

Seniors' Stories

Volume 5



SENIORS CARD



FRONT COVER: OPEN CATEGORY WINNING ENTRY

Rebecca Hilton Brown

Daisy and her Great Grand Poppy

Daisy (7 months) with her Poppa (93). She nuzzled in as he kissed her bald head, whispering stories about the Nan she missed meeting, who would have also adored her. My Mum, Nan and I had been an inseparable trio and Poppa ensured that Daisy knew the love of his life.

Acknowledgements

This collection of 100 stories is the fifth volume of *Seniors' Stories* written by seniors from throughout NSW.

The theme of this year's edition was *Love Your Life* and each story reflects this theme in its own unique and inspiring way.

The photographs in this edition form part of the Art of Ageing photographic exhibition. This exhibition celebrates ageing and dispels the negative myths and stereotypes of getting older.

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

Thanks also to Colleen Parker and the project team from the Fellowship of Australian Writers NSW Inc. and those involved in the design and printing of the book.





A message from the Premier

It is a pleasure to introduce the fifth edition of *Seniors' Stories*. These stories are a fine example of the literary talent of seniors in NSW. They prove that age is no barrier to creativity, wit and wisdom.

I would like to thank the more than 600 writers who applied to have their stories published in this fantastic collection. The theme for this edition is *Love Your Life*, and the number of applicants shows just how many of NSW's seniors can relate to this philosophy. It brings me great pride to know that older Australians across NSW are expressing themselves positively and thoughtfully in a time-honoured format – storytelling.

Congratulations to all the contributors to this book. I encourage you to write more and share your stories in the knowledge that they are read and enjoyed by people of all generations now and in years to come.

Gladys Berejiklian MP
Premier

A message from the Minister



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

I am privileged to meet many older people, learn from their wisdom and experience firsthand the generosity of time they contribute to their communities.

Seniors Card members were invited to contribute an original story around the theme of *Love Your Life* which was also the theme of the 2019 NSW Seniors Festival. We were overwhelmed by the numbers and high quality of stories submitted by seniors from across the state.

Publishing the selected 100 stories is a great way to showcase the writing talents of seniors and provide an insight into their lives and the experience of older Australians throughout NSW. Telling stories is an age

old tradition in all cultures; its how we pass down knowledge and history through the generations and how we gain an understanding and realisation of the diversity which 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 and encouraging older people to stay active, healthy and socially connected.

I hope you enjoy reading this wonderful collection of stories.

Geoff Lee MP

Acting Minister for Seniors



Foreword

For as long as I can remember I have always been fascinated by the power of words. Whether in the pages of a book or the lyrics of a song, words unlock emotions from deep inside us all. They can bring us to tears, transport us to places only dreamed of, incite us to indignation or anger, educate, entertain and in a song, instantly take us back to a moment in the distant past, a wedding, a lost love or the birth of a child. They are the signposts of our lives. As a singer I have sung the stories written by the world's greatest songwriters. As a songwriter I have tried to emulate them as best I could.

I love the true story. The written record of a real life experience is always preferable to me. Whether a recent event or stories passed down, they give an insight into the human experience. The written word can transcend time. The words of Henry Lawson and Banjo Paterson transport us back in time and allow us to see how it was in the formative years. My first ancestor in Australia Matthew Lock arrived on HMS *Surprise* in the Second Fleet in 1790. Through the written word I have been able to relive his and other's experience in the new colony. Unless someone wrote it down their story would be lost forever.

Here are our stories.

Bob Pierse



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A Comforting Cup of Tea

Janice Lepherd

Mount Annan

Mary lived a placid life in her little home in an orderly and attractive street, occupied by folk who like her, were now retired. The homes were well kept and the gardens tended with loving care. The neighbours were considerate of each other without being intrusive, on first-name terms but respectful of each other's privacy, she loved her life.

But then her world changed when her next door neighbour sold up and went to live with her daughter.

Mary was gardening when the removalist van arrived to offload the new owner's possessions. Some rather dated looking furniture was carried in, the lounge and chairs looked shabby, and there did not seem to be much else interesting as far as Mary could see from her low level position near the fence. The new owner arrived just as the removalists left and then Mary saw something that gave her immediate palpitations! He was young and huge, had a plait down his back, moustache and tattoos on various parts of his anatomy that she could see, and was leaping from a large, shiny, noisy motor bike.

She scuttled inside before he saw her, closed the door firmly, and made herself a strong cup of tea. What was the street coming to with people like him moving into her nice, quiet, respectable street where she had lived so happily for 40 years? Her Fred would turn over in his grave if he could see what was happening. Upset now, she reached for the phone and called her long standing neighbour on the other side. Much tutting and disturbing thoughts surfaced during this conversation.

Over the weeks Mary endeavoured to keep out of the way when the motor bike roared up to the house. From his occasional visitor, she knew her neighbour's name was Chook. Chook!? His voice

was loud and Mary shuddered. By now she and most of the other people in the street would do anything to avoid speaking to, or being anywhere near Chook. They were all intimidated by his presence and the wretched motor bike.

Not long before she moved, Mary's neighbour had renewed the back side fence between them with panels of colorbond, very smart and much more attractive than the old paling fence. One afternoon Chook managed to hit one of the panels with a huge stone whilst mowing, causing a deep dent. Chook tried to flatten this out with dire results. Mary, now overwrought to the point of hysteria, marched next door and confronted him.

"What are you doing to the fence?" she demanded.

"Just leave it alone, you're making it much worse. The neighbourhood is going downhill fast, with the likes of you moving here."

Chook listened with his mouth open, his tall frame towering over her. "Anything I can do to make amend ... No? ... Sorry Luv."

Then Chook began revamping his front garden and one by one, painted gnomes appeared on his lawn. Horrible looking things, thought Mary, but then what else would you expect from Chook? An ornamental wheelbarrow and a couple of pink plaster flamingos completed the transformation. He stood back and admired his handiwork, then noticed Mary pulling out weeds.

"Hi Mary, how do you like my landscaping? Isn't it great? I'm getting married and all this is for my bride. Won't she just love it?"

Shuddering inwardly Mary agreed – what else could she do?

A few days later she looked out through her frontwindows to see two local boys from some blocks away pick up a gnome each and move at a fast trot down the street. Everyone knew these boys, they were always in trouble. Indignation took hold of her and when Chook came home she told him what she has seen. Hideous though these ornaments were, they were Chook's property and he should be told. "Thanks Luv, you're a real good neighbour you are. Anytime you have a problem you just come and tell me. I'll get it fixed for you."

Later that evening, Mary pondered the day's events over a cup of tea. It just goes to show that appearances aren't everything she thought. She would sleep easier now, knowing there was a protector next door and somehow the motor bike didn't make that much noise, it would let her know when Chook was coming or going. And it would be nice to have a married couple next door – bring a refreshing feel to the street. Who knows, in time one might get used to the pink flamingos and garish gnomes. Hopefully the summer sun would fade the colours. She relaxed now and knew she would once again love her life.

Mary was out the front in time to wave Chook off to the church on his wedding day. He emerged from his house, *but* not the Chook Mary knew. Dressed in a perfectly fitting black suit with white shirt, hair expertly cut, no beard or whiskers. He looked at Mary and winked as his best man drove up in a white car. "I won the bet Mary. The guys reckoned I wouldn't last the distance in this street looking as I did. I had a month off work and made the most of the bikie image. Now it's back to normality, marriage, beautiful clever wife, city job and the best neighbour in the world. I fooled them all didn't I – except you!"

As the car moved off, Chook (he would always be Chook to her now) leaned out the window and called, "Don't worry about my landscaping. One of my mates is coming round tomorrow to take all the stuff back to the second-hand shop. Pink flamingos and gnomes don't go with the shell castle and sea-creature feature we want to create. Hope you can give us some ideas!"

Mary feebly waved Chook off, then tottered indoors to make a strong and comforting cup of tea. Surely Chook was teasing her again? . . . She reached for the phone for a long talk with her sympathetic and understanding neighbour.

A Journey to Meet My Grandson

Linda Smith

Cabramatta

The birth of your first child is meant to be a joyous occasion with nothing but happy emotions that go into your memories as one of life's greatest moments, but there are some that do not fit that mould and sadly mine was one such birth. The moment my first son was born, everyone in the room went quiet, he was not presented to me but taken quickly to the special care nursery and I felt like I was having a bad dream that I couldn't wake from. The dream continued as my doctor started to explain that although my baby had an incomplete mouth both internally and externally this was nothing to worry about these days as it was easily fixed surgically. It turned out that this piece of information was a gross understatement of the facts as I was to find out very quickly in the near future and for many years ahead.

My son today is thirty five years old, a beautiful kind, gentle, calm individual who is also a doctor with a great deal of life experience under his belt. He also has a warm, loving partner who is a delight to all who meet her. They set up house about two and a half hours drive from the rest of our family, in a pleasant town on the South Coast.

This is the background, so now begins the journey.

Ever since I heard my son's anxious voice on the phone informing me of the immanent birth of my first grandchild five weeks earlier than expected, I had been living in a state of controlled excitement with emotions swinging from elation to concern and back, so when he followed up on his original call about 11.00pm that evening announcing the birth of a tiny but healthy baby boy that had slight breathing difficulties due to his immaturity, I was relieved that there appeared to be nothing more serious to contend with. I didn't know then that further complications and a transfer to a more sophisticated children's hospital was to take

place in the next few days. All I knew was that as soon as I was given the okay to do so, I would be on my way to visit the newborn.

The time arrived at last and I was leaving on the train to travel to the South Coast hospital to meet my tiny bundle of joy.

It was raining heavily when I left home and the wind was becoming quite strong, with squally gusts buffeting the train, but I hardly noticed as my head was in the clouds and I felt it was the most glorious of days.

Looking out of the train window I noticed the rain had turned quite cyclonic and it was hard to make out the names of the stations as we passed through with the usual scenic landscape becoming a blur.

The dramatic vista outside complete with sound effects from the wind and water crashing against the train windows felt like sitting in the middle of a symphony orchestra as it was building up to the climax of a musical melodrama.

I arrived at my station after what seemed a very long journey but in reality was not more than an hour and a half. Alighting from the train I realised the full extent of the extended storm that was all around us and was almost swept over by the wind. Water was cascading down the exit ramp from the station like a waterfall and a small group of passengers along with myself stood waiting for this to subside before we could exit the station.

It was taking too long so I paddled through the water and struggled up the ramp and then turned up the hill to the hospital situated in an all-commanding position at the top. The wind didn't help and it was quite a battle, but once again I was spurred on with the enthusiasm of my mission, arriving at the hospital somewhat the worse for wear.

I made my way to the maternity section where I met two of my daughter-in-law's friends who were also there to visit. My daughter-in-law appeared just as we had introduced ourselves and greeted us, followed closely by my son and we made our way to the special nursery for pre-term infants.

The visitors were limited in this area so I went alone with my daughter-in-law and was overcome with a rush of emotion as I stood over my tiny grandson's crib and literally absorbed the picture of this small perfect human being with breathing tube bringing him the extra oxygen he needed and could not yet quite manage to get for himself.

There were also other monitoring devices attached to him and I remember just wishing I could pick him up and cuddle him and welcome him to our family, but that was to come a little later.

I had lived my whole life up to this point and never experienced the same feelings of intense elation that swept over me in those first few moments and suddenly I realised and understood the great gift we have bestowed upon us when our children make us grandparents.

Life changes for us when we have children and then again when we become grandparents and we recognise the promise of a new life whether it be the smallest or the largest of creatures on our planet, it is the glue that binds us all together and gives us a form of immortality and hope for a brighter future for all.

My son and his wife were to go on and produce another boy and then a girl, all beautiful healthy children, a gift of far greater value than we could ever have imagined.

A Late Bloomer

Narelle Noppert

Picton

"Wow, there is a lot to look at!" My guest stated as she eyed my modest-sized backyard. A member of an organization I belonged to, Sue was a talented artist and I looked to her for acknowledgement of my creative streak.

"There is so much to look at, but it's not overdone, it's very creative." I walked with her giving commentary, or a story behind each piece of artwork, plant or decor.

"I am a keen gardener and over the years I have done every craft and hobby imaginable, and if the opportunity presented I displayed them, inside or out." I had become bored doing the same thing, so mosaicking offered ideas limited only by my imagination, which was growing daily. I had practised for over a decade now.

"The mosaic faces peering from the rose garden were an exercise capturing the detail of a face. They weren't meant to look oriental, they decided that for themselves," I admitted, quoting a teddy bear teacher from years back. One adorned a pair of hoop earrings and another a pair of glasses and I explained how difficult it had been to attach them.

"I'm hearing you girl!" Sue nodded with understanding. "Most of my art includes added texture of different mediums." She continued, telling me of the process of making lovely paper from scraps of cloth. Sue admired my mosaiced bird house, plant pots, table tops and wall hangings of varied designs. She particularly liked my fairy wrens of tile and crockery. Each had a tale, and she listened happily. It felt good sharing with the like-minded.

"Mind if we sit down?" I gestured to Sue. Today was a bad knee day for me, both were red and swollen and the early cold had affected my back. I had health above average for my age, my doctor told me, but the arthritis was certainly my Achilles heel.

With the jacaranda shifting gently in the breeze, we sat watching the birds eating from the bird feeder. I explained my attraction for pretty things, obvious in the line of little teapots and china flowers in pots. I haunted markets and op shops to find pieces suitable for my mosaics or backyard décor. I choose mostly pastels but love a subtle splash of bright colour!

"Not everything of beauty can be sacrificed for my artwork, some pieces need their own presence. Perhaps the upside of living on my own and finding my own identity."

Sue looked at me with understanding and agreed.

"And the lovely handmade cushion covers, made by you, I assume?" I nodded and smiled meekly, feeling like a total success.

Following Sue's visit I sat and pondered how good it felt to share my passion. I had never been sporty or crafty throughout my life but retirement gave me the opportunity to explore and find a self I hadn't known. Given the gift of old age, I have time to exercise and create, an indulgence one could almost feel guilty for, if not for some sacrifice in well-being.

I keep as fit as I can and recognize my creativity has grown. I am told I have an eye for colour, not bad for the high school girl sent to the Principal's office for spilling water over her pitiful painting.

Ageing is a balance and a blessing, denied to many.



A Life with New Directions

Kate Worth

Peakhurst

Some may think a move to a retirement village is the end of a long road, but to me it is a haven of new opportunities.

Rather than being the end of a life spent mainly in the service of others as a nurse, a wife and mother, following my divorce I worked as an administrative officer at a university for some years. During this time, even though I had left school at fourteen, I also obtained my degree as a Bachelor of Arts.

I later enrolled in a small business course and started my own business of Design and Layout which I ran for some years. However, it became a rather lonely existence sitting in front of a computer meeting deadlines in those years. So following that, I obtained a job at the Women's Health Centre in the Illawarra where I worked for 12 years; firstly as a part-time receptionist, later becoming full time. Finally I became the administrative officer there, with a lot of responsibility.

So this latest change into the retirement village has been something entirely new. My move here has provided me with a lovely and manageable small home, and surrounded me with new friends and gardens. That is not to say that everyone is my friend. There is a great variety of different people in the village, and I am able to relate to some more than others.

There is a small swimming pool on the premises, warm and inviting and a great place to rest weary bones. Aquarobics is a new and beneficial occupation for me and it is another place to meet more people in relaxed and congenial surroundings. Many of those people, mainly women, who attend the classes are not residents in the village and this variety makes for interesting connections.

We become 'friends in the pool'. So it is altogether good for body and mind, especially as we try to remember everyone's name!

Another opportunity arose for me when I discovered a Chair Yoga class run in a nearby Community Hall by a wonderful younger woman at a reasonable cost. She is quite inspiring, and after classes there, my body is totally relaxed, stretched and I feel mentally calm. Most of those attending these classes are older women with whom I have interests in common, so there is always someone available for a friendly chat before the class. After the class we are 'away with the birdies'!

In the village I have also been able to indulge myself physically by creating new gardens where I grow vegetables, herbs and flowers, as well as native plants. Many people walk along the path and admire my efforts and I love to share the fruits of my labour with other residents, staff and visitors and I get a great deal of pleasure from that.

Another little-known benefit for those in this village are the volunteers, who quietly give up their time to assist residents in various ways and for which there is no cost. One of the best things about this village is that I have been able to join a Writing Group that is run by a long-time volunteer, who is a published writer herself. She also has writing friends, novelists and poets among them, who she invites on occasions. This inspires us and injects us with new ideas to aim for.

As our wonderful writing mentor, Jan gives up her time unstintingly twice a month to impart her considerable knowledge to those of us who wish to increase their writing skills. Jan sets us different subjects every meeting and we each read our stories aloud. So not only do we learn new skills, we also learn about our fellow writers.

It has been an absolute bonus as far as I'm concerned to be able to develop some of these skills and receive thoughtful and knowledgeable information on how to further develop and improve our writing. Jan has added immeasurably to the depth of my experience, enabling me to contemplate creating a compendium of stories about my life to leave my children and theirs.

However, it is not all 'sweetness and light' in a retirement village. Where I live there are dividing lines between those called 'Lifestyle residents', of which I am one and those who can no longer do everything for themselves and are nominated 'Low Care'. They can receive assistance with shopping and household chores and receive help to shower and dress if they require that. Also if they choose, they can attend one of the dining rooms for 2 meals a day. Then there are high-care residents who no longer live in their own unit but are moved into a full-time facility where constant care is provided. Of course, all of this assistance comes with a cost but for those who have no relatives or friends nearby to care for them, it is absolutely essential.

Hopefully, although I am about to have a hip replacement, I am still able to do all the things I want, at least at this stage! And I am certainly enjoying my life here, close to family and with friends in the village and plenty of occupations to keep my body and brain activated!

A Love of Birds

Paul Hydes

Kew

It is a summer evening on the mid-north coast of NSW and a DVD of Downton Abbey is playing. The scene is the Dower House with Maggie Smith at her imperious best, while in the background on set, a Blue Tit is calling. The unmistakable chatter of this tiny bird is recognizable, even after 30 years away from the UK, the result of repeated exposure to it as a child.

A nest box on the wall beside our dining room window became home for a succession of families of this bird. With up to nine chicks per brood, they were watched with baited breath as they made maiden flights across the face of the window to the shelter of a Forsythia shrub, my first encounter with the wonders of birds.

A supportive family provided the opportunity and hardware at the age of 12 to kick-start my hobby of birdwatching. Since then, I have been privileged to see birdlife on 5 continents, often in remote areas but also with a wife and son who are not immune to the delights of the birdlife around us. This is especially true in Australia where they have been lucky charms for locating some species.

Friends and colleagues over the years have scratched their heads in bemusement, unable to fathom the attraction, oblivious to the remarkable visual and audible diversity on display. With around 10,000 species of birds on the planet, they come in many shapes and all sizes, very much a case of, "All creatures great and small" and certainly size isn't everything.

Memories of the "great" start with an early European foray in Corsica where a broad winged, 3 metre spanned Bearded Vulture passed close overhead. Its black flecked, orange body clearly visible with naked eyes as was a black moustache Merve Hughes would have been proud of.

This bird was of such an intimidating size that my fellow climbers scurried for cover among the rocks, leaving me on the narrow pass, re-closing my jaw as this endangered icon of the Alpine regions glided away down the valley below. 10 days of sweat and toil, sleeping rough at altitude, vindicated in an instant.

At the other end of the scale, I suspect no one forgets their first close encounter with a humming bird. Mine was a Ruby throat, on a mountain track above Salt Lake City, the highlight of a trapped weekend on a business trip out of Sydney. One second, the air in front of me was clear and crisp with the scent of pine needles, the next there was a "hummer" at head height and arms-length, hovering as it inspected this unlikely shrub. I was captivated. Motionless. Afraid to break the spell. But then gave in to an urge to slowly raise my left arm, crooked finger and all, transfixed by what I was seeing. Inevitably, it declined the offered perch but in the magic of that moment, anything seemed possible.

In Australia, great and small are exemplified by a Wandering Albatross, circling our boat off Wollongong and the diminutive Emu wrens, filigree tails and all, in the heaths near home. While some of our birds don't fly, or do so rarely like the stately Bustard of inland Australia, others go to the other extreme. Standing on a Laurieton roof cleaning solar panels, the whirring sound of a close flying Needletail was the first sign of its presence. With a wingspan of only 30cm, this summer migrant from Russia is a miracle of aerodynamic design, clocked at over 200kph and the fastest natural lifeform on the planet. I simply sat and watched, as they patrolled the tree line for insects while I stoked up the memory cells. The solar panels would still be there tomorrow and next year but for these birds, under threat in their forest homes, who knows? Sadly, several Australian species are in similar straits.

Some people ask if I ever tire of seeing the same birds, to which the answer is an emphatic "No". There is always something different. Sitting in an armchair, a glance out of the window shows a cloud of swallows taking off from the roof tops. Why? The stiff wing beats of a marauding Little Falcon soon provide the answer. The antics of honeyeaters, both large and small, pole vaulting as they feed on flower spikes. A Friarbird's alarm call that tips me off to the presence of a bird of prey, motionless in the tree nearby. Whipbird calls are a feature in the bush around here, but only once have I heard the full stereo duet, with a male song ending in the "whip crack" on one side of the track and the responding female, "tiu, tiu, tiu" on the other. And only now are the human psychological benefits of birdsong being appreciated, little surprise to birdwatchers accustomed to the Dawn Chorus which can result in 40 different species calling in a 20 minute monitoring period.

Seeing each of the 30 or so migrant species to arrive each spring is like meeting an old friend, a connection with the seasons while marveling at the miracles of navigation and endurance involved. For some birds it is a case of moving down the coast while for others it can be a 10,000km trip from their breeding grounds in the arctic. Even common birds can reveal surprises as so often, "we see, but do not observe", noticing plumage details and habits only possible with close observation at a garden bird bath.

It is this love of new detail, whether individual, social, visual or audible of some of the moving images in nature's art gallery which keeps me coming back for more; appreciating their beauty and the insights on their world rather than relegating them to mere ticks on a twitcher's list. So many unanswered questions. The sheer wonder of birds!

All this, with my wife, family and the delights of a vibrant local community. It's easy to love my life in the Camden Haven.

A MOBI, a Vampire and a Girl from Manly

Arthur Ongley

Northmead

I became a MOBI in January 1962. MOBIs were the original inhabitants of the Royal Australian Navy's Apprentice Training Establishment, HMAS *Nirimba*, at Quakers Hill in Sydney. Every six months a group of about fifty, fifteen and sixteen year old boys were selected from around 500 applicants across Australia to undergo a five-year Apprenticeship to serve on the ships of the Royal Australian Navy and the Fleet Air Arm. Some Navy hardliners didn't like that initiative of the RAN, and in derision, called the inhabitants and graduates of HMAS *Nirimba*, MOBIs, which stood for the 'Most Objectionable Bastards Imaginable'. Rather than allowing such name-calling to discourage them, MOBIs wore the name with pride, and still do!

The fifth year of our apprenticeship was spent on board a ship of the RAN. I spent my fourth year at HMAS *Cerberus* in Victoria and received a posting for my fifth year to HMAS *Kuttabul* at Kings Cross, alongside Garden Island. I was anticipating working on ships that were being refitted at Garden Island.

I travelled from Melbourne to Sydney by train in mid-1966. When I reported to the Quartermaster at HMAS *Kuttabul*, he looked at some paperwork, then said, "You aren't supposed to be here, but aboard HMAS *Vampire* and she is a war in Borneo!" Within hours I received a full course of inoculations, photographed and issued with a passport, and given a one-way ticket for a Qantas flight to Tawau in Borneo. "Don't wear your uniform on the flight. If you do, and the plane is shot down over enemy territory, and you survive, you will be shot on sight. You'll join *Vampire* in Tawau."

I was twenty. I had never been in an aeroplane, out of Australia, on a Destroyer at sea, or in a war! When I arrived in Tawau, I was met by the British RAF and hosted by them because *Vampire* was still at sea. During my stay I drank lots of orange juice

because the temperature was very high, and heard scary stories of helicopter raids on the enemy and fatal 'copter crashes. HMAS *Vampire* sailed into the harbour at Tawau to disembark the Communications Technician I was replacing and to take me to the ship that would be my home for the next two and a half years.

I was proud to be a member of that great ship's company. My learning curve was steep and I had to find my sea legs quickly. A typhoon en route from Borneo to Hong Kong threw me in at the deep end. We were fortunate to have Lt. Commander David Martin, who later became our much loved and respected Governor, as the ship's Executive Officer or 'Jimmy'. HMAS *Vampire* was a happy ship.

Following our visit to Hong Kong, *Vampire* was assigned to escort HMAS *Sydney* ('The Vung Tau Ferry') to and from Vietnam as part of Australia's War Effort. That was the first of three trips I made to Vietnam in those turbulent times.

HMAS *Vampire* was the first Australian Warship to visit Indonesia following the Confrontation. I had done some duty free shopping in Hong Kong and bought myself a new 35mm Yoshika camera. As I was stepping ashore in Indonesia the camera slipped off my shoulder and fell into the water between the ship and the wharf. A ship's diver volunteered to retrieve the camera before it could take in water, but armed Indonesian soldiers on the wharf, believing that we were plotting to spy on the hull of their own warship tied up in front of *Vampire*, did not allow our diver into the water. No shots were fired by the soldiers or the Yoshika.

When HMAS *Vampire* returned to Sydney just before the October Long Weekend in 1966, the Captain announced that in company with

HMAS *Duchess* (which had replaced the ill-fated HMAS *Voyager*) there would be a Family Day At Sea for families and girlfriends on the long weekend.

I did not know any girls in Sydney, so asked my Northern Beaches family for any suggestions. My grandmother suggested a young (16yr-old) girl from Manly and although my parents doubted the suitability of a match, an introduction was arranged and Denise Lovell accepted the invitation to spend a day at sea aboard HMAS *Vampire*. That was the first of many dates and the beginning of daily correspondence during a 9 month tour of duty in the Far East by *Vampire* in 1967.

In 1970 Denise became my wife. We had two children and now have five grandchildren. Two of the great joys of my life with respect to my time on that great Australian Destroyer have been speaking about that time to my son's (he is a teacher) and my granddaughter's classes, and for Denise and me to give a family tour of HMAS *Vampire*, which is now the centrepiece of the National Maritime Museum at Darling Harbour, telling them my story, the story of a MOBI, a vampire and a girl from Manly.

A Play on Words

Jill Nash

Sawtell

Do you love words as well as life?

My life is rich with the pleasure of words. As soon as I read the theme for this year's competition the words **love** and **life** sprang out at me, urging me to come and play.

Addicted to the word target in the Sydney Morning Herald, and to *Letters and Numbers* on SBS, I rushed to start the journey of discovery. How many words could I make out of the theme? Would there be a pattern? Could I turn a fairly random collection of words into a short story?

Immediately the word **evil** lunged towards me, tempting me to include him in my list which might include his friends **rue, vile, fell, ill, foul and rile**. No, no, that's not the intent of the theme with its positive, Pollyanna message. Away with you **evil**.

How about **vole, four, eye, roll and rove**? These are just a few of the 386 that I am offered by the internet as words that can be made from **love your life**. I choose these five to start my story.

The little **vole** scrambled up the riverbank on his **four** legs, one **eye** on the creek below, the other looking for potential enemies. He moved on; he wanted to **rove** along the top of the bank towards the safety of his **hole**. Pushing his little snout inside, he was ready to **roll** down the tunnel of home. Ah that's nice, the **vole** in his **hole**. And where is his friend, the **mole**? He doesn't appear. If only the theme were love **my** life. The mole could belong to this club and even **move** a treacherous thorn out of the way of his friend. But no, mole has to stay out of the story.

With the addition of the letter '**y**' our **vole** is a beautiful anagram of **your love**.

As we get older, nature seems to beckon us to see and enjoy her in all her minuteness and grandeur. The very word means birth, the beginning of life, the life that is ours to love. This natural life can be as simple as a drop of dew on a bud or the drama of an electric storm, the song of a bird or the taste of a home-grown tomato.

I live in a coastal village and I am surrounded by nature. The beach is about ten minutes' walk away from my home and is my daily destination. Sometimes it calls me to meditate, sitting on the bank, eyes shut, the light breeze gently fanning my cheek while I let the sounds of the waves wash away any negative thoughts or emotions. At other times I stoop to marvel at the pattern left by the same waves – a few shells, a piece of seaweed and a handful of sea-smoothed pebbles, moulded into a beautiful shape, washed by the salty waves and glistening in the sunshine.

My home backs on to a creek, alongside a golf course. It is home to many creatures, a variety of plants and paper-bark trees that look as if they've owned their spot forever. Early each morning, the kookaburras wake me, their cackling laughs daring me not to smile. They rouse the rest of the bird brigade, who are also celebrating a new day – they love their life too. Later, a family of ducks glides past, pausing to check out the riverbank for the odd tasty morsel. She won't find a vole or a mole here, but mother looks so calm as her little ducklings struggle in the mud of the bank. She looks content with her life. Later still, at dusk, the low winter sunlight shines through the reeds lining the bank, giving them a glow as they sway side to side. There is a cavalcade of birds coming home to take their place in the many trees and shrubs.

They seem to be telling each other the news of the day or checking on who has not yet arrived to take up their usual night-time roosts.

It's time for me to retreat to my own roost. I switch on *Letters and Numbers* to pitch my wits against the contestants. Night falls, the air chills, and as I settle into my bed, I reflect on my day. I am **fully** replenished and I have **refilled** my spiritual coffers, and I do this **every lovely** day of my **life**. What an abundance of happiness lies in this year's theme.

A Sense of Wonder

Sue Southwood

Tahmoor

'Curiosity killed the cat!' was my father's response to my never-ending questions. I must have wondered what 'curiosity' was. I must have instinctively known, because I eventually stopped asking, although I can't remember how old I was.

Now that I am old I realise that perhaps he didn't know the answers. When my children's curiosity showed up, I remember doing my best to answer them. If I didn't know I'd say so and suggest asking someone else or to look it up; show them where and how to do so. When their children came along, they'd say, 'Ask Nan, she knows everything!'

Of course I didn't and told them so. I also told them I had been around a long time and had learned a thing or two since I was their age. I learned how to investigate and find my own answers, and so showed them how to do the same. This was before Dr Google, smart phones, laptops and iPads. Yes, even the grandchildren have grown up so much older and wiser than I'll ever be. I just hope they haven't lost that sense of wonder I had as a small child. Everything is only a click away and even our language has changed. I mean, whoever thought we'd use a mouse to find out something.

I remember my childhood well ... I must have driven my parents mad. I'd often lay in the long grass and watch clouds form and disappear. Where did they come from? Where did they go? I'd watch plants grow from tiny seeds, into wonderful flowers or food to eat ... how did that little seed grow into such a big cabbage? Fruit trees were amazing. In the winter they looked dead. Come spring, those same trees would be covered in flowers, all fluffy and lovely, crowded with bees. How did we get delicious juicy fruits from those little hard green things in the flowers? How did the fruit taste so good?

How do those bees make honey, how do the chooks make eggs and how does the cow make all that lovely milk? Questions, questions, questions?

Growing up on a market garden taught me much about where our food came from by mere observation. We had no honeybee hives ... hives were nasty itchy things I got on my arms and legs. Someone must have told me. I had to wait awhile before I found out about cows and hens, but it was usually from a book that I discovered the wondrous workings of animals, birds and bees. My observations served me well to a point – I watched the rooster with the hens and sort of worked things out. The cow was a bit different. I always wondered why Dad would take the cow up the road to the neighbour's bull every so often. "So we can get some milk," he'd say, which left me wondering quite a lot.

As I grew up, I became a voracious reader and would look in books from the school library to find answers about nature. I even discovered how I came to be here, from a book. Some of these facts took away from the wonder of life, as I grew to understand more. I was not about to ask my Mum or Dad! As I have grown older, the magic has stayed with me. I have new understanding of how clouds come and go, how blossoms turn into delicious fruit and tiny seeds turn into flowers and vegetables ... or little people. Yes, the miracle of life was learned, not at my mother's knee, but from the cold hard facts printed in a book.

All this awareness could have taught me a whole lot more than it did. What was missing was the emotional and spiritual connection between facts and life. This lesson had to be learned the hard way. When I learned the facts of life, nothing was mentioned anywhere in these learned tomes about feelings. Nor was imagination mentioned. I had plenty of both but did not know what they

were nor how to manage them. One only had observable information, to which we attached our emotion or imagination, or both. I watched how grown-ups behaved and this was confusing at times. No wonder I made my own reality.

Sometimes emotion would link with observation and thus gave me a totally different slant on fact. To make sense of life, imagination came to the fore. One would not actually go ahead and ask a parent to clear up confusion, it was not done! Imagination could make facts much more palatable. I grew up reading newspapers, magazines, school textbooks, the dictionary, anything. Sometimes facts were only fiction, and fiction became fact, with a hefty dose of imagination. I often had to make it up as I went along. Sometimes that sense of wonder got drowned by the awfulness of fact.

Then television came along, much more graphic than any information source I could find before, even radio. The 'awfulness' of real life was there in front of me every day, like it or not. The more I saw the more I wanted to know. The actual 'wonder' of television no longer engaged my mind. I became enthralled by images observed by strangers and so came to believe that what was there was real. Nobody thought to turn off the switch. We were all obsessed by the need to know.

I could not ask why anymore because nobody knew. News was conflicting and some of us went out and found out from experience. I grew to adulthood, bore children of my own, as they too have done. I still don't have all the answers. Somehow this world has increased its speed and we need to make time to watch the bees gather pollen, the flowers bloom and the rain fall from those clouds. We all need to turn off technology and be in the moment long enough to wonder.

A Surprise Prize

Pauline Downing

Camden Park

We circled Longyearbyen Airport for the second time. From my window seat I was looking down at the moon, mesmerised. Surely that aspect could only be seen from a spaceship! It was the most astonishing sight and to confirm it on the second approach, I saw it again!

We had arrived in Svalbard just two days before the shortest day of the year in 24-hour darkness on the most northerly habitation on our blue planet. And how, why?

In February I received an email advising I had won second prize in a travel competition. I hadn't entered one. Straight to trash. Curiosity made me recover the trashed email. I emailed the Svalbard Tourist Information Centre to that signature name. She confirmed the offer as genuine. I was to choose the time I wished to travel and arrangements would be made. Was I surprised? Golly!

I then remembered completing a survey in November. Obviously, it had prizes attached. I had won four days' stay with return flights from Oslo and full accommodation in the best hotel in Longyearbyen ... 14,650 kilometres from Sydney and a touch over 1,000 kilometres south of the North Pole.

Decisions! When to go? 24-hour midnight sun or the dark time, 24-hour night. We would be at Longyearbyen for the shortest day of the year, the Winter Solstice in the northern hemisphere. We decided to combine it with Christmas on the Lofoten Islands just north of the 66th parallel, the Arctic Circle. Norway is pure magic under snow and a white Christmas is something most Australians would dream of.

We left the hotel in Oslo at 4:30am and walked to the station to catch the first train. All airport trains carry flight information screens continually being

up-dated and there was advice of our flight's cancellation. Perplexed, we arrived at the check-in counter at Gardermoen airport to be told we should go home and return the next day as serious storms had closed the airport in Svalbard. We stood riveted to the spot. I advised the booking clerk that home was Australia. His face froze with indecision and he dashed into the rear office returning with bus passes and accommodation vouchers for overnight at the Gardermoen Airport Hotel where we arrived in time for a hot and welcome buffet breakfast.

Boarding Norwegian Air the next morning went smoothly. We had only one scheduled stop at Tromsø, a city that is just north of the Arctic Circle. We wondered at the delay in departing, noticing equipment on the tarmac being loaded into the hold. All the passengers were astonished to see emergency crews, Red Cross personnel and rescue dogs filing into the aircraft. Two young men behind us asked if we knew why?

"Not at all," we replied and they checked Google on their phones. There had been an avalanche in Longyearbyen, caused by the worst snowstorm in over three decades, people had been killed and many were feared trapped in their homes on the edge of the town.

It was a very solemn plane-load of tourists that landed, the emergency crews first to disembark to speed across town to the disaster site. Nothing had been advised to us at the airport check-in, no announcements had been.

We disembarked and slid and slithered through the snow spindrift to the small building that is both arrivals and departures, to retrieve our luggage from the single carousel adorned with a fully sized polar bear as its rotating centrepiece. We boarded the shuttle bus in silence, we felt a long way from home.

The town was smothered in snow, abnormal depths of snow. Roads were blocked. It was the worst snowstorm in over 30 years. When we reached our hotel, snow was piled half-way up the windows of the foyer. Shoes were removed and left in the lobby and we were booked into the very warm and pleasant Spitzbergen Hotel overlooking the glacier valley.

Behind us reared the dense snow-covered mountains. We simply stared through the picture windows at the enormous snowed-in peak directly behind us. *C'est la vie* absolutely succinct in this situation. That evening soup of the day was the most delicious we have tasted, a glass of wine and fresh, warm home-made bread, how can I possibly convey its exquisite taste?

Less than a kilometre from our hotel is the Svalbard Global Seed Vault, the 'Doomsday' vault that stores many countries' agricultural biodiversity. Above the entrance is a phosphorus green artwork of fibre-optic lights and highly polished steel shines eerily through the dark. I never dreamt I would ever see this place.

We took a snowmobile tour hoping to see the Northern Lights. Longyearbyen needs tourists as the Norwegian government is closing the coal mines that have always sustained the residents of Svalbard. At the edges of the town are signs warning of polar bears. The bear population in Svalbard is almost double that of the residential population of 2,000. It is illegal to leave the town limits without the protection of a rifle that is capable of killing a polar bear, especially since climate change has diminished the ice and bears may come looking for food. Starving bears that break into cabins outside of the town are darted, fitted with GPS receivers and relocated.

The bear may have robbed the larder but could be in danger of gastronomic explosions ... it has happened ... in a helicopter ... just imagine.

We stopped to watch the Svalbard reindeer grazing on lichen in the moonlight. Natural evolution has dwarfed these reindeer, the females giving birth over millennium to smaller calves. We scanned the heavens for the lights and our guides dispensed steaming hot drinks from flasks. It was very cold and snow clouds had blocked out the moon.

We had experienced a disaster, where avalanches are more dangerous than polar bears in one of the most remote places in the world. Life should be lived – take it up on whatever it offers you ... and love it.

A Whisky a Go Go Story

Bob Pierse

Holgate

My name is Bob Pierse. I first joined The Delltones as Lead Singer in 1968 and worked with them until I resigned at the beginning of 1982. In March 1973 we were booked into Brisbane for two clubs, Chequers and Whisky A Go Go. There were other gigs as well before we started. The day before we'd been rehearsing at Chequers with our backing band Trinity and a drummer who'd been booked to work with us. I recall after the rehearsal Peewee and I having words over the quality of the sound system. Strange what you remember.

On that dreadful night we'd done a couple of other shows and arrived late at the Whiskey. We were so late some of the crowd had left. We got changed in our dressing room to the right of the stage, cut three songs from the show and went on and did it. After getting changed after the show, Sep and I went out to the table near the stage and sat down with the band Trinity for a drink. A few minutes later Peewee and Brian came out with their suit bags and asked if we were coming with them. Sep and I said we'd have a drink and get a cab back to our apartment near the Victoria Bridge. They walked out and I said to Sep that we would have all sorts of trouble getting a cab in The Valley at that hour so he said he'd get the suit bags while I ran through the club and downstairs to see if the boys had left.

As I came out the door Brian was walking back across the road. "*Great, you're still here,*" I said.

"I was just coming back to make sure you didn't want to come with us," he replied.

I cannot recall in all the time we'd spent together, any one of us double checking if someone wanted a lift after saying they didn't! Sep arrived with the suit bags and we drove the few minutes back to the digs. Fire brigades were passing us before we reached home and we commented that there must

be a big one somewhere. We had a nightcap and hit the sack.

The next thing I recall was a banging on the door of the apartment. It was around 5.00am. No one else stirred so I got up and opened the door.

"You're alive!" said the caretaker standing at the door.

"What?" I said blearily.

"Whiskey burned down!" he said. *"Your father in Sydney heard a report on the radio about the fire and the Delltones were performing and three group members were dead. Your wife just rang and asked if I'd come check on you."*

At this stage my wife, Rosemary, thought three of us had died in the fire.

I probably swore and I went in and woke the boys. None of us could believe it. I rang a relieved Rosemary and the others rang home before they heard it on the news. As it turned out, we'd got out only a couple of minutes before the fire. Two of the band we'd been sitting with had died in the fire. Had Sep and I not decided to leave and Brian and Peewee be still waiting outside, we might not be here today. If we hadn't cut three songs out of the show, none of us might be here. If the boys had left, Sep and I would certainly have been there waiting for a cab when Finch and Stuart arrived!

In the morning the dreadful truth was all over the news. Fifteen people who we had just performed for had died. We saw our drummer later in the day and he was very shaky but glad to have survived. He told us that the first anyone knew about the fire was when smoke began to fill the room from the ceiling. When it was halfway down, the lights went out and the panic began.

Some weeks earlier all the windows had been riveted shut and heavy curtains covered them due to noise pollution requirements. There was also talk that the fire escape was locked.

When the lights went out our drummer went for the stage in front of him and felt around and grabbed a guitar. He'd been in our dressing room earlier so he headed for that. He found the window and smashed it with the guitar. There was a young woman near the window and he pushed her out, then he began to pull himself up. He said when he got halfway up, the smoke was getting the better of him and he thought, '*Oh bugger it!*'. At that stage he said he almost let go but with a mighty effort he pushed himself out the window, landing on the awning below.

The following day Sep and I went to an Extraordinary Actors Equity Meeting in Brisbane where the music industry voiced their concerns about the fire traps they worked in nightly; places like DB'S, a popular late night venue, had one set of stairs in and no way out. The head honcho from Sydney told them to calm down and go back to work. At that point Sep and I left. We were both angry at his offhand attitude to their very real concerns. We had a meeting with the agent and he booked us into a hotel in Rockhampton. We couldn't get out of Brisbane fast enough! We were all pretty shaken up at what had occurred.

I have often wondered if Finch and Stuart waited until the show was over before committing this terrible deed. Somehow I don't think so. They simply drove up and lit a petrol bomb in front of the air conditioning intake in the foyer and drove off.

Until the Port Arthur massacre this was the biggest act of terror in modern Australian history.

This is why I love my life!

Am I Ready for Grandparenthood?

Brendan Horgan

Killarney Heights

Kerry and I were thrilled and delighted when we were told that our son and daughter-in-law were expecting a boy child. Imagine that, me a grandfather. It hardly seemed possible. But am I ready for this? It seems like I haven't stopped fathering and now I'm going to be a grandfather?

As his birth day became closer our anticipation grew and grew until we got the call in the early morning to say that our grandson was happily in the world after a caesarean section. Both mother and baby were okay. I'm not ashamed to say that more than a few tears of joy were shed at the news.

Problem was that they were in Newcastle and we in Sydney so preparations were made to make the car trip the next day to meet the latest addition to the family.

I had always been troubled about what kind of father I would make mainly because my own Dad died when I was just 6 years old. Not having a fathering role model troubled me until a friend wisely pointed out that role models aren't always what they should be and so, not tainted by anybody else's mistakes, I had the opportunity to trust my instincts and work it out for myself.

That I did.

There was quite a bit of trial and error along the way on my part but after all is said and done I'm really proud of both my sons and the men they have become. I must have done something right. Either that or I did not do too many things wrong. Both of them have taught me a great deal and perhaps they learned something worthwhile from me along the way. If nothing else I always tried to lead by example.

Would this grandfather thing work out just as well?

When we finally got to Newcastle to meet this new young man we were told that there was a problem and that we would not be able to see him for some time as he needed some urgent tests done. So we would have to wait, and wait.

After several hours his father told us that there was problem. We would be all terribly upset by the news that was about to be delivered.

The bad news was that his aorta was partially blocked and that he needed medication to keep his aorta open. The good news was that even under these difficult circumstances we were able to see him and spend some time with him while they prepared him for what was to come.

He needed surgery to re-open his aorta and this could only be done in a specialist paediatric facility with the right surgeon and equipment. So he and his Dad got to ride in an emergency helicopter to Westmead Children's Hospital that night. His mother was unable to fly due to her surgery the day before so we were tasked with carefully driving her from Newcastle to Westmead to be re-united with her newborn son. My admiration for this new mother, already high, grew enormously. She had endured a great deal to get him into the world and now we all faced the uncertain prospects of surgery on this tiny baby.

The next 10 days or so are a bit of a blur really.

Our grandson had the surgery and spent a week in intensive care recovering from what must have been a trauma for him as well as for his new family. He then spent some time in a surgical ward before he was able to be taken home to begin his new life.

For us, we saw him as often as we could during his hospital stay, even though it broke my heart to see him wired up to monitors with cannulas in place for feeding and medication delivery, blood tests and so on.

But he was here, he was fighting and he seemed to be getting a little better every day.

He was clearly a tough and resilient little man, albeit one who was only a few days old. We were told that it was good that he had gone full term as that set him up for a better outcome than a premature baby may have expected given an invasive surgical procedure when only a few days old.

He showed us that we had nothing to be worried about and in fact everything to be grateful for as he took all that was thrown at him and thrived. It will be fascinating to see how he grows and develops from here.

I'd like to formally thank the medical staff at both Newcastle and Westmead for their incredible care and attention. They were brilliant. How privileged are we to live in such a society!

But back to the main question – am I ready for grandparenthood?

You know what, after that experience I think I am. Sure there will be mistakes of omission and commission along the way, but I already admire this new man so much I reckon he'll forgive me if I get it wrong and probably educate me along the way.

Whatever happens I can assure you I'm now very much looking forward to what lies ahead watching this incredible little man grow into an incredible big man. Hopefully there will be many days of fun and laughter as well as days of learning and growing.

Will he be spoilt by his grandmother? – Of course. Will he be spoilt by me? Suffice to say I am officially besotted. He smiled at me (I'm telling you it was not wind) and my heart melted on the spot.

Shall I keep you posted?

Angry Oldie or Blissful Boomer?

Willa Hogarth

Coffs Harbour

Love your life? Don't give me that new age crap. Life's okay but ageing is hard work. That's not including what's going on around us like the perilous state of the environment, not trusting our pollies, the lack of integrity in our banks ... I could go on and on.

But keeping it personal, ageing is a full time job.

You have to make yourself exercise *every* day; you have to keep your brain active and learn new things like Italian so you don't get dementia; you have to *remember* to write things down so you'll *remember* them; you have to find sneaky ways of finding out people's names that you should remember but don't. You suffer sore knees and backs and shoulders – being a fitness freak; you never thought that would happen to you. You definitely have to give up that one last ski trip to Thredbo (even if you did work down there for two seasons and skied in Canada in your youth).

You see your GP more, have piles of tests and see specialists: you need your heart checked – echocardiogram; blood tests for cholesterol, thyroid, diabetes; skin cancer checks – biopsies and 'things' cut out; bone density scans. Then there are other professional hangers-on – physios, osteopaths, exercise physiologists, the naturopath who wants you to 'age gracefully'. All cost mega dollars.

You have to accept the wrinkles grooving your face and all the other stretchy skin – looks like an aerial picture of the Queensland channel country after flood. What about that cascade of fine lines above your knee caps? In a funny way it's beautiful – could be fabric for a dress.

You become invisible: a movie about oldies (especially oldies having sex) makes big news.

At last, you think, we've made the big screen. Oldies in advertisements? You're joking. Even in ads for retirement villages people look 50 and model beautiful with coiffed hair and designer clothes. The only articles in newspapers are about car crashes caused by older drivers or retirees complaining about Bill¹ threatening to take away their tax credits.

The media is the culprit; you can blame it for the lack of positive images. All those pictures of the young and beautiful, not many of the old and beautiful. Which you are – you realise that. But all those skinny, aloof models on catwalks and in magazines are images that reflect the modern beauty goal we're supposed to strive for; they're much stronger than that courageous ad for underwear with all those wonderful women in different sizes and shapes and colours. And did it include older women? No.

There are positives. Discounts are big. No car registration, \$9 movie tickets, \$20 concession to the Bellingen Readers and Writers Festival and 10% off at the local IGA on Thursdays. The Seniors Card gives you hundreds more: from \$10 lunches at the Narrabri Bowling Club to 50% off the Church Point Ferry Service.

Then there's the \$2.50 day travel pass in Sydney. That really is a good deal. You can even travel from Coffs Harbour to Southport for \$2.50. A few problems: you take the train to Lismore, wait for a bus, it takes 6 hours to get to Southport and you arrive at midnight.

The airline companies totally ignore you. You'd think baby boomers would have demanded discounted air fares by now. Maybe they're too busy being SKlers (Spending the Kids Inheritance) or YOLOs (You Only Live Once).

1 Bill – Leader of the Labor Party in 2019 'Bill' Shorten with election promised to increase taxes

There is more: you own your time, none of this 9.00 to 5.00 work regimen, you're free to do what you like. Write at 2.00am and get up at mid-day if you want. Go visit little sister in Queensland and feast on Brisbane theatre. Or do house swaps in Sydney and get some big smoke fun – art galleries, streets of federation houses, food from different countries – Moroccan, Ethiopian, Japanese. Coming from Coffs Harbour, I enjoy that.

Oh, I said 'enjoy'. What else do I enjoy? Walking on hard sand beside the frothy sea edge watching waves shuffle in. Sauntering over Macauleys Headland listening to black cockatoos screech at each other like demented couples. Staying at home and writing all day without one interruption. Meditating in a group, my own 'sangha'. Talking to my 'bestie' in New Zealand, both of us cackling like crazies about how we cope with life. Eating and joking with a group of friends I've known for so long it's embarrassing. Holding hands at the movies. Sitting in a cafe with my chai tea (infused with coconut milk) and a large piece of orange and almond cake (or any cake). I love it all.

So I do love life. In fact here's a poem:

Love of Life

It fills the body with light
It shines out through smoky eyes
and fills the world.
Drinks in the first glimpse of a full moon
The knowing stare of a baby
Skin on skin
A heart hug
A perfect sentence.
Unique for each it emerges like an Irish fairy
seen or unseen by others.

As a Mother

Barbara Barrett

Byron Bay

At the age of fifteen, my mother won a Mothercraft Award; presented by Lady Cilento. Seventy-five years later we discovered it on the lid of the family emergency medical kit. It had been opened numerous times to retrieve band aids, a 'blue bag' – to relieve stings, betadine, cotton balls and ointments for the many needs of six active children. She lived up to the award throughout her life.

The oldest of her three siblings instilled caring responsibilities at an early age. During the war she became a sergeant in the Australian army, helping to rehabilitate returned soldiers. The direction of her life changed when she met the love of her life; in time her husband Tim. As a wife she continued with her profession as a physiotherapist, until her children arrived. Then we had the full advantage of her training. "Stand up straight". "Sit tall". "Don't cross your legs whilst sitting." Heat lamps for cramped muscles after strenuous exercise. She lived out the remainder of her life as a mother of many. A grandmother and a great-grandmother.

Our friends were always welcome. No trouble extending a meal. Our backyard encompassed: a natural tree house, an 'old car' – for imaginative travels, a partial cricket pitch converted in cooler months to a 'field' for modified games of hockey – no obstruction rules, a barbecue where many gatherings of hockey teams, swimming teams, friends and family congregated.

Mum's kitchen became the hub of our lives. A good breakfast to start our days. Lunches prepared for school. Sunday roasts. And a different dessert every night. Our father had a sweet tooth. Left-overs could be served up again, with the request for a "Yes please", indicating a desire for a mixed helping. In winter a solid door replaced the fly screen door to the kitchen. A wood burning stove providing a warm haven in cold Toowoomba days with westerly

winds adding a wind chill factor to the decreasing temperatures. We were drawn like moths to a flame. Delicious aromas frequently wafted from that space. Favourite meals were often catered for. Time was taken with each child as Mum washed and we took turns nightly with a tea towel in hand.

Opportunities to participate in sport, academic and leisure pursuits were encouraged as they became available or an interest shown. Our decisions supported in an atmosphere of harmony, love, selfless and benevolent caring. On one occasion, Dad commented with a smile: "Please don't give away my trailer" ... as maturing children moved from home. Mum would willingly do without, if she perceived a family need.

Teased for her hoarding ceased when a hail storm battered the roof tiles. Ice cream buckets collected drips until the numerous cracked and broken tiles were replaced. Preschools and schools continued to appreciate Mum's collective tendencies.

Reading widely gave her a balanced perspective on life and living. She was a font of wisdom, a peacemaker who was able to see both sides of a problem. Ready to listen and offer advice on many issues. Her passion for the written word continued throughout her life with every available opportunity taken to indulge. Tired from her continual demands on her time she often fell asleep with glasses on. Such a clever Mum. Able to read with her eyes closed.

Her special chair was surrounded with mending, knitting, letters and books. Never an idle moment. With progeny embarking on careers to distant places, letters and emails were read and reread, and phone calls eagerly awaited. Family visits were always such happy occasions, with much laughter. Tales were told and often embellished

in the retelling. Around a 'family' game of cribbage Grannie's able mind was quick to pick up extra points, for any player.

Exploring Australia and enjoying the natural beauty and inhabitants became possible when Dad joined a four wheel drive club. A map marked all the highways and byways they navigated. Their camper trailer could be erected in ten minutes with a kettle on the boil. One fascinated onlooker once asked if they could repeat the procedure so it could be captured on video.

Returning home for us all was always a time of celebration. 'A house is made by human hands – a home by human hearts'. Favourite food and refreshments virtually on hand as we walked in the door. It took a long while before we could get Mum to sit down and be waited on – herself!

Until in her late eighties her time was rarely her own. It was then she could finally catch up on her reading!

At Mum's funeral I read a poem containing words: 'I have loved much and well' finishing with: 'Thank you for teaching me about love and life'. It summed her up well. A full appreciation of her lifetime.

My sister asked me to write a verse about 'Our Mum' which was printed on a bookmark with photos of her favourite things. I carry this with me daily as a cherished memory of a woman who Loved Her Life.

You will recall memories in many ways
Hold them close from day to day,
a whistling kettle in the early morn,
cups of tea since you were born,
Mum's marmalade on toast
is a recollection like her Sunday roast.
The aroma of Anzac biscuits baking
will be another awakening.
Tales told around a pack of cards
with laughter erupting from victories starred.
Words of wisdom forever being told,
worth a giant's weight in gold.
A nest of mending, letters and books,
Not a moment was wasted in her special nook.
A tippie of whisky, her medicinal cure,
For good health to be sure to ensure.
A taste of dark chocolate after dinner at night,
A bunch of violets, such a beautiful sight,
She was the centre of our family

At peace now, we can let her be.

Blame it on the Ukulele

Carol Magee

Five Dock

Can one fall in love at 65?
Is it too difficult?
Is it worth the effort?
Will it take up too much of my time?
What if it doesn't work?
Read on to find the answer!

I was 65 and just retired a few months! The big question was, 'How do I fill my free days?' Yes, I have yoga, some social golf and movies. I spend some time sightseeing. I could catch a ferry and see all different parts of Sydney. It's such an amazing and beautiful city, but I needed more.

I wanted to do something meaningful!

After teaching for many years I felt I should use my skills and help out at my grandkids' school. That was a strange experience, I was used to being the one in charge of the class and I was now a 'happy helper'. What a lovely experience that was!

At the end of the year, I was at a retirement dinner for one of my friends, when I got into a conversation with her husband who was a passionate ukulele player and belonged to the BLUE MUGS aka the Blue Mountains Ukulele Group. He encouraged me to buy a ukulele and I did.

Well it wasn't an easy relationship. My doubts were endless. How do I strum correctly? Will I master these chords? Am I too old to learn to play this instrument?

The ukulele felt uncomfortable to hold and strum and my strumming didn't sound good,

Thank goodness for Mrs Google. There are so many ukulele sites on YouTube and with persistence I started to fall in love.

The practicality of holding the uke was overcome by having a strap attached. My strumming improved over time and I gained some confidence.

I took myself to the nearest ukulele group in my area and had a marvellous night listening to special visitors from Samoa play beautiful gospel music. I was smitten. I picked my ukulele up and played every day.

Another friend who bought a ukulele at the same time as me suggested we go to a Blue Mugs strum-along at Springwood. It was a very informal night and I loved it. I had fallen in love with a ukulele!

I joined the Mugs and at first lacked confidence. With time, help and encouragement from all the lovely members I relaxed and loved playing at the gigs.

The ukulele has enriched my life. Through joining the group I have made many wonderful friends and travelled to places in regional NSW that I'd never heard of!

Next year a big group of Mugs are travelling to the Northern Territory to perform for many Indigenous groups and listen to their stories and their music. Music is such a beautiful way to learn about other people's cultures.

I am now a part of a smaller group of five and we love to play and sing at a variety of nursing homes. This gives us a lot of joy and the residents love to clap along, play a percussion instrument and sing.

My life is wonderful, I have an amazing family and great friends. I see my grandkids on a regular basis and they do sleepovers at my place. We cruise together and enjoy having quality time together.

So I did fall in love with the ukulele and it was a struggle but well worth the effort. It's through the ukulele that I have a passion for life and all it has to offer.

I encourage anyone who likes to sing and likes people to buy a ukulele. It's such a great way to make friends and to give back to the community.

BLAME IT ON THE UKULELE! A THING OF LOVE!

Book Ends

Maryhelen Cox

Winmalee

It was on Lord Howe, that jewel of an island 600 kilometres off the New South Wales coast. It was the last night of our holiday and we thought we'd take a walk up to higher ground. It was very dark – that inky black after a full moon.

Sitting on a hillside and looking out to sea, we could see a little light on the horizon. A ship no doubt anchored for the night. As we watched, the light grew brighter and we thought it might be coming closer. Or perhaps it was a larger ship than we first imagined – maybe a cruise ship making its way across the South Pacific.

But the light continued to grow even brighter, more intense and more orange – and we felt a rush of fear. Oh no! It's a fire! The ship is on fire! What shall we do? Who should we call? Those poor souls on board!

And the fire did indeed grow. It got higher and fiercer and more alarming until with a soaring thrill of delight, we realised we were watching the moon rise, beautiful and majestic, lifting up from the horizon. It was a magical sight – immense, full, and pulsing with light. It was one of the most incredible things I have ever seen, before or since.

We walked home in moonlight as bright as day. That full moon hadn't started it waning yet. I like to think it was waiting for us to make its glorious entrance into the night and to fare us well.

Fast forward 35 years and we are still together (another miracle!) and we are standing on the Fannie Bay lookout in Darwin. This time it is the Indian Ocean that stretches out before us and a hot day and late evening that are coming to an end. This time it is the sun – full and shimmering and dripping butterscotch yellow that is sinking into the sea in its daily pageantry. The sky treated us to a spectrum of gold to deepest red as the sun inched itself into the horizontal line of the horizon. These sunsets are routine for Darwin but to watch for the first time that life-giving orb with its display of dazzling colour and energy disappear from view is a spiritual experience.

A moonrise and a sunset – across a span of space and time – two moments that book end my life – or much of it anyway. Those moments have made my life fuller and have been constantly happening over the years whether I am aware of them or not. Such riches are there for all to partake of and to enjoy. We only need to stop and wait, watch and share.



66



AMERICAN BEAR
Speed and Precision

Indian
SCOUT

Brain Dead

Barbara Stacey

Cronulla

My computer is brain dead!

It happened five weeks ago. I was trying to move stuff into iMovie and it resisted, gave a sort of gurgle and a sigh, the screen went black and up popped a question mark.

I tried everything: Looked up Google where I found and pressed buttons simultaneously, then found lots of people with the same problem, all offering advice. One person on line said to put the whole damn computer in the fridge for half an hour till it cooled down and came to its senses.

But it never did! The question mark stayed.

Even took it up to the geniuses at Apple who are all 16 years old. They couldn't fix the malingerer. It's still brain dead and worst of all I'm sure it's catching! All my nouns are disappearing. Must be dementia or alzheimers or whatever it is that makes your brain shrink.

I once asked a brain type doctor what filled the space if your brain shrank?

He said liquid.

What sort of liquid? Something good like pink gin?

But he didn't think that was amusing.

Computers aren't the only gadgets I don't understand. How do they work? All those little prickly bits of metal in the back lying there so smugly.

I don't understand phones either. I come from the era of tin cans and string.

Once I had two internet addresses which happened through no fault of mine. When I tried to tell a very foreign voice that I only needed one, he replied that lots of people like the security of having two

addresses because you have a back-up. I told him I'd train a bunch of pigeons if I was that concerned. He put me through to his supervisor and the problem was fixed but pronto.

Back to the missing nouns.

I've started a list of lost words in a special little notepad. First is 'albino' closely followed by 'crepe myrtle'. If I tell myself 'pancake', I arrive at Crepe Myrtle.

Yesterday I lost quendas. What are quendas I hear you ask? No wonder you lost them! I had to check with the relatives in Perth to solve the mystery. Quendas are a sub species of bandicoot and are found in the hills of Perth. A long time ago whilst on a holiday I'd stood still for ages in the bush near the town of Quindalup waiting for them to show up. And they did. I was delighted. So you'd think I'd remember the cute little things. But there you go – another escaping noun.

And proper nouns? Well why do you think all those Probus clubs have name tags?

Any clubs that the elderly join have name tags come to think of it, even my ukulele club which is full of entertaining old men in loud Hawaiian shirts bearing name tags.

I have a dear old friend with the vanishing noun problem too. She couldn't remember the name of a street and was giving me clues till we found it. This turned into a strange type of charades really; 'A boy chook with eggs' she'd said. 'The boy hen has eggs', she explained again.

'Rooster Street?'

'No?'

'Laycock Street', she screamed.

Got it! It was a cryptic sort of day.

Do you remember that joke where Paul Keating asks a lady in a nursing home, 'Do you know who I am?'

She says, 'No dear, but if you ask at the main desk the receptionist will tell you who you are.'

So funny. I still enjoy that joke. You can stick in any politician you hate and it always works. Mind you I didn't hate Paul Keating one bit. No! We could do with his classy, witty putdowns in parliament today.

Today's politicians are not witty. A great sadness really.

Now, apart from my problem of forgetting nouns, the whole world has given up on adverbs and that really cheeses me off. Just look through some Facebook comments and weep.

Surely it wouldn't take long to put 'freshLY cut sandwiches' on the sign outside the shop?

Those ancient Egyptians would be turning in their sarcophagi now since we've adopted hieroglyphics in the form of emojis. Such fun and how clever is the person who invented them. But we have emojis front on, AND side on which is something the ancient Egyptians might like to know since they didn't seem to be into people depicted front on, unless they were dead!

Anyway, I took my ailing computer off to a place recommended by Apple, since Apple could not retrieve the content from the damaged hard drive.

It was a whizz bang place in the city. An entire floor in York Street with glass and secretaries and fancy glasses of water. Was going to cost a bomb. A week later they said they needed more time and it would cost more. You can come and collect your ailing computer if you're not keen on this plan. Good idea!

Meantime, a friend in my favourite coffee shop where our problems are solved, said why not try that bloke two blocks away. If anyone can retrieve stuff he can. So that's where I went.

Robert sat in his Aladdin's cave workshop of computer bits and pieces right beside our local politician's office.

'Yes', said Robert, the computer whizz from down town, 'I'll ring you when I've had a look'.

And he did. 'Not impossible. I can do it.'

Wonderful!

Meantime I had rushed off to Apple and bought a new computer in case I had to use paper like Victor Hugo when I was at a Bootcamp for writers.

So the wonderful Robert collected stuff from the damaged hard drive, put the content in my new computer and now I'm in business and can complete my movie.

So I have a computer with a brain.

How I love technology when it works. What a joy!

Now I need a replacement brain too. I want my nouns back.

Where do I go?

Breathe Deep, Walk Tall

Gail Houghton

Coonabarabran

The plane's wings looked almost as wide as the width of the valley. The mountains were coming up fast; the runway seemed no wider than a single-laned road.

What was I doing here?

What was I thinking?

Reality was fast approaching just like the landing at Paro, Bhutan. The jolt of the wheels connecting with the runway mirrored the jolt in my stomach.

What was I doing here?

Breathe deep, walk tall ... down the rickety steps into the arrivals hall. The model adorning the baggage carousel was stunning. A scaled model Dzong, complete with distinctive traditional decorations. The distraction almost lulled me into a sense of complacency. This lasted only until I snatched my bag and walked alone from the arrivals hall into the melee of guides, drivers, trekking companies and logos on sticks.

Breathe deep, walk tall ...

All the guides and drivers wore their traditional dress, the gho. How splendid they all looked with their knee length black socks, white pristine cuffs. My guide and driver made themselves known to me and off we went into this magical land of the dragon and stunning mountains.

Today was just being acclimatized to the altitude and the country itself. After lunch it was watching an archery contest, the national sport. Prayers for success and opponents were a feature of the warm ups between each set of flying arrows. The traditional bows have been replaced with modern contraptions that look like they have come from a sci-fi set. Between rounds, girls dressed in their traditional kiras sang and danced in circles,

weaving forward and back, side to side, their voices melodious with traditional songs sounding almost like birds calling, the notes were clear and rose and lowered in tone with their body movements. What a magical place.

A walk through the markets showed a lot of familiar vegetables and fruits and then some not so familiar like fern fronds. They were tied in bunches like the asparagus, their ends curled like snails, their colour a deep green, almost black. Ngawang, my guide, told me how tasty they were when in season. A great start to the first day. I was becoming complacent with the sights, sounds and experiences before me. Tomorrow was another day though with a trek to Kila Gompa Nunnery.

The Kila Nunnery is reputedly the oldest nunnery in Bhutan and I was looking forward to seeing this place of history and tradition.

We began the day early, as although the distance to drive where we would begin our trek was not many kilometres, the condition of the road and the speed restrictions meant it would be hours of travel. As we began our climb, the vegetation of tall blue pine and brown oak trees stood as sentinels by the roadside. The mountains were steep; the drop into the valleys was jaw dropping. The single lane road wove in a zigzag pattern, higher and higher. Toji, our driver handled the car like a ballet dancer. There were sometimes twelve hairpin turns in a kilometre of distance. We spun, pirouetted with the gentleness yet strength of a prima donna. Never were there screeching brakes, never a jerk against the seatbelt.

Breathe deep ... swallow as my stomach matched the turns and twists. Watching the horizon did not help as it blurred and even disappeared with the turns, the sheer drops were frightening.

The tall trees should stop any careering downhill, should there be a mishap. It was understandable tourists were not allowed to drive.

Breathe deep... thankfully; I had ginger bears in my pocket. Sucking on one kept the stomach in order as we spun about. Red and pink flashed by, almost hypnotically as we turned this way and that. Rhododendrons, lanky with competition from the pines and oaks, bloomed in defiance. Lichen seemed to be on every tree and rock. Some hung like fairy lights, lacelike and fragile looking but giving the branches an eerie look, hiding behind the sage coloured garlands.

At last we reached the car park ready for our trek. The nunnery was just a distant group of white blobs in the distance, it looked a daunting task. There did not seem to be a path to follow and the view into the valley, while spectacular was a definite long drop!

What was I thinking?

It looked so far, so high.

Breathe deep ... walk tall.

We set off, one step at a time, the lush green grass was slippery with dew, I really did need poles, I should have thought of that.

One step, breathe, one step, breathe, it hurts and I feel sick, one step, stumble.

I look up and can see the buildings more clearly, but this is hard. I try not to let them see the tears coursing down my cheeks. I wipe them away quickly; I am determined to do this.

Breathe deep ... walk tall.

Closer and closer, I stumble to the buildings, some are so precarious, held up with props as they jut out from the side of the mountain, and they look so dangerous. I almost expect them to tumble down as I stumble and lurch against the rocks below them.

A small gate appears and a stupa. I stop and rest while Ngawang and Toji say their prayers as they encircle the stupa. The goal is in sight, a few more elevations, even steps cut into the rocks and I will be there. My heart is pounding with exertion but I am determined. It is just one step at a time, and I finally arrive.

The relief and joy is mirrored in the laughter of the nuns as we step over the threshold into the temple. They are trying to play a flute and are laughing at each other's attempts. They are oblivious to my discomfort, which stops when the climbing stops. I join in with their laughter.

I did it!

Life is so amazing when you embrace it.

Just breathe deep, walk tall...and believe!

Bush Tennis

Peter Johnsen

Broulee

I'm reminded of the proliferation of backyard tennis courts in Sydney suburbia back in the fifties and sixties. Usually down a long lane beside an unprepossessing house to a wired sand or clay court behind the backyard. With mid-week housewives and retirees meeting on Wednesday mornings to have a gossip and take a trip back to their glory days, winning the District Under 15 Ladies Doubles.

Small toddlers, banned from the red sand court, hanging around whingeing and the older ladies with names like 'Bette' and 'Dulce' and 'Dot', with a groundstroke as sure as it was forty years ago. Many had indulged in the unusually Australian tradition, after years and years of the hard bush life, of retiring to the city. My great grandfather had an unrecorded birth along the trail near Gunning and spent his best years on a property south of Bourke, toiling away under the western sun. But he had retired to die at Strathfield in Sydney, away from family and friends and that beating sun.

Here, you will observe a certain seriousness and no-one could be accused of playing 'hit and giggle' tennis. But instead, they give their best. Like anyone living out bush in those days, my mother, Dorothy, a bush-bred girl, knew her tennis. During the 'golden years', anyone out there could be called upon to act as a reliable doubles' partner.

Drive out west through any dusty 'town'. Those that cling to that status, when the map clearly shows only a 'locality'. Invariably, somewhere in amongst that group of huddling dwellings and sheds and tanks, a little off on the outskirts, there would be a cyclone-wire surrounded, sand or clay tennis court. Inside the enclosure an attendant rough-hewn high chair, that kids loved to climb up and fall off.

On one side, the prevalent wind side, there would be paper litter and clutter building up against the cyclone wire. On the outside of the court, just near the creaky entrance gate, would be found a rectangular shelter of varying and on occasion, suspect architecture. Some have a dirt floor with bare timber fittings, slapped up quickly and left. Some are newly painted, invariably in white and neat. At their best, you will find some painted in club colours with a seat all the way around the walls and a large bench plonked in the middle of the concrete slab with two long picnic-type seats either side and something of a bench in the corner. They might even have a large opening window that revealed the court and allowed all to watch from the shelter of the shade.

Invariably, on the table, a half dozen neatly wrapped packages of lamingtons, various slices and quarter-cut sandwiches. And always, always with the ever-present din of flies buzzing overhead. At the rear you would find an old rusting forty-four-gallon drum, for rubbish. Inside, at the back wall, a dingy tap popping out of the ground mysteriously, with the hint of cool water. Outside sitting rather raggedly on a simple timber base, a rusting small half-size water tank, that no-one's used for years, still with its piping straight from the bottom of the tank, through the corrugated wall and hanging suspended in mid-air with a spout, over nothing really, just there.

And most important of all, perched above every one of those tennis sheds, the obligatory corrugated iron roof, heaving under uncertain nails against the ever-present blazing sun.

And if you had looked closely enough, a way off, in amidst the long grass, an ancient roller, glistening rusted tan and blackened from years of constant exposure.

Here on a Saturday arvo, my mother and uncle and aunties, bush cockies, roustabouts and others from all the stations congregated to represent Yantabulla. This weekly entertaining were visitors from Hungerford up north on the Queensland border. Yantabulla, on the Cuttaburra Creek, and part of the overflow from Queensland into the Darling basin, still had a pub then. A tired, long, single-storey rectangle, ground level verandah at the front, with an impressive collection of DA bottles, stacked neatly to a man's height and extending off into the nearby scrub.

During the evening, short, sharp outbursts of laughter would interrupt the bush silence and low voices could still be heard well into the night. And by the end of night, no-one even remembered that Tom had won the men's final in straight sets. Inevitably, there'd be the late, drunken incoherent search for old Ronnie, who had the only ute keys and couldn't be found. Finally, he'd be located sound asleep under the cattle truck parked down near the tennis court.

One after another, utes and trucks and old land rovers would slowly disappear into the black distance, their head lights fading off, away from the town's solitary street lamp.

And here now, as the ladies packed up, just in time to get home for afternoon tea, the reminiscing turned from laughter to the shaking of heads. All had different realities now, from those days of bygone tennis comps, and lazy, romantic bush Saturday afternoons. For a few hours a week though, they could be back there, where they imagined the air was dusty but cleaner and the shine of the setting sun seemed somehow brighter and more radiant. There, almost everything seemed better.

Camping

Stephen Wicks

Albion Park Rail

The mist swirled around the tea trees as the morning breeze ruffled across the coastal dunes. A crisp morning presented us with a fading night sky as the sun prepared to rise above the black night ocean. As I walked across the dunes a startled kangaroo disappeared into the thick coastal bushland which provided a safe home for many native animals that made the dune landscape their home. The sound of the sea was becoming louder as I approached the crest of the last dune before descending to the beach below.

The high tide during the night left behind lines of seaweed which extended beyond my vision. I remembered the time as a younger man when I could see to the end of the beach in both directions. Time seems to race by without notice, appearing to quicken in pace each passing year. This place for us is a slice of paradise where relaxation, the sea and the dunes call to our inner spirit awakening the energy our lives are driven by.

A fisherman lunges with a rod in hand in an attempt to cast a bait beyond the breaking waves. An explosion of stars flash, as the bait splashes into the sea disturbing the phosphorous laden plankton that inhabits the sea in countless millions. The patience of the fisherman flows forth as he waits an endless time watching the ebb of the surf and the movement of his line. Strange time is, it can pass without notice and also create a moment where time appears to stop as the morning breeze blows, the surf ebbs and flows and the fisherman sits and waits.

Leaving the fisherman's timeless world, I ventured further along the beach following the surf line so that the sea washed around my ankles creating a soothing, frothing massage of sea and sand. A couple with a small dog stroll in the opposite direction stopping to throw a coloured

ball along the beach. The small dog would race after the ball and return to the couple dropping the ball at their feet. The man would pick the ball up and pretend to throw the ball causing the dog to chase after the ball still in his hands. Laughter could be heard across the sand as they found joy in the game being played.

The surf was breaking on a number of banks along the beach with a single board rider enjoying the challenge of surfing a wave across the bank before paddling out to catch another. Surfing has been a later activity in my life as I discovered the challenge of paddle board surfing. Many mornings before dusk, the van is loaded with the paddle board before heading off to the surf destination of choice. Tomorrow could be a day that I join the lone surfer where even if the waves are small, being in the sea under the oceans embrace, is where time stands still for a short moment.

The sun was almost showing itself above the horizon. The silhouettes of a large flock of sea birds stretched low to the sea as they returned to their daily roosting place amongst the tea trees, banksia and the dunes. Time to return to the camp site where the spirit calls and the kettle whistles.

The camp ground, a place where people come to escape the pressures created by the need to provide the necessities of modern life. When you look around the camping area people are sitting and reading, cooking breakfast on an open fire, talking to the camper next door. Every camper is called mate, howdy, how are you, no need for formal names which remind us of the places we are escaping from for a day or two. The simple life being supplied by the camp, to all those in its presence. The kettle whistled returning my attention to the real world, "tea's ready" better get it before it goes cold.

As the sun nears the western horizon, the sky dims to a deep indigo hue, pushing the blue of the day to its resting place where it sleeps until dawn. The dunes start to emit the sounds of the coastal bush bringing to light the many eyes that have been watching the campers with amusement and wonder during the day unnoticed. Laughter is heard across the way as a camp fire is started. The flickering silhouettes of campers mingle with the swaying shadows cast into the trees by the yellow light of the spirit. The camp fire is the primeval spirit that protects the campers from the dangers of the night. The modern life pressures are driven aside by the spirit as its warmth surrounds the watchers who sit and stare into the depth of the flames being hypnotised by the random flickering, pops and cracks. As the camp fires dim, the camp lows into a peaceful quiet where the bush sounds can be heard and the star blanket appears providing the theatre of awe to those willing to watch.

On the last day the camping ground seems to reach out and hold on to your spirit in an attempt to prolong your stay. Stay another day can be heard being whispered by the coastal breeze, the tea trees, the banksia, and the dunes. One more walk across the dunes to see the fisherman sitting in his timeless world. One more walk to hear the couple laughing at their dog chasing the coloured ball. One more walk to remind me of the simple things around us which we can hold onto as we love life.

Camping with Crocs

Judith Turner

South Durras

'I believe we may have made a terrible mistake,' my husband whispered.

'Looks like a schoolies tour,' I said biting my lower lip. I glanced around the small group gathered outside the Darwin Backpackers' hostel. *What possessed me to book a couple of old retirees like us on an eight-day Adventure Camping Safari, sleeping in swags with no tents and a bunch of young backpackers?*

Ray shrugged, 'Oh well, there's no going back now.'

We watched a battered twelve-seater 4WD truck rumble around the corner, brakes squealing to a stop. A bearded, muscular young man in brief khaki shorts, tattered bush hat and sturdy boots leapt out. 'Hi, I'm Leo, your driver, guide and cook. Who wants to go to Broome with a bit of adventure on the way?'

The energetic youth of the group punched the air and called 'Yea' while Ray and I stared apprehensively at our transport. *Would it make it to Broome?*

'C'mon, let's load the luggage and get this show on the road.' Leo climbed on top of the truck. 'Gunna be hot. Hope you all brought your swimmers.'

The Japanese girl looked alarmed. 'What about the dangerous crocodiles?'

'Don't worry, I won't let you swim near any crocs.'

From the start, this shy, Tokyo girl, Naoko, stuck very close to my side. I wondered about her travelling alone on such a trip and know at times she found it quite a daunting experience. I can still see the horrified look on her face when Leo handed her the shovel and biodegradable toilet paper and explained the method of toileting in the outback.

We camped the first night near Lake Argyle. Leo unloaded the luggage and bedding and then showed us how to set up our swags. No tents, just swags on the ground which proved extremely comfortable. With no barrier between us and the sky, each night we marvelled at the extraordinary, breathtaking spectacle of stars. Magic!

Leo produced a cask of white wine and whipped up a tasty meal for dinner. We sat on camp stools that balmy evening, two old crocs and young travellers from all around the globe, now becoming the best of mates.

Leo gave us a rundown on what to expect on the trip: staying mainly at rough bush camps, only one shower between here and Broome, but we could freshen up with swims along the way. 'In safe water holes,' he said looking at Naoko. 'We begin at dawn to make the most of each day.'

'What time is dawn?' asked Naoko.

'A-ah, around five am.'

Next morning, we woke to the sound of an alarm clock at 4.30 am. A chorus of expletives rang out and a loud '*Who belongs to that?*' from Leo.

'Solly, solly,' wailed Naoko. A hail of shoes flew in her direction.

The air-conditioning had broken down three hours out of Darwin, so we rumbled along with open windows through the red dust south of Kununurra until we reached The Bungle Bungle Ranges in Purnululu National Park, setting up camp late afternoon for our two-night stay. Ray and I enjoyed a cold beer and watched the kaleidoscope of colours reflected by the setting sun against the beehive-shaped domes in the distance. They reminded me of a family of wise old people. An ancient, all-knowing, mystical link with the land.

On our hike next day, a small whirlwind spiralled dust from the path ahead. My grandmother believed these *willie-willies* were spirits of the place. I imagined this one welcomed us as we trod with respect. Fan palms clung to walls and crevices as we marvelled at the orange, yellow, black, and grey stripes of the sandstone and conglomerate domes.

What a place!

What a day!

Early next morning we set off for a helicopter ride to view the whole range from the air. When I saw the chopper had no side doors, I happily volunteered to take the middle spot. I gripped the pilot's seat in front of me with my knees and arms as we tilted, soared and dipped. My two companions, precariously secured only with seat belts, *also* clutched at the pilot's seat and the three of us gasped in alarm each time we banked over and down for a better view. 'Spectacular!' cried Ray, but I could hear the terror in his voice.

That afternoon we had one last walk in the Bungles. Our usually boisterous group moved silently, an inexplicable sense of calm and peace slowing our pace. Through a lush green gully, a narrow rocky chasm, on to the wonderful acoustics of Cathedral Gorge. Here, after freshening up in the crystal-clear pool, we sat hushed as our young Welshman, Tom, sang *Nessun Dorma* in his fine tenor voice. Life is full of extraordinary gifts.

We arrived late at the next camp at Parry's Creek farm and set up beside a giant boab tree near a picturesque billabong. The local grazier pulled up in his ute. 'Don't any of you think of swimming down there,' he warned. 'I've set a trap for a big croc that took one of my dogs. Hope I'll catch him soon.'

Naoko's eyebrows shot up in terror. I shared her alarm. 'Leo,' I said, 'I'm not comfortable camping next to a billabong with a big croc.'

Leo assured us our camp was a safe distance from the water, but he could see I was not convinced. 'Judy, to prove I'm not worried, I'll put my swag between you and the billabong. Don't worry, I'll protect you.'

Next morning, I was the first to wake. Birds flitted and twittered around the still billabong water. I looked around. *No Leo*. I went searching and found him sound asleep in his swag way over behind the truck.

I gave him a kick, 'You said you'd protect us!'

He opened one eye and his mouth twisted into a wry grin. 'Judy,' he said, 'I lied.'

I wanted to kick him even harder.

'Did you sleep well?' he asked.

Chocolate and Vanilla

Colleen Parker

Port Macquarie

Planning retirement and a hobby farm, my husband researched alpaca breeding. When I learned that the softness and lustre of alpaca fibre makes it the most valuable textile in the world, I was keen to use the yarn for my own knitting.

We began with two Peruvian white males, *Laramie* and *Dallas*, to keep the grassy paddock under control. Next we visited an alpaca breeder.

"These females should suit your needs," he suggested. "*Tiffany* is a gentle girl – timid. She will travel better if you take *Peaches* too. The price includes two matings for each maiden."

We loved their colours: rich-brown *Tiffany* with her light-brown male *cria*,² *Timothy*, 'at foot'³ and the beige, *Peaches*. Loading them into the trailer I was as excited as a child at Christmas.

Back home, *Laramie* and *Dallas*, nosed the new arrivals in welcome. I registered them in our farm's name, *Fairbrooke*. Each animal receives an engraved number on a clip which is stapled to a left ear.

Morning routines involve emptying and cleaning water buckets then refilling them with fresh cold drinking water. *Laramie* delights in placing his muddy front hoof into the first bucket as I place it on the ground; one of his 'fun' activities.

At midday the merged herd animals cluster under a shady peppercorn tree snoozing. I am surprised how each personality interacts with the others just like human family members. When educating ourselves further, listening to another breeder about herd management, I felt a tug at my foot. An alpaca was unpicking my sneaker lace! It was 'love at first sight' with the mischievous *Donouska*.

2 Cria – newborn alpaca

3 At foot – staying close to 'mum'

"Would you sell her? She'd fit in so well with our lot." So *Donouska* travelled home comfortably on the back seat of our car, much to the surprise of other motorists when we pulled up at red lights and the head at the window catching the breeze did not belong to a dog. We stopped for hay and carrots on our return after which we scattered the carrot slices for them all, to help settle her in.

"They are not for you," I laughed as the dog and cat gate-crashed the party.

Within days the alpacas were taking 'treats' from our hands and *Donouska* discovered my colourful rose-bushes. Stretching her neck over the fence she devours a daily snack. How can I scold her when she moves close with a gentle touch on my cheek? Fortunately the rosehip is good for her.

My husband is coerced into her games. When he squats to weed poisonous yellow fireweed from the paddock, she sneaks up, grabs the peak of his cap and canters off, dropping it out of his reach. He retrieves it, continues weeding but she comes again – and again, enjoying the human interaction.

By attending Alpaca Shows we learn techniques for handling the animals for 'showing' to judges. On one such occasion we admired two alpacas standing calmly while children stroked their necks. Yes, *Domino* and *Knight* joined our herd, their jet-black fleeces winning many ribbons.

Every year, a shearer visits. We assist by gathering the fleeces from the table then calm the animals as they're drenched and nails are clipped. The fleeces are spun into skeins and balls for sale. I knit scarves, warm tops and rugs with the hollow, thermal, lightweight fibre.

Our day of wonder was when: *Peaches* delivered our first *cria* born on *Fairbrooke*; a solid brown male, *Chocolate*. His aunties and uncles gathered around the little bundle lying in the grass. In the wild, *crias* are on their feet, running with the herd by dusk, for safety. If a birth is imminent, but noon passes, the mother delays the birth 'til morning. Our second *Fairbrooke* arrival surprised us because from a distance she looked like a white plastic bag in the paddock. We approached with caution to meet our beautiful snow-white female *cria* born to *Donouska*. Name? *Vanilla*.

Such was our harmonious life on *Fairbrooke*. One terrifying morning at 4.00 o'clock we woke to blood-curdling squeals and screams. Racing outside we saw two dogs attacking the herd. Young *Timothy* was lifeless beside his mother, *Tiffany*, who died next day from the shock of her loss. *Laramie* protected the others, hiding them behind a blackberry bush. *Dallas* distracted the savage dogs, drawing them to the dam. But the weight of his drenched fleece dragged him underwater, he was scalped and he died. We captured one dog, called the police and the owner was charged. The memory of that horrific experience remains graphic.

We built a higher fence. *Bandit*, elected night-watchman, dozes during the day, belly facing the sun for maximum warmth. After the night meal of pellets and hay, he positions himself at the front of the enclosure to watch over the 'family' comfortable in the stable, until dawn. Alpacas are natural protectors used on many sheep farms.

Our German Shepherd and cat too, are alert for snakes, mice, frogs and other 'visitors' but when a car stops at our front gate it's the alpacas whose stares alert us to look in that direction. And we know when a storm is brewing; our alpacas sit in 'cush⁴ position, their rumps towards the direction of wind and rain.

Our planned move to a safer district entailed loading them onto a float. Fun-and-games for the alpacas as our helpers load two, then another two; but meanwhile one jumps out, then another – and the scenario continued for an hour till we're all exhausted. The trailer eventually drove off through the gateway with the dog chasing, while the cat sat forlorn on the driveway watching.

But their misery turns to joy when, two days later, we're all re-united. *Little Chocolate* and *Vanilla* show us all affection when we arrive. Home is not a location. Home is being together, living a life we love.

4 Cush – the alpaca folds its legs under its body to rest or keep warm

Chooks on the Table and the Cat ate the Toad

Kaye Christensen

Harrington

I've loved the life I've lived. My most precious year was 1966. News included: Mr Menzies' retirement, Vietnam War conscription, St George winning its 11th, consecutive Rugby League football final, rains coming in August to break the drought, Play School's first airing, Prince Charles attending Geelong Grammar and 14th February heralding Decimal Currency. Then, on 19th February I married my childhood sweetheart.

We fell in love at High School and agreeing to marry him, meant leaving my 'townie' lifestyle to become a dairy farmer. I mastered it, had gorgeous babies and lived amidst unbelievable love, fun and laughter.

We leased the cutest riverside farm on Dumaresq Island, which was accessed via a punt across the Manning River. Roy, the punt-man, practically lived in a little blanket and pillow space in the engine room, escaping in the wee hours to his family ashore. He came to the aid of my sister and me for our first solo milking, while my husband was doing contract tractor work. We hesitated too long with our first cow and she sat down, unable to be milked but Roy slapped her to standing and off we went. He continued to help me with any cantankerous cows whenever I needed him and kept his punt on our side each night, when my babies were due. He was a good man.

We had family and friends visit, playing board games and cards in the evenings, enjoying happy, delightful times. We night-fished by tying a line around a Coke bottle, casting it out, and leaving it behind our bedroom French-doors. A rattling bottle meant breakfast was covered. Farming life was busy but we found time to socialise at the School Hall, playing Euchre or Carpet Bowls. Everyone's children came along. We had chooks, a dog to round up our cows and a cat to catch the river rats. We also had an outdoor red-back-spider seat toilet, which required

a regular, large hole-digging event by my husband. That took me some getting used to.

My chooks sometimes slipped into the kitchen if the house was unattended. Some friends called in once and were aghast; the chooks were thoroughly enjoying the cake crumbs, upon my table. I love chickens and they've been my friends right up to now, 2019. I have screen doors these days.

The cat came running down the hallway one afternoon, which was unusual, as he was an outside cat. He was making a growling noise, so my sister tried to scoot him out, but to no avail. She ran toward me, the cat chasing her. Then it suddenly stopped dead. Actually, dead. After milking and finding our dilemma, my husband asked if we had been fishing. We had two in a bucket for cleaning, we proudly announced; one a flathead and one a puffy fish. We didn't know, we were 'townies', the puffy fish was poisonous, the cat ate the toad. Sadly, we weren't given another cat until much later, but we kept only good fish after that.

We woke to cries of "Help!" before daybreak, one winter's morning. Our milk cans were collected by a milk-boat. The driver slipped off the deck, his boat continuing alone. He was in big trouble.

It took neckties, belts and dressing gown cords knotted together.

It needed the drowning man to remove his Wellington boots.

It required the men to have strength, faith and some luck.

It took a wife to stand on the bank, worried but shouting reassurances that they were almost there. And they were.

And they did.

He was most thankful. We heard him. His boat ran ashore at the next milk jetty.

Interestingly now, but as it was in those times, it was never discussed again. They shook hands, nodded and my husband said, "All in a Day's Work".

Weeks after my second baby arrived, a massive flood ensued. It was 1968. That was interesting for me: herding cows onto a purpose-built high mound, wading out with a bucket to milk them, seeing our toilet swept away and hearing my mother, from the opposite bank, anxiously telling people that I recently had a new baby. Things eased and, albeit very soggy underfoot, work had to be done. The toilet building was salvaged from a treetop and a new seat purchased. No flushing toilets for me yet though.

The flood and our tiny farm, became part of our daily conversation; we needed a larger property. My husband started enquiring of available farms for lease. A city businessman came to talk with him one afternoon, just as we had started milking. I continued, while the men chatted outside. The businessman said that my husband had been recommended to him, as the ideal farmer for his newly purchased property. The man talked a while longer and, noticing our cows were still being milked, he asked who was milking them. I met him then. He was pleased I was the farmer's wife, saying he thought I may have been an inexperienced, young 'townie'. We smiled, confidently.

This next adventure brought bigger farming, bigger family and the next twenty plus years. But what a *wonder* to us, was Dumaresq; our partnership, our two children, chooks on tables, a toad eating cat, learning to farm and saving a good man. It happens. All in a day's work.

Every life holds the happy, the sad and the unfortunate. None is perfect.
But I always look for that *wonder*. Every day.
And the current residents of the new-age Dumaresq, for them what suits?
Cars that don't wait on a punt, or the punt man working his tricks
Maybe chooks who are stylish, laying green coloured eggs, in coops
But never pecking cake crumbs from the table or floor
I'd say more than one flushing toilet that doesn't need to be fixed
Groomed dogs on a leash, and buying fish from a store
They really don't know what they have missed of the times of 1966.

Comfort Zone

Maureen Kelly OAM

North Arm Cove

A wave of total satisfaction engulfed me as my plane landed at the airport. As it taxied to the terminal, I analysed this feeling. Was it because I was nearly home after four weeks away? Was it the enjoyment the book I had just finished reading had given me or was it simply the fact I truly love my life wherever I am or whatever I am doing?

As I snuggled under my doona that night I recalled an early memory, a memory of survival which was so much part of my young life; so character-building it has probably contributed to me always loving life to the full.

I shudder, even today, whenever I hear the sound of a wailing siren. This 'fear' started in 1943 when I was aged four. The siren would sound to warn everyone of an impending air raid which could, possibly, damage our house and others in my village just outside London. Even worse, kill people!

My mother, without fail, would ask, 'Have you got your gas mask?' I would nod and pick up the glossy brown box with a strap of white tape containing my Mickey Mouse gas mask.

It did puzzle me that the siren often sounded as I was eating my pudding which meant a long walk down our garden path to the air raid shelter, figs and custard sliding from side to side in the bowl. Maybe it was good I concentrated on the figs and custard, rather than the time I might have to spend in the shelter?

The shelter door was made of corrugated iron protected by a high breeze-block wall and accessed by steep steps cut deep in the soil. The rounded roof was covered with grass and flowers – or were they weeds?

The interior was cramped and there was an earthy, dank smell and I still remember how cold and cramped it was. The beds were built by my father, the mattresses and pillows stuffed with straw made by my mother who also made sleeping bags using old blankets and eiderdowns; nothing like the bags my grandchildren curl up in today when they go camping.

A special treat was a tin of *Peak Frean* custard cream biscuits secreted in a small cupboard. It always puzzled me that they were called 'custard creams'. There was no cream in sight, just a yellow mixture sandwiched between two biscuits. Without fail, from my mother's knitted string bag would come a metal tin with a picture of London Bridge on the lid. Inside were sandwiches cut into triangles nestled in grease-proof paper. These sandwiches were not spread with butter, but margarine as there was no butter available during wartime in our village. Funny how these sandwiches always tasted better while we were in the shelter, perhaps it was a comfort thing?

One morning we awoke to a parachute flapping in the breeze on our lawn. I remember seeing a man in uniform accompanied by two men in black suits, inspecting our billowing intruder. It was eventually identified as 'German' in origin. I don't recall my parents ever speaking again about this event but I do remember it caused a 'buzz' around our neighbourhood for a few days!

To this day, I have a vivid, glorious recollection of VE Day May 8, 1945 – the day the WWII ended.

Church bells pealed from every steeple in our town and I didn't have to go to school that day. Street parties were held everywhere, flags fluttering freely in the breeze, a piano would appear, as if by magic, on the pavement and we would sing and dance as 'happy' music filled the air.

One neighbour had an accordion and sometimes the pianist and he, would join together to provide the musical entertainment.

My uncle, who had been safely evacuated from Dunkirk, played Irish jigs on his violin. This was a big change of repertoire for him as he usually accompanied my piano-playing grandmother giving us all a stirring rendition of her favourite piece 'Jerusalem' which we grandchildren had to dutifully sing. She was a strong woman, full of fervour and love for Winston Churchill. There was loads of laughter everywhere, something I had rarely encountered until that time.

Our biggest thrill at this time was we had street lights! I had never walked down a street at night which was illuminated before that. Everyone took down their blackout curtaining. How amazing to look through a window at the sun sinking each evening, and appreciate moonlight illuminating our bedrooms at night. Nights were gloriously silent. No drone of planes which we had grown so accustomed to. Immense peace contributing to my love of life.

My ten-year old grandson recently completed a school project on air raid shelters. He amazed me with his knowledge, my son suggesting he interview me on the subject.

'Nan, what happened to your shelter after the war?' he asked.

'It was removed but I can't remember how long that took but I do know the spot then became a sunken garden full of flowers and brightly-coloured gnomes,' I told him.

A cheeky smile appeared on his face.

'What else do you remember from such a long, long time ago?'

Of course, this question caught the attention of my son. He smiled, the way children do when their parents are given the rare opportunity to reminisce!

'I was nine when I saw and ate my first banana! My grandson gasped!

'Fresh fruit was in very short supply when I was very young, not like today'.

A sigh from my son. 'We have all grown up knowing that story and we never dared waste any fruit we were given when we were little,' he told my grandson. It dawned on me then how many things we take for granted in 2019! Comforting memories for me though, all part of a life packed with ups and downs, but why wouldn't you love it all?

Country Style

Cecilia Blackwell

Sapphire

Ageing is an odd business, no way would I want to be young again but I struggle to accept the limitations that my seventy plus years place on me. Dawn each day is both a challenge and an adventure; a challenge in terms of finding the energy to perform the tasks that my choices have led to: caring for my animals, furry, woolly, hairy and feathered.

They provide a structure that ensures an early start to the day; watching the sun rise, hearing multiple roosters claiming their territories, closely followed by the bellows of two pet cattle, the baaing of sheep and the indignant calls of the always hungry cat family. The obverse at the end of the day, glorious purple and gold sunsets, even more spectacular in this drought year.

This may sound daunting, but it is my life; the fulfilment of a goal decided on in my teen years. Living in the city back then, I always wanted to be out in the bush with lots of animals and space around me. Now I have 240 acres, eight paddocks and five dams – all of the latter currently dry, if only it would rain, the work load would halve, around two and a half hours daily, rather than the current four to five.

Strangely enough, given my contented, if busy, life (I still work part time as a counsellor). I've found myself thinking more and more about people from my past, sometimes family members, but more often it is those who I think of as the 'almost forgotten'.

Is it a haunting?

Sometimes it feels that way, as most of them are almost certainly long gone, as they were adults when I was a child.

Who are these people?

The earliest were the people populating Sydney's Hyde Park in the early 1950s. My Dad introduced me to these characters during our Saturday afternoon escapes from our one bedroom inner city flat. He was ex-air force, but prior to the war, he'd cut cane in North Queensland, driven trucks, careened around in leather jacket and silk scarf and as a thirteen-year-old, worked in a bakery during the Depression. Some of the people we talked with were smelly, some dirty and others talked with funny accents. When we walked on, he explained to me that all had been affected by the war directly or indirectly and that it was important not to judge others by how they looked or acted. This message has stayed with me ever since and enabled me to work effectively with a wide range of people, kindness is perhaps the most important quality of all.

My grandparents, he from western Queensland, she from London, met during the First World War and travelled to Australia on the first boat after the war, to make a home in rural Queensland. She loved books, poetry, her children, but Pop most of all. The memory of their loving relationship, that lasted for thirty years after he died, a model hard to duplicate in these times.

Then came the time of psychiatric training, a place that was a community in its own right. The stone walls still stood, but the high iron gates were opened, as the medications grew stronger. My first eye opener to this enclave came from matron, my fault, in my ignorance, I was treating patients as people. What she missed was, that not only were they people, but they were amazing despite various psychiatric diagnoses. I learnt chess with one of the forensic residents, about classical music from the European furnace man and about life from all of those who had been condemned for their differences.

They were an amazing selection of ages, races and behaviours but a few have remained with me over the years: Ivy, who at 90 something years, cleaned from dawn to dark, because that kept her voices quiet; precious Annie and Evie, two ancient Aboriginal women, best friends from different western tribes, different language groups, they used sign language. Their presence was most likely due to post-natal depression. Then there was the woman who had been a brilliant university student until she had a mental collapse. Periodically, she would take on the persona of Napoleon and re-inact his triumphant battles, with ensuing chaos on the ward.

However, this was in the past and much is not made of the changes in mental health care, and the closure of institutions that provided shelter and care for those unable to cope in the outside world. However, there is a clear lack of support for many of those with mental health issues, they struggle to find secure accommodation, employment and meaningful relationships, difficulties often compounded by the side effects of medication.

Why do these people continue to feature in my thoughts and feelings? It is a question that returns to me at the oddest times and it is perhaps, that there is no-one else who remembers them, as they were forgotten even back then; no visitors and only the occasional quick doctor visit every few months.

My life, their lives, our lives, separate in a way, each unique but at the same time intimately connected. It is a fallacy to think in dichotomies, us or them, black or white, sane or mad, for at different times in life, we can all fall in and out of those contested spaces and after all, what is normal?

In the end, isn't life all about the people and things that we love?

Love is the fuel that keeps us doing the things that have to be done as well as the reward for much that we do.

Friendship, a sense of kinship, even kindness are all derived from, nurtured by love, hopefully unto the last breath.

Decades

Eunice Whitmore

Castle Hill

1930 to 1940

I lived in a spatial country house called, *Highfields*, in England, feeling loved and secure.

It was an idyllic childhood. The countryside instilled a love that encouraged hobbies like bird-watching and butterfly hunting amidst the flora and fauna. Friends became confidantes and soul-mates, dreaming dreams and keeping secrets. Skating, sliding and sledding on fields and hills of frozen ice in winter.

No social media or television meant we used imagination to create our own pastimes.

Marred by WW2, preparations were in full swing to build air-raid shelters and bring in blackouts. The real war was imminent. At night we recognised the throbbing sound of the German bombers journeying north to the valuable ports and cities of our beloved England.

1940 to 1950

Relentlessly the war and rationing continued for 5 long years before our heroes returned home.

Teenage years were very different from those enjoyed today. Mothers were in the WVS and we had to mind babies and knit for the troops. My sister Pat, 13, auditioned local talent and staged a concert of singing, dancing and recitation. Held above empty stables our audience climbed a vertical ladder and squeezed through a trapdoor before having the privilege of joining in the chorus of 'There'll Always Be an England'. We were to raise £3 for Clementine Churchill's Aid to Russia.

High School meant hard work, as skills were honed and encouraged by 'spinster' teachers who resigned if they wed! I developed a love and expertise in sport and at 18 moved to Bedford and a 3-year live-in course in Physical Education and Physiotherapy. After graduating, I moved north to begin a fulfilling career. I was 22.

1950 to 1960

My first salary went towards skiing in Denmark.

'The Royals' were like our own family and we had flown the flag as staunch Royalists when George V died, and again at subsequent events. 'The rise and fall' of Edward VIII who abdicated to marry that 'awful Wallis woman' is common knowledge.

The Duke of Windsor's untimely death which meant an inevitable successor to the throne was a devastating blow but Elizabeth's Coronation with its extravaganza all obliterated the horrors of war.

Her marriage to the handsome Duke was almost upstaged by my sister, Fay's wedding as our neighbours pitched in for clothing coupons to purchase materials for 'copy-cat' crinolines. My sister and I were stoked.

My own marriage in 1956 took me to a happy life in London and a honeymoon in Devon where I was encouraged to land an 80lb blue shark single-handed. It qualified me for the Angler Club of Great Britain, would you believe?

In 1958 the pitter patter of tiny feet as my beautiful son Robert was born.

'*The pen is mightier than the sword*' they say and my father, already 'down under' soon lured three out of four families to emigrate.

1960 to 1970

Demanding occupations, new homes and new babies dominated our lives and we thrived in our new environment.

1970 to 1980

'Hello Sydney' from the top of the Harbour Bridge'

My sister visited Australia frequently and especially for my daughter's wedding in Manly. Travelling with her to the land of the long white cloud and the phenomenal Milton Sound was magic. We revelled in the forests of Tasmania and snorkelled in the Barrier Reef where eating mangoes was mandatory. The Outback beckoned and I can say I've ballooned over Uluru and been challenged to climb this Monolith. It later became an Aborigine Spiritual site inside the National Park.

We stayed at Kakadu and flew over crocodile infested rivers before going further westward to the amazing wild flowers of coastal areas and Broome. Anxious to see more of UK, we went to James Herriot and Summer Wine country; historical castles on the East coast and fun places like Blackpool and Butlin's. I caught up with old friends to walk the Yorkshire Dales and Channel Islands.

1980 to 1990

Ballroom dancing was a love which I have connected with since the age of 60, sometimes five times weekly and I continued with enthusiasm.

Mildred and I were the most senior on a tour all through Holland, France, Germany, Italy, Switzerland and Eastern Europe. It was an exhausting cultural and musical trip but we were proud of our unflagging stamina.

1990 to 2000

Olympics and what a buzz!!!

I stayed at home. I bought a large TV and watched everything. I babysat Lindsay and Ryan and sometimes took them to the city screens with a picnic. As a reward I went to many equestrian events. Happy days!!

2000 to 2010

I moved into a retirement community at 74 where I had time and energy. I travelled to my favourite Lord Howe Island with Mildred and as I am still considered to be useful in my chosen profession I joined a conference in Fiji.

I enjoyed committees, gardening, volunteering, scrabble, movies and driving. I loved organising line dancing, showing movies and catering for morning teas.

Sadly I came to the realisation that my sister could no longer travel and in 2015 she passed away with Dementia.

2010 to 2019

The grandeur of a Rocky Mountaineer Train Trip and a cruise through the Inner Passage to Alaska cannot be surpassed. After feasting our eyes on Orcas and humpback whales in their natural habitat in Vancouver we moved on to ecstatic scenery of the ice fields and snow topped mountains to explore the towns of Juneau, Skagway, Glacier Bay, Ketchikan, Whistler, Jasper, Lake Louise, Banff and Kanloops.

Every name conjures a fairytale story of wonderment for my daughter and grand-daughter who accompanied me. The mushing with Alaskan Huskies was a unique experience. Black bears in a Ketchikan forest and our incredible accomplishment, zip-trekking thousands of feet above forests, from mountain peaks were breathtaking. Reliving it is inspiring.

As I approach my 90th year I am grateful to live and love life.

'Nuff said.

Don't Tell Patricia

Philippa Shann

Wollongong

So this was it. This was her life now. Not by choice certainly. Marie looked despondently at the bare walls and tried to suppress a feeling of panic.

Damn that Sunday morning fry-up. That was the cause of all this. It had set off the fire alarm and her (well meaning?) neighbours on either side had knocked loudly on her door to tell her that her kitchen was on fire. Only a small fire though – nothing to get so excited about. Talk about an overreaction!

She'd flooded the bathroom after becoming engrossed in a Sudoku. Damned thing took ages to solve. This resulted in more knocking and concerned faces. And then the garden; simply beyond her now. In its day it had been glorious – a thing of beauty of which she was inordinately proud – but now it was an overgrown wilderness; largely dead or dying.

Once again, the neighbours on either side came to comment. Could she just trim some of the trees? Or even just the hedge? Bloody hell, she was eighty-nine, but she just smiled politely and seethed inwardly before closing her front door.

Her daughter suggested that living in the family home was clearly beyond her capabilities. Too many rooms to clean and a garden that was getting away from her. It was time to move somewhere smaller. To a place where there was 24/7 care and her every need would be addressed.

Marie hated the thought that she was not 'coping'; that people regarded her as old and useless. Someone to be pitied and sighed over. And her room in this rest home was like a prison cell. A bed and a tiny dresser. A small lounge and an unfinished ensuite. Patricia wore her long suffering face (she had been wearing it quite a lot lately) and explained that it was a wet room.

Bloody right it will be wet. Damn shower has no walls ... , thought Marie mutinously. Still, there was quite a pleasant view – magnolia in full bloom and a busy bird bath. Maybe she could plant some shrubs out there and even some daffodil bulbs for next Spring ... if she was so inclined.

But honestly, she felt uprooted. Hardly any of her belongings had made the journey; Patricia had seen to that, by having a serious chuck out and donating most of it to the Salvation Army. Just a few photographs remained and a couple of her absolute favourite books. Even her clothes had been culled to a bare minimum. *And then named!* It was like her first day at school all those years ago. She felt the same shyness, uncertainty and downright fear. Tears threatened.

No, she mustn't feel sorry for herself. She was no quitter. She had always made the best of any situation. She squared her ample shoulders and took a deep breath. On opening the door she saw an arrow pointing to the dining room. She followed the sign although the smell would have led her there. And what a smell – all rich, herby and delicious. Marie looked at the daily menu board. Beef stroganoff no less – and at lunchtime too.

"You're a bit early Love," said a smiling woman. "Lunch is at midday, but why don't you pop to the lounge, there's a quiz starting in about five minutes."

Marie loved quizzes, but where was the lounge? No problem, the lady escorted her there and then proceeded to introduce her. "Everyone, this is Marie. She is new so be nice and make her welcome. You can sit there Marie," she said, indicating a vacant chair.

And so the day passed. Not so bad really. Marie's team won the quiz. Lunch was a veritable feast. Afterwards she joined a high-spirited group near the conservatory. And in the afternoon a rather engaging young man came and banged out WWII songs on an aged mahogany piano. That was fun. Singing always made Marie happy. She loved to open up her lungs and let rip. She was never sure they fully appreciated her voice at church.

On her way back to her room – well it was a suite really, with French doors opening onto a private patio – Marie noticed the events board and saw that the next day was pet day. A lady from the RSPCA was turning up with some kittens. That would be fun.

She decided to have a rest before dinner – chicken cacciatore. The food was excellent. And such a relief not to have to visit the overcrowded supermarket and then travel home, loaded down with shopping bags on a full bus.

She'd had some embarrassing times on that bus. The step was high and she often stumbled trying to get up. Then, to produce her gold card she had to let go of some of her bags. Last week two of them toppled over and the toilet rolls slid under a seat while her tomatoes slowly meandered down the back of the bus.

"Get your card out while you're waiting!" snarled the driver, "this just holds everyone up!" Sam the Surly tutted loudly while Marie began searching for her elusive Opal card. Each week he sighed exaggeratedly when she failed to press the button for her stop. But she wouldn't have to worry about him anymore! Marie couldn't help smiling as she snuggled down on her bed – very comfortable, just perfect for a quick afternoon nap.

Hmmm, things were looking up. There were definite advantages to living here. A lively social life for a start. Activities every day and such interesting ones too. Marie thought she might try flower arranging, and the watercolour class looked good too. As did the trip to Sydney to see a matinee... she had put her name down on several lists.

And the food was sublime. No more struggling with recipes for one. And the staff seemed friendly and helpful.

Yes, she thought she would be very happy here, but she wouldn't let Patricia know this...

Just yet.

Embrace the Journey

Anne Nielsen

Kincumber

I gazed out the window past sports fields and gum trees to where my dreams and fantasies lay. Images of multi-coloured cupolas and bustling camel markets beckoned. I could almost smell the aroma of exotic spices and taste the street food proffered – more inspiring than algebra.

Bang! Bang! Bang! The noise of the teacher's ruler hitting her desk, brought me back to the equations on the blackboard as I struggled upright in my seat. Was it my blush or my sunburn that made my face so red?

All too soon, basketball practise, hopscotch and carefree laughter with schoolmates gave way to the responsibilities of adulthood. My first hurdle was to find a job: something to do while I waited to see if I'd be accepted into university. The local pharmacy was looking for counter-staff. They hired me.

I loved my new life, earning money and feeling so grown-up. The boss sent me to various hair and makeup courses, which really captured my imagination. I decided to stay in retail.

One cosmetic company offered me a junior position at a large department store in the city. I thought it such a glamorous job. My co-workers took exciting holidays to Turkey or Hawaii. I saved hard so I could go too. We decided on Club Mediterranean in Tahiti, right on the beach. Surfing, snorkelling, comfortable accommodation, food and entertainment – everything was included. I had a whale of a time until a couple of Australian nurses joined us.

'I don't like the look of that mole on your arm,' said the first nurse.

'Been there all my life. I've an identical one on the other arm.'

'I don't like the colour nor the odd shape.'

The second added in a serious-sounding tone.

'Promise me you'll see the doctor immediately you return home.'

Ahh, yes.' Dr Goldsmith said, when he looked at my mole. 'Can't say one hundred percent one way or the other, until pathology takes a look.'

Before I had time to think, he shoved the paperwork at me to sign.

'Whip it out tomorrow. We'll have the results end of the week,' he said.

Like Alice in Wonderland I spin down the rabbit-hole. There's nothing to grab onto as I fall. The Cheshire Cat leers from the branch of a tree. A tall white rabbit dressed in a cream coloured suit, peers anxiously at his oversized pocket watch. *How much time will he give me?* I wonder.

A funeral is in process, the priest is swinging a censer, clouds of smoke fill the air. People, teams of black clad figures loom. Piles of flowers lie on the snow around the gaping hole in the ground. *What's that shadow above me?* The lid is being lowered onto my coffin.

'No! No!' I yell. *Can't they hear me?* I push my arms up with all my might. 'No! I'm not ready to go...'
My voice trails off.

I awake. I'm in a hospital room. Vases of flowers are positioned all around. A handsome young man in a white coat is standing next to me, holding my wrist. His kind eyes calm me.

'My name is John,' he says, exposing his ultra-white smile. 'I need to take your temperature,' he gestures with his thermometer.

That's how we met. Our whirlwind romance was followed by a small wedding on a beach in Bondi. During the ensuing years we added three children to our happy little suburban bungalow. The youngsters grew up and began to make their own way in life. Soon, we were awaiting our first grandchild.

Ours was an idyllic life, until the accident. John was driving home on his motor bike one nasty wet night and didn't see the bus pulling out from the curb. He was dead on arrival at the hospital. That night, my world died too.

Over the next couple of years, I immersed myself in volunteer work to take my mind off the loneliness that even four grandchildren couldn't fill. My best friend, Kate, a lively divorcee, was determined to lift me out of the doldrums. She demanded I come to ballroom dancing with her.

'Bit of exercise, you need it,' she said.

On my first night in the beginner's group, the men lined up in one row and the ladies in another to learn the steps. Whoever was in front of you was your partner for the next dance. There were no couples as such and everyone mixed in the breaks. I decided this arrangement would suit me very well.

The second time, Kate and I stayed on to watch the advanced group. The music started – an old familiar Latin number *La Cumparsita*. 'Oh, I love this,' I announced, to no one in particular.

'Would you like to dance?' said the tall man next to me.

'I'm only in beginners,' I replied.

'I watched you dance the rhumba before,' he said, taking my hand and leading me onto the dance floor.

That's how I met Anton, a retired travel agent. He literally swept me off my feet, turning my childish daydreams into reality.

'Marry me, I want to show you the world,' he said on bended knee.

How could I refuse such a daring offer to restart my life? 'I must speak to my children,' I faltered.

'Have you seen the Colobus monkeys in Zanzibar?' he asked. 'We could start in Morocco, take a train from Marrakesh to Casablanca.'

'Can we have drinks there in Rick's Café?' It was something I'd always dreamt of.

'Yes, and then to Egypt to ride camels around the pyramids.'

'It's tempting,' I giggled, teasingly.

'Perhaps you'd prefer the Trans-Siberian Express to see Lake Baikal or climb the Great Wall of China? Maybe Machu Picchu, too.'

I accepted Anton's proposal, while recalling my mother's words. 'Hardships help us to appreciate all the good things that happen. Just remember that everything in life can be to your benefit. Be happy, love your life.'

Fake Senior?

Matthew Solomon

Balgowlah

Well it finally happened! The sign read 'Seniors discount' and they didn't ask to see my card!

I should have seen it coming. Over the last 12 months, people I meet have asked if I was retired. The nerve! You might as well say: 'You look old'. Last year I came down with shingles, to which people commented: 'Isn't that an old person's disease?'

I'm new to this 'Seniors' thing. Last year I got a bit life weary and decided I'd down tools for 6 months and focus instead on things other than work. So, I'm a temporary Senior. I think of myself as a 'not quite a senior'. Last time I looked I was middle aged, so this feels like a big transition.

I'm two months into this, (loving it so far) and this is what I've noticed: Almost universally people have responded to the idea of taking time off work with; 'Oh, you planning to travel?' It's difficult for people to get their head around what you might do if you're not working or travelling.

Many men I spoke with prior to leaving work commented that they would love to leave their unsatisfactory jobs, and didn't need to still be working for the money, but couldn't imagine how they would spend their time. Yet many retirees I have spoken with comment that they couldn't imagine how they could fit work back into their life, being so busy in retirement.

I decided to structure my time and not just drift. I'd always been very active and the thought of just lazing around and not 'doing' didn't appeal. And, I wanted to test out that old dog – new tricks thing.

So, I made a list of the things I wanted to do and achieve in the 6 months off work. There's categories (health, learning, volunteering, recreation, family), and there's items in each category. In my mind, I thought I'd schedule activities across

these 5 categories, daily for some and weekly or periodically for others. I'd then get to the end of my 6 months off work refreshed and able to look back on a wonderful half year of my life.

It's kind of worked out like that, but every now and then life throws some variations my way. Like my adult son bringing my first grandson over at 7.00am and offering him to me to look after whilst he (my son) catches up on his sleep. Or my youngest son offering for his girlfriend's mother to stay with me and my wife for a week to see Sydney. Or my tennis partner offering for me to look after her guide dog puppy for 10 days whilst she was away on holidays. It's certainly thrown my planned structure!

At times life already feels too full. I'm already wishing I had more time each day. A friend has already forecast that the 6 months off work won't be enough and that I'm really retired but don't know it.

I now look at my list and see that I've done everything on it at least once. I've started 2 languages and 2 musical instruments, I've done 2 volunteer assignments, sailed, surfed and fished, and (almost daily) gone to the gym. I've read 2 books, seen some theatre and ballet, enjoyed some picnics and meals with friends.

My wife tells me I'm measuring things. 'I've done 10 things today honey', I say proudly. I should stop that.

Already I'm thinking I'd be fine to extend this 'time out'.

Yet all my life I've intentionally given my time and energies to meaningful work. I studied Psychology to help others, worked in not-for-profit organisations with the most disadvantaged, and held senior roles supporting many staff.

Is this all over now?

Am I being too hedonistic?

For the most part these questions are content to stay in the background. For now and the next 4 months, I'll enjoy seeing my grandson grow and change; I'll enjoy more time with my wife; I'll become better at Arabic, Chinese, piano and guitar. I'll say 'yes' to some things and 'no' to others. I'll exhaust myself some days, then recover other days.

My wife's already commented that I'm more friendly. You often don't realise the weight of work until you're away from it.

Now I feel freer to greet people and less time constrained to have conversations. I'm happy enough to be the only male in the 'Aqua' exercise class or to be the youngest participant in the dedicated senior exercise classes.

I mostly don't feel like a senior (or how I imagine seniors feel). I see the incredible range of seniors, with some 'old before their time', and others full of vitality and life interests.

The arrival in the post of my Seniors Card was met with great joy. I'm proud to acknowledge my Senior status to my friends, almost like a badge of honour.

'What about all the jobs around the house and garden?'

I'm aware I could be giving my time to this. The house needs painting. There's a lifetime of collecting stuff that needs to be sorted. There's all those jobs you put off doing until you have time.

This is a catch up time of life, but I don't want to be consumed by the 'have to' things of life, but rather by the 'want to'.

So already we've gone to a music festival that for the past 20 years we've said we'd go to one day. And taken electric scooters out for a spin. And gone for walks to the café with my son and grandson. These are the simple joys. Not that I didn't love life beforehand. I can look back and be thankful for most of life. It's a hard reality that we must all go through grief and anguish at times, as this world is not as it should be.

Now I still love life. A different life. For a time. Discovering the Senior in me.

Finding the Light

Anne Joyce

Valla Beach

With increasing excitement I studied the Bristol Old Vic's Acting course offering sessions in *Voice, Movement, Improvisation* and *Singing* with promises of loads of practical experience. At sixteen my dream career unfurled before me – until I read the final paragraph: fees per year – ninety pounds. I crumpled the leaflet, tears of disappointment streaming. It had sounded so perfect, exactly as I had anticipated. Father earned less than ten pounds a week as a plumber. No way in the world could I ask my parents to pay. It was out of the question.

I pitched the brochure into the bin and never mentioned it to Mum and Dad. I made the naively mature decision that my passion could be fulfilled as a hobby rather than a career and so I acquiesced to my parent's wishes and accepted a traineeship at Gloucester's department store. *'This way you'll always have something to fall back on'* advised my wise dad, but the drama mantle was never far from my shoulders. Theatres were prolific in England as were amateur theatrical societies bursting with eager citizens filled with acting aspirations. I took full advantage of any casting opportunities.

As Christmas drew near, shoppers filled the store and all assistants were commandeered to serve in the busiest locations. Surrounded by counters filled with a vast assortment of greeting cards offered at 'one pound for a dozen', my life was frantic. A young sailor caught my attention ... thrusting his cap at me he asked, *'Fill it for me will you love? You choose.'* His cool, carefree manner contrasted to the desperate shoppers scrambling for their pick. Filling his cap, I wondered what sort of exciting adventures coloured his life. Compared to his world, fashion and sales seemed boringly tame and I envied him his freedom. Ultimately I embarked on my own voyage testing a diversity of occupations in search of the perfect fit: waitress, nanny, stable

girl, boarding school house mistress, vet's assistant, hairdresser's receptionist...

Eventually I stumbled into the Royal Air Force where I discovered bases had theatre clubs, as well as romance. A posting to Singapore as an RAF Officer's wife proved a break-through in my acting career. An amah looked after our son and I took full advantage of the freedom she provided. The Changi Theatre Club presented back-to-back productions and inter-services competitions. In addition to live theatre I became a presenter on Forces radio developing my own programs. Returning to the UK with a 'Best Actress Award' fired my motivation and resulted in my acquiring the Royal Academy's Licentiate Diploma in Speech and Drama as a Performer.

Relocating to Canada opened doors to a professional career. In the period between teenage ambition and my family's new life in Canada, I came to realise that nothing replaces life experience. Acquiring the resilience to persist, fortitude to face rejection and humble gratitude for good reviews were all valuable lessons. Even caustic critics, though initially stinging, could teach improved performance.

Earning the coveted Equity, and Association of Canadian and Television Actors' Union Cards, I quickly discovered that versatility was essential for survival in this competitive professional world. My roles were diverse: from dinner theatre, educational theatre, the classics to innovative works of Canadian playwrights. A new script never failed to excite: becoming the person, interpreting the role and developing a character whilst collaborating with the cast and Director, always an adventure.

'Find your light, feel the warmth of your spot and use it. Be seen!' was a frequent direction when rehearsing. With more experience this became an instinctive reaction on stage. Every production offered opportunities for learning and growth. The buzz of connecting with audiences, the delight of developing lasting relationships in a company, fed my soul.

It wasn't always easy. Disappointments and broken dreams abound in an actor's world. But dynamic times and success outweigh grief and you learn to keep moving. There's always another audition, another role, another experience on the horizon.

I'd been introduced to the work of a 19th century English immigrant, Susanna Moody and felt an immediate kinship. Keen to stretch my skills, I embarked on researching material for a one woman play. Her life and times became my devoted focus and my play *'Daughter by Adoption'* was born. Susanna was a writer and her books were part of the educational curriculum. By tailoring the play's two acts to fit the schools' program, I launched Humming-bird Productions and successfully performed on tour throughout Ontario. Meanwhile my career in Toronto continued and I balanced my role as Mr Higgins' mother in *My Fair Lady* with learning Susanna's lines in the dressing-room during my time off stage.

For over a decade I enjoyed a lively career as actress, director, instructor and playwright and came to realise that actors are the most fortunate of God's creatures. By entering the skin of another person; by adopting the gristle and grain of a character in order to distil, to interpret and tell their story, we are privileged to gain a unique understanding of human nature. To be truly authentic, an actor commits to becoming that person, physically and emotionally.

We left Canada for Australia and whilst visiting my sister in Queensland, I auditioned for the Queensland Theatre Company and accepted the position of Coordinator and Workshop Leader in their Roadshow Company, touring schools in northern Queensland. What a fabulous introduction to my new home!

Settling in Canberra, it was rewarding to be part of their evolving arts scene. Two decades later and retirement to the Mid North Coast, a slowing down in artistic opportunities anticipated. How wrong I was! A renovated theatre, a vibrant amateur company, and the offer to teach for TAFE meant I was re-energised.

And so it continues, until the curtain closes, the stage is dark, the auditorium hushed and the final light is extinguished.

Flourishing

Jane Cioffi

Rose Bay

I accept with grace and thanks the lived experience of my life. The loving of it being captured in my heart brings peace, warmth and security from which to move forward looking for opportunities, new ways to be creative, to learn and do things outside my comfort zone.

How did I reach this place in my life born out of the ever-changing context of the years? The platform of my childhood and adolescence nurtured a love of nature, a joy of being active through sport and ballet, a reverence of life guided by a religious school education, a window into intelligence from my father and love of style inherited from my mother. However deep inside me I never felt quite good enough, unable to fit in with those around me. This grew an inner strength and resilience to endure. The years ahead drew strongly on this resilience to meet the challenges in my life that became opportunities to create the love for my life as it is today.

Launching forth on a career that held confrontation with suffering, wanting to make a difference and to care for others I studied hard to excel. After graduating travelled to work overseas where I married. What lay ahead was unexpected after the arrival of our daughter and then son my beloved husband became seriously mentally ill reigning havoc on us all. Now charged with responsibility as the partner and parent the years ahead living through disappointment, fear of being able to manage were just a step away from being overwhelmed. Despite wanting so hard to hold everything together I had to bravely face that my children were too distressed by our daily life. My hopes were shattered and I realised all I could do was take my leave from our marriage and build a separate life that was safe and would enable my children to flourish.

Setting out as a 'single parent' I settled my children into a new environment so they could grow, enjoy friends, treats and all that childhood should be. My love for them, my acceptance that I was responsible charged with the life skills gathered over the years gave me the capacity to endure. Eventually I bought a house, built a career, establishing a semblance of normality of life. However, as honesty must prevail, I was quite damaged. Fortunately, I found a way to put this so to speak 'in a box' only a repetitive nightmare never let me forget where I was really at. Always my children drove me on giving me the will to aspire and achieve in creating security for all of us.

Some years on I met a work colleague who was himself damaged. This led to a beautiful partnership that nourished me, brought to my now grown children, a stepfather or as my son said a father. Where my son is today, I owe much to his wisdom and deep caring showered on him and us all by the strong principled qualities he enveloped us with and tough kindness that encouraged. Over the years travelling together, helping each other realise our dreams, quietly worshipping together, strengthening each other in times of difficulty and just being in the moment are treasured now he has taken his leave.

I pause now reflecting on what brings me to loving my life. Acceptance that I must find a way to create a standard of life for my children that would nurture values in their young lives that would enable their independence. Recognition that I loved to study and be challenged to develop myself as a critical thinker propelled me along an academic trajectory that led to many research studies and resulting publications. Quite amazing myself this has contributed and even perhaps made a difference in understanding and insight into decision making and diversity in health. Gratitude for the major crossroads that were gifts. These included the opportunity to become

resourceful and build capacity internally; to share years with a loving partner who was blessed with high integrity, a keen mind, a love of life, strong religious beliefs above all 'my rock'; and my children who taught me so much through the pleasure of watching their lives unfold as they engaged and grew to be independent. Finally, a reluctant arrival at widowhood that is 'a work in progress' to accept as a gift. Indeed, a gift it is as my beloved partner left me with all I will need if I am wise, thoughtful, careful and hold tight his spirit and memories to light the way.

Finally I love my life thanking the father of my children and wishing him peace; loving my ability to live a deep internal life; treasuring the peace I draw from my faith in God; happy with the contribution I can make volunteering at the hospital and in the community; loving my early morning walks by the bay; blessed with the warmth and care my children bring me ... all made possible by the strength gained over the years. This brings me to feel comfortable that when the time comes, I can slip into God's arms knowing my children are strong and resourceful with hope at last to be with my beloved again. Humbly I go gently into the twilight of my life.

This is a story of loving my life. Is it the only story? I sense there is a deeper layer to the story of loving my life. This layer holds wisps of ever-present tensions, ambiguities, doubts, quivering indecisiveness, anxieties, vulnerabilities, seeds of inspiration and creativity, dreams, hopes and so it goes on. Crafting this story will ring out the power that is closer to the essence of how my life shapes itself, the cherished kernel of loving my life. That is for next time...

Free Mystery Trip

Baldwin Groney

Epping

Your Free Lucky Ticket

Congratulations for winning a free mystery trip. This adventure-packed discovery journey is the experience of your own life. You have been extremely fortunate! You have won against incredible odds. Life is the most precious prize that you could ever win.

Even more amazing, you did not have to pay for your winning ticket! You received it for free. It was offered to you. Life is a fabulous prize and you have won it.

Congratulations. You are very lucky.

"Look at my number! I can't believe it! I can't believe it! 412111... I've won! I've won! I've won a free mystery trip!"

"Wow! You are so lucky! Where did you buy the ticket?"

"I didn't buy it. It was given to me!"

Our winning prize ticket in life's raffle has been provided to you freely by your sponsors.

They did not purchase it either. Rather, their own winning tickets have entitled them to bid together for your free trip with Destiny Travel. Your travelling ticket was issued at their discretion. Imagine that you had won a considerable amount of money in a lottery thanks to a ticket provided by someone else. Wouldn't that be incredible luck?

Your life is an even bigger win. It's the ultimate jackpot! Be grateful to your sponsors. They supplied the ticket that has generated your life. We'll whisper to you later how they did it!

Mystery Flight.

A mystery flight is a travel to an unknown destination.

The Airline Company provided you with a ticket without disclosing where you will be travelling to. In your mystery flight, Destiny Travel was unable to supply an itinerary or time table. They couldn't say what the trip would be like, couldn't predict the flying conditions ahead.

Life is a test flight in a one-off prototype. You constantly face new situations through time and space.

You meet people, events happen. Decisions have to be made that only come along once.

No matter how hard you search, you won't find guidelines that you can refer to. No instruction manual has been provided to you when you were born. There is no book, no video and no script. It's all happening live.

Your life is full of surprises. Every day brings new discoveries. Trust your luck. Have faith. Your heart will tell you what's right or wrong.

Don't be frightened. Be challenged. It is a wonderful adventure.

Best of all, it's free.

This is your Captain speaking.

"On behalf of Destiny Airlines, I would like to officially welcome you aboard this special flight. I know that you joined us some time ago and we have been flying for a while but the best time to speak to you is probably right now.

What I have to say is pretty simple. We are very honoured to have you as a passenger. On this flight, each passenger is treated individually with the utmost care. Our crew is always ready to assist you. You might not realise it but you are very fortunate to have been selected to travel with us. You are flying

aboard an incredible Spaceship. What a wonderful machine! By now you would have familiarized yourself with its features. Enjoy all the comforts it provides.

As it is a mystery flight, I am unable to disclose your destination or the time of arrival. I can tell you that it is a wonderful journey, a unique odyssey. Enjoy your travel on Spaceship Earth with Destiny Airlines. I'll speak to you again later. Thank you for flying with us."

Seeing your life in a mirror.

Imagine that you did not exist but that you could see a person exactly like yourself living on Earth. How much would you be prepared to give in order to enter this person's body and claim his life as yours?

"I am in the 'No Life' Planet looking in a mirror. What do I see?

A person just like me, living my life on Planet Earth. I wish I could be him. Life on Earth looks so exciting, beautiful and fulfilling."

"How much?" says The Voice. "How much would you be prepared to pay to live this person's life?"

"I would give everything I own. I would do anything you ask me to do."

"Well", says The Voice. "Reach through the mirror, Go to Planet Earth and live this person's life as your own."

"Thank you, it's wonderful! How much do I owe you?"

"It won't cost you anything!" replies The Voice. "It's a special present from me to you."

"This is most generous. It's an incredible gift. I'll be grateful all my life."

"Enjoy your life", says The Voice, "and keep in touch."

Your life is priceless.

What else is free? Your life's been granted for free. There was no collection of any royalties, tolls, taxes, duties or levies. What else has been supplied without raising a fee? The amazing Universe, the stars in the night, the warmth of the sun, the light of the sky, the air that you breathe, the oceans, the beaches, the mountains, the plains, the water and the rain, the power of the wind, the splendour of the clouds, the animals, the plants, your wonderful body, your amazing mind, your understanding of this incredible world.

It's all been provided for your to enjoy. Look around, as you travel. There is so much to be grateful for. However, read the fine print: you have to pay for food, accommodation, clothing, as you were delivered hungry, homeless and naked. Still it's a pretty good deal: an almost free ride in the greatest amusement park there is, has been and will ever be.

My wish is for you to appreciate your good fortune and live this wonderful gift of life to the fullest.

Enjoy your trip on Earth.

Love your life!

Full Circle

Beryl Matthews

Valla Beach

I was born in a time when it was a man's world, as it had been since the year dot. As head of his household a man's word was law and women and children blindly obeyed. Men were kings of their castles and reigned supreme. Or so they thought! But, behind the scenes, women wheedled and cajoled, quietly made suggestions, hinted at possibilities, used cunning seduction, and even threw tantrums, to get what they wanted. This was an accepted way of life. But World War Two quickly changed that balance of power.

Many women took over the jobs left vacant by the men and boys fighting overseas for our freedom. They learned skills they previously thought impossible. They worked in engineering and manufacturing; became mechanics and drivers and sat in many managerial positions. They grew stronger, physically and mentally, while still raising children and maintaining their homes as they always had. They were experts at multi-tasking became almost a different species to the women the men had left behind years before. These women had learned to stand up for themselves. But others remained locked in the old hierarchical life, of which my family was one.

My father certainly was the breadwinner, but it was usually my mother who had the last word. As I grew older she and I clashed many times when I tried to assert some semblance of independence. After I married the man of my dreams, I was happy to kowtow to his will and let him direct my life. I was in love and those rose-coloured glasses fitted so well. Several years later I overheard him saying that he owned me, having paid ten pounds for me on our wedding day and he would use me as he pleased. Suddenly, the fog lifted from my eyes and I saw him in a very different light. I began to challenge him; I stood up to him; said I wasn't one of his chattels!

My changed attitude started me down the road to independence. I felt as a chicken must feel when breaking out of the confines of its shell. Germaine Greer and Women's Liberation can be thanked for inspiring me to continue travelling this road.

I spent years trying to find out who I really was and eventually, this mouse became a lioness, but one with a mild ferocity. I was independent earning enough money to keep me that way. I was obstinate. When told I couldn't do something, I'd say 'just you watch me' and go off and do whatever that something was, regardless of any knowledge, or lack thereof, of said subject. Men were the worst when I asked 'why not?', their stock reply being 'because you're just a woman'. I knew how to change tap washers, fix blown light fuses, repair the mower, decorate the house. I laid floor and wall tiles, grew vegies and flowers. No-one was going to dictate to me ever again! I refused all offers of help, thinking that acceptance was a sign of weakness.

I didn't want anyone's help.

I believed I didn't need anyone's help!

I could manage quite well on my own, thank you very much.

I hated when I had to call on tradies to repair something I was unable, or unqualified, to do myself.

Life went on. I retired and moved house. Then, quite suddenly, I found I physically couldn't do certain things anymore and I'd need to ask for assistance. My reliance on others has now become a part of my life. How I loathe this. But I am appreciative of any help I get.

In the supermarket, it seems many of the items I require are on the highest shelves, out of my reach. Once I would have walked away, but now I wait until some lovely, younger person, taller than me, comes by and using my best manners, ask them to get the item for me, then thank them for their kindness. When my computer decides not to function, I phone my technician and I become 'this silly old woman who needs him to work his magic on her computer'. He, also, is a lovely young thing. While changing my landline to the new network, the technician asked if I'd like a new handset for my extension line, no charge. I gushed 'Oh, could you, would you? Little old ladies like me need a phone by their bed.'

'No worries', he said. My 'helpless, silly, little old lady' ploy is played out quite often these days and I am beginning to realise how much power it holds.

Many women of my vintage are now fabulous little old ladies who, having progressed from those early years of subservience, have become confident members of today's society. But, at the same time, they have come full circle, by returning to the wheedling and cajoling of yesteryear, so they can satisfy their need for that 'just out of reach' special something, be it on the top shelf, or elsewhere.

A sweet smile and a little bit of flattery is all it takes!
I'm loving it!

Funniest Happiest

Duncan Jefferson

Mosman

I was trying to recapture an olive that had temporarily escaped from my plate when I became aware of a tug on my trouser leg. Looking down into the forgotten shadows of the dining table where legs normally lurk, I saw the familiar face of Tyson who was giving me the universal 'Sshh' sign. Before I could acknowledge him, my son called out from the head of the table: "It's your turn Poppa."

Looking up, I casually dropped my serviette over the recalcitrant green, oval drupe and picked up a glass of bubbles to lubricate my memory.

Best, funniest and happiest is a game they play at the end of their evening family meal. I've no doubt that my daughter-in-law introduced it, just as she has introduced so many other forms of light and love into our expanding family. You don't need to discuss the bad things in life these days as they tend to introduce themselves. Kids getting bullied, kids not coping with fractured families, kids being kids! Life's tough these days for most families and don't get me started on the 'trumped-up' litany of disasters regurgitated ad-nauseam by newspapers, TV and now those blasted mobile phones!

"Don't drink all the grog Pops, otherwise we'll be here all night." My son had obviously secreted away all the pithy sayings I used on my own father! My son's a good bloke and a much better father than I was, although I did try my best and I reckon the kids have turned out to be pretty decent human beings.

"Why not let Ellie go first. It'll give me time to think. These little grey cells of mine don't seem to be as nimble as they used to be," I replied. Instantly I felt the warm hand of my beloved gently wrap itself around mine and that made me very happy.

"Urghhh" came from beneath the table where Tyson had rolled his eyes up in mock horror at our obvious love for each other. That made me smile too. It's just

too hard to explain to young heads that old love is the best sort of love.

"Best" began Ellie "is having Nona and Poppa here."

"She says that about everyone who comes to dinner," said Tyson in a stage whisper. I winked conspiratorially but Ellie didn't miss a beat. Nona just glowed in the glory of her words.

"Funniest," she paused, "was watching Dillon take Tyson for a run."

Dillon is the family dog and best described as a sturdy mongrel. Tyson weighs about 30 kilos wringing wet, so when Dillon goes for a run, Tyson does too! And believe me it *is* a funny sight.

"Happiest? Since I've been at our new school it's been hard to find new friends, but today I was asked to join the netball team."

General jubilation met this announcement. Ellie is one gem of a child. She's coped with so many changes in her short life as her Dad followed his career. But they're settled now and it's great to see the young ones flourish and their parents put some roots down.

Talking of roots, I discovered that I must be an Ent. If you haven't read *Lord of the Rings*, then you won't have heard of them, but Ents are ancient trees that walk! Sue and I thought we'd settled. We'd raised our little tribe, but then they left and we had to decide what to do with the rest of our lives. It was either stay put and live on our memories or see the world whilst we could and create some new ones.

It's been fun and we've discovered so much. It's one great beautiful world out there. But the other thing we realized is how much more adaptable we are than most young folk.

"Come on Pops, I'm dying of thirst over here and Claire won't let me have another drink until you've given us your stories."

"Okay," I stalled, "Funniest, well, we were on a train ride into Paris when it stopped just outside of a station ... "

"Hang on Dad, it has to be from today."

"Oh, right. Well, you know we were going to go to the Dawn service and we had to be up very early?' General nodding of heads greeted this statement. "So, after I'd checked the alarm clock in our room at 5.00am I got up to make the young bride a cup of tea." The aforementioned lady melted my hand again with the gentle pressure from hers. "So I made the tea and took it back to her. That's when she checked her watch and asked, *why are you getting up at 4.00? Dawn service isn't until 6!*"

For a brief moment there was silence and then the penny dropped. The clock in the guest bedroom hadn't been changed since daylight saving came in!

"No! Ah Dad I'm so sorry." Son was genuine with his regrets, but I had none.

"It made me chuckle son. At least I wasn't losing my marbles, so I was pretty happy."

Taking a sip from my re-charged glass I continued. "Best? The dawn service this morning. Standing with this blessed little family as the horizon lightened and hearing the last post being sounded. Old sacrifices and sufferings from years past shared with all you precious people. And Ellie wearing Dad's medals. He would have loved to have seen that."

"And happiest?" This was Claire.

I looked at her and I think she knew the answer already. My boy is so blessed to have married that girl. "Happiest?" I lifted Sue's hand above the table before gently kissing it. "I've been the happiest man on this planet since I first set eyes on this woman."

I could see tears form in Ellie's eyes whilst from below the table I heard a young voice say 'Yuk.'

Her Happy Place

Shirley Durigo

Lake Albert

When Betty was feeling a little low, she would often retreat to her happy place where, as a child she ran home from school up the rickety stairs of the tiny back porch and into the old Queenslander kitchen.

Her nostrils would be saturated with the tantalising aroma of freshly baked biscuits and slices. There on the humble yellow kitchen table lay trays of monkey nuts, jam drops and coconut slice. A feast for the eyes and bliss for the nose! Mum had been baking again.

So many times Betty watched her Mum beating cakes with a worn wooden spoon in a marbled mixing bowl. No fancy electric mixer for Mum then – just hard work.

Oh the treasures of cakes, biscuits and sweets that were made in that old gas stove! The deft skill in baking light fluffy melt-in-your mouth sponges; fruit cakes dripping with ginger and sultanas, as well as colourful crunchy biscuits and succulent slices was amazing.

Their tea was usually very plain – just meat and three veg. But for sweets, there would be a banquet of either sticky steamed puddings, dripping with jam or golden syrup; Queen Pudding tacky with meringue and apricots, along with the flurry of flummery and bowls of blancmange, both of which melted on our tongues. Mum's sticky toffees, honeycomb and marshmallows were celebrated at all school fetes.

As an only child, birthdays could be lonely for Betty, but Mum always produced a very special birthday tea, accompanied by the birthday cake of the year. For her tenth birthday this was the princess and the frog cake, sodden with lime jelly punctured by a chocolate frog, leaves and other lollies.

Come Sunday as she returned from Sunday school, the aroma of a delicious lamb roast greeted Betty half way up the street. Slices of moist pink lamb

graced their special willow plates, along with brown crunchy potatoes, pumpkin and beans, all swimming in the most flavoursome gravy. This was heaven!

Back then chickens were not bought from the freezer section of any supermarket. She remembered being terrified as Dad decapitated a poor chicken, it started running haphazardly in circles around the backyard. To top off this horror, she then watched Mum bathing it in the laundry copper, only to pluck every feather from its wrinkled body! It was so gruesome, but this was soon forgotten when it was baked to perfection on Christmas Day!

Like food, music was also a very important part of Betty's childhood. Her earliest memory was listening to her favourite show on the wireless on Sunday night, whilst she ate her tea on a tray. But it was the gramophone that got a great workout! The old 78 records were brought out for family gatherings in the tiny 60's lounge room, with country tunes bellowing from the record player. Frothy XXXX beers were poured into icy glasses from the long neck bottle and the party would begin. Dad and Auntie Margaret started singing along to the records, but soon reverted to the grand old Scottish songs of their childhood. It was amazing how Dad's brogue morphed, the more beers he drank.

As a small child Betty joined in with the catchy tunes, warbling in her child voice, swaying from side to side. When this performance received such a great reaction, she often inflicted it in on the neighbours through the fence, hoping for a similar response! She joined the school choir for the Eisteddfod and later performed as a soloist. This was to be one of the most nerve-wracking, but character-building, experiences of her young life! Music always provided happiness to Betty, from her first Christmas Carol book to her extensive record and CD collection in later years.

Her parents occasionally attended dances and there she watched bands playing for the very first time. When she was a young 13 year-old, Dad once retrieved her from the dance floor when a much older boy was getting a little too close!

Betty's consumption of music continued through radio and television shows. But it was her 16th birthday that saw the beginning of it all, when she was given her first record player. The rest, as they say, is history. She scrimped and saved pocket money, buying singles each week and playing them in her bedroom, performing as the ultimate pop star in front of the mirror, miming madly into her hairbrush.

Once working, she frequented the local club every Saturday night. Gyrating in her gigantic platform shoes and super-wide flares was exhilarating! She and her girlfriends danced with each other for most of the night, coyly watching the bar, hoping the boys would eventually approach them on the dance floor. Sometimes it did happen, even if it was just before closing time.

With the advent of colour television, Countdown changed Betty's life. The music leapt off the screen, pulsating with bright flashing colours. Sunday night was never the same again!

From her first Sherbet concert, she revelled in the melodic sounds bouncing off the theatre walls, her eyes dazzled by the young men with long flowing locks in their satin pants and jackets. Over the years concerts remained a constant in Betty's life – just the artists changed.

As she grew older, when she felt a little blue, Betty liked nothing better than to crank up the music in her car and sing at the top of her lungs, with the windows wound up tightly. It was so easy to get lost in the world of music.

At other times it was bliss just to sip a coffee and eat something delicious using one of Mum's recipes.

Betty knew that both food and music so easily transformed her life, allowing her to disappear into her own world of joy. With them both, she could once again be in her happy place.

I Am What I Am

Paul Barrett

Padstow

My mother passed away nine years ago this May. In her final years she was obsessed with knowing more about her lineage. As her known family members passed away around her, she was convinced that she must have family, unknown to her, still living. Like most of us she knew her parents and grandparents, but beyond this her memories ranged from scarce to non-existent. In her closing years I worked with her to try and put together her family 'DNA jigsaw puzzle' and have continued to do so partly in her memory but also to be able to pass down more of our heritage to my children and grandchildren. Little did I realize it would become a passion and open doors to relationships I didn't know existed. Fortunately, my mother shared in some of this knowledge before her death and I am confident that she is watching with interest from 'the other side'.

In my research I discovered that our family history was littered with tales that could fill a novel or movie script, some close to home and others from the distant past. My first discovery was that one of my mother's paternal uncles, raped and killed his eleven-year-old niece. His conviction in the 1940's was one of the first in NSW to rely heavily on forensic evidence. This was one skeleton which had been safely kept in the closet 'til it was resurrected in my research. There was also my mother's paternal third great-uncle who was the last Australian born person to be tried in NSW for piracy. There is also the story of my mother's great-grandfather, a compositor by trade who went bankrupt in Sydney and took his family to Melbourne where his wife's family was from. While there, in a chain of unfortunate events, he was set upon by a gang of hoodlums masquerading as policemen. He subsequently died of blood poisoning from his injuries a couple of days later. Those responsible were never convicted.

On my father's side, there was the discovery that his grandfather, (who he and his siblings had always been told was a soldier of fortune and had died at sea), had actually been secretly divorced by their grandmother and lived and died a couple of suburbs away from the family home without ever seeing his son or grandchildren. His grandmother subsequently remarried and had a step son who eventually became a prominent NSW Commissioner and one his descendants serves in the current Federal Parliament. Also, on my father's side, his second great-grandfather was a sea captain whose ship was wrecked in a savage storm off Murwillumbah in 1890. He, his crew and passengers were all lost at sea.

As I have outlined, much that has occurred within the family happened across several generations. Although many of these episodes were tragic, other less dramatic happenings also occurred. These were the normal day to day things which sew the fabric of a family together. For example, I found that my maternal great-grandmother operated a carting company in the early 1900's in Sydney and was obviously a businesswoman ahead of her time. Her family was sadly touched by the untimely death of her thirteen-year-old brother who died after falling through the roof skylight of the Sydney Markets while trying to get a good view of the NSW Contingent marching down George St to join the Sudan Campaign. I also confirmed a family story that her Irish husband, my great-grandfather was linked to the Freehill family who in the early colony, were very influential in legal, religious and political circles. Unfortunately to date I haven't been able to confirm what that exact relationship was as it appears the two families never socialised in Sydney, but DNA results have confirmed the oral family history.

Another family tale handed down from my paternal great-grandmother was that she was descended from either Spanish or French aristocracy. To date I have been unable to give any credence to this tale although I must confess, I have only traced her family line back three or four generations. Interestingly, I did discover that she had been found by Police wandering the streets without any means of support in 1895 at age 15 years. The Sydney courts admitted her to an Industrial School from where she was eventually indentured as a domestic servant to a Double Bay family with ties to the Marshall Brewery. At age eighteen years she eventually completed her indenture and was released from her apprenticeship. In life she was apparently extraordinarily talented at doing crochet work which she on sold to earn a modest income. It is thought that she may have learnt this while in her 'apprenticeship'.

The final tale I will relate is that of my three times maternal great-grandfather who was born in Bedfordshire England circa 1796. He was unfortunate in that his father named him 'Kosciusko', presumably after Thaddeus Kosciusko who led the Polish Revolution in 1795. Our Mt Kosciusko is also named after the same gentleman. I initially thought this distinctive Christian name would make it a little easier to trace him but not so. In a time when many officials were barely literate, the variations in spelling made the task extremely difficult. I subsequently discovered that he married, and his wife gave birth to a son, named James Kosciusko, in Liverpool England. The family migrated to Tasmania in 1841. They had two other children, one of whom was my two times grandfather, who also had a son named Kosciusko. I had a difficult time trying to trace this son eventually discovering he had, perhaps understandably, preferred to be known as 'Kenneth'. James Kosciusko also married and had a son named

James Kosciusko junior, however I have been unable to date to trace him. I suspect he also may have adopted a different moniker.

Do I love my life?

Of course, I do! This interesting history shapes my life.

I Do Love My Life

Lois Merriman

Jindabyne

Do I love my life? – Of course I do, why wouldn't I?

I love waking up each morning, which is a very good start to the day. I lay in bed and thinking about what I am doing to do this day. Every day is a new day and one to be grateful for. I can sleep in if I want to or get up with the sparrows and enjoy the dawn chorus. I can watch the sky slowly light up and wonder if there will be spectacular colour show. I always have my camera ready to snap away at any glorious sunrises or heavy frost or misty mornings and put the results on Facebook for my friends to share and delight in. I live in a beautiful part of the countryside and I love strolling along the walking tracks admiring the magnificent views and revelling in the fresh air and sunshine, fog or even snow but still beautiful in its own unique way.

It is my life and I get to choose how I live it. Some days I spoil myself and do very little especially if it is cold. Then I rug up and sit by the window in the sun, that is if there is any, and if not then out comes a blanket or on goes the heater.

I boil the kettle for a cuppa and get a good book and pretend to read when in actual fact I more often than not doze off. Other days if the weather is agreeable I potter in the garden or fiddle with my pot plants, throw the ball for the dog and feed the wild cockies, galahs, sparrows, doves and magpies. The Galahs act true to their name and keep me amused with their carryings on. They are the jokers of the bird world their antics make me laugh every day. They hang upside down from the pergola keeping an eye on the feed bowl waiting for the seed to magically appear.

My Maggies always say thank you by giving me a full voiced recital and one of the Maggies comes to the back door and sits on the garden seat and chortles away whilst watching for me through the

sliding glass door. When I come into sight it calls to its mate saying 'food is on, come now'. I serve prime mince nothing but the best for my feathered choir. If I am a bit late with the parrot seed the Cockies sit in next door's tree and screech until I appear, their racket sometimes annoys Mrs. 'Out the Back' but hen she just takes her hearing aids out and all is well.

As most of my family have passed away and those still alive live interstate I live alone. I have my fur baby of course, a Jack Russell, who is convinced he is either human or I am a mutated 2 legged canine. He rules the roost and has me well trained and like all well trained pets I am obedient and jump to his command.

My human friends are absolutely wonderful and very special too. I would not be without them. We spend some lovely quality times together chatting away about politics and righting all the wrongs of the world, if us baby boomers ran the country it would be a far better place to live and die too for that matter. My friends and I eat good food and enjoy a glass or red or two. We celebrate together all our important moments in life such as milestone birthdays or anniversaries. We are also there to support each other in times of need and stress. We all have a very positive outlook on life and make the most of every moment. Life is too short not to.

I take enjoyment out of the simple things in life. Life is a joy when you don't have to run to somebody else's schedule, wants or needs. Some might say this is selfish but after 55 years of full time work when the people I worked for ruled my life I now luxuriate in doing my own thing. I still have a lot to contribute to society. I am a fully functioning member of my community and can offer advice based on my personal experience, it is up to others to decide if they actually want to hear what I am saying.

There are occasional times I thoroughly enjoy being a Grumpy Old Woman. At my age I feel I have well and truly earned the right to express my opinion, politically correct or not.

Sporadically I have what I call my 'no go' days. These are days when I disconnect the land line phone, turn the mobile off, take the battery out of the front door bell, lock the front door and close the curtains. I put on relaxing clothes, brush my hair, clean my face and proceed to have a day when I spoil myself and become totally self-indulgent. I do what I want when I want and how I want. I might garden, I might cook, I might knit, I might start a landscape painting alternatively I might do nothing but daydream, whatever, it is an uninterrupted day for me.

I love my life; it is what I have made it and I would not change it for all the tea in China. Some days are a little tougher than others but I am still grateful for those days too. I look back over my life with great fondness at what I have experienced and what I have achieved. I tell my friends of all ages if there is something you long to do – do it now, you never know what is around the corner. Yes I definitely love my life and I enjoy each and every day as the alternative doesn't bear thinking about it is far better to have your feet on the grass than under it.

I Don't Feel Old

Kevan Smith

Mayfield East

I *don't* feel old.

When someone refers to 'an old person' I agree that their lives must be hard. To 'be old' must be a great drain. One day I might get there, but not today.

I've lived in this town all my life and love it here. I never really intended to stay, always thought I'd 'live abroad'. Or find a place in Oz that was more appealing than this town. I thought I'd find a woman and go live some place exotic, some place better. Funny thing is, I never found that place. Maybe because such a place is hard to find.

With life, work, marriage and family the years here just suited. That time thing raced past and, without noticing, I was still here and still loving it. Oh sure, I spent a couple of years travelling through England and Europe, like every second Aussie, when I was young. But family and friends drew me back. Back to a busy but peaceful life. A place where I knew lots of people but came across total strangers every day. People I didn't know, people with interesting stories, with exotic backgrounds and smiles in their hearts. A crowded place that still wraps me in the comforts of region, town, home.

The Big Smoke was – and is – a great place to visit. Its hustle and bustle, push and shove, noises and smells are great surges in the blood, rushes to the mind and explosions in the spirit. But the train ride north settles me with the contentment and peace of 'going home'.

So many things have changed around town. It's funny, when I start telling young people what 'used to be there', I hear my father and grandfather talking through me. It makes me smile. I will admit, it surprises me when I see a housing estate that was bush when I was a kid. My mind flicks back to when I used to play community cricket there, or fly a kite down that hill, or sometimes pretend it was

a deepest, darkest jungle full of lions and tigers to stalk. Mowgli and I used to beat them every time as we threw stones and climbed trees with the chimps.

Not content with early retirement, I got a job as a School Crossing Supervisor. I enjoyed looking after the kiddies. It's marvellous how so many said 'thank you' when they crossed in front of me. Nice to know our country will be in such good hands one day. I've even gotten a Christmas gift or two over the years. I loved it when a tiny tot peeped over their parent's shoulder and waved at The Lollypop Man. The 'new job' was very fulfilling, if only for an hour or two a day, every second week.

But still, I wanted more.

It's a pity those couple of Uni degrees weren't useful any more, nor the 45 years of work experience. After 60, I couldn't get a job for love nor money. It seems I couldn't even get a job doing the programs I used to manage. When I sent in a resume with the many pages of experience, I'd get a reject letter, if I was lucky. On the rare times I did get an interview, the grey haired man walking in could feel the air change. My God, I've spent more time in the workforce than these jokers have spent breathing. That scared them, they didn't know what they were missing.

So, off to school again. And a new life in a job that is both fulfilling and rewarding. I get paid to 'just be nice to people'. I'm now a Support Worker for people with a disability. Again, that feeling of comfort and caring, of 'being home in this town' gives me.

Life is good! Life is caring for people as life cares for me.

Sure, there has been a few changes on the way. The hip is wearing out and I wear glasses for close and afar. I've even picked up the world's fastest growing condition, Diabetes 2. Other than sugared

food and drink – along with lounge surfing – I think you pick it up from public toilet seats. But, I'm handling it well. I don't want to lose a toe or two, go blind or have the ol' fella drop off. I'm now doing more exercise than I've ever done but it's good not having to groan every time I bend down to pull on my socks.

But hey, I've left the best bit till last!

I've found myself a new love. My wonderful partner helped me, in fact, it's because of her encouragement and support I even got started.

I've discovered Writing!

Yep, I've joined a Writing Group where we share our work, critique and support. I even go to Writing Festivals these days. After a little while, I started entering a few writing competitions. So far, I've had works printed in a few newspaper competitions, even been included in an on-line anthology. I guess I can call myself a published writer now, pretty good huh? That always makes me laugh. But it's really like being a 1st year apprentice again, with a long road ahead to being a tradesman.

To celebrate my new-found bohemian lifestyle, I've grown a full grey beard and shaved off what is left on top. I'm told it looks like a cross between Hemingway and Papa Smurf, which pretty well sums up my writing style.

A lot of life has changed. Some people have gone, lost a few good ones on the way. A bit sad. But it's pretty good, I enjoy myself. I hope others do too, even if I can be a tad grumpy at the stupid things they do.

All in all, life is great!

I look forward to many more years of having fun!!

Just For Laughs

Greg Tuchin

Woonona

I feel that I have had a great life so far, with lots of different kinds of experiences and over a hundred different types of jobs. My first job when I was fifteen was working on the dodgem cars at Luna Park in Sydney, during the school holidays. My role was to sort out traffic jams and the quickest way to get to the jam was hitching a ride on the back of the dodgem car. I rode on the rubber bumper at the back, holding onto the power pole and trying to impress the teenage girls who flocked to Luna Park during the school holidays.

It was so much fun jumping from one dodgem car to another, like a slow speed version of James Bond. We felt so cool and confident as we hitched around, busting kids for deliberately causing a crash and throwing them out.

I spent about a year hitching rides on the dodgem cars before I moved up the chain and started working at the River Caves. Stopping and starting the river boats near the huge paddle wheel was extremely boring, but once we got inside the caves it was a whole lot more fun. Two ride attendants were always rotated on duty in Iceland, to stop anyone from smoking. The management was always scared of fire because the whole place was built of timber and plaster-mache.

Our job inside the River Caves was to make sure none of the punters got out of the boat and caused mischief. This rule did not apply to the staff. We were allowed to hitch a ride on the back of the river boat and catch it all the way around the caves, back to Iceland. If we got bored we could take off our coat and pretend to be a statue to fool the punters in the boats.

I often used to ride a boat around to Toyland and go through a back door into the Ghost Train to scare the kids. The other fun thing to do in Toyland

was to go out another service door, which brought us to the bottom of the first hill of the Big Dipper. We could lie in wait, directly underneath the track of the first hill, and then stand up above the track as the big dipper car hurtled towards us. We waved our arms frantically at the frightened riders, then ducked below the track, seconds before the big dipper car could have sliced us in half. I'll admit, I only did it once, and because I like to think that I'm pretty intelligent, I gave myself a ten second buffer. I have been there with other guys who ducked with two seconds to spare. Nuts!

It was so much more fun working at Luna Park, than just going there. My friends were all jealous so I got them jobs too. Once I hit eighteen I was allowed to operate some of the rides. My favourite was the Rotor, a cylindrical ride where the floor dropped away and the centrifugal force held the riders suspended against the wall while the floor dropped. We had to crank the motor up to fifth gear before we could drop the floor. Then we slowed it down gradually, to let the riders slowly slide down the walls to the floor below. It was fun driving that, especially watching the girls trying to hold onto their mini-skirts (it was the Seventies) as they slid down the wall.

Luna Park became my *go to* job for about five years, right through high school and even when I went onto teacher's college. Throughout my five-year stint at Luna Park I managed to work on every ride, from the Mirror Maze to Coney Island.

One New Year's Eve I was rostered on the Ghost Train which was built in 1932 and so was the electrical system. It reminded me of the movie Young Frankenstein, with three huge, iron circuit breakers, covered in dust and cobwebs.

My job was to load the people into the car and start them off through the big, ghostly doors. To do this I had to wait until everyone was in the car and push a button to charge the first few metres of track. The car surged forward, through the doors and onto the next section of charged track. This transported the car all around the ride until it reached the end.

Sometimes, while I was waiting for the punters to get in, the car would be bumped by another and move onto the charged track before everyone was ready. So I, like all the other ride attendants, would hold the moving car back with my foot, sending sparks flying all around the wooden floor. I knew bugger-all about electricity in those days, but I used to think that mixing electrical sparks with wood was pretty dangerous. Little did I know what would happen on the same night exactly three years later.

I was hitch-hiking around Europe when I read about the fire in the Ghost Train that killed seven children. I was amazed that the whole Park did not go up. Suddenly all the laughs were gone. All my friends, who were still working there, lost their jobs. The people who worked at Luna Park were a strange bunch: not *carnies* in the true sense of the word, but battlers, doing a second job to make ends meet, or pay back debts. Some were just misfits, who did not know what to do with their lives.

Years later I met a guy who survived the fire but lost five of his friends. He never laughed again.

Life Embrace It – Don't Waste It

Caitlin LARBALESTIER

Gymea

Life was good, we enjoyed it. Catching up with family, travelling, pursuing our hobbies or social activities, but I could not say we were loving life. We live in a wonderful country and enjoy a freedom we take for granted, so why were we living but not really loving life?

What was missing?

Were our expectations too high, did we take too much for granted, or were we just stuck in a rut?

Sadly, I did not have an answer.

Unbeknown to us this was about to change. A group from our photography club decided to arrange a trip to the Flinders Rangers, somewhere we had talked about visiting. We agreed to be a part of this group and waited for the departure date to be confirmed and advice on payment for the trip.

Imagine our surprise when we discovered it was arranged to be a self-drive camping trip. It was 40 years since I had been camping and had vowed to never do it again. It always rained and in an era of no disposable nappies it was a disaster. Hubby's experience of camping was when he hitchhiked around Australia in his late teens. We were definitely not campers and had never even thought about it.

However, we had made the commitment to go, so we set about making a list of what was needed, borrowing what we could. As time went by, we started to get excited putting together the things we needed. A whole new world had opened up, this was starting to sound like fun.

Family and friends thought we were crazy. Camping for the first time in our late sixties, putting up and down a tent each day until we reached our destination. Sleeping in sleeping bags and on camping mattresses, in what promised to be

freezing temperatures. What were we thinking? A challenge had been set and suddenly we started to feel more alive than we had in ages.

Lists were made, a tent bought and a few trial runs erecting it in the lounge-room, we did not want to look like novices on our first night. We even slept on our camp mattress, not as bad as we thought. We were having fun and our adventure had not even started.

The day of departure arrived; our adventure had begun. We were both nervous.

As we headed south on the black winding road, under clear blue skies we began to relax. It was so good to be out of the city and enjoying the wide-open spaces. Gundagai was our first stop and we were anxious to get there and set up camp in the daylight.

Our lounge-room practice paid off and we had the tent up and secure, our bedding in place in record time. Off to a very good start. Time for a cuppa in the camp chairs overlooking the river then off to do some sunset photography, a walk along the river and a chat to our fellow group campers. What a great day we'd had.

The first night was clear and crisp and we marvelled at the Southern Cross as we said our goodnights. I drifted off to sleep thinking, I am sleeping under the stars and slept soundly waking in time for some stunning sunrise photography and feeling energised and ready to go.

We had travelled the same roads on other trips, but this time it was different. Our camping adventure gave us a new lease of life, our eyes were opened to different things, a different way of life, a simple and fun journey.

We experienced freezing cold nights, but we rugged up and many nights sat around a camp fire chatting with friends.

We were loving life.

The scenery changed constantly and we were in awe of our beautiful countryside. We became more aware of the effects of the drought and realised how lucky most city folk are. There is not much to love in life when faced with hardship in the city or country, the hardships many of our farmers and folks in country towns are facing break your heart when you see empty dams and creeks, dry baked pasture and starving animals both farm and native.

Our arrival in The Flinders Ranges took our breath away, it's beauty, its ruggedness and vastness had our cameras clicking away nonstop. We walked and explored gorges, flew over the mountain ranges and valleys and learnt about the culture of the local people and the history of the pioneers who opened up this great country.

Despite the cold nights and a few showers of rain, we loved camping. My kids laughed when I messaged them that I had done it again, gone camping and it rained, but it was only one night and it was lovely lying in the tent listening to the rain on the roof. Cooking over a camp stove was fun, even rugged up with beanies and gloves. Battling with our sleeping bags gave us much cause for laughter, but they kept us warm and cosy.

I was loving life.

Our journey back into Sydney had us feeling somewhat sad, this had certainly been an adventure for us and one that we had thoroughly enjoyed, though not the sort of 'holiday' for everyone.

We found we were truly loving life.

Why?

We were doing simple things that challenged us in a nice way and we were having fun doing it. We had no great expectations, we just enjoyed whatever came along.

We loved our adventure, the experience and the pleasure it gave us, so much so, that we have planned another camping trip.

We are embracing and loving life.

I now have the answer. To love your life, you simply need to embrace it, don't waste it.

Life is a Beach and Light Rail

John Sahyoun

Bulahdelah

The wind whistled through our lives and the blazing sun emphasised our somewhat wrinkled skin and recoloured hair. The smell of salt filled our nostrils and for a moment this was the best time of our lives.

"Come and put your feet in the water," said my friend as she dangled her feet in the side of the pool.

It looked inviting but I said, "No, I'll just sit here and enjoy the sun."

Newcastle ocean pool ... it seemed a thousand years away from any other point in our lives. And it was for a brief moment in cosmic time the only place we wanted to be.

What an adventure. All through my life I'd been excited about things. The birthdays, Christmas and family gatherings were a time of excitement. But now, it's just about enjoying life the best you can. No more mortgages, children grown up and without the other stresses a working life brings.

But this occasion was different. In a world of made-to-measure there appears to be so few experiences we can enjoy for the sake of it. And being somewhat older we become more selective of the experiences we wish to partake in. We wait for that experience that will literally blow our skirt up. However, we had come along. The Newcastle light rail had just opened and I was keen to travel on it. I was never a fan of the heavy rail going all the way into Newcastle and buses were really not my thing. Not wanting to do it by myself I started to ask the people around me if anyone was interested in joining me. My young nephew had done the ride when it had opened and was super excited by the whole experience. I was hoping that others might have been as enthusiastic.

"No" was the response I got from everyone in my family.

"I'll even buy you lunch," I added as a sweetener. But to no avail.

Okay, I'm sure there are others who would enjoy this experience. Family, no. Perhaps my good friends might be more accommodating?

"What are you doing Tuesday next week? The new light rail has opened in Newcastle and I'm dying to see where it takes people. Let's catch it and look at the beach and then we can have a late lunch?" I suggested.

Thinking of yet another rejection, I was somewhat surprised by an acceptance. "That's a great idea. Yes, I'm available."

It was however, not without its issues. What may have seemed easy in our youth becomes a logistical nightmare when older. There are children and grandchildren who need to be picked up and catered for at certain times and their demands can overpower any other commitments that might need to be catered for; time, meetings and dare I say, shopping and bills seem to wait for no one.

For us, it was a new adventure.

The light rail clanked past some familiar places, its shiny red exterior in contrast to the drab and grey surroundings. We arrived at the start of our beach adventure with eagerness.

What a wonderful walk along the beach in near perfect weather. My main thought was that I was probably over dressed for the day as the hot summer had extended what seemed like forever and in retrospect I should have worn shorts and thongs rather than jeans and shoes for the adventure.

The walk from the final light rail stop to the beach, although longer than I would have imagined was going well, just lapping up the sunshine and enjoying the view.

We settled into a rest position after our walk. I was interested in what people were actually doing. People spotting, I guess you would call it. Besides the usual swimmers, sun lovers and people ducking out for five minutes for lunch I was particularly interested in what two young ladies were doing sitting next to us.

The pair of young girls sitting down from us played with their mobile phones and took more selfies than simply lapping up the experience. It seemed to consume all their time there, only breaking momentarily to wet their bodies to escape from the heat. On holidays a few months earlier I noticed the same thing. Whilst I was busy enjoying the lukewarm surf on the Gold Coast young people walked along the beach looking into the social media posts on their phones. I thought to myself, what is more important ... the experience or the need to share yourself with everyone on your social network account? Surely there is much more in life to experience than a tiny screen.

After this experience, we walked down to the Hunter River foreshore for a well-earned lunch. Just lapping up the sights topped off with a chicken schnitzel and cold beer. Could you ask for anything better? We certainly couldn't! That was until we realised we had to be on the light rail again and off again to meet the responsibilities of our individual lives.

In the next few months we have been able to reflect on that day which seems frozen in time but not so long ago that we will forget. We both agreed that it was a simple, yet rewarding experience that we would be add to our list of ongoing adventures.

There was never a report to be written. Nor an evaluation. Nor a performance review. And as being seniors, it was as cheap as chips. Just the sun, surf a new experience on the light rail and having a great time out. We didn't need to have life switched on for us. It was for us to enjoy and at that point in time just being alive.

I still wake up every morning thankful for being alive. There's still a thousand experiences to go while I'm alive and each one is worth living.

Life is Best Measured Differently

Sarah Faith

Tuncurry

As a child I thought I understood that the clock went round and the minutes were a space, it had something to do with the moon or maybe it was the sun, either way, it just was. You could hold your breath for a certain amount of time and that might vary, but not the time, the time just was.

The understanding about that didn't become clearer, as I once thought it might. Instead, time began to be less reliable and more mysterious in its presentations. Good times with weddings bells ringing out and toddlers walking first steps with a buttery arrowroot in one hand, came and went so quickly. I'm sure the space that once was, had shrunk.

The middle of my life filled both so much space and no time at all. Memories of children making their way into the world on soccer fields and canoeing down wild rivers, gaining degrees or proudly wearing a Chef's hat all jumbled together and seemed to pass in a flash or linger long after yesterday became today. My heart could be overflowing or broken into pieces and sometimes it seemed that the shadows might stay but the sunlight kept on rising and nothing ever stayed the same, especially not the time, whatever that was.

I began to see that life is best measured differently. As I lived longer on this earth my deepening understanding of what mattered had nothing to do with the ticking of clock and it seems to me that time really does slow down and speed up I had never understood compasses or barometers either but I often felt I knew intuitively which way to go and how the wind would blow.

So the gauge for a day is not 12 or 24 it's how many smiles were had watching a granddaughter dance, regardless of the distance travelled to get there. It's the rate of my heart beating when my children all turn up wearing leis to surprise me with a birthday

cruise. It's the warmth of kindness felt as a son walks around a series of gardens just to be of company to his Mum.

I have and do experience so much love and blessings in my life it's not possible to fit them into the spaces for minutes, nor hours or days or even years. Recently retired, my days have blurred without the calendar of meetings and visit and reports to be written. What day is it? I don't know, I just know that it's beautiful.

My day and life is not a series of sunrises and sunsets, although they do happen. Oh yes they do, in all their glorious colours and characters, sometimes timid and sometimes bold. My life is being here right now, in whatever moment this is. Showing up and participating. Fumbling a bit and fronting up anyway. This is my first short story and I have no idea how to double space or any of the other technical aspects I'm supposed to know.

But when I hit send, as I will any minute now, I'll be alive and loving it. It won't matter to me if nobody reads this or if I don't manage to figure out all the rules. I'm a late blooming rebel. I can't climb up onto a desk and shout about seizing the day but I am, yes I am, seizing it.



Life on a High Note

Lyndel Short

Bonnet Bay

The brilliant stage lights blinded me to the audience beyond the stage, but I could sense the energy from the crowd as they leapt to their feet as we sang the last chord. The seven minutes of competition had gone so quickly that I wasn't sure that we'd sung both of our songs. Had we done enough to win, and represent our country at the next International competition in the United States? It was hard to tell.

How did I get here? If you'd described this moment to me a few years ago, I'd have responded with incredulity and probably sarcasm. A forty year career in technology had moulded me into a conservatively dressed people manager who knew a lot about several important but low-profile computer systems. You'd have described me as responsible, reliable and slightly dull. Life revolved around meetings – so many meetings – and my colleagues were mostly male. However, a chance phone call from an old friend opened a doorway, just a crack and I walked through it without any idea of the parallel universe I was entering with those first few steps.

I grew up in a musical family and we all liked to sing, but as I grew older, employment and family commitments restricted the time available to commit to regular choir rehearsals. Before I knew it, I was on the home stretch to retirement as an IT Manager, with no other way of describing myself. But at my friend's urging, I went along to the Open Night of the local Sweet Adeline chorus. Sweet Adeline – what is that? They told me it's a world-wide organisation of women who love to sing in the barbershop style. When the chorus started to sing, I was astounded at the sound that filled the room, the happy animated faces and the underlying musical complexity of the barbershop four-part harmonies they were producing. I felt a compulsion to join this amazing

group and immediately started rearranging my priorities so that I could sign up for the 'prospective members' program.

Chorus members know how to deal gently with new people. They are careful not to reveal that, although on the surface this appears to be a one-night-a-week hobby, it's actually a lifestyle, or as my husband describes it, perhaps even a cult! I set to work learning the assigned songs, coming to grips with the terminology and techniques of this unfamiliar style of music. Unbeknownst to me, the 'local' chorus I had joined was in fact, the highest performing chorus in Australia, with an unbroken string of national titles and had represented Australia in the US on several occasions. I didn't realise then that the standard they set meant that only 10% of those who applied were able to successfully complete the prospective member program and the three month probation period. However, I was loving the experience, the learning, the practice time at home and the steady improvement in my capabilities and before I knew it, I was one of the lucky few welcomed into full membership.

The music was wonderful, uplifting, joyful and 3 hour rehearsals flew by. But just as much of a revelation to me was the experience of being part of such a supportive, friendly group of women. After a lifetime of being surrounded by men due to my chosen field of study and employment, I suddenly had more female friends that I could ever have imagined. And such lovely, talented and fascinating women too!

Once they knew I was fully hooked, they started to reel me in. A first, a low-key performance here and there such as Citizenship ceremonies singing our Australian repertoire. A new costume, with a surprising (to me) amount of sequins and velvet. Special chorus makeup including the 'official'

shade of red lipstick. Like the proverbial frog in boiling water, bit by bit, I found myself becoming a 'Sweet Adeline', dressed in my show chorus outfit with my hair styled and my eyes made up for performing under lights. And next, the assumption I'd be attending Perth for the National convention, fully equipped with two new costumes and a pair of regulation earrings!

So, there I was on the stage, under dazzling lights with the rich, resonant sound of the chorus in full voice, swirling and rising and falling around me. The muscle memory kicked in as I sang the way we'd practiced so many times and I smiled with the genuine joy of producing a performance that we knew was going to impress the visiting American judges.

Later that evening we sat together, holding hands tightly and on the edge of our seats as the results of the competition were announced, so slowly, in reverse order. "And the winner and this year's champion chorus is ... ". We leapt to our feet, hugging each other, crying, cheering – we'd done it! Next stop St Louis, Missouri, a city that's not on many people's must-visit list, but for us, the most wonderful destination on the planet.

How did my life transform so dramatically, from caring about accounting systems and staffing ratios, to wondering if my false eyelashes will survive under the hot stage lights? I brought forward my retirement date, as work was impacting on time available for singing. I volunteered for chorus management roles where my technical and project management skills are valued. It's so rewarding to work with a team who are also close friends on something we are passionate about, rather than corporate performance targets.

I joined a quartet, learning even more about the interaction between each part, in a small group singing in close harmony. I spend hours watching YouTube videos of the top choruses and quartets from around the barbershop world, both men and women and eagerly await live video streams from overseas competitions. I can hardly remember my previous life and I don't know that person at all well anymore. And that's just fine!

Life – Whether to Love it, or Not?

Beverley Toohey

Rosebery

Yours or mine, eh?

Does one really love their life or should it be aspects thereof. I am absolutely sure there are ups and downs in anyone's lifetime.

And should I discuss the lives of others as well?

Well, let's go – with mine.

A few times when I've been on a downer my son has commented my 'glass is half empty' and that it should be 'glass is half full'. At first I did not comprehend what he meant but now use the expression regularly to convey my feelings.

Overall, I've had a happy life. Even though my parents divorced when I was young – unusual at the time – they certainly did all they could to make me happy.

I married a man eight years older and always knew he was the one, although family queried the age difference. We had 60 years of married life before he sadly passed away. Our last few years have been in our apartment at Little Bay with two bedrooms, sunny north-east aspect and privacy overlooking one of the golf courses. Absolutely wonderful.

Then I found myself living alone for the first time in my life. I've read where some find this difficult but possibly because I've always been positive and independent; it has not been too bad at all. I returned to full-time work after my sons started school so that possibly built my independence.

My sons, now in their fifties, are great support and comforting which helps to 'Love Life'. I used to think daughters would be the ones to care more but since learnt, from friends, that this is not necessarily so.

The highlights have been my happy marriage, birth of two sons, international travel from 1957 to recent

times including 13 cruises since retiring in 2000. For no special reason I always kept a diary of these travels and now enjoy looking back at the notes that flood my brain with memories.

In retirement I volunteered for a while as a driver for Meals on Wheels; attended aqua classes twice a week; helped at my grandson's school canteen as I was unable to do so in my son's time as I was working. At these places I also made new friends, kept the smilers and ditched the negative ones.

All my life I knitted or did tapestries, now unable to do either but enjoy reading thriller novels from the local library. My other interests are given to theatre with friends; attending seminars on health; strata meetings; but mainly the Cape Banks Family History Society who are not only helpful with genealogy but has given me this impetus to write and they are very positive and happy people.

Now the downers. Since I was in my mid-twenties I've had physical health problems and my husband was always my 'tower of strength'. Nine major surgeries between 1962 and 2008 and at one time a specialist predicted I would be in a wheelchair by the time I was 40. Now at 86, I sometimes wonder how close the wheelchair is. Independent Living is my aim – see, I still need to Love Life.

And Robbie Williams wrote a song, Love My Life, – how about that?

With this aim I've gradually purchased items to assist, for example, lift lounge chairs, electric bed, VitalCall, and most importantly email my son each morning to say, "I'm up."

You wonder why I email? Well it is due to my hearing loss and seldom, if ever, use the phone anymore.

I happily cook each night and 'live to eat' not 'eat to live' but no longer have the dinner parties of the past. Just a friend for lunch now and then.

I'm not a superstitious person, however, over many years, when I see the Evening Star in the sky, I silently say:

Star light, Star bright

First star I've seen tonight

I wish I may, I wish I might

Have the wish I wish tonight.

And over the years it was always the same wish:

For my husband and me to live a long and happy life together – which we did.

Live for the Day

Leone McManus

Como

Love Your Life

The sky told the story. It was early dawn, the first rays of red streaked across the heavens, mingling with the wispy clouds redolent of a religious painting depicting a spiritual epiphany. Several butcher birds carolled the start of the new day as the sun emerged from behind the clouds.

It awakened the solitary sleeper, who despite being riddled with arthritis and pain, rose to look out the window. The stiffness was formidable but the sky mesmerised the being who hobbled across the bedroom to the large window and stood silent.

The lonely soul made tea and swallowed an array of tablets from the Webster pack on the sideboard. As usual, the widow spoke to the photo of her late husband who had recently joined his other Vietnam veterans. She wished him, in the photo, a morning greeting, then looked down at her arthritic fingers with her diamond engagement ring. She still remembered when he proposed and she glowed with the distant memory.

Her wedding had been a brief interlude between her husband leaving again for the steamy jungle where agent orange had left him breathless for the rest of his life. They could never have children but she was so grateful for his return. The years raced by until one day she realised that they were old and tired and weak. Now she was alone.

The old widow dressed, consumed her breakfast and departed for the park near the river. She was slow of gait, stopping now and then to admire front gardens or a pedestrian with a dog. The path meandered down the hill until she arrived near a café which was already busy with customers.

She stopped and felt the magnificence of the moment. . .the smell of coffee, the fragrant scent of gardenias in the park, the laughter from a child and the sparkle of the river. Brilliant diamonds glistened in the water as it lapped the shore, small boats bobbed up and down and she watched as a train crossed the rail bridge. She smiled.

Loss and tragedy she reflected, are all part of the tapestry of life. Once the past is written there is no going back, no alteration, no second chance.

Life cannot be planned as chaos will have his way
The only lesson to learn is to live now for there
may never be a tomorrow.
Today is all we have.



Living Life

Raylene Austin

Kew

On a small Atoll of Heaven in this great big world where disasters hit unsuspecting places and I'm in the Maldives⁵, laying on a sun lounge by the blue waters of a marine lagoon in the vast Indian Ocean. The sea merges here with the sky making it almost an invisible horizon. The tide flows through the lagoon out to the sea bringing in cooling drifts to make the water just right to enter. Floating is peaceful in the water, reef sharks pass by looking to feed on small fish. Drowning may be an impossibility as the ocean salt content allows you to float with ease in water temperature that refreshes without being cold.

An afternoon visit to the capital, Male, left us amazed as we inspected the 400-year-old mosque built from coral dressed with intricate patterned coral tiles at the entrance. The President's residence was across the road from the mosque. The flag was flying to say he was at home but there was no invitation to tea. Maldivians main source of income is from the sea. We were able to watch the filleting of the deep-sea blue tuna. We passed a memorial for the eight policemen who were gunned down by terrorist in 1988.

A healing process is happening. I'm loving my time here.

We have been at the cross roads many times in our life and destiny is in choosing which path to take. It's Easter and Anzac Day Week 2019. My husband and I made the decision for this trip back in February. Two package deals were on offer, Sri Lanka over Easter then onto the Maldives the alternate deal being Singapore/Maldives we took the latter.

The bombing of Colombo on Easter Sunday reaffirmed our decision keeping us safe but our hearts go out to the people who unsuspectingly were caught up in this terrorist attack.

This is likely to be the last overseas trip that my husband and I will take together. He is finding it harder to be mobile but we are enjoying this time together celebrating 50 years of marriage. Before retirement my husband worked mainly in the Mining Industry which meant many fly-in-fly-out positions. Retirement saw the need to refocus on the art of living together. The bonding and travelling over the last 10 years have given us a new lease on our life. Our separate interests bring a healthy environment into our lifestyle.

Three years ago, now in our 70s, downsizing was the only option so we moved into an Over 55 Resort, relocating from the Sunshine Coast to Kew 35kms south of Port Macquarie. It was the same day as the move, when the door closed on our home of 22 years and we headed south across the border to our new residence and adventure.

Exiting off the Bruce Highway onto the Gateway Freeway my phone rang. "Hi this is Nambour Breast Clinic. There are some concerns in regard to your mammogram that you had last week at Maroochydore. We would like you to come in ASAP for further tests."

This was a shock as I started having these tests at the age of 40 and not once had I had a call back. "I'm on my way south and I won't be back."

"Where are you?"

"This side of Brisbane."

5 Maldives pronounced (Maldeaves)

"Can you turn around because the follow-up tests are important!"

"No, but I will follow this up at Port Macquarie."

Hence further tests acknowledged I had breast cancer. Three operations and 15 Radiation treatments, 2017 started as a healing process. Two years have passed and I am cancer free.

Life's been good to me. Returning to Sydney from this amazing holiday, I feel blessed that we travelled safely back home, to the friends and the many activities we are involved with. I am now a Lawn Bowls coach, involved in a Writing Group, a member of Probus, attend outings arranged by the Resort Social Club and for peace of mind body and soul attend Meditation.

Buddha was asked: *"What have you gained from Meditation?"*

He replied: *"Nothing, however, let me tell you what I have lost;*

*Anger, anxiety, depression, insecurity,
Fear of old age and death."*

Love my family, friends and my life.

Lost Time

Diane Quaife

Rylstone

She didn't look back as she closed the door. She walked reluctantly down the path she had walked for nearly 21 years glad she had rescued her favourite plants but unsure they would survive in the cool climate she was moving to. Would indeed she survive this unexpected upheaval in her life?

How could a small village in central NSW compare to the cities she had lived in?

What would she do with herself, no friends to pop by for a wine and chat but more importantly no partner to confide in and share her life with?

She felt faint as she climbed into the ute, how could life have dealt her such a blow all at once. Lost her business, lost her home, lost her partner and too proud to tell her friends and family how she really felt she had decided to just move on ... move away.

It was foggy and cold as she drove across the Blue Mountains, she saw a truck slowly crawling up the mountain ahead of her as she drove closer, she could see it was her removalist van. Great, she would overtake it at the next overtaking lane and ensure she arrived before them. Missy, her beloved dog was asleep on the back seat but Alley, her beautiful Burmese cat was not impressed and was voicing her displeasure with a high-pitched whine. She was sure it sounded like 'why, why why' ... like what was going through her thoughts at the time.

As the ute slowly came down the mountain, the fog lifted and the sky turned into a glorious blue that seemed to stretch out forever. The countryside suddenly changed into harsh brown open spaces but with the blueness of the sky it seemed to be welcoming her to her tree-change.

The sandstone cottage looked more inviting than she had remembered it. The sun was beating down but there was a chill in the air. The keys were in

the door. This wouldn't have happened in Sydney. There was a smell of something delicious wafting down the hallway. On the kitchen bench there was a welcome card with a fresh loaf of banana bread. How quaint she thought but also immediately thought I'm not joining the CWA that's just not me but secretly laughed to herself, if only he could have been here to see this. He would have been in his element. They had often talked of moving to the country when they retired but she had never really thought that was what she wanted. She had dreamt of travelling the world and enjoying everything the big cities had to offer not living in a small village far from family and friends.

Everything had happened at once; their business started to fail which put a strain on their relationship, both secretly blaming each other for the failures. She wanted to sell it years ago, but he did not. They hadn't any children as they married later in life and it was not an option. As the stress of a failing business and strained relationship continued, they decided to pack everything in. Close the business, sell the house, divide what was left and go their separate ways after 21 years of ups and downs it had come to this.

As far as she knew he had returned to England where they had met. They said they would remain friends but they both knew that wouldn't happen, too much resentment had built up. So as soon as everything was finalized, he said his goodbyes and she hadn't heard from him again. No forwarding address!

The van arrived, the help she'd hired were not there to help ... was this an indication of country life? She called them on the mobile phone the reply she got was "we're on our way".

Finally, they arrived and quickly everything was unloaded albeit in a rush. Everything seemed to fit the way she had planned. She took comfort in seeing her favourite pieces of furniture fit nicely into their new home. Alley had finally stopped the “Why Why Why” and was sitting on a window ledge enjoying the warm winter sun. Missy was exploring the backyard as if she had been there for years. She loved the big spacious area much bigger than what she was used to. Boxes were slowly being unpacked and her home was taking shape. The doorbell rang, it was her neighbour with a large bunch of flowers, an invitation to dinner, an invitation to join her and a group who walk twice a week, an invitation to join her at the next CWA morning tea, an invitation to join the local club, an invitation to a concert in the local hall, an invitation!!!!!! Wow how many invitations can you get on your first day in a new village?

As the neighbour left, she smiled, well this certainly wouldn't happen in the big city she barely knew her neighbours even after 21 years.

Her first night she couldn't believe the quiet, it was a little disconcerting but when she went out to her back garden and looked up at the sky the stars were unreal and the moon was so full. The sky seemed to be smiling at her and she felt a huge relief and her stress seemed to lift. May be this was the right decision. She decided to accept the invitation to dinner at her neighbours. It was time for her to start her new life.

She looked in her wardrobe for something that reflected her new country style but opted for the classic black top and slacks. She walked more confidently than she had for a long time over to neighbour's house and rang the doorbell. As she was introduced to the guests her heart started to pound as he took her hand and said, “I've been waiting for this moment for 30 years”.

Love your Life

Garry Dean

Sanctuary Point

The damper was cooked to perfection. It proved to be as satisfying and warm as the friendship that had formed between David, Bruce and me. Many star-filled nights had blanketed our adventurous world since our days of youth around the embers of a campfire.

Forty years of age and married, mates, experiencing once again, that exhilarating sense of freedom in the wild.

A singalong around the crackling warmth vividly returned the once favoured memories of single life and seemed to strengthen our bond of companionship, in the knowledge that our wives collectively had urged this to happen – our first reunion.

“That old guitar must be around a hundred years old, did you make it?” – I half jested towards Bruce, who sat seemingly uncomfortable upon a fallen branch. As if only yesterday his large unclassical hands, recalled the rhythm of all those nostalgic songs that we had grown up with. Bruce freely admitted that he held no expertise on the strings, though with each hastily swallowed mouthful of alcohol his boyish image shone brighter from within his bulky frame assisting those lost years to reappear.

David, also a largely built man, was remembered as the ‘Gentle Giant’. He thrived on a weekend with the boys. His singing voice had always resembled to me, the sound of a distressed moose, however, without those monotonous sounds of our David, the trio was incomplete.

We spoke of times when the three of us were inseparable. Young teenagers, discovering life, pursuing the fairer sex, while boasting of our conquests with some exaggeration.

I was always the smaller of the trio and assuredly the most outspoken. At times my extroverted attitudes would find me in deep water only to be plucked from the depths of certain embarrassment by two caring and protective friends.

Interrupting the rhythmic sounds of Bruce’s playing, I recalled aloud, those ‘knockabout’ times when the three of us shared similar laughs as enlisted men – or more accurately, boys, in the army cadets.

“I was a Corporal”, I reminded Bruce. “And I, a Sergeant,” Bruce retorted, with a skiting chuckle.

“And Old Dave over there, outranked both of us. Didn’t you Old Mate?” I added, glancing across to where he slept.

Conversation seemed to cease as abruptly as I had caused it to begin. Following a silent pause, which seemed like an eternity, Bruce, now freed from his intense thoughts, spoke outwardly.

“There were those three years we united together to play footie for the Mortdale Giants – Do you remember that good buddy?”

I grinned with a proudness he could feel. Three years of winning premierships, at a time of our lives when most sensible men would have long since ‘hung up the boots’. We discussed individually each and every member of that team and laughed together about the fistic challenges on and off the field.

I was the team’s Hooker. Fast with the feet and fast with the tongue. Bruce, a front rower or my ‘prop’ to hold me up in the scrums just as he had in life, during many of my over-zealous performances.

“And David,” we said in unison. “Well, it took two props to supply the perfect balance to a winning team and what winners we were!”

The guitar was placed aside and Bruce rose sharply, proceeding to walk with some unsteadiness towards the river. He was upset.

Three guys do not remain best mates for over 25 years and not realise when somethings wrong. I followed him to the edge, joining him beside the old rope-swing tree, still carrying the initials of our youth.

“Things are not the same as they used to be,” Bruce blubbered. It hurt me to see such a powerful man become so emotional but unlike days of old, Bruce on this occasion, reached out for my support. I, the Prop, Bruce the Hooker.

I listened to all his frustrations, all of them. I understood.

For David, it was different. He would never understand why our tears were flowing. “Come on Buddy, let’s join the company. Remember, there are three women at home wanting to hear about our reunion,” I urged.

The balmy weather, mixed with the consumed alcohol soon found Bruce sleeping soundly. Looking around the campsite, all was still and silent. I needed to relax, I thought, otherwise this would be an extremely long night.

When sleep finally arrested my troubled mind, I dreamt of a tragedy a few years ago. A road accident seldom spoken of anymore.

A tragedy that only God could explain.

I have never seen Bruce hung over from the night before and the following morning was to be no exception. He had risen early, fetched water, cooked breakfast and was sitting quietly, doodling in the red soil with a small twig. He seemed surprisingly happy and bright considering his tearful night.

I quickly sprung from my sleeping bag, packed my kit and joined him for toast and eggs. I needed to say one more thing.

“What about Dave now, Mate?” I asked. With a pause, he replied, “I’ve decided to let him rest,” Bruce replied.

We finished our meal and swept the site with a tea-tree brush. Together we turned towards David, the third Musketeer. Bruce had chosen and placed fresh flowers at the head of his resting place.

“He always was hard to get out of bed,” I said to Bruce who responded with a firm but gentle squeeze of my shoulder. We smiled with content as we turned for home.

I will always love you mate.

My Family Smells

Christopher J Hall

Ermington

I held an orange close to my face and inhaled the citrus flavours, my mind wandered back to my early days as a young child: Christmas; an orange or mandarin from Jaffa in the toe of my Christmas stocking, the waft of steam from the Christmas puddings that Mum had slaved over since October, mince pies with all those seasonal exotic tastes, orange peel, crystallised ginger, crushed cob nuts, cinnamon, burning candle wax, pine needles and roast chicken (we never had turkey) and the scent of hard boiled sweets.

My thoughts turned to all those other times that are instantly brought back to life, such love and all with just one single nostalgic smell. Now in my 79th year I realise that the effort for the brain to recall not only the events, but smells, is a brain exercise Pilates for the mind and reminds us of our depth of love for so many things.

I focus with determination on getting some of the smell recollections down on paper: one of my earliest recollections of smells was during wartime. I could only have been three or four years old. It was before we were evacuated to Scotland, Rod, Mum and me.

Staying over at Granny Daniels' house at Ightham Common the house had an air raid shelter made from curved corrugated iron with the roof covered with soil. It was located in a deep trench close to the back door of the house. It was the smell that I remember most. It was dank oppressive and a mix of human odours and kerosene. The kerosene smell invaded everything including clothes bedding and the air.

I turn my thoughts to more positive recollections of love for all things.

In Dad's greenhouse the rows of two metre high strong tomato plants were heavy with fruit –

I dared not touch. Dad would pick a fruit in the bright humid atmosphere, one that was perhaps not just ready for the plate in the big house. I recall the scent on my hand, the juice dripping down my chin, to the soft crisp flesh but most of all the smell of fresh tomato. Mown grass in the apple orchard where some apples had been churned up and mixed with the cuttings – an evocative, nostalgic perfume.

In the USA in 1964-65 I worked as a mechanic building the powerboat engines for the Gardner brother's attempt on the world's international race programme. In the plant of Daytona Marine Engines in Florida, I recall the smells of marine varnish, petrol and Valvoline oils – they never left me. Like the scent of wood shavings, sawdust, wood stain and turpentine.

In Australia also, most everywhere the eucalyptus trees shed their winter bark, fill the air with wonderful perfume – the gum smell that brings us 'home', when we come back from overseas trips. Eucalyptus hardwood burns slowly and with a unique scent. Here in our depths of memory are these lovingly stored smells. Here they await the next exact same smell – possibly a barbecue, it's lamb chops and minted potatoes adding to the aroma we can never forget. Forest fires many miles away trigger recalls of evacuations from bushland to the safety of emergency centres in the heat of Aussie summers.

Seaweed and fish in the fish markets of Glebe, Middle Eastern flavours of kebab shops in Auburn, trodden fruit and vegetables across the floors of the Flemington Markets. All these amazing and heart rending aromas are stored up in my tiny brain awaiting the awakening by the next exact same smell – possibly in the next life.

I marvel at God's design for the system; living, memorising latent and alert, to be jolted into recall by a simple smell channelled via my nose to a computer not much bigger than the grapefruit; my brain. Simply amazing!

I have fond memories of our first shop in Summer Hill, NSW. I recall happy times, long hours of work satisfaction with success and most of all the flower shop's smell. The smell of freesias, roses chrysanthemum, each powerfully mixed together to give that unique flower shop scent. I close my eyes and I remember the Flemington flower markets on cold days at 5.00am each morning.

Needless to say, this too will pass, as it did eventually, but the smells remain a positive link with our past. Smells of blood and bone fertiliser, bags of pine bark chips, cucumber plants, creosoted garden stakes all conjure up lost opportunities. I need to visit a garden centre again to experience whether the nostalgia is positive still.

Religions use smells and our smell sense as reinforcement of rituals. High on the list is incense burning at the Easter program this goes back further than the two millennia since the birth of Christ. The indigenous races, dating back thousands of years in Australia smoke eucalyptus leaves to drive away bad spirits. In church to the smell of just extinguished candles, holy oils on our forehead on Ash Wednesday. The burning twigs of lemon scented eucalypts on Easter Saturday, lit in a cauldron for the Easter vigil.

Trips and places visited are remembered instantly not by a picture of a town square but by the smell associated with them. Approaching Spain from the sea the town's drains, sewage and cooking combine to give an unforgettable smell. It reaches us far out to sea and we could navigate with it until we

come into harbour. In particular places the local vegetation of thyme and mint and rosemary waft perfume across the ocean to sailing boats seeking harbour from the afternoon mistrale. In Italy I recall the rich aroma of coffee percolating, in France the Gauloise cigarettes, in Germany the sausages, in Spain the sewers, in the USA the comics and here in Australia the eucalyptus trees in the heat of the afternoon sun.

Smells are a sign of our love of life, the richness of our experiences, the environment we have inherited.

My Fortunate Life

Maureen Morgan

Manly Vale

Born in London 1941, I was indeed fortunate to survive. However memories of my very early life are filled with feeling very special and much loved.

As a fatherless only child in a house of adults, I would have been rather spoiled. Two vivid memories of that time are finding the street next to ours totally demolished into burning rubble and attending the End of War Street Party, with more food than I had ever seen before and everyone singing and dancing.

Post war life was wonderful. First were tap and ballet lessons. I just loved to dance, being eager to perform for any audience. Dancing has been a lifelong passion; from rock and roll as a teenager, to ballroom dancing in my twenties and now nearing eighty, I love Line Dancing. Back in 1946, the biggest excitement of all was to go to a pantomime at night in a real theatre. Even today, I remember that five-year-old and her amazement as the curtains opened and the orchestra began.

Could life be any more exciting?

Well yes, because in 1948 my mother and I were to embark on a huge adventure, travelling by train to Glasgow, then by boat all the way to Australia, as ten pound Poms.

One distinct memory is when the ship finally stopped somewhere in the middle of the world (actually Port Said) and I viewed the exotic East for the first time. Azure blue sky minus cloud, heat so intense, there seemed to be a shimmer in the air. This must surely be a city, as the maze of buildings stretched as far as the eye could see. Buildings unlike any I had seen before, all in brown or dazzling white, unlike the grey stone of London. We were on the sea, but there was no smell of the sea, just a warm, sweet, spicy smell from the land. Strange brown people, all wearing long flowing robes,

even over their heads, packed the landscape; enterprising hawkers in small boats surrounded our ship, offering wares for sale.

I was so disappointed we could not get off and explore, but ten pound Poms were not allowed ashore. Deep in my soul a promise was made, one day I would arrive in an exotic land and explore; and travel I did, before children came along and after they had left home. Nowadays the only travel I do is the Bravo cruise, combining my two loves, Music and travel; and how fortunate I am to have the health, energy and financial security to enable to continue this passion.

The other unforgettable memory of that six week voyage was that my mother fell in love with another passenger. I vividly remember the night before we reached Australia, when Mum hugged me in bed and whispered, "Would you like Taffy to be your Daddy?"

I remember looking up into her face, which was so radiant, her eyes shining excitedly and thought I'd better say 'yes'. Whether she would have forgone the chance of happiness if I had said no, I'll never know, but happily she had nearly fifty years of marriage and gave birth to five more children.

Being the eldest of six, I naturally tended to look after them, bossing them around, which gave me the perfect background to become a school teacher; a career I loved. In fact even today, some sixteen years after retirement, I enjoy teaching Line Dancing to Seniors.

Australia started as a disappointment. Where were the black people and strange animals I had seen in the library book in London? But I loved the open spaces and constant sunshine and very soon found another passion – horses! They seemed to be everywhere, pulling the baker's cart, residing in

the dairy and ridden by numerous children living in the housing commission suburb of Old Guildford. There was even a riding school there, a place I frequented, just to pat horses and breathe in their heavenly aroma. Buying a horse became a serious pre-occupation in my early teens, finally achieved when I was old enough to have a part time job.

My Nana, who had joined us prior to the birth of baby number three, felt my cultural side was being neglected. She encouraged me to sing in the school choir and took me to the Combined Primary School concert, held at the Town Hall. What a fortunate experience, sitting under the powerful organ and behind a full orchestra, singing wholeheartedly. Many, many years later, when at a Jonathon Welch Concert, the great man said: "Get thee to a Community Choir, it is good for the soul". I did just that and joined the local senior's choir, making more friends and having a great time.

My Nana's final step in my cultural awakening, was to take me to see the opera, *Carmen*, at the Elizabethan Theatre. What a perfect choice for a fourteen-year-old girl. Such stirring music, dazzling costumes, feisty heroine and dashing hero! I was hooked and a love of opera ignited. What a fortunate outing!

At thirteen I attended Burwood Girls' High, a fortunate choice because the local Parramatta High was co-ed and my parents didn't want me mixing with testosterone fuelled boys. Aged fifteen, when I was hoping to join Tommy Smith's racing stables as a strapper, the school awarded me the Old Girls' prize, which paid for senior year fees and uniform. Following good results in the Leaving Certificate, I won a scholarship to Sydney University. Tertiary education was unheard of in my family, so how lucky was I?

All has not been a garden of roses, I made some bad choices along the way. Significantly becoming second wife to a man with three small girls. However that resulted in two wonderful sons and those same small girls are today my best friends and theatre partners.

If I could, would I change my fortunate life?

Not for an instant.

My Life Now at Eighty Four

Dorothy Morgan

Kew

I open my eyes and stretch! The clock radio confirms that it is time to start the day!

So 'what day is his?' I ask myself, 'and what have I planned for the day?'

Monday! It is definitely Monday.

'Oh! And, today is the first day of a week of preparation. In just seven days' time I am going to host a special dinner for ten guests. A member of my class is going to move closer to his grandchildren, and we the class members are joining together to farewell Ian and wife, Sandra.

Oh! What fun! I mused as I hopped out of bed to make my early cup of tea.

Sipping my tea, I plan the week of cleaning, shopping and cooking.

Today I must extend the dining-room table! I must check the dinner service and serving dishes required. Oh, and make sure the linen and lace tablecloth is ready to do its job.

I love to entertain my friends and family. This time it will be the members of the class who have been in the class since the beginning of 2017.

We have such a pleasant time in class once a week. It is the camaraderie of like-minded people and want the spouses to experience it.

Most of us have made great inroads into the formation of our Memoirs, One member is ready to put his Memoirs into book form.

So my reverie ends and I must start work!

I know that I can speak for a lot of the residents as well as myself, when I say we just love it here, at Laurieton Residential Resort. A very enthusiastic Social committee keep us busy, with planned activities and celebrations. Volunteer residents conduct classes of Tai Chi, Yoga, Card making and Meditation, to name a few. I attend Meditation, Tai Chi and my class of course. That is three mornings.

Shopping is very handy and in walking distance at the big Woolworths complex. Laurieton is accessible by bus and car, if we drive, as is the busy Port Macquarie.

I have no help in the house or garden YET! Touch wood! Life is just plain enjoyable! It really is the first time I have felt retired.

An expression favoured by my son-in-law, is 'Life of Riley' and every day I think I am living it!

In our lovely resort houses and gardens, with the lovely scenery of the area I can safely say, 'I love my life'.

But then I always have.



My Mothers Garden

Peter Gardiner

Marrickville

We have recently sold the house in which Mum and Dad raised our family of six kids. It was a simple fibro house, hand built by Dad, who hauled the materials from the local train station on foot. It was of no enduring value to the people who bought the land. It was, naturally, demolished, but that didn't wipe out the love, beauty, sacrifice, and joy that was shared in that house. It was on a double block of land, and so there were two houses opposite. The higher house was the house of Johnny Day, my childhood friend. The lower house belonged to a family called the Stump's. They had no children. In all those years, though I saw Mr. Stump irregularly, I only ever met Mrs. Stump once. When I was a kid, she had her niece staying with her, a girl named Cecily. And I remember many times those summer holidays playing with Cecily.

The Stumps could be described as the eccentric people of Oatley. Their house was surrounded by bush. It was just a mat of trees and shrubs. Apparently, there is a tree so rare in their garden that each year people from one of the universities come out and check its size, growth and so on. If you've seen *Home Alone*, you may remember the old man next door about whom all the horror stories are told, and who cops the fears of young Kevin. Well, Mrs. Stump is Oatley's answer to that man. For another generation, she is the Bo Ridley of Oatley.

Mr. Stump didn't engage in conversation when he saw us. He sang a song. It was rather weird speaking to this man in the middle of the street, while he sang. And the last word of every line was 'mmm'. One day he sang to me, "When I grow too old to mmmm, I'll have you to mmmm mmmm", which sort of left all things to the imagination.

As I said, we were on a double block of land, and so there was plenty of garden. The rule when Dad was alive was the backyard was his, and the front yard was Mum's. Dad's backyard was full of vegetables, and chooks. And Mum's front yard was full of trees and shrubs. Which annoyed the hell out of Dad. He used to look at Mum's garden, and say, "And not a bloody thing to eat!"

Mum has always boasted that she never bought a plant. Bringing up six kids on one wage, she could never afford to, so all her shrubs she grew from cuttings. She would be walking around the local streets, and see a plant she liked, and ask the owner if she could take a cutting. That her garden never cost her a penny, was something of which she was immensely proud.

A few months after my father died, my mother received a letter from Mrs. Stump. She had just heard the news, and thanked Mum for the many kindnesses of her and Dad over the years, and how much it meant to her to have neighbours of friendship and goodwill, and offered her condolences. It transpired that the reason she never went out was that she was crippled from severe leg injuries. The only time she ever left the house was to go to the hospital for her treatment. She spent her days in the front room of the house, looking out, and what she saw, was my mother's garden. She then went at length to describe how much my mother's garden had meant to her. She noted how the passing seasons brought different flowers to life, and mentioned the many shrubs and the colours of each: some were pink, others cerise, and some white. Each plant was described and the beauty that each had brought to Mrs. Stump was shared. It was the one thing that brought love and joy and beauty to her life.

As I read this letter, I was struck by this profound image: a woman, who could not go out, confined to her house, looking at the world through one small and solitary window. And the most beautiful thing she had in that outside world was a garden, my mother's garden, grown from cuttings and scraps, by a woman who could afford no more, but tended them with love and care and devotion.

Never, never, never, underestimate your ability to bring love and beauty to this world.

My Tuesdays

Pamela King Ferrari

Thirlmere

"Nanna!" I hear the voice as I enter the gate of my son's house. When I walk through the front door she runs and clamps her arms around my legs.

While her mother dresses for work I supervise the little one's breakfast.

Her tiny hand holds mine as we farewell Mummy. The emotions of love and trust overwhelm me. "No Kenzie, you can't go on your slide, the grass is wet. Let's go and put some shoes on."

Her minor tantrum is ignored. I find chalk hidden under a plant and start drawing on the footpath. The distraction works and she takes the chalk to create footpath masterpieces.

Slipping inside, I play her Wiggles guitar. It soon has her running in to do the actions of "Rock-a-bye Your Bear." The front door is closed until the grass dries.

"Dug Dug" she says. I've left Dug the Pug outside. The door is quickly opened and closed again.

We play more Wiggles music, with actions, then she wanders off to her toys. She brings me a small bucket full of jigsaw pieces. There are four separate jigsaws in the container designed to make it more difficult for her. Who is Mum kidding?

The lid is a bit stiff. "Help pees Nanna". I tip all the shapes on the table. In no time she has all four puzzles finished. She completes each puzzle again. I make a mental note to find a more difficult puzzle for this child.

Now bored with the puzzles she stands at the end of the hall gesturing with her little hand for me to follow. In her room she looks at her books. "What about this one?" I ask.

"Nope."
"This one?"

"Nope".

"Which one do you want us to read?" Finally, she picks four. She climbs onto the lounge, taps the cushion and says "Sit." We read the books, well, I try to read while she turns the pages. We make all the appropriate animal noises.

Morning tea time. I have brought delicious yoghurt with fresh blueberries. I get two spoons, lift her into the high chair and we share. When I've had my fill, I leave her with the rest. Oh damn! I didn't put her bib on. The purplish stain is not only all over her face and hands but on her clothes too. (Mummy will be pleased).

Mess cleaned up, I lift her from her chair saying, "Up, up up", then, "down, down, down". Just like in the Wiggles song.

"More" I am told so we repeat it another four times.

Back on the lounge she takes my hand and starts drawing circles with her finger. I know what she wants. "Round and round the garden.....". Such a sweet giggle. Her turn to draw circles on my hand but at the end of the rhyme I must tickle her. She pulls off her shoes and shoves her foot in my face. "This little piggy...." You guessed it repetition.

She takes my hands to get me to stand and we pretend she is pulling me across the room, then pushing, then pulling, then....

She is amusing herself with her dolls, so I slip into the kitchen and empty the dishwasher. Here comes my little helper.

The grass is finally dry so out we go into the sunshine to play. After about half an hour she is happy to come back inside.

Time for lunch. Ham sandwich for the little one and ham and salad wrap for me. She eats the ham and offers the bread to Dug. "No, Kenzie, not for Dug." I get a sweet smile. You know the one – condescension.

"More." She eats the ham and cheese from my wrap.

I take a small fruit juice from my bag. She knows there is a second one and looks for it. "What do you say Kenzie?"

"Pees." It is said in a way her mouth forms an irresistible smile. Who can say no?

She plays for a little while but is starting to tire and asks for her dummy "Nunga nunga."

"If you want your nunga you have to go to bed." Firm shakes of the head.

She points to the remote control. "Puppies." Okay, if there is no sleep, we'll have some quiet time. I put on the *Air Buddies* movie about five puppies who rescue their parents.

She is getting drowsy, so I grab her dummy and bunny. Cuddle and rock her then put her in the cot and pat her on the back. She is soon in the land of fairies.

I've brought some work with me but opt to watch television for a while. As soon as I sit on the lounge I have a little black pug cuddled up on my lap. This is his time.

After an hour or so I hear her stirring. She is standing in her cot still drowsy but with the same sweet smile. We cuddle on the lounge and I switch the television to *The Wiggles* and, again, both of us must do the song actions.

Now wide awake, she takes my hand and leads me to the kitchen showing me she wants something from the pantry. "Use your words Kenzie."

"Biscuit pees Nanna".

We share a snack then pass the afternoon much the same as the morning.

A car pulls in the driveway. "Mummy!!!" she cries as she runs to the door.

It's time to go. I get the greatest good-bye cuddles and kisses. Oh, how I love my Tuesdays with my delightful granddaughter. I never dreamed the love for my first grandchild would be so consuming or returned in such an extent.

I drive home with Wiggles' songs in my head. They should disappear by about next Monday.

Nobody Told Me Not to Wear My Overcoat!

Sharon Stanynought

Concord West

The aircraft door opened to a humid Sydney evening. A whoosh of clammy air came down the cabin, bringing along the quarantine officer who fumigated us into our new life on the other side of the world. As we struggled off the plane with our bags and our ridiculously redundant overcoats, we were met by my expat aunt and uncle.

“G’day,” they called, an Aussie twang inflecting their tone just as much from habit now as for laughs, and whisked us away in their Holden. It was 1974, and my mother and I had arrived for our first Christmas in Australia.

The cold of the northern hemisphere winter that year had been bitter. Our last night in England was spent with my father’s brother and his wife. They, too, wanted to settle in Australia – and would do so in years to come, following the trail blazed by my maternal aunt and uncle five years previously. But now it was our turn.

Dad had packed us off to Heathrow – “Get some sun, get Sharon settled into school and I’ll tie up the loose ends here.” We duly left him behind to finalise the sale of our two-up-two-down in London’s East End. We were not to see Dad again until early the next year, and this coming Christmas would not be forgotten.

Saying goodbye to my friends proved the hardest part of the journey. Promises were made to keep in touch forever. Leaving one’s country and social group at the age of sixteen is not easy. But life in England then had been a constant battle against strikes, power failures, and financial instability. I knew that life in Australia was my way out; I would do well there.

Flicking through my aunt’s letters, I had tried to imagine the life of an Australian. She described her garden; ‘filled with fragrant jasmine; plentiful jobs;

the sun shining all the time; it’s simply marvellous; a life so much more relaxed. Apparently, most of the houses in Sydney were bungalows – super posh, to our ears. The photographs she sent of Bondi and Coogee had me daydreaming for hours of this golden life that my parents said would happen to us one day. “Finish your O-levels, and then we will go!”

It was December, it was scorching ... and I loved it! I felt as though I was on holiday – a holiday that would never end. But where did Christmas go? The shops lacked their snowy decorations, there were no carols blaring from their doorways. Where were the glittering baubles, the Christmas lights strung along the roads? Where was the blustery cold? Whatabout the snow?

“Don’t forget, these are the summer holidays, too,” said my aunt, “people go away or play cricket in the garden at Christmas”.

As Christmas edged forward, I knew it would be tinged with sadness for Mum and me. After all, my father was on the other side of the world. We had not spoken since parting. International calls were expensive and, besides, my aunt didn’t have a telephone.

I went to bed early that Christmas Eve, content in the knowledge that at least Dad had his brother for company back in England. Still, I missed him terribly. And there was one thing I simply had to know – had it snowed over there? I felt disassociated with the time of year, as it lacked the festivities of a wintery Christmas as I had known it. The air was humid and heavy with the scent of summer flowers, not cinnamon and tinsel. Darkness came late, unlike the three-in-the-afternoon nightfalls of a northern country. In the mornings, sunlight danced boisterously through the window. Looking out, I no longer saw the pavement covered with

snow as if the baker had gone berserk with a bag of flour. Instead, our neighbour's Christmas tree lights, brilliant white, winked in their window from across the scorching road.

Christmas morning, 1974, was a momentous time for me – but it was even more so for Australia. Cyclone Tracy was to sweep through Darwin while I slept. The news of it filled the day – the television and radio battled for attention as they blared simultaneously. Listening in, I could hardly fathom such devastation. Was this normal for Australia, my new homeland? It made me realise how tiny and tame England was in comparison to this vast continent. While we perspired in the humidity over a traditional roast dinner, my aunt mentioned how she and my uncle had originally considered settling in Darwin. The penny took a while to drop: had that been the case, we would all have been sleeping in Darwin the night Tracy came to visit.

Family gatherings increased in size over the years since that first Christmas. Dad finally joined us, followed by his brother. Friends and family from England visited on occasion. Meanwhile, growing numbers of cousins – and eventually their spouses – joined my husband, my twin daughters, and me in our Concord home. We would spend the day in the pool or playing cricket in the backyard, complete with garbage bin stumps – after all, my husband is Australian!

It has been forty-five years, though it seems like yesterday. And, as we sweat over our hot Christmas dinners, listening to the cicadas' own Christmas carols, I look back and think of those family members who can no longer join us. We raise a glass to all the memories. We Skype friends in England who really did keep in touch forever. I look back and know I'm having a wonderful life here.

My daughters say that the smell of gardenias blooming under their bedroom windows reminds them Christmas is coming. Now, finally, I'd have to agree – but it would be nice to see a little snow!

Norma's Shoes

Christine Johnson

Rozelle

Renovate or detonate! The words caught Norma's eye. They described where, hitting the swivel of her sixties, she'd reached in life.

Ever since her husband's premature exit from this world – a classic heart attack linked to stress – Norma felt a need to reawaken a time of unalloyed happiness. She investigated properties for sale where she'd holidayed as a child, spending joyful days in her grandmother's company. Money wasn't an issue. Give Jim his due; an accountant, he'd a head for figures. A shadowy presence looking over her shoulder, he perused the computer screen. Norma trusted her psychic powers; for her, dead never meant departed. She sensed Jim, scanning images called up for the umpteenth time. Renovate or detonate.

Norma navigated the keys. A rust-streaked roof, two palms flanking the front door giving the whole an exotic picture-postcard look. Once inside, Norma detected a spectral shudder. A stickler, Jim wouldn't overlook damp patches and cracks, to take in Baltic pine floors, pressed-metal ceilings and the original woodstove gracing the kitchen. Detonate. Norma sighed, preparing to delete. Then she stopped. Jim's supernatural voice whispered.

'Look at the price.'

In the following weeks, Norma ousted decades of clutter; packed only what she cherished. When she arrived to collect the keys to her property, the youthful agent grinned.

'Old Seymour's place? Repair or despair!'

Norma regarded this aspirant poet, sensing the groans of bards long-gone.

'What brings you out our way?'

'My grandmother lived here.'

What Norma didn't describe was Gran's other worldly visit to deposit her penny's-worth in the decision-making. The night before the auction, Norma dreamt she was a girl, Gran braiding her hair.

'It's true,' Gran urged, interweaving the strands. 'You've the knack. Put something in your hands, it'll come up a treat.'

Norma woke, followed her grandmother's ethereal advice, went to the telephone and put in a winning bid.

As she inspected the tumbledown dwelling she now owned, she made an unexpected discovery. A secret space! She turned after admiring the vast woodstove, and spied a crooked door. It opened with an elegiac creak.

Norma entered, eyes adjusting to the darkness. The room was tiny. A solitary windowpane of glass let in a slanting beam of light, turning strands of cobwebs silver. And now she noticed something else. Shelves! They lined the walls, reaching up to the ceiling.

An ancient, worn-out shoe stood sentinel, alone in the middle of the floor. Norma lifted it, examining its buttoned strap and stitched sole. This relic of past journeys placed onto an empty shelf she looked around, spellbound. And then, eyes sparkling, she smiled.

'Gran, you've led me to my larder.'

In an instant the years dissolved. Gran, a cheerful mist-of-a-spectre smelling of flowery old lady hovered, dressed in classic pinny. Norma recalled hours spent under her guidance. From Gran she inherited the belief that an array of home-made preserves on larder shelves was a sign of good housekeeping. Jellies, marmalades and

creamy curds – Gran taught her how to make them all. It'd been a highlight each holiday: a little girl and an old lady laughing, saving summer surplus for winter use.

Work began, restoring Old Seymour's house. As it progressed Norma sensed age, both in herself and the place, shifting towards something graceful; to celebrate. Workmen replaced iron, polished floorboards, unblocked fireplaces, and wielded paintbrushes. Bit by bit, the quaint property regained its original charm. Tasks completed, Norma prepared to make a fresh start, build new memories.

In her refurbished kitchen she laid out her preserving equipment. Her first essential, the heavy-gauge pan bequeathed her by Gran. Worn with use, an old friend she'd never part with. How much had gone into it over the years – fruit, the sweetness of sugar, and the sweetness of love!

Knives, shredders, spoons, a sugar thermometer, and a host of jars joined this matriarch of marmalades. Every day, opening the door of the little larder, Norma admired her handiwork. Containers filled with rosemary jelly, grapefruit preserve and quince jam; empty shelves, empty no more. And then one day, turning to leave, she stopped.

There it was: that old shoe, on the floor. Somehow, placing jars, she must have knocked it. She replaced it on the shelf.

Another day, arriving with more jars, the shoe blocked her way again, back on the floor. How? Mice! Norma set traps. Next time, a search of the larder showed only the inscrutable shoe – returned to the ground. From then on shoe strife reigned. The mysterious shoe's eerie restlessness perplexed Norma. Her preserving disrupted, she decided the recalcitrant shoe had one last chance.

'Stay on the shelf, or go.'

But stretching forward with the nomad in her hand, Norma froze. Something shimmered. It was an identical shoe with a scrap of yellowing paper.

Norma read aloud: 'Mending, Madam, courtesy Seymour's Shoemakers, 1874.'

The world of the larder took on the aura of magic. The little window's light intensified. Norma positioned the shoes side by side. An intoxicating smell of leather filled the air, accompanying the phantom arrival of shoes and boots tramping back from the past, buttoned, laced and buckled. Nestled on a stool amongst them was a beady-eyed man with kit-of-tools, plying his trade. A thick needle flashed, piercing the leather he gripped. Eyes beaming up at her through frost-white eyelashes, the apparition vanished.

In this house she wasn't alone! To find renewal, her footsteps led her here. But disturbing decades of dust had roused this co-habiter. Perhaps he'd never left. Whatever, Seymour the Shoemaker, surgeon to soles, had visited leaving his gift; repaired good as new. Shoes wise with age to inspire her now, bridging into the future.

That summer, granddaughter Rosie visited, returning to the city, bubbling with enthusiasm.

'Grandma Norma's place, it's awesome! We made marmalade. There's this secret room where Grandma found old shoes. Norma's Shoes, she calls them. I drew labels for jam, with a picture. The local shoe-shop sells it. And a ghost haunts the house! For real! When can I go again, Mum?'

Ode to Bede

Sally Farmer

Coolamon

It was a chilly, calm, pre-dawn morning. A sombre crowd congregated at the Victory Memorial Gardens to honour the Anzacs. Prior to commencement of the Service a television reporter interviewed my adorable 8 year-old twin granddaughters. They spoke sincerely and eloquently when the reporter asked what Anzac Day means to them, "Anzac Day means to us celebrating what the Anzacs have done for us and to remember those people who died in the War."

During the Dawn Service I was moved to tears as I felt a great desire to express what my heart was feeling. My heartfelt thanks went out to the people who fought for this country in order for us, living now, to have the freedom we enjoy today. Who should I tell, I wanted to write, but to whom? My grandchildren expressed their gratitude and so should I.

Who could not be touched when the Wagga City Rugby Male Choir sang 'On Flanders Fields'? Who could not have a tear in their eye as the Army trumpeter played the plaintive notes of 'The Last Post'? Who could not feel moved when the National Anthems of both New Zealand and Australia were sung?

That afternoon, after attending our Coolamon ANZAC march, my husband took me to visit the R.S.L Hall where we saw displays informing visitors of the history of Anzacs and detailing the involvement of local residents. We were humbled as we perused the information and memorabilia collected over the years.

Amongst the many photographs displayed on the wall, one of a young soldier named Bede intrigued me. I felt Bede's eyes follow me as I meandered through the Hall and thought about how to thank these wonderful young people. Bede's handsome,

young, fresh face and cheeky grin epitomised an Anzac for me. 'You're it Bede, you're my metaphor. My metaphor for all those who fought and gave their service and many of them their lives, for the love and honour of their country'. So much has been written about the bravery of the Anzacs, speeches, letters, poetry, songs, our War Memorials and Museums are full of memorabilia, but I want to add my personal thanks.

Bede, I know nothing about you except what I can glean from your photograph. I see your country boy grin, your dark wavy hair, your eyes full of light, mischief, and anticipation. Perhaps you thought going to War was going to be a grand adventure. You were loved by your family. They were no doubt proud that you went to war. I imagine they prayed you would come home safe and sound. I don't know if you did come home, went on to live a good life and enjoyed all the ordinary things we are free to do today. Thank you Bede. Thank you for taking up the call to fight, to protect your country from the perceived peril, to give those you would never meet, the chance to have a life of freedom. Thank you for letting us enjoy the extraordinary things in our ordinary lives, without fear of reprisal or threat.

In the end, possessions don't matter, they say so little. At a certain point we realise the things we want are not 'things'. They are people and sensations, the sound of rolling thunder approaching, the smell of freshly brewed coffee, the sun on our face and wind in our hair, the smell of a rose, the sound of a new born baby, the taste of chocolate, the feel of salty tears running down our face, a beautiful sunset, dew glistening like diamonds on the grass in the pale morning light, multitudes of extraordinary things in our ordinary lives.

We are free to experience love, loss, grief, pain, regret, guilt, sorrow and laughter; emotions which are part of our humanness. I could not imagine living in a world where people are not free to express their love of music, art and religion. Nor free to celebrate diversity with compassion and understanding of others, not even daring to dream of a world united in peace.

Do you, Bebe, look down on our world of today and grieve for Mother Earth? You fought for your country in the hope that we would love and cherish it. Do we humans appear to be on a path of destruction due to greed and overpopulation? Do you see the scars on the earth where we have dug coal to feed our hungry industry? Do you shed tears when senseless acts of violence occur? Do you worry that we have not learned from our past; rushing like a plague of ants to satisfy our greed and thereby not paying heed to our fragile planet?

I hope you can also see the beauty of the world today. Not the man-made cities and structures proving our architects and designers are so clever, but the simple things of life; a baby's first smile; the look of wonder as a child finds her own hands; the young boy looking adoringly at his grandfather; the teenagers first flush of love; the grey-haired couple leisurely strolling hand-in-hand along the beach.

Bede, I, one of today's planet dwellers, love my life and will do my best to appreciate the extra-ordinariness in my ordinary life as well as respecting our fragile Mother Earth.

With gratitude, thank you, to all those like you Bede, for honouring our country with your willingness to fight for freedom.

On Earth, One Life

Lance Bowden

Mudgee

The needle that pierced my juvenile skin just below my left shoulder brings immediate relief. Within seconds, the adrenalin fluid strikes its mark. I surrender.

My tense body, having fought for an hour, mining my lungs for traces of oxygen while my open mouth gulped up the surrounding air before hauling it down the narrow aperture of my throat; the strong auditable, involuntary, rhythmic wheeze from a contracted respiratory system; sweating brow and poundings in my head camouflage the images of star-like shapes in a jet black world as I struggled to breathe.

But I did breathe and wheeze, and I continue to breathe every day of my life, sometimes with the support of modern medication, sometimes without needing medical intervention. Daily rituals as a young child of taking medication when my breathing became distressed, to taking preventative medication as an adolescent then as an adult. Learning to manage my respiratory condition was paramount to my getting on with my life.

Having said this, there have been moments, moments in my younger life where, through sheer frustration, I have challenged the 'creator' as to "Why me?" and on occasions I have gone to lengths to offer up a deal or two. However, in time and with a more mature head on my shoulders I came to realise that a partnership with my own self, my respiratory system, was essential to my enjoying and progressing my life. Thankful that my condition, comparatively, is a small irritation in the scheme of things; thankful that the deals did not come to fruition.

At sixty-six years of age my moods and activities are tempered with reflective moments; good times and not so good times that cannot be erased or

tampered with and no amount of wishful thinking will change my life's history. We are accountable firstly to ourselves and secondly people's lives we have touched in some way or another throughout our childhood, adolescence, adulthood and transition to retirement. And yes, I am a grey nomad.

One of these reflective moments, a moment that humbles me as a human being and always gives me a renewed and clear perspective on life is to look up into Earth's amazing night skyscape and view the moon in all its phases then view the most recognisable celestial formation in the Southern Hemisphere, the Southern Cross. But the most exquisite, most humbling of all the reflective moments in my life to date is to view our world, planet Earth from space.

Earth, rotating effortlessly twenty-four-seven with two parts blue (water), one-part green-brown (ground), and a veil of translucent white moving and interacting endlessly with Earth's atmosphere. And it's the only known place in the universe where life, as we know it, exists. Human beings live at the most prestigious address in the universe; albeit the size of a pixel in deep space. What a privilege it is to live on Earth. A privilege that none of us should take for granted. It's our time, it's our one shot at living on Earth and it shouldn't be to our detriment through a lack of self-perspective.

We know that life is complicated. How complicated depends upon the many variables within our life. Some opportunities we see coming, some we do not. Some will challenge us; extend us; change us. Sometimes life seems that it cannot get any better, sometimes life will suck, but as human beings we are tenacious, enduring, determined and enterprising.

We spend our time; hours, days and years striving for what makes us happy through our relationship choices, career choices and leisure activities: love a beer, love that car, love travel, love bush walking, love to garden, love to go, love that watch, all with the expectation these notions are what we need or deserve. Sadly, the sentiment surrounding the word love has become undervalued, carelessly applied, lacking intent, and misdirected. Love has been wronged! Let's right this wrong.

I continue to breathe every day of my life whether it is supported by medication or by virtue of having a good day. I continue to have reflective moments in my life and I continue to have special moments; moments of child-like wondrous joy for life, family and my place in community.

In truth, everyone's life is a one-off experience; unique in every way possible. Let us then, through self-promotion, be true to ourselves and have no regrets. To this end, let us all leave the legacy through personal exertion, that our lives have been well lived. But above all let us through self-actualisation, demonstrate what it means to love your life.

On the Other Side

Nola Foster

Terrigal

At last, at the age of 67 years and 11 months, I am about to retire. I'm not going to miss my working life in the slightest, except perhaps from a financial point of view. There are so many thoughts rolling around my mind, things I have always wanted to do, to try, places to see. Even time for simple pursuits such as cooking and craft. Maybe now I will find time to settle to writing my first novel, or perhaps a children's picture book. The most exciting prospect is having more opportunities to enjoy the caravanning lifestyle in my little 'home away from home'.

So, after farewell celebrations with my work colleagues, my new life begins. First project, inside my house needs painting. Not quite the activity I'd been dreaming of, but necessary. Months pass. Because I can, I undertake the painting project at a leisurely pace. Perhaps not a good idea in hindsight because it really impacts on my nebulous retirement intentions. I have trouble allowing myself 'leisure' time, too much to do! Though I manage to devour many of the novels that have adorned the bookshelf for years, waiting on my attention. My conscience might be admonishing me for taking time out for such an inessential task, but, then I argue with myself and win – it is research! And it is too wet today for painting, or too hot. Every would-be writer must read, right?

Eventually, I complete the most essential painting tasks. It's taken me so long, I almost need to start all over again! During all this time, the one thing I choose not to give up, is my participation in an Acapella Chorus which I have belonged to for nearly nine years. While I was working, it was the special thing that I did, just for me and my sanity. Singing with other women and making beautiful music together, just using voices, is totally uplifting. Now I start to add a few other activities.

I have discovered that I love to cook! Who would have thought it! But not just any cooking. I want to try making some of those things that we buy instead of making at home. Chocolate. What a delightful pursuit! You can even eat your mistakes, or just retemper and start again. I buy the couverture chocolate and a variety of moulds, spend hours researching the do's and don'ts, like don't allow even a hint of water to pollute your chocolate or it'll be ruined totally. What temperature does it have to reach in order to be tempered properly? Eventually, I master it and my first batch of filled moulded chocolates are delicious. Dark chocolate with an Irish Cream flavoured Ganesh filling. Very moreish.

Next, jam and marmalade. My friend had a glut of grapefruit from the huge tree in her backyard, so I helped her out by relieving her of enough fruit to make a nice batch of marmalade. The novelty of that soon wore off though, so what next? Bread. Once again, very satisfying to tame the yeast and produce tasty, natural and healthy bread. I have been making my own bread for perhaps eighteen months and still find great satisfaction when I produce a lovely loaf. It is a temperamental process, and each loaf can be subtly different, but I enjoy the challenge. Soap making is next on the list of totally unnecessary things to try!

As time goes by, I find myself feeling restless. My new hobby, playing on my new iPad. I keep dreaming of an adventure, caravanning around the countryside. Maybe I need a new caravan with all the bells and whistles? My dear little van is getting rather old, a bit like me really. Hours disappear in a flash as I scroll through the many sites advertising caravans for sale. I feel rather disloyal to little Cara, the nickname I gave my caravan many years ago. Indecision takes hold so I do nothing.

I'd like to live somewhere in the country. What could I afford? Where could I go? Out comes the trusty iPad and I research real estate sites obsessively. My father's family came from the Forbes area so perhaps I could look there? But then, I like Armidale and Coonabarabran as well. I think I need to combine my desire for a caravan trip with a venture into the heart of NSW so I can explore the potential for my tree-change. I spend time reading about the wonderful showground camping experiences that the lucky grey nomads are reporting on. I join the Facebook group, so I will know where I can stay when I'm roaming the countryside. Fantasy? We'll see. I may not be grey yet, but a nomad I could be! Could that be my new lifestyle? My imagination works overtime as I try to project myself into that way of life.

I find my spare time being taken up researching a life when in fact, I should be out there living it. So, my latest resolution is, make definite plans, choose an itinerary, and lock it in! Just as soon as my next chorus singing competition is over.

It is so easy to dwell on what might be, or what should be, and in so doing, to lose sight of what you have in the here and now. Every day is a gift to be loved and cherished. We need to love our lives and make every minute count, enjoy it, whether it's knitting that baby jacket, filling your kitchen with that aromatic aroma of baking bread or turning a boring old block of chocolate into an artistic delight. One day you could wake up and think where have the years gone? I've wished them away, wanting some intangible something that will make me happier, when happiness is right there for the taking, if you can just reach out and embrace the real world doing what brings you joy. The grass isn't always greener on the other side.

On the Top of the World

Hilary Kite

Gloucester

Nima Sherpa had been recommended to me as a guide by an American couple I met in Delhi and I had prearranged the entire trip by email, so was a bit apprehensive that all would be properly organised. I need not have worried. Nima met us at Kathmandu Airport and after sorting out trekking permits and other formalities with the least amount of fuss, we were on our way to Pokhara – the starting point of our hike.

Our trekking party consisted of myself, my sister Elaine, and my son Murray. Nima had suggested we fly which was certainly preferable to the return journey which we opted to do by bus – a most terrifying trip. Elaine spent the whole way on the edge of her seat, exclaiming loudly 'Oh my hat!' or, 'Goodness, he's mad!' at every death-defying bend of the precarious mountain road. My sister doesn't swear.

And so the three of us with Nima and two porters to carry our bags, set off on the Annapurna trail. The scenery was breathtaking, as were the long ascents – up, up and up some more. It is a very popular trekking route, and, in some places, long flights of steps have been built to make the climb easier. Murray soon tired of staying back with the 'old ladies' and often went ahead with the porters – those sure-footed men in flip-flop sandals, carrying our heavy packs.

Overnight stops were at the locally run tea houses. These varied in luxury – classified by me as to the ablution facilities. If I had to risk my neck in the dead of night down a slippery slope to access a muddy toilet room, it was definitely a 1 star. Of course, none were of a 'Western' design, and squatting with wobbly, tired-out thigh muscles is no fun. Many times I wondered whether I would ever straighten up again. A rail, or handle strategically placed, would earn another star in my rating system.

Being the start of the trekking season, the trail was not very busy. The monsoon rains were in their throes making some days' walk rather wet and the paths slick. Wooden suspension bridges slung across fast-flowing streams, and at times hard against rocky mountain sides where the run-off cascaded down in rushing waterfalls, made for precarious crossing. Negotiating one of these Elaine slipped, nearly dropping her fancy camera into the chasm. She put it into the relative safety of her backpack after that and only brought it out at rest stops. I had to rely on a basic 'point and shoot' to try and capture some of the splendour. But, the best and most enduring pictures are those in my memory.

And so we hiked on, taking it fairly easily. Other more energetic people passed us on the way, only to be caught up that night around the communal dining table of the tea house. At bedtime it was difficult to leave the warmth of these places where a fire burnt under the table and a drying line, strung at our knees, dried out our wet socks as we ate and chatted. The menu surprised me. I had imagined eating Dal bhat – the Nepalese staple of seasoned rice, most nights. But things had obviously been much influenced by Western tastes. Pizzas with improbable toppings were high on the list, as well as the nauseatingly sweet Fried Mars Bar, a chocolate bar dipped in batter and deep fried! Nima kept pressing us to order more food – it was all included in the cost, and he couldn't understand our small appetites. I concluded that most of his clients were big-eating Americans.

The highest point on our trek was the Annapurna Base Camp. At 4130m, I definitely suffered a little from the high altitude. We had spent the night at the Fish Tail Guest House at Machapuchare Base Camp and arose before dawn to climb the last 400 metres. As the sun rose, the incredible snow-capped

mountain panorama gradually emerged, and along the path, tussocky Alpine vegetation and bright flowers delighted. We were in a remote and beautiful place, pristine and mostly unscathed by the outside world. It felt untamed and free.

And then we heard: While enjoying a welcome hot breakfast the appalling news came through on the Emergency radios. The date was September 11, 2001 and the world had been thrown into chaos. We couldn't at first believe the reports, but during the next few days, as we wended our way down from the mountains, we heard more details from those coming up the trail. A young American related how his father had escaped from the second Tower. He contemplated an immediate return, but his family had urged him to stay in Nepal – possibly one of the safest places to be. We had to agree. How lucky we were to be here.

The return trip through the tiny villages; children were playing in the dusty streets, farmers toiling in their precariously terraced food gardens and women were going about their daily chores. I felt glad that their lives were untouched from wider threats.

By then the tourist season had started in earnest and we met large groups trekking up the trail. Many of these were camping outfits and a huge number of porters carried their gear – from food and cooking pots, to tents and even toilet seats. I realised sadly that my earlier assessment was totally inaccurate. With their fragile economy so dependent on Western tourism, these people would all be severely impacted.

Back in Kathmandu we visited a Buddhist Stupa and as I rolled the prayer wheels I determined to live each day as if I too might have no more to live.

And then we left. Back to our real world. But a part of me yearned to stay a while longer in that place of stunning scenery where faded and tattered prayer flags flutter in the wind.

Paths Less Travelled

Judith Neville

Little Bay

My eyes strained to see movement of something large in the water. I realised my heart was beating faster both from fear and excitement, so I tried to slow down my breathing through the snorkel. After a few minutes, a grey shape emerged from the deep and I knew it was what I had been waiting for – a hammerhead shark!

I was lucky to be enjoying a five-day cruise of the Galapagos Islands with my sister on a catamaran that accommodated sixteen guests. We had joined a women-only tour group who were all over sixty years of age and keen to explore parts of the world less travelled. Our group had the entire boat to ourselves, plus the crew of course.

The previous day our adventure tour guide, Juan, had already taken us on a snorkelling tour along the rocky coastline of a volcanic island. The water was so warm I did not know why it was suggested we wear wetsuits but I assumed it was for protection from the equatorial sun. With an occasional flip of our fins, we floated along on the current in calm waters. We saw fish of different sizes, a black-tipped reef shark and a penguin. The Galapagos penguin, a cold-water animal, survives due to a specific cold current that runs from the open ocean to the islands.

Once back on board, some of the crew handed out towels to dry ourselves. We dried our faces and heads first then helped each other peel off the wetsuits that clung to our bodies. It is much easier climbing into dry wetsuits than removing them when wet. There were groans interspersed with much laughter as we struggled to pull off the wetsuits. We then showered and changed into suitable clothing for our pre-dinner drinks. Juan was so impressed with the way we older women had handled the snorkelling trip, he suggested tomorrow we look for hammerhead sharks before breakfast.

Exclamations of excitement burst from the women who expressed their delight with this opportunity. I looked around the room at their animated faces and back to Juan. "Is there any danger involved?" I asked Juan. Was I the only one who felt a little trepidation with this activity? The other women looked at me as if to say 'what a silly question'. Juan responded the sharks were only interested in the fish and not us. I did not feel reassured.

Overnight our ship had sailed to Genovesa Island, a shield volcano. One part of the caldera had collapsed leaving a horse-shoe shaped wall of rock creating the Great Darwin Bay. The sea within this bay dropped down eight thousand meters. It was from these depths that the hammerhead sharks were known to ascend to feed just after dawn.

Again, we donned our wetsuits and grabbed our snorkelling equipment then clambered into the zodiac boats to take us to the drop-off point. Despite my hesitation last night, I was excited to get into the water. I pulled on my fins first then my mask and snorkel. Without any hesitation, I swung my legs over the side and slipped into the water with very little splash. I did not want to sound the dinner bell to any unseen sharks below.

We floated around for nearly five minutes before Juan called out "there's one" and pointed below him. I did not see a thing. With so many of us in the water, I was not close enough to Juan so I missed the shark. The water was not as clear as the day before which made it very difficult to see fish more than six meters down.

Another ten minutes went by when I perceived movement directly below me. Then it appeared from the gloom and into the shafts of sunlight. Looking down on it from the surface, its skin was grey and it moved its tail from side to side

propelling it through the water. It looked about two metres long. The shark was only swimming at cruising speed moving its head to one side then the other as it searched for fish. The flattened and laterally extended head was unmistakably that of a hammerhead.

I floated silently above the shark while watching it move around slowly doing what seemed like a figure eight. After a few minutes it then moved in the direction of Juan and the other snorkelers. I raised my head from the water, removed my mouthpiece and shouted “shark” and pointed towards them. Many heads popped up looking at me then immediately they dropped back into the water looking in the direction where I was pointing.

We snorkelled around for a further twenty minutes without seeing another shark so Juan called us back to the zodiacs. I swam to the boat then took hold of the security rope along its side to stop me from floating away. I pulled off my mask and with it came the snorkel. I raised my hand with my mask and snorkel and one of the crew took them from me. With one hand holding on to the rope, I bent my knee reaching down to my ankle to pull off my first fin then the other. Once my fins were removed and again passed up to the crew member, I climbed the step ladder up into the boat taking a seat next to my sister ready for the ride back. We both looked at each other with the biggest grins on our faces. “Wow!” I exclaimed. “How good was that?”

However, this was not the end of our fun as the group was to fly south the following day to our next adventure, cruising Antarctica for ten days. We saw minke and humpback whales breaching, penguins swimming frantically to escape the hungry mouth of a leopard seal, and other spectacles of the southern ice continent.

Travelling to two remote areas of the world on the one trip was inspiring. No wonder I love my life!

Piano Bar Blues

Mavis Miller

Oberon

I'm the singer at Tuck's Tavern. I also do saxophone. I'd rather do saxophone but it's hard to get a singer to stay put in a small resort like Windy Bay. Pretty, but too far from the city.

The people around here are mostly middle-aged and middle-income. Sometimes a big city company will come here for a conference and folks in suits will turn up at Crystal Cove Convention Centre, at the other end of the Bay. They come to Tuck's to relax after spending all day doing their games and workshops and bondings and some will try to pick up a date from the limited resources hereabouts.

Tonight there's a boozy bunch perched on the high barstools at the 'piano bar' – a tall curved bar that separates us, the band, from them. Behind them is a narrow track for the drink waiters and behind that is a row of chairs lined up against the back of the main bar. A nicer, quieter bunch is seated there.

"Gimme 'Red Sails inna Sunset!'" yells a thin guy with a soft belly at the piano bar, his beer slopping from the glass over his sleeve but he's too drunk to notice. He's slapping his left hand on the piano bar. His wedding ring makes a clacking sound and he lets his hand drop onto his lap. When it comes up again, pounding the bar in time to Jake's soft drumbeats, the ring is gone. Jerk.

He's with Denise, a local. She's always available, always hoping for a prince, always finding frogs – in this case, a toad. The guy talks loudly and non-stop through our piece and one of his colleagues from their conference, a chubby lady with a pleasant face, flips a drink coaster at his ear. She's right behind him, just across the waiters' track, so she doesn't miss. He turns around and leers at her. She doesn't smile back.

Beside her is another woman from the conference, talking to a tourist; beside the tourist is an empty chair. We ignore, *Red Sails* and play, *The Sultans of Swing* and the crowd cheers. Everyone listens, except the loser with Denise. At the end of the piece we move right into *Misty* and the guitar player does his thing; I'm doing back-up.

I watch as 'Toady' orders another beer. Denise gives him a sickly smile and heads for the loo. He doesn't know she won't be coming back. I watch him tilting back and forth on his stool. He glances behind him a couple of times, smirking. The chubby lady has a plump lap and he's eyeing it. She gives him a look that should've killed him on the spot but he keeps on teetering back and forth, winking and grinning at us like an idiot. I see the chubby lady whisper to her friend and her friend whispers to the tourist and they all move over one seat. Like that kid's song – "There's ten in the bed and the little one said 'Move over!'" It's hard to play serious jazz when you're choking back laughter.

Toady sets his empty beer glass on the bar and this time he goes for it, tipping his stool back far enough to fall over. He makes like it'll be an accident. It is. He hits the floor with a crash that stops the conversation, though we keep right on playing. The chubby lady, one seat too far away, looks down at him innocently, raising one eyebrow as if to say, "Tut-tut" and then she turns her attention back to the band.

I love my life! There's a cheeky smirk on her face and we all grin and segue into *I'm a Bitch*.



Pirouettes Mid-Air

Carrolline Rhodes

Nambucca Heads

When I look back over the past fifteen years of my life, I can hardly believe them for it seems that more life-changing events have been packed into these years than in the previous sixty.

I became a deserted wife at sixty-one and the big house with the pool disappeared along with the marriage. I bought a tiny villa on the edge of a major highway because it was the best I could do with a fifty-fifty settlement, and during every sleepless night I regretted not having more of an option. Then (quite unexpectedly) I fell in love, which felt like being sixteen again: it was heady and marvellous and utterly beguiling.

Misplaced optimism resulted in selling my villa and buying a house half-and-half with Mr Newlove. Two years later we separated and there I was out on my own again.

After couch surfing at friends' houses while the legals were sorted, I moved into the house I received in settlement of this ailed relationship, then I sold it and bought another. Now I've sold this one, and I'm moving again, which – given the trauma of the past few years – seems hardly sensible, but few who know me would ever describe me as sensible: risk taking is more my style.

This move will be to a self-care unit in a lifestyle retirement village. You know, the likes of which run advertisements on television featuring seventy-something women who look fifty, with silvery hair flying in the breeze, lounging about with suntanned blokes flashing impossibly white teeth. They're usually sitting on a deck sipping wine in an intimate group and they're overlooking a private golf course or a river, and their clothes are always to die for.

Well, the *self-care unit* description is true as is *retirement village* but I suspect the reality will be very unlike the ads. I do anticipate a life with more style

than I've experienced for a while, though, together with the benefit a man brings without actually having one of those. On my own at seventy-six I will never need to climb a ladder to change a beeping smoke alarm's battery, call a plumber to fix a dripping tap, or find a screwdriver with the right head to fit whatever screw needs turning: it will all be done by Darryl from Maintenance while I am out and about, pursuing the good life and loving it.

What stretches before me was not conceivable at the time I became a discarded wife. Nor when Mr Newlove revealed himself to be someone I should have run screaming away from the moment we met. It is the result of making enough money from the sale of my last two homes to purchase this new lifestyle, although that is not what I set out to do.

My aim had simply been to put a stop to the relentless *if-only* thoughts that were bringing me to my knees, the never-ending regrets that kept me trapped in the past. I decided the way to escape the ceaseless mind-chatter would be to examine my options and come up with something better than I had.

So I did.

And I have.

Boxes are piling up and the removal van arrives in less than a week. It will follow me through the security gate and on to where my unit waits ready to welcome more than my furniture, my china and cutlery. A spirit made resilient by adversity will take up residence. In hand will be a chilled bottle of wine to celebrate the end of a fifteen year journey that almost crippled me, but didn't. A couple of wines should set me up for the unpacking, the sorting and storing: the dreary part of every move.

As I continue packing, an unwelcome thought is niggling away, telling me the move is nothing more than running up the white flag and surrendering to old age, but I know this is just part of the mind-chatter that would keep me trapped. When I'm all settled in, I am determined to live the possibility inherent in the advertisements, albeit without a man with sparkling crowned teeth, or a private golf course, although there truly is a croquet lawn, even a nearby river. I have made up my mind that I will never go to the door without a megawatt smile, hair you can see your reflection in, and perfect makeup. I will breakfast at the café beside the river one or two days a week as I lazily read a newspaper or chat with other regular patrons and I will be the epitome of assured serenity. Mind you, I'd swap serene composure for the reckless passion of youth if I had only half a chance, but as you now realise, I've rarely been sensible. I should add that even as a little girl I regarded boundaries as challenges rather than barriers.

Back then I had a recurring dream. I was quite tubby in those days, indeed my family nickname was Podge, yet almost every night I would find myself running away to the circus in dreams. There I'd be, almost as wide as I was high, wearing a tutu and ballet pumps, fishnet stockings restraining my thighs, a tiara firmly attached to my hair, and I'd be walking a tight rope while the audience below gaped in wonder at my daring. The finale was always a mid-air pirouette that defied gravity, my chubby little feet landing sure-footed on a wire stretched across the big top. Now, a lifetime later and no longer sure of foot, it feels as if I am again leaping.

As before, there isn't a net should I fall, but then, I've never hit the floor so hard I haven't been able to get up, have I?

Post-Polio, My Wife and My Dog

Alpheus Williams

Red Rock

Four am, two days ago, I fell on my way to the office, walking down the ramp in the dark. I released the grip on my forearm crutches to open the door and collapsed. It was an unprotected fall. I went down like a puppet with cut strings. I didn't have time to protect myself. Hurts like hell especially falling on concrete. I fell on concrete. I don't think I broke anything this time but everything hurts.

Today I'm in the office, messing around on social media, I should be writing. My wife comes in at six am to take the dog for a walk on the reserve running along the river. I take my walking bike.

I modified the bike about five or six years ago. I bought it cheap. It's just a kids BMX bike. One of those short ones. I knocked the sprocket and peddles out of it, so I could take the weight off my body but still get around by using my legs. It works a treat and I can go for walks with my wife and dog in the morning. We walk a couple of blocks, cross the road and enter the reserve. 'J' lets the dog off her lead. She runs and gambols across the grass. We can't help but share her *joie de vivre*.

'G' stands at the boat ramp looking out over the river. He sips from a giant cup of coffee. He's on his own, all full of quiet and thought. Our dog runs up to him, says hello, gets a pat on the head. She sprints back to us, her tail is a happy blur as she bounds back to us with her mouth open and tongue hanging out in a smile gone all goofy.

The grass is wet with dew and the sun is coming up over the ocean at the river mouth. The sky is all flushed pink, purple and red. It's a beautiful thing. Three black faced spoonbills fly across the sky, graceful and white. They float like dreams, land across the river on the sandbank and wade in the shallows. Small fish scatter at their approach, ripples

of retreat on the water. Our dog, a border collie, loaded with fun and energy sprints out in front of us and returns as if on some sort of giant rubber band.

The morning is mild enough to sit out on the deck for breakfast and why would you want to sit anywhere else on a day like this? Butcher birds sing in a large pine tree that looms over the neighbours' roofs. I've cooked *okonomiyaki*, or at least my version of it. J sets the omelettes on the table. I lean my crutches against the wall and open the fridge to get the ice water and go down again. At least this time it's on the timber deck and not as painful, but it's painful enough. I roll around on the ground like a worm on a hot tile. It hurts. The dog commando crawls on her belly towards me, I can feel her breath on my face. The eternal empath, she's concerned. I'm touched. My wife is there too. I don't know who hurts most, me, the dog or my wife. I manage to get into the chair. Swallow the pain and settle in for breakfast. I feel a lot better after coffee.

After breakfast we drive into town and J does the shopping. I sit in the front seat and roll the windows down. The dog crosses from the back into the front and settles in next to me.

When J finishes the shopping and loads the car, I drive us back to the village. We stop at the little shop to pick up our mail. The river looks lovely. It's warm enough. We drive to the cottage and I change into swimmers. J drives me back to the river. She and dog sit at a picnic table as I go in the river. The tide is on the way out and the water is crystal clear. Small bream scatter beneath as I swim against the current for a time. When I finish, I join J and the dog at the bench and dry off. We drive home and prepare lunch. Eat out on the deck, watch birds flit in and out of the giant pine.

I haven't fallen in at least a couple of years. Twice in so many days is a bit unsettling. I weighed this morning and have put on a few kilos. It's essential that I lose them. Everything is different now. When you get polio you fight like hell to do what others can do, to stay mobile, to be independent. When you get post-polio syndrome you can no longer do that. The more the push the more damage so the less we can do. It's like mass murder on nerves cells. It's all about pace and planning.

I will think things out. Lose a little weight. Do what needs to be done. This is my life now. I love my wife. I love my dog. I love my life.

Rainbows and Mister Lincoln

Franklyn Cowell

Artarmon

This book belongs to Olivia Hammond.

There was no mistake. It was written on the inside cover of the thick journal, and in her own hand, no less. She found it while walking along an overgrown, unfamiliar path, her attention drawn to its pristine condition as it lay on a dilapidated wooden bench.

Intrigued, Olivia flipped to the first page: *I was born in Whyalla, South Australia, on the 3rd June, 1950, to Deborah and Lachlan Brody.*

Wha-a-t? This was too close to the truth to be a coincidence. Nervously, she thumbed through a few pages then picked one at random.

Page 34: *... watched as my father packed our cygnet blue FJ Holden for the long trip to Sydney, where he was promised a job at The Daily Telegraph.*

True again, but she had not written any of it. She decided to read on, if only to call out the writer as a fraud and cruel prankster.

Page 37: *Married at twenty-five; widowed ten years later when my husband was the victim of a hit and run, leaving me to bring up our three children...suffered the first of many nervous breakdowns.*

Page 59: *... my lucky break when I got a job as a teller at CBA.*

Page 73: *How does one get back into the workforce after being made redundant at 53? Mortgage repayments cannot be met. The house will have to go.*

Confused, but anticipating what she would find next, Olivia read on.

Page 79: *I worry for Chris, my youngest. In with the wrong crowd and still jobless. Forever borrowing money that I know will never be repaid. Is he doing drugs? How have I failed him?*

Page 89: *The grandkids mean the world to me, but I don't see them often enough. Are their parents keeping them away from me? Perhaps I'm not the best Grandma around?*

Finally, on Page 107: *heart attack at the Westfield car park in Chatswood. Paramedics perform CPR and employ a 'Packer whacker'. Rushed to the Royal North Shore Hospital...*

"Olivia. You've found your book!"

She started at the sound of her name, surprised to see a stranger by her side.

"It's not yet finished, Olivia. You'll need to hand it back," he said, with a gentle smile and a sideways shake of his head, extending his hand to take the book from her.

Olivia ignored the request. She pressed the open journal firmly to her chest and turned to Page 108 ... Nothing ... Every page after 107 was empty.

"Olivia", he continued patiently, "you have spent your entire life worrying over your family, blaming yourself for thinking you were never good enough. And that has been your greatest folly, for you have endured pain and suffered hardship by the score for your loved ones. That makes you so much better than just 'good enough'.

"Sadly, you have not really lived, only existed. Remember, this one life is all you have, and learning to love your life begins with learning to love yourself. Go back and embrace every breath, make use of every one of your five senses, sometimes simultaneously. Kiss a rose, taste the dewdrop on its petals. Do not just look at a rainbow, try smelling it, caressing it. Yes, you can, if you really want to."

He gently prised the book from her grasp, comforting her, "This cover was designed especially for you. A burst of rainbows to promise you true happiness in life, accentuated by a strikingly beautiful red rose in the middle. Your favourite flower, Olivia. Your very own Mister Lincoln."

Her recovery in hospital was remarkable and the medical staff had no hesitation in discharging her a week later. They put it down to her good genes, for want of a better explanation.

At home, she thought deeply of her strange encounter and the message it contained. She looked across at Mister Lincoln, handsome in his ceramic pot by the window, masses of deep red petals and seriously green leaves, dutifully doing his job of filling the room with his heavenly perfume as he basked in the morning sun. Perhaps Mister Lincoln got the formula right, after all. Let the universe take care of itself while he drank in the living power of the sun and got on with what he did best: looking great and smelling wonderful.

Lesson learnt. Every hour of every day had to matter.

She visited her library and enrolled in painting classes and joined a walking group, created a Facebook account and renewed old friendships, signed up to volunteer at the local Vinnies store and even started to keep a journal.

She also organised to spend weekends with the grandkids. She took them to the park and delighted in their childish antics, then treated them to fruit juice and ice-cream afterwards at the kiosk.

Returning home from one such weekend, spent, but in high spirits, she sat by her window and watched as an evening drizzle dissipated to reveal the last faint rays of the setting sun, then smiled knowingly as a rainbow arced its way across the darkening sky.

Signing off on another brilliant day with an entry in her journal, she was prompted to retrieve her 1972 vinyl of Sonny and Cher's 'All I Ever Need is You'. She closed her eyes and knew she had finally found herself in the lyrics of Cher's last track 'Somebody', with its message that true happiness has always been there for the asking.

Olivia tilted her chin ever so slightly towards the open window and gently breathed in the sweet scent of dear Mister Lincoln. Then she opened her journal once more and carefully wrote 'Today I kissed a Rainbow.'

Scandalous

Judeth Materna⁶

Bundeena

Firstly, I should say right off, I am not in the legal profession, have never practised law but have studied a variety of legal courses, in medical diplomas, post graduation as an RN. Throughout my 34 years as a Nurse/midwife, I have probably broken every law (short of murder) in the NSW Criminal code. Such was the regimented nursing we did, with the limited education outside of enemas, bedpans, bed-making and dressings, that we practised.

Being a third year student nurse on night duty in the old open 'Nightingale' 60-bed male medical wards, with 2 or 3 lesser-year students and in charge of the whole lot, I was more in dread of roving Night-duty Sisters than I ever was, or aware of, what legal obligations applied. I do now...

Preventing an escaping patient at 5.00am, from running down Macquarie Street, stark naked, ('Mr X' didn't want his pills or the procedure in theatre), was determined to have a beer and bolted, was more important than having to face the morning staff with the news. False imprisonment, assault, battery, consent and anything else never entered our heads. Sending two juniors out with a blanket to capture him, wrap him up and drag him back was the go. Leaving myself alone on the ward with 59 other male patients was, well, nothing really. Negligence and Torts? What were they? Negligence was letting him escape and Torts? How tight or taught could we then manacle him to the bed?

Why a stiffly, starched uniform, thick black-stockings and a towering, winged edifice on one's head makes a girl more attractive than a scantily clad Kings Cross pole dancer, still puzzles me. Being 'goosed' during a sterile dressing procedure, grabbed in a bear hug, gummily kissed and propositioned by a 92 year old male promising me the 'best sex I have ever had'

was par-for-the-course. Assault and battery, implied consent? To whom and by who?

Donahue and Stevenson, had nothing on the retired NSWSC judge (I mention no names), who when fasting for a procedure, got out of bed, crossed the room, picked up a vase of flowers, then proceeded to drink the flower-water and munch on the leaves! We were just glad it was daisies and not roses.

Then there was the case (??) of the very junior nurse who, (why do these always occur on Night Duty?) following 5.00 am Orders, collected the dentures for cleaning, of all 58 men in the medical ward, took them to the utility room and did so. Only problem, she collected them all in the ubiquitous 'green' bowl without keeping them in each persons' container. At least 3 of the patients said she had worked wonders, their dentures fitted better than before!

If the NSW Court of Appeals can strike terror into junior solicitors, just imagine doing patient ward rounds with one of the 'gods' of the medical profession, when junior nurses, even in an attempt to pass on critical information, dared not speak to a senior nurse or a sister and never, never, EVER speak to a person wearing a white coat, trailing in 'god's crocodile' on a ward round.

I have been lucky not to end up in court for defamation. Taking Latin as a school subject, allowed me to write in patients' reports, things as ISQ, Ipso facto, Ipse dixit or modus operati etc with a remote chance, that no one will understand what I meant.

⁶ Judeth Materna – (Ret) RN/Midwife, BA(Hons), DHA, Dip Paralegal Services

Just in case, you think me a know-it-all, I do have 3 friends in the legal profession and two of them are still friends, one keeps me laughing with stories of 'A day in Court' and the other two, highly intelligent persons, can't understand how I could still love my past profession.

But then I was once told, "The highest ranking HSC students go into Law, if they can't stand the sight of blood." I wish I had had the choice.

Sisters

Carolyn Thrum

Wolli Creek

Separated at birth it took ninety years for the sisters to be reunited.

Leaning heavily on her stick, Elsie Martin made slow progress down the empty nursing home corridor. Her shoes were too large for her shrunken feet and she was embarrassed at the loud noise they made as they slapped against the floor tiles.

'Room 191, room 191,' she repeated until it stood before her. Taking a deep breath and trying to straighten her osteoporotic back, she knocked.

'Come in,' a voice croaked. Elsie pushed open the door and stared. She was expecting a clone of herself. Her daughter, who'd been conducting the search, told her she had an identical twin. This woman looked nothing like her.

Edith was lying in a large green vinyl recliner and Elsie wondered if she was able to walk. Her collar bones protruded above the neckline of her dress presenting a landscape of mountains and valleys where her necklace of large white pearls lay delicately balanced. Elsie's hand was involuntarily drawn to her own neck to explore similar possibilities. What was left of her thin hair between patches of a shiny scalp had been died black and one of the nurses had tied a red ribbon around a small clump of it. The rest of her body was hidden under a white cotton hospital rug, with a blue border line.

'You're my sister are you?'

'I believe so. You'd better sit down. You look like you might fall, staring like that.'

Elsie backed into a chair. 'Did you know we are supposed to be identical?'

Edith laughed; a loud, rusty laugh that turned into a choking cough. 'Look at you short and fat while I'm tall and slim, more refined you might say.'

'I'm not exactly fat. I used to be but I can't eat a lot anymore.'

'No neither can I but that doesn't make us identical. What's that accent you've got?'

Elsie was sorry she'd bothered to come. 'I've been living in the United States all my life. The couple that adopted me came from Kansas. They told me I had a sister but nothing about our parents.'

'It looks like I was a lot luckier than you. The couple that adopted me lived here on the harbour. I was an only child. They sent me to a private school. I didn't care to find my parents. After all they abandoned us.'

Elsie glanced in a mirror behind Edith's chair. *My hair might be white but I've got a lot more of it.*

Edith gave her sister a smug smile. 'Now tell me about yourself?'

'I was married twice and have 3 children.'

'So was I,' said Edith, 'and I also have 3 children. I nearly died after the birth of the first in 1940.'

Elsie leaned forward. She was frowning.

'What month was that?'

'It was March why?'

'I was terribly ill in March 1940 and no one could work out why. Perhaps I was feeling your pain? I was hospitalised for two weeks.'

'That's incredible and maybe that also explains my sudden bad headaches. They used to come upon me for no reason.'

'Come in,' Edith shouted to the loud rapping at the door.

'Mrs Martin? Oh there you are. I gave you the wrong room number, I'm so sorry. We have another Edith, your sister just down the hall.'

Elsie shook her head with disbelief at Edith.

'I knew she wasn't my sister,' Edith laughed, 'I haven't even got one but it was good fun to talk to you Elsie. I don't get many visitors. Maybe you can call in again some time.'

Elsie stood and glared at Edith before following the nurse into the hallway.

When she saw her small round sister with matching osteoporosis and one overlapping tooth beneath her happy smile, her face lit up. 'I've found you at last.'

So Foul and Fair a Day

Paul Ryan

Emu Plains

I'll let you into a secret. I was a bit scared. Tried to be casual about it all, but I suspect people could see through me. Constantly talking about it, even to strangers at the pool or on the bus, must have been a giveaway.

You see, I was going into hospital for a hip replacement. No big deal these days, but I hadn't been in hospital since I was five to have my appendix removed and that was nearly sixty years ago. I hadn't even had a cannula or a drip, and I was fully aware of my good fortune over so many years.

Shakespeare has a character in Richard II to advise the Queen to: 'Lay aside life-harming heaviness/And entertain a cheerful disposition', and I have always felt that a positive attitude was essential to loving your gift of life.

Now though, the theatre of the stage was to be a different theatre of performers in medical masks and scrubs.

This story though is not about my stay in hospital. That's hardly going to make riveting reading. This story is not what goes on in the operating theatre but what goes on in the mind beforehand – the psyching up process. How do you summon the mental strength, and let's call it what it is, courage, to undergo major surgery with all its attendant risks?

Shakespeare's Henry V urged his troops to 'Stiffen the sinews, conjure up the blood/Disguise fair nature with hard favoured rage.' Although I felt it might be a bit extreme to *imitate the actions of a tiger*, I could see the merit of Henry's stirring call to arms. He was like the modern coach exhorting his players to face the unknown and find some hidden strength that might help them prevail. Of course, prevailing for me wasn't to be against a foe. In fact, everyone was on my side. We were all one team. How then to fight the fears? The first weapon is logic. My research told

me that there were 115,000 hip, knee and shoulder replacements performed in Australia in 2016. Surely there had to be comfort in numbers. The overwhelming majority make spectacular recoveries. There's a positive thought to inspire!

Yes, but what about the unspoken medical C word ... complications?

I'd heard stories about the unfortunate people who develop infections and clots, and those you hear in hushed tones who 'were never the same again'. I remember overhearing a man at the railway station telling a fellow traveller about an acquaintance who 'went in for simple surgery and never came home ...', his voice trailing off as I moved along the platform.

Needless to say, none of those things happened to me. I didn't allow such dark thoughts to enter my head once the big day arrived and I was dressed in my hospital toga with the countdown begun. Heck, I loved my life and this little hiccup wasn't going to change things! No, I had a checklist of wonderful things to think of to stay positive. One of my friends has a mother-in-law who has had three hips and two knees replaced. She's still going strong at 94. That was my best story until another friend topped it with his father who has had four hips and two knees replaced! He is now in a motorised scooter but let not that detail spoil the story.

There were a score of other bluff and hearty survivors who gave me confidence with their recoveries.

My positive thinking led me to all these other life-affirming rationalisations:

I'll have a new hip and no more pain, and I will be able to walk around without what was becoming my identifiable limp.

I'll be able to go overseas later this year and not be the poor, slow traveller holding up the groups on the city walks.

My hip is not getting any better and it will have to be replaced one day. Best to have it down now while I'm "youngish" and more readily able to bounce back.

I've been told I've got the best surgeon doing the job. Everyone seems to have a good opinion of him, even my daughter who is a senior nurse at the same hospital, and she should know!

I have signed up to donate my removed bone (as precious as ivory) to help the healing of some needy, unknown person. This makes it an altruistic exercise! Playing to my sense of vanity, I convinced myself that the whole experience as a patient would make me more empathetic, appreciative and compassionate. In short, a better person!

My confidence was boosted when I thought of my cheer squad of family and friends, their Get Well cards and inspiring words. I had people praying for me, even the most saintly lady in the suburb where I live. Why I even had Masses being said for me by priests in the country parishes of Cork, Ireland. How could anything go wrong? I even began to look forward to it.

Bring it on. I feel invincible!

My last, deliberate thoughts before I lost consciousness were of my grandchildren holding their hands, experiencing their cuddles, seeing them smile because they think I am funny.

When I woke up those thoughts were still fresh in my mind. It seemed time had frozen, even though two and a half hours had passed. I looked around the recovery ward with exhilaration and the thrill of survival, and with a fresh appreciation of the gift of life and my love for it.

So You Think You Know Me

Wendy Gordon

Cranebrook

You know my thoughts? You are talking about life?
I love my life!

I do love my life!

And I will continue to love it!

I have lived.

I have loved.

My memory is good, excellent even. Don't believe me? Why, I can almost remember being born! Not quite, but my earliest memories are in fact of feelings – feelings of warmth, security and love. Yes, surrounded by family, loving, always together, snuggling, cuddles. I remember gentle, wise guidance. I remember being taught to be responsible and independent, even from quite a young age. Preparing me for life, my mother always said. Happy times, joyful even, playing with my brothers and sisters. She watched over us with love and yes, pride, as we played our carefree games, sometimes a bit rough, for sure, but we never really hurt each other. A beautiful start to life. The season of spring. New life. Beginnings. Yes, I had it good. Lots of others don't. I am thankful.

My family used to walk together, and that gave me a strong love for distance walking, for observing nature and people, for appreciating the less-observed aspects of life, for knowing when to stop and spend time alone with the secrets of nature. Its amazing beauty and diversity would often astound me, even the ordinary things like dew on a spider's web. I marvel at the spider's work, the strength of its silver chain. I sometimes wished for more education in the study of flora and fauna, to better understand and appreciate my world. But that was not to be. I just learned to involve my senses instead, stopping to look carefully and thoughtfully, to appreciate different scents and perfumes, the differences

between night and day, or before and after rain or dew, on plants and insects I observed – differences which made each walk unique and special. These walks formed me and shaped me.

I learned to value friendships, and the importance of caring for people, including those we met on our walks. Many suffering from loneliness, from care and worry ... but gentle encouragement or an act of kindness is easy to share, and the response made every pause in one's busy life worth the trouble. Not imposing, but sensing when some-one needed to talk, I tried to be ready and available, sensitive to their needs. My family recognised that I had a gift in that area.

Life brought its difficulties. It brought separation from my birth family, with the grief that involved. Sometimes life, independent of our choices, does bring new beginnings. No use dwelling on the past or its hurts, the sometimes bitter loneliness and confusion, the feeling that no-one understands. I continue on, bringing to each day and to those I meet the wisdom acquired through each of life's seasons. The summer of my life was busy – I was fulfilling all my roles. Time passed swiftly. Then the autumn came gently, almost imperceptibly, with subtle changes.

My life is now in the winter season. Dear friends are gone. Roles have changed. I think I receive more than I give. But I have lived well, with responsibility and independence. This is what my mother would have wanted. Have I changed? No. I still value nature with all its hierarchies, its splendour, its beauty, its power. Yes, I love its power to uplift and refresh, so I still love to walk every day. Yes, I am slower, and I don't walk as far. I still value people, and try to be an encouragement to those I meet, from all walks of life. These are some of my life's simple pleasures. And I think that to love life, one must enjoy its simple

pleasures – food, a place of shelter, and the warmth of love, given and received. I have all three. So I am blessed. The greatest of these is love.

I still have family – yes, a different family now. My needs are considered. They sometimes prepare surprise meals for me – just for my pleasure and delight. I am still included in all decision-making. I am still valued, despite my years. Sometimes, I think my family even learns things from me! Inside I smile at such moments. The delight of the young ones when they realize that they can safely share their secrets with me – that is indeed special. Despite my age, I still understand their feelings, their concerns and worries. My role is to comfort and encourage, letting each one know that I am there for them.

I sometimes need their help too. For example, I still have quite an irrational fear of storms. Family helps me to be calm, and they remind me that they are also there for me, a nice reciprocal relationship. Just to have company in the real storms of life is a great support, when one's years are advancing. It can be discouraging to experience increasing pain, but it is expected. It is a preparation. One day the pain will be gone, floating away, and my outside, the shell which is my body will die. This is the course of life. But I will live again – free of pain and tears. My early memories of warmth, love and security will be a renewed reality. And I will live forever, in the hearts of those I leave behind.

Thank you to my mistress for sharing my life experience. I never learned to type. I am her dog. I love her. And yes, I love my life, with all that it has held, holds, and will hold.

So you thought you knew me ... ?

Some Reflections on Hiking with My Daughter

Beth Taylor

Elderslie

I was a late bloomer (in my fifties) when it came to discovering what I like to call Adventure-Hiking. It may have been that I had more discretionary time because my children by then had become less dependent and more 'self-care'. Or it may have been that my children, by then young adults, had become the perfect hiking buddies. And so began my incredibly memorable and exciting hiking years.

Although I had always loved bushwalking – the half day variety – I was now able to venture on multi-day hikes, with a varying crew of people which nearly always included my daughter. Her university years with their seemingly continual semester breaks gave the perfect opportunities for annual multi-day hikes, and even when she entered full time employment and then met and married her man, our hiking plans were able to continue. Then came the pregnancy and the impending baby ... well, that's another matter...

Although I plan to continue to hike, I have cause to now reflect upon those fun and precious years of hiking with my consistent hiking buddy, my daughter. Hiking long distances with a pack on your back is not just about fitness, exercise and stretching your physical limits. Nor is it just about a beautiful shared experience with a loved one. Nor is it just about experiencing the mind-blowing grandeur or minutiae of wilderness scenery. Nor is it just about meeting incredibly interesting people. It's also sometimes about facing your own 'giants' and learning invaluable life lessons, no matter how insignificant these may seem. Hiking the Overland Track with tiger snakes as your constant surprise companions (why didn't anyone tell us that February is tiger snake mating season?). Twisting an ankle on those treacherous tree roots on the Overland Track. Flooding tracks and landslides on the Great Ocean Walk. Man-eating sand flies (slight hyperbole here)

on the Milford Track. Snow, deep mud and a suspected snake bite on our next hike on the Overland Track (so it snows in Tasmania in summer ... who would have thought ... ?). Gale force winds, driving rain and near-hypothermia amidst the volcanic craters on Tongariro Crossing. Pushing on when your body is screaming for rest or when the blisters or back pain were excruciating. And they were the fun times!

Experiencing the exhilaration of facing a 'giant' and coming out the other end in one shape or another, whether that is by pushing through fear, exhaustion or frightening weather, leaves us with a skill and mindset that is transferable to other 'giants' in life. Sometimes what we learn here is an uncharted way for us. We can rewrite our own self-image and expectation of ourselves. So often it is not about the physical challenges as much as the psychological. There's nothing like the high of adrenalin pumping through your body when you face a 'giant' and come through at the other end, to say nothing of the stories you have to tell afterward. Together we can teach each other about fun, beauty, perseverance, creative problem-solving, adventure, toughness and the healing therapy of silence and solace – a place where the white noise in your head fades. Because as I have said often – "Once you're on the track, you're on the track". All you have is each other and what you carry on your back, no matter what you encounter and what goes wrong. That's an amazing gift in this day and age of obscene plenty.

There are those adventures where you return home with a sense of having conquered, and there are those times when you just come home with a good story to tell (or embellish) and in need of a hot Radox bath. It's all part of it. That experience of "I actually did that"! Irreplaceable. But sharing that journey alongside your daughter is indescribably special.

And I hope that one day my daughter and my grandchild can be saying these very same things.

Well, these reflections were written just prior to my attaining that momentous milestone of reaching Senior's Card eligibility! It is with great enthusiasm and zest that I can now say I have continued these adventures post 60 years of age, having just completed the stunningly beautiful 75 km Queen Charlotte Track in New Zealand. Although without my daughter, I managed to find a friend in a similar age and stage as myself. We used a little more pharmaceutical panacea to aid us than in our younger years, but that amazing sense of satisfaction and enjoyment was the same. So maybe I can hold on to that hope that I may yet be able to share these adventures with not only my daughter again, but my granddaughter. But I haven't been able to find hiking boots to fit a pre-walking 10 month old!

Stretched

Teresa Kempe

Meadowbank

Sometimes life throws you a curved ball. A family tragedy propelled me into uncharted waters. Suddenly I was responsible for meeting not only our family financial needs, but somehow satisfying a crescendo of debt collectors. Running my own business from home seemed the only viable solution as it allowed flexibility and long working hours. Sleep was not a priority but putting food on the table and paying the rent definitely was.

I set myself up as a virtual office. Over time and out of desperation to satisfy my clients, I honed these skills. Surprisingly, after many years of struggle, my business was successful but the added bonus was the expertise I developed which I may not have acquired otherwise. I learnt to assess customer needs, offer advice, add value and produce excellence. I suggested additional services and always kept my pricing reasonable. Communication and meeting deadlines were key, as was integrity. My clients knew my motto – if your business is successful, so is mine. It was obvious I enjoyed my work and was proud of the services I provided. In the twenty years of running my business I never had a client who did not pay, most thought I did not charge enough.

In late 2013, just after I turned 65, I had the opportunity to volunteer in Fiji. I received the Australian Aged Pension which provided my living expenses and, as the exchange rate and the lower cost of living were favourable, I could live comfortably.

What a challenge! Where my skills in Australia were a dime a dozen, in Fiji they were highly valued. I soon found myself stretched beyond anything I could have imagined. I volunteered in a small mission school, assisting the administration. Soon after my arrival compulsory, free education was introduced. Instead of struggling families having

to pay fees, they had no excuse. Their children had to attend school. Our little school of 100 soon swelled to 300 students. As you can imagine with such a large increase in school numbers the administration was flat-out reorganizing the timetable, enrolling new students and inducting new staff. New classrooms were urgently needed.

Suddenly I found myself appointed project manager to build new classrooms. But how to do it in the timeframe, within budget, was a challenge. Some internet research revealed the best option was classrooms made from shipping containers. This had never been done before in Fiji but the school board approved the plans as it would be quick and hurricane proof. The great thing about shipping containers is their structural integrity. To reach the same standard using conventional building material would be expensive and slow.

At the beginning of January we laid the concrete for the driveway and the pad, brought in the shipping containers and set to work converting them. Two forty foot containers were mounted side by side. The middle walls were removed and the frames joined. A false A-shaped roof on short poles created an airspace above the container's roof as well as a verandah roof, to keep it cool. A laser cutter created windows on either side for airflow and light. Electric cabling was installed and then the inside walls, ceiling and floor. Louvered windows were set in place. Inside was painted light blue and the outside sea blue. The end result was magnificent. Teachers vied for the opportunity to teach in the new classroom. It was airy, clean and conducive to learning. This became our Year 13 classroom. From start to finish had been only four weeks.

At first the Ministry of Education was unsure of our plans as they feared the containers would be too hot and uncomfortable.

However when they saw the finished classrooms they were highly impressed and suggested more schools could use this solution.

As soon as the first classroom was finished we ordered two high-top 40ft containers which were joined to create the Home Economics classroom. This was constructed the same way but with tiles on the floor, a centre bench for preparation, many more electrical circuits and two sinks. Generous donations from Australian supporters provided all the kitchen equipment including stoves, crockery, cutlery, utensils, washing machine, urn, mixers, etc.

My task was to coordinate with the builder, to ensure he and his men were paid at the end of each week, the supplies they needed were ordered, delivered and records carefully kept for accounting purposes. All my previous office skills were invaluable.

As I reflect on my five years in Fiji, not just with the school, but serving on the boards of two not-for-profits, assisting other schools with their administration and even helping rugby teams with visa applications and event programs, I was often stretched beyond my capacity. The different cultural values, particularly when it came to time [Fiji time is notorious!] had me digging deep. Meetings almost always started late and the flow-on effects impacted other activities. Somehow I learnt to be flexible, to change my expectations and live 'in the moment'. Through the change of pace I was often surprised by unexpected opportunities, time to develop close relationships, share stories and just relax. I was honoured in so many ways, almost always escorted to the front of an event and thanked profusely. It was humbling to be acknowledged with such genuine appreciation.

My years in Fiji were not without challenges, even some tears, but through it all what I learnt was inestimable. I was surprised by joy – the joy of making a valuable contribution, lifelong friendships and realizing my potential to make a difference.

Seniors – you can do it! Maybe not overseas, but even here in Australia, you will find extraordinary fulfilment in service to those less fortunate, and who knows, you might even love your life!

Stories of a Sideman

Greg Henson

Loftus

I was a professional drummer. My first big show was, 'Jesus Christ, Superstar' back in 1972 and I made a decent living. Being a musician was all I ever wanted and I had a great time.

It was 1992 when I had the opportunity to work with a rock legend!

Fifteen minutes before starting time, twelve thousand people were already waiting at the Sydney Entertainment Centre for said Rock 'n Roll legend to appear.

The band backing him hadn't any rehearsal with him, nor even met the man, so didn't know what songs he was going to do. What the band did know was 'they were packing it' – absolutely shitting themselves! I wouldn't have believed it myself, only that I was the drummer on that tour.

A loud knock on our dressing room door brought us to reality...

"Okay guys! I'm Frank! ... Security! He's arrived and wants to see you. Follow me."

"Here's the band Sir, I'll come back in a minute to take you to 'side of stage' and I'll be waiting when you come off Sir. Have a good show Mr Berry!"

"Yeah, close the door behind you!"

So here we are, I thought to myself, standing in front of Chuck Berry, the man who invented rock 'n roll, with songs; 'Sweet Little Sixteen' and 'Johnny B Good'. The man who changed the course of music, who changed my life and the lives of countless teenagers all over the world and who in less than three minutes would be up on stage in front of twelve thousand people, with a band he'd just met – and looking like he couldn't give a shit. I didn't want to think about it. I wasn't feeling too good.

"Who's on piano?"

"Er, me Sir," Lance said.

"Okay, Mr Piano Player, you just keep rockin' that piano Son, as if there's no tomorrow!"

"Er, Mr Berry, er... have you got a song list?" Lance nervously asked while scratching his head.

Ignoring Lance's question, with his eyes darting between Tony Mitchell (playing bass) and me, he said, "Who's on drums?"

"I am, Mr Berry." I tried to look cool calm and collected.

"Keep your eyes on me at all times, and in particular watch my right foot. When I stamp it down that's when you all stop. You got that Mr Drummer?"

"Sure Chuck, no worries."

"The name's MISTER Berry to you, Son."

"Er ... Okay, Mr Berry."

This tour is off to a great start, I thought to myself. I've got a whole month with this ego-maniac and already he hates me and I haven't played a note.

"So that just leaves you, Mr Bass Man, does it?" looking at Tony with eyes as black as charcoal.

"You better play something good and just listen out to me. To answer Piano Man's question, no, there is no song list and no, I don't know how long I'll do up there. Are you all familiar with my songs?"

"Yes, Sir," Lance said, smiling at him, expecting the same in return.

"Good. So ... no mistakes!"

Just then Frank returned, Mr Personality himself.

"They're ready for you, Mr Berry.

"Okay guys, I'll see you on stage."

What an a-hole, a talented one, but still an a-hole, I thought to myself as we climbed up the back and on to the revolving stage.

Jerry Lee Lewis was into his last song. We took up our instruments and prepared for the madness, soon to break out.

There we were, on stage, waiting for Jerry Lee to finish. The applause faded and the stage began to revolve. We were, in front of twelve thousand people, all staring at the three of us: Tony, Lance and me ... clueless. After what seemed like an eternity, he appeared, with guitar in case, walked to centre stage, turned his back on the audience, opened the case and unravelled his guitar lead. He started, Johnny B Good – the roar from the crowd was deafening as he did his famous duck-walk from one side of the stage to the other, guitar screaming out the riff that every rock and roll player grew up on. If you owned a guitar, that was the first thing you learned; good old, 'Johnny B Good'.

He'd yell the key out, count it in and away we'd go.

Once he walked up to Tony, "Hey, bass player man! What song are we doing?"

I couldn't believe it! Neither could Tony, who yelled back to Chuck, "Sweet Little Sixteen!"

I remember one time on the tour, we'd finished a show at the Brisbane Entertainment Centre when Chuck walked across the stage towards me with his hands out, palms facing up, as if to say, "Give me five!"

I thought, this guy wants to thank me for a gig well done. I felt ashamed for thinking he was an a-hole.

We met in the middle of the stage, his palms still facing up ready for me to give him five, so I did, I gave him ten. Slap! went the sound of our hands as they met. I felt pretty good I admit. It's not often you get a star like Chuck Berry coming up to you with a thank you like that. He looked at me, "No! No! My car keys! Have you seen my car keys? I've lost my car keys."

"What? Your car keys?" I said, feeling a little stupid and foolish at the thought of what I'd just done, which turned me to being plain peeved. The guy was just a bugger; he knew what he was doing all along.

He was a strange dude all right, that Mr Berry but I would not want to change a thing; it's the journey that you take and the road that you travel that makes your life special!

I've still got more miles to go ... living life to the fullest!

Stories of the Stones

Julie Chapple

Wahroonga

When I was a little girl, I dreamed I would travel the world. It seemed so exciting, so glamorous and definitely so out of reach. I happily listened to anyone who with a travel story to tell. It was something other people did, but not little Julie. I always planned to travel after I finished my teacher training, but then I met my beloved husband, settled down, got a mortgage and started a family. The travel dream rapidly faded as the reality of one small demanding baby, the death of my lovely mum and too little money took its toll.

Then one day, something extraordinary happened.

I vividly recall that day, the day when my husband told me we were relocating to Stockholm in Sweden for six months' work. Actually, I said back then, "I'm not ready to go just now and especially not to Sweden. Um, where exactly is Sweden?". All I knew was that I painted Stockholm tar on my horses' hooves and that my Ikea furniture comes from somewhere called Sweden?

We packed up our home and left Sydney. It was our first overseas trip. I vividly remember setting foot on English soil for the first time en route to destination, Sweden. I could not believe it. My dream had finally come true. I was about to discover another land, another culture.

I got a taste for travel, but still my wanderlust was not satisfied.

We now fast forward 25 years. At last, I had become a seasoned traveller. It was about this time that I began a tradition of picking up small stones from places that 'spoke' to me. Usually, this was from a country or a city where I never expected to return. Over the years, my small collection of pebbles has increased at the same rate as my travels. Now the collection sits in a large dish in my home in Sydney. I can't tell where all the stones have come from

any more. There are just too many and from such varied countries. I sometimes wonder at the mix of geology sitting in that dish. However, what I can do, is write about each of those places that meant enough to me that I leaned down and picked up a little piece of that foreign land and carried it back home with me.

I would never have believed that I would travel the world as much as I have done. It is indeed a privilege to be able to stay in one place long enough to scratch the surface and see behind the glitz and glamour of a 5 star hotel and the recommended tourist attractions for that place. Without my husband's overseas work commitments and his willingness to have me accompany him, I never would have had all these experiences.

Sitting in a steamy bar in Taipei, a man asks me why I do what I do. I am now 60 years old, so shouldn't I be staying put in the hotel enjoying the easy life? Why do I keep going out day after day, determined to experience all there is to offer. Why do I ignore the heat, ignore the loneliness and often the stress of doing it mostly by myself, ignore the weird looks as I explore the back streets and public transport systems and get comments about my crazy hair and pale skin. I had never really thought about this before. I just know what a privilege it is to be part of this great and wondrous world and that at last I can live my dream, secure in the knowledge that soon I will get back on a plane and return to the land I love the most, Australia.

Fast forward again, a couple more years. Here we are, back in the land we love, Australia. Husband has retired and it is time to explore our own backyard. No more 5 star hotels, instead it's a 5 star caravan with all the comforts of home – an off-road one with a serious tow vehicle.

We have had to learn a whole new set of skills too. As the saying goes, one is never too old to learn.

These journeys are about getting to know our country. Together, we have sat around a campfire in the “Top End” feasting on bush tucker and have felt the breeze blow in from the Arafura Sea over the ancient escarpment at Ubirr, whispering a promise of things to come. With good friends, we have scrambled down that last sand hill, whilst carefully watching for crocs, and dipped our toes in the warm waters of the Gulf of Carpentaria. Hand in hand we have watched the sun rise over ‘Big Red’ the sand dune on the very edge of the Simpson Desert and watched it set on the spiritual heart of this great land – ‘The Rock’. Together we have swum in warm sapphire blue creeks and freezing crystal clear rock pools with plunging water falls, which take one’s breath away. We walked parts of the ancient song lines and tried to understand more of Australia’s first people. Most evenings, when we are on the road, we sit around our campfire with the infinite canopy of stars twinkling above us. The Milky Way is a vast, thick, white highway leading out into the unimaginably huge universe. As we sip our smoky, black Billy tea, the beauty and the wonder of it all brings tears to my eyes. In a moment of clarity I realise that life is all about the journey not the destination.

Taking back the Light

Alison Logie

Balgowlah

I loved my Life ... then my life was taken from me. I was blind-sided, ambushed, an unexpected assault from behind. One minute I had everything then the next minute ... nothing. I had not died although death was the attacker. Hard to believe that fate, destiny, the Universe, call it by whatever name you wish, could come upon such a beautiful morning and decide to throw me to the ground and rob me so callously. The Caribbean sky back-lit with a blue so arresting and so beautiful that you actually forgot to breathe. I would have thought that fate, destiny, would have looked at that sky and decided "No, not today." I would have thought the purling of the warm lagoon waters over the Coral Reefs would have calmed any fatalistic design to rip away the life I had been blessed to live for so long. But obviously this destiny, fate thing had plans of its own. The instrument used to sack my being and plunder my life mercilessly was the removal of the man who had taken up residence in my heart during the young and tender years and made it the hearth he was never going to leave.

All I remember of the time following the assault, is the black hole. For long periods of time, the bottom of the black hole was a good place to be. It was a darkening. A darkening to ebon-hues, when nothing mattered. A clutch of whispering inky voices telling me about my life. My life now. Did they not know how much I loved life, my life, his life!

My own rare susurrations ... "Don't think, you don't have to think, better not to think."

Then, from the bottom of the black hole came the moments I thought I glimpsed my life, way up, further than I could reach. No, not really my life after all. The feeble light I could see up there could not be my life, surely not.

My life had a light that bedazzled and enveloped, a light that was infectious. The man in my heart came through the fugue ... "One life, that's all you get. Climb now."

I wasn't sure I wanted to be out of the black hole, not really. Just stay a little while longer was what I kept thinking.

The precious voice in my heart spoke louder now, much louder than my own. Mine, whispering, persuading me to stay safely in the dark. "One life," his voice said. Slowly, I began the climb. Slowly on purpose I think. The light up there was so weak. There would be nothing in my life to love, would there?

There was a dinginess to my life's light. Then a small glow here and there pushing the grey back. Twinkles that turned to gleams and a glistening that pushed further until the luminosity and refulgence had eased their way to the front of the queue! The days of running around the rim of the black hole, sometimes falling in, sometimes able to pull back, those days were now at the back of the queue.

I lost my life for ten long years. Over those years, my assailant returned repeatedly. Knives inserted and twisted, hurt and pain inflicted. Choices made, decisions taken ... to try to get back to loving my life. A different life maybe, but surely still worthy of loving. Then a sort of breakthrough ... I needed to create a life-raft to get me there. I looked back down the track to the corner where my life took a detour. Peeking around the corner, I saw my life where the light was brilliant and blazing. I pulled back shaken and breathless, unsure whether I could shake off the trauma enough to re-visit what I had lost. Did I have the strength?

I built my life into a pile, seeing it all. The man in my heart, the children I carried and raised, things taught, things learned, the uphill battles and the exhilarating downhill successes. The talents discovered, the kisses from children, the tenderness of the man in my heart. Between every layer the liveliness, the wonder, the comfort, the satisfaction and the pleasures that I had taken for granted. The 'pile' of my life grew very tall. The man who stole his way into my heart had inter-woven his infectious humour, his silliness, his goodness and delight so that we lucky few who stood beside him in his spotlight were enthralled.

The very last addition to this pile that is my life, was my loss, that which was wrenched from my life. I stood back and surveyed everything. I saw it with joy and I saw it through tears that ran. I looked in silent contemplation until I realised that here was my life-raft. I realised that even with the inclusion of my heart-breaking loss, my life was *still* blessed and truly worthy of loving.

And so the world turns and life goes on. I am able to love my life again. It is a *changed* life but a life filled with love and sparkling light. I still have the man in my heart. He will never leave and I will not let him go. He is a paying guest, however. He pays in all manner of currency. He does repairs, mending my heart when it gets a little broken. He sends silly, funny thoughts that allow me to smile secret smiles. And he often takes my hand and we take a slow meander through the forty years of life we shared together. The light is still bedazzling and the love is still encompassing.

Having lost my life for all those years has made me into a messenger of sorts. My message? Love your life and everything it contains for there can be no other way to live.

Thank you Australia

Vivien Sale

Kincumber

Needing a new beginning in life, Sally's decision to fly across the world created mixed emotions. She was young enough to give it a bash, bold enough to give it a try and scared enough to cry and miss her family in a busy London.

"How will I survive? What will I do? Where will I live? But what if I don't give it a try?" She asked herself.

After a very long flight, the plane lowered and flew over the 'land of milk and honey'. Across the red tiled roofs, the Harbour Bridge came into sight and then the Opera House. Sally's heart skipped a beat as Peter Allen's song welcomed her to her new home.

As she stepped foot onto Australian soil, her new lifestyle embraced her so deeply she felt she was wearing a warm coat.

"How could I have been so naive?" she asked herself. "Australia has opened up so many opportunities for me, and like Captain Cook, I'm going to be brave."

She checked in the library to find the history. She learned about the Indigenous people. She learned about the floods and drought and read Dorothea McKellar's poem. Who was that fair dinkum larrikin in the local RSL Club?

Her first job was to learn 'strine'. Her new friends berated, laughed and guided her. "No darls – it's not advarntaydge or darnse – our language is much more down to earth than that."

"I'd better learn quickly then," Sally told her new friends, "I want to become like you".

With much encouragement from her new pals, plus a few hiccups along the way, she slowly got the hang of Australian life.

What a joy it all was. 'Learn by doing' was her motto and by golly, she surely did. Ups and downs were part of her journey and let's face it, there's no such word as 'failure'.

"How can I give back?" Sally asked her new friends. "Volunteer, share your talents and become a dinki di local." And so Sally did.

"What's the Melbourne Cup? And why do I need to take a plate?" she asked Fran, her new bestie. "I'll take two if that poor lady is short on crockery". Fran giggled and explained the Australian way of entertaining. Sally laughed. "Whoopsie, I'd better get the hang of this *real quick!*"

So Sally settled into her new lifestyle real quick. She desperately wanted to be part of the gang, to think like an Australian, to become an Australian.

"Sorry folks, I'm not coming back," she announced to her family in England.

After a few years of doing her homework, it was a very proud day for Sally when she at last became an Australian Citizen. She celebrated with her new friends. They brought a plate and popped some corks.

Sally couldn't wipe the smile from her face. "My thank you will never be loud enough," she said.

"I love my life."



The Aftermath

Pushpa Vida

Westleigh

Part 1: The Immediate Present

It is a cold night.

It is a blistery night.

It is an unusual night for the month of December.

The night of December 1st.

The wind has picked up, and I can hear its dull moan, echoing and reverberating through the hollow stillness. The sound distresses me.

December is the official opening of the summer season in Australia, when the heat of the ground rises to envelop you in a haze of blistering warmth. The cold of this night is unusual, the feeling of chill exacerbated by the iciness in my heart.

The irony of I – even nature violates officialdom!

The day had begun just as any other, but with a sense of excitement. Tomorrow is my birthday, and like always I know that Pat will have surprises that will delight me. He has done so in the past. Last year, I found my surprise gift of an iPad when I was pumping up the pillows in the morning. Nothing in his demeanour had even hinted at this gift. In fact, he had not even greeted me, and I thought that his advancing age had impacted his memory. As I whooped with joy at the discovery of my gift, I saw him in the far corner of the room, the creases of his face deepening in a cheeky grin. His surprises continue... Pat never announces them, he just allows me to find them.

How I wish you hadn't let me find this 'surprise', Pat....

It is midnight and Pat, my darling Pat, has not returned home, and I fear – honestly, I do not even know what to fear. My insides contract in apprehension as I hone my auditory senses for the slightest disturbance to the eerie stillness of the

night. Search parties have been dispatched, as I sit on the bed with my hands folded in an appeal to the divine. I can sense the fear in the pit of my stomach.

It is two in the morning when the night wind echoes the approach of a vehicle. I clench my hands, control the quiver in my lip and rush to the door. 'Tell me something positive, please' – unspoken words hover in trepidation knocking at the doors of my heart. There is a police car on the road opposite. I run out to meet the officers who are half way up our driveway. I don't say a word, my eyes ask it all. The officer holds out his hand and utters the words that confirm the worst, "I am sorry Ma'am, but I am afraid ... " I do not hear the rest. I have collapsed within and without, to words that in one second tear through the tapestry of my life; words that wound...

Happy Birthday, Betty – you love to be surprised, don't you?

How can someone so full of life, be dead?

Dead is the term used for rotting trees, wood and accounts. Not for my Pat. As I stumble back to the house – our home – I am encompassed by acute agony and agitation, and the moaning of the wind is replaced by the moans of my heart. Nature is synchronising herself with my distress.

A blanket of cold envelopes me yet again.

It is a cold night, this night of December 1 ...

It is the beginning of my life without my Pat.

Part 2: The Present

Pat mine

I am sitting on that comfortable sofa in the corner, the one that sits just beneath your benevolent gaze on the wall. The lounge room stretches onto the deck, but there is no movement, no sound. Time was when this area reverberated with your merry laugh, each time you and I shared a joke, or a pleasant memory especially of our courting days. You were such a determined and positive person, my Pat – wherefore did that positivism evaporate? Why did you never allow me to look within the dark recesses of your mind, and why did I not recognise those ‘tell-tale signs’ that are on the Black Dog displays?

I am still unsure of what went wrong...Yes, we had a few financial worries, but did that necessitate that extreme step? You had told me that you would take care of everything...In retrospect, what did that ‘everything’ even mean?

Yours always

Betty

Part 3: The Latter-Day Present

I open my iPad – your last birthday gift – as saline water courses my cheeks. I open that last text message from you; which I only saw the day after ... To *My dearest, darling doll-face...* This was an epithet that often amused our children. What did that message convey? Your apology...and your advice. To never walk the path you did. To live with courage. To face the future with my chin up. And that you are always watching over me. Are you, Pat?

Right now, at this very moment when I am feeling defeated and destitute? I will do as you advise. I will live. Life cannot get any worse than this ...

The doorbell is chiming. I walk toward the front door and open it a tad. A lady is standing outside. Well groomed, with a neat coiffured head and a pretty handbag. Now, where have I seen this bag before? Ah yes – I had pointed it out to Pat once as we walked through the Pitt Street mall. I had been fascinated by its tan colour and the soft leather, but its exorbitant price tag had caused both of us to take a step back. Now, this near-perfect stranger was carrying the very same bag, my bag ...

‘Hello’, I greeted ‘is there someone you wanted to see?’

‘Yes’, she responded in a soft, almost husky tone, ‘I am here to see Betty. Oh! Is that you? Hello, I am Rhea. You see, I knew Pat very well ...’

Part 4: The Future

Pat always had a proclivity for husky tones ... but I have abandoned my proclivity for leather handbags.

I am alive again!

The Best Man

Margaret Helman

Hunters Hill

Bob's apprehension was palpable when he called Lisa and revealed that his intended bride was not in Sydney. "She's still in the Philippines," he said with a wavering voice that indicated he felt awkward. Lisa, in her sixties and a marriage celebrant for over twenty years had 'seen it all'.

They met at Lisa's home and Bob, shy and awkward unravelled the story about his boat mechanics business located on the banks of the river in a cosy old suburb 'at the Parramatta end'.

He lived and worked in a boatshed on a rocky Sydney sandstone outcrop.

Bob's reputation as a reliable fixer was legendary amongst yachties on Sydney Harbour. When an old salt found himself in trouble with his yacht in a race from Sydney to the Philippines, he flew Bob to Manilla to solve the problem and rescue the yachty's reputation as a skilled Sydney salt.

Saturday night in Manilla. Bob joined a group of yachty blokes at a ritzy club throbbing with music, dancing and the spicy aromas of Filipino food on the grill. The men goaded Bob into dancing with some girls. He met Mitzi.

Mitzi kept in touch and now Bob was preparing papers for their wedding celebration in the autumn of the following year. A fiancé's visa was granted to Mitzi. Bob was excited when he called Lisa to say they could now plan a date and time for the wedding. Lisa suggested they meet and prepare the ceremony.

"Isn't it a standard script type thing?"

"No – you can help me shape it – create the tone of your ceremony."

"Oh don't worry about that. Just do what you like."

The wedding day arrived. An exquisite 'champagne' autumnal day, a shining blue sky and a slight drift of breeze coming off the water. Gulls squealed and swooped. River cat ferries slid past and passengers gazed, curious about the assembled guests on the rocky shoreline. Spinnakers on passing yachts flapped with frustration seeking to catch a head of wind.

Lisa followed Bob's arrival instructions and counted the one hundred and twenty seven sandstone steps that wound down to the wedding venue – a solid sandstone platform adjacent to Bob's boatshed.

Guests wearing their very best gathered, sipped on pink champagne, chatted and teased Bob. He stood ill at ease and resplendent in a black dinner suit and red bow tie.

Suddenly someone shouted, 'Look over there – here she comes'.

Mitzi the bride sat dressed in white like a China doll, in a silver Sydney Harbour tinny. Her raven black hair glistened in the glare from the sun. A bulky older bloke, wearing a green towelling hat, plonked unevenly on his freckled head rowed assuredly.

Bob could hardly lift his gaze to witness this vision. His face changed colour from red to white as he wrestled with emotion.

The guests lovingly supported him and pushed him forward to greet his bride.

Mitzi carried a pink rose bouquet and her delicate powder pink ballet flats dangled from the fingers of her other hand. Meanwhile an enthusiastic guest tossed off his shoes, stepped into the water, gathered Mitzi up in his strong arms and held her up high – like a trophy. He whisked her over the tidemark and placed her onto the sand.

Everyone was excited. Lisa shouted 'give her a round of applause'. The guests responded with noisy enthusiasm. They laughed, cheered and clapped.

Lisa led the bridal party through the throng of guests and assembled them in the shade of the boatshed. She discretely enquired if the groom had a best man. At that very moment the guests broke out in laughter.

Everyone was gazing upward to the stairway from the road. Bob's face became electric with excitement. Tears rolled down his cheek.

"Here's Larry," he said.

Lisa waited expectantly.

Larry, a blue cattle dog with a thick girth and an air of great self-assurance, took his time to waddle with a certain swagger over to the groom. He lined himself up beside Bob and became a member of the wedding party. Positioned in place, he wriggled around, gazed up adoringly at Bob, pricked his ears, through back his bulky head and let out a shrill, wild 'WOOOOF'.

"We can start now," the groom said.

The Big Loop

Heidrun Rodach

Erina

We had lunch under the awning of our caravan overlooking the picturesque Meadow Creek.

'I don't want to go on travelling,' stated Michael.

The duck in front of us dived head first and stuck its tail out of the water.

'What do you mean?' I asked.

'I don't want to live on the road anymore.'

'But we planned this trip for years, it was our dream to do the Big Loop around Australia.'

My partner was adamant: 'We have been on the road for a year. I have had enough of it.'

I left the remainder of my lunch and walked down the main road of the small town of Gunning.

My mind went into overdrive.

'What had I missed?'

Michael had purchased the best off-road caravan once he retired. I had given notice at my work once we had found suitable tenants for our house and we joined the Grey Nomads.

Life was about discovering new places. We explored remote Western Australia, snorkelled at Ningaloo and hiked in The Kimberley. Each campground was a meeting point of like-minded travellers. Sitting around campfires with a glass of wine in hand, we compared caravans and shared travel tips. Along the way we found a job for a few months and managed a caravan park. We joined fossickers to find that elusive nugget and volunteered at a National Park campground near Margaret River as campground hosts.

I had reached the southern end of Gunning and was still shell shocked. Slowly I made my way back to Barbour Park.

That evening we talked, but Michael's mind was made up. He wanted to go home. Next morning, we packed up and headed off.

Historic towns on the way would have been a pleasure to explore. Now we just drove. Our conversations were limited to arranging our life. Putting on a nice face with our friends, children and grandchildren was a chore. But Michael seemed to have a new spring in his steps while a black mood was weighing me down.

'Now what?' was a question which popped into my mind, morning, noon and evening and thousands of times in between. It kept me up at night. What do I do with my life?

My neck tightened and headaches became regular companions. But worst of all, our relationship went from bad to worse. We just co-existed. I was resentful, that he had destroyed my dream and had taken away a lifestyle I had enjoyed. He had not consulted me, asked me or discussed the issue with me. He had not even danced around the topic. He just made up his mind.

'Go and see a Bowen Therapist,' a friend recommended when I was once again blinded by the pressure stretching up my back into my forehead.

'What can a Bowen Therapist do where a physio and osteopath had miserably failed, except to further deplete my savings?' I argued in my head. Life on painkillers was not a life worth living and I finally made an appointment.

Even though I googled 'Bowen Technique' and read about Tom Bowen whom the therapy was named after, I had no idea what to expect as I finally arrived at the Bowen clinic. "I will be making moves over certain parts of your body and will then pause to allow your body to process," Dianne explained before I laid face-down on the table.

'Is that all she is doing?' I silently questioned proceedings before I fell into a deep calm. I left the clinic exhausted. That night I fell into a deep sleep, the first for quite a few months.

'What is involved in becoming a Bowen Therapist?' I enquired at my follow-up appointment.

Within a week I was enrolled for my first module in the Certificate of Bowen Therapy.

Weekends were taken up with classes and within months I perceived a change in myself. I was happy again, content and focusing on the joys of life. Friends, neighbours and most notably my partner Michael volunteered eagerly as bodies for my log book hours. The studies came with frustrations as well as I had to complete modules in Anatomy and Physiology, clinic management and health regulations and the grey matter had to be woken from its slumber. But there was never a question of giving up. I had a goal and I was going to succeed.

We sold the house and found a more suitable residence in a central location where I could set up my clinic. Straight after I received my Certificate I started to practise. I enrolled in the Diploma course and continued to study while seeing patients. There was a new challenge to set up a web page, acquire a business and domain name, get stationary printed and fit out my clinic. Slowly my appointment book filled with patients. Word of mouth was the most powerful advertising.

Now I enjoy work more than ever before. Most of all I enjoy that I can make a difference to people's lives and that has made a difference to my life. I get out of bed and have a purpose. I am linked to thousands of practitioners by social media and exchange ideas. Seminars and courses are part of my on-going training and a great way to meet therapists. I meet patients every day with their unique personalities and issues.

At the age of 77, Ita Buttrose was appointed as chair of the ABC and commented: 'You are never too old to achieve great things'. She has become my role model.

I was distraught and disappointed when a change was forced upon me. Now I can see that it was an opportunity to develop and grow. Working as a Bowen Therapist made me into a stronger person, a woman I am proud of. I have found my calling in life, at the cusp of my retirement age and enjoy every day with all its challenges and joys.

The 'Boat People'

Cheryl Kuhne

Kingscliff

An axe was included. And a chainsaw. And so began the compiling of lengthy lists: supplies and equipment needed for a future adventure on water ...

We are eight.

We are four couples

We are the 'Boat People'.

We have been the 'Boat People' for 27 years.

Our story began over dinner at a fund-raising evening in a Victorian country town. After hearing of the untimely death of a young farmer in the area, discussion ensued as to what each person would like to do before *they* died. "Always wanted to do a houseboat on the Murray," said Warwick.

"Well, you organise it, and we'll all come along!" came the immediate response.

Ideas do not always materialise for farmers tied to the land. But we made this happen! The *Lilian Grace* was booked. Many evenings were spent discussing travel plans, what to bring and what we might do. Then six months later, in March 1993, with crops harvested and grain carted, the 'Boat People' set off for Mannum in South Australia, each couple's vehicle laden with food and drink for the coming week ... plus, fishing tackle, skiing gear, tools, personal necessities, sewing and knitting supplies, games and cards, copious amounts of chocolate, dress-ups and a speedboat. Many items were brought along 'just in case' including a gun, a case of pears, and the afore-mentioned axe and chainsaw!

Life on board began. Somehow Brian became captain, Warwick first mate, Jack the cabin boy, and Eric chief advisor. The men took turns to navigate the River from the helm and were never short of advice each to the other. Mooring, if not a challenge

to begin with, soon became the impetus for four differing opinions as to how to navigate the river currents and the best site for anchorage avoiding any submerged trees and discarded debris.

Leisurely days drifted by. We held a 500 'card tournament', playing into the wee hours of each morning and keeping an individual score for each participant; the winner duly crowned and awarded. The official fishermen were often up at daybreak and their catch provided the meal of the day, or at worst, the entrée. A large tapestry was stitched, knitting needles clicked vigorously, and good books were devoured. Lively discussions and animated debates filled any vacant moment.

The four wives worked together to prepare meals. One night we asked our dear husbands to dress in formal attire for dinner. They pranced in wearing their shorts, with lurid neckties from the '70s against their bare chests. In subsequent years, ingenious costuming outclassed this evening both in resourcefulness and creativity.

Another evening we asked our men to prepare dinner whilst Maureen took Elayne, Leanore and Cheryl for a spin upstream in the speed boat. On our return, and from some distance, we could see smoke rising from the *Lilian Grace* and wafting across the water. Later, having eaten charred chops and thawed sausages, secret investigations began with certain forensic evidence revealing the first batch of sausages had been burned beyond recognition and tossed into the river. Needless to say, the women resumed kitchen duties!

Time passed quickly and in spite of our cramped quarters (one tiny bathroom, one shower and basic kitchen facilities) we all agreed it had been a fun-filled week. We held a post-boat party and unanimously agreed to "do it all again"!

How the benchmarks have been raised in subsequent years! From basic houseboat to luxury vessel with en suites and spa. From river vessel to train, and hire cars to planes. From country dwelling to city abode, and river shacks to seaside houses. We have travelled from the East and across to the West and explored most areas in Victoria and many places within Australia.

We are eight.

We are four couples.

We are the 'Boat People'.

Together, we have laughed and cried. Argued and prayed. Shared joyful moments and periods of gut-wrenching sadness. Shared family events: the marriages of our eleven children, the arrival of 23 grandchildren and the birth of one great-grandchild. We have mourned the death of Warwick and later warmly welcomed Geoff. We supported each other when our parents and grand-children died or when we faced sickness or surgery. We have worked together and helped each other when farming was particularly tough, through floods and droughts, property settlements and clearing sales.

Although our weeks together have not been drama free ~ an overturned boat, a rushed trip to a hospital emergency department, lifeboat oars floating away in the distance, threat of fire and subsequent evacuation, a foul smelling environmental toilet system, a cancelled flight and almost missing the Indian Pacific, to cite a few ~ these have not curtailed our enthusiasm to plan for each ensuing year.

Every year each one of us has been present and accounted for! And next year 2020, we will notch up the 28th successive year! We believe this is indeed unique and many people have remarked when told of our story, how remarkable it is.

Like the ebb and flow of the Murray River, through the tides of our lives, these special friendships have been cemented. And as we step into our next adventure together I am certain each one of us could unequivocally say to the other, "Love your life!"

The Edwardian Corner Cabinet

Averil Waters

Maroubra

I am an Antique, or so they say, as they stand and admire me.

Am an Edwardian, crafted in England in the Year of our Lord Nineteen Thousand and One, shortly after King Edward VII came to the throne. I joined the family, the Doctor and his Wife, in the same year in their new house in Southend-On-Sea in Essex. I was a wedding present, don't you know?

I have moved with the family a few times but I certainly never expected to find myself in the Antipodes. I came here in the year Two Thousand and Ten after the sad time in the dark. I find I like it here. I am a corner cabinet and I like the corner in which she, the Elder Daughter of the Second Son has placed me. I have a good view of those entering the room. I have been dusted and polished and feel better for it. The carving shows up well and my glass doors are shining. I am afraid that some pieces have become detached and I do expect Her to see to it one day.

I am pleased that the Crown Derby Tea Set once again graces my upper shelves. I am a trifle surprised to see that the teacups appear to have been abandoned in England, but I am sure the Granddaughter will arrange for them to join us soon. The tea-set was also a Wedding Present and we have been together for all these years. I have a silver teapot sitting on the top shelf. Not quite as old as I am, but certainly an Antique.

I have taken few journeys these past 100 years or so. We lived in Southend-On-Sea for some years. Both Sons were born there. When the Doctor retired we moved along the coast to Sussex to Bexhill-On-Sea. Quite a genteel place.

Poor Man he died shortly after we moved there – a heart attack. He was still quite young leaving his wife to bring up the two boys. I admired Her greatly.

She was a strong woman born ahead of her time. She would have enjoyed the modern world.

I lived there with Her for over 50 years. I saw both Sons grow up. Both became lawyers. Not doctors: she would not have allowed that. She was very proud of both of them. The Second Son went to India, don't you know? I met his young children when they came back from India. They used to come for tea. The Young Girl played chess with Her, the Boy played cricket in the garden. Sadly, She was not herself for the years before her death.

The Second Son took me to his house when She died. In Purley, in Surrey. In suburbia don't you know? I liked that house large and spacious and it was close to the Church. I could hear the bells. His wife looked after me very well, although she was a little careless with the Crown Derby. I saw the family grow up. Four of them. Three became lawyers and one a cricketer. Indeed, both the girls became lawyers. She would have been proud.

When the Second Son retired, we moved back to Sussex, to Cooden, just near Bexhill. That was a lovely house and I held court in the Dining Room. Her portrait faced me, the elder granddaughter's. It has joined us here, across from me again.

We had a happy time in Cooden. The children and the grandchildren came to visit. I enjoyed the Christmases. They were joyful occasions. Then sadly, the Second Son died and some years later his Wife also. She had not been well and we were all alone in the house for some time. I missed them both.

Then one day these men came and I was taken apart and packed up and put into the dark. It was a long time before I was moved again. Then I was taken apart and wrapped in special packaging and put on a boat. The sea journey was long and while not wishing to complain, from time to time, it was a trifle rough.

Then one day we arrived and I was unpacked and put together again and placed in my new corner. I was pleased to see Her, the elder Granddaughter. We had memories we could share.

So here I am in my latest corner in the year Two Thousand and Eleven, 110 years since I was crafted, and in a place called Sydney in Australia of all places but it is by the sea and it is warm.

The Granddaughter sits beside me tapping away at that typewriter with pictures. I am not too sure I approve of my lower cupboard with its carved doors being used as a filing cabinet, but one has to move with the times, don't you know, and I am *happy* here.

The Farmer's Wife

Betty Zdan

Peak Hill

The drought hit hard. One minute the paddocks were lush green, and the dams were brimming. Next came nothing but straw.

Finally, bare red dirt, and death. Hand feeding sheep, became a daily ritual.

Another dust storm loomed on both the north the western fronts. This is crazy. I wondered what I had roped myself into.

Eight years ago I met and married a farmer. I left a city job and family; far away from the Central Plains where I still live. I watched the Seasons change the countryside. The tall grasses swaying in the breeze under magnificent azure blue skies. The sheep were thriving. It was a wonderful life.

Now, I plodded through the paddocks to the dam we had de-silted, praying it had water.

I came across the bleached white carcasses, dried by the scorching heat; they were the sheep that did not make it to the dam in time.

It tugged at my heart strings.

Memories of treating lambs, all with selenium deficiencies, unable to walk. Cuddling orphans in my arms, and bottle feeding all hours. Hungry Ewes with lambing sickness; starving, and dying every day.

The tears came easily, as I reflected on the worst of the drought. The hole we dug for the dead; was very deep this year. Almost as deep as the despair I felt in that moment.

After a recent light shower of rain; some hope.

I had never been so excited to see weeds.

At last something green for the sheep to eat. Then followed by disappointment; a letter came from Council regarding Bio-Security and Weed Control

Management. They chose the wrong day to phone for an inspection of our property. My husband; deeply affected by the drought; gave the girl on the other end of the phone, a 'blast', she wished him well and hung up with a promise to phone back; she never did.

We paid for our third semi-trailer load of hay, our funds were now depleted. We decided to apply for Government Drought Relief Funding. We filled out one hundred and forty pages. This was required as our farm had too many Titles, each requiring a separate form. Only to be told, there is a new shorter version of the Drought Funding, which they now require.

It felt futile; we decided to go it alone.

Do we sell up, or keep going?

My husband had been through it all before. He was not one to throw in the towel; his family had been on the land for three generations before him. Our choice was easy. We loved our life on the farm. We loved our animals.

Whenever life was tough for me, I reflected back on the life of my parents. A young migrant couple who came to this country with just a suitcase. Unlike my husband they weren't born into this land. The land was borne unto them; through hard work and determination. They were amazing resilient people.

They loved and respected the land and taught me their same resilience. They taught me, that where there is despair, there is always hope.

As I worked away in my veggie patch; making it bigger; excited, I exclaimed out loud, "Look a worm!" Mulching with veggie scraps has paid off. I thought to myself.

I walk through what was left of my flower garden.
It is suffering the neglect of the drought. I had been
busy helping my husband, with more urgent matters
around the farm. Hobbies took a back seat.

I find a single rose bud about to burst open and
display its glorious perfection, for all to see. Yes.
There is hope on the land and things will get better;
I reassure myself again.

Later I sit on my front verandah sipping a cup of tea.

I gaze at the mountains that present me with a
kaleidoscope of ever changing colours; reflecting
their beauty, peace and serenity.

My husband pulls up in the work ute with one of our
working dogs in the back. The dog aptly named
Mr. Boof is excited for having just put in a good days
work. He jumps off the back of the ute, gallops over,
giving me a huge boof, and a slobbery kiss.

I give him a big hug, "You have had a good day
helping the boss then eh?" I ask.

He tries to answer me; then goes to his rough
old sling bed, and collapses in it. I look into my
husband's eyes. They are as red as the dusty plains;
from a hard day in the sheep yards.

"Like a cuppa?" I ask. He nods in his usual silent tone.

I make him a cup of tea and bring it out to him on
the verandah. He is staring into the distance.

"This is the life," he says.

"Yes it is," I reply.

The Good with the Bad

Chris Maitland

Elanora Heights

The journey from birth to death for me has been varied ... some of it I would class as an adventure while other times more routine, but overall there is not much I would want to change if offered a chance to re-live it. The seemingly obligatory aches and pains that come with approaching one's *Use By* date can be annoying, for some inhibiting, but if we only get one life, we should attempt to make the most of every day.

In the words of the song that Paul Anka wrote for Frank Sinatra, "Regrets, I've had a few, but then again, too few to mention." But one was big, watching a small business I created and developed eventually become too small to maintain, and taking too long to recognise that.

But overall, I have enjoyed a wonderful life and am thankful to reach my seventy-sixth year without my body thus far succumbing to any number of life-threatening diseases that have regrettably taken several of my good friends and relatives.

They say we should enjoy our work and, in the main, I have. Thirteen employers over sixty years, three were so good I returned for second stints.

I have made many interesting friends through the years, and regretted losing touch with some, so upon retirement I made it a mission to try to catch up with the memorable ones, enjoying the odd lunch here and there ... but that's another whole story.

I couldn't have wished for better parents, each generously loved and nurtured me, the pity was that they were unable to sustain their love for each other and the family unit broke up when I was eleven. No siblings to help endure that time, but I emerged from that drama, determined to make my own future marriage last the test of time.

I have been fortunate to marry a wonderful woman, with whom this year we celebrated our golden wedding anniversary, returning to our island honeymoon destination fifty years on. We have withstood some ups and downs, but our mutual love and affection and a shared sense of humour have carried us through the bad times.

Together, we created two delightful children who brought us much more joy than despair as they grew into responsible and achieving adults. The legacy is now to have our four engaging grandchildren, each distinctly special in their own unique ways, develop similarly.

Without shouldering the parental responsibility for these intuitive young minds, I am free to choose to draw on my life experiences as a supplement to inform and educate them, looking in as they develop under their parents' guidance, adding my subtle assistance to develop and encourage them on their paths as individuals in their generation.

Having enjoyed a full life to this point and with 75 years up, why not impart a positive outlook to this younger generation on how good their lives have the potential to be. I have started by enlightening them on the changes that I have seen in my lifetime. They may be disbelieving at first, but I want them to know how life was without computers, without television ... even before the fax machine. I can spin tales of sitting with my parents, around the radio at night, listening to comedies and quiz shows and dramatic serials ... no pictures, but a theatre of the mind, engaging our imaginations.

I began by writing my life story to educate the four about their forebears and our family heritage, to enlighten them on how it was to grow up in such a different lifestyle seventy years ago. No big publication here ... just a print run of a meagre

four copies, but 120 pages of how their paternal grandfather lived and worked – over 200 photos too.

If not from one who lived it, how else can they learn of post-war rationing and planned blackouts by zone in Sydney on one or two nights each week because of seven years of limited power generation. How about before we had refrigerators when the iceman plodded through our house to deliver blocks of ice to keep our food cool and fresh in the Ice Chest? We could buy milk, bread and the delicacy of rabbits from the back of a horse and cart, even the necessary clothes props to keep the washing from dangling on the ground before the invention of the rotary hoist.

Before TV News, we had newsreel theatres, showing continuously an 80-minute program of Australian and International News with a mix of Tom & Jerry cartoons, imported Pete Smith specialities, and documentaries. City office workers would often spend their lunch-hour at the newsreel theatres.

From an early age, my parents introduced me to live theatre, the Easter Show with its enthralling Sideshow Alley and the Circus with clowns and daring trapeze artists. Ah, the memories! My wife and I have already initiated our eldest two grandchildren to those three enduring attractions.

To enthrall my grandchildren with tales of how much change I have seen in one lifetime is my way of impressing upon them the unlimited potential the future holds and the amazing unimaginable changes they will see in their lives. Once they have mastered how to call a friend using a rotary dial telephone that we put in front of them the other day.

I have enjoyed my life up to now but I still have up to twenty-five more years so I better get out and live it don't want to waste any time.

The Lilac Chair

Caterina Zavaglia

Milsons Point

Agnes's favourite time of year was always Spring.

The path home was lined with wild freesias that perfumed the air with a heaven scent. She pushed open the rickety old gate and lifted the lid to the letterbox. She pulled out the mail. One letter. She walked hurriedly to her veranda and breathed a sigh of relief at having avoided old Mrs Kennedy, who was busily weeding her garden next door.

'I'm not in the mood for her mindless chatter today,' thought Agnes.

Agnes headed for her favourite armchair in the sitting room. She sank deep into the soft lilac velvet, opened the letter and as she read, the tears of joy began to flow ...

Agnes couldn't remember when she felt this happy. Was it the day she married Taylor or the day her daughter Gina was born? Both days were still etched in her fading memory as the happiest days of her life. Happy memories were now overshadowed by the heartache she felt since Taylor died last year. Sadness now permeated every part of her being. She missed Taylor more than she ever imagined possible. She felt so alone without him. The walls of their home echoed of days gone by. Photos and memorabilia in every corner. Each treasured token telling a story of places they'd been together.

'Love your life, visit new places, do what you want to do and be happy...' Taylor had whispered to her in his final days.

Agnes caressed the velvet arm of her chair, and smiled thinking about what she'd just read. She now had something to look forward to.

Gina looked in the mirror and saw the reflection of a bride. The Chantilly lace was exquisite. She thought she looked rather beautiful but she still felt unsure of

the dress. She wanted so much to have her mother there to give her a nod of approval and say, 'Yes, this is the dress'. Gina would just have to trust her own judgement this time.

On her way back to the office Gina thought about the letter she'd written her Mum. She didn't have the heart to put all the details of her marriage in writing and thought it best to call her on the telephone to explain.

'Hi Mum, how are you?'

'Gina darling, I'm sooo excited for you! I read your news and wanted to call you immediately but you said to wait for your call! Oh darling, this is just perfect. A wedding to plan and, oh, I so love planning events and then we'll all be together at Christmas, of course without your Dad, I know, but it will be wonderful to have you home and I can't wait to meet your darling Elliott...'

'Mum, wait, please stop a minute. Mum, I didn't know how to tell you, but we're not getting married in Australia. We're getting married in New York and it's just going to be Elliott and me and then we're having our honeymoon in Nantucket. I'm sorry Mum, but we just want a small affair, just the two of us. We're not having a big family wedding or reception.'

'What? Gina, you can't be serious?'

'Oh Mum, please try and understand, it's what we both want. We want to focus on the marriage vows not the whole wedding fiasco.'

'Oh Ginny, that's ridiculous! I can't believe you're talking like this!'

'Mum, I know you're disappointed but please try and understand. I have to go. I'll call you again in a few days when you've had time for all this to sink in.'

'But Ginny, I, I...'

'Bye Mum, I have to go.'

The phone went dead. Agnes was in shock. She couldn't believe it. She had one daughter and the thought of not being able to share her wedding day with her was absurd! Agnes suddenly felt that familiar wave of sadness envelop her again.

Gina stared at the phone and felt dreadful. She felt her mother's pain and disappointment. She didn't have the heart to tell her mum that Elliott was the one who insisted they get married, just the two of them, alone. She wanted her mum to accept Elliott and so she omitted to tell her the fact that Elliott had been married before and he didn't think it was important 'to have all the fuss of a big wedding'. Gina, on the other hand, had always wanted a beautiful wedding with her Dad walking her down the aisle. Sadly that dream could no longer become a realisation and so she went along with Elliott and his wish of an intimate wedding, just the two of them alone. Gina thought of her Dad and how much she missed him. She thought of life back home in Australia. She loved New York but often felt homesick for the simple life of Kurrajong, her home town. She was melancholy for the sound of bellbirds and longed to fill her lungs with the fresh country air. She'd call her mum again tomorrow and try and make her understand.

The taxi driver came to a stop in Fifth Avenue outside Tiffany's just as Agnes had asked him to.

'I'll just be ten minutes to pick up an order.'

Agnes re-emerged from Tiffany's carrying one robin's egg blue bag.

'Thank you driver. We can go now.' The taxi driver continued the journey to the address Agnes gave him in Long Island.

Agnes alighted the taxi and stared at the little grey cottage in front of her.

With a huge sense of trepidation she walked to the door. Her mind suddenly turned to Taylor and drew encouragement remembering his words, 'Do what you want to do and be happy.'

She rang the doorbell. She heard footsteps and recognised their heaviness as they came closer. The door opened.

'Oh my God! Mum! What are you doing here?'

'Hello Ginny. Well darling, I've only got one daughter and I'll be damned if I'm going to miss her wedding!'

The List

Catherine Casey

Oakdale

Bob Walker's idea of 'heaven' had always been seeing himself behind the wheel of a brand-spanking-new 'Winnebago' motor-home, heading off into the Australian sunset with his wife, Ellie, by his side.

This dream had been Bob's first entry on his 'bucket-list', even though he knew he would have to wait until retirement to fulfil it. But he was determined to make it happen, as there had been five entries all up, two of which he had already achieved, including this one, and there were three more to go, one of which had been left blank except for a question mark, which had always intrigued Ellie and their family, but which he never revealed.

Ellie had also made a 'wish-list', which she preferred to call it, instead of using the 'b' word – because the thought of buckets reminded her of the hundreds of nappies she had washed in a bucket, before they were able to afford their first washing machine. Ellie's first entry was for her and Bob to take a luxury cruise on The Mediterranean, visiting Santorini, the island where her grandmother was born, as well as cities she had always dreamed of visiting, like Venice, Rome, Florence and Monte Carlo.

Even though Ellie was third generation Greek, she had always resonated with her heritage, and she realised this was a lofty dream for a woman who had never travelled out of the Sydney radius, and whose priority during their fifty-year marriage had been raising their four children, and then taking on the role of grandparent and 'minder' to their six grandchildren. A responsibility she took on happily, even though she felt that her family had become increasingly demanding during the latter years – adopting a sense of entitlement as they started to hint that she and Bob should sell the family home and move into a retirement village, in the process freeing-up some of their inheritance,

so that they could buy their own homes. However, Ellie's dream of sailing the Mediterranean kept her going, and even though she knew that Bob's heart was set on exploring 'grey-nomad' land, she always believed she would convince him to take her on the cruise, eventually.

So, here was Bob at last, sitting behind the wheel of his mighty 'Winnebago', heading off into the sunset as he had always imagined, the sound of Willie Nelson's 'On the Road Again' playing in the back-ground, contemplating the adventures that lay ahead. This was Bob's perfect scenario, except for one thing – the empty seat beside him. Empty that is, except for his much-loved guitar, which is cossetted carefully by the seatbelt. Sadly, Ellie had become ill twelve months earlier, and passed away. So Bob's elation at achieving his dream was tinged with sadness and regret, but also a certain amount of guilt, mainly because he had never really intended to take Ellie on her long-dreamed-of cruise, as he always felt certain that he could steer her towards the 'grey-nomads' lifestyle instead. You see, Bob loved life, particularly his own, and his world had always revolved around himself and pursuing his own interests, evidenced by the esteem in which he held his greatest achievement, which was winning the local RSL Club's Darts competition – the prize being a \$400 meat-tray, which fed the family for a whole month. This was a huge deal for Bob, especially as he could now cross that one off his 'list'.

However, he still had two other entries, plus the question mark! One of those entries was to make peace with his estranged brother, Ken, a Vietnam War veteran who was confined to a wheelchair after being severely injured in a mine explosion.

Ken had always held a grudge against Bob because he was a conscientious objector, and refused to enlist. Bob felt regret about the estrangement, and wanted to put things right.

The second last entry was one of Bob's biggest dreams – to sing at the Tamworth Music Festival! He'd long held a passion for country music, having won the Country Karaoke Championship three years in a row – so this would be a biggie for Bob.

And now to Bob's final entry, the question mark.

Bob had been smitten by only two women in his life – Ellie, the love of his life, and Callie, his first love. And Dolly Parton, of course! But that's another story.

Bob had met Callie when they were growing up in Mudgee. Bob's father was a coal miner, and Callie's father owned the mine. They started dating in high school, but her wealthy influential family had more lofty intentions for their beautiful daughter. So Bob reluctantly took off to the big smoke, in search of a new life.

During his travels, Bob finds Callie still living on her family's property near Mudgee. She had married a wealthy grazier in her late teens, but their marriage was short-lived. She had never forgotten Bob, her first love and the only boy who ever made her laugh until she cried.

While rekindling their love, Callie told Bob that his brother, Ken, had returned to Mudgee some years before, forming a blue-grass band after discovering a passion for playing the fiddle. She invited him to the local RSL club where the band performed every week.

The brothers' reunion was welcomed by them both, as Ken had also wanted to reconcile with his brother.

Their mutual love of music brought them closer together, with Ken inviting Bob to join his band as lead guitarist and vocalist.

A year later, 'The Walker Brothers' band appeared at the Tamworth Music Festival, winning first prize in the blue-grass category, the prize being a trip to Lexington, Kentucky, the home of blue-grass, and only 1,000 kms from Iowa – the original Winnebago-land! An absolute must-see!

So, 'bucket list' complete?

Not quite, as Bob had started a new list, which included a visit to 'Dollywood', and hopefully a glimpse of his 'Tennessee Dream Girl'!

But that's another story!

The Nose on Your Face

Philip Sprott

Bar Beach

Albert really looked forward to walking out of the office for the last time. His last five years were focused on planning the transition. He was looking forward to the day he could leave his desk without first sliding a work file or two into his briefcase. Gone would be the pressure to finalise a report, prepare a submission, or polish a presentation in time that really should have been his own. He could have a glass of wine with dinner without worrying whether it would dull his resolve, and dissuade him from the neat pile of papers waiting expectantly on his home office desk. Inevitably, on the rare occasion he succumbed to the wine, he would rise at some ungodly hour the next morning to finish what he felt he should have done the night before. Albert didn't like getting up early, so almost every evening, he left the wine glass in the cupboard, and soberly extricated himself from his post prandial family to deal with the pile of paperwork he couldn't put out of his mind.

Albert was a good employee. And smart. Everyone at work said that, and everyone knew he was a capable old mentor, willing to guide and advise when a project seemed too hard. He always had an answer, and he was always kind about it. This tricked me too, he used to say, the first time I encountered it. You're smart to pick the problem, and you're smart to come to me. This was why there had been such a turnout at his retirement party, and why his retirement gift was so special. Every colleague in the office had happily contributed, and the result was an exquisite little oil, by a renowned painter Albert admired. No place for a watch, they'd said. Retired people don't need to worry about the time.

Before he walked from the office for the last time, Albert collected up the few personal items he'd kept there, small mementoes strategically placed to remind him daily of his life and the world outside

work. Some of them had been in the same place in the same office for 32 years. He put these into his briefcase, in the space that on every previous day had been occupied by work files. He left his office key with the front desk, and his parking pass with the boom gate attendant. Albert didn't hurry. He had no regrets, but had no desire to rush this last drive home.

The following months were hectic. Part of his preparation to retirement had been to list all the annoyances around the house that needed fixing, all the people he wanted to catch up with, and all the places and shows that working so hard for so many years had prevented him seeing. Albert was confident he had enough to fill the time he used to spend at work, and sure enough, there didn't seem enough hours in the day. When he didn't have a catch-up meet, or a lunch engagement, Albert was out with oil can, screwdriver, and ladder. He fixed every loose and squeaky hinge, every sticking window and door, and every clogged gutter. He stopped the leaking taps and repaired the sagging shelves. He transformed the garden into a picture, neat and colourful.

Work colleagues called, and Albert met them for drinks a few times, but the main topics of conversation were work, office politics, and work relationships. He hadn't realised when he'd lived these issues how insular the conversation had been, but he'd become an outsider to this group, and these previously fascinating topics soon lost appeal. He began making excuses not to go. Albert knew he had worked with a wonderful group of colleagues, and had enjoyed their company, but they'd been work mates, and none had evolved into more.

Albert had always been passionate about art, and had a small collection of original paintings by domestic artists. As he'd planned, he began to visit

galleries and exhibitions that he had seen before and loved, or had always intended to see. Once he had worked his way through his A list, he set to work on the next tier, those Albert considered the lesser galleries. His retirement was on track, and Albert couldn't help but feel pleased with himself.

Albert was on his way home from one of his excursions when he began to reflect on the day he'd just spent. Planning the trip had been exciting, everything had gone like clock-work, but the paintings in the gallery had been rather disappointing. He pondered this a little, and realised he wasn't surprised at all. The exhibiting artists weren't on his favourites list, and he had gone because he could rather than because he wanted to. He began to wonder why he had done that. There was little needing repair at home, his garden was in fine shape, and he rarely did lunch at all these days. He didn't see his old work colleagues anymore, so he had plenty of time on his hands. It was then Albert realised he had taken this trip today simply to have something to do. This took him quite by surprise, until he began to recognise he'd completely underestimated how much it took to fill the void left by a lifetime career of long hours and dedication. He felt a little unsettled.

At home, Albert slumped into his favourite chair. How had this happened after such careful planning? He shuddered at the thought midday television may enter his life. His eyes wandered around the room, moving from one of his precious artworks to the next. And that's when it came to him. He wanted to paint. He knew he'd always wanted to, but never been bold enough to say. In order to feel fulfilled, he needed to be challenged, not occupied. He would start tomorrow.

The People You Meet

David Crook

North Sydney

It took me almost a year, before I was 'accepted'. Almost a year!

Every Sunday, I'd walk down to the Carpenter's Arms to watch the late kick-off match. The second half. I'd walk in and order a pint. Take a seat at the bar, if there was one. Stand by the wall, if there wasn't.

Every Sunday evening. A copy of *The Economist* in my coat pocket, to keep me company. If company was needed. This was my local pub. My Sunday ritual. Walk down, walk in, order a pint. A weekly part of my London life. But I wasn't a 'local'. Not yet. Not a local, yet.

I'd see the regulars there, each week. The 'real' locals. The forty-something, a bit dishevelled, thick-set man, who spoke only in quiet grunts. Not to anyone, just to himself. And, the fifty-something, wild-eyed man, with broken teeth. Who'd get so tense, when his team was on the screens, he'd scurry off, outside, for a cigarette, saying 'no, no, no, no, no'. Like that character from *Vicar of Dibley*, without the 'yes' tacked on the end. Or the sixty-something, well-dressed, more than slightly menacing man, who looked like he could be an east-end gangster. What I thought an east-end gangster might be like. Or perhaps a seriously bent Marylebone ex-copper. And, whatever he was, he always was shown 'deference' by everyone at the bar. And he was always locked in serious conversations. That always involved language that I won't repeat here, now. And, then there were the younger 'locals'. The twenty-something gym instructor, with his even younger girlfriend. Who both dressed, all year, as if they didn't feel the cold. The thirty-something drunk Australian, who thought he could chat up any girl who walked in. Who often, quite surprisingly, appeared to be correct. The tourists and the passers-by. The young women from 'up north', in town for

the weekend, for a 'hen'. The older couple, here to see the Stones, playing in park, again. The young Sri Lankan asking my advice about the wording of his resume. He was the first person I really spoke with there. At my local. Apart from 'hi-ya, what you having?', 'four pounds fifteen, love'. My weekly barmaid conversation. Every Sunday.

And in addition to all of them. The older ones, the younger ones, the tourists. As well as all of them, there were the 'would-be locals'. The 'want-to-be locals'.

And, thinking back, perhaps, that was just me. Just, only, me.

So, it took almost a year, before I was 'accepted'. But I kept showing up. And eventually, I guess, I must have looked like I belonged. Belonged, enough. I must have worn them down.

'Connection' is a subtle thing. Perhaps too subtle, really, to be 'dissected'. Examined. To be measured. But easier, perhaps, to recognise. A look, a nod, with or without a word. A smile. A shrug.

A shared exasperation at a penalty shot gone wide. Consternation as a referee holds aloft a 'yellow'. As he reaches for a 'red'. Or, instead, a shared exuberance for a goal, scored well. This was the year of Leicester City's 'miracle'. Another year of Tottenham Hotspur's stumbles. A year of dreams found. Consecrated. Of hopes lost. Devastated. Like every year, every season. And just like every season, there were many moments shared. Shared by 'locals' and by not-quite-strangers.

I think that two things happened to accelerate my 'integration'. My 'acceptance'. That's how it seemed to me.

First, one Sunday evening, the caretaker from my apartment building was also at the pub. And I was surprised. Because I'd never seen him there. But there he was, that day. And he was, clearly, accepted as a 'local'. And we nodded recognition, from our respective corners of the bar. And then, somehow, I could tell. Could tell he was explaining how he knew me. Explaining to the wild-eyed man, with broken teeth.

And, as it happened, this day my team was on the screens. And the caretaker knew they were my team. And I could tell he was explaining that they were my team to the wild-eyed man, and anyone else who was there to listen.

And, here, in this London pub, to follow my Manchester team was a crime akin to treason. But, that year, my once-strong team was weak. And so, my crime, it seemed, was now a source of something more like pity than disdain. More like mirth than murder.

So, I was now known as a believer, in a wrong, and sadly so-lost cause.

Second, after a long and late-night, week-night, work engagement. As my cab ferried me to my home. I thought to 'pause' a while and said, 'just drop me here'. Just drop me at 'my local'. And going in, to my surprise, I saw all of them. All of my Sunday football bar-stool buddies. My acquaintances, all of them were there. All, late, on a week night.

And while my first thought was 'are they always here?' My second thought was instead, 'might they think I'm always here?' Because, really, who could be sure which 'fact' was which?

So, I walked in and said, 'a pint please', like I said each Sunday.

But, unlike each Sunday, tonight I was met with nods of recognition. No words spoken. No words needed.

A European game upon the screens. And, without ostensible 'engagement', we collaborated in this shared experience, of watching teams who we felt nothing for, as we each drank our pints.

And things had changed. They had.

As I placed my empty glass upon the bar and made towards the door, the wild-eyed, tooth-broke man, lightly touched my arm and said, 'safe home'.

And then, the next Sunday as I sat on my bar-stool the forty-something grunted to me as a goal went in. It was, clearly, a conversation.

I was, now, accepted.

There are many ways to find a kind of 'love' within our lives. This pub was one.

The Perfect Day

Peter Woodward

Dubbo

About 15 years ago, I had been having a rough patch in life and had suffered broken ribs, nose and part of my hip and severed a tendon in my elbow. At about the same time, my marriage had failed, so generally, there had been better times in my life. While I was recovering, I kept having this dream of being down the coast, sitting in the sunshine, and listening to the ocean, with a fishing line in my hand. Seemed like it would be 'The Perfect Day'.

After a bit of planning, the opportunity arose.

On the actual day, my 85 year old father decided to come with me. He had also been having some rough patches in his life, and had fractured his neck at C2. This meant he was somewhat limited as to how quickly he could move. It took him an hour to get settled into the car and by the time we got to Queanbeyan, some twenty minutes away, he was looking for a cup of tea and he needed to stretch his legs. After four more stops, I finally got to the spot I had been dreaming of.

The only problem with the plan was that it had started to rain, the wind was blowing off an iceberg that was coming up the coast and the waves had been whipped up in size by a late cyclone off the Queensland coast.

So I gritted my teeth and rigged my fishing line for heavy surf with a 130g sinker and off I went. I left my father warm and cosy in the car.

After a bit of a walk, I started fishing. I snagged the same rock four times and lost my hook, line and sinker each time and my patience was wearing a bit thin. So I packed up and relocated to the beach and looked at the families drinking coffee on the balconies of their cabins, while I was cold and wet, and still dreaming of sitting in the sun and a gentle wind.

In my new spot I actually started to catch something; seaweed; great big bunches of it; 20kg bunches of it.

As my fifth bunch got close to shore, a wave came in and dumped on it, and for some reason I got a bad feeling and was just about to think, "Uh Oh" when the hook dislodged from the seaweed.

I managed to turn my head to one side when the 130g sinker came screaming through the air and went "Whack" into my temple. I was just about to say "Ouch" when the fish hook followed through and lodged in that bit in the middle of your nose between your nostrils. At that point I was beyond saying anything and just fell to my knees in the sand. I now suspect that I probably got concussion from the sinker blow.

Apart from the thumping headache and the intense stinging in my nose, I thought I was thinking fairly clearly. This possibly explains why I made the decision to try and remove the hook myself with a fish hook remover. I had thought about driving into town to the hospital for assistance, but I didn't realise I was attached to my 9ft fishing rod. It seemed to me that the only way to get the fishing rod into the car would be through the boot, with the back seat down. I had it worked out, that I would have to crawl into the boot first, then climb into the front seat and then drag the rod in behind me before I could drive to the hospital. Thinking that would probably be painful, and because I didn't want to alarm my father, I decided to try and remove the hook myself, although, I should have realised that whenever Rex Hunt used his patented hook remover, he was actually using it on a fish that didn't have the capacity to demonstrate pain. As well, it struck me that it was not going to be as easy as it looked on television to just shake the catch off the end of the hook for some reason. Meanwhile, there is quite a considerable amount of blood adding

to the mix. Perhaps the best part of the situation was that I hadn't lost my bait in the seaweed, but on taking several sudden deep breaths for reasons unknown I actually managed to get the pilchard to travel a fair way up my nostril, and I just love the smell of pilchards up close and personal.

So after half an hour of wrestling and jiggling the hook, all of which nearly had me laughing with joy, the hook finally came out. It was about that point that the blinding revelation hit, 'Why didn't I just cut the line to get into the car?'

Meanwhile, the coffee drinkers were all applauding and I think they were probably throwing coins onto my beach towel for the mad mime artist on the beach. If ever I catch sight of myself on Funniest Home Videos, there will be really big trouble.

Needless to say, I didn't even look like catching a fish for the rest of the day, although I'm sure if I had gone for a swim, there would have been hundreds of bigger fish trying to get up my nose, looking for a pilchard.

When I got back to the car, my father said "You must have caught a lot of fish, your shirt is covered in blood."

It was at that point I laughed, which was probably about six months from the previous time I had actually laughed. To me, this made that occasion 'The Perfect Day' and it made me realise that, although life can be tough, you can 'Love Your Life' regardless.

Even to this day, whenever I think of this Perfect Day fishing, I get this funny twitch in my nose and a small tear in my eye.

The Reminder

Yvonne Norris

Shoalhaven Heads

It was the first business day after the Christmas and New Year holidays and as I needed money to do some grocery shopping I left home early and headed to my local bank. It was a humid rainy morning and I was feeling very tired and in a bad humour. My family had been to stay for the holidays and returned to their homes late the day before. They left me with a pile of dirty linen and towels, an empty refrigerator and pantry and an empty wallet.

I arrived at the bank a little too early and found it still closed and a long queue spilling out on to the footpath in front of me. I stood in line, impatiently shifting from foot to foot and mumbling complaints to myself about the wait and the weather. The line behind me grew longer.

Suddenly, I heard music and turned my head to follow the sound. I saw an old lady seated on a stool with her back to a nearby shop window. She was wearing a long black skirt and a mauve long sleeved blouse. A long strand of pearls hung from her neck. Her hair was long and silver. She strummed a tune I didn't recognise on a ukulele. When that tune ended she leant forward to turn the pages of some sheet music that was on a stand in front of her. She fumbled for awhile until she found what she was looking for and then began to play and sing. Her voice was sweet and clear. I recognised the song she was singing. It was a song that I really liked but hadn't heard for a long time. The melody was haunting and the lyrics very poignant. I stood still, closed my eyes and listened.

She sang of homeless men and women on the streets of London: the lonely man wearing worn out shoes; of his sad eyes and lowered head. She sang of the bag lady; her dirty hair and ragged clothes and the old salt that has the sea in his blood but no food in his stomach. She sang of the children sleeping rough on the streets. They are all cold and wet.

The sad song ended and I opened my eyes, bringing my reverie to an end. I stood there pondering the lyrics. The song really touched me. It brought to my mind that there are homeless and less fortunate people than me all over the world and it made me feel ashamed of myself for complaining about being a little inconvenienced when suddenly the man standing behind me prodded me in the back.

At last the line was moving forward. Instead of being angered by his annoying prodding, I turned and gave him a big smile and then moved along. I realised that I was a lucky person and should be very happy with my lot in life.



The Right Decision

Margaret Stening

Paddington

In the life of my grandmother, Mary Boyce, can be seen a woman whose external circumstances did not determine her love of the life she was living. Instead, it depended on how she dealt with what she was given. The tragedies and hardships of her life she succeeded in overcoming and she transferred the strength she learnt in that process into a commitment to improving the quality of life of those around her. She was deeply religious, unquestionably believing, and of course, it was from there that she derived her strength. She was never bitter or despairing about the things which befell her. Instead, she appreciated all that she had, loved her life and was passionate about helping out the community.

In writing this account of the life of my grandmother, I have drawn on the memories of my sister who recalled what was told to her by our grandmother and our father, and who has memories of her own from her experience of living with my grandmother in the 1940's; those of my mother, and of course, my own.

My grandmother was born in 1890 in a small village called Tullagh in Country Donegal. It is a spectacularly beautiful place, but cold and wet and life was harsh. The original Boyce house can be seen today, it is a small thatched building, one of the only two rooms was for the whole family. It had a large open fireplace at one end, and in that room the whole family lived, cooked, ate, washed and slept. The other room was for the cattle.

In 1914 with no work or future for her children, she emigrated to Queensland with her husband Michael and four children. Michael was given a grant of land of some acres in the bush. Her life on this small holding was hard. The property had to be built from scratch, and to support a family. Michael had to take a job as a miner in a Blair Athol and she suffered great loneliness with him being away.

She was confined to the isolated property, and therefore, there were not the structures in place for social life. This meant that, because of the absence of Michael, in addition to the care of her children, washing, ironing, cleaning and cooking, she had to work on the property. In particular, for someone from Ireland there was discomfort of the intense heat of the Queensland summer.

There was personal tragedy too. Of the nine children she bore, only six lived to adulthood. One of those children, a two-year-old boy, Patrick, was playing in the kitchen when he fell into a cauldron of boiling water that was on the floor. Another boy, the much loved Danny, was seven when he died from snakebite or eating poison berries, they never knew with certainty. In 1922, when her youngest child was six months old, Michael her husband was diagnosed with stomach cancer, and died the following year.

After her husband's death, she moved with her children to the coal mining town of Collinsville, and lived there for the rest of her life. Here, there was a large Irish community, including her relatives, who had emigrated. Her house in Collinsville was a Queenslander. Up on poles, with wide veranda on all sides. At night swinging in the breeze were brightly coloured Japanese lanterns. Her garden brought her much joy, but she was perpetually at war with it. She grew roses of which she was very proud. But these roses, she stated, did not simply yield, but in time with love and hard work they gave in and came to life and flowered with an intense fragrance.

Her real life revolved around the Country Women's Association and particularly, the Church. She worked tirelessly to remedy the loneliness of women in the bush and its lack of social activities, creating a network of support and meetings at her home. She campaigned actively for bush nurses and for a maternity ward in the local Collinsville hospital.

The Church provided her with a constant social life. There were always raffles, card parties, fêtes or dances to raise money for the Church. House dances were embedded in Irish society. They were often held on a Sunday on her veranda, and the community would gather to have an exuberant time dancing, playing music and storytelling. She cooked with love all day on the old wood stove, and made marvellous sponges and scones, for which she was famous. On special occasions she killed some of her chooks. It upset her greatly, for they all had their own names. My sister recalls a sense of happiness and love surging through everyone at these gatherings.

She placed great value on education, but circumstances had prevented her from giving her children that opportunity. My father was academically bright and had won a scholarship to Brisbane to finish his secondary schooling, but on his father's death, had to leave and get a job. In 1959, she came down to New South Wales for my sister's graduation from University. She said it was the greatest day of her life, to see a grandchild of hers with a University degree.

In 1950, she asked her children for something for the first and only time in her life. She wanted to go home to Ireland for a visit, and asked them to contribute to the fare. She went by sea and stayed fifteen months. When she returned to Australia, she felt it was her home. The Collinsville community was like a family. It had been a great place to raise her family, and they had flourished, and it had given her a life that she loved. She declared, "It was tough to leave my family in Ireland, but Australia has handed us everything, it was the right decision."

The Right Time

Patricia Webb

Buff Point

My paternal grandmother came from a wealthy family; landed gentry of the time. Brought up under strict religious and moral rules, all seven children were expected to make advantageous marriages. But Grandma broke the rules in the worst possible fashion. She fell pregnant out of wedlock.

Her father, my great grandfather, didn't hesitate to banish her from all familial contact. No letters could be exchanged, no visits arranged. She was put on the train and sent to Sydney. Broken heart or no; she was on her own. She had her baby in a mission house, and by the grace of God and a generous landlady, she was able to keep her child. So many of her era weren't so lucky.

The years progressed from the turn of the 1900's, and my grandmother managed to eke out a life for herself and her daughter. She met and married my paternal grandfather in 1914, and marrying him must have given her a feeling of security she had lacked since her banishment. Then came the arrival of my father. Finally, a measure of happiness.

But the advent of WW1 the year Dad was born would have dampened that happiness, for three of her husband's boys from his former marriage were to go off to war. The return of only two and their subsequent move interstate would have been heartbreaking. The gradual breakdown of her husband's health over the next fifteen years was probably inevitable. What price happiness? How much adversity was she expected to endure? Was there ever a 'right time' for her?

We scroll to England at the end of WW1, and the birth of my mother. She was the younger of two sisters, born to a woman much younger than my learned grandfather, who played chess and read Shakespeare and Keats. He'd been the owner of numerous pubs in London, and was married for

sixteen years until his wife died, leaving them childless. One wonders if his boarding school education was the appropriate background for a man to take the reins of his father's business, or whether his dreams would have carried him in a different direction. He bowed to the familial expectations of the times. To step in where one's parent deemed. He was the eldest son. So he became a Licensed Victualler.

His relationship with my maternal grandmother was short, and, as I have found in latter years, never legitimised. A few years after the war, my grandfather made the decision to settle on the other side of the world. By this time he was in his mid-fifties, and so he left their mother well-settled financially back in England, and he and the girls sailed for Australia.

Australia was the 'land of milk and honey', he'd quoted in a letter to one of his sisters, and his expectation was to find work immediately. He supplemented his savings during their six week journey to Sydney by taking photos with his newly acquired camera.

However, Sydney wasn't ready for a refined middle-aged man with two little girls, and a letter of recommendation he carried was to a job entirely unsuitable. Within three years, he was forced to place the girls in a Salvation Army home. He was now penniless, jobless, and homeless. It's not known how he survived the Depression years, only that for a short time he became the driver of a work truck and tea-maker for the crew of young workmen (by sheer co-incidence one of whom was to become his son-in-law). The diversity my grandfather faced during this time must have been utterly demoralising.

But, somehow he survived, and in his senior years, he spent sweet times with his daughters and their young families, became a member of the lending library in Sydney and attended concerts. According to my mother, reading and the theatre were his true passions in life. Was this finally his 'right time'?

I am, by chance, the descendent of these two people. Somehow, their paths converged and their offspring became my parents. Now I know the adversities they both faced and endured, I have the greatest respect for their lives and times. I can barely comprehend the loss and suffering they experienced, and the stiff and unbending strictures of the social mores that governed their times. The people they became shaped my parents, and, in turn, shaped me.

In stark contrast, my life has been loving and fulfilled, with opportunities, choices, family network, travel, and a wonderful family to share all this with. I'd like to think that a passive nature and a feisty independence are what have been handed down. I have worked hard to carve my niche in life with my husband and children, and now we sit comfortably in our retirement. What a difference a century has made. We have experienced extraordinary social and economic changes during our lives, ones that have shaped our own destinies. The freedoms of our youth are no longer viable, but these have been altered for a more technologically-oriented norm of today. And, there is yet another generation to add to the family tree.

What will the future hold for them? Will their lives be shaped as dramatically as my grandparent's lives were? What kinds of adversity will they have to face? That is something I will probably never know, but I will make sure they know how they came to be. I love the fact that I have a grasp of this 'today-technology' to help me know my grandparents and to know how their lives evolved.

I will never know how the actions and decisions of my generation will influence future generations, and I cannot presume to say that my grandparents didn't experience happiness. But I am in the here and now, a small generational space in life's great scheme. For me, the freedoms and opportunities to live an unfettered and fulfilling life, unthought-of in times past, have surpassed anything my grandparents may have dreamt of.

Yes, for me, it's the 'right time'.

The Silent Feminist

Leonie Huggins

Murwillumbah

Alice trudged down the track towards the main road, shuffling her sandalled feet on the rust coloured soil, coating them with fine red talc. The setting sun was capped by a luminous pink sky, covering the parched landscape, and Alice's face and arms, with apricot glaze.

However, Alice was in no mood to appreciate the scenery. Her mood was mutinous, her thoughts tumbling. It wasn't her turn to collect the mail! It was Margaret's! Mother had no right! But there was no point in answering back. In their house, there never was.

Alice reached the gate, unchained the catch and looked inside the old milk can which served as a mailbox. There were none of the crusty bakery loaves that used to be delivered on Fridays. That had stopped, like many other things, as the drought tightened its grip on Mother's purse strings and Father's temper.

There was a brown paper parcel from Anthony Hordern's Department Store, tied with string. Alice thought longingly of the blue chiffon dress she had seen in the last catalogue. She imagined wearing it to the dance and the way that Jimmy Martin would look at her when she did. With great excitement, she had showed it to Mother, who had responded with a regretful shake of her head.

Alice pushed the string aside and tried to peek inside, but could see nothing. It was probably a shirt for Father. The children never wore store bought clothes. Mother sewed them all, her Singer treadle machine whirring for hours on most afternoons.

There were three letters, all for her parents. Two were bland anonymous envelopes, but the third made her catch her breath. The envelope had the school crest on the left-hand corner. It was her school report!

Alice skipped to the gate, latched it quickly behind her, and started the mile back to the house with a spring in her step. She knew her report would be good. Mrs Hutchinson had said the school was proud of her. She had encouraged Alice to return next year and go on to the Leaving Certificate.

The back-kitchen door clicked shut behind her as Alice moved quickly through the connecting walkway to the veranda of the main house. At first, she heard nothing, but as she came closer to the front room she heard soft voices through the open French doors.

Mother and Mrs Paterson were seated on the brown Chesterfield lounge. Two Royal Doulton tea cups with matching saucers and cake plates sat on the low table. The crumbs on the plates were a caution in themselves. It was rare for either lady to take time off for afternoon tea.

Alice knew the old adage that those who listen uninvited hear no good of themselves, but was unable to tear herself away. She stepped out of view and pressed herself to the wall.

'I really don't know how we will manage. What with the drought and the wool prices the way they are,' Mother said.

Mrs Paterson murmured something soothing.

Mother's voice was high and stretched. 'I've been so careful! I really thought it couldn't happen again. I had such trouble when Sophie was born. The doctor said that I mustn't have any more.'

'When is it expected then?'

'Sometime around the middle of June,' Mother's voice wobbled. 'Oh, the thought of going through all that again. The sleepless nights... getting up in the freezing cold. It's more than I can bear.'

Alice strained to hear. The leather seat creaked as Mrs Paterson leaned towards Mother. 'There, there, Evelyn. There's no point in getting upset. I'll give you a hand whenever I can. Perhaps Mabel Stokes might be able to spare one of her girls to help. You know, just for the first few months.'

Mother sighed heavily. 'I've already thought of that. It's no good. We can't afford it. Besides, Bill will expect our girls to help out.'

Finally, Mother continued, her voice stronger. 'It's God's will, after all. I'll just have to make the best of things. The worst of it is that Alice won't be able to go back to school. It's such a shame. She wants to be a teacher. That's why I sent her away. You must remember, Bill was so against it.'

'How could I forget? Bill kicked up a fuss, alright. He doesn't believe in book learnin' for girls.'

'I wish there were another way, but it's the only option.' Mother sighed.

'And I wish I could help more, but with things the way they are ...' Mrs Paterson's voice faded, then brightened. 'Maybe it will be a boy this time. That would make Bill happy.'

Alice pressed against the wall, stifling her scream to silence. Scalded by disappointment, she slid slowly to the floor.

'What's going on here, girlie? You up to no good, or what?'

Alice scrambled to her feet, trying to conceal both her guilt and tears.

'I, I've got the mail,' Father. I...I was just bringing it to Mother.'

'It's alright, Bill. Let Alice come in here, I need to talk to her. Marge has just left.' Alice's head pivoted towards her unlikely saviour. She followed on unsteady feet.

'I have a feeling you already know what I have to say,' said her mother, drawing Alice down beside her. 'Your face tells me that you overheard us talking.'

Alice nodded, her eyes filling with hot tears. She couldn't speak, but held out the letters and parcel.

'I'm truly sorry, Alice. I know how disappointed you are. You probably don't believe me, right now, but you will find ways to love your life, just as it is. We women have to, you know.' Mother leaned forward and placed a rare kiss on Alice's forehead.

'Oh, what good timing,' Mother picked up the brown paper parcel. 'This is for you. Off with you now and open it.'

As Alice turned away, she saw the three letters, unopened on the side table. The one from school was on top.

The Window of Time

Sheila Drakeley

Umina Beach

Looking through the window of time, I welcome glimpses of childhood as they slide into view. The after school freedom as my brother and I run down the hill to the railway bridge, stop to make a wish as a train roars overhead, then race on to the fields. We fish for tadpoles in the stream flowing alongside, and if we're lucky, take our catch home in jam jars to await the arrival of tiny jumping frogs. Smiling faces one morning when we see them jumping from the outdoor laundry, up the steps and into the kitchen. Oh dear, now a glimpse of my mum with a broom gently sweeping the tiny intruders into an old saucepan insisting we return them to their home in the stream.

Later when living at my grandparent's house ... there's my haven, the upstairs room with wall to wall bookcases where my love of books was born. Sitting on an old couch overlooking the garden, I leaf through crisp pages of stories far too old for me, my finger tracing the letters as my mind creates stories from the jumble of words.

There's Grandpa, and we're walking through the gate at the bottom of the garden with his dog, Tammy. Ambling along a pathway at the side of the cornfields, he chats about his bike rides in the Pennine Chain and his school days. Happy smiles take away the sadness of living away from my mum and brother as we walk and talk.

Home again. My mother's re-married and we're living in my Step-Dad's house where we have three older siblings to share our lives with. A learning experience of patience and understanding for all of us. But, as Grandpa often told me ... 'Look on the bright side and things will work out for the best'. And they did.

So, childhood was where lessons of life began. Balancing the good and bad times only comes from living those experiences.

Glimpses of teenage years come into view. Young love is wonderful but painful when romance falls apart. This again is a learning experience, although memory reminds me how quickly teenagers fall in love again.

I see my first day as a working girl. Feeling grown-up on my bus journey to the city but well remember the attack of butterflies in my stomach when meeting my boss and his stern looking secretary for the first time. As junior member of the team it was my job to make the tea, do the filing and deliver messages to other departments. Walking aimlessly, lost in that huge building balancing tea cups on a tray a kindly lady, seeing my plight, points me in the right direction to the office.

Again Grandpa's words come to mind ... 'You start at the bottom of the ladder and gradually work your way up gaining confidence with every step'. By the way, I should mention he was a lay preacher at the local Congregational Church and his quotes have proven most helpful along life's journey.

Glimpses of our wedding day are recalled; a joyous occasion shared with family and friends. Whoops, on our way to the reception the bouquet Mum's dear friend created for me as a wedding gift, had fallen apart in the taxi. Smiles from the driver as roses scattered the floor and a fit of giggles from the bride. The wonderful honeymoon over and it was back to work where I stepped up the ladder to assistant secretary.

My career speeds out of the pictures when our first child is born on Christmas Day. There is no greater love of life than the unforgettable experience of holding our precious child for the first time. The moment is expressed with overwhelming tenderness for the new life created and bond embedded forever in our hearts.

Glimpses of life pass quickly as we take on the responsibility of bringing up our four children. Watching them grow, sharing their ups and downs is both a responsible and rewarding challenge. Inevitably as well as happiness, mistakes are made on both sides along the way. There's me placing photographs in an album, one of the Christmas tree, the other of our son's Christmas Day birthday cake. The glimpses refuse to slow down and the time has arrived when, one by one, they're leaving home to begin life's journey. I see tears are on my face as the door closes behind them.

Joy again as grandchildren come into view bringing memories of their laughter and chatter ringing through the house. The pleasure of caring for them after school and during school holidays renewed our life as we saw things and places through their eyes. Years skim by as they too become mature adults preparing for life away from home.

The glimpses jump way ahead to retirement. A new life experience and the time of freedom we'd looked forward to. I see the hobby and sport groups we joined and the friends we made along the way. The choices were plentiful and gave a new lease of life in our retirement years. Travel and places visited are remembered along with the other memories in family albums.

My glimpses passed over the sad and difficult times but the ones seen show me how full life has been and ... my window of time isn't over yet.

My walks on the beach, my books, the theatre, movies and dear friends at the writers' group continue to give pleasure. And now without my partner, it is heart-warming to know my family and friends are always close at hand.

On closing the window, I recall another of Grandpa's quotes. 'Life, with its many twists and turns are like chapters in a book, they keep you guessing until the end'.

Touchstone

Ann Eyers

Narrabeen

The cold salt water tickles my toes and shocks my senses as the ocean closes over my head and locks me into briny silence. When I burst from beneath the waves to gulp salt laden air, I know how good it is to be alive.

The ocean has always been the touchstone against which I've tested my physical and mental strength. The inherent dangers of trifling with its unpredictable whims is irresistible to me.

In the post war 1940s my cousin Beth and I shared a swimming costume.

'Hurry up and get out of the water,' I'd shout to her as I urged her into one of the first three places in her swimming race at Balmoral baths. That gave me time to suit up for my race. But for all the joy of the ocean I had then and still have, I can't match it with ability.

As soon as I hit the water I feel like an excitable puppy, unable to disentangle my limbs from each other as they become agitated and uncoordinated by over enthusiasm. This creates a dangerous liaison between the sea and me. But still I return to it, again and again.

In high school I was offered the opportunity of attempting a life-saving certificate at Dee Why ocean pool. It was a lesser certificate than the Bronze Medallion so I thought I may be able to manage it. I reasoned that there must be some worse swimmers than me whose life I could potentially save.

My good friend, Judy counselled me on style. Hers was smooth and energy saving, mine wildly thrashing and exhausting. I barely managed the certificate but when somebody called, 'Let's jump off the rocks and swim in.'

I threw myself off the rocks with gusto to swim to the beach through the surf. The thrill of the challenge made me breathless.

I seemed to catch wave after wave, only to be slurped back to where I'd started. I considered allowing myself to be deposited by a wave back on to the rocks and possible safety. Then I had a flash vision of my body, like a collapsed string puppet being worked by the waves. Judy and others 'talked' me on to a safe wave back to the beach.

My brother Howard has hauled me out of the surf several times, handing over the responsibility of talking me out of rips to my husband, John when I married. In recent years the task has been delegated to Howard's wife, Nanette or daughters, Belinda or Samantha. They guide me from the beach through the shore break into safe waters before trouble strikes.

When our first child, Rebekah was born we lived right on North Narrabeen beach with the enticing sound of the waves crashing onto the sand. More than once I had to ask a board rider to give me a lift back to the beach after drifting towards New Zealand in the runout.

By the time of the arrival of our second child, Michael, we were living at Avalon. Though a hill separated us from the sea, I could still hear the waves beating against the cliff.

We lived an idyllic life with friends, Marie and Bob and our combined children, swimming every day, and evenings too when our work was done.

I was thankful that my precious children became accomplished swimmers capable of saving themselves without my assistance.

Howard and John pursued a passion for horses during our years in Avalon. In order to live a combined rural and beach life we moved to the Central Coast where we could enjoy both.

Travelling further north, niece, Tanya has spent countless beach holidays at Nelson Bay with me, providing the snorkel and goggles to view the underwater world in a fantastic sanctuary, alert but not alarmed by my incompetence.

Even further north, on a visit to the top of Australia with dear friends in recent years, we daily observed a crocodile just hanging in the water not far from shore. We were assured he was a pet but even so we didn't swim in that water but went around to the next beach for our swim where we were told he didn't venture. We considered it prudent to listen to the best advice on crocodiles.

On a surfing safari in Sri Lanka last year with Nanette and Belinda, I experimented with a plan to exit the surf by laying on my back in the water where the waves were breaking. I thought the approaching waves would roll me gently on to the sand. It was the wave of the day that lifted me up and shot me, as if from a cannon, a good way up the beach, still on my back and chewing sand. That gave us a good laugh.

Recently, by an odd happenstance, I've been given refuge in a beautiful water view apartment in a place of caring people. I'm able to wake in the morning to the vision of the rising sun turning the black silhouette of the hill opposite to orange and red against a purple sky. It gives me time to snatch my coffee and be in position on the balcony and watch the sun rise out of an ocean thumping rhythmically on to the sand like a tribal heartbeat. It reminds me of why I hold views which strongly support the conservation of both land and sea for all future life to inherit.

These days my body is held together with surgical steel. I find it difficult to maintain my balance in the beach sand so I've obtained some quirky new aids which I'm keen to trial.

Autumn is here now and winter is coming but I know spring will morph into summer and the call of the sea will become strong again.

Some sunny day when the surface of the water is a carpet of winking diamonds I'll take up my new aids and become a part of the ocean's magic once more.

Travel Adventure Career What's Next?

Vicki Stewart

Forster

I wanted three things – travel, adventure, career. But in 1960s Australia, opportunities were limited for a 14 year-old female from a lower working class family living in a working class city. The exact details of how I was to accomplish these three goals escaped me at the time. I was a typical self-involved teenager – short attention span, full of angst, self-conscious, with practically zero self-knowledge. But, undeterred, I set out on my quest by immediately applying for every job in the 'Help Wanted Female' classifieds of the local paper, regardless of the listed requirements. And it worked. I took on a series of jobs in the city and country, all interesting, all different. I made my own way, made my own opportunities. And I accomplished my goals. From this foundation of multiple jobs and experiences, I travelled and lived in foreign countries, made plenty of time for adventures, and kept up-to-date with advances in my IT career.

It wasn't always smooth sailing. I do carry many regrets about things I could have done differently, things I should have done, things I shouldn't have done, opportunities missed. But, now in my 7th decade, I look back with admiration and love for that 14 year-old, her optimism, her daring. She wasn't happy about her circumstances, her lack of education, breeding and manners, or the second-class status of women at that time. But she forged ahead, she succeeded, she reached her goals.

Self-help gurus offer three necessities for a contented life – *something to look forward to*, *something to do*, *someone to love*. Three new goals. I accomplished my first three, these new ones should be a doddle, right?

'Someone to love' is a given. My partner of 47 years, while not in the best of health, puts his best foot forward every day. He puts in the effort regardless.

What's not to love? And we have a little clowder of rescue cats, and we love them all to bits.

'Something to look forward to' is a little more precarious. Health and finances enforce limitations. This goal has been scaled back to the simple things. Lunch out at the club surrounded by other retirees, rather than a 'Twitter worthy' dinner at an expensive restaurant surrounded by 20-somethings. Photography day trips to close-by landmarks, parks, and events, instead of the grand (and expensive and stressful) annual overseas trip. Checking the 'what's on' listing in the local paper for ideas to plan for excursions.

'Something to do', now that I'm well settled into retirement, has been simplified to a little yard work, a little gardening, a daily walk, a little volunteering, family history research, indulging my love of reading, and binge watching favourite TV series. Slowing down is not so bad after all.

I still struggle with making each day meaningful, to feel that I have accomplished something, however small, each and every day. Throughout my life I was an obsessive list maker. I gave that up a few years ago when I accepted the slower rhythm of my life and the restrictions imposed by age and uneven health. Maybe I should renew that habit, recognise the accomplishment of checking off completed items.

Some years ago, when working a particularly stressful job in a foreign city, I tried keeping a Gratitude Journal, noting three things every day that I was grateful for. I wasn't very accomplished at it, making banal and commonplace entries – 'A beautiful sunny day', 'Easy commute to work this morning', 'Cafeteria had crispy bacon', 'The boss was in a good mood', 'X has stopped wearing that dreadful perfume',

'Had a good night's sleep'. I stopped making entries simply because they were so embarrassingly banal.

But now, after slowing down and having the time to appreciate the ordinary, I may just start another Gratitude Journal. On page 1 will be the big ticket items like, *'Clean safe water to drink'*, *'My trash gets picked up every week'*, *'Good medical care'*, etc. The daily entries though, will acknowledge the ordinary, along the lines of, *'Saw dolphins on the morning walk'*, *'A kookaburra laughing on next door's antenna'*, *'Bees buzzing in the lavender'*, *'The new blanket is wonderfully warm'*, *'Two king parrots in the bird bath'*. I love the simplicity of this slow and relaxed life I'm settling into.

Travelling

Sandra Grant

Soliders Point

We're in the final countdown of the preparation for a substantial trip. It's been in the planning for about eight months but we've left most of the hard work to our travel agent, preferring his experience to hours of trawling the internet and some pot luck.

In these last weeks it's more about what is being left behind than the adventures before us; the mail, the dog, the house and garden, bills to be paid; allocating tasks to our willing friends and relatives.

The trip itself is about retracing our steps from nearly twenty years ago. Our first cruise and trip to Canada and parts of America came swiftly in the wake of 9/11. We left on the Saturday following the Tuesday of that terrorist attack which was to have far-reaching effects for the world. We, carrying our 'alien' passports, were searched everywhere we ventured in America. Our dollar, previously healthy by comparison to the U.S. dollar, had dive-bombed to half the value of the greenback. People were wary of strangers and fiercely patriotic. We witnessed the tensions which at once had drawn people together in patriotism but had also made U.S. citizens wary of strangers and each other. We were extra careful in all our conversations.

At home I'm sure our friends and relatives were concerned for us.

Our cruise from Vancouver up through the Inside Passage was a wonderful escape from the world. The ship had less than half the number of passengers who had booked passage, leaving us to be spoiled by a full complement of crew. The Alaskan wilderness was vast and quiet and beautiful as it drifted past our ship. We watched the sea for pods of Orca whales and scoured the shoreline hoping to see bears. At each of the ports we chose to 'wing it', wandering off on our own, exploring the local museums and making our own discoveries. We

were not internet addicts in those days so we knew little of what was happening in the world apart from the ship.

I hope this time, to be every bit as awestruck with the expanse of mountains and wilderness as in 2001. I'm sure the scenery will be as impressive. I will listen to people giving expert commentary about the history and I will take a stack of photos to prompt my memory when we return.

Just as interesting as the trip, is the reflection on where the inspiration to travel comes from. We will be flying across Canada to see parts of Nova Scotia, a place that has been imbedded in my memory since reading 'Anne of Green Gables'. Our first really big trip was of course to England and parts of Europe. My husband wished to see the Cornish fishing village where his father had spent his childhood before migrating to Australia and my high school French teacher inspired our trip to France.

I'm not sure that I ever believed I would visit the places I discovered in books. 'Travel' in my childhood was something that rich people did and the closest thing to it, in my family was the occasional Christmas holiday to a coastal camping ground or visits to relatives in the country.

In the last twenty years, thanks to the reward of Long Service Leave, I have travelled to Europe, Africa, Canada, North and South America and Asia as well as throughout Australia and New Zealand.

I remember that first long trip to Europe during the Northern winter and apart from the historical places and the quaint little towns which sticks in my memory, is the subtlety of the light. It shows in all the photos I took. When we returned home the lurid green of the vegetation and the brilliance of the sky hurt my eyes for some days.

I have gained a better understanding of different cultures, history, geography and myself. I always enjoy planning a new trip and researching the places we'll visit but I know that I'll be looking forward to returning home. 'Home' is to be embraced by all that is familiar; family, friends and particularly my surroundings. Nothing will come close to the beauty of the place where we have lived for the last sixteen years; where visiting family and friends always remark on how lucky we are. From my kitchen window I can see dolphins in the bay and the squadrons of pelicans that lazily circle overhead. I can watch sheets of rain sweeping towards us as storms approach and once the holiday crowds have departed, it is the most tranquil of places.

Travel is a great adventure and one of the most rewarding parts of it is to be reminded of the pleasure of coming home.

Trekking's the Way

Pamela Irving

Narrabeen

"Boris! The indignity! The indignity!"

Boris Johnson ambled past, blonde forelock wafting in the breeze. The toilet bowl, tethered between his humps, swayed way above our heads.

We sympathised with him whenever the caravan of 17 camels and eight horses overtook us as we walked along the river valley. Boris already stood out, being one of only two pale coats in the long line of darker camels. The rest carried tents, food, cooking gear and baggage. But Boris had drawn the short straw and was destined to carry the full-sized plastic toilet bowl each day from camp to camp, where it was placed above a hastily dug hole and surrounded by a plastic shelter for modesty.

Boris complained each morning as the toilet was lashed between his humps, a deep rumbling emerging from his open jaws when the ropes were pulled ever tighter around his chest. However he wasn't alone with his complaints – all the camels grumbled as their loads were piled on, whether from the tightness of the ropes, the weight on their back, or just because they would have preferred not to walk, it was impossible to know.

The owner of the camels and boss of the expedition was a much respected man in the community, I was told on the first day. He rode his small horse, sometimes with the walkers, at other times with the caravan, dressed in his purplish traditional Mongolian brocade coat, belted around the waist with yards of yellow cloth. The coat buttoned across one shoulder and was bloused up above the belt as a pouch to hold whatever he needed through the day. A bone-coloured Fedora hat and trendy sun glasses were perfect accessories. He was the height of cool and we named him Johnny Depp. He had a beautiful smile with very white teeth but always looked stern when being

photographed. His status didn't stop him helping the wranglers load and unload the camels, dragging heavy bags side by side with his staff. Meal breaks would find them all sitting together, chatting and drinking.

Our trek was in the Altai Mountains in north west Mongolia near the borders with China, Russia and Kazakhstan. The staff – animal wranglers, cooks, kitchen hands and guides – were all ethnically Kazakh and therefore Muslim in a predominately Buddhist Mongolia, but following decades of communism, many Mongolians are now atheists.

Even though we walked for nine days through the mountains with no villages or roads it didn't seem like wilderness. Most days we'd see a few round white gers in the distance, the traditional large tents used by the nomadic Mongolians while they grazed their flocks of sheep and goats, and herds of horses, cows and yaks. A couple of times young children cantered up on their horses – a caravan of foreigners walking through their land was a curious sight indeed, and no doubt a welcome distraction from herding animals all day.

Inside the gers we were served tea made from boiling mare's milk and dried fingers of yoghurt or cheese. It was a real family home – pictures and decorations on the walls, several beds and a little wood stove for cooking and warmth. A dried cow's stomach hung from the wall, used to store the processed milk products. Fuel for the stove was animal dung, collected and dried in the sun.

Cairns marked the top of mountain passes and were decorated with coloured cloth and other offerings. Animist beliefs still linger in these isolated mountains. Believers walked around the cairns several times and once I saw Johnny Depp light dried herbs he'd carried, the breeze fanning the smell down the hillside.

Generations of nomads with grazing animals have turned these steep rolling hills and river valleys into green grassy lawns, any trees or bushes long ago nipped off before growing high enough to deter herbivores.

One day it rained all day, one day it was sunny all day, and on the rest we had everything in between, real Melbourne weather. I climbed a very steep hill for about 20 minutes wearing a Merino thermal underwear top, long sleeved shirt, fleece jacket, goose-down parka and gortex jacket, but wasn't hot when I reached the top. And this was mid-summer! Winter didn't bear thinking about.

The rivers were narrow and shallow, but fast-flowing. The first time we had to cross, a rope was strung between the banks and with a wrangler either side we clung to the rope, wading through the thigh-deep icy water. There were 18 of us to get to the other side and the same young guys went back and forth, thoroughly soaked. When it was my turn, I tried to hold up the young man on my right arm as he was struggling as much as I was. Eventually it was decided riding a horse was a better idea and from then on we forded rivers on horseback. I found this almost as precarious as the wading – the horses were too small for large westerners, the saddles tiny with short stirrups. I was familiar with horses, having ridden a lot in my younger years but felt I was perched on top, not at all part of the horse.

I would have liked to have removed my feet from the stirrups and let my legs dangle, but thought I might be told off.

Our nine days of the Raj ended undramatically with the caravan silently departing in the early hours of the morning, back the way they came. I'd like to think the toilet was allotted to another beast and that Boris at last regained his dignity ...

Unlocking The Memory

Jill Curtin

Northwood

My mother is in her ninety-sixth year, has advanced dementia and lives in an aged-care home. She is well looked after, but never happy. Her discontent has given me pause for thought. It worried me that my mother who has lived to a fine old age, no longer loved life.

I wanted to find the key to unlock the personality of the fair, pretty girl with the laughing eyes, that I see in the old family 'box brownie' snaps. To lift her spirits, I needed to wind back her memory over seventy years to a time before I was born.

There is such a large part of a parent's life which their children never see. Those first thirty years or so, before children are born or are merely infants, are hidden. That period of time can equate to a third of an average lifespan. Family photographs can give a clue as to the lives our parents led, the company they kept and where they were living. But a person's life is more than the sum of those simple facts. Joy, fears, anxieties, the whole gamut of emotions are only revealed if the parent chooses to disclose them and even then, the telling might not be the truth.

In trying to understand my own mother I have pondered the question, what if I could ask other family members or friends who were there in those early years to tell me about my mother, would I understand her better? In the case of my family, that's not possible as my mother's only sibling, a brother, died during World War 2 and both her parents are dead and her friends too predeceased her before I thought to ask them.

Even as a child I could feel my mother's discontent. She was itching for a freedom that eluded her. Sometimes her anger could barely be contained and bubbled to the surface with little provocation. She was a 'flag carrier' for that generation of young women suppressed to such a degree that allowing

them to find themselves was too much trouble and too disruptive to those people who depended on them to be reliable, compliant, obedient and non-challenging.

I know my mother did have happy times – those old photographs are the 'give-away'. She had her moments of glory, her 'fifteen minutes of fame' which artist Andy Warhol provokingly says is our due. During World War 2 my mother was employed by the Australian Navy in its Cypher Department at Potts Point. In order to be accepted for this job she had to pass a high security clearance test, which she did. Her brother was a sub-lieutenant in the Navy having joined the Service after leaving school in 1937. He was a career sailor.

Those were my mother's salad days – working at Potts Point gave her all she wanted in life. I know this because whenever there is any reference to warships or battles involving the Australian Navy, my mother, even now after all these years, can recall the dates, the ships, even the names of some of the ships' captains. Her recollections are astounding. This was her passion. There is no doubt she loved life then. She was valued for her knowledge, her ability to use the cypher machine with accuracy, her attention to her work and her enthusiasm to do her job well. The work not only satisfied her longing to be useful it also gave her a social life and a close circle of friends all working to serve their country in a time of need. Despite the seriousness of the war situation, my mother was fully engaged with life and loving it. Even the death of her own brother on active service only seemed to heighten her need to work and do her best. Then it all stopped.

The war was over, women were expected to step down and return to their former roles, whatever that entailed. My mother left the protection of her parents' home to become a wife and mother to a

man ten years her senior who was set in his ways. This was meant to make her happy! My father wasn't a villain by any means. He was faithful, a good provider and generally a genial person, but he didn't have interests outside the home apart from his work.

The enthusiasm with which my mother speaks of those war years even now has led me to believe that her life diminished when her job with the Navy finished. Never again was she to feel the stimulation that work gave her. Never again did she feel she made a difference. Gone was that feeling of getting up in the morning with a sense of purpose and rushing off to work and being appreciated for doing just that little bit more than was required because she felt her job was worth it.

My mother can't have been alone. There must have been so many women like her who tasted the freedom work gave her but then gave it up peremptorily.

My mother had a great sense of duty to be a good wife and mother but this restrained her. She was shackled to domesticity, but not in the way it was portrayed in the advertisements of the 1950's which show the happy housewife with a frilly white apron. For my mother and many like her, the apron was more of a manacle.

Now when I visit her, we go back in time, we speak about the warships in the harbour, the steep, stone steps in Woolloomooloo that she climbed each day on her way to work, the many handsome young sailors visiting Sydney who escorted her to glamorous nightclubs like 'Romanos', 'Princes' or 'The Trocadero'. Her eyes light up – she loves life again. Certainly, "The years have turned the rusted key"⁷ but it is still possible to unlock the door of memory.

7 From Around the Boree Log, John O'Brien

Warming with Love

Judith Bond

Campbelltown

Click clack, knit knit, oh to warm the receiver with Love!

A pair of bamboo knitting needles size 4.5 and 15 balls of eight-ply yarn! Fifty stitches, fifty rows and two hours later, one knitted square is completed. Only 27 more to knit!

Two months later, the twenty-eight brightly knitted squares are finished. A layout on the floor. Does yellow go here or there? Where does pink fit in? Oh, the challenge to complete a colourful design. Yes, wow, how bright the blanket will be.

The squares are hand sewn together and a crochet border on the outside edge completes the blanket. The handy work is checked. Does it meet the standard and requirements, with no loose threads? It is delivered to the warehouse. Oh yes, it passes!

It is neatly folded and packed with nine other blankets into one yellow heavy-duty plastic bag. More blankets and more bags are packed. Ten bags are sealed, picked up, trucked to a charity collection centre. They are loaded into a container and shipped overseas to Cambodia.

After port clearance, the container is emptied. The ten yellow bags are taken by tuk-tuk to the Director of a school in the outer slum area Phnom Penh. They are stored in one large room, used as a storeroom and for staff meetings.

The following week, a staff meeting was held. Out of curiosity, one young female staff member is keen to see what is inside the yellow plastic bags. A bag is opened, and one colourful blanket is taken out. In awe, this teacher picks up a blanket and wraps it around her shoulders. In her excitement, she comments, 'this is my wedding dress'. That comment shows the value and high price of such an item.

This person, an orphan, was abandoned as a baby and left on the steps of a church in a remote farming village of Cambodia. She has lived in an orphanage all her life and always had to share items.

Much to her absolute delight and thrill, this teacher was given the blanket by the Director's wife. She was overjoyed to receive such a gift for herself. She was speechless to receive her own and overcome with emotion. To see her receive the love that was created in the making of this blanket was so heart-warming.

In Cambodia and most Asian countries, gifts are not given at Christmas or for birthdays, so to receive a personal gift is very rare.

A week later, the yellow bags were loaded into the back of a pickup truck. After a five-hour drive to northeast Cambodia, down a dusty track, over a rickety bridge, the truck arrives at a remote village. This village has a school established, with children walking over thirty minutes to learn to read and write.

That day, the ninety-nine children at school were instructed to enter the biggest classroom and sit on the floor, unaware at the gift of love that they were about to receive.

After a few songs in their native language and rote saying times tables, the Director informed the students that they were to receive a gift. That this gift was 'one gift for one child for one life'.

The yellow bags were brought to the front of the room, opened and the contents ready to be given.

As the students lined up, one blanket was put into the hands of each child. But before each received, it was hands together and a bow by the child. This is their custom to express thanks. The giver needed to wait until this action was finished in turn, by every child.

These children have never received such a gift and were in awe to hold their very own blanket. As each hugged their own, they were so happy and speechless. When school was dismissed, beaming with delight, they hurriedly skipped the dusty wind-swept tracks to their home, holding their very own colourful blanket. Oh, the warmth of love that first night would be remembered for life!

In this rural area, the afternoon winds blow, and the nights are cold. In their bamboo thatched huts, families huddle together for warmth. Their parents are subsistence farmers, living from day to day.

Now one teacher and ninety-nine children each have their own hand knitted blanket, a gift of love for life, from Australia.

I am reminded that it is more blessed to give than receive.

One Gift for One Child for One Life

Watery Embrace

David Dodd

Sapphire Beach

It's not like I'm peering into an abyss or anything. It's choppy down there, but it seems so far down when standing at the top.

How long will it take?

Will it hurt?

The white underbelly of a Virgin jet roars ridiculously close overhead on its descent path into Coffs Harbour Airport. There's a hundred or so passengers up there who are totally oblivious to what I'm about to do.

And what a stunning day as a flock of feathery witnesses wheels down to perch along the steel safety rails near me. About twenty silver gulls I'd guess, but I'm unsure: my mind is elsewhere. I lean over the rails again and survey the chop below me. A piece of clear plastic bobs up and down on the broken water; possibly a bait bag discarded thoughtlessly by a fisherman, but I don't care at this moment of time despite my abhorrence of ocean pollution.

How did I get to this point in my life?

What was the actual trigger that made me so resolute about today?

There were other choices. Other options for this day.

Under a scorching February sun, I momentarily reflect on my absolute fear of edges. It's a morbid fear, it's not even about heights. It's just that I've always believed there's a law of physics which holds that the closer you get to an edge, the pull over that edge increases proportionally, until it becomes irresistible and gravity takes over. I'm sure it's a universal truth. Aren't others aware of it?

It's the law of physics that I discovered as a skinny ten-year-old when peer pressure coerced me up the steps of the high diving board at the Kempsey Municipal Swimming Pool. Standing alone at the edge of the platform, looking downwards at a gaggle of boys treading water below, faces up-turned and shrieking as they egged me on. And that feeling of utter loneliness as the law of physics took over and sucked me roughly from the safety of that concrete diving platform. I'd changed my mind mid spring and the action of trying to undo the dive at the last minute had thrown my action out of synch. With all the grace of a plummeting brick, I smacked the water. My first high dive was a massive belly flop. Water rushed up my nose and my guts felt like they'd been ripped open. Spluttering to the surface, tears in my eyes and strings of snot dangling from my nose, my mates roared their approval of the entertainment value of my massive fail. Yes, it was precisely that moment in 1963 when my lifelong fear of edges took root.

But, c'mon ... ageing ain't for sissies!

Face your fears!

My head is flooding with reasons why I shouldn't be here now. At this place, leaning over the rail, 50 years later. Staring into the abyss. Yep, this will all be over quickly.

I tentatively climb the rail. The ocean below me is calling my name. Or perhaps it's the haunting lure of sirens. I'm only jumping, so there won't be a belly flop again. And I'm resolute. No attempt to turn back. I *will* conquer this irrational fear. As I step off the top rail, my thin whimpers are rendered inaudible by the enthusiastic whoops and shouts of

support offered up by my family. My wife, adult kids and my grandkids have lined the edge of the Coffs Harbour Jetty to support Pardy as he faces his fears and makes his first jetty jump. It's a rite of passage for many Coffs Harbour teenagers, but I'd avoided jetty jumping until the morning of my 60th birthday.

It feels like an eternity in the air before the ocean rushes to meet and envelop me in its unexpectedly cold, watery embrace. There's a slight stinging under my arms. Made the novice's mistake of putting my arms outwards as though I was flying. Then the ocean spits me upwards and I explode to the surface, whooping and fist pumping at the ten grinning faces peering downwards. The row of seagulls on the rail also seemingly offers up its raucous support. I'm feeling a tingle of exhilaration, and a sense of liberation. I've done it.

I'm unsure if I'll do it again for my 70th.

Weightless

Elaine Staples

North Richmond

Bella, unwisely, was standing, fresh from the shower, in front of her full-length mirror, realising that not only was she vertically challenged but horizontally challenged as well. In effect, she was thinking that she looked like an inverted mushroom or maybe a rotund doughnut which made a plump tear roll down her plump cheek.

She realised that she couldn't do anything about being vertically challenged because it ran in the family but, having attended an author talk about 'Positive Thinking' at the local library, she felt she should do something positive about being horizontally challenged so she shuffled off to get a cup of tea and a Scotch Finger biscuit while she thought about it.

Life in the retirement village was slower now that she was 'getting-on-a-bit', and now that she was getting pleasantly plump (cross out pleasantly), she felt she needed a challenge.

A kind neighbour drove Bella to the Mall where firstly she visited the pharmacist to drop in a lump of prescriptions. In that Chemist shop there was a weighing machine which, unwisely, Bella stood on while it announced to everyone within earshot that Bella weighed one hundred kilos, which made another plump tear roll down the other plump cheek.

After puffing around with the supermarket trolley Bella spied a magazine at the newsagent about 'Weightlessness'. Realising she had to lose some weight she bought it, expecting to find the usual ridiculous recipes and suggestions for diets. Ridiculous because she already ate healthy frozen food, with a Magnum for dessert, washed down with a ginger beer. Secretly Bella thought the problem might be the Scotch Fingers accompanying her cups of tea so she vowed to cut them out sometime, probably when hell freezes over.

The magazine turned out to be all about space travel, astronauts; a new world. She was delighted, engrossed, even more so when she discovered that people had applied and were being interviewed for *Colonisation of the moon*. She read: there would be *domes*. Domes to live in, cook in and grow produce. Scientific equipment in hospital domes, a gym, a hairdresser, an entertainment dome and she hoped there would be a coffee shop dome with a good supply of Scotch Fingers.

Bella was so interested that her Scotch Finger fell into her tea. Trembling with excitement she 'phoned the magazine people to get information about an application form. She spoke to a journalist but she had to repeat everything twice, especially when she mentioned her age whereupon he became quite breathless. He promised to send an application form. He said his name was Fred Johnson.

Now, Bella was not casting aspersions upon the Public Service but it was a well-known fact that if it's at all possible they will stuff it up, no matter what 'it' happens to be. Well, apparently because her D.O.B. on the form was unreadable, she was summoned for an interview together with six strapping young guys, all successful applicants. The interview geek person seemed surprised to see her sitting amongst young male hunk applicants and became suspicious. 'Excuse me; did you put in an application form?'

'Yes, I did. My name is Bella.'

'Now I remember I saw your application form and thought it was good to have a female applicant. I remember your date of birth was not legible. How old are you Bella?'

'Well' said Bella 'I've gone a bit over the three score years and ten.'

Some of the hunks snickered. The scientific person was smirking when he said 'I think you'll find it not feasible Bella and I'm sorry if you've been caused any inconvenience.'

Bella quietly murmured 'I have your advertisement with me which states that all successful applicants will be offered full and extensive training. So, thank you, I accept.'

When the meeting was over, the science nerd person rushed to advise his superiors of the latest stuff up who roared, 'This has got to be kept under wraps. We'll be a laughing stock if this gets out.'

Headlines read: ELDERLY WOMAN ACCEPTED FOR ASTRONAUT TRAINING

It was difficult wearing the astronaut training uniform because they had to make a smaller, fatter one for Bella. The guys left her behind because she was too slow. Didn't they realise that at her age everything was done in slow motion? At the foot of the metal ladder she almost gave up until she remembered that she was representing the elderly. Showing extreme courage Bella launched herself into the training dome where she floated around like a padded weightless blimp, turning cartwheels and somersaults. She felt that she was upside down while the capsule rotated rapidly, her brain furiously trying to adjust to the new unusual and sensory positions without gravity. Her arthritis didn't hurt, she felt young again.

While Bella loved feeling young again, it made her think. So she asked, 'It crossed my mind that my fellow astronauts may prefer to take some young lady astronauts to accompany them to the moon instead of me? There were some muffled cheers.

At home again Bella 'phoned Fred Johnson. 'Fred it's me, Bella. I'm not going.'

'Why Bella,' asked Fred, 'too tough for you?'

'Well, I'm sitting in my recliner looking at all the photos on my wall, depicting my life. My children, my grandchildren and I was thinking that I had done my bit to colonise this Earth and it might be the right thing to do; to allow young astronauts to do the same for the Moon. I hope the elderly will understand.'

Fred Johnson said 'That's noble of you Bella. I'm sure they'll understand.'

However, Bella was not really being noble because in her final de-briefing the authorities had forcefully pointed out that there was no way that there would be tea and Scotch Finger biscuits available in the space shuttle.

Headlines read: HEROIC ELDERLY LADY ASTRONAUT RETIRES

'There's no better place than here on earth.'

What Comes Next in this Adventure?

Rosemary Peters

Tahmoor

'Just keep the tractor pointing straight ahead, even though you feel it wanting to slew to the right,' my very new husband yelled from his seat on a ditch digger working in the irrigation channel of the front paddock.

City bred, my first venture into a country paddock was just south of Sydney, Woollooware to be precise. Dairy farms and pastures covered the landscape. A few homes were being built near the railway station. Great friends of my grandparents with six sons milked a herd of a hundred or more and to be in the creamery started my love of the use of farm produce.

My sister married a dairy farmer, not far from Brisbane, who milked a herd of Ayrshires. I visited whenever I could, but farm life was not for me, so I thought. Five years on and I married my dairy farmer who also grew cotton and small crops in central Queensland. Starting the day at four in the morning to milk cows, feed pigs and then get the milk-run completed before 8.00 am, with tea and toast thrown in to stop starvation, became the regular routine.

The first crops of cotton, recommended in the area by the Department of Agriculture, filled a hundred acres. Lucerne for feed and hay were grown nearby. Small experimental crops such as broom millet, garlic were trialled.

My time of theatre going, shopping at city stores, art galleries and harbour cruises came to an abrupt halt. In place was setting up and cleaning out the dairy, stick-picking paddocks, hand weeding, learning to drive the tractor, poddy calf feeding, filling the fuel tanks of vehicles, directly from a forty-four-gallon drum, while moving into a newly built basic home containing absolutely nothing.

Afternoon dairy duties over, a shower in the dairy engine room was luxury. Our pet goanna always came to say good day. The only water at the house was one tap in the laundry over a pair of cement tubs, no washing machine. A copper provided hot water as a clothes washing; farm overall cleansing; soap making and jam making facility. Evenings were spent constructing cupboards and shelving in our bare rooms, yes, by kerosene lamp, as electricity was yet to be supplied.

The love of a rural existence was always with us. Even after returning to our trades and professions, we still worked with farming communities, sometimes living in farm houses when housing shortages prevented living in a town house. A cut flower supply garden was established to produce fill-in blooms to local florists. Evenings then would be background music to 'how many bunches for Parker's?', 'this gypsophila is flowering well.', 'are all the dahlias bunched?' as springtime saw forty to fifty bunches prepared for delivery three or four days each week.

Then there was my special love – the piggery. We had twenty-five sows, and being a midwife, where else would I be but right there when a litter was delivered? All my girls had names, all had special habits, likes and dislikes. Piglets grew, left for market, mothers rested and the process repeated. Carpet-wool sheep roamed part of the two hundred acres. We started spinning, weaving and experimentally dyeing the fibre. I still have a large floor rug in use after twenty years.

Retirement came. We chose to outback volunteer, which meant a variety of farm jobs according to the skills we had learnt. So much pleasure was had, meeting these isolated people, helping them in hard times, to ease the pressure and listen. Sometimes the family with whom we stayed had not seen any

other people for two or three months. We even took on previously untried jobs. To be shown the very special animal or object in a particular area was humbling. Ruby shouldered kangaroos and brush tailed bettongs come to mind. Rebuilding a sinking shed roof, paving an outdoor area previously a dust bowl, making jam from a crop of rosella fruit, meals for freezer storage when all hands were busy feeding starving stock, filled our days. In between were wonderful days of travelling Australia and visiting family.

To be honest, love of theatre did continue when I was involved with small town theatrical productions, learnt to square dance, and joined a local writer's group. Shire libraries or State library membership for distant readers is always available.

A life I had never considered in my first quarter century has given me a love of this land and the spirit of adventure. To find the beauty of another Australian town, the flora and fauna associated with soil type or rainfall. Have you heard the silence of the Australian bush? I have witnessed how people cope with distance, drought, delivery delays and deprivation. This continues in many rural areas.

Apart from nursing, I seem to be a jack of all trades, and dipping into untried areas has kept me looking for the next adventure. I love the life I've lived, and continue to do so.

When I Was 10

Ken Driver

Wyee Point

When I was 10 years old, it was 1956 – the year of the Melbourne Olympic Games. My parents talked about it with great anticipation, that the Olympics would be held in Australia for the first time. I don't remember much about the event itself (we had no TV then), but I have a magnificent book, the official Melbourne Olympics souvenir edition, given to me back then by my dear Nana.

This 144-page case-bound book features pictures and statistics for every event, day-by-day, for the entire Games. The official opening was on Thursday November 22, 1956 by HRH the Duke of Edinburgh. The 19-year-old Ron Clarke ran the final leg around the Melbourne Cricket Ground with the Olympic Torch before lighting the 'Flame' in the big gold cauldron. Gold medal winner Betty Cuthbert, was the first Australian at these Games to break an Olympic Record (100 metres in 11.4 seconds). Other famous Australian sporting names of the day were Marlene Mathews, Dawn Fraser and Murray Rose. This book was, and still is, a treasured possession.

My father was not wealthy. He was a Life Insurance salesman who earned commission by door-knocking from house to house, selling insurance policies and collecting premiums, always walking his rounds as far as his trusty Packard shoes would take him. Dad's shoes needed repairs more often than most people's, so he did the repairs himself to save money. For that job he used a weird-looking contraption called a 'last'⁸ that had four different sized cast iron feet sticking out, each pointing in a different direction.

When I was 10, my three big sisters were in their teens – 15, 17 and 19. I was the nuisance little brother who sneaked through the house to see if I could catch them kissing boys who came courting. I liked

listening to the music when my sisters played their rock 'n' roll records on the gramophone and danced in the lounge room, bopping away to Johnny O'Keefe or Bill Haley and The Comets.

There was an area under our house at the back, high enough for a 10-year-old to stand in. My father had a small section of it partitioned and laid a concrete floor. He inscribed 'Kids Cave' with a stick in the wet concrete, and that became my special place to play, to pretend, and to hide from my bossy sisters.

1956 was the year television started in Australia. We could not afford a TV set at first, but our next-door neighbours, the Watsons, had one and I was privileged to be invited into their place for an hour or so some nights to watch Bob Dyer's Pick-A-Box. The screening was in black and white of course. Mr Watson was an engineer and I remember thinking they must have been really wealthy to own a television set.

I recall snippets of some other events of the late 50s, probably because I overheard my parents talking about the news stories of the day with my grown-up sisters. For example, I knew that Mr Menzies was Prime Minister; that a Danish architect won 5,000 pounds for his design of the Sydney Opera House; and that something called the 'six o'clock swill' had been abolished – mothers were not too happy about that, apparently.

We often visited Grandma and Grandpa Driver's house at Burwood. Grandpa had a tool shed up the backyard near the chook pen, with an amazing assortment of gadgets and implements. My favourite was the grinding wheel, used for sharpening cutting tools like scissors, chisels, knives and something called a scythe. It had a rotating handle, gears and a big, heavy abrasive flywheel, the whole unit

8 Last-shoemaker's tool shaped similar to a human foot used in the manufacture and repair of shoes

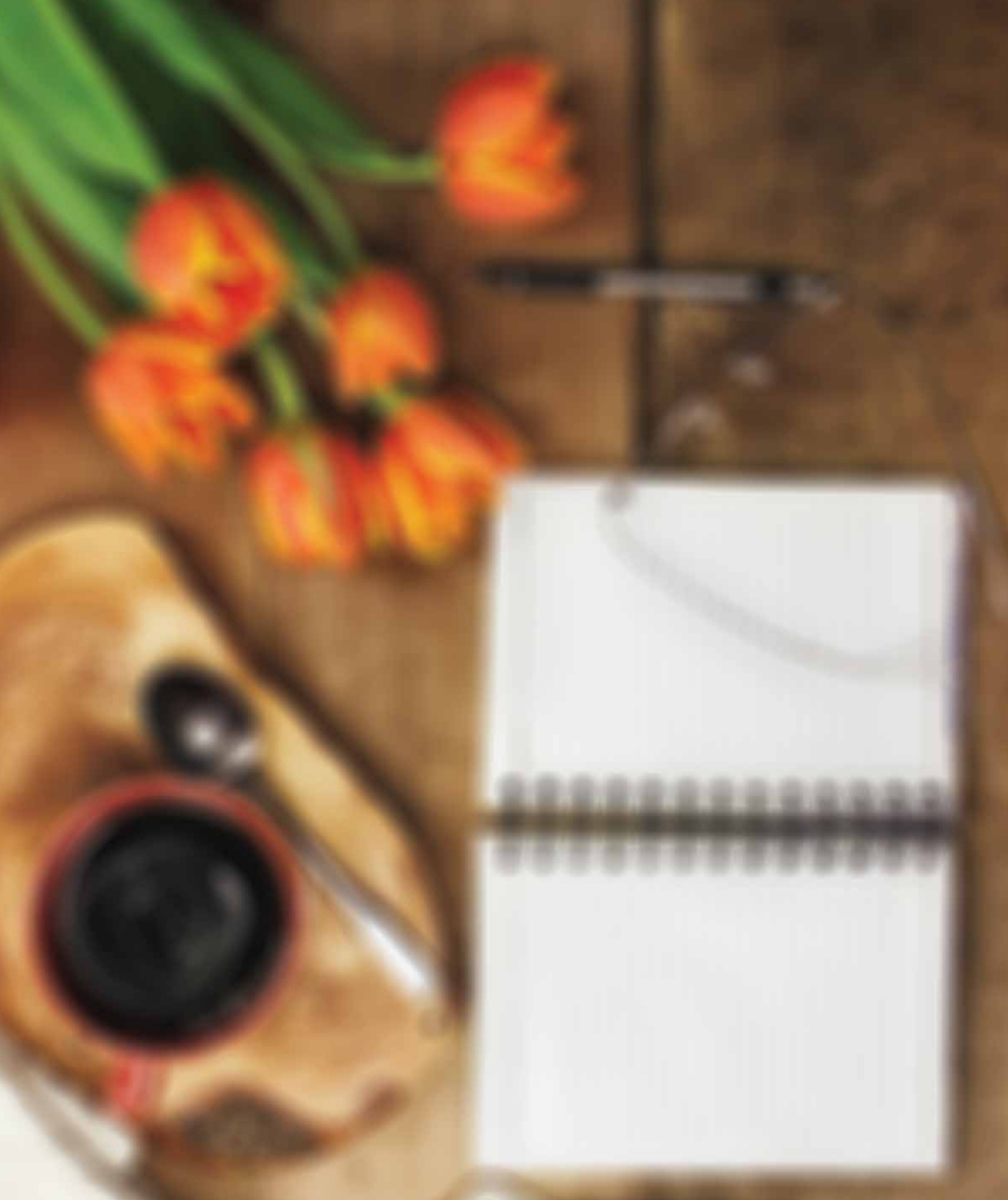
mounted firmly on the wooden workbench. A few turns with the handle and the flywheel would spin faster and faster, continuing to spin under its own momentum, so that Grandpa could let go of the handle and use both hands to guide the tool he was sharpening.

I was fascinated with this thing, cranking it up until my arm ached to see how long I could make it spin after I let go – five minutes was the target. So, while the rest of the family was in the house with Grandma having tea and homemade lamingtons, I spent most of the duration of our visits in the shed with Grandpa, learning about how mechanical things worked. That was the important thing to me, understanding how things worked. No doubt I tested his patience with my incessant questions.

Every January, our family stayed with my grandparents in a converted 4-car garage at Narrabeen, on Sydney's northern beaches – our annual holiday at the seaside. There was no electricity, no hot water and no flyscreens. We slept on stretchers and bunks, separated by flimsy curtains for privacy and draped with huge mosquito nets to keep the bugs off while we slept. An icebox served as our communal refrigerator and I was intrigued to watch 'the ice man' deliver a huge block of ice each day to keep it cold.

Grandma's specialty was Christmas pudding, which had enough rum in it to preserve it for 20 years. She would tie up her boiled creation – the size of a soccer ball – in a white muslin bag and hang it from the rafters in the garage for days, or maybe weeks, to 'cure'. It always seemed a bit weird to me that anyone could eat this blob hanging like a carcass in the dust and heat, but for the adults the unveiling of Grandma's special pudding was an occasion for great excitement.

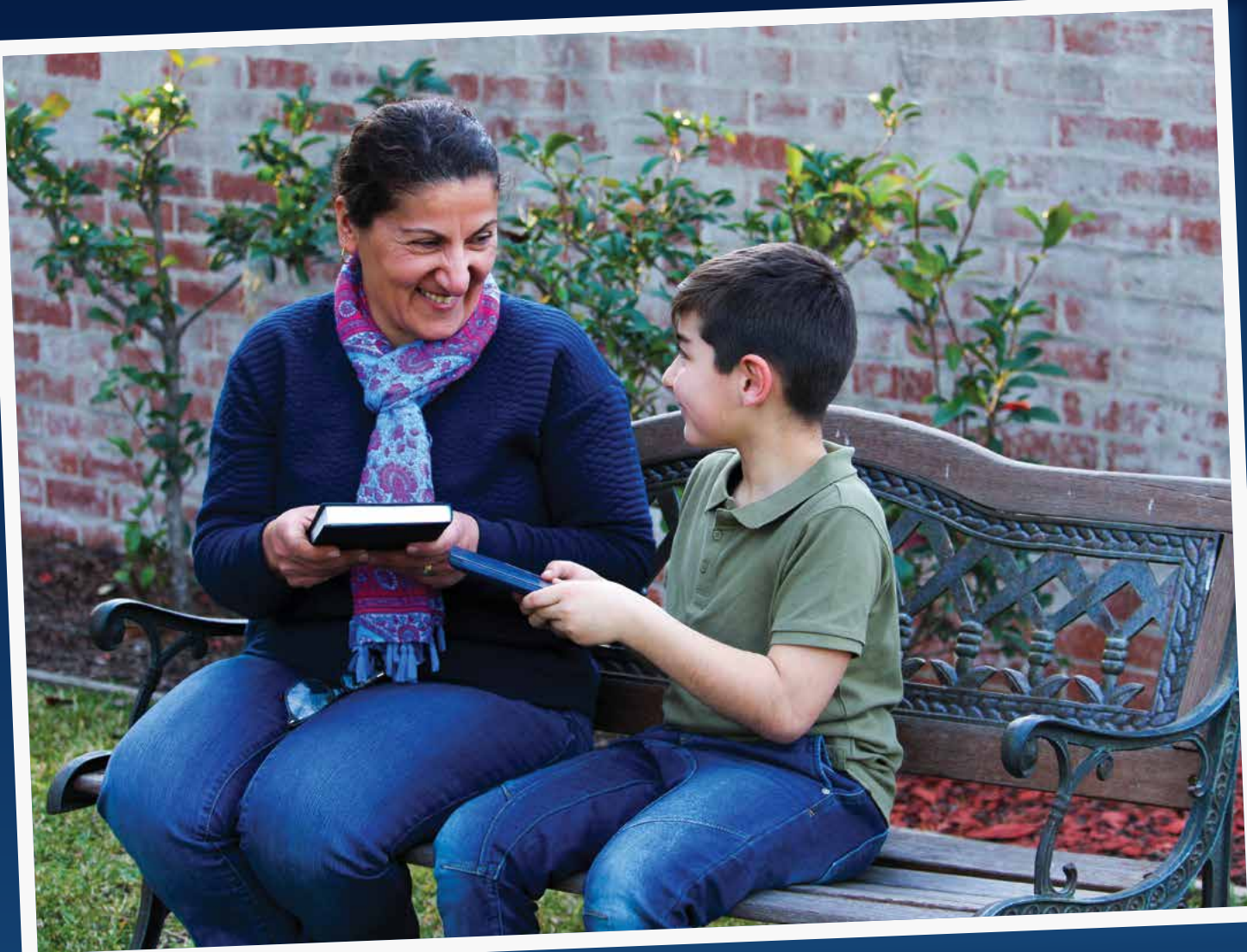
I am a Pisces. We tend to daydream a lot. Through high school, and even later at University, I often dreamed about inventing perpetual motion. Imagine a force that could propel vehicles or drive machines without using any kind of fuel – just by harnessing the natural energy of gravity and momentum. No doubt, that dream was inspired by my fascination with Grandpa's grinding wheel, way back when I was 10.



BACK COVER: SCHOOL CATEGORY WINNING ENTRY

Natarsha Camilleri

Our lives are like books, with each year as a different chapter. A switch in generations is implied from a young boy offering an e-book and his grandmother a printed novel. This aims to show the telling of life experiences and illustrates the strength of this relationship.



SENIORS CARD