



# Travels with a talkative lady

**The love of my life (to that point in time) appeared out of a dance club melee, shortly after arrival in Adelaide. I was scouting ahead of Tom on my first real work assignment. Impressed by her miniskirt and sculptured 60s hairdo - which hurricane winds could not have shifted - ours was a remarkably short courtship: just a few months, ending with marriage vows in front of her Catholic altar. I was too young, and she was too naïve, but it worked for a turbulent decade or so.**

Bubbles Babs - as she was known - was a fantastic lady who talked a lot! She had a guttural, but decidedly infectious laugh, which drew me to her. Not quite sure why we parted, though talking may have tipped the scales. Onlookers were often amazed, not only by the number of words that could be aired in a couple of minutes, but also the variety of topics covered. As years went by, she honed her ability for both speed and subject range: delivered together, mixed all in one pot. I grew used to it, but newcomers would often stagger away, in a head-spinning aura of dizziness!

I guess she was a full-blown extrovert, while I was somewhere towards the other end of the spectrum ... a mild-mannered mouse. Our opposites-attract differences were evident at our first meeting, when I arrived in my cabbage-green estate car, while she rolled up - sun-glassed, with flower-pot hair - in a natty white sports job. She let me drive

her home in the early hours, top down – the sports car that was - to sleep on the couch. From that moment on we were entwined.

As described, our mini-courtship finished off with a Roman Catholic wedding, held at a non-descript, cream-brick church - one of those with a rather frugal box-shaped and jarringly garish stained-glass windows – to be found across the ubiquitous outer suburbs of 1960s Australia. Functional, not beautiful: the apt description that springs to mind. My boss Tom, an avowed anti-Catholic (brought about by his own disastrous marriage to one of that order in a former life) warned me, in his clipped, Anglicised Aussie accent:

*“Next thing you know George, you’ll be crossing yourself and shuffling rosary beads. For Christ’s sake man, don’t do it!”*

*“Sorry Tom, it’s too late; the horse has bolted,”* I replied. *“And anyway, Catholic, or no Catholic, I think I love her!”*

I can still recall an approximation of the answer I received back from Tom, which was - to put it mildly - not complimentary and contained a range of expletives deleted relating to my stalwart character!

As a purpose-built antidote for both lackluster church and nondescript suburb, my young bride was extremely beautiful and so we jetted away for a honeymoon, which centred on driving a white top-down (here we go again) *Volkswagen Beetle*, around the hilly bi-ways of New Caledonia. Apart from cementing our relationship, this enabled an early feel for the tropics, and though the lady and I did part company after a fun-filled association, the love for an equatorial life has stayed with me until the present day.

She was a teacher and a very good one at that, partly due to the fact that though she was in her twenties she was as effervescent as the six-year-olds in her charge. Sheer bluff was her main technique: *“Do your homework Henry, or there’ll be no lunch for you tomorrow! Clean your desk Madeleine, or the bogey man will come to get you tonight!”* ... and so forth. The seven-year-olds could see through her well-meaning pretense - in much the same way as they might call out their classmates - but they all loved it and

played along with the game. This somewhat intriguing modus operandi gave the young lady a great start in many different classrooms, as we moved from place to place around Australia. To put a date on all this, I remember vividly waiting to collect my bride of about twelve months, from her second country appointment, as Neil Armstrong's immortal words beamed out from my car radio: "*One small step for man.*" etc., etc. That sort of thing tends to remain in the memory, no matter what transpires from day to day.

Apart from the humdrum of daily life, with blips of excitement here and there - that most people can testify to - we did manage a few relatively daring expeditions to various corners of Australia, beginning with a road trip in my brand new, mustard-coloured (company sponsored) *Holden*. My Aussie friends were apt to describe its colour in more derogatory terms and I do admit that possibly I was last in line when the company was dolling them out, but it was at least good camouflage for those fearsome deserts we traversed going North to Cooper Pedy and *The Alice*. In those days of flower power and weed there was no smooth road as you find today, so the car took such a pounding from rocks hitting the underside as we traversed the vastness of Simpson's *Gibber Desert*, that guilt got the better of my conscience and I loaded the shit-coloured machine onto *The Ghan* train, for the journey back down South.

We did the habitual climb of *Ulluru*, - or *Ayer's Rock* as it was still being called in those days - and I remember my wife berating an elderly person at the top, because this little old lady had actually zoomed past her on the final approach to the summit, like *Jack Brabham* with the finish line in sight. But before long they were chatting along, best of friends, though I could detect the old dear looking a bit whoozey: not from the exertions of the climb, but from the fact she had already been introduced to ten far-ranging topics, in the space of five minutes. On that same day excursion out from Alice Springs I also recollect my partner posing for a photo in the refreshingly cold waters of *Simpson's Gap*, mini-skirted and bouffant hairdo of course: her flamboyant signature tune!!

A year or so after that we made our first visit to the island state of Tasmania and spent one night fighting a fierce gale in a camping ground not far from the centre of Hobart.

After an evening out for dinner we returned to find all the tents flattened by the storm. This time, through deeds rather than words, my young wife managed to *borrow* a few undamaged support poles from an absent neighbour, which we then used to fix our own two-man affair. A little later we listened in silence when the guys next-door returned, a bit under-the-weather and cursing at not being able to find the right poles to put their tent – coincidentally much the same design as ours – back together again! There were a few furtive glances between us and them the next morning, but my wife came to the rescue with a long and varied account of the Aboriginal Dreamtime and the dangers of climbing Ulluru. They wandered off with a pole-less tent in their pack; slightly confused, but none the wiser.

Another memory sticks in my brain, of walking out of a Valley, South West of Hobart and crossing a field, to the increasing sound of music from the blues duo *Sonny Terry & Brownie Maghee*. The music just seemed to fit the scene so well; I had never heard anything quite like it before. We had stumbled on a big *bush bash* and true to form my partner had soon talked our way into the party. From there, we came to know a few dozen locals, as we danced and drank on through late afternoon and into the night. For many years after the event, just playing one of those same blues tracks would immediately conjure up memories of the festivities that day, in front of the big white homestead, its green lawns running down to the banks of the Huon River. And I guess I might have just wandered on past if it hadn't been for the outgoing nature of the lady beside me. At times decided advantages can accrue from travelling with an outgoing person, who never holds back from launching into conversation.

But then time came for the customary Australian pilgrimage, for a year or so, to the Northern hemisphere; back to UK roots and continental Europe. In accordance with this youthful pursuit we headed off - in our case via Hongkong and Bangkok - to become barman and restaurant keeper in a small Mayfair pub just off Oxford Street, named *The Running Horse*. This somewhat worn-at-the-edges little place was a block or two from (what was then) the top-rung boutique hotel for the rich and powerful: *Claridges of London*. In addition, just around the corner were those singing nightingales in Berkeley

Square, the American Embassy in Grosvenor Square and the fashionable shops of Bond Street. So in effect we had landed right in the thick of it: the place that was then known the world over as *Swinging London*!

We lived in a room up under the roof, which was slightly bigger than the bed, and each morning descended the narrow stairs to my young wife's restaurant on the first floor and my polished wooden bar, at ground level. The manager was a short, stout, *Geordie* tyrant, who sucked every sinew of work from our antipodean bodies - from nine in the morning to 12 at night - even to the extent of enforced collection of dregs from used coke bottles, to be re-capped and sold to unwary customers the following day!

But there were some advantages. *Vidal Sassoon* had his London training school next door, so free weekly haircuts came with the job. Then in addition to Vidal's often glamorous trainers and trainees, the pub's four or five deep lunchtime crush had a habit producing some very well-known local residents, such as *Michael Caine*, *Lulu*, *Barry Gibb*, and the Ironside lawyer *Raymond Burr*. On numerous occasions, customers with connections would pass over high-priced tickets - free to us of course - for the latest London theatre shows (which had to be used on our one and only free night of the week). The stage production of the musical *Hair* was one of those we were able to view from front-row seats, at the Shaftsbury Avenue Theatre. Impoverished Australian backpackers masquerading as royalty!

Mayfair, as everyone knows, is at the top end of the *Monopoly* board, thus a few of the locals - especially the famous ones - would tip quite lavishly, or more-often-than-not offer to buy drinks for me and my remarkable wife (if she happened to be assisting behind the bar). Occasionally, and usually later in the evening, I would take up their offer and pour myself a drink, but most of the time - and partly because I didn't want to get legless whilst working - the system was to move a coke bottle from right to left under the bar, which signified drinks received, later to be claimed in cash. Working at *The Running Horse* was also where I came to know and like the drink nicknamed *Black and*

*Tan* - a mix of three parts bitter to one part *Guinness* - It enlivens the beer and calms down the Guinness, and I still enjoy the occasional B&T, even today.

On certain weeknights at the pub, there would be a *lock-in*, when after ringing the traditional 11 o'clock closing bell and the local bobby having placed his helmet on the ornate bar, I would lock and bolt the double front doors (on this occasion, more to protect the constable from being spotted, rather than any particular security measure). With a handful of local cockney residents enjoying their favourite tippie, we would carry on till one or two in the morning. The landlord however never let up; no matter what time to bed up under the rafters, we both had to be down by nine in the morning, to mop up and get ready for the next busy day. It was all a bit of an induction by fire, but finally, when the boss accused us of fingering the till, we walked out, never to return. He knew too well that a one or two pound discrepancy over the day's taking was almost inevitable, considering the complex array of food and drinks on offer and the fact that the lunchtime stretch was so incredibly busy; yet he chose to force the issue, causing us to leave. Maybe he just did not like Australians. We will never know.

Next, we moved to another job for two, in a Three-Star New Forest hotel, *The Bealieu Arms*, which my wife found in the ads section of a local newspaper. In those days, a couple could get work with accommodation and meals thrown in, plus the princely sum of £25 a week as the wage. The new job put us in charge of an industrial-sized dishwasher, which we operated on alternate shifts with a pleasant young couple from Spain, who could say *hello*, but that was about the limit of their English. From this vantage point we got a wonderful insight into the workings of a busy hotel kitchen. Two of the porters, Glen and Gavin, were gay, with a capital G, and the head chef would periodically jump the serving counter, armed with a carving knife, to attack the nearest waiter. We enjoyed sampling the customer's dishes as they drifted past on their way to the dining room, and we became fat from the extra consumption of leftover black-forest or cheesecake, late at night, in our tiny bedroom up above (again, this was a sort of pyramid shaped room squeezed in under the beams).

The New Year's Eve staff party, awaited and anticipated by all, was a total riot, which started a few new - and very brief - relationships, within the hotel staff fraternity! An incident I can never forget was when the novice couple from Spain were learning the ropes and we *inadvertently* forgot to tell them that for glassware the stainless-steel dishwashing extravaganza should be on low power. I distinctly recall the incredible noise, along with a look of horror from the Spanish couple, before they began extracting the glass fragments from the machine. In our defense, we did assist them to clean up.

By mid-January, with enough money saved to go travelling in Europe, we booked a two-week skiing holiday at the resort of Mayrhofen, in Austria. Incredible though it might seem today, the £25 that we earned (between us) gave us enough for holidays abroad. These were the days when package prices were ridiculously low – something like £40 each, all-inclusive, for a week or ten days!

After a wonderful two-weeks of ski lifts, snow ploughs and late night Schnapps, we decided that the price of the holiday (including the flight) was so low, that we could opt not to take the scheduled return flight back to Britain. Instead we bussed across Switzerland and down the Southern side of the Alps into Italy. Then we elected to train Eastwards from Milan to Venice, before completing the circle, up and over The Bremmer Pass, back to Munich. Arriving back at the airport four weeks late, BEA (British European Airways, the European arm of BOAC, later to become British Airways) had no problems in finding us a rear seat on the next plane back to London: something that probably might not happen quite so easily in today's world of restrictions and security.

The most distinct recollections from our circumnavigation of Austria, Switzerland and Northern Italy, were: firstly, the very beautiful, but stomach-churning, mountain bus-ride to San Moritz; then secondly, the fantastic train-side scenery travelling southwards, alongside Lake Como; and thirdly, my talkative other (and I) burning half our clothes on an enormous, oven-hot water heater, during a few day's homestay in in a small underground bedsit, across from the station in Venice!

We returned to Britain and I fell into a job selling cars for my uncle's garage in Cornwall. The car for sale was the inexpensive, but built-like-a-tank *Skoda*, imported from a state-run factory in Yugoslavia. Its main selling point was indeed price: it was dirt cheap; even cheaper than the mini: half its size (and a snip at just £600!). I thought my uncle was a somewhat unusual type: he had fathered six children within a decade, was deeply in debt, and hid behind the sofa, in his house next to the garage, when creditors came to call. Later I realised it wasn't so much the burden of six kids which caused the problems, but the simple fact that though he was a good car-mechanic, this did not translate to being an astute business manager. The whole affair went on for many years, causing both him and his partner more than their fair share of anguish.

My wife and I lived for several months in a nine-foot caravan – less than twice the size of the small double bed it enclosed – in a farmyard setting, a mile or so from the garage. She gained plaudits for her job in the local *Woolworths* shop, partly because the post required a lot of talking. In those days *Woolworths* staff operated from a central aisle surrounded on all sides by customers, so there was ample opportunity for staff-customer banter, which of course Babs embraced with all her usual enthusiasm, especially after being cooped up in a nine-foot caravan with me – the least talkative character in Cornwall – through the previous night.

Because my uncle cum boss couldn't afford a car transporter, part of my job was to travel overnight by train, through London, to King's Lynn on the other side of the country; there, to pick up a brand new gleaming *Skoda* and drive it back to Cornwall. The round trip took about 30 hours. On one rather forgettable occasion I stopped at the holiday resort of Torquay, to drink beer and dance to what was then the new and revolutionary *disco* sound. Subsequently, I spent several hours in the local police station, after being asked to blow into the bag on my way out of town. Fortunately, the doctor took so long to arrive with the blood test (which was compulsory in those days) that I had sobered up sufficiently to avoid any prosecution. The Rolling Stone's *Brown Sugar* was the appropriate dance hit, on that night, though I was only on beer ... nothing more exotic!

At the end of a glorious English summer, we took off again, via a throw-away-priced package tour to Salou, on the Costa del Sol, South of Barcelona: the two weeks holiday including flights and accommodation at a massive beach-side resort, all for about £50 each! Again, we repeated the method honed earlier in the year, with a slight deviation, by electing not to use our allotted flight back to London; this time deciding to return back to Britain cross-country style, through France, Switzerland, Germany and Belgium, to Holland. After re-acquiring a good Aussie tan on Salou's beaches, we headed off to Barcelona (free of charge, via the airport transfer bus). Memories of the Catalan capital are not many, but feature caged birds on the promenade, plus sitting on a slim wooden bench and staring at barrels of red wine stacked to the ceiling, while listening to my partner reminisce about life in Australia ... and slowly getting pissed!

We travelled North by train to Andorra and met up with Martje and Willem, two hitchhikers from The Netherlands who were enjoying a month's vacation on the Mediterranean Coast, in what was a unusually warm *Indian Summer*. The next day we left our hostel together with the Dutch couple, boarding a local commuter bus that took us down the steep, zig-zaggy road to Ax-les-Thermes at the base of the Pyrenees, just over the border in France. Later that day we parted company with our new-found friends who had to hurry back to work in Holland, but before they left we agreed to stop by their place in Rotterdam ... if and when we made it there.

At exactly the same time as we began our hitch-hiking tour from the South of France through Western Europe, there was widespread media coverage of the murder of an Australian couple in the same Andorra-France border area where we had met up with our two Dutch friends. Martje and Willem read about this in the Netherlands press a day or two after reaching home. It turned out that the only identification found on the bodies of the dead couple were tickets from Andorra to Ax-les-Thermes; exactly the same journey that the four of us had taken. So imagine the surprise when a few weeks later we located their *strasse* and arrived on their doorstep in Rotterdam.

*"We thought you were dead!"* They cried, in total disbelief. *"But thank God you're alive."*

The murdered Australians had travelled the same route just a couple of days before us. Looking back, I understood then why an elderly French lady had waved her stick at us when she saw us hitch-hiking, shouting: “*Non, non! Allez vous, allez vous!*”

We drowned our sorrows for a couple of weeks, mourning our dead compatriots with copious quantities of beer: two dozen delivered every day like milk bottles in a crate, to the street-side door of their tiny second floor flat. Most of our waking hours were taken up with picking through a marvellous collection of vinyl albums, and listening to the melancholy sounds of that era, from *Bob Dylan, Jimi Hendrix, Joan Baez, Carly Simon, Kraftwerk*, and many others.

Another remarkable thing happened as we hitch-hiked our way across Europe on our way to Holland, when after a few days in the French Alps we managed to get a ride out of France in a cosmopolitan VW, combi-van. I say cosmopolitan because by the end of the day the eight or nine-seater had played host to five different nationalities, as we motored across Switzerland in the teaming rain, finally arriving in Strasbourg late that same night. The van was driven by a German couple: students who were moonlighting as hire-car drivers, returning the vehicle, from Lyon on The Rhone, over the Alps and back to its base in Stuttgart on the Rhine. Fortunately for us, the common language for everyone - including a young French man and a teenager from Japan, who both jumped in bedraggled and wet on the way - was English. My partner, who commanded a little French and German (but no Japanese), became self-elected chairperson for the duration of the journey. And of course, she performed as always, with aplomb!

Between Strasbourg and Rotterdam we managed to get a number of rides from a range of vehicles and people plying the busy highway that travelled along the Rhine. One, a burly German truck driver was ensnared by my wife in her usual micro-mini, outside a busy roadside café (this was often the dubious method employed to get a lift, with me appearing from the bushes - or in this case from behind another juggernaut - after the deal was sealed). Anyway, despite the initial con our affable chauffeur seemed happy enough, and with my partner sitting yoga-style on top of the roaring engine, doing her

best in broken German to keep him amused, we barreled northwards towards our Rotterdam destination.

Then exactly the opposite: a suited person wearing police-green shades - who turned out to be an architect, with a sumptuous home in Darmstadt - picked us up in his late model Mercedes and proceeded to move faster on four wheels than I had ever been in my life before. It was a hot day and he ended up taking us back to his house for a Cinzano on the Rocks. I can still taste that wonderfully tall, cool drink, even now! Later that day we were quaffing steins of beer with him and his wife in their favourite Frankfurt beer keller. Such a shame to think that *hitching*, as it was known, is now an all but dead and buried art; it added an amazing flavour of not knowing who you would meet and what was around the next corner ... in the best of all senses.

The next day, fresh out of Darmstadt, we somehow managed to be dropped in the middle of a very busy autobahn intersection, and while I was rummaging around in my bag for a breakfast roll my young wife was busy with the micro-mini, trying to acquire a ride. Unfortunately, the vehicle that took the bait was a German police car, from which emerged two big and burly guys, dressed in black and toting guns. We realized too late that hitchhiking, or even walking on or near an autobahn, was taboo. Anyway, my partner in commendable style, managed to talk our way out of the predicament and we paid a small on-the-spot fine before waving goodbye to the two *polizei*, who seemed quite amused by the whole thing, before picking our way under the ribbons of road to a nearby village and a well-earned cup of coffee.

As a result of our successful travels – that is to say they started and finished much as planned, with some unexpected highlights along the way – I began to grasp that being talkative could at times secure quite an advantage. This undoubted talent came to the fore again, just a few years after Europe, when my by then not-so-new wife and I were burbling clockwise around New Zealand's southern isle, in a tiny white, mini-minor, packed with camping gear and cookstoves ... plus a whole new range of mini-skirts! That summer was a particularly hot one, and with the heat came the flies, the midges

and the mosquitos: anything airborne with six legs came in multiple assault numbers, which could at times be cloud-size!

Leaving our little white rocket at the *Manapouri Wharf*, in the far South-West of New Zealand, we ferried across *Lake Manapouri*, then zig-zagged with a busload of tourists, up and over the mountain, from there dropping down into *Doubtful Sound*. It was late in the day when after cruising one of the deepest inland waterways in the world, with mountains rising like sky-high perpendicular walls above our boat, we took the decision not to go back with the bus, but to stay on in The Sound. Through all our travels, *not* returning with the throng seemed to have become a re-current theme.

An hour or so later, with the oncoming dusk, we discovered the sandflies. They swarmed in their millions and descended as miniscule, but ferocious vampires. With little protection other than an industrial strength insect repellent - which I discovered rendered you blind for an hour or two if it went anywhere near the eye - we stumbled on the only other human being who appeared to be existing in that very isolated area, once the day-visit busloads had departed.

Victor's small yacht was anchored not far from the shore, in waist-deep water, and following a few waves and calls we waded out and clambered aboard. He was a somewhat weather-worn but intriguing guy, originally from Split on the Yugoslav coast. Appreciative of the company - though somewhat bemused by my wife's banter - he produced a mammoth bottle of Plum Brandy, the consumption of which he declared would keep the sand flies at bay. So with that in mind we drank and talked on in to the night, retreating to his tiny cabin below when the bottle gave up its final tot.

Once again my wife's ability to talk the foreleg off a chicken had worked a treat. I hate to think what would have become of us if we had been left to our own devices on the docks of *Doubtful Sound*. The imagination conjures up New Zealand news sheets inwardly gloating at the stupidity of two young Aussies who had succumbed to the *Sandflies of the Sound*, while Australia's parliament discussed sanctions against their cousins across the Tasman, for not protecting the welfare of Australia's youth.

But whatever might have come to pass, I am sure my talkative partner would have had something to say about it ... even if from the heavens above.

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