

Oh, no. Not this  
story again ...  
Work and travel  
tales

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Sydney

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# Introduction

We spend about a third of our lives asleep. Another third is taken up with family, friends, leisure, holidays, and shopping. If we've been lucky enough to be fully employed, the rest is spent getting to, being at and coming home from work during all the years we earn a living.

My life as a paid worker started as a cub scout at about the age of 8, doing jobs for our neighbours in Bathurst for a few coins during Bob a Job week each year. In my teens, I had jobs in school holidays, and on weekends while I was a university student. In 1973 I worked for 18 months in the library at the Natural History Museum in South Kensington in London. On returning to Australia, I drove taxis for a few months while I considered what I might do as a career.

In late 1974 I started my first job in what would become a lifetime's work in public health. I stopped drawing a salary 42 years later. My longest job was at the University of Sydney in the School of Public Health, where I worked from 1978-1981, and from 1988- till February 2016 when I retired. Over those 30 years, I lectured medical students, taught postgraduate courses, marked uncounted hundreds of 2000 word essays, supervised 16 doctoral and 30 masters research candidates, examined theses, applied for research grants and assessed many others, undertook research projects sometimes lasting 5 years, wrote over 500 research papers, editorials and commentaries for research journals, wrote and promoted books, gave thousands of media interviews, wrote hundreds of opinion page articles for newspapers, chaired education and research committees, edited research journals, reviewed others' papers, sat for cumulatively many hundreds of hours in many different committees, and above everything else, sat for often 14 hours a day at my desk at the university and at home in front of a computer screen.

In all this time, my late father who was a hairdresser who left school at 14, could never really get his head around what 'job' I did. "What is it you actually *do*, Si?" he asked more than once. His job was easy to explain: women came into his salon every day, had their hair cut, styled or coloured, then paid and left. I tried to simplify mine for him by explaining that I taught adult university students and wrote books and articles about prevention in health. My own son Joe works in a large bank in some mouthful of an executive role that I in turn, also struggle to understand.

But my career was far richer than all the things I've just listed. In a great university like Sydney, you mix with many inspirational colleagues and students. Inevitably, there are

a few at the opposite end too: frauds, cheats, blow-hards and bone-idle untouchable 'protected species'. University work can take you to places you'd never imagined visiting. Academic work took me to every continent, giving seminars, lectures and classes and running training in advocacy and tobacco control. I had many unforgettable experiences.

There's a lot of writing about work, often in books by famous people who take you through their discoveries, creations and anecdotes about colleagues. There's also a lot of 'pursuit of excellence' self-improvement dross, and of course mountains of technical how-to books about all sorts of occupations and professions. But there is relatively little where people put down on a page the stand-out stories that they most like to tell their friends about things that happened to them during their working years.

When you spend a wonderful evening with friends, people always tell stories around the table. These can be funny, frightening, riveting, cautionary, salacious, serendipitous or surprising. They can be about little incidents that are remarkable, big picture issues, and the best and worst of people. Sometimes they are about several of those things. But above all they are compelling. People pay close attention and don't drift off into private conversations. Many of us have a collection of these that we try to insinuate into story-telling evenings when someone starts it going. Our suffering partners sometimes get to hear these many times. The best ones sometimes get requested by others, in the way we ask a musical guest to play or sing a favourite piece. Bob Jones, who played guitar in my band The Bleeding Hearts, has a story I often badger him to tell others. Bob played many hundreds of gigs for the Sydney band Le Club Nerd over 15 years. The band played perfect pop covers, with different members often getting in costumes or hats to add to the theatre. One of these was Men at Work's *Down Under*. Bob would come on stage in speedo swimming briefs, a tee-shirt and a lifesaver's cap, and play flute throughout the song from the front of the stage. One night a woman in the front row suddenly "dakkeed" him mid song, pulling the speedos to his ankles.

When he tells the story, everyone at the table gasps, roars with laughter and asks him immediately "so what did you do?" "I just kept playing till the end of the song" he says. He gets asked to tell the story a lot.

In this collection, I've written down some of the stories that I have told many times on such occasions, including a few perennially requested stories, you might guess at. Most of them are about work and travel situations I've been in. Enjoy the ride.

Simon Chapman  
August 2018

# Child labour in Bathurst

The first time anyone outside my family gave me money for some sort of work was during “bob a job week” in my one and only year with the cub scouts. I lasted only a year in the South Bathurst cubs because I was asked to leave by the chirpy little man who was the local Akela, or cubmaster. He was from Lancashire and had pink hairless legs and the right level of briskness you need in a cubmaster. This man and his wife, who was much larger than him and who we had to fittingly call Baloo the Bear, got rid of about four of us for persistent cricket playing in the cub hall. We all knew it wasn’t so much the cricket as our continuing ability to break into the hall before he arrived to open it. I suppose the expulsions were an antidote for his fear of being exposed for his lax security and turning up late.

I had joined with a few kids in my class and our parents arranged to take it in turns to fetch and carry us from the meetings on Tuesday evenings. One boy’s father opened my eyes to what ‘father’ could mean besides the experience of it that I took for granted. This man would roar and bellow at us to shut up and sit still in the car. One evening his car wouldn’t start and I heard an adult swearing for the first time in my life.

Cubs were a dreadful let down for me. I nearly burst myself in anticipation of joining because of the wonderful uniforms. Well, mostly the cloth badges you got awarded for passing little tests in things like knot tying or stamp collecting and then had your mum sew them on your shirt sleeves. I had one of the largest stamp collections in school, but they refused to give me the stamp collector badge because I had pasted them all in my album. Apparently, everyone was supposed to understand this was not on, little sticky hinges being the correct way.

The crouching “dib-dib-dib, dob-dob-dob” ritual has been described often enough, and was certainly bizarre. I can’t remember thinking anything of the sort at the time though. Prattling this stuff while crouching with your fingers pointed to the floor seemed the most natural thing in the world to do on a Tuesday night. Our troop had a wonderful tall stick with a moulded wolf’s head in hard black plastic on the top, with dozens of ribbons swapped with other packs around the state at jamborees fixed under the wolf’s head. It was a privilege to be chosen to fetch the stick from its cupboard and hand it to Akela for the ceremony.

Bob-a-job-week was eagerly anticipated by everyone. Why, I don’t know. It wasn’t as if you got to keep the money that people gave you. Everyone knew the procedure that had to be followed and would sign the paper we carried around saying what we’d done, how thorough we’d been and how well we’d applied ourselves to the work. Each afternoon of bob-a-job-week

I cruised the neighbourhood in old clothes with my cap and 'woggled' tie to show people I was a real cub and not a masquerading imposter. Everyone knew the houses of old grouches and mean bastards who'd have you cut their lawn, rake it up, pull the weeds, chop the wood, wash and polish the car and then give you one shilling and sixpence. One kid's father had to go around and tick off one old bloke who'd done this.

Mrs de Ferranti, wife of the district school inspector, got me to rake up her leaves and then gave me some home-made lemonade and amazingly, five shillings, an unholy amount. This was the meaning, I decided, of one of my father's favourite sayings: that "some people had more money than sense". The best job I remember was to climb our next door neighbour's walnut tree and beat the branches to get the tardy ones to fall off. Imagine getting paid to have fun like that.

Old Jack Palmer (as Dad called him) down out street was about 85. He had recently won the lottery and when I knocked on his door he gave me four shillings for nothing. But I had to make him a cup of tea and then sit in one of his old chairs with its lace antimacassar hair oil protectors while Jack told me about wonderful Clarrie Grimmet the cricketer and Les Darcy the boxer.

Bathurst is home to the famous Mt Panorama motor racing circuit, just out of the town. There were two race meetings each year: Easter (starting with motor cycles on Good Friday and Saturday and then cars on the Sunday and Monday) and the October long weekend, which was cars only — both 'production' cars (modified version of cars that could be bought from motor dealers) and open wheeler, proper racing cars that you would never see on public roads.

Pit Straight at the bottom of the mountain was about a mile and a half away from our house, with the main road leading to the track being literally the next block away. When I was in primary school, opportunities arose twice a year for local kids to sell the race programs.

I jumped at this opportunity. You earned a small amount of each program you sold, so there was huge incentive to put in long hours and develop compelling sales techniques that would see the cars and bikes pull up at your little stand, instead of any of the dozens of other kids trying to sell as well. The most intense selling occurred on the side of the road where there was line of cars and motorbikes inching forward in the queue to get into the gated-off public viewing areas around different parts of the track.

Some kids had parents who were far more strategic and would drive them well beyond the outskirts of the town, mainly in the Sydney direction, so that incoming race goers could grab their programs at just as they saw the first glimpses of Bathurst in the distance, and as their excitement began to rise.

There were slim pickings inside the race venue, moving among the crowd trying to sell to the few who'd not already bought one on their way in. Those trying to sell like this had to carry their supplies with them, so could never carry many nor earn much.

In the week before the race meeting, all the school kid sellers and their parents would go to the school assembly hall and ask for the number of programs they estimated they could

sell. There were apocryphal tales of some kids selling 500 or more and almost needing an armed guard to escort them back home each day. I sold over 200 one year but 500 was the stuff of legends.

I sold for about three years in succession, each year becoming more sophisticated and strategic in where I pitched my pile of programs and how I went about the sales pitch. The programs had all the races with the driver and riders listed; race records; lots of photographs and advertising. Dad made me a big amateur sign painted onto a piece of plywood and would help me load the programs into our car and get me up to a good selling position beside the road at about 6am. I would fan out an artistically inspired array of programs in my ten year old's hand and then start up the chant "pro-oh-grams!" hundreds of times a day to the on-coming cars.

I don't remember any memorable incidents, nasty or happy, but selling programs also got you free into the race track where you could smell the unforgettable Castrol R(acing) oil fumes, hear the screaming engines and particularly drink in the antics of the often very wild looking motorcycle crowd.

The bikies, as they were called, rode British bikes like Nortons, BSAs, Triumphs, Ariel Square 4s, and Velocettes. This was in the era just before Japanese makes like Honda, Yamaha, Suzuki and Kawasaki ('Kwackers') began their dominance. Italian bikes like Ducati were unheard of and I recall no Harley Davidsons, which were only available at that time as imported US army surplus in parts you had to assemble.

On the Thursday before Good Friday, the crowd would begin arriving in town. Motorcycle helmets were not compulsory in those days, although many wore them. Many also went bare-headed, but some wore Nazi war helmets and World War II fighter pilot leather head and side-of-face caps. I also remember one frighteningly majestic rider who had a black wide-horn steer's scalp with the horns somehow still attached and a flowing mane of long-haired cowhide half way down his back. A modern Visigoth.

More would arrive on Friday for the race practice sessions and stay over on Saturday night after the races had finished. The local newspaper would publish letters each year fretting that these invaders would once again 'terrorise the town'. There were many hundreds of them lining their bikes on up either side of William street and roaring continuously around the block bordered by William, Russell, George and Howick streets. Many had what we called 'bikie molls' (pronounced 'moles') with them, always as pillions. Like the men, these girls were amazingly exotic to me. The standard look was black dyed hair, leather jackets, light pink lipstick and lots of badges, chains and metal studded belts. They would lounge like satanic serpents across the bikes, drink beer out of the bottle and aggressively kiss their men in public.

Drinking on the street was not allowed, but it was rampant, with the dark broken glass of smashed beer bottles everywhere. Every year, lots of police reinforcements would arrive from Sydney and the next week, the *Western Advocate* newspaper would list the number of arrests for drunkenness, disorderly conduct, resisting arrest, assaulting police and the hundreds of defect notices that had been written for non-compliant bikes.

One year, our Cathedral's bishop decided that the forces of light in the city needed to show these infidels what Bathurst stood for. So a procession of witness was organised to take place leaving the cathedral (which was inside the main block which the bikes thundered

around) and parading around the block as hymns were sung. A bunch of maybe 100, led by the bishop and several ministers, followed by the fully robed cathedral choristers and then the most pious of the congregation, wended its way slowly around the block.

As I sung in the cathedral choir, I had to join them. I wanted to run down the first lane between shops we passed to spare myself the total humiliation of this spectacle. The bikies roared with laughter, with a few well-pissed among them striding out theatrically alongside of us, often trying to mockingly put their arms around us. I remember several bikie girls lifting their tops and shimmying their tits at us. Others in the choir felt the same as I did, but the sanctimonious parishioners who sang out loud were convinced they had held Satan at bay.

Perennial racing drivers I remember well were Arnold Glass (red Maserati), Bib Stillwell (Cooper Monaco and Cooper Climax), Bob Jane (Jaguar), Bill Buckle (Buckle GT), Ron Hodgson (Jaguar), Leo and Ian Geoghegan (Lotus Ford and Ford Cortina), Brian Muir (Holden), Frank Matich (D-type Jaguar), and Brian Foley (Cooper S and Studebaker Lark). Jack Brabham raced at Bathurst in 1960, winning the Bathurst 100 in his Cooper Climax.

In the bikes, one man totally dominated: the great Kel Carruthers who seemed to win several races at every meeting every year, way out in front on his exotic Honda. Side-car racing was particularly exciting, with the bikes sometimes sliding into others and the side-car passenger planing across the bitumen into the safety fences. One year I saw a death.

When I was awarded dux of the primary school, the headmaster took me down to the local bookshop to select two books as an award present. I chose one on motorcycle racing.

After I stopped singing in the cathedral choir and lost my church scholarship, things must have become a little difficult financially to keep me going to the local Anglican school, All Saints College. So when the town's only department store, the Myer's Western Stores, announced it was doing the civic-minded thing and offering bursaries for two upstanding youths, it got brought up at the dinner table. I applied and duly went along for my interview with the local manager and some town dignitary, no doubt a judge of good character. I remember nothing about the interview except that I was bought a navy Bermuda jacket and that it seemed obvious that I should say all the right sort of things about what an interesting thing it would be to make one's career in retailing. This seemed to do the trick, because I got one of the bursaries and had my photo taken for the local paper shaking hands with the store manager.

The school fees were paid, but the biggest perk for me was that while others would have to try and get jobs picking fruit for the Edgells cannery in the school holidays, I got to work in the Western Stores – in the menswear section, no less. The Western Stores was a vast, flat building in the main street. On hot summer days, the footpath would shimmer outside it and the corrugated iron roof would make cracking sounds as it expanded in the heat. But inside it was always cool, with fans circling and different smells identifying which part of the store you were in. The perfume counter had the usual line-up of harpies with teased hair and pancake makeup you could scrape off and long scarlet talons that they'd file below the glass display cases when things were quiet.

The woman who had run the tobacco counter for as long as anyone remembered also attended every wedding that was held in the Roman Catholic church. She and a small circle of friends, mostly other aged spinsters, were outside the church in any weather. Some said that



they simply liked weddings and comparing bridal dresses and the rest. But others said that they had a watching brief on signs of advanced pregnancy. By actually being there, they could be the first to ignite the rumours if they weren't already current. Spent shotgun cartridges were regularly scattered with the confetti on the pavement by chortling mates of the groom.

Landing the menswear department was too good to be true. It was headed by a gangly fellow named Terry who I first judged to be a total company man. Terry was perhaps 22 and saw his future in the retail trade. He was working his way around the various departments to get valuable experience that would put him in good stead to become a store manager by the time he was 30, he told me. Terry had an unfortunate complexion and a large Adam's apple that he drew attention to by wearing Carnaby Street polka-dot or paisley ties.

On my first morning, I was eager to please Terry, as well as to get in good with the two other guys in the department, Ted and John. Ted was a bodgie with a flat-top haircut. He drank and played in the darts comp at the Commercial hotel. This was a pub that frequently saw fights spilling onto the pavement. He chewed gum all day and constantly asked my opinion about whether passing girls would root or not. He would serve the grazier's wives, patiently unpinning shirts from their boxes knowing all along that four or so would need to be unpinned before just one was bought. To their faces he was attentive and helpful, but ten yards out of range he would be merciless.

John though, was very enigmatic. He was an olive-skinned, short handsome man with a nameless wife and kids. I could never understand why he was working there. He was perceptive and intelligent, but above all tranquil and helpful to me.

Terry soon picked up that I was quick on the sales uptake and so needed to organise something that would put me in my place. One hot afternoon he called me over and told me to go down to the supplies section in the basement, ask for Bob and say we needed a long weight back in menswear. I set off. Bob told me to sit down. I sat and waited and after about ten minutes of watching Bob read the paper at his desk, I then worked it out and slunk back to the guffaws of the staff of each section I passed through who'd had the word passed down. To make things worse, two days later I was sent to fetch a sky hook and blithely went down again to see Bob. I worked it out as the words left my mouth.

One weekend, I was invited to a party in a woolshed, some 15 miles out of town. The nameless schoolboy band I sang with was playing our second gig. Being a wannabe mod, I needed something suitable to wear, so decided to quietly borrow a three-quarter length brown vinyl coat from the prime rack in the menswear department for the weekend. I wore it to the dance, thought I looked a prince, and returned it to the rack on Monday after carefully restapling the price tags.

Out the back was the hardware section where farmers and builders would pull up in their utilities and load up with bags of cement and sand, and lengths of four-by-two timber, or fourbee as it was called. I worked there for one Christmas holidays and must have been as good as useless. I knew absolutely nothing about what I supposed to be helping to sell and every second question from a customer saw me dart over to one of the real staff to ask them to decode what I'd been asked to fetch.

My school, All Saints College, was always looking for local students to do paid maintenance work around the grounds during school holidays, so one year a few of us (Frank Chadwick, Toby Hennessy and Stuart Westgarth and I) signed up. The pay was desultory, but the rumour had it that the work was dead easy.

This proved not to be the case. I was set up to paint out classrooms and a honeycomb of wooden lockers. There were acres of these and it was utterly boring work that made your hands ache from hours of painting each day. The grounds foreman was a self-assured Cockney called Ernie. One day he called us together and explained how we were all to get up on onto the sheet metal roof of the two-story main building of the school with wire brushes and brush off all the surface rust that was visible across much of the roof. After that, we'd have to paint it with an anti-rust chemical and then later paint the roof.

It was mid-summer and Bathurst often baked in Fahrenheit temperatures in the high 90s. That day was one of those. These were the days well before high awareness of skin cancer prevention, although lotions like coconut oil said to prevent you getting burnt were in common use. None of us had brought anything like this with us, so Ernie improvised. We were ordered to take off our shirts and he then dipped a broad paintbrush in a bucket of linseed oil that the school kept in bulk quantities to oil cricket bats. He slopped this viscous oil all over us, with rivers of it running down our bodies. "Nuffing like it to stop you from burning in the sun", he told us all, grinning wildly.

Anyone who's oiled a cricket bat with linseed knows it takes several days to penetrate the wood and leave the surface of the bat non-oily. Applying it to skin was always going to be a problem. And indeed it was. When I got home, I was nearly black with metal rust dust that had stuck, half-baked in the linseed oil, which after six or so hours in the sun on a tin roof with no shade, was still oily to the touch.



**L-R Stuart Westgarth, Toby Hennessy, Frank Chadwick, me**

I first got in the shower, and must have gone through half a bar of soap trying to wash off the dusty oil. But it barely broke down the oil at all, let alone removed the grime. Mum came in and filled the bath and then began trying to soap and scrub it off. It made some difference, but most of the mess was unremovable. Dad then tried dousing a rag in kerosene and rubbing my skin. Again nothing, with the fumes adding to what was now considerable distress.

Finally, dad went to the local chemist for advice and came back, incredible as it now seems, with a bottle of acetone. All the bathroom doors and windows were to be opened and a fan set up to blow the fumes away while mum wiped me furiously with an acetone-soaked rag. This worked. My parents got on the phone to those of the other linseed-plastered boys and passed on the useful information.

The next day the parents stormed out to the school and spoke to the principal 'in no uncertain terms'. These days, lawyers would have probably been immediately summonsed.

With these work experiences under my belt, I set out to conquer the world.

# Undergraduate housing

In 1971, when I was just 19 and in the second year of my undergraduate arts degree, I moved into a two-story terrace house at 297 Glebe Point Road in Sydney with four other friends, Stephen Ives, Ranald Allan, Rick McEwan and Ian Ruwoldt. I'd been in secondary school in Bathurst with Rick and Ranald, and knew Stephen from Bathurst too, although he'd been at another school. Ian, always known as Roo or 'the local boy' after he'd started to be called that by a Glebe street identity, had a connection with Ranald from Parkes in the central west of the state where they both grew up.

The house next door (number 299) was also owned by the same slum landlord who owned ours: a Greek who rented a tiny office in the same building as the Hellenic Club in Elizabeth Street in the city. This house was also populated by students, who were mainly studying architecture at the University of Sydney, just down the road. One was David Jacobson who had also been at school with me, Rick and Ranald in Bathurst. Another was Alex Tzannes, later to become one of Australia's most prominent architects and Dean of Architecture at the University of NSW.

What united us was that the houses were both hovels. Solid hovels, but hovels nonetheless. And so the rent was dirt cheap. The weekly rent for five bedrooms, a downstairs living room and small room that an agent might try to describe as a dining room, a tiny kitchen, an outside toilet and 'laundry', and one putrid, narrow bathroom upstairs, was just \$25. Five bucks each. It was pretty much like the chaotic house in BBC's 1980s series *The Young Ones*, but ten years earlier.

The kitchen downstairs had a stone sink with one cold water tap and a dilapidated Early Kooka gas oven with a three-burner cooktop. We bought a half-rusted but working fridge with an icebox that wouldn't defrost and found a used electric frypan in which we did most of the cooking. Every bit of furniture, all the cheap and battered pots and pans, plates, cups and glasses were bought at second-hand junk furniture shops, like the barn of place known as the Tempe Tip run by the Salvation Army which was an outlet for clapped-out furniture intended for Sydney's poorest. That included us, we all decided.

To get hot water to wash up with in the kitchen, we would have to either boil up water in the gas-fired 'copper' tub in the outside so-called laundry, or run a succession of buckets up and down the stairs from the bathroom, where there was a gas water heater

you had to light with matches. Both these methods took considerable time, so what mostly happened was that days of filthy dishes were left piled up on every surface in the kitchen. It was cockroach paradise.

When necessity required that we clean up to have any hope of cooking something, there would be a group effort, generally preceded by smoking a joint to make the drudgery more fun.

Our staples were cheap cuts of 'lean meat' from a butcher a few doors up. We'd dice this up, fry it up and then cover it with a can or two of pre-cooked three bean mix. One day when buying sausages, a customer before us bought a few kilograms of the lean meat. It was dirt cheap, and it soon became clear why. The meat was trimmings cut off bones and rough ends of standard cuts sold to the knowing as food for the many greyhounds kept by locals who raced them at the nearby Wentworth Park dog track. We were eating dog food, and we didn't stop once the penny dropped.

Late on Saturday afternoons, we'd also ride our motorbikes or take Dave Jacobson's Wolseley 1500 to Paddy's markets in the Haymarket. The Wolseley had a feisty MG motor and Holden rear-end and one day was painted bright red with paint stencilled 'Cool it' signs all over it. It eventually died a sudden death when the front suspension collapsed.



**L-R: David Jacobson, Richard Climie, me, Stephen Ives, Wolfgang Luif, Ranald Allan, Simon Harvey (architecture student UNSW)**

We'd buy up left over fruit and vegetables that were being sold off for next to nothing in the last 30 minutes of trading, saving the stall holders from carting it back home. Vegetable stews were many, with mincemeat or the dog meat thrown in. We ate well.

Rick was tall, athletic and extremely good looking. The rest of us embraced the poor student poverty chic of the day. All of us but Rick were at university, while Rick worked in a service station pumping petrol in the days before you had to do it yourself and learned architecture on the job in a firm. He was a thrifty, focused and purposeful about where he was heading in life. He drove a very tasty VW. While we were all long-haired, bedraggled urchins affecting flirtations with French existentialism, Marxism, anarchism, and glacier-paced European arthouse cinema, Rick was well-groomed and had a girlfriend, Denise, who was – and looked like she was – from the conservative, leafy northern suburb of Pymble. She thought we were all highly amusing. While we got about wearing clothing we could buy cheaply at army surplus stores (in winter I wore an army jumper, great coat, jeans and huge floppy black leather fireman's boots that came up nearly to my knees) Rick and Denise wore neat polo T-shirts and clean, tailored jeans. Rick even had a tailored leather jacket that was stolen by a hitch hiker someone brought home to crash on the sofa.

Stephen affected the lifestyle of a Parisian louche. He wore a black velvet beret, scarves and for a period toyed with the idea of actually changing his name to Jean-Paul Chabriere, which he thought was more befitting to the butterfly that was rapidly emerging from the cocooned country town youth now living the bohemian lifestyle in inner Sydney. He had a girlfriend - Kathy Davidson - also from Bathurst, but he would soon come out as gay, to her great distress.

Kathy was a voracious reader of classic literature while Stephen ploughed into Sartre, Camus, Genet, Merleau-Ponty and the rest, dramatically reading out to us all impenetrable and portentous passages that he seemed to understand. He had invested in audiophile quality stereo equipment (AR speakers, and a large Pioneer amplifier). He had vast classical record collection and educated me in what through later life I would both love and loathe. He went through phases of Beethoven, Mahler, Mozart, Bach, Schoenberg, Wagner, and many others, but lost us all when he began consuming atonal music. I told him once that it was surely called this because one day someone would have to atone for composing it.

He would stay in his room for hours conducting imaginary string quartets and whole orchestras. When he was out we would roll joints and play our music on his system at wall-shaking volume. Iron Butterfly's *Inagadadavida*, the Rolling Stones, John Mayall, BB King, Muddy Waters, Pink Floyd, Santana.

Rick had money, Ranald and Stephen lived on Commonwealth scholarships, Roo worked behind the bar at the Toxteth Hotel, one block up from our house and I was a weekend room service waiter in a hotel in the city, so we always had enough to live on.

Like every house we visited, our house was awash with dope. You could buy a plastic bag full about the size of a tobacco pouch for about \$15, \$20 if it had heads in it. Hashish was plentiful too, and later on, LSD which I tried twice. Most of us of us would roll up joints several times a week, nearly always cut with tobacco.

One evening, heavily stoned, we set about decorating the main living room. Rick's mother Helen had an interior decoration business in Paddington. Rick brought over some old wallpaper sample booklets she was throwing out. These were each about five inches thick and had 50 or so large square pages, each a different sample of wallpaper ranging from plain colours to the garish with embossed, flock-velvet designs. We cut these out and mixed up a huge bucket of glue. Across several evenings, we covered every wall of the dull central living room with the wallpaper squares, all different.

Stephen befriended two Austrians who had been backpacking in Australia. One was Arno Müllbacher (later a professor of molecular immunology at the Australian National University) and Wolfgang Luif, an elfin, mystical sensualist who had got a casual job at Taronga Park Zoo. They would often visit Stephen to talk philosophy, foreign films and listen to his music.



**L-R: Ranald Allan, Arno Müllbacher, and me returning from Paddy's markets**

One day Wolfgang, or Wolfie as we called him, temporarily 'borrowed' a six-foot diamond python from the zoo and brought it to our house where we were having a group dinner. He returned it the next day. That night it crawled into a tear in the upholstery of our filthy sofa. We removed the cushions, but couldn't locate the snake. Eventually it was found and someone decided that the occasion merited Annie, my girlfriend, posing with the snake in a mock-Satanic photograph.

She took off all her clothes (party nudity was a common stunt in those days) and draped the snake around her, affecting a vampish demeanour. Someone had a polaroid instant camera – one of those that within 30 seconds, would send a poor quality colour photo out of a slot in its rear. I proudly placed the photo on the mantelpiece in my front, downstairs bedroom.

A few weeks later, I came home from university in the middle of an afternoon and walked inside to find my father paying me an unannounced visit from Bathurst. He'd come down to buy supplies for his business.

He was sitting on my bed, looking ashen. He handed me the nude photograph of Annie and the snake and asked me what the hell was going on. I stammered something about it all being a bit of fun and tried to explain how polaroids worked, as if this would appease him. He tore it up in front of me, almost in tears.

After he left, I noticed how filthy the house was. While we had various agreed duties, anything that needed doing that had not been anticipated in our rostered division of labour usually went unattended until it could not be tolerated any longer. So when a stray dog had come into the house and shat in the hallway just outside my room, it sat there for almost a week while we all waited for one of us to decide that they would clean it up. It was there when dad paid his visit, along with the hideous wallpapered living room, the piles of festering dishes, and my unmade bed with its greying sheets unwashed for many weeks.

We drank at the Forest Lodge Hotel, where Wasted Daze were the resident band. We drank Resches beer and awful, cheap wine like Cawarra claret and Kaiser Stuhl flagon wine, the precursor to goon bag cask wine. Very occasionally we would go to a cheap restaurant like the Lebanese Emad's or Abdul's in Surry Hills, the Greek Diethnes in the city or Chez Madeleine in Darlinghurst where they served (for us) the indescribably exotic French onion soup, garlic calf brains and boeuf bourguignon.

Stephen and Kathy tried to move beyond cooking mince with canned beans, and began to hold dinners that were the beginnings of appreciating what good cooking could be like. They also opened all our eyes to art house cinema. We would go into see what my parents would have called 'continental' films at the small Gala, Lido and Roma cinemas, and especially at the University of Sydney Union Theatre on Paramatta Road. These often had much-anticipated nude scenes and racy actors doing outrageous things. Directors included Fellini, Pasolini, DeSica, Bertolucci, Renoir, Goddard, Truffaut, Bresson, Resnais, Fassbinder, Buñuel, Kurosawa, Eisenstein and Ingmar Bergman. These were sometimes unforgettable (I was mesmerised by Buñuel's allegory about people being trapped in their past, *The Exterminating Angel*) but often excruciatingly obscure and tedious (Resnais' *Last Year in Marienbad* was my idea of cinematic purgatory).

Diagonally opposite our house was the Valhalla cinema. We heard that a theatre group was rehearsing the scandalous musical theatrical revue Oh! Calcutta! there. It was devised by the English theatre critic Kenneth Tynan with contributions from Samuel Beckett, John Lennon and Sam Shepard. The cast performed nude for about 40 seconds. Some in our house managed to talk their way into an (un)dress rehearsal. Eric Wills, a conservative politician who was NSW Chief Secretary, prevented it ever opening for paying audiences.

I had bought a Honda C90 step-through motorcycle, to get me to and from university in Kensington and my weekend job at the Wynyard Travelodge in the city. One day Ranald came home having bought a BSA Gold Flash. It was a massive, beautiful thing from the golden age of British motor cycles. It was many years before electric starting bikes became available, so the BSA ('the beezer') had to be kick-started. Ranald was not a big guy and he would usually get it up on its centre stand before gamely trying to tramp down on the starter pedal, often many times.



I was beyond impressed with what he now rode. My Honda was a toy in comparison. So when Richard Climie, a medical student who frequented the house, told me he knew a mate who had a Triumph Thunderbird for sale, I bought it the next week for about \$600 which I'd saved. It too had to be kick-started. It was often so difficult that I would wheel it to a downhill sloping street at the back of the house, turn the ignition on, hop on and clutch-start it away from the shaming gazes of those I hoped to impress.

I had a few public moments when I could not get it going, with my then very thin frame being barely able to get the pedal down, let alone with enough force to start the motor. Ranald and I were drenched in the kudos that came with owning big, powerful and very loud piston-slapping bikes. Ranald declared one day that we were the founders of a new bike gang, the Glebe Gobblers a name suggested by his very stunning and smart minx-like girlfriend of the time, Lesley Oliver, also from Bathurst. The Gobblers had no other members, but we knew this was only a matter of time. We let Rick, Ian and Dave borrow our bikes when we were not using them, hoping to seduce them in the way we both had been.

After I'd had the Trumpy for about six weeks, I came home one night and as usual, parked it in the back yard. When I went to get on it the next morning, it was gone. No one had borrowed it and the keys were in my pocket. So it had been stolen.

That afternoon I sat on the front step drinking a longneck Resches beer, all forlorn over my loss. A guy walked past and then came back about 20 seconds later.

"Is there someone here who owns a Thunderbird?"

"Well, there *was* someone who owned one until last night" I told him "but it got knocked off."

"Yeah ... well, I think I might've heard something about that"

So I invited him in and opened another beer. He was a member of either the Finks or the Nomads, I forget which one now. He was only a few years older than me, and didn't look or act particularly mean. He explained that bike gangs were always on the look-out for proper bikes like BSAs, Triumphs or Nortons to steal for spare parts or to rebirth and sell. This was well before Harley Davidsons were what they are today. He told me that my bike had been noticed and followed home and that it had been taken by a guy in the Hells Angels called Tiger. My bike was a pre-unit model where the gearbox was separate from the engine. These were apparently in short supply for parts.

Was I interested in becoming a one-percenter, he wanted to know. I had never heard this expression before, so he explained that 99 per cent of motor bike owners were law-abiding people who never did anything wrong. But one per cent were outlaws who rode with gangs like the Finks, Nomads, Gypsy Jokers, Black Uhlans, Comancheros and the most notorious of all at the time, the Hell's Angels.

I was about to explain that I was a university arts student studying Durkheim, Weber and the rest and so wouldn't really consider this an option, but thought better of it and gave him some line to see where the conversation might run.

He said that Tiger would be drinking at a pub right on Taylor Square in Darlington on Friday night. If I turned up, had a drink with Tiger and allowed the other Angels to check me out, they might give me my bike back if they liked me and I was willing to join.

So that Friday Ian and I went up to Taylor Square. I gingerly climbed the stairs to the upstairs bar and in a crowded room saw about twenty fearsome looking blokes in leathers. The absurd reality of the situation dawned on me fast and we left without buying a drink.

The next day I told the story to a constable at Glebe police station. "You'll have to have more for us to go on that what you've just told me, mate" he said. So I knew the name of the guy who'd taken it, where he drank and the cops were still not a bit interested.



**Triumph Thunderbird 1960s**

Eventually, the squalor got me down. Actually, that was not it at all. My long-time girlfriend Annie had wealthy, very conservative Catholic parents. If we had told them we were going to shack up together without being married, we predicted her father would go berserk. So we decided to get married at the advanced age of 19. I moved out of 297, married Annie and moved to a two roomed half-house in Kensington, next to the university. The other side of the house was occupied by a former dancer, Shirley, from the TV music program Bandstand, and her tow-truck driver husband. We'd share a few beers on the back lawn and hear Shirley's stories of Little Pattie, the Dekroo Brothers, Brian Davies and other wholesome singers like Sandy Scott.

Rick, Dave and Alex became highly successful architects. After I'd left, one night some of the architectural students knocked a doorway full of bricks out of the shared wall between the two houses to make it more communal. I've always imagined the owner's face when he would have eventually stepped foot in the place after we all left.

Ranald wrote film scripts, a novel, worked on a lobster boat in Western Australia, and became very involved with Aboriginal communities in different parts of Australia. He

wrote a book in 1989 about playing tennis with Jack Nicolson, as well as short stories. Today he works in film script editing in Tasmania.

Stephen came out as gay while we all lived together, and broke Kathy's heart. He often went to bath houses in the Darlinghurst area, as well as to beats. He nervously told us all the details that astonished us and made us fear for his safety. He was viciously bashed one night by a group of men in Queens Park in Bondi. He was one of the first men diagnosed with AIDS in the early 1980s and took his own life when it became advanced, with no prospect of containing it. Guy Sanchez, his French partner, a gentle, handsome man who also took his life a few years later after also being diagnosed, told us that Stephen had drunk a bottle of Grange hermitage and had been playing Mozart on the record player on the night he died alone. We heard the news while living in London and knew we had lost a wonderful presence and influence from our lives.

Ian came from a Lutheran fundamentalist family. He had a brother who was active in the early days of gay politics. The brother had been disowned by his family, and Ian decided he wanted no part of it either, in solidarity. He took a job in Lawsons, the auctioneers, and began to develop a career as a fine arts estimator. He acquired Corot, Aubrey Beardsley and Norman Lindsey etchings and was always wonderful company. But Ian became increasingly alone in the world, saw a long-term relationship fall apart, began to use heroin, was gaoled for importing a saleable quantity and on release was rumoured to have died from an overdose. Where, no one knew. There were two others who sometimes visited 297 who left their lives the same way.

Every time I drive past the house, I miss Stephen and Roo and think, with great affection, "I used to live there."

# Tips on being tipped

The Wynyard Travelodge hotel can be found on the corner of York and Margaret streets, just on the edge of Sydney's central business district. Rising to 22 floors, it was built in the 1960s.

In 1971–2 while a university student, I worked there, first as a room service waiter and later as the weekend car park attendant. I walked past the building one day and went in on a whim, asking if they had any work. As I enquired at the counter, one of the managers happened to be there. He called me aside and said that it was my lucky day. They needed a room service waiter on weekends. Could I start that weekend?

I was introduced to Charles, the head of porters and room service. He was a stocky, bald, obviously gay man, in an era well before the word 'gay' had any currency. He took me up to a uniform room a few floors up and fussed over me trying on the teal coloured jacket with the Travelodge logo on the breast pocket. He told me what I wanted to hear: that any tips I earned would be mine to keep. There would be none of the tip pooling malarkey as long as he was in charge, he said. Those who earned their tips should not have to carry those who didn't. I was not going to disagree.

Room service on weekends consisted of taking up breakfasts and dinners to guests' rooms after the kitchen phoned our desk saying they were ready. If I worked the day shift, I had to do occasional lunches, but these were uncommon. Eating your lunch in a hotel room when there was plenty of choice by walking a few blocks into the city did not appeal to many guests.

The afternoon shift started at 3pm and went through till 10 or 11 at night when the kitchen closed. Lone guests seemed to order meals in their rooms far more than couples or families who ate in the hotel dining room. I've always found eating alone in a restaurant a desolate experience. You are usually served very quickly when you are alone, as if the staff know that it's awkward sitting by yourself in public when most tables are occupied by couples or larger groups who are pleased to take their time.

So I would take up the orders on a trolley, almost always to people alone in their rooms. There's not much you can do to extract a tip out of someone when all you have to do is to lift a tray off a trolley and place it on the desk in a hotel room. So I developed a patter designed to exude helpfulness and start engagement, particularly from those with

tell-tale awkwardness. I could often pick the ones who were not used to staying in a city hotel, not sure about the tipping thing and wanting to avoid any embarrassment. So I'd ask them if there were any questions they might have about getting around town, things to do or places to eat. This solicitous, helpful guy is so charming and friendly, they'd think as they found a couple of dollars.

But the best perk owed itself to Sydney's archaic liquor laws in the early 1970s. The hotel was not permitted to serve liquor in rooms. The bar and dining room in the Trav-elodge were the only places guests could be trusted to imbibe. Back in their rooms, liquor would surely lubricate all sorts of disinhibitions that civic authorities of the day wanted kept in check. But Charles the head porter had told me that a loophole allowed staff to leave the hotel on purchasing errands for guests. You know, dry cleaning, pharmacy products and yes folks, alcohol carefully concealed in brown paper bags.

So I'd always ask guests who'd ordered meals if they would like me to run down the street to the nearest hotel and procure them a bottle of wine or a bottle or two of Tooths DA or KB lager. I'd always hint conspiratorially that this was a little private arrangement I was making with them rather than imply it was somehow part of the regular service we offered. We kept a list of all the wine, beer and spirits sold at the bottle shop section of nearest hotel, the long-demolished art deco Pharlert's Hotel in Margaret Street.

I recall several on the wine list. The sickly-sweet Ben Ean Moselle and Porphyry Pearl, Black Tower and Mateus rosé, Seppelt's Moyston claret and Chalambar burgundy, Great Western champagne, various Penfolds vat numbered reds and their premium St Henri claret. I'd deliver these to the rooms, remove the corks and shuffle about while they handed over their money supplemented with my tip, which nearly always was given.

One night a guest ordered two bottles of Great Western champagne. I took them up in ice buckets expecting to walk in on the preliminaries with his lady friend. But he was alone and already well on the way. About an hour later he ordered another one. And then later a fourth. When I took the last bottle up he was quite maggot, dishevelled and crying. He told me his life was not worth living and looked utterly miserable. I feared he might be writing himself off prior to a suicide attempt and went down and told the duty manager.

We both went up, opened the door with the master key when he didn't answer the knock and found him passed out on the bed, barely conscious. Fearing he might have taken pills as well, we called an ambulance who took him away. I never heard the outcome.

Single men sometimes used these interactions with us to ask about call girls. I carried various contact cards the women had given us so would give these to the men to make their own arrangements. Sometimes the women would drop by the porters' desk on their way in if they had forgotten to bring condoms. We had a small stock and would supply them, again in the expectation of tips.

I was entitled to a free staff meal, which was prescribed to be one of the cheaper items on the menu. I'd got friendly with several of the cooks over the couple of years I worked there. My new mates made it clear that I could have anything I wanted. So my lunches and dinners were luxurious by the standards I ate at home with the other students

I lived with. I'd have chateaubriand, grilled snapper, steak with béchamel or béarnaise sauce, and as many oysters as I wanted. I could never afford to eat in restaurants, so made up for my penury by eating my way through all that was on offer at work. The cooks showed me how to cook a perfect steak (very high temperature grill and turn it just once) and the key to successful omelettes.

In my second year of university the opportunity arose to step up to be the weekend car park attendant. I had my own little booth in the entrance to the car park with a desk where I could work on my university assignments. There were two busy periods, the first around check-out time at 10am and then in the hour before 3pm when people would begin arriving. I only worked the day shift.

But for the rest of the day, it was very quiet, I couldn't believe my luck that I was being paid to mostly just sit in my booth and read. One day a guy drove up in a high-end gold coloured Mercedes. He asked if I could get the car washed for him. I had no hoses or cleaning equipment so took a decision on the spot that I would wait for a quiet period and fang the car over the Harbour Bridge to the Whale Car Wash at Cremorne, put it through the wash and quickly head back. It all took just 20 minutes or so and I hit him up for some preposterous fee which he gave me with a tip to boot.

So from that day on, I ran a sly car wash racket while working for my wage and pulling small tips for fetching their cars up from the lower parking levels. I'd only do it for luxury cars (Mercedes, Jaguars, Daimlers, Fairlanes and the occasional Chevrolet Impala). I never once was caught being away from my booth. But one day I had a very close call.

It was a glacial paced, quiet day and I was bored witless, waiting for the hours to crawl by till I could get on my Triumph Thunderbird and roar home. I went into the car-park toilets and thought I'd leave my mark on the wall above the urinal. I'd been reading one of the Barry Humphries *Bazza Mackenzie* comic books. One panel showed some graffiti in a toilet which said "don't look up here, the joke's in your hand." So fearlessly unoriginal, I took a black making pen I used to mark the car park dockets and scrawled the words on the wall above the urinal.

When I came out, there was a new Ford Fairlane waiting in the drive outside my attendant's booth with the motor running. The general manager for Travelodge right across Australia was the driver. He asked me to park his car in his reserved spot and walked toward the lifts. When I got back to my booth from parking his car, he was back at my booth and said to me "Some mindless fool has graffitied the wall in the men's. Call up the cleaners and get some cleaning spirit and rags and then clean the damn thing off."

My graffiti effort must have been the world's shortest-lived message. Like some private patron of the arts, the manager was the only person to see it.

In 1971, Sydney saw the famous wild protests against the South African Springbok rugby tour. The match was at the Sydney Cricket Ground and I was on duty in the car park until 3pm when the game started. I'd been attending planning meetings with friends about how to help with the protest. Veterinary science students arranged to get hold of a

small pig which they greased up and put inside an esky box in a false bottom. The injected it with anaesthetic, measuring the dose so that the pig would wake just after the game started. Except that they used too much and it didn't. Others planned to dive bomb the players with a remote-control model aircraft operated from outside the ground, in the car park, with directional instructions being issued from a walkie-talkie inside the ground. That one didn't get off the ground either, I believe.

So at 3pm I throttled my motorbike out to Moore Park, still in my smart car park uniform. I raced into the ground but could not find my friends. So I crushed into a standing space on a wooden bench seat about 10 metres from the ground's perimeter fence. The roar of the demonstrators was deafening and smoke from discharged smoke bombs was drifting everywhere. Standing on the bench seat below me was a large, frothing redneck tour supporter who was aggressively pushing and shoving demonstrators. I saw him lunge at a couple of students, and took the opportunity to increase his momentum, shoving him hard in the back as he lunged forward. He speared into the cement concourse below the seats but as he fell, looked up and saw it had been me who had pushed him.

Now enraged, he scrambled to his feet to come at me, but was kept back by a wall of now frenzied protestors. In an instant several police arrived, took one look at me in my jacket, white shirt and tie seemed to instantly decided that I must have been a tour supporter and the other guy a protestor who had turned violent. They carted him off. Ever since I've often tried to dress conservatively at demonstrations.

I kept working at the Travelodge until I graduated and it was time to strike out into the world of overseas travel.

# The stuffed animals' museum

At the end of 1972, at the moment the second hand swept past the last day of my undergraduate degree, my (then) wife Annie and I flew to London on one-way tickets. It was our first time overseas. We were going to see the world, and starting with a few years in London seemed smart.

On the first day there, I walked into Australia House at the Strand. I went into the library, dropped the name of a librarian friend at my university in Sydney who I said had recommended that I try Australia House. I asked if they had any jobs or knew of any in other libraries. I'd had a bit of casual work stacking returned books, so was plainly a skilled worker.



**The Natural History Museum main hall in 1973**



As luck had it, the woman knew my friend and gave me a list of her own librarian contacts. South Kensington had the Natural History Museum, the Science Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the three were on the list I was given. Twenty minutes later, I got the tube out there and walked first into the Natural History Museum, the nearest one. The massive neo-gothic main hall housed a suspended blue whale skeleton, stuffed elephants, hippos and rhinos. Stuffed animals everywhere you looked. Hundreds of tourists thronged the building. I knew immediately that I wanted desperately to work there.

On the directions of an attendant, I made my way to a large locked door and pressed the buzzer. I was shown in and asked to speak to someone who might know about possible employment. Rex Banks was the deputy head of the museum's library. He was a suited man of about 35, balding and with precise manners and conversation. He ran a few questions by me, and then said I could start the next Monday as something called an 'accessions clerk'.

So on the Monday, I arrived at the library. The efficient and enthusiastic Rex explained my job. Each day, I'd first go to the mail room which should have sorted the incoming mail for the entire museum by about 9.30am. I'd carry the library mail back in a sack on a trolley and tip it all out on a big table. I'd sort out the letters from the book parcels and new issues of natural science journals and put any personally addressed letters in staff pigeon holes. I'd then begin the exacting task of registering by hand the arrival of all the new books and serials in a big ledger for the books and a massive alphabetic cardex system for the journals. The latter involved me finding the card for each journal in the day's pile, entering the year, volume and issue number, rubber date stamping the new issue and then placing it on a shelf where another highly skilled staff member would take over and move it to shelf display for newly arrived editions.

Rex warned me that Mondays was always the worst day, as the mail sack would include international material delivered to the postal service over the two days of the week-end. So on that first Monday, after filling in employment forms, being issued with a name badge, getting my instructions from Rex, having a quick tour of the library and meeting the staff, and then retrieving my first large sack of mail, I fell to my task.

I finished everything by 11.15am. Rex came by to see how I was going just as I finished. He looked alarmed and began random checking issues to see if I'd entered their details correctly. Everything was in order. "This is quite amazing" he said. "The person who did this job before you, was here for four years and I think he never finished it once."

He then led me to a large cupboard bursting with back issues of serials. "In fact here you can see the backlog that has not yet been entered into the system. Could I ask you to see if you can manage to reduce the size of this after you have finished the new arrivals indexing each day?" It took me about a week to empty the locker.

I told this story to two Australian librarians who worked there as well. They both said to me conspiratorially that I'd best be careful because I'd upset a few people who did their work at a similar pace to my predecessor. I might get tapped by the union represen-

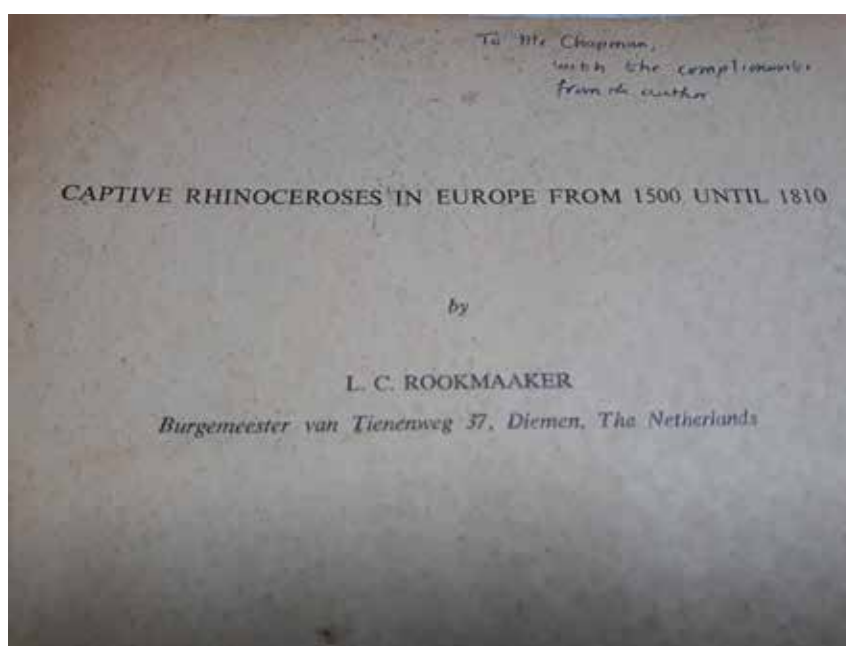
tative to slow things down, one warned. One said that the poms 'wouldn't work in an iron lung' and resented us sons and daughters of rugged colonialists.

So from the day I cleared the backlog, I changed my work routine. I'd not arrive until nine. I'd first read *The Guardian* while having a morning cup of tea. And then I'd take a different approach. I'd read any of the articles that interested me in the journals and browse through the books. I'd take a full hour for lunch and usually go across the road to the Victoria and Albert museum and wander through the galleries.

There were many hundreds of journals covering every area of the plant, mammal, fish, invertebrate, reptile, amphibian, insect and fungal kingdoms. There were also historical, paleontological and artistic focussed journals and books. I waded in every day. I spent hours looking at rare, original editions of Audubon and Gould's sublime and priceless illustrations. I immersed myself vicariously in the preoccupations of natural scientists.

One day a small monograph came in from a burgemeester from the Netherlands, a Mr Rookmaaker. His fascination lay with documenting captive rhinoceroses in Europe between the years 1500 and 1810. I wondered how Mr Rookmaaker had hit upon this obvious gap in knowledge and devoted himself to its exploration. What was there about the year 1812 that caused him to rule a line in his search? Were there other scholars, perhaps accountants, wig makers or goat farmers by day, who in their spare time who undertook deeply private parallel research about captive tapirs, aardvarks or sloths?

I wrote to Mr Rookmaaker, telling him how I had come to read his monograph and how fascinated I was by his efforts. He immediately posted me back a signed copy, which I still have and often show house guests when conversation turns to life's rich tapestries.



In those days long before the internet, researchers would visit the library to browse through the latest editions of arcane South American journals on spiders or pig husbandry volumes from far-flung lands. Among these visitors, there was none so fussed over as Miriam Rothschild, author of on-going taxonomic six-volume catalogue of the world's fleas (*An Illustrated Catalogue to the Rothschild Collection of Fleas*). Her interest had followed that of her father who had earlier catalogued 500 species and her uncle Lionel Rothschild who had built a private natural history museum at Tring, 48km to the northwest of London where the Natural History Museum had another museum, bequeathed by Lord Rothschild.

This imposing woman would visit the library quite regularly, in her chauffeur-driven Armstrong-Sidley which had its own reserved spot under the museum. We were all told she was coming and so the finest porcelain tea set was taken out in preparation. My job was to gather together all the recently arrived journals with articles on fleas. She wore a plain head scarf tied in a triangular fall toward the back, so that she looked like a member of some obscure order of nuns who went about their duties without wearing a full habit.

One day Rex asked me if I had a driving license. I did. So how would I like to help out for a few days by driving a museum van to the countryside to pick up specimens that people were offering the museum? The regular driver was away. I jumped at the chance to escape the long afternoon hours of pretending to be busy doing nothing.

My most memorable assignment was to fetch a dead albino badger from a house on the edge of a village near Reading. The woman who opened the door looked like she had got her hair done and made the house look very schmick for the arrival of the important people from the museum in London. She must have been crestfallen when some gangly Australian youth turned up. After my tea and shortbreads she took me to a garden shed where her husband had bagged the body. I put it in a large sealed box in the van and drove back to London.

The vast public display areas of the museum were a tiny fraction of what lay within the building. The areas not open to the public housed hundreds of scientists, educators and administrators but there was one large section in the bowels of the back area of the building which was worthy of a Victorian horror novel. It was here that I had to drop the dead badger.

The dignified white-coated man who opened the door to this chamber of dark dead animal preparation arts looked like someone you would imagine might work in such a place. Sensing my curiosity about what went on here, he gave me a brief tour of one section. This was where flesh was removed from the bones of animal carcasses, presumably so that their skeletons could be revealed, sometimes for display.

One glass box had what was left of some sort of small rodent which was covered in flesh eating ants cleaning it up. Another room housed large metal vats where larger animals were simmered until all the flesh fell away from the bones. There was a dolphin being boiled clean in the tank the day I was there. I assumed there may have been a taxidermy section somewhere too, but never saw it. Large, mostly empty rooms housed shelf after shelf of mounted animals from the golden era of stuffing when exotic animals from the col-

onies were all the rage. I vaguely recall seeing what seemed to be different historical fashions in taxidermy ranging from single specimens nailed to a board, to detailed collections of birds of paradise in glass-domed leaf and branch settings, and action tableaux of big cats killing prey. Today, I follow @badtaxidermy on Twitter and have bought their indispensable book, *Much ado about stuffing* and have an open order for a stuffed owl with a friend who frequents auctions.

After 18 months, Annie and I decided to set out to do the London to Sydney overland trip, through Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. The library staff put on an afternoon tea and I was presented with two motley stuffed armadillos, the South American equivalent of the rabbit. One was a hairy armadillo, an abject creature with long whiskers protruding between his armour-plated skin. I asked no questions about where these had been acquired, but they adorned the top of my kitchen cabinet for the next 40 years until I was implored to sell them to a lucks-in buyer in a garage sale.

# A bad end at Bad Ems

We could see the Opel slowing. Sometimes they slow down to just check you out. Did we look rough or smelly? Did we look like trouble? Once in a while they slowed right down, pulling over ... and then accelerated as you walk quickly toward them, middle finger saluting you through gales of laughter.

But this one was stopping. They were two Turks, in their twenties. The driver stocky, the other one thin and a little stupid looking. They beamed big smiles at us, both getting out of the car to help put our backpacks in the boot. It was about noon on a gloriously warm, clear day.

It was 1973, I was 22 and living in London for a year with my (then) wife, Annie. I worked as an accessions clerk in the library of the Natural History Museum in South Kensington. Annie 'temp-ed' as a shorthand-typist in different offices, fending off lascivious middle-aged supervisors with bad English teeth and offers of after work drinks.

We lived in rented rooms in Earls Court, Golders Green and finally Friern Barnett, near the Cockfosters end of the Piccadilly Line. We worked to squirrel away money from our miserable pay packets so we could move around the English countryside and see a bit of Europe. We were dirt poor and so hitch-hiked wherever we could.

On one ambitious odyssey, we set out to hitch to Morocco. After crossing the channel on the hovercraft with dozens of vomiting Japanese, we got a lift at Dieppe in an empty orange truck returning to Seville in southern Spain. Near Bordeaux, our driver pulled into a dirt road into an unmarked diner where we ate simple, magical French country food. There was no menu. After serving us, the waitress re-entered the room having changed into a mini-skirt, a clinging top and platform shoes. She and our driver went off to get to know each other better in a small caravan in the yard while we waited in the cabin of the truck.

When he returned, his chatty demeanour changed completely. Now sullen, out came the photographs of his daughters in their first communion dresses. Out came the rosary beads. Instead of taking us all the way to Seville as he'd promised, we were dropped at the St Jean de Luz border with Spain.

We got as far as Salamanca but after a fruitless day beside a dusty road in the Spanish heat, we gave up and took a train to Madrid.



**Annie and our waitress (after relaxing)**

**Our driver and our waitress**

This time it was a later trip through Germany. We'd been far more successful, rapidly traversing from Heidelberg to Heiligenhafen on the Baltic sea. But this journey gave us a ride we would never forget.

We were on a feeder road onto a highway heading toward Koblenz in the Rhineland, on our way to Köln to see the famous cathedral. We settled into the back seat of the Opel and quickly established that they spoke almost no English, although considerably more than our non-existent Turkish. So the lingua franca needed to be German. We'd both done it for a few years in high school.

"Wir fahren nach Koblenz, bitte" I chirped. They nodded. They understood. We were on the road to Koblenz. After a few minutes, an off-ramp showed a town called Bad Ems. They turned down it.

We looked at each other with a tinge of anxiety.

"Entschuldigen Sie. Wir müssen nach Koblenz gehen. Wir müssen dort den Zug fangen" It was kind of true. We *did* want to go to Koblenz but we would probably just hitch-hike again onward to Köln. Trains cost money.

They said nothing but "ja, ja" and kept driving. The driver glanced at us a few times in his mirror.

We soon arrived at Bad Ems. It was a small town with lots of trees on the river Ems. 'Picturesque' was unavoidable. There were plenty of people walking about. It was a public holiday. They stopped the car next to a park on the riverbank and got out. They seemed relaxed and gestured to us that this was a lovely place, didn't we agree?

They both walked over to a nearby public toilet near a kiosk and came back with a can of Coke for us to share. In the toilets, they had put gallons of oil in their hair and doused themselves in cheap cologne.

They made small-talk about the park, where we were from and were keen to know if we liked Coke. After about 5 minutes, we started up again about the need to get the train at Koblenz.

While they were away we discussed whether to ask them to open the boot so we could get our bags out so we could leave these two and get another lift back up to the highway. We decided against it.

Other than ignoring us when we gently remonstrated about needing to go to Koblenz, they'd done nothing weird or alarming. Perhaps they had always planned to come off the highway to Bad Ems for some lunch? Perhaps they thought we might like a little detour to see this very pretty town? It seemed quite possible. So getting alarmed might seem offensive to them.

But the hair oil and cologne were something else. Or maybe not. Perhaps Turks, like anyone else, liked to freshen up after a drive or before lunch or when in new company?

The stocky one then said to Annie "Können wir einen Kuss haben?" (can we have a kiss?) It was not as if we had been chatting amiably for hours, with any edge of flirtatiousness. The request seemed straight out of a predatory playbook that said „we fancy kissing this woman. We have your bags in the boot. We've been hearing you saying repeatedly that you need to get the train in Koblenz. Well, here's the deal. It's up to you."

So Annie explained, as nicely as she could, smiling away, that we were married and so of course, kissing was not appropriate with a married woman. She showed them her wedding ring.

They asked again, but without any real insistence. Just out of hope. We started up the Koblenz train refrain again, getting more concerned.

So we got back in the car and began to drive in the direction of the signs back to the highway. But then they turned right when they should have gone left. This time, we half shouted at them in unison „Wir müssen nach Koblenz gehen! Bitte. Bitte!"

They said nothing. They looked straight ahead and the driver started speeding up. We soon entered a forested area. We clenched our cold hands together, tighter than I can ever remember. We were terrified.

I said to Annie, let's not do anything that's going to get us killed. I reached for some imagined stereotype about swarthy Turks who would likely have knives and no respect for young western women moving around the country in the way we were. She should have been home in the kitchen.

It seemed obvious that they were after sex. We discussed Annie allowing them to do so, and how she might do nothing to anger them or make them anxious about the consequences if this was what was about to happen. She began silently crying. I felt utterly useless.

After driving into the forest for the longest 15 minutes of our lives, we turned off the deserted, sealed forest road and onto an unsealed narrow track. Within a minute, we were in the grounds of a brick factory. They stopped the car alongside a couple of others and tooted the horn.

In the upper floor windows of a building with about three floors, men began to appear. There was no sign of any brick-making work going on, so we quickly assumed that the building was some kind of dormitory for the employees, who began to come down stairs. Most were well dressed, perhaps getting ready to go somewhere on the public holiday.

Soon there were about 15 of them ranging from teenagers to men in their 50s. They were all Turkish and talked among themselves, staring and smiling at us. Annie looked ghost-like. We held hands and tried to look friendly.

I stammered a few questions in German about which parts of Turkey were they from? I had no idea what to say to any of their answers, constantly thinking about how long it would be until our fates played out. Would we be killed or released? Would I be killed first, or both of us together afterwards? Would all of them rape Annie? Would any of the older men stop it happening? I kept thinking how incongruous it was that we would be violently killed on what was by now a brilliantly sunny, warm day by men who were relaxing on their day off.

Our stocky driver and an older man then beckoned to us to follow them into the building. We climbed the stairs to a dining area adjacent to where the men slept. So this was where it would happen.

They gestured for us to sit down. Black tea was poured into small glasses, in the Turkish style. Small plates of black olives, feta cheese and bread were put in front of us. I saw my hand trembling as I reached for an olive and spread some cheese on bread. My mouth was dry with fear, the food barely stimulating any saliva. I had to swallow hard to get it down.

They talked among themselves, occasionally urging us to eat up.

I decided to try and remind them of their families, hoping this might dull their appetite for what was to come. So I asked which of them had wives and children back in Turkey. Several of the older ones did. One produced a photo from his wallet. Then another, and then another did the same. This looked promising. So I asked if they would like me to take their photos and send the pictures to their families in Turkey. This was met with obvious enthusiasm.



We all then went back downstairs and got my Minolta SLR 101 out of my backpack in the car boot. I threaded a new roll of 36 shot film into the spool and wound it on. They all crowded about to watch this. The men then lined up one at a time. All, without exception, wanted their photo taken next to Annie, with some putting an arm gingerly around her shoulders. I asked one to write down each man's name and address in Turkey to correspond to the order of the pictures I would take.



**Annie with the Turks**

When all this was over, we ceremoniously shook hands with them all, drank some water they brought from upstairs and I then plaintively reminded our driver that we had a train to catch in Koblenz.

He and an older man then gestured for us to get into the car. Everyone shook our hands again, warmly. We were driven all the way to Koblenz railway station, with Turkish music playing on cassette in the car.

These were the first Turks we'd ever met. We allowed some primordial racial fear to poison every second of our time with them. For their part, they had stopped to help strangers. They'd diverted to show us a beautiful historic town. They'd then taken us to their 'home', shared their simple food and tried to talk with two graceless people who just kept saying they wanted to leave.

We never posted their photographs, I'm ashamed to say.

# The life you (don't) choose

In 1973, at the ripe old age of 22, my then wife Annie and I took the fabled overland trip from London to Australia. We'd been living in London, where I worked as an accessions clerk in the library of the Natural History Museum and Annie worked temping as a typist.

After getting the ferry to Dieppe, in France, we hitchhiked to Brindisi in southern Italy, took a ferry to the Peloponnese in Greece, a bus up to Athens, a cheap flight from Athens to Istanbul, and then got local buses through Turkey, where we spent nights with monstrous bed bugs in Sivas and Erzurum in the west of the country. The buses then continued all the way across Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan, with third class unreserved trains from Amritsar to Delhi, Agra and then to Calcutta in India. After losing perilous amounts of weight to travellers' diarrhoea, we surrendered to a cheap flight to Perth and took a bus across the Nullabor plain to Sydney, our home.

We were adopted by a beaming Iranian girl, Farah, on a bus in Turkey, returning from *au pair* work in Germany. She insisted we stay with her family in Tehran. It was during Ramadan. On the first full day with them, they prepared vast quantities of food for us and watched us eat lunch. We repaid them by blocking their squat toilet with toilet paper, necessitating the arrival of a plumber and an assembly of curious neighbours. We travelled down to Isfahan to marvel at the turquoise mosaic covered mosques. We lived on pomegranates, pistachios, lamb kebab and pilaf, crossing the vast Iranian plains toward the magnetism of Afghanistan, a place that had fascinated me as a boy. We were warned by police to not go into the very fundamentalist Mashed, so changed into another bus at a station on its outskirts and then moved onto the border with Afghanistan.



Annie and me with Farah and her brother, Tehran

We had arrived at the Iranian side of the border about 2pm. It would close at 4pm. With about ten minutes to go, baksheesh negotiated and eventually extracted by the border guards, we were let through and into the no-man's land between the Iranian and Afghan border. Because the Afghan side of the border also closed at 4pm, this meant we were obliged to stay in the only hotel in the no man's land. This cosy arrangement, presumably benefitting all parties concerned, was known to every traveller on the route. The travel writer Paul Theroux, wrote about it in his 1975 book, *The Great Railway Bazaar*.

Boys who looked about 10 swarmed all over us offering palm-sized black hashish for a dollar. While we had both smoked dope in Sydney and London, we were wary enough to avoid it here. We had crossed the border with some German guys and a Yugoslav woman about our age. They had all immediately bought hash and sat in the garden smoking it before dinner. Shortly after, the boy who had sold it to them arrived with several Afghan border guards, pointing them out. They confiscated the Germans' passports, saying that they would be returned after they paid ten per cent of the amount of money each border crosser had been obliged to note in their passport as we crossed on the Iranian side of the border.

The Yugoslav woman was taken away by the guards to a nearby garrison building. When the Germans went over to buy back their passports, they saw she was being raped by the men from the garrison. We were all helpless. We didn't even know her name. There were no phones, no Yugoslav or Australian embassy in Kabul (which was weeks away for us) and the rapists seemed to be a mixture of border guards and soldiers who might have been the only authorities to contact. God knew what might have passed for police in such a place.

Welcome to Afghanistan.

The next day we went onto Herat, 300km from the border. It was a dusty town with tree lined streets. We stayed for a week, the start of a month in that unforgettable country, then still a kingdom. Our hotel had no bathroom, but there was a pit squat toilet that smelt so rank, you had to hyperventilate before going inside so that you could hold your breath for the minute needed. With the state of our bowels, that was easily time enough. There was a public bathhouse in the main street that had a women's night once a week. However, the boss man there allowed Annie and I to go in together on a men's night and have a private room that you could lock from the inside. We scoured the walls and door for any peepholes, but found none. The water was hot and the floor tiled. It was bliss.

We also stayed a week in Kandahar, a place that would decades later headquarter the Taliban. One afternoon a policeman told us to turn away from the market we were heading for. "Tribal people are there. They will cut your throat", he told us. The capital Kabul, with its Chicken Street mecca for western travellers, sold lapis lazuli jewellery, wolf skin fur coats and leather horsemen's knee boots.

This was in the days well before the internet, cell phones, fax machines and credit cards. You carried cash and travellers' cheques, and picked up mail *poste restante* at the post office. Some sold their blood at local hospitals, where you were invited to push your arm through an elasticised hole so they could take whatever they wanted. We gave that a miss.

Part of the adventure was to do it all as cheaply as possible. An old diary I found shows what we paid for transport from Istanbul to when we entered India: about \$25 each in 1974 prices. A mud floor and wall 'hotel' in Herat in western Afghanistan cost 15 Afghani a night, with rats, a horsehair and straw paillasse mattress, and complimentary hashish or opium, usually smoked with the hotel owners who liked to play the travellers at chess. There were 40 Afghani to the US dollar. The decrepit buses we travelled in regularly broke down, till the driver's clanking under the bonnet for an hour got them going again.



**Herat street scene**



**Kandahar**

<b>Journey</b>	<b>Duration</b>	<b>Cost per person</b>
Istanbul-Erzerum	24h	85 Turkish lira
Erzerum-Iran border	8h	30 lira
Border-Tehran	14h	350 Iranian rials
Tehran-Mashed	24h	200 rials
Mashed-Afghan border	14h	100 rials
Border- Heart	4.5h	50 Afghani
Herat-Kandahar	7h	25 Afghani
Kandahar-Kabul	14h	25 Afghani
Kabul -Peshawar	8h	400 Afghani
Peshawar-Lahore	9.5h	18.5 Pakistan rupees
Lahore-Indian border	2.25h	1.75 rupees
Border-Ferozopore	0.5hr	0.4 rupees

We finally we took a bus from Kabul through to Jalalabad, then through the Khyber Pass and into the even more lawless North West Frontier region of Pakistan. All day long we saw wild looking Pashtun men on small horses and camels, swathed in bullet belts with ancient looking rifles slung on their backs. Urchins and mangy dogs ran alongside the bus. When we stopped, small crowds would gather around in silence, utterly expressionless, staring at us without ever smiling or trying to touch or speak with us. It was unsettlingly eerie.

Peshawar is the first city you come to in Pakistan after passing through the Khyber Pass. The Australian cricket team played a test match and one day game there in 1998, but

security has since stopped further international cricket there. It was an unprepossessing place with a chaotic, unmemorable downtown area with shops selling the same cheap plastic junk, cloth and drab furniture that held no interest. After an hour or so of wandering about and being stared at still more, we were persuaded by a taxi driver to spend the rest of the day with him for about \$3 in his deteriorated Morris Ambassador. He would show us the sights, where the people lived and some nice countryside near the town.

It was all dreary beyond imagination, with more unremitting staring all day, few trees and people eking out a living sitting all day next to a rag in the dirt displaying a few onions, fly infested goat meat or metal bric a brac, like locks, buckets and engine parts.

Late in the afternoon we unexpectedly came upon a circus tent pitched in a dry, featureless park. In the hour that followed, I saw what my life might have been.

We got out of the taxi and made our way to a series of wagoned cages constructed of iron and hardwood. They looked like pieces out of a Federico Fellini set from *Satyricon* in ancient Rome. Some housed monkeys and depressed, mangy bears, but one had a liger, the result of a male lion mating with a female tiger to produce some of the biggest large cats known. But it was the young foreign couple who were the most exotic creatures to what rapidly built to another silent crowd of well over 100 men and boys who surrounded us, all utterly expressionless. No women were to be seen anywhere.

Within minutes we saw a turbaned Sikh making his way through the crowd to us. He carried a splendid carved walking stick topped with gaudy coloured cut glass. He introduced himself as the circus owner and invited us to his personal tent for tea. There was no refusing. The crowds parted before the exotic entourage.

Glasses of tea and sweets were brought and we answered his enthusiastic questions about where we were from, what our occupations were (we had long learned to not say that we had no jobs or were students, which brought either consternation or obvious thoughts that we must have very rich parents). We were 'teachers'. Then a litany of calibrating questions came about the price of various goods in Australia, and the inevitable benchmark question: "how much does an engineer earn in your country?"

It was then that the conversation changed. I remember every word. It went like this.

"Do you know modern dancing?"

Modern dancing? We looked at each other. What did he mean?

"You know, like cha-cha-cha?"

Well, yes, we did. I'd had a particularly progressive teacher who took dancing at school and daringly went beyond the barn dance and the Pride of Erin.

"And do you have bathing costume?"

Well, yes, we had those too. This was very much the right answer.

“Well, I am making proposal for you to join our very good, most famous circus. The best in all Pakistan. We travel all over the country including to the most famous and beautiful Swat Valley!”

We would have our own tent and we would dance the cha-cha-cha in our bathing costumes at each performance. This would be to audiences that we didn’t need to ask about but who would be all staring, silent Muslim men.

I had instant visions of my rapid disappearance, with Annie becoming the exotic consort of the sikh or traded to a local warlord in some valley in the ungoverned north of the northwest frontier.

We said that he had given us much to think about and we would need to contact our families and employers in Australia before committing to this tempting offer. We would send him a telegram with our answer as soon as we heard.

The next morning we got the bus to Lahore, where a solicitous, effusive businessman seeing us studying a town map, insisted on taking us to a cinema where an English language cowboy film was being shown. In the darkness he surreptitiously began to start his grope at Annie’s breasts. We got up and left, with the man following us back to our sub-one star hotel where he tried to force himself into our room.

Dancing in my swimming trunks in a travelling circus in Pakistan was not the life for me.

# Driving Mrs Happy

When I arrived back from living in London in 1974, I had no job and no money. On the first day back in Sydney, my mother presented me with a folder full of job advertisements she'd been clipping from newspapers in the last few months. "This looks like it would suit you" she'd say. After a few months, I landed my first job in health, an area I stayed in for the rest of my working life.

In the meantime, I'd got a taxi driver's license to keep the wolf outside the door. After my first day driving, I was utterly sold on it. I kept my license for about five years, often doing a shift on a weekend to supplement the meagre salary I earned in those early days.

Taxi driving has lots of drudgery, but almost every day surprising and sometimes delightful things can happen, almost always without warning. A lecture every psychology undergraduate sits through is about the power of intermittent reinforcement being long understood as the most powerful of all drivers of reward-seeking behaviour. Rats will press a bar far more frequently if they are rewarded intermittently with a food pellet, compared with a pellet dropping after a fixed number of presses. Poker machines are built on this principle: when you cannot predict which press of the button will deliver a win, when you can discern no pattern, the attraction of the activity can become more compulsive.

Most fares during a shift are totally unmemorable. A passenger hails you, gets in and tells you where they want to go which is often somewhere you have taken people many, many times and holds no interest. Most are lost in their thoughts, say nothing the whole trip. They pay you and an hour afterwards you would struggle to remember anything about the trip. Others murmur banalities about the weather or the traffic.

Those fares meld into one another and some days, that's all you get. But whenever I got out of bed at 2.30am to make my way to the cab depot to start my 3am-3pm shift, I would always anticipate a trip to somewhere I had never been before in Sydney's vast footprint or having an unforgettable, non-tedious eccentric get into my cab.

On my very first day as a cabbie, I picked up my first cab, a Ford Falcon, from the Red Cabs depot in Victoria Street Darlinghurst. I'd been in the day before and had the two-way radio procedures explained, how to work the meter and how the division of the

day's spoils worked. The cab company paid for the fuel, and took a pay-in of \$30. I got the rest, however much or little that might be. I found that you usually had made the pay-in by about 10.30am, so all the money on the meter after that was yours.

I drove the cab across William Street and into Darlinghurst Road, taking it all the way down through Potts Point. Outside the old Chevron Hotel, a couple in their 20s hailed me. The woman said "Narrabeen". This seemed instantly like a great fare to have picked up. But I had no idea how great until we got there. The guy had been drinking a lot and was slurring his words.

The shortest route to Narrabeen was 30km, and at that time of the morning there was almost no traffic on the road once we got out of the city. So we got up there very quickly. "What address do you want?" I asked. "Just keep on going" she said. On we went. In fact, on for another 18km to Palm Beach. I'd made the daily pay-in on my very first fare, so was very excited about the day's prospects.

Once we got to Palm Beach she directed me to a house. The guy started to get out with her but she told him firmly he was not to come in. Her family lived there and it was not happening. So he asked me to drive him back to Potts Point, to the naval base at Garden Island. He soon went to sleep on the back seat and when I arrived I couldn't wake him. So I told the military police who were on duty at the entrance that he owed me what by now was a huge fare. They got his wallet out and to my luck, he had enough cash.

So this first fare made my first day one of the best earning days in my driving career. I once drove a pair of glasses down to Moss Vale for a wealthy man who'd left them behind in Sydney. The airport was sometimes very lucrative with people here for the first time asking to go somewhere far away that no local would ever take in a cab.

Around midday one Saturday, I was cruising in the city looking for jobs and the operator's voice crackled "City to Darling Point, first call" I gave my location in Pitt Street and was quickly allocated the job "Hilton Hotel in Pitt Street. For Rockefeller" I knew immediately who my fare would be.

After my English born-parents retired from their hairdressing business in Bathurst, they moved to the Sunshine Coast in Queensland. They very quickly realised they'd made a mistake and moved back to Sydney. They started working as live-in domestic staff for the wealthy. Mum presented very well. She had grown up in a middle-class family in Surrey, spoke with a home counties accent, was open and friendly and wonderfully personable. Dad had a working-class background, but after years of learning how to flatter the insecure who were anxious about how their new haircut or shampoo and set had turned out, he immediately came across to strangers as disarmingly charming.

After a couple of false starts working for some newly-rich business people of whom mum would say scathingly "they have absolutely no idea how to treat their servants" they landed a job with the newspaper magnate, the late James Fairfax, at his iconic Darling Point mansion, Glanworth, in Lindsay Avenue, with its sweeping gardens going right to a stone wall at the water's edge. They stayed with him for several years, with mum being cook and housekeeper and dad the butler.



Fairfax was 'old money', well used to domestic staff and treated my parents wonderfully. He insisted they could drink whatever wine he was drinking, which was usually the wonderful St Henri claret. He was very often abroad, or spending time at his beach house at Bilgola or his country estate near Bowral, Retford Park. So mum and dad often had the sole run of the massive house for many weeks on end. Its walls were covered with well-known paintings by Australian masters. I remember a Rodin statue. Dad loved waving to the tourists on the Captain Cook harbour cruise as he watered the garden, as if he owned the place.

The day before, mum had told me that she was cooking lunch for Happy Rockefeller, wife of Nelson, the American billionaire. When Happy stepped into the car she passed me a card with the address and I immediately said I knew exactly where she was going, as my mother would be cooking the lunch she was attending. She replied effusively "oh what a coincidence". When she asked about a building we passed, I followed up with some non-intrusive commentary about the history of the areas. She seemed interested and appreciative.

So when we arrived, I was salivating about the size of the tip she'd pass to me. With the radio booking fee added, the fare in those days came to something like \$13. She passed me \$15 in notes and sat there waiting for the change. I gave her back a few coins. She looked at what they were and handed me back one. I passed it back immediately and said, carefully weighting my sarcasm with a big smile "that's OK, it might come in handy to you."

Later that afternoon I went to a phone booth and called mum, fearing Fairfax might have protested about my incivility. But nothing had been mentioned.

Other drivers always advised against picking up groups of young drunks from Kings Cross or outside early-opener pubs, as they could get smart-arsed, and sometimes try to do a runner without paying. Or worse, vomit in the car which would mean you had to clean it up and be off the road for hours. None of that ever happened to me. Nothing ever turned nasty, although one very large Pacific Islander drag queen became very insistent before the sun rose one morning that she should give me a blow job instead of the fare from Kings Cross to Bondi.

If you got into danger with a violent passenger, the procedure was that you would press your two-way microphone and say "M-13, M-13" and give your location, presumably as the blows rained down on you or as the assailant held a knife at your chest. This was long before satellite tracking that could give the radio base. I was driving toward the city down Parramatta Rd when an M-13 call was made giving a location in Camperdown. The driver was being attacked. I was about four blocks away without a fare and so drove there straight away.

As I approached I could see four other cabs had already arrived and the drivers had the attacker on the ground giving him a beating. The police arrived shortly afterwards.

I had passengers who argued bitterly with each other, who cried alone in the back seat, who tried to have sex, who stank like a urinal, who insisted we take a route which

was far longer than the way I knew, who made unabashed racist comments about people we passed, who asked for half day tours of the sights and loved what I showed them, who offered me food they had just bought, who railed against politics of all complexions, and with whom I had instant rapport. I had broken people, mournful people, tiny and massively obese people, exquisitely beautiful people, people who reminded me of others. The cab was a little *cinema vérité* theatre we shared.

Forty five years on, I still wake occasionally aware that I've been dreaming of a cab. The feeling is one that cab driving is a reality check about an uncomplicated world where someone pays you for a service that has a clear beginning and an end, where unlike the day-to-day of most jobs, you know exactly what the value of what you are doing is at any moment, with changing numbers on the meter being an objective, unambiguous reality.

# My first proper job

The job advertisement my mother had cut from a newspaper in 1974 gave me little to go by. The NSW Health Commission was looking for staff to work in health education. It didn't say education about what, but it sounded like it might have all sorts of possibilities. I applied and was called for an interview. At 24, just back from living in London and traveling overland back to Australia, I'd had no relevant experience whatsoever. So I thought I'd have a stab at answering whatever they threw at me to try and land what my parents would have called a 'proper job'. My father had often said I had "more front than the Queen Mary" (or the department store on Hyde Park, David Jones).

One of the interview panel asked "If you were at a pedestrian crossing with the 'don't walk' sign displaying, and there were no cars in sight in either direction, would you cross or wait for the 'walk'?" I instantly thought here was a trap to catch dishonest, insincere applicants, so beamed and said, of course, I would walk. They then asked if I'd explain *why* I would walk, so I said surely it was important that we all should be able to assess risk and act on it. In this situation you could readily assess there was no risk, and so the act of waiting there had little virtue going for it, even though pedestrian crossings were of course wonderful things.

I got the job and the man who asked me the question, Jim Cullen, confirmed my instincts when we met again on the first morning I started. I was inducted with a cohort of about a dozen similarly inexperienced people. Some of us were to be generalist educators, while others were allocated to specialised areas like sexually transmitted diseases. I landed 'mental health and drug education' and given an extra bracketed appellation 'at-risk populations', whatever that was supposed to mean.

These were completely green fields days in public health. There were no undergraduate degrees in health education or promotion and the first Masters of Public Health degree started at the University of Sydney in 1977 when I was on the staff there. Public health already had a long history, starting with public hygiene and sanitation, dental health and early vaccination campaigns, and baby steps in public nutritional advice. Car seat belts had been introduced only in 1970 and the first tiny and anodyne health warnings appeared on cigarette packs in 1973. The Health Commission's film library in Mena House on Macquarie Street in Sydney, the same building in which we all worked, was kept busy sending out film canisters to schools and youth clubs containing black and white films giving dire warnings about the dangers of drugs and not saving oneself until marriage. The two film

library staff, Jack and George, had a copy of the early porno film, *Deep Throat*, and would furtively hold screenings for some of their mates on days when their information chain told them that the section heads were away.

It was left up to me and my newly-minted colleagues to decide what our new jobs actually meant. This was an era long before talk about 'aims and objectives', 'key performance indicators', annual progress interviews or even job descriptions infected and stultified working life. We just made it up as we went along. We settled it very early in the piece that by 'drugs' we would take it as read that this referred to both licit and illicit drugs. But the public demand was for lurid and prurient information about 'hard drugs' and sagas of user downfall. We'd get frequent calls from parents, teachers and journalists wanting information on tell-tale signs that their children might 'on drugs'. "Could we come out to the school and lecture the children about the dangers, and could we bring along an addict so they could see for themselves where it could all lead?"

There was little in the way of reliable data quantifying which population groups were most at risk for drug use and harm, but that which was available showed clearly that the drugs most commonly used and causing most harm were tobacco, alcohol, and prescribed psychotropics like minor tranquillisers and the early anti-depressants. My very first research paper published in the Medical Journal of Australia in 1976 was called *Psychotropic drug use in the elderly: public ignorance or indifference?* It was about how old people swallowed a hugely disproportionate amount of all tranquilisers and anti-depressants that were prescribed in Australia. I took to myth-busting early.

I put together a slide-show talk called 'drugs in perspective' designed to demystify all of this. I must have delivered it 30 or so times to teacher in-service training courses, nursing students, bored police cadets, and service clubs looking to 'do something' about the scourge of drugs. The audiences at talks at Rotary and Lions club talks were often well-lubricated and you struggled to see to the back of the room for the cigarette smoke. The reception was always polite and the audience attentive, but I'd always drive home imbued with the feeling that what I was doing was pissing into a very strong wind of cultural and commercial factors that would marginalise homoeopathically small-scale efforts like mine into complete inconsequentiality.

This was an era where new fashions in health education and promotion competed to beat the door down for the interminable succession of staff development courses that we all regularly attended. Utter tosh called 'values clarification' exercises were run, driven by desk calendar portentous homilies like "if you don't understand yourself, you can't expect to help others understand themselves".

This was also the era of 'encounter groups'. There was no end of 'centred' proselytisers soothingly promoting these rudderless exercises in letting it all hang out, which often left the more vulnerable staff raw, exposed and unresolved in front of their more robust colleagues. The irresponsibility of it all was astonishing.

When someone had a birthday, almost the entire office would decamp down to Chinatown and have a celebratory lunch. Lunches always saw lots of wine go down and when we left the restaurants, never before 3pm, very few would go back to the office. There was

a car pool that was openly abused by almost everyone in the building. You could sign out a car overnight or all weekend without needing to give any reason. Nobody seemed to care. Looking back on it, this was an era neck deep in unbridled unaccountability in contrast to today's other extreme of unending petty micro-management.



**Rob Piggott, me, Cathie Hull at work in 1978**

My 'at risk populations' remit began to take shape when we started getting calls from clueless people in custodial roles with people using drugs. One day I got a call from the head psychologist in the state prison service. She confided she had been told to 'do something' to rehabilitate the swelling ocean of drug users in prisons. So she had gone right to the top and called the drug problem busters. Like babes in the woods we walked right into it. Sure, we told her: you've come to the right people. All clueless together.

One of my colleagues, Michael O'Neill, came with me out to Long Bay gaol. Michael was an intense, dour, highly intelligent and troubled man some years older than me. He had a black beard that covered most of his face, lending his normally sad demeanour even more pathos. We were led through a succession of locked gates and doors and into a room with about twenty chairs set out in rows, already positioned by the warders for the selected inmates to come in and get a no-holds-barred lecture about the evils of drugs which, like a quick-acting hypodermic injection, would turn them away from drug use for ever.

We rearranged the chairs into a circle, observed by warders muttering to each other "so what's all this, then?" Soon about twelve young men were led into the room. We started by asking them to each tell us why they had come along today. "To get out of sweeping duty" several of them concurred. "Something different ..." said others.

We then asked them to tell us their stories of how they ended up in prison. Several were heroin users but most were 18-20 year olds who had simply been busted with marijuana and come up against unbending magistrates who had given them 6-24 months. One was a promising rugby league player from the bush, bewildered and isolated from his family in the city playing reserve grade for a major club. Another was a central coast rockabilly guitarist who'd been busted smoking a joint while loading his car after a gig. There was not a middle class one among them. All had left school early. Some had family members

who'd done time. All were beyond bored. Over the six weeks we went out there once a week, none seemed like a danger to society. A few had deep personal problems and chaotic backgrounds.

We first took them through what seemed, about three minutes after we'd started it, to be the apotheosis of our profound naivety. At our workplace, staff development sessions had all started with inane 'ice-breaker' and 'trust building' exercises designed to unstiffen everyone and lubricate their protective character armour. So we asked our inmates to take turns in being lifted into the air by the others, and held there 'relaxing' for about 30 seconds.

We had not considered for a moment that our prissy notions of trust might be a little different to those developed by men living in the brutalising environment of a maximum security gaol where standovers, bashings, constant targeting of any vulnerability and the absolute necessity of developing extremely finely tuned algorithms of personal trust and space were the constant backdrop.

For the rest of the session we tried lamely to get them talking about their hopes for the future and how over the next months we might all work together to greatly reduce the possibility of them ever returning to prison again. A warder said to us on the way out "I thought youse blokes were supposed to be talking about the dangers of drugs to them?"

We sat in the car for several hours after this cold reality shower, trying to take in the utter futility of what was expected of us. We decided that the best we could possibly hope to achieve was to provide a kind of respite hour each week for these men: something that they would look forward to, even if it was only because it was a momentary distraction from the drudgery of their prison lives. If these hours could seed even some small insights into how they might avoid coming back inside on release, or give them some solace and respite from their awful lives, we thought this might sow seeds of something useful. We continued with these sessions for about 10 weeks and were not asked back.

One man, a wild-eyed, multi-drug using Pole began mailing me cowboy comics he'd written and illustrated. These were called 'yippees' by the prisoners and told simple tales of cowboys, outlaws and cops, with speech bubbles. There was some rudimentary plot structure, but mostly there were vehicles for morality lessons like "always stick by your mates", "animals give you unconditional love" and so on. I was touched by these, and wondered if he had anyone else in his life he wrote to. After about three of these arrived in the post and I wrote back appreciatively, I never heard from him again.

Some nuns called us one day and asked us to come out and frighten the devil out of a bunch of 'uncontrollable' teenage girls who had been referred by the Children's Court to spend a few months in a locked convent just across the Tempe bridge on the Prince's Highway near the airport. "Uncontrollable" was a catch-all categorisation used by the custodians for all manner of problems: stealing, violence, constant truancy, sexual conduct. The girls were sniffing glue and solvents, in sad attempts to give themselves fleeting euphoric sensations and a small sense of achievement that they had out-smarted those who disapproved.

As with the Long Bay prisoners, we found a group of neglected, lonely girls from chaotic backgrounds. It was plain to see that the excitement of finding ways to momentarily intoxicate themselves and thwart the nuns was 99 percent of what their 'drug problems' were. After about three sessions we insisted that we run parallel sessions with the nuns about the 'drug problem' problem. But we were told this was not possible. So we told them we could no longer continue.

This sort of experience rapidly fomented a growing understanding in me that so much of what passed as health education in those days was beyond futile. It was small scale, with the aggregated 'reach' of what all my colleagues and I were doing being trivial.

A few of us started venting these frustrations to each other and giving the metaphor a heavy workout about the importance of building fences on clifftops as well as providing ambulances at the bottom for people who had fallen. I grabbed hold of a job opportunity at Sydney University at the beginning of 1978 to help develop Australia's first Masters of Public Health degree and co-author the first national report on health promotion.

Around this time several of us formed a public interest group called the Movement Opposed to the Promotion of Unhealthy Products (MOP UP) and started becoming go-to sources regularly quoted by the news media looking for comments on what the government should do in prevention. Our high profile successful challenge to have the comic actor Paul Hogan excluded from Winfield cigarette advertising in 1980, locked me into a life of public health advocacy for 'upstream' legislative and regulatory reform that absorbed me for the rest of my career.

# Strange bedfellows

In 1985 I was asked to travel to Islamabad in Pakistan to speak to government health officials on how they might begin to curb the alarming growth in smoking there. It was just my second overseas assignment for an international cancer agency and wanting it not to be my last, I put a lot of work into my preparation. I'd be joining three or so other consultants in a network that assisted the International Union Against Cancer in what later came to be known as 'capacity building'.

Entry to Pakistan meant changing at New Delhi, after an earlier change at Singapore. I would need to overnight in Delhi and then get an onward flight the next day at midday to Islamabad/Rawalpindi, the capital. My plane got into New Delhi very delayed at around 1am. It took an eternity to get out of the arrival hall, queuing with hundreds of Indians returning home, many lugging their new boxed VCRs. Then there were the tortures of the Indian hand-written, everything-in-triplicate customs and immigration system that still operated at the time.

Once outside, I found myself with about eight other disoriented, dog-tired westerners. We were the ones with no hotel arrangements all wondering where we might find a hotel at 3am. A helpful woman at an information counter inside had recommended one just off Connaught Circle, warning us with the Indian side-to-side head shake that we would be finding it perhaps a little bit expensive at \$15. We picked our way through homeless people sleeping on the footpaths, made our way to a parked bus, woke the driver and set off with the promise of sleep in a comfortable bed.

The hotel desk clerk was asleep. He told us there was only one room vacant. It would sleep two. I stood my ground and all but one of the others raced after the bus, already moving down the street. Left standing there with me was a woman aged about 30. We had not spoken a word until now. She was American, a backpacker, attractive, and I would learn later, on her first overseas trip. Summoning my most 'trust me' demeanour, I stammered that I was very willing to share the room ... the circumstances ... what a long night ... boy, was I ready for sleep etcetera. Totally unfazed, she agreed immediately, thankful.

In silence we filled out the registration cards. "We are not minding here that you are not married, sir" he grinned at me, knowingly. Again in silence we were shown into a lift so small that, with our luggage and the clerk, we were forced to press up against one another as the lift crawled upwards several floors. When he opened our room door we saw that 'sleeps two' meant in the one double bed. It was obvious that this was not the sort of hotel where one



could request that a fold-away bed with crisp sheets be fetched in the middle of the night. So we both said nothing, requested a wake-up call at 9am and closed the door. It was by now about 4.30am.

Well, there we were and what was there to say? She wasn't rushing to talk about the delicacies of the situation, so I decided too that this was the civilised course to take. She said she would like to go straight to bed and asked me what side of the bed I would prefer. She then went into the bathroom painted, like the bedroom, in the cracked and fading dull blue-green that seems to cover every wall in India. She emerged moments later long legged and undressed to a T-shirt. She unpacked a sleeping bag and climbed in.

I sleep naked, but knew that this would be a statement hardly in keeping with the situation. So I sat on the edge of the bed and discretely pulled my jeans off, also leaving on my T-shirt. I swung under the sheet in my underpants. Instantly, our weights caused the old mattress to sag dramatically in the centre. Inside her sleeping bag, she half rolled to the middle of the bed. I held onto my edge and thought it was going to be a long night.

In the dark, we then exchanged names and she asked me what I was doing in India. I explained my transit and my task. "And what about you?" I asked. She was on her way to work at a leper colony in Orissa.

"Oh, you're a doctor or a nurse are you?"

Yes, she was going to be doing a lot of nursing work there. Helping out, generally.

"And how long will you be working there?" said I, off to change the course of the health problems of a developing country in a mere few days.

"Well, I'll be staying there for as long as possible. I don't plan to leave" she said.

She was a nun.

This was the first time I had spent the night with a nun, particularly one who's name I had not got until I got into bed with her. So you'll appreciate that there was not a lot to fall back on from here. After what seemed like ages of lying wide awake thinking about all this, I must have fallen asleep. But then a loud banging woke us. The room was full of the morning light, but we couldn't have been asleep for more than an hour, surely. I looked at my watch: 6am. What were they doing waking us now? It wasn't remotely 9am. The heavy knocking and calling out kept up. Perhaps there was a fire?

From her sleeping bag, she looked at me expectantly. Go on, answer the door, she was suggesting. I'd have to get up. The knocking was almost furious, but there was a slight problem. Well, not slight actually. I had acquired one of those high tensile men's morning problems which would be very obvious if I climbed out of bed in my underpants. By now, she had hoisted herself up onto her elbows to support me in my ministrations with the person banging on our door. It was clearly my job. There was going to be no hiding it. The knocking showed no sign of letting up so there was nothing left but to make a dash for it.

I swung out of bed and bent half double as if stricken with stomach cramp, hobbled to the door, in a John Cleese-like silly walk trying to disguise the problem. There I crooked my upper body around the door to find a grinning house boy holding a breakfast tray aloft. "Sorry, sir. Wrong room" he said immediately.

I went back to bed. Nothing was said.

When I later awoke, she was still asleep. I carefully got out of bed and went into the bathroom. I parked a visiting card of unearthly proportions in the toilet bowl and turned the flush handle. After a few clacking twists, no water fell from the cistern. I inspected the water inlet valve. It appeared to be open.

What do to? I filled a plastic tumbler glass with water from the hand basin and from on high, bombarded my creation, which of course didn't move. I tried this forlorn manoeuvre several more times and then gave up. Oh, the ignominy that now awaited. The monstrous airline food engorged creature that had hidden inside me was there for her to see when she would enter the bathroom when she woke up.

I re-entered the bedroom, helpless at the embarrassment I would soon face. I rationalised that even the Queen takes a dump. And of course my new nun friend did too, every day of her life. I knew that in the leper colony where she was headed, she would live with far, far worse. I apologised to her in advance for what she would find. I thought I saw a small, empathic smile.

Having slept together, breakfast seemed sensible. We found a place in the Kwaliti chain restaurant next door where peeled boiled eggs were served. These displayed the distinct grey lines of finger prints of the person who had peeled them in the doubtless hospital hygiene standard kitchen we could not see.

That afternoon I flew out to Pakistan where in the solitary, air-conditioned comfort of my room in the Intercontinental Hotel, with a machine-gun carrying security guard in each corridor, I came down with the worst case of both-ends, fire hydrant-force food poisoning I have ever experienced.

The bell boy who had taken me up to my room kept returning on various odd pretexts. As I lay dying, with every drop of water dehydrated from my body, he finally asked quietly if I knew Mr Gerard from Australia. You see, Mr Gerard always asked for him and was a most special friend because he could give a most special massage that I would be also wanting, yes?

At 4pm, Keith Ball, a medical colleague from London, coming to the same meeting as I, came to my room. He reached into his pharmacy kit for the magic pills. By the next morning I was fine.

Smoking rates in Pakistan haven't changed much 30 years later while India remains the country with the highest prevalence of leprosy.

# Acrobatics in Khartoum

“Excuse me, sir” the stewardess whispered “would you like to come with me? We have a seat up front in business class that we’d like to offer you.” It was the first time I’d ever heard these magic words on a plane. It was November 1984 and I was on a British Airways flight from London. We were somewhere over the Mediterranean. The plane was full of holidaymakers bound for the Seychelles but it was making a stop at Khartoum in Sudan, and that’s where I was getting off.

So she led me to a plush seat down the front. There was only one other person there. Two other stewards joined her. They said that they’d noticed that I was the only person getting off at Khartoum. Had I been there before? No, I hadn’t. “Oh, you poor thing. We feel so sorry for you!” they chorused “You’ll really need this then. It will be the last you’ll have for a while”. They presented me with a whole bottle of Bollinger.

I was on my way to a World Health Organization assignment. It was a pan-African workshop on tobacco control and I was being what they call a ‘temporary adviser’, giving several talks and leading discussion on plans for cooperation between the delegates. In those days – and it may be still the same today – the WHO could not select or even recommend individuals to attend the capacity building meetings they held. They couldn’t direct their member states to send someone who might be ideal. This was unlike the International Union Against Cancer, for which I’d also done work. They were free to tap anyone they liked, and so invited delegates with reputations or who were in key positions within government or agencies and might be stimulated to go back home and try to make changes.

I soon found out that delegates to WHO meetings were a very mixed bunch. Some were exactly those you would have wanted and expected to attend such a meeting, but others had absolutely no experience and quite often, not even any interest in tobacco control. They were simply people who for various reasons were in favour with the government officials who’d received the WHO invitation to nominate a delegate. “Want to go to Khartoum? The WHO has asked us to send someone.” I later learned that this phenomenon was known as ‘sultan’s nephew syndrome’ among seasoned consultants who competed to tell the best story about the most bizarre ‘experts’ who arrived at meetings via this process. A few years later when I worked at a similar meeting in New Delhi, the local WHO officer told me that the meeting had been a great success because only a couple of the delegates had gone shopping during the entire time the seminar ran.

I'd long had a fascination with Sudan since being a serious stamp collector when I was a boy. Its stamps had camels among date palms and robed men wearing fez. I banked it early with Afghanistan, Zanzibar, Iceland and the Congo as exotic bucket list destinations. So alighting from the plane into what looked like a large tin shed arrivals building saw all the air rush out fast of that fantasy.

The reality dawned fast that Khartoum was a flat, rubbish-strewn, impoverished and completely undistinguished place. My taxi passed nothing that caught my attention as we drove to the hotel on the shores of the Nile. This was a whitewashed, spacious four star affair but almost empty of guests, other than our conference group. I was there for four nights and for two of these there was no running water in the rooms with only cold when it sometimes came on. The swimming pool, resplendent with international guests enjoying the good life around it in the foyer photographs, was empty. The dining room had few options and when you ordered something as simple as eggs on toast, half your life would pass before it was brought to the table. With Sudan being strictly Islamic, there was no alcohol available. So we drank tea, very bad coffee or the best option, fresh lemon juice. All day long.

One evening I was sitting with a group of west Africans on a verandah overlooking the river. A Nigerian looked at me through wistful eyes and said "Simon. I am *dreaming* of lager." This remark animated all of the black Africans who mostly kept their distance from the north African Arabs in the group. What a shithole this place was. What sort of government didn't allow its people to drink beer, they all said. A Tanzanian called a contact at his embassy and was invited over the next evening to drink diplomatic zone sanctioned beer. We looked at him imploringly to get invited too, but to no avail.

The seminar was the usual story I came to experience often across the next decade of training consultancies: delegates droning on as they read out every row and column number and percentage from tables showing smoking rate data on an overhead transparency while everyone else in the room tried to stay awake. Everyone told the same story. Tobacco control was unfortunately not a priority in their country. Someone had done a survey once about smoking rates among children in one high school. Another with student nurses in some hospital. These were often years out of date, but the presenters had flown for many hours across Africa to go through the ritual of presenting this stuff.

My role was to provide commentary after each presentation. An enormously obese, pedantic Swede with laboured breathing and a fidgety Italian bureaucrat whom I was told later by a jaded consultant could speak six languages but think in none, were my colleagues. We struggled to find anything to say about the almost useless data obtained with near to zero quality controls that we had to sit through on each day of the seminar.

On the final day, we were mercifully all taken across the Nile to Omdurman, the historic site of the battle in 1898 when an army of 8,000 British and 17,000 Sudanese soldiers commanded by General Sir Herbert Kitchener defeated the vastly larger army of Abdullah al-Tasshi. The British were seeking revenge for the death of General Gordon three years earlier and attempting to reconquer Sudan.

Omdurman had a vast, often squalid but wonderful market which I wandered through for an hour or so and bought a large basketware camel's feeding nosebag. I thought it might make a nice vase for dried flowers. It was one of those unforgettable experiences where you know you are seeing exotic people and sights you would simply never see anywhere ever again.



**Omdurman market**

At the end of the day I witnessed something quite extraordinary that taught me a big lesson about my assumptions about global cultural and political influence. The twenty or so of us were all taken to what was quite easily the most modern building I saw in the few days I was in the country. It was a newly built theatre with the interior fitted out in polished timber panelling. We were led inside and seated. Then one after another, performing to just twenty of us, some ten different groups of dancers and drummers in regional dress came on stage and performed. There were Nuer, Nubian, Dinka, Bari and others I don't recall. Their dress, stature, physiques and dancing were all completely diverse.

It was beyond wonderful. I felt both enormously ignorant about the diversity and the depth of the tribal cultures being represented, but also so privileged to have been exposed to it. But it was what happened after the interval break that stunned me even more.

We resumed our seats and soon out of the orchestra pit we heard orchestral music strike up – violins, cellos, brass, woodwinds, kettle drums. It had enough imperfections in it to make it obvious that it was not a recording, but an orchestra. There was some Johann Strauss and some Mantovani-style light orchestral music. I think they may have even played some Boston Pops-style Beatles.

After a few minutes the curtains opened to cavorting Sudanese acrobats, all men. They juggled, rode unicycles, did human pole balancing acts, spun plates on long sticks, did gymnastic floor routines and trapeze acts across the next 45 minutes as the unseen orchestra in the pit played its heart out. It was all in the style of classic Chinese acrobatic shows.

And yes, this was exactly what we were watching: a large troop of Sudanese acrobats and musicians, performing acrobatics to Chinese routines while Chinese trained classical Sudanese musicians bowed and blew away in the orchestra pit.

Sudan was the first country in Africa that China used as a foothold into opportunities to exploit the continent's riches. It poured vast money into roads and infrastructure and embarked on a program of cultural exchange. We spoke to some of the musicians after the performance. They had been given Chinese government scholarships to train in China and Chinese teachers had also come to Khartoum.

For the first 20 minutes I found it hard to get past the feeling that what I was seeing was simply bizarre. Why would Sudanese take up Chinese acrobatics? Why would a budding Dinka trombonist go to China and develop repertoires of light classical music, totally alien to Sudanese culture? But then I began to think that we would find nothing unusual at all if these young Sudanese performers had gone to places like the US, Britain, France or Canada and learned acting, music, sport, architecture, the restaurant trade or indeed anything that took their interest.

Today we are completely used to seeing western cultural and commercial influences permeating almost every facet of our lives via music, movies, products and advertising. American fast food chains operate in almost every country, selling standard items. Facebook, YouTube and other social media see the spread of everything under the sun. In Sudan in 1984, there was none of this, but the Chinese were there weaving economic, political and cultural influence. This brief encounter was an unforgettable penny-drop moment in my understanding of geopolitics.

# Ridding Papua New Guinea of smoking

In 1983 I received a call from the late Nigel Gray, who was then head of the Anti-Cancer Council in Victoria and also the director of the International Union Against Cancer's tobacco control program. Nigel became a close friend and mentor until his death in December 2014 when he was 86. He asked me to join him and two others, Gary Egger and Paul Magnus, on a visit to Port Moresby where we were to try and convince the government to ban all forms of tobacco advertising. Proposals to do this had been discussed since 1978, and word had got around that the time was right for a final push that might just get up politically. It was my first international assignment of many in the four decades that followed.

We met with the Minister for Health and his advisors in Port Moresby and shortly after we returned, we received word that the government had agreed to do what we had urged them to do. The Tobacco Products (Health Control) Act was passed in 1987. I can't recall an easier legislative victory, although word spread in the months and years afterwards that the ban was being barely implemented.

So in January 1987, the regional office for the Western Pacific of the World Health Organization in Manila asked me to spend three weeks in Papua New Guinea and write a 'situation report' on restricting marketing and advancing education about tobacco use.

In those days, WHO consultants were required to start and finish any consultancy by flying to Manila, with the field trip sandwiched between the two visits. The stated purpose of this astonishing waste of travel money was 'briefing and debriefing' and apparently only face-to-face encounters were suitable for the complex information that needed to be imparted.

I was briefed by some functionary who basically paraphrased the bland terms of reference for me which I of course had already received. He explained that they'd had little luck getting any information from the PNG government on the tobacco situation in the country. My job was to go there and ferret it out. I then met with the resident WHO nurse who walked me through the importance of malaria prophylaxis while there. Working in the School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine, this was all total news to me. I'd flown all this way to be given a talk they might have guessed I could have given myself.

Three weeks in PNG were spent with book-ends in Port Moresby, with a week in between spent whistle-stopping through Lae, Goroka and Madang. In Port Moresby I stayed in a house owned by the Choulai family. Bernard Choulai had been a friend in the days I lived near Darlinghurst in the late 1970s. His Chinese-Papuan family had run one of Port Moresby's general merchant stores for many decades. Bernard was still living in Sydney but assured me I'd be very welcome to grab a bed in the house where his older brother 'Chug' lived.

Chug ran a PNG artefact shop and an adventure rafting business. He made me feel completely at home and told me to never take a walk out beyond the razor-wired confines of the house's garden because of the very real danger of raskol (pidgin or Tok Pisin for rascal in English) gangs robbing and assaulting. Port Moresby has long had a reputation as one of the world's cities with the highest violent crime rates. Each time we'd drive down into the town, or when the WHO transport car would bring me home at the end of each day in the office, groups of men and youths could be seen sitting beside the roads.

While I was made welcome in the house, I was not the only one being welcomed. Papua New Guinea has some 1000 traditional indigenous groups, with around 850 different languages being spoken – around a third of the world's total current languages. The Wontok (one talk) social system that operates throughout the country sees social, employment, financial and housing support extended among members of each language group. When I arrived at the house I was shown a room with single bed I could use. When I arrived back from the WHO office after the first day, someone else had been sleeping in it and their belongings were in the room. There were also several people who had set up residence in the space under the house, which was up on stilts to help keep it cool. Others were in the kitchen cooking.

When Chug arrived home he told me these people were all his Wontoks and they would be coming and going while I stayed there. I had no idea how to navigate the question of where I would sleep. I was pretty sure that I was absolutely at the very bottom of the chain of claimants on the bed and spent most of the evening thinking over contingencies about how I might beat a retreat to a hotel later that night. But when I went back into the room the other person's things had gone, so I stayed put and said nothing.

One Friday, Chug asked if I might be interested in spending the weekend rafting with him and about a dozen paying customers down the Angabanga river. There was a spare space in one of the rubber boats they were using. It was on the house, he said. We'd be leaving the next morning and back in Moresby on Sunday night. Is the Pope a catholic? I asked him. A river called the Angabanga sounded like something straight out of a Phantom comic.

So the next morning we set off on a three hour drive west from Moresby, at first on a sealed road and then more slowly on dirt. On a track leading down from a bridge over the river we'd be rafting down, we prepared the boats, put on helmets and life jackets and got a few minutes paddling instructions and what to do if we capsized in the fairly serious rapids we'd encounter within about 100 metres of striking out. We got the comforting story about one guy who had capsized and clambered onto a rock platform while still in the rapids and had to stay put on it for 48 hours while the boats made their way downstream, were



driven back to the jumping off point and carefully steered to where the man was perched. They succeeded, but said it was touch and go whether a second attempt might have been needed.

I'd never white-water rafted before so was apprehensive, but up for it. The early rapids – as it turned out the only ones – lived up to their threat. Within minutes of casting off the shore, a woman in my boat had her paddle's handle rammed hard into her chin by the force of the current in the rapids. She split her chin almost to the bone. A doctor who happened to be a passenger in the boat stitched and bandaged it from a first aid kit when we were able to pull in downstream. Someone offered her a big token of whiskey they had brought along.

We slept the first night in light sleeping bags on a small sandy beach with towering cliffs on either side of us. Fireflies hovered around us and at first light I saw a magnificent large hornbill in a tree near us. Later in the trip we saw small freshwater crocodiles, after earlier being assured there were none in the area we had slept.



**Rafting the Angabanga**

On the second day our passage downstream was very sedate, mainly drifting with the current and steering around occasional fallen trees. Around 11am we pulled into a small village where a family had an arrangement with Chug's business to cook up pig meat in a ground oven. In a shallow earth pit, a fire had been heating up rocks before our arrival. Banana leaves were then placed on top of the rocks, and large flaps of raw pig and yams positioned on top of this. More banana leaves were then added, then soil and more fire started above the soil, if I remember it well enough.

We all then sat in a raised, wall-less hut and drank warm South Pacific lager from cans with a few of the men from the household. Betel (areca) nut was offered around. The routine involved placing a slice of the green nut in your mouth and beginning to chew it to a pulp so the active, reputedly mildly intoxicating ingredient leached into your saliva and was then absorbed into your bloodstream and up to the brain.

I was looking forward to experiencing what all this was about. But the instant the nut slice hit your tongue or the wall of your mouth, you felt an instant sensation of having a highly unpleasant astringent, near-burning sensation attacking the healthy cells in your mouth. We watched the local men add lumps of slaked lime powder and green pepper-

corns to the mixture in their mouth, producing a reddish swill which they would spit on the ground. This mixture presumably altered the pH of the whole process in some way that I quickly decided I didn't need to experience.

About four hours after arriving, and with us all nearly dropping with hunger and the forgettable effort to politely drink lousy warm, flat beer in the heat of day, steps were taken to check whether the meat was showing signs of being ready. The soil and top layer of banana leaves were removed and after some discussion about whether it needed to stay in for another hour, the vote was to give it a try.

With a few exceptions, the slabs of meat were barely warm. A few from down near the hot rocks were almost there and these were sliced up and given to us with a chunk of barely cooked yam and another can of warm beer. The skin still had bristles all over it, now covered with half congealed, oozing fat making it all the more appetising. Forget crackling. Forget the idea of any meat you wouldn't have thrown straight in the bin anywhere else. I tried to extract what might have been a sliver of lean meat from its thick fat surrounds. The little I got was undercooked, and whatever hunger I had rapidly abated at thoughts of all the stomach problems I could imagine erupting a few hours later.

It was clear the others held this gustatory feast in the same esteem as I did. So we took a few tentative bites out of the bland, under-cooked yams and indicated to Bonnie, our crew leader that we thought we'd best continue our journey.

Café food, such as it was in Moresby, was beyond awful in those days. Battered deep fried fish, hamburgers, rudimentary pizza and the very worst sort of Cantonese rice sludge with sweet and sour, black bean or oyster sauce on your choice of meat. But if you had facilities to cook, you could do well. Back in Moresby, I went with another friend to the Boroko market and bought a wonderful array of fresh vegetables. Pumpkin leaves and local fish cooked in coconut milk was superb. A stall selling whole smoked, blackened tree kangaroos looked interesting but was too much for us to consume. You could also buy 'brus' -- thick blackened compressed tobacco leaf, wrapped in newsprint torn from the local Post Courier newspaper. I was told the Post Courier was probably the most smoked newspaper in the world.

My WHO assignment was a matter of gathering what little data on tobacco use, production and taxation revenue available from the government library, talking to a list of government officials someone had prepared for me about the prospects of and barriers to any tobacco control policy getting adopted, and then doing whistle stop visits to Lae, Goroka and Madang to get an away from the capital perspective.

Those I interviewed fell into optimists and pessimists. The optimists pointed to the government having banned baby bottles some years earlier and strong restrictions on liquor trading hours as indications that the government would act if persuaded well enough to do so. But most were cynical about the financial influence of the tobacco industry and the ingrained culture of political corruption that would see any rumours of serious threats to the industry quickly side-tracked.

In Lae, the person I was scheduled to see didn't turn up so I walked up one side of the featureless main street and back down the other side. Local youths eyed me suspiciously so I went back to my basic hotel room, read a book and slept until it was time to fly out to Goroka the next day.

In Goroka, my hotel was a kilometre or so out of town, down a long driveway from the main road. I went into town to meet Michael Alpers, the legendary west Australian epidemiologist who had led the genetic research on those from the Fore tribe in the Eastern Highlands who had not died from *kuru*, the prion disease caused by cannibalism. His group identified a gene that rendered those with it immune to *kuru*. Michael was deeply pessimistic about anything happening with tobacco. He took me to a small building in the grounds of the Institute for Medical Research, unlocked the door and showed me dozens and dozens of IBM golfball typewriters, still pristine in their taped-up boxes. "These arrived a few months ago. Nobody here ordered them. We don't need them and no one in Moresby seems to have any interest in getting them returned. So they'll just sit here. It's typical of what goes on here" he told me.

He also told me something that I've used many times since in risk communication lectures about the problems that anyone would face in PNG in trying to convince a typical villager that smoking was harmful. "They'd take out their packet of cigarettes and ask you to show them which ones were the deadly ones so they could throw them away. The understanding of disease causation here only accommodates immediate or very-soon-after causal consequences. You eat bad food or drink bad water, get sick and understand it was just that particular food or water source that was the problem. They have no concept of chronic exposure being a problem down the track." I suggested that things were often little different in populations where we assumed more sophisticated understandings would operate.

After our meeting I wandered around the small town and went to the Commonwealth Bank (*Nambawan haus bilong moni*) to get some money. In front of me in the queue was a local barefooted man wearing an old western suit jacket, tribal arse-grass, a nose bone and a tomahawk tucked into a belt around his waist. He had a bank passbook which he passed to the teller and withdrew some cash. It was a perfect vignette of the country moving into the modern world.

It began to rain, so I went into a pub to watch an Australian rugby league match on television, eat some early dinner and wait out the rain. It was then dark, but having not seen a taxi anywhere, I began the one kilometre or so walk back to my hotel, the Bird of Paradise. About 50 metres along the driveway that led from the main road to the hotel, I was confronted by a man pointing a bow and arrow at me. He was hotel security and let me pass when I showed him my room key.

At Madang, as happened at Lae, the person I was supposed to see meet was somewhere else, so I again sat on the verandah of my hotel near the sea most of the day, read a book and wandered around. One memory was the huge amount of rubbish littered everywhere. Years later, telling a friend who'd lived in PNG for many years about this, he told me of a famous attempt by civic authorities in Medang to clean it up by paying locals for the weight of rubbish they could collect and bring to the local dump. Word of this spread

far and wide and some enterprising Highlanders went to the Goroka dump, loaded up a truck and drove it down to Lae to try to collect their money.

On my last weekend in Moresby I went to a rugby league match. I'd never seen anything like it. Both teams loved attacking but were defensively hopeless. Whippet-quick backs darted across field, straightened up and almost always scored with barely a hand laid on them. The crowd whooped and roared every time. The final score was something like 69-58. In a county that had supposedly implemented a tobacco advertising ban several years earlier, there was tobacco sports sponsorship advertising everywhere.

I went back to Sydney and wrote my report, mailed it to Manila, but refused to go back for the ridiculous de-briefing ritual. Smoking rates today in PNG among the poorest communities are about 43%.

# Drunken soldiers in Uganda

In 1993, I was asked to travel to Kampala in Uganda to join four other consultants from Canada, the USA and England in running a national training workshop in tobacco control policy for the International Union Against Cancer (the UICC). I'd been infected and enraptured with African music when living in London ten years earlier and ever since, seriously obsessed. So I jumped at the hope that I could catch a few bands while I was there and browse in the local markets for cassettes of Congolese rumba (soukous) which was popular over most of Africa but unobtainable except for a few albums released in the west. Other than a week in Khartoum, I'd never stepped foot in Africa and couldn't wait to get there.

I flew from Sydney to Perth, then onto Johannesburg, where I changed to a flight for Nairobi and then to another short flight onto Entebbe, Kampala's airport which had been in world headlines in 1976 when an Israeli commando unit had staged the daring rescue of some 100 Israeli hostages during Idi Amin's mad reign. Bullet marks were still showing in the airport walls.

I was met at the airport by the local head of public health for the Museveni government, a quiet man of about 40. After my long series of flights from Sydney I was keen to get quickly into the hotel and sleep. But he apologised that we would have to wait another three hours for two more flights to arrive with the others coming in for the meeting. His budget was so precarious that he could not afford the costs of a minibus taking us the 40km into town more than once.

After about another hour, two of the others arrived and got the news that they would also have to wait for another consultant coming in on another flight. We were all hungry so went into the only place selling food inside the airport. There was a desultory menu with few options that looked like they never changed. On our host's recommendation, we all went for matoke (pulped plantain banana) with gravy and a soft drink. The lukewarm matoke was totally bland, with the watery gravy barely flavouring it.

The bill came to about \$10 for the four of us and the three foreigners joked about the next- to-nothing that \$10 would get you at any other airport. Our host said quietly that the cost of the meal came to about a quarter of his weekly salary. We quickly grabbed the bill.

On the way into Kampala, he had our driver pull over, got out and spoke to a woman selling bananas by the side of the road. It was his wife. She needed to sell fruit to make ends meet for their family. There was no one buying.

When we entered Kampala, some sort of protocol demanded that we go to meet the superintendent of the Makerere University Hospital. His cement floored office was bare except for a central desk and a few filing cabinets. A very large wrench lay on his desk. After greeting us he excused himself, taking the wrench to fix a water supply problem into the hospital. I tried to imagine the superintendent of the large teaching hospital I worked at in Sydney doing that.

We were taken to see some cancer patients. The ward was near to bursting with women from their families camped beside each bed. They washed the patients and their sheets, cooked for them on little pot stoves and tried to comfort them. Most drugs were either not available or were prohibitively expensive. Everyone looked quietly desperate. An ambulance was being used for a fruit and vegetable transport, bringing in food for those with no support.

Our hotel where the conference was held was in the town of Mokono, some 27km west of Kampala, near Lake Victoria. I shared a small room with a Canadian I'd met several times before. The mosquitoes in the room at night were almost as big as Stuka fighter planes from World War II and nearly as noisy. We took it in turns to sit up during the night to swat them, as there seemed no way to keep them out of the inadequately screened room.

Near our room in the garden was a filthy cage of about a cubic metre, housing a miserable young chimpanzee, covered in flies and excrement. A few hundred metres away were street markets with women in wonderful coloured cloth selling baskets of fruit and vegetables and smoked, black fish from nearby Lake Victoria. Open air butchers sold meat, almost black with flies.

Over the next three days we took a hugely attentive group of about 20 through the fundamentals of tobacco control rationale and strategy. In the opening session, a senior surgeon from the university hospital gave a talk about a lung cancer case he had seen the year before. The patient was a male airline pilot for Uganda Airlines who had been educated in England where he started to smoke. No one else attending the meeting had or knew of any Ugandan case series of lung cancer, let alone any national trend data. Such data just didn't exist, so a single case study was the best that was available. While you saw many men smoking in the street, cases of lung cancer were uncommon and a relatively recent development. Chronic diseases like cancer, lung and heart disease took 30-40 years to become epidemic following the huge upswing in smoking that occurred in western nations after mechanisation of cigarettes reduced their price and made them dirt cheap. So seeing lots of smoking but not much tobacco-caused disease was not surprising. We needed to walk the delegates through this paradox and emphasise that preventing smoking blowing out further than it already had gone was the name of the game.

One of the consultants was a woman from the USA. Her topic was how to increase public awareness of the harms of smoking. She had a compilation reel of high production value TV anti-smoking ads that had been used in the US. The delegates watched them

as if they were seeing some sort of exhibition from an impossibly wealthy nation. She ploughed on and on through dozens of these, without it apparently ever occurring to her that no one in the room even had access to a projector, let alone to the lavish budgets that were required to produce let alone pay for the TV screening of these messages. I'd lugged an overhead projector to Kampala donated by my hospital's staff room at the request of a former student who knew I was coming over. There was silence at the end with everyone being too polite to make the obvious comment.

The poverty all around us was ever-present. All the international consultants agreed that the participants should receive the same per diem living allowance amount that we were being given. The UICC agreed. This was something like \$US50 a day (our hotel and meals were paid for). I'd gone to a bank and cashed \$50 in local money. Uganda was in the midst of rampant inflation with the exchange rate yielding a stratospheric number of Ugandan shillings to the dollar. I was handed a pile of mostly tattered Ugandan shilling bank notes that would have been almost half a metre high if I had stacked them all together. I had to stack them in a large cardboard box to carry them from the bank.

On the second day of the conference, a small utility truck arrived from the bank. When the cover was removed from the rear section, almost the whole floor area was covered about 400 cm deep in bundled Ugandan banknotes. Once inside, counting out and then recounting each delegate's allocation took half the morning. Each person got enough to fill a large suitcase with cash with value like that in the worst days of Germany's Weimar Republic.

At the end of the first day all the consultants were driven into Kampala to wander around and take in the sights. Huge, decrepit marabou storks mingled with people on footpaths, and watched everything from branches and fences, their stooped, bald heads, filthy black and white feathers and blood stained, scabrous faces making them look like ancient guards from some Hades. They surveyed the scene for edible garbage and carrion such as dead town dogs. I wondered how many of them had feasted on human corpses during the Amin and Obote eras of mass killing.



**Marabou storks, Kampala**



Downtown Kampala was a ramshackle place, with very little resembling anything like a modern western store. I made for the market area and did a bee-line for stalls playing African cassettes from dust-coated portable players. The cassettes were mass copied with black and white photocopied inserts. Local youths gathered around to see what I would select to ask the stall guy to play. They'd clap and jive to anything I selected that they liked, urging me to buy it. Everyone was as friendly as can be.

Ugandans are generally large, often tall and immensely open people with a quick disposition to laughter. When they shake your hand, they do it gently but hang on for quite a while till it becomes almost an act of holding hands. I never met one in that week with any agenda to try and milk me of money on some pretext, as is an almost daily experience in poor nations everywhere.



**Kampala bus station**

When it was time to be go to the place we had agreed to meet to get the return cab, no one was there after I waited 30 minutes. Many passing by asked if they could help me, so I finally asked one to show me where I might get a bus out to Mokono. The man insisted on walking me into the dusty labyrinth of a vast bus parking area behind the market where white mini buses waited till they were full to drive to dozens of destinations in all directions. My guy took me to the Mokono bus, where I was greeted by a near full bus of mainly women who'd been shopping in the market.

The contrast between bus travel in Kampala and in any other city I'd ever been in could not have been greater. In Sydney, you talk to no one, look at people only when they are not looking at you, apologise if you brush past them or touch them and take your journey in absolute shared silence, saved only by the delight of uninhibited infants when they talk to their parents and make comments about others in the bus or train. Two beaming women next to me immediately asked me my name and where I was from. Was I married, did I have children? Did I like Uganda? What was in my bag? Cassettes! So they then began singing, joined by most of the others in the bus. "Please, you now sing us an Australian song!" they pleaded. So I sang *Waltzing Matilda* and taught them the chorus. This kept up over the entire journey. How dire it must be for people used to such warm communality to arrive in socially frigid cultures where anyone talking to you, let alone singing in public, is given wide berth as a potential crazy person.



We were advised that it was always essential to reconfirm your flight out, as flights were often cancelled without notice. We were all on the same flight out to Nairobi where we would get our various connections. The airline advised that our plane was at Addis Ababa with mechanical problems and would not be available the next day. Another one scheduled to arrive was at Rome airport, but also had problems.

“This is normal” everyone told us, perplexed by our simmering anxieties about missing the first in a chain of connections that might see us limp home over days with mounting penalty charges. “Many people take a taxi to Nairobi”, they counselled. Two taxis would be involved: one to the Ugandan border with Kenya and then after walking 50 metres across the border, another long journey through the Rift Valley to Nairobi. It would all take about 12 hours, and six of us could all fit in the long chassis Peugeot taxis that had three rows of seats, with our bags tied on the roof. It would cost us each only \$40 for the whole journey.

We all jumped at this news and took off at dawn the next day. The Ugandan countryside was verdant and lush. The road was sealed and not in too bad repair and the car ran well. This started to look like it might turn out to be an unexpected, pleasant adventure. We all began to relax, feeling lucky at the opportunity we had been given.

About two hours into the four hour first leg to the border, we saw two or three soldiers up ahead on the side of the road, in the middle of nowhere. As we approached they fanned out across the road, waving us to pull over. They were skinny teenagers in uniforms far too big for them. Each carried a fearsome looking military rifle. I was in the front passenger seat and wound down my window as we pulled up. While the other two wandered about the car peering in at us, the one at my window demanded our passports in slurred speech that the smell on his breath suggested was alcohol affected at about 9 in the morning.

He took the passports about 40 metres into the bush to a larger group of soldiers standing around one who was sitting at a small table under a tree. After about 10 minutes several of them led by the one at the table came back to our car. Questions then started about what we were doing in Uganda, where we were going and which countries we were from, despite the passports showing this. Perhaps they were illiterate.

The leader then said a little aggressively to the American consultant who had screened the lavish videos “Are you married?”. She immediately launched into an indignant reply about this being absolutely none of his business. We all stiffened until the English consultant next to her spoke over her and explained that his colleague had misunderstood the question, and yes, she was definitely married but her husband was not with us. I think someone in the back may have squeezed her harm surreptitiously urging her silently to go along with this.

There was then chatter among the soldiers for a minute or two until they finally waved us to drive away. We then all erupted at her in the car that if this ever happened again, she was to show the soldiers her wedding ring which one of the men in the car now quickly took off his finger and gave to her. She sulked for the next 30 minutes until we reached the border with Kenya, as naïve to the instinctive safe response to such questions as she had been in the training course to the bewilderment of the participants to her videos.

The next leg of the journey took us right through till well past nightfall as we traversed the huge, wide Rift Valley on the way to Nairobi. We saw a few zebra and giraffe in the distance, but the day was unremarkable. The driver had about four Congolese cassettes on rotation which I appreciated but probably drove the others spare.

At my hotel in Nairobi, I asked the porter if he knew any live music venues near the hotel. It was a Saturday night so I was hopeful. He directed me to a place quite near the hotel in the middle of a large park: the Garden City nightclub. I walked into the park in darkness, quickening my step as I began to think about how unwise this now all seemed.

I got there about 10pm and the place was thronging with Kenyans absolutely dressed to the nines. The women were beyond elegant in wonderful dresses and headcloths. The men were all in tailored suits and spivvy, satin shirts with motifs. I was not only the worst dressed there, I was also the only white guy in the place.

Bar girls immediately swarmed around wanting me to buy them drinks and draping their arms around me. I must have been watched because after I declined about three approaches, a man from a group came over and asked if I'd like to meet his friends who were taking up several tables. Like the Ugandans, they were wonderfully friendly and my self-consciousness quickly deflated as we bought each other beers in bottles so recycled that the surface of the glass had almost turned opaque.



**Samba Mapangala and Orchestra Virunga**

The band came on soon. It was Samba Mapangala and Orchestra Virunga. I had their first LP and couldn't believe I'd walked in on a major Congolese pan-African rhumba band. They played non-stop until I left at about 1.30am. I was told they'd continue till 4am. While there were about seven of them on stage, every now and then someone would

come from the audience and relieve a musician, taking over a guitar, the drum kit or singing. Congolese rumba often starts with a kind of waltz-time section where couples dance sedately together, ballroom dancing style. Then, on a change of beat from the drummer, a piece erupts into an extended pattern known as the *sebene*, instantly filling the dancefloor with people cutting moves with hips, bottom-shaking and hands weaving repeated patterns and theatrical salutes. Appreciative dancers 'shower' the musicians with money, poking it into their pockets as they play, or folding it into cigarette-thin rolls and placing it behind the musicians' ears.

I'd seen wonderful African bands play in London – Somo Somo, Les Quatres Etoile, Sam Mangwana and the African Allstars, Remmy Ongala and Super Matimila, Hugh Masekela – but the experience of being in a bar in Nairobi, drinking, dancing and laughing into the early morning with Africans while consummate musicians powered on for hours without a break, is something that holds you close to African music as a standard of pleasure against which you compare every other musical experience you have later. Twenty years later I'm still in love with it.

# India time

In February 1995, I went to India at the request of the International Union Against Cancer (UICC). A group of doctors was holding an anti-tobacco advocacy training workshop in Indore, a city in the central state of Madhya Pradesh. I would be one of two international speakers.

The atlas showed me Indore was about equidistant from Bombay and Delhi. No one I asked could tell me anything about the place. So the day before I left, I went to a bookshop and browsed through the Lonely Planet guide to India. It advised against visiting Indore, calling it the 'Detroit of India', saying it had nothing of interest and that it had a population of 1.3 million. It sounded just wonderful.

Filled with foreboding, I flew into Bombay, a city I had always managed to avoid. My memories of India from past visits were of astonishing red tape, so I armed myself to face the immigration desk with duplicate copies of my letters of invitation, my outward ticket and bank statements. Instead, I found each booth efficiently staffed by one man ready to help people to fill in the landing cards, and a stamp man eager to pass you through.

Bombay is built on a 30km long peninsular and I had arranged to be put up overnight at the Tata Institute for Fundamental Research which was located at about 29km along this. The first bend past the airport took me into all I had imagined Bombay might be. Frantic traffic, thousands of tiny stalls and shops, the best and worst of smells, incessant car horns, cows and smoke. Within minutes of leaving the airport we passed an elephant loaded with mattresses and furniture, plodding along among the bicycles and walkers on the side of the road. Parklands were taken up with garish Indian weddings, the gaudy imitation golds and silvers all arc lit and high pitched female songstress music blaring from loud speakers.

The next day I retraced the trip back to the airport in the company of one of India's most renowned epidemiologists, an old friend Prakash Gupta. That morning he had shown me over his latest research project -- a house-to-shack survey of Bombay residents' tobacco habits. In two years he and his group had amazingly interviewed some 99,000 people using hand-held computerised data-entry devices.

Indore was a featureless sprawl of crumbling, dusty buildings. The streets were lined with old mango trees and eucalypts, their trunks whitewashed to serve as road markers. There were countless small shops selling scrap, ironmongery, Hindu postcards, cloth, used tyres, *Thums Up* cola and pan masala chewing tobacco, along with cigarettes the cause of the massive

epidemic of head and neck cancers that make India the worst place on earth for these hideous and avoidable diseases.

Indian driving is the worst I have ever encountered. The previous oligopoly of the car market by the old Morris Oxford/Austin Cambridge copy the 'Ambassador' and the Fiat Padmini, had been broken by the introduction of the Suzuki Muruti. Together with the lumbering Tata trucks, three wheeled two stroke and larger diesel taxis, wandering cows, countless motor scooters and bicycles, these cars swarm over the roads, spilling onto the verges to get around other vehicles whenever their way is barred.

I drove with perhaps a dozen drivers while in India. They all were of the same purpose and seemed to follow the following rules. Drive as fast as you can. If you are in traffic, whether moving or momentarily stationary and your way is blocked by a vehicle in front also heading in your direction, sit on the horn. How many times I wanted to ask a driver whether blasting the horn actually achieved anything when it was quite clear that the car in front could not move either. If you can go around a car via the right, do it. If there is something oncoming and it is the same size as you or smaller, don't worry, go right ahead even if this causes the oncoming car to swerve off the road. If you can't overtake on the right, go around to the left. Whenever you overtake or pass anything, approach a corner or someone walking on the side of the road (ie: just about every five seconds), blast your horn. Not a little toot -- give it a good workout. If you come up to a traffic light, above all see if you can squeeze in between any cars at the front. If this means driving up on what passes for a pathway at the roadside, go right ahead.

The condition of the cars was appalling. One morning a car arrived for us. It had four totally bald tyres, two smashed rear lights and when it braked, the driver would always have to wrestle with the wheel to stop the car broadsiding into the on-coming traffic. No car I travelled in had a seat belt. All had cassette players and the driver would always ask "do you like Indian music?" (I do) A dusty cassette would be retrieved from the floor with always the same effect -- the tape speed would vary so we would listen to this dreadful cacophony of wonky sound, the driver showing not the slightest indication that he thought anything was amiss.

One day we came alongside a crowded local bus. All the panels of the heavily plated sides were scored and scraped. And then I noticed that below each window were crusted streaks of dried vomit, trailing back where passengers over the years had parked the tiger out the window as the bus moved through the streets. I could not imagine that the bus, nor any vehicle that I saw in India, had ever been cleaned. On two of the three days we travelled into Indore, we saw serious car crashes. One involved an overturned truck. Its wheels were still spinning as we passed.

We were accommodated in a hotel 18km from the centre of town on the main road toward Bombay. The hotel was up on a small hill and the brochure in my room said that it had breathtaking panoramic views. The only thing that took my breath was the ever-present smell of insect repellent that they sprayed in the rooms without abandon. The view was over surrounding wheat country, interspersed with several unremarkable, treeless mesas.

The room was comfortable, with a full bath, lots of hot water and a satellite TV tuned to a choice of pop music clips, D-grade sport (one day the full Tasmanian duathlon was being covered) and a channel running ten year old episodes of the Australian soaps *Neighbours* and

*Home and Away*, as well as *MASH*. There were two large bottles of Bisleri water in the fridge I could use with my Scotch. I soon realised that the seals were broken on these, meaning the water had been added by the hotel.

The hotel was plainly Indore's showplace. Every day in the foyer, a board would say "We welcome Mr Ravi Murthi" or "Sales Meeting of Kwaliti Trading Company". In the evenings, the lawn was covered with groups of men laughing loudly while their wives and families roamed the hotel inspecting the breathtaking view, the sports gym and the billiard room. The bar menu invited you to "ask about our cocktails". I asked one night and was told they had Kingfisher beer or local whiskey. You couldn't phone abroad and the desk clerk who worked the morning shift was close to my idea of braindead. On several occasions, I approached the desk he always seemed to be running his pen over the list of guests. I would ask for the room number of one of the other conference delegates. No reply. I'd ask again. No sign of life. Nothing approximating even the slightest sign that he was aware I was there. If I had stood there naked I'm sure he wouldn't have noticed. This was the person on whom my hopes were pinned in getting any phone calls from home put through to me, or taking down messages that might be left.

The teaching program was scheduled to run over three days, commencing at 9am and finishing at four. The other foreign speaker with me was a great friend from London, David Simpson, who had been director of Action on Smoking and Health, UK. On the first day, the taxi arrived at our hotel 15 minutes before 9am. We set off for downtown Indore, 18km away. Being peak hour, the road was choked and we arrived at the conference venue just after 10am. In the cab, David and I began to whittle the program away to accommodate our late arrival. But this was just the start of it. We were on India time.

In the garden of the conference centre, they had set up a large tent with a table-bowing massive buffet of curries, dahls and nan breads. Tables were set with all the chairs covered with their own white cloth. All the conference participants as well as a retinue of local health officials and civic dignitaries mingled around waiting for the esteemed foreign speakers to arrive. Before we could eat we had interminable introductions with all the important people, with photos taken. We then had breakfast for the second time that morning. Just before 11am we made our way into the lecture room, two hours late. More or less the same thing happened at the start of the next two days.

The programs for these events always feature dire slabs of 'situation reports' where every delegate is given the lectern to enthrall those in the room with copious details of surveys of smoking prevalence in their home state or city. These are often years out-of-date. A standard approach is for speakers to show an interminable set of slides and to read out almost every number and column total for the thoughtful edification of those who cannot read these numbers for themselves.

There is never any question that these presentations can be simply provided to the delegates in a folder. They must be presented. Question time then sees people asking about burning matters like "what is the reason that smoking by male university students has remained steady but female has fallen from 4% to 3%?"

When you see that there are some 15 or so of these presentations scheduled, your heart sinks. You find small mercies in a presentation where the speaker has only the barest of data,

while you steel yourself for those where the first slide warns that you will be getting detailed breakdowns of adult, school student, university student, doctor, nurse, medical student, and occupational tobacco use, not just for smoking, but bidi, gutka and pan masala use too.

David and I gave our first introductory lectures and then worked through lunch to pare back the program to accommodate all these country reports. We slashed whole topics and reduced others to 10-minute summaries, the depth of what could be covered in any session rapidly draining to the most basic levels.

At these meetings it is very common to have a good quotient of people who want you and the meeting to endorse some message or strategy that they are sure no one else has ever considered and which they just know will be hugely successful because they have discussed it with a few colleagues who are also very excited by it. There was a father and son juggernaut at this meeting who hovered behind us at every opportunity, pressing long essays they had written into our hands, insisting that we sit with them at each meal or tea break and showing us dozens of seemingly random photographs of their workplace, line-ups of colleagues, patients and tobacco products they had photographed in markets.

The father was a wealthy private hospital owner and his adoring son, a London-trained surgeon, the pride of his father. They implored us to make room on the program for them to reveal their solution to the problem of tobacco in India.

With the program in tatters and every noble educational goal long flown out the window to accommodate what had turned into a kind of declarative 'me-too' ceremony for every participant, we submitted to the inevitable. With the moral conviction of a television evangelist, the son launched into his proposal with great animation: that it was obvious that all we needed to do to solve the problem was to burn all India's tobacco crops! As the government would be surely interested in doing this, the meeting should resolve to promote this solution! He got a rousing round of applause.

On the second night we attended a function to celebrate the launch of the first issue of the Indian edition of Tobacco Control, the British Medical Journal's specialist journal of which at the time I was deputy editor, and David news editor. A small number of papers had been reviewed and judged as of an acceptable enough standard to be published. So a gala launch of this historic publication was naturally in order.

The procession of the dignitaries was led by a decorated elephant which quickly laid large steamy pats in front of the stage, as elephants tend to do. We were all given quite enormous rosettes to pin over our hearts. These were about six inches in circumference with foot long tendrils. Indian ceremonies seemed to be very long, very garish and had very little concern about excess. If it was at all possible to fit in extra speakers, this was a good idea. A second edition of the journal never eventuated.

On the final day of the meeting, the man running the event bade David and I come to his office. An elaborate tea service with Indian tid-bits was set out and staff busied themselves ensuring that our plates were never empty. After about 15 minutes of unctuous praise for the workshop we had run (stupendously successful, all down to our presence and so on), he cut to the chase. The grant given to the organisers by the UICC had most unfortunately proven to

be quite a bit short of that required to run the meeting and support all those who had travelled from the length and breadth of India to attend the splendid event.

We agreed that this was indeed unfortunate but being extremely polite, ventured no opinions or questions about what in blazes had happened to allow this significant budget over-run to have occurred. Then came the crunch. As we were both from wealthy nations, would we be so very kind as to understand that the budget over-run unfortunately left him with no funds to reimburse us for our international airfares, per diems and accommodation costs. Would we mind ever so much to pay our hotel bill from our own funds and then get these back from our own employers? He was sure that this would not be a problem, with us being such superstars who had acted as ambassadors for our employers?

The UICC gave a groan that could be heard from Geneva, shrugged and paid our expenses when we got back home.

The local professor of dentistry and maxillofacial surgery who turned out to be president of the Indian Dental Association had been running a one-man anti-tobacco campaign for 20 years. He took me for a tour of Indore on the last afternoon, the day after the meeting had concluded. We walked past the municipal council depot and he proudly showed me the local garbage trucks on which were written various anti-tobacco slogans. We then walked up some narrow stairs into a down and nearly out building where at each doorway stood a man shielding the civic authorities inside from unwanted visitors. The professor explained that some years ago he had given dental treatment to the Indore mayor, and while the mayor was in the chair, mouth agape, had convinced him that the council trucks should have anti-tobacco slogans painted on them. The mayor would be very pleased, he was sure, if as an overseas visitor, I were to drop in and express my enthusiasm for the signs -- none of which I could read because they were in Hindi.

We passed through three or four doorways and were eventually seated on some decrepit vinyl chairs in a narrow room. Within thirty seconds, a functionary rushed in and fussed us into the mayoral chamber. This room was done out in brown plastic wood panelling, with around twenty chairs in U-shape around the mayor's desk. The room was full of people, with the mayor seated at his desk. Two of those seated nearest to the mayor were quickly asked to vacate their seats and we sat down. In Hindi, the professor launched into his explanation of why we were there. All in the room remained quiet while he talked on and on. I wondered how it was possible to draw so much from the story of the slogans on the garbage trucks.

Finally it was my turn. With the effusive fruity turns of phrase I had begun to develop over the last few days, I told the mayor that in all my travels and in all my experience of anti-tobacco work throughout the world, this was the first time that I had ever seen a council's garbage trucks covered with such slogans. I added how honoured I was to be received like this. At this he seemed quietly pleased, and gestured over an aide who quickly left the room. The others in the room then recommenced their animated talk with the mayor. We sat patiently and after some minutes I suggested to the professor that we should be thinking about moving on to go to the airport for the flight to Bombay. He interrupted the conversation, making our excuses. No, sorry. Tea was coming. Of course, it would be. So we sat there still longer. After drinking the sweet cardamom tea, we rose, bowed and left. We had been there perhaps an hour.



As we left, I asked the professor if we had walked in on a council meeting. He explained that the group in the room had been a mayoral deputation from the next town. They were there on a matter of some urgency. Indore pumped water from the local river to the next town, involving a rise in altitude of some 500 feet. Because there was a power shortage in Indore, water was not being pumped to the next town and the taps in the town were dry. The local mayor from that town, the only woman in the room who sat in silence the whole time, had driven around in a truck in her town announcing via loudspeaker that she was going to Indore to tell the Indore mayor to make the water flow again. She had promised them it would be on again by 4pm that day. We had left the room at 3.45pm.

Later that evening, when I finally arrived at Bombay airport, the tobacco crop burning private hospital owner and his evangelical son had driven out to say farewell. After I had checked in my bags into the international departure section I was saying my goodbyes when suddenly the crop burner produced a farewell gift for me to take back on the plane as carry-on. It was a huge brass candelabra, about a metre tall. Not only was it going to be totally impossible to carry it on board, it was one of the ugliest things I had ever seen in my life.

I had exchanged many gifts with overseas colleagues. I have some university colleagues who cherish the most awful of these. This was a shoo-in for the 'most awful' short list ahead of innumerable embroidered playful kittens given by Chinese visitors and coat of arms plaques from staff from obscure foreign universities on fact-finding junket tours of Australian universities – just what you always wanted to make room for on your office wall.

I thanked them profusely, and walked through to the passengers-only customs area. I pressed the brass tower to a cleaner with a mop and bucket, fairly sure that he never before or since received such an interesting gift from a departing passenger.

# Volcanos, tsunamis, storms and near-death experiences in the Caribbean

Dominica, not to be confused with the Dominican Republic, is one of the Windward Islands in the Lesser Antilles group in the Caribbean. A former French and then British colony, it has a population of around 72,000 and gained independence from Britain in 1978. If the expression banana republic has a near perfect match, it would be Dominica, with the crop employing about one third of the workforce.

In 1997, after a holiday with Trish beside Lake Michigan and in New York city, we flew to Dominica to spend 10 days with an old friend, Geoffrey Bond, on his 35 foot yacht, moored just off the wharf at Portsmouth, a tiny banana exporting port on the island. He was there for about a year supervising the reconstruction of the wharf, directing about 12 Barbadian (or Bajan) labourers.

I'd known Geoffrey since the early 1970s when he lived opposite me in south Paddington and became a great friend. An engineer, he would spend the week working at one of the power stations in the Hunter Valley, returning to Sydney on the weekends where he would spend lots of time at Sydney's first Vietnamese restaurant, Tien's, which he had bank-rolled to allow a Vietnamese mechanical engineering student, Le Thang Tien, to open a restaurant bearing his name.

In April 1976, Richard Beckett wrote a review of the restaurant in the *Nation Review*, speculating that it was funded by South Vietnamese victors with spoils from the war, and whining about there being no *nuoc man* (fish sauce) in the *pho*. Spirited letters published the next week defending the restaurant and wildfire word-of-mouth praise for it soon saw queues form down Glebe Point Road on most nights. On many a Friday night, Geoffrey would drive back from the Hunter Valley and take me and my then wife Annie to eat late with the staff after the last diners had left.

A few years later he tired of the brutal dullness of supervisory engineering, and decided to retire early in his early 30s, living simply on the rent from his Sydney house and doing the occasional job when it suited him. He left for Greece and bought a small yacht, the Donna Louise which he still owns today. Over the next 40 years he's lived nearly all the time on the boat around Greece, Spain, Poland, the Baltic, Cornwall and Ireland where he mostly lives today. We'd stayed on his boat for a week once in Rhodes harbour, drinking ouzo and eating freshly caught smelts (marides) late at night in tavernas.

In the early 90s, he sailed alone across the Atlantic and berthed in St Lucia. He's always been a wonderful letter writer, and sent enchanting, hilarious instalments about his daily life and adventures at Trinidad's soca carnival, bribing Haitian port officials who had stepped straight out of a Gilbert and Sullivan naval operetta and the delights of different regional rums. So when he insisted we divert from New York to Dominica and stay with him on the boat, there was no refusing.

On our arrival, he apologised for the boat's toilet being out of order and suggested we just dive off the boat each morning for our ablutions, if hanging our bums over the edge of the boat did not appeal. It didn't, so we had daily morning swims in the crystal clear water, teeming with fish. Daily life was oppressive. We'd make banana fritters and wonderful local coffee, read on deck, catch fish for lunch and when the sun began to move below the yardarm, drink refreshing, palate cleansing Red Stripe lagers from Jamaica before availing ourselves of tinctures of the best rum I've ever experienced: many varieties of Bajan labels I'd never heard of.

The wharf labourers would BBQ fish and meat in an old oil drum cut in two and then sit about talking and laughing till late on the wharf. They were led by a muscular, handsome man of about 25 called Kensal who Geoffrey reliably informed us was in great demand by the local girls. On one of the first nights we heard them playing reggae cassettes through a beat-box and rowed over in the boat's tinny from about 30 metres away to join them. They soon all took up improvised percussion instruments – cutlery on cooking pots and lids – and began sensual jiving with each other to the reggae and ska music. Kensal was very keen on dancing with Trish, who of course protested about this for nearly 10 seconds. From that night onward, ever-increasing embellished projections of the intense future of their relationship were proposed to Trish by me and Geoffrey.



**The Portsmouth wharf, Dominica**

The boat's radio was always tuned to the BBC World Service, and we always switched it on at the times that the Caribbean bulletins were broadcast. The major news was the great

concern about a possible major eruption of the Soufrière Hills volcano on the nearby island of Montserrat, 171km away. There had been a major eruption in the previously dormant volcano in 1995, and each day the BBC bulletins told of preparations for the evacuation of the island and concerns about a tsunami. Naval vessels were standing by to assist if needed.

One night, as we sat on the deck, we asked Geoffrey to describe what would happen in Dominican waters if a tsunami moved south from Montserrat. He said that the safest place to be would be out in deep water in the ocean, several kilometres away, where we'd experience little more than a passing bump of rising water. But what if it happened here where we were anchored? Deadpan, Geoffrey pointed to a point about a kilometre inland from the shore. "Well, we wouldn't know much about it ... the boat would be smashed to pieces and end up way up there."

We became preoccupied about it and asked if we might go ocean sailing out in the deep waters and perhaps visit a nearby island. So the next day we set sail for Iles des Saintes, 50 km north, a dependency of Guadeloupe, itself a French *département*. Neither of us had any ocean sailing experience. The first hour as we cleared the sheltered waters near Portsmouth, it was just bliss. We saw a few flying fish and gazed out at the vast blue ocean with a perfect wind behind us. On Geoffrey's tuition, I took the wheel.

But shortly afterwards, a storm came from nowhere, pounding the boat with rain and sending giant waves at us from the west. Instead of sailing over an almost still ocean, we lurched up and then down the other side of waves at least the size of a double story house. When it started, Geoffrey took the wheel and set us a course through it, then asked me to take over and hold that course. He then settled down pretending to be asleep on a plastic covered deck mattress. Trish and I looked at each other in grim fear of what the next hours might bring.

We didn't want to panic, as it was obvious you couldn't just change channels with a remote. We were in the middle of it with no escape. But we were in the sort of cauldron familiar only from white-knuckle disastrous storm-at-sea movies. Waves crashed over the deck several times, ending his 'sleep'. His theatrics in pretending to sleep were perversely reassuring but we felt very frightened. As quickly as it had started, it began to stop about 40 minutes later. The sky cleared and the sea flattened to being just choppy. We soon saw the port entrance to the island ahead.

Iles de Saintes was quite surreal after Dominica. It was immediately apparently affluent, with many expensive yachts and motor cruisers moored. Everyone spoke French, there were ATMs, cafes, boulangeries, patisseries and bars with French people drinking pastis in the sun. After the poverty of Portsmouth just 50km away, with its dilapidated couple of bars, a battered fish and chip shop as the height of local cuisine, and pot-holed roads, this was like a transplanted suburb of the French Riviera.

We shouted Geoffrey to a restaurant meal, shared a couple of bottles of Beaujolais, and slept the night in the harbour. Our trip back was uneventful, with Geoffrey telling us about the worst, apocalyptic sailing conditions he'd experienced mid-Atlantic and in freezing conditions in the North Sea. You thought *that* was a storm? No *this* is what a storm is like, he told us.

We returned back to New York a few days later, with the contrasts of the trip seared forever in our memories.

This year Geoffrey was back in Sydney. He contacted me for advice about a recent diagnosis of mesothelioma, the asbestos-caused, incurable lung cancer. As an engineering student, he'd had a work experience placement with James Hardie, the company which made asbestos products for decades, and has been subject many times to litigation from its employees. He told me of a room he had to work in several times where asbestos dust rained down like a snow-storm.

I introduced him to the best lawyer in Sydney with vast experience of asbestos litigation. He's having all his medical and hospital bills paid for, as well as getting a substantial six-figure payment for damages. It gives him enormous pleasure to know he will leave this and his Paddington house with its rental income to his daughter who lives in Cornwall and, like him, lives on a boat. He knows he will die from the disease and we have had several conversations where we have talked about our feelings about death and dying. He has lived a life that many would not choose to lead, living in the confines of a small yacht for most of his life, not caring a jot about material possessions, fashions or other false securities.

He has lived a peripatetic life since his early 30s and will always be one of the most contented people and best raconteurs I've ever known.

# The beautiful Miss Feng

I got out an old, large atlas, turned to the double page detailed map of China and searched for Weihai. There it was. At the end of the far north of the eastern seaboard, just across the Yellow Sea from the Korean peninsula. The internet then told me it was then a city of around two million people in Shandong province. I'd never heard of it.

It was 1997 and I'd been included in a team of people from the School of Public Health at the University of Sydney who would take turns to run topic-specific training programs for Chinese public health workers from around the country who would be gathering in Weihai. I would fly in to teach four days straight on tobacco control, just as two other colleagues, Deirdre Degeling and Lesley King, finished their stint on 'health promotion practice'. We had funding from the World Bank. It was a prestigious grant with a lot riding on it for my university's hopes for building a foothold in the massive education and training market of the world's most populous nation.

I'd travelled in many countries since my early 20s but had never been to China. It was all going to be a walk in the park.

The journey to Weihai took me via Hong Kong where I changed to a flight for Beijing. From there, I would catch a short flight to Yantai, also in Shandong province. A representative of the local officials running the meeting would be at Yantai airport to drive me to Weihai. At Hong Kong I changed about \$150 Australian dollars for Chinese RMB, reasoning that all my meals, accommodation and transport would be paid, and that a northern provincial port city would have few souvenirs of any interest.

My plane arrived at Yantai about 7pm, as dusk approached. The airport building was little more than a large shed. There was one other empty commercial aircraft sitting on the tarmac. About 40 of us, all Chinese except for me, disembarked from the plane and my bag was ready in minutes. But there was no one there to meet me. And there was no information desk, no café to sit in and wait. All the other passengers quickly left the airport with those who met them, or in taxis. No flights were scheduled either in or out that evening.

After about 20 minutes the staff at the airport looked like they were locking up, but still no one had arrived for me. I kept waiting just outside the terminal but after about 40 minutes of no one showing, other than some cleaners still inside, there was no one but

about five taxi drivers to be seen. They were playing cards on the kerbside and drinking tea.

What to do? *Surely* they would be coming for me. But what if they didn't? What if there had been some miscommunication with the driver and no one was coming. And what if the taxi drivers all left after their card game? They would be coming, surely, as there were no more flights due that night. I'd be stranded there outside at the airport, which looked to be well out of town.

So I decided to take a taxi. I walked over and all the drivers jumped up from their cards. "Weihai" I told them. They all looked perplexed so I tried a few different efforts at pronunciation. Wee-hi? Way-hi? Were-hee? Way-hee? One of these worked and two drivers began a quite vigorous tussle to get my bag, pulling it hard back and forth between them. The taller of the two won out, put the bag in the boot and gleefully gestured for me to get in the car.

The car was tiny, grimy and charmless. It had no meter, two-way radio or music radio. It was some sort of dour Chinese make. We set off and shortly pulled in to a petrol station. By this time I'd established the driver had zero English – not even "hello" – which exactly matched my prowess in Mandarin. So we communicated non-verbally. Smiles, thumbs up when he'd finished filling his tank. The offer and the declining of a bottle of water.

Shortly after fuelling, we took an on-ramp to a two-way six lane elevated concrete highway. It was by now getting dark and the only traffic on the massive road were trucks going in both directions. I could see little of the countryside.

I then got into a very cold sweat. I had no idea which hotel I was staying in when we would reach Weihai. The correspondence had never mentioned it. It had been all about the participants, the course objectives and getting my teaching materials to them well in advance so they could translate them. There was a final email about picking me up at Yantai airport. I knew Weihai was a city with two million people. I feared it would probably have hundreds of hotels. But I didn't even know if the course I was teaching would be held in the hotel, or in some government building elsewhere in the city. That seemed quite likely.

I began filling with thoughts of this rapidly shaping as a major incident, with students having come from all over China, only to find that the useless course teacher from Sid-er-knee was lost somewhere in the city. I planned it out in my head that I would check into a hotel with internet, and then send an email to the course directors telling them where I was staying. It would be all OK.

The taxi spluttered along. Weihai turned out to be not some adjacent twin city of Yantai. It turned out to be about a 90 minute journey west along the highway.

We approached the city limits and began passing the grim, featureless high-rise apartment blocks that are all over China. My driver struck up the sign language again. "*Where* in Weihai are we headed?" The shrugged sign language for "well, where?" seemed universal. I'd had 90 minutes to think about what to do when this inevitable moment came.

So I flapped my hand in the 'go forward' manner and said "hotel" a few times, hoping it was an international word. We kept driving and after some time began to reach an obvious downtown area. I saw a large, opulent looking hotel and gestured for him to drive over to it.

I walked into the lobby and explained my predicament to the clerk who spoke very good English. He disappeared into a back room and about two minutes later emerged to tell me that a couple of phone calls to other hotels had located where the course was indeed being run. It was about a block away.

I could not believe my luck. What were the chances of this happening? I asked the clerk to ask my driver what the fare would be. I was anxious I had only the equivalent of \$150 on me. This didn't look like a city that had ATMs that would operate for foreign bank accounts. The answer was about \$25 Australian dollars. This included him having to drive back to Yantai and the fuel costs. I asked for this impossibly low figure to be repeated and finding out that it was true, I gave him about \$80 in RMB out of utter gratitude.

The driver was aghast and then delirious. He pumped my hand furiously. I think he might have even hugged me.

Deirdre and Lesley were still in the hotel, and leaving the next day, so we had tea. They had the light-headedness of prison inmates who were about to be set free from a 10 year sentence of hard labour. They told me obliquely that the next days were going to be 'very full-on' but I could sense them tacitly conspiring to not worry me with any details of what lay ahead.

They'd also had several calls put through by the hotel desk to their room from male escorts keen to provide their 'services'. They were certain that I was about to spend a week swatting off local prostitutes. But by the end of the four days I'd had not so much as a card under my door.

The next four days were unforgettable. Breakfast was at 7.30am in a special room petitioned off for all the students, the course officials and me to eat each of our massive three daily meals. My every movement was chaperoned. It was out of the question that I should ever sit at a table by myself and read or just quietly eat alone to recover from talking all day. If I rose to go to the toilet, one of my translators would immediately jump up and walk with me into the men's. If I wanted to just walk round the hotel to stretch a little, they were always a few steps away.

There were about 40 students, with around equal numbers of men and women. There were some in their twenties but most were middle-aged with one or two in their late 50s. Each day they sat facing me in no-nonsense chairs in three straight rows on a ceramic tiled floor. About four or five times a day, a student would park a gob of phlegm with an audible splat on the tile floor as if it was the most natural thing in the world to do. Someone once told me that Chinese find westerners' habit of carrying around a snot-filled cloth in their pockets all day equally strange.



On the first day, I noticed three men who sat to the side of the class group, mostly looking out the window, bored. They kept coming and going, but then after day 1, never appeared again. On the second last day, I went up to my room on the afternoon tea break and saw them sitting in room near mine, playing cards loudly, smoking and drinking shots with the door open. That night, I asked one of the older students who they were. He spoke quite good English and explained that they were communist party officials who always attended anything involving foreigners to keep an eye on things. It seemed I was apparently no threat to the state.

Each day I commenced teaching at 8am and went through till 10.30am when we had strict 15 minutes for tea and bland Chinese pastries that coated the roof of your mouth with grease. We'd then get going again until 12.30pm when, at the very second the time arrived, everyone would instantly rise and move quickly down to the dining room again. I'd sometimes be mid-sentence.

Afternoons were a carbon copy of the mornings, until we finished at 5pm. Everything I said was translated by one of the translators. This meant that everything took at least twice as long as it normally would have. I found out in the first 15 minutes that all attempts at humour crashed and burned in total silence. The translators paused, came alongside me with pen and paper and asked me to explain what I had just said. They then translated and no one ever laughed or even smiled. I made a big point of encouraging anyone to stop me at any time and ask questions or make contributions from their own experience. But not once did this happen. When I asked the class questions, I had to soon point at someone to get an answer. This never led to any extended discussion. After the first hour, I knew I was in for a very long four days.



Class photo

Each meal saw me seated in the same chair on a large round table with a central lazy susan which rotated the plates of food. The students were all rostered to sit with me, with a translator at the ready. From the moment we sat down the questions started. These would invariably take the form of "Professor, today you told us about [topic here], Can you please tell us some *more* about this now, thank you?" It was relentless. It was as if I was

seen as a human encyclopaedia and they just wanted me to start at the beginning and keep talking.

At lunch on the second day, I began watching a television set mounted high in a corner of the room. Any distraction was welcome. It seemed to be some sort of singing talent quest, with beaming young women singing wholesome songs while dancers twirled ribbons about them. My translator spoke up "Excuse me for asking, Professor, but do you like the singing of the young lady we see now?"

"Yes, very much. She has a lovely voice." I replied. This seemed to animate them. So I quickly added "And she is also very beautiful!" This caused peals of twittering laughter and whispering behind hands. This was the first time I'd glimpsed any sign of some enjoyment among them. So I continued "However, she is not so beautiful as Miss Feng." Miss Feng was one of the students who wore a winsome smile most of the time and from time to time gave me eye contact that suggested a friendly soul.

This time my comment drew gasps and saw prolonged whispering around the table. Miss Feng just beamed.

Each night after dinner, I got into the habit of running a full hot bath and lying in it until the water began to cool. It relaxed me but importantly carved thirty minutes out of the long evenings in my lonely room before I went to bed. The television in the room had no English language programs and I'd finished most of the only book I'd brought with me.

But on the second night, just as I got out of the bath there was a tap on my door. There stood Miss Feng with three other female students. I asked them to wait, quickly dressed and let them into the room. Miss Feng had dressed up, put on make-up and had dabbed on some scent. She was shy to a fault but gently coquettish as the others made small talk about the course being 'so wonderful', how they so much liked me being the teacher and so on.

I quickly turned on my laptop and went to the family photos. Here is my wife! These are my children! Here are *more* pictures of my wife. And here's a photo of our wedding! I am so lucky! And now I must please be excused because I must start my lengthy and detailed preparation for the next day.

Over the next couple of days there were some occasional furtive looks, but the photos seemed to have worked and there were no more visits to my room.

On the last day about 2.30pm, I felt totally drained. Having talked non-stop for three days to a room of people nearly all unwilling or unable to answer questions or contribute discussion is enervating and dispiriting. You plough on like a marathon runner knowing the finish line is still a long way away, but a voice inside you constantly wonders how much is being understood, how much is relevant and whether the translator is accurately conveying what you are explaining. I'd also reached a point where I just didn't think anything more I could have talked about would be relevant to this group.

So I commenced the wind-up talk that always comes at the end of a course. Thanking them for their attendance, wishing them well in what they would go on to do in tobacco control, walking them through some important sources of information they could consult in the future. I then stopped and began to gather my papers.

One of the course officials darted over to the translator who then came to me and said that I must continue until 5pm, some two and a half hours away. We took a tea break and when we returned, I broke them into small groups and told them to develop a list of priorities for action in their local areas, appoint a spokesperson and then report back at 4pm. They resisted, saying I was the expert and they wanted to keep on hearing from me.

But I also resisted, insisting that this was an important way of seeing what they had learned.

At dinner on the third night, a meat dish had me stumped. It was a dark meat but had a texture I couldn't pick. I asked the translator to ask the table if they knew what it was. After some time the verdict came back. "It is a strange animal from the mountains but we do not know its name". Some sort of goat? Deer? Pangolin? The conversation turned to what we eat in Australia and I emphasised seafood. Many of the students were from inland cities and so had limited experience of fish.



**Weihai fish market**

So I asked if at lunch time the next day I could be taken to the city's fish markets. I planned to buy fish that I was told the hotel cooks would be happy to prepare. The markets were in a vast old, dimly lit warehouse. There were some larger outlets but most sellers looked like local fishermen selling their recent catch out of plastic crates. Some had little more than sheets of now wet cardboard spread out on the filthy floors with a dozen or so fish on offer. I saw some crustaceans that I'd not seen before (I later learned they were

mantis prawns) and bought about 15 kg for an impossibly low price. The cooks added them to the banquet that was served on the final night, in salt and pepper style.

The three communist party officials reappeared for the banquet, smoking openly among the students attending a course about tobacco control. I'd been warned that these dinners always saw seemingly interminable toasts and that I would be expected to respond to each one briefly and then toast again and again those who had made the speeches.

This ritual began early into the banquet and the drink that I was expected to drink throughout proceedings was the truly vile local spirit, mao tai. This was utterly foul stuff, so I quickly suggested that they might like to toast in a very special bottle of whisky I had in my room. I fetched an unopened litre bottle of Glenfiddich single malt I'd bought at the outbound duty free. When it came to the next toast I put a tot about a single knuckle deep in my glass, toasted and tipped it back.

The apparent boss communist then took the bottle, poured an almost full glass, toasted me and then sculled the whole glass in a few gulps to raucous cheers from his comrades. He then gestured for me to repeat the toast. I made pathetic supplicating gestures and declined. So they then finished off the bottle, quickly becoming totally cactus in the process.

A week or so after I arrived back home, a typewritten letter arrived at work from China. It was from Miss Feng. She spoke no English, so I assumed that the letter had been written for her, probably by a street letter writer. It started like this "Dear Professor Simon, Every morning I wake at 4am and cry 40,000 tears thinking about you." It went on to explain that her heart ached for me, that she longed to see me very soon, and that my happiness was her only thought.

I'd described the episode in Weihai to my wife when I came back, so I showed her the letter, commenting that this sort of appreciation might be something she could consider expressing each morning on waking too. I did not write back. Two weeks later a small parcel arrived. This contained a greeting from Ms Feng and an embroidered cushion cover showing two fluffy kittens embracing. Just the sort of thing I love. Again I showed Trish, who this time chased me around the house with a pretend meat axe accusing me of being a philanderer with this poor, misguided woman.

Again, I didn't reply, but when the third missive arrived, I wrote back. The third letter came in a bigger parcel which contained a set of elaborately embroidered double bed sheets. A Chinese colleague at work explained that these were wedding sheets and that Miss Feng was becoming more explicit in her hopes. I wrote a short note explaining that I was very happily married and that she must understand that nothing could come of her hopes for us.

I often wondered since if my indiscretion in commenting on her beauty may have triggered the commencement of a honey trap scenario being played out. Chinese friends suggested that it was almost certainly a woman taking her chances at having met a foreigner whom she interpreted as being interested, and assumed would have means worth pursuing. But they emphasised that more orchestrated honey traps were very common

in trying to compromise government officials, businessmen and perhaps even academics. Deirdre and Lesley's overtures from accommodating male escorts may have fitted that pattern as well.

The letters stopped, but I sometimes wonder if Miss Feng ever tells this story, and how different it might be to mine.

# In Iceland with Thor the Norse God

On the third day of the course, I waited in the foyer of the School of Public Health for the students to emerge from the lecture theatre, walk up the corridor and meet me where I was taking them to a Thai noodle cafe in Newtown for lunch. As Thor approached I saw one, then two more, then another one and finally three women dart to the doors of their rooms along the corridor to peer up the corridor and check him out as he passed by.

Thorgrimur Thrainsson had come all the way from Iceland to Sydney to attend my annual course on tobacco control. It ran over three days, and in a typical year about 10 external students would sit in with my 30 or so coursework masters students, often bringing rich experience from their own countries that fed additional material into our discussions and problem-based learning.

Thorgrimur was the person in charge of tobacco control in the Icelandic department of health and had seen my course advertised on an international listserv to which we both belonged. Born in 1959, he had developed a few other interests as well. When I met him, he had already written several books for children and today has written 34, including seven listed among the 100 Best Books of the Century published by the Icelandic Publishers' Association. He is the only author in Iceland to have had two books in first and second place on the Icelandic Record Sale List. As if this did not make him intriguing enough, he also wrote the *How to Make Your Wife Happy – Sexual and Practical Tips for Men*, with Wikipedia noting it was “the most talked-about book in Iceland in 2007”.

He was also no slouch at football, being capped for Iceland 17 times playing defender between 1977-1990 and playing 12 games for his Premier League Club in the UEFA Champions League.

In 2016 he announced his intention to run for President of Iceland but pulled out when Iceland's football team (he was a key part of the backroom crew) made strong progress in Europe, qualifying for the 2018 World Cup.

From the moment he stepped into our building on the first morning of the course and asked the first person he saw if they could direct him to my office, he had caused a frisson of excitement among many of the women in the building. A nervously excited colleague led him upstairs. It had been the same on the first night of the course when he came to my house with the other external students for dinner. My wife pulled me into our bedroom and

said, almost in a trance, “Simon. That man from Iceland is like a Norse god. Who *is* he?” So, from then on, he was always referred to as Thor.

The corridor scene on that last day was like a scene out of a choreographed 1950s swoon movie, when a handsome crooner like Elvis would walk toward the camera singing a sultry ballad while mesmerized, captivated female fans would helplessly fall in behind him as his spell drew them out from doorways or behind stage furniture. I forgot to add that he has also been a fashion model, and actor and a prominent motivational speaker.



Source: <https://grapevine.is/news/2015/11/24/author-steps-forward-as-presidential-candidate/>

He and I got on immediately and in 2003 he emailed, inviting me to take a side trip to Reykjavik after I attended a meeting in Utrecht in the Netherlands. The Iceland government would pay all expenses. I'd give a few talks. It sounded like a tough, rotten gig.

Until then, I'd paid almost no attention to Iceland. I thought: snow, central glaciers, blonde, stoic Nordic people maybe a bit dull from living through interminable, dark, freezing winters. That was about it. But after spending just five days there, I was spellbound. I never hesitate today to immediately describe it was the most unexpected, unique, intriguing, endlessly dazzlingly beautiful place I've ever visited.

Thor picked me up around 10pm from my flight from London. It was summer time and in the midnight sun northern latitude there was the barest trace of dusk. Over the summer, true nightfall lasted only a couple of hours from around 1am, never getting entirely dark. We drove 50km into Reykjavik along a modern highway, passing vast acres of lichen-covered lava flows, with occasional areas of pasture growing in thin soil. Trees were uncommon, other than those planted near houses. The soft light and green lichen across vast flat plains with occasional cows grazing imbued the place with an unexpected, calming tranquility.

In the late 12<sup>th</sup> century when Iceland was first settled by Norwegians, it was heav-

ily forested, but extensive deforestation occurred during the “little ice age” from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century where vast forested areas were felled for heating and construction. Today, there are only a few stands of birch remaining in isolated areas, apart from trees in settlements. Erosion from deforestation and sheep farming caused widespread deterioration of the soil, with many farms being abandoned.

Reykjavik is a small city by any international standard. Today, it is home to about two-thirds of the national population of just 338,000. Most buildings are timber-walled or stone. There was a lightness about everything, with pristine air, perfectly clean streets, lots of unique artisanal shops, cafes, bars and parks. During summer the narrow streets in the downtown area thronged with people of all ages. I’d never seen a more strikingly alive and buzzing community.

He’d booked me into a very small, five story boutique hotel, Hotel 101, in the 101 area. So many hotels you stay in are cookie-cut from mass hotel chain algorithms where accountants, market researchers and hotel architects configure the optimal fit of room size, view and willingness to pay that will yield the best occupancy rates within single digit accuracy to please shareholders. These places have no personality: nothing to draw you back, or compel you to describe them to others.

I suspect that this hotel was expensive, but it was unlike any hotel I’d ever stayed in. It was like being in a secret, utterly secluded designer showroom bedroom. The large window opened right onto the postcard harbour, with its fishing boats, yachts and gulls. There was a small selection of eclectic CDs with a high-end miniature sound system. After going straight to bed, I woke at 4am, made some tea and sat in a wonderfully comfortable unique chair, transfixed by the stillness and light of the early morning. I put on Daniel Lanois’ *Shine* album that had just been released and which I’d never heard. I knew immediately it would always be an album I would often play: one of those indelible pieces of music that transports you each time you hear it, back to the place when you first heard it. Its lo-fi, pedal steel, spacy tracks were perfect for the setting and the hour.

At lunch the next day, after I’d given a couple of talks to researchers and health department people, Thor asked me what I’d like to eat. “What you eat in Iceland” I told him. “Something local”, imagining herring pickled or cooked in an Icelandic way or smoked local meats preserved for the long winters. He took me to a small restaurant with a view over the sea and ordered several dishes while we talked about our lives and families. The first dish arrived. It was a small spread of thin strips of a dark meat, cooked in a light vinegary sauce, a little thicker than a carpaccio cut. It was as tender a flesh as I’d ever eaten. “So what is it?” he played with me. I guessed it might have been a prime cut of reindeer backstrap or fillet. No. Perhaps the dark meat of a local goose? No.

It was .... wait for this ... puffin, those impossibly cute, small gull-like seabirds with their beautiful half-moon red and black striped beaks and wise little eyes. I’d assumed that they would be protected and that people would all recoil from killing and eating them because of their iconic beauty and cuteness. Well not at all, sunshines. It turned out they are commonly eaten in Iceland and on restaurant menus, listed as *lundi*, all over the country.



A few dishes later, a decent-sized steak arrived. It was as succulent as I'd ever tasted and assumed it must have been prime local beef. But no. It was whale. I thought Iceland might have been a signatory to some global treaty against whaling as I knew it had progressive social and environmental policies. Thor confirmed this, explaining that entrepreneurs anticipating the ban had stored tonnes of whale meat in refrigerated containers which were being very slowly consumed in the years since, as we had just done. If ever I'd experienced true, deep ambivalence, this was the moment.

The next day he drove me inland and north, with one of his colleagues, Vidar. We first passed through the 6km tolled tunnel under the Hvalfjörður fjord. We drove on and on over perfectly maintained roads, passing farms, pumice stone covered beaches and hamlets. The Icelandic infrastructure was state-of-the-art everywhere we went. The economy is based on fishing and bauxite smelting, using the endless reserves of geothermal power on the island. The country is highly affluent.

About 4pm we stopped at a small town, Stykkishólmur. There was hardly anyone to be seen in the main street. "Everyone will be down at the town baths" he explained. We walked there to join them. Like many towns throughout Iceland, this one had thermal hot spring fed public baths. There were some small pools as well as an Olympic-sized one and hundred-some townsfolk sat about in the wonderfully warm water in what I was told was a daily ritual for many in the town. In the pool with me was the service station operator, a school teacher, the mayor and a bunch of teenagers.



**Stykkishólmur**

Being a national identity, Thor was known by literally everyone. It took him ages to walk from the showers to the pool area, with almost everyone stopping him for a chat. At a

café where we had coffee, the next table was the renowned photographer Sigurgeir Sigurjónsson, whose *Lost in Iceland* landscapes grace the bookshelves of many who've been to the country. It seemed that sort of place where you would encounter such talented people quite regularly.



**Wodin and Thor**

The next day on our way back to Reykjavik, we went via Snæfellsjökull glacier. Thor borrowed two snowmobiles and we took off fast up the vast glacier in snowsuits, goggles and helmets. Several times in snow we were in total white-out situations, unable to see our hands in front of our faces. This was my first time in such conditions and the other two were highly amused by my anxiety and disorientation.

On my last day I went to a bookshop. An astonishing array of international authors were on sale, all translated into Icelandic. But more striking was the vast number of Icelandic writers in a dedicated section. I tried to imagine an Australian city with the same sized population as Iceland – let's say Newcastle in NSW, which has over half a million – churning out even a small fraction of the output in the last 150 years that I saw in the bookshop that day. I couldn't think of a single example, googled "Writers Newcastle Australia" and found none.

Meanwhile, Icelandic libraries' data show that a book by Thor is borrowed once every 5 minutes.

Unforgettable.

# An unforgettable dinner in Istanbul

Istanbul has wonderful nightlife, although Erdogan's agenda may soon end much of that. I've been there four times and been showered with famous Turkish hospitality. My oldest and best friend there is a senior professor who, last time I was there, was running a conference at which I was speaking. There was always going to be a great dinner sometime that week. But this one would be unforgettable.

She invited her best friends at the conference to a restaurant about 400 metres from the conference centre in the Taksim district. It was in a quite narrow, newish high rise building of about 10 floors, cheek-by-jowl between other similar anodyne structures. We caught the lift from street level up several floors. There were about twelve of us: several locals, a French woman, me and my wife Trish, and others I can't remember. There were maybe four men among the twelve. I landed at a part of the table with great conversationalists.

There was feverish talk about the mess Turkey was in. All the Turks at the table were incendiary about the creeping erosion of the secular state under Erodgan. Angry accounts were given about daughters having to wear headscarfs for university entrance interviews or be instantly rejected. About jailed journalists and academics and the small-mindedness of those in power. The women were feisty feminists with commanding jobs in a male dominated culture. They all drank alcohol and bossed the waiters around.

About an hour into the meal, the restaurant was full and people were loose and enjoying themselves. The two women opposite me suddenly said emphatically "Oh. My. God." They were staring past our side of the table and looking through the restaurant windows into the building next door.

There, not five metres away, was a room with the lights on. A gossamer thin white curtain had been drawn, but with the lights on inside, we could see everything in the room. The curtain presumably prevented them from looking out clearly. A very overweight middle aged naked man and a considerably younger, large breasted and full-bodied woman, also naked, had entered the room, perhaps from the bathroom. They set about their tasks. The quick consensus was that she was a prostitute he had called out to his hotel. If we were wrong about this, the man was punching well above his weight if this was his wife or girlfriend.

Our table had the box seat for the spectacle, but there was no hiding what they were up to from almost every vantage point in our restaurant. Very quickly those on other tables got up, brought their drinks with them and crowded round behind our table to get the next best view. Young couples, small dinner groups, a few elderly couples and the staff all joined the throng.

Every new phase of the performance drew gales of laughter. When she took him in her mouth, some cheered and roared. "It's a wonder she can locate it under all the fat!" "Ah, the first course is now being taken". When the missionary position changed to rear entry and we saw the man's thin little bottom gamely pounding away below his considerable back, there were lots of eewws and "oh my gods!" and goodness knows what else being said in Turkish.

This was the first time I had ever watched live sex in a room full of mostly strangers. Or actually, in any context.

I had these thoughts.

First, I'm confident that, presented with a questionnaire on what we would do in such a hypothetical context, nearly everyone in our group would have not hesitated to affirm that, *of course*, they would have asked for the restaurant curtain to be drawn, or dispatched a waiter into the next building to tell the occupants to please turn off their lights. But presented as we were with the opportunity to watch proceedings - unknown to the performers - no one could look away. The asymmetry of consent between the watching and the watched just flipped the ethical compass for everyone. "They don't know they're being watched. We don't know who they are. We'll never see them again, What's the harm?" would have run the rationalisations.

Far more than that, everyone just roared at the spectacle. Far from there being any awkwardness, everyone instantly decided this was spectacular luck we'd chanced on. No one seemed to spend a nanosecond surreptitiously checking non-verbally with others how they should behave. It was uncontrollable, communal, bawdy unity that had been instantly let off its leash.

I wondered too about whether the reaction of the room would have been any different had the performers in our hotel window theatre looked very different. What if we had decided that they were two young honeymooners, with the bridal gown draped over a chair? Or a sweet, long-married couple from the Turkish countryside, in town for a short holiday having saved up for months? Or elderly tourists, lovingly pleasuring each other in the privacy of a hotel room during a holiday? What if the man had been lithe, muscular and handsome instead of fat and out of shape? What if their ages had been similar? Would any of this have changed our response?

It struck me that the essence of the hilarity went something like this: hiring a prostitute is a private and generally clandestine, knowingly shame worthy activity, nearly always done by men with the power to hire women to do something that many people routinely experience as a mutually exchanged gift from someone with love and affection for them. It's something the man would have probably been hugely embarrassed about, had he known

of the audience. Embarrassed about his cover being blown and about his less than film-star like body. So the laughter here was about the combination of the shattering of the man's hopes to keep his private vices private and the sort of mirth occasionally experienced when we experience or see the wind or a wardrobe malfunction expose body parts in an everyday situation.

His innocent misjudgement about the lighting had transformed him from a man with the power and means to buy sex to an unwitting public cuckold, providing entertainment to a roomful of diners.

Most of our only experiences of watching others having sex is via filmed pornography, occasionally almost unavoidable to anyone using a computer. There, unless the acts are filmed and uploaded without the consent of those involved, the performances are consumed as inauthentic and clearly commercial: they are doing-it-for-money, or purposefully, consensually exhibitionist, in the case of amateur uploaded porn. But here we witnessed a couple in action who were quite unaware that their private, transacted intimacy in fact had an audience.

So public virtues, as might be expressed in a serious-minded conversation about respect for privacy, the ethics of the right thing to do in everyday life or of the case for prostitution took a running jump against the power of private vices – here, the temptation of force-fed voyeurism, of a box-seat on what goes behind closed doors.

I've told the story dozens of times, and have even had friends say "I hear that you had an *amazing* dinner in Istanbul once", wanting to hear the details for themselves. It seems there's a little voyeur in most of us.

# Entering paradise

“Have you been here before?” asked our taxi driver, as we waited for the mechanical iron gates to open. We hadn’t. “Well then, you are about to enter paradise, my friends.” This we would quickly discover, was quite true.

It was early April in 2014, and along with 11 others – several who’d brought partners – I had been selected to spend a month in residency at Villa Serbelloni in Bellagio on a small promontory where Lakes Como and Lecco meet in Lombardy in northern Italy. The huge two-story villa originally dating from the 15<sup>th</sup> century (although much changed since) with panoramic views over the two lakes was bequeathed to the Rockefeller Foundation in 1959 by the American Principessa deal Torre e Tasso to establish a centre “for purposes connected with the promotion of international understanding”.



**The view from the top of the estate**

In the years since, many hundreds of writers, researchers, artists, musicians, advocates and activists, government and international agency officials, and former politicians have attended either highly focused specialized meetings lasting a few days, or been selected as residents who would spend a month working on a project. These, like mine, could be a book, an artistic or musical creation, or a planned campaign or event. None were related to the others' projects, so we twelve lived together, working away alone all day in our tranquil studies on our individual projects, and coming together for meals and pre-dinner seminars twice a week, where each of us would take a turn to try and explain our work to the others.

In my group there was a devilishly handsome Peruvian former politician, Francisco Sagasti, writing a book on the relevance today of the fifteenth century philosopher Francis Bacon; a drone geek from Harvard, Patrick Meier, who had helped coordinate massive drone and social media intelligence on the 2010 Haitian earthquake, after his girlfriend was caught up in it. His 2015 book, *Digital Humanitarians: how big data is changing the face of humanitarian response* was on how drones and big data could be used for humanitarian purposes. There were books being written by a Columbia University urban planner (Robert Beauregard), a Filipino novelist (Menchu Aquino Sarmiento), a wonderful Canadian in the next room to us, Elin Kelsey, was writing a book hoping to inspire children to avoid nihilism in an age of rapidly advancing planetary destruction, and New Yorker Anne Nelson, whose play, *The Guys*, about firemen who died in the 911 terrorism, had been an off-Broadway hit starring Sigourney Weaver and Anthony LaPaglia. Anne's 2017 book, *Suzanne's Children – a daring rescue in Nazi Paris* was being written there. The story of efforts to save the lives of Jewish children in Nazi occupied Paris, it is quite a masterpiece of vast research and compelling writing. There were campaigners for South African children's literacy (Mark Heywood) and peaceful coexistence in Israel (Elise Bernhardt) and a London artist of Nigerian heritage, Mary Evans, who worked on fine silhouette illustrations of the African diaspora in the UK. A transgender man, Scout, whose name plate on his room door read 'NFN Scout' (no first name) was involved in advocacy to reduce smoking within his community.

I arrived having written 30,000 words of a book on how Australia had succeeded in legislating plain tobacco packaging. I wrote that much again over the month, sitting down to write after breakfast each day and going through to four in the afternoon, when I'd go off to play tennis or walk a few hundred metres into the village with some of the others to a favourite *enoteca* for wine, cheese and olives or bask on the lawns in the early spring afternoon sun.

The vast grounds of 53 acres included stonework from Roman times, the ruins of a fortress built in the same period (mostly destroyed in the 12<sup>th</sup> century) and a chapel from the 11<sup>th</sup> century, artificial grottos constructed in the walls of the hill in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, as well as the remains of various buildings built across the more than 500 years in which the estate had been occupied since the middle of the last millennium.





**L-R: Robert Beauregard, Anne Nelson, Francisco Sagasti, Mark Heyward, Trish Kirby, me. Photo by Debra Billow**

We all arrived on different days until gradually the group was complete. After about two weeks, a new cohort arrived which included the American novelist Patrick Flannery (author of *Absolution*, *Fallen Land*, and *I Am No One*) and the Harvard epidemiologist David Hunter. A couple of days after we arrived, a new face appeared among us. Agnes Gund – Aggie as she insisted we call her -- was older than the rest of us. After her first appearance at breakfast, I went to my room and googled her, intrigued.

Aggie is a huge figure in the New York art establishment, being President Emerita of the Museum of Modern Art, recipient of various presidential awards and appointments, and collector of over 2000 paintings. She sold a Roy Lichtenstein in 2017 for \$165m and used much of the proceeds, as she had done for many years, for art philanthropy and education. Needless to say, she was very, very rich. Beyond any of our comprehensions.

We all became rapidly entranced by this warm and fascinating woman. She dressed each day in track suits and sneakers, showed no signs of her wealth, and never dropped names or told self-important stories. If you were lucky enough to have her at your table, she was always more interested in others than in holding forth about her own amazing interests and experiences.

Few could resist trying to gently coax her into talking about her life and those we assumed she must have mixed with. We learned that she was good friends with David Rockefeller, who had apparently insisted she visit the Bellagio centre. Her conversa-



tion suggested a highly determined and focused person, preoccupied by her passions for encouraging young artists. She seemed to move through life quite indifferent to the lustre of some of the personalities she knew or had met.

Three stories she told epitomised this.

In her unhurried delivery, she told our table one evening of how she had been looking in a Fifth Avenue antique shop for a suitable trunk or box she needed for some purpose.

“Well, there was quite an interest in a corner of the shop over a man who had a small crowd around him looking for an autograph. I looked at him and I had no idea who he was, so when the people had dispersed I went over to him and said ‘excuse me, but I’m wondering who you are’. He said to me that he was a musician. So I still didn’t know. He was dressed in some quite strange clothes so I asked him ‘are you a jazz musician?’. He looked at me as if ‘heavens, get me away from this silly old fool who doesn’t know who I am’ and then he left the shop.”

“So I then walked down the street to another similar shop and there he was inside again, this time surrounded by even more people annoying him. By now he knew me, and he came over and said ‘let’s get out of here’.”

Everyone at the table was wondering who it must have been, so we asked her. She thought for a moment.

“It was ... now ... what’s his name ... what is it . I know ... Keith. Keith ... Richards” she finally remembered, still seemingly not really understanding who it was she had met.

A second story saw a neighbour, also a serious art collector, phone and ask if she could bring around a man to Aggie’s home who was very interested in art and who was currently looking at the neighbour’s collection.

“Sure, bring him over” she said. “So the two arrived and it was true, the charming man was very interested and knowledgeable about art. But then I see my daughter, who’s living with me, jumping around in the kitchen making sign language at me. ‘What is it?’ I ask her. ‘Don’t you know who that man is, she says to me’. Well no, I didn’t. It was Steve Martin, who I’m supposed to know is some famous movie actor.”

Another night, she was lamenting the racism and class snobbery in some of the circles in which she moved. She told us she had been staying at a friend’s place near Martha’s Vineyard, a mecca for New York’s wealthy, north of the city. Bianca Jagger was staying there too and would swim and sunbathe topless on the boat deck in front of the house.

“Well, one day” Aggie told us “the phone goes and it’s a neighbour. The woman was ringing to complain that my friend was allowing the hired help to parade around topless, lowering the tone of the place. This appalling woman could only see that a dark-skinned woman must be a servant and not a friend.”

One day at breakfast Aggie talked of her frustration that she couldn't get her laptop to print to the office printer and efforts by others had also failed. She said she was going to get her own printer flown in from New York. I suggested it would be far easier to buy a new one in the town or down the lake in Como, a short ferry ride away. I started into advice about how much cheaper it would be to buy a new one locally than fly one in from New York, but quickly realised that thrift of a hundred dollars or so was unlikely to be pivotal in her thinking.

There seemed to be an unspoken rule that people did not talk much about their work or projects at meals, our evening pre-dinner cocktails or in the after-dinner soirees each evening where we'd often gather around a Bechstein grand piano while Anne and my wife Trish played Rogers and Hammerstein and Cole Porter songs for us to sing. Anne sang soprano lieder as well, quite beautifully. Trish charmed everyone with her ukulele. (see her singing Vance Joy's *Riptide* here.)

On our way to Bellagio, we transited through Milan. In a bookshop, among a wall of paper masks, I saw a George Clooney looking down on us. I knew he had a house near Bellagio and thought 10 euros might lead to all sorts of possibilities. Each night before dinner, we'd all meet in a drawing room for drinks. On the second night I arrived wearing the mask. All the women immediately queued to drape their arms around George for intimate photographs. One got me to hold her, carrying her across the threshold of her bedroom, while she looked longingly into George's eyes.



George Clooney with Trish Kirby

In the last week we were there, a waiter from the dining room, Francesco, quietly asked if he might borrow the mask for a day or two. Of course, I said. "What do you have in mind, can I ask?" Francesco also worked some nights in a restaurant in the town.

"Well, I have served Mr Clooney many times. But Mr Clooney has never served me. So I will get one of my colleagues to wear the mask and serve me at a table for a photograph."

We got to know all the waiters over the month, and quickly developed affectionate familiarity with several of them, feeling almost awkward that they were waiting on us. They showed us pictures of their children and told us about their lives and loves. One evening, warmed by the wonderful wines that were served each night, and swept along by the palpable ease of everyone with each other, I was seated next to Pilar Palacia, the *tres elegant*, immaculately dressed Spanish woman who managed the centre, always looking like she'd just stepped off the set of an Almodovar film. I asked whether our group, with its very obvious ease with each other, was typical of the clusters who came together at the centre.

She said that there was a lot of variation, but ours was up there with the most convivial. I pressed her for stand-out stories at the other end of the spectrum. One resident had once checked in, then was never seen again. When she was contacted she apologized that she had quietly left the centre without advising anyone, feeling stricken with anxiety about what she feared lay ahead with the intimidating company.

Another group had a man who was openly disdainful of the quality of the wine served in the dining room (there were different wines served every night, mostly quite superb). So after a few days he took to bringing his own bottle, bought in the town, and consuming it in front of everyone without sharing. What nationality was he, I asked Pilar. "I think you can guess" she said immediately, with perfect diplomacy. I suggested Bernard Shaw's aphorism that the US had passed from barbarism to decadence without an intervening period of civilization might have been apposite. I caught a gentle smile. She did not demur.

Before we arrived, I'd seen the list and some details about the people we'd be living with for a month and was a little daunted. I assumed all of them would be renaissance intellects who could hold forth on almost any subject with erudition and verve. The manifold ignorance of the Australian bumpkins among them would quickly become obvious to all. But that chimera is one that invariably shatters quickly when you spend time with even the most revered of people. Everyone has their own palette of insecurities, preoccupations and foibles. The centre of most people's lives and the things that they most want to talk about when they are relaxed are their families, their adventures, their joys and passions. Several of our group were quite shy. Some had writers' block that upset them, but those I will always remember were story tellers and those whose work was driven by passion to share it with the world and change things for the good. When it came time for them to talk about their work, several located their interest in what they were doing with deeply personal stories, imbued with their values and hopes for how they could make highly focused contributions to making the world a better and fairer place.

The many hours we all spent together after our daytime working hours were over was when we got to know one another. Wine, food and singing around the piano drew nearly everyone together most nights.

The Bellagio experience changed my life. I knew that each day after breakfast I could sit at a desk with lightning fast internet, overlooking one of the world's most famous mountain lake views, and have no interruptions all day. An espresso machine in a nearby room kept me spiked, and I brought lunch in a bag back to my study after breakfast. The words poured out. It was a writer's heaven.

When I got back to Australia, I knew that I had hit a wall. What I'd been able to do in Bellagio (and on an earlier seven-month sabbatical in Lyon in France in 2006) was far more satisfying than anything I'd been able to do throughout most of my academic career. Producing long-form writing every day across weeks and months was what I had always longed to do as a researcher. I envied those few who were able to do it in academic life, avoiding research and teaching leadership positions as I hadn't. These sabbatical experiences showed me that I might be able to structure my life so that after 35 years of staccato, interrupted writing, where priority had to be given to all the other tasks of academic work, I could spend what was left of my life doing what I had always wanted to do.

I saw a financial advisor who within minutes assured me that I could afford to retire right away if I wanted to. We wouldn't have to sell our house until I was 92 she calculated. I made the decision before I left her office.

I've never felt more stimulated and content.

# Why did you get into this work?

Across my career, I've often been asked by interviewers "What got you involved in the sort of work you do? What drives you to keep at it?" Depending on who's asking, there's an occasional edge to the questions presaging that a little probing will lift the lid on a deep moralistic busybody, driven by a barely disguised missionary zeal to lead sinful smokers off the pernicious path of self-destruction and into a wholesome life of glistening health.

In the 1970s, when I first started working in health, I'd sometimes sense the same assumptions in people I talked to at parties. When they asked and I answered that I was working in tobacco control, I'd feel the hesitancy: he probably doesn't drink. Never smoked dope. No chance of any sex with this guy. He probably thinks the music's too loud. Steer well clear.

Early anti-smoking efforts in the years before strong evidence rolled out that smoking was deadly were deeply mired in puritanism and ideas that the body was a temple from where the devil and his work had to be driven out. The evils of drink, smoking, masturbation, temptresses, cads and reading novels travelled together in a morals crusade that extolled abstention from fun and pleasure. Purse-lipped temperance groups picketing pubs, jokes about Methodists who eschewed dancing and the rest, and the way that smoking and under-age drinking were pretty reliable markers of kids who were often more edgy and interesting than their heads-down classmates all coalesced in those days to make any mention of tobacco control a tad suspect.

When the Niagara of evidence became undeniable that smoking was out on its own as a cause of disease affecting almost every part of the body, the moralists' chorus began being joined by doctors and health authorities who had long also brought us warnings about other dangers that we were thankful to receive. Just as no-one thinks of a lifesaver at the beach warning about sharks or dangerous rips as a moralist or killjoy, the overwhelming evidence that smoking was harmful radically changed the complexion of anti-smoking efforts.

Seventy years along from these early studies, research has repeatedly confirmed that around 90% of smokers regret ever starting. While some die-hard smokers still want to trot out their favourite talismanic self-exempting beliefs ("plenty of people smoke all their lives and don't die early", "everything's bad for you these days", "what about all the air pollution we breathe in every day?", "I keep fit, so get the nasty stuff out of my system")

most smokers today are reluctant, embarrassed and apologetic. A huge majority have tried to quit and I've never met a smoker who hoped their children would take it up. There can be few if any products with such a near-universal disloyalty and resentment among their consumers.

Most occupations and professions don't attract the sort of questioning I described earlier. I can't imagine ever saying to an accountant "so what was it that got you interested in accounting when you started?" or asking a dry cleaner "you've been doing this for 35 years ... can I ask what the fascination is?" We mainly assume that it's the money, the security and comfortable routine, inertia and the quality of working environments that keeps people in their jobs or attracts them into something else.

We don't think to ask surgeons or oncologists why they do what they do. It's obvious that people likely to die from cancer often desperately want to try and avoid that happening, or give themselves some extra time. But it's also obvious that most people need little convincing that prevention is as, or more important than curing or treating. Yet while the thought of people railing against the work of lung cancer surgeons is unthinkable, all across my career I've seen bizarre and sad little pro-smoking groups form, flutter and fade and heard smokers calling radio programs to whine about feeling under siege.

The "explain yourself" imperative is generally reserved for those who choose to do odd, anti-social, demanding, revolting, seamy or dangerous work: undertakers, midnight to dawn radio hosts, sex workers, plumbers who wade in raw sewage, skyscraper window cleaners. With daily smoking prevalence in Australia down to a whisker over 12%, and 90% of smokers regretting ever having started and often highly supportive of policies that might help them smoke less or quit, we are looking at about a mere 1.2% of the adult population who are contented smokers and might think it somehow strange or offensive that I've spent 40 years helping to foment this situation.

So when I'm occasionally asked the "why?" question these days, that perspective on the likely attitudes of those listening to the interview (it's usually on radio) guides my response. I'm never tempted to try and repudiate the time-warped, neo-puritanical framing of the question as if it's a serious, widespread critique. Instead, I steer the conversation over to considering the importance of and challenges in hobbling and discrediting the upstream formidable forces that keep promoting smoking and doing all they can to defeat, dilute and delay effective tobacco control policies capable of reducing smoking on a wide scale.

I've worked in public health since late 1974. I've focussed on a range of issues that extend from tobacco control, gun control, helping people better understand the risks and benefits of adopting (or avoiding) certain medical procedures such as having prostate specific antigen test or getting immunised) or avoiding (or not) exposure to allegedly "dangerous" technology like mobile phones and transmission towers and wind turbines.

The common thread in all of these issues are the efforts of industries, lobby groups and determined, often obsessed individuals to thwart evidence-based public health policy and practice which threatens these industries or the cult-like belief systems of people who eat, live and breathe hatred of a public health strategy.

A classic analytical matrix in public health is the epidemiological triad that was first applied to the effort to understand and then better control infectious and vector-borne diseases like cholera and malaria: the agent, host, environment and vector matrix.

In the control of malaria, we put a lot of effort into understanding the agent that causes the disease, the five types of plasmodium parasite that multiply in human red blood cells of humans and in the mosquito intestine. Agent control involves efforts to develop a vaccine which would prevent a person being bitten by a mosquito carrying the parasite from developing malaria. One such vaccine first passed human trials in 2017, possibly indicating a revolution in efforts to control this terrible disease.

Those who are infected with the plasmodium parasite are known as “hosts”. Here, control efforts are concerned with educating those who live in areas where malaria is endemic to take efforts to protect themselves from being bitten by covering-up at times when they are most likely to be bitten, wearing repellent, using insecticides and being diligent about destroying or spraying mosquito breeding water like that which collects inside old tyres, cans, and water storage. These breeding areas are known as the “environments” that need to be mapped, inspected and controlled. A wider definition of environments would embrace considerations of the cultural, economic and political environments in endemic malaria areas. If local health authorities had no funds to support malaria control, this would be importantly identified in a malaria control analysis and efforts taken to raise such funding and support.

Finally, the female anopheles mosquito is known as the “vector” responsible for the plasmodium parasite agent which enters the bloodstream of hosts. Vector control starts with studying the life-course and behaviour of these insects in attempts to wreck their efforts to bite people.

In tobacco control, the vector whose every waking moment is concerned with maximising the number of smokers (hosts) who consume tobacco (the agent) is the tobacco industry. So a large part of my work has been involved in exposing and shaming the industry, its acolytes and those in politics who take its donations and hospitality, oppose or water down potent legislation and collude with its ambitions to keep as many people smoking as possible.

The “what has kept you going in this issue all these years” question is easily answered in two ways. First, smoking rates in both adults and kids are at all-time lows, and showing no signs of not falling even further. Lung cancer, a rare disease at the beginning of the twentieth century, rose to become the leading cause of cancer death by the 1960s. But in Australia, male lung cancer rates stopped rising in the early 1980s and have continued to fall, some 20 years after we first saw large-scale quitting happening about the huge publicity was given to the bad news about health. Female lung cancer rates look to have plateaued at a level that makes their peak just a few years ago reach only half the peak rates that men reached over 30 years ago.

Continually falling disease and death rates from tobacco caused diseases have made tobacco control the poster child of chronic disease control, envied by people working today in areas like obesity and diabetes control. It’s been such a privilege to have contributed to

many of the major policy developments that have happened since the 1970s: advertising bans, the highest priced cigarettes in the world, large scale quit campaigns, smoke free legislation in workplaces, bars and restaurants, plain packaging, graphic health warnings on packs, bans on retail displays of tobacco products, and a duty free limit of just one pack.

Second, the mendacity of those working in the tobacco industry throughout my career has strongly motivated me to keep hard at it. In the decades before the evidence on tobacco's harms were established, anyone working for the tobacco industry might have as easily been working for any industry. They were selling a product with strong demand and surrounded by convivial social rituals. The companies employed many people and contributed to communities via sponsorships and benefaction. What was not to like?

But with the advent of the bad news, the industry rapidly descended into decades of the very worst of corporate malfeasance. Those who stayed with the industry or came into it did so with their eyes wide open about what they were being rewarded to do every day and so were open game to account for their actions and the consequences. In the face of all they now knew, the industry doubled down. It conspired with other companies to deny the harms, it lied that nicotine was not addictive, shredded oceans of incriminatory internal documents, corrupted science through tame consultants and scientists, bribed politicians, promoted pro-smoking doctors to the media, donated to political parties likely to support its goals, bought up community support via vast sponsorship of national and international sport and culture, chemically manipulated cigarettes to make them more addictive, researched and targeted children in its advertising and promotions, relentlessly attacked any tobacco control proposal that threatened in any way to harm its bottom-line, cynically supported limp tobacco control policies that it knew were useless but made it look good, and supplied products to agents known to be involved in illicit, black market trade while unctuously railing against that trade in public, posturing as good corporate citizens.

The industry has long been peerless in occupying the throne of corporate ethical bottom feeders. This popular and political understanding is now so pervasive that its conduct has become an almost universal comparator for corporate pariah status. If you google "just like the tobacco industry" you will be deluged by a rogues' gallery of other industries that have lost public trust.

Shining 10,000 watt arc lights on that conduct has been of immense importance to tobacco control. It is rare today to find a politician who is happy to share a photo opportunity with any tobacco company. When I interviewed Australia's former health minister and attorney general, Nicola Roxon, for my book (with Becky Freeman) about Australia's historic adoption of plain packaging, she emphasised that "everyone hates the tobacco industry" and that this understanding steeled the government to brace against the industry's best efforts to defeat the legislation.

In 2018, all companies are engaged in high profile rebirthing displays where they openly acknowledge that smoking is deadly and argue that they want to do all they can to encourage smokers and future smokers to switch to electronic vapourised nicotine products like e-cigarettes. After around only a decade of widespread use, they have declared that consensus already exists that these products are far, far safer than combusted tobacco. The most authoritative summary of the evidence on this to date, the 2018 report of the US



National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine, shows this consensus is very far from the case.

While spokespeople working down one corridor of tobacco companies extol the virtues of these new products and megaphone the transformational role they will play in the tobacco industry, those working elsewhere in the building continue to do all they can to attack proposals for effective tobacco control policies and legislation wherever they can. In recent years all the major companies have mounted huge efforts to try and stop plain packaging, graphic health warnings, increased tobacco taxation, retail display bans, and flavour bans.

This blatant duplicity is stomach-churning. The industry's clear goal is to not have its customers abandon cigarettes and use e-cigarettes instead. It is to have these customers use both products (known as dual use), to tempt former smokers back into nicotine addiction and to reassure teenagers that these allegedly safe as you can get products hold none of the threats that smoking holds. They cannot believe their luck.

The evidence is mounting that this scenario is exactly the way things are playing out. E-cigarette users are in fact less likely to quit than smokers not using them. And dual use is by far the most common pattern of use.

Every single policy in tobacco control that has ever been advocated by those of us working in this field has been adopted in many nations. The tobacco industry has lost every policy battle it ever fought. As a result, we have been able to get where we have in dramatically reducing smoking.

# The most fun you can have

Some years ago, the ABC ran an almost continuous promotion across several weeks for *The Librarians*, a poke at an occupation popularly synonymous with purse-lipped, dull people who love orderliness. The promo gag centred on a gormless Kym Gyngell taking his garage cover band very seriously, and channelling a flailing Peter Garrett from Midnight Oil. Along with a lot of weekend cover band tragedies, I'm afraid I just didn't see the joke.

In 2004, the seeds of my cover band The Original Faux Pas (later rebirthed as The Bleeding Hearts), emerged from secret afternoons in our guitarist's living room to play a handful of classics like the Swallows' *It ain't the meat, it's the motion* and Eydie Gormé's *Blame it on the bossa nova* at my wife Trish's 50<sup>th</sup> birthday. I was the singer.

Polite friends mumbled that we weren't too bad, so of course there was then no stopping it. Over the next 14 years, we played 42 gigs in pubs, clubs, festivals, harbour cruises, conference dinners and house parties. On election night in 2007 we renamed ourselves Howard's End, incontestably causing conservative prime minister John Howard to lose the election to Labor's Kevin Rudd. We always played to raise funds for causes and charities we liked and helped raise \$127,000 for causes like the UNHCR, Amnesty International, the Cancer Council, domestic violence, and the homeless charity, Missionbeat. We played two well attended gigs in Glebe's Harold Park Hotel for Peter Greste, the journalist jailed in Egypt, and later two for a school for girls in South Sudan, as featured in Tom Zubrycki's 2017 documentary *Hope Road*.

In 2012, I tempted ABC Sydney's breakfast radio host Adam Spencer to play with us in two fundraisers for Somalian refugees in a massive camp at Dolo in Ethiopia. I'd heard him explaining he was learning guitar and correctly anticipated that it would be every guitar student's ambition to be invited to sit in with an acclaimed stadium-filling band like ours. We pulled \$25,000 in door money and pledges given across both nights.

We played as the final band late at night at two festivals held on our long-time keyboardist's farm at Ourimbah on the central coast North of Sydney, to raise money for multiple sclerosis research. There were about 400 at each event who danced and cheered throughout our set. We realised we could get up there and make lots of people have a great night and help causes at the same time. As all bands will agree, nearly everyone is oblivious to the mistakes you make every night, including once when the keyboard player completely forgot to play the entire critical organ solo in the middle of the Doors' *Love her madly*. All

was forgiven and asking a few people in the crowd later, no one but us knew. But not once in 42 gigs did we ever have a song collapse and have to start again, something you often see with pub bands.

At the other end of the scale, we played two inexplicable fizzers. Our bass player, Dave Petroni, had a small farm near Bowral in the southern highlands. The publican at his local pub begged him to bring the band to Bowral one Saturday night. So, along with our \$300 soundie, we made the trek down the Hume highway. I'd plugged it across NSW that morning on ABC radio weekend's Simon Marnie's regular 'what's on' segment. We were all anxious if security would be needed and whether we should have informed the local police to set up a traffic contraflow on the approaches to the pub.

We sound-checked at 6pm to an all but empty pub and then ordered pub food. At 6.30 the publican nervously asked when we planned to start playing. We told him about 8pm. "There won't be anyone here by then" he told us. "They all go home by about 7.30 to watch telly." At this point there were about 15 people in addition to us in the room. All but two were wives and friends. The other two were an aged couple, the man in a wheelchair. They'd heard me spruiking it on the radio that morning and had driven down from Campbelltown. They left half way through our first set. So we played to ourselves, our dutiful entourage and a local gasbag who arrived late and told us he was very good mates with the shock jock Alan Jones who had a place down there. "I can get Alan to promote you guys next time you come down" he promised. The pub even messed up our name.



**Faux Pas? Paux Pas? Fox pus? Oxford/Cambridge, tomayto/tomarto?**

A second doozie was raising money for a major charity, at the Grandstand at Sydney University. The charity staff gushed with enthusiasm when I approached them, but disappointingly declined to push it on their website or by direct email to their Sydney supporters. Instead, they said they would ask a bunch of students who volunteered for them to leaflet lecture theatres and bring all their friends. But somehow, the two volunteer students who arrived late, apparently had no other friends. They sheepishly assisted in barbequing

a few of the half tonne of sausages that the Grandstand management had generously donated to attract hordes of students from the adjacent colleges who would be clamouring to be there. A colleague of mine and band fan had dragged her three teenage kids along. They whined from the minute they arrived and had to be taken home by their embarrassed mother.

We'd convinced another superb cover band we'd played with once before to share the gig. We had door takings about \$60, well short of even paying our soundie, so the charity got nothing – the only time that ever happened.

Over the years we had five different guitarists, two of whom (Paul Grogan and Bob Jones) had very extensive band experience. We also had a veteran bass player, Dave Petroni, who could knock the socks off the Who's John Entwistle in *My Generation*, our anthem to zimmer frame rock. Some of us had limited to zero time in other bands, various commitment to practising, and musical abilities.

Like all bands, we had our share of tensions. A short-lived member said *soto voce* to our drummer one night that if he didn't hit the skins more softly, he would walk out. We lived in hope until he soon moved along. One of our guitarists would often stop playing mid-song at rehearsal, shouting his exasperation at others he felt were not up to scratch on a song. This happened at more rehearsals than it didn't. He'd rapidly apologise profusely, saying "sorry, sorry, sorry" *ad libitum*. One night the other guitarist said cheerily "Hey, no need to apologise. We all know you're an arsehole. You've just displayed it a bit earlier than usual tonight."

Well, he was, and he wasn't. His talent was the absolute backbone of the band for years. Everyone I've ever talked with who's been in a band will tell similar stories of the foibles and peccadillos of just about everyone they ever played with, except of course themselves.

We all understood that we promoted ourselves as a dance band, so any dance floor clearers that anyone suggested we rehearse were supposed to be assessed against that criterion first. But everyone had different preferences like blues, country, or 60s pop which they tried to insinuate into rehearsals. Compromises saw core material retained that everyone liked but many songs were on death row, executed by anyone in the band who barely tolerated it after a gig when such a song had even half a bar of problems. We all had power of veto though: I refused to ever sing *Nutbush City Limits*, *My Sharona*, *Smoke on the water* or similar perennial entries on collections of best beer hall hits and ocean cruise liner request lists. Dave, our bass player, would roll his eyes at anything remotely country, while Suzanne Plater who shared the lead vocals with me for several years was on a mission to be a white Etta James.

When Australia's health minister, Nicola Roxon, led Australia to introduce plain tobacco packaging, Trish who was at that time doing back-up vocals, rewrote the lyrics to Shangrila's *Leader of the Pack* as a tribute to Nicola. Four of us were having dinner one night, and sang it to an iPad camera, with Trish in a lurid Julia Gillard \$15 red wig. We put it up on YouTube and over the next months it had 1500 hits.



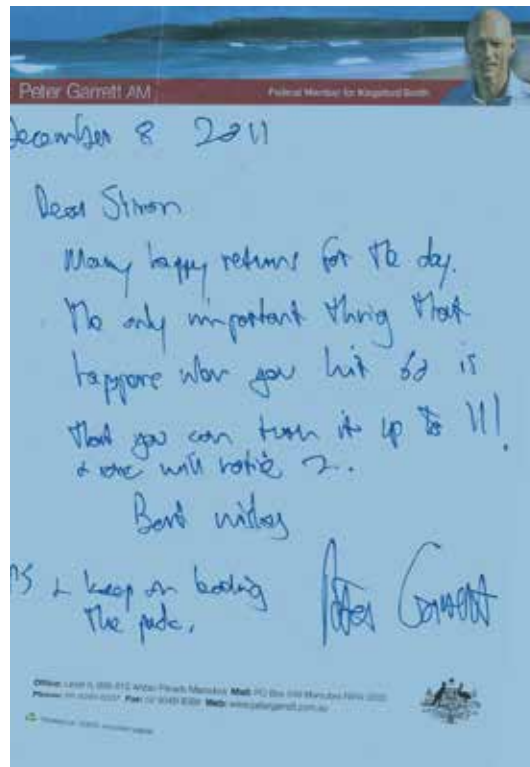
Exchange Hotel, Annandale

Some months later I was with a friend in a Canberra restaurant near Parliament House and in walked Nicola, soon joined by her parliamentary colleagues Jenny Macklin, Peter Garrett, Greg Combet, Kevin Rudd and Craig Emerson. We chatted to Nicola before the others arrived and then continued our dinner. As we were leaving, I heard a male voice behind me call my name. I turned and it was Peter Garrett who had followed us out. I'd never met him before. The next words of the world famous rock star turned politician were "I hear you are a world famous rock star!"

He said Nicola had sent the video link to many of her colleagues, and thought it was wonderful fun. The three of us stood on the footpath swapping early bad gig stories. A few months later, he sent me a birthday note for my 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, referencing the famous *Spinal Tap* scene about "turning it up to 11".

It's fashionable to put cover bands down, just because we get around. Several times we've played with earnest bands playing their often dreary 'original material'. But when the crowd hears the ghosts of Roy Orbison with George Harrison and Tom Petty jangling out the opening to *Handle with care*, or the irresistible beat of T-Rex's *Get it on* they are instantly on their feet. A few of the youngest head for the door, but for the rest, cover bands are a connection with a lifetime of songs that are hard-wired in our heads. The Rolling Stones' *Hey McLoud get offa my ewe* has not been number one in New Zealand for 50 years for nothing.

You have to wait till page 491 of Keith Richards' biography to read the essential lines that resonate for anyone who's been in a band. "The real release is getting on stage. Once we're up there doing it, it's sheer fun and joy ...feeding off the energy that we get back from an audience. That's my fuel ... I get an incredible raging glee when they get out of their seats. Yeah, come on, let it go. Give me some energy and I'll give you double back." Anyone who's had a band behind them playing the guitar power chords in Hunters and Collectors' *Holy Grail* or has belted out the Young Rascals' *Good Lovin'* or the Stones' *Rock & Off* knows that feeling when you play to a room full of people wanting to let loose on the weekend with a loud band playing anthems from across their lives. It's exhilarating.



### Turn it up to 11

Now it's true that there were some differences and similarities between us and the Stones. We had to lug our own gear and we never had a jet but some of us are nearly the same age as Keef and the rest. When I sing to the smiley one in the one row deep mosh pit that "I'm a king bee. I can buzz better baby, when your man is gone", it may not have quite the same potential as Mick singing it. But the Canada Bay Club, where we once played to 35 mostly non-dancers, was our equivalent of the Stones' Crawdaddy Club in Richmond south of London in the early 1960s. The barman at the Canada Bay Club who said he was the brother of a member of the original AC/DC, swore we had the same potential. He'd know, right? So we played a blinder in the second set and hit them with our rhythm sticks.

As support act at Wamberal Surf Club to some local favourites (who unforgivably played a Neil Diamond song), we were each serially approached afterwards by a drunk middle aged woman, indecently younger than most of us. But we all drove home able to say we had attracted our first groupie.

Band crowds aren't pleased much easier than Japanese conference delegates in kimonos on a Sydney harbour cruise in summer. They stare at you for about 20 minutes, then start to pogo and go nuts. While they can make strange requests like *The lady in red* in the middle of a sweating dance set, I'll have them anytime over kids who are dragooned by their parents to come and hear this great music. They look pole-axed with disdain and then leave.

Wednesday nights rehearsing at Stagedoor studios in Alexandria is the best \$25 a head of fun it's possible to have. Over the years we shared the venue with uncounted death

metal thrash bands, but also silverchair, Barnsey, the Angels, the Choirboys, various Australian Idol winners and even that astute judge of talent Marcia Hines who all had booked adjacent rooms on the same nights as us to quietly pick up tips. We just walked past them and they tried to look cool, pretending not to know us.

One night we were all set to rehearse the Angels' *Take a long line* until we heard the unmistakable riff seeping from beneath the soundproof door in the next studio room. It was the Angels rehearsing a comeback tour. Uh-oh. Park that one.

In my mid 50s, a sports car proved an empty illusion. When I brought a sleek black Nissan 300ZX with a sports exhaust home, my wife named it the Jeff Fenech-mobile, after the gold chain wearing Australian boxer, the Marrickville Mauler. "Why didn't you just pick up a megaphone at a disposal store and walk down the street telling everyone you are worried about your dick? It would have been a lot cheaper" she said. But a cover band is the real thing. After several Nellie Melba departures as a back-up singer, she soon became as addicted as the rest of us, and switched to keyboard. We had a sax player who was a senior partner in Australia's biggest law firm. His wife said he was helpless after just a couple of gigs. Paul Grogan who played lead guitar with us for much of the period and works for a big health charity, played Brisbane pubs in the 80s and then wrote love songs for Filipino pop singers, but he could cut it like Carlos Santana on a good night.

One Christmas, I saw a band of guys in their late 60s singing crooner and 2CH hits-and-memories to an enraptured room at my late mother-in-law's nursing home. One was a state parliamentarian. Not our demographic, yet. But each generation defines itself partly by the music that refuses to leave its collective heads. Cover bands will not fade away.

Here's a collection of some of our performances [https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLx\\_XVT38LmUbo2UpBaCx6mcAWPP6PEGNM](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLx_XVT38LmUbo2UpBaCx6mcAWPP6PEGNM)