THE TOP FIVE

REGRETS

of the DYING
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of the DYING

A Life Transformed by the Dearly Departing

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INTRODUCTION

On a balmy summer’s evening in a little country town, a conversation was underway that was like many cheerful conversations taking place simultaneously all over the world. It was two people simply catching up with each other and having a yarn. The difference with this conversation, though, was that it could be later identified as one of the most significant turning points of a person’s life. And that person was me.

Cec is the editor of a great folk music magazine in Australia, called *Trad and Now*. He is equally known and loved for his support of folk music in Australia, as he is for his big cheerful smile. We were chatting about our love of music (which was very appropriate, since we were at a folk music festival). The conversation also touched on the challenges I was currently facing, to find funding for a guitar and songwriting program that I wanted to start in a women’s jail. “If you get it up and running, let me know and we’ll print a story,” Cec said with encouragement.

I did in fact get it up and running and some time afterwards, I wrote a story for the magazine about my experiences. When I finished writing, I questioned myself as to why I wasn’t writing more stories in my life. After all, I had always written. As a freckle-faced little girl, I wrote to pen friends all over the world. This was in the days when people still wrote letters by hand that went into envelopes and mailboxes.

Writing didn’t stop at adulthood either. Handwritten letters to friends continued, as did years of journals. And I was now a songwriter. So I was still writing, as such (just with a guitar, as well as a pen in my hands). But the enjoyment I experienced in writing the story about the jail, which I did at the kitchen table with an old-fashioned pen and paper, reignited my love of writing. So I sent thanks to Cec and soon after, I decided to start writing a blog.
The events that followed changed my life’s direction in the very best of ways.

‘Inspiration and Chai’ began in a snug little cottage in the Blue Mountains of Australia, naturally enough, over a cup of chai tea. One of the first articles I wrote was about the regrets of dying people whom I had cared for. The role of a carer had been my most recent occupation before the jail job, so it was still fresh in my life. Over the following months, the article gained momentum in ways that only the Internet can explain. I began receiving emails from people I didn’t know, connecting with me on the article and then on other articles I’d written since.

Almost a year later, I was living in a different little cottage, this one in a farming district. One Monday morning as I sat at the table on the verandah to write, I decided to check the stats on my website, as one does from time to time. A puzzled but amused look crossed my face. The next day I returned for another look, and the next. Sure enough, something big was happening. The article, also called ‘The Top Five Regrets of the Dying’ had found its wings.

Emails began pouring in from all over the world, including requests from other writers to quote the article on their blogs and for it to be translated into numerous languages. People read it on trains in Sweden, at bus stations in America, in offices in India, over breakfast in Ireland, and on and on it went. Not everyone actually agreed with the article, but it prompted enough discussion to continue its ride around the world. As I said to the few who didn’t agree, if I did reply, ‘Don’t shoot the messenger’. I was simply sharing what dying people had shared with me. At least ninety five per cent of the feedback that came in from the article, though, was beautiful. It also reinforced just how much we all have in common, despite cultural differences.

All the while this was happening, I was living in the cottage, enjoying the bliss of the birds and other wildlife that the creek out the front drew in. I sat at the table on my verandah each day and kept working, saying “Yes” to opportunities that began presenting themselves. In the months that followed, over one million people
read ‘The Top Five Regrets of the Dying’. Within a year, that number had more than trebled.

It was due to the enormous amount of people who connected to this theme, and at the requests of many people who contacted me afterwards, that I decided to elaborate on the subject. It had always been my intention to write a full-length book one day, as many other people also wish to do. As it turned out, though, it was only through telling my own story here that I could fully articulate the lessons that were given to me while caring for dying people. The book I had wanted to write was ready to be written. It is now this book.

As you will read from my story, I’ve never been one to follow any traditional ways in life, if such a thing truly exists. I live as I am guided and write this book simply as a woman who has a story to share. Also, I am Australian, and as much as I have written as universally as possible, Australian spelling and language is used.

Almost all of the names in the book have been altered to protect the privacy of the families and friends. My first yoga teacher, my boss at the pre-natal centre, the caravan park owner, my mentor with the jail system, and any songwriters mentioned, are all original names, however. The chronological order has been shifted slightly, too, in order to share common themes between clients.

My thanks go to all who have assisted my journey in so many different ways. For support and/or positive influence professionally, special thanks go to: Marie Burrows, Elizabeth Cham, Valda Low, Rob Conway, Reesa Ryan, Barbara Gilder, Dad, Pablo Acosta, Bruce Reid, Joan Dennis, Siegfried Kunze, Jill Marr, Guy Kachel, Michael Bloeme, Ana Goncalvez, Kate and Col Baker, Ingrid Cliff, Mark Patterson, Jane Dargaville, Jo Wallace, Bernadette, and all who support my writing and music by connecting with it in a positive way.

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Thanks of course to my mother, Joy, the most appropriately named person to ever walk the Earth. What a sacred lesson in love you have given to me, by natural example. Endless thanks, beautiful woman.

To all of the wonderful people who have now passed on – whose stories not only make up this book, but have also influenced my life significantly – this book is a tribute to you. I also thank the families left behind, for the loving, memorable times we experienced together. Thank you all.

Lastly, thank you to the magpie singing in the tree by the creek as I write this. You and all of your fellow birds have kept me delightful company whilst writing these pages. Thank you, God, for sustaining me, and for sending so much beauty my way.

Sometimes we don’t know until much later that a particular moment in time has changed our life’s direction. So many of the moments shared in this book changed my life. Thank you, Cec, for reigniting the writer within me. And thank you, the reader, for the goodness of who you are and for our connection.

With loving kindness,
Bronnie.

The Verandah at Sunset
Tuesday Afternoon.
“I can’t find my teeth. I can’t find my teeth.” The familiar call flowed into the room as I attempted to have my scheduled afternoon off. Placing the book I was reading on the bed, I wandered out into the living area.

As expected, Agnes was standing there looking both confused and innocent, smiling her gummy grin. We both burst out laughing. The joke should have worn thin by now as the misplacement of her teeth happened at least every few days. But it never did.

“I am sure you do this just to get me back out here with you,” I laughed as I began today’s search in now familiar places. Outside snow continued to fall, enhancing the cosiness and warmth of the cottage. Shaking her head, Agnes was adamant. “Not at all, Darling! I took them out before my nap, but when I awoke, I couldn’t find them anywhere.” Other than her memory loss, she was as bright as a button.

Agnes and I came to be living together four months earlier when I had responded to an advertisement for a live-in companion. As an Australian in England, I had been doing a live-in job in a pub to keep a roof over my head. It had been fun and some lovely friendships were made with other staff and the locals. Bar skills were definitely handy and had enabled me to start work immediately on my arrival in the country. So for that, I was grateful. But it came time for a change.

The two years prior to going overseas were spent living on a tropical island, as picturesque as any postcard could ever portray. After more than a decade of working in the banking industry,
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I had needed to try an existence that released me from the Monday to Friday, nine to five grind.

One of my sisters and I ventured to an island in North Queensland for a holiday, to gain our scuba diving certificates. While she cracked onto our diving instructor, which was of course very beneficial for us in passing our tests, I climbed a mountain on the island. While sitting on an enormous boulder in the sky, smiling, I had an epiphany. I wanted to live on an island.

Four weeks later, the bank job was no more, and my belongings were either sold or sent to a shed on my parents’ farm. Two islands were chosen from a map simply for their geographic suitability. I knew nothing else about these islands, other than I liked their location and there was a resort on each of them. This was before the Internet, where you could find out anything about everything in a flash. With application letters in the mail, I headed north, destination unknown. It was 1991, also before mobile phones arrived en masse in Australia a few years later.

Along the way, my carefree spirit was given a timely and cautious warning, as a hitch hiking experience saw me retiring from that occupation very quickly. Finding myself on a dirt road in the middle of nowhere, way off track from the requested town, rang enough warning bells for me to never put my thumb out again. He said he wanted to show me where he lived, as houses faded away and bushland thickened, the dirt road showing few signs of regular visitors. Thankfully I stayed strong and determined, managing to talk myself out of the situation. Only a few slobbery kisses were attempted from him as I finally exited the car, rather quickly, in the right town. So that was the end of my hitch hiking.

I stuck to public transport then. Other than that dodgy experience, it was a great adventure, particularly not knowing where I would end up living next. Travelling on various buses and trains ensured my path also crossed with some great people while I was being transported to warmer climates. A few weeks into the trip, I called my mum who had received a letter telling me there was a job waiting on one of the chosen islands. Being so desperate to escape the banking grind, I had made the ridiculous mistake of saying I was
willing to take any job, and a few days later was living on a beautiful island, up to my elbows in filthy pots and pans.

Island life was a fantastic experience, though, not only releasing me from the Monday to Friday grind, but also effectively releasing me from even knowing what day of the week it was. I loved it. After a year of being what was not so affectionately known as a dish-pig, I worked my way into the bar. The time in the kitchen had actually been a lot of fun and taught me a wealth of things about creative cookery. But it was hot, hard, and sweaty work in a non-air conditioned kitchen in the tropics. Days off at least were spent wandering magnificent rainforests, hiring boats and cruising to nearby islands, scuba diving, or just kicking back in paradise.

Volunteering in the bar eventually opened the door for me into this coveted role. Overlooking a million dollar view of perfect calm blue waters, white sands, palm trees swaying, the whole thing, it was not a hard job. Dealing with happy customers who were having the holidays of their lives, and becoming adept at mixing cocktails worthy of travel brochure photos, was a world away from the previous life I’d known in banking.

It was over the bar I met a man from Europe who offered me a job at his printing company. Travel yearnings had always been a part of me, and after more than two years of island life by then, I was starting to crave some change and to enjoy being somewhat anonymous again. When you live and work within the same community day in day out, privacy in your every-day living can start to become sacred.

Culture shock was to be expected for anyone returning to mainland life after a couple of years on an island. But to throw myself from that into a foreign country where I couldn’t even speak the language was challenging to say the least. Some nice people crossed my path during these months, and I am glad to have experienced the time. But I needed some like-minded friends again, so eventually headed off to England. Arriving there with only enough money for a travel card to get to the one person I knew in the country, and with one pound sixty six left over, a new chapter began.

Nev had a lovely big smile and head of thinning white curls.
He was also a wine-loving expert, appropriately working in the wine department at Harrods. It was the first day of the store’s summer sale and coming straight off the overnight ferry across the channel, I certainly looked like the waif I was wandering into this classy, busy joint. “Hi Nev. I’m Bronnie. We met once. I’m a friend of Fiona’s. You crashed out on my beanbag a few years ago,” I announced to him over the counter with a cheerful grin.

“Of course, Bronnie,” I was relieved to hear. “What’s happening?”

“I need a place to stay for a few nights, please,” I said rather hopefully.

Reaching into his pocket for his key, Nev replied “Sure. Here you go”. And with that I had a roof over my head, sleeping on his sofa, and directions to his place.

“May I also borrow ten quid, please?” I asked optimistically. Without hesitation, ten quid came out of his back pocket. Offering words of thanks and a cheerful smile in reply, I was sorted. I had a bed and food.

The travel magazine I had intended to find a job from came out that morning, so I picked up a copy, went home to Nev’s and made three phone calls. By the next morning I was being interviewed for a live-in pub job in Surrey. By that afternoon I was living there. Perfect.

Life rolled on for a couple of years with friendships and romance. They were fun times. Village life suited me, reminding me of the island community at times, and I was surrounded by people I had come to love. We were also not terribly far out of London, so regular trips happened easily, most of which I thoroughly enjoyed.

But further travel was calling. I wanted to check out a bit of the Middle East. The long English winters were good experiences, and I was glad to have done a couple of them. It was a complete contrast to the long, hot summers of Australia. But I had a choice to stay or go, and decided to stay for one more winter, with determination to save some money for the trip. To do this I needed to remove myself from the pub scene and the temptation to be out socialising every night. I was never much of a drinker anyway and have since become a non-drinker, but being out and about every night still cost money that could take me travelling instead.
Almost as soon as I’d made that decision, the job advertisement for the role with Agnes caught my eye, as it was only in the next county to Surrey. The position was offered to me at my first interview, when the farmer Bill realised I was a farm girl myself. His mother, Agnes, was in her late eighties, had shoulder length grey hair, a cheerful voice, and a huge round stomach, covered almost every day by the same red and grey cardigan. Their farm was only about half an hour’s drive away, so seeing everyone on days off was easy enough. But it felt like a different world while I was there. It was very isolating, as I was with Agnes around the clock from Sunday evening until Friday evening. Two hours off every afternoon didn’t allow much time for socialising, though I did use that time occasionally to see my English man.

Dean was a darling person. It was humour that linked us from the very start, within the first minute of meeting. Our love of music also bonded us. We had met the day after I arrived in the country, just after the interview for the pub job, and it soon became obvious that both of our lives were richer and funnier by knowing each other. Unfortunately, though, it wasn’t Dean’s company I was most keeping by then. I was usually snowed in with Agnes – and more often than not, busy looking for her teeth. It was amazing how one could find so many different locations within such a small home to lose your teeth in.

Her dog, Princess, was a ten-year-old German Shepherd who moulted hair everywhere. She was a sweet natured dog but was losing strength in her hind legs from arthritis. It was a common condition in this breed of dog apparently. Learning from past experience, I lifted up her rump and looked underneath for her lady’s teeth. No luck today. On another occasion, though, she had sat on them. So it was always worth the look. Princess wagged her big tail then returned to her dreams by the fire, forgetting the brief disturbance in a second. Time and again, Agnes and I crossed each other’s path as we continued the search. “They’re not here,” she would call from the bedroom.

“They’re not here either,” I’d reply from the kitchen. Eventually though, I would find myself searching the bedroom, and Agnes the
kitchen. There are only so many rooms to search in a little home, so we covered them all to be doubly sure. On this particular day they had slipped into her knitting bag, beside the lounge chair.

“Oh, you are a treasure, Darling,” she said, putting them back in her mouth. “Come and watch television with me now that you’re out here.” This was a strategy that was often used, and I smiled as I went along with her request. She was an old lady who had lived alone a long time and was enjoying the company. My book could wait. It was hardly like the job was strenuous at the best of times. It was simply companionship, and if she needed that outside of my scheduled work-hours, no worries.

The teeth had previously been found under her cushion, back in the bathroom vanity, in a teacup in the kitchen cupboard, in her handbag, and numerous other half-believable places. But they had also turned up behind the television, in the fireplace, in the rubbish bin, on top of the fridge, and in her shoe. And of course, under Princess, the mighty German Shepherd’s backside.

Routine works for a lot of people. Personally, I thrive on change. But routine has its place and it certainly works best for many people, particularly as they are getting older. There were weekly routines and daily routines with Agnes. Every Monday we went to the doctors, as Agnes had to have regular blood tests. The appointment was at the exact same time every week. One thing per day was enough, though, or it would ruin her afternoon routine of rest and knitting.

Princess came everywhere with us, rain, hail or shine. The tailgate of the pick-up would be lowered first. The old dog would wait patiently, always wagging her tail. She was a gorgeous creature. I would then lift her front paws onto the tailgate and quickly grab her rear and lift her up fully, before the rear legs gave way and we had to start over again. I would then be covered in sandy coloured dog hair for the remainder of the outing.

Hopping down was easier, though she still required assistance. Princess would drop down herself so that her front legs were on the ground, but would wait for me to lift her hind legs down. If Agnes needed me to help her in any way in between, Princess would wait in that position with her backside in the air until I was ready.
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down, she walked happily and painlessly, always wagging that big, old tail.

Tuesdays were spent grocery shopping in the nearby village. A lot of elderly people I have worked with since have been very frugal. But Agnes was the opposite. She was always trying to buy me things, particularly things I didn’t need or want. Every aisle would see the same two women, one elderly and one younger, arguing with each other. Both would be smiling and sometimes laughing, yet both were determined. As a result, I would end up with half of what Agnes wanted to buy me. This could be various vegetarian delicacies, imported mangoes, a new hairbrush, a singlet, or some terrible tasting toothpaste.

Wednesdays were bingo, again in the local village. Her sight was deteriorating so I was Agnes’s eyes, for confirmation at bingo. She could read the numbers OK and hear relatively well, but checked with me to be sure before she crossed off each number. I loved all of the old people there. I was in my late-twenties and the only young one, which left Agnes feeling very special. She would describe me as ‘my friend’.

“Well, my friend and I went shopping yesterday and I bought her some new underpants,” she would announce seriously and proudly to all of her elderly bingo friends.

Everyone would nod and smile at me as I sat there thinking, ‘Oh, brother’.

On she would go. “Her mother wrote to her this week from Australia. It is very hot there at the moment, you know. And she has a new nephew.” Again the heads would nod and smile.

It didn’t take me long to learn about editing how much information I gave her. I hate to think what they would have known of my life otherwise, particularly when Mum posted me some lovely lingerie and other gifts, to pamper me from afar. But it was all innocent and loving with Agnes. So I managed to endure the blushing and cringing she sometimes caused me.

Thursdays were the only day we stayed out over lunch. It was a big day out for the three of us, Princess included, of course. We would drive to a town in Kent and have lunch with her daughter.
Thirty miles was a long way away by English standards, but just down the road for an Australian. Our perspective of distance is definitely a cultural difference.

In England, you can drive two miles and be in a whole new village. The accent will be totally different from the previous village and you may not know anyone, even if you've lived in the other village all of your life. In Australia you can drive fifty miles for a loaf of bread. Your neighbours can be so far away they ring you up or speak to you on the two-way radio to say hello, but they still think of you as their neighbour. I once worked in an area in the Northern Territory that was so remote they flew planes to get to the nearest pub. The little airstrip would be full of single and two seater planes early in the evening and totally empty by the next morning, when they had all flown home to their cattle stations, half full of grog.

So the big day out on Thursdays was indeed a big day out for Agnes, but a lovely leisurely drive for me. Her daughter was a gentle woman and the occasions pleasant. The two of them always had a ploughman’s lunch, with beef, cheese, and pickles. I often marvelled at English people’s love of pickles. It was a good country for vegetarians, too, though. So my choices were never terribly limited. Being so cold, I usually enjoyed a warming soup or a hearty pasta dish.

Fridays were spent very local. We lived on a cattle farm with its own butcher shop. The farm was run by two of Agnes’s sons. Our outing on Friday mornings was to the butcher shop. Although Agnes insisted on taking her time and looking at everything in great detail, she bought the exact same things every week, exactly. The butcher even offered to deliver her order, but no. “Thank you very much, but I must come and make my choice here,” she would reply politely.

In those days I was a vegetarian. I am a vegan now. Yet here I was living on a cattle farm, not unlike how I had grown up. Even though I didn’t advocate eating meat, I did understand the business and the lifestyle. It was familiar territory after all.

We would wander back from the butcher shop and walk through the barn talking to the farmhands and to the cows. Agnes would plod along slowly with her walking stick, me close by her side, and
From the tropics to the snow

Princess behind us. It didn’t matter how cold the weather, we would just wear more layers. Fridays were always spent this way, visiting the shop then the cows in their barn.

I marvelled at how differently English cows were treated to Australian cows, with their warm barns and individual attention. But Australian cows did not have to endure English winters. It still made me terribly sad getting to know these cows on an individual basis, though, knowing we would probably be buying their flesh from the butcher shop at a later date. It was a hard thing to come to terms with, and I never truly succeeded in doing so.

The vegetarian thing came up a lot at home despite my attempted silence and my respect for the family’s chosen lifestyle. I was never the kind of vegetarian or vegan who would be overly verbal about it. Yet having seen what I have in my upbringing, and then being taken on a life-scarring school excursion to the abattoirs, I do understand why some Vegos get so vocal and passionate about it. It is heartbreaking when you find the bravery to look honestly at these industries and at what goes on behind the walls.

But I preferred to just live quietly and simply by example, respecting everyone’s right to live the way that made sense to him or her. I only spoke of my beliefs if I was asked and was then happy to, since there was a genuine interest. It is interesting though, how almost-strangers from meat-eating paths have attacked me without provocation over the years, simply because of my choice not to eat animals. Perhaps this is partly why I chose to live a quiet vegetarian life. I just wanted peace.

So when Agnes started questioning me about why I was a vegetarian, I hesitated. Her very survival was based on the income from their cattle farm. In effect, I guess mine was, too, although I hadn’t related to that immediately. I took the job simply with the intention of saving money and brightening up an old lady’s life.

But she persisted with her questions. So I told her about my feelings of watching cattle and sheep killed when I was a child and how affected by it I was, how much I loved animals, and how I had noticed that cows mooed differently when they knew they were about to die. Their sounds of terror and panic still haunt me.
That was it. Agnes declared her vegetarianism on the spot. “Oh boy,” I thought. “How am I going to explain this one to her family?” Speaking about it with her son soon after, he then spoke to Agnes of his desire for her to continue eating meat. But there was little budging at first. Agnes finally accepted eating red meat one day a week, fish one day per week, and chicken another day. The family fed her on my days off, so she would be eating meat then, too.

Over time my views have strengthened and now I would not even consider accepting a job that involved cooking flesh. But I did back then, and I hated that part of my role. I could never cook meat without being saddened that this was once a beautiful living thing, which had had feelings and a right to live. So I liked this arrangement instantly, even though fish and chicken were certainly still animals, by my way of thinking.

It turned out, though, that Agnes had only agreed with her son Bill in order to keep the peace. She had no intention of eating any meat at all during the week. So I spent the remaining winter and spring months cooking us up delicious vegetarian feasts of nut-loaf bakes, divine soups, colourful stir-fries, and gourmet pizzas. I think Agnes would have happily lived on boiled eggs otherwise and, of course, baked beans. She was English after all, and the English do love their beans.

The snow melted as the daffodils bloomed into spring. Days grew longer and blue skies returned. As the farm came to life again, newborn calves ran around on their wobbly, skinny legs. Birds returned and greeted us in song every day. Princess moulted even more. Agnes and I removed our winter coats and hats, and carried on with our same routine for another couple of months, enjoying the spring sunshine. We were two ladies of very different generations, walking arm in arm day after day, as we shared continuous laughter and stories.

Travel was calling, though. We had both known from the start that I would be going. I was missing Dean, too. The weekends were not enough time together anymore and we were keen to head off travelling together. My job was advertised before long, and our days started winding up. Those months with Agnes were a wonderful and
special experience. Although I had accepted it mostly as a job for the benefit of my travel yearnings, companionship was beautiful work. It was much more enjoyable for me than pulling beers. I would rather help someone walk steady because she is old and frail than someone who is young and drunk, or even old and drunk. Plenty of both had been done during my employment on the island and in the English pub. I much preferred looking for an old lady’s teeth to removing dirty ashtrays and empty pint glasses.

Dean and I travelled to the Middle East, where we marvelled at vastly different but fascinating cultures (and ate heaps of delicious food). After a wonderful year or so away, I went back to visit Agnes. Another Australian girl had replaced me and we had an enjoyable long yarn, after Agnes had drifted off to sleep in her armchair. Sharing lots of stories, she admitted to being somewhat puzzled by the first question Bill had asked when he interviewed her. I asked what that was and cracked up laughing when she told me.

The very first question Bill had asked was, “You’re not a vegetarian, *are you*?”
AN UNEXPECTED CAREER PATH

After those years in England and the Middle East, I finally came home to my beloved Australia. I was a changed person, as one is after travel. Returning to work in the banking industry, it soon became obvious that this work would never satisfy me again. Customer service was the only highlight of the role now, and while it was easy to pick up work in any town, I was restless and desperately unhappy in my working life.

Creative expression was also starting to flow from me. Now living in Western Australia, I sat by the Swan River in Perth one day and made two lists. One list was what I was good at. The other one was what I loved to do. From this I had to acknowledge there was an artist of sorts within me, as the only things that landed in both columns were creative talents.

“Dare I think I could be an artist?” I thought to myself. Despite growing up around musicians, the reliability of a ‘good job’ has also been instilled in me, hence why no one could understand my restlessness with a steady nine to five existence in the banking game. They were ‘good jobs’; good jobs that were slowly but surely killing me.

Intensive soul searching unfolded, as I tried to work out what I could do well, but also enjoy. They were hard times as everything was changing within me. I finally came to the conclusion that I would have to eventually be working from the heart, as working only from the intellect had already left me too empty and dissatisfied. So I began developing my creative skills through writing and photography, which led to songwriting and performing eventually, in a long and roundabout way. All the while I was still working in
An unexpected career path

banking jobs, though mostly as temporary staff now. The trappings of a full-time job were just not possible to endure anymore.

Perth was a long way from anywhere, though, and as much as I loved living there, the desire to be more accessible to those I cherished saw the eastern states calling me back. So across the mighty Nullarbor Plains it was, through the Flinders Ranges, along the Great Ocean Road, up through the New England Highway, until Queensland declared itself home for the next while. Some of this time found me working in a call centre for people subscribing to an adult movie channel. It was far more interesting than the banking industry at times.

“Um.”
Silence.
“I’m just ringing up for my husband.”
“So you would like to subscribe to ‘Night Moves’ then?” I would reply in a friendly, accepting tone, always putting the women at ease.

Or the guys would ask, “What’s it like? I mean, do you see everything?”

“I am sorry, sir. I’ve not viewed it myself. But I can offer you a one night trial for $6.95 and if you like it enough, you can call back and subscribe to it on a monthly basis.”

And of course, there were the expected calls of, “What colour knickers have you got on?” Bronnie hangs up. But when the giggles had subsided, it was simply another office job. Friendships were formed with other staff, which made it more enjoyable. But my restlessness continued to fester.

We moved back to my home state of New South Wales. Dean, the man I had been with in England and the Middle East, had moved back to Australia with me. Soon after we relocated back to New South Wales, our relationship came to an end. We had loved each other dearly for years now and had been best friends for most of that time. It was devastating to watch our friendship fall apart. But our numerous lifestyle differences could no longer be swept under the carpet or laughed off, as had once been done.

I was a vegetarian. He was meat eater. Working indoors all week, I longed for outdoor life all weekend. He worked outdoors all
week and wanted to be indoors all weekend. The list went on and on, and seemed to grow larger by the week. The things each of us delighted in, no longer delighted the other. A mutual love of music still bonded us and kept us hanging in there for a while. But in the end, the communication channel between us lost its strength and we each battled with our own loss, watching our shared dreams disintegrate before our eyes.

It was a heartbreaking time as the relationship finished and the grief of such loss arrived. As I curled up in a ball sobbing, wishing we could have made it work, I knew in my heart we couldn’t. Life was calling us in different directions, and the relationship was now hindering our paths rather than helping them.

The search for more meaning in my life intensified and as a result, the work issue increased in prominence. Waking up to the fact that being an artist is a very hard way to survive until your work has gained momentum and a healthy reputation, I had to find a new direction in the meantime. Surviving as an artist was going to be possible eventually. If I could dream it, I could do it, after all.

But I needed to get back to earning and I needed to do it in a field that allowed me to work from the heart and to be my natural self. The pressure of selling products within the banking industry had increased and I had changed too much. I no longer fitted into that world, if I ever truly had. Determined to continue on my creative journey, the choice was made to work as a live-in companion again. At least then I wouldn’t be stuck in a rent or a mortgage grind, which would also free me up from the rigidity of routine.

Despite the years of soul searching that had led up to this point, the final decision was almost a casual, flippant one. Simply, I’d take a job as a companion for the benefit of my creative path and to also work from the heart, all the while enabling me to live rent-free. I had no idea then that my yearnings for a heart-felt job had been so clearly heard, and the years to follow were in themselves going to be such a significant part of my life and my life’s work.

Within two weeks, I had moved into a harbour-side home in one of the Sydney’s most exclusive suburbs. Her elderly brother had found my client Ruth unconscious on her kitchen floor. After more
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than a month in hospital she was allowed home, providing she had twenty-four hour care.

My experience in the care industry had only been companionship with Agnes those years prior. I had not looked after sick people and was honest about this to the agency employing me, but they didn’t mind. Carers who were willing to live-in were a commodity and they were not going to let me slip through their net. “Just pretend you know what you’re doing, and call us if you need any help.” Holy dooly, welcome to the care-game, Bronnie.

My natural empathy enabled me to do the job reasonably well for a new person. I simply treated Ruth as I would my own grandmother, who had been precious to me. Catering to her needs as they surfaced, I worked it out as I went along. The community nurse would come in every few days and ask me questions about things I had no idea about. Because I was honest with her, she ended up helping me enormously as I learned about medications, personal care, and industry jargon.

My employers would drop in now and then, too. Happy that the client was happy was enough for them, and off they’d go. They had no idea I was becoming emotionally and physically exhausted in a rapid time. I am not sure I had yet realised it myself.

Ruth’s family was pleased because I was spoiling Ruth rotten. There were foot massages, manicures, facial, and lots of lovely bedside conversations over cups of tea. Like I say, I treated her as I would my own dear grandmother. I didn’t know any other way.

Ruth would ring her bell throughout the night, too, and I’d be down the stairs in a flash, helping her onto the bedside commode to go to the toilet. “Oh, you are glamorous,” she would to say to me as I wandered in. Her impression of my glamour was that I sometimes wore my hair in a bun to bed, simply because I was too exhausted to get the knots out at the time. And my so-called ‘glamorous’ nightdress was due to my mother’s insistence I take it.

“You can’t go to this lady’s place and sleep naked or in any old thing,” Mum had pleaded. “Please take this and promise me you will wear it.” So in respect of my darling mother’s wishes, I found myself wearing a satin nightdress to bed. Glamorous I was,
half sleepwalking into her bedroom four or five times a night, eyes struggling to open, longing for reprieve from my exhausted state. Ruth would need me all of the following day too, so little chance was ever presented to catch up on a few hours of sleep. I was also doing housework, which I tackled during Ruth’s afternoon naps.

Sitting on the commode, she would also want to talk then. Ruth loved all of the attention after years of living on her own. I was enjoying our friendship, too – except for hearing about what cups and saucers they had used at whatever dinner party thirty years ago, while she urinated on the commode at three in the morning, my body just longing to return to bed.

Over the weeks, Ruth spoke of the years around the bay and of the children playing down by the harbour. Horse and dray, plodding along through all of the quiet streets, had done the milk and bread deliveries. Sundays would see the neighbourhood all dressed in their best clothes for church. Ruth spoke about her children when they were young and of her husband long since passed. Her daughter, Heather, whom I found to be delightful, would drop in every day or two and was a breath of fresh air. Ruth’s son and his family lived out in the country and had Heather not also mentioned her brother, it would have been easy to forget his existence. He did not play an active role in his mother’s life.

Heather was the rock that supported Ruth throughout her decades as a widow. Ruth’s elderly brother, James, also helped. He would wander down from his home about a mile away, every afternoon. You could set the clock by his visit. There he was in the same sweater, day-in, day-out. He was already eighty-eight years old and had never married. With a mind as clear as they come, he was a wonderful character, and it was my pleasure to know him and to enjoy the simplicity of his life.

Ruth was not recovering from her illness, however, and was still in bed after a month. More tests were done, and it was then I was informed that she was dying.

Walking down to the harbour with tears in my eyes, everything felt surreal. Children were playing in the shallow water. The footbridge hanging over the bay swung lightly as happy people
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walked over it. Ferries cruised by on their way to Circular Quay in the city centre. I walked as in a dream, as laughter rang out from a group of people having a picnic.

Sitting against a sandstone cliff, the water almost at my feet, I looked up at the beautiful sky. It was one of those perfect winter days, when the warmth of the sun is like a balm. Sydney is never totally freezing in winter, not like European winters. It was a glorious day, where a light coat was sufficient. Having already grown close to Ruth, the thought of her passing left me tearful for my own inevitable pain. The shock that I would be losing her was my first reaction. My tears flowed as a yacht sailed by, full of happy, healthy people. It then also hit me that I would be her carer, the one nursing her until the end.

Growing up on the cattle farm, then a sheep farm, I had seen a lot of animals dying or dead. It was not new to me, although I was still always terribly sensitive to it. But the society I was living in, the modern society of Western culture, was not one that exposed its people to dying bodies on a regular basis. It wasn’t like some cultures where human death is out in the open and a very visible part of everyday life.

Our society has shut death out, almost as a denial of its existence. This denial leaves both the dying person and the family or friends totally unprepared for something that is inevitable. We are all going to die. But rather than acknowledge the existence of death, we try to hide it. It is as if we are trying to convince ourselves that ‘out of sight, out of mind’ really works. But it doesn’t, because we carry on trying to validate ourselves through our material life and associated fearful behaviour instead.

If we are able to face our own inevitable death with honest acceptance, before we have reached that time, then we shift our priorities well before it is too late. This gives us the opportunity to then put our energies into directions of true value. Once we acknowledge that limited time is remaining – although we don’t know if that is years, weeks, or hours – we are less driven by ego or by what other people think of us. Instead, we are more driven by what our hearts truly want. This acknowledgment of our inevitable,
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approaching death, offers us the opportunity to find greater purpose and satisfaction in the time we have remaining.

I came to realise how detrimental this denial is in our society. But at the time, on that sunny winter’s day, it simply left me completely ignorant of what lay ahead with Ruth and of my role in caring for her. Resting my head back against the sandstone wall, I prayed for strength. Having already faced plenty of challenges in my upbringing and adult life, I believed I wouldn’t have been brought to this place had I not been capable of doing the job. This didn’t particularly ease my personal sadness and pain.

But sitting in the warmth of the sun that day, quiet tears falling, I knew I had a job to do and would give Ruth all of the happiness and comfort I possibly could for her dying weeks. I sat for a long time, contemplating life and how I hadn’t seen this coming. Yet I was also accepting that I had gifts to share and this is what I was being asked to do. Walking back to the house a strong resolve developed within me. I would give this situation the absolute best I had, and would catch up on sleep later.

My employer dropped in later that day. Explaining that I had never even seen a dead person, let alone cared for someone towards their passing, I heard my words fall on deaf ears. “The family loves you. You’ll be right.”

‘You’ll be right’ (as in, ‘You’ll be alright’), is such a common expression in Australian language that I accepted I would be. Ruth’s deterioration was quite fast from that point. Other carers came in to relieve me on days off and as her needs increased, I was relieved of night duty. I was still called on by the other carers, as I oversaw the running of things. But, at least sleep was now possible.

The days were still special and more often than not, it was mostly just Ruth and me. It was a quiet neighbourhood, with occasional laughter ringing up through the trees from the harbour-side park below. Heather would drop in on us, as would James and a string of specialists doing their jobs. The learning on offer was immense and I was growing enormously in my role, without then realising the full extent of it. I simply did whatever needed doing and asked a lot of questions from everyone I could.
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One morning as I was about to leave for two days off, excited to be heading out of the city to visit my cousin and to enjoy some lightness after the weight of it all, I noticed the smell from the bedroom. The night carer had either not noticed it, or had not wanted to, hoping it could be left for the day carer who was about to come on. I saw a lot of this in coming years.

There was no way I could leave my beautiful friend lying in it for another minute. Her bowels had opened and evacuated completely. Lying limp, Ruth was only able to reply to me with quiet grunts. Her major organs were collapsing. The night carer reluctantly tore herself away from the gossip magazine she was reading and helped me, as we cleaned this gentle woman and changed her sheets from underneath her. It was a relief when the day carer arrived, dropped everything and pitched in immediately with pleasant cheer. We had Ruth clean and resting, and in no time she was in a deep sleep, exhausted.

Sitting out in the bush with my cousin later that day, my heart was still back at the house. Welcoming the lightness and humour his company always provides, I was glad to be hanging out with him. But it was not going to be possible for me to stay away for two nights. Ruth was in my thoughts too much, and I was sure she didn’t have that long left. I had only been at my cousin’s for a few hours when my employer called and said that Ruth was in her last stages and could I come?

Arriving back around dark, the somber mood of the house was palpable before even walking inside. Heather was there with her husband, as well as the new night carer who had just arrived. She was a lovely Irish girl.

Heather asked would I mind if she went home? I replied gently that she had to do whatever felt right for her. So home it was. After she had left, though, it was initially a little difficult for me to remove judgment from the situation. I could only imagine my own mother dying and how I would move heaven and Earth to be with her at her passing.

They say that everything comes down to love or fear: every emotion, every action, and every thought. I concluded that fear was
driving Heather’s decision and for that I felt a rush of compassion and love for her. From the start of our association, I had found her to be a very practical person and somewhat detached. But this situation was foreign to me. I didn’t want my own beliefs and conditioning to hinder my regard for someone I had come to care for, simply because she handled things differently to how I would have.

Sitting in the darkened room with Erin, the other carer, I came to accept and respect Heather’s actions. She did what she’d had to do, because she had done all she could. For decades, she had kept her mother’s life in order as well as that of her own family. She was completely and totally exhausted by now, both physically and emotionally. She had given all she possibly could and wanted to remember her mum sleeping peacefully, as she was when Heather left. I smiled with respect and my assumed understanding.

In conversation with Heather in the days afterwards however, I found out that Ruth had implied to Heather that she wanted her to go. Heather knew her mother well enough to read her wishes. So it had been in love she left, not fear at all. Similar situations also became somewhat familiar in the years to come. Not every dying person wanted his or her family there. They said their goodbyes while conscious and occasionally preferred to be seen out by carers, allowing their families to keep other memories instead.

Erin and I chatted quietly in Ruth’s room, the presence of death lingering. Erin explained how in her family, the room would be filled with everyone by now. Aunts, uncles, cousins, neighbours, and children – everyone would come along to say their farewell, to send the person out.

We fell into spells of silence, both of us looking at Ruth, watching and waiting. The night was incredibly still as I quietly sent Ruth love from my heart. Erin and I would chat a little again, then go back into silence. She was a beautiful person to share the experience with, as she cared. It was in her naturally to do so.

“She’s opened her eyes,” Erin suddenly said to me, startled. Ruth had been in a semi coma for the entire shift so far. “She’s looking at you.”
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I moved closer to the bed and held Ruth’s hand. “I’m here, Sweetheart. It’s OK.”

She looked directly into my eyes and a moment later her spirit began to leave the body. It shook for a short time. Then all was still.

Instantly, tears rolled down my cheeks. Speaking silently to her from my heart, I thanked Ruth for what we had shared, told her I loved her and wished her well on her journey. It was a very reverent moment, full of stillness and love. Standing in the darkened room, all of my senses alive, I silently thought what blessings I had been given by having this time with her.

Then Ruth’s body surprisingly took another huge breath. I jumped back, swearing, my heart beating out of my chest. “Holy shit!” I said to Erin.

She laughed at me. “That’s quite normal you know, Bronnie. It happens a lot.”

“Yes, well, thanks for telling me,” I replied in shock, smiling at her. My heart was pounding hard and all of the reverence of the moment was gone. I stepped back beside the bed with great hesitance. “Is it going to happen again?” I whispered to Erin.

“It could.”

We waited in silence for another minute or so, hardly breathing ourselves. “She’s gone, Erin. I can feel she’s gone,” I finally said.

“God bless her,” we both uttered quietly, at the same time. Moving our chairs closer, we sat with Ruth for a while in sacred silence and loving respect. I also needed to settle a bit, after the fright of the moment before.

Heather and my employer had asked me to call them when it had happened, which I did. It was about two thirty in the morning. There was no more either of them could do now. I’d also been directed earlier that day with how to proceed from here. So I called the doctor to come and issue a death certificate. When that was done, the funeral home was called.

Erin and I sat in the kitchen until Ruth’s body was taken away about the time the sun was coming up. During those hours of waiting, we both went back to look in on Ruth at times. It was a compulsion to still care for her body, even though she had departed.
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from it. I didn’t like her being in the room alone. The strange, dark
time afterwards was very special in a way. But there was also a
tangible emptiness in the home that night, after she had passed over.

Ruth’s home was offered to me the next day as a house-sitting
situation. Heather said it would take months for the estate to settle
and rather than leave the house empty, the family would feel more
secure to have someone living in it. So I went on to live in Ruth’s
home for some time afterwards, which was a blessing for my physical
situation. It was also good to be somewhere that had now become
familiar to me.

I had realised the around-the-clock live-in work was going to be
too exhausting. Never being able to do anything by halves, I now
understood I would need to remove myself from future patients
between shifts, by going home each night. Care work asked much
more of me than straightforward companionship.

Over the following months, I watched and assisted as Heather
moved Ruth’s belongings onto new places. Her physical world was
dismantled one piece at a time, as happens to everyone. I had been
nomadic for so long that I still had an aversion to owning too much.
As a result, I declined many things Heather kindly offered to me.
They were just things, after all, and while they had belonged to
my friend Ruth, I knew her memory would stay on in my heart,
as it has.

I did fall in love with a couple of old lamps, though, and they
are with me to this day. Ruth’s home was later demolished by the
new owners and replaced with a modern concrete creation. The old
frangipani tree that had thrown summer scents throughout the
home for decades was crushed in the blink of an eye and replaced
with a lap pool. An invitation arrived for me to the housewarming
party of the new place.

The people who had bought Ruth’s home had been uncomfortable
with the spiders and their webs across the trees in the garden. Yet
Ruth and I had previously sat in the sun room watching the Golden
Orb spider weave a web so strong you could lift it up to walk under.
It was a marvel we had both loved and shared. Standing near the lap
pool, looking at all of the new, fashionable plants that had replaced
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an established garden of love and longevity, I was delighted to see a Golden Orb spider weaving her web high across one of the new plants.

I sent love to Ruth with a smile and knew that in her own way, she was visiting me there that day. Her home may have been gone, but her spirit was with me. I thanked the new owner for the invitation, had a chat, and walked down to the harbour. Sitting where I had the day I first heard about Ruth being terminally ill, I felt grateful for all we had shared and for all I had learned through our association.

On that summer’s day, I smiled realising just how much more I had been given back then, a lot more than just living rent-free. As the happy day unfolded before me, I continued to smile in gratitude. And by having directed my vision to that Golden Orb spider, Ruth had already smiled back.
A few random shifts came my way after Ruth’s departure. At shift handover I met other carers. This was the only brief time of socialising with other staff. Throughout the long twelve-hour shifts, there was no team banter or laughter, as handover was the only time we ever saw each other. The client, family, and medical professionals who dropped in became the only contact.

This made the relationships even more personal. It also gave me time to occasionally read, write, continue my meditation practice, or do some yoga. Many of the carers went crazy with too much time to themselves, and it was not unusual to arrive at a house and find the television on before breakfast. Grateful that I loved my own company, the long hours of silence suited me quite well. Even if there were people around, with a dying person in the home they were usually peaceful environments.

Walking into Stella’s home in the tree-lined suburb, this was definitely the case. It wasn’t just the fact that she was dying. These were peaceful, gentle people. Stella had long, straight, white hair. Graceful was the first word that came to mind when we met, despite the fact she was lying ill in bed. Her husband, George, was a beautiful man and welcomed me naturally.

Having to accept a family member is dying is an enormous life changing time in itself. When that person reaches the stage of needing twenty-four hour care, however, everything about the life these people knew has disappeared. Their privacy and the special moments of just the two of them in the home are gone forever.

Carers came and went, changing shifts morning and night. Some were regular but some only came once, in between their
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own regular clients. So there were new faces to deal with, new personalities and varying work ethics. Before long, though, I became the regular day carer for Stella. A community nurse would also visit, as would the palliative doctor. He was a man I saw briefly with many clients over the following years and what a special, delightful, kindhearted person he was.

After the experiences with Ruth, my employer said I’d handled it beautifully and offered me more training in palliative care, if I would like to go down that road. I accepted this offer, as I felt that life was calling me in this direction for now. The time and learning with Ruth had had a profound effect on me, leaving a desire to grow and experience more in this field.

My training involved two workshops. One of these was to show myself and other carers how to wash our hands properly. The other was a very brief display in lifting procedures. That was pretty much it, my full extent of formal training. Then sending me off to work with Stella, my employer told me not to tell them I’d only ever had one palliative client. She believed I could do the job, as did I.

Honesty had always been a significant part of my personality. But when questions came up from the family about my experience, I found myself lying, all because I needed the work. New laws were also coming in about staff qualifications, of which I had none. Even though I couldn’t prove my skills by speaking of previous experience, however, I did also want Stella’s family to feel at ease with me. I knew in my heart I could do the job well, as it was about gentleness and intuition more than anything. So I went along with the lies, saying I had nursed more people than I had when they asked. Lying felt so uncomfortable for me, though, I could never do it with another client.

Stella was very much into hygiene and wanted clean sheets on the bed every day. But she was also a lady of style and insisted on wearing a matching nightdress to go with the colour or pattern of the sheets. George laughed to me one day that he had found himself in trouble for choosing the wrong sheets for the nightdress she wanted to wear. I said to him laughing, as I ended up saying to the families of almost all of my future clients, “Whatever makes her happy”.


And so it was that this tall, graceful woman lay dying in her choice of sheets and nightdress when she asked me about my life.

“Do you meditate?” she asked.

“Yes, I do,” I happily replied. It was not a question I had expected.

Stella continued. “What path do you follow?” I told her, and she nodded in understanding.

“Do you do yoga?” she asked.

“Yes, I do,” I again replied, “but not as much as I’d like to.”

“Do you meditate daily?”

I said, “Yes. Twice a day.”

I couldn’t help but smile, when after a moment she replied with a gentle voice, “Oh, thank God. I have been waiting for you for ages. I can die now.”

Stella had been a yoga instructor for forty years, long before yoga had become an everyday thing in Western culture. Back then it was something strange from the East. She had been to India several times and was very devoted to her path.

Originally, because it was too out-there for the world they lived in, Stella had said she was an exercise instructor when asked, rather than a yoga teacher. As society thankfully evolved over time and yoga became more mainstream, she came out of her shell and taught many students the arts and wisdom of this path.

Her husband was a retired professional who still did a little work from home. He pottered about peacefully and I enjoyed his presence. The home library was full of spiritual classics. Many I had read, but many I had wanted to and as yet hadn’t. It was a reader’s dream come true, particularly for one so interested in philosophy, psychology, and spirituality. I devoured them as much as possible. Stella would stir from her sleep, ask what book I was reading, where I was up to in the book, and pass comment on it. She knew them all. When she was alert enough for long conversations, which wasn’t often enough, it was always about philosophy. We shared many theories and found our thinking not terribly different from each other.

My yoga practice also improved greatly. I didn’t feel I had to hide what I was doing, or go off into another room. The door to Stella’s
bedroom was never closed, so fresh air blew through unhindered at all times. It was a lovely space to work in. Stella’s peaceful white cat called Yogi would lie on the end of her bed and watch me. As the afternoons in the neighbourhood were particularly peaceful, I used that time the most to stretch and breathe. Thinking Stella was asleep, I would be delighted when she would pass a comment on something I was doing and how to improve that posture or to try another similar one, perhaps more dynamic and challenging, before she dozed off again.

At the time, I had been doing yoga for about five years. It had begun in Fremantle, a suburb of Perth, whilst living over in Western Australia. Twice a week I would jump on my pushbike and ride down to Fremantle from a couple of suburbs away. Kale was the teacher. He truly was a wonderful introduction for me to yoga. He hadn’t found his own way to it until late in life. Back injury drew him to it. Obviously life had big plans for him and he did find his calling, much to the benefit of his many devoted students.

When we had left Perth, life became unsettled for some time. But yoga continued to call. Wherever I was living, I would search for a new class and sometimes join one briefly. But finding a class I could connect with as much as I had Kale’s was in vain. It was not to be found.

During my time in Stella’s bedroom, I came to see how I hadn’t truly connected with my practice, as I was still looking to the teacher for the connection, instead of myself. This was changed permanently thanks to her guidance. I have enjoyed other classes since, as they push me a bit further than may happen in my home practice. They are also a great way to meet up with like-minded people. But my home practice doesn’t waver now, as the practice itself is the teacher. Stella had made her mark on her final student.

Her biggest frustration was that she was ready to die and it wasn’t happening. I would arrive in the morning and ask how she was feeling. “Well, how do you think I am feeling?” she would reply. “I am still here and I don’t want to be.”

She was also unable to meditate anymore. After all of Stella’s years of mental discipline and the connection she had experienced
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with herself through meditation, she thought it would be a natural thing now as she approached her return home. In fact, she thought her practice would intensify. But it was my practice that did. Every afternoon when she drifted off again, I would do my afternoon sit. “You’re so lucky,” she would say to me later. “This is so frustrating. I can’t meditate and I can’t die.”

Perhaps you are still here for me. Perhaps there are still things that I need to learn through you and that is why your time has not yet come,” I suggested.

She nodded. “I can accept that.”

As is always the case when any two people interact, we were there to learn through each other. When I broached the subject of surrender, Stella began to find more peace within. As I sat beside her bed and spoke of days gone by, of learning to let go, she listened with interest.

Over the years, I had lived from one leap of faith to the next. I told her how I had hit the road south years earlier with nothing but a full tank of fuel, fifty dollars, and an intention to move somewhere cooler for a while. With a town on the far south coast of New South Wales in mind, I headed off in that general direction. Visiting friends along the way, I found a couple of days’ work, which allowed me to continue the trip. Having already been so nomadic, I had friends dotted all over the place, and it was wonderful to see them again, some I’d not seen for almost a decade. I eventually arrived in the town intended but with little money.

A caravan park on the headland had the best view in town, overlooking the mighty Pacific Ocean. So I stopped there for a night. The back seat of my old jeep had been removed and replaced with a mattress. Curtains went up before I’d hit the road and there it was, I was mobile. Checking out the work opportunities in the town, things looked a bit challenging initially. But it was autumn, my favourite time of year. So I just savoured the perfect weather for a couple of days and did a lot of walking.

Paying for my site at the caravan park, though, was not going to be possible on an ongoing basis. My money was running out, and I was really only there for a shower and as a base while I made
some contacts. So I bought some food and headed into the bush, following signs to an inland river not far away. Having lived by leaps of faith before, I knew I would have to face my fears head-on yet again. If I was going to will something to me through faith alone, I had to get my head out of the way, and that is always the hardest thing.

Unhealthy patterns surfaced in my mind, results from my past conditioning and society telling me I couldn’t live this way. Fear started rearing its ugly head as I wondered how on Earth it was all going to come together, yet again. Bringing myself back to the present moment was the only thing that had saved me before and was the only thing that would save me now. And there is no better place to face your fears than in nature, where you can get back into the true rhythm of life.

When fears were sleeping, I enjoyed wonderful days in a healthy, uncomplicated routine of eating simple, wholesome food, swimming in the cleansing, crystal clear river, watching the curious faces of wildlife come and go, listening to birds with a variety of songs, and reading. It was a reverent time, spacious and beautiful.

Almost two weeks went by before I saw another person. The day I did see people was pleasant. It was a family of three generations, out at the river for a picnic lunch. This told me it was probably the weekend. I left my jeep open and went for a big bushwalk, giving them the place to enjoy. In the late afternoon I lay in the back of the jeep, still with the back and windows wide open, and read for a while. The beautiful light of dusk filtered magically through the trees.

As the family was leaving, the woman – who was my age and the mother of the two children – broke away from the group. Her husband, parents and children continued to their car. She walked over to me quietly and lent inside my jeep. I looked up from my book a little startled and smiled, as she simply whispered to me “I envy your freedom.” With that we both laughed, and she left, without another word or time for me to reply.

Lying in the jeep that night, the curtains open, frogs singing by the river, and a blanket of a million stars keeping me company,
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I smiled thinking of her. She was right. I was as free as they come. I didn’t have enough money or food beyond the next few days, but right at that moment, I was as free as a person could be.

People have often asked me since about the various trips I did to the bush and other places in the country, and if I was ever scared for my safety. The answer was no, rarely did I have reason to be. There were a couple of potentially dodgy situations, like the hitch hiking thing. But I came out OK and put those rare occasions down to good learning. As every move was done intuitively, I tried as best to always move forward with trust, knowing I would be looked after.

We are mostly social creatures, though, so I headed into town again. I phoned my mother, with whom I have a healthy and loving relationship. Being a mother, she was always a little concerned for my welfare. But another part of her understood that nomadic life was a part of me. She didn’t judge my choices, but was always relieved to hear from me. The day before she had spent two dollars on a lottery ticket, with the intention of winning me some money. She is such a naturally generous person that life blessed her.

“You give to me in so many other ways,” she said. “I insist you take this money. It was with the intention of helping you that it came to me anyway.” So I gratefully found myself with money to get through another couple of weeks.

Waking up in my jeep at the caravan park the next morning, I headed down to the rocks to watch the sunrise over the ocean. I love that first glimpse of light, where there are still stars out but a whole new day is coming. As the sky turned pink then orange, I sat on the rocks watching a pod of playful dolphins swimming by, flipping themselves out of the water for pure delight. I knew then that everything was going to turn out just fine.

After a long and enjoyable chat about life and travel later in the day, the owner of the park returned to my jeep dangling a key. “I don’t need van number eight for another ten days. It is yours and I will not allow you to pay one cent for it. If my daughter was sleeping in the back of her car, I would hope someone would do the same for her,” Ted declared.
“Bless you, Ted, thank you,” I said, fighting back tears of gratitude.

So I had a roof over my head for the next ten nights and somewhere to cook. During this time, though, fears were starting to rage fiercely in me again about my situation. I had to earn some money. My food supply was again diminishing. Each day I visited all of the businesses in town, and while I met plenty of fine people, no work was forthcoming. Walking back up the hill to the headland and caravan, I took a deep breath, trying to stay present, but trying to find a solution, too.

I hated this part of my life, this compulsion to always throw caution to the wind and create such challenging situations for myself, time and again. Yet it was also addictive. Each time I did this, I challenged my fears head-on, and somehow I always, always landed on my feet again. In some ways each leap of faith became harder, as it brought me closer to the core of my deepest fears within. Yet each leap also became easier. I had tested my faith to the limit on many occasions previously and had gained wisdom and stronger faith in myself through the process. Life also made more sense to me this way, regardless of how hard it was at times. I just didn’t fit in with the way conventional society works.

It was at that point, as I watched the high tide wash back out, that I remembered the importance of surrender, of letting go and allowing nature to weave its magic. The same force that balances the flow of the tides, the force that sees seasons come and go perfectly and creates life, was surely capable of bringing the opportunity to me I needed. But I had to let go first. Trying to control the timing and outcome was a terrible waste of energy. My intentions were already out there, and I had taken what action I could. My only job now was to get out of the way.

I laughed gently at myself, remembering I had forgotten this. It was a lesson from previous times. When I was out on the very end of a thin, flimsy, bending limb, the only thing to do was surrender and see where I landed. It was time to let go again.

Surrender is not giving up, far from it. Surrender takes an enormous amount of courage. Often we are only capable of doing so
The Top Five Regrets of the Dying

when the pain of trying to control the outcome becomes too much to bear. Reaching that point is actually liberating, even if it is not fun. Being able to accept that there is absolutely nothing more you can do, other than hand it over to the greater force, is the catalyst that finally opens the flow.

The next morning I headed down the rocks to the water, where dolphins at play greeted me again at sunrise. I was feeling completely empty and drained after the onslaught of fear, pain, and resistance, finally leading to the surrender. Emotional exhaustion had worn me out. But watching the dolphins, I absorbed the new dawn and slowly, gently, allowed myself to be refuelled by hope.

In casual conversation with some people on holidays in the caravan park a few days later, a job was offered to me in Melbourne, another seven or so hours south. “Why not?” I thought. I was free to go anywhere and had wanted to live in a cooler climate anyway. Melbourne soon became my favourite Australian city and remains so. But I hadn’t considered moving there at the time and had no idea how much I would benefit from living in such a creative city. It was only through surrendering and staying present that I could allow the job opportunity to flow my way.

As I finished telling my story to Stella, we both smiled. She ate her half a strawberry, agreeing without ego. She had been trying to control the moment of her passing. It was time to surrender that control and as much as she didn’t particularly like the idea, she accepted it might still be some time before her day came. It takes the body nine months to form. Sometimes it takes a little while for it to close down, too.

By now, though, she was very weak and almost off her food entirely. There was no energy to eat, but she accepted small pieces of fruit simply to taste things. The day before, it had been two grapes. Today it was half a strawberry.

Her illness should have seen her in a lot of pain, especially for how far along it already was, before she was diagnosed. But there was very little pain, which amazed her doctor. It was mostly exhaustion she experienced as it spread. All of the work she had done on her spiritual journey gave her a very strong connection with her body,
now blessing her with being almost pain free. It was also what allowed her a smooth departure when the time came.

Two or three days previously, I had noticed her fingers had swollen to the point that her wedding ring was now causing deep indentations in her finger. It looked like it was affecting the circulation there. Phoning my employer, I was advised by the nurse that the ring had to come off. With George lying on the bed beside her, I worked on the finger with water and soap, gently removing it. It took so long to do, and by then both Stella and George were crying. I felt like the devil’s advocate, except that by the time I had succeeded in removing this symbol of their love that had been there for more than half a century, I was crying, too.

Always such a dear man, George called her by a special, affectionate name that had been a part of their married life for so long. I left the room while they shared a rare moment of private closeness, lying in each other’s arms for perhaps the last time ever. As I stood in the bathroom crying, I felt blessed to witness the depth of love that was between them. It was unlike any I had seen previously. They were true friends and both gentle, considerate people with everyone, and especially with each other. But it was still painful for me, watching them cry as the wedding ring was removed from Stella’s finger forever.

Their son and daughters visited regularly and were there a great deal more now, as time was drawing in. I liked them all. They were very different to each other. But each of them was a decent and lovely person. One of the daughters in particular, though, I had grown especially close to.

A cool change came along unexpectedly one day, and I found myself at work without enough layers. George had insisted I put on one of Stella’s cardigans. Both he and Stella then agreed how much it suited me. It was one of those things you wouldn’t normally notice in the shop, as it wasn’t your style. But when you put it on, you fell in love with it instantly. On this day the family, including Stella, gave me the cardigan to keep. Years later I still wear it. She had style, our Stella.

That night, she fell into a coma when I was at home sleeping.
I returned the next morning to find a solemn house. George and their son David were there. As the soft breeze blew in through the bedroom door George laid on the bed beside his beautiful wife. His hand held hers, which was now getting cold. Stella was still alive; but in these cases, as death gets closer, the circulation is affected in the extremities. Her feet had also lost their warmth. David sat on a chair holding her other hand. I sat on a chair farther down the bed, my hand on her foot. I guess I just needed to touch her, too.

After more than twelve hours of being in a deep coma, Stella opened her eyes and smiled at something towards the ceiling. George sat up. "She’s smiling," he declared, startled. "She’s smiling at something."

Stella had no awareness of us anymore. But the smile she gave to whomever or whatever she was looking at cemented something in me that has never waivered. Having had meditations previously that took me to blissful places well beyond the usual human plane, I had never doubted an afterlife. But looking at Stella’s amazing happiness as she smiled to the ceiling with her eyes open, I knew now with total conviction that nothing would ever sway me from this belief. There is something more to go to, or return to.

After she smiled, Stella let out a small sigh, her eyes rolled back, and all was quiet. George and David looked to me for confirmation. Having only experienced Ruth’s passing before now, I waited for the big breath, which was not forthcoming. “Is she dead? Is she dead?” they asked in despair and heart-broken sorrow.

I tried to find the pulse in her neck, but my own heart was beating so hard, I could only feel that rhythm. I was under immense pressure and had no idea what I was doing. They looked at me desperately. I didn’t want to declare she had died and then find her living for another day or two, or even just taking one more big breath. So I prayed for guidance.

A calm came over me as I looked at her then, and I knew she had left. It had been such a smooth, graceful, and gentle departure I hadn’t been able to tell. But this wave of love now sweeping through me confirmed she had gone. I nodded, and then George and David left the room immediately. The most heartbreaking sob echoed
through the house as George acknowledged his beloved wife was gone. I sat in silence with Stella, as my own tears then also fell.

A couple of hours later, with the rest of the family there and practical details attended to, we said our goodbyes to each other. The morning had now warmed into a very hot day, and I was contemplating what to do with myself, really just wanting a superficial distraction. Still driving the same jeep from all of those miles travelled previously, I had to slam the driver’s door to get it closed properly. It had been this way for some time. As I did so this day, the whole driver’s seat window shattered and fell inside the door panels. I sat there staring at it, already numb from the morning’s events and now even more shifted, due to the huge bang that came with the shattering. I looked out of the window, glass free except for a few fragments, and accepted that perhaps the best thing for me was just to go home.

It took three days for the replacement window to arrive. So I spent those days at home and down by the harbour. I thanked Stella constantly during this time for sending me home. It was the best thing, allowing me to simply be. A couple of months later I received a letter from Therese, the daughter of Stella’s I had grown close to. The day after Stella had passed, Therese was walking down the street, naturally thinking of her mum. A huge white cockatoo flew right down in front of her, so close she could feel the wind from its wings. Stella was that sort of woman, capable of sending us signs, and I delighted in reading Therese’s letter.

A year or so went by, and I visited the family for dinner. I was looking very forward to the night, especially to see darling George again and to see how he was getting on. Therese and her husband came along, too. The evening started out well and it was lovely to hear how George was becoming quite social, playing bridge and other things. Then somehow the dinner conversation ended up back in the “lie” department. Therese was asking questions as to how different her mum’s passing had been to all of my previous clients, or something along those lines. That was my big chance to come clean and tell them how I had been so inexperienced when caring for Stella.
I really don’t think they would have minded by then, as they were more than happy in the service they had received. But I couldn’t come clean, as George was just so delighted to have me there and kept making a point of how beautiful it was for us all to be together again. It took him back to Stella, I am sure. I wanted to get Therese alone that night and tell her the full story, but no chance came up.

We lost touch soon after that night as life moved on. Some years later, though, we all reconnected and I was given the chance to tell the family of my inexperience, and of my regret in not being straight with them from the start. They were beautifully accepting and forgiving about it, saying I more than made up for it with empathy and compassion. They had felt from the start I was the right person to care for their mother, as had I. It was lovely to re-connect and remember what we had all shared together. Every winter, I still wear my cardigan and I think of Stella at times. Last winter I was wearing it as I re-read a book she had given me, pausing and smiling at my own memories. This work sure introduced me to some beautiful people.

But either way, the lying thing was a great lesson. After my time with Stella, I decided I would never again lie to clients. The main thing was that I had learned from it. I was an honest person and regardless of how difficult honesty may be to deliver, it was the only path I would ever walk comfortably.

Learning from what happened then allowed me to forgive myself, and this, is the greatest forgiveness of all.
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