

I wish I had a book like this ten years ago because it would make the time with my husband's dementia so much easier.

Everybody should read this book, said Cathy, a registered nurse.

Everybody who intends to grow old should read this book, said Simon, a retired teacher.

Our journey with dementia is a story about my husband Joe, a Slovenian migrant, finding shortcuts to quickly re-establishing himself in Australia. He first became a sugar cane cutter, then moved to work on Snowy Mountains Hydroelectric project before he built a home in Canberra where he worked as an electrical contractor. He came to Lightning Ridge for Christmas 1968 holiday and found a two carat gem red on black opal; he also caught the opal fever and that sealed our fate. Lightning Ridge with miners as colourful as the gem they search for, this outback post became our home.

The story is about Joe's loss of memory, skills, and life; it is about the grieving and about overcoming grief. I kept a diary of signs, symptoms, and progression of Joe's dementia from 2004 until he died on 18.2.2013.

Our journey with dementia is a true story. It tells about:

- Australian migrants
- Lightning Ridge opal miners
- Signs, symptoms, and progression of dementia
- The loss of my husband,

This is also a story about the lessons I learned through Joe's long sickness; lessons about Age Care, health care and aging;
I also learned a lot about myself.

Dementia is a term used to describe the symptoms of a large group of illnesses which cause a progressive decline in person's functioning. At present there is no cure. Dementia is the greatest cause of disability in older people. In 2014 there are close to 400 000 people in Australia suffering from dementia and their treatment costs the country about 5 billion dollars a year.

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

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

For my husband, Joe

Our journey with Dementia

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My life with Joe

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

Our son Marko was born in 1961.

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

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

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

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

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

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

In 1966 after three years in Australia Joe was again an electrical contractor; he also encouraged me to present my certificates to Department of Education. I passed the English tests and was again employed as a teacher. We were finally back where we wanted to be. Our education wasn't

wasted after all. Joe took our two years old son Marjan with him to work while Marko and I were at school. Life was exciting; we were climbing the mountain. We were building our Canberra home.

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

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

I'd like to stay for a couple of months, said Joe at the end of school holidays in January 1969. We went to Sydney; Department of Education gave me a job as a teacher in Lightning Ridge. I also dropped into the Lands Department and they gave us a block of land next to the school. As Joe drove back to Lightning Ridge I sketched a plan for the house; we stopped in Dubbo to order bricks. In Walgett I went to the Shire office and produced my plan for the house; the engineer said that it has to be a proper plan so I paid him twenty dollars to make it proper for the next shire meeting in a couple of days. Within a week Joe and his Finish Canberra friends bricklayers started building a house and within a month we moved in it. The bureaucracy wasn't there yet to slow down the progress. It was a time for actions rather than paper work.

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

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

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

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

Joe dug a shaft in Glengarry and bottomed on opal; he earned in one month what he made in Canberra in a year. We haven't yet considered that the flow of opal may not be guaranteed or regular. Other miners pegged their claims around Joe. Stories spread like a wild fire about a man who has never been underground before and then after a couple of days he became a millionaire.

Joe never denied being a millionaire. He actually liked that. I was totally embarrassed. Why was I still working if my husband was a millionaire? Why couldn't I pay off our mortgage? I had two children I could spend some time with. Our boys found their own excitement riding bikes and motorbikes in the bush with their friends.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Just over a hundred years ago the first white settler pastoralists arrived in these vast outback tablelands where the only high ground is a ridge a couple of hundred meters above sea level. The name Lightning Ridge came long before opal played any role in the lives of Lightning Ridge people. The red iron stones on the lonely hill apparently attracted electric storms that once killed some 600 sheep and some shepherds at the turn of the twentieth century so they started calling

the place Lightning Ridge. The name Lightning Ridge became officially recognised as such in 1963.

There are different stories about who first saw the rainbow in the dust of Lightning Ridge.

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

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

There are no rivers or springs so no human life existed until the new settlers dug dams and made rain water tanks. The first dam was sunk in 1885. The first parcel of opal was sold by Nettleton in 1903. Aborigines first started coming to the Ridge in 1930s after white settlers drilled for artesian water and made dams to water their animals.

What a short history.

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

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

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

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

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

Hungarian opal buyer Imre came to introduce himself to Joe.

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

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

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

But you have a beautiful wife, I said.

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

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

It gets easier when you learn English, I conceded.

It gets easier especially for women, because there is a shortage of women, said Imre. I speak better English but I still have an accent and it really goes on my nerves when they ask me where do you come from and I say Sydney and they say no I mean where do you really come from. You have an accent. Let me guess, they propose and they list the names of the nations they know nothing about. Oh I once met a Hungarian fellow on the bus, nice man, yes Hungarians are nice, and they are a bit like this and that, people begin weaving a story about people like you. They keep explaining to me what Hungarians are like because they once had an acquaintance that happened to be Hungarian. I once knew a man who once met a Hungarian man and this person feels obliged to tell me all about my nationality. I felt like saying shut up, you ignorant idiot. They hang on you their whole preconceived ideas of what a person of your nationality is like. Migrants hate being asked where you really come from. I am proud of being Hungarian but when they ask me where I came from they are telling me that I don't belong and that I am not an ordinary Australian. And never will be. People like to poke in migrants' private selves so they can adjust their prejudices. They never ask you where you came from because they admire your mind or your face or your history; they just want to single you out to put you down so you would not pretend to be an ordinary Australian. Ordinary Australians come from England. Some boys even changed their names and became Johnsons and Smiths but as soon as they open their mouths they expose themselves as liars; they look foolish and weak camouflaged by a foreign name.

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

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

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

Australians consider European men domineering, I said.

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

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

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

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

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

Lightning Ridge really is a men's town, I observed. Most women work in service industry to provide money for mining and essentials.

European women were among the first working women in Australia, said Imre.

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

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

On Sunday I took our boys to church. No religion can adequately explain to me the beauty and enormity of life and universe but I went to church out of loyalty to my parents and because I needed to be a good person. The silence of the church always brought me closer to the core of myself which I call my soul. Believers are lucky people because their beliefs make them feel secure and at peace. Belief opens your soul to the divine the way sex opens your body into the intimacy with the loved person. I needed to be close to somebody. Faith offers possibilities of the

everlasting which all humanity craves. I really hope there is god in charge and that he will in the end make everything right.

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

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

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

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

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

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

I brought a model of a mosque with me to remind me why I am here, says Sheriff. Allah keeps me young and strong. I have never been sick. People often ask me what is the secret of my fine health and I tell them: believe, believe, and believe. Believe in justice and righteousness. Follow Allah. Look at yourself in the mirror and ask yourself if what you are doing is right. My job is to do service to Allah. I pray to Allah regularly and ask for his help to be righteous. Being rich means having a peace of mind, health, and the belief in God. Australians don't believe any more. In the olden days Christians closed their shops and hotels for Christmas and Easter and worshiped God in their churches. Now the trade is best on feast days and the trade became more important than worship. They spend the feast days in the clubs and hotels. I came to Lightning Ridge to bring Allah here. I have a model of a mosque on my table and I pray five times each day to the merciful Allah to change Lightning Ridge into the second Mecca. I believe that in not too distant future there will be a real mosque in Lightning Ridge. We Turks value loyalty,

family, honesty, and cleverness. We prize a good sense of humour as it is often considered a sign of intelligence.

People brought to the Ridge national robes and grape cuttings and seeds and recipes and memories of rituals and celebrations that make life meaningful. Home is where the heart is, said Amigo. There are no borders for the melody played on the invisible heartstrings.

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

Joe often complained that Australians mumble their words and he cannot follow them. With his family he always spoke Slovenian. Sometimes we hated him for isolating us like that from the company of others but boys are happy now that he made it possible for them to learn Slovenian. They speak and understand much of other Slavic languages as well. They also appreciate the skills they learned from their father. They can build and maintain houses; they can repair cars and gadgets. No obstacle ever stopped Joe and our boys also became capable in ingenious. It is amazing how much programming is passed on from one generation to the next. It is easy to believe in the reincarnation.

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

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

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

Our journey with dementia

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

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

Joe's friend Frank had a mother who died from dementia; he considered her mad so he placed her in a nursing home; he was ashamed of madness in his family; now he became particularly denigrating towards Joe. Was he afraid of losing his own failing memory? We all became aware of our diminishing brain power. It was interesting that while men denigrated and ridiculed Joe, women crooned over him like they would over an injured bird. Admittedly there were friends who must have had some understanding of and tolerance for old age and dementia because they became patronisingly nice to Joe. He lapped their patting and smiling; he had no idea that they were patronising him. The old pretentious hero was dead; the invincible became weak and vulnerable.

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

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

Joe offended some people by accusing them of stealing.

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

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

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

What happened to me? Why can't I, Joe began to mutter when he failed to do what he wanted to do. When I could not reason with Joe anymore I began to jot down some of Joe's new behaviours.

My notes from 2005 until 2010.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Joe wants to serve me. I am not used to being served. He keeps on asking: Are you all right; do you want beer, no, maybe wine, no, what about soft drink, nothing thank you, do you want

coffee, no, I am fine, what about tea, are you all right? I am flattered by his offers but I wish he would stop bothering me. He keeps covering me up in bed so I won't be cold.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Joe is very concerned with not having money in his pocket. Money was always in my bag; he never owned a wallet. Now I give him money and he hides it. The next day he wants more

money because he forgets where he hid it yesterday. This became an ongoing theme. I suppose money is on everybody's mind. Money is safety and security. Especially when you feel vulnerable.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Joe is sleeping a lot.

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

I found him talking to a picture of our grandson.

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

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

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

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

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

How could I blame Joe for being sick? After the diagnosis Joe gradually changed into a playful child that just wants to watch the flowers and feed the birds while holding my hand. He became the opposite of what he was; he played with children and welcomed stray cats and dogs. The man who wanted to shoot any stray cat or dog coming into our garden is now on his knees patting a homeless cat he fed. In his pocket I found a steak he saved for the stray dog. Joe became an animal loving child.

The following two years were gentle and peaceful for Joe and me. The man who criticised me does not live here anymore; he is replaced by the man who just wants to hold my hand. At 79 he

deserves a little playfulness; he is more relaxed and happier than he has ever been. He tells me that I am his angel; that I am the best; the most intelligent; the most beautiful. He is no longer afraid to tell me how he feels; he does not mind being vulnerable. He is grateful for having a lovely family. Our time together became enjoyable. He keeps telling me how fortunate he is to have a lovely family. I miss Joe's leadership and his ideas but I love this new Joe.

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

Prof. Hawke said that there are many kinds of dementia but most common is Alzheimer's disease. Definite diagnosis can only be made by the post mortem so he wrote down Joe's dementia as Alzheimer's' which is at present progressive and irreversible. Abnormal changes in the brain worsen over time, eventually interfering with many aspects of brain function. It progresses from mild forgetfulness and cognitive impairment to widespread loss of mental and physical abilities. In advanced Alzheimer's people become dependent on others for every aspect of their care. Dementia could last from 5 to 20 years.

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

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

Last in first out, said Helene, a psychiatric nurse. Recent events, activities, or names are first forgotten. As the disease progresses, symptoms are more easily noticed and may become serious enough to cause persons with the disease or their family members to seek medical help. People in the middle stages of the disease may forget how to perform simple tasks, such as brushing their teeth or making a cup of tea. Their thinking may become muddled and problems arise with speaking, understanding, reading or writing. Later they may become anxious or aggressive, or wander away from home. Approximately 25 per cent of Alzheimer's patients experience hallucinations or delusions during the course of their illness but usually only for a short period. Treatment for dementia generally focuses on controlling current symptoms and slowing down the deterioration.

I began to worry about Joe's depression medication Zoloft. I don't think that Joe really was ever depressed; he was agitated and anxious; he was restless and frustrated by his inability to complete the tasks he knew he could do in the past. Antidepressant Zoloft only calmed him down. Codeine in Penadine forte painkillers before and after operations also depressed his pain sensations, Normison made him sleep. Doctor prescribed Lipitor statins against cholesterol years ago and only lately research showed that they could be harmful. One doctor explained that

doctors are pressured from Pharmaceutical companies to prescribe medication. Joe's cholesterol was never really high but his doctor wrote scripts for protection just in case. As a diabetic Joe had to use artificial sweeteners that contain aspartame which has lately been suspected of changing the brain functioning.

Nobody could say if these medications altered or slowed Joe's brain function. Since 2004 Joe was no longer physically active because his sciatica caused him pain. He also isolated himself from his social contacts. I suspect that these factors contributed to his dementia but even the doctor could not say for sure.

During the five years from 2004 until 2009 Joe had hernia operation, spinal operation, shoulder replacement and knee replacement. I wonder if frequent anaesthetics, painkillers, antibiotics and other medications contributed to or caused his dementia.

All types of dementia follow similar path of irreversible deterioration of physical and mental ability. Prof Hawke tested Joe for Vascular dementia but the results were inconclusive.

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

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

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

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

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

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

There are regrets; we should have been better parents, better partners, and better friends. We regret petty jealousies, arguments, and selfishness. We wish we did not greedily work for the possessions but spent time with our children. We want to make up for all that now. No more demands, pressures, duties; we only want to make our family happy. We began distributing

possessions gathered during the last 50 years of fury and work; possessions became meaningless. The only souvenirs we treasure are the ones still stored in both our memories.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Max is an independent Gospel preacher bringing Good News wherever he goes. Trust in God. In the end that's all anyone can really do. We will all be old one day if we live that long, Max jokes. He is 85 and riding his bike every day visiting the aged and the sick. He is at most funerals. Max confessed recently that he learned some bad habits in the orphanage where he grew up. Older boys did some sinful things to him and he learned to do these same abominable acts to younger boys. When he saw the light, he gave his life to Jesus, confessed, repented and made amends. I have known Max for 43 years. We talked about history, politics, philosophy and religion; when

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I have answered your question nineteen times during the last two hours; my voice betrayed me once; I did not mean to sound nasty; I know you only offer me drink because you love me; I am so sorry but I just don't feel like having that glass of wine; no I am not thirsty; I don't need a soft drink either. I just want to watch this film; no the film isn't more important than you; no film is more important than our family.

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

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

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

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

It is twelve thirty at night and he is tidying the house. What is happening? He says suddenly. Why don't I know anything? Why can't I dress myself? Where are we? Where are we going? Why don't you tell me?

I have tears in my eyes. If I could only help him.

Joe went out and started pruning passionfruit at 2am.

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

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

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

Joe dressed in my swimmers again and put socks over shoes. He is constantly packing to go but has no idea where. We don't want to be too late, he says.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I often cry in desperation; I am scared of being on my own. What will I do? I have never been alone. I keep talking to Joe; I hold his hand; he is the only person needing me. Old age is so unattractive. What reason is there to love and be loved past your blossoming. Only Joe and I remember our blossoming.

Notes from 2011 diary

Joe and I lived a friendly, idyllic, fairly comfortable, idle life until at the beginning of 2011 Joe began to lose control over his toileting. Every night he wakes up to get to the toilet but sometimes he stumbles and falls in the dark if I don't wake up quickly enough to turn the light on and escort him. I cannot lift him up when he falls so I call the ambulance. Sometimes he rolls off the bed and cannot get up. I cannot expect the ambulance to come all the time so I sometimes call neighbours and friends. I sleep lightly listening for his movements. By the time he reaches the toilet and pulls down his pyjamas he is already dripping. I have him sleep without pyjama bottoms and that helps. I removed floor mats and have only one bed cover so he would not trip.

I am exhausted because I do not sleep.

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

During the day I try to get him to walk but he seems contented just to sit for hours. He became removed from reality but responds well to loving attention. We both enjoy cuddling. Visitors disturb him; he does not like my attention taken by others.

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

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

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

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

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

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

I asked Joe to sit in front of the house and feed the birds while I worked in the garden. I forgot about him for a few minutes and found him spraying weeds and pest poisons. I persuaded him to come with me and led him into the shower. While I got dressed he sprayed hair spray and deodorants around the bathroom; he was angry when I took them away.

Joe goes into the car but I hid the keys. He manages to empty the battery by pressing buttons.

Joe cannot see the spoon in front of him or the soap in the shower; his slippers are always on the wrong foot. He came into the kitchen with my swimmers over his head and his arms in the swimmers' leg holes. He cannot get out of it. He sometimes goes naked outside. At night he

wakes up and packs things for the trip. Today he almost swallowed a handful of his painkilling tablets; he mixes salt and sugar into any food in front of him. He sprinkled sugar into cashews and lemon squash over meatballs. Has to be watched at all times.

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

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

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

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

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

Joe lost 5kg of weight in a short time. Falls asleep in a chair. Celebrated his 82nd birthday yesterday 12.2.11. I invited a few close friends for a party but he did not drink or eat anything. He is becoming very frail barely walking or standing.

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

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

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

It is Easter Sunday 2011 and Marko's and Marjan's family are visiting. We cannot wake Joe to go with us to church so ambulance comes and they take Joe and myself to Sydney hospital to check his heart. I ask for permission to sit in hospital next to Joe overnight to reassure him but I was not allowed. I booked into the motel but the hospital staff kept me awake most of the night asking me to calm Joe down by telephone. Joe begged me to call the police and to come and get all the strangers out of his room- he believed that he was in our home invaded by burglars.

They tell me that Joe requires a psychiatric nurse on the return trip and there is no room for me on the plane. I have to stay in a Sydney motel while they return Joe to Lightning Ridge hospital by plane. Lightning Ridge hospital staff again rings me a few times during the night to calm Joe down by telephone. He became totally disoriented and bewildered. It would be so much simpler if they'd let me stay with him overnight in the hospital and travel on the plane with him instead of a psychiatric nurse who could not manage him. But such are the rules and protocols.

On 20th May 2011 we went by bus to Dubbo for a check up. Joe became exhausted and on the return home I couldn't get him to walk. I took him to hospital. The next day a doctor recommended that Joe stay in Age care unit. The separation was traumatic for both of us.

Behind the locked doors in 2011

For over fifty years I looked after Joe's health and dietary requirements; together we looked after our family and business; we took care of each other's safety and wellbeing but when the door of the Nursing home closed behind Joe on 22nd of May 2011, we both suddenly lost control of our lives.

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

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

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

I admit that Joe and I felt vulnerable, sensitive and easily upset. We found ourselves behind the locked door, we lost the freedom of association and movement; we lost the choice in basic things like clothes, food, daily routines, and entertainment. We lost all decision making powers and decisions were often made for us by people who were less competent, caring and professional. They told us how to behave, what to eat, where to sit, how to talk, and what not to touch. They told us with a preamble: You should know better than... They reprimanded us daily for breaking the rules made on the spot and referred to them as protocols and codes of behaviour we are supposed to follow. No discussion allowed about the validity of staff's demands or the rules.

I remember the words of a high ranking police officer friend who said: Rules are to guide the wise and to make the fools follow blindly. Wise ones evidently are thin on the ground of the nursing home and the fools follow the rules the way they understand them. Don't even mention common sense.

Age care staff provided no information on medication, medical condition or pain and diet management.

For the first time I understand how prisoners feel. Only age care residents were not convicted of anything.

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

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

I wanted to tell someone about Joe's medical history but nobody listened.

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

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

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

After a few weeks the staff security man weighing about 160kg reports that Joe became violent. He is screaming when changed and showered. He hits and scratches and has to be restrained.

I notice bruises and cuts on Joe's face and arms. Doctor prescribes antipsychotic drug Risperidone to sedate him. RN Kim assures me that Joe's aggression is a result of his dementia. I say that he was never aggressive at home. Dementia changes their behaviour, says RN Kim. I point out that Joe isn't violent with the staff that treats him gently; he is only resisting those that handle him roughly. His joints are inflamed and painful that's why he resists being changed by the security man. One care worker tells me that all residents are on Risperidone because that makes it easier for the staff to manage them. I look up the side effects of Risperidone and find that this antipsychotic drug was banned in USA nursing homes. It should especially not be administered to demented people with diabetes and renal problems.

When on Risperidone Joe gradually changed; he was always cheerfully joking but now he seems half dead/comatose slumped on the table; he never even opens his eyes. I ask the staff that instead of giving him Risperidone they call me day or night to help with handling. I live five minutes away from Age Care. They called me a couple of times just before mealtimes. Joe was restless because he was hungry. Risperidone increased his appetite. They pushed and pulled him along and he resisted. I tell them that he reacts defensively when pulled by his arms because his shoulders are very painful. Any wounded bewildered animal would defend itself.

More Risperidone sedates Joe so the staff leaves him slumped in a chair all day. I do not want to see Joe hungry or restless or heavily sedated. I offer to take him out during daytime or for me to be with him if his behaviour becomes problematic but it seems easier for the staff to dope him than to have me around.

I keep explaining that Joe has severe pains in his joints and should not be pushed and pulled roughly. I keep asking if he is receiving Zyloprim and RN Kim assures me that he is under doctor's care so I should not interfere.

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

I suggest to the manager that carers should distract him with an appropriate activity or engage him in an appropriate dialog when he becomes restless. Instead of increased doses of Risperidone he should get frequent small portions of food because of his diabetes and also because Risperidone enhanced his appetite. He needs to be prompted to drink by placing the glass to his lips.

Frequent bruises were the proof that Joe was handled inappropriately. I found three deep finger nail cuts on his left arm. When questioned about it the nurse said: He must have done it himself. I tell her that Joe cut the tips of his fingers on his right hand forty years ago with a lawnmower; he has no fingernails on his right hand with which he could inflict nail wounds on his left arm.



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

A few days later I find Joe with a cut to his head. The nurse tells me that Joe was naughty; he had wandered into a wrong room. The carer came after him from behind, grabbed his arm and yelled for him to come out. He pushed her away. She slammed the door on him and he fell

sustaining a big cut on his head. He was left on his own lying on the floor until he “became cooperative”.

I often find bruises on Joe. He fell off the bed and cut his head a few times.





Eventually someone realised that Joe has a severe gout attack because he did not receive Zyloprim for months. His joints hurt because of the gout attack which was caused by their dismissal of my frequent requests that he has to receive Zyloprim.

Risperidone increased Joe's appetite and he became restless when hungry; he ate more food; he put on weight which increased his sugar and uric acid levels.

I beg the staff to be patient and gentle with handling Joe. Finally they acknowledge that Joe is in pain rather than violent. He did not attack the security man he just defended himself. The doctor prescribes an anti-inflammatory corticosteroid drug Prednisone against painful inflammation caused by gout. Prednisone in turn drastically increases Joe's sugar levels. I find him slumped on the dining room table. I alerted RN Kim but she says that Joe is only sleeping. I know that something is wrong. Eventually I convince them that he is unconscious. Joe is in and out of hyperglycaemia for days. He is in acute care when I notice that he developed swollen feet and black patches on his heels. These patches opened as lacerating ulcers which never healed. They begin treating him with massive doses of antibiotics. Ulcers caused Joe constant additional pain so they dope him with more Risperidone to keep him quiet; the drug makes it easier to manage him. The succession of drugs changed Joe's behaviour; he cannot sleep; he has ferocious appetite and when hungry he paces the floor. They sedate him.

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

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

They told me what Joe cannot do or have but nobody seems to care whether he drinks his drink or eats his food. I ask the staff if he was given a drink and the server says that there is drink always right next to him if he wants it. I ask them to introduce food and drink to his lips and then he will accept it but they tell me that they can't force him to eat and drink if he does not want to. Some of the carers spread rumours that Joe's gout attack and hyper were caused by the food and drink I brought to him. Everybody in Age care seemed to be an aspiring diagnostician. Especially the staff who attended a three day TAFE course on caring.

It was Joe's 83rd birthday on 12.2.12. It was a weekend and I asked RN Kim specifically not to dope Joe because I prepared a party for him at home and had friends from interstate visiting. When I went to collect him he was totally unresponsive-doped- slumped over the table with his jaw hanging open and a string of drool hanging from his mouth. RN Kim was nowhere to be found.

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

He is not doped, she says.

I can see that he is, I say.

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

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

How do you know, I ask.

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

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

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

He does not open his eyes and does not respond to my voice, I say and then realise that it is no use talking to these people.

RN KIM is hiding in the medicine room to avoid me.

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

I speak to the management the following Monday.

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

I pointed out that side effects of Risperidone make Joe hungry all the time. He gets agitated and restless. I can calm him by giving him bits of fruit but the nursing staff said that I make his sugar levels rise. I asked them for suitable small portions of food as he is a diabetic but they give him more Risperidone instead to disable him so he cannot move. I offered to come every morning and help with showering and dressing Joe but they rejected my help.

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

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

I am becoming more and more distressed and cannot sleep. I cry a lot.

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

After three weeks I see Joe's regular doctor. He apologises profusely and says: what happened to Joe should never have happened.

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

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

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

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

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

While in Age Care I am polite and cooperative at all times because I do not want to jeopardise Joe's situation.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The manager asks what my relationship with RN Kim is. I never wanted to name anyone as being incompetent or bad so I say that I really have no relationship with Kim. I wonder why the manager singled RN Kim who seems to set the hostile tone of her shift. Did the manager detect some impropriety? RN Kim never once smiled at anybody and her staff looks equally unhappy and hostile towards each other, residents and visitors. They screech orders. Don’t do this don’t touch that. Behave yourself. Have some manners. You should know better. At the beginning I was totally unprepared for this law of the local jungle. I know I am older than the nursing staff and it is easy to mistake me for a resident who has to be told how to behave, what to do and say and think. I made a mistake of letting them know that their putdowns succeeded in hurting me. I told them that I did not sleep at night because their words offended me. Of course they felt victorious. They hurt me intentionally. I let everyone know that they succeeded; they got to me. They saw me vulnerable and susceptible as I cried and begged and complained.

If I was a bit wiser I would remember the chooks pecking the other bleeding chooks. I should have hidden the pain and smiled. I should also remember that we will remain different forever and that people will always want to dominate each other with any weapons they possess. At my

age I should definitely know better. I learned to smile. Smiles take years off my face; a smile also indicates my willingness to lay myself down as a mat for the young. One does not hate a thing one walks on.

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

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

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

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

When a friendly RN is on, all her offsideers are gentle, friendly and quietly efficient. All residents and visitors know who is nice and who is not. We all dreaded RN Kim.

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

What is causing Aspergers's disorder, I ask.

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

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

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

During the 2012 there were many changes. RN Kim explained to me that new RNs are imported because they are young and therefore cheaper. I sense that she is not happy about it. A year after Joe became a resident, RN Kim explains to me different responsibilities, authorities and competencies of the staff. I say that it would be helpful to everybody if the management spent some time with new residents and their loved ones to explain at the beginning what was expected

from them and what they could expect from the Age Care; what responsibilities and rights each had and what rules apply in the facility. Finding out who was who, who was in charge of what and what rules applied, was a bewildering experience for me and for everybody I spoke to.

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

RN Kim was transferred into the administration. The fat security man became a dog catcher.

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

We all rejoiced when the new friendly staff came.

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

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

And so is everybody else, replied Irene.

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

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

I thank God for the change.

Residents

From the beginning it scared me to see friends entering a place that has no exit. Now I understand that most residents are at some stage of dementia and have to be kept safe behind locked doors. Suddenly they are cut away from the familiar people, activities and places. The sights and sounds and smells they loved are a thing of the past. We are all shocked into a realisation that life is only a fleeting moment; that time never stops to give one a second chance; that the future has been cancelled. A few residents at first receive an occasional visitor until they too are forgotten and left to rest.

People in Age Care are different on every level. 18 residents came from four continents, eight countries with 18 different educational levels etc. There is also a hierarchy of employees from nurses to kitchen to cleaning staff. They have a mysterious variety of abilities, qualification and responsibilities. The staff ranges from well educated to those with a few days of training but all have vested powers to order residents and visitors around and tell us what is right and wrong and how to manage health and behaviour of our loved ones.

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

I look at the Age Care dining assembly.

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

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

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

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

Most residents are concerned with their finances and personal possessions. They worry about privacy and autonomy; they see enemies all around. It is frightening to surrender the last vestiges

of self. I remember old clichés. You are what you know and do and have. The residents no longer do, or know or have but they still feel the loss.

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

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

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

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

Rachel is with her husband Ron all day every day. She is a hospital volunteer and a great comfort to all residents. She does the laundry and wipes the tables but she is not allowed to give food or drink to anybody. Rachel and Ron eat with simple appreciation of nourishment. They were and are each other's only love. Their parents did not like them to marry because she is a Maori and he is English but they loved each other and have a loving family. They are chirping like young lovers but sometimes Ron snaps and swears and hits. He has never been angry or abusive in his life before dementia took over, says Rachel. Now on an occasion he swears fluently and loudly. I wonder where and how Ron learned to swear. He also constantly demands to be taken home.

Joe cannot by himself take a drink sitting in front of him so he is usually dehydrated. If I see him drowsy and not responding I give him a glass of diet cordial and he revives instantly. Often Joe goes without a drink until I come. The server told me that he is usually sleeping. Morning and afternoon drinks are usually left in his vicinity although they know that Joe has no capacity to reach for them. Some ask him if he wants a drink; they should know that he cannot make a decision or express a wish or need. He no longer talks or responds but he drinks thirstily if the drink is introduced to his lips. I gave Joe a drink one day and my Rachel's husband Ron said that he was thirsty too. I gave him half a glass of water with a drop of diet cordial.

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

Rachel asked me to give him a drink when she is away, I defend myself.

Everybody looked at me as if I committed a murder. I would never denigrate and reprimand four times publicly any child the way these four people reprimanded me. I really do not need to be told four times in front of everybody in a thundering disrespectful voice that I should know better. On her return Rachel was also reprimanded for giving me permission to give her husband a drink.

Among many other tasks Rachel does everybody's laundry. When she once alerted the staff that Joe fell in the garden a nurse said to her: stop interfering with our work.

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

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

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

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

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

He went to Philippines and got himself a young girl for a wife. He tells me that he bought Viagra but it did not work and anyway his new wife would not let him touch her. He chased her with a gun and then police came and the doctor recommended nursing home.

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

Simon is obsessed with the loss of his sexuality. He tells me that he is looking for someone that would take him out; he is like a puppy panting for a loving home. He became a nuisance telling everyone how he would like to make love to a woman. Any woman. He just needs a volunteer woman on which he would test his potency. He explains to everybody that he knows different ways to sexually satisfy a woman. All he needs is a willing partner. Simon was born on Croatian Hungarian border and his wife was Croatian. He can still go to town but he has nowhere to go and no one to see. He gave his money to his daughter to make room for him in her home but she tells him that it is much better for him in Age care. She did not like him marrying a young Pilipino girl. Simon tells every woman how nice bottom they have; he is obsessed with breasts and bottoms.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jean Claud tells me to call him John. John married an Australian lady who is in hospital at present so she placed him in respite care. Born blind to Jewish parents in Paris, John was a target of many taunts and torments as a child. He was a highly intelligent student in a Catholic Franco-German school for visually impaired on the border of Germany and France. He felt persecuted by the teachers, priests and students; everybody had a go at him. They wheeled his bed into the German section of the dormitory and yelled Hail Hitler. Hitler is coming back and will burn you in Dachau. Partially visually impaired students tied him on the cross and fed him faeces. He burned the school in order to be sent home and escape the torture. His father was violent and John often ended in a casualty. On his vacation in England a Baptist family told him that Jesus loved him. For the first time they also hugged him. He became a Messianic Jew and devoted

church goer. These Christian people taught me how to be independent so I could escape the prison of my blindness, says John.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Most residents are still on Risperidone which helps them sit still and forget their sadness and anxiety. Does it matter if they are made contented? As soon as a resident becomes unhappy, or fidgety or starts to pace the corridors the staff demands from the doctor that he prescribes something to keep them manageable. I worry about the harm doping does to the residents. Then again many are praying for death anyway because they are simply tired of life.

Wasn't it only yesterday that these adventurers flirted and tried to impress me. Nobody tries to impress me anymore and nobody is impressed by me or them either.

Decades ago these exuberant solitary individuals brought their plans and hopes for the future to Lightning Ridge and now they are suddenly alone, lonely and forgotten. Young care-workers serve them food and make their beds but they have no idea what dreams these people are dreaming. Some never had a family, some have broken families; some never had children others have children who are busy in distant cities. Their children never learned from their parents to care for the old; they never met their older relations. They never learned to revere the old. Sadly

half a century after their arrival these heroes of the outback became old people. It does not make much difference if they are rich or poor. These days we hardly mention the red on black; rainbow and harlequin patterns of the opal colour are of little interest to most of us.

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

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

Lately I attended many seminars about personality mental disorders. Members of the community who seem to function and perform normally in their roles tell how they cope and manage to hide their disorders. Depression manifests itself in different ways; anxiety seems to be common to most; then there are phobias and panic attacks and schizophrenia and paranoia. The invisible trauma of mental sickness causes people to act differently. I haven't walked in the shoes of the person afflicted with brain malfunction so I better show compassion for people who behave differently. The fact that they hold a job is a testament of their struggle.

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

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

The year of 2012 is coming to an end.

The whole atmosphere in the nursing home changed for the better. We all became carefully kind and gentle with each other; the tension evaporated. When I want to go out someone opens the door for me almost instantly. If I ask for assistance with Joe it is offered immediately. I love these foreign care givers. There is no new investment, no new equipment in the Age Care facility. It is only people. I can't get over the fact that all the staff is doing what they are supposed to be doing with smiles on their faces rather than frowns. The tension is gone; we greet each other with a genuine smile.

Yesterday they baked a cake for Evelyn's birthday. Ron and Rachel celebrated 56th anniversary of their wedding and the staff prepared a party with decorations and a cake. I remember with sadness Joe's birthday in February 2011 when he only got a large dose of Risperidone. I found him slumped over the table while his friends waited at home for him to wish him a happy birthday. Lately everybody's birthday has been celebrated by all of us; every visitor is welcomed. I try to forget the visitations of the past.

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

On 11th November 2012, Remembrance Day, I go to the church. Most of the nurses also come to Catholic Church. I exchange the peace offering with them. Four of them came from India, one is from Philippines and two are Irish Australian. Since they started working at the Age care, there is a calm, gentle, kind, caring atmosphere. Could it be true that those who follow Jesus really try a bit harder to love their neighbours? Maybe the change is due simply to the fact that these new carers have no other interests in our town's social structure so they dedicate themselves more thoroughly to the residents of the age care. Perhaps they are showing gratitude and appreciation for being in Australia. Perhaps we, Australians, need a wakeup call. Maybe we have taken Australia with its many gifts for granted.

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

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

I remembered that this cook was our tenant forty years ago. She was defrosting the fridge; she tried to pry away the ice in the freezer with a knife and accidentally put a hole into it. The gas escaped and Joe scolded her. She never forgot it and now was the time for her payback. Competing for power really is a local, tribal thing. Local Age care staff miss no opportunity to let visitors know who is the boss and what rules apply. Most are biased towards friends and family; they also ostracise residents on the basis of previous family disputes or connections. There is evident cultural and ethnic bias; often they knowingly or unknowingly act on envy, jealousy and hatred. They chatter about TV shows and boyfriends while a visitor waits to be let out through the security door or before they respond to any requests from the residents or visitors. E.g. I asked two care workers heading towards the exit to let me out. We have to attend to the residents first, snapped the care worker standing next to the exit button. They made the bed, found the program on TV and chatted with the resident for ten minutes before one flicked the card to let me out. She just wanted to show me who is the boss. Complain again and we will make you pay, was the message.

I don't argue or complain; I learned my lesson..

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

I still believe that it was my right and duty to monitor Joe's medical and nursing care; I know he would do the same for me always. I could even delude myself into believing that my complaining helped to change the culture. I mentioned to the manager that I am writing a diary and will try to have my journey with dementia published. I had no realistic hope at the time to write a book but they know that I occasionally write articles for magazines and have had books published. Would it be possible that ..;no, no, it is not possible that they would want to be seen

in a better light although it would be wonderful if that was true. I was documenting the abuse and had pictures of injuries Joe suffered.

Perhaps everybody contributed to the improvement but I still believe that overseas staff and the new management changed the place. Maybe miracles do happen.

My diary from 2012

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

I feed him and kiss him and he keeps on eating and kissing with his eyes shut. He is kissing all the hands that touch him gently. He is kissing the food and the drink that touches his lips. I sit next to him in the dining room and force his mouth open for the first sip of the drink and then he drinks it all because he is always thirsty; same with food. I know that it is easier for me to sit next to my freshly washed and dressed and perfumed husband than it is for those who prepare him so. Preparing him is their job. For some it is what they like doing or what they chose as their career, for others it is a necessity

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

Joe is on a soft diet now. I taste his mash to see if it resembles in any way any of the known food substances. The mash looks much like what will become of it at the other end; only smell changes slightly. Shades of yellow carrot sprinkled with green mashed peas; much like a melted speckled brick. It tastes like gravel. No salt or fat or sugar allowed. Joe spits out the mash but happily eats mango and bananas I bring him. Sometimes I smuggle in ice-cream. Food is the only thing he may still enjoy. What else is he to live for? The staff say that they have to keep him on the diet for his health's sake because he is a diabetic. In his dying days he is not to enjoy any forbidden fruit that may raise his sugar or blood pressure or cholesterol. What are they saving him for. Do they believe that mash will cure him?

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

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

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

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

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

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

The new staff restored my faith in the Nursing Home care. The new management and the imported staff have no interest in local issues; they are here professionally and when they leave they leave behind only a memory of their professional competency and any caring kindness they offered. There is humour, laughter, chatting, patting; games and exercise were introduced for residents. During the balloon game I saw the residents laugh for the first time. Their faces blossomed as they patted the balloon into the air.

Even the leftover local nursing staff gradually became a little more respectful and accommodating. The gentle ways of newcomers must have rubbed off on them. Greetings and smiles began to appear everywhere. Rules vanished.

I gradually learned some valuable lessons myself.

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

I had to adjust my expectations.

As one resident put it: Ignore the ten percent of ratbags; perhaps they are coping with their own afflictions. Concentrate on the ninety percent who are fine or at least reasonable.

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

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

Finally I realised that doctors are not gods. Sometimes they make mistakes. My husband's health and my wellbeing are not their first or only priority. People live longer; age care is expensive; the health of old demented people is not at the top of anybody's list. All seems well as long as the oldies are kept quiet, clean, cool and fed.

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

Eventually the staff and I developed mutual respect. The new nurses are friendly, sympathetic and understanding; I put up with the few arrogant and negligent and lazy ones.

It took me awhile to accept the fact that the ratbags and the caring nurses, are paid the same money. But that too is a part of a general pattern of life.

End time-2013

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

Joe became more loving, grateful, contented and demonstrative. I understand why in the past he did not dare tell me how important my love was to him; he had to keep me under control because he was scared to lose me. There were young migrant boys all around us so he had to be watchful but he would never allow himself to appear vulnerable or jealous. I was jealous, attention seeking girl; I needed attention to survive. I am trying to make it up to Joe. Joe will never get better but I want his last days to be peaceful and loving. The ulcers on his heels are inflamed, open, red around and white in the middle; he cannot walk anymore. Two men job with the lifting machine, said the nurse. I can only hold his hand and kiss him. Sometimes he rewards me with a word. Once he pulled me closer and kissed me smack on the cheek.

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

By the end of 2012 Joe's health gradually deteriorated as expected and was predicted. He had a few falls, so he became confined first to the chair and later to the bed for most of his time. There is no turning back.

31.10.12

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

My sons will also have to make a step in line. Next in line. Death will hit our boys because there won't be anyone to fall back to; to carry their history. For the first time I miss having my extended family around me. I want to go home. I am alone. I would hate to become a nuisance to my children and grandchildren.

I wish Joe was with me watching 2012 American elections. We were both interested in politics. Now I no longer care which party will win the election or who will win the knowledge or talent test. I have no one to argue with. I have no-one on my side.

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

I am here now. I arrived.

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

I don't like my face in the mirror. I do not dream about the riches or love anymore. How wonderful youth is when one falls in love and becomes blind to all the imperfections of the loved one. When one believes in the love of an ideal man or woman.

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

3.12.12

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

I am 73 now; I am grateful for my health, my looks and my ability to think. I understand much more than I did at seventeen when Joe discovered something nice in me. I hope I can still do things and be someone important in someone's life.

Writing helps me cope with loneliness and despair.

Locked doors behind me

Locked doors behind you

Nobody wants to know

That we are broken in two

Part of me with you

In a nursing home

At the mercy

Of those that don't know you

That will never know you.

You hold my hand

With eyes shut

Elevated feet

Lips moving silently

Who are you speaking to?

What are you remembering?

Where are you travelling?

Memories

Of blooming springs
Of dreaming
Of believing
Of dancing cheek to cheek
We arrived
Don't go yet
I don't know how to do it alone
We have it all now
The bed is waiting
The movie is on
Books to be read
Flowers to smell
The kitchen invites
The future is ours
Don't leave me
There is nothing for me
Without you
Why can't we go
Hand in hand into the valley of silence
Like we travelled
Every step of the way
Watching out for each other
Don't leave me behind
Seventy three in front of me
Seventeen inside
Who would believe
That I was ever seventeen
And looked at the sky for eternity
Looked into your eyes and discovered
Love like nobody ever knew
The first flower of spring
Seventy three on the outside
Seventeen inside

People in the nursing home became my friends.

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

How could a place change from hell to heaven?

Nobody walked anybody or played games with anybody in 2011 when Joe first entered this place. Nobody talked to visitors or residents; nobody greeted anybody. Now they tell me what Joe ate, how they washed him, what medication he is on. They ask me where I would like to sit with him. Would I like a cup of coffee? I talk to Rachel and Evelyn and we agree that we are all grateful for the change. All is well that ends well, they say. I believe that everything is possible if we put our minds and hearts into it.

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

4.1.13

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

10.2.2013

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

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

16.1.13 I had a dream that Joe was well again and we remembered the days of his sickness and his getting well. We were grateful for our health and each other. Nothing else was important. I was grateful for the dream and wanted it to continue. Perhaps we all fail to be grateful. Unfortunately nobody gets a second chance; nobody gets the opportunity to use the painful lessons one learns on the way. There was a preacher on TV telling how every flower needs manure to grow and bloom. We all apparently need unpleasant times to understand and appreciate.

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

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

17.1.13

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

20.1.13

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

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

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

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

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

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

Our mountain is levelled now and our gathering of possessions is meaningless. Will we ever know why we were granted this moment in time immemorial? Will we ever know if we spent this moment as we were meant to?

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

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

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

12.2.13

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

14.2.13 Joe survived his birthday and his number 13. He always said that everything happened to him on 13th. I think it will be good for him to be at rest. It's time to make that last step in line to eternity. Do people live good lives in order to have a nice funeral with lots of nice words said about them? I am next in line.

15.2.13

I cannot read or watch TV.

I am stunned into waiting.

We never reached the future

We never found the answers

We never became

Who we wanted to be to each other

The mountain laid itself into the valley

As we travel the last steps into the unknown

Saturday 16.2.13

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

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

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

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

Tuesday 19.2.13

Phone calls with condolences came from all over Australia and from overseas. Funeral has to be arranged. We have to get music in order.

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

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

Wednesday 20.2.13

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

Daniel planted a tree in memory of Joe.

Thursday 21.2.13

Everything is a blur of faces and words.

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

In Loving Memory

Of

Jozef Zagar

12 February 1929 - 18 February 2013





Our Lady of Fatima Church

Lightning Ridge

Jozef Zagar was a loving husband to Cilka, Father to Marko and Marjan and father in law to Kathy. He was Poppy to his adored grandchildren Daniel, Michele, Natasha, Eliza and Janez

Order of Service

Lightning Ridge 23 February 2013

Opening music - Tanja's ballads

Opening Prayers

Make me a Chanel of your peace

Daniel Zagar: First reading from Ecclesiastes: There is a time for everything

Responsorial psalm Marjan Zagar: The Lord is my shepherd

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

Song Pogresam te- I miss you - Tanja Zagar.

Marko Zagar : Eulogy

Nasha Zagar: I remember

Marjan Zagar Tells about dad's wishes.

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



Nasha Zagar:**I will Remember... by Nasha and Eliza**

I will remember how Poppy used to call us his little girls,

Even when we grew taller than him

I will remember how he loved to feed the pigeons,

And his fancy hairstyle that was similar to a top knot pigeon's.

I will remember how he said to me once 'what is that beautiful singing,'

Even though I was crying;

That made me laugh,

I will remember how he liked to tickle toy animals and make them jump,

And us at the same time

I will remember how he liked to joke around,

I will remember how he used to say 'who is that'

We thought it was funny until we realised that he was suffering from Dementia

He loved life and he loved his family.

We will miss him

Prayers of the faithful:

Daniel: Thank you God for our poppy who loved us and was always so happy to be with his family. Lord hear us

Lord hear our prayer

Nasha: We ask you Lord to bless all the wonderful people in Lighting Ridge hospital and Age Care who lovingly and patiently cared for our poppy during his long illness. Lord hear us.

Lord hear our prayer

Eliza: Dear Lord please bless all who came to celebrate our dear poppy's life with us. Lord hear us

Lord hear our prayer

Janez: Lord we ask you to bless the good people who visit the sick and the lonely.

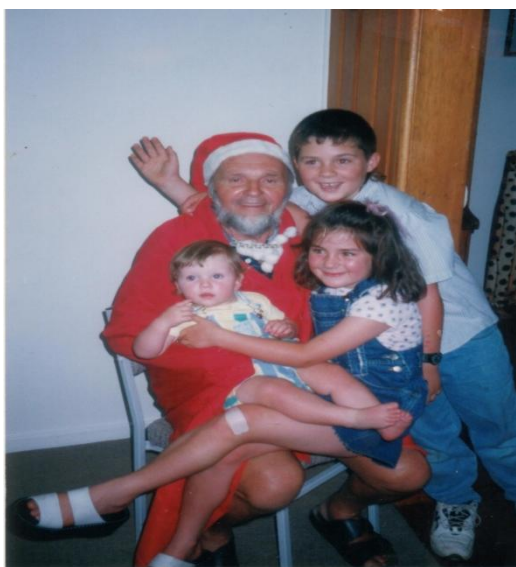
Lord hear us

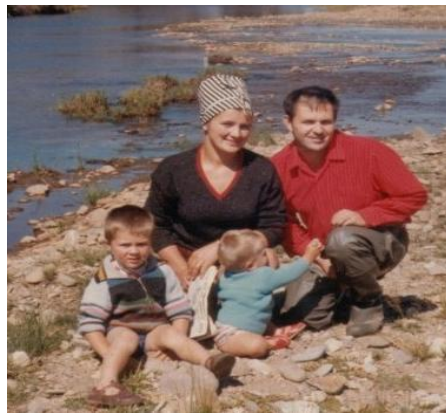
Lord hear our prayer

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

Where no one stands alone - Elvis Presley







Saturday 23.2.13

The world became surreal. We eat and play cards; we have to do something. At 6pm we go to mass for Joe and then we have a BBQ. Women prepared cakes for the early celebration of Kathy's birthday. We play bowls-bocce in the backyard. With a house full of people we have to do something to pass the time. Mourning will have to wait.

Sunday 24.2.13

Most of the visitors left. Marjan took his family and me for a drive to where floods were and we saw thousands of fish that died as the flood-water subsided. That too is life.

Monday 25.2.13 The last visitors left and I locked myself in to deal with my heart. I cannot face people; cannot even talk to anyone on the phone.

Tuesday 26.2.13

I feel guilty for not talking to all the wonderful people who expressed their condolences by their presence or by phone and email.

27.2.13

I haven't been out of the house since the funeral. I feel unwell. There is a stone in my chest and I have to melt it into tears. I feel shaky and cannot face anyone. Maybe I hope that Joe will return if I wait alone. I have been calling him but there is only silence. One never knows another's sadness and there are no words to describe it.

Regrets. I haven't been good enough; I was a selfish person. I was a jealous woman; I wasn't generous; I was needy; I wasn't grateful enough for good things in life; I worried about possessions and achievements rather than people.

I now know that Joe and I have been blessed; we held hands all the time; we knew we belonged. Maybe it wasn't an ideal marriage but life rarely is.

Joe became first my friend then my lover then my husband then the father of our children and grandfather to our grandchildren. In the end he was my child for a few wonderful years. He lost his inhibitions and fears; he told me how much he loved me and how precious I was to him. I washed him and fed him and caressed him. We grew closer during the last few years than we did during our courting days. We became each other's everything. We spent most of everyday in each other's arms. I hope he also remembers our days of our togetherness.

1.3.13

I am surprised by many expressions of sympathy from people I did not expect to remember us. Phone keeps ringing; sympathy cards keep arriving. I went to town for the first time and returned weak and unbalanced inside and out; I try to be brave but I can't get my head or my heart in order. People say: hang on and be strong; I really feel like I am dangling in space. I no longer belong anywhere; I have no reason to be anywhere. My reason for living died. Mick Ford brought Joe's ashes.

Linda rang for me to come for coffee. I said: I can't come visiting yet. I have a stone in my chest. I have to melt it into tears before I can live again. She said: Drink chilli sauce and it will make you feel better. I can't blame her for not feeling what I feel. I did not feel anything when friends lost their partners. I never knew what it is like. Being cut in half is personal. I need time.

2.3.13

The song Did you ever know that you were my hero is playing on my mind; Joe truly was the wind beneath my wings. I feel old, weak and vulnerable; my wings are folded.

As I went shopping for the first time people hugged me and expressed their condolences. I dreaded their intrusion into my sadness and confusion but I was grateful for their caring. I will gradually fade away. Joe and I will be together again. I have to believe that. He made me feel safe and protected, wanted and needed, precious and loved. I am none of those things anymore. I am not essential to anybody.

People have been good to me. Friends come and congratulate me on my nice family. I almost forgot that my family also suffer the loss. They performed beautifully in their roles during the funeral. They stood by me and we remembered our lives as we witnessed Joe's dying.

I wrote a note for the local paper and I meant every word of it.

Thank You for helping us celebrate a special life

My family and I wish to thank all the people who came to celebrate the life of my husband Joze Joe Zagar on Friday 22.2.13. We also thank everybody for expressions of sympathy, kind words of support and offers of help.

We appreciate the great kindness and support of the Age Care staff during Joe's long illness. Thank You especially to the staff of Age Care who supported us and made us welcome in the facility during the last days of Joe's life. You are unforgettable.

We thank the good people who visited Joe and other residents of the Age Care. We are especially grateful to the ladies who come to Care and Share their lives with the residents on Fridays. God bless you.

I feel very fortunate knowing that in my hometown, Lightning Ridge, live many wonderful people who care.

Last but not least I would like to thank all my friends who travelled from far away to farewell their friend Joe.

4.3.13

Visitors keep coming; sometimes I wish to have time to weep but they entertain me with kindness and humour. Life is for living. I wish Joe was with me. We had everything we ever wanted but his time was taken away. Time is all we ever have. He is in another world. I love you Joe. Look after me from wherever you are.

7.3.13 In the mornings I search through my dreams but dreams are fading away when I open my eyes. I try to return into my dreams because anxiety has not reached my subconsciousness yet. Cally asks me how do I feel in myself.

I haven't had the time to feel anything yet. People talk to me and I am as I always was, cheerful and polite. I have been on the roller coaster and it hasn't stopped yet in my head or heart. I like harmony I am careful in what I do and say.

I remember Helen's words: The rain fell in a desert and the tiny shoots of grass came up but a camel spotted them and ate them before they had a chance to grow. Helen related that story to

my grief experience. I can't explain why I can also relate my grief to those shoots of grass. I have to mourn my Joe; I have to cry and I know I will but first I need a rest from all the camels. Let the grass grow in my desert. I make sentences but I do not feel yet. I am busy; I keep busy; people keep on coming; I am overwhelmed by the kindness and friendliness of people I barely know.

I get emails offering assisted living; I watch films about assisted dying. I finally understand the prayers of long ago. As children we were told to do novenas for a happy last hour; we prayed to be reconciled with God before dying. We also had to beseech Mary to pray for us now and at the hour of our death. The hour of our death is our destination before we enter the other side whatever the other side may be. We are all on the way; from now on every day will be a gift.

27.3.13

Full moon always plays tricks with me. It starts with bad dreams; it causes sleeplessness and desolation; a feeling of doom and worthlessness makes me depressed. I know that these negative feelings will pass. At night I dream about travelling with Joe. I get lost, I lose my possessions, I lose Joe; nobody listens to me, I run to escape. The scenery is always depressing; I get bogged in the mud, the road ends and I cannot turn back. The dreams really are related to my situation but they change as soon as the full moon is over.

Some people dismiss full moon's influence and I tried to ignore it but the nightmare dreams always start a week before full moon and as soon as the moon begins to wane I again sleep well and dream pleasant dreams. This has been happening all my adult life. I can only speak for myself but the influence of moon cycle on me is real.

22.3.13 I am afraid. Will anybody hold my hand like I held Joe's hand when I will no longer speak or eat or walk on my own? I hope that god will not make me wait too long after I stop doing things for myself. I have never been good at waiting and waiting for death is not pretty. I must keep busy and stop thinking of eternity. I still have Joe's funeral flowers and condolence cards displayed with his ashes. Dust to dust is no longer a poetic expression. It sits on my table but does not respond. Death is a one way road.

People ask me: What will you do now? Are you going away?

Should I do something? Should I go away? I belong here. I have been here for 45 years and people know me; many of them hug me as we meet in the local supermarket or at the post office; they greet me on the street; we meet at community gatherings. Lightning Ridge became my hometown. Maybe I don't belong here, maybe nobody belongs here but after almost half a century I don't belong anywhere else. I am alone here but I know that I will be alone anywhere I go. Here at least I am alone among people who know me. Knowing someone is almost like liking someone or like belonging. Not really belonging because the only place I ever belonged was with Joe. I knew that from the beginning.

18.3.13 At two in the morning I felt someone tapping me on the shoulder. I jumped and screamed. As I opened my eyes I saw a shadow of Joe over the bed. He was covering me up. I became totally awake and a pleasant sensation flooded over me; I felt at peace; I was complete; he was there watching over me. I tried to recall the vision. I closed my eyes to relive the moment and the feeling of being safe and complete. I stayed awake until the morning savouring the warmth and friendliness of the event. It was a dream of course. I heard of ghost stories, apparitions, visions and so on. I always knew that they are a game of the mind; a dream; a

fantasy. But what is life but a dream? What do we know of the subconscious that produces dreams? Seeing Joe had a feeling of a real visit.

Oh, my God, real life is not like that.

What is real life like?

What is real life?

What is real?

Are dreams real?

Is being awake an illusion?

Is real what I touch or what touches me?

I feel like the cloud has lifted from my horizons. I will have to re-evaluate my beliefs, values and expectations. The sun is shining; the breeze is refreshing. I have to choose the path I will travel. I have to find something in the future to live for.

I am beginning to accept solitude. We are all alone in part of ourselves regardless of how many people are moving around us. I visit the tree Daniel planted for Joe; it is growing beautifully. Life goes on. My garden needs me.

I have been a child, I have been young; now I will try to enjoy every day of being old and older. I will accept moments of sadness and those of joy because I know that they will pass and never return. I will make the experiences help me grow.

4.4.13

Nobody tells me when I cross the line and say something inappropriate or when I do something unseemly. Nobody tells me what to do or what to be; there is nobody who cares. Freedom is liberating and the greatest liberty is death. I watched a film in memory of Dr. Anne Turner who chose euthanasia for herself. Her husband died from dementia and she knew what to expect when she was diagnosed with the same fast deteriorating disease. Forgetting scares me. What will I do when the time comes? I would hate to be a nuisance to my children but then Joe never became a nuisance; he completed me, he offered me an important role until he died. What would I be without this role? I was essential to Joe. Maybe I will have to allow my children to cope with my ageing and dying. Life is only an experience; witnessing Joe's death was an awesome spiritual experience. I think we all experienced a new dimension of life. I wonder if it was right for the children to be present when Joe died but we all felt closer to each other by the experience.

The debate about euthanasia scares me; the idea of having a friendly farewell from life is nice but life itself wants to go on.

I assisted Joe until his death. Did I have the right to prolong his misery by feeding him and giving him drinks? I remember many years ago when I was in pain; all I wanted was to die. I was living for the needle to take away the pain. I was young then and there was a chance that I would get better but I only wanted to end the pain, to escape. People occasionally asked if Joe is getting better. There was absolutely no chance for his condition to ever get better. What right did I have

to prolong his suffering? Was I only serving my own selfish purpose; was I afraid to lose the role of a carer? Did I want people to see how good I was to Joe so they would admire me? Did I pretend that Joe and I had an ideal relationship? No relationship is perfect; we managed to muddle through our disputes like everybody else but during the last few years we became totally devoted to each other. The struggle for supremacy and power ended when Joe surrendered. I wish I was more tolerant. I look at my beautiful home and garden and wish that Joe was here to enjoy it; everything is a work of his hands and mind. He enjoyed building; he liked using his mind, his energy and his skills. I wish he had time to enjoy the fruits of his labour but I know that idleness never made him happy. He enjoyed achievement; he was climbing the mountain; he was happy with his successes. Even children often complain that they are bored when they have nothing to do. Work is life. Nobody owns anything really; we only take care of things for a time. Life is a temporary arrangement. Only the memory remains but even that fades. Was I trying to be good so I would go to heaven? I don't know if anyone is still seriously considering the everlasting glorious life in heaven or the torment of hell. I experience hell when I am bad. When I am good I experience the harmony of heaven.

I don't think I would be a good old person accepting help; it would be the worst being looked after by my sons. Their wives might not want me to be a burden to them. Then again maybe they are more generous than I am.

There are billions spent on dementia to prolong the misery of those that no longer know that they are alive. Kevin has been in a nursing home for over eight years, he never moved out of his chair or spoke a word or ate by himself or showed any sign of life but they feed him and wash him every day. Millions are also spent on premature babies although most of them will never be healthy and strong. And at the same time healthy children are dying of starvation all over the world. Paradoxes of life.

I met Mary on the street. She called me her inspiration. She poured out her story. Her husband Steve changed. She left him for a couple of months and now she returned in the hope that she will be able to cope. They have been inseparable for the last fifty years but now she can't cope anymore. He is clinging to her, controlling her, blaming her and accusing her; he is happy one moment and angry the next. I can't take it anymore, Mary sniffed into the hanky. I stood by him all my life but now he tells me that I am stupid and forgetful. This has been going on for a year now. I just keep a distance.

Did you see a doctor? Maybe something is bothering him.

Doctor gave us both antidepressants and it helps a bit, says Mary as she wipes her eyes. I don't ever remember seeing Mary on her own but now I never see them together. I am afraid to mention dementia and ask if they had a test. I don't want to plant the wrong ideas into her mind.

I knew you'd understand, says Mary. How does she know that I went through the same stage with Joe? We almost separated during the first years of his dementia.

Lucy comes with Jehovah Witnesses' pamphlets. I like Lucy; she is convinced that her story about god is the only true story and that she will be saved by her faith. Lucy hopes to convert me to her truth. I need a faith; faith is a gift; faith offers certainty and security. I would like to have a simple faith of my childhood but I lost the certainty of my parents' faith. I have to accept the awesome mystery instead.

People from the very beginning have been searching for the creator of the universe. They needed the almighty who will reward good deeds and punish the bad. The belief that the almighty is in charge, takes away the burden of responsibility and the fear of failing. It is god's will, we say. Faith is the foundation for hope. Faith, hope and love, my mum used to say as she embroidered the words on my hanky. Without love we are nothing. Do we punish and reward ourselves by our own idea of good and bad? Who is deciding what is right and wrong. Shakespeare said: There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so.

Everybody created for himself an image of god; people ascribe to god their own characteristics; everybody wants to be powerful, worshiped and glorified forever and ever. The idea that the creatures on the anthill of our tiny planet know the mind of the creator of the universe, seems presumptuous to me.

There have always been gods on Earth though; some have been chosen others have chosen themselves. Some have been kind some have been cruel but they all punished disobedience.

I watch the news; there is a mass hysteria when one of the god-like-dictators dies. People cry openly on the streets for the person who oppressed them. Do they believe that they have to cry to show how obedient they are?

Harmony Day 2014

For Senior's week 2014 community organisations prepared Harmony day gatherings and celebrations for Golden girls and boys.

This is the first outing for me since Joe died.

We meet at Lion's Park for a BBQ, multinational food-fest, fun and games. There are people of many nations, ages and cultures seated around large tables; we feel compelled to chat and assimilate our vastly different views and concerns.. We hug and pat each other as we inquire about health; mental and physical. Nobody actually asks about mental health but we all want to know how others cope with aging and loneliness. Social butterflies of the past became wilted flowers looking for simple recognition and friendship. Most realised that pretensions are useless since intellect and money cannot buy youth and desirability. We don't even flirt anymore. Harmony day is getting more harmonious every year. I sit again with my friends from the Age care and some of those on the waiting list. We smile benignly. Even Simon realises that there is no turning back the clock however much he would still like to test his manhood.

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

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

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

I would myself often just like to sit and look at animated faces and gestures demonstrating happiness; but I smile; some even laugh benignly to cover up the empty moments, so harmony will shine on our disillusioned faces. I try to forget that, although we lived along each other for decades, we are strangers and that we don't really care for or know each other; we are only here for a free BBQ and to let the organisers go on with their job. It is apparently healthy for older citizens to socialise; it is healthy also for the organisers to have the organising jobs. Medicare Local employs people to exercise with us elderly; they help us with water aerobics, walking and gymnastics; they also help young families to shop wisely and look after their babies properly. The whole town is looked after. We no longer have to struggle; there are helpful offices all around us. They write vouchers when your money runs out; they also provide counselling. No need to struggle; no need to be strong or wise. Just smile gratefully. Deal with your aloneness privately, please.

This reminds me of my mother. As a child I tried to help the newborn chicken out of the eggshell but mum told me not to do that because the struggle makes the chick strong and healthy.

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

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

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

In the morning I watched the line of ants diligently marching through the brick wall towards the supply of food in my kitchen. I watched their disciplined struggle for survival and then I sprayed them dead. The swallows came, hundreds of them celebrating life. In their beaks they brought the mortar for the foundation of their new homes on the eaves of my house. They like brick houses. They seem to like white brick houses best. Every year hundreds of them come and mark the spots for their nests all around my house. Some nests are already architecture in progress others are just foundation markings where the swallows mix the gluey saliva into the dirt to secure the nest. I watch the flurry of their excitement and enthusiasm. Full of life they are building a home and a future for their species.

I remember those swallows in our barns at home; swallows were the harbingers of spring; they were welcome every year to nest in the warmth of the stable. As children we loved to watch the little beaks waiting for their parents to bring food. We were told never to harm swallows. Only here are hundreds of them and the dirt falling from their beaks is all around the house. Their building site is my veranda; I can't let them build hundreds of nests. I take the hose, wash away their efforts and make their struggle futile. The gluey brown marks on the white brick are reminders that I stopped their friendly colony multiplying. You can't hose down their gluey foundations. I see the confusion in their flight. I feel the pain in my chest but they found another house and they start again. Such is life; it never gives up.

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

It is economically sensible to keep people kicking as long as they can rather than put them in the residential care which costs the government plenty. People live longer so we are becoming more of a problem every day. It is cheaper to keep community harmonious with little gatherings in the park.

Exchanging local gossip is like a breeze refreshing the day. We air our prejudices and political convictions to contribute to harmony. Prejudices and hatreds grow like that. Local scandals provide the grounds for embellishing the stories. We would be bored and depressed without gossip. Without human tragedies nobody would bother reading the papers.

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

We dig into the history and culture of our ancestors to offer Australia all we are. Places we came from, things we have seen, and people we have met uniquely shaped us. Together we celebrate multicultural Australia and the centenary of our town, begins Uta.

Generations following each other. It's comforting knowing that our children carry our genomes into the unknown future. I wonder if immortality is our only purpose; is there no other meaning to life? Did we weave stories about god just to preserve the hope that there is after-life? Is life independently organising its future without our help and prayers? Plans are man's odds are god's. Life goes on and we are no closer to the meaning of it all; we do not understand space and time; we cannot define Nothing, from which according to scientists time and space and mass exploded; we might as well call this almighty nothing, god. Or life. Or nature. Or Big Bang. Or Boson- the little god. What really is your name, God? We would like to uncover god's secrets, we peel away false notions but there remains another and another layer of unknown. Is life an enormous everlasting onion? We cry peeling away its layers. Is life ignoring our efforts and anxieties

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

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

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

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

Times were hard for new settlers but Aboriginal people probably suffered the most because they became dispossessed. Their way of life was destroyed; the government told Aboriginal children not to speak the language of their parents and not to listen to them. Parents lost control of their children and of their own lives.

My children have Aboriginal mother and German father; they are growing up to be Australians; Hopefully we will become a nation where people respect and accept each other for who they are. The only time all my brothers and sisters met was in 1973 at the Head office for Children's welfare in Sydney. We had a meal together in a restaurant and went in the Hyde Park afterwards

to play. I was thirteen and my youngest brother was four years old. I was excited and looking forward to seeing them but we never met all together again. I don't feel particularly close to any of them because we hardly know each other.

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

In 1978 the government flew me to Walgett to meet my mum. We were both crying when we met.

Lightning Ridge in 1978 was very different from what it is now; it was like the Wild West from American films. I met a lot of colourful people both black and white. The Diggers hotel was a drunk's paradise, plenty of alcohol, plenty of drinking friends and plenty of colourful yarns about opal and the one that got away.

Lightning Ridge miners hate ratters who go down other people's mines at night and steal their opal. Some claim holders threw dynamite down to blow them up; I know of one young man who went grey overnight because he got caught in a blow up. I used to own a claim but gave it up because the town has almost overrun itself with rules and regulations; mining became too expensive.

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

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

We really are a rainbow coloured lot. We are probably the only town in Australia where overseas born residents have the majority. There are over twenty five nationalities present right here today. sums up Dianne.

Ppal means everything: popularity, power, luck and prestige, agrees Dominick.

Elena, a Philippine lady, takes the microphone; she is looking over people chattering and smiling. She tells how her husband came from Lightning Ridge to Philippines looking for a wife.

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

Filipino ladies are pleasant, beautiful, young, well educated Catholic girls who abandoned their dreams of marrying a young husband of their own nationality because they wanted to make their families in Australia. Love is a many splendid thing. Love for the offspring comes first. Old European men and young Filipino women had to give up something to make a family in the right environment. Perhaps we are all trading something for something else to get what is really important to us. Most of us traded our beautiful homelands so we could offer our families more prosperous life in Australia. You can never have it all, Joe used to say. You can't eat your cake and have it.

I remember my earlier conversation with Dianne.

Females pick a male that will best provide for their young, said Dianne. The strong male inseminates more females; the richest man picks the prettiest girl. It is only natural; the same happens with other species. Since I could not have children I did not need a provider so I picked spiritual partners. When you are young you don't rationally think about it but it is in the nature of things. It's the preservation of the species.

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

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

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

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

Now we have more people in the offices than down the shaft mining. Those in the know have the power to use the poor miner any way they like, Bill calls out; he is an old-timer respected for his experience, wisdom and knowledge; he does not need the microphone. The pen pushers are the first to know where opal was found and they exploit this knowledge.

Mining became too expensive for an ordinary bloke so most people are on some kind of social security, reasons Steve quietly.

Alcoholics claim to be disabled and they are even entitled to a personal carer these days. An alcoholic and his carer pocket about nine hundred dollars a week. They are also entitled to a rent assistance and other handouts. No wonder men no longer dig for opal, says George.

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

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

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

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

I remember the time when there were four of us teachers in the local school; there were 96 students and the question was whether the student numbers would warrant having four teachers. There are over a hundred people employed now for 400 students; they have all the new gadgets but the student achievements haven't improved, I say to nobody in particular and nobody is interested. We remain different and have our own axe to grind.

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

I remember a migrant camp Bonegilla near Albury, explains Sally. Most of us migrants in the fifties and sixties came to Bonegilla to be sorted out and sent where work and accommodation was arranged for us. We were all reborn in Bonegilla. We carry the name Bonegilla written on our hearts and that was probably the only identification with Australia the man had. He probably heard of opal on his arrival to Australia and ventured into mining.

I remember Bonegilla. Most of us are a bit nostalgic about our second hometown. Bonegilla is the place where we first smelled the dripping and crunched the corn flakes. Bonegilla was our introduction to mutton and gravy and boiled veggies and flies and foreigners and heat. I will never forget the flies. Nobody in Bonegilla spoke English except officials who decided where we will live and work. Over 300 000 migrants passed through Bonegilla between 1947 and 1971.

I loved Bonegilla. I experienced an enormous surge of optimism and hope. We left behind the terror and the anxiety, the relations and the regimes; we were free. I remember the tiny corrugated tin rooms and the raindrops falling on them and the noises wind made. There was hope and excitement in the air.

While I rejoiced and dreamed of our beautiful future my husband moaned about soggy vegetable floating in lukewarm water, greasy mutton, grey gravy, strange smelling custard, spongy bread, overcooked eggs, burnt toast, and lumpy porridge, concludes Sally.

I heard Barry the bus driver say the other day to some American tourists coming to town that Lightning Ridge is no longer opal capital of the world but it became a retirement village. People come to soak their old aching joints in our hot artesian baths, tells Uta.

I don't care anymore, mutters 81 years old Hungarian, John. He lived on his own since his wife died ten years ago. Recently he entered a local nursing home and is missing his freedom and the adventures of the olden times.

Lightning Ridge is the only town with a question mark on the road sign after the word Population, says Dominick.

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

I hear there is a new rush at the back of Grawin, says Tommy. Everybody knows this little elflike miner who writes poetry. During the last forty years I've been chasing every bloody rush from Coocoran to Carters to New Town, from Nobbies to Nine mile and back again; I have been

sinking the bloody holes all my life and I never found opal. I am sick of rushing after the new rushes; I am sick of sinking holes and camping.

Rich people like to go camping once a year but we, opal miners, choose to camp all year around, says George. We are where we want to be; we are doing what we like doing; we do it when we feel like doing it.

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

Everybody has a finger on the button and the ears wired to something. We used to go bird watching and we listened to birds tweet; now people don't meet face to face, they meet on the face-book, agrees Uta.

Everything you ever wanted to know is on your computer; it's no use arguing or discussing face to face, says Dianne.

Where are the days when we went to the pub to just be with friends, smiles Bill. When I first came to Lightning Ridge an old miner told me: Here you lean on people who do nothing; you just wait for each other to do **nothing** together. When you get a feeling that you have to do something, lay down until the feeling passes.

Everybody is pressing buttons these days, says Dominick. I used to carry information in my head now they carry it in their pockets.

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

My head is full and can't take more information, my Joe used to say when he could no longer follow the instructions. I wonder if he was sad about not being able to remember. It scares me not remembering things.

Where have you been hiding, says Steve to Jack who joined us. Jack was Jovan back in Bolgaria but nobody remembers that.

I am busy, laughs Jack.

Doing what? asks Dominick.

Looking after old people. I start in the morning and don't finish until after dinner.

What old people, I ask. Jack is himself 85.

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

Everybody knows that most old miners have some money and opal stashed somewhere in their homes for a rainy day. Recently Jack placed his friend Tom in the nursing home and brought a solicitor to fix the papers so he could inherit what Tom had. Tom died a month later and Jack moved into his big brick house. Jack is boasting that he has over a hundred descendants, a formidable army of young people.

They are Jack's private Mafia, whispers Steve.

We all remember Jack walking with a stick most of his life.

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

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

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

I remember our arrival to Lightning Ridge. A friend took us to Jack's camp; I found him cooking porridge for his children and any others coming along. Whatever else Jack has done I will always remember him serving porridge to the children. Jack's two wives brought along children from other liaisons but he cooked for all of them and all of them carry his name. Maybe now in his eighties he looks after old people in the hope to secure the inheritance for his descendants.

Jack's daughter told me that dad never failed to put food on the table. When he ran out of money he contracted jobs with local farmers; he engaged Aborigines to do fencing, shearing and grid making for him. He bought them grog and tucker in return for their labour.

When English settlers were granted large leases in Australia they employed the poor convicts to work for them. The great divide between the two was never bridged. Workers and landowners are two distinct classes, explains George. Cockies now destroyed opal mining with their demands for compensation.

Funny how we developed our prejudices, says Charlie. Farmers in communist countries were considered the lowest rung and backward. The more land they owned less desirable they were. Private property was seen as immoral. Their children left the land uncultivated and went to work in the factories.

Lightning Ridge has more artists than any other town of that size, ponders Lucy who is not interested in mining or farming. People write books, paint pictures, create sculptures, build unique dwellings and plant exotic gardens.

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

Following our men to this desert, we had to create our own entertainment, adds Uta.

I never had a desire to be famous or at least I thought that the price of fame was too high. It must be my impoverished background. I came to the stage now where I don't want to have anything I don't use and need, I don't want to live in fear of thieves and of jealous people, Impi explains her new philosophy on life.

We were climbing the mountain; we were reaching for the stars, says George. His words echo in my mind. His words are the voice of my generation. We gathered goods and wisdom and knowledge; we finally became comfortable with ourselves and our station in life; we are ready to enjoy the rewards of hard labour and do all the things we never had time for before. We will be there for our family and friends and do good things for our community and humanity. We are on

top of the mountain and the view of the other side is into another valley. We have done what we came here to do; the time of rest arrived. We built our own monuments. Every generation travels a different road but destination is the same.

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

I always had the best of everything; I was never hungry; I chose what I wanted to study and all my life I worked in the jobs I loved, said Marta. She is a tall, slim, elegant, rich lady afraid that life will leave her unfulfilled. She does not know what more to wish for. She is even more afraid for her one pampered child.

I asked her why only one child.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Maybe we should have left some mountains for our grandchildren to climb, I smile.

We got hooked on getting rich. And on being better. With nobody to rely on and nobody to interfere we had to become self-reliant, says Marko.

The new refugees probably feel the same, everything you do becomes everything you are. Maybe we should not blame the kids for being relaxed. We made it possible for them to be comfortable.

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

We are the war babies who really had to use our wits, I smile in agreement. It is good to sit with people who travelled the same road.

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

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

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

How are you?

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

Not really, he said.

How is that?

A dog on the chain is fed and loved.

But you are free.

I can't eat freedom, he said. My friend never married, he has no responsibilities but he is not happy either.

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

I begin to understand where and how Lightning Ridge people formed their attitudes and views of the world. Many developed prejudices against nations, religions and races by an experience with people they met. We remember the same events but we are seeing them quite differently. This reminds me of the three blind men describing an elephant. We only remember tiny snippets of events that touched our minds and hearts. In retrospect we interpret events as they touched us. I remember the saying: we don't see things as they are; we see them as we are. We are never sure how we touched others but what touched us is etched into our memory.

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

I get sick of watching television. Murder, corruption and sex everywhere these days, sighs Impi with the sense of disgust; she is the oldest person present.

Corruption and sex are older than us. Those on top have always been corrupt and those at the bottom would be if they had a chance. These days it's harder to hide your sins, George states with authority because everybody knows that he reads.

George had dreams of making films and of being famous. He still keeps his body trim but we can all see age stamped into his skin. Now he is equal with the rest of us. I think old age is the best equaliser of people. One slightly demented person is no more important than the other. In the same way one drunk person is equal to all drunks. Their condition deletes everything else they ever were. Just as well that we are all heading in the same direction; this equalisation is a sort of a boomerang justice. What goes around comes around.

The poor finally got the voice. In the past they were punished for complaining, declares Uta. Uta is a thin tall serious Austrian lady who knows about persecution and injustices. She is doing penance for the wrongs her Nazi father committed. She is using every opportunity to teach the world to sing with one voice in harmony; she is determined to make everybody love each other. Self-righteous people have that undeniable earnest voice.

Church always helped governments to keep the poor obedient, adds Dominick.

The church oppressed them internally and the police stopped them from outside, agrees Steve.

When I asked Steve why he hates clergy, he told me his story.

I don't trust anybody, says Steve. His mother was a domestic and she could not keep him so she left him in an orphanage. At the age of six he became a servant to a cruel farmer; this did nothing to help him trust human nature. He hates rich people, politicians and clergy. He sometimes served in the presbytery. He was hungry and hoped that he would get some leftovers from the priest's plate but the priest gave the scraps to the dog.

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

I hate religions. I only believe in nature. I am glad they finally unmasked the priest paedophiles; Dominick throws his hatred of the clergy into the melting pot of intercultural harmony. Most paedophilia happens in the family with married men abusing their own children, Dianne defends the religious.

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

Parents have more power over their children, says Uta.

I watched Steven Hawkins last night. He said: When we will reach the last star, we will know the mind of god. I contribute this bit of Steven's wisdom to the Harmony but nobody seems interested in Steven Hawkins.

Scientists talk about trillions of galaxies and millions of light years but I can't relate to that. The question remains: what is beyond the last star, Uta eventually joins in the topic.

I am amazed by technology, says Dianne. I Skype my family in America for free every day. Who would believe fifty years ago that we will talk to people on other continents face to face for free.

I read that soon we will teleport people from one planet to another, announces Dominick who takes pride in reading about these things. He lives on the field in a shack without windows or doors. He has no electricity or water but he buys science magazines when he comes to town to cart council water home.

We keep making uncertain statements to glue our mismatched isolation into a harmonious companionship. It is all a patchwork. A small sample of a global village. We try hard to fit into this mosaic. One has to believe in something; god by any name.

Politicians work for their own pockets, continues Steve.

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

People who believe in God try a little harder, states Uta with the authority of a believer. I only follow Christ's teaching; love your neighbour as yourself; I follow God's revelation to the letter.

Uta firmly believes that God created Adam and Eve six thousand years ago and she can list the generations after them according to the Bible.

I only believe in what I see with my own eyes, says Steve.

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

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

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

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

A man asked his fellow prisoner:

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

Is there a difference? Asked his friend.

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

Communists punished you if they only suspected that you were unhappy, laughs Steve. He was in jail for two years because he tried to escape from the misery of his youth. Steve was never happy; 'we are here to suffer' is his motto.

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

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

It is interesting that of 8 billion people no two are the same; we think and feel and look different. Our DNA or genome or whatever you call it, is unique. They can trace your origins to Adam, Dianne tries to steer the conversation more in line with Harmony.

The scientists would rather believe in Big Bang than in god, sighs Uta.

Do you believe in evolution, Steve turns to Dianne.

I believe that species evolved in their kind but I will never believe that people evolved from monkeys. Different species can't cross reproduce. Different cats can have kittens but a cat and a dog can't make babies, reasons Dianne.

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

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

Politicians try to do the same, says Steve.

Life is an uncertain temporary and fragile arrangement; it's no wonder people want to place it in the hands of the almighty. Any almighty that offers hope, safety and protection. An afterlife is a bonus offered by most gods. Especially to old people, I say but nobody responds to my words. I notice that everybody travels in their own thoughts.

As long as there is poverty there will be gods, says Impi.

Societies maintain moral life with the aid of religion, agrees Dianne

Leaders camouflage their greed with ideals of common good while those at the bottom plan the revolution. It has been like that from the beginning, says Impi.

As soon as the opportunity arises those on top start feathering their own nests, says George.

I have to believe that there is someone in charge, says Dianne.

I rather like the idea of someone being in charge; the blind faith in the Big Bang seems scary, says Impi.

I wonder if the world would be better if people were the same, I try to neutralise the topic.

It would be boring, says George.

By the time you figure out what to believe and do, you die, declares Bill with the voice of knowing. Old people have this kind of final certainty in their voices. Bill has been here from the beginning.

As I listen to the assembly I realise that all of us elderly speak with an accent whether it is Scottish or New Zealand or African or Mongolian. There are rows of tables with about a dozen mismatched people each explaining to each other the ambiguities of life. My father said that there will always be those above and those below but the most important people are the ones that walk beside you. Now we walk together. We are finally equal if not the same.

I remember Milica of my student days. She was beautiful, witty, desirable, rich, and popular. I was none of those things but Milica chose me as her companion. I tagged along with her into society that did not even notice me; I suppose I was an accessory that presented no competition for Milica. She told me about her famous boyfriends and about her rich family and I was grateful for her company. Perhaps it was less demanding for her to socialise with those on the lower step of the social ladder.

Our Prime Minister Julia said, that she never knew what her lover was up to when as a lawyer she orchestrated the registration of a slush fund from which he misappropriated money, Dominick changes the topic. It is amazing how we fill the empty places and silences with news that touched us.

People are attacking poor Julia just because she is a woman, says Uta who is a peacemaker with the beliefs of a Seven Days Adventist. George once said that Seven Day Adventists are peacemakers because they are vegetarians. Not eating meat apparently makes them less aggressive. No iron in their diet or something.

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

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

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

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

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

People exchange glances; they cannot believe that Bill is seriously defending Melanie who became a town's pariah.

She owns half the town, says George.

We all know that she made her millions from stolen opal, accuses Dominick. He used to borrow money from Melanie and left his opal with her for security. To Dominick honesty is all but honesty made him go broke. Being broke makes you even less desirable than being a crook.

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

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

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

Sally told me that 85 years old Martin she worked for, wanted to marry her but she said that she could not lay down with the old man who had saggy grey skin.

If I only knew that he would die so soon I would be really good to him; but I didn't, did I; I could have had his house; now I have nothing, said Sally. The man who bought Martin's house took most of Martin's belongings to the rubbish tip before he moved into the house. Martin's old freezer was full of spoiled food because electricity was cut off, so the new owner dumped the freezer and the food.

Soon after Martin's death Jane, a young single mother, was scavenging at the rubbish tip when she saw a perfectly good pair of shoes. She stretched over an old freezer and stepped into an ice cream container.

The story is going around town embellished and changed by each storyteller.

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

The tip keeper threatens to call the police; health regulations prohibit scavenging or something. He stands over the mountain of rubbish like an almighty and Jane moves away before he could confiscate her stash. She will try again as soon as he goes away. She remembers where there is another pile of ice-cream containers taped over the top. She is watching from the bushes as the tip keeper turns into his little shed to make a cup of tea and have a smoke. Jane hides her bag under the bushes and climbs towards her treasure throve from the opposite side over the old fridges and mattresses; she keeps her head low and her eyes on the man. I should have put the shoes on instead of thongs, she realises when she cuts her foot on a broken glass. She wraps a hanky over the bleeding wound and crawls ever closer to her treasure. Tripe 7.2.12, says on one

ice-cream label. The other one says: goulash 7.2.12. So the food is a month old, calculates Jane. Who would throw out a freezer full of prepared meals? Divorce? Death? Who died?

I'll think about it later, decides Jane as she reaches for another container covered by a mountain of rubbish. A sealed plastic bag under the food has hundred dollar bills. She stashes the money into her bra. Feverishly she opens another container and finds another money bag which she stashes into her pants. The tip keeper is yelling; the bulldozer is again pushing an avalanche of rubbish towards her. Jane runs downhill, falls over and rolls into the bushes. She has no idea how long she has been lying there. There is blood on her hands; she must have hit her head as she rolled down the hill. The loud bird calls break the silence. Jane realises that it is time to pick her children from school but she needs a wash before anyone would see her. She walks slowly to her camp. She cannot risk to be seen by anybody so she waits for the darkness.

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

Jane's mind is full of plans and dreams; this is her lucky break; this is what she was born for. Is there really such a thing as divine intervention? She needs a lucky break since the bastard left her with two kids and no money.

The story spread like stories do in a small town. Most people believe what they are inclined to believe. Jane must have told her good luck story to someone who could not keep the secret. In a small town any story is retold until it becomes too big to be believed.

Martin kept the money in his freezer for safety. If he put it in the bank he would not qualify for a pension, Sally told me.

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

I am appalled at the vulgar language people use these days, tells Sally. My neighbour was calling her children for dinner: Get in, you little mother fucker cunts. Her morning parting words for her partner were: Fuck yourself you fucking mother fucker. Sally looks around to see how her bravery will be received. Most of us never dared say fuck even in a sentence about gutter people. We mentioned the f word but that was as far as we dared stray from decency.

People these days seem obsessed by sex. In my time bathroom activities were never mentioned and I never discussed my bedroom activities with my closest friend let alone aired them publicly, says Impi self-righteously. She is a grand old lady who knows that she knows better than the rest.

I remember when saying fuck was a criminal offence. Many drunken Aborigines were jailed for saying fuck, says George..

Old ladies still feel a bit sinful saying shit or fuck. It is written in their genes and in their culture that words like that are demeaning for ladies. I realise that claiming to be a lady is itself an

outdated, old-fashioned idea but we cling to the safety of our mother's teaching. Our husbands and sons may vent their anger with those words in our absence but they do not dare confront us, old ladies with them. Culture is holding people from straying too far. I like old-fashioned. I am rather withdrawn and a bit shy; perhaps I am a bit scared to make a fool of myself. I'll stick with f word rather than disgrace myself by saying fuck. I cannot even say fart.

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

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

Girls these days swear, steal and direct boys how to make them achieve orgasm. We used to enjoy and suffer quietly, says Uta. She is a pious, righteous lady who left her husband to show her solidarity with the poor. She had two children with men she introduced to Good News.

Girls sue boys for sexual harassment. I wonder how are boys to predict if their advances are going to be considered a harassment, says Impi.

Gays are everywhere; gays became gayner than heterosexual people, agrees George.

Everybody is saying how proud they are of being black, or homosexual, or sexual, or bisexual or multi-sexual, says Impi. Just imagine me saying that I am proud of being heterosexual; that would make me homophobic. Saying that I am proud of being white would be racist.

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

Look at all this lovely food, Dianne points at men turning sausages and steaks on the BBQ.

I remember our BBQs. You can have a day off; I am cooking today, Joe would announce. I always had twice as much work with his BBQ than I would with the oven roast but he loved to be a chef. poor darling. Women at our BBQ parties ignored me but flirted with him and praised his skills.

We finally have everything we ever wanted, says Impi.

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

We gravitate towards each other to create harmony for Harmony day and to please the organisers. We have to show our appreciation by creating a body of unity that is a bit bigger than the sum of bodies we are. Gravity is like god; invisible and unknowable. The smiles connect us like electric impulses of the brain connect the memories. We are all scared of losing our memories so we smile at faces as we try to remember their names. Harmony is important for our mental health. We must keep alert. I look at faces that with age lost appeal and distinction

I am glad I am old and don't have to follow fashions, says Dianne.

I am going to the bore baths after this, says Sally.

I sometimes go for a swim myself and there listen to the exchange of world news from different perspectives. Most of the bathers are from Europe and they communicate in a sort of universal mixture of languages they all understand.

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

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

I string words into poems; I speak to who Joe and I were.

We travelled on our cloud
For half a century
We promised
Eternity
Fidelity
Felicity
To each other
I want to see
What part of me
I left with you
I want to see
What did you do
With what we called
Our destiny
I want to see
If it is true
That love lasts for eternity
I want to see
If really
That part of me
With part of you
Was best of us
If that was what was meant to be
You were my destination
My eternity
You were my lullaby
My promise
My sanctuary

You came into my dream
Smile all over you
Like rain on dying flowers
Sadness gone,
Thirst quenched
Future beginning
Restlessness settled
Ready to go
One step after another
I am at the end of the road
With a story about us
Nobody can separate
What melted into one book
Of what we met on the way
To here

I am a Little Red Riding Hood
Wandering in the woods
No longer afraid of a big bad wolf
No longer searching for strawberries
Not hearing the birds
Not seeing the flowers
No one to laugh with
At funny
No one to cry with sad
No one to paint my face for
No one to dine and wine with

I had a gem
Hidden inside
Too precious to be seen
Too fragile to be known
Too scared of being broken
Too unique to replace
Nobody admired me because of it
Or it because of me
I hid it for safety
Knowing that you knew
That I am
Was enough

Just a stone on the grave of what used to be us
Just the wind blowing away memories
Raindrops
Tapping away
Echoes whispering
Your name
How could you leave me
In the middle of life
Unprotected
Unloved
No longer tickled to tears
No longer anybody
To anyone
Nobody to give a damn
If I die
Like you died
Nobody to share my dreams
Or food or bird watching
Nobody to live for
Nobody to approve or disprove
My behaviour
Nobody to praise or criticise
My decisions
I am not anybody's next of kin
With skin to skin awareness
Of being alive
Nobody responds to my touch
Nobody is touching me
I am a solitary tree
I need to cry in someone's arms
I need to call someone my own
Flowers I planted for your admiration
Bloom for themselves

Numbers follow each other on the clock
Days change names
Birds are nesting and flying away
Bees are buzzing
As I remember
Our moment in time
Just a stone on the grave of what used to be us
Just the wind blowing
Just the rain on the stone
Tapping away
Echoes whispering
Your name
All is spent
And said
We are
Where rest is a must
Set in a stone
Decorated with angels

You came
From your grave
Small
Childlike
You asked
If I still hold
The memory
Of us
Before transcending
Into night
You came to see
If you still make me happy
I wish you would stay
I don't know what we could do
At this hour if anything
I touch your side of the bed
I listen for your breathing
The bed is silent
I tell you to watch the news
You always watched the news
You are no longer here
I need to hold your hand
We held hands for half a century
Are you going to have a cup of coffee
A lolly, a chocolate, an apple, a kiss
What are you going to have

Christmas carols crying for Christmases
Of long ago
Childhood songs of love for a neighbour
It is Christmas, it is midnight
Hide your empty heart
Smile away tears
Where is my neighbour
Who is my neighbour
Silent is the night
Cabbages making heads
Oranges ripening
The big tree-our tree
How we admired that tree
The birds partying in it
How we loved to watch cockatoos at breakfast
They outside eating sunflower seeds
Us inside
Singing as we went
And laughed
Pointing out people and things
Faces on TV
Words on paper
Meaningful lines mixed with memories
Making plans for grandchildren
So proud of our boys
Loving them more every day
Holding hands like a daisy chain
Nobody to rejoice with
Or cry
I sit in the sun
With an empty seat next to me
I have to merge into a long forgotten single line

If I could
I would frame and protect
That moment we met
To remember the joy
As we held each other
And knew that we were
Just right
If I could
I would frame and protect that moment we had
To save the delight
For my evenings alone
A picture complete
Nothing is missed
Nothing is lost
I am running
The finishing line
Is a blur
But I am running
I must not be left behind
I will never catch up
If I stop running
To find god
To be god
To be with him
In him
To be just right in his eyes

Did you find in me what you were looking for
Or maybe something more
For a moment you were a part of me
And I a part of you
As one
In a book of time
Nobody can rub out
What we had
Or imagined we had.

What a beautiful day

To shop

Garden

Cook

Wash

Dust

Wipe

Scrub

Dream

Kill time, ants, spiders, cockies, mice, weeds, cats, dogs, enemies

Dreams, lovers and flowers die on their own

Worn out memories go with the refuse

Another murder on TV

Another romance in a book

Another misery disclosed

Another mystery solved

In the headlines

Local murder like a breeze refreshes stale dialogues

Enough

Gala event illustrated

A joke retold

A compliment rewarmed

Tired feet turned home

Enough

Cheer up

Life goes on

Running on empty
Trying to keep alive
Or living
The half of me with the half of you
Longing for unity
I don't know who I am
Since I am no longer half of you
Did I ever know
Was I ever anybody in particular
Was I ever the same today as yesterday
Was I ever certain of where I was going
Was I ever certain of anything
A snow flake lingering in the air
Melting into the ground
A butterfly floating from flower to flower
A breeze moving specks of dust
Travelling hand in hand forever
Making bubbles of life on the way
Bubbles of fragility afraid of fading
Of bursting into nothing
Hoping for another bubble in the afterlife
To start again with a stronger everlasting
Less afraid light within
Shining into eternity
Searching for the heart of it
For the head and heart of it
For the last secret

Flowers along the road
Are waiting to be picked
Everybody wants to be chosen
Everybody needs an embrace
We will soon see
The mystery revealed
We will soon know
Why we followed the script so willingly
Nothing ever is
Old or new
In timeless eternity
Like specks of dust
Hand in hand we go
We thought we were thinking
When we just followed
What was written in our head and heart
For us to do
Build a nest, store food, court and procreate
Nurture, guide and die
Like a flower on the roadside
Shedding seeds of new
Like specks of dust
Hand in hand we go.
We are all in line
To be picked
To become each other's first choice
I am afraid to be left behind

You sit and stare
Unable to move
Unable to beg
Unable to cry
Without a shoulder to lean on
Spent and shrivelled
Once loved faces around you
Waiting for God
Lips in prayer
Hands folded in resignation
Lonely days are long
Endless nights are scary

The mourners respectfully
Sniffing into white hankies
For their beloved
Departed
You will never be forgotten
You will live in our hearts
Says the obituary
I am cold
Inside and out
Lonely people
Walk with me
Without desire
We tremble in the wind
The rock we stood on melted
I am treading lightly
I do not wish to offend those who would comfort me.

I close my eyes to dream
Escape the pain
To start again
As someone else
A poem wanting to be born
In pain I scream
A bud in the making
A flower of the future
In place of emptiness
It could not possibly hurt so much
These emptiness
There are no words in emptiness

Sitting on top
With the view over
Evolutionary creatures
Struggling for food
Cold inside and out
Nowhere to hang my hopes
My longing has no address
My god gave me everything
Sitting on top
With a long way down
With a clear view of abyss
Holding on
Not knowing how long
Or why
I don't jump
Those below
Want me to jump
To make room
For next in line

The world ended
When you stopped loving me
Says the song
Since everybody forgot my name
Since nobody is happy because of me
Since nobody prays for me
People only pray to die
Pain free
Not to be a nuisance
Not to be incontinent
Not to beg for mercy

Give thanks for being
By leaving a trace
Of living
Every hour we know less
Of who we were
Every moment we are less
To each other
Undoing all we did
Paying for the wrongs
Emptying the tears
To wash away yesteryears
Saying goodbye
Not knowing more or less
Of where we were
Or where we are going
Talk to God
They say
Heaven is real
Hell is not

It was only a dream
Fading into the daylight
It was a dream
With us in it
There is no dream without us in it
I chase the wind
As time goes by
I watch it go and wave goodbye
I join the wind
I get along

Over the fence
The little white daisies
With a hint of pink
On the edges of petals
In stony dry bed
Praying for rain
Never picked
Just looked at
Over the fence
Outside the fence
Where things grow wild
Like our love
Searching for unity
Outside the fence
Outside of us
We understand each other
Feeding as we are
From the same ocean
Swimming as we are
In one eternity
We know what it is like to be
As we are
Small within the universe
Twice as big together
Rushing
With twice the need to succeed
And grow bigger
We know what it is like to be smaller
Without
We silently
Search in our hearts
For memories of places where we were
For the shiny apple of the knowledge tree

Showing us the way
To heaven
As we wade
Through hell
Our feet took us away
We wanted heaven
We chose hell.
Touch and go
Chasing each other
Through hell
To heaven
Time to evaluate objectives for living
Find ways to undo the mistakes
Forever hoping
For a winning ticket
To a better tomorrow
Touch and go
In the obstacle race to heaven
I jump over hungry faces
Rejected dreams
I collect honey
In touch and go race to heaven
Longing to hold and to have
The star
That was never mine
Never to be afraid
Of going away
Same distance forever
On parallel roads into
Unknown
Never asking
Why
Where

When

Why

Sun set behind the red line of the horizon

Crickets sing lullabies

As the sky lights up million candles

For my pleasure

The wind is dancing on the leaves

The rustle of the petals is scenting the air

When I wake up

I will forget the tears

The fears and the laughter

I will be strong

Fearless

Decisive

Creative

Cheerful

Getting along

I am going

Left right

Time goes on

30.4.14 It is 3am.

I had a vivid dream of going to the zoo with Joe. I stopped to buy something for children in a cafe but he kept going. I went after him but could not find him. There was the lake and the path around it like in Bled only the water was dirty. I heard Marjan calling: he is here. The voice came from a rickety old two story house. He is waiting for you upstairs, said Marjan. I tried to find the way up but the stairs were taken away. I tried and tried to find a way and then I woke up quite unhappy.

Now I know that he is waiting for me. How could he not? He was always waiting for me. I have to hurry up.

The finality of death scared me but I find comfort in knowing that Joe is there waiting for me.

30.4.14

You are waiting for me

you are calling my name

I am coming

I am coming every day

I cannot find the stairs to heaven yet

so wait for me

just keep on calling me

I want to be with you

2.5.14

I searched for someone in my dreams but the place was desolate, empty, abandoned; once precious possessions were left behind covered in dust. I realise that my dreams are a reflection of my inner life. Jewells and gadgets are meaningless when Joe's arms are not around me, when he is not admiring me and with me enjoying what we have. Not loved, not protected, not being precious to anybody, that is poverty.

Nobody is looking after me

nobody is looking at me

nobody is looking for me

nobody is looking with me

I became a Nobody

But who was I before? I was a teacher, a mother, a wife, a colleague, a housekeeper. I was a player in many situations but I lost my roles. Was that all I was? A part of something else? wasn't I ever a person on my own? Is anybody ever anything on one's own? I have to reattach myself to something somewhere. I have to find a new usefulness, a job, a role.

I played an equal opportunity role
In statistics
Stunt roles
In motherhood
Support role
Holding up your ego
A reluctant part in climbing
On foreign ladders of success
I had a minor part in persuasion
Among different races and creeds
With changing popularity
I have been a carefully avoided singer
Background fashion model
A runaway crier
Always scared of madness
I played a key role in research
Of God's intentions
About the future
And afterlife
Away from smallness
A distant star
In a very late night movie
A face of innocence
Your face and mine
As the wind in the grass played our tune