangi Wangi

"You have got to be joking. David, you have GOT to be JOKING!

"New start you said, new country you said, new opportunities you said. New house, new countryside, new views, new garden, new birds, new animals. Well, where are they? All you've brought me to is black desolation.

"No house, no garden, no trees, no animals, not even a sparrow. All we have is ash, black ash, lots and lots of ash. If we could sell *that* we would make a fortune!"

"But Ellie, at least we've still got the views. Look, just look, at the views, you can see the lake even more clearly now some of the trees have gone."

"Trees, oh yes, the trees. And what happens next time a fire decides to pass through? Do we get an even better view? Or possibly a completely new view from a hospital window? Or from a debtor's prison, because all our possessions have gone up in flames."

"No, no of course not. But Ellie, just see what we have now. A totally cleared block, we can start from new. We can put whatever we want, wherever we want. You can have a studio, look there, right on that knoll, facing north for the light, with the hills in the distance for inspiration. It'll be perfect."

"Oh yes indeed, I could call it my black period. Black hills and black trees on a black landscape. Oh yes, that'll sell for millions. What other bright ideas have you got? How about the North Pole, that could be my white period, it'd make a change from black. It couldn't be any more desolate than this!"

"Listen, it won't always be like this, it'll grow, it'll turn green again. There'll be plants and flowers, the animals will come back and the birds. There'll be lots of birds. As soon as the trees recover they'll be here."

"What trees David? Where? They're all burnt to a crisp. They're dead, deader than dead, not a spark of life. You couldn't even light a fire with them."

"Oh, very funny, but it's not really that bad. This is Australia, not Europe. The country here is different to England, it's resilient, it needs the occasional fire passing through to clear the undergrowth and set new seeds. Fire brings new life, believe me, in a couple of years you wouldn't know there'd ever been a fire here."

"Oh yes. And which tabloid did you read all that in? Dead is dead, it'll take years for even the weeds to come back into this ... this ... wasteland. Look how long it takes new volcanic islands to start to turn green. We'll have had grandchildren before this is back to life, and then it'll all just burn again."

"No, no, Ellie, we can do things to stop that. We should start planning now. We can keep the area around the new house totally clear of trees and debris, we'll have a tin roof that won't burn, and huge water tanks to hose everything down with.

"We'll have to start small and simple until you sell some pictures and we can make some money. And there's lots of scope for my landscaping ventures.

"And ..."

"And no insurance as no company will give any fire insurance after this lot."

"We won't need it. We'll fight any fires and keep them away. We'll have a huge swimming pool we can sit in till it passes over."

“And boil to death David, oh yes, very sensible.”

“Well okay, maybe not that. But it can be done, we can stay safe, I know we can. And after all, one side is all water. We could always sit it out on a boat.”

“And return to what, to all black again? What’s the point?”

Ellie came back to the present with a jump as the interviewer asked anxiously if she was alright.

After all, Ellie Sanders was one of Australia’s most celebrated artists of the past 30 years. Ellie looked over the interviewer’s shoulder at the painting that hung over the fireplace, her very first picture, the first of the series entitled Rebirth and remembered so well that conversation in the fire-ravaged forest. David’s enthusiasm, and the black ash covering everything and leaving dirty smuts on their clothes and faces.

And she also remembered her second visit to the block.

She’d wanted to forget all about it, sell up and try to restart her painting career somewhere more familiar to her, more like home – woods, bluebells, old oak trees, cottages. But David had insisted, really insisted.

“Just come and see what I’ve found, please, you really have to see it. You couldn’t possibly imagine it but it’s real. It’s what I’ve been trying to tell you, I was right. Please come.”

So Ellie went, reluctantly. She had no idea what he was so excited about, what could possibly be any different. And this time they trudged through black mud, as there had been days of rain since the fires. But everywhere was still black, black as coal, black as death, until they came around the knoll to where they had argued so vehemently – and there they were.

Like candles making a pathway through a dark night, they led along the top of the stony ridge and down towards the water’s edge.

In a bizarre twist of nature the filaments of orange flowers bursting from the centre of the sprays of green growth resembled nothing so much as the blaze of fires burning amongst the black ash.

But this was new, vibrant life, overcoming the blackness of the past. A new start. Perhaps David was right, perhaps she could paint here.

And this miracle would be her first painting, she would call it ‘Rebirth’.

Reflections on Life and a Summer of Fire

Sandra Grant

Soldiers Point

We have travelled through an area that just six weeks earlier was a furnace. Hungry for the dryness of the bush, the monster fire consumed everything in its path. Buildings constructed of a myriad of materials melted in the heat. The summer of 2019–2020 will long be remembered for the ferociousness of this fire. The crowds of holidaymakers who would usually be stretched out on our beautiful beaches sat nervously by screens looking for news and then often returned to the cities in long traffic queues trying to escape the fire's path.

We have not come to gawk at or mourn our amazing wilderness areas. We are merely doing what we often like to do throughout the year; visit the mountains for a change of scenery. As we drive, we can see how the fire, in places has been detoured from its destructive route. Merely singeing the boundaries of some properties, we are in awe of the momentous effort it must have taken by our brave fire fighters to protect these properties.

Areas once populated by dense stands of tall trees are now a collection of blackened poles and the ground underneath is barren and revealing. I can see rocky outcrops and undulating terrain instead of the wall of grey-green that would have confronted me prior to the fire.

But I look again and notice that already on those blackened poles are little tufts of leaves, like the first tufts of feathers on a baby bird. On closer inspection the ground is not entirely barren. There are tiny green shoots poking out from beneath the burnt ground. The bush will recover. Hopefully animals will return once it provides food and shelter for them. People will rebuild their homes and their lives once they recover from the trauma of this summer.

This summer has been a lesson in resilience. The bush provides a model for resilience, the rebuilding after trauma. I know of many people whose lives have been torn apart by different events; trauma caused by betrayal, loss, sickness.

A childhood friend, confided that her marriage break-up left her stranded, distanced from her family with her three small boys. She had no job or prospect of work and no savings to fall back on. Many years later she admitted that she had resorted to feeding her family with food salvaged from dumpsters. Thirty years later she is a graphic designer who travels the world for her company as a buyer looking at the latest homeware trends. She is a picture of resilience, and her sons have great admiration for the sacrifices she made for them.

If I concentrate, I can still recall the moment I discovered my husband's betrayal. It felt like I had been punched hard in the stomach by this revelation. I was winded and for weeks was scared to take a deep breath because that caused the pain to travel all through my body. I slept dreamlessly because the effort of getting through each day was so completely exhausting. The life that I had planned and built brick by brick was no more. I had no energy to make plans for a new life. I was just surviving and looking after my family. Fortunately, I had work and I think the responsibility of just getting up and going to work each day helped in that survival.

I know I am not alone in having faced trauma. There are many stories amongst my friends. I admire each of them for the way they have stitched their lives back together and raised their families under difficult circumstances. They continue to look after grandchildren and ageing parents and contribute to their communities in endless ways. And they do it with happy, positive dispositions.

I reflect on the renewal of the Australian bush and wonder if we are influenced by this environment. Have we, subconsciously realized that our harsh environment makes for sturdier species of plants. Are we also determined to not stay blackened and beaten by life's direst storms but are we hard-wired to send out new little shoots of growth towards a new life. I hope this is true for all the families who have suffered through this last summer.

The Angel Who Saved Me

Carolyn Condie

Tolland

The goats presented with extended panting tongues and wide yellow eyes filled with fear. This caused me concern as they were to kid next month. Then a ferocious wind arrived which in a flash could lift our skirts and wrap them around our necks twice. All the sheep were restless. They knew something was wrong. The news I dreaded wasn't far behind.

The urgency in Steve's voice had me running to him. The look on his face said it all. My eyes were drawn to beyond his frame. Orange red flames were racing across our paddock. Six to seven meters high and with that wind whipping them along they became dancing fingers stretching out and grabbing their prey. They raced across ours devouring everything with an absolute frightening energy. I stood with Steve and sprayed fast water. I watched the direction those flames went and thought *'the animals will be safe, it's not going near them'*, then suddenly they changed direction, laughing at me and raced towards the animals. Other flames turned to follow. I felt dread and instinctively ran down to open the gate, but the metal latch had absorbed the fire's intense heat and I burnt my hands trying to lift it up over the post.

The flames whipping at me burnt my head and face and singed long hair fell with my touch. My fire-retardant clothes saved the rest of me. As I ran back to Steve yelling, *"I'm burnt"*, my trapped animals loudly vocalised their pain. Steve's face winced on sight of me and kind words conveyed, *"drive to the Post Office and get help"*. As I rushed to the jeep so did the dogs. Echoes of pain followed me down our drive.

For two kilometres of winding road, tears fell with 'echoes of pain' repeated in my head. As I came out of the curve into the straight short stretch, terror startled me sober. Half a kilometre away was the Post Office, but I was blocked by walls of red flames and a fallen tree. I had to turn back but go where? I had a narrow turnaround area with flames to greet me both sides of the road. Turning around I reversed into bush and my rear wheels got caught up on something. Now I was in panic mode, screaming at the jeep and began a frenzied action doing reverse to drive, reverse to drive in rapid succession. When the jeep jumped and jerked forward it took seconds for me to grasp I was free. I momentarily revelled in that occurrence, but my joy shattered when I stared at the burning trees lining the road to my escape and thought, just minutes before they weren't. I prayed intently.

Wind rattled the jeep. My fear palpable as I strained to see the road, or not seeing it at all and the jeep effortlessly moved along anyway. Distant flames flashed through a fog of smoke, while hungry flames were close companions lashing at the jeep as if in a feeding frenzy. This really scared me as I thought the jeep might ignite with my slow progress. At times it felt like I was in a capsule gliding along, but with fire and smoke surrounding me, combined with the winding road, it was a claustrophobic ride. My anxiety reached new levels and the Kelpies whined in sympathy. I gave them hope then softly cried *"Please help me. Please"*.

Then without warning I experienced coming out of a night-dark tunnel into bright sunny daylight. I remember being amazed seeing green paddocks rising to hills half a kilometre ahead. Emotions flooded me with the realisation I was alive because *'A Guardian Angel had watched over me'*. I had a Guardian Angel. That took some time to process.

Knowing it changed my life.

On seeing a firefighter's truck coming towards me I veered to the edge of the road. Eventually I was taken by ambulance to Goulburn Base Hospital.

Two goats died from injuries, while others had ears, mouths and vulva's' burnt. The sheep had few injuries due to their wool growth. A Veterinarian came to heal wounds. Five goats had teats burnt off and could not rear their kids. Four of those five had twins and I bottle-fed their nine kids. I fed hay daily until I saw enough feed growing out in paddocks. Black cashmere kids molded into cavities of burnt fallen charcoal trees. The fire took our building materials, two rain tanks, melted lengths of sewerage pipe two meters down in open trenches and other farming equipment.

The smell of bushfire smoke and anguished cries haunt me. The recent terrible fires across NSW brought that day in March 1986 to words finally on paper. My story of survival. Did I possess resilience? I hope I did.

The Crop Sprayer

Robert Gilchrist

Cremorne

The afternoon sun glinted off the spinning propeller of the ancient Cessna 188 crop-duster, as it came to a halt outside the bar of Narromine Flying Club. Leaving the engine ticking over, Jim jumped out of the lane and sprinted across to the entrance of the club bar, where Mark, the barman, stood waiting.

"Here's your six-pack of VB Jim."

"Thanks mate! I'll settle up with you tomorrow. I've only got another hour of daylight to finish dusting those wheat fields. The VB beers will help make this shift go quickly," said Jim.

"No worries mate. See you later," said Mark.

Mark watched the Cessna smoothly leave the runway towards the south. He could see Jim taking a long sip from the can of VB as he banked the plane.

Sitting at home alone with yet another tinnie of VB, Jim watched the Channel 7 news broadcast covering the horrendous bush-fires ripping the heart out of south-eastern Australia. The 2020 season had turned out to be the worst on record. Jim had joined the Rural Fire Service after his wife died in a car crash two years back. He'd been lonely and so offered his services as a pilot. In their wisdom, the RFS taught him to drive their fire trucks instead.

Hearing the familiar ring of his mobile, he took a call from his old mate Steve, who was the area commander of the Narromine RFS.

"Jim, we need a couple of truck drivers urgently in the Bermagui area. It's not a flying job but I know you can get there quickly. Can you help us out?"

"You can count on me," said Jim. "I'll take off at the crack of dawn tomorrow. Can you arrange a pickup for me at Merimbula Airport? I'll be there before 10:00am."

"You betcha Jim! I'll pick you up in person. And bring your uniform!"

Brianna was transfixed by the ridge fire burning out of control towards Cobargo. The kitchen window of her 'Forever Home' at Wallaga Lake usually provided a great view of the forest. But the intense yellow smoke clouds and the approaching night disguised the destruction that was being wrought by nature. She took it all in her stride, just as she'd taken the painful, long-drawn out death from cancer of her second husband Alan, only six months earlier. Despite having been a resilient funeral director for 12 years, Alan's death had ripped Brianna apart. The lovely home they'd planned and built together near Bermagui and just a few photos were all that remained of their deep love for one another. *'Just another lonely night'*, Brianna thought as she headed up to bed.

Brianna's vivid dream about her last holiday in Bali with Alan was rudely interrupted at 5.10am by a loud knocking on her front door. Slipping on a white dressing gown, she rushed down the stairs to open the door. Two burly men in RFS uniforms confronted her, introducing themselves as Jim and Steve.

"Sorry to be the bearers of bad news Mrs Mills, you've 'til 6.00am to dress, pack and leave your property. Your house is directly in the path of the approaching fire-front and we can't save it. But we can save you."

Brianna gulped, "This is a bit of a shock!"

Jim said, "Be strong Mrs Mills, draw on your reserves of resilience. We'll be back in 45 minutes to collect you and your possessions and take you to the Bermagui oval, with your neighbours."

"But, but ... I'm not organised. Can I have more time?"

"No. Brianna, it's now or never with this fire-front. It's racing towards you as we speak. We've already lost a truck and four firefighters. We expect your home to be surrounded by fire before lunchtime. Don't delay!" bellowed Steve.

Two hours later, Brianna was sitting on her favourite beach chair at a windy Bermagui oval with 5,000 other people. Her resilience had been sorely tested by Alan's death. Now their beloved 'Forever Home' was on the brink of destruction. At least she'd remembered to bring Alan's ashes with her. The thought of him being burnt twice just didn't feel right.

The weather changed overnight at Bermagui, with a southerly buster bringing colder air. It changed the direction of the fire-front and modified its micro-climate. The squatters at the Bermagui oval had a cold night, but with the morning came celebration. The houses at Wallaga Lake had barely been touched by the fire-front.

Jim stayed with his RFS colleagues fighting the fire at Cobargo. But the severity of the heat forced them all to retreat before 22 homes were destroyed. After an interrupted night's sleep at the RFS campground in Bermagui, Jim decided to head up to the oval to see if he could find Brianna. She recognised his burly form in RFS uniform immediately. She called out to him, "Jim, I'm over here!"

"You look cold and a tad gloomy", said Jim. "I've got some good news for you. The fire-front missed your home and you can return safely. Can I give you a lift back?"

Brianna leapt up and hugged him. She said, "You've made my day! I'll definitely take that lift home!"

Jim was an aviator, not a geek. He'd been surprised at how quickly he'd mastered Zoom, the now legendary video-conferencing tool. He'd been using it for three months to talk with Brianna on a daily basis. The two had grown very close since the terrible trauma of the fires. Jim stayed with her at Wallaga Lake every second weekend. He loved her cooking and the time they spent talking for hours in her outdoor spa, overlooking the lake.

Opening Zoom for his daily call with Brianna, he noted the shine in her eyes.

"How're things, me dear?"

"All's well here. I'm looking forward to seeing you at the Lake for Easter", said Brianna.

"Me too", said Jim. "By the way, will you marry me?"

The Phoenix

Rosemary Baldry

Winmalee

Huge hungry flames, like fire breathing dragons, devour our houses, leaving ash and rubble in their wake. These are our homes where we live, love, wash dishes, tie shoelaces and raise our families. We hear sirens above the roar of the fire and the din of exploding cars, people screaming and dogs howling. Help is coming! But the engines race past our street on a mission to save trapped evacuees. There are no fire trucks for Buena Vista Road, just mums and dads with garden hoses. It's too late to leave. Even the ambulance can't get in. Word goes round to take the wounded to the top of the street. Pets whose owners are at work are trapped in their houses. Not all are saved.

The fire moves on to ravage other streets in Winmalee and Yellow Rock. Men shaking and trembling climb down from rooftops. We hug. Numb, we walk the street trying to take stock. Number 1 gone! Number 5 gone! Number 6, 7, 9, 11, 13 ... and more, too many more are gone. We stop counting. Thankfully we have no human fatalities. Some of us still have houses. We try to console our neighbours. Fuel tanks are still exploding, live wires hiss from burnt power poles, gas mains flare, ruins smoulder, houses collapse and a child's swing hangs precariously from twisted metal poles. Our eyes see the destruction but our brains cannot comprehend. We wonder where to go from here. Tomorrow we will think about recovery. Tonight we weep.

Silence shrieks emptiness and loss when we wake in the morning. Holding our breath we wait, hoping to hear birds calling, a car door closing, children chattering, even that noisy motor bike, but there is no sound. It's as if the world has ended. We feel alone and deserted. The smell of soot and smoke invades our nostrils and our bed sheets stink of ash. The hot water tank provides sufficient lukewarm water for our showers. There's a knock on the door

and a work colleague greets us with a thermos of hot water and breakfast she has taken time to prepare. We accept her offer to take our mobiles and charge them. Throngs of neighbours congregate in the street, some viewing the devastation for the first time. They step over melted garbage bins and sift through the rubble looking for something, anything as a memento; a link to their former life. Warnings of asbestos are ignored. People are desperate. We, the lucky ones, still have our treasures, Richard's first shoes, Roger's Dad's cufflinks, my Grandmother's wedding ring. Cheers erupt when a neighbour finds their fire proof safe. None of us are prepared when they finally prize the damaged safe open and reveal its precious contents, fused and mangled.

Thank God for the Salvos! They move into hell with us as soon as the authorities allow. In the middle of the ruins they set up their tent, tables and chairs, rugs, cushions, tea, coffee, a cold drink, food and tissues. Lots of tissues.

"Sit down, love."

"Oh, your sister's here! Lovely to meet you, Helen. Please join us for breakfast."

Neighbours come and go. They are living in friends' houses, tents, caravans and other makeshift accommodation. Kids are trying to sit their HSC without their books and study notes. They joke about how they looked forward to not wearing school uniforms but now crave the identity with their school community. Every night they wash the uniform they were wearing that fateful day. They have no other clothes. Some days we just sit, other days we talk and talk and talk. There are always lots of hugs and tears. The lucky ones have photos, "Do you remember book parade when Jo was in kindy? I had these photos printed for you."

Power is restored and the Salvos move on to care for others. God bless! And thank you.

We escape to Springwood where life is normal. No warzone here. Thinking a nice quiet lunch with internet access at Roger's club will revive our spirits, we are surprised to find that Springwood Sports Club has transformed from club to evacuation centre and now recovery hub. The carpark is full with information booths from insurers, building companies, government agencies and charities. At the entrance we weave our way through donated clothing, essential toiletries, pots and pans, dog food, blankets and toys. A smorgasbord lunch is provided for all, free of charge. We protest, we still have a home, can afford to pay but the club has suspended trading and is looking after the community. Later we learn that their generosity and community spirit costs them dearly and the club goes into liquidation.

The Australian bush begins its restoration. New ferns appear, eucalypts sprout green and red tips, buds form on grevillea and wattle, eager to burst into red and yellow blooms. Slowly the street starts to rebuild. Rubble is cleared and houses are being repaired. 'For Sale' signs go up on some blocks while others are being measured for new homes. We hear a chorus of birds; crimson rosellas, king parrots with fluoro green stripes, rainbow lorikeets, red-browed finches and sulphur crested cockatoos. The kookaburras laugh again. A mother possum carries babies on her back, wallabies, lizards, and snakes reappear and there are yabbies in the creek. We welcome back old neighbours and meet new ones. Kids are playing street cricket, riding their bikes, arguing and giggling, their bright t-shirts and shorts echo the colours of the birds. Our bush views are a little sparse but restoring and at night Sydney still sparkles like a jewelled bracelet on the horizon.

The phoenix takes time to rise from the ashes but slowly and surely Buena Vista Road is reborn, thriving and strong.

The Resilient Grevillea Robusta

Anthony William Yetton

McGraths Hill

The seed fell from the Grevillea Robusta with a rustling crack as it smashed into the debris-covered, yet soft surface below. Six days of unusually constant rain had told the mothership that the time was right to breed. Propelled by the gentle, early summer breeze, the seed landed some 10 metres from its parent. The husk was already broken open, having been germinated by the greedy honey-eaters, and the jolt of the crash jettisoned the seed onto the damp, lush, fertile soil. Hungry for nutrition and desperate for liquid, the voracious seed began its journey to mature Silky Oak with this simple drop.

The Grevillea Robusta, or Silky Oak, to me is the arboreal representation of everything that is Australian. Its lush, deep green foliage that is peppered with its golden spikey flowers for much of the year. Its tall, rangy, craggy-barked trunk and branches demonstrate its determination to survive, no matter what nature throws at it. Its capacity to re-generate itself is simply a miracle of resilience.

The seed swelled with the water and the nutrients and before long had pushed the root tendrils deep into the surrounding earth, whilst, simultaneously, sprouting shoots that form the basic shape of the eventual, towering Silky Oak it was always destined to be.

With a further, sparse, periodical dribble of rain over the next few years, the seed matured from a meagre sapling, into a young, budding clone of its mother. Tall and rangy, often covered with brilliant, unmissable golden adornments, it developed into a magnificent example of Australia's national colours – Green and Gold. Standing proud alongside its mother, matching her splendourous display with one of its own.

Over many years of defoliation, leaf re-generation, flower-dropping and bark discarding, the undergrowth became rife with bracken, decomposing tree waste and an array of unwelcome foreign matter, developing an unhealthy mass of combustible fuel, just waiting for an opportunity to burst savagely into overwhelmingly destructive flame.

The Silky Oak was now a magnificent example of natural construction. Tall, proud and colourful, dominating the landscape alongside its mother, generating a spectacular Green and Gold display for anyone lucky enough to witness it.

The 2020 bushfire season in NSW was one of the worst in history, almost eclipsing the massive Victorian fires of 1851, when a quarter of the State was burnt out. After many, many months of rainless despair, the ground was parched, the foliage was water-deprived and desperately dry.

The Silky Oak was in the firing line. As the fire ripped through, the surrounding bush was cruelly decimated along with most of the surrounding landscape, and the dominating, tall, proud Oak, along with its mother, was cremated by the fierce, savage, voracious fire storm. The fire tore through the forest like a monster from the deep, devouring everything in its path. Indiscriminate of its victims, man, buildings, equipment and forest were devoured as if the fire had not been fed for a hundred years. The human cost is immeasurable. The Flora cost is immeasurable. The Fauna cost is immeasurable, devastating and some species may never recover. Communities were devastated. Villages were wiped out and townships left isolated. Phone and computer services were destroyed and communications were all but useless.

Some say this was the worst fire in living memory. People lost everything but the clothes on their back and Australia responded as no other nation on earth could respond. Billions of dollars were raised to support the devastated communities. Businesses put compassion ahead of profits. People gave until it hurt them. Governments pledged support for the affected and sporting groups, clubs, international stars, entrepreneurs and wealthy philanthropists donated to the cause as never before.

The Silky Oak was stripped bare of foliage. Its bark was carbonised black and beginning to peel off the trunk. The broken-down foliage at its base was nothing but carbon. Its branch tips were blackened and slaughtered. A more desolate scene would be difficult to find.

And then it rained. And rained and rained and rained and rained. The parched earth absorbed liquid gold as if the very future of its forest depended on it. And it did. The Silky Oak sucked up the moisture hungrily, gratefully, just as it did as a seed. The moisture assuaged the blackened wingtips and brought them back to life. Burnt leaves were discarded and replaced the carbonised foliage with lime green buds that promised a brilliant Green and Gold future that reminded us that, as Australians, we will prevail, succeed and prosper. What doesn't kill us makes us stronger, and we will rise and conquer.

The sapling oak had grown, matured and survived its most testing challenge. Sadly, the mothership did not survive. Her age, condition and deprivation were such that she capitulated and fell at the last hurdle. She had done her job and created the future of her species, successfully giving birth to a stronger, more resilient, more powerful sibling.

The seed fell from the *Grevillea Robusta* with a rustling crack as it smashed into the debris-covered yet soft surface below. Six days of unusually constant rain had told the mothership that the time was right to breed. Propelled by the gentle, early summer breeze, the seed landed some 10 metres from its parent. The husk was already broken open, having been germinated by the greedy honey-eaters, and the jolt of the crash jettisoned the seed onto the damp, lush, fertile soil. Hungry for nutrition and desperate for liquid, the voracious seed began its journey to mature Silky Oak with this simple drop.

The Silky Oak, *Grevillea Robusta*, is so representative of our Australian culture. Tough, beautiful and resilient, displaying our national colours and resurrecting itself from the direst of straits, it says to me that we are Australian and we are unbreakable.

Together

Peter Pickett

Dalmeny

He stood there silent as the side of his mouth glistened with the kiss of another glass of wine. We had been arguing and I had returned to the kitchen to see why my last jibe had gone unnoticed.

“Well say something!” I snarled.

He looked at me, struggling to evoke a response. It was then that I realized that the wine dribble was not wine. Ray began collapsing to the kitchen floor. I flung my arms out to break his crashing fall onto the marble tiles. His body began convulsing and my First Aid training kicked in. I pulled his flaying body clear of obstacles and rolled him onto his side. The telephone jumped into my hand and I dialled Triple 0.

The ambulance roared to a stop and the lifesaving ambos diagnosed and began treating Ray for a severe stroke. I lurched onto the front seat and the siren heralded our drive to RPA hospital. Ray was scurried off to surgery and I was led to what seemed like a darkened enveloping room, to wait. Tears began welling up then cascading down my ashen grey cheeks. It felt like an eternity before a figure opened the forbidding door and proceeded to deliver the news. A lump rolled down my throat as he began.

“Ray has had a severe stroke and the clot has lodged near his right ear. We cannot use the drug to disperse it as this may cause more brain damage.”

I was so overwhelmed with emotion. He was alive. A nurse led me through endless corridors before I found Ray in the Intensive Care Ward. Wires and tubes consumed his still body as I held his hand to let him know he was not alone. I sat there until the early rays of the sun greeted my exit.

I was granted one week of compassionate leave by my principal and I felt so isolated and distant. Both our families lived in regional areas and therefore only I was there to climb this Mt Everest with Ray. My day was consumed with long visits to the hospital, dealing with Centrelink and the Guardianship Tribunal. Ray’s marathon stay of two months in the Stroke unit was only eclipsed by his three month internment in Balmain Rehabilitation Hospital. While in the Intensive Stroke Unit, our good friend Robin, came in to give Ray a swish haircut as I trimmed and polished his nails. He always took pride in how he looked. Nightmares can materialize and did so with a vengeance at Balmain. The piercing screams from the mentally scarred patient next to Ray still haunt me to this day.

That magical day arrived and I drove Ray home. Tears rolled down his face as he eased out of the car. Speech was a distant part of his life and his right side was never to recover fully. But he was home and now we could, little by little, grab back some of what was lost.

I took some more Long Service Leave and began the healing for Ray. He was going to RPA Day hospital for physical and speech therapy. Each day we would walk the thirty minute journey. I would sit with him as he struggled through each torturing session. These lessons were followed up at home for reinforcement. It was heartbreaking watching a body so broken but also uplifting to see the brow of determination on his face. Gradually he gained 30% of his speech and we developed other ways for him to communicate, such as a book. This vital book contained emotion emojis, telephone numbers, places, things to do and what he did today. I had to teach him to read and write, of which I was thankfully trained to do.

The Guardianship Tribunal had granted me control of Ray's estate while he was still undergoing treatment. Centrelink became the new nightmare. Every fortnight I had to drag Ray off to his doctor who would declare Ray unfit for work. I then have to take him in to Centrelink to hand this in. This went on for three very long years. All the time I was trying to keep my own health and go to work. We had no assistance from anyone. On an otherwise uneventful day I received a disturbing phone call from an employment agency.

"We need Ray to come in for a job interview or he will lose his benefits," the monotone voice oozed out.

I politely told them that Ray's medical certificate was handed in. But according to the agency, Centrelink had not notified them. The agency informed me that I had to sort it out. I politely informed them that it was the agency that had the communication problem and therefore they needed to fix it. I was churning inside. Three weeks before Ray turned pension age he had to go to Centrelink for his final evaluation. We were led into a barren room and sat at a desk. In strode a man who slumped down in his chair and rustled through his leather briefcase. He pulled out a thick pile of papers and threw them in front of Ray.

"Now read through these before we begin the questioning!" he snarled.

"He can't read, he has very limited speech, has no use of his right hand and walks with a limp," I replied.

"So why isn't he on a disability pension?" he inquired.

"Great question," I offered.

So they had kept Ray on the lowest benefits for three years and only put him on a pension when his age entitled him to it.

We went home dismayed by how we had been treated over the three years but we came through it all .

Resilience.

Love.

Resilience.

We now reside on the far south coast where our resilience carried us through the recent bush-fires and delivered us safe and together with its tender embrace.

Trial by Fire

Greg Bartlett

Tura Beach

The old lady stood up shakily, the rosary beads wrapped tightly in her palm while the three little girls remained with heads bent in prayer. Their mothers huddled in a tight group, the hot wind whipped at them, slapping their anxious faces as they stared towards the ridge where a wall of smoke rolled their way. Clara Whelan's little cottage was being defended up there by her son Jack and a few neighbours armed with nothing more than hessian bags and rakes. The well had long run dry in the drought.

She looked at her chestnut gelding, Hurricane, nibbling the dry grass at the edge of the shallow river. An idea came to her. Jack had two heavy milk cans in the back of his truck.

She called across to the women, "Give us a hand!"

They carried the cans, a stack of buckets and a coil of rope over to the horse. Clara threaded the rope through the handles of the milk cans, looped it around the pommel of the saddle, pulled until the cans dangled either side on Hurricane's forequarters.

"Right, let's fill these cans and I'll take 'em up to the men."

"Mum, you're not going to..."

"Listen! It's my place and it's my job to help."

Everybody knew it was pointless arguing with the old woman. People said it was the Irish in her.

Buckets scooped up water, skimming over the sandy floor, swallowing with it the foul layer of ash and incinerated gum-leaves carried there by the wind. Clara's grandchildren helped too and methodically the milk cans were filled until water slopped over the rim making the big horse's sinewy, red hide glisten.

The little group followed the old woman across the flats to where the bush climbed upwards.

"That's as far as you go," she ordered. "I'll be back in a jiff."

The track led half a mile through low lying scrub to her home. It was a steep rise, the pathway worn bare by daily trips to the river and before that, seasons of harvesting beans on the flats. Clara pulled Hurricane by his reins, his hooves clattering on crumbling shale sending up small clouds of dust leaving a fine, powdery coat over the thin trail of spilt water.

When the farmhouse came into view the heat and blast of hot air hit her and the horse hard. Hurricane balked for a moment and had to be dragged forward. In the distance she saw a line of figures shrouded in smoke slapping at the ground with blankets and bags where patches of flame spread from random ember attack.

Above them Clara saw tips of giant orange tongues licking high up into the air. The canopy of trees swirled in the hot wind, flared into flame and leapt across to latch onto neighbouring gums. The fire's hot breath was unbearable.

"Mum!" It was Jack running towards her.

"Take the cans son and fill the feeding trough."

Others caught sight of water slopping out, abandoned the fire to run over and gulp greedily out of cupped hands and wash stinging eyes. Filthy blankets and scorched clumps of hessian mopped up what was left before they took off back to the fire-front.

"I'll get more water."

As Clara led the horse away, Jack called and ran over, lifted the woollen shawl from her shoulders and wrapped it over her hair and around her face. She nodded her thanks.

Back at the river the girls greeted her with quickfire questions about their men.

"They're doing their best. Let's get these cans filled." That was Clara's way. Few words, no fuss.

Once again Clara and Hurricane toiled back up into the fire. By the time she arrived things had turned for the worse. The men had retreated closer to the cottage. A youth clambered over the roof, slapping at embers landing in gutters while crouching against the full force of the wind.

A giant gum near the building suddenly exploded in a blinding flash of blue light as it roared alight, showering them all with stinging cinders. The reins slipped from her grasp as the horse spun away. If not for the quick action of a neighbour the precious load would have been lost. The boy on the roof continued to run about in a frenzy, now kicking off flaming clumps of tree.

Clara looked about her little farm as the cans were emptied. Charred rags were soaked and the men stumbled away to whip and stomp at the ground. Pools of fire ran like lava towards the veranda splashing onto its boards and crawling up the posts before being noticed and beaten out.

By mid-afternoon the smoke blocked out the sun and the world turned to an eerie amber shade. Back and forth Clara and Hurricane carried water, lost, as were the others in their solitary, grim struggle to be not overrun. They fought the fire until the wind suddenly changed. A cool southerly pushed the front onto itself until it reluctantly ran off back into the hinterland.

Clara led Hurricane down to the river for the last time. Jack and the others followed her wearily trudging over a grey carpet where only spindly black skeletons of charred saplings rose like spears from the ground.

On the river bank they hugged and gave thanks. Clara led them in prayer with one hand resting on the exhausted horse, its ashen sweaty coat covered in cinder scars he would carry the rest of his days. Hurricane's eyes remained closed and as it snorted the huge chest rose and fell. The firm touch of Clara's hand and familiar sound of her voice the only reward he required.

Post Script

Elaine Cozens was six years old when she watched her grandmother, her neighbours and family fight to save the farm from the fires of 1952. She learned recently how the terrible fires of this summer had destroyed the old farmhouse at Kiah.

5:00am Christmas Day

Wendy Henderson

Albury

We moved from Melbourne to Darwin in January 1973.

After just a year our little family excitedly took possession of our new home in a street of identical houses all on stilts.

December 1974 most of our Darwin friends had headed south to family but I had the baby's little bike under the tree and had invited neighbours for Christmas dinner.

On Christmas Eve we attended a children's party in the afternoon and later we were to attend another party.

It had been raining solidly for two days. Everyone was talking about the impending cyclone. We had two false alarms earlier that month and most Darwinians seemed quite unconcerned. We hadn't yet experienced a full 'wet season' so the tropical climate was still new to us.

The evening Christmas party was cancelled.

We went home and prepared the house as best we could. The radio warned us to stay at home, to tape up all windows, fill the bath with water and buy batteries. There was no suggestion that we decamp to the school so I finalised things for Christmas the next day and prepared myself for a nasty storm.

Many senior staff were out of town for the holidays so John was left to manage the electricity supply. He thought he would be home soon and returned to work in his work's vehicle.

There was no such thing as a mobile phone in the 70s, so I was isolated and alone. I couldn't talk to neighbors as the wind was howling and it was pouring as only the tropics can.

We owned a sedan which was parked under the house. Next to it was a laundry of concrete bricks.

The rest of the house was accessible by concrete stairs front and back. It was a wood-floored, wood-framed, fibro structure with glass louvred windows from ceiling to floor. The roof was iron.

The wind appeared to be blowing from the south toward the carport. Above the carport with windows facing the wind were the baby's bedroom, the lounge/dining room and front steps up to a verandah.

On the sheltered side of the house was the back door at the top of the stairs with our main bedroom, bathroom and kitchen windows.

I was a little nervous watching the sky from the front verandah but as there was no one to consult I just muddled along.

It had been raining solidly since midday and it was growing dark. The wind was howling and the lightning was so constant I could see clearly without any lights.

Over time the wind got stronger and I could feel the house being buffeted with fierce gusts and heard a terrific thumping noise and a shuddering under my feet. It was our car in the carport being pounded against the laundry brick wall.

Thinking that this might be the worst of it I woke baby and moved her into our room on the sheltered side of the house. She was sleeping well.

Water was bubbling through the louvres in all of the windows. Despite the tape, it was spilling over the lounge room floor.

By 10 o'clock I was becoming extremely anxious. I took down the wet curtains and stored everything else away in the hall cupboard.

Then one of the glass louvres cracked open completely pouring water into the room. I hurriedly removed a louvre out of one of the windows on the other side of the house. I had to push with all my weight to fit the missing glass in and then close the windows against the force of the wind. All the time more water was forcing its way through and the house was shaking.

Then the radio went off. No power, no lights, no phone. I was alone.

I shut the door to the damaged side of the house and retreated with my baby into my bedroom. It was then that I heard a terrific explosion. This was the lounge room's full wall of windows blown away. Afraid that I might need to leave the house, I filled a small case with some essentials and we rushed into the bathroom.

It was midnight. The noise was horrific. Then I heard another explosion. More windows were gone taking the whole side of the house with them.

We huddled in the bathroom.

John mercifully arrived. He came through the back door his face as white as a sheet. The work car was in the drive the motor running. He had seen our house from outside and said we must go.

At that moment, the last of the ceiling came crashing down on top of us. Somehow we dashed through the back door out into the storm and scrambled into his waiting car.

We backed into the street, everywhere was chaos. The car bounced up and down over broken timber and metal. Essential to keep the car's back to the wind or be toppled over. We were helpless and just went in the direction the wind took us. Power lines across the road, roaring wind and screaming metal and constant lightning. It was hell.

Our minds were racing, if we can only keep the wind behind us and make it to the school. House after house collapsed in front of us.

No chance of steering the car. So we let the road, now a river of water, and the storm select our fate. Finally we could go no further. Lying below the window level, we prayed knowing that the next huge gust could be our last. Knowing that the heavy ripping debris bouncing off the car, could crush us at any second. We thought of our families and what heart breaking news they might be waking up to.

We dozed exhausted until the gap between gusts of wind slowly lengthened. Just a little at a time.

It was over. It was 5.00am Christmas Day 1974.

A year later I still found myself fleeing the cyclone in my sleep.

A Dream Worth Having

Robyn Schiralli

Miranda

Robyn was exhilarated beyond measure. She tossed her graduation mortar high into the air and watched it float wistfully to the grass below. It was a surreal moment; the culmination of years of challenges. Working through these challenges had required flexibility, without submission and without ever giving up on her ultimate prize – the attainment of a Bachelor degree.

It was not until she reached her mid-forties that she began to think seriously about university study. Perhaps it was because her elder son had commenced study to become a Chartered Accountant and her younger son was considering what study path he would ultimately take. She knew that the process would not be a straight-forward one, given that she had not completed her Year Twelve Higher School Certificate. Instead, she had opted to attain a Secretarial Business Course diploma after completing Year Ten at High School.

Mobilising herself with an ample armoury of determination and relevant internet resources, she made her first move. With the decision made that the University of New South Wales would be her first choice, given the proximity to her full-time workplace, the process began.

“You will need to complete a University Preparation Program before being assessed for entry into one of our faculties.” The administration officer’s tone was abrasive and without proffering further details, she closed the call. This would be Robyn’s first hurdle, but certainly not her only one. She successfully navigated the University’s website to complete the application.

It did not take long for Robyn to receive a response. The course, which consisted of two subjects to be attended on two evenings per week would be undertaken over a semester. It would mean a disciplined approach, adhering to a rigid timeline, travelling from her full-time employment to the university on these days. She would not allow any obstacle to thwart her dream.

For the next several months she made the pilgrimage, buoyed with the end goal in mind. During that time, she witnessed several class members, mostly mature age, withdrawing from the Preparation Program. Robyn had no intention of falling victim to the intensity of full-time employment coupled with the uncharted waters of mature age study. In fact, her resolve became stronger as she met and overcame stumbling blocks along the way.

The first stage of this journey was nearing a close, with class results to be revealed that evening. With the same sense of exuberance that she had felt on her first evening of study, Robyn was keen to learn the outcome which would also determine her eligibility into university. The lecturer smiled as she read her name and final score. She had been accepted into the Arts faculty at the University of New South Wales.

Whilst overjoyed with the result, Robyn encountered another obstacle on the path to attaining her degree. A review of their syllabus highlighted the limited number of evening classes on offer, making it apparent that she would need to look at other institutions to accommodate her competing full-time employment position. She had heard that the University of New England specialised in distance learning and, having no doubt in her tenacity to maintain focus autonomously, she contacted them immediately to lodge her transfer request.

She was accepted on the basis of her successful completion of the Preparation Program and mused at the relative ease of the process. It was contra to the tenacity that she had needed to employ to ensure that she did not surrender her long term vision.

First term was due to commence within days and Robyn's eagerness could be paralleled to a child on Christmas Eve. She fingered the crisp pages of her text books, inhaling their own special perfume and previewed the workbooks which the University had sent her. Her excitement was interspersed with a sprinkling of apprehension, as she was cognisant that she had never undertaken this level of study. However, she quickly abandoned any self-doubt, with the added reassurance of her supportive husband and sons.

She had chosen to commence study on a part-time basis over six years. Her days were sometimes arduous, with most evenings spent cloistered in front of her laptop completing assignments. Distance study presented its own challenges, one of which was to ensure assignments were lodged with postal deadlines in mind. On many occasions this necessitated a midnight drive to the postal depot to guarantee on-time delivery of the Express Post satchel. Needless to say, sleep deprivation was always a factor to be dealt with.

For the ensuing four-and-a-half-years she continued her pattern of work and study, encouraged by the gratifying results she continued to receive for each assignment, maintaining a credit/distinction average. With her confidence boosted by her ability to juggle family life, full-time work and her beloved tertiary study, Robyn made the decision to increase her subject load by one unit per semester. It would mean a closer completion date leading to the

pinnacle of her dream – her Graduation. It would also mean a test of her resilience in overcoming the associated obstacles that would confront her.

With the decision made and the semester in full swing, study and assignments became all consuming. The final stages of study progressed quickly and formal examinations had been scheduled as per previous semesters. As she exited the examination room for the last time, she knew that she had given it everything that she had to give. The results of this enormous endeavour confirmed her declaration to be true.

Graduation Day arrived! Robyn travelled with her husband to the University's campus in Armidale. Whilst treasuring the culmination of what had consumed her world for the previous six years, she knew that the presence of her sons would have made the day even more special. Much to her delight, they too had shown their own resilience in driving 12 hours to surprise her on her special day.

A Letter to Eliza

Geraldine Levett

Riverview

Dear Eliza,

I have been thinking a lot of you lately.

You are my great-grandmother and you died 55 years ago.

I remember you standing silhouetted against the kitchen window. Leaning against the vintage cast iron sink, you spoke many home truths about life and how it was meant to be lived.

Ma and Pa Lynn, your adoptive parents, had built the impressive mud-brick stone house in 1880 in Murray Street, Lidcombe, a suburb in the west of Sydney. Much later in the 1950s, I felt the icy-cold stone floor of the narrow hall as I plodded down to the primitive kitchen where you bustled around organising afternoon tea. Creeping gnarled fingers of the sprawling fig tree tapped at the glass pane of the window. This immense fig tree supplied copious amounts of juicy, ripening fruit for your jams. It dominated the sprawling backyard. Nearby, the deep brick well heightened the magic of the place. The smell of freshly baked scones wafted through the house. Scones layered with sticky fig jam and lashings of clotted cream.

As a young girl with a vivid imagination, I remember thinking your rambling home was a haven for both tranquillity and adventure. I looked up into the sprawling ficus carica and I saw my mother as a young girl, wispy blonde-haired and long-limbed, lounging amongst its spreading branches. Dreaming...

After the delicious scones you retreated to your rocking chair and read a newspaper while I curled up on the worn, faded tapestry sofa with a book. However it was never quiet because you ran a noisy commentary on what you were reading.

Why am I thinking of you Eliza? (Can I call you by your name?)

In my mind you epitomize strength and determination Eliza.

What would you think of the world today – 2020, Eliza?

This year we have experienced catastrophic bushfires, immense floods and now the world wide pandemic of the Coronavirus. Life has thrown up so many challenges, but these were not new to you Eliza.

Your own grandparents emigrated from Yorkshire to find new wealth on the Victorian goldfields. After a nightmarish voyage which lasted four and a half months, the ship arrived at Port Phillip Bay on 14th November, 1849. Their first 'home' was a rough lean-to on the crumbling banks of the Yarra in the 1850s. About 25 years later your own father had the tough job of a bullock train driver in Victoria. Your poor mother had nine children and eventually took her own life in despair and loneliness. As luck would have had it, you were fostered out to the Lynns, family friends, who eventually moved to Sydney. They bought land in Lidcombe and built a home. The Lynns were kind and loving. You never saw your father or your siblings again.

As an only child, you thrived in your new family. After completing primary school, the Lynns paid for 'private' home-schooling. At a time when few women had careers, you trained as a seamstress and worked in the fashion house of Bon Marche in Broadway in Sydney. Life opened up with a proposal from a wealthy young man but both families disapproved of the match. Unfortunately, you went on to marry George who changed the course of your life. One hardship after another followed. As George went fossicking, you set up

your house made of wattle and daub, walls lined with white-washed flour bags and bare earth floors. Your future looked bleak as the full brunt of the economic depression hit Australia in the 1890s (along with a severe drought). Desperate times fractured marriages. As well as returning to your family home in a loveless marriage you gave birth to four children. As fate would have it, the Gallipoli campaign in 1915 took your husband. Alone you mustered your strength to sew flannels for the troops. Not quite 'haute couture' but useful and practical. Meanwhile you sold off some of your land. The horrific Spanish Flu crept in with the returning soldiers to further disturb your equilibrium.

Eliza, today we are struggling with the Coronavirus epidemic of world-wide proportion.

Vigilance was your second name Eliza and you cared for your family diligently.

Fresh fruit and vegetables were gathered from the garden, wild rabbits from the bush land and abundant fish from the creek.

Life taught you to be self-sufficient.

As your children grew and had their own families, life settled down until the Great Depression sucked up the 1930s. Out into the streets you pushed your rough and ready trolley laden with home-grown fruit and vegetables to sell. In the evenings you made clothes for your ever increasing number of grandchildren. My mother, Patricia, was one of them. Lovingly she brushed your fine grey hair as you sat in your rocking chair and told stories of the 'olden days'.

Your strength and perseverance was an inspiration to your children and grandchildren. A disrupted childhood, personal challenges, unhappy marriage, world epidemic, world wars, and world-wide depressions all presented immense challenges but

you bounced back and never gave up.

So you are excused from being cranky and irritable at times Eliza. Rather dogmatic and opinionated too. Life had been tough but you continued to meet each challenge head on.

Fifty-five years after your death your great-granddaughter smiles at the photo of you as a young and stunning woman of twentyish, dressed in the latest fashion-frilly, white blouse, fitting bodice and tapering long skirt. A mass of curly hair was pinned up while unruly strands slipped cheekily on the nape of your slender neck. Oh, and your eyes, narrow and fierce, determined to take on the world.

Hardships were ahead of you but your strength lived through the generations of women who followed you. I am one of those women and your strength empowers me as it did my mother and grandmother before her.

You are my inspiration Eliza,

Love...

A Positive Trade Off

Janice Rowan

North Manly

Before Mr P came into my life, I was happily married and employed in a full-time job that I was passionate about! My three adult children were busily engaged with their own lives and I was looking forward to spending the so called 'Golden Years' with my husband, Peter. We wanted to do a number of things such as overseas holidays, which had previously been put on hold because of family commitments or financial restraints. However all these future plans initially fell apart when Mr P, unexpectedly and uninvited, entered my life!

The day in 2009 that proved to be a precursor of what was to come, began when my husband, Peter and I were about to board a ferry with friends, to spend a long weekend on Cockatoo Island. Peter handed me a take-away coffee and my right hand began to shake uncontrollably for a short while. Initially, I brushed this off as an isolated incident of over-tiredness or stress ... however the hand tremor soon reappeared on and off over the next few weeks, along with some other concerning signs. While teaching at Preschool, I began to notice that I was taking longer to write up my daily reports while my writing was becoming cramped and much smaller.

These first warning signs set off alarm bells, so I took myself off to my GP who ordered an MRI with a referral to see a neurologist. I vividly remember that fateful day, sitting in the Neurologist's office with Peter and being given a diagnosis of 'Parkinson's'. Total shock took over and while I could hear the voice of the specialist talking about treatment options, this was drowned out by my inner voice screaming 'This can't be happening to me!'. Mr P had arrived to take up residence!

My initial reaction to Mr P's presence in my life was one of total disbelief which sent me spiralling into a grieving process for some time. I was stuck in denial and at the beginning, told very few people about my condition. As I soldiered on with my physical job, I found it increasingly difficult to keep up with the pace of my energetic pre-schoolers. Soon I dropped down to part time work which caused me to further grieve about what Mr P had taken from me!

Fortunately, over the next five years, medication mostly kept Mr P's symptoms under control, so many people still remained unaware of my condition. However, when I retired at 62 years, I commenced writing poetry to help fill the void left after 26 rewarding years of teaching pre-schoolers, as well as a therapy to seek some respite from the daily challenges I faced. My first poems were somewhat raw with emotion, but later began to have a more positive slant as I got enough courage to share some on a poetry site on Facebook. I also wrote a short story, *My Nana is a Mover and Shaker*, as an attempt to explain my Parkinson's to my grandchildren and later posted this on Facebook. This was a way to finally let my friends in on what I had carefully hidden from them all this time!

Shortly afterwards, my outlook towards Mr P continued to further transform after I saw a post by *Medicine X* on Facebook, seeking people to share their stories of living with Parkinson's for an App they were making. I decided to apply and to my surprise, was chosen to have my own personal experience written into the storyline for their App – *Parkinson's Xplained*, which was released in April 2016. This was the breakthrough trigger that changed how I was coping with Mr P in my life!

Finally I realised I had to make a positive trade-off – ie. to work with and not against Mr P. Clarity finally hit, that by sharing my story, I could help others and increase awareness of Parkinson's in the wider community. Soon, I began to write more poetry as well as self-publish a number of children's books, in a creative surge of energy which I truly believe would not have happened if Mr P had not come into my life!

So I end my story by reflecting back over the last ten years with a letter to Mr P.

To Mr P,

You initially turned my life upside down 10 years ago. You made me grieve for lost dreams and the life I used to know! My vibrant spontaneity, energy and get-up and go were gradually replaced by poor sleep and movements so slow. Most days now turn out better than others, while some can be quite bad; especially when you inflict pain, cause frustration and make me sad. You have created a world where I need ongoing medication to control your impact of symptoms so I can continue to live a life with meaning and direction.

But on a positive note, your constant challenges over the years have made me more resilient and a stronger person, determined to do the best I can throughout my remaining years of independence! You also awakened in me a creative spirit and a positive sense of purpose in artistic endeavours where I often seek respite in writing, poetry, painting and leisure activities, including dance and Tai Chi. Also, having you in my life, has introduced me to many wonderful new friends who inspire me with their creative talents, achievements, advocacy and personal stories, while also coping with you in their lives!

Now that you are progressing into a stronger force, I will try to focus on these positives to block all your negative influences to end up feeling a victim!

Hope for better treatments and perhaps that breakthrough discovery of a miracle cure will continue to motivate me to keep on going forwards, despite having your intrusive and continued presence in my life!

Yours sincerely,

A Tough Old Bird

Susan Ash

South Golden Beach

I decided to become a tough old bird at 70. I was going to build resilience into a body that had the potential to bend and shuffle, so I embarked on a program of walking. Walking the Camino, as some had done approaching 70 seemed too difficult with the time at hand, but something more local like the fifty-five kilometre Twelve Apostles Walk along the southern Victorian coast seemed manageable.

My daughter and I booked in April for September which gave me five months to prepare. Instructions from the company indicated to just walk every day and make sure your hiking shoes were walked in.

The time fled and the date for the walk arrived. I knew I wasn't prepared enough. A sleepless night with many trips to the bathroom to settle a nervous stomach preceded the morning of the pickup. Visions of being left far behind on the path flashed through my mind.

The Twelve Apostles Lodge sits close to the Great Otway National Park among huge mountain ash, blackwood and messmate trees. This would be our home for the next three nights and we were welcomed by Sue, one of our hosts, with coffee and homemade scones. The other four walkers in our party were all women, including another mother and daughter. Our fitness levels varied, two of us were grey-haired. Walk leaders were Kyle and Harry, two fit and gentle young men. After introductions, we kitted ourselves out in Gortex rain jackets, gaiters, over trousers and backpacks with our lunch. As the rain began to fall, we headed out to Castle Cove. The view over the Southern Ocean was vast and the sea rough, rain squalls gusting in. We set off in single file. Soon the rain was falling heavily. Our heads down with rain hoods over our hats, we almost missed seeing a koala and its joey pointed out by Kyle. We stopped for lunch under the dripping messmates. Kyle explained we were on Gamubanud land and

respectfully acknowledged the elders past and present. We didn't stop long before setting off again to the cliff top heading down to Johanna Beach. The tide was high so walking along the beach involved running in single file at the first inlet to avoid the crashing surf. We continued along for two kilometres trudging through the soft sand. This was familiar enough for me, a beach walker so I was gaining some confidence that I might manage this walk after all.

Back at the Lodge, our evening began with a delicious meal, served with wine. We six women shared stories of our lives and our families, our work and our hobbies. The chat went on past our evening briefing with Kyle, who quietly explained that the next day would be the hardest – 1,052 metres up and 8,989 metres down over a distance of 14.5 kilometres along the Milanesia track. It rained all night.

We set off the next morning in cool weather and headed straight down the slippery track. Hiking poles were essential. The underlying clay had turned into a thick sludge. Down on the beach, we crossed Milanesia Creek and stopped for a hot drink. Kyle pointed to a headland about three further on to the south and announced that would be our lunch stop. So began the first of many ascents and descents. Up Wattle Hill we passed massed tea-tree and wattle bushes in flower. Squalls came in off the ocean sending us unpacking our rain gear only to get very hot and stripping it all off again. We began the ascent of the famous 130 steps cut into the slope before Ryans Den and finally paused at the summit. The mothers and daughters were grouped for a photo shoot and praise flowed from the fittest walker to the two grey-haired ones. "You two are amazing!"

Still I could feel my legs were getting tired and the beginnings of a blister beginning to form. After lunch, we could see the peaks and troughs of the remaining headlands and valleys we still needed to traverse. The gravelly clifftops where the track led were so, so slippery after the rain. Walking down was a trade-off between strength and balance. The hiking poles were grimly stuck into any stable ground to avoid slipping.

Just put one foot in front of the other. Concentrate on each step. I was dimly aware we were falling behind but my treasured daughter hung around, telling silly jokes. At one point she said, "You ARE amazing, Mum". She must have been feeling tired herself. I was beginning to feel rather strange as we came up the last incline to join the others at the finish. According to my phone, I had climbed 110 floors and done 27,000 steps.

A massage and foot bath awaited us at the Lodge. On our final evening Harry and Kyle having walked all day, miraculously transformed into wait staff and served us dinner. The conversation turned from politics to shared stories of escapades. We six women were now firm friends, checking on inflamed hands and blisters and remedies for tired legs.

The last day we packed up and headed to the Gellibrand River to walk the final eight kilometres to the Twelve Apostles. Kyle explained we were now on Giraiwurrung country and requested safe passage on their land. He asked us to walk in silence and reflect on the highs and lows of our four days together. My reflection – yes, I was proud for taking the challenge to attempt a walk that I thought would be beyond me. I felt invigorated from the physical challenge even though the blister on the side of my right foot was huge and painful. But the greatest reward was the camaraderie I found walking in our beautiful country, stripping away all unnecessary clutter. Engaging with nature, with each other and with ourselves is what builds resilience.

Achieving Potential in a Connected World

Dr David Gray

Coogee

It's 5:30am, my dream is shattered by the ambulance-like cry coming up the stairs. Ahh, the grandchildren jump like transformers onto the bed. "Get up grandpa," they shout, "we want to play."

Groggy, I wonder, how did we survive the last three years? We did not plan it. It just rolled in like a tsunami consuming everything in its path. The dimming of the light over full-time work ended, the thirst for more leisure and travel thwarted for now. Family is now the centre of our universe, so the choice is easy, but the journey is exhausting for us and our family. Our son and daughter-in law's journey takes 'the road less travelled'. Their resilience forged in uncertain and difficult times. They share a measure of determination and a spirit to overcome any obstacle faced. Our son who stood resolutely beside his wife as she struggled and overcame all barriers to achieve her PhD dream only to be met with disappointment as government shut down funding, damaging her spirit, her self-esteem and the life she had hoped for. Undaunted, and disciplined through four years of the roller coaster PhD ride she realised that when one door closes its time to open another one.

As Calvin Coolidge popularised earlier thinking during the 1920s that, 'Nothing in this world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not: nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not: the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent'. So, living with her parents and with her husband's support and her love of science she decided to study medicine. I don't think my son really knew what he was getting into at that time. My goodness, its only 10:00am on Saturday and the grandkids will be here for another 36 hours. Will I last the distance?

Anyway back to the main story. To study post-graduate medicine, hurdle one was to pass the Graduate Medical School Admissions Test (GAMSAT). Okay, she was pretty good at study, but it still took six months to get ready for that exam and to get through successfully. Hurdle number two began in first year (2013) in adjusting to studying with 25-year-old colleagues, when 35. Don't think there is much of a gap at that age then think again? Hurdle number three, the bombshell news of a baby girl on the way and born in December, just two weeks before final exams. Disaster, just failed exams. Time to take a year off (2014) to look after the baby and build that special bond. The journey continued with repeating year one and success. Hurdle number four, entering year two (2016) and all looks great. Bombshell, another baby boy on the way, born in October, six weeks before final exams. In such a stressful time I don't know how she managed to pass. Now it's 2017 and time to take another year off to bond with her new baby son. In 2018 she enters year three and passes. In 2019, it's year seven and her final year of medicine. As Malcolm Fraser, a former Prime Minister said once "life wasn't meant to be easy" and this proved to be prophetic as her parents decided to sell their home in September, three months before her final exams. It was chaos, two kids, a house sold and to be emptied before those exams. Disaster, just failed one of the final exams.

"No more study please," was the plea but this was a determined woman. One month later all the exams were resat and passed.

At that stage, as grandparents, we had been babysitting the children in our house almost every weekend with our son, for over two years. You would think, life would get easier. Not so fast, now comes her medical internship with occasional weekend and night shifts. Both parents working

full-time and looking after two young kids is an exhausting experience. But still there was no choice but to carry on. Resilience was their strength. They are however, not alone. It means more babysitting for us as grandparents and the 5:30am wakeup.

But there's more, if this was not enough to put up with. There is the drought, the bushfires and finally the Coronavirus. The world is in chaos. The shortages and panic buying, the stock market crash, the anxiety felt throughout society. The world has changed as we know it, in less than a month. We are banned from public gatherings or meeting friends, with all restaurants, clubs and gyms being closed. We are shattered that it is likely that over a million people will lose their jobs in Australia alone, as a result of this pandemic. We are now unable to be with our grandchildren as a precaution in case they are carriers of the corona virus. I am actually sad that we will not be babysitting for a while and miss the "get up grandpa" but we know the Coronavirus will pass and things will return to normal.

Despite all the gloom and doom, we know we are lucky to have a close family, to have our oldest son who is absolutely devoted to his wife and children and to have another daughter and son who are all close to each other. I think the remarks popularised by Calvin Coolidge around resilience focusing on persistence and determination are just as true today as they were during the 1920s. Resilience is the capacity to recover quickly from adversity by maintaining control of a situation and the ability to think of new ways to get to grips with problems. Successful people don't get there by themselves. They need the support of family, friends and sometimes just plain good luck to overcome life's difficulties. This story is an example of how one person overcame daunting obstacles to achieve her dreams.

All I Can Offer

Wendy Gordon

Cranebrook

"I'm too young to have a child! I'm not ready to be a mother!"

She was just nineteen, still a girl, married off so her parents would have one less mouth to feed. So little experience of the world. Unlike her husband, aged thirty-five. He'd had a difficult childhood, one of 10 in a poor family. A fire tore through their house when he was just thirteen, off to high school in the only pair of shoes he had ever had. They lost everything. For him, high school lasted just that one day. All the older children had to find work, and he laboured until he went to war for his country. He carried his twin brother from the battlefield, and wished he could die with him.

One so young, the other so traumatised. Were they ready to be parents? To offer unconditional love to a baby? A small child? A teenager? To guide and train him to make wise and good decisions? The boy was born. No help offered to new parents, no guidance for them. But the child grew. The household grew. Four sisters followed, and much later, a brother. All a burden to the parents. They struggled. Financially, emotionally, socially.

Life was hard for the boy. Was he loved? "I love you when you're good!" A cruel answer! What was "good" enough to earn love? Why must a child earn love? How frightening, how unsettling. To know that you would never be good enough. Never good enough for a parent's love. Then there were the rules. No speaking unless you were spoken to first. Never argue with your father or your mother. Don't speak while the news is on. No opinions on news or current affairs. "We don't want to know what you think. In fact we don't want you to think. You kids don't know anything about life!" But the boy did think differently from them. He dared to form his own opinions. He did not see them converse respectfully. His opinions were considered to be

"arguing back with adults". Arguments. Constant friction. Obey! Obey! Break the boy's spirit! Teach him who is boss. The scapegoat of their own failing relationship. Refusal to submit.

No laughing, no fun, no celebrations. "Play outside when you come home from school. I've just washed the floor! Don't bring muddy footprints into the house! Come in for baths, dinner, homework and bed. And don't annoy your father!" A clean and tidy house and "peace and quiet" defined her success as a wife and mother.

And so the boy grew. But could not conform. He dared to speak, argue back, rebel. Refused to study – to spite them. Sought his escape in television programs. Anything to help him forget. Did not fulfil his potential. More arguments and threats. Deaf ears. So little love. So lonely.

Finally, they threw him out. The boy who had never known love. At eighteen he lived in a men's shelter. Joined the Air Force to gain a degree. Learned to drink and smoke, acted tough, but failed his exams. Picked himself up and started again. Trained to be a teacher. Married. Could he find love in his own little home? Two children brought him joy. His wife was happy to let him work, look after the children, and do all the housework. She liked to socialize. She had no time or love for a husband or children. The marriage did not last. So little love. So lonely.

He taught Aboriginal children. They too were vulnerable. He understood them, and he cared. Time passed. But the years took their toll. An unsuccessful eye operation left him with impaired vision, and other health issues. Teaching became impossible. A series of business ideas failed, mostly through lack of adequate financial backing. Perhaps because his wife took everything, left him with nothing. Perhaps through lack of support and encouragement.

He found a new partner, a support person for a small farm he was establishing. He sourced a container for temporary accommodation. He planned a little cottage. Then the cyclone hit. Everything was lost. He started again.

He felt increasingly weak. Lost weight. Collapsed. Rushed to hospital. Multiple tests. Caged and strapped in, tubes everywhere. Trapped by illness. Calcium poisoning from the bore water. Kidney functioning extremely poor. Blood cancer. Near death. Far from home. So lonely.

He had been excluded from the family news circle. No wonder he kept his distance. The others were the "good" ones in the family. Weren't they? How much did they conform and compromise in order to be loved? Was earned love real? It was selfish. "Make my life smooth. Don't bother me!" The price of love. None knew unconditional love. But he was the black sheep, the trouble-maker.

One sister heard about his illness. And told another. Years of lost contact, when he thought no-one wanted him or was interested in him, and when they thought he had rejected them. Replaced by forgiveness on both sides. Understanding. Renewed communication. With the hindsight of maturity the sisters recognized a lost boy, a real human being, a brother, a brother who was not the cause of all family disharmony, but one who had always needed love. They offered support and love. Unconditional. They recognized his resilience throughout the hard journey of his life. He recovered.

Every day of his life, he had picked himself up. After his "failed" childhood, after every failed relationship or business, he never gave up. He started again ... and again ... and again. During illness, he never gave up.

He has worked out how to purify the bore water. He labours with buckets of water, looking after fruit trees, vegetables, ducks and chickens. He is still building his cottage. A hard life.

Many stories reach us of resilience during and after illness and devastating loss, but to be resilient in the face of daily lack of love? True resilience. My brother, a good and caring person. I offer my love.

All Quiet on the Eastern Front

Brian Tolagson

Port Macquarie

Silence envelops my existence. It is eerie in a way yet enjoyable in an odd way, a change from routine that pleases me. From my open window barely a single bird call is heard from the forest a few metres away. Hardly a person passes along the once-busy footpath between the forest and my window. It has been this way for eight days now.

I shop in the quiet hours just after dawn or around noon to avoid crowds. All my regular activities are cancelled – philosophy group, writers' group, fishing club, photo group, bowls twice weekly, coffee mornings, lunches with the "Old Farts" and happy hours. I communicate in person very seldomly. I use my mobile to call my friends more often to keep in touch.

It's not the musty dampness from the frequent passing showers that has lowered activity nor the many extremities of temperature nor any malady on my part but a non-poisonous but otherwise deadly sub-cellular organism known as Coronavirus or COVID-19.

I wonder is this how the world ends – in a whimper, not a bang? But I resolve "Not if I have anything to do with it". Sensible, responsible people have heeded the official pleas and bunkered down for as long as it takes. We are hardy, or at least most of us are. We've all had serious injuries or accidents, illnesses, lost cherished loved ones, lost employment, endured bushfires, flood or cyclones and financial hardship. We've all developed a resilient toughness.

I admit I was a little apprehensive about staying indoors at first. What was I to do with my time? How would I cope without seeing my friends? I enjoy shopping and a cappuccino, even if I'm on my own. But, after a couple of days, the misplaced anxiety subsided and I began to adapt. I was catching up

with home cleaning chores. I picked up an old hobby. Time was flying by. There was time for a bit of writing, an occasional video and then I started on what I call "the long list", those things I never quite get around to doing, like culling my computer files and chucking out bits of memorabilia I never use or refer to.

Yet, I can't help but notice the sudden stillness of my retirement village surrounds. The abrupt lack of ambience. The lack of laughter from visiting grandkids. A dearth of neighbourly chit-chat. A passing parade of tradies, carers, relatives and delivery vans that busy up the narrow village streets.

I find I've discovered reserves of pliability I didn't know I had. I am encouraged by the resolve and spirit shown by my mates when I call them for a chat. There is a retired fitter I know who said with a Scottish brogue "we'll all have a damn good laugh and a drink when this is all over". A retired nurse said she was missing regular visits from her adult children but it was all for the better. Another mate who had recently lost a daughter to cancer plagiarised an old TV comedy with the wry comment "if it's not one damned thing, it's another".

We'll make it through this, our annus horribilis. Our parents did in World War Two and grandparents in the Great War and Great Depression. Now it's our turn, a time when shit just has to be done. After all, we've got to find a way to use all those stored toilet rolls, haven't we?



WORLD WAR II
in photographs
Rollis

GOULBURN-MULWARRA
ROTARY CLUB

SIDY MORRIS WEST
C CHURCH

L.A. LARKIN
THE BOLD RIDERS
BUREKA!

GREAT SOUTHERN ARK
AUSTRALIAN AGRICULTURE

MAGNIFICENT AUSTRALIA
AUSTRALIA
AUSTRALIA
UNFINISHED JOURNEY

Management of Mental Disorders 1
Management of Mental Disorders 2

ALAUSTRALIAN Colonial Days
WESTWARD
TEENAGERS
THE WAR CRUISE

GERALD SEYMOUR
THE JOURNEMAN TAILOR
POPULAR MATHEMATICS

POLAND
TODAY'S BEST
JAMES HERRIOT
JAMES MCFEEN
WOMAN'S BODY
Frankie

CHRIS SIDNEY
JOHN NEWCOMBE

THE WARRIORS
500's Computer Prints & Tips

ROBERT

PAPA COSTI
GREEN BROTHERS

THE WARRIORS
500's Computer Prints & Tips

THE WARRIORS
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ROBERT

AIRCRAFT

THE WARRIORS
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ROBERT

AIRCRAFT

Ally

Karen Conlay

Elanora Heights

Sorrow and loss, were immediately recognizable. Her eyes didn't lie. They told of a love lost. Reflecting in her tears someone unwanted, tossed away on a rubbish pile like a rotten apple. A love that didn't even begin, but should have been there all along, a mother's love.

Her young years spent at boarding school, only returning home for the holidays. Her nanny, Martha, a spinster with an ordinary face, the only best friend she ever had. Mother was far too busy to fuss with Ally. Left to her own devices she began to draw and write. Little sketches at first. Sentences came tumbling out on the page with no direction, just a mishmash of phrases that spiked her imagination. At last she had something to call her own, something that belonged to her. Something that couldn't be taken away. This became her magical world, the only time she could really be herself. She didn't care that no-one was around to listen. Her secrets hidden away in the pink velvet jewellery box her father had given her before he left. She guarded this treasure with her life. Disguised, wrapped in an old moth-eaten grey blanket, up in the attic. Mother would never find it. She hadn't been up there in years.

As she grew into her teens, she gained more of an understanding of the world around her. Having this 'lost love' wasn't going to define who she was. She owed it to herself to just be herself. Tucking her past up in that grey moth-eaten blanket she tried to grab hold of happier times.

But often the opposite would happen. The blackness would get blacker, her cluttered mind brimming with anxiety and agitation, overflowed like a burst dam, remembering times spent up in the attic contemplating suicide. Unthinkable thoughts that came from the left and stayed indefinitely like an unwanted lodger; thoughts of self-harm. "Exit stage right" lay patiently in the wings like a panting crouched cougar.

Multiple scars etched into her skin in a zig-zag pattern up and down her arms and wrists. Failed attempts of ending a life undeserving. These were her silent sins; no-one knew about them. Sudden mood swings coupled with depression, losing interest in her appearance, having trouble sleeping, only a ghost would recognize these symptoms now. She became invisible. Feeling like a vacant lot in the middle of a city she stood forlorn. Unloved by a mother who was as distant as a lost postcard.

The arduous journey back, a long march which started with a single step. In her more lucid moments, she realized she was the one, the only one, who could take that first step. Clawing her way back she likened herself to a cat on a hot-tinned roof, some spots would be hotter than others, but come nightfall the cool breeze would come.

Learning to live without, coming to some sort of acceptance, wondering why, these were her everyday thoughts. Steel barriers went up with the flick of a switch as they turned into themselves. Relying on no-one, she learnt to be fierce, strong and courageous. She walked alone. Not because she wanted to, because she had to.

Gathering strength, as long days folded into each other like soft meringue she had thoughts of the future, her future. In a clearer mind she longed for her childhood passion to return. She thought back to those days in the attic. Especially the times when magic entered her life, at first like a stranger, but slowly it evolved and became so much more. As time grew so did her passion.

Life held many surprises. Her writing and sketches were published eventually. Ally became a famous writer and illustrator of children's books. At long last she had found her magical kingdom. In one of her Forewords she writes, 'For mother; whose invisible love led me on this journey'.

Alone I Continue to Stand

Patricia Dewey

Pennant Hills

I stand alone.

For 120 years, and over four different stages of life, I have stood alone yet have rarely been lonely. I have survived. As unprepossessing as I am, little has changed to either my interior or to my exterior.

However, the purpose for which I was originally built has gone. Over the years I've served the people of Hornsby Shire in four different ways: each different to the other.

The reason for my existence came in the year 1900 when I was constructed as a *drill hall* along Peats Ferry Road Hornsby to serve as a training venue for those who formed the F Company Volunteer Rifles.

The men in F Company needed a venue where they could meet and train and so I was constructed. The purpose of the Company was to defend Australia against the enemy as everyone knew the Empire had to be defended at all costs.

Men from F Company breathed life into me with their weekly drills. I was the venue for 50 local men who changed weekly from civilian clothes into military uniforms to practise drill and marksmanship. A rifle range was constructed so that the training could be put into practice. F Company went from strength to strength.

Late in 1900 some members left Australia to go to South Africa to fight for the Empire. Most returned but sadly not all were as fortunate. When peace within the Empire was achieved many volunteers left the Company and I was not needed to train those willing to defend our country.

In 1906 buildings such as mine were scarce in the rural area in Sydney's north and local residents fought successfully to stop me being transferred from Hornsby. In 1906, Hornsby Shire Council was formed and, without premises to call home, it seemed natural that I could be a suitable venue for the Council Chambers. However, another urgent need for local residents was a court house to save residents travelling long distances to have legal cases heard.

The two parties could not agree on my future use. Subsequently after both debate and discussion officials decided that I was to become a Court of Petty Sessions within the Ryde Police District and so I entered the second stage of my life as the *Hornsby Court House*. I opened as the new temple of justice at Hornsby on 15 November 1907.

Being solidly built it did not take a great deal of effort or money to convert me to a Court House. However, I was only used once a month as there was little crime in Hornsby and Magistrates only needed to visit Hornsby once a month. The Court of Petty Sessions was held only when required.

If the walls of the court house could talk they would tell a range of stories from the inquest relating to the drowning of a toddler in a nearby creek to that of a man who was fined for not sending his children to school.

Although beginning to feel old I continued to be used as the local court house until, in 1915, modern new court house premises were constructed almost next door. Unused I might have been but for a time I was happy to oversee children working in the gardens close to me during the days of the First World War when they grew vegetables for the local war effort.

By 1920, the land I stood on was vested to the NSW Department of Education and I watched as buildings were constructed. I was not lonely for long and was described *as being of a wooden structure in a perfectly sound condition composed of material which at present is almost unprocurable, it is about 67 feet in length by 30 feet in width and on a concrete foundation. It stands on a beautiful block of land adjoining the new school.*

PERFECT! Stage three of my life began when I became *a school*. That was fortunate as I felt needed and became alive again. The sound of hammering echoed through me as partitions, that had been put in place for my use as a court house, were removed and I was converted into three classrooms of equal size to be used by the children of Hornsby Public School. Heating stoves were placed in classrooms as were ceiling vents, blackboards and storage presses and each room was intended to seat forty pupils. Life breathed into me once again when the first pupils marched into me on 7 March 1927.

I remained the property of the Department of Education for forty years; used by three Hornsby schools namely; Hornsby Public School, Hornsby Junior Technical School and Hornsby Home Science School. However, in 1957 a disastrous bushfire simultaneously ended the lives of those three schools. Fortunately I was spared.

At that time my neighbour was the small but majestic Hornsby Shire Council Chambers, but by 1960 Council has outgrown that premise and looked for land so a modern building could be constructed to serve the ratepayers of Hornsby Shire. There was only one problem to that development going ahead and that was ME. After exchanging the land on which I was standing with the Department of Education Council was left with a dilemma; what to do with the old drill hall? There were two alternatives – demolish or move it.

By 1970 Hornsby Shire Historical Society had been formed and needed premises for meetings and a *museum*. A decision was made to move me to a park in Normanhurst where I remain to this day.

Initially residents protested about the old building in their park but 50 years later I am still here and show great resilience when my walls echo with the sounds made by hundreds of children when they visit and explore my museum. Surrounded by tall majestic gums which stand as sentinels I am custodian to many treasures relating to life in Hornsby Shire.

An Old Man on the Lake

David Benson

Hawks Nest

Eighty-nine-year-old Bill was going fishing. He was after tailor and he was out on the lake in his old tinny and outboard. He had two heavy trolling lines ready at the back of the boat.

Ahead the tell-tale seagulls were circling, and their faint cries could already be heard. Bill neared the seething mass of tailor and circled the school, catching three small fish. He had both lines out. He felt a tailor hitting the outside bait, then, suddenly, the inside line pulled taut and because of the angle of pull, it slipped deftly off the holder and over the back of the boat. 'I've hit a snag,' he thought.

This had happened before, so Bill turned back across his path. He started to pull in the second line in the hope that it would pick up the line that had gone overboard. At last he got his bait up and sure enough, there was the other heavy line caught in the hooks. He then had a large pile of line in the boat.

He stopped the motor and began to haul in line. The boat was beginning to seem full of line. After what seemed an age, he pulled up the plastic spool and dropped it into the mess at his feet.

Then to pull back to the snag. He felt a flash of excitement when he felt the line take pressure, then start to move. He had a real fish on the end of his line! This wasn't a tailor.

Suddenly a locomotive pulled on the other end. Line burned through his hands and the dinghy turned itself in the water and followed. Bill grabbed the cloth he used to hold onto fish and padded his hand against the burning line. His heart rate raced dangerously.

Gradually the boat turned rear on to the pulling fish. Bill braced his feet against the transom of the boat and retrieved thirty metres or so of line. Then, with a thudding run, the fish dragged the line out again.

Time went on and slowly Bill was winning line. The fish slowed up in its flight. It became a dead weight. Bill's heart rate slowed. He pushed his feet hard against the transom and kept hauling.

At last, he could see something big down below. Then suddenly, the line ran to the side catching him off balance. Bill swivelled on the slippery back seat and as he did, he pitched onto the floor of the dinghy and into the midst of a tangled mass of line.

The pull was immense and he, fish-like himself, was pulled down the boat in the midst of the slippery, tangled lines. He landed against the middle seat, stretched full length with the line tangled around the cloth in his hand. There he lay and suffered the buffets of the fish up on the surface and on the other side of the thin layer of aluminium that was his boat's skin.

The fish in its exhaustion lay on the surface and Bill, inches away, lay in his bed of line. Each joined by that thread of nylon.

At last, he knelt against the side of the boat. He peered over the side and looked directly into the eyes of his opponent whose head was almost out of the water. The fish was huge. More than a metre long and heavy. How was he going to land such a giant?

What he did next was unconsidered and almost bizarre. Half kneeling against the side of the boat, which was uncomfortably low to the waterline, he grabbed the fish by the gill. He grasped the enormous gill with his fingers, triggering a thrashing of the fish's body as the fish closed its gills onto Bill's fingers locking them in place. The sharp edge of the gill began cutting into his fingers. With all his might Bill bent his arm, pulling the head towards him.

At this point and with his aged heart thumping in his chest, Bill realised his dire predicament.

What he did then was equally absurd. He reached in with his other hand, still with cloth and line firmly etched in and grabbed the other gill. The combined weight of Bill and the fish were then resting heavily on the side of the boat. Water was beginning to slop over the side.

Bill felt strange, literally face to face with this creature. It had almost given up the fight and was lying reasonably still, but heavy in his arms. Bill mustered his energy and lifted with all his strength. He succeeded in getting the huge head up and over the side. The fish twisted and trapped his hand under it. His arms were feeling numb and his head was giddy with the effort. Water was starting to pour over the side.

Then, fatefully, the bow wave from a passing cruiser swept along the dinghy and lifted it up. With it was the fish and in one movement the fish and water washed into the dinghy.

Bill and the fish lay together in the water amid the lines in the bottom of the boat while the boat drifted. Bill could feel the roughness and coldness of the creature lying beside him. They lay for some time and gradually he could feel the life leaving the fish. It thrashed a few more times and then lay still.

Once again, he raised himself. He levered himself onto the seat and looked down. The fish had shrunk. The monster was suddenly just another fish. He was filled with a mixture of elation and sadness.

Practicality soon took over. Tangled lines, a boat to be bailed out, a motor started. A long journey home, a worried wife to placate and a late chilled beer. He clasped the starter cord on the motor. The Johnson kicked back into life and with it, so did Bill.

Armagh Park Road

Sharon Dean

Sydney

The night sky was dark and menacing as Tarren stepped onto the curb.

The driving rain felt like needles against her face as she proceeded to cross the street with her friends close behind her. Nothing had prepared her for what was to come. It was 1974, the music scene vibrant and alive.

Having just left a rock concert featuring Dragon, they were animated and laughing, reminiscing over the night's performance as they made their way home.

A car travelling erratically came speeding around the corner through a red light, its wheels screeching on the wet slippery dark road towards her. It collided with her with such a force she bounced off the bonnet and was thrown through the air before landing onto the cold hard cement where she lay unconscious. Driven by a boy of fifteen, with no headlights or wipers, the car flashed by in a torrent of muddy water drenching her as it sped past.

Her friends rushed towards her frantically looking around for help.

An old fashioned red wooden phone box on the corner caught her friend Abbey's attention, propelling her forward. Abbey opened the door, her hands shaking as she picked up the black phone handle, dialling 000.

Muted sounds were heard in the distance as the ambulance came closer, its siren piercing through the darkness of the night as it came into view. The glare of the ambulance's white headlights faced Tarren as she slowly regained consciousness and began to shake uncontrollably from the shock of the impact. Dazed, she tried to move as blood gushed from a wound on her forehead, her knees grazed and covered in wet earth were embedded with tiny pieces of gravel.

On arrival at the hospital, paramedics rushed her into the emergency department, nurses and doctors hurried to attend her.

Antiseptic assaulted her senses as she was swiftly transported to the x-ray department, her body constrained on the stretcher to keep it still, each movement agonising as the machine assessed her shattered bones. The CT scanner clicked and whirred, sounds alarming as it reviewed her throbbing head injury.

Tarren was not able to move. Anxiously she looked up, comforted by the warm tender touch of the nurse's hand against her aching skin, soothing and reassuring with a compassionate sensitivity and a smile that calmed her.

It was then the full effect of the accident was explained. Tarren had suffered head injuries, severe bruising and had fractured her pelvis in several places. Tears cascaded down her youthful smooth cheeks as she realised what lay ahead.

Several months of painstaking rehabilitation, perseverance through agony, with every second, she was determined to walk again. Sleep was difficult and placing pillows between her knees helped relieve the pain. Every morning her therapist arrived to begin the slow process to walk once again.

Lifting one foot at a time onto the cold white tiled floor she felt emotionally exhausted as she wept silently.

Light-headed, she would fall, only to lift herself up again to take another slow agonising step forward, her movements heavy and measured, her will-power her strength. Although her wounds were healing and the dark purple bruises were fading to a pale-yellow tinge, she needed to concentrate to alleviate the excruciating pain each step took.

Over the next three months she progressed from a wheelchair to the cold steel walking frame and finally the uncomfortable wooden crutches – although unsteady, she was feeling more confident. It was then the doctors decided she was well enough to receive additional news they had been keeping from her. Tarren was hopeful this visit was to inform her she could return home. The news however was life changing. The doctor said that although she was close to walking normally again, her pelvis had not healed correctly, and her bones were deformed, signifying the likelihood she would not be able to give birth in the future. A shiver ran through her body as she faced the doctors, shattered by this heartbreaking news.

Back in her sterile hospital room she cried herself to sleep each night, waking up in a sweat, her body trembling. Frustrated, wanting to give up.

Several weeks into her rehabilitation she realised how fortunate she was, her body was healing, she was healthy and had become motivated with the desire to learn from the accident. And so, began her journey back, her motivation and strength had stirred her onwards.

On leaving the confines of the hospital three months later, Tarren stood motionless in the doorway. A cool wind caressed her skin, the driveway was lined with Jacaranda trees reaching skyward, their mauve blooms falling to create a carpet on the driveway below. Flowerbeds, flourishing, emitting their perfumed scent through the light breeze, and she smiled.

Tarren recognised she had been challenged and overcame the obstacles of her accident with strength, persistence and dedication.

Bent But Not Broken

Alice Mantel

Concord West

I have to admit that my mother was not the easiest of people to please. I know that kids always say that kind of thing about their parents but I'm saying it now, as an adult who has had a bit of time to think about this.

I knew the end was near in the nursing home when she could no longer be completely resistant to the staff. Physically she was too weak and finally, she could no longer form the words to insist on having her own way. Now I admire that fighting spirit – it keeps you alive on your own terms just a bit longer, but at the time, it was a bit embarrassing to be constantly apologising to the staff.

As a parent, it's not that she was cruel or mean to us kids, it was just that she always set her standards rather high. Most people would see Mum's approach as being the 'you still are not good enough' line – yes, you got a good result in that test, but you could have started studying a bit earlier. On the other hand, if you really did mess up, you could probably expect the same response from her, so failure wasn't that awful.

I guess it was an intrinsic part of my mother's character to always want something better and to never be quite satisfied with what had been achieved. Yet she was not ungrateful. How could someone who had lived through Hitler's time ever be ungrateful for having survived, for having had a family and lived a long and interesting life? No, her belief was that things could be changed by having hopes and ideals and not accepting what chance determined.

Have you ever wondered what makes a person's character?

My theory is that you are born with many urges and aptitudes which you only discover, event by event, throughout your life. But you also have an innate attitude that directs your responses to those events. Life never really changes that attitude regardless of whatever happens to you. So, if you are a grumbly baby, chances are that you will be a grumbly adult and an even more grumbly older adult when all your pretensions melt away, leaving only the core self.

In the case of my mother, at age 16 she wanted to be a jeweller. Her mother was completely against such an idea. It wasn't a profession for a girl. Anyway, there was a Depression: nobody would be buying jewellery. Instead, her mother sent her daughter off to be an assistant to a cousin who was a dentist. Turned out to be good decision. It enabled my mother to work in other countries and it taught her the finer points of being a jeweller – like learning how to make plaster moulds and to cast teeth in gold. Useful skills that she eventually applied when she began to design her own silver and gold pieces.

Her occupation took her to Germany, to witness the end of World War II, to see the prisoners transported on the trains from Auschwitz and to meet the man who became our father. In the midst of a ravaged Europe, my parents could not see any chance of a peaceful life. Instead, they looked to the new world for a fresh start. Fortunately, Australia welcomed them, but it was not the life they had expected.

Imagine how my mother felt as she arrived in an isolated camp of steel huts in western NSW after a sea voyage of several months. What was the point of matching shoes and handbags, or beautiful dinner sets in this dry paddock? A person of different character would have been angry or defeated by such alien and harsh circumstances. Not my mother. She had hoped for a better life and here was peace

and opportunity. For a woman who had grown up with a housekeeper and a cook, she soon adapted, learning to cook cakes and custard and rabbit, freshly caught on the land. And to love the wide brown spaces and its laconic people.

Eventually she gained the qualifications to become a professional cook which was a hard, physical job. Years passed.

Where others would have sought an easier life, she saw a different future – to create a business out of her passion. Until then, cutting and polishing semi-precious stones and occasionally making some silver items was merely a hobby. Now she was banking her entire superannuation on this very risky idea. For once, we children supported her. Sometimes we were begrudging of our time helping out, nevertheless we were also proud that our mother was a business owner, respected and known amongst her peers. Not only was she very successful in growing that business, but when she sold it, she was able to retire to be the artistic person she always wanted to be.

Some people think that the concept of resilience is the same as survival. To my mind, survival can sometimes be a matter of luck – yes, it may be because of an individual's determination, but often it's just luck, or a last-minute intervention by some unexpected incident.

Resilience, however, encompasses more than survival. Resilience means being able to continue and even grow as a result of one's lived experience. Resilience acknowledges difficulty and challenge but also resists, preferring to endure those incursions rather than being untrue to an ideal. Perhaps it also includes an element of luck.

I'm holding a brooch made by my mother – a delicate spray of snowdrops. This elegant piece renders a simple idea in a sophisticated way. The flat leaves curl around the flowers of sculpted ivory suspended on silver threads. For me, it is a European image.

For me, this brooch and the other pieces I still possess do not so much represent my mother's resilience, but rather her creative 16-year-old self, annealed and enriched by the adversity she overcame in her life.

Cape Ahoy

Ian Smith

Wangi Wangi

I'd left it 'til the weather cleared, no sense getting wet on a four-hour walk. I'd always wanted to get to the end of some of the capes on the Tasman Peninsula and I'd managed Cape Raoul last year and sought out Cape Hauy this time.

It had stopped raining at Devil's Kitchen so I packed up and drove the 20 minutes around to Fortescue Bay, parked, packed lunch and set off at around 10:30am. I had timed it right but, though the rain was no more, the bush was still wet and it continually brushed against my jeans as I made my way along the rocky trail.

The first bit beside the bay was lovely as the climb offered glimpses of what was to come, but that soon stopped and the track turned inland.

Twenty minutes in and I started to sweat though it wasn't really hot, simply the exertion required to scale the slope and the rampant humidity. I hoped it wouldn't last and eventually it levelled out and had bits of smooth boardwalk, such a relief after the uneven rocks.

It spat rain once but I knew it was just the left over so I trudged on regardless and it soon stopped. Then the undulations started until I made it past the two-hour return sign. From here the trail dropped alarmingly, the trees ceased and left only bushes, none more than two metres tall, obvious victims of the ferocity of the winds and poor soil in these parts. At one place you were well advised to grab the rope that was available.

Indeed, the wind was rated as strong and, on the exposed parts it is understandable why. I'd passed a lone Aussie on his way back and he'd been drenched in the early downpours. Later on I came across an expat South African couple and they too had been caught. Silly them, if only they'd waited.

Now the promised views were starting to materialize. Tall proud dolerite cliffs became apparent as I moved further out on the peninsula, finally coming up the rear of one until the sound of the surf carried up the bluffs and the atmosphere changed to one of amazement.

Within 10 minutes I was at trail's end and here the panorama was positively scary. On the gosh-isn't-it-scary? (not what I said but some people's censoring devices are very sensitive), scale, it rated quite highly.

The jaw dropping height of the dolerite is something to be experienced. It is truly awe inspiring. Thus, as I do, I sat and broke out my lunch of silverside soaked in tomato relish and pondered where my friends and relatives would be eating now. Air conditioned offices, at a mine site, on their farm? I knew I wouldn't change places with any of them at that time.

The foam below washed up on the kelp beds and then left them high and dry while hundreds of feet above vegetation eked out a tenuous existence in the nooks and crannies where the barest of soil might have accumulated. Out to sea a romantic square rigger drifted along, soon to be passed by a modern yacht and then lost in the rain squall that overtook it.

As someone once said, "It's the scale of the place that gets to you." I knew the feeling right then. I moved around taking photos until I noticed some precipitation. I opted to shelter under a small scrawny gum tree, curled in an upright foetal position beneath its arched trunk. After about five minutes as the storm intensified, I realised it was going to be futile and set out on the track.

I was reminded of pop music; Wet Wet Wet, came into my head as the sky darkened all across the horizon and here I was, nearly two hours from base.

Where once there were left-over puddles from the morning showers, now there were ponds. In places I had to side step the trail to avoid them. Though I had a spray jacket it, too, slowly seeped moisture until I reached the two-hours-return sign again. By then I was saturated well and truly, no longer imagining how much smarter I'd been than those who left early.

There was a couple in their thirties there, wondering whether to proceed or not. They had only just finished the five-day Overland Track two days ago and it had been fine the whole way. Now they were thinking of quitting this minor walk such was the weather.

Within another 10 minutes my boots started to squelch. What does it matter when everything including underwear is wringing wet? It's just a noise.

The track was a series of rivulets but luckily the rocks were grippy still, so walking was okay, even if a little uncomfortable. As if to taunt me, just 10 minutes from the motorhome it all stopped and the sun splayed on various parts of Fortescue Bay.

Every item of clothing went into the bath, hopefully to dry a little sometime in the next few days because I've since found that the bad weather is here for another day at least.

Author's note: This track is now paved the entire way and has 2,020 steps, each way. It's part of the Three Capes Walk.

Clowning Around

Bob Moore

Cumbalum

He found it when he was looking for something else. Angus was rummaging in the garage for Christmas lights. He found them too, eventually. But the other find intrigued him, mostly because he had no idea what it was. It was flat-ish plastic and actually quite heavy. Heavy in a manner lumps of plastic don't tend to be. He had to know what it was.

The lights he dealt with first, even though Pop could've done this himself if he wasn't so... depressed. Not the same man since Gamma died. Angus looked at his grandfather staring at the TV screen, slumped in the chair so that the top of his track suit pants looked high enough to cover his nipples. There was so little of him now that he looked almost swallowed by the recliner. Then Angus visualised his grandmother, Gamma, gently smacking his wrist. *Your grandfather isn't well, just leave him be.* This from a woman who had died after three separate breast tumours, and never – not once – complained in the 15 years it took for the cancers to beat her.

Once the lights were up and working, he unfolded the plastic on the garage floor. One crease opened out to reveal the face of a clown. The heaviness was in the base and Angus realised that he had unfurled one of those bounce-back toys. He shook his head. *What on earth...?* It seemed so unlike them and neither grandparent had mentioned it to him before.

From a cupboard he took out the bike pump and proceeded to blow it up, thinking that plastic stored like this would have to be split. But the clown stayed pumped up, its rictus grin staring back at him. Angus punched the clown in the face. It swayed to the floor and swayed back up again, grinning in defiance. It was a bit creepy and he went to put it in the bin before another thought made him pause.

Pop would only get out of the chair to go to the bathroom or bed. He did no exercise; he was getting demonstrably weaker. Could this toy provide some sort of fun opening to getting active? Gamma used to get Pop out in the yard and he used to take her to all her appointments then visit her every day in the hospice, but she's been gone for ten months now and Angus is the yard labourer. Pop needed an incentive to get out of that chair.

The face of a clown just didn't seem appropriate, though. Almost insulting. He would change it; he had a degree in fine arts – the one his grandfather told him would lead to unemployment. The old bugger had been disturbingly correct so far – which was why the portraitist was here as an unpaid carer. This could be the opportunity to show him, he at least had talent.

At first he thought he could paint Gamma over the clown face. He quickly dismissed that idea: no one was going to punch Gamma's face, even *if* she bounced back. Pop only had two interests: Westerns and cricket. John Wayne? Horses? He didn't think he could pull that off. Which cricketer then? He recalled his eyes glazing over as Pop regaled him (over and over) with Steve Waugh stories: how he'd come back stronger after being dropped; how he'd scored a century from the last ball of the day; how he'd menaced the Pommie and Windies bowlers. It had to be, Tugga.

It took a while to find the right type of paint: enamel worked better than acrylic. Angus worked from internet images. Tugga's trademark well-worn baggy green cap soon emerged. In any portrait, though, the face was paramount and Angus was quite happy with it, noting the wry Steve Waugh smile, under steely eyes. He also painted cricket whites with pads

and a bat held nonchalantly, confidently. He found some remnant red material and superglued it to the left-hand pocket: Tugga's lucky red rag.

All the while Pop was either in the recliner, the bathroom or bed, completely unaware. Angus waited until the paint had dried then dragged it into the lounge room.

It took a while for Pop's gaze to move from the screen. When he finally looked Angus's way, his brow furrowed.

"Is that ...?"

Angus pushed Tugga on the shoulder and the toy hit the carpet before returning upright.

"That's no way to treat a legend."

Angus smiled. Pop almost smiled back.

"Where did you find that?"

"It was folded up in the garage."

"Steve Waugh was in my garage?"

Angus explained about the clown and the paint job. Pop said he'd forgotten about the toy and complimented him on the job... actually complimented him! Angus explained that it was for Pop to exercise with. Pop couldn't see the point. They argued the toss back and forth before Angus invoked his grandmother.

"What would Gamma say to you?"

Pop paused, his eyes a little bit watery (although that could have been the light) and just when Angus thought he'd lost him entirely, Pop cleared his throat.

"She'd tell me to get off my arse."

Angus thought that over.

"She would have said 'bottom!'"

Over the summer, while the Tests and one-dayers were on, they devised a game: Angus would be the bowling team and would 'bounce' Tugga if there was a wicket. Pop would bounce him if the batsman scored a boundary. Bounce him twice for a six. It took a while for Pop to build up the strength, but eventually Tugga hit the carpet with each push. Pop even seemed to be enjoying himself, willing the batsmen on and grumbling if they got out.

"We should go to a game, Pop."

Pop thought it over and nodded before getting out of the chair and putting his arm around Tugga's shoulders.

"Will we take Stephen as well?"

"Nah, Pop. He's retired."

"Gave it away too early for my liking."

Angus smiled and held his tongue.

Courage at Sea

Liam Kenny

Bayview

During the Second World War, Jack was a Merchant Seaman from Liverpool in England. Like many Liverpool Irishmen, he was a stoker in a ship's boiler room shovelling coal into the huge furnaces. This created the steam which drove the engines of the vessels carrying much needed food and supplies from the US to a besieged Britain.

Such ships were always in the sights of German U-Boats which patrolled the North Atlantic like starving wolves with their pointy, fang shaped torpedoes at the ready. The first time Jack's ship was struck, it was fortunate that major damage was not sustained and to compound that good fortune the steamer was only 36 hours from Liverpool. It limped home without loss of life or its precious cargo.

Following a brief respite, he was back in action once more but the wolf pack struck again when the ship was in mid ocean steaming toward New York with its cargo holds almost empty; a rare misjudgement by the U-Boat commander. They preferred to wreak their havoc on ships travelling in the reverse direction and low in the water indicating a full belly. Perhaps he was working on the theory that another ship out of the mercantile fleet was one that was difficult to replace in those troubled times.

Jack was lucky once again as the torpedo struck at mid-night while he was asleep in his bunk on the upper decks. All of the stokers on the night shift sadly perished as the blast was below the waterline where the men were working in the boiler rooms; those unfortunate men, not killed by the blast, drowned when the ship slowly sank in the freezing Atlantic Ocean.

The survivors, including Jack, managed to reach the upper decks before capsize and went to the lifeboats that were winched down into the sea. More good fortune smiled upon them. Within

twenty-four hours a Canadian vessel returning home collected the survivors and ferried the terrified men to New York's safe harbour. Within just a few weeks, space was found for them on returning ships which miraculously managed to avoid the patrolling German submarines to make it safely back to Britain.

Despite pleas from Jack's wife and other relatives, he sailed once more to continue what he called God's work but this Trans-Atlantic voyage would be his third and last.

Yet again in mid-ocean disaster struck as twin torpedos from the silent, stealthy hunter below homed in right on target. The Merchant Ship was soon despatched to a watery grave taking with it all but ten men. Once again Jack was fortunate; he was dazed but unhurt, save for a deep cut to his head. He made it out of the badly damaged boiler room to the metal staircase. He reached the listing upper deck just before the ship capsized, hurling him into the ocean. He was plucked from the water by eager hands, becoming one of the ten who made it to the only lifeboat lowered that night. His nine companions included the captain and chief engineer.

The U-Boat Commander proved to be more humane than many in the German Military. He brought his submarine to the surface where bright searchlights spotted the hapless survivors.

"If there are senior officers among you?" he megaphoned from the bridge, "you are technically prisoners of war and as such you must surrender yourselves to my crew who will launch a small craft to pick you up. I'm sorry we can't take all of you men but space constraints will not allow this. However, we will give you some food, water and medical supplies and set a course for you to South America.

"You will be in a busy shipping lane and our communications officer will radio neutral shipping to watch out for you. Hopefully, a Brazil-bound steamer will intercept you and take you to the safety of that country.

"Now, I rely on your honour gentlemen to identify yourselves if you are officers. For the rest of you, I wish you God speed."

The inflatable picked up the identified officers and left the rest with a large container of water and food along with a compass setting to the South American Continent. Two days at sea and a Panama flagged vessel spotted the survivors before transporting them up the Amazon to the Brazilian town of Manus, where they languished for almost six months in a detention centre. They had no form of identification and Brazil was uncaring at that time, being sympathetic to the German cause. However, a Catholic Mission deep there in the jungle heard about them and was able to finally get a message to the Vatican and wheels were set in motion to bring the men back to Britain.

When my mother was alerted and her war widow's pension ceased, she welcomed my dad back with open arms. We were all excited about his survival and one of my earliest memories was playing in the street when a cab pulled up outside our house.

A small, bald man darkened by six months of intense sun, emerged from the rear holding a battered, old suitcase in one hand and a bird cage in the other.

I was initially afraid of this strange, dark, little fellow. The cage held three exotic, colourful Macaws which my dad sold for a tidy sum at his local pub.

In 1948, with the war well and truly over, my parents took stock of their lives then and into the future. My two-year-old brother died that year, from a brain injury he suffered following a catastrophic fall.

Liverpool had little to offer a young family traumatised by war and now the loss of a baby, so it was off to the sea once more.

This time though all was calm and the destination glorious. My family migrated to Australia and it turned out to be the most significant voyage of my dad's career. His resilience and courage had paid off handsomely for his fortunate family.

Damn Those Clichés

Janine Holston

Murwillumbah

So how do you get resilience? Is it genetic and you inherit it from your parents – or is it like the insanity you inherit from your kids?

The dictionary definition states that resilience is learned, acquired and honed throughout one's life. Well, I started life the same as everyone else – by being born – so no lessons there.

Perhaps developing one's resilience starts in childhood and continues on – you know – the trials and tribulations of childhood illnesses, growing up and surviving the sibling battles, which were nothing compared to the incessant torture of school and the dangers in the playground – from *those* kids.

I never did like nor fit in at school, but that was okay because I really didn't want to. I had my own little group of friends who were brought up and thought more like me – and we made our way through school and life the best way we could. Sport (meaning any physical activity), getting out into the bush, gardening, arts and crafts and music – that's what life is all about.

So, after many illnesses, at the age of 11 I underwent life-saving surgery and things were always different after that. I mean how weird was it as I really didn't have all the pain I said I did – I just didn't want to go to school after being placed in a different class to that of my friends – just because we talked too much! Anyway, to find out that I actually had a genetic defect inside me that needed fixing immediately was surreal – and – strange as it may seem to some, I was actually excited to have an operation and a 'scar' just like those on my mum. Of course nothing could have prepared me for the pain that I awoke to, after counting backwards from 100 for the anaesthetist (I remember saying ninety-nine and that was it), or the weeks ahead of relearning how certain body parts and organs are supposed to

function and of course the long physical recovery process. But survive it I did, and proudly wore (and still do) a huge scar down the middle of my stomach to prove it. A few years on and I begged my mother to let me wear a bikini. She eventually caved in and as she suspected, some people were horrified on seeing my (keloid) scar and thought I should cover it up – but hey not me – this was my (battle) scar and without that operation I would not have lived much longer – so don't look!

Of course there have been many other necessary operations and accompanying scars since that time but none as momentous as that first one – and the emotional aftermath of that took years to emerge. Perhaps it was that experience that most prepared me for the other 'lessons' to come throughout my life. I mean how much more learning do I need for goodness sake?

Don't get me wrong – there has been some amazing times like the indescribable joy of becoming the mother of two incredible children – which resulted in the appearance of the mother lioness to fight and defend her young ones. And now, of course the sheer delight of their young ones, my four beautiful grandchildren.

Also, the exhilaration of travelling in and around Australia and many far flung and out of the way places in the world (never was one to do the norm), exploring and learning about different cultures and meeting incredible people and hearing their stories.

How lucky am I to have such an amazing family and friends – together with such wonderful fun-filled happy days and years mixed in with some not as pleasant times like marriage and relationship breakdown, miscarriage, both physical and mental illnesses of family and friends, career changes, redundancies and the pressures of working in the

frenzied corporate world (aka *the zoo*) eventually resulting in burnout and then early retirement (the best job ever) and so many more defining and challenging life experiences – far too many to list right now.

And mixed into all of the above my parents inevitable deaths. After many years of illness, Mum died first. Then there was the agony of feeling so helpless watching Dad die slowly of a broken heart after losing the one and only love of his life – Mum. As difficult as those experiences were I feel both blessed and honoured to have been able to ‘be there’ to both care and nurse them during their final time on earth. Gut wrenching yes – but rewarding – and all part of the circle of life.

Yes there has been times when I have wondered ‘what next’ and sometimes I think okay ‘no more’ or ‘what now?’ and times when I have metaphorically screamed ‘come on bring it on – throw it at me – you can’t break me!’. Because just like that rubber ball I keep on bouncing back ready for the next thing and (like Dory) ‘just keep swimming’!

Of course everyone goes through the normal ups and downs, as well as trauma, in their lives and everyone deals with it differently – that’s life – which brings me to those damn clichés:

- what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger
- grin and bear it
- put on a happy face
- when life hands you lemons, make lemonade
- the sun will come out tomorrow
- after all tomorrow is another day (thanks Scarlet)

I am sure you have heard them all and many more – numerous times I suspect. And guess what – the really funny thing is that they are all true!

Looking back now, I often wonder how I survived through the years, not to mention some of those experiences – and people. But of course all of that, together with the wonderful support from family and friends, has helped shape me into what I have now become – a happy and resilient Senior – and damn proud of it too!

Don't Forget Me, Benny

Franklyn Cowell

Artarmon

He did it for Eva. Every school day he did it for Eva. With his big, red STOP sign held up high, Benny strode on to the pedestrian crossing. It gave him immense satisfaction when cars, trucks, motorbikes, all came to a halt at his command so that the little ones could safely cross the street on their way to school. He was the Lollipop Man, although officially he was known as the School Crossing Supervisor.

The children called him by name, smiling and waving as their parents hurried them along. He smiled in return and looked at their happy, innocent faces as they strutted off to school. And he remembered Eva.

Life is good, he reminded himself as he breathed in the fresh, salubrious air of wonderful Sydney, his long-adopted home. But it was not always like this.

Life had started rather traumatically for both of them on that fateful November night in 1938 when Eva preceded him into this world by just thirteen minutes. The Nazis were burning synagogues and the Jewish people feared for their lives. Growing up in Czechoslovakia, he remembered his mother telling him about *Kristallnacht*, the night they were born, the Night of Broken Glass, because soon after that the German army occupied Prague and from there, things started to deteriorate.

Benny was too young to process the events of the next few years, but he remembered being herded on to a cattle train with his family and hundreds of others, eventually ending up at the Theresienstadt camp-ghetto in Czechoslovakia.

His parents were always afraid. Even today, he could remember snippets of their serious, whispered conversations:

There are no certainties in life. This is what makes up our existence.

Change will always be around us. So be optimistic.

Just after Benny turned six, the family was deported to Auschwitz, located in German occupied Poland. He screamed from the stinging pain as a tattooist pricked his left forearm with a six-digit serial number. Soon after, on the orders of SS physician Captain Josef Mengele, the twins were forcibly separated, but not before Eva, struggling in the grip of a burly guard, turned to Benny and, tears streaming down her face, screamed "Don't leave me," and then, what sounded like "Don't forget me, Benny..." before being whisked away.

And again, echoes of those solemn whispers between his parents:

Your problems will educate you. Face up to them. They will develop your character and give you hope.

Even after more than seven decades Benny could not erase the frightful memories from that earlier time. He was placed in barracks with older boys, many of whom looked similar. It was only later that he found out why: Mengele was using his unfettered powers conducting inhumane experiments on Jewish and Gypsy twins, many of them children, on the pretext of tracing the genetic origins of various diseases.

Don't run from the things that scare you. Face them!

They were marched to the camp hospital almost daily, where they were probed, prodded and x-rayed. Those boys showing signs of weakness were never seen again. Sometimes Benny had cuts administered to his body that often became infected. He suffered terrible bouts of diarrhoea, and it was only the thought of being reunited with his family that steeled his resolve to survive.

Benny shook himself out of his reverie as another batch of school children assembled to cross the busy street. "Ah, Eva," he sighed aloud as he stepped on to the crossing. "See, I haven't forgotten. I look into all these beautiful faces and can find you so clearly in each one of them. You are always with me."

It was luck, or providence, or both, that helped in saving his life. With Germany facing certain defeat, hundreds of them were made to take part in a forced march out of Auschwitz, but were rescued along the way by Partisans. He was returned to Czechoslovakia but moved to Malta and found work in the shipyards while still a teenager.

He remembered how, as a 20-year-old, he had gone back in search of his family, only to learn that they had all perished under the Nazi plan for the 'Final Solution'. What a sad way to die, he had thought at the time: killed by Zyklon B, a gas normally used as an insecticide.

Don't dwell on the past. Don't let it define who you are.

It was happenstance that brought him to Australia. A fellow worker was immigrating and convinced Benny to apply. He found work at the Cockatoo Island Dockyard in Sydney and remained there until its closure in 1991, but not before he had married, bought a modest home in Sydney's inner west and raised a large family, all on a single wage, facilitated with many sacrifices endured along the way. And now his grandchildren made his *raison d'être* so complete.

Identify what makes you strong. Then embrace it; own it, and never let it go.

He studied his left forearm. Yes, they had branded his body, but could not trammel his spirit. He realised that which made him strong, uniquely strong, was his faith in humanity; for no matter the evil in the world, good men and women always stood ready to counter it.

We must forgive. Only then are we able to put the past behind us and move on with our lives.

The happy chattering grew in intensity as Benny stepped out yet again to halt the oncoming traffic. The children giggled and danced around him, and he knew all was right with the world. Faith – his faith – had triumphed.

His parents, too, lived on in him, through their words of enduring wisdom:

Give your time to others. Once you give it, you cannot get it back. It is the ultimate gift.

Benny's grin grew wider as Eva after Eva after Eva called out his name as they merrily skipped past, wearing their biggest and brightest smiles.

Don't Give Up

Linda Visman

Wangi Wangi

Ernie shivered and clutched the rough grey blankets closer about him. His usually bright blue eyes were dull, half shut, shockingly sunken and bruised-looking against his pale face. Aunt Telly and Aunt Sarah had only stayed a few minutes, but their visit had exhausted him. They looked so solemn to the four-year-old, nothing like their usual cheerful selves.

Both aunts kissed him goodbye, Aunt Telly's lips lingering on his cheek a little longer than usual. At the door, she spoke quietly to his mother, but her whispered voice carried to the sick boy.

"Oh, Hannah! T'little mite's desperate sick. Ask t'good Lord to tek 'im now. It'll be t'best thing fer young Ernie."

His mother murmured something and the three women went down the stairs together. She returned a few minutes later, and gently placed a damp cloth on his burning forehead. Her smile was tremulous and her eyes red. As she leaned over him, Ernie felt a tear splash onto his cheek. He spoke, his voice barely audible, and she had to lean closer to hear him.

"Don't cry, Mother, I'll not die. I'm goin' to get better."

Ernie, my Dad, didn't die.

Although he suffered illnesses throughout his childhood, including the pneumonia that almost killed him, he grew to be a strong and determined man. He studied hard to become a fighter pilot in World War II, serving for four years in the Defence of Britain. In 1954, Dad brought Mum and us four young children to Australia in search of a better life, one less constrained by the rigidity of England's class system. An Australian son, David, was born here in 1958.

In 1961, a polio epidemic raged through the Illawarra.

Three-year-old David caught the disease in October and was in Wollongong hospital's isolation ward. Driving to work as a concreting contractor exactly two weeks later, Dad felt unwell and visited our doctor. By lunchtime, he was also in isolation and, before the night was out, was sent to Sydney's Prince of Wales Hospital, the doctors saying he had to go into an iron lung. Dad resisted, and they allowed him overnight to see if he could manage alone. He did.

Dad was told he would never walk again. However, he was determined to overcome the paralysis down his right side, not give in to it. He refused a wheelchair, asking our boilermaker neighbour to make steel crutches for him. On a check-up visit, his doctor told him he hadn't obeyed his orders to rest, so was no longer his patient. That didn't faze Dad. Wearing a full body brace and a full leg brace, he got around using those heavy steel crutches, working to get back to normal life.

It took over two years, but gradually, starting with a few minutes then an hour a day, he strengthened his muscles. With Mum's help, he created moulds for concrete pavers, balustrades and columns. In spite of chest weakness and still having to use the leg brace, he was finally earning enough money making, selling and installing these products to support the family.

Dad became respected around the community for his courage, honesty and positive attitude. He eventually discarded his braces and continued his successful concreting business until retiring in 1986. Mum died in 1994. Immediately after that, Dad was diagnosed with advanced macular degeneration and lost his driver's licence. He adjusted to both losses, although he dearly missed Mum. He used a large screen for reading, and then talking books.

He'd walk to the shop with his white cane and catch the bus to the shopping centre. He was admired for his cheerful and positive attitude to life. When asked how he was, no matter how he was feeling, he always replied with a smile, "Top of the world!"

Dad was almost 87 in 2008, still living alone, when he underwent a routine bowel procedure. Things went wrong and he was rushed to hospital for an operation to repair his perforated bowel. However, he was bleeding internally and not strong enough to operate on. A week later, seeming to improve and looking forward to going home, his condition suddenly deteriorated. He developed several massive infections – staph, peritonitis, septicaemia, bi-lateral pneumonia – plus severe oedema. Then he had two heart attacks.

Nobody, doctors included, thought he'd pull through. He slipped into a semi-coma, interspersed with periods of delirium, where he hallucinated flying his fighter plane, or instructing enlisted men – he'd been a Warrant Officer. He received the Last Rites from two Catholic priests and seemed more at ease. We adult children took turns sitting with him day and night for three weeks, not knowing if he would survive. I advised my five sons, who lived interstate, not to come. I didn't want this to be their last memory of their grandfather, the positive, encouraging man they'd always known.

One day, my older sister told Dad it was alright for him to go and be with Mum. He obviously heard her, and in short, lucid moments, his voice hardly audible, he spoke to us. "I'm not dead yet..."; "I'm not going yet – I've things to do." Although only slight at first, there was a change after that, and he slowly but steadily improved.

The *miracle man*, as the nursing staff called him, survived, went to rehab, then back home. We had another five years with Dad. He continued to be an inspiration to all around him with his positive attitude and beautiful smile. Then, one night in 2013, he fell, breaking his hip. He was operated on, but I think he'd decided it was time to go – he told us he'd had a good life. Six weeks later, Dad died, just six days before his ninety-second birthday.

A great many people came to send off Ernie, the man who was always "top of the world".

Dreams Can Come True

Janice Lepherd

Mount Annan

"Kate, you are nearly there, the position of your feet is still not quite correct for the Pirouette," her dancing teacher instructed her.

Kate, red in the face from concentration and exertion, tried – once more – to get the position right. She loved her ballet classes, loved the music that was played whilst the young girls moved gracefully to the set music – but she found that this position was proving most difficult. Some of the other girls, slightly older than her, sniggered to each other and exchanged knowledgeable glances, before gliding off to perform perfectly, or so they thought, to gain their teacher's approval. Little did Kate know that she showed great promise and her teacher could foresee that with dedication and perseverance, she would one day go far.

She was a new pupil to the ballet school at the commencement of the year. Her parents had moved to this city some months before, and she missed her friends and the ballet classes she had attended there, but nothing could stop her from working towards her dream, of one day becoming a ballerina. With this aim in mind and with strong determination for an eight-year-old, she learnt quickly and had almost caught up to the other girls of her group.

It seemed that they did not have her strong desire themselves, and her eagerness to improve amused them at first, and then annoyed them. These girls were from affluent families, whilst she was not so fortunate, and her parents had sacrificed much so she could commence fulfilling her dream.

'Why can't I get this right?' she thought to herself, becoming frustrated and then angry that her body would not do what her mind was telling it. So once more she applied herself to the task in hand, and once more her teacher encouraged, "You can do it Kate, you will master this."

The end of the year concert was coming up, and the girls were being allocated solo and Corps de Ballet parts, and all were excited at the prospects of dancing before their families and friends, and of course with wearing the beautiful costumes being made for their various roles, and of having their hair put up and make-up applied. They gathered in groups and talked excitedly of the upcoming performance, and those doing solo dances acting so very superior to those who had not been selected to do so. Kate was worried, for she knew that her parents could not easily afford any beautiful costume for her, even though she was 'just one of the Corps de Ballet'. She wanted to look like a real ballerina with a tutu and her hair up with a crown, but was secretly afraid that she would not be dancing at all – no costume, no dancing.

So Kate resolved that she would make the most of the dancing lessons she'd had that year. Hopefully her parents would be able to afford her dancing school fees next year, but as she was the eldest of four girls, she was doubtful about that, but she would continue to hold onto her dream of being a ballerina by working hard and learning everything she could about ballet dancing, and who knows, she may even gain a scholarship to help her advance this passion. As she moved her body to the music, she was lost in her world of dance and delighted in that.

One afternoon, Kate was held back, the other pupils having been dismissed, and was shown a new short routine by her teacher. Asked if she could do this, Kate had no hesitation in demonstrating that she could, and was then told that she would most likely be dancing that solo piece at the concert, the pupil who was to have done so had injured her foot and they did not think she would be able to perform, so Kate was the understudy. She was ecstatic, her dreams were beginning to come true.

Then – the problem of costumes. She hesitantly voiced her worry to her teacher but was reassured that all would be well, she would be dancing. The dancing school had a reserve of various costumes, and ones would be found to fit Kate.

The older girls, each of whom thought that they should have been given the solo part, treated Kate with jealous snide remarks, aimed at hurting her mentally and trying to upset her concentration. However, Kate worked on, with her teacher encouraging her, practising and at last perfecting the move that had given her so much trouble earlier.

Then, two days before the concert, she received crushing news. Sylvia, the injured dancer, had made a rapid recovery and her ankle had healed so well that she would be able to dance that solo after all. Inwardly Kate's heart broke, but outwardly she graciously accepted that she was simply one of the Corps de Ballet once more. How the older girls loved that, but Kate ignored their comments and instead now concentrated on doing the best she could with her dances, her mind freed of the worry of costume expenses.

The concert was a great success, and her parents so proud of her, and Kate mentally reinforced her burning ambition to be a brilliant ballerina one day.

Awards were presented at the break-up party a week later, and to Kate's surprise she was the recipient of one. The introduction to her presentation of this award was announced, "To the student who has shown strength of character and great resilience this year, Kate Broadfield."

Kate was congratulated by her teacher afterwards. "You know Kate, each time you overcame your setbacks and problems you showed your resilience and strength of character, you really deserve this award. You know the meaning of the word 'resilience'? It's the capacity to recover quickly from difficulty, toughness – and that is you!"

This resilience was to be her companion all through her dancing career.

Engaging the Headwinds of My Life

Dr Jane Cioffi

Rose Bay

A life fully lived inevitably brings storms. When such storms strike, I lean into the headwinds hold fast to the mast of belief in myself and speak directly to the storm. With a steady hand on the tiller, I am guided by the stars that hold life's meaning, steeling myself to bring to the fore whatever it takes to lift myself up to ride out the storms blowing me off course. By accepting these situations, taking charge, and recognising what is really important in life, the power to prevail despite storms declares itself. This mindset humbly carries me out of storms and strengthens my resolve to thrive again with a new sense of how blessed I am.

Underlying this mindset when a storm confronts is perseverance. Initially I am silenced. With acceptance of my life exactly at that moment my inner suffering tells me to trust in myself 'to figure it out' knowing I have always got through before so now will be no different. Connecting to all within me a restorative path to do whatever is necessary to 'get back on track' is glimpsed. I steel myself for my best effort based on my beliefs about the critical position I am in. Giving myself time, I slowly harness the wherewithal to handle what must be done tinged with a little apprehension considering possibilities, envisaging the effects they could have, and focusing on maximising the upside. I embark on the steps I need to take to get to the other side of this hardship in a controlled, effective, timely manner that reflects my hopes that this work in progress 'can do it' for me.

My most recent violent storm loomed last winter. I went out for my early morning walk fully anticipating it would be as usual. There had been a storm overnight and it was quite chilly so I was wearing my jacket. Listening to my favourite talk back radio host, soaking up the current affairs I so love I took my usual route. I walked past the shops, service station,

the gym then onto the path beside the tennis courts bordered by massive old trees gnarled, twisted and heavy with foliage. There were large puddles on the path and heaped up fallen leaves. I went around the first puddle then the second. That was when my foot got caught in a wire hidden in the leaves. Next thing I knew I was on the ground having fallen heavily. Instantly I knew I had broken my hip. It was still dark. Nobody was around. My dear son had wisely advised I install an emergency app on my phone so I retrieved my mobile from my jacket and pushed the emergency button. The pain was starting to set in by now. Knowing an ambulance was on its way was reassuring.

Seven months later after my hip had been 'pin and plated', a stay in acute care, 10 weeks of fairly intense rehabilitation involving gym and hydrotherapy sessions my disrupted life started to come together. I was so grateful I was gradually 'finding my feet'. The reality of slowly being able to return to my cherished activities getting on top of everyday tasks took continued effort to keep moving, persevere with pain and weakness in my leg, strengthen my body with exercises, and face up to challenges of multiple daily activities such as getting off the bus, driving the car, doing the shopping and carrying the laundry basket. Over the weeks I made small gains which nurtured a positive attitude to recuperation. My confidence grew and I became more comfortable with moving on with life after my hip fracture. Often the Nike motto popped into my head, '*Just do it*'.

Reflecting on the messy complexity of this storm I recognised my attitude to endure 'under fire' with quiet courage had enabled me. The layered arsenal of assets and resources I had built and stored over the years provided an inner strength. Agency for my life was empowered from within with a mindful protective shield filled with a sense of self-esteem,

ability to conquer, a spiritual inner peace, a critical consciousness of my beliefs and values, a desire to health enhance, reliance on self, belief that a degree of control is possible and a mantra of self-determination. The key to my empowerment and use of these strengths was my underlying inability to accept incapacity. In the first few days after my fall my mind churned away on making sense of where I was at and where I needed to get to. I figured I needed to return to my usual routine as soon as possible. So, I set in place a modified daily regime from waking at my usual time till I went to sleep at night. The familiarity awoke shades of 'my normal self' which was comforting. However, I had to be quite creative about carrying out my routine as often it was very tricky and took ages to accomplish things as I needed to factor in my weaknesses, engage my strengths and seek assistance to fill in gaps in my capacity. Engaging with power and energy in this way moved me toward a state of positivity and brought back the meaning of my life little by little.

With gratitude I have risen from the battle embracing well-being and treasuring all I have regained and learnt. The wise Chinese saying, 'Chi Ku Shi Fu', eating bitterness is good fortune epitomises my passage through this storm having consumed the hardship and tasted the fruits of my labour while holding fast to the mast of my belief in myself. Being aware I always have choices to pursue what really matters and trusting in my ability to heal and calm myself engenders a sense of personal power and makes me hopeful that I can thrive despite storms in my life to come back stronger with more insight into myself.

Faith Conquers All

Lucy Camilleri

Matrville

Over a cup of tea one afternoon, a lovely and quietly spoken lady began to reminisce. She relayed this heart wrenching account of her life, showing how her strength and faith helped her to be grateful, compassionate and understanding, living a fulfilling life.

She started with this statement highlighting her strengths and a beautiful heart. *'My life has taken many turns but my faith, courage and will to survive, have helped me through the difficult periods of my life.'*

She then continued with her story. *'I was born to Dutch parents in 1923 in Dutch East Indies, a Dutch Colony now known as Indonesia. Many people commented on my appearance, because with my fair skin, blonde hair and blue eyes I did not exactly look Indonesian. My memories of my childhood are of a happy home filled with fun and laughter with my parents and brother.'*

We had Indonesian servants to help with the running of the household: the 'koki' (cook) who prepared our meals, a female servant attended to the bedrooms and a male servant for the upkeep of the rest of the house. We also had a young boy who looked after our gardens. There were no high rise units and most people lived in houses with lovely gardens.'

Although we spoke Dutch at home and went to Dutch-language schools, we also learnt Indonesian, so we could converse with our servants, with whom we had a friendly relationship. I had a wonderful childhood and my school years were most enjoyable, as I loved learning new things.'

In January 1942, the Japanese invaded the Dutch East Indies and my life was to turn in a different direction. The Japanese ordered all Dutch families to be sent to prison camps, which were in fact concentration camps.'

As her hands began to tremble she held my hand and shaking her head simply said, *'The Japanese were not nice.'* She recoils as she remembers the atrocities, humiliation and hardships she endured at the hands of the Japanese soldiers. Savage beatings and kicking were common for the slightest misdemeanour.

'Every day between 11am and 4pm, which was the hottest part of the day, we were led into the paddocks. We had very little covering on our bodies and no hats. We were ordered to prepare the ground for vegetable planting and as no tools were distributed to us, we were forced to use our bare hands. The soldiers watched us constantly and if we were not working to their liking they hit us with their rifles. The sun was very hot and we were not given any water during this time.'

The food consisted of meagre servings of rice daily just enough to keep us alive, and we ate the grass to help allay our hunger. Any rain was most welcome; we ran outside, cupped our hands and drank the refreshing rainwater. I was soon to learn that drinking water would help to keep me alive.'

During our conversation she would often be pensive and say *'Religion is important, ja.'* She believed her faith kept her alive.

'On occasion I was sent to help the mothers with their babies. I was so hungry that I would eat their vomit and drink their urine.' She covers her face with her hands as she says in a quiet voice, *'Babies' urine is not so strong, ja.'*

Most of the babies did not survive. *'I never stopped hoping and praying that the war with all its atrocities would soon end.'*

In August 1945 the Japanese surrendered – the war was over. It was such a joy to see the Canadian soldiers, who were truly wonderful and worked endlessly to reunite families and loved ones. So many people died of starvation in the camp, and it was actually no small miracle that my whole family survived.

Tears of love and joy were shed as after three and a half years we were together once more. We hugged one another; our bodies had become thin and frail but the love in our hearts was stronger than ever.

Following the Japanese surrender, the Indonesian nationalists declared independence. We were forced to leave the only home I knew and return to Holland, which was quite alien to me. It was here that I met the man I was to marry. We migrated to Sydney and were married in 1950 and settled in our home at Matraville.

Although it was difficult at first, everything was new and exciting. The Australian people were very friendly and helpful. The local grocer, a Dutchman, taught me to speak English fluently.

Unable to bear children we were fortunate to adopt two beautiful baby boys. We brought them up speaking both English and Dutch as I felt it important to keep our heritage alive. I recall our boys often saying they were hungry when in fact they desired a treat. I pray they will never experience the pain of real hunger.

Our lives were dedicated to family as well as being active members in our church community, helping out with church cleaning, school canteen and meals-on-wheels. I had such wonderful support that I wanted to express my gratitude by helping others.'

Through the support offered from Randwick Community Services she was able to remain living in her family home. She had cherished memories which made her last few years memorable to her.

This frail lady survived and did not dwell on the bad times but always thanked God for her wonderful life. She was grateful that she was still able to walk to her friends' homes and share a cup of tea and a chat. She has shown me that to love and care is to truly live your life.

Thank you to a very lovely lady for sharing your story. Her parting words to me were 'tot ziens' meaning see you soon.

Fishing for Blackfish

Judith Turner

South Durras

My heart thumped as I left the station on that first callout after a year off work following the accident. A trail bike rider had phoned. Said he'd hit a tree, trying to avoid an old bloke lying unconscious across a track by the river. I hoped the Ambos got there before me.

From the location, I figured the old bloke might be Charlie Moon. Dad and I used to see Charlie Moon fishing for blackfish from his little tinnie near the ruins of the jetty at the back of the river. Dad and I never *could* catch blackfish. We tried and tried, but never got the knack. "It takes special *know-how* to be able to catch blackfish," Dad said. "Old Charlie Moon has it. I wish I knew his secret."

Charlie had lived down by the river since the late 1940s. When he was younger, he used to do odd jobs for the Maguires and old Mr Maguire let him build a shack in a remote, uncleared part of the property. Dad told me that Charlie was a POW on the Thai/Burma Railway. My wife, Robyn and I visited the site of that Death Railway years ago as we backpacked around Thailand. Robyn said it was the saddest place she'd ever been.

The Ambos had Charlie on the stretcher when I arrived. "Not good," said Steve quietly as he closed the ambulance door. "The kid's alright. Just a scrape and a bit of a shakeup. We'll take him in for a check. You okay, Jeff?" Steve had been at my last callout a year ago, when the body on the stretcher was my eight-year-old son.

For months, I stayed home on the bed, staring at the ceiling, limbs too heavy to move. I couldn't stomach going out, watching people go about their daily business as though nothing had happened. Didn't they understand that the whole world had changed and the pulverising grief was unbearable?

The police department organised counselling and compassionate leave and then I took all my sick and long-service leave.

People deal with grief in different ways. My wife, Robyn is a nurse. Robyn squared her shoulders and took on extra shifts. She's just skin and bones. I often hear her sobbing in the bathroom, but she gets up every morning and faces the day. We hardly talk these days.

Charlie died on the way to the hospital. Next morning, I trudged along the track towards the river, the track Charlie Moon walked for over 70 years. His wallet did not indicate any next of kin, so I headed down to his shack to investigate further.

It was clean and tidy inside. The meagre furnishings reflecting the Spartan existence of its owner who had lived here in isolation since the end of the Second World War. The older people in town respected his need for privacy. Men like old Maguire knew something of the scars of war, understood how it might affect a man.

I found a wooden box in the wardrobe and discovered a yellowed birth certificate revealing Charlie's age to be 93, his Army discharge papers and two old photos. One was of a young soldier with a beautiful woman. The other, which was very creased and water damaged, was of the same woman holding a baby. I turned it over and read the faded, smudged writing on the back. 'Darling Charlie, what do you think of your wife and son? Love Madge and John.'

What happened to Madge and John?

Did Madge meet someone else while Charlie was away enduring the horrors of the POW camps?

Did he carry that photo of his wife and son through the rain and mud and miseries of Hellfire Pass, only to come back to nothing?

I shook my head as I looked around the old bare hut and thought of the Charlie Moon's 70 years of seclusion there with no wife and son.

As a youngster, I saw Charlie pulling in those blackfish with such skill and questioned how anyone could retreat inside himself to such an extent.

Now I understood, as I had no son to fish with either. Closing the door, I gazed out through the trees towards the sunlight streaming down on the river and wondered if the old man found peace in this tranquil place?

I used to feel sorry for old Charlie and his isolation, but it certainly was a beautiful, peaceful spot to live the life of his choice. Perhaps I had been wrong. Perhaps I could learn something from his strength and resilience in surviving the horrors of war and hardships on his return.

I strolled down and squatted by the old jetty, wondering if I would ever learn to catch blackfish. A fish jumped midstream. The water rippled and then stilled. "Rest in peace, Charlie Moon," I said.

As I headed back to town, I thought about the possibilities of tracking down the son, John. But first I had to speak to Robyn.

Grace

Marjon McNamara

Como

The silence in the room was deafening.

Where before there was the happy banter between excited first time parents, there was the dawning realisation that all was not well.

Samantha's hand searched for Mike's and gripped it tightly, listening to the rapid beat of the baby's heart, feeling her own heart rate rise to match it.

"Is everything okay?" she asked, as the ultrasonographer kept running the probe over her tummy in the same place. The baby kicked in response.

"My baby's okay isn't it?"

"Let me just get the doctor in to check this one thing," the ultrasonographer said.

A moment later the doctor came into the room and Samantha adjusted her position as directed. The scanner ran over her tummy again and again. Mike asked then, "What's wrong? Please tell us!"

The doctor sat close to the bed and gravely replied, "I'm so sorry, but your baby has a condition that's not compatible with life. It has..." Samantha heard nothing else; her ears were buzzing, her skin icy, her pulse racing. Her baby, her precious longed-for baby wasn't going to live? "... you need to think about what you want to do," the doctor continued.

Samantha's head was spinning; thoughts, emotions, jumbling around, nothing making sense. Mike, with tears in his eyes and his arm around Samantha stood, "Thank you doctor. We need some time to process this," and with a handshake they left.

As they drove from the hospital, Samantha kept her hand on her baby bump, feeling the jerky taps against her hand as the baby moved.

"Is it something I did?" Sam sobbed. "My fault?"

At home, grief broke over them. Together they sobbed and prayed for a miracle. They read the information the doctor had given them, and frantically searched the internet.

There was no doubt. Their precious first baby was not going to live.

Anger, raw and visceral held Samantha in its grip; rage and grief intermingled. The night was awful, as family members rushed to console and share and grieve.

Three days later, Mike and Samantha sat in the obstetrician's rooms, and calmly stated they would continue the pregnancy. "We are blessed to have this life given to us, so we want nature to take its course."

Life continued. The young couple went to work every day, and spent quiet evenings together, tearful at times, cuddling in bed with hands on Samantha's tummy, treasuring each kick and roll of the baby. Then one evening Mike came home to a quiet and accepting Samantha...the baby hadn't moved during the day. At the hospital, it was confirmed – their precious baby had died. Numb acceptance cushioned them from the bustle and noise of the Labour Ward as Samantha had labour induced. The heavy doors of their room cocooned them in a surreal womb, as Sam delivered their poor dead baby girl. Mike and Sam lay together in the bed, cuddling their little one, checking out her tiny fingers and toes, with tears of grief and loss dripping on to her cold face.

"She was ours for a little while," Samantha sobbed.

"She'll always be ours honey," Mike choked out, "Always in our hearts."

So day followed day. Some days were deeply sad, others felt like life was improving. Family gathered around and supported the young couple, as they themselves grieved over the loss of the baby, Grace; as the hopes and dreams that had been held in their daughter, niece and granddaughter had shattered.

The few bits and pieces that had been collected for the nursery were folded away lovingly and put into storage.

Gradually laughter came back into Samantha and Mike's life. They busied themselves with work, and spending time with each other and the extended family. Memories of Grace became less agonizing, more sweet.

And then came the news. Samantha was pregnant again!

"We are not going to let fear overwhelm us," said Mike as they looked at the two lines on the pregnancy test. "This baby will be well, I know it!"

Together they saw the obstetrician, and booked in the ultrasound. Butterflies were swarming in Samantha's tummy as the probe was moved around. The little heart beat was strong, but Samantha was watching the technician, trying to discern her expression.

"Do you want to know the sex of your baby?" they were asked.

"Are you saying my baby is all right?" Samantha asked in a whisper?

"Your baby is just fine!" the technician replied, "So? Do you want to know?"

Samantha was scared to look forward to the birth of their second child. The trauma and fear she had felt while she was carrying Grace kept churning in her memories. She felt unable to enjoy the pregnancy, and relied heavily on the quiet certainty that Mike felt that all would be well.

Weeks passed. The due date approached. Mike pulled out the crib and other furniture from storage. Samantha spent time washing and folding the tiny baby clothes, finally loving the tumbling kicks that kept her tummy contorting.

Then labour started, naturally.

The hours flew by, as Samantha breathed through the pains, her focus completely on the new life that was struggling to come forth.

The moment came as the baby started emerging, Samantha grunting and sweating, and then the most welcome sound; the wailing of a newborn echoed in the room, mingling with the joyful sobs as Mike and Sam cuddled their new son close, rejoicing.

They had a healthy little boy! They examined his tiny fingers and toes, circling his shell like ears, placing butterfly kisses over his cute face.

Family members were waiting when the midwives were finished with their tidying up.

Amongst the joyful tears, as Samantha held the baby close, she whispered into his ear, "I love you baby boy. You are so precious to me. You had a big sister once. Her name was Grace."

Hardships Overcome

Vicki Stewart

Forster

On New Year's Eve 1787, Surgeon Arthur Bowes Smyth described the conditions on board the convict transport *Lady Penrhyn*:

'... many of the women were wash'd out of their births by the seas ... This night was a dreadful one indeed, the sea was mountains high, sometimes it seem'd as if the ship was going over. The chicken coops were on the round house & fasten'd very securely ... gave way & came with such violence against the side as to drive the goat house all in pieces & lamed the goat & kidd -'

My 5x great-grandmother, Mary Davis, was one of those women. Raised in Shrewsbury, an inland town in Shropshire, she had probably never been on a boat before, nor seen the ocean. And yet, here she was, on a storm tossed ex-slaver prison ship, sailing half way around the world. Two years later she was sent to Norfolk Island on the last voyage of the *Sirius*, and hauled to shore by rope through pounding seas when the *Sirius* grounded at Slaughter Bay. A year later she bore her only child, a daughter she called Charlotte. Both returned to Sydney in 1793. Undaunted by the deprivations and indignities she endured, Mary's resilience and determination carried her through the final years of that century and we later find her as the housekeeper at Government House in Parramatta during and after the Bligh years and into the early Macquarie years.

On Wednesday, 2 March 1814, Jeffery Hart Bent, aboard the convict transport *Broxbornebury*, made this entry in his journal:

Only Irish stew for dinner! The gale increased during the night and six sheep were drowned. The convicts screamed when the gale struck, all aboard thought they would not survive the night. Because of the weather, this day the convicts had no food or water.

My 3x great-grandmother, Mary Lawrence was one of those convicts. Shortly after arrival she and her future husband, George Davis, also a convict, settled into a relatively comfortable existence in Sydney and started a family. George received a land grant, and in the late 1820s, with Mary again pregnant, the family set off for the lengthy and arduous journey to the Yass Plains. They carried their worldly belongings on a bullock dray. The daily hardships encountered along this uncharted route can only be imagined. Mary gave birth during the journey. On arrival at their selected grant, a small makeshift lean-to was their first home. George and Mary slowly built up their land holdings and livestock, leaving a lasting legacy to their descendants. Mary died at age 103.

My mother, Joan Achurch Woodman, lived much of her childhood with her grandparents, Euphemia Buckmaster and Bernard Sweep. In her memoirs, she wrote the following about her grandparents:

When Gran married Pa Sweep in 1906 they lived in a house with dirt floors. Pa had greyhound dogs and trapped rabbits for a living. The house was way out in the bush. One day bushrangers came to the house and raided the place, taking all the bags of flour and sugar, but didn't hurt the family. They saved 100 pounds and built the house in Russell Street. Gran frequently took us out in the horse and sulky to visit relatives. She made all our clothes, even our pants and petticoats. They were made out of flour bags. She dyed them different colours to mask the printing. She also made our hats. They were made of calico with starched brims. Our Aunties gave Gran their old dresses and she recycled them into clothes for us.

I have many fond childhood memories of my own, spent with this unassuming and generous couple. Nightly, we sat around the kitchen table playing Five Hundred and Euchre with Pa. Daily, we picked fresh fruit and vegetables from their carefully maintained

garden. How I wish now that I had asked my Gran more questions about her early life, about how she managed to overcome the hardships and setbacks, and lived the quiet life of acceptance of her lot in life.

My own mother, Joan Achurch Woodman, also proved her mettle when faced with adversity. In another section of her memoirs she writes of her post war experience on the farm between 1946 and 1953:

Kankool was the worst eight years of my life. When we arrived, because of the drought, we only had bore water to drink. There were no conveniences whatsoever. No bathroom. A dish on a stand on the veranda to wash your face and hands. A galvanized tub on the kitchen floor in front of the fire to bath in. The old wood stove would smoke through the house instead of going up the chimney. There was never any dry wood when it rained. The kerosene fridge would never burn properly. We had a meat safe hanging on the veranda with wet bags over it to keep the meat cool. I did the laundry in a kerosene tin over an open fire in the yard. I had to carry the water from the windmill in the orchard. The clothesline was a piece of wire strung from one side of the yard to the other and propped up with a clothes prop. Many a time the prop would fall and all the clothes would fall in the dirt. I did the ironing with old black irons, put on the stove to heat up. I had close to a thousand chickens that had to be fed. Twice a week I packed 24 dozen eggs in four egg crates, took them up to the Kankool station and put them on the train. First thing every morning was, milk the cow, feed the lambs, get the boys off to school, feed the chickens and pigs, clean the house, then in the afternoon I had to feed all the animals again.

Whenever I feel like complaining about my own circumstances, I remind myself of the resilience of each of these admirable women.

Harley and Me

Yvonne Newman

Cowper

Being unable to get the dinghy's motor going I chose to take the canoe out to check the rising floodwater. My dog Harley and I paddled against the runout tide. We had to hug the flooded bank because even three metres out, the rapid current made me struggle for control.

We decided to paddle as far as the houseboats anchored way out from their wharf, usual practice during a flood. As we turned, I made the mistake of swinging the canoe into the mainstream rather than towards the bank. The flooding current instantly grabbed our little vessel and dragged us toward the catamaran hull of the enormous houseboats.

We struck hard against the anchor buoy, the current tipping us sideways trapping us in the canoe rapidly filling with raging water and I knew that if I didn't quickly get us out, it was going to suck us down, when it sank under the boats.

With Harley under one arm, I struggled out of the hold then lunged toward the buoy as I let the canoe go. Both Harley and I watched as it flipped, turned bow up, was sucked under and disappeared.

Harley clung onto me as I slid us up toward the anchor, thinking that I may be able to flip her onto that structure to safety but she was too heavy and too scared, I was too weak and the current was too strong.

Each time I lost my grip on her I reached out, grabbed her scruff and dragged her back, every enormous effort becoming harder. Thinking that I could hand-over-hand, work my way across under the bow, then slide along the side to the back of the boat and climb aboard, while Harley clung onto me, I let go of the anchor and scrambled for the underside of the bow but there was nothing there to grab.

With no time to think more than, 'We could quite possibly die here today', the current took hold of us, the water tumbled over us and we were going down. I kissed Harley's head and let her go. As she disappeared I launched myself toward the side of the boat but didn't reach it and the current sucked me down and I went under.

The water pushed and pulled me around under there for so long and I was about to give up when my hand wrapped around what turned out to be the edge of the hull. I reefed at this pulling myself across the underside and saw daylight. Then I was sucking air and clinging to the back of a dinghy attached to the houseboat.

Knowing it was Harley's body being slammed against the hull when I heard a thumping, I called out her name. Miraculously her head popped up, she was alive and directly between the houseboat and my dinghy.

"Harley!" I called, "Harley! COME!"

God love her, she looked around, saw me, stopped struggling and let the current carry her to me.

Now we were hanging on with one hand, my body horizontal in rising, rushing, turbulent, floodwater and both exhausted. On the third try, I managed to get Harley's front paws on the edge of the dinghy which then allowed me to push the rest of her into the little boat. Getting out of the water was not going to be as easy for me. My arms and shoulders were aching, I was body tired and I knew if I didn't get myself out soon, I would have to let go.

I inched my way towards the back of the houseboat but could not climb onto the platform. The current was too strong and kept pulling me away. Just clinging to the platform was hard enough. There was a ladder but it was locked upright and I couldn't

reach it. Looking over to the far side of the second houseboat, three dinghies away, there was a metal structure reaching into the water. All I had to do was, get over there.

Telling Harley to “Stay” and hoping she would obey I let go of the platform and launched myself toward the first dinghy grabbing it before the current ripped me away. I then inched my way around this one and launched myself towards the next. I did make it and thankfully Harley stayed on the bow of the first dinghy watching.

The most physically difficult thing I have ever done, in my 62 years, was climb out of that water. I truly did not know if I was going to be able to hang on, lift my legs high enough and then actually climb to the platform. I did though, collapsing when I got there.

We must have slept because I didn't notice that the weather had closed in and I started to fear we may be spending the night and the coming storm on this boat. Looking across to the bank I saw a group of people gathering at the water's edge, some had even settled into deckchairs so I knew something was going to happen. Using their tender the owners of the houseboats dropped us off in our flooded yard, promising to attempt a rescue of my canoe. Andrew thinks it may be stuck under the hull and will surface when the water subsides.

Later, I looked up, Near-Death Experiences. There's a lot about angels, out of body floating, white lights and long lost family reunions but I think our experience was not anything about that.

I kissed Harlequin Goodbye, was it about heartache and loss?

I was trapped and couldn't do anything to save her, was it about hopelessness?

When I was under there in the dark I nearly gave up, was it about futility?

I was and still am very sad because I let go of Harley, I don't think I will ever get over that but it wasn't about that either.

We survived. Our unique bond has become stronger. It was about us and our remarkable resilience.

Here I Go Again

Barbara Stacey

Cronulla

My dad was a cripple – not that I ever noticed. Cripple: not a word that's fashionable today. Why do they change words all the time? Okay, nowadays 'disabled' seems the right word. We've been through, spastic, crippled or handicapped and now it's disabled. But whatever the word, he had a withered leg jauntily sticking out from his boxer shorts.

According to his sister, he was not expected to ever walk as a toddler, but a nurse noticed his toe was moving and so the diagnosing doctor was proved wrong. He also had a hole in his back big enough to insert a fist. "A bullet hole from the war," he'd say, and I believed him. Of course he didn't go to war but I didn't understand why then. That hole came from being in an iron lung sometime in his childhood and having his lung drained from pneumonia. I had no idea he was in any way incapacitated. He ran, well hopped and limped around the place, played cricket with the local church team and mowed the lawn with a push mower. He climbed ladders, (falling quite often, resulting in broken arms) and planted flowers and vegetables. The beach was not his favourite spot, the sand making walking difficult, however he loved cricket and batted left handed and bowled right handed or vice versa.

When he suffered a stroke in his late seventies, a well-meaning therapist had a built-up shoe made for him which was never successful. Now I wonder why he didn't just throw it away! It didn't help at all and just put strain on his hip which had coped with the situation for nearly 80 years.

His other leg was a perfect leg and my sister managed to get two of those. She has lovely legs whereas I ended up with Mum's legs which were bandy. Ah well, not to worry. They reached the ground, which when you come to think of it, is an excellent plan for legs.

Dad drove a manual car, so he lifted his withered leg with his hand and put it on the clutch to change gears. He never had an accident and always drove on main roads since back roads were too much trouble. I think the present generation has no idea of how horrible polio was and how many people's lives were affected by it.

A good friend of mine asked me to mind her cat, Alice B. Toklas, when she moved into a flat which banned pets.

"Fine," I said, and Alice moved in with my dogs, a cat and a few bantams.

Alice had three legs and had been in a car accident. "What a bad driver she must have been?" I used to joke. She waltzed along, one, two, three, one, two, three. Once a friend of my son's laughed at her gait. The kids were sitting on the floor playing Dungeons and Dragons. She promptly bit him and it's become a good story still told now that the 'bitee' has children of his own.

Alice loved sitting on a table in the sun in front of the shed. I never saw how she got there but I knew she always forgot she had three legs and jumped off when it was time to find another patch of sun or come in for dinner. Quite often Dad would see her stand up to stretch before leaping off so he'd go hopping through the house to try and help her down. He'd be yelling, "Don't jump Alice!" A futile cry. He was never in time and Alice would land, SPLAT! Shake herself and waltz off.

I can't understand how I seem to attract animals with three legs or damaged legs. It's a mystery. There was a tortoise, with one leg missing in action. He had been wrapped in newspaper and thrown over the fence by my Italian neighbours. He moved happily into the little pond where he enjoyed eating Cabanossi. They told me they'd found him on the road.

Almost, but not, road kill.

A magpie with a sort of club foot used to visit. We called her Maggie Google since that was the sort of noise she made. She would come into the house and check where I was, her little head craning around corners till she found me. Usually I was lying in the bath. "Google, google" she'd call 'til I found a towel and emerged. Maggie Google could catch tidbits on the full. I suspect she was a cricketer in a previous life. One day she came no more and I worried she'd fallen in a storm, her having to hang on with only one foot, but it seemed she'd found a more sheltered spot about six blocks away and I hear now she has a partner and a family of her own.

Mice? Yes there were mice and of course one baby born with three legs. You guessed it didn't you?

What to do?

Oh the dilemma. One part of me wanted to flush it down the loo on a teaspoon but friends prevailed thankfully, because that morsel of a mouse grew up and learned to spin her exercise wheel at full speed. Of course she was named Alice. It seemed fitting. One back leg was missing and the remaining leg simply moved into the middle of her tiny body and became strong. She had a handsome, creamy coloured husband called Eddy, who loved train rides so he'd sit on the station of the plastic train set and wait for the train.

Alice and Eddy had ten babies which they carefully tended. They separated them into two bunches and while Alice fed one bunch Eddy sat with the other. Then they swapped. How about that? Neat. Mathematical too.

I was sitting peacefully near a pond in the gardens the other day and up came a duck with a limp.

Oh no, here I go again.

How Do You Tell Someone They are Amazing?

Susan Brown

Revesby

I sat opposite my friend of 50 years and saw a few tears unwittingly dribble down her cheek. I had never seen her cry in fifty years. She wiped her face and apologised. Unnecessarily. And I never saw another tear.

But, if I had been a fly on the wall, after I left, I'm sure I would have seen her sob her heart out. From the pain, from the uncertainty, from the fear, from the loneliness. She wasn't going to share that with me, she didn't want to upset me, she was going to keep pretending that everything was okay. But I knew.

I have told her often that if she is feeling low or depressed or in pain, I was only a phone call away. That she could talk to me about anything, at any time. But in all the time that I have known her, I have never received a phone call like that.

Over the years, I have seen her travel through very difficult times, more than any one person should ever have had to deal with. But she continually found joy in the most arduous of situations and battled on against all odds. She always bounced back, though sometimes more easily than others. She has an inner strength that I admire greatly.

She talks about the wonderful members of her family who have given her remarkable emotional support. She doesn't talk about the mother who abandoned her as a child. She talks about the others who brought her up with love and compassion. Her father, her grandmother, her aunts, her uncles. People for whom she has developed an overwhelming love. And she still pines for them today, long after they are gone. Her heart still breaks when she thinks of them.

She doesn't talk about her failed marriages. She talks about the children who resulted from them. The children who she brought up almost single-handedly and with a rugged determination.

The children who have grown into amazing adults. The children who have provided her with support and love over the years. The children and grandchildren who surround her now, but who she holds at a distance, because she doesn't want to be a burden to them.

She doesn't talk about her medical problems. Not the major problems that commenced as a small child. Not the related mobility issues that have plagued her ever since. Not the many hospital stays throughout her entire life. Not the life-threatening illnesses that she has come through. She has borne all these with an astounding attitude and an outward smile on her face. But, how do we know what she feels inside? We didn't then, and we don't now.

Her complex medical issues have taken their toll. She is all but housebound now and that is difficult for her. She is often too ill to have visitors. We make plans, but they are sometimes cancelled because she is so unwell or in pain. And that is distressing for both parties. Her telephone is her life line. And that is very busy. She has many lifelong friends and she talks to them often. And you have to ask yourself, how does someone have so many long standing friendships? The answer is simple. It's that old saying, "to have a friend, you have to be a friend". She is a very good friend. She cares about people. And she is interested in them. She worries about them and doesn't want them to worry about her.

She is very compassionate. She worries about other people. Not just friends going through tough times. People she doesn't even know. People in news stories. Bushfire victims, domestic violence victims. And she becomes very passionate about it all. She is emotional thinking of them. But you don't see that emotion when she thinks about herself. She is always telling me that there are many people worse off than her.

Visiting her is always pleasurable. I know that I brighten up her day, but she also brightens mine. We reminisce about old times. We remember our shared experiences and laugh at our crazy adventures. We touch on her problems, but they are never the centre of our attention. And she is almost embarrassed to talk about them. But there is always a sadness to her that lies hidden beneath the surface.

How do I tell her that she is amazing?

I have tried to tell her this, many times. But she doesn't like it. She rejects it, she is embarrassed, she won't accept that she is special. She thinks that she is very ordinary. But I know that she is extraordinary. I am lucky to have such a strong, joyous person in my life. I am lucky to have her as my friend. I wish that I had her strength, her joy, her capacity for endurance, her resilience. There have been times when life has not treated me well, when I have been in the depths of despair. She is my role model then. My problems always seem insignificant in comparison to hers. Her strength and friendship has encouraged me to get through these troublesome times.

Her dreams are slipping away. Things that she has always wanted to do are becoming beyond her reach. And that is sad. But she has no regrets, she has lived a very full and happy life. She is content with her lot. When I chat with her, she is always laughing, showing pleasure in the smallest of things. If you were to ask her about her life, her response would be very positive. She would tell you that she has lived a wonderful life. And she has, because she has made it wonderful, no matter what has been thrown at her.

My friend, you are amazing!

How I Saved a Hospital

Rob Clifton-Steele

Chatswood

When travelling west to the bush, I like to drive at night. The roos and wombats have generally finished their sunset kamikazes across the highway, the western sun in the eyes is not a problem and the cool air through the open window keeps me alert.

I was driving the 1,200 kilometres in 1999, to an Aboriginal community near Broken Hill and had arranged to meet Ray, my project partner, there. I was always reliable for appointments and so when I didn't turn up by mid-morning he rang my wife. She told him that I had left on time and certainly should have arrived by then. Perhaps he's stopped for a sleep, she suggested.

Ray waited until that night to call the police, who told him that there had been no accidents reported, but said that they would look out for me.

In our work, Ray and I had been through some interesting trials together and were not easily fazed. He had once stopped breathing in Alice Springs. I had lost three teeth in a botched extraction by a bush nurse. But when travelling we had never fallen off the radar, so, by the end of the second day, he was becoming concerned.

Two days before, I left Sydney and drove for about 600 kilometres. At midnight, I stopped at a roadhouse for a meal, then set off for Broken Hill. About 30 minutes down the road, I was hit by excruciating pain in the stomach, violent biliousness and irresistible diarrhoea. I got out of the car just in time and, relieved, momentarily felt okay. I assumed that I had food poisoning. I drove for a further 10 minutes before the same pain, biliousness and diarrhoea hit me again. Again, I made it out of the car. I drove and stopped like this for some time, in excruciating pain and worried that I was going to die.

On the outskirts of Cobar, I saw the large 'H' sign denoting a hospital. I headed for it, parked in the dusty car park and, leaving my car unlocked, staggered to the front door and collapsed in the foyer.

I woke up three days later to be told that I'd had a kidney stone. Finding me collapsed in the foyer, the doctor and a nurse carried me into the one communal ward, apparently brought me around and, having worked out what was wrong, knocked me out again.

During the three days that I was missing incommunicado, Ray had mounted a search and had finally tracked me down to the Cobar Hospital. My wife is not known for, shall we say, spending money unnecessarily, something Ray learnt about her when he told her that he had found me. He expected her to catch the first plane to Cobar, but she casually enquired if there was a train station nearby.

The head, and only doctor, Charlie, was overjoyed at my arrival and we since have become firm friends. But it was not my sparkling conversation that made him happy. His hospital was in danger of being closed down because of a lack of patients. The department had been analysing the number of patients and had required an average of 12 beds occupied over three months to make the place viable.

My three-day stay pushed them over that threshold.

He hasn't yet admitted it, but I'm firmly convinced that Charlie knocked me out for three days to inflate his average and keep the hospital alive.



How Mighty the Turtle

Wendy Saini

Goonellabah

So there we were at Bundaberg finally, despite torrential flooding rains in our home, the Northern Rivers. Robyn, my friend and I had been planning our turtle adventure for two years. And here we were on this beach at midnight, seven hours north of where we lived, a lantern lighting our way to the hatching site, rather like the star leading the shepherds to the birth of Jesus Christ.

Total silence enveloped the group as we gathered around. The researchers timed our arrival at the birthing site well. Tiny loggerhead turtles erupted one by one through the sand from way down in the depths, their little flippers working furiously to escape their birthing place. Like fledgling prehistoric dinosaurs they sprouted forth, each one only an inch and a bit, after waiting in their eggs for two months. Rather like a high rise building but underground, the ground floor baby residents have to fight harder to reach the surface. Some don't even make it. The research workers when present, helped those too exhausted to crack the surface by digging around gently with their fingers. Incredibly only one in 1,000 turtles survive to maturity.

I noticed one late turtle was moving around in circles, not sure which direction to choose. "He's my special needs turtle!" I thought, after teaching special needs children for many years. The researcher picked him up and plonked him in the middle of the others and they somehow mostly knew the direction to the ocean. The undulating craters and peaks of the sand gave the turtles no let up as they battled their way slowly down to the sea. Those of us with torches created a tunnel of light by parting our legs and aiding the turtles to find their way. One baby turtle sat on my foot for a while, possibly to have a well-earned rest. The incredible procession of tiny creatures eventually completed the arduous sand trip and then floated with the tide being washed

backwards and forwards until they were in deep enough water to swim freely.

Tears welled up inside me, feeling so grateful to have witnessed one of nature's incredible feats. Robyn felt the same way. The ocean suddenly shimmered and sparkled as the half moon revealed itself from behind night clouds. I like to think that it was shining a path for the turtles to help them on their journey.

Then, another miracle!

Our group leader received a call telling her a mum turtle was laying eggs up on the north end of the beach. After a good walk we came across a big loggerhead turtle busily covering her eggs with her front and back flippers. Upon finishing she slowly turned 180 degrees and then she was off, dragging herself down to the water's edge. From her slow exhausting movements she soon became a dancer floating away with the tide, her body weightless and swimming effortlessly. As she swam away another turtle like a black rock in the night, came out of the water, for it was her turn to find a place to lay her eggs. The incredible circle of life!

I was so enthralled. I took this story of the turtles back to my school where I counsel some children with anxiety. I shared my experience of the resilience of these little turtles with the whole assembly and later with one particular boy who experiences panic attacks. I gently revealed to him that these turtles have no mums and dads or anyone to care for them when they hatch, unlike himself, that they are on their own and they bravely find their way down to the ocean, and swim miles to South America. There are many obstacles on their way, challenges and changes, yet they keep going. He was quiet and finally I asked him, "Would you like to have a little ceramic turtle to remind you to be brave and strong and try new things?"

At first he declined and walked away. There was silence. I felt a presence. He was back. "How can I help you?"

"I think I will have that turtle after all." He held it tightly in his hand as he walked away.

Epilogue:

There are many miracles in nature such as this story demonstrates. With decline in turtle numbers and other species, we all need to be proactive in assisting our environment to heal, for us and our children and grandchildren and all the species on this unique planet. Nature on its own can only do so much. The numbers of turtles for example, are decreasing due to increasing manmade pollution, reduced food, being hunted and caught up in trawler nets etc.

The turtles and we, are all part of this fragile ecosystem, and sadly, the environment is not a priority for governments including ours. This year has seen incredible disasters on mass, droughts, bushfires and flooding rains and still there is no definite action. We can't rely on governments. Every person can make a difference and be a force to make positive changes, so that future generations can experience the wonder and beauty of nature, like I just did on this extraordinary night.

One can only hope and pray.

I Am Geranium

Catherine Philps

Thirroul

Resilience! Did I hear somebody mention resilience? I can tell you all about resilience. I am a street garden geranium. My garden is a verge garden, close to the railway station which is a hub station for my area. I'm also close to an oval where many football games are played. That means many cars park near me on every week day and on many weekends.

I am rather beautiful, even if I do say so myself. My vibrant green leaves are feather soft to touch, although you need to make sure that my little hairs are all aligned if you fondle me. My leaves are pretty tough though. If you try tearing one of them, you'll have to pull really hard. As for my petals, they are a deep crimson and silky to touch. They are much more fragile than my leaves but if your fingers violate them, I will leave a nasty red stain on them, blood red to remind you of your crime. My trunk is strong and sometimes gnarled because I have lived to a ripe old age, but the green stems which support my leaves and flowers are liable to crushing and breaking.

How come you think you're so resilient I hear you ask? Well, just think a moment. I did say that I was a street garden geranium and believe me, I've seen it all. There are lots of dogs, rough rampaging things that they are, but there is one dog in particular, a little rough-haired mongrel, who comes snuffling along regularly. He just loves to run amok through my garden bed. He's a middle-aged dog and you'd think that he'd know better. I won't even mention his owner. This dog is a bit heavy footed and has been known to break off some of my leaves and even my beautiful flowers but that's not the worst. When he pauses and sniffs consideringly, I shrink into myself and wonder, is he going to lift his leg or is he going to squat? If he lifts his leg my roots get little vibrations all through them because, although there is good nutritional value there, without dilution

that drink is just too strong. I wonder sometimes if I don't get a little drunk. If he squats, well, I can only hope he doesn't totally cover me with it. I usually pray for rain. His owner is useless. She seems to think that because her dog is squatting or lifting its leg it doesn't matter because it is in a garden. Who is going to educate this woman?

What about the cats I hear you say?

Actually, I don't really mind the cats. They tread more softly through the garden and if they are going to do their business, they are choosier, looking for a bare spot and then scratching it up. So long as they don't do it too close to my roots, they actually aerate the soil which is helpful for all of us.

Then there's the cars. Just because I'm planted in a street garden the drivers of these cars seem to think that they can park their monsters right on top of me. When I smell that hot rubbery smell, I get really frightened. I've been so close to extinction a number of times. I lost my best friend, the Federation Daisy, only the other day. Now she was a tough old bird but she couldn't survive an SUV parked right on top of her. Even some of my other mates, the succulents, have had all their juice squeezed out of them. I myself have lost a limb and I felt right poorly for a while.

Fortunately, our garden beds have some lovely ladies who come along about once a month to help us all along. They cut off broken branches, tidy us up, replant pieces that have been broken off and get rid of those pests, the weeds. Yes, I know the weeds are plants too but they are so selfish. They take all our food and drink whenever they can. I have to admit that, although I say I'm resilient, I don't think any of us would survive in the long run if it wasn't for those ladies. I think they are called volunteers. They do a pretty good job. They are the good humans.

Now, where was I? Oh yes, humans. The girls and boys, men and women, who come to the oval to watch or play sport or to attend events. There are always plenty of garbage bins around, but after a busy weekend you would never know it. My garden is full of bottles, lolly paper wrappers, cigarettes, straws and even, on one memorable occasion, a baby's nappy. Many thanks to the kind person who later disposed of that for us. Humans have legs, we haven't. Why can't they walk a few metres to throw their rubbish in the garbage bin? As my friend the Kangaroo Paw said, I bet they wouldn't do that at home.

Then, my worst nightmare. I'm not alone here, all of us in the garden would agree. It's the louts who get off the train later at night after they have been out having a great time somewhere else. Usually drunk, they go skylarking around, trampling on us, pushing their mates onto us and then, the final insult, being sick all over us.

Somehow, we survive, we are resilient.

Our volunteers keep us going as do the comments of the good humans passing by who admire us. Comments such as: doesn't the rosemary bush look good today, how lovely is that bottlebrush, my, the kangaroo paws are doing well, just look at the lovely colour of that geranium.

How I love to hear that last remark. I think to myself: I am beautiful, I am strong, I am resilient.

I was an MK

Beth Robertson

Davidson

I was born in 1949, first child of a loving evangelistic partnership, so I was a missionary's kid, dotingly depicted in church circles as an 'MK'. Although this designation ensured a heroic status with the Aboriginal people and church adherents, in general society it was an unknown alias. Yet unfamiliar to me, we were of the most isolated minority social order with little community status nor support, a self-inflicted cocooned detachment from secular society. It was commanded that the only decision for me was heaven or hell, reflecting a black [for sin], or white [for purity] choice of being a Christian or a 'heathen'.

Our happy family relocated frequently to 'mission houses' in remote country locations, the Aboriginal kids being our nominated playmates, teaching us to eat witchetty grubs, gather butterfly cocoons and trace animal tracks. But it was mandatory that white buddies were to be Christian, and all social activities were linked with the church, as Big Brother was watching.

This bread and dripping and cocooned upbringing, was lovingly based on fundamentalist Biblical teaching with Sunday sacred, as were our bodies, so makeup was forbidden. Movie or television stars or heathen idols such as Elvis and the Beatles were perceived as sinful. So, alcohol, dancing and gambling, including raffles, were evil as was Santa, the Tooth Fairy and the Easter Bunny. And 'sex' was not a polite word. Our lives were to be a witness of moral perfection to the adherents of the churches my parents led.

I had no idea we were atypical or on the poverty line, my parents having no set salary as financial support was derived spasmodically from the obligatory tithes of city church members. Cash arrived in the mail, so meals were planned on what the postie delivered that day.

Our clothes and household goods were eagerly dragged out from 'mission boxes' which were donations again from the well-meaning network of church Christians. We owned no unnecessary 'worldly' commodities as the amassing of material possessions was unsound Biblically and not coveted. But in my parents' view, God would always provide, albeit with little effort from us. Prayers were answered when our cars were again provided by financial devotees carrying out 'God's will'.

We travelled extensively visiting Aboriginal settlements and often willingly slept under the stars, praying that God would supply food and fuel for the trip. Much of the journeying was to host deputation meetings at city churches to attract finances. During these services, some on street corners, we as children would be employed to speak or sing which cultivated a fallacious and unnatural feeling of prestige and high status.

As we often changed schools, education was spasmodic, but as MKs we were divinely destined to be teachers or nurses, so that we could minister dutifully on the mission field. However, as my schooling concluded, I became aware of my handicapped social status and with amazement, was awarded a Teachers' College scholarship. So, when I moved to the city I thought through a possible grapple with the restrictive cocoon of my youth. However, I was set back temporarily by being closeted in a Christian girls' hostel during my study years, which further encased me in that sanctuary of surveillance by Big Brother.

Then, as I launched my teaching career, I confronted anew that entrenched social disadvantage stemming from the religious inculcation which was grounded on fear and guilt. It was in this phase that I secreted strategies, albeit uncertain, to remodel my persona. So, although I still believed my sins 'would find me

out' and I was conceivably 'backsliding', I began my cautious way forward by wearing makeup and miniskirts, teasing my hair, and even using lemon juice to encourage blonde streaks. I rehabilitated my internal locus of control by going with non-Christian friends to movies and even appreciated Elvis' tantalising moves and the Beatles' music. However, some days there was not a song in my heart, but I sang anyway as I knew a whole network of Christians were praying I'd return to the fold.

Just as I was emerging from that pupa stage, I met a handsome young man and fell in love. He knew my secrets and which buttons to push. Unidentified at the time, our relationship was the catalyst and my passport to a new sense of meaningfulness with an unfamiliar, but fresh, open and positive identity.

When we revealed our engagement to my family, he was eagerly received as he was a church elder and from a Christian family. However, after our alcohol-free wedding, we found it profoundly healing by cautiously withdrawing from those childhood church armed forces and so we enthusiastically planned a future, paradoxically based on Christian values. It was not an easy metamorphose, but it unexpectedly felt like everything now made sense.

Hence, because of that serendipitous event, I discarded my MK designation even though it would have been uncomplicated to go with the flow. When my parents died, although I was still to them proudly an MK, I was no longer living the submissive pupal existence they faithfully yearned for me. As the intimidating church leaders gathered around each parent's death bed to pray and rejoice at their transition into glory, I was not uncomfortable, but miraculously was fortified with those credentials that had enriched and strengthened my resolve to metamorphose.

One day soon after my much-loved Dad died, I was walking in a congested subway in the city when I had an out-of-body experience and saw my father's loving eyes acknowledging me from the other side of the surging and oncoming crowd. Although this undoubtedly was an implausible and imagined spiritual episode, it was then I found the well sought-after closure by conceding my Dad had unexpectedly and unequivocally supported my transformation. Those eyes celebrated my aspirations and my emergence from a lowly meek and ragged MK chrysalis to an unexceptional, and uninhibited butterfly. My self-fashioned flight had been all-embracing, and I soared.

I'm Here and I Care

Mavis Gunter

Lake Munmorah

I huddle in the corner of the back porch in the shop. The light is on in the shop but I prefer the darkened corner. I don't want to be in extreme darkness. This not my usual place to sleep and I'm so afraid to be in the dark all alone. I'm tired and hungry with no money and no place to go. I did have a few dollars but where I slept in the park last night someone stole all I possessed. I won't sleep tonight I'll sit here and watch, maybe I can sleep in the park tomorrow when it is daylight.

Everyone looks at me, they don't see me, which I don't mind. My clothes are still clean and respectable but I've lost my handbag and blanket. I don't know where to go to get another. My life so far on the street has been a fearful experience. I've never known this life before. I had a good job as a waitress, it was only part time, but it paid for the rent of a small room in the inner city, it wasn't much but I didn't mind. I've been divorced now for almost a year and the bastard took me for everything I owned. He even took my cat, my only friend and left me almost destitute.

I've been ill now for a month and lost my job. The landlord didn't waste time in throwing me out onto the street. I tried everyone I know to give me a night's rest but they all have their own one room apartment and don't have room for me. I said I didn't mind sleeping on the floor and surfing with other friends but it was useless, they had dumped me like a hot potato. Nowhere to go and no friend or relation.

I'll have to find something to eat soon and I'm cold. I don't know what to do. I need someone to take me in their arms and tell me not to worry everything will be alright. I know that won't happen. The cement is cold where I'm sitting and I have protection from the garbage bins, if I don't mind the smell. That is hard to take after being used to a warm clean room. I'm

afraid to leave this semi-dark area. I've always been afraid of the dark. Please someone help me and tell me what to do. I've always been a confident person not needing to rely on anyone. I've never asked for help before. Where is my Good Samaritan? A shadow approaches me as I cower in the corner, an ancient looking figure bends over me.

"You're new here aren't you love?"

He caressed my cheek gently, like stroking a timid kitten. His long hard finger nails lightly touching my skin as he shuffled further into the corner. I felt intimidated as he came forward, "Come with me Love, I can take care of you. You can't stay alone here without even a blanket to keep you warm."

Although he sounded kind I had never encountered anyone like him and feared his intentions.

"No, thank you." I cringed away from his touch.

There was no way from my position as he loomed above me blocking any escape to freedom.

"Please go away." My voice trembled and I felt tears for the first time since my divorce. I could smell alcohol on his breath as he leaned forward almost touching my face with his beard. Then he shuffled away talking to himself.

I can't stay here I must find another hiding place. As I sat staring into a blank future a Salvation Army woman walked towards me.

"I haven't seen you here before. Have you had anything to eat yet?"

I didn't answer I was so ashamed for her to find me like this.

"Are you hungry?"

I almost fell at her feet in gratitude.

"Thank God you have come, I prayed for a miracle."

"Well dear I don't know if I'm a miracle but I can take you to a canteen for a warm meal and hopefully a bed for the night."

By the kindness from that lady was how I was able to go to University and study philosophy and the humanities. I work at my profession during the day and travel the streets at night delivering food and comfort to my people, the homeless and needy.

I hear so many sad stories from my people, how, as sickness and misfortune they have been driven to the loveless life of the street.

Old Charlie is still here. He's very gentle and means no harm. He has been here sleeping rough for 20 years and has grown to prefer his outdoor life to the confines of a room. He knows every regular and helps them find shelter. He has become the helper-grandfather to visitors to his streets and lets the Sallys know of any new comers.

Invictus Convictus

Michael Hetherington

Marsfield

There were 99 of them. What must have they been thinking as they were herded, unceremoniously, into the hold of the *Speke*? They knew that their lives would never be the same again and some, no doubt, would have feared the very worst.

They were all female convicts sentenced to transportation to Botany Bay for differing numbers of years. But, in truth, their sentences would probably be for life. What they also did not know was that they were being transported not just for their crimes but, hopefully, to become the prospective wives of male convicts. This was in order to build a new, productive and stable colony in New South Wales for the glory of god and King George!

This was to be the fate of my wife's three times great-grandmother, Isabella Clarkson, who was no angel, it must be said. She and her boyfriend had been living in the attic of a pub, aptly named The Hole in the Wall, in Holburn, London from where, as opportunities presented themselves, she stole – much like Dickens' Artful Dodger. Isabella had been apprehended in The Hole in the Wall with stolen silver and linen in her possession and during her trial at the Old Bailey in September 1807, the evidence of her guilt was overwhelming. She called no witnesses for her defence and it seems as if she was resigned to accept whatever punishment the court may impose. In any event, at the age of just 18-years-old she was sentenced to transportation for seven years.

For the next eight months she would be imprisoned in the appalling and overcrowded gaols or hulks moored in fetid flats, typical in England then. By the time she and her 'shipmates' had been assembled in Falmouth the prospect of the six-month voyage might even have seemed a welcome respite. This, despite her having to endure long periods below decks, primitive and public sanitary conditions, meagre rations and close confinement with a hundred other women. But she would experience these conditions soon enough, as well as the ever-present trials of seasickness, scurvy and other illnesses. And for certain women there were always the sailors, of course. A comely woman, pleasing to the eye, could make the voyage much more bearable if she had a mind to. These were desperate times and many of the *Speke's* 'passengers' had been, and still were, desperate women.

Having set sail from Falmouth on 18 May 1808, The *Speke* arrived in Sydney Cove on 23 September 1808 with only two of her convict cargo having died during the voyage. The immediate fate of the survivors would normally have been a short journey up the Parramatta River to work in the female factory but a fire had destroyed, it so the convicts were assigned to individual masters to work in whatever way was demanded of them. Isabella Clarkson, through luck or possibly through her looks, demeanour and pleasing manner, found herself as a servant in Government House.

What follows is the story of Isabella Clarkson's fight for survival in those formative years of the New South Wales colony.

Her advantage was that she was, clearly, attractive to men and in the absence of an education or skills she would also need the protection of men. Not surprisingly, therefore, it took just months before Isabella had formed a relationship with a recently pardoned convict. A pregnancy, the death of the new born and the end of the relationship followed in quick succession. So, too, did the start of a new liaison, this time with a member of the NSW Corps – effectively her jailer – and Isabella became pregnant again. But, following the reassignment of the father where he re-joined his wife and family in Tasmania, Isabella and their unborn child were abandoned to whatever fate had in store for them.

As a matter of pure necessity, Isabella found another ex-convict and married him. The child she had been carrying was born but died within a year but she did bear two daughters from this, her first, marriage until, in 1814, her husband died. So, in the space of five years, Isabella had born four children from three different fathers – not all products of a loving relationship – and buried two of them as well as her first husband. She was then 25-years-old. A lesser woman might have been inclined to give up, but not Isabella.

In April 1815, HMS *Indefatigable* arrived in Sydney carrying 200 male convicts. Included was Thomas Saunderson who had been transported for life following his conviction for horse stealing. But rather than a life in shackles, Thomas had sufficient freedom to meet Isabella and to marry her in August 1815. The marriage celebrant was none other than Samuel Marsden. Over the course of 11 years, seven children were born and Isabella had achieved the stability that comes with a successful marriage. It was not to last. Thomas Saunderson died in 1838 leaving Isabella, aged 50, destitute.

Isabella's challenge was to provide for the youngest of her children at a time when government assistance was simply non-existent. She played to her strengths and in 1842 she started looking after the five children of recently widowed man named John Luke. Even though she was 22-years older than him, the two decided to formalise the arrangement by getting married the following year. Isabella was nothing if not a fast worker and with a fierce desire to share her life with someone who she believed could support her. They lived together for the next 25 years, both dying within a year of each other, Isabella at the remarkable age of 88.

My wife can be counted as one of hundreds of descendants of that resourceful and resilient lady. Despite her failings, and there were many, she not only survived but, in her way, she thrived. I, for one, am grateful that she did.

It's Called Resilience – This is Olive's Story

Lance Bowden

Mudgee

The circumstances now surrounding him are foreign and very confronting.

He sobs openly, his hands cradling his head as it moves deliberately left than right in disbelief. Raising his head, tears rush down his cheeks while the clear mucus from his nostrils hangs from his quivering top lip.

"Why? Why Olive?"

Olive, his wife of 34 years appears to have lost her hearing and while he has been aware of this for several months, has been hoping against all hope that the situation is only temporary. Today however, the prognosis has defeated him.

Olive's journey to discovering the probable cause for her hearing loss ends in a cul-de-sac of opinions from doctors and hearing specialists including several renowned hearing specialists from the United States of America, attending Westmead Hospital at the time Olive was being assessed. All opinions are inconclusive.

What is conclusive is that Olive had lost 95% hearing in her left ear and 85% hearing in her right ear.

Two months prior, in August 1985, Olive (age 54 years) having woken after a restful night's sleep, experiences a loss of balance and feels nauseated. With her left ear 'blocked' and along with the other symptoms still presenting, a trip to the doctor's surgery proves inconclusive, but a 'viral infection may be responsible for her feeling unwell'.

Six weeks later and waking from a good night's sleep, Olive sees her husband mouthing the words "good morning" and lets him know that she doesn't feel his humour is appropriate. He is taken aback. They are both taken aback! Olive's hearing in her right ear is also not responding.

Olive's speech is immediately compromised; unable to hear her own voice she speaks more loudly than normal, and her speech patterns have become slower and more pronounced.

"IT'S, OKAY, WARREN, WE, HAVE, A, GREAT, FAMILY. I'...M, SURE, I'...LL, BE, OKAY. I'...M, STILL, HERE!

So, how does someone cope day to day with the disconnect between movement and sound; the voices of family members and life partner, everyday background noises in life, sounds in nature, and general communications from radio, television, emergency vehicles, telephone and alarm clock?

Olive experiences the highs and lows of choices offered to her as solutions to amplify her hearing and is grateful for the minuscule improvement to her hearing however, Olive's upbringing as a country woman has given her the 'get up, dust yourself off and get on with it' approach to life that is engrained in her psyche. Always positive, she is grateful for the steady improvements to her balance, reduced nausea and the fact that she has already 54 years of great hearing and has an excellent 'library' of sounds that she could call upon.

As a result, she navigates her life through simple signing and being an excellent lip reader (catching out her unsuspecting children and grandchildren). Olive stays true to herself, continuing to live her life as if her hearing loss is no more than a mere blip on her life's journey; waking each morning to a vibrating alarm clock tucked under her pillow; carrying a small note book and pen when shopping to assist in her communications with frustrated listeners; encouraging family and friends to speak directly to her face 'and a little slower' to ensure that she is included in conversations; television viewing no longer needs sound but the screen always displays subtitles.

Always visible, Olive participates at Rotary meetings, functions, outings, fund raising, as well as visiting neighbours and helping family; volunteering her time to the office of the Federal Member of Mitchell; supporting her husband in his business endeavours. She was always dependable, tenacious, hardworking, supportive and a loyal friend.

Not once does Olive display negativity towards her circumstances choosing instead to serve as an example to her family and others that everything is possible. The independence which her car driving has always given her doesn't diminish, it is just done with more visual circumspect.

In 2001, after tedious testing Olive secures a place in Professor Clark's Cochlear implant programme and in time undergoes the operation to implant her very own cochlear.

It's 2003 and the small consulting room feels cramped and the air palpable as seven family members sit motionless along one side and one end of the small rectangular desk, their eyes fixed upon the audiologist.

The absence of conversation is broken as the audiologist looks up from her computer and focusses her attention on the person directly in front of her; Olive, her patient, who together have travelled the same road for the past three years, although this journey for Olive has taken 18 years.

"Olive, are you, ready?" asked the calmly spoken audiologist with very deliberately formed words that Olive clearly understands.

Nodding her readiness, Olive looks towards her husband, three of their children and two of their teenaged grandchildren with her smile of confident reassurance. Our emotions are straining within our very beings; our eyes welling with tears, while muscles around our faces try to return the smile with the same reassurance.

Without warning, other than a subtle nod from the audiologist, the word "Olive" is spoken, where upon Olive turns suddenly left to her husband as her face with the look of genuine surprise, breaks into the biggest, broadest smile; a smile reaching from ear to ear, the smile telegraphing to all of us that she has heard the voice of her husband once again. Tears aplenty, throat muscles choking back this reality, smiles all around, excited comments between siblings, grandchildren, Olive and Warren. Even the audiologist is moved to tears.

Then, in a moment of relative calm Olive says, "I heard that!"

Tears of joy along with excited yet grateful hugs are the currency for everyone in the consulting room. It's October 2003 and Olive's cochlear implant has been successfully turned on and the hearing to her left ear restored!

Olive, our mother, a woman of enormous courage and personal belief.

Joan Cassidy

Ross Moule

Forster

McKinley Springs sat on a rise, a treeless hump on otherwise monotonously flat country.

It was surrounded by a sea of stunted low Mulga scrub suffocating under a mantle of fine grey dust. The town from a distance appeared to be deserted. To the east lay a dry lake bed dotted with abandoned wells marking where bore drains and channels once brimmed with water. Soldier Settlers dried the lake and exhausted the springs trying to farm country not suited to the plough. It took six years for their dreams to be blown away. Only the unreliable memory of the old and the desperate imagination of the young could recount anything of the towns buoyant past. But incredibly, amid this desolation there was a small band of die-hard locals doggedly surviving and unwilling to relinquish what belonged to them. In the centre of town on Bourke Street stood the Mechanics Institute Hall the one focal point for what was left of their civic pride.

"There she is," shouted Stan Dobson, the local Ag Officer, looking out from the awning on Edith Spencers shop. "She's rounding Jarrod's Bore, ten miles out." Joan always entered the town from the west but according to her itinerary it should be from the south. Joan never explained and besides everyone but her employer knew that she detoured via the Fiddle Creek Aboriginal Settlement. She had been running secret library sessions there for some years.

Away to the west a pall of dust could be seen rising steeply into the air behind the old Albion truck Mobile Library unit No 3. It trundled along the sandy track bouncing and rocking, swaying, swerving this way and that steering between and around the reefs of Mulga roots lying in wait to bust axles or shred tyres. The truck affectionately known as the

'old brute' was unsighted as it began to struggle up the rise. Then to the cheer of the crowd it appeared rumbling onto Bourke Street in a cloud of dust steam spurting from a gaping hole in the radiator. The truck shook and shuddered to a lumbering stop in front of the hall. The crowd hushed waiting for the cloud dust to clear and Joan to appear.

"Hello," she shouted like a side-show spruiker waving her dilapidated straw hat above her head. "So good to see you got lots of new books. Ladies, there's English Women's Own, the latest edition. And for you station blokes the latest catalogues from Hoffnung, Lasseter and McLean Brothers. But there's a lot more than that let me tell you. A dozen new novels but listen to this, the Magic Lantern is no more and thank goodness for that. I have with me a film projector with sound mind you, so tonight in the hall, 'Strike Me Lucky' with our own George Wallace. What do you all think of that? Nothing is too good for you lot, see you all inside."

Tomorrow will be another day of important events for Joan that will run over the top of each other. The only thing certain about her planning will be the first item on her list. Joan never tired of the jumble of activities, the exuberance, the uninhibited sheer joy and excitement the town bristled with. One hundred and sixty books were borrowed or extended. She had converted another four of the "I don't need to read culprits," to her growing band of "where do I start pioneers."

At the end of the day the same strong young men who had unloaded the truck returned as promised to load up the library. Late in the afternoon her departure was finalised from the running board of the old truck speaking passionately of their friendship and courage.

The old truck urged by the crowd slowly turned over, sputtered, coughed, backfired then violently out of time near bounced off its chassis. Joan violently pumped the accelerator then opened and closed the throttle repeatedly until the engine found its rhythm. The crowd cheered, Joan waved, crunched the old brute into gear and lurched off down Bourke Street in clouds of black smoke and red dust. Mr Johnson had repaired the radiator and the Ladies Book Club as usual packed her a tucked box.

Joan Cassidy continued her Library run for the next 12 years visiting McKinley Springs and four other towns on her circuit every two or three months. Flat tyres, broken axles and shattered. She shared the horrors of the devastating loss of twenty-three young volunteers in the Second World War. Her strong young men who were always on hand to unload and load the library were all gone, lost, killed in one night, their first battle. Joan added an extra day to her visits tirelessly throwing herself into what she and her library could provide to rehabilitate survivors and their families.

It was a never ending fight for the rest of Joan's working life with the State Library Bureaucracy to keep her run open. By 1953, Joan along with her old brute couldn't endure the tough slog of long motor trips wrestling the big truck for days on end. The service ended with Joan's retirement that same year. Her life ended in 1956 in a nursing home in Toowoomba, Queensland. She spent her last days among people who had no idea of her unique life oblivious to her remarkable achievements, endurance and generosity. McKinley Springs was abandoned one year later, in 1957; all services and funding withdrawn.

Where the Mechanics Institute Hall once stood holding pride of place on Bourke Street a small brass plate can be found fixed to a large granite boulder, it reads:

There is nothing said that has not been written. Nothing read that does not create thought. The greatness in yourself is already written. Find those words, begin a new life.

In memory of Joan Cassidy JP 1956

A Father's Resilience

Garry Taylor

Little Hartley

"Kylie has leukaemia."

The words are coming out of the doctor's lips and reaching my ears but it can't be my five-year-old he is talking about. My partner and I are standing in a staff kitchen at the hospital which the doctor and social worker somehow think is an appropriate place to utter those three devastating words.

They are asking do we have any questions, are we okay? All I can think of is recently watching John Meillon in *The Fourth Wish*. The message I took from the movie was leukaemia is a death sentence. Is Kylie going to die? Not fair she has all her life ahead of her.

We leave Kylie at the hospital, poor kid, but we also have a four-year-old and a four-month-old baby that need us as well. We need to get home to them and sort out who knows what, whatever it is, I am sure it needs sorting. Life will never be the same. Selfishly I think how will I cope?

The next day we find ourselves in Sydney at a children's hospital. The doctor is explaining what will happen next. I get some consolation because he talks in percentages. As an engineer I understand figures. 75% survival rate. So not what happened in *The Fourth Wish*. Testing is done. The diagnosis is Acute Lymphoblastic Leukaemia or 'ALL', the most common childhood leukaemia.

The Doctor knows what he has to do, lots of drugs, radiation, testing. Kylie is still very sick so she is just sleeping in the ward. The hospital is overloaded and what I call normal sick kids with such ailments as broken arms are put into the cancer ward. Obviously, the parents aren't told. The mother of the child in the bed next to Kylie strikes up a conversation. 'My baby boy has asthma, what is your child in for?' I suppose she thought she would get an answer like

'she's here for appendicitis'. The look on the woman's face when I say Kylie's got cancer! At least I could say it, my coping mechanism is cutting in.

Over the next few weeks it is amazing to see how resilient one is. Well on the surface at least. Inside the pain, the suffering, is going deeper and deeper to areas that I didn't know existed, compartments for storing away things you don't want to face.

Weeks turn into months, months turn into years, Kylie has survived the treatment and gone into remission. Our youngest boy, Cameron, is about to turn five, so that means Kylie is nearly five years in remission. Five years, the doctor's magical number for declaring a child cancer free, with the likelihood of ever getting leukaemia again being extremely small.

A few years before this we had moved to the country town of Cooma. I am at my desk working away on my latest project when the desk phone rings, it is my partner, she is obviously upset. This isn't good I think, as she is with Kylie at the regular cancer check-up clinic in Canberra just over an hour away. Again, three dreaded words hit my ears. 'Kylie has relapsed'. Tears well up and I excuse myself to my boss and head outside to try and get my head around this latest bombshell.

We are in Sydney again; the doctor is giving us the percentages. Up to 40% chance of survival without a bone marrow transplant. The odds of survival are greatly increased with a successful transplant. He says more than 60%, so a bone marrow transplant is a no brainer. Luckily Cameron was not only brought into this world to be a joy to his parents, he carried that life-giving marrow that Kylie needed for the best chance of survival.

It doesn't take long for the people in Cooma to find out the news on Kylie. They rally and do what humans do best in trying times. They arrange the support we need, casseroles arrive unannounced, money is raised at concerts, time off from work is given without hesitation.

We spend many weeks at the Sydney hospital watching Kylie battle to survive. Each painstaking day of waiting for the blood test results to see if the transplant is a success. Trying to keep Kylie's brothers entertained, educated and also coping with Kylie's illness. Finally, success, time to leave the hospital and start the new five-year count down.

Time has marched on and my partner and I are in Paris with Kylie celebrating her 40th birthday. We can't help but touch on those years of treatment, facing death as well as the happiness of the outcome. The way the family survived.

I recently turned 65 so I have had a few decades to contemplate how I managed to cope with the life changing event of Kylie being diagnosed with cancer. On the night of my 65th birthday I find myself at an observatory near Mudgee and while looking at all those stars and the vastness of the universe, I decide that the human race's resilience comes from a universal life-giving force. That force enables those who call upon it to survive by giving the ability to cope with those unexpected events, which thankfully we have no idea are coming. But, I hear an internal voice warning, the key is to make sure you open and deal with those deep hidden compartments, so full of grief and pain, as soon as you can or that resilience will only be skin deep.

Learning From a Spider

David Linfoot

Castle Hill

A wise person told me once that if, as children, we were not prepared to try again after failure, we would never have learnt to walk.

How wonderful it is to see a young child take his or her first steps. We see them fall over but pick themselves up and try again. Perhaps some of us lose this wonderful gift of not giving up as we get older.

We all have some special gifts but many new skills can be learnt even if we are afraid to put the correct number of candles on our birthday cakes in case we set off the fire alarms!

Failure is something that happens to us all at some time but we might inadvertently encourage this attitude by deciding that something is not possible for us, before we even try to master a new skill.

Yes, we do have to be realistic and some physical activities are just not possible as arthritis and other health problems affect our joints and restrict our movement. I could not at my age compete in a major sporting activity but then I probably could not have done so when I was young. However, when I read about the young athletes I learn that the ability that they have is not all an inherited skill, they have been prepared to put many hours into their training, often getting to the swimming pool while their less motivated friends are still asleep in bed.

If our brains have maintained a reasonable degree of proficiency, there are many skills that we can continue to use and we can even learn new ones if we are prepared to try.

A number of my friends did not use computers when they were in the work force and they are not prepared to learn how to use this technology now. When I was a young child (in the 1940s) many homes including mine did not have a telephone.

Now, anyone who does not have a home telephone or at least a mobile phone would be considered quite strange. Now, I find it quite unusual if people do not own a computer or some technology such as a smart phone or a tablet.

To learn how to use new technology, we have to be like a child and not be afraid of 'falling over'. I am no computer expert and I have made many mistakes in my effort to master this new skill but I have learnt a lot of useful lessons. First, a mistake will most likely not do any damage to the computer, phone or tablet. Second, we can do what children do and experiment with the devices. There is usually not just one right way to do things and being prepared to try various procedures is a good way to learn.

There are plenty of good books to help learners but joining a computer club and having lessons is probably the best way to master the basics. It is also good to be able to remember the regularly used commands rather than having to refer to notes and this is probably good training for our brains too. I find that learners who try to follow their own notes miss the joy of trying (and maybe failing) until the correct procedure is worked out and some just can't follow their own notes a few days after making them. Of course, as a last resort it is quite okay to ask grandchildren for help if we are fortunate to have grandchildren.

Crosswords, particularly the cryptic type can be quite challenging and a novice looking at the clues would probably say that they make absolutely no sense. Again, it is a skill that can be learnt and working backwards, looking at the answers and understanding that a lot of the clues contain anagrams can make some of them eventually make sense. I felt a great sense of achievement when, at an advanced age I finally managed to solve a whole puzzle without cheating! An experienced crossword

solver who does crosswords from a daily newspaper can tell learners which are the 'easiest' puzzles to start with.

When I was a child, my mother told me the story of Robert Bruce, King of Scotland who, having lost a battle with the English foe, hid in a cave for some months to hide his disappointment. While there, he watched a spider making a web at the entrance of the cave. Many times the spider fell down but each time it got up and resumed its work, finally succeeding in building a large web. Robert Bruce learnt a lesson from this and decided to rally his troops and resume the battle against the enemy.

That was resilience or as Robert Bruce was supposed to have told his soldiers, "if at first you don't succeed, try, try, try again". It is not always easy to do that but it is worth trying!

Life Begins at Sixty

Jean Mills

Thirlmere

She was a taciturn, skinny little girl accustomed to feeling unloved. Her unhappy demeanour ostracised this detached, introverted, odd looking kid who was teased unmercifully. She made no efforts to retaliate due to her feelings of rejection, inferiority and insecurity. She coped by reading and writing and entered into her own world ignoring all her physical and mental suffering. If she didn't think about it, it didn't exist. There were no books at home so she wrote her own. She spent time writing stories and poetry in the fields of her limited imagination. She knew she was always that piece of the puzzle that just did not fit. She did not fit into her family, fit into her hometown and especially not fit into social norms of that era that dictated who and what she should be.

Due to a mother who believed tertiary education was a waste of time for women, her dreams of going to university and escape were thwarted. She refused to conform and ran away and joined the Army when she was 17 to escape the stigma, isolation, abuse and drudgery. Little did she know that serving her country would trap her into the life that her mother said she should and would ultimately have. Her immaturity was paramount in marrying a man totally unsuited to her mentally, spiritually and intellectually. That first physical attraction waned when she found they had nothing left in common to build a future together. By the time she was 30, the straps of her life were tightening and she was losing the ability to breathe. He had tried to control his wife by bullying behaviour which stifled her creativity and forced her to flee this smothering environment paralleling her discontent and prior escape from bondage as a teenager.

Memories of the strange young girl wanting to learn what the rest of the world offered surfaced. She had always hankered on getting a degree and finally when free university education became available, she availed herself of the opportunity. She only completed four years of a five year degree. As she seemed to fast forward through the decades of her life, running from one thing to another, starting one thing after another, she was never able to find the time to finish what she started. After all, she did have to work and socialise and her children needed her. She managed to complete numerous Diplomas and Certificates but it was never enough. Her inner child kept reminding her that she had not fulfilled her dreams and her bucket list still had other remaining things in it.

Thirty single years passed in a blur, hopping from one thing to another, searching, wishing and looking for the satisfaction and fulfilment she had always wanted and needed. When she was sixty, she took leave from her job to travel Australia. She made some bad decisions and was left with no future plans or goals and no idea what to do with the rest of her life. In fact, she was quite morose. Inadvertently she had slipped back to her childhood persona and her life was filled with reading and writing to fill the gaps in her life.

Suddenly and unexpectedly, she was offered a purpose in life and will be forever grateful for the opportunities her unmarried daughter and grandson opened up for her. As she woke to the autumn of her life, she found herself back in the town with her daughters. She had instilled in them the value of reading and education. All of them had obtained University Degrees and Masters in their own chosen fields showing her what could be done. She was immensely proud of their achievements, however, she still felt alone and incomplete.

She settled into her new life in a little flat under her daughters' abode and re-commenced life at full pelt making new friends and babysitting as required. However, things were about to change. She had always maintained a façade of professionalism and decorum hiding her insecurities and loneliness. She now went from being immaculately groomed to swimming at the beach, walking, socialising, listening to local bands and generally being very laid-back. She began to love her life.

Her daughters did not recognise this new entity. They misinterpreted her behaviour and informed her she was getting Alzheimers' disease or some form of dementia. Consequently, she enrolled in her old University in two post-graduate subjects and obtained high distinctions in both. 'Ha!' That proved to them she still had some of her marbles! She dug out those last wishes in her bucket list and put them on the fridge. Finally, without any excuses or anything to hold her back, she had the incentive to enrol at University to complete a Bachelor of Social Sciences and Welfare.

It was funny that when she finally sat still long enough, her life started to turn. On a study break, she walked across the road to bump into a man with beautiful blue eyes and when she walked up to receive her degree the diamond on her finger flashed with contentment and dreams coming true. She graduated when she was 65 years old and then completed a Diploma of Counselling.

In the sunset of her life she discovered a new way of living and giving. She married a gorgeous, kind and intelligent man who broadens her horizons and respects and enables her in all she was in the past and all she became. That skinny little girl matured and morphed into me.

As I now move into another decade of my life, my bucket list is empty but I have new dreams to follow. There are no more straps around my chest and that dejected, naïve girl stands in the shadow smiling. It is never too late to start living: I did, I started at sixty.

Like a Slender Bamboo in Stormy Weather

Tam Duong

Kirribilli

To this day, I still cannot comprehend the strength of my mother's mental ability that kept her calm and forgiving through the many misfortunes she had endured throughout her life, until her peaceful pass away in a cold and greyish autumn morning.

With her given name as 'Truc', a slender type of bamboo, maybe she is the metaphor of the perennial grass plant which can withstand and always bounces back after being bent and trashed in strong wind and torrential rain.

Born in a small town in the North region of Vietnam, my mother lost her father when she was three-years-old, and was left with her grandma while her mum travelled around as a contract nurse to various hospitals. From her story, she was really loved and spoiled by her grandma, hence, even though missing her late dad and her absent mum, she was having a somewhat happy time.

Unfortunately, when she was about four, her grandma went for an afternoon nap and never woke up. Without the care of her loving grandma, she was sent to live with her uncle, his wife and six of their children, who ganged up in their constant rivalry against my mother. Even though there were no physical fights, their frequent nasty remarks about her 'orphan-like' condition and their rejection made my mother feel miserable and lonely in the crowded house.

After many years living in the bullied 'orphanage-like' environment, my mother was reunited with her mum in Qui-Nhon, a pleasant coastal city in Central Vietnam. It should be a happy time of her life, living under the same roof with her mum, except for the fact that her step-father was a regular drunkard, who in his intoxicated stupor often beat her mum for no apparent reason.

Longing for a life away from the constant violence, when just 17, my mother accepted my father's proposed marriage without actually knowing him. Even sharing the house with her in-law parents and five siblings, and busily caring for the in-law family members as well as helping my father at his French patisserie, my mother was happy, and happier when my eldest sister was born, a sweet and affectionate child, who united the family in a harmonious and happy household.

But, a terrible thing at the age of three, my sister got typhoid fever and passed away. The unimaginable fate threw my mother into a depression, and my father into a remorseful mood.

After what seemed like a long time, their wound was healed, my mother again energetically helped my father's patisserie, turning it into a favourite place for coffees and cakes in that little town. Then I was born, near the end of WW2, which prompted our parents to move away from the war-torn town, into Saigon City.

Settling in a deserted land, my mother built up a rabbit farm, while my father worked in a restaurant. Then my mother gave birth to my brother, a beautiful baby, healthy, and as affectionate as my lost sister. My family was a happy one again with his arrival.

My father worked hard at his two shifts and my mother did well on her rabbit farm. After a couple of successful sales, one morning all of her 70+ rabbits died due to a kind of poisonous leaves that my step-uncle innocently gave to the rabbits. Saddened but not defeated, my mother started a chicken farm. But after only one successful season, one night when my father was at work, my mother was robbed by armed bandits who took most of my parents' hard-earned savings, and also all of her chickens.

To avoid future visits by those bandits, my parents moved into a safer area of town to rebuild our lives. With the energy and strength, properly sourced from my brother's lovely characters and his charming self, my parents continued their effort to build a comfortable living and a happy family.

Things seemed to go well for the family, with my father's good earning, my mother in good health and my brother and I getting along really well. But as if cruel fate tried to test my mother's endurance and suffering, my brother got typhoid fever and passed away. My memory is still carved with the sad image of my mother sitting motionlessly, holding my younger brother's body and sobbing all night long.

A terrible darkness gripped my family. My mother's depression resurfaced. My father got drunk and stayed away from the family, then took a job on an overseas cargo ship, and travelled away many months at a time.

In the lonely house, I got struck with an 'at-first' unknown disease, until a doctor found out that I got typhoid fever and saved me. With my recovery, my mother came out of her depression, and really took care of me, spending a lot of time with me, reading books to me, teaching me maths, taking me to the zoo.

One day, suddenly my father came home with a mistress and asked my mother to let her live with us. Surprisingly, my mother agreed, not crying, not upset, just calmly agreed.

During the next four years, my mother was very kind and friendly to the mistress, like a sister to a sister, until one day, as sudden as when she came, the mistress decided to move out to start a new life for herself.

In her old age, my mother developed a diabetic condition; so she tried to walk everyday as recommended by her doctor, until she fell and broke her hip and could not walk any more. Eventually, her eyes got cataracts and glaucoma, and she could no longer watch her favourite TV shows; then her kidney failed and required regular hooking up to dialysis machines.

In spite of all her ailments and disabilities, my mother never complained, she was always calm and sweet, as I can vaguely see her through the plane narrow window, above the thick white cloud.

Living the Dream After the Move from Hell

Deborah Kirby-Parsons

Kains Flat

My theory is that time passes quickly because we forget most of what fills our days. This isn't the case for my move to Mudgee. After 20 years of dreaming and over a decade since I took the big leap, moving day feels like it was yesterday.

Things started off badly when four burly men arrived early as I emptied a wardrobe. One helped stuff clothes into a bag while two others grabbed whatever they could and dawdled out to the truck. The fourth seemed to be making a plan, though didn't communicate it to anyone.

At 4:30pm that long crazy day was about to get even longer and crazier after I was told the truck was full and I had to immediately order and pay for another one.

I didn't have \$3,000 and I had no way of getting it, but despite trying to convince them of the flawed assessment process that underestimated the contents of my house, the movers said they'd leave Sydney at 6:00am and drove off.

My son Jack and I spent the whole night carrying what remained out to the footpath, so his father Stuart could pack his car and unload our belongings into his neighbour's garage. The last item left at 2:30am.

With the rental house empty, Jack helped me wipe and mop for a couple of hours in readiness for the agent's inspection. We then drove to Stuart's and put our heads down for 45 minutes before piling the dogs in the car and securing my favourite lamp on Jack's lap.

Hitting the road at 6:00am sharp, we aimed to reach the house before the truck, with keys, a floor plan and large numbers to stick on doors so the movers could match numbered boxes and furniture with the corresponding rooms.

Fabulous plan.

Great.

Big.

Fat.

Fail.

The truck left at 4:00am not 6:00am and when the driver phoned to say they'd arrived, we were hours away. Thankfully a door was unlocked and the movers were able to get in, but without the numbered floor plan everything was dumped illogically throughout the house.

We pulled up as a dressing table with a shattered mirror emerged from the truck, followed by an up-ended planter, which covered everything in soil during the journey. This created deep scratches on furniture that had been stacked, flat surfaces together and no padding between.

My next concern was the newly polished floorboards. The impact of the builder not replacing the roof on time, meant the floor people weren't able to complete their work until the day before we arrived.

Then I discovered that I needed to order gas – something the plumber who installed the water heater forgot to mention. So there was a mad scramble to organize a delivery and find the cash to pay the driver. Those cylinders aren't cheap!

Thank goodness he knew how to connect everything because I was clueless and my logical, very clever son was asleep in the fenced vegetable garden along with the dogs. They, – the dogs, not Jack, – had to be contained so the people I hired to do the job weeks before could finish installing the yard fence.

Unloading continued haphazardly until the movers said they were finishing up and would start emptying what was left in the truck onto the lawn. I was gobsmacked because nobody mentioned a knock-off time and I assumed they'd continue until the job was done.

On top of this, dark clouds were gathering, so Jack and I scratched around for more money – most found in crevices in the car – and offered \$42.70 in exchange for 20 minutes work.

We raced back and forth but got soaked lifting the last boxes onto the verandah. Thankfully nobody got struck by lightning because that would have been the icing on the cake!

Soon after, I found Jack cocooned in a doona on the floor. I prayed that none of the piles around him would topple over because I didn't have the strength to dig him out.

After their dinner the dogs skulked off towards Jack and I scoffed down half a stale sandwich. The tap water was brown so I put a glass outside and drank the rain. Exhausted and aching I finally sat down. From that vantage point the boxes stacked to the ceiling looked even more ominous.

When I opened my eyes again I could see nothing but black and I mean BLACK.

For a moment I thought I was dead but my racing heart indicated otherwise and I soon worked out where I was. Stumbling around I found a switch but the light didn't work, so I felt my way back to the chair.

A lick on the face woke me.

I let the dogs out and retrieved towels and clothes from the car as Jack headed towards the bathroom. I tossed his things through a gap in the door and ten minutes later he emerged a different person. Clean for starters, but more ... human.

Words can't describe how it felt to step under that gently flowing warm water after two days of not showering, but sadly the feeling was short-lived. At the very moment I put shampoo on my hair ... the water turned to ice.

Recoiling I hit my back against the tap handle.

I cried.

Then I sobbed.

Wiping away tears I reassured myself that I'd made it through the past two days without killing anyone, so I could not be beaten.

Dripping bubbles and wearing my towel, I hunted for the 'kitchen appliances' box. I found a bucket mid-search and finally unearthed the kettle in the bedroom furthest from the kitchen.

Standing in the shower recess beside a bucket of warm water, I used the dog food scoop to finish rinsing my hair.

Finally I was ready to take on the world, or more accurately, to look for the water heater manual.

There was just one problem ... where on earth should I start?

Metamorphoses – A True Story

Ann Flegg

Glenhaven

“Mrs Dwyer! Mrs Dwyer!” shrieked our next-door neighbour, Sylvie, who was the only person in the street who had a phone, and who was the willing bearer of messages for immediate neighbours. She came running in a flurry across our backyard via the makeshift gate in our communal paling fence, causing chooks and ducks to scatter and take refuge in the long grass riddled with paspalum. Her face was flushed and damp, her bosom heaving with exertion, and her voice conveying the momentous news she had just received, was ragged and incredulous.

“Betty’s won first prize in the lottery!”

Nan screamed, “Good God!” and collapsed into a chair, and Papa whispered, “Jeezus!”

It was 1949. I was six, and my Mum and Dad and I lived with Mum’s parents in a modest house in an outer working-class suburb of Sydney. Money was tight and the only affluent people we were aware of, were in films, books and magazines. But at least everyone was in the same boat, scraping along together to make ends meet. It was only three years or so since the Second World War had finished and lots of things were scarce, except poverty. You had to be resilient and adaptable. Winning the lottery, a dream many pinned their hopes on, seemed to be the only way to escape this down-at-heel existence, and buying a lottery ticket or two every week was something people did to keep their dreams alive.

Mum worked part-time in a bookstall on Granville station. The bookstall was hardly better than a roughly-built lean-to, which clung to the side of the pedestrian bridge between the two platforms, and the floor consisted of wooden planks with wide, irregular spacing. When Mum took me to work,

which she did from time to time, I enjoyed peering down between the cracks at the trains and steam engines as they passed underneath. It was freezing in winter and cold air came in through the gaps in the floor. Mum absolutely hated the cold and I don’t know how she stayed in the job as long as she did.

Mum shared this job with her cousin, Violet (who was not one of the shrinking varieties). A short, overweight, cheery soul with mobility problems. The closest toilets were on the station and she found it nigh on impossible to use the steps to get to them. She was unfazed by this, and when she needed to do a wee, improvised by using a jar, then tipping the contents through the cracks of the floor. How she succeeded in managing this toileting operation behind a counter and with people hurrying past is a mystery. But then again, desperate situations called for desperate measures. If commuters on the platform below wondered what was trickling down from the bookstall from time to time they would never have guessed.

It was while Mum was working in the bookstall one morning, that a reporter arrived with his camera to tell her that she and a porter had shared first prize in the State lottery. She was in such a dither that, when she rushed to a public phone on the station to tell Sylvie the good news, she had to ask a stranger to dial the number because her hands were shaking so violently.

At home, Nan regained her composure, gathered herself together and announced she would make a surprise celebration cake for Mum to have when she arrived home from work, and she would also invite all the neighbours in to make the occasion more festive. And so she set to work.

My almost-blind Papa was assigned his task: mixing the ingredients by hand in a large, blue and white striped bowl. I sampled the raw ingredients with my fingers and licked whatever I could – a childhood pleasure that is now taboo. Nan had no electric mixer in those days. The Sunbeam Mixmaster, her pride and joy, came later.

The cake was finished. A double-layered sponge cake filled with mock cream and a thin layer of mulberry jam (from our tree). Nan iced it with green icing, Mum's favourite colour, and topped it with piped rosettes of cream embedded with silver cachous.

Nan decided to hide the cake so Mum wouldn't see it when she came in, so she sat it on my bed at the front of the house to be brought out later when the time was right.

A wink from Nan when the party was in full swing, and I knew it was time to bring out the cake. But what a devastating sight confronted us at the doorway of my bedroom!

Hunched over the cake, slobbering and slavering, was our Pekingese dog, Ming, her face and ears smothered in cream and cachous, nostrils and eyes clogged. Nan yelled, "Goddamn!" plus a litany of her favoured swear words. In a flash, she threw the dog to the floor where it gave an almighty sneeze, spraying cream and silver balls everywhere. Nan grabbed a knife, moved the cake to the dressing table, and proceeded to sculpt and shape the wreckage in an effort to resurrect her masterpiece. Once satisfied, and with great aplomb, she carried the cake out to Mum and the guests, where it was admired, then quickly devoured after congratulatory cheers.

No-one was aware of the cake's metamorphosis and, as far as I know, no-one suffered any ill effects. Perhaps our immune systems were primed to eating less hygienically prepared food back then?

As a child I thought the incident perfectly normal but, in this day and age, wonder what the health and safety brigade would think about retrieving a cake from the jaws of a dog, then serving it up to unsuspecting guests.

In those days life was different.

My Cabin I Call Home

Sylvia Abboud

Epping

The skies were dark grey and the winds were blowing, whistling and howling across the nine metre waves. As I stared through the port hole I could see the waves twirling and felt the rocking of the boat which churned my stomach, struggling to keep any food down. My cabin which I called home was located on the lowest deck, stuck on this endless endeavor across the seas. I was one of the lucky ones. I had absolutely no future in the country I left behind.

Let me introduce myself. My name is George, I was only 21 when I left my family and all of my friends back in my home, Lebanon. I knew there had to be a better life out there somewhere! Resilience? Yes if anyone endured resilience it was me and it all started 57 years ago when I jumped on a ship named *Patrice* and sailed for 40 days and nights until I finally arrived to what I now call my home, Australia.

As the boat approached the shore, I remember seeing a massive bridge and next to it a large face which had a lit up crown on its head, the biggest smile and the whitest teeth staring at me. People started to clap and cheer as we approached the port. I got my bags and ran to the exit and couldn't wait to see what my adventure and future would hold for me.

I was greeted by an old distant relative who migrated to Australia nine years earlier and got to stay with them on my arrival. They were the most beautiful, loving family I had ever known. As days went by I learnt to assimilate to my new country's culture and blend in with their everyday life. I met a girl by the name of Susan and I fell madly in love with her. I remember being captured by Susan's most piercing blue eyes, as blue as the ocean, taking me back to all those months watching the

endless seas. She had a heart of gold and from the moment I laid my eyes on her, I knew she would be my treasure. She was my beauty queen and I was going to go to great measures to win her heart over. As days went by, to my surprise, I got my first job as a ticket collector at a railway station in downtown Redfern. I worked the night shift which finished around three in the morning and slept during the day. My pay packet wasn't much but again I was the luckier one to have a job.

I finally serenaded Susan into marrying me but getting her father to agree was a challenge. Persistence was the key and I finally won her over. We eloped!! We had four wonderful children. My wage wasn't enough to make ends meet so during the day I went to our local club and ended up playing the pokies and sometimes I would win which brought joy to my family as I would take them all out for a treat! Unfortunately, with the wins, also came the losses and before I knew it I had single handedly lost all our worldly assets which wasn't much to start off with. Having enough food on our table was a struggle. Even though it was my doing and I had days where I would think that my Susie was going to walk away, she never did. My bad habits became worse and my sweet Susie just kept putting up with it. As the years went by not only did my habit worsen but my health did as well, but what never changed was our love for each other! Our children became our rock, they all became successful in their own ways. They watched and learnt what was right and what was wrong and thankfully our strong love for each other and our resilience to many things won in this case and our children chose wisely not to follow their dad's bad habits and footsteps.

Our weekly family outings and dinners with our extended family brought nothing but laughter, joy and happiness which superseded our dark past. Every Australia Day long weekend we went to the Central Coast of Sydney and painted our country's flag on our faces and danced and danced 'til our feet couldn't hold us any longer.

Days seemed to go by so fast with God's blessings our family expanded again a total of nine grandchildren. We still struggled but if something got broken, we fixed it.

I look at myself and see how happy my life is! I wake up every day thinking how blessed I am to be breathing and being able to watch the sun rise and sun set. Being able to hear birds chirping away and cicadas at night. I am so blessed because I have my very own dialysis machine in the comfort of my home even though it's a housing commission home. I connect to it with the help of my blue-eyed Susie, three days a week for six hours a day whilst watching movies together! Lucky I have the dialysis machine to clean out the one or two drinks I shouldn't have had! And then that dear old prostrate of mine had to welcome cancer, its old mate which found residence within me but growing ever so slowly, slower than I can ever keep up with, thanks to all those wonderful 'lollies' I keep taking!

Diabetes, well another mate of mine and my choice in menu is left to be desired for. Yuck! Yuck! Yuck!! But as long as I have my sweet blue-eyed Susie to enjoy life beside me and a less frequent visit to my old mate TAB every now and then, how much luckier in life can I be?

Resilience – did I hear someone say the word 'resilience'? Well my hearing has gone down a bit. I guess I got to go and get my ears checked as well! Cheers!

My Father's Story

Jill Schuler

Armidale

Memories of him walking across the paddock at the end of day. His gait is stilted on account of one too many accidents from horse falls. Then an operation to remove the knee cap. He walked with a stiff leg, this never impeded him except he didn't ride horses as often. He stood tall, with his dark brown skin, in his simple work attire, always a leather belt holding his knife and pocket watch, and his battered felt hat. A quietly spoken, shy bushman. He was my father for just on 14 years. Born in 1932 at a railway siding north of Nyngan NSW. Father a German fencing contractor and an Australian-born mother, he was the third youngest of six siblings. His mother died when he was aged five, his father when he was seven. He and his two younger siblings were placed into an orphanage where he spent his childhood. His older siblings were old enough to work, they all stayed in contact for the remainder of their lives.

Following a dream of fading memories of his bush years, leaving the orphanage, he drifted following jobs that involved horse handling. Later he moved up to Western Queensland taking a job as a station hand. In the nearby Surat he met and fell in love with Mum.

After marrying, they moved out to the sheep station. This was my home until I was nine, my sister ten. Mum drove us in and out 32 kilometres (20 miles) each day on a rough corrugated black soil road to school. We moved to town for easy access to school. My parents bought a Queenslander style house next door to the local pub. Dad stayed on the station coming into town to us midweek and weekends. He did everything for us, from carrying buckets of hot water from the backyard wood-fired water heater, up into the house for bathing, chopping the firewood. Restumping and painting the house all this on his own.

As a child I consistently suffered with severe headaches and often sick and on one annual holiday visit to my grandparents, my grandfather took me to the Toowoomba hospital. There I was given an X-ray of my head. A very painful lumber puncture followed. The diagnosis is unclear to me now. Mum's version: X-rays found something lodged behind my right eye. Suggestion to drill into the back of my head and put air in to dislodge it. Mum said 'no'. I was taken through to Royal Brisbane Hospital. After further testing tension headaches was the final diagnosis. Mum and Dad's incompatible explosive relationship meant it was a volatile household to be in.

To stop this unhappiness, Dad decided to move away. He was unhappy in his job at the time and left to follow his dream to see the Northern Territory. A journey of 2,700 kilometres using a hand operated clutch on account of his leg.

On hearing of roadworks and earth moving jobs he drove to Katherine NT; and landed a job. Employed as a grader driver, he never dreamt he could be a machinery operator because of his leg. To us he wrote, he sent post cards and letters telling of the Katherine Gorge and surrounds. Though a loner; he told of enjoying the company of other blokes.

Not long after he drove back home for a visit. Everyone was happy. In the new year we'd all move up to Katherine and start a new life. On leaving to go back, he gave us all money. Dad always carried a rifle. Before he left, he swapped Mum rifles. Dad took Mum's .22 calibre. His .303 calibre was illegal in the NT.

Friday 1st of May, 1970 he spoke to us from the phone at the public bar in Cloncurry, telling us everything was going well and tomorrow he would be at the border town of Camooweal. It was to be the last time we spoke to him.

Monday night, 4 May 1970, a knock on the front door and a commotion. Soon Mum came to the bedroom door and said, "your father is dead" He was shot. I stayed in bed listening to Mum and my sister in the next room talking. It's a blur.

Dad never socialised. He trusted everyone. He may have opened his cashed-up wallet at the public bar, anyone could have seen. Later speaking to locals his sister was told the gun was standing beside the car his arms under the blanket. We will never know. He died at Bourke and Wills monument by the Corella River on the Barkley Highway 48 kilometres (30 miles) west of Cloncurry. Date of death, 3 May 1970. Is his death another suspicious death on the Flinders Highway? Flinders Highway becomes Barkley west of Cloncurry.

Coroner's report: 'the cause of death unsuspecting'.

Mum was too scared to fly. The publican from next door went for us and drove the car back. Dad's brother and sister drove up from Melbourne and arranged the funeral. Twenty-six years later I received fading photos of the beautiful vintage hearse, one lonely wreath sat on his coffin. On the back of one, a plot number of the grave at the old cemetery in Cloncurry.

The car came home with his personal effects. We never saw his new wallet or rifle again.

Counselling for Mum was a brandy bottle. She fell on the front path broke her nose. She tried to commit suicide. Looking like a werewolf, blood everywhere, my sister and I held her down on the bed to stop her. Then she went to bed for six months, we sisters became her servants, went to school and kept the house going. When she got up, she was depressed about her weight gain, we did laugh with her.

Life did go on although it never left us.

In 2009, I was diagnosed with hydrocephalus (water on the brain). A VP shunt was inserted. My Medical history shows; cause of lifelong severe headaches; born with hydrocephalus.

My Grandmother's Gift of Resilience

Arthur Ongley

Northmead

My grandfather's transfer from England to Hong Kong in 1938 was a welcome job and lifestyle opportunity. Arthur Frank Wood, was an engineer attached to the British Admiralty. His job had taken him to Portsmouth, Rosyth in Scotland, Malta (where my Mother was born), and then took him to Hong Kong, The Jewel of the Orient. My grandparents and their teenage children sailed to Hong Kong and set up home in Kowloon. Frank worked at the Royal Navy Dockyard and on weekends the family enjoyed picnics together and with friends at Repulse Bay. They enjoyed visits to The Peak which gave them breathtaking views of their new harbour city, and trips into the New Territories. On Sundays they attended Methodist Church services in Kowloon.

Then came the threat of war. As the clouds of war grew dark and the invasion of the Colony became a distinct possibility, my grandparents decided that my grandmother and the children should leave for the Philippines while my grandfather would enlist in The Hong Kong Volunteer Defence Force to defend the Colony. When hostilities ceased, my grandmother and the children, who were the guests of Christian missionaries in Manila, would return to Hong Kong where the family would be re-united and life would continue.

The invasion of Hong Kong was fast and furious. Hong Kong fell quickly and the Japanese occupation forces took over. My grandfather survived the battle but was taken Prisoner Of War and held in the brutal unhygienic Sham Shui Po Camp just out of Kowloon. From time to time friends and former servants were able to meet Frank secretly on the perimeter of the camp to give him food, personal supplies and news of the war and especially his loved ones.

War clouds over the Far East turned darker still, so my grandmother and her two children fled the Philippines on a ship bound for Sydney, Australia. Upon arrival they lived for a time at Manly and then moved to Rose Bay. My grandmother found work, and so did the teenagers. My mother joined the Shell Company in Sydney (where she eventually met my father) and my uncle joined the Royal Australian Navy. He served aboard HMAS Sydney in Korea, and the Destroyer Anzac.

Letters from my grandfather reached Australia. They were full of love, good counsel, and the longing for reunion. Through the Red Cross the family was able to send care packages to Hong Kong. In 1943 the family received the terrible news that Frank had succumbed to the mistreatment of the Japanese, malnutrition and diphtheria.

My grandfather kept a diary during his three years as a POW. It was found, given to the British and taken to London along with many confidential documents. My grandmother could not take possession of it, but when she made the trip to London to visit her parents, she made a type-written copy of it. In the year 2000, prior to a trip my wife and I were planning to make in 2001 to visit my Grandfather's grave at Stanley, the site of the POW Camp at Sham Shui Po and the family home at Kowloon, my mother gave me Grandmother's copy of her father's diary. Mum had never read it, and as a result of macular degeneration was not able to read the small and fading type on thin discoloured typing paper. Over several months I re-wrote the diary and was able to produce a readable copy for Mum and the family. I read so much about my grandfather's resilient life and service under the most difficult circumstances.

My grandfather's final resting place, Stanley Military Cemetery is on a hill on the southern side of Hong Kong. Buried there are those who fought and died from the day of invasion, the same day Pearl Harbour was attacked, December 7, 1941, until the day of surrender, Christmas Day 1941, and those who died as prisoners of war. Repulse Bay, also on the south side was the place where my grandfather, his family and friends spent many happy hours swimming, relaxing and gathering with friends. The Peak, high above the business district of Hong Kong, gives breathtaking views of Hong Kong Harbour. The Star Ferries can be seen criss-crossing the magnificent harbour. Kowloon, in clear view was where my grandfather and his family lived. Close by is Sham Shui Po where my grandfather died. The site of the POW camp is now a housing estate. The old parade ground is now a park. Inside that park in the shade of Canadian Maple trees are memorials to the Hong Kong Defence Force and the Canadian troops who helped defend the Colony.

I had another reason to visit Hong Kong. I wanted to see if the Neptune Bar in Wanchai still existed, and it did! During the Vietnam War I served aboard the Royal Australian Navy Destroyers *Vampire* and *Torrens*. Hong Kong was my favourite Asian destination. Some shipmates and I formed a band called 'The Saffrons', that performed in the Neptune Bar during leave times ashore. Making music with friends and entertaining others while on duty overseas and away from home for months on end helped develop resilience as servicemen.

At the age of 15, I decided to join the Royal Australian Navy. Just after my 16th birthday I left home, took the oath of a serviceman and prepared for life on the ocean waves. My grandmother asked to see me, and during our warm and wonderful conversation, from her rich and resilient heart, said, "Arthur, remember this, failure is never final. If you don't make mistakes, you don't make anything." That counsel was my grandmother's gift to me, my children and grandchildren.

The example of those who have gone before, and the encouragement of those who stand alongside enable us to dig deep, live with hope, and respond with resilience. Resilience enables us to rise above the ruins, recover from storms and reach for that which is good.

My Name is Lisa

Sandra Murray

Lennox Head

Standing on the bare earth with my baby daughter on my hip I stared at the sky. Somewhere under this sky was my husband, Frank, imprisoned in a POW camp. I too, was in a camp for women and children. It was October 1943 and the Japanese had invaded Indonesia. I wasn't to know at that time that Frank was in Singapore and later transported to Changi to work on the Burma railroad. All I knew at that moment was that hunger gnawed at my sides and I was anxious for Mary-em who was only 18 months old. Married at 19 and giving birth to my child shortly before turning 20, Frank and I had hardly started a married life. I had only seen Frank a handful of times, firstly due to his training in the Army and then because of his interment. The first time he saw Mary-em, she was three-months-old. Then after 'house arrest' all Dutch, English and foreign women and children were transported to this camp, near Ambarawa.

My mother and sister were in another camp. Fortunately, I had my friend Ida with me. Together we used to plot and scheme to get more food. The rations were meagre and the daily serve of rice and bread made of starch wasn't enough for us let alone for my little daughter. We heard from the others that at night we could slip out and exchange jewellery or money for eggs and sugar with the Indonesians gathered at the tall wire fence. This was short lived. Our captors found out and the punishment was to stand in the hot sun all day. At some point I had fainted and I lay burning in the tropical sun.

One terrible day, all women under the age of 25 were summoned to parade in front of six Japanese soldiers who sat at a long table looking us over.

At the last minute I had taken Mary-em with me and I held her steady as she cried. She was terrified of men. Thank God I had her with me. There were 10 young unmarried women picked and sent away from the camp. We never heard from them again.

One older woman volunteered herself instead of one of the young ones who was there with her mother. Young boys were taken too. The mood in camp was one of grief sometimes tipping into madness. Hunger, sickness and death were the order of the day.

Some women tried to sing to help with the despair. That was not allowed. Christmas came and we decided to make little gifts for the children. I was able to make a ball, and a rabbit out of old clothing. For Mary-em's second birthday, Ida and I had some material and embroidery thread and we made her a book. She was 'over the moon' about it and now, many years later she still has it.

Sickness and disease were rife in the camp. One day a child got the chickenpox. In a matter of days all the children were sick including Mary-em. Then we had an outbreak of whooping cough. There was no medicine. If a child survived that, dysentery and fever killed off many. One day a child could be fine, the next dead. The small graves multiplied. The women started to die with dysentery and malaria. I ended up in the makeshift hospital where the only treatment for dysentery was Epsom Salts. Lying there, I could hear a little girl singing a Dutch song about green grass under her feet. Then she stopped singing and I heard her mother's sobs.

In June 1944, we were suddenly told to pack up, we were being moved to another camp, Banjoeberoe. We walked the distance, about five kilometres carrying our luggage. Mary-em was so happy because she had not seen anything outside the camp before. She had blisters and her toes were bleeding, but she never cried.

The new camp was much better, it had a bathroom! A very big one where we could shower with 15 other women. The malnourished bodies of the women was a jarring sight.

For breakfast there was Tapioca porridge. It was like starch and Mary-em couldn't swallow it. The Japs then told us we could forage for snails in the yard. We collected a lot and the kitchen women made a puree of them. We got one spoon each. I gave Mary-em my spoon because she needed it more. Her mouth was full of ulcers.

One day in August 1945, our captors started to disappear. Slowly it dawned on us. The rumours were true and the war was over! What we didn't realise was that we were now sitting ducks for the Indonesian rebels who wanted independence. They were on the rampage. In our old camp at Ambarawa, hundreds of women and children were killed.

At our camp, the Gurkhas arrived. These Indian soldiers under the British Army were to protect us. One soldier showed me through his binoculars that the Indonesian rebels were swarming down the mountain toward us. When the shooting started, one woman was killed and some were injured. A few weeks later the English came to rescue us in big trucks. We were delivered to another camp and surrounded by soldiers with cannons. Later we were moved again and eventually arrived in Jakarta by army transport ship.

Later I found out Frank was in Balikpapan and I was to join him there where he had a large army tent for us to live in along with the rest of the soldiers. But I couldn't get to him so eventually he persuaded a pilot friend to fly him to me. One day, I was out on the street buying bananas and a truck stopped and there was Frank. I was so shocked all I could say was "so you finally made it!"

After everything, I was a strong woman who had survived.

Never Say Die

Elizabeth Jones

Warabrook

Nobody ever wants to hear the 'C' word. Hearing the words "you have breast cancer" are the four most dreaded words in a woman's life. What do you say to the doctor who utters those words? You want to scream and cry, but instead you smile and say "oh well, why not me?" Stupid really when you think about it. But that's what I did. I smiled and said it was okay and believe me inside it took every ounce of control for me not to scream "No!!! What have I done to deserve this?"

I walked out of that doctor's office and just looked at the sky, felt the sun kiss my face, I walked to the car and just sat with my head in my hands and thought how do I deal with this? I have to tell my husband, my family and most of all, I have to face it head on. There were many unknowns ahead and just the myriad of request forms and letters in my hand terrified me.

I had always been the healthy one, the one who bounced back every time from any knock. This knocked me for six ... I did not know how to bounce back.

How do I? Knowing the dreaded 'death' is knocking at my door ... I didn't know if there was a Heaven, I was happy here thank you very much.

I managed to drive home, slowly walked to the house and immediately poured myself a wine. I walked into my husband's study and sat down. He looked at me and said, "How was your day?" My response was, "Oh great. I just got told I have an aggressive form of breast cancer and need surgery, treatment and could possibly die, but how was your day?"

He stared at me and then put his arms around me and said, "Really? You are joking? We can't do without you."

Well, no, I wasn't kidding and that was little comfort knowing how I was leaving my family in the depths of despair while I face the biggest challenge of my life. I felt bad thinking these things, but really ... I didn't want it about him. I wanted it all about me. I was the one facing this, I was no longer his wife, a mother, a grandmother, I was me. I needed to feel for me. I needed to think for me. At that moment when he said we can't do without you, I realised I couldn't do without me either.

We both told our children and their reaction was similar to my husbands ... OMG how are WE ever going to cope? What will happen? Will you be okay? This can't be happening to us. I told them, "No it's not happening to you, it is happening to ME and I need to fight this thing for ME, not your dad, or you, or the grandchildren ... this is MY fight and I need to win it and if I don't, I know I've done MY best."

I knew they were hurting for me and I know their reaction was one of shock and horror with what was occurring to the family but I needed this to be about me, not them. I needed their support, yes, I needed them to help when they had never helped before. I wanted them involved but I did not feel it was their fight. This was MY life we were talking about and that raised the question what was my life all about? I had been so busy 'doing' for everyone in my life that I had no real understanding of who I really was or what life I experienced. I lived my life consistently considering other people and what I could do for them. I really did not know who I was, what did I actually enjoy in life? What made me happy? I needed to know the answer before time ran out.

Over the next few weeks, it was a blur of extremely painful surgery, beautiful flowers, well-meaning friends and family coveting me and telling me I would be fine. I didn't feel fine and therefore I didn't think I would be fine, but somehow I made myself

stop the feeling of being sorry for myself and take control. Having a defeatist attitude would never keep me here to discover the wonders of life, so I was desperately trying to heal physically and mentally.

Once I recovered from the surgery, the real challenges of radiotherapy and chemotherapy began in earnest. I met some amazing people sitting in the chair hooked up to chemo. I met young people, who were in the prime of their lives, facing this immense struggle but believing wholeheartedly they would recover.

I had been closeted in a world where I had lost sense of actually living my own life and being me.

I enjoyed being with the people in my life. I comprehended that I needed them as much as they needed me. Thoughts about raising my children and how I felt it was over before I was ready, kept coming to my mind. I wasn't ready to say goodbye to them or me.

I was not ready to die, I was going to live and after everything I went through, I did recover and am 'cancer free'. There I said it, two words of pure joy!

I found the person I am, I discovered my love of life and the people in it, I enjoyed discovering ME and I am very happy to cohabit with ME for many more years to come. Life will throw curve balls, but it is about playing the game your way and giving it your all. I dreaded hearing the 'C' word, but I asked myself, "Why not me? Why was I so special that I should not get cancer?"

Challenges in life are many, face them and accept them.

Then repeat after me ... "Never Say Die"... to yourself ... over and over again.

Feels good doesn't it?

Nico

John Lynch

Lisarow

He told me of his first Christmas Day in Australia and how desperately homesick and lonely he felt. In the morning he set some traps and then in the afternoon he went out and collected a pair of rabbits. His owners provided Christmas lunch for him but the food was bland and alien, and he longed for some taste of the old country to revive his spirits as well as his taste buds. He grew some garlic in a sandy patch beside the milking shed; he was given two onions by the Mrs, and he discovered a weed with a pleasantly bitter taste and which cooked up nicely without going to water.

There was a spot by the creek that the 'roos frequented keeping the grass low and fine. He saw them there late of an afternoon propped on an elbow drowsily chewing. Nico skinned and gutted the rabbits expertly then chunked them down into similar sized pieces. He browned them with some butter in the camp oven while the fire was high then added his other ingredients and creek water, setting the heavy lidded pot on the edge of the glowing coals.

Italians, when we workk, we workk when we eata, we eata.

If there was a bottom rung in Australian society in 1943 I'd say Nico was on it then. As an Italian prisoner of war in Australia he had experienced the derision and distrust of Australians during WW2 while fighting was still happening. After being captured in North Africa, he was farmed out from an internment camp to a family with a mixed dairy and cattle property in the northern rivers of New South Wales and he worked their land as if it was his own.

I worka so hard, John. I get so strong. Strong as a horse.

As he says these words he humps his back and puffs out his chest. By putting his hand on my shoulder, he claims me as his audience. He tells me how his owners let him use an acre plot to farm for himself. He worked this when he finished the owners' work for the day, ploughing with a horse as the sun slid behind the tall flooded gums. The horse was tired and reluctant and would not pull.

I get so angry John. I puncha the horse and it knock out.

He swings one of his short, stout arms in a sideways hook/uppercut and I just know he is telling the truth.

When I met him in the early eighties on the north coast he was an 'old settler' to me and someone I could learn from. I helped him feed about six hundred pigs each morning, hoiking huge bags of wheat through his pig shed early from five to seven. We would then stop for breakfast. Usually have a dozen fried eggs, pasta, then boiled fruitcake washed down with strong black tea. A truly Italio-Australian breakfast. We did general farmwork until about ten. For this he paid me, not much. Maybe three dollars an hour plus a big box of vegetables from his garden fertilized by the manure washed from the pig shed.

Nico worked through the war as a prisoner farm labourer and went home when peace was declared. His owner wanted him back and struck a deal before he shipped back to his family farm near Naples. He sponsored Nico to come back to work as a share-farmer taking half of production, less costs. It took two years, but when he returned it was as a married man with a baby daughter; not with him but back in Italy.

For the next three years Nico worked even harder than he had during the war. He was now his own man and could measure himself against other farmers and look them in the eye when he spoke

in his broken English in the Main Street. He worked and made money. Some he sent back to his family and some he kept safe with him, hidden. He would not have his family come until he had more than a shed with a bare earth floor and could afford good clothes for his wife and daughter. The three years were a blur of sweat, dirt and aching muscles.

When I knew Nico, he had the best dairy farm in the district. He sold cream to Norco for 35 years and used the skimmed milk to raise about a thousand pigs annually. Mrs Nico had no English. She rode on the carry-all on the back of the tractor as together they saw to the work on the farm. Just one hand kept her stout frame glued to that carry-all as Nico drove the blue Ferguson all over the undulating paddocks. He lowered the carry-all when they came to a gate for her to open.

They had two daughters and four grandchildren. No sons to work the farm. The family was highly respected. Nico's opinions and advice was sought after. Everyone wanted a farm as clean, profitable and productive.

The yellow Valiant worked its way up the hill, slowly negotiating the craters in the dirt road. Nico sometimes stopped at our gate on the way back from Lismore, just to talk or maybe to tell me when he needed me to work. Mrs Nico always stayed in the car, just giving a little wave. The language barrier still there after forty years. Nico licked his dry lips with the tip of his tongue as he rolled a smoke.

"John, I've got the cance."

"Cancer? Nick. Are you okay?"

His shoulders came up as his mouth turned down at the edges in that most typical of Italian shrugs.

"Can you helpa me tomorrow? The cows, they gotta move."

Nine Years and Counting

Paul Spooner

Mallanganee

It will be another couple of months before we have to go see the surgeon-oncologist again. Even though it's a bit of a journey, we look forward to it. We got into the habit of making it an overnight stay, to celebrate.

After the year long treatment had finished, each time we visited, her markers would be lower. Initially it was three month intervals, shared between her local oncologist and her saviour, the one on the Gold Coast. The one that removed so many cysts. Some as big as golf balls. I idolise the bloke. I'm concerned he works so hard. Saving lives. Always looks tired. But what can you say? The visits gradually expanded to every six months. Now she sees him once a year.

Before it all started I had told her something was amiss. She just shrugged it off. Didn't want to know, or accept anything could be wrong. She was middle aged, sure, but had not felt healthier. But I was aware. Things just weren't right when we were intimate; "like bashing my head against a brick wall, I told her". She laughed at the analogy. Put it down to the ageing process. Menopause.

It took her another two years to go to her GP, about the slight spotting that had just begun. From there it spiralled outward. GP to the first Gyno'. An instant referral from him to the guy on the Gold Coast, who we were told, had a great reputation. The shock of surgery four weeks later.

His schedule was jam packed, he informed us, but after the initial examination, he made space. The suggested four-hour key-hole operation expanded to nine hours and an eight inch scar on her abdomen, a collection of fourteen cysts and most of her womanhood removed.

After his effort, both of us haggard by the ordeal, he took me aside and told me she would need lots of prayers, love and support. He couldn't tell me what

amount of time she would have left. I felt mugged. Not being that way inclined, I could only promise the latter two. I shook his hand in both of mine and thanked him profusely.

After the initial shock of drastic surgery had passed, she and I talked and were determined. Initially, there were a couple of mental lapses, stress related issues, seeding doubt, but we never relented. Never broke faith. We promised each other through the weeks and weeks of Chemo' and radiotherapy, that 'it' was not going to win. The constant travelling for tests and examinations we made light of. The countless blood tests, resulting in bruised arms. The choosing of scarves for a hairless head – we laughed about that. I couldn't stop kissing that head, because it looked so much like my own hairless pate, and I can't kiss my own! All the visits to support groups and the donated free-bees, which amazed us. We made light of everything and carried on as though nothing had happened. We were like Siamese twins for that year. She stayed absolutely positive and she was never alone for any of it.

With each visit up north her numbers reduced and then finally stabilised between nine and 13. Then the hair came back, whiter than before, but it suited her.

When the Doc' researches her records on the computer, he just shakes his head. What he says would shock some people – "I wish all my patients could be as positive as you. You know you should be dead". And I'm positive he doesn't believe how it turned out. One of the best of his successes.

We don't mind at all. Because we consider him like family. And she's still planning holidays for the future.



WHY DOESN'T SHE LEAVE?
A woman's life of secrets & lies
MARION HOCKING
A woman's life of secrets & lies

Handwritten notes in a spiral notebook, including the words "The first" and "The second".



North to the Sun

Ann Eyers

Narrabeen

There's a wall of glass between my favourite chair and approximately six square meters of lush garden. The view from the chair looks north across the garden to a grassy area through which a path meanders and beyond to the silhouettes of large trees. In one tree there's a family of kookaburras and another hosts visiting possums. Possums and wallabies frequently use the path to get to my place.

On either side of my large window there are Lilly Pilly shrubs and between them a Grevillea. Each leaf and limb shivers and sways in rhythm with the shifting weight of a visiting bird or whichever way the wind blows.

I came to this place at the end of October last year. It was late spring and too late to plant a summer garden but I brought with me a healthy lemon tree in a large pot. It was to be the tree around which the rest of my new garden would be planted. Daily I transported my worm rich compost from the old place, bag by bag, precariously perched on my walker. I chose a prime position for the lemon tree and gently coaxed it into its new home.

Some weeks later I took my niece Tanya to view the lemon tree which just the evening before had been smothered in sweet smelling white flowers. There was not a flower left to view and the little lemon tree had become lopsided as if its neck had been broken. The cause may have been a possum reaching for the flowers whilst dangling from the Lilly Pilly or a wallaby leaning in a little too far and toppling over onto it, but I had to surgically mend one of the upper branches which is still swathed in a bandage made of a strip of my night dress.

It was hard to leave my garden for a weekend in late November in the midst of drought for the unmissable northern NSW wedding of another niece, Belinda. Eight terracotta water spikes were placed strategically around the garden, two of them for the lemon tree. After I filled eight wine bottles with water and upended them into the garden spikes for the purpose of keeping the garden moist, the bottle strewn garden resembled the aftermath of a wildly abandoned Bacchanalian drinking party. It had to be done.

Upon arrival home on Sunday night ready for my third spinal surgery on Monday morning I found the lemon tree well watered but extensively nibbled around the outside edges. There was only enough time to build a difficult obstacle course designed to thwart munching marauders before I had to leave again.

After surgery and just before Christmas my son, Mick, and grandsons, Aspen and Jazz, built me two veggie boxes and a compost tumbler for the garden. I have shallots and lettuce, basil, chives, Ceylon spinach and red veined sorrel in one box, all beneath black wire baskets which I use to cover anything I want spared by the wildlife. The other box is crammed with beneficial insect plants to encourage the good insects who will fight off the baddies. I'm very respectful of the rights of the birds, animals and insects but as a mini scale farmer I do need to borrow a small area from our shared space for my crops.

Each morning I swish the filmy curtains away from the glass so that I can gaze north over the garden to the sun. The noisy miners and rainbow lorikeets are ready to colonise the early opening grevillea to drink the day's first honeyed offering from its flowers.

Now that it's autumn the sun is moving its arc lower and further north allowing warmth to finger its way into my wee house. By the time I'm sitting in the special chair sipping my breakfast coffee, I'm ready to make daily observations.

Early one morning whilst observing the garden and pondering the rough waves on the surface of the sea of mulch, I noticed the mulch around the lemon tree was being disturbed into flight by bush turkeys raking vigorously at it. They strutted, without haste, past my window as if they didn't know my insulting and disparaging remarks were aimed at them. They eyeballed me disdainfully to let me know that my mulch was too low grade for their needs anyway. Above their heads two lorikeets stopped line dancing towards a flower at the end of the grevillea branch to watch the 'goings on'.

Another morning's observations revealed that the fat bottomed bandicoots had dug around the base of the lemon tree, even after I'd made drastic changes to the garden maze. They'd ignored the bundle of sticks here, upturned pot there, cuttings of a plant a friend Helen said bandicoots don't like, and even the shadow cast by a cardboard cutout owl.

I'm happy to be a member of this band of living things sharing the natural environment whilst attempting to struggle with our compromises. The kookaburras and white cockatoos, magpies, noisy miners and rainbow lorikeets are my much loved friends. I'm even very fond of the bush turkeys because they make me laugh and of course it's impossible not to love the marauding possums, wallabies and bandicoots. They enhance the environment and for the most part do much more good than harm so I can only learn from them.

Tonight as I drew the curtains over the glass window at roosting time I saw two lorikeets, heads close together, enjoying 'last drinks'. A disgruntled miner swooped on them from the roof gutter. The lorikeets didn't budge but both pulled their heads down into their ruffled neck feathers to continue drinking until suddenly, refusing to be drawn into a bar fight, they shrieked and took flight.

The grevillea dining room and bar is closed for the day and the lemon tree is preparing for the night's activities.

Tomorrow we will all again look north to the sun for our salvation.

Nothing to Remember

Stephen Sparke

Blueys Beach

Have you ever experienced the feeling of waking in a strange bed, and in the first few moments of consciousness, scrambling to make sense of where you are and how you got there?

Then suddenly you remember. Oh yeah, the party last night. That girl I met? Is that where I am? Well, a long time ago maybe.

For me those days are long gone. But more recently, when I did wake up in a strange bed, there was no realisation of anything. Nothing came back to me. Nothing to report.

When I opened my eyes I saw an unfamiliar ceiling. It had speckled tiles in a grid pattern that reminded me of an office. Soft beeping sounds were going off all around. The light was dim and low and I sensed that I was in a windowless space.

After looking at the ceiling for a while, and still none the wiser, my gaze turned down. The room was large, there were other beds, machines with tubes connected to them, people passing quietly by. And in front of me, partially obstructing my view, right there over my groin and pelvis, was some sort of metal contraption. It looked like a Meccano set on steroids. And were those two metal rods really poking out of each of my upper legs?

Hmmm.

I turned to my right and there at last was something familiar, my wife Jennifer sitting in a chair beside the bed. I can't remember how long she waited before speaking. But it probably wasn't long. She is a get-on-with-it type of girl. She told me that I was in the intensive care ward of St Vincent's hospital Sydney.

The call from the police must have been terrifying for her. Yes, I was late returning from my regular Sunday morning cycle ride but that was nothing out of the ordinary. On this particular morning, however, I wouldn't be coming home.

The accident happened when my bike came into contact with the left side of a taxi that was travelling in the same direction. It was enough to send the bike in one direction, and me, unseated from it, in another. I sailed over the bonnet of the taxi before landing in front of it, and then got dragged underneath for as long as it took the taxi driver to stop.

When they finally got me out from under the vehicle I had lost litres of blood. My right buttock, the part of my body that had gotten most intimate with the underbelly of the car, now had a gaping hole in it. My pelvis was crushed, my right hip had come asunder, and my jaw was broken. It was touch and go apparently.

However I hadn't lost consciousness. A witness said I was screaming in pain. Well yes, and why wouldn't I be? But I also learnt that I gave lucid answers to the ambulance and police when they asked me questions. I still can't square those two accounts.

Between the time of the accident and my waking up in the strange bed some 48 hours had elapsed. They are 48 hours that are lost to me. The last thing I can remember is riding down Liverpool St in the CBD and preparing to turn into Elizabeth St. The accident happened several metres after the turn. But I can't even remember going around the corner, let alone getting clipped by the taxi. It's almost as if the recording tape had been rewound to just before the accident and then the erase button hit.

The experience has given me a new-found appreciation of what the brain is capable of. Medical experts no doubt have terms and definitions for it. How I interpret what happened is that my brain figured that this was something I didn't need to know and went into full censorship mode. Nothing to see here, it said.

Two months after being admitted to hospital I was raised out of my bed to the vertical position for the first time. Another two months passed before I finally got home from my Sunday morning bike ride, albeit not on a cycle, but on crutches.

During my rehab I had a meeting with a psychologist who encouraged me to talk about my experience. When I said I couldn't remember anything she seemed surprised, almost annoyed with me. She encouraged me again to talk about it, but my answer was still the same. Surely she knew about repressed memories or whatever the term they have for it is. Maybe she wanted me to bring them up.

During my recovery in hospital people would often tell me how brave and resilient I was. That's not how I felt. I had simply woken up in a hospital one day not knowing where I was. Then it was just a matter of getting wheeled in and out of several operations before taking to the crutches and eventually making a full recovery. I never felt any pain, thanks to morphine and a button to press when I needed more. (Although thinking back to the metal rods sticking out of my thighs, I do sometimes wonder why they didn't hurt, even with the morphine.)

It's been 10 years now since the accident. They say that the experience of it is still in there somewhere. But my brain still keeps it secret from me. Well, I hope it stays that way. Sometimes I wonder if I should find out more details about what happened. But then I think again. No, don't want to go there. That must be my brain talking.

Old Tom, the Man Political Correctness Missed

Neville Turbit

Russell Lea

"Old Tom is a cranky bugger."

I had heard it a dozen times along with "heart of gold" and "a bit simple". Those comments only proved one thing. They didn't know Tom's story.

Tom was born in Diamond Creek. It was a one-street town which had no diamonds and a dry creek bed.

"Should call it Nothin' Gully," said Tom.

His parents liked a drink. Mum didn't slow down the drinking when she was pregnant.

"If I had been in the womb any longer, I would have had to go to AA meetings before I was born."

"Dad was away a bit on holidays," Tom said. "He stayed at Her Majesty's Hotel where they had striped pyjamas."

While he was away Mum decided there was money to be made from the local shearers.

"Shearin' is hard, physical work. If they didn't have a bad back from shearin', they did when Mum was through with them."

School was an intermittent activity. The only encouragement he got from his parents was "Go if you want."

Things changed one day when Tom was in his twenties. He was probably heading towards the hotel room next to his Dad until one event changed his life.

"It wasn't raining cats and dogs. It was the whole f**in zoo," said Tom.

First, the creek came over the banks, then over the bridge. Soon the main, and only street was underwater. As the water lapped around his ankles in the public bar Tom decided it was time to leave.

"They were all running like rabbits that had found a new carrot patch. Nobody remembered the widow McDonald. She lost her marbles years ago and would think the water was a sign to take off her clothes and have a bath. Nobody wanted to see that."

"Her house was cut off so I decided to swim there. The water wasn't the problem. It was the snakes looking for somethin' above water level to climb on. Heard the term lower than a snake's belly? That was me."

"Sure enough, she was on the front veranda knittin'. As I climbed on the veranda it parted company with the house and we had a nice boat trip down the river. A hill stopped us."

"The next day people came back to see the damage. The main street was covered in mud that looked like shit only thicker and smellier. The power was out and there was no water."

A community meeting was held to decide what to do. After a while, Tom got sick of listening. "Gees isn't it obvious? We start at one end and dig the mud out. After that, we clean out the shops and houses. You blokes ever seen a shovel?"

"Where do we put the mud?" asked one.

Tom looked like he had just been asked does the sun come up in the morning.

"Where it bloody came from. Back in the creek. The creek is still running strong so it will wash away."

"Should we get council permission?"

"Mate I would, but I can't write."

The next day, under Tom's direction, fifty men armed with shovels and wheelbarrows gathered at the start of town. By the end of the day, they had a road from one end to the other.

"What do we do now Tom?"

"We start on the houses."

"Which one will we start on?"

"Bill, can you get the bucket full of numbered bingo marbles from the community centre?"

Bill returned with the bucket. Tom told him to take out every number after 58. There were 58 houses in Main Street.

"Tom drew out a number. Twenty-six. So we start by cleaning number 26."

"What do we do then?"

A roll of the eyes and a count to 10.

"I don't know. How about we draw out another marble?" sneered Tom.

The work continued for a few weeks. Each day, Tom would draw out more numbers, and another house or two would be cleaned out.

Now Tom had a mate called Jacko. They had formed a close friendship when Jacko's intermittent school days coincided with Tom's occasional visits. Jacko was now the local council works supervisor.

"Mate. Need you to come down here and fix a few things. Might need a crew and a bit of roadbuilding equipment. There is a slab of beer in it."

Needless to say, Jacko arrived the next day with a crew to fix roads and bridges.

Another mate was Dino who had a brother with the electricity people. Poles and wires suddenly appeared out of nowhere. When a TV reporter visited Diamond Creek, Tom put out a call for Chippies, Sparkies and Dunny Divers. All were guaranteed a bed and as much beer as they could drink as long as they were still able to work the following day.

Insurance assessors were intimidated. Politicians were cornered. Government authorities were bamboozled. Within a few months, the metropolis of Diamond Creek was functioning again.

"What are you going to do now Tom?"

"I'm seeing the Mayor tomorrow about a little contract."

"What would that be?"

"Well, the bloody creek is choked with all that mud. It needs some serious earth moving to open it up again."

That was a few decades back. Tom still works for the council seamlessly flowing from one contract to the next. I guess it is our way of saying thanks.

So, before you say he is a cranky old bugger, find out the true story. He had everything against him when he entered this world but still saved the town. When the crisis arrived, one man rose to the occasion. It could only have been a man like Tom. He had weathered more storms than we will ever see.

You might say he is simple, but he sees simple solutions. You might say he is cranky, but he bulldozes through red tape. And one thing the whole town knows. He does have a heart of gold.

On a Sinking Raft in Shark Bay

Robert Anderson

Kew

In June 1956, as an RAAF driver/mechanic I was sent to the Royal Airforce camp at Onslow, above Exmouth on the Northwest coast of Western Australia, for one of the British Atomic Bomb Tests. The detonation would be on the Monte Bello Islands opposite the Onslow base. Prime Minister Menzies wanted some Australian participation in this British project and a few Australian airmen were provided by the RAAF to assist our English cousins at this time. My job was to operate the Leyland Airport Fire Engine in the case of an emergency!

Waiting for the right weather for the big blast gave us quite a bit of free time, although there was not a lot to do in this dry and deserted part of the country. One day I helped a group of RAF airmen make a raft from old planks and four gallon drums, and eventually became part of the 'crew'. It certainly floated and soon with five on board it was bobbing out to sea on the tide, but all too quickly. The current was taking us into the Indian Ocean! We were definitely not sailors but nobody was going to jump in and swim; we were just around from Shark Bay! The clouds were building and the wind strengthening, whipping up the waves. Our deck was moving, straining the joints. We had not considered the tide or the possibility of being taken out so far.

There was a navy frigate tied up at the wharf just around from the camp; had they seen us being sucked out to sea? There was a helicopter for emergencies; this was an emergency! The light was failing and we could barely see the shore. There was a storm coming from the west and we felt the chill of the wind. Nothing else could go wrong, other than lose somebody overboard! Almost from the start one of the men was standing in the centre, waving his arms and saying, "they must see us – they must see us". Beside him another was sitting, hugging his knees, eyes down, not speaking (was

he praying?). Someone was sitting on the edge, legs in the water (in shark territory!). Then somebody shouted "the bloody thing's sinking". Miserable with cold and fear, the raft rocking, trying not to fall off, and night approaching! To know it was going down and being one of several trying to stay afloat in the dark. This was hell! The caps on the drums were obviously letting water in; we tried to tighten those we could reach through the deck.

What do we do now; when do we leave a sinking raft? A couple were quiet or paralysed, but generally it was panic. By then we were all clinging to the planks, physically and mentally disoriented, and in very deep water! If anybody had a God, that was a good time to call him. Did we have an hour or just minutes? Then a truly amazing thing! Out there through the misty light, towards the islands; was that a sail heading towards us, at this time? How we shouted, how we waved. They saw us.

Two Aussie navy boys had sailed out to the Monte Bellos, and what should they find on their way back? A sorry but excited mob on a pitching craft, about to go under in the dark. It was a Cadet Dinghy as used by the Royal Brighton Yacht Club, a small, weekend sailor's boat designed to carry two people. We would make it seven, no, no, can't be done, and in this weather! (I still have nightmares and a horror of the deep). They would try! "Does anybody have sailing experience?" I confessed to a little. It was not just a matter of the boat pulling alongside to pick up the extras. Our lump of a craft could crash into the side of the rescue boat. And how to steer a small yacht in such a situation? Our sailors had to turn-about and pass by the raft a few times to affect the transfer; a difficult manoeuvre; it was not as if we were in a fixed position. At each pass one or two jumped in, thrashed to the side and scrambled aboard. I was told to get in last and man the jib, the little sail up front.

When it was my turn to jump, the decking was actually underwater. I think I pushed off so hard I practically skimmed over the surface to my space at the front, by the sail. The miracle was that this wonderful little boat had a flotation tank at each end and really couldn't sink. The two-man crew worked at keeping us level, not too much air in the main sail, and running straight for the eastern side of the bay. I strained on my rope to keep the jib sail flat. We hung on grimly, though a couple had bailing duties. There was no question of sailing to a point, all the effort was staying afloat in the bumpy waves. We would be glad to get off on the edge of the desert!

Soon we were surfing to the beach. We leapt out, immensely grateful to feel feet on solid sand even though it was a long way from home. We helped our brilliant sailors pull the boat high up on the shore; they planned to return for it the next day. The walk to camp was miserable, with obstacles and detours along the beach and we were very late for our evening meal. No complaints; what a story we had to tell. The next day we learned that the duty officer had been about to send out a motor launch or the helicopter to save us. 'They' had been watching and were just able to see the valiant rescue in the failing light.

On Being Forced to Part

Marianne Pauls

Mona Vale

As our small red car drove away, I stood outside in the carpark with my daughter and granddaughter, the three of us of us in silence. This day had been coming for a long time but somehow we had avoided thinking about the consequences for us all. We were motionless, unable to comprehend what the next step would be. We eventually went back into the office, feeling forlorn as we watched Mario drive away. He looked at us over his shoulder and waved at his three girls before heading off.

As I looked around the office sadness permeated my whole being. This was a time for goodbyes, our little family unit was to be turned upside down for who knows how long. Our family photographic business was being forced to close its doors due to the proliferation of mobile phones. These photos we had taken were a big part of our lives. Photos could now be taken instantly on your own mobile phone, there was no need to go to a studio to capture those special memories. After eight years of creating photos of people's lives, we were forced to walk away. Now the uncertainty of our future hung over us. The three of us stood there in tears and embraced each other. At that moment we realised what we would be losing, the love and stability that we had known all our lives.

Six months later I too was driving away. This time only two girls, my daughter and granddaughter were standing at the top of the drive as I left. It was even harder, they looked so lost and lonely as I drove away. I could hardly see them in the rear vision mirror as the car was packed tight. I was joining Mario in Sydney, where he had been living with friends while looking for work. The trip from Tasmania to Sydney by ferry and car gave me plenty of time to wonder what I would do next regarding work and where we would live.

I decided on that trip I was going to do something for me. Life had not been easy, family commitments meant I had to put my dreams on hold. For a long time I'd had the desire to work in Pastoral Care. I'd had the opportunity of a pastoral carer helping me, at a time when my dad died and since that time I'd wanted to work in this caring role.

As the hours passed on lonely stretches of highway my thoughts would take me from feelings of optimism to feelings of doubt. Being in my early 60s I needed to get work to help Mario in saving our family home back in Tasmania. We were very close to bankruptcy. The sheer weight of responsibility at times would cloud out any reasonable thoughts of what I wanted to do. I realised a huge dilemma was unfolding. The trip gave me the time to weigh up two different options. Could I get work that fulfilled a dream I'd had and at the same time provide for our family?

When I arrived in Sydney I realised the need to be earning a salary was urgent and immediate. It looked as though my dreams would have to be put on hold once more. However, I found that enrolling in a course for Pastoral Care at St Vincent's Hospital I would be able to work towards achieving my goal of Pastoral Care. Yet there was the nagging thought constantly in the back of my mind: Would I get enough work in this area to support my family with the financial dilemma we were in?

At the conclusion of the course I was employed in full time work but it was not the Pastoral Care work in a hospital setting of which I had been dreaming for so long. However I stayed in that role for 12 months and at the same time I continued to study to add to my qualifications. While doing a 'Diploma in Pastoral Care for the Ageing' I found another job working in the community providing home care to elderly residents. While working with the elderly another door opened and I realised I wanted to change direction. I learnt there was more Pastoral Care work available in aged care facilities. I also discovered I have a passion for helping these vulnerable folks. Once again I set about getting work in Pastoral Care but this time in aged care.

Another six months went by during which I found work as a Pastoral Carer. I now work four days a week in aged care facilities. I was told I would never get full-time work in Pastoral Care but this has not been the case. As I arrive home at the end of my eleven hour day I am a little envious of my friends, their constant overseas trips and endless time to pursue hobbies. I know I will not be retiring for some time but I am so grateful I did not give into self-doubt at a critical time in my life. My husband and I go back to see our daughter and granddaughter on a regular basis in Tasmania. Even though we live apart we have discovered that our small family unit has grown stronger as we all faced challenges over which we have no control.

One Step at a Time

Heidrun Rodach

Erina

Life in Australia was exciting. A new country, new lifestyle, new friends and then a new family helped me to put down my roots. Sadly, contact with my mother across the ocean became less and less regular over the decades. But we stayed in touch with the occasional visit and phone calls on birthdays and special events.

A few years ago, I was woken by a call from Germany. My mother was in hospital. Aged 82, she had fallen off her bike and broken her pelvis.

"No, you don't need to come. I will be ok once I get home," was her rather feeble reply when I told her that I had booked a flight.

I arrived in Germany and made arrangements to bring her home. Hospital bed as well as bathroom and walking aids needed to be ordered. I found a physiotherapist to help with rehabilitation at her house and took on the task to get her back on her feet. Apart from my daily walk while she rested during the day, I spent every minute with my mother. And for the first time in my life I listened to her.

Growing up during the Second World War, there were plenty of hardships. Food was scarce and only the inventive and resilient survived. Bargaining, swapping, stealing and starving was part of daily life. My mother remembered picking wild berries, collecting chestnuts in the forest and being given a pear as a special treat by her grandmother.

A bomb fell on her parents' house and she was under the rubble for days. It was during winter time. My mother was freezing and had given up hope of being found alive. Her brothers had joined the army and the three girls were hands on cleaning bricks and mixing mortar as the family slowly rebuilt the home.

Education was out of the question. The children were asked to contribute by working on the farm or doing social service for the elderly and infirm. Clothing was mainly hand-me downs, often repaired and refitted multiple times. Shoes were a luxury that nobody could afford.

But my mother thought that she was still one of the lucky ones, as they had a garden and were able to grow fruit and vegetables. She learned to preserve fruit and make jams. Cabbages were fermented for winter and potatoes and carrots were stored in the cellar. Nothing was wasted. Surplus was shared and exchanged with friends and neighbours. Scraps were fed to chickens and they in turn provided valuable eggs.

The start of married life was just as hard for her. My parents built their own house and contributed as much as they could of their own labour to cut costs. Second hand furniture was appreciated and a washing machine, TV and phone were luxuries that were bought much later.

My mother told me how they started their own business, producing wine and selling it from their cellar door. It was all hands on in the vineyards and in the cellar. Again, my mother had to skimp and save as the money was invested in growing the small family business.

My mother lost her husband when I thought she was old. Now I realise that she was still a young woman. A lot of responsibilities suddenly fell into her lap. She had to find a solution for the business as she was not able to work the vineyards and produce the wine.

All her life she nurtured her vegie garden. She grew everything we needed. She preserved, made jams and later filled the freezer in summertime for the colder months. In wintertime she sat on the sewing machine, doing repairs and making clothes for us until we demanded newer fashionable items. Socks were darned and old elastic replaced in undies. She cooked and baked, often late into the night, especially before Christmas to make the special Christmas cookies.

My mother has a strong faith and attended church regularly. But she also looked after the elderly in the neighbourhood with a pot of home-cooked stew or fresh cake.

The more I listened to her the more I recognised her courage, the resilience, the spirit, the commitment and most of all her endurance to carry on. Not once did I hear her complain, not once did she cry or whinge. She just carried on.

Slowly, with sheer determination my mum was back on her feet when I left to fly back to Australia. She even went back on her bike to go shopping, visit her doctor or look after dad's grave in the cemetery. "Why waste money on taxis or the bus?" was her philosophy. She loved her independence and did not want to bother anybody.

I visited her the following year. We spent time in the garden, where she continued to grow her own vegetables. I climbed the ladder to pick the ripe cherries which we preserved in jars. Strawberries and raspberries were either frozen or turned into jam. She still went out and picked the wild blackberries and blueberries and put them in fruit slices and cakes.

In the evenings we sat in the garden on her favourite bench to catch the last sunlight and she talked. One night, mum pointed to a contrail in the sky.

"I am thinking of you each time I see a plane overhead. It reminds me when you left to live in Australia."

Tears welled into her eyes and she swallowed hard.

"It's nice to have you here with me."

On my yearly visits I listened to more of my mother's stories. I recognised that she had hardships and trauma in her life. I also recognised that she did not dwell on it, but kept on going. She found an inner strength to address challenges at hand and simply continued to put one foot in front of the other as best as she could. One step at a time.

Panaceas

Martha Mollison

Pennant Hills

Jack was hostage to whichever one of his daughters darkened his door.

Each one powered up the rickety verandah steps with her clutch of self-constructed remedies and the next hours whooshed around him like ocean waves swirling and crashing on a solitary rock.

His loneliness let the prospect of a fresh visit override his disappointment and frustration over the last one.

Who would it be this time?

Melanie the Medical Inquisitor? "How's that toenail going? Still bothering you? Did you take your diuretic pill this morning? You've got an appointment with a skin specialist to check those horny things growing on the top of your ears. You're starting to look like a devil, Dad."

Sally the Sanitiser? "My feet are sticking to your kitchen floor! How could you let it get so bad?" Extracting a rusty bucket and ancient bottle of floor cleaner from under the sink, "Your sponge mop is useless! It's filthy and falling apart. Now I have to waste my time going to buy some."

Fran the Feeder? "Hi Dad, I've brought you some homemade soup. These containers can go in the freezer and the pot is for us today. Why are you scowling? Don't turn up your nose. Those green bits are kale. I saw online that it's very healthy. Might boost your immune system. You're never too old to try something new."

Alice the Activities Director? "Get your jacket on! We're going down the peninsula today. There's a new cafe there and we'll have just enough time for some morning tea and a beach walk. What on earth did you spill on your jacket? Where's the other one?"

Later, out at the coast, Alice pulled into a small carpark and said, "This is it, the *Cafe for Buoys and Gulls*. Cute, eh?" Jack silently opened his door and got out.

Alice clenched her teeth as she rounded the car to lock his door. He would never do it. "Anybody's going to steal your car they can get in it anyway," he always insisted.

"As if I could afford another one," she grizzled to herself, then quickstepped to catch up with him at the railing of the overlook.

"Look, sharks!" she pointed excitedly.

"Seals," he muttered. "It's always seals down here. They like to play with a flipper in the air." Thinks she knows everything, he thought.

As they headed for the entrance, the sunlight struck an array of pee stains on the front of his old work chinos.

"Why don't you wear the new pants I hemmed last week?" she fussed. Embarrassed she steered him toward a quiet corner of the deck.

"The usual?" He nodded.

She set the flat white and fruit scone in front of him and seated herself. She watched him add the sugars as he smiled at the seagull perched nearby.

"Not for you," he shook his crooked finger at it.

"Dad," she hesitated. Why was she the one to do this? "Dad, we think it's time you got some help around the house." He looked surprised.

"I'm ok. You girls help as you can."

"Yeah, but Dad, it's just not enough anymore. We think you need someone to come on a regular basis. To clean and do some cooking."

"I'm ok," he repeated. How to ruin a sunny outing! Don't want some busybody fussing in my place. "Clean? I'd never be able to find anything if some bloody tidier came through."

Alice took another swallow, assessing the shoreline and superstitiously waiting for a good wave. "We've found someone on Gumtree who could be a big help to you." She tried a bright smile. "Mel, met her yesterday. She's young, she's new in town and she's got a little three-year-old boy to look after. She's worked as a motel cleaner and also a short order cook."

Dad frowned, coughed, looked away.

"She's keen to get started," she pressed. "Couldn't you just give her a chance? You and Mum always helped people out when you could."

"Do I have any say in this?" he sighed.

Alice placed her hand over his. "Can you give it a fortnight's trial? I promise you can let her go then if you're not happy."

The following day a skinny young girl in tight jeans knocked on his screen door. Behind her was a shy little tyke.

"G'day, I'm Eva," she chirped. "Luke here and me," pulling him out from behind her left leg, "we've come to help you out."

Jack surveyed the small child's pale worried face. He was dwarfed by the battered backpack he carried and gripped a worn Teddy.

So began the trial. It couldn't be said that Eva was the best cleaner, and her cooking was nothing to rave about, but she came every day with a smile and brought whatever groceries he asked for. Even better, she respected his piles of stuff and worked around them. And she never criticised him.

Jack was a bit put off by the piercings and he didn't like the smoking either but she always did it out the back after she'd made them both a cuppa. Reluctantly he adjusted to carrot sticks and SAOs with Vegemite in front of Luke. Eventually he reconciled to sitting through the morning cartoons as well. But one day he tripped over the matchbox cars on the floor in front of the TV.

"How many times have I told you not to leave your cars here?" he roared.

Luke's bottom lip stuck out and he went very silent. Then he climbed up onto the sagging lounge next to Jack.

"I love you, Pop Pop," he whispered.

Jack put his arm around the tiny shoulders and pulled Luke in against his side. He stared out the window quietly until he felt Luke's body jerk and then soften into sleep.

"You're the one thing that keeps me going, Sonny Boy," he thought.

Plague Proportions

Jeanette Campbell

Booragul

Podgy cats snoozed under the lucerne hedge, one eye on the back door, radar ears, spasmodic waft of the tail. At the sudden click of the screen door they catapulted into action. A freshly trapped mouse was not much fun, but so much less trouble.

The cats too slow for that tasty treat would loll back into the shade and wait ... not for long. A few minutes later the scene replayed.

By the time the sun was high in the sky our eight cats were sated. Curling up in a quiet nook after their hard morning's work, they slept the afternoon away.

Not so the mice. With unrelenting regularity the traps under the kitchen sink went 'pop'. One more mouse, one more trap to reset. The old farmhouse gave much opportunity for the little pesky rodents to squeeze through some tiny hole, make their way into a palace of pleasure. Those who escaped the snare invited their friends.

The weather was warm, crops abundant, conditions just right. Mice overtook the house, the sheds, the grain bins, the haystacks, the machinery. Voracious appetites, motherhood at six weeks. Farmyard mayhem. In our rubber boots we stomped on neonates, buttons of flesh squirming in the hay. No-one pronounced we couldn't. The only good mouse, a dead mouse.

"I've been workin' me nut," Dad announced one morning as he rattled the cornflakes into his bowl; as Mum broke his eggs into the pan. He'd just come back from milking, metal bucket full, frothy on top.

"This mornin' I walked past that empty 44 gallon drum. You know, just as you go in an' get the chaff. Well, it was warm! So, I took the bit o' tin off the top and I couldn't believe me eyes! It was full o' mice! They poured out all over the place. What a pong! There was a bit o' crushed wheat in the bottom.

"Well, they won't be pourin' out o' there tomorro' mornin'". Dad was emphatic. He didn't divulge his plan, a man of few words. Mum didn't press him.

That night we heard the car being backed out of the garage. On looking through the window we saw him driving towards the cowshed. Glancing at each other, we shrugged. We never knew with Dad. He was cooking up something.

When he came back into the kitchen he didn't say a word, neither did we. Mum brewed him his usual cup of black tea and passed him the leftover custard from dinner. Making a little too much had become a tradition. Dad's nightcap.

Next morning, the routine began again. Milking first, then breakfast, then feeding the pigs, the horses, the chooks. But on this particular morning there had been an interlude. Dad came into the kitchen as usual, with the frothy, warm milk. But this time he had a grin on his face 'like a horse eatin' thistles', as was often his expression.

"The mice met their match this mornin'," he declared in triumph. He revealed his plan. Last night he had backed the car in under the awning of the shed, up close to the drum. He had then placed a pipe over the exhaust pipe, tilted the tin on the top of the drum and pushed the pipe way down.

On arriving at the shed at daybreak the drum was warm once again. The mice hadn't been observant and the die was cast. Dad slipped quietly onto the car seat, disengaged the clutch, and turned on the motor. Bingo! A drum full of dead mice! They didn't stand a chance. If only Dad could have done that to the whole shed! The small victory didn't mean a thing except it added another yarn to Dad's repertoire. A story to share with his mates in the years to come – about the mice that didn't get away.

The traps in the kitchen cupboard continued to pop, the cats became fatter, sleeker. The shops ran out of steel-wool to stop up the cracks and the mice still oozed their way in. Mum was at her wits end when she found a mouse nest in the linen cupboard.

As she pulled a rarely used towel from the bottom of the stack a mouse ran over her hand and down onto the floor. My startled mother stepped back and screeched, blood pressure rising! Regaining her composure, she removed the towels. She found husks, crumbs, fragments of straw, mouse droppings all tucked into a comfy nest in the corner. The cosy arrangement was swiftly dealt with, then Mum settled her nerves with a cup of tea. The twin-tub machine washed every skerrick of linen and every shelf was scrubbed before Mum was satisfied.

Then the defining moment came at last. The first frost of winter stopped the mice in their tracks. The traps stopped popping, the cats stopped snoozing and we cleaned the mouse contamination from every nook and cranny. The mouse plague was over.

Many years later, a small boy in my Sunday School class presented me with a tightly-wrapped gift. With eyes gleaming, he helped me tear away the festive paper. A large felt mouse peeped out, pink ears, pointy whiskers. A doorstep. I thanked the three-year-old profusely. "This will be so useful! What a beautiful present!"

He skipped across the room to go home, hand-in-hand with his mum, a cheeky grin.

I didn't realise how that mouse would propel me back to the farm, back to the dirt, the smell, the disarray.

Feeling guilty, a few days later I squeezed that poor felt creature into the back of the linen cupboard, tucked into a comfy corner behind a stack of towels.

Quarantine

Felicia Henderson

Annandale

When the doctors ran out of lifesaving ideas, Suzie wanted to screw up Rupert's Living Will and forget their reasoned, dignified discussions about not prolonging his suffering. Wanted to speed him down to ICU with five doctors working on him as they ran, like in TV medical dramas. Drips and tubes and IV equipment flying behind like deathly tackle. Intervening! Intubating! Resuscitating! Whatever it took.

"Charge!" they'd scream, defibrillator beseeching his heart to beat. And it would. They'd pump him full of drugs. Carry out procedures. And he'd slowly recover. As he always did. She'd sit by his bed in the ward, maneuvering herself around the comfortless hospital chair, tempting him with takeaway Thai and reviews of the latest films they'd go to when he was discharged. They'd patch him up and she'd take him home, a much coveted, if slightly shabbier, souvenir. But no. Not this time. The junior doctor in Ward 2 South on the ninth floor, ten hours into a twenty hour shift, wrote apologetically on a certificate 'Total organ failure'.

Staggering through the hospital the evening before (hang on, no, must have been a few evenings before, who knew) she'd glanced through the big viewing window in the lounge at the end of the ward – at the blooming city lights in houses where a thousand cheery meals were being consumed. Since then she'd been on Rupert's favourite chair, in the shape his body had traced on the weary fabric (The Shroud of Rupert). Her eyes unfocussed on the silk curtain she'd always called Bay of Thailand blue; it shimmered and changed hue at different times of day. Right now it had the greenish slick of that gasping canal she once saw in Bangkok.

The world beyond her window was suddenly full of things she lacked the skills to negotiate. Shopkeepers and funeral directors requiring financial transactions. Dorothy from next door asking where Rupert on his mobility scooter was, and when she explained (which felt so *strange*) enquiring about how she was travelling. Travelling (rhymed with unravelling) used to mean something fun, exotic, something you saved up for. Not spinning through each day like you were lost in space.

By request, flowers. Each day more appeared. Roses and freesias and lilies. So many Death Lilies. Their clamouring scents made the lounge room a garden. Terrible for her hay fever but she didn't care. Just took more tablets as her sinuses ached. At least that pain had a name and a cure. She grew into Rupert's flattened cushions, struggling to start his eulogy, selecting the best photos for the slideshow. You had to be careful with those pictures, those memories. If you breathed too deep you might swoon into their musty incense, unable to heave yourself out of that far too comfortable chair.

She shuffled through the photos. Someone had snapped a couple at their wedding. She, in that floaty dress with her hair flowing past those amethyst drop earrings. Rupert squirming in his tails, hair thick and dark and flipped up lackadaisically round his shoulders, fringe concealing his eyes. And the moustache! Who were they, these two, sleek, frolicking young otters, like a pair in a video of 'Feelin Groovy'. They'd gone out one day and bought those tails at an Op shop, called up their friends and after the registry office grabbed cheap wine and barbecue chicken on their way to a park.

Three years ago they'd been invited to a friend's daughter's wedding at a resort in Fiji and Suzie had politely RSVP'd that Rupert wasn't well enough. They might have managed it somehow, but it seemed absurd, expecting people to increase their carbon footprint so massively just so you could get an Instagram photo on a foreign beach, wanting you to go the distance for a marriage that quite possibly wouldn't.

After the funeral she shut herself in the house. There was no reason to go out. Her fridge and pantry were full of food and the bathroom cupboards packed with washing powder and toilet paper. Friends stopped by until they stopped coming. She turned off the news. Bushfires. People dying in China of a virus. It was all too depressing. She started rereading books that had once given her pleasure.

Finally, she ventured into the backyard, the garden shrouded in weeds and vines. A voice drifted over the fence. Dorothy's. Suzie hadn't seen her in a while. "I was on one of my cruises," it said, "and now I have to stay inside for two weeks. Quarantine. I've got no food. Or toilet paper."

Suzie had read about the virus spreading but secretly thought *I don't even care if it kills me*. "Well," she called back, a tad reluctantly, "you'd better write me a shopping list then."

She drove to the shops with the credit card Dorothy put under the mat, leaving her groceries on the front doorstep. Filled her scripts from the chemist. The next day she left some jam drops made from grandma's recipe. The following day her legendary shortbread. In the next few weeks, then months, they shared a biscuit and a cup of tea in the backyard each afternoon, the fence between them.

She began to recall how the garden had looked before Rupert got sick, and tugged away some of the vines. Found his pruning saw in the shed. Dorothy reached over and handed her cuttings. They stood on stepladders and looked over the fence and admired each other's gardens, just like she remembered her grandmother's friends doing, when they came to visit.

Dorothy had a little plaque hanging off her bird box that said 'The best place to dig for God is a garden.'

The Chinese Tallow Tree dropped its leaves and autumn sun flecked the yard like confetti. She raked the leaves quickly before they festered, turning them into compost. Dorothy's cuttings thrived.

And then one day she located the spot, where she'd dig the hole to put Rupert's ashes, and plant his tree.

Rebound

Anne Joyce

Valla Beach

For someone with mental health issues, my choice of course with our local U3A group might be considered somewhat risky.

"Jocelyn, do you even know what Quantum Consciousness is?" My young friend's voice was sceptical. "What a waste of time, a bunch of oldies sitting around, talking about *living in the present* and *becoming more self-aware*. Are you sure Turkish Cooking wouldn't be a safer bet for you?"

I could feel my defensive juices rising. As usual Margo knew what buttons to push. Not that I'm not grateful for her company. She's a conscientious carer, practical and as a live in companion a great help. It's just that she's so blunt, lacking sensitivity and downright rude.

"That's the point of doing the course, Margo. Learn something new."

"Bit late now, isn't it? Thought you'd be content just to watch the telly or play cards with the others at the Senior Citz.'

I swung my bag onto my shoulder and headed out the door.

"Shouldn't you take your walker?" she yelled. Yet another bone of contention.

I'm warmly greeted as I stumble into the hall using my walking stick. Margo's probably right but I'm self-conscious about my newly acquired wheelie walker, even though I'm convinced that the stability and improved posture it provides is worth the expense. But these are people I've known for 15 years and I cringe at the anticipated questions and sympathetic murmurs; the offers of assistance to which I react most ungraciously. I'm turning into a bitch.

Paul, the tutor introduced himself as a retired psychiatrist, though I suspect, like actors, psychiatrists never really retire they just get older.

"I have no idea where to begin," he announced. "So today we'll start at the end, work backwards to the beginning and spend the next five weeks filling in the middle."

I liked him immediately. Each week he turned up, barefoot in shorts and colourful shirts; his greying hair in a pony-tail or a topknot perched on the top of his head.

He prefaced each session with comments like:

"I woke this morning and thought '*what's the point? What do I talk about today?*'"

Leaving twenty-three U3A'ers silently nonplussed, waiting expectantly for an answer. Sessions inevitably ran over time. The topic gathering momentum after a two-hour warm up. Each week we returned, intrigued and eager to continue this exploration into the 'journey of ageing'. We expressed what growing older meant, practised meditation, struggled to understand deep and meaningful concepts and generally came away wiser, though somewhat befuddled.

I've a degenerative condition, my mobility deteriorating daily and have increasing pain. Everything is getting harder to do. I swing from just coping to the blackest of depression, angry and bitter. I can't live alone and kicked up a real stink when an aged care facility was offered. My family feel they have provided the best option with Margo employed as my keeper. They see her as efficient and professional and assume my negative comments just another indication of my bad temper and resentment at becoming impaired.

My previous life of physical activity and social interaction seriously curtailed, I realise it would be all too easy to become a recluse, but the thought of spending more time in Margo's company hastened my intent to sign up for as many activities as I could muster energy for: Play reading, poetry group, book club, choir, ukulele lessons and concerts. At least, that's what I signed up for. Totally unrealistic. I'm lucky if I can manage one outing a week. So, here I am, floundering around in Quantum Consciousness.

I don't pretend to understand everything covered in the sessions, but something resonated as last week's final exercise drew to a close. I wrestled with it for a couple of days before sharing with our worthy tutor. I wanted him to know that something he initiated had had effect.

I took a deep breath and focused on unravelling my thoughts into a cohesive explanation.

"I have a track record of achievement Paul. Always striving, loving challenge. Onward and upward my motto. But, like a falling star, I'm currently tumbling, turning somersaults in the dark; purposeless, futile. I'm struck down, physically incapable, mentally worn out by the struggle to function. Angry as I resent the condition defining this alien me. Exhausted from putting a positive spin on my existence for those who know and love me.

Who am I? Where have I gone? Where is the real me?

The space conjured up by your meditation connected me to an entity of profound wisdom.

My other self? A God moment? Defies definition.

I heard clearly: *"Wait, hope, be reassured. Your core being – the real you – is safe, intact. All will be well. Know that you are nothing but love and loved."*

You provided the platform, enabling this complex, comforting insight to occur, flooding my heart with thanksgiving for the past and hope for the future.'

Paul took my hand. "Thanks for your wonderful and articulate feedback.

"You understand everything and more, of what I'm trying to communicate. You're in a difficult place physically and emotionally, hugely challenged. I'm doing my best to help face those challenges head on rather than deny or avoid them."

"The Big Learning is that we are not the body. 'We are the energy field that 'contains' the body. You've felt that now.

"Godliness isn't an experience. It's Who You Are. That's Home.

"Your Wisdom Voice has spoken Truly, Clearly, as it always does when we focus.

"Wait and Listen. As we evolve the emphasis gradually shifts from doing to Being."

At that moment I realised Paul's apparent vagueness and bizarre approach was an illusion. This man knows exactly what he's doing.

Gratefully I embrace this point of stillness found in the heart. Free of thought, tranquil and blissful, it births the creative impulse; the immortality of love which transcends time and place.

This is my immortality.

Roll Reversal

Tracey Edstein

Raymond Terrace

As an only child Rose was used to the inference that growing up she'd been 'spoilt' – 'indulged' – even 'ruined', one so-called friend said! Truly! However, it really grated on her when her mother started to make similar not-so-subtle suggestions. After all, hadn't she been the spoiler? While Kathleen lived safely in Dublin, she had mastered the art of Skype since the husband she'd nursed for many years passed away. While Rose felt that Skype's main purpose was for Kathleen to see her grandchildren – Lily, Joachim and Caleb – grow and learn, Kathleen had started to see it as a window into her daughter's life, seemingly free of many of the constraints Kathleen had experienced raising Rose in Ireland.

As children do, Rose quickly picked up on this inchoate tension and played on it.

"Where's Mummy?" Kathleen would say as she read a story to the wee ones, as she liked to call them.

"She's having coffee with her friend Meg!"

"She's having some me-time!"

"She's having a bath!"

On the occasions when this was true, Rose's easy-going husband Simon was invariably in attendance, but Kathleen was old-fashioned enough to think mothering was a 24/7 role.

"You're living in cloud cuckoo land," she'd say. "Life wasn't meant to be easy. You'll have no resilience if something goes wrong in your perfect life!"

After watching one too many of those Tourism Australia ads, Kathleen decided it was time to head down under. When she announced this via Skype, Rose had to stifle a sigh – and then a news item popped into her head... "Let's not rush into anything Mum – haven't you heard about that virus – what's it called – corollavirus? It might not be the best time to travel?"

"Don't be such a panic merchant – I'll be fine."

Famous last words.

Just before Kathleen left Dublin on her first trip to Australia, a two-week isolation period was imposed on all travellers coming from or passing through affected areas because of the outbreak of coronavirus. Rose was horrified.

By the time Kathleen arrived – coughing, but surely just from the inflight aircon? – Rose had organised accommodation at a nearby Airbnb. She'd cooked a variety of dishes and divided them into meal-sized containers. She'd stocked up on Kathleen's favourite Australian chardonnay, and Tim Tams, and necessities like toilet rolls, tissues and hand sanitisers. She'd be sure to tell Kathleen how early she'd needed to be at the supermarket for those items.

Rose was a teacher at a school a few suburbs away – in the opposite direction from her children's school. Each child had at least one after school activity – tennis, netball, swimming. Each activity took Rose to a different suburb. And as the virus took hold, the necessity to be vigilant about hygiene became apparent. Rose knew she sounded like a broken record as she reminded her children about careful handwashing but she didn't care.

Ironically, Kathleen still needed Skype to stay in touch, even though she was only around the corner. However, she was frustrated by how difficult it was to find time to chat to Rose, Simon and the children when they were in the same time zone! Not only did she have to take into account school/work hours, after school commitments and Rose's meticulous schedule where household chores were concerned, she also had to allow for Rose's (and at times Simon's) regular forays to increasingly remote stores for increasingly mundane items: pasta, tinned anything, hand sanitiser, flour (for goodness' sake) and of course, toilet rolls! Initially Kathleen was dismissive of Rose's determination that her family be well provided for; "You'll manage; just stay home and stay safe." But as Rose pointed out, Kathleen had everything she needed, sourced before the rot set in. "When you begin your last toilet roll Mum, you'll get it."

Kathleen's illness began with a whimper but quickly proceeded to a bang. To spare you gruesome details, gentle reader, let's simply say that while it was unrelated to coronavirus, Kathleen's malady was real, unmistakable and demanding where those prized rolls were concerned.

Suddenly she was more needy than Lily, Joachim or Caleb. She was weak, she couldn't eat and had to force herself to drink to avoid dehydration. She couldn't do any chores like washing or cleaning, and Rose was obsessed with the idea that Kathleen's illness made her more vulnerable to the coronavirus. She issued strict instructions, regularly, about handwashing, fluids, rest and more handwashing!

Rose visited Kathleen daily, extreme caution her accessory of choice. She whisked in, deposited washing, lemonade, fruit and whatever else she thought was needing, mopped at a rate of knots and whisked out again. Contact continued to be solely through Skype. It was for the best, according to Dr Rose.

As Kathleen slowly recovered, she began to feel lonely. The idea of being confined to home, even someone else's home, was not nearly as appealing as it sounded.

However, she had to admit that despite a sick mother, three children, a husband, a full-time job, a home, various family commitments *and* a pandemic, Rose simply powered on. Kathleen had been concerned that if she contracted the virus, or merely a severe case of exhaustion, it would all fall apart – and Kathleen might fall off the radar. However, she was beginning to realise that no virus would be game to invade Rose's carefully curated existence – and there was great comfort for Kathleen in knowing that.

Who was it who boldly suggested that Rose lacked resilience?

Secrets of Life

Roslyn Lindsay

Spring Ridge

We all have secrets that help keep us striving through life to get to where we think we want to be. We meet lots of hurdles and we all have our own individual stories.

I remember when my late husband and I watched a great movie, *City Slickers*, and Jack Palance was the star of the show. Jack was the tough old cowboy type, tall and lean and a man of few words. He spoke of *The Secrets of Life* but he died on the movie without really telling us what the Secret of Life was.

My husband Reg was a prolific song writer and a huge Country Music Star. We married in 1988 and I became his Manager which I might add was a huge job for a girl like me from country Victoria and not really knowing anything much about the Entertainment Industry.

Reg guided me through what he needed me to do and I became more confident with my new role and really enjoyed putting shows together, booking musicians for recording studios to putting albums together and all the live performances from Rodeo to Town Halls and the big clubs and casinos it was a fantastic lifestyle.

Everything was going along just wonderfully until tragedy struck while on tour and Reg suffered a cerebral haemorrhage and was transferred by Air Ambulance to John Hunter hospital. The shock for me was almost unbearable, it was touch and go for 24 hours. While the Doctors were deciding what we need to do, Reg suffered a second haemorrhage.

The medical staff didn't think he would survive the night, but he did. He didn't give up and neither did I.

He was in hospital for six weeks before they could operate. The surgery was successful but not without more complications. Reg was suffering severe seizures so back for more surgery to rectify this. After many days into months Reg was well enough to come home.

He had to re-learn all the skills we take for granted, the struggle to get his strength back and to work on his memory was enormous. We kept striving towards the day he could go back on stage and perform as he used to.

That day finally came after twelve months of hard work and self belief. He was so strong-willed and that is what got him through this devastating part of his life.

As the years rolled on Reg's health deteriorated and I needed more help from wonderful nurses and agency staff to help me nurse Reg in our own home which by this stage was somewhat like a small hospital ward. Reg never gave up and always believed he would get better each day but that wasn't the case. There were many trips back to hospital and I learned much about health and what to do to make sure Reg was as comfortable as I could make him.

The toll of caring full-time for my darling husband was starting to show. Every day was a challenge but I knew I had to be strong and not give up, I couldn't ... Reg needed me so much just for his survival. What kept me going was music and my horses. I would have a carer come in twice a week so I could do the shopping and go for a ride out in the bush that surrounded our home.

Christmas 2002, I was able to take two weeks of respite and Reg went to a nursing home on the coast and I was able to go to a rodeo camp-draft in the New Year.

I remember Reg asked me please don't leave me here, he knew he was at a nursing facility and it really bothered him. I reassured him that it was only for a few days so I could recover and have some time off to regenerate my batteries so I could continue to look after him in our own home, this made him very happy and he knew it would only be a temporary situation. As it turned out I was wrong!

I was out in the arena getting ready for my turn in a camp draft event at Stroud National Finals Rodeo when I asked my horse to extend to a fast canter when all of a sudden I thought 'wow my mare has stumbled'. It all happened so quickly the next thing I knew I was flat on my back in severe pain and not able to draw breath. I thought oh my God what just went wrong?

The first-aid people were straight to my side and worked on me to keep me breathing. Once they had assessed me it was thought best to call the Westpac helicopter and off to John Hunter hospital. The doctors explained to me that I was seriously injured and had broken ribs, punctured collapsed lung, a slash in my spleen and very severe bruising all over my body.

Over the next couple of days I had a set back with my spleen rupturing so off for emergency surgery. My mother was called and my sister and brother all made the trip up from Victoria to look after me.

I was in hospital for three weeks and once I was sent home I was not in good shape. I was very worried about Reg and knew I had to work on getting well and regaining my strength so I could have him back home with me but this was not to happen.

Reg survived for a further five years before he passed away in hospital aged 79 years.

I have built a barn on my ranch and called it The Reg Lindsay Memory Barn to house all of his memorabilia. I take each day as it comes.

One lifetime just isn't enough.

Make the most of your life. Happy trails.

Simple Life of Mary

Kris Revson

East Ballina

As if it was not enough to put up with a plain name like Mary, my whole life was full of hurdles. As soon as things were going smoothly, I had to jump through new hoops. The first hurdle, if this is what you call it, happened when I discovered, at the age of five, I was adopted.

"We always loved you like a daughter", my parents tried to reassure me with well-worn platitudes.

I felt abandoned. I vowed in my childish way to look for my real mother.

We lived in a brick bungalow in a leafy cul-de-sac. My adoptive parents were not rich, but we had good food and everyday comforts, except love.

I always liked sweets. I remember coming home from school and smelling delicious cakes as soon as I entered our neighbourhood. In our kitchen there were muffins or banana bread cooling on a cake rack, bowls of frosting to lick and my mother's speciality, boiled lollies, to try.

My school uniforms stretched to the max no longer fitted me. My nickname was 'thunder thighs'. That was difficult enough, but the real challenge started when the kids at school, probably overhearing their parents, discovered that I was adopted. There were whispers, and everyone scattered when I tried to join them. Left alone, I escaped to my favourite spot under the jacaranda tree. I dealt with loneliness and rejection by inventing amusing stories and dreaming about being reunited with my real mother.

When I was fourteen, my adoptive father died. Despite being a good student, I had to leave school and start working. My hopes about a career in nursing gone. People told me I was lucky to work in a local bank, if I worked hard, this was a career ladder many girls dreamt about.

Happy to earn money and pay my board, I started saving too. Then I encountered Mr Brown, 40, married with children. I thought he was an old man. Every time I went to the store room, he would appear out of nowhere and brush against me. His vile smelling suffocating breath made me gag. I could tell no one, so I took matters into my own hands.

Next time he followed me, I stood wedged into a tight corner. When he approached me, I pushed the stack of boxes towards him. He wobbled and fell with half of the store room paraphernalia toppling over him. I didn't think it hurt him and tried not to giggle. The next morning he gave me notice. I found a job in a cake shop. They knew me well.

Soon I was old enough to leave home, and the best way to do it was to become a nanny or a housekeeper. I found an advertisement, 'Nice family needs help'. They asked me, "Can you cook? Do you like children?" and "Can you start next week?" I smiled and answered in the affirmative. My new job gave me all I needed, including unlimited access to the pantry.

Even though with my voluptuous figure I would not see myself as desirable, I had a boyfriend. We dated for a while. He used to say "there is more of you to love," so it wasn't a surprise when he asked me to marry him.

We laughed and ate a lot. I cooked and baked all the time. We enjoyed our life as a couple, except my weight was piling up. We tried but couldn't fall pregnant. Perhaps it was the reason my husband left me a few years after we were married. His new wife was young and skinny. They had a child straight away.

I had time to look for my mother. After years of frustration and many dead ends, I discovered her identity and visited her grave. No longer busy searching, I had time to follow my dream of becoming a nurse. I enrolled in the nursing training in a psychiatric hospital.

I was happy living alone and working hard, always ready to cover extra shifts, weekends and holidays for people who wanted to spend the time with their families. The last few weeks before my retirement, I was tired and dizzy. I always dreamt about travelling and made my list of places to visit, but I needed to rest first.

I don't remember how it happen, but I remember waking up in a hospital connected to machines which were making humming noises. The smell of disinfectant was overpowering. I heard people talking:

"Massive stroke, she will never walk or talk again. It would have been kinder to let her go."

"I am here! I can hear you," the voice inside my head screamed.

"My last challenge," I thought, "and with my lifetime training in overcoming adversity, it should be easy." A small doubting voice in my head disagreed.

My brain seemed to work well. I amused myself by inventing happy stories just like I used to when I was young. Now and then a niggling doubt would surface. "How am I going to cope?" I would remind myself again and again, "you did it before ... you will do it again."

One day a nurse noticed my eyes moving. "She is trying to communicate. Perhaps we can help her?"

I could not believe my luck. I became involved in a trial of a new computerised communication tool for people who, like me, had a diagnosis of a 'lock in syndrome'. Soon I could type on the computer using my eyes. I could 'talk' now, tell people how I felt, and type funny stories. Everyone laughed and came back asking to read my next story. My new nickname was 'writer in residence'.

After the stroke, my life was simple. I didn't know what would happen next, or if my training in hurdle jumping would be enough to sustain me? I hoped the answer would be 'Yes', but only time will tell.

Soldiering On

Elizabeth Bankes

Bondi Junction

My mother's advice for facing difficulties was to 'pull your socks up and get on with it.' She grew up in a mining village in Yorkshire, where there was one toilet for the whole street. At 14, she won a scholarship, but then the Great Depression came and she was forced to leave school and work as a shop assistant.

Dad, a Lancastrian, was a teacher at a grammar school in Rotherham, Yorkshire. He first saw Mum at a dance in 1939. He'd got to know her mother (Granny) as he was serving in the Home Guard at the beginning of the war and met Granny who was a plane spotter. Being a teacher meant Dad wasn't called up at the beginning of the conflict. He asked Granny if he could write to her daughter and ask her out. Granny was thrilled and not long after, Sam and Lois began 'stepping out'. They married in 1940.

Soon after their marriage, Dad was told to catch the train to Catterick training camp, and not long after that he was sent overseas fighting for the British Army. He served in North Africa and Italy and Mum didn't see him again for over four years.

I grew up listening to Dad's endless stories of his experiences during the war. I could almost repeat verbatim his description of the landing at Salerno or how the Italian women would do anything for something to eat or a pair of stockings. Mum on the other hand, rarely mentioned what the war was like for her.

Looking back, I realise that in many ways, those years could have been worse for her than Dad. Being the one left behind seems harder to bear than for the one who leaves. Despite the danger Dad faced, he appeared to have a good time. Like many of the troops, he had a mate whom I met many years later and together Eric and Dad saw the sights of Rome, Padua and Florence. They swam in the

Mediterranean off Tunisia and 'Dog Rot' the army cook fed them well. Dad had dysentery once while travelling on a troop train but other than that it all sounded like Boy's Own Adventure.

Mum, however, was alone in their house in Rotherham. Luckily, she had Peter the dog who knew the difference between the German and British bombers. Peter warned Mum with barks when German bombers were approaching well before the air-raid sirens started but was silent if they were Allied planes. As soon as Peter began to bark, Mum knew to hide under the stairs. There was an Anderson shelter in the garden but she preferred to stay in the house and hope that the stairs would protect her and Peter from the bombs.

One of the few times Mum acknowledged the war was when she heard police or ambulance sirens. The piercing sound brought back memories of bombers heading for Sheffield to destroy the factories, or when German Messerschmitts were flying over to spray their bullets on the houses.

During the war, Mum worked in the office at Steel, Peech and Tozer. It was an armaments factory situated between Sheffield and Rotherham. It can't have been easy for a young, attractive redhead to walk home in the blackouts or to hear the air-raid sirens start in the dark streets.

When Mum married Dad she was 24 while he was in his early 30s. A young woman in an office with an absent husband was prey for the men who had not gone overseas and she had to close the door to those who knocked hoping for a bit of action.

Luckily for Mum she had family living in Rotherham but she must have had lonely nights, as well as the fear that her husband would not return or return as a different man. Mum was aware that loneliness drove some women into the arms of civilians or the

American servicemen who came to assist in the D-Day invasion. But she was true to Dad and even after he died at the age of 94 and she went into a retirement home, she still rejected the advances of the few men who lived there.

Dad was the only one in both families to be called up despite there being five married sisters between them. None of the siblings had any idea what it was like for Mum to be left behind.

Finally, in early 1946, after Dad was demobbed, he arrived home and in 1948 my brother was born. I came along in 1951 and in 1955 we migrated to New Zealand.

Mum listened to Dad's war stories as if she had not heard them before and sympathised with his weak bowel – caused by the bout of dysentery – his soldiery mannerisms, walking as if on parade, trimming his pencil moustache, frequently polishing his burnished brogues, that had been engrained during his training. To many women the constant reminiscences about the war would have driven them mad but Mum appeared not to mind.

When I was old enough to appreciate it, Mum showed me the small recording Dad made while he was in North Africa. To listen to it, the needle of the record player had to be held down onto the cardboard as it was the size of the centre of an LP.

To my dismay, I've never been able to find the recording again. Perhaps they threw it away or it was hidden in a book that I got rid of when they died. That was the only time Mum heard Dad's voice in over four years. He spoke about the colour of her hair, how much he missed her and how he hoped he would see her again soon. For a man who was not overtly romantic it was a lovely recording. Mum died at 92 and as she lay dying she sang their favourite wartime song, *We'll meet again*. I hope that's the case.

Standing Tall

Lyn McKinnon

Temora

It's Saturday morning and my dog and I are taking a leisurely stroll around Lake Centenary near Temora, NSW. Occasionally I stop to have a yarn to other walkers but the atmosphere is peaceful with only the water birds floating on the water in front of me and the sound of snapping twigs under my feet as I walk under the gumtrees.

Then I hear it, a sound that seems to come from the depths of my soul. A droning noise, that wafts with a familiarity I can't quite put my finger on. The noise looms louder and between two gum trees I spot a silver shadow flying very low in the sky.

I know what it is instantly. As it slowly flies across the sky in front of me I recognise the old De Havilland 'Tigermoth' biplane, a relic from World War II. Straight away my mind takes me back to my childhood, waiting nervously on our property airstrip with my brother, for our first fly in an aeroplane exactly the same. While we are waiting the 'Tigermoth' is being put through its pre-flight checks and is being entrusted to take the kids for their first flight. The butterflies in my stomach join me for a free ride as I pull on the big leather flying jacket and goggles to keep out the cold. The cockpit is open to the elements and situated between the top and bottom wings. As I climb onto the bottom wing I am reminded by the pilot not to step off the walk-way or I will fall through the fabric wing!

Dad's mate stands at the front and heaves on the huge wooden propeller and the aeroplane sputters into life while the 'chocks' are pulled away from the wheels and we're off up the paddock. The old aeroplane rattles and shakes across the bumpy ground until its wheels lift into the still morning air and we are floating across the countryside.

My dog tugs at his lead and I'm drawn back to the present, on the walking track as the noise fades into the distance. As I follow the track around the Lake, walking in the peace and quiet I am reminiscing and realising what a great honour it is to be the daughter of Bob Stewart, my Dad, who helped pioneer aviation in Australia for people with disabilities. After a serious car accident in 1957 he became a paraplegic which grounded him. The accident severed his spinal cord and he could no longer walk, let alone fly an aeroplane, and especially the 'Tigermoth' he loved so much.

In the 1950s this prognosis meant being institutionalised. Neither he nor Mum wanted that for him, so after eight months in hospital he came home to their property in south western New South Wales. There were no social security payments in those days or government assistance so Dad's family helped with the day to day running of the farm while Dad concentrated on exercising his shrinking muscles and built up his arms so he could walk on crutches and be able to manage the physical challenges that were constantly part of his day. With no automatic cars he bought an old ex-Army Willy's Jeep and quickly manufactured hand controls and got his Drivers Licence back. This was a huge achievement but only a stepping stone to Dad.

Flying had always been his passion and he wanted to 'soar with the eagles' again. He had been in the RAAF at the end of the War and had lots of mates with their 'wings'. Of course Dad and all our family were still enjoying our weekend flights in the old 'Tigermoth' but Dad needed his mate to fly for him as his legs were lifeless and it required strong leg action on the rudders during landing and take-off to control the aeroplane.

Amazingly, the next step in his bid to regain his 'wings' came from a very unusual direction. The Victa Company, the Australian company which manufactured the famous Victa lawnmower, financed the first completely built Australian light aircraft, the Victa Airtourer. Dad loved its high performance in the air, with its low wing, fully aerobatic capabilities and decided to buy one. As a consequence, and to help Dad in his bid to regain his Pilot's Licence, the Victa company invited Dad to contribute in their advertising campaign.

From then on there were months of negotiations with the Department of Civil Aviation, medical and design experts. A design modification to the foot rudders was completed where they were converted to a hand control on the instrument panel and finally passed by the Department of Civil Aviation. Dad's instruction flying hours were undertaken with a Senior Flying Instructor who came to live with us on the property for six weeks in which time Dad learned to fly his Victa Airtourer with its new modification.

After two years of trials and many disappointments with official decisions, the 'red letter day' arrived! Dad drove back from the road mail box to our house with his Unrestricted Pilots Licence in his hands and a smile a mile wide on his face! The 'air' was his again!

I now realise, following my reminiscing during my morning walk, that through my Dad's achievements and struggles he paved the way for many disabled people to be able to follow their dream of flying. Today there is an organisation called 'Wheelies with Wings – Flying Scholarships for the Disabled' which I was fortunate enough to witness one of their Presentation Days at the Temora Airport.

On that very special day tears of joy flowed as I watched the newly qualified disabled pilots all take off from the Airport.

Stripped Bare

Mark Rutherford

Cabarita

'Sarge' ... Nobby Clark, and his wife Beryl slowly made their way to the seating outside the supermarket. Beryl rolled slightly on her dicky knee and Nobby's leathery face held a permanent half grimace of pain as he dragged their faded old shopping cart, with one crooked wheel, behind him. It had become their daily ritual to check out the shelves of the store for life's essentials.

With various grunts and groans they eased themselves onto the bench seat bathed in sunshine. Before entering the supermarket they would catch their breath. They had no expectation of this visit being any more successful than the previous ten. They nodded at the familiar face of Charita Kumar, the supermarket cashier as she stepped out for a break. Charita inhaled a big breath which made her light brown skin tinge with colour, accentuating her beauty. She was richly clad in a gorgeous sari of bold colours and glistening threads. Her sandalled feet peeped out with brightly coloured nail polish and small gold rings adorning the toes.

"Hi Sarge, Beryl. Isn't it a glorious day? It is bedlam in there. So good to get outside for a few minutes. Are you cold, Beryl?" she asked observing the soft white gloves Beryl was wearing that reached to her elbows.

"No Love, just with this virus thing, I saw on the telly that they recommend wearing gloves. I haven't worn gloves since Nobby was Grand Master and that was 40 years ago! But I still had 'em."

Charita smiled. "They look beautiful but make sure you wash them every day."

"O'course Love." Beryl looked a little miffed at the advice.

Nobby broke into the conversation. "Any point us going in, Char? We're looking for the usual – toilet paper, wet wipes, bread. I'm okay, ex-army and all, wiping me bum on newspaper but Beryl draws the line."

Charita looked sad. "I'm sorry Sarge, I think the shelves were stripped bare by 7.30 this morning. As soon as I finish my break I'll go and check. Save you the effort."

"Thanks Love," replied Sarge. "You know I was born in the Depression, a kid during World War II, fought in Korea, raised two sons and the girl, lost our youngest boy before his time," he heaved a big sigh which caused his gut to rise and fall. "I have never seen anything like this. Never felt so bad. Never felt that I couldn't look after Beryl. It is just so hopeless. Never known a worse time."

Beryl reached across and placed her hand on the old man's knee. "It's alright, Love, you'll do me. If it has to be newspaper, so be it. I ain't about to ditch you for a younger man over how I wipe me bum," she cackled.

Charita rose and took her leave. Through the window the couple watched her go behind the counter, chatting to the other cashiers.

"Thought she was going to check the shelves for us," grunted Beryl. Nobby just shook his head in resignation. Groaning, he rose slowly. "Come on Love, let's get this over with. I'll buy the paper on the way out if the shelves are bare."

As they entered the store, making their slow progress through the throng of people, Charita beckoned them over. Nobby looked exasperated. He was going the other way, but he altered course towards the girl, with Beryl following dutifully.

"Mr and Mrs Clark, this is the store manager Mandeep Patel."

"Pleased to meet ya," responded Nobby stretching out his meaty hand. Mandeep smiled but did not take the offered hand. "Oh yeah, sorry. Forgot. Old habits, you know?" said Nobby withdrawing his hand and looking at it as if it had betrayed him.

Shoppers lining up with their near empty shopping trolleys watched impatiently as the store manager ushered the couple to the front of the checkout queue, Nobby struggling to get his old shopping cart to follow instructions.

"Mr and Mrs Clark, Charita has told me how hard you are finding it, at the moment, with the virus scare and lack of supplies. I've got a few things here for you to take with you," said Mandeep. He reached under the counter and offered up two large toilet rolls. The crowd of shoppers went quiet. Then he reached under again and produced a packet of wet wipes and a bottle of hand sanitiser. Heads began to peer over the counter to see what else was hidden in this magic cave. Finally, he reached in once more and produced a box of disposable latex gloves. Packing all the items into a plastic bag he gave them to Charita who, lifting the vinyl top of the old shopping cart, dropped them in.

Nobby and Beryl watched in silence. Nobby's eyes glistened and he cleared his throat loudly. Shoppers closest to him stepped back a pace. Nobby looked at the young manager. With a crack in his voice he said, "Ya didn't have to do that, young fella. We'll be alright. What about all these people?" he gestured with a sweep of his arm.

"It is my honour Mr Clark. At times like these we need to stick together, look after those who looked after us for so long. And besides, we couldn't have Mrs Clark getting those beautiful gloves dirty, could we?" he smiled.

The store had been silent. Then came a single clap hesitatingly followed by two more before the whole crowd started to applaud. Nobby and Beryl looked like they wanted to disappear but offered self-conscious smiles to everyone. A small boy, pushed forward by his Mum, carried a prized loaf of bread to Beryl and offered it to her. Beryl's face dissolved. She so longed to hug the youngster.

Nobby and Beryl walked out of the store, shoulders back, lightness in their step, waving cheerily to Charita and Mandeep.

"What great times we live in, Love!" said Nobby, taking Beryl's hand.

The Battle for Magnolia Acres

George Lancaster

Newtown

Easy pickings, think the two young men standing under a tree across the street from Magnolia Acres. Break in, steal the meds, make a quick getaway. Resistance is slim to none – comatose geriatrics, maybe a night nurse or two. They're practised at it. But not here. They have no clue of Lachlan 'Bull' Galloway. Boss of the Rheumy Renegades.

"What time you got?" Carl's been asking every ten minutes.

"Mate, ya jess asked me. Chill." Max taps his watch. "When it's time, I'll tell ya."

"Dja see that?" Carl points to a darkened window. "Swear the curtain moved. Think they're watchin' us?"

"I said chill!" Max wonders again about bringing Carl. His fidgeting is making him nervous. "Trust me. No one's watchin'."

Agnes 'Cutter' Green steps back from the window glass, her night-vision goggles trained across the street. She'd earned her nickname the hard way in a career felling trees in Tasmania. Now 75, her hands can still crush apples, though these days she makes sure they're half rotten before attempting the parlour trick.

"Bull," she whispers into the headset. "Think I may 'ave been spotted." An axe rests against her wheelchair.

Lachlan's 80-year-old voice erupts. "Don't matter, Cutter! We got this!" He's been hard of hearing, and loud talking, since the stun grenade exploded too close. Cut short his AFP command, at least in the field, but not his instincts. Nor his access to used surveillance equipment. "Killer, you ready?"

"No worries, mate." Killer is Bob McLean, stationed inside the rear entrance. Owned an extermination business before old age relocated him to Magnolia Acres. Though leaning on a cane, it still leaves one hand free to lay down a potent spray.

The three first met at Lachlan's insistence that the Leura Aged Care Home had lax security. Agnes and Bob weren't sure how they could help, or why the place needed better security, but were curious to hear more.

They were the only other residents to show up for the meeting in the back garden. Following a presentation about their vulnerability, particularly the medicine room, Lachlan had picked a blade of grass and held it up. "See this grass? This is us!" He slowly bent it in half. "Yes, we're bent! But not broken!" He let loose of one end and the grass returned to vertical. "Should anything go down, age won't matter! As long as we plan ahead!"

Taken by his confidence and gung-ho attitude, the two joined up then and there. The name Rheumy Renegades was Agnes' idea. As was Bob's nickname. Hers she already had, as did Lachlan, from when schoolmates discovered Galloway was a cattle breed.

For the next year they'd met every week, mapping out optimal positions, fine-tuning plans, and stockpiling supplies. Lachlan never lost his zeal but Agnes and Bob had started to waver. Until two nights ago, when they'd noticed the two hooded figures loitering beneath the tree.

"Young'uns 'll probably hit us tomorrow night!" Lachlan had said, the three of them watching with night-vision goggles. "Can't wait! And!" He added, "Make sure your body cameras are charged! Don't wanna miss the replays!" His laugh boomed inside the small foyer.

Agnes and Bob, though nervous, were emboldened by his words. And demeanour. Spending the next day preparing calmed their nerves even more. Nothing like staying busy to keep your mind clear. Something they fondly remembered. From when they were working. And it was a mindset effortlessly rediscovered.

"Hey Killer," Agnes whispers. "They're on the move!" She wheels around and gets in position at the end of the hall, axe at the ready. She can see Bob at the other end, his cane on the floor, each hand holding a large spray tank.

"Affirmative, Cutter." Bob's smooth reply. Then a less calm, "Just heard the back door open. Got that Bull?"

"Affirmative Killer!" In the general manager's office Lachlan is at the computer. Within a week of moving in he'd got his granddaughter, who was overjoyed to help her gruff grandfather, to hack into the system. And access security codes. He types a code and external doors lock tight. He keeps his hands poised above the keyboard, awaiting Bob's next signal.

Carl hears the click and tries the door they just entered. "Hey Max. It's locked! How we s'posed to get out?"

Unfazed, Max reassures. "Front's all glass. Louder than we planned but we'll be long gone." He opens the next door and steps into a darkened hallway. When they're both through, it clicks. Locked. Then the lights turn on.

"What the he—" Carl's question is extinguished by a torrent of sorbolene moisturiser hammering his face, chest, his whole body. The same for Max. They contort against the onslaught, flailing their arms and feet. But Bob's kept the other tank aimed on the lino floor under them. Their feet slip and slide on the slippery surface and the two intruders slam against the far wall.

"Cut it, Cutter!" Bob yells as he steps into a recessed doorway.

"Got it, Killer!" Agnes swings her axe and slices through stiff webbing tied to a doorknob near her. Counterforce elastic webbing tied to opposite doorknobs near Bob is set free, slingshotting dozens of folded Zimmer frames and aluminum canes down the hallway. They smash into the two, rendering them bruised. And senseless.

"Ready Bull!" Bob grabs a third tank and sprays water on their prostate bodies.

Lachlan and Agnes come wheeling toward him, each carrying something heavy on their laps. By now the other denizens – residents and nurses – crowd into the hall and watch as Agnes and Lachlan dump two twenty-kilo bags of plaster of Paris on the wet thieves.

A nurse comes near, winks at Lachlan, then reaches down and brushes away rapidly-stiffening material from nostrils and mouths.

Lachlan calls the police. The number's on speed dial. "We got some perps to collect! And bring a surgical saw! You'll need it for this cast of characters!"

Laughter shakes Magnolia Acres.

The Blue Bucket

Kathryn Herring

Oyster Bay

In 2013, my husband and I moved house.

We didn't go far. We literally moved over the hill. Easy walking distance from our old house to the new one. We used to call that house a shack on stilts. The 70s weatherboard cottage perches precariously on the crest of a steep slope, almost a cliff. Although the back of the cottage rests on a sandstone platform, the front is supported only by steel posts, several metres high, bolted onto more rock platforms that jut out from the cliff face.

Massive local indigenous angophoras and blackbutts tower over the house. They grew there, their seed randomly distributed by a passing parrot or the wind, growing in the cracks in the sandstone. Over time, the trees and the rocks have become symbiotic, each depending on the other for stability. Generously, between them, they protect the shack from the elements.

For a keen gardener, that site presented insurmountable challenges. The absence of any level ground meant that gardening activities provided quite a thrill, especially for someone who was afraid of heights. But I was determined to plant that block, and create an indigenous garden, even if it meant clinging to the rock and perching on the side of the cliff while I weeded and planted.

I was also determined to create a frog habitat and lure some local frogs onto the property. Some people are driven mad by their constant croaking, but not me. There's a particular common local frog, the Striped Marsh frog, that calls with a low, knocking sound. I call them "bok bok frogs" and for me, their sound is somehow comforting.

But the severe millennial drought defeated me. Even the importation of tadpoles from a nearby pond, an act of desperation, failed.

Eventually, I learnt to live without frogs, and instead appreciated the flocks of king parrots and crimson rosellas that visited.

When we made our big move over the hill, to a beautiful level garden block near the water of Oyster Bay, I started to re-imagine a frog pond. The drought was long gone, water was abundant and the bay was nearby. My dream was in reach.

But with so much to do, renovations to finish on the house and a substantial garden to maintain, it became a future project.

We got to work on the garden, rejoicing in its flatness. It was a thrill to explore the property, planted by the previous owners over about 50 years with indigenous and exotic species. I felt as if I was living in a mountain garden that had been transplanted to the southern suburbs of Sydney. The front garden was a cacophony of magnolias, maples, pink and white camellias and azaleas. Come September, plum trees welcomed visitors with a display of double pink blossoms on their black trunks. As the plum blossoms faded, the new lime growth of the maples was skirted by pure white blossoms of a weeping cherry. Later, the iridescent flowers of a jacaranda reflected the swathes of agapanthus and lavender lining the driveway, enveloping the property in blue. It was a feast for the senses, backdropped by a blue haze of massive eucalypts that surrounded the property.

Out back, ancient frangipanis competed with murraya hedges, camellias and huge indigenous palms for every skerrick of earth.

Standing guard along the two metre high side fence were mass plantings of strappy plants – cordylines and dracaenas. Their spiky helmets peeked above the wall, blocking our spectacular view of the bay. So – off with their heads! Instant view! I knew that

these plants would sprout new tops in no time. And the cuttings could be planted out, or even just grown in water. These plants are really the gift that keeps on giving.

I'm a terrible pruner. I always feel as if I'm murdering a plant when I prune. And as for thinning out, or removing a plant ... well, let's just say that I live in a jungle.

So confronted with a bunch of dracaena and cordyline tops, I knew that I couldn't just throw them into the green waste bin. What to do? I'd put them aside for the time being, and plant them out later.

I grabbed an old blue plastic bucket from the garage and filled it with water. Into it went the cuttings. I knew that they'd be sprouting roots within weeks, ready for planting. The whole shebang was popped around the corner in the side passage.

But typically, I procrastinated. With so many gardening tasks to attend to, the bucket stayed where it was. Occasionally topped up with water, it sat, month after month after month. The tops sprouted roots and leaves. Luscious new striped green and white growth filled the bucket, eventually completely obscuring the blue plastic. A living, abstract sculpture. Marvelling at the resilience of nature, I watered the bucket from time to time and then forgot about it.

Until the following spring.

One evening, I sat on the back deck watching the sun set over the palms. The bay glistened pink then silver, and the silhouette of the remnant gum forest blackened as the sky changed from red to pink to grey and yellow. I felt my soul replenish.

Then I heard it.

Bok.

And again.

Bok.

And again.

What was that? That knocking? Washing machine? No. Door? No. Weird.

Then it hit me. It was a frog.

OMG! An amphibious friend had moved in!

Thrilling!

But where was it? I hadn't built the frog pond yet. Didn't even have a decent water bowl in the garden.

I had to find out.

Dashing down the back steps, I followed the sound. Bok ... Bok ... Bok.

Sounds like it's under water.

Sounds like it's near the side fence.

Walked over to the side fence. It stops. (They're pretty shy).

Hmm...where's it hiding?

Then I saw it. The blue bucket.

Crouched down. Careful. Be very still. Just listen.

There it was, again.

Bok.

It was the bucket.

Croaking.

The Boy Up the Street with Polio

Barry Collin

Elermore Vale

In the 1950s, one of our regular so-called 'junk mail' deliveries was a large brown paper bag neatly folded within a paper sleeve. The promo on the sleeve told us about the charity that assisted young polio victims, and these bags were delivered all over Newcastle. The charity was collecting your clean rags and used clothing, and within the city's inner suburbs where I lived, they dropped off the bag every month with a plea for contributions. It was a respected charity, and everyone seemed to give freely. There was a photo on the sleeve in blue ink of a young boy a little older than me, who was on splayed-out crutches, with callipers on his legs, and a somewhat strained expression. Rather sad but effective advertising.

This boy actually lived about four doors up the street from us. On occasions I observed him being picked up at his house by people in a shiny fancy car, and he was fully resplendent in a suit and tie. I bring up this subject here because the boy had a great impact on me in a couple of ways. Firstly, I saw him as some sort of celebrity because of that photo associated with the paper bag as well as the pickup by that rather impressive black car, and secondly because of our little bit of vocal interaction that we had from time to time. Sometimes he would be sitting out on his front veranda in a high back chair and I would stop for a talk. He would tell me in a rather raspy voice about the drudgery of the polio and the many restrictions that it placed upon him. When I brought up the subject of the fancy car, he told me it was about him going to meetings with groups or associations trying to raise money for children with polio. He even laughed about his *begging tools*, the special pair of shiny crutches and callipers worn just for that job! He was the face of children with polio in Newcastle, a task he did very well. Despite the many issues he had, he always

seemed to have the capacity to smile. He certainly made my own issues look particularly insignificant against his, achieving this with his warmth and funny flare.

However, the thing that struck me most was that whenever his mother found that he was talking to someone she politely asked him to come inside, which he dutifully did with a roll of his eyes. The strain and effort he had to deal with just to get himself up on those crutches really amazed me! He gritted his teeth and his face turned a deep red with veins standing out on his neck and temples. He showed a resilience in his efforts just to achieve what others see as a simple task, something no doubt that he performed day in and day out.

I asked my mother about why his parent always called him to go inside whenever we were in discussion. Her explanation was that maybe his mother wanted to insulate him away from other kids so that they did not unconsciously elevate his expectations of life. If true, then that's rather sad. I think of this often, especially with the knowledge that the Salk Vaccine became available in 1952, which turned out to be a little too late for this young man. To get an accurate dating of those times, I believe my story would originate about circa 1954. This would place my age at nine, and the boy in question would have been about 13-years-old.

There were occasions when my friends and I grabbed our fishing rods and headed off to the harbour to do a spot of fishing. We made a lot of noise with the excitement of the adventure as we rode past the kid's house on our bikes. I saw him just sitting there on his veranda watching us go on our fishing expedition. I waved and continued on, after all, polio boys can't fish! Polio victims couldn't do anything! And yet I was troubled by

this. Troubled because I knew that with a little effort on his parents' part and of course on ours too then he could be on that wharf, in a wheelchair, fishing, having a far greater time than we were, simply because it was seen as out of his realm of possibility. We as young kids discussed this, but never did anything about it. The initiative for such a project would have had to be ours, and it would have needed cooperation from his parents with transport issues etc. Of course, what my mother said as to why his mother called him in when we were talking, also clouded the situation.

Today, physically impaired children get all sorts of opportunities to experience normal things in life (*'Riding For The Disabled'* immediately comes to mind) but this was the 1950s. I still think about that boy, the boy with that determined strained face, the boy whose name I cannot remember but wonder how life actually turned out for him.

The Bureaucracy of Dying

Heather Geeves

Blaxland

I have never doubted the wisdom in philosopher Alain de Botton's observation that 'a good half of the art of living is resilience'. What I didn't appreciate, though, until my mother died last year is, just how much resilience is required to deal with the art of dying.

Don't get me wrong. I had envisaged long before I experienced it, the thickness of the sorrow itself and the heavy blanket of grief that might descend as I continued to live in a world in which a person I loved was no longer present. But what I could not have predicted is the strength I would need when confronted with the bureaucratic processes around dying.

My mother passed away ever so gently in a hospital ward where kind-faced nurses brought me cups of tea as I sat at her bedside. The doctor who was called to confirm her death stepped softly into the 4:00am silence, offering condolences and bowing with praying hands as he backed out of the ward. Later, as I departed the hospital building, the rising sun shimmered its gossamer rays on the delicate horizon. Scarlet and amber leaves cushioned the path that led to my car.

In the weeks that followed, I was cocooned by my adult sons, who came away from their busy lives bringing meals, company and comfort. Friends filled the house with beautiful flowers and filled my heart with beautiful words. Resilience came easily enough when I was buffeted by such kindness. But the true test was yet to come.

By the time winter arrived, I had learned that a special kind of fortitude is required to deal with the dispassionate coldness that comes with the bureaucratic imperatives that must be addressed when someone dies.

To be fair, many of the humans I encountered as I went about closing bank accounts, cancelling pension payments, disconnecting services and finalising fees, were models of sensitivity as they enacted whatever their systems required them to do. But I had to steel myself for more than a few bureaucratic booby traps that lay in wait.

It started when a letter arrived, addressed to my mother, a few weeks after her death. It advised that the home-care package she had been assessed for, 18 months earlier would shortly be allocated and that she would be receiving a 'Level One' package while awaiting a higher level package for her more complex needs. I phoned the government department that sent the letter. I told the Client Services Officer that my mother was no longer alive.

"I'm sorry, but I can't speak to you without the client's consent," the voice informed me.

I pushed through this implausible requirement, courteously explaining that the records would show that my mother had long ago provided consent for me to be her representative. This move seemed to enable me to pass through Level One of the conversation; but it soon became evident that I had moved up to a more complex level.

"So how can I help you today?" asked the voice.

I repeated that I was phoning to notify that my mother had died.

"Okay," it said, "do you mind if I put you on hold for a few minutes? I need to get permission from my manager for your mother to be deceased."

I could guess what this meant, of course. I understood that systems have rules and that this system must require approval from higher up before certain changes can be made. But I felt winded by the blunt force of the comment and I punched back.

"I don't mind at all if you put me on hold for a few minutes," I retorted, "but if your manager doesn't give permission for my mother to be deceased, I don't know what we are going to do about it. I didn't know that you had to get permission to die in Australia."

"I'll be with you shortly then," pronounced the voice, without flinching.

A few minutes later I was taken off hold.

"That's all been approved," I was informed. "Is there anything else I can help you with today?"

Weeks passed, and I was feeling relieved that all my dealings with bureaucracy were behind me. But then a second letter arrived for my mother from the same department. This time it was to inform her that she was now to be allocated a higher level home-care package. Bracing myself, I phoned again. I explained that I had already notified the department of my mother's death and was surprised that this second letter had been sent.

"Can I put you on hold while I check?" asked the voice.

Moments passed, and the voice returned.

"Yes, I can see that you did phone us," it confirmed, "and I can see what you've done. The problem is that you let us know your mother was deceased but you didn't let us know she would be declining the package."

As I hung up the phone, I found myself transported back to a Social Theory exam that my much younger, undergraduate self, had once struggled with. If only life could be lived backwards: what more perfect example could I have asked for than this to answer that question about the purposely impersonal nature of bureaucracy?

Those voices on the phone had taken themselves completely seriously as they carried out their regimented processes. But my mother would have thought their conversations with me were hilarious. During a life that was often very difficult, she had been an expert at using humour to lighten the dark times and help her over the bumps.

I knew that the interactions I'd had to navigate were very small bumps in the scheme of things. But being able to see the funny side was what had allowed my emotional tolerance to stretch and then spring back into shape unbroken. If that was a sign of my resilience, I had my mother to thank for it.

The Long Day

Kathryn Perry

Goonellebah

On entering the mess tent I left the cold evening air behind and breathed in the slightly stuffy, but welcoming warmth created by the cooking. I was so exhausted I just wanted to eat and tumble into bed. I looked around the room of drivers, orderlies and nurses until I spotted Kitty. Collecting my supper tray I made my way over and sagged into the chair opposite her. "Do you feel as bone weary as I do?" I enquired.

"Bone weary doesn't even begin to describe it, it's been non-stop today," was Kitty's mumbled reply.

Kitty and I were amongst the first female ambulance drivers to join the war on the Western Front. We bought and equipped our own motorised ambulances then left behind our servants and suffragette banners to do something useful across the channel.

"My motor was playing up today," I said. "Twice she stalled on me and I had to crank her up."

"Did you have anybody on board?" Kitty queried.

"I did the second time, two stretchers and three sitting on the bench. Those three were such dears, they insisted on helping me even though between them I don't think they had four working limbs." I said sombrely. "I'll have to get my head under the bonnet and see what's going on." I could see a concerned look on Kitty's face, so I rushed on. "Don't worry I'm not going to try and do it now. I've hardly got the strength to lift this fork at the moment let alone lifting up the bonnet. I'll do it first thing in the morning."

I ate my meal mechanically while Kitty and I caught up on each other's day. Today was only her second day back. She'd been off for a week with concussion from mortar fire near the first aid station. I was glad to see she was doing well. As she went off to bed

I opened my diary and marshalled my thoughts about the day. There was one incident which stood out, and it had been my initial run of the day over to the first aid station. I began to write.

Driving over to collect casualties I could see up ahead that an ambulance was stopped on the track, and just beyond that a steady plume of dark smoke rising up to mingle with the battle haze that was already drawing a veil across the sun. The Kaiser's new offensive was turning the sky as bleak as the landscape. This part of the Western Front would have been beautiful before the war but after three years of bombardment it looked like nothing we'd ever seen before. The churning sea of mud stretched for miles, broken occasionally by the remains of a tree or the scattering of bricks from some farm building. In the winter it was treacherous, the ice made glass-like shards of it, and in the summer it fluctuated between being baked as hard as clay or a muddy sort of quicksand sucking at anything that dared to traverse it.

As I bumped along the track getting closer I could see that there was a figure huddled down behind the ambulance. It was Deb. I pulled on the brake, grabbed the first aid bag and jumped out to see how badly she was injured. She was crouched leaning against the back of the vehicle and in front of her was a puddle of vomit. Now that I was close I could hear her sobs as she cried into her hands. With the sound of artillery and shells up ahead I wasn't sure if she had heard me arrive so I said "Deb, it's Ellen, what's happened, are you hurt?"

She carried on sobbing but shook her head. I went to investigate the smoke and discerned what had put her into this state. Deb had only been with us for a month and although she'd seen her fair share of wounded and dead by now, she'd never seen this sort of carnage. I was confronted with a large

crater and the chassis of a vehicle from which the smoke was pouring. Spreading out in an arc, other parts of the vehicle were strewn around along with the grizzly remains of what could be several bodies. The air was thick with the smell of burnt rubber and gasoline but there was also the metallic smell of blood. My hand went to my mouth as my stomach reacted to the scene. This wasn't a sight we got used to. I breathed slowly and calmed myself before going back to Deb. With two years of experience under my belt, I knew that I had to give her a stern pep talk rather than a shoulder to cry on. Once I got her back in the driver's seat I sought out the best way to get past the obstacle. Half buried in the mire was a tin hat with a red cross on it. This burning wreck must have been an ambulance. No time to think about whose it was. I wouldn't share this piece of news with Deb, she'd hear about it soon enough. Getting back into my vehicle we carried on to collect our wounded.

The rest of the day was mostly a blur. All those trips back and forth full to the brim with wounded. Every bump and jolt elicited a scream of pain from behind causing me to wince and slowdown in sympathy, but at the same time I knew the urgency of getting them to the field hospital without delay. There is no happy medium, just trips filled with pain, worry and tension.

Every time I arrived at the hospital I had to steel myself against the possibility that not all of my casualties would have reached there alive. The miracle of today was that every single one of those brave boys made it, and I could breathe a sigh of relief.

The Peanut Butter Miracle, An Incident in War

Ferdinand Brockhall

Armidale

At 14-years-old, alone in the Japanese all-male concentration camp on Java, I was not just ravenous, but starving. But then, so was everyone else and it made no difference that worked for even the pitifully mean provisions provided.

'Starving' is different from 'hungry', even from 'ravenous'. The latter two are a craving, in a Dickensian sense an unfulfilled want for, '... MORE ...?'

For me, starving in the concentration camp was looking down into a pitch-black bottomless pit, an overwhelming endurance which blotted out even a flicker of hope. But the choice was stark: give in to despair and die, or, '... *When there is nothing in you, except the will which says to them: 'Hold on...'*¹ to survive.

Life holds some strange twists and this was definitely one.

In our camp, working for our living was tied to a paper entry of 10 cents a day for every person who lined up for 'Tenko'— morning Roll Call. With no-one excused, the sick or incapacitated in our ten-thousand-man prison camp unable to stand were not counted, and so we each never received the already meagre 10 cents worth of food. And with it came the unceasing craving which even the stout-hearted faced with no confident hope for better to come.

In the game of life the concept of hope is never better than a gamble with such a thing as luck. As days stretched into weeks, weeks into months and amazingly into years in which nothing much good came to pass. Suddenly my luck changed.

I was working alone in a small vegetable plot behind the Japanese kitchens when the door opened. There stood the Japanese cook, no more than a couple of centimetres taller than me, but he wore boots while I went barefoot. The cook's calling, "*Tobang, koko ni*" – the feared command, "Prisoner, come here!" – usually followed by slaps, kicks or beatings, I expected the worst.

Born in Java to Dutch parents, I did not speak Japanese, other than understanding their all too often experienced commands. Neither did the cook speak Indonesian, used both by the Japanese and we prisoners. How surprised was I when his arms not threatening, but rather with a kind of invitation, he beckoned me, "*Koko ni, koko ni*", "come to the kitchen?"

Inside, the cook pointed to a table on which stood a small hand operated meat mincer and under it an enamel bowl. Next, he pointed to two buckets: one unbelievably filled with roasted peanuts, the second with sugar, and a small container of salt; delicacies of an almost forgotten past.

Noticing my confusion, making winding movements in the air, the cook beckoned first to the mincer. Dropping peanuts into it and continuing his winding movements over the mincer, he mimicked adding sugar and salt to the nuts.

In a flash of clarity that came to me, "PEANUT BUTTER!!", I exclaimed. I will never know if the Japanese cook had understood me, but his lusty, "*HAI*" – "YES" – I took for an agreement.

1 "If", Rudyard Kipling's Verse, Definitive Edition, Hodder and Stoughton Limited, London

Left alone, I began making the raw ingredients into paste by loading the mincer, turning the handle and watching a crumbly substance tumble from the spout. Judging it rather too coarse, I stuffed it back into the machine for another go. And when after a third treatment, it was finally judged to be a reasonable imitation of the pre-war, store-bought variety.

Even though the process of this wartime peanut butter-making was laborious, I did not mind. It was certainly easier than digging ditches or performing the other heavy labour I was used to. And in truth I thought the situation ripe for an opportunistic exploitation!

Every time I reloaded the small mincer with partly ground paste, taking care that the cook could not see me, I stuffed a portion of the delicacy in my mouth. I cannot describe the sensation of the taste of it at the time, or the surge of energy that coursed through my entire body, other than to say that it was overwhelming. And the miracle continued.

For the rest of the war the Japanese cook kept me working in his kitchen cleaning and dishwashing, where he allowed me to scrape caked-on food residue from his pots and pans and eat it: I could hope to survive.

Unfortunately, with the memory of my own good fortune sometimes comes a feeling that I compromised a common bond with camp mates who unlike me continued to suffer. I cannot forget that many, too many of my friends and unknown fellow prisoners never made it to the end of the war.

VJ (Victory over Japan) Day remembrance annually falls on 15 August. In our camp the news that the war was finally over did not reach us until 28 August 1945. On that day, every year I remember those with whom I shared a common lot.

When I reminisce on the war that robbed me of my childhood and too early challenged me to either survive as a man or probably die, I sometimes wonder was it by chance, or luck, or hope, or simply a stubborn will to beat the odds? Or was it by the grace of God's mercy which rescued my future through something as common as peanut butter? The answer to this rests with one's own judgement.

To me, paradoxically more than a chance incident in war that saved my life, 'The Peanut Butter Miracle' reflects the kind of tenacity expressed in Kipling's 'If', "...*When there is nothing in you except the will which says to them: Hold on ...*".

I held on.

A true story.

Prisoner of war 1942–45, Çimahi (Java) concentration camp.

At time of writing 91 years of age.

The Queue

Graeme Woodlands

Wyee Point

It is about six o'clock, a cool morning, the sun not up yet and I am surrounded by men with grey hair and bald heads. There are women too, mostly grey – some with a colour that must have come from a bottle. There is an elderly lady hobbling about on a stick, she should be sitting down. It is obvious to me, that we are all the same vintage.

Memories come flooding back!

Having been born during the latter part of World War II we were always taught to be polite and wait our turn. These so called 'Baby Boomers' have constantly been told 'they have never had it so good'. That may be true as we live in retirement, however, the road to retirement has not always been 'beer and skittles'.

There is a lot of envy directed to the 'BB' but they don't realise that we grew up in a period where the luxuries of today were rationed. Our parents had to queue up for ration coupons for butter, cheese, sugar, tea and meat. There was then another queue to purchase the necessities. Clothing was also rationed and second and third children wore 'hand me downs'. Girls may have had a dress made from old curtains and if a baby boy had an elder sister, he may have to wear a dress but it was called a smock to save embarrassment.

Growing up in the 'fifties' was a struggle for lots of people. Everyone was paid cash in the hand so again we had to queue to put some savings in the bank. We could put our name down for Housing Commission homes which were being built in new suburbs that were being developed, however, they were 'a long way from the Town Hall Clock' and public transport. The good news was these houses had big backyards for us kids to play in but the bad news was they were built of fibro. This came back to haunt us 50 years later.

Those kids who struggled with school left at age 15 – the girls learnt shorthand and typing while the boys became apprentices. The others went on to Fifth Year and the smarter ones on to University, the others became teachers or worked for the Government or the Banks. The good news was that everyone could get a job and did work. We had the Olympic Games and television started. There was also a fear of all the New Australians mostly Greeks and Italians who seemed to be taking over everything. They spoke a different language; they ate different food. Once our beer was frothy but now our coffee is frothy.

They played football with a round ball and didn't understand cricket! What is happening?

Then came the Sixties and the start of flower-power, hippies, the Beatles, 'one-armed bandits', the pill and most of all the Vietnam War and the conscription lottery. Most people went to church on Sundays – the Catholics ate fish on Fridays, while the Protestants didn't and the Methodists didn't dance! Men had to ask their girlfriend's father if they could get married. (She usually had her ear to the door to listen in.) The hotel staff had a dinner break which meant all the bars were closed from 6:30pm to 7:30pm. It was abolished! St George Rugby League team was unbeatable.

I wonder, were we becoming more sophisticated? I cannot answer that, it is for history to decide.

The Seventies became 'It's Time' and Gough and later there was Frazer and Kerr, then — no Gough. All this caused a fair bit of turmoil. (Just thinking about poor old ScoMo, who was holidaying with the family in Hawaii when the bushfires were on and copped a rollicking from the newspapers and letter writers. No mention about Gough when he was on holidays in Europe when Cyclone Tracey hit Darwin

on Christmas Day. He made a token return to Oz for two days!). Protests and protesters were buzz words. The Vietnam War was still the talking point and Jack Munday was one of the protest leaders with his Green Bans.

Then Kerry Packer bowled a googly, took on the Cricket Establishment and won.

Howzat!

That's better, the sun is up and a bit of warmth on our backs. Crickey, there are many more people now.

The Eighties brought about our first 'knockabout' Prime Minister, Bob Hawke and with his side-kick Keating, we had the accord and interest rates of 18%. It was great for those with savings but murder for those in business or buying a home. Paul Hogan and Dame Edna were household names and the stock market took a huge plunge and the 'R'¹ word was in place.

The Nineties saw 'the recession we had to have' which led to the demise of Keating and the start of the Howard era. The VFL became AFL, the Rugby League split with Super League and then finally NRL was born. GST was on the horizon and the fear of the Millennium Bug threw business into a tailspin and the end was nigh!

The year 2000 started without a whimper, all our computers, iPads and mobile phones were still operating. That was the end of the Millennium Bug – what can we frighten people with now. Ah ... Global Warming! Kevin 07 came to power and the GFC. This started a revolving door of Prime Ministers. In the past 12 years we have had six PMs – Bob Menzies was in office for fourteen continuous years.

It has just gone seven o'clock and the supermarket doors are opening – the queue is way back in the carpark. Armed with my over 70s ID we all advance at a quicker pace. That woman that hobbled up with stick earlier has done a 'Lazarus' – she is running. Someone yelled out, "There is no toilet paper!"

I may as well go home!

What a bummer!!!!

1 R word was used for 'Recession'

The Recalcitrant Knee

Denis Puniard

Holt

This particular right knee was doing very well until there was an altercation with an opposition football player and a boundary fence. It was not quite the same afterwards. Still it could do most things fairly well. For many years it played squash, golf and umpired Aussie rules footy. It completed three marathons, a lot of cross country and fun runs and lots of bush walks. Climbing hills was a real challenge and any contact sport was definitely out.

In more recent years the squash and running were not a feasible proposition, but bike riding was a real buzz. Ten years of some serious riding eventually gave way to pain, swelling and restless nights. The experts said there was no cartilage left and the bones were having a great time mashing against one another, and it was full of arthritis. We recommend a Total Knee Replacement (TKR).

These days TKR's are fairly commonplace especially for the more mature members of our society who have worn out their original knees. Pretty much everybody who gets a new knee recovers quite quickly and gets back to normal life with better functionality than previously. But not all work out this way.

September 2017 – First TKR. Despite keen attention to rehabilitation the bloody wound would not seal. This surgeon made a side cut (a bit unusual) to manipulate the new knee into place. The side cut kept leaking.

October 2017 – First revision. "Let's go into the side cut, clean it out and see if we can get a specimen to identify your infection"

Okay – let's go.

No bug identified and still weeping. Being in Melbourne for a family affair and trying to get some help with a weeping wound was not a lot of fun, especially when the local hospital team eventually said "go back to your surgeon".

December 2017 – Second revision. "Suggest we do a partial replacement. Cut it open, replace the plastic liner between the top and bottom metal bits, and get a specimen to identify the bug."

Alleluia!

"The bug is Staphylococcus Capitis, and we have antibiotics that can treat that."

Let's Go!

"Two antibiotics three times a day by mouth. Go for six months and see what happens."

Six months later blood tests show the infection marker CRP at 3. No infection – really good.

Back on the bike and back to golf. "Stop the antibiotics and see what happens."

May 2019 – overseas trip for three months planned – "All good to go but take the antibiotics with you."

A great trip, got back to Oz without a problem and all good until mid-August. Knee gets rather fractious. Swelling, pain, cannot bend it. Blood test shows infection back up at CRP 100. "Back onto the antibiotics."

Early November – CRP back below 5. "Let's get off the antibiotics again."

All good. Back on the bike and back at golf.

Late November – Knee gets fractious again. Back on the antibiotics again. "Oops the antibiotics have killed your white blood cells. You have none. Stop those antibiotics."

This time – not good. The bloody knee throws a real tantrum.

Experts say: "The bug has made itself at home by forming a biofilm on your metal knee. Only real remedy is to remove said metal knee and put in a new clean one. But this is a two stage replacement. We need to leave you with no knee for six weeks so we can make sure the bug is gone. We will put in a concrete spacer so you can at least move around a bit. It is shaped like a knee, but is full of antibiotics and crunches a lot. But you need to have an intravenous drip attached for four weeks."

Thank God for Hospital in the Home (HITH). They came to my home and replaced the antibiotic bag every day. Yippee – home for Christmas. Deja vu – this is where we were two years ago!

Mid January 2020– "Stop the antibiotics. See what happens!"

Late January – "Blood tests all clear – no bug apparent. Let's put in the new knee."

Early February 2020 – Back to surgery. But this new knee has a silver lining. "That stops any bugs from attaching themselves to the metal. Not only is it silver but it also comes with a hinge to make it bend better."

Mid February 2020 – Back home. Wound sealed and start serious rehabilitation. After three months of not bending or serious weight bearing, said knee is still a bit recalcitrant.

Look Mum – no hands. Crutches are sitting nearby but only used if going to the shopping mall – to ward off skateboard riders and feral children running about. "Infection gone but let's run blood tests twice a week to be sure, and to be really sure, let's have some more antibiotics twice a day orally."

March 2020 – The antibiotics are finished – done their job, it seems. Physio is hard at work. The gym and swimming pool are now featuring. The bike is ready to go.

Stay tuned for the six month post operation update.

Has the bug really deserted the recalcitrant knee?

Acknowledgements:

- A patient and caring wife. Nurse, taxi driver and target of some serious frustrations.
- Daughter with six-month-old granddaughter. Calls every day and brings baby to me for lots of care and attention. What a gem.
- A select group of family, colleagues and friends who text or ring to say "R U OK?" or "How are you going?"

You find out who really cares.

The Sixtieth Birthday Treat

Jackie Laing

Kew

Michael stood on the brink of North Brother Mountain, on the mid-north coast, clammy hands that normally worked a computer, gripping the handle of a red and yellow hang glider. He was a thousand miles from his comfort zone, he hated heights.

The Australian sky, a deep azure blue with white fluffy clouds was lost on Michael. More used to gazing into the small screen of his laptop his mind could not take in the scenery that lay before him.

Michael was undergoing a gamut of emotions, fear was the main one, fear of heights, fear of letting go, fear of seeming ungrateful; his wife had gone to great lengths to arrange a special surprise for his sixtieth birthday and he was hating every minute of it. He also felt anger as he realised that after 40 years of marriage his wife didn't understand him at all. How could she do this to him? As Marian drove him up the steep incline of Big Brother Mountain an hour earlier he realised just how high the mountain was.

He met with the fellow who taught him the intricacies of hang gliding. The fellow was an Ocker Aussie with bulging muscles, tall, dark and no older than twenty five. Michael hated him as well. He was introduced as a professional, as far as Michael was concerned, professionals used computers, worked in offices and wore suits and ties.

He knew he should control his mind chatter, but old habits die hard, he thought in computer lingo.

Are you a man or a mouse?

Why did I byte off more than I can chew?

How did I get into this gig?

Didn't help!

He looked at Marion and smiled a sickly smile. He knew that after this he must be word perfect. He would hate to hurt his wife.

He tried to think of other things; the sixtieth birthday party that Marian arranged for him for that night. Michael was quite aware that if anything went wrong, and it could, he would miss it anyway. He was working without a net.

He heard a shout and looked up, his worst nightmare had arrived. The time to launch off into the unknown had come. He followed instructions given to him through a headset and without realising he was airborne.

Michael had heard the expression. 'Your heart in your mouth' but never experienced it before. Every muscle felt knotted, his eyes were slits in his face, as the wind rushed by he hardly dared to look down.

Slowly through his consciousness, the voice of the trainer penetrated. His body relaxed slightly as he manipulated the hang glider and looked around him. He had to admit it was amazing up there, he saw a couple of gulls flying below him. The river sparkled in the sunlight and everything was in miniature. The aromatic smell of the gum trees assailed his nostrils. Tiny cars followed a ribbon of road and toy boats bobbed on the water. The wind was rushing past Michael's body and he knew that not only had he conquered his fear, he had done something brave and exciting.

When he landed on terra firma he experienced an intense adrenaline rush. He could have gone straight back up again. He felt very courageous, he had conquered his worst fears.

He was so happy it was his sixtieth birthday, so happy that he was married to a wonderful wife who truly understood him and he was so looking forward to the party that night and – did he have a tale to tell!



The Unwanted Daughter

Kim Teoh

Gloucester

Seik Ying could feel the steamship slumbering toward quayside. Barely 15, she arrived to marry someone she has never met. She would not see China again until she was nearly ninety.

She could hardly believe that she survived the two-month voyage through roller-coaster waves across the South China Sea. She finally arrived in Penang, otherwise known as the Prince of Wales Island, off the northern west coast of what was then British Malaya.

The wharf was busy, with porters shouting to all and sundry in a Chinese dialect that she didn't understand. Whatever it was, it's quite a different dialect from her native Hakka.

A little old lady in bound feet wobbled toward Seik Ying. She had come to Dapoo in Guangdong province in South China three months ago, to propose to her grandmother that her only grandchild would be much better off, married to her son in Malaya. She was of the marriageable age of fifteen and after all her grandmother was already getting old and frail.

Seik Ying didn't see much of her mother who had remarried after her father died soon after she was born. He had gone to Indonesia to seek his fortune but died from malaria. The proposal seemed like a good idea, but it terrified Seik Ying.

Seik Ying was persuaded by her grandmother that the proposal was good for them both. She never doubted her grandmother's love. Rather she has always loved her grandma and trusted her even to the point of agreeing to marry a stranger in a faraway land.

A month later after the proposal was made, the two parted company. Seik Ying would never see or speak to her grandmother ever again.

Now she was in a foreign country. People were of different shades of brown and black and they spoke different languages and dialects. It was her first time on a ferry that would cross from Penang to the mainland, Province Wellesley. She then boarded a train that would take her to Taiping, in the tin mining district where immigrant Chinese labourers worked.

At age 17, Seik Ying had the first of her 11 children. Two of the children died when they were very young. It was especially painful for Seik Ying, as they were boys given the penchant of Chinese families for male heirs.

It was a busy life for Seik Ying and her husband. He had been an English teacher who was arrested and tortured by the Japanese who believed he was a spy, just because he could speak the White Man's tongue. His brother died but when the war was over, he was freed, traumatised so much that he wasn't allowed to teach any longer. He then started a small shop selling stationery, badminton and table tennis racquets, tin toy soldiers imported from England and walking dolls and the like, to the British soldiers and their families stationed there. Seik Ying sewed and sold curtains and ruffles and stuffed cotton for the mattresses.

Having had so many children, Seik Ying was determined that if another girl was to come along, she would be given away. Sure enough another girl was born and she was taken to the convent but the nuns refused to accept the child. She was offered to a Chinese temple but they also turned it down.

When she grew to four years' old, a widow who lived a few doors away in their row of shops, adopted her.

One day, the widow needed to go shopping and decided to tie the child to a chair so she wouldn't run back to her home. As soon as she left, the child yelled and screamed for help but the neighbours dared not intervene. Her sister happened to pass by and heard the commotion. She hurried home and her mum came to the rescue. That was the end of the adoption episode.

By now, the child's many siblings figured out that she was unloved and unwanted. No one played with her and she grew up a lonely child in a big family. She was the unwanted sister. However, she was overjoyed when her eldest sister took everyone to Sunday School and she was allowed to follow. Their parents were only too glad to have a quiet Sunday morning. It was only much later that they discovered to her horror the white people were teaching them a foreign religion!

It was too late. Her children had become Christians and the lonely child had learnt that even though no one seemed to love her, God did. So God's child she became. She grew up and eventually, together with her husband, Cheng Chooi, she became a missionary on Borneo Island, in Indonesia's West Kalimantan.

She taught English in the Kindergarten and Year One and catalogued the books in the primary school library. She loved telling stories and teaching nursery rhymes and songs. The children would call out to her when she walked by, after school or during recess, but apart from smiling and greeting them, she avoided their hugs.

The first year went by. It seemed to take a very long time. In her second year, she allowed some kids to befriend her and to hold her hands. In her third year, she even allowed the children to visit her at home. At the end of her time in West Kalimantan, it suddenly dawned on her why she had 'answered the call of God'.

God had sent her there to discover herself. She was finally freed of her fear of children. The frost from years of nasty name calling and insults when she was a child began to thaw. She learnt that children easily shared their love and she was free to love them. My name is Kim Teoh. I was that unwanted daughter.

There's Light at the End of the Tunnel

Cathy Robson

Kincumber

Have you heard the title of this story given to someone who needs hope when facing dark days? I have also heard an ending where it says ... but it may be a train coming toward you! Oh dear, what a way to squash that hope and bring doubt and fear. That was the situation my husband was in a few years ago and that train was coming full steam ahead!

To give you some background into our lives, we had traipsed all over the countryside and interstate with moves that were essential for my hubby's career. As our family grew and schooling days began, we became quite concerned about these moves. When our eldest was approaching high school, we decided that it would be best for hubby to leave this company and work for someone who would let us stay living in the same town. It was a beautiful country town we had become quite fond of. Our children were settled; I had made lovely friends and was enjoying being a home Mum as hubby's job had required extensive amounts of travelling each week. So the decision was made. We would stay put and hubby would find a new job.

At just the right time, there it was ... a job handpicked for my man, but there was one drawback. He would still have to travel to other country towns, some being a distance of 890 kilometres away! Oh the pain of making the right decision. We prayed, we made long lists and made the decision it was better for him to keep travelling than for our whole family to be disrupted again. I must admit I breathed a big sigh of relief as we had already had seven moves.

Months turned into years and as hard as it was, Mondays would come and off hubby would go. Some weeks it was only two to three days a week but on the long trips he would be away the entire five days. I can't say he enjoyed these times away.

If you knew how much my man enjoyed home, his children, cooking, gardening and our many pets including ducks, chooks, dogs and his aviary, you'd understand. Providing for his family was paramount, so off he would go to do his very best. On the home front we really did get on fine. Thankfully I was blessed with amazing fun-filled children and with music lessons, sports, youth groups and friends' dates there wasn't much time to spare. With gifts in Dad's pockets and squeals of excitement on his return, time did seem to pass quickly.

Then came the day ... one by one our babies had grown up and were leaving home to study and chase careers. I was grateful I had studied a distant education art course for two years and was very happy teaching in a home studio we built on the side of our home with council approval. The children had fun pitching in and I will never forget the day when dad and daughter put on gum boots and laid the gooey cement! It soon became a beautiful place of giftedness and fun for all the students that came to learn different creative ways with the brush.

Suddenly, without warning, there was that light at the end of the tunnel and sadly it was a train coming towards us. My hard working, integral and sacrificial man lost his job. The shock for us both was absolutely devastating! There was no regard for all the hard work he had put in for 30 years; no recognition of all the previous achievements; no mention of the retirement fund he was working towards and the hardest of all, not even a thank you! You see, my dear hubby reached 'that' age! He was 63 and was quickly replaced by a much younger man. Colleagues, family and friends were all horrified at our news, but it was soon realised that this was not just happening to my hubby but to others from a diverse range of companies. There is so much I could say about our demise but after three failed court cases that were so stressful and humiliating

we decided that it was best for this amazing man to pick himself up, dust himself off and not have to pay any of the court cases should he lose anymore ... being mindful of the fact that these big companies never lose!

So just what did he do?

He 'showed them' that's what he did! It didn't take him long to realise that if he stayed down in the doldrums that was only giving these selfish companies more power! He studied even though he had spent many years attaining a uni degree; he sent his resume to many different places even if they weren't advertising; did odd jobs for family and friends and even had time for fishing.

It wasn't long before the phone rang and the voice at the end of the line said "we think you have applied for a job that you haven't realised is being advertised" and no he didn't. In good faith he just sent off his resume to so many places hoping and praying for the best. During the interview my very brave resilient man realised that it was the last day of his long service leave that we had been living off for the last six months ... and yes he did get the job. He is happy to say after five years, it is his best place of employment yet. He is now 68 and hasn't even contemplated retirement yet!

So dear friends, if you do see that light at the end of the tunnel, it may be that darn speedy train coming towards you, but you have a choice! Jump out of the way and run towards that light! It may be the best decision you ever make!

Under Fire

Colin Mountford

Swansea

"Hendricks, get out of there, there's too many of them; we need back up."

Bullets flew passed his head as well as smashing into the wall he was hiding behind. Morgan kept calling Hendricks to leave; nothing he said was going to shift Sergeant Hendricks.

"I'm running low on ammo, come on Jonus."

"You go, Morgan, take Adams with you. He's bleeding too much."

Hendricks wasn't going to leave; not until he completed his mission. His persistence and resilience were surely going to get him killed. It wasn't the first time he stood his ground. Hendricks was an obstinate SOB, but, he had the respect of his regiment. Morgan tried one more time, nothing on this planet was going to make Hendricks leave.

"God damn it, man. How many are there?"

"Maybe ten."

"How many?" said Morgan, worried about what he was going to say.

"Twenty, maybe?"

"Holy crap man, we're all going to die." Bullets slammed into the brick wall.

On the other side, an enemy soldier pointed an FIM-92 Stinger, he was about to fire.

"Have you still got a grenade?" Morgan nodded his head and pulled the grenade out of his jacket. Hendricks grabbed it and pulled the pin. Counting down five, four and threw. It landed just inside the enemy cover. It exploded and bodies flew out everywhere.

"Make that fifteen."

"Morgan, what's your position, over?" A call came in from HQ.

"Two clicks north of tower J. you better hurry, there's only me, Hendricks and Adams here. Scotty is done for; Adams is wounded, he copped one in his left shoulder."

"We are under heavy fire. Mission? Over."

"Affirmative."

"Hold on as long as you can guys, we're on our way."

"Roger that, over."

A grenade landed just outside their wall and exploded, taking out half the wall. Hendrick's ears were ringing, he couldn't hear what Morgan was saying; his lips were moving but no sound was coming out.

Hendricks checked his mags; two left in his jacket and half a mag loaded.

"Okay, if we don't move from here, they will finish the wall and we're dead." Hendricks knew that maybe there's too many and finding another point would be a better option. Or he could just charge at them and see what the outcome would be. Not a very strategic plan, but Hendricks wasn't a planner; do first and then think of the consequences.

"Pete, can you move right and get in behind them?" asked Hendricks.

"What about Adams?"

"Take him to that building over there, he'll be fine until the chopper gets here. Give him a shot and put a bandage on the wound. You have to hurry and get around. Keep your head down."

The enemy was now opening up, they wanted to get rid of this troublemaker. Automatic weapons blasted away.

Hendricks had a quick look and fired, they took cover and backed off. They were yelling out and one brave soul decided to run at Hendricks, not a good idea. He didn't get far; he dropped like a lead balloon.

Shots were being exchanged over and over. "Where the hell is Morgan?" All of a sudden shooting started from the right. Morgan was in position. Hendricks waited for a moment for the enemy to focus on Morgan. He suddenly stood and fired at them. Three went down as Hendricks fired. They swung around to fire at Jonus. It was too late; the enemy was caught in a crossfire. They turned and ran. Morgan came out of his position and moved to join Hendricks.

"Let's get the hell out of here, Adams is waiting for us to pick him up. I told him to shoot anything that moves. Unless I call his first name."

"Okay, let's go before they come back with more men."

The mission was a success and the three boys were able to get out alive. Adams was loaded onto the chopper. He got a ticket home and recovered from his wounds.

Hendricks and Morgan were sent off on another mission two weeks later; Morgan was killed while trying to penetrate an enemy stronghold along with three other men.

After returning to base, Hendricks decided he'd had enough for now and wanted to return home on special leave. Losing a good mate in battle with insurgents, made him think that his time may be near.

Colonel Thompson said, "Take a break Jonus and come back in six weeks."

"Yes sir, I think I will."

"Sorry to hear about Morgan; he was a good man and soldier."

The colonel paused for a moment, "Your pass will be ready this afternoon."

"Thank you, Sir," said Hendricks.

"Oh, by the way, I have recommended you for the Star of Gallantry."

Hendricks was surprised by this; he had no idea. "Sir, with due respect; I believe Morgan deserved the same. He was a man of great courage, fortitude and resilience."

"Yes, he does soldier; his wife received the medal posthumously from the Prime Minister yesterday."

"Go home and see your family. Good work son."

Hendricks left the Colonel's office and headed back to barracks. The men were waiting for him to return and find out why he was called to HQ. He explained what happened and the news about Morgan.

Hendricks rang his wife Jennifer and told her; he was coming home for six weeks. Jenny told the kids; he could hear them screaming in the background.

The plane landed at the military airport in Perth, Western Australia. Two days later, Jenny and the kids were waiting for him.

Jonus Hendricks decided to resign from the forces and focus on a new career, Jenny wondered why but said she would support him whatever he decided.

Hendricks dedicated the rest of his life helping returned soldiers who had developed PTSD. Government support was difficult, and the help, leadership, and resilience helped many military personnel.

Enhance your reading by listening to the theme from 'Band of Brothers', if possible.



Walk On

Lynne Matson

Hamlyn Terrace

Each day I walk my neighbourhood. This is my therapy time, meditation time. This is how I have learned to cope with the hardship life has thrown at me. So, walk on.

This is the house where the curtains twitch every time someone walks by. I've never actually seen who lives in there. It's untidy, with weeds overtaking the gardens, the lawn is a dust bowl, the letterbox crammed with yellowed papers and the place looks sad. Local kids call it the 'haunted house' and dare each other to knock and run. It is a bit creepy and I always walk quickly past and try not to notice the curtains opening ever so slightly for someone to watch me as I go by.

Around the corner and I almost walk straight into this massive man. Tall, wide shouldered and heavy, he looks like a footballer who went to seed 30 years ago but somewhere under all that bulk I know there is still muscle, scary. Then he puts out a hand to set me straight because I have nearly fallen over. He greets me with a "Good Morning" and I notice this giant of a man has a tiny white fluffy dog on a lead behind him. Gently he picks it up and holds this scrap in one huge hand. He offers the dog to me to pat in the same way someone might pass around a box of chocolates. I sense this wee dog is the man's friend, family and reason for living all rolled into one and so I obligingly coo over this little one and stroke its head. We exchange a few insignificant words about the weather then move on in opposite directions.

Here is the house where the young mum has three children under school age. They tumble over each other and around the garden like a litter of puppies. When they see me, they run over to say hello. The eldest one confident and a bit bossy, the middle one shy, peeping out from behind her big

brother and here comes the little one who has only recently started walking. So, it is a couple of steps, stop, balance, and then another couple of steps. This is a happy place and I enjoy stopping to chat to these little lovelies for a few minutes while their mum watches on, smiling. Our eyes meet over the children, we nod and smile at each other and then, again, I move on.

Up the road I go and now a decision. Should I turn left or right or maybe today cross the road here? No, I will turn left, when in doubt go left, that's what I always say. Oh, here comes that very tall and lanky high school boy that I used to be nervous of in case he said something rude or laughed at me intimidatingly. That was before we stopped and said hello one day. Ever since then we smile as we see each other and say a few words as we pass. He really is a nice polite boy even though he is so tall.

Past this house that recently was sold. The family which used to live there has moved north. I often spoke to the mother at the bus stop while she waited for the afternoon bus to bring her two children home from school. Now, this house has been empty for two, three weeks and I am looking forward to seeing who moves into our neighbourhood.

I'm glad I came this way today. I have nearly reached my favourite house and there is my friend out the front waiting for me, looking expectantly up the road. She sees me. A huge smile welcomes me as she lifts her arm to wave. Now I have come to her house. She opens the front gate and gives me a warm hug. This lady is tiny and almost frail. She is quite old, a tiny wrinkled prune of a woman who still manages to exude the life force and energy of someone much younger.

We speak to each other in smiles and hugs, this little one and I, because she does not speak English. I don't know her nationality, perhaps Greek? It doesn't seem to matter, we communicate quite well with gestures and smiles. We see into each other's heart. I'm not sure of her name because she chatters so fast, words tumbling over each other in the same way water rushes over stones in a creek. I have decided to call her Maria, she doesn't seem to mind.

The first time I stopped here was a while back when 'Maria' was struggling to put her garbage bins out the front. Ever since then I always make sure I walk this way on that day of the week, it has become my routine to help her in this small way and I have gained a friendship that is warm and special.

Time to move on, the day is half gone and I really should get going now. Up to the end of this road, cross at this corner and then around the next and I am home.

Here comes cat from under the bush in the front yard. She has been waiting for me to let her back inside. The house is quiet and empty. There is only cat and me now.

I have enjoyed my morning, seeing all my friends and making a new one. They don't know my name or where I live. They might not consider me a friend or even an acquaintance, just the lady who walks by, but I regard each one a friend and they are the highlight of my otherwise quiet, dull day with just cat for company.

Perhaps I will walk again this afternoon, when the children are coming home from school. Yes, if it is a nice afternoon that is definitely what I will do, I will walk on!

Walking On

Margaret Onus

Penrith

'Rubber Ball bouncing back', sang the voice on the Muzak. "How is that supposed to help me?" Tony asked the coach, "I am not a bloody rubber ball, I am injured, half my leg is missing, my body hurts, and my head can't think straight."

The coach looked at Tony, scanned him up and down, and took his time to answer with, "I don't think you are a rubber ball, it is just coincidence that the sound track is at that point, when you rolled in, but tell me, do you wish you were a rubber ball, something that gets thrown out for a dog to chase, and chew?"

"Maybe," said Tony in a flat voice, his eyes focussed on the floor, his mind pictured his faithful border collie. "It would be easier than sitting here in pain and thinking about what's next." The coach was going to add, if you had been a rubber ball, you might have bounced out of the accident, but thought better of it, jokes, even bad black humour jokes would not have been appreciated by Tony at that moment.

The coach, who was assigned to work with Tony on his fitness, understood the demoralised tone, the unhappiness and defeat that pulled at Tony's mind. The worry that shadowed his every thought and the fear of the unknown cloaked his mood. He knew he would need to be supportive, but push gently.

He sat down opposite Tony, on a low seat, and in a firm gentle tone said, "Tell me about your pain?"

"The real or the phantom pain?" shot back Tony, and the coach saw him relax just the tiniest bit. At last he had found someone who would hear him

out as he talked about the pain in his leg that was not there. He knew it sounded nuts to talk about such things, but it was doing his head in, not talking about it. The leg and ankle had been in intense pain after the accident, the medics had thought long and hard about how to save his life and his ankle, but in the end his life had won out, and his leg just below the knee had been sacrificed. Sometimes he wondered if they should not have tried so hard. The leg wounds had oozed and smelt terrible. The smell still turned the pit of his stomach when he recalled those long days lying on his side in the hospital bed, just staring. Sometimes staring unseeingly out the window. Sometimes staring as if still trapped in the accident scene. Then, came the gangrene, so the decision was quick and surgically precise.

Like a dog with a bone, Tony went to the gym every day. He and the coach started a routine of stretches, exercises, and bandaging. The coach talked about pain openly and slowly. Tony saw his surgery site change from an inflamed ballooning fleshy heavily bandaged limb. He saw it mould into a solid neat form that would take his new leg and foot.

Tony tried to filter all the experiences that had happened in just 20 weeks. He had gone from being able to work, play sports and run a business, be a brother, and a partner, to being flat on his back in hospital with limited options. He was now unable to work, and he felt guilty that his girlfriend was traumatised, and he was alone, as his little brother was now deceased. His thoughts rattled around in his head, when he was alone, at night in the small hours, they whispered "I am stuffed", and they demanded answers, "Is life this tough?"

As he leaned against the edge of the hydrotherapy pool, the water gently massaging his stump, he remembered the times his little brother had badgered him endlessly across those summer days when he first discovered girls. He remembered the times they had laughed, splashed and dunked each other. It hurt to think that those days would never come again, and the warm water was as an eraser rubbing at the memory as he tried to hold it tight. "Why can't the pain be rubbed away?" said Tony, out loud to himself as much as to anyone? "The bad stuff seems to be anchored with invisible threads, it hangs on, while my happy memories seem to float out of reach."

"Yeah, I've been here for two years trying," said his fellow swimmer, his back half turned as he adjusted his weight belt and eased into the water. "But when I am in the water, floating, and can't hear anything, I do feel happy sometimes," he added, "all the worries leave."

The pool lap routine was monotonous, and a brief chat to fellow swimmers was always a welcome break. He moved off, his thoughts chanting, 'Don't fall, walk tall'.

The fittings of the prosthetic foot on the stump became more frequent. Each fitting, brought the chance to go home closer. How sweet that word sounded.

Another visit, another adjustment, saw his stump leg transform into a high tech fibreglass column with its own computerised ankle. Never mind robotic imitation, when the leg was fitted, Tony was crying tears of delight.

The clinic date for the final fitting and hand over approached. Tony was excited and scared. The stump sock and liner slid on snugly to his short leg, nick named, 'little brother', and the fit into the prosthesis was perfect.

How good it felt to stand up, he turned slowly to look in the front and rear mirrors in the gym, and took his first tentative steps. Walking practise became the new monotony.

It felt good to stand, and walk. His mantra echoed in his head, 'this is not only about me, this is for you too little bro'. He smiled and thought I am that rubber ball bouncing back. He took out his phone, called an Uber and hesitated, who to visit first, girlfriend or dog?

We're a Wirey Mob

Christopher Hall

Ermington

The magnolia tree in a giant tub in my garden drips with the flashing colours of the Rainbow Lorikeets. It's been so dry its leaves are browned, hit hard by the heat of this summer's drought. Now the rain has come, survival mode kicks-in as it shakes off those curled up leaves and holds up handfuls of fresh new growth.

Across the street a gangling Jacaranda, till now denuded of green, springs into a new summer coat, even presenting a flurry of unseasonal blooms that blow along the path in dappled mauve, defiant of drought and nature's calendar.

On the rock face of the sandstone railway cutting at Wollstonecraft station a bonsai Moreton Bay fig tree clings with determination to the vertical wall. Its tentacle roots are spread out in a fan shape to seek out the rare trickles of water and dampness to nourish its stunted parent.

This powerful natural ability to survive, to adjust, to shake off defeat, lies at the heart of the DNA of Australia and the character of its people, both ancient and more recent, and of its flora and fauna.

A koala coming out of the bushfires is bewildered and black and clings to the trunk of the towering ironbark tree. The trunk too has been blackened almost to the topmost boughs. Now from the craggy open cracks in its charcoaled bark oozes tarry black resin. When autumn finally comes, the bark will fall away in rough shards, to be broken down as forest litter and foraging debris for the quaking magpies and tiny ants and slaters, to act as mulch for the tree next Spring.

It is only three weeks since the fires were quelled here by exhausted firefighters and volunteers, but nature already presses onwards. Tiny blades of woodland grass already are appearing. They point skywards to where the scorched remaining gum leaves hang dappling the sunlight on the forest floor. The wiry eucalyptus, a ghost gum, cracks its bark open to reveal new shoots, new life.

Soon the disasters of the past summer will be added to Australia's long list of overcome challenges, its list of heroes, and its lost ones. Soon we will be together once again to stand strong and resilient as a nation. This attribute will be celebrated not in a fundraising concert or a speech by a vain politician, but as an ANZAC Day commemoration, to not only our fallen war heroes, but also to our self-esteem, to our pride in who we are, and what we stand for again, and again. It's what we do. We're a wiry mob!

(As I start to write this piece, the threat of the coronavirus looms, and again our lives will not be the same again – our resilience will be called on to see us through, yet another national challenge).

I have no doubt, that we have all known those, who have experienced survival and have shown us that Aussie spirit. For me it was an inconspicuous Asian; Daniel (*His name is changed here to protect his anonymity*) he was already in his 70s when we first met him. He was sitting on an upturned milk crate sorting out a box of second-rate tomatoes and bagging the good ones to sell in the Sunday market in Balmain. This scruffy old Australian-born Chinese was to become a firm friend. His amazing collection of life stories, not the least of these, that clearly illustrated the Aussie spirit of survival, was the fact that soon after the end of World War II, after a number of years in active service with the Australian

Army, he was operating a gambling casino in Tokyo for Americans stationed there. He told me that it was usual to take around US\$10,000 each day. He ended up with investments in property and agencies, including some global companies. He became a member of the Millionaires' Club, at least twice, but through gambling and poor money management he lost everything. He and his wife clawed their way back. Over some 20 years they tried everything from acting and modelling for advertisements, to cookbooks and selling stuff in the local markets. He never gave up on once again becoming wealthy. That was his style, his dream. Circumstances and the advancing years took their toll and here he was selling all sorts of small fry knickknacks in the weekend markets. Resilience, or as I call it: 'Australience', his best and most endearing attribute.

Recovering from bushfires, flood, sickness or droughts, overcoming personal disabilities, business failures, Australience is always the underlying strength of our people, our animals and environment in this wonderful country. We will see many more examples as we tackle this latest health scare, now added to the list of national challenges.

Yes, we're a wiry mob.

Western Plains Christmas 1934

Leonie Huggins

Murwillumbah

The little girls chased after the old Dodge truck, oblivious to the puffs of orange dust, their calls chiming with excitement as Father drove in slow circles. He loved to tease, and he knew they had been waiting for this.

Finally, the truck stopped. Father clambered down from the cabin and walked around to the tray. "I've got a beauty for you this year." He grasped the trunk of the Cypress pine and hefted it upright, scattering needles and a waft of pungent pine. "Out of my way now," he commanded the dancing children. "This is heavy, and I don't want to trip over you."

A battered tin bucket filled with wet sand was waiting. The children held their breath as Father righted the tree and anchored it firmly, grunting with effort. The tip was almost to the ceiling. "See! Look at that! Just enough room for the star Alice made."

Margaret was already kneeling beside the bucket, measuring a length of red crepe paper to cover it. Carefully saved tinfoil, silver paper and rewind crepe paper streamers waited in a box to festoon the tree.

While the girls decorated, Mother was down the ramp in the kitchen, which was separated from the main house for fire safety. It was built of split, un-barked logs, had a floor of logs and packed earth and an iron roof. At the scrubbed pine table, she prepared a suckling pig to roast, complete with an apple in its jaw. She had saved for this festive fare since Easter, hiding coins in an old tea caddy. Fluffy, golden four-egg sponge cakes sat cooling on a rack. The old Metters stove plus Mother's magic meant there was never a failure. They were renowned as the best cakes in the district. Some would be iced, others would be doused with sherry and turned into trifle.

She laboured into the evening, pausing now and then to wipe her damp brow with the hem of her apron. Filled with purpose, she ignored the stifling heat and darkening sky outside. After carefully covering the festive food, she supervised the younger children as they washed, ate jam sandwiches for tea, said their prayers and went to bed.

When the rest of the family had eaten and washing up had been delegated to the older girls, Mother made a cup of tea and put her feet up.

Almost immediately the weather turned. Gusts of wind eddied around the house, pushing dust through the cracks in the walls, coating every surface with fine red talc. They watched with dismay as all the housework of the past few days was undone in minutes.

But worse was to come.

Silver-mauve zags of lightning split the sky; thunder growled and clapped. Rain spattered noisily above. There was a lull, then a wrenching crack as the wind lifted and twisted a section of the iron roof, lifting it high into the sky. All hands, Mother, Father, Brother and the big girls, scrambled to save the precious food from the teeming rain. When it was safely stowed they huddled under the remaining roofing as the storm continued.

As suddenly as it had come, the storm stopped. Mother took the kerosene lantern, carefully crossed the sodden kitchen and ventured up the ramp to check the children. Amazingly they were still asleep, all four topped and tailed in their double bed like sardines in a can. "Thank goodness for small mercies," she murmured.

With her finger to her lips to signal quiet, she turned to the others and whispered. "Off you all go to bed. We'll clean this up in the morning. It's too late to do it now." She didn't mention the work she still intended to do.

It was early when the smallest child, a blonde girl of five, wriggled out of the bed she shared with her sisters and tiptoed along the hall. The rising sun slanted in through the French doors, lighting up the tree with glitter. Nestled in the branches were four dolls, beautifully dressed in tiny hand knitted garments. Her eyes widened and she whispered a soft, "Oh!" She hoped the pink one was for her.

"Happy Christmas, Molly". She felt a light touch on the top of her head and looked up to see Mother, still in her nightdress with her long, silver-streaked plait over one shoulder. She took Molly's hand. "Shhh! Don't wake the others. Let's go down to the kitchen."

Molly looked longingly at the tree but she followed obediently. It was a rare treat to be alone with Mother. It was the bigger girls who looked after her most of the time.

"What...?" Molly looked up and saw a gaping hole where the ceiling should be. "Why...?"

"There was a great big storm while you were asleep. Today we are going to have a picnic Christmas, right here in our own kitchen. Won't that be fun?" Mother stoked the fire and moved the kettle into place. "Sit here for a minute while I go and get dressed. Then I'll make us some toast."

In the fresh cool of the morning the younger girls were sent outside to play. They paddled in puddles and made mud pies, shaping them into gingerbreads and Christmas trees. Inside the debris was cleared and the rubbish raked. Before lunch the children were called to the veranda, where they lined up to wash in the big enamel bowl.

The table was laid with a starched white table cloth and the worn silver cutlery polished to a high sheen. The aroma of roasted pork filled the air. There was no roof, but overhead the sky was blue.

Molly was last to be seated, wriggling onto her chair, clutching the precious pink doll in one hand. The family was quiet, waiting for Mother to say grace. But before she could start, Molly blurted, "This is the best Christmas ever!"

Mother smiled, bent her head and led the family in prayer.

When the Going Gets Tough

Teri Kempe

Ryde

Between September 1940 and May 1941 London suffered a major bombardment from Germany's attempt to derail the British response to their Second World War push into Europe. To date airstrikes had predominantly been on airfields and munitions factories, but in September 1940 the attacks switched to the major British cities. In London this was known as the Blitz. The German command envisaged a quick and decisive attack on centres of population would so discourage the populace they would insist on surrender. They underestimated the British 'bull-dog spirit'. Rather than surrender they became more united than ever – as Winston Churchill exhorted: 'We will fight them on the beaches...'.

Many children were evacuated out of London in anticipation of direct German bombing of the City but for many, sending their children far away to stay with strangers did not appeal, despite the government's encouragement to do so. As the war gained momentum, each night for several hours thousands of tons of bombs rained down on English cities. The air raid sirens were deafening. Wardens knocked on doors to hurry folk along. Everyone had to race for the shelters. Those who stayed risked death.

My dad served as a signalman in the Army and was away for the duration of the War. My mother elected to stay in London and keep my toddler sister with her. She had moved in with her in-laws in Battersea, near the Battersea Power Station, which became a favourite target of German attack. Despite the danger, they felt safe as they had their own bomb shelter under their house.

Everyone had to support the war effort and my mother enlisted as a nurse. During her shifts my grandparents minded my sister in their apartment.

While I was born after the war, I remember my grandparents' Battersea home, as I visited it many times as a child. It was only much later I learned it had been restored following partial destruction in the War. It was a two-storey apartment in a long row of similar houses with adjoining walls. It had an ornate white wrought-iron fence, a small path which led up three steps to the huge white front door. On the ground floor the lounge/dining room was on one side of a long passage with quite a large kitchen on the other. The stairs to the bedrooms and bathroom were at the end of the passage.

One of my favourite places to play as a child was the secret laundry chute. What appeared to be a cupboard door, hid the chute that went straight to the basement. A two-step ladder was always placed in front of it and as a child I could jump up and slide at an alarming rate to the basement below. Fortunately a large mattress was always stationed at the bottom to catch me. I never grew tired of this game, even though I had to run up the steps and out into the street to re-enter the house, much to the annoyance of my grandparents.

The path of the bombing raids was completely unpredictable, so the family had to be ready to take shelter at a moment's notice. The nearest large bomb shelter was 15 minutes' walk away at Clapham South. It was too risky to run there after the siren sounded so my grandparents, my mother and my baby sister used the laundry chute to make a quick entry to the safety of the basement. I can only imagine how scary it must have been, particularly for my grandmother, quite a large lady, to let go and arrive unceremoniously on the mattress below.

Several other families from the area shared this basement laundry which they accessed through a trap door and concrete steps at the rear of the property. As it was well below ground, it was considered safe during the bombing raids.

My mother had been an actress before the war. She attended the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art and acted alongside some famous names like Sir Laurence Olivier and Sir John Gielgud, although her roles were only minor. Unfortunately all the theatres were closed during much of the War.

As the nightly bombing raids intensified these families spent more and more time in the shelter below their homes. My mother, and some of her friends, decided they needed to make a distraction for the children during the long nights when it was difficult to sleep.

Each night in the air raid shelter my mother gathered the children together and at first just read them stories. *The Water Babies*, *Dr Doolittle* and *The Jungle Book* were their favourites. It wasn't long before just reading became acting them out. With my mother's suggestions and help, the children created plays to help pass the time and distract them from the noises of war up above.

My grandmother was quite eccentric and had some funny hats and scarves which my mother could use as costumes for the little ones. The children were quite creative in making props and suggestions for scenery. This was a great distraction from the terrors of the night. It was during these long wartime nights that my mother witnessed the creativity and talent of so many of the children. She found only minimal encouragement led these children to find their own expression, lose their inhibitions and perform with much joy. The laughter was a great relief in such troubled times.

Following the success of the bomb shelter performances, after the war my mother continued to meet with the children and founded the Marylebone Children's Theatre which evolved into the London Children's Theatre.

One often thinks nothing good could come out of war but the courage and resilience of the families in war-torn London is inspiring and encouraging. It helps us to keep our perspective. The human spirit is indomitable.



Mental health services and support contact list

Lifeline – 13 14 11

24-hour crisis support telephone service. Lifeline provides 24/7 crisis support and suicide prevention services.

Beyond Blue – 1300 22 46 36

Beyond Blue provides information and support to help everyone in Australia achieve their best possible mental health, whatever their age and wherever they live.

NSW Mental Health Line – 1800 011 511

A mental health professional will answer your call about mental health concerns for you or someone you are concerned about, including children, teens, adults and older people.

Carers Australia – 1800 242 636

Short-term counselling and emotional and psychological support services for carers and their families.

Head to Health – <https://headtohealth.gov.au/>

A digital mental health gateway funded by the Australian Government, containing a range of trusted mental health services and resources.

MindSpot – 1800 614 434 – <https://mindspot.org.au/>

A free service for Australian adults who are experiencing difficulties with anxiety, stress, depression and low mood. They provide an online assessment and treatment course, or also help you find local services.



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