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Choices from the heart A collection of stories



Background to Project

Here at Kew Neighbourhood Learning Centre we are passionate about social inclusion and for a long time have wanted to document the stories of the many amazing people in our local community living with mental ill health. As is well documented around 1 in 5 Australians are affected by some form of mental ill health each year.

Through a grant from the Kew East Community Bank - Bendigo Bank we were able to employ Anne Carson, an accomplished writer and poet, and member of our KNLC team to undertake the project.

The process involved both internal and external promotion of the project through a poster as well as approaching individuals personally. Nine individuals told their stories with seven of the stories making it through to publication as contributors were able to withdraw at anytime throughout the process.

Each person met with Anne on at least three occasions; the first to tell their life story, the second to give feedback on the first draft and the final meeting to make any further changes. Each story took from a few weeks to a few months to complete. A project steering group including some of the contributors worked through any issues along the way. Special thanks to everyone involved.

Choices from the Heart is the treasure you now hold in your hand!

Robin Kenrick

On behalf of all at KNLC

**Many thanks to the following writers for their moving,
beautiful and most personal stories...**

Louise Davenport

Kay

Valerie Kingdom

Shirley Hillman

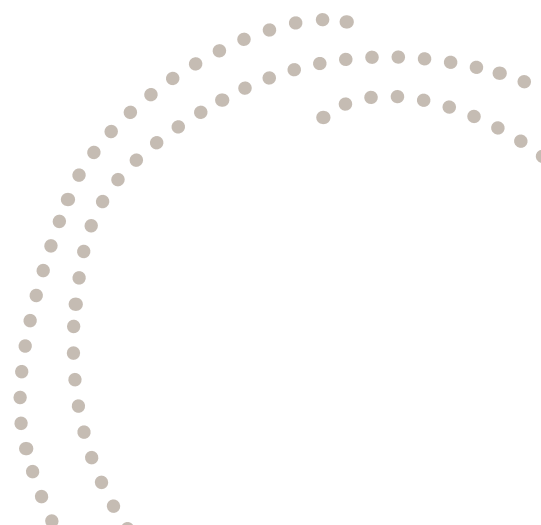
Peter Montana

George

Ray

Special thanks to Kew East Community Bank Branch –
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and Jo Marchese.

Designed and typeset by Marchese Design



It has been a great privilege to be entrusted with writing the life stories of such a wonderful group of people. Not only have they done battle with their mental illness but they've also battled harsh judgements society has made. This makes their bravery in speaking out about their lives even more remarkable. I was honoured by how open they were – even with painful and difficult experiences. Their openness allows the drama inherent in their stories to emerge and this makes for moving and compelling reading.

We wanted to write these stories for two reasons. Firstly we wanted to contribute to the education of the wider community, helping them understand their neighbours, friends or relatives who might be living with a mental illness. What better way of doing this than to hear from the people themselves. So we gave a group of people the chance to talk about their experiences and express their points of view. This enabled us to fulfil our second goal; namely to demonstrate to the people themselves, living with the daily challenges, that their stories and their endeavours matter to others.

There are many struggles for people living with a mental illness. One of them is to somehow or other not to let it take over your life; to prevent it from becoming one's sole identity in the world. All the participants made, and continued to make repeated choices like this – to follow an interest, learn something new, decide on a goal, risk love – each time a choice like this is made, a step is taken towards a richer life.

It has been a challenge to witness the suffering implicit in these stories – from people's own minds but also discrimination from the broader community, lack of understanding, hospitalisation, homelessness and financial disadvantage. Despite times of despair, all of these people have found ways to live and thrive, helped in some cases by pharmaceutical advances over the years. I was astounded during the interviews by how much we laughed. Humour, much of it black, was one tool in the armoury, helping people gain perspective and endure.

One of the most moving parts of each interview was hearing what people are most proud of. A child, a personal quality, an accomplishment – these human achievements sing out.

I admire this group of lovely, gritty, street-wise, people. They have developed an impressive kit of survival skills – patience, non-judgementalness, resilience and endurance. They have much to offer in terms of their collective wisdom, if only we would let them. Hopefully this booklet can be part of the new era where all people are valued for their humanity.

My thanks to all the participants for their openness and trust, to KNLC for support and making the project possible and to Bendigo Bank for funding.

Anne M Carson

Author; Kew, October 2010

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Work by Dimitri Cherpanov. A painting of Point Hicks where Louise would often go on holidays

Louise

My name is Louise Davenport and I live in a flat near the Yarra. Sometimes I walk down there and it's very peaceful. It's a one bedroom flat and I'm surrounded by my ex-husband's art. They're big landscape paintings, ochre and black ink and are actually called faux landscapes because they're abstract. I'm looking after them for him and I love them dearly. My marriage to my ex-husband is the thing I'm most proud of in my life. We lasted for 30 years! I got married when I was only 19 or 20. We met at a party and broke up 7 years ago. He caused me a lot of pain at different times but we're still friends, we just don't like living together. He gives me a hard time sometimes. He says I should exercise – but how can he say that to me when he doesn't – even after he had a heart attack last year! He wants to see me write again and use the computer and get fit. And I've started - I go for walks at 4 o'clock in the afternoon, down by the river.

We had lots of adventures when we were married. We loved to go camping. These were the best experiences I've had. Point Hicks was our favourite – at Croajingalong National Park. We just had a tent. Once we were caught in a flood there. We were cut off for 2 weeks and the lighthouse guy had to use a boat to get our supplies in. I needed medication which they flew in from a major Gippsland Hospital. They rang Melbourne and spoke to my doctor and arranged to bring it in by plane and boat. I put that scenario in my novel *Mother's Claw*. We also camped up north on the Murray and in the Otways.

We were pretty bohemian in the 70's and 80's. We had a group of friends who ran a clothing shop in Brunswick St

Fitzroy. This shop was the first to go into Brunswick St, before it became fashionable. It had 4 or 5 rooms to let at the back so there were always people around and we had parties and lots of fun. We have friendships that go back 20 or 30 years to that time. The people don't really come here but I do run into them at gallery openings and launches the publisher puts on.

But I had a hard beginning. Mental illness runs through the whole family. The family's mental ill health history is like anchors round my legs, pulling me down. My mother killed herself when I was seven and a half years old. That started it off. Then I got sick when I was in my 20's. My brother just got diagnosed last year. The doctors had never seen anything like it – someone in his late 50s having his first bout.

Early in my marriage my husband and I had genetic counseling at the Royal Women's Hospital. They said to me that any children I may have would have a one in three chance of suffering a mental illness. We walked outside and stood on the steps of the hospital and counted every third red car. They came often. We decided that we had enough problems with my illness and would likely be unable to look after children who might be afflicted with the same disease.

After my mother died my Dad remarried. I was really close to him and fairly close to my stepmother. I had a complicated relationship with her and my memories of her are mixed. She gave up a good career to marry my father and bring up his five children. She helped me many times; she cooked great meals and generally took care of us. She read all my essays with encouragement while I was at school and as an adult she

sympathized and helped me in my long lasting dispute with the State Public Service which was often traumatic. But she had different standards for her biological daughter and for us. Her daughter received special treatment as Cinderella, with my twin and I being the two ugly stepsisters. My stepmother's mother lived in a house next door to ours and she made my twin and I collect cow dung for her to make compost. Nothing like that was ever demanded of her granddaughter. In addition my stepmother professionally carpeted a room for her biological daughter. This room also had inbuilt wardrobes and shelving and she kept it locked. We weren't allowed in. So that led to a sense of unfairness. But we often had fun with our stepsister. One time we used her room to perform a play by Shakespeare. We moved the bed against the wardrobe to create a stage and put chairs in the room for the rest of the family to watch us. She was also the ring leader of late night adventures when we climbed out of our windows to go and raid a local farmer's passion fruit vine and play in his haystack. I was the most ungainly of the three of us and they had to give me a leg up and push and shove me through the window and back into the bedroom.

Another memory I have of childhood is from when I was 9 or 10. My father worked in the Campbell's factory and each year the workers would be issued with a pair of steel toe-plated shoes. At any one time he'd have many pairs still in use and he kept them lined up on the verandah. Well, this day I can remember polishing the whole lot of them – 5 or

6 pairs! I wanted to put everything I felt for him into those shoes so that they shone so brightly.

From early on I was good at writing. At school I remember writing short stories. They used the same methods of Creative Writing back then when I was in form 4 as they do now! The teacher put out a farm boot and a picture of a shed and we had to write from them.

My sister Marie and I are twins. We get on pretty well. We have that extra understanding that lots of twins have. We speak on the phone most weeks and she lives in Elsternwick. I spend Christmas with her and her family.

I matriculated, then took off 2 years working for the ANZ bank. Later I went on and did a BA at Melbourne Uni. It was at the end of the BA that I got sick for the first time. I'm not sure what brought it on – perhaps the uncertainty of not knowing what I was going to do next. They call that *Situational Disturbance*.

I worked in different administrative jobs from 1980 to 1993. Twice the State Public Service employed me but I failed the medical exams for permanency. So I worked as a temporary then took a redundancy package in '93. It's really hard working when you have mental ill health. I was the only one in that office who, because of my failure at the medical test, was unable to go for promotion.

What I always wanted to be was a writer so I could tell my Mother's story – to bring her to life. That was always my big dream, since I was very young. As a child I was always hoping that she would return. Between 30 and 35 years old



I wrote a novel called *Mother's Claw*. I was very proud of it at the time but there's so much trauma in that book I can't even open it now. I would have liked to have written a novel that was less personal. But I tell myself I don't have a license on pain – everyone experiences pain at some time during their lives.

This book had lots of other material in it as well. I got it published in 2001 by Black Pepper Press. But I have some misgivings about the novel. There are two sentences in it I feel so remorseful about. After my father's death I invented an image as a symbol for his wisdom which now disturbs me. I'd also like to change the title of one passage from *John Cain's third Term* to *The Government's third term* because of the complexities surrounding the employment of people living with a mental illness. These concerns make me feel strongly that I don't want anyone to read the novel. If it is ever reprinted I would change these two things.

The publisher is very good to me personally. We still have contact and he gave me a book for my last birthday. He's good to others and he's published 3 or 4 other authors – poets I think they are – with mental ill health.

While I was doing the novel I was studying with Gerard Murnane. He was unreal, such an inspiring teacher whose lectures held a measure of poetry. He encouraged the use of strong verbs and images with minimal use of adjectives. He used to say *catch the detail with emotion attached*. I used his method in the short stories I wrote. It must have worked because I got 3 of them published, then republished in my

novel. The magazines were *Meanjin*, *Southerly* and *Westerly Magazines*. It's not easy to get stories into them – I was rapt!

After a big gap I went on and got my Masters. They were encouraging me to take leave and finish the Masters later because I'd been stressed and deeply depressed but I knew if I did that it would never get finished. So I pushed myself and got it done. I had scholarships to support me. I wrote about the history of Queensberry St in Melbourne.

We were living in Oakleigh then. Mostly we lived in warehouse type places because of my husband's art. When I was doing my MA we were living in a studio above a newsagent. It was amazing to look at but didn't have a bathroom although it did have a tap and a sink. And these white painted windows all down the side. On the other side were metal windows – very unusual and it looked great. We stayed there 4 years.

Now I'm here in Richmond. It's Housing Commission and some of the people have issues with each other but I don't have issues with anyone. I don't get involved and I'm friends with everyone. I'm proud of that, no one ever says anything bad about me because I always try to get on with everybody. It's one of the things my ill health has taught me – how not to be judgemental and to accept people for who they are. It's not much but I don't judge people any more. I'm the only graduate here and not one of them has any education. The boys have all been in boys' homes for petty crimes. Some of the people around here use speed, heroin, marijuana.

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He used to say *catch the detail with emotion attached*.



My neighbours these days would say no if I were to ask them for any drugs. They don't want to see me get ill again. I smoked marijuana for a long time and did detox with De Paul House in 2006. Towards the end of the programme I started crying and couldn't stop for over an hour. One of the nurses asked me if my tears were because of the past, the present or the future. It was in fact for all three, the past, the present and the future. Giving up marijuana was like saying goodbye to your best friend. I like myself more without the marijuana, which combined with alcohol, leads to anti social outbursts which embarrassed the people around me and sometimes humiliated my husband. Now I feel that I'm a pleasant person who enjoys both solitude and sociability with others.

I think people in the community need to know more about mental ill health. When I get sick I have psychotic episodes, which can last anything from a week to a couple of months. It's like living out a narrative of a terrifying short story, sometimes developing into a situation where continuing to live is untenable. I lacerated my forearms on occasion and took an overdose on another because I thought suicide seemed a less painful way to die than the methods of murder my voices were predicting. I also have auditory and what I call tactile hallucinations. Hallucinations are really scary like living a very, very bad nightmare that goes on and on, or like dreaming aloud. You might be in the bush and mistake ti tree roots for live snakes under your feet. That's the tactile hallucinations. You feel the ti-tree roots squirm and slither just like they were actually moving.

Last time I got sick I thought that John Howard had set an integrity test for me and if I failed I would be buried alive with fire ants or drawn and quartered by police horses or urinated on by dogs. I imagine that I have to do terrible things, humiliating things. Only at the time I don't know it's just imaginary. I think it's really true. Or I get really scared that if I do a certain thing something bad will happen to someone I love. I have to have medication all the time to stop this but it makes me slow. I'm lucky I have a really good doctor. He's excellent. He's close by if I have any relapses and he really understands my illness and sometimes he's been instrumental in preventing me relapsing.

Having this illness has taught me patience. There were so many things I had to be patient about. I had to wait 18 months in a womens' boarding house before I came here. They said they'd transfer me within 6 months but it was 18 months in this tiny little room like a prison cell. I jollied

it up with colourful bed covers and blinds. I intended to get this place together with my husband but we were living separately, then he started another relationship. He's in Apollo Bay now.

More recently I think I've gotten stronger. I had another episode 2 years ago and I was in hospital. It takes a long time to recover. But I'm writing again. I'm writing about my life around here and my neighbours. Like the time Uncle Les got dragged into the Yarra by a husky. He could have drowned but we all laughed our heads off it was so funny. Writing about my neighbours and what they get up to may lead into something else but it's more a story than literature. It probably won't have lots of symbols. I've started putting down different words and paragraphs, so it's progressing, maybe to a long short story or maybe even another novel. I aim to return to writing. Maybe this year will be my come-back year!

Having this illness has taught me patience.



Kay

My name is Kay and I live in an Office of Housing unit in Kew. I'm 57 years old and I have an acquired brain injury. Mostly it's short-term memory loss.

I was born in Darwin. My father was the Regional Director for the Northern Territory Department of Civil Aviation, and he was posted there for 2 years. I have an older sister and brother and 2 younger stepbrothers.

One of the early memories I have is talk about the Petrov Affair. When I asked Dad what had happened to the gun used by the KGB to take Mrs Petrov out of Australia, he told me that it was probably still in his safe in Darwin. But I learned from writings about him after his death that he had actually mailed it to the Russian Embassy in Canberra – in a plain envelope without saying who it came from!

I have lots of unhappy memories from childhood. I was sick a lot of the time – scarlet fever, pneumonia multiple times, I had two operations on my eyes. My mother was not good with me when I was sick – she was a very cut and dried kind of person and had no compassion. The only time I saw her being compassionate was when she had cancer and was in Peter Mac. She heard about the mother of a school friend who had died – then, for the first time in my life I saw her show some compassion.

Mum died when I was 10 and I was better off without her – particularly when I developed a mental illness later. She was a real bitch. My Dad was lovely and he remarried when I was 17. Before that we had a housekeeper – she was very nice but she wasn't a mother. My sister behaved like my mother – cold.

A story about my uncle shows something of her attitude. He was a prisoner of war on the Burma Railway. The Japanese kept him alive because he was a doctor and he could keep the other prisoners alive and keep them working. As a result he had what is now called Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. When he returned my sister, who is a physiotherapist in England and should know better, said he was mad and not worth knowing. I got on well with my stepmother until an episode in 1993 when I told others in a psychiatric hospital that I wanted to hurt her. I didn't realise it at the time but the law had changed and they were obliged to tell her. She wouldn't have me in her house after that. But she tries as hard as she can to accept my condition. Past health professionals haven't helped but my recent workers have done a lot to promote understanding between us.

I deeply care about my family and I know they try hard to understand my illness. I use workers to translate my experience and help my family understand it – but they don't always get it right

I had my first episode of mental illness in 1970 – it was after my Dad remarried. I was working as a dental nurse at the time. I thought I was stupid because that's what my sister and mother always told me. But the episode – it was depression – it's always depression with me – seemed to come out of the blue. I tried to kill myself with barbiturates. It was the night Tullamarine airport opened – I remember because Dad had to go to the opening as he'd chosen the site. They didn't find me until the next day – that's a lot of time for a lot of barbiturates to

be in such a skinny little body. They took me to Prince Henry's then to Alencon Hospital (later to become Pathways, then later again to become the Albert Road Clinic).

After I'd recovered Dad wanted to help me. He took me to a psychologist to have an IQ test and I got in the top 5%. This was such a surprise and showed me that I wasn't stupid after all. On the basis of it I decided to do nursing at the Alfred or Prince Henry's but soon after that I got sick again. One of my nurses advised me to go the Queen Victoria Hospital because it was smaller and we would go to the Alfred for 6 months placement to do casualty and male nursing anyway. So when I got better that's where I went and trained. I topped my year in that training too.

I've had lots of different jobs nursing: and all without any self esteem! I worked in alcohol and drugs, the Child Psychiatric Unit and the Children's Hospital, Intensive Care, Home training for Dialysis. In 1981 I got a Community Health Nursing Scholarship to study Community Health. Later I worked in the field. Then I worked as a Nurse Educator and studied a Graduate Diploma in Education. When nursing education was closed in hospitals I converted my Diploma of Nursing into a Bachelor of Nursing in Administration. These hang on my wall at home. When I saw my sister's place she only had one – up her I say! To my brother and sister I'm the mad one. But I've never thought that mental illness is any different to physical illness. And it's easier to fix than physical illness. It's all the same to me. But I stopped being physically sick when I got my mental illness.

In January 1993 I was in the Melbourne Clinic. I'd continued to have lots of episodes of depression – they couldn't always get my medication right. I'd been told there was a patient there who was going on and on about how she was going to hang herself. Well I just did it. I got my brain injury from it. After 3 months in ICU at the Melbourne Clinic I was sent to Royal Talbot. After about a year I went back to Agency nursing. I did about 10 shifts over a 3 month period but I realised because of my short-term memory loss I was a danger to my patients. That was hard. I had a short stint as a paid consumer representative at the Albert Road Clinic where my memory failed me. I also worked as a Personal Carer. But I haven't been able to return to my profession.

I spent a year in Larundel 1995 or 1996. It was a year or two after the attempted hanging. I found it very satisfying because I was able to give feedback to the Director of Nursing because of my nursing background and that helped them change things to be better for patients.

Not long after I got out of Larundel I decided I wanted a job as a consumer consultant which is called consumer representative in the private sector – don't you love that? It cracked me up to hear it! It was a fairly new thing then to appoint a consumer as staff member on a part time basis to help communication between staff and users of the service.

At this time my doctor also suggested I also become a Community Visitor with the Office of the Public Advocate. So I did. And I've been doing it for nearly 10 years. Nine of those were in psychiatry and one in disability. I hope to return to

Psychiatric Community Visiting soon as well. I love this work. I love being able to use the skills I've got and the knowledge I've got from both sides of the bed in making change and giving praise where appropriate.

I also do two mornings a week in the Mental Illness Fellowship Op Shop in Kew. This is great because they accept the special needs from my memory loss – if they want me to do anything special they have to write me a note. They also may have to explain things if I'm not clear. These are helpful things I wouldn't expect if I was doing paid work. As well as this I take a Scrabble group in a Neighbourhood House in Richmond.

In the past I ran the Prime Timers group for 40 year olds over at the Neighbourhood House in Richmond but my impaired memory made that impossible.

At one time I had a period of three time weekly psychoanalysis. It was a bit of a wank. Any growing I did was because of experiences I was having not because of the therapy. But he did get me to go out to my mother's grave. I only went the once but it was good to do it.

My current meds are good – there are no side effects except for a dry mouth. I also have my angry pills – a particular anti psychotic as I get angry spells from my head injury.

The hardest thing about my brain injury is not having any money. I've always been a girl who could spend – travel, clothes and I like trying to be stylish. I also miss belonging in society because of having a work role. I get a bit of that from my current role with the Community Visitors. I

even acted on an information DVD designed to explain the organisation.

The most valuable thing I've learnt from my illness is "if you believe in it stick with it" and "don't let the turkeys get you down."

The most important thing to me is being cared for. I haven't explored many romantic relationships – I just wasn't very interested. I have my friend Tim and Lin – my next-door neighbor. Lin has become a real bosom buddy via her dog Zoe who is the love of my life. Zoe has got attitude (like me!) and I like that. I have to use discipline to stop Zoe's expressions of attitude getting her into trouble, like I use *angry pills* to stop my expressions of attitude getting me into trouble.

I wouldn't have my car if not for Lin. She doesn't drive but she bought the car and I'm legally the designated driver. It's called, with a sign on the window, *Zoe's Wheels*. If Zoe gets out of Lin's or my place she runs straight for the car and if she doesn't all we have to do is shake the keys and she'll come straight back. When I die the car will revert to Lin – that's if the car hasn't died first.

I never learnt to cook so I have all my meals in at Lin's. She's Malaysian Chinese. I take in my breakfast and we eat together. Then she cooks for me at night. She even got me eating red meat again. In return I clean her flat and look after her dog. There's a lot that we share. When she wants to express anger she says "As Kay would say..." I'm 57 and she's 59.

it" and "don't let the turkeys get you down."

For entertainment I play chess and Scrabble every second week with Tim. I met him in 1996 through a shared friend. My memory finds these games challenging but Tim has the patience of Job. I can't read because my eyes got damaged from taking Ginko which was to help my memory loss. I do watch a few DVDs but TV doesn't interest me much. I see a few movies and enter competitions in magazines which are good brain exercise.

Many things have helped me come to grips with my condition including a wicked sense of humour and my own stubbornness. But I wouldn't have been able to do any of that without the support and respect I've received from ARAFEMI (the Association of Relatives and Friends of the Emotionally and Mentally Ill).

I had always believed I would die before I got old. Now is the first time in my life when that isn't true. I actually think I

might live into old age – I don't want to – I don't want to end up in some terrible nursing home – but I'm happy enough in my life to actually want to be here. This is primarily because of good medication that didn't exist before and people who care for me as I am.

There are many people who have helped me to come to this happier place in my life. I'd like to give heartfelt thanks to all the workers and friends at ARAFEMI for their help and encouragement over the years. I also offer thanks to the Mental Illness Fellowship for their education, encouragement to volunteer and support while doing so. And thanks to the staff of the Office of the Public Advocate and in particular the Community Visitors Programme for educating and allowing me to be an Advocate on their behalf. Dr John Cocks has been my Psychiatrist for many years and I also offer my thanks to him.



Valerie

My name is Valerie Kingdom but most people call me Val. I live at Prague House in a room to myself and get all my meals cooked for me. I am one of five children and I have a twin brother Vic. We were born in 1940, just after World War II began. I remember my older brother coming home from war – my mother asked me if I wanted to go and see him marching but I didn't want to so when he got back to the house he lifted me up in his arms. I was quite happy to see him. The other thing I remember from the war was a big hole in the backyard – a bunker – and Dad showing it to me.

I had a happy childhood but I was sick a lot of the time. First off when I was 3 or 4 I had a Torticollis neck – that was a big twist in my neck. I had to go to hospital to have surgery so my head could face straight. I remember calling the wound 'a nasty cut' – Mum and Dad taught me to say it even though I was only really little. Apparently Dad collected me from hospital. I was always tired as a child, when other kids would run around I just had to come home all the time and lie down.

School was hard – I remember a woman hitting me when I was not even 5! I can still see her standing over me while I was lying on a rug on the floor. She was meant to be looking after me! After that another girl hit me too. So I don't have many happy memories from that time.

When Mum and Dad married they didn't have a penny. They worked hard – Dad delivered ice and Mum wood chopped and weighed it on the scales then put it into bags to sell from the house. One happy memory I have is of Mum getting us a beautiful ice cream birthday cake one year from

the Peter's Ice Cream Factory. I remember how nice it was. I used to be close to my older brother; I thought he loved me all those years but he didn't. It seems he blames me for things that went wrong in the family that were really Mum's fault. I didn't go to high school and left school at 14 because Vic said I had to work. I got a job in a lolly factory and had a few other jobs after that. But I had a breakdown that same year. What had happened was that a man had interfered with me from when I was 3 or 4 until I was 11 years old. I didn't tell anybody because what could you say? It caused me to get sick, I heard voices – I thought the family was saying things about me and that voices were on the radio talking about me. They got nasty those voices but I wouldn't let them take over – I told them that I wouldn't listen to them.

Then I kept on getting sick on and off again. I went to lots of hospitals – first Essendon, then a Day Centre, then Royal Park and Larundel quite a few times. I was on medication – Largactal it was then – it made you put on weight and insulin as well. I had shock treatment too. It helped me but I felt bad about it. I didn't agree to have it so my Mum must have signed the forms.

In between times in my twenties I worked at the kids hospital. Then I had time in St Vincent's then Royal Park again then Plenty hospital. I was in and out of Plenty – I went to a couple of hostels but they were so dirty – I didn't last long. Then I was back in Plenty, working because they only had a skeleton staff and expected all the patients to do the work! Well, I cleaned. Then after I left I worked with Meals

on Wheels for 15 months. But I got depressed and asked to go back to Plenty Hospital.

When I turned 36 I went to Mountain View Lodge in Olinda – it was lovely. I stayed there for 18 years. From when I was 36 to when I was 54. My friends from the hospital were there already – Esme, Lillian, Valerie, Miss Collins and Betty Margaret. We got on well together.

Mrs. Grant ran it with her husband and she adopted me because she had always wanted another daughter. I used to do a lot of cooking there, particularly cakes. I had watched my Mum you see so I knew how to do it. I didn't follow a recipe, just did it out of my head with help from Mrs. Grant. We had lots of fun times there listening to music, going to see the horses who lived next door and playing with the Grant's dog Jenny. I called it Jenny Penny Grant – I always had nicknames for everybody!

But I had to move out of Mountain View Lodge. Mrs Grant's husband died and as she was 70 she had to retire. Other people took over the Lodge but there was lots of trouble and I had to leave. This made me scared and I cried all the time because I thought I didn't have anywhere to live.

They found me a place at Listerdell Nursing Home, then that closed and I moved to Shalom Nursing Home but eventually that closed too and I had to move on - again. Next was Hamer Court but that closed too. I've had so much bad luck with places closing on me. It's broken my heart.

When I was at Hamer Court I used to look after baby possums. I put one under my jumper and another slept on

my chest and it weed on me! I looked after them for an hour while their Carer did other things. They were so small and used to cuddle up inside a sock. They were beautiful. I found one on the grass once and the Carer came and took it away to look after it.

In between all those hostels I had more hospital visits too – for more relapses, but also because I fell over and had seizures.

I still have contact with the family. I see Vic – but his health isn't good. My eldest brother has died and both my parents. But I keep in touch with my sisters and I know the names of all my nieces and nephews. I would have liked to have got married but I couldn't because I had to see the psychiatrist. I don't care now because I'm quite happy the way I am – my own self – you know what I mean? I'm independent.

Now I've moved to Prague House. It's both good and bad but I'm quite happy to be there. At least it's all new and clean. I have my own room with a TV on the wall (all the rooms come with one of those) and my own TV on a cabinet. I've got a chair where I put my toys – Mini Mouse and two teddy bears; Vic (after my brother) and Joe (his mate). I've also got toys on the cabinet and on one wall there are four windows.

I live a different life these days. I have so much to keep me busy. I come here to work at Kew Neighbourhood Learning Centre three days each week – I've been coming here for so long. There are lots of people here who are important to me. I couldn't think properly at school so I never really learned to read and write. Avril has helped me with my reading and

writing and with computer. Kylie has helped me with knitting jumpers and Bev has helped with lots of things. So has Lisa and Laurie is a very nice person. I keep everything organised in the kitchen and they've named it after me – Val's Kitchen they call it ... I like that. The other two days I go to gym. I do knitting and play bingo and Rummy-oh. My mental health is good these days – the medications are so much better than in the old days. But I have to take 17 tablets every day! I don't care though because it makes me feel so much better.

I'm argumentative like my father and brother – I argue and argue and sometimes I have to be told to stop. If I'm not stopped I can go on and on. People tell me I'm cheeky. I can put it over and I always get in to trouble because I do things I shouldn't do – but that's a bit of a game – I've got a good sense of humour.

The thing I'm most proud of in my life is that I can actually do all the things I do now – for so long I couldn't do anything. The thing was I had the brains but I blocked everything – couldn't get what I wanted to say to come out. Now it's different, I talk and talk - you could make a movie of my life.

– for so long I couldn't do anything.





Shirley

I'm Shirley Hillman - that's my married name and Shirley Sells was my maiden name. My Dad was Aboriginal – he was a nice and gentle man. My Mum was white. We lived on a dairy farm at Red Cliffs on the Murray River. We had cows but we also grew grapes for wine. My father taught people about bush tucker. Goannas, snakes, rats, witchitee grubs. We didn't eat them but he knew all about them. He also knew about how Aborigines made their own flour. They ground wheat to make the flour, then made pastry and cooked it wrapped in clay in the coals of a fire. It was a bit like damper.

I was the eldest of 8. Their names are Ian, Elaine, Elva, Janine, Lisle, Daryl and Wayne. But I don't know the names of my mother or father. I was made a Ward of the State at 10 because my mother drank and couldn't take care of us. I had to look after the younger children. My Dad applied to the courts for custody but they wouldn't let him take care for us. He didn't like their decision – he wanted us back but the court wouldn't let him. They put me in Travencore then at 10 years old and put all the other kids in places too.

Some of my happiest memories are back when was a 5 year old riding my horse to school. His name was Neddy and he was a brown colt. I brushed him every day and gave him water from a bucket and carrots from my pocket. I treated him like a person!

I went to lots of different places as a kid - Kew Cottages, Janefield and Sunbury - I went to them all! They were OK. Later I went to Royal Park for my nerves because I got upset.

I didn't get much schooling. Now I can write a bit, I can type with one finger on the computer and copy words from paper but I've learnt those things later in life.

After those other places I went to Murikine Hostel in Hawthorn for Young Women. That was in my 20's. I was working in a factory in Box Hill spray painting car panels. I enjoyed it.

I was raped when I was 21. I told the Police but they wouldn't believe me. That's what made me nervous. When they didn't believe me it made me feel dirty and angry. But I couldn't do anything about it.

I went to Eugene House, then Swinburne Ave – there were three of us – another girl and one boy. The staff taught me how to do shopping and banking and cooking. We all had our own room. I was working at a workshop making pottery and painting it and then packing it up.

Then I went to Burwoodvale House in Hawthorn. I was living with a friend and we had a landlord. Then I moved into another flat.

I haven't seen my brothers and sisters for a while and that makes me unhappy. I had a misunderstanding with my sister - she bossed me and it made me angry. My baby brother Wayne loves fishing and he lives in St Kilda. He came to visit me at the hostel... But I don't see any of the others anymore. My mother, sister and brother all drink and this upsets me.

In 1981 I married my husband - his name is Ronald James Hillman. I've known him since he was 11 and I was 13. I was a cradle snatcher – imagine me being a cradle snatcher!

That's very funny. We got married at a church in Cotham Rd and I wore a white satin dress which came all the way down to the floor and I had a long train. My sister was a bridesmaid and my other bridesmaid was a friend. I ran all the way down the aisle because I wanted to get there quickly. The minister had to yell out "don't run Shirley!" that was funny. We had a reception afterwards. I remember we ate chicken and wedding cake and we drank champagne – thank heavens, and had a lovely time.

My husband still gives me presents - this bracelet and my watch and me gave me these earrings for my birthday. We don't live together any more. He lives in East Kew in a Unit by himself and I live in Kew. He comes to see me every Saturday and I like to see him. I loved him then I still love him now. He's 65 and retired but he used to work in Heidelberg.

I live in Prague House in Cotham St Kew now. I have my own room and share a bathroom, and living room. I get all my meals there. I've been there 3 months and I like it. I've got a telly in my room and I want to get a cassette recorder because I love music - all the old stuff from the 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s and 70s. That's what I like best - listening to music. I've also got lots of stuffed toys in my room - puppy, teddy bears, lion and koala. But I don't like football. I go for Essendon

but it doesn't matter to me who wins. May the best team win!

I come to Kew Neighbourhood Learning Centre every Thursday. The most important person in my life is from here – her name is Lorrie. When she was younger she talked a bit. We used to live together in a SRS in Fairfield. We lived there for over 20 years! I didn't like moving so much in my life. Often I had to move because of the way I talk – it's different and people often mocked me, teased me and didn't listen to what I said. This was terrible. But finally at the SRS, I had some stability after all those years of moving. I had lots of friends but many died – some of car accidents, sickness, lungs, breathing.

Apart from coming to Kew Neighbourhood Centre, the rest of the week I do things at Prague House. They have exercise and some play scrabble, chess, snooker but I like all the music things - sing-alongs, listening to CDs.

I take tablets for my nerves - Clozapine and they really help.

I've got a wicked sense of humour. There's another Shirley here at Kew - I've known her since we were in Travencore together. She was 8 when I met her and I was 10. We've known each other for over 50 years ago. Can you believe that? Two Shirleys - we're double trouble!



Peter

My name is Peter Montana and I live in an old converted fire station – I’ve been there for 8 years and I’m very happy to be there after having lived in lots of other places. I was born in 1951 and lived first in Almond St Nth Balwyn. We were there for 10 years and my 2 younger brothers Adrian and Andrew were like me born in St Andrews hospital, East Melbourne. My parent’s names are Jean and Perce – Dad died in 2002 but Mum is still alive – though she’s getting on now. She lives in Carnsworth Uniting Church Aged Care. She’s been there just under a year.

I had a happy childhood. Mum and Dad were something of pioneers in Nth Balwyn in the 50’s – then it was all paddocks. I remember a blue racing car and a billy cart my Dad made – well, I helped him by painting it. I remember all the way back to kindergarten – it was called St Aidents and I can still remember doing painting there.

Then I went to Boroondara State School – it was wonderful and I had good friends of both sexes – including my first girlfriend. My memories of that time are still strong – I recall wearing those short shorts and long socks. I liked sport and I tried my best at swimming and athletics. I was good at these and I was quite good at schoolwork too. Later I played classical piano and learnt for 10 years. In fact all of us Montanas played piano. My parents were both musical. Mum sang in a choir and she used to sing to us – sometimes around the fire. I remember *Over the Rainbow* the Judy Garland song. Dad played violin in the Zelman Kew Orchestra.

After 10 years at Almond St we moved to Highbury St in Nth Balwyn and I went to Balwyn High. I repeated 5th form because I found the transition from 4th to 5th to be very challenging then I got a job in the ANZ bank. Before that, as a schoolboy I’d had lots of jobs – as a bicycle delivery boy for the local chemist, in a supermarket after school and doing deliveries for a grocery and wine merchant – that was from 16 years old until I was 24.

Then in 1974 I set up my own business. I called it Lagoon and I sold period clothing from the 20s, 30s, 40s and 50s for both men and women. I had a silver lady lamp screwed into the banister on the stairs. She lit the way! The shop wasn’t that big – just 4 racks of clothing and one display case – but it was very important to me. It took 2 years and a lot of work to set it all up, to make the contacts with suppliers and to build up my stock. Mum did all the washing and I had a couple of girls sewing alterations. I really liked all the contact with people – I was the one who did all the sales. And of course the clothes themselves – such wonderfully designed and coloured fabrics. It was such an exciting time and I feel so disappointed I couldn’t continue in the business for longer.

In a way I have continued to express my love of clothing and fabrics by setting up some of the flats I’ve lived in with wall-to-wall bric-a-brac and period clothing. But back then, when I was running Lagoon I had a breakdown. Before the breakdown I’d been using some drugs a little. I had religious experiences. It seemed to come out of the blue. I just woke

up one morning and there was gravity under my feet, the birds were chirping and my psychic experiences began. This went on for a couple of months and eventually the local GP put me in Larundel. I was there for two months and they gave me medication.

While I was in Larundel a friend ran Lagoon. She was living above the shop. But when I got out of hospital I found that all my contacts had dried up – one person had died and another lost her second hand trading license. There hadn't been much business while I was away. Well, everyone advised me to sell up so that's what I did.

I went travelling for six months and thoroughly enjoyed myself. I rode a motorbike through Bali, went to Java and then stayed with Mum's Auntie in London. I did a 16 country European Contiki tour where we stayed in tents and traveled in the big Contiki tour bus. Then I had a week on Mykonos. While I was there, there was an eclipse of the sun which I watched on the nudist beach. That was something! Then I took an American Express hotel tour of England, Scotland, Wales and Cornwall. It was great.

On the way home I spent a week in Sydney to see the girl I loved. I proposed to her 3 times but unfortunately we didn't get married. I'd known her since High School, so I'd known her for a long time. Perhaps it could have worked but in the end my physical disabilities got in the way. While in Sydney I also saw my brother who lived there. Back in Melbourne I got a job with General Credits company – that later turned into AGC and Associates East Doncaster which was a finance

company. But around 1980 all the psychic phenomena came back and General Credits told me I couldn't return. I guess they sacked me. That was hard. I was in Willsmere for a time then went home to live with Mum and Dad. I think Mum understood because I suspect that she had had some psychic phenomena herself. This time the episode lasted for four and a half years.

I say that but really it hasn't stopped since then although it has stabilised. Birds chirp into my mind and the radio and TV talk to me.

I live a very busy life. I visit mum every day and twice on Wednesdays. She's close by and I have my car – I've never been without my car or my license. I have a disability pension. I spend my time doing lots of different things. I go a few days a week to Kew Neighbourhood Learning Centre – I go on the weekly outing with Bev, I do the Ability at Work programme and I water the vegies and come and sweep up the leaves in the car park.

I also go to Mosaic where they run classes on things like computers, current affairs and creative writing. Once a week I deliver 3 meals for Good Grub – that's a church organisation a bit like meals on wheels. On Wednesday afternoons I spend about one and a half hours cleaning the Mental Illness Fellowship Op shop in Kew. I've been doing that for 11 years and never missed a day. I also go to a men's group called Men on Malmsbury. So I'm busy. I live independently so there's all the cleaning and shopping and banking to be done once a week too.

On the weekends I like to listen to a music video on Saturday morning. I also go to Church. Every Sunday to St Aiden's and once a month to the Reverend Pam White's service.

All my daytime friends now are at KNLC and Mosaic and church. Twenty years ago I had to break totally with all my friends because of drug use. When I came out of Rehab they advised me to and I did. So I don't socialize much at night, I stay at home and watch TV.

Decorative art is very important to me – that's why I really liked running Lagoon and having so much contact with fabrics. It's why I'm surrounded in my flat with things I chose myself and that I love – embroideries, objects of art and I reckon I've got something from every period. I hope to get a Deco silver lady lamp because I really like them. My flat used to be part of a fire station and there are lots of pipes on the walls. These come in very handy for hanging things – I have beautiful gowns and kimonos. I've got other objects set out on doilies and there's hardly any room for more things. I like the textures and colours and shapes of things from the old world. My choices are from my heart and they make me happy.



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疥 治

George

My name is George and I was born on the 9th August in 1935 in Shanghai. My father ran a small business trading rice. My Mum was a housewife and I was the eldest of 4 children. He died at the age of 33 when I was just 8 years old. I started work at age 15 and I had the responsibility for supporting the family financially. I started working on the factory floor, in a workplace where there were 3 shifts per day. The factory made mint oil and used a complicated procedure of cold and heat processes. It was difficult work. The boss – who was my father’s very good friend – then sent me to work in a laboratory. After working in the laboratory I was transferred to Beijing. The communists had taken over in 1949 and the factory became state owned in 1952. It was 1956 when I was sent to Beijing for 8 months to work for a state owned organisation doing administrative work in food control. It was a newly established organisation and they needed more staff to monitor the progress of different food factories.

After Beijing I returned to the laboratory in the factory where I’d originally worked. In May 1958 I was sent to work in rural China. I farmed for 3 months then worked on a programme to install communication receivers – a bit like radios but connected by wire – in every house free of charge. These receivers were used to make announcements to direct the farmers about their farming processes.

In August 1959 I was sent back to Shanghai because the Government wanted to set up a lot of tertiary colleges. Just a few days before I started work there my mother died, so I was very sad. I also had ill health in the early ‘60s – hepatitis

and gastro bleeding. But I was excited about my new work – in the office like a secretary, looking after the students in one faculty. I was very happy to have this job because my high school education had finished when I was only in year 10 – I was so happy to return to the education environment. I worked in colleges like this for most of my working life until 1990.

In 1966 when I was 32-years-old, I married. My wife was 26 years old. Friends had arranged our introduction and we met for the first time outside a cinema – it was called the Peace Cinema. In the second year of our marriage my daughter was born. This made me very happy.

Around 1981 I changed to another College because the first college didn’t treat me that well. But I enjoyed my work – even more so at the new college. I always had a yearly award because I worked very hard. At one time they awarded me a small black and white television and this made me very happy. In 1976 when Mao passed away I was able to have all the neighbours come in and watch the events on my television as televisions were still relatively uncommon.

In 1995 my daughter and her family moved to New Zealand. At this point they had one son. After they left I looked after their flat in Shanghai. I was then employed by a company from Shanxi Province selling marble as a bookkeeper. I received quite a high salary for this work and worked with them for 2 – 3 years.

My wife and I missed our daughter and her family very much. We decided to join them in New Zealand and left

Shanghai as a Permanent Residents in 1998. In 2001 another son was born to my daughter. In New Zealand people are allowed to have a second child very soon after the first. If my daughter's family had been in China they would have only been able to have a second child 5 years after the first. This was because they were both only children. I was very happy with this second child, as I became the main carer for him. He was born prematurely by cesarean section. The first had also been delivered this way. But the second son was only 2.1 kg – so small. I saw him for the first time just two days after his birth. I gave him the name *Pun-Pun* which means *hope-get-fat!*

My daughter moved to Australia from New Zealand in 2001 and this affected me greatly. I felt very sad and lonely because it left just my wife and I, by ourselves, without English to communicate with. We lived in a street with 9 other houses but were the only Chinese people. Even the television was in English! We were very isolated. My younger brother had passed away in 1969 and my mind kept going to how unhappy his death made me. He was only 29. I felt very isolated and homesick. For quite a long time I felt that life wasn't worth living and I wanted to kill myself. My wife put a lot of effort into learning English. I love to learn but I hardly remembered any new things. I couldn't sleep – even with sleeping tablets. I'd wake up very early – I waited to hear the cock crow and the birds begin singing.

All this was very hard to cope with because no-one in my family had ever had a mental illness and I hadn't had any difficulties earlier in my life. It took a long time for me to

get help. I really wanted to get rid of the old unhappiness but I just couldn't. I told my doctor that I wanted stronger sleeping tablets because it wasn't enough to just sleep for 4 hours a night. I told my doctor I wanted to kill myself because my life wasn't worth living. After several visits he took me seriously and really listened. He sent a psychologist from the big hospital to come and visit. Finally someone was taking me seriously – but the interpreter they sent wasn't from Mainland China and she didn't speak Mandarin well - her English was perfect but her Mandarin wasn't. They visited me twice at home. I felt sort of better because I knew someone was looking after me. In the end I was diagnosed with depression. I tried lots of different medication but there was always side affects. I'm no longer on medication as I never really found one which suited me.

In April 2003 I was also awarded New Zealand Citizenship which made me happy because it meant I could move to Australia. But in June that same year my daughter was involved in a car accident and I came to Australia for 2 months to look after her.

In 2006 I had a kidney removed because of cancer. A psychologist started to visit me and nurses from the Mind-Body Organisation visited me every week. This was helpful. There was a Malaysian nurse who could speak Mandarin. She suggested I shouldn't stay at home all the time. So I became a volunteer at a local Aged Care facility. It made me very happy even though it was only once per week – because I could make some sort of contribution to society.

One day around this time – 2007 – an Indian nurse suggested I go to a programme for Chinese people recovering from mental illness. At first everyone seemed much sicker than I was but eventually I realised that they were happy despite their illness. I could be like them. In time I was elected as a leader of a small group because by then I had grown to love them and they loved me too. I stayed there in that group for about 3 years until I came to Australia. The group was called Bao-ao She which translates roughly as Wide, Compassionate Love, Association.

Now I like to be happy and busy and I like to be in an environment where people are learning and where they love each other. If I don't have lots to do I think too much. I have realised that happy things last only a short time but sad things last a very long time. Now I'm in Australia – I live with my daughter and her family. When I first arrived it was school holidays and I went to my daughter's shop every day. I helped her boys with music. Now we're back into term time and they are all so busy I don't get a chance to talk with them much. I cook for them every day. I go to the swimming pool for arm exercises. I come here to Kew Neighbourhood Learning Centre Chinese Group. A friend from the swimming pool suggested I might like it and as soon as I came I felt very happy. They are very kind to me. I feel happy although my daughter and son-in-law have no time to talk to me and my grandsons have little time. My wife is still in New Zealand doing a computer course.

I enjoy helping others and this has become a habit in my life. For instance back in New Zealand I was able to give directions to the bus drivers who didn't know the route. This made me proud because even though I was an immigrant there I was able to help other new comers. In my street I always knew who was sick, who had passed away. I would visit and sometimes take Chinese food for them.

In New Zealand I got a lot of help including in living daily life. I felt very sad but because so many people helped me I felt I should live a happy life. Also Bao-ao She gave us a book which taught us to be confident and to live independently despite our mental illness. In this way we could avoid discrimination. All this has led to me taking a strong attitude to my mental illness. It's not easy but I now tell myself that I can overcome my difficulties, that it's not good to kill myself. Gradually I have pulled myself together.

The most precious thing to me is my English name – George. In Chinese my name is Jixian Yang. In 1998 I went briefly to a Church where an elderly man asked if I wanted an English name. I did and he gave me the name George. I am very proud of this name because it gives me an identity in a foreign country. We moved out of the area and I didn't see this elderly man again, but I will never forget him and the precious thing he gave me.

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Ray

My name is Ray and I was born on Christmas day 1944 in St George's Hospital in Kew. I remember a great deal about my childhood and I have memories going back to when I was a toddler. My mother was a seamstress – not professionally – she made artificial flowers commercially but she did sew all her own gowns for balls after she'd taken a dressmaker's course. My parents loved going to balls and dancing.

I recall standing beside her at the sewing machine. I would have been young – maybe 4 years old. It was a treadle Singer on a black wrought iron stand. She would sing:

*Dear little Violet
Tender and true
Where do you come from
And what makes you blue?
Why do you snuggle
Down in the soft grass
Are you afraid
Of the children that pass?
Tell us, tell us, Violet do,
Tell us, tell us
What makes you blue?*

That was the first song and I can still remember it word for word! I also remember picking out a strange little creature in the whorls of the wrought iron and I took this to be the Violet of the song.

I had a very good connection with my mother – a spoilt little brat I was. She made a special thing of Christmas for me because otherwise I'd miss out on a birthday. The kids at school used to say *you're lucky because you get two presents* but it was only my mother who gave me two – everyone else just combined the two events and gave me just one normal-size present!

I loved school but I was very timid. I used to avoid conflict and the teachers worried me a bit. But I loved the things we learnt and I was good with words. I remember in about second grade we had a woman who used to teach us Speech. I remember;

*Jonathon Jo had a mouth like an 'O'
And a wheelbarrow full of surprises.*

It was years before I realised that this was written by AA Milne. Jonathon Jo was my father – he had that wheelbarrow full of surprises and could make something out of anything! He worked as an industrial metal worker but was also good with wood. His father was a cobbler in Hawthorn. But the place where my father worked literally went under when he retired because he was so versatile and could handle anything. The others couldn't and the business just couldn't survive without him.

We had a bit of a love hate relationship. He was very intolerant and didn't know how to love. He couldn't show us love. But he did show it to my son – his grandchild.

Adolescence was pretty scary. I discovered girls. Seems like I had a different girlfriend every week. I started going to a Church in Deepdene, primarily to meet girls. At times I was a bit confused as to who was actually my girlfriend.

I was also very confused about religion – I still am. I wrote a poem in recent years which deals with this. I wrote it when I was living in a bungalow – I was very alone and not very happy and thinking I'd like to believe in something. Then suddenly this poem came. I called it *God is the Question*.

I loved my early work as a photographer. I worked for Athol Smith John Cato – they covered advertising and social photography. Both are established photographers with work in the National gallery. I worked for them for 4 and a half years. Then I freelanced for a while, then set up a photography course at Phillip Institute. I liked doing that too. After this I went back to Teachers' College and studied a Diploma of Education. I got a job teaching at Bellam Technical School for about a year. I gave it up in the end because it took 4 hours out of every day just to travel there and back on public transport. This was too much. Next I worked for the Department of Overseas Trade designing a magazine for them called *Australia* – produced in 4 languages.

I married when I was 22 years old. She was one of Melbourne's leading models and in fact won Model of the Year. Our son was born in 1970 when I was 26. We decided to go overseas then – my wife was modelling in London and I was working on books about Australian slang. But the company who had contracted me went broke and all my work went down the tube. It was difficult because I liked being in England

but didn't like being away from family and friends. We lived in Wimbledon Common and my son and I would go looking for the Wombles.

Then my marriage broke down. I came back to Australia because of the isolation and loss. I was about 28. I felt this loss of my wife and child so much. I felt I wasn't hearing from them enough so I decided to go back, basically to see my son. I only had enough money for a one-way ticket and left with just 60 cents in my pocket. The moment I stepped on the plane I lost my sanity and was hallucinating. Everyone ignored my strange behaviour. Somehow or other I got through customs and started walking towards London. Well, a taxi driver saw me walking and U-turned and came and asked me if I wanted a ride. I thought *what a nice man* and asked him to drive me to Australian House. But of course when I got out of his cab and walked away he came chasing after me! A passerby intervened and said he'd help. I thought he was going to help me and I thought again *what a nice man!* But of course he wanted to help the cabbie so he called a Bobby. I had a guitar with me and the Bobby decided that he'd use that as collateral and that I'd come back the next day to pay – but I had no intention of doing that.

I saw my wife twice on that visit but she freaked out and both visits were disastrous. I wandered London for 10 days with very little food or drink. My life was saved by our old landlady. I'd travelled to the house where my wife, son and I used to live and I'd met the landlady who was out in the garden. She was a nurse so she could assess my situation. She helped keep me in the area until my father could come to take me home.

There was a slight problem in that I'd thrown my Passport and International Driver's Licence in the bin outside a Tube station. I ended up writing a novel about this whole experience and called it *Limbo Dancer*.

I was very pleased to see my father and enjoyed the trip home. By that time I wasn't thinking too much about my wife or son. But when we returned my parents put me in Larundel. This was so frightening because I knew nothing about mental ill health, psych hospitals etc. All I knew about was the Kew Loony Bin. But I was out of my tree and they locked me in A Ward, then confined me in a locked section of that locked ward. They got the Police Surgeon to see me. I knew him because we both had the same literary agent – but he didn't recognise me. This was even more distressing. He asked me if I heard any voices and I answered *only my own!* But he classified me as schizophrenic.

I've been in there and other psych hospitals so many times with repeated psychosis. Initially I hated Larundel but the last time I was there I really appreciated it – that was about 15 years ago.

After I recovered from that first episode I went to Swinburne to study a Post Graduate Diploma in Film and Television. I passed but went manic doing it even though I was on medication. They sent me to Royal Park and treated me as a schizophrenic. This was the worst, and it nearly finished me.

But my wife (I had remarried in the eighties) realised I had been paying Private Health Insurance and was eligible to go to a private clinic. She got me transferred to the Melbourne Clinic and they reclassified me as Bipolar. Actually the man, Jonathon Cade, who discovered Lithium as an effective treatment for

Bipolar disorder helped confirm that as an accurate diagnosis for me. This was a great relief because I never identified as a schizophrenic. After 30 years on Lithium it's left me with a shake in the hands - it's a Parkinsonian condition but I won't deteriorate like people with the actual disease.

At this time I was working for the National Safety Council as their Art Director producing a couple of magazines. Then I worked in a flower shop at the Jam Factory. When I used to get really stuck into work I'd put so much into it I'd burn out. I worked 7 days a week and my wife barely saw me. I'd go home for a meal and few hours sleep then I'd be off again. I was living on coffee – over 20 cups per day – and this didn't help. The mania would be followed by depression and hospitalisation. After a number of cycles like this my second marriage broke down in the 80s.

I was seeing a Psychiatrist at this time. He was able to control the mania with medication but he couldn't get the depression under control so he proposed a course of ECT. Well I was scared – I'd seen *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Back then they used it for punishment and they didn't use a muscle relaxant or an anaesthetic. My doctor reassured me on all these issues and I decided to go ahead – what else was there for me to do?

I used to tell the nurse how beautiful the injection was. I'd wake up very quickly afterwards in what I called *The Morgue*. All the people who had had ECT were sleeping it off on trolleys under white sheets. But it didn't effect me like that – I always woke very quickly and wanted to get going. The nurses would chase me all over the place telling me I should be resting but I didn't feel like it.

I hadn't been back to hospital in 10 years but then in 2008 I had a horrible experience where some people used and abused me. I ended up in St Vincent's hospital for 4 -5 months.

My mental ill health is very hard to manage – it's not just the big things which get me down. Even something as simple as laughter affects me. I think I've got a fairly good sense of humour – in fact have a developed sense of the ironic dimension of life. But when I really laugh I get so euphoric, high, I feel so happy. Then, suddenly the laughter's gone and I take a dive. I've tried different programmes at Melbourne Clinic over the years– they were ok but I suppose I feel like I've got a condition to manage not something I'm going to recover from. Something innate was triggered in me after my marriage breakdown and loss of my son.

These days I do morning and afternoon shifts at the children's crossing. I go to a writing group at the Hawthorn Community House. Sometimes I go to an Art group there as well. Three lunchtimes each week I have lunch at the Bowen St depot of the Salvation Army. I live in a Boarding House called Carrical House. I've never lived in a Boarding House before but the others who live there say it's the best they've ever lived in. I find it a bit trying at times because I'm not used to living with lots of people. There are 30 people – mostly men – living there.

Creativity is very important to me. I get very depressed when I feel that I'm not being creative any longer. I often look at work I've done in the past and I think *Did I really do that?* I think *Why can't I do that again?* *Why am I at this point where I have a block?* It's very difficult to just turn it on. When I was in advertising it was very high pressured. I was dissatisfied with almost all of my work – it was too mundane, not as earth shattering as I'd wanted. I don't

have the outlet now that I had before.

Fifteen years ago I joined the writing group. I had a mentor – Michael Dugan – he was so encouraging but he died 5 or 6 years ago. I really miss him. But I continue to write – it provides some outlet for my self expression.

One of the things my mental ill health has taught me is how intolerant people in the general society are towards people who are different. When you have mental ill health you tend to mix with people from other minority groups and people who have problems. I spent a lot of time hiding my illness but I've found in recent years it's better to discuss it and be open. In fact the more I talk about it the more I come to terms with it. I've found that people will be understanding if they have the time to listen to you and if your symptoms are under control.

I have two objects which are very important to me. One is my Grandfather's gold pocket watch. I'm keeping it for my grandson. I thought someone had stolen it but it turned up again. The other is a small Miner's lamp. Instead of glass it has mica and uses a party candle. It belonged to Grey of the Burke and Wills expedition. He was the cousin of my maternal grandmother. She went out to farewell them when they left from Royal Park. This man came up to my grandmother and gave her the little lamp as a keepsake. Even though it probably should be in a museum I'm keeping it for my grandson.

On paper I've had a pretty terrible life – so much that is considered good has been destroyed. But at the same time I don't have regrets. How can I when my son means the world to me – he is what I am most proud of in life. I'm a grandfather to his two kids. They live on the Peninsular. We've had our hard times but it's all resolved now.

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