

Head in the Clouds

A year ago a woman at a bus stop checked me out in my wheelchair and asked my wife - my ex-wife - 'Was he tall? How tall was he before he-'

'Maybe you should ask him.' Angie sounded tired. 'Hey Nik, this woman here wants to know how tall you were. But I'm pretty sure you're still a hundred and eighty centimetres, aren't you hon?'

My head bobbed up and down. 'Yup. Still one eighty.'

The bus driver looked annoyed when he saw me. Got up and banged down the ramp.

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These days I could still stand up and hold onto things, only just, like a baby yearning to be a toddler, from my manual wheelchair - the electric one was on order via my caseworker - struggling to straighten my rickety legs in order to peer into the skip bin and see exactly what my brother Rob and his two spawn had tossed in with the rubbish; which of our dead mother's treasures were gleaming there, among the stuff that had quietly silted up her accomodating house over the past few decades.

Treasure is only treasure if someone explains how it gained that label. It might be easy to miss it, if you never visited the owner, knew almost nothing about them and their history, had never sat down and admired an exquisite piece of embroidery stitched before the grog slurred their nimble fingers. Or delighted in a photo of your oma aged five, in a squirrel skin coat on a sled in an ancient pine forest, where come summer she'd be cramming her bucket with berries.

You might not notice such things if every item in your own house arrived there via a Freedom Furniture trolley; all beige and grey and so generic a personal shopper could have wheeled one through and stocked each house you built, in a slightly more upmarket location each time.

Ok, sure, there were things that needed to be got rid of. You didn't need to save a thousand filthy plastic bags and perished rubber bands. Or dozens of cans of food so ancient they were oozing botulistic secretions through the floorboards. But the unperished food could be donated to a food charity, especially during Covid times. And anything recyclable should be mined sorted, distributed. The age of acquiring was coming to an end. The future for Rob's children (not mine as I wouldn't be having any) would consist of conserving and salvaging, not consuming and trashing.

Crash! Her weaving loom landed in the bin and splintered into a dozen pieces.

'The boyz are doing a brilliant job, aren't they.' Rob repositioned his butt in the sling of a fold up canvas chair; someone had to take on the role of supervisor. 'Dunno what we'd do without them hey.'

As far as I knew, you could hire two oafish thugs pretty easily and cheaply off Airtasker, but where do you find an ad for someone to respectfully sort through and find a home for fifty years of a deceased person's lovingly acquired possessions?

Stop. Please stop! Can we just slow down. None of you ever visited her. And now you want to hurl her entire life into a skip bin. You'd probably hurl her in too if you knew where she was.

I didn't bother saying it because I knew it wouldn't work. I'd been treated like I'd lost my speech and hearing - as well as my mobility - since my MS got worse. I'd have to try another tack.

'Robbie, she once told me she hid money in a drawer somewhere. A lot of money.'

Rob stood up abruptly. 'Time out boyz,' he announced, putting his hand up in a stop sign.

'Can we just get this done,' whimpered the elder son. 'We've got the footy tonight.'

‘It’s all good guys, we’ll get there,’ Rob said, ‘but Uncle Nik wants to go through some things inside, some drawers, personal possessions, see if there’s anything we want to keep. We need to be, respectful.’

I took some deep breaths, gathered my strength. After this was done and the will sorted - whatever it might contain - I’d never have to clap eyes on my brother again.

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Our mother vanished into thin mountain air, five months earlier. The spring day was warm when she set out on her walk the police informed me a day later. The dreary, mist-clinging winter dwindling at last. Her nearest neighbour, from a hundred metres up the road, saw her that afternoon - you couldn’t miss her in that hot pink cardigan and grey feathered hat - wandering along the road towards the bush with her dog, Monty.

‘You wouldn’t be dead for quids, would you,’ she’d called out to him. Mum adored her long rambles.

That night the weather changed. Down in the city I hauled a blanket onto my bed and slept badly, woken every half hour by sudden gushes of rain pelting the tin roof. I made my usual call the next day and mum didn’t answer which wasn’t unusual; her phone often went flat. I tried again that afternoon then rang the neighbour, who went over and banged on the doors and windows. Monty was shivering on the verandah with his lead still on - not a good sign. I rang Rob (who said he couldn’t get off work that week but text him please) then caught a cab to the station.

How could a seventy five year old woman simply disappear? The police took me to the start of her favourite track where I sat in my wheelchair, watching the searchers descend. A kookaburra laughed from a bunioned gumtree. We were great bushwalkers, mum and me, back in the day, racing each other up the steep bits. But now, in my chair, a gutter might as well be Annapurna. I remembered the gaps, next to that track. You could slip, especially after rain,

skidding towards the escarpment. If you were lying in the bush with a fractured leg a light cardigan would be drenched to your icy skin.

The search dragged on and the fog rolled back in; helicopters beating through it like meringue, sweeping and scanning the valley. The cops took Monty out, hoping for a sniffer dog, but he didn't give any indication of where they'd been separated, just wanted to get back to the heater and his bone.

I could still get around her house with my crutch - the wheelchair was for long distances... like the front door to the letterbox. There were plenty of things to grab hold of inside. It wasn't an IKEA house; not a storage solution in sight. It was full of old and eclectic pieces, exhibits from her meanderings, spotted at auctions, charity shops or the odd local cleanup. A menagerie of small china rescue dogs, an atomic coffee maker, a heavy, wavy Murano vase and a scuffed ceramic kookaburra perched on the piano I learnt to play on. The only uncluttered part of the house was her dining room. It was sacred, kept that way for the family Christmases.

She'd always claimed she tried to keep the collecting down a bit, but at local cleanup time what went out never did quite correspond to what came in the rest of the year. I used to come up specially to help her get a few things out on the kerb. 'I'm making an effort,' she assured me. But then I'd spot her wandering down the road taking a sneaky look on the neighbours' piles, and the next time I visited there'd be something new to show me.

'I say Nikki, will you look at this. Bitossi - just a hairline crack. Just because something's not perfect, doesn't mean it deserves to be trashed. And a dial phone - red ones are rare ones. From St Vinnies.'

The cops searched the house but didn't find any clues. Or a note. They managed to half prise the front door of the granny flat open, down the end of her leafy yard, but a solid wall of furniture was jammed up against the door.

'No-ones been in there for years,' I told them. 'It's packed wall to wall with her stuff.'

‘More stuff,’ said young Constable Purvis, already turning back to the house.

While search parties scoured the bush, I lurked inside, poking around in the crowded cupboards with my crutch. Empty vodka bottles, stacked at the back. A pile of scrapbooks that she’d glued Women’s Weekly clippings into. An entire one devoted to The Royal Family. ‘Andrew and Fergie. The Fairytale.’ ‘Princess Diana. The Untold Story.’ Gracious, was there some Diana detail we missed, among the tsunami of dramas the women’s magazines had flooded us with over the past few decades. Di clearly had more facets than the diamonds in those tiaras. The royal family - just another bunch of people with the problems family’s always had, only a bit more photographed. If only Andy Warhol had been right, and we’d all ended up with our fifteen minutes of fame, instead of the same old celebrities.

Another scrapbook full of recipes she hadn’t cooked for decades, not since alcohol became her main ingredient. More magazine articles - handy household hints - for stain removal or unblocking the sink - that didn’t work so well for trickier things like ‘How to mend a broken family’ or ‘Coping with an unhappy marriage’. An inspirational tale - ‘Woman gives birth in iron lung’. There was a sample of mum’s handwriting, analysed by Madame Svetlana at Penrith shops back in the seventies, who said she’d have a difficult life but was a survivor. All my merit awards and school reports. None of Rob’s. Though she’d glued in his poems, sweet little things he composed at twelve. A photo of mum in her twenties in a butt clutching miniskirt, popping a bottle of bubbly. And one of Rob and me on Santa’s knee. A quirky story ‘Dogs can talk to you.’ I looked down at Monty busy with his bone. ‘Where is she boy?’ But Monty just kept gnawing.

A few days into the search there was a blink of hope, a voice. One of the searchers heard a cry - or thought they did - rising feebly up the valley. Again I waited, next to the cliff. People were lowered on ropes, calling out all afternoon, bashing their way through the snarly bush.

It should have been a beautiful sunset, over the distant crags.

‘Could have been a bird,’ they told me, looking away, ‘or an echo. Noises travel strangely through these valleys. We’ll keep looking along the track, a few of us, with torches. We’re not giving up.’

Eventually the search was scaled down and abandoned. There’d be a coroner’s inquest some time in the future and Rob and I would organise a memorial service in a while - or at least I would. Of course I knew she must be dead but families of missing people always imagine them alive somewhere. I had a dream where she was holed up in a cave in the mountains with a candle, looking out at the world. It was ridiculous, I knew, but I left the back door unlocked and a note on the kitchen table.

‘Monty’s in good hands mum. We love you.’

I finally had a shower, once I got back home to my commode and Serena, my carer, who fussed over Monty.

‘Mum would have been safer in a nursing home.’ Rob shook his head. ‘I did mention that option to her.’

I wondered when he’d done that; as far as I knew he only saw her once a year, at Christmas.

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Last Christmas was our final one; Angie abandoned me a few months later. (‘I can’t go down with you Nik, there’ll be nothing left of me.’)

Mum had ushered us in. ‘Here we are again, together again as a family,’ giving Angie a watery kiss, topping up her glass with a some fine Beluga ‘from the crystal clear water of Siberian springs’ I noted on the bottle, doubting her family members sent there on Stalin’s orders had sampled either crystal clear water or vodka in those salt mines.

The table had been set, as usual, with bowls of cooling sauerkraut and fried potatoes on her best cross stitched mats. She’d once done lovely handiwork - her mother had taught her - and

weavings on her loom which dad found at an auction and fixed up for her, early in their marriage. A happy memory, mum interlacing those pretty wools into cushion covers and wall hangings, instead of refreshing a tumbler of vodka most of the day, flitting from one unfocused activity to another, like a chicken poking around for a worm or a scrap of something to sustain it.

‘Yo Nikko man, good to be touching base.’ Rob amputated the goose’s wings and its legs; a stream of glistening fat spurting over the side of the the plate onto the cross stitch. ‘How’s the music going these days?’

‘Actually, I’ve got some half decent gigs lined up. I can’t carry my keyboard; lucky I’ve got Angie to help. Dunno what I’d do without-’

‘That’s the way,’ Rob plunged his knife through the breast. He’d picked up a few Americanisms after being headhunted into a gated compound for two lucrative years in the US, broadening his professional horizons, two years I didn’t have to see him at Christmas. After workshopping empathy, at some corporate retreat, he’d taken to asking me how my music was progressing, interrupting swiftly before he had time to find out. ‘Hey, ran into Johnno Pappas. Head of the school council, remember. Blast from the past eh. He’s done well. Moved to a warehouse, inner city, somewhere. Already petitioning the neighbourhood, hassling the council. Haha.’

‘To do what?’

‘Close the pub noise down. The Grand Duke. Grand Puke he calls it - inner-westy trust fund brats vomit outside at closing time. Gross. Papp’s got kids. He works! Killing hours. Bands till all hours apparently.’

‘Can’t have that,’ I said. My band had played that pub once. Another one biting the dust. Rob’s mates were all movers and shakers, just not to rock n roll. Christian music was enough for

them and creative was an adjective that went best with accounting. So John Pappas had moved to the inner city. Couldn't wowsers like him stay out in the suburbs.

'Pappas knows what he's doing,' said Rob. 'A great investment. It's all up, up and away round those parts!'

'Nikky,' said mum, 'you could move up here, you and Ange, if it gets too expensive down there. Move into my granny flat. It's packed with my stuff at the mo but we could get in and clear it out.'

'Thanks Pat,' said Angie. 'The flat would be gorgeous, fixed up for sure, though probably more suitable for one person. I've got quite a few treasures myself. May I?' She reached for mum's vodka bottle and poured us both a slug. Another slug.

I wondered how much longer we could survive in the city. The rent on our place took up most of our income and it'd be years before we got near the top of the housing department list.

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We got close to the end of the cleanup weekend, finally. I'd got them to pack some of the good stuff in the twin cab for Vinnies, probably where she got most of it. Along with a box of photos and treasures to drop at my place. There was just the granny flat down the back to clear the following weekend.

'A superb addition to the property,' said Rob, 'when we get it all on the market. Value added in a highly sought after area.' He clasped one hand over the other like a priest and arranged his face in a solemn pose. 'After the inquest of course... Anyway boyz, let's have a quick look at the granny. Real crap, nothing worth saving there.'

They hauled out the first few things: an old bed with with rusty springs, a wardrobe, some boxes. And that was it, as it turned out. There was actually nothing behind it, just the half empty inside of the flat. Rob got his phone out, put on the torch. We all peered into the gloom.

Our mother emerged from the bathroom and stood there blinking in the light of the iPhone, silver hair awry, a bush wraith in a purple flannelette nightie. ‘Winter’s on the way,’ she said. ‘And I can’t survive that in here. And what the bloody hell was all that banging.’

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The search was officially over. The local paper featured her on the front page, beaming with Monty. ‘Grandmother emerges from hiding. Our reporter Di Elmsbury asked Pat how she managed to survive for five months.’

‘I climbed in the window last spring, after a walk with my dog, Monty, then I pushed some boxes up against the curtains,’ she said. ‘It was full of my pandemic supplies. Plenty of food and toilet paper. It had been my secret shelter for years, that no-one else knew about.’

A day or so later, I think, I spotted a young police officer through a crack in the boxes and decided to stay inside. I was frightened. There’d been talk, a lot of talk, about putting me in a nursing home, and figured with this wretched virus about I’d best disappear for a while.’

‘It seemed that Pat was exceptionally well equipped for a five months stay, with books, a radio with batteries and a kerosene lamp. And her old camp stove.’

‘At night I’d have a little wander round the garden with a torch and potter round my house. I’m down the end of the road with no neighbours nearby. And I’d look up at the stars. I knew my Monty was being looked after so I didn’t worry.’

There was a picture of a tapestry cushion she’d stitched over the summer. A schoolgirl made a short documentary about her, for her Year 12 project, which was shown at the local library as part of the film festival. Mum had her fifteen minutes of fame.

Constable Purvis was disciplined for not searching the property thoroughly at the time they were looking, but he got off lightly, and new protocols for dealing with hoarders were developed for similar incidents in future.

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‘I’m sorry I put you through all that, Nik, but if the truth be known, I’d gotten a little too fond of the grog. Wasn’t thinking straight I suppose,’ mum said to me later. ‘Lucky most of my good stuff was still in the ute, instead of that skip bin. And we salvaged a few treasures from that too, didn’t we, Nikky boy, before they took it away. Do you know, everyone’s been clearing out during the pandemic. There’s great finds up for grabs in the charity shops. We’ll go hunting. I don’t suppose you’d come back to the mountains would you Nik. Those city rents. I’ve got my Sixty Minutes money, we could fix the granny flat up with a ramp and the right sort of shower. There’s schemes out there to help. Joanne up the road used one.’

She’d asked me that a year ago, when it wasn’t something I’d wanted to contemplate. But I started thinking about it now, very hard.

‘We could make it a studio. I’ll buy you a computer and those programs you need to make music if your hands conk out and you can’t play the keyboard. There’s musicians in these here mountains. We could go for years together, me with an aged care package, you with your funding. And I’ll be able to host Christmas this year, just like I always do.’

Together again, as a family. Great.

‘Angie can still come if you like, if she wants to, even though she’s not living with you. Families are changing. I read an article about that in a magazine.’

Actually Angie had sent me an email, a few days earlier. ‘I saw your mum on ‘Sixty Minutes’. What a trooper. I don’t suppose you and I could meet up one day. I could push you to a cafe for lunch.’

I was still hurt that she’d left, but not as much. I’d taken after mum a bit, become a bit of a salvager myself. With my good hand I typed. ‘I guess we could meet up, why not, but you won’t have to push me. I’m in an electric chair now.’

