

## My journey with Dementia

Dementia is a term used to describe the symptoms of a large group of illnesses which cause a progressive decline in person's functioning. There is no cure. Dementia is the greatest cause of disability in older people. There are close to 400 000 people in Australia suffering from dementia and their treatment costs the country about 5 billion dollars a year.

Dementia is a major health problem in the western countries with ageing population. Worldwide there are close to forty million dementia sufferers. On average the symptoms of dementia are noticed by families 3 years before diagnosis is made.

You lost our memory  
It was all we had  
Of our time  
Good and bad  
What are we now without  
What became of our knowing  
That time  
That spring  
Our life  
Are we anywhere  
Anytime  
Out of time  
Out of knowing  
Our moment in time slipping away  
I cannot see us  
We are no more  
I tremble  
The autumn leaf falling  
In a maze  
I am fading away  
Nobody wants to hear  
Words that were us  
I lost even words  
For the memories we had  
Lost in the dust of the day  
To reincarnate and blossom  
As the new first spring  
For the children to dream  
You no longer speak to me

## Contents

Harmony day 2012	3
Memories remembered	11
Joe's story	22
My life with Joe	26
My journey with dementia	33
Notes from my diary 2011	43
Behind the locked doors	45
Notes from my diary in 2012	52
Residents	57
End time	63
Notes from my diary 2013	65
Harmony Day 2013	71
Childhood memories	74
Poetry	78
Stories from many countries	102
End	210

## Harmony Day

During the Senior's week 2012 the office of Intercultural Community organised a Harmony Day celebration; they provided a BBQ in the Lion's Park for us elderly of many nations.

Harmony day at Lightning Ridge is about honouring our tradition of a fair go; of appreciating the benefits of our cultural diversity and respecting each other, wrote our local historian Barbara in a promotional pamphlet. Barbara is a pretty part Cherokee Indian who came from America to be with her Australian boyfriend. They have parted long ago but she stayed and devoted herself to our history and our community. You have to devote yourself to something when you find yourself old and alone in the world.

Community workers are professionals who know what oldies need to survive. They are the good oil that stops our wheels from squeaking.

We also celebrate the centenary of our opal mining town this year so it is appropriate to organise community gatherings. About two hundred mostly elderly people gathered and we chat to each other to make sense of the harmony and of ourselves. We are trying to create a sort of family out of remnants from slightly damaged world's adventurers. We must be careful not to look desperate or depressed. Most of us are depressed and desperate in our aloneness. As our working days came to an end we realise how disconnected we became. Perhaps some would like to just sit and stare at those who still have the energy to make attempts at being funny but we all feel obliged to actively engage in the festive spirit and harmony. We have to be sociable and hide our anxiety.

I would myself often just like to sit and look at animated faces and gestures demonstrating happiness; but I smile; some even laugh benignly to cover up the empty spaces so harmony will shine on our disillusioned old faces. I try to forget that we are strangers and that we don't really care for or know each other; we are only here for a free BBQ and to let the organisers go on with their job. It is apparently healthy for older citizens to socialise; it is healthy also for the organisers to have the organising jobs. Outback Health organisation employs people to exercise with us elderly; they help us with water aerobics, walking and gymnastics; they also help young families to shop wisely and look after their babies properly. The whole town is looked after. We just have to be grateful. Being grateful is a source of happiness.

This reminds me of my mother. As a child I tried to help the newborn chicken out of the eggshell but mum told me not to do that because the struggle makes the chick strong and healthy. We no longer have to

struggle; there are helpful offices all around us. They write vouchers when your money runs out; they also provide counselling. No need to struggle; no need to be strong or wise. Just smile gratefully. Deal with your aloneness privately, please.

Forty years ago we were all struggling as we invented dwellings, machinery, entertainment and community. We loved our neighbour because we knew that we depended on each other. Life was in front of us. We were busy climbing the ladder of social and economic success.

We don't need each other anymore. We only need the community workers who organise Harmony days; we smile as they serve us sausages and steaks with smiling faces. We will remember our homeland, our youth and our dreams in the aloneness of our other days. Our successes and failures are of no interest to anyone. Even our elegant eloquent influential friends became worn out old people more interested in the popular cures for urinary and digestive problems than in having their picture in the fashion pages of our four page local newspaper. There is nothing in this paper, we all agree, because we don't relate to little events young ones celebrate.

What have we done; what have we achieved? What is in front of us? During Harmony day we try to forget these questions; they will surely creep on us in our aloneness.

In the morning I watched the line of ants diligently marching through the brick wall towards the supply of food in my kitchen. I watched their disciplined struggle for survival and then I sprayed them dead. The swallows came, hundreds of them celebrating spring. In their beaks they brought the mortar for the foundation of their new homes on the eaves of my house. They like brick houses. They seem to like white brick houses best. Every year hundreds of them come and mark the spots for their nests all around my house. Some nests are already architecture in progress others are just foundation markings where the swallows mix the gluey saliva into the dirt to secure the nest. You can't hose down these gluey foundations. I watch the flurry of their excitement and enthusiasm. Full of life they are building a home and a future for their species.

I remember those swallows in our barns at home; swallows were the harbingers of spring; they were welcome every year to nest in the warmth of the stable. As children we loved to watch the little beaks waiting for their parents to bring food. We were told never to harm swallows. Only here are hundreds of them and the dirt falling from their beaks is all around the house. Their building site is my veranda; I can't let them build hundreds of nests. I take the hose, wash away their efforts and make their struggle futile. The gluey brown marks on the white brick are reminders

that I stopped their friendly colony multiplying. I see the confusion in their flight. I feel the pain in my chest but they found another house and they start again. Such is life; it never gives up.

Harmony only lasts because the government organises it for our health. Maybe we all crave harmony because we are tired of life's futile conflicts and confrontations.

It is cheaper in the long run to prevent depression and pain than to heal it. It is also economically sensible to keep people kicking as long as they can rather than put them in the residential care which costs the government plenty. People live longer so the governments have to be sensible about the age problems. We are becoming more of a problem every day. It is much cheaper to keep community harmonious with little gatherings in the park. The debate about euthanasia scares me; the idea of having a friendly farewell from life is nice but life itself wants to go on. It's comforting knowing that our children carry our genomes into the unknown future. Is immortality our only purpose; is there no other meaning to life? Just the repetition without an explanation? Did we weave stories about god just to preserve the hope that there is after-life? Is life independently organising its future without our help and prayers? Plans are man's odds are god's, mum used to say. Ljudje obracajo bog obrne. Life goes on and we are no closer to the meaning of it all; we do not understand space and time; we cannot define Nothing, from which according to scientists time and space and mass exploded; we might as well call this almighty nothing god. Or life. Or nature. Or Big Bang. Or Boson- the little god. What really is your name, God? We would like to uncover god's secrets, we peel away false notions but there remains another and another layer of ignorance. Is life an enormous everlasting onion? We cry peeling away its layers. Is life ignoring our efforts and anxieties?

I read that soon we will teleport people and then we will not need transport, announces Dominik who takes pride in reading about astronomy and space explorations. He lives on the field in a shack without windows or doors. He has no electricity or water but he buys scientific magazines when he comes to town to cart council water home.

Million light years away has no meaning for me and I do not relate to trillions of galaxies either. The question remains: what is beyond the last star, Ursula joins in the topic. Ursula is a thin tall serious Austrian lady who knows about persecution and injustices. She is doing penance for the wrongs her Nazi father committed. She would use every opportunity to teach the world to sing with one voice in harmony; she is determined to make everybody love each other. She has experience. Steven Hawkins

claims that Big Bang created time and mass. He also said: When we will reach the last star, we will know the mind of god.

I contribute this bit of Steven's wisdom to the Harmony.

People did not believe that they will ever talk to people on other continents face to face. I think that it won't be long before you will just press the button and be teleported on another continent.

We keep making uncertain statements to glue our mismatched isolation into a harmonious companionship. It is all a patchwork. A small sample of a global village. We try hard to fit into this mosaic.

It is really nice to go out sometimes; Barbara nods the seal of approval in the organiser's direction. She is herself still much involved in organising community events.

I get sick of watching television. Murder, corruption and sex everywhere these days, sighs Impi with the sense of knowing as the oldest person present.

Corruption and sex are older than us, laughs Graham, an ancient wiry opal miner, potter and artist. Those on top have always been corrupt and those at the bottom would be if they had a chance. It's just that these days they can't hide anymore, Graham states with authority because everybody knows that he reads. He was a wrestler and had dreams of making films and of being famous. Now he is equal with the rest of us. Graham still keeps his body trim but we can all see his age stamped into his face. I think old age is the best equaliser of people. One slightly demented person is no more important than the other. In the same way one drunk person is equal to all drunks. Their condition deletes everything else they ever were. Just as well that we are all heading in the same direction; this equalisation is a sort of a boomerang justice. What goes around comes around. It is less demanding to socialise with those on the lower step of the social ladder because they still have a bit of awe for those who read and aspire.

I remember Milica of my student days. She was beautiful, witty, desirable, rich, and popular. I was none of those things but Milica chose me as her companion. I tagged along with her into society that did not even notice me; I suppose I was an accessory that presented no competition for her. She told me about her famous boyfriends and about her famous family and I was grateful for that.

All leaders are corrupt. Politicians look down on people they represent; they would like to believe that their shit doesn't stink, Stanko agrees with Graham; he knows a lot about being looked down on. Stanko does not

trust anyone; he grew up in an orphanage and later became a servant to a cruel farmer; this did nothing to help him trust human nature.

The poor finally got the voice. In the past they were punished for complaining, declares Ursula.

Church always helped governments to keep poor people obedient, insists Dominick.

The police do the same, adds Stanko.

Look what Vatican has done during the WWII. They let Hitler....Dominick stops in mid sentence.

Everybody let Hitler do what he did. Nobody could stop him; How could Vatican stop Hitler without an army; it took the whole world to destroy Hitler, Ursula stops Stanko saying more against the church.

Vatican helped where they could. Of course they had to compromise in order to do some good, helps Barbara.

When I asked Stanko why he hates clergy he told me how he sometimes worked in the presbytery as a boy servant. He was hungry and hoped that he would get some leftovers from the priest's plate but the priest gave the scraps to the dog.

Dominick hates priests for much the same reason. There were eight in the family. They killed one pig each winter and his mother gave a leg of it to the priest.

We air our prejudices and political convictions to contribute to harmony. Prejudices and hatreds grow like that.

Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin killed many just to scare the others into obedience.

Communists punished you if they only suspected that you were unhappy, laughs Stanko. He was in jail for two years because he tried to escape from communism. Stanko was never happy; 'we are here to suffer' is his motto. In his dreams he is forever killing those that oppressed him.

Who do you think will win US election; Charlie throws in the current topic.

I hope it is not a Mormon, says Stanko.

I don't want a Muslim either, says Graham.

Why is their religion so important, I ask.

I don't trust church people. I don't like any religion, says Stanko. I only believe in what I see with my own eyes.



So you don't believe that there are microorganisms in your body, admonishes Ursula.

There are millions of brain cells you cannot see with your own eyes yet they make your body function, helps Lisa.

You can't hear the sounds and smell the things a dog can, says Barbara.

I agree with women and could add that sadness and gladness, pain and love are invisible but I don't say so because they would give me the looks if I did. Instead I tell a story I recently heard about two Chinese freedom fighters in a political re-education detention.

A man asked his fellow prisoner:

Do you know the difference between an ordinary prison and the communist political re-education detention?

Is there a difference? Asked his friend.

Yes, said the man. In an ordinary prison you know what your crime is and how long your prison sentence is. From political re-education detention you come out only when you are changed or dead. That soldier came out dead.

All leaders are crooks; they work for their own pockets, says Stanko.

Most leaders want to do some good but in the end they are only people, I try the middle ground.

People who believe in God try a little harder, states Ursula with the authority of a believer.

In the beginning was the word, Graham philosophically steps into our inadequate discussion. The word is a sword that persuades people to believe what their leaders want them to believe. Revolutionaries first discredit the existing leaders with the word; they slander them and when the existing leaders appear dirty, the masses demand their removal. The new idealistic politicians take power and begin to indoctrinate the young. But they also become corrupt so the next generation starts the process all over. This is a universal formula. Full circle.

Look at Middle East. They are forever killing each other and claim that their god is on their side. With us or against us, Dominick drops his bit of knowledge into the Harmony pot.

I do not follow any party; I follow the Christ's teaching; love your neighbour as yourself, says Ursula piously.

It is interesting that of 8 billion people no two are the same; we think and feel and look different. Our DNA or genome or whatever you call it, is

unique. They can trace your origins to Adam, Barbara tries to steer the conversation more in line with Harmony.

The scientists talk about universe like it is their playground but they don't know what is at the beginning or the end of the universe, adds Graham.

They would rather believe in Big Bang than in god, sighs Ursula.

Someone had to establish natural laws so evolution could do its job, Graham gives a seal of approval to Ursula's statement.

I believe that there are more intelligent beings than us. We might be just their playthings, Hainy becomes animated. He is rarely contributing to conversations and when he does people turn in his direction. Perhaps your words gain weight if you rarely speak.

Do you believe in evolution, Stanko turns to Barbara.

I believe that species evolved in their kind but I don't believe that people evolved from monkeys. Different species can't reproduce. Different cats can have kittens but a cat and a dog can't make babies, reasons Barbara.

It is impossible to make all people believe the same, I agree.

Scientologists try to create people who think and believe the same. You pay for their auditing during which they destroy your former knowledge, attitudes and affiliations; when you reach the state of clear, which is an empty mind, they fill the emptiness with their doctrines, explains Graham.

Politicians try to do that, says Stanko.

I am glad they finally unmasked the priest paedophiles; Dominik throws his hatred of the clergy into the melting pot of intercultural harmony. Dominick is a single old man believing in nature. He actively hates all religions. He says that he only believes in nature. One has to believe in something to give life a meaning; god by any name. Faith is a foundation for hope that what we desire but cannot see and understand will be realised; faith makes us believe that life has a meaning; that there is someone in charge. The odds that there is someone in charge are more compelling than the blind faith in the Big Bang.

Most paedophilia happens in the family with married men abusing their own children, Barbara defends the religious.

But priests have the power over children and they are looked up to, says Dominik.

Parents have more power over their children and they should be a good example, says Ursula.

I wonder if the world would be better if people were the same, I wonder.

It would be boring, says Graham.

By the time you figure out what to believe and do, you die, declares Bill with the voice of knowing. Old people have this kind of final certainty in their voices. Bill has been here from the beginning; mining and living in the camp. Everybody knows Bill by his long grey hair and unruly beard reaching his chest.

We are in Lightning Ridge because we are different. We are not satisfied with simple existence; we want to create something; we want to leave something behind; something that will carry our name. Look at Amigo. For years he carried ironstone boulders on his back to create his castle, elaborates Bill.

As I listen to the assembly I realise that all of us elderly speak with an accent whether it is Scottish or New Zealand or African or Mongolian. There are rows of tables with about half a dozen mismatched people each explaining to each other the ambiguities of life.

I am disgusted with people attacking our poor Prime Minister Julia just because she is a woman, Ursula takes over; Ursula is the peacemaker, with conviction of a Seven Days Adventist. Graham once explained that Seven Day Adventists are peacemakers because they are vegetarians. Not eating meat apparently makes them less aggressive. No iron in their diet or something.

Julia is the most eloquent, elegant and intelligent woman I ever knew, helps Lucy the Jehovah Witness.

They are jealous of Julia, explains Helene the feminist and atheist.

Julia can give as good as any man but she calls on gender because she knows that it is harder for opposition to attack a woman, argues Graham. She calls the opposition leader Jack the ripper, a simpleton and a gutter snake but as soon as a harsh word goes in her direction she calls it misogyny and sexism.

Julia says that she never knew what her partner-lover was up to when as a lawyer she orchestrated the registration of a fund from which he misappropriated money, explains Dominick.

I heard an interesting story in town, declares Graham. Our town's millionaire Melanie claims that she is in the same position as our Julia. Melanie's boyfriend brought home buckets of opal he stole from other miners' claims during the night's rapping. Melanie cut these gems and sold them; they split the money but she claims that she had no idea where the opal came from.

Ratting in other people's claims is a mortal sin in Lightning Ridge and people righteously condemn anyone involved in it.

Like Julia, Melanie dropped her boyfriend as soon as he got caught ratting, tells Dominick.

She swears by the lives of her children that she had nothing to do with ratting, laughs Graham.

Melanie has never actually been underground, let alone down any mine. She admits that she bought opals from her boyfriend and his friends but she claims that any buyer would buy any opal especially if it was going cheap. No buyer asks a miner where and how and when he found the opal. It is cash industry. I actually admire Melanie; she is singlehandedly managing her multimillion empires with her four years of irregular schooling; she is a genius. Julia has the advantage of education but Melanie is operating on her wits, explains Hainy.

People exchange glances; they cannot believe that Hainy is seriously defending Melanie who became a town's pariah; how dare she get so rich while others struggle?

Hainy is an old chum but nobody knows his history. He is often in the pub talking about opal and mining but he has no family or close friends. Hainy likes being a devil's advocate.

She owns half the town, says Graham.

We all know that she made her millions from stolen opal, accuses Dominik. He used to borrow money from Melanie and left his opal with her for security. Since he is broke she does not want to know him. To Dominik honesty is all but honesty made him go broke. Being broke makes you even less desirable than being a crook.

Let's face it if she did not buy those opals somebody else would and we would never know where those buyers banked their profits, Hainy dismisses the accusation.

These days you can't hide anything; media gets right into your bedroom with them cameras, says Sally following her own train of thoughts. She was named Slavica back in Bosnia but she assimilated and reconciled herself with Australian version of her name making it easier for Australians. She lived by her hands, she likes to tell; she never had a voice in any decision making until her husband died, god rest his soul; he was a violent, controlling bastard. Now Sally is equal with all of us. She still cleans for old people despite her age. She has a healthy respect for a dollar.

Only if you are somebody important with somebody else's partner, Graham winks happily. He was on occasion in trouble for being in the wrong bed but these days he sleeps alone. Sally confided in me that Graham wears incontinent pants. You get to know people when you do their laundry.

It is well known that 85 years old Martin wanted to marry Sally; he wanted her to look after him but she said that she could not lay down with the old man who had saggy grey skin.

If I only knew that he would die so soon I would be really good to him; but I didn't, did I; I could have had his house; now I have nothing, Sally confined in private to me.

I just heard what happened to Martin's money, tells Sally to our gathering. The funeral director bought Martin's house in the hope that he will discover Martin's hiding place and his treasures. He took most of Martin's belongings to the rubbish dump before he moved into the house. Martin's freezer was full of spoiled food because electricity was cut off, so the new owner dumped the freezer and the food.

Soon after Martin's death a young single mother, Jane, found some money on a rubbish tip. She brought it to the bank. Tim the bank teller apparently told someone about it and the story is doing the rounds of the town.

Where did you get this money, asks Tim twisting his nose.

Kids dropped it into a pot of stew by accident, apologises Jane. She is shifting her weight from left to right foot; her eyes are darting in all directions hoping that nobody she knows would be coming through the bank door. She simply did not prepare for interrogation.

It stinks, says Tim. He does not know what to do. Should he call the manager or the police?

You should have at least washed it.

I tried, stammers Jane. She regrets that she did not keep on washing the notes better but she was afraid to damage them.

Tim places the money into a plastic bag and hands Jane a receipt. Twelve thousand in green one hundred dollar notes turned sickly reddish from tomato sauce. Jane shines a grateful smile at Tim. Her mind is full of plans and dreams; this is her lucky break; this is what she was born for. Is there really such a thing as divine intervention? She needs a lucky break since the bastard left her with two kids and no money. Thank God for Neighbourhood Centre that gave her food vouchers. The story spread

like stories do in a small town. People embellish it with every telling to make it more interesting.

Jane is scavenging at the rubbish dump for clothes when she sees a perfectly good pair of shoes a bit further away. She stretches over an old freezer and steps into an ice cream container. The contents spill over her feet. The smell of the reddish mess is revolting. She tries to wipe her feet with the newspaper when she notices a plastic bag full of hundred dollar notes. Real money. She looks around anxiously. The freezer must have been full of money hidden in ice-cream containers under the foul smelling sauces spiced heavily with herbs and garlic. The mess is dripping over her legs as she tries to reach a pile further away but the bulldozer is pushing the rubbish over it all. She wants to scream but that would alert the driver and the rubbish tip keeper and she cannot trust them with her secret. She makes a note in her head where the rest of the containers are so she will return when the bulldozer stops.

The tip keeper threatens to call the police; health regulations prohibit scavenging or something. He stands over the mountain of rubbish like an almighty and Jane moves away before he could confiscate her stash. She will try again as soon as the tip keeper goes away. She remembers where there is another pile of ice-cream containers taped over the top with the labels of foods. She is watching from the bushes as the tip keeper turns into his little shed to make a cup of tea and have a smoke. Jane hides her bag under the bushes and climbs towards her treasure from the opposite side over the old fridges and mattresses; she keeps her head low and her eyes on the man. I should have put the shoes on instead of thongs, she realises when she cuts her foot on a broken glass. She wraps a hanky over the bleeding wound and crawls ever closer to her treasure. Tripe 7.2.11, says on one ice-cream label. The other one says: goulash 7.2.11. So the food is a month old, calculates Jane. Who would throw out a freezer full of prepared meals? Divorce? Death? Who died?

I'll think about it later, decides Jane as she reaches for another container covered by a mountain of rubbish. A sealed plastic bag under the food has hundred dollar bills at the bottom. She stashes the money into her bra. Feverishly she opens another container and finds another money bag which she stashes into her pants. The tip keeper is yelling; the bulldozer is again pushing an avalanche of rubbish towards her. Jane runs downhill, falls over and rolls into the bushes. She has no idea how long she has been lying there. There is blood on her hands; she must have hit her head as she rolled down the hill. The loud bird calls break the silence. Jane realises that it is time to pick her children from school but she needs a wash before anyone would see her. She walks slowly to

her camp. She cannot risk to be seen by anybody so she waits for the darkness.

Eli and Danny are already home playing in the old wreck of their car. Jane crouches next to the water tank to wash herself and check the damage. The bleeding stopped on her foot; there is an ugly scratch on her face; her knee is grazed.

Jane must have told her good luck story to someone who could not keep the secret. In a small town any story is retold until it becomes too big to be believed.

Martin apparently kept the money in his freezer for safety. If he put it in the bank he would not qualify for a pension. Nobody ever found out for sure.

Most people believe what they are inclined to believe.

Young servers exchange knowing glances in our direction and we sigh in their direction. Young ones speak in unaccented monosyllables and text in single letters. They replaced poetic forms and metaphors we used with colourful explicit sexual exclamations. When the young see bewilderment in the eyes of their oldies they sometimes say sorry. I wonder if they are sorry that we are old and unable to understand life. They have no way of knowing that once upon a time we also shocked our elders by dropping bits of unseemly sentences in order to make them understand life. One can never explain life for all times and generations but this continuous assimilation of generations and nations creates a surface harmony.

People these days seem obsessed by below the belt body part and their functions. In my time bathroom activities were never mentioned let alone described in detail. I never discussed my bedroom activities with my closest friend let alone aired them publicly, says Impi self-righteously.

Joe used to say when maxi skirt reached the floor: It's time to change the fashion. I pat my husband Joe's shoulder in appreciation of his former wisdom. I hold his hand as he sits beside me in a wheelchair provided by Age Care; we were connected by holding hands like that all our lives. Having him next to me makes me complete.

I realise that people have been pushing boundaries forever; maybe one day we will start searching for any boundaries left.

I am appalled at the vulgar language people use these days, tells Sally. My neighbour was calling her children for dinner: Get in, you little mother fucker cunts. Her morning parting words for her partner were: Fuck yourself you fucking mother fucker. Sally looks around to see how her bravery will be received. Most of us never dared say fuck even in a

sentence about the gutter people. We mentioned the f word but that was as far as we dared stray from decency.

They get it from television; the coarse language, sex and violence, explains Impi. She is a grand old lady who knows that she knows better than the rest.

Penis and vagina rule Britannia, sings Graham. Fuck is the word of the day; I remember times when saying fuck was a criminal offence. Many drunken Aborigines were jailed for saying fuck.

Fuck replaced shit and bloody regained its blood stained origins while damn became almost a religious expression these days. Old ladies still feel a bit sinful saying shit or fuck. It is written in their genes and in their culture that words like that are demeaning for ladies. I realise that claiming to be a lady is itself an outdated, old-fashioned idea but we cling to the safety of our mother's teaching. Our husbands and sons may vent their anger with those words in our absence but they do not dare confront us, old ladies with them. Culture is holding people from straying too far. I like old-fashioned. I am rather withdrawn and a bit shy; perhaps I am a bit scared to make a fool of myself. I'll stick with f word rather than disgrace myself by saying fuck.

Germaine Greer said on TV the other day that if pornography was a school subject, children would soon become bored with it, tells Ursula.

I am already bored with dialogs that have fuck as every second word. I lose the story, says Barbara.

Girls these days try to be not only equal but the same as men; they swear, steal, demand sexual satisfaction and direct boys how to make them achieve orgasm; they noisily express their joys and their dissatisfaction. We used to enjoy and suffer quietly, says Ursula. She is a pious, righteous lady who left her husband to show her solidarity with the poor. She had two children with men she introduced to Good News.

Girls sue boys for unwelcome advances; they demand compensation for sexual harassment. I wonder how are boys to predict if their advances are going to be unwelcome, says Impi.

Some boys shun girls altogether. Gays are everywhere; gays became gayer than heterosexual people, agrees Graham.

Everybody is shouting how proud they are of being black, or homosexual, or sexual, or bisexual or multi-sexual, says Impi.

You never hear anyone say: I am proud of being heterosexual. That would be homophobic. Black people keep saying that they are proud of being black but white people never say that they are proud of being white.



That would be racist. I see nothing to be proud of being one or the other, says Graham. We look in his direction suspiciously. I sometimes wonder how all these solitary men and women deal with their sexuality. Most had no permanent partners for years and yet time comes sometimes when one would want to get a bit excited.

Super modern; super different; super clever; you have to stand out. Exotic is better, laughs Barbara.

People always wanted to stand out and be better than those around them, concludes Graham.

We didn't have war for awhile, says Impi. She firmly believes that necessity is the mother of invention. She has seen the necessity after the wars.

People used to argue about things but these days everything you ever wanted to know is on your computer; it's no use arguing or discussing, Barbara attempts to change the topic.

When you think you know a lot you realise that only circumference of your ignorance widened, I throw into the conversation but nobody responds to my bit of wisdom.

Everybody has a finger on the button these days. People carry little gadgets and press the button to contradict your arguments, says Dominik.

Knowledge is like god; you make a step closer and he moves a step back, pronounces Ursula who firmly believes in the almighty and intelligent design.

Look at all this lovely food, Ursula points at men turning sausages and steaks on the BBQ. She wants to turn our attention away from religions in order to protect her faith.

Lovely salads and cakes; ladies do most of the hard work, I assert my feeble feminism. I remember our BBQs. I will do a BBQ, Joe would announce. You can have a day off today. I always had twice as much work with his BBQ than I would with the oven roast but he loved the praise, poor darling. I pat Joe's shoulder remembering his cooking. He sits quietly beside me in his wheelchair and we smile at each other occasionally to reassure ourselves. We feel strengthened by the connection. He does not initiate conversations anymore but he smiles benignly as people greet him. Women at our BBQ parties ignored me but cawed towards Joe in praise of his skills. He smiled happily at them with one hand on the fork turning the meat while paying attention to the beer in his other hand.

Oh, the flirting games we played, sighs Impi again and we all sigh for the golden olden flirting days.

Nothing is sacred and secret and precious any more, laments Ursula.

Schools replaced moral education with sexual education; they think that knowing about different sexual positions is more important than knowing right from wrong, says Barbara.

I found a new boyfriend, whispers Eva in my ear. She must have become inspired by our talk about sex

Who is he, I force myself to show interest in the sexual exploits of seventy five years old lady.

I met him at the bore baths. He is almost ten years younger than me, boasts Eva with a twinkle in her eyes. We were both virgins for years and it is wonderful to enjoy good sex again, she adds.

Good for you, I whisper back. Being a 'virgin' myself for many years now, I got used to it. Desires probably die with the lack of right hormones.

We live in a throwaway society, comes Graham's thundering contribution. Perhaps he is no longer interested in sex. He had no family or visible partner for years. Maybe he is also a new born virgin?

Think it and you can find it in a discount store; Stanko's voice is always soft although everybody shouts at him because of his deafness. Maybe soft voice comes with the lack of confidence; one hears the fear in it. Is that a heritage of Stanko's orphanage years?

We have everything we ever wanted, says Impi.

To have nothing and want everything is better than having everything and wanting nothing. Wanting gives meaning to life, Graham shows off with old clichés. I suppose we all want to contribute some words of wisdom to the Harmony because wisdom is all we have. Wisdom travels hand in hand with old age. Young ones are not interested in our wisdom so we are happy to scatter it among our generation. Who would want to trade precious innocence for old wisdom? Ignorance is bliss; playing childhood games into the old age helps; it is better to laugh silly than cry wise. It is so unbecoming to know it all; to have all the answers.

We gravitate towards each other to create harmony for Harmony day and to please the organisers. We have to show our appreciation by creating a body of unity that is a bit bigger than the sum of bodies we are. Gravity is like god; invisible and unknowable. The smiles connect us like electric impulses of the brain connect the memories. We are all scared of losing

our memories so we smile at faces and try to remember their names.  
Harmony is important for our mental health. We must keep alert.

Young servers are coming around with drinks.

We over-populated the planet, declares Graham who reads.

The weakest breed fastest, agrees Stanko who suffers.

Maybe the weak feel stronger with greater numbers, I say to nobody in particular.

Many smart, rich healthy couples do not feel the need to reincarnate themselves at all, agrees Barbara.

Rich adopt Hollywood style from Africa, informs Graham.

We will all be eventually replaced by Africans and Asians, says Dominik who observes nature.

We import everything from Asia why not children as well, laughs Impi.

They want to give the poor a chance; Ursula tries to see the good in everything.

They are too lazy to have children of their own so they buy them from poor countries and then they buy them nannies to take care of them, says Barbara.

Everybody is so proud of being different these days. Same is boring, says Impi.

I look around and see the faces that with age, lost appeal and distinction

Times have changed beyond recognition, says Barbara. I am glad I am old and don't have to follow the trends.

Bore baths became bigger attraction than opal, says Sally.

Our artesian hot water pool is the main meeting place. I sometimes go for a swim and listen to the exchange of world news from different perspectives. Most of the bathers are from Europe and they communicate in a sort of universal mixture of languages they all understand.

## Memories remembered

The bell indicates that Ursula wants to begin with the Harmony Day program so we all look up at her standing on the platform with the microphone to her lips.

For the beginning of the third millennium we dig into the history and culture of our ancestors to offer Australia all we are. We always knew that the suitcase or the rucksack we brought was light compared to the wealth within us. Places we came from, things we have seen, and people we have met uniquely shaped us. Together we celebrate multicultural Australia and the centenary of our town.

I will call on some of you willing to tell about yourself so we will know each other better. It is only right to start with Joan who is an Aboriginal lady and so the first Australian.

I am one of the so called stolen generation, Joan begins as she takes the microphone from Ursula.

It is hard to believe how confident and well spoken some Aboriginal people became during the last few years. I remember trying to encourage shy reluctant Aboriginal students and parents from over forty years ago. We all came a long way since then. Money from mining made it possible for many to become better educated.

I was lucky to have good foster parents who helped me find my real family in Lightning Ridge, says Joan. I feel sympathy for those members of the Stolen Generation who didn't get to meet their parents or get to know their own people or culture; it's very sad to go through life without your real family around you and not knowing who you belong to or where you come from.

I also feel sorry for those Aboriginal people and white people who don't understand and don't want to understand the full story behind why and how Aboriginal children were taken away. Some say and believe it was because of neglect and abuse, but this is not entirely true. Sure the abuse and neglect have happened to some but the majority, especially in the early years, were taken because of the assimilation policy at the time where the government tried to breed their black skin out. Aboriginal people are a resilient and strong race and this is why we are still around to this day.

I don't know what else could have been done to help the Aboriginal children in those days. Perhaps relatives should be asked to take the children that needed care before they took them to strangers and so cut them away from their blood relations and cultural background. These days Aboriginal people foster Aboriginal children.

The policies have changed over the years for everybody and I believe that every policy however well meaning had its failures. Times were hard for new settlers and the government in the olden days but Aboriginal people probably suffered the most because they became dispossessed. Their way of life became devalued; the government told Aboriginal children not to speak the language of their parents and not to abide by their rules. Parents gradually lost respect and authority so they lost control of their children and of their own lives.

The assimilation is an ongoing process. My children have Aboriginal mother and German father; they are growing up to be Australians; we are all building this new nation that will hopefully accept and recognise the contributions of every person from whatever culture they come. Although we come from different backgrounds I hope we will become a nation where people will respect and accept each other for who they are. Aboriginal culture is gradually gaining the recognition it deserves as being the way of life of the original inhabitants of this country.

The only time all my brothers and sisters met was in 1973 at the Head office for Children's welfare in Sydney. We had a meal together in a restaurant and went in the Hyde Park afterwards to play. I was thirteen and my youngest brother was four years old. I was excited and looking forward to seeing them but we never met all together privately again. I don't feel particularly close to any of them because we hardly know each other.

I am the only one of my family still living in Lightning Ridge; others are scattered all over the place. I wish we could meet and talk to come to terms with our lives and get to really know each other.

In 1978 the government flew me to Walgett to meet my mum. Val Boardman picked me up in a big black limousine (that's what it seemed to me at the time) to bring me to Lightning Ridge. Mum was crying, we were both crying when we met.

From the stories I have been told, times were hard for our people but they got by and became stronger.

Lightning Ridge in 1978 was very different from what it is now; it was something like the Wild West. I met a lot of colourful people both black and white. The Diggers hotel was a drunk's paradise, plenty of alcohol, plenty of drinking friends and plenty of colourful yarns about opal and the one that got away. Some opals I have seen at the Diggers were beautiful and worth thousands of dollars. The Diggers was also a home to the Potch Queen festivals until it burnt to the ground in 2006; it was a sad day for the town. The Potch Queen was held every year for the past 15

years, it is an event when men dress up as women and parade themselves on the catwalk and everyone has a good laugh.

The bowling club used to be just a small little place with a handful of poker machines; now I believe it is the biggest and richest club this side of Dubbo.

Lightning Ridge miners hate ratters who go down other people's mines at night and steal their opal. When the ratters got caught some claim holders threw dynamite down and blew them up, I know of one man who went grey overnight because he got caught in a blow up.

Owning a claim has changed a lot too, lots of rules and regulations, I used to own a claim but gave it up because of the new laws and the cost. The town itself has almost overrun itself with rules and regulations to keep up with the rest of the world.

The town has grown and is still growing. There's a beautiful new school with between 400 and 500 students, the kids have everything they need there.

Barriekneal Housing Community are building and buying more housing for the local Aboriginal people, they are a great advocate for the town.

Lightning Ridge is a very generous town overall, an Olympic pool with a theme park was constructed mostly on donations from the townspeople which goes to show what the people of this town are made of.

I haven't experienced any serious racial discrimination since coming here to live, it's a fairly laid back town still and I feel comfortable living here, concludes Joan.

Our town really has a rainbow coloured population, smiles Barbara.

Where rainbow coloured opal is the only measure of worth. Opal means popularity, power, luck and prestige, agrees Dominik.

Elena, a Philippine lady, takes the microphone; she is looking over some two hundred people chattering and smiling. We are probably the only town in Australia where overseas born residents have the majority. There are over twenty five nationalities present right here today.

Elena tells how her husband came from Lightning Ridge to Philippines looking for a wife.

After White Australia policy ended during the fifties many aged European Australian migrants went to Philippines to pick a young girl for a wife; these girls provided an opportunity for the old men to have a family. The men's hope of ever finding the girl from their hometown, faded as did their youth.

Filipino ladies are pleasant, beautiful, young, well educated Catholic girls who abandoned their dreams of marrying a young husband of their own nationality because they wanted to make their families in Australia. Love is a many splendid thing. Love for the offspring comes first. Old European men and young Filipino women had to give up something to make a family in the right environment. Perhaps we are all trading something for something else to get what is really important to us. Most of us traded our beautiful homelands so we could offer our families more prosperous life in Australia. You can never have it all, Joe used to say.

I remember my previous conversation with Barbara.

Females pick a male that will best provide for their young, said Barbara. The strong male inseminates more females; the richest man picks the prettiest girl. It's only natural; the same happens with other species. Since I have no children I did not need a provider so I picked spiritual partners. When you are young you don't rationally think about it but it is in the nature of things. It's the preservation of the species.

No girl wants to admit that she married for money but many do, I said.

Everybody sticks to money; men even more than women. You only have to look at television. Everybody is honoured to be in the company of someone rich. The rich and the famous claim to love each other for who they are but when they part, they only remember the money and fight over it. Money truly is the root of all evil. Women may sometimes marry for money but men murder for it all the time, said Barbara with a hint of bitterness in her voice.

Maybe love of life is the only true love. Maybe love is a survival.

I came in the early sixties when the town had two teachers, one policeman, a visiting priest and a bush nurse, Charlie takes the microphone. I used to be Drago back in Croatia but it is easier to get along as Charlie being named after Prince Charles, he laughs awkwardly. Anyway, when I arrived in the sixties one policeman administered mining, traffic and law and order. If he said to a miner I don't want to see you here tomorrow the miner had to pack up and go. We had no ratters, no thieving and no disorder. We had no social security or unemployment benefit. You couldn't claim that you were looking for employment if you chose to live in Lightning Ridge. There was only opal. We were proud of our self sufficiency. When a miner struck opal he invited the town to a BBQ and people would pass along uncut opal to be licked and admired.

Now we have more people in the offices than down the shaft mining. Those in the know have the power to use the poor miner any way they like, Bill calls out; he is an old-timer respected for his experience,

wisdom and knowledge; he does not need the microphone. The pen pushers are the first to know where opal was found and they exploit this knowledge, Bill's thundering voice needs no amplifier.

Mining became too expensive for an ordinary bloke so majority of Lightning Ridge people are on some kind of social security, reasons Stanko quietly.

It became too easy to claim a disability, agrees Graham. Alcoholics claim to be disabled and they are even entitled to a personal carer these days. An alcoholic and his carer pocket about eight hundred dollars a week. They are also entitled to a rent assistance and other handouts. No wonder men no longer dig for opal.

Young girls manage to have a few children and they never need to bother about work again, says Dominik.

Office workers are out looking for the needs in the community to secure their jobs. The more they search for needs, more needs appear. More social security offers, more scared and insecure we feel. Our names became a part of the invisible computer statistics. We are fish in the net, says Bill.

You wouldn't want to live without all the services, I smile in Bill's direction.

Since government agencies take care of people, people stopped caring, Bill dismisses me. We used to rely on each other so we were good to each other. Now people don't even care to get to know each other.

I remember the time when there were four of us teachers in the local school; there were 96 students and the question was whether the student numbers would warrant having four teachers. There are well over a hundred teaching staff now for 400 students; they have all the new gadgets but the student achievements keep falling. What is happening? I say to nobody in particular and nobody is interested. We all have our own axe to grind.

I came to Lightning Ridge in 1963 as a child with my parents, Eva takes the stage. Mum suffered from rheumatism and she heard about the therapeutic artesian hot springs that just opened. Most Europeans swear by the healing power of the local bore bath. I remember a man sitting on the edge of the pool with his feet dangling in the water. The tourists asked him about mining and where he came from and if he found opal. The man smiled and pointed at himself saying: Bonegilla. I don't know if Bonegilla was his name or nationality or a place he came from. I can still see the poor Bonegilla man sitting on the edge of the bore bath there, remembers Eva.



Now thousands come for a swim in the hot bore bath during glorious sunny winters and you can hear them chatting in many languages, I add.

I remember Bonegilla. It is a migrant camp near Albury, explains Sally. Most of us migrants in the fifties and sixties came to Bonegilla to be sorted out and sent where work and accommodation was arranged for us. We were all reborn in Bonegilla. We carry the name Bonegilla written on our hearts and that was probably the only identification with Australia the man had. The man probably heard of opal on his arrival to Australia and ventured into mining. Bonegilla is the place where we slept that first night in Australia, where we first smelled the dripping and crunched the corn flakes. Bonegilla was our introduction to mutton and gravy and boiled veggies and flies and foreigners and heat. I will never forget the flies. Nobody in Bonegilla spoke English except officials who decided where we will live and work. Over 300 000 migrants passed through Bonegilla between 1947 and 1971. I loved Bonegilla. I experienced an enormous surge of optimism and hope. We left behind the terror and the anxiety, the relations and the regimes; we were free, says Sally. While I rejoiced and dreamed of our beautiful future my husband moaned about soggy vegetable floating in lukewarm water, greasy mutton, grey gravy, strange smelling custard, spongy bread, overcooked eggs, burnt toast, and lumpy porridge.

I remember the tiny corrugated tin rooms and the raindrops falling on it and the noises wind made. There was hope and excitement in the air.

I heard Barry the bus driver say the other day to some American tourists coming to town: Lightning Ridge is no longer black opal gems capital. It became a retirement village. People come to soak their old aching joints in our hot artesian baths, tells Ursula.

I don't care anymore, mutters 81 years old Hungarian, John. He lived on his own since his wife died ten years ago. Recently he entered a local nursing home; after a bypass he needs a good care but he is missing his freedom and the adventures of the olden times. John still accompanies the meals on wheels distributors; he was doing voluntary work for many years.

Opal is no longer our shining light, says Stanko seriously sad..

This is the only town with a question mark on the road sign after the word population, says Dominik.

Lightning Ridge blossomed as the black opal town when European migrants came during the sixties and seventies; since then the population fluctuated between three and twenty thousand depending on the latest opal rush, says Graham

I hear there is a new rush at the back of Grawin, says Tommy. Everybody knows this little elflike miner who writes poetry. During the last forty years I've been chasing every bloody rush from Coocoran to Carters to New Town, from Nobbies to Nine mile and back again; I have been sinking the bloody holes all my life and I never found it. I am sick of rushing after the new rushes; I am sick of sinking holes and I have enough of camping as well. I booked myself into the local resort nursing home.

Rich people like to go camping once a year but we, opal miners, choose to camp all year around, says Graham. We are where we want to be; we are doing what we like doing; we do it when we feel like doing it. We chose to drop out of the city jungle and take our time to look at life.

I know that we are all a bit scared of the nursing home; of this last station. You lose not only freedom but your personality once you enter Age Care. Most people fight to the end; they struggle to keep their independence. Struggle is life.

I am sick of trying to keep up with technology and progress, Barbara changes the subject as she tries to work out her camera; this constant race to keep up with new gadgets is killing me. My little brain can't take it anymore. Just as I learn how to work something it becomes obsolete.

Everybody has a finger on the button and the ears wired to something. We used to go bird watching and we listened to birds tweet but now everybody tweets on twitter; people don't meet face to face, they gather on the face-book. I don't want to understand this unreal life, agrees Ursula.

People don't know how to relax and enjoy time; in the end time is all anybody has, says Bill.

I remember Joe jokingly saying when he could no longer follow the instructions: it's easy for you empty headed people but my head is full and can't take in more information- I wonder if he was sad about not being able to remember. It scares me not remembering things.

Where have you been hiding, says Stanko to Jack who just joined us. Jack was Jaka back in Slovenia but nobody remembers that.

I am busy, laughs Jack.

Doing what? asks Dominik.

I am looking after old people. I start every day at seven in the morning and don't finish until after dinner.

What old people, I ask.

I have four old men who have nobody else, says Jack as he sits himself next to us. Jack is a known local identity. He never failed to see an easy buck. Everybody knows about him registering claims and gluing bits of opal in the walls so he could sell the claims-mines for more money. I remember miners saying that they would never buy anything from Jack but most did in the end. He could be very convincing.

Recently he placed his friend Tom in the nursing home and brought a solicitor to fix the papers so he could inherit what his friend had. Tom died a month later and Jack moved into his big brick house.

Many old miners live on their own; they never married and they forgot their relations in Europe, whispers Sally.

Everybody knows that these old men have some money and opal stashed somewhere in their home for the rainy day. Jack also knows that these old men need protection. He is boasting that he has over a hundred descendants, a formidable army of young people, who need money. They are Jack's private little Mafia, said Stanko.

Jack is a slim 85 years old walking unassisted. We all remember him walking with a stick most of his life.

Dad takes his stick and hobbles up to the pub with it when he is broke because someone always feels sorry for a poor invalid and buys him a drink, said Jack's daughter to me over forty years ago.

Jack was on a sickness benefits even back then in 1969 and remained an invalid until he got old age pension. Now he became a carer of old people who have nobody else to leave their belongings to.

I was with Jack the day when he was going to buy Diggers Rest hotel some fifty years ago. The deal was almost done when Jack changed his mind and put the money on a horse instead. And lost the lot, tells Bill.

My family stayed with Jack when we first came to Lightning Ridge. Slovenians find each other in all sorts of circumstances. I remember the first morning; I entered Jack's kitchen and found him cooking porridge for my children and his children and any others coming along. Whatever else Jack has done pales by the fact that he always took care of children. Jack's two wives brought along children from other liaisons but he cooked for all of them and all of them carry his name. I have a suspicion that he is still looking out for his children, grandchildren and many great grandchildren. By caring for old people he secures their inheritance.

Jack's daughter told me then that dad never failed to put food on the table. When there was no opal and he ran out of money he did odd jobs. You had to go where jobs were. Jack found odd jobs with local farmers

and engaged Aborigines to do fencing, shearing and grid making for him. He bought them grog and tucker in return for their labour. Times got easier for Jack when his wife died in the eighties; he was left with a large family; he got a house from Aboriginal Housing company and Home help from Home Care. Since he got age pension supplemented with carers allowance he is doing fine. Caring became a lucrative business; entrepreneurs like Jack found their niche in it. Government pays for people to take care of each other; it is cheaper than caring for them in the nursing home. Jack told me a little about himself. As a fifteen years old he joined partisans but at the end of the war in 1945 he escaped to Italy and in 1949 he arrived to Australia. He is proud of the fact that he was the first Slovenian who married an Aboriginal girl. He showed me their wedding photo. They were both very young and beautiful. They had four children. After a few years another Slovenian Rudi came to live with them and Jack's wife had four sons with Rudi. They lived together for many years. Later she had eight more children to different men and they all carry Jack's name. Jack found another beautiful Aboriginal girl by the time we came to his place and she brought her two children with her. While together she had five more children before she died from drugs someone gave her. Only two of the children really were Jack's from the first wife and one from the second but they all carry his name and he took care of all of them. They all call him dad and he proudly calls them his children.

We go a long way back Jack and I, says Tina taking the microphone so everybody could hear her story. We used to sing and dance in the old Diggers Rest when I first came to the Ridge.

When I finished high school in 1968 Nan gave me a brochure about Lightning Ridge; she paid for my excursion to this outback town. My friend Jessica and I read about this mysterious town that lures adventurers hungry for excitement and riches.

So here I was in Lightning Ridge with the bus load of tourists for the Easter weekend 1968. At the woolshed dance I met Toni who became my husband and the rest is history. Tina laughs a surprised, sad, lost laugh of the prematurely old. The fine lines on her face tell their own story about the years in the camp without water or electricity. She had a stroke and broke her hip; my health is not as good as it used to be, she says. Her husband died so she decided to enter the nursing home. Home Care bus brought her to this social gathering. She loves to remember the golden, olden days with people who were also there in those heady days.

Diggers Rest is a meeting place for all the misplaced adventurers, the bus driver warned us, Tina continues. This hotel in the middle of Lightning

Ridge was the only meeting place in town in them days. My first memorable impression of Lightning Ridge comes from the paintings on the walls of Diggers Rest hotel. The pictures told the story of a hopeful city sleaker with big dreams and a flash car coming to town. The artist followed the man's riches to rags story for six months of sweat and toil. After six months the man walked away with his head down and the bundle of rags over his shoulder.

It has all gone now, the good and the bad, says Stanko travelling his own sad memory lane. The mining industry is finished and that's the end of us as well.

We are just waiting for our number to come up, says Lisa mournfully.

Cockies have destroyed opal mining. They want compensation for the land that does not produce anything, concludes Bill.

Cockies, the landowners are Australian elite. They never wanted to mix with workers, let alone miners, agrees Graham.

It is funny how we developed our prejudices, says Charlie. Where I came from farmers were at the bottom of the social ladder. Land owners in the communist countries were the most maligned class; they were politically incorrect and socially unacceptable as backward. The more land they owned less desirable they were. Private property was seen as immoral and farmers had to sell their produce to co-ops for less than the cost of the production. Their children left their land uncultivated and went to work in the factories.

We all grew up with different perspectives, concludes Graham. When English settlers were granted large leases in Australia they employed the poor convicts to work for them. The great divide between the two classes was never bridged. Workers and landowners are two distinct classes.

Every man has a heroic story of when he was smarter and more successful than the rest. Everybody came here to rise above his station.

Lightning Ridge has more artists than any other town of the same size, ponders Lucy. People write books, paint pictures, create sculptures, build unique dwellings and plant exotic gardens.

Everybody has a creative hobby of some kind, agrees Barbara.

Coming from densely populated countries into this isolated mining town we had to create our own entertainment, adds Ursula.

I never had a desire to be famous or at least I thought that the price of fame was too high. It must be my impoverished background, says Impi. Still I am happy if finally my name makes it into your book, she smiles at

me. Historical society published a few miners' stories I collected. Impi is one of the people who told me her story.

I came to the stage now where I don't want to have anything I don't use and need, I don't want to live in fear of thieves and of jealous people, Impi explains her new philosophy on life.

I think you have the most interesting community here, says Michelle who is still considered a newcomer after fifteen years. She came when her husband retired and then he died and she attached herself to the volunteer ladies working at St Vincent de Joe's second hand shop.

I don't know what we would do without Vinnie's, says Barbara. It is such a friendly meeting place.

We were climbing the mountain; we were reaching for the stars, says Graham. His words echo in my mind. His words are the voice of my generation. We gathered goods and wisdom and knowledge; we finally became comfortable with ourselves and our station in life; we are ready to enjoy the better future; to enjoy the rewards of hard labour. We will do all the things we never had time for before. We will be there for our family and friends; we will do good things for our community and humanity. We are on top of the mountain and the view of the other side is into another valley. We have done what we came here to do; the time of rest arrived. We built our own monuments. Every generation travels a different road but destination is the same.

I remember Marta who came to visit me from Slovenia. She is interested in the lives of migrants.

I always had the best of everything; I was never hungry; I chose what I wanted to study and all my life I worked in the jobs I loved, said Marta. She is a tall, slim, elegant, rich lady on top of the mountain. She is the same age as my son Marko. Marta is an only child; she wants to squeeze everything out of life yet she is afraid that life will leave her unfulfilled. She is even more afraid for her one child.

I asked her why only one child.

Most people in Europe have one child or none, she said. This child is pampered and worshipped and lavished. The child became a status symbol. Most Slovenian children have university education; they drive the latest cars and wear the newest fashions.

Who will be doing the manual jobs in Europe if everybody holds a university degree, I asked.

There are plenty of refugees who are only too happy to do those jobs, said Marta. They have big families so there will always be enough labourers.

Refugees come to Europe to give their children a better future, I warn from experience. They are climbing the mountain. Like us migrants in Australia, we accepted any hard and dirty work to provide good education for our children. Our children are our future; now they are better educated and richer than those with parents born in Australia. Poverty and deprivations make you strong. Most refugees are energised by the injustice and oppression; when put into the new environment they quickly integrate and climb to the top.

I want my daughter to have a choice.

Necessity is a great force; we had it and these children haven't experienced it. They lost the go getting instinct, I warn.

Marta brought me some modern Slovenian literature; I realise that even the language I grew up with does not exist anymore. During the centuries of German rule Slovenians accepted German words; after WWII we were earnestly rubbing out established Germanised words and quickly filled the gaps with Serbo-Croatian expressions; we accepted not only names for items but specially the sequential wordings of swearing; we had no swear words of our own. After Slovenians became independent in the 1990s Slovenian sophistication became measured by how many English words were inserted into Slovenian language. Literary style changed; new prose is sprinkled with a litany of names for sexual actions and organs that rarely have anything to do with sex or love or the story. Only peasant women bringing produce on the markets still speak Slovenian, I remember. Young Slovenians get angry in many languages. I wonder if Slovenians realise that their language and identity are disappearing. Maybe the world should speak the same language. Why should a couple of millions Slovenians stick to the past. Languages die every day unnoticed. I am sad thinking that what I was is no more.

The weak ones fall by the wayside, I remember another Slovenian Less reflecting on life. Less was called Ludvik at home but he assimilated and made his name easier for Australians.

My son Jeff is fifty and with all his education he does not seem to be getting anywhere, laments Less. He is bludging for money all the time. He puts it through the poker machines. I can't understand how young people who are so smart and educated can't make a go of things. Half of them are on drugs; are they so unhappy that they want alter who they are?

Old people used to say that one generation builds the next one destroys and the next one begs. Maybe necessity really is a mother of invention, I ponder on the changing world.

We invented the machinery; we built camps out of nothing. We had no one to turn to, no relations, no connections, no education, no school friends no social security. We had to survive on our own and that made us strong. Education in itself won't make you strong. Or happy, said Less. Young ones don't look for opportunities; they just don't have a go. I don't know if they are plain lazy or just have no ambition. I think the new generation will never do as well as we migrants did. My sons came with me to sell opal in America but they were reluctant to approach people. They give up if they don't succeed instantly. I never give up; I keep on looking and asking. People can only say no or go away or leave me alone but there is always a chance that once in a while one will say yes and there comes your chance.

We provide for them too well, I agree with Less; I agree with most people. That makes it easier to get along. I also know that everybody is looking at life from different perspective.

They live comfortably because they know that the government will provide or that they will inherit from their parents. They are comfortable. We wanted them to be comfortable. I suppose we robbed them of the incentive; we took away the challenge, Less wants me to see his point of view.

Kids have every opportunity while we had to make our own luck. We lived on challenge. Our life improved every day. We were on perpetual high from the day we were born. How can our children compete with that? We became addicted to success.

It is hard for us to slow down and see it all wasted by our children and grandchildren. We conquered all the mountains. We dreamed of the time when we will sit on top, enjoy the view, smell the roses and drink champagne, I agree with Less.

Only refugees are still scratching. In the next twenty years refugees will overtake the world, said Less almost sad. He is sitting on top of the mountain and wonders if it was all worth it. Climbing the mountain was clearly more exciting than comfort and luxury.

Maybe we should have left some mountains for our grandchildren to climb; I return to the Harmony theme and try to bring humour into our wonderings.

We, migrants, had to be twice as good as those born here because we had an accent. We had to pay for acceptance. We paid and felt stronger. I suppose we got hooked on getting rich. And on being better. With nobody to rely on and nobody to interfere we became self reliant.

The new refugees probably feel the same, I dare mention.



My friend's son said that failing uni turned to be his best experience. He had to find a job and a place to live. He was thrown in at the deep end as they say here. Everything you do becomes everything you are. He eventually finished uni while he worked, says Less.

Maybe we should not blame the kids for being relaxed. We made it possible for them to be comfortable.

Still I wish they had more of a go. You never know how strong you are until you test your strength. Every time you fail at something you learn something. You learn to cope. We ran an obstacle race but we jumped higher every time. You learn what you need to know. They learn that it is easier to swim downstream and go with the wind; we took risks and learned by mistakes. We are the war babies who really had to use our wits.

It is good to sit with people who travelled the same road.

My father used to say: Everybody is your competitor. I was just a boy then and did not understand what that meant.

The words get their meaning when we are ready for them, I say remembering the teachings of my own parents.

I remember other lessons life taught me, says Less. The world is not against you; everybody runs for himself. Look for the shortcuts. Plan strategies. Build reputation, bank on it. Don't lose your cool. Seek free advice; acknowledge other people's input, use expert information; weigh pros and cons, make notes, place yourself in diverse scenarios. Don't cross bridges before you see them. Don't burn your bridges. Be kind to yourself. Forgive yourself for making mistakes. Try, try again. These lessons helped me when I had nobody else to guide me. I learned the strategies to manage life.

I asked my friend the other day:

How are you?

Like a dog without a chain, he said. Lucky you, I said.

Not really, he said.

How is that?

A dog on the chain is fed and loved.

But you are free.

I can't eat freedom, he said. My friend never married, he has no responsibilities but he is not happy either. As they say: You can't have your cake and eat it.

We have it all now, I conceded.

I could live in a mansion on the Gold Coast but what would I do all day on the beach. I would die of boredom. I am much happier in a hole scratching for a gem opal.

I begin to understand where and how Lightning Ridge people formed their attitudes and views of the world. Many developed prejudices against nations, religions and races by an experience with one or two people somewhere in their growing up. We remember the same events but we are seeing them quite differently. This reminds me of the three blind men describing an elephant. We only remember tiny snippets of events that touched our minds and hearts. In retrospect we interpret events as they touched us. We are never sure about how we touched others but what touched us is etched into our memory.

Soon the bus will take the residents of the nursing home back to Old Age care for after-lunch nap.

I sit on my mountain and write this book about my journey and about the people that travelled beside me. I want to breathe new life into the fascinating stories we shared. This travelogue might provide a glimpse of what is in store for us all.

## Joe's story

My husband, Joe, told us stories about his father who always found an opportunity in adversity.

Before the WWII dad sympathised with workers' union movement demanding better conditions for workers. He inherited some money from his relations in America so he began building our home, said Joe. We had just settled into it in 1941 when Germans invaded Slovenia. They first transported priests, teachers and Communists. Dad was known as leaning towards communism because communists promised fairness and equality.

Germans inspected every student; they measured our faces and wrote down the colour of our eyes. We were told that fair-haired, blue-eyed people were allowed to stay. It also helped if your name sounded German.

My family was told to pack what we could carry and we were taken to Serbia. Serb villagers were kind to us. They gave us an old mud house with one big room and a little kitchen. We put straw on the floor and slept one next to the other, five children and our parents. The shopkeepers and other rich people paid for our keep. Mum cooked in the school building for the settlers. We brought tin cans to fill with vegetable soup and carry it home.

Partisans in Serbia carried out isolated attacks on Germans; they also blasted bridges and the railway to sabotage transport. The Germans retaliated; if partisans killed one German soldier, Germans killed 100 Serb civilians. For one German officer, they killed 1000 Serb civilians.

Germans ordered town's people to guard the railway against partisans' sabotage. The town's rich people paid my dad and other Slovenian settlers to serve their time guarding. There was no other income so they accepted.

The job was dangerous. If the partisans destroyed the rail, all guards on duty that night would be shot. I remember my father telling me how he thought he saw the shadow of someone hammering something on the railway. He pleaded with what he thought was the shadow of a partisan, not to blast the railway. As he got closer, it was only a dog eating a bone.

Joe liked to tell stories of his father's heroism.

About 1200 Germans were housed in the Army barracks. When Italy capitulated in 1943, 200 Italians were brought over from Albania to look after horses for Germans. They were allowed to come to town in the afternoon, and many of them came to our place. Dad read German newspapers and was well informed about politics and the War. He bought

wine from the farmers and sold it to about 20 regulars, who came to hear the news and to drink. They toasted each other quite openly with the slogan: 'Slavs will win against Berlin!' Slovanski sin premagal bo Berlin

Once an Italian soldier offered Dad some German horse gear like bridles, reins and chains in exchange for wine. These were valuable commodities during the War and the Germans had lots of that stuff in the barracks. The Italians helped themselves to anything they could exchange for drinks.

Serb peasants brought wood, vegetables, meat and wine to sell at the market once a week. Dad offered them the horse gear that the Italians had sold to him, and the peasants paid for it with wine. When Italian soldiers came again, Dad served them the wine and asked for more belts, chains, reins and bridles.

At first farmers brought bottles of wine, then small barrels, and then bigger barrels. Once they brought a barrel that wouldn't go through the front door so they had to cut a bigger opening into our mud house! Hundreds of litres of wine were sold each week.

By now, Dad had quite a business going. He tested the wine for strength by putting a strip of newspaper half in the glass half hanging out. The wine would soak into the paper and the water ran out over the glass through the strip of paper. He told the wine producers that they were putting too much water in their wine. He said that so he could pay them less. I don't know if it really showed that water was being added but the farmers believed him. I think it was only a trick Dad used to get wine cheaper!

About fifty regulars came to drink outside our house most evenings. They sang, told jokes and laughed while they drank. About twenty Italians, many more Slovenians, and sometimes, even a few Germans came to our house. When Russians began coming, they wanted vodka, and they drank it in big wine glasses!

Someone must have told the Germans about Dad trading in their horse gear so they came to search the house. A Serb interpreter came with them, and he saw the chains through the straw on the floor but quickly covered them up. Dad always liked Serbs.

Italian POWs also traded things like old uniforms and other sorts of clothing for wine. Once, Dad bought a jumper and later sold it to a villager; the wife of the Orthodox priest recognised it as one she knitted for their son. When she approached the man wearing it, he told her that he had bought it from my father. She came to find out how my father came to have that jumper.

I saw Germans arrest all local men and made them parade in the yard, explained Joe. The men had to look up at a second story window where Germans and their Serb collaborators watched. These Serbs helped Germans choose 18 men. Germans took them into the field and ordered them to dig their own graves before they shot them. Italians had to bury the bodies and before they did, they took their clothes. This woman's son wasn't even dead yet as they tried to bury him. He pleaded for mercy but the soldier just hit him on the head with a spade.

The woman asked Dad where he got the jumper but he only told her part of the story: he said that the Germans had killed her son and that the Italians had taken his clothes but he couldn't tell her that her own Serb neighbours pointed out her son for Germans or that he had been hit with a spade so he would fall into his grave.

In Serbia people raced pigeons, Joe cheered up telling about his birds. At an arranged time on Sunday mornings, owners released groups of up to five birds from their homes. One sort raced in circles and the others flew high and did up to ten summersaults coming down. Some stayed in the air for up to 8 hours. The owners and the players placed bets on whose pigeons would stay the longest in the air or do more summersaults. I would let my pigeons circle up, and when they came back close to the ground, I whistled them up again. One of my pigeons always came to sit on my head. At night, the Russians liked to give him vodka to drink until he got drunk. Peregrine falcons killed some pigeons.

Dad used to send me to buy him big bags of tobacco from the farmers. I sold some pigeons so I also bought a bag of tobacco for myself. I made smaller packets to sell to soldiers who came to drink at our place. I made quite a bit of money but then my father took it to buy wine. Once I made a good deal when I traded a pair of young pigeons for two piglets but usually I just traded pigeons for corn and wheat.

Pigeon's courtship is much like ours. Before they mate, they wipe their beaks and then they kiss. After mating, both pigeons fly a couple of circles. Both parents look after the young –one sits on the eggs and the other brings food. The males are very protective of their females.

I bought a pigeon pair of a really good breed. They mated and had young every month. When the chicks were still in the nest, there were already new eggs. I had about a dozen pairs of pigeons when someone stole them. Eventually, I found out who it was and I told Dad. He came with me and told the thief that he would report him to the German police if he did not return them and pay for my losses.

The man had re-established my pigeons at his place by not letting them out until they had young. He knew that they would return to look after the

babies. The thief was afraid of my father and brought back my pigeons and the money they earned him.

Before we left Serbia, I sold most of my pigeons. I took three pairs home with me but in Slovenia peregrine falcons got them. It was 1945 and I was sixteen. I looked for an apprenticeship but there was nothing available.

I found a job in the textile factory tying the ropes that ran around pullies to turn the spindles under the machines. There were about 600 spindles and I had to check them regularly during my eight-hour day. I had to be on my knees most of the time and my hands were blistered from pulling the ropes. It was a very dirty, hard job.

After about a year I got a position as an apprentice electrician. When I completed the apprenticeship I worked for a private firm for two years before I applied to go to a business college that would qualify me to become an independent electrical contractor. I went to school mornings and worked afternoons.

I finished college and started full-time work until they called me into the Army. Slovenian boys had to go to the southern Yugoslav republics and soldiers from the southern republics served in Slovenia because the Communists wanted to assimilate the five Balkan nationalities and change them into one Yugoslav nation. We were all supposed to speak Serbo-Croatian to build the brotherhood and unity. The children of mixed marriages would have no choice but to call themselves Yugoslavs. I believe if Communism lasted another generation people might have forgotten their nationality. When I returned from the Army, I worked for about three years as the manager of a government electrical company before I opened a private business.

Dad was sorely disappointed because communist revolution did not improve our situation. He was still a poor peasant; he began to drink, concluded Joe rather sadly. Joe obviously learned his survival skills from his father.

Joe added new details and emphasis to his stories with every telling. He liked to share his childhood memories with his children and grandchildren.

He told them about his days of glory and heroism. One of the highlights of his life was when he was about ten. During the month of May the children had to go to mass at dawn every day. On the way to church one day Joe found a hundred dinar note. He ran home to give it to his mother. She took the precious note to the priest to announce it from the pulpit so whoever lost it would get it back. The priest said to her: Nobody needs

this money more than you do. I will hold it for a week and if someone asks for it I will give it to him but I will not announce it. Nobody came for the money and Joe's mum bought a sack of corn so they could eat polenta that whole year. Joe was a hero.

## My life with Joe

I met my husband Joe in 1958. At the age of 28 he opened electrical installations business in a house where I lived as an 18 years old Teacher's college student. Joe employed a few electricians and apprentices to do electrical installations all over Slovenia. He asked me to do some office work for him and I was happy to earn some pocket money after school. I was an obedient child and did what he told me to do. Everybody seemed to do what Joe told them to do at the time. Joe was ambitious, he had the voice of authority; it seemed natural that people followed him. When I finished teacher's college we married in 1960. The role of the boss and an employee became the pattern for our relationship. Joe remained the head of the family and I organised the internal affairs. The division of labour and responsibilities suited us both. He never asked me to do any heavy outside jobs and I had the full autonomy inside our home.

Our son Marko was born in 1961.

In Slovenia Joe worked from dawn till late into the night. He bought a block of land to build a home. He also bought a car for his rapidly expanding business. He didn't realise that private sector had no business to expand or prosper in the communist society where every worker had to remain equal. It wasn't at all smart for a private sector to drive a car when the socialist officials still rode pushbikes. The government simply had to stop him. Joe wanted to take us to America but Australia was inviting healthy qualified young migrants at the time. Joe used to say that we will build America in Australia.

We left Slovenia-the most beautiful homeland one could wish for -but Joe soon learned the Australian saying: You can't eat your cake and have it. We came to Australia in 1963 with a big basket of hopes and dreams; Joe and I were strong, healthy, well educated, willing and ambitious.

On coming to Australia Joe heard that one could make good money sugar cane cutting. Three days after our arrival we bought a car and drove to Queensland. It has been awhile since Joe did any manual labour but he kept up with the seasoned cane cutters. His hands were bleeding when his first blisters broke. He said that it will be OK as soon as his calluses hardened. As the cane cutting season finished Joe heard that one can do well on the Snowy Mountains scheme so off we went. In North Queensland at Christmas Snowy sounded cool. Joe became a face electrician in Island Bend tunnel. He was the first to go into the tunnel after blasting. The work was hard and dangerous, he saw men die and lose their legs. He often worked double shifts and sometimes three. The day our son Marjan was born on 16.3.1965 Joe worked two shifts and



then was to work the third shift but he asked to go and see me and his son in hospital.

The only time Joe complained was when a foreman called him names. What names, I asked. Joe said: the foreman yelled SPARKY, SPARKY but I said: you sparky yourself and went home.

I told Joe that electricians were sometimes called sparky so he forgave his foreman and they became friends.

We lived in the old abandoned house in the old Jindabyne and saved the money to buy a block of land in Canberra.

In 1966 after three years in Australia Joe was again an electrical contractor; he also encouraged me to present my certificates to Department of Education. I passed the English tests and was again employed as a teacher. I was finally back where I wanted to be. Our education wasn't wasted after all. Joe took our two years old son Marjan with him to work while Marko and I were at school. Life was exciting; we were climbing the mountain. We were building our Canberra home

Let's go to Lightning Ridge for a holiday, Joe announced out of the blue a few days before Christmas 1968. A friend told him that one can get rich overnight opal mining. You just register a claim and you are your own boss. Black opal is the most magnificent gem and it can only be found in Lightning Ridge. I did not argue; I am a born follower; I followed Joe to Australia; I followed him to Queensland sugar cane fields, to Snowy Mountains and Canberra so why not go for a short holiday in Lightning Ridge.

On Christmas day 1968 Joe went specking on Canfields and found an opal worth about one month's wage; he also caught the opal fever. For this two carat gem opal Jerry gave Joe a standing offer of four hundred pounds. Joe said that he will never sell this first opal but we needed money for the roof of the house so he did.

I'd like to stay for a couple of months, said Joe at the end of school holidays in January 1969. We went to Sydney; Department of Education gave me a job as a teacher in Lightning Ridge. I also dropped into the Lands Department and they gave us a block of land next to the school. As Joe drove back to Lightning Ridge I sketched a plan for the house; we stopped in Dubbo to order bricks. In Walgett I went to the Shire office and produced my plan for the house; the engineer said that it has to be a proper plan. I paid him twenty dollars to make it proper for the next shire meeting in a couple of days. Within a week Joe and his Finish Canberra friends bricklayers started building a house and within a month we moved

in it. The bureaucracy wasn't there yet to slow down the progress. It was the time for actions rather than paper work.

I provided bread and butter for the family while Joe searched for the fortune. Joe promised to return to Canberra for Christmas but Glengarry opal field opened and he found a few opals there so he put off returning to Canberra until next Christmas.

In 1969 the world was young; Lighting Ridge was largely undiscovered and mysterious; it invited vagabonds to come and discover its beauty. People were hungry for adventure, riches, love, excitement, change. We were so young. We came from every corner of the world bringing our stories, traditions, culture and spirituality into the barren outback.

Everybody worked hard to get closer to that trace of opal that meant the realisation of all dreams. Ridge is a place made for dreamers. Maybe all the people in the world are dreamers but opal miners took that extra step; they left their country, their family and their jobs to scratch in the dirt for the elusive colour; for red on black; for orange green; for harlequin pattern; for rolling pattern; for the most mysterious mixture of colours with the hint of violet under the green and blue and fiery red.

When in 1969 Joe started to mine in newly opened Glengarry opal fields we all moved there at weekends. Joe and I slept on a trailer while the boys slept in the car. Camping in the bush was a welcome adventure for the children and Joe found the company of other miners a good source of local knowledge. We gathered around the fire in the evenings to barbeque the meat, drink beer and tell yarns.

Joe dug a hole in Glengarry and bottomed on opal; he earned in one month what he made in Canberra in a year. We haven't yet considered that the flow of opal may not be guaranteed or regular. Other miners pegged their claims around Joe. Stories spread like a wild fire about a man who has never been underground before and then after a couple of days he became a millionaire. Joe never denied being a millionaire. He actually liked that. I was totally embarrassed. Why was I still working if my husband was a millionaire? Why couldn't I pay off our mortgage? I had two children I could spend some time with. Our boys found their own excitement riding bikes and motorbikes in the bush with their friends.

The promise to become rich overnight was shining in front of the miners during the hungry years of their search. They came from every corner of the world and spoke little English but they soon became fluent in opal mining jargon of the field: gouging, fossicking, trace, shin-cracker, pocket, patch, noddling, carats, potch, rolling pattern, harlequin pattern, dry run, wet puddling, and dry rumbling.

Joe seemed invincible as he led us into all sorts of adventures. During every school holidays we went fishing, camping and hunting. Trout fishing, walking along the rivers and camping on the riverbank with our Canberra friends was a highlight of the year.

We travelled all over the world and always felt safe and protected and loved by Joe. He would not rest as long as there was something to do; -he never gave up; he fixed any obstacles on our way.

Joe wasn't always agreeable; he had a mind of his own and he always presented an alternative view. I benefitted greatly from his ingenuity and intellect. I did not always appreciate his comments but his constructive criticism helped me become a better stronger person. Nobody ever had to wonder what Joe might be thinking because he always said what he thought. What he said was what he meant. His thoughts were sometimes annoying but he liked to say; you have to be harsh to be kind with criticism. He said it as he saw it. He liked to argue but he insisted that one only argues with people one likes.

Joe included his sons in every job he was doing so they became skilful in all kinds of home and machinery maintenance. He also has taught them values he held strongly such as honesty, fairness and to stand firm when a problem threatens them. He was a role model for the boys. They appreciate his guidance; they learned from him how to be fathers to their children. Joe was a family man; he was a good provider, guide and protector. He was a hard worker but he always found time to play games with friends and family. He liked to debate politics, philosophy, history and all social issues. There was never a dull moment in his company.

Lightning Ridge became a home for our family. Although opal became harder and harder to find the hope remained that in the next load will be the gem Joe came here for.

Joe promised right at the start that living in a place with no electricity or running water was just temporary until he built a house in town. He took it for granted that nothing and nobody would stop him. Nobody even tried to obstruct new endeavours of miners who were busy inventing housing, machinery and society.

Joe and I sometimes went to the pub after dinner. Joe would have one beer and I would have one smoke and we would go home. Sometimes Joe got caught in a shout and he had to wait for his turn to pay. Often the group would get bigger and our home going time became delayed.

Drinking singing and storytelling is how miners spent their free time.

As a teacher at the local school I became a part of the community. Locals soon introduced me to Lightning Ridge history.

Just over a hundred years ago the first white settler pastoralists arrived in these vast outback tablelands where the only high ground is a ridge a couple of hundred meters above sea level. There are no rivers or springs so no human life existed until these new settlers dug dams and made rain water tanks. The surface is covered by reddish ironstone. The story goes that the ironstone attracts lightning and the lightning struck and killed the shepherd his sheep and the dog. The place got a name Lightning Ridge which became officially recognised as such in 1963.

The name Lightning Ridge came long before opal played any role in the lives of Lightning Ridge people. The red iron stones on the lonely hill apparently attracted electric storms that once killed some 600 sheep and some shepherds at the turn of the twentieth century so they started calling the place Lightning Ridge. There are different stories about who first saw the rainbow in the dust of Lightning Ridge.

Aborigines always had eyes to the ground foraging for food as they were, so they surely noticed pretty stones on the surface of Lightning Ridge ground, said Roy Barker. Some opals would have surfaced after the rain eroded the ground. They must have been delighted by the beautiful colours but they never considered them as having commercial value. They were not food and they did not provide shelter.

Nobody is quite certain which white settler first spotted a flash of lightning in the stone. Maybe it was the first white shepherd in the middle of the nineteenth century wandering around the mound of raised dirt in the middle of the flat outback. Maybe Mrs Parker from Bangate station became intrigued by the shiny stones Aborigines brought to her; maybe it was Mrs Ryan strolling near the government tank at the beginning of the twentieth century that saw something shiny in the dirt; maybe it was Jack Murray who first took a serious notice of the sighting and began to look for opal.

The first dam was sunk in 1885. The first parcel of opal was sold by Nettleton in 1903. Aborigines first started coming to the Ridge in 1930s after white settlers drilled for artesian water and made dams to water their animals.

What a short history.

Everybody in Lightning Ridge knew everything there is to know about opal; they mined it, polished and sold it for cash. Nobody needed to know how much they found, nobody knew that they were alive. Most lived in camps without running water and electricity but the promise of instant riches kept them happy. One may be broke today but the next day everybody may talk about his wealth and success.

I suppose we all needed to be admired and respected. One can always count on respect envy brings, said Anton.

I met people of many different backgrounds who brought talents and skills to energise this outback town. I soon learned that about seventy percent of miners never become rich; they just get used to their camp dwelling and hoping and creating. Another twenty percent make a fair living and they build houses in town. About ten percent become properly rich. A fair lottery, they laugh. The only tickets you need are muscles and perseverance.

Most miners were migrants who did not manage to assimilate and integrate into the regular Australian workforce. They wanted more; faster. In the zenith of their lives they wanted to shine, to attract attention and love.

Opal buyers came to our home to see what Joe found and they would haggle, toss the coin and pull match sticks to determine the price of his opal.

Hungarian opal buyer Imre came to introduce himself to Joe.

Australia really is a melting pot of nations, said Imre. I asked him what was the hardest thing for him when he first came to Australia.

There were no girls, he said without hesitation. No girls, no dances, no singing, no romancing, no social life, no cultural activities. We lost the best years of our lives without the pleasure of female company. We lived in cultural vacuum.

I believed that it takes a real strength for a man to admit that he wasn't worthy or able to find a partner in the first years of his manhood.

But you have a beautiful wife, I said.

I was lucky to bring Eva from home, he explained. Most non English speaking boys came alone. Some of them accepted the rejects of other nationalities and races. It was better to have anybody than to live on their own though many got used to being on their own.

Maybe a lovely wife gave Imre the confidence to admit his initial vulnerability.

It gets easier when you learn English, I conceded.

It gets easier especially for women, because there is a shortage of women, said Imre. I speak better English than most Australian yobboes here but I still have an accent and it really goes on my nerves when people ask me where do you come from and I say Sydney and they say no I mean where you really come from. You have an accent. Let me guess, they propose

and they list the names of the nations they know nothing about. Oh I once met a Hungarian fellow on the bus, nice man, yes Hungarians are nice, and they are a bit like this and that, people begin weaving a story about people like you. They keep explaining to me what Hungarians are like because they once had an acquaintance that happened to be Hungarian. I once knew a man who once met a Hungarian man; this person feels obliged to tell me all about my nationality. I felt like saying shut up, you ignorant idiot. They hang on you their whole preconceived ideas of what a person of your nationality is like. Migrants hate being asked where you really come from. I am proud of being Hungarian but when they ask me where I came from they are telling me that I don't belong and that I am not an ordinary Australian. And never will be. People like to poke in migrants' private selves so they can adjust their prejudices. They never ask you where you came from because they admire your mind or your face or your history; they just want to single you out to put you down so you would not pretend to be an ordinary Australian. Ordinary Australians come from England. Some boys even changed their names and became Johnsons and Smiths but as soon as they open their mouths they expose themselves as liars; they look foolish and weak camouflaged by a foreign name.

Just as well our children have no accent, I smiled.

People still ask them where does that name come from, where are your parents from? In some ways it is harder on our children because they never knew anything about any other country. All they are and know is Australian.

Sometimes changing a name seems sensible. Like in the case of my Polish student Peter Jędrzejczak. His father got sick of spelling his name again and again so he took the pronunciation of the last part of his surname and named himself Chuck Peters. Simple for everybody. Easier for his children. Then there is Eva Didenskov Nickiphorowitch; she is so proud of her name that she would not dream of shortening it. I remember this dignified lady who carried a piece of paper with her name to save her spelling it.

Australians consider European men domineering, I said.

Migrant men often cover up their vulnerability with aggression and arrogance, admitted Imre; they work harder because they need to build their base in Australia, they also need to establish their status. They have to keep their women under control. I often feel sorry for migrant women because their husbands feel that they have to dominate and control them. Men are simply scared to lose their women.

I never looked at it that way, I admitted. I began to understand Joe's need for control; it would mean a failure for him to lose respect and love of his family. He simply could not deal with failure.

For us, the post war men, it was a shock to find ourselves in the situation where we could not find a suitable wife, continued Imre. We were made to feel undesirable in Australia. In Europe there was a shortage of men after the war. Millions of men were killed in the war and in communist countries more millions of men were killed after the war. Many soldiers returned from the war disabled and disillusioned. There was a great shortage of marriageable men so women felt lucky to find and marry any man; they found it hard to feed the orphaned children and old people on their own. Men were appreciated. Europe was starving after the war; actually the world was starving, said Imre.

I read that in the past Muslim men were compelled to marry two or more women because there was a shortage of men when many men were killed during the wars. The women had to be taken care of, I remembered.

We have the opposite in Australia. There are about ten non English speaking migrant men to one migrant woman. Good Australian girls would not be seen with a boy who cannot speak English unless that boy becomes rich. That gives migrants an incentive to get rich quick, said Imre. Most non English speaking migrants suffered some condescension at least at the beginning; they were 'New Australians'; outsiders to the land, people, politics and culture. They needed to grow roots fast.

Lightning Ridge really is a men's town, I observed.

Most women work in service industry to provide money for mining and essentials. European women were the first working women in Australia, said Imre.

A few migrant boys lived with Aboriginal girls in the camps scattered over the fields. I met the first Aboriginal couple June and Roy. June told me that both her grandfathers came from Scotland on the same boat. They were pastoralists who had children with Aboriginal women.

My Scottish ancestors were never a part of our lives, said June. They didn't want to know about me and I don't worry about them. They made Aboriginal girls drunk to have sex with them but they did not want to know them in the daylight. Aborigines accepted all of us half castes and they still do. Everything changed though when non English speaking Europeans came, said June. Europeans took Aboriginal women for their wives and made families with them. They improved the life for Aborigines. We like Balts, said June. I realised that for many Australians

Baltic sounds the same as Balkan. European geography is as far away for them as Australian used to be for me.

Miners met in the pub and told stories about the opal they found and about the plans they had for the future. Some dreamt of going home to bring with them the virgin girl that is waiting for them in their village. They only needed one good load, just one patch of red on black.

On Sunday I took our boys to church. No religion can adequately explain to me the enormity of life and universe but I went to church out of loyalty to my parents and because I needed to be a good person. The silence of the church always brought me closer to the core of myself which I call my soul. Believers are lucky people because their beliefs make them feel secure and at peace. Belief opens your soul to the divine the way sex opens your body into the intimacy with the loved person. I needed to be close to somebody. Faith offers possibilities of the everlasting which all humanity craves. I really hope there is god in charge and that he will in the end make everything right.

There were about twenty farmers and shop keepers but no opal miners in a small wooden church. Cut off from their familiar grounds, miners got used to living in sin. Hotel was their place of worship. In the hotel one could find the bishop, the policeman, the doctor, the teacher, the drover, the artists and poets, the academics and the illiterates talking about opal and mining.

I figured that the secret of Lightning Ridge harmony lied in the fact that nobody was quite certain which nationality, race, culture or religion was dominant, or who held the majority, or power or popularity. The only colour miners were interested in was the colour of opal; the only race they are interested in is the race to find the illusive rainbow colour on black silica. Everybody had an equal chance to get rich. Everybody especially had an equal chance to become equal. Most Europeans arrived to Lightning Ridge in the sixties and seventies. They came to be free to do what they like when they like, without the boss making them feel less because their English was not good. With hard work and a bit of luck they hoped to become who they intended to be. When a new field was discovered the message spread and opal fever rose. People from any remote corner of the world may know about the new rich area before the miner's neighbour.

Miners were ingenious inventors of machinery and dwellings and community. They were mixing bits of themselves with bits of others; they mixed bits they brought from their country with bits that were here before.



Olga, a Polish lady of Jewish descent visited her friend Slavka who is a Slovenian Catholic. Olga brought a Serbian paper for Slavka to translate her horoscope into English because Olga wanted to know what her former German boyfriend was doing with his new Filipino wife. Neither Olga nor Slavka spoke much English but they found a way to share this vital information.

Greed will win hands down every time, I heard a wise old Bill explaining to new miners around the camp fire. In mining you can't trust your friend or your brother. When two men are after the same thing both will want a bigger piece. Maybe kill for it.

Most migrants carried a hope to recreate in Australia a country much like a homeland they blossomed in.

I brought a model of a mosque with me to remind me why I am here, says Sheref. Allah keeps me young and strong. I have never been sick. People often ask me what is the secret of my fine health and I tell them: believe, believe, and believe. Believe in justice and righteousness. Follow Allah. Look at yourself in the mirror and ask yourself if what you are doing is right. My job is to do service to Allah.

I pray to Allah regularly and ask for his help to be righteous. Being rich means having a peace of mind, health, and the belief in God. Australians don't believe any more. In the olden days Christians closed their shops and hotels for Christmas and Easter and worshiped God in their churches. Now the trade is best on feast days and the trade became more important than worship. They spend the feast days in the clubs and hotels. I came to Lightning Ridge to bring Allah here. I have a model of a mosque on my table and I pray to the merciful Allah to change Lightning Ridge into the second Mecca. I believe that in not too distant future there will be a real mosque in Lightning Ridge. We Turks value loyalty, family, honesty, and cleverness. We prize a good sense of humour as it is often considered a sign of intelligence.

Others brought national robes and grape cuttings and seeds and recipes and memories of rituals and celebrations that make life meaningful.

Home is where the heart is, said Amigo.

Time passed quickly amid the excitement of opal mining. Every day brought new adventure. I wrote stories of everyday people and events. Most of my friends found a hobby; an artistic expression of some kind. Some built castles in the sky as they shared their lives and the news of new opal rushes.

It is 2012 and my husband, Joe, does not talk much anymore. He first stopped speaking English and then he stopped speaking altogether; he

actually never liked to speak English; he complained that Australians mumble their words and he cannot follow them. With his family Joe always spoke Slovenian. Sometimes we hated him for isolating us like that from the company of others like that but boys are happy now that he made it possible for them to learn another language. They speak Slovenian fluently and they understand much of other Slavic languages. Boys learned much from Joe and they appreciate the skills they acquired. They can build and maintain houses; they can repair cars and gadgets. No obstacle ever stopped Joe and our boys are also capable in ingenious.

We are what we grow up to be. It is amazing how much programming is passed on from one generation to the next. Looking at our children it is easy to believe in the reincarnation.

On the outside I, myself, became a living picture of my mother. From my father I inherited the love of storytelling. Everybody in my family knew that there was a special bond between my father and me because we both read and wondered about life. His storytelling sustained us during the wartime. In Australia I wrote down people's stories; it was easier to like strangers from around the world after I listened to their experiences; I came to understand their pain and joy. Through stories we found places in ourselves where we are same. Stories are my father's legacy to me. I still find comfort and harmony in words.

I can see that my granddaughter Nasha inherited my looks, my mother's looks really, but she is careful and introspective like her mother. Eliza looks like her mother but she is a spark of her father Marjan who keeps us laughing all the time. It is great when one inherits the best of two parents. Janez is also a mixture of both parents.

Marko's children Michele and Daniel are not as close to me as I would like them to be. Divorce does so much damage. I have seen many children broken through their parent's divorce. Daniel is handsome and overly generous; he is so easy to love but I am not sure if he loves himself. Divorce traumatised his gentle personality. Marko is an academic with great understanding of the universe; he is an interesting debater about any topic but he does not talk about the life choices he made or the women he chose.

## **My journey with dementia**

Life changed drastically for my husband Joe and me over the last 8 years. In 2004 Joe was a gregarious, healthy capable, strong 75 years old man; he was very much the leader of any group. It all started to go wrong in 2004. We were driving to Gold Coast for annual holidays. In Moore Joe stepped from the pavement onto the road and he doubled in pain. He stayed in bed most of the time with sciatica-back pain for the next eight months. He read and watched TV. I often joined him for a nap after lunch. I did not mind him having a rest. He worked hard all his life. I tried to get him to walk a little for exercise but he said that his back hurts too much. He gradually lost most of his social contacts. His doctor recommended glucosamine and fish oil while we waited for laminectomy- a back surgery in the lumbar spine region which helps relieve spinal stenosis related pain.

Joe's health improved after the surgery but his behaviour gradually changed; he became increasingly frustrated. He found it difficult to do his usual maintenance jobs. He would take machines apart but was unable to put them together again; that made him angry. He often blamed me; he accused me of not doing enough to help; of trying to make him look stupid; of hiding things; of not telling him things. He became a nasty old man telling people that I lose and forget things. He kept asking the same questions incessantly. I assumed that diminished physical and mental ability is normal during aging. Neither he nor I understood what was happening but we were falling apart. Joe became afraid of thieves so he packed things away. He packed his tools, locked the shed, hid the key and forgot where. When he couldn't find them he blamed me for taking, losing or misplacing them. We argued every day. I used to call him whenever there was a problem but gradually I tried to find solutions to avoid arguments. Joe was always argumentative and liked to compete in discussions with his friends. He used to present valid alternative views but now his arguing gradually became just arguing. Often he would become quiet and unresponsive; he sometimes made irrelevant comments and became lost in his thoughts. Men started mocking him and some even laughed at him when in the midsentence he forgot what he was about to say. He often belittled those same men before, but now they sensed his weakness. Some watched Joe's deterioration with glee; they won the final argument. Gradually some stopped talking to Joe altogether; they began to consider him either nasty or stupid or plain mad. Most of their visits stopped. Most of our peers became absorbed with their own aging and health issues; maybe they became afraid of catching Joe's sickness and losing their own brain connections.

A friend's mother had dementia and was considered mad so he placed her in a nursing home; he was ashamed of madness in his family; now he became particularly denigrating towards Joe. Was he afraid of losing his own failing memory? We all became aware of our diminishing memory.

It was interesting that while men denigrated and ridiculed Joe, women crooned over him like they would over an injured bird.

Admittedly there were friends who must have had some understanding of and tolerance for old age and dementia because they became patronisingly nice to Joe. He lapped their patting and smiling; he had no idea that they patronised him. The old pretentious hero was dead; the invincible became weak and vulnerable.

As Joe's brain cells failed to make proper connections his behaviour was changing from one extreme to the other. One moment he scolded me: Why don't you do something; do I have to do everything myself; you are wasting your time; a moment later the pleading frightened child returned. You are my angel, I love you, he declared. Joe's veneer became fragile.

I stopped arguing; it was easier to just get along. We gradually grew closer; eventually Joe became loving, positive, non judgemental and playful. He became the opposite of what he was; he played with children and welcomed stray cats and dogs. He wanted me close all the time and I did not mind. I was able to realise my nurturing nature while I was also in position to grow strong and independent. I liked my new role; I had a new purpose in life. For the first time I felt important to Joe.

Joe offended some people by accusing them of stealing.

I know you are only looking at my tools now but later at night you will come and steal them, said Joe to Jeff. I was embarrassed. Jeff doesn't understand the sickness and was seriously offended.

I believe that Joe's yearlong isolation and inactivity contributed to his condition but I cannot say exactly why and when first signs of dementia appeared. How does one know when dementia begins? Is there one clear sure sign? Joe made all the important decisions; he found solutions for any problems and could repair anything from a house to a car to a computer. He was the rock for our family and friends.

Joe is an electrician but he did the plumbing, cementing, bricklaying, carpentry, and gardening as well. He built our beautiful new home. When I couldn't figure out something on the computer he would have a go and it always worked. He fixed faults with my printer and my kitchen gadgets. When something did not work I simply called Joe. How dare he suddenly fail? I never knew how much Joe meant to me. He was my anchor, protector, guide; he was truly the wind beneath my wings. He

was always by my side; he was firmly on my side; I could always count on him.

What happened to me? Why can't I, he began to mutter as he failed to do what he wanted to.

### **From my diary 2005-2009**

When I could not reason with Joe I began to jot down some of Joe's new behaviours:

Joe began to leave the lights and appliances on most of the time; water was left running in different places.

One night in 2005 the fire alarm woke me and I went into the garage to find it covered in water to my ankles. It was hot water and the steam activated the alarm.

Joe became obsessed with washing hands. After going to the toilet in the garage; he soaped his hands and kept on washing them. He forgot to turn the water off. I got annoyed; he got angry.

In the past Joe sulked for days when angry but I noticed that his sulking no longer lasted. If I left him for a few minutes he was smiling sweetly on my return like nothing happened. I welcomed that change because I always found it difficult to cope with his silent treatments.

Joe can no longer follow the instructions; he cannot program DVD or TV or make any gadget work. I have never been any good at these things but now I have to learn.

Joe cannot follow the story on TV or recognise familiar people like our prime minister.

Joe wanted to do gardening but he pulled out plants instead of weeds. He took secateurs and started pruning. You better go to bed; I will join you in a minute, I say; I feel guilty but I can't let him prune the blooms of my favourite flowers.

Joe wants to serve me. I am not used to being served. He keeps on asking: Are you all right; do you want beer, no, maybe wine, no, what about soft drink, nothing thank you, do you want coffee, no, I am fine, what about tea, are you all right? I am flattered by his offers but I wish he would stop bothering me. He keeps covering me up in bed so I won't be cold.

Joe said that he was late coming home because he got lost. Of course he couldn't get lost in a little town where we lived for 37 years.

Joe asked who lives in this house as we were entering our yard. Was he joking?

When I told Joe that we saw a certain film the day before he would say: you may have but I did not.

Joe was cooking his famous goulash. It was always perfect but this time it was inedible and we could not figure why.

I invited a few people for a BBQ; Joe wanted to do it because he said I know nothing about BBQ. He burned the meat and blamed it on wet wood and unhelpful me. I was annoyed. He sulked visibly upset. Nobody understood why his BBQ wasn't perfect as usual.

Joe picked his clothes off the floor. Let me put them in the washing machine, I try to help. Do you think that I can't put them in the wash; he says pulling the clothes away. OK, you put them in the washing machine. Where is the washing machine, he asks. In the laundry. Where is the laundry?

The antenna knob of a TV broke off. Joe set himself to repair it. He took the whole TV apart and stayed with the job for a couple of weeks. In the end I took the TV to be repaired. The repair man said: It would be a ten minutes job if you brought it to me in the first place but now it took me three hours to put it together again.

Joe always repaired our car. Today he tried to repair the mechanism on the car door that would allow the closing of the electric window. He has done that before but now he disabled all the windows and then let the brake go and crashed the car into a tree.

Joe's garage and shed are overflowing with stuff but when he needs something he sends me to the shop for it because we cannot find it. He has millions of screws and bolts and tools and machines of all sorts. To help him find things I sort the screwdrivers on a pile and pliers on the other pile, drills together and so on. I show him what I have done for him but he cries. The loss of territory and authority makes him sad. I will never find my tools again, he says with tears running into his porridge. Why can't I...he never finished that sentence.

Did Joe's dementia start when he began collecting things? Did he start collecting things because of his dementia? We would go to revolve and garage sales and he would buy and buy. In the attic above the ceiling he sticks everything that he will need one day. Nothing is allowed to go in the bin; not an old oily rag, not a scrap of metal. He will repair everything when he finds the time, he says.

While shopping Joe would chat up strangers and buy unusual silly items he does not need. He likes to carry a small furry toy rabbit and asks the sales people to tickle its tummy. With his fingers he makes the rabbit jump and startle people.

Joe was installing the kitchen of our house next door. I asked a carpenter to help him. The carpenter gave up and then our son Marko went to help. And gave up. And Marjan tried until he too gave up. Joe did it himself. He did it wrong but what do I know so I let it go.

Joe is very concerned with not having money in his pocket. Money was always in my bag; he never owned a wallet. I give him money and he hides it. The next day he wants more money because he forgets where he hid it yesterday. This became an ongoing theme. I suppose money is on everybody's mind. Money is safety and security. Especially when you feel vulnerable.

I had Joe write a diary after breakfast so that he would have some evidence of events and of what was said. He dated every day's writing. I noticed that today he wrote the date: 32.7.05

Joe was still driving when we went to Canberra. The walnut tree in the backyard of our Canberra home was a catalyst in some way. Joe wanted to throw a net over it to stop cockatoos eating the walnuts. Marjan helped, Marko helped, Shane helped. They all declared that it was not possible because the tree was too high, so Joe engaged me. I said: don't worry about a few walnuts; let the birds have them. You have been at it the whole day so have a rest.

Joe said that we are all against him. We are going back home to Lightning Ridge, he declared. Let's wait for the morning, I tried to stall. We are going now, he said. I am not going, I said. For the first time I defied him and he left just before dark on an 800km journey to Lightning Ridge. When Marjan came home he became worried and decided to follow his father and talk him out of going back. I remembered that the mobile phone was on the car's dashboard so I rang Joe. Where are you? I don't know, Joe said sheepishly. I remembered that GPS was still directed towards Canberra. I told him to press OK three times and it will direct him back to Canberra. It did. Joe was very quiet on his return. Unusually quiet. When frustrated he would usually rant and accuse those around him of sabotaging his efforts in some way but now he just went to sleep.

Joe had a knee replacement surgery. During recovery he saw non existing strangers walking past his hospital room window and he heard voices. I attributed his behaviour to anaesthetic. He made the staff ring me at midnight to tell me to go home and look after the children. I was home asleep in my bed. And so were our grandchildren. Hospital staff had a noisy party in the room next to Joe and he thought that Marjan, his wife and I were drinking there and that we forgot about Marjan's children.

In September 2005 we went to Europe. Joe had been an excellent driver of unblemished record. It seemed natural to expect him to drive. I was afraid to drive on busy European roads but Joe always did it without effort perfectly. In Munich he had to merge into the highway traffic and this time it was a horror drive. The cars around us were beeping, I was screaming, our grandson, Daniel, was at the back hunched over and covering his face with his hands. Eventually we arrived to Ljubljana and Joe went to bed. He was tired and wanted to stay in bed most of our holidays. I remember Daniel telling me all the time to walk slowly because poppy can't walk fast. Poppy was always fast walker.

On our return Joe wanted to wash the driveway but every time he turned the pressure pump on, it shorted. He is an electrician but couldn't figure out why. He tried to put air into the weed sprayer and worked on it for days unsuccessfully. He gets angry when I try to help; he insists that he knows and I don't. I fixed everything for years, he accuses. When did you fix anything? Joe was always a reliable fixer and a capable hard worker. There was no stopping him. Fixing things was his mission. What is happening...he wonders sometimes.

Joe keeps asking every few minutes when we are going to Canberra and he begins to pack his bags. On 2.07.07 he drove towards Canberra; suddenly he crossed the road; he fell asleep while driving. I took over driving.

Joe was still driving while in Canberra; in Plaza he slightly scraped a car parked next to him and just drove home. Police came because someone took his car number.

Going out of the driveway Joe hit Daniel's car and blamed Daniel for leaving it there. In a shopping centre he scraped the wall of the parking place.

I managed to convince Joe to let me drive home from Canberra but during the trip he kept asking why they aren't coming with us. I asked who THEY were and he said: All of them.

On the way home the car suddenly jumped and stopped. I was driving at 110km an hour. It scared me until I realised that Joe pushed the lever into reverse. Later he opened the door while I was driving at high speed. Just as well he was strapped in.

We stopped at the service station to refill and have lunch. It took Joe over half an hour to eat his hamburger. I noticed that his walk changed into a slow shuffle.

I gradually got used to cope with Joe's changing behaviours; I attributed them to old age and the surgeries he had.



I don't trust him to drive anymore but he is offended if I don't let him drive. I am also scared to drive with him next to me. I insist that it is cheaper to travel by bus.

Joe is sleeping a lot.

As we went shopping I observed Joe talking to himself in a big shop mirror. When we had a swim at the bore bath he came home in a pair of women's sandals and brought home some clothing that did not belong to us.

I found him talking to a picture of our grandson.

Joe had to fill in the form but he could no longer sign his name.

The last two years were the worst and most confusing and frustrating years of our 50 years old relationship.

On 1.9.07 Joe and I went to test our memory with the local GP who directed us to a specialist in Orange where Prof. Hawke diagnosed Joe with dementia. Final diagnosis is beyond doubt now, admitted and acknowledged.

I am totally unprepared for dementia. The symptoms came gradually so I gradually got used to them.

Since Joe was diagnosed I stopped being annoyed with him and had started to treat him with patience and understanding. I became a sympathetic carer rather than an angry partner. Neither of us knew what the next chapter of our lives will be like. I was remorseful about blaming Joe for forgetting and for not being his old capable self.

How could I blame Joe for being sick? After the diagnosis Joe gradually changed into a playful child that just wants to watch the flowers and feed the birds while holding my hand. The man who wanted to kill any cat or dog that strayed into our garden is now on his knees patting a homeless cat he fed. In his pocket I found a steak he saved for the stray dog. Joe became an animal loving child.

The following two years were gentle and peaceful for Joe and me. The man who criticised me does not live here anymore; he is replaced by the man who just wants to hold my hand. At 79 he deserves a little playfulness; he is more relaxed and happier than he has ever been. He tells me that I am his angel; that I am the best; the most intelligent; the most beautiful. He is no longer afraid to tell me how he feels; he does not mind being vulnerable. He is grateful for having a lovely family. Our time together became enjoyable. Joe accepted life and people without judgement or criticism. He keeps telling me how happy he is; how

fortunate he is to have a lovely family. He is grateful for every day he spends with his children, grandchildren and me.

I miss Joe's leadership and his ideas but I love this new Joe.

I read about dementia. I attended all available seminars and conferences on dementia. I have to prepare for the next chapter of our lives. I tell my doctor that I am scared of losing my own memory but he said that while I am worried about forgetting I do not have dementia. People with dementia blame others for forgetting they do not know that they themselves are forgetful.

***Prof. Hawke said that there are many kinds of dementia but most common is Alzheimer's disease. Definite diagnosis can only be made by the post mortem so he wrote down Joe's dementia as Alzheimer's' which is a disorder that impairs mental functioning. At the moment, Alzheimer's is progressive and irreversible. Abnormal changes in the brain worsen over time, eventually interfering with many aspects of brain function. Memory loss is one of the earliest symptoms, along with a gradual decline of other cognitive functions, and changes in personality and behaviour. Alzheimer's advances in stages, progressing from mild forgetfulness and cognitive impairment to widespread loss of mental and physical abilities. In advanced Alzheimer's people become dependent on others for every aspect of their care. Dementia could last from 5 to 20 years.***

Last in first out, said Helene, a psychiatric nurse. Recent events, activities, or names are first forgotten. As the disease progresses, symptoms are more easily noticed and may become serious enough to cause persons with the disease or their family members to seek medical help. People in the middle stages of the disease may forget how to perform simple tasks, such as brushing their teeth or making a cup of tea. Their thinking may become muddled and problems arise with speaking, understanding, reading or writing. Later they may become anxious or aggressive, or wander away from home. Approximately 25 per cent of Alzheimer's patients experience hallucinations or delusions during the course of their illness but usually only for a short period. Currently there is no cure for dementia and nothing can reverse the damage that has already occurred in the brain. Treatment for dementia generally focuses on controlling current symptoms and slowing down the deterioration.

Dementia is an umbrella term covering a large number of disorders that can affect thinking and memory. Alzheimer's disease is characterised by changes to some of the nerve cells within the brain. Over time these changes result in cell death. Some proteins can deposit on the nerve cells in the brain, forming what is called 'neuritic plaques'. These interfere

with the normal transmission of information between brain cells. Tangles can form from broken down portions of nerve cells.

While there are many theories about why these changes in brain cells occur in some individuals, no one explanation has yet been accepted. In fact, there probably is not one single cause of the disease, but several factors that affect each individual differently. The condition is slightly more common in women than men. Risk factors are increasing age, family history of the disorder, having a history of head injuries or strokes, and having a history of depression, particularly if the first episode of the depression occurred later in life.

I began to worry about Joe's depression medication Zoloft. I don't think that Joe really was ever depressed; he was agitated and anxious; he was restless and frustrated by his inability to complete the tasks he knew he could do in the past. Antidepressant Zoloft only calmed him down. Many Penadine forte painkillers before and after operations also depressed his pain sensations, Normison made him sleep. Nobody could say if these medications also altered or slowed Joe's brain function. Since 2004 Joe was no longer physically active because his sciatica caused him pain. He also isolated himself from his social contacts. I suspect that these factors contributed to his dementia but even the doctor could not say for sure.

During the five years from 2004 until 2009 Joe had hernia operation, spinal operation, shoulder replacement and knee replacement. I wonder if frequent anaesthetics, painkillers, antibiotics and other medications contributed to or caused his dementia. All types of dementia follow similar path of irreversible deterioration of physical and mental ability.

Prof Hawke tested Joe for Vascular dementia but the results were inconclusive.

I read that symptoms of Vascular Dementia include confusion, problems with recent memory, wandering or getting lost in familiar places, loss of bladder or bowel control, emotional problems such as laughing or crying inappropriately, difficulty following instructions, and problems handling money. Usually the damage is so slight that the change is noticeable only as a series of small steps. However, over time, as more small vessels are blocked, there is a gradual mental decline.

The symptoms of Lewy Body Dementia can often have a psychiatric quality –increased anxiety, some visual hallucinations and a general problem with concentration and persistence. The cognitive problems and speed of deterioration can sometimes be more rapid than Alzheimer's disease but this can vary significantly. Fronto-temporal Dementia often shows itself first as changes in behaviour, mood or normal personality features but then will also include changes in cognitive skills, particularly

attention, problem-solving, judgement and organising skills. As a result this disease can be quite distressing for family members and carers.

Learning how to cope with dementia helped me assist Joe and maintain my own health and well-being. Dementia support groups helped me to develop useful, supportive networks.

I engaged Joe in enjoyable activities and generally played along with him. I avoided stressful situation and maintained constant and familiar routines; I minimised confusion by reducing choices, clutter, noise and glare in the environment; I provided meaningful activities that Joe is comfortable with and this reduces boredom and agitation. I became careful not to introduce any new subjects into our conversation to avoid endless questions to which the answers are forgotten immediately. I hope to stay as we are because I cope but I know that every day I will be less able to.

Conversations became irrelevant but light-hearted and our chatter is pleasant for both.

We both became aware of the end time approaching so we want to make the most of it. We remember the exciting times, our many travels, our children and grandchildren.

There are regrets; we should have been better parents, better partners, and better friends. We regret petty jealousies, arguments, and selfishness. We wish we did not greedily work for the possessions but spent time with our children. We want to make up for all that now. No more demands, pressures, duties; we only want to make our family happy. We began distributing possessions gathered during the last 50 years of fury and work; possessions became meaningless. The only souvenirs we treasure are the ones still stored in both our memories.

Joe liked quality shoes and clothes for going out but for work he would only wear old rags. I try to make Joe wear his best clothes now but he refused; he has to save them for when going out or away to Canberra or Gold Coast.

The faraway places we used to travel are gradually forgotten as we discover the life in our garden. We spend many hours every day on the veranda watching birds and flowers and generally letting the world go by. The rush is over; the urgency and ambitions gave way to appreciation and gratefulness. Joe is becoming ever more contented, lovable, compliant, affectionate, loving and submissive. He always enjoyed nature and had a great love for nature documentaries. He became fascinated with lizards in our garden. He spends hours watching their every movement; he caught grasshoppers laid on the grass and waited for the lizards to take them.

Gradually the lizards came closer and closer until they started taking grasshoppers from Joe's hand.

We look at delicate structures of grasshopper's head and legs. We watch the bees buzzing from flower to flower. We follow the processions of ants at their labour. We are in awe; every creature knows what they need to know; they are no less and no more than we are. Bees help to fertilise plants which in turn produce honey for their sustenance. It is wonderful to see how everything in the nature is connected. Joe and I feel a part of our environment; our labour provides safety and nourishment for so many other species.

Our friends are coping with their own aging. Most of them embraced religion; they found peace and hope in God. They all promise prayers for Joe's health.

Joe and I are Catholics; I am fairly regular traditional church goer but Joe came to church only on special feast days. I don't like leaving him home now so I take him with me and he does not mind.

Toncka and Stane, our oldest friends, were baptised as Born Again Christians and became pastors in a Pentecostal movement. They tried very hard to convince us to become members of their congregation. They placed hands on Joe and prayed for his health and conversion. When they returned to Slovenia to bring the Good News to people there, they sent hankies soaked in the waters they blessed to place on Joe and make him better. Toncka told me on the phone that dementia would never happen to Joe if he was baptised by her as a Born Again Christian. Only the faith in Jesus can save him, she said. Joe never allowed them before to pray over him; he wanted to remain in the faith of his parents.

Rudi came to visit and he too promised prayers. He is a Seven days Adventist and they rely on dietary and behaviour rules for their physical and spiritual health.

My friends Marie and Lucy promised salvation and health through Jehovah's beliefs.

Max is an independent Gospel preacher bringing Good News wherever he goes. Trust in God. In the end that's all anyone can really do.

We will all be old one day if we live that long, Max jokes. He is 85 and riding his bike every day visiting the aged and the sick. He is at most funerals. Max confessed recently that he learned some bad habits in the orphanage where he grew up. Older boys did some sinful things to him and he learned to do these same abominable acts to younger boys. When he saw the light, he gave his life to Jesus, confessed, repented and made amends. I have known Max for 43 years. We talked about history,

politics, philosophy and religion; when you talk to someone for almost half a century you begin to think of them as friends. We all carried our little sinful secrets as a burden through life until nobody is interested in our confessions anymore. We are yesterday's news. People these days know sins that we could not even imagine.

I admire my friends' beliefs, dedication and sacrifices. I actually admire all these believers equally since their role model is the same Jesus.

I try to pray but I lack direction. I cannot say that I firmly believe in anything except in my smallness and ignorance in face of the eternity and universe. I feel like a leaf falling off the tree in the autumn; I will land where the wind will blow me and I will fertilise and feed whatever will want to suck the minerals of my body. As for my soul, my spirit? I never knew where I came from, who I am or where my soul originated so the path into the unknown will not be anything new.

Joe spent a couple of days negotiating with a man who wanted to buy our car. I left him in the man's company because it is good for him to talk to someone. I sold the car, he said. Where is the money, I asked. His daughter will bring it, he said. What is his name? No idea. Where does he live? No idea. Which car did I sell, he asks me. None, I tell. But he drove it away. No, he didn't. I gave him the key. No, here is the key.

We have to pack, take the pictures off the wall we are going home, Joe declared. Home where? Lightning Ridge; we are home. But when the others come they might want our pictures, what others, you know the rest of them, who, all of them, the ones living here; we live here, nobody else lives here; but they are coming; when; I don't know.

It is scary having these meaningless conversations but I try to keep them light and reassuring.

You are the best; nice legs, beautiful dress, cute cat, lovely food. I am simply not used to Joe's positive comments. All inhibitions have disappeared. Joe is who he truly is; there is no more cover up and pretence and propriety. He is neither afraid nor ashamed. I never knew this person who was with me for 52 years and I never saw him the way he is until he lost control over his pretence. I always knew that he loved me but he rarely said it.

Are you all right? Do you want a drink? Can I make a cup of coffee for you, he keeps asking.

I am trying to be kind and patient most of the time.

I have answered your question nineteen times during the last two hours; my voice betrays me once; I did not mean to sound nasty; I know you

only offer me drink because you love me; I am so sorry but I just don't feel like having that glass of wine; no I am not thirsty; I don't need a soft drink either. I just want to watch this film; no the film isn't more important than you; no film is more important than our family.

From midnight until three in the morning is always critical. He goes to wee and then starts rearranging the house. He sleeps in his new shoes so nobody can steal them.

We were going to Canberra but in the morning I find that the contents of my bag, money and documents, disappeared during the night and could not be found. We found them packed under the cushion days later.

Are we going now? Where? Oh, you know. Are they coming with us? Who? They, pointing at people on TV.

I have to find the birds. They just hatched, he said as he pressed the buttons of remote control after he watched the bird documentary. He tried to disconnect computer because the birds might be hiding inside.

It is twelve thirty at night and he is tidying the house. What is happening? He says suddenly. Why don't I know anything? Why can't I dress myself? Where are we? Where are we going? Why don't you tell me? I have tears in my eyes. If I could only help him.

Joe went out and started pruning passionfruit at 2am.

Joe called me Marjan and he asked me to tell Cilka to get ready. My son is Marjan and I am Cilka. Joe is packing because he is worried that someone will steal his shoes and toiletries.

I used to work here when we were making the airport, he said on the way to Dubbo as the bus stopped because of road works. He remembered his first job in Australia building Canberra airport almost fifty years ago. The scenery was similar.

Why are they here, he asked about TV people. Will you give them something to drink?

Joe dressed in my swimmers again and put socks over shoes.

He is constantly packing to go but has no idea where. We don't want to be too late, he says.

Where is Marjan? Where are the others? Aren't they coming with us?

Ask mum, she will give it to you, he said to me. I am mum.

We were in Dubbo hospital waiting room. Why do we have to wait? We can ring Marjan to pick the children. What children? Aren't we waiting for them? Who? Them. Can't they look after them?

On the way from Dubbo: Is mum driving? She is a good driver. I am mum, I snap. Sorry. I will have to get up early to go. Where? I don't know; aren't we going somewhere. Are we going to sleep there? Where? There. Is mum staying at home? Aren't you coming with us? With whom? Cilka and me. I am Cilka.

On our way out from the bus Joe took over the bus steering wheel and they had to force him out.

Joe is unwilling and unable to dress and undress. He puts both legs into the same hole of the trousers over wet swimmers. At the pool he tries to take everybody's clothing and shoes. Two socks on one and none on the other foot.

I found his medications sometimes in the bin or melted in coffee.

Cannot count backwards from 20. Does not know the places in town.

I saw a mouse running over the bench. Funny no droppings; I'll look for it. Same the next morning. Look in the drawers in the bedroom, maybe the mouse is hiding.

Are we going home tomorrow? Where to? Home? We are home.

I keep on communicating with Joe on his terms, responding to his train of thoughts. We sat on the veranda watching the birds. Why can't I... Why don't I..He never finished the sentence. Did you get the bird seeds, he changed the subject.

This coffee is too hot and bitter. It is my coffee and yours is in front of you on the table. Repeat 3 times. Your coffee is in front of you and it is just the way you like it. I don't want it the way I like it; I want you to have it the way I like it.

Is Marjan married? Who did he marry? Have they got any children? Call them for dinner.

Joe is constantly worried about me; would I like to drink or eat or be dressed better. What do I need? On 4.12.09 we were in Canberra and he said: I will buy you the best shoes, two pairs of shoes, one for the winter one for the summer so that you will be comfortable. We went from shop to shop until we found the most comfortable shoes for me.

Did he perhaps remember his barefooted childhood? Shoes, were a big problem after the war; especially warm shoes for freezing winters.

Joe follows me around. Are you all right? He keeps asking. Yes. Are you sure? Yes. Do you want me to cover you up? No. Are you all right? Do you need a drink? Have something to eat.



Save some lunch for the children. What children? You know Janez and the girls. They are not here. But they might come. They are 800 km away.

Joe is talking about the people on television. They pretend to drink coffee but they really have wine and then they'll get drunk and will blame the drink and leave their children at home alone. Joe is constantly worried about people drinking alcohol and not taking care of their children. Since we never had issues with alcoholism in our family Joe might be remembering his father who became an alcoholic. Joe was always disciplined; he might have been slightly under the influence of alcohol half a dozen times in his life but normally he would only have a couple of drinks when out with friends. He also never smoked; his father's smoking and drinking caused sadness and poverty in his family.

I wonder why Joe keeps bringing drinks to me; once he opened 8 bottles of beer and said: I know what I am doing. He did not want to drink any of it but he wanted me to drink. Actually I don't blame him for trying to feed me and make me drink because I am pushing him to drink and eat as well. I have to put food into his mouth sometimes. Perhaps he is just reflecting my own words and behaviour.

Is their room ready? What room? Where will they sleep? You better leave the light on for them. They are just people on TV. They can't sleep there all night.

Joe is constantly looking for others who should be here and follow us. Maybe they are in the other room, he says.

I often cry in desperation; I am scared of being on my own. What will I do? I have never been alone. I keep talking to Joe; I hold his hand; he is the only person needing me. Old age is so unattractive. What reason is there to love and be loved past your blossoming. Only Joe and I remember our blossoming. I get slightly depressed but I remember that we are all in the same boat without the energy to paddle. Most of us feel alone as our old friends are dead or in the process of dying.

## Notes from 2011 diary

Joe and I lived a friendly, idyllic, fairly comfortable, idle life until at the beginning of 2011 Joe began to lose control over his toileting. Every night he woke up to get to the toilet but sometimes he stumbled and fell in the dark if I didn't wake up quickly to turn the light on and escort him. I could not lift him up when he fell so I called the ambulance. Sometimes he rolled off the bed and couldn't get up. I couldn't expect the ambulance to come all the time so I called neighbours and friends. I slept lightly listening for his movements. I became exhausted because I did not sleep. Going to the toilet at night became a real problem. By the time he reached the toilet and pulled down his pyjamas he was already dripping. I had him sleep without pyjama bottoms and that helped for some months. I removed floor mats and had only one cover so he would not trip.

I often could not get him to shower so I had to wash him. He can barely stand in the shower anyway. He cannot put his arms into sleeves on his own after I put a shirt over his head. I became more and more tired, restless and frustrated. I cry because I am scared of being on my own.

I try to get him to walk or lay down but he is contented just to sit for hours. He became removed from reality but responds well to loving attention. We both do a lot of cuddling and enjoy it. Other people disturb him.

I make it easy for myself by being loving, gentle, undemanding, patient and available. He reacts badly to any criticism or loud sounds, unexpected touch or sudden approach. I announce myself from a distance, come gently and tell him what to do. If he does not do it, I try again with a different approach in a few minutes.

Going in and out of the car is a problem. He does not recognise the rooms but functions on automatic from the bedroom to the bathroom on-suite; he never forgets to wash hands. He eats a bit; likes mostly sweet things and fruit. Meat is difficult.

He opened the bedroom window. Why? To pee. Go to the toilet. Where is the toilet?

He stood at the window at night and talked sign language with his shadow.

Any movement from A to B is difficult unless it is spontaneous and then he walks well on his own. Sentences and questions are never finished; the thought gets lost in formulation. Food is eaten at his will; sometimes a lot but nothing at other times. He loves to have me close at all times and keeps kissing me.

I made a mistake telling Joe about our neighbour, Stanko, being robbed overnight; Joe keeps asking about it all day. He started taking pictures off the wall so nobody will steal them. He is packing his clothes.

I asked Joe to sit in front of the house and feed the birds as I worked in the garden. I forgot him for a few minutes and found him spraying weeds and pest poisons. I persuaded him to come with me and led him into the shower. While I got dressed he sprayed hair spray and deodorants around the bathroom; he became angry when I took them away. He went into the car but I hid the keys. He managed to flatten the battery by pressing buttons.

While having breakfast Joe took a sip of sugarine. He cannot see the spoon in front of him or the soap in the shower; his slippers are always on the wrong foot. He came into the kitchen with my swimmers over his head and his arms in the swimmers' leg holes. He could not get out of it. He sometimes goes naked outside. At night he wakes up and packs things for the trip. Today he almost swallowed a handful of his painkilling tablets; he mixes salt and sugar into any food in front of him. He sprinkled sugar into cashews and lemon squash over meatballs. Has to be watched at all times.

Joe has to be fed most of the time; he has a shower, shave and change every second day as I also change the bed. He usually goes to the toilet well; he sleeps a lot. Sometimes he cannot find the bathroom or bed by himself. When I cannot move him, I leave him and after a few moments he walks normally on his own. He leans on me and wants to hold hands all the time; he follows me to the toilet and asks what I am doing. If I move a bit in bed he asks where I am going. Are you all right he asks every few minutes.

Joe has not recognised our car for years, does not know the way home, sometimes he wants to go in and out through the window; cannot find the door.

Are you coming with me to the pool? I asked.

Cilka already asked me and she would be jealous if I went with you, he said. I am Cilka.

Joe is becoming weak and I am sad and sorry for him; perhaps I am sad and sorry for myself as well.

Joe lost 5kg of weight in a short time. Falls asleep in a chair. Celebrated his b/day yesterday 12.2.11. I invited a few close friends for a party but he did not drink or eat anything. I am scared of being left on my own.

He is becoming very frail barely walking or standing.

20.2.11 Joe does not eat and I worry. I want him to be with me for as long as possible. If he does not eat he will die and that really scares me. I urge him to eat and drink constantly. He toys with food and mixes in the bowl coffee and meat and vegetables and wine and then secretly takes it out to the dog next door

23.2.11 Watching the program on TV about laying the cables for broadband, Joe commented: These electricians are stealing the cables so they can sell them and buy drinks. They get drunk and don't look after their children. Look at the children hiding in that cloud. It is dangerous when people don't look after them, he said.

2.3.11 Joe opened the cupboard ready to urinate in when Helene was visiting. When Marko was here I saw faeces falling down his trouser leg for the first time. I led him into the shower and cleaned up. I introduced a waterproof cover for the bed and incontinence pants. The pants made things worse as he was still insisting on going to the toilet during the night and while he fumbled and half pulled down the pants drops of urine were already on the bed, on the floor and around the toilet.

Joe could not wake up on Easter Sunday 2011 so ambulance came and they took both of us to Sydney to check his heart. I asked for permission to sit in hospital next to Joe overnight to reassure him but I was not allowed. I booked into the motel but the hospital staff kept me awake most of the night asking me to calm Joe down by telephone. Joe begged me to call the police and to come and get all the strangers out of his room- he believed that he was in our home invaded by burglars.

They told me that Joe requires a psychiatric nurse on the return trip and there was no room for me on the plane. I had to stay in a Sydney motel while they returned Joe to Lightning Ridge hospital by plane. Lightning Ridge hospital staff again rang me a few times during the night to calm Joe down by telephone. He became totally disoriented and bewildered. It would be so much simpler if they let me stay with him overnight and on the plane but instead they allocated him a psychiatric nurse who could not manage him. Such are the rules and protocols.

On 20th May 2011 we went by bus to Dubbo. Joe became exhausted and on the return home I could not get him to walk. I took him to hospital. The next day the doctor recommended that he stay in Age care unit. The separation was traumatic for both of us; the first year of Joe's stay in the age care was a nightmare. Many painful and almost fatal mistakes in regard to Joe's health were made. Gradually I blended in with the nurses, visitors and residents; new, friendly, caring nursing staff arrived and during Joe's second year as a resident we established boundaries and

some mutual understanding and even respect and liking; we became a family of sorts happy to see each other.

## **Behind the locked doors in 2011**

For over fifty years I looked after Joe's health and dietary requirements; together we looked after our family and business; we took care of each other's safety and wellbeing but when the door of the Nursing home closed behind Joe in May 2011, we both suddenly lost control of our lives.

As Joe entered the Age care, the staff simply dismissed all my requests, instructions and opinions. At no time did anyone have a consultation with me to gather information about his condition and his past treatment and requirements. It was a shock to me to realise that I had no more say in Joe's treatment or wellbeing. I wanted to tell someone about Joe's medical history since the staff and the attending doctor knew nothing about him. I did not even get to see the doctor for weeks afterwards.

Joe's wellbeing was central in my life yet the staff considered me a nuisance rather than help. Nobody informed me about the running of the facility or about the code of behaviour or any rules Joe and I would be subjected to. I had no idea who was who in the hierarchy of the staff and who I could turn to for information or help. I was lost in the woods of different uniforms who were giving me conflicting messages and instructions. E.g. Joe wasn't eating much so one nurse said: can you bring him food he is used to, while other said that no food is allowed into the facility.

I was treated as if I also lost my faculties. Perhaps the staff is so used to dealing with demented residents that they forget about those who still have the capacity to think a little.

I admit that Joe and I felt vulnerable, sensitive and easily upset. We found ourselves behind the locked door, we lost the freedom of association and movement; we lost the choice in basic things like clothes, food, daily routines, and entertainment. We lost all decision making powers and decisions were often made for us by people who were less competent, caring and professional. They told us how to behave, what to eat, where to sit, how to talk, and what not to touch.

I believe that it should be up to the staff or management to facilitate an informed introduction into the Nursing Home for every new resident and their primary carers.

Age care staff who work behind locked doors every day feel at home there; they can come and go as they like. For the residents and their carers Age Care is the whole new restricted reality.

At the age of fifty-two Joe suffered severe gout attack. His arthritis presented with painful joints; this was hereditary in his family. I learned everything about uric acid and how to control and maintain gout with Zyloprim tablets and diet. For the following 32 years Joe never had another attack.

At the age of sixty Joe became diagnosed as diabetic so I learned about diabetes and kept it under control with sensible diet and Diabex tablets.

On entering the Age Care I presented the nurse with Joe's medication: Zolofit, Lipitor and Diabex. I only had about ten Zyloprim tablets left at the time and they were already out of the jar and packed into the bags for administration. The Registered Nurse in charge at the time, known as RN Kim, told me that they cannot accept tablets out of the original jar. I said that I will go to the doctor for a new script the next day. The RN Kim told me not to bother because the doctor is seeing Joe and will give her a script. For the next few weeks I kept asking if Joe is taking Zyloprim for his gout but they dismissed me saying not to worry since Joe is under doctor's care.

RN Kim never once smiled at anybody and her staff looked equally unhappy and hostile towards residents and visitors. They provided no information on medication, medical condition or pain and diet management. Nobody bothered to explain the rules regarding the residents and their visitors yet they reprimanded us daily for breaking the rules made on the spot and referred to them as protocols and codes of behaviour we were supposed to follow. The reprimands usually started with: You should know better... No discussions entered into the validity of staff's demands or the rules.

I remembered the words of high ranking police officer friend who said: Rules are to guide the wise and to make the fools follow blindly.

Wise ones evidently were thin on the ground of the nursing home and the fools followed the rules the way they understood them. Don't even mention common sense.

After a few weeks the staff complained that Joe became violent. He was screaming and hitting out when changed and showered. The security men complained that he hits and scratches. They prescribed antipsychotic drug Risperidone to sedate him. RN Kim assured me that Joe's aggression is a result of his dementia. I said that he was never aggressive at home.

Dementia changes their behaviour, said RN Kim. I pointed out that Joe wasn't violent with the staff that treated him gently; he was only resisting those that handled him roughly. His joints were inflamed. I noticed that Joe had bruises and cuts on his face and arms.

One care worker told me that all residents are on Risperidone because that makes it easier for the staff to manage them. I looked up the side effects of Risperidone and found that this antipsychotic drug was banned in USA nursing homes. It should especially not be administered to demented people with diabetes and renal problems.

When on Risperidone Joe gradually changed; he was always cheerfully joking but now he seemed half dead/comatose slumped on the table; he never even opened his eyes. I asked the staff that instead of giving him Risperidone they call me day or night to help with handling. I live five minutes away from Age Care. They called me a couple of times just before mealtimes. Joe was restless because he was hungry. Risperidone increased his appetite. They pushed and pulled him along and he resisted. I told them that he is not violent but reacts defensively when pulled by his arms because his shoulders are very painful. Any wounded bewildered animal would defend itself.

More Risperidone sedated Joe so the staff left him slumped in a chair. I did not want to see Joe hungry or restless or heavily sedated. I offered to take him out during daytime or for me to be with him if his behaviour became problematic; it seemed easier for staff to dope him than to have me around.

I kept explaining that Joe has severe pains in his joints and should not be pushed and pulled roughly. I kept asking if he is receiving Zylprim and RN Kim assured me that he is under doctor's care.

I told the manager that I do not want Joe severely sedated. Joe was a very active man all his life. I asked if he could be given some activity when he is restless. I never needed to use force or harsh words at home or when visiting in age care. He always complied with a gentle word and a bit of patience. If he was going in the wrong direction I would simply distract him into doing what I wanted.

I suggested to the manager that carers should distract him with an appropriate activity or engage him in an appropriate dialog when he becomes restless. Instead of Risperidone he should get frequent small portions of food because of his diabetes and also because Risperidone enhanced his appetite. He needs to be prompted to drink by placing the glass to his lips. He should not be handled with force as he is suffering from a painful arthritis.

Frequent bruises were the proof that Joe was handled inappropriately. I found three deep finger nail cuts on his left arm. When questioned the nursing assistant said: He must have done it himself. I said that he cut the tips of his fingers on his right hand forty years ago with a lawnmower; he



has no fingernails on his right hand with which he could inflict nail wounds on his left arm.



Whatever. Don't talk to me about it, she brushed me off.

I was told on another occasion that Joe was naughty; he had wandered into a wrong room. The carer came after him from behind, grabbed his arm and yelled for him to come out. He pushed her away. She slammed the door on him and he fell sustaining a big cut on his head. He was left on his own until he "became cooperative".

I often found bruises on Joe's legs and body. He fell off the bed and cut his head a few times.



Eventually someone realised that Joe had a severe gout attack because he did not receive Zyloprim for months. Risperidone also increased his appetite and he became restless when hungry; he ate more food; he put on

weight which increased his sugar and uric acid levels. His joints hurt because of gout attack which was caused by their negligence. Any/every living thing would react adversely to pain.

Finally it was acknowledged that Joe was in pain rather than violent. He did not attack the security man he just defended himself. The doctor prescribed an anti-inflammatory corticosteroid drug Prednisone against painful inflammation caused by gout. Prednisone in turn drastically increased Joe's sugar levels. I found him slumped on the dining room table. I alerted RN Kim but she said that Joe is only sleeping. I knew that something was wrong. Eventually I convinced them that he was unconscious. He was in and out of hyperglycaemia for days. He was in acute care when I noticed that he developed swollen feet and black patches on his heels. These patches opened as lacerating ulcers which never healed. They began treating him with massive doses of antibiotics. Ulcers caused Joe constant pain so they doped him with more Risperidone to keep him quiet; the drug made it easier to manage him.

The drugs changed Joe's behaviour; he could not sleep; he had ferocious appetite and when hungry he paced the floor. They sedated him.

RN Kim told me not to interfere in their work. The staff accused me of sabotaging Joe's wellbeing by bringing him bananas and mango which he always loved. I also made sure to keep him hydrated. I said: Joe is 83, he is at the final stages of dementia; I only want to see him happy and enjoying the time he still has. The security man stepped in and said: If you think you can look after Joe better, take him home.

I said that I would gladly look after Joe but I cannot lift him if he falls. He told me to leave the looking after Joe to them if I am not prepared to look after him myself.

They told me what Joe cannot do or have but nobody seemed to care whether he drinks his drink or eats his food. I asked the staff if he was given a drink and the server said that there is drink always right next to him if he wants it. I asked them to introduce food and drink to his lips and then he will accept it but they told me that they can't force him to eat and drink if he does not want to. Some of the carers spread rumours that Joe's gout attack and hyper was caused by the food and drink I brought to him.

Everybody in Age care seemed to be an aspiring diagnostician.

Other visitors and I were constantly reprimanded for not adhering to strict dietary rules and behaviour.

It was Joe's birthday on 12.2.12. It was a weekend and I asked RN Kim specifically not to dope Joe because I prepared a party for him at home and had invited friends. When I went to collect him he was totally

unresponsive-doped- slumped over the table with his jaw hanging open and a string of drool hanging from his mouth. RN Kim was nowhere to be found.

I told you not to dope him, I said to a member of the staff.

He is not doped, she said.

I can see that he is, I said.

You should not make any accusations that you can't prove, she said.

I must come in on this as well, called out the nurse's assistant/kitchen server pushing the trolley closer. Joe got no Risperidone last night, she affirmed standing next to the enrolled nurse.

How do you know, I asked.

We were both here and we both saw the RN Kim not giving it to him. And anyway, you have no evidence that he is on Risperidone.

I see him and I know, I said. He is slumped in the chair and does not respond. His jaw is loosely hanging to one side and he is salivating; he cannot speak or hold anything in his hand.

He is breathing that means that he is responding, said the kitchen server. If he wasn't breathing he would be dead, she added knowingly.

He did not open his eyes and did not respond to my voice, I said and then realised that it was no use talking to these people.

RN KIM was hiding in the medicine room.

As a teacher I often had the similar defensive reaction from primary school children. When a child was accused of doing something wrong his supporters said that they saw him not doing it. I hoped that the staff in the hospital would be more grown up. How can the two of them see the third person not doing something? They just said whatever pleased their stern boss RN Kim or whatever they were told to say. They were prepared. They knew that I cannot prove that Joe was heavily doped with Risperidone. Especially I could not do anything on the weekend.

I spoke to the management the following Monday.

The new manager told me that it is hard to change the entrenched ignorance and bossiness of the staff. There should be respect, tolerance and friendliness; she said that she knows nothing of the rules and protocols the staff was quoting.

I pointed out that side effects of Risperidone make Joe hungry all the time. They don't give him extra food so he gets agitated and restless. I can calm him by giving him bits of fruit but the nursing staff said that I

make his sugar levels rise. I asked them for suitable small portions of food as he is a diabetic but they give him more Risperidone to disable him so he cannot move. I offered to come every morning and help with showering and dressing Joe but they rejected my help.

I told them that caution should be used when prescribing Risperidone to people with dementia and diabetes, as there is a greater risk of side effects and even death. Risperidone causes Joe's hunger and as a consequence raised sugar and uric acid levels; it may also cause his agitation, anxiety, headache, trembling, excessive saliva, stiffness, leg restlessness, dizziness and fast heart rate.

I said that when Joe entered the nursing home he ate little; his sugar was under control, he was happy; he suffered no pain. Now he is a wreck; a bewildered, unhappy, changed man in pain.

I was distressed and could not sleep.

Nobody listened to me; the nurses repeated their mantra that they only follow the RN and she follows doctor's orders. I again pointed out that antipsychotic medication should not be used for demented diabetic patients but they told me to talk to the doctor. I waited for an appointment and asked the locum doctor that Joe be put off Risperidone. He promised to stop the prescription for it but his message apparently got lost and did not reach the nurses.

Joe's side effects of strong drugs were continuously treated with other strong drugs.

**I waited another three weeks for appointment with Joe's regular doctor. He apologised to me and said: what happened to Joe should never have happened.**

**He explained that unfortunately mistakes were made; the script for Zylprim was lost somewhere and that was why Joe developed gout. They treated gout with Prednisone; the side effects of this new drug raised Joe's glucose level and he fell into hyperglycemias. They could not stop prednisone instantly but gradually. High blood glucose levels also caused Joe's foot ulcers. Doctor said that he was only following nurses' observations and demands in regard of Risperidone.**

It took many months of Joe's pain and my anxiety before the doctor admitted that all Joe's problems started because they did not give him Zylprim in the first place. Prednisone raised his sugar level to the point that it could not be measured and he broke out in ulcers. He was in pain and they administered more Risperidone to keep him quiet.

I told the doctor that I was asking the nurses daily if Joe got his zylprim but they ignored me. I believe that it was their duty to administer the medication so they should have made sure that the doctor prescribed for it.

I was polite and cooperative at all times because I did not want to further jeopardise Joe's situation.

I don't know why Joe's doctor left town at that time. For months after his departure the medical staff coped with side effects of drugs Joe was given. After they finally stopped doping him, he returned to his pleasant self and for many months we were again good company for each other. I often took him home for a day and we again wandered around the garden and he fed his pigeons.

Watch him dance now, said Joe as a flock of pigeons came close to his feet and some began their courting. They will kiss, Joe smiled and squeezed my hand. They are like people, he said kissing me.

This was the beginning of a peaceful period for us and we spent most days together driving around and sitting in our garden.

The staff never apologised to me; instead some of them and particularly RN Kim and her shift became even more hostile. I was the winging enemy who did not trust the 'professionals' to do their job; I asked questions and pointed out their mistakes. They became busy inventing rules and restrictions to stop me visiting Joe. They pointed out that evidently Joe was in Age care because I was unable to look after him properly so I had to relinquish my caring role to them. I repeated that he was well cared for at home and was in Age care only because I could not lift him when he fell.

A nurse said to me in a very stern voice: You better stay away because he is more cooperative when you are not here. Fortunately this nurse eventually left after a fight with other good nurses.

Evelyn said: They bully us constantly but we are afraid to complain because things may get worse. Everybody is scared of the staff.

I always acknowledged that some of the staff were excellent carers and had no problems with Joe's behaviour or mine. I said that I am grateful for their professional and compassionate care. Their good deeds did not go unnoticed. One of these excellent carers said to me: A bit of kindness and respect goes a long way to make the work easier and to keep everybody happy. The assistant manager also commented that there was too much tension among the staff and between the staff and residents, visitors/primary carers.

I said to the manager that perhaps some in-service is needed to remind certain members of the staff that they are not dealing with idiots, or criminals or naughty children but with respectable members of our community who became in some way incapacitated. I pointed out that we are not in the army to be constantly ordered about; controlled and patronised. Most residents just need to be helped along.

There is a general feeling among residents that they are at the mercy of the staff and that the staff is there out of goodness of their hearts. I know that their job is not easy but they have chosen it and they are getting paid for doing it. Kindness does not come naturally to some so perhaps they shouldn't be in these demanding jobs. Demented residents will not get better or younger; they only have each day to be happy in.

The manager asked what my relationship with RN Kim is. I never wanted to name anyone as being incompetent or bad so I said that I really have no relationship with her. I wondered why the manager singled RN Kim who seemed to set the hostile tone of her shift. Did the manager detect some impropriety?

In 2012 new nurses from India, Philippines and New Zealand arrived; they go about their business with friendly, gentle efficiency. The influence of these good carers even rubs off on the local staff. Gradually they even introduced games and craft activities. For the first time I noticed smiles on resident's faces as they bashed balloons into the air.

I thank God for the change.

RN Kim who has always been aloof and abrupt has in a rare friendly conversation explained to me that new RNs are imported because they are young and therefore cheaper. I sensed that she was not happy about it. For the first time she explained to me different responsibilities, authorities and competencies of the staff. A year since Joe became a resident and I became a daily visitor I began to understand the workings of the Nursing home. I mentioned to the RN Kim that it would be helpful to everybody if the management spent some time with new residents and their loved ones to explain what was expected from them and what they could expect from the Age Care; what responsibilities and rights each had and what rules apply in the facility. Finding out who was who, who was in charge of what and what rules applied, was a bewildering experience for me and for everybody I spoke to.

RN Kim and her offsideers snarl and screech orders. Don't do this don't touch that. Behave yourself. Have some manners. You should know better. I was totally unprepared for this law of the local jungle. I learned that most of the staff only had a few days training and have to unconditionally obey the nurses.

I know I am older than the nursing staff and it is easy to mistake me for a resident who has to be told how to behave, what to do and say and think. I made a mistake of letting them know that their putdowns succeeded in hurting me. I told them that I did not sleep at night because their words offended me. Of course they felt victorious. They hurt me intentionally. I let everyone know that they succeeded; they got to me. They saw me vulnerable and susceptible as I cried and begged and complained.

If I was a bit wiser I would remember the chooks pecking the other bleeding chooks. I should have hidden the pain and smiled. I should also remember that we will remain different forever and that people will always want to dominate each other with any weapons they possess. At my age I should definitely know better. I learned to smile. Smiles take years off my face; a smile also indicates my willingness to lay myself down as a mat for the young. One does not hate a thing one walks on.

The manager asked me to consult with her weekly. I mentioned that generally there was no activity, exercise, interaction, communication with residents or consultation between the staff and the rest of us primary carers and visitors. We only learned about their protocols when we were rudely reprimanded for what was considered our transgressions.

I don't know why gradually most of the rude and aggressive staff either transferred or left altogether.

We all rejoiced when the new friendly, humanely professional staff came.

**A visiting district nurse came to see me at home and she explained: nurses are trained to be very strict and disciplined in following doctor's orders because in the hospital no mistake is tolerated. They have to be in charge. They have the health of their patients in their hands. Most nurses are not trained to work in caring capacity of a nursing home and in cooperation with residents' primary carers. Apart from nurses most of the general nursing, cleaning and kitchen staff have little training, experience and understanding in the care of the elderly and demented so they have to strictly follow orders from a nursing hierarchy. Health is a delicate thing and nobody wants to make a mistake.**

I realised that the staff are like soldiers who have to obey vigorously and not reason why.

I read the rule saying: the wheel that squeaks the most gets oiled more frequently but I was told that the rule in nursing says: those that whinge the most get the least attention.



I should have known how to dodge the bullets but I was too fragile to run. Joe was dying; he was in and out of coma at times. He was no longer my rock; he was no longer supporting me and making me strong.

RN Kim in a rare pleasant mood complimented me on the behaviour of my visiting grandchildren. She mentioned that she has two grandchildren with Asperger's syndrome. Her daughter finds it difficult to control them. They are on antipsychotic drug Risperidone; the same drug they gave my Joe when he misbehaved and complained about his pain.

What is causing Aspergers's disorder, I asked.

I carry the gene that is causing AD, said RN Kim.

I looked up Asperger's syndrome and found out that it is a form of autism characterised by significant difficulties in social interaction. Individuals with AD experience difficulties in basic elements of social interaction which may include a failure to develop friendships. Some children with AD grow out of the main symptoms but difficulties in social interaction persist. Kim told me that she also is a victim; so perhaps she does her best with who she is. Knowing that Kim's abrupt uncaring behaviour is not a personal attack on me made it easier for me to cope and forgive. We all have problems we must put up with.

Should Aspergers' syndrome person be in a position where empathy and friendliness are vital? Someone within the management must have known about Kim's condition.

During the 2012 there were many changes. Security man became a dog catcher and RN Kim was eventually transferred into the administration.

Maybe in the end they realised that caring wasn't in their nature.

Irene, a member of the Age Care staff told me that she met the RN Kim in the supermarket.

I am just so happy to be out of that place, said RN Kim to Irene.

And so is everybody else, said Irene.

Kim caused much tension not only between residents and visitors but also among the staff. It just shows how important one person, the leader-boss, is. She may be a competent and disciplined nurse but her personality disorder prevented her from being compassionate and caring. I wonder if there is or should be some kind of screening in employment of medical staff in regard of their personality.

## Notes from my diary from 2012

I visit Joe every day. There is no hope anymore for my husband having any kind of meaningful life. I bring my face to touch his face and he kisses me; the touch of the skin is good for both of us. His body is stiff in a foetal position most of the time. Today I cleaned his nose and he snorted big lumps of dry phlegm that made it hard to breathe. I shaved him and cut his fingernails and toenails. He has bedsores, his heels are open lacerating wounds; his joints hurt. He holds my hand tight. I don't know if he is aware of his condition or of me but he winces in pain to the touch. I rub his back and he purrs and whispers: you are my little kitten. I love you. I know that he is still there. He is still my husband.

I feed him and kiss him and he keeps on eating and kissing with his eyes shut. He is kissing all the hands that touch him gently. He is kissing the food and the drink that touches his lips. I sit next to him in the dining room and force his mouth open for the first sip of the drink and then he drinks it all because he is always thirsty; same with food.

The priest anointed Joe and placed hands on him; Joe no longer resisted; he seems to enjoy the gentle touch of any hands as he closes his eyes to receive the blessing in Jesus name.

Joe is on a soft diet now. I taste his mash to see if it resembles in any way any of the known food substances. The mash looks much like what will become of it at the other end; only smell changes slightly. Shades of brown with sprinkles of green; much like a melted speckled brick. It tastes like gravel. No salt or fat or sugar allowed. I could slim down on this mash but Joe doesn't; he rejects the mash but eats mango and bananas I bring him. Food is the only thing he may still enjoy. What else is he to live for? But they have to keep him on the diet for his health sake because he is diabetic.

With some annoyance I remember the kitchen lady pushing drink trolley; she bypassed Joe so I asked her for a drink. She looked at Joe and declared that he is asleep and does not require a drink. Everybody in a nursing home is half asleep until there is a reason to be awake. I bring out my bottle of juice and he drinks and revives like flowers watered after the drought. Keep alert Joe or you will not get your water. Can he have something to eat for morning tea, I beg the all knowing server and she tells me that he is not allowed anything because he is diabetic; he could choke on a biscuit. I feed him mango and bananas and pour juice into him. Maybe I should follow her advice and not feed Joe. Maybe I am only prolonging Joe's suffering by keeping him alive. Maybe I am only serving my own sense of ethics. Maybe I am just scared that he will leave

me. Should I help the staff enhance Joe's chance to permanently rest in peace?

I know that it is easier for me to sit next to my freshly washed and dressed and perfumed husband than it is for those who prepare him so. Preparing him is their job. For some it is what they like doing or what they chose as their career, for others it is a necessity.

By the end of 2011 Joe's health gradually deteriorated as expected and predicted. He had a few falls so he became confined first to the chair and later to the bed for most of his time. Joe is forgetting more and more and he gradually removed himself into his own world. Our memories became meaningless with nobody to share them with. There is no turning back.

It scared me from the start to see friends entering a place that has no exit. Most residents are at some stage of dementia and have to be kept safe behind locked doors. Suddenly they are cut away from the familiar people, activities and places. The sights and sounds and smells they loved are a thing of the past. We are shocked into a realisation that life is only a fleeting moment; that time never stops to give one a second chance; that the future has been cancelled. A few residents at first receive an occasional visitor until they too are forgotten and left to rest. They have no one to impress; nobody is interested in what they do or feel or think or remember.

83 years old Vincent wants to visit Joe with me. I also want to introduce Vincent to the Age Care where he will surely be soon. Vincent is very frail and has nobody; actually he has a dog and they are devoted to each other. In age care they see how starved Vincent is so they offer him a plate of food they had spare. I make him a cup of coffee and share with him a piece of fish I brought for Joe. He eats with great appetite. The next day Vincent tells me that the nurse in Age care wants to see him and would I take him with me again. He was hoping for a free lunch. I told him that he can stay in the facility and still go out during the day. Vincent's dementia hasn't progressed yet to the stage where he could not go out. Will they let me keep the dog, he asked. They do not. Vincent buys his smokes and dog food, he pays his rent and buys a couple of dozens of pies for himself every pension day. The rest of his money goes to the poker machine; he says he enjoys his freedom. He is happy. Which is obviously more than residents of Age Care have.

In a small town everybody is a part of a town's relationship network. In a relationship people bicker.

In Age Care people are different on every level. 18 residents came from four continents, eight countries, 18 different educational levels etc. There is a hierarchy of employees from nurses to kitchen to cleaning staff.

There is also a mysterious variety of abilities, qualification and responsibilities. The staff ranges from well educated to those with a few days of training but all have vested powers to order visitors around and tell us what is right and wrong and how to manage health and behaviour of our loved ones. E.g. a girl warns me not to get close to the food trolley; not to help Lisa to her chair, not to give Ron a drink, not to get close to PJ. Rules and protocols are their mantra. Their voices are harsh and commanding. I dare not move or say anything.

E.g. Joe cannot by himself take a drink sitting in front of him so he is usually dehydrated. If I see him drowsy and not responding I give him a glass of diet cordial and he revives instantly. I want to ensure a quality of life for Joe. During 2011 I found him hungry and thirsty most of the time. He is on a tasteless diabetic diet. As soon as he gets a drink and a bit of food he settles down pleasantly. Often Joe goes without a drink the whole day until I come. The server told me that they offer him a drink but he is usually sleeping. Morning and afternoon drinks are usually left in his vicinity although they know that Joe has no capacity to reach for them. Some ask him if he wants a drink; they should know that he cannot make a decision or express a wish or need. He no longer talks or responds but he drinks thirstily if the drink is introduced to his lips.

I asked Rachel, a friend, to give Joe a drink when I went away for a day. I also promised to do that for her resident husband Ron if ever she was away. I gave Joe a drink one day and Ron said that he was thirsty too. I gave him half a glass of water with a drop of diet cordial.

Who gave Ron a drink, came security man's, thundering voice over the assembly. Cilka you should know by now that you are not allowed to give anybody food or drink, said the kitchen assistant. We have to record everything that goes in and out of residents, helped the nursing assistant. Cilka, do not give anybody food or drink, repeated the RN sternly.

Everybody looked at me as if I committed a murder. I would never denigrate and reprimand four times publicly any child the way these four people reprimanded me. I really do not need to be told four times in front of everybody in a thundering disrespectful voice that I should know better. On her return Rachel was also reprimanded for giving me permission to give her husband a drink. Rachel is a volunteer in Age care and should be given a gold medal for her work, patience, obedience and submissiveness. Among many other tasks she does everybody's laundry. When she alerted the staff that Joe fell in the garden a nurse said to her: stop interfering with our work.

Evelyn said: There is no point complaining about the staff because some people are just born like that and will never change.

Simon said: I'd rather die today with a smile on my face than be miserable here and pray to die every day.

Clearly the quality of life is more important to these old people than quantity.

Getting out of Age Care facility was always a problem. E.g. I asked two care workers heading towards the exit to let me out. We have to attend to the residents first, snapped the care worker standing next to the exit button. They made the bed, found the program on TV and chatted with the resident for ten minutes before one flicked the card to let me out. She just wanted to show me who is the boss. Complain again and we will make you pay, was the message.

I accepted that local staff could not help but be a part of town's politics. Everybody is someone's friend or enemy; present or former partner in mining; related to or in relationship with someone. They all have common history; social and financial standing in the community play a part in local politics. Even neighbours and their pets sometimes play a part in their working behaviour.

E.g. I asked the cook/kitchen server for Joe's drink and she said: I will first serve more important customers. Saying that one resident is more important than the other is, of course, inappropriate but hierarchy such as it is did not allow anyone to reprimand her openly although they exchanged glances in surprise. I asked her earlier on if Joe can get normal food instead of mash and she brushed me off sternly saying that she only listens to her boss. She could have just referred me to her boss politely if she chose to be professional. She needed to show me who is in charge.

I remembered that this cook was our tenant forty years ago. She was defrosting the fridge; with a knife she tried to pry away the ice in the freezer and accidentally she put a hole into it and made the gas escape. Joe was scolding her because we had to buy a new fridge for the flat. She never forgot being scolded and now was the time for her payback.

I don't argue or complain about her behaviour.

Competing for power really is a local, tribal thing. Locals miss no opportunity to let visitors know who is the boss and what rules apply. Most are biased towards friends and family; they also ostracise residents on the basis of previous dealings or family disputes or connections. There is evident cultural and ethnic bias; often they knowingly or unknowingly act on envy, jealousy and hatred. They chatter about TV shows and boyfriends while a visitor waits to be let out through the security door or before they respond to any requests from the residents or visitors.

RN sets the tone of the shift. When a gentle, friendly, quietly efficient RN is on, all her offsideers are gentle, friendly and quietly efficient. All residents and visitors know who is nice and who is not. We all dread RN Kim.

Everybody is happy when new carers came in the middle of 2012. They actually talk to residents and visitors; we share bits of ourselves with the staff; we tell news and jokes.

The Indian nurse tells me that India has no summer but has instead a rainy monsoon season; it rains nonstop for three months. Rice growers like that. She also tells me that India is now promoting one child families; the government stops giving child support to families with more than two children. Another Indian nurse tells me that in India a family looks after the old ones. I love these gentle nurses. I explain how I would also like to look after Joe but can't lift him when he falls.

A beautiful Pilipino girl with a sweet and gentle disposition brings a smile to every face. She hugged me when Joe was very sick; she told me how she cared for her demented father. Everybody loves Michele, the wobbly New Zealand nurse. One feels better just looking at her kind face. All New Zealand nurses seem to have a sense of humour; for the first time we are allowed to laugh and generally see the funny side of our situation; their generosity and hard work is appreciated by the residents and visitors.

Sara is 16; she is like a breath of fresh air; as a volunteer she does manicure and plays games with residents during her lunch hour.

An Aboriginal nurse tells me how Aborigines respect and revere their elders.

She is wonderful.

The two new male nurses make residents feel cared for and important.

The new staff restored my faith in the Nursing Home care. I don't know for sure if the improvements were due to the new management or as a consequence of the calm helpful influence of the imported staff. Staff from other places has no interest in local issues; they are here professionally and when they leave they leave behind only a memory of their professional competency and any caring kindness they offered. They made the age care facility a pleasant welcome place. There is humour, laughter, chatting, patting; games and exercise were introduced for residents. During the balloon game I saw the residents laugh for the first time. Their faces blossomed as they patted the balloon into the air.

Even the leftover local nursing staff gradually became respectful and accommodating. The gentle ways of newcomers must have rubbed off on them. Residents and their visitors are grateful to these idealistic young people. Greetings and smiles began to appear everywhere. Rules vanished.

Tolerance and respect are the words the manager displayed on the door but now tolerance and respect is also evident in the way nursing staff operates.

I gradually learned some valuable lessons myself.

People in charge of the nursing home are ordinary people who have their own private lives with all the ordinary private problems. Their thoughts do not revolve around the welfare of my husband like mine do. They make mistakes; when criticised they become hostile. Their work is their survival not a hobby. I feel remorseful for being angry. Regrets are my punishment for being self-centred. I realise that we are just like the rest of the people; some are by nature caring, hardworking, friendly and generous while others are negligent, aggressive and lazy. The snake only attacks when it feels threatened or when protecting the family. We are no different.

As one resident put it: Ignore the ten percent of ratbags and concentrate on the ninety percent who are fine or at least reasonable. Perhaps this ten percent are coping with their own afflictions.

I had to accept that while Joe is my whole life, to the staff he is only one of their many demented residents.

I had to adjust my expectations.

Most of the staff are not trained to understand residents' many medical conditions and requirements so they have to strictly follow the orders of those in charge. It is always easier to deal with people who are qualified to confidently apply common sense as well as rules.

I learned to cope with the fact that even qualified medical staff is not always all knowing or caring; they are like the rest of the population; some can be at times arrogant, aggressive, belligerent, ignorant and negligent. Just because they are in a caring profession does not mean that all of them are natural carers. Some nurses may be more suitable for other areas of health where discipline is the key.

Finally I realised that doctors are not gods. Sometimes they make mistakes. My husband's health and my wellbeing are not their first or only priority.

People live longer; age care is expensive; the health of old demented people is not at the top of anybody's list. All seems well as long as the oldies are kept quiet, clean, cool and fed.

As I get to know people I understand and like them better. I must accept them as they are. I practice tolerance. We are all trying to survive. Is it my right to complain and try to change their attitudes? Is it perhaps my moral duty to protect the most vulnerable any way I can?

Eventually the staff and I developed mutual respect. The new nurses are friendly, sympathetic and understanding; I put up with the few arrogant and negligent and lazy because they are all part of life's pattern.

It took me awhile to accept the fact that all of these people are in the same caring profession and paid the same money; the ratbags ruining much of the good work good people do. But that too is a part of a general pattern of life. I should be more grateful and appreciate the good things I have. I must learn to be contented. Why should I have the best of everything? What did I do to deserve a problem free life?



## Residents

Most residents of Age care hope that one day their friends or children will come and take them home. Joe, however, never once mentioned home; he forgot about it before he was admitted. He does not know where he is but he visibly feels at home when I am with him.

I look at the Age Care dining assembly.

Evelyn, at the age of 91 is the oldest; she has a clear mind only her legs are not what they used to be. Her generation died. She only has a baby sister who is eighty-six. Evelyn is not easily pleased with the service; these silly young people should know better but they don't. She complains. I don't like fish; you should know by now that I don't eat fish, she says. Eat the rest, the server dismisses her complaint. In Evelyn's time people showed respect for old people. Evelyn is always busy. I do buttons, she says. She has millions of them. Ladies from the Vinnie's shop bring old clothes and she rescues buttons for sale to help the poor.

Evelyn cried and followed me to explain her problem. Nobody wants to listen to her complaint. She signed a paper for the nurse to take some money from her bank account. She was worried about someone taking all her money so she tried to get to the bank to check it. I told her to talk to the nurse about it. The nurse said to Evelyn: The manager explained to you what happened and how it works. She did not, said Evelyn. Yes she did. You don't remember. I would remember but nobody explained, cried Evelyn. If you say it again we will declare you mentally incompetent, shouted the nurse with the finger pointing into the old lady's face. As the manager approached them, this same nurse patted Evelyn and said in a sweet voice: Are you ok now darling?

I later learned that Evelyn placed her purse on the vegetable shelf in the local supermarket during her outing with the help of Home Care lady. They had it on camera as somebody picked her purse. Manager of the supermarket rang Age Care office so they decided to take over Evelyn finances. Evelyn insists that someone stole her money from her drawer in her room.

Peter wants me to check his bank statements every day. Nothing is safe here, he says. They are all thieves.

Most residents are concerned with their finances and personal possessions. They worry about privacy and autonomy; they see enemies all around. It is frightening to surrender the last vestiges of self. I remember old clichés. You are what you know and do and have. The residents no longer do, or know or have but they still feel the loss.

Trudi is 89; she was born in Austria but married a Croatian and lived in Bosnia for twenty years. She stands at the door and tells me that she just came to visit her husband and is now waiting to go home. Her husband died ten years ago and she has been a resident for two years. Everybody loves Trudi. She prays all the time. She carries her Croatian prayer book everywhere she goes. In it she has pictures of her mother and of her babies. She shows them to me every day. She forgot English and speaks only Croatian which others don't understand.

Gwen is a lady; I thought that she was a stuck up lady but she smiles and nods to everybody. She dines like she was in a restaurant all dressed up waiting for a boyfriend. Small bites and a napkin to dab around her mouth. She is the only one not wearing a bib at meal times. She has fine bone china cup in front of her; the others have plastic mugs. She knits scarves for everybody. I like her for the dignity she brings to the joint. She told me about her unhappy childhood in the strict religious cult. She does not want to have anything to do with religion now.

Lisa is a tiny lady who picks at her food birdlike with trembling hands; she is shaking from cold and frailty. She complains that air-conditioners make the place too cold but nurses like it that way. Lisa is close to ninety and tries hard to hold on dignity. She is not happy with the treatment she receives. In her hometown in Philippines she was a princess until she married an Australian farmer and came to never-never; she calls all Australia never-never. Australian government would not let her come to Australia until the white Australia policy was abolished during the fifties. She lived in this never-never now for fifty years. Lisa demands that her friend Helen buys for her the right shade of lipstick and nail polish although at her age it may not be very important what colour her inverted lips are. Without her dentures her lips almost disappear. Most residents have denture problems and some refuse to wear them; their lips dragged inwards make old age more visible.

Edith is an aboriginal lady from Goodooga, Henrietta is from Germany, Barbara is a much loved local Aboriginal, and Jane used to be a nurse in this same place for many years.

Rachel is with her husband Ron all day every day. She is a hospital volunteer and a great comfort to all residents. She does the laundry and wipes the tables but she is not allowed to give food or drink to anybody. Rachel and Ron eat with simple appreciation of nourishment. They were and are each other's only love. Their parents did not like them to marry because she is a Maori and he is English but they loved each other and have a loving family. They are chirping like young lovers but sometimes Ron snaps and swears and hits. He has never been angry or abusive in his

life before dementia took over, says Rachel. Now he swears fluently and loudly. I wonder where and how Ron learned to swear. He also constantly demands to be taken home.

Men's table is in the corner. Allan splatters his food over his bib and face and table. This giant always looks out for more food. I once chipped a bit of my sandwich for him but bossy boots nursing aide reprimanded us both and scraped the bit of bread out of Allan's mouth. A special diet. Doctor's orders, she hissed in my direction; Allan looked like a bullock before the slaughter with his bovine eyes and salivating smile. The nurse tells Allan to behave himself and use the knife and fork properly. Allan is humming the sentimental tunes from long ago coming from the radio. He has been here from the start. He is close to fifty now but he was in his twenties when his motorbike collided with the truck and left him physically and mentally damaged. He can't have the food he craves because he would grow too fat and heavy for the staff to manoeuvre.

Next to Allan is Janek, everybody calls him PJ being for Polish Joe since nobody can pronounce the man's name. In five years Janek never had a visitor. I look at his eyes to see what mood he is in and then we both smile and he extends his hand towards me and I give him my hand to kiss and he says you are ki ki- he wants to say kind but the sentence is too long. Sometimes his eyes are angry and I keep the distance. He is somewhere between seventy and ninety. Nobody can tell me anything about him. One day I saw him carrying a big book and I asked him if I can have a look at it. We sat in the dining room and looked at his family album. There are people smiling, feasting and socialising. I see Janek in black suit and a bow-tie with the microphone in his hand addressing a meeting of well dressed group of people. I see pretty women smiling at Janek. He must have been somebody important.

John is an eighty six years old Hungarian; he wants nothing to do with people at varying stages of forgetting because he still remembers. He tells me about his open heart surgery after which he never properly recovered. John is annoyed because Simon wants to talk Hungarian with him; he keeps explaining that he forgot Hungarian but Simon forgot English.

Simon was a handsome local artist; he fancied himself as a desirable playboy until he realised that nobody fancied him anymore. Since his wife died he offered himself to just about every female but they all rejected the old slightly demented man. He can't comprehend what happened. He was certain that women will follow him like a Piped Piper into the sunset.

He went to Philippines and got himself a young girl for a wife. He tells me that he bought Viagra but it did not work and anyway his new wife

would not let him touch her. He chased her with a gun and then police came and the doctor recommended nursing home.

Simon regularly proposes marriage to me and I keep telling him that I am married. He tells me that maybe I will marry him when Joe dies. Should I be offended? Many old ladies in the Age Care complain about his propositioning.

Simon is obsessed with the loss of his sexuality. He tells me that he is looking for someone that would take him out; he is like a puppy panting for a loving home. He was an artist; he was a handsome, intelligent man but he became a nuisance telling everyone how he would like to make love to a woman. Any woman. He just needs a volunteer woman on which he would test his potency. He explains to everybody that he knows different ways to sexually satisfy a woman. All he needs is a willing partner. Simon was born on Croatian Hungarian border and his wife was Croatian. He was always a bit of a Casanova and women used to appreciate his compliments; he is surprised that nobody wants him now. Nobody visits him. There is no room for old men. He can still go to town but he has nowhere to go and no one to see. He gave his money to his daughter to make room for him in her home but she tells him that it is much better for him in Age care. She did not like him marrying a young Pilipino girl. Simon tells every woman how nice bottom they have; he is obsessed with breasts and bottoms.

Simon sometimes dances a little jig singing licky dicky and the ladies get upset. RN Kim asked me what does licky dicky mean in Croatian. I told her that licky dicky means nothing in Croatian but sounds much like dicky licky in English. I understand that the old ladies are frail, fragile, and slightly frightened of Simon's exuberance. It is not easy to coop together people who are so different and act so unconventionally and without inhibitions. I can go away but the residents can't escape him.

Simon sits himself next to me sometimes because it is easier for him to speak Croatian which I understand; he tells me about Napoleon, Greek and Roman history, about Russian literature, about astronomy and about art world. I am amazed how much knowledge is still stored in his head. He reasons well on any historical or scientific topic. After awhile he notices that I would prefer to read my book so he asks me if I would mind if he told me something before he goes. I said feel free to tell me anything. He said; I get so excited in my trousers when I talk to you; I am sure I would get an erection if I touched you. His manliness is still the main issue for him. He tells me that he talked to an Indian woman about marrying her but she told him that her cousin in India still needs a husband so she could come to Australia. Now Simon would like to test

his virility with some woman before he begins plotting to get this Indian woman to Australia. He went to see the immigration people to get permission to marry. He says that he is afraid of embarrassing himself by being unable to perform sexually.

Most of us try to disguise and deny the need to be noticed, recognised, appreciated, adored, praised and maybe loved. I realise that we do everything for love. I wonder if animals have the same need to be loved. People work, create and kill for love. Animals kill for the privilege to mate. Perhaps mating is all and Simon knows he can no longer mate even with the help of Viagra. Maybe we created the word love to disguise our natural need for mating. Maybe we wanted to lift ourselves above the animals by writing poetry and painting pictures. We are preening ourselves like birds do before they start their mating dance and nest building. Maybe people only work harder in order to prepare a better nest for a mate.

We try to maintain our individual humanity in the anonymity of the Age Care; we know, actually the whole world knows, that we live in the shadow of death, waiting to be at peace with our maker; but there is still a flicker of life that wants to express itself. And be validated. We would like to forget at least for a moment that we are just an age problem the government is dealing with by providing nourishment and air conditioner.

I told RN Kim that Simon never touches anyone; he only likes to tell everyone how nice it is to see them and how beautiful they are; women and men. He brings a bit of sound and colour to the drabness of the silent place. During the next few days I notice a change in Simon. He is on Risperidone. He sits alone and stares into space. His face changed; he is unsteady on his feet; his eyes are enormously sad. Simon swears and prays quietly in Croatian; his lips are silently asking god to take him. I hear the whispers of his prayers in Croatian. He goes to church on Saturdays and mouths these same prayers half audibly there.

After a week I notice that Simon's effects of Risperidone became less obvious; his jolly romancing begins again in slightly modified form. They must have adjusted the doze.

Jean Claud tells me to call him John. John married an Australian lady who is in hospital at present so she placed him in respite care. Born blind to Jewish parents John was a target of many taunts and torments as a child. He was a highly intelligent student in a Catholic Franco-German school for visually impaired on the border of Germany and France. He felt persecuted by the teachers, priests and students; everybody had a go at him. They wheeled his bed into the German section of the dormitory and yelled Hail Hitler. Hitler is coming back and will burn you in

Dachau. Partially visually impaired students tied him on the cross and fed him faeces. He burned the school in order to be sent home and escape the torture. His father was violent and John often ended in a casualty. On his vacation in England a Baptist family told him that Jesus loved him. For the first time they also hugged him. He became a Messianic Jew and devoted church goer. These Christian people taught me to be independent so I could escape the prison of my blindness, says John.

Peter is in a wheel chair since he had a stroke. Lately his head hangs low, his face seems swollen; his bottom jaw hangs loose. His wife left him after he had a stroke and his children live in Sydney. He fiercely hates the staff that in turn ignores his needs, wants and wishes. Risperidone keeps him quiet.

I am rather fascinated by residents' stories. Terje tells me that in his Norway hometown they have no sunlight for six months. There is a lot of water and mountains but the nearest house is seven kilometres away. Children's first lesson is how to build an igloo and how to dig a trench to survive a snow storm. They have many fish recipes.

Most migrant residents forgot English and returned to the language of their youth until even that failed them.

My Joe says an occasional Slovenian word, Simon speaks Croatian to everybody and Henrietta speaks German. Ron and Rachel sing Maori songs in Maori language. They are the gentle breeze of the establishment.

Joseph is Czech and Ivana, his visiting girlfriend, is Ukrainian. Both are around 80. Ivana is a yoga teacher and astrologer; Joseph was a master builder. Both feel frustrated by Joseph's fast deteriorating health.

Old Age residents are much like my garden. The flowers hang their blooms unless I water them but as soon as I do they lift their heads in a blooming salute. Same with people in a nursing home; the spirit of life returns to their faces as I shake them into remembering by sharing my memories with them. I can feel the vibrations of reawakened information in their bodies; when they make connections their faces blossom. I wish I could water these wilted flowers and return the life to their faces, to bring back memories and smiles and flirtations. They call out to me in the hope that I will spend a few moments with them. To the young nursing staff they are foreigners who have to be fed and washed but to me they are people I knew in their younger days. They told me their stories and we became connected. Our connections are fragile but they are all we have. They know that I know that they are real people. For some I remain the only witness that once upon the time they were young. One is only truly alive as long as someone wants him to be alive; when someone knows him.

Most residents are still on Risperidone which helps them sit still and forget their sadness and anxiety. Does it matter if they are made contented? With their heads hung low they are like wilted flowers during the drought. As soon as a resident becomes unhappy, or fidgety or starts to pace the corridors the staff demands from the doctor that they be prescribed something to keep them quiet and contented. I worry about the harm doping does to the residents. I believe that it speeds up the dying process. Then again many are praying for death anyway because they are simply tired of life.

People lose the will to live when disconnected. Wasn't it only yesterday that these adventurers flirted and tried to impress me. Nobody tries to impress me anymore and nobody is impressed by them either.

Decades ago these exuberant solitary individuals brought their plans and hopes for the future to Lightning Ridge and now they are suddenly alone, lonely and forgotten. Young care-workers serve them food and make their beds but they have no idea what dreams these people are dreaming. Some never had a family, some have broken families; some never had children others have children who are busy in distant cities. Their children never learned from their parents to care for the old; they never met their older relations. They never learned to revere the old. Sadly half a century after their arrival these heroes of the outback became old people. It does not make much difference if they are rich or poor. These days we hardly mention the red on black; rainbow and harlequin patterns of the opal colour are of little interest to most of us.

We talk about health. We exchange the news about aching joints, heart palpitations, pace makers, sugar levels and blood pressure; we compare various stages of dementia we are in. Some call our famous town a retirement village. Young adventurers no longer come to search for the famous gem opal- red on black; instead old tourists come for the hot artesian baths to soak their pains away. I am also old and irrelevant to the young but to the residents I am a real person.

Every Friday there is an alleluia hour in the age care. Church ladies call it a care and share hour; they lead the residents into singing hymns; they also spend a few minutes with everyone. This little conversations are the only human acknowledgment for many.

Lately I attended many community educational seminars about personality mental disorders. Members of the community who seem to function in their roles tell how they cope and manage to hide their disorders. Depression manifests itself in different ways; then there are phobias and panic attacks and schizophrenia and paranoia. The invisible trauma of mental sickness causes people to act differently. I haven't

walked in the shoes of the person afflicted with brain malfunction so I better show compassion for people who behave differently. The fact that they hold a job is a testament of their struggle.

I learned to read faces and can now tell at a glance if a person will be nasty or kind, serious or have a sense of humour. I also realise that we all have good and bad days. Good and bad feelings spread like a virus; sometimes it is better to keep a distance and give space for bad emotions to evaporate.

Finally I have to accept that young people are in charge now. I shouldn't expect them to know that the residents and I were once young. Like us older people, young ones only have one chance to gather wisdom of their own. The oldies saturated the market with wisdom nobody is interested in. Perhaps only the powerful, rich and famous remain desirable into the old age; they pay for the privilege. Somewhere I read a new golden rule which says: Those that have gold, write the rules.

The year of 2012 is coming to an end.

The whole atmosphere in the nursing home changed for the better. We all became carefully kind and gentle with each other; the tension evaporated. When I want to go out someone opens the door for me almost instantly. If I ask for assistance with Joe it is offered immediately. I love these foreign care givers.

Yesterday they baked a cake for Evelyn's ninety-first birthday. Ron and Rachel celebrated 56th anniversary of their wedding and the staff prepared a party with decorations and a cake. I remember with sadness Joe's birthday in February 2011; he only got a large dose of Risperidone. I found him slumped over the table almost comatose with his jaw hanging down while his friends waited at home for him to wish him a happy birthday. I begged the RN Kim beforehand not to dope him.

Lately everybody's birthday has been celebrated by all of us; every visitor is welcomed. I try to forget the visitations of the past.

For Melbourne Cup we all got dressed up and participated in mock races and in the excitement of betting. There is already the talk about Christmas party.

On 11th November 2012, Remembrance Day, I am in the church. Most of the nurses also come to Catholic Church.

I exchange the peace offering with the nurses praying piously in their pews. Four of them came from India, one is from Philippines and two are Irish Australian. Since they started working at the Age care, there is a calm, gentle, kind, caring atmosphere. Could it be true that those who



follow Jesus really try a bit harder to love their neighbours? Maybe the change is due simply to the fact that these new carers have no other interests in our town's social structure and so dedicate themselves more thoroughly to the residents of the age care. Perhaps they are showing gratitude and appreciation for being in Australia. Perhaps we, Australians, need a wakeup call. Maybe we have taken Australia with its many gifts for granted.

There is no new investment, no new equipment in the Age Care facility. It is only people. What people need is not possessions but love. I can't get over the fact that all the staff is doing what they are supposed to be doing and they do it with smiles on their faces rather than frowns. The tension is gone; we greet each other with a genuine smile.

The manager did say that it takes time to change the entrenched culture. I saw slogans she pinned on the walls: Respect and dignity in this workplace. I did not believe that the words would mean anything. Then I remembered the words from the bible: At the beginning there was a word and the word changed everything.

I still believe that it was my right and duty to monitor Joe's medical and nursing care; I know he would do the same for me always. I could even delude myself into believing that my complaining helped. I mentioned to the manager that I am writing a diary and will try to have my journey with dementia published. I had no realistic hope at the time to write a book but they know that I occasionally write articles for magazines. They also knew that I published a few books. Would it be possible that ..;no, no, it is not possible that they would want to be seen in a better light although it would be wonderful if that was true. I was documenting the abuse and had pictures of injuries Joe suffered.

Perhaps everybody contributed to the improvement but I still believe that overseas staff and the management changed the place.

Maybe miracles do happen.

## End time-2013

**D**uring the last eighteen months I cried a lot; for the first time I realised what anguish people feel when they lose their life partners. Half of me was cut away and all our memories gradually died. I never knew such loneliness, desolation and grief. Nobody could share my sadness. Joe lost contact with friends long ago but in our aloneness we became closer every day. I remained with him most of every day in the nursing home as he moved away more every day. On rare occasions he would look at me and say something like: you are so lovely or you are my angel or I love you so much. It was like the light would flicker into the darkness.

Over the last 8 years Joe became gradually more loving, grateful, contented and demonstrative. I understand why in the past he did not dare tell me how important my love was to him; he had to keep me under control because he was scared to lose me. There were young migrant boys all around us so he had to be watchful. He would never allow himself to appear jealous so he had to be decisive and sometimes aggressive. I was also jealous as soon as another female took away some of Joe's attention. I was an attention seeking girl; I needed attention to survive. I am now trying to make it up to Joe. He loved me and protected me all his life; now is my turn to be there for him. Joe is not coming back; he will never get better but I want his leaving to be peaceful and loving. The ulcers on his heels are inflamed, open, red around and white in the middle; he cannot walk anymore; he is stiff in bed lying in a foetal position. Two men job with the lifting machine, said the nurse. I can only hold his hand and kiss him. Sometimes he rewards me with a word. Once he kissed me smack on the cheek.

I am so grateful to the people who look after Joe for me. They could not be nicer to both of us. It is a pity that I had a bad start with local employees.

31.10.12

Two nurses came to talk to me today. One explained that there is the form to be filled in regard to Joe's treatment. I knew what the form was and have expected it. It asked if I was going to let Joe go peacefully when his organs gave up. No artificial resuscitation, no tube feeding, no heart stimulation. I cried because I felt that I was signing his death warrant. This simple action sapped my energy and the will to live. I don't want to be old alone. I understand now why couples die soon after each other. I might do a bit of tidying up before I go. Women usually die after their husbands because they need to make arrangements and tidy up.

My sons will also have to make a step in line. Next in line. Hopefully. Death will hit our boys because there won't be anyone to fall back to; to carry their history.

I would hate to become a nuisance to my children and grandchildren.

I wish Joe was with me watching 2012 American elections. We were both always interested in politics. I look at long lines of people patiently waiting to choose their future leader.

It is ironic really how we rush and look for the shortest line; to be served first; to get there fast. I have seen people travelling on the same plane arguing about their place in line to get to their seat on the plane. They know that they will all get there and that as soon as they are seated they will want to stand up and walk and get out. Yet these adults argue about reaching their destination, their seat on the plane, first.

I am here now. I arrived.

I keep busy; that's the best I can do during the day but when in the evening I turn off the light I have no dreams to put me to sleep. All the silly questions come to visit. Why am I here, who am I; why is waiting for death such a boring sad thing. I always lived in the rosy future and my dreams were there on the bedside table to play with before the sleep took me into the dreamland. Now I only have nightmares.

I don't like my face in the mirror. I do not dream about an ideal man anymore; there are no ideal people. How wonderful youth is when one falls in love and becomes blind to all the imperfections of the loved one. When one believes in the love of an ideal man or woman.

My mind is congested with information. It is a highway of sudden stops and delays. I keep searching the folders of my mind for the dates and names. Perhaps that is how dementia begins.

I no longer care which party will win the election or who will win the knowledge or talent test. I have no one to argue with.

3.12.12

Nobody can replace Joe because nobody else knows me as I was at seventeen and at fifty and at sixty. Inside of myself I am still all of those things that I was back then but only Joe knew all of those things.

As I listen to other people I realise that everybody is an individual, a unique single entity.

I am 73 now; I am grateful for my health, my looks and my ability to think. I understand much more than I did at seventeen when Joe

discovered something nice in me. I hope I can still do things and be someone important in someone's life.

I spend most of my time with Joe these days. I like to see my friends there.

Chi is walking Neils, Fran is playing balloons with a group, some residents are absorbed in craft and art.

How could a place change from hell to heaven?

Nobody walked anybody or played games with anybody in 2011. Nobody talked to visitors or residents; nobody greeted anybody.

Now they tell me what Joe ate, how they washed him, what medication he is on. They ask me where I would like to sit with him. Would I like a cup of coffee? I talk to Rachel and Evelyn and we agree that we are all happy and grateful for the change. That's how caring should be done.

All is well that ends well, they say. I believe that everything is possible if we put our minds and hearts into it.

Joe tightens his grip on my hand when I ask him if he is happy; he likes me being next to him.

4.1.13

I always liked our town because people are so unique, talented and skilful. Now I realise that they are all looking for an expression of themselves; they are searching for the purpose to their lives; they need to make their lives meaningful. Which brings me to the question: is there a meaning to it all? Did we lose the meaning in the abundance of things we own? All the Christmas presents became forgotten, unwanted junk as we try to put our lives in order again after festivities. Is there anything that we can take into the night as we meet ourselves? Is anything forever? We are all fighting our own demons. The more I become familiar with people around me the more personality disorders I discover. I am sure that they also learned how to cope with my disorders. Struggle and conflict and the fight for survival go on in all living things.

10.2.2013

I have taken a sleeping pill with hot milk; I read a boring book but I cannot go to sleep. I can no longer make up fantasies to take to the dreamland. I try to create happy exciting scenarios in my imagination to escape from the nightmares of my life; I make up dreams of wealth and strength so that people will notice how loveable I am. Are we all deluding ourselves in this essential self love to survive after we lost the innocence and the belief that someone is calling our name into the night? There is no story in my madness. I am trying to laugh but I laugh alone.

When I finally fall asleep my dreams are a muddled repetition of day's events and in the morning I don't want to wake up to what is in front of me. Is this depression? I feel totally alone. I miss Joe. In the morning I tell him how I feel.

16.1.13 I had a dream that Joe was well again and we were happier than ever before. We remembered the days of his sickness and his getting well. We were grateful for our health and each other. Nothing else was important. I was grateful for the dream and wanted it to continue. Perhaps we all fail to be grateful. Unfortunately nobody gets a second chance; nobody gets the opportunity to use the painful lessons one learns on the way.

In the afternoon Joe smiled at me, kissed me and tried to talk. It was like he rose from the dead. I haven't seen him smile for about six months. Asleep as he is, he is still the only person really close to me. He knows me and loves me; I always knew that Joe loved me, needed me and wanted me.

I am grateful to God. What is god's name and address I wonder? I like it being a secret; we are in awe only of things we cannot define or understand. I listen to music; I cry and sing with sad songs; crying helps me go to sleep.

17.1.13

People often ask me if Joe still knows me. Joe's eyes are closed most of the time and he rarely says a word so I have no way of knowing if he knows me all the time but when his eyes are open he knows me. When he speaks he calls me mati-mother like he used to. This is a reward for my waiting and being there. Very rarely he rewards me with a smile. He often tries to tell me something, he really tries, and I try to guess what he wants to say; he shows pleasure when I guess right. He squeezes my hand. Months ago when he still walked and talked he knew me all the time. His face would light up as he opened his arms in greeting. I think that I am the only person he knows but he showed recognition of our grandchildren by looking from one to the other; he smiled ever so slightly.

20.1.13

People are rushing by to catch up with the new discoveries and technology. Humanity is pooling the knowledge and we struggle to absorb it all. We are scared of being ignorant; of being left behind. We are afraid of new ways people communicate and would like to communicate like we used to; relaxed and with a cuppa in our hands; face

to face and not on a face-book. We rush forward and dream about the good old days.

I remember my father telling me once: Close your eyes and see the magic land where you can be anybody and where everything is as you would like it to be. Most residents sit with eyes closed. I hope they see their magic land.

22.1.13 I arranged the delivery of my new PC modem a day before the announcement that any mail addressed to residential address instead of PO Box will be returned to sender. I told the sender that there must be a PO Box number on the parcel; I also told the post office to put it in my box even when addressed to my home. They all knew full well that the parcel was mine and I expected it but they returned it to sender. Rules are rules. Every day one meets people who like being difficult; they follow rules instead of using common sense, common kindness and understanding. We all have bad days when we want to take it out on something or someone.

Sometimes I get tired of friction but maybe we need friction to distract us from meaningless existence. Maybe conflicts are scattered among us to keep us alert and interested and thinking. Maybe overcoming daily senseless confrontations is all there is to life. Maybe I am unhappy because I did not discover a higher purpose for my life. I am annoyed because I let people unsettle me with their innate attempts to control me. Nothing is as important as a peace of mind.

I wish I had a simple faith. I even try to pray but since I lost my religious innocence my prayers lack direction. I cannot say that I firmly believe in anything except in my smallness and ignorance. I feel like a leaf falling off the tree in the autumn; I will land where the wind will blow me and I will fertilise and feed whatever will want to suck the minerals of my body. As for my soul, my spirit, will it return to where it came from? I never knew where I came from, who I am or where my soul originated so the path into the unknown will not be anything new.

1.2.13 Today I gave permission for the doctor to give Joe more painkillers. Will these painkillers kill him? Do I want him to die or live? I know that it is sensible to let him have a rest from pain now that there is no hope of him having a meaningful life. They are still serving him tasteless diabetic food; I suppose they have to follow the rules and look after his health. He spits out their mash but he still enjoys mangoes and bananas I bring him. I am looking after his enjoyment; I feel guilty and then I cry. Sometimes I think that I should buy a pack of smokes or have a drink but I know that nothing will take the pain away. I feel fatigued and sleepy but I cannot get a restful sleep. I eat for comfort.

### 9.2.13

I wonder sometimes why god let us struggle and gather and build and climb the mountain only to struck us down when we become comfortably perched on top. When we feel that we could fly, our wings get clipped. Dust to dust; same dust forever? Is god punishing us? Is he having a laugh? Why did he make us believe in the future? Is he afraid that we would become like him; reach the heavens. Build a tower of Bebel again? Is he still guarding his fruit of knowledge? Does he keep us guessing because he does not want us to know? Why did people always want to know?

Our mountain is levelled now and our gathering of possessions is meaningless. Does life have a purpose or a meaning? Will we ever know why we were granted this moment in time immemorial? Will we ever know if we spent this moment as we should?

I often remember mum's old saying: Plans are man's odds are god's iljudje obracajo, bog obrne. I made plans for little meaningless events while god dealt with the issues of life and death.

I know there is a list of things to do; I need to have a list and I need to be useful to pass through time. I did not change the world for the better although I had ambitions to do so for a brief period of time. The world and the humans in it remain as vicious and selfish as the rest of the creation fighting for survival; we are all programmed by the same creator. We pretend to be generous but we are afraid of losing a place, status, loved one or love itself.

We never moved the boundaries we came here to move. Boundaries are endlessly stretching into the abyss. We are terrified that the boundaries will brake and we will descend into the abyss but we are still pushing and waiting for a little white daisy; we want a gently scented lily of the valley with the face of heaven growing on the edge of the abyss growing alone in that forgotten far away garden of the fairies.

### 12.2.13

The dining room is decorated, the cake is ready, and Joe is washed and perfumed for his 84th birthday. We sing happy birthday and I kiss him. I try to put a bit of cake into his mouth but it falls out. I give him a bit of ice-cream but he chokes and coughs it out.

14.2.13 Joe survived his birthday and his number 13. He always said that everything happened to him on 13th. I think it will be good for him to be at rest. Am I prolonging his suffering and mine? Nights are the worst. I try not to rely too heavily on sleeping pills. It's time to make that last step

in line to eternity. Do people live good lives in order to have a nice funeral with lots of nice words said about them? I am next in line.

15.2.13 I cannot read, watch TV or write. I am stunned into waiting. I don't function; I feel weak and unable to think.

We never reached the future

We never found the answers

We never became

Who we wanted to be to each other

Now it is too late

The mountain laid itself into the valley

We travel the last steps into unknown

Early on Saturday 16.2.13 the nurse telephoned to ask permission to suction Joe because he was choking; the fluid was entering his lungs. I watched Joe cough; his face was contorted with pain. I believed that he will die from choking then and there. They syringed morphine into his belly. I prayed that he would not have to suffer too long. He had nothing left to enjoy since he could not swallow anything and even breathing choked him.

On Saturday I rang Marko and Marjan. They came home often when Joe was poorly. I held Joe's hand and talked to him for the next 25 hours. I moistened his lips with the cotton bud and wiped his face; I kissed him and told him that I loved him. Marjan's family arrived early on Sunday morning; they travelled over night and together we sat with Joe the next 12 hours. We talked about all the things we did together with Joe. We remembered our fishing trips; our overseas travel, our Christmas celebrations and all our birthdays. None of us slept for the last 36 hours so I went home with the children to have a short sleep. Marjan stayed with Joe overnight and we returned early the next morning Monday 18.2.13. We stayed with Joe until he died.

During the long hours on Monday 18.2 Joe stopped breathing and his pulse stopped for some seconds many times but he kept coming back coughing and struggling. We prayed and sang and cried. Nobody wanted to leave. The staff brought us sandwiches and blankets but nobody wanted to sleep. We spoke to Joe and held his hands until at eleven twenty-five in the evening he stopped breathing; he changed colour almost immediately and his temperature fell. Within minutes his body became cold and he was at peace.

We came home at midnight and I emailed friends that Joe passed away.



Tuesday 19.2.13

Phone calls with condolences came from all over Australia and from overseas. Funeral has to be arranged. I had most of the funeral service ready, we only had to get music in order. We chose Slovenian singer Tanja Zagar's song I miss you, Daniel O'Donnell's song You are my hero and The coat of many colours. We played Tanja Zupan's ballads as people gathered in the church and Elvis Presley's Where no one stand alone, as the last song when they took Joe from the church and into the hearse. In between we had hymns sung by Susan Boyle: Make me a channel of your peace and How great you are.

Marjan wanted to have Joe cremated. During their many fishing times on Tumut river Joe expressed the wish for his ashes to be scattered in the Tumut river. Marjan remembers the deep pool near the rocks where they caught most fish. He wants to put a plaque there in memory of his father.

We arranged for the church service on Friday 22.2.13 at 2pm. Marko and Daniel prepared their speeches. I did not expect our old friends from Canberra to come but they did. People were coming from everywhere to express their sympathies and phone was ringing constantly.

Wednesday 20.2.13

We finalised the funeral booklets and sent them to be printed. Children prepared the readings. Marko wrote the eulogy. Music is ready.

Daniel planted a tree in memory of Joe.

Thursday 21.2.13

People came from everywhere; everything is a blur of faces and words.

22.2.13

At 130pm we finally gathered in the church and everything fell into place. The funeral service lasted almost two hours. Many of us cried openly with Tanja Zagar's song: I miss you and Marko cried as he told Joe's life story.

In Loving Memory  
Of  
Jozef Zagar  
12 February 1929 - 18 February 2013





## Our Lady of Fatima Church

### Lightning Ridge

Jozef Zagar was a loving husband to Cilka, Father to Marko and Marjan and father in law to Kathy

Poppy to his adored grandchildren Daniel, Michele, Natasha, Eliza and Janez

### Order of Service

#### Lightning Ridge 23 February 2013

*Opening music - Tanja's ballads*

#### Opening Prayers

*Make me a Chanel of your peace Susan Boyle Gift track 8*

**Daniel Zagar:** First reading Ecclesiastes A Time for everything

**Responsorial psalm Marjan Zagar:** The Lord is my shepherd

**Father James:** The Gospel - A reading according to John 14.1-8  
Do not let your hearts be troubled

*Song Pogresam te- I miss you - Tanja Zagar.*

**Marko Zagar :** Eulogy

*Gozdic je ze zelen.*

**Nasha Zagar:** I remember

**Marjan Zagar:**

*Did you ever know that you are my hero. Daniel O'Donnel:*

**Prayers of the faithful:**

*The coat of many colours - Daniel O'Donnel*

**Marjan Zagar:** 2 Timothy 4v7-8

*How great thou art*

**Fr James address:** The Lord's prayer, final commendation and Farewell

*Where no one stands alone - Elvis Presley*

**You are invited to join us in the Bowling club for refreshments**



### **Eulogy by Marko Zagar**

Jozef Zagar, known as Joe, was born on the Twelfth of February 1929 in Smartno in Slovenia.

Joe was the second of six children; his father was a miner with irregular employment and his mother stayed at home and kept the household going.

The family was poor and their most precious possession was a goat which provided milk for the family; his mother grew much of their food in their garden.

My Father was a man whose focus was his family; he was a provider, a guide and a protector.

Dad was a hard worker but he always found time to play with friends and family. I think both my brother and I have inherited this trait - When you work you work hard but when you play you play hard too. Dad took us on many trips around Australia and around the world.

Dad liked to debate and had strong views on politics, philosophy, history and all social issues. And while sometimes it seemed as though you could never change his mind he was also open to convincing arguments. Dad had the sharpest of minds and it was one of my earliest lessons that he was a hard man to fool. Though he loved to tease and fool his family and friends.

But most of all Dad was a spontaneous daring adventurer who followed his dreams. There was never a dull moment in Dads company.

Dad grew up in turbulent times He was 10 years old when WW2 started and his formal education was erratic. The family was relocated for part of the war but when he returned to Slovenia he was fortunate to find work as an electrical apprentice. Being an electrician of course was not enough for Dad so once he completed his apprenticeship he went on to complete a two year management course.

In 1958 at the age of 28 Dad opened an electrical workshop in the house where Cilka - then an 18 years old student who later became my mum, lived and so set in motion the rest of his life. He had employed a few electricians and apprentices to do electrical installations all over Slovenia and asked Cilka to do some office work for him. She was happy to earn some pocket money after school. She was an obedient child and did what he told her to do. Everybody seemed to do what dad told them to do at the time though this changed once he had his sons.

Obviously Mum was more important to Dad than an office clerk and while it does seem a little cliché, once Cilka finished college Dad married his secretary in 1960. In 1961 I turned up and made it a family of three.

Dad worked from dawn till late into the night. He bought a block of land to build a home and also bought a car for his rapidly expanding business. I remember dad telling me that when he was a young fella the preferred after shave was a little petrol so that the girls thought you had a car so maybe the car was more than for just his business but a status symbol as well.

What Dad didn't realise was that the private sector was not allowed to prosper in the communist society where every worker had to remain equal irrespective of their abilities.

In 1958 in a communist country it wasn't at all smart for a small business owner to drive a car when the officials still rode pushbikes. These petty officials went out of their way to make Dad's life very difficult.

Dad had had enough and decided that a new life in a Western country would let him realise his dreams. At that time Australia and Canada were inviting qualified young migrants. The flight to Australia was leaving first so that's where we went. Dad used to say that they will build new America in Australia.

So at the age of 33 Joe and his wife packed up their two years old son a reel to reel tape recorder a few clothes and enough money to put a deposit on a car and left the only home they had known. They were sad to leave their friends and family in Slovenia-the most beautiful homeland one could wish for but they - but Joe soon learned the Australian saying: You can't eat your cake and have it.

We left for Australia on the 13th of May 1963 and from that time on the family lucky number was 13. We ended up in Bonegilla but the food was alien to us. We bought a small camp stove to cook with but the smell of stewing mutton was so off putting that we left within a few days.

Three days after arrival to Australia dad bought a car. He heard that one could make good money sugar cane cutting so off we went to Queensland. The cutting team said they would take him on if his wife could cook Spanish food for them. Dad assured them that Cilka could, though at that time Mum couldn't boil water.

It had been a while since Joe had done any manual labour but he kept up with the seasoned cane cutters. His hands were bleeding when his first blisters broke. He said that it will be OK as soon as his calluses hardened.

When cane cutting season finished Joe heard that one can do well on the Snowy Mountains scheme so off they went. In North Queensland at Christmas the Snowies sounded cool in more ways than one.

Joe became a face electrician at the Island Bend tunnel. He was the first to go into the tunnel after blasting to reset all the lights. The work was hard and dangerous, he saw men die and saw men lose their legs.

Joe often worked double shifts and sometimes three. The day his son Marjan was born he worked two shifts and then was asked to work the third shift but he asked to go and see his wife and son in hospital. That third shift the face electrician lost his legs in an explosion.

Dad worked when tired, when he was sick he went to work, when his throat was closed with tonsillitis he worked; but the money was good and he wouldn't miss a single day's work.

The only time Joe complained was when a foreman called him names. What names, Cilka asked. Joe said: the foreman yelled SPARKY, SPARKY but I said: you sparky yourself and went home.

Mum told Dad that electricians were often called sparky so Joe forgave his foreman and they became friends.

With the money saved from working in the tunnel the family bought a block of land in Canberra. After three years in Australia Joe was again a self employed electrical contractor and building a house for his family. Cilka was again teaching in Canberra and Marko and Marjan attended school; life was getting better every day.

That's when Joe's plumber invited him for a holiday in Lightning Ridge. This town was made for Joe. Work when you want and as hard as you want, no boss no regulations and a promise of overnight riches. On his second day on opal fields Joe found a two carat gem opal for which Jerry gave him a standing offer of four hundred pounds.

I'd like to stay for a couple of months, said Joe. Cilka found a job at the local school to provide for the family while Joe searched for the fortune; they let their home in Canberra and settled here in a friend's shed. They bought a block of land and Dad started to build a small house. Joe said that he will never sell his first opal but he needed money for the roof of the house so he did.

Joe promised to return to Canberra for Christmas but then the Glengarry field opened up and he found a few opals there so he put it off returning to Canberra until next Christmas.

Forty-four Christmases later Lightning Ridge became a home and although opal became harder and harder to find the hope remained that in the next load will be the gem Joe came here for.

Joe seemed invincible as he led his family into all sorts of adventures. We went fishing, camping, hunting and pig chasing on motor bikes. He loved trout fishing, walking along the alpine rivers and camping by the rivers in the Australian High Country surrounded by family and friends.

We travelled all over the world and always felt protected and loved by dad. He would not rest as long as there was something to do-he never gave up, he fixed any obstacles on our way. We always felt safe as long as dad was there.

Nobody ever had to wonder what dad might be thinking because he always said what he thought. What he said was what he meant. His thoughts were sometimes annoying but he expressed them anyway. He said that one only argues with people one likes. Dad was our family's most sincere and constructive critic. He liked to say; You have to be harsh to be kind with criticism.

During his last few years dementia gradually took away dad's knowledge, skills and memories but he still enjoyed spending time with his family. Dad's childhood memories were the last to go.

He liked to tell about his days of glory and heroism. One of the highlights of his life was when he was about ten. During the month of May the children had to go to mass at dawn every day. On the way to church one day Joe found a hundred dinar note. He ran home to give it to his mother. She took the precious note to the priest to announce it from the pulpit so whoever lost it would get it back. The priest said to her: Nobody needs this money more than you do. I will hold it for a week and if someone asks for it I will give it to him but I will not announce it. Nobody came for the money and dad's mum bought a sack of corn so they could eat polenta that whole year. Dad was a hero.

I am thankful for the attributes that my father instilled in my brother and I, like the ability to improvise and adapt to most situations. He has taught us those values that he held most strongly such as honesty, fairness and to stand firm when a problem threatens. Dad was a very strong willed and proud man who helped bring his family where they are today. We all appreciate him and know that some of it has rubbed off onto us.



Dad was always happy as long as he had his family around him. We will miss him and he will remain forever present in our memories and in our hearts.

**Nasha Zagar:**

**I will Remember... by Nasha and Eliza**

I will remember how Poppy used to call us his little girls,

Even when we grew taller than him

I will remember how he loved to feed the pigeons,

And his fancy hairstyle that was similar to a top knot pigeon's.

I will remember how he said to me once 'what is that beautiful singing,'

Even though I was crying;

That made me laugh,

I will remember how he liked to tickle toy animals and make them jump,

And us at the same time

I will remember how he liked to joke around,

I will remember how he used to say 'who is that'

We thought it was funny until we realised that he was suffering from  
Dementia

He loved life and he loved his family.

We will miss him

**Prayers of the faithful:**

**Daniel:** Thank you God for our poppy who loved us and was always so happy to be with his family. Lord hear us

Lord hear our prayer

**Nasha:** We ask you Lord to bless all the wonderful people in Lighting Ridge hospital and Age Care who lovingly and patiently cared for our poppy during his long illness. Lord hear us.

Lord hear our prayer

**Eliza:** Dear Lord please bless all who came to celebrate our dear poppy's life with us. Lord hear us

Lord hear our prayer

**Janez:** Lord we ask you to bless the good people who visit the sick and the lonely.

Lord hear us

Lord hear our prayer







Saturday 23.2.13

The world was surreal. We ate and played cards; we had to do something. At 6pm we had mass for Joe and then a BBQ. Women prepared cakes for the early celebration of Kathy's birthday. We played bowls-bocce in the backyard. With a house full of people we had to do something to pass the time. Mourning will have to wait.

Sunday 24.2.13

Most of the visitors left. Marjan took his family and me for a drive to where floods were and we saw thousands of fish that died as the flood-water subsided. That too is life.

Monday 25.2.13 The last visitors left and I locked myself in to deal with my heart. I cannot face people; cannot even talk to anyone on the phone.

Tuesday 26.2.13

I feel guilty for not talking to all the wonderful people who expressed their condolences by their presence or by phone and email.

27.2.13

I haven't been out of the house since the funeral. I feel unwell. There is a stone in my chest and I have to melt it into tears. I feel shaky and cannot face anyone. Maybe I hope that Joe will return if I wait alone. I have been calling him but there is only silence. I am scared but I do trust that god will help me through this sadness. One never knows another's sadness and there are no words to describe it.

Regrets. I haven't been good enough; I was an attention seeking, selfish person. I was a jealous woman; I wasn't generous; I was needy; I wasn't grateful enough for good things in life; I worried about possessions rather than people.

I now know that Joe and I have been blessed; we held hands all the time; we knew we belonged. Maybe it wasn't an ideal marriage but life rarely is.

Joe became first my friend then my lover then my husband then the father of our children and grandfather to our grandchildren. In the end he was my child for a few wonderful years. He lost his inhibitions and fears; he told me how much he loved me and how precious I was to him. I washed him and fed him and caressed him. We grew closer during the last few years than we did during our courting days. We became each other's everything. We spent most of everyday in each other's arms. I hope he also remembers our days of togetherness.

1.3.13

I am surprised by many expressions of sympathy from people I did not expect to remember us. Phone keeps ringing; sympathy cards keep arriving. I went to town for the first time and returned weak and unbalanced inside and out; I try to be brave but I can't get my head or my heart in order. People say: hang on and be strong; I really feel like I am dangling in space. I no longer belong anywhere; I have no reason to be anywhere. My reason for living died. Mick Ford brought Joe's ashes.

Linda rang for me to come for coffee. I said: I can't come visiting yet. I have a stone in my chest. I have to melt it into tears before I can live again. She said: Drink chilli sauce and it will make you feel better. I can't blame her for not feeling what I feel. I did not feel anything when friends lost their partners. I never knew what it is like. Being cut in half is personal. I need time.

### 2.3.13

The song Did you ever know that you were my hero is playing on my mind; Joe truly was the wind beneath my wings. I feel old, weak and vulnerable; my wings are folded.

As I went shopping for the first time people hugged me and expressed their condolences. I dreaded their intrusion into my sadness and confusion but I was grateful for their caring. I will gradually fade away. Joe and I will be together again. I have to believe that. He made me feel safe and protected, wanted and needed, precious and loved. I am none of those things anymore. I am not essential to anybody.

People have been good to me. Friends I forgot about have come to see me and congratulate me on my nice family. I almost forgot that my family also suffer the loss. They performed beautifully in their roles during the funeral. They stood by me and we remembered our lives as we witnessed Joe's dying.

I wrote a note for the local paper and I meant every word of it.

Thank You for helping us celebrate a special life

My family and I wish to thank all the people who came to celebrate the life of my husband Joze Joe Zagar on Friday 22.2.13. We also thank everybody for expressions of sympathy, kind words of support and offers of help.

We appreciate the great kindness and support of the Age Care staff during Joe's long illness. Thank You especially to the staff of Age Care who supported us and made us welcome in the facility during the last days of Joe's life. You are unforgettable.

We thank the good people who visited Joe and other residents of the Age Care. We are especially grateful to the ladies who come to Care and Share their lives with the residents on Fridays. God bless you.

I feel very fortunate knowing that in my hometown, Lightning Ridge, live many wonderful people who care.

Last but not least I would like to thank all my friends who travelled from far away to farewell their friend Joe.

4.3.13

Visitors keep coming; sometimes I wish to have time to weep but they entertain me with kindness and humour. Life is for living. I wish Joe was with me. We had everything we ever wanted but his time was taken away. Time is all we ever had. He is in another world. I love you Joe. Look after me from wherever you are.

7.3.13

In the mornings I search through my dreams but dreams are fading away when I open my eyes. I try to return into my dreams because I am still connected to people there. Anxiety has not reached my subconsciousness yet. I like harmony; I cannot handle conflict anymore so I am careful in what I do and say. I try to live in the present, enjoy the moment and be grateful for the good things I have. I like being loved so I try to be kind and helpful. I am grateful for my lot and will try to enjoy it.

Cally asked me how do I feel in myself.

I haven't had the time to feel anything yet. People talk to me and I am as I always was, cheerful and polite. I have been on the roller coaster and it hasn't stopped yet in my head or heart.

I remember Helen's story:

The rain fell in a desert and the tiny shoots of grass came up but a camel spotted them and ate them before they had a chance to grow. Helen related that story to my grief experience. I can't explain it why I can also relate my grief to those shoots of grass. I have to mourn my Joe; I have to cry and I know I will but first I need a rest from all the camels.

I make sentences but I do not feel yet. I am busy; I keep busy; people keep on coming; I am overwhelmed by the kindness and friendliness of people I barely know.

I don't think I would be a good old person accepting help; I was always the one helping. It would be the worst being looked after by my sons. Their wives might not want me to be a burden to them. Then again maybe they are more generous than I am. I don't know if I could be generous to

my mother in law in the same way I was to my husband. To the end he was my other half; he offered me security of knowing that I m lovable and loved.

I get emails offering assisted living; I watch films about assisted dying. I finally understand the prayers of long ago. As children we were told to do novenas for a happy last hour; we prayed to be reconciled with God before dying. We also had to beseech Mary to pray for us now and at the hour of our death. The hour of our death is our destination before we enter the other side whatever the other side may be. We are all on the way; from now on every day will be a gift.

27.3.13

Full moon always plays tricks with me. It starts with bad dreams; it causes sleeplessness and desolation; a feeling of doom and worthlessness makes me depressed. I know that these negative feelings will pass. My present dreams are about travelling with Joe. I get lost, I lose my possessions, I lose Joe; nobody listens to me, I run to escape. The scenery is always depressing; I get bogged in the mud, the road ends and I cannot turn back. The dreams really are related to my situation but they change as soon as the full moon is over.

Some people dismiss full moon's influence and I tried to ignore it but the nightmare dreams always start a week before full moon and last until full moon. As soon as the moon begins to wane I again sleep well and dream pleasant dreams. This has been happening all my adult life. I can only speak for myself but the influence of moon cycle on me is real.

22.3.13 I am afraid. Will anybody hold my hand like I held Joe's hand when I will no longer speak or eat or walk on my own? I hope that god will be kind to me and not make me wait too long after I stop doing things for myself. I have never been good at waiting and waiting for death is not pretty. I must keep busy and stop thinking of eternity. I still have Joe's funeral flowers and condolence cards displayed with his ashes. Dust to dust is no longer a poetic expression. It sits on my table but does not respond. Death is a one way road.



## Harmony Day 2013

For Senior's week 2013 community organisations again prepared Harmony day gatherings and celebrations for Golden girls and boys. They help us seniors become a family of sorts as we face the same challenges. This is the first outing for me since Joe died.

We meet at Lion's Park for a BBQ, multinational food-fest, fun and games. There are people of all nations, ages and cultures. Most are old people who realised that pretensions are useless since intellect and money cannot buy youth and desirability. We don't even flirt anymore; we hug and pat each other as we inquire about health; mental and physical. Nobody actually asks about mental health but we all want to know how others cope with aging and loneliness. Social butterflies of the past became wilted flowers looking for simple recognition and friendship. Harmony day is getting more harmonious every year. I sit again with my friends from the Age care and some of those on the waiting list. We smile benignly. Even Simon realises that there is no turning back the clock however much he would still like to test his manhood.

People ask me: What will you do now? Are you going away?

Should I do something? Should I go away? I belong here. I have been here for 44 years and people know me; many of them hug me as we meet in the local supermarket or at the post office; they greet me on the street; we meet at community gatherings. Lightning Ridge became my hometown. Maybe I don't belong here, maybe nobody belongs here but after almost half a century I don't belong anywhere else. I am alone here but I know that I will be alone anywhere I go. Here at least I am alone among people who know me. Knowing someone is almost like liking someone or like belonging. Not really belonging because the only place I ever belonged was with Joe. I knew that from the beginning.

18.3.13

At two in the morning I felt someone tapping me on the shoulder. I jumped and screamed. As I opened my eyes I saw a shadow of Joe over the bed for a fraction of a second. He was covering me up. I became totally awake and a pleasant sensation flooded over me; I felt at peace; I was complete; he was there watching over me. I tried to recall the vision. I closed my eyes to relive the moment and the feeling of being safe and complete. I stayed awake until the morning savouring the warmth and friendliness of the event. It was a dream of course. I heard of ghost stories, apparitions, visions and so on. I always knew that they are a game of the mind; a dream; a fantasy. But what is life but a dream? What do we

know of the subconscious that produces dreams? Seeing Joe had a feeling of a real visit.

Oh, my God, real life is not like that.

What is real life like?

What is real life?

What is real?

Are dreams real?

Is being awake an illusion?

Is real what I touch or what touches my heart?

I feel like the cloud has lifted from my horizons. I will have to re-evaluate my beliefs, values and expectations. Life is a gift; the sun is shining; the breeze is refreshing. I have to choose the path I will travel. I have to find something in the future to live for.

I am beginning to enjoy solitude. We are all alone in part of ourselves regardless of how many people are moving around us. I visit the tree Daniel planted for Joe; it is growing beautifully. Life goes on. My garden needs me.

4.4.13

Nobody tells me when I cross the line and say something inappropriate or when I do something unseemly. Nobody tells me what to do or what to be; there is nobody who cares. Freedom is liberty but liberty is death. I watched a film in memory of Dr. Anne Turner who chose euthanasia for herself. Her husband died from dementia and she knew what to expect when she was diagnosed with the same fast deteriorating disease.

Forgetting scares me. What will I do when the time comes? I would hate to be a nuisance to my children but then Joe never became a nuisance; he completed me, he offered me an important role until he died. What would I be without this role he provided for me? I was essential to Joe. Maybe I will have to allow my children to cope with my ageing and dying. Life is only an experience; for us witnessing Joe's death was an awesome spiritual experience. I think we all experienced a new dimension of life. I wonder if it was right for the children to be present when Joe died but we all felt closer to each other by the experience.

I assisted Joe until his death. Did I have the right to prolong his misery by feeding him and giving him drinks? I remember many years ago when I

was in pain; all I wanted was to die. I was living for the needle to take away the pain. I was young then and there was a chance that I would get better but I only wanted to end the pain.. People occasionally asked if Joe is getting better. There was absolutely no chance for his condition to ever get better. What right did I have to prolong his suffering? Was I only serving my own selfish purpose; was I afraid to lose the role of a carer? Was I serving my own sense of justice and ethics? Did I want people to see how good I was to Joe so they would admire me? Did I pretend that Joe and I had an ideal relationship? No relationship is perfect; we managed to muddle through our disputes like everybody else but during the last few years we became totally devoted to each other. I wish I was more tolerant in the past. Was I scared of being alone? Was I trying to be good so I would go to heaven? I don't know if anyone is still seriously considering the everlasting glorious life in heaven or the torment of hell. I experience hell when I am bad. When I am good I experience the harmony of heaven.

I look at my beautiful home and garden and wish that Joe was here to enjoy it; everything is a work of his hands and mind. He enjoyed building; he liked using his mind, his energy and his skills. I wish he had time to retire and enjoy the fruits of his labour but idleness never made Joe happy. He enjoyed achievement; he was climbing the mountain; he was happy with his successes. Even children often complain that they are bored when they have nothing to do. Work is life. No wonder Joe was frustrated when he could no longer figure things out. I will try to enjoy what we made but I know that soon I will also have to leave everything behind. Nobody owns anything really; we only take care of things for a moment. Life is a temporary arrangement. Only the memory remains but even that fades.

There are billions spent on dementia to prolong the misery of those that no longer know that they are alive. Kevin has been in a nursing home for over eight years, he never moved out of his chair or spoke a word or ate by himself or showed any sign of life but they feed him and wash him every day. Millions are also spent on premature babies although most of them will never be healthy and strong. And all the while healthy children are dying of starvation all over the world. People don't like to talk about starvation but they are protesting against abortion. Paradoxes of life.

I met Mary on the street. She called me her inspiration. She poured out her story. Her husband Steve changed. She left him for a couple of months and now she returned in the hope that she will be able to cope. They have been inseparable for the last fifty years but now she can't cope anymore. He is clinging to her, controlling her, blaming her and accusing her; he is happy one moment and angry the next. I can't take it anymore,

Mary sniffed into the hanky. I stood by him all my life but now he tells me that I am stupid and forgetful. This has been going for a year now. I just keep a distance.

Did you see a doctor? Maybe something is bothering him.

Doctor gave us both antidepressants and it helps a bit, says Mary as she wipes her eyes. I don't ever remember Mary walking on her own but now I never see them together. I am afraid to mention dementia and ask if they had a test. I don't want to plant the wrong ideas into her mind.

I knew you'd understand, says Mary. How does she know that I went through the same stage with Joe? We almost separated during the first years of his dementia.

Lucy comes with Jehovah Witnesses' pamphlets. I like Lucy; she is convinced that her story about god is the only true story and that she will be saved by her faith. Lucy hopes to convert me to her truth. I need a faith; faith is a gift; faith offers certainty and security. I would like to have a simple faith of my childhood but I lost my faith. I have to accept the awesome mystery instead.

People from the very beginning have been searching for the creator of the universe. They imagined the almighty that will reward good deeds and punish the bad. The belief that the almighty is in charge, takes away the burden of responsibility and the fear of failing. It is god's will, we say. Faith is the foundation for hope. Faith, hope and love, my mum used to say as she embroidered the words on my hanky. Without love we are nothing. Do we punish and reward ourselves by our own idea of good and bad? Who is deciding what is right and wrong. Shakespeare said: There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so.

Everybody created for himself an idea of god. People subscribe to god their own characteristics; everybody wants to be powerful, worshiped and glorified forever and ever. The idea that the creatures on the anthill of our earth know the mind of the creator of the universe, seems presumptuous to me.

There have always been gods on Earth though; some have been chosen others have chosen themselves. Some have been kind some have been cruel but they all punished disobedience.

I watch the news; there is a mass hysteria when one of the god-like-dictators dies. People cry openly on the streets for the person who oppressed them. Do they believe that they have to cry to show how obedient they are?

## Childhood memories

I am too much of a sceptic to deny the possibility of anything, said some philosopher.

I believe that we live by what we are made to believe to be the truth.

Faced with death and mortality I often remember my parents. I wish I knew them better but I never found time. I left my village and my family at the age of twelve to face the unknown of the city. I wanted to study but I missed their guidance and protection.

I only remember my early childhood.

And they lived happily ever after, said my father most nights before my soul transcended into the playground of a Happyeverafter. His fairy tales left a blueprint on the pages of my first awareness; the prince kissed a sleeping beauty and she blossomed and married him to live with him happily ever after. The big bad wolf and the monster were destroyed; the wicked witch lost her wand power and all the good people lived happily ever after. I was usually half asleep curled in my father's arms when the last words were spoken.

Mum counterbalanced dad's fairytales with a strong doze of Jesus and the saints who all waded through the valley of tears before they settled in the paradise forever. The lives of saints were mum's recipe for desirable behaviour that led to Happyeverafter in heaven. The saints were heroic beautiful people who accepted their cross and carried it courageously; they never questioned the reasons for suffering; they trusted that God in his wisdom will eventually pay everybody according to their deeds. Mum reminded me that there are visible and invisible crosses for everyone to carry on the way to sainthood. God apparently never gives you a cross you cannot carry. The biggest crosses we carry are seven deadly sins: jealousy, gluttony, lust, greed, envy, pride, wrath and sloth. These sins can stop you being a good person, said mum.

I combed mum's long hair while we sang hymns to the glory of God. Mum promised that God will never stop loving me as long as I confessed my sins and promised not to sin again. *I decided to become* a saint to please God and my mother. I believed that being good meant being obedient. Diligent and generous were extra attributes but obedience was the key. Obedient girl was always called a good girl. Children have to obey the grownups that provide for them and protect them against all evil. The evil was a part of every story my parents told me, but the evil never won in the end.

Mum repeated the stories about Fatima and Lourdes until I felt that I personally knew those innocent children who saw the Virgin beyond the hills. Joan of Arc became my heroine. Mum explained how a boy Augustine once tried to unravel the mystery of Holy Trinity; he sat on the beach when he heard God's voice: You will sooner empty the ocean into your bucket drop by drop than understand the mystery of Holy Trinity. Augustine accepted God's words and was rewarded by becoming a saint. Perhaps it is best not to question what one cannot understand.

I wish I could hear God speaking to me, I said.

Keep listening and one day you will hear him, said mum.

I loved the purity, courage generosity and great sacrifices of the saints. I thanked God every day for giving me a chance to serve him in preparation for the everlasting life in a paradise. When grazing the cows I imagined Virgin Mary appearing to me like she did to those other shepherds in Fatima. I looked into the morning mist with the

longing for the Virgin to bring *me an important prophetic message. I daydreamed about the glory I would bring to my family if the Virgin chose me* as a messenger. In my innocence I could almost glimpse the Promised Land. In my solitude I listened for the voice of God that would speak to me like he spoke to Biblical people and saints of long ago. People gradually lost the ability to hear God; distracted by constant human activities we are dangling in space disconnected from this permanent energy source. And all the time we know that our actions reverberate through the universe.

Adam and Eve were as familiar to me as the Little Red Riding hood or Cinderella. God told Eve not to touch the fruit of the tree of knowledge but the snake tempted her to disobey God. She is the reason all humanity has to wade through the valley of tears before they could return to paradise. I wondered if the tree of knowledge with its shiny forbidden fruit is still in the paradise or has it been removed since it served its purpose. Is the invisible snake still present?

Is curiosity a sin or a punishment? Is knowledge bad? Does God want people to guess what he is going to do next or how he creates or why? Or what his name is? Or what pleases him? Is God just letting people discover how ignorant we were and are? Is he showing off how almighty he is? Under the smallest he hides a smaller still and beyond the biggest the bigger still. There is no end to the mystery. Is God playing hide and seek with people? He creates mysteries and then tempts people to delve into the unknown. Does it really worry God if people call him Jehovah or Jesus or Allah or Budda or Father or Brother? Or sister? What are God's rules? Does God really enjoy worship and adoration? Will God punish me for asking too many questions? *Does God want people to live like other species who sustain life without questioning?* Does anyone really know what God would have people do? Is God like governments who like people to obey without questioning?

Are scientists happier than tribal people of the jungle? Happier than bees collecting honey or birds making nests or microbes buried within our bodies? How can one measure happiness?

Mum told me a story about the girl who insisted that she would never succumb to temptation. The girl's mother said that she will test her. She covered a dish with a cloth and told the girl that she must not look inside. The girl said that this was easy. When her mother left the girl wanted to have just a tiny peek to see what was under the cover. As she moved the cloth the mouse jumped out.

I remember my father discussing Bible stories with the neighbour.

I don't understand why they were unhappy, said the neighbour.

I don't understand why the workers in vineyard were unhappy, said the neighbour. They were happy with the job and the promised wages but when they saw that the farmer paid the same to those who came late, they complained.

Privileges are only appreciated as long as they make people feel privileged. As soon as everybody gets the same trophy, the trophy loses its meaning and value. It is always that little extra that makes one special. People are less worried about poverty than they are about being a bit better off than their neighbour, said my father.

I like the story about the poor widow who only had a coin and gave it as her offering. Jesus appreciated that woman's gift more than the rich offerings of the wealthy because she gave all she had.

Unfortunately a person with nothing more to give can no longer be generous, said my father.

I wonder why some people are generous and others are mean, said the neighbour.

I scratch your back and you scratch mine. If your back is never scratched you stop scratching. If you live with people who never do anything for you, you become mean.

I never understood how turning another cheek would help me though, said a neighbour.

If you refuse to fight back you take the wind out of the attacker; you destroy his sting when you refuse to be outraged by his attack; it is no joy attacking a defenceless person. You only have to look at Jews. When Hitler tried to exterminate them, they gained sympathy of the world. They realised their dream of a nation state; they returned to Jerusalem.

Most explanations in my home were somehow connected to the Bible. Nothing is new under the sun, my father often said. He read books; he was also the only peasant in the village who bought newspapers.

I was always an obedient child; I obeyed parents and authorities but my father said after the war:

Most crimes are committed by those who obey orders. Dictators dictate to the obedient to do their dirty deeds. Give to Cesar...He stopped there; I knew that he was sad and angry but I was too young to understand the meaning of his words.

Recently I heard a joke about American recruit being tested for special military services. To pass the obedience test he was told to shoot his wife. The commander closed the room behind them and for a while there was much commotion in the room. Finally the soldier came out and said: You bastards put blanks in my gun so I had to strangle her.

Such is total obedience.

Dad made toys and whistles from young spring saplings for me; he taught me to play tunes and imitate birds. He sometimes made up stories in the dark of long winter evenings and I listened, mesmerised by his words. The snippets of his words remained with me..

Walk lightly into the world, because the world is constantly changing. The events will eventuate because of you and despite of you. Don't be afraid when things seem wrong because bad experiences make us enjoy the good ones. Things changed in my lifetime beyond recognition; they will change in yours even more. Change as the world changes, but hold onto the magic land within where your favourite blossoms are kept. Nobody can ever take your magic land away from you. There will always be people above you and below you but most important people are those that walk by your side.

I can still hear my father's voice as he lulled me into the magic land of dreams.

I wonder if dad's words follow anybody else as they follow me. Maybe he spoke them for me alone. Maybe he had nothing else to give me so he offered me the legacy of a magic land.

I know nothing about things Mum and dad dreamed about; I was too busy with my own dreaming. I was that young sapling storing up the melodies of life. People

impressed their knowledge and wisdom on me and I soaked new experiences like a sponge. The more I became like them the more people liked me.

Only people you love can cause you anger and sadness and happiness, said dad. But they will only make you feel a certain way if you allow them to, he added.

The splendour of my childhood reappears with the few people who touched me on the way. *I remember the words of St Thomas Aquinas: There is no lasting happiness on Earth. People are longing for something precious all their lives and when they get it they live in fear of losing it.*

*One is always afraid of losing whatever makes life worth living.*

Does God want me to just repeat the yesterdays and yesteryears until my energy runs out?

Millions of people dance every day on crowded streets without seeing each other. The eternity will chug along without noticing that the torch changed hands. Nobody really comes first or last; the circle closes to make sense of the bubble that was life. It makes no difference if one is the beginning or the end. Time is the healer and death conquers all. RIP is an order nobody can ignore. Mistakes will be forgotten; sins will be rubbed out. Rest in Peace.

I would like to meet Joe again in some other life. I would like to tell him that I love him.

The tree our grandson Daniel planted in Joe's memory is flourishing. Life goes on.

Children believe in magic, I said to Marko, as we watched a children's program on television. They need mysteries. When I was little, faith provided the scope for imagination.

Faith is a gift parents bestow to their children. An atheist said: There is no such thing as a Christian child; only a child of Christian parents. There is no Muslim child but a child of Muslim parents, said Marko.

Everybody was Catholic where I come from. I failed to bestow a faith on my children.

There will always be preachers who will try to persuade you to think and believe as they do but no two persons ever believe the same, said Marko.

I wonder what the atheist's parents believe. Did his mother perhaps read tea leaves or coffee stains or horoscopes or tarot cards? Maybe she consulted numerologist or clairvoyant or mediums? Surely she sometimes wondered about the mysteries of life and what is beyond.

People dabble with astrology, prophecies, drugs and dreams to escape the reality, said Marko.

We sat in silence travelling with our own thoughts.

We are all bundles of cosmic energy constantly renewing, transforming and reprogramming ourselves. This bundle of connections, vibrations and rotations perceived as a body is just a shell for ever changing emotions, feelings, desires and thoughts. In the end a corpse reprograms itself back into bits of cosmos to become something new, said Marko.

Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it, said the lord, I quoted the Bible.



Too much multiplying, said Marko. More people, more pollution, more climate change.

Yet the quality of life is improving, I said.

Life is not improving for millions of nomads who are dying on the way to the feeding centres we supply with food, said Marko.

People always denigrate those lower down on the scale of evolution, I said.

People denigrate people who aspire to be their equals. Hitler denigrated Jews to justify their extermination. That reminds me of a story you once read to me about the mouse plague. The king got cats to eat the mice and when cats over multiplied he got dogs to kill the cats and so on until he got the elephants to kill the lions. But the elephants were defeated by mice nibbling their feet. There is no lower or higher in the natural world. Intelligent people are constantly and unsuccessfully fighting viruses and bacteria that we consider to be at the bottom of the evolution, said Marko.

Amazing how old stories carry life's truths.

Psychiatrists analyse the brain functions, doctors do genome mapping, astronomers are discovering new sky bodies, said Marko.

Too much information, I laughed.

Science makes you think; it takes you out of the comfort zone that simple faith used to provide, said Marko. We are designed to see things at our eye level but science makes it possible for us to see further and deeper. There are millions of little invisible grains of pollen carrying genetic material for fertilisation right in front of our eyes. HE and SHE of the plant world are gravitating towards each other just like people do.

It is easier to relax and leave the universe to God, I said.

Science will take us a long way towards understanding space and time but science will take more time and space than we have to find ultimate answers; it is not going to be in our time.

Are you searching for answers, I asked.

I have no time to search for answers I know I will never find.

Have you ever read the Bible?

Everybody should read the Bible. It is the foundation of our morals, laws and traditions. Not knowing the Bible is like not knowing history.

Do you believe Bible teaching?

Bible was not written by an academic university committee; it is a collection of wisdom as existed two thousand years ago. It was a guide for people of that time on how to co-exist. Knowing the Bible has little to do with religion and a lot to do with understanding how our spirituality and societies evolved.

What do you believe; I tried to get close and personal to my son.

I believe that everybody should be entitled to believe or disbelieve according to his or her knowledge of science and according to his or her understanding of Holy books and nature, said Marko.

People need to believe in something.

You cannot believe in science since beliefs are not based on evidence and science is.

Blessed are those who did not see, but believe, I quoted my mother.

You can be certain that science will never be definitely certain about anything. The new generation will always dispute the previous one.

Rational explanations take away the magic, the poetry, the sense of possibility and the joy of imagination, I sighed as I remembered my childhood..

I was six when I looked at the grain of wheat and I convinced myself that it had a face of Jesus; I later saw a shape of Jesus in the host of her first Holy Communion. God was also looking down through the new growth of the tree branches covering the road. The spring sun created a golden crown on God's head and the birds sang his glory as they busily procreated. I felt tears of gladness as I peered through the spring growth into heaven. I was overwhelmed by the greatness of creation. Life was unfolding itself wondrous and fresh. It is sad that one grows out of childhood innocence.

Ever since my first communion I became acutely aware of my every sin. I regularly confessed and repented to cleanse myself for Jesus who suffered because of my misbehaviour. I unburdened myself in that dark confessional so I could receive Jesus in the communion. I revealed to the priest my every evil thought; I knew that God already knew them all. The everlasting fires of hell scared me less than the pain I caused Jesus. Going to heaven meant everything in those days. Maybe the greatness of the universe can only be touched with a magic wand or faith or childhood innocence.

Life was a preparation for the birth of Jesus who was later killed to take away my sins. The festivities through the year were celebrations of Jesus' life. Whoever ever celebrated the birth of Jesus forever owes allegiance to that baby in some secret corner of their awareness. They can never completely abandon the idea of God watching in order to reward the worthy and punish the sinners.

Even people declaring themselves atheists sometimes sigh: Oh, my God, in the life or death moments. Some who claim that God does not exist still blame him for disasters. Shame on God bringing pain upon the innocent children. Oh, my God how could he? People curse God in all languages. There are believers who pray for rain or to stop the rain; some pray to win the lottery others to pass the test; some pray for good night's sleep others for food to eat. I saw non believers pray over their sick child. When being rational does not help, people surrender and hope that there is someone with ultimate power, compassion and fairness. My mother used to say: He who does not know how to pray should sail the sea. ( Kdor moliti ne zna naj se na morje poda.)

I say occasional 'thank you god' for good things in my life but I do not feel entitled to special favours or for God to change the laws of nature because of my nagging. During my childhood the idea of eternal happiness was so wholesomely awesome that I never touched it with a conscious thought. It was simply heaven to believe in perfect justice and eternal life in a paradise.

Our bodies are operating on the auto pilot breathing, digesting, renewing, purifying and maintaining balances and temperatures but we really are who we are in the invisible domain of thoughts, feelings, desires, and beliefs, said Marko.

Can any reality be perceived equally by all living things?

Living things perceive physical reality by their unique but unreliable senses, said Marko. I saw a poster saying: Millions of flies can't be wrong. It had a pile of shit covered with flies. The shit must be the sweetest smell to fly's senses.

Why are people so keen to make others believe as they do?

Leaders need to convince their armies that they are creating a better world, laughed Marko. Look at how many millions died believing in Hitler and Stalin and Caligula. The leaders have to unite the followers in their belief.

Why do atheists push their beliefs as aggressively as political and religious leaders, I asked.

Same reason. Nobody has proof either way so people will believe what they feel comfortable with. Or what seems more propitious.

Some people try to merge the idea of God within the idea of intelligent design; they long for God even when they believe in the evolution, the Big Bang and the Black Hole. Who activated the Big Bang? they ask. Is there intelligence outside time and space? Is there time before the beginning of time; is there time after the end of times? What can one see from the edge? Who created God? Who made the evolution possible? *How can God run himself for eternity? How long is eternity? How far is the end of things? What is behind the last star? Does a bird have a different view of the world? What is the truth?* Is every part of the universe acting independently and singularly or do we act as one: solar systems down to DNA particles and atoms rotating, vibrating, and renewing.

Your questions will keep scientists in their jobs forever, smiled Marko.

It is amazing how believers and non believers who look alike on the outside are really so different. Stane, a Born Again Christian friend, gave me a book about people claiming that Jesus led them on a tour of hell and heaven. They described the burning in hell; the smell of sulphur, the melting rotting flesh, the worms and the serpents and tortured never-ending screams. *Around their necks the hell dwellers wear a sign describing the sin they committed.* The worst sinners are homosexuals, abortionists and people who did not pay tithes to the church. They scream for mercy but *nothing can be done to help these people, says the book.* Stane warned me to repent before it is too late. I am happy that hell is rarely even mentioned in Catholic Church. Even purgatory became redundant since people stopped buying off days in purgatory for their loved ones.

People believe some weird stuff, said Marko. I just heard a story about a publican who wanted to build a hotel next the local Baptist Church. Parishioners unsuccessfully tried everything to stop the construction. In the end they turned to community prayers. About a week before the hotel's opening, a bolt of lightning struck the hotel and it burned to the ground! The church folks were bragging about "the power of prayer". The angry bar owner eventually sued the church on grounds that the church was ultimately responsible for the demise of his building. The church denied all responsibility. The judge read carefully through the plaintiff's complaint and the defendant's reply. He then opened the hearing by saying: I don't know how I'm going to decide this, but it appears from the paperwork that what we have here is a bar owner who now believes in the power of prayer, and an entire church congregation that does not.

In the evenings I often listen to music; I sing and cry with sad songs. I string words into poems to find peace. I speak to who Joe and I were. I will have to find a new purpose for my life now. Writing helped me cope with my husband's dementia and with his death. I cried my tears into words and lines to console myself.

Locked doors behind me  
Locked doors behind you  
Nobody wants to know  
That we are broken in two  
Part of me with you  
In a nursery  
At the mercy  
Of those that don't know you  
That will never know you.  
You hold my hand  
With eyes shut  
Elevated feet  
Lips moving silently  
Who are you speaking to?  
What are you remembering?  
Where are you travelling?  
Let's caress memories  
Of blooming springs  
Of dreaming  
Of believing  
Of dancing cheek to cheek  
We arrived  
We have it all now  
The bed is waiting  
The movie is on  
Books to be read  
Flowers to smell  
The kitchen invites  
The future is ours  
Don't go yet  
I don't know how to do it alone  
Don't leave me  
There is nothing for me  
Without you  
Why can't we go

Hand in hand into the valley of silence  
Like we travelled  
Every step of the way  
Watching out for each other  
Don't leave me behind  
Seventy on the front page  
Of me  
Not at all me  
Inside  
Not at all what we are  
To each other  
Seventy  
Stars in the eyes  
Became shy  
The words of loveliness are afraid  
Hands tucked away  
Seventy on the front page  
Seventeen inside  
Who would believe  
That I was ever seventeen  
And looked at the sky for eternity  
Looked into your eyes and discovered  
Love  
Like nobody ever knew  
The first flower of spring  
For everlasting spring  
Who would believe  
That I knew  
When I was seventeen  
What nobody knows now.  
Seventy on the front page  
Of me  
Seventeen inside  
I am a Little Red Riding Hood  
Wandering in the woods

No longer afraid of a big bad wolf  
No longer searching for strawberries  
Not hearing the birds  
Not seeing the flowers  
Where am I going  
Stuck in the fog  
No one to laugh with  
At funny  
No one to cry with sad  
No one to paint my face for  
No one to dine and wine with  
I had a gem  
Hidden inside  
Too precious to be seen  
Too fragile to be known  
Too scared of being broken  
Too unique to replace  
Nobody admired me because of it  
Or it because of me  
I hid it for safety  
Knowing that you knew  
That I am  
Was enough  
Just a stone on the grave of what used to be us  
Just the wind blowing away memories  
Raindrops  
Tapping away  
Echoes whispering  
Your name  
How could you leave me  
In the middle of life  
Unprotected  
Unloved  
No longer tickled to tears  
No longer anybody

To anyone  
Nobody to give a damn  
If I die  
Like you died  
Nobody to share my dreams  
Or food or bird watching  
Nobody to live for  
Nobody to approve or disprove  
My behaviour  
Nobody to praise or criticise  
My decisions  
I am not anybody's next of kin  
With skin to skin awareness  
Of being alive  
Nobody responds to my touch  
Nobody is touching me  
I am a solitary tree  
I need to cry in someone's arms  
I need to call someone my own  
Flowers I planted for your admiration  
Bloom for themselves  
Numbers follow each other on the clock  
Days change names  
Birds are nesting and flying away  
Bees are buzzing  
As I remember  
Our moment in time  
Just a stone on the grave of what used to be us  
Just the wind blowing  
Raindrops  
On what made us embrace life  
Just the rain on the stone now  
Tapping away  
Echoes whispering  
Your name



All is spent  
And said  
I still wish that you were here  
I don't know what we could do  
At this hour; if anything  
I touch your side of the bed  
I listen for your breathing  
For the gentle tremor of our bed  
The bed is silent  
I tell you to watch the news  
You always watched the news  
You became the news  
You are no longer here  
I need to hold your hand  
We held hands for half a century  
Are you going to have a cup of coffee  
A lolly, a chocolate, an apple, a kiss  
What are you going to have  
Christmas carols crying for Christmases  
Of long ago  
Childhood songs of love for a neighbour  
It is Christmas  
It is midnight  
Hide your empty heart  
Smile away tears  
Where is my neighbour  
Who is my neighbour  
Silent is the night  
Cabbages making heads  
Oranges ripening  
The big tree-our tree  
How we admired that tree  
The birds having a party time in it  
How we loved to watch cockatoos at breakfast  
They outside eating sunflower seeds

Us inside  
Singing as we went  
And laughed  
Pointing out people and things  
Words on TV  
Words in the paper  
Meaningful lines mixed with memories  
Memories of years past  
Making plans for grandchildren  
So proud of our boys  
Loving them more every day  
Holding hands like a daisy chain for well over half a century  
I am nothing now  
Nobody wants to see what I have done  
Nobody to rejoice with  
Or cry  
Or just sit in the sun  
With an empty seat next to me  
I have to merge into a long forgotten single line  
If I could  
I would frame and protect  
That moment we met  
To remember the joy  
As we held each other  
And knew that we were  
Just right  
To remember our spring  
If I could  
I would frame and protect that moment we had  
To save the delight  
For the evenings alone  
A moment in time  
Drops in the ocean  
Sunrays in the sky  
A picture complete

Nothing is missed  
Nothing is lost  
I am running  
The finishing line  
Is a blur  
But I am running  
I must not be left behind  
I will never catch up  
If I stop running  
To find god  
To be god  
To be with him  
In him  
To be just right in his eyes  
My friend  
Did you find in me what you were looking for  
Or maybe something more  
For a moment you were a part of me  
And I a part of you  
As one  
In a book of time  
Nobody can rub out  
What we had  
Or imagined we had.  
What a beautiful day to repeat yesterday  
Time to  
Shop  
Garden  
Cook  
Wash  
Dust  
Wipe  
Scrub  
Dream  
Kill time, ants, spiders, cockies, mice, weeds, cats, dogs, enemies

Dreams, lovers and flowers die on their own  
Worn out memories go with the refuse  
Another murder on TV  
Another romance in a book  
Another misery disclosed  
Another mystery solved  
In the headlines  
Local murder like a breeze refreshes stale dialogues  
Enough  
Gala event illustrated  
A joke retold  
A compliment rewarmmed  
Tired feet turned home  
Enough  
Cheer up  
Life goes on  
Running on empty  
Trying to keep alive  
Or living  
The half of me with the half of you  
Longing for unity  
I don't know who I am  
Since I am no longer half of you  
Did I ever know  
Was I ever anybody in particular  
Was I ever the same today as yesterday  
Was I ever certain of where I was going  
Was I ever certain of anything  
A snow flake lingering in the air  
Melting into the ground  
A butterfly floating from flower to flower  
A breeze moving specks of dust  
Travelling hand in hand forever  
Making bubbles of life on the way  
Bubbles of fragility afraid of fading

Of bursting into nothing  
Hoping for another bubble in the afterlife  
To start again with a stronger everlasting  
Less afraid light within  
Shining into eternity  
Searching for the heart of it  
For the head and heart of it  
For the last secret  
Flowers along the road  
Are waiting to be picked  
Everybody wants to be chosen  
Everybody needs an embrace  
We will soon see  
The mystery revealed  
We will soon know  
Why we followed the script so willingly  
As nothing ever is  
Old or new  
In timeless eternity  
Like specks of dust  
Hand in hand we go.  
We thought we were thinking  
When we just followed  
What was written in our head and heart  
For us to do  
Build a nest, store food, court and procreate  
Nurture, guide and die  
Like a flower on the roadside  
Shedding seeds of new  
Like specks of dust  
Hand in hand we go.  
  
We are all in line  
To be picked  
To become each other's first choice

I am afraid to be left behind  
You sit and stare  
Unable to move  
Unable to beg  
Unable to cry  
Without a shoulder to lean on  
Spent and shrivelled  
Once loved faces around you  
Waiting for God  
Lips in prayer  
Hands folded in resignation  
Lonely days are long  
Endless nights are scary  
The mourners respectfully  
Sniffing into white hankies  
For their beloved  
Departed  
You will never be forgotten  
You will live in our hearts  
Says the obituary  
As the relatives argue  
Over the remains  
I am cold  
Inside and out  
Lonely people  
Walk with me  
Without desire  
We tremble in the wind  
The rock we stood on melted  
I am treading lightly  
I do not wish to offend those who would comfort me.  
I am very alone  
You were the essence of my life.  
All ties broken  
No one to report to

No one to consider  
No one to be afraid of  
No one to be angry with  
No one to love  
No one to dream about  
What am I waiting for  
I close my eyes to dream  
Escape the pain  
And start again  
As someone else  
As someone young  
And full of hope  
I close my eyes to dream  
Silence screams at me  
Life is closing down  
A poem wanting to be born  
In pain  
To make me feel alive  
A bud in the making  
A flower of the future  
In place of emptiness  
It could not possibly hurt so much  
Just emptiness  
There are no words in emptiness

Sitting on top  
With the view over  
Evolutionary creatures  
Struggling for food  
Cold inside and out  
Nowhere to hang my hopes  
My longing has no address  
My god gave me everything  
Sitting on top  
With a long way down  
With a clear view of abyss below  
Holding on  
Not knowing how long  
Or why  
I don't jump  
Those below  
Want me to jump  
To make room  
For next in line  
The world ended  
When you stopped loving me  
Says the song  
Since everybody forgot my name  
Since nobody is happy because of me  
Since nobody prays for me  
People only pray to die  
Pain free  
Not to be a nuisance  
Not to be incontinent  
Not to beg for mercy  
Give thanks for being  
By leaving a trace  
Of living  
Every hour we know less  
Of who we were



Every moment we are less  
To each other  
Undoing all we did  
Paying for the wrongs  
Emptying the tears  
To wash away yesteryears  
Saying goodbye  
Not knowing more or less  
Of where we were  
Or where we are going  
Talk to God  
They say  
Heaven is real  
Hell is not  
It was only a dream  
Fading into the daylight  
It was a dream  
With us in it  
There is no dream without us in it  
Chasing the wind to catch time  
Searching for moments spent  
I chase the wind  
As time goes by  
I watch it go and wave goodbye  
I join the wind  
I get along  
Growing away, my son  
You cried for mummy and daddy  
You roamed and wandered  
A chatterbox  
Smiling  
Kissing  
Waving goodbye  
You were growing away  
More every day

You picked pebbles  
And flowers  
And sticks  
And words  
And reason  
On the road  
Growing away  
More every day  
You chased birds  
And dogs  
And people  
Growing away  
More every day  
You were  
Coming and going  
Singing sad songs  
Drying tears  
Playing mad tunes  
Growing away  
More every day  
You were a wild boy  
Flying high  
Living it up  
Before redirecting  
Refocusing as fathers do  
Slowly  
Cautiously  
Becoming a man  
Coming home every day  
Watching the children play  
Worried about them running  
Away  
More every day  
Slowly and sensibly  
Guiding

Kissing the pain away  
More every day  
Coming home to stay  
Playing with children  
And memories  
More every day  
I search into my dream  
To see  
If you found me  
If I found you  
Like we promised  
I pray every night  
To meet you in my dream  
We travelled on our cloud  
For half a century  
Touching each other's sacred places  
Open eyed  
For a lullaby  
Every night  
We promised  
Eternity  
Fidelity  
Felicity  
To each other  
I came to see  
That part of me  
I left with you  
In sixty-two  
I came to see  
What did you do  
With what we called  
Our destiny  
I came to see  
If it is true  
That love lasts for eternity

I came to see  
If really  
That part of me  
With part of you  
Was best of us  
If that was what was meant to be  
I am merging, disappearing  
I am becoming a part of everything  
There is nothing apart from me  
Dying to begin again  
World without end  
According to the plan  
That will remain a mystery  
Now you are dead  
Now all that we had  
All that was said  
All that we wished  
Is in my head  
As I wave goodbye to emptiness  
To be  
Without a struggle to come first  
Without the fear to be last  
Without the need to be more loved  
To rest and see  
Your glory  
It hurts this letting go  
My son  
This breaking of the heart strings  
When I don't  
You don't  
And nobody does understand  
Are your sails still tight  
My son  
Are you still adrift  
Looking for your star

Does a downtown light  
Shines a promise still  
Don't sail too far  
Don't cry inside  
Build the bridges son  
Build the homeward road  
It hurts this letting go  
This breaking of the heart strings  
When I don't  
You don't  
And nobody understands  
But we must go on  
Build the homeward road  
I weep for things  
I left unloved  
I rushed ahead  
I closed my ears  
To your music  
Trashed the flowers  
You have picked  
I pushed ahead  
Afraid to be last  
And left behind  
It has been written  
What was meant to be  
The spring of our blossoming  
Following us into the desert of our living  
You were my dreamland  
My destination  
My eternity  
You were my lullaby  
My promise  
My sanctuary  
Walking  
Waiting

Anticipating  
The next step  
Crossing the next line  
And then you came  
Smile all over you  
Like rain  
On dying flowers  
Sadness gone,  
Thirst quenched  
Future beginning  
Restlessness settled  
Ready to go  
One step after another  
Sounds listening to each other  
Words smiling at each other  
They paint the picture  
Of joy  
They created  
Satisfied  
They smile  
Word to word  
To tell me who I am  
Again and again  
All of you walking with me  
Moulded me into a sentence  
I stand at the end of the road  
A testimony of your words  
Made into a story of us all  
Nobody can separate  
What melted into one book  
Of what we met on the way  
To here  
Where  
The words in the stone  
Tell us to rest in peace.

Now we know  
Who we are  
Part of each other's picture  
We hear echoes from afar  
Familiar  
We are  
You are here  
Where rest is a must  
Set in a stone  
Decorated with angels  
You came  
From your grave  
Small  
Childlike  
You asked  
If I still hold  
The memory  
Of us  
Before  
Transcending  
Into night  
You came to see  
If you still make me happy  
Within  
Invisible  
As we were  
Before the grave  
You do  
I do  
We are  
Where we have always been  
Together  
To meet again  
Over the fence  
The little white daisies

With a hint of pink  
On the edges of petals  
In stony dry bed  
Praying for rain  
Never picked  
Just looked at  
Over the fence  
Outside the fence  
Where things grow wild  
Like our love  
Searching for unity  
Outside the fence  
Outside of us  
We understand each other  
Feeding as we are  
From the same ocean  
Swimming as we are  
In one eternity  
We know what it is like to be  
As we are  
Small within the universe  
Twice as big together  
Rushing  
With twice the need to succeed  
And grow bigger  
We know what it is like to be smaller  
Without  
We silently  
Search in our hearts  
For memories of places where we were  
For the shiny apple of the knowledge tree  
Showing us the way  
To heaven  
As we wade  
Through hell



Our feet took us away  
We wanted heaven  
We chose hell.  
Touch and go  
Chasing each other  
Through hell  
To heaven  
Time to evaluate objectives for living  
Find ways to undo the mistakes  
Forever hoping  
For a winning ticket  
To a better tomorrow  
Touch and go  
In the obstacle race to heaven  
I jump over hungry faces  
Rejected dreams  
I collect honey  
In touch and go race to heaven  
Longing to hold and to have  
The star  
That was never mine  
Never to be afraid  
Of going away  
Same distance forever  
On parallel roads into  
Unknown  
Never asking  
Why  
Where  
When  
Why  
Sun set behind the red line of the horizon  
Crickets sing lullabies  
As the sky lights up million candles  
For my pleasure

The wind is dancing on the leaves  
The rustle of the petals is scenting the air  
When I wake up  
I will forget the tears  
The fears and the laughter  
I will be strong  
Fearless  
Decisive  
Creative  
Cheerful  
Getting along  
I am going  
Left right  
Never to stop  
Time goes on

## **Stories about the good old days, by slightly damaged people**

I go to funerals almost every week. I listen to eulogies and regret never finding the time to get to know my acquaintances better. Often it is only as they are being laid to rest that we hear about their ingenuity, bravery, tragedies and challenges.

It is not easy to invite and accept strangers into your life. I have no time or energy to get used to new sets of values, habits and traditions but I need to attach myself to others. Do we all need to be somebody's best friend or at least a friend; an acquaintance, a lover; a soul mate, a partner, an admirer? While I cared for Joe I did not need anybody else but now I have to reintroduce myself and hope that people remember me.

## Amigo

Lightning Ridge is fast becoming a retirement village, says Amigo. He built himself a castle from local iron boulder stones on the fringe of the town bordering on the opal field. I stop for a chat as I go for a walk.

You built yourself an everlasting monument, I smile.

I have to use my energy on something, says Amigo.

I realise that I also have to do something so I sit on the stone bench and listen to his story. Knowing people's stories really makes it easier to like them.

When I went back to Italy my parents were disappointed that their son who set off to make his fortune found no opals and no wife. I think that is the real reason I am building a castle. I thought I'd better have something to show for my time here. If I had found my fortune I wouldn't be building a castle but now I'd rather have the castle than a million dollars.

I talked to many people about my castle and how I built it. I tried to make it interesting for them so I told different details to different people but the story is always the same castle. People write about the castle and they add their own bits about me but they never really say what I would like to say. The castle is my public face, solid and strong because it is a rock. People come because the rocks represent stability, permanence, and strength.

There is also a private person behind the rock and that is much more difficult to talk about, says Amigo. Nobody wants to know my thoughts and feelings because thoughts and feelings change constantly. They are like the seasons and the weather trying to wear down the rock. Only the rock is strong and can withstand the changes.

Men do not talk about feelings and thoughts, I said.

I cannot even ever honestly say what I think and feel about the people I like and about those that come to see me. I have to maintain propriety so I can continue living with these people. I need these people because we share bits of our private selves with each other. Being discrete and tactful stops me from being completely honest.

Nobody dares to be completely honest. These days we also have to be politically correct, I say.

We say what is expected and acceptable because we are afraid to tell the truth. It does not matter if someone writes the truth about you after you are dead. You can no longer hurt anyone and you no longer need anyone.

It feels good to share your thoughts with a friend though, I said.

The Bible tells us to be kind to strangers so it follows that foreigners must have always been hated, says Amigo with a dash of bitterness. It is even harder to talk about my own private intimate thoughts and feelings although these thoughts and feelings make me who I am. My thoughts and my feelings are the most precious part of me so I am careful whom I share that with. Perhaps the private me is not as solid as a rock. Today I swept my castle and I found a honeybee in the corner. It looked dead. I took it in the sun and it flew away. A thought came to me that I am much like that bee.

Like a honeybee

Caught in the winter wind

With a frozen wing

Where is your sting?

Where is my sting?

We try to hide our sting to get along, I said.

I had enthusiasm, plans, energy and dreams but at the moment I feel no urgency to create. I lost my sting. My castle is waiting unfinished. I see no purpose.

Perhaps your feelings will change.

I was always anxious not to upset my mother with anything I did or said. It is a burden to feel responsible for someone's feelings. Now that she passed away I feel free to be myself. I don't owe anyone to be anything in particular. I don't have to please anyone.

There is always a fear of rejection, failure and old age but there is also the fear of being a stranger to people around you. A person needs to be understood and to understand, to be accepted and to accept. It is difficult for a migrant to ever fully achieve this because the part of a migrant always lives where he grew up and with the people he shared his childhood with. That part of him remains a stranger in a strange land.

Most people in Lightning Ridge are migrants and feel much the same; we miss the intimacy and we are afraid of it; we are the same in adversity, I agree.

Migration is a traumatic experience. Most migrants escaped from poverty and war and their guiding light was a better future for their children. They worked harder than Australians, because they needed to grow roots into the new country. Australians resented their success. When I was younger I wanted to make a fortune, get married and have a family.

Perhaps I am lucky that I never found a fortune. I never married and have no one to worry about. I believe that men are less concerned with the family than women. For women family and home and children mean everything.

Family is a source of pleasure and pain, I admitted.

Men often like to avoid that pain.

We stand there in the sun, two strangers having a strange conversation about our strange situation.

Do you miss Italy, I ask a silly question that others often ask me.

Italy is a favourite tourist destination because of its ancient history, culture, natural beauty, mild climate and well-known cuisine. But despite its ancient history and culture, Italy is one of the youngest European countries. It achieved independence and unification in 1861. Until the Second World War there was a huge gap in Italy between the poor and the rich and little prospect for the peasants to prosper. During the last two hundred years twenty six million Italians left Italy in search of fortune. When Mussolini came to power he dreamed of creating the Second Roman Empire in which poor Italians would develop their colonies Libya, Eritrea and Somalia rather than immigrate to foreign countries. These countries in northern Africa had an important strategic position.

Mussolini also wanted to separate the church from the state because he believed that the church had too much influence on government decisions. Whatever government came to power little changed for peasants. Peasant remains a peasant.

Italian missionaries were among the first white people in Australia. Like other great powers Italians struggled for expansion into the new lands. The white man in the eighteenth century maintained that it was their duty to bring civilization, culture and religion to the rest of the world. Catholic Church was eager to have a part in bringing all that to Australian natives. Australia also promised riches to poor Europeans. Gold rushes brought many fortune hunters to Australia. By the beginning of the twentieth century there were eight thousand Italians in Australia and by the end of the century there were eight hundred thousand. In Lightning Ridge there are about ten of us. At the beginning of the third millennium the first generation migrants are old and dying out. The second generation call themselves Australians. They think and work and feel like any other Australians. Italian names blended into every walk of life.

The Second World War was especially devastating for Italians because they fought against each other siding with the foreigners on opposite ideological ground. Most Italians never wanted this war; they obeyed their leaders like people everywhere do.

After Italy surrendered in 1943 half of Italians sided with allies and the other half with fascists. They were mainly killing each other.

Much like Slovenians, I said.

The West protected Italy from communism after the war, the Marshal Plan helped to rebuild Italy and the social reform also helped poor people to gradually prosper. Before the war my father's family lived on a big property and worked for the landowner, continues Amigo. There were over fifty people working for this landowner. They were allowed to keep fifty percent of what they produced. After the war the government took the land from the big landowners and distributed it to those who worked on it.

Partisans would have preferred Italy to side with Russians but Christian democrats won the election and they turned to the West. Italy would never prosper with Russians like it did with the West. If you were known as a communist after the war it was harder for you to find a good job and be promoted. There was bitterness; people had to make a readjustment.

Many poor Italians escaped but there have never been any political divisions among Italian migrants like there are among those groups that came from communist countries.

Europe was devastated after the Second World War and many people wanted to escape as far as possible from pain and poverty.

The living conditions in Europe improved since then and the need for mass migration ended in the eighties. At present Australia became a refuge for people from Asia and Middle East war torn countries. They became new Australians and they carry the brunt of prejudices because they are visibly different and they celebrate life differently.

Italians persevered to keep the best of their heritage and blend it with the best of what they found in Australia. They assimilated less than other groups of people. Other nations may have lost their essence in the melting pot of Australian assimilation but Italians added their own to the melting pot and so influenced and changed what

Australian culture was. They recreated and enriched Australian cuisine, fashion, art, building industry and they made their mark in politics. Italians made pasta and pizza a major part of Australian diet.

I am not a member of any migrant organisation but I know that I can call on Italians anywhere in the world. We have a strong sense of community.

The same goes for Slovenians and for most European migrant groups, I said.

It became fashionable these days for old Australians to boast about their European ancestors. They tell me about their Italian friends, in laws, ancestors and co-workers. Being continental became a mark of prestige rather than inferiority. It was fairly easy for us white Christians to assimilate with other white Christians. I am a part of what Australia is. The government established all sorts of multicultural offices and I suppose they have to make them serve some purpose but I have no need for them.

Most ethnic clubs became Australian clubs; the new generation does not know the difference. Migrants needed these clubs after they arrived to Australia, they had to have a place where they could gather as a community to celebrate and feel at home.

Migrants became a unique blend of Australiana as well as of everything they brought within themselves from their country.

For my 50th birthday I received a card saying: 47 was the best year because that was the year you were born. I don't know that the world changed because of me but 1947 was the time of huge changes. In 1946 Italy became a republic and in the 1947 Treaty it lost its colonies and considerable territories.

In 1947 Australia also opened its door to European migrants.

I was born near Treviso in northern Italy where dad's family comes from. I only remember dad as a young man, because he grew old when I was in Australia. Dad was an adventurer. As a twenty years old man he was conscripted to work in Somalia from 1932 until 1934. When he got married he worked in Switzerland as a building labourer. He came home during winter when the building industry stopped. When the factory opened in our town he got a job there. Even when dad was around he remained an observer; he kept his distance. He wasn't to be disturbed.

I am a bit like that myself. I like to observe and try to determine the meaning of things around me.

Dad adjusted to changes around him. He claimed that it is best to go with the regime. If you go with the government you get the benefits. He quoted another Italian who said: It does not matter which side you are on, when the regime changes they will say that you were on the other side.

Dad's favourite saying was: Everything is temporary. Every year we rearrange our winter stores of produce in a different way.

I believe that he was saying that it's no use making permanent plans because circumstances change and one has to adjust to fit into the new system.

Dad was always self sufficient, he never asked for help from anyone.

On Sundays my two brothers and I played soccer. We were the best in our team and our team usually won the game. Dad came to watch and after the game he went to the pub with other men and they talked about the game and the players. When dad returned home for dinner he said that I was the best player. He was proud of us boys

and I was happy that I made him proud. He wasn't bragging about us but we knew that he was proud.

I also played a trumpet in a brass band and sang in a choir.

My mother was born in Sicily but during the war her family were evacuated to just north of Venice.

Mum was the heart of the home and family; she was a hub of the wheel. My sister, my two brothers and I were the spokes in that hub. Perhaps dad was the rim of the wheel to hold us in place for mum. We went to church every Sunday we served as altar boys and went through sacraments. We did not pray at home. Perhaps my parents only followed what was required of us all.

I used to write to my mother but since mum passed away the family fell apart and grew in different directions.

My brother is an important man at home and he writes sometimes. I write straight back and hope that he will not write again for a long time. What could I write to him if the weather hasn't changed since the last letter? He does not know the life I have and I don't know his life. Things that belong together stick together without glue but some things never can, they fall apart and stay apart.

I was always looking for adventure. As a child I liked to explore the ruins of the old Roman fortification in Italy where I grew up. The secret passages and the mystery of it all fascinated me. At the age of twenty-two I read in the Reader's Digest about Lightning Ridge opal. I suppose that article changed my life. I came to Australia in 1970.

In Tennant creek where I played soccer, people did not know my name so they called out Go Amigo. The name stuck and everybody knows me now as Amigo, which in Spanish means a friend. In Italian a friend is Amico.

In Tennant creek I met Klaus, A German opal miner, who showed me the first opal chip bottle. He was going to Lightning Ridge so I packed my camping gear into my land rover and went with him.

I worked on opal now for 29 years. I still like to do at least a few hours of mining each day. When you get tired you sleep better and you are happier. The work takes the toxins out of your system.

When I first came to Lightning Ridge I made a camp at Three mile. Klaus and I became partners and worked together until Klaus left. I started with the Czech Julius at Billy goat Hill on Meehi towards Angledool. We found a bit of opal. We were one of the first miners there but Billy Goat Hill soon became a great rush. The other two miners took a day off from digging to go goat shooting. They saw the white Billy goat disappearing over the hill. They chased it and lost it, but on the way back they stumbled on the abandoned diggings and found bits of colour.

They drilled a shaft. It is a dream of every opal miner to sink a shaft and bottom on precious opal. They drilled on opal. The next thing we knew the whole hill was pegged out. A local farmer let the news out to the newspaper. But the miners weren't worried. They had their claims, which should keep them rich and happy. Nobody tells you how much they found, some found millions but most found nothing. At the time miners laughed at the suggestion that there might be a danger from claim jumpers and



ratters. Miners were all honest, genuine men then. They trusted each other. Not like now.

In 1980 I went back home to Italy. I haven't made a fortune and I had no wife so I felt that I failed. When I returned to Lightning Ridge I made a camp under the tree and started to build the castle next to it. I needed to do something, I suppose I wanted to make people pay attention. I had to do something spectacular to show the world that I am not a failure.

I've never done any building in my life but when I saw big conglomerate iron boulders beside the road I began picking them up and taking them home. Conglomerate stones have pretty white pebbles in the ironstone.

At the beginning I had no plan; I just wanted to build a nice place to live in. Soon it became a creative hobby that gave me much satisfaction. After I finished the large room in which I now live, I kept on building. I was only interested in how the structure looked; I wanted to create a work of art. I sat back and imagined what it should look like as I placed each boulder in its place. I was really building to satisfy my own creativity.

People asked me what will happen to the castle when I die. Some say that the government will take it if I don't make a will. Will the Prime Minister come to live in it, I wonder? It does not matter who lives in it and who looks at it, or owns it; the castle will remain a part of Lightning Ridge. You simply can't take it away.

I will never go away from Lightning Ridge.

Sometimes I get annoyed with people. I like the visitors coming to look at my castle but I don't like to answer endless trivial questions about how many bags of cement I used and how many boulders are there. It is like asking an artist where he bought his brushes and how much he paid for them. I want people to look and enjoy and think whatever the castle inspires them to think and enjoy. A picture means different things to different people and so does my castle. If it makes people think and dream, I am happy.

I don't seek attention personally. I like to keep my life private while the castle is there for everyone to see. I wanted to build something spectacular for people to take notice but I don't want them to take notice of me. It is distracting to work under constant scrutiny; I lost interest and creativity. I like visitors passing through the castle but I wish to remain in the background. I feel that the art should make an impression by itself without my explanations. Things have their own meaning, it isn't important what the castle means to me; it is more important what it means to each visitor.

I like to imagine and think and make sense of my surroundings. I get many visitors. Jehovah Witnesses come, Seven days Adventists come. I go to any church. I am a good Christian. Like most Italians I was brought up as a Catholic but I really don't believe that anybody should have a monopoly of God because if there is a creator he created the world for all.

Perhaps it is good to remove yourself from the world and pray in the privacy of the church but one most often prays when real life problems have to be overcome or are overcome.

People of other traditions claim that God is everywhere, but do you really talk to God when you talk to a bird or a flower? Perhaps we created God in our own image.

Religion reminds me of a story about a father who loved his three sons equally. He had one diamond ring. He promised each son at different times to leave him the ring after he dies. The ring would mean that the son was the leader of his people. Before he died the father decided to have two fakes made to keep all three sons happy. Nobody could tell which was the real diamond. After their father died the boys argued endlessly about who is the one with the real diamond, and who is the real leader.

The other story I like is about the real love.

Once a girl asked her fiancé to prove to her that he truly loved her. How can I prove it, asked the boy? Kill your mother and bring me her heart on the plate still warm and pulsating, said the girl. The boy killed his mother, placed her pulsating heart on the plate and ran with it towards his girl. He stumbled and fell tipping the heart on the rocky road. As he tried to pick up the heart, he heard the tiny, worried voice coming from the heart: did you hurt yourself, son.

Anyway, we all claim to know Jesus better than anybody ever knew him. Everybody is trying to interpret his words as he understands them but people of his time were the only people who could really relate to him because he was telling them about things they lived with.

I like the story Jesus apparently told about the pool where an angel came to stir the water to give it a healing power. People rushed into the pool with their little ailments but there was a really sick man lying right beside the pool for years.

I often wonder about the meaning of the story. How come someone did not push the sick man into the water? Then again being right next to the pool couldn't he ask someone to help him into the pool? Perhaps he could have even pushed himself with some effort. Why was he there, sick beside the water that could make him well?

If you believe that something will make you well, it probably will.

Sometimes only one more step is needed. Sometimes behind the next inch of dirt hides the fortune. Many miners have given up the mine and others later found the opal in the next truck of dirt from the same mine. I like the adventure and the mystery. But most of all I like a challenge.

I enjoy dancing. Three times a week I go to the club. We do line dancing and Latin American dancing. Line dancing is more challenging. We travel and meet other dancing groups. We have competitions and go to festivals.

Someone asked me if I would do things differently if I had another chance, if I was twenty again. I don't think I would want to be twenty again. I am fifty-four now and I travelled the hard long road to be where I am and to be who I am. I wouldn't want to travel that road again. There are new experiences in front of me.

If I found a million dollars tomorrow I would like to see the world but I would return to my castle. People I know come and visit; they like the stability of my place. The rocks give you strength. Rocks are forever.

I wonder sometimes what it is like to be rich. I remember a story about the tramp that lived under the bridge with his mates. One day he bought a lottery ticket and won a million. He bought the bridge and told his mates to clear off from under his bridge. Money changes people; it takes you away from the comfort zone of your mates.

It's much the same on the opal fields. You find a fortune and lose your comfort zone.

If you sit under the tree and see the butterfly, you follow its movements; you admire its colours and wonder about the meaning of it all. If a swarm of butterflies comes along you shoo them away because they become a nuisance.

It's much like that with people.

I lived on my own in the Ridge for 28 years. I have little in common with people in my home-town; I have little in common even with Italian community in Australia because there are few Italians in the Ridge. I am closer to Australians than to Italians who never left Italy.

We changed, I said.

Now I have a friend from home that has travelled a similar road I travelled. We can go right there to our beginning and share the memories of our growing up as well as the reality of our becoming Australians.

Familiar things make you feel at home with another person. I like to travel with a friend so I can share what I see and experience. Another person adds strength and gives everything an added meaning. When you bring pictures of the places you've seen for people to see, they soon become bored but when you experience those places with someone the memories of those places bring you closer.

What's the point of going around the world if you have nobody to share the experience with?

When I went home for the first time in 1975 I travelled with backpackers through Europe, Middle East and Asia. I suppose the experience of other cultures prepared me for the multicultural Australia.

My African friend tells me that the ancient statues in the Middle East originally represented Africans with flat noses but when white Christians took over they smashed the noses so the statues looked more like them.

I don't know if the story is true or not but I know that we like the familiar faces. Jesus in the most Christian countries is a blue-eyed blond handsome man with wavy hair.

I suppose it would be hard to adore someone who is not like us or who is not perfect by our standards. God created us in his image and we create God in ours.

It is hard for everybody to adjust to the changing society. America had time to blend their many national and racial groups but Australia is young and has been rushed into change. You can't ignore ethnic differences but the differences of a small group should not change the fabric of the society.

A friend of mine says that Muslims have sown the seeds for the take-over. The gang rapes of white Australian girls by Muslim Youth in Sydney have stirred a lot of unrest. The ever-increasing number of boat people, refugees from Islam countries, is coming illegally to our shores. Australian humanitarians want to open the country to them but there is a real fear in the society that the change will be too painful. People become dangerously reckless when they have nothing to do and nothing to lose.

These days the media is not allowed to report the racial or ethnic identity of a criminal. When Italians came to Australia after the war they felt responsible for each other. If Italians achieved something in Australia they were called Australians but if they had done something bad they were called Italians. If one Italian committed a

crime the whole Italian community felt condemned and responsible. This made the community look after their own law and order.

Italian migrants always protected their small businesses. They paid insurance; insurance protects you and every insurance costs you. Mafia is an Italian tradition of protection.

Mafia protected Italian migrants who tried to compete when people made it difficult for Italians to succeed.

Later Mafia became glorified in films and books but it really grew from poverty and prejudice.

Mafia looks after you when you are good and they look after you if you are bad. They help you if you pay their share and they get rid of you if you don't. Most insurances do the same.

Mafia is not only an Italian way of protection.

Chinese protection racket is a copy of Italian Mafia. Mafia is everywhere because everybody needs protection and someone to do the dirty work for them. In Australia we hear of drug dealers being protected by police. A lot of money is paid to corrupt policeman who keeps drug dealers in business. Since the collapse of communism Russia has become flooded by Mafia.

Most governments and big business have people who get rid of their opponents. Sometimes they only need to destroy the person's credibility to remove him. Destroying someone's credibility is the easiest way to destroy a person or a group of people.

Australians want migrants to become naturalised but maybe it would be better if they did not. If a migrant commits a crime during a certain number of years, Australians should be able to extradite him. This would save us all a lot of trouble.

Now gods, stand up for bastards.

Shakespeare

Stanko

Lightning Ridge is opal business; there is no social life, no closeness, no connection; people come and go and you never hear from them again, says my neighbour Stanko. Everybody is here to make a quick buck and people are cheating each other all the time. I would like to go somewhere else but at my age I would have to start from scratch again. Anyway I would be alone and a stranger wherever I went. I am lonely here and I will be lonely elsewhere. I am here to suffer.

You have everything you need to be happy but you choose to suffer, I smile at his constant story about suffering.

I get tired of life. Life does not interest me anymore. Sometimes I feel like: Why do I have to keep going? I do not like going to people's houses because they might not like it. Some people like to meet new people but it is hard for me to begin to like and trust new people. They are likely to ask for favours and money if they get too close. I don't go out. I have nothing in common with the drunks in the club. Most proved to be dishonest users and I don't need them. I know the history of many people; I know how their friendships and relationships were broken because of opal. I live in my workshop; I cook for myself; nobody complains about my cooking or about my lifestyle.

Stanko shows me some of his works; the jewellery he makes is exquisite.

What will you do with all the opals and jewellery, I ask.

I like to look at it, he smiles. Stanko gradually tells me a bit about himself.

There are about ten Slovenian opal miners in Lightning Ridge at any time but there is little love lost between them. They escaped from poverty and unhappy family situations: most have been betrayed somewhere on the way; most believe that they deserve more out of life than they received. All of them hold firmly onto their properties; they believe that what they have is what they made, is what they are. To do is to be; to be is to have; that is their motto. Their property offers them identity.

I remember my father's words: You can only give what was first given to you. To which my mother added: Much is expected from those that were given much.

Not much was offered to these men; what they have is what they worked hard for.

Less and Stanko are two Slovenians of the same stature and age, they travelled the same road but they are as different as chalk and cheese. Less is amazed at all the opportunities he had, he finds something positive in every situation; his face is ready to crack into laughter at any moment. He kisses most women as a greeting in the supermarket in a flirtatious, welcoming, friendly, cuddly way. Less pats everybody's dog. He became a part of a large Aboriginal community.

Stanko on the other hand never smiles, he does not recognise a joke and does not trust anyone. He dyes his hair, has a gym installed in his bedroom, orders coffee from an Austrian delicatessen in Sydney, and wears shades of brown and grey. He vaguely associates with Germans since his two wives were German. He is a sad and serious man keeping a distance. He believes that people have dishonest motives for associating with him. His favourite saying is: I am here to suffer. I hate rich people. I

always hated rich people. The only thing Less and Stanko have in common is a fierce pride in their possessions. Both are known as shrewd businessmen.

Less met Stanko while working on the Snowy mountains hydroelectric scheme. Many migrants met there.

Stanko is known as an expert and honest opal cutter; he polished Joe's opals and the two men became as close friends as two men can probably ever be on opal fields. They came to trust each other.

Everybody is a user, says Stanko. People only talk to you to get something from you.

I can hear in his words the longing for genuine friendship. For love without reason. Can anyone love anybody for no reason at all? Attraction happens without reason but love and genuine friendship seem to grow reluctantly and slowly like fragile fragrant flowers that only grow with a lot of care. Stanko says that he has no friends. Maybe he never gave anyone permission to come close enough. Maybe he expects too much of a friend. Maybe he expects more than he is willing to give.

You can take the boys out of Slovenia but you can't take Slovenia out of the boys, said Joe.

That could be said for any nationality, I add. We all carry our tribal history.

It doesn't bother Slovenian men when strangers have more luck than they have but it is unforgivable for one of their own to step up and be better off. They are fiercely jealous of each other's success in mining and life in general. They measure themselves against each other.

Stanko told Joe that he cut at least three million dollars worth of opal for Less.

The bastard said that he will pay me commission when he sells the stones. He is not selling because he does not need money, but I do. He found at least five hundred million worth of opal but he is so mean that he owes money to everybody. I have never met anybody as greedy as Less, says Stanko.

Stanko would never do a favour for anybody, says Less. He wants to be paid to say hello to you. I asked for his opinion about cutting a certain stone and Stanko said that I should ask the person who WILL cut it. I am not a teacher to give free lessons and advice, said Stanko. He is so mean that he doesn't even spend money for his own holiday. If he goes overseas he goes on business. He never visits his own family in Slovenia.

I wonder how can these men still pretend to be friends? Are they visiting each other because they expect something from each other or because as Slovenians they feel that they owe something to each other? Do they hold some kind of ownership of each other? Is this a sibling rivalry since they have no siblings to compete against?

Have you ever been back home on holidays, I ask Stanko.

I have no home. I know that I was born in Slovenia but I have no idea where, says Stanko.

You must have some family in Slovenia.

This is all I have to remind me of home, Stanko holds up three small black and white photos as we drink coffee.

My mother Elizabeth worked as a domestic servant somewhere and could not take me with her from the hospital where I was born so she put me in an orphanage, tells Stanko. I never knew who my father was. I guess I was too embarrassed to ever ask my mum because she was really a stranger to me as well. I was about twenty when I learned that I had an older brother who was also put in an orphanage before me.

I am often looking at these photos, says Stanko offering me the only image he has of his mother. I look at a beautiful tall and slender girl with long curly blond hair.

She looks beautiful, I say.

Sometimes I wonder what sort of life she had; she must have been unhappy to give away her babies; why didn't she marry and have a family?

It was a common practice in Australia as well that authorities took the babies of unmarried girls and offered them for adoption. The authorities convinced young mothers that they must sign their babies for adoption if they loved them and wanted them to have a good home. Most of the time the girls were not even allowed to see or hold their babies. Most suffered all their lives thinking about their children.

I wonder how she died. Was she thinking about us, her children? Did my father know about me at all? I guess I will never find the answers, says Stanko.

In those days young unmarried mothers had no choice, I say.. There was no government help and illegitimate children were ostracised. Your mother must have hoped that some family will offer you a good life.

These are my friends; Stanko puts snapshots of faded boys into my hands. I really treasure these photos because they are the reminders of me being young. They are my only souvenirs. Mum must have given this one to me. I am among other children but there is a cross on top of my head indicating which one am I.

An older peasant took me out of the orphanage when I was old enough to be useful. I grew up with his family until I was fifteen. I called him dad and his wife mum but I was never really a son to them; I wasn't a part of the family; I knew that I was a servant. I worked on the fields and with pigs and cattle. They loaded big loads on my young back to carry home from the fields.

Other children knew that I was a servant boy so they called me names and tormented me. They teased me and pushed me around because I was poor and had nobody to protect me. I slept in a stable with the animals. My bed was over the sewage pit. Sometimes I slept in the corner of the room where the farmer slept with his wife. He was spitting on the floor all night and in the morning I had to clean that. Towards the end of my stay on the farm I shared a room with the farmer's grandson. They even let me eat at the table.

My whole childhood was miserable. I often wonder how I survived as a barefooted hungry boy during the cold winters. My feet were black from dirt. Everybody slapped me if I did something wrong or if I didn't do enough. Everybody was ordering me around and nobody had a kind word for me. There were no games, no rest, and no friends.

While working on the fields we often had to run into hiding when German planes were bombing us. Partisans sabotaged the train and Germans retaliated against our village. They burned all the houses and we escaped into the forest. We made a shelter from tree branches and stayed in it for the best part of a year until the nearby bishop

offered us accommodation in his stable where we spent the rest of the war time with bishop's cattle.

During the war I attended school irregularly. School was far away and I had to feed the pigs and cows and work on the fields. We had to learn Italian while under Italian occupation.

My new parents had two grown up sons and a daughter of their own. One son was with partisans and the other was killed as a Home guard. It must have been terrible seeing their sons fighting on the opposite sides. They were themselves just poor peasants trying to survive. They had a woman servant who was the most vicious person I ever met. She hated kids and I was terrified of her. I buried myself in the straw to hide from her but she came after me with the pitchfork and started poking until I came out. She was a mean woman who never married or had children of her own. They sent me to church and I didn't mind that because the old priest was good to us during the war. When I was 15, however, the new young Chaplain replaced our priest. I saw women taking best foods to him and he threw much of it in the rubbish rather than offer it to us hungry children. He asked me at the confession if I had a girlfriend and what we were doing. I had no idea about girls; I was very embarrassed and started to hate the church. Later I met church people who helped refugees in Austria. Girls told me that they had to do favours for these men so they would speed their emigration.

After the war in 1946 the farmer received a letter saying that mum wanted me back; she found me through the Red Cross. When she came to take me I ran away in the forest to hide. They had police searching for me. I did not want to go with a stranger and leave the only family I ever knew. Mum found a place for me in Tito's institution near Tuzla where I became apprenticed as a fitter/turner. Mum's brother Rudi opened a bakery in Tuzla and mum also worked in Tuzla as a domestic for an important politician. Rudi was a nice enough, kind man; he had his own family and I only saw him a few times. I was never a part of his family. I have no contact with him or his family now.

I returned to Slovenia in 1949 and found a job in a car, truck and bus factory. I lived in a factory barracks and ate in the factory kitchen. I was hungry most of the time; there was food shortage. My boss was a communist who had less training than I but I had to obey him. They asked me to join the party but I declined. I never wanted to be a member of any organisation. I like to be on my own.

Years later I visited the farm where I grew up; I just wanted to show them that I was fine. I had new shoes and fine clothes. I wanted them to know that I succeeded on my own. The farmer's family were themselves poor and didn't show any excitement or happiness seeing me or my new clothes.

In 1951 I was called into the army.

Before I went to the army I visited mum; she had a room next door to the minister she worked for so I had to go through the security procedure but once I was in the building I was allowed to stay with mum for a couple of days. I could not bring myself to call this woman mum because she was never a real mum to me. I felt embarrassed and frightened of her. I heard that her boyfriend was the security guard to a politician; that's probably how she came to be shot with the pistol owned by the security officer.



After two months in the army I got a letter that my mother died; she was 47. I wasn't allowed to go to her funeral because I wasn't sworn in yet. The swearing in comes after three months of military training. I never found out why and how mum died. I do not know where her grave is.

The military training was terrible; we had to slide and walk and crawl in the dust and mud and rain. I was wet, dirty and tired in the evening but I was expected to be clean and ready the next morning. Once I lost my uniform buttons while sliding in the mud. I asked the officer where I could get new buttons and he told me to figure it out for myself. The only way I could get them was by stealing from another soldier. I had to do extra duties like cleaning toilets because I lost my buttons. We were ordered to go to sleep for a short time after lunch but as soon as I would fall asleep there was a call to assembly.

Later they sent us to work on the railways, bridges and tunnels. Every Sunday afternoon we had a couple of hours free to go to town.

Uncle Rudi told me that I have a brother Tone so I went to see him when I came out of the army. Tone never came looking for me although he was five years older than I. Mum never knew where Tone lived; only Rudi knew. He lived with a kind family who had no children of their own. When I last saw him he was married with five children and a house of his own.

I found a job as a turner fitter at Ljubljana railway station. I have pleasant memories from the time I spent in Ljubljana. I often went swimming in Sava River with my new work friends. We also went socialising, drinking and dancing. We joined a folklore dancing group and travelled all over Slovenia performing national dances. That was the best time in my life; that's how I met my first love Ivanka, who was also a dancer. Being with Ivanka made me happy for the first time. Unfortunately Ivanka found somebody else to love. He was a student and had a car so she left me.

The railway station was my real education. I watched people kissing and hugging and saying hello and goodbye. I dreamed of one day saying goodbye to everything I knew until then; I wanted to start a new life. When Ivanka left me I decided to escape.

A friend told me that he knew the way over the Austrian border because he was a border guard while in the army. We tried to escape over the mountains but we got lost and became separated. It was a foggy, snowy night and I fell down a slope; luckily a tree stopped me from falling deep into the crevasse; I almost froze to death hanging onto that tree. I tried to make a fire to warm myself but everything was wet. I had a can of sardines and the oil from the can helped me make a small fire so I survived. In the morning I decided to return home. As I boarded a train a policeman tapped me on the shoulder. We know everything about you, he said. I believed that they caught my friend and he told them but that was just their way of interrogating me. The judge asked if I will ever try again and I said yes I will try until I succeed. He told me that he will give me only one month jail because I had no criminal record but if I ever came before him again I will get five years jail.

Ivanka came to see me in jail and she laughed at me for trying to escape. Her boyfriend left her so we started going together again. We had a son Bojan. I would not marry Ivanka because she betrayed me once and I could not trust her again. I also knew that one day soon I would escape. Ivanka later married an Italian widower who had three children and they lived like a big family. I met her every time I returned home and I spent time with Bojan. He is married now and he named his son Stanko

after me. My son Ashley recently went to meet Bojan but they could not communicate much because Bojan does not speak English. Ashley does not speak Slovenian or Italian.

When I came out of jail I got back my job and my room so I stayed there for seven months. A friend then offered to help me escape by train. I had to give him all my belongings as a payment for his help. He knew the train driver's wagon had a hole under the table just big enough for me to squeeze through into the underbelly of the train which was full of soot, oil and dust. I waited for the train driver to go with his books to the office and while he was there I squeezed in. I laid there for 16 hours until the train came to Munich. When everybody left the train I came out and tried to clean myself in the toilet. A civilian policeman tapped me on the shoulder and asked for papers. I did not understand German then but I understood when he said: Straight back to Tito. I was terrified.

I was sent back to Salzburg jail in Austria for a couple of weeks. Austrians were sending back many Slovenians especially if they found out that they had a criminal record, sickness or dependent children at home.

From the jail they put me in a refugee camp and I was allowed to go out to look for work. I registered to immigrate either to Canada or Germany. After five months in 1957 I was allowed to go to Germany. I had to sign a contract to work for eighteen months in the Essen coal mine. During that time my half brother wrote to me; he asked me to send him a motorbike. He probably thought that once you are in Germany you can pick money off the street. I did not write back and we lost contact since then.

In Germany I met my best friend Franc. While others spent their time and money drinking we stayed in the barracks and played chess.

After my contract expired I could go where I pleased. I wanted to go as far from Europe as possible so Franc and I decided to register for Australia.

On 6 May 1959 we arrived on a ship to Fremantle and then by train to Bonegilla. On the ship I met Vinko who knew Slovenian boss Paul on the Snowy Mountains project. He arranged for us to do shift work in the Tatangara tunnel. I lived with other Snowy workers in the barracks. It was a boring, miserable existence. Occasionally we went to the pictures in Cooma or to the pub in Adaminaby. I brought a camera and projector with me from Germany and started making photographs; this hobby made life a bit more bearable. I worked and saved hard. I had to be strong and resist bad company if I wanted to save and become independent. Many boys went to Cooma or Sydney on pay days to spend their money on drinks and girls but I wanted to save my money.

Vinko went to visit relations in Mildura. They told him about opal mining in Andamooka. Franc bought a car and four of us, Vinko, Franc, Frank and I decided to try our luck on opal. Anything seemed better than labouring in the dangerous tunnel. Little did I know that opal would become my life. The wages on the Snowy were good and we saved enough money for this new venture. We went to Adelaide to buy picks and shovels, ropes and candles and off we went. We stopped at Andamooka Station and started to make a tent thinking that we reached our destination but it was just a farm 27 miles before Andamooka. A farmer came with a dog and a gun to ask what we were doing. After a lot of explaining he let us sleep there for the night.

Andamooka was a barren, isolated little settlement of about thirty miners. There were Aborigines specking for opal in the dugout dirt, there were about ten Czech miners and some Germans. The four of us were the first Slovenians.

It was hot; there was no shade and no water. Eventually we got a cistern coming so we could buy water to fill our tanks.

We started digging shafts by hand. It was a backbreaking job and soon we became disillusioned, exhausted and rather sad. I was thinking of what to do when I got an idea: Boys we saved money on Snowy why don't we buy a compressor and jack picks.

We towed the compressor on a dusty dirt road from Adelaide and on the way a wheel flashed past us and flew into the scrub. We realised it was a wheel from our new compressor. The studs were not tightened properly.

Ours was the first compressor on the opal field. We registered a claim each in German Gully and began sinking. Frank and I worked together and Vinko and Franc worked nearby. We had no idea really what we were looking for. A Czech fellow came every day to check what we were doing. He was an old miner so he told us what to look for and what to do. One day he saw that we reached the opal level and told us to stop. In the dirt he picked opal chips. I yelled to Frank to stop the compressor but he did not hear me so I switched it off. He came up, Vinko and Frank joined us and we were very excited looking at opal for the first time. We made it; we were enormously excited. The news of our find spread like a wild fire.

An older Czech miner introduced himself as Petnushak; he said that we uncovered a very rich vein of opal. He warned us that the buyers would cheat us because we knew nothing about opal. He also offered to clean and class our opal before selling. I wasn't too keen but others liked this friendly kind Petnushak and so Petnushak became our partner. This was our biggest mistake. We let him work my claim where we bottomed on opal; we started sinking new shafts. We found a slip going through most of our claims carrying pockets of opal. Petnushak cleaned the opal on a hand grinder. We sold the first lot to opal buyer Jim Collins for 6400 pounds. We split the money and felt very rich. You could buy a beautiful house for that money in those days. We competed who will dig more opals but once found, opals seemed to vanish. We realised that we had valuable stones so I became suspicious. Where are other bags of rough opal? We have been warned by other miners not to trust Petnushak but he seemed so kind and honest; he bought drinks for us in the pub. Soon we found out the reason why he kept us drinking. His friend Skrusny was ratting in our diggings while Petnushak kept us in the pub.

Petnushak began complaining about his health and he made several trips to Adelaide 'to see a doctor'. Petnushak paid sixty pounds to a man to take him to Adelaide. The man warned us that Petnushak was stealing our opal and selling it in Adelaide. Petnushak even pulled a gun on him threatening to shoot him if he told us. This man also told us about Petnushak's friend who had a nightclub in Adelaide. Petnushak opened the suitcase full of opal and said: I don't ever have to work again. I have my boys working for me and they are getting opal every day. When the night club owner saw the opal he arranged for some girls to entertain Petnushak; in the meantime he stole most of the opal. The driver had an argument with Petnushak and returned to Andamooka alone. We rushed to Adelaide and learned that Petnushak put the rest of the opal in a bank vault. Being young and inexperienced we had no idea of how to get our opal back. We took him to court and that cost us 1700 pounds but before the case came up Petnushak sold most of the opal. After all the trouble we only got 2000 pounds from him. We were disillusioned and our partnership ended. We sold the claims and divided the money equally.

In 1961 Vinko went to Europe for a holiday. Franc and I went to Sydney and rented a flat in Woollahra near Slovenian religious centre where young Slovenian migrants met. The church had a good kitchen; we also had music and dances. We played games like Italian bocce.

I started working in Sydney and I put a deposit on an old house in Homebush. After a few months I leased the house to Dobrsek and left with Vinko, Franc and Martin for Lightning Ridge opal fields.

Lightning Ridge in 1961 could hardly be called a town because it had no proper buildings and no facilities. You couldn't get in and out of town when it rained because the dirt roads were slippery and boggy; the place was a dump; there was a shack in the middle where you could buy or order a few supplies. Later they built a Diggers rest hotel where this only shack store was. There was no bore bath or town water but one could buy water from a cistern in town.

We took two 44 gallon drums of water twice a week and we pitched our tents in Coocrain. There were other Slovenians: Less, Slavko and Rajko mining at Coocrain at the time. We cooked on open fire under the tree. We started digging but found mainly green and blue opal. Everybody wanted red on black then. We dumped buckets of inferior green and blue opal which could bring us a fortune today. Later other miners found lots of red on black on a level lower in the same claims we mined.

Opal dealer Harold Hodges had two trams which were converted into the only motel accommodation in town. Whenever someone found opal in those days they would invite the whole town for a BBQ and although we did not know anybody we joined them.

When I returned to Sydney Dobrsek told me that his German wife had a sister Elizabeth in Germany. Elizabeth came to Sydney and we married in a civil ceremony. I became a conventional husband going to work and tending the garden and doing everything other husbands do in the city. And all the time I wanted to be back in the wilderness of the opal fields. I longed for the open spaces, for the talks and laughter of friends around evening fires, for the peace of colourful sunsets. I missed the open spaces and friendly camaraderie of opal fields. I was lost in the city; I became a nobody among strangers. I missed the desert and my friends with whom I used to share my life. I knew everybody in Andamooka and I missed the place itself. As time passed I overcame the disappointment of being cheated; nice memories of Andamooka surfaced more and more often. I asked Elizabeth to come with me to Andamooka but she did not like to leave behind the comforts of city life. I sold the house in 1963 and then Elizabeth came with me to Andamooka. I felt free again and among friends. I started buying, cutting and selling opal. I bought a drill with my friends Gabrsek and Franc. I found in Andamooka what I was looking for but Elizabeth was less happy every day. For her there was nowhere to go and nothing to see. One day she said: I am not going to waste my life in this desert. I am going back to Germany. If you are not coming with me I will go alone. I paid her a ticket and took her to the boat and I never saw her again. The next day I applied for the divorce.

A few years later I met a drunk slumped over the bar. It was my worst enemy Petnushak. I wanted to smash a bottle on his head but my friends stopped me. He wasn't worth it. He was just a drunken rag. He called to me: You don't talk to me anymore, you silly so and so. Let's forget what happened so long ago. Come and buy me a drink. I bought him a whisky because I wanted to hear what really happened so

long ago. How much did you really get from our partnership, I asked. I didn't keep the books but I reckon I got from 60 to 70 thousand pounds. And how much did your mate get mining in our claim at night. About 30 000, said Petnushak slurring his words. He later returned to Czechoslovakia and I believe died there.

I tried mining in many places but I only found bits of opal. To survive I began cutting opal half a day and mining the other half. Eventually I began buying small parcels to make doublets and triplets. As my business grew I had to go to Coober Pedy to buy opal so I could fill my orders.

As a turner fitter I was used to working with machines and metals but I learned to cut opal by experimenting. Opal industry was new and there was no one to teach me. Opal was cut solid if it was thick enough; when the colour was thin I made doublets, i.e. I glued a thin layer of colour on the dark base-potch which is natural opal silica without colour. Opal is fragile and can be damaged by heat or impact. In 1963 I heard that some gem stones like sapphires had a top protection made of crystal quartz which is a harder material. I bought some quartz and shaped a cover for opal doublet. That's how I made the first triplet which is opal made of three layers. I went to Percy Marks, a buyer in Sydney, and sold him some solids, some doublets and some of my first triplets. He asked me for my business card but I had none so I gave him my address. A few months later I got a letter from a solicitor because Percy sued me. I had no idea that he previously patented the triplet making. I had to pay a fine of 700 pounds. I had no idea about the law and my English was poor but an opal dealer Bruno Mauser helped me.

Eventually everybody in Andamooka started making triplets and they became very popular all over the world. Solid milky red opal was cheap at the time so it was more profitable to make triplets. From a two inch milky red opal you could slice 120 slides to make triplets. Every solid opal is unique so it is hard to find a match for pairs and sets of jewellery but when you slice it the layers are the same or very similar; they are suitable for matching sets of jewellery like bracelets, earrings etc. The colour of triplets is much brighter and more beautiful than solid milky opal because the cabochon top makes the colour reflect from different angles. The quartz also protected the opal. At the beginning I shaped every cabochon quartz dome for every triplet but soon Japan produced calibrated readymade quartz tops. By 1965 opal triplets could be found in most jewellery shops all over the world. The tops were no longer made from quartz but from ordinary glass. I bought my first glass tops in Germany. Glass is not as strong as quartz. I bought white glass from the company that makes eye lenses. I used it for those triplets that were individual free form but good quality.

Percy did not renew his triplet making patent because he could not stop everybody.

A Hungarian, Joe Bilke and his brothers invented the first opal slicing machine. Actually Bilke took a marble slicing machine and adapted it for opal. The cutting process was slow but there was a minimal loss of opal through cutting. Bilke offered to sell me a couple of his machines at 3500 pounds each but he said that I cannot see the machine until I paid for it. I insisted on seeing it first but he said that everybody could copy it if they saw it. A German friend eventually helped me make a machine but I was already too late to make big money because the world was flooded with triplets.

Bilke had a lapidary shop and workshop. They sliced opal and made triplets secretly day and night. They made three to four thousand triplets a week.

There is not much opal left suitable for triplets. There is also less demand for triplets. Since making triplets is more labour intensive than doublets and solids it is also less profitable. I do not make triplets any more. I rather create jewellery from cheaper pieces of opal.

In 1963 a Slovenian priest Dr Mikula used to come to visit us every year in Andamooka. He said that he is visiting every Slovenian wherever they live in Australia. He collected donations for a Slovenian religious monthly magazine Misli. He said that if I had no money I could pay with opal. He returned every year.

In 1972 I moved my business to Adelaide and bought a house there. I was a regular customer at the nearby chemist shop owned by Leo, a Serb friend. Ute worked there as a pharmacy apprentice. Ute and I married in 1972. Our son Julian was born in 1973 and Ashley in 1975. Ute came with her parents from Germany when she was four years old but we spoke German in our home all the time. I did not teach my sons Slovenian because I was away a lot and they stayed with Ute.

I planned to buy a plane because I travelled to other opal and gold fields. I began travelling to Asia and Europe to sell opal and jewellery. I travelled to Andamooka and Queensland opal fields to buy rough opal. I had flying lessons but I had a few bad experiences flying with others because of dust storms. I decided that a four-wheel drive is more reliable.

Ute was complaining that I spent too much time with opals and that I did not take the family out and spend time with them. She wanted me to sell the opal and invest in real estate but I couldn't part with my colourful gems. They became my life. Every stone is unique; every gem has the power to enchant someone. Japanese like them green, Europeans prefer them red; the brightest and colourful are rarer and more precious; some are known by name. No two opals are the same and one is more beautiful than the other.

Ute became interested in alternative medicine and she studied at university. Later she opened her own clinic with homeopathic and herbal healing; she is also a pharmacist.

In 1985 Ute left Ashley a note that she will be away for some time. She went to Sri Lanka on business but she never returned. She found somebody else. She left the boys with me. After three months I received a letter from a lawyer saying that she wanted a divorce. By 1986 we sold the house by auction and settled outside the court. I paid for boys' schooling but they lived with their mother.

After the divorce Hans, a German opal dealer offered for me to stay in his house because he was going to move to Gold Coast. Before he left he met a woman and both stayed with me in his home. Hans knew all my opals well. He and I travelled together doing business around the world. I had a parcel of about 500 carats of top quality opal which wasn't for sale.

I travelled to Lightning Ridge frequently and eventually in 1990 I bought a block of land here. I became a wheeler dealer in opal.

Before I left Hans's place to go to Lightning Ridge, I put the parcels of good opal into a safe deposit box in the bank. On each bag I wrote the colour of the opal and its weight. I did not check the bags closely at the time I deposited them in the bank or when I took them out. A friend told me later that Hans told him that he has a good buyer for top quality opal. He asked me if I still have my good stones. I became suspicious and went to check my parcels. I discovered that the opal in my plastic bags

was not my opal. It was of much poorer quality. It was of the same weight and similar colour but much inferior to the opal I deposited. I was in shock. Only Hans was capable and had opportunity to swap it while I lived in his house and travelled on business. I confronted Hans but he acted offended and denied it. I could do nothing. I was so angry that I wanted to kill him.

Ute and I sometimes visited a Dutch clairvoyant who was very talented. She was helping police in criminal investigations. She told us that one of our sons was exceptionally talented. That is Ashley who is a concert pianist and travels around the world performing.

She charged 80 pounds a visit and I saw her about once a year. I did not tell her anything; I just listened to her information.

After Hans stole my opals I went to her; I did not tell her about my problem but as soon as I sat down she asked me: how much do you think he stole from you? I said one hundred fifty thousand pounds. She said: It was much more. But don't worry; what goes around comes around. During the next year Hans's wife divorced him and took most of his money. She threatened to tell the taxation office about his dealings if he did not pay up.

I used to socialise while I had a family. I was the foundation member of the Slovenian club in Adelaide and we socialised there every weekend. I know most Slovenians in Adelaide but I lost contact. Their club has good programs for their children; they have schools and games and concerts and family celebrations.

We were competing with friends who will have a better house; we went for picnics and dinners but since my divorce I live alone. I don't care anymore.

Lightning Ridge is opal business; there is no social life, no closeness, no connection; people come and go and you never hear from them again. Everybody is here to make a quick buck and people are cheating each other all the time. I would like to go somewhere else but I can't decide where. I would go away but then I would have to start from scratch again. Anyway I would be alone and a stranger wherever I went. I am lonely here and I will be lonely elsewhere. I could buy a beautiful home but I don't need it.

I get tired of life. Life does not interest me anymore. Everything seems futile. Sometimes I feel like: Why do I have to keep going?

Some people like to meet new people but it is hard for me to begin liking and trusting new people. They are likely to ask for favours and money if they get too close.

I don't go out much. I have nothing in common with the drunks in the club. Most proved to be dishonest users and I don't need them. My boys tell me to enjoy myself and spend my money but I find more joy in work than in spending money. I grew up to work and save so spending is new to me. I created what I have from nothing and I believe that everybody should do the same. If you really want to do something you will find a way of doing it. Maybe I wouldn't achieve everything I achieved if I could rely on the family to do things for me. I would not be as strong as I am. Life means developing skills and trying your best.

Once a week I like to go pistol shooting. 35 years ago I got robbed in Adelaide a few times so I applied for a gun licence. I was told that I had to join the shooter's club and since then I really enjoy this sport.

I watch the news and read the paper but films and stories don't interest me. I am happiest when I am making jewellery and cut gem stones.

I am never homesick because I never had a home; I am not even homesick for Slovenia because I lived in misery there. Most people were miserable during and after the war but most of them had families to share their misery with. I was on my own.

Times have changed and Slovenia prospered; now illegitimate children are as welcome as those who have two parents. Slovenians at home also have everything they want and need but they live their lives and I am not a part of that.

People often ask me to teach them about opal business but I don't want to. Let them learn the hard way like I had to. Once I showed a lady what I do and on the way out she just said: Now I know everything. She never said: thank you. On the street she said to me: I know why you don't want to share your business secrets. You are scared that I would take over your business. People are nasty like that. I don't trust anyone. I stay on my own, I prefer being on my own. I don't want to bother anyone and I don't like anyone to bother me.

If I had another life I would spend it dealing with Queensland opal. It is more stable and easier to shape and mould. I could have bought a trailer load of Queensland boulder when people did not know much about it but now it is almost as expensive as black opal.

I always wanted to create something special. I did not have much formal education but I became expert in things I like to do. Opal industry is only a small part of a huge jewellery industry. As a fitter turner I was used to working with metals so I started working with gold and silver. I created my own ways of doing things. I read magazines to enrich my own ideas as I create master pieces from gold and silver. It takes me a long time to fashion a piece of jewellery and then I have casts made to fit the stones in.

Many people all over the world steal other people's ideas. When I sell a piece of jewellery I made someone can easily take out the stone and have more casts made of the piece. That happens in every other area of trade, of course, and nothing much can be done about it. I make individual setting for special free form stones.

There are always dangers of being cheated or robbed in opal business. If partners don't cheat you, opal cutters and dealers will. You are also always in danger carrying money and gemstones when you are doing business. I travelled all over the world but I could never relax and have fun because at the back of my mind were always opals I carried with me. Sometimes I left them with friends, sometimes I put them in the lockers or safe deposit boxes but I was never completely sure that they were safe. I was often in Frankfurt and there are crooks at the airport and at the railway stations waiting for the next victim. I understand many languages and I heard them talking about their plans. They had no idea that I could understand them.

I'd like to go for a real holiday and enjoy myself but there is always something holding me back. If I could only get rid of all my property and pack my bag. Belongings I love became a great burden; I want to unload and be free.

In 2006 I went to Andamooka and stayed there in a motel with people I knew for many years. Heather and her boyfriend are running the motel and the post office. I hid two bags of opal behind a shower curtain before I went for dinner in a restaurant next door. There are cameras on the entrance and inside the motel so it seemed pretty safe



because I was right there next to my room. I did not even check my bags of opal while I was there but when I returned home I had a shock. One bag had a lock on it and it wasn't touched but there was opal missing from the other bag. They stole over thirty thousand dollars worth of opal. What could I do? I had no way of proving what they did. There were cameras but they must have used them to monitor my movements so they could steal while I was in the restaurant. I was so upset that I could not sleep for weeks. I tried to think of how I could get my opal back but there is no way. I tried to ring Andamooka police but I could not even get anyone to answer. I was going mad about it.

I heard later that Heather and her boyfriend stole other people's money and opal. They knew what I was carrying; they knew all the people that stayed with them.

It is hard for me to trust anyone. Perhaps it is best if you own nothing; at least you can sleep in peace.

I only work now because I enjoy creating special pieces; I do not need to make money anymore so I can afford to be creative and spend time on things I like. I am carving opal. Creating these pieces helps me pass the time and keeps me sane.

I wanted to teach my sons to take over my business but they are not interested.

About twenty years ago a Swiss man and a Frenchman discovered the formula for chemically growing opal. They made perfect stones a little harder than opal. It is hard to tell them apart from the natural opal. They sold their secret to Japan under the name Gilson. Now many people tried to grow their opal but nobody else has been really successful. Lately they are selling a plastic version of synthetic opal which can be used for triplets or inlays. Gilson opal is sold from one to two thousand dollars per gram but this plastic version goes from two to twelve dollars a gram I used some of their materials and it is magnificent. Most people could be fooled into believing that they have real opal while they only have plastic. When you are a reputable businessman you have to tell the buyer exactly what you are selling. There are fines of ten thousand if you sell something else for opal. Nobody can fool me though about any kind of opal. I have seen it all and experimented with everything.

There used to be quite a lot of matrix material in Andamooka; it can be very beautiful and often much nicer than real opal at the same price. I bought a lot of that material and treated it. Black matrix is the most expensive and does not need treatment but other varieties do. There is a soft porous matrix that can be treated in a few hours and there is a hard variety that takes weeks. It seems that every matrix dealer has a different recipe for treating matrix. Generally it is cooked in sulphur acid and sugar so the material becomes black and the colour stands out. Some people even treated it in used gear box oil.

Ashley is also a composer and music teacher.

Julian is a public servant interested in computers. He got a Slovenian passport and is thinking of working in Europe.

I was never interested in politics and religion. I am not saying that I don't believe in God but there are too many religions and people fighting each other for their God. I read the Bible but it makes me sick to read about people asking God to help them kill their neighbours. It has always been like that, people saying that they are fighting for their God when they were really fighting for themselves.

My friend once said: Man likes to look for eternity in moments: into the deepest corner of his soul he encloses a precious memory and into velvet padded little boxes he closes a ruby, a sapphire, or an opal – something rare, unique, and precious. It is easier to fight the desert of everyday life if in the moments of hardest distress, poverty, and loneliness something permanently beautiful shines through the darkness. Opal has that beauty for me.

I remember Stanko's words because they are also the words of my father. Close your eyes and see your magic land, he said when I still believed in the fairy land.

My father also said: The value of an individual or of the nation is measured with wealth. Wisdom and virtues and art have value only if the rich are willing to pay for it.

Opal has no value unless the rich are prepared to pay for it. But it has a beauty.

*Vladimir Less*

*I was born in Maribor Slovenia in 1939 and came to Australia as a teenager in 1956. My father had a workshop making furniture in Maribor. He employed 38 men. During the WWII he joined communist resistance force. After the war communists nationalised his workshop so he turned anticommunist. Mum was always very religious but dad turned to Catholic Church only because he was disappointed with communism. My younger brother became a priest.*

I left school so I could help dad in the workshop. He trained me to become a carpenter but I never passed any exams. Dad was very strict. When I was seventeen I made a mistake and cut a door a bit short. Dad hit me with a plank. I told him that he hit me for the last time. My cousin worked in Austria. I went with her to her home near the Slovenian-Austrian border. From her home we could see the border guards playing soccer and so we crossed to Austria unnoticed. We went to my uncle in Graz. He told me to go back home. My cousin and I hitch hiked to Salzburg. She went to work there and I reported myself to the authorities. They interrogated me and then put me into the refugee camp. Austrian farmers and builders came to the camp to look for workers and I went to work in the quarry. The owner of the quarry did not have any children and he wanted to adopt me. I decided to stay in Salzburg. At the time I met a friend who wanted me to go with him to Canada. I registered to go to Canada but I needed a guarantee of a job there. It was easier to get to Australia or Africa. We had to sign up for two years work in Australia because they sponsored us and paid our trip. We boarded the ship Toscana just before Christmas 56. It was full of European migrants. Many Hungarians fled the revolution; there were also Italians and Greeks and Yugoslavs.

We came to Melbourne and from there to Bonegilla migrant camp. Most Europeans did not like Australian food in the camp but I was not worried about the food because I found a girlfriend there.

After a fortnight I was sent to Melbourne Broadmeadow camp and worked there for 7 months. That was very unhappy time for me. The pay wasn't good and the camp life was lonely. I wanted to go back home. I cried for home. I was desperately homesick. My friend and I worked together and shared a room. We went to the authorities and told them that we wanted to go home. They told us that we must first repay the money for our trip to Australia. We had no money so we had to stay. They gave us a job in a factory making plywood. We worked a lot of overtime and earned much more money.

My friend was very clever and he later became a boss of this same factory employing 1500 women in Homebush. He drank a lot and had much trouble with women. He would get into fights and had trouble with the police.

I met Toni who told us that one can earn better money in Sydney where they were building Waramanga dam. We worked there for 16 months. We cleared trees and burned them; these were beautiful thick perfect old trees but we just blasted and burned them.

There was a group of Slovenian political migrants who were in a position to find good employment for people. They recruited boys for work on Snowy Mountains Scheme. I went to work on Tumut 2 tunnel close to Cabramurra for 16 months.

As I returned to Sydney I met many Slovenians. Catholic Slovenian priests had a 40 room hostel next to the church. They offered free accommodation to Slovenian migrants who had nowhere else to live. There was a wonderful Slovenian kitchen underneath and a billiard room. We also had dances on special occasions.

I met Maria who came with her boyfriend. When her boyfriend went to work in Adelaide Maria and I fell in love and moved in together.

I met Steve while I worked for Snowy Mountains Scheme. He went to Andamooka and brought some colourful rocks and said that they were worth thousands of pounds. That's how I was introduced to opal. My German friend Ray told me that I don't need to go to Andamooka because there was opal also in Lightning Ridge. We had no transport so we put together 56 pounds and bought an old car. Ray drove but he took the wrong turn and we ended in Nyngan. It was raining, the road was muddy and he hit a tree. I had bad cuts to my face and I lost 3 teeth. A farmer came along and took us to Coonamble. The car was not worth repairing so we left it there and took a taxi to Lightning Ridge.

We believed that Lightning Ridge was a town but there was nothing. The only shop/hotel was shut because it was Sunday and we could not buy anything. Harold Hodges took us in to camp at his tram motel. Ray found his friend and stayed with him but I stayed with Harold. Fred Reece used to come to do jobs for Herald and he said that he will show me where to find opal. I started mining in New town biscuit bend about four feet deep. I found some small stones and showed them around in the pub. Harold offered me eighty quit for them. Billy Francis said that it was a good price.

I returned to Sydney to fix my taxes. I met Joe and Ricky and John whom I knew from working on the Snowy Mountains scheme. Joe had a car so we all went to Lightning Ridge. In the pub there Herby Brown told us about Coocrain opal field where he found good traces. Ivan who was with me on a ship coming to Australia came in with Jim the opal buyer.

Joe, Ricky, John and I registered a claim each and began working as a sort of partnership. Joe knew that we depended on him for transport because he had a car so he felt that he could boss us around. He did not want to pull the dirt out. We worked like that for 14 days. John and I pulled the dirt out for each other on the hand windlass. There was a shallow level and we moved fast to make a connection and get some air. In the meantime Joe and Ricky moved with Mick Bower who found good opal.

I left the nobbies we found on the side of the row for a week. One day Les brought us some tobacco and as I rolled a cigarette he hit one large nobby we had in a bucket with a pick. It showed beautiful red on black; over 100 carats of red in rough. We had that nobby in the bucket for a week but we didn't bother to snip it. The nobbies were scattered all around us. I showed a snipped piece of that nobby to the buyer and he gave me 250 quit for it. We then collected a bucket of nobbies and left it with the cutter. After he cut the stones he told me that in the future I should always stay with the cutter while he is cutting my stones. He priced the red stone at 3000 quit but said that I should ask for 5000. Three buyers came from Sydney especially for that 83 carat stone and we sold it for 3800 quit. The buyer said that we either take a house in Sydney or the money.

I went to Sydney and took two teenage girls with me because they wanted to visit relations in Sydney. My girlfriend Maria heard about the girls so she left me. She was pregnant with my baby but she had an abortion. She returned to her boyfriend in Adelaide, They got married but she could have no more children. Eventually she divorced her husband. They spent all their savings on their bitter divorce. I haven't seen Maria now for 45 years. She rang me about ten years ago and would like to come back to me. I have also been divorced from my wife by that time. Since then Maria and I talk regularly on the phone but I don't want her back. I want to remember her as she was forty five years ago when we were so young and so in love.

While in Sydney I bought a Buick convertible and enjoyed myself with my friends. Andrew and Joe, my friends from Sydney, came to Lightning Ridge for Christmas 67 when the sugar cane cutting season finished. At the time Ivan came from Andamooka and said: What are you doing here? I get 1000 quit per day in Andamooka.

John and I went to Andamooka and stayed there for 9 months. I spent the money I made in Lightning Ridge and made nothing in Andamooka. We went to Coober Pedy. The roof of the mine collapsed on me there and I was unconscious for three days. They sent me into a home for disabled in Willaura for nine months because I was paralysed. Very gradually some feelings returned to my legs and hands and I came back to Lightning Ridge on crutches. Less took me to his home and his mother looked after me. One day I went on my crutches to three mile field; I left the crutches on top and went down the shaft on a rope with a screwdriver and a candle. I came up with 1500 quit of opal.

Less and I worked together. When Les got married his father in law joined us but he was thieving all the time. If he couldn't steal the stone he would smash it. I told him that Les will kill him.

A lot of people cheated me but I still always came up on top.

As I came back to Lightning Ridge I met Suzy a very beautiful Aboriginal girl. Our son was born and we got married. Suzy's grandfather was one of the first settlers in Walgett area. He came from Scotland with his brother and they bought the land near Walgett. He had a large Aboriginal family and provided for them well. They are a well respected family.

Suzy's mother never liked white people. Once I brought my children to her to look after and while outside I heard her say: the little white dog is outside. I took the children and looked after them myself.

Suzy's family is bit like that, bossy and up themselves. They are lighter in colour and have blue eyes so they feel a bit superior to other Aborigines. I was helping all of them all my life but nobody ever said thank you. I gave them money but they put it through poker machines and came for more. They never learned to say thank you or sorry. They don't like white people but they all take and steal from them.

Suzy's father once buried the money I gave him but his son dug it out and put it through the poker machines. Suzy's mother was jealous if I made money and did not share with them.

I always looked after Suzy's relations; they still want me to share with them everything I have but they don't know how to manage money. They say that in their culture they share but they really only want to share what I made and not what they

have. They stick together like Muslims against outsiders. I am an old man now but kids and relations are still looking to me for help.

Suzy left me but I still like to help her. She would like to come back but there is no way back for me. I still love her because she gave me three lovely children and we had a good marriage but I don't want her back.

I lived with Aborigines all my life. I like them but I never became one of them. They made me feel like an outsider.

I am happy that I have three lovely children and eight wonderful grandchildren to leave them everything I own.

Despite her family Suzy and I had good times together. We went dancing and socialising. Suzy sometimes came with me to check the tailings but she never came down the shaft to mine with me. Suzy took care of all the bills and administration. Our son Steve took over from her when she left. We are divorced now and she lives in Queensland. Maybe I should have gone with her but I like Lightning Ridge and I made money and friends here. I still have mining claims which I do not want to leave behind.

Our marriage has really fallen apart when Suzy's sister took Suzy to Sydney and introduced her to the cult Spiritual Australia. Suzy was going to 'church' for two years before I found out that this church had nothing to do with God or religion. It had to do only with money and sex. There are no prayers or religious ceremony.

A friend once said to me: If you don't want to pay taxes just get a few people together and organise a religion and you are free to collect tax-free money from them.

The groups of this cult meet all over Gold Coast. I told the police about their trickery but the police said that they know all about them but can't do anything because they are not breaking any laws. People join of their free will.

I attended one of the sessions with about fifty people. I told them that I am from Lightning Ridge and they told me that they have another lady from the Ridge in the group. That was my Suzy. They turned off all lights and made two circles. The outside circle pushed the inside circle towards the middle in the dark. The candle was lit and we were told to bring the money on the plate.

I also attended one of the meditation meetings. They hypnotised me in the dark room. A man was holding my hand and the woman was massaging my head. I woke up tired and wet from sweat. I was confused, dizzy and changed. For a long time after I had weird dreams about this same naked woman standing over me. After this meditation we were to choose our partners. A woman came to me. I told her that I am married but she told me that it does not matter and I can stay with her. They try to destroy marriages.

Suzy told me about her experiences through meditation. She said: I flew out of my body and into the beautiful paradise. I can still see it and smell the flowers. I have to put the deposit on that paradise or somebody else will take it.

The cult leaders knew that Suzy has a lot of money and they brainwashed her to give the money to them.

I told my children what their mother was doing and they said that I was crazy. We went together to visit Suzy. After dinner she told us that she is going to church. I told the children to go with her but they did not want to go. I wanted them to see for

themselves what it is all about. They asked Suzy but she laughed saying: Less has weird dreams.

Suzy was drinking more since we parted. The flagons made her go off. Our son said that mum is going mental. One day she trashed the house and had a fight with a neighbour over a high fence. Police took her to the mental hospital. She told the psychiatrist that her house was bugged and that people were spying on her. The doctor told her that she has nothing to hide and that nobody wanted to know anything about her. I told Suzy to tell the doctor about the cult and about those criminals that brainwashed her through hypnosis. People became depressed and suicidal after the meditation hypnosis. I found out by myself how they make you crazy. I signed the hospital form saying that Suzy's family will be responsible for her wellbeing and they let her go.

Suzy found out that I went to the police and she blamed me for putting her into the hospital so I could sign her out to go with her family. She came with us and stayed with our daughter for awhile but the pull of the cult was stronger than her family. She left suddenly and joined them again.

Our children told their mother that she has to choose between them and the cult so she left the cult but our children were not strong enough to stand up to the cult and up to their mum. Our daughter Melanie was very upset but she could not stop her mum. Suzy told her: Poor Les is dreaming.

I just spoke to Suzy's younger brother Jeff; he is about fifty and with all his education he does not seem to be getting anywhere. He is bludging for money all the time. He puts it through the poker machines. I can't understand how young people who are so smart and educated can't make a go of things.

Old people used to say that one generation builds the next one destroys and the next one begs. Maybe necessity really is a mother of invention.

We miners invented all the machinery we needed. We built camps out of nothing. We had no one to turn to, no relations, no connections, no education, no school friends no social security. We had to survive on our own and that made us strong.

My sons came with me to sell opal in America but they were reluctant to approach people. I think the new generation will never do as well as we migrants did. Young ones don't look for opportunities, they just don't have a go. I don't know if they are plain lazy or just have no ambition. I keep on looking and asking. People can only say no or go away or leave me alone but there is always a chance that once in a while one will say yes and there comes your chance. The young ones just don't use common sense; they have no ideas or initiative.

Kids these days don't think about the rainy day or old age. They live comfortably because they know that the government will provide or that they will inherit from their parents. They enjoy their comfort. We wanted them to be comfortable. I suppose we robbed them of the incentive; we took away the challenge.

Kids have every opportunity while we had to make our own luck. We lived on challenge. Our life improved every day. We were on perpetual high from the day we were born. How can our children compete with that? We became addicted to success. Now it is hard for us to slow down and see it all wasted by our children and grandchildren.

We conquered all the mountains. We dreamed of the time when we will sit on top, enjoy the view, smell the roses and drink champagne. We sit on top of the mountain now and wonder if it was all worth it. Maybe we should have left some hills for our grandchildren. Climbing the mountain was more exciting than comfort and luxury. We were scratching for survival. We are still scratching. We are also afraid of falling down from the mountain.

We, migrants, had to be twice as good as those born here because we had an accent. We had to pay for acceptance. We paid and felt stronger. We had an incentive. I suppose we got hooked on getting rich. And on being better. With nobody to rely on and nobody to interfere we became self reliant.

My friend's son said that failing uni turned to be his best experience. He had to find a job and a place to live. He was thrown in at the deep end as they say here. Everything you do becomes everything you are. He eventually finished uni while he worked.

Maybe we should not blame the kids for being relaxed. We made it possible for them to be comfortable. Still I wish they had more of a go. You never know how strong you are until you test your strength. Every time you fail at something you learn something. You learn to cope. We ran an obstacle race but we jumped higher every time. You learn what you need to know. You learn that it is easier to swim downstream, go with the wind, take risks and learn by mistakes. We are the war babies who really had to use our wits.

My father used to say: Everybody is your competitor. I was just a boy then and did not understand what that meant.

I remember other lessons life taught me.

The world is not against you; everybody runs for himself. Look for the shortcuts. Plan strategies. Build reputation, bank on it. Don't lose your cool. Seek free advice; acknowledge other people's input, use expert information; weigh pros and cons, make notes, place yourself in diverse scenarios. Don't cross bridges before you see them. Don't burn your bridges. Be kind to yourself. Forgive yourself for making mistakes.

These lessons helped me when I had nobody else to guide me. I learned the strategies to manage life.

I asked my friend the other day:

How are you?

Like a dog without a chain, he said. Lucky you, I said.

Not really, he said.

How is that?

A dog on the chain is fed and loved.

But you are free.

I can't eat freedom, he said. My friend never married, he has no responsibilities but he is not happy. As they say: You can't have your cake and eat it.



## Martin

Martin is over eighty and lives on his own. You remind me of the beautiful place I left behind, he tells me. The beautiful St Martin's mountain above my home is a pilgrimage and tourist destination and yet I chose to live in this godforsaken bush. Mum named me after St Martin because we lived under his mountain. Why did I ever leave all that behind? Martin sighs with a faraway look.

Why did you?

It is a long story, he says very quietly.

It isn't easy to like Martin but Joe felt sorry for the old Slovenian.

He is a mean bastard, said Stanko. He doesn't trust women so he blows himself a plastic lady to keep him company at night.

You don't know that, laughed Joe. He did not like derogatory remarks about his friend.

He has no friends because he is too tight to share anything with another person.

Maybe he was cheated too many times, said Joe.

Why don't you return home now? I ask.

The last time I was in Slovenia I walked with my father up St Martin Mountain. He showed me a place where in 1919 he picked blueberries with my mother in the forest. They were young lovers. My father was nineteen and mum was eighteen. They loved each other but dad's family did not want him to marry mum because his family was rich and mum came from a very poor family. Mum's mother bought a little wooden cottage and a little paddock on which mum produced most of our food. She also built a smoke-room in which she smoked meat for the restaurants.

When I was about four, mum married a handsome man but he was poor and he came to live in mum's house. I was a love child but neither my father nor my stepfather loved me. The court ordered my father to pay child support for me and he hated me because of it. He turned away when I met him on the road.

I remember mum sending me to dad's butcher shop to buy meat. She hoped that he would give me some extra but he never did. He turned away when I entered the butchery. When I was about eight years old Dad married a rich girl and they had twin daughters. Dad then asked my mother to let me live with him but she did not let me.

My father was a butcher and his two daughters, my stepsisters, have a butcher shop each in Ljubljana. Mum and my stepfather had eight more children and they worked hard to survive. My stepfather became a Shire treasurer. He was considered a good, hard working and well-respected man. I felt that he disliked me because he hit me all the time. He never let me go anywhere or do the things I wanted. When he hit me at the age of fifteen, I grabbed him and pinned him to the ground. I did not hit him but I told him that this was the last time he would hit me. I was a tall strong boy by then. From then on he never touched me but he tormented me verbally. Mum tried to protect me and that annoyed him.

I finished primary school and three years of secondary school before I began my apprenticeship as a cabinet-maker.

I always wanted to become an artist. I painted church domes with the artist Zeleznik. I wanted to study with him but unfortunately Mum could not pay for me. When I finished my apprenticeship I worked for two years until the war changed everything.

Slovenians became split in three groups.

The old Slovenian leaders, the prosperous business people, the rich farmers and those influenced by the church were afraid of Russian communists who wanted to change the society. They hoped to survive the war and continue as they were. Most later supported Domobranci, home guards who guarded their homes and their way of life.

Most poor factory and farm labourers welcomed the change. They had nothing to lose so they joined OF Liberation front, organised by Russian revolutionists, which promised to take from the rich and give to the poor.

We were a Catholic family and like many others interested in survival rather than politics.

Italians occupied Ljubljana but northern outskirts where I lived came under Germany. My two sisters just finished primary school when Germans took them to Klagenfurt to become Hitler's Jugend. They worked in the kitchen of the army barracks.

I was very sick with pleurisy and a chest infection at the beginning of the war so I did not have to join the army. When I went back to work in 1943 partisans took me during the night. In the morning mum reported to the German police that partisans took me during a curfew. Germans caught the partisans. As a revenge two partisans came next morning and shot my mother in the kitchen in front of six of her children. My youngest sister was two years old.

The younger of the two partisans who shot my mother was my school friend and a boyfriend of my sister. Later he realised what he had done and he hung himself.

Germans sent me to Klagenfurt where my sisters worked in Hitler Jugend camp. I got a job as a cabinet-maker in the same barracks as my two sisters. At the end of 1943 they sent me to the Russian Front. Grenades were falling all around me but young person gets used to everything. I was lucky. Once I picked a grenade that fell next to me but did not explode. I chucked it away. They were going to give me a bravery award for it. In May 1945 I got civilian clothes from a farmer and tried to return to Austria. Russians captured me and put me into a solitary prison. After a week they let me out to work for them. I escaped to Austria and found work in Klagenfurt where I worked before.

I met Justine who escaped from Slovenia with her Home-guard boyfriend who was returned home where communists killed him.

May 1945 was a miserable wet month. We were supposed to celebrate the end of the war but we were displaced and unwanted and starved. Millions of East Europeans begged to be sent anywhere but home. During the next couple of years Soviet Union more or less forcefully repatriated five million of their citizens; some were shot on arrival, some were sent to Gulag or exiled into Siberia. Some were used for forced labour. Just because they tasted the West they became contaminated. Immediately after the communist victory people realised that Stalin was a bigger evil than Hitler. Eastern refugees were ready to go anywhere rather than home. The displaced persons camps were maintained by UNRRA-United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration and many people just had no will to leave them.

I remember UNRRA parcels of tins and cheeses and powdered eggs, I say. We always celebrated UNRRA parcels.

Europeans expelled their German minorities and western compatriots mostly returned to their home willingly or emigrated overseas. A few German war criminals were judged and punished by a proper court but most of them were soon rehabilitated in their former political and economic positions. They were the ones who knew their jobs.

It was much worse for Eastern Block refugees. It was the time to settle the scores; to celebrate the winners and punish the losers.

Twelve thousands Slovenians poured on the fields of Austria and surrendered to the Field Marshal Alexander along with thousands other refugees. The world was tired of the war; they had to solve refugee problems quickly. Tito demanded the return of Yugoslav citizens. Sending refugees home was practical and sensible as far as British were concerned but sending them to Tito was a death sentence for these anticommunist refugees. They were tortured, killed

And buried in mass graves.

In 1947 Justine and I got married and applied to immigrate to Australia. We learned English for 31 days on a ship. We signed the contract to work for two years wherever they sent us. I asked to work as a cabinet-maker and they sent me to Sydney.

I worked in the Burwood hostel where we lived. Justine worked in a hospital as a cleaner. In two years we saved enough to buy an old house and we were very happy. I learned enough English to open a workshop with a wonderful friend from Africa. We worked together until he died five years later. After his death I expanded my factory and eventually employed eleven people making occasional furniture. I worked very hard as a manager-owner of the factory. I delivered furniture to the shops like David Jones and Mayer's. The lifting of the furniture was hard and I damaged my back.

I had to sell the factory and I opened the furniture shop in the hope that the work will not be as hard. I had to deliver things but I could not do the heavy lifting. I sold my second-hand shop in 1975 but Justine ran a furniture shop with other employees.

In my spare time I did inlay pictures in wood. I still have some beautiful works.

At that time I visited a Slovenian man Joe in hospital. He damaged his back while opal mining and could not walk. When he was released from the hospital I drove him to Lightning Ridge. He was married to an Aboriginal girl and sort of became part of the Aboriginal community. I lost touch with him later.

Bore bath helped my back. I went twice a day to soak in the hot water. For a few years I travelled to Sydney for therapy and back again into the bore bath.

Lightning Ridge became more and more attractive. Looking for precious gems seemed exciting. I also liked the company of the easygoing, friendly, honest miners. I returned to Sydney but the dream of the colourful gem and colourful life did not go away. I built a portable camp in Sydney and brought it to the Ridge. It was an escape from the pressures of my business and from hard work that aggravated my pain.

I finally sold my furniture shop and the land in the Blue Mountains during the nineties. I was happy to get rid of the worry and the problems. I built a house in Lightning Ridge and my wife moved up to be with me.

My health was not good. Justine also became ill and she died in 1998. I only own the house I live in now but even that is too much to take care of most of the time.

Soon after we came to Sydney I met other Slovenians and we talked about building a Slovenian club where we could meet and celebrate and have a Slovenian school. While I was off work with my bad back I searched around for a suitable land and found it. We collected donations from Slovenians and bought the land.

We built our Triglav club with voluntary labour at weekends. We elected the committee and the president. There were twelve of us permanent trustees, foundation members, to see that everything was running well. We opened the charitable organisation Triglav Community Centre so we did not have to pay tax if there were any profits from the club activities.

Soon after Slovenian priests Bazilij and Valerian began to organise the building of the religious centre in Maryland and later Slovenian clubs grew in every larger city of Australia.

Some Slovenians co-operated with the Yugoslav embassy while others congregated around the church.

Those that resisted the embassy were interrogated when they came begging for visas to go home.

As the foundation member of Triglav and its trusty I continued to work for Triglav but I watched out for any impropriety from the embassy. They offered the club many things in order to keep us friendly. They brought artists and books and music from Slovenia but in exchange they demanded to be our guests so they could keep an eye on us.

In 1980 I returned to Slovenia with Justine for the first time since 1943.

Dad's daughter invited us to stay with her and my father was there. At the age of sixty I spoke to my father for the first time. I saw Slovenia and my many relations for the first time after thirty-seven years. Since then I keep in touch with my relations.

Dad told me that he loved mum and that he was sorry that he did not marry her. He was also sorry that he ignored me when I was a boy.

Dad was born in 1900 and died in 1983. He was always a serious, businessman. People respected him and his family. His daughters helped him in the shop and later each of them opened their own shops.

There was poverty and misery when I left Slovenia but now Slovenians live comfortably. I could have had my own business and prosper there with them in Slovenia.

I am much like my father. I had little time for socialising. My business success gave me much satisfaction.

Mum was a happy, outgoing person. She was an honest, hardworking woman and people respected and liked her. Mum was not interested in making money.

Australia offered opportunity to migrants to make something out of their lives. The bank offered me as much money as I needed to open my business and I never had money problems.

Australia became my home. I like the warm climate and friendly people.

I became especially attracted to Lightning Ridge. The bore bath was good for my back, bush life offered freedom from pressures of the city life, people are friendly, and looking for opal gave me hope. Unfortunately my wife did not find happiness in Lightning Ridge. She missed her Sydney friends and city life. There are about a dozen Slovenians in the Ridge but they come from different backgrounds and don't mix well.

I am not a regular churchgoer but I have been doing the BBQ for all church functions during the last twenty years. The nuns and the priests have been good to me.

I haven't been well since my wife died but there are many people who look out for me.

I am happy that Slovenia became independent. I am grateful to Slovenians who stayed home and made the independence and democracy possible. I believe that Slovenians are more united and kind to each other now than ever before.

Slovenians resisted German rule for centuries. Now they are eager to be with Germans in the European Union. I suppose it is good for Slovenia to be in the company of the European nations but it makes one wonder. Why did Slovenians fight for independence for centuries? All our poets and writers and artist and politicians dreamed about the happy future when we will be our own masters. The wars and poverty and struggle seemed meaningful as long as there was hope and faith that one day Slovenians will rule Slovenia. It seems like we are throwing away what our ancestors died for. It seems that Germans will finally take over Europe. They did not succeed to do that with the wars but they seem successful with economy. I am really afraid that rich foreigners will buy Slovenia and keep Slovenians as slaves.

Things changed beyond recognition, I remind Martin.

The rulers re-educate the masses to believe what they want them to believe. There is a saying: Go for his balls and his heart and mind will eventually follow, says Martin.

Martin died soon after and left his assets in equal parts to different local organisations. The funeral service and the Catholic Church received their share. His many relations missed out. He wanted to change his will in favour of his family but his time ran out. Furious arguments followed.

Where there is a will there will be relatives, said Stanko.

There is much speculation as to what happened to the opal and cash Martin had hidden in the house. The funeral director bought Martin's house in the hope that he will discover Martin's hiding place and his treasures. He took most of Martin's furniture and personal belongings to the rubbish dump before he moved into the house.

Soon after Martin's death a young single mother, Jane, found some money on a rubbish tip. She brought it to the bank. Tim the bank teller apparently told someone about it and the story is doing the rounds of the town.

Where did you get this money, asks Tim twisting his nose.

Kids dropped it into a pot of stew by accident, apologises Jane. She is shifting her weight from left to right foot; her eyes are darting in all directions hoping that nobody she knows would be coming through the door. She simply did not prepare for interrogation.

It stinks, says Tim. He does not know what to do. Should he call the manager or the police?

You should have at least washed it.

I tried, stammers Jane. She regrets that she did not keep on washing the notes better but she was afraid to damage them.

Tim places the money into a plastic bag and hands Jane a receipt. Twelve thousand in green one hundred dollar notes turned sickly reddish from tomato sauce. Jane shines a grateful smile at Tim. Her mind is full of plans and dreams; this is her lucky break; this is what she was born for.

Is there really such a thing as divine intervention? She needs a lucky break since the bastard left her with two kids and no money. Thank God for Neighbourhood Centre that gave her food vouchers. The story spreads like stories do in a small town. People embellish it with every telling to make it more interesting.

Jane is scavenging at the rubbish dump for clothes when she sees a perfectly good pair of shoes a bit further away. She stretches over an old freezer and steps into an ice cream container. The contents spill over her feet. The smell of the reddish mess is revolting. She tries to wipe her feet with the newspaper when she notices a plastic bag full of hundred dollar notes. Real money. She looks around anxiously. The freezer must have been full of money hidden in ice-cream containers under the foul smelling sauces spiced heavily with herbs and garlic. The mess is dripping over her legs as she tries to reach a pile further away but the bulldozer is pushing the rubbish over it all. She wants to scream but that would alert the driver and the tip keeper and she cannot trust them with her secret. She makes a note in her head where the rest of the containers are so she will return when the bulldozer stops.

The tip keeper threatens to call the police; health regulations prohibit scavenging or something. He stands over the mountain of rubbish like an almighty and Jane moves away before he could confiscate her stash. She will try again as soon as the tip keeper goes away. She remembers where there is another pile of ice-cream containers taped over the top with the labels of foods. She is watching from the bushes as the tip keeper turns into his little shed to make a cup of tea and have a smoke. Jane hides her bag under the bushes and climbs towards her treasure from the opposite side over the old fridges and mattresses; she keeps her head low and her eyes on the man. I should have put the shoes on instead of thongs, she realises when she cuts her foot on a broken glass. She wraps a hanky over the bleeding wound and crawls ever closer to her treasure. Tripe 7.2.07, says on one ice-cream label. The other one says: goulash 7.2.07. So the food is a month old, calculates Jane. Who would throw out a freezer full of prepared meals? Divorce? Death? Who died?

I'll think about it later, decides Jane as she reaches for another container covered by a mountain of rubbish. A sealed plastic bag under the food has hundred dollar bills at the bottom. She stashes the money into her bra. Feverishly she opens another container and finds another money bag which she stashes into her pants. The tip keeper is yelling; the bulldozer is again pushing an avalanche of rubbish towards her. Jane runs downhill, falls over and rolls into the bushes. She has no idea how long she has been lying there. There is blood on her hands; she must have hit her head as she rolled down the hill. The loud bird calls break the silence. Jane realises that it is time to pick her children from school but she needs a wash before anyone would see her.

She walks slowly to her camp. She cannot risk to be seen by anybody so she waits for the darkness.

Eli and Danny are already home playing in the old wreck of their car. Jane crouches next to the water tank to wash herself and check the damage. The bleeding stopped on her foot; there is an ugly scratch on her face; her knee is grazed.

Sally must have told her good luck story to someone who could not keep the secret. In a small town any story is retold until it becomes too big to be believed. Some are saying that Martin kept the money in his freezer for safety. If he put it in the bank apparently he would not qualify for a pension. Nobody ever found out for sure. People say the new owner of Martin's house threw out the old freezer full of food before he moved in so most people believe what they are inclined to believe.

If you don't believe it, you won't understand it.

St Augustine

Sheref

Sheref is a local mechanic. His white beard reaches to the middle of his chest and his dreadlocks reach his waist. He richly oils and perfumes his hair; he bows low and extends both hands in greeting; he lightly kisses my hand saying: my teacher. He used to come to my class when I used to teach English to the migrants.

Big silver rings decorate most of Sheref's fingers. Despite his ornamentations he does not present any danger to Lightning Ridge men. What woman in her right mind would ever dream of going to bed with this old Muslim? Everybody talks about Muslims being a danger to the world peace but I like to listen to Sheref's understanding of the world and life in general.

I was born in a small Eastern Turkish town seventy years ago, tells Sheref. Allah keeps me young and strong. I have never been sick. People often ask me what is the secret of my fine health and I tell them: believe, believe, and believe. Believe in justice and righteousness. Follow Allah. Look at yourself in the mirror and ask yourself if what you are doing is right. My job is to serve Allah. I pray to Allah regularly and ask for his help to be righteous. I am rich because I have a peace of mind, health and belief in God.

Australians don't believe any more. In the olden days Christians closed their shops and hotels for Christmas and Easter to worship God with their families in their churches. Now the trade is best on feast days and weekends so the trade became more important than worship. They spend these feast days in the clubs and hotels. I came to Lightning Ridge to bring Allah here. I have a model of a mosque on my table and I pray to the merciful Allah to make Lightning Ridge into second Mecca. I believe that in not too distant future there will be a real mosque in Lightning Ridge. I am from a leading Turkish family of shahs. My eleven brothers and sisters live all over the world. The World book of Sancars shows where the members of my great family live. There are 13 members of my family in Australia. Most Sancars migrated to Germany but they can be found all over the world. My father was a railway stationmaster. My two grandfathers were shahs of their villages with their own systems of government. They were upstanding men and also the religious leaders of the village. My family moved to the East of Turkey where traditions are still observed.

I learned from my grandfather never to be afraid because Allah is looking after us. Once during an earthquake people ran away but my grandfather told me to prostrate myself on the ground and pray to Allah. We were saved. People came from far around to seek the wisdom from my grandfather.

Many people in modern Turkey are not true Turks. True Turks came from Turkistan, which is a vast area now divided among many Asian nations.

I used to march on ANZAC day with the Turkish flag but some people did not like that. I wanted to show people that Turks also fought for peace. Young Australian boys came to Turkey to fight for England. Turkish boys were forced to fight for Germany who wanted to rule over Turkey. Now we both celebrate the memory and the peace. I left Turkey in 1963 and went to Germany and opened a mechanical workshop in Shlesgitter. Australia was recruiting migrants at the time and in 1972 I migrated to Australia. In 1973 I met a Frenchman who invited me to go with him to Coober Pedy.



I was to look after his machinery and have ten percent of opal he found in the open cut. He had a huge open cut and he found much opal. Once he found a huge opalised fossil fish. When he came on big money he kicked me out so he did not have to share it with me. I returned to Sydney where I had a car repair business in Parramatta. I met Roman and he brought me to Lightning Ridge. I opened the workshop and named my business the Wrestler because I used to be a wrestler. In 1991 Roman's sons drilled on the opal mining exploration lease in Coocoran field. This area was leased out five times before but nobody found opal. I prayed to Allah that they find opal. I pegged a claim on the lease and went to register the field as Allah's Rush but authorities insisted on naming the field Kelly three. Their representative came to inspect the field and rolled the car. Allah was not pleased. The mining department then agreed to register the field as Allah's rush. My friend drilled a hole and placed a sign Allah Rush on it. I put a plaque at the base of the sign to thank Allah for his goodness and generosity. People celebrated because Allah the merciful helped to find the richest opal field in Coocoran. There were buckets of opal in my claim but Peter and Marko jumped my claim, put the blower on it and sucked the opal out. The big court case followed and we agreed to split the claim in half. They gave me a bucket of opal to sell. I sold it to Linda for 2700. I gave them 2500 and for 200 I bought T-shirts with the sign Allah's rush printed on them to give to my friends. I had a hole drilled into the solid ground but when it bottomed I found a ballroom underneath. A neighbour came from underneath and took all the opal out. I complained to the Mineral Resources office but my neighbour was a friend of the inspector and I could do nothing. The men in the office always come first. They cash on their knowledge. I found a partner, Tom, and we used a tunnelling machine to dig. You cannot check the dirt when you are tunnelling and the person who washed the dirt stole whatever opal was there. Many got rich on Allah's rush but I didn't. The miners, who cheated me, were punished. Marko and Peter died while I am still here soldering for Allah. The wealth did not bring them happiness but my faith brought it to me. I sponsored the Goodooga all girl touch football team called Allah's rush and they were the clear winners too.

Allah says that everybody has to do whatever little one can to destroy corruption and bring justice to the world.

Be careful whose hand you shake because there are few honest friends around. Your first friend is bread, the second friend is health, and the third is Allah.

Mohamed was a smart man. He was a fighter, a businessman and a teacher. He said: If you want to survive on Earth one hundred years as an animal you must try to live at least one day as a human being.

The world is corrupted and Lightning Ridge is no exception. You feel sorry for a hungry little dog and feed him but when it grows it bites you. We elect people to represent us but once elected they only represent themselves and look after their pockets and their greed. They search for you when they need your vote but forget you as soon as they are elected.

There are over 200 000 Turks in Australia. They meet in their clubs, restaurants, nightclubs and mosques. Turks are not Islam but Islam grew with Turks. Turks spread Muslim faith. Mohamed himself said: I am Arab but Arabs are not for me.

Laurence of Arabia said: I can deal with Arabs but I cannot bargain with a Turkish soldier. It means that Arabs are treacherous and would deal with anybody, sell and buy without principles. One can trust a Turk but never an Arab.

Muslims produce hashish but they do not use it, Afghanis produce heroin but not use it. It is the dealers who are getting rich from it not the poor growers of cannabis or poppy seeds.

Criminals know how to use poor people. They elect their representatives and through them rule the world.

I was married six times. I married the first wife at the age of fifteen and had a child at sixteen. In Turkey a boy meets a girl and then his parents go to the girl's parents to ask for the girl to be their son's wife. The boy and the girl cannot meet on their own before they are married. The boy's parents have to give money or some other valuable thing like a sheep to the girl's parents so the girl's parents can buy a dowry for their daughter.

I don't tell the secrets about my marriages. As long as I keep the secret I control the secret but as soon as I tell it, my secrets control me. I only tell my secrets to people I trust. If I fail to tell the secret to the woman who becomes my wife, she will find out and my face will be darkness before her. The Imam comes to your home and registers your marriage by the Koran but you can also register your marriage in a registry office. If you divorce your wife by Koran you just tell her that you are divorcing her. Muslim way is not to hit a woman but you divorce her if she does not obey or does not show respect. A woman must never cross the path of the man. If she sees the man coming she must stop and let him pass. A woman is also free to divorce her husband. If a woman is unfaithful to her husband he must kill her and her lover. Most widows rarely remarry. The government looks them after. If the couple has no children it is up to a man to establish whose fault it is. The wife must allow her husband to prove himself with another woman. If the second woman does not have children he can try it with two more women before it is established that the fault is with him. A man can have more than one wife if he can afford it but these days few men can afford it.

In the days before Islam women were sold on the bazaar but Islam teaches that women have to be protected and respected. Man can marry many women to take care of them.

In Turkey most girls go to girl's school. A Turkish woman is the boss in the house and she can do as she likes as long as she shows proper respect for her husband.

The modern Turkey outlawed the fez, the head covering of a man and a pecha, the covering of a woman. Modern Westernised Turkish woman does not have to be covered but in my part of Turkey East of Ankara women still wear Pecha and thatch. Pecha is the covering of the mouth and thatch is the decorated covering of the top of the head. The eyes and the nose are always uncovered. Women wear a long modest dress.

Turkey has no pension or social security for unemployed. The family has to provide for their children, their old people and for those that have no work.

My two sons live in Sydney with their families. They are non-believers.

I have more children in Europe but I never look back. You cannot go ahead if you look behind. People spend too much time thinking about things that had gone by. I believe in Allah and go forth. Allah gives me power to go straight. I pray five times a

day in my special room. I pray for justice. Allah created the world for everybody and told men to rule the world; he said that it is better to work than to pray.

A couple of Pakistani shop owners and I are the only people in Lightning Ridge who pray regularly and follow Muslim faith. I observe religious laws, eat no pork, observe Ramadan and abstain from alcohol.

Muslims in Turkey celebrate Curbum Bajram, which is the remembrance of Abram's sacrifice on the mountain. God told Abraham to spare his only son Isaac and instead sacrifice the lamb. Muslims kill the lamb in remembrance of that day; they share the meat with their neighbours and friends. In Australia meat does not mean much because we can have it every day so we make other sacrifices. I make donations to the mosque in Sydney.

Every year Muslims observe a month of Ramadan. I don't eat or drink or smoke or make love during the daylight hours of Ramadan. At the end of Ramadan I feel rejuvenated, purified and happier. To me belief is a very personal relationship to Allah. Muslims don't confess to a man we confess to Allah. Every Muslim, who can afford it, should make Hajj, a religious journey to a holy place once in a lifetime but Hajj is no good if you cheat someone or don't help someone near you first. Hajj 2001 was a pilgrimage to the mount Arafat from which Mohamed gave his last sermon before he died.

Muslims don't force their religion on others; we respect other beliefs. Christians, Jews and Muslims have one God, the God of Abraham. We believe in Ten Commandments and the life of Jesus. Muslims believe that Mohamed was a messenger from God.

Some religions say if you don't do something God will not love you. This is wrong because God loves you always. Some leaders of religions want to own God and use him to promote their power over people.

There is much trouble at present in the world. The international bankers manipulate the world affairs. They helped install Saddam Hussein in Iraq and then they killed him. They installed Bin Laden in Afghanistan and now they killed him. They created Israel and now there is war in the Middle East. They supported Mubarak and now they are telling him to go. They forgave Gaddafi now they killed him. It is all CIA's work; they are all agents of CIA.

Palestinians and Jews are children of Abraham and should live in peace together. Hebrew religious Jews want to live in peace with Palestinians. They want to please God. The non-believing Jews and black money makers manipulate the innocent people. Arab oil magnates and American bankers are in charge of the world order and whatever they do, they do it to suit their purpose. Suicide bombers cannot fight with inferior technology so they forsake their lives.

People did not have war for a long time so they became careless and they forgot that they need God.

I believe that Australia should not get mixed up in other country's problems.

When I was young my sister came to complain about her husband beating her. My father told me to fix him. I hit him hard. My sister went back to him and both of them hated me forever because I got mixed up in their business.

The outsiders should teach and negotiate but stay out of what is none of their business. The big powers pretend to be doing something so they can spend billions for

security. They know very well if anyone wants to destroy the world they can do so despite their security.

I once gave a child a dollar to ask his teacher this question: Which runs faster: a horse or a donkey? Everybody says a horse but I tell you the one that is pushed the hardest runs fastest. The one that is hurting the most will keep on going.

Someone once asked a little bird: why do you fly up and down and this way and that. There is a lot of shit falling all around and I try to avoid it, said the bird.

Mohamed once said: whoever conquers Constantinople will be a great leader. When Ottoman's army advanced, the Sultan promised not to destroy Christianity but make it one with Muslims.

A wise Sultan was only eighteen but he was very popular and people brought him flowers. He pointed to an old man and said to people who brought him flowers: Give flowers to my teacher.

Mohamed taught us that we must give credit to our teachers.

It is rather unfortunate that people become wise and old at the same time. When they know what should be done they can no longer do much, I say.

That's why God ordered children to listen to their elders, says Sheref.

We are all in the gutter but some of us are looking at the stars.

Oscar Wilde

Alex

My story is written in cement, says a shabby looking toothless middle aged man pushing his old bike up the hill. I bring my friends to see this unique bush astronomer who likes to tell about his life and work.

I built the Bush Universe observatory from 1983 until 1998. On the steps of the Observatory I wrote in cement my story and the story of astronomers who were persecuted and wrongfully punished like myself.

I was born in Jablonka, Poland in 1933. I migrated to Australia in 1970.

In 1978 I was robbed and bashed. The police found me and the dead woman in my flat. I had no money, did not speak English and had no one who could speak for me. I was found guilty of murder and was sentenced to eight years imprisonment, which I began to serve in Bogga Road prison in Queensland.

After a couple of years a journalist became interested in my case. After four years and six months he proved my innocence and I was released.

Did you get compensation for wrongful imprisonment, I ask. These days you get compensation for everything.

In those days nobody asked for compensation, says Alex. I came to Lightning Ridge to get away from people. I grow my fruit and vegetables and build the monument to those who, like myself, have been wrongfully prosecuted. I was always interested in astronomy but had no opportunity to study at home. I have lots of books about astronomers who were persecuted and prosecuted for their beliefs and for daring to tell the truth. I am no longer alone because I know that they also suffered. They never got compensation either. I wrote in cement what I know about the sky and universe and about the people who also loved to study the Universe.

I created my own oasis in the desert because I needed a place where nothing would disturb me.

Gas fridge exploded in Alex's caravan and he died in the fire but his simple sentences in broken English on the steps of his astronomy towers tell tourists more than any eloquent eulogy would.

And though I have all faith so that I could remove mountains and have not charity I am nothing

The Bible

Pieter

I met Pieter at the church gathering. Everybody knows him as Peter The old Dutchman who rides his bike. He is the oldest man in town but he still works at St Vincent's second hand shop and helps the poor and old. He tells me about Netherlands. Netherlands is a small but prosperous north European country where about 140 nationalities live in harmony. The land is flat and rich. Although only five percent of population works in agriculture, it is a major exporter in dairy products, chocolates and flowers. The highest mountain is only 321 m tall but Dutch are the tallest people in Europe.

Almost half of the country is under sea level but Storm surge Barrier protects it from flooding.

The country is known for the international court in The Hague, for the biggest seaport Amsterdam and for the famous artists like Rembrandt and Van Gogh and Van Dyke.

By 17th century Netherlands was the biggest commercial maritime power. They established trading stations in Java, South Africa and America. The traders established the Dutch East India Company, which later took over the government of its lands. When it went out of business the lands came to Dutch government.

English and Dutch became colonial rivals and in the conflict Dutch lost New Amsterdam and North America.

In 1940 Netherlands declared neutrality but Germans invaded it.

In 1942 Japanese invaded Dutch colony of Indonesia and after the war Indonesia became independent with Sukarno as the first president. Dutch army returned prompting a war for independence and in 1949 Dutch gave up and left Indonesia.

I was born on 26.12.1917. As a child I lived in Madijun in the middle of Java and in Surabaya and later in Jakarta the capital of Indonesia, Peter begins his story.

Indonesia consists of over 120 000 islands of which less than one thousand are inhabited. Australia's landmass is four times that of Indonesia but Indonesia has ten times as many people. Indonesia is a hot humid country because it is close to the equator and is surrounded by water.

My father arrived from Holland to Indonesia which was Dutch colony in 1913. Later he married my mother by proxy and she joined him in Indonesia. He worked for the Dutch government as a railway builder. I went to Dutch school in Indonesia. Children of mixed Dutch-Indonesian races and Dutch children would go to school together but I don't remember that there were any Indonesian schools for Indonesians. The official language in Indonesia was Dutch. I don't know if a written Indonesian language even existed at the time and I never saw any Indonesian literature.

Even when Indonesia became independent the university in Bandung taught in Dutch. Lecturers from Holland went to teach there. At the time Indonesia had no terminology for the technical language. At present Dutch is no longer used in Indonesia.

My father was strict about my studies. After primary school I attended high school in Holland and did a mechanical engineering course. At high school we learned the modern languages like English, French and German.

Dutch, as the rulers of the Indonesia had a very privileged life; life was very carefree for us children. We played and participated in sporting activities. During the long school holidays my parents hired a house in a small village in the mountains where we went for bushwalks and horse-rides. On our walks we noticed the difference between the city people and those in the country.

Sometimes I saw village people coming towards us. When they saw us coming from some distance they sat on the side of the road and bowed to us reverently when we passed and then they went on their way. It showed that they respected us. We were thought of as above the indigenous people but we felt that they also appreciated us. We saw that more in the county than in the city. Indonesians were labourers and Dutch were overseers.

We had servants who looked after the household chores. We had native cooks, washerwoman, gardener and the baboe, which means Indonesian woman who looked after the children. We talked Indonesian with baboe. They were affectionate towards us. With natives I spoke Malay and Indonesian but I forgot most of it now.

I played mostly with Dutch children but there was no conflict between the races. Everything was very organised and we had a good security system. If there was any trouble they sorted it out quickly. They destroyed in the bud any revolt or attempted uprisings. Indonesians tried to gain ground to establish their independence. They knew that they could not achieve much but sometimes they wanted to show their dissatisfaction with the government. There were killings. Some Dutch people slept with the revolver under the pillow but we were never threatened.

We went to Holland for one year when I was 8 in 1925. I went to school in Holland. We travelled by ship and I saw how other people lived as we stopped at many places on the way.

In 1932 it was the end of our Indonesian experience. Dad was recalled to Holland and pensioned off. He was just over fifty.

Holland was a big change for me and I did not like it. The climate in Indonesia is much more pleasant than in cold Netherlands. I attended a technical mechanical engineering school when the war broke out. I got a study leave and did not have to go into the army.

Germans invaded Holland on 10.5.1940. They were bombing our cities and Rotterdam was flattened to the ground. Hitler wanted to rule the world. Holland resisted the invasion but we only had an unorganised small army and were taken over in five days.

My family and most Dutch people were against Germans but there was a small Nazi party in Holland who collaborated with Germans. Most Dutch people despised them.

I was late for work on 6.6.44. I walked to Amsterdam and saw a news item on the board announcing that the allies are coming. Great multitudes of allied soldiers crossed the channel through the night. Germans were confident that they could resist them but allies managed to hold their ground. That was the dawn of our liberation. Allies could not get over the Rhine during the cold months of winter but in May 45 they liberated everybody.

Japan occupied Indonesia but Indonesian forces organised the independence movement and later Sukarno became Indonesia's first president. Sukarno was Dutch educated.

After the war I joined the Dutch army and was sent to Indonesia to fight against the independence movement but Indonesia became independent in 1949. Dutch still kept an army there to help Indonesians establish their own army and government. Dutch government wanted to remain on friendly terms with Sukarno's government specially since there were still Dutch companies in Indonesia and Dutch government had to protect them.

Indonesians also needed our help in establishing their economy. Some of us were asked to stay longer to help them with setting up the army and the government. I left Indonesia in 1950 and returned to Holland.

At the time there was a lot of publicity for emigration. Like most of Europe, Holland had to recover from the war and could not provide for its people. The government promoted emigration to South Africa, New Zealand, Canada and Australia. I decided to come to Australia. I read about this wonderful warm continent. Canada and New Zealand were too cold. Africa had apartheid and Catholics were not desirable because we consider all human beings equal.

I landed in Sydney in January 1951. I did not know anyone. The Australian government gave me some money to start me off and keep me going until I got a job. It was very easy to get a job anywhere. Australia was badly in need of workers. I learned English at school and refreshed it through the books. It takes years before you learn the language well but compared to others I was at an advantage. I also knew some French and German. I went to the technical college to learn welding. I worked in the truck assembly as a welder, and on the construction works.

In the Catholic weekly I found an advertisement for Thomas Aquinas academy in Sydney. Anyone who wanted to gain deeper understanding of Christian faith could attend. I attended courses on theology, philosophy and Scripture. Doctor Woodbury was the greatest teacher I ever met. He was well educated and a good presenter of knowledge; he spoke with authority and I felt that he spoke the truth.

I met my wife at the college and we got married in 1960. We have six children. I hoped that my family would be my greatest achievement but unfortunately my marriage did not work out. My oldest daughter was unruly and unmanageable; she ruined her life with drugs and lives in an institution. She can't work and is under medication. Other five children are leading good lives; they are hard workers, healthy and honest. They do not practice Catholic religion but they have their children baptised and may one day return to the faith.

My wife and I split up and I came to Lightning Ridge in 1983 when I retired from work. We did not want to sell our house so the family has a home to go to. I read an advertisement in the paper that a house was selling for nine thousand dollars in Lightning Ridge. I could afford that so I came to Lightning Ridge and bought it for 8000.

The first week I realised that the camp I bought was riddled with termites so I had to rebuild it completely with termite resisting timber. It was a big job for one man. Lightning Ridge was quite different then. There were no houses just camps on the opal fields. I never associated much with Dutch people because I was born in Indonesia and don't really consider Holland my home.



In Indonesia we had a Catholic church. In the congregation were also those natives that understood Dutch. Franciscan order of priests learned Indonesian and they held Indonesian service for those that did not understand Dutch. There was also a Protestant church but they were not as prominent as in Holland. There was no animosity between churches since we all lived in a foreign country.

I never returned to either Indonesia or Holland. I lost touch with friends in Holland many years ago.

I meet people through St Vincent's shop or the Catholic Church. My family were always practising Catholics. Being a Catholic means everything to me. Christ himself established Catholic Church. There were some undesirable leaders in Catholic Church in the past but so were in other churches. Other Christian churches are changing the rituals and the dogmas. Ecumenical movement is a good idea but we can't have a middle church, we can't compromise on dogmas. Catholic Church does not condone divorce and abortion. It demands the celibacy of the priests. There are many offshoots of Catholic faith because people sometimes want particular liberties and they rebel against the rulings of the Catholic Church. They want to live the life that is not acceptable to the Catholic doctrine.

I believe in the trinity and incarnation and the resurrection. I believe in sacraments. The Eucharist changes us into holy people. Catholic Mass is the re-enactment of Last Supper. Protestants believe that the Christ is present during the ritual of remembrance of Last Supper but we believe that the bread and wine are changed into the body and blood of Jesus.

If we start compromising on doctrines what will be left of the religion?

I studied Mariology and accept the Marian dogmas. Protestants believe that Mary was just an ordinary sinful person.

St Vincent's was established during the eighties. St. Vincent de Joe conference is a group of people that has committed themselves to help the poor. There are 250 branches in NSW. Lightning Ridge group is called Our Lady of Fatima conference. There are about a dozen members and we meet every fortnight. We visit the lonely, the old, and the sick. We look after the needy; we provide the money for their fares, food, electricity etc.

Some people get into a habit of asking for help so we advise them not to spend on gambling, smokes or alcohol. Most poverty is a result of people spending money the wrong way. Their greatest disadvantage is ignorance and the lack of training.

Sometimes people cannot pay for their prescription or buy new glasses. When someone needs to borrow money we ask the president to authorise any bigger payments. At least two people would have to agree and sign the cheque. The money from the St Vincent's shop goes to the diocesan office and is used as funds for St Vincent's conference works. People who die sometimes bequeath the moneys to St Vincent's and that is a source of our funds. All the work is voluntary.

About twenty years ago St. Vincent's conference decided to twin with another St. Vincent's conference in the third world and so help the poor and less privileged. Our twin conference is in Rimu in Sumatra. Indonesia is poor and conferences could not exist without our help.

Indonesia is predominantly Muslim country with only three percent of the population being Catholic. They have no social security and those that have no work are left at the mercy of the family and the charities like St. Vincent's.

I like history books specially the history of the Catholic Church and hagiography-the stories of the lives of the saints.

We have much in common, I say. I was brought up on the lives of saints.

## Drago

I was born on 28 October 1932 in Velika Mlaka near Zagreb in Croatia tells our friend Drago.

Dad's father was 25 years old when he was killed during WWI. Dad's mother was a washerwoman and was not allowed to keep her son with her so she left him in the presbytery where he grew up looking after the pigs and cattle.

From there, Dad was called into the army. He had an operation for a stomach ulcer at the age of 23. When he came from the hospital, the neighbours welcomed him home with a glass of brandy. He drank it, felt sick and died.

I was a year old and his only child. Mum and I lived with her mother.

My maternal grandmother was a very strong and influential woman in our family. She was one of twelve Brozevic children. Her husband, my Grandfather Lackovic, had worked in America. When he injured his leg and got some money, he returned home to Croatia and married my grandmother. They had one child, my mother, before he died.

Grandmother and her one-year-old daughter lived with the Lackovic family. They treated her badly so she left and took care of an invalid, Janko Hrvoje. When Janko died, he left her his little house and some land. That was our home.

Four years after Dad died, Mum married his friend, Ivan, who came to live with us. My grandmother told him that he had to take special care of me. They had two daughters – Maria lives in Canada and Mila in Croatia. I think my stepfather liked me better than his own daughters.

I enjoyed swimming and fishing in the river Sava. I played soccer with my friends but Mum and my stepfather were always after me to work in the fields. I finished primary school by the time war had started, and when I was 16, I got a job as an assistant machinist in a factory, Rade Koncar.

A year later, I got an engineering apprenticeship. The boss was very strict. I smoked, drank and chased girls, often coming late and tired to work. He did not belt me when I got into mischief but did chase me, and I ran like a rabbit!

The boss would yell and threaten me but I finished my apprenticeship and worked for a year before they took me into the Army in 1952. Groups of us soldiers drove Army trucks all over Slovenia with food supplies, ammunition, and officers as part of the training for the war.

The food was horrible and tasteless. Mostly it was cabbage – cabbage and cabbage with cornmeal or beans. On rare occasions, we found a small piece of meat mixed with the cabbage or beans. There was never enough food.

We loved Tito's birthday because we got tins of American Spam for dinner. For breakfast, we got 'Truman's eggs' that were powdered eggs sent to Tito by Truman, America's president. I suppose Americans wanted to keep Tito happy with food parcels so he wouldn't go begging to Russia!

We were building a brotherhood and unity for Tito's Yugoslavia so it was safer not to mention any nationality other than Yugoslav. Tito, who was born half Slovenian and half Croatian, believed that it was easier to rule united Yugoslavs rather than six warring nations.

The Communist rulers made us believe that religion and nationality were harmful, shameful, old fashioned, outdated and dangerous. People gradually learned to be scared and ashamed of nationalism, religion and of parents, who still practised religion and nationality.

Serbs were the most powerful and populated nation in Yugoslavia, and they tried to keep the other nations obedient. Most of the officers in the Army were Serbs. We knew who was who, although we never spoke about it. You wouldn't dare discuss these things. Serbs never discussed their plans with Croats. Publicly, we sang and danced to the unity and brotherhood but we whispered about Yugoslav dictatorship.

A Serb friend worked in Slovenia for 25 years and he married a Slovenian girl. When another Serb heard him speak Slovenian with his Slovenian family, he declared that he should be shot for betraying his nation. He was supposed to change his Slovenian family into a Serbian one!

Nobody went to church while in the Army. We were not told directly that we must not go, but they told us about reactionaries who went, and of people who were backward and believed in God. Even boys from religious families would not dare to go as they could be identified in uniform, and a soldier had no permission to change into civilian clothes. We had Sunday afternoons free but there was no afternoon church service.

Students and other young people were invited to build Brotherhood Road from the north to the south of Yugoslavia during their holidays. The government plan was to make young people of different nationalities mix, socialise, fall in love, form families and procreate Yugoslavs. United, assimilated and intermarried, these people would destroy the memory of the offending national identities.

Croatia and Serbia are the two biggest rivals for power on the Balkan Peninsula. Serbs and Croats were historic enemies, but after the war, they had to pretend that they had forgotten about the feuds of the past and their differences. Privately, Serbs dreamed of a greater Serbia. Privately, Croats dreamed of independence.

Serbs are Orthodox, use Cyrillic script, and have a Turkish history because Turks ruled them for centuries. Croats are Catholic, use Latin script and have been ruled by Germanic governments for centuries.

After the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the kingdom of Slovenians, Serbs and Croats was created in 1918.

In 1928, the Serbs killed the Croatian leader of the party in Parliament. As a response to that killing, Croatian, Ante Pavelic, and his colleagues emigrated to the West and organised an illegal group, Ustasi. They were the Croatian Elite Volunteer Army with special privileges much like SS in Hitler's Germany. Many Croats did not like Ustasi.

Ustasi means people who stand up and resist. They were fighting against Serb domination and they killed the Serbian King Alexander while he was in Marseille.

When Hitler attacked Serbia, Ustasi made a deal with Hitler to create an independent Croatia. Pavelic promised Italy the Adriatic Coast, and much of Croatia's land went to Hitler's ally, Hungary, as payment for Hitler's protection of Croatia. I suppose Pavelic tried to resist Hitler and Mussolini's demands but he needed their protection and arms to fight Serbian Cetniks and partisans.

After Army service, 1954 - 1957, I worked as a machinist in a toolmaking factory. In June 1957, I tried to escape over the Slovenian Alps into Austria. The Border Police caught me. I lied in Court when I said that I escaped because I had problems with my stepfather, had no accommodation and no job.

I had no criminal record so they let me go with a two-year good behaviour bond. The authorities sent me to another factory and I started to work the very next day. After nineteen days, I escaped again. I knew a friend, who worked with cattle transports to Germany. He cleaned the wagons and put lots of hay in the middle for cattle to eat on the journey.

He and I hid under that hay. Yugoslav and German inspectors checked the wagon before they sealed it. We travelled for 20 hours to Salzburg. When they opened the wagons on Sunday morning, we were in Austria!

As we moved out of the wagons, we saw people going to church, clean and fresh, while we smelled like cattle because we had slept with them. The stationmaster yelled at us in German to go and report to the police.

My friend and I bribed the labourers, who cleaned the wagons, and they helped us back into the hay ready to go on to Germany but the stationmaster called the police, and they took us to a refugee camp.

Many refugees were returned to Yugoslavia in those days. I applied to go to Australia. In December 1957, I got a passport and they took a load of us illegal emigrants to Genoa on the way to Australia by the ship, Aurelia.

There were about 1400 migrants, mostly escapees from some misery or other. I arrived in Australia in 1958. When I said that I was Croatian, Australians labelled me a terrorist and troublemaker!

When people from the former Yugoslavia arrived in Australia, they wanted to tell the world their nationality but nobody wanted to hear that there were five distinctly different nations in the Federation, and that Yugoslav is neither a language nor a nation.

We had to remain Yugoslavs even though we had escaped from Tito because we didn't want to be Yugoslavs! There were disputes everywhere if one of the migrants from Yugoslavia said that he was anything but Yugoslav. This was a great disappointment for most of us.

I arrived in Melbourne, and from there, went to the Bonegilla refugee camp. They sent me to pick grapes in Mildura where the farmer began calling me Charlie. Prince Charlie was an adorable little boy then so maybe Australians wanted us all to be Charlie, her Majesty's sons. I did not speak English so the least I could do was to be Charlie, and make it easier for Australians.

I met other Croatians in Mildura, and as soon as I saved my first one hundred quid, I discharged myself from the farmer and went with my new friends to Ingham in Queensland to cut sugar cane. This was the hardest job I have ever seen or done. They paid six shillings a ton but they kept sixpence a ton. In the end, I got those sixpences because I survived the whole season. We each cut four to five tons a day!

I moved to Wollongong and started working for BHP. After a year, I went to Cooma to look for a job with the Snowy Mountains Scheme. I began by washing heavy

machinery for the Snowy Mountains Authority until 1965, when I got a job with These brothers building the Tatangara Dam.

During our holidays, my friends and I travelled to Sydney to spend what we saved on girls, cars and drink. I smoked heavily. I returned to Khancoban and stayed until 1968.

In Sydney, I met a Croatian girl, Lucy, and we moved to Glen Innes. I worked in a Quick Freeze factory and she worked as a waitress. We bought a house, and later, we bought another one. We both wanted to stop smoking, and we stopped hundreds of times, but we always started again.

In 1972, we went to Lightning Ridge on holidays where we met many Croatians. When we ran out of money, we returned to Glen Innes and went potato picking for a month. I worked in the sun, bent down from morning till night, and all of a sudden, I felt a terrible pain in my head.

When I was an 18-year-old, I was playing soccer and another player hit me on the head by accident. I had a tremendous headache. An x-ray showed a burst blood vessel and a tiny drop of blood pressing on my brain. The doctor said that when the blood dried, the headache would stop. All was well until Lucy and I went to pick those potatoes in Glen Innes.

The doctor told me that I had to have an operation or I would die. It was successful except my skull sank on one side. I was very sick. I made a bet with Lucy that I would stop smoking.

She made up an official contract to pay me \$150 if I stopped for a year. She also tried to stop but couldn't, so she tried to catch me smoking. She had spies where I worked, and engaged her friends to watch me and tempt me but I never touched another cigarette.

Then Lucy refused to pay me the \$150. We argued. We argued a lot about other things as well, and in 1978, we split up. We had several court battles to settle the property and sold one house to pay the judiciary then sold the other and split the money.

The judge ordered Lucy to pay me out, \$25,000. She paid five years later. I think I won the bet though – I felt better not smoking and saved money that way.

I returned to Lightning Ridge where I became known as Charlie-do-Winchy because I welded winches or electric hoists as they are called. I also sharpened picks and points but got sick of it.

I am never short of friends because they come when they need me for some job or other. Friends also like to stay with me when I have a carton of stubbies, a cask of wine or a bottle of whisky. People tell me not to be so helpful but it's my nature. I often felt disappointment because friends were hard to find when I needed help.

I will be 70 if I live until my next birthday. I am still single. People have promised me generous wedding gifts so I keep looking for a bride. She would have to be a very special person and should not think herself better than I.

My home at the 3-Mile has become a Lightning Ridge landmark. People live left or right of Charlie-do-Winchy! Recently, I sold my home because I had decided to return home to Croatia.

When I got back to my hometown, I felt like I had come to another planet. I still had a house and some land, and my sister still lived there but I did not feel at home.

Lightning Ridge has become my home. I am with people who like me. I may have no family in Australia but am used to living on my own – I have no other home. Maybe other miners have no other home either.

People in Croatia complain about being poor but they drive new cars, they eat good food and have decent accommodation. They have an easier life than I have on the opal field. They have it like America at home now, but they still complain.

They say that they have everything on credit. I don't know why they keep on complaining. We don't do that in Australia. Or maybe we do. Maybe, we whinge all the time wherever we are.

While in Croatia, I felt a lump growing in my stomach. I returned to Australia because I had no medical insurance. A Lightning Ridge doctor told me that I had cancer. I had injured my heel a few years ago and it did not heal. When I went to the doctor, he diagnosed a melanoma.

It has spread through the lymph nodes into my blood stream, and I have a growth in my stomach. I had chemotherapy to shrink the growth but it has not helped. Every day, I get weaker and skinnier. The Bowling Club is renting me a room in town now, and the Club's manager has told me that he will organise someone to help me when the time comes.

I would give anything to be healthy. The Jehovah Witnesses took me to an herbalist and I bought lots. They bring me books about healthy living, and they read the Bible to me every day. I have made a Will and left everything to my sister and my niece.

I know that I will die soon. Most of my friends are at the New Chum Cemetery already. The rest have to wait their turn! We are all going to look for traces of opal while underground or maybe in Heaven, there is a lot of opal. Maybe a big 'red on black' (opal) is waiting for everyone, who did not find one on earth!

My doctor told me that I have a little comfortable time left and then he will try to make the rest a little bit less uncomfortable. I am really frightened!

I used to swear a lot but I don't swear any more. I would like to ask God what I have done to deserve my miserable life. I believe that God is cruel.

All my life, I worked hard and helped everybody. I never cheated anyone. Why is God punishing me? I lived in poverty and sickness and never had any luck. Now I am dying, a foreigner alone. I wake up scared many times every night.

I had read about the new medicines, Meganin and Broccolin, produced by some Croatians. I knew that I was grasping for straws but thought I had nothing to lose since I could not take my money with me. The medicines cost me \$600 for a month but my cancer continued to grow rapidly. I got skinnier and sicker every day so threw the medicines away!

I look like a skeleton. I wear a large shirt to hide my stomach that is growing because the tumours are getting fatter. All I have now is this cancer baby growing inside me, and whatever I eat is swallowed by it. I am afraid that people will take advantage of my sickness so I don't tell them that I am dying.

I would give anything for one more day, and I would do anything to be healthy again.

My doctor has suggested that I talk to the One above. I am only on casual terms with God but my sister, Maria, is totally involved in doing His work. She keeps bringing groups of Canadian visitors on the pilgrimage to Medjigorje to pray to the Virgin Mary, who appears there.

Maria is praying for me. She writes and she rings. I wish she would let me die in peace. I wonder why I have become so popular during my sickness. There are visitors coming all day, every day. Jehovah Witnesses come to read the Bible to me and the Catholic nuns come to visit. Friends tell me not to worry because God loves me.

I asked my friend Cilka why everybody is so nice to me, and she said, "When people feel that they are losing something precious, they begin to appreciate it more. We are afraid to lose you."

Possessions mean nothing to me anymore. I lent twelve thousand to a friend, Aldo. He promised to return the money in a month's time. He is having a ball with my money. He knows that i am dying; he probably prays that I will die soon!

I wish I had respected and appreciated my health more when I had it. It is the only thing that really matters.



## Peter

I was born in a Bosnia in May 1952. I came to Australia in March 1983, and to Lightning Ridge in 1990.

My parents were subsistence farmers. Bosnia has a mixture of ethnic and religious groups and is known as a synonym for conflict. About a third of Bosnia's population are Serbs. I am a Serb as are my parents, whose known ancestors came from Montenegro.

Most Serbs follow the Orthodox faith. Theirs is the Julian calendar that puts Christmas thirteen days later than the Gregorian or Catholic calendar.

Balkan Slavs intermarried, and in the past, lived without ethnic animosity or religious hatred, but WWII created lasting conflicts.

The Communist star first appeared in 1942. Serbs had to choose between the Communists under Tito or the Cetniks, a national army, under Mihajlovic. Serbian families were split and forced to fight on opposite sides. People did not know who to trust – they were terrified!

Communists took my grandfather's oxen. They promised to return them if his son would join the partisans. That's how my father became a partisan for a year. He saw partisans killing Cetniks, their own people. He refused to kill fellow Serbs and escaped to join the Cetniks.

Partisans provoked the Germans so citizens would join the Communist Revolution. The Germans then retaliated against civilian Serbs, and thousands died because the partisans had killed a few Germans. But the Communists did not care about the Serbs. They ordered people to forget their nationality and God, and become a new nation of atheistic Yugoslavs. Their aim was power after the War.

Tito was supported by the Allied Forces to lead Communist Yugoslavia that was made up of five nations and six republics. The sixth was Bosnia with its ethnic-religious mixture. Tito wanted to rule in peace so he enforced it!

Much has changed in the Balkans since I was born in 1952. I remember the fear and the whispering of older people during my early childhood. They did not even notice me but I remember their words. They wondered who was behind their troubles and who caused their poverty and suffering.

I hid behind doors and listened to every word. I tried to find meaning in the words I had never heard before. I sensed that what people were saying secretly to their relatives and friends was more important than what was spoken openly. Our elders talked about the world powers manipulating the Balkan nations against each other.

I lived at home until I finished primary school then went to Banja Luka and finished my apprenticeship as a fitter and turner. I became interested in politics, philosophy and sociology. I wanted to help make a better society so I began looking for answers.

Why were my people afraid and confused? Who was hiding behind the events that made people kill each other? Why were some people rich beyond my imagination while others suffered in poverty? Why do some people have all the power and others are powerless? Why does the West consider our people less intelligent and less important? Why do they insist on making decisions on our behalf?

At school, I learned that Tito was our best teacher and leader, but people whispered about him. We were known as a Cetnik family so we had to be especially careful in Tito's Yugoslavia.

My grandfather used to listen to Tito's speeches on the radio. He said that he didn't speak Serbian or Croatian. People concluded that Tito was not who he said he was.

I was about eight years old when I was chosen to participate in a nationwide relay to honour Tito's birthday. I ran home to tell Mum. I was so proud to be one of five children chosen but Mum didn't share my excitement.

"So they got you!" she muttered.

"Is that what I deserve?" asked my uncle.

I wanted to find out who Tito was, and who had made him Tito. I came to the conclusion that there must be an international interest to keep the Balkan nations fighting!

Yugoslavia began with three nations – Slovenia, Croatia and Serbia. Later, Macedonia and Montenegro were annexed. Montenegrins are Serbs and Macedonians are a mixture of Serbs and Albanians.

In 1963, Tito created two new nationalities – Bosnians and Muslims. During the centuries of Turkish occupation, many Serbs and Croats were forced to accept the Muslim religion. Tito declared the Muslims of Bosnia an official nationality and so isolated and united people of the same religion rather than nationality. Bosnians identified themselves as either Serbs or Croats.

At the age of 19, I began working in Slovenia. A year later, I went to Iraq to work as a mechanic. Many Europeans worked in Iraq. From Iraq, I went to Kosovo. We laid pipes for the water supply but Kosovo Muslims destroyed what we built. They were attacking Serbs and the Army had to look after us.

Kosovo is the predominantly Muslim region of Serbia. Kosovars began demanding independence so I returned to Iraq. Why did I have to escape from my own country?

When Tito died, he left a legacy that the Yugoslav nations would have to rotate the presidency every three years for the next 30 years, giving the different nations a chance to lead Yugoslavia. Tito did not want his personality cult to be diminished by another central leader, and that has created further conflicts and jealousies.

The Serbian leader, Milosevic, emerged. He wanted to keep Yugoslavia together and retaliated against Kosovo's Muslim separatists. He wanted to protect those Serbs living and working in Kosovo but did not follow the directions of the New World Order.

Then America bombed Serbia because they did not allow the Muslim terrorists in Kosovo to secede from Yugoslavia. We became lazy and didn't ask questions.

Who is in charge of the New World Order?

I read that world financiers known as Illuminati dictate to the world politicians. This organization was created in 1776. I believe that they have promoted and led all the world wars since. If they need a war they create one!

The global economy is in their hands, and they have control of the media and of industry. They have a plan to destroy national, political and religious authorities so they will become the only authority. They promise to replace old values, attitudes and

institutions with new ones that are based on honesty in an effort to make all people prosperous and happy.

People are frightened of chaotic madness. New laws and rules are created every day. People are no longer allowed to use common sense to make decisions for themselves. I believe that Illuminati wants people to become confused and frightened so they will look to them for guidelines.

Politicians, religious leaders, teachers and other respected leaders of society have been accused of crimes. I wonder if this is how Illuminati plans to destroy existing authority?

The International Convention on the Rights of Children says that their parents should not indoctrinate them. I cannot understand why people allow an international elite to dictate how to bring up their young.

My mother's father was called into the Army Reserve in 1939. When Germans invaded Serbia, they took him to Germany as a POW. In 1948, he came to Australia as a war refugee and lived and died in Brisbane. He brought out the rest of my family.

My mother and father arrived in Australia in 1970 but returned to Yugoslavia in 1975. My two sisters remained. I came legally to visit my relatives, and I liked Australia. Life is much easier here than in Serbia, especially at present, but my soul is not in Australia. My friends are not here, and social events do not exist for me.

There are no traditions or festivities that warm my heart. At home, people sing and dance, they walk along the street to meet friends and relatives – they make each other feel alive. Economically, we are well off but spiritually, I feel poor.

In Melbourne, I worked as an itinerant, casual employee, mostly with other Yugoslavs. It was easier for me to be among my own people but in the long run, I missed the opportunity to learn English.

Lightning Ridge was especially attractive to me because there are so many migrants. Over 100 Serbian men and about 20 Serbian women live here. About 10 Serbs came to Lightning Ridge during the Balkan War in the 1990s.

Together, we built a club close to the Bore Baths – most of us like to soak in the hot artesian waters. We brought the old Anglican Church onto the block and renovated it. This is our little Serbia.

Once, someone wrote 'Tito's Yugoslavs' on the telephone pole. The person who wrote that didn't know that most of us had escaped from Tito's Yugoslavia because of Tito. Western nations always think of Serbs as Communists. Our people were afraid to say how they hated Communism and Tito!

I met my wife, who is Hungarian-born, in Yugoslavia so we spoke Serbian at home, and I have three daughters. Unfortunately, I am separated from my family and only see them occasionally.

I aim to teach my daughters not to take things at face value – I would like them to question every decision they make.

## Gustav

I was born in 1950, the third of the five children, in a small town on the river Olza near the Slovak border. My father was a coal miner and Mum looked after the children.

When the Germans occupied Czechoslovakia, my father had to serve in the German Army. After the War, he was captured by the British Army and became a POW in Denmark. He felt very lucky that the Russians did not get him because they sent most of their POWs to Siberia!

When the Communists came into power, my father had to join the Communist Party. He built a house in our town where my family still lives. My parents are church-going Catholics but I was never religious. I am not saying that I don't believe in God but churches place too many restrictions on my life.

As I grew up, I loved to read books about travelling to other countries. I especially remember a book about Hanzelka and Zigmund's travels to South America and Africa. I loved their adventures. I dreamed about seeing the world but I realised that it would never be possible while living in Communist Czechoslovakia.

Nobody was allowed to prosper enough to be able to take a holiday like that. Communism didn't allow you to open a private business or earn more than what you needed to survive from one pay to the next. You were not allowed to speak your mind or to try and change things.

After primary school, I finished agricultural college. I worked for a few months before I was called into the Army. They put me in a Border Patrol that gave me the opportunity to escape into Austria. If the Austrians returned me or if I got caught, I would get a minimum of four years in jail. I was sentenced to three and a half years in my absence.

I was in a refugee camp in Vienna when I learned that Australia readily accepted migrants. I was happy to go to a different country and experience new adventures. I arrived in November 1970.

After a couple of days, I got a job at BHP, Newcastle. I worked with Czechs in the blast furnace, a dusty, hot work place, and a different job to what I was used to. I spent my first happy Christmas with Czech families in Australia.

I lived in a camp and could save a bit of money. I needed a holiday so bought a car and headed north. I had heard that a man from home lived in Darwin. It was a dry winter and the weather was very pleasant for travelling.

On the way back south, I stopped at the Coober Pedy opal fields and tried my luck at opal mining but did not find a fortune. In fact, I ran out of money so sold my car and travelled with a friend to Port Augusta, where I caught a train to Sydney.

I started work at General Motors Morris. When I got bored, I flew to Darwin and found a job in the Forestry Department work shop. The pay wasn't good so I joined a friend, who was going out to Nhulunbuy on the Gove Peninsula in the Gulf. I got a job with Nabalco in the aluminium plant. Luckily, I moved out of Darwin just before Cyclone Tracy destroyed it, Christmas 1974.

Nabalco provided board and good pay. I saved enough to send my parents the money to buy a car. I also bought a plane ticket to Sydney and began a nine-month adventure. This was the highlight of my life!

I wanted to go to Rio de Janeiro for Carnivale but stopped in Tahiti and Peru en route. There was a revolution and a curfew in Peru. I wasn't allowed to travel for ten days so I missed the festival in Rio. I went through Bolivia and Brazil and stopped in San Paolo. I saw the Incas' Lost City of Cusco.

I met many young backpackers and we travelled by bus together. In Ecuador, I met a Canadian man, and five of us paddled a locally made tree canoe down the Amazon River. We reached the Indian Territory in the Amazon jungle where it was too dangerous to go any further.

I wanted to go to North America to see my uncle's family in Chicago but could not get a visa so went to Toronto, Niagara Falls and Montreal instead. From Canada, I flew to Morocco. I bought a small motorbike and headed for Madrid to see the bullfights.

I travelled by motorbike through Portugal to France to see the Eiffel Tower. I went through Belgium, Holland and Sweden to Germany. They did not allow my little bike in the big tunnel so I took Hannibal's trail over the Alps near Italy. There was snow, and the road was often too steep for my bike so I had to push it.

I was afraid to go home because I would go to prison for escaping. I got to Vienna, rang my parents and asked them to meet me there. They told the Czech authorities that they would try to get me to return home so, after a month, got their passports, and we had our happy meeting in Vienna.

From there, I travelled through Italy to Greece where my bike finally broke down. I took a bus to Istanbul where I met some young people, who were going through Asia by train. Some went to see the world while others only wanted to get cheap drugs. We went through Iran, Pakistan and into India where I visited the beautiful Taj Mahal.

Asian countries are interesting but poor, and the food is bad. In Bangkok, I met a Polish man from Australia and we travelled to Singapore then back to Darwin together. I started to work for the Forestry Department again but I soon met friends, who were rebuilding Darwin after the cyclone. They gave me casual building jobs and told me about Lightning Ridge.

In 1976, I went to Lightning Ridge to mine for opal. When I got to town, I found out that there was no money in my account. I had counted on still having a few hundred dollars. I had no money, no food, no car and no accommodation.

I turned to other Czechs and asked for jobs to earn my keep. I met a Slovak opal buyer, Joe, and began to mine with him on a percentage basis. He provided spending money and paid all the mining expenses. We worked at Carter's Rush, where everybody around us found lots of opal but we found nothing.

In six months, we did not find enough to pay for the food we ate. Later, we mined at New Year's Rush and found enough to be comfortable for a couple of years. I worked with Joe's machinery while he was cutting and buying opal.

In the meantime, I went sapphire mining and travelled around but Lightning Ridge always called me back and became my home.

In 1991, I returned to the Czech Republic. Communism had collapsed and I was no longer afraid of having to go to jail. There, I met a woman, who had been a little girl when I left home. She was practically our neighbour and still lived next to our house.

She was divorced but had no children. We married and she gave me a son. I spent most of the time with her for the next four years.

Then, I decided that I could no longer live in the Czech Republic. My wife decided that she did not want to come with me to live in Australia. Besides, her parents and my parents did not like each other. She still works as a dental assistant and lives with our son.

People in Europe live different lives and they think differently. If I were rich, they would expect me to give expensive gifts. If I gave everybody an equal amount, each would think that he deserved more than the others. If I gave more to someone, others would be jealous.

They judge a person only by the amount of money he has. If I told them that I was poor, they would look down on me and think that I had failed in life. If I told them how much money I had spent on my travels, they would say that I was showing off.

These people wouldn't understand that I had enjoyed my adventurous life. They would have to live many lives before they could experience everything I have. Perhaps I should have saved some money instead of spending it on travel but I enjoyed it, and I am not sorry.

Lightning Ridge is the best place in the world for me. There are many beautiful places in Europe – I especially love Alpine country – but no other place offers you the freedom to be whoever you want to be, and to do whatever you want to do, when you want to do it.

Lightning Ridge means the whole world to me. There are interesting people from every corner of the world. Nobody looks down on anyone else, and everybody has an equal chance to find opal.

When I ran out of money, I found some casual work to keep me going. When unemployment became a problem across Australia, social security payments became available to those that had little luck with opal. You may get enough money to survive but not really enough for mining expenses. Most miners are on unemployment benefit.

Many miners work on a percentage basis for those who have machinery and can pay for the fuel and maintenance. But, unfortunately, Lightning Ridge has changed for the worse since I came in 1976.

In those days, miners trusted each other. They showed you their opal. There was no ratting or stealing. There were fewer breakdowns when we had less machinery. When someone found a good parcel, they invited the whole town to a BBQ and showed their opal.

These gestures renewed your hope that one day you too would be so lucky. Miners were a big family then. Since social security provides for those who cannot find opal, miners are afraid to show what they do find.

## Wlodzimier

Australians could not pronounce my name so I made it easier for them by shortening it to 'Vodek' as soon as I arrived in 1982.

I was born in 1953 in a small Polish village. My mother was a teacher and my father was a coal miner. I had two sisters. My mother was a practising Catholic and my father was a practising Communist. I consider myself lucky because I never experienced the suffering of War, and I always had enough of everything.

I finished agricultural college but I began a career as a dancer and singer with a professional folk dancing and singing group. We travelled and performed around the world for ten years. Singing was my life – I was doing what I enjoyed. I met Roma, who was also a member of the performing group. We got married and have a daughter.

In 1981, there was great political unrest in Poland. The Solidarity Movement was reaching a point of no return. It became inevitable that the government would be overturned. People were afraid that Russian troops would invade Poland. This would create bloodshed and uncertainty.

I was afraid for my daughter and did not see a positive future in Poland for my family. I also wanted to change my career. Travelling and performing every day was a hard job. We had been to many countries but we had seen very little as we travelled from one city to another, mostly at night. I would have to retire from the performing group at 42, so I needed some other experience.

In our travels performing, Roma and I loved Canada and wanted to live there. We applied for a visa to go on holidays to Austria, and from the refugee camp near Vienna, we applied to immigrate there.

We waited for nine months but no answer came. Then, we decided rather to go to Australia. Our two and a half year old daughter, my sister and her boyfriend also came with us. The committee of Polish women in Perth sponsored us to come and teach Polish migrants to dance and sing old folk songs.

We stayed for six months but there was little demand for our work. Perth was a slow, backward city, and there were no opportunities for us to continue our professional careers so

we moved to Sydney, rented a caravan, and tried to find work in our profession.

After a few months, we realised how hard it would be to continue in our careers without the knowledge of English. I was in shock and could not see myself staying in Australia. Roma and I became very disappointed and frustrated. We could sing and dance for free in the clubs but we needed to earn our wages. There was nothing left to sing about!

We decided to return to Perth but stopped in Melbourne, where my sister had settled. We were receiving refugee social security payments. There, my wife met a prosperous Polish man, who promised her a comfortable, glamorous life. I wanted to stay close to my daughter so took a job in a printing factory.

Work was still easy to find in those days. Later, I started a cleaning business and also worked as a taxi driver. I simply realised that I had to lower my standards, step down from the cloud, and secure my survival.

I used to smoke a lot so quit in one attempt but I did not feel any better for it. In fact, I still feel sick and seem to have every imaginable complaint. Perhaps I need something to give me a reason to live.

In 1986, an opal miner offered me a trip to the Mintabie opal fields. He talked about the treasures of the opal mines and the adventure of the bush life. I had nothing to lose so I packed my van and followed him.

I lived in my van on a mining claim. I had no money for equipment so I looked for a partner who had some. A Pole offered me a job in Coober Pedy. After a year with him, I became very sick and had to go to the Melbourne Hospital.

I stayed in Melbourne with my sister during the hot summer months so I could be close to my daughter. When I returned to Coober Pedy, I found that my Polish friend had thrown all my belongings on the tip!

So, I started mining on my own but it was hard without any financial support. Just before the war in Iraq in 1989, I opened a small restaurant. While Desert Storm was fighting Iraq, people were scared to travel and stopped going on holidays. I was losing business so I quit.

I was always fascinated by opal so I travelled to Lightning Ridge. Compared to Coober Pedy, the magnificent green bush and rivers around the Ridge made it seem a paradise. The town itself is just a convenience for me but the bush life is magnificent.

I had always dreamed of a place like Lightning Ridge, away from the rat race of city life and all the stresses, pressures and frustration. I love going down the river in my little boat. This is a paradise of peace and quiet for me!

I was an angry, impatient man in the city but in the bush, I found calm, beauty and tranquillity. I find bits of opal to keep me going. I have everything I need. I don't sing any more. I simply cannot sing.

In some ways, I feel like I died twenty years ago. I have no ambition to do anything. I wish I could find an aim in life again, something to look forward to, and forget that I am waiting for death. Something in me died when my wife left me. At the time, I wanted to return to Poland but didn't want to be away from my daughter.

I am 48 years old without a proper job and without a proper house. I suppose I have become more and more comfortable living from day-to-day without a commitment. I am comfortable the way I am but miss a relationship with a woman. I believe that a woman my age would look for security and money, and I have neither.

I returned to Poland for another sister's funeral and realised that I never really wanted to leave the land of my birth. I had only hoped that we would become more successful in Australia. I even considered staying in Poland but it felt like being in jail after the freedom of living on the opal fields. I also want to live where my daughter lives.

I intend to stay in Lightning Ridge. Half a dozen Polish men live here but no Polish women. I like to occupy my mind and my body. I like a good discussion about politics, current affairs and news. I am interested in the folk singing and dancing of other cultures. I love reading anything I can get my hands on. I attend educational courses to keep my mind active.

For me, life in Poland was beautiful. Everybody was looked after by the government, we had free education and health care, and everybody had a job and earned his pension. But now, my relationship with my daughter is very important to me, and I



spend time with her at the Gold Coast in Queensland, where I can stay with my sister during the hot summers.

I don't know why it is, but Polish people can never seem to get along with each other. Although we are a family, my daughter and I cannot live together. Maybe we need each other to blame for our misspent lives. Maybe that is love!

## Lucy

I was born as an illegitimate child, Lucy Kobles, on 14.9.38.

My father was Robert Mihail Schwartz. He was an intelligent Jewish man who wanted to become a doctor. His father said that any idiot could be a doctor and that instead his son should become an engineer. Dad was 204 cm tall and had to bend his head to get through the door.

Dad applied many times for permission to marry mum but every time it was refused. People said to mum: Why would a nice Catholic girl want to marry an ugly Jew.

Finally my parents got the licence and they married on Friday the 13th. They called two strangers from the street as witnesses. They were in a hurry because they were afraid that officials would change their minds. Dad adopted me and I became Lucy Schwartz.

Mum's parents lived in Romania. My grandmother must have been good looking because she married a handsome army officer. She had a strict religious upbringing and believed that sex was only meant for procreation. As soon as she got pregnant, she told my grandfather: go away from me Satan.

My grandfather went to Hungary. Mum blamed her mother. When mum was seventeen, she followed her father to Hungary. My grandfather was a publican. He was still legally married to my grandmother but he lived with three other women at the same time. The women knew about each other. He had three children with one and two by another.

Grandfather has never seen his daughter, my mum, as a child. When she arrived he saw a woman in her rather than a daughter. Mum soon moved in with her friend who had tuberculosis. Mum worked in a buffet and there she met my father. He realised that mum also caught tuberculosis. He knew that his father could help her.

My grandfather had a law degree and a doctorate but no money. He married my grandmother whose parents were rich farmers. With his knowledge and his wife's dowry my grandfather became established as a leading solicitor for the government railways. He had eighty solicitors working under him.

During the communist revolution my grandfather's family lost most of their wealth. They were going to hang my grandfather but luckily the revolution was defeated. After escaping with his life my grandfather gave all his wealth to Jewish organisations. He built several hospitals. By the time his son met my mother he only had a Sanatorium for tuberculosis patients in Budapest.

Dad persuaded my mother to go to the Sanatorium where she would be cured for free.

When mum was cured she had sex with my father out of gratitude. She became pregnant. My father was in love with her and wanted to marry her. She told him that she didn't love him. He told her that she would learn to love him later. Mum had no choice. Alone with a baby, without a job, she married him but she never learned to love him.

Mum was brought up to hate Jews. She taught us to hate Jews.

When Hitler came mum hated having a yellow star on our house. She had to fight to prove that we were not Jewish so Hungarian Nazis would not kill us.

Later when we escaped to Austria I heard my 14 years old brother Rob talking to the neighbour's boy Lali. Nazis killed both their fathers because they were Jews. Rob made derogatory remarks about Jews and Lali got angry and said: How dare you dirty your father's memory like this. Whether you like it or not you are one of us. That made us think for the first time about being Jewish. Even my mother realised that she made a mistake in making us hate Jews. For the first time we became aware that we have Jewish blood in us.

I have vague memory of dad sitting near the window and speaking loudly. I do not know what he was saying but I remember that he had gold teeth at the back of his mouth.

I was too young to remember much about my father. Most of my memories come from my mother. She told me that dad had a huge appetite. When he was 13 years old Jews had their forty day fast. At the end of the fast his mother baked a goose for a feast. Dad secretly ate almost the whole goose. He became so sick that he could never eat meat again.

Soon after my brother was born in 1942 Germans took dad to a forced labour camp. They starved him so much that when they gave him a piece of pork speck he ate it despite his dislike of meat and despite his Jewish beliefs.

One-day dad came home from work to tell mum that they are taking him away. We had a boarder Bela Nagy at the time and dad asked him to look after us. Bela was a handsome man but I never liked him.

Dad never returned.

After the war a man told us what happened to dad. All the men marched for hours. Dad's varicose veins burst and began bleeding. At the railway station they told them that train would take the sick to the hospital so dad intended to go on the train. His friend was already on the train.

Someone told dad that people who go on a train would be killed. Dad went on the train to warn his friend but when they wanted to come down it was too late. The train closed and they were taken a few kilometres away where they had to dig their own graves before they were shot dead.

Our lodger, Bela, became my stepfather. He was a postal technician from an alcoholic dysfunctional family. I couldn't stand him. I think his whole family was a bit mad. He was an unhappy man who argued until he was blue in the face. Mum and Bela were fighting like cats and dogs all the time. Mostly they fought over us children. Bela used to say that he never saw worse children than we were.

Mum and Bela had another child, my stepbrother.

Once mum told Bela to leave us and he did. After six months mum heard that he was marrying a nineteen years old girl. Mum went to see him and eventually Bela returned home with her. He probably just tested mum because he wanted to come home. I suppose mum and Bela loved each other despite the arguments.

Mum worked at the restaurant late every night and Bela also worked. My dad's parents did not want me to live in that situation with no-one looking after me so they took me to their home.

I was upset because my brothers were allowed to stay with mum and I could not. I believed that mum and Bela did not like me. I got in trouble all the time. I ran away. My grandmother could not cope so they took me to a convent to be looked after by the nuns. My grandparents had to pay a lot for my keep.

Some of the nuns were really nice but I hated the priest. He turned forty and they made a big party for him. He told us that Virgin Mary appeared to him when he was nine and told him to become a priest.

Everybody thought that he was a saint but I didn't. There were about seven older orphaned girls in the convent. I saw this priest put his hand up girls' dresses and he stroked their bottoms. I don't know why but I felt that it was wrong. Maybe he didn't do anything else but I felt bad when he was around.

In the evening before my birthday we had beans for tea and I did not want to eat them. The nun said that I would have them for breakfast. At six in the morning on my birthday she pushed them into my mouth spoon after spoon with her hand scooping the beans.

We were starving after the war. Bela tried to swap some clothes for food with the farmers in the nearby villages. They caught him and threatened to send him to Siberia. The Russians wanted to get every available man to work in Siberia. Mum begged the officer to let him go. She was an attractive young woman and she played up to the officer until he let Bela go.

Mum decided to go herself to the rich farmers near the border to swap some things for food. She was heavily pregnant as she went to the railway station. The train was full of people. They did not dare go off the train for fear that someone would take their luggage or their spot. Nobody knew when the train would move. People held each other as they went to the toilet on the side of the train. When the train moved, it was supposed to stop before the border but it just slowed down a little and everybody jumped from the train. Mum was afraid that she would lose the baby but she didn't. She was away for weeks. She swapped things for potatoes and flour and butter and she dragged all that home.

In the meantime at home Bela cooked beans. We had nothing else. While he had some fat we did not mind beans but in the end it was just beans and I got sick of them.

Before I turned thirteen communists closed the convent so I had to go home.

I started fighting with Bela again so they sent me to a boarding school.

As a teenager I began to write a diary. I wrote about boys. The headmistress found my diary and sent me home. I told her that I did not do anything wrong and that it was all just a fantasy.

I told my story to the newspaper reporter and they published it.

They sent me to another boarding school. For an unexplained reason the head mistress did not like me. I was always in trouble.

A few months after I went home, the headmistress rang my mother to ask her if I could recite a poem for a show. I was very good at reciting poetry.

Mum was upset with the headmistress and asked: Why do you want Lucy now? She was never good enough for you when she was there. You never liked her.

The headmistress explained that my best friend told her lies about me and that I got into trouble because of that. Now she found out that it was all a lie so she wanted to apologise.

My friend was a village girl we took in to have a holiday with us in Budapest. I really liked her and never thought that she would do me any harm.

When I was in high school Stalin was God. Whenever his name was mentioned we had to clap and his name was mentioned over and over many times every day.

I was fifteen and in a boarding school when Stalin died in 1953.

Everything changed.

I heard an 18 years old boy, Vili, say that it was about time Stalin died. His friend reported him to the authorities; they arrested him and bashed him. Vili later escaped and we met in Australia and he became my first husband.

The new official political line developed between 53 and 56. It began with people saying that Stalin was a murderer who killed Lenin and that he was a robber.

Our teachers were confused; nobody knew the correct, official policy.

I was eighteen in 1956. On my way from school I saw a placard on which university students demanded freedom of speech and press. They also wanted to get rid of Russian dominance.

The trams stopped running and there were lots of people walking. I joined the crowd and we walked to the national museum. On the platform was a man who asked us to go to the radio station and broadcast the students' demands. We moved towards the radio station and selected six students to go in. Thousands of us waited outside the Iron Gate for hours. We started calling for the students to come out. They did not come so the crowd rushed forward. Men broke the telephone pole and they began hitting the Iron Gate with it. The army came and dispersed us with tear gas. The police started shooting. A group of people went to the army barracks. The soldiers distributed guns and ammunition because they were also against the Soviet Union.

As I walked home I saw the cars burning and the trams overturned.

My neighbour was taken to the hospital. He was shot in front of the radio station. Two weeks later his girlfriend asked me to go with her to the hospital. We met a group of people who were collecting the injured from the streets. They also delivered parcels and messages from one revolutionary group to the other.

We joined the group. There was a curfew at the time but the leader of the revolutionary group later gave us a piece of paper that allowed us to travel anywhere anytime. Sometimes we transported ammunition.

After a few weeks the revolution was defeated.

When I came home I found out that mum and Bela were looking for me in the hospital. There were trucks loaded with people and soldiers were holding guns on them. Mum asked about me. A soldier said that my name was on the list and evidently I would be on the truck.

A secret police officer came looking for me. Mum told him that I wasn't home. She didn't know that he was my friend. He came to warn me to leave the country.

Two of the people from the neighbourhood escaped to Austria to see if it is easy to get through. They came back to pick up their families. When my mother heard about them she decided to join them with our family. She knew that I was going anyway and my brother also wanted to go.

Budapest used to be two cities, which are joined now. We lived in the outskirts of Pest. In the morning of 20.11.56 my brother and I got dressed in the several layers of clothes and started walking towards the railway station. My brother was fourteen and I was eighteen. Just before we reached the river that separates Buda from Pest, the curfew began. There was a two-story house where we used to take food for the children during the revolution. The caretaker took us in risking his life. It was still curfew in the morning when we decided to go across the bridge. We learned reasonable Russian at school and when the soldiers stopped us we told them we are going to work in Buda. At the railway station we bought tickets for the whole family. We sat on the train quietly, terrified of other passengers. Anyone could report us but as we got closer to the border it became apparent that everybody was going to escape.

That night twenty squadrons of Russian Mongolians came to Hungary. When we got closer to the border town's people who were waiting for the train told us not to go off the train because Russians are already there. When we got to one of the last stations they told us that Russians haven't arrived yet. Everybody got off the train. We walked about twenty kilometres to the border. We got there in the dark. People told us to go through the forest until we reached the bridge over the river. We couldn't find the bridge so we all waded into the river. Bela, my brother and myself made many trips helping others get across. I became so exhausted that I went under. I had a sheepskin jacket and Bela grabbed for it and pulled me out.

The river was shallow but freezing cold. I got soaked and we walked in wet clothes. We had no idea if we were in Austria or in Hungary as we came to a lake. There was an abandoned boat and we rowed it over to the other side. Border patrol was shooting at us but we came to the other side safely. We walked for a long time. My grandmother couldn't walk so we were pulling her. The trucks came towards us; we had no way of knowing if they were Hungarian or Austrian but we didn't care we just wanted a ride. These Austrian farmers told us that we would all die of pneumonia. They lit the haystack and we sat around to dry ourselves. They gave us some schnapps to drink. The younger ones went to report to the police. The trucks came and took us into the village. Different farmer's families took us in and we stayed there for a few days. I had to wash all our clothes. They gave us beds with thick eiderdowns and food. We gave them gifts that we brought with us. We decided to go to Vienna Rothschild spital, a hospital converted to a refugee centre, where they organised the distribution of refugees.

Twenty of us went to one room because we wanted to be together. Some of the people were given money from different organisations. Bela got 500 shillings from Austrian PMG because he was working for PMG in Hungary. We were fed but the food was terrible. We supplemented the rations with the money Bela got.

Bela's sister lived in Australia so Bela talked my mother into going to Australia. I didn't want to go with them because I hated Bela. In Hungary we lived in our house but in Australia we would have to live with his sister. Mum talked me into going with them. We made the application, went through interviews and medical checkups and finally got the papers. They told us that we would go to Australia with the first ship.

Every day for weeks we were going to the office to look for the tickets but they did not arrive. The ship left a day before our tickets finally arrived. There were about ten of us with the tickets for Aurelia ship that got the tickets too late. We were upset so we decided to go to Salzburg where the refugee headquarters were. We came to Salzburg just before Christmas 1956.

They told us that Catholics could go to Australia as a Christmas gift by Qantas. The plane was scheduled to stop at Abidjan in Arabia. At the time Arabs and Israelis were fighting and the Arabs said that if there was anyone Jewish on that plane they would kill everyone. Mum assured the authorities that we were all Catholics. Everybody was saying how come we were Catholics with a Jewish name Schwartz.

We arrived to Australia on 27.12.1956. Catholic and Jewish representatives waited to help us. The Jews asked us if we were Jewish because of our name but my mother insisted that we are not. The Catholic priest then came to us and said that if anyone is in any way related to Jews to go with them because they could help more than Catholics can. We still didn't go with the rabbi but half of the passengers from the plane did.

Most of them were Jews.

We were taken to a refuge outside Sydney and stayed there until Bela's sister Agnes sent us money to travel to Adelaide where she lived.

We were the first refugee family from Hungarian revolution that came to Adelaide. The newspaper reporters came to the railway and our story was published so everybody knew about us. People offered to help us but Agnes and her husband said that they would look after us.

Agnes rented us an apartment in her huge house. After a few days Bela got a job as a telephone technician and paid rent to his sister. The apartment was furnished with bits and pieces picked from the rubbish tip.

Soon we went to buy our own second hand furniture. We found a nice leather lounge and they wanted seven pounds for it. We told them that we were refugees and they said that they would give it to us for five. We said we would go home to get the money. We went back in the afternoon but the lounge was sold. Agnes bought it and hid it in the shed.

Everybody in Bela's family was a bit funny like that.

Agnes had a huge yard with 180 fruit trees but we were not allowed in the orchard. I think that Agnes was afraid that we would pick the fruit or do some damage. When they were in a charitable mood they gave us fruit but we were never allowed to pick it ourselves.

Agnes also locked the pantry where she stored her preserves. She accused us of stealing jam.

Sometimes they would be very generous and at other times they would be unreasonably tight. Agnes was very generous to us years later. She bought us a car and an air-conditioner.

Agnes had no children and she was scared of what children would do. My two brothers were lively 14 and 11 years old boys. They kicked the ball on the bitumen

road one-day and Agnes complained that they lifted too much dust and made the roof dirty.

The incident developed into a nasty row, which was the last straw after all other accusations. The whole family was arguing and in the end we packed up and walked out. We walked outside all night.

The next day we looked for our own place. We had no car and knew very little English. We weren't very smart at all. We rented a house from an agent for seven pounds a week. The house was supposed to be furnished but it had no beds or wardrobes. We bought everything on hire purchase and we could not make repayments. Bela earned fifteen pounds. He needed money for travelling to work and for his smokes. It practically left us nothing to live on.

Mum took in five lodgers to help with money. I was 18 and too old for the junior wage so it took me over a month to get a job in Alaska ice-cream factory. After six weeks ice-cream season was over and they told me to come back in four months.

Agnes found me a job in the Catholic presbytery. One older priest was teaching me all sorts of things and one day he started touching me. I pushed him away and ran home. He wrote me a letter saying that priests are only humans. He gave me an English Hungarian dictionary as a parting gift but I never went back.

An older Hungarian man's wife worked at Phillip's. She told me how to get a job there. I learned quickly and worked hard but the management continuously increased the norm. I pushed myself to the limit because I didn't want to lose my job. I could not speak English so I could not complain. I skipped lunch and tea; I did not even go to the toilet so I could do the norm. One day four men in white coats came and watched me work. I was afraid that I would be sacked if I don't do enough so I persevered. At the end of half an hour I made more than a norm. After the men left the co-workers attacked me physically and verbally but I could not understand what it was all about. They got a Hungarian interpreter from a different section and she explained to me. The workers complained to the bosses that it was impossible to do the norm but I just proved it to them that it can be done.

My legs were swollen from pushing the welding pedal in the factory so I asked for a day off to see the doctor. I heard that they were looking for nursing aides in the hospital so I asked for a job. My co-workers at Phillip's realised that I did not understand what was happening so they apologised for attacking me. They gave me many presents when I left.

In the hospital it was awful because every time a patient got sick I got sick. I took everything too much to heart and became emotional about their suffering. I thought that the nurses were cold hearted but they were just being professional. I stayed for about a year.

There was a Standard English test at the university which everybody from non English background had to do to enter university in Australia. From five hundred entrants seven of us passed the test. They were amazed that after two years I learned so much English. The university dean asked me about my college studies in Hungary. I told him that I studied geology at the technical college and he gave me a certificate equivalent to Australian high school plus geology component.

I got a job in the research laboratory of the Mines department. I worked on the spectrograph. They crush stones to determine the mineral content of the material. I



learned quickly and enjoyed my work. The engineers were teaching me all the time patiently and I was very grateful. I had to get naturalised to keep the job.

I enrolled at university. I got time off work for study. I was getting full wages but I only worked seventeen hours a week. My future looked very bright and promising. It was the best time of my life.

The only problem was my fiancé Vili and my family.

I lived at home at the time and we were arguing constantly. I hated it but it was my duty to help support the family.

On the first day there was a reception and a ball at uni. I told Vili that I would come out after the dean finished his speech. That was ten in the evening. I was the only girl enrolled in geology. Vili got jealous because the boys wanted me to stay and dance with them.

I came home late one day from Vili's place and mum called me a whore. We had a horrible argument and I left with Vili.

Vili was a semitrailer driver and he wanted me to go with him trucking. We argued about it all the time. He made it impossible for me to continue with the studies.

I had to give up my job. I repaid the money the mines department invested into my study and I dropped out of university to go with Vili on the semitrailer.

I was pregnant and I did not want Vili to say that he had to marry me. I decided to have an abortion. Vili's cousin took me to a Hungarian dentist who was doing abortions. He gave me an iodine injection and told me that I will be in pain. As I took the taxi home I screamed and the driver had to stop because I was vomiting. Luckily he thought that I was drunk. Abortions were illegal and I was terrified that someone would report me to the police. A few days later the dentist gave me another injection. I had no money for a taxi so I went home by train. From the railway station I crawled home in agony. I believed that I was going to die. I was almost unconscious as I crawled into bed. I was haemorrhaging heavily and I noticed a lump of flesh that was a baby.

Two weeks later Vili and I got married in the presence of two witnesses in the Catholic Church. I expected some kind of celebration but when we got home Vili changed into his overalls and went to work. I hoped that my wedding day would be somehow special. Vili came home late from work. I suppose he was tired because he just turned over in bed and went to sleep.

Later Vili and I wanted to have a baby. I became pregnant but lost the baby every time during the early pregnancy. We went back to that dentist to ask why I couldn't have a baby. He said that there was something wrong and I would have lost the first baby anyway. Apparently I am lacking the hormones that make the placenta and the baby grow.

Since then I had infections of my uterus, tubes cleaning and complete removal of left tube and ovary before I finally had a hysterectomy at the age of 41.

I was married for fifteen years. There were times when Vili and I were happy and I enjoyed travelling with him. I helped with loading and driving the truck. We hardly

ever slept because we were always on the road. Other truck drivers told us about tablets that would keep us awake. Some were slimming tablets and we took them by the handfuls. We bought them from the chemist. At first we didn't need a script but later we did and then we bought them on the black-market. We were young and healthy and we never thought of the consequences. I could hardly wait to stop taking them. While on these tablets I suffered a nervous breakdown and was hospitalised for two weeks. I came out and was back on the truck and back on the pills.

We lived in Adelaide with my parents in law and later we bought a house next to them. I idolised my mother in law at first. She was everything my mother wasn't. I hardly knew my mother. Later I discovered what a conniving woman my mother in law was. She was an extravagant woman and in total control of the whole family. If I wanted to buy something I had to beg her for money. She was squandering money and the three men could not supporter her lifestyle.

The service station contracted the transport jobs and the family subcontracted from them. Everything they bought went through the service station. My mother in law did not check the accounts or pay the bills. We owed money and never saw any cash coming in.

I suggested to Vili that the two of us go through the TNT service. We worked for two years and paid our debts. The money came into my hands. The old service station then offered us loads for which they paid us cash. We paid cash for filling up.

I left Vili several times but he threatened to kill himself and begged me to stay. We decided to go to Andamooka to mine for opals. We asked Villi's father to look after our business.

I was mining for a year with Vili in Andamooka when we got a telegram to get home urgently. Vili and I worked all night to get out whatever opal we could. Vili went to fill up a generator and he told me to stay where I was but I was scared and I followed him. Next to the generator was a hole and when I stepped next to Vili I fell in about 2 to 3 metres. Vili pulled me out and we went back mining. Vili was rushing to finish the job. He accidentally hit his knee with a pick. I had to finish the job.

As we returned we discovered that Villi's family did not pay any of our bills. The business owed money. We had to sell the house to begin trucking again. We owed money to my parents and Villi's parents. Villi's parents also lost the house and moved in with us in a rented house. I walked out after a huge argument.

I agreed to go with Vili to Coober Pedy. In Andamooka we had a bulldozer and an old bus converted into a caravan. It took Vili and his father months to fix the bulldozer before we could go to Coober Pedy. Vili suggested that his mother and sister come to Andamooka as well and I said that if they do I would go.

I had arguments with Vili.

I met Dodo years ago when Vili and I first went to Andamooka. I liked Dodo and wanted to go with him even then. I told Villi that I will leave him and go with Dodo. Vili pretended to have a heart attack down the mine and begged me not to leave him. I promised him never to see Dodo again.

We returned to Adelaide and I had not seen Dodo for years. When we returned to Andamooka to pick our bulldozer Dodo arrived. Wherever we went Dodo was always there. At a party Dodo had a few drinks and he asked me to dance. He kept saying that I should come with him. I told him to go out where we could talk privately. I left the

door of the bathroom open so people would not think that something was going on. I begged him not to create a scene. He grabbed me and kissed me just when Villi walked in. I was upset and rushed out. I was going to go to Adelaide. Just as well I got bogged seven kilometres from home, because the petrol I had wouldn't last me to the next petrol station. I returned and found Villi and Dodo talking at the table. Vili said to Dodo that if he ever separated from me I should come back to him. I got angry with Vili because he was giving me away so easily. I had no real intention of going with Dodo because he was a known womaniser but I went and we had a good life together. Dodo is my second husband Erwin.

We found a big opal in Andamooka but by the time we sold it we had little profit. It was a 75 kilogram black matrix that had lots of opal going in and around it. We sold it in Western Australia for one hundred seventy five thousand dollars but the people who sold it for us only paid us one hundred thousand. We were sorry we sold it. We went to Europe for holidays and there we met a friend who was mining in Lightning Ridge. We decided to come and have a look. It was a lovely town. Other opal fields looked like moon craters. Ridge black Opal was also the most beautiful. We lived in a tent and later in a caravan until we bought a block of land and built a house.

I am half Jewish by birth but I was brought up in the Catholic religion. I believe that Jews are God's chosen people but they disobeyed Jehovah and were therefore put at the mercy of other nations. If they kept the covenant with Jehovah all would be well with them.

I always wanted to become a Missionary because I loved the idea of teaching about God and helping the poor.

After the war communists told us that there is no God. I was angry with God because he allowed the oppression and suffering but when I was in trouble I still prayed. The mysticism of the church ritual still affected me strongly specially since the churchgoers were harassed and persecuted.

Mum's mother lived in Romania but she came to live with us a year before we all escaped from Hungary. She was brought up as a Protestant. Later she worked for the Catholic bishop whom she considered a saint. She was so taken with him that she became a Catholic. Since then priests could not do anything wrong in her eyes. In Australia she made us all go to church every Sunday. She criticised our behaviours all the time and we started hating going to church.

As a widow of a Jew killed by Nazis mum got some help for the children from the Jewish organisation in America. If we were Jews we would get more but they knew that we were brought up as Catholics. Mum stopped going to church when she decided to live with Bela. Bela hardly earned enough for us to live on.

My youngest brother was Bela's son but because mum did not remarry he was named Swartz and also received help.

Mum and Bela married as soon as we came to Australia.

The Jews I met are more religious than other people. I would be a Jew if I was brought up in a Jewish religion or if both my parents were Jews.

Jewishness and religion was a way of life for my father's parents. Every activity had religious rules and meaning. I.e. A saucepan used for meat could not be used for a

milk product. The tea towels used to dry meat containers could not be used for other dishes.

Every week my grandmother would bake a platted white bread. After the sunset we sat down around the table. My grandfather lit the candles on the menorah and then he prayed in Hebrew.

Jewish women only go to church on special occasions. I only went once. The men put their caps on and wrapped themselves in some kind of cream coloured blanket before they read the scrolls. Everybody touched these scrolls wrapped in the burgundy colour velvet and then they kissed their own hands. This looked ridiculous to me and I laughed so they sent me out.

My grandparents did not eat anything in my mother's house when they came together but if one of them came they would say don't tell the other that I took a piece of cake or something that was not kosher. Jews bought meat from the kosher butcher, which killed the animal and let the blood drain on the ground.

Jews do not eat pork.

The Bible says that blood contains life and one must not consume it.

Even now as a Jehovah witness I believe in this part of the Old Testament. Jehovah witnesses do not take blood transfusion. The law about not taking blood is repeated in the New Testament.

Circumcision was an essential part of Jewish law but Jesus came to fulfil and improve Jewish law. Apostle Joe sought a ruling on the circumcision. The authorities established that Jewish law of circumcision is not binding for Christians.

Christians must not commit fornication, not eat anything sacrificed to idols or consume blood.

Bela's sister Agnes became a Jehovah's Witness during the seventies. Grace stayed in her caravan to instruct her. Grace travelled all over Australia to preach.

My family hated the Witnesses and considered Grace crazy. We thought that Grace converted Agnes to get her money.

Years later I met Grace in Andamooka. I called her in because I wanted to know what she said to convert Agnes. She began talking about the paradise on earth and I was laughing inside. I could not understand how anybody could believe in her fairy stories. Witnesses came to sell magazines and books. I bought them to get rid of them. I threw the books in the bin but the more I bought the more they came. I asked them not to come. Finally I had to slam the door in their faces to get rid of them. We came to Lightning Ridge and I met Evelyn whom I also knew in Andamooka. I had no idea that Evelyn was a Jehovah witness. She was not witnessing in Andamooka.

You can not be a Witness if you do not live your life according to the Jehovah principles. If you later change your life and want to come back they accept you. Evelyn was reinstated into Jehovah fellowship in Lightning Ridge. I invited her to my place and she brought me a Bible. I started to read the Genesis but it made no sense to me. I returned the Bible saying that reading it would make me lose the little bit of faith I still had. She told me to read the revelation. I couldn't understand the word of it. She began explaining and I learned. I told Evelyn that I am not interested in religion and if she weren't a friend I would have kicked her out long ago. She laughed and said: I know I am using our friendship.

I told Evelyn that Witnesses changed the Bible to suit their teaching. She brought other Bibles so I convinced myself that all the Bibles were saying the same things. At that point Evelyn asked me if I wanted to study the Bible. I told her that I would listen but would never convert. I had a very low opinion of people who changed their religion. She asked me if I would mind if she brought Grace with her. They began coming together. When Evelyn moved away Grace began teaching me. We argued over everything but I kept learning.

I learned that Catholic religion adopted many pagan celebrations and Greek philosophy. The doctrine of trinity and the celebration of Christmas came with Constantine in the fourth century.

The Bible says that at the beginning there was the word and the word was with God and the word was God. The word became flesh and it dwelt among us. Jesus was the word and the flesh, he was the only begotten Son of God.

Jews gave animal sacrifices for their sins but this ritual was to prepare them for Jesus who would give his lifeblood to vindicate Jehovah sovereignty. Until Jesus gave his lifeblood there was no resurrection. Jesus did what his father sent him to do. The Holy Spirit came upon the Apostles at Pentecost and filled them with the power to speak in the tongue everybody understood so they could preach to all people. Holy Spirit is God's active force. Speaking in tongues is no longer needed because now the Bible is available in all main languages.

At the time Dodo and I lived together for seventeen years without being married. I could not get baptised as Jehovah Witness without getting married so I asked Dodo to marry me. I could barely wait to be baptised so we went to Adelaide and married in a civil ceremony. My whole family and Dodo's family were against my new religion.

I was baptised on the 20.10. 90 at Sydney Jehovah's convention. I sat in the front row with other candidates. I panicked that I won't be able to do this. I wondered if I was hypnotised or I really believed.

A brother gave a talk before the baptism and when he spoke I felt a peace coming over me. I knew I was right.

All of the candidates stepped into the water. The two brothers on each side leaned us back into the water saying: we baptise you in the name of the father and son and the Holy Spirit.

The baptism was only the start of my religion. Grace never told me about the meetings I would have to attend after baptism and about witnessing.

I was terrified of going to witness.

Jehovah Witnesses do not believe that we have a separate soul. When God blew into Simon's nostrils Simon became a living soul. God told the first two people if they ate of the forbidden fruit they would die.

God clearly told Simon and Eve that they would return to the dust if they sinned. The person who sins dies. There is no hell, just death. The Bible says that there is no knowledge nor devising nor wisdom in the grave where you are going.

The sacrifice of Jesus gives us a chance to be resurrected.

The serpent lied to Simon and Eve when he told them that they would not die. Satan lied when he said: only your body dies but your soul lives on.

Greek philosophers held a myth that there is a separate entity, the soul.

One hundred and forty four thousand Jehovah Witnesses will be resurrected to heaven to become rulers with Jesus. The rest of the resurrected mankind shall inherit the Earth and shall delight themselves in peace forever.

At first Dodo did not mind my association with witnesses because he believed that it was just a phase I was going through. When I asked him to marry me he was very happy. I told him that religion will take me away at times and I will have less time for him. He said that he did not care as long as I did not try to change him. When I went to be baptised he did not say goodbye to me. When I returned he refused to talk to me. Gradually he got sick of being angry and he saw that it did not change anything so we began talking again. He didn't like me going witnessing but he knew that I will do it because it was very important to me. He loved me enough to go along.

Of course I tried to invite him into our religion but every time I try he closes down. He makes a joke of it saying: perhaps one day...

I lost my friends when I left Vili. They chose to stay friends with him. They only listened to me so they reported back to Vili. Everybody told me for years to leave Vili but when I did they did not stand by me.

My friends and relatives refused to accept my religion. Although I never had any Jewish upbringing they believed that I betrayed Jewish religion. My mother said that nobody ever hurt her like I did. All her life she was terrified of cancer and when she got cancer I told her that we would be resurrected together and live together again. She said that she would rather go to hell than be with my cronies and me. Mum talked about it at every opportunity.

My brother taught that I was a bit stupid but gradually they all learned to ignore my religion.

Every witness has to do as much witnessing as possible. I was on my own in the Shipyard when I first offered people the Jehovah's magazines. Some people argued that we are wrong, they tried to convince me and I tried to convince them.

I dreaded witnessing. I was praying at the door that nobody would be home. Going in pairs helped, you feel stronger. You get used to it.

Some people call us nasty names. A farmer once told us that he wanted nothing to do with trash. Normally people tell you if they are interested. Often people who are not interested end up talking for hours.

I have been witnessing now for eleven years.

The knowledge and the faith completely changed my life for the better. It answers all the questions I ever had. It is also a guide to my relationship with my husband and everybody else. I am still easily hurt. I used to have a quick temper and retaliated. Now I make an effort to see things from another person's point of view. I consider other people's upbringing and circumstances. They might be hurt themselves.

In the past I threatened to leave when Dodo and I had an argument. Now I don't say anything when he is upset and wait for an opportunity to talk. After the argument is forgotten I might tell him that I was hurt by a particular

thing he said or did.

When I was six during the war the acting company was looking for child actors. There were over five hundred children auditioning for the place. They picked an English girl Coco and myself. Mum would have to take me to practice but the war was on and she did not want to risk me being killed.

In high school they were looking for singers for the Budapest choir. I did not even prepare a song but they took me on. The principal did not like me go to practice.

When in Australia there was a television talent quest called Stairways to the stars. I sang in Hungarian and got a huge ovation. They wanted me on the program but my mother in law said that she was not going to have a singer whore in her family. So it came to nothing.

Ever since I remembered I wanted to be an actress. I had a good voice, I read poetry on stage, I had the talent but always something happened or somebody stepped in.

I won a writing contest and began writing romance stories but never finished any. I had an opportunity to go to acting school or singing school but my family stopped me. I enrolled in the university and my boyfriend stopped me. I opened a dress shop in Adelaide but did not do well.

For many years I was sorry that I came to Australia. In Hungary I would probably have gone to university and make something out of my life.

I never felt that I belong. I hardly know my family. Perhaps my father's father and my father's sister Clare had been in some way special. My grandfather loved me the most and he expected much from me and I lived up to that.

My life was never monotonous. I started many things with great enthusiasm but something always stopped me. Perhaps I should have persevered. I was always able to fight for other people but not for myself.

My greatest achievement was when I became baptised as a Jehovah witness. It completely changed the way I am looking at things and my expectations. It made my life complete. Other things became less important and I have no time for them.

## Helene

I have a wonderful life. Beautiful paintings, pottery and ornaments surround me. My pets adore me. Internet connects me to my friends on other continents. My work is interesting and my colleagues are friendly and kind.

I feel fully alive; I only have one life so I want to live it to the fullest. My late husband Bill said that we should not only exist and consume but extend ourselves towards others.

I reconciled with my past and draw my strength from it. I am so much better off than many that did not have to overcome the adversity. I no longer dwell on my misfortunes; I became a stronger, more understanding person because of them. The events stored in my memory may not be significant but these events made me who I am.

I believe that things happen for a reason. Perhaps I had to experience everything I experienced so I can help people who now rely on my understanding.

Sometimes the past is a heavy burden. You can run to the end of the world but this burden comes with you unless you face it and resolve it and use it. So I put my story on paper; I no longer have to carry it within.

People who are fortunate enough to grow up safe, secure and loved, these people will never be able to truthfully say: I know that pain; I have been there myself; you are not alone.

Feeling alone in suffering is devastating. One becomes scared and ashamed of the pain one cannot speak about.

I can see my life in Switzerland more clearly from the distance. As I grew up I was too involved in the events and could not see them dispassionately.

I was born as an unwanted illegitimate child in a Switzerland village in the middle of the Second World War. My mother was an eighteen years old farm girl who wasn't allowed to bring the baby home from the hospital. By becoming pregnant she brought shame on her family and on the family of her boyfriend. She had to apply for food rations because of me and that too brought shame on her proud family.

I never met my father. His family was disgraced by my birth. My mother and my father each had to pay half for my keep to the home that took care of me.

I only knew my mother vaguely. We never had any kind of relationship to this day. The idea of Mother is a kind of vacuum for me; I never called her mum. I missed having a mother, I wished I had one but I never did.

As a child I was selfish; children see only their needs and wants, they do not know that other people also have needs.

I was a rebellious, withdrawn, shy child. I had no reason to like or trust people. I never learned how to show affection and I did not do well at school.

I have very rarely received affection as a child; nobody paid any attention to my needs or enjoyed my achievements. What was the point of pushing ahead?

I suppose I could have achieved much more with a bit of encouragement and support, with a bit of love, acceptance and understanding.



For a long time I was rather afraid to get close to people and trust them. I laughed a lot to cover up. I learned to see a funny side to most things. Maybe I was born with a sense of humour or maybe I developed it for my protection, to cover up my real feelings. There are as many things one can laugh about, as there are things one could cry with. I chose to laugh, I feel fortunate that I can see a funny side. Someone once said: if you had nothing else to laugh about you can always laugh about yourself. I laughed about myself a lot and the older I get the more important it seems to me not to take myself too seriously.

I have nothing to be ashamed of and no reason to be afraid. There is something good and kind in everybody. I am looking for that good.

Perhaps it was easier for me to leave home because I never felt a part of a family. I think being illegitimate also coloured my attitude towards boys. I was horrified that I would get pregnant and end up like my mother. At times I regretted not having children, but I didn't want to do to my child what has been done to me.

Lately I wonder what pain this young farm girl, my mother, must have suffered when she had to leave her first baby in the orphanage under the Shire guardianship.

Ten days after my birth my mother had to leave the home for unmarried mothers and leave me in the care of the nuns. I stayed there until I was five. I wasn't put up for adoption. I clearly remember the elaborate head covering of the nun as she leaned over me when I cried at night. It was so scary that I remained as still as I could.

When I turned five my mother's sister and her husband, who were my Godparents took me to live with their family. They had three children my age.

When I was seven my mother became pregnant again. She married and had four sons but her new mother in law never wanted me near the place.

I haven't spoken to my mother for over thirty years now. I went home last year but we did not meet. Her husband had died. My half brothers are aware of my existence but I never met any of them. Nobody in their family is allowed to mention me. I am a shameful secret that has to be kept hidden.

My first pleasant memory is of my grandmother's visit. She brought me a banana and took me on her lap and I lapped up the affection. I adored my grandmother. She must have liked me because I felt safe and protected with her.

I spent some time with my grandmother on the farm after my grandfather died. My cousins became jealous of my grandmother's affection so their mother, my Godmother, took me to live with them again.

I began to call my Godmother mum but her daughter told me that I had no right to call her mother mum. I never called her mum again.

My Godmother's husband was a very cruel man. He bashed me for no reason; he enjoyed seeing me suffer. As I left Switzerland at the age of thirty-eight, he said: good riddance. Nobody ever liked you anyway.

When he died in 1988 I was glad that I would not have to see him if I decided to go home for a visit.

Yes, I still call Switzerland home and I am proud to be Swiss!

I began school but I failed in the first class. My grandmother decided to take me home to her parents up in the country to start a new school year there at the age of eight. Just before she was to pick me up she died of a heart attack. My world came to a halt. I missed her so much.

I was back with my Godmother who was pregnant again. She said that she couldn't cope. I believed that she couldn't cope with the dumb child that failed in the first year of school.

I vividly remember the whole Godmother's family going for a meal in a restaurant. My Godmother had a new baby in a pram. As they entered the restaurant she told me to stay outside to look after the pram. The dog also stayed with me. After half an hour she brought a kind of cake and broke it in half, half for me and half for the dog.

The guardianship board decided to send me one hundred kilometres away to a home for slow learners.

In that home I was ridiculed for my dialect at first but after the initial shock I began to like it there. The schoolwork was not challenging but I enjoyed reading and daydreaming. I stayed there for seven years. For the first time I felt equal to all others around me; I felt that they treated me fairly. They did not favour one child more than the others. I was punished when I did something wrong and not just because I existed. The home mother showed me the first bit of affection and I was grateful for it.

I remember our home mother telling me that my mother came while I was asleep and that she cried as she watched me sleep. I was almost always asleep when my mother came. Maybe she really came and cried or maybe our home mother just wanted to make me feel good.

My Godmother also told me that my mother always wanted another girl but only had boys. People said that I look like my mother.

I never had the opportunity to ask my mother how she felt and she never told me.

I still keep in touch with my cousins, my Godmother's children. One of them commented recently: it is amazing what became of Hilda despite her bad start in life.

This comment was probably meant as a compliment but there was a reminder in it that once upon a time I was their servant and an unwanted child. I felt the sting of a putdown although I am happy now.

I kept in touch with the home mother and with people who worked there. I made my first friends in that home and I still keep in touch with some of them.

Monika is one of my friends from that home. She now lives in Sydney. When she came for a holiday to Switzerland she told me about Australia. Perhaps she is the reason I am here in Lightning Ridge.

We had a very religious Protestant upbringing in that home. After the confirmation they sent the girls out to service as domestics. Unfortunately for me, my Godmother claimed me. She said that she would accommodate me and look after my welfare.

The guardianship board decided that I had to do an apprenticeship. I wanted to become a cook but I was not tall, strong and 'smart' enough and so wasn't considered suitable. The teachers noticed that I had artistic talents so they recommended that I learn dressmaking.

So at the age of fourteen I started my adult life.

My Godmother accommodated me for a fee. By now she had five children aged from three months to eighteen years and there were four adults in the family.

I worked at the dressmakers and in my spare time I worked on the farm. What I earned I had to pay for the school fees and the train fare to attend the one day compulsory school and one voluntary evening design class per week. I loved designing and art.

My design teacher insisted that I attend the art school and I mentioned this to my Godmother. She said that I was mad. Who did I think I was? Where would I ever get four thousand franks to pay for the art school? End of discussion. There was no money to pay for art or design school.

I kept on sewing and working on the farm for the next two and a half years while my cousins enjoyed themselves. I very seldom had a day off. I had to work during the holidays.

Occasionally my Godmother would give me some pocket money for my labour but as soon as I saved a bit she would find a way of retrieving my savings. She sold me something she did not want and I did not need or told me that she needed the money.

I never even had enough money to buy material to make a dress for myself.

You really never make money with dressmaking or art. Art always was a hungry profession and so was dressmaking.

The highlight of my life as an apprentice was when I broke my arm in a water driven spin drier. I was happy because I had a rest from the farm work and dressmaking for eight weeks. The nurses in the hospital were all so nice to me and I was often asked to sit with someone and read for them. I also had a real holiday in the Italian Swiss.

To the surprise of everybody I finished my dressmaking apprenticeship with top marks in the School of Zurich.

I bought my first sewing machine when I was thirty-two. If I had a sewing machine any earlier I would have to sew for everybody. I didn't really like sewing.

I started china painting when I was twenty-three and that was a source of much satisfaction.

At seventeen I became a live-in housemaid to a Protestant pastor. I earned more than I would with dressmaking and I had a free board. I worked from morning till night. The pastor was an autocratic father to three boys and two girls.

At that time my cousin got married and her husband's brother came to the wedding. He was adorable. We just looked at each other very much struck by our first love.

It was the first time I danced. My Godmother commented that I couldn't dance and I felt that people laughed at me. That remark must have hurt me very much. I think that remark made me self-conscious about dancing for the rest of my life. Maybe I would be a good dancer if I could only forget that first dance. I never felt comfortable dancing because I could not get it out of my head that I can't dance.

It was the same with music. I loved music and I carried my flute everywhere. This was the only instrument I could afford to play but the teacher kept telling me to stop

blowing into it because I disturbed people. All the things I really liked were always out of reach for me.

At eighteen I began working in a French Swiss hospital near Geneva Lake on a geriatric ward for women.

I cared as a nurse's aide for a very colourful ninety-seven years old woman that cursed a lot so my first French words were swear words. I loved that old woman and when she died in my arms I was too upset to come to work for several days.

I began to work for aged men during a flu epidemic. Ten out of fifteen men died in one week. I became hysterical with grief and shock. Death was all around me. I promised myself never to work with aged people again.

At twenty I applied to do a nursing course in Zurich but I did not have enough education and had to return to old age care nursing. I did a two-year geriatric nursing course. I was always lumped with difficult patients.

After two and a half years in a geriatric ward I needed a change. I went into the hospital that cared for chronically mental ill patients. What an experience that was! I knew about the old people but I didn't have a clue about mentally ill. My Godmother said: What a stupid idea. You will go mad. What about dressmaking?

After twelve months I started on a medical ward in a private hospital in Berne. I met a neurosurgeon who insisted to take me to Zurich and work in his clinic. I did not feel confident enough to take that challenge but instead I enrolled in the training course with the university clinic for psychiatry in Bern.

I was happy and well paid for doing the course. I finished with a Diploma for psychiatric nursing and began working as an occupational therapist. After a couple of years they offered me a position with even more responsibility. I accepted on the condition that I would get three months holiday before commencing it.

I always wanted to travel, so in 1980 I went with my friend, Elizabeth on a tour of Australia and New Zealand. Elizabeth was a cook in the home where I lived and Monika was also one of us girls so we had a kind of reunion. I suppose we were a kind of family to each other.

Monika wrote to us that we didn't need to know English because all Australians were migrants.

Elizabeth and I were to stay with Monika for three weeks but we soon became bored and Monika suggested that we go to Lightning Ridge, which was only an eight hours trip by train.

I always liked to collect rocks so Lightning Ridge sounded wonderful.

The railway stationmaster warned us that in Lightning Ridge we would find only a bunch of criminals. I didn't understand what a bunch was. I insisted on going.

Instead of eight hours as predicted by Monika the trip took more like twenty hours with all sorts of delays. After sightseeing we were enormously hot and exhausted. We slept until late in the evening. We then decided to explore the nightlife in the bowling club. We sat there talking loudly in German to attract some German-speaking patrons but nobody came. We ordered beer because we didn't know the names of other drinks.

There were two characters eyeing us. They brought beers and we were happy to have company. We were not really used to drinking alcohol and for sure we did not enjoy it.

After midnight we were asked to leave because it was closing time. The men were Keith and Ruben. We later learned that they made a bet with each other that they would have a drink with us.

Keith was a charming, interesting and good-looking man. He promised to pick us up next morning and take us with him mining. We worked all day and then he took us home and cooked for us. He was a good cook and I thought that he was the most wonderful person in the world. The next day we went washing the opal dirt and specking for opals. I loved looking for interesting stones and stayed all day in the hot sun. Keith was most considerate and a real gentleman who did not push himself on me.

After Lightning Ridge we went on an unforgettable bus camping tour to Darwin. On our return to Sydney Monika noticed a Ute standing in her driveway. What the hell does that man want, she said. It was Keith and he persuaded me to go with him to Lightning Ridge for a week before we departed for New Zealand.

For the next eighteen months Keith and I corresponded and he phoned me often.

Keith came to Switzerland and wanted to travel all over Europe. He only had five hundred dollars but he brought some opals from other people to sell on consignment. I helped him sell. I was spending a lot of money on Keith. He never hesitated to use my money. I was a bit anxious about spending my savings. I should have seen that Keith was using me but I still wore my rose coloured glasses.

I already decided to go with Keith to Australia. I resigned from my job and vacated my flat. I really liked Australian climate and had fond memories of friendly Australians.

Keith wasn't keen on my going to Australia. I applied for a working visa and told Keith that I could work wherever I liked. I always had to stand on my own feet and I did not want to change this.

We went to Australian Embassy in Berne. A lady there warned me to be careful. Apparently Keith had four children. Keith and I had our first serious argument because he lied to me that he only had one daughter. I should have turned back then, but I still did not see the warning signs clearly.

On our arrival to Australia we spent one month in Sydney with his old mates in a filthy flat. Keith found me work so I could earn my keep.

Before we returned to Lightning Ridge we went shopping. Keith chose many nice things for me but I had to pay for them. He chose a washing machine and other household items and we loaded his Ute. We drove all night and arrived exhausted to a hot filthy caravan on the opal field. Despite the poverty in my youth in Switzerland I never lived in conditions as appalling as that. I washed and bleached and sewed and cleaned before I could settle in my new home. The washing machine never even got installed.

I was still very much in love.

Keith was a compulsive liar. The truth would choke him. He was after vulnerable women; he wanted my money and someone to look after him. He did not want me to learn English and become independent. He was afraid that I would leave him if I found out what he is really like.

He found me a cattle puppy dog Dinga for company and Dinga stayed my devoted friend for the next eleven years.

I learned later that apart from being married three times and not divorced from the last wife, who had three children with him, Keith also had a current girlfriend, a nurse. I met this nurse and she said: Keith lied to me that he had to go to a Swiss sanatorium for his health. She also told me how she left her job in Sydney to come to Lightning Ridge to live with Keith. He changed both our lives.

Keith was on an invalid pension but I had no income so I quickly began looking for work.

Keith was in hospital a lot and I found work as a home care worker. After two years I broke up with Keith.

Some of the opals Keith brought to Switzerland belonged to his friend Bill. I met Bill the first week I had been in Lightning Ridge. Bill was a gentleman and when things went from bad to worse with Keith, Bill became more and more my friend.

Keith's former girlfriend also became a great support for me.

The job in Switzerland was kept open for me for two years and I considered returning. When I was really down and decided to return, the job was no longer available, so I stayed.

I applied for a job at Walgett hospital as a psychiatric nurse. They told me that I had to become registered first.

Keith's ex-girlfriend helped me write the application for registration as a nurse. Bill organised a friend to buy a small car for me so I could travel independently.

I went to Orange hospital for five months and got my registration.

I worked in Orange for two to three weeks at the time without a break and then returned to stay with Bill in Lightning Ridge for a few days off. He also provided a home for my dog Dinga. Bill supported me when I was down and unhappy. My days with Bill were the happiest for me but I had become the subject of the town gossip and I was very unhappy about it.

When I complained that people talked about us Bill said: As long as they have us to talk about they will leave some other poor person alone. Bill also said: When you face the problem straight on it loses the power to upset you.

When I became registered as a psychiatric nurse, Walgett hospital no longer employed psychiatric nurses, so I took a job as a nursing aide. I hated it. Walgett is close to Lightning Ridge but people there are very prejudiced against Aborigines and non-English speaking migrants. They did not accept my nursing registration. They made me do whatever they didn't like doing. One day I was a cleaner and the next I was in charge of the ward if there was no other nurse on duty. I was always paid the least. I felt overworked, underpaid, under-appreciated and completely frustrated.

Bill and I married in 1986. He was a wonderful man and we had much in common. He was a businessman in Newcastle before he moved to Lightning Ridge with his

wife. When his wife died he stayed here. We loved to travel and collect rocks. He was a very stable person and a great friend. He was of Scottish background and the first of five children to be born in Australia. I was happy with Bill, there has never been anyone like him. Bill enjoyed doing the same things as I; he supported me in things I wanted to do. All my friends and family adored Bill.

In 1989 we travelled to Switzerland. He developed a blood clot and had to be hospitalised there for three weeks. He came out of the hospital weak and his doctor said that he was running on one cylinder instead of four. Bill just wanted to return to Australia. In Sydney he was put into intensive care. After six months we returned to Lightning Ridge. Bill was still very ill but also very happy to be home. Sadly he only lasted two months.

When Bill died his son in law wanted to take everything Bill and I had. He even stole the rocks Bill and I collected.

After Bill's death I couldn't do anything for months, I was not able to leave the house. I knew I had to start to do something because I had no income.

My friend, Sue, prepared an art exhibition of cats. I sewed cushions with cats on them, painted cats and made cat pet rocks. One picture of a cat sold for \$350 and I felt really good about that.

I became a tourist tour guide and as a manageress of the Wallangulla motel for five months. I made curtains and leadlight windows for the bowling club. I painted rocks and taught China painting. People gave me their opals to take to buyers and they paid me a percentage.

For nearly three years I did all sorts of jobs. In 1991 I started again with home-care.

When the Day Care Centre coordinator position became vacant I got the job as a coordinator. I enjoyed my eight years looking after senior citizens.

I would rather starve than ever return to Walgett hospital.

In October 2000 I went to a meeting at Lightning Ridge Health Centre where I was introduced to the boss of the Mental Health Team as a Swiss trained psychiatric nurse. He offered me a job as a psychiatric nurse. By this time I cared for an old client for eight years and I felt reluctant to leave her. Just before I told her that I was leaving she died and I was very happy to accept the offer. I was put on probation for three months. After nearly twenty years I finally became permanently employed in a job I trained for.

I became a member of the Mental Health Team and I am happy in my job. There are people of all ages referred to me for the initial assessment. The visiting psychiatrist comes once a month but we have videoconferences if and when a problem needs to be attended quickly. I am learning new methods and techniques, the work is exiting and I enjoy doing it.

There was no school for migrants when I arrived to Lightning Ridge. I learned the first words of English with old timers on the opal fields and on the street. I remember the word bloody being added to everything. I considered the bloody to be an enhancement that made the events and people more exciting and better. It was a bloody lovely dog and the beer was bloody good, it was a bloody nice day. Until one day I heard on television about the bloody accident. Two busses crashed and there

was a lot of blood. I was surprised that the word bloody was used in such a serious case but Bill explained that this was how the word was meant to be used.

Not being able to write English was my greatest handicap.

In 1995 TAFE started English classes and I enrolled. In 1999 I enrolled in my first computer course. I enjoyed studying and my life became very interesting with all the new people I have met. Since I am on Internet I enjoy being in touch with my Swiss friends and cousins.

I still have problems with writing reports but people I work with are understanding and helpful.

Years ago I had to write reports about patients in the Bloomfield hospital and there was nobody to help me. I knew what I had to write and what happened but I had no proper words for it. Eg a mental patient defecated in the flowerpot and I tried to find the word defecate to describe the incident. I kept asking other medical workers to help me write the report but nobody listened to me. Finally I told a doctor that a patient shit herself in a flowerpot and the doctor said: Oh, did she. People on the street don't normally talk about intimate personal things like that; they would either say bath or powder room to camouflage the basic human function. Where was I to learn?

Just as well I can see a funny side of everything and can laugh at life now.

I learned to accept myself as I am and the people around me with all their problems and stories. You can travel the world but you have to take yourself wherever you go and until you solve the problems within yourselves you are never free.

Lightning Ridge is a colourful place with people from all over the world. You are likely to find an ex policeman or a doctor or a priest socialising in the pub or digging for opal. You never know what kind of person is hiding in a camp on the opal fields. Here I don't feel different because we are all different.

Lightning Ridge is much like a psychiatric hospital only the people go home and cook for themselves.

Opal unites the people of Lightning Ridge but they remain strangers at some level; they feel vulnerable and lonely especially when they are sick or old. Friends come and go and are soon forgotten in this itinerant mining town. There is no permanency in relationships.

Being a migrant and a stranger I can relate to how these people feel. It is hard to create intimacy, it is hard to love a stranger. The diversity is interesting but the sameness creates familiarity and strengthens ties. We need someone to share the childhood memories and culture and background.

The hometown does not exist in Australia. There is no village life where everybody is part of the community. People in Australia often don't even know their neighbours.

The Australian country towns are service towns for farmers who live their isolated lives. The service providers may come from Greece or China and the service receivers might come from anywhere in the world.

During my first years in Lightning Ridge I joined the Bowling club. Someone once said that my bowling trophies only collect dust but I love to dust them because they remind me of the good times and people I met. I like to socialise with other bowlers because they have nothing to do with mental health and the work I am doing. They



make me feel that we live ordinary lives in a normal world although I am aware that we all put out our brave public faces and hide the real stories of our lives. I get involved in the sport of bowling rather than dwell on all that goes on inside people. Bowling used to be a pensioner's game but more and more young people get involved in it now.

Lightning Ridge is a man's town and there are many lonely old men who would love to have someone to take care of their needs but they forgot how to care for a woman. I had some male friends but there was nobody I would want to trade my freedom and independence for. I don't really want to become a wife and serve any particular man. Men my age are set in their ways and want someone to follow them but I would also like someone to go where I want to be. I think it would be impossible for any man to replace Bill.

I learned to rely on myself and accept the challenges that come my way.

I think I fell in love with the Australia. Australians offer refreshments and readily chat about the weather and about the place you came from but they quickly tire of people. Now I realise that this instant friendship is not a lasting friendship.

In Switzerland it takes long before you can enter someone's home and be offered refreshments but when you have a friend you know that it is for keeps.

I did not leave Switzerland because I was unhappy there but I was adventurous and in love.

Now this sunburnt country became my home. I love Australia and even the flies don't bother me anymore.

## Gina

I was born as a first of three children on 21.12 38 in Zabreb. My father was working for the government as a spy. He provided well for us. We lived in a nice home.

My father was one of 13 children. His mother was a midwife. People from all over called her to help them with childbirth. She stayed in my heart as a nice person and I loved her.

I believe that mum and dad loved each other. Dad was rarely home but whenever he came they made another baby. My two younger sisters were born before he disappeared in 1945.

Dad joined the Ustashi Croatian army. He was a friend of the Ustashi leader Ante Pavelic. Dad's brother was Pavelic's body guard. He was also a writer of children's books. Ustashi were cooperating with Germans so Germans granted Croatia an independent state. Ustashi were fighting against communists but in the end communists won the war. Ustashi escaped but many were returned and were later killed by Yugoslav communists. We never knew how and where dad died.

I remember that mum was informed three times that dad was killed and each time she began wearing black to mourn him but every time he came back. The last time he came home at midnight; he knocked on the door but mum was too scared to open. It was the beginning of 1945 and partisans were getting closer. Ustashi were on the run. Dad called and I called out to dad. In the end mum opened. Dad looked drunk. He was in the uniform and had a machine gun and grenades around his waist. Mum asked him why he came; he put the family and himself in danger. He put down the gun and grenades and went to bed. Mum put the gun under the bed. There was a big noise outside so dad jumped up, kicked the door open and yelled out: surrender or I'll shoot. The cat miaowed. Dad got dressed then. He talked to himself saying that mum will get him arrested. As he was going mum told him never to return. We never heard from him again.

I loved my father and he loved me very much. That's the only real love I remember. He was handsome and he sang on the radio. He used to play cards and drank a fair bit. That's where he met my mother who was a waitress in a restaurant. Mum was quite pretty when she was young. She came to Zagreb as 13 years old to help the cook in the priest's kitchen. Her parents found a job for her so she had to leave school. Once a month her father came to take her pay. The cook scolded her father for not letting his daughter keep the money she earned. Later she found herself a waitressing job.

After the war the government threw us out of the house. We were Ustashi family and Ustashi were considered traitors. Mum found a little run down flat for us. She had to go to work. I was a baby sitter for my youngest sister since I was four. The middle sister went to mum's parents because there was no room for her in the flat.

I used to go for school holidays to mum's parents but they were busy and paid no attention to me.

I often wonder why my mother never showed any affection towards us children. She never listened to us or talked to us, never told us a story or praised us. I looked after my younger sisters and helped with housekeeping but she never once said that I was good.

When my sister was a few months old mum tried to smother her with the pillow. She left a pillow on top of her and went out but when she returned she found the pillow on the floor and the cat curled around the baby's head.

Maybe mum suffered from post natal depression and never recovered. Maybe she never learned from her parents to show love. Maybe she was overworked.

I felt that mum never liked me or my sisters. My sisters and I never learned to be affectionate towards each other either.

I remember an incident when I was about five. Our neighbour had a pear tree. She told me not to take the two pears they were saving. One afternoon the neighbour came crying to mum. Why did your daughter take the pears? I told them that I didn't take them but they would not believe me. Mum took a knife and pushed me on the chair saying that she will kill me. She actually slightly stabbed me in the stomach before the neighbour pulled her away. I had a scar for years but the memory of it never faded. I was terrified.

After the war mum found a job in a storeroom of a huge government building. She wasn't educated but she must have been intelligent because she remembered every article in the storeroom. When a storeman died she became a store manager. The government built flats for the employees and she got a new flat.

I went to boarding school when I was eleven because I couldn't stand being at home. I finished four years primary and three years of high school. I started an apprenticeship to repair nylon stockings. I learned very fast and I earned good money working for a dressmaker who also did stocking repair. I had to save carefully. I still lived in the boarding house paying a nominal fee.

At the age of seventeen I escaped to Turkey without telling anyone. Two other girls and I knew a man who had a brother working on an old Turkish cargo ship. He told his brother when the ship will come to Rjeka port. We paid the duty guard to turn a blind eye. We put men's clothes on and swaggered like drunks. Someone called: stop. Another man said: they are only dirty Turks, let them go.

We boarded the ship during the night and hid on top of the coal underneath the deck. We were trembling as we heard the Yugoslav inspectors above checking the ship before departure.

They found us after a few hours and took us in the office for interrogation. An interpreter translated for us. The captain said that we were just half an hour in the international waters and that they will ring Rjeka police to pick us up. They would put us in jail. I told him that I am going to jump in the sea rather than be sent back. I would have done so. My friends cried. The man who was with us was shaking uncontrollably. The captain slapped his brother really hard because he helped us. Both brothers were locked up on the ship.

The captain telegraphed Turkey and they told him to bring us over. We had a bath before they locked us in the room. The captain told us not to go out because he was responsible for our safety. We were young girls among the Turkish sailors.

On the fourth day the officers came to take us three girls on top of the ship. They showed us a Yugoslav ship in the distance and they told us that they will send us over. We cried. After six days we arrived to Istanbul and became celebrities. It was the first

time that young girls would come there on their own. Hundreds of people came to meet us; they called our names and took our photos.

People looked poor and I wondered where we came. We were taken to the police station where they made beds for us. They asked us what we wanted to eat and soon the waiter brought whatever we ordered. We were questioned. We did not want to stay in Turkey. My dream was America because as children we received UNDRRA parcels from America. A man took us to the shop and American council paid for our clothes and accessories. They put us in a hotel until they found accommodation for us. We just ordered whatever we wanted to eat. We were there for two weeks and our pictures were in the papers every day. We found accommodation and they gave us government benefit which was more than an average wage. We had a good life in Turkey.

There was no employment. We could find a little work in coffee shops but we were afraid to lose benefits.

I was there a year and a half hoping to go to America but they told me that it will take five years before I will be allowed to.

I decided to go to France but Croatians caused some political trouble there at the time so they did not want me. They said you can go to Australia. I didn't want to go but I agreed. They bought me new clothes and sent me to the dentist. After a month on 2.5.1957 I was on the plane for Australia and arrived to Perth. A Croatian catholic priest and a nun were waiting for me. I stayed with them for two weeks. I could not eat the food but I just drank milk. A Croatian farmer came with his wife and they took me with them. I was there a few weeks until I became stronger.

There was no work in Perth so the government found me a job and a room in Paddington near Sydney. I worked in a thong factory for a month until I found a job in a Croatian coffee lounge making cappuccino. After six months there I met Mathew who escaped from Croatia. He had a brother in Perth.

I was crazy about Mathew. I couldn't see my life without him. He came to ask me for a dance in the Croatian club. I was in love. He was handsome and intelligent. I was blind to any faults or differences. He was well dressed and well groomed. He talked well and behaved like a real gentleman.

We got married after living together for six years. We have a daughter Mandy who was born in 1965.

We moved to Melbourne. Mathew was a technician and he opened a camera repair shop. He worked very long hours. I was home alone with Mandy so I tried to make our home perfect for him when he came home. After a couple of years Mathew became sick with the brain tumour. He wasn't allowed to work for many months. He couldn't stand being without work. He worried about business and employees. We had to pay rent for the shop and make repayments on the house.

After three years in Melbourne we moved to Lightning Ridge. Mathew was in Lightning Ridge before so he knew about opal mining.

I got a block of land in a ballot. Toni Skoro made a room for us to move in. We sold the house, business and another block we had so we built the home in Lightning Ridge.

Mathew told me to look after our money because the doctor told him that his tumour may return.

Mathew learned to cut opal well and he became a very popular cutter. I began to buy small parcels of opal. Bruce brothers brought five little stones and I offered eight hundred dollars. They asked if it was standing offer and I said yes. I hoped they would not return but they did and I paid. Mathew comforted me saying that even if we lost we didn't lose everything. I went to Lenny Cram and he said that the sand on the back spoiled one stone. Mathew recut all the stones. Chaplain then bought one stone for nine hundred dollars. That gave me courage to start buying.

When Mandy was seven I went to visit mum. I had nothing to go home for really but I wanted to see mum. I always had mum on my mind. Maybe I wanted to make her love me. I cannot say that I ever loved my mum but at the same time I knew that she took care of us. We were never hungry and we had better clothes than other children. When I was little I always dreamed how I will run away and get rich to help my mother.

Mum loved my dad and then hated him for leaving her with three little children to look after.

Mandy and I flew to Rome but I could not make myself book a plane for Zagreb. It took me one week to decide if I really wanted to go home. I couldn't eat. I was choked. I couldn't make my mind. Mandy and I stayed in Trieste for a week feeding pigeons in the park before I gathered strength to make a decision to go home. On the border we heard Croatian language and it was lovely but it was very hard to face the past and the people from my past.

Mum and my sisters Violet and Georgia were happy to see me.

One day Violet was sitting in the kitchen smoking while mum talked to Georgia. I overheard Georgia crying and begging mum to tell her why she never loved her.

Mum was very cool and said: there is no room for you in my heart. There never was.

I didn't want to upset mum but I asked Violet what it was all about.

Violet said: You don't know mum, she is much worse than you remember.

We girls never learned from mum how to show affection for each other. I only saw my sister Georgia during school holidays because she always lived with our grandparents. She inherited their land and home but she divided it between her three sons. They are prosperous builders who subcontract big jobs to trade contractors.

Her sons demolished the old house and built a big modern home. Georgia lives in the big house but she has no pension and has to work on the land to survive.

Violet was married to a Serb reporter and they lived in Kosovo for thirty years. Her husband died just before the Kosovo war. Kosovo Muslims threw Violet out of her flat. She was found unconscious and they took her into the refugee camp and later to Serbia. She has a daughter and three grandchildren. I have been looking after them since the war in the 1990s. I sent them about twenty parcels of clothing.

I sent mum money regularly since I left home. She never asked for money but she always wrote how expensive everything was at home. She also wrote that my sisters were well off and did not need my help. She did not want me to send anything to them. She wanted me for herself. I became popular with her, I suppose, but I felt that I

was buying her love. My sister said that mum loved me most but I think I bought her love with the money I sent her. I always wanted mum to be best dressed and looked after. She had more clothes than anyone around her. She went on a sea holidays and had a good life.

Mum died 16 years ago.

My relationship with Mathew deteriorated when we came to Lightning Ridge. We became reasonably successful and prosperous compared to a lot of poor migrant miners but I began to see a side of Mathew I never knew before. He came from a very poor family of nine. When we had nothing we had dreams and we were happy but when we had no more money problems he changed. Even when he had a business in Melbourne he began to pretend that he was better than other people. He especially liked to show off in front of poor people. He loved good food and he never missed to boast about the food he ate and the drinks he bought. I was often embarrassed by his boasting and sometimes I kicked him under the table but he just asked why I was kicking him.

He got worse when we came to Lightning Ridge. He liked to make himself bigger than people around him. He had a need to impress others. When people came with bits of opal they found to barely survive he liked to boast about good things he had. In those days most miners lived under the tent without government support.

Little things he said and did got on my nerves. When the first astronauts landed on the moon he started to read about it and he always tried to make himself look smarter than people around him. He told me that I was not educated and that our people were from the dark ages and had no intelligence. He was sweet to their faces but denigrated them behind their backs. He said that we must look for a better class of people and distance ourselves from the poor people. I began to dislike him. I didn't like the two faced person he became. His brother Peter has the same tendency to make himself bigger than he is. Maybe this trait runs in the family. They were dreamers who needed to be bigger than people around them.

Mathew also expected too much from me; I felt overworked and underappreciated.

Mathew and I had separate finances. He was happy about that. He went on holidays to Croatia and bought a car for his brother in Croatia. He went to Croatia many times. I bought myself a new car instead. I also had a veranda built and put concrete around the house.

Mathew loved his daughter Mandy. He spoiled her and I objected. When I told her to eat, he told her that she does not have to if she does not like it. Mandy looked at him for support when I demanded that she does something. She would not swallow food so we had her tonsils removed to eat better.

I became frustrated and shouted but he told Mandy that she does not have to listen to me. Mathew loved children, he loved to play with them. Mandy's friends loved him. To me he seemed childish but maybe he never had childhood games and wanted to enjoy them with his daughter. He wanted more children but I wasn't keen.

Mathew and I did well in business together but we began to live separate lives. I got a block of land, had a flat built and left Mathew. He told me to take everything we had but leave Mandy with him. I told him that Mandy can see him every day but she had to live with me. He wanted me to come back and remain friends. When I left we often

met in the pub for lunch. There was Toni who played in the band and he asked me out. Mathew became jealous and wanted me back. Toni wanted me to go with him to America. Mathew told Toni that I am a lesbian and he told me that Toni is a homosexual.

I met Veselko and we lived together for awhile. He got married to a woman from Croatia but after she arrived to Australia they separated and she returned to Yugoslavia. I found Veselko an opal claim in Glengarry. I bought him a generator and he worked.

One day a man came looking for him He said that he was a debt collector. I said that nobody died because I understood that he was a death collector. He said that he came to take Veselko's car. I gave Veselko a massage and I paid his debt. I told him that it was a loan and he said that he will repay me double. After two weeks the finance company came for the debt he had for bringing his wife from Croatia. I lend him more money but soon he found ten thousand dollars in the claim and he paid all his debts.

Mathew went to Croatia and brought back a new wife Sonja. I had problems with Mathew and his new wife Sonja. Mathew was nice to me when we met on our own but when he was with Sonja he turned his head away. He spread dirty rumours about me.

I sold the house and went to Cobber Peddy with Veselko. Mandy stayed with Sonja and Mathew until I settled and bought a house in Cobber Peddy. I stayed two and a half years. I bought cutting machines and I began to buy rough opal. I leased a shop. The previous owner taught me about the business. I bought the settings/findings in a lapidary shop. I learned to set stones. I bought cheap stones in rough, then cut and set them for tourists. I was on a good spot and thousands of tourists came to buy cheap souvenirs. They were selling like hot cakes. I learned to make initials with opal chips in cheap settings.

I worked seven days a week twelve hours a day.

When I sold everything in Copper Peddy I bought a town house in Surfers paradise and brought my mum for holidays. She was very happy.

I wasn't happy in relationships. I can't imagine myself living with a man again. I am very happy on my own now.

## Impi Freeland

I was born on 28.7.1913 in America as the oldest child to the Finnish migrant parents. My mother's older sister came to America first. She was a cook to goldminers in Alaska. Later she married a farmer near Seattle. When she returned to Finland she told everybody about the wonderful America. She took her sister, my mother, and her brother with her. Others followed.

Mum was a short stout woman. She must have looked exotic among blond Finns with her white complexion and dark hair. She was afraid that I will inherit her short legs but I have long legs and needed them to walk long distances to school.

Mum met dad in Seattle. They got married and I was on my way.

Dad wasn't impressed by America and couldn't wait for me to be born so we could board the boat and go to Fiji. As a girl I was a disappointment and a useless encumbrance to my parents.

My father was a romantic adventurer and a great talker. I must have inherited this trait from him. I never had time for hobbies but I looked forward to the train journey from work so I could talk to my fellow travellers.

Dad got a job in Fiji. When the ship arrived to Fiji mum was scared of the natives. They sailed ahead to Australia and my father fell in love with Australia. The fertile land and warm climate attracted both my parents.

Australia accepted northern European migrants after the WWI so as a child I was surrounded by migrants. Germans congregated around each other and so did Ukrainians and Finns. There were also thousands of British migrants.

My home was always Finnish but the world around me was English Australia. I have never been to Finland and at 88 I think I will never go.

Finnish was my first language because my mother never learned to speak much English. Finnish is easy because it is a phonic language. English is difficult as a second language because you say one thing and write another. I learned English naturally as a child and have become an interpreter for mum and other people.

I inherited some property in Finland and I wish that I could go and see the country of my parents. I heard so much about Finland that I feel like I know every inch of it.

I wasn't interested in Finland while I was young but with age I suppose there comes a need to belong and to be able to say who you are. One needs to find a place in the life's chain of the clan. My son Joe showed some interest in his heritage while girls were never interested in anything but themselves. Maybe girls are less interested in the past than boys. Maybe it is a boy's thing to search for roots and meaning and belonging. Death often makes you think of the clan that lives on when one dies.

My father insisted that we become Australians as quickly as possible. It has always been implied that those poor migrants were an unhappy lot but we weren't really. Most quickly acquired a laid back lazy Australian lifestyle, love of the sunshine, wilderness, and the untouched beauty of nature.

We did not celebrate much because dad became an atheist. He refused to wait for God to fix things. He planned and did things for himself. He wasn't particularly energetic or capable or industrious but he was a thinker and a dreamer.



I think one must be mad to leave one's home and go to live in another country. If God is kind to you and keeps you healthy and strong you may survive. My father didn't.

My father and his friend Budsy bought a hundred acres of land on the outskirts of Sydney. Budsy earned some money by cutting railway sleepers while dad cleared the land. Dad sifted the good black soil through his fingers and declared to his family: You will never starve on this land. This land will feed you. And it did. We had no government help and nobody else to turn to so we had to look after ourselves.

People mistook Dad for a German because he spoke German so it was hard for him to find employment while England was at war with Germany during the WWI.

Mum produced another baby girl to dad's utter disgust.

After the First World War Australia was swamped by pommy whingers. The ones not killed in the war must have been shafted to Australia.

I believe that they starved in England and became incapacitated. They were not physically strong and bone-lazy as well but would pinch anything they could reach over the fence. They were hopeless. We wondered how they managed to survive. I learned later on, that most had no working class background. English society probably wanted to get rid of them so they paid their passage to Australia. The poor English migrants came from slums in England and have never seen a seed put into the ground and reap the reward for it. They were disadvantaged in that way.

It was fun for us to grow our food. We always bought land but these other people may never have felt the satisfaction of having land and growing what they needed. Eventually they learned to work.

People these days are becoming lazy, spoilt and weak. They are waiting for handouts so they don't have to dirty their hands with work. They don't even know how to help themselves. I remember a lady in Sydney who had a thin strip of land in front of her house and she grew all their vegies on it.

Everything changed when European migrants began coming to Australia because they wanted to come and because they saw great opportunities in Australia. They saw that the land is fantastic and they could grow things and they were willing and able to work. Europeans had to pay their own way. Usually the whole family saved to get one of theirs in to the New World. That person was responsible for repayment of that debt in some way.

We always regarded Germans as more advanced in culture and technology but people never really like them. My father spoke glowingly about Germans. Nearby was a settlement of soldiers that returned from the WWI. They resented dad standing up for Germans. Dad was a union man, a good speaker but not really practical or political. He was not dedicated to any particular cause he was just a gregarious type who liked to impress.

There were also Italians. In my father's opinion Italians were wonderful because they managed to grow wonderful food. They prospered with hard work not like people do these days by cheating each other.

Mum just scoffed at dad and whispered that Italians are Catholics. She told me to keep away from them and not to chase Italian boys. All the offshoots of Catholic Church hate Catholics because of their power. Italians were very industrious; they grew everything, managed well and had large families.

Mum was prejudiced against blacks, Jews and Catholics.

When dad died we had no one to help us so mum helped in the house of these Italian families and they kept us supplied with best of food.

There were few Eastern and Southern Europeans at that time in Australia.

My father was enchanted by Australia. Next to our lot of land was a big paddock of wattle trees. Dad was mesmerised by the blaze of its golden beauty reflected in the sun. God's own given country, he romanticised while mum sweated and moaned over the washing and the hard work on the land. I don't think we would ever have survived without my father's dreaming. What a wonderful land, a fairyland, dad went on while mum toiled in the paddock.

I am always intrigued with the way things grow and how every seed knows what to become. To me and my family land meant survival and a source of food. I always lived on the land that fed us so we never felt poor. The family next to us in Sydney had the same land we had but they never cleared it. They always reached over the fence to get our fruit and vegetables while my dad admired the glory of their golden wattle trees.

Dad built our first home with a proper underground sauna like they have in Finland. The heat was contained underground, it was like an oven. Cleanliness was very important in our home. Mum scrubbed the wooden floor every week until it was white. When I started working I bought some varnish and painted the floorboards so we didn't have to scrub any more.

Dad cleared our land of every tree so we could grow vegetables and make money. He gave things away. He grew enough food to feed an army so he gave it away to neighbours in basket-fulls.

No one in our family ever made money. We never had money but we never went hungry either. Dad couldn't believe how cheap sugar was in Australia. He bought a whole bag of it and we ate it. I believe that we damaged our teeth with sugar in those days.

Dad travelled a lot and has seen different fruits growing so he said when he gets some land he would plant every kind of fruit tree. We had 37 fruit trees and the Poms next to us always came to us to get some fruit. Dad gave them seeds and seedlings and cuttings but they never planted anything.

From the trees dad cut down he made fire wood and stacked it near the house. We came from Finland where everything is used and nothing is wasted. Worn out clothes become dusters.

These days people waste so much and then they whinge that they are poor. It's the little things that make a difference. You have to save every day to become more comfortable. People become jealous if you have more than they have. That's why they hate Jews. Jews are careful with little things, their children are tidy and they learn to be careful with their belongings. Jews help each other; they stick together and get rich. People come to them to borrow money and then they curse them for wanting

their money repaid. Other nations want to be like Jews but they are careless and lazy and they argue with each other instead of going ahead and sticking together. People hate Jews because they can not live up to their standards.

People these days take their good fortunes for granted. They spend their money freely and never mind tomorrow. We saved for a rainy day because it was surely going to pour. Mum left lots of junk when she died but most of it stayed in the house and is still there. The land must be worth a lot now.

We had no close neighbours; there were always acres of land between us. There was a railway station nearby where we lived and that was handy for going to the markets and to town.

A Syrian family lived nearby and mum asked me to go with the lady to the city and interpret for her. The city lady had let us into their beautiful home. I didn't understand either of their languages but both spoke a bit of English and I tried to make them understand each other. The lady of the house wanted my Syrian neighbour to do some embroidery but she refused to pay the price. I never before saw anything as beautiful as that house. They were very rich and our neighbour was starving. I realised then how rich people exploit the poor.

My father fancied himself to be more educated than he was. Education was a big thing in my family. Both mum and dad pushed me to become educated and I soon knew more than dad. The idea of me going to a little country school was exciting to my parents. What a wonderful country this is where my daughter can get free education, raved dad.

I became opinionated and arrogant with all this new primary school knowledge I got in the land of opportunity.

Mum comes from a pious Lutheran family and to her religion was culture. It was hard to find a Lutheran church or a church at all in those days in East Hills near Georges River on the outskirts of Sydney where we lived. Mum found a Church of England as the next best thing.

Later mum found a Catholic school and entrusted her daughters into the care of the nuns. I became Catholic from then on but my sister married a Jew and she took Jewish religion.

Mum did not like public school education because the children there were rowdy and disorderly. If there was any money in the house the books and education came first. I never had any toys or dolls.

Dad was about to begin a real job installing the electricity in the huge Anthony Hordens building next to People's Palace. We were all very excited about the prospect of our father being in charge of putting electricity into that beautiful place. I remember us going to buy all sorts of appropriate clothes for his work one day but the next day dad dropped dead. I never knew how or why he died. I did not understand death. I knew cats and goats and pigs die but not people.

I was eight and since then I grew under mum's influence and I suppose I became much like mum in my long dresses to protect my modesty.

Mum never went to school; many people in those days were illiterate. I just remember her being ordinary in her working clothes but she must have been beautiful to catch dad who was quite smart and handsome.

After dad died mum was down mentally, physically and financially. She was alone with two daughters to feed and look after. She sold our land. I heard that mum often came to look at the land she sold. She stood there crying and the lady who bought it saw her and felt guilty. The new owners never made anything out of the land. I sometimes wonder what became of it now that it is part of the city. I heard later that the lady bought the land because she felt sorry for mum and that they intended to give it later to me.

We rented a place and Mum began to work at RRR Railway Refreshment room and loved it there. Budsy married mum and they had another daughter.

I was eleven when Budsy died and mum was left on her own with three daughters.

Mum knew an elegant Finish lady who lived next to where they built the Sydney Harbour Bridge. With her English Gentleman husband Mr Top they ran a kind of a hostel first for Finnish migrants and later for migrants in general.

Mum let me go by bus and train to Sydney sometimes to take some produce to this lady and the lady let me stay with them for a few days. They were thrilled by fresh eggs and cream and cakes I brought and I was thrilled to be able to taste their lifestyle.

These trips to the city were the highlights of my life. As soon as I would come to the house I would go and wash my hands. They commended me how clean I was but I only washed my hands because I liked their scented soap. Being with elegant people in the rich home I got ideas that I would also like to have all the good things.

Mr Top went to the barber's every morning to have his face and his hair arranged.

I don't think I was a very good daughter when I was young. I didn't understand the attitudes nations have towards each other. Finns like most people consider themselves a bit better than the rest, cleaner, hard working, honest. On one hand I was a Finn migrant on the other I was Australian. Everything I absorbed during those growing up years became part of who I imagined myself to be.

At fourteen I had to go maiding to earn some money. There I was, blond with huge new bosom sticking out, a lovely bait for men to chase. I became a live in maid for ten shillings a week. The disgusting old man of the house was after me. I had no lock on my bedroom door so I stacked the furniture on the door at night.

I soon packed my bag and went home. I never told mum why I left. In those days you did not talk about sex or sexual abuse. You didn't talk about pregnancy or poo or anything like that. Sometimes I think that kids these days know too much about sex but then I wonder if anyone can ever know too much of anything.

Mum asked Mrs. Top once to talk to me about sex and short skirts. We wore modest long skirts.

My next employer was a lovely, kind, gentle Belgian family. The lady taught me a lot; I became quite uppity and she made me believe that I was as good as she was. She taught me a lot about the fine living and she smelled so nice not at all like us farm people who had to work with animals. We were clean family but not at all elegant. They had important guests and I served them. The lady lent me her black dress but it was very tight over my big boobs. With my bushy blond hair and rosy cheeks I looked a picture. Men followed me with their eyes and I enjoyed being admired. Her husband was a wool buyer and when they returned to Belgium they wanted to take me with

them but mum would not let me go. She did not speak English and without a man in the family I had to take the responsibility.

I became confident enough to enrol into a secretarial course at the Business College. With all my new expertise I went to work for Farmers department store in Pitt Street where I met people who were quite different. Everything that happened later in my life was based on the pictures I formed about the world before I knew that there were other, quite different people in the world.

I worked for a firm of accountants. My boss had trouble with staff, people couldn't stand working for him but I loved it there. He paid well but he wanted the job done tiptop.

When Mount Isa mining opened I went to work in the office there. Men from all over the world came to work in the mine. About three hundred Finns came and most of them were young men. They wrote home how good it was in Australia and new eager migrants joined them.

It was an exciting time for a young girl like myself, admired and courted by all these young lonely men. Girls were scarce; especially Finn girls and I had a whale of a time attracting all the admiration.

I picked Aimo, handsome young Finn who came from a farming background in Finland. It must have been hard for him to adjust to the new country.

Aimo was never interested in farming and I did not want to marry a farmer either. Mum wasn't too happy when I brought him home. She said that I would throw my life away. I suppose she would have picked a Finn man for me before she would have me marry any other. Australians we knew were a rough, common lot so at 28 I married this Finn Aimo Sankkila and became pregnant with Gail. We got fed up with Mount Isa so we sold our home, packed up and returned to Sydney.

Coming to Australia was a first taste of freedom for Aimo and he liked it. He liked having a wife simply because having a wife was a sign of success but a wife also tied him down. Especially the wife that was constantly pregnant.

Money was always a problem with us; we never had any. Not having money was a lifelong theme in my life. I believe that neither Aimo nor I had been good managers. It never entered Aimo's psyche to build a home or buy the land so we could settle down.

Aimo became restless. We moved to Brisbane. Aimo did some labouring and I took some office work when I could get it. I wasn't very popular as an employee with three small children who could get sick at any time. We had two daughters and a son and we could not go anywhere.

Eventually Aimo decided to go to New Guinea to earn more money. I was to follow as soon as he settled down and got the place for us. He provided poorly for the children. Aimo must have caught something because in 1956 he died before I could join him. He was a poor useless bastard who left me to look after our children on my own.

I returned to Sydney because mum was very sick and she soon died. I applied for the deserted wife's pension. I was trying to feed my three children. My oldest daughter Gail looked after the younger two children when I had to go to work to supplement my pension.

Much later I married my neighbour Harold Freeland who was a widower living in his house next door. He was a bright and breezy man and a good company. He had no children but when he died his family home went to his sister who had three children. I did not contest the will and I had to find a place for myself. I considered going back to Mount Isa to work there but I was too old so I applied for widow's pension and started life on my own. I could afford to buy a small place in the country but it had to be an interesting place. I would die of boredom in an ordinary country town.

In 1975 I came with my friends to Lightning Ridge which was an attractive, exciting place at the time. I always lived with people that came from different countries so coming to Lightning Ridge was like coming home. I have a strong personality and have always been considered wilful.

In Lightning Ridge you can be anybody and people still accept you. Of course there is prejudice but people often have no power to discriminate against others because they are not in a position to give them a job or a home or do any favours.

People who do not get ahead in life often like to bitch against those that can. Lazy people bitch about those that work hard and keep themselves proud and tidy.

I like Lightning Ridge. I don't even need people as much as I need the cheerful warm town itself.

Sydney is a cold place with cold people. It is fine for young people to sharpen their wits there because if you manage to survive in Sydney you will survive anywhere.

People everywhere are many sided. I like to converse with people who are mentally happy and active, people who have enough intelligence to talk about events as they are without feeling criticised or judged, people who can laugh at themselves and the life generally. I don't like people who have no ambition or energy to improve themselves. It does not mean that you have to be financially better off but to become more alert and wise and knowledgeable.

The superstition says if you manage to grow a money tree you will never be poor. I brought a money tree and it grows well. I am not wealthy but I feel rich.

Australia is so very easy for everyone. If people feel poor that is their state of mind rather than lack of things. I still cannot see the poverty and misery in Australia. People will always be poor unless they learn to grow things and help themselves.

I praise God for the wonderful world he created but I don't worry about little details of religions. Christians all believe in Jesus and fight each other in his name so I don't want to be bothered with little differences they have. I find it difficult to believe. Mum never went to school but she had her simple faith. I sometimes wonder if the Christian training I had is the way to the truth or is it just a story of people who helped and guided their fellow men. Animals always have a leader but I don't know if the same applies to humans. Are our leaders specially gifted? Maybe the masses just push forward certain individuals who are willing to fight for their benefits.

The leader has to have courage. He has to be prepared to stand out in front and take the flack. Most people rather duck instead. Politicians sometimes have convictions but

commitment is even more important. They must believe in themselves. Leaders love to be loved and they get egotistical satisfaction from being the centre of attention. Occasionally there is someone who stands out and have people follow his ideas. This someone might shun the limelight and not seek leadership. This someone might not have the courage and commitment to stand in front and represent and argue for others.

Politics is all about money. In Australia people are jealous of those that get money from the government. They resent Aborigines getting special benefits.

I remember the poor wretched Aborigines who lived along the George River during the floods in 1915. An Aboriginal family came to our back fence. They were thin, cold and hungry. Mum was terrified of blacks but she packed lots of food and I took it down to them. I told them to leave the dishes at the fence when they finished. The next day I found the dishes washed and empty. We were amazed that they washed and returned the dishes.

The biggest sin in my childhood was stealing. The fact that they did not steal our dishes made me believe that they were not bad. We never saw them again. They lived somewhere on the riverbank. They had nothing to live in yet they didn't even try to build anything. It was hard for us to understand that they did not try to improve their situation. Their whole psyche was different. They asked for this and that but they did not change the situation for themselves. We learned that we must help ourselves but they did not.

Aborigines never learned to grow things and to this day they are not growing food. It was hard for us seeing Aborigines living in total poverty and yet they did not help themselves like Europeans did. It was clear to me that we were very different.

I don't tolerate ignorance well. People who have no ambition to improve themselves are rather boring. I don't mean that one should be rich but one should grow in knowledge, wisdom and understanding. I think factory work destroys people mentally. To do the same monotonous work all your life must do some damage but I suppose we have to have workers.

In 1975 I bought a block of land in Lightning Ridge and had a small cottage built for me. At the beginning I used to spend a couple of months a year in Sydney to work in the accountancy firm where I worked before. I earned money to pay my bills for the whole year. I loved my work. My boss always knew exactly what he wanted and how to get it. I like people who know what they are doing and who are doing their jobs well. He liked my work too.

I don't consider myself especially maternal or a model parent. I haven't seen my daughter Leone and her two children for ages. I haven't seen my son Joe and his four children for a long time.

Gail is my oldest and she has always been my helper. She is staying with me and looks after me now.

My son Joe Sankkilia is remembered as the inspector Brennan in the TV series Phoenix. He is still acting in ABC programs. Leone is a successful psychiatric nurse. Both of them are driven to make money and get up in the society. I suppose I am a dead loss to them.

I came to the stage now where I don't want to have anything I don't use and need. I don't want to live in fear of thieves and of jealous people.

By telling my story I may finally get my name in print. I never had a desire to be famous or at least I thought that the price of fame was too high. It must be my impoverished background.



## Rose

I never imagined that Australia would one day become my home.

I was born in 1937 in Prussia near Kaliningrad in the Gulf of Gdansk in the Baltic Sea. Prussia is a former name of a region in Northern Europe along the river Vistula and bordering on Baltic Sea. On the West Side Prussia bordered on Poland and on the East it bordered on Russia.

Prussia was an independent German speaking state from 17th century until 1918 when it became an enclave of Germany. The Treaty of Versailles in 1919 made Germany surrender West Prussia to Poland. The free corridor was created from Germany through Poland to join Germany with Prussia. Hitler occupied Poland in 1939 and thus joined Prussia with Germany for the duration of the war. In January 1945 Russians invaded East Prussia. Russia always wanted to have East Prussia because it borders on the Baltic Sea.

West Prussia was annexed by Poland. Russians wanted to cleanse East Prussia of German people and settle it with Russians. They resettled many East Prussian German residents to Siberia and along the Ural. Many Germans like my family escaped to the West because they did not like to live under Soviet regime.

My home-town in East Prussia had sixty thousand people. We had a happy comfortable life. I have two older brothers and one younger sister.

My parents had a butcher shop and my father also sold horses. I never thought of us being rich but we had cars and houses and land. My father came from that part of Prussia that is now Poland. Mum's parents came from Germany.

My family escaped to the West in 1944 and I have never been back to see my birthplace. When Communism collapsed my husband and I planned to visit but before we could do that my husband died.

I remember our dangerous escape well. My parents, my grandmother my brother (14), my sister (3) and myself (7) travelled to Germany on horseracing truck. It was already very cold, on some days we had minus 25 C and the snow covered the icy road full of other freezing people escaping in their cars and horse wagons.

Our truck was loaded with food like salami, honey, cheese and syrup. We took wool blankets, fur coats and doonas for warmth and some treasures. I brought with me to Lightning Ridge the silver knives and forks we took with us to Germany. We even took our chickens, ducks and geese with us.

My father was a very popular horse trainer and horse seller. He sold thousands of horses all over Germany. On our escape route to Germany we met many of his business friends and we stayed with them for a day or two.

Very often we had to leave the truck in a hurry to hide and escape the bombs and gunfire from the aeroplanes.

I was sick most of the time with diphtheria so we travelled for a few weeks.

We settled down near Weimar and my father began doing his business again. Weimar, the birthplace of our great poet Goethe, is a wonderful city.

In 1945 Americans arrived and the black Ami soldier gave me my first chewing gum. We liked the Americans but they left in 1946 and the Russians came in. Our life became tough. Curfew was on after 8 PM. Children were not allowed to play on the

street, my father's business became strictly regulated and he could not travel freely any longer. We were all afraid of Russians. They looked very serious and mean; not like Americans who laughed and talked to us.

My father was a sanitary medical aid worker in the German army. My older brother was taken into the Hitler Jugend army at sixteen to fight against Russians. He was captured by British army in Netherlands and was in the North Germany prison camp until 1946. My family did not know if he was dead or alive until one day in 1946 he came to see us in East Germany. He was 18. He heard from our relations in West Germany that we escaped to East Germany in the late autumn of 1944 when the Russians advanced into Prussia. We left our entire property in Prussia and never got it back. My brother returned to West Germany.

After my grandmother died in 1951 we also moved to Hanover in West Germany. We were lucky to go before they built the Berlin wall. Even then we had to tell the authorities why we wanted to go and how long we will stay. My parents said that we wanted to visit relatives in East Berlin. From there we escaped by railway to West Berlin and from there to Hanover by aeroplane.

As I stepped off the plane in Hanover I tripped and landed on my face so I kissed the German soul like the pope does when he visits the country.

In Germany I met my relative, Ingo. He was twenty and I was fourteen. I was very impressed with this handsome young man but most of all I was impressed by his 350 cc Horex motor bike. It was an English machine with a thundering sound much like Harley Davison. To this day I love motor bikes and sometimes my son still takes me for a ride on his Harley Davison.

Ingo was my first love. I remember us sitting under the apple tree just holding hands. We did not do anything; we felt enormously happy just being together. It was the most romantic time of my life with dreams and longing. We believed that our love would last forever.

Life in Germany after the war was depressing for everybody. Ingo went to Canada and promised to get me as soon as he settled down. I promised to wait but it took him a long time. He never asked me to join him.

In the meantime I continued with my schooling and helped with cooking and housekeeping. My parents again opened a butcher shop and employed three people. I had to cook for them and for my family. I wanted to become a midwife but I met Bruno in 1954. We fell in love and got married when I was eighteen. Our marriage was very successful. We had a happy life with our two sons and three daughters.

Ingo was not so happy and successful in Canada. It was too cold for him in Vancouver and he returned to Germany in 1957. He was not happy about my marriage and my happy life. He went to Australia in 1958. This was the end of our story. All that was left were the memories of our first love. We never wrote to each other or kept in touch since then.

My life with Bruno was good and we raised our children well. Bruno and I owned a shoe shop. In 1986 I opened a handcraft shop next to the shoe shop. I loved that shop.

One day in 1989 my sister rang that Ingo was on a round the world trip and was visiting his family in Germany. We invited him to our home. When he came I looked at him and said to myself: Oh, my God, he is old. He had lovely hair before and now

he was bold. Then I looked in the mirror and saw an elderly woman. I wasn't the young Rosel any more either. I couldn't believe that the years have gone.

Bruno, Ingo and I had good times together. Bruno and Ingo liked each other and we often went fishing, bowling and caravanning together.

Ingo told us about Australia and especially about Lightning Ridge opal mining. Bruno and I decided to visit Ingo and travel around Australia. We promised Ingo to come in July or August 1990 and do some mining with him. We read everything we could find about Australia. I even went to evening school to improve my English. I learned English at school but I forgot most of it. We paid for our tickets. We were to travel on 28. June 1990.

On 6th of June my Bruno passed away in my arms. He had a heart attack. I fell into a black hole of grief and despair. I did not recognise or understand the world any more. My children helped me through the days and weeks of my deepest sadness.

What was I to do with the tickets to Australia? I did not feel like going but my children urged me to go. They went with me to Frankfurt and wished me well as I went on the plane.

Ingo was waiting for us at the Sydney airport. He had no phone at the time so I could not let him know about Bruno. When I told him that Bruno died Ingo was sad because he had lost a friend. Ingo showed me around Sydney and we went to Opera house to see Aida. We stayed in Sydney for a few days but then we went by plane to Lightning Ridge.

The strange world opened to me. I had to go thirty years back in time. The dirt track to Ingo's camp brought me to the life without electricity and running water. There was only a water tank and a generator. There was one TV station. I had 35 in Germany. This New World helped me overcome my grief and despair.

Looking back now I realise that I made the right decision. Six weeks in the bush with Ingo helped us become close friends again. Ingo never married so there were no problems for me to stay permanently. But I wasn't sure if I could or if I wanted to live with him. We parted as friends. Before I left Ingo gave me an opal mine as a present. It was to say to me: please come back.

When I returned to Germany I experienced the same black hole of despair again. I thought long and hard, I talked to my children and thought again. In the end I sold the shops and came to Lightning Ridge in 1991 to stay for six months.

Now I live between two continents. For three months each year I am with my family in Germany and the rest of the year I am with Ingo in the bush.

Sometimes Ingo comes with me to Germany but he would never live in Germany again. Everything in Europe seems so small compared to Australia and specially to the Australian outback where Ingo loves to live.

Ingo and I have much in common. We both like to read, we enjoy nature, and we love our garden. We planted vegetables and flowers.

I wanted to learn English fast. I met my first English teacher Cilka Zagar and she was and is in my opinion the best. I met other nice people. For four years I went with Hilda Buchanan to the Day care and helped her with old and handicapped people. These people helped me a lot with my English. I learned a lot from them and now I

am no longer afraid to speak up. I learned about other countries and I met the first Aboriginal lady Elsie Parker.

I continue to go to English classes and enjoy the company of other migrants.

I became a member of Trans-cultural community and I have to speak there as well. They asked me to do a radio program on Opal FM. Many people, not all of them German, like the music I play for them. I have been making this program for three years now, in German of course. I did not have enough German CDs so I wrote to a German radio station for them. They invited me for an interview and I spoke in Mainz live for about nine million listeners. I told them about Australia and Lightning Ridge opal mining. They were very pleased with me and I had a lot of feedback from my listeners. The station gave me thirty new CDs and later they send more to me to Lightning Ridge.

I developed a good relationship with them. I have to go to Mains every year and tell stories about Lightning Ridge and my life in the Australian outback.

I feel integrated in Lightning Ridge community and life. My English improved and I read only English books, magazines and papers.

My favourite author is James A. Michener. I like good music, preferably classic. I like a cup of coffee or a glass of good wine. This is heaven for me. My friends know that I always find time for a good conversation about music, literature or theatre or just for a chat.

Yeah, life was good to me, my relationship with my two men was especially happy. I am a very lucky woman.

My mother had a great influence on me and I still feel her presence in my life specially when I have to make an important decision. Mum was a strong, proud, confident woman. She told me to hold my head high and never let anyone put me down. She taught me to look after my hygiene and grooming. I learned how to cook and keep a home in good order. I followed her example in bringing up children and my children followed me. They all had jobs to do and we told them that they have to save half towards their bikes and we would give the rest. They learned young to work and save. We disciplined them strictly.

I still believe that a smack on the bottom at the right time and for the right reason is a quick and effective remedy for inappropriate behaviour. My husband only had to raise his big voice to make order in the house. Thank God we never had any serious problems with our children or grandchildren. I am very proud of my children and their achievements. All of them are married and have families. I have eleven grandchildren and I love them all very much. My children are very responsible and hard working. They are passing on the values they learned in our home.

My husband Bruno was a confident supportive man who let me develop into a strong independent woman. I was only a little girl when I married him at 18. He was already twenty-nine and knew what he wanted and how to get it. He was a winner in everything he did. He liked playing cards because he liked winning. He also liked travelling and fishing. Bruno liked to go to Ireland by car or plane on fishing trips. Once I went with a cycling group on a tour to Ireland. There I met my two friends and later we travelled through Europe on our bikes. We met every year and on our tours we discovered new parts of Europe. Travelling on my own with my friends like that made me more self reliant, independent and confident. I discovered Europe and at the

same time I discovered my inner strength that helped me make the big step to Australia. I don't think I would be able to take this new life if I didn't first travel through Europe.

I think Bruno would be delighted to see me enjoying life in the bush camp in Lightning Ridge.

I learned to get along with people and welcome new challenges. I believe that things can only improve. This must come from my upbringing and from the teachings of my mother. I was fortunate that my mother and my husband gave me a sense of pride and self-confidence.

I did not escape from Germany; I came to Australia because I wanted to share my life with Ingo. Now I have the best of both worlds. I love the time with my family in Germany and I enjoy the tranquillity of my bush life with Ingo on the opal fields of Lightning Ridge.

Lisa Kennedy

I was born in Manila in Philippines. I spoke English well when I came to Australia fifty years ago to join my husband but Australian slang and phrases are often hard to understand and use for a person from another country. Many migrants speak better English than many Australians. They are more careful with words and don't shorten and mispronounce them.

Archipelago of Philippine islands is part of South East Asia. Philippines consist of Luzon and Visayan group of islands and the Mindanao and Sulu islands which are generally mountainous with narrow coastal plains.

Mindanao was Muslim long before the islands were named after Spanish king Philip. 400 years of Spanish colonisation established Catholicism and the America left its influence since Spanish American war in 1898.

Philippines consists of 7000 pacific islands speaking different dialects. The main dialect is Tagalog and they teach it at school since Philippines became independent. You have to learn Tagalog at school to be able to get a job in Philippines since Tagalog became Philippines official language. English is learned but it is no longer compulsory. I cannot understand Tagalog well. I was brought up in Spanish and English.

Spanish invaders came in 1529 and ruled Philippine for 300 years. They brought Catholic religion and Spanish language. Spanish was the main language in Philippines until in American-Spanish war at the beginning of the 20th century Americans took over Philippine. Since then we all learned English. We liked Americans. In 1941 Japan occupied Philippines. American General Mc Arthur promised: we will come back. We were happy about it. Americans returned after the war and gave us ten years Transition time to independence.

I was one of nine children of a rice plantation owner. My family lived in the city but our father visited the plantation to oversee the tenant workers. Mum sometimes helped dad in the business so the children were put into the Catholic boarding school run by nuns.

I finished four years of primary, three years of intermediate and four years of high school before I began my studies at St. Thomas University run by Dominican Fathers. This is the only Catholic university in Philippines. The story goes that this building is the only one in Manila that could not be effected by an earthquake. The priest took the only set of its plans to Spain and they got lost at sea.

I graduated as a Bachelor of Science and Education. I began teaching English and drama in intermediate school but I did not like teaching much. I took a course of typing and short hand to do office work.

Filipinos pay much attention to the education of their children and most Filipino migrants are well educated.

When the war broke out my family moved from Manila to the country for safety.

In 1950 I met Ben Kennedy who was in the USA army in Manila and we got married. Ben was one of the world's gentlemen.

In 1956 Ben's father got sick so Ben wanted to return home to Australia to be with him. Ben's father died when he was sixty. Ben's brother and Ben himself died in their sixties.

I didn't know much about Australia. In Philippines we learned more about America so I was more familiar with American way of life. I only heard about Australian Aborigines but I did not know anything about Aborigines either. I learned to like Australian life, different ways of doing and saying things. I have been to Japan and Hong Kong but I have not been to America or Europe.

I came with Ben to what I always called The Never Never. After a city life in Manila the isolation of the life on an Australian sheep station came as a shock. Ben's home was between Lightning Ridge and Goodooga. As we drove to his home I said: I don't see any people. Ben said: Our neighbours are only five miles away. For a city girl five miles was a never never.

I stayed in Australia for a year but the white Australia policy was strictly enforced during the fifties. Although I was married to an Australian I wasn't allowed to stay because I wasn't considered white. I returned home to Philippines for a couple of years.

I did not want to rescind my Philippines citizenship. I was an Australian resident and after ten years I applied for Australian citizenship.

Ben's parents produced their own fruit and vegetables. They also had eggs and killed their animals for meat. I liked Ben's parents simply because I loved Ben and they gave him life. I believe that they probably resented the fact that I am from Philippines but we were friendly to each other. We went to Walgett shopping once a week. I worked in and around the house.

I met the ladies of neighbouring properties as I went shopping with Ben to Walgett. I also met new friends through the phone. There were seven of us on the same line. I met Merelyn Knight and we became friends. We still meet a few times a week and together we visit the lonely and the sick in Lightning Ridge.

We are both members of the St. Vincent's society and we help with the St. Vincent's shop. I like helping the needy.

Catholic Church brings Catholics together. At the beginning we had mass once a month in different homes but at the beginning of the sixties Waterfords began to build the Catholic Church.

I felt that I went back in time when I came to Australia. The life on the land was still very primitive. We had kerosene fridge but no electricity. We had an old crank generator for light. The only general store in Lightning Ridge was run by a man from Walgett and Dawson supplied bread and meat. Later Dawson took over the store and the post office. Lightning Ridge had no police station, Angledool was bigger than Lightning Ridge at the time and they had a police station. Angledool also had an Aboriginal Mission and Anglican Church.

Even when I went to Sydney I could not go to the cinema because I have seen all the films before in Manila.

In 1977 Ben sold the farm and we moved to Lightning Ridge town. Ben was a treasurer and later a president of the Bowling club for many years. Everybody respected and liked Ben. Ben and I were foundation members of the Bowling club and I joined the bowlers from the beginning. I travelled to all Australian cities with the team to competitions and I won many trophies. I enjoy the company of other bowlers, the exercise, and the competition.

I also joined the line dancing group and the walk aerobics.

Since my operation I cannot walk to all my charity meetings and I cannot always get the transport. Taxis are not reliable. Merelyn Knight takes me with her to visit the sick and the lonely and to go to meetings of St Vincent and to the conferences of St Vincent de Joe society, which are held in Parkes.

I lost contact with my family, my brother and sisters are dead and many of their children live in America and Canada.

Australia is my home country now. I am going to stay in Lightning Ridge until they take me to the New Chum cemetery. Most of my friends are there and the rest of them will come after me.



## Elena Edgley

I was born in 1955 in San Dionisio Iloilo on Panay Island in Philippines. I am the fifth of seven children. Filipinos have large families.

My grandmother is half-Spanish, she is fair and tall and we called her mestiza, which means half-Spanish half Filipino. My one brother is very tall after our grandmother but I am only four foot eleven inches and weigh a hundred pounds, which is forty five kilograms. I am used to empirical measures because Philippines were under Americans for a long time.

The rest of my ancestors are Filipinos. My grandfather was a typical Filipino, short and dark brown. My father was a very good-looking man. I don't know his family because they come from the other island. My father died from ulcer when I was only twelve and my youngest brother was six.

I was always very shy; I grew up believing that I am ugly but I have a fine light brown skin after my grandmother. They teased me that I was picked from the river and look different than the rest of my family.

Most Filipinos are Catholic but not many go to church. My family was very religious and we all went to church every Sunday. Before bed we had to wash and then my father told us Bible stories and the stories about saints. The whole family had to kneel down and pray rosary every night. My eldest brother came home drunk one night but he still had to kneel down and say the rosary.

Our life revolved around religion. The happiest month for me was December because of Christmas festivities, presents and holidays in the city at my auntie's place.

We had a mass at three in the morning from 16 until 25 December. I loved to go because after this night mass mum bought us rice cakes called bibingka and hot pandesal, which was kind of hot fresh bread. If I woke up too late I missed out on the mass and the bibingka. There was trouble if they did not wake me up because I would cry and cry.

After Christmas midnight mass we all ran home to find presents under the Christmas tree. We got chocolates, clothes, lollies, and fruits. For Christmas we had apples and grapes especially imported from California because these were not local fruits.

My parents were well educated and one of the biggest farmers in our region.

When I was about five my father sold our land and we moved on Mindanao Island, which is a Muslim territory. The land there was much cheaper. He bought a large homestead and a rice field. All of us children went to school so we lived in a small house in the town Ipel Zamboanga del Sur. My mother was a hard working woman. My father became sick with malaria and had complications. He said that he wished to live at least five more years to see us all settled. I was twelve when my father died. Our dreams were crushed.

My mother's sister sent for us and we returned to Iloilo. She adopted our family. She bought a hacienda next to the hacienda of Don Lopes who was the relative of the Philippines vice president. We had a beautiful big house and our property measured about two square kilometres of cleared land. The highlands are used for sugarcane and the lower regions are for the rice fields and the beachside is used for the fishpond industry. Our uncultivated land was given to the poor during the Marcos reign.

My auntie only had one son and he was always away. My older brothers and sister got married young and moved away and the younger brothers were still little children. I felt lonely on our hacienda because there were no girls my age around.

I continued my studies and finished high school. My auntie asked me if I wanted to go to university or at least do a course for my own pleasure. She wanted me to learn dressmaking and I enrolled but didn't like it and didn't attend. I enrolled in a beauty course. At the beginning of the course the teacher asked me why I wanted to do the course. Other girls had ambitions to earn money and open the shop but I said that I just wanted to solve my own beauty problems.

I finished a Hair Science and Beauty culture course. My auntie thought I was training to become a dressmaker. When she found out she was quite pleased that at least I would know something. When I returned home they all wanted to have a beauty treatment so I had a lot of practice. For two years after that I stayed home and did my own grooming. I became bored and wanted to get away. I was getting older and wanted to break away from my family.

We had five servant girls, a houseboy and a driver to do all the jobs in and around the house. I wasn't allowed to talk to the servants because my auntie said that they would lose respect if I had fun with them. My auntie told me that I do not have to do any work but I must watch and learn how they cooked and washed and cleaned to prepare myself for marriage. She said that I wasn't a pretty girl who will get a rich husband so I will have to make my husband happy by cooking and keeping the house well. I am a good cook and I have a nice home now. My husband says that I am very pretty as well.

I did not go out with boys much. When a boy tried to get close to me I moved away. I was very choosy. People called me a snob but if I don't like someone I just don't talk to them.

I had ambitions to go to other countries. I wanted to go to America or West Germany. I did a chambermaid course and I learned to speak German. My mother and auntie told me that if I wanted to be a chambermaid I could be a chambermaid at home.

My auntie told me that I have everything I need on the hacienda. She was a lovely woman who loved us but would not let me go out. I had everything at home but I missed the freedom to do what I wanted to do. Mainly I wanted to get married and have my own family. She did not approve of any of my suitors. She wanted me to stay with her.

For holidays we went to the city and I liked the freedom of the city. I decided to go to work in a beauty shop in Manila.

My auntie asked me what would it take for me to stay with her. She promised me half of her property if I stayed with her and never got married. She said that marriage will bring me much trouble and that I was too spoiled to survive in a marriage. Especially if I married a foreigner who did not understand our ways.

My auntie and I sat on top of the hill one-day and she said: look as far as your eye can see; all this is our property and this is your home.

But the place was too lonely for me and I wanted to go.

My cousin was a first lieutenant in the Philippine's navy. He promised my mother and my auntie that he will look after me in Manila. My aunt and my mum told me to call

them if I needed help or if I wanted to return. They were afraid that I would do something bad in the city if I needed money.

I found a good job in a beauty salon as a beautician. After four months my cousin had to go into the battle with Muslims in Solo. He was worried about me being alone in Manila and wanted to send me home to Panay Island into the province of Iloilo. He sent a message to his wife that he will bring me home in a private jet belonging to the Philippine Air force.

In the meantime I found a friend which was the wife of the chief of the Filipino air force. She told me that she would help me make a good future in Manila. This lady said that I was the best in my category of beauticians. She also recommended that I should go overseas to promote my profession. She introduced me to her friend who had a Copacabana nightclub. I got a job as a private beautician for 250 girls working in the nightclub. The girls were entertaining foreigners in Angelus City Pangpanga which is a province of Manila. I had to fix their makeup, do their hair and select their clothes. I enjoyed working there and I earned lots of money. After about six months the mamasan, the owner of the nightclub, told me to show my face to the foreigners so I can marry one of them. He knew that it was my ambition to go overseas. The trouble was that I was too scared to look at the foreigners.

I am so very tiny and they were so very big.

Mamasan gave me a job as a geisha in a restaurant connected to the club. I was really scared and was ready to go home. Men approached me and asked me to sit down and talk to them. I wanted to run. I told my problems to the dressmaker who worked for these girls. She was a married woman and she took me home and found me work as a beautician with her niece.

One of my customers was a lady who was an attorney of the one of the stockholders of the restaurant. She told me to apply in the gymnasium to be trained as a sport's masseur. I enjoyed my work in the gymnasium. Every Friday and Saturday we had women's day and many women came for a workout.

By 1980 I was trained as a sport masseur. I worked in one of the biggest hotel restaurant in Angelus City.

The owner-boss warned me not to marry a foreigner specially an Australian but he himself introduced me to his best friend who was a rich businessman from Mackay. I did not like this old man with a large belly. I wanted a good-looking man not too much older than myself. My boss then introduced me to a widower who was a supervisor in a mine in Mackay. I promised to come with him but I changed my mind. Bar girls laughed at me saying that I had a strong gut but weak knees.

I met Shortie in the restaurant. He was with an old foreigner who knew me well. The old man asked me to join them and have a drink. I ordered a glass of milk. I liked Shortie and agreed to meet him the next day. Shortie is very fit and strong. He is an ex boxer. He asked me if I would marry him and go to Australia with him. I agreed.

Shortie's real name is Robert but he is only five foot three inches tall and someone in Coffs Harbour gave him a nickname Shortie. His relations call him Bob. My friends in Philippines couldn't believe that I found a good-looking man like him.

I went home to ask my mother for permission to marry. Mum and aunty said that Australians were ex convicts and would mistreat me or even kill me. If I was to marry a foreigner I should marry an American.

If I were you I would not marry at all, said my auntie.

I said that I liked Shortie very much and wanted to live with him. This was also the only way I could go overseas. They said that if I marry him I should never return home. Those words hurt me very much. I only invited my friends and club members to my wedding. Shortie was very happy but I was sad because my family wasn't with me.

The emigration people did not accept my birth certificate so I had to return home to get my baptismal certificate. I asked Shortie not to come with me but he said that whatever happens he wanted to be by my side. I planned to let him stay in a hotel but he wanted to come home with me. I rang my auntie but my sister answered that my auntie went on holidays with all the family. When I arrived home only my first cousin's son was there with the housemaids and my sister. My mother was very sick. She already had the first signs of Alzheimer's disease.

We stayed with mum for three weeks and she saw that Shortie was a very nice man. Mum died a few years later but I had no money to go to her funeral.

Mum was a high school mathematics teacher before she married. She worked as a private teacher to Russian and American children in Negroes Occidental where the sugar milling company is. The owner of the mill was American so mum spoke English with them.

Now mum spoke English with Shortie.

Shortie was thirty-seven and I was thirty in 1985 when we got married in Philippines registry office. Australian embassy gave us permission to marry so I could come to Australia.

In Philippines we were not allowed to marry in the church without papers from my husband's parish in Australia.

Shortie is Australian born Presbyterian of Scottish ancestry. His first wife was Catholic. Shortie's first marriage was annulled because he was considered too young when he married the first time.

Shortie's first wife was fifteen and he was seventeen when they got married and had a baby. They divorced after three years.

Shortie and I married again in Lightning Ridge Catholic Church.

My aunty later realised that my prayers were answered and I found a good man. She wrote to us that we should visit when we return to Philippines.

We returned three years later and we had a big party. Mum did not recognise anyone any more.

My husband and the rest of my family accepted and liked each other.

Before we married Shortie told me that he was not rich.

On my first day in Australia I looked around and believed that everybody in Australia was very rich; everybody ate steak, wore nice clothes and lived in nice houses.

I asked Shortie if everybody in Australia was rich.

Shortie said that one day I would find out for myself.

Shortie was worried that I will get bored and demand to go home. His friends told him that I would never get bored because I communicate well with everybody. I learned English at school.

After a few days we flew to Shortie's home in Coffs harbour. I was impressed with his beautiful clean house. He took me into his commercial fishing boat, he took me shopping and to RSL club where he taught me to play bingo and poker machine. I was never a gambler. I won lots of money but I lost it too so I decided that gambling was not for me.

Shortie went to work and I enjoyed my time at home. Many Filipino ladies came and I gave them fish Shortie caught. Every week we had a party and I was very happy.

Three years later Shortie's business collapsed. He borrowed twenty thousand to fix the boat but he got sick and could not run it any more for a year. The government took his licence. We were in big trouble because without a licence we could not sell the boat for the right price. We ran out of money. We were not eligible to go on the dole because Shortie was a professional fisherman.

I looked for a job to help out. I found a job in the printing press printing magazines and ads; I worked eight hours a week at five dollars an hour.

I couldn't find a permanent job.

We decided to sell the house before we went bankrupt so that we had at least some money left. We moved to live in the boat for two weeks and I cried every night because I felt sorry for myself. I felt disappointed; I wasn't used to poverty. We bought a caravan and stayed in a caravan park for six months. I tried to get a good job or open a business so we could get back on our feet.

I began to cook spring rolls for the local bowling club. Everybody loved my cooking but the trouble was I had no licence. The chief cook picked spring rolls in the middle of the night to be safe. I had too many orders and could not cope. I realised that I will not get rich cooking so I decided to join retired Australian women living in the same Caravan Park. I watched what they were doing every day while Shortie was in the pub. I wanted to learn from the old people so I made friends with them. On Wednesdays and Saturdays they left in the bus to do art and craft activities. They learned pottery and lapidary. I was interested in cutting stones. I hoped to earn money by cutting diamonds. I had no driving licence yet so I joined the old people on the bus and we went to the lapidary club. I enrolled because I wanted to do something for myself. I would have a go at anything to help out. I asked my husband to join us instead of sitting in the pub every day. He agreed. Shortie had no patience but he tried to please me and be with me. We learned and I made a collection of all different stones shaped into different styles. Shortie cut one agate stone.

My mother in law came for a holiday with her boyfriend and I very proudly showed her my collection. She knew about stones so I asked her to price them. She said that the most expensive stone was only three dollars. I realised that I am not rich yet and that I wasted my time. After my mother in law left I searched through the books to find where they mined diamonds in Australia. I wanted to cut diamonds. I found the

book with opals. I loved the beautiful colours of Lightning Ridge opal and was impressed with how expensive opals are.

I bought the book Lightning Ridge opals and forgot about diamonds. When Shortie got home I asked him if he knew where Lightning Ridge is. He said that he had never been there but knew about it. His friend told him that it was very hot in Lightning Ridge and that we had to wait until winter. We bought a tent and loaded everything we needed for mining into our station wagon. We planned to stay for winter and return later to Coffs Harbour.

First we went to Glengarry opal field but did not like it because there were no shops. We stayed in the Caravan Park in a tent and it was very cold. They told us that we have to register a claim. We got a generator and bought a camp on the claim in Pumpkin flat for four thousand dollars. We started mining with a hand windlass. I pulled out the dirt and I also went down twenty-five foot to work with pick and shovel in the shaft. Shortie and I did not even find a trace of opal the whole winter. We sold the claim and the camp and bought another claim with the camp on it at Bold Hill field.

The hole was ready for mining. We didn't find anything for six months. Shortie found me crying in the shaft one day. He asked what was wrong and I said: tell me who I am where I am and what am I doing. I cried feeling sorry for myself. Shortie told me to go home to rest. He said that every time he looked at me digging hard his heart was crying.

After a month he found a pocket worth about five thousand dollars. It was exciting but it could not repay what we spent.

I stopped mining and began looking for work using my qualifications as a masseur. Shortie did not like me working on men but allowed me to massage women. Shortie's friend asked him to massage his sons who were football players. Women asked me also to massage their husband so I asked Shortie for his support because we needed money. He asked what kind of support I needed and I said just your trust so he said OK. I massaged full time and made money.

Lightning Ridge community was very supportive. I was amazed how many customers I had. I never advertised it was just the word of mouth publicity. One customer gave me lots of towels and made a beautiful massage table for me. One lady also gave me a towel so I had enough. The men on my massage table were well behaved and very nice. I was so happy. I can't express enough gratitude for the big support of Lightning Ridge community. I will never forget that.

During the first year in Lightning Ridge Shortie wanted me to go to the Bowling club to socialise. He said you have to go out sometimes you are not an Aborigine to live in the bush. Gradually we made many friends and love being here.

I realised that we did not like this town because we always planned to move out when we got money.

I bought potch and colour to cut and sell stones. I learned to cut opal from Sally Hall. I was cutting all the time. I knew that I wouldn't be able to massage all my life because my hands get sore so I started to buy and sell opal. I go to America every year and I made contacts there that buy from me. It's not a big business but it helps us to get through..

Shortie and I tried to have a baby. I went to see a doctor but he could find nothing wrong with me. The doctor called my husband and he said to Shortie that if he wants babies he had to stop smoking and drinking. Shortie couldn't. He is still drinking and smoking regularly like most Australians.

In Philippines not many people can afford to drink and smoke. They drink coconut wine but beer is a luxury. Only very rich can import wine but others drink rum made from sugar cane. We have tobacco plantations in the part of Luzon and most of people in the country grow their own.

I never smoked or drank alcohol.

I am grateful to my husband because he trusts me and lets me be independent. I am very honest and faithful to him. I meet lots of respectable, nice men on my travels but I am always honest and true to Shortie because my marriage is very important to me.

Shortie has a bad back and cannot work. He is on the health benefit and I am his carer.

There are about thirty Filipinos in Lightning Ridge. They are all my friends and sometimes we meet. We are happy in Australia. Most of the girls are young and have old husbands but our culture prepares us to marry older men to have a stable relationship and a family.

I am the breadwinner in my family and I try again and again to earn my living. If I fail I try again and never give up.

I experienced being rich and being homeless. I always wanted to have a home of my own and now I am happy in my camp.

People in Philippine cities live much like Australians, they rent a flat or a house.

My auntie's brick hacienda had six bedrooms and upstairs we had two bathroom and one for visitors. We had separate rooms and toilets for the servants. Working people have to pay social security for their retirement. They also have a limited and inferior health cover and free medicine.

Schooling is free since Marco's time. Cory Aquino made reforms and provided free public schools. Good students can study now and pay later for university courses.

Many people are unemployed so they look for casual work cleaning or farming. Many try to become domestic helpers overseas to Saudi Arabia or Hong Kong, Japan or Singapore to feed themselves. In the country there are many squatters. They are people who ask if they can build their stick house on your property. In return they do some work for the landowner.

My family lives in Philippines and I miss them. I try to bring my nephew and his wife as a skilled immigrant. I support my grand niece who is nine with school things and whatever else she needs. I would like to adopt her.

We from Iloilo speak Ilongo dialect; every province has a different dialect but we all have a national language Tagalog so we can understand each other. We learn Tagalog at school. Most people learn English as a second language. When we go to Manila we speak Tagalog or English. My parents can not speak Tagalog but they spoke English

fluently because in their time they learned Spanish and English and did not learn Tagalog.

The life and nature are abundant where I came from in Philippines. People eat good fresh fruits and vegetables and lots of fish. We grow tropical fruit like mango, banana, jackfruits and many other fruits. We import potatoes but grow all green leafy vegetables.

Those of us, who could afford it, have American, Spanish and Chinese foods. The poor people eat cheaper food like vegetables and dried fish, rice and sweet potato, cassava and boiled green banana.

The really poor would only have boiled rice and maybe fish sometimes.

Common breakfast for the rich in Philippines is garlic rice, eggs, fried fish and adobo. Adobo is meat cooked with spices specially garlic and vinegar. You boil the meat in water, add vinegar, spices, soy souse and seasoning; when the water reduces it becomes a sauce to go with the meat.

Very few people in Philippines are fat because their food is always fresh and people are always active. Most Filipinos live with one hand scratching and with the other feeding, a kind of hand to mouth existence. They work in the morning to eat lunch and work in the afternoon to eat dinner.

Filipinos are very hospitable and the house is always open and everybody shares food. Everybody in Philippines would feed you if you are hungry.

Family kinships are very strong and family is always there for every member. Parents are strict with their children. Our lives were very restricted. We were allowed to go dancing but had to come home at prearranged time.

I was a rich girl and enjoyed my life in Philippines but I am happy in Australia as well.



## Ursula

I was born towards the end of the WWI in 1944 in Graz in Austria as a fourth and last child. Austria with the population of eight million people is a mountainous central European country reaching from Alps into the East Danube basin. Mountain lakes and rivers, skiing slopes and forests make Austria a beautiful country. Many castles and palaces scattered throughout the picturesque countryside are the evidence that for many centuries the rulers of Europe liked to live in Austria. The first Austrian Republic was proclaimed in the 1919 after the disintegration of Austrian Hungarian Empire. In 1955 Austria regained full sovereignty. Austrians are predominantly Catholic German speaking people.

My father studied medicine but he discontinued during his clinical years to volunteer himself to work as Hitler's manager of the workers.

My father's father was a judge. He used to play a mouth organ and danced with us children. He was a kind person and has helped the Jewish people during the war; however, after the war someone accused him of mistreating Jewish people and he was imprisoned. Later they reviewed his case and found him innocent.

When the war started my father joined the Waffen SS and went on the Norwegian and Russian fronts.

After the war my father was caught by Russians and was to be deported by train to Siberia. He jumped from the train and travelled crouched on his knees by night until he reached the river Elbe. English soldiers caught him there and imprisoned him in Austria. He didn't mind that because he was home in Austria.

After the war we were considered less desirable because my father and grandfather were involved in the Hitler's war.

When I became a thinking person with a conscience I was against Hitler. I also resented the fact that my father supported Hitler. I was born on the same day and the same hour as my father. I was afraid that I would become like him.

I had psychological problems reconciling myself with my father's choices but I don't know what my choices would be in his situation. I wondered what I would have done being in his situation when public opinion was all for Hitler. Many Austrians supported Hitler but after the war most denied it. It was impossible for me to discuss these issues with my father. He is an authoritarian figure and I felt that he would not allow me to discuss his beliefs and his choices.

My father is not a Christian and he has never given his heart to God. I have no right to teach my father. I have to honour him as he is but I am praying for him to accept Jesus in his heart.

I was about five when my father told us that he killed about six men in combat during the war. He said that he was never involved in the executions because there were always volunteers who wanted to do that. He said that in combat it was either him or the other man who would pull the trigger first.

When I was ten we moved to Vienna. I finished secondary school and a three-year Chemistry course. I had lots of problems at school at that time. I worried about things. Perhaps the events of the war always bothered me. I was rather self centred and self-conscious. I was extremely shy and worried about what people thought of me. I never had a high self-esteem or confidence to present myself.

I believe that much of my background is racist and especially anti-Semitic. I believe that people who lived through the terrible times of racism and war carry a tremendous pain inside and they wish to heal the pain. On one occasion a Jewish boy in Vienna and I met and hugged. We could not express the pain we felt in words but the tears washed some of the pain away. We just knew that the other person was dealing with the same issues and felt the same.

I was very confused by my background and upbringing. I felt suicidal during my adolescence and I prayed to God to let me die. This was a big moral dilemma for me.

I believe that my father loves us very much but he left our upbringing to my mother. Cuddling children was something women did. My mother was gentle and catered for our individual needs as much as she had time for.

Mum called on dad only when children had to be more severely punished. His ways were more regimental, rigorous and strict. He didn't want children to be confused by two different styles of upbringing. My father taught me to be honest, he was honest himself and he was very upset with me when I would make up stories as children do. I felt guilty because I knew that the stories I told weren't true. Maybe my real life was boring so I invented exciting events.

I look more like mum but I have my father's strong convictions about how things should be and how people should behave. I do not agree with my father's ideas and he does not agree with mine.

My father was in prison after the war so my mother's mother came to help us. My mother worked in the hospital as a nurse. Grandparents were a blessing for us children but parents and grandparents often disagreed on how to bring up the children.

When my father came out of the prison my parents worked on the farm. I remember living on a farm in the mountains. It was the most joyful time of my life. I still remember the smells of the mountain flowers and herbs and the beautiful sights. It was a lovely time for us children who were not aware of all the problems our parents had. We loved the animals and the trees. We saw deer and other animals. When it rained the fire salamander came out and the rainbow made the sky magically beautiful.

I loved many trees but there was a special fir tree called larch, which had tiny flowers and soft green leaves. We used to know and pick all sort of herbs and mushroom and fruit in the forest. We had blueberries, strawberries, gooseberries and hazelnuts and chestnuts. We spent most of our free time in the forest. We had more bush food than Aborigines had here.

When we lived on the farm I had to look after the cows. We lead them through the forest to the beautiful grazing areas. Sometimes the children played and the cows disappeared. They came back on their own but we were in trouble if we didn't bring all the cows home. My father would hit us with a stick. The cows were a great responsibility because they did not belong to us but to the landowner we worked for. One cow was called Onetime one and she never obeyed. She was more trouble than all the rest together.

Easter was always a big thing in Austria. We had processions and the church bells were heard echoing in the mountains. There were three bells before the mass, the lunchtime bell and the evening angelus bell told people to stop working and to say a prayer.

I always loved the forests. Later I worked for the forestry commission in Vienna located in a remote building of the lovely castle of Schoenbrunn, which means beautiful fountain. It really was a fairy tale place. My friend, Elizabeth, attended acting classes and took me along. I completed the acting course and would have liked to act but was too shy. I trained in women's artistic gymnastics from the age of twelve until eighteen. I also worked for a doctor who did research into osteoarthritis.

I interrupted my acting studies and went to France to work as a nanny for a year. While in Paris I also worked in a little self-serve restaurant. An older man came to eat there. He must have been over thirty while I was only in my early twenties. We went to the movies and I fell in love. I felt at home with him spiritually. Both of us were at ease with each other. I had to return to Vienna and we parted without properly saying goodbye. This was my first and very innocent romantic love. The pleasant memory of that love stayed with me forever.

During my acting studies I also met William who eventually became my husband. My marriage was a bit rocky from the start. I should never have told my husband about the man I fell in love with while in France. William felt that I never loved him like I loved this first man in my life. I should never bother my husband with my feelings for another man. I loved William in a different way.

William and I got engaged. He went to Australia. William travelled before and had his passport ready. I stayed with his mother until my papers were ready in November 1969. I joined William in Sydney where he was working. We got married and had a daughter Ursula in 1973 and Barbara in 1980.

I spoke a bit of English when I arrived in Australia and I did some English courses to adjust to Australian English.

We had no problems making friends with Australians.

I visited my father in 1979 with my daughter Ursula. He played with Ursula happily.

I first came to Lightning Ridge when my husband played puppets at schools in this area. I was also performing. My husband wrote puppet scripts. We had fun times making puppets and performing.

I came in contact with Aborigines as I worked in Balmain hospital. I loved the caring way in which they related to each other. William wrote migrant success stories for the government at the time. In 1970 there was a bicentenary celebration of Captain Cook's first arrival to Australia. William's friend came with us to La Perouse celebration. I saw Aborigines put a wreath into the water as a sign of mourning because for them it was two hundred years since they began losing their way of life. For them it was a Day of mourning. Aboriginal poet Kath Walker spoke beautifully about the loss her people suffered. Her talk inspired me because she spoke strong words of truth but she spoke with love rather than with criticism and with a sense of encouragement for her people to survive.

Since then I became interested in Aboriginal spirituality and way of life. I became involved in Aboriginal women's sacred secret teachings. I fell in love with Aboriginal people. My marriage ended then. My husband left me because he felt that I distanced myself from him when I became involved with Aboriginal people and began to practice what I understood to be their culture. We were divorced in 1983. My mother once said to me that I become too involved in things.

If I were a full Christian I would have never caused the separation from my husband. He is a friendly, gentle fun person and we had some good times together. My husband and I remained friends to this day. Our children never had a relationship with their father interrupted. We had a cordial separation. I became a homemaker for my children.

After my marriage I had two more children, Benjamin and Ereehna.

My first contact with Seven-Day Adventists happened when the Aboriginal man Burnam Burnam brought two Seven-Day Adventist Aboriginal sisters to my house. They were sisters of the pastor George Quinlen. I loved them for their friendliness and they inspired me with their gentle kindness. I will always remember them.

Claire Grogan was a friend of my son Benjamin's father. Clarie was an Aboriginal boxer who later travelled with Aboriginal representatives as their supporter and bodyguard. He last worked as an Aboriginal liaison officer in north Queensland. When I arrived to Lightning Ridge I realised that I was pregnant with Clarie's child. I rang Clarie that we are going to have a baby. We have a daughter Ereehna. Ereehna is an Aboriginal name meaning under the tree. Ereehna saw her father only once at Fred Hollows funeral. Clarie died soon after in March 1993.

My husband and I applied for the housing loan and it came through just as we were breaking up. We could have bought anywhere and the bank asked if either of us singularly wants to apply. I chose Walgett area because it is an area of Aboriginal teachings I was involved in. I came to Lightning Ridge because Aboriginal women I associated with came from this area and I wanted to get more deeply involved in their way of life.

In 84 I came to search for a place to buy in Lightning Ridge. My children and I stayed in a tram motel. I remember it being springtime. We listened to the butcherbird sing every morning. The thought came to me that if Mozart came here he would be inspired to write a beautiful symphony. I really fell in love with the place then.

I bought a little house next to Seven Days Adventist church. I had only little money and it was the only cheap place I could find. It took me a year to get the house transfer.

I didn't want to become a member of any church for a long time because of the negative church histories but when the Seven-Day Adventist pastor asked me if I would join them in the church service I was favourably inclined to do so because I had pleasant experience of my two friends who belonged to the same church. I brought my children to Sabbath school and learned along with them. Seven Days Adventists like people to really study and believe before they are baptised but you can come to church and join the congregation. I started to go to church in 85 and was baptised in 93. I was immersed in the tub of water in Moree. You can be baptised in any water deep enough to be immersed in.

After baptism I signed the contract that I will pay the tithe and live by the Bible principles. Seven Days Adventists do not drink alcohol, they do not smoke or take drugs. There are many Seven Days Adventists who cannot keep the rules. They are not rejected because of it but they do not become the leaders in the community.

We pay ten percent of what we get and these tithes go into the pool to pay for the pastors. Some poorer congregations cannot pay for their pastor so the congregations share the money. Offerings beside the tithe are for special purposes.

The Malachi speaks of the importance of observing the giving of tithes to keep the teachings of God alive. We worship on the Sabbath, which is Saturday and represents the day of rest after the creation.

Advent means looking forward to the Second Coming of Christ. We know the signs that tell us that the Second Coming is near but the exact coming has never been foretold. Jesus said that only his father knows when the end will come.

Our church has no holy pictures or statues; it is very sparsely furnished. During a reverent church service we invite the Holy Spirit to be with us and the presence of the Holy Spirit makes our worship very special. Lightning Ridge has a congregation of about twenty people. We have a prayer meeting on Tuesday night and the Bible study before the divine service on Saturday.

We believe that communion is a symbol in remembrance of the Last Supper rather than actually changing the bread and wine into the body and blood of Jesus. When we have Holy Communion we also wash the feet of each other in remembrance of Christ doing so. It means that we show our humility and unity like Jesus did.

The faith and the church helped me a lot in bringing up my children because they learned to live by the Bible principles. Glory be to God for the family I raised. The Bible studies helped them develop the conscience by which they live.

Barbara was the first to be baptised. Benjamin was next and then Ereehna. Ursula, Benjamin and Barbara live in Brisbane.

Ereehna is with me and is in year 11. I am very happy with the way they live. None of them are smoking or drinking. They work and live righteous lives.

Seven Days Adventist are members of a nine-million-strong worldwide family which promotes a holistic lifestyle of healthy eating and physical wellbeing for the body; they are a close knit family of friends to nurture each other; they teach salvation through Jesus Christ, who offers the peace of mind in this busy world. Seven Day Adventists welcome Christians of every persuasion and do not consider themselves to be the only true followers of Christ.

I had many health problems and was always very conscious of a healthy diet and lifestyle even before I became a Seven-Day Adventist. As lacto-ovo-vegetarians Adventists have a fine health record.

When I visited Austria the second time in 1992 my father did not want to see me because I had an Aboriginal child. He never met my children Barbara, Benjamin and Ereehna. He said that he did not approve of me having an Aboriginal child because he believes that children of mixed races are unhappy. We wanted to see him because my mother was sick but my family told me that my father does not want to see us. My mother said that he loves us but that was his way of showing disapproval. I was sad for him and for us because he would surely enjoy the meeting with the children. I spoke to him on the phone after my mother died but he sent the message through my sister never to call him again.

I have a brother in Germany and my two sisters in Austria; we love each other dearly and have contact all the time. I would like to talk to my father but I have to wait until my father allows me to see him. He is a healthy 90 years old who looks after himself

in Graz. He lives in the same flat where we all grew up and I consider this place my home.

My mother's parents were Catholic but mum decided to become Lutheran even before she met my father. My father's family was Lutheran as he descends from Carpathian Mountains which is traditionally Lutheran country.

When I was about ten we had a Lutheran pastor who loved God very much. All of us children wanted to be baptised because he was an example of what we wanted to be like.

When I grew up and began to investigate the church's involvement in the Hitler's war I became upset and left the church.

I was always an introverted person and daydreamed a lot when I was young.

One day I had a vision in my daydreams. I saw precious stones on the banks of a small riverbed. I felt that I had to build a bridge with these stones. I laid the stones together; they weren't held together by mortar but they remained in place. A low arch of the bridge reached into the moor. There were sad looking horses stuck in the moor. When the bridge was built the horses pranced happily on the bridge and galloped into freedom. I never forgot this daydream.

Later when I began reading the Bible, I realised we are all the body of Christ and each of us has a value and the beauty of its own. I realised that the precious jewels I have seen are God's saints.

I believe that we have to confess to God everything we are. We have to acknowledge ourself and not run away from who we are but make amends to those we might have hurt.

Since I have given my heart to God, I desire to be completely honest with everyone around me but I cannot speak about things that involve other people because I do not know another person's heart and thoughts. I can only tell my side of the story because the other person may see things differently and speak of them differently.

I prayed most of my life but I never read the Bible until one day I was at my mother in law's place. There was a Bible and I opened it to Matthew 5 and the passage before me said: You have heard that it was said you shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I say to you love your enemies, bless those who curse you; do good to those who hate you and pray for those who spitefully use and persecute you; that you may be sons of your father in heaven for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those that love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same, and if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others do? Therefore you shall be perfect as your father in heaven is perfect. When you pray, go into your room and when you have shut your door, pray to your father who is in the secret place, and your father who sees in secret will reward you openly.

Reading this passage taught me to love my enemies. I realised that if only we followed this teaching we would not have wars and hatred. It became easier for me to love my father despite his rejection.

I hope to walk with God and let God lead my life. When I get up in the morning I talk to God and thank him for the sleep and the new day. Then most days I study from the

Bible. I still tutor and help with gymnastics at school; I am also selling Christian books. I also want to be better qualified in healing by spinal exercises.

I pray that my children would appreciate the goodness of God and be happy with what God has given them. I was stubborn most of my life and I am myself late in appreciating his loving ways.

## Aboriginal storytellers

Aboriginal children learn about British heroes who discovered and developed Australia. There is still nothing in history books about Aboriginal timeless democracy, heroism and endurance, tells me Aboriginal elder Roy Barker.

On 26th of January 1788 the British flag was raised at Port Jackson and this heralded a new beginning for the timeless continent of Australia.

Australia became the biggest jail with 6000 British convicts. With convicts came the soldiers who looked after them. The explorers and later they would be graziers followed.

Governor Philip and the First Fleet arrived with the instructions to treat Aborigines with kindness, but many new settlers who came in contact with the natives, considered Aborigines a pest that hindered their economic progress and caused losses. To new settlers, death of an Aborigine seemed a just punishment for killing the sheep or cattle. A constant war went on for the first twenty years of the occupation. Aborigines killed some settlers and many more Aborigines were killed.

The instructions, given to Arthur Philip, before he departed from England to establish the first British settlement in Australia, were that Aborigines in New South Wales were immediately to be regarded as British citizens and so come under the protection of British law. The protection of British law rarely reached Aborigines in the outback but the brutality of invasion was ever present.

White settlers saw that the rich soil along the rivers wasn't cultivated. They thought to themselves: why would Aborigines need land if they don't work on it. They had no way of understanding that Aborigines were owners of this land.

These settlers considered Aborigines as one cultural, economic and political group, as one culture, one people. Aboriginal diversity was disregarded. It was easier for settlers to deal with one lot of people. The origins of immigrants have always been taken into consideration and in the present multicultural society each group of immigrants became proud of their cultural identity.

Australian natives may be of the same or similar racial origins but they were never one nation. They never lived under one government, spoke one language, and believed in the one and the same God. They had different laws, customs and features. The main common characteristic of Aborigines is the fact that they lived in Australia before white settlers came.

The native groups of Australia had less mutual contact than European nations. The distances and the smaller numbers of people made it impossible for the natives of one part of Australia to communicate with the rest of the country. Over thousands of years these groups developed into uniquely separate nations much like Europeans did.

It has been established that about 600 distinct groups of Aborigines lived in Australia with two hundred distinctly different languages. Each group had their own beliefs, laws, rituals, traditions and territory.

Gamilaroi group was one such nation with the territory from Hunter to Macintyre river, from Tamworth to Goondiwindi. Walgett, at the junction of Barwon-Namoi rivers, is on the edge of Gamilaroi and borders on Ualarai and Wieland territory.



Oxley's party of explorers reached the flood drenched Dubbo during 1818. Evans brought his party to Coonamble. They expected to find an inland sea or at least a better country for new settlers who demanded that the government open new country.

No law could stop the would be pastoralists from following the explorers. They eventually secured a legal status by paying the pasture fee.

In 1828 Sturt's party headed towards Walgett. By 1829 they met the first of the Gamilaroi tribe camping along the Barwon-Namoi rivers.

A local Aboriginal elder Ted Fields tells me:

Until 1830s Walgett Aborigines readily found food along the waterways but as the new settlers settled with their cattle runs along the rivers, Aborigines were gradually pushed away from their food and water supplies. White settlers saw no signs of land ownership or cultivation so they decided to use the land for their cattle runs. This resulted in many battles between the spear and the gun and predictably the gun won.

Eventually most Aborigines started to work for the cattlemen. Some were lucky and had a kind boss but many were treated badly.

Aborigines were even more afraid of the huge, newly introduced animals as they were of white people. They sometimes speared the cattle and sheep and because of it squatters gunned them further into the bush.

Aborigines believe that Guli Gurinai, our water spirit, lives in a water hole in the Barwon river near Gingie Mission. During the big drought Guli Gurinai created the waterways on our routes from Gingie through Cumborah and to Narran Lakes where Aborigines met other tribes regularly for trades and religious purposes.

The main items for sale at Aboriginal tribal gatherings were stone and wood objects and shells; hard wood for weapon and tool making and hard stones for spears. Stone knives, spear heads and axes were prized items that were traded across the continent on the well established routes. News and traditions were shared along with these valuable items.

Aborigines were friendly at the beginning but they soon came in conflict with settlers because of new restrictions over the land, sacred grounds, animals, traditions and customs. Most often the fights began over Aboriginal women.

Out of 73 white people in Walgett during 1845, 71 were young men. They found Aboriginal women to sleep with, so the conflict between them and Aborigines increased.

No-one ever recorded the birth of the first half cast child in Australia but it is likely that a half cast was born in Australia before a white child. Men came to the bush and they had children with Aboriginal girls.

Even to this day the jealousy in Aboriginal marriages causes a lot of unhappiness.

Roy's father Jimmy Barker, said in his book Two worlds of Jimmy Barker:

Immorality appeared after 1850 when old marriage laws began to disappear. The old laws forbade promiscuity and the penalty was death.

Green nee Kennedy tells me about the cattlemen:

They made women drunk to have sex with them. The next day they wouldn't even look at them, they put them down and the kids they made. White men took a pick of Aboriginal women and Aborigines could do nothing about it.

Aboriginal men were given sugar, tea, grog and tobacco so they wouldn't object to whites taking their women. Aboriginal men were shot if they interfered. The prettiest Aboriginal women were taken by the worst of whites. The half-castes were reared by their mothers. Some kids have white hair and blue eyes but they are Aboriginal because they grew up with Aborigines. They know nothing of their father's family. Even these days white men make Aboriginal women drunk to have sex with them. The next day they don't even look at them.

June Barker tells:

Walgett was a man's town and few white women were willing to stay so Aboriginal girls were welcomed by white settlers. The white man rarely recognised them as wives but many children were born from these unions.

The orders from England were to protect the natives but settlers said that they also needed protection from the natives. Their sheep and cattle were speared and shepherds killed. Their women were killed in their homes.

In 1848 Native police force was brought in to deal with frontier violence.

Roy Barker said:

British learned their lesson from the civil war in America, where many nations were jockeying for political positions. British played one nation against the other there. In Australia they brought up and rewarded Aborigines from other parts to help them wipe out local Aborigines.

Aborigines felt justified to hunt on their land like they always did but the settlers kept them away from the waterways where cattle was grazing. Aborigines, deprived of their traditional food sources, speared the cattle. White men gunned down Aborigines.

Attacks by Aborigines were reported but not much is written about the retaliation of whites. Many massacres were not even reported others were not punished because Aborigines could not testify in court.

The free settlers established their runs and appointed managers, supervisors and workers. The station owners usually returned to the comforts of the city life. Mainly bonded immigrants, former convicts and soldiers remained on the land to face the rigors of daily living.

The explorers searched into the heart of the land to find new green pastures. To keep emancipated convicts and retired soldiers in the self sufficient colony, land was needed and there was a lot of land available.

Ex convicts and soldiers were offered land but they were not suited as pioneers because they had no knowledge, working experience or capital to establish the stations.

Government offered loans and other assistance but settlers who built on their own strength survived the best.

In 1836 a legal right to graze could be bought for ten pounds a year. In 1839 James White registered the first run on Boorooma.

Aborigines remained on the land and became valuable workers. They were used to bush conditions.

Said Roy Barker:

Aboriginal culture and wishes were disregarded from the beginning. Aboriginal traditional grounds and laws were often violated.

British government refused to count Aborigines as British citizens until 1967. It was estimated that during the first 30 years of colonisation, there were about 500 000 to 700 000 Aborigines. By 1938 Aboriginal population dropped to 50-60.000.

Aborigines suffered more casualties than Australia did in all its other wars. The killing was still going on at the beginning of the 20th century but it was condemned by the world and had to go underground. Most murders of Aborigines weren't reported and recorded. Many died from newly introduced diseases and from the shock of intrusion on their existence. There are no monuments for Aborigines who died in defence of their country either.

Aborigines were denied the access to guns, even later in my day few Aborigines were allowed to handle a gun.

By 1848 all the land along the Barwon-Namoi rivers was taken by pastoralists but even after initial subjugation, Aborigines presented a constant threat to pastoral expansion.

Walgett, or Walchate as it was originally known, was the name given to the 'run', which was described in 1848 as possessing 32000 acres and grazing 300 cattle.

Roy Barker tells:

Despite white Australia policy there were many Afghan and Indian workers brought here to work. Tibooburra had lots of them. They were also ring-barkers and market gardeners in this area. The Chinese boundary riders were brought to Australia in the 20s and 30s.

Bonded indentured coolies were brought from China and other Asian countries. Many Kanakas were brought to Queensland. There were Chinese and Indian market gardeners living in the district. They all mixed with Aborigines and many of their descendants are still among the local Aboriginal community.

Coolies were at the second bottom rung of Australian society at the time but they were tolerated by Aborigines and whites. \*\*\*\*

Anthony Fernando's father was brought from Ceylon as a coolie worker sometime during 1840s to work on the North coast and north-western slopes of NSW. Anthony was taken away from his people and was not allowed to know his Aboriginal mother. He is related to the Fernando, Walfords, Flicks, Winters and Roses in Walgett.

Anthony strongly identified with his people although he lived apart from them. In 1887 Anthony tried to give evidence in court against two white men charged with murdering Aborigines but he was prevented from doing so. This event pushed him into the fight for Aboriginal rights.

Anthony left Australia as a ship's boiler room labourer and had lived in Asia and later in Italy. He spoke to the world about his people. He was caught as a refugee in the First World War in Italy. He tried to meet the Pope and present the plight of his people to him. He petitioned the Swiss government to prevent the destruction of his race.

Anthony was the first advocate for the creation of an autonomous region for Aborigines under Great Britain because he did not trust white Australians.

Anthony supported himself as a toy maker in 1923 in Italy where he was handing out pamphlets about the extermination of Aborigines in Australia. Mussolini's government had him imprisoned before they deported him to England.

In London he made toy skeletons and pinned them on his coat and called out in front of Australia house: This is all Australia has left of my people. They tried to get rid of him by putting him into jail and mental asylum but he stood unrepentant and strong ambassador for Aboriginal people. He had little or no contact with his people but they knew of him. He was an inspiration to later Aboriginal political activists.

Aborigines continued to hunt and gather in their traditional way when they weren't working on the stations. They were also valued as trackers who found people lost in the bush. They also tracked down criminals.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century Aborigines were considered a dying race and the government wanted to smooth their dying pillow. They issued rations and blankets for Aborigines.

Aboriginal Protection Association was formed and it put pressure on the Premier Sir Henry Parkes to create an office of Protector of Aborigines in 1880. The office made a rough census of Aborigines for the purpose of distribution of rations. They counted roughly 9000 Aborigines in NSW at the time. The government created Aboriginal Protection Board in 1883. APB was to make the passing of the Aborigines less painful.

Roy Barker lived on the Brewarrina Mission and he tells:

By 1880's an estimated seventy five percent of Aborigines died. Complete tribes disappeared. In 1882 census revealed that there were 154 full bloods and 34 half castes in Walgett district.

Many Aborigines, who were fit and useful for the work on the station, remained on their traditional grounds while others were moved to the reserves and missions. They came under the orders of the managers that looked after them.

The churches renewed their interest in Christianisation and care of Aborigines. During the 1880s the churches put pressure on the government to segregate and protect Aborigines.

The missionaries were of the opinion that Aborigines should be protected from the bad influences of lower class whites. Two main laws for the protection of Aborigines were: no alcohol consumption by Aborigines and no whites on the reserves. It was assumed that lower classes of whites would bring alcohol to Aborigines and corrupt them with their behaviour.

Aborigines were concentrated on special reserves a sufficient distance from white settlements in order not to be contaminated by whites. The Aboriginal Mission was first established nine miles out of Brewarrina in 1887. It was under the control of the NSW Aborigines Protection board.

First residents were a few older people and children but a few years later more Aborigines came and they established a garden and made a school by the end of 1888. By 1890 the reserve of over 5000 acres was cleared and the fence was made to keep 2000 sheep. Boys' and girls' dormitories were built.

Many young boys and girls from the mission have been apprenticed to district residents to learn station and house works. They had to be given an appropriate board and some pocket money. The rest of their wages was paid to the Aboriginal protection Board and banked for the apprentice to receive at the end of apprenticeship.

The managers, health workers and teachers were usually the only white people living on the mission. All other work on the reserve was done by Aborigines. They grew cattle and sheep and slaughtered it for food. Some worked on the maintenance others were gardeners. Men usually went out to look for work on the stations.

The old, unfirm and those who could not look after themselves were given rations. They also had medical treatment.

Most Aborigines from Angledool, Walgett and Pilliga spent some time at Brewarrina Mission, so the children could be sent to school there.

Gingie Reserve was established in 1895. The manager and the teacher took care of its running. Mission people were expected to find work on the land but they were to stay out of town. \*\*\*\*

Roy Barker lived and worked on Brewarrina Mission and he said:

I was born on the Aboriginal Mission Station in Brewarrina on the 26.3.1928 and was found by auntie Ada Howell.

My mother Evelyn Whighton was sent from Bulgadrimine Mission to be apprenticed at the big station near the Queensland border at the age of 14. Her sister Marnie was sent to a different station but she also married Roy Kelly from Brewarrina after she finished her apprenticeship.

Evelyn married my father Jimmy Barker who lived at Brewarrina Mission.

I clearly remember the day Angledool people were moved to Brewarrina in 1936. I still know the Euralicah names for birds and animals. I also remember Tiboobarra people moving into the Brewarrina Mission. We, Brewarrina children will never forget Mr Fred Johnson's donkey team. That was the first time we saw a donkey.

When Tiboobarra people arrived there were four different dialects spoken on the Mission. Aborigines from Angledool spoke Euraliah, the language of the Marran tribes. The Tiboobarra people spoke their Ngemba tribal language and a lot of them, like my father Jimmy Barker spoke Muruwarri and Ngemba. Muruwarri was the tribal language of my grandmother who came from the Culgoa river. Some old men on the Mission like Tommy Carr, Billie Campbell, Henry Nolan and Hero Black could speak two or even three different languages.

During the Depression work was even harder to find for Aborigines than for the rest. The population at the Brewarrina mission grew to over 300 but it decreased by 1965 to only about 50.

Brewarrina was the oldest Aboriginal institution that was still managed as such in 1965. The reserve was reduced and only a few acres remained for the Station buildings and the cemetery.

As a boy I watched old men making the weapons. They would sit on the wood heap making weapons and they explained what each weapon and boomerang was used for. They were happy talking in the language and laughing sitting there.

I learned to make small steel Tommy-axe. They used rasps to file the wood and broken glass was used as a scraper and gave the wood a nice smooth finish like the sandpaper or a fine electric sanders do today.

The old men got us young boys to rub guthal on the weapons and boomerangs. Guthal is emu or goanna fat. Today we use linseed oil to preserve wood the same way.

At school I had to learn that it was right what the white superior people have done to Aborigines, I was taught to become ashamed of my parent's culture. I was taught that a good way to live was a white man's way.

I had to put my age up to join the army and went to the Islands and Japan for nearly three years.

When I returned I still wasn't allowed into the RSL or a Hotel. There were four or five of us returned Aboriginal soldiers and we couldn't get into the ballot for Returned soldiers' Blocks, which was held in Bourke in the early 1950s.

There are monuments for white dead soldiers but there are no monuments for Aborigines who did not return from the war. They even put up the monument for the dog on a tucker box nine miles out of Gundagai, but there is no monument for Aboriginal soldiers.

After the war I took up shearing. At the weekend I was searching for bush timber to make tools and weapons like I learned from the old men before the war. I used Ngemba designs and patterns on the artefacts.

We moved to Lightning Ridge in the 1960s and there I started making weapons the same way I learned from the old men on the Mission. In 1975 we moved to Brewarrina Barwon Fort. I began to produce artefacts in a little workshop. I felt that they represented our culture and should not be forgotten. I felt that everyone should learn how our ancestors managed to survive in this country for thousands of years making and using these artefacts before the white man came. I wanted young Aborigines to know about their culture and be proud of it. I wanted them not to be ashamed when jokes were denigrating the boomerang. There was a song going: My boomerang won't come back. When boomerang is made and thrown properly, they do come back.

I bought an electric saw and grinder when I realised that using the old rap, broken bottles and tomahawk slowed me down too much.

By 1983 I had a good collection of the weapons, bark coolamons and ancient grinding stones. I also had a good memory of legends and Dreamtime stories. My wife June Barker and I began to visit the schools to show Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students what little we had left of our culture. It was the ancient culture of the Australian inland river tribes.

June and I went to Menindee 1995 Ngalilia Norta-Norta Killara. The words mean All learning together. It was good to attend this first gathering of the Aboriginal elders from everywhere and share our memories. We feel that this gatherings are important if our culture is to survive. We would like to see more of our young Aboriginal people come to listen and learn. We also hope that some of the young Aboriginals might be encouraged to go on with their education. The Menindee gathering of Elders would like to see our languages taught to our children even if it is just words.

Now that we have returned to Lightning Ridge my wife and I opened a little shop to sell artefacts which I make. This place is important as a Culture Centre, a sort of keeping place for all our Aboriginal ancient grinding stones, weapons, and bark coolamons. It will be a place to talk about the Bush Medicine and Food.

We exhibit the collection of old photos of the Brewarrina Aboriginal Mission Station. We will always remember our Mission life.

My father, Jimmy Barker was a handyman at the Mission. He built houses, helped with teaching at school, he built tanks and did many other jobs.

Missions offered some protection to Aborigines and there was the first chance for Aboriginal children to go to school. Christian churches also provided care and comfort to Aborigines.

Most local Aborigines spent some time at Brewarrina mission.

In 1966 a new Aboriginal settlement of thirty houses was built on the outskirts of Brewarrina but they had no manager. The place is about a mile from the town and known as Dodge city.\*\*\*\*

June Barker tells:

I was born at Cummeroogunga Mission on the bank of the Murray river in a humpy made from kerosene tins and corn bags. My mother Blanche Charles of Cummeroogunga and her people were Yorta Yorta people.

I was a happy child. Children are happy anywhere as long as they have their loved ones around them. Our elders told us what we needed to know, they taught us how to keep happy and safe.

When I was a little girl I was always afraid of the Yuri woman with long red hair who was coaxing the naughty disobedient children away. We were scared that Yuri woman would get you if you were spiteful or swore or stole something. Older women used to show us children the little footprints in the sand that were left by Yuri woman after the rain. They looked like baby footprints and they scared us a lot. When I grew up I learned how to make those same footprints to scare my children and grandchildren into doing the right thing. That's how our children learned to behave.

Yuri people were little midgets who helped mothers bring up their children in obedience. Wherever Aboriginal children were, the Yuri Woman wasn't far away watching all the time.

Right down along the Barwon Darling river there was always Mirrioola or Mirrigunnah in the water holes. In the Murray river a bunyip or the little bekker people were waiting.

All these mythical beings prevented children from coming to some harm or from straying too far away. It prevented children from getting drowned in the water holes or getting lost in the bush. This was Aboriginal way of warning their children of danger.

Aborigines always liked to celebrate with their people.

One of my pleasant childhood memories for me was when Lucy Lyons got married to Ted Murphy. She looked so radiantly beautiful in her long white gown and her lovely long, black hair hung down over it. She had red and pink flowers in her hands and in

her hair. All the children just stood and stared because we never saw many lovely Aboriginal weddings and beautiful brides like Lucy.

The other happy memory is of those evenings on the Brewarrina mission. I can still remember the smell of fires and the meat grilling. The fires were burning at the back of every house and mothers were sitting down flat raking the coals for the grid iron to cook the meat and damper. For us hungry children it was a beautiful smell and sight. We spent much of our time sitting around the fire talking. At Brewarrina Mission Aborigines grew their own potatoes and onions, they planted flower gardens and trees.

The Aboriginal mission at Angledool closed in 1936 because of an epidemic of eye complaints. The residents were sent to Brewarrina Mission which had a good Treatment room where I worked.

I was 14 when I left school at Pilliga and had to move to Brewarrina Mission, where I had to work in the Treatment room for my rations.

Sister Pratt at the time reported that trachoma and impetigo were prevalent, that food and hygiene were inadequate. Whooping cough, sores and boils were common and tuberculosis was present.

The Angledool manager became Brewarrina manager. He was later dismissed because he was neglecting his duties.

With the appointment of a new manager the situation improved. About two hundred residents lived at The Aboriginal Mission in Brewarrina in 1937. They started to produce their own meat and vegetables again and so the health improved.

My father Duncan Ferguson was born on Narrandera and his people were the Waradjarie from Warrangesda. I think both my great grandfathers came from Scotland on the same boat. One was Ferguson and one was Gowans and both married Aboriginal women. My Scottish ancestors were never a part of our lives. My Scottish and English ancestors didn't want to know about me and I don't worry about them.

Aborigines accepted all of us half castes and they still do.

Later, when non-English speaking migrant men came in the fifties and sixties, many of them married Aboriginal women and stayed with their families.

My father turned Christian before I was born. My mother was a Christian from her teenage years. My father first heard Mr Arnold Long preach the Gospel at Cummeragunyah. My dad accepted the preaching and he lived a Christian way of life for over fifty years right up until his death. Mr Long was a missionary with the AIM (Aboriginal Inland Mission) My dad worked with AIM from then on and because he was Aboriginal they called him a Native worker. We had a little truck and we went where AIM missionaries told us to go. We went to Brewarrina mission, Walgett Mission, Cubawee Reserve on north Coast, Talbragar Mission near Dubbo and later in 1949 to Pilliga Mission.

Arnold Long's mother Mrs Retta Long from the North Coast was a founder of the Aboriginal Inland Mission. I met her when I was very young. She tried to organise children's home for Aborigines and she wanted them to learn from the Gospel.

Aboriginal Inland Mission sent missionaries out and my family went everywhere with my father who preached the Gospel. My mother had a beautiful voice and she also played a small, fold up, pedal organ and a steel guitar. She never had any steel but she



used a vanilla essence bottle instead and it gave the same sound effect. We all sang and everybody joined in, because they all knew the hymns.

I don't think of myself as belonging to any particular religion but I believe and I have accepted the teaching of the Bible. I believe that God created the world and gave it to people to look after and I believe in the teaching of the New Testament and the Ten Commandments.

Aborigines are very spiritual people but they never worshipped idols. They believed that there was a supreme being (a big fella in the sky). Ngemba people called this supreme being Biambi. He looked after them and helped them make fish traps at Brewarrina. Biambi created the land and put it in their keeping. This land is where Aborigines have always been.

The Brewarrina Mission, was first established nine miles out of Brewarrina in 1887. It was under the control of the NSW Aborigines Protection Board. Most Walgett Aborigines spent some time at the Brewarrina mission.

Brewarrina was one of the oldest institutional type community that existed as such until 1965. Other Aboriginal Missions in the region: Walgett, Angledool and Pilliga did not last as long.

First residents were a few older people and children but a few years later more Aborigines came and they established a garden and made a school by the end of 1888. By 1890 the reserve of over 5000 acres was cleared and the fence was made to keep 2000 sheep.

Boys' and girls' dormitories were built. Many young boys and girls from the mission have been apprenticed to district residents to learn station and house works. They had to be given an appropriate board and some pocket money. The rest of their wages was paid to the Aboriginal Protection Board and banked for the apprentice to receive at the end of apprenticeship.

The managers, health workers and teachers were usually the only white people living on the mission. All other work on the reserve was done by Aborigines. They grew cattle and sheep and slaughtered it for food. Men usually went out to look for work on the stations.

The old, infirm and those who could not look after themselves were given rations. They also had medical treatment.

Brewarrina mission operated until 1965.

Most Aborigines had to move to the mission or on the Reserve so their children could go to school there. In later years many wanted to live on the mission because the mission offered a refuge and a sanctuary from all sorts of abuse in the outside world.

The government sent there young Aboriginal girls who were to be apprenticed out when the people on the properties rang for them.

Sometimes the girls had to wait for months before they were sent out and they lived a very restricted lives. They lived in a long dormitory and they were only allowed out a couple of hours in the afternoon. They had jobs and learning to do every day as well as do housework for the Matron, and look after the manager's and assistant manager's families.

Treatment room offered first aide for the mission people. I gave out cod liver oil and eye drops. The Aboriginal mission at Angledool opened in the twenties and closed in 1936 because of an epidemic of eye complaints. The residents were sent to Brewarrina Mission where I later worked in a good Treatment room. Sister Prat reported in 1937 that trachoma and impetigo were prevalent, that food and hygiene were inadequate. Whooping cough, sores and boils were common and tuberculosis was present since Angledool manager became Brewarrina manager. He was later dismissed because he was neglecting his duties.

With the appointment of a new manager the situation improved. About two hundred residents lived at the Aboriginal Mission in Brewarrina in 1937. They started to produce their own meat and vegetables again and so the health improved.

By 1935 Aborigines on the mission planted vegetable and flower gardens and trees.

The Aboriginal mission at Angledool closed in 1936 because of an epidemic of eye complaints. The residents were sent to Brewarrina Mission which had a good Treatment room. I used to work in the Treatment room later on.

The Angledool manager became Brewarrina manager. Sister Prat reported in 1937 that trachoma and impetigo were prevalent, that food and hygiene were inadequate. Whooping cough, sores and boils were common and tuberculosis was present.

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Preachers came to teach Christianity and people enjoyed singing hymns.

Rations of flour, tea, sugar, meat, potatoes, soap, butter and jam were given to those that could not buy them but others had to pay for them. Clothing was distributed yearly where necessary.

During the Depression from 1936 to 1937 people from Angledool and Tibooburra arrived to Brewarrina and the population grew to over 300 but it decreased by 1965 to only about 50.

Aboriginal families on the missions existed on rations for which able bodied Aborigines had to work. They were under the supervision of the mission managers and under the constant threat that they will be hunted out of the mission and their children be taken away if they disobeyed.

Lola Dennis is related to most local Aborigines and she tells me:

I was born on 28.1. 1936 at Brewarrina mission to Less Howell and Elaine Carroll. My mother came from around Canberra with her mother Lucy Gooloogong. My father's mother Ada Howell was a Sullivan from Walgett before she got married to Dick Howell.

My father was away from home most of the time droving up in Queensland. Once when I was very little he took me with him to Richmond and left me at the convent there when he had to work.

My dad was a real musical person. People liked him because he played a mouth organ in the open for clay pan dancers.

My father liked to drink and that got him in a lot of trouble.

During the Depression work was hard to find. Aborigines who had no one to look after them were put on the mission and there they got their rations of flour, meat and tea and other things they needed. Brewarrina was a most beautiful mission in them days. We had everything there, gardens for veggies and cows to milk and sheep to kill. People weren't allowed out of the mission to go to town without permission but they could go walking in the bush.

My father was thrown out of Brewarrina Mission because he was drunk and got into a fight.

No grog was allowed on the mission but people used to sneak it in or get drunk down by the river and then they'd get into fights. They got Metho or wine and they would drink down by the river. Without grog they were all nice people. I think all people are nice as long as they are not on the grog. Grog caused me much sadness and trouble. My husband is an alcoholic and so are all of my children. Only my daughter Rhonda and myself are not alcoholics, we only drink on special occasions. I lost my children, three of them died because of grog and the others can't stop drinking. I think they should not sell grog to dark people.

My mother was terrified of my father so she left us and went to Condobolin when I was only a baby. My dad was a very nice person but grog turned him bad and we lost our mother because she was afraid of him. She returned to us when dad passed away.

Dad's mother and father, Ada and Dick Howell reared me and my sisters Lyla and Bertha. They were really nice and they looked after us well.

I went to school at Brewarrina and had English teachers Mr and Mrs Challender from England. They were strict but very kind and gentle with us. There were about twenty children from kindergarten to year six at the mission then.

If parents neglected their kids a truck would come and the kids would be taken and put on the train to go to the boys' or girl's school where they looked after them. They could come back when they were 18 or 20. Mimi Dennis' niece and nephew aged from 5 to 10 were taken away because nobody wanted them or looked after them.

I went to school with June Barker and Ella Nagy. Roy Barker used to look after us and teach us right from wrong. I loved to go swimming with girls in our special swimming spot called a wool wash. Boys were swimming at the pump station. We had a grown up looking after us all the time.

We often went to catch rabbits with rabbit traps and dogs. On cold winter mornings we had to go wood picking for our fires.

After I left school they sent me straight to the station into an apprenticeship to get experience in housework duties. I stayed at the place called Beeseeda for three years and after I returned to Brewarrina I got a job at Yarana. After two years I went back to Beeseeda which was like coming home again. I was really happy there and I could help myself to whatever I wanted. They took me to the pictures and looked after me well. The people on both stations were really beautiful and they liked me. I did housework and I looked after their children.

Beseeda was my real home and I had my own room and they gave me a gramophone and records to play. I was never lonely there.

I met Frankie Dennis, Joanna and Dudley Dennis' son at Brewarrina when I was about 18. Frankie was a musician and an artist then. He played a guitar and taught me

to play and we had a many happy sing alongs together. He carved beautiful emu eggs and he made boomerangs and spears. He taught our boys to play guitar and they also like to sing to it together.

Frankie was a clever, good man until grog got hold of him. We lived at Dungalear for some time because Frankie worked there. My oldest daughter Rhonda was born in 1953 and she had a tutor for correspondence school at Dungalear. In 1962 we moved to Namoi Reserve and she started at the Public school in Walgett. Later we moved to Gingie and the kids started to travel on a lorry to the convent school. All of the Dennis kids followed to the convent school. Rhonda had a baby at fourteen so she finished school.

Frankie and I got married at the registry office in Walgett because I didn't know yet that I was a Catholic. I had a beautiful mauve dress with flowers on. Mrs Mac Bride made a lovely cake and we had a party down near the levee in their camp.

Later I met sister Teresa who came to teach at the Catholic School in Walgett. Father Shanahan and sister Teresa taught us about Jesus and I became Catholic. I was baptised and confirmed by the bishop so Frankie and I got married again in the Catholic Church.

I really saw my mum for the first time in 1964 after I married and had five children. Joey was a baby then. Rose Davis' mum Nellie Copeland was down in Condobolin cotton picking when she met mum and they must've talked about me. Mum gave Nellie a letter and a photo for me. She told me my date of birth and that I was baptised a Catholic.

My husband Frank took us all to a place called Yanda near Griffith to meet my mum. Mum and I held each other and cried. We stayed for a month with her. She couldn't stand it away from us anymore, she was lonely for us when we left so she joined us and stayed at Gingie until she died in 1985. She was a very quiet person and all her family was around Condobolin.

I didn't even know that I had religion and that I was Catholic until I met mum and she told me about it. She told me that all the Carrolls were Catholics from a way back. I didn't know my date of birth until then either. She told me that she left because she was terrified of dad who drank and bashed her. She didn't dare take the children with her but she used to send us presents.

Frankie and I parted because of alcohol, he lost his leg because of it and still he couldn't stop drinking. I used to have a lovely home in Walgett for my family and my garden was always full of flowers until my children grew up and started coming home drunk. My husband Frankie also started to drink then and he was often in horrors. Frankie and I had nine children but only four are still alive. We have fifteen grandchildren and five great grandchildren. I look after my grandchildren now.

I work for the CDEP (Community Development Employment Program) now, I enjoy making things, sewing and cooking there. I always liked the quiet friendly life and I liked to have a nice, peaceful home. CDEP is a nice place for me now.\*\*\*\*

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By 1925 Australian School of Anthropology was established and it offered first recognition to the unique Aboriginal culture. Anthropologists paid respect to Aboriginal beliefs and have tried to restore Aboriginal elders to their rightful positions.

In 1929 a conference on Aboriginal Affairs was attended by the friends of Aborigines, representatives of most churches and unions. Under the pressure of the missionaries the government had to hold inquiries into the massacres of Aboriginal people.

Thelma Thorne said:

White people often say: we can't change the past. To me yesterday is the past. If we do something good today tomorrow we will have a brighter past. I am a member of the Walgett RSL and I see Australians celebrate their wars. Why can't we Aborigines celebrate our past. When we celebrate Aboriginal day at school many cocky kids stay away. I asked a cocky woman why they do that and she said that she didn't know, they just always did that. The change will have to come from both sides.\*\*\*\*

During the 20's and 30's Aboriginal leaders like William Ferguson, Doug Nicholls, Pearl Gibbs and Faith Bandler worked to force changes in the treatment of Aborigines and to help initiate programmes for Aborigines. The Committee of Aboriginal Rights and the Progressive Association took up the call in 1937. That was the beginning of Aboriginal political movement.

Roy Barker remembers:

In 1930s Aboriginal activists tried to get better conditions for Aborigines. When I was a boy in the 30s Anglo-Saxon population was 6-7 million to about 100 000 Aborigines.

In 1937 William Ferguson, an Aboriginal shearer and unionist from Riverina formed the Aboriginal Progressive Association that began to lobby for the abolition of APB and for full citizenship for Aborigines.

Bill Cooper, Doug Nicholls, Pearl Gibbs and Jack Patten were also with Ferguson.

In 1938 Ferguson and Jack Patten organised A Day Of Mourning and protest against extermination and dispossession of Aborigines, on the occasion when the rest of Australia celebrated 150 years of white settlement.

With another 100 Aborigines he held a conference of Aboriginal Progress Association in Sydney, to petition the government for Citizen Rights, Land settlement and Education. They advocated the abolition of Aboriginal Protection Board but recommended the retention of Aboriginal reserves for those Aborigines who could not look after themselves. Ferguson and Patten presented a letter of demands to the Prime Minister, they even sent petitions to the queen but they were ignored.

In 1938 the two men began to publish the journal: Abo Call. This is our paper, said its editor Patten. It is to present a case for Aborigines from the point of view of Aborigines.

Patten reported Bill Ferguson saying at this Aboriginal conference: 'All men and women of Aboriginal blood are concerned because Aboriginal Protection Board is suppressing Aborigines. We ask not for protection but for education. If our children were given proper education, they should be made able to take a place with other Australians. We want ordinary citizen rights, not an Aboriginal Member of Parliament. We ask that government make the land grant to Aborigines, as most of our people have practical knowledge of farming and could make a living as farmers. So far we have been denied the opportunity to make progress.'

In his resolution Mr. Patten stated: 'In advocating the abolition of the Aboriginal Protection board we understand that there must be some stepping stones from the

jungle to the modern civilisation but we want equal rights and opportunity. We have no desire to go back to the primitive conditions of the stone age. We ask you to teach our people to live in the modern age, as modern citizens.'\*\*\*\*

June Barker tells:

My grandfather William Ferguson was one of the first Aboriginal politicians. He spoke out for Citizen's Rights in the early 1930s. He must have been a very strong person to stand up against the evil and protested against the mistreatment of Aborigines in those early days. He asked for the abolition of APB because APB controlled Aborigines. After APB was abolished in the 1940s, equality began to slowly happen for Aborigines.

The amended APB Act in 1943 provided for the exemption certificate, which freed an Aborigine of all the restrictions imposed by law on other Aborigines. This exemption marked a transition towards full citizenship. The certificate was commonly known as a dog licence or a beer ticket.

Aborigines don't like to talk about the exemption certificates, now. There is a little bit of shame attached to these tickets because they are proof that Aborigines wanted to be considered the same as white fellows. In those days many Aborigines would rather be anything but Aborigines. Some claimed to be from India or Maoris or from some other country. They don't like to be reminded of that now because now they don't have to be the same as a white man to be accepted. They'd like to forget about their dog tags. \*\*\*\*

Roy Barker said:

Australia never practised apartheid, there were no signs keeping blacks out of town, there were no rules about their behaviour. Discrimination was personal, it was just decided on the spot. We just knew where the resentment was and we moved back as soon as we felt it. Psychologically it was devastating and confusing to Aborigines because they never knew where they stood and how far they could go. Their ancestral land was taken so they had no-where to go but on the mission or on the river bank near town. Gradually Aborigines sneaked into town. Often they were refused service and entrance into the cinema.

Where country towns are situated today there were usually tribal headquarters in the past. These Aborigines came into contact with whites first. Europeans enlisted them to work for them. Aborigines that presented no challenge to the white man, became servants and soon learned the language and the white ways. They were the first Aborigines in town.

Aborigines that resisted whites were culled out of the area and moved out and later sent on to the reserves. \*\*\*\*

During and after the war life was especially tough for everybody.

Roy Barker said:

In 1938 two hundred thousand white Australians controlled all the land in Australia. They measured the land in square miles. The number of Aborigines was an all time low at fifty to sixty thousand and they owned no land. They lived on government reserves or attached to the station where they worked.

Although there were still quite a few full blood Aborigines around in 1940, NSW had the greatest number of half-castes. These half casts learned the skills of their white

fathers and the cunning of the Aborigines. As workers they were equal to any white man. They demanded to be paid the same. They stood up to the white farmer and demanded a fair deal. They often settled their differences in a fist fight. Irishmen met their match in these men. Eight out of ten an Aborigine would dish the white man out.

In other parts the white stockman would bash the black man but not here. There was more pride in an Aborigine during the 40s than there is today. Many of these Aborigines became good boxers. Some, like Steve Dennis, became national champions.

The union rules said that youth wages were half of the grown up man. I remember Bangate station manager coming to the mission to get some workers. He said to Tom Winters senior that he couldn't pay us, young boys, the full wage. Winters told us to take our swags off the truck. He said to the manager: these boys will do as much work as me, so you pay them full wages or we aren't going. The manager left but he came back and paid full wages.\*\*\*\*

Roy Barker said:

Mass migration of non Anglo Saxon Europeans after the war, changed the whole concept of Aboriginal-Anglo-Saxon relations.

It broke the domination and the racist attitudes of Anglo-Saxons. The white Australia policy finally collapsed. By 1980s Australia tripled its population and many of the newcomers were non Anglo-Saxons. They changed everything. British migrants never married our girls. It took European migrants to make families with Aboriginal girls.

More money became available to Aborigines. Unfortunately more money often meant more liqueur.

Drunkenness became a symbol of defiance against the white community and often still is. Most of arrests and convictions were caused by liquor and that remained the same until 1999. Alcohol caused much unhappiness for Aboriginal families and still does. Said Roy Barker:

The history still doesn't give Aborigines recognition for their part in developing Australia. In the early part they did all the work on the land, they were stockmen, fencers, shearers, housekeepers, servants of all sorts, yard and house builders. Anglo-Saxons got the credit for all that. It is estimated that up to one thousand Aborigines served in the second world war. I know that twenty-one Aborigines from Brewarrina went to 2WW. Five of them never returned but others tried to get to the ballot for soldier's blocks on their return. White Returned soldiers were getting land to work on but Aborigines were told that they had no experience on the land so they didn't get it..

Aborigines always lived off the land and they did all the jobs on the land for white settlers, yet they weren't considered experienced enough to hold their own piece of land.

Most explorers actually succeeded only with the help of Aboriginal guides. While recognition was given to explorers, their guides were forgotten.

The political position of Aborigines was improving while there was a balance of power between the East and the West during the Cold War. The West had to show the world that they respected human rights more than the Soviets did. Since the fall of Soviet union the racism raised its ugly head again in Australia.\*\*\*\*

In 1975 the prime minister handed to Gurindji people their traditional land. In the 1980's and 90's land issues became a central focus.

Said Roy Barker:

Things are changing all the time. Aboriginal Protection Board was changed into Aboriginal Welfare, DAA changed into ATSIC. The submissions are made by ATSIC and money is allocated for Aborigines but Aborigines are still powerless. According to ATSIC rules an Aborigine cannot use Aboriginal Legal Service to sue another Aborigine or an Aboriginal institution. In that way all those who are distributing government money are immune from prosecution if they misappropriate funds. The leaders made the law so nobody can sue them.\*\*\*\*

Majority of today's Aborigines in Walgett district suffer tobacco and alcohol related ill health. Depression is caused by the enormous social change, devaluation and disregard of their cultural heritage and by past racial discrimination. Majority of Aborigines are unemployed, have large families and depend on social security.

Very few Aborigines have any private property apart from personal possessions. They have nothing to lose except freedom. Jail became a second home for some because in jail they meet with friends and relations from home, they have regular meals and organised activities.

Roy Barker said:

Most Aborigines still haven't learned to handle money. Saving money to buy a house is new to Aborigines. Until 1940 they could exist virtually without money. Very few Aborigines are in business for themselves.\*\*\*\*

The main life support for Walgett Aboriginal community in 1997 is social security. Some are supplementing their income with seasonal work, some still live on the land or on the opal fields but transport is a problem and living close to services is important where there are large families.

Most regularly employed Aborigines work in the educational, legal and health services. Women are always busy with large families and some go to work as well.

A number of Aboriginal men are long term employees of the Walgett Shire Council.  
Roy Barker said:

Mabo decision has not produced results and Wik court decision was really an indecision. The judges said that they cannot decide for all occasions. If they would grant fishing and hunting rights to Aborigines that would be a decision. If they granted access to sacred sites that would be a decision. Everybody should have access to places of significance. We would just like to claim that we are the descendants of the original owners of the land. I know we will never get the land back. Aboriginal places exist on the map only. They got it all sown up.

If you look on the map you see land marked as Aboriginal but it is really government land, government reserves.

Aborigines were often moved around. There are very few that could claim permanent occupancy of their ancestral land, therefore, only one Mabo claim succeeded so far and that was only for eight house blocks of land.

It seems unfair that Cape York is owned by half a dozen white people because about two thousand Aborigines live there.



There is also much of Australia owned by foreigners. Japanese bought the best part of Australia. They are taking over without a war. Takeover tactics changed.

Said Roy Barker:

It has never been a government position that Aborigines had no right to land, they just ignored the pre-colonisation rights while the government created property rights.

In 1975 Racial Anti discrimination Act stated that there should be no discrimination based on race. That meant that Aborigines can have the same land rights as any other Australians. Aborigines could claim the land which wasn't made private by the state created property rights.

Since Mabo decision in 1992 and the Native Title Act in 1993 the natural right of an Aborigine to inherit after his parents became recognised. They have previously been denied this on the basis of race.\*\*\*\*

Wik family lodged a claim for their traditional land in Federal Court on 30th June 1993. The Wik claim went straight to court without being mediated by the Native title Tribunal. The land Wik family claimed was a pastoral lease. The judge made a decision that any native title have been extinguished by the granting of the pastoral lease. This decision was appealed to the Full Federal Court and was later sent to the High Court where the judges have decided 4 to 3 majority that it was not impossible for any native title rights to have survived the granting of the pastoral lease.

The High court did not rule on Wik native title rights but on Native title generally. It ruled that pastoral leases do not necessary extinguish native title.

The High Court judges did not come to an unanimous decision and neither did the nation.

The whole nation became confused as to what the Native Title means for them and what is traditional connection to land. The definition on what continuous association with the land means has not been tested by the court.

Roy Barker said:

The claimants have to go to court to show that they maintained a traditional connection to their land and that their native title rights have not been extinguished by the pastoral leases.

How could Aborigines maintain this association with the land if the land was fenced off and they had no permission to be there? They were settled and resettled and put into missions and institutions, they were concentrated and dispersed, re-educated and remoulded. How could anyone expect continual physical traditional connection to the land. Everything traditional has been stripped off them. They were made into a second class white fella.\*\*\*\*

Most of the land along the Barwon-Namoi rivers had pastoral leases over it during some time since 1788.

People tried to find clear definitions and certainty as to what activities will be permitted to pastoralists and to Aborigines on the same land.

Queensland premier representing National party demanded extinguishment because wealthy graziers owned vast leases and had much power. State governments would like to have the capacity to confer on graziers a title of exclusive occupancy. This form of freehold title would make the rich much richer and more powerful.

The prime Minister denied that there was ever even a consideration of giving pastoralists a freehold title.

The politicians on both sides tried to perform a miracle that would satisfy everybody.

Joe Keating said in November 1993: It is essential to safeguard the rights of those who hold existing grants of interest in land and that there is no obstacle or hindrance to renewal of pastoral leases in the future.

The Premier of NSW Bob Carr said on 23. 1. 97: I want to say to people on rural properties in Western division Of NSW that I am absolutely dedicated to protecting the status quo and reject a situation where farmers might have to negotiate with someone before they can put a dam on or plant crops.\*\*\*\*

The prime minister said in April 1997: I am determined to deliver certainty to pastoralists and fairness to Aborigines.\*\*\*\*

Three Native Title Claims were made over Walgett Shire and this set everybody in Walgett Shire talking about the native title. Their words were heard, their sentiments were spread, and the prejudices were revived.

The local people refused to be named because they were scared of the politically correct elite and the Aboriginal backlash.

Said Roy Barker: It is amazing what sentiments the fear of the unknown can generate.\*\*\*\*

The local shopkeeper said: They'll spend millions of taxpayers' money on lawyers. Aborigines will get nothing, whites will hate them, that's all. The cream always comes to the top.\*\*\*\*

There was a general consensus among whites:

It is a common law that Aborigines have rights to the land because of their prior occupation but whites managed to ignore this law for two hundred years. Why do they have to open the issue now? It's them damn lawyers bringing it up again. There is money in it for them. The taxpayers will pay huge fees to lawyers who work for Aborigines. Judiciary cooked this for their own benefit. The Crown sold the land to settlers. Why can't they let things be? The system has never been challenged or changed. The Crown will have to pay compensation for it now. Haven't we been paying compensation ever since a white man first stepped on the continent? We provided health, education, housing, social security. What more do they want?

The first successful native title claim near Campsie came good but Campsie Aborigines sold this native title for three million dollars to the state government. Rival groups got nothing and they counter-claimed the prior ownership. Who is entitled to what?

So much for their kinship with the land. Would it be right for those more forceful to get what they ask for and the rest of Aborigines to get nothing? Aren't all Aborigines entitled to the same consideration in regard to the land, whether they make a claim or not? If any right, privilege or compensation is given, should it not be given equally to all whose ancestors were the first occupiers of Australia.

Should individual Aborigines get land or should all Aborigines share in the same privilege? Should provision be made for future generations of Aborigines?

If some Aboriginal people get compensation now, this compensation is here today and gone tomorrow. Will their descendants want to be compensated again tomorrow.\*\*\*\*

Roy Barker said: We only want the recognition of prior ownership.

The judiciary made the law that will occupy them for the next ten years. Nobody can understand what this law means, all they tell us is, that it means different thing for every piece of land. Lawyers make ambiguous law so they have to interpret it. It's the whole new religion they created.

Eight thousand mining claims alone being negotiated case by case will send the country broke in lawyers' fees. Government will not be capable to sustain the process.\*\*\* Roy Barker said:

We should try to save what we can.\*\*\*\*

People tried to interpret the constitution again. It says in the constitution that the Commonwealth can legislate for the benefit of Aborigines. It literally means they cannot legislate against them.

Harry Hall concluded:

People keep chasing equality. You'd think that they would realise it by now that we are only equal in our coffins underground.

Equality is an illusion, it is something politicians chase like a dog chases his tail.

People need a scapegoat. They need someone to kick and they always will. We were all wronged and damaged somewhere down the track.\*\*\*\*

On 13th June 98 Ularoie Elders celebrated their Remembrance and Reunion Day on the grounds of the old Angledool Mission. They chose the place where they want a monument erected for the 300 families that were moved from Angledool to Brewarrina Mission in 1936. June and Roy Barker invited me to come along.

June Barker commented:

Most of the story tellers in this book have been associated with the Angledool Mission and haven't forgotten how they were moved on the back of the open trucks to Brewarrina Mission on the 26th May 1936. We say sorry to the stolen generation and sorry also to the Angledool people who were taken away 62 years ago, never to return and live on their homeland.\*\*\*\*

Among the hundred people who gathered were many descendants of Angledool Ularoie nation who have never before stood on the home ground of their ancestors. There were elders who were, as children, taken away. There were some who were as children taken to the boy's home and didn't see their families again for years. There were also people who were removed from their families and forced into the apprenticeship at an early age.

There were tears and laughter, sad and happy memories, hugs and kind words exchanged all around in the hope to heal past injustices.

ATSIC Commissioner Steve Gordon from Brewarrina addressed the gathering:

We only met in the past on sad occasions at funerals but from now on we will meet here every year to celebrate and offer support to each other.\*\*\*\*

Tom Winters spoke:

Australian government allocated three hundred million dollars for the reconciliation. When that money runs out our funding will be stopped, we will be nationalised in the same way migrants are nationalised a few years after their arrival. We will become Australians. There will be no more Aborigines, we will be one people, ATSIC will be abolished and Land Councils will not get any more funding. We want the truth to be recognised by white Australians and we want our children to learn the truth and be proud of their ancestors. We are here to remember and celebrate not to wallow in self pity.

Roy Barker said:

We are in a better position than most indigenous people in the world, because we never signed a treaty with the invaders. They defeated us but we are still demanding our rights, we want a recognition of true history of Australia, and our place in it as the first Australians. \*\*\*\*

During May 98 National Sorry day was held in most communities to commemorate the history of removal of indigenous children and its effects on the present Aboriginal generation.

On 29 May Walgett Shire organised Moorambil Day, a meeting of different people, in the park, to celebrate, remember and say sorry to Aborigines for the suffering in the past. About a thousand people attended the festivities. There were local Aborigines, school children, officials and local public servants.

Few local white people from Walgett district attended. Many wanted to be friends but there was still uncertainty as there were still unresolved issues on the banks of the Barwon Namoi rivers in 1998.

People don't know where they stand and where they are going.  
The Namoi-Barwon riverbank is still a disputed area.

Alan Hall tells about his life:

I was born 4.11.1931 on Brewarrina Mission. My mother was a Gamillaroi and my father was Yuwaaliaay. Our traditional land stretches from Angledool to Walgett. My parents returned to Angledool mission in 1931. In 1936 they closed Angledool mission because of negligent management and people were moved to other places. Most went to Brewarrina but my family moved onto the riverbank near Dirranbendi.

The land was always a part of our lives, it owns us, and it holds our spirits. The rivers were our bloodlines, they sustained our lives. We are a part of the nature and we had systems that protected nature and our way of life.

Elizabeth and I travel around the country to meetings and we speak about protecting the land and the waters. We are registered as one of traditional land owners of this land and have put our names down with Michael Anderson's claim for Native title over these lands. In 2003 we registered Yuwaaliaay Elders Aboriginal Corporation. Our aim is to improve the lives of Aboriginal people and to live in harmonious relationship with nature and all other peoples.

We realise that our traditional land will never belong to us again but in a democracy we will have to learn to live alongside with the rest of the people. We would however ask for compensation that should benefit all Aboriginal people equally. At present we are negotiating the purchase of Slacksmith's property. We would like to secure employment for our people and provide for their secure future. The government told us that we have to demonstrate that we have the capacity to work and manage the property. They suggested that we lease the property for two years and develop management and work skills to make the venture successful. The alternative is to actively seek partners with proven track record.

We have the elders who are willing and able to direct the management and we have the workers willing to work and learn but we are still looking for a manager. Historically Aboriginal people played no part in commercial side of the business of running the property so they never had a chance to develop those skills. We need an experienced manager to train our people. We would like to have Aboriginal management eventually but we may have to learn how to do it first.

During the last twenty years Elizabeth Wallace and I lobbied the governments for a fair distribution of government money and for Aboriginal rights, I wore every cap they had, I have been a president and Commissioner of many organisations; Elizabeth and I travel constantly. Like it so often happens in any group of people those close to the trough get everything, they look after their families and friends but the outsiders are left behind. We are fighting for those that cannot fight for themselves.

In the olden days Aborigines did not have much education but we all learned skills. I hardly ever went to school but I learned to do everything that needed doing on the land. I worked on most of the properties around here and there was not one job I could not do from horse breaking to shearing and fencing. Our young people go to school but they can't do anything, they never learned the skills we have. Grog and drugs and idleness ruined them. We are losing them. We have to get them into the workforce; we have to provide them with an incentive to lead a good life. When I wasn't busy on the property at weekends I used to go dry puddling opal dirt. I was an opal miner since 1980.

Elizabeth Wallace nee Sharpley remembers:

I was born on 12.4.1929 in a humpy at the Angledool Aboriginal mission to Ron Sharpley and Daphne Dool. Ron's father was a local Aborigine and his mother was an Indian, by the name of Leonard. Daphne's mother was a local Aborigine and her father came from China to work as a boundary rider on the Dungalear station.

When I was little we were real poor but we had fun and we were happy. Kids are happy when they are safe and with their loving parents and relations. The rest of the world doesn't matter to them. We used to be happy making beer bottle dolls, we dressed the bottle up and we made the mud pies and decorated them. I have never gone dancing or gambling or anything like that but I have always been happy. Even now walking in the bush every day cheers me up.

I remember my grandfather telling us kids stories to frighten us from wandering away. He said that Yuri man and woman would get us. We believed that Yuri people were the little people who took naughty children away.

Granddad used to take us rabbit hunting. The dog would chase the rabbit into a log and granddad would split the log with an axe.

My Chinese grandfather was a boundary rider on the Dungalear station. He worked all his life. We bought all our supplies in the Dungalear shop. Granddad wouldn't let us kids wander around into town and when he was cross he would throw his hat at us.

My family was moved from Angledool to Brewarrina mission when I was still little. Aborigines lived in humpies in the bush then, but when white farmers took over the land Aborigines were moved to the missions and Reserves.

Angledool people were split up, some were sent to Bourke and Gunnedah. We travelled in a horse and sulky to Brewarrina. My parents didn't like moving from their home. Brewarrina was a big mission in those days but we knew no one there. They took my older brother and sister who were ten and twelve to Cootamandra home and I didn't see them again until they were already married.

I liked Brewarrina because it was just the bush then with not many houses. We stopped at the river bank until they built the mission homes. We used to go fishing there and Mrs Bonnie used to carry me in a gulay on her back. Gulay was a blanket tied at the waist and around the neck. Except for the manager's family the whites weren't allowed on the mission. We were scared of whites and if someone came we just ran inside to hide.

There was no alcohol allowed on the mission.

We stayed at Brewarrina until the Gingie mission near Walgett was built in 1940. Dad built a tin humpy near the river for us at Gingie so we were close to water. Dad looked after the vegetable garden for the manager of the mission and gave out vegetables to the people on the mission. There were about twenty families from different places at Gingie then. There was fence and a gate around Gingie and the people had to report to the manager if they went in or out. Aborigines were allowed to town but not into the pub. They got grog from those Aborigines that lived in town and from some whites. They were searched for the alcohol when they came to Gingie gates. Sometimes a taxi would bring Aborigines home to Gingie and they would search it for alcohol. But Aborigines got real cunning. Sometimes they'd get a loaf of bread and take the insides out so they could put the bottle inside. Others unloaded grog outside the gate and went for it later.

I went to school for the first time at Gingie and have learned to read and write a bit. I spent a lot of time helping the manager's children to read and write there on the veranda.

At the age of fourteen I moved with my family to Dungalear where my dad worked as a boundary rider. I was a housemaid for the Mick Curen family. I had a nice uniform and a white apron as I served the meals and set the table.

When I was about fifteen I was apprenticed out to Glass family on the Carlton station on the Come by chance road. They were very nice people and I learned to do all the housework really well. I did all the beds and swept the floors and washed. I slept in a room down the back of the house and I ate on the veranda.

Jim and Cynthia Glass only had one daughter. When Jim died, Cynthia and her daughter moved to June where they first came from. Don Evans became the manager on the farm.

I returned home to Walgett where I worked at the Imperial hotel for a year. I made beds and helped in the kitchen. I also did some washing and ironing for people on the side. I gave mum the money I earned so she could buy food for us.

I learned to be a good house keeper and I am always proud to show my home to visitors. I kept a tidy, clean home wherever I lived.

When I was about seventeen my family moved from Gingie to Namoi. In 1950 Victa Wallace came to Walgett from Narrabri doing some work for his boss. He worked on the station at Narrabri and was a very shy man. He was so shy that he got frightened of court people, so he never went there to ask them about marrying us. He kept putting it off so I moved to Narrabri with him and four of our twelve children were born there before we returned to Namoi. Victa drove a septic truck for awhile but then we moved back to Carlton station and stayed there for about fifteen years. I always taught of Carlton station as my home.

Everybody liked Victa. He drank a bit too much sometimes but he got along with everybody. There was a copper Mick in Lightning Ridge, he was a really good policeman and you could talk to him. Once I went to him to complain about Victa's drinking. I was sick of carting water and wood by myself while he was drunk all the time. Mick put Victa in a lockup over night and after that Victa never touched alcohol again until the day he died. I never tasted alcohol in my life. Victa smoked since he was seven but I never smoked either.

We used to go from Walgett to Lightning Ridge sometimes with a horse and sulky. We liked it there because we could go looking for opals. We moved to Lightning Ridge in 1968. My youngest three children were born in the camp there.

My husband Victa died in 1980 in his own town Narrabri. I returned to Lightning Ridge with my three youngest children and we pitched a tent under the tree. We had a forty four gallon drum and we filled it with water from an old opal mine. I used to roll the drum to my camp.

Victa's three brothers still live in tin camps in the bush. We were all used to living in the bush so we didn't think that it was hard. I got my pension and we were really happy there. We did not want for anything.

Later I bought an old caravan and paid it off slowly. We cooked in my camp oven which I still have and boiled our billy on the open fire. I know we can't go back in

time but I would like to cook my meat on the grid iron again and boil my billy on the open fire. I like to remember how we trapped emu and kangaroo and cooked out in the open, sometimes we cooked it in the ground. Mum used to cook damper in the ashes.

I am not much for staying inside and watching videos. I like walking in the bush. The birds and the trees cheer me up and make feel good and well.

In 1989 I put my name down for a home and five years later I got it. I am happy in my new brick home. I keep it clean; I don't trust no-one else to clean it.

My oldest daughter Kay and the youngest Leanne don't drink but all the rest of the family do. I tell them not to come home when they are drunk and they stay away until they sober up. If they come drunk I tell them to go away until they sober up. My kids are always welcome in my home but I will never let a drunk in my home.

Mum and dad never drank because they worked all the time. I think Aborigines need something to do.

My son John died on the road in Narrabri. He was drinking and there was a brawl so his cousin put him in a taxi to go home. But the taxi never brought him home. When they found him on the road he had head injuries and he was dead. Taxi driver said that John wanted to go out of the car and hitch a ride to Moree.

The police said that he was hit by the semi-trailer. My son in law is a policeman there and he had an argument with John the day before. I don't believe that John was killed by the semi-trailer; I think he was hit on the head. There was more blood on the grass than on the road and his only injury was to the head. He had an arrangement to go to work on a tractor in Walgett the next day. Not knowing what happened to him worries me all the time.

My youngest daughter Leanne has a speech impediment. She couldn't breathe when she was born so the nurse put a tube into her throat and it caused a tear. She had to go to Sydney to have an operation and had the tear repaired. She was left without oxygen during the operation so she suffered the brain damage. When she was about ten we had to leave Lightning Ridge and go to Gunnedah because Leanne had to go to the school for the disabled. I wanted to sue the doctor but Victa said to leave it, so I let it go.

I was always happy. I get along with everybody; I have never been upset with anybody. People have been good to me. In the olden days people were less hurtful and nasty to each other. Kids never called grownups by name but they called them auntie or uncle whether they were blood relatives or not, just to show respect. My family have never been in trouble with the police in the olden days.

Still my best memories are of my children and when I had them. They are all really good to me and they keep coming home and make me happy.

I always taught my children not to be greedy and to share with each other. My children keep coming back to me and they bring their children with them. Most of them do opal mining and other jobs around Lightning Ridge.

I don't need very much money because I have my pension. If I had one wish it would be for my children to be friends to each other and to talk to each other. My children used to be shy and quiet but my children and grandchildren became enemies to each



other lately. I would wish that my grandchildren and children would keep out of trouble.

I have never done anything wrong in my life and I had never been in trouble with police in the olden days, yet I had four coppers coming at one o'clock at night not long ago. They came looking for my son because they suspected that he stole some opal. He didn't, but the police searched my house and my daughter's house. They looked everywhere; we even had to lift the sleeping babies off the bed so they could look. They never found nothing but they were nasty to me and they spoke nasty to me and I did not do anything wrong. This upsets me. I told the inspector that there were no drugs or smoking and drinking in my home but he took no notice. I ran his boss in Sydney and he said that he will look into it. My son and my grandson were seen with some friends from Mungindi who might have taken something and the police came after my boys. One copper said that he will get one of the Wallaces.

Still things are good because more white people are nice to Aborigines. If people don't talk to each other they don't know how they feel about each other. In the olden days people in Lightning Ridge knew each other and talked to each other but there are so many new people coming and people don't bother to get to know each other anymore. It starts prejudice and discrimination. I went to the club and the bouncer there was so rude to me. People don't have the respect for older people like we used to.

My daughter Daphne likes to remember my father, her grandfather. He couldn't read but he had two boxes of books which he gave to her because he knew that she will want to read them. Daphne also remembers my mother who was 105 years old when she died in August 94. My mother still spoke her lingo with the kids. Daphne is doing really well. She finished Aboriginal Studies Course at Teacher's college in Armidale before she trained at the National Gallery and became the first Aboriginal curator of Aboriginal Art works in Canberra. She didn't feel good in Canberra though, because few people would talk to her. She left and went to Sydney. She travels around Australia selecting Aboriginal work for the Gallery. She has problems at work there as well. Other people are after her job and they are picking on her. If she does not take some work for the Gallery people get nasty to her as well. People like to pick on the person with a good job like that.

Daphne is a painter. I help her paint and I am selling one of her paintings Gudu Bidi for two thousand dollars. It tells the story about my mother waking the fish in the Barwon River before she went fishing. She picked up the stone or some dirt and threw it in the water three times calling Gudu Bidi.

Now I am helping Daphne paint the story of Coocrain. I heard this story from mum and Ivy Green. There were two girls who wandered away from home on their walk about. The crocodile got them and swallowed them. They became opalised and that's why the beautiful opal is found on Coocrain.

I thought that maybe Daphne forgot the mother's day this year but she rang me and told me to check my bank account. She put five hundred dollars there to make me happy.

My daughter Vicki used to work on the computer and later she worked at the art gallery in Moree for five years. She is expecting her third child now so she returned home to Lightning Ridge and has put her name down for the house.

Kevin has three children but his wife Diane died and the children are looked after in Walgett by their Nan Joan Ashby. Kevin worked all the time, he is shearing and mining.

Barry works in Narrabri, he has six children. Barry is a hard working man but he and his wife drink too much sometimes. I get upset with him if he comes to see me drunk.

Susan returned to Walgett with her family now. She used to have a good family and her husband always worked for the Telecom. Since they split up the kids are often in trouble. Her boys stopped going to school when they were only twelve and fourteen. I am trying to help and I called their father but they don't like me getting mixed up. I worry about them because they are my kids and I love them.

Now I have fifteen grandchildren and two great grand children. Some of them are lazy; they don't keep their homes clean and tidy like I do. They are not going to school or look for a job. If they get a job they don't keep it.

I keep telling my children how alcohol ruins their lives and their children's lives. My grandchildren are brainy but they won't go to school and do the right thing. They don't want to get a job and if they get it they leave it. My daughter is trying desperately to teach them the right ways but her children are on drugs and alcohol and get in trouble with the police. She gets so desperate that she started to drink and gets drunk herself. I just wish to help her.

Children today are different to what we used to be. I never had to hit any of my children, I just talked to them and they did as they were told but these days I talk to my grandchildren and they take no notice. They are being bashed at home but it does not help either. I baby-sit my grandchildren sometimes and when we are alone they do not touch things and they do as I say. I might have to smack their hand so they do what I say but as soon as their parents are there kids take no more notice.

My father died about ten years ago but my mother passed away on 6th August 1994 at the age of one hundred and five. They lived along Namoi River with their nine children. In 1994 they counted 113 grandchildren, 228 great grandchildren and 40 great great grandchildren. Most of them live in and around Walgett.

Many white men had children with Aboriginal women and some of these children were taken from their Aboriginal mothers and placed into white institutions from 1883 until 1969. Sometimes the fathers did not want their children close to their homes and sometimes the fathers demanded that their children be brought up in a white institution.

My people always believed in God. I always knew that there is God. Even when I was a child I knew that there is God. When we ran out of food and had no money somebody would always turn up with the money or food and mum just said: There is God. My parents always believed in God and so do I. My people believed that if someone was bad they were punished. They pointed the bone at them and they got sick or died. The old people told us stories like that to warn us to be good.

I think mum and dad were Church of England. I don't know if I was baptised but I used to go to Sunday school at Namoi Mission where two Aboriginal ladies, Mrs Bonnie and Mrs Ivy Kennedy taught us about God. We were too frightened in those days to go to church so people came home to us to teach us. We lived in the bush all our lives and we didn't know about church things. I had one of my daughters, Vicki,

baptised because she was very sick in hospital. My people believed in God in their own way.

Brian Kennedy

Everybody in Lightning Ridge knows and likes our Garbo, Brian Kennedy. Brian is like the sunshine on our streets. He keeps the town clean; he has a smile and a friendly word for everyone. He told me that he read the book Goodbye Riverbank where local Aboriginal people tell their stories. Brian said that his mum also remembers the olden days and would like to tell her story. That is how I met May Kennedy, a gentle, softly spoken lady with a ready friendly smile. Her home is spotless and decorated with souvenirs and pictures of the family. She tells me that her mother and grandmother also liked to keep their homes beautiful. C.Z

May Kennedy

I was born on Christmas day in 1925 in Cobar hospital. At the time my family lived on Nacarbo station where my father George Frail worked as a station hand.

My father was an Englishman who came to Australia in 1900. He married my mum Jane Williams and they had five children. We lived in the shearer's quarters where Dad built a tin hut with four rooms for us. Mum and dad did not drink alcohol. Dad was a hard working man. He often took us shopping to Cobar in his truck. He used to break horses and when I was eight a horse kicked and killed him.

Mum was a full blood Aborigine from Ngaampaa people around Cobar. Granny talked in Aboriginal language but mum did not speak it much and I only learned a few words. Granny died at the age of 103. They took her in a dray to Brewarrina cemetery. Granny never smoked, drank alcohol or played cards. She looked after me and told me that I cannot do what I like until I am eighteen. Mum was a very nice lady. I never had any problems with people either and everybody was always very nice to me. Mum was a cook on a station and her sister Polly was a housekeeper.

My parents were strict and mum smacked us if we did not do as we were told. Children in those days were not allowed to listen to grownups talking. The grownups would tell us children at the right time what we needed to know.

After dad died mum had to take care of her four children on her own. We cooked on the gridiron and in the camp oven. Mum was a great cook and she was the boss in our home. Mum also cooked for the manager's family. They were a nice family with three children and we played together like one family. In those days everybody white and Aboriginal kids played together not like these days when white children do not like to play with Aboriginal kids. We always had white and Aboriginal friends.

Mum used to go to Carrara Aboriginal Mission 30km from Cobar to get a pink slip so she could get money for groceries and clothes.

When my older two sisters had to start school Auntie Topsy Simpson took them to the Angledool Mission. Carrara Mission broke up when I was eight and the manager told mum that we will be taken to Ivanhoe, Wilcannia or Brewarrina. Mum told him that she wanted to go to the Angledool Mission because my sisters were already there. The manager asked mum how she was going to Angledool and she told him that Lenny would take us.

Mum's sister Polly died and left a son Lenny. Mum took Lenny as her own and called him Lenny Frail. Lenny was a good shearer about ten years older than me.

When Carrara closed in 1932 Lenny bought six horses and two buggies. We loaded our belongings and left. On our way we stopped at Cobar and continued to Bourke

and Brewarrina and then to Goodooga. We had our tent to sleep in on the way. In Hebel mum asked the policeman where Angledool Mission was. The Mission manager gave us a house with two bedrooms. Lenny was shearing and mum started to work for the policeman Hammond's family. All of us kids played together and Mrs Hammond made us wash our hands before we went in to eat.

The Mission manager gave us rations of tea, flour, sugar, salt and some meat. He also gave mum a pink slip to get the money for other things. There was a general store, a baker and a butcher at Angledool. We bought vegies and fruit from the Chinaman's garden. We could not grow anything because there was not enough water. We picked bush fruits like condongs, guise, goodiger and mulga tree fruit... We caught rabbits and fish for food as well. For sores and colds mum boiled sandal wood which we called bathal. We drank it and bathed our sores in it.

About thirty of us Aboriginal kids went to school in Angledool and we loved it. We had slates and chalk to write on them. The manager's children came to school with us because the manager and his wife were our teachers as well. Other white children had a school in town.

We used to go fishing in Narran River. I remember an old blind lady holding the stick and walking behind us. She threw the line and then tied the line on her toe to feel the fish pulling.

I also remember an old dark fellow showed us a trick. He put a piece of paper on the stump and moved away. He told us children to close our eyes. He clicked his fingers and the paper was blazing. I don't know how he did it but I saw people make fire by rubbing two sticks together.

Angledool Mission closed in 1936 because of bad management and we moved to Brewarrina. There were Brewarrina Aborigines, Tibooburra people and Angledool Aborigines. Tibooburra group soon moved back to their grounds at Broken Hill with their donkey teams.

I went to school in Brewarrina until I was fourteen. The Mission manager was also our teacher and I never learned much. We had inkwells and pens but no pencils... The manager's wife taught us sewing and I was good at it. I even won the first prize. I was good with my hands. The manager and his wife also gave out sugar, tea and flour every Thursday.

I had lots of fun with my friends at the Mission. Mavis was my best friend. We loved to make cubby houses. We looked for old crockery and cutlery for our cubby house. We made dolls from the wooden pegs and dressed them in fine pieces of material. We also made a cart for our dolls from a square fish tin. We made a hole and tied a string to pull our dolls for a ride.

It was really nice in Brewarrina. This man Johnson took us to town on his wagon pulled by donkeys so women could collect their endowments. It was good nine miles to town.

They closed Brewarrina Mission in 1966 but they made a new one on the river bank called a Silver city. I think they gave it a nickname Dodge City now.

The Aboriginal Protection Board apprenticed boys and girls on the properties at the age of fourteen. Girls learned the housework and boys learned the station work. I was sent to work as a domestic to Gundawiri station which was Jack Williamson's property six miles away on the Bourke road. Mr and Mrs Williamson treated me like I

was their own daughter. I had a nice room next to the kitchen and I ate in the kitchen. I learned to clean, wash and cook. I set the table for the family really pretty. I stayed there four years and learned to become a good housekeeper. They took me with them whenever they went shopping or to the pictures but I never went home to Brewarrina to visit my family.

Mrs Williamson gave me clothes and food; she paid me one bob and sixpence a week the first year, three bob the second year and nine bob the third year. She put the rest of my pay in the bank for me. After four years I left with 45 quit which was big money in 1943.

I was eighteen when I finished my apprenticeship. I went to Walgett and bought myself good clothes, shoes and even a hat. I started work at the Imperial hotel as an assistant cook. I also served the tables. I earned a pound a week. The owner Mrs Blair also gave me coupons to buy shoes and clothes. I stayed for a year until Blairs departed. They wanted me to go with them to Sydney and work in their hotel there but I wanted to stay closer to home.

A friend told me about the job at Enmore near Colly 20 miles out of Walgett. I worked there for a year for Murphy family. I earned two pounds a week. Murphy family was nice to me. I only went shopping in Walgett once a month and I had 8 pounds to spend. I caught a train to Walgett to go shopping at Johnny Johnson's store and Murphy family came to pick me up from the train station. The mailman's truck came to pick me up when I went to visit my family in Brewarrina. The hawker also came around to sell everything from fruit to pencils and clothes.

Mr Murphy gave me lots of rabbit traps and I caught rabbits for their skins. Mum turned the skins inside out to let them dry before she bagged them in the chuff bags. The mail truck took them to Cobar and the mailman sold them and bought for them anything mum wanted. Mum also sold fox skins. She tied a branch to the buggy and dragged it in the bush. She smeared a bit of meat on it so foxes would follow the smell to where she laid the bait. Mum died in 1965 and is buried in Brewarrina.

While working at the imperial I met Kenneth Kennedy. I liked him and later we went together for a year before we got married in the Church of England in Walgett on the 4.4.1945. I wore white from the hat to my shoes. I had a bunch of flowers. We had a wedding cake with Kenneth's mum in Wee Waa lane in Walgett.

Kenneth's father was dark but his mum was pretty white with blue eyes. Kenneth trained in the army during the war but the war ended just as he was ready to go. He was in the army reserve.

Kenneth was working at the Dungalear station so I moved in with him and we lived in a little cottage there. Kenneth was a good worker; he drank a bit but he was a good man.

My first child only lived a few days and I was very unhappy losing him. Our other children May, Rhonda, Irene, Brian, Jane and Kenneth were born in Walgett while we lived at Dungalear station. Kenneth was my baby. He died of a stroke at the age of twenty five.

I taught my children by correspondence while we lived at Dungalear but when we moved to Lightning Ridge in 1959 they started public school there.

My husband bought a little tin house for forty pounds and we lived in it until Kenneth bought a block of land close to the school. He paid Alec

Wood twenty pounds to bring up a house from Dungalear. They cut it in sections and loaded it on the truck for us. I moved in it with the children and we lived in this house for many years until we got a proper house in Matrix Street.

Kenneth was still working at Dungalear and only came home on a horseback on pay days. He worked for twenty five years at Dungalear.

We have always been Church of England. I don't know when we became Church of England but mum and granny were Church of England and all our children were baptised in the Church of England. My children never missed their Sunday school. . Their godmother was Mrs Allport. An Aboriginal preacher Bert Gordon used to preach in Lightning Ridge and we went to listen to him. He was a lovely man and he took care of many young people.

I always wanted to live in Lightning Ridge because you can go opal mining; it is also easy to find a job here.

I registered an opal mine at Canfells. Kenneth went down digging and I pulled out four gallon tins of dirt with a winch.

We had an old puddler which is a drum with the holes punched in. I filled it with dirt and wound it around so the dirt fell out through the holes and the nobbies stayed in.

We found lots of opal but we didn't know its value so we sold it for any money. Once a Canadian opal buyer came down the mine and picked some of our nobbies from the treacle tin. He paid us a few bob. He had the stones cut and polished. Maybe he got a lot of money for them but we will never know now.

My daughter Irene and I worked for the shopkeeper Pantelakos who had a Black Opal motel. We cleaned the rooms. Pantelakos family were very nice to us. When they were leaving they said that if we ever wanted a holiday to come to stay with them in Sydney. I always remembered that.

Kenneth became very sick and he died in 2000. We stayed in Walgett with Flossy Kennedy while he was in hospital. We were married for fifty five years. I used to like playing cards; I remember playing with friends who would prepare dinner for everybody and we had a really good time. I was a good old gambler but I had to give it up because I was short of money.

Brian Kennedy

My father worked for us all his life. We lived at Dungalear which was a large sheep station. I remember dad working long hours; he spent most of his time on a horseback mustering sheep. Dungalear was a great place to grow up in; it had lots of things to see and do. Mum used bush medicine when we were sick and she also used plain baking flour to seal an open wound and stop it from bleeding. She showed us what bush tucker to eat. Back in those days bush tucker and medicine were plentiful.

I grew up to believe that everybody should work to earn their own living. I started working when I was fifteen. I have never received social security and I refuse to get it now.

I have no teaching qualifications. I have no children of my own and I am not an authority on how people should live so I never judge others. I try to lead a good life myself so I can be an example to others. I suppose I would like to be a kind of a Piped piper and have young ones follow me and lead healthy and respectful lives. I meet many people through my work and I think everybody trusts me and respects me.

In my time we respected our elders and the rules they made. We knew that they could make all the decisions about our lives and there was no conflict, fuss or arguments; we knew what was the right thing to do. Everybody felt safe. I have been happy following these rules and hope that others would be happy as well. We need rules to live by so we feel safe.

Government took away a lot of parental authority. Through government intervention Aboriginal parents lost authority over their children. Some parents don't dare discipline their children because they are afraid of what government is going to do to them if they do.

In my time we learned to take care of our belongings; kids played outside so they didn't muck up the house. They wouldn't want to destroy the place they lived in. When you work for something you respect it and look after it.

I came to Lightning Ridge School in 1959. I never missed school. There was just a handful of us Aboriginal children in a school of white kids who called us blacks. The way they said blacks made us angry; we waited at the school gate to get them. The beauty of it though was the fact that white parents never became involved in our fights.

My family never had any real conflict with other people. We never confronted people because we liked to live in peace.

My parents believed in working for and caring for our family.

In the application for a job I wrote:

I grew up in the days before technology became the way to the future. In the early part of my life I was a manual worker which kept me on my feet a lot; that meant no time for laziness; I was always a non-smoker, a non-drinker; I never touched drugs so that means that there is no place in my body for any disability from drugs or work related mishaps. I always keep a clear head.

Later in my life I worked with machinery; I started with ploughing wheat fields with the latest models tractors; a multi tyre roller pulling a grid roller crusher with four wheel tractor.

During 1981 and 1982 I worked for the private contractor on the Moree Plane Shire. Since 1987 I worked for Walgett Shire Council where I had the opportunity to use modern technology such as hydraulic levers and electric control buttons which demands great responsibility and knowledge. I have always been a cautious person around machinery and moving parts.

I have done opal mining courses to learn about hidden dangers in the mining game. It is important to use a lot of common sense and awareness in mining and specially to take notice of your surroundings.

My twilight years are fast approaching. I made an application for the job in the coal mines. I told them: I want this job to see me to my retirement age so I can say to myself: my life in the workforce from day one to my retirement age was a good one and I have been one of those people who never collected social security from the government.



There truly are 8 billion stories in the world. Australia has 23 million of them. When we will hear all of them and agree on the same story, only then we will know the true history.

4.7.13

I had a dream. Joe stood next to my bed and said: If you really want me to come with you I will come. I became confused thinking: Aren't you dead? I extended my hand to touch him; I tried to get up and speak. I managed to open my mouth and half stand up but the effort woke me. It was 130am. As I opened my eyes Joe faded away.

Today I am going to Walgett to celebrate Christmas in July with Homecare people. Last year I celebrated it with Joe and the memory must have surfaced in my dream.

What is a dream? Is Joe's spirit coming to visit when my soul transcends into the subconscious? What do we know about the spirit world or dreams?