

## **Bolt out of the Blue - Part 2** or

### **There's No Such Thing as a Free Lunch**

**Name for Publication:** A Usual Suspect

Gday Battlers. A quick recap of a pretty average month. My brother was found dead, I had to identify him at Westmead Hospital and informed I could pick up his belongings from Hornsby Police. In their infinite wisdom, the cops hand over his bong and a sandwich bag of weed. This apparent act of goodwill explodes in my head. "What are these bastards up to?!", like Skyhooks – "Horror Movie" looping in my brain.

A few days later I'm feeling extremely weird drafting a letter of thanks to Marrickville Coppers. They delivered the news of my brother's death to my mother with great sensitivity..... But I couldn't get that bloody bag of pot out of my head.

About a week after my brother's funeral, I'm flopped in my thinking couch, raising a glass and reminiscing about the good old days. When 'BANG, BANG, BANG' on my front door. I know who it is, but hoping against hope it's some religious group, AND I'M AN ATHEIST!!!!

I try to work out how I could hide my plants like a seasoned magician. Looking through the peephole. Yep. Coppers. SHIT!!! I open the door and ask "Why not use the doorbell instead of waking up my Dad?.. and he's been dead for 5 years."

I recognise the Sergeant from Marrickville, and immediately kick myself in the arse for writing that letter. It's the raid I've been dreading.

I look out to the street, I'm greeted by 4 marked police cars, 2 unmarked cars, uniformed and Drug Squad Cops, K9 units from both NSW and Federal police, and a helicopter that is about 100 meters overhead.

The Sargent shows me the warrant and informs me of why they are there. I respond to my nemesis, "You know that letter I gave you", "Yes" he replied.

"Can I get it back? .....Just kiddin .....But seriously, can I get it back?" A smile cracked through his Asbestos coloured face.

I ask a Detective, " Why so much Artillery?", "Are you looking for pot or Osama Bin Laden?" ..... "Don't you blokes do surveillance?" .... "No wonder we're taxed so much" ..... "We've only got 3 plants".

"We got a tip off" the Detective responds, .... I quickly retort.., "Captain Fantastic from Hornsby Police doesn't count as a tip off !!!".

As I read the warrant, I was hoping there was a God and she would transport my babies to a safe house like Captain Kirk in a Star Trek transporter.

They usher me outside and take possession of the house, and let the "dogs" in to rip the joint apart.... Not the lovely, man's best friend kind .... Young plain-clothes coppers who think they can make Commissioner in a week if they bust a simple worker with 3 plants.

They then bring in the K9 units, jumping, climbing and generally have the time of their lives like they're on a treasure hunt. The K9s start getting hits the instant they're brought in. They enter my younger brother's room first up, To give some perspective, he looks exactly like Shaggy from Scooby

–Doo, and was the reason the dogs were getting hits all over the house. He is a slob. There were empty pot satchels everywhere, if the Great Pacific Garbage Dump had a sibling it would be my brother's room.

A young cop who hated me from the get go, tried equating this mess to a sophisticated pot selling empire. Asking me about my bank account, my mortgage, wanting to search the roof, dig up the backyard. I couldn't help but laugh at the very suggestion of being Mr Big with 3 plants and a slob for a brother. I said to his Boss, "He must be the brains of the outfit,eh!!

They took us back to Newtown police where they take our prints and then our mugshots. Newtown Police Station had clear plexiglass "Dog Boxes" where they would hold defendants and mugshots were taken in front of these holding cells.

As my brother was getting his mugshot, I was mouthing obscenities and generally being a dick. You could see the "Trying not to laugh" look on his face, until they moved me to a proper cell, and were able to get his best side.

We returned to my house and they concede that I'm not Mr Big and wrap up the "Police Operation". The young cop decides he isn't done and says "What about the roof?" The lead Detective exclaimed, "ENOUGH, it's done!!" I can't resist and flip the bird at Eddy Munster while the Detective's back was turned.

When finally leaving, the young cop attempts to put cuffs on me and his Boss said "No need for those." I again raise Eddy's blood pressure and slyly wink at him.

I have a large dog and hadn't picked up poop for a few days, and as we're leaving the Young Turk treads in a massive dog shit landmine. It's the middle of summer and it absolutely reeks, and everyone started laughing.....he's got spanking new white Nikes on.

He asks" Mate, do you have a hose??" ..... I think to myself, "Now I'm his mate, I'm callin' bullshit early on this one" ... "YYYeah", I reply with my best 'Karma's a bitch voice'. "Well Can I Use It???" Sounding like he was about to pop an artery.

"Yeah, Nah, the warrant's been executed, get off my property", I replied.....I like my petty torments as much as they do. As we drive off, his fellow Village Idiots were laughing, watching him frenziedly scrapping his shoe on the grass patch out front. I call it "poo-etic justice". I couldn't help but feel my Brother havin a giggle at the young Cop's misfortune.

In closing Battlers, I impart to you this dollars' worth of free advice, if a Copper tries to give you a bag of pot, never take it, because, There's No Such Thing As A Free Lunch.

The End

By a Usual Suspect

**In memory of my Older Brother,**

**Who made this raid possible.**

## **Mother Naively**

**Name for Publication:** Danielle Joy Golding

So I clutch at the reality of this painting, I have done it, I have swapped it, with Katherine for another work, to exchange for another something, gave her a portrait, and was given the keys to impressionism, as it seemed back then, looking to find the originality of this work, this portrait, I see I have used, metallic crimson acrylic, and a lurid green to resemble the wild snakes in the hair of Medusa, I see that she is not herself, she has become a character from the past centuries of coveted time, and as a finale, had, represented out teenage years, here to represent us, for me to find her beliefs, and I suspect the brothers, they have all survived the connection, now the best detectives of the precinct couldn't unravel anything close, I asked the blue fellows to think of this, of what has happened still, she resides in that photograph that of appearance, then the fine arts at Tafe, night school? Another expression for her, an example, a corollary by her, where is she now? In which lurid act of things, I suspect, but not related to the information, now my hunches of it, only to find.

And any witch, could have gone on, I suspect the worst from knowing, about the witches, they are nearby, from the religious position of myself and the driver, a lift, a short distance, my only lift, from Uralla, the witches are usual, they are as practical as reality, as of themselves mirrored there, of course which makes them all dangerous, I think of the dirt roads, to nowhere with the added details of granite rocks, still, looking at this picture, they she paints herself? Another landscape.

She photographs herself, I'm left looking at this imagery/picture, trying to fathom it, trying to see a clarity in the diesel pollution of its murky surface, of who she was, who she is, and who were her developmental selves, all products of mental health in the seventies, who they were as it transpired. This I think we may leave of late, leave to life, as undistinguished as anything that ever began, and drives of which is again being felt, the decision to leave, the situation, unfurled as again a priority, so we will never know, or to leave it, undisciplined, or leave it to another individual, with the right to understand, I think that there is time to understand.

What do we say of Dorian Gray? The whole motivations of Oscar Wilde? Reflections and resemblances, the story, just a painting that means something to someone, and what it means, what it seems to reveal, through, love, narcissism, vanity, arrogance, intolerance, and rejection, at that age Dorian was scandalous himself, I hope that what I call it, it's potential casework, to stand there, reading over the works of that age, the age she was, again on the moors out on the moors, to express the wildness of youth, like a daughter.

Femail youths, we were all affected by Oliver Twist, sympathy to tears, for him, didn't stop it from happening.

## Cop This!

**Name for publication:** LuLu Joy

At 15, my family, my church, my doctor and my God, all believe I'm too tall for my age and gender. They put me on a pill to stunt my growth. All it does is stunt my happiness! I come from a strict churchy family... no blue jokes and no black humour. Thanks to my darling dad, we had plenty of pun. But you can't beat fundamentalism...there's no fun and a whole lot of mentalism.

At fifty-five, I'm faithfully keeping a lifelong vow: Never ever tell a Joke.. I'm philosophically opposed... someone could get hurt. I couldn't laugh at someone else's joke either. Just in case.

My friend would say: "Shush! Here comes the Fun Police"

By now, I've reinvented myself fifteen times...Corrections Researcher, Primary Teacher, Massage Therapist to the Stars and a dozen more. I'm running out of gas. I transfer from a mainstream Service to a Disability Employment Service.

On the front counter is a pamphlet advertising a training course. There are 2 questions at the top:

1. "Do you have a mental illness?" Actually, I have three. I've diversified. My depression has grown legs: Generalised Anxiety Disorder and PTSD.
2. "Are you funny?" You've got to be joking! Although at Toastmasters, a public speaking organisation I'd recently joined, my mentor enthuses: "You're funny."

Huh? I'm flummoxed. What does he mean?

I apply and get accepted into the *Stand up for Mental Health-Comedy for Change* course. I'll be learning how to make fun of my mental incompetence. What a Joke! At least, for the next twelve weeks I don't have to lie on my dole form about the fifteen jobs per week that don't exist.

So here I am on the first day of the course, meeting the other participants. Bi-Polar-Bearers, the Anxiety Society, the Attention Deficit Hyper-Activists and the Depressive Downers. Two of each.

I'm so envious of the super-witty Bipolars. They can flit from the dark side to the funny and back again, making light of everything. But I don't like it when they exaggerate just to get a cheap laugh. The other Depressive makes puns out of my tragedies. How dare he? I'm offended! Couldn't they tell? I'm not looking for laughs, that's superficial. I'm looking for joy.... serious joy.

The first lesson: Standup comedy is about misdirection. You lure the audience's attention over here, and then switch direction over there. But my whole life has been mis-directed, and where's the funny? Week 1 and week 2...still no material. Week 3 and week 4... I'm panicking. In eight weeks, I'll have to do five minutes of Standup comedy....on Sydney Town Hall stage....with no jokes and nothing funny....help!

The next week at Toastmasters, I announce: "I've started this Standup Comedy course, and. I've been depressed all my life. Please help me." Up jumps John. "I'm an ex stand up judge I'll help." We're sitting at the Marrickville PCYC Cafe. John says: "Tell me a story from your life." "OK.... I'm twenty-one, it's my first job, I want a calling, not just a career, I want to serve the community, be fair, just and honest. So, I join the Victorian Police Force....in the 1980s.

It's my first undercover assignment, 'impersonating' a sex worker. I'm thinking I wouldn't mind 'being' a sex worker, but 'pretending to be one' to entrap, that's the crime. My five other female

squad members are heavily made up, scantily clad and dripping with jewellery. It's Winter in Melbourne, and I'm not being cold for anyone. So, I dress in a navy-blue tracksuit. Sexy?

I'm in Grey Street St Kilda, the red-light district, standing next to a 'No Standing' sign. I'm thinking: "Nobody's going to proposition me." Suddenly, a man walks up to me, in a navy-blue tracksuit...We're a perfect match. He says: "How much for oral?" I say: "I'm sorry sir, I don't do oral, I do verbals." I didn't really say that; the other depressive in the class came up with that line. This is what I say: "I'm a police constable, You're under arrest!"

I'm at the Court House, and it's my turn in the witness box. The magistrate addresses me: "Constable, in your experience, do you believe the defendant's telling the truth when he says he's never done this before?"

"Your Honour, I don't know...it was my first time too." The whole court burst into laughter. Even the defendant!!

All during me telling this story to John, he's saying: "That's funny!" I shake my head. "What's funny?". He begins telling me back each part, and I'm convulsing.... with laughter, for the first time...ever. I'm no longer offended, I'm belly laughing...We rush home and start working on my Town Hall routine.

My five minutes of fame is just a couple of city blocks away. I'm making my way up George Street towards Sydney Town Hall. The pedestrian peak hour push forcing me to slow to a shuffle. I'm wondering whether I'm going to be seriously late. But then I'm thinking: Even if I don't make it there, it doesn't matter, because I've already made it in.... (I'm holding my belly) ....here!

I skip onto the stage to the Muppet's version of my favourite song. At the mike, I open with: "I'm Constable Joy and I'm a Depressive!" The 600 strong crowd are laughing with me... about me. Later, I'm striding back down George St...no longer stunted. I'm standing up inside myself for the very first time.

It's been seven years since then. .... I've discovered that my traumas and tales are eagerly waiting to be transformed into set ups and punchlines. Now I can make a joke, because "I am my own joke!" and it doesn't hurt...me... or anyone else. I've got a new direction...Miss Direction. Actually, she prefers Ms Direction.

At the end of that *Stand-Up for Mental Health* show, an audience member comes up to me, and says: "After seeing you perform; I've only got one thing to say:

"EVERYONE NEEDS SOMEONE LIKE YOU IN THEIR LIFE!"



## Maude

**Name for Publication:** Anonymous

Maude was ninety six the day she sat at Ruth's kitchen table and listened to Ruth tell her granddaughter about the first time she used a telephone. For Ruth it was a story of wonder and excitement. For Ruth it was a small story that told of how much times had changed. For Maude it was a different story, too big to be told in one sitting, too important to tell without telling what came before and what came after the moment that sent Ruth running for the telephone.

At sixteen Maude had known she was too young to get married. The boys weren't yet men and she was still a girl. Those boys stood tall, walked big and talked strong but their mamas still pressed their shirts and cooked their meals. She did know she was too old to play with the boys any longer, but she was still sneaking out curious about the way they talked, the way they were growing into their stride, stretching their bodies and filling out their shoulders.

It was her curiosity, her need to be part of that growth, that took her to the altar. Her brother-in-law, her oldest sisters husband had heard tell of the sneaking out and the need to be a part of their growing and he'd chosen one of the boys for her. He thought he could satisfy her curiosity, keep her out of trouble, if he got her married.

She married Jack and they played house, but they were still so young. All the while, outside, next door, down the road and all about the town those boys were growing. They were still stretching, talking and walking their way towards manhood. Maude couldn't help but carry on watching them. She still carried curiosity in her bones.

She met Ern when he came to fetch his dog from her yard. He carried himself differently. He talked softer. He walked with a gentler stride. They found ways to bump into one another in town and from there conversation flowed. Ern talked of never quite belonging. Maude spoke of wanting things bigger than small towns could hold. It wasn't long before holding space for one another's dreams led to holding one another.

The day Jack heard tell of the sneaking out and the holding Maude was in her sister's kitchen. She sang and told stories while Anne and Ruthie made scones. She was standing at the sink when they heard heavy footsteps on the back porch. The slamming of the screen door silenced her song and she turned to see Jack. Shotgun in hand he'd stopped two steps through the kitchen door. She turned to meet his angry eyes so full of questions and tears. He stood gun on his hip in silence; unable to ask, unable act.

Anne pushed Ruthie gently from the kitchen, through the lounge room door. Never taking her eyes from Jack, she spoke softly; "The McKenna's have the phone on. Call the constable. Run on now girl." Ruthie ran through the house and down the front steps. Anne stepped steadily back into and through the kitchen. Rolling pin still in hand she moved until she stood between Jack and Maude. Her strength solid beneath her soft self telling him this wasn't the way. Not a word was spoken, and she watched as anger and confusion melted into shame and hurt. He sat, shotgun in his lap, desperate to understand, powerless to ask. When the constable arrived, he was sobbing quietly. With one hand on his shoulder and the other under his elbow the constable helped Jack to his feet and led him home. Whatever conversation they had wasn't enough. Two days later Jack, unable to understand, unable to forget his shame, turned the shotgun on himself. All he ever wanted was for him and Maude to be as happy as he thought they had been.

When the story was told Maude watched her niece as Ruth stood to put the kettle on the stove. She watched Ruth's granddaughter setting the table for tea. She stood and walked out to the laundry. Knowing some stories were bigger than kitchen tables she pulled the old billy can from under the stone tub. Thinking on just how much times had changed she dug out the enamel camp cups. Knowing no matter how much times had changed it was still so hard to grow up a girl, she whistled short and shrill to call the girl and hearing the screen door she sang out; "fetch some matches and tell your Grandma to bring the tea". They walked down to the river. At ninety six Maude wasn't as steady on her feet as she used to be, but the mud between her toes called the memories she'd been searching for. As the billy boiled and Ruth complained about old joints and lack of proper chairs Maude began to tell her own story. She spoke of all the things that came before Ruthie was sent running for that telephone and all the things that came after.

## First Date

**Name for Publication:** Chloe Steward

I check my lipstick in the mirror before stepping out of the car. He's going to think I'm an idiot if I have lipstick on my teeth. I don't think I've worn a full-face of makeup in front of him before. I must look perfect. And, if I say so myself, I look ravishing in this red A-line dress, nude wedge heels that make my legs look longer, my hair freshly washed and straightened – quite a difference from the tight ponytail I wear at work – topped off with a generous coat of mascara and lipstick the colour of love hearts and strawberries. I am romance personified.

I walk past his blue Lancer and call him.

“Hey! Where are you?” My heart beats a samba at his voice.

*Play it cool.* “Hey, I just got here. Where are you sitting?”

“When you walk inside, turn right after the desk. I'm at the table in the corner.”

I squash the phone between my cheek and shoulder as I brace to heave the wooden door open. For a place as fancy as this, I would've thought they had a door attendant.

My heels knock on the polished wooden floor of the restaurant. I blink. It takes a few seconds for the dim shapes to crystallise into small tables dressed in white linen, topped with lamps that bathe diners in a cosy yellow light. Large white dinner plates display juicy steaks and vibrant salads pushed into the middle of the plate like the star of the show, supported by an artful sweep of red wine jus and leafy garnish. Polished steel cutlery tinkles and the hum of chatter diffuses with the ambient jazz quartet in the middle of the room.

Ladies draped in shapely silk dresses, fine chains of gold and strings of pearls worth more than my car adorning their necks. Across from them sit gentlemen in dark suits, starched shirts and bow ties sport Rolexes and shiny wedding bands, heads bent forward in quiet conversation. Penguin-liveried waiters glide like ballroom dancers, delivering players of steaming fresh bread and dipping oils, large glasses of wine, flutes of champagne, and tumblers of scotch. I feel underdressed and outmatched. I'd considered splitting the bill with him but change my mind.

“Good evening, Madam.” A smooth-chinned, moustached waiter greets me with a deferential bob of his head.

“Oh, um, I'm... he's already here. The table around the corner, he said!”

“Of course, Madam. If you'll follow me.”

I shake off my nerves and smile slyly, swaying my hips like I belong here. I imagine myself walking with the grace of Audrey Hepburn.

I see him at the corner table, one of the yellow lamps illuminating his handsome face, and I blush.

And then the restaurant tilts. Wedge heels are no match for waxed floors. I sway like a rum drunk sailor on deck during a storm. My feet scramble for footing like I'm running on a too-fast treadmill. All sound is sucked out of the room into the black hole of his mouth as he looks at me in shock.

He's half-way out of his seat. The waiter's foot hovers, arms outstretched, leaping towards me.

The patrons next to the aisle gasp. Chairs scrape. Cutlery clatters.



Pain shoots through my knee as I break my fall. I see my mortification reflected in the varnished floor. I look up slowly, peering through my eyelashes. I take a deep breath and smile demurely.

“Madam! Are you okay?”

I laugh a breathy laugh, like Marilyn Monroe and accept the waiter’s arm. I smooth down my dress and touch a hand to my hair. I shrug my shoulders back and stride over to the table.

He’s standing up now, accepting me from the waiter like he’s asked for my next dance. I sit down and he lays the napkin over my lap. As he tucks my chair in, he bends down to my ear. “That was quite an entrance,” he breathes.

“I wanted to make an impression,” I reply coyly.

“You certainly did.”

And to this day, whenever someone asks us about our first date, we look at each other and try not to laugh. “Well,” I say, “I fell head over heels for him.”

## Mother

**Name for Publication:** Liam Booyens

“You did it again,” my mother calls from the lounge room. Her voice muffled under the headphones. “Good morning to you too” I responded. These are the first words to echo through our house today, the splendour of the mountain morning split by my mums shrilly calling voice, and my confidently incorrect response.

Life is good in our little castle on the hill. I have food, water and a place where I can close my eyes and drift through the day, home. A cascading rumble of footsteps rushes down the hallway like rain approaching from distant lands. The sound abruptly cuts out as it reaches the door. My mother’s knuckles rapidly strike the brittle peach threshold of my box.

A sudden bolt of energy rushes to my lips, the urge is almost unbearable. I could say it with relative ease, just a few words is all it would take. “If that’s not OCD then I don’t know what is.” That’s not so bad right, what does it even mean? To me and my mother however this would be the same as me saying something like “I wish you weren’t such a detestable wench” and as you could imagine this would not go down well.

So I sit back in my chair and clench my teeth tight. This cannot get out. This needs to stay as just a passing thought. I manage to swallow my words and instead respond with a simple “yes”. The false gold handle twists slightly to the left then sharply to the right.

The door creaks open with an eerie laughter and my mother finally slips into view. “Good morning darling, just letting you know that you’ve left your towel on the couch again. There is a damp patch under it, it’ll probably start to smell soon. I’ve moved it to the laundry this time, I think you know this but you should probably be the one to clean up your own mess.” As she speaks, I begin to spin in my seat, I turn to face her and then turn some more.

My eyes settle upon a shelly peach piece of fabric, oddly similar to the colour of the door that my mother now stands paired with. It is held up by a silky smooth, gold and amber branch of driftwood that leans up against the far corner of the room. “I haven’t had a shower today” I say, my stare unwavering.

She lifts her head over her shoulder and then without a word, turns and leaves the room. I spin back to my computer and hit play, filled with self-righteous bliss over my small victory. I let myself be consumed by the amazing world of ones and zeros.

It feels as if no time has passed by the time I hear the second rapping at the door. Has my mother come back for round two? No this feels different, the urgency and formal nature of the first knock have vanished. I couldn’t explain how I got so much from a simple three rounded sound. Like a child with a ball thrown at their face, it’s just second nature to move your hands to minimize the impact and maybe, just maybe, even catch the ball.

“Come in” I say with an echoing ring at the end. I knew what to expect, this was no threat to my throne, this was a peace offering, a way to say “I’m sorry”. The handle jolts to the right and the door creeps open, this time as I turn to face her my eyes are met with the alluring site of a good old fashioned hot chocolate. She spills into the room, a fresh look of subtle impairment covered with a simple smile set on her face as she does so. “Sorry” she whispers, lifting the cup to my level.

I could have relished this moment for a minute or two longer than I did, but at the time I felt no need. This offering of liquid gold had served its purpose. “It’s all good, thanks for the hot choco.” For

just a second, our roles had reversed, I was a forging parent and she was the child, apologizing with a gift. "Come sit, let's plan our day."

There are so many ways a conversation can go, so many things that can be shown. So much pain and so much hurt, so much gain and so much to be learnt. One thing remains true, I love my mum through and through.

## **An Ode to Vale Street**

**Name for Publication:** Liza Holmes

I have many memories of Vale Street. Making pottery, works of art, the people who went there, the people running the groups, the BBQ's – even the salads, the seasons and the changes in the weather.

The people running the groups really looked after me. They were intuitive and helped me out emotionally if I wasn't feeling great. If I was having a bad day, they supported me, they didn't push me.

I even remember having naps on the lounge.

There was lots of colour around, lots of activity and the nice aroma of food being cooked. The beautiful smell of the food was so good that it made me hungry, and I could not wait to start eating.

I remember being on the bus on my way to Vale Street, and the time the lady next to me pointed out a donkey in someone's yard. But it took me a while to turn around, and I missed seeing it.

Time ticked by – there was a clock at Vale Centre, which I heard on a regular basis – it was a bit noisy. Sometimes the people got a bit noisy too, but that didn't upset me – it made the environment more interesting.

There was always a chance to look at the gardens in Vale Street. In Autumn especially, the trees were brightly coloured, and the flowers would change depending on the season. There were herbs and vegetables growing in the front yard of the centre. It made the Centre more homely and gave us the opportunity to have a go at gardening. It also gave us an interest in what was going on in the Centre. Even the people who smoked looked after the place, leaving their used cigarettes in the ashtrays available.

I went back to the Centre years later as part of an art group and enjoyed meeting lots of really interesting people there.

Unfortunately, the Centre closed a few years ago. I really miss going there. I have fond memories of the Vale Centre, as I'm sure many others have too.

## **Extreme**

**Name for Publishing:** Marley Jane

The stars are positively brilliant tonight, my beloved. They radiate across the night sky like bright diamonds imbued with the energy of more than a thousand atoms. Still, they are nothing in comparison to the energy I am radiating. I am aflame with power, divinity, and purpose. The galaxy above is lit with a pathway that is just for me and only me. Nothing can stop me – not that I want it to. Behind me a desperate voice finds a momentary pause in the maddening landscape and feebly asks if I will slow down and come to bed. I decline and in doing so confirm the obvious – I am indeed manic.

“You see, YOU SEE THIS,” my voice goes higher in pitch and intensity as I wave my hands in the cool August night sky. “Feel! Feel the embodiment of Nirvana, the pulsation of Rumi, the stigmatisation of our Lord Jesus Christ,” I declare holding my hands above my head. I make sense only to myself. A surge of electric energy courses through my body. The soft hum starts its way from the strands of my wild and unruly curly hair and flows all the way down to my bare feet. I can walk on water; I can cast out deranged spirits and I will tell you a secret – the secret to humanity is love.

My husband is tired. For six weeks now he has watched his wife start to fly too close to the sun. At first it was good to see the return of positive energy from the place of sadness and despair but as the ascent became more and more unpredictable, stranger, and bizarre the adventures heralded a new emergency. This was far beyond the scope of what he could handle. He takes his tired and weary soul back inside the house and I stay wide-awake on our son’s trampoline believing I am some magnificent entity.

It is so quiet. Even the highway several kilometres away is eerily quiet. On clear nights like these you could sometimes hear the coal trains coming down the Mountains or loaded trucks on the Great Western Highway. Tonight there was nothing. Not even the sounds of possums squabbling for a precious branch or out to explore disturb the pin drop silence. I put my right hand over my chest and I feel the beating of my heart. A little fast perhaps but nothing too alarming. In fact, I kind of like it. To a point.

I was in my work speak, medication non-compliant. I deliberately went down this path because in the absence of feeling nothing I wanted to feel something. It was a relief for a while. To gain some control, to fit in with my peers and smile, laugh and talk like I was whatever one defined as normal. But we sailed past that and now they were afraid and weary. I saw their side-ward glances just as frequent as I saw the shadow figures. Deranged, squashed up faces in oversized hooded cloaks just in my peripheries. Always commanding a second glance – did I imagine that or was that really there?

As my racing thoughts continued into the night, I wondered how far could this ascent take me? Very little was in my control and I was starting to feel scared. The pleasurable waves of ecstasy in the first wave of mania were intersecting with fear and paranoia. I could feel myself becoming exceedingly irritable as I was more aware of how alone I was on this journey. The deathly still of the blue hour was in direct contrast to my mind.

I knew from my work and my history this would end by the lights of an ambulance to whisk me into yet another mental health unit. A detainment under the Mental Health Act seemed the clearest route out of this rapidly emerging chaos. I was determined not to restart my medications fearful of another Depression. I would need to go by force there was no other way about it. As daylight rose higher into the sky, I became acutely fixated on the sounds coming up the hill I believed would take me away. Fear consumed my body and I felt physically sick. “NO! You can’t make me go! I can get well here with my family – they know how to look after me” I scream with piercing pain at its most

raw. I see the face drop; it is of a face defeated. “No, my love, you are unwell. You need more than what I can give.”

I step up into the ambulance with trepidation and disbelief. This was not how I envisioned my demise. My third admission for my Bipolar Affective Disorder was on the cards once I entered the hospital. I would restart my medications again begrudgingly and the rollercoaster would continue. I loved, hated, cried, screamed all emotions in this moment. I never asked for this illness – it chose me. My dazzling kaleidoscopic visual spectacle of the world would be restrained for a while . . .

## Last Minute Memoir

Name for Publishing: Trevor Zadro-Jones

### Trigger Warning - Suicide

I wonder if you can miss things after the fact. The ground is coming up quick. Quicker than I thought it would. I haven't missed anything for a while. What could I miss? Chocolate? The feeling of hot water on cold fingers. That smell of the baked goods section in the supermarket, early morning. The feel of a cat's ears. Friendly bus drivers. A smile exchanged with a pretty girl in the street. That was a good memory. Strange that it's one of my last. I know what I won't miss. Stubbing my toe on the corner of the pillar at the bottom of the stairs. Lectures at a university unknowingly centred around societal status. Report cards. Beetroot. That one girl I know who thrives on irrelevant drama.

I'm curious how many people will be at my funeral. No I'm not. Showing up to funerals is a sign of respect to the family, not the deceased. The real connections will appear at my wake. Those who liked me enough to want to see my dead skin sheathing a functionless body. Wake. What a stupid name for such an event. I hope someone brings my dog.

The wind is nice. I feel severed from timely and moral restraints. This act is perhaps the strongest embodiment of man's privilege of choice. Maybe that's why people skydive. Some ego-driven demonstration of their ability to make a final choice, and change their mind halfway through. It makes them feel empowered. I hate that word. Empowered. It couldn't be more human. I doubt a tiger feels any sense of empowerment when it kills for its cubs. It's necessary. Maybe that's what I'll be next time.

I didn't eat today. I can't even remember my last meal. It's a waste of food really; giving a meal to someone on death row. An act of kindness sure, but wouldn't a hug suffice? Maybe that's what I'll miss. Or do miss. It's hard to care when you're given nothing.

I wonder how they'll find me. A bush-walker perhaps. Or an abseiling student. Maybe someone else will follow my lead and see me on the way down. Their last act would be sending a text mid-air; "Hey there's some guy down here impaled on a tree."

That'd be funny. Laughing is strange isn't it. The body just convulses and your breath finds a new rhythm. God only knows why. Or maybe some scientist does. What's the difference, it's just more useless information. I'm sick of seeking. I'm bored of this perspective. I forgot to write a note. Ah well. The ground is coming up really quick.

Quicker than I thought it would.

## While at a Cafe

**Name for Publishing:** Hannah Mills

Xpress Cafe contained an odd kind of paradise. The cafe revelled in its modernity, with pastels pulled from a young girl's bedroom carefully complimented by walls and tables of marble laminate. Through windows that stretched to the ceiling, the cafe offered an unobstructed view of the car park. An illusionary haven teetering on the edge of smoke and tarmac.

"I'm seeing Halloween things already," Ruth said, "I'm like, can we not? It's too early."

I too had seen the jack o' lantern and witches' hats during my trip to Daiso a month earlier.

The store was obviously aware of its own absurdity, having hidden the rack in a nook behind the entrance displays.

"I found Christmas decorations today," Eva said.

"Christmas stuff? Already?" Ruth said, "No one would buy them now. You wait until a few days before Christmas, and then they're all fifty percent off. Why would you start buying now?"

"Or you just buy something in the sales..." Eva swung her arm out in a gesture I could not deduce much reason for, but instinctively understood, "like decorations, you buy them in the sales *for* the next year.

"Then you get 50 percent off everything or even less!"

Absolutely, Ruth. Fifty percent off would be nice, particularly from this cafe. You thought so too, with that sound you made after opening the menu. No one else in this bustling place made any indication of such feelings, however. Their half-empty drinks sat on tables, left for ghosts to finish. The high prices and shiny modern interior design of the cafe covered up the consumerist greed under a materialist illusion of luxury.

"I did not do a single decoration last year." Ruth stirred her coffee. "I'm like, I've got a cat, she'll eat anything that's available, so I'm like just not bothered."

"Milly will eat stuff, but she's pretty good with the tree. She's left it basically alone."

A cat huddled up in a Christmas tree, chewing its way through tinsel. I imagined having a small black furball of my own and I wanted to tell you as such. But, it's time and you had to go. You both exchanged the necessary words and promised to meet again soon. And you were gone.

Your departure left a kind of quietness in me. We had grown so close in these mundane moments. I had peered through a window into your lives, seen your you-ness, and it was like I could understand a small piece of what small, simple things mattered in your worlds. It was almost as if I knew you.

I leant back against the plush bench beside their now empty table and sipped at my strawberry smoothie. I looked at the menu. The food here really was overpriced.



## **Singing You Home**

**Name for Publishing:** Chandu Bickford

### **Trigger warning – suicide**

There are no cheerful ladies with tea trolleys here. No meals rolled in or relaxed relatives chattering. There is neither day nor night.

Monitors beep and buzz, your vital signs run in silent lines across myriad screens. Their erratic rise and fall screams,

‘Look-at-me, look-at-me.’ Says, ‘We are watching you because this is serious.’ Too serious.

Your heartbeat is inconsistent. Your jaw slack and grey. I lean close to check if it’s just stubble, but no, it’s your skin - despite the steady push-pull of ventilated air into your lungs.

Snake vines of tubes slide into and out of your veins. Heavy lids of eyes are closed to the carnival of life support. You lie still in its fluorescent grip - an unwitting main attraction. No one knew the weeks of ideation that tormented you. No one knew they would change, become a choice.

Your chest is naked and exposed above the sheets for easy access; defib paddles are at the ready.

Everyone is poised.

Everyone wants you alive.

I sit on a plastic chair between the pulsing machines and stroke your arm. It’s a rare sibling thing in our no-touch family. I talk to you as normally as I can, trusting some parts of what I say will land.

Your skin feels tender beneath my fingertips. It triggers a cascade of domino-like memories to fall.

That first phone call and our brother’s breaking voice.

His news slamming like a fist into my gut.

Turning to my daughter, too young to hear a story so real.

Trying to console her, prepare us both for a journey we’re not ready to make.

Climbing out of the car because I’m not ok to drive.

Hearing kookaburras laugh, seeing cows graze peacefully in a paddock nearby.

Sunday afternoon looking normal and feeling anything but.

Standing on the side of the road in the mud, my whole body shaking.

Howling like an animal because there is nothing else I can do.

I thought you were going, gone.

But here, now, there is a flicker behind your lids, a new tension in your jaw. Something in you is trying to gather the bits all broken apart.

‘You don’t have to rush to come back’, I whisper. ‘Take your time.’

Blood pressure rises on the screen opposite. Is that a good thing or bad? Should I stop talking? The nearby nurse makes a note in your file and nods.

The constant mechanical noise highlights a lifetime of silence around subjects we've never wanted to discuss. And I realise that in our family, we've never said enough. All these years, all our words and feelings, have been like small stones, tossed lightly, so they just skim across the surface.

As I sit beside you, too close to this edge where life meets death, I feel a new truth rise in my chest. I won't be quiet anymore. How has it helped? You've ended up here in this windowless hell.

I conjure your favourite female vocalist and start to sing. The haunting human sound is foreign beside the technological thrum. But as the melody unfolds it builds a fragile bridge between us – her words, my pain, your possibility.

The monitor alarms, the nurse is alert, on her feet. All we have is this moment, this harmony, a humble offering from my breaking heart to yours. There is a flicker across your face, a recognition. Part of you is resurfacing.

One tear slips down your ashen cheek, and then another.

We are waiting. Two allowed in here, a handful in the quiet room down the hall. Everyone else is by their phone. Selfishly we want a promise of your return. An end to this reckless uncertainty.

I sing and watch. Sense you are somewhere beyond this battling body. That you are in a realm of waiting; a liminal land where many unseen hands hold you while you rest. A transition place from which you can choose to wake, or wither away.

It seems that almost five decades of fatigue have descended on you. I move in close and say, 'I know you are tired. And you can decide to go. But you don't have to. You can do it differently, we all can.'

So, rest now. Take as long as you need.

And when you are ready, we will be here, singing away the old, unhealthy silence. We will sing you home.'

~~~~~

It's been a year since you came out of that coma in the ICU.

Your first shaky steps have been replaced with dog walking and harbour side runs. The recovery has been slow and deep. At family gatherings our conversations are more honest. Our hugs are warm and long. There is laughter stitched across the scars we still feel, they are held with a new thread of compassion. We each are weaving harmony and healing alongside the hurt, aware that overwhelm can happen to any of us, at any time.

It is a reminder of our fragile link to life.

This is one gift you gave us.

Another is, you are still here.

## **Shattered Dreams**

**Name for Publishing:** Kasia Olszewski

Twenty years ago I sat with my feet in the ground of a rental property in Katoomba. My toes were roots, growing, binding me to the earth. Feathers lay scattered in semblance of a ritual. It all felt profound and sacred.

In the psychiatric ward no-one asked about what had occurred. My experiences were silenced. Their voiceless echoes were soon forgotten. I decided that, should it arise, psychosis was something I must go through, honour even.

I longed for the community to hold me in my journeys. I envisioned places where the internal landscape could be explored unmedicated, where I could travel through the episode and come out the other side, the dream interpreted.

I didn't want to take medication.

A psychiatrist told me he would not see me unless I took three different medications for five years. I balked at this proposition. I was angry at his lack of a client-centred approach. I didn't see him again.

Another psychiatrist said he would journey with me. I travelled to Sydney to see him. I started to think that maybe I needed something. I accepted his prescriptions. This did not totally quell the episodes.

Propelled, I ran through the bush in Hazelbrook. I was naked except for the backpack on my back. The gradients of shadows on the bark of gumtrees were my signposts. It had gotten dark.

Those around me were greatly concerned. I was blind to this.

Five years ago, many episodes in, the awareness of my being in danger and vulnerable shocked me. I was jolted out of the longing to derive some greater sense of meaning from my experiences. My embodied dreams were made futile.

I sat down and cried.

## The other city

Name for Publishing: T. Turner

The other city lies across the oceans.

Not ordinary marine oceans, but vast oceans of time and space, of thoughts and concepts.

The other city was known a lifetime ago, or perhaps a lifetime into the future.

The other city was (or will be) created by following a fully featured plan.

The plan relied (or will rely) on the simultaneous inclusion of many elements.

The other city was (or will be):

Arranged, Augmented, Automated

Beauteous, Bright, Broad

Conducive, Connected, Creative

Decentralised, Diversified, Dramatic

Energised, Equitable, Expansive

Floral, Flowing, Functional

Generous, Genial, Gregarious

Habitable, Healthy, Heritable

Imaginative, Innovative, Integrated

Joyous, Judicious, Juxtaposed

Kinaesthetic, Kindly, Knowledgeable

Laissez faire, Light-hearted, Liveable

Majestic, Multifaceted, Multi-storeyed

Natural, Networked, Nuanced

Operational, Organised, Outgoing

Perpetual, Photogenic, Progressive

Quaint, Qualitative, Questing

Refreshing, Relational, Robust

Satisfying, Scenic, Synchronised

Timeless, Trailblazing, Transformative

Unifying, Universal, Utopian

Venturous, Vibrant, Visionary

Walkable, Wealthy, Wholesome

Xerophilous, Xylographic, Xylophonic

Yielding, Yonder, Youthful

Zealous, Zesty, Zoophilous

We are moving across vast oceans towards the other city, as returning visitors or first-time visitors.

It matters not whether the other city is a reality, or remains a dream.

We will meet in the other city when we know the time and space is right.

## **Palm Island Dreaming**

**Name for Publishing:** Henry Johnston

I'm not sure what shocked me the most; the cockroaches scurrying out of my dead mother's spare room, or finding an unframed oil painting hidden amidst the musty clutter of a rickety old cupboard.

There are nights when I wake at 3.00 am in a funk, startled by the memories of that sad afternoon rummaging through bundles of frail and faded goods. But I slip back into a doze, by thinking of the painting, which shimmers with a light as effervescent as when delicate strokes first touched the small canvas, guided by the hand of an amateur artist, decades ago.

The scene is sweet and simple. To the left of the frame, the fronds of three healthy coconut palms sway in the afternoon sea breeze. Dense foreshore scrub girdles the lower portion of their trunks, as cycad quatrefoils struggle through impenetrable undergrowth, seeking the sun. A sward edges toward a warm tropical white-capped blue, ruffled by an offshore wind. I can almost smell the rotting seaweed on the beach, and recall a primal caution to look out for oyster-shell-clustered rocks, underfoot.

I am drawn to four seabirds, hovering on the updraft, eyeing those rocks, scattered along a glimpse of sandy beach. The Frigate Birds, or Man-o-war, soar above the bay in search of prey. Five smaller mates are suspended to the right of my sight, and draw my gaze to a two-masted yacht, which completes the painting's foreground.

Four grey clouds float above a distant island marked with a curved peak that looks like a volcano. And it is this faraway land that locates the artist on the mainland foreshore, painting his homeland.

Though small and almost unseen, the yacht is the artist's conduit to the object of his longing, his country. If only he could be aboard, sailing toward the land, almost hidden beneath pearly clouds. But his yearning is not to be fulfilled.

How do I know this? Because the painting was a gift to my mother for her kindness. And I remember the artists' name, or nickname.

He was called Elvis. Young, good looking, with longish black hair, slicked back with a quiff held in place over his forehead, courtesy of a popular commercial pomade.

Elvis was a contemporary of Albert Namitjira, an Arrente man from Central Australia, which is about as far from the salt water people of Townsville in far North Queensland as you can get.

Namitjira's artworks sell for millions of dollars, but it is unlikely the creator of my painting knew of Namitjira's existence. Despite this, the men shared one thing in common. Both were wards of the state. Namitjira's citizenship was eventually granted, but Elvis remained under close surveillance.

He tested positive for leprosy.

I'm not sure if he was transferred from the leprosarium on Fantome Island, which is part of the Palm Island Group, or if he came from Great Palm Island, glimpsed in his artwork, and about 65 kilometres northeast of Townsville. What I do know is the painting was a heartfelt gift to my mother, who assisted with his treatment regime.

I hope Elvis was cured and lived a long, happy life.

When I can't sleep, I imagine he returned to Palm Island, even though he couldn't vote in elections there. This changed after the Referendum of 1967 when Australian voters were asked to alter a provision in the Constitution, that is . . .

*'Do you approve the proposed law for the alteration of the Constitution entitled — "An Act to alter the Constitution to omit certain words relating to the People of the Aboriginal Race in any State and so that Aboriginals are to be counted in reckoning the Population"?'*

Almost 91 percent of the votes cast, and with a majority in all six states, approved the alteration.

Once again, we are being asked to vote in a referendum. This time the words read; *A proposed Law: to alter the Constitution to recognise the First Peoples of Australia by establishing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice. Do you approve of this proposed alteration?*

If we vote in the affirmative, we give a voice to the descendants of thousands of Aboriginal men and women, incarcerated, stolen from their families, cheated of wages, and vilified for the colour of their skin. But if we vote no, we ignore the entreaty of the *Uluru Statement From the Heart* and deny any chance of truth telling or Makarrata, a Yolngu word meaning, a coming together after a struggle, to face the facts of wrongs, and to live in peace.

A no vote metaphorically banishes Aboriginal men and women to the leper colony that is racism. We cannot and must not allow this to happen. A no vote is a victory for a revival of the White Australia Policy, and a contemporary reimagining of Apartheid.

Vote yes and enjoy a good night's sleep but if you vote no, the scurrying cockroaches of hatred will haunt you forever.

## Veritas

Name for Publication: Margaret Lyons

**Trigger warning: Child sexual abuse. Suicide.**

*“When I was a child I caught a fleeting glimpse out of the corner of my eye, I turned to look but it was gone, I couldn’t put my finger on it. Now the child has grown, the dream is gone. I have become comfortably numb”*

*Pink Floyd*

*Comfortably Numb, The Wall*

### Kidnappers

At seemingly random spots between the intersections my siblings and I would emerge, babushka like from between the trees, cross the street and walk past three or four houses before crossing back.

To the outsider these unusual crossings may seem like an odd waste of time and effort but to anyone who knew anything, we were obviously doing our best to avoid places we had identified as possible kidnapper lairs.

Although none of us or anyone we actually knew were ever abducted, our town was an apparent hotbed of kidnappers, our leafy wide streets, the epicenter of all pedophile activity. According to older siblings and neighbourhood children, our part of town, the East side, was literally littered with predators eager to pounce.

Our local kidnappers had the evil intentions. Clearly, they weren’t financially motivated as no concept of ransom ever entered the scenarios discussed. Talk in fact rarely ever went beyond the event of ‘being kidnapped’ as none of us had any actual inkling of the ramifications of abduction or the human propensity for cruelty and violation.

A few things we were certain of were these;

Kidnappers lurked around parks, schools and the local shops. Kidnappers peered out from behind curtains and grabbed children as they walked past their fences, Kidnappers easily lured children with the promise of junk food, in particular, boiled lollies, kidnappers captured and transported their victims in scratchy hessian sacks. On completion of the abduction kidnappers ate their victims, traditionally in a stew or soup.

It was also common knowledge that the majority of kidnappers displayed some distinguishing, usually grotesque physical feature, a hunchback, a toothless grin or a wonky eye or they wore some particularly disturbing hat or drove a suspicious looking, common white van. There would be some obvious visual cue marking them as flawed and dangerous.

We were all aware however that a small but very efficient percentage of pedophiles looked just like sweet old men. This created an obvious dilemma as many of our grandfathers, fathers, the bishop, and some of the priests and Christian Brothers also looked just like sweet old men and these were people we knew and trusted, people would never in a million years harm a child.

It was generally agreed that to differentiate between an everyday sweet old man and a most probable kidnapper there must be evidence of two or more suspicious traits; i.e, peering, lurking or sack carrying.

Being quite a little person, I was aware that I could be easily grabbed and I would fit snugly inside a sack but in terms of being lured, I thought I would be safe. I simply couldn't fathom why anyone would do something so cruel as 'boiling' to something as beautiful as a lolly. Why boil a lolly? Boiling usually ends badly and more often than not, it results in foul odours, and plates empty except for uneaten piles of soggy, bland tasting peas, beans or the even more hideous, brussel sprout.

If our parents were aware of this dangerous demographic and the threat we were constantly under, they certainly didn't show it. Our expressions of fear were met with condescending reassurances, rolled eyes and stifled smiles. So secure were the adults in the integrity of the empire they had fought so hard for, the nation they loved, and the collective responsibility of the church which they took for granted, and so solid was their faith in the simple transparency and quaint wholesomeness of 'country living' they allowed us to roam free and until the sun had begun to set.

Our worries were easily dismissed with the standard 'if, in the unlikely situation someone really does want to violate you, well obviously you would run to the priests in the presbytery or the Christian Brothers who lived quite near us, somewhere where safety was a hundred percent guaranteed....

### MY GUARDIAN ANGEL

Accompanying Rudolf (my teddy bear) and I everywhere, my guardian angel perched, transparent on my left shoulder like a loyal pirates' parrot. Usually, I imagined it as a pretty winged creature with human features, pale and feminine, delicate gossamer wings and luminescent halo, patiently waiting, watching, ready to spring to my defence in the face of bunyips, bones, bagpipes and any number of similar atrocities. (explained earlier)

For the most part, I placed a lot of faith in my personal angel but there were times when I would imagine it taking on a markedly different appearance and I would hesitantly question its intentions.

Sometimes, just as I was on the verge of doing something deceptive (like steal a tim tam from the packet hidden way back in the fridge or tell my teacher I had my library bag when I had left it at home) I would feel the slightest tap tap tapping on my shoulder or sense the gentlest breeze getting trapped in my thick web of curls, and I would see my angel transformed, with horns and talons and the stern face of Father McScary. I was fairly sure that it would swiftly report my transgression to god and in those times I wondered if it were not just one more of the heavenly fathers' spies like the priests, brothers and nuns.

*(The following refers an altar boy abused by a priest. This boy commits suicide.)*

### MIKEYS' GUARDIAN ANGEL

Mikeys' guardian angel checked out a long time ago. Rendered blind by the view from the young Mikeys' shoulder it slunk away quietly, ashamed and impotent, powerless in the face of earthly demons posing as gods disciples. Shattered by an epic failure to protect its charge from violations most evil, the gossamer wings limply floated away and the halo dimmed then withered till it revealed nothing but a dusty crown of thorns.

So weakened was the "guardian" angel by what it witnessed that any reports it managed to make to god were delivered in a tone so meek and mumbling that they went unheard. Or surely god would have intervened.



## **The choices we make**

**Name for Publishing:** Lesley Christen

As I climbed the stairs I tripped slightly. Holding on to the banister I steadied myself and taking a deep breath I climbed the last two stairs to the landing. I had come a long way from the Blue Mountains to Singapore and as I walked across the landing to the English room, I steadied myself before meeting with the staff awaiting me. This was a long way from the alternative school in the mountains where I had taught for 10 years. There I had felt the excitement of ideas and the confrontation of excited minds beating in different directions.

Here there was the calm of assurance that the organisation would carry the teachers through the day. The staff were very courteous and as the new head of department I was very careful not to overstate my presence. My first teaching job was in a school similar in organisation and position within the larger society and it wasn't until I started creating theatre that I could relax and play with my own spontaneity. I knew similarly that the formality I was experiencing in the first few days would dissipate with the expression of my own creativity.

It only took a few days for me to recognise the Power relations within the staff, those with whom I could be at ease and those with whom I would need to be careful. It was very different with the students. English is a subject that allows not just the flow of ideas but when the moment is right for a student the emergence of the unexpected, the surprising. Of course, all teaching has its mundane moments but in my teaching world I have tried to maximise my opportunity to move into that world where students are excited and challenged. I never saw myself as a social worker in the sense that my role was to work in challenging situations. When first teaching I was sent to a country school with very little cultural stimulation. At my first opportunity I moved back to the city where I would be able to give students the chance of theatre and the arts generally.

In my early years of teaching, I had the opportunity to work in England. Although it was very near Oxford, the School was close to a car manufacturing Company. I remember my despair when standing at the front of the class I could feel the many directions of the thoughts of the students in front of me. In seeking survival, I realised I would have to stand at the back of the class so that no one knew if they were within range of my view. In that situation I felt like a Warden in a prison. I couldn't wait to escape.

It wasn't until I was back in Australia and in a new relationship that I left Melbourne to live in Sydney where I first experienced the solace and the stimulation from working in a situation where students eagerly paid attention, expressed ideas fluently and showed great interest in performance which was my first love. My delight in hearing the words of Shakespeare, whose works entrance and nourish me, could be shared. I would produce at least two Shakespeare plays a year, most frequently Twelfth night and a Midsummer Night's dream. If I had older students, I would venture to produce Romeo and Juliet which always proved to be a delight to us all. It was an environment where action and language moved both students and parents.

Moving to Singapore seemed like moving to small cosy bubble-a group of expats living in apartments or condos as they were referred to, walking everywhere since owning a car in Singapore is incredibly expensive, and meeting of a Friday at Holland Village to share drinks and chat about the week.

That night as I reflected on this enormous change in my life, I also became very conscious of a recent diagnosis I had been given.

I was staying with my daughters the Christmas prior to me coming and had woken up finding it difficult to walk. The local GP sent me to the hospital where the diagnosis was confirmed that I had MS.

As yet my symptoms were generally mild and infrequent and I had a tendency to minimise the onset.

In taking up this position in Singapore was I demonstrating enormous courage or idiocy?