Travels with an African Husky

a journey that will fill your heart, a true story that will make you cry and laugh out loud

by John Martin Bradley
Travels with an African Husky

by John Martin Bradley

Part 1  Harriet, Holly Tree Farm and England
Part 2  South Africa and Amy the Husky
Part 3  England Again
Part 4  Portugal

THOMAS AND HARRIET

Photos related to the book can be seen at my website www.AfricanHusky.com

This book, all its words and contemporary images, are copyright to John Martin Bradley.
In Sickness and Health

She looked at me with such pain in her sunken eyes and whispered in a hoarse voice “I feel so ashamed”.

“Six years ago we said ‘in sickness and health’”. I whispered back, looking into her eyes, stroking her face, still so beautiful in spite of everything, and said as reassuringly as I could, my voice shaking as I fought back the tears, “Nothing is too much trouble. Nothing”.

We held each other and sobbed. It was the worst moment of my life and hers too I think.

It was also the best.

She had become too weak to go to the bathroom on her own and of all the slings and arrows of sickness, this robbing of her dignity was one of the worst for her.

There was one thing worse. Something that weighed so heavily on her, in spite of her constant efforts to remain positive and strong, and that was the terrible realisation she would not get to see her children grow up. This, of all things, was too painful to bear.

Harriet passed away on April the 3rd 2005. Tilly was a week away from her second birthday and Thomas was not quite five.
Harriet

My first date with Harriet was at the Natural History Museum in London for a talk given by David Attenborough. A year later, on top of a mountain in the French Alps, I kicked off my skis, got down on one knee and proposed to her. We moved to Holly Tree Farm in Hampshire in 1998 and got married there a year later. Two dogs and two children followed, Thomas in 2000 and Tilly in 2003.

In July 2004 Harriet came into the bedroom saying she had just had a bad bleed and there must be something wrong. It took two flushes of the loo to make the blood go away. Nine months later, in spite of the best treatment we could hope for, and love and support from a remarkable medical team, she passed away. Cervical cancer. She was 38 years old.

I packed up my life and took my kids and dogs to Cape Town in South Africa. I decided to give myself two years to get back on my feet and do something I had always wanted to do. I was going to train as a professional photographer. Two years became six. We were adopted by a street dog husky who travelled with us back to England and onto Portugal.

This is the story of that journey. A liberating story of healing while on a journey to where the sun shines. All held together by two kids and a husky with an overwhelming need to mother her pack.

Travels with an African Husky includes some of my favourite photos of the places and people we met and includes snippets from a cathartic project I threw myself into where I interviewed and photographed 28 remarkable old men in eight countries who were combat pilots in WWII.

A couple of unexpected things came out of these conversations for me. They taught me it is possible to go through the worst kind of experience imaginable and come out the other end a more whole and compassionate person. And secondly I got a good idea of what it takes to stay in a marriage for 65 years and still be in love and loved at the end of it.

This is my first attempt at writing a book in story form, so please forgive me for my lack of skill as a writer. Unclear what was the best way to do this I settled for writing it as a diary, which is pretty much how it started out anyway. Recording snippets of our lives. Vignettes giving a glimpse into things here and there, rather than a masterfully interwoven piece of non-fiction. I wrote about things that hurt and things that made me laugh. I have tried to be honest, even though this has left me looking bad a lot of the time. And I wrote about things I thought people might find interesting or, most importantly, that might bring a smile to peoples’ faces. I hope you like it.

Travels with an African Husky is dedicated to Harriet, Thomas, Tilly and Amy the husky.
In the Beginning

London. I devoured every morsel it threw my way and I did it with a slavering insatiable red eyed carnal lust that made up for years of isolation on my dad’s farm.

I love big cities. Years stuck in the middle of nowhere left me yearning for something intense, something that would grab my soul and shake it like a dog shakes a rat. London did that for me. I felt like I was home from the very beginning.

I had two lives. One with my Aussie mates and the other with my English friends.

My first life was spent going out almost every night drinking and eating, playing tennis at Battersea Park, watching rugby, riding bicycles everywhere and doing our best to have as much fun as we could. This was a life lived day-by-day where London was a staging post before going somewhere else, a box to be ticked on a CV, or a safe haven from which to explore Europe.

My second life was spent around my English friends and had a comforting permanence about it. This was a life rooted in England as home. It was also that part of my life that took me to art galleries and museums, not as a tourist but as a regular visitor. It was almost as if I didn't want my Aussie mates to know about this side of my life. They were far too cool to marvel at wonderful things behind the scenes at the Natural History Museum like a whale’s tape worm that was large enough to fill a 20 litre jar, or the hand written first draft of Charles Darwin’s Origin of Species. I got to know original prints by Hiroshiga and works by Mondrian as well as a colony of other artists going back 500 years. Design marvels at the V&A … to me there was a magic about all this.

I kept going back again and again. Some pieces became as familiar as old friends and, as it is with old friends, it was always a pleasure to bump into them again, learning something new about them with each few minutes enjoyed in their company.

I worked in the hallowed space of the Map Room in the old British Library carrying out research for firms all over Britain. I built a little business around it, which I later sold … but that is another story. The Map Room closed at 4:30 which gave me thirty minutes every day to explore the British Museum and over a period of a couple of years I got to know it pretty well.

This may come as a surprise, but there is something intensely sexy about about working in a research library. The sexual tension in the air is almost palpable, crackling like static electricity. Not a few trysts took place there and in this sense it was a bit like a pick-up joint for the bespectacled. Sadly in those days I didn’t wear spectacles.

And London was full of music, fantastic music, you name it it was there.

I started going to talks by the great and good. All of whom came to London at some time to champion their cause or their latest book.

It also meant days spent at Henley and weekends in comfortably large houses in the country eating, drinking, sleeping, reading, talking politics and religion; and, when it wasn't raining, walking, playing tennis and shovelling pig manure before trundling back to London on Sunday night exhausted, but happy.
I was not from the same caste as my English friends, but they welcomed me into their lives all the same. Initially I thought they accepted me because, as someone who had spent most of his life outside Britain, I did not fit into a box in the same way I would have if I came from a particular class or a particular part of the country. Now looking back on it I think it was because I accepted them and was comfortable in their company. I did not judge them. I loved them all, but I was especially fond of the matriarch. A general’s daughter, who had grown up in India and the Scottish island of Skye with all the privilege that entailed. Of course all that privilege is now very unfashionable in England, but to me Mrs Corrie was wonderful and her stories were gems told so well her audiences would hush in awe until she was done.

And then of course, London meant the opportunity to travel. Deciding at the drop of a hat on Friday morning to spend the weekend somewhere a two or three hour flight away. Trips to Budapest, Amsterdam, Stockholm, Paris and Barcelona.

Life in London was good, but in spite of all the frenetic activity that gave the impression of a full life, there was something missing. I was single again.

Helen Rigby invited me to a party at her place which was affectionately known as Latchmere Towers, a nod to the establishment run by Basil Fawlty.

I was lumbered with making polite conversation with a rather stilted and socially inept merchant banker type and I was eager to find an excuse to speak to someone else.

A smile nudged the grimace from my face as I saw my friends Darren and Helen push their way into the packed room. Helen made her way straight to me and kissed me. She knew the banker chappie and said hello to him too.

“What’s going on with you Mr Bradley?” she asked with a twinkle in her eye, sensing my relief at being able to get away from the banker.

I kissed her in return and was just about to launch into something I thought she might find amusing, when I lost my thread completely. It was then I saw her for the first time.

I felt as if I had been transported into a B-movie. Everything slipped into slow motion and the sound had been turned off. Harriet Madeleine Ethyl Rigby had entered the room. Slender. Blonde brunette, I wasn’t sure which. Didn’t care, I couldn’t take my eyes off her. Beautiful eyes, beautiful hair … I thought she was just lovely in every way.

I asked Helen if she knew who that girl was and when she said yes, I playfully demanded she introduce me straight away.

Once we started chatting we didn’t stop all evening. Her voice was beautiful. It sounded like honey. If honey had a sound, that is what it would sound like. I just knew that to be true. By turns we argued passionately and heatedly about all sorts of things. Sometimes nodding in silent agreement as the other spoke. It was as if there were no one else in the room.

As it turned out she was newly single and not ready for a relationship. She was happy to be my friend, but for months over that summer she spurned my more carnal advances. Telling me to be
patient. She was not ready. We saw each other regularly as we hung out with the same people and always sat together or danced together or walked together, but that was about it.

Eventually I gave up trying and became interested in a girl called Pollyanna.

Pollyanna made a big impression on me, but looking back I think she was too erudite, too skinny, too beautiful, too nice and, what’s more, her father owned a brewery. She was too perfect and I realised that, in spite of her father’s vocation, she was not right for me and I was not right for her.

Sometime later I remember thinking “Harriet is the one you should marry”. I was a little surprised when this thought popped into my head uninvited and unexpected, like an opportunistic cat darting through a door left open for a moment.

Soon after this startling realisation, I asked Harriet out on a date to listen to Sir David Attenborough speak at the Natural History Museum. Some date you might say, but I knew she wouldn’t say no to listening to Sir David, or Dave as his brother used to call him. I knew it was a sure bet she would say yes and I was right.

Being a complete coward and not wanting to appear too keen I also asked two other girls, both of whom said yes. Polly Fox and Sarah Hawkins, friends from my days in Australia.

Harriet looked fantastic. Dressed in an understated way with a black quilted jacket and silk scarf. We sat very close to the great dinosaur and listened as the wonderful David Attenborough talked to us about making wildlife documentaries in the early days. I remember I kept stealing glances at Harriet. She was very pleasing to look at after all. And when she caught me looking at her she smiled with her eyes, giving me a thrill.

After the talk Harriet made her apologies and said she had to go back to the office and make a call to the States. I was crestfallen.

Over dinner with the Aussies, they told me I looked mighty unhappy, but not to be too worried because so did Harriet. Polly held my hand and said, “She’s wonderful and perfect for you”. Then the girls chatted away as if I were not there and made elaborate plans as to how they were going to get the two of us together. Which I thought was a bit of a bloody cheek and told them so with mock indignation.

A month later it was Christmas party time. Still nothing had happened between Harriet and me, in spite of Polly and Sarah’s best plans. We were both quite busy with work and nothing came of our false start at the museum.

I had been to a long Christmas lunch with my main client and I was in a very merry mood. My friends were gathering at a pub on the Fulham Road after work and I dutifully turned up and, hallelujah and praise be to the landlord, there was the lovely Harriet. I gave her a big smile, kissed her on the cheek and chatted to everyone but her.

Somehow or other I had convinced some rather attractive girl to let me blow a raspberry on her bare tummy and, according to Polly Fox, when I did this, Harriet looked terribly jealous. Polly being
Polly and never one to hold back on saying what she thinks, felt it her duty to tell me “You should have seen the look on Harriet’s face when you did that”.

“Say that again Polly.” I said.

“You heard me, now get over there and stop pretending you’re ignoring her. You know how much you like her, you great plonker”.

And so I did.

We walked into the road to escape the noise in the pub. Told each other how we felt about each other and kissed for the first time. From that moment we were rarely apart for more than a few hours for the next seven years.

I even managed, by complete serendipity, to get invited by Harriet’s sister Helen to spend a week at her parent’s house for the festive season which was just a few days away.

“Oh poor you, you can’t spend Christmas in London on your own”. Helen said with genuine concern.

At this stage none of Harriet’s family knew we were an item, so this led to us making love whenever and wherever we could without anyone knowing. By New Year everyone had twigged and Harriet’s gobsmacked sister called me a sneaky blighter and a few other much ruder things.

Actually now I think about it, Harriet’s sister Helen and I had been out on a date a year before. She told me we probably weren’t right for each other, but she had a very nice sister I should meet. Perhaps serendipity wasn’t at play after all.

We went out for ten months before deciding to buy a place, preferably in the country with a bit of land where we could eventually build the energy efficient house I had been planning for years. We didn’t have a lot of money, but we managed to pull it off all the same.

In the meantime we made the most of life in London. One of the highlights for us was getting to use her boss’ box at the Albert Hall and when it was full we could usually get free tickets in the gallery. That year we watched a lot of wonderful performances from Tosca with live animals on stage, to Cirque du Soleil, and Ladysmith Black Mambazo. I’d never before experienced the rarified atmosphere of a box at such a grand hall. It was a bit like being in a dream from which we would soon wake and so we drank it all in gratefully and with joy.
ON HOLLY TREE FARM

So having banged on about how much I liked living in a big city, I found myself about to head back to life on a farm. But this time it was different, I was with Harriet and we were only an hour and a bit from London.

Saying goodbye to the wonderful city that had been home for nine years was easier than I expected. For Harriet too. Partly because we had done all that we wanted while there and, like many couples, we conformed to the stereotype of going to London in pursuit of interesting work and finding a partner before moving out to raise children in a place with more space. The dream of kids, dogs and a house with a large garden was impossible for us in London, but we were just able to scratch together enough money to buy Holly Tree Farm.

Now it is true that Holly Tree Farm sounds nice, but sadly the reality of the place did not match the rural idyl you might picture based on the name alone. It was not without its charms, but as one friend put it when struggling for a nice thing to say about the place, he settled for “It’s a lovely name”.

So we had sunk our every penny into a lovely name.

To be fair though, the day we first visited it, Holly Tree Farm looked great. It was a magnificent summer afternoon and the golden light of late afternoon transformed the place into something that looked like it could be bashed into just what we wanted with lots of hard work and some imagination. The idea was to knock down the ugly 1960s three bedroom house and build a new passive thermal, energy efficient house in its place. We wouldn’t be able to afford to do that for some time, but at least we would be on the road to doing it.

That afternoon we stood in the top field looking down onto the barns and house imagining what it would be like to raise children there - well actually that is what Harriet was thinking, I was fantasising about what I was going to do with all those sheds. Anyway, Harriet turned to me and said “Well I’m up for it if you are”. We kissed and walked down to the house telling the owner we were interested and would be in touch shortly.

Three months later I parked an 8.5 ton truck outside 28 Tonsley Road, filled it to the brim and drove off to a new life in Hampshire.

Not having driven such a large vehicle before I found it a bit hair-raising. At one stage stopping at the lights and hearing the frantic beeping of a horn behind me. I looked backwards and saw a guy leaning out of his car window and shouting “Oy mate, you’ve just put it in reverse”. Clearly he twigged it was a rental truck and seeing the reverse light had come on, decided he needed to do something before I smashed up the front of his very fine motor car.

Harriet arrived just as I pulled up outside the house. The former owner was still taking stuff out of the house and had his front end loader parked by the kitchen door, chucking the last of his stuff into the front of the big digger. As soon as he was gone, we went inside and found the old owner had left us a bottle of champagne and some firewood. It was a good start.
Ian the Dog

Holly Tree Farm had been overgrazed and left to go to ruin. The place looked bleak. It needed trees. A lot more trees and so over the next two years we planted over 2,000 trees and shrubs. What a difference it made, not just in terms of how it looked, but also to the entire ecosystem.

We let patches of ground grow wild and piled tree cuttings and other organic material in places to provide food, shelter and protection to small insects and animals like field mice. Within a year we had buzzards nesting in our hedgerows. Obviously feeding off the small furry creatures nesting in patches of our newly formed wild ground.

Such beautiful birds, I would watch them for ages. One day I saw one trying to catch a thermal above our hedgerow before giving up and flying directly to our neighbours big house 400 yards away. Once there it rode the warm air rising off their roof, rising in tight circles so that in no time at all it was soaring at 1,000 feet.

We fought a war against stinging nettles and hog weed. Trying to let desirable “weeds” establish themselves while knocking back the undesirables.

We had a lot of wild rabbits. So many they were over-running the place and in winter every blade of grass was eaten down to the ground. We called in the ferreter and he caught more than 300 in a stretch of hedge just 80m long. That’s a lot of rabbits in a small amount of hedge.

We went to a rescue centre and got two dogs, one for me and one for Harriet.
Firstly a mad Alsatian Lurcher cross whom we named Ian. He spent the first week doing runny poos all over the house and eating the furniture. Later he made a name for himself by chewing his way through a plasterboard wall in order to escape and on another occasion attacking two greyhounds and biting the tail off one and the testicles off the other. He was a nightmare.

Ian was my dog in the beginning, but later he became Harriet’s dog. He worshipped her.

The second dog was a Jack Russell. We called him Bertrand to start with, but that was soon shortened to Bertie. When we brought the little savage home for the first time he was so filled with rage on seeing Ian that he flew at him all teeth and flailing claws. Like an idiot I put my hand in to stop the fight and Ian bit me. His canine went right into the soft part of my wrist where you might see a doctor taking your pulse.

It hurt like hell, I mean it really flippin’ hurt and while I was bent over and moaning in pain with my sore hand held next to my groin, Harriet got it into her head that I had been bitten in the gentleman’s region. Suddenly she was very worried.

When I stood up and pointed out that I had been bitten on my wrist, she scoffed and all sympathy fizzled out in an instant. Clearly she was concerned I might have been rendered unable to fulfil my obligations in the children production department.

The other thing I remember about this incident was her medical doctor father telling Harriet over the phone how to clean out the wound with a cottonwool bud dipped in disinfectant.

“You’re not very good with pain are you?” she said as she drove the cottonwool bud in again just to make sure the wound was clean.
ON THE MAN WHO BIT THE FISH THIEF

We made friends with a guy called Nigel who looked like a street person and drove a beaten up old pick-up, but was worth millions. On Friday nights Nigel would have a wash and shave, put on some clean clothes and drive his new Porsche into town.

Most people in the area couldn’t stand Nigel because he used to break all the planning rules and didn’t give a hoot about what anyone thought of him. He knew the planning code better than most planners and so part of his fortune came from buying property for a modest amount and selling it on with a colossal profit. His big thing was trout farms. He’d buy a piece of land next to a river and bend every rule in the book until he was able to build a house on it or turn it into a fishing farm or both. He’d also invented a way to genetically alter trout to make them enormous, I think this also contributed to his considerable wealth.

Nigel was good to Harriet and me. Helping in all sorts of ways with practical advice about building things. He dug a big hole for us with his digger which I lined with plastic and turned into a pond by diverting rainwater off our barn roofs via a length of 50mm pipe which we buried underground. When it rained the water gushed into the pond. It was gratifying to watch.

I put four species of fish in the pond and to my surprise a year later there were five. Somehow carp had made their way into our water. I discussed this miracle with Nigel as he is a fish expert and he explained it’s quite normal. What happens is fish eggs attach themselves to a duck’s legs and then fly with the bird from one pond to another. That is how bodies of water not connected to streams or above water falls are colonised by fish. And it also works to diversify the gene pool.
In no time we had frogs and newts and all sorts of water borne insects in the pond and of course we started getting visits from Mr Heron who was interested in eating all the fish. We introduced some water plants donated by Nigel and within a year they had spread right around the edge of the pond. When the reeds established themselves, we soon had some Moore Hens set up camp by the pond edge. We took such a lot of pleasure from seeing all this happen and especially from creating something from nothing.

When I’d see Nigel’s pick-up coming up the driveway I would put on the kettle to make him tea. Nigel used to come to the house, kick his boots off by the front door and, without saying hello, launch into the next part of the monologue he had delivered the day before. He would stay as long as it took to drink his tea and then leave. Sometimes in mid sentence and without saying goodbye. He would be so totally focused on what he was saying it was like he was thinking out loud and I wasn’t there. But he always had interesting things to say, so I was OK with his eccentric behaviour.

One morning Nigel came around in a state of excitement. He looked awful, even more filthy and smelly than usual.

“Morning Nigel, haven’t seen you for a while” I said.

“Flippin’ hell. What a thing. For the last three nights I’ve had poachers taking trout from the ponds. I got so flippin’ angry, the police wouldn’t do a thing. They’re useless”.

“Well Nigel, short of camping out at the ponds, what can they do, especially as there is only one policeman to cover the whole area?” I asked.

“Yeah exactly, so that’s what I did. Last night I took a bottle of Scotch and some pork pies and a sleeping bag and hid in the bushes by the ponds. About two thirds of the way through the bottle of Scotch I heard an explosion and flicked on the torch to see these five bastards trying to blow my fish out of the water. Anyway I got out of my sleeping bag tout suite and, in my socks and boxer shorts, ran at them screaming like a mad drunken Scotsman”. A terrifying thought, especially as Nigel is not a small man at well over six feet tall.

“So anyway the gutless wonders took off in all directions, but one of them, the closest one made straight for the fence nearest to me and I got hold of his leg as he went over the wire. He’s not going to forget me in a long time” he said as if inviting me to ask why.

“Why is that Nigel?”.

“Because I bit the bastard. I bit him so hard there was blood coming out his trouser leg. I chewed on his calf while he was stuck on the fence”.

Between bursts of laughter he went on to say the guy got away, but it won’t be long before he ends up at a doctor with a raging infection and then the police can nab him. Wishful thinking I thought.

“Better not tell the police you bit him Nigel, that’s assault. Actually Nigel, it’s cannibalism”.

Shortly after biting the fish thief, Nigel called the police who, in his words were typically unhelpful and uncooperative until he mentioned the explosives. This brought the full might of the police and
army bomb disposal guys into action. The bomb squad and police arrived just as the sun was coming up and moments later an army helicopter gunship was hovering overhead.

Who said life in the country is quiet?
The Man Who Loved His Tractor

Very close to Holly Tree Farm there lived a young man called Derek. He was a farm labourer and pretty much knew everything there is to know about arable farming and maintaining equipment.

Derek would come and cut the grass in our fields and harrow them too. It was not an expensive thing to get Derek to cut the grass, but an unspoken rule was that when Derek turned off his engine, you had to be prepared to set aside between 30 minutes to an hour to shoot the breeze with him. Derek liked to chat and he would have considered it the height of bad manners to just pay him and let him be on his way.

One of Derek’s favourite things to talk about was farming. Which was OK with me because I found it interesting. Harriet, on the other hand, would run away when she saw him coming, as if The Jehovah’s Witnesses were coming up the driveway.

There was something else that Derek was passionate about and that was his old tractor. He bought this old beauty as a rusting broken down hulk for the equivalent of a month’s wages. He brought it home, pulled it apart and put it back together again so that it looked like a new tractor.

As a result he knew that tractor intimately. How it worked, how to service it and how to fix it when it broke down. A slight change in the tone of the engine or the sound of the differential would speak volumes to him. He was to tractors what Robert Pirsig was to motorcycles. This man was one with his machine and it gave him great deal of satisfaction.

Derek is a quiet humble man who will probably never go to university or do other things we associate with successful clever people, but he has an understanding of what it means to live a meaningful life, a life that makes him complete and happy. He understands this in a way that most of us will never get, because we are too busy looking for it over the next ridge, while actually we probably already have it in our hands and just don’t realise it. We don’t see it.

Derek has the wonderful gift of being content with what he has.
A couple of months after moving to Holly Tree Farm, we went skiing in Meribel with some of Harriet’s friends. I love skiing, but only started when I was in my late 30s. I’m not very good at it, but picked up the basics pretty quickly as I used to surf and being ignorant of what can go wrong, revelled in going hard and fast. Harriet was always worried I would come unstuck and break a leg or my head, but to her surprise the worst thing I ever experienced on the slopes was third degree sunburn.

Late one morning we were just about to start the long run back down to Meribel for lunch, when I threw my poles onto the snow, kicked off a ski and got down on one knee. Harriet looked at me and said “What the hell are you doing?” and then “Oh my God!” as I took her hand and asked “Will you do me the honour of being my wife?”.

Six months later we were working furiously to prepare the barns at Holly Tree Farm for the wedding reception. The Dutch barn where hay was normally kept was to be the dance area, the big shed was prepared as a bar and, following the removal of several tons of malodorous pig manure thanks to Nigel’s digger, the pig shed was to house the spit roast … which of course was to be a pig.

My future mother-in-law Kay was speechless when we said we wanted to hold the reception in the barns as they were falling apart and the rat population down there was astonishing. There were so many of them, sometimes you would see them scrambling over each other.

I remember one evening I called to Harriet from the bottom of the stairs “I’ve just had a really unpleasant experience”. A miner’s torch strapped to my head, my shirt sleeve rolled up as far as it would go and my arm dripping wet.

“I just went out to get some firewood and saw the water butt was overflowing, so I stuck my arm in to unblock the pipe, grabbed something soft and squidgy and when I brought it up to the surface it took me a moment to figure out what it was. A big black drowned rat”.

Harriet passed me the disinfectant.

My future father-in-law Marcus, on the other hand, could barely conceal his joy at the thought of all the money he’d save on having the reception in the barns.

Months of hard work followed, but with only hours to spare everything was ready and the place looked presentable. We got married in the local church and everyone came back to the farm in time for the heavens to open. It rained as if it were a tropical monsoon. The gutters overflowed and there was water everywhere, but nobody seemed too concerned and it all went swimmingly … as some clever clogs put it.

We honeymooned with the dogs in Devon. A few days spent recovering from the sheer slog of the preceding months.

Before long we went to visit my parents in Australia. They were suitably impressed by Harriet, especially my father who made her feel a welcome and special part of the family. My mother gave
her a wooden mallet of the type used for tenderising meat saying if I ever got out of line, she should use it on me. Not the sort of advice I was expecting my mother to give my new wife.

A year later on a hot August afternoon, Thomas was born in Winchester Hospital. It must have been a cold and bleak night nine months before, because that day the hospital was overflowing with women going into labour. Harriet had opted for an epidural, but they had all been allocated to other women by the time her turn came. She made do with gas. Thankfully it was all over pretty quickly and out came this unhappy little fellow who was red faced with indignation at having to leave the comfort of the womb.
ON WHEN HARRIET COMMUTED TO LONDON

Before Tilly was born Harriet used to travel by train into London to work. She had been working for the same firm for a few years and loved her job as PA to the chairman of the oldest venture capital firm in London. Their offices were in Mayfair and to get there from rural Hampshire she had to leave at seven in the morning and usually didn’t get back until seven at night.

I remember I used to yearn for her, especially towards the end of the day and feel a sense of excitement as the time of her return approached. When I heard her car coming up the driveway, I would pour her a glass of wine and hand it to her as she came in through the door. Dinner would be ready for her.

Usually she was so tired, she would eat and go to sleep. Especially when she was pregnant.

It was a long hard slog for her. Sometimes the train would be delayed and she would phone to say she would be late again, please could I put Thomas to bed and she’d get home as soon as she could.

It wasn’t really much of a life for poor Harriet.

As I worked from home, I would pick up Thomas from the child minder and then play with him from about 5PM and feed and bathe him before Harriet got home.

We always knew she was near because the dogs’ ears would prick up, normally Bertie the Jack Russell, our early warning system, would hear her first and start keening followed shortly by Ian. Bertie would leap onto the top of the sofa by the window that looked down the driveway towards the barns so he could see Harriet’s cara. And then Thomas would do the same calling “Mummy, Mummy”.
In warmer weather I would use a brick to hold the front door open all day long and so when Harriet got home the dogs would scramble through the door and charge down the 90 yards or so to the bottom of the drive barking all the way and trying to bite each other as they fought to be the first one to get to her. Thomas would tumble along after them as best he could.

I remember one day thinking to myself as I played with Thomas that I had never been so happy. I was in love with a beautiful remarkable woman who loved me madly back in return. We had a lovely baby boy, a nice place to live and two wonderfully mad dogs. What more could a person want? Life had a sense of purpose and meaning.

Looking back on this time it seems idyllic. Of course it wasn’t, but all things considered life was good. It seemed that a strong sense of purpose kept us smiling in the face of the arduous stuff that sometimes felt like it was going to overwhelm us.
On Tilly’s Home Birth

Tilly is a year and a half younger than Thomas. She was born in our bed at Holly Tree Farm. Two midwives came to the house when Harriet’s waters broke and Tilly popped out soon after. There is a photo of Harriet having a glass of wine immediately after Tilly was born. No doubt people will tell me that is a very bad thing to do, but the young madam seems to have turned out fine. All in all our home birth was a success. The midwives were brilliant and everything was done in an un-rushed calm way and had something gone wrong, we could have got to the hospital in less than ten minutes.

When Tilly was born, Harriet chose to give up work to be a full time mother. This meant we were critically short of money at times. Looking back I think it was the right thing to do and in time the money thing sorted itself out. In fact when my business took off, it really took off.
ON HARRIET DURING HER SICKNESS

I don’t want to dwell on the bad things. I want to remember Harriet at her best and I want to look forwards not backwards. I don’t really want to dredge up all those terrible things again now that they are nearly forgotten. It is in the past.

It was terrible for Harriet and her parents and brothers and sisters. Her children were too young to understand what was happening at the time, but they have grown up without a mother. It was no walk in the park for any of us.

So why bring up all this stuff? Why? Because it makes me angry to think she may not have died if her tumour had been caught earlier and there are people out there now who are in the same situation. If I can write or say something that nudges people to go and have their checks done and as a result if even just one person is saved from going through all this terrible stuff, then writing about it will make it worthwhile.

I don’t remember much from the time when Harriet was sick. Looking back I see most of it as a blur. I remember I was very tired most of the time. Harriet spent a lot of time sleeping. From late summer to mid winter she was mobile, but the chemotherapy made her feel nauseous and terribly lethargic.

Harriet would spend days at the hospital and my nightly drive to see her always involved a rush to get out of the house. Sometimes I wouldn’t have eaten because I didn’t have time. Once I even wrapped a piece of salmon in tin foil and put it on top of the car’s engine in the hope it would be cooked by the time I got to the hospital so at least I would have something to eat … it was partly cooked, but I was so hungry I ate it anyway. Road sushi.

There was a list of medicines she needed to take every few hours. I called it her preflight checklist which Harriet thought was funny as the morphine would send her soaring, flying like a bird. The morphine of course was to help with the pain and then there were other things to counteract some of the side effects of the drugs.
Harriet never complained about any of it. One morning she woke me as we had both slept through the early morning drug delivery. Harriet reached across and gently held my arm whispering “John Martin, John Martin”. I was out for the count, but eventually realised she was trying to wake me. When I opened my eyes I could see she was looking quite distressed. “The pain is excruciating” she said with a raspy voice. I sat bolt upright, realising I had not given her her morphine, and rushed to the dressing room to grab the red box. “I am so sorry my darling”. I said, feeling terrible that I had slipped up. Once again she put her hand on my arm and just looked at me with wide forgiving eyes, not saying a word.

This was the only time she said anything about the pain or discomfort she was going through.

There were many cock-ups and looking back there are plenty of things I could have done better to help her and the kids.

There were times when I was so tired I could barely find the energy to walk up the stairs to bed. At times like this I would think about an SAS soldier who said when it got so hard during his training he was ready to lie down and give up, he would tell himself to just keep putting one foot in front of the other and keep going. And I took courage from this and, like him, kept going by putting one foot in front of the other. One step at a time. Come on just one more, you know you can do it …

I could paint a picture of the heroic husband and father looking after his sick wife, two children, running a business and coping marvellously well. Exuding confidence and positive energy all the time and dealing effortlessly with all the little and big problems that cropped up daily with a smile on my face and a spring in my step. But that would be a lie. A great big whopper of a lie. It was not like that at all.

Sometimes dark thoughts would sneak in and I would find myself wanting to run away, or give up. Terrible thoughts that I am almost too ashamed to put down on paper, like wishing I had never met Harriet. Envy of the normal life my friends were leading. Missing the physical side of married life and so on.

Then after a good sleep I would tell myself that when you are tired it is normal to have these kinds of thoughts and not to attach any meaning to them. Let them run their course, but don’t listen to them. Stand back and observe them with rational detachment. “Gosh I must be tired, I’m having those thoughts again. I’d better get some sleep”. People who are religious might say that it is at times like this that you let down your guard and the devil runs riot exploiting the chink in your armour.
On Getting No Sympathy From My Mother

I phoned my mother at one point, because I felt a strong need for a kind voice and some sympathy. As often seems to be the case with my mother, what I got was not what I expected. She listened patiently and then when I was done, paused for a while and said “You do realise that when I was sick, your father resigned from his job and looked after me and you lot for six months? Now buck up, stop feeling sorry for yourself and get on with it. You need to be strong for Harriet and those two children. You need to put all thoughts about yourself on hold and put everything you have into them”. She was right of course.

My mother had breast cancer when I was four years old. We lived in Jersey in the Channel Islands at the time. My father had a flying job in Africa and he would commute backwards and forwards or we would go and spend time with him in Deepest Darkest. When mum was diagnosed, dad quit working and became a full time carer for my mother. This was in the dark ages when men did not do this sort of thing. I always admired my dad because he was a gentle and kind man who had also seen action as fighter pilot in World War II. Now I admire him as much for looking after my mother when she was being treated for cancer.

I can remember going with my father to visit my mother in hospital. She caught me eyeing her dinner and not having an appetite, or more likely pretending she didn’t have an appetite, offered it to me. I wolfed it down leaving not a scrap on the plate and wondering if there were more. Clearly hospital food was better than Dad’s cooking.

My mother had a radical mastectomy which involved removal of a breast and muscle down her side. After the operation she had to do exercises to get her left side working again. I remember she used to “walk” her left arm up the wall using her fingers. It made her take sharp intakes of breath and close her eyes. She would get quite frustrated at not being able to do this simplest of things.

As she got better and grew stronger she could move her hand up the wall without any trouble at all. Before long she could lift a large gin and tonic all the way to her mouth. Remarkable. Five years later she was lifting heavy boxes of fruit onto the grading machine on our orchard in New Zealand and doing so as well as any man there.

Doctors said if Mum survived another five years after the surgery, she would be beating the odds. Nearly fifty years later she is still driving us nuts.

My mother’s survival gave me a great deal of confidence that Harriet would see this through. I could see in my mind’s eye, a picture of us all happy and smiling with great grandchildren running around. We would be celebrating a long life well lived.

I knew it was all going to be OK and I would reassure her as best I could, painting a picture of our old age, giving her something to hold onto.
On the Foresight to Think with the Benefit of Hindsight

In spite of thinking it was all going to end well, there was a time when I really struggled with everything. Looking after Harriet, Thomas and Tilly (who wasn’t even two and still in nappies) plus all the other things, including a business that was growing startlingly quickly, was more than I could cope with.

And yet I felt any offer of help was a criticism. It felt like people were politely saying I wasn’t doing a very good job and so I said no every time people offered help and tried harder to do everything myself.

“I’m fine, I’ve got it covered” was what I kept saying. Then one day I felt I couldn’t keep going any longer. I went and sat in my tool shed on my own and cried tears of frustration, anger and exhaustion. “What am I going to do, I can’t carry on like this?” I said to myself.

Then a thought popped into my head.

I imagined I was ten years down the line looking back on what was happening now. And I wondered what would I have to do now, so that when I look back I can say I did a pretty good job. What would I be saying with the benefit of hindsight?

I didn’t have any answers to the question, but I said to myself “When you figure it out, that’s what you’re going to do and in ten years when you look back you’re going to give yourself a pat on the back”.

I felt much better straight away. I had a path to follow. I didn’t know where it was going, but my hunch was it was going to a better place than where I was.

Over the coming days I decided priority number one was to say yes to people when they offered help. I soon discovered that when people see someone suffering, their natural instinct is to roll up their sleeves and get stuck in in whatever way they can.

It was then that I started meeting my angels. They started popping up all over the place. They still pop up unexpectedly.

I saw with fresh eyes that people around us felt helpless and just wanted to do something. Anything. And I had been stopping them. I began to see that saying no meant blocking people and when we block people, we stop them becoming angels. When I said yes, the floodgates opened and Harriet and the kids saw the benefit in more ways than you can imagine. And everyone was happier.

Help came from everywhere, sometimes even from complete strangers in the village. Learning to say yes was extremely difficult in the beginning, but once I got the hang of it, I said it a lot.

If you are partial to thinking of things as a flow of energy, then you might buy into the idea that my saying yes got the energy flowing again. Whereas before, my saying no had stonewalled all that positive energy. And now that it was flowing again, it was making up for lost time.
Angels came to us in all guises. Sometimes the most unlikely people in the most unlikely places turned out to be angels. I learnt you never can tell who is going to be an angel.

Thomas and Tilly’s teachers have often been angels. I have been humbled again-and-again by the love and care given to my kids by the people who teach them. Starting with Thomas’ first teacher to Tilly’s present singing and music teacher and a lot of other wonderful teachers in between.

So what is an angel? I don’t know how to explain it, but you will know when you meet one. You may even be one without realising it. There is probably one sitting near you right now. If you give them permission, they might just surprise you. And if you acknowledge them for their wonderfulness (I think I just invented a new word) and are grateful in a way that is real and comes from the heart, they might just keep on being an angel and wouldn’t that be a fine thing.

The other big thing I decided was important when I had the foresight to think with the benefit of hindsight was what my mother said about putting all thoughts about myself on hold and putting everything I had into Harriet and the kids. This was easier to do than you might think because I was so tired all the time. I discovered a great sense of purpose in devoting myself to looking after them. It gave me energy which I could throw into looking after my family, and it gave me the will to smile when normally I would be dragging my sorry arse around wearing a face like a horse with colic.

Since then I have spoken to other people who have shared this experience when their world gets shunted sideways. There are times in our lives when we do this sort of thing and get a different idea of what is important and what is a piffling distraction. What’s more, you find there are a lot of piffling distractions in life and a lot of people who obsess about stuff that would not rate a mention in a wide angle snapshot of the cosmos.

And you meet people who share your newly formed distinction between what is important and what is not and your conversations with these people are unlike any you have had before.

And have I patted myself on the back ten years later? Not really. I think I got it together for Harriet in the final months of her sickness which makes me feel good, but then in the years that followed I can think of a lot of things I could have done better. Lots of things that were a complete cock-up. Once the pressure was off, I lost the plot a bit.

One thing I am pretty happy about is the way Thomas and Tilly have turned out. In the big picture, that is more important than anything else and I feel Harriet smiling at me when I say that.

So in the course of getting to grips with things with a renewed vigour, there was still no escape from having to deal with things that were crushingly difficult. And one of them was I had to tell my carefree lovely little boy that his mother was not going to get better.
On Telling Thomas His Mother Was Not Going To Get Better

After we knew it was very unlikely Harriet was going to get better, I had to steel myself to tell Thomas his mother going to die. It was a terribly difficult thing to do and I put it off for days. At bedtime I would lie with him and read a story and when I closed the pages of the book I would feel my heart pounding so hard I could hear it in my ears.

Finally I found the courage to do it and in the softest voice I could muster, I explained to him that his mother was so sick she was not going to get better. I can’t remember exactly what he said, but I remember when I finished speaking he said something completely unconnected. Something that had happened at school that day.

I went through a surge of different emotions from relief that I had done it, to anger that he had not taken on board what I had said especially as it was such a big deal for me to say it, to compassion at the thought that he was only four and a half years old and this is not something he could possibly understand, to the idea he had heard what I said and understood it, but did not know how to respond and needed time to think about what I had said.

In the coming weeks he asked me questions about death. I answered them as best I could. Our brave little man was trying to make sense of it as best he could, walking around staring at the ground and sometimes giving me glances as if he wanted to say something. It broke my heart to see him grappling with this terrible thing. I wanted to take his grief and suffer it for him, so he would not have to. I still see him grappling with it and it still breaks my heart. He has grown up without a mother. I cannot imagine how hard that must have been, in spite of my best efforts to be both a mother and a father to him. People say the relationship between girls and their fathers are stronger than with their mothers and the opposite is true for boys.

Thomas became a man when most little boys were still little boys.

And in that journey that young men make around their fathers, trying to earn their respect, doing things intended to make their fathers hold them in awe, I hope he comes to know there is nothing he needs to do for he has already done it. In becoming a man when he was a boy, and not losing his compassion in the face of such a terrible thing, he will always have my love and respect.
A World of Dreams Without Pain

Often I would just sit with Harriet until she went to sleep. The morphine taking her away to a world of dreams without pain.

I remember one day I held her in my arms, one hand holding her head against my chest. We didn’t say anything, we just sat there. I lowered her back onto the bed and stroked her face. She whispered “You make me feel so cherished”.

My heart felt as if it had been squeezed. Just a few simple words, but they meant so much to me. I kissed her. She smiled as best she could and drifted off to Morpheus.

Harriet would sleep for hours and hours and when she woke and needed something she would ring a little bell. I would hear it tinkling and head upstairs.

She watched a bit of TV, but would doze off. Normally she was a prolific reader, but she couldn't concentrate, so books lay unread on her bedside table.

Time passed more easily for her when she slept.

After Christmas Harriet contacted all her friends to tell them she was not going to get better. The cancer had spread and now it was time to say goodbye.

Lots of people came to see her. They drank tea and chatted about old times. Laughing and crying in equal measure.

Leaving was always difficult. Emotional farewells, knowing but not quite believing that when that person walks out through the door, Harriet would never see him or her again. Someone special to her, someone she had been to school with, or knew from her time at Cambridge or later in life. People with whom she had shared laughter and joy.

Saying goodbye brought home the enormity of what was happening.

Now I look back on it, there is one thing that strikes me about all this and it is that we had time to tell each other how much we loved each other. Harriet’s family and friends had time to do the same. Nothing was left unsaid. There was no doubt about how we felt for each other.

I think about people who lose their loved one’s in car accidents or heart attacks, never having had the chance to say a proper goodbye and am grateful that in the face of this terrible thing, at least we could do that.
The Stackable Box Magic Trick

Trying to get two children fed, booted and spurred before school each morning proved a challenge. Missing socks and underpants were the bane of my life. Expletive filled minutes wasted trying to find a missing sock drove me nuts and, no doubt, cast a dark cloud over the start to the day for everyone else. The dogs would scatter and hide.

I bought 14 stackable plastic boxes about twice the size of a shoe box. I wrote their names, a day of the week and a number on each of them. Just before bedtime on Sunday evening I would line them up on our double bed and the four of us would put the childrens’ clothes in them.

Harriet liked it because it gave her something to do and be around the children.

One box for each of them for each day of the week. So, for example, on Monday morning the kids would know they had to look in the box labelled Monday with a number 1 on it for their clothes. It worked like magic and made for a much happier start to the day.
On the Lady of the Lasagne

One day someone rang the big bell we used as a door bell. I went to see who it was and was met by a complete stranger holding something wrapped in tin foil.

“Hi, you don’t know me, but I live in the village and when I heard about your wife I wanted to do something and this is all I could think of. It’s not much, but I hope you like it”.

She peeled back the tin foil to reveal a delicious looking lasagne. Tears welled up in my eyes.

“I’ll pop back in a couple of days to collect the baking tray. No need to wash it, I’ll do that”.

I thanked her profusely. We ate it that night and it was delicious.

People helped in all sorts of ways. Some practical, some unexpected.

At one stage my Nepali brother-in-law Pemba arranged for 150 Buddhist monks in Nepal to pray for Harriet.

My sister-in-law Helen had taken six months off work to volunteer in an orphanage in Kathmandu and while there she fell in love with Pemba Sherpa. A lovely fellow with a big heart, they now have a son Jigme and live in London where Pemba has to take special medication to help him acclimatise to living at sea level.

Pemba also helped me nail some of the half finished jobs around the house, so Harriet would not have to live on a building site while she battled her illness.

Harriet’s brother Jeremy and his wife Sarah paid for a team of cleaners to come to the house and give it a thorough clean. It has to be said the place needed it. I am not very good at keeping the house clean at the best of times and when Harriet was sick I attached even less importance to it.

Jeremy used to visit Harriet in hospital and read to her. Her favourite poetry. Short stories, novels. She would say afterwards how much she loved having him read to her. It was very special for her.

Our neighbours David and Mary Firebrace babysat when I went to visit Harriet in hospital and spent many hours with her when she was home.

My old university friend and best man Darren and his wife Helen, and Harriet’s old housemate Claire used to bring entire three course Sunday lunches and even do the washing up before leaving. The respite was wonderful and gave Harriet a chance to be around old friends without feeling the need to make conversation, which she found tiring.
The Last Photo

This last photo of Harriet was taken on one of the days when Darren, Helen and Claire brought Sunday lunch. This was the last time Harriet walked downstairs. I see it as a joyful photo. I know it sounds a bit mad to say this, but there were many joyful times in those last months. This is one of them.

![The Last Photo](image)

**CLAIRE, HARRIET, HELEN & DARREN**

As January and February passed she became weaker and weaker until eventually she was unable to walk up the stairs on her own.

By late March she was deteriorating fast.

By the start of April Harriet could no longer drink anything. She became terribly thirsty, but she couldn’t take in fluids. The nurses gave her a bag of sponges on sticks and we would soak them in water so she would suck on them to get some relief from the thirst.

Harriet passed away on April the 3rd. Tilly was a week away from her second birthday and Thomas had four months to go before his fifth birthday.

It sounds like a terrible thing to say, but it was a relief to see an end to her suffering.

Afterwards I sat with her on my own, holding her hand. I talked to her for a while. Telling her I was glad her suffering had stopped, saying she knew how much we would miss her. I thanked her and told her not to worry about the children, I would do my best to raise them.

When I was ready I said “Goodbye my lovely wife” and kissed her one last time.
The time that followed Harriet’s passing was a time of peace. You might think it was time spent trying to come to terms with what happened, but actually I didn’t have the energy or desire for that sort of thing. I just spent time with the kids and did the things you do to get by, to just “be” in a simple uncomplicated way. We walked the dogs, we ate, we watched films, we played games, we bathed and we slept.

I worked from home, so I was able to be there for the kids when they came home or when they needed me. I was always there. Sometimes one or the other would curl up in a ball on my lap as I worked, or just come for a hug when they felt the need for it. Especially Tilly, she was and is fond of hugs. Small things, but in my mind, more important than words can describe.

**On It Being Just a Disease**

It dawned on me one day that sometimes children think when something bad happens it is because they are bad. It is part of human nature to think or expect that bad things happen to bad people. It is a great failing of ours. I spoke to the kids time and again about this, saying how the loss of Harriet had nothing to do with them and telling them what good children they were.

I told them it was just a disease that takes hold of peoples’ bodies, that’s what diseases do. Diseases don’t pick and choose people because they are nice or not. If that is how diseases work, then Mummy would still be with us; because she was such a good person.
On the Confusing Mothers at School

I was grappling with some of the problems of parenthood and decided to seek the opinions of mothers at school.

The interesting thing for me was women had different views on how any given problem should be dealt with and insisted in a conspiratorial tone that I must do things their way or I would mess-up my children.

This was shocking news for me. Not the news that I could mess-up my children, I already knew that; but it was news that everyone was just winging it, making it up as they went along, and doing their best to hide this startling fact from the world.

Harriet used to say “Often wrong, never in doubt” and that sums it up nicely.

I was a bit fazed when I realised children did not come with a user manual. I mean that realisation was bad enough, but then when it began to sink in that women may not be hard-wired for raising children after all, that was a shocker.

This unexpected news was also uplifting for me, because it meant that my views on childrearing were just as valid as theirs.

Firstly I thought well this is interesting, surely they should all be saying the same thing? Then it occurred to me that each child is different and what is right for one child may not be right for another. So now I like the idea of trusting myself to make the right judgement by looking at what others say and do and choosing what my gut tells me is best for my child.

If you are a man reading this, have strength. You can do this parenting thing if you want to. I have met lots of great single parent fathers. Raising children is one of the hardest things you can do regardless of whether you sit or stand to pee, or whether you sleep alone or with your other half.

And if you are busy raising children, none of this will come as a surprise because you already know all this. You are reminded of it everyday.
Don’t Drink and eBay

“Thanks so much for your prompt payment. When can you come and collect it?”. 

I woke up to find I had bought a piano. 

Hmmm, we already had a piano. Perhaps buying another one wasn’t such a great idea, especially when under the influence of a very fine bottle of Bordeaux’s best. 

Slightly fazed by the drunken eBaying incident, I decided I might not be coping as well as I thought. 

I emailed my old boss from my days in Johannesburg fifteen years earlier to throw an idea at him and his wife. “What do you think of coming and spending some time in England?”. 

To my astonishment they said yes. Mike and Carol packed up their lives in Deepest Darkest, got on a plane and arrived in a blaze of sunshine early one summer morning.
On Mike and Carol Fynn

Mike had been my boss when I worked for Ogilvy in Johannesburg. At that time I went out with Carol’s sister Jane. We spent a lot of time together and became good friends.

At the same time I was grappling with Harriet’s passing away, Mike and Carol were going through some grappling of their own. They had reached a stage in their life where their kids had grown up and left home and their old existence lacked meaning. Someone had moved their cheese.

So my suggestion was opportune and they leapt at the invitation to come to England and help me with the kids and running my now booming business and to keep on top of things at Holly Tree Farm, which was looking like five acres of weeds.

For them it was the start of a big adventure. They basically packed up their life in Johannesburg, resigned from their high-powered media jobs, sold most of their stuff and came and stayed with me for a few months.

It was fantastic to have them at Holly Tree Farm. Nice to have some help with things, but also nice to have their company. As it was summer we would spend our evenings on the front lawn cooking dinner on the BBQ, with the kids setting up camp on the lawn and sleeping next to us on the grass as we played petanque and drank too much wine.

Carol was a great cook and so we ate like kings. And of course the kids fell in love with her and Mike.

After a few months at Holly Tree Farm they got a job at a large country house in Norfolk taking on the task of turning it around to get it back on its feet financially. Something they had never done before, but they pulled it off with flying colours. Eventually going back to South Africa to take up a job running a game farm and trout fishing establishment. Perfect jobs for them as when they first got married Mike worked as a game ranger for the Parks Board and they lived a simple happy life in the bush.

Mike and Carol were two of our angels.
Shouting at a Storm

While Mike and Carol were staying with us I took a few days off and visited Portugal. Starting in the south where the November weather was perfect and driving all the way to Oporto in the north where the weather was much the same as England - terrible.

A storm raged while I was there and I went down to the beach to watch the waves smashing against the rocks at close quarters and feel the sea spray on my face. The wind was howling with such a vengeance I had to spread my legs apart and lean into it so as to not fall over.

I was caught up in the full fury of mother nature. I felt she was screaming at me, so I decided to shout back. I looked around, there was no one in sight and there was no way anyone would hear me in such a wind, so I stood there shaking my fist at the sky and shouted “I want my wife back” as loudly as I could again and again until I was hoarse. My shoulders shook as my shouting turned into sobbing.

I walked back to the car wet through and emotionally drained.
On Dogs and Cancer

Some people will tell you dogs have the ability to know what is going on with peoples’ wellbeing. To smell cancer and other diseases. To be happy or sad in tune with their master’s feelings.

When Harriet was sick, our dog Ian turned into a bag of bones. I was never sure if it was because he was picking up on what she was going through, or because I forgot to feed him for two months.

I feel sure that dogs can tune into things like sickness and in Ian’s case, because he was so close to Harriet, I think he suffered along with her. Looking back now I am sure he was depressed and this is why he did not eat.

There were times when Ian would not leave Harriet’s side, sitting or sleeping next to her all the time, putting his head on her arm as if to console her.
On My Very Fine Herb Collection

I put the word out that I was looking to rent out the fields for horse grazing. A local policeman dropped by to see if they were still available as he was looking for somewhere to keep his horses.

A nice guy, we stood by the front door chatting about all and sundry for ages. Just as we wound up the conversation he made a comment about how nice the garden looked and how healthy my plants were, especially my herbs.

“What was my secret?” he asked and I told him “The trick is to use lots of manure and fertiliser and keep them well watered”.

To which he said “Yes these two marijuana plants seem to be doing very well”

He pointed to the two herb pots by the front door. I looked in dismay saying “What?!?! How on earth did they get there?” and he burst out laughing. He quietly suggested I remove them in case I had a visit from an on-duty policeman who may not see the humour in it.

Later it dawned on me that it must have been a practical joke by the very nice Czech couple Marek and Marcela who helped me with the kids earlier in the summer. Cheeky blighters.
The Strong Woman Genes …

My parents lived unusual lives and travelled a great deal.

My father came from a family that was comfortably off in a modest sort of way. Dad went to boarding school from the age of six. He was a pilot in WWII and worked as a pilot until 1970 walking away without a scratch from several crashes in the process. He shot down a German plane, sank a torpedo boat and killed a sniper using four machine guns and four cannon. He is the only man I know who has been to Timbuktu.

My mother came from a very large family and all the money brought into the house was spent on simply getting by. World War II made it possible for her to taste life overseas, which is what she wanted to do and, as a nurse in the army, travelled to India and Singapore at the age of 19. Something that was unthinkable for someone from her village before the war.

After the war she found that home was never the same. She wanted to travel again. Then she met this handsome pilot who was courting an Eastern European princess. Unperturbed by this minor obstacle, my mother decided she was much better than this pretentious aristocrat, and with her amazing hair, gregarious firebrand personality and good looks, she set her sights on my dad. The poor man did not stand a chance.

It seems all the women in my life are strong willed and powerful. In Harriet’s family it is the same and so my lovely daughter is the recipient of “strong women” genes from both sides of her family. I feel sorry for her partner when she grows up.

My sister Avril once did something that left a lasting impression of what strong women are capable of.

My sisters have always been into horses and when my father was fruit framing in Australia, they kept their horses at the orchard. One day Avril was standing in front of her horse “Brandy”, holding him by the halter and saying sweet nothings while stroking his muzzle. When suddenly the most extraordinary thing happened.

A key part of this story, by the way, is that at that time it was fashionable for women not to wear a bra. And on this occasion my sister was conforming to the fashion.

So anyway, as Avril was telling Brandy how handsome and strong he was, he started nickering and, as if it were the most natural thing in the world to do, reached forward and bit Avril on the nipple. Well as I am sure you can imagine, being bitten on the nipple by a horse is an excruciatingly painful experience. Certainly judging from the effect it had on my sister, this is true.

A loud scream issued from Avril. An impressively loud scream from such a petite woman. A moment later she stepped back, still holding the halter in her left hand, drew her right hand back and punched Brandy on his muzzle. The poor horse staggered backwards and as good as fell over.

“Bugger me” I thought. “My sister can punch out a horse”.

Anyway I digress.
After my parents got married they lived in Canada, then Jersey - where the cows come from; followed by parts of Africa, Singapore, Borneo, New Zealand and finally Australia. My mother’s dream of a life spent travelling came true.

MUM, DAD AND MY SISTER AVRIL

They were complete opposites, but they were married and in love for over 60 years. My father died in 2009 - a few months after I had photographed and interviewed him for my book on WWII pilots. My mother is still broken hearted.

As a consequence of my parent’s travel lust, I inherited a similar passion for moving about and thanks to them I have some wonderful childhood memories.

Memories of Africa as a child with a witch doctor coming onto our front lawn in full regalia, complete with colourful flowing robes and a big face mask, and doing a dance while making a lot of noise. Memories of snakes and monkeys in our garden and fishing with my dad (and actually catching fish).

Memories of Borneo. I remember my mother, armed with a broom, running after a big monitor lizard, that seemed to me at the time to be as big as a crocodile, and chasing it into the bush after it had killed one of my pet ducks. I was upset about the duck, but impressed as hell by my mother’s act of bravery. And I have fond memories of hours and hours spent snorkelling on coral reefs with my dad. I used to dream about swimming with fish among the brightly coloured coral for years afterwards. And I remember sailing in the plywood Mirror dingy he built me - cutting off two of his fingers in the process.
Insert Cat Before Entering

When my father retired from flying we moved to New Zealand where he bought an orchard and grew apples and pears. After four years we left beautiful Nelson and moved to Wahroonga Orchard in Roleystone near Perth in Australia.

Wahroonga Orchard was both heaven and hell wrapped up in a romantic vision of a rural idyl.

Being an orchardist meant my father could be his own boss, the master of his own destiny and this made him complete. I think my dad was ahead of his time in his holistic thinking about life and food and work. Funnily enough this only occurred to me now that I write about it. At the time it all seemed a bit unorthodox. In fact I thought it was a ginormous pain in the arse.

I worked for my parents in the summer picking fruit - hard physical work - and in the winter caring for the trees, pruning them and so on.

The work and the challenges were unending. In summer it was not uncommon to work all day from the time you woke up to the time you went to sleep with a three hour break in the afternoon when it was too hot to do anything, but groan and make faint whistling noises.

Then late in the afternoon my mother would use an old hammer to bang a rusty length of rail track hanging from an Avocado tree next to the kitchen to announce it was time for tea and cake - always homemade. I still have that length of track. The dogs and cats would come running to join us from near and far in the hope of a scrap of something to eat. And then we would fire up the tractor and head back up the hill to start picking fruit again, fix broken pipes, mend fences and turn pumps on or off.

The orchard was planted in the 1800s. The house was typical of the old colonial design so popular with the British in India. Its wide verandahs providing shelter from the sun. Its hardwood floors uneven but unbending. But this was no gentrified design icon from a previous era, it was a working farmhouse with wiring and plumbing from the dark ages and idiosyncrasies too numerous to mention, like tricks and knacks required to open doors and windows. When the wind blew, it blew through the walls and floors as if they were nothing more than a minor inconvenience.

We had no keys to the house. For twenty something years the doors were either open or unlocked. Nothing was ever stolen, at least not as far as we know. When people came to visit they walked straight to the kitchen without knocking on the front door. Stray dogs and cats made themselves comfortable on the sofas, simply walking in as if it were their home. It wasn’t unusual to find a horse or a pony on the side verandah, head poking through a door or a window asking in equine “Strine” for a carrot or a pear. Kangaroos bounded across the field in front of the house.

There was a flag pole in the front garden. It was more a tall skinny tree trunk than what you might think of as a flag pole. In the old days it was used to communicate with the transportation agency at the bottom of the hill, back when they didn’t have telephones. If a flag was flying it meant there was fruit to be collected and a horse and buggy would trundle up the steep hill, load the day’s harvest and take it to the train station where it would be taken to the market in Perth.
The orchard was planted where it was because there is a stream that runs through the valley in which the trees were planted. The stream was fed by several springs and this fresh water made it an oasis and an ideal place for growing fruit.

We grew pretty much everything and this meant we had a long picking season. As well as fruit there were 60,000 daffodil bulbs which bloomed in early spring, turning two fields a brilliant yellow.

There were four dams in the valley and we used the top dam as a swimming hole where we would have parties and go skinny dipping.

The third dam had a two inch pipe that fed water to the house half a kilometre down the valley. The dams were full of little prawn-like creatures called Julgies which ducks liked to eat. Sometimes it seemed like every duck in the region would land on the dams and stir up the mud as they tried to catch the Julgies. We always knew when they were there because when you turned on a tap to run a bath or do the washing up, the water would come out brown and leave a muddy sediment. White shirts were an impossibility in summer. It also meant that occasionally these little prawns would make their way into the bath and if they had come through the hot water pipe they would come through pink and ready cooked.

Water was heated by a wood fire in the laundry, a place that I was always a little cautious about going into because it involved taking your life in your hands. Its cold concrete floor made it a popular place for snakes in summer. Sometimes I would throw a cat in first and if it started hissing or came flying out with a terrified look on its face, it usually meant there was a snake in there and I’d head off to get my gun. I suggested to Dad we should make a sign for the laundry door saying **Insert Cat Before Entering**, but he just raised his eyebrows and shook his head.

The orchard was surrounded by pine trees that acted as a windbreak to protect the fruit trees from the Mistral-like winds that howled through the valley in early summer. These trees attracted flocks of large black cockatoos that loved pine kernels. They would rip the cones apart with their big powerful beaks to get at the seeds before throwing them to the ground. Of course we soon learnt it was not a good idea to walk under the pine trees when the cockatoos were feasting in them.

Like most orchardists, my father would spray insecticide to protect the fruit from insects that could quite easily destroy an entire crop. Dad used Dieldrin which was deemed a more user-friendly alternative to DDT, but even Dieldrin was banned in the 1970s.

He would put on his heavy-duty plastic raincoat and mask and goggles and go and murder large numbers of insects with his tractor-driven sprayer. This always struck me as being a bit odd, because if ever an ant walked across the sitting room floor he would take a piece of newspaper, scoop the ant onto it, take it outside and set it free. I am sure this was a reaction to having killed people in the war.

After a few years of spraying Dieldrin in a fairly indiscriminate way with it finding its way into our drinking and bath water, my mother would get sick whenever Dad sprayed. Although it has to be said, they both lived to a ripe old age.
The sprayer also doubled as a home-based fire engine and we often used it to fight fires alongside the local bush fire brigade and in fact we painted the words Wahroonga Orchard Bush Fire Brigade on the back of the sprayer.

When fires raged through the area it was not uncommon to stay up for two days in a row fighting and spotting fires around the orchard. We’d come back home, black from head to foot, smelling like Lapsang Souchong tea, kick off our boots and fall into bed to sleep for 14 hours. Mum would always get upset about the state of the sheets, but we were too tired to pay her much heed and anyway her remonstrations were usually gentle and tinged with respect for us for what we had done fighting the fires.

It always upset me to see how these fires affected some of the slower moving animals or those that had nowhere to hide from the flames and smoke.

Kangaroos and wallabies could move quickly, often in a mob, and more than once I had to rebuild sections of fence where they had hit the wires in the dark and knocked the fence over. They must have been big and moving quickly to do that, because those fences were built to keep in horses. Either that or my fence building skills are not all they’re cracked up to be.

Bushfires could spread startlingly quickly and on a hot day with the sun blazing away, a strong bushfire was difficult to stop. The heat so intense I heard eucalyptus trees explode as the sap in the trees expanded, splitting them open and exposing the flammable sap to the flames so that it would catch fire like napalm.

I was told the best way to prevent bad bush fires is to have less hot fires on a regular basis, every couple of years or so, so that the undergrowth and organic material at ground level never builds up so much as to feed a strong fire. But of course when suburbs encroach on the bush, this tends not to happen and so when a fire does take hold, it can wreak havoc.

My teen years on the orchard were different to life experienced by my friends living in the suburbs. I envied them their time spent lazing around watching TV and taking it easy. For me there was always something to do and if my father caught me watching rugby on TV during the day he would stand there glaring at me as if to say “don’t you realise there is lots of work to do out there”.

I look back on my time on the orchard and see how it shaped me. Hard work and independence being part of lesson. And of course a passion for growing things, a love of animals and nature, and a feel for the holistic nature of the world. My father never lectured me about anything. He preferred to teach by example and this was what he taught me without saying a word.
My cousin Anthony came to visit from England. He was the engineering captain on the Royal Navy aircraft carrier Ark Royal which was in Fremantle for Australia’s 200th year celebrations. He took Mum and Dad onto the ship and showed them around. Dad got to sit in the cockpit of a Harrier jet, remarking how small the cockpit was compared to a Mosquito or Beaufighter. Anthony spent a few days on the orchard and said he felt quite at home because it reminded him of Mill House where my father grew up in England.

Later when people from Australia came to visit us at Holly Tree Farm they would say it reminded them of the orchard. It’s funny how some things are passed on down the generations.
The Mentally Unhinged Parrot

We had a lot of animals on the orchard. People would abandon their pets either by asking my parents if they would have them or by just driving past and dumping them over the fence.

We had 19 horses. Most of them abandoned or unwanted by their owners.

We had half a dozen dogs including Rufus a jaw-droppingly stupid Red Setter who moved in for two months before my sister Sue found the owner. We came into the house after work one day and found Rufus sprawled full length on the sofa, barely raising an eyebrow when he saw us.

Then there was Oliver a German Pointer who had been so mistreated by his former owners that he would snarl at anybody who went near him. In the beginning we had to chain him to a tree and feeding him was a fear filled task as he would try and savage the hand that fed him, playing devious tricks with how taut the chain was so he could try and sink his teeth into you. Before long though he gave into the love and patience of my parents and became a calm, happy and funny dog who had a repertoire of acts designed to elicit sympathy and attention. His favourite being an affected limp, sometimes switching legs if it took too long for someone to make a fuss of him. German Pointers are hunting dogs, but while he could point, raising one paw and “looking the business”, if you fired a gun near him he would run off in fear and hide behind the nearest tree.

And cats too numerous to mention. One was the undisputed leader. A Burmese. I had seen her around for over a year, gradually coming closer and closer to the house, but never letting us near her. Then one day she moved in. I was lying under the tractor doing something or other when she came and lay on my chest. She purred so loudly I thought she was going to burst. She loved us passionately and had an insatiable fondness for being stroked.

When my mother would walk the 100 yards to the chicken coop to collect the eggs each day it was not uncommon to see the Burmese cat run a few paces in front of her, lie down and roll on her back so Mum could scratch her belly as she walked past. This would happen three or four times, with neither my mother nor the cat tiring of the routine.

And as much as the cat loved her humans, she hated the other cats and dogs and would bully them mercilessly - even James the big Rhodesian Ridgeback was scared of her. And as I am sure you know, Ridgebacks are bred for hunting lions.

And then there was the mentally unhinged parrot. He was a big white bird with a powerful beak. He had obviously been someone’s pet, because when my father found him he couldn’t fly as one of his wings had been clipped. After a few weeks it became pretty obvious why he had been dumped.

Dad was at the top of the orchard when this parrot strode up to him. Dad took off his sweater, threw it over the bird, carried him down to the house and put him in the big aviary with the dozen or so other parrots I had at the time. An act for which he would never forgive my father. For the next 30 years this bird plotted and sometimes succeeded in executing acts of vicious revenge on my father.

For some reason this parrot loved me and would let me stroke him and scratch his neck and feed him by hand and when I sang to him he would dance. But whenever Dad went near him he would
become quite agitated, squawking, fluffing up his feathers, flapping his wings and swearing like a sailor.

The aviary ran the length of the packing shed and at the far end it butted onto Dad’s workshop. The parrot would stand at this end of the aviary when Dad was there and rain insults down on him repeatedly telling him to “Fuck off” and saying “Fuck you”. Which, given that my father was a pious man who never swore, would drive him to distraction.

There was definitely something not right with this bird. Within a few weeks of him arriving, all but one of the other birds in the aviary escaped because they couldn’t cope with his constant harassment.

I was making coffee one morning and looked out of the kitchen window to see, unfolding in front of me, an act of aggression befitting a war zone.

Whenever Dad walked past psycho parrot he would do something to provoke him and on this occasion the parrot was waiting for him. As soon as Dad had walked past, having completed his customary act of parrot provocation, I saw the bird scamper up to the roof and and climb through a secret hole he had made in the wire. And then, in a flash of white feathers, he launched himself at Dad, who, with his back to the aviary, was completely unaware and unprepared for the pent up fire-ball of fury that was about to collide with the back of his head.

I was about to call out to him, but it all happened so quickly there was no point.

Parrots have some of the most powerful beaks in the avian world and their talons are not unlike those of an eagle. It was this combination of tooth and claw that sank into my father’s head.

Dad’s reaction was momentary bafflement, bewilderment and shock at the searing pain, but by the time psycho parrot had started pulling out chunks of hair he seemed to realise what was going on and tried to swat the bird as if it were a gigantic bee attached to the back of his head.

I grabbed a couple of tea towels and ran out to rescue Dad who by then was shouting “Get this beast off me!”.

When psycho saw me he calmed down and became quite contrite. As I took him in my hands and carried him back to the aviary, he looked at me benignly and then darted an evil look at Dad, hissing at him like a snake.

One day as I walked down the driveway on my way home from school I could see the front door was closed. It was almost always open, so I wondered what was up. My father opened a window and shouted “Your bloody parrot’s got out and he’s eating the front door, trying to break into the house” then he slammed it shut again. He sounded a little freaked out.

Sure enough as I got to the front door, psycho parrot was there tearing strips off the door frame in a very determined fashion. When he saw me, he stopped immediately and with a coy expression, walked up to me and let me pick him up.
Psycho parrot was still alive when I wrote this thirty years later and lives with my nephew Mark. No doubt he still spends his days plotting revenge against his nemesis.

And then there was a goat called Petal. She broke out one day, snuck up behind my mother and head butted her on the backside sending her sprawling onto the grass as she bent over to pick up some clothes by the clothes line. I won’t tell you what happened to Petal as a result, except to say that my mother makes a very fine curry.
SEEING BEAUTY IN THE ORDINARY

Mum said something to me once that has stayed with me ever since.

One summer, after we had been farming for ten years, my mother picked a peach and turned to me holding it almost reverentially in her hands and said "Look at this, it is perfect".

I didn’t understand her to begin with. Each week we picked thousands of peaches and I said in a grumpy teenage way that I did not think it was any different to any of the other squillions of peaches I had picked that summer, but she said “No. Look at it. I mean really look at it. It is perfect. Perfect colour, perfect shape, perfect size. It is perfect”.

My immediate thought was she had been in the sun too long and had gone a bit crazy, but then I put those thoughts aside and looked at the peach. She was right. It was perfect. I looked at her and smiled.

I disagreed with my mother on most things, but this time she said something I thought was quite profoundly true. And I saw something in her I had not seen before. The ability to see beauty in the ordinary and take joy from it.

MY MOTHER AND MY FATHER
(with the adopted dogs Oliver and James)
A few months after Harriet died I was sitting at my desk feeling pretty miserable and looked up at a photo on my office wall. It was an old photo of an earnest young man in the uniform of the Royal Air Force. The young man wore wings on his chest showing he was a pilot. This was my father and the photo was taken in 1940 on the day he got his wings. He was 22 years old and after deciding the priesthood was not for him, was lucky enough to follow his other longing, which was to be a fighter pilot.

There is another photo of him taken with all the other young men on his course. He told me that of the 50 or so men in the photo only a handful of them would have made it to the end of the war in
1945. The rest would be dead. Having been killed on missions over Germany, or in raging fires in flying accidents, or drowned in the channel, frozen to death in the North Sea or blown out of the sky by flak over Holland or France.

Another photo of him taken five years later shows how much he has aged. He looks like an old man.

I remembered how he described standing on his parent’s tennis court in 1940 looking at the horizon which was on fire after a German raid. He described how he seethed with rage and vowed to make them pay for this atrocity. Not a very Christian thing to say for a man who had been training to enter the church, but, like many men at the time, he was so enraged by what was happening to his country that thoughts of mercy and forgiveness were put to one side.

As I looked at the photo of my father on the wall, it occurred to me he was not going to be with us for much longer. He was 87 years old. An idea started to form in my mind which was to get myself down to Australia and photograph and interview him before it was too late. I decided I wanted to photograph him in the same pose as in the photo on the wall so I could put the two photos side by side.

I bought some professional camera equipment and learned how to use it. To the point where for a long time this was all I did. At the time of writing this I have photographed and interviewed 28 WWII pilots in eight countries. It became a cathartic thing for me.

If anyone were to ask me what can I say to help them overcome their grief when something terrible happens, I would say find something to throw yourself into. Something you love doing. Something that stops you dwelling too much on the sadness and gives you some respite, a place to go where you can be happy for a while. For me that thing was photographing and interviewing pilots who saw action in WWII.

For a year or so my father refused to be part of my project because he was so angry with me for photographing four German pilots. And especially because I told him I really liked every one of them and he would too if he met them. This was something he was never going to forgive me for and told me he wanted nothing to do with anything involving Germans.

It took me a long time to understand why he still disliked Germans so much; especially these former pilots, as most of them were not affiliated to the Nazi Party. In a nutshell I think it is because it is easier to forgive yourself for killing someone who is an arch villain, than it is if they are nice guys.

I worked on him as best I could, but the one guy I really wanted to photograph, the man in whose honour the work was to be dedicated was not having a bar of it. I was hurt and disappointed. At that stage I had photographed ten pilots including some some of the most famous surviving pilots of WWII, but my father kept saying no. Then to my immense relief the day before I was to fly home, he agreed.

As it turns out I got some nice photos of him. Photos that captured his spirit. I even got one that is reasonably close to the photo on the wall. But as he was being a cantankerous old goat when I shot him, he refused to follow directions.
As the effects of a glass or two of red wine kicked in, a twinkle came into his eyes. This was the man I knew and loved.
Although in the best photo of the day, he looks as stern as hell. Probably because I told him to imagine he had a German JU88 in his sights.
Peter Lunnon-Wood

As a boy I grew up around WWII pilots and to me they were all larger than life. My favourite was Peter Lunnon-Wood who was a Spitfire pilot seeing action in France and Burma.

On one occasion his plane was shot up over France and rather than bale out he decided to try and make it back to England. Calling in for help, he was “talked” back by a Woman’s Auxiliary Air Force radio operator who gave him directions and encouragement as he nursed his badly damaged Spitfire across the Channel.

Peter had just enough height and speed to scrape over the white cliffs of Dover and moments before ploughing his beautiful aircraft into the rich soil of Kent he asked the WAAF who’d been guiding him home “I don’t suppose you’re free for dinner tonight?”. No surprise she said yes and it was to be the start of a wartime romance that lasted until he was sent to Burma.

In Burma Peter got in trouble for refusing an order to shoot elephants the Japanese were using to transport materiel. He told me “I was happy to kill as many bloody Japs as I could, but they weren’t going to get me to shoot any elephants, bugger that I told them”.

On another occasion when he was flying a mission with his wingman “Blackie”, they came across a large pontoon packed full of Japanese troops crossing a river. Peter described how, whooping with excitement at the sight of it, he and Blackie got right down to within a few feet of the water and flew in with machine guns and canon blazing resulting in a great deal of carnage. With steel helmets and billy cans bouncing off his wings as he passed through the maelstrom.

Peter radioed Blackie saying he was going in for another go. “Are you mad Peter? They’ll be ready for you this time”. And Blackie was right. Peter hit the water 400 yards from where he had just killed and wounded a large number of Japanese soldiers.

With Blackie providing covering fire, Peter managed to get out of his Spitfire and make it into the cover of the jungle. They chased him for four hours and when they caught him, they beat him until he was unconscious.

When I knew him he still had the scar on his forehead where he had been hit with a Japanese rifle butt.

Contrary to what you might expect they did not kill him. Instead they forced him to walk back to their camp where he was put in a hole in the ground surrounded by barbed wire. A week or so later a young Japanese officer came to him late at night with his pistol drawn, pulled the barbed wire aside and, using hand gestures, told Peter to make a run for it. Which he did.

Sadly Peter died before I had the idea of photographing old pilots, but he definitely would have had pride of place in the set of images because to me he is a legend.

Peter lived every minute of his life to its fullest. He set an example of how not to take life for granted because you could be dead tomorrow. In some ways he was as mad as a cut snake, but I have a great deal of admiration for him. He was a big influence on me when I was growing up.
Walter Morison

One of the most audacious pilots I photographed was Walter Morison. An erudite raconteur extraordinaire whose Wellington bomber had crashed into another Wellington near Cologne in Germany. He was the only survivor out of the twelve crew from the two aircraft.

As he had broken his arm badly, the Germans put him in a hospital for six weeks before sending him to a PoW camp from which he and another pilot, Lorne Welch, escaped with the intention of stealing a German aircraft to fly to Sweden.

Having spent several days on the run wearing made-up Luftwaffe uniforms, he and his friend eventually found an aerodrome with various German aircraft scattered about. Choosing the one they liked the look of best, they made their way to the aircraft and Walter climbed into the cockpit. As the two of them were trying to figure out how to start it, a German sergeant walked up to them and demanded “What are you doing in this aircraft?” to which Walter replied in his best schoolboy German “I am an English officer”. The German sergeant responded with a loud guffaw before saying “Komm mit” and the three of them walked back to the hanger chatting like old friends.

Walter said “Most Germans are just like you and me, it was just the SS and the Gestapo who were the utter bastards. I have spent my entire adult life telling people that”.

WALTER MORISON ON THE RIGHT.
Just after he and Lorne Welch had been caught trying to steal a German plane to fly it to Sweden. They spent the following weeks in solitary confinement. Walter was eventually sent to Colditz.
A Traffic Jam To Remember

I drove to the other side of London and up to Hertfordshire for a meeting. A drive that would normally take less than two hours. On the return journey, I got stuck in a seven and half hour traffic jam. My phone battery went flat, I had an achingly full bladder from too much coffee and no one to look after the kids - I didn’t even know where they were. I swore I would never put myself and the kids in this situation again.

I found myself saying “That’s it, I’m leaving this dreadful country. I’ve had enough”.

That night I started making plans for leaving for Cape Town and set the departure date for two months away. In the meantime I wanted to get as much work as possible done on my project photographing WWII pilots and set about trying to meet as many as I could before we left.

I wrote to embassies in London trying to get access to pilots who had flown in WWII. The German Embassy wrote back with an air force colonel thanking me for my interest and saying he was sorry, but it was not policy for the embassy to give out names and addresses. Attached to the neatly typed letter on official letterhead was a hand written Post-It note saying “I suggest you email Herr Theo Nau. He flew Bf 109s in the war. Here is his email address … Good luck!”.

I travelled to Germany and met Theo. We spoke for some hours and became friends. He was shot down by an American Indian flying a P47 Thunderbolt. After the war he tried to find the pilot who shot him down, but he died before Theo could meet him.

Theo was very helpful in putting me in touch with other pilots and it was through him that I met Generals Miroslav Standerer and Günther Rall - the world’s highest scoring surviving fighter pilot then alive.
On Meeting General Miroslav Standerer

Three days before we left England to go and live in Cape Town in South Africa, I flew to the Czech Republic to photograph and interview the 90 year old Brigadier General Miroslav Standerer who lived with his beautiful 54 year old wife in Pilzen in Western Bohemia.

General Standerer had wanted to be a pilot ever since he saw a plane flying at a local fete when he was 13 years old. His dream came true and he did a lot of flying, not just in the Czech air force, but also the French air force and the RAF.

When the Germans invaded Czechoslovakia he escaped “As the Germans came in through the front door, I was going out through the back door” and joined the French air force in France, once again escaping when the Germans turned up uninvited.

He made his way to England travelling south through France, doing his best to avoid betrayal by the French and later the Spanish. He travelled on foot and train over the Pyrenees, through Spain and westwards to Portugal where he caught a ship from Lisbon to Liverpool. Many other Czech pilots did the same. In England he flew Spitfires, Hurricanes, Beaufighters and Mosquitoes, but in spite of numerous dogfights, never scored a victory.

He said that towards the end of the war he was terrified every time he went up. This is the thing I admire most about him. To keep going back into action time and again even though he was scared witless required a great deal of courage and determination. I also admire him because he has been through some very bad times in his life, but managed to keep going and come out the other end with something like a smile on his face.

After the war he returned home, but when the communists took over he escaped from Pilsen back to England where he re-joined the RAF and later lived in Germany. Many of his fellow pilots who stayed behind in Czechoslovakia were incarcerated and shot. Kafka would have had a field day with this extraordinary man.

When I arrived at his apartment he invited me in and speaking in perfect English asked “Would you like a drink?”. I was just about to say a cup of coffee would be very nice when I noticed a bottle of Scotch on the table and two glasses. He saw me looking at the bottle, I looked at him and smiled saying “A Scotch would be nice” and we both laughed. We drank the bottle of Scotch. I was so drunk all my photos from the day are terrible. Out of focus, blurred, incorrectly lit, really appalling. He spoke for hours, a fascinating story of a man thwarted by war, various ‘isms” and fate. He laughed at his misfortunes as if they were of no consequence. Beyond his control.

At the end of the working day we heard a key in the door. His back stiffened and a look of fear came over his face. It was his wife. When she saw me and the empty bottle of Scotch she erupted. I was kicked out of the apartment, scrambling to get my stuff together as she berated him, occasionally pointing a finger at me and saying things that I can only imagine were not very nice.

Miroslav and I stood in the street for 30 minutes waiting for a cab to arrive. It was freezing, but he didn’t seem to mind. I imagine it was preferable to the icy treatment he was expecting when he went back inside.
I liked Miroslav very much and sent him a bottle of Scotch as a Christmas present and to thank him for seeing me. He wrote back saying “You did not have to send it to me, but seeing as you have I had better drink it or it will evaporate. Which would be a senseless waste”.

General Miroslav Standerer
On Meeting General Günther Rall

After meeting General Standerer in the Czech Republic, I drove to Bad Reichenhall in Upper Bavaria on the German Austrian border to meet the flying legend Lieutenant-General Günther Rall.

The general lived in an old fortified house which was a bit like a castle. I had difficulty finding the place, but eventually asked some locals for directions and sped off so as not to be late. Arriving exactly on time I found the general waiting for me outside his house, seemingly unperturbed by the light snow falling on him.

I opened my window as I pulled up next to him and he said “Herr Bradley I presume” in a rather unfriendly tone. I thought uh-oh this is not going to be as much fun as meeting Miroslav Standerer and I bet there won’t be any Scotch today.

“You must put your “chumper” on”. He said. It was an order not a suggestion. He seemed concerned about my wellbeing given it was so cold. I found this to be an endearing characteristic in such a famous man. No doubt that is why his men worshipped him and would fly into the jaws of hell with him. A lot of them did and a lot of them didn’t come back. A terrible burden to bear for any man.

As I chatted to Günther, I realised there was something special about him. Something that set him apart from other men. A greatness shining through him in his humility, his compassion for others and his sheer determination to get things done. It had never occurred to me that one of history’s greatest warriors, and a general no less, could also be a compassionate person. At first glance the two things seem mutually exclusive, but now that I have met and interviewed three generals I can say it is true for all of them. In Günther’s case I think part of this came from his ability to sublimate his own needs and wants for something else, something he believed was more important than himself. Something he thought was good and right. In this case the fight against communism.

He was the third highest scoring fighter pilot in history and the highest scoring pilot still alive when I photographed and interviewed him.

Günther was decorated by Adolf Hitler three times. There are several surviving photos taken of him after each investiture and they tell a dramatic story. The story of Germany written in a young man’s face.
The first time he was decorated by Hitler there is a photo showing a fresh faced officer who is beaming he is so pleased with himself.
The second time he has a different expression. He told me that on this occasion he realised Hitler was crazy. He realised he had put all his money on the wrong horse. Suddenly it became clear that the terrible sacrifices being made every day on the eastern front were for a mad man. His world came falling in around him. You can see it as clear as day in the photos taken that afternoon. He looks as though he has been crying, or is fighting back the tears.
Then he spoke about the third time he met Hitler. “We were losing the war and we knew it. We were in full retreat, it was a complete disaster and we knew it would not be long before it was all over. Meanwhile this crazy man was showing us big maps of Eastern Europe and, with sweeping gestures of his arms, telling us how he was going to colonise the lands to the east of Greece”. A photo from the time shows Günther resigned to his fate. The thousand yard stare. He told me that by this time he had stopped fighting for the Fatherland. He saw his primary role as saving as many of his men as possible from the coming slaughter.
In another time I think he may have been a great leader or scientist. It is just such a shame he wasted so much of his energy on the collective madness that gripped Germany in the hands of a small man with a silly moustache.

I’m sure his telling me to put on my sweater and his concern for the cold came from years of fighting in the savage Russian winters in conditions so bleak they had to light fires under their aircraft engines before they would start.

Günther was able to draw upon enormous reserves of strength and bravery combined with single-minded focus and attention to detail. He shot down 275 Russian, British, French and American aircraft. As a point of reference, my father shot down one German aircraft in the same period and, contrary to myth, that was pretty good going.

Günther was shot down eight times during WWII. On various occasions he broke his back and his pelvis, was scalped and had a thumb shot off. When he broke his back (in three places) he was carried out of the battlefield on a truck that bounced for hours down a dirt road. The pain was so intense he tried to pull his side arm to shoot the driver, but passed out before he could.

On the first night in a field hospital he said there was an effete male nurse to whom he owed a great debt. Günther told me “Clearly he was not fighting material, if you understand me, but he stayed with me all night talking to me and keeping me from drifting off to a sleep from which I would never wake. If it were not for him my bones would be lying in Ukrainian soil”.

Eventually he was sent by rail to Vienna, where he was looked after by a very pretty doctor who, he soon realised, was paying him a lot of attention during the painful and difficult months that he recuperated. It wasn’t long before Hertha and he married.

In hospital Günther was told his spinal injuries meant he would never fly again. He said the German equivalent of “bugger that” and went on to fly many more missions only stopping after being shot down by a famous American ace called Hub Zemke. In this encounter Günther’s thumb was shot off and the ensuing blood poisoning kept him in hospital and out of action long enough to save his life.

As Günther was such a successful fighter pilot, he was often interviewed on state news. One day he returned from a mission and as he got down from his plane a film crew nabbed him and interviewed him. Immediately behind them were some ominous looking fellows in large coats who wanted to speak to him in private. They were Gestapo and they had come to arrest him. Hertha, his wife, had been arrested for helping Jewish doctors escape to England from Vienna. Günther blew his top and told them to go away saying “Either I am a national hero or I am not”. Eventually Günther’s commanding officer got Herman Goering, second only to Adolf Hitler, to have all the charges dropped. I imagine the outcome would have been quite different if it were not for some strings being pulled.

Günther described meeting in London, after the war, some of the Jewish doctors Hertha had helped to escape Nazi persecution. He described to me how ashamed he was and how forgiving and non-judgemental the emigres were.

Hertha is such an interesting person I plan to write a book about her. And actually I think her story, intertwined with Günther’s, would make great film.
Günther had many scrapes with death and they were not confined to WWII. After the war he became head of the German armed forces and was on hand when Palestinians kidnapped Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics. At the airfield where the helicopters were ready to take the hostages away, a firefight erupted and the policeman standing next to Günther was shot in the head and fell to the ground - dead.

In my very darkest times I think about Günther and compare my situation to some of the things he has been through and I find myself saying “stop feeling sorry for yourself, get up off your arse and get moving. What would Günther do in this situation? You know he wouldn’t be moping around feeling sorry for himself”.

The one hour he promised me at the start of our meeting had become four and to my surprise when it was nearly time to go he pulled out a bottle of Scotch. With a twinkle in his eye he said “My doctor tells me I must have some everyday to help with my circulation”.

We chatted about his life. He still skied. He loved spending time with his grandchildren. He was very proud that one of his grandsons played in a rock band and he spoke with great love about his daughters. Then he spoke about his beloved wife who had passed away a few years before. Tears came to his eyes as he told me about her. How she cared for him when he broke his back. How they lost their first child when her car was strafed by an RAF Mosquito and she had a miscarriage. He told me about her helping Jewish doctors and how, after the war, they both ended up working at Salem school which is where the couple became friends with Prince Philip and the Queen. He talked about religion and the role Christ had played in his life. He had a little Christian shrine in the room in which we were sitting and there was a candle burning in it (I did not have the courage to tell him I am not religious).

I asked him what he would say to my nine year old son about war. He said “War is a terrible thing. A terrible waste”. I heard the same words used by nearly all the pilots I spoke to. Then he went on to make a case for the importance of having a strong defence force, a strong deterrent to protect your country.

As I left the general his parting words were “Cheerio. Give my regards to Prince Philip”.

“If I see Prince Philip, I promise I shall pass on your best wishes”. I replied. It’s not everyday you get to say that.

I glanced over my shoulder as I drove off down his long driveway. I shall never forget the image of him standing there, his hands in his jacket pockets, with a big open smile. I felt I had spent an afternoon in the presence of greatness. Not because he is one of the greatest fighter pilots ever, or because of his strong sense of duty. I felt I had been in the presence of a great man because he had a big heart.

His story is timeless. The story of a well intentioned young man who threw himself completely into the service of something he believed to be right and good. Only to find he had made a big mistake. To find it was not what he thought it would be and to his shame had become an instrument of darkness. There must be countless young men and women experiencing just that even now. Especially in the Middle East.
Günther remains the most remarkable man I have ever met and here is my favourite portrait of him, taken before we drank the Scotch.
Leaving Holly Tree Farm for South Africa

The day after I photographed and interviewed Günther, the kids and I flew to Cape Town where I planned to take a two year break, but where we ended up living for the next six years.

Sarah, who worked for me at the time, moved mountains in getting everything sorted out with the house and dogs before we left. Everything went smoothly on our last day in England thanks to her. She kindly took us to the airport. I did not look back as we drove out of Holly Tree Farm. Too many painful memories lay there. It was time to look forward.
South Africa

We swapped gloomy wet England for a new life in Cape Town, a city so full of light and energy it filled the senses. My face hurt from smiling so much. This was my cue to stop grieving and start living again. And for the kids too. Even Ian and Bertie, the street dogs we brought with us from England, had a new zing in their step.

Ian the dog was completely neurotic and sometimes did extreme things that would leave me picking up the pieces. Sometimes literally picking up the pieces. Like the time he bit the tail off a greyhound and testicles off his friend. What joy. Ian could be a handful, but I loved him.

The dogs arrived in Cape Town a few days after us. I picked them up from the airport and took them straight to the beach for a run and to deal with the fact they hadn’t peed for at least 24 hours.

Ian got out of the car and walked purposefully up to two guys lying on the sand. With some trepidation I watched wondering what mischief he was about to do, when, to my astonishment, he cocked his leg and peed on the head of one of them. Mayhem ensued with Bertie the Jack Russell yapping furiously as I proffered obsequious apologies. At which point the guy told me to just stop talking and go away. Although, I hope you understand, those were not the words he used. He was after all quite cross.

We soon settled into a routine in our new home. Life was good in the most beautiful city in the world. The kids made friends and were happier than they had been for a long time.

FALSE BAY, SOUTH AFRICA, AT DUSK.
Now dear reader, please forgive me for not mentioning this earlier, but after being on my own again for a couple of years I met someone and fell in love. I had a girlfriend. Her name was Joss and we started seeing each other while I was still in England and she was in Cape Town. For a year or so I would fly down to see her or she would fly up to England to see me and we would go on trips to France and other interesting places. She was a strikingly attractive woman. Smoulderingly wonderfully ball-grabbingly sexy with a voice so beautiful it was a sensual pleasure just to listen to her speak. She was quick witted and clever and made me laugh. I hadn’t laughed so much and so hard in a long time. And the icing on the margarita glass was she had a passion for great food and cooking.

For the first year we would speak for a couple of hours every day even though we were 10,000 kilometres apart. She was in my thoughts all day and my dreams all night.

When I decided to move to Cape Town, Joss was so excited and put a huge amount of time into finding a place for the kids and me to live and organising all the stuff necessary to make an empty house habitable before our things arrived from England. So when she picked us up from the airport, we moved into a house that was nearly a home.
A Dark Place

After Harriet died I was bewildered. I was overwhelmed and stuck in a rut of grieving and coping, or being seen to be coping. The move to Cape Town was as much as anything about escaping pressure to be seen to be happy and coping.

I felt the need to go somewhere where I could spend time in a dark place and no-one would know. Where I could grieve in private. And that is what I did. During the day when the kids were around I was “there” for them, but then at night, especially at night, I went to some dark places in my soul. I drank too much and cut myself off from everyone else.

In spite of my feelings for Joss, it was not a happy time and she felt hurt and angry. Things hadn’t turned out the way she expected. I may have been there for the kids, but I definitely wasn’t there for her.

“I’m competing with a dead woman for your love and I’m losing” she said.

Things didn’t work out and we went our separate ways. I haven’t heard from her in years, but I hope she can forgive me for messing her about so much. I think people who have lost someone should give themselves plenty of time before getting into a new relationship. Obviously there is no formula for this, but I have heard anecdotes of the magic two year mark. Two years was not enough time for me, but it seems a lot of people are ready to move on again once stepping over this threshold.

For me grieving came and went in waves and as time passed, the waves were further apart. I’d like to say they were less intense too, but I can’t. Sometimes this was true, but sometimes even now I feel the pain as if it all happened yesterday, and then it goes away and leaves me in peace again.

And as for going into relationships with people who have recently lost someone, I would say you are asking to be hurt. It takes time, sometimes a lot of time before people can give their heart to someone else. Do you really want to hear endless stories about your lover’s dead wife and be compared to her and to see her things and photos lying around the house? No. It takes time for people to work these things out of their system and until they do, there is no space for you. Avoid at all costs is my unasked for advice. Fish, plenty of.

I spent too much time grieving. How much is too much? I have no idea, but looking back I feel I could have moved on sooner than I did by allowing myself to feel pain rather than building a wall around it and trying to cope. It will catch up with you eventually no matter what you do.

I think if you are going to grieve, then allow yourself to really grieve. Don’t pussyfoot around. Grieve with a vengeance. Grieve properly, fully and completely. Abandon yourself to it. Get it out of your system. And when you have done that, which will almost certainly take longer than you think, it will be easier to choose between being bitter and twisted or someone who learns to live with happiness and loss at the same time. The mind flip in this is it IS possible to live in state of happiness even when you are grieving intensely.
Abukaya

Music has always been part of my life, but for a long time when Harriet was sick and afterwards I didn’t listen to music or read books for that matter.

Moving to Cape Town changed that and I saw it as a sign of coming to terms with grief.

In time I started going out more and occasionally would venture into the middle of Cape Town to listen to music. Very often jazz played by guys from the townships.

I was reminded of the time I first lived in South Africa during Apartheid. At that time I worked for a large advertising agency in Johannesburg and shared an interest in live music with one of my colleagues, an otherwise conservative blonde haired fellow who had been an officer in the army, but who had a passion for the jazz of the black townships.

We used to do the unthinkable for the time which was to pay someone to drive us into Soweto so we could visit shebeens to listen to jazz. We did so with some trepidation as sometimes bad things happened to white folk venturing into these places after dark. The chances of getting shot were pretty good. We would slide down on the back seat to make ourselves less obvious and sit with towels over our heads so no one could see we were whities.

Once in a shebeen we would be treated as a curiosity and with some suspicion as normally the only whites who ventured that far into Soweto were policemen or soldiers carrying guns and truncheons, and travelling in armoured personnel vehicles. Once they realised I was not South African, they were usually very friendly and welcoming. My South African friend lived in my shadow at these times. Only once can I remember anyone being aggressive to us and his friends pretty quickly told him to shut up and leave off. And of course the music was fantastic. Raw, but with an intensity of feeling I was unprepared for. This was not technically perfect music and more often than not the instruments were on the verge of falling apart, but it didn’t matter.

By comparison the music I listened to in Cape Town in more recent times was more perfect, but less edgy. It lost some of its soul because it was being played for tourists and white people. The venues were a lot safer and cleaner, but it wasn’t as exciting. There was one “plus” to this and it was that the chances of getting shot were less extreme.

I also really liked Marimba and particularly enjoyed listening to a band called Abukaya who usually played at Mama Africa in Long Street. Their lead singer had a very unusual voice in that it was normally quite high pitched, but then he could switch to a baritone. I got the impression he had been trained to sing opera. Africa never ceases to surprise.
Tilly & Thomas and Mother’s Day

I was not the only one grieving.

There were times in Cape Town when, in the lead-up to Mother’s Day, Tilly would go very quiet. She would see the other kids coming to school with their mothers and it would cut her to the quick. For two days she would cry and cry. Her teachers consoled her as best they could. Putting cushions in the corner of the class for her and just letting her be.

I became concerned that Tilly was growing into an introverted and shy little girl. It worried me that perhaps she would never come to terms with not knowing her mother, something that would leave its mark on her for the rest of her days.

Class assignments around mother’s day used to throw her as well. Things like “Write what is good about your mother and why you love her”. Of course she had no idea. She was too young to remember Harriet. In those days she called me Mummy Daddy, so she would write about me instead.

And Mother’s Day would affect Thomas too. He would drift off into his 1000 yard stare and we would lose him for a day or two.

As they got older they dealt with Mother’s Day better, but those first few years were terrible.
It Takes Balls To Be A Single Mother

Because I am a man, it was OK for me to ask stupid questions about raising children. But occasionally people would come out with things that would hurt or frustrate me. Patronising sentiments like “Oh how sweet, he really doesn’t have a clue, but he’s trying so hard”.

Sometimes I wonder what it must be like for women struggling with the same questions, for I am sure they must struggle with them. Wandering around in a state of shock asking themselves, what the hell has happened to my life now I have this little person to look after and what in dog’s name am I supposed to do? I wondered if they would be judged as fools or bad mothers for not knowing the answers intuitively.

Can men make good mothers? I think so, if they embrace it. If given the chance and the space to explore what works and if they have the courage to make mistakes and keep going, then yes they can add motherhood to their LinkedIn peer endorsed skill set.

I’m in the camp that believes most women are predisposed, for whatever reason, to mothering children. And of course I have women friends who shout at me for saying this as they have no inclination to mother children whatsoever. Notwithstanding that, I also think that even women who are inclined to live and breathe being a mother have to learn how to do it and in this sense they are no different to men.

So looking at it this way, if a man finds himself in a situation where he has to mother children and he sees a good reason for doing it and he wants to do it, then there is no reason why he can’t be just as good a mum as the next mother.

I like Humans of New York and just read about a widower in India who raises his daughter. They live in very humble circumstances, but have enough money for the girl to go to school. It was beautiful the way he described looking forward to seeing her when she comes home each day and hearing all about what she learned. I thought what a great dad he is. He is the mother she lost when her mother died.

And another thing I’ve found interesting about this child rearing thing is that by the time you’ve figured out what to do the rules change. Just as you think you are getting the hang of it, they grow up a bit more and are operating under a different set of rules. They’re always one step ahead of you. And then by the time you’ve really figured it all out, they’ve grown up and left home.

Now I think about it, I am not a single parent. I have a husky and she mothers Thomas, Tilly and me. She gets very anxious if she can’t find one of us. She doesn’t like us arguing. She consoles us when we are sad. She makes us smile. So I suppose that would make her the single parent. And as an aside, if you let an alpha female dog think she has dominion over you, you are screwed, but that is another story.

Did you know that in Ireland up until the 1970’s when a woman died and there was no extended family to take her children, they were put into the custody of the state, even if the father was living in the house?
As I said, because I am a man, it was ok for me to ask stupid questions about raising children. But I know from “between you and me” chats with single mothers, if you are a woman, you can’t ask those questions because the other women will make you feel stupid.

I have heard so many women tell me how on their first day at home with a baby, they didn’t have a clue what to do and felt abandoned and helpless.

And then I’ve seen that women can be as brutal and unforgiving on the battlefield of child rearing as men are at war. Something visceral is unleashed within them when it comes to children. Something that makes them put the wellbeing of children, even children who are not their children, above all else.

To paraphrase the army general in *Apocalypse Now*, they are given permission to operate without any decent restraint, totally beyond the pale of any acceptable human conduct.

Gentleman on this battlefield we are truly screwed, because we have been conditioned in a completely different way and we are totally unprepared for the ruthlessness we face on this Thin Red Line of bloody noses, snot, vomit, wet bed sheets and gag-inducing poo-filled nappies (diapers to you American chaps). However there is good news. The beauty of conditioned behaviour is it can be changed. So man-up. You can shine on this battlefield, or if not shine, I know you have the balls to get up with a smile on your face each time you’ve been knocked down. I know you can do this if you choose to.

Having said all that, I can’t say my parenting style is a particularly pretty thing.

After one house move, I found I had 14 glue sticks, four half full chocolate milk and two strawberry milk powder containers in the cupboard and … well you get the idea.

Everything is a mess in my house. The car looks like a environmental no-go zone. Sometimes I want to give up on being a parent and become a gigolo, and here are some of the reasons why.

The time they put a dozen coins in the car CD player.

The car DVD player being so covered in finger marks you could barely see the screen and all the DVDs being covered in finger marks too.

I thought I was good at getting them to brush their teeth until I had to face the humiliation of taking Thomas to the dentist and finding he had huge holes in his teeth.

Falling asleep in their bed when reading them bedtime stories became the norm.

And you get used to it getting to 9 o’clock and you realise you haven’t eaten yet, so you end up eating their leftovers. Cold pasta, soggy fish fingers or chicken nuggets and peas that have dried out.

You become desensitised to your son weeing on the toilet seat and not flushing the loo.
When he was a little older I wrote this note to Thomas:

When you pee: lift the seat before you start weeing (assuming you are standing), take aim (preferably at the water in the loo), do not look around or sing or jump up and down, just stand still and focus with all your might on peeing into the loo, do not walk away until you have completely finished weeing, make sure you leave the seat up as putting it down when you've finished is just blatant pandering to some feminist dogma, and lastly flush the loo and wash your hands.

And then as a parent I faced problems with the tooth fairy. Sometimes with my kids the tooth fairy was a bit forgetful. And each night she forgot to leave money, the amount due doubled. Sometimes the tooth fairy had had too may glasses of wine. I’ve definitely found it to be the case that inebriated tooth fairies are terribly unreliable.

As an aside, in Afrikaans they have what is called a tandemuis which translates as a tooth mouse - I love that idea. I can just see a little mouse coming and swapping a tooth for a coin.

Putting them to bed was always a battle. Firstly they didn’t want to get into the bath and then I couldn’t get them out again. Then getting them into bed was a fight.

Brushing Tilly’s hair was always a time consuming affair. Although I did learn to plait hair and found this saved time in the morning as it was easier to get her hair ready for school if it had been plaited the night before.

By necessity I became an expert on hair conditioner.

I learned about thrush. When your five year old is squirming in discomfort at 10PM and you don’t know what to do. Thank Dog for Canestan.

And then thank Dog too for Phenergen which is an anti-histamine based pain killer. I remember one night Thomas was a sick little fellow and couldn’t get to sleep. I looked skywards and asked “Harriet what the flip should I do?” and the words that popped into my head were “5ml of Phenergen”. And I gave myself a shot too for good measure.

And the list continues …

Dealing with well intentioned friends and relatives can drive you nuts.

Nagging the kids to do stuff over and over again.

Them nagging you over and over for things they want (which when they get, they are not interested in anymore).

Saying no over and over again. And of course for a single parent there is nobody else to send them to when they have misbehaved and no-one to share the load with.

The time Thomas had a serious nose bleed just as we were about to get on an international flight and me asking some stranger to hold tissues on his face while I went in search of ice to stem the bleeding before we boarded. Thankfully it stopped and we were allowed on the plane.
And then there is the noise. Children are noisy, especially packs of little girls who seem to take a great deal of delight in shrieking very loudly.

Sometimes children scream and you know it is not a big deal and ignore it and sometimes they scream and you sit bolt upright and run, because you know something bad has happened. Like when Tilly impaled her foot with a pair of kitchen scissors.

Packing at the end of a holiday and rushing so as not to miss a plane. And finding their things have expanded and now don’t fit in the suitcases for the trip home. Carrying three suitcases is infinitely harder than two.

Dealing with them getting irritated and squabbling in the car.

Public toilets were a constant source of embarrassment for me. Having to go into the women’s loo with a very young Tilly while Thomas stood outside on his own. Me taking a deep breath as I announced to all in the Ladies that I, a man, was coming in with my daughter. Sometimes sidestepping this by accosting a friendly looking woman on her way into toilets. I often used the disabled toilets, because then I could have both of them with me at the same time, but of course one day I got an absolute bollocking from a woman in a wheelchair.

Trust me all this was a monumental ball ache … but of course all parents know this.

And then you have to think about the things you get from your children. Wait! What are those things? Just remind me. Oh yes …

When Harriet died people said “Poor you, you have to raise two small children on your own”, but actually I found I was loved completely by these two little people and this made a very difficult time so much easier to deal with. Sometimes it felt like it was the three of us against the world and this brought us closer together and made us feel we could beat any challenge that came our way.
THEY ONLY HAVE ONE CHILDHOOD, DON’T MUCK IT UP FOR THEM

If I were to put my parenting style into a few words it would be “Don’t muck it up for them”.

The more I dwell on this the more important it becomes to me. And another thought is they only have one childhood. It will be what they remember for the rest of their lives. It will shape them. I want it to be a good memory not a bad one. It was bad enough for them to lose their mother - the worst thing that can happen to any child.

I decided I am going to give them the best, most extraordinary childhood I can with the resources I have. Financial, emotional and most importantly - my time.

I want my children to look back on their childhood when they are older and to have that memory bring a smile to their faces.

There are so many things I could have done better with the kids, but one thing is for sure, they have had a memorable childhood. They’ll certainly have a lot to talk about.

I am stopped in my tracks sometimes when the kids remind me of things said or done that I forgot about or attached no meaning or value to, but which to them assumed lots of importance. Some good some bad. It is as if you can never be quite sure what is significant and what is not.

Things said in hurry without thinking that are carried like weeping sores for weeks or years. Others that are cherished and lift their souls.

TILLY AND BERTIE ON HOUT BAY BEACH, SOUTH AFRICA
A Parenting Rant

So now I am going to make a whole lot of unsupportable generalisations about parenting.

You legions of ideal parenting bloggers and academics, you can all go home and relax. I have the answer to the question you have spent decades researching.

I know exactly what children need to be happy and normal.

They need you.

Not just on the weekends. Not after seven at night five days a week. They need you all the time. 24 hours a day seven days a week. They don’t need you in a hyper full-on “quality time” kind of way, they just need you around. They need to know you are there, just there, if they need a hug, or reassurance, or have a burning question, or want to tell you something they have done, or a bumped elbow, or just want to curl up on your lap and go to sleep. They need you and no-one else will do.

That is going to really piss off some people because they cannot possibly maintain their standard of living and not work in order to be with their children. Leaving work to be with your kids can be financial suicide. Two incomes versus one, one income versus none makes a big difference to how you live your life. Of course many of us have no choice - we have to work, but for those who choose a new car or an extra large wide screen TV over time with their kids, I say shame on them. I’m going to get hell for saying that, but I’ve said it because I believe it to be true.

Look at cultures in developing countries, OK let’s not beat around the bush, I’m going to say what people think but are too polite to say. Cultures in countries that are supposedly not as advanced and civilised as us. Look at how mothers are with their babies and their children. They are with them all the time. If this were a measure of how civilised a society is, then we have become barbarians. We put things before people.

My instinct tells me our children need us around. I know this is not very scientific, but I’m telling you what I think, what I feel to be true in my gut. It is my feel-for-the-steel - as my father would say about flying an aircraft. Forget what the flight manual says, go with your gut. You haven’t got time to refer back to it when you are pulling a 6G turn upside down with a 109 on your six o’clock or the milk is boiling over while your three year old is turning blue because that piece of apple you just gave him is stuck in his airway and the dog’s going nuts because the rabbit just got out. Just go with your gut. When you are in the zone, your gut will tell you the right thing to do every time. OK maybe not every time, but often enough to give you confidence in your ability to make the right choice more often than not. And when it comes to this most fundamental thing about raising children, my gut tells me the answer is simple. They need you around.

Having you tell them, either explicitly or by example, that your work is more important than them, or your sport or whatever, just doesn’t cut the moutarde.

If there are two parents in a family, this is a whole lot easier to do because while one is working, or out for a run or whatever, the other can hang with the kids. Being a single parent makes this a whole lot more difficult, because it's just you and them. As an aside I found I could pretty much take my
kids everywhere, even restaurants when they were very young because they were chilled and didn’t make arses of themselves.

I’m not saying you shouldn’t have time for your own things, you will surely go nuts (or broke) without it, but there is room for balance.

And if you try to be perfect you are going to make yourself and your kids very unhappy. If you are unhappy, I can guarantee you your kids and your dog will be as miserable as muck. They feed off you and take a lead from every nuance of your body language, the tone of your voice and the sincerity of your smile. Learn to belly laugh at your complete cock-ups. They won’t remember you messing-up, but they will remember the chortle. And they will pay it forward when they have their own children.

So what does it mean to be in the zone? This is your child we are talking about. If you spend a lot of time with her, you will get to know her better than anyone else. She will become the centre of your world and even without knowing it you will be in the zone. You will be the best person in the world to make decisions about your child. It makes good sense to listen to what other people have to say, because sometimes people come out with pearls of pure wisdom that speak to your heart and you find yourself shouting “well roger me with a stick, if that ain’t the answer” while doing a little jig on the spot, finishing off with that drumstick-on-a-cymbal thing people do. But be prepared to take a lot of what people say with a pinch of salt - it might have no bearing on your kid at all. You will know, because your gut will tell you.

And those things that people tell you you MUST do or your child will be completely messed-up, they are probably absolutely right about that for their children, but that doesn’t necessarily make it right for your children. You need the courage and the self confidence to know that and to have the strength to do what you sense is right for your kids. When people tell you these sorts of things they are doing it out of love and when you reject what they tell you it can make them feel hurt and angry. They can take it quite badly and when that happens you need to summon the strength and compassion to find a way to stay friends with them. Even when you are sleep deprived and you can barely function at the most basic level, you need to dig deep and hug them. To hug them when your every nerve ending is screaming at you to kill them. You know you will feel differently in a week.

End of rant … thank Dog for that I hear you say.
Tilly and the Trampoline

When Tilly was angry or frustrated she would get on the trampoline and bounce her troubles away.
On Not Catching Fish

As I like going fishing, but rarely catch a fish, I call it not catching fish.

There was a time in Zimbabwe when I went not catching fish. We were in the mountains between Zimbabwe and Mozambique with Mike Fynn who knew the area really well. His counsel to me was “Now you will need to keep a keen eye on the river for signs of trout and another keen eye, both ears and your intuition on the look out for the leopard that is probably standing behind you and about to bite out the back of your head. If you feel the hairs on the back of your neck rising, take that as a clue to your impending death. So, not to put too fine a point on it, I suggest you don’t become too focussed on the fish. But most importantly remember you are here to enjoy yourself”.

He flashed his million dollar smile reassuringly, but I definitely caught a flicker of schadenfreude in his eyes as writ large on my face was the fear that comes with the thought of a leopard licking the grey matter from my skull, like soup from a bowl.

That day fishing in a trout infested river, I actually caught something. Yes I managed to catch my ear. Just as I got into the rhythm of swishing the fly in and out of the water like an old timer, working the mosaic of the water like a pro, I swished one cast a little too close to my head and it harpooned in and out of my earlobe as if driven by Captain Ahab himself. A surprising amount of blood followed. I was so exasperated that, after removing the barbless hook from my bloody lobe, I decided to head back to the others. Pondering, as I walked along the river, the question ‘Are leopards, like sharks, attracted to the smell of blood?’. Before long I reached the spot where I had left my fluorescent shorts, my shirt and my coveted Timberland sailing shoes and … they were all gone. I stood there, mostly naked, with the thought dawning on me that some blighter had appeared out of nowhere and stolen my clothes. For an ungracious moment I wished for his demise in the fangs of a large spotted cat. A prospect made more likely by his being easier to see in the dense undergrowth in those incandescently bright shorts.

Then I reconciled myself to the thought that if someone is so poor they need to steal clothes, maybe they deserve the clothes more than me. And the thought of a man dressed in fluorescent shorts in the back-of-beyond in rural Africa, the envy of his peers, the idol of the girls, strutting his stuff for all he is worth in ridiculously bright pants, brought a smile to my face. I was a bit pissed off about losing my shoes though - they had just reached that peak of perfection, worn-in and fitting like a glove, but not so worn-in as to be worn-out.

On another occasion I was not catching fish in Lake MacQuilvane on a yacht and telling Mike’s son Johnno not to dangle his feet in the water because a crocodile could come and bite off his legs. Then I quietly lowered myself under the water from the bow and swam the length of the boat underwater, grabbed his feet and pulled him into the water. Judging from the reaction, he surely thought he was about to die in the jaws of a crocodile.

I have also been not catching fish in Hermanus with a guy standing not ten paces away catching a great big Steenbrass every time he cast his line and me nothing. Same bait, same place. I went home empty handed.

And then there was the time Thomas caught an enormous Grunter on the Breede River and I caught nothing. That day we left Ian the dog on the shore and paddled about 50 metres into the river. Just
as Thomas was about to bring the fish alongside the boat, I heard splashing on the other side and looked over to find Ian had swum all the way out to the boat. A scary thought given that Zambezi Bull Sharks had learned to hang about under fishing boats waiting for an easy meal as the fishermen reeled in their catches.

![DADDY, THOMAS AND THE GRUNTER HE CAUGHT](image)

Earlier that summer a team had tagged a pregnant Zambezi Bull Shark in that part of the river. They dragged it to shore to measure it and its torso was as high as a man’s knee. This was a big shark. They put a GPS tracker on it and found that the next day it had swum 35km up the river - in 24 hours. Passing through sections of the river where holidaying families swim with their children in the mistaken belief there are no sharks in rivers, especially so far up river and certainly not monsters like that one. A chilling thought.
**Thomas and the Horse**

We were staying at a place called Champagne Castle in the Drakensberg (Dragon Mountains) in Natal in South Africa. Our thatched cottage had a big fireplace and although it was warm enough to swim during the day, at night it was cool, and so each evening we lit a roaring fire. The cottage looked down onto a field with horses and every day Thomas would walk down there and sit on the fence. One horse took a shine to him and would wander over and say hello in the hope of an apple. Of course Thomas was only too happy to oblige.

Thomas has an strong affinity with animals. It is as if there is a conversation going on between them that most of us can't hear or understand. It is as if they are reaching out to him and saying “Hey, it’s all going to be OK”.

![Image of Thomas and the Horse](image1.jpg)

![Image of Thomas and the Horse](image2.jpg)
A Visit to Australia

I decided I had to take the kids and go and see my parents before it was too late to ever see them again. I also wanted to photograph my father for my book on pilots.

It was a week before Christmas and it was hot in Perth. We stayed with my old friend Russell O'Callaghan for a couple of days before flying up to Carnarvon in the north west where my parents and sister lived.

I was surprised at how much my parents had aged in the last few years and felt doubly glad I had made the trip.

My sister Avril lent me her Toyota 4WD and I decided it would be fun for the kids to take them fishing on a remote beach. I told Dad what I planned to do and asked him if he would like to join us. “No thank you” he said slowly. Then after a pause. “Are you sure this is wise? What if you get bogged in the sand? Are you sure you know what you are doing?”. I said “Yes, I have done this plenty of times in my old Suzuki”. He looked at me skeptically and said “Take some drinking water with you”.

Thirty minutes later I sped up to get over a slight rise before hitting the beach and came to an immediate stop with the wheels sinking to the axles in the blink of an eye. We were well and truly stuck.

Thomas looked at me and said “Grandpa was right”.

It was then I realised I had forgotten to let some air out of the tyres.
“Don’t worry guys, I have my phone with me” I said, whipping my iPhone out of my pocket with all the swagger and bravado I could muster only to find there was no reception. None.

I looked at the phone. I looked at the kids. They looked at the phone. We looked at the horizon far out to sea where the sun would be setting in a couple of hours. They looked at me with an expression of complete faith that Daddy knows what to do and he will make everything alright. I smiled wanly. Wishing I had put a bottle of wine in with the water, because this was going to be a long night.

Then I remembered seeing a four wheel drive and a large tent hidden in the bush about 500 metres back up the track. I told the kids to stay with the car and not to leave it under any circumstances until I got back.

I plodded off up the dirt road hoping these guys would have a tow rope and be able to pull us out of the sand.

There they were. Their Land Cruiser and tent hidden from the air by cut branches and fairly well concealed from the road too. I wondered what they were up to out here in this remote place and going to some trouble not to advertise their presence.

There were two of them and they watched me approach without saying a word. Staring at me and occasionally sipping on their beers. They were sitting in deck chairs wearing the ubiquitous work boots, shorts and sleeveless t-shirts and broad rimmed felt hats of the Australian outback. One of them had a big bandage on his leg. It looked a bit grubby as if it hadn’t been changed for quite a while. The other had a remarkably large nose. As I approached I called out “G’day” in my very best “Strine”, the best Aussie accent I could muster.

The response, quick as a snake bite, was “You’d be a bloody Pom then. What are you doing out here in the middle of nowhere?”

“Yes.” I replied. Almost as an apology. “I’m very sorry to bother you, but I managed to get my car bogged and wonder if you could possibly help me get it out”.

The one with the bandage turned to the other and said, with a shrill cackle “Well what do ya know, the Pommie bastard has got ‘imself bogged.” They both thought this was very funny and roared with laughter until the cigarette tar in their lungs started gurgling and they gasped for air, sipping furiously on their beers as if somehow that would help. Clearly there had not been much going on around here and this was the funniest thing they had heard in a long while.

“So tell me Pommy bastard, was that you we saw go by in four wheel drive a few minutes ago?”

I swallowed hard and said “Yep that was me”.

More laughter, gurgling noises and slurping of beers.

“Don’t tell me you got bogged, that’s impossible. I mean you’ve got a flippin’ four wheel drive for God’s sake! A FOUR WHEEL DRIVE! A FLIPPIN’ FOUR WHEEL DRIVE!” bandaged-leg-man
repeated with a snotty nasal whine that would put a hyena to shame and by now the two of them were on the edges of their chairs hands against chests from laughing so hard.

I glanced sideways for a moment wondering if a long slog back into town might not be less painful than this, but thought better of it when I remembered the urchins in the car.

Getting a little agitated at their rudeness, but at the same time very conscious we were pretty much at their mercy I got straight to the point, by now completely giving up on any attempt to speak with an Australian accent “I was wondering if you could help get me out of the sand, do you have a tow rope?”.

“How hard can it be … how flippin’ hard can it be?” bandaged-leg-man kept saying.

“There’ll be some free beer in it for you” I said. The laughing stopped immediately and the two Aussies looked at me in the same way a pair of dogs give you their undivided attention when you’ve just told them to sit in exchange for a meaty treat. Now I had them by the balls.

“If you help me get out I’ll bring you a slab of beer tomorrow as a thank you”.

They looked at each other before bandaged-leg-man said “Two slabs of beer”.

“You have a deal” I said and shook their hands.

To begin with there was no effort to get out the tow rope. Lots of walking around and chin scratching followed by “Bugger me, you’ve done a bloody’ good job of getting this heap of rubbish stuck in the sand”.

“How do you think you can get it out?” I asked trying to hide any hint of anxiety in my voice.

Bandage man looked at me disdainfully and said “Of course we’ll get it out”.

He got in the Toyota and started it up, trying to rock it backwards and forwards and a few other tricks. None of which worked.

A glimmer of satisfaction must have flashed across my face.

Without a word he got out, grabbed the tow rope and attached it to the four wheel drives’ tow bars and with a click of his thumb gestured to his mate to get in the Toyota. A few moments later she came out in one smooth move.

“I can’t wait to tell Grandpa” said Thomas, his eyes twinkling.

The next day I returned with two slabs of beer and had a cup of tea with them. They were my new best friends.

“Ah we didn’t think we’d see you again, ‘specially with two slabs of cold beer. 48 little beauties”.

“Two slabs of free beer in it for you” I said. The laughing stopped immediately and the two Aussies looked at me in the same way a pair of dogs give you their undivided attention when you’ve just told them to sit in exchange for a meaty treat. Now I had them by the balls.

“If you help me get out I’ll bring you a slab of beer tomorrow as a thank you”.

They looked at each other before bandaged-leg-man said “Two slabs of beer”.

“You have a deal” I said and shook their hands.

To begin with there was no effort to get out the tow rope. Lots of walking around and chin scratching followed by “Bugger me, you’ve done a bloody’ good job of getting this heap of rubbish stuck in the sand”.

“How do you think you can get it out?” I asked trying to hide any hint of anxiety in my voice.

Bandage man looked at me disdainfully and said “Of course we’ll get it out”.

He got in the Toyota and started it up, trying to rock it backwards and forwards and a few other tricks. None of which worked.

A glimmer of satisfaction must have flashed across my face.

Without a word he got out, grabbed the tow rope and attached it to the four wheel drives’ tow bars and with a click of his thumb gestured to his mate to get in the Toyota. A few moments later she came out in one smooth move.

“I can’t wait to tell Grandpa” said Thomas, his eyes twinkling.

The next day I returned with two slabs of beer and had a cup of tea with them. They were my new best friends.

“Ah we didn’t think we’d see you again, ‘specially with two slabs of cold beer. 48 little beauties”.

“Two slabs of free beer in it for you” I said. The laughing stopped immediately and the two Aussies looked at me in the same way a pair of dogs give you their undivided attention when you’ve just told them to sit in exchange for a meaty treat. Now I had them by the balls.

“If you help me get out I’ll bring you a slab of beer tomorrow as a thank you”.

They looked at each other before bandaged-leg-man said “Two slabs of beer”.

“You have a deal” I said and shook their hands.

To begin with there was no effort to get out the tow rope. Lots of walking around and chin scratching followed by “Bugger me, you’ve done a bloody’ good job of getting this heap of rubbish stuck in the sand”.

“How do you think you can get it out?” I asked trying to hide any hint of anxiety in my voice.

Bandage man looked at me disdainfully and said “Of course we’ll get it out”.

He got in the Toyota and started it up, trying to rock it backwards and forwards and a few other tricks. None of which worked.

A glimmer of satisfaction must have flashed across my face.

Without a word he got out, grabbed the tow rope and attached it to the four wheel drives’ tow bars and with a click of his thumb gestured to his mate to get in the Toyota. A few moments later she came out in one smooth move.

“I can’t wait to tell Grandpa” said Thomas, his eyes twinkling.

The next day I returned with two slabs of beer and had a cup of tea with them. They were my new best friends.

“Ah we didn’t think we’d see you again, ‘specially with two slabs of cold beer. 48 little beauties”.
Bandaged-leg was growing on me. The other guy looked a bit sly but didn’t say much. He was completely deferential in to his more chatty mate.

“So how did you hurt your leg?” I asked.

“I did it on a combine harvester fire. I got good compo for it though. Don’t need to work for a while so thought we’d spent it out here. As good a place as any”.

“Compo” is government compensation for a worker’s injury. Somehow I didn’t believe him, but didn’t push it. There was something very dodgy about these two.

“Why did you cover everything with branches” I asked as casually as I could, thinking they might actually be on the run from the police and trying to hide out for a while. Big nose glanced anxiously at bandaged-leg-man who casually answered “To keep the sun off - it get’s fricken hot out here”.

Driving back to Carnarvon we saw a wild kangaroo. The kids were excited to see this beautiful animal bouncing along at a fair old speed. Then I realised there weren’t that many kangaroos around. This is the first one we’d seen. When I was a teenager and used to come up this way, I remember there being lots of them everywhere.
ON KEEPING COOL IN CORAL BAY

My sister Avril and her husband Dale took us up the coast to visit Coral Bay where swimming in the sea was a delight as the water was as warm as bath water, unlike Cape Town where it is as cold as ice and takes your breath away.

In the morning we walked for half an hour or so up the coast to visit what is called The Skeleton Beach Shark Nursery. Avril told us there would be dozens of young sharks in this little bay swimming around in a few feet of water. I was a bit skeptical, but sure enough when we got there, there were lots of sharks from a foot to a few feet long right there in front of us.

Dale, Thomas and I decided to wade into the lagoon to get a closer look and as we did, the cunning little blighters tried to execute a circling movement. They did no harm and were just curious, coming right up to us like dogs. Sharks have such bad press, but they are beautiful creatures and these pups were no exception.

Once we were settled in, Avril and Dale headed back to Carnarvon.

It was hot.

Late that night I couldn’t sleep and got out of bed to go for a walk along the beach in the hope of catching a cool breeze and getting some respite from the heat. Once there I decided, against all common sense, to go for a skinny dip, telling myself that those dozens of sharks I saw earlier in the day were not that big and anyway they were a good couple of kilometres further down the beach.

The water was wonderful. I soon found myself rekindling memories of the warm seas of my childhood in Malaysia. While my thoughts swam in fond reminiscence, the distraction meant I did not see some young guys sauntering up the beach until they were quite close and then of course their drunken banter was almost intrusive. I don’t think they realised I was there. I slipped deeper into the water like Martin Sheen in the final part of Apocalypse Now.

Now dear reader I want to make it clear that I had only intended to nip into the water for a minute or two, but while these guys were there I had no intention of getting out. Yes I chose dealing with the consequences of getting my manhood bitten off by a shark over the embarrassment of running naked up the beach to grab my clothes.

After what seemed like enough time for every top-of-the-food-chain predator within five miles to find his way to me and eat me, the chortling ones had moved on. As soon I thought they were far enough away, I dashed out of the water to grab my clothes. I knew exactly where they were, I had put them between the bows of a catamaran so I could find them easily in the dark.

In a flash of genius rivalling the most insightful moments of Stephen Hawkins, I realised why the chortling ones were chortling. The blighters had stolen my clothes. And then it dawned on me a pattern seemed to be forming in my life. Getting naked in proximity to predators with large sharp teeth seemed to always end in me losing my clothes. Note to self …

Once I had dwelled on that for a moment I remembered I now had to get home unencumbered by accoutrements of any sort.
So with eyes darting left and right, shoulders hunched and hands covering my manly bits, I set off up the beach. Trotting from one tree to another when I was sure no one was looking. Sprinting as best I could across the road when there were no cars. As an aside, did you know it is not so easy to sprint while clutching your prized parts? But needs must and sprint I did, not wanting to be caught like a rabbit in the headlights. Then I shot up the side of the hotel and onto the back of the building where we had our rooms. I was chuffed. It seemed I had made it without being seen by a single soul. Problem. No key.

I knocked on the back door. Quietly to begin with and then more robustly all the while anxious that I might draw attention to myself from other people staying in the hotel. Still no answer. I decided the kids would hear me better if I went to the other side of the building and tried to get their attention from there, but that meant going through the busy part of the hotel. I looked around and noticed there was a clothes drying rack next to the back door and surely if our room had one, it meant the others did too.

I felt a surge of hope. Maybe someone left a towel or something else I could borrow for a few minutes while I walked into the public part of the hotel. Sure enough, a few doors down the way a very fine beach towel hung within reach. I didn’t even need to set foot in the little back yard of the neighbour’s hotel room. Borrowing is one thing, trespass another. A quick hoik and in a moment I was decent again. I strode purposefully round the corner and past a chattering throng of late night drinkers, none of whom recognised the towel as theirs. I got to our front door and could see Thomas sleeping like a cherub. In no time I woke him and was in. I quickly pulled on a pair of shorts, zipped out the back door and returned the towel to its rightful owner. Well I say that, but actually I wasn’t quite sure which yard I had taken it from as they all looked the same. I took pot luck and scarpered, smiling at the mischievous thought of what the occupants of the place would make of how a towel that was not theirs ended up hanging in their yard and the likely accusations that would follow from the people whose towel it was.

Back in the hotel room, I poured myself a beer and sat on the verandah quietly supping away, when a passer by I had chatted to earlier asked how my evening had been.

“You look as though you’ve had a quiet evening” he said with a tone suggesting he was concerned I might be finding Coral Bay a little uneventful.

“Oh yes, very quiet indeed”. I replied.
The next day we headed back to Carnarvon and spent a few days with Mum and Dad. I recorded oral histories with both of them. First my father and then my mother. She didn’t understand why I would want to do such a thing, but as her story unfolded I learned a lot about her and told her so. Things I knew nothing about. Things that would have died with her. Mostly little things, but things that are precious to me. I have never gone back to listen to this piece of family history, but one day I will and I shall be glad I recorded this conversation with her. Oral history is such a wonderful thing.

As you know my father was not interested in being photographed for my big pilot project, but eventually he relented. As it turned out, I was saddened because he did not remember some of my favourite stories. I prompted him with cues that I hoped would spark old memories, but where there once would have been an outpouring of anecdotes, now there was just a trickle. His memory was not what it was, but it was still a joy to hear him tell the stories he could remember.

Some years earlier in England my sister-in-law Helen had given me a silk map of southern Italy. She told me it was the kind of map issued to aircrew flying in combat zones in WWII and maybe my dad would find it interesting.

Aircrew were given these maps to help them find their way to allied lines in the event of getting shot down and things going a bit pear shaped. This was one of those maps and I had brought it along on our trip to Australia to show my father. I was keen to see if he would recognise what it was.

I handed him the map “Do you know what this is?” He slowly unfolded it and after a while smiled and said “It’s an escape map. I used to have one of these, exactly the same”.

He started pointing at some of the names on the map, telling me he had done this here or that there. He brought the map to life.

I asked him where he put it when he flew and he explained “I used to put mine in a little packet with my morphine ampules, a fishing line and hook and the gold they gave us to buy our way back to allied lines if we got shot down. And I put this next to my revolver inside my flying boot like this”. He said sliding his hand down his calf. I couldn’t imagine a man as gentle as my father using a revolver, but then it occurred to me his aircraft had enough firepower to sink a small ship - something he did one night.

“Whenever we landed back at base the first thing we had to do was hand back the gold” he chuckled.

Soon our time with my parents came to an end and before long we were walking out to the aircraft parked on the tarmac. I knew it would be the last time I saw one or both of my parents and I struggled with my emotions.

I was also conscious they had lived full lives journeying around their children, grandchildren and great grandchildren. Both of them had cheated death at some time or other and in that sense were lucky to have lived so long. Their lives were complete and I knew their imminent moving on would be a normal part of life and that took away some of the sting.
We flew back to Cape Town and got on with school and photography and BBQs and daily visits to the beach. A routine that made us happy.

My father passed away two months later.
ON CHILDREN'S PARTIES, SCHOOL LOCK-INS AND CAPE TOWN’S CHEEKY BABOONS

Cape Town is dominated by Table Mountain. A glorious piece of rock that can be seen from miles out to sea and a long way inland. The mountain is part of a range that extends south towards False Bay and Cape Point. There are troops of baboons in the mountains and sometimes these guys get up to no good with humans. They can also be a bit scary as they are like big intelligent dogs with hands. They also have large fangs and a mischievous temperament.

Tilly was invited to a birthday party at one of the vineyards at the foot of the mountain near Constantia. A beautiful spot with vines, and pine trees and spectacular views of the mountains. A large marquee had been laid out with tables, chairs and lots of food and sweets. About a hundred parents and children stood around enjoying the fun when a troop of a dozen baboons appeared out of nowhere and walked brazenly to the edge of the party. One big fellow walked right into the marquee and started scooping food off a table into his mouth. Honestly, his table manners were appalling.

Like an idiot I decided to shoo him away with a plastic chair. Walking up to him with my manliest voice saying “Shoo, shoo, go away”, but he clearly didn’t understand what I was saying. Then it occurred to me he must be Afrikaans speaking so I said “Voetsek”. This he seemed to understand and with an indignant look on his face which said “who the hell do you think you are, this is my mountain and I do what I want here, leave me alone or I will break your arm with my teeth, these big teeth, see them?”. He showed his canines to me in an impressive display of machismo.

In response I said “Hey, nice teeth” and backed away as quickly as I could without losing face. Then guys in green overalls turned up and shooed them away by banging metal dustbin lids which I presume also functioned as shields.

I picked up Thomas and Tilly from school one day and Tilly was bouncing out of her skin with excitement. “Daddy, Daddy a baboon broke into school and we were locked in our classroom for hours”.

Thomas and Tilly’s school lay in the shadow of Table Mountain and one day it had an unscheduled visit from a wild baboon. An infamous chappie who was well known on the mountain as “Naughty Boy”.

Naughty Boy broke into the school and all the children had to stay locked in their classrooms until the appropriate men in green overalls turned up with a dart gun to drug him, catch him and return him to his troop on the mountain.

Naughty boy caused much amusement amongst the students as he ran amok for a couple hours culminating in the pinnacle of naughtiness by doing a poo on the running track, which for some reason Tilly thought was hysterically funny.

Baboon Does Poo On Running Track. Not a school newsletter headline you read every day.
On Eric Johnson My First South African WWII Pilot

I had the great pleasure of meeting Eric Johnson who had been a Kittyhawk and Spitfire pilot in WWII flying in the South African Air Force alongside British, Australian, Canadian and New Zealand pilots.

Eric lived with his wife in a retirement community overlooking the beautiful Simons Town harbour. In the distance I could see Seal Island where the iconic photos of the great white sharks leaping out of the water were made. Sometimes the sharks were spotted swimming into the harbour.

Eric was a lovely old fashioned gentleman who, with his goatee, looked a lot like Jan Smuts. In fact he said he had met General Smuts while walking up Table Mountain shortly after WWII. The great general of the Boer War and the First World War patted Eric’s son on the head and said “This is our greatest asset, our children”.

Eric had that sun-worn look typical of so many pilots I have met who spent many years exposed to the sun, either in their cockpits or living and flying in hot sunny countries. And now, of course, his face and head were a mass of solar keratoses and basal-cell carcinomas.

Eric told me he got married after having only known Ingle for a couple of weeks and then ten days later he and his squadron were sent to North Africa. In the end he was away for four years without going home once.
During that time his wife did not hear from him for a long period and she was sure he was dead. In fact he had nearly died. Not from a gunshot wound received in battle, but from blood poisoning in hospital in Cairo.

He showed me a photo from that time. There were four fresh-faced young men in their uniforms with silk neck scarves all sporting their hard earned wings on their chests. Eric said that of the four men in the photo, three would be dead in two months after coming off second best in aerial duels with the Germans and a few months later he too would be close to death in hospital.

I chatted with Eric for a couple of hours. Hearing him tell of some of his actions in his fighter plane. He described strafing troops on the ground, saying it was such a terrible thing to do he still had nightmares about it 65 years later.

He also told me about attacking a German position from very close to the ground before getting away as fast as he could by flying over a wadi with some palm trees.

“As I flew over the trees I spotted some German gunners trying frantically to get their 88mm anti-aircraft gun lined up on me. I can see it now as if it were yesterday, the startled look in their eyes. I was only 30 or 40 feet above them when I heard a loud “bang” and looked down at my wing to see a large hole.

“They managed to let off one round and it hit the aircraft right where I would have been sitting had I not slid the aircraft sideways across their position rather than fly directly over it. A fraction of a second earlier and that shell would have gone through the cockpit and I would have been killed for sure”.

ERIC & INGLE
Photo by John Martin Bradley
He told me that on another occasion he was shot up during a dogfight with a German Bf 109 fighter over the Sahara. He managed to get away by pushing his Kittyhawk into very tight turns that made it hard to breathe, pushing his body hard against his straps and calling on every ounce of strength he had. The 109 couldn’t match his turning circle and broke off.

Eric’s rush of excitement at having made it out alive was soon tempered by the bad news on his instrument panel. His engine was overheating and he knew it would seize at any moment.

Looking around he saw what looked like a good place to crash land and much to his relief managed to get into the right position before he lost power. With just enough airspeed he brought the plane in for what looked like a textbook wheels-up landing.

The Kittyhawk hit the ground with a tremendous noise and Eric’s forehead smacked against the gun sight above the instrument panel. In all the frantic activity in the preceding few minutes, he had forgotten to tighten his shoulder straps and, as he was to find out, this would cost him dearly.

Badly cut over one eye, he crawled out of his plane and passed out, spilling all his drinking water. After dark he came to and started walking north. In the morning he stumbled upon a Bedouin who gave him water from a goatskin bottle and pitta bread that was still warm from cooking.

Eventually he was rescued by a British patrol, but the blood poisoning that followed from the cut on his head nearly killed him and he spent months in hospital in Cairo.
On 60 Years of Marriage

Louis de Bernières wrote “Love is a temporary madness, it erupts like volcanoes and then subsides. And when it subsides, you have to make a decision. You have to work out whether your roots have so entwined together that it is inconceivable that you should ever part. Because this is what love is. Love is not breathlessness, it is not excitement, it is not the promulgation of promises of eternal passion, it is not the desire to mate every second minute of the day, it is not lying awake at night imagining that he is kissing every cranny of your body … That is just being "in love", which any fool can do. Love itself is what is left over when being in love has burned away.”

One of the unexpected things to come out of meeting and getting to know all these WWII pilots is the background to their love lives. I often wonder what it is about these old men and their wives that have kept them together for so long after their being in love has burned away. Over sixty years in most cases. What is their secret?

After much pondering and chatting about what the secret could be, there is one word that keeps coming up and it is kindness. They show kindness to each other. All of the old men I interviewed, well not all, but certainly most were gentlemen in the old fashioned sense of the world. They were gentle and kind.

In his book *Words That Hurt, Words That Heal*, Joseph Telushkin challenges people to go 24 hours without saying anything unkind to or about somebody else. He says do this and see what happens. Well you can guess what happens. And so looking at this, it is not surprising these old couples have been happy together for 60 years, because that is how they are to each other every single hour of the day for six decades (although I don’t think this is true for General Standerer, based on the way I was kicked out of his apartment by his incandescently furious wife).

I think these guys grew up in a time when it was commonplace to show respect to people in their orb. I’m not saying people are not that way now, but I think it is true to say it was part of their nature back then. They didn’t think “Oooh I think I shall be kind today”. No it was more a case of them not having to think about it, because it was part of the way they were. No doubt there were the occasional blips, but generally that is how they were.

Kindness is such a wonderful quality. It is in the same place in the universe as compassion, but compassion is a little more grandiose than kindness. Jesus and Buddha did compassion, we mortals do kindness. Kindness is a more humble, simple word. It is more do-able.

And then there is something else which I saw in my father, a man described as a saint for putting up with my mother, and I think that was because he never judged her. They were married for over 60 years and they were still in love until the very end. When my father passed away at the age of 91 my mother was devastated. In all their time together while I was around I never once heard my father say an unkind or hurtful word to my mother. It wasn’t a picnic for either of them as each had more than their share of faults and weaknesses, but it seems to me it wasn’t so much about seeking someone with no warts and blemishes as being OK with them. Loving them in spite of their failings.

There is a wonderful film that paints a picture of this in a humble and beautiful way. *Another Year*, directed by Mike Leigh. Although I must warn you, it is spectacularly un-Hollywood in style.
I wonder what my old pilots and their other halves would make of the notion of “not settling”? I wonder if they would say that looking for Mr or Ms perfect is a road to unhappiness and disaster? Looking for a perfect person who, firstly, does not exist and, secondly, if they did would drive you nuts. Especially if you could not be kind and non-judgemental about their perfect-ness.

And then I wonder what they would make of the notions of co-dependency in a relationship? All I see in these old people is total co-dependency. So much so that when one dies, the other often dies a short while later - within weeks or months.

I have heard so many people say that co-dependency is unhealthy and cannot make for a happy relationship. That one needs to maintain one’s self, one’s identity, in the face of a relationship. I kind of agree with that in some ways, but my experience in my own life, especially with Harriet, was that I became one with her. I didn’t become her and she didn’t become me. There was a meeting in the middle and we become something other than what we were alone. And it was a beautiful and lovely thing.

When Harriet died it took me a long time to stop doing things that I would do because she liked them done that way and I wanted to please her. On the other hand, I remember once having a flippin’ Eureka moment when, after she died, I realised I didn’t need to consult with her about something important, I could just do it.

Having said that, for a long time, and even now with matters to do with the kids, I would have a conversation with Harriet about something and ask her opinion. Of course, I knew she wasn’t there. She is dead. But I know her so well, that I know, with a fair degree of certainty, what she would say about any given matter.

I am thinking now about my relationship with my daughter Tilly. I tell her every day that I love her, that she is beautiful and wonderful and how happy she makes me. And I try, sometimes not successfully, to live by the “If you can’t say something nice, don’t say anything at all” mantra, which admittedly gets thrown back at me by the kids when something not so kind escapes from my mouth.

Somebody said to me that being that way with Tilly is setting her up for problems later in life, because no man will compare with her dad in the way he loves her. It is an interesting thought, but I don’t care for it. I shall continue to tell her how much I love her and how wonderful she is, because she is. And what is more, she should know it and believe it without a shadow of a doubt.

My love for my son Thomas is different. It is no less, but it is different. It has a lot to do with being a role model, but that is another story. I have a feeling my relationship with Thomas will grow even stronger when he is grown up. That is what happened with my father and me. I was in my early 20s and would go and spend weekends with my parents. We would light the BBQ and sit around until late, cooking, eating and drinking wine, and bringing out the Port at the end of the evening. That is when I got to know my father and became close to him.

So getting back to my old men and their wives and what was it that made it possible for them to still be so in love with each other after 65 years?
They were all gentlemen in both senses of the word.

Gentle and kind men who cherish their wives.

And gentlemen in the sense that they behave like old fashioned gentlemen, they respected their wives and behaved towards them in the way they would like to be treated.

Most of all, there is no question in the minds of these old lovers that they are loved deeply and beyond a shadow of a doubt by their other half. They may bicker and grumble from time to time, but when their life long lover is gone they know they will be desolate.

And what about their wives? Those I met were all strong women with their own points of view, strongly held. Powerful, even formidable people in their own right, but they seem to have given themselves over to their men (as their men have in return).

They seem to just adore their men - they look at them with an open unguarded adoration. Their men may not be terribly handsome anymore, their sex lives have surely come to an end, their bodies are falling apart, they know the weaknesses and foibles of their lovers more intimately than you can imagine, but they love their men so strongly you can feel it in the air.

Those old men and their wives seemed very good at allowing their lover to be who they are - not expecting them to be someone they are not. They have accepted them as they are. They are not trying to change them, or fix them, or mould them, or impose their will on them in any way. They love them without question and without judgement. There is nothing held back in their expression of love for each other. It is not contingent on certain things being done, certain conditions being met, it just is.

They have accepted that this is who they are going to be with for the rest of their lives - lives that will draw to an end in weeks or months, at the most a few years and they make the most of it, or at the very least just accept it and take joy from it.

No question now of have I made the right choice? No question of is Mr Even-More-Right just around the corner if I hold out a little longer? No none of that. This is it. And there is the answer to my question. They have accepted that THIS IS IT. This is my bed and I am lying in it and actually you know what, it isn’t that bad. In those words their liberty is constrained as tight as a knot, but also they are made free to love without constraint. They have moved beyond thoughts of “oooh I better hold back in case I get hurt.” They are free to love deeply and completely without fear of rejection. Knowing it will be returned without question.

So in all this I see kindness.

Kindness and not judging your lover. Accepting them for what they are and how they are and celebrating that with kind words and actions every day.

And if you sense a tinge of envy in this for me. You are right. I look at them and wish I had enjoyed the same long life with the woman I married.
And yes of course I know I will have all this in the future and that thought fills me with a sense of optimism and excitement. Writing this book has been a cathartic thing for me. It has helped me make sense of things I have struggled with and move on. I can put my hand on my chest and say I am now well and truly “moved on”. I am ready for some wonderful woman to walk into my life and when it happens I will be a very lucky man indeed.

So now back to the story of our journey. I have pleasure in introducing you to someone who became very special to me and the kids and this is also where you get to meet the Amy husky.
On Moving to Stanford

After a couple of years in South Africa we moved from Cape Town to a small town called Stanford. By this time I was in a relationship with Hesma who is Afrikaans (Dutch South African). Tilly fell in love with her and called her called her Mummy. Thomas was very fond of her too, but as he still remembered Harriet she would always be mummy to him.

Like many privileged people in South Africa, we lived in a big house with a pool and a garden. A short walk to a river and a ten minute drive to the sea. We had glorious views of mountains and vineyards. It was idyllic.

On hot mornings I remember I would step out of the bedroom through the French doors, dive into the pool, swim to the other side, get out and walk across the patio to the kitchen to make coffee. Dripping wet. The puddles in the house would dry quickly, but my thoughtlessness would drive Hesma nuts. She liked to keep a perfect house.

Hesma taught me the fine art of cooking with fire. I had lived in Australia for a long time so I thought I knew all there was to know about BBQ’ing, but when we moved to South Africa, I realised I had a lot to learn. In South Africa they do not BBQ, they braai which is short for braaivleis and can be translated as to grill meat.

Cooking with a wood fire is considered best, but it is imperative to get the bed of coals just right. Neither too hot nor too cold and staying at the right temperature long enough to cook the food. It takes years to learn to do this, but I had to cram years into weeks or I would not be entitled to take my place at the braai with the other men. This may not sound like much, but it is a vital part of South African culture and defines you as a man. Fortunately I had a good teacher.

I also had to learn how to prepare meat for eating. One trick I still use all the time is to add the BBQ sauce after the meat is cooked. And to do this by putting it in an oven roasting dish with a lid and shaking it so the meat is covered in the sauce. It is so simple to do.

Coating the meat after it is cooked stops the fire from caramelising the sugars in the sauce and turning it black on the meat. And of course if you put cooked meat or sauce in the tray that held the raw meat, you will find yourself puking for Pomerania and sprinting for the loo. So it is best to have two trays and save yourself all that trouble.

Some people swear by marinading their meat before cooking it, but I’m in the camp that says the marinade is usually only skin deep and makes the meat wet and more difficult to brown off. Some will tell you that using a salt laden marinade overcomes that problem and not only softens the meat, but draws the marinade into the meat giving it a much better flavour. I, on the other hand, think this makes it too salty.

I like cooking with wood as it imparts a special flavour to the meat and it smells nice.

For a while I used to cook home made chips (fries) on the braai in a big cast iron pot, a trick I saw on a cooking programme. But I stopped doing this after a couple of disasters.
Firstly I set fire to the hedge that ran down the side of the house “Daddy is the hedge supposed to be on fire?” asked Thomas in a disarmingly casual way.

The second time I was standing by the braai with my friend Bruce Basset, who is a professor of mathematics. It had been raining the night before and I had left the cast iron pot outside. Some water had made its way into the pot and the oil sat on top of it so I couldn’t see it was there. Anyway in mid conversation about something clever, the cast iron chip pot exploded and we were covered in oil.

Standing there unfazed with oil dripping from his hair and sipping from his wine glass, Bruce went into an explanation of the physics of what just happened and why the oil was not as hot as one might expect it to be ... the water reached boiling point sooner than the oil etc. etc..

I never cooked chips on the open fire again, in spite of inspiration from Rick Stein’s adventures in France. It’s a shame really because it was always such fun doing them on the fire and the house didn’t smell of oil.

FISH AND CHIPS SOUTH AFRICAN STYLE
The Weekend Hesma Went to Visit Her Mother

One weekend Hesma went home to visit her mother. On Saturday she called to say she had found a dog eating scraps out of a rubbish bin in the street. I said I didn't want another dog and, anyway, if we went back to England it would be a world of pain to take an African dog with us.

Hesma lowered her voice to sultry and seductive mode “This is not just any dog, you wait until you see it”. I knew I was totally powerless as soon as she started her charm offensive on me, my head was saying one thing, but my heart was saying another.

And so it was, at the bottom end of Africa, on a sunny Sunday afternoon, I laid eyes for the first time on a very special six month old Siberian Husky. “My word!” I said. “She has the most amazing blue eyes!”. I was smitten.

This was Amy and, as you will see, she became a very important and much loved member of our family. I had never had a female dog before and she was quiet different to any male dog I had got to know in my life.

AMY ON THE FIRST DAY A street dog had landed with her feet in the butter.

Tilly was dazzled not just by Amy “Daddy all these dogs are so lovely, why don’t we take them all home?”.

“We can’t adopt them all Tilly. We can’t give them all the love they need. We’re going to adopt this very fluffy one and make her feel as loved as any dog in all dogdom. That is the best we can do. That’s the best anyone can do”. 
Ek Is Lief Vir Jou.

Hesma’s mother tongue was Afrikaans which is a form of old Dutch. It can be a quite expressive language and I was always fascinated to learn sayings that we do not have in English.

One of my favourites is “ek is lief vir jou” which translates as something like “I have love for you”. It doesn’t necessarily mean you are in love with someone when you say it, it means you have love for them. You have a place in your heart for them. A girl might have love for her best girlfriend. A boy will have love for his aunt and so on.

In the beginning it was a source of frustration for Hesma to have to speak English all the time, but she coped pretty well and persevered. The kids and I on the other hand were slow to pick up Afrikaans. Tilly was not bad, but Thomas point blank refused to learn it saying “I’m English, I’m not going to learn Afrikaans, I’ll never use it”.

THE SMILERS
“Oh No, Not the Bonking Whales Again”

About a two hour drive from Cape Town and about half an hour from Stanford there is a pretty little seaside town called Hermanus. Nestled on the coast of Walker Bay, it is famous for the large number of whales that come to visit every winter. It also has some spectacularly large Great White Sharks and people come from far and wide to go cage diving with them.

Anyway, enough of the tour guide codswallop …

We lived there for about a year and all in all it was a very agreeable experience even though it was not without incident.

We lived in a run down old house with an enormous garden and lawn which turned brown in summer and, as we were close to the cliffs, had extraordinary views of the sea.

In fact we lived so close to the sea we could hear whales at night, especially if there was no wind. They had this habit of slapping their tales against the water and venting through their blowholes in a way that sounded like a vuvuzela. And sometimes making sounds that made you think they were mating. We heard this sound a lot, so clearly it was something they enjoyed doing.

After the first few nights the humour value wore off and we would find ourselves saying things like “Oh no, not the bonking whales again”. Not an expression that one gets to use everyday and probably not one you’d find in a textbook of standard English expressions.

We never had this problem in London so I wasn’t quite sure what was the correct protocol. “Hey! Mr Whale, if it’s not too much trouble please could you stop humping quite so enthusiastically or go and do it somewhere else?”. I felt tempted to march to the end of the garden and tell them to bugger off, but instead I pulled a pillow over my ears and tried to get to sleep.

Amy was fascinated by whales. She would cock her ears and look towards the sea when she heard them.

One day we walked right down to the waters edge and she stood transfixed as a whale swam right up to us and whooshed a great plume of water into the air. Then lying just a few yards away it raised an eye out of the water to have a good look at us. She seemed especially interested in the husky.

Amy was quite startled and did that nearly run away then come back for a closer look thing that dogs do. They checked each other out for a few minutes, Amy barked and sniffed the air and rocked back and forth on her haunches until she got the courage to move even closer for a good sniff. The whale seemed equally fascinated.

Another time we were standing on the cliff watching five whales in the small bay just beneath us when we spotted a sixth whale about 500 yards away ambling along slowly in the direction of the open ocean when it changed direction and put on a surprisingly fast burst of speed and swam in a straight line directly to one of the whales immediately in front of us. They seemed quite happy to see each other.
Pointing out what had just happened, I said to the kids “That’s amazing. Obviously they were talking to each other when that one was way over there and that is why he came over here. It looks like they know each other, like they’re old friends”.

Thomas looked at me and said “Wouldn’t it be great, I’d love to be able to talk to a whale”.
On the Rolls Royce of BBQs and No Man Is An Island

Our tired old house had a small verandah at the top of the stairs that led up from the garden and from it you could see a magnificent view of Walker Bay all the way across to Stanford and Gaansbaai. I posted a video of the view on the Travels with an African Husky YouTube page https://youtu.be/MJsRjJpke2og - you can see Amy in the clip in the first few seconds and my BBQ too.

Hesma’s uncle Hennie made me the most amazing BBQ I had ever seen. It was an old gas bottle that had been cut in half and had a pair of grates that could be raised and lowered using an old car jack that you cranked with a specially made handle. This was the Rolls Royce of all BBQs and it was a great honour to be given such a fine piece of home-made kit.

OH NO, I BURNED THE CHICKEN AGAIN

On most evenings we would use the Rolls Royce on the verandah in order to make the most of the view and the cool air. After a few weeks of doing this the locals got to know we would be at the front of the house in the evening and the hungry ones would come by begging “Please I haven’t fed my kids in two days”. Some of them were just trying their luck, but some were clearly not in a good way and you would have to have a heart as cold as stone not to give them something. But then of course when word got around that I was good for free food, more and more came asking and it meant having to grapple with the question “where do I draw the line, I can’t give food to everyone”.

And you find yourself wondering how can you enjoy your privileged life when every night someone stops at your gate pleading for food. That fantastic view doesn’t look so great when you are feeding off people who are hungry. At the most callous level it is an annoying intrusion. Somebody is pestering you when you are trying to have some family time and a bit of fun and nice
food. At a more compassionate level how can you enjoy your food knowing that guy looking at you from the other side of the fence is hungry and you are filling your face and giving scraps to the dog? There is almost something obscene about it.

This is one of the things I found very difficult about living in South Africa.

To deal with these issues, most of the “haves” leave the country or hide themselves away from the “have nots” and live their lives behind a high wall. Although, to their credit most of the South Africans I know do what they can, in the midst of busy lives, to make life better for the less well off, or to help animals. It is almost unthinkable for people to throw away food or old clothes or shoes. You can be sure that if you don’t want something, someone else will and they will put it to good use.

As I write this I feel myself meandering into a cul-de-sac where I should not be. If for no other reason than there is nothing I can say that would reflect what is actually going on in that complex cauldron of craziness.

If there is one thing I am clear about it is this. The longer I stayed in South Africa the less I understood the place. The more I got to know about it, the more it confused me.

In the beginning it was all so clear and the answers seemed pretty obvious. The more time I spent there, the more I realised I didn’t know what the question was, let alone the answer.

Exposed to real people from all backgrounds, all the convenient cliches that had nourished my thinking for so long died on the vine. Desiccated, weightless and devoid of substance they turned into dust and blew away as meaningless specs of nothingness, floating unseen in the ether where they belong.

So now as I write this we are safe and cosy in Portugal, but Hermanus’s hungry are still there. They haven’t magically gone away because I cannot see them. Which leads me to wonder what mental gymnastics have I gone through to be OK with this?

One thing living in a country like South Africa does it is thrusts real issues in your face. Hunger and violence are two biggies. If you feel your life lacks a sense of purpose or meaning, then go and live in a quasi war zone. The little things in your life won’t seem so important anymore and you’ll get a sense of what is real and important and not take things for granted anymore. And as perverse as it may sound, that is one of the things I liked about living there, along with the people from all shades of the rainbow who filled our lives with such energy, love and purpose.

I often say that in South Africa 99 out of a 100 people you meet in the course of the day will overwhelm you with kindness and then the hundredth will shoot you in the head for your phone. At which point I would turn to the kids and say “that's why we should never say hello to more than 99 people a day”.

And then of course there was the astonishingly beautiful scenery and elephants, giraffes, rhinos and whales. I never tired of looking at Table Mountain, I would draw the curtains back in the morning and say “My dog! Just look at that”.

“No man is an island, Entire of itself, Every man is a piece of the continent” John Donne’s poem is so beautiful, but what does it mean in a real sense? What does it mean in a place like South Africa
or Brazil or India? How does it translate into something tangible in a world filled with bad stuff going on? Hungry people can’t fill their stomachs with words, no matter how beautiful they are, and people can only give so much before they reach a fatigue threshold and either can’t give anymore, or start feeling resentful about having given so much. And whatever they give, it is never enough. There is always a need for more. I think John Donne’s poem is at best a red herring, at worst I think if he were to participate in a reality TV programme he would be exposed as a monstrous fraud unable to live up to his impossibly high expectations of others.

So after a total of eight years in South Africa I now think of the bad stuff that goes on there and everywhere else as being something I can’t do anything about beyond helping a person here and there. There are people who are driven to try and change such things on a grand scale, but I am not one of them. I’ve made peace with it and let it go.

So on the one hand all the hand-wringing and emotive words inherent in No Man Is An Island don’t make a scrap of difference in the real world. They are empty gestures designed to make people uttering the words look good and feel good about themselves. Politicians are fond of such words.

And on the other hand, there is something I know I can do that is the best contribution I can make to John Donne’s continent. It is something that is do-able and can make a real difference and that is to raise my children to be normal happy, loved, kind, gentle and loving people. And by doing that I might just do something really good. Something that lasts for a long time and may trickle down to my children’s children and their children. And that is what most of us try to do and it is enough. But saying it is enough doesn’t do it justice, doesn’t pay homage to the utter wonderfulness of it (there’s that word I invented again) and the sense of meaning it gives our lives.
On Cecelia

Cecelia worked for me around the house for some years. She is a formidable woman, hardworking and full of love and laughter. She made such a difference to our lives.

Cecelia had six children and as many dogs. Her husband had a drinking problem so she basically did everything for her family herself. A familiar story.

Cecelia had one foot firmly in the 21st century with her use of mobile phones and an understanding of the importance of the Internet in her youngest son’s efforts to get a job, but then her other foot was firmly rooted in the traditions of where she grew up and she would surprise me with her superstitions and beliefs. She carries tribal scars on her face, but knows how Facebook works.

Whenever she found a preying mantis in the house she would raise the ceiling with her screams. Apparently there are bad spirits in these unfortunate insects and she was astonished when I would catch the little beasties in my hand and take them outside and release them in the garden.

She wasn’t particularly fond of Zulus either. Pulling a sour lemon expression and telling me they are terrible people who cannot be trusted. I asked her if she didn’t like Zulus, then what did she think of President Jacob Zuma. “Ahhh yes, he loves the people, so we love him” was her answer. Clearly in her mind, not all Zulus were bad.

She also didn’t like Africans from other parts of Africa. She called them Africans and said the word with a sneer. Hearing this I thought I truly will never understand this country.

Her belief system was based on some synthesis of Christianity and age-old beliefs from her community. When I first met her she took my hand, pulled me close and in a near whisper said “You can trust me, I love Jesus. I am a Christian and I am a good person”. She nodded knowingly and let go of my hand.

When we left to go back to England, it was an emotional time in many ways and leaving Cecelia behind was one of the things that made me sad. I did my best to try and find her a good job. Placing ads in various papers and online as well as trying to get her a position with one of the up-market nannying agencies. So many people were leaving South Africa it was becoming difficult for people like Cecelia to find a good job, or any work at all for that matter.
On the Fine Art of Sploring

In our time in Hermanus we would often go for little drives to walk the dogs on the beach or to go not catching fish or just go exploring, or “sploring” as Tilly used to say.

One day we went to Onrus, the next town down the road and saw about 30 dolphins surfing among the boogie boarders. It was as if the dolphins and surfers were competing for the same waves, but in a good natured laugh-out-loud kind of way.

Sometimes we saw huge pods of dolphins in Walker Bay, especially when the sardines were running. One day I saw hundreds of dolphins swim past the house churning up the water as they went.

When the sardine runs would take place, the beaches would be covered in dead sardines. Beautiful little blue gems lying on the sand.
At other times large numbers of equally beautiful little jellyfish would wash up on the beach. The most wonderful adaptation, a jellyfish with a sail that made it possible to harness the wind to move across the oceans. Not all of Africa’s natural wonders are as big as an elephant, some of the most interesting were hard to see, but no less spectacular.
On Shark Attacks

In the time we lived in and around Cape Town, it seemed like the number of reported shark attacks went from about one a year to one a month. There was the old woman in Simons Town who used to swim every day and had done so in the same spot for years. She was swallowed whole and all that remained of her was her swimming cap.

Then there was the English guy working in Zambia who had come to Cape Town for a holiday. He was also eaten whole while swimming in Fish Hoek. All they found of him was his face mask.

And another English tourist who had his leg bitten off, also in Fish Hoek. He was picked up off the beach by a helicopter and rushed to hospital.

One day we met a young Afrikaans guy who was covered in bandages. He spoke some English, but not so well. With help from Hesma I asked what had happened that he was all bandaged up and he told us he had been scuba diving for abalone when something gave him a forceful nudge. He turned to see what it was and saw an enormous Great White Shark which promptly started nickering him, taking small bites out of him to see if he tasted nice. Of course we all expressed our astonishment at this and asked what happened next. He told us he put his hand on the shark’s snout and pushed him away. The shark swam off and fortunately for him didn’t come back for more. The guy went to hospital and it took 70 stitches to close up his lacerations.

One night I went out for a drink in Hermanus and got talking to some surfers who were not happy chappies.

I had heard in the news that day that a boogie boarder had been attacked by a Great White Shark and it had bitten off his leg. The poor kid bled to death in the water.

The guys I was talking to had been in the water with him when it happened or on the shore about to enter the water. They were in a terrible state when I chatted to them. Traumatised by what they had seen and traumatised because the shark did not bite the guys leg off in one go, it took a minute or so and all the while he was screaming in fear and pain.

Some of the guys with him panicked and went back to shore. They felt terribly guilty because they had abandoned their friend. Others felt bad because they did not go out to help him or did not get there in time to help.

They drank heavily that night.

One thing was for sure, after talking to them I was never going in the sea in South Africa again.

A lot of people believed the reason for the increase in shark attacks is because the boats that take people out to view the Great White Sharks put out food to attract them and so the sharks have begun to associate people with food. And sometimes when a big shark comes across a person in the water it thinks it’s food. The shark tour people refute any link between their activities and the increase in attacks.

I think sharks are beautiful creatures and a necessary part of marine ecosystems. I also think it is a terrible thing that so many are killed every year for their fins, which are used to make shark fin soup. A dish that should be banned in my opinion. They are caught on lines, dragged on board industrial sized fishing boats and, while they are still alive, have their fins and tail cut off before
being thrown back in the water where they drown they because they can’t swim. If they don’t keep moving water does not flow over their gills and essentially they can’t breathe and die.
On Rusting Doors and Murder in Paradise

One night we were watching a film with the fire roaring and all the doors and windows latched shut against the stormy winter night when Thomas got up to go to the kitchen.

“Tea anyone?” he asked and turned the handle to the door only to hear a clunking noise that sounded like metal grating against metal. Hesma and I immediately looked at each other. She frowned slightly.

“I can’t open the door. Look” he said turning the handle with nothing happening.

In South Africa most people have burglar bars on their windows to stop people breaking in. Now it is true to say that in most countries getting locked in your sitting room would not be such a big deal, because you could just climb out the window. But in a crime ridden country like South Africa, getting locked in is a big deal because those things designed to stop people breaking in also stop you from breaking out. A rather scary thought in the event of a fire.

“Oh my Dog, we are stuck” said Thomas.

“It’s alright” I said, “I’ve got my phone, we’ll just call someone and ask them to help us get out”.

“Ja and it’s OK” said Hesma, “we have a full bottle of wine, so we’ll be fine”.

Hesma called her friend Cecile explaining with much laughter what had happened. She said she would come straight away with her friend Andre who could help with hacksawing the burglar bars.

Soon we had cut our way through and Hesma and the kids climbed out. I passed the dogs through and then climbed through myself. Fortunately I had my keys on me, so getting back in through the front door was a doddle.

We invited our rescuers to stay for a drink and spent the next couple of hours chatting about life and telling stories over several bottles of perfectly palatable plonk. Andre was an interesting guy with a great sense of humour. His tales of life in the bush made me a bit envious of his time spent amongst the great animals of Africa.

I said to Hesma “I like Andre, we should invite them around for a braai sometime soon. It would be nice to make some new friends and my gut tells me he’s one of the good guys”

Hesma agreed and we tottered off to bed giggling like 12 year olds and a bit worse for wear from all the wine.

The next day Hesma’s phone rang. It was Cecile. As she listened her face became very stern. She said a quiet goodbye and turned to me, not speaking for a few seconds.

“What was that all about?” I asked, “You look like the world has ended”.

“Last night after they left, Andre went home, grabbed his shotgun and a baseball bat and went to his ex girlfriend’s house. He shot her. She’s dead. And he beat her new boyfriend so badly he’s nearly dead as well. Andre has been arrested and charged with murder”.

Andre is to spend most of the next two decades in prison.
On the Breakup with Hesma

Hesma was an angel who came into our lives for a couple of years and then moved on. When she came to us she stepped out of all that she was used to. Her language, her food, her culture and in exchange she got to be something she longed to be, a mother. For the only time in her life she got to know what it was like to raise little people, all the ball ache and joy.

She gave my children and especially Tilly something they had lost. She became a mother to them and possibly will be the only mother Tilly will ever know.

After Hesma and I went our separate ways, I packed up our stuff in Hermanus and moved back to Cape Town. Before we left, I sprinkled some of Harriet’s ashes in the rock pools where the kids and Hesma used to play. Where they laughed and had fun. And as I did this, I heard Harriet speaking to me. She said I should thank Hesma for her. It gave her pleasure and joy to see the happiness she brought to her children.

To make a difficult time even more painful I told Hesma what Harriet’s voice had told me. I hope she looks back and sees how much she added to the lives of two children and how they will remember her with love for the rest of their lives.

So why did this relationship not work out? I could go on about the enormous clash of cultures and expectations between the Afrikaners and the English. I could go on about different ideas about how to raise children, but of course common ground can be found in all these things. If I had been prepared to be content with life in rural South Africa, then we might still be together, but I felt constrained, like a dog on a leash, like a husky on a leash. It was strangling me.

To Hesma Cape Town was a big city and she didn’t want to live in such a big place. To me Cape Town is just that, a town. A big town, but a town. London and New York are cities and I love them both and feed off their energy when I am there. I couldn’t live in these places, but it’s nice to go there once in a while. By comparison, a future never ventured beyond rural South Africa, even with all its natural beauty and lovely kind hearted people, would have driven me crazy and we both knew that. We also knew the future for Thomas and Tilly lies in Europe or North America or Australia. These are the expectations we have been brought up with, expectations that are normal for us. Hesma’s expectations of a normal life live in a different place and, from what I understand, she has gone back to what is familiar to her and although she misses the kids terribly, she is happy.

And there was something else. In spite of Hesma’s beauty and charm, I was drawn to her because she had no children and in fact could not have children. I knew from the beginning that her soft heart would fall for Thomas and Tilly and they would have a mother. I was caught up in thinking that would be a very good thing for them and her and as a result we would all be happy. I now know that was a mistake. You need to choose a partner for you, not for your children.
On The Peculiarities of a Husky

Huskies are not like normal dogs. People say they are like wolves. I actually think they are more like foxes, but regardless it begs the question, who in their right mind would have a wolf living with them in their house?"

Huskies are truly hopeless hounds when it comes to being guard dogs and are more likely to lick an intruder than bite them.

They are fiercely independent and almost impossible to train to do anything other than pull a sled.

They shed huge amounts of fur all the time and it ends up on everything, your clothes, your food, your furniture.

And the worse thing is they are incredibly good escape artists and once out will run all day if given the chance, after all that is what they are bred to do.

I caught one that had escaped and was running through the streets when we lived in Hermanus. When I called the owner he sounded very relieved and told me the last time his dog escaped it ran 27 kilometres to the next town - in one day. The worrying thing about this is they have no car sense and so once they get near a road, they are vulnerable to getting hit by a car.

And another thing about them that worries me is they are such popular dogs that people steal them.

Huskies also have a reputation for killing cats and other small furry animals including small dogs. This is one of the reasons there are so many huskies in dog rescue centres. They are not easy dogs to keep and in my opinion need to be around humans all the time, or in the company of other dogs. Definitely not locked in a house on their own for eight hours a day.

The other day someone asked “Do you want a kitten?”. Opening a cardboard box revealing a little ball of fluff with big pleading eyes looking up at me saying “I’m soooo gorgeous, you know you can’t resist taking me home”.

“No thank you” I said “Amy will eat her. I’d take the kitten home, show her to Amy and she’d say, oh that’s so sweet of you, but I’ve just eaten. I tell you what, put her over there and I’ll have her later”.

And that’s why we don’t have a cat.

There are lots of endearing things about huskies though. I love the way Amy puts her head on my lap as if to console me when I am down in the dumps. And it’s sweet the way she goes all wobbly kneed over cheese, she just loves cheese. It always makes me smile when she canters like a horse, slightly sideways. And then she talks a lot and sometimes goes crazy in the house running backwards and forwards and leaping onto the sofas and beds.

We were out walking Amy one day when the local boys football team ran past and she decided to follow them. All of a sudden the boys got it into their heads they were being chased by a wolf and scattered in all directions, much to the consternation of their coach.

Amy likes digging for moles on the lawn, sometimes digging down a couple of feet. I don’t know which does more damage, her or the moles. And she does this thing where she stalks them. She can obviously hear them moving underground and very gingerly creeps up on them, leaps into the air and dives onto the spot where she thinks the mole is and digs like crazy. I suppose this is a behaviour for finding mice under the snow. Funny thing is that she had never seen snow when she used to do this.

When she chews bones she doesn’t chew them properly, so when they come out the other end it is extremely painful for her. The first time we discovered this, we thought she had been bitten by a snake. She was screaming in pain and we all rushed out to see what the problem was only to find it wasn’t a snake at all.

One day I heard Amy barking in a way that was unusual. She sounded a bit anxious and was yapping repeatedly and so after a minute or so of this, I thought I’d go and investigate. She was standing by the pool pump barking away and as I walked up to her I thought oh-o, this has all the hallmarks of a snake and sure enough there was a young cobra with its head flared hissing away at Amy.

I pondered what to do for a moment and realised I had a number on my phone for a snake catcher. Someone had emailed it to me. I typed the word snake into my iPhone search box and to my relief the number for the snake catcher came up highlighted in the email. “Thank you Steve Jobs” I said to myself as I called the number. The snake man said he’d be there in few minutes. And he was. Armed with a bucket and an aluminium thingy with a claw on the end. In no time he had the snake in the bucket and took it away to release it somewhere in the wild where it would be safe from people and their cats and dogs and they would be safe from it.

A week later while walking Amy we saw another cobra and it was enormous. Thick as my wrist and longer than Tilly was tall. Amy gave it a wide berth.

In Australia we lost dogs and a horse to snakes, so I am very wary of them.
In my last year in Cape Town I cemented my friendship with a former high court judge who had been good friends with Nelson Mandela. He used to mentor me in my business life and often in my personal life too. His wisdom and common sense were a great source of strength to me. I felt privileged to listen to his quiet words spoken with deliberation and confidence. Often he would steer a line of thought back to first principles rooted in a clear idea of what was right and wrong, always arguing the case for the right course of action.

Every Wednesday I would go and spend a couple of hours in his chambers discussing business stuff and Amy would come with me.

She had a little routine which involved a complete inspection of the law chambers, visiting all the lawyers in their rooms as if to say good morning to each of them. Once she had done that, she would come and join us in the boardroom where she would sit as happy as any husky in a boardroom could possibly be. At least for the first couple of hours. Then she would get bored and start howling like a wolf, which was not such a big deal if it were just the two of us, but if, as happened one day, we were on a conference call to an important business prospect, that was a different matter. But, to his credit, my mentor passed it off as if it were the most natural thing in the world to have a howling wolf in your boardroom.

And if you are wondering why we call her an African husky when everyone knows there is no such thing, it is because sometimes she is so bloody naughty I find myself calling her “that ‘frican husky” and of course the polite version of that for the kids is “that African husky”.

THOMAS AND AMY
On Amy’s first trip to the beach with us.
Our Little Friends

Tilly has long hair. Very long hair and for years I brushed it and plaited it until she was old enough to do it herself. At about this time I noticed she was scratching her head a lot, but paid it no heed. Then one night I went to check the kids were alright before I went to bed and noticed she was vigorously scratching her head as she slept. I lifted the hair from the side of her head and nearly jumped back in surprise. It was as if her scalp were moving. As if it had a life of its own.

I got the magnifying glass from my desk and had a closer look. There were literally hundreds of lice crawling about on her scalp and I could see lots of nits too, just ready to burst into life like something from the film “Alien”.

TILLY AND HER AMAZING HAIR

I checked Thomas, but he had none and I am follicly challenged so didn’t have any either.

I must confess I had a flash of panic at the thought of what other mothers would say about me letting Tilly’s infestation get so out of control.

It took three months of guerrilla warfare to nail the little bastards. Washing bedding and so on after each treatment. Working my way down the shelf at the pharmacy until I had tried pretty much everything. Tea Tree Oil seemed to work at first, but in the end I resorted to a chemical that smelled as if it had been formulated in the bowels of hell by Satan himself. This worked.
Time to Go

Thomas came home from school looking very upset and went straight to his room shutting the door firmly behind him.

I could see he was upset, but left him for a while to deal with whatever was bugging him. 30 minutes or so later I knocked on his door, went in and sat next to him on his bed. He was lying facing the wall.

“What’s wrong Mr T?” I asked.

“Nothing” he said. Standard response given to parents when there is something wrong. I nudged and probed as gently as I could until he turned to face me, his eyes red and his mouth tight.

“Yesterday” he said “my friend’s mother did not pick him up from school. My friend waited and waited, but no-one came so he went to the office to tell them his mother hadn’t arrived. They called his house, but no-one answered so they called his grandfather who went to the house and found my friend’s mother lying dead on the kitchen floor in a pool of blood. She had been stabbed”.

His voice was shaking now and he said “Daddy I don’t want to live here anymore. I don’t want to live in a country where if you are late picking me up from school I think you have been murdered. I want to go back to England”.

Thomas’s words were quite compelling. It was time to leave. We had come for two years and stayed for six. No girlfriend, no job and two kids who wanted to go somewhere they could live a normal life like their friends in Australia and England. I chose England.

By this time Ian was 14 and struggling to walk properly. The muscles on his hind legs had atrophied so much he could barely stand up sometimes. I had to face up to something I had been putting off for a long time. Thomas and I took him to the vet and cried our eyes out as we said goodbye. We buried him in the garden in Hermanus.

And of course you might be wondering what happened to Bertie. I always thought his end would come in the jaws of one the big dogs he used to take such exception to, but no sadly his end was not so grand. He ate something on the beach at Hout Bay and it caused an obstruction in his intestine.

After doing what he could, Dr Krein, the wonderful Constantia vet, gave me the bad news. Moments before the injection I said the magic word that would always spur him into furious activity “Rabbits!” and for a moment he was alert and ready to go hunting with his team mate Ian. I wanted him to go out with a happy thought flashing through his mind.

We buried Bertie at the foot of Table Mountain and sometimes when I see photos or film of this iconic landmark, I am reminded that is where Bertrand le Grande is buried. The greatest, boldest, bravest Jack Russell I have ever had the pleasure of knowing. Cecelia cried her eyes out all day, the day Bertie passed away.
With a heavy heart I said “So long Fair Cape and thanks for all the fish” and we got on a big tin can and headed north. Amy was put in a kennel until we got things sorted at the other end.
Very sadly Harriet’s father Marcus emailed me to say my mother-in-law Kay had passed away after eating something carrying a nasty strain of E. coli bacteria while on a cruise ship in the Mediterranean.

Marcus worked as a family doctor for most of his adult life. He was fond of saying the body is a self healing machine. Leave it alone to get on with it and it will fix itself most of the time. It followed then that he had a reputation for being unsympathetic to his childrens’ ailments and no doubt his wife’s too. An uncharitable part of me wonders if this contributed to Kay’s illness taking such a hold over her.

Within a couple of years Marcus met a much younger and vivacious woman called Ginny. They got on from the very start and we were all very pleased that he had found happiness again. Then to our collective astonishment Marcus announced he was taking Ginny on a cruise to the Amazon. Within hours the rest of us were placing bets on the odds of Ginny surviving a trip on a ship with Marcus and dear reader it should come as no surprise when I tell you the odds were not in her favour. I claimed the film rights to the Serial Killing Family Doctor.
SALISBURY

On our return to England we ended up living in Salisbury, a lovely cathedral city with an ancient history. We rented a house with a river flowing through the garden and large communal fields to one side. It was an idyllic place to live and the kids went to the local schools.

THOMAS AGED 13

Everyday we would walk Amy along the river and she would get very excited when she saw ducks. Swans, on the other hand, left her moving as far away as the lead would allow while pretending to take an interest in butterflies. She had an altercation with a swan and is now scared of them. Urban myth has it they are perfectly capable of killing a dog. The preferred method being to drag it under water and drown it.

My abiding memory of the house in Salisbury is how cold it was. I hate being cold. After spending so much time in warm countries, I find the cold eats away at you and you can never get warm.

Another thing about Salisbury is that when Amy would escape, she would go in search of fox poo and then roll in it. It is the most vile smelling thing imaginable and so when she would eventually come home or we would catch her, she would be locked in the conservatory until I had the courage to bathe her.
AMY GIVING ME LIP AFTER ROLLING IN FOX POO
OUR UNEXPECTED VISITOR

We had very heavy rains in December and January and a lot of the region was flooded. Fortunately the flood defences around the house held out and we were fine. Having said that, the driving rain made the front door swell so that it became difficult to close and so we started using a side door. For some reason Thomas decided to use the front door one day and didn’t bother to close it properly. He didn’t come to me and say “Daddy I can’t close the front door, it’s stuck, could you please close it” no there was none of that, he just left it open.

That night Tilly had a friend over for a sleep-over and they decided to make a camp in the kitchen and put mattresses on the floor. After hours of chatting and shrieking they finally drifted off to sleep.

At about three in the morning Tilly came into my bedroom and whispered something in my ear. I woke and said “Sorry my love what did you say?” and she whispered something very quietly, too quietly for me to hear so I asked her to say it again.

“Daddy there is a man asleep in my friend’s bed”.

I said “Sorry Tilly I don’t think I heard you properly, say it again”.

“Daddy there is a man asleep in my friend’s bed”.

“No that’s impossible”.

Quite firmly now Tilly replied with “Yes it is Daddy come and look”.

I said “No there can’t be. Are you sure it’s not Amy?”.

“Come and look” she whispered.

Sure enough there was a man asleep on one of the mattresses on the floor. This was bizarre enough in itself, but two other things also struck me as being a bit surreal. Firstly he had taken off his boots and put them very neatly beside the mattress and secondly Amy was standing over him licking his face. No barking, no growling. She was licking his face. In no time this slobbering woke the dozing stranger who took a look at Amy and then a look at me and adopted an expression that seemed to say “what are you doing in my kitchen and why is there a wolf licking my face?”.

Now you might think at a time like this you would know exactly what to do and you would do it, and, if you are a man, probably do it without hesitation and in a deep voiced manly kind of way. I must confess, I stood there completely flummoxed. This eventuality was not covered in the instruction manual. Then the Englishman in me kicked into play and without hesitation I offered him a cup of tea. Always a good fall-back position in times of trouble.

“Would you like a cup of tea?” I asked.

The dozy one closed his eyes, said “No” and went back to sleep. Rude bastard. You’d think he would at least have the courtesy to say no thank you.
I called the police and they took him away.

There is a reason I offered our unexpected visitor a cup of tea and it goes back to our time in South Africa. I often said to the kids that when someone breaks into the house, not if, but when, I want you to offer them a cup of tea and ask them how many sugars they want. Don’t look at them, definitely do not give them eye contact and when they ask where all the valuable stuff is tell them it’s already been stolen and then show them my empty cufflink box and your mother’s empty jewellery box.
The Old Man at the Supermarket Checkout

One evening I went to the supermarket and was served at the checkout by a 79 year old man. There weren't many people there so I took my time and chatted to him. An articulate and intelligent man, his business and retirement savings went down the tube ten years ago. This was the only job he could get and the only way he could support himself. He said the promise of a bright future had vanished. Especially for people like him.

This conversation left its mark on me. I bet we will be seeing a lot more people like him in the coming years. Octogenarians working in supermarkets to make ends meet, or just to survive. A sad sign of the times.

It was another nail in the coffin for England for me. I realised I don’t really like England. I love it when I’m not there and am proud of my British blood, but there are nicer places to live. Portugal is one of them.

Sick of the appalling weather and various other things, I felt I had made a big mistake. England was not for me and I made plans to leave for good. The idea was to head south to Lagos in Portugal where I had visited years before and where it was almost certain the sun would be shining.
THE JOURNEY TO PORTUGAL

Getting out of the house on time was a nightmare. We drove through lashing rain all the way to the ferry port and all the while I was anxious because Amy was supposed to be in a dog box for the trip across the English Channel. In a sense she was, but I couldn’t assemble it properly in the space available inside the car so it sat in two halves stacked like spoons with her sitting inside it on Tilly’s duvet. As we approached the check in point at the ferry terminal I could feel my heart rate increasing as I thought about what a great pain it would be to be refused entry onto the ship because the husky was not in a properly assembled dog box.

All my stressing was for nothing though as we were waved through with a smile and “what a beautiful dog, such lovely eyes”.

The Trip Through France

For some reason Tilly decided to say “‘ello govnor, pleased to meet you, would you like a cup of tea?” over and again. And then the French version of it with additions like ferme le bouche and other quaint French expressions. I started looking for places on the side of the road where I could drop her off and leave her.

We drove all afternoon through the rain. After a while Tilly’s broken record stopped playing and to her credit there was not a word of complaint from her about the tedious drive. It was really chucking it down and at one point I went to brake and nothing happened. Then I put my foot down hard and the brakes caught - phew.

We had dinner in a French truckers cafe. Everyone was very accommodating and the array of food on offer boggled the mind and the taste buds. I have been to France more times than I can remember, but there were things on that buffet that I had never seen before. They were so foreign to me, I had no idea which food group they were from, but I tried them anyway and secreted a few bits away for Amy. She wolfed them down.

The next morning we got up at sparrows, drove past Bordeaux onto Pau and then into the Pyrenees where, thankfully, Amy got to see her first snow - Tilly too. And finally the African husky had her first romp in the white stuff. She loved it - running around in circles and pronting like a springbok - smiling from ear to ear.

Amy had come a long way from foraging for food in rubbish bins in some hot dusty little town at the bottom end of Africa.

This was a bucket list item ticked off for me. I remember saying to Hesma how much I’d love to take her to play in the snow in the French Pyrenees. It felt so good to see her running in the snow. And as much as I would like to have let her off the lead, I dared not in case she ran for it.
AMY IN THE FRENCH PYRENEES
Her first ever run in the snow

As we drove away, she had her head out the window and was mesmerised by the snow flakes falling on her nose. Staring cross-eyed as they settled on her muzzle.

Soon we were in Spain and Tilly replaced her Ferme la Bouch mantra with the only Spanish-ish expression she knows Prepare a Morte (thank you JK Rowling). The beautiful Spanish lady at the service station in the foothills of the Pyrenees looked a little worried when Tilly announced this to her with typical Tilly gusto. Worried you understand not for fear of impending death, but for the psychological wellbeing of my daughter. Shooting me a look willing me to maintain my strength as she passed me the change. That unspoken bond thing that flashed between us left me a little chuffed to have crossed paths with a compassionate soul mate.

We then spent some hours travelling through dull lifeless land that reminded me of Arizona with concrete apartment blocks. This gave way to more interesting orchards of almond trees in splendid blossom. Eventually we found ourselves in Madrid. Right in the middle of the bloody place during rush hour traffic - which had me cursing like a trooper and Tilly lecturing me on the how vulgar the “S” word was and wouldn’t it be better and altogether more clever to say Sugar-Honey-Iced-Tea. Meanwhile Amy stuck her head out the window and swam in the sea of smiles and finger pointing that followed from a flotilla of marooned commuters whose dull journey, for a moment, had a ray of light shone upon it.

She slept in the car overnight as a chill wind from the north beat against the grand old city.
The following morning we started early. The sun shone and the further west we got, the warmer it became. My spirits soared as we crossed into Portugal. A few hours later we were standing on a beach in Lagos. The sun was shining and the sea gleamed bright blue before us. The light hurt our eyes. We had made it and all felt right and good.

BATATA BEACH IN LAGOS (with Tilly).
“Welcome to Paradise” said the woman at the estate agent. Hyperbole I thought.

My first priority was to find somewhere to live and pretty soon we chose number 12 Rua Infante Sagres, a stone’s throw from the iconic green apartment in the middle of town. I signed a contract with Maria da Conceicao Dias and we moved in straight away. Everything we needed was in the apartment. Maria’s mother had lived there for many years and it had a distinctly dark 1970s feel to it, but we were happy to overlook that because of the location and we liked its three terraces. Especially the big one on the roof that had glimpses of the sea and where I could BBQ.

Maria took an immediate like to Tilly and I thought here is another angel. In time I found this to be true. Maria was not a tall person, but she had immense stature in the town of Lagos, having come from humble beginnings, she had worked her way into a position of influence in the local community and was respected and perhaps feared too. I learned in time that, although she was always unfailingly kind and polite to me, she could fight her corner if she felt the need to.
Tilly and I went to buy some things for lunch and I was astonished by the fish counter in the supermarket. It was like a shop in itself and the display was an extravagant work of piscatorial art.

I bit into a tomato and to my immense pleasure it tasted like a home grown tomato. It tasted the way a tomato should taste. Now that might sound like a really stupid thing to say, but after the tasteless blobs of water in red skin that I had become accustomed to in England, these were a joy. My first lunch in Portugal consisted of a couple of tomatoes, lettuce with fresh bread and lashings of olive oil all washed down with a glass of red wine in the winter sunshine.

I thought, Portugal may be one of the poorest countries in Europe, but these people appreciate good simple food. Most of it seems to be grown or caught locally and it is fresh.
Serendipity on the Hard Shoulder

I went to the airport to pick up Thomas who, for the time being, was still living in England. He had grown in the few weeks since we had last seen each other. Tilly kept looking at him with an expression of awe, she was so proud of her big brother.

As we got onto the highway for the 90km drive back to Lagos, there was a loud noise and the steering wheel started wobbling. I pulled onto the hard shoulder.

“Don’t worry guys it’s just a flat tyre. I’ll have it fixed in a minute” I said to the kids. I felt smug at the thought that I’d had the foresight to buy a can of that stuff for fixing flat tyres. The tyre didn’t look in great shape, but I thought I’d try my luck anyway. No joy, the magic-in-a-can fizzed away, but the tyre remained as flat as a cheap fajita.

OK, plan B I thought. Fishing various tools out of the boot, I got to work jacking up the car so I could put on the spare and we could be on our way. Cars whizzed by just inches away which made me fear for my wellbeing. I could see the newspaper headlines “Father of two hit by car on highway near airport. Children found playing with electronic tablets on roadside, oblivious to father’s tragic death. Pet husky runs all the way to Spain in two days”.

When I went to loosen the wheel nuts I found the tool I had was the wrong size. The original wheels on my SAAB had been changed to a low profile type and whoever did this did not supply the right sized wheel brace. I turned the boot upside down and inside out in search of one, but soon realised we were scuppered.

I stood for a moment as the sun neared the horizon and wondered what I was going to do. Especially as we had only been in Portugal for a short while and I had no confidence in my ability to communicate in the language of our new home and anyway there was no one I could call even if I could falar Portuguese. There was nothing for it, but to stand on the side of the road with my thumb out.

People driving by had grim determined expressions, nobody would give me eye contact, some even looked away. I realised these were people in a hurry to get home after a hard day at work. I stood there for 45 minutes waving, doing little jigs and getting the kids to pull sad faces, but still nobody stopped. The sun was going down and soon it would be dark. I was becoming anxious.

Eventually a Portuguese guy in a big American pick-up pulled over. He was quite drunk. I could smell beer on his breath. He spoke faltering English and after I explained what the problem was, he said something I didn’t understand before walking back to his car and rummaging around in the back of the pick-up. I remember he had an enormous dog sitting on the front seat, friendly enough, but slobbering everywhere. After what seemed like a long time, he said the Portuguese equivalent of “Ah ha!” and produced a wheel brace.

It was the right size and in a few minutes I had fitted the spare tyre. We were back in business.

I thanked him very much and offered to give him some money, so he could go and buy some more beers, as a thank you for his kindness. He said “No, it is not necessary”. He seemed quite adamant, so I let it go. We shook hands and he opened his mouth as if to say something, but instead shook his
head and started walking back to his pick-up. After a moment he hesitated and turned back to me saying “I am sorry for my English it is so bad, but I want to tell you a story so you will understand why I cannot take your money.

“Two years ago I took my car to Morocco and when I was a long long way from any town my car stopped. There was a problem with the engine. I tried to fix it, but there was nothing I could do. I waited for hours, but nobody came. I was on my own. It was very hot. And then an old car came down the road, I waved to the Arabic driver and he stopped. We did not speak the same language, but with signs like this” he said waving his hands about “he understood and getting a rope from his car he tied my car to his and pulled me 40 kilometres to his village.

“And when we got there, one of his friends fixed my car, it was a problem with the carburettor, and he invited me to his house to eat with his family. His eldest son spoke some English like me so we were able to talk a little bit. I told them about Portugal and they told me about Morocco.

“You can imagine I was very grateful, because I had never seen such kindness from a stranger before. I offered him money to say thank you, but he said no. I thought I had said something bad, but then his son explained. He told me his father did not want money, but he wanted to ask me to do something in return for the help he had given me. He said, one day you will find someone on the side of the road and when this happens, you can repay my father by helping him.

“So I am repaying my debt to him and now it is your turn. I ask you to do this for someone else one day and when you do, you will have paid your debt to me”.

I shook his hand again and with my hand on my heart said “I promise to do that”.

And I have.

IF YOU LIKE THE STORY SO FAR, I REALLY HOPE YOU DO, AND WOULD LIKE TO READ THE REST, PLEASE CLICK HERE.
PAPERBACK VERSION OF THIS BOOK

If you would like a paperback version of this eBook please visit the website www.AfricanHusky.com and follow the Buy the Book link.

PHOTOS

Lots of my photos related to the book can be seen at my website www.AfricanHusky.com

I have created a series of albums with all the photos: My Albums

Photos from Holly Tree Farm

Photos from 4 Minus 1

Photos from our time in South Africa.

Photos from our time back in England.

Photos of our time in Portugal.

Photos of Doors of Lagos

Photos of WWII Pilots

VIDEOS

Gemma and Kyle performing "I Want You Back"

Karmameleon - Leon performing on his guitar;

Hermanus and Walker Bay in South Africa - View from Our House

Portuguese Water Dog and Amy
WEBSITES etc:

www.AfricanHusky.com

Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/groups/TravelsWithAnAfricanHusky/

MyAlbum galleries: http://myalbum.com/i01k76g3588f

www.JohnMartinBradley.com

www.CombatPilots.co

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To all the angels who appear in this book, even if they are not mentioned.

Renee Capetta for being a generous supporter of my writing.

Dr Doron Samuel for his insightful comments, compassion and for just being him.

Amanda Berry for her encouragement and helping me with my Afrikaans spelling.

Savina for her feedback.

Maria da Conceicao Dias for giving us a place to live.

All the people who supported my Indiegogo campaign.