seniors' stories

volume 3

SENIORS CARD

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Acknowledgements

This collection of 100 stories is the third volume of *Seniors Stories* written by seniors from throughout NSW. The themes of these stories are linked to the priorities of the NSW Ageing Strategy 2016 – 2020, namely: health and wellbeing; working and retirement; housing choices; getting around; and inclusive communities.

NSW Seniors Card would like to thank the 100 authors whose stories are published in this volume of *Seniors Stories*, as well as the many other seniors who contributed to the overwhelming number and quality of stories received.

Thanks also to contributing editor, Ambra Sancin, Book Expo Australia, and those involved in the design and printing of the book.

A message from the Premier

It is my pleasure to introduce this third volume of Seniors' Stories for the enjoyment of all people throughout NSW.

Our society continues to benefit greatly from the wealth of experience provided by our older and wiser generations.

The NSW Government values and supports seniors' involvement in our community and aims to help older people stay active, healthy and socially connected.

Through the NSW Government's Ageing Strategy 2016 – 2020 we will continue to focus on the services that our seniors want and need.

We will continue to deliver initiatives such as the Tech Savvy Seniors Program in partnership with Telstra, which gives older people the opportunity to develop their skills and confidence using technology. The government continues to support the Elder Abuse Helpline and Resource Unit, deliver the Liveable Communities Grants program, and expand the NSW Seniors Card to include more special deals for older people throughout the state.

I wish to congratulate those who contributed their stories for this publication and thank all seniors across NSW for their wealth of knowledge and experience in helping to guide the increasingly prosperous future of our state.

Gladys Berejiklian MP
Premier

A message from the Minister

I am very pleased to introduce the NSW Seniors Card Seniors' Stories volume 3 book.

NSW Seniors Card is our most widely used service for NSW residents over the age of 60. In addition to NSW Seniors Week and the Premier's Gala concerts, this book is a way of recognising our seniors.

During the past year Seniors Card members were invited to contribute an original story around the five priorities of the NSW Ageing Strategy 2016 – 2020: Health and wellbeing; Working and retiring; Housing choices; Getting around; and Inclusive communities.

We were overwhelmed by the number and quality of stories submitted by seniors from across the state.

Publishing the selected 100 stories is a great way to showcase the writing talent of seniors and provide an insight into their lives and the experiences of older Australians throughout NSW. Telling stories is an age old tradition in all cultures, it's how we pass down knowledge and history through the generations. By writing and telling stories, we gain an understanding and realisation of the diversity that exists in local communities.

This latest volume of Seniors' Stories is just one way of recognising and valuing the experiences of NSW seniors and building connections between the young and old.

I hope you enjoy the stories featured, whatever your age!

Tanya Davies MP
Minister for Ageing

Foreword

Rory O'Donoghue

I love a good story. I remember as a five year old, lying in a hammock in the garden of my grandparents' home in London, listening to the daily radio serial and being transported into a wonderful world of my own imagination as the words washed over me and created vivid images in my mind. The bond between storyteller and listener is unique. Can the storyteller engage the audience? Can he or she create in the listener that spark, that thrill of adventure and discovery. Look at the cosy scene of a parent with book in hand and child on knee, both deeply engaged in the story at hand. It is indeed a wonderful moment and a life ritual of the highest order.

Story telling has long been a means of passing knowledge down from generation to generation. As an actor and singer I deeply value the power of the written and spoken word. I love telling a good story either in word or song, taking the audience on a journey with me, all the while making time stand still and transporting those present into another world for a few precious moments.

For me, my story continues to be written with new adventures and discoveries each and every day. Watching my family and those around me grow and develop their own life stories is indeed a huge joy. In the pages that follow you will encounter tales of joy and happiness, sadness and loss, each of them an honest and considered gift, straight from the heart. I sincerely hope you enjoy our Seniors Stories.

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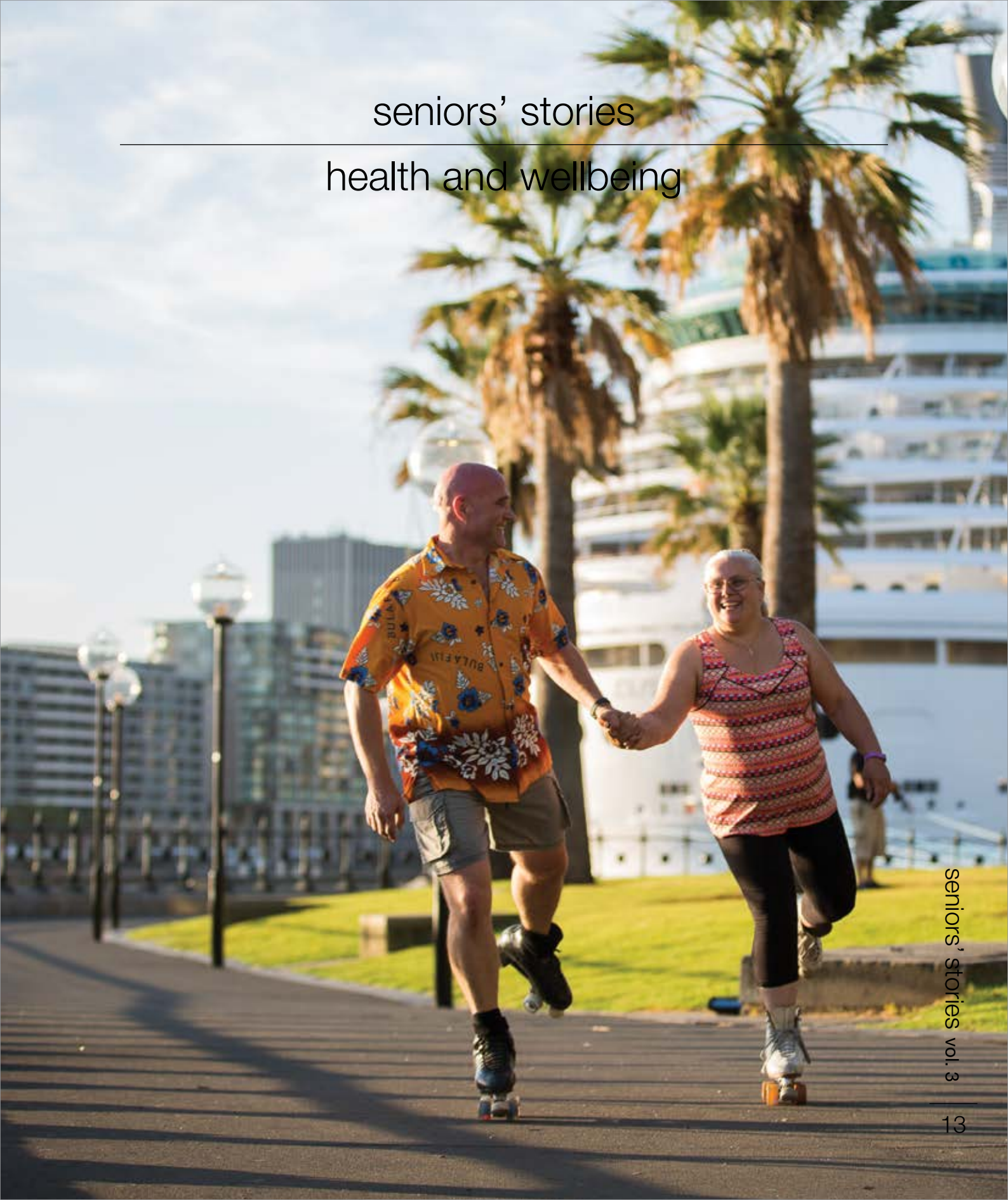

Cosmo and Monty

By Annette Whitfield

For over 10 years, my husband and I regularly took our two golden retrievers, Cosmo and Monty, to visit my mum at her nursing home. Even though she had Alzheimer's, she seemed to love their visits, especially as she had always been a "doggie" person.

We regularly dressed up Cosmo and Monty for special occasions and they loved wearing their personalised, handmade Christmas reindeer or Easter Bunny outfits. It was always so much fun and they seemed to enjoy it as much as all the residents did!

About eight years ago, when we were visiting on Christmas Eve morning, we witnessed something very special ...

All the residents were in the communal room, and Cosmo and Monty split up and went over to say hello to everyone, as they usually did. We noticed a new patient, lying in the foetal position in a reclining chair in the corner of the room. Cosmo walked over to her to get a cuddle, but the lady was unable to move her arm. Ever persistent he moved to her other side, placing his head under her other hand. She then began to gently stroke his hair and he licked her hand. I told her that we wanted to wish her a Happy Christmas and hoped she would be feeling better soon.

Several minutes passed and she turned towards me, tried to smile and with tears streaming down her face said, "He's a lovely doggie." I hadn't noticed the woman sitting at a table behind me until she suddenly started to cry. She told me that was her mum and she hadn't been able to communicate at all since she had a severe stroke several weeks earlier. Within a few minutes there wasn't a dry eye in the place – we had all witnessed a Christmas miracle.

We were very proud of Cosmo that day. It reinforced our belief that Cosmo and Monty's regular visits may have made a difference to the patients at mum's nursing home ... even if they weren't always able to communicate the joy they felt from something as simple as a cuddle and lick from one of our special boys.

Grief, loss and love again

By Anthony Jackson

So this was it, sitting in an upstairs bedroom looking out of the window onto the square below, staring into the dark street. It was 3.00 a.m. and still no sleep.

It had been six weeks since my beautiful wife of 20 years had passed away. I felt my life was over. The kids are grown up and have kids of their own. Not a lot of time for dad, or had I just pushed them away?

I was a 54 year-old retired detective living in the UK. Night-time was the worst time for me and as a retiree, I had no inclination to do anything during the day. I spiralled deeper and deeper into a black hole, thinking, "Well, ok, this is the best I can get and maybe it will not be too long before my time here is over too."

I turned to my computer, typing in the word "grief". Numerous hits popped up but one caught my eye: an American website for people who had lost a loved one. I clicked and soon I was in a chat room with lots of men and women who all greeted me kindly, enquiring about my loss. The hours passed as I chatted away to others in the same boat as me. This was just what I needed. When I could not sleep, talking with others helped me begin to come to terms with my own loss. It was amazing that I could talk with people from all over the world from my own home. There were "rooms" for every type of loss and I soon found myself going to a room for those who had lost a spouse.

I began chatting with a lady from Australia who had lost her husband six weeks after I had lost my gorgeous wife Pauline. We seemed to be a mirror image as she too had experienced a long and loving marriage with children and grandchildren. She was desolate and lonely too and as time went on I began to look forward to us chatting.

My evening was her morning and vice versa. We could talk to each other through the worst of times. From chatting online, we progressed to telephone calls, encouraging each other through the deepest of our grief and emptiness. My day started to revolve around our calls. I so looked forward to talking with her and we became firm friends.

The lady had decided on a holiday to visit a friend in the UK so I offered to show her the sights. She was not too sure. It was easy to chat online and even on the telephone but to actually meet! I later found out a friend of hers asked her, "What do you have to lose? You know he is lovely. If you don't like him, just move on. If you do not meet him I will never talk to you again."

So it was to be after all. We met in London and it was an amazing four weeks of fun and travelling all over the UK. I was so sad when she had to return to Australia. The telephone calls continued, and I arranged a visit to Australia the following year. It was as if no time had passed between our last meeting. We continued as before, having a wonderful time and holidaying together. But good things always come to an end and I had to return to England. Although I was not in the deep depression of before, I could not help thinking I was still so lonely and something was missing from my life.

After a visit to the UK the following year, things settled back into a pattern of daily calls until one day I got a call I never expected.

"I can't afford the telephone charges here, how do you think you would like to live in Australia?"

Wow, I was stunned but very happy. We were just two lonely people who had found some happiness together. However, I really never expected or dreamed of that.

It was madness ... I packed up my house and arranged for it to be rented out and flew to Australia in November. My children, God bless them, backed me 100 per cent, only wishing me to be happy again. I left them promising that I would return to the UK as often as I could to see them, and of course we did have the telephone and Skype so we could always keep in touch. I probably see them more now than when I lived a few miles away because when I do visit we have regular and quality time together.

So began the long and arduous process of Australian immigration, but in 2014 it came through and I now have permanent residency. I fully intend to take Australian citizenship when I can do so. I am happy again. Who would have thought it? My lady has now become my wife and I am extremely proud to be her husband. We are both grateful to be given a second chance, living here in this wonderful country enjoying our time together.

Let this story be a lesson to everyone who has loved and lost. Life is never over. Life is for the living and my advice is to take any chance you get to be happy. I did, and now I hope this story will continue for many more years.

Strike a pose

By Barbara Barrett

"Just keep moving, plaster on a smile, and finish with a pose." This is my advice to newcomers joining our seniors' Zumba class.

"Concluding with a pose alludes to successful moves throughout," I add. Not to mention the sense of achievement experienced.

The media has recently been extolling the health benefits of music. What a great way to keep the mind and body active. Social benefits are an additional plus.

Loud pulsating percussion pumping out from our class eliminates any drama that might have been mind-occupying prior to the class. It energises, invigorates from head to toe. Smile-lines and laughter add years to your life and nourishment to the soul.

A wake-up routine warms up torsos, calling gossips to attention. I've nearly got those movements right, only occasionally going the wrong way.

I increase my concentration. More complicated routines are best completed early in this active hour.

Positioning with a full view of our instructor is necessary. Her direction signals and finger-counts silently indicate dance manoeuvres – especially helpful when memory recall is challenged. Fortunately the hall is big enough to allow space between the participants. It has been known for near-collisions, with breathless laughter generally following any errors.

Toes tap to timbales, tambourines and beating bongos. Reminders are given to lift the heels on turns. My gammy knees don't particularly hold up well on the spins, so I exercise on the spot.

Sliding stealthily we're swept by the music's tide. Shifting seeds of sand shaken in gouged-out gourds enliven movements.

Weight is transferred as abs and hips rotate the pelvic clock.

Relaxed arms go with the flow.

Rhythm changes and we are stomping, bouncing and pumping arms. A ripple from the shoulders transfers through the body creating a vibrating marshmallow effect.

Then there is the buttock shuffle. I'm sure mine looks nothing like the tight muscular cheeks of the instructor as she struts her stuff.

Periodically our taskmaster produces vibrant "cheer squad" pom poms. As long as I get the same colour for each hand I'm fine. Fortunately my shoulders allow for circulating movements and shape-shifting gyrations. Everyone is so focussed on the colourful swirling attachments that effort is seemingly minimal and painless.

Allowances are made for varying disabilities.

You don't necessarily have to do the crossover steps of the grapevine. The music can be quite fast on occasions and a tangle of legs is not a good look.

Beside me, a very fit 76-year-old bounces, hops, twists and turns: she's my role model. I hope I will be as active when I have reached her age. Daily walks to the Byron lighthouse are definitely worthwhile.

An hour has quickly passed and the music slows. Body stretches terminate the cardiovascular workout, releasing tension and possible painful muscles. The adrenalin rush of blood pumping has calmed.

Movement continues languidly, my smile remains as hands meet. Congratulatory applause echoes around the room, concluding our weekly session of enjoyment.

Black dogs and deep holes

By Megan Gibbs

The tears ran down my face as I sat opposite my doctor. She looked at me intently and said, "I think you are depressed."

"Oh no," I said, "I am just tired."

How could I be depressed? I had a loving family, a home, no big financial worries, absolutely nothing to be depressed about. Except maybe caring for my mum – but that was my job, my responsibility. Wasn't it? I wish I had listened to my doctor then because things went from bad to worse.

Let me take you back a bit. I had always felt I was the strong one of the family. I could cope. I could fix things. It didn't bother me to take over caring for my mum. Unfortunately it didn't go as planned and my body started to send me signals with stomach upsets, a minor heart problem, a visit to the emergency ward with severe stomach pains and a couple of others that you don't really want to know about! The most worrying (but secretly acceptable) was the extreme weight loss. I attended to each complaint but still refused to believe I was depressed. My main goal was to attend my son's wedding in North Queensland.

I made the wedding, sort of. I was ill all day, rushing to the ladies' room minutes before the ceremony. Hey, at least I looked good, as I had lost so much weight. No "fat mum" in these photos, I thought. Then it all crashed and I was too ill, dazed and confused to attend the reception. It was a nasty, bewildering feeling. I couldn't relax, concentrate or even sit still. I honestly felt like I was losing my mind. Somehow I made it home to Sydney and straight to my doctor's office. This time there were no words of denial from me.

My doctor prescribed counselling, medication and a stint in rehab. I took her up on two out of three, determined to stay at home and recover. My dear other half was steady in his resolve to help me through. Every day seemed so long, especially the mornings. At least in the afternoon I knew it wouldn't be long until I could seek refuge in my bed again. My doctor asked if I was suicidal. I swore I was not and yet secretly I wondered if my husband would be better off without me, and he could go on that overseas trip I didn't want to go on. I couldn't seem to relax with TV or reading and I cried a lot. Unfortunately the counselling didn't really work for me but finally the medication did.

Slowly I got stronger and was able to let go of my husband's amazing help and stand on my own two feet. This took about six weeks, which may not sound much but it seemed forever to someone who was afraid to face every new day. The healing is an ongoing thing and it would seem my demons might never fully leave me. If something bad happens in my life I need to increase my dose of medication and I then work extra hard to reduce it again. I try to present to the world as normal but I have my good days and my bad days. I figure it's best to just acknowledge the bad days and enjoy the good ones. I think I will always be working hard to not let the "black dog" fall into the deep hole again.

Surfing injury

By Bob Nash

It is 1969 and we were off on a youthful surfing trip to a place known at the time as Yagan; now referred to as the back beach of Seal Rocks. I was in my late teens, travelling with a group of surfie mates in their 1967 HR Holden Panel Vans.

I was surfing at the north end of the back beach early Saturday morning about 7.00 a.m. when I took off on a left breaking wave, the opposite way to my usual foot comfort stance, and realised that the wave was going to dump. I flicked the board back up at myself to grab and sort of fall out the back of the wave. I missed grabbing the board's edge by *thaaattt* much! (apologies to Maxwell Smart.) The edge of the board struck me in the forehead, hard, but I managed to forget the pain, thanks to an ever-widening pool of blood around the board in the water. My mates were obviously more concerned than me, expecting Jaws to leap up any moment, and began shepherding me to the beach.

When we reached the beach, one of my mates had the sense to wrap a towel around my head to stem the flow of blood from a gash about two inches long on my forehead. As we dragged all the boards and other gear back to the panel vans, we got ready for a mad dash back to the local doctor in Forster, to stitch up the gaping wound. It was a sandy track back over to Seal Rocks, before a gravel road out to The Lakes Way. The "ambulance" (panel van) driver drove like a lunatic, and not being experienced on sand, slid off the side of the road at the first bend and down into the scrub.

In panic mode now, my mates nominated one of them to run to the nearest farm and ask if anyone had a tractor to pull the van out, incoherently explaining that I was potentially brain addled and bleeding to death from my injuries. Fortunately, one mate found a pair of my undies and taped them with electrical tape to my wounded head.

It was almost 10.30 a.m. before the tractor arrived, and the panel van was extracted. Off we drove rapidly, but more carefully, to Forster.

In seeking directions to the nearest – and only – doctor in Forster on a Saturday morning, we were told that he only works a half day and the surgery would close at 11.30 a.m. We arrived at the surgery at 11.40 a.m. to be told he had already left, and were given the address of a Taree doctor who usually works on Saturdays.

We arrived at the Taree surgery at 12.30 p.m. to find a packed waiting room. The receptionist/nurse informed us that the doctor would return at 2.00 p.m., as he had just headed up to the hospital and if went go straight to the Hospital Emergency, he was on duty and would probably see me there.

Arriving at Emergency, I am greeted by a triage nurse who looks at the wound and says I will need at least five to six stitches, and to wait for the doctor to finish with his current patient. She removes my "undie bandage" and swabs the wound, then replaces the undies with a gauze pad and wraps my head up properly.

After almost an hour's wait, I become concerned and check with the receptionist who

informs me the doctor has been called away to an urgent home birth, and perhaps it would be wiser to go back to his surgery and wait, as his shift at the hospital will have ended by the time the birth is over. It is now almost 2.00 p.m.

We return to the surgery and wait and wait and wait. At 3.30 p.m., the doctor returns, checks the urgency of the waiting patients' list and I am told I will be the fourth patient in line. It is almost 4.30 p.m. by the time I am finally called into his room.

He removes the hospital-applied bandage, checks out the wound intently and then asks me what time the accident happened. I answer that it was "about 7.00 a.m." which, by his slowly shaking head – and some tsk, tsking – isn't good news for me. He explains, "If you'd only come in earlier, I could have stitched the wound. As it has now remained open for so long, the skin will "bunch up" when it is stitched. So all I am able to do is pull the wound together and place butterfly Band-Aids on it to hold it together and hope it won't pull apart."

His final words, as he places the Band Aids in place were, "Now stay out of the water for the next two weeks!"

I could have screamed! This was the first day of a two-week surfing holiday to Queensland and back, and was now ruined by the stupid delays of an idiot mate's driving errors, a Forster doctor who only worked half days on Saturdays, and having to chase around Taree for ages, looking for the doctor, who then finally tells me, "I should have come in earlier." Aarrgghhh!

I managed to be a good boy and stay out of the surf for three days … then gave in to the temptation of great waves. As medical insurance, I bought a box of butterfly band-aids and kept replacing the loose ones daily, but still ended up with a "Frankenstein" scar on my forehead, which I still bear to this day.

Seal Rocks … fond memories.

A mile in my shoes

By Geraldine O'Brien

Sometimes a day stands out only in retrospect. On this particular day, my wife and I went shopping and passed a rack of high-heeled shoes. I expected my suggestion of how attractive she would be in them to be met with her stock response to similar past suggestions that "they were difficult to walk in." They were uncomfortable and she was quite content to wear sensible shoes. But it was the additional protestation that they were just plain dangerous that stood out from every other time. She kept walking. Why did I not let it go?

At that moment I decided her reluctance could be addressed easily by proving to her that such shoes were not difficult to walk in – neither uncomfortable nor dangerous. Returning to the store later, alone, with a mix of bravado and embarrassment, I bought those towering, strappy creations in the largest size available and went home to prove my point.

It was so simple. I slipped my foot into the unfamiliar curve of the steep sole and noticed the lightness and openness of a woman's shoe. Just as easily I slid the other shoe on and fastened the narrow straps around my bare ankles. I was doing well. I could stand and I could even walk, albeit a little flat footed, in towering four inch strappy, opened toed shoes.

So five years ago, the world changed for me immediately and, I think, forever.

I looked at my feet in the mirror. I had never felt beautiful in my life until then. The skirt and tights I bought in the following days only reinforced the pink fog that comes over a cross-dresser. This was a rapid introduction to something I had never thought about. Cross-dressers were just the butt of Priscilla jokes.

Days later I told my wife about my immediate and urgent need to dress in women's attire. I did not realise the implications and difficulties cross-dressing would cause those close to me. She did not understand and I could not explain why. Later, our adult children would also not understand this aspect of their father.

The internet assures me that I am not the only person with this difficult proclivity (albeit most realise the need in their childhood or youth). Between two and five per cent of the population cross-dress, I read. Such needs fall under the umbrella of transgender, now considered part of normal human diversity. It does not take long to learn that gender and sex are not the same. Sex is anatomy whereas gender is one's perception of maleness and femaleness. Just to complicate things there is a continuum between the two rather than two distinct states.

It shocks and saddens me to realise that before the internet, gender non-conforming children or adults would have remained bewildered by what they experienced and completely alone. Had I realised my need at the age of five I would have been thought of as mad or perverted or both. I understand only a fraction of their fear of rejection.

Cross-dressing for me is more than clothing and make-up. It is not erotic. And I am not gay. I think it is about growing beyond the opinionated, controlled male I was and becoming gentler, more intimate, more accepting of people and difference. I am a better, more complete person for having integrated this into the male who still exists. I am not effeminate, but I seek to include traits thought commonly more feminine. And sometimes I need to present as closely as I can to a woman. I am not a woman trapped in a male body. I am otherwise contented being male.

I expect you find this difficult to understand. That is OK. I still do.

A gender clinic advised it was not something to be cured. The initial joy of knowing I am not broken, turned then to the realisation that this is probably permanent.

Welcome to me.

For the sake of my family, I no longer cross-dress. But I still need to. It never leaves. I still buy clothes. And I make the best of this exquisite bliss and utter torment.

Agnes, a wonderful psychologist helped me understand that I probably used the cross-dressing in my experiment to break out of the very strict male stereotype I had developed throughout life. But why such an extreme measure just to grow? Because I would not have noticed anything less confronting and the self will eventually prevail.

Cross-dressing may have stopped me taking up lawn bowls or golf in my retirement, because stilettos damage the greens, but it is a blessing. Through it I have learned more about me and about life than I could possibly have imagined.

While you may never have to think about gender, you will be confronted with aspects of human diversity during your life. You may not understand that diversity because it is not your journey. But be brave. Do not judge. Do not hate or exclude. That hurts real people. And those you hate may be the ones you love.

I am not 'out' to anyone beyond my family, one friend and now you dear reader, so I will close using my assumed female name.

Geraldine

OMG, I've been branded!

By Cheryl Halpin

We had left our small hometown where everyone knew us. We had friends of all ages but "friends" was the only relevant term and this odd expression called "age" did not seem to exist. We just sailed through the days and weeks like everyone else.

Moving to the coast was a much-anticipated adventure. I first heard the expression "God's waiting room," a nickname given to our new town and other small coastal towns. I found it quite humorous but gave a shoulder shrug of nonchalance. After all, I was young, in my sixties.

During the first few months I began to feel an odd sense of confusion. Young shop assistants treated me with a gentle respect, some almost with indifference. It slowly dawned on me that it was all to do with how they perceived me. After all, they didn't know I was young, ageless, that there was no number connected to my years. It did, however, have a direct impact on how I began to perceive myself.

I must add here that I had reached a wonderful time in my life where I'd discovered the joy of carefree dressing, what I have lovingly called my "daggy baggies." Happy Hour in my daggies is total bliss! Of course there are times when I "don the face" and the "good gear" but I had become au fait with that awful expression "comfortable in my own skin", or so I thought. Suddenly, I was allowing myself to feel uncomfortable in said skin and thought perhaps I should do my shopping dressed to the nines. Would this encourage a change in attitude to this woman who was so obviously "over the hill"?

Once, when changing my password at an ATM, a younger person actually stopped and asked if I needed help. Help? Did I *look* like I needed help?

I finally realised that to some people younger than me, I am old and I struggled with a sense of frustration, confusion, indignation and a degree of despair. I actually felt quite intimidated by these new feelings, knowing that, had I stayed in my hometown this would not have become a part of my life – would it? I must admit that my analytical self tends to often over-think situations but at the time this was quite overwhelming.

I had never seen so many old people or perhaps I had never noticed so many old people. Note here to analytical self: you are using the "old" word; you are also guilty of labelling.

For some months I struggled with being thrilled with our new home, meeting new people yet feeling plagued by my new awareness.

I joined many group activities and slowly came to know many of the wonderful locals. Ever so slowly I became known as me again. One day I passed an older lady dressed in a variety of bright colours and sporting a hot-pink walking stick. She looked great. I found myself watching her, marvelling at her, my grin wide. I realised that I was seeing the best of senior years. I was seeing (and dodging) the Jack Brabhams in their mobility scooters with

gay flags flying; the fabulous array of brightly coloured walking sticks; the curvaceous bulges of saggy, excess weight in the too-tight gear of those of us at the gym. And I loved it. What an adjustment. What a revelation. What an epiphany!

I remember some years back seeing a story on grannies, mums and teen daughters all wearing the same outfits. That's us! Love the "new" 40s, 50s and 60s. Love that each awesome new season outfit is the "new black." Love that I am once again comfortable in my own skin (though fluorescent lighting is not my best friend). Wouldn't change it for quids!

Dear God, please don't be offended but we oldies move pretty darn fast so you'll need to run to keep up, let alone catch us.

Ten years without Isaac

By Cheryl Kuhne

A dear friend recently slipped me an article from the *Sydney Morning Herald* called 'Living with Beauty and Tragedy', the story of Kate Dyer, clinical midwife and consultant for high-risk pregnancies at the Royal Hospital for Women, Randwick.

I read the article and was not unmoved. Whilst it reminded me so much of the work my youngest daughter does as a bereavement midwife, it also brings to the surface, as happens from time-to-time, what I shall now call "Isaac feelings."

Yes, it is 10 years since our first grandchild, Isaac James, was born. And died. On 30 January 2006. He arrived after a gruelling labour and weighed 10lb 9oz. He lived for two short hours.

I did not see my dear daughter, his mother, filled with joy following the birth of her son. He was born in the evening and I was not able to drive to the hospital. I remember saying to her, "You will be so very exhausted, I will come see you in the morning." We were not to know my first meeting with Isaac would be filled with such sadness. And how I lamented that I did not see the joy-filled face of his mother, my daughter, with her new born, first-born son.

In January 2016, Isaac's mother organised a special lunch following a visit to the cemetery, where Isaac is buried. Because of my husband's health issues at the time we were not able to share this remembrance with family and friends. Ten years on and the grief still rises and often rages. I wrestle with the fact that had he lived we would not have his brother – that dearly loved boy who was born the following year. This grandson, and his two sisters have brought immeasurable joy into our hearts and lives.

But Isaac, our "big little boy" your birth and death have also brought joy and blessing to our family and beyond. Your birth and death shaped your aunty's career, bringing into our lives other bereaved parents, who became her friends – and our friends. Your funeral service touched the hearts of hundreds, so many of whom vowed to become better parents. Your death gave this grandmother insight into the grief that mothers have to live through, fathers endure and grandmothers – the mothers of the mothers who bear such loss – also suffer two- fold. They can do little to help their own child mourning such a horrendous loss when they themselves struggle to come to terms with such tragedy.

My being agrees with Dyer who states, "... Beauty and tragedy are so closely linked ... I mean emotional beauty. I mean physical beauty; I mean beauty in how families can turn a really awful scenario around. They can find language that is not about the overwhelming sadness, or the overwhelming anomaly. They focus on things they can control, and they focus often on things that are so beautiful, like, "He's got the best nose."

The morning after, struggling, I went to see Isaac and his mother. There he was, snugly wrapped and lying right next to her. Perfect in every way, but lifeless. As I cradled him in my arms I thought, "I need to take something of

you with me forever – something that I will never forget. Something my breaking heart will hold." I touched his forehead ever so gently, and my finger pressed lightly into his soft baby skin. That's what I have taken. That's what I remember: the soft touch of his skin. I have felt many babies' heads since then, on purpose, just to see. Isaac's imprint is different. Always it is different. Embedded in my memory as real as if that touch had happened a moment ago.

I witnessed beauty and tragedy in my eldest daughter on the day of Isaac's funeral. She was beautiful. I wonder if I told her that? I wondered how could she look so beautiful after such a tragedy. Her beauty came from her inner being. Her strength. Her faith. Her God. Certainly there were questions. Many without answers. And through all this beauty and tragedy, her heart quietly pondered. It still does. And it will – always. As it will for all of us so closely connected with Isaac's arriving and departing.

Beauty does not reside in all aspects of tragedy. Isaac's father and mother were parents even though they did not take their baby home. Empty car seat. Empty cradle. Empty arms. They made that beautiful baby and had dreams and hopes for him and for themselves as parents. I was a grandmother, receiving oh so many cards of comfort and encouragement, but not one acknowledging my "grandmother-hood." Beauty will follow when someone I know experiences this tragedy for I will ensure their grandparent status is acknowledged – it is not their fault that child did not stay.

Isaac, you are tragedy and you are beauty. How many teenagers in a secondary college assembly listened to my letter about your death? Who knows what those young people now carry in their hearts. We meet random mothers in random places, each with a story to tell ... we are not frightened to share. For we know that you, Isaac, are the reason we can offer part of ourselves to another, knowing the beauty in our message softens the tragedy they endure.

Tai Chi

By David Ross

My name is David Ross and I'd like to share my story of finding Tai Chi, which has become my saviour.

In 2001, aged 45, I was struck down with a back injury which stopped me being able to work. The doctors decided a spinal fusion was needed but after only a few weeks of relief, the pain returned. In early 2003, the doctor suggested the removal of the "hardware" in my back to take pressure off a possible blocked nerve. To my dismay the pain was still there, and as with any failed surgery a certain amount of depression was starting to set in. There was nothing the doctors could do. I was left with chronic pain day after day, week after week, year after year. With the help of pain doctors and more drugs than I wanted to take, I was on an emotional roller coaster. I was lying on the lounge up to six hours a day, doing little exercise, because it was better, I thought, to lie still and hopefully alleviate the pain.

I'd done a little Tai Chi in early 1998 and after lying on the lounge for three years – after two failed operations – I was more than ready to start some low impact exercise. I knew Tai Chi was an ideal exercise to start as it is slow and gentle on the joints and helps many other health conditions. I saw an advertisement in the paper for Tai Chi, rang the number for more details and the rest is history.

In my first class I was greeted by the instructor who made me feel so comfortable that by the end of the one-hour class, I was hooked. I was sore in the legs and my back was still aching but as weeks went by I was starting to get used to the moves and getting relief from my back pain. Without knowing it, I was not only building the strength in my legs but also starting to build my core strength, which helps the back.

I was feeling much better, seeing an improvement in my back pain as well as my mind and body wellness overall. The depression started to fade and I noticed I was able to stretch more, walk further and join in more social events. Tai Chi works the mind, body and spirit: the spirit not being the spooky variety but an uplifting feeling, a feeling of worth and confidence.

I have been doing Tai Chi for over 10 years now and have graduated from a student to an instructor for the Australian Academy of Tai Chi and Qigong. During my training I have devoted myself to bringing the art of Tai Chi to as many people as possible. I believe everyone over the age of 50 should do Tai Chi because its low impact exercises and slow rhythmic movements are ideal for those who no longer fancy running on a treadmill or lifting weights. Tai Chi uses your own body weight to help you improve your overall body fitness. It can help many health-related conditions such as arthritis, asthma, blood pressure and obesity. It can improve balance, muscle tone and strength, bone density, the lymphatic system, as well as prevent falls, help with rehabilitation from surgery and many other conditions.

If you decide to start a class you will also be taught how to breath, stretch, stand and Tai Chi walk to help your balance. Balance

is a very important part of your everyday life. Deteriorating balance can lead to a lack of self-confidence, which can also lead to depression, which may then lead to not wanting to attend your regular meetings, hobbies or catch up with friends. Failing balance can lead to a declining quality of life.

Tai Chi can help but it all starts with you. So why not consider joining a class to improve your health. I've been there and I know how hard it is. But if you can relate to my story then you've nothing to lose, except maybe a few kilos. You will also gain more confidence, improve your self-worth and also mix with people interested in improving their health.

I now teach nine classes a week and never lie down on the lounge anymore. I believe that Tai Chi has improved my longevity and I'm sure it can improve yours as well.

Bikes, beasts and bears

By Geraldine Levett

I want to share with you our three days in Spitsbergen, the largest and only permanently populated island of the Svalbard archipelago in northern Norway.

First impressions are of lots of snow covered peaks (called spits) with the sprawling town of Longyearbyen being a collection of brightly colored houses. Reds, greens, yellows and blues dotted against the white, bare landscape. It's a bit like being inside a meringue pie.

Our adventures started the next morning as we headed off into the wilderness on our snowmobiles after a very brief rundown on how to drive these mean machines. Following the leader, we meandered into the misty whiteness, feeling like an Arctic equivalent of *Easy Rider*.

When we stopped for a briefing and switched off the engines, the deafening silence of the place was overwhelming. We were thwarted in our attempt to reach an abandoned Russian settlement because of the thick, whiteout conditions. It was hard work just keeping up with the snowmobile in front of you and simply impossible to make out the leader of the pack! Being last in line, the track got ruttier so my husband, Steve, decided that virgin snow was the way to go. After all, the worst thing that could happen was tipping over the snowmobile and we had already been warned not to throw out our arms and legs for fear of having them guillotined by the heavy machine.

As passenger I kept silent, feeling my role was to keep alert to any lurking polar bears. Hearing the dull throb of the engines meant we were not lost. As the trip continued over frozen snow covered glaciers and into gorges of frozen waterfalls, I grew colder to the point I couldn't feel my toes or fingers. Extra socks and gloves and a hot chocolate did the trick. Soon the sun emerged and we felt its welcome warmth as we snaked back to town.

The following day the sky cleared into a bright blue and the sun shined in patches on the snowy landscape. Still, it was 10 degrees below zero. We were whisked off to the dog camp at the edge of town where the dogs' howling couldn't disturb the inhabitants. Our young Danish guide, Jasper with a bung eye, led us to a small and uninviting log cabin where we were instructed to put on extra clothing. We groped around in the dark until we found what we needed. Everything had a distinctive damp, doggy smell about it.

We plodded out to the putrid dog yard to bond with the animals. Out of the corner of my eye I spied a primitive, bare and uninviting wooden sled. Where was the romantic *Doctor Zhivago* with its sleek lines? And the bells, where were the tinkling bells? Perhaps ours was behind the shed?

I stood frozen to the ground, contemplating the scene of snarling, howling beasts. It was a scene out of the apocalypse. Steve wasn't daunted by this spectacle. He grabbed each of the six snarling dogs that had been chained to their kennel in the dog yard.

He patted and spoke to each one of the dogs as instructed, as if they were playful pets and not the rabid beasts they appeared to be. Jasper had emphasized the importance of building up a relationship with them and Steve worked furiously to do so. I didn't have the heart to tell him one of the mutts had just peed over his leg. Jasper gave a brief lesson on how to drive the sled: just go and stop with the command "whoa." Simple!

Across the snow covered landscape with its fjords and peaked hills we floated. The dogs ceased barking while they ran but continued to poo. They were content to be working as they pulled us along on our rough sled. Only a cold canvas sling in the frame of the sled protected me from the snow below. Steve stood behind me, controlling the direction of the sled. It was tougher for the driver when we had to go up a slope because he had to run alongside the sled to lighten the load. His breathing was labored during these times. My job was to anticipate and lean out when turning corners.

A small hole in the snow revealed the entrance to a spectacular ice cave. The entrance looked more like a slippery dip so Jasper kindly fashioned steps for us with his icepick. He slung his rifle over his shoulder joking about maybe finding a polar bear in the cave. This didn't go down well with me. I was already in a state of heightened anxiety about these creatures.

The return trip was uneventful until a split second when I spied the dog camp and thought the dogs could take a short cut through the soft, fluffy snow. The panting dogs must have read my mind because we abruptly took off before I had a chance to lean out from the turn. The sled toppled and I decided to abandon ship. Home was in sight and there were no polar bears around. Steve held on with the anchor in his free hand. Soon he too let go, managed to scramble to his feet and chased after the toppled sled being dragged by the determined dogs. Meanwhile I trudged through the thick snow. In the distance Jasper was running towards the dogs and waving his hands. He suddenly lurched amongst them and took control. We declined his invitation to unharness the writhing, snarling mutts.

Weary and smelly we returned to Lonyerabyen dreaming of a long, hot bath.

Our time in Spitsbergen had been a never-to-be-forgotten adventure but no more dog sledding for us. As for the bears, well we didn't have any encounters with any live bears but, for me, imagining them had been bad enough.

I ran a marathon

By Philip Soller

I ran a marathon! Me? A 70-year-old athlete! My grandchildren still do not believe it. They suspect that I hitched a lift in one of the official cars.

How did this marathon happen when less than 18 months before the race I could not complete their short school Big Walk? In fact, I could not get out of bed for a full day after the event.

I realised how unfit and flabby I had become and made up my mind to do something about it.

First step, visit the sport shop and become the proud owner of Nike running shoes. According to the salesman they would make my running feel like a walk in the park.

Not wanting to be too ambitious, I planned a route around two blocks. Halfway, I decided that one block would make a better target. Some fifteen minutes later I limped into my garden. Even a cold beer could not revive me.

Day two, I reluctantly put on the Nikes and set off on my "training." Somehow, I felt a little more confident. As each day passed the run became easier and I decided to increase the distance. Soon I was doing five kilometres. On one of these runs I met a fellow jogger who suggested that I join him that weekend and enter a fun run.

I turned up at the appointed place, date and time and was amazed to see the large crowd of runners – young and old, men and women, fat and fit. *Bang!* went the starter's gun and we were off. I soon found myself in a group at the back of the field and felt a spirit of camaraderie more than competiveness. I eventually finished and was excited to receive a certificate.

From that moment on I was hooked on fun runs. I was gaining confidence and set my heart on running a half marathon. Each weekend I pounded the road and slowly increased the distance. I was running further and faster. After several months I was ready to attempt the half marathon. Surprise! I finished. But a full marathon would be another kettle of fish.

Nike's slogan is *Just Do It* and that became my inspiration. The City Marathon was my objective. I remember the trepidation I felt as I filled in the entry form. The great day dawned and I took my place amongst the thousands of runners. I, again, found myself in a pack at the back of the field. We were off and together we ran until the finishing post came into view. Almost there!

How proud was I to see my name in the results in the newspaper the following day?

My trip

By Julie Robertson

I headed to the railway station, looking forward to my trip to the art gallery. No babysitting today, just some time for myself.

My trip is over a kilometre away but is made pleasant because the gardens along the way are pretty. Over the years I have enjoyed seeing families leaving for work and houses being renovated.

Whereas I had in the past often raced to my stop, hefting a heavy bag and switching mental gears from housework to work mode, nowadays, in retirement, I can stroll.

There is a remarkable big grey gum along the way. It requires some acknowledgment. When the azaleas are out, there are some fine specimens to admire. Of course, the jacarandas are a standout in their season. One garden has extended to the verge, with Aussie native shrubs arranged in neat square treated pine boxes. That house went from being quite a sad, neglected place to a cheerful looking, well-maintained one over a couple of years. I admire the restoration work each time I pass.

On this day as I strolled, a young woman dashed ahead of me, her ponytail flying from side to side. Her hip just skirted mine as she turned the street corner. It took but a split second for me to right myself from a near fall. Had she stopped to check my well-being? Not a jot. And a thought reared. There was a half kilometre to go. Could I beat her?

I quickened my pace to a brisk walk. The white tracksuit was already at the corner of the next street. I began to run. White tracksuit might not be heading to the station, as it is moving straight ahead. Nevertheless, I turn the corner and know it will take some seconds off the straighter, longer route. Now I am going at my version of full pelt. This is really just a quiet lane. No-one will see me careering along.

There is the little park, only a pocket handkerchief playground, but with a cutting at the back corner which runs into the next street and shaves time off. No time to admire the gum tree today! Across the park I head. There are two streets left now, one a long straight road of many houses where I had always been loathe to run, even when I was late for work, unwilling to be seen dashing about in work clothes and heels. Hmm. Even today I won't run there.

But first is the other street, the one with the loveliest gardens. I huffed and puffed, ignoring any blooms. Home improvements did not catch my eye at all. I knew about *banana lane*. It is my name for a brief stretch that takes a good chunk off the street but goes largely unused. It is often muddy underfoot and overhung by banana trees that line some of the back gardens. It is really just a nightsoil path where once workers had carted pans of nightsoil from backyard dunnies to trucks. All before my time, pre-modern sanitation and indoor toilets. I scurried along thankful for local knowledge of shortcuts. I knew white tracksuit would be far ahead of me if she were to finish near the shops and railway line. But wasn't I having fun, stretching out on my run!

Turning into the final lengthy street, I slowed to a more decorous gait. And there she was! Right at the very end of the road, indeed.

Head bent forward between her knees, hands on hips and standing still. Way ahead of me. She had yet to cross the road.

Oh, I wish it had been in slow motion! She straightened up and turned her head to check for oncoming traffic. A truck turned slowly, holding her dancing from foot to foot.

And there I was, a good way away, indeed, but having already crossed the street and walking on. The woman she had brushed against a long way back. Even from that distance I could tell she was bewildered. How on earth had I almost caught up? She paused momentarily as I continued on my way, at a dignified walking pace. Cars turned into the busy road as she waited … and waited. We met at the zebra crossing to the railway entrance. She stared. I smiled.

And I beam as I go that way again. I've never seen her since. I don't know who she is. But I know she did me a power of good and I am thankful for the small adventure.

I didn't hear this one coming!

By Keith Apps

Granny looked over my shoulder and said to our grandson, "Don't talk behind Pop's back as he will not hear you. Standing in front he can see your lips move." This is not the first time my wife has used third party communication to assist me as I negotiate retirement. Yes, it's obvious ... I need a hearing check-up.

So I am locked into the soundproof booth to ascertain my ability to communicate with the outside world. With the hearing consultant I am taken through several steps of listening to "pings" at different decibels and frequency and then onto repeating words heard through the earphones. It's these exercises which I will later explain the significance of to my loving wife. After the tests I am advised that a hearing aid for each ear is required.

Arriving home, I first explain to my loving wife that both ears need hearing aids.

"Can you wear them to bed?" I explain *no*, to which she responds, "that's a shame."

"Why is that a shame?" I ask.

"Well, it means that your snoring will still not wake you up," she says.

I then go on to expand about my visit to the hearing centre and what I have learnt. Firstly, how women's voices tend to be higher in pitch than men's voices and therefore I can mishear her or not understand what is being said.

"Oh," my wife responds. "So you're saying that if we were a gay couple, two guys, then we would communicate better than we do now?"

I struggle on as I am simply not sure where this conversation is now heading, until my loving wife turns to me and says in her deepest voice possible, "Well, would you like a cold beer then?". I must admit I did hear this clearly.

I then offer how consonants have a deeper sound than vowels and this is why you can misinterpret words you think you have heard. My wife now replies, "So I might say 'duck', but you have thought you heard ... er ... 'truck' you know, as in 'God I'd love a duck'." Well, I thought, how is this going to all work out? What will it all be like when I receive my hearing aids?

A week later I duly get my hearing aids and go home. There is an obvious expectation on my ability to finally hear what my wife is saying rather than have it corrected several conversations later. So I ask, "how long do you think I have had this problem?"

"About 10 years," is the answer.

Well, *I'll be ducked*, I thought to myself.

I retreated to the open door behind me to listen to the warbling of birds, the distant sounds of children in the park, dogs barking and then – after many years – that wonderful sound of autumn leaves crunching under my feet.

I have, for want of better knowledge

By Les Langston

I have, for want of better knowledge, determined I shall live my life to the maximum, consistent with the status of my deteriorating health. In the words of my general practitioner, "ageing is not for the faint hearted." I guess to some extent that's a matter of relativity.

As we age, particularly into our 90s, there is hardly one part of the body that remembers its youthful fervour. Some shortcomings are minor, others are major! In addition to one's ailments is a fairly constant weariness, no doubt reflecting the ageing of our complex body componentry. Just as our motorcars deteriorate, but can be refurbished, so too does the human body, excepting it defies return to the excitement of youth, or the stability of middle age maturity.

However, it is patently obvious, no one lasts forever. So, in order to maximise the enjoyment of one's remaining years it behoves us to adjust our lifestyle to standards relevant to that of our health. For those that have lived a very active life, it is often extremely difficult to recognise that you can no longer perform as you once did. However, an objective evaluation of the tasks under contemplation, together with a dedicated positive thinking approach, should ensure that life might prove just as rewarding, as it did in the past.

Of course there will be times when we experience an unusual situation in our health, perhaps requiring a hospital visit, short or long, when positive thinking may temporarily go out the door. Support and caring from family and friends will usually provide sufficient comfort and understanding to guarantee a return to positivity, fairly rapidly. A loving spouse is of unquestionable value in this regard. There is none so close as a devoted partner with whom to confide one's secrets when experiencing a downer.

Having survived heart surgery in my mid-60s, various not-so-serious medical procedures in subsequent years, the premature loss of an eldest daughter – then, later, my wife – I felt reasonably confident to face whatever the future might bring.

Until four years ago when I was confronted with the big C.

It is often said of men, "you won't die *from* prostate cancer, but you will probably die *with* prostate cancer." I'm not sure that I can agree with that statement!

Being too old to consider surgical treatment, I embarked upon periodic injections as an alternative until the urologist declared they were of no further value, as the cancer had progressed too far. The last two years have been spent under the guidance of an oncologist, who, with a series of different injections and complimenting medication, has managed to slow down the natural progression of the cancer to my bones. Nevertheless, it is not a cure; it is merely a delaying tactic.

So, here I am, not knowing how many years I have left ... but then I guess that applies to all of us in one way or another.

My advantage is that I am conscious of short-term inevitability, which gives me the

opportunity to prepare. Furthermore, the prognosis has not affected my mind.

Loss of mental faculty is a cross I don't think I could bear – but then again should it occur, I will have no choice but to accept what life dictates.

I have known people facing similar prospects, for whom I have great sorrow, but mostly all they do is whinge and whine about their misfortune and cry "why me?"

While ever I retain an alert mind I am determined I will never resort to self-pity. Not only will it fail to rectify my problems, it will only make me feel miserable and prevent me from enjoying my remaining time.

Just as importantly, by presenting a positive attitude, I am assisting my children and grandchildren to minimise their sorrow when the time comes for me to depart this earth. I clearly recall my deep feeling of devastation at the premature death of our eldest daughter at 44 years of age; equally so, the soul shattering emptiness following the loss of my wife, my confidante of almost 70 years. It is my express wish that not one of my family of some 45 descendants should experience a similar suffering at my passing. I want each of them to be able to celebrate my rich life and not be shackled with unnecessary grief.

So, for want of better knowledge, I await that time philosophically, while I continue to make the most of what I may be blessed with.

Growing old gracefully

By Martin Ochtman

I don't think of myself as old. When I read articles about old people or the elderly I do not think of Nancy or myself as part of that group. If, on the other hand, they talk about pensioners I do think we are part of that group.

There are rare occasions when I am aware I am ageing: when a wound is slow to heal or when my skin is scratched so easily. Even then I am likely to blame the medication I am taking which tends to thin the skin.

I tell myself I don't show many signs of ageing. I have most of my hair. Its colour is not much different to how it was when I was younger. "Ash blonde" is named so because of the presence of silver (not grey) hairs amongst the blonde. I do concede the ratio might have changed a little. My skin appears to be more lined (not wrinkled) than it was. This is of course due to sun damage, as I am able to spend more time outdoors rather than being chained to a desk.

Physically I can do everything I did as a 40-year-old, including push-ups, sit-ups, weights, walking and even running. OK, so not as many, nor can I run as fast or as long. One of the signs of ageing is that we get shorter but this is not happening to me; indeed I seem to be getting taller. I know this because when I bend down to touch my toes they seem further away.

I have always been forgetful. I have an active mind, which is often far away (on another planet according to Nancy) and a request like "pick up some eggs at the shops" does not register. I do seem to grope for words more than I used to, but I know so many more words now that it takes longer to search the database.

As a child I had my share of hang-ups, insecurity, shyness, fear of rejection. I suppose I was very defensive because I was sensitive underneath and didn't want people to know. This meant I came off as anything from rude to rebellious. I do remember that girls scared the hell out of me.

With the passing of years I think of myself as maturing like a good wine. Again Nancy and the grandchildren claim this is a delusion.

"You have just not grown up yet."

My response is, "Growing old is mandatory, growing up is optional." On reflection however I may have to find a new riposte, the first part of the phrase indicates I am getting old.

In many ways I like where I am now in my life. My wisdom is increasing. It is true I started on a very low base but we must acknowledge improvement. I like having the time to study and explore ideas. I am now, finally, comfortable with who I am - warts and all. I now recognise that I am different, we all are, some more than others. The rebelliousness in me is still there but instead of rejecting I question almost everything – I hope – in a rational manner because over the years I have studied and gained experience and now have the tools to be analytical.

I have always and still have a well-developed sense of humour, it is one of the best defence and coping strategies. Everything can

be treated with humour, even death. However, this does sometimes get me into trouble. As someone once said, "I think of myself as an intelligent, sensitive human being with the soul of a clown which sometimes causes me to blow it at important moments."

I have learned two of the important things along the way. First is to not to be judgemental, to accept people as they are. We do not know what they have had to deal with in their lives. I still have the option of choosing whether to associate with them, but I do not have to condemn them. The other thing I have learned is the futility of anger. As the Buddha said, "Holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone; you are the one who gets burned."

When I finally get to the stage where I am old, and hopefully still have most of my faculties, I shall sing with gusto:

> "How do I know my life is all spent
> My get up and go just got up and went
> But in spite of it all I'm able to grin
> And think of the places my get up
> has been."

Turning 70

By Pam Scott

I remember turning 21. My best friend, who was 13 days older, told me our life was virtually over since we, or at least she, had made all the important decisions in life. She had chosen her future husband and their wedding date. They had also bought a block of land and selected a project home to build on it and now it was just a matter of playing out the hand they had been dealt.

Although I laughed about it at the time – and so did she years later – she was right about her life in a way. They did marry and still remain so. They lived in their first house for decades until both children left home. Her husband stayed in the same job just as long, while she continued to pack his lunch to take to work, sometimes leaving little love notes many years after the honeymoon period was over.

It didn't turn out that way for me. I remember when my divorce finally came through, when I was in my 30s, that I felt then my life was over. With two boys to raise alone, I felt my world had turned upside-down.

The next birthday of any note was 40th and my friend and I exchanged funny cards with *Happy 40th* writ large on the envelope for the benefit of the postman. I don't know now why that seemed funny – or embarrassing. But I did have a feeling that maybe the saying that life began at 40 could be true. I had almost finished my PhD and a new career was waiting for me.

Fifty was quite a turning point. At 49 I was offered a job in Vietnam. I thought it might be for six months or a year, but I ended up staying on, re-inventing myself as new opportunities presented themselves. That decade gave me such a new lease on life. Suddenly I was nobody's mother, wife or daughter. I was just me, living an independent life for the first time among people who embraced life and accepted me into their world. I felt like a teenager again. I went dancing. I had singing lessons, and ping-pong lessons, even drumming lessons. Looking now at the photos taken during that period I see how happy I looked. That fact alone gives me pause for thought.

Turning 60 was a difficult birthday. While I might have half-believed that 50 was the new 40, it was harder to accept 60 as the new 50. What's more, it was finally time for me to head back home to Australia, to be nearer to my mother who was now alone. But I had no job to go to and no real prospect of finding one. I no longer fitted easily into Australian society. I didn't know where I belonged anymore. I actually flew back to Australia from Vietnam on my birthday so that I would be halfway between both my homes. And I felt unsettled for the next decade. Yes, I managed to spend some more time working back in Vietnam – a year in HoChiMinh City, another three months in Hanoi, plus a couple of shorter trips during that decade. But it wasn't quite the same.

In 2015 I turned 70. I don't think any of us can fudge that as being the new anything except the reality of being 70. The odd thing was that it felt unexpected. I'd had 70 years

to prepare for that day but I wasn't ready for it. On 1 January 2015 I recorded in my diary: *So, the year I've been dreading is here. In three weeks I'll turn 70. It sounds old. But worse, I fear and feel my decline.* A few days later: *I'm trying to remember who I used to be, how I felt, my hopes, ambitions, confidence. It is time to take back my life.*

It was hardly surprising then that my subconscious got into the act to graphically illustrate and mirror back to me my situation in a dream a few days before my 70th birthday. In this vivid dream it was a beautiful sunny day and I was in a tiny motorboat out in the ocean whizzing about, jumping waves and generally having a lot of fun, feeling good about myself and about life. There were other people in the water, enjoying themselves swimming and surfing, and further in the distance, crowds could be seen on the beach. But I was having plenty of fun alone. Suddenly the sky turned grey, the sea went flat, and I looked around to find myself alone and adrift, unable to restart my boat. A sobering, panic-stricken moment. The next moment I found myself run aground on a small pebbly beach. After getting out of the boat and pulling it high out of the water, I was just about to head off to find help when suddenly a shadowy figure appeared just long enough to hand me a key. It was no ordinary key, but a large and ornate gold one. I turned back to the boat only to find it had disappeared, leaving me alone on a deserted beach with a key in my hand. Then I woke up. The message seemed crystal clear. It was time for me to find a new boat and I held the key to my future.

Inevitably, the day of my birthday came and the sky didn't fall. I could even laugh about receiving, amongst a couple of birthday cards, a notice from the government letting me know that they were sending me a bowel cancer testing kit now I had turned 70. An unnecessary reminder of the decrepitude and disease to come! But the dream had provided me with fresh resolve. I was going to embrace being 70 and make it into a project. Could I find a new boat that would sail me through the quiet or stormy seas of old age? I'm trying.

Life at 101

By Robert Claridge

Some may think that 101 is a house number or bus route. It is, in fact, the venerable age I attained on 13 August 2016!

From the dizzy heights of a century plus, I can look back on an interesting and fulfilling life.

Having spent my youth in Alexandria, Egypt, where my British father was a jockey, I enjoyed the wonderful facilities of the Anglo/French Swimming Club and spent most of my summer school holidays at the beach, where we had a beach hut. My favourite pastime was springboard diving and swimming.

I had a Raleigh bicycle, and then rode a Triumph 250cc motorbike. I have never learnt to drive, nor owned a car.

When World War II commenced, I was volunteered by the British Admiralty's Naval Armament Supply Department to deliver guns, spares and ammunition to the Mediterranean Fleet. In this capacity, and as a civilian, I boarded hundreds of warships in Suez, to deal with ship's Captains and ammunition officers. The Captains I had to interview were always very gracious and hospitable and offered every kind of alcoholic drink as a refreshment! I often declined, accepting a cup of tea or coffee instead.

It is noteworthy that with the Naval Ammunitions Supply Department, we remained civilians throughout the war, which enabled us to deal with superior uniformed officers on equal grounds. When the Mediterranean was blockaded by the enemy, Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, all incoming shipments of ammunition arrived from the UK and USA at the port of Suez, which became a hive of activity.

It was in Suez in 1943 that I met my future wife Helen, who stole my heart. We were married in 1944 and our daughter Patricia, was born a year later.

As British occupation troops were repatriated back home and Egypt was granted independence, I saw the writing on the wall as life changed in Egypt, with the natives becoming more aggressive as they took over from us Europeans. We migrated to Australia in 1948, spending the first year in Randwick in a boarding house, living in just one room, until we were able to buy our first home in Matraville.

Settling in Sydney, I joined the clerical staff of Macdonald Hamilton & Co., the agents for P&O Lines, also later The Orient Line. The greatest bonus we derived from this were the cruises we embarked on every year.

Although we were usually allocated luxury cabins way beyond our means, we were charged a mere 20% off the lowest fare in the ship (for the six-berth stern cabins close to the propellers). It was therefore infinitely cheaper for us to enjoy a fortnight's Pacific Island cruise every year, than spending a week's holiday in the Blue Mountains! As a result, we travelled the world extensively visiting Ceylon, Singapore, Hong Kong, Japan, the Philippines, Canada, the USA, Bermuda, Nassau, Panama and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. As the song has it, we can truly say, "We've been everywhere!"

After retiring from P&O, I started playing tennis, which I thoroughly enjoyed until my early 90s. We sold the family home in Matraville and moved to a unit in Northbridge to be closer to our daughter and family – and I still live there today.

In October 2011, my beloved wife Helen passed away. After 61 years of marriage, I sorely miss her. I am fortunate to have a devoted daughter and son-in-law, two grandchildren and five great-grandchildren who are a source of delight and joy.

We had a big family celebration last year for my 100th birthday, and I received many cards, including letters of congratulations from the Queen, Prime Minister, Premier and Governor-General, to name a few.

I have seen an extraordinary number of changes during my 100 years, and spend many hours on my computer writing my memoires, which my daughter wishes to publish one of these days.

Who would have foreseen the advent of television, jet air travel, supermarkets, huge shopping complexes, computers, mobile phones, a population increase in Australia by several million through immigration? And the variety of international foods now available – including exotic Thai, Vietnamese and Indian – is in sharp contrast to boiled beef and cabbage, or sausages and mash.

Who knows what may come next!

When is it time to retire?

By Robin Lisle

In 1994, in my early 50s, on a visit to my doctor with a sore shoulder, I was rushed off to see a gastroenterologist, starting a 20-year friendship.

I was about to take my holidays, with a six-week trip to South Africa already planned. However, I was diagnosed with severe ulcerative colitis. Undeterred, my wife and I pressed on with our journey to see our daughter who had recently moved to Johannesburg. After a wonderful trip, but putting up with inflammatory bowel disease (with help from my wife), I had to face the reality of treating this complaint. After years of blaming too much spicy food, bad food, 'gastro going around', and many other excuses, I started treatment.

Nothing seemed to work. Perhaps I had left it too long to seek treatment? My pathology results were not encouraging, and I was confronted with the news that if I didn't undergo an operation to remove my bowel very soon I would be dead. In 1997, at 55 years of age, I underwent this surgery, and ended up with an ileostomy and "a bag". This was to be a temporary measure, hopefully, with another operation in six months to reconnect my bowel and get rid of "the bag".

I returned to work after a few weeks, learning to cope with this new situation. Soon, I had the second operation. There was still some inflammation either side of the join, but it had settled down after being detached from the ulcerated colon. In a short time, after going through the agony that all patients experience after a major operation, I returned to work, on limited medication, but requiring constant surveillance due to the ongoing threat of a relapse or cancer. My pathology results were initially good, although still showing the disease present. After a couple of years it was decided that I could undertake colonoscopies without anaesthetics by fasting for a few days and not taking purgatives – as I was having three or four a year.

At 65, I took up running. In 2007, after my son gave me a month to prepare, I ran the City to Surf finishing in Bondi, and didn't find the task too difficult. I continued to train, with the view that I may be able to complete a marathon. I entered the Canberra Marathon eight months later. With the support of my family, I was able to complete the event in a reasonable time. It was great to participate in a number of other events as well and experience the "runner's high". Even early morning training sessions before work offer satisfaction that overcomes the "why am I not feeling well, must be old age" syndrome.

I have been able to participate in a lot of major events around the country and I have felt very satisfied with my efforts. I suspect my doctor (twenty years my junior), took up running after seeing how well I had done. My disease had never played a part in my running, although injuries have curtailed some of my training. But encouraged by family, I have been able to get up off the floor and compete.

Travel has always been a part of our lifestyle, and ulcerative colitis has not intervened. My wife and I have always favoured the more adventurous style of travel, such as trekking in remote parts of the Indian Himalayas – much to the horror of my doctors.

I had always enjoyed my work but retired in 2010. This meant we could travel more and still engage in walking and running. My health seemed fine, but a pathology test showed a different story, with more and more cells showing signs of dysplasia (a precursor to ancer).

At 71, I agreed to have my rectum removed and now have a permanent ileostomy and bag. At this age, it was much harder to deal with all the post-operative recovery situations, including stomach pumps, with a belly full of stitches, difficult to control bleeding and general weariness from being pushed and pulled around. But this was the situation for me, a much fitter person than most other younger people.

Six weeks after leaving hospital, I had a post operation visit to my surgeon, who – when asked when could I start running again replied, "I thought you had" [been running]. So 100 days after my operation I was able to run 16 kilometres. Of course, my family were very sympathetic. They had purchased a special belt from the US in which to carry my stomach bag so that I would have no excuse to stop running. Seven months after my operation, we were back in South Africa – with our son and his family. My son's long held goal was to run a famous ultra marathon near Durban.

Not being very confident with my bag, things did not always go to plan. But that didn't stop me participating in three *Parkruns* (five kilometres), while over there, as well as visiting some of South Africa's wonderful wildlife parks.

I had a rough 2014, with five more operations. None of the operations was related to my bowel; they were performed for kidney stones, bladder stones and prostate enlargement issues. So, no marathon for me in 2014, but being able to finish two half marathons gave me a lift. The following year started with hope but failed to deliver. Feet and leg injuries meant I could only run in shorter events and not even a half marathon, despite my training.

However, in 2016, at 74, I completed the Canberra Marathon in quite a respectable time, finishing second in my age group (my son insists I came fourth last, as there were only five in my age group to finish). I aim to again compete in a marathon before we go on another trip to Spain and France to walk in the Pyrenees and the Pico De Europa.

Having a chronic illness and many operations is no reason to lie back and fall to pieces. Get out and get going! Adrenalin is a wonderful and powerful tool to help one feel better and improve overall health.

For people wanting to start exercising, there is no better way than looking at the *Parkrun Australia* web site to see where your local run is located. Don't be mislead by the event's name, as there are plenty of walkers, strollers and dog walkers involved in these free Saturday morning community events. They take place around the world and some have government sponsors as well as health industry groups.

The ironman from the city of steel
(Aunty Jack's sidekick Thin Arthur takes on the World)

By Rory O'Donoghue

It is often said that "life is a journey." It is also said that "life begins at forty." I agree with one of these quotes but not the other. Life is indeed a journey and an unpredictable one at that. I would never have thought that at 51, in the year 2000, I would discover I had a food allergy.

I am allergic to gluten, a food I had previously unknowingly consumed all my life. Eliminating it from my diet was indeed challenging as gluten is present in so many everyday foods. When I eventually did, amazing things happened. I experienced a new lease on life and a remarkable clarity of mind. My body shape changed and I started to lose subcutaneous fat. My eyes and skin became very clear and I had boundless energy which, having been very athletic in my youth, led to a deep desire to resume physical exercise. I started jogging again and pretty soon I was running 5kms a day and feeling so much the better for it. I also took up a regular swimming program. All the while my health and fitness improved dramatically.

One day in 2003 I was at Warringah Aquatic Centre doing my swim training. I was a regular there and well known. Many at the pool also remembered me as Thin Arthur from *The Aunty Jack Show,* the ABC TV series from the 1970s. Indeed the head coach was a huge fan and we became good friends. Training at the pool on that day were some members of Warringah Triathlon Club and they suggested I buy a bike and start doing triathlons. Well, the idea appealed to me instantly. I had watched triathlons on TV and marvelled at the endurance of the athletes. I also appreciated the skill of making fast transitions between the different legs. It resonated with my theatrical background and I likened the event to a stage performance complete with quick changes between scenes. Yes, this sport would really suit me. All I needed was a bike and I now had an excuse to buy myself a really good one.

My triathlon journey commenced with shorter distance races to "suss things out." Triathlons come in many shapes and sizes: from entry-level enticer events of 250 metre swim, 10km bike and 2km run right up to the notorious Ironman of 3.8km swim, 180km bike and 42.2km marathon run. The Hawaiian Ironman, the World Ironman Triathlon Championships held in the lava fields of Kona in the searing heat of the Hawaiian summer, is considered the ultimate triathlon challenge. I could never quite comprehend the concept of a full Ironman. The distances were mind-boggling and the whole thing seemed beyond the realms of physical possibility. How could you run a full marathon after cycling 180kms and swimming 3.8kms? I would be happy enough to do the shorter distance events.

Once I started doing triathlon I was hooked. I embraced the whole lifestyle. I loved the training and the excitement of race day. The more I raced the more I improved and as my

fitness and strength grew I found myself ready to take on longer distances. In 2005, at age 56, I entered the Port Macquarie Half Ironman, a 1.9 km swim, 90 km bike and 21.1 km run. As I began my training I realised I had reached another milestone on my triathlon journey.

I absolutely loved the event. The atmosphere was amazing as supporters lined the streets and cheered as I rode through town and ran along the waterfront. It was a hugely satisfying and joyous occasion and a just reward for the hard work I had put into my preparation. Needless to say I entered many more Half Ironman events and with each race my performance improved. Incredibly, as I became more accustomed to longer distances, I gained a new perspective and I could now see a way of actually completing a full Ironman event. I was able to visualise the race. I felt the rhythm and the pace needed to complete the entire event in good shape. With the right training I was certain I would be successful.

My Ironman journey began in 2007 when I entered the 2008 Australian Ironman Championships in Port Macquarie. I knew what I had to do in training and I had six months to prepare. The stories of that magical moment when you eventually finish with the crowd cheering and the announcer proclaiming, "You are an Ironman" resonated in my mind and I was ready for that moment.

And so it was on 6 April 2008, aged 59, that my vision became a reality and I completed my first Ironman triathlon, officially becoming an Ironman. This was truly a life-changing moment and since then Ironman has become a much loved annual event for me.

Now at 67, where am I on my journey? In 2014 I was ranked in the top 10% of Ironman triathletes in the world in my age group. In the same year I won the NSW State Duathlon Championships and was selected on the Australian team for the World Duathlon Championships in Adelaide. I love racing and I am a regular on the triathlon circuit, competing in all the distances. I am also happy to say that my race times continue to improve with regular PBs (personal bests).

I am still working as a professional musician. I have four wonderful children, six beautiful grandchildren, a loving partner and an inspirational, hale and hearty 95-year-old mother.

Yes indeed life is a journey, but does life begin at 40? In my case I would have to say *no*, because at this stage in my life there are new beginnings to be found in every moment.

Amazing ride

By Wendy Gordon

"You can't be serious!"

"Impossible!"

"I don't believe it!"

These were the reactions of my family. My husband said nothing. Too shocked. I knew it sounded ridiculous.

But I had already confided in one other. He said, "Of course you can! You will do it! How much time do you have?" "Eight months," I replied. And so it began...

The next week I turned up at my indoor bike training class with one goal, and this one person who believed in me, my trainer. I would ride in the inaugural *Ride to Conquer Cancer,* a 200km bike ride held over one weekend. I would raise money to help bring into being the Chris O'Brien Life House, a centre for excellence in research and treatment for cancer sufferers.

Yes, I had just turned 61. No, I didn't have a bike. No, I had not ridden a bike since I was 12. Never had a bike with gears. Never had cleats.

My training began, hour-long sessions, twice a week, then, three times a week. Two-hour sessions. Four hours on Saturday and Sunday afternoons as well. Cross training, resistance training to simulate hills, training in pedalling techniques, learning to use different muscle groups to avoid fatigue, speed training, planning nutrition and hydration, monitoring heart rate, learning the warm-up and cool down exercises, pacing myself, avoiding cramps.

Who knew there was so much to it? I had thought it would be just "get on a bike and keep going."

Guidance to buy a bike; courage to start riding outside; specialist bike paths – around the lakes; along the river, then the road; Twenty kilometre rides with the heat, with wind; building up to 80 kilometres at a time, then 90 kilometres; learning how and when to change gears; adapting to cleats; leaning into curves; body position; inevitable tumbles; some bad falls; impossible hills; heart lurching as I was attacked time and again by swooping magpies in spring, snapping at my helmet, sounding like a cracking whip!

Many adventures, new friends. But lots of blood, sweat and tears.

In native bushland, on a bike path, swerving around a bend, I see a bride spreading out her gown – with her photographer. No time to stop, so a successful swerve into the bush and out again. Same for a family of ducklings. Again for the young lovers listening to their music, as well as the old couple. Why on a bike path?!

Ah, but the small child, running straight into the bike path! Another swerve, but it did not feel right. Something was wrong. This was not just long grass alongside the bike path! I was sinking, sinking into a canal of murky water, cleats still attached to bike. I struggled to keep my head up, grabbed some reeds. How to unclip cleats, and free myself from the bike? Finally I emerged, a horrifying site of green slime trailing from my helmet, my face, my

clothes, my bike – streamers announcing to all the folly of my undertaking. The child looked at me in terror.

Flinging off as much slime as I could, embarrassed beyond words, praying my bike, gears, brakes – everything – would still work, I hastened from the scene, praying also that my remote car lock and my mobile phone would survive their dunking, praying that I would not meet anyone I knew. All was well. A hurried change of bike clothes in the car (yes, at my age!) and a grim determination to finish my training plan for the day kept me at it. Think of your reason for doing it!

The months passed, and as the day approached I confided in my trainer, "Do you know they have cars come along to pick up any who can't finish? I don't want to be in the "sweep-up!" And I don't want to be last!" He promised, "You won't be swept up, and you won't be last!"

As the day approached I started to pray that I would be sick, unable to compete, that something would happen so that I could withdraw honourably. I became terrified. Two hundred kilometres for a novice was ridiculous!

The day before the event we had to take our bikes to the starting park, and lock them in for an early start. The weather was horrendous. Biting wind – gale force at times, sheets of rain, all buffeting the car as I drove down, and black ice in the nearby hills. *I will never finish the event,* I thought glumly. But surely they will cancel if the weather is bad? This might be my answer!

The next day dawned, calm and still, perfect weather for riding. As we gathered, all 1600 of us, I noted that they were mostly very athletic-looking young people, with a smattering of older ones who looked as though they had been riding all their lives. Fear gripped me. But we were riding for those who had cancer, the most difficult journey of all. I could do it. And I would.

We were away. I followed my training, pacing myself, recalling with clarity my trainer's instructions, and everything came together. I reminded myself of my reason for riding. The cancer journey is harder. Keep going. On hills, I overtook the younger ones, those who had not trained as much *(just jump on a bike and keep going)*. Down hills I flew, setting new speed records for myself!

It was exhilarating, amazing. The kilometres flew past. I finished the first 105 kilometres by lunch – and was in the first third of the field. Would the second day be more difficult? No, I had prepared well, trained to reach my peak on this weekend. I finished by lunch again, also in the first third of riders. Reaching the finish line to the cheers of the spectators was very moving, the climax to the most difficult thing I have ever done, and the most satisfying and fulfilling. This was my personal "Amazing Ride!"

Longing and desire

By William Lawton

Longing and desire are the waking emotions of each day. And longing and desire mark its close. There is longing to touch and to speak but the room is empty. There is desire for presence, awakening and transformation. But the day carries heaviness and unfulfilment. One more week and it would have been Margaret's birthday. Instead it will be two months since her all-too-sudden death. The room remains empty.

Perhaps the grieving will pass soon. There have been hundreds of beautiful messages celebrating Margaret's gifted self. Each day brings some fresh gratitude for all she was in someone's life. Each reckoning gladdens the heart. Some speak of the desire for love and friendship, some tip-toe around a longing for the afterlife. Some are more direct, full of promise that Margaret and I shall again see each other face-to-face. I love each message. They are all from the heart and all speak a love-truth that has inspired the writer.

But deep inside my longing and desire I have no sense that Margaret is in the next room. She has gone from me and though I long for her presence I will not see her again. This is the one realisation that offers me courage to go on. I honour Margaret's memory, not her recovered presence. I love who she was, not who or what she might have become. She has gone from my sight. She has not *passed on*. She has died.

I need to steady myself there and say again: she has died. No euphemism helps. Though I say this after almost 60 unbroken years of grief counselling others, the language and sentiments of funeral services still speak to a lifetime of longing and desire. I pause here: millennia of human expectations haunt my thinking. Almost intoned, these isolated sentences speak of a longing for transcendence:

> *I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. S. John 11. 25, 26.*
>
> *We brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord. 1 Tim. 6. 7. Job 1. 21.*

This ancient language is also part of my heritage. It is like music to my spirit. Longing and the desire for transcendence have exerted a huge impact on the Christian imagination. I certainly have no wish to dismiss it, merely to approach it with caution. Nowadays, the ordinary, not the transcendent, energises longing and desire.

I hold still to this in my daily memorial of Margaret. She is here in memory. She is alive in memory. I see the evidence of her in the generosity and transforming life she bestowed on others. I read the letters of former clients grateful at how she pointed their longing and desire to hope and fulfilment.

But I am alone. Margaret is not here. The room is empty. She is not in the next room just around the corner. She is not in some

construed place beyond death. Death marks her absence – except in longing and desire and memory.

Longing and desire shaped Margaret in her persistence with "the other" which was part of our evolving sense of identity and growth. Margaret met every person and every thing beyond her as vulnerable, transitory and changing. Her life was bound with theirs. Today will find me alone and vulnerable but not lonely because "memory" inspires living. The room is empty of all but longing and desire.

(This is how I described my feelings after the first two months in October 2015.)

A new home for James

By Yolande Enright

All that last week my senses were in uproar. My stomach churned and the air whistled round my ears. That week, after 45 years of marriage, every meal seemed like the Last Supper – with me as the Judas. My phone conversations were muted, words spoken in code for what was unfolding.

James was booked for respite with the option of full time care in a local nursing home. He had taken my first entrée into the subject badly.

"You want to piss me off!" – followed by a fumbling in the drawer, the withdrawal of the little red book containing names and numbers gathered over time.

"Where is it? The real estate agent's number! I'll get my own place!"

A villa from the past, the address still etched in his mind in an otherwise random grab of details of various locations of long ago. "What's our street again? What suburb are we in?" were much more likely queries in recent days.

This from a man who had not lifted a sock for over four years and whose washing, dressing and delivery for every outing, appointment and family festivity had been the responsibility of someone else. Sounding plausible on the phone, James made arrangements for an inspection, a possible unit on a mountain goat site up innumerable stairs and nowhere near a bus stop. I had a meltdown!

Sobbing on the phone, I was soothed by our ever level-headed daughter who advised, "Mum, stick to your plans for the day."

I left James to the agent and departed for my planned visit to a friend, knowing that the carers I'd booked would scoop him up in the aftermath and hold him for my return. He was grinning in anticipation of an adventure as I pulled out in the car. I was not grinning but grimacing at the embarrassment and futility ahead for the agent: the prospect of assisting a shuffling client on his stick into the car and round a property. It turned out that James was unable to exit the car at his potential new home. Inaccessible!

There followed weeks of cat and mouse tactics. Innumerable calls to the agent who became less and less available.

"I'm going to give him the arse. He's hopeless! Never gets back to me."

Intercepting a call, I set the realtor straight. The hope of a sale faded from his voice as I spelled out the situation. The next step was a judicious unplugging of the phone when the old fears of being discarded surfaced and the little red book came out of the drawer.

Lots of changing of the subject and happy reminiscences from the past were my methods of gently steering his mind elsewhere.

"He's a maverick! He's just a maverick," James' mother had confided to me one night many years before when his unpredictability and quick flaming temper had me on the ropes. "Just look after him," she'd said as only a mother would. His bi-polar syndrome had reared its head in his middle years. The mostly enthusiastic manias gave way more often to the lows and excess drinking. Neither extreme was

easy to live with but a severe brain injury when he was 57 brought an end to his wild dreams and shut down his working life. Since then the maverick has surfaced regularly, but also the humourist and the dreamer. Gradually over 18 years, declining mobility and functionality had brought us to this point.

In recent times, I could only manage to take him to very few places for a meal or coffee. Easy access for the rollator, short distance in, tables not too close together, chairs not too low and with arms for leverage. More often it was takeaway coffee in the car, fish and chips in the car, sandwiches in the car. The one cinema that was manageable had to be dropped from our social whirl. We never saw the end of any film in our last year of movie-going as the demands of the bladder had to be met. Drives were the best outings but no longer than an hour. I learned this the hard way when I noticed that when my back was turned, James would pee out the passenger door regardless of the other vehicles and their occupants. Every car park in the district was marked in this way.

Me … frantic … "What if the children see you?"

"Then they'll learn where it comes from."

Silence reigned for much of the time in James' final weeks at home, as the idea of what might be ahead was sinking in and I wrestled my demons of guilt and anxiety. Our usual laughing banter had disappeared.

On the eve of the respite, "Well I'm going to the pub. It's my last night of freedom. I'll walk. I owe it to myself!"

I thought, "Lazarus is rising," but locked the screen door for his safety. I uncorked a nice chardonnay and poured two glasses and soon his equilibrium returned. We laughed together. I couldn't resist a tear for this lovable, unpredictable and spirited man, true to himself in any situation.

I'm getting good reports from the new home. James greets us profusely when we visit and joins in our conversations with the other residents but does not yet see himself as having a permanent place there. He is first to the table in the café at mealtimes to get his favourite spot. He sits in the sun in the courtyard on the cane chair just outside his door as he liked to do at home. His TV beams out *The Bold and the Beautiful* as it did at home and he has a cheerful and conscientious team at his service.

He is still plotting ways to contact his agent. "Bring in my little telephone book."

This maverick is not through yet.

Raptoree's flight

By Christine Haines

The Doctor's face portrayed sympathy as he glanced at me before turning a serious face to the weepy, withered woman who sat next to me. She claims to be my mother. I humour her, but disbelieve her words because she doesn't have feathers and her nose really isn't the style of my sharp, brown beak.

"Lillian, Raptoree's psychosis is extremely severe. I'd say her delusions are now her total reality."

The drab woman remained silent, trying to control her sniffling, before asking, "Did the latest blood tests show anything?"

The Doctor hesitated. I knew he was a Doctor because his white coat had MD written in large black letters. For a bird, I am very clever. Even I could tell he didn't want to answer her. I like him because he always addresses me with my eagle name.

"Yes. There's a medical reason for your daughter's delusions. I'm sorry, but she's positive for the genetic mutation known as 22q11 deletion syndrome."

My mother just stared at him, like he'd spoken in snake speak.

The Doctor continued. "We need to include Tom in further discussions and decisions. I'm unable to help you any further so I'm setting up an appointment for you all with a psychologist.

"But look at her," whispered my haunted looking mother. "She's beautiful, she's only 22. Surely these fantasies will pass."

I sit sedately, hearing but not listening to their morbid discussion. They are not important in my life. I am Raptoree, a stunning white-bellied Sea-Eagle, and I can spread my glorious wings and soar above the ocean, or drift upon the updrafts of air currents, even hold myself tight as I dive into the waves. It's shitty annoying though that this ridiculous human skin keeps me grounded for now. But... one day... I will.

When the Doctor and the old woman stand, I also rise, straightening my long white dress and checking that my grey feathered cape, made from discarded eagle feathers, hangs straight from my shoulders to the floor.

One day I won't need these human coverings, I thought, as I strutted towards the red-eyed woman's vehicle, my only method of transport until I actually fly.

I got out of the car and stalked towards the cottage, ignoring the white haired man who always asked me to call him Dad.

"Emily, would you like a sandwich and coke?"

I stop and stare straight through him.

He groaned, then asked again, "Raptoree, can I get you anything?"

I stretch out my arms, flap my cape twice, and reply haughtily, "I'll get water."

I open the fridge. At least I'd trained the woman well. Lying there was a large piece of fish, which I devoured greedily.

"I'm going to the cliff top to practice my flying," I state to these tedious humans.

The woman's eyes begin to leak as she moans, "Don't Emily, you can't fly. You're not a bird."

I glare at her with hostile eyes. "I need to practice my flying," I insist.

The man's eyes portray his fear and horror. "Please Raptoree, stay with us."

They just don't understand. This I know. I've seen the looks of terror on their faces as they'd watched me run, leap and twirl near the edge of the cliff. I know their imagination sees me trying to fly off the edge, tumbling to the sharp rocks and thundering sea below. They are too ignorant to know my destiny, I tell myself as I run towards the cliff face.

I'm taking a rest now, tired after practising my flying skills. I'm a fledgling in training, but one day I will sail the skies, and it will be me that people point to, wishing they were me, with the freedom to soar through the sky on a two metre wing span. I will fly and hunt with my family. I will skim over the surface of the sea as I search for prey.

Vaguely, I recall being a young girl, but miraculously, my body has become a magnificent bird of prey, soon to be free. Once my practicing is finished, that is.

"Raptoree."

Uh-oh, that white haired man. Must be time to leave my rock and return to my nest in that brick building.

I stretch my wings as I wake. I study the large poster of a family member which adorns my wall. The Eagle is a creature of stunning beauty, a magnificent bird of prey. White head, massive grey wings and body, brown feet with black, very sharp, extended talons. Glaring brown eyes and brown hooked beak. Makes my heart pound just looking at it. I look in the mirror to check my feathers. Briefly I see extended, thin white arms, but they quickly morph into powerful wings. I dive through the shower and eat my fish. I have to make do with fish because these two wretched humans with downcast eyes refused to cook the snake I once brought to my nest.

Strangely though, there's a curious pain in the area my human heart used to be. I walk to each person, lay my beak upon their hair and wrap my wings around their shoulders. They both looked shocked, then worried. As I leave for the cliffs, I notice them follow me.

I look into the blue sky, hazy from wind-blown sea spray. Circling high are two magnificent Sea-Eagles, my family.

'Soar with us.' They call to me. 'Come. Shed your human skin.'

Suddenly I feel power in my wings. The eagles swoop. 'Fly, fly, Raptoree.'

I look behind. The humans are racing toward me, arms outstretched, screaming. "Emily, Emily." The stupid name drifts away on the wind.

I face the cliff, look down into those hard, sharp rocks and the foaming white spray the crashing sea sends up. I look to the blue sky, to my feathered family, soaring above and waiting. I will wing my way to them and rise majestically as is my destiny.

I fly!

seniors' stories

working and retiring

Whatever Happened to …?

By Chris Maitland

Some will join Probus. Many will decide they now have the time to trace their family history. The active among us may either increase the frequency of golf days or elect to switch to the more sedate lawn bowls. Or some may get out and about with the Gold Opal for a mere $2.50 daily. The transition into retirement affects us all in so many different ways.

As for me, I determined that it could be fun to catch up with a few long-lost friends from my teenage years. With my working life behind me and abundant free time on my hands, I developed some sleuthing skills.

First up, you have to have a target list, so armed with a few names to start, I headed into the State Library to scrutinize the electoral rolls. The women are the hardest to find because most of them changed their surnames through marriage.

The State Births Deaths & Marriages register isn't of great benefit. Birth details are embargoed for 100 years to protect the living. Marriages are only accessible from 50 years ago and beyond, so finding a marriage dated after August 1966 is virtually impossible. Deaths are much more easily traced with only a 20-year limit restricting, BDM data after July 1996. But better than that, the Ryerson Index on the Internet has recorded every death notice in newspapers from 1803 up to last week. There are more than 2 million death notices alone from the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

I began by searching for my first steady girlfriend from 51 years ago. I knew she had married but to whom? I discovered a death notice for her father in the *Illawarra Mercury* newspaper that listed the full names of the descendants. So now I had a surname to look for in the electoral rolls.

To search the electoral rolls from 1903 to 1989, you have to know the name of the federal electorate and the subdivision name in which the person resided to be successful in finding people. It's been much easier since 1990; with every individual person's name listed alphabetically in one master New South Wales roll.

After a couple of false starts, I found my first girlfriend (in her second marriage) living in Wollongong's northern suburbs. I wrote her a letter explaining how in retirement I had this urge to catch up with my teenage friends of 50 years ago. At first, there was nothing, but after six weeks, and on the verge of giving up, she called to say *hello*. We chatted and both agreed it would be fun to have lunch together, providing we told our spouses. We met up a week later, and it was three hours of fun although I was disappointed that she claimed not to recall half of the memories that I could recount.

Next were four girls, work colleagues from a wonderful two years I spent building a career that began in Wollongong. I knew the name of the brother of one, located him, got the relevant phone number and what followed was a fabulous Saturday afternoon lunching with the four, all with much better memories than me.

I found a childhood mate, a next-door neighbour from Carlton. Jimmy had become a farmer with a herd of cattle in northern New South Wales. And then there was Ray from Mount Colah; we met through our enjoyment of tenpin bowling and we travelled overseas together in 1967. He had married twice and now lives in Queensland. I had to be content with phone calls – no lunches – with the latter two.

What about school reunions? It seemed our school had never had one and so began my biggest project.

I placed a message in *The Daily Telegraph's* 'In Search' column, initially trying for the whole of the final year at Kogarah Intermediate Boys High in 1958. Finding another two from my class of 42 who were keen, we soon realised that we would need to confine any reunion to just our class. There were eight classes and more than 300 students in just our year group alone.

One guy came up with a Year Book that listed every student in every class alphabetically and showed two initials for each. Between us, we managed to recall all 42 given names, but having the middle initial enhanced our chances of finding them in the electoral rolls. I actually found 20 of the 42 and was able to confirm a further two had died – the law of averages would suggest that at age 71, there could be more deceased. The *St George Leader* newspaper ran a story on our quest and featured a photo of four of us sitting in one of our old classrooms in 2014.

To assist recognition on the reunion day, I made up nametags with thumbnail pictures of each guy from an old school photo. Eighteen attended our reunion at a Chinese restaurant in a Sydney CBD club on a Saturday afternoon. What an incredible buzz when 18 guys saw each other again, almost all for the first time in 56 years. I got to reunite with one of my best mates from those school days and we reminisced a lot. Two months later he died from cancer.

To date, I have contacted 28 friends from at least 50 years ago and there are others I have yet to find. I welcome your call. I'm in the book.

Animal watch

By Christine Wenborn

While undertaking animal watch observations at Sydney's Taronga Zoo, I was continually asked by visitors what I was doing and why. I hope this goes a little way to answering those questions.

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It is twenty minutes before the end of a two-hour watch. My attention is captured by a juvenile gorilla clapping and vocalising to attract the attention of a female. Intently, I document my observations and marvel at the similarity between the human species and these primates. I could be in the mountain mists of Uganda watching these gentle giants following their daily routine. Instead, I am at one of Australia's most prestigious zoos known for its excellence in animal care and breeding programmes for endangered species. I am an animal watcher.

I am one of the privileged few who observe animals to record data, which can be used to answer behavioural questions about an animal's wellbeing or information about its species.

This is no ordinary job. There is a selection criterion, training and testing which demands a high pass to be accepted into the programme. It is a world of wonderment often depicting animal behaviours rarely seen during a fleeting visit to a zoo. Courtship rituals, maternal care of a newborn, the rough and tumble world of juveniles during play sessions and the interactions of animals are a few of the areas that are of keen interest to the observer.

As watches are carried out from the public areas of the zoo during normal operating hours, I have often been asked how I manage to observe an animal for two hours. Unlike their human counterparts, animals are never boring. From a Spinifex mouse to a leopard seal, a meerkat to an elephant and every member of the fur, scale and feather brigade there are magical moments that heighten the senses and take your breath away. Witnessing an infant gorilla take its first steps as it totters and teeters on shaky legs, I marvel at the tenderness of the female to whom the infant turns for reassurance. Similarly, elephants greeting one another with a trunk caress or a group play session in the pool with snatches of dunking and snorkelling reveal a part of their lifestyle that is often hidden from the casual observer.

Of course there are times when a watch is undertaken on an animal that is unwell. Today, zoos are called on to rescue and rehabilitate native animals that have been injured in the wild and suburbia. Whenever possible, animals are nursed back to health and released. It is at these times that I am struck by the compassion of the keepers. Animal observers work closely with keepers liaising on the welfare of animals and it is a privilege to spend time with this special group of people. I can remember volunteering to watch a baby deer that had developed a cough after a bottle-feed. The keeper was concerned and a watch was scheduled. Upon arrival at the enclosure the foal was nowhere to be seen and I thought I had been mistaken concerning its location. Suddenly, a very out-of-breath keeper appeared.

"A thunderstorm is predicted," he said, "and I thought the foal would be frightened so I've put it in the staffroom!"

Animal watching is unique because once cast under its spell, the observer looks at the natural world through very different eyes. Understanding why a particular species behaves the way it does not only helps with the profile of a species but it also provides valuable information for animal management and husbandry. To stand in front of an enclosure in the early morning, before footsteps and voices break the stillness, is a special moment. It is not a time for recording but a time for sharing a moment in the animal's life. It is a time for forgetting where you are and becoming totally absorbed in the world around you. If you did this a million times you would never be bored because each time it would be different. That is what makes animal watching unique. You just never know what the next moment will bring.

You do not need special training to develop a love of nature or care for the environment. But the special training afforded by Animal Watch heightens your awareness for the intriguing world of all creatures great and small. Once hooked, the observer is launched on a fascinating journey in which each tiny nuance of the animal under study can result in a myriad of interpretations. This is what makes animal observations so exciting and rewarding.

Animal watch would have to be the best job in the world.

Keeping busy after retirement

By Claude Hatton

During my forties and fifties, when I thought about retirement, I had visions of a dignified retirement dinner at 65, with my peers offering congratulations on completing a successful career.

As I approached 60, I was working in my dream job, at a level I had achieved two years previously, due to the culmination of my experience and training. My visions of retirement were looking good. My wife had been given a forced redundancy package 12 months' earlier and because of my employment position at that time I suggested she should take advantage of the opportunity and retire. It took six months of submitting countless applications before she finally resigned herself to the fact that she wasn't going to receive any job offers.

As we all know, life can change in a heartbeat and it did, two months prior to my 60th birthday. One of the partners in the business, for which I worked, was killed in a car accident. This was devastating for his family, but it had an almost immediate adverse affect on the business, which closed down a week before my birthday. A redundancy package and all entitlements were paid, which gave me a substantial bank balance and would allow almost six months to find alternative employment.

This financial position seemed fairly comfortable at first, but over the next six months, I discovered that 60 year old HR/Quality & Safety professionals in the job market were considered "over-qualified" and not in demand. After a couple of temporary assignments and more job applications than I care to remember, I managed to secure a permanent role as a Quality, Safety & Environmental Manager, with an electrical manufacturing company. This came with a salary of less than half my previous package, but presented some interesting challenges and "kept the wolves from the door," by paying the bills, albeit, with little to spare.

At that stage, my thoughts of retirement were somewhat diminished and thoughts of working until I was 70 seemed the more likely scenario, as I had a substantial mortgage, far too little superannuation and little or no prospect of returning to my previous employment status.

The two and a half years, I spent working for the electrical manufacturing company turned out to be the most stressful period of my life. The owners of the business ran a very successful, but trim operation and my salaried colleagues and I were working more than 50 hours each week, due to the huge workload placed on each of us.

I had developed osteoarthritis in my knees and thoracic spine a few years earlier and I began experiencing worsening symptoms, which were now affecting my ability to carry out my day-to-day duties. I was suffering severe headaches and neck pain, exacerbated by working at a computer for the majority of my days. I was using painkillers daily to enable me to function at work and was drinking more than I should after work to cope with the stress.

I felt trapped in a situation over which I had no control and often confided to my wife that I was concerned about how long I would be able to maintain working at this pace. She was always very supportive, but would ask, "What else can we do?" I could only shake my head and keep going each day.

When I was at work, I felt I had to hide my medical condition, because I was concerned that the owners would let me go if they knew working at a computer was exacerbating my neck condition. They didn't ask me to attend a pre-employment medical examination before they employed me, for which I was thankful, considering I probably would not have been considered fit for work. I also made sure that I didn't miss any time due to my medical condition, however I got to the stage where I could only work for about eight and a half hours each day.

It wasn't long before my boss called me into his office, where he dropped the bombshell – I was being made redundant due to management restructuring. I think I was in shock at first, but took the news gracefully and was at home telling my wife about it one hour later. Once again, I received a reasonable redundancy package, which would maintain our lifestyle for three to four months, but then what? The reality was that I was 63, my wife was 62 two and neither of us had any prospects of gaining employment. I decided to see my doctor, who had no hesitation in certifying me totally unfit for any type of work. He also suggested that I make a claim on my superannuation fund insurance cover (for total and permanent disability) which I did immediately, but it was declined. We had no option but to register with Centrelink for the first time in our lives.

The reason I'm telling this story is that I'm sure there are people in similar situations to mine and this story may alleviate some of the helplessness that is experienced when something like this occurs.

I have always been a very positive and confident person and I think I had the misguided view, that life gets easier as you get older. It doesn't; maybe it will in another 20 years? There is something soul-destroying about being made "redundant." You start to question the positives in your life, such as your self-esteem, your confidence and your social value. It's very disconcerting to say the least, but the biggest failure is failing to keep trying.

I'm grateful to have a wonderful loving wife, who has supported me for 46 years and together, we have now found new positives to facilitate a happy life together. My wife is receiving Austudy, while she is studying Nutritional Medicine and Western Herbal Medicine, which consumes most of her time. I'm receiving the aged pension while I'm writing my second book and playing guitar, which keeps me busy.

We sold our home and downsized to a smaller one to eliminate the mortgage and as many retired people say, "I don't know how I ever had time to work!"

The battle of Queen Street

By Douglas Golding

In June 1960, I had a minor part in a media war. At the time, small local suburban papers, like the ones I later owned in Newtown and Redfern, were beginning to be displaced by larger papers covering a wider area. People were driving to the shops rather than walking or going by bus, so they were shopping over a wider area. These bigger papers offered the prospect of bigger profits, and the Sydney media families – the Fairfaxes and the Packers – formed a new company to keep Melbourne's Rupert Murdoch out of Sydney.

This simply alerted Murdoch to the possibilities of this new medium. He engaged a Sydney businessman to buy a small family-owned company in Parramatta, Cumberland Newspapers Ltd, which was printing a number of weekly suburban papers. The family company was finding it hard to finance its expansion, and had put out feelers in several directions, hoping to attract a buyer. But the company was not prepared to sell to the Packers or the Fairfaxes, or to Rupert Murdoch. So Murdoch used an intermediary.

Now Murdoch had a press he could use to print new, large-circulation suburban newspapers, but the Fairfax/Packer company did not. So Clyde Packer, Sir Frank's elder son, closed a deal with the receiver of the Anglican Press in Queen St, Chippendale. This was close to the John Fairfax office in Broadway, where type could be set, and its presses were suitable for small runs. And so began a contest between the three great media proprietors, fought out on the street, rather than in the boardroom. I was involved as the PA for Francis James, the owner and manager of the Anglican Press.

The brothers Clyde and Kerry Packer and a few hirelings broke into the premises and kicked out our staff and began to change the locks. But Francis James had powerful friends; men like Frank Browne, who'd just served three months in Goulburn Gaol for contempt of the Federal Parliament. Frank Browne knew where to find hirelings too, at any time of day or night Rupert Murdoch was happy to pay for them and he sent a reporter and photographer to cover the fracas.

At 12.15 a.m. Clyde Packer threw John Willis into the street. At 1.00 a.m. John Willis and I began to attack the front door with a solid piece of 6 x 4, to create a distraction, while Francis James and Frank Browne's men smashed the toilet window at the back of the building and climbed in. At one point, Kerry Packer put his head out the front door to see what was going on. Sadly, our battering ram hit him in the face. Murdoch's photographer was there to take the picture of blood streaming down his cheeks. Soon afterwards, Frank Browne's men overcame the Packers and their men in ugly hand-to-hand combat, using printer's spanners and mallets and other improvised weapons.

By 4.00 a.m. when the *Mirror* reporter came to interview Francis James about the events of the night, all was calm. Francis said, "Fighting? No fighting here. Douglas and I have been having a Bible study. Do you know Psalm 78, verse 66?" The confused reporter

went back to his office and I went to James' office to find a Bible. Psalm 78.66: *He beat back his enemies; he put them to everlasting shame.* That's what we had done.

The battle moved to the courts; Murdoch sank about £65 000 into the Anglican Press to keep it afloat and to keep the Packer/Fairfax company out. A year later, the combatants agreed to carve up the Sydney suburban paper market – the Fairfax/Packer venture would have the suburbs in the east and south and Murdoch would have the suburbs in the west and north, and Cumberland Press would print the papers for both companies. The deal was another big wins for Murdoch, and I had been a small part of it.

A retirement problem

By Hazel Cook

A question I hear a lot is, "What do you do when you have retired?" I think some people have a list of things they would like to do. However, even plodding along, they often have the list finished within a year.

Now what do I do? We all have a problem with this, regardless of what we say, and then we launch into something that takes our interest or a friend has suggested and we follow that friend.

Sometimes it is Meals on Wheels, helping out with Church activities, going onto a roster for the Opportunity Shop – something worthwhile. Or maybe starting that art class that you always thought you would like to do.

For me it was something completely different ... it was joining a wildlife group and finding out the joy of looking after native animals. Of course it is a purely volunteer occupation and so that meant now I had to build an aviary and come up with all sorts of interesting morsels like snails, rats, mealworms, crickets, yabbies, mice and also go out and collect grubs. It also meant storing some in my freezer.

Now has it all been worth it? My answer is a definite "yes."

Can you imagine getting a squirrel glider in care that has been hooked up in barbed wire? This dear little girl had two joeys in her pouch and they were both furless. That meant that I had to do a good job of looking after "mum" as she needed enough milk to raise her joeys. As the injury was to her groin, I had to keep her inside so that the flies did not get to her injury. So I put her into a large net reptile cage (actually and zipped her up with a little box inside for her to sleep in. The next morning I could not find her; she was not in the box or in the cage. I looked everywhere – on top of the curtains, under the bed, but to no avail. Then I looked into the bed. There she was, a typical female, under the doona on top of the flannelette sheets with her head on the pillow. Of course you must laugh at this. So back into the box and the cage I put her. This time I put a very small padlock onto the zipper. Next morning I expected her to be in the box but no –she had pushed the zipper open and squeezed herself, with her two joeys in her pouch, out of the aviary and back under the doona. Who was I to suggest that she should not be in there? So I covered up everything in the room with old doonas and sheets and let her have the run of the room.

Of course there was a happy ending. Her wound healed and her joeys grew so that they now had fur and were left behind when she went out at night to feed. She was released where she was found with a brand new nest box to live in.

The retirement move

By Helen Davison

When we retired, my husband, Allan, and I did what normal people do and moved north.

North is relative to one's start point. Melbournians end up on the south coast of New South Wales. For us Sydneysiders, north meant the north coast. We could not afford a sea change, so we opted for the cheaper option: a tree change.

We ended up in Kundabung, a small community of 150 people, east of Scrub Gum and down the road from Dondingalong and Yarrahapini. Allan fell in love with the house and its forty acres when he found it in the real estate listings. He immediately dubbed it "My House." This satisfied Allan's desire to turn his hand to farming and my primeval longing to be able to hang out the washing naked, if I wanted to, without offending neighbours. Neither Allan nor I had any hands-on experience with farming; I don't even have a green thumb. In fact, I have a girlfriend who used to come to my home in Sydney and take away my pot plants to "save their lives!"

The neighbouring farmers nicknamed Allan "The Grass Parrot" because he only had forty acres and was, therefore, too small a landowner to be called a "cocky." I suspect the name meant more than this and alluded to his lack of knowledge in all things country.

I, however, studied agriculture for the Higher School Certificate, a choice of subject motivated by the misunderstanding that it would be an easier option to any of the other sciences. I cannot, however, claim any functional, or theoretical understanding about the ways of the land.

I attended the only city school that offered agriculture as a subject so when I had to go to boarding school half way through year 11, I was sent to a Ladies' College in the country to continue with this study. It was a small school with only four boarders in my year and seven "day girls" who came in from the sheep stations throughout the district each morning and went home on the school bus in the afternoon.

What I lacked in first-hand knowledge, I made up for in curiosity and was a keen learner with a very patient agricultural teacher. Facts that were known almost *a priori* to the local girls mystified me.

"Why," I would ask in class, "do you have to pull all four teats when you milk a cow?"

After all, the udder was just a bag of milk that could be emptied via one outlet, surely. I could hear the sniggers muffled behind my classmates' hands and sense the eyes rolling but the teacher took the time to enlighten me by explaining about mammary glands and milk ducts.

Sometimes the country girls would tease me with misinformation. They didn't tease the other city girls who were either less naive or had served their apprenticeship in the years before I arrived. I spent a lot of time exclaiming, "Really?" and receiving a reply, "No, not really," which provided everyone with an opportunity to roll on the ground with belly aching laughter. There was no point in being offended, so I would join in. My mother always

said that it was a great gift to be able to make people laugh but I don't think that being the brunt of a joke was what she alluded to, but, if it worked, so be it.

"Laugh and the world laughs with you," she would say.

One girl casually announced at recess that she had *milked the horse that morning.* This time I knew I was being set up as the straight guy in an unplanned comedy routine.

"Ha! You can't fool me. I know you don't milk horses and besides, I also know that your horse is a stallion." I was proud to be able to reveal my growing sophistication in matters of agronomy and livestock.

Instead of rolling upwards, all sets of eyes looked directly at me in disbelief. Did I really not understand, they said. With no hint of condescension, she told me that I was quite correct – her horse was a stallion and that was the point. She had milked the horse and would send the milk to Sydney where it would be used to inseminate a mare and she would be rewarded with a supplement to her pocket money.

"Oh," I replied, regretting that it sounded more like an "ooh" through a wrinkled nose and pursed lips as if I had unwittingly walked into a deposit of recent vomit. It was an acceptable response, I thought, to the incongruity of a seventeen-year-old girl wanking a horse and then catching the school bus to the local Ladies' College.

Now Allan and I were the brunt of our neighbours' Pitt Street Farmer jokes. But, had it not been for their help, we probably wouldn't have survived our forty acres. Pete, who lives on the other side of the creek and whose family has been in the district for so long that he refers to his acreage as his "selection," taught Allan all he knows. He can now stretch the wire of a fence, distinguish between the various weeds and grasses and help round up the cows when it's time to send them to market.

Allan likes being a farmer, albeit of the small bird variety. He gets up with the crack of dawn (because the noise wakes him) and beats the bounds. Then he mounts the tractor – that was the one thing we had to buy, apparently, when we found ourselves on forty acres – and drives around in circles slashing the paddocks until morning coffee. The rest of the day is spent in the recliner because it's hard work being a farmer. And I have yet to succumb to the urge to hang out the washing while naked.

Go west young man

By John Nance

In 1965, aged 22 and having taught for a few years in a Sydney western suburbs primary school, I was sent to teach at a remote one-teacher school in a village in the centre of NSW.

The village, consisting of a general store cum post office, Country Women's Association Hall, railway station and a few railway workers' houses, was on the main western line between Sydney and Broken Hill.

The school site was made up of a wooden building comprising the schoolroom, storeroom and a converted railway carriage as the teacher's accommodation. It was divided into a kitchen/living room at one end, a bedroom at the other and a bathroom in the centre. As the nearest mains electricity supply was nearly 60 kilometres away, the carriage was fitted out with Porta-Gas cylinders. Lights, refrigerator, hot water and heating were all gas-operated and my water supply was delivered by train from the polluted Lachlan River every week and pumped into tanks located on the nearby railway branch line. Fortunately for the pupils and me, the school had rainwater tanks and these supplied our drinking water.

After two weeks settling in with my dozen or so pupils, ranging in ages from five to thirteen, the local postmaster and storekeeper invited me to go with him on the Saturday mail-run. This was not just for company but also to enable me to get to know the vast local area and meet the families who ran their sheep stations in what was proving to be another long drought-affected year.

Early on Saturday morning, we loaded up his ute with our deliveries (a week's worth of mail and newspapers, groceries and the odd spare tyre or auto part) and headed off across the railway line in a northerly direction for a long day's driving.

At each homestead we visited we were warmly welcomed by the various families and treated like old friends while we sat around kitchen tables chatting and enjoying tea and freshly baked scones or cakes. The supplies would be unloaded from the ute, the mail collected and then we would be on our way to the next property.

Around lunchtime, we travelled many kilometres further north to a remote property suffering the ravages of extreme drought for some years. As we drove along the dusty track towards the homestead, we had to drive slowly as any sheep on the road were too weak to get out of the way of the vehicle. One or two, close to death, were lying on the road itself.

As we approached, I could see that the homestead was surrounded by a high wire fence with gates. In contrast to the dusty dryness of the surrounding terrain, inside the fence was lush grass which the farmer and his family had managed to keep as green and healthy as possible thanks to bore water. Inside the fence, hundreds of newly-born lambs were being kept alive by having abundant food to eat.

To a city boy like me, this was an extraordinary sight to witness. We parked the ute, took out the boxes of supplies, opened the gate and entered the area around the house.

Approaching the house in the centre of the compound was like wading slowly through a churning ocean of lambs until you reached the wide verandah.The family greeted us with the warmth and hospitality that true country people in remote places always provide. They took our supplies and led us into the dining room where we sat down to a magnificent lunch of roast beef and vegetables, with freshly baked bread and a generous glass of fine whisky.

These are the sights and events that you hold in your memory forever. This is a celebrated part of the true Australia: glorious but rugged and treacherous countryside; occasional hills in the distance; uneven roads and tracks through paddocks of red dust and mallee scrub; huge distances between villages and towns, but most of all the hospitality and kindness of families doing it tough but always showing generosity of spirit and a welcoming attitude towards anyone they happened to meet.

Over the hill

By Lyn McKinnon

I had finally reached that stage in my life. I turned 60 and thought I was "over the hill."

Being a baby boomer, I was lulled into complacency. I could finally look forward to retirement and a superannuation payout to take care of me into my twilight years.

How it happened is still a mystery ... In a heat haze, I landed in the outback with not a hill as far as the eye could see. A huge shock to an old girl who had spent her life surrounded by the comfort of green undulating hills and wheat crops waving in the breeze.

As I alighted from my car, I had to adjust my eyes to focus on the horizon way off in the distance where my hills used to be. There was just wide-open space with no paddocks, no trees and no grass. And what was worse, no back fence and no neighbours to gossip with. Panic set in with the realisation I was completely alone!

Or so I thought, until I came face-to-face with two beady eyes sticking out of a very long, inquisitive feathery neck. I gathered from the emu's gaze that he wasn't expecting visitors and this was his home. And as far as I was concerned, I had already overstayed my welcome. I had very little time to wallow in self-pity; the emu and I were going to have to get used to one another.

My husband and I had just purchased the old Border Gate Hotel, a derelict outback pub-with-no-beer perched on the border of New South Wales and South Australia, west of Broken Hill. The pub was a grand old 120-year-old heritage building with fourteen-foot ceilings, foot-thick walls and cedar doors – and rooms everywhere! The oak barrels holding the main bar up had long been empty and as I walked down the long dark hallway, the revelry of drinkers' ghosts echoed from the walls. I peered down the steps into the old cellar and hoped there were only small secrets down there.

My new home was older than me! I began to warm to the old place after shovelling out the dust and removing a lot of unwanted creepy crawlies. Painting and cleaning began in earnest, until the "old girl" shone like a new pin.

This venture allowed my husband a nostalgic return to his youth. Walking into the now silent bar, he remembered his father entertaining the drinkers on Saturday nights while playing bush songs on the squeezebox and his mother pouring drinks behind the bar. Without a liquor licence we planned to breathe life back into the old place as the *Bordergate Truckstop*, providing fuel, home cooked meals and rousing outback hospitality for the interstate truck drivers and travellers who drove past our front door.

To the uninitiated, this seemed a simple solution. But for an old girl like me, who decided never to earn a living from cooking food, this was a whole new ball game. Instead of relaxing with all those leisure hours ahead of me, I found myself hitting the floor at six thirty every morning to cook hearty breakfasts for hungry truckies. The day would finish with mixed grills and rump steaks at twelve midnight. To my astonishment, the bush

telegraph spread the word, 'Good Tucker at the Bordergate!'

The same familiar faces began to return week in, week out, and farewells were only temporary. I also soon discovered many overseas visitors visiting the Border for an outback experience.

In the quiet ambience of an outback evening, I took a few minutes to enjoy the sunset in all its splendid colours and realised the outback had woven its magic spell and the green hills had faded from my memory. The old 'pub-with-food and no-beer' was swinging again, not to mention the old girl who thought she was 'over the hill.'

Now what the hell am I gonna do?

By Peter McAra

Born in Kalgoorlie, Western Australia, the son of a gold miner, I was raised to understand the merit of hard work.

During high school vacations, then university, I took on blue-collar jobs such as truck driver and miner and also earned a living in roadwork and bridge construction. In adult life, my work ranged from chemical engineering to management consulting to academic jobs in Australia, USA and the UK. I'm still a bit confused about the career I was meant to have.

One chilly July afternoon in 2005, with "retirement day" #1 to begin the following morning, I gave my last lecture at the University of Wollongong, strolled to the car park, and drove home puzzled. What to do with the rest of my life?

A few years before, my wife and I – both long-term Sydneysiders – had been bitten by the tree-change bug. We bought acres on the NSW South Coast, built a house, and moved in. I was lucky to land a job close to our new home in the forest. But immediately after my retirement, a gnawing sleeplessness took over my brain during the small hours. It got worse each day. One morning, as I strolled about our forested property, taking in the magnificent Australian red cedars that had attracted loggers (mostly illegal) to the region in the early 1800s, a thought beetle bit me. Why shouldn't I grow cedars in the boring paddocks, infertile and weedy, that made up the less pretty part of our property?

"Forget it, mate," a kindly neighbour told me. "The cedar tip moth eats the heart out of the young trees. You end up with round bushes, not pretty trees. And they ain't worth a cent. Everybody's tried to grow cedars. Councils, state governments, forestry experts, timber companies. They've all given up."

Fascinated by chemistry since a childhood strung across a numerous mining towns, I told myself there must be a chemical that would fight the wicked cedar tip moth. I contacted multinational chemicals manufacturer Bayer, and they offered to trial some of their new products on my trees. Little did I expect that they'd spend year after year delivering experimental chemicals for me to treat the rows of tiny tubestock trees I'd planted.

Ten years wafted by. Nothing worked. Then one day in late spring, as I checked out the results of Bayer's latest offering, *Bingo!* Their new product had worked on 99% of the plantation. Months, then a year or two, passed successfully. The trees grew tall and straight, and Bayer told me I'd set up the world's first successful cedar plantation. I Googled cedar timber websites and found that the now rare timber, probably salvaged from fallen rainforest trees, sold for several thousand dollars per cubic metre.

Meanwhile, NSW Government's Farm Forestry service had issued me a document called a Harvest Guarantee; something I hope my grandkids will remember if ever they sustainably harvest the plantation. Among their many other benefits, (ecology,

riparian restoration.), cedar forests are 'green.' Neighbours who run cattle, that produce naughty methane gas, are now talking about climbing aboard the green (and profitable) bandwagon of cedar farm forestry.

History tells us that most of Australia's east coast, from the tip of Queensland's Cape York Peninsula, was home to the timber that pioneers named Red Gold. Many east coast ports, including several on the NSW South Coast, were established to ship the precious product to Europe. Illegal logging produced huge fortunes, sometimes for escaped convicts who took up the trade when they fled into the forest to escape floggings and chain gangs. Now I dream that the ten years I worked to establish my plantation will contribute to a profitable new green industry all along Australia's eastern seaboard. It may well slow down climate change as cedars, perhaps in their millions, gobble up carbon dioxide.

But wait, there's more. Cedars kept me amused by day, but what about evenings? Television is great, but one's brain sometimes hungers for something else. Like many retirees, I'd long suffered from a festering sore called "novelitus." I'd always wanted to write a novel. Now, after more than 50 years of a too-busy working life, I had the time.

I learned from the local grapevine that a big international publisher was interested in Australian novels. I found the address, then fired off the first chapter of a novel I'd begun maybe thirty years before, but never got round to finishing.

Some days later, the phone call came from the publisher. Could I meet their editor for lunch in Sydney? I sure could! By the end of that lunch I'd been instructed to write a chapter for another book the publisher was planning, then submit it as soon as possible. It all progressed too fast: more meetings, a contract signing, deadlines, research, a zillion edits, and finally- despatching the complete novel for publication.

Then the dawning of the "dreams-come-true day," with the local launch, the media clippings, the bookshop displays, the first cheque. But writing subsequent novels has rather got in the way of looking after my cedars. And so it continues. I've had my share of rejections, good advice, and bad reviews.

But now, seven years later, six of my books smile down at me from my bookshelf. And let me tell you, writing novels can be a pleasant break from boring television. But then on a cold wet day, writing can also be an excuse for me not to struggle into my working clothes, climb onto my tired old tractor, and go to mulch the cedars.

My retirement life

By Peter Wade

Retirement had been on my mind for several years, but at 63 years of age I felt too young to retire and was very uncertain about what I would do to fill my days. But I did know that when you get up in the morning and have no enthusiasm to go to work, it is time to change your job or your life.

I had not followed any of the sage advice about planning for retirement by talking to my wife, establishing a solid group of friends in the local community or looking for part-time or charitable work opportunities to help fill my days and keep my mind active. Rather, I went cold turkey on day-to-day work, gained a Seniors' Card and only then realised that I was unprepared for the changes that retirement brings.

I had kept a part-time role in my old company that maintained a contact between work and retirement, but having spent the previous 15 years flying between Sydney and Perth as a fly in/fly out executive, I finally realised the enormity of the life changes that my decision was about to cause. Work had been such an important part of my life that all my friends and acquaintances were in Perth and I had fallen out of contact with all but my immediate family who lived in Sydney.

I viewed retirement through the rose coloured glasses of a fairy tale with freedom to do all the things I hadn't done in my working life: sleeping in, tackling each day without a plan, endless reading of my library books and visiting art galleries for enjoyment. It began that way, however I was continually getting under my wife's feet as she continued to live her planned and structured life; a life that wouldn't and couldn't change with my retirement.

It was then I realised that retirement *did* require organisation and planning otherwise days would drift by and in essence time would be a wasted commodity. Without the structure provided by a working career, it was easy to defer doing things from day to day and then week to week. That is not to say that slowing life down from a hectic work schedule should not be part of retirement – it should be. And it is a fun thing to do. But life, even in retirement or especially in retirement, is for living.

This recognition wrought some immediate changes in the way I began to think about, and embrace, my retirement. I did sit down and think about the things I had missed out on because I was too busy living my career and made a mental list (my bucket list) of tasks that I wanted to accomplish. Simple things like spending more time with my children and grandchildren; travelling with my wife; maintaining contact with brothers and sisters; writing poetry and a book about our heritage home; being available. These are not really tasks but things to enjoy and with which to take pleasure.

That is now my retirement life and I am back on an even keel with equilibrium between past and present and a future that lives in my hands. I now follow my father in law's advice that when you take a journey never come back on the same road that you went. Physically, we have followed that dictum when visiting

family living in Alstonville in northern NSW; we always travel though different towns on our return journey exploring parts of the countryside and visiting new towns that would not be otherwise seen in religiously following the quickest route. I am also trying to follow that concept through other parts of my life by exploring both sides of discussions, understanding differing viewpoints and using both sides of my brain.

Perhaps that is the role of retiring … allowing your body to slow down to allow your mind to think more deeply of what life is all about.

In my shoes

By Petra Schwarz

Contrary to the saying "I would not like to be in his/her shoes," I delight in being in my shoes, and I mean this literally as well as metaphorically.

Ever since my best friend, Angelika, left Hamburg for Australia in 1954 I dreamt of exploring Australia and one day I realised this dream.

I migrated from Germany to Australia in 1986 after I'd spent four weeks holidaying on the South Coast of New South Wales in 1985. I became aware that there's a big difference between being a tourist and a resident – with all obligations and rights that come your way. I never looked back and never returned to Germany, not even to visit. I made Australia my home, and I love it unconditionally.

I experienced the apprehension of employers putting on a mature-aged foreigner with a strong accent. However, I was able to convince a manager that my skills and experience would benefit their enterprise and soon I had a foot in the workforce. From then I never had problems again, except during the recession in 1990. I took this as an opportunity to study economics and a year later I started working for a Sydney-based German company.

During the holidays, I travelled extensively throughout our fantastic continent; some years later another opportunity saw me become a tour manager on camping safaris around Australia. I am fortunate having seen most of Australia in every season. The landscapes are breathtaking and the wildlife is bewildering. I also enjoyed the interaction with international tourists.

Even while enjoying the role, I had to acknowledge it was exhausting and I returned to office administration in the Southern Highlands.

My redundancy, following a takeover of the company I worked for, triggered a decision: it was time for a change. I followed my dream – living for six months in Buenos Aires, brushing up on my Spanish skills, experiencing the vibrant lifestyle, the elegant fashion and the mouth-watering cuisine. This was in 2003 when the Argentine economy was rock-bottom and the cost of living very economical for me. After two days in a youth hostel (single room with shared facilities) I was able to rent an apartment in a sought-after suburb not over-run with tourists.

Shoes had always been my passion and I felt I was in paradise! The shoes I bought there are mostly handmade and uniquely designed and I received lots of comments about my shoes from both men and women back in Australia.

Cultural offerings were in abundance, mostly sponsored by the Argentine government and very affordable – if not free; I feel like I'm a fount of knowledge on concerts, entry-free days at any museum and the wonderful collections of art. I found cultural centres in many suburbs, but a highlight was a ballet performance 'Giselle' at the Teatro Colón. The building and the decorative interior is a jewel on its own. Most of the buildings in Buenos

Aires are designed by French architects and no money was spared furnishing the palaces around Plaza San Martin. They were all privately owned, but are now maintained by the Argentine Government. Marble columns, golden ornaments and ceiling paintings adorn the interiors and all buildings have a stained glass skylight, which provides natural light with a ray of sunshine.

My symbolic shoes brought me out of retirement back into the business world when I discovered a very simple device for making toast outdoors, with the Spanish slogan translated as *A Pleasure to Create.* I remembered that as tour manager on camping safaris around Australia, I'd noticed that we don't have good equipment for making the perfect morning toast in the great outdoors … Here I now was, checking out the cost of possible products, availability and shipping requirements!

Back home, I continued my research, and decided to start importing those outdoor toasters into Australia for campers and travellers who love the great outdoors. After eight years of trading, I had established a flourishing business, supplying quality camping stores all over Australia and also catering for the general public at outdoor expositions.

I am so happy about my adventure to South America and my venture at home. My shoes have the perfect fit – literally and symbolically. I was glad to not be a retiree; however I am now enjoying an obligation-free life and volunteering at the Historical Aviation Restoration Society Museum (HARS) to keep active.

They said

By Lyndell Robyn Winn

OK, the day had arrived – the first day of retirement. So what now?

"You will have so much fun," *they said*, "no more wake-up alarm," *they said*, "go and see the world," *they said*, "you are so lucky" *they said*. Well, to all the *they saids* out there, let me tell you a little bit about achieving all those *they said* goals ...

"You will have so much fun," *they said* – after working since the age of 13, fun seemed to have taken a back seat for many years, so to re-learn this skill took some doing. The guilty feeling of not earning a living had to be erased from the memory bank and replaced with a new outlook on life. Yes, fun soon made its way into my life in many forms: spending more time with the grandchildren (which usually involved spending anyway); going to shops for things other than groceries (spending again) and learning to play the ukulele (this one didn't involve spending so that's a bonus). I soon came to realise that the *they saids* were starting to look quite accurate.

"No more wake-up alarm," *they said* – being a retiree means less physical exertion; not going to work every day means a lot of sleep becomes less important (or needed). The evening news and current affairs programmes become the highlight of our day and a means of staying in touch with the outside world. Retirement also means less social interaction (compared to the daily morning tea cakes and bikkies and lunch breaks with co-workers) and the only alarm clock to live by is the sun (usually about 5.00 a.m.) Ugghhh! It doesn't take long to get over this though and soon the old alarm clock is laid to rest. The *they saids* were right again.

"Go see the world," *they said* – OK, this sounds great but where do you start when you have only ever travelled about 200 kilometres from home since you were 13 years old? The world is a very big place, but one has to start somewhere. Go on a cruise *they said* – yep, sounds good, so the local travel agent became by mentor, psychologist, banker and my 'how to avoid a nervous breakdown' adviser. Having never sailed the ocean waves before, the thought of waves bigger than the tap running into my bathtub was truly daunting, but 'be brave' I told myself and took on the challenge. This was the beginning of venturing more than 200 kilometres from home, and soon my husband and I began our caravan adventure around Australia. (I haven't mentioned him – Ross – before because this is my story and he has adjusted very well to retirement anyway. Took him no time!) You can read between the lines there. My ukulele, affectionately known as Luke, became an important part of our travels, even to the point where I wrote a little ditty titled *I'm A Not So Mad Nomad*, which is a boppy little sing-a-long and as the title states, reflects the grey nomad life on the road. Once again the *they saids* knew what they were talking about.

"You are so lucky," *they said* – Lucky? I never thought I was "unlucky." I had a great job, great workmates and a great family. But I soon learned that "lucky" has many

meanings and the *they saids* obviously knew that better than I did. My working days were full of challenges and achievements and I was so lucky to have been a part of a wonderful organisation. I am blessed with good health, a loving family and a determination to make a mark in my retirement years (that is lucky). I can now choose what I do every day (that is lucky). I have never bought the winning Lotto ticket but winning money is not the only way to be lucky. So, again, the *they saids* were right.

I suppose my story is similar to that of many retirees and I guess many retirees have come across the *they saids*. One day the they saids will retire and realise the full meaning of the advice and encouragement they gave to many new retirees before them. We are all so 'lucky' to be able to have 'fun' and 'see the world,' 'in our own time' in our retirement.

All aboard the Sloop John B

By Winfred Peppinck

There comes a time, in every holiday, where there is a high point every bit as evocative as the view from the Eiffel Tower or the sight of the Acropolis or a dip in a lagoon in Bora Bora. I mean that most pleasurable of moments when you say, "I'm going home."

It happens no matter how great the holiday has been, no matter how many *I don't want this to end* moments you have had. It happens even as you sit by the side of the Road to the Isles, sipping a twelve-year-old malt from your hip-flask, cutting another wafer of Lanark Blue for your Carr's Water Biscuit, while looking over the Glenfinnan Memorial to Bonnie Prince Charlie, with a piper's lament on the breeze! There is *that* realisation, that the end is nigh!

No, it is not that moment when you count *how many more sleeps till we leave*, for we all do that on holidays, a bit like a hit parade countdown to day number one! It is probably not even when you sub-consciously start to hum in your head the old Beach Boys song, *The Sloop John B*, for even though you have long forgotten all the words, the chorus still comes crashing back to you like a Bondi dumper;

I wanna go home, let me go home
Why don't you let me go home!

No, they are but steps on the journey. I'm talking about the way that a marathon runner sees the finish line, the way basketballers see the countdown clock, or the way that in Switzerland as the minute hand reaches the hour, you feel your train move. The moment that you *know* you are going home is an infinitely defining moment. Oh, there may be delays, or there may be detours, but a Rubicon has been crossed here people, we *are* going home.

I register still fifteen days to go in a riverside bistro beside the Loire ordering another *'vin rouge Mon Cheri.'*

"Scusi," I call to a waiter in Orvietto, Umbria, calculating ten more days of luxury living left, stopping when and where we please, a time of abandon where news of floods and pestilence, bombings and stock market oscillation is as remote as the other side of the moon. Just she, me, and *Jane*, our thirty-something companion with her waspish tongue, yet clear enunciation, who tells me, "Go left at the roundabout, second exit," and who only mildly admonishes me, "Turn around when possible," when I get it wrong. Indeed, the sharper tongue for my foolhardiness, is from my wife, "You took the wrong exit, silly." Secretly I wish that she and *Jane* could switch stations so I could push the little OFF button and just jaunt along with Jane.

About five days from departure date, I hear Brian Wilson tuning his guitar, Al Jardine warming his vocal chords, and I start picking up good vibrations. I am suddenly miles away, in my own house, in shorts and a tee-shirt, patting the dogs and looking fondly at my own bed, when through it all, I hear my wife growl, "Do you want another coffee?" Suddenly I am confronted by a bow-tied, waist-coated waiter, in a café in Bonn beside the Rhine. *"Ein bitte,"* I quickly mumble lest *We Sailed on the*

Sloop John B should inadvertently tumble out instead, and I look through the mist and rain at yet another barge heading for Dusseldorf, Dortmund or Duisberg.

"Five more nights," says my wife, echoing my thoughts, "And then we will be in our own bed." She's getting those good vibrations too! I look across at her and smile. Oh, I love the clothes she wears, for very soon now, I will be able to pack them away, for good! Good, good, good vibrations indeed.

I say so with all modesty cast asunder, I am such a terrific packer; my wife calls me "Kerry!" Shoes first, build a border, "smalls" to fill the middle bits and pack around delicate items (okay pedants, smalls can also be "delicate!"). Hardcover books to shield the delicates, etc, etc. There are three 'P's in Peppinck, standing for Program, Planning and Punctuality! I plan from a long way out! In Amsterdam, I first try my *going home gambit,* albeit a trifle early.

"Darling, there are only two more nights. Do you think that I might pack all the clothes you won't be wearing again, together with all the ones I won't be wearing again, and we can live out of one suitcase?" She is unmoved, despite her suitcase weighing 28 kilos. ("I just had to buy that kitchen-knife block in Spoletto, and those candlestick holders in DKW were an absolute bargain; as for the dog toys, they hardly weigh anything at all!"). Oh yes, I am the lugger too. Lug them to the car, lug them into the hotel.

"Oh you don't have a lift? Hmm, yes, quaint and old, I see. No, they didn't make lifts in the seventeenth century, ha ha ha," very droll, you old turd, I hiss, and heave the cases up four flights, on stairs that even Twiggy has to breast sideways. No wonder I look like I have sprung a leak by the time I reach the top. I'm puffing like Stephenson's Rocket.

"Poor darling," she says sympathetically, "I'll take out *Vogue* and *Marie Claire* and make it easier for you." I smile like someone who has just been crapped on by a seagull, and go down to get my own case. Up the four flights then!

London. Departure day at last! Frank Sinatra's been in my head all morning. I sang him in the shower. *It's Nice to go Travelling.* With heavy emphasis I crooned his line, *"No more packing...or unpacking."* Frankie, baby, I'm with you ... and Mrs you-know-who!

A tombstone far too early

By Joyce Martin

They all had that funeral head look that said, "It's all over. Times up. You're going to die." Still, none dared utter the words that matched their looks but instead carefully put on exaggerated smiles and said, "It will be OK. You'll find a way to keep going. After all, it happens to all of us eventually."

In keeping with their good intentions, many quietly took me aside and offered their suggestions as to how I might cope with this drastic, and according to them, premature change in my life. "You've got to plan for it," they advised. "Start as soon as possible to build the exact plan that will give meaning to your life, will fill the void, will keep you busy." Then, with downcast eyes, they added silently or aloud, "You know what happens if you don't."

Others were more explicit in their advice as they said, "I know of several volunteer organisations that are looking for people. You know how important it is to feel useful." Again, they gave me the 'end-of-the world' look that said, "You know what happens if you don't." And, being good friends they tried to guide me towards activities that would provide me with a sense of purpose, everything from knitting squares for the homeless to rolling up my sleeves and doing turns in soup kitchens where I could be the instrument of death to perfectly good food. As each of these suggestions was put forward I bit my tongue and courteously restrained from telling them how I hated anything to do with the construction of anything from yarn and had spent the better part of my life avoiding any cooking that didn't involve a microwave. They saw through me and sighed.

Still others tried to focus me on "keeping the mind active" so I didn't "catch Alzheimer's." Toward this end I was gifted with a lifetime supply of crosswords, Sudoku, find-a-words and mind games. Yet, they must have realised even as they offered these that most would somehow become bottom-drawer-fillers rather than daily supplies of mind exercises. Thus, they sought more structured ways of keeping what they called "my still active mind" from turning to mush. I was supplied with brochures, pamphlets and websites for courses on everything from Swahili to how to become super rich in 10 years. Again, I saw little potential use for Swahili and even less for a course that would take up ten years of my life just to give me money I would never have the time to spend.

Others, of a more relationship-oriented bent, stressed that it was, after all, relationships that keep us alive and healthy after retirement. Therefore, they supplied the brochures, pamphlets and websites that they felt I should sign up for in order to increase my social networks. I tried to explain that I was happy with the friends I had and while not averse to making new friends, the idea of going out there hunting for new people seemed a bit like a safari and my use of Swahili, improbable and unnecessary.

Finally, there were those who suggested my free time might be best filled by thrusting myself more fully into the lives of my children

and grandchildren. I tried to explain that I had raised them to be independent not only by my words but by my example and I wasn't about to change that now. In response, these well-meaning people said simply, "You could make yourself useful ... you know ... babysit and stuff." I laughed as I thought about how my two teenage grandsons would take to the idea of being babysat by granny.

Instead of taking on their well-intentioned advice, I set about taking out old dreams from the archives of practicality, dusting them off and breathing new life into them.

Three years later I don't think my mind has turned to mush and to the best of my knowledge, I'm not dead yet. What I have done is finished and published my first novel and written half of the second with a third in the works. I've strengthened old friendships and through my serendipitous interests, I've acquired new friends who have opened unforeseen windows of opportunity. I've travelled, not for something to do, but to visit places that have always fired my imagination and curiosity. I volunteer to support a local orchestra where I have the privilege of watching sheets of music being constructed into the most wondrous live performances.

To those who shook their heads and worried that my retirement from work meant a retirement from life I can only say, "You ordered my tombstone far too early."

seniors' stories

housing choices

A new house and home

By Dorothy O'Reilly

After 44 years of full-time employment, the time had come to retire. I had the extreme good fortune of enjoying a very rewarding career and most importantly, I had the privilege of interacting with some truly extraordinary people who had shaped and enriched my life both personally and professionally. It is those relationships that are the greatest prize for the years spent working and the hardest to farewell.

No doubt, there will be friends with whom that relationship will continue, but it is foolish to believe that as people move into another new phase of their lives that relationships will not change. Once you leave a place, where you had on a daily basis shared so many common activities and areas of focus, it is inevitable the bonds that held everyone together will no longer be there and as a result people will move on with their lives to form other more relevant relationships.

Retiring from work for most people is a major change and one which they have difficulty adapting. Typically, they try to minimise any other discontinuity in their lives so they can slowly ease into that new routine and lifestyle. In my case, we decided to make this a significant and more dramatic event. We put our "forever" house on the market and decided to move away from all the things we thought we wanted in our later years. A house that was perfectly manageable and suited our needs and one we spent many years on perfecting, the comfort of knowing our neighbours, familiarity of the area and the convenience of amenities within a stone's throw as well as geographical closeness of friends.

Our decision was based on a number of factors. We no longer needed to be concerned with proximity to transport, the time it took to travel daily and juggle multiple commitments both professional and personal. We now could move closer to our family and enjoy more time with them, particularly our grandchildren and time management was no longer a major factor. We recognised that those friends, who will continue to share our lives, will come to visit wherever we may reside. Importantly we will get an opportunity to meet new people and make new friends. There was also a significant financial advantage in moving away from a major city. By selling in a very buoyant seller's market, we had the flexibility in selecting not only the type of housing but also the area in which we chose to reside.

Selling a house and finding another is a serious undertaking and often creates enormous stress. Once you have found and acquired the new house, all the effort and associated stress becomes irrelevant as you shift your focus and energy on settling in and making the new house your own home. In our case, the size of the project and the process surrounding us making the house our home has been far greater than we had anticipated or imagined.

We found that much of what looked like good housekeeping on the part of the previous owners was a pure illusion created for the purpose of selling the property. We bought this

house for many reasons: the location, the layout and the style, but mainly it was the way we felt when we walked in. I have always believed that when you walk into a house that is meant to be yours there is a feeling of welcome and warmth that comes over you, as though the house extends its hospitality. Many would consider this total nonsense, but we make our choices based on so many variables and who is to say which of those variables is best.

Renovating a property whilst living in it is a taxing experience but we know that when all is finished we will have a home that we can enjoy and share with our family and friends.

Having moved closer to our grandchildren, life has taken on different priorities. When they are with us, nothing else really takes on more significance or importance. They are the focus of our attention; we marvel at their interaction, each new skill leaves us in wonder and amazement. I find that we have so much more patience and our own energy levels climb as they draw us into their perpetual motion. Their visits leave us exhausted but also very happy and satisfied and each visit increases our storage of priceless memories to be later recalled and recounted.

I have always worked and in recent times was concerned how I would cope with retirement, despite having a long list of things that needed to be addressed. Retirement would give me that time and opportunity to work down that ever-increasing list of items. I should not have wasted my energy on those concerns. I can honestly say that life is really terrific and always busy. I have the time to take in so many aspects of life that previously I just flew past without really noticing or for that matter appreciating. The saying "take the time to smell the roses" is exactly what has been taking place and that feeling of added appreciation and awareness is intoxicating.

The passion for life, the desire to overcome challenging hurdles and getting things accomplished has not diminished. Generally, the brain has not caught up with the rest of the body; the desire to carryout challenges, very often leaves one acknowledging that ageing is not a state that can be totally ignored. Aging is inevitable and no doubt I can see and feel the decline in my physical dexterity and energy, as well as the recuperative capability. However, as there is a strong will and determination to pursue our planned course, we simply ignore the effort and deal with the after affects as best as we can.

Life after retirement is amazing, it is a shame it took all those years to get there.

To downsize or not – that is the question

By Margaret Ashwell

It's that time in life when one needs to consider the question: is it time to downsize?

In my younger days I've advised others that life would be much simpler if one downsized, so I should practise what I preach.

With this in mind, I approached "my bank" for a bridging loan. In the past you could walk in and ask your question – now you have to make an appointment. The lady staff member, instead of helping a faithful senior citizen like me, insisted on outlining the limitations of my downsizing: I couldn't choose a bed-sitter and free up my money to invest and support me for the rest of my life, while I sailed the high seas to countries previously seen on televised holiday shows. Also, instead of starting the process and being ready to make an offer, like another bank had advertised, I had to come back when I found my dream flat. I suppose I should have insisted, but I trusted her.

For 14 months, I traipsed around Chatswood – my chosen destination, sat in on auctions, chatted with other flat seekers and crossed numerous ones off my list. Real estate agents started to call me by name as I entered yet another flat, newly placed on the market. With time, the value of what I was looking at steeply rose, but the value of the house I was to sell didn't.

It was time to downsize my dream: a two-bedroom flat was no longer within my reach, it had to be a one-bedroom flat. My size criteria had changed, but not the bath. The builders, like fashion experts, have decided, without asking me, that modern people like showers, so one-bedroom flats don't have a bath!

Out came a tape measure to see if I could modify the bathroom for a bath; extra visits to hardware stores to find a bath that would fit were added to my itinerary.

Meanwhile, the prices kept rising astronomically. An about-face was required. Real estate agents vary in their advice: find your dream place first then sell your present property; sell first then you know how much you have to spend. The latter sent my stomach into knots with the thought of being stuck without a home and having to waste money moving into a rented apartment, while my hard-earned cash quickly lost value.

Is it worth it?

Do the advantages of living within walking distance of grocery shops and transport, having a café for a regular cappuccino treat right at my door and access to the free reading material from the library outweigh all this angst?

Yes.

I ploughed on and taking the bull by the horns, I put my house up for sale.

"Life wasn't meant to be easy," said a certain politician in defence of his change in policy.

I was fast learning how true this is, and not without cost. I lost weight keeping the house and garden tidy for open days twice a week, ensuring the lawn was mown, the jacaranda blossoms were raked up, the garden was weeded and – the most difficult of all – my work desk was devoid of its usual clutter.

Lo and behold, the building I'd gazed longingly at but felt was beyond my means suddenly opened up a select few flats for sale. The two-bedroom flats were snatched up within a week of coming on the market – not so the one-bedroom flats.

I could hardly wait for the next inspection opening. I was ready with tape measure, pencil and paper. The one-bedroom flat had a view to die for, but would my library fit in the bedroom? That was the all-important question.

Other inquirers were amazed at this woman on her hands and knees measuring the walls. Not so the real estate agent. She smiled to herself – after six weeks on the market, here was a serious contender.

I made an offer, but received ghastly news: a developer had the hide to want to block my view! Do I take the risk?

I slept on it. I returned to the flat – my flat. I wanted it so.

I downsized my offer. The vendor was getting desperate and, amazingly, it was accepted.

Now ... time for real downsizing!

Clothes I couldn't fit into or hadn't worn for years sought a new home at the charity shops. Books I'd hung onto with the intention of reading again followed suit, as did cooking equipment that I'd not used for yonks. Knick-knacks, which had lost meaning, were stuffed into spaces between larger items, packed into boxes and shipped in my boot to the nearest second-hand shop. Initially, to avoid embarrassment, I dropped things off at the most convenient charity shop after hours, but emboldened by the thanks received on one attempt during daylight, I regularly dropped a bag or box off on my way to and from other activities.

I became more generous as I tried to declutter. The siblings, nephews and nieces were bombarded with photos of family heirlooms that I couldn't fit into my dream or could bear to give up. Friends were given presents I thought they'd appreciate.

Mind you, this didn't happen in one go, and required several attempts and mistakes (a few things went which I later realised I should have kept) and heart-rending (some pieces of furniture held fond memories).

The day of the move came. With bated breath, I showed the removalist where each piece of furniture should go. Wow, it actually fitted! After the books were unpacked and the clothes were hung, some more unneeded items went out.

With excess furniture stock, the charity shops declined some items, so they ended up on the kerb for the Council pickup. After the house was vacuumed and the keys for the next owner deposited with the real estate agent, the move was complete.

Now it is time to enjoy my decision. As I sit typing this, I pause to lift my eyes to the horizon of the city lights, and thank God that I ever decided to downsize.

Seachange

By Meryl Broadley

Our decision to sell the city home we had lived in for 27 years and move to a quieter country lifestyle was met with mixed comments. "You'll soon be bored!", "How will you fill in time?", "It's hard to make friends when you're older."

True, it has been hard to make friends and the friends we left behind are our oldest and dearest. As for the comments about boredom – I am still sorting the lifetime of photos I brought with me 15 years ago.

We wondered how our city bred Staffordshire bull terrier, Gizmo, would take to rural life. She adapted readily, asserting she would do it her way. Our new house was on an unfenced estate so it was a priority to enclose a secure area at the back for her. First, we put up a wire netting fence and when the permanent one was completed we rolled up the wire and left it inside the yard temporarily. The dog did not like being shut in and soon had her revenge.

One pitch black February night we were deluged with that ferocious driving rain that sometimes assaults us here in the Northern Rivers. At 11.00 p.m. we decided to go to bed. About midnight we were woken by a howling dog. We barked back our own threats and warnings to Gizmo and the noise ceased...only to start again as soon as we settled back down. After three attempts to avoid the inevitable, my husband very reluctantly rose and prepared for an expedition out the back. As it was impossible to keep dry he dispensed with clothing and trotted off stark naked with his flashlight to discover a sodden dog, inextricably entangled in a roll of fencing wire. It was some considerable time before he freed her and returned, also sodden.

Eventually, Gizmo tolerated her night quarters but did not appreciate being shut in during the daytime. She learnt to lift the gate latch – always cunningly waiting until after we had driven out. When we chained the gate she escaped by scrabbling up the portable gas cylinder and over the fence. This was discovered when our neighbour remarked on a strong smell of gas in her back patio! The cylinder had been ripped off the wall and some of the piping damaged.

We settled into the rhythm of country life, enjoying the open green of our village. Gizmo insisted on her walk each afternoon and this was a great social event as she greeted every large dog in passing.

Small dogs were beneath her notice. There were two little white fluffies living around the corner. They were never leashed and teased Gizmo by running in and out and snapping at her. She mostly stuck her nose in the air and pretended to ignore them. However, one day after walking freely in the reserve, I was slow to re-attach her lead. When one of the fluffy dogs appeared and rushed at her she took off like a whirlwind after it. I was terrified that she would do it harm, that she might shake the fluffy to death like the hapless possums who occasionally ventured into her yard. But she merely straddled the dog so that it could not move. It squealed like a stuck pig and the

owner came running. When he observed the situation he shrugged his shoulders and walked back inside.

We lived in an avocado growing district and drooled over the luscious green 'fruit.' One year a half eaten, ripe avocado began to appear on the grass outside the door every afternoon. It had to be that dog! We found that she sneaked off for a short time when no-one was watching and returned with an avocado, which she had obviously enjoyed and now wanted to share with me. I was horrified when the vet commented that one avocado has as much richness as three cans of dog food. Although I was tempted to cut her rations I didn't have the heart to do so. We tried to watch her but she was elusive. All we managed to observe was that she ran back up the reserve behind our house. Finally, I spotted a large avocado tree in a nearby backyard. What we never did manage to understand was how she reached the fruit. She was not a jumper or climber, being as wide as she was long, like a small pig, and there was nothing to scrabble up. We never did solve that mystery.

Gizmo has hijacked my story. Seachange was to be about us but she has muscled in and taken over as she frequently did. Just like in my attempts to pull weeds with 20 kilos of warm hairy animal on my lap – an impossible feat. I had to banish her from my person and she retired to the shade of the nearest shrub or tree, watching me. She didn't budge while I was there and followed closely whenever I moved.

Our 'fat, black and hairy girl' bridged the gap for us between our city and country living. When she died, life lost its spark. We both missed her intensely. She kept us company on the veranda in the morning while we ate breakfast. She didn't want our food, she was just happy to be there.

In the afternoon, when I came down after my nap she greeted me joyously, her beefy chest outlined in the doorway, fidgeting from foot to foot and intimating with many sighs and groans that it was time for our walk. For many months after her death, when I was working outside, I would look up quickly and catch a fleeting glimpse of a black shadow nearby.

Recently we moved to a smaller cottage in town. We left Gizmo behind with the memories of the first years of our seachange. She is still there, waiting for me faithfully in the shade of the nearest bush or tree, her eyes following me with a reproachful expression, rolling them in disgust at my many shortcomings.

Sydney Cove

By Peter Lindeman

I once remarked to my friend John, a retired naval captain who has travelled widely, that I thought Sydney Cove to be a most interesting place. He replied, "I'll go further than that, I think it is one of *the* most interesting places in the world."

My wife Judy was on a shopping trip to Sydney not so long ago and we were staying at the Royal Automobile Club. I had the afternoon free so decided to take my paper and read it out on Bennelong Point. It was a perfect winter's afternoon. Not a breeze stirred, and the blue water of the harbour was just moving gently. I found a chair and opened the paper, but who could read on an afternoon like this. The Harbour Bridge curving up into the sky is always inspiring, and we ordinary folk wonder how they managed to build it. On the other side of the Cove sat the Opera House with its graceful white sails gleaming in the afternoon sunshine. Two of the most recognisable and strikingly modern man-made structures in the world, both of them here on the edges of Sydney Cove.

A lady carrying a book took a chair alongside me. I commented on the beauty of the place, and thus began a two-hour conversation with a pleasant stranger. We talked of The Rocks area. She had spent her early years in Melbourne and had not heard of Jack Mundey, the reviled and hated leader of the Builders Labourers' Federation from the late 1960s to the early 1970s. Politicians and developers thought the old buildings on The Rocks should be demolished and replaced with steel and glass towers. Jack withdrew the labourers and a great confrontation went on. In the end the BLF won, and The Rocks area was saved. Today it is well recognised that Jack Mundey and the BLF had more foresight than the government, community leaders and developers of the time.

The winter sunshine warmed our backs as the ferries came and went about their business. The concourse on Bennelong Point is always crowded. Perhaps every tourist coming to Australia walks along there at some time during their visit. Rhonda, my new-found friend, was living in The Toaster – an apartment building overlooking the Cove while searching for a house to buy. The Toaster and the Expressway are two blots on this otherwise pleasant landscape. She confessed she felt like a hypocrite because she despised the building but was living in it.

"Where were you thinking of buying?" I asked with interest.

"Blues Point Road, McMahons Point," came the reply.

"There is a pub half-way down Blues Point Road," I commented.

"Where would it be in relation to that?"

Her reply stunned me, "Nearly opposite, a very old stone cottage with modern additions at the back".

I was flabbergasted. I knew the cottage, and in fact used to own it! We sold it when we moved to the bush. It is probably the oldest, or second-oldest cottage on the north side of the harbour. There is a saying, "it's a small world,"

but who would believe that one could sit down next to a stranger on one of the world's busiest concourses, and discover they were about to buy an old house you once owned.

The sun was getting low now and there was the beginning of a chill in the air. The bars along the waterfront were filling up, and talk and laughter was everywhere. The ferries were busier than ever as the city offices began to empty. It was time to say goodbye to Rhonda and make my way back through the cosmopolitan crowds along the walkway. As I approached the Club, I turned to look back at the Harbour Bridge and Opera House, and the old buildings of The Rocks. A replica of the Bounty was tied up at the wharf. My friend John's words came back to me, "I think it is one of the most interesting places in the world."

The well

By Peter Norman

There was a legend about the well in the garden of Winchester House, the old wooden bungalow at number 10 Waterloo Street, in the quiet, but parched, country town of Wandoora. Despite being there for as long as most folk in the town could remember, the well had never been known to run dry.

Old Charlie Hawkins, the town's oldest resident, who had lived all his life in Wandoora since 1934, claimed that it had often run dry before the war, but after the war ended, never ran out of water.

Since the war, the home had been owned by several families. First were the Hobsons, who bought the bungalow in 1945 when it was derelict. This was after Jim Hobson returned from active service as an army engineer in New Guinea. Jim repaired and restored the house to its former glory. Much to the surprise of the locals, he established productive vegetable gardens and bountiful fruit trees, which helped the family through the tough times in the post war years. Jim said the plentiful supply of water from the well was the reason for his success.

The Hobsons sold to the O'Gradys in 1963. They lived in the home for 25 years, until they became too frail to manage it. Then came the Warburtons, who held it until they too found the maintenance beyond them, and moved to a local retirement village. They were followed by a succession of young professional families who occupied the home for relatively short periods, after finding country life did not suit them.

The current owners are the Miltons, who have lived there since 2003.

Over the years, many stories about the well had arisen. Some folk claimed the well was a miracle, and likened it to the healing spring in Lourdes. Others said it was a gift from God as a reward for those who had so valiantly fought for Australia, and should be dedicated to the fallen.

The more sceptical townsfolk scorned the idea of any supernatural intervention and claimed the well was fed by an underground spring.

As a result, there was no common agreement in the town as to the reason for this never-ending supply of water.

Then one afternoon, as Reg Milton was tending his garden, a car drew up and an old bent-over man who Reg did not recognise stepped out. With the aid of a walking stick the unknown man approached Reg, complimenting him on his garden. While discussing the garden the man revealed he was Jim Hobson and that he had established the original gardens after the war. He said he was passing through the town and came by to see how the old place had changed.

Reg was dumbfounded. Although he had learned from locals that Jim had built the place up, almost from scratch, he had thought that Jim had long since left this earth.

Excitedly, he told Jim how grateful he was for the well that was the source of his good fortune in keeping the gardens alive and productive.

Old Jim gave him a sly grin, saying, "Did Old Charlie Hawkins tell you the secret of the well?"

"No," replied Reg, quizzically.

"Back in 1945, when I bought this property, it was as dry as Ghandi's thong sandals," said Jim. "Nuthin' would grow without water and you couldn't rely on the old well."

"So Old Charlie Hawkins and me worked out a way to solve the problem," he added. "Using my engineering know-how, we just tapped into the town's water supply on their side of the meter and ran an underground pipe to the bottom of the well."

Building my house

By Rod Yates

When I grew up, it was not uncommon for people to build their own house.

Popular materials were fibro and timber. I certainly admired people who did that. Later, fired brick was thought to be superior, but brickwork needed skilled tradesmen, and that added expense. Perfection and precision became important. By the time I had a family, the cost of a house was beyond my reach, and besides, I felt the typical housing design didn't create a feeling of homeliness.

I'd come across a book called *Living in the Environment* about buildings in Victoria, using mud bricks. This hadn't been done by anyone in NSW, but it presented a means by which I could stretch our budget and get something that would feel homely. From 1979 to 1982, this is what I did.

The project attracted an astonishing amount of interest. Eventually, the council asked me to close the site because so many people were visiting during the day while I was not there, and that presented a risk. At that time the *Sydney Morning Herald* announced there would be an open weekend about two weeks later. I organised things so people could see a variety of methods and get information. During that weekend, and another, we had about 4,000 visitors. I soon realised I was being more effective as an art teacher than I was teaching kids about far away things they weren't interested in.

In fact, it became obvious that this was a solution to help a lot of families get homes of their own, with much less mortgage stress. If I could get people to accept some guidance by retired builders, the issues of quality control could be managed, and then finance might even be possible. In those couple of years I met many fascinating people and some had great plans to build their own homes also. I began to realise what could be achieved if you could get a group of like-minded people to work together.

Eventually, I needed a little more money to finish the project off. The Advance Bank had been most encouraging, as had the Blue Mountains Council.

A valuer came out to inspect the place. That night, there was to be a report on the project on *Channel Ten News* as well. This was a house about three times the size of typical homes and it was based on a sweeping curved and flattened conical shape to suit the land. The land was quite a spectacular block looking all the way towards the city. Sometimes you could see the Harbour Bridge when everything else between was covered in clouds.

To my horror, the valuer decided that the place was only worth about $45,000.

"Forty thousand dollars for the land, $5,000 for the house," he said. I asked him why, and he said the roof wasn't in alignment and you couldn't put a string from one end to the other and have it touch all the way along.

Well, it struck me that my family could live in that house; it would keep us dry and happy. Thousands of people seemed to think it was a good house; even *Channel Ten* thought it was newsworthy. If having a bit of string touch the

roof all the way along was what mattered, I'd go around and chop two inches off the column at one end and drop the roof down a bit. I was pretty angry. At about 8.00 p.m., after the *Channel Ten News* report, I went around to the site, climbed the ladder and cut two inches off a post to lower the roof. Surely this would add value enough so we could get the finance we needed?

As the chainsaw came out of the cut, it bounced twice on my shoulder and wrist and then across my nose, making quite a mess. As I woke up in hospital the next day, I realised you simply cannot have a straight line on the roof of a house that is basically a flattened conical shape. Its just geometry! The valuer had been making an excuse, in favour of conformity.

Slowly I began to realise that high value properties yielded more fees and interest. Economical housing was not good business for banks, insurance companies or valuers. Least of all, houses that were bushfire resistant were the last thing they wanted, no matter how sensible the design. They just didn't want to deal with owner builders! Now, 40 years later, things haven't progressed. There is still a strong resistance against pragmatic design ideas, and the median price of a simple family home is usually more than a million dollars. Much could be said about that

My house actually ended up costing about $35,000. But now it would sell for about $1.5M. Photos of it were included in a book on Australian Architecture.

By now I could have recycled much of it, just as you would upgrade your car, or household appliances. However, that hasn't happened because my wife changed her plans and I lost everything. Since then I've built several other homes, and each time the result has been pleasing to everyone except the valuers.

Meanwhile, a constant theme in the media is why the cost of housing has to be so high and what can a first homeowner do to get started on a home of their own? If only I could get a group of like-minded people together, maybe there would be a solution!

seniors' stories

getting around

Bet you can't make a wooden Porsche

By Don Langley

It was just a casual action.

Stuck inside on a rainy day and bored stiff, I picked up a magazine our son had left lying on the coffee table. As I casually leafed through the pages of this motorbike magazine, I came across an article on the first motorbike that Daimler Benz made, arguably the first anyone made. Pictures accompanied the article and as I looked at them I thought, "I could make that." So I did...but I am getting ahead of myself a little.

For approximately 45 years I had been involved in the building industry in a number of capacities and I simply loved working with wood. To me it was a beautiful experience, seeing and smelling curls of Oregon coming off a piece of timber as a hand plane moved across it. No electrical tool can even remotely duplicate that experience. But I digress.

When I retired I started to seriously work with wood. I am not a great artisan – I just love the experience.

I made lots of pieces, including a grandfather clock, several rocking horses, dinner and coffee tables and even four harps.

And then I saw that magazine article.

There were no dimensions other than the circumference of the wheels, so I enlarged a photo until the wheels were 50% full size. Now I had a scale to work to, with every detail being half-size.

I had never made wooden wheels before, but I had some knowledge of their structure. I had a friend turn the spokes as I had no lathe. I could not find a blacksmith willing to fit the steel rims so I did it myself. There was no way the original engine could be duplicated so I installed a Villiers from a lawn mower with a belt drive. It took me eight months to make and I vowed that even though I had never ridden a motorbike I would ride that machine on my 80th birthday. The bike is now on display in the prestigious Powerhouse Motorcycle Museum in Tamworth.

All those mates who so generously gave advice (a lot of which I ignored) soon started asking me the question "What now?" I have to admit I was hooked. Having made a two wooden-wheeled machine, what about a four-wheeled machine? I surfed the net and came across a beauty. A young Alaskan, Bobby Sheldon, had built a car even though at the time, 1905, he had never seen one. His girlfriend had taken up with a guy with a flash horse and carriage so, to outdo him, Bobby made a car, the first in Alaska. The original – and only one – is now in the Fairbanks Museum. He made it out of anything available in his town at the time. I wrote to the curator and asked permission to reproduce it and if permission was granted could they send me details. They were wonderful.

I reckoned if Sheldon could do it, so could I. I made the wheels but this time I found someone who could shrink the steel tyres to the wooden rims. I fitted a ride-on mower engine and a ride-on mower rear axle. It had no steering wheel, only a steering device similar to a boat tiller. The seating upholstery presented a problem as no upholsterer would tackle the

job, except at an exorbitant price, so I did it myself. I also did my own painting and was very pleased with the result.

There it was! I drove it in the Grand Parade of the local show, and it made the front page news in the Fairbanks daily newspaper. Wow!

Now what? Ah, something simple – and back to surfing the internet. I came across a buckboard cycle car, the meanest vehicle ever produced. Buckboards are those contraptions you see in old Western movies in which a cowboy is frantically fleeing Indians on a wooden spring-less platform drawn by terror-stricken horses.

Now, the one that interested me was a five wheel horseless vehicle. The fifth wheel was hinged to the rear and propelled the vehicle. Briggs and Stratton had designed a fifth wheel with a petrol engine incorporated within the rim of the wheel. I built it with an electric 36 volt motor driving a wheel and frame taken from a postie bike. Worked well.

Then it happened. A close mate had found, on the internet, a picture of the first Porsche that was made in about 1898. It had disappeared over the years, but in 2010 it was found in an old shed and is now displayed in the Stuttgart Porsche Museum.

"Bet you can't make that," he said to me. Wooden wheels, wooden superstructure? It was like hanging a carrot in front of a donkey.

The wheels for the Porsche were designed differently to the others I had made, but I found T Model Fords were similar so I designed mine as such. The suspension was the same as a horse-drawn sulky but no spring maker would tackle them owing to the joint of the spring, so I designed the junction myself. Insofar as the first Porsche was fully electric – the system including the batteries weighed over half a tonne – I have installed a fully electric drive system. I made the seating and rear canopy and upholstered it myself.

Why do I do this? It's an interesting hobby and one that provides fascinating background stories. It also keeps the brain working by figuring out all the associated problems. I also get to share a lot of time with mates.

I am grateful to my wife for her infinite tolerance and to Joshua O'David, master carpenter, friend and mentor.

(That name is in code and I leave it to anyone to decipher that code.)

An emotional family arrival

By Heather Payne

I thought I would never get that moment out of my head. Now, only two days later, it's floating away from me down the stream of time. I must capture it before the impact dies. Nearly all the passengers have disembarked. Finally, the last passengers appear.

Angela throws herself full length on the floor. Her arms are flung forward, reaching to touch, to pull safely to her these five young people who are slowly approaching up the airport's tunnelled ramp. She is crying. No, she is almost howling, over and over again, "My sister! My sister!"

There is no sister.

Angela moves her arms out to the side as though she has been crucified. As though she is a Sister doing penance, pleading for forgiveness. Then she struggles to her feet and moves forward. "My sister. Oh, my sister!" Loud, beseeching as though her heart will break. Arms outstretched to gather the living and the dead to her. This sound contains all her loss. Encompasses the long struggle to bring these children to her. All her gratitude for their safe arrival. All the memory of being a hair's breadth, the blink of an eye, the beat of an artery, the slash of a knife, the rip and tear of a bullet, from her own death.

The children are almost here. But it is not these tall, black young men and young woman Angela's reaching to embrace. It's their mother. The woman who used money meant to buy a cure for her illness to give the chance of life to her children. It's the one she couldn't save that Angela is calling to safety, calling home. She clings to her niece as though to the lost sister.

This young woman has been strong. When she and her brothers were removed from their onward flight in Johannesburg and taken to the terminal, it was she who insisted: "No. This is our flight. We must fly today. Not tomorrow, as you tell us." She persisted until the plane was halted in its taxiing from the terminal. She persisted until someone ran with them, across the tarmac, to the waiting plane, until they were safely on their way again. Now these two women, aunt and niece, cling to each other as if to life. The child is proxy for her mother. Arms wrapped around neck and shoulders, locking out the world, tears sealing a pact to never lose each other.

Those outside this embrace are astonished at its intensity. Domestic Arrivals is not accustomed to reunions quite like this. The stewardess from the flight across Australia tells us, "I didn't know they could speak no English. I wondered why they were so reserved." The brothers stand stiffly, waiting. Their faces are wooden and controlled. They are looking anywhere but at their sister and their aunt. If they let go, if they let down their guard for an instant, it will be too much to bear. Clearly it cannot be done. But a single tear rolls down the cheek of one of the twins and gives the lie to his indifference.

I feel I must move these locked-together women forward. This public place is all wrong. We must go. These young travellers must be taken to a place of privacy and rest. They have no visible baggage to carry but their load is still heavy. We must begin, with small steps, to help them lay it down. The older boys seem unafraid of this new place and walk well ahead of us. Is this role the orphanage has told them is theirs? Are they meant to lead the way while the women and the old folk follow? Or perhaps they are merely making space between themselves and the women's emotion. As we straggle forward, strung out along a night-darkened corridor, I see Angela's exhausted face. The wig she wears to lessen her Africanness is wildly dishevelled as though she has emerged from a struggle with unseen demons. She hardly has the strength to walk.

This is an eye-witness account. The author was a support person to Angela (an Australian citizen whose name has been changed in this story to protect her privacy) and her husband.

The proudest day of my life

By Carol Cruikshank

Ah yes, I remember it well ... 31 January 1975, the day I finally obtained my driver's licence. Let me take you back several, nay many, decades to explain why it was such a momentous occasion.

There weren't many women drivers in my environment growing up. Driving was seen as "a man's job." When I met my husband-to-be he had just bought a second-hand Austin. However, shortly afterwards he had a knee injury, requiring a plaster cast from groin to ankle.

Due to his injury, I tried learning manual driving so I could do the chauffeuring. During the first lesson I hit the accelerator instead of the brake and ploughed the car into his neighbour's low brick fence. Needless to say, the entire time of my fairly brief marriage I was never again behind the wheel of any car we owned.

Several years later, my boss in Goroka, New Guinea, decided I should learn to drive the TAA VW bus. I lasted as long as a short drive around town and attempting to park between two (thankfully empty) oil drums at the airport. It was a disaster – and I refused any further lessons.

While working for the Four Seasons Hotel in Toronto, I took driving lessons in my lunch hour and attempted the driving test in a friend's old classic Chevy convertible, after a very little time driving the huge monster. The Chevy's dashboard, steering wheel, and bench seat were all covered in blue, thick, plush fabric, which caused raised eyebrows from the instructor and test official! Doing a turn I took a short cut over the kerb and nearly had a nervous breakdown as did nearby pedestrians. But I think it was the seat moving forward and back a foot each time I braked that caused me to fail.

I decided to forget about driving. I could not afford a car on my salary anyway.

In 1974, by serendipitous byways, I bought a business and definitely needed to drive. Trying to call on customers by subway trains, street cars, buses and taxis was definitely not good time management. A little Honda Civic was purchased, waiting in my garage while I had lessons in December and January amidst sleet, rain, snow and icy roads. A brave friend took me out for many lessons in city driving and emphatic swearing, both of which I hadn't attempted before. It was interesting to discover my tyres were the exact width of the street car tracks, making it tricky to extricate the car before being rear-ended by a tram.

But by the end of January I was a proud driver with a licence. Unfortunately, a sense of direction does not come with the licence, which became a joke amongst my friends.

Luckily, each time I did full circle skids on icy roads there was no traffic around. I learned the hard way about living in the frozen north. You do not take your car through a car wash then lock it, as ice freezes in the lock! Do not use the hand brake when parking, as it freezes onto the tyres. Don't let your petrol get below half a tank as the condensation freezes. Turn the engine on at least 20 minutes before driving if parked outside, so it can thaw out. It takes 20

freezing minutes to scrape ice off a windshield (10 for just snow), and don't forget the antifreeze in the window washing container.

But the independence and freedom of driving outweighed these issues. I proudly tootled around the countryside and considered taking up long haul truck driving as I was so besotted with this wonderful new experience.

In 1989 I returned to Australia. I had never driven on the left-hand side of the road, only knew Sydney via the Anzac Parade and Oxford Street bus and tram routes to Central Station or Circular Quay. I purchased a car from my friends on the Gold Coast and headed south alone, confronting my first ever roundabout – the huge one in Ballina sprouting towns and distance signs for half the state. I chickened out at Gosford and left the car in my father's garage and caught the train to Sydney.

After purchasing a house in Shellharbour it was time to move the car to my mother's home at Maroubra Junction. I will never forget that drive from Gosford over the Sydney Harbour Bridge, onto the Cahill Expressway and the intersection at Taylor Square. I could hardly breathe from North Sydney onwards.

I eventually got used to being on the wrong side of the road, but not before giving my mother a few scary moments. The best thing I did was 20 years of volunteer driving for local community transport, helping patients to and from medical and hospital appointments. I finally learned to navigate around the Sydney and Illawarra regions.

The saga of my first trip down Macquarie Pass in thick fog after only two months of driving in Oz will be told another time. I am still recovering.

The wonderful Henrietta

By Jill Newton

It was 1953. Dad said, "We should have a car so we can have picnics and go camping." My sister and I thought it was a good idea. Mum was a bit hesitant.

A week or so later, Henrietta arrived. She was dark green with big wooden spoke wheels painted cream. She was very erect and stately, with lots of room inside.

New cars arrived in a flood in the 1950s. People were very proud of owning a car and Sunday drives were all the go, showing the new car to anyone watching. Our neighbours had the latest model of something or other. Dad just laughed and said it looked like it had been finished with a trowel. (Many years later I discovered it was a Triumph *Mayflower*.)

Henrietta was a 1928 A Model Ford. She was different and noticeable. We

loved her. Mum was an excellent needlewoman and set to work covering the worn seats with some very nice upholstery fabric. There were two bucket seats in the front and a big lounge seat in the back. Mum's front passenger seat tipped forward so the people in the back could get out. Henrietta only had two doors. Mum said she was pleased because, "The girls can't fall out." Mum always sat as close as possible to Dad. She couldn't put her faith in her door.

Henrietta had a very solid bumper bar that Dad had to climb over to start her with the crank handle. No ignition key when she was built! On the steering column were two little levers: advance/retard and throttle.

I landed the most responsible, nerve-racking job ever! I had to scramble into the driver's seat, with all senses primed, ready and waiting, watching Dad cranking away with that 'Z'-shaped handle. As soon as Henrietta coughed into life I had to push up the advance/retard lever. Dad had to jump back over the bumper bar, clutching the crank handle, and rush around to the driver's window to take over the advance/retard lever. If I pushed that lever too soon Henrietta would choke and it all had to happen again!

That was all right when we were starting off at home, but when Henrietta decided to conk out in traffic, Dad had to grab the crank handle, jump out and wave to the cars behind so they would know what was going on (not that that placated any one). He'd then dive over the bumper bar, crank away with me diving into the driver's seat, poised with fingers as close as possible to that wretched lever, just willing Henrietta to come to life again.

We could now drive on our camping trips. Previously we always got the train to Cronulla, a ferry to Bundeena and then walked the five miles to Marley. Usually the journey was in fading light, the track rough with deep ruts from gouging rainwater, and huge rocks with snakes lying across the warm sandy track. Driving sounded wonderful!

We drove to the Royal National Park surrounded by all the camping gear we didn't have to carry; a great start! We crossed Audley Weir and began driving up Artillery Hill, with Henrietta going slower and slower. We

told Dad there were lots of cars following but he told us not to worry. We nearly got to the top when poor Henrietta decided she'd had enough. Mum's face got whiter

and whiter. My sister and I weren't worried, even when the traffic went down the hill and out of sight.

Dad said we'd have to back down the Hill and give her more "grunt." First, all the traffic had to get past because we couldn't turn around. Eventually we reversed down, Dad gave her 'all she had' and up-and-over we soared. Dad laughed and we sang . Mum hadn't said a word.

Then we left the bitumen. Henrietta was high and robust. We had a four-wheel drive long before everyone else. It was a rough and exciting trip driving into Marley. Henrietta rose and fell with the terrain, she made noises we hadn't heard before but Dad reassured us, enjoying this marvellous adventure. Mum later told our aunt, "It was so rough the girls just rolled around like two peas on the back seat." No seat belts in those days!

Owning Henrietta now meant we didn't have to catch the train to our grandparents' home in the country. Dad embarked on another trip with gusto. Just getting to Wyong in those days was an adventure with one narrow torturous bend after another.

Dad had a wonderful sense of fun. He'd choose a car coming towards us on the other side of the road and call "wave." We'd wave with a flourish and call out in a very friendly manner. The occupants looked startled to see people in such an unusual car waving to them. My sister and I loved this game. Mum didn't. But it did prevent my sister being carsick.

In the 1950s, the Redex Trial was of great interest. Everyone lined Parramatta Road waiting for the arrival of the participants, including Jack "Gelignite" Murray in his 1947 Ford De Luxe.

We were driving along Parramatta Road looking where to park Henrietta, when the waiting crowd thought we were part of the Trial. They waved and cheered. Dad laughed and waved, and yes, we did too. Dad really enjoyed it and said it was good manners to wave back.

Be careful, they drop from the trees

By Joan Hurley

My friend Denise and I both enjoy train travel and with our Seniors' Cards we receive a 50% discount. So on Sunday 26 June 2016 we were excited to book a trip from Ballina to Broken Hill. We caught the bus from Ballina to Casino and at Casino we boarded the train to Sydney.

Trains are always filled with interesting people and this one was no different. However, the lady who had a lasting effect on us, and left us pondering, sat across the aisle. Rather rotund, with magnificently manicured red fingernails, and a good deal of leftover pastry from her pie decorating her blue tracksuit, she lifted her head from her magazine to say "hello" and enquire where we were headed.

"To Broken Hill," we said, hoping she'd be suitably impressed.

"Oh," she gasped, "be careful, they drop from the trees there."

There was no time to ask for an explanation. The train stopped, she gathered her belongings and was gone. When people make statements like that it can play on one's mind. Denise and I were wondering just what we had to look out for.

After a night in Sydney we were aboard the train to Broken Hill by 6.30 a.m. next morning. As we crossed the Blue Mountains the snow was falling, turning the villages and landscape into a magical winter wonderland.

We travelled west for 12 hours, through country towns and the outback, which was totally green after recent rainfall. We arrived at Broken Hill by nightfall. We were looking forward to a nice hot shower and dinner at the Palace Hotel where we had booked rooms.

The Palace Hotel is an iconic hotel in the heart of Broken Hill, famous for featuring in the movie, *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert.* We thought it would add to our adventure staying there. We walked into reception to find Brett, a very affable young man, sitting at a desk surrounded by an amazing assortment of unusual objects, from deer's head to cow's skull and anything in between. A little alarmed, but still undaunted, Denise asked would he have a room with an ensuite.

"Well," Brett commented, "there is the Priscilla Suite."

So after following Brett up a staircase totally encompassed with vibrant landscape paintings, we arrived at the Priscilla suite. Brett opened the door. Well, talk about things dropping in Broken Hill! I'm sure our jaws dropped to within an inch of the floor. The floor, by the way, was bright red carpet and there was a big bed with black satin sheets, and garish paintings all over the walls and ceiling.

We were still reeling from the Priscilla Suite when Brett led us into the Pink Room, which was covered in the brightest of pink candy stripes on the bed, ceiling and walls.

We picked up our jaws and told Brett we didn't really think we'd be comfortable here. Brett said, "That's fine, I'll return your deposit, but you may have some trouble finding accommodation in town, as there is a movie being filmed." We left and I have a feeling Brett may have dropped down laughing at two

grannies from Ballina considering staying in the Priscilla Suite.

We were prepared to take our chances and did find accommodation at the Charles Rasp Motel. Charles Rasp, we later learned, was a boundary rider who kicked a shining stone one day. Silver mining had started at Silverton, so encouraged by this stone Rasp took out a mining lease at Broken Hill with David James and James Poole. This was the beginning of BHP.

At the Charles Rasp Motel, Terry who worked there, offered to chauffer us around town in his Rolls Royce. Denise was rapt, she dropped into those luxurious leather seats, realising a lifelong dream if not to own, at least to have a ride in a Roller.

The next day we headed out to the Menindee Lakes, a series of freshwater lakes that are connected to the Darling River to provide water for Broken Hill. However, Lake Menindee itself is totally dry. The locals are very upset about this. Properties further north on the Darling, particularly Cubbie Station, in southern Queensland, take water for irrigation before the river gets to Menindee, which lessens the flow. But even worse, according to the locals, is that all the water was released from the lake to flush out the mouth of the Murray River. Numerous crosses dot the area in protest for all that has been lost by the draining of the lakes.

To ensure Broken Hill doesn't run out of water, a 270-kilometre pipeline will be be constructed to bring water up from the Murray River to Broken Hill.

Silverton was our next stop. This ghost town has become very popular with movie makers. Currently a TV series called *The Leftovers* is being filmed there. But most famous of all is the *Mad Max* movie, with a Mad Max museum in town for enthusiasts. Lunch at the Silverton Hotel was an interesting experience, with much memorabilia to be enjoyed, and four donkeys wandering freely around the hotel veranda.

We flew home the following morning, never finding out what was going to drop on us from the trees. With further research, including some help from Google, I did discover that what we had to watch out for was "drop bears." A drop bear is apparently part of modern Australian folklore, referring to a fictitious, carnivorous version of the koala said to drop from trees and spoken of in tales designed to scare tourists.

Well, there you go – now I know!

The Pope and I

By John Bryant

Australia went berserk in 1970 when Pope Paul VI became the first pontiff to visit. As a non-Catholic, the event would have slipped beneath my radar except for an unexpected encounter.

At that time the love of my life was a black BMW 250cc single cylinder motorcycle. I was the first bloke in my group of friends to get a bike so I didn't have any riding buddies. For entertainment, I dressed in black just like the motorcycle cops. At night, riding my black motorcycle dressed in black leather, black helmet with chromed V8 badge on the front, I would roar up beside a speeding car and motion the driver to pull over. I loved the scared look on the drivers' face as he slammed on his brakes and slid to the kerb. I would accelerate off into the night, adrenalin pumping, laughing my head off.

The day I encountered the Pope I was on my BMW, about to cross the Sydney Harbour Bridge. At the southern approach the traffic was at a standstill, so like all motorcyclists I filtered through the gridlock until I came to a roadblock. A cop told me that the Pope's motorcade had just left the city and was due to cross the Bridge at any moment, hence the holdup. Just then there was a throaty rumble of engines and the Pope's white limo, flanked by more than a dozen police motorcycles, roared into view. And there he was Pope Paul VI, the man himself! Sitting serenely in the rear of the open top he waved majestically to the throng of cheering spectators. It was an impressive sight.

After the Pope's motorcade was about halfway across the Bridge the cops removed the barricades. Being at the front of the queue I gunned the BMW and went hell for leather to catch up with the Pope. I wanted to get another look at John Paul VI from close quarters. No one seemed to notice me coming up at the rear, so I tucked myself in behind the police motorcycles, figuring that I could enjoy the spectacle from a unique perspective. Dressed in my all-black cop uniform, I blended right in. I don't reckon I was more than 10 metres away from the Pope, so I got a very close look at the back of his head.

As we reached the northern end of the Bridge the motorcade swept off into the North Sydney bypass. I kept following, tucked in tight, right behind the last of the police motorcycles. It wasn't until I glanced in my rear vision mirror that I saw the traffic cops pushing barricades across the road behind the motorcade, preventing other traffic from getting tangled up with the Pope's official party. So there I was, a fake cop dressed in a fake police uniform, riding my old single pot BMW, now part of the greatest show on earth!

As the motorcade wound its way majestically through the streets of North Sydney there were thousands of cheering spectators waving flags and holy objects. The only ones waving back at the crowd were me and the Pope – the police motorcyclists sat stiffly in formation, staring dead ahead like stuffed dummies.

I got so caught up in the excitement of waving and shouting back at my fans that I nearly ran into the back of the motorcade as it came to a halt outside the Catholic church. My bike came to a standstill wedged in between the last two police motorcyclists. They looked at me and I looked at them. They both shouted at once and instantly I was surrounded by uniformed police and a couple of plainclothes blokes who grabbed me and dragged me off my bike.

After a quick trip in a paddy wagon I spent the next hour in North Sydney Police Station answering questions. Who was I? What was I doing? How did I get so close to the Pope? Who else was involved? What was my intention? Had I been in trouble with the police before? After strip-searching me for weapons, they finally figured out I was simply a teenage jerk that hadn't actually broken any laws. With much ranting and raving and a barrage of threats, they let me off with a stern warning, telling me never to try such a stupid stunt again. To be honest I was scared stiff and extremely relieved when they took me to the back of the police station and pointed me to my bike, which they had trucked over and left sitting in their parking lot.

By the time they let me go the Pope was long gone and there wasn't a single spectator to be seen anywhere, just the North Sydney streets covered in rubbish. As I headed the BMW up the Pacific Highway towards home I was feeling strange. I was still shaken by the roughhouse tactics of the cops, but I also felt a huge thrill at having pulled off a ride in the Pope's motorcade. I noticed my hands were trembling as I gripped the handlebars.

I was winding my way up the Pacific Highway through Pymble, running the day's highlights through my mind, when I saw them. A couple of young blokes on a smoky, noisy, ratty old Honda Dream, and they weren't wearing helmets. Weaving all over the road, I figured they were either unlicensed novices or perhaps they had had a couple too many at the Pymble pub. The cop in me surged to the surface. I felt honour bound to pull them over; after all, if I didn't protect the community from this riff-raff who would.

I'll never forget the look of dismay on the blokes' faces as I pulled alongside and pointed towards the kerb; their eyeballs bulged and mouths hung open. But then, to my horror, the driver was so nervous or terrified that he forgot to watch where he was going. The old Honda developed a fatal wobble. Suddenly it crashed, its front wheel wedged into the side of the Telecom telephone box next to the road. As I accelerated away I caught a glimpse in my rear vision; I saw them both scramble to their feet. They were OK.

Irresponsible kids!

A frightening experience

By Lesley Langston

Perhaps you have had the good fortune to visit Lawn Hill National Park and its three magical gorges with their associated permanent waterways. The park is an oasis in the midst of the vast dry scrub type savannah land of north-western Queensland.

When we caravanned there, we negotiated a torturous corrugated dirt road before reaching a basic camping facility, adjacent to the middle and larger of three gorges. Next day we hired a canoe to explore the middle and upper gorges. Having never canoed before, this was a learning experience – as was convincing my wife to sit still to avoid rocking the boat. However, the wondrous views of spectacularly brilliant red vertical cliff walls through which we paddled were a photographer's dream.

At the western end of the middle gorge we reached a reed hidden, two-metre high falls and adjacent mooring platform. A wooden portage enabled transfer of the canoe to the higher water level of the upper gorge. With a concerted effort we managed to traverse the portage and deposit our canoe onto the waters of the upper gorge. Another tricky bit of juggling between upper platform and rocking canoe had us back in our trusty craft, ready to tackle the second stage of our adventure.

Now in a calm backwater, a narrow passage led to the main body of upper gorge water, while to our left a fast flowing stream tumbled over the falls. The platform and exit passageway was enveloped in a canopy of Pandanus trees, whose branches reached the waterline. As I busily restored our gear, my wife – mindful of the rapid stream of water flowing to the falls (and that we could be swept along with it) – started paddling furiously. All she achieved was to drive us under the water-hugging Pandanus branches.

The Pandanus incorporates an effective defence mechanism, by way of razor sharp-edged leaves. Seeing this array of shark-like teeth descending upon her, my wife ceased paddling and ducked her head away. Unfortunately, her body followed her head and the weight transference meant the canoe leant in the same direction – in this case, alarmingly so. In retrospect, the scene may have seemed hilarious. There we were, one moment seated reassuringly in our fibreglass container and next, floundering frighteningly under water. Fortunately, we were wearing life preserver vests.

From experience, I can now state with absolute assurance one's first reaction is just numbing shock and panic. However, instinct – assisted by the vest – prevailed and almost instantly I resurfaced, albeit spluttering and gasping. I had my head above water and was kicking my legs to remain upright. But where the hell was my wife? I was starting to panic but then saw an arm reaching around the side of the now upturned canoe. She was captive beneath it.

I needed to act swiftly, but being claustrophobic and in a state of panic, she was unable to immerse herself underwater to escape. I felt too short of strength to lift the canoe up. Nevertheless, treading water, I managed to tilt the canoe sufficiently to drag her out from underneath it towards the nearby bank. She was obviously in shock – her eyes were dilated and she was whimpering like a child. She fearfully responded to my instructions to place her feet on an underwater rock I had located and hung onto a Pandanus tree branch (minus spines), while the water lapped her chin. Amazingly, her glasses and hat were still where they were supposed to be – on her head. She had to be persuaded to stay put while I swam after the paddles and our camera bag, which by then were merrily floating towards the falls. While the camera bag floated, water penetration put paid to my expensive camera.

Despite the number of canoeists out that morning, we were entirely on our own. After a few unsuccessful attempts, I was able to return the canoe to its normal orientation, only to find it half full of water. As I couldn't empty it, I decided to load my wife into the bobbing craft, a task more easily determined than achieved. Now I faced the seemingly Herculean assignment of pushing the canoe ahead of me as I swam back to the portage platform. But there were still no people in sight.

I eventually had the fibreglass monster alongside the dock. By now the water was only waste high, so I was able to stand and steady it while my terrified wife scrambled onto terra firma. It was then I noticed my bloodied legs and arms, lacerated by razor sharp, rasp-like calcified subterranean rocks and tree trunks that I brushed against in the shallows

I realised I was too exhausted to turn and empty the canoe of water. Thankfully, two couples appeared and I was so relieved to have these two younger men assume command of the situation. Once satisfied that we were unharmed and capable of returning to base, they emptied the canoe and relocated it beside the middle gorge platform and helped us aboard. One of the ladies loaned June a coat to combat her shivering, caused by the drenched and cold clothing. Later, these good Samaritans, having found June's jacket and my totally saturated Akubra, visited our van to make sure we were still coping.

So take heart, no matter where or when you strike trouble, there is always help on hand from caring people.

That's life! Undoubtedly the Goddess of Fortune saved us that day from tragedy, three thousand kilometres from our family.

Space camp – Huntsville USA

By Michael Links

About 30 years ago, I saw a film and had a dream – to attend Space Camp in the USA. I never expected the opportunity to arise and put it out of my mind, until 18 May 2013.

I met Jackie Slaviero at Macquarie University's Open Night. Dressed in blue NASA overalls, she was a schoolteacher who had made about seven school group trips to Space Camp in Huntsville, Alabama. I registered my interest and in the September/October holidays of 2014, my 15-year-old son Hugh and I set off for the adventure of a lifetime – to Space Camp with groups from two other schools.

We flew to Los Angeles and stayed at the Hotel Angeleno. Over the next three days we visited the Getty Museum, California ScienCenter and Universal Studios. However, on Sunday afternoon we travelled to Space Camp in Alabama. Our first talk was about Rocket components – the hardware of rocketry. The evening session was devoted to Scuba Diving in a 24-foot deep tank, to simulate the feeling of floating in space.

The next morning we had a talk on fuel cells and did some experiments to demonstrate how they work. After that we had our first space shuttle mission. We were divided into two groups – Mission Control and Shuttle Crew. We were given flight plans and had to assume certain roles. I was 'FDO' – Flight Dynamics Officer. Among other things, I had to calculate the amount of rocket fuel needed to carry out manoeuvres. Our mission was to deploy a satellite and our flight plan reflected that objective.

In the afternoon we had team building exercises in Area 51. This involved co-operative problem solving exercises like all crossing a river by using available planks of timber. After that we had another space shuttle mission. The shuttle simulator is built just like the real shuttle both in size and features. It has many panels with hundreds of switches which have to be operated at the right time, just as on a real mission. In the late afternoon we tried the multi-axis trainer. This is a machine that has nested concentric circles and can spin you in any direction. It feels like a capsule spinning out of control.

On Tuesday we had an aborted mission. I was the pilot. Aborted missions are not all the same, it depends on the shuttle's location at the time the decision is made to abort. There are specific flight plans for each type.

At midday we had a history tour. At Space Camp they have an original Saturn V rocket. A building has been constructed around it and it is dedicated to the Apollo Moon landing program. The lunar lander and orbiter are there, as is the lunar rover and a model of Skylab. The part of Skylab that landed in Western Australia is on display. The council in WA sent NASA a fine for littering after it crash-landed.

The evening exercise was a turn in the centrifuge, which spins you fast enough to create a force of 3.7g's. After that we used the FA Hornet simulator, which was installed in

an actual aircraft. Landing safely is harder than it looks.

On Wednesday we made two-stage rockets from kits of plastic, cardboard and balsa wood. They reached heights of 300 feet, then parachuted down.

Our long three-hour space mission was next, complete with simulated problems. As pilot I was asked to fake a heart attack two minutes after lift-off. The team then had to cope. Further problems occurred in mission control. Eventually I safely landed. (The heart attack wasn't permanent).

On Thursday we went on a Flying Fox (zip-line). It was about 50-feet high. I loved it. It was so fast. Close by, Hugh's team were climbing up and jumping off a 32-foot pole – with safety ropes.

On Friday we had a graduation ceremony, with one of our team members getting a medal for the most outstanding team member. It was well deserved too! After graduation we flew back to Los Angeles for a tour of Disneyland before heading home to Sydney.

Train memories

By Richard Alaba

You know what it's like. Three young ones in a cramped motel, and the Blue Mountains are cold outside. We get restless so I say, "Let's ride the Zig Zag Railway," and they cheer. We laugh about Thomas the Tank Engine and other happy Playschool characters and arrive before anybody even says, "Are we there yet?"

The Station Master is impressive in a bright red eighteenth-century uniform, like a walking military museum. His "volunteer" badge reminds me how much people love trains and how much work has gone into restoring these rolling treasures. There's so much brass to shine and coats of paint to stop the rot of ancient trees. It's epic work and I'm glad someone loves doing it. We name him the "Fat Controller," like the friend of Thomas. There is a lot of laughter and the chatter doesn't stop.

There's a long two-part whistle, and the train moves forward slowly. I recall reading somewhere that every train whistle has a different meaning, and two long bursts mean the train is starting to move forward. I tell the kids and they laugh; the very thought of trains having something to say is rather funny, especially if you are young. Steel wheels moving slowly on steel rails are a bit like chalk on a blackboard, but with a hard, heavy, grinding sound. Not pleasant, but something you get used to.

I grew up in a house opposite a railway. When we had visitors at home and a train passed by, they would stop talking, look around in amazement, and ask, "How can you stand the noise?" We would laugh, and answer, "What noise?" and pretend we didn't notice. We did not tell them that you could not hear the television when a train passed because the rumbling was so loud it drowned all voices. But, like a lot of things in life, if you must endure it every day, it sort of disappears.

The 150-year-old train we are on is in no hurry at all, but train time and real time are not the same. The train noise makes me think how different life was for my parents. The kids called them *Babcia* and *Dzadcia*: grandma and grandpa in Polish. Steam trains connected their villages, brought food and visitors, and sometimes took them to a 'big town'. School children flocked to see them, and often formed a waving guard of honour. Mum loved the whistle that was blown just for them. "We were poor but happy," she would say, and trains were often mentioned if you could get her to talk of the past. She, too, lived opposite a railway as a girl, and her friends would visit just to see a train go by, which happened almost every day. The trains moved slowly through her village with little noise then. Anyway, kids are noisier than trains, she used to say, in the Polish accent she never lost.

We stop on a lookout with views that stretch forever: over different coloured fields with symmetrical patterns, over distant hills, smaller valleys, winding roads, tiny villages and dotted little homesteads that must be so quiet to live in, far from a train. We are on the return leg of the trip, and a long whistle produces a cloud of white steam. "Where do the clouds go?" missy asks, with her head half in and half

out of the carriage window. My mum once told me that her railway was not allowed to have a name, certainly not the 'Polish Railway'. At different times in her life, it was called the Prussian, Austrian, German or Russian railway, as each country took turns in putting their flag on Polish soil. In fact, most of Europe did this at some stage of Polish history, but that was before railways were invented. It was hard to make her talk about life in Poland. When she did, she often mentioned how many of her village friends had disappeared, like clouds of train steam ... one minute there ... next minute not. Gone! Polish people speak like that.

She remembered her quiet village becoming busy, with uniforms and loud voices everywhere. One train a day became five, then ten. They came and they came, day and night, one after the other, and some stopped, and some didn't. She feared the ones that stopped. If you got close they smelt like cattle trucks, but there were never any cattle inside. There were lines of people, each with one bag, who were moved into the carriages that had no seats. Some people she recognised, most she did not. They moved quietly, in orderly lines. And the doors would shut, some babies might cry, and the trains would leave. And every time one blew its whistle, people in the village would stop what they were doing, and look down.

Trains were in short supply between 1941 and 1944, but over 1,600 extras were found, and most of the trips were to destinations in Poland. They were heavily loaded, and many pulled fifty enclosed carriages, each carrying up to a hundred people. They didn't stop running for over a thousand days. It took 200,000 workers and thousands of soldiers to supervise. Trains were needed urgently on many fronts, but the work had priority because it was the most efficient solution to a big problem. Moving millions of people: quickly, quietly, and secretly.

Our ride is over in less than an hour but train time is not like real time: you see so much in trains. Some memories sneak innocently into your day, and then linger across time and space to become milestones of your life. I wonder if my parents ever rode on this train. Perhaps after getting off the ship, and before having me. I can feel them here. One more whistle as gleeful chatter reaches the platform. Our shoes leave tracks on black earth. The Lithgow soil is no place for clean shoes and some footprints last forever.

One thousand miles in a Kirkham Cobra

By Ron Thorp

It is said that the journey can be just as interesting as the destination. Such was the case when my son Ron and I embarked on a thousand mile journey in his partly completed Kirkham bodied Cobra.

The purpose of the journey was to participate in the annual hill climb at a destination in the Scottish Highlands known as "Rest and be Thankful." Why it was so named was for us to discover.

A vehicle with no hood or side curtains and minimal creature comforts is not the ideal transport in the UK, where inclement weather is the norm. However this was not to deter two intrepid souls from enjoying the company of other like-minded individuals at such an intriguing destination.

A check of the forecast weather in the days ahead indicated a wet weekend, although this was amended closer to the time on a regular basis.

Preparation was confined to taping up holes and gaps in the floor of the car and packing as much warm and waterproof clothing as we could fit in the confined luggage space.

A brief road test prior to departure revealed a loose hub spinner and the tendency for reverberations from the unsilenced exhausts to set off alarms in parked cars. Sorry about that folks!

Fortunately the weather was more favourable than expected on the journey to Glasgow with only brief showers, which left us unaffected provided we were moving at a reasonable pace.

Upper speed limits in the UK are limited to 70 mph, however this becomes somewhat academic on the motorways where 80 to 90 mph is the norm, except where fixed speed cameras exist. Not once did we see a motorist pulled over by police – who are conspicuous by their absence on the roads. Nor did we see one bad accident during our journey.

The Cobra cruised comfortably between 80 and 90 mph, being overtaken periodically by family hacks, some doing well over the ton. Must give them some satisfaction passing a Cobra!

Upon arrival at Glasgow we were greeted by event organiser Bill Telford and invited to view his Hawk bodied Cobra that resembled my original 289 in many respects. Bill treated us with a car wash and details of his Classic Car Tours.

Our experience at the event is detailed in a separate report. Suffice to say it was well worth the journey.

At the conclusion of activities we spent a comfortable night in the Loch Fyne Hotel at Argyll overlooking Loch Lomond.

The return journey commenced in showery weather that changed to a hot sunny day. No sooner had we shed some excess clothing than the clouds closed in and the rain started in earnest. The Cobra's body soon resembled a leaking boat with more water coming up from the road than falling from the sky.

With no shelter in sight we had no alternative than to press on as stopping on a motorway presents other hazards. Eventually the rain eased and the water level inside the car dropped.

Delays on the motorway were frequent, with signs indicating delays or queues ahead. After slowing to almost a stop and creeping along for some time the traffic would suddenly accelerate away as if the start of a race had just begun – a strange phenomenon given that no apparent reason for the delay was ever seen. Reactions from fellow motorists were interesting, ranging from bemused stares from the comfort of warm dry SUVs or such, to thumbs up and shouts of encouragement to the two bedraggled souls sitting in the rain waiting for the traffic to start moving.

The ten-hour return journey ended happily at 6.30 p.m. with our arrival at home and a warm welcome and dinner served by the lovely lady of the house.

Needless to say we were glad of the rest and thankful for having arrived safely.

The tale of the boy from Oatley

By Ronald Craggs

Billycarts were everything a boy dreamed of when I was a child in the '50s. We would make them out of anything we could find, and our building skills weren't all that great! The challenge was to find good wheels. Fortunately, at the time, my dad was working at a nearby TV tube manufacturing plant. He was a technician and his job was to fix things when they broke. He was able to procure some great little solid rubber wheels with ball-bearing centres. They were perfect for the task.

So, with a limited knowledge of how to make things, we started putting together our billycarts. Around fifty nails were used for each joint, most of which went in about 5mm and then bent over. Oh well, you can only try to do your best when you're a kid.

At the end of my street, there was a dirt road called Dame Mary Gilmore Road. It was steep and ended with a sharp turn to the right at the bottom of the hill. We would start at the top and let fly. Throw your bum to one side and you end up doing broadsides on the gravel. Hit a rock and you fall out. Everyone laughed!!

We always waited for each kid to go it alone. That way the rest of us could stand at the top and laugh at the crashes. Ride safely and you were dead boring – but go fast and throw yourself around and everyone thought you were great. We laughed ourselves silly. In those days there were no mobile phones, no kneepads, no elbow-pads, no helmets. Nothing really, just old sandals and worn tee-shirts. Oh – and shorts. I don't recall getting long pants until I was about 12 years old.

My mum told us that we had to be home before dark. That was the rule and God help any kid who did not comply. So, at the end of the day, we would trudge home with our sometimes broken billycarts in tow. A few cuts on your legs, or elbows, or anywhere else for that matter and you were thought of as great. A dribble of blood and, well, every boy was impressed.

There and back in PNG

By Jan Hunter

The plane was tied up – by a chain attached to a stake at Jacksons Airport, Port Moresby. It was 1974 and the Missionary Aviation Fellowship 206 Cessna was loading six passengers, including me, three children and mountains of luggage.

Dubbed "The Golden Geckos," the single-engine mosquitoes connected mission stations all over the territory; delivering mail, calves, chooks, curtain rods or yoghurt culture – lifelines in times of emergencies. Everybody was fitted in, with our four-year old strapped between her nine-year-old brother and me – and our seven-year-old next to others in the front.

We tried some loud conversation, reading, entertaining with pipe cleaners and after two and a half hours we began to lose height over the distinctive terrain of the Western District. Below us were huge serpentine rivers and swamps between the forests. Suddenly the bustling station of Kawito was in front of us. While stretching our legs during reloading, we realised there were no hills, nothing beyond the airstrip but sky and grass, a stark contrast to the mountains around Moresby.

During the five-minute trip to our destination, we could clearly see lagoons, trees with outsized yellow flowers and a few villages. Banking sharply we flew straight for the Aramia River, the Awaba sawmill and the very short airstrip – quite hair-raising. On landing, the plane was surrounded by local Gogadala children, the girls with full heads of tight short plaits. Hiking along the road was my husband and our missionary friends – one a teacher, the other a nurse.

The station was on a strip of ground rising out of swamps, bounded on one side by the river, only nine metres above sea level. A road ran the length of the station, with houses and buildings branching off. The only mechanised land vehicle was a tractor but bicycles did great service, often in slippery, muddy conditions.

A highlight of that holiday was a trip to the only longhouse in the district. We boarded the noisy launch, *Sivarai* (meaning *News*), and chugged slowly upstream. The broad river was edged with swaying grass that undulated in our swell. The trees were sparse, but the black palms showed kinks in their trunks, a legacy of a drought. We saw elegant egrets, but not one floating log turned out to be a crocodile. Once crocodile shooters could bag 1,000 a week on this river. Gogadala canoes passed us regularly keeping well out of our wake. We marvelled at the grace of the paddlers. The pod shaped canoes, hollowed from a tree, sealed by burning, held up to 30 standing paddlers. With a flip of the wrist and dipping the broad oars in unison, they were poetry in motion. Occasionally the occupants would yodel, but silence was the norm.

Finally, the *Sivarai* veered out of the river into a three-metre channel cut through the floating grass. We blanched when the driver opened the hatch and sat on the cabin roof, steering with his big toe. The channel closed in and we stopped within sight of a huge lagoon. Two canoes with child paddlers arrived. They

slid the canoes over the mud and weeds to the side of our launch and with a slosh to get rid of the five centimetres of water in the bottom, bade us enter. With much trepidation we got on board, sat down in the bottom and kept very still. Our littlie huddled between my knees. Husband and the two boys plus launch driver got into the other canoe, one end of which was open to the water. With some pushes and yells we were out of the channel, propelled across the lagoon at a great rate, accompanied by a flotilla of craft manned by youngsters of all sizes. Livingstone in Darkest Africa could not have felt more adventurous!

After negotiating the mud on the opposite bank, we were surrounded by runny-nosed children and escorted to the village along a path flanked by canoes in various stages of construction. As we climbed the incline we caught a glimpse of the longhouse through the fronds of the palms. The vast A-shaped thatch crowned the rise like a crouching monster. Drawing closer, the atmosphere changed. Here was old Papua ... timeless.

The longhouse was raised, and underneath were children playing, women weaving, pots bubbling, pigs and dogs running about. Climbing the rickety ladder we were escorted through the smokey building. Cobwebs were everywhere and some light came through holes in the roof. We were shown through the huge building, divided into small sections for each family. Our friend played interpreter during the conversation.

Our return journey was delayed when the *Sivarai* stuck fast on a grassy bank. The pilot went overboard but the water was too deep for him to find a footing, so one of the child canoeists used their paddle to lever the boat into the channel. We stopped on the river for the pilot to clear the weeds from the propeller.

As we chugged homeward our boys lay on top of the cabin while the adults mulled over what we had seen. We were jolted from our reverie by the passing of a canoe with an outboard motor. A cane chair was strapped in the middle of the craft, cradling a European reading a paperback, complete with red bandana round his neck and a slouch hat trimmed with tree kangaroo fur.

That holiday ended with us sitting in the tractor trailer, a lantern held high, lighting the way to the plane. The whole area was shrouded in morning mist and it was incongruous to be in thongs and summer clothes yet barely able to see ahead. As we stowed our luggage and said our goodbyes, the fog lifted and we climbed aboard. We were soon bumping into Jacksons Airport, back to work and school in Port Moresby.

The tram and me

June Collins

There was a time when the tram was king of the road; its kingdom a network of steel tracks throughout metropolitan Sydney. They ran for miles and miles up hill and over dale to give a workable lifeline to commuters. However, without electricity, the tram was beached.

To get the tram up and going, a simple electrical system was put in place by extracting electricity from the overhead live wires drawn through a long flexible rod bolted onto the tram's roof. However, it was not a perfect solution. Sometimes the rod slipped off the wire in a sparkled thud, leaving the tram without a wheel to stand on ... so to speak.

Two very different tram carriages were used: an inside open plan carriage and the individual compartment carriage associated with the running board. It was well-known that the tram ran at a snail's pace flat-out; nevertheless, it was a main source of transportation for a long time – from 1899 to1961.

In the 1940s, when I was a wee tot, it was the running board tram that passed through my suburb via Redfern, entering South Sydney's industrial area (now called the inner city), where I grew up. My favourite tram ride was the one where it got up enough puff to generate a 'hula sway' up Botany Road in full swing. With me seated next to mum, our journey took us into town to shop and enjoy a juicy meat pie at DJ's for lunch.

As a frequent tram passenger, I liked to sit next to the door on the hard wooden bench in one of the eight individual compartments to watch life go by. On one occasion, I saw my two brothers mucking about on the side of the road, laughing with some well-known scallywags. I left the tram at the next stop to investigate their shenanigans. What they had done was stupid ... but boys will be boys. They had placed a penny on the tram track to see what would happen. The coin became twice its size and as thin as writing paper. The embossed king's head on the penny was decapitated, leaving just a small copper disc. What a waste, a penny would buy three chocolate frogs!

The cream and green coloured tram carried me to school and others to their workplaces. The slow journey gave commuters time to read the newspaper – usually bought from a young paperboy, who sprang onto the running board holding the papers under one arm, supported by a strap. He'd move along the running board, sticking his head in each compartment with a drawn-out shout, "Extra! Extra! Sun or the Mirror!" After completing each carriage run, he alighted and caught a tram back the other way, repeating his actions until all papers sold. My eldest brother was a paperboy. Girls were never ever papergirls; otherwise I would have sprung onto the running board selling the news of the day.

Fares were collected by a conductor, decked out in a dapper navy uniform. He could have been dressed for a wedding: pants, shirt, jacket and tie, and on his head, a matching cap displayed an identity badge of the state ... perhaps to advise travellers they are in NSW?

He carried a large leather bag heavy with coins under his arm, supported by a wide leather strap. He held an eight-inch oblong ticket case in one hand, while the other hand grabbed a vertical metal bar as he sidestepped his polished shoes along the narrow running board, regardless of winter storms or burnt summers. This was not a job for a klutz.

According to Hoyle, a lot of injuries were sustained – as well as deaths – either by falling onto the tram, falling off the tram or under the tram. Steel wheels show no mercy. The tram, bound to a track, was powerless to swerve, and even if the tram had right-of-way at all times, fatal collisions occurred.

Up front, the driver of the tram – decked out in the same uniform as the conductor – sat alert in a small cubicle. His job was to stop and start the tram, steer around street corners and control the speed; when danger intruded, he had to brake at an instant.

The old tram rode the green mile in 1961. Prior to that, hundreds of trams had ended their services in ash, cremated at Burning Hill Randwick. What a pity! Why wasn't there a more constructive idea when the long reign of the king of the road finished?

Time has passed and lessons have been learnt. It has taken almost 60 years to realise the meaning of "when you're on a good thing, stick to it."

Remember the phoenix that rose from the ashes? Well, listen up people – stand and raise your glass ... the tram is about to rise from its ashes!

Fishing trawler in a storm

By Trevor Wilson

Your 21st birthday should be a time to remember. In 1966 on board the 54-foot fishing trawler Mirrabooka out of Twofold Bay, Eden, it certainly became something unforgettable.

The young crew consisted of the 22-year-old skipper, 'Soupbones', the head deckie, 21-year-old 'Madness' and me, the rookie – who for some colourful reason – had been nicknamed 'Fagon.' We had stored provisions for three days at sea and set off around 3.00 a.m. for the fishing grounds about seven hours south-south-east of Eden.

The weather report seemed favourable and reported a nor'easter at 20-25 knots. I took the first shift on the wheel and remember Clearance Clearwater Revival singing *Proud Mary* on the radio; I cranked it up and joined in. Just on daylight, we had our first shot in about 60 fathoms, taking about an hour to shoot the gear and relocate our position ready to shoot the net again. The results were good, so we decided to have a couple extra shots and anchor out of the north-east roll behind Gabo Island for the night. Usually the nor'east wind drops away about dark but on this occasion, it blew all night. Next morning we made an attempt to fish in about 45 fathoms, but gave it away after a couple of shots. The winds had lifted the swell to three meters or better, and the tide that flows through Bass Straight against them made the swells very uncomfortable.

That day the wind had strengthened to a steady 40-50 knots by dark, so the skipper said, "We should anchor in closer to Gabo and let more anchor line out, to insure the 120lb plough anchor will bite in and hold firm. This has turned into a black nor'easter and we might have to shelter here for a few days yet." On the fourth morning the wind had eased, but there was still a consistent roll coming around the island, meaning there was quite a heavy swell on the other side.

The skipper decided we would head for Eden and save the good catch of fish that had been iced down in the fish room below decks three days earlier. He said, "Make sure everything is stowed away and there's nothing loose on deck – it might get a bit hairy on the trip home. While you two do that I'll get breakfast ready; there'll be nothing to eat or drink between here and home."

With those thoughts in my head Madness and I made sure everything was tied down and securely stowed. After breakfast we cleaned up, stowed everything inside the wheelhouse and galley, then with the diesel motor purring, we lifted the anchor onto the fore deck, stowed the anchor rope so it was secure, and set out for Eden.

Soupbones and Madness were both experienced seamen who had grown up around the wharf, boats and the ocean; I also had an affinity for the surf and the ocean, and had on a few occasions been to sea on a boat.

As we rounded the seaward side of the island, they seemed to be unnerved by the increasing size of the swells, contemplating

how uncomfortable it was going to be travelling home.

The adrenaline was already rushing through my body as we eased out into the open ocean. We were making headway at about half throttle and the swells had increased in size, but were not as steep as they were days earlier – yet at intervals there was the odd wave that was bigger and steeper than the others. The trip was as uncomfortable as you can imagine; being thrown from side to side and intermittently, thrown forward then back, as well as up then up again, then down hard.

"You'll find it more comfortable if you go down in the fo'c'sle and lay on your bunk," Soupbones suggested. I was willing to try anything to alleviate the pulverizing I was being given, so holding onto anything I could grab, I eventually made it two metres to the fo'c'sle ladder and with difficulty, climbed sometimes down, sometimes up, to get to my bunk. I tried to climb into my bunk and was more times in the air than on it.

The water was dribbling through the fore deck, making everything wet, so I slowly made my way back up the ladder to the wheelhouse and was greeted by two blokes with grins from ear to ear. "Enjoy your sleep?" they chuckled.

We were nearly halfway across Disaster Bay, heading for Green Cape Lighthouse when a set of mountainous swells loomed up and crashed against our bow. The skipper pulled back on the throttle but was too slow. The bow disappeared under the first swell, taking green water onto the deck, washing the anchor and chain down beside the wheelhouse. The diesel screamed as the propeller left the water cavitating, and sending a rush of white water out the stern, making the entire trawler shake and shudder. Then another and another ...

Finally, cautiously, we made our way home to Eden.

Tom

By Yvonne Norris

Tom has gone now but he was my best mate. We worked together for many years, driving the steam trains that hauled the long coal trucks over the Blue Mountains and down to Port Kembla from where it was exported to overseas countries. We were railway men through and through.

We lived not far from each other and when we were rostered off together, we spent a lot of time with our families and also trout fishing in the local stream. Many a meal we shared eating the fish we had caught with our own hands.

There was one thing that annoyed me about Tom: his obsession with time. His trains ran strictly to the timetable and even when he was off-duty and heard the whistle of another passing train, he'd check his watch to make sure it was running on time. His whole life became ruled by time. Breakfast was at seven, lunch at midday and dinner had to be on the table at exactly six in the evening. The family showers were timed and his four children had to be ready and waiting for the school bus in the mornings at exactly eight. The whole family had to be settled in bed by half past seven. If anything happened to change the routine, he became quite agitated.

I felt sorry for his family, even though Tom loved them all very much. Their life was so regimented it became miserable. His children loved to come and play at our house as we were a lackadaisical lot and life just seemed to happen around us. His wife loved to come and visit us so she could enjoy an afternoon tea without having to watch the clock.

One day at work I spoke to Tom about his obsession with time and suggested that he leave his watch at work. He became very angry and told me to mind my own business and that he would live his life the way he pleased. He then climbed up into his engine, checked with the engineer that they had a full head of steam, blew the whistle, let the brakes go and rattled off into to the distance.

Much to my sorrow that was the end of our friendship. We didn't spend time together again although our families kept in touch. Time marched on and I missed him. Our children grew up and we grew older. Before I knew it, the railway had pensioned Tom and me off.

A few years later, I heard that Tom was very ill. I went to visit him hoping that we could mend our broken bridge of friendship. I knocked on his front door and his wife's eyes filled with tears as she welcomed me inside. She led me to their bedroom where Tom lay – a shadow of the man I knew. He put a hand out and pulled me close when he realised who I was.

"Hello old mate," he whispered. "You know the tracks are getting harder to cross and we are running late. I heard the whistle blow and the last train has just left the station."

He then closed his eyes and peacefully faded away.

My Model T tour

By Gary Amesbury

I have been lucky in my life, being able to combine my work with my hobby.

I am a vehicle builder by trade, have owned a business and had the opportunity to teach my trade to others at TAFE NSW. As a vehicle builder I had many skills: welding, sheet metal work, fibreglass construction and woodworking to name a few. During my employment at TAFE NSW, I was approached by a teacher from the School of Panel Beating. He also ran classes in vehicle restoration and had received requests from students for a course in the restoration of timber-framed vehicles. After a lot of research and assistance I developed a two-year syllabus.

We didn't have to do much advertising and the classes filled almost instantly. I ran the classes two nights a week for the next five years. During the first few weeks, I was asked which vintage car club I belonged to! My response was, "none!" and the following week I was presented with an application form for the Model T Ford Club of Australia. That was nearly 30 years ago and I have been a member ever since, held various positions on the committee and designed and managed their website.

In 2008, to commemorate 100 years of Model T Fords, our club put on an epic event. We gathered a few of the toughest members and organised an 'Around Australia Tour'. With eight Model T Fords and four support vehicles we set off in April and successfully completed the 22,000-kilometre adventure in the planned 180 days.

The tour had many memorable moments including fantastic scenery, several breakdowns, a few disagreements and the opportunity to make great new friends. Along the way, we collected money for the Royal Flying Doctor Service, an organisation that provides excellent primary health care across Australia.

My car for the tour was purchased as a well-used utility conversion in very poor condition. I set about restoring it from the ground up and had the motor fully reconditioned by our club mechanic. I was originally restoring it back to a five-seater Tourer but in planning the tour, I changed the design and turned it into a camper, complete with double bed, kitchen, storage, water tank, two fuel tanks and an additional 100-hour deep cycle battery to run my accessories.

I designed the camper in partnership with my wife, Marilyn, who had ideas that I converted into reality. The end result was a very usable, simple to set up 1927 motorhome, which we lived in for the entire 180 days of the tour.

Everywhere we went we drew a crowd. People could not believe that this troupe of 85 to 100 year-old cars was attempting to travel around Australia, a feat that many would not attempt even in a modern vehicle. With a top speed of 65–70 kilometres per hour, we were a bit of a road hazard but everyone accepted that we were also road users and entitled to be there. Truck drivers were both curious and courteous.

Our group was invited to many places and events, including private car museums,

town festivals, car clubs shows. When we had breakdowns, the locals came to our aid with parts and workshops – and none accepted any money. The country people were especially accommodating and friendly which all added to a very enjoyable and exciting adventure.

My First Car

By John Carswell

I was in my last year of high school, 17 years old and living on a citrus farm 18 miles out of Gosford. I desperately wanted to own a vehicle and have my independence. My friend at school, Billy C, had bought an old Austin A40 and together we had searched the used car yards of the district for a suitable car for me.

The owner of the local Central Mangrove Mountain garage, Jacky C, was selling a black Ford V8 two-door with dickey seat and a large painted Daffy Duck on the driver's door. My father did not see this as a suitable vehicle for a young fellow's first car, as it was too powerful and would draw too much attention from the local constabulary. No doubt he was correct and the search continued.

Uncle Les, an Englishman who married my father's cousin, was a car salesman at a Rootes Group car yard in Gosford, where we thought we'd receive good advice. And there she was, in all her classic black gleaming beauty, a 1951 Wolseley 6/80! The test drive went well, despite the steering being a little loose, the engine missing a little when not under load and a little puff of smoke or two at certain times. Uncle Les, an expert in English cars, was very confident, bless him, that she had many miles left in her and said that all English cars used a little oil.

My father, also an Englishman, heard the story that evening and agreed that the Wolseley sounded more suitable than the V8 Ford. An excited son was espousing its strengths: six cylinder, double overhead cam, twin 1 ¼' SU carburettor engine and a wood grain dash that included a silver St Christopher medal in the centre of the glove box. Of course, it also had the Wolseley emblem with light at the top of the chromed radiator. It was also a well-known car as it was used by the English police in the 1950s.

Before the big day of the purchase, I had to save a little more. It was the Waratah bush flower season (the flower being New South Wales' state emblem) and also, unfortunately, very close to the final school exams. But with the real priority flung aside, the bush was combed for the rich red wildflower. They were prolific that year and I got a good price from the local flower agent.

With 80 pounds burning a hole in my pocket, Saturday morning could not come quickly enough. I cannot remember whether we took the Wolseley for another run before the purchase, but by 1.00 p.m. the deal was done. I was as proud as punch and on my way to Ourimbah to play cricket for the local Mountains team. When travelling along Ourimbah, with the engine missing a little because of the light load on a flat road, I looked in the rear vision mirror and saw nothing but a grey blue colour. The exhaust was so dense that nothing could be seen behind the car.

A great cheer went up from both teams on my arrival at the cricket ground. No-one had ever seen a car expel so much smoke. When the match ended, the old Wolseley would not start for the homeward journey. Half a dozen good natured cricketers gave me a push and the engine found enough compression to fire up.

On the expressway hill, my mighty six cylinder, double overhead cam, twin carburettor engine could only manage 45 mph. It wasn't long into the journey that a VW beetle pulled up alongside and the driver yelled out through the passenger window that he thought I was on fire!

Something had to be done. There wasn't a warranty on cars of that age and value so I set about diagnosing the car's issues. Due to the amount of combustion gases passing the non-existent piston rings (which were a broken mass in the bottom of the sump), the oil pressure gauge read 70 PSI. This build-up of pressure took some oil from the sump through the sump breather pipe to the oil-filled type air cleaner. The oil level soon overfilled the air cleaner and then dribbled into the carburetors and was burnt by the engine.

This car was seriously burning oil and quickly depleting my bank balance. I disconnected this sump breather pipe and directed the oil and fumes to a tall collection tin where the oil could be recycled back to the engine. Once this modification was done, most of the smoke disappeared from the exhaust but pungent gases remained, coming through the floor and into the car. The passengers' and driver's windows had to remain open at all times to prevent asphyxiation.

There was always a problem in parking the Wolseley as it had to be clutch-started due to the starter motor not turning the engine fast enough. With my oil-saving modification, I managed to limit my oil consumption to 4-1/2 gallons to my first 600 miles.

The accident-damaged Wolseley needed a new engine and was towed to our farm by the local garage at a total cost of 15 pounds. At 17 years of age, I had never changed over a car engine, but I needed to do this. We did not own a chain block so I used my father's 1951 3-ton Bedford farm truck and his ropes – slung over a shed roof beam – to lift and replace the engine. The farm shed was constructed of round smooth natural bush poles that eased the friction on the ropes.

The new engine was a vast improvement and now the Wolseley had a top speed of 84 mph on the flat without a muffler! In fact, I left the muffler off on one night trip to Newcastle with my lifelong friend Mac, and we were entertained by the great flashes of flame on deceleration that illuminated the bush on either side of the road. There was one hiccup however, when I dropped a valve head into a piston in Newcastle where I was training. I replaced the piston and valve in the street outside the boarding house, much to the consternation of the manager. The final overhead valve timing had me beaten without the use of a workshop manual.

A mate in a Morris Oxford towed me to a garage in nearby Belmont where the owner, a Dutch mechanic, timed the "old girl." The work took one week as he did it in his spare time, but he did not charge me. I made sure he was not short of Mangrove Mountain oranges for the duration of my apprenticeship.

I do not even vaguely hold a grudge against my Uncle Les, as he did me a huge favour in selling me a car that needed a lot of help. This experience convinced me to take up a career in marine engineering.

I sold the Wolseley for 90 pounds in Newcastle after owning her for a year.

Ten pound pom

By Cass McHaffie

The twelfth of February 2015 was the 50th Anniversary of our family arriving in Australia as migrants.

It was such a cold winter in 1964 in the East End of London, that we made a decision to get some information from Australia House in London so we could take the children to a warmer climate. There were a lot of advertisements at that time asking migrants to "Come to Australia" and "Grow Tall in Australia." The charge for a passage was 10 pounds, which was about a week's wages for me.

As we had enough money to put a deposit on a home in Australia, the Australian Housing Commission sponsored us. We had medicals and other checks and departed England on 10 February 1965. In those days many migrants came to Australia by ship but we were offered a Comet 4 plane trip, which we accepted.

Our family consisted of me, my husband, a boy of four and a girl aged seven. I was the youngest of five children and thought that, as my mother had four children staying in England, I would not be missed. It is as we age that we know now that this is so wrong.

Our destination was Adelaide, South Australia but there were quite a few stops before our arrival. Our first stop was Beirut, then Karachi – where we wanted to buy toys for the children. The sales person said we had to show him a passport, which in those days we did not have as another form of identification document sufficed. He refused the sale. A lady was passing by and he asked her if she had a passport. I believe she was an American. He sighted the passport and let us buy the toys, though we told him we did not know the lady. He replied that the "rules stipulated he had to see a passport, no matter whose."

On then to Bombay, where it was hot but our children dressed in winter clothes. Singapore followed, where I purchased a postcard of the International Airport ... and I still have the postcard! The airport was a single landing strip, which reminded us of a scene from an old Bogart film, with a few palm trees nearby and little else.

The first stop in Australia was Darwin, where we were sprayed by handsome tanned males dressed in pure white shorts and shirts. They entered the plane with aerosol cans and missed no one!

From there, it was on to Melbourne where we had to wait for a connecting flight to Adelaide.

The temperature when leaving England was around 7 degrees Celsius and in Adelaide around 40 degrees Celsius. We were met by an official at the airport and taken to Elder Park Hostel (now the site of the Festival Arts Centre). My first impression was not a good one because of the low standard of accommodation. Needing to wash clothes, I was horrified to find the water from the taps was brown!

We arrived on a Friday and on Sunday we went out to a new town named Elizabeth to choose a house. I was disappointed but, desperate to get the children settled, we bought

a house and moved in the following Friday. The idea of building a town for migrants to buy homes and assimilating them with rental accommodation did not work. For the first time in my life I saw bailiffs putting people out of their homes onto the streets.

The six years we lived in Elizabeth were not easy for us. On reflection, the hardest experience my husband had was to be told there was no work when we arrived and, for the first and only time in his life, he was told to "go on the dole." He found his own job very quickly.

Having no relatives or friends in a new country, I felt that I had to wait before I could apply for work as I wanted to be with my children. The money that we brought with us kept us financial for two years. But when the time came to look for a job, it was a shock to be told that – at 34 – I was too old for office work. Having no experience in shop work, what was I to do? My desperation was obvious at the interview I attended for the accounts office job and I asked to go on a waiting list to work in the department store.

The next day, I was offered a position to train as a shop assistant in Myer. After the training, I was transferred to the accounts office – the position I had applied for 18 months earlier. I enjoyed this immensely, but the experience of being a shop assistant has benefited me in many ways.

Much water has flowed under the bridge since then. To cut the story short, my husband was successful and stayed in the same employment for 28 years and I worked also for 23 years.

We moved from Elizabeth after six years, then lived at Glenelg for 12 years and built a home at a beach suburb in Adelaide where we lived for a further 12 years.

We were now retired and had neighbours who told us they were moving to the Tweed area ... which prompted an interest in starting a new life somewhere different. In 1994 we came up to the Tweed for a holiday and saw blocks of land on sale at Terranora. The area was lovely and the soil was superb. We purchased a block, and in 1995 moved from Adelaide (with our own house design) and had our house built looking out to Mount Warning.

After seven great years there, we had to sell and come closer to amenities in the Tweed area, where we have been the last 14 years.

We've travelled so many times to Adelaide by car, on different routes, to visit our family but we are happy that we decided to move to an area that has so much to offer. ... Boring is not in our vocabulary!

I have been a volunteer with the Hospital Auxillary for over 19 years, working in the shop of the great Tweed Hospital. My husband was a volunteer with Marine Rescue for nine years, and also with Sailability. He is now a volunteer in the Cancer Council booth in the Tweed Hospital foyer. Both of us are cancer survivors and feel very fortunate.

On 14 July this year, we will celebrate our 60th wedding anniversary.

The travel bug … Is it heredity?

By Christine Sales

Travelling along the cobbled road, I am approaching my grandfather's birthplace.

He was so special to me.

From him I know I have inherited my need to travel.

Pa – as I called him, embarked on a journey as a young man, with little worldly experience, from his home in Scotland to the other side of the world, to a small town named Dorrigo in Australia

He endured a truly miserable voyage of 38 days on a steam vessel that ploughed its way slowly towards the unknown, as a third class passenger, sharing his life and daily rituals with close to 500 other "travellers." Pa's need for solitude was possible only when wandering alone among the alleyways, markets and villages close to the dockside areas whilst the ship was berthed, replenishing the stores and trading with the locals for tobacco and other commodities.

Exotic aromas, spicy flavours, flamboyant colours assailed Pa as he explored the docks in South Africa, leading him to write in his journal, *Why did I not undertake this voyage before, why did I leave it until my travel time has to be limited to going directly to my nominated destination.*

On reaching Australia, Pa travelled first inland, then as the summer heat sucked him dry, tortured his fair complexion and made him weary to the bone, the Highlands called to him … to feel the mist, the rain and the cool breathable air. Soon, he headed off to the mountains – The Great Dividing Range – travelling north and along the ridge towns of The Blue Mountains. Unable to find work in his trade as a butcher, he travelled to Dorrigo and knew his life would be lived here, no matter what work he undertook. He would do it to sustain himself.

Finally finding work as a butcher, Pa become renowned for his sausages: fat pudgy meat-filled fingers with spicy bits that hit the middle of your tongue and chips of bacon buried like a threepence in a pudding. And the aroma! As soon as the sausages were cooked you just had to eat them, even though the heat burnt your tongue.

Sitting in Pa's lap, listening to the soft burr of his voice, I'd find the blistering hot mints kept in his pocket, and even though I knew it was going to bring tears to my eyes, I just had to suck on one whilst Pa recounted his journeys, reading me excerpts from his journal. It was then I made the irrevocable decision … *When I grow up I am going to travel. I am going to Pa's home in Bonnyrigg, Scotland.*

I will take that travel bug and exploit it … it is my heritage.

I am going to see what I can, where I can and however I can, in as many different places as I can on my journey to Pa's home.

I eventually journeyed in the reverse direction to Pa, with fewer challenges and unknowns, but my travel bug seems slightly satisfied.

I have arrived

I am at Pa's home.

I will find his memories and blend them with mine.

Then decide where next to venture.

My Japanese Australian life

By Yuko Ramzan

I take a 5:56 train from Wollongong station and go to the northern side of Sydney every Monday and Thursday morning to mind my granddaughter. Almost everyone I speak to about this trip thinks that it's a hard job to do, but I am doing it very happily.

I worked as a Japanese language teacher for 20 years in Wollongong, before going back to Japan in 2010. I turned 60 when I was in Japan. I would have liked to continue living there, but my family was waiting for my return to Port Kembla where we have our family home. I was glad I came back home, but at the same time I was feeling that something was missing from my life. I focussed on my garden. I cooked a lot for the family. Nonetheless, I felt that something was lacking in my life.

While I was working full-time in Wollongong, I raised two sons and studied to better qualify myself, completing one undergraduate degree, two masters degrees, and a PhD. Yet I always felt I was not contributing enough to the work force where I belonged because my English language skills were not good enough. So, I worked especially hard to compensate. That was what I was feeling then. When I had completed all my studies, my sons were already independent, and my husband retired early as he had injured himself at work. Then I felt that I was in the position to be able to tell my family what I wanted to do. I wanted to try living in Japan. I thought it might be the last chance to do so.

I was 56 years old when I decided to go back to Japan in 2010. I had so strongly cocooned myself before that time. The cocoon came about because of my lack of confidence, which stemmed from my perceived English language deficiency. I'd been feeling as though I was defective merchandise amongst my colleagues. Since I left Japan to marry my husband, I had suffered from this lack of confidence.

In Japan, I felt as if I was a fish in water, swimming confidently in the work environment. I felt that all my effort and my hard work – studying, working and managing my family – had paid off. I never had that kind of self-belief when I was working in Australia. However, while I had the confidence back in Japan, I also realised that it was all my attitudinal problems that caused the fear while working in Australia. Leaving Australia after many years to live in Japan provided me with a chance to observe my own self from a distance. Or, it might be the aging process that helped me to gain the valuable realisation. The cocoon cracked, and finally disappeared. I came back from Japan to Australia in 2014. I was 61 years old.

My mum worked until her retirement, and then she had a stroke when she was just 60 years old. She could not enjoy her retirement, as she didn't recover well enough to keep her quality of life. Thus, I was always determined not to repeat my mum's life. So when I came back from Japan, I tried to enjoy my life after many years of hard work. However, I could not find a nicely balanced retirement, and I still felt that something was missing from my life.

Nonetheless, the gloomy feelings were wiped away when my granddaughter was born.

A lot of my friends in Japan see my life as very dramatic. I was born in Japan and married a man from Fiji. Then I gave birth to my two sons in Fiji, but a military coup forced us to immigrate to Australia. I left my family in Australia and went back to Japan for four years, where I was involved with an educational reform of a university. However, it did not feel dramatic to me at all. Rather, I was only trying to complete a duty that was in front of me. My home base had moved from Japan to Fiji, Australia, then back to Japan, and finally to Australia. Some people see such a life as dramatic, but it was nothing like that.

I was struggling to settle down after my busy life in Japan into a calm and peaceful everyday life with my family in Australia because I did not have any dutiful tasks to be completed. I realised that I lost the duty that was always there to be completed, and that was a reason why I felt this way. Cooking and gardening were my hobbies – not duties. I should have been pleased to gain such freedom, but I did not know how to appreciate it until my granddaughter was born.

Monday and Thursday are my happy days; taking a very early train to go to my granddaughter and spending a day very joyfully. Being able to care for my granddaughter is not a duty that is ordered by somebody. It is a very worthwhile duty chosen by me. I am now in a position to realise that I can exercise this duty as I have gained freedom after retirement, and that the experiences that I went through in the past assisted me in this realisation. It is a task that I truly love to do. Since I found this task, I feel that the cocoon I had once has vanished.

I cannot express how grateful I am to be able to do this.

Our travel adventures

By Carys Pollard

When I married John 49 years ago, I didn't imagine the motoring adventures we would experience together, just the two of us, in remote places.

As a young couple in 1968, we set out from Wales for India in John's Mini Traveller. The adventure proper, however, really started when we left Europe and crossed by ferry over the Bosphorus to Asiatic Turkey (There was no bridge in those days).

After the bustle of Istanbul, Asiatic Turkey was very quiet. We headed south to the ancient cities Pergamon, Troy and Ephesus and saw virtually no other travellers – a stark contrast to the situation today with hundreds of tourists clambering over the ruins every day. We encountered a handful of European travellers camped informally near the unfenced hot springs and 'stone waterfalls' of Pamukkale, but nobody in Cappadocia and further east along the rough unpaved road under Lake Van in the Kurdish region.

For security we always chose to camp alongside an army or police post. But this did not stop someone stealing a pair of my knickers drying overnight inside the Van City police station grounds!

In Iraq, where Saddam Hussein had only just taken power, we feared a less-than-friendly reception, but we could not have been more wrong. For example, our car had three punctures in quick succession when returning from the ruins of ancient Ur in 50 degree heat. However, Arabs in flowing robes spontaneously offered assistance, as did others a little later nearer Babylon when we stalled with a flat battery in the middle of a flooded irrigation channel.

There were no tourists at these amazing ancient sites, and the complete lack of tourists continued when we entered Iran. We visited the beautiful blue-tiled city of Isfahan, the magnificent ancient Persepolis destroyed by Alexander the Great, as well as other ancient historical sites.

From Teheran and further east in Afghanistan we encountered a few more people driving the shortest route between Europe and India. Our memories include the remote giant Buddhas of Bamian north-west of Kabul, now sadly destroyed by the Taliban, and the Afghan government safety warning not to be in the Khyber Pass after 6pm.

From Pakistan we crossed into India with its well-known landmarks. Two distinctive recollections are the narrow winding road through the Himalaya as we tried unsuccessfully to reach the Shipki La Pass into Tibet; and being attacked by bandits when we had set up camp beside the trunk road towards Mumbai.

In 1999, in our late 50s we set out in the same Mini Traveller on a much more challenging five-month journey – Malaysia to Wales via Thailand, Laos, China and Tibet, Mongolia, Siberia, Russia, Belarus, Poland and western Europe.

Many of the roads we experienced in our earlier journey were very rough and required very careful driving, particularly the one to Bamian. But this time we had many more extreme challenges: the rough unpaved road

from Laos into China built originally to supply Viet Cong arms. There were wet boggy roads with huge truck wheel trenches, rock falls in the mountainous regions of western China and bridges washed away. There were huge rocks left on the road after the drivers of large trucks had finished their mechanical repairs, which made driving after dark extremely hazardous. Driving was slow – 172 km in 17 hours one day. Our heavily laden roof rack kept breaking, requiring welding repairs at the end of the day on 13 occasions. We needed special help on three occasions: getting our car trucked across a swollen river in western china, being towed with carburettor problems along desert tracks at 4,200 metres, and getting our Mini dragged from a river with its floor submerged 10cm under water.

The main road into Tibet from northern China is used mainly by military vehicles and quite good. However, crossing several 5,300 metre (17,500 feet) passes where the oxygen levels were only 55 per cent of those at sea level was dangerous.

We couldn't complain about the roads in Mongolia – there weren't any! We simply followed the occasional tyre marks in the sand on the edge of the Gobi and kept an eye on our little plastic compass (No GPS in 1999!) Other vehicles were rare.

Space prevents me recounting the incredible saga of our crossing the Mongolia-Russia border.

The main hazards in Russia were police seeking bribes. Every day we were stopped, sometimes five times a day. But acting as stupid foreigners we managed to avoid paying any bribes. In the main square of Perm the policeman demanded to see what was in our roof trunk. We had overestimated our need for toilet rolls and John started stacking dozens of these in the middle of the square for everyone to see. He was quickly instructed to put them back by the sheepish policeman!

Every day of our five-month 30,000km journey brought something new and wonderful. Special highlights I would name are: parking our little car in front of the Potala Palace in Llasa, conquering several 17,500 foot passes, camping in the wide open spaces of Mongolia, and camping in the freezing cold beside spectacularly beautiful Lake Baikal.

Our third great adventure took place when we were in our 60s. In 2007 we drove from Vladivostok to England over five months. Travelling with another couple in two 4WD vehicles, we were able to explore more remote regions of Siberia, making friends of local native peoples, negotiating quagmire roads, fording wild rivers and clearing a landslide by hand in pouring rain on Stalin's notorious 'road of bones'. We also obtained permission to visit Murmansk – the Russian Arctic restricted nuclear port 70 degrees north.

All three adventures restored our faith in humanity.

However, our greatest adventure was our pre-GPS 1999 second journey, recounted with the earlier one, in our book *Don't kiss me – It's very terrible*. A novel by John was inspired by our first adventure.

seniors' stories

inclusive communities

My musical story

By Arthur Ongley

When I was a 15-year-old boy living at Freshwater, and in possession of my first transistor radio, I heard the tune *Apache* by The Shadows and decided I wanted to play guitar.

I took my first lessons by correspondence through The Melody School of Music that advertised in *TV Week*. In 1962 I joined The Royal Australian Navy as an apprentice at HMAS Nirimba, Quakers Hill. My guitar was always close at hand and throughout my naval career I played in bands with navy mates. Apache was always on the playlist.

Following my navy days, my girlfriend (now my wife) and I played folk music with a friend and spent 21 years pioneering a youth work program in Sydney called Young Life'. They were wonderful years and music played an important role.

In 2004, my wife and I planned a holiday to Hawaii, which I saw as my opportunity to buy an American-made Fender Stratocaster Guitar – just like the one Hank Marvin of The Shadows played. I saved hard and on the day I bought it at Harry's Music Store in Honolulu, it was on sale. With the change, I bought my first ukulele and took my first lesson on the footpath just outside The Royal Hawaiian Shopping Centre in Waikiki. It was love at first strum! I fell in love with the ukulele and the music of Hawaii.

During another holiday to Hawaii in 2007, I decided to form a ukulele group back home in the Parramatta and Hills district of Sydney – to share the joy of ukulele and community music. My wife Denise decided to learn ukulele so we could share a ukulele journey towards and through our retirement.

Parramatta Baptist Church in Northmead invited us to use their space, a ukulele enthusiast from Hobart helped me set up a small website and offered to design our logo once we had a name for the group. The name came to me during the night. We would call the group 'PHUN' (The Parramatta & Hills Ukulele Network).

I am convinced that the ukulele is the happiest and most fun instrument on the planet!

PHUN had its first meeting in April 2008, with 11 (mostly) beginners present. Today, about 80 ukulele players, mostly seniors, attend PHUN's monthly Saturday Jam Session and about 40 retirees attend PHUN's Monthly Monday morning Jam Session. The PHUN ukulele community is warm, friendly and joyful, a great way for seniors to connect, converse and celebrate together. Some of us spend additional time sharing the joy of ukulele music at retirement villages, nursing homes and churches and pass on any donations we receive to help the homeless in Parramatta.

In 2016, eight years after pioneering PHUN, I am still passionate about helping others get together to learn and play the ukulele, to sing and strum, and to share and celebrate their own and each other's stories. As one 80-year-old shared with me recently, "Before I came to PHUN, I had never played an instrument and had very few friends. Now I have 60 friends with whom I play ukulele,

sing the songs I like, and share the joys and struggles of life."

Denise and I had the joy of helping to care for our oldest grandchild before her pre-schooling began. We bought her a pink ukulele when she was three and used our ukuleles when singing nursery rhymes and Wiggles' songs together. Sophie began learning ukulele when she turned seven and this year will perform with her ukulele for the third time in her school's annual Showcase Of Talent.

Last year, when I turned 70, Denise and I decided to take our two children and their families to Manly, the place where we both spent our childhood years, for a weekend of celebration. It was wonderful to see the grandchildren, all under 10, experiencing life in a hotel room overlooking Manly Beach, chasing waves and playing in the sand. Some weeks later, Sophie said, "Grandpa, will you help me write a song about Manly?" So I did. We called it *Manly*, and Sophie has sung it publicly several times, and to no more an appreciative audience than my mum, her great-grandmother, on her 91st birthday – early this year – in her Northern Beaches Nursing Home.

Let's all go to Manly, down by the sea
Strolling down the Corso, playing on the beach
Breeze is gently blowing, sun lights up the day
Let's all go to Manly, let's catch some waves.
Let's all go to Manly, and walk among the pines
Take the path to Shelly Beach, and by the ocean dine
Breeze is gently blowing, sun lights up the day
Let's all go to Manly, forget our cares today
Manly, where the Harbour meets the sea
Manly, is where I love to be.

Any old iron?

By Bill Hoyles

Council clean-ups are a great opportunity to get rid of those unwanted household items that are too large for the standard garbage bin and too time-consuming or worthless to advertise for sale online. They also provide rich pickings for what were, during my childhood in England, called "rag and bone men" or "tatters." Back in Blighty these entrepreneurs methodically roamed the streets of my housing estate with a horse and cart, ringing a hand-bell and shouting, "Any old iron?"

Unwanted items were thus disposed of with the owners' knowledge and consent to be broken up for scrap metal, repaired for resale or kept for personal use. Today in Australia this tatter's role has been replaced by opportunists in small trucks, utes, cars, on bicycle or even on shanks' pony, who scavenge the council clean-up piles on the nature strips in the hope of making a quick profit or simply picking up a hidden gem for personal use.

On one occasion, my neighbours and I had discarded a reasonable quantity of mixed quality council clean-up materials that were picked-over in just such a manner, leaving council to remove the unwanted dregs a few days later. All was well with our little corner of Sydney as our neighbourly street returned to its pristine garbage-free condition.

The day after the clean-up, I took my fox terrier for a walk, while my neighbour took to cutting the newly accessible, slightly yellowing, grass on the nature strip where his clean-up pile used to be. My dog is getting old now, and so am I, therefore our walk in the park took about 30 minutes of dutiful sniffing and marking of territory – by the dog that is, not me!

Returning home I noticed that my neighbour had completed his grass-cutting and had crossed the road to chat to a couple of passing folk who lived up our friendly street. As I returned to my house, my dog-walking calm was shattered by the anguished cries of my neighbour's 13-year-old daughter, who had run to their front gate holding on to her little brother.

"Dad, dad, come quickly," she shouted, her cries drowned out by a passing car. Worried that there had been an accident I asked what the matter was, and if I could help.

"I was looking out our front window and saw a lady walking off with our lawn mower," she said, pointing up the road to where a lone stooped figure was 30 metres away making her getaway on foot with the purloined machine. I handed over the dog lead and gave slow chase.

Now I am 67, large, round in stature and reasonably unfit, but it was not hard to catch up with the lady as she was, I would guess, in her mid-to-late eighties and was pushing not only my neighbour's full-size Victa lawn mower up the hill, but also her shopping trolley and handbag loaded on the mower's engine.

What followed was the most bizarre confrontation. She insisted the lawnmower was her property because it had been abandoned on the nature strip for the last three days. I told her she was mistaken, that my neighbour had been cutting his grass and she would have to return it. She became more and more incensed

as I stood barring her escape route and the knuckles of her hands literally turned white as she tightly gripped the Victa's handle. She was convinced that I was just an opportunist trying to take her prize. She kept repeating the same mantra; that it was now her lawnmower, that she didn't know me, and that she would not allow me to take it from her.

After several minutes of abject failure, I told her if she did not return it I would have to call the police. At that point she held up a rosary she gripped tightly in her right hand, pointed the crucifix at me, as if conducting an exorcism, and told me she had just come from church and was an honest woman who would never steal anything.

My neighbour then walked up with my dog and joined me. Together we took a united stand, but to no avail. Eventually he also felt constrained to tell her that if she did not return it voluntarily the only alternative was the police. Refusing outright to let us even touch *her* lawnmower, we eventually convinced her to at least push the lawnmower back down the hill to my neighbour's house, where he was able to show her the newly cut grass in his green bin, point out the scattering of freshly cut grass still on the pavement, and even remove some of the damp grass that had stuck to the wheels of the lawn mower.

Faced with the evidence of recent use, she angrily and reluctantly agreed to relinquish her prize and beat a slow, sad retreat back up the hill with just her shopping trolley and handbag. My neighbour and I had a good laugh about the whole incident and the stalemate we had faced. My neighbour mused as to what the police reaction would have been if they had found two large adult men unable to retrieve a stolen lawnmower from a very senior female armed only with a rosary and crucifix.

Is there any moral to this story? I guess that if there is then it must be: *People cutting grass outside houses shouldn't throw bones!*

Volunteering: the highs and the (very few) lows

By David Linfoot

I was 60 years of age the year the Sydney Olympic Games were held. I used to think I commenced my time as a volunteer in 2000. However, as I reflect on my life, I realise I, along with most other people, have been volunteering from an early age.

Young children seem to be very willing volunteers and appear to be particularly pleased when given some responsibility, but they don't really think of themselves as volunteers. In primary school one of my jobs was to put out the red *Children Crossing* flags on Victoria Road outside Gladesville Primary School. I don't imagine that current safety laws would allow such a job to be given to a school pupil.

The free milk was still being given to school children in the 1940s and one of my important jobs was to help move the crates of milk bottles from the sunny delivery point to a cooler area so at least the milk was reasonably palatable at recess (which I think we called "playtime").

Perhaps it was not so cool for high school pupils to volunteer, as I can't remember many volunteering experiences during the five years I attended Drummoyne Boys' High School. However, I did volunteer to go in a school play – if that counts as volunteering. I can't recall too many details of the play but I know I had only a small part and I was most embarrassed when the father of a friend of mine stood up and called out "bravo" when I appeared on stage. My friend's father had spent some time in the local pub before attending the play night.

Out of school, my volunteering consisted of teaching Sunday School and leading a Church Youth Fellowship group, but, again, these activities were never really referred to as "volunteering."

After school I got a job at AMP, the insurance giant known then as the AMP Society. This was where my theatrical career blossomed (or some may say bottomed out) as in the 1950s, AMP had a thriving Musical and Dramatic Society. At that stage AMP was at 87 Pitt Street and our productions were at the Anzac House theatrette in College Street. Following AMP's relocation to Circular Quay (or Sydney Cove as we were encouraged to call our location) we had our own theatre in the building, although it has since been converted for other uses. I did not appear on stage with him, but the actor Bryan Brown performed in an AMP Musical and Dramatic Club production before he became a full-time actor.

One of the AMP productions was *The White Sheep of the Family* and I played the white sheep in a family of criminals. We performed this play in Parramatta Gaol before a number of the prisoners who enjoyed the play immensely, except that they did not seem to like the character I was playing!

AMP decided my talents would be better served in the country, so in 1961 I was transferred to Lismore Regional Office, where my theatrical talents were at once noticed – or was it that there were few volunteers? I took part in a number of productions put on by the grandly named Enterprise Productions.

Returning to Sydney, being engaged, married and then a father (in that order), my arm was twisted to join Westleigh Players, a theatrical club established in the newly-created suburb in Sydney's northwest. One of the club members was Mary Gibson, sister of Mel Gibson, whose family had moved to Australia from the United States. On one occasion I gave Mary a lift to her home in Mount Ku-ring-gai and she introduced me to her family. My claim to fame is that I met the soon-to-be famous Mel.

Mel did perform for Westleigh Players but any collectors of memorabilia would not find his name in the programme of the play he was in. At that stage he was a student at NIDA and they were regarded as professionals and not allowed to perform in amateur productions. So he performed under an assumed name. (Hopefully this revelation will not get Mel into trouble – it was a long time ago.)

Mary Gibson and I performed in a truly dreadful one-act play in Wagga Wagga during a Drama Festival competition. We were the sole survivors of a nuclear disaster and we lived because we wore paper bags on our heads (I warned you that it was dreadful). Strangely, we did not win the competition, but I'm sure it was my fault, as Mar- like her brother Mel – was very talented.

Yes, the year 2000 was when I really thought of myself as a volunteer. I had been retrenched from AMP (my talent unrecognised again!) but was fortunate to get a job with one of AMP's rivals, MLC. AMP was a major sponsor of the Sydney Olympic Games and I heard that AMP employees were invited to do all sorts of exciting things relating to the Games. I was never bitter about my retrenchment from AMP so I, along with thousands of others, willingly applied to be a Games Volunteer. I was fortunate to be assigned to the Olympic Park site and learnt a lot of useful information, such as using correct terminology (accessible toilets, not disabled toilets). Seeing the dress rehearsal of the Opening Ceremony and the actual Closing Ceremony are highlights of my life.

In recent years I have registered as a volunteer in the retirement village, which is now my home. So volunteering can be an almost cradle-to-grave pursuit.

Volunteering is almost always a win-win situation. Many would not regard taking part in theatrical performances as being true volunteering, but it is unpaid "work" and hopefully provides enjoyment to others.

The Ballet Studio: 'Un grand jeté'

By Douglas Bender

It began on a day I will never forget. The 1985 ballet school year was done, the end-of-year production over.

Going into my wife's ballet studio to pick up some gear, I was confronted by a sight akin to what would later become known as Ground Zero. A landscape of twisted rubble; unbelievable destruction; nothing left of studio, dressing rooms or office and a dance floor fit only for moon walking. Bulldozers, by then standing silent, except for the satisfied smacking of their fat lips.

I carried the shock home.

When the fury, indignation, heartache, sobbing and more fury subsided, many sober meetings took place around the kitchen table. The keen brains of a triumvirate of ballet teacher, builder and artist were engaged. How to prevent this ever happening again? Conclusion: it could only be guaranteed by owning, not leasing, the building.

Who could know that the Mongrel Mob would bring salvation?

We learnt that the mob was having a cash crisis and was keen to sell its premises. The neighbours were even keener. The premises comprised club rooms atop a vast rugby league winter training barn. The huge space of the barn had a sawdust floor and roof and walls with more holes than Swiss cheese. Only minds of great vision, practical know-how and courage could see the possibilities. Mine wasn't one of them. As possibilities took shape and images flowed, the bank came to the party to strike a deal with the gang members (an offer we couldn't refuse). I sat aghast, a lone voice crying "but...but...but..." unheard against the roar of great plans and euphoric, "We'll show 'em."

We had no money. We would have to mortgage the new building to the hilt and our home as well, just to get enough to cover the materials. The viability of the whole venture would depend on winning a substantial claim for damages and the broken lease from the destroyers of the former studio. This could not be guaranteed, in fact most thought it laughable to even try.

Nine parties were sued, each with their own barrister against our lone but oh-so capable barrister, ably briefed and assisted by a pupil's solicitor parent, and our law student daughter. Even they were daunted by the prospect and often counselled giving up. But the implacable will of the affronted ballet teacher prevailed. No mercy, no surrender. I think in the end the big boys and their high powered barristers were humbled by the gutsiness and sheer fight of the minnow they thought they could bulldoze as easily as their machines had accounted for the building. They were forced to settle for a modest amount of money – just enough to ensure the venture's viability.

Despite my desperate misgivings I couldn't help but get caught up in the dream and the euphoria it generated. I became fatalistic.

But then, disaster!

The building had been acquired, the plans drawn, work was ready to begin when the council discovered a stormwater drain running diagonally under the entire property. As a condition of plan approval, the drain needed to be uncovered and concreted all around to ensure its security for storm runoff from properties on the hill above. The euphoric bubble burst. Shoulders slumped, heads lowered, spirits deflated. "Have to sleep on it, don't know the answer," came the mumble.

It was a moment of revelation for me. Until then I'd felt out of it, a passenger clinging precariously to the outside of a runaway train. Cries for help were unheard ... were we bereft of any of the skills needed in this grand enterprise?

But there was something I could do. It required only grunt, strong arms, bloody-mindedness and perseverance.

I took a week off work. I borrowed a pick, a shovel and a spade. At daybreak on the first day, I presented myself at the building. Just the building and me. So quiet, semi-dark in the barn, still, with a strong musty smell of mud and sawdust. I began in the top corner ... easy at first ... pipe two feet in diameter ... only two feet below the surface ... progress initially encouraging. However, it soon became apparent that the pipe went steadily down at an angle to the far corner, some 70 feet away.

But I'd begun and this was my moment of commitment. I slogged, from first light each day until there was no light left, for seven straight days. By the end, the pipe had been completely uncovered all around from two feet down at one end to 14 feet down at the other. I remember well the pride I felt at this purely physical endeavour. How each night I would arrive home and slump in a chair, so exhausted I couldn't move for an hour. How I developed blisters on blisters. For me that was the turning point. From then on I committed to the project the only capabilities I had – blood, sweat and tears.

But without the vision, brilliant technical and practical capabilities, sheer grit and determination of the ballet teacher, the builder, the artist and the wonderful volunteered support of many parents and friends, it could never have been achieved. It took a whole year of fabulous endeavour and changed the lives of so many.

It gave the community 18 wonderful years and countless amazing memories to thousands of students, teachers, parents, production crews and audiences. I am proud I was a part of it.

Communication: the text message and the postman

By Gary Corben

In April 1966, I started work as a telegram boy at Darlinghurst Post Office.

Riding a pushbike around East Sydney, Darlinghurst and Kings Cross was both eye opening and a challenge, with dangers including weaving through heavy traffic in between double-decker buses up and down Oxford and William Streets.

It always seemed easy hanging onto the grab rail of the bus to get a free tow up Oxford Street, until the conductor walked to the rear platform and with a wry smile, lifted clenched fingers from the stainless steel pole.

It was an interesting time of full employment; we were always short staffed because everyone had a job and who wanted to work as a telegram boy anyway? I did and I loved it!

Saturday overtime was often available at Kings Cross Post Office when someone didn't turn up for work, and often occurred at busy times when the HMAS Sydney was getting ready to depart Garden Island with a load of troops going to Vietnam. I delivered hundreds of telegrams to the ship's purser; all well wishes and messages of "a safe return" from family and friends of our brave soldiers heading off to war.

Unlike today, security didn't seem to be as tight at Garden Island. I would ride my red bike unhindered through the gates, peddle up to the ship, rest the bike against the gangplank and deliver the telegrams to the purser.

Larger post offices like Darlinghurst had tele-printers to send and receive telegrams. However, Kings Cross Post Office sent and received telegrams through a pneumatic tube that travelled all the way to the telegraph room at the GPO in Martin Place and back to Kings Cross Post Office. These pneumatic tubes were common in larger department stores too and were used to send payment upstairs to the cashier. The receipt and change would be returned to the point of sale by pneumatic tube.

From time-to-time, a container full of telegrams would get stuck in the tube and a quick call to the GPO telegraph room would result in the traffic officer sending a blast of compressed air to clear the blocked containers. When this happened, everybody stood back from the drop cage at Kings Cross as approximately half a dozen containers could arrive at the same time with an almighty crash as they hit the wire basket.

It was a brave lad indeed who would put his hand into the basket to retrieve a container at those times.

So, just let me say that text messages in those days were called "telegrams." Unlike today, there were no mobile phones, no Facebook, no internet, no selfies and no texting a message to the person sitting next to you in a restaurant.

Life seemed so much simpler then.

I remember a day when a delegation of "suits" visited the postmaster's office at Darlinghurst Post Office. They looked really important and it appeared to be a very serious meeting.

I later found out there had been a series of construction mishaps on the new Reader's Digest building site under construction in Cooper Street, Surry Hills. The suits told the postmaster that it was strange that the mishaps always occurred around the same time every morning and in the early afternoons.

Crane riggers (in those days) used whistles to signal the crane driver to go up, down or left and right. The mishaps were being investigated when there was almost another incident. The culprit was quickly identified as the local postie who was on his rounds in Cooper Street. He was blowing his whistle at every letterbox, causing havoc with the cranes.

Today the art of writing is waning: letters with stamps attached are referred to by Gen Y as "snail mail," and are delivered by a postman riding a Honda motorcycle.

Sadly, I can't recall the last time I heard a postman's whistle, and from memory, it was around 1984 when the last telegram was sent.

But we all move on; the advance of technology has changed the face of the world. One might now ask, "Why write a letter when you can Skype your grandchildren in London and chat face-to-face or send an email which will arrive in their in-box within milliseconds?"

When I was a kid, this was Dick Tracy stuff and mobile phones comprised two tin cans connected by a piece of string.

Cheating Vera

By Joan Stammers

Way back in the sixties, the Beetle and Whist Drives at our local Congregational Church were the highlight of the church calendar. Everyone looked forward to these quarterly events.

The adults played whist in one room and the children played beetle in the annex. A few volunteer adults stayed with the kids and organised the game, they explained how it worked and tried to prevent cheating.

Being a church group, most people were pretty honest – except for Vera.

Vera was a vigorous 88-year-old who outwitted everyone. Being a senior of the church, she considered herself an authority on all religious matters and because of her advanced age, everyone indulged her and agreed heartily with most of her religious philosophies.

She was, of course, a pillar of society. She frowned upon ladies who attended Sunday services without wearing a hat. Her glare at the offender was the equivalent of a good rapping over the knuckles and the problem was quickly rectified the following week. No one wanted to be on Vera's bad side – she was quite formidable in her wrath.

She would sniff with disapproval if a child rattled a lolly wrapper during service, but was not above discretely popping a mint into her own mouth.

Another reason her eccentricities were tolerated is because she had two grandsons who were church deacons and they worked tirelessly for the church. They were well-respected, honest men and so Vera reigned supreme and terrorised the little ones, her mouth pursed like a dog's bottom with disapproval at all infringements.

She showed no warmth or compassion, though she considered herself beyond reproach as a good Christian.

The intricacies of whist were beyond Vera so she attended the Beetle drives with the kids instead – not as a volunteer, but as a bona fide player.

This was accepted without question for a while and her luck at winning was quite uncanny. The prizes were well worth winning – usually a box of chocolates or perhaps a game or a book.

It was a poor community and to win such a prize was to be the envy of all. Everyone waited with anticipation at the end for the winner to be announced.

Beetle was, of course, a game of chance and depended upon the roll of the dice. There was no skill involved so when Vera won so often even the kids began to question her good fortune.

Eventually, it became so bad and obvious that everyone would groan when Vera entered the annex. They knew what the evening's outcome would be.

Still, the adults turned a blind eye, probably because they didn't know how to tackle the problem and so Vera's good luck continued to flourish.

It fell upon the cheekiest of young players to bring Vera down – me! I was sitting beside

her after one of the regular reshuffles – winners were made to play with losers. It was a team game as well as an individual one.

"I think you forgot to roll the dice, you just put a leg on your beetle," I pointed out.

"Oh silly me, I forgot," she said, but she didn't remove the leg. I was on to her after that and kept a close eye on her movements.

"Are you sure you rolled a five?" I said, "It looked like a three to me."

"No, of course I'm not sure," she said, thinking quickly. "I'm a little short-sighted but it looked like a five."

"Well, you'd better take that eye off. You rolled a three and that's an antenna. You've already got two of those," said cheeky me.

'Oh, I thought it was a five,' replied Vera, determined not to be outwitted by a precocious nine-year-old. I was equally determined not to let this pass. I called over one of the presiding adults and explained that Vera was having difficulty seeing the dots on the dice and could he stay and help her.

Vera bristled. Of course, she could see quite clearly and certainly didn't want anyone peering over her shoulder.

"Don't worry, dear, she said, I'll put my reading glasses on, that will help." She fished in her bag and put on some glasses. The adult was moving away but I wasn't giving up.

"She's made two mistakes already, I said loudly."

The adult hesitated and by now Vera was red in the face and seething with this little upstart. She gathered up her dignity, stuck out her ample bosom and rose to her feet. She glared down at me with her best withering look, but I wasn't intimidated. I stared right back, my gaze never wavering.

"I think I'll call it a night, she said. It's getting late and the game still has quite a way to go. I have an early start in the morning – bible study group, you know. Goodnight everyone."

She flashed a final glare at me, as I now wore a smug look of triumph on my face, and departed.

I may have won the battle but everyone, including Vera, lost the war.

A meeting of the Church Council was called and cheating Vera was on the top of the agenda. No one really knew how to handle this delicate situation. Everyone acknowledged she was a cheat but the direct approach was out of the question.

The only solution that didn't upset anyone was to stop the Beetle and Whist Drives. The motion was carried unanimously. Everyone heaved a sigh of relief. The problem was solved.

A motion was put forward that perhaps a quarterly game of Bingo might replace Beetle and Whist. Vera couldn't cheat at that as the numbers were checked at the end of each game.

And so it came to pass.

That was 58 years ago. Funny, I can't always remember what I did yesterday, or what I'm supposed to do tomorrow, but I've never forgotten cheating Vera!

The old digger

By Leslie Young

I first saw him when doing some grocery deliveries for the old Flemings grocery store in Berala in Sydney's western suburbs. I had just loaded several deliveries and was passing Berala Hotel when he unsteadily descended the pub steps and headed for home.

He wasn't drunk but seemed like he'd enjoyed the hospitality a pub gave a lot of older blokes of his generation: having a few beers with mates or anyone else that was up for a yarn.

"G'day cobber," I said as I pulled to the side of the road and leaned out the passenger window. "Would you like a lift home? I'm probably going your way anyway with these deliveries."

"I live up near Chisolm Road," he smiled.

"No problem, I'm going that way, I'll just drop a couple of these on the way. You'll be home in five minutes."

As we arrived at his neat, modest little home he turned and gave me a firm handshake and said, "Come in for a cuppa and meet June, my better half." He was a real wiry old fellow and spoke with a raspy voice. June was very friendly and started boiling the jug. I explained that I had some frozen foods among some of my deliveries but spent about ten minutes enjoying a cuppa and their friendly company.

After that they started having a few grocery deliveries of their own from Flemings and we had more cups of tea and longer chats.

He'd first introduced himself as Bob Hanley and was a veteran of WWII. He showed me a photo of himself in uniform before setting out on the troopship for some years in hell. He was a magnificent physical specimen standing tall and straight with a muscular frame.

"I fought in the tents in Queensland for a while and was middleweight champ of the troopship, but that was before the war and before Changi," he said.

He had an old scrapbook with old photos and his life story in a couple of hundred thousand words.

"Someone should read and publish this," I said to him and rang a radio station to tell them, but when I put Bob on the phone his voice over the airwaves did not come across clearly. He seemed a little disappointed not to be able to convey his thoughts to the public, but his slow raspy voice with his cheeky grin and nod were best in person.

He told me his raspy voice was mainly due to a lifetime of smoking, some throat cancer and a prognosis of a limited life expectancy.

"Garbage," he said. "I'll show them they don't know what they're talking about. I'll walk around bloody Australia."

He'd come home from the war an emaciated frame of a man half the weight he left as a fit, fighting soldier. The smile and the wink were still there and he'd survived Changi so no doctor could tell him the end was near.

I was sitting having dinner with my wife and kids, watching the evening news when an item came on that drew my attention instantly. It was old Bob Hanley with a wheelbarrow and his three faithful dogs, telling the TV

cameras that he would defy medical opinion about his imminent passing and walk around Australia pushing the barrow with a few necessary supplies accompanied by his three faithful companions.

"He's got to be kidding," I turned and said to my wife. "The poor bugger has trouble breathing properly. He might have survived Changi and he's certainly a tough old bastard but they were years when at the peak of his powers. I can't see him making it more than halfway to Gosford."

Weeks later, I began to realise just how determined and tough old Bob was, when I heard a Sydney radio station was flying June to Mount Isa to meet up with Bob for their wedding anniversary. "Mount Isa, you've got to be bloody kidding," I said.

It was about April 1975 when Bob set out. There were no mobile phones so I was keeping up with Bob's progress only by listening to the occasional news reports.

As each day, week, and month and then year passed, I realised that this old bloke was a man of steel and that Changi had been an unfortunate speed hump in Bob's life. Something that merely slowed his progress, it had not finished him off as it had many brave allied soldiers.

It had been three long years when I heard a news broadcast that Bob, his wheelbarrow and faithful dogs were approaching the outskirts of Sydney. He arrived in Sydney to a hero's welcome and had his 15 minutes of fame. It took three years through heat and floods, loneliness and deprivation. Not to mention three weeks in Holbrook with pneumonia.

I went to visit Bob about a month later to shake his hand and to tell him he'd become even more of a legend than before. He told me Aboriginal people had been very kind to him at several points along his journey – both feeding him and looking after him when he was a "bit crook."

"A couple of semi drivers gave me a carton of beer each as they roared across the Nullarbor Plain. One night I camped on a hill in outback Queensland and it poured all night ... the dogs and I woke up in the morning surrounded by floodwaters ... it took quite a while for it to go down so we could move on," he told me.

My father-in-law was from an old boxing family and told me the state amateur titles were due to be held at Georges River Sailing Club on Saturday night. So I asked Bob if he'd like to go and that I would pick him up and drop him off. He jumped at the chance to rekindle old memories.

As the night progressed Arthur Tunstall introduced Bob to the fight crowd to a great ovation and several young fans came over to ask him about his odyssey with the wheelbarrow and three faithful canine companions.

I lost touch with Bob for a little while but I dropped in on June to see how things were going a little while later and was very sad to hear that Bob had passed away.

I wished I had been around to go to the great man's funeral. He was part of a generation

that had lived through the great depression, WWII and suffered in places like Changi.

Years after Bob's incredible achievement another tough old bloke, Cliff Young, showed just how much we underestimated older Australians. In comparison, our current generations seem softer, spoilt and more materialistic.

June told me later that she had offered Bob's wheelbarrow to several places that did not show a lot of interest, but finally the Australiana Village at Wilberforce said they would love to have it. They closed for a while, then opened only on special days. I would love to know if they still have it.

His exploits now hold pride of place in the Guinness Book of Records – a 14,500-kilometre trek with a wheelbarrow and three faithful companions.

Vale Bob Hanley – an absolute champion and true Aussie icon.

Les The Milko – I'll never forget you.

The 1965 Freedom Riders

By Lorraine Curtis

In my tenth year, Charlie Perkins and the Freedom Riders passed through my town: a town with a reputation for maintaining neglect and abuse of the people confined in the Aboriginal reserves and missions located on the outskirts of town.

These reserves were established early in the 20th century to segregate the Indigenous population. This segregation policy was enforced across NSW and along the north coast regions. Some of these reserves were administered by live-in managers employed by the Australian Government and some by church groups. The living conditions were appalling: poorly maintained housing without running water; a single tap in the middle of the reserve the only water supply; no electricity service to the dwellings ... no better than camp ground facilities.

Some of the people living on these reserves worked in and around the town but their movements were restricted by curfews, both in the town and on the reserves. These camps were all within a short distance of a non-Aboriginal town population living without restriction or discrimination. Children who lived on the reserves were taken from their families and placed in homes or foster care. A number of these children were born as a result of sexual liaisons between the white men from the town and the Indigenous women on these reserves and known as "half-cast" offspring. It was deemed illegal for these children to live on the reserves.

Lennie* and I met in a school in a town that, following decades of segregation, had allowed Aboriginal children to be educated in its schools. The assimilation policy was based on the flawed thinking that merging the mixed blood population with the white population would result in the demise of the full blood Aborigine. Lennie and I were in Year 5 at the school in a town and municipality that supported and enforced racist rules, such as "whites only" admission to the local swimming pool and segregated seating in the picture theatre and other local businesses.

I was mystified and confused at the inconsistencies of the messages I was receiving from my community elders and what I was seeing around me. In my childlike innocence I was colour blind. My friends didn't have colour or race. They were other children who liked the same things I liked. Friends, who talked about the things I liked to talk about, went swimming in the river, played hockey, rode push bikes and chatted on the way to the lolly shop on a Saturday morning; always with an exchange of childish ideas and opinions.

Lennie was in my class at school and I was in awe of him. He seemed pleased to be my friend. He didn't care that I was a girl, and white. I was his equal. He talked to me about his dreams, his hopes. He listened when I talked about my dreams, my hopes. He could draw ... stunning pencil drawings, landscapes, faces. I envied his ability to draw. He could also run faster than most of us. He won many races at our school athletics carnivals. His name

appeared in the sports section of the local paper for his athletic achievement. Lennie was also a good swimmer and swam competitively later in life but Lennie and I could not swim together in our sport lesson. Lennie was not allowed entry to the local swimming pool. He was the wrong colour. I can still recall my anger and puzzlement that Lennie or any of the other Aboriginal children at our school could not be admitted, with the rest of us, to the local pool. Once I understood the full meaning and consequences of the word segregation, I was angry but I also felt a deep sadness and shame at the decisions of my white elders. At the tender age of 10, I began to understand the meaning of the word hypocrisy and as time progressed, racism.

In 1965 Lennie and I sat together in class. We were friends who were learning, sharing and unaware of the Freedom Riders rolling through our town. Unaware that the Aboriginal people in our town did not have a voice. After decades of abuse and disempowerment they sought basic human rights – basic rights the white population of the town took for granted. Ann Curthoys, in her diary entries written during the Freedom Ride, recorded the protest in my town and talked about the gathering outside our swimming pool on a warm day in February 1965. She described how some of the protesters collected a group of children from one of the reserves on the edge of town and assembled outside the pool. The children and two of the protesters, including Charlie Perkins were refused entry to the pool. The protesters displayed their banners and stayed at the pool gate for a few hours. She writes that, apart from an initial meeting with the mayor, the Freedom Riders protest was ignored by the town population and the local media.

Lennie spoke little about his life in the boys' home. We talked about art. We talked about music. We talked about the river and our pushbikes. We talked about the athletic carnivals. We talked about all the things kids talk about at that age. We had a friendship at school only. In the process of moving into high school, Lennie disappeared from my life almost as suddenly as he had come into it. As I embraced maturity in my hometown it was all displayed there in front of me: the historic decline of the local Indigenous cultural and tribal society, resulting in the marginalisation and humiliation of a once strong and independent people. All as a result of decades of racial segregation, segregation of education, denial of civil rights, natural justice and the right to vote.

I still remember Lennie and our short friendship. I would like to think he remembers me, wherever he is.

**Name changed with respect*

An American migrant

By Maryhelen Cox

With so many people on the move in Europe, border security and the never-ever-ending shout of "Stop the Boats," it occurred to me recently that I too am a migrant.

It is true that I came to Australia from America under very different, even easy conditions. I had a resident visa in my passport and a teaching job waiting for me. But I was 22, had all my belongings in a suitcase and was leaving the family home for the first time on my own. I was no traveller but I knew I would regret not taking advantage of the opportunity to teach school in Australia.

We stayed the first week in a Migrant Hostel in Coogee (a hint maybe?) and went to orientation presentations each day. I didn't understand much of what was said – electrical sockets were power points and apartments were flats and if I died they would send my body home.

One thing did resonate with me though, a young American speaker advised us that, "though you more or less look and talk like these people, remember that you are not one of them. They are different from you." This stayed with me for some reason and I set my sail to journey under that mantra.

So I was a guest in this great southern land. I was here to learn, to fit in and listen to these people. It worked a treat. The teachers, parents and children at school, my landlady and her family, even the Greek man at the local milk bar loved sharing their lives with me and helping me to adjust to my new life. I was taken to local historical spots and was taught multiple Aussie folk songs. With my new friends I would pour over maps and be challenged to pronounce the long Aboriginal place names. I was invited to watch Norman Gunston (and be quite aghast at the lack of censorship on Australian TV) and was urged to buy *The Magic Pudding* (which I loved, though could never make heads nor tails of). School holidays were spent exploring this vast country and marvelling at its beauty.

Of course we Americans did stick together, that is just what people do in a new place. My roommates Nina and Mary Ann made a huge contribution to my happy time. We are all still dear friends today. Together we discovered this strange place. Australia in the late 70s was a more "foreign" place than it is now. The shops closed at noon on Saturday and the country put up its feet from mid-December to after Australia Day. It really was the laidback lifestyle we yearn for now.

I came to Australia for 2 years and am still here, 40 years later. I stayed because I loved teaching, because I married and had my children (and now grandchildren) here. As years passed I had my church family, delightful neighbours and friends. Yes I was homesick in many ways but now email and other instant affordable communication helps enormously. There were trips back to America where I compared the two cultures and my situation. As time went on I found I would talk about 'going home' when heading to America and then 'going home' when going back to Australia. Both countries were 'home'

in my heart and I was coming to terms with that and it was tearing me less and less in two. Now I have dual citizenship and two passports and two homes in my heart, and I am at peace with that.

I have a group of friends who are American ex-pats (don't you love that word? I never thought I would be an ex-pat!) and we get together at least once a year. It is a group of amazing women (Oprah would be proud) and as varied in lifestyles and localities as you can get. We all came to Australia as recruited schoolteachers and stayed. Together we can talk about our past lives and experiences in America and 'get it'. In January we spent a wet weekend in beautiful Bowral to celebrate our 40th anniversary of arriving in Australia. We asked the question 'any regrets?' and all agreed that we were happy to have spent our lives in this lucky country.

It was lucky for us in different ways—but we all felt our lives were richer (some financially, some not so much) and fuller from living here. The young waitress at breakfast thought it all very exciting when she heard what we were commemorating and we all thought 'we were that young once', and how blessed we were to have gone on such an adventure and to have once been strangers in a strange land.

The world is a smaller place now than it was 40 years ago. Airfares are cheaper and people, old and young, travel as a matter of course. It is wonderful to see new places but it is a different story to stay in a new place and make it your place. That is the story I can tell today because this place, Australia, is the place where I belong.

Dingo ambassador

By Pamela Ferrari

I met Berenice Walters, founder of the Dingo Sanctuary, Bargo and known as the *Dingo Lady* in about 1988, when I was Tourism Manager for Macarthur. Her passion for dingoes was infectious and I became an enthusiastic supporter; dingo handler, sponsor and Board member.

I spent a lot of my spare time at the sanctuary and with Berenice as my teacher and mentor became confident talking about dingoes and introducing my favourites to visitors.

My job involved very long hours and a lot of stress. When things got too stressful my favourite thing was to visit the sanctuary just before closing.

After saying hello to all the dingoes, spending extra time with each of my favourites, Berenice and I would enjoy a glass of wine in the sanctuary as the sun set. The dingoes often broke into song and if they didn't, Berenice was always able to get them started. I am blessed to have been able to experience this on many occasions and always went home revitalised.

My son, Clinton, was also a welcome visitor. His favourite dingoes were Wattle and Oola. One time Dr Harry Cooper visited and Berenice asked if Clinton could come. Clinton not only featured in the episode of 'Talk to the Animals' along with Wattle, but also was included in the opening of each show.

The dingoes were mostly on their best behaviour on the day, except for Wattle who, in her exuberance, knocked Dr Harry's glasses off and Humpty-Two, who chewed the expensive cover off the outdoor microphone when no-one was watching.

Clinton and I also participated in the annual 'DingoFest', which included a parade of dingoes. Clinton would parade his precious Oola and I would provide the commentary.

I was honoured to be trusted by Berenice to take a dingo out for socialisation or promotional activities. When we organised a fair at the Liverpool Visitor Information Centre, the sanctuary's volunteers brought along several dingoes and we put on a mini Dingo Parade.

One of my roles as tourism manager was co-ordination and promotion of the AussieHost customer service training program. The sanctuary had a littler of pups due and I spoke to Berenice about my idea of sponsoring a pup as the mascot for AussieHost – to attend certificate presentations and other events.

My reasoning was twofold: using a dingo would draw attention to the program as well as to the sanctuary and its work.

We had been successful in taking dingoes to a variety of tourism events including the annual Tourism Expo at Darling Harbour. Their presence always drew attention to our displays.

The dingo I sponsored was named Hostie. My beautiful girl was socialised early, attending her first promotional photo shoot at six weeks of age.

The irony of this event was that it was held in a Camden Council building previously used by the Moss Vale Pastures Protection Board;

the organisation that had been responsible for the dingo "control" activities in the district.

From the age of eight weeks she attended AussieHost certificate presentations and tourism promotional events. She was a hit with everyone she met and very relaxed under any situation, although car travel wasn't her favourite thing

One of the certificate presentations was to be held at the Campbelltown Catholic Club. I rang the club prior to the function and asked if I could bring a dingo. A moment of silence came from the other end of the line, then a little giggle and "I thought you said a dingo."

"Um, yes, that's what I said."

"Oh! I don't know, I'll have to check with the manager." The manager came on the line and I explained that this particular dingo was the mascot for the function, extremely well behaved and socialised.

All went well until the food was served. Everyone was lined up waiting to help themselves from the buffet when Hostie decided she was the most important one there and tried to jump on the food table. I think in the end she got more to eat than anyone else because they wanted to feed her titbits.

Once, she even attended a citizenship ceremony for Wollondilly Shire Council and got more attention than the Mayor.

The Dingo Sanctuary rarely bred stock but did breed for other sanctuaries and zoos.

One litter was selected by Western Plains Zoo, Dubbo for the new dingo enclosure. I had spent a lot of time with these pups and had the pleasure of being at the sanctuary when their handlers came to collect them.

Sometime later, while attending a conference in Dubbo, I contacted the handlers to see if I could visit the now adult dingoes.

I was made very welcome by the staff and taken behind the enclosures to be let in through a back gate. To my complete delight they remembered me and jumped all over me. It was a moment I will never forget.

As I write about this special time in my life, I am working on Berenice's biography. I had been out of touch with Berenice and her daughter Christine for some years and hadn't heard about Berenice's passing following a long illness. Christine was concerned about the future of her mother's records. I jumped at the opportunity to help out and agreed to sort through all her manuscripts, photos and videos. This is involved digitising everything so that her years of research and work will be available to future generations of researchers and students.

I have published a book about Berenice and three of her dingoes titled *For the Love of a Dingo.*

My time with the dingoes taught me a lot about Australia's native dog and I was very lucky to have experienced a very personal relationship with many of them and to have received their love in return.

But, mostly it was a great honour and a privilege to be involved with an inspirational lady who had dedicated her life to educating people about our wonderful dingo.

Driving a worthwhile cause

By Patrick Leonard

Just before my retirement I decided to take a driving instructor course. I had driven a car into the city for 25 years and got used to the behaviour of others on the road. Being cut off and overtaken on the inside never phased me as it was all part of the daily hour-and-a-half journey each way. I passed the driving instructor's course and then worked part-time for a popular driving school to get some experience.

Years later and now retired, living in Katoomba, I read in the local paper that a lady had set up a scheme to assist ladies coming into the local Women's Refuge to gain a driver's licence if they did not have one. This was to raise their self-esteem and also perhaps help them to get a job in the future. She worked very hard to raise monies to put them through a 10-lesson instruction course with a driving school. After the lessons the ladies would apply to the RTA to take a driving test. Many passed but some needed extra tuition. Through the local paper, the lady appealed for people to assist the ladies who needed a bit more tuition. As my driving instructor's licence was still valid, I volunteered my time. It was very rewarding for me to see someone gradually progress to be able to pass their test after a few extra lessons.

There was one lady who had taken the 10-lesson course but felt she was not confident enough to take the test. I was asked to take her for a lesson and assess her capabilities. On taking her out in the car I saw that she was careful and competent and in my opinion had the required level to attempt the test.

I congratulated her on her abilities and told her I thought she was ready for the driving test. But she didn't think she was. "If you have been told all your life that you are useless and can't do this or that it is very hard to be confident."

Having been told previously a little about the lady's background I understood what she meant. My response was that if you hold the person telling you this in high regard then that can be an influence, but if you don't think highly of this person then it is just their opinion and you should dismiss it and have confidence within yourself. I then reinforced that in my opinion she was ready for the test and from the way she was driving I felt she would be successful in passing it. She thanked me as I dropped her off.

The next afternoon I received a phone call from the Women's Refuge organiser.

She said that after our lesson yesterday the lady went home and booked a test on the RTA website for the following day. That morning she had successfully passed her test.

I was so happy for her and I did feel a sense of achievement and had a tear in my eye. There was a feeling of satisfaction in that I was able to assist her in having the confidence to take the decision to book her test and to successfully pass it. We both got a reward from our endeavours ... perhaps me more than she knew.

This is only one of the many activities I volunteer my time to. For me the main things about volunteering include stepping outside my comfort zone, enjoying what I am doing,

and meeting people. If the activity doesn't have these ingredients then I move on and give my time to something else more worthwhile.

We may be seniors but we still have a lot to give to our communities. My advice to retirees is that if you are able and have time, volunteering can be used to great advantage to assist others less fortunate and is richly rewarding as well.

Benvenuti a Tutti – welcome everyone

By Ros Derrett

I drive a bus every Friday. A bright yellow hi-viz bolero is part of my weekly ensemble as I drive the 14-seater to collect people wishing to attend the Lismore Italian Seniors Day Club. It offers me a great opportunity to join other volunteers – Ellie, Sil and Stella – in delivering a suite of activities that stimulate and engage our dedicated senior partners.

Ellie was instrumental in establishing the service over 30 years ago for local residents of Italian descent and now I find my hours behind the wheel a great way to familiarise myself with the highways and byways of my town. Ellie still rides shotgun on the bus as we stop to pick up folk, exchange pleasantries in Italian, buckle up, catch up with the weekly gossip and watch the landscape pass by. There is great anticipation on all sides for what the day might bring!

Our bus companions are men and women who came to Lismore and the district during the 20th century. Each week we learn more about each other. As we tweak the twists and turns regarding their migration and their integration as settlers in unfamiliar rural surroundings, my curiosity is piqued through tales of adjustment with humour and unconstrained conversation. There is rapid-fire delivery – sometimes in dialect, sometimes in pidgin – revealing long-held familial connections and wider social engagement with one another through work and play, and is all testament to their resilience.

Card playing becomes the focus on our arrival at the community centre. It is characterised by each player assembling personal accoutrements neatly and a grim determination to settle into prolonged traditional combat. Sometimes there are winners and prizes. Meanwhile, we volunteers prepare morning tea, intrude on their concentration, but animate the exchanges between players. Later a hearty lunch will act as a catalyst for further social interaction.

Bus trips offer a great day out, exploring new faces and places in the region from the beach to the hinterland, such as the aircraft museum or an exhibition celebrating *matrimonio nella mia patria*. The wedding dresses on display raised the level of nostalgia, as our seniors produced photos of their own nuptials back in Italy. Many of our seniors represent the stories of families captured in the 1993 publication of the social history of Italian settlement *The Power of the Land.* They reveal the importance of the oral traditions, the engagement with games like bocce, the accordions and music of the Veneto region of Italy from where they came.

Students from local high schools have learned a great deal from visits they have made to the Italian Seniors Day Club. Their teachers have been impressed by how much more confident students have become after spending time in conversation over lunch with the older men and women. A marked improvement has been evident in the students' understanding of the Italian language through the shared cultural exchange encouraged by Care Team leader Joan and the school staff.

These young people join in with a meal, benefit from the chitchat based on questions prepared earlier and then relax into stories shared about early life in Italy, the migration to Australia and the life in the district since. Young and old are surprised by how much these meetings change their lives. Over a bowl of pasta conversations flourish and generate a lot of laughs and increase knowledge. And then comes the special treat – an exciting, robust, Italian singsong with great atmosphere and camaraderie!

The highlight of each visit is playing tombola alongside one another. Like bingo, this game provides students with an opportunity to ensure they know their numbers in Italian (no English allowed!). The students' success in winning prizes builds lasting mementoes of their visit and becomes the impetus for return visits.

Traditional card playing aficionados amongst the seniors joined the thousands who attended the inaugural *Piazza in the Park* in 2016, to commemorate the thriving Italian cultural heritage and its contribution to the dynamic regional community life.

Staff and volunteers who come together for the Weekly Day Club work hard to demonstrate the Eden Principles that seek to minimise loneliness, helplessness and boredom. The companionship that comes from these gatherings builds trust, meaning and pleasure for all involved. The sharing of wisdom implicit in the interactions provides great memories and personal strength for us all. The volunteers create menus, produce a hearty lunch and offer yummy morning teas, while the underlying chat assists with integrating newcomers amongst older attendees. Then there is the bus ride home at the end of the day with the winners' loot.

Grazie a tutti ... (thank you everyone). My contact with you all brings so much satisfaction.

Caring for my niece

By Aunty Glenda

I've been caring for my niece's daughter, Alice* for the last five years, since she was four years old. I was a caseworker with an Aboriginal organisation that looked after foster carers, but I gave that up when she came to live with me full time. She has PAPA Syndrome which is a rare arthritis in children. I have to give her a needle every night and take her to the specialist every three months. The doctor is very pleased with how she is going – she's put on weight and her hair has grown.

All my kids have grown up and having a little four year old was daunting at first. At first it was so hectic. I have five grown up kids, but I hadn't looked after children for a long time. And with visiting the Children's Hospital often and caring for Alice's special needs and getting her ready for school to cater for her disability was hard. But then I got used to the routine so that helped me manage things a bit better. And having a car was really good. I have health issues myself. My daughters help out a lot. If I have to go to hospital they look after Alice. Her school was so accommodating and the hospital clinicians helped a lot.

It's really physical work. And emotional as well. To see her sick is upsetting. If she just bumps her finger when she is playing, it swells up and she has to go to hospital. But it's so rewarding to see the great results with her health and we have a lot of fun together. We go out, we go to the movies, we go out to dinner. We've been to Queensland to the theme parks. She loves camping. I love camping too, but its getting harder to get out of the camp bed these days.

I know a lot of older Aboriginal people stay home because it's a big effort to get out and there aren't many places for Aboriginal seniors to go and be together. But I was already very involved in the community.

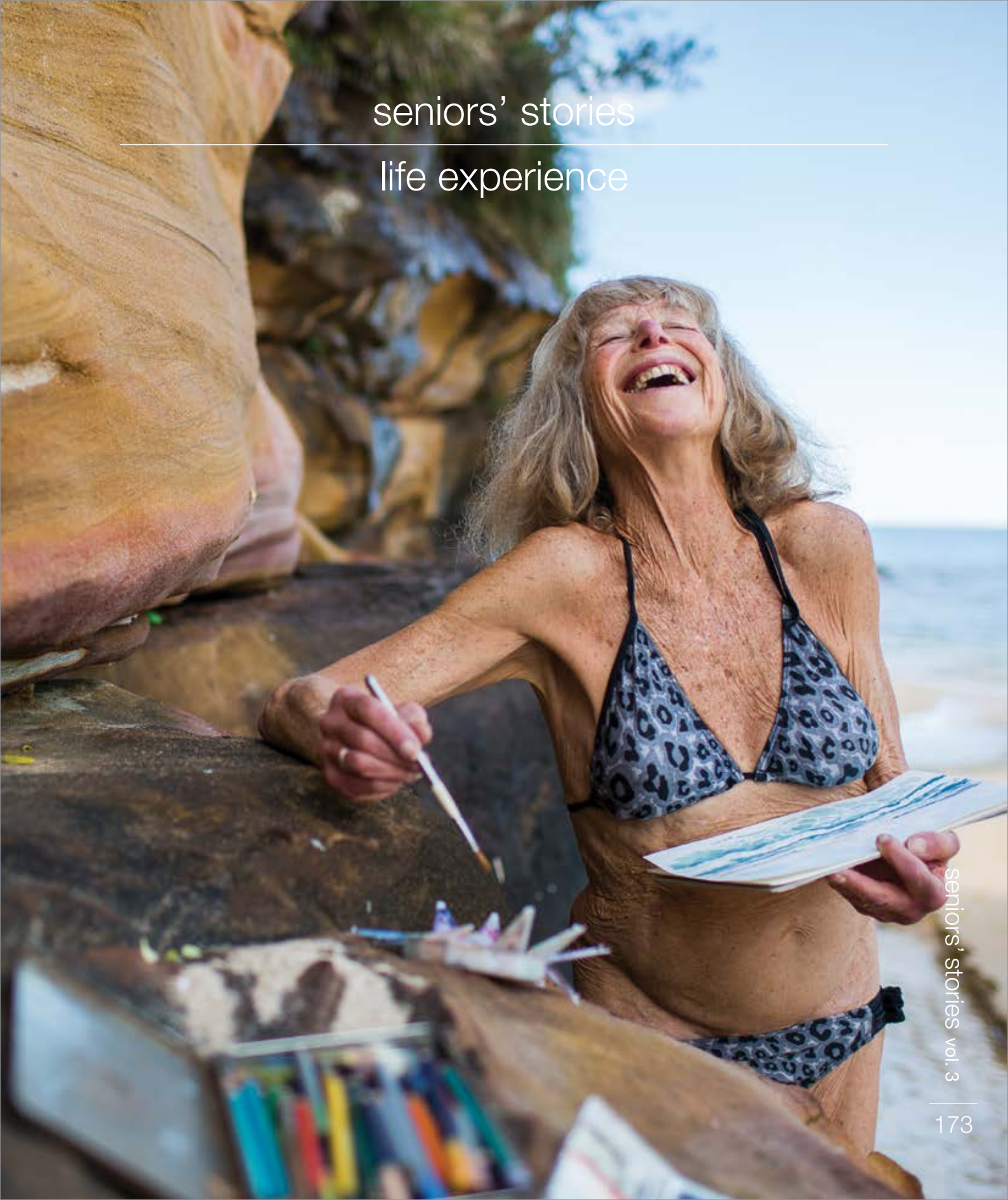
I'm still very active. I'm a member of the Aboriginal Advisory Committee with Blacktown Council and I advise council on issues in the community. I'm a JP as well. I did volunteer policing for the local police station. Especially for Aboriginal people in lock up, I'd help them out if they needed something to eat or something to wear in court, or just a listening ear. That was interesting. I've slowed down a lot now because of caring full time for the little one.

I've just done my Cert IV in Aboriginal Art recently. Art interests me. And I go to my local sewing group every Monday night too. My daughters say "hold on mum, slow down." And I think "what for"?

**Name changed for privacy reasons*

seniors' stories

life experience



For the love of Mary Kelly not Big Sandra

By Allan Hull

My mum's best friend Mrs Kelly had a daughter Mary who started primary school aged five at the same time as me. I cannot remember exactly when or how it came about, all I know is that I was in love with Mary Kelly and had been all of my short life.

Her house was a five minute walk away from mine and I can remember quite vividly to this day standing outside her house, many times, even on cold winter evenings trying to think of any excuse to knock on her door and say … what? If her mum answered, what would I say and if Mary answered what would I say and if her dad answered, well, perish the thought.

But my need to be in her company outweighed any of those concerns and I cannot remember the excuse I gave, but there I was in the house with Mary and we were looking through her comics, her kids' magazines. She had a whole drawer full of these and I had never seen so many in all of my life. Before I left, Mrs Kelly gave me some old ones to take away. These I treasured for years.

I am not sure now exactly why I loved her so much but I do remember that she was quite different from the other girls in the class. She had the most beautiful soft white skin. She had the sweetest gentlest voice, quite proper and polite and spoke not at all in the dialect of around and about but of elsewhere. She also had the loveliest smile. Everything about her was perfect. She was smart … too smart for me as it turned out.

One year, she was top girl and I was top boy. We were perhaps about eight. A stand-in lady teacher was taking the class. She asked Mary and I to leave our top seats and come down and face our classmates. She wished to know what standard we had achieved and how that compared to the other schools where she had taught and proceeded to ask this ridiculously difficult mathematical question that only Albert Einstein could calculate. Mary had the answer at her second attempt, and now I loved her even more.

She was so bright that eventually she was advanced a year and soon left for secondary school, and later attended University.

Walking home throughout my early boyhood years, whenever I passed her house I would stop and look and say to myself, "I'm going to marry her one day." Well, to tell the truth, I don't think she even knew I was alive and reluctantly, I eventually came to the realisation that I would not be marrying her any time soon – and didn't.

In my last year at primary school, aged about 11, I heard that a group met up after school at Hamilton Road Play Park. One day I joined them there instead of going home, as I would normally do.

I knew everyone there, some from my class some from other classes and I was invited to join them in a game they were already playing, a game called "kiss and cuddle or torture." This game was new to me.

When it was Big Sandra's turn, she chose me and when asked what she wished to do she

decided straight away upon kiss and cuddle. She took me by the hand and led me away to a quiet spot nearby where she proceeded to shower me with kisses and almost squeeze the life out of me. Well, I thought, *Kiss and cuddle? This is more like torture.*

Anyhow, the torture ended when she stopped kissing and hugging me and once unshackled, she whispered tenderly in my ear, "I love you. I love you!" What a shock.

Once back with the group, without wasting any time, I loudly blurted out, "You'll never guess what Big Sandra just told me ... she said that she loves me!" Everyone burst into laughter except Big Sandra who started crying inconsolably and ran home in great distress. I can still see her black sandals, white ankle socks, long navy blue pleated skirt, white school blouse and navy blue cardigan disappearing into perhaps, her very own distant, dark dungeon of absolute total humiliation. After that episode Sandra never ever spoke another word to me.

Through the years I have dwelt often on that seemingly minor event and deem those few words the cruelest I have ever spoken. I did quite like the girl. No, I really liked her a lot.

So, when the day of reckoning comes along and I am asked if there is anything that I would wish erased from my "Cruel Things Said List," betraying Big Sandra's very personal and intimate secret is right up there at the very top.

And, hey! Big Sandra, if you're reading, please, please forgive me.

But I really wish that Mary Kelly could have loved me just half as much as Big Sandra did.

Authority figures are always right

Joy Barrow

Well, that is what I believed for many years. I was involved in a peace demonstration with Earl Bertrand Russell who led The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) in Trafalgar Square, London, and it was life-changing.

I was a teenager on school holidays and the power of his speech and the compelling influence of 60,000 people left me in awe. Although there was a chance of civil disobedience, authority figures, and mounted police ready to take action, I wasn't frightened. This experience allowed me a new licence to question the *powers that be*.

It was through an appendectomy that I learned fear of authority. Thrilled to be going to hospital, I danced to the ambulance dressed in a pink nightie trimmed with rosebuds. Ambulances were uncommon in our street and the neighbours came out to see me leave. I smiled and waved and they called out messages of good luck.

However, that was the end of the fun. In the hospital bed reality sank in. I was four years old and alone. Nobody spoke to me. Doctors pushed and prodded my abdomen and talked to each other. I was to be operated on immediately, as there was fear of my appendix bursting.

Placed on a trolley, I was wheeled into the operating theatre, a gas mask clamped over my face. I struggled but the gas was stronger than me. When I awoke I was in the women's ward because the children's section was full up. This was good as the women missed their children and were very kind to me.

For three days, a stern faced nurse asked, "Have your bowels moved?" I didn't know what bowels were, so fearing it was something I had done wrong I said, "No." What a mistake that was ... I then had to endure an enema.

I was so excited about starting school. I would try on my crisp white blouse, practise knotting my tie, adjust the sash on my tunic and pack and unpack my satchel. I gloated over the 12 coloured pencils, and sharpened the lead ones. The great day dawned' I was five and life was wonderful. But after a week I became uncertain. I was a chatterbox and as an only child I would often talk to myself. The teacher told me to be quiet but I couldn't help myself. She marched to my desk holding large scissors and told me to stick my tongue out.

I shrank in fear as she told the class this is what would happen to them if they talked at the wrong time. Hanging on to one of my plaits and opening and closing the scissors she held my head firmly until I began to scream. Just as she said *I could have one more chance*, I fainted.

We didn't say grace, read from the bible or have family prayers but we went to church every Sunday. We walked to church and people joined in along the way. We went to the 'big' church and after half an hour the children filed out in a crocodile to Sunday school.

I loved this escape from sitting still and listening to our minister lecture his flock. I arried a newly minted penny to send to the poor black, heathen, African children!

Sunday school started with a chorus and I would sing along. My favourite was 'The

Wise Man Built his House upon the Rock' and I belted it out. I was told to sing quietly, as I was tone deaf and out of tune with the other kids. I was mortified and turned bright red as everyone looked at me and giggled.

Things got worse and in the end I was only allowed to mime.

The local policeman was my next cause for panic. I walked from school down 'Daddy Winker's Lane' to my home. Through plots of market gardens, wild flowers, trees, birds and a babbling brook that ran under a small stone bridge, I would swing my arms and happily skip along. One day from the top of the bridge I saw a beautiful doll lying at the water's edge. I ran home and begged my mother to come back and help me get it. That's when the horror began: it wasn't a doll, it was a baby. The police quizzed me and I was terrified they thought I was a murderer and that I might be locked up.

Over the years hospitals, schools, churches and policemen became objects of terror. When my mother was hospitalised for a very long time I wasn't allowed to visit. I was 13 and the minimum age was 16. I was a tall girl and I planned how to get into the hospital ward. I chose a coat with a thick beaver lamb collar that came up high on my neck, a cloche hat that pulled down on my head, a pair of kid gloves, matching handbag and Cuban heeled shoes. Yep, I passed as a young woman.

I took two buses to the hospital and although nervous, I practised how to walk, how to speak and even had an escape plan if I got caught. Throngs of people crowded in doorways waiting for the signal to visit. Keeping my head down I asked for Mrs Bell and the nurse, busy with other things, never looked up as she waved me on.

I spotted my mother and she gasped in surprise when the penny dropped and swore she wouldn't have recognised me in the street. We hugged and kissed and all too soon the visit ended but I knew she was getting better and would come home soon.

This was my first encounter of challenging laws and it was to be many more years before I travelled to Trafalgar Square and began a life where I felt free to question anything I was not comfortable with.

The story of Peanut

By Bob Lowe

Just before I reached Harris's dam, a mob of about 60 working plant horses galloped across the road in front of us. I stopped my Toyota to have a look. As I did so, the horses turned around and came back in front of my car. One particular bay gelding stood out for his striking looks and conformation. He let out a loud snort as he stood up right in front of the vehicle and I thought to myself, "You will be my riding horse."

The following week the horses were mustered into the house yards. I spent most of the next day drafting and choosing suitable horses for each stockman. We had only just started drafting when this bay blur came flying into the round yard and continued racing around for about forty seconds. When he pulled up he let out a resounding snort and I said to Paul the head stockman, "What have we got here?"

"He is only a jackaroo's horse and bloody hard to catch," was Paul's assessment of the gelding.

"What's his name and does he buck?" I asked.

"He's called Peanut and the name suits him, Paul replied, "Although I have only seen him ridden a couple of times, he has not bucked."

I knew then that this horse was going to be mine and we would go places. So I quietly stepped into the round yard. Then all hell broke loose. This little dynamo went around that small yard flat out. I just stood still in the middle and after about a minute the small bay horse pulled up and turned to face me. He was in a pretty fearful state so I just stood still, watching him without looking him straight in the eye.

After some time, I moved and all hell broke loose again. I stood still once more and watched until he stopped. I quietly told the men to take a break. For the next little while I was going to let this horse know that things were about to change for him.

It was not as if he didn't know what was going on as he had been getting away with bad behaviour for years. He was eight years old and according to the horse book, had been broken in by a pretty good horseman four years ago. After about fifteen minutes of his antics, he was in a lather of sweat, eyes rolling around his head and not ready for any approach, so we all left him in the round yard and went for a smoko.

After half an hour he was a little more settled. He rattled around a couple of times and stopped. I waited, then bent down and walked straight to his front feet. He backed up a half a step and let me touch both feet as though I was going to hobble him. I then quietly stood up straight and gave him a pat and rub around the neck and head. After maybe thirty or forty seconds I walked away and opened the gate to let him out. He saw the gate open and flew out of the yard.

Over the ensuring years this little bay gelding and I became best mates and he would be one of the ten best horses I had ever ridden. He was tough, smart and always seemed to have that little bit extra when I needed it. It

did not matter whether you were cutting out, chasing weaners over the basalt, chasing cows and calves in the rocky ridges or under pressure at a big camp draft – this little Peanut gave it his all.

When I think back over the years, I have been very lucky to have ridden some outstanding bush horses. Maybe these horses would not have won major horse events like camp drafts at Warwick in Queensland, or a ribbon at a Royal Show or a major cutting horse competition When, however, decisive and crucial action was required in the bush day or night, I could always confidently rely on these amazing bush-bred horses.

Somewhere over the rainbow

By Carol Magee

I was nearly five years old and I lived in a city called Belfast, Northern Ireland. It was 1953 and everyone we knew was poor and looking for work.

I played on the footpath outside our terrace house in Belfast, with my little sister; we could do that as no one had cars and the streets were safe to play in.

We saw our dad who had been lucky and had picked up some work. We would have a special treat tonight. "Daddy, Daddy," I called, "Have you a treat for us?"

Later that night he told us a bedtime story about a beautiful land very far away, where it was sunny all the time. Children could go to the beach anytime of the year. We had never seen a beach. He went on to tell us of this amazing country, its strange animals called kangaroos, koala bears and lizards. He also mentioned snakes, which I didn't like the sound of. I'd never seen a snake, as according to legend, St Patrick had banished the snakes from Ireland. I wanted to go to this wonderful country. I wanted to run along the sand and play with the koalas and kangaroos. I was so excited! "When are we leaving, I asked?"

We were lucky to get passage on a ship and mum, dad, my sister, brother and I landed in Victoria in late October 1953 – just before my fifth birthday.

We were sent to Preston and stayed in a hostel for over six months. We were over the moon. There were lots of kids to play with and a big canteen where we had our meals. Kids don't need much to be happy. Later, dad got a job in Traralgon – with house included!

We had a garden to play in and we would run through the sprinkler on hot days. I started school and was very popular because everyone wanted to listen to my accent. Mum was pregnant again and another baby boy arrived. So life was busy for her with four children, but we were all happy.

My little brother David was eighteen months old and mum was pregnant when disaster struck. Dad was rushed to hospital and died after six weeks. One day we saw him; the next he was gone. I was seven-and-a-half. Our world was turned upside down!

Mum needed her family and wanted to return to Ireland. We embarked on a long journey on board a ship headed for Southampton, then another to Belfast.

It was a terrible trip: mum was very ill and spent most of the time in the ship's hospital. My brothers were too young to realise that dad was gone for good. But I was devastated! I read them stories and told them about leprechauns and fairies that lived in Ireland.

The baby was stillborn when we arrived in Belfast. It was a girl and we named her Barbara.

We stayed with my grandad, who was fairly old and it was hard for him having four boisterous children in a small two-bedroom home.

So my aunt said we could move into their home just down the street. She had four children too. Can you imagine the noise – feeding time at the zoo!

My aunt was wonderful and having my cousins helped get over the loss of our dad. Mum was 27 and Dad was 29 when he died.

Eventually mum remarried … a wonderful man, a friend of my aunt's. He was a bachelor and took on four children. He was good to us and loved Mum dearly.

When my husband and I were courting, I talked about Australia all the time. Thankfully, he was intrigued and we decided to immigrate once we married. We left for Australia at the end of September 1967 and arrived in Melbourne on Melbourne Cup Day. My friend Carol had migrated a few years before me and she met us at the dock and took us to her family home for the day.

Arriving in Sydney was spectacular. Sailing past the Harbour Bridge was wonderful. The sun was shining and I thought, 'I'm home at last.'

My aunt's husband had joined the Royal Australian Navy and now lived in Sydney.

All my dreams came true: I had three beautiful children; a nice home in a beautiful country, where we had freedom of belief; where there was work and opportunity. Finally, my siblings all married and came to Sydney and I was overjoyed, as I'd missed them so much. Then mum and my stepdad and youngest brother migrated. I was the happiest person in the world.

When my children had all finished university, I decided to go back to college and study to become a primary school teacher.

I taught for 25 years and I'm now retired and helping out at my grandchildren's school. I have six lovely grandsons and one beautiful granddaughter. I am blessed.

So, *Somewhere over the rainbow* dreams can come true!

Plateau days

By Christopher Turk

Childhood days are some of the most memorable days of our lives. They are innocent days yet formative days. Places and people will always hold a special place in my heart.

Mum and Dad somehow convinced the bank to lend them 500 pounds to buy 5.5 acres of land on Avalon Plateau. Our first home, known as "Ridgewood" looked down on our plots of land and when we looked further afield we could see headlands and beaches stretching on towards Manly – a million-pound view. The house was set in the bush with kangaroos, koalas, snakes and lizards as our neighbours. Mum tied a bell around my brother's neck so we could find him when he wandered away.

At first our home, just for a while, had no windows or doors. One lucky kookaburra swooped through the window, caught some meat being prepared for tea and flew straight out the door. We had chooks, and I remember Dad cutting off the head of one chook for a Christmas meal. I still picture the chook running shakily around, minus its head, till it sank slowly to the ground. Luckily we did not have chicken dinner very often.

The Plateau was set above the northern beaches of Newport, Bilgola and Avalon. Long, winding dirt roads led to the top where a few scattered houses were visible. Few families occupied these houses so we were some of the few children that called the Plateau "home."

Bush fires were a constant threat on the Plateau. We watched one day as a fire headed up through the bush and was only stopped at our fence line by Dad and other bush fire volunteers. Another time, Dad on his birthday, came home exhausted around tea after fighting another threatening fire. However, at night it flared up again and a neighbour's house was saved from burning to the ground by their dog barking in the middle of the night. Sometimes, my brother and I felt like real heroes when we broke off a leafy branch from a tree and beat out the fire on its fringes.

Plateau days were days of discovery. We felt like we owned the whole of the Plateau and it became our playground. We traced rocky creeks right down the hill to the end of their destination. We caught tadpoles. We jumped from one rock to another as we explored the land like Indigenous Australians. We built forts and cubby houses. We found where orchards grew and Christmas bells and Christmas bush were easily found to decorate our house. At Christmas time we picked a small tree to decorate. In those early days we lit real candles on our Christmas tree. Dad, who loved to write songs, even wrote one with the title *Candles on our Christmas Tree*. Family and neighbours came around to sing and enjoy the spirit of Christmas.

My sister and brother were very close as there were not too many children around – and we really liked each other anyway. We were all skinny as rakes and I have no idea how my brother and I carried and hauled a wooden canoe down a steep bush track to the water and back again. We loved playing cricket on the side of the road with a power pole as our wicket; with bush on my cover drive side and

the road for lofted on-side strokes. One time we moved further down the road and one hook shot smashed through the window of a vacant house. Of course, we wrote an apology and offered to pay for the window. Luckily no letter came, as we had no money.

Perhaps one of our greatest discoveries was a huge cave, bigger than a four bedroom home, with a smaller cave separated from the larger by a small waterfall. We always wanted to know what was around the next bend or what lay below the escarpment. So we plunged through ferns higher than our heads and clambered down the rocks to discover this wonderful cave. I think we were the first white people to find the cave that must have been used to shelter indigenous folk, as there were shells from the beach and signs of ancient fires.

I think Mum was the real hero in our family. Her Scottish background meant she managed the household budget well and always cared for us even when resources were scarce. She recalled how she used to walk my sister down the hill to primary school while carrying me on her hip. This meant two tiring trips every school day.

One of my favourite photos of Dad was when he was in the RAAF defending Darwin – he wore his slouch hat and shorts and no shirt and other buddies by his side. Dad had a beautiful mellow voice and he composed many songs and loved to sing around the piano whenever he could. We often played war games using some of Dad's old uniforms.

Dad always had a generous spirit and often after a cricket game he would pile as many of the team into our car as possible and always stopped for a drink or an ice cream. It was always a mystery how he was able to do this when we seemed to have so little money. As far as possible he would always come to our cricket or football games. Once, Dad was the umpire in one of our cricket games and I bowled a beautiful ball and the boy was given "Out LBW" by Dad. The boy ran down the wicket telling Dad he was not out. So Dad, with his ever-affable nature, gave him "Not out." Fortunately, a few overs later he really was out.

Mum and Dad have both passed away, but memories are so sweet and last a lifetime. These stories can be passed on to our children and grandchildren.

Conversations with a grandchild

By David Thomas

What has changed, you want to know,
since I was just a lad?
Have things changed for the better, or are
they just as bad?
What did I do with my time after school
and what games did we play?
How did I get to school in the morning,
what lessons did we learn each day?
Did we have a car and mobile phone or go
for holidays in a plane?
Was the weather different then or is it just
the same?
How did my mum do the shopping and
what did I eat for tea?
And what did I do to fill in time before
computer games and TV?
Let's just make a beginning, with one or
two simple things
We had a car that went slowly up hills,
whilst the engine tappets went ping
The telephone was attached, to wires and
cords and only went ring ring.
Others in the street they had no phone, so
often they would come
To make urgent calls to the doctor, about
things like their sick old mum.
A sixpence or some pennies was left, to
cover the cost of the call
Mum kept the money in a Vegemite jar, in
the china cabinet in the hall.
I certainly didn't get driven to school, no
matter how it rained
We put on gumboots and raincoats, and
walked there just the same.

At lunch times we played with marbles,
never minding the dirt on our knees
Or some times we played cricket, with
stumps painted on pine trees.
For lessons we learnt our times tables, until
we knew them off by heart
Reading, wRiting and aRithmetic was
what we called the three R's.
Our writing was done with nibs and ink
and we made letters nice and round
With a thin line on the upslope and then a
fat line coming down.
Our classrooms had a map of the world,
with the United Kingdom shaded in red
And above each door was a picture of the
Queen, with a tiara on her head.
History was about England's Kings and
Queens, but the only thing I can recall
Was King Canute, who tried to turn back
the tide, but it didn't listen to him at all.
The teachers gave us maps of England, with
only dots in the empty spaces
I always managed to get full marks, for
naming cities in the right places.
But reading out loud I loved the most and
I practised at night in bed
The secret was, to read one word ahead, of
the word that was being said.
We had no supermarkets or McDonalds
and definitely no KFC,
A fish shop on the corner was where we
bought our Friday night tea.
If we were lucky and had a shilling, we
would buy a bob's worth of fish and chips

We ate them straight from a newspaper packet, with a hole torn at the tip.

For breakfast each morning, we had fresh milk, delivered the night before

By a man who drove a horse and cart, which we heard but we never saw.

The billy-can for the milk, was put on the verandah each night

It always stood on an old wooden stool, with the money placed inside.

Our bread, so crisp and oven warm was delivered before lunch each day

A special treat was to be given a slice to eat, before it was put away.

For fruit and veg that were the best, we went to the market on a Friday night

A noisy, smelly busy place, with vendors calling with all their might

About how their vegetables were the best and their prices were always right.

Most nights for tea it was boiled veg of white and yellow and green

With fatty lamb chops or sausages or perhaps some salty corned beef.

For second course, we had apricots or pears, from a Fowlers preserving jar

But sometimes we just ate bread and jam or a homemade apple tart.

I don't know what my mother would say, if she went to the supermarket today

And saw cardboard packets, of custard and tarts, in the refrigerated display.

Our custard was always made at home from Lion Custard Powder

It used up all the leftover milk, so none of it went sour.

And what did we do to fill in time before computer games and TV?

I guess we met our mates in the park and played cricket or a game of footy.

When tea was over and the dishes were done and the table cleared away

We would turn on the radio and gather around, to listen to the radio plays.

Inspector West, Dad and Dave, Smokey Dawson and the hit parades

Whilst Bob Dyer and Jack Davey with quiz shows, came over the old airwaves

You know, all those shows, were a part of our lives, like the TV shows of today.

So grandchild, I have rambled on

And I haven't answered all that you asked

To do so in a single talk would really be quite a task.

But wait there just a moment, what the heck is going on?

Whilst I have been talking with my eyes closed tight,

The little blighter, has up and gone?

Discombobulated

By David Wright

Now, why am I here ... standing in the hallway with a confused look on my face? The wife has sent me to fetch something and, being a man, I only half listened and said "okey-dokey." The problem is: do I risk the wrath of the good woman by going back and asking what it was she wanted or do I stand here and rack my brain in an effort to recall the instructions?

Being a man means that I cannot multitask outside a work environment. I wonder if I am *losing it* ... is dementia slowly setting in or am I simply in dream mode all the time. Now ... was it to get her watch or her phone or her purse or was it just to get the wash ready? Bugger!

I turn and sneak a peek at what she is doing ... maybe a clue will come. I slowly turn and, bugger, she is looking at me ... just move on confidently out of sight. Now, what was it she asked for and will my slowly turning brain help me out. Bugger again.

The bedroom is the place to be because most of her treasures are in there. Now ... look around, is there anything obvious sitting in plain view that will give me a clue? Well, everything is in plain view but nothing springs to mind.

She was doing a crossword at the time I left, so is that a clue? But what can possibly be in here that relates to word games? That can't be it then. She was on the iPad just before she started on the puzzles ... maybe she wants to check an email address or something. But what's in here that could possibly relate to a computer? Bugger.

Better check to see what she is doing now ... head down, thinking hard on a puzzle, perhaps the answer is in her office, so I'll sneak in there while she is concentrating on something else. Her home office is really the smallest bedroom in the house and it has been set up as a library, a computer station, a sewing and patchwork room and many other things. Really, it's a woman's version of a man cave. But once inside the room my spirits go down, as there are way too many clue options for my single dimensional man brain to comprehend.

There is a knock on the front door ... hallelujah, a distraction. "I'll get it," I shout from the office doorway. Rob from over road stands there looking in need of man advice. "Hi mate, what can I do for you," I say a little too loudly. Then Rob and I talk about a problem he has with an electrical appliance that appears to be on the fritz. All of the sudden, all thoughts of my little chore inside are forgotten. After a few minutes I think I have Rob squared away with a couple of things to try on his appliance, so I proudly walk back into the sitting room to a frosty glare.

"What was that about?" she asks.

"Just a little problem Rob had with his TV, but all OK now," I reply.

Then there it is, I suddenly remember: nail clippers. That was it – nail clippers! "Hang on a tick," I say and off to the bedroom I go to locate the clippers. There they are, by the bedside table.

I wander triumphantly back into the sitting room with the nail clippers and lay them carefully on her reading table and smile broadly.

"What are they for," she asks.

Bugger.

Discombobulated!

A family's run to ruin

By Dr Thollairathil Chacko George

The villagers saw the van of the travelling salesman, Mony, turn into its usual parking spot under the large banyan tree. For many years he had brought their household stuff. They always gathered around his van to listen to stories and watch him demonstrate the week's products. They trusted him and this made him quite a rich man.

This time, he had a different story to tell them.

"I am getting old and my health has started to weaken. I have reached a point where travelling and looking after the finances is not easy. I will get one of my two sons, Hans or Reece, to take over the business. But my problem is, Hans is a high school teacher with a college lecturer wife. Reece is a mechanic. Hopefully he will be able to serve you the same way I have done all these years."

The villagers were sad to see him go but decided to welcome Reece. Reece and Mony visited the villages for a few weeks together so that Reece could learn the routes and products.

Reece said, "I am not a confident salesman like you father, but I will give it a go. I will resign my factory job for now. Hope your health improves with some good rest."

Reece's wife, Malini, agreed to his decision. She was a housewife and couldn't help in any other way. They needed their son Josh to go to school.

However, Reece could not become a good salesman. He could see the falling sales but he did not know how to manage it, he continued to order new stock without any real need. He had to find a way forward but he hid the issues from his family. He did not want to face the fury of Mony and was too proud to seek alms from his brother. All he could finally do was to sell the van, Mony's business vehicle, and the remaining stock at a loss.

Though Reece was able to hide the facts from most people, he needed to provide for his family. He resorted to begging for money from his former colleagues and eventually turned to alcohol to forget his worries. Mony eventually came to know of what happened to the business he developed, but he decided to let Reece solve the issues himself.

He started to be away from his family, sleeping at the bar. One day, he got into an altercation with some drunk men and was severely thrashed. He fell down unconscious, with no one to look after him. He did not reach home that day.

Malini went around the town looking for him and was shocked to find him in this state at the bar. She called Hans, Reece's older brother, for help. Hans was a loving brother and quickly came. He took Reece to the hospital. The doctors admitted him and he underwent tests.

One doctor reluctantly broke the news to Hans and Malini: "He has severe internal injuries. We can try our best, and wait and see."

Despite their efforts, Reece did not survive two more days. The sad news made Mony feel he was responsible for his younger son's death. He told Malini:

"I am ashamed to face you and Josh ... I forced Reece into this and took him away from his comfortable life. Please forgive me."

Malini could only shed tears and worry about Josh's future.

Leena, Hans' wife, never liked Reece and Malini; she thought they were lower class with lower education and life status. But pride forced her to visit and offer condolences, empty as they were. It was not a known fact that, despite the higher education and higher employment status, Leena had an uneducated mind. Hans felt the undercurrents in the family but he tried to support Malini and Josh, without Leena's help and approval.

The turn of events forced Malini to look for a job, which she eventually found in the form of a cook's position with a family. Josh was a good student and passed his school final examinations with distinction, unlike Leena's son Amit, who managed only a lower grade pass. Both Amit and Leena felt jealous and contemplated ways to discredit Josh. They needed to find a more permanent solution to stop Josh, as they considered his success in life an embarrassment to them. Leena decided to approach a local criminal who was known to her, to seek help to satisfy her prideful needs.

"I want this problem solved," she told him. It was his profession to see such 'issues' solved.

Josh liked playing cricket and soon after Leena's meeting, Josh suddenly fell ill at his game. His legs gave way and he collapsed. All the players gathered around and one of them called a taxi to take him home. Rather than improving, his condition deteriorated over the next few hours and he was taken to a hospital. After many rounds of tests, the medical team discovered that he had a serious toxin in his bloodstream. Despite many hours of IV drips and medication, Josh became unconscious. Malini was distraught.

Hans and Leena came to visit. Hans sat beside Josh and tried to console Malini, but Leena stood expressionless. Hans and Leena visited daily for a week bringing food and anything else Malini needed while she kept vigil at her son's bedside. By week's end, Josh had slipped into a coma, and a few days later, he passed away.

Suspecting foul play, the hospital informed the police, who ordered an autopsy. They started an investigation into the matter, in particular the nature and source of the toxin. Lab tests had shown that the poison was a particular type of rat poison only available at two locations in the town. After making adequate enquiries, the police searched Malini's house and Josh's locker at the Cricket club. They also interviewed family including Hans and Leena. During the interview, it became apparent from Leena's demeanour that she was hiding something. After a further hour's interrogation, she admitted to her involvement in poisoning Josh. She was charged with murder.

Despite her terrible losses, Malini remained as humane as she has always been, visiting Leena while in remand. The half-hour visits remained predominantly silent. Only tears were shed, not words.

Cricklewood chronicles

Elizabeth Anne Peterson

In 1971, with my thirtieth birthday looming, I decided to quit an unsatisfying job and finally follow my dream to live in the green and pleasant land of our terribly British childhood storybooks. But unlike most of my compatriots who used London as a temporary base for their travels, I spent most of my two years in London working in twenty-two very different short-term jobs, exploring locally and only taking four short trips out of the country.

Two weeks after arriving I found myself in a Central London secretarial agency, having my shorthand skills tested by an amiable lady. I transcribed my notes on a rock-solid Imperial typewriter, ignoring the text, which – by oversight or design – had been left on the desk.

I was immediately offered a six-week post in an elegantly appointed city financial establishment, which provided superb free lunches. Work only really began after "morning coffee," solemnly dispensed from a silver tray by 'The Manservant.' When I wasn't taking dictation from a waistcoated gentleman with an odd turn of phrase, I sat in my little room at the end of the hallway, painstakingly restoring work done by the typing pool, whose machines had a habit of punching out the letter "o". Before the availability of white-out correction fluid, we used powdered chalk and gobs of paper.

There followed shorter but equally memorable jobs: a Danish brewery *(help yourself to beer);* a bikini manufacturer *(darling, drop everything and model that gold mesh number for us);* a wine wholesaler *(would you know a recipe for mulled wine by any chance?);* a Wapping freight company *(power's cut today so we didn't order you because we've got electric typewriters)* and a Bloomsbury publishing house where I acted as "gopher" between two buildings on opposite sides of a square, running from central overheating into freezing wind – and subsequently going down with flu.

Being at home during the day, I finally crossed paths with one of the three medical students from the top flat in our Victorian terrace. This dapper fellow, whose physician father in the Midlands posted him the leading British medical journals each week, prescribed me a sure cure: a tottering pile of back issues, weighted down with a huge medical dictionary and aspirin from the hospital dispensary.

Restored and fortified, I returned to my agency, announcing that I was now a medical secretary. *(An extra 95 pence an hour!)* Then, a quick spelling test ... *cholecystectomy?* "Don't know that one, dear? Never mind, you'll quickly learn."

And so began my career in National Health hospitals, where most of the secretaries were temps. *If they'd paid the permanents the equivalent of the agency fee* ... I thought ... *their worry – my gain.*

I unravelled the mysteries of The Underground on my way to writing and typing and taking messages for social workers in floral skirts, maintenance engineers in oily overalls, surgeons in crisp well-fitting white coats and registrars in ill-fitting ones.

Eventually I was sent to an "indefinite" job, conveniently near the flat I was sharing.

Of the five medical secretaries, only two were permanents: the senior – Hesther, single and in her mid-forties, who favoured flowing smock-like garments, and Margaret, a prim young lady whose curiously "refeened" accent caused the rest of us to raise not always surreptitious eyebrows.

Hesther was always first in, beavering away, but one mid-morning, her chair was still bare. The office phone on her desk began its strident ringing, faintly audible above the working clatter.

Margaret took the call, "Middical Siccritaries. Noew, this is Moggrit. Virry well, I'll let her knoew." Replacing the receiver precisely, she turned towards me and said, "Mr Smaiyth requaires Mrs Hemilton's newts."

"Her *whats?*" I asked, almost dropping my cup of very milky hospital coffee into the open desk drawer.

"Her *newts*," said Moggrit firmly. "He's seeing her in his *rhums* in Harley Street this auhfternoon and they must be sint over immediately." I *immediately* went to the pigeonholes, extracted Mrs Hamilton's file, and began to rapidly type the notes Mr Smyth had dictated the day before.

And then the door crashed open, and in billowed Hesther, catching her large patch pocket on a chair and remarking to the room at large, "I *do* like these dresses, I feel so *preg*nant in them. I'm a *bit* late today, but the *train* got held up for more than an *hour* just outside *Neas*den. *And* of course, I wouldn't have my *knitting* with me, *would* I!"

One of the registrars ambled in, rolled a squeaky-castored chair up to my desk, and began dictating before I had uncapped my pen. His particular responsibility was the Spanish ward maids, and irrespective of the patient's identity, prefaced every report, "*Carmen Miranda* presented in clinic," so that my note taking always began after this formula.

"Oh, and by the way," he said as he reached the door, "Greenwood wants to see you in clinic. Now."

Mr Greenwood was one of the specialist surgeons, and usually dictated to me in the afternoon. Wondering what he wanted so urgently, I ran down the glassed-in walkway that joined the main building to the clinics.

"Come in," he said briefly, and pointed to a small square package on top of his "in" basket. "Open that, would you mind?"

Being an obedient (and naïve) secretary I did so, uneasily noting that he was edging his chair away from the desk. Exhaling with relief, he grinned as I held up a surgical appliance returned by a patient. Later, as I ate my lunchtime sandwich on a soot-riddled rooftop bench, it dawned on me that he assumed he had been sent a parcel bomb; although he had anglicised his surname, his accent and features would always betray his origins.

Despite inevitable change, London in the early seventies was still the city of my childhood dreams, and I was there: independent, visiting galleries, concerts, theatres, stores, exploring the centuries-old city and countryside, sharing grotty flats, riding the Underground ...

And that was all that mattered.

Photo Dad

By Graham Telfer

I remember Mum being excited and this made me excited too. My sister, Robyn was only a baby so she was too little to know what was going on. But I did. My dad was a soldier in a photo. Every night Mum would bring the photo into my room, tuck me in bed and say a prayer to keep our *Photo Dad* from getting hurt. He would sometimes write Mum letters that made her happy. Sometimes *Photo Dad* would send us a new photo and Mum would show me which one was him. One day, *Photo Dad* sent me my very own telegram telling me he would be home for Christmas. My mum was called Ivy and she read it to me:

Dear Darkie
Daddy sailed 6th December
Santa Clause on same ship
Love to Mother and Robyn
The telegram was dated 6 December 1945.

I was called "Darkie" by *Photo Dad's* soldier friends because of my thick, dark curly hair. Ever since Robyn was born, Mum began calling me "Brud" which was short for brother. I liked Brud better than Darkie.

Mum and I were very close. For a long time there was only the two of us; that was before Robyn came out of mummy's tummy. She called me "her little man of the house" and that made me feel good. I liked the way things were at home but sometimes wondered what it would be like to have a proper dad.

The boat was coming in on 20 December and that day Nana and Pop Telfer joined us on a trip to Sydney Harbour. Mum and Nan were very excited but I didn't quite know why. I was a little bit anxious because Mum had said that our life was going to be different from now on.

There were lots of people on the wharf to see the boat, as it was a huge ship. A band played lots of songs and the soldiers threw coloured streamers to us. I raced to collect a few to take home but the bigger kids got more than me. Soon the plank came down and the soldiers started to come off the boat. Did we just pick one of them out to be our *Photo Dad*? They were all wearing the same clothes and hats.

Suddenly Mum started yelling and waving. I couldn't see him – he was just a picture. They were all big men with hats and they all looked the same.

"That's him," Nana Telfer cried. He marched towards us but then went straight by us to the Discharge Tent. Lots of soldiers broke the line and hugged their family but *Photo Dad* went straight on by. (Years later I was to learn that he was very emotional and didn't want to cry in front of the other men).

"The brute," said Nana.

Mum said nothing but I could see she was sad. "Maybe he is going to take another photo for us to take home," I said to Mum to make her happy. We waited about an hour before we saw him again. He came up to my mother and hugged her in a way that I'd never seen before. I didn't like it very much. He kissed my Nan (his mother) and hugged Pop; then he took my sister, Robyn, in his arms, kissed her gently and spoke to her in baby talk. I was standing behind

Mum, looking at this big stranger. As he came towards me I moved further behind Mum and gripped her leg tightly.

"Just give him a little time," Mum said.

Uncle Jack drove us home to Annandale. I sat as far from *him* as I could. Why did he have to come home with us? All we needed was another photo. I can look after Mum because I'll soon be three.

Mum seemed very happy – happier than I had ever seen her before. He didn't seem as pleased as Mum though and I secretly hoped he would soon go away.

When we got home to Young Street in Annandale, Mum had to put Robyn down for a sleep and she left her "two men" to get to know one another (whatever that meant). We sat and looked at one another; he didn't know about kids and I didn't know about dads. He didn't play 'Cowboys and Indians'. We didn't talk much and eventually Mummy came back after settling Robyn down; she sat on the lounge next to him and kissed him. He then started to touch and kiss my mother again. I didn't like it at all, so I kicked him in the shins.

Suddenly I felt really scared; he was about to whack me but my Mum stopped him. "Elton," she said, "You should be happy, your son isn't used to seeing men fondle me."

You see, my Mum was very wise and *Photo Dad* understood the wisdom that was hers.

That's how, in my eyes, Mum and Dad started as a couple.

Young love

By Jennifer Boyle

One Saturday afternoon in March when I was 17, my two great loves collided: the finals of our tennis competition and the gold medal exams in Ballroom and Latin American dancing. Could I choose one over the other? I could not.

On the one hand, our team had played hard all summer long and were odds-on favourites to win the competition. On the other, if I passed up on the medal exams I couldn't take them for at least another six months and then I would miss my opportunity to secure my Bar to Gold Star (the highest level attainable) as a junior. And besides, I'd already paid the exam fees. Could I find a way to do both? Yes, after all I had a whole three-hour window. If I allowed an average of 20 minutes for each set, ten minutes for each medal, an estimated 75 minutes' total travel time ... that amounted to two hours 45 minutes. A whole fifteen minutes to spare, what could possibly go wrong?

The first set of tennis was at 1.00 p.m. After that, I would travel to the dance studio, do my exam, then go back to the courts for the second set, and so on. After the third and final set I would have to be back in the studio for my Bar to Gold Star medal in ballroom by 4.00 p.m. or the examiner would be gone. No problem? The first problem was distance; the courts were at Collaroy Plateau, the dance studio at Balgowlah. The second problem was changing from tennis togs to dancing gear and vice versa. The final hurdle was transport; neither of my parents could drive and I had my licence but no vehicle, so I looked to my step-grandfather, Nugget, to be my chauffeur for the afternoon.

Nugget, as his nickname suggests, was a short, stocky man, bald on top with a fringe of dark hair somewhat like Friar Tuck. He was difficult, temperamental and suffered from "small man syndrome." He was never inclined to do anything for anyone simply out of the goodness of his heart. He always exacted a *quid pro quo* and the favour could, and often would be, withdrawn at any time. For instance, he owned one of the first Polaroid Instamatic cameras. If you were in his good books he magnanimously bestowed this "boomerang" gift on you only to take it back at a later stage for some imagined slight.

Having organised most of the major players to accommodate me, all I had to do then was convince Nugget to pick me up and ferry me to and fro over the course of the afternoon. Simple, you might think, but you'd be wrong. Somehow though, after a great deal of negotiation, I did manage to convince him to forego his bowls that Saturday afternoon and be on hand to drive me.

After the first set, it was into the car – an Austin A30 which was a very small car manufactured in the early 1950s. On the back seat, I shed my tennis dress, sandshoes and socks, donned my suspender belt, stockings, satin high heels, and my slim fitted, blue flamenco style dress. My arrival time at the studio was perfect and with a quick check to see my seams were straight, I did one of my

medals. On the return trip, it was off with the dancing gear, on with the tennis gear, arriving just in time to play my second set of tennis. This round trip was repeated successfully a short time thereafter. Lady Luck was shining on me that day.

After my third and final set we had sealed our win on the tennis court but I'd no time to celebrate. It was into the back seat again. But changing this time was more problematical. Not only did I have to change into suspender belt, stockings, and high heels, but I also had to don a stiff, raw-starched rope petticoat, overlaid by white tulle one. These petticoats were so stiff and full that there was barely room for me in the back seat of that tiny car. Next there was the problem of the whalebone, strapless bra with numerous hooks and eyes – at the back, of course. And while the wearing of seatbelts was not compulsory then and so not at all remarkable, the sight of a half-naked teenage girl changing into diaphanous organdie evening wear in the middle of the afternoon in the back seat of a car almost certainly was. It was definitely a source of much amusement and laughter to the passengers of a double decker bus we were overtaking in our haste. Making like an ostrich, I pretended I couldn't see the bus, urged Nugget to drive faster, slipped my white strapless evening gown over my head, brushed my hair, applied a splash of lipstick and lurched out of the car almost before it had come to a full stop – with a full 10 minutes to spare. Nugget certainly came through for me that day, and now it was time to pay the piper. I just wish I could remember the terms of the deal.

A fortunate life

Margaret Edmonds

I was born during the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya at the Fort Jesus hospital in Mombasa. My parents had left the UK after the war for a life without the rationing and devastation war had caused. Dad was a pilot of small aircraft, so from a very early age I spent time flying around Kenya.

When I was two, we moved to the capital Nairobi, where we had a wonderful childhood playing in the garden for hours on end and spending our summer holidays swimming in the Indian Ocean.

My father took a job in Addis Ababa when I was 14. I loved Ethiopia. The people, traditions and countryside were amazing. Leaving school after Year 10, a career in child care took me to the east end of London to a Dr Barnardo's Home where I spent four happy years getting a certificate that led me to wonderful jobs around the world.

I travelled to Ankara, Turkey where I was nanny to an embassy family for two years. I then returned to Addis Ababa and took a job at the English school teaching kindergarten. A short spell in Spain was followed by what was supposed to be a three-week holiday with my sister in Ndola, Zambia. I met my future husband and stayed five years. Our three beautiful daughters were all born there. Life in Zambia became increasingly difficult as countries with internal wars – Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and Zaire – surrounded us. Guns were readily available and crime was rife.

It was time to leave and we decided to return to the UK, which was my husband's home and where my parents were now living. We lasted one year to the day! The short winter days left us cold – literally and metaphorically.

So we were off again. This time the Middle East became our home for five years in the Sultanate of Oman. Living in a mining town north of Muscat, the capital, we spent many weekends in the United Arab Emirates. The three children loved this life as it afforded them the freedom to roam round the mining camp on their bicycles and endless hours in the pool. The temperatures would often get to 44 degrees Celsius and the humidity left us drained. Each year on our annual holiday, we would travel back to the UK to see the family and then stop off in another country.

When the girls were nearing high school we knew it was time to leave and on our yearly trip we travelled to America, New Zealand and Australia.

It was Australia that offered us the life style we craved. We loved the space, the outdoor life and the endless opportunities the country offered.

A year later we emigrated and Brisbane became our home. What a year to land in Brisbane! Expo 88 had just begun ... my husband began work and the girls enrolled in schools, so I took the opportunity to volunteer at Expo. We spent many hours lying on the grass listening to music, watching live shows and eating at the different food outlets.

It was not to last; the job took us to Wollongong where I decided to go back to studying. I enrolled in a bachelor of Education at Wollongong University. This was one of the finest achievements of my life. As a mature student I had to learn to play a musical instrument, dance write endless assignments and research, research, research! What an amazing opportunity this was. It made me realize that you are never too old to learn, that change is inevitable, and that we are all capable of achieving great things. I believe it showed our daughters that they could always go back to study later on and not to put too much emphasis on the HSE.

I loved teaching and was fortunate enough to have some wonderful jobs in both private and public primary schools. I left teaching due to illness in the family but later began working for Meals on Wheels. Looking back on my life, I started in a career where I was looking after babies, progressed to older children and now work with the elderly and love it.

That is the first sixty-five years of my life. I wonder what is in store me for the next years.

Stalking Domingo

By Margaret-Rose Stringer

Once upon a time, my husband and I shared a wonderful life together, and in its very simplicity it seemed to lack nothing.

During the first decade I was totally ignorant about opera (he was much less ignorant than I, as I subsequently discovered); until an accidental viewing on SBS-TV of Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* introduced us both to Plácido Domingo. It was a production filmed in real locations, not on the stage, enabling Plácido to display his incomparable acting ability – as well as his glorious voice and his Spanish beauty. The pair of us was stunned: I by my first experience of opera and Chic by the performance of its greatest exponent.

Instant converts, we started to amass an impressive Domingo collection of operas on CD and laser disk (great heavy things, those, and hideously expensive as they came from the USA) – even some on VHS. (You can forgive us: it was the late '80s.)

Eventually our collection ceased to be sufficiently satisfying, and Chic decided the time had come for us to lay eyes and ears upon our hero – which meant, of course, taking to the skies in order to stalk him around Europe. My husband overcame the obstacle of my terror of aircraft by sending me off to a "fear of flying" course being run at the Sydney airport by a group of women pilots – which was so successful as to prevent any need of his having to drag me by the heels onto the 747. And all throughout these weeks, enquiries and preparations were being made regarding the Domingo itinerary.

But that preparatory time ended with our having only the one firm booking – at Barcelona's Gran Teatre, where Plácido was to sing *Adriana Lecouvreur.* I possibly don't need to state that this single booking, we felt, totally justified our first ever-European trip: I believe we would've gone even if he were to sing any part of the Ring Cycle (you're right … nothing could make us Wagner fans – nor even of Mozart: it was the emotion of the Italian *musica lirica* that gripped us).

Our passion for Domingo had changed our life forever, and we wanted to gain every iota of benefit it offered us.

While we were in Barcelona we were apprised of the mind-blowing fact that a friend in Sydney had liaised with one of his in Hamburg, and this latter gentleman had got us tickets to *Tosca*, to be performed at the Staatsoper in that lovely city. Our own itinerary was chucked out the window on the spot as we set in place another dose of bliss. Bliss both performances (the *Tosca* turned out to be *La Bohème,* btw) truly were, and almost impossible to describe – so I shall attempt to do so only by saying that to hear the recorded Domingo is one thing, and full of wonder and joy; but to see him and be able to hear him *live*, that is so amazingly fantastic as to render all else a pale imitation. You can never, *ever* forget it.

And so we came home, a bit speechless (for us) and starry-eyed, and considered ourselves the luckiest pair on earth. But …

It can't have been more than a few weeks later that a Saturday morning paper told us the astounding fact that Domingo was going to tour Australia under the auspices of Opera Victoria.

Me being me (I'm sort of ... determined), I managed to get connected by phone to the manager of that organization, and offered him all the reasons why we two should be given tickets to Melbourne and Sydney. At that moment, I wasn't thinking of the Adelaide performance, but that was to be the icing on the Domingo cake.

Ken Mackenzie-Forbes, delightful bloke, was thus the chief instrument in our obtaining seats in the *front row* in Melbourne and in the *sixth row* in Sydney – which goes to show that determination is a useful trait. In Melbourne I took along a small posy of red and gold roses that a florist put together for me, and walked the very short journey to the bowing Plácido at performance end to give them to him. In Sydney, I took along my copy of his autobiography *My First Forty Years* to have him sign, and even exchanged a couple of words in Spanish with him. I thought life was complete.

But then the Adelaide concert, some week away, hove onto the horizon!

When I'd read *My First Forty Years*, I'd found that Plácido had a dear friend living in Perth, (my home town) and that this friend was married to a Mauritian lady. My family had a close history with the Perth Mauritian community of the early '60s, and my still-Perth-based mother knew the lady. My husband and I pressed her to make Plácido's friend's wife aware of our passion for our hero, and a friendship was struck with the Bertinazzo family. It had blossomed and one evening we were apprised of the happy fact that she and Giuseppe meant to travel to Adelaide for the Domingo concert. Instantly we became intending travellers there ourselves; and I (in typical fashion) took over the arrangements. They would fly there, we would drive down, and thus would we all be made exceeding happy to see Plácido onstage again.

And when Plácido phoned them in Adelaide from his hotel, Josée and Giuseppe arranged for us to join them for dinner that night!

We thought we had already experienced more of him than most opera-lovers would or could do: we were wrong. Dinner with Domingo, *really* too hard to describe! Big, beautiful, intelligent, gentle and humorous, he listened as I rested my hand on his arm and regaled him with ... I don't remember. Chic couldn't remember. All we knew was that it was the most wonderful time of our life.

And the concert the next night (where we also met Ken Mackenzie-Forbes) was sheer ... heaven ...

Monkey on the loose

By Alexander (Alistair) Stevenson

In 1947 I was 11-years-old and living in Glasgow when something quite extraordinary happened to our lives.

It was early Sunday morning. The family was fast asleep when I crept downstairs to collect the morning newspapers from the front door letter slot, the fresh bread rolls, and milk delivered earlier to the side porch. My parents, my two older sisters and my young brother were still fast asleep in the upstairs' bedrooms.

Sitting alone at the kitchen table, feeding on a freshly toasted buttered roll and a large mug of sweet tea, I felt thoroughly relaxed having my usual Sunday quiet time.

I was completely captivated by the newspaper's funnies (comic strips to you) and could hear nothing above the chatter of the birds. However, I began to sense, behind me, a different sound. Looking around, I nearly fell off my seat when I saw the little monkey at the kitchen door. He was sitting on the floor munching away at one of our precious breakfast rolls, his eyes firmly fixed on me.

As I reached out, trying to save what was left of the bread roll, he scrambled up on to the table. In his excitement, and realizing the prospect of a new game, he ran around the table scattering the newspapers in all directions.

"Help Dad, there's a monkey in the house; come and see it. Hey Mae, Margaret come quick, there's a monkey in the house," I yelled. Up the stairs the wee devil ran, much faster than I could, disappearing quickly into my sisters' bedroom.

Well what a helluva commotion followed! The screams could be heard for miles. Into their bedroom I dashed to find the girls, tearing at their hair, jumping up and down on their beds, yelling their heads off. They were really testing the bed springs!

The monkey gleefully jumped from one bed to the other. He was having a great time. My father dashed into the room. The girls were begging us to "please, please catch him." In came Mum dressed in her nightie, "I told you Dan Stevenson that bloody monkey would be nothing but trouble. Ye said it was securely tied up, ye stupid bugger." Eight-year-old Tom ambled in to his sister's bedroom. The monkey was exhausted, sitting still in the corner of the room, as Tom approached quietly and slowly towards his new wee toy. Picking him up, Tom proudly stated, "This is Cheetah." And from then on that's what we called him.

The previous night my father and his pal returned from a Saturday night drink at the local where they had bought the pet monkey from a hard-up sailor. My mother was not at all impressed with the excuse that, "the kids will have great fun with it."

It was about this time my grandmother, on my father's side, was planning to marry again, having been a widow for 24 years. My mother agreed to host the occasion and worked hard at cooking a special banquet for all the guests (family only) for the big day. The cousins happily played in the street and the grownups nattered away inside the house. My mother relaxed, her breakfast table was looking good.

Unfortunately, nobody seemed to notice the monkey was not in his quarters.

Cheetah was on the loose, and when I sneaked into the dining room to have a look at all the goodies, the cheeky wee monkey darted between my legs, scampered across the room, climbed up the legs of the table heading straight for the wedding cake. As I approached him, ever so carefully, he turned around, saw me, and took off carrying the top of the wedding cake with him. The cream cakes, buns, soft drinks and glasses tumbled everywhere. I didn't know what to do but I knew this little fellow was going to be my undoing. I had to let my mother know what was happening.

She wasn't happy to be drawn away from the adults in the kitchen, where they were laughing, chatting, smoking and drinking, "Hey Mum, you had better come see this."

"What is it Alistair? What is it for goodness sake?"

"It's the monkey Mum, he's let loose in the dining room."

"What? Who the hell let him in there?"

"Ah didnae mean it mum, honest ah didn't"

"Ah'll hang for you Alistair. One of these days Ah'll murder ye."

I followed her into the dining room. Cheetah was hunched in front of the fireplace eating a cream bun. Never did a monkey look so guilty or a woman so furious. There was no holding back this time. Mum flew at him.

She grabbed the poker, she swore, she tried to grab Cheetah but he was too quick. Her hair was in a mess as she yelled, "Come here ya wee bugger."

She was exhausted, as she glared at the mayhem surrounding her. I was afraid to say anything. Silence prevailed. Slowly she approached him. He was watching her and taking hold of his wee willy he pointed it straight at her new dress and peed. I could not believe that I was seeing this.

She was absolutely furious. She stomped back to the kitchen, a complete mess and everybody in the neighbourhood heard her scream, "Danny Stevenson, see that monkey, it goes, or by hell I go."

It was gone the next day. No one was sorry.

Worse than a nightmare

By Robert Phillips

We were at the beach in Fiji and I needed to go to the toilet.

There was a flash resort nearby with a big sign, *Hotel Patrons Only*, promising strict penalties for any riff-raff who ventured onto their hallowed premises. Well, I had pressure to go which was greater than the threats of death, so without saying anything to anyone, I discretely paid a visit to a large toilet block near the back fence of the hotel property.

Inside, two Japanese gentlemen were using the only two urinal bowls as I walked behind them to a cubicle and closed its door. The Japanese were talking loudly and probably had no idea that I was in the immediate vicinity. They finished and went. I completed my ablutions, but to my horror found that someone had locked the solid door to the block from the outside.

"Bother, " I said.

Haunted by visions of spending the night in the loo (well after the departure of the coach we were travelling in), I climbed onto the toilet bowl and tried to shift louvres in a narrow window, but to no avail. I was contemplating my own Waterloo when, luckily, I found another window at the back of the block and forced it open. It was about a metre off the ground but I managed to get one leg over and out, and stood on the ground with the other leg up in the air, propped on the window sill, quite locked into position, definitely immovable.

As if things weren't bad enough, I could hear an irate resort owner unlocking the door to the toilet block.

"Cripes," I thought, "It might really hit the fan here."

At that precise moment, wife Bronwen appeared, catwoman-like, and was so pleased to see I had a leg-over, she grabbed the ankle of the non-compliant leg and hoyed it from where it was stuck to the sill. It fell, gratefully, to the ground.

As the angry owner, hearing the ruckus, made his way down the edge of the building to investigate the source of my painful yell, Bronwen did a bunk into the bush, followed by me limping on one leg.

Believe me, there are times in your life when a nightmare is preferable to reality.

A white Christmas on order

By Roger Liles

Did you know you can order the weather you want on a special day? Within reason, of course. No of course you can't order a heatwave on Christmas Day in Moscow, any more than you can order a white Christmas in Brisbane, Australia. Let me tell you the story of how I know this.

I met a beautiful lady early in 1970 named Mary. She was in England, visiting from Australia on a working holiday. By spring, we were getting along famously. One beautiful balmy evening we were by a pool with one of my flat mates, Martin, and his girlfriend. I was feeling good about Mary so I decided to take a chance. I knew she had no intention of staying in England; she loved Australia, especially Sydney far too much to stay away.

I shared a story with them of how my interest in Australia was piqued. When I was at school, in a geography lesson we learned about how the different states had different rail gauges. This required passengers travelling from Sydney to Melbourne or vice versa to change trains at the border, which was Albury, on the New South Wales side, and Wodonga on the Victorian side. For some reason this had conjured up an image of a Wild West type scenario and I wanted to see it. I told her I wanted to at least visit Australia some time because of it. I then said I would order a white Christmas especially for her if she would marry me. (For those of you who do not know, it is very rare for London to have a white Christmas.) She said yes! We married in September and honeymooned in Rudesheim, on the Rhine. Despite the beautiful weather and location, which made it a memorable holiday, I told everyone how I had ordered a white Christmas for Mary.

Throughout the year if anyone spoke of Christmas I would tell them I had ordered a white Christmas, as it was going to be my last Christmas and Mary's only Christmas in London. As it was getting closer, the long term forecast was for a mild Christmas, therefore no chance of snow. I kept telling everyone that it would not be the case, as I had ordered a white Christmas. Leading up to Christmas the weather was mild, in fact quite warm for that time of the year. The talk was of most people anticipating another damp miserable Christmas. I continued to remind people I had ordered a white Christmas, telling them that it would happen.

Christmas Eve came and the forecast had not changed, and I was adamant that it was going to be white, as I had ordered one. By then, I also didn't really believe it, but had to continue the charade, almost to convince myself. The most common comment I got was, that "there was no chance," and "not to be silly." Martin had invited us to a Christmas dinner, where I'd lived when sharing with him. He was going to cook with his girlfriend's help. It was a big house with five bedrooms; the other guys who lived there were going back to their families for Christmas, so the four of us had the huge house to ourselves. I had ordered a fresh turkey from the butchers of the supermarket where I had worked and Martin was to pick

it up, as I was likely to be late. He could start cooking it and hopefully we would have dinner about 8.00 p.m. Unfortunately, Martin saw all the frozen turkeys being sold near the entrance to the store, and thought that was where he had to go. The butcher, with whom I'd placed the order, had the fresh ones. So dinner for 8.00 p.m. was not going to happen. By the time we got to eat, it was already Christmas day. We had had a good evening with some indoor fireworks, a few jokes and games to pass the time.

Some of you may know that when it snows it quietens all the noises outside. That gives a feeling of snugness to me. I told the others I could feel it snowing, but they jeered, telling me to forget it, as it is not going to be a white Christmas. I insisted that I could feel it. Nobody took any notice. As no one else would go and check, I got up and looked out the window. It was already a couple of inches deep. They would not believe me, I had to really push before Mary said she would come and look just to shut me up.

It was hard to believe, but we went out into the adjacent park, and threw snowballs at each other – and built a snowman! The snow lasted throughout Christmas day and Boxing Day. The day after, as the weather had turned warm, the snow melted.

Now when anyone is despondent about the weather forecast for a special day, I tell them if there is good enough reason and enough belief and determination, you can order the weather you want for that day ... within reason of course.

Finding a good man is like finding a needle in a haystack

By Rosemarie Hawke

My mum was a very special person. Mum used to encourage us to chase our dreams and believe that magic can happen.

If I had not had such a special mum I may not have set out on a quest in 2014 to find a person I had sat next to during my Economics lectures at Sydney University in 1970-1972. After all, what chance is there to find someone after all those years, when all you know is their given name and family name and approximate year of birth?

I had a special reason to try and find him. I wanted to thank him for some comments he had written to me in 1972 that I did not find and read until 1978. His words gave me comfort in what were proving to be difficult times. When I found the notes I wanted to be able to explain why I had not responded to them earlier but of course, there was no way to find him. Despite the passage of time I never forgot how I felt when I found the notes and I dreamed that somehow one day I would be able to thank him.

Significant changes in my life gave me the freedom and time in 2014 to pursue my quest. My first step was to check the university results to verify that I did have the correct spelling of his given and surname. Fortunately for me the records also provided his middle name, which proved helpful.

I had known he was a gifted student and concluded he would have excelled in his chosen career, so I expected my task to be as simple as typing his name into Google and getting my answer. It was not to be that simple. I found no trace of him in my initial searches. I was puzzled, as I was certain he would have risen to the top of a large company or be a very senior member of the public service. I found no trace.

I checked a range of White Pages listings across Australia. I tried phoning a few people with the same name. They were all very helpful and polite despite the weirdness of receiving a phone call out of the blue from a women asking whether they had been at Sydney University in 1970-72. One of them initially thought their nephew might be the person I was seeking, but he contacted me later to advise he had been mistaken. It's amazing how helpful and trusting people can be.

I also wrote to one address in Sydney that I thought looked promising. I checked my mailbox daily for a couple of weeks hoping for a response or a returned letter. Nothing. Then, while working in a temporary job in Canberra I received a phone call from a person of the same name I was seeking who confirmed receiving my letter. He apologised for taking so long to reply, explaining he had been in Germany for a few weeks and had only just returned. We had fun chatting and he was interested to know why I was seeking to make contact with someone from my past. When I explained the situation he was very supportive of my efforts and encouraged me to keep trying to solve the puzzle.

Quite reluctantly, I submitted an enquiry to a Sydney newspaper that publishes requests for reunions and contacts but heard nothing.

I felt I had exhausted all possible lines of inquiry in Australia. Then it dawned on me that the most successful Economics graduates in the 1970s left Australia to take up opportunities in the UK. I checked the UK White Pages but found nothing.

When I had been tracing my family history I had come across a UK-based service that holds records of births, deaths, marriages and electoral rolls. I thought it was worth a try. *Bingo!!* There was the name I was looking for, in about the right age group, somewhere near London. It looked promising. I wrote a letter, asking whether he might be the person I sat with during Economics lectures and explained I would be interested in hearing about what I was sure must have been an interesting life. I included my address, phone number and email address.

More anticipation! Would there be a letter? Would there be an email?

The days turned into weeks and maybe months. I managed to accept that there might be no reply. After all, there was nothing to entice the recipient of my letter to reply – other than curiosity.

Then, like so many other things in life, when you least expect it, there it was: an email!

Yes, he was the young man I had known at University. Yes, he did remember me. Yes, he was having an interesting life.

I received his email at the end of July 2014. When he returned to Australia to visit his family in December 2015, he made time to visit me.

I was finally able to explain to him why I had gone to such efforts to find him. He was clearly touched that the words that he had written in 1972 had made a difference in my life. At last I was able to thank him. I had a wonderful time hearing about his amazing career and filling him in on the path my life had taken. We are still in touch, sharing ideas on how to stay well as we age.

I am so thankful my mum allowed me to be a dreamer. I am glad I chased the dream of locating someone who made a difference in my life to say a belated "thank you."

Mischief in maths class

By Sandra Archer

It was 1963 and I was in a second year maths class.

As an exuberant 13-year-old, I was full of fun and enthusiastic about life in general, but a little less enthusiastic about algebra and equations. Occasionally I fancied myself as the class clown. My antics were harmless enough but on this particular day, my mischief saw me being sent out of the classroom and embarking on a journey of terror.

I must have been eating in class. How else would I have had a fist full of orange pips?

As the teacher abruptly stopped writing on the board and turned to face the class, she asked tersely, "Who threw those?"

Owning up to this question was sure to surprise and impress my peers.

"I did, Mrs E."

She hesitated for a second and apparently decided that I had crossed the border of what she would tolerate. I remember that Mrs E. had a rather relaxed form of behaviour management, but this time I had gone too far. Her brown eyes widened as she uttered the words: "Go down and see Miss Gordon!"

Oh no! Not Miss Gordon! My buffoonery had backfired.

The command sent me into immediate shock. My youthful colour drained away, my mouth dried, my hands became instantly cold and clammy and I squirmed in my chair as my shaking legs tried in vain to push me into a standing position. A second command affirmed that the teacher meant what she said and so I set off along the forbidding corridors, which were to lead me to the scariest vice principal I have ever come across. There she was, writing at her desk. I could see her through the tiny window of her office door. What was to become of me?

All eyes were upon me as I returned to the classroom. The girls were bursting with curiosity as to my fate. Mrs E. also enquired, "Well, what did she say?"

Gingerly, I answered: "Er, Nothing, Mrs E. I didn't speak to her. I just saw her!"

I held my breath as I waited her reply. Mrs E. began to smile, and then laugh.

"Sandra, I will have to let you off because of your initiative!"

The feeling of relief was overwhelming. Needless to say, I never threw orange pips again.

The hairdresser

By Sue Artup

When I was a little girl I used to curl up in my mother's arms and smell her hair.

I loved her hair. Everyone admired her hair. But the smell of her hair was not to be shared. It was my special thing; the olfactory surety that she was mine. It connected us, mother and first-born. It lingered on her combs and about her dressing table. It comforted me when she was away. In her dotage her hair is a perfectly-shaped cloche of silver-grey.

One day she makes the ill-advised step of allowing a *barber* to cut her hair. Hacked! Mauled into a non-descript colourlessness. I will not go out with her until it grows long enough to be fixed by a proper hairdresser.

I tell her to dig out a photograph of her lovely head so there can be no mistaking the look we must re-capture.

"I can just look in the mirror darling!" she quips, deliberately missing the purpose.

She leans over the contents of her handbag, strewn over her bed. "I must go to the bank afterwards and cash a cheque." *A dog-eared piece of signed paper worth $1,000.*

"I'll stick it here." *Nice and secure, attached with a rubber band to the outside of her wallet.*

"Won't it flutter off when you go looking for your Visa card?" *Good point, damn elusive Visa card.* She settles on her change purse, both cheque and card ... *can't go wrong there!*

In the hairdresser's, she reflects: *no, that cheque is better off in the inside pocket of her handbag.* I point out that she has shifted the cheque around three times now. She swings at me, "I have not! Don't you make things up! Don't you try to put one over! And in public!"

Never argue with your mother.

Summoned to the washbasin, I try to fill the hairdresser in on the debacle of the last haircut. Mum takes her arm, pulling her away from me and muttering in her ear. The girl turns to me and says, "Oh, are you a teacher?"

"That was supposed to be our secret!" exclaims mum to her new ally, who has already betrayed her by almost exposing the secret I can only guess at.

The haircut is beautiful. A bit coiffed, a bit floosy but, we have style!

Lunch in the shopping centre is a celebration. We flutter and chatter and order our chai lattes – so warming that she is far too hot in her woollen singlet, banlon spencer, silk blouse, short-sleeved jumper, long-sleeved jumper, " If I just undo the buttons of my blouse..."

Hands dive and writhe under two layers of jumpers.

Still hot.

"I'll just wriggle out of this little jumper ..." *Oh my God, the short-sleeved one under the long-sleeved one.* She manoeuvres her arms like Houdini and sits momentarily still to catch her breath from the effort. With a last hunching of the shoulders my straight-jacketed mother attempts to yank the under layer down around her waist.

Not happening.

The under-jumper and the outer-jumper meet at elbow level. I look up from my chicken

and avocado toasted Turkish to see a Vital Call button staring me in the face. A Vital Call button sitting atop a woollen singlet, banlon spencer, and curtained by an unbuttoned silk blouse.

Mum looks down at her exposure and back at me. We shriek with laughter, drawing even more attention to the contortions she is still – red from mirth rather than embarrassment – trying to master.

"Just pull your jumper over your head, quick! Do the buttons up!"

With one swift movement the outer-jumper is off. Then the under-jumper, but not before she realises with a moan of horror: "My *hair!* Oh no, my *hair!*" clasping her head with both hands, trying to salvage the remains of her coiffeur.

At home we settle down with our wine and the quotidian word puzzle, trying to save brain cells even as we kill them. Since my last visit she has tidied the place up. Nothing is in reach anymore, least of all her pens. "Someone keeps taking my pens. They are never where I leave them." I take out my ubiquitous pencil case, and gently goad her, "These are *mine*."

"Well mine look just like that."

"You didn't have yellow pens on Sunday."

"I know what colour pens I have! I don't know who has been shifting things around!"

Mr Nobody.

Later when scavenging for an emery board I find her pens tucked away amongst the letters and cut-out recipes and handy hints and scribbled notes on everything from the names of opera singers to the treatment of Alzheimer's.

We restrain ourselves and leave enough wine in the bottle for her dinner tomorrow.

"Leave it on the floor in the pantry, darling. That way if I have to crawl I can still get it."

Heading off to bed, we scream with laughter again.

"I love you so much, my daughter."

I push my face into her hair. And she is there.

The puny pugilist

By Kevin Murray

It's 1963 and I've just entered "big school." This means that I have moved from fifth class at Marist Brothers Mosman to sixth class at Marist Brothers North Sydney. More importantly for this story, it means that my whole class has moved from being at the top of the school to being once more at the bottom. Each of us would soon feel that primal urge to mark out our place in the new pecking order in that social battlefield that is the school playground.

I was an underdeveloped, quiet, scrawny twelve-year-old. In a social structure that rewarded prowess on the football field above academic achievement, I was the lowest of the low. Wise enough to befriend larger, more athletic types, I was however, vulnerable and exposed whenever the tough boys came looking for ways to assert their dominance. I needed an effective way to leap up that pecking order. I needed a plan.

I decided I had to fight someone. I admit to being slightly put off by the fact that I had only ever fought with my sisters before – and that was usually just verbal fisticuffs. I had never actually punched anyone (or anything, for that matter) before. I had, however, watched many TV shows where the hero inevitably slugs it out with a saloon full of villains, emerging triumphant through the swinging doors with, at worst, a slight trickle of blood emanating from the corner of his mouth.

I started observing these shows with greater interest. I would observe the nuances of pugilistic prowess – the left uppercut, the right jab, the frequently-effective 'one-two.' I would stand in front of the bathroom mirror practising my aggressive stances, imagining bulging muscles where all that the mirror revealed were lumps, which to the untrained eye would be considered indistinguishable from a mild insect bite. In moments of rational coolness, I would observe that these stances looked decidedly less aggressive if the steam was wiped from the mirror, but nevertheless, my mind was set. I was to become invincible, and revered from one corner of the playground to the other. I was to literally become a legend in my own lunchtime.

A more substantial obstacle to these ignoble ambitions was the fact that I actually didn't dislike anyone with enough fervour to justify picking a fight with them. And besides, I was realistic enough to know that I would only stand a chance of winning against a foe who shared similar anatomical attributes with me, namely: skinny, un-athletic, preferably short-sighted and, hopefully, as scared as I was. But who?

I looked purposefully around the classroom. Peter Smith? No – he's small, but he's my best friend, and as strong as an ox. Tim Wilson? No – he's a front-row forward. For the A Team, no less. Tony Bramble? It would be very easy to pick a fight with him. He's always in trouble. But being so makes him too experienced, so *no*. What about John "Four-Eyes" Fogarty? He's the smallest kid in class. He's a loner, so not much risk of someone tougher coming to his defence. He appears to

read books constantly, so he won't attract too much sympathy from the other boys. And his family is poor, so I guess he hasn't even had my advantage of learning how to fight from TV. Perfect!

So, Four-Eyes Fogarty it is. Now all I need is to invent a reason for a fight. Surprisingly, I discover that this is not difficult for a twelve-year-old boy. All it requires is a bit of pushing and name-calling over some trivial incident and you have a fight on your hands. My plan is now set. I shadowbox that night, confidence growing. Mine will be the name on everyone's lips by this time tomorrow.

Lunchtime arrives too soon as I feel my late-night bravado rapidly waning in the cold light of day. However, I need to go through with it. My whole future depends on this day! I wait for some small excuse to pick the fight of the century. I don't have to wait long – you see, Four-Eyes Fogarty spends much of his lunchtime walking around the playground, his nose immersed in a book. This makes him a sitting duck for taunts. He has, however, developed a degree of immunity to taunting, so I have to use something more substantial. The tennis ball with which we are playing handball proves to be the perfect first-strike weapon. I wait my chance, then direct it at the unsuspecting Four-Eyes just as he walks past. I let rip with emotions I didn't even know I had. I accuse him of being deliberately obstructive, causing me to lose that vital winning point. I refuse to accept his spluttering apology. I push him (just like in the movies!). I call him names. I knock his book to the ground.

For the briefest of moments I hesitate. Suddenly I see myself in poor Four-Eyes' shoes and I feel sorry for him, but it's too late now. I've come too far. The crowd is gathering and I must go through with it. In a few minutes, after I punch his lights out, I'll be "king of the castle" and I won't ever have to be socially catalogued with the likes of Four-Eyes Fogarty again.

As he stoops to pick up his book, I decide that this is an ideal time for that well-practised, fabulous right uppercut to the jaw. Whoosh! You could actually hear the bones break, just like Clint Eastwood punching out the bad guy. Four-Eyes stood bolt upright at the shock, his black-rimmed glasses askew. My right fist recoiled in sheer pain. The bones I heard breaking were not in his jaw. They were in my hand. The fight was over. My friend Pete wrapped my throbbing arm in my shirt and marched me off to the infirmary. This was not the triumphant march I had in mind.

As we ascended the stairs I glanced behind, to see my recently-contrived adversary surrounded by enthusiastic admirers who previously had never even acknowledged his existence, heartily congratulating him on his stunning victory. They were even calling him John, for heaven's sake!

The principal phoned my mother, who came and took me to hospital. Again.

The photo box

By Sandra Grant

I have put it off for four years now ... sorting through a shoebox of photos that belonged to my mum and dad. Technically, I guess they still belong to Mum but in her state of mind I doubt that she remembers who the people are or when the photos were taken. There's my mum as a young girl. Her face is happy and carefree. She is dressed in a waitress uniform, black dress with a frilly white apron. Four young women, standing in a row, like a chain locked together, arms around waists, smiling for the camera. You can almost hear them giggling. Mum was probably about 16 at that time. She left school at 13. As young people, they were expected to help support their families in a time when everyone contributed because times were tough. There is no sign of resentment in her face. No sign that she should have been destined for a different life. I wonder who the others are in the photo. There is another photo which has some writing on the back identifying the other girls by their first names only and the notation, "Packing fruit at Kentucky." She is still wearing an apron but a more serviceable one this time. But still the four of them are smiling and carefree.

I can remember some of her stories; adventures she had as a working girl. As a teenager, her parents had all her top teeth removed (not out of cruelty, but necessity, as she had cavities and they didn't have the money for fillings.) She recovered from this but it was some time later that her aunt, visiting from Sydney, suggested to her parents that she needed dentures and they agreed she should go to Sydney. Her lovely aunt arranged for her to go to the dental hospital where she was supplied with some new teeth. The same aunt arranged for her to start work in an office with her. She was put on the switchboard for the office, which was fine until the phone calls started coming in. This was at a time when calls were connected by putting a plug into a board for the correct office to receive the call. Needless to say, my mum, who had never even had a phone at home – let alone seen a "fancy" switchboard – got into quite a mess and disconnected the bosses from their calls and put people through to the wrong offices. I think they gave her a job in the filing department after that.

At the ripe old age of 15 she and her younger sister went to the Riverina where they had been told they could get work as fruit pickers. Can you imagine parents of today letting two young girls to go to Leeton alone to find work?

The next group of photos I've sorted through are Mum with my father. He, at first, is in uniform, heading off to New Guinea and the excitement of the war. It's hard to reconcile this courting couple with the people I knew as my parents. Mum is still looking carefree and as my sister says, "glamorous" – with this young man, laughing and obviously besotted with the young woman. They're swimming, laughing, and sitting on my father's motorbike, my Mum with her arms around his waist. Always smiling and laughing.

Wedding photos come next. My mum is wearing a borrowed wedding dress, but holding a beautiful bouquet. Her two sisters are bridesmaids and once again the word "glamorous" comes to mind. My father with my mum. He looks a little worried, not quite as carefree as in previous photos. There's one of the bridal couple with my grandparents, Mum's parents. But I can't find one with my paternal grandmother and have to ring my aunt to ask if she was there. There were family difficulties but yes, she did attend the wedding.

I move on. In this group, a house is being built in a new part of Tamworth. My father is building it and they're living in the shed while construction takes place. It must have taken a couple of years because there are photos of my brother as a baby and then as a toddler and another baby – me.

My brother, playing with a dog, climbing high up on a ladder, holding a hammer and helping Dad and standing next to me, a chubby-faced and happy baby.

Another group of photos. This time we're all on the farm near Carroll. Now there are four children. My mum is holding up a baby. She looks happy. She was born to this role of mother but perhaps four children really stretched her patience. She worked hard at looking after us, constantly washing, cleaning and cooking. No wonder her face takes on a weary look in these and later photos. Here the photos are less regular: the occasional family outing where we're all dressed up and off to town – a treat during school holidays, as I recall; my brother in a football team; some school photos; some photos of us with aunts, uncles cousins and eventually boyfriends, girlfriends and then another round of wedding photos.

I have to pack away the photos, but I have made progress and some are now in an album that I take to show Mum when I visit.

She looks at the album with interest but I have to remind her that she is the young woman in the photos. She says, "I was good looking, wasn't I?"

I tell her, "yes and that's why you had such beautiful looking children."

She laughs and in her face I see the same smile from the photos and know that my mother is still here with me.

Life in the 1950s

By Pauline Johnston

At Easter, my son, his wife and my two adorable granddaughters came to visit. For Easter I bought the girls a teddy bear each, on which I had embroidered – with much effort – their names on the bears' paw. The teddy bears, together with ceramic bunnies, eggs to paint, two chocolate rabbits, and 10 smaller eggs for the *Easter egg* hunt were popular treats.

At the end of the Easter egg hunt, both my granddaughters ended up with five small eggs each in their baskets. My eldest granddaughter, aged five, said to me, "Nana this is the worst Easter ever," as she gazed down at the five small eggs in her basket. At bedtime, my granddaughter's remark prompted me to tell the two girls a story about me when I was a little girl about their age. By the time I finished the following story, my five-year-old granddaughter said to me, "You know Nana, this really has been the best Easter after all," as she cuddled her Teddy Bear and fell fast asleep.

I remembered the time when I was four years old. When I was born in 1950, times were pretty tough for my parents. We – Mum, Dad, younger sister and baby brother – lived with my grandparents in Liverpool, UK. I had no toys, as my parents were poor, so I kept myself amused with simple things: stones to play *Jacks*, an old rope to skip with and a ball that my friend Cathy was lucky enough to own and share with me.

The highlight of my week was when the 'rag and bone man', wearing his flat cloth cap and dressed in rags, would haul his cart along the cobblestone road shouting, "Any old rags, any old rags." At four, I would weave my way to the front of the crowd to see what treasures the rag man had on his cart. One day, I spied a doll, half hidden under his pile of old clothes. I raced back up the street to my Nana's house and told Mum I needed some rags to get the most beautiful dolly I had ever seen. Mum fished out a few bits and pieces for me and off I went, breathlessly arriving back at the cart, hoping "my dolly" was still there. I handed over my rags and asked for the doll.

"Sorry little girl, you need more rags to get this doll." With tears stinging my eyes, I raced back up the street on my little legs.

"Mum, Mum, the rag man wants more rags for me to get my dolly."

Mum must have seen the desperate look on my face and picked up the only other thing she had left to give me: a rag mat off the floor! Off I went with the little rag mat rolled up under my arm. *Yippee*, the rag man gave me my beautiful doll. When I got home Mum looked at my very first toy – a plastic doll that had two black holes for eyes, no clothes and was very dirty. Mum and I washed "Molly" in the sink until she looked brand new. Molly went everywhere with me, and at night I would cuddle her until we both fell asleep.

One morning, I woke up to find my precious Molly gone. "Mummy," I cried, "Molly's gone." My mother sat me on her knee and explained that my daddy had taken Molly to the doll's hospital to get her eyes fixed. Each morning, I would wake up hoping my dolly would be home. After what seemed a lifetime,

Molly was back sitting at the end of my bed with the most beautiful blue eyes that opened and closed.

By the time I was five-and-a-half, my parents moved to a new neighbourhood and I started school. A few months into my first school year, my teacher told us that a raffle was to be held on Friday. The tickets cost one penny for a choice of two prizes: a well-used lampshade and a set of hand-knitted dolls' clothes, including jacket, bootees and hat. Mum gave me the penny and I bought the raffle ticket. Friday came around and all day I waited in anticipation for the draw at the end of the school day. My teacher held the basket containing all the raffle tickets up high. Twenty-six pairs of eyes followed her hand as she dipped it into the basket and called out, "The first winner is ..."

Monday morning couldn't come fast enough. I went to school to show my teacher and classmates the best-dressed doll with the most beautiful blue eyes in the whole wide world!

I had never shared this story with anyone until this Easter. I am grateful that my granddaughters understood and accepted the moral of this story and will always remember that you don't need lots of toys or possessions to feel loved and secure.

Escaping the Sri Lankan war

by Ratnajothy Navaratnam

It was 22 July 1983, my wife, two children and I were going for a drive to visit my cousin. As we were passing the cemetery in Borella Colombo, a group of people came and stopped our car and said, "There is a wild mob of thugs attacking all the cars and all the Tamil people! Please go back to where you came from!"

We didn't know the reason why this incident was taking place but immediately returned home to Barnes Place, Colombo.

Later we found out that there had been 13 Sri Lankan Sinhalese soldiers killed by a landmine blast set up by the Tamil Tigers. News of this incident triggered country-wide panic and as a result the Sinhala Thugs took advantage of the Tamil people living in Colombo by looting their properties, setting fire to their businesses, and killing and raping at random.

The following day there was a lull and I thought that things had returned back to some sort of normality so I visited my office at the Rio Cinema, Slave Island Colombo (which we owned). Only half the staff had turned up for work and there were no crowds waiting to see a film so I decided to cancel the morning show. I waited around to see what was happening.

Some of the staff members arrived late and informed me that the mob was attacking all the Tamil businesses. I went up to the top of the Rio Hotel, adjoining the cinema, and I could see smoke in the air and riots starting.

When I came down, my loyal Sinhala staff requested me to please go home as the mobs had already surrounded Slave Island and the people of Slave Island could not hold the mob back. I took their advice and asked my two, female, Tamil secretaries and my cashier to accompany me as they were also unsafe staying on the premises.

As we were travelling along the Bara Lake, there was a traffic jam due to the mob closing in on Slave Island and we were unable to move. Thankfully, a new road was being built just nearby. As the road was still unopened, the workers had left tar drums blocking the new road's entrance. In the spur of the moment, without a second thought, I drove straight through the tar drums and onto the new road, which ultimately led me home to Colombo. If I had not escaped through the new road, I would have been one of the victims of the '83 riots.

When I arrived home, a few of my relatives had gathered in my house and also at my parent's home, seeking refuge there while my parents were in India. With great difficulty, I was able to urgently contact my parents and tell them not to take their scheduled return flight to Colombo the following day.

I later found out that the passengers on that particular flight were brutally attacked after landing in Sri Lanka, on the bus travelling back into Colombo.

Later that day, my second cinema The Trio, Devwala Colombo had been set alight by the Sinhala Thugs. I gathered the bare essentials necessary for my family and friends but soon realised we didn't have any money, so I decided to go to the Rio Cinema. As I was about to step

into the car I was informed the Rio too had been burnt and the mob was gathering around the Cinnamon Gardens area, just minutes from Barnes Place.

As a safety precaution I divided my family and took them to Sinhala friends who volunteered to safe house them. We received some food from the Lions Club where I was president.

My best friend, a member of the Lion's Club who was also Sinhalese, took me into his home and that day and night we heard a rumour that the Tamil Tigers had come to Colombo, which resulted in chaos. However, the rumour was not true.

When the chaos subsided the following day, I was able to collect my family and return to our home in Barnes Place. That was the day I decided to migrate to any other country to keep my family alive.

Thanks to Australia who opened its arms to the desperate Sri Lankan Tamils at the time.

For the past 30 years I have enjoyed the peace and harmony of this beautiful country which celebrates multiculturalism. As result, I was able to rebuild my life without the fear of persecution.

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