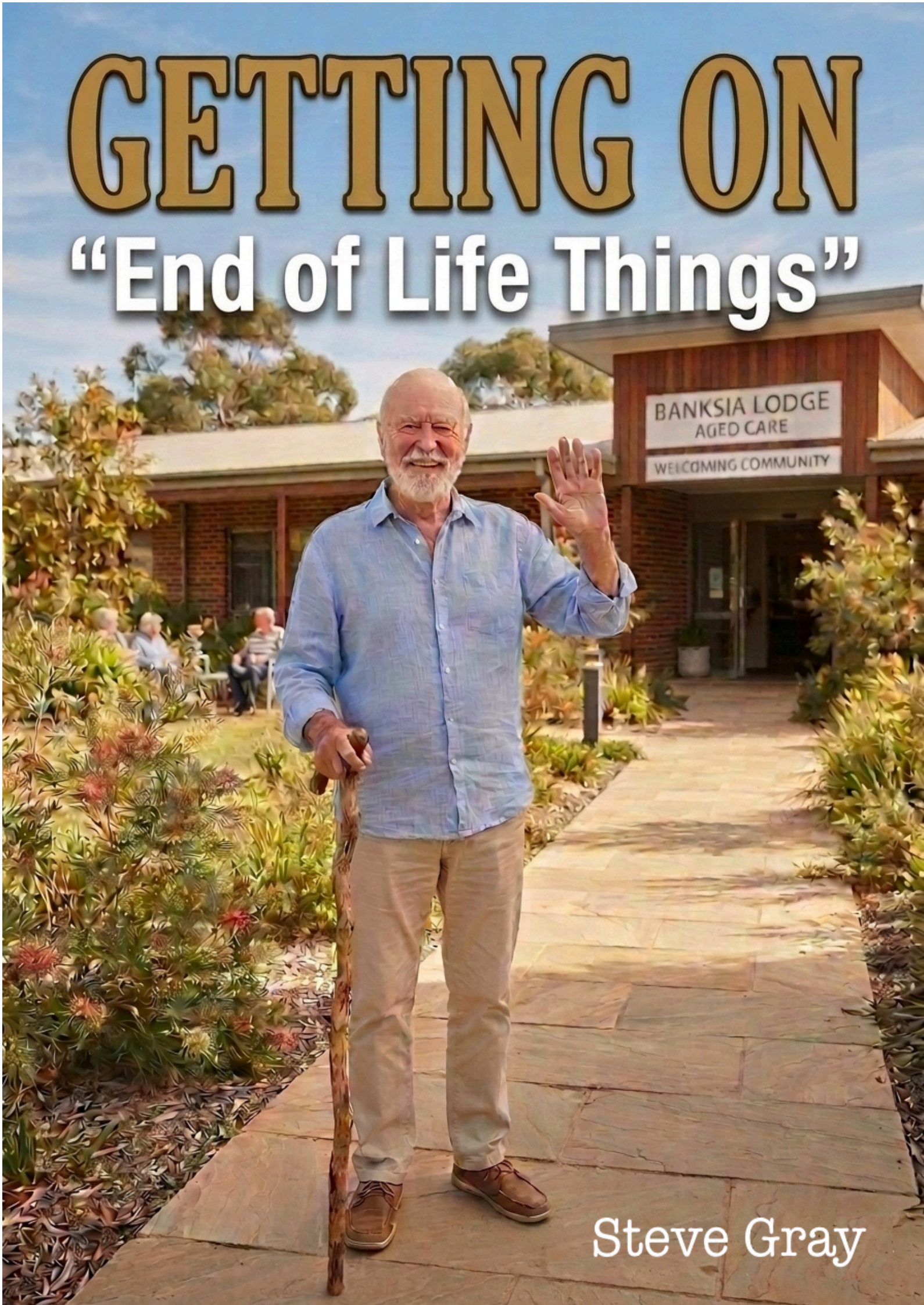
GETTING ON

"End of Life Things"



Steve Gray

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End of Life Things.

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Editor: Aileen Wood

stevegraywriter.com.au

Chapter One

I am getting on in years, and there's something about a change that would be nice. I'm single, widowed, retired, and have spent time travelling, writing, making art and having a reasonable time of things, oh sure I have had health challenges, who doesn't at my age. Years earlier I was actively engaged in making art. It was late in life when I realised that this simply meant I made things that took up space and often they were things that other people didn't want, that's why I now write.

I did think at one stage that what I wanted was a large gallery with a unit attached to put all my artwork in. It seemed logical, but it would have cost a lot to heat and cool it. So nope, I got rid of a lot of the artworks. My brain then said writing would be better, I have a fascination with words and guess what, writing takes up a lot less space.

I have just listed my property for sale, and am about to explore some level of aged care accommodation. I will have the cash and be able to sort out what I want without having to figure out selling my property because I have to, but because I would have already sold it. My emotional connection to where I live is minimal so there will be no love lost there. It's a nice spot and all that but, no emotional connection of any worth.

Our investments have served me well, my wife, Jean, passing away a while back, has meant that I have her superannuation as well as our other investments making things even easier. She only released it all about six months before she passed away, she was delighted that it would open up a world of new things for us, well, no, she didn't ever really grasp the fact that our investments and inheritances prior to that, had served us well and we were on 'easy street', well before she released her superannuation.

Jean didn't have much of a head for finances, nor a mind for anything that looked official, like mail, I almost always opened all the mail that came in, and responded to various things, like bills. It was the same with her superannuation, she didn't know how to even access it, or who the company was that had it. She was advised to change her email for it from her work email when she retired, So she passed it to me and I put my email address on the thing while she set up her personal email, she promptly forgot about it. So it stayed as my email right up to the end. I guess I found that amusing, and no I didn't do that to control things.

She would ask me from time to time how much she had in her account, I would say ‘guess.’ She would come up with a figure that was often well down on the actual amount. She didn’t seem to care, they would invite her to take part in retirement seminars, every year, two or three events a year, she went to one about six months before she quit her job.

Unfortunately she didn’t spend any of it, perhaps she thought she did. Her untimely demise was sudden, I guess that’s what makes the situation untimely, the suddenness of it. Jean was hit by a small delivery van while crossing the road in a busy shopping strip, the driver was going way too fast I thought. It was a mess.

The ‘strange thing’ about how things ‘evolved’ that day was in a dream I had many years ago, very clear and explicit, a deja vu experience. It woke me in an amazing fright. The next day I told Jean about it, and any time she was out and about I would say, ‘keep your wits about you, and be extra careful crossing any road, make sure to look both ways.’

On this actual day, I was parked across the road waiting patiently for Jean to return. We had been out shopping for all the usual things. It was sunny and clear, quite warm, she said she wouldn’t be long. For some reason I noticed when she came out of a shop after a while and crossed the footpath smiling, clearly happy, and as bright as sunshine. Something about this day I recalled, and it wasn’t until it happened that I remembered the Deja vu dream from many years earlier. If I had recalled it a fraction earlier I could have called out to her to stop. But no, that didn’t happen, so I didn’t call out. It all happened very fast.

Jean manoeuvred between some parked cars, ready to cross the road, instead of looking to her right for traffic coming towards her, she was looking at me smiling, clearly very happy. There was a fair bit of traffic coming the other way, Jean had seen that, I saw it too in the rear vision mirror on my side of the car. There was no traffic coming the other way at that point.

I then looked forward, there was a white van coming through the roundabout just down from the shops, it was moving at a fair pace I thought. Jean didn’t see it, she was watching the traffic on the other side of the road to her left, and then stepped out. I didn’t see the impact and thank goodness for that.

All of a sudden there was some kind of loud muffled ‘bang,’ and the screech of tyres on the road. Instantly there was a lot of chaos, the driver of the van was a young indian guy doing deliveries. His van’s brakes kicked in and he skidded to an abrupt halt. He was in total shock the moment he got out of his van, and collapsed on to his knees in a heap, screaming

something in his native language. All of the traffic in both directions had now stopped. I was across the road quick smart and was also in shock, shaking and crying etc seeing the scene laid out before me, in front of everyone. We were all in total disbelief.

People came from all over, kind people, people who were walking on the foot path, and working in the shops. The police were there in just a few minutes. I was consoled and supported by a local shopkeeper who was a freakin' angel. She bought a seat out of the shop and suggested I sit, I did. It was a very traumatic time, she chatted to me in a very gentle way realising I was Jean's husband rather quickly. I spoke to her a while after the event, and thanked her profusely for her support. She had some training in mental first aid as it turns out, and I said that it was a very useful skill, delivered well.

The police closed off that section of the street and things were sorted out by those in charge, not me. I was trembling, who do I call, what do I do, how do I handle it, what next? One step without checking the traffic and bang, that was it, Jean was taken from me… From us. Her life now ended. The driver was a mess, all he could say, on realising I was Jean's husband was, 'I'm so sorry, it all happened so fast! She just stepped out and it was too late by then.' I remember the look of dread in his eyes, poor guy didn't have a chance, I didn't know what to say, too many things were rushing through my head.

One of the police officers drove me home in my car, it wasn't far actually, half a suburb away. The accident happened in a spot that we didn't usually shop in, I have no idea as to what Jean wanted to buy or look at that day. She was well known to browse thrift stores and so on, often realising after a ten minute browse that she didn't need anything, but that day I don't recall what she went to get, or see, I do recall she was happy, in a sunny, bubbly kind of way.

The police and other emergency services were all fantastic explaining everything very clearly, and I was so pleased they checked on me at home later that day, bringing Jean's personal belongings that were scattered all over at the accident scene. They had a service I could call to chat to a counsellor, if required.

Phone calls to family and friends was a messy, teary affair, naturally it caught everyone off guard. Disbelief, denial and all that. All of my main contacts were called, I then put a message on my social media page, comments of support came thick and fast.

Gina, a friend of Jean's, arrived at my place not long after the police left, she had dropped everything on getting my call, although not a close friend in the sense of dropping in or calling every week, when she caught up with Jean it was a decent chat, she was always hyper in her talking, her activities and so on, very ADHD. Today she was different and thank goodness for that, consoling and offering to help in any way she could, she had slowed down somehow and asked lots of good questions to see if I was okay. She shook her head in disbelief.

I told her some of the details but left out the very awkward, gory messy parts, far too gross to share. The impact was solid, sudden and full force, the van took a good ten metres to stop. The police suggested the van was going forty kilometres an hour, I thought it was more than that, but they assured me the maths don't lie. Anyway there was a mess created, human remains splatter badly, depending on where the person is hit and the part of the vehicle they come into contact with. I recall that there was no movement of the body on the ground and I didn't run towards her, something in me simply said, 'Stand back, it's a crime scene now,' need I say more.

I told Gina about the lady from the shop who came out with a chair and asked me how I knew the person on the road, and then suggested I should sit. She had all the right questions and recorded the details, my address, Jean's name and so on, so level headed I thought. Gina agreed. Gina left a short while later, offering to catch up soon.

My thoughts went to what's next, I had in mind a local funeral service that I had some degree of respect for, I had suggested to the police that I would contact them to organise the 'post event' details. What a weird phone call that was. Wherever the body was, it needed to be handed over to the funeral service, they seemed very understanding and would take things the next step, a representative would drop in to see me and organise things, in other words collect some cash and tick a few boxes on a form while being consoling. Don't read any sarcasm or bad thoughts into that statement, it's just the reality of things. Details collected and funds transferred, all good, cremate, no service thanks.

The memorial catch up with family and friends was all a sudden thing, thankfully Jean and I had discussed what should happen when one of us passed away, who to contact etc. Gina was a great help, organising a local venue and thinking of things like a reception book for people to sign etc. I was a mess. My family, what's left of them, turned up, nieces, nephews and their kids, then Jean's family, and a few friends, people we both knew, and a

small handful of people that Jean used to work with. Some I haven't seen in ages, some I only knew their names and therefore I had never met.

I held things together rather well I thought, I kept my speech short and sharp. How we met, things we had done, things we liked and disliked, a few funny moments. Writing the speech was a tragic kind of an affair, bullet points, what to start with, how to end it and so on, so many memories that could be shared, but I kept it all to the main memories. Our choice not to have kids, holidays we went on, mental health issues, physical health issues and so on, just enough to give the audience a taste of what our life together was like.

Her siblings added some positive points. The day faded into a mess by the time I got home, Gina had picked me up and dropped me off, then checked in on me the next day, she was a gem. Some of my family stayed somewhere in town and dropped the next day, touching I thought.

The first few nights with only me in the bed was strange, restless sleep, then a sense that things had irrevocably changed, a change thrust upon me, not a welcome change at all, the meaning of life, a question I explored more than a few times, came on a freight train through my head, did I still have meaning even though I am now newly 'single' or not?

Words for her, for me, for us.

Every time we change, we seem to leave little trace of ourselves,

I can be lost in all that, what's the point, leaving minimal trace.

Other relatives did the same, but with less philosophy I guess,

People will discard things, people will be discarded,

and the memory becomes just another 'I wonder moment'.

Now she is gone, taken too early,

I too shall be gone, what was the point of our existence?

Does our existence need to have a point?

If not, why not?

One thing we chatted about from time to time was not having kids, a decision we made early in our relationship. The only downside in an obvious sense, is not having a direct person to share our experiences, assets and wisdom with. I shared a lot of that via my writings but there were so many things to share and I was never sure, in fact I am still not sure… How many people read what I have written and if they get any value from it.

I had things a bit hard for a few weeks after the accident, then for some reason, I went into a deeper spin, I didn't answer my phone for a few days, I put it on silent. One day I walked for about three hours, up and down local streets, baseball cap on in case the sun came out, thankfully the weather was mild and lightly cloudy. I left at about 8.30am and kept going, one foot in front of the other, beginning, middle end, next step. I always liked plodding, rather than a fast walk to get somewhere, just a slow walk, a plod. My mind pondered many things in the process, somehow compiling the information I had been exploring in my head for the past few weeks.

The shadows grow heavy and steep,

The cold air is harrowing and sharp;

A ghostly embrace in the gathering grey,

For the missing beloved who drifted away,

Leaving silence that burdened the heart.

I stand where the darkness meets ground,

And struggle to breathe in the chill;

The salt of my tears falls like wintery rain,

To water the earth with the weight of my pain,

While the wild wind is calling me still.

My mind wandered, and thoughts on all sorts of things flooded my head. I would return home, sit and cry, deep sobbing tears for what seemed a long while. I then settled. A sense of calm came over me for a few hours. I had a light lunch, then rang a mental support service to have a chat. I felt that doing so would be helpful, however the person I chatted to was rather robotic and so I felt it was useless. I rang back later on and got a different person, who worked out better. I didn't tell them I had rung earlier, I didn't want to mess up things, just chat with someone, there was now a degree of calm, I slept well that night.

I turned my phone off silent mode and returned to getting on social media as well. Slowly but surely a degree of fragile positivity returned to my thinking and ways of doing things.

Chapter Two

The people from the funeral service rang, the cremated remains could now be collected. I organised to pick them up. They offered me a 'nice urn', rather than the plastic 'box' the remains initially came in. I was polite and said no thanks, Jean didn't want any of that. She wanted to be sprinkled across a garden bed that had a nice view, perhaps the botanic gardens.

I had known for a long time that the botanic gardens didn't want people spreading their ashes there, it changed the PH of the soil apparently. I didn't care too much for that, but if I did spread the ashes, I probably wouldn't take the std container, but perhaps I would find another form of delivery. I remembered the film, The Great Escape. Where they had to spread diggings from the tunnels, they had a system of putting the dirt into long pockets inside their trousers, with a simple string release system. That seemed okay but laborious.

Perhaps all I needed was a different container? Or do it in smaller bits and not all in one go? That could be useful. I went to inspect the gardens and find the right spot to lay the ashes. I noted that there were a few staff about tending the gardens. It was early in the day, I came back about 1pm, less staff about, I also noted that areas they had tended to, probably wouldn't need to be worked on for a few weeks. Therefore they probably wouldn't be in attendance in those areas for a while.

I found a suitable spot, the edge of a curved garden that faced east, it would get the morning sun, nice. I then had a thought, perhaps I should match the colour of the soil so what I put there, wouldn't stand out. So I took a photo on my phone.

I mixed the ashes with some ‘premium’ potting mix and took a small sample to the gardens. I had a ‘zip lock’ bag with the contents, yep that was easy to put in my jacket pocket and retrieve when required. I got there and realised it was soon to rain, aha, that would be useful, lay out the goods and let the rain integrate things into the soil. The colour was okay, and the small bag worked. The rain came and did its deed a few minutes after I was gone.

I made various trips almost daily, two bags, one in each pocket. No staff about, dump the goods. That went well, no complaints, no issues and I marked on a screen shot of the garden's satellite image, where the ashes had been placed. I sent the image off to family and friends. The process took a while, I ended up thinking it was like some sort of minor pilgrimage.

I started to have deeper thoughts about life, death, values, beliefs and anything else that tested my worth, our worth. Jean would have loved to have chatted about all that, come to think of it we did. Late nights, well late for us, after nine thirty, that was our bedtime. Chat for a while, TV on silent, just the images then chat about some burning issue. Then off to bed and sometimes the conversation would continue until quite late, various views pushed back and forth. Values, opinions, facts and data, we would swing between various principles and notional concepts.

In between things, I had flashbacks, I guess we all do one way or another. Our wedding, how the excitement we both felt was filled with anxiety, fun, thrilling thoughts, a few drinks and so on. It was a truly special day. Lots of laughs with my mum complaining about a mark on the front of her green dress. She didn’t like green, I never figured that out, we had green carpet in one of our houses when I was a kid, I never figured that out either.

Reality would then kick in, well, okay reality was always there, it was the flashbacks that kicked in.

These could then flip to other thoughts that were not so good for me, jobs that went bad, etc. Things that happened to me as a kid, a fight where I got spat on, a billy cart ride down a bush track that was an incredible adrenaline rush, even though it nearly killed me on a few occasions. The bush track was very steep and at some points the rocks thrown up by the front wheels were a challenge to try and avoid.

Then there would be more current thoughts, holidays on my own, Jean didn’t like crowds or art galleries, I didn’t mind crowds. Art galleries were what I lived for in a sense.

Strangely, on one occasion I was away for three weeks and on my return, I said ‘Did you miss me!’ Jean rather casually said, ‘No…’

Life went back to some sense of normality, I returned to writing and even created a few drawings, small A5 and A4 works on ‘nice paper’ some I included text, short statements to express feelings at the time.

The property sold and I had some time before the place settled, the new people wanted a longer settlement, that was fine by me.

I went back to the writing group I had been part of for a long time. They had been ‘briefed’ via email from me on my situation and were loaded with suitable condolences and support.

I had been writing for a long time and these works I had created were part of my values, my adding to the wisdom of the world, or at least I hoped that the knowledge I shared may be of value, but how would I know? Sales of my books had been the last thing on my list of interests, I just wanted to be creative and not create more ‘stuff’. I had done that with creating visual art items for around forty years, writing took up a lot less space! A web site and a bunch of e books available online.

Words would generally flow with quite some ease, I would readily gather words and make a list, and for a while I found the lists would be dark, angry, harsh words, and they fitted in to the deeper dark genre of fiction I enjoyed writing, some stories were focussed on a couple tearing each other apart, vitriol and harsh comments filled the air and I liked it.

I also didn’t care if people read the darn things, I would add them to my website, then put a link up on my face book page. I found out a while later that people did read some of them but I didn’t know which ones, so that was a bit of a mystery, but I would lie awake at night sometimes wondering what they thought. My flashbacks happened mostly at night as well, time to think, time to ponder.

Chapter Three

I had a message from Wei Lim, a friend from years ago, a fabulous guy. I have kept in contact with him for ages, he's in Singapore these days and has done well in business, a few

hiccups along the way but mostly okay. He had heard of Jean's passing and offered me condolences.

Wei had lived with us as a student at Uni, years ago, completing one course and then moving on to a masters level qualification. He was part of a group of students we had in our boarding house that we ran for about ten years. It was a good little income earner having students, the odd hiccup but mostly okay, we had students coming and going. Most had part time work to sustain them, a few had income sent from their parents who were well to do.

Wei was with us for about four years, on and off, he moved out for a short while with friends, but that didn't work out so he moved back in.

Wei was always willing to help out, if he saw I was about to do some maintenance and got out the ladder, he would come and hold it, pass me tools and all that. He was studious and got good results, it all paid off for him. We have kept in touch and he has dropped in on us a few times, the same at his end, we dropped in on him too when passing through. Always generous in his hospitality and welcome. Come to think of it, we did the same.

Younger than me, by about twenty eight years, he's a workaholic and has remained single, the occasional girl, but still single. He said they would only get in the way of him setting up a business etc. He liked setting things up, making a profit and occasionally he would sell something off.

On one occasion he was able to buy a company back, two years after selling. The new owner wasn't able to make it work. Basically they didn't follow Wei's guidelines and the business went sour, he picked it up for a song, and had it back into profit territory in six months. Selling again for a bigger margin yet again, not long after.

His message mentions he has a business in France, and he may have to spend some time physically there. I wondered why he was telling me that? I thought I had better reply, so I did, a short note.

He was back with more detail not long afterwards. I sensed he was nosing about, trying to figure out what I was up to. Things went back and forth over a few days. Push came to shove and he was wondering if I would look after things in Singapore while he went to France for twelve months. Keep an eye on his apartment, I would have to pay some rent to fulfill some government guideline, which I thought was a bit 'rich', but it was simply to take the edge off things for the government guidelines. At first I thought nah, he can figure things

out some other way. I then slept on the idea. I like Singapore, there always seems to be something new to discover or rediscover.

His apartment wasn't anything flash, I had visited a couple of times over the years. He wasn't into having lots of 'things', It was built in the late 70's, early 80's and was maintained in an okay condition. He thought though, that if he left it empty, that anything could happen, like a water pipe burst, or I don't know, something else, so if someone was there they could look after things like that.

I called him and had a chat, refined some details and basically discussed what he wanted and what I might be able to provide. I told him I would have some time away from the place, I was still into travelling, and would need to come home for family events and all that. A few weeks here and there, he was agreeable to that, he was also wanting to keep Mrs Lee next door happy, she liked having a neighbour, she felt safer that way, a gentle but a sometimes anxious soul. Jean and I had met her a few times. Her English was okay, but I had to listen hard.

Wei asked me about how I was coping with losing Jean, it had been about nine months now, so mostly I was doing okay. I mentioned that I was about to sell my place and move into some form of aged care accommodation, the sort where maybe they had a unit and then you could move into higher level care as the need arose.

I had been in the process of getting rid of 'stuff' and figured I could put things into storage if need be, things I really valued.

Wei gives me a timeline a few weeks off yet, he had been back and forth to France and things were starting to ramp up.

I fly out after organising a longer term Singapore visa, I had to show all manner of paperwork etc for that one. I still managed to just have carry on luggage, I figured anything extra I would buy over there. Not that I really needed much.

My new Australian address was with my niece in Melbourne, she was happy to collect whatever had to come my way in the mail, which these days wasn't much, but the Accountant wanted the details to have on his files and it gave me an 'Australian' address. My niece would message me, I would then suggest she open it and usually it was 'bin worthy'. It's funny I chatted to her more that year than any other time over the past fifty years.

On arrival Wei took me out to dinner, which was nice, and then he flew out late the next day. Like me, he was a light traveller, his apartment had lots of storage so he left a range of things behind. He pointed out things I needed to know and had a list of details, all very useful.

The first week or so I wandered about lots of places I had been to before, the hop on hop off bus, and various other places, like the artificial gardens and the botanic gardens. Then various hawker markets for food. I even went on some of the metro train lines I hadn't been on before.

On quiet or rainy days I sit and play solitaire to pass the time, in between wandering about the place. The lead up to playing solitaire was sometimes boredom, either too hot or wet to go out. Wake up, have breakfast, take meds, check the news on the TV or computer, check emails, check my socials… maybe write some things, a story or somesuch, then sit.

Solitaire was then the way to go. Occasionally this would lead into some flat time, Jean used to say that 'I'm feeling a bit flat…' then would mope about and sleep a lot, nana naps and such to shake what was essentially some form of depression.

Sometimes my solitaire time was depressing, a wave of melancholic feelings, or a wave of morose thoughts. The hours would pass slowly, the afternoon sessions like this were a fuzzy situation, the sun would set somewhere out amongst the other apartments and there I was, not pleased, not over sad, just flat.

Rarely, but sometimes, this could be accompanied by a migraine, the visual interference type, with grey areas, or squiggly lines, annoying more than anything.

If it was the start of the day, that was a bigger nuisance than later in the day, or just before bedtime. At night I could readily go to sleep and the thoughts would disappear, along with the migraine. Sometimes I would wake at some ungodly hour, 3 am etc and not get back to sleep easily.

I would sometimes get up, look out the window. So I would sit, sometimes put the TV on, sometimes just sit. My head would ponder various things. These days I don't let my memories of doing bad-ish things get the better of me, I let that guilt go ages ago. I figure they are just memories, I can't change what has happened, I can only recognise they have happened and now shrug my shoulders and move on.

By now, most of the morning rituals and feelings have happened, if I sat still enough I could hear Mrs Lee next door playing country music, which I can just hear, I occasionally put some music on while I write on my computer, far out exciting Jazz and classical gear, so I don't have to hear the country stuff.

Mrs Lee is nice enough, she invited me in for tea early on when I got to Singapore, green tea, thanks very much. I think it was the first week I was there. She wants to improve her English so I offer to help out with that, more than happy to help actually. I made note of some of the basic words she messed up and corrected her on those. I had her read some things, a few paragraphs and then I would read some, then we would compare and discuss what the writing was about. Her comprehension picked up fairly quickly. I taught her some aussie slang, she found that amusing, and would giggle at some of the things, like, 'Gday Mate!'

Thankfully we got on well, things ticked over nicely and I had her into Wei's place for tea too. She had two grown kids, who had grandchildren, they were learning English and she wanted to be able to chat to them readily in decent English. One time they came to visit her, she invited me in to hear them talk and talk back to them, I told them a bunch of stories and amused them no end. They called me Mr Bob… It was kind of quaint and reminded me of my teaching days, not too much to cause a bad flashback, but enough to amuse me.

I asked her why she liked country music? Her neighbour when she was growing up played it, it annoyed her Mother sometimes, but her Father didn't mind, Mrs Lee got used to it and liked it. Her late husband Ji, didn't mind too much but preferred Chinese traditional music. He passed away from a heart attack about five years ago. Mrs Lee said she liked the peace and quiet, he was apparently a bit deaf in his later years and would speak loudly all the time.

Back in Wei's apartment, I thought I would have to clean things up after Wei had been there, but no, like many people over here, he ate out a lot, it can be very cost effective, so his pantry had very little in it. I actually added to the contents a bit. I found a shop over in the Orchard Road area that was a huge cheese shop, another that had specialty chocolate, so I was set.

Solitaire to pass the time, I then got to thinking about solitary situations. There was an old guy up the street from us when I was a kid, Mr Webster, he was as deaf as a post I remember that. On his own, relatives lived a town away, he was retired as far as I know, sat at

home watching TV etc I guess. When he passed away I would have loved to have checked out the inside of his house. I can imagine a standard lamp beside a well worn old upholstered chair that would have been thread bare I guess. A radio, not sure about a TV. Then a simple set up in the kitchen: a small table and probably just two chairs, one for him and another, well, just in case. I remember he drank lemonade, it would be delivered each week and he had quite a collection of empty bottles.

Years later Jean and I saw an evening with Dame Edna Everage, the last part after the very funny first part, was based around a character called Sandy Stone. And the scene that was set on stage, was just how I thought Mr Webster's lounge room would be. I sat enthralled, pondering the life of being on your own when you're older, like I am now. Wow, Solitaire and a quiet time pondering things, memories, and such.

The view from the main apartment window on one side, is the back end of a school and a back street, the other side is a view between apartments that has a river or a canal in the distance, it was a nice view but the window was in an awkward spot, meanwhile the other window looking out over a school was off the main living area and more suitable for sitting and taking in the view. I wished the building was rotated one hundred and eighty degrees, but alas that was not to be.

The place was built in the early 80's and has a few quirks and issues. The main thing I liked was that it had two lifts, if one was out of action the other generally worked. I had a flashback to staying in New Jersey many years back, at a place that didn't have a lift and I was on the fifth floor of an old apartment block, man that was difficult. I was there for a week and, only once did I get to the street level only to find I had left my wallet in the apartment.

The aircon in Singapore and Wei's place is good, recently upgraded, quiet and very efficient. When it's 35 degrees and high humidity outside, I could have the apartment comfortably lower in temperature than outside.

I had been to Singapore a number of times before and had seen many of the main sites, some at night as well, which was amazing. As mentioned, I revisited many of those but took in more details this time around. One thing I had done once before was to go to the 'end of the line' on the metro system and then have a look around to see what was there. Sometimes, there was a nice park, or a shopping mall and apartments. If it was too hot to wander about outside I would make note and hopefully return there at another time.

Some days I play too much Solitaire on my phone and sometimes I don't bother at all, I had deliberately chosen not to get into any other games on the computer or my phone. I did that years ago and found it was too addictive and I didn't get things done.

I slip into a melancholy state for a while, just a bit flat, not overly interested in things. I return home to Australia and then come back four weeks later. I was back home to catch up with family, nieces and nephews, for Christmas. The catch ups are short lived and a bit hollow. I am always amazed at the kids having grown up and their parents, my nieces and nephews are now starting to grumble about health issues, funny that.

Their kids are starting to talk about longer term relationships with partners. These days it seems the kids are leaving marriage for a lot later, very late twenties and into their thirties, real estate prices have gotten out of hand again, and so the smart ones are waiting longer, saving like crazy. I rented a car for part of my time there. I haven't driven for a long while, so it took me a bit to get things sorted in my head. Singapore has a good Metro system, so a car there is a silly inconvenience in most cases, even Wei didn't have one.

While back in Australia I visited a bunch of places I haven't been to in ages, like a park near Auburn Road in Hawthorn, I have driven past there a bunch of times over many years and about 45 years back I pulled up there on my way home from work, I got out and sat on the park bench there for about ten minutes, it was a nice break. A lady approached and asked what I was doing there, in my sometimes smart arse way I said, 'I'm sitting, that's what I'm doing, sitting. And what about you, what are you doing?'

She shook her head and said she just wanted to watch out for her kids and the other kids in the street, she basically wanted to know if I was a creepy man. I looked around and then added, 'Well for a start I don't see any kids, maybe I scared them away. But please know, I am just having a rest, I'm not here to interfere with kids.' So this time around, I sat and waited for her to return, no not really, but it would have been funny if she did. I tried to calculate how old she would have been, yeah, I soon figured she would be long gone by now.

Various other places I dropped into, like places we have lived before, like the six places in Geelong, yep all still there, and the three places in Melbourne, two in Canterbury and one in Mitcham. I like reminiscing, the cars in the street have changed, the colour of the houses and some of the landscaping has altered too. It's fun, and nostalgic. I thought next time I need to come back in Autumn, the trip up Mont Albert Road is worth it, all the trees turning into autumn colours, it's so beautiful.

Chapter Four

I spent a precarious time at first, with the Nieces and Nephews, sure they said they would love to have me for a few days, that would be good, and then the Christmas lunch there as well, all good. I always thought my Nieces husband Frank was an okay guy, but one Christmas after he had a few drinks he called me a dickhead, based on something I said. I was always weary of him after that, the funny thing is I have no idea what it was I said and it hasn't been mentioned since.

Anyway we got on okay, the business he ran he had sold off a few years back and they were basically doing very nicely, investments and their farm, the farm was more about having some space, rather than having any cattle and all that, a few sheep they borrowed off a mate to keep the grass down, that was about it.

I visited the other relies as well, and did the same as I did in Melbourne, looked about various places I remembered from years back, still the same, but different. Not that that makes any sense, just that time passes and things have to change, but remain the same. I found a bunch of galleries to look at, most closed for the Christmas break.

I'm finally asked about how I was coping without Jean, the stories flowed and I shared a few things about her that they didn't know, nothing too serious. I left those bits in my memory, they can be read about in my memoirs at some stage in the future, those rare but cataclysmic moments.

When I return to Singapore it's still Christmas time and the wettest time of the year there. It all adds to the melancholy and my mind drifting, exploring, the value of being a human at my age, will my wisdom be passed on? Is there any real wisdom I have to pass on? Will anyone notice or care? Caring, now there's a thought, who cares? My rellies didn't, it was always me contacting them, and now that I think about it, it was the same with friends, what was left of them… I contacted them. I once did a 'blitz'. I phoned a person or two per week for about six weeks, just to catch up and say hi, those I was close to, I would invite myself over for a cuppa. Yeah, nah, not ideal, they would chat, but, Yeah nah, it was all a bit shallow.

Being single now is part of my melancholy, I make my own decisions so that's good, but now it's all a bit hollow. I liked sharing experiences with another person, although it didn't happen often. There are community activities over here, but most of the people that go

to those avoid English, so I was a bit on the outer. I found a group of Aussies that caught up occasionally, but I found their common interests were more sports related.

The flashbacks are brewing, sometimes more than others, like the time I left a good job at a country university to take on a new role in Melbourne. The job looked good, but all of a sudden I had to realise that if things didn't work out I would be out of work. Day one, heading out the door at 5pm, I got let out by a senior technician, who said, 'Be ready to work long hours, we stay until the work is done, oh and remember the first three months are a probation period.' I went home shocked, he was on the money. I got good at working longer hours and also good at making the most of my travels around town and dropping into galleries for a 'look see'.

I still clearly recall that technician holding the door open just a fraction and stopping it with his foot. I was trapped, when he started his little rant. I was a little depressed about that, but I made it through, until the company folded up their Asia Pacific region eighteen months later… That meant another change, but hey that's a different flashback!

Back in Wei's apartment, the day started out dry, then bang, the rain came, torrential is not even close to explaining how heavy the rain can be here. It settled after a while but ten minutes of heavy rain really changes things. I sat and watched, it was so heavy I could barely see the school out the window. In the afternoon the rain settled down enough to leave a period of dry conditions. I head off to the local Hawkers market to get food. I had tried many things there, but today I went for a fairly straight forward meal, a chicken soup with Tofu. By the time I got back it had started raining again.

The depressive state I experienced faded out, and all of a sudden things were okay again. Not that I was deeply depressed or anything, just a bit 'flat'.

I was writing like crazy for a while, adding more and more to my website, short stories, angry stuff, poetry that I thought really pushed the boundaries and things where I wondered where I was heading but I wrote anyway. Then one day it just petered out. It didn't worry me much, I had an email from a 'fan'. That was after I had stopped writing for about three months, It triggered me to write some things, and then it all took off again. They found me via my website, the only email I received from there. I wonder how many people are poised to send a note but say, 'yeah, nah…' and didn't bother in the end.

I went back to an earlier theme and wrote a story about a next door neighbour to a previous main character, Janey, and then let that family evolve, Janey had one child at that stage so they connected on that level attending the same play group etc.

I take a walk in some of the parks around Singapore, I make a list and tick each park off as I go. Ideas for stories flow. When I write if it's raining or too hot outside to be outside, I am happiest writing, but if the weather is mild and agreeable I would prefer to be outside, but sometimes the writing just flows, frustrating times.

I like to sit and watch people, in the hawker markets, in the shopping malls, out in the street, the tourists, first time visitors and so on. I love watching first timers with a map, trying to figure out where things are at. Over the time I have helped a few, 'Go up this way for about two blocks and then you will see the park, it should be on the right…' That sort of thing. It makes people happy, that's nice.

I got to see various sides of Singaporean people that I might usually miss. Those that don't like tourists, 'They just clutter things up and make things busier than they need to be.' Then those who are friendly and happy with how things are.

There is some travel, Europe again, Greece, then Italy, then France and beyond. I catch up with Wei and see his project in France and how it's going. I don't think the workers there really wanted him there, I feel sure they wanted a French person to run things, not a Chinese guy. He asked me for some advice on some business issues. I hope what I added was wise enough for him to want to take it on board. He knew that I had some business knowledge and had written hundreds of articles on various business issues over many years.

We only ever learn the headlines of history. We know the names of the kings who built the fortresses or the dates the empires fell, but we miss the gritty, minuscule truths of the everyday. Take European cafe culture. It isn't just about coffee; it's an ancient, hard-won art of deceleration. I felt the weight of that truth most clearly in Spain, watching a single table occupied by the same locals from the crisp morning hours straight through past nine in the evening. They sat under the amber glow of streetlamps, unbothered by the blur of tourists around them, claiming a casual lifestyle that felt entirely foreign to the frantic pace of modern life.

Walking down those ancient, buckled cobblestone streets, my mind instinctively reaches for a yardstick to measure the age of the stones beneath my boots. Being Australian,

my historical anchor is fixed to the 1850s, the frantic, muddy dawn of the gold rush era. So, when I look up at a carved stone lintel over a doorway and read a casual date from the 1500s, it delivers a physical jolt. I stand before Renaissance-era artworks and architecture, acutely aware that even older layers lie buried just beneath the surface. It is a vertigo-inducing realisation: I am standing right bang in the middle of a timeline that makes my own home feel impossibly young.

To survive the quiet of solo travel, you learn to seek out the briefest sparks of human connection. In galleries, it usually begins with a muttered observation from a stranger. If I happen to know a piece of trivia about the artist or the hidden symbolism in a canvas, I'll offer a sliver of extra knowledge. Sometimes it dissolves after a polite, thirty-second chat. Other times, it ignites into a sharp, five-minute repartee of information exchange, a brief intellectual dance before we drift back into our separate lives.

My mind often drifts back to an early trip to Singapore, sitting on a wooden bench at the zoo. We were waiting for a keeper to feed an exotic creature from Madagascar when an American man sat down next to me. Like me, he was traveling alone. He was a retired lawyer, sharp-tongued and endlessly curious, who desperately wanted to see the world, but his wife preferred the comfort of home. *Same as me, but different.* We talked for a solid half-hour, two parallel lives briefly intersecting at a tropical enclosure, sharing the unique camaraderie of men who love their families but still chose to cross oceans by themselves.

Switzerland brought a different kind of scale. I came for the high mountains, the precarious cable cars swaying over sheer drops, and the tricky cogwheel trains that defied gravity up impossibly steep inclines. Engineering marvels, without a doubt. But the higher the altitude, the more the silence pressed in.

On those long, high-altitude train rides, I found myself exploring the dark, quiet corners of my own mind. A persistent sense of isolation settled over me, accompanied by a cold, practical question: *What would happen if I died right here?*

If my foot slipped on a wet mountain trail, or if I bumped my head in an unfamiliar alleyway, or got struck by a car on a sleek Zurich street, what is the actual choreography of an anonymous death?

An ambulance arrives, staffed by medics speaking a dialect I don't understand. Followed by a sterile hospital room where a monitor flatlines. The local police combing through my pockets, pulling out a passport to trace my identity.

Followed by a phone ringing in the quiet of an Australian evening, and a relative sighing, *'Oh, Uncle Bob has passed away… I wonder what we will need to do next?'*

The fragility of being a stranger in a foreign land is that your entire existence hinges on a passport and travel insurance.

The antidote to that morbid spiral seems to be the warmth of a crowded room. Lost in thought, I finally ducked into a packed cafe to escape the chill and find some food. Every table was claimed except for a few empty chairs at mine. A couple close to my age, speaking with unmistakable English accents, caught my eye and politely asked if they could share the space.

"Yep, all good," I replied, pulling back my jacket.

Their names were Rod and Edith. What began as a logistical necessity quickly thawed into a rich, easy conversation. We swapped the standard currency of the road, where we had been, what we had eaten, what scams to avoid, and before the plates were cleared, we were exchanging social media details. It was a pleasant, grounded afternoon, a vital reminder that making connections is probably the true ballast against the isolation of the road.

Re-anchored to the world, I packed my bag the next morning. My itinerary pulled me forward to Bern for a handful of galleries and a specific museum a fellow traveler had recommended ages ago. From there, I boarded the train to Zurich, a smooth, beautiful rhythm of clicking tracks, rolling green landscapes, more quiet galleries, and the endless, beautiful work of sightseeing alone.

Back to Singapore for a while, Wei returns, his France project wrapped up, he sold it off to a guy from Germany. Wei was happy with that, I said goodbye to Mrs Lee, then off to Australia, Brisbane, Gold Coast, Sydney, then Melbourne, to catch up with my family. I go to my storage facility and shuffle a few things about, pondering what to do with things.

Chapter Five

My change has been brewing, I have now spent a year in Singapore with a few breaks in between, learnt a few things, reminisced, ‘flat’ moments, and here I am about to go the next step.

I had my mind set on a retirement place that had units first, then a room inside a supported facility next. But now that I get close to making a decision, I have had a change of mind. The place I have lived for the past forty plus years, getting close to fifty years, is too far away from people who are family, I don’t have a heap of friends here, a couple of them have passed away and frankly I can come and visit others at group barbeques, easily enough, by catching a train etc. So I’m now looking at places closer to my family.

I am now exploring things differently. I am thinking, ‘What would Jean have wanted?’ and frankly she probably would have been happy to do whatever was sensible. I look up a few facilities online, check out their websites, reviews and so on. There’s one place that stands out and on phoning them they have a unit ready to become available close to the time that fits for me.

I drop in to visit the facility, make a down payment and get things sorted. So far so good. The director of the place, or should I say the ‘Golden Years Co-Ordinator.’ Is Fiona, lovely lass, let’s hope that stays the way it is… She assures me I will enjoy the facility and all it has to offer. Fiona shows me around, I ask questions to explore things a bit further, how many staff, how many residents, the sorts of activities they do and so on.

I’m shown around the units, that’s all good, and the inside of a place soon to become available. There was a lady still living there who was most gratuitous and let me have a look around. A simple two bedroom spot with quite reasonable amenities. I still had a few more days of staying elsewhere, so all that was fine. Fiona then showed me the aged care facility and what that was like, clean, neat and tidy. I had seen enough of these types of facilities to know a ‘thing or two,’ I saw all the ‘nice things,’ Then started to notice all the ‘other things.’ The sorts of details people miss, simple things like crappy picture frames with fading prints.

I’m off for a while, dates set for my move in and all that.

My mind goes a bit astray at times exploring the flashback to Jean’s accident, and how that changed so many things in my life. I was thankful she had released her superannuation, it

saved me having to verify who I was, and why I was claiming my wife's superannuation. I have a big sigh though when I think that she didn't get to use it, but then I think of all the times we used our other investments and so that balanced things out. It was a funny kind of loop, my mind wandered back and forth. It was a tricky loop to navigate.

I recall a time I spent a week in hospital and how she was so helpful, bundling me into the car to go to the emergency department at the local hospital. I was sixty seven, had a week of being flat out in bed due to back pain, Ankolysing Spondylitis. They tried various pain medication and there are a couple that I have had before that cause hallucinations, and panic attacks, so they tried a different one, well it still created hallucinations and rapid breathing that really hurt my chest. But the hallucinations weren't bad, just thousands of short videos and still images of people in various places doing various things in my head, I don't recall if I knew any of the faces but there I was waking up at odd times, sore chest and wondering how my brain could create so many images?

They did a cat scan, then an MRI along with a colonoscopy. Urgh, a week I would rather forget, but there was Jean, ready with fresh clothes, ready with a smile and a treat of some kind, some chocolate etc. My back improved and I was walking a bit after three days, but it was tough going, I rather dislike pain.

One thing that popped up from time to time was how long Jean spent visiting when I was in hospital, all the various other times. In fact, on the first visit to have a kidney stone removed, I was asked by the admin staff and then the attending nurse, who was with me. I asked the nurse if it was an issue, she pointed out how many people were waiting to go to surgery for various things and how they had a family member or friend with them, not just dropped off, but supported right up until they were wheeled away ready for the first step in their procedure.

In a rather casual way I then said, 'Well, is that an issue that a social worker might explore?' The nurse nodded and said, 'Well maybe.' Nothing more was said, then the next time around, eighteen months later, I told the admin person and nurse that I was here on my own and that was okay.

Other reminders of past medical events flashed by, kidney stones, all of them had to be surgically removed, a nuisance, the recovery was the worst. I think in all I had about six of them. Some of these involved having a temporary stent fitted. A flexible silicon tube that held the ureter open until things healed, it sat in place for about five to six weeks, and then through

a ‘simple’ procedure they remove it, they reach inside the bladder, via your penis, with a special camera and tool, grab the end of the tube and ‘ever so carefully…’ yank it out. It is not a pleasant thing but it has to happen. One time they took a bit longer to schedule this procedure and the urologist was alarmed by that, it turned out okay.

The tricky thing about having this ‘stent’ in place is how it feels, bloody awful, the first two weeks you are fatigued and can’t really exercise much as the foreign body ‘stent’ irritates your insides. You don’t want to do anything and feel like crap. I shake my head and say urgh!

The things you think about as life gets on. More flashbacks, more thoughts, more of everything. Time with Jean, times she supported me, and the opposite is also true. There were angst ridden moments, harassment, I told her one day that she was fast on a track to becoming a bully, the way she harassed me about things. I had to explain in fairly scientific terms that harassment was repeated information the recipient didn’t want, and then if that continued it was considered bullying. She got the point. I wish I had done this quite early in our relationship, alas I did not.

Now as things came to some sense of wrapping up, I had lots of images flipping through my head. Chunks of memories, family and friends, Good things and tougher times, times of guilt, of concern, of doubt. Then there was silence, not sure why, but things somehow stopped. All I had was some sense of clarity, the scenery, the sky, just the things around me without pent up memories and ‘attachments.’ There was a special sense of simply being, and happy about it. I smiled, well I did anyway, but now I was more aware of it. Things didn’t bother me, there was no frustration, no annoyance, no frivolous things to disrupt me. I was to some degree, at one with the world.

I went to the storage facility where my ‘important things’ were, I cleared out a bunch of things, what was left were a couple of original or limited edition artworks, way too precious to throw out or give to a thrift store. They were significant works by artists I had met or admired. I put a label on the back that said they were to be donated to a local regional art gallery, unless one of my relatives really wanted them. I wasn’t about to hold my breath on that one.

The rest of the things were more to do with clothes I liked, I whittled that down to just a few things, other bits and pieces I wondered why I had kept those items, and they were donated to a thrift store.

I bundled the things that were left into the hire car I had, and took them over to the facility. It turned out they didn't have a unit available, there had been a big mix up, but they did have a single or a 'double' room at the next level facility that would be useful, and I would have 24/7 access so I could come and go as I pleased, that was only required if I was out late seeing a play or similar. I accepted it, after all I didn't have many choices! Fiona was red faced and most apologetic, I just stood, stoney faced and said, 'Well what options do I have?'

I think they felt rather guilty about the mix up, I thought I would be able to leverage the situation a bit, and so they gave me a double room. I asked about storage for some of my 'stuff', they didn't have many options, I then mentioned that they were artworks by 'famous' artists. Fiona started to explore options then.

I was now reduced to a few larger works of mine and two small photographs. The facility opted to help out by storing a few of their current artworks, which were faded prints, and allowing a few of my arty pieces, done by other artists, to be hung, they caused a bit of conversation amongst visitors who would stop for a look-see. The other things I had were more clothes, I needed a spot for my computer and screen and I was all set.

I thought about my forty odd years of involvement in the 'arts' making, looking, and so forth reduced to a few items and a huge bunch of memories, the rest had been gone for a while now. The writing I did replaced the creative side, and I was able to create a bunch of e-books, poetry and such then put these online, they didn't take up space as such and were available for all to see, with some of those being for sale.

Some of the writing was 'rather angry', some of it relating to my relationship with Jean. Most people would see her as a saint, but the way I wrote things you would certainly think that the women I mentioned in the written works were often portrayed as nasty, that wasn't necessarily Jean, mostly that was a feminist dreamer of some kind, standing their ground.

It was useful at times to join in with the older residents in the facility, there were activities and meals sorted etc, the only thing the facility didn't have were the sorts of snacks that I preferred, like dark chocolate and cheeses. Off I would go for a walk or in a taxi to the supermarket, get my 'goodies.' and then go back. After a long while I opted for a mobility scooter, not that my mobility was bad, it was actually very good for my age, 'use it or lose it' was always on my mind, so I would walk a fair bit, inside and out depending on the weather.

I would revert to solitaire to amuse myself, afternoon naps became a bigger thing again. And chats with some of the staff were useful, the activities lady, Simone had quite an interest in art and music, so we spent some time chatting, me pointing out some key artworks and artists and then some musical bits and pieces, things from the 70's, rock, pop and classical with the odd chunk of 'art' music and or jazz, fusion stuff.

She confided in me that one of the supervisory staff is somewhat narcissistic. I knew a thing or two about that, and was able to advise her, 'Stay away from them as much as you can…' then figure out what things she failed at, the narc that is, and then aim to squeeze her out. I know it sounds harsh, but people like that are a downer for so many people, staff etc. Any expert in the psych field will tell you narcissists are exceptionally difficult to change.

We hatched a plan. A resident had an issue, no not me… and this 'narc' was given the task of sorting it out, when push came to shove the 'narc' failed. Berated a staff member along the way, which was recorded and witnessed and she was also found to have messed up on some legal issue to do with paperwork, it meant that a resident's family had good reason to make a complaint. 'A medical issue was not reported…' All of a sudden the narc had a bunch of 'strikes' against them. When the head of the facility found a gin bottle in the narcs desk, that was it. The narc was put on notice. It wasn't long before they found another position elsewhere. No longer the current facilities problem.

The new appointee, Tina, started out well, but was forewarned, just in case, by a certain resident… 'That the last person in this role was a narc'. I winked as I said to Tina, 'We will not tolerate a bad person in this role.' I think it surprised her that I was so forward and articulate, I subtly pulled the old, 'I have qualifications in contemporary HR practices, and I will not be the brunt of poor HR choices. I then shook her hand and wished her well. I finished with 'Love people, so they can readily love you back.'

I think I caught her by pleasant surprise, she smiled a bit wider when she saw me about the place after that, I would quietly say things with a smile, like, 'How's the people love going?' One day I was in the main recreation area watching some silly TV program and she sat down next to me and said hi. It turned out she had a question, 'I want to love the people I work with and supervise, but some are driving me nuts.'

I smiled and said 'Ah yes, and let me guess, it's the dumb ones that drive you nuts, they hide in some spot and sit on their phone texting, playing games, basically wasting time, in a sense they don't want to be here. Now let me guess further, you want to be able to alter their

behaviour but without confrontation… Am I right?' She was quietly stunned and shook her head in acknowledgement.

I then said, 'Walk quietly up to them, stand about two metres away, don't make obvious eye contact, if need be look at their forehead, then wait until they stop fiddling with their phone, say nothing. They will soon stop and walk away. Do that to enough of the 'slackers' and they will soon stop. Oh and the same with slow workers, you want them to move faster, but they get into this slow work habit. Say nothing, but be there watching for a bit. Basically get out of your office and be a presence for good. Let me know how you go.' Things progressed and she gave me the thumbs up one day.

On one of the noticeboards they had a list of the values the organisation wanted to live by, at the top it said 'Respect.' I was right by it one afternoon as Tina came by, and I pointed to it, smiled and said, 'Is it working?' She stopped and took a double take. Then mentioned 'It probably is, the staff are fairly compliant at the moment.' I smiled and said, 'It's a great point to discuss, one to one, or in small groups, exploring what it means and so on.' She nodded in agreement. I then added, 'And the residents?' Tina shrugged her shoulders, either she didn't know, hadn't thought of it as an issue to relate to the residents or something else. I smiled and headed off, leaving her to consider that one.

The head of the facility, Fiona, wandered by later that day, I smiled, again, and had a quick chat. She didn't seem to be in a rush to get anywhere, so I thought why not, so I asked, I wanted to get her view on the word respect… She ambled through a corporate style explanation, I said, 'Very nice, now, does that apply to everyone or staff only?' She replied, 'Everyone.'

I added, 'So the staff respect everyone, and the residents do too, yeah?' She nodded in agreement. I then asked, 'So are there examples of respect that each could follow, so they can have an understanding of what it means, or at least should mean?' Fiona then followed with, 'I will look into that, it seems like a thing we should have in place. Oh and thanks for the chat.' Ah, I thought, another seed planted.

Chapter Six

It wasn't long before I had a thought. It was 'too early' to settle into a place, I wanted something more. As they say in the classics, '*I lit out for places west.*'I was off, there's more

of Australia to see. One week out west to Adelaide, then on whim I flew to Brisbane. Then the light rail etc to Coolongatta and then flew back to Victoria. My usual thing, get a bus going out and about and then see lots of things you wouldn't normally see, some things you didn't want to see either!

In the Rundle Mall there was a busker setting up just before lunch, a guitar and a keyboard Arnie Regan, funny how I remember his name. Anyway I chatted, type of music, what he does when he's not playing and similar blah blah stuff. I didn't expect much from his music, I had been wandering about the place for a fair while and it was good to stop.

I grabbed a drink from a shop nearby as he started up. The sort of music you feed a few notes in, then they add another layer, and then, and then. I nearly walked away, but the second song grabbed me… it was layered, but he had a foot pedal that somehow stopped some sections, altered others and bingo something ad lib happened. He was good at noodling his way through the tricky bits. In a short break after about five songs, he told me that the machine would also listen to his playing and acted like it was a human musician, creating and exploring, and to be honest I was merrily impressed. Buskers, I usually listen to, I take in one or maybe two tracks, so five was a new personal best for me. He then showed me another trick, the 'machine could take any existing track, morph it and give him the chords etc. 'Any Song?' Yes came the reply. So I said 'Yo' Mamma by Frank Zappa.' The machine heard me and bingo up came the chords etc, he jumped right into it after I said, 'I know the words to this one.' He pointed to his microphone, then cautioned me the machine would mix things up, so follow what's on the screen.'

Well that was fun, it certainly mixed things up! But hey I did okay for an old guy and a rather old song to boot. Arnie did okay as well. He had a few people scan his bank account and donate a few dollars here and there. We shook hands and I was off.

If I recall, the art gallery was next. Then the Casino, something about people gambling hard earned cash is depressingly amazing. The staff would just do their job, more cash burnt up in the process. I noted that most of the staff were AI Agents, bots and such, able to concentrate, scan people, know who was who and all that. Derelict souls became more and more derelict, sadly fascinating.

I headed back to my accommodation and lo and behold a few doors down from that was a pokies place, the neon sign sparkling over the doorway, I wandered in, grabbed some simple food, then wandered about watching more desperate souls fading into oblivion. A long

and torturous road they wandered along, misery street headed off to the left, oblivion to the right, Wretched distress was straight ahead. Ah the roads we travel.

I did the same in Brisbane, checked out the struggling and dishevelled at a pokies joint and then the Casino. I wish I had the energy to check them out at like two am, but nah, I valued my 'beauty sleep.'

Back to Victoria, the rail line from the airport was having maintenance issues, so yeah, they had buses, train to gippsland and 'home', I chatted to Lauren at reception for a good five minutes about what I had seen and done. She was fascinated that I liked watching people gamble. Not long after dinner time, I noticed that there were a few faces missing, oops, they had passed away, 'tick 'em off the list, times up, exit stage right.' Then there was a new face, Mrs Thomas, the next day there was another 'new recruit.' Mr Richards, sprightly, but he could have seizures and fall about the place, it might be once a week or less, but they were often enough for him to be concerned about. His daughter offered to take him into her home, but he said, 'No way they live in a mess!' He had a theory that she didn't want to see his money go to someone other than her… Bad luck lady!

No one asked where I had been, one lady looked me up and down, had a scowl and then looked away. I have no idea what that meant. Dinner was had, back to my room for chocolate 'a la mode'. Some scotch with some port to wash it down. One of the guys two doors down from me liked scotch, and would float across my open doorway with a smile, I would then offer him a 'short snort'. He never said no. I have good taste in Scotches, eighteen year single malts thanks very much. He liked them too! Richard Symes, nice guy, a little hard to understand some days, but after a scotch he was more legible, shall we say. He only ever stayed for one, he suggested it might mess up his medications too much.

Richard had some good stories too, we would swap stories back and forth, remembering various jobs he and I had done, and then a few laughs about things. He was a bit older than me, mid eighties. But there were plenty of things that cut across our memories, stories about specific events and people locally. We were able to keep ourselves amused for quite a while most days. Especially after lunch, chatting away, then there would be some activity about half an hour after lunch, like bingo. Yeah we had some fun with that.

One afternoon Richard sat near the caller, and called out a few random numbers that confused a few people. I had a laugh, none of the staff really thought that residents would do that sort of silly stuff, ah yeah I got news for them. On winning they usually gave a snack

sized chocky bar, but that afternoon, old Richard called out, ‘You’ve won a trip for two, one way to CHINA!’ Old Mrs Johnson lit up with delight, then had to accept that all she got was a Freddo Frog.

There were funny events, then sad ones as some people faded, becoming lost and confused, waiting at the front door to be picked up by a non-existent family member. The staff would aim to use diversion therapy chats to guide them elsewhere. Then the occasional fall, not that there were many in plain sight, the other ones were in their rooms, toilets etc, the only evidence being a big bruise or two, messy.

Richard and I joined in on a craft activity one arvo, they were making cards, Richard made a valentines card for one of the female staff. He drew a picture of Glenn Quagmire from the cartoon show Family Guy, waving, it was fairly rough but you knew it was Glenn. She thought it was lovely, such a nice gesture, until one of the male staff pointed out what Glenn’s character was like in the cartoon, she was then rather embarrassed. I had a laugh at that one.

Some great nephews' birthday came up, and they took me along for the ride. Yeah it was okay, restaurants and such still serve up too much food! And I noted it was a lot noisier than the place I normally had dinner. Also no restriction on the amount of salt… I had a kids meal, just to make sure I didn’t leave a heap of food! Buggalugs had a fine time, he was a happy little chap, he did well, ate all his nuggets, yay, go buggalugs. Okay so I’m not big on names these days. His real name is probably Algonquin J Athur Hoomin… or some such, I just say ‘Happy birthday kid.’ then pat them on the head. Then getting out of the car I said, ‘See ya buggalugs!’ as they drove off he asked his mum, who or what is buggalugs? I had a chuckle.

Arriving later, I have to punch in a code and being about 8.30 at night it needs to have a staff member check the camera, see who it is and let them in. I suggested to the boss they should have a face recognition system, nah too expensive. Anyway I wander in after waiting too long, excuses and all that from the staff.

In the reception area they have a greeter bot called Bryan, it has face recognition, and can sense me coming from a few metres away, ‘Hi Bob!’ cheery little runt, I stop and say, ‘Oh Ya, it’s Bryan, how’s tricks you old bastard?’ It has no real idea of how to respond to that one, and I mix it up every time I go past, just to keep old Bryan confused. Its screen lit up

with a magic trick being performed by a cartoon character. Amusing… I smiled and said ‘Go Bryan!’

I liked interacting with Bryan, you could ask it stupid questions and it would feed answers back until the cows came home. It saved me using up some of my data allowance, fascinating. One day one of the cute female staff was wandering by and I asked Bryan what Julie's phone number was. Well, I was joking, but Bryan called out the number! Julie stopped and said ‘WHOA.’ The boss had to call the company and have them adjust that feature. I had a laugh. I told her I wouldn’t be able to remember the number anyway. But my phone had heard the number and inserted it into my contacts. I had another laugh about that when I realised.

One afternoon Julie was helping out with an activity. We were sitting around discussing things we remembered and so on, and general discussions. I piped up and said, ‘Does anyone believe in people having the ability to guess when something is about to happen?’ One of the other staff said, ‘Oh you mean like a premonition?’ I then added, ‘Yeah that’s it.’ I had my mobile phone in my hand primed to go, julie's number was all set I just had to push go. I then added, like for instance, I bet Julie's phone is going to ring soon…’ We then looked at Julie, she looked at me and then there was silence. I pressed the button and we all heard it ring. Oh wow came the response, she took one look at the number and by then I had hung up, she gave me a wry look, I laughed. She was a good sport, there were others you would never do that to.

Chapter Seven

The wingback leather chair in the corner of the sitting room had long worn into the exact shape of my frame. It was my sanctuary, a deep, maroon anchor in a world that had lately begun to spin a little too fast, a little too blurred around the edges.

I settled into the cushions, letting my weight sink fully into the familiar support. Across the room, a clock ticked with rhythmic cadence, marking time, a steady companion. I rested my arms along the worn leather armrests. Through the tall window, the late afternoon sun slanted across the floorboards, casting a long, amber block of light that found my resting hands. The sun shone warm, a deep and comforting heat that seemed to seep straight through

my now papery skin and into my very bones, soothing the ache that had settled there agers ago.

From somewhere down the hallway, the sharp clatter of a dropped spoon was instantly followed by a booming, robust burst of laughter. It was Richard. I didn't need to open my eyes to know the sound. Richard had been my dearest friend, a man whose presence had always been marked by a stubborn refusal to let life be entirely serious. Richard was likely in the hallway, fussing over something, making a mess of things just to keep his mind busy. He hears a familiar laugh down the hall, and the sound acts as an anchor, connecting me to a bunch of shared jokes, quiet mornings. I closed my eyes and smiled. A soft, private expression, born from the simple comfort of knowing I was not alone.

A subtle shift in the air stirred me briefly. The heavy, stagnant warmth of the room parted as a cool breeze moved the curtain, sending a ripple through the fabric like a wave breaking on a quiet shore. The sudden movement brought the outside world indoors. I drew in a slow breath, and the air was thick with the rich, nostalgic scent of the earth. I smelled cut grass or rain, a fragrance so vivid it instantly conjured images of summers decades past, of running through wide pastures, of damp soil beneath bare feet, of a life lived in full, vibrant motion.

With that breath, something shifted inside my chest. For months, a tight knot of some form of anxiety had resided there, a restless, nagging fear of what was to come, of things left unsaid, of the inevitable parting from the world I know. But as the cool air washed over me, the knot simply unraveled. I let go of an old worry, allowing it to drift away on the breeze like ash from a dying fire. There was no more need for vigilance. The world would keep turning, Richard would be alright, and my story had been well-written. My breathing slows and deepens, matching the slow, easy rise and fall of the wind outside.

The sounds of the facility began to fade, falling away into a soft, uniform hum. The ticking clock grew faint, and Richard's heavy footsteps in the hallway seemed to echo from a vast distance. I felt remarkably unburdened. I think of Jean’s face, her features sharp and beautifully clear in my mind's eye, untouched by time or grief. The memory brought no pain, only a profound, radiant stillness. I feel my hands are light now, as if the very gravity of the earth had lost its grip on me, freeing me from the physical weight I have carried for so long.

The amber sunlight on my lap slowly gave way to twilight. The room fades into soft shadows, the edges of the bookshelf, the framed photographs, and the drapes melting into a

gentle, velvety dark. There was no fear in the dimming light, only an immense, enveloping peace. The threshold had been reached, the long journey brought to its natural end. I am finally home.