

“My dear, if you were a horse ...” East Gippsland, Victoria

The copper-tipped arrow shot up quickly into the darkening Gippsland sky. Behind Black Mountain the sun was sinking, leaving the creek, our little wooden house and the surrounding land in shade. My older brother Bill called out to us: “Quick – come outside and look at this!”

My mother and I rushed out onto the verandah, leaving the baby sleeping and my sister Juliet reading inside. Bill was standing by the lucerne paddock a few hundred yards away. “Look at this,” he said. With all his strength he drew back his bow, fitted a second arrow and released it. In a smooth, graceful arc the arrow flew upwards. As it rose higher and higher we saw the arrow-tip gleam like a spark of fire when it caught the golden light of the sun.

It was beautiful. “Oooh!” we cried, watching the bit of flashing gold in the sky high above the shadowed land. The arrow with its brightly shining tip seemed to stay up in the sky for a long time before beginning its descent away from the last of the setting sun.

Just then my sister Juliet wandered out on the verandah, still reading. The arrow gracefully arced down and down and down. With stunning rapidity – thwock! – the arrow shot into Juliet’s upper arm. With a sharp, shocked little scream, she dropped her book. In the same instant that I heard the book thud onto the verandah our mother was at Juliet’s side.

At times like that, in the 1950s in this remote place with no electricity and the car away where our father was, working on another farm, our mother’s nursing skills came in handy. Inside, she washed and dressed the wound. It was while this was happening that my sister, looking at the layers of fat under the punctured skin on her arm, said, “Gosh – we’re just *meat!*” Apart from this existential shock, the only enduring effect was the small scar on her upper arm.

We were living on our sheep farm in Suggan Buggan (pronounced like the ‘oo’ in ‘book’: *Soog-en-Boog-en*) It’s a wild and beautiful place on the edge of the Snowy River, 133 kilometres north of Orbost, which is 375 kilometres east of Melbourne. It was so isolated that when we first arrived the kingfishers by the river were not scared of us. It is still isolated because, even now, not many people are keen to brave the terrifying road to the Suggan Buggan River.

Beyond the river, there was no road to our place until my dad borrowed a bulldozer and made one. It’s still not paved but it has a name now – after him – it’s called Hollingsworth Road.

We had a horse called Coco, a cow called Prim, and Bruno, the first of a series of calves. Sometimes we had pigs. There was an orchard. My mother, Roma, grew vegetables, looked after the chooks and topped up our vitamin C by making rose hip syrup. Juliet and Bill milked the cow even though Roma said, “Girls shouldn’t milk

cows before adolescence because it will make your hand grow big and no man will want to marry you!”

She taught us by correspondence school. As well as this, Roma looked after anyone in the surrounding district who needed medical help. Injured or orphaned animals also received her attention. She rescued hurt birds and fed them with an eye-dropper. She rescued joeys and baby possums and fed them with a baby’s bottle.

Drovers drove their herds of cattle through our property every spring until the Snowy River Hydro-Electric Scheme made it impossible to get through that way. Bill Pendergast was one such regular, a tough old guy. One time, as they were drinking tea, my mother asked him how he was, and he told her that he had broken his foot a while back. She wanted to have a look at it. When he showed her she said that it was looking very good, and asked what he had done to treat it.

“I just kept me boot on till it mended itself,” he said.

After Roma died, in late 2004, Juliet and I discovered two diaries from her time in the bush, scribbled in old exercise books, which she had kept in the 1950s until she needed prolonged medical attention herself, for her ailing back.

In the first diary is an account of her treating our nearest neighbour, Viv Richardson, when he drove the two miles to our place after some molten lead had splashed up into his eye. Another time she fixed him up when he had cut his hand while sharpening his axe.

She also treated our cousin Keith Davies’ feet when he ran through the ashes Bill had run through minutes before. The area Bill had run through had cooled and the area Keith chose was unaccountably still hot. Keith’s family had a dairy farm at Gelantipy, which Keith runs now.

On Wednesday 5th May 1954 Roma writes that my father

was working on the house, knocking don the scaffolding when a three inch piece of board with a nail in it fell on his left hand, thumb side of wrist. Perfect puncture wound, very sore. I applied antiphlogistine poultice, after shaving it. Poor boy couldn’t sleep. I gave him aspirin and tea at 2 a.m. I pray to God that it doesn’t give trouble. I have visions of amputation or tetanus or something.

Roma did a splendid job of looking after everyone but the responsibility clearly weighed on her sometimes: “I gave poor Bill his H.I of tetanus toxoid nd am sitting here worries sick about a reaction. God, I hate to give them to everyone” (17 July 1954). She gave the family polio injections in 1957 at Gelantipy. Some years before she died, she recalled how awful it felt to inoculate me because as she aimed the big needle at my arm, my usually placid baby face changed into an expression of disbelief, both comical and heart-breaking to see.

Roma's own health became increasingly worse as her back pain intensified. She often lay down with a hot water bottle – as hot as she could stand it – to ease the pain. Once, Juliet was filling the hot water bottle when she accidentally dropped the heavy kettle on the bench. Boiling water splashed onto the bottom half of her face. At Juliet's shriek, Roma leapt up and dealt with the resulting burn. Juliet remembers the skin peeling right off. She can't recall what Roma did but there was no scar at all.

There are diary entries about Roma's back pain as early as 1954 when we were still living in the one-roomed hut by the river, waiting for my dad to finish building our house. On 6th May that year she writes: "The washing seems to rob me of all my time. I stand in the river and slosh away. I boil here and cart things down wet and rinse them and hang them on a line by the river. ... and how my spine screams." When she spent a day helping our dad to put in fence posts, she writes, "I love it but I pay for it."

On 30 May 1954 she writes, "My back is feeling battered." In August of that year she saw a Dr Stafford in Bairnsdale and then another doctor in Melbourne.

The X-rays showed a deformed vertebrae (congenital) which slipped forward after Penelope's birth etc. He will operate when I can get a bed – one to two months. Hell. How can I put up with the time? Very pleased and happy that that is my pain's cause. I was scared it would be TB of the bone, osteomyelitis or something.

The next entry is Friday 26th November 1954. She writes about having morphine four-hourly for two days after the operation.

I couldn't have borne the pain without the injections ... They did my back and turned me and sponged me four hourly (sometimes six hourly and I nearly went mad with the pain and discomfort). I couldn't sleep and had to lie there hour after hour unable to move to lift my back one inch off the bed ... when the nurses came they were angels and couldn't do enough for me.

A year later, she is staying with relatives in Sydney and seeing doctors there. She writes in December 1955 that her cold turned into pneumonia, with pleurisy, and that Dr Rowe was disappointed in the state of her back and that she must rest, and he ordered a plaster jacket for six weeks. By 13th February 1956 Dr Rowe

Said he had done all he could for me and I mustn't lift anything heavy and generally take it carefully for a year or two. To wear a surgical corset and come to see him in a month's time. I am very dissatisfied at his taking no notice of the sore bones in my back and on returning here I cried and cried. ... I went to see Dr Ryan here and told him the whole story. He suggested an X-ray and made the appointment ... I feel very depressed at my future life because the Dr said my back would go again if I didn't take care. Also he said if I had another baby the spondilolithesis would come again and this time plaster wouldn't fix it. He said I would never be strong and never be able to nurse again, a dreadful blow to me ...

On the day of her return (train to Canberra, then to Bombala) on 11th March she writes that she is “appalled at the state of the kitchen” and on 2nd April that my dad had dug 40 post holes.

By the following month her back is already weakening. By 28th April she writes, “My back aching very badly.” The following day it was so bad that she stayed in bed all day and our dad had to do all the chores. He did his best. But I remember him plaiting my hair so tightly that I could hardly blink.

In July 1956 she writes that she is pregnant. During the pregnancy she had a terrible time with her back. My brother Patrick was born in Melbourne and she was away for nearly a year. The doctors thought that she wouldn't be able to walk again. After a long while, she did walk, and then after more time could do so without crutches, but she always had trouble with back pain.

Soon after the July 1956 entry the diaries stop. There were many more visits to doctors. Roma liked her doctor's bedside manner with a dash of black humour: an oft-repeated story, always told with much hilarity, was how Dr Maxwell looked at her X-rays then looked at her, and said: “Well, my dear, if you were a horse I'd take you out to the paddock and shoot you.”

More operations followed. There was a laminectomy and a spinal fusion. There was continuing pain. By the 1960s we'd moved to Sydney. Bill and Juliet had visited the Suggan with our dad a few years later and sometimes over the following decades my brothers visited too, staying with our cousin Keith and his wife Sue and their daughters. But the visit my sister and I made in 2011 was the first time I'd been back since I was a child.

It was fantastic to see Keith and to see old friends like David Woodburn, who runs the Seldom Seen petrol station, and Clive Richardson (the son of Viv, who had got the molten lead in his eye). Clive now has an organic orchard. The 2009 bushfires had a detrimental effect on most people's farms.

We finally found the place where our home, which had burnt down decades before, used to be. In the late afternoon Juliet and I stood on that burnt out place where only some bits of melted glass remained and where the big front gate still stood. The sun filtered low through the surrounding gum trees, illuminating a copse of spindly rose bushes by the fence. The land beyond was full of tall, yellow bizarre new weeds we'd never seen before and choked with paspalum. Keith told us there were deer now too in the area and feral cats and wild pigs.

Juliet and I stood there so many years later, filled with sadness, thinking of the past and thinking of our parents, long gone. We stood there thinking of our brothers, Bill in Perth and Patrick in Queensland, and wishing they were there with us.

Not long before Roma died, she told me she didn't regret a single day of living in the bush. She said that not one child ever said they were bored. During all that time none

of us kids ever saw a doctor. We were not exposed to the usual measles and mumps of childhood and we didn't get colds or flu. And Roma dealt with inoculations, and accidents like arrow wounds. It was a wonderful part of our childhood and although Roma was very unlucky with her back, we kids were lucky to have the experience of living in the isolated bush, and we – and the people on neighbouring properties – were lucky that our mum was a nurse.

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