



## *Eldorado*

The Space Age Bookshop on Swanston Street adjacent to the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology was a mecca for many an aspiring hippy living in Melbourne in the seventies. Once a week, I'd skip a life drawing class or a lecture on art theory and cross the road to check out the latest additions to their impressive collection of alternative lifestyle literature. Stepping through the sticky-taped and poster-plastered door, I'd enter a muted and bountiful world, far removed from the clamour and hubbub on the other side of the plate glass window. Amidst the haze of smouldering Nag Champa incense, to the dulcet strains of Pink Floyd, I'd scan the room; before me shelf upon shelf lined with books on every topic imaginable—from companion planting to building yurts, from Bach flower remedies to beekeeping, from kundalini yoga to curing bacon. After selecting a glossy-covered volume, I'd join the other long-haired, patchouli-scented, flared-jean wearing youths to sit cross-legged on the sea grass matting scouring its pages. As poverty-stricken students, we could rarely afford to buy a book but the staff at Space Age were cool,

man; they never dreamt of throwing us free-loading undergraduates out on the street.

One day, I managed to scrape enough coins together to purchase a copy of *Earth Garden Magazine*, a quarterly publication featuring articles from hippies all over the country already living ‘the good life’: growing veggies, preserving fruit, milking goats, spinning wool and puddling mud into bricks. Itching to show it to my boyfriend John, I stuffed the journal into my tapestry shoulder bag and caught the Number 16 tram back to our flat in St Kilda.

‘Check this out! This is *it!* This is what we have to do!’ I announced as I burst through the back door brandishing the magazine; a cigarette paper and some fragments of marijuana bud wafting off the kitchen table onto the lino. Grinning at me adoringly in greeting, John bent to retrieve the leaf of Tally-ho and as I pulled my chair up beside him, spreading the journal before us, he finished rolling his joint.

Prior to my arrival on the scene, John and my high school sweetheart Shaun shared a grimy, sparsely furnished flat in a lane off Spencer Street in the city. When Shaun ditched me for a blonde and leggy Swedish exchange student, John, with his hazel eyes and spiky Rod Stewart haircut, stayed at home, offering me his shoulder to cry on. The ‘angry young man’<sup>1</sup> who’d been dux, school captain and best but never the fairest on the footy ground at Wangaratta Primary had completed his HSC at night school after being expelled from no less than three secondary colleges, including the prestigious Haileybury College, for a pathological disregard for authority. Over the course of the next few months, John bided his time, trusting I’d get over Shaun and hoping I’d fall in love with him.

We had a lot in common. For one thing, we looked alike—

---

1 Used during the mid-20th century to describe young writers, intellectuals and artists who were disillusioned by traditional social norms and society in general.

resembling a pair of brushtail possums with our diminutive stature, fine features and brown hair and eyes. Clad in the regulation unisex garb of the time—denim jackets, bell-bottom jeans and clunky platform shoes, we were often mistaken for brother and sister. We both grew up in rural Victoria, John in the north of the state, me in the south. Like many country kids our age, desperate to escape a stultifying existence in a small country town, we'd left home and our families as soon as possible, keen to embark on an exciting life in the city and eager to launch our brilliant careers. Possessing a similar sense of humour, we shared an interest in Eastern philosophy, preferred dolmades and samosas over 'meat and three veg' and would rather have died than vote for the Libs. We liked the same music—Jackson Browne, Joni Mitchell, Neil Young and read the same books—Huxley, Kafka and Gabriel Garcia Marquez; and agreed that *Midnight Cowboy* and *Nashville* were two of the best films ever made.

Wrestling like bear cubs under the blankets, we'd spend the whole day in bed, kissing, canoodling and discussing everything that mattered, only leaving the flat as the sun set over a glassy Port Phillip Bay. Then laughing and scattering seagulls, we'd race to the end of St Kilda pier and wait in the luminous lilac light for the colony of fairy penguins to come home and roost in the rocks. On cornflower-blue-sky Sundays, we'd take a picnic basket into the Royal Melbourne Botanic Gardens and park ourselves on a tartan rug under a sprawling Moreton Bay fig, squabbling families of yellow-crested cockatoos screeching in the branches above. Nibbling at my chicken wings, I'd listen with rapt attention as my impassioned and gesticulating boyfriend (who could have really done with a soapbox) waxed lyrical about Lenin, Marx and revolutionary socialism.

'The way to crush the bourgeoisie is to grind them between the millstones of taxation and inflation,' John declaimed, quoting Lenin one afternoon.

‘Man is born free and everywhere is in chains,’ I countered, citing Rousseau’s *Social Contract*, trying to get a word in edgeways and add my two-cents-worth to the conversation as I licked the soy-honey marinade from my fingers.

By the end of the year, inseparable and indisputably soulmates, John and I found our own flat to rent and moved in together.

Like half the globe, we’d read Schumacher’s *Small Is Beautiful* which denounced the dehumanisation of people by the methods of mass production and advocated a global, small-scale approach to the manufacture of food, goods and services. Rampant materialism was destroying the earth, the renowned author claimed; a seductive thesis that appealed to our blossoming idealism and Arcadian sensibilities. John and I were in agreement—the impending threat of nuclear war notwithstanding, we needed to take a stand, get back to nature and save the planet from toxic pollution. Not only that but the thought of ‘working for the man’, being chewed up and spat out by the capitalist machine, was becoming an imminently terrifying prospect.

So, it was settled. Despite the fact that Labour Prime Minister, Mr Whitlam, was providing us with a never-to-be-repeated free university education, I’d drop out of art school and John would defer his political science degree at Monash; escaping to the country, we’d grow our own food and become totally self-sufficient. As the plane trees shed their brown-paper leaves and the mustard light, like looking through a glass of pale cider, slanted across the street, we packed our beat-up HR Holden station wagon with wood crates filled with rice, flour and tins of sardines, a two-man tent, a kerosene-fuelled lantern, a cast iron frying pan, a camping stove bought from the army disposal store in Russell Street and our prized possession, a recent purchase from The Space Age Bookshop: *The Vegetable Gardening and Animal Husbandry Handbook*. Young, in love, courageous or just plain foolhardy, with no strong

ties, family or anyone significant to bid farewell in Melbourne, we left the city in search of a new life.

Up the Hume Highway, deep into Kelly Country, we arrived around dusk on the outskirts of Eldorado, a hamlet nestled in the Woolshed Valley that, in the 1850s, was the epicentre of the richest goldfields in Victoria.

John grew up on a sheep and wheat farm in the district; his father, Frank was a soldier settler and had been granted a large holding of land as a reward for his services in Papua New Guinea. The farm, spread across a flat and bleak expanse of terrain that had lain fallow for years, was punctuated by stands of limb-dropping river red gums and the odd murky-watered dam when Frank arrived in the parish of Boorhaman in 1951. The returned digger installed his petite and plucky new bride, Annie (whom he'd met in a dance hall in the city on his leave from the Air Force) in a weatherboard cottage set on the front boundary of the isolated property. Before her marriage, Annie was a dancer in the chorus line: four evenings a week she'd fix a victory roll in her hair, don her polka-dot frock, slip on her peep-toe pumps, dab a little *Vol de Nuit* behind her ears, put on some lipstick and rouge, then take her place on stage at the Palais Theatre in St Kilda. Saturdays, she'd play social tennis at the club in Port Melbourne, meet up with friends for a swim at the Sea Baths or go for a stroll along The Esplanade, more often than not dropping by the popular Polish cake shop, Monarch's in Acland Street for a French vanilla slice or chocolate éclair. On Sunday afternoons, she'd catch the tram up Chapel Street to see Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers in the matinee movie at The Astor. One can only assume that Annie fell deeply for the shy, tall and handsome war veteran in uniform to give up the high life in the Big Smoke for 1000 acres of dirt. Or, perhaps she just didn't think it through.

Frank became an expert at breeding sheep, sowing grain and reaping a harvest from wheat. But when it came to his own seed,

the bastards refused to germinate. In the spring of 1956, the nursery painted and decorated in their brand new three-bedroom house, Frank and Annie bundled their two-year-old adopted daughter Kay into the FX Holden and with quiet excitement and nervous anticipation, drove down the Hume to the Sisters of St Joseph's orphanage in Carlton.

Under the stark fluorescent lights, the air saturated with the scent of Pine O Cleen hospital grade disinfectant, a recess bell ringing in a school yard in the distance, the middle-aged couple were led along a row of cribs containing the bathed, talced and tightly swaddled infants; stooping in turn to inspect the sad little parcels of life asleep on their ticking stripe mattresses. John was consigned to a cot at the end of the row and as she looked down upon his wee, worried face, his rosebud lips working as if to suckle, Annie felt a profound and distinct tug inside. Is this what motherly love feels like she wondered? Her heart ached for the tiny forsaken soul, this newborn with a scruffy thatch of tawny hair, yellowish skin and the gaunt features of a drowned rat.

Lifting the puny package from his crib, Annie placed a light-as-a-feather kiss on John's corrugated brow and turned to her husband. Frank, nodding, signalled to Matron.

'We want this one, please,' he said with firm resolve.

John was eleven when Frank took him aside to ask if he wanted to stay on the farm when he grew up. But having watched his father work like a dog, day-in, day-out, year after year, John rejected the offer, horrified by the prospect. The ambitious lad had a grander and more illustrious future in mind. One day he'd be a scientist or like his hero, Olympic athlete Ron Clarke, a long-distance runner. Disappointed but resigned to his son's lack of interest, Frank sold the farm and retired comfortably 'off the sheep's back', buying a triple-fronted brick veneer house on a quarter-acre block in

Wangaratta. A decade later John was working day-in, day-out, on his own property; the irony not wasted on the sheep farmer's son from Boorhaman; and probably not on his father, either.



On that first night, like the bushrangers who roamed the Woolshed Valley a hundred years earlier, John and I holed up in a well-hidden spot on the banks of a running creek amongst the undergrowth, grey box and wattles—our home until we found a farmhouse to rent. In the fast fading light, we unloaded our camping gear and pitched the tent. John built a fire with the abundant twigs and branches scattered under the trees; I cooked a lentil and potato stew, boiling the billy just as the gully plummeted into inky darkness.

In our private open-air theatre-restaurant, illuminated by fire-light and flying sparks, a backdrop of gum trees swooshing and swaying in the wind, we drew our deck chairs up to the campfire, ate our smoky meal and drank our sweetened tea—enthralled by Mother Nature's dramatic performance and in awe of the life we were on the precipice of living.

A choir of warbling magpies and highly amused kookaburras woke us at dawn. Stretching and yawning, we clambered out of the clammy, airless tent into a fresh and fragrant day to begin, what was to become our unhurried and orderly morning ritual. Together, we collected twigs and broken boughs, lit the fire, cooked breakfast and heated some water in a saucepan; the echoes of our banter accompanied by metal clinking on metal reverberating through the trees as we rinsed our tin mugs and plates in the chipped enamel basin. To a stranger passing by we could've been mistaken for that young couple in McCubbin's triptych, *Pioneer*. On numerous excursions to the National Gallery as a student, I'd sat in reverie before that masterpiece of Australian art, the artist's romantic depiction of the

landscape never failing to capture my young and impressionable heart—my hippy heart.

Housing was our first priority. Most days, we'd wipe our faces and 'pink bits' with a warm, wet cloth, dress as neatly as we could, considering our primitive living conditions and head into Wangaratta to make the rounds of the real estate agents; once a week stopping off at the laundromat to do a load of washing before heading back to camp. But as days turned to weeks with the bush becoming a wonderland of crunchy white frost and still with no place to live, the idyll began to lose its gloss. Nights were the worst. Huddled inside the tent lit by a flickering Tilley lamp, we'd toast our be-socked feet on a sooty cast iron pot chocked with red hot coals, and share, for medicinal purposes only, slugs of Jack Daniels straight from the bottle, whilst taking turns to read out loud the only works of fiction we owned—Sartre's mind-numbingly depressing, *Nausea* or Voltaire's comical *Candide*, a battered, second-hand volume I'd kept since studying 18th Century History in Year 12. Sometimes, as much to ward off the bone-chilling cold as to satisfy our youthful urges, we'd try to have sex. Rugged in multiple layers of clothing, looking like a pair of fornicating Michelin Men, we'd awkwardly make love; afterwards, clutching each other for warmth in our tiny refrigerated tomb. Overnight, icy stalactites formed on the tent's ceiling and each morning we'd be woken by a freezing drop of water on an exposed forehead or cheek.

And then it started to rain. Whether it was a hard and merciless downpour or a relentless, insidious drizzle, the rain didn't stop. The campsite became a quagmire. Our sleeping bags, perpetually damp and growing a ghostly film of patchwork mould, began to smell like the dingo enclosure at the Melbourne Zoo. Defecating was a miserable exercise involving a raincoat, a shovel, an umbrella, gumboots and a damp roll of toilet paper. Unable to light a fire outside,

we'd be confined to the tent, heating up baked beans on our little butane stove.

There were tears. All of them mine.

'When are we going to find somewhere to live?' I'd snivel, my stiff upper lip giving way to the wobbly lower one.

Staving off mutiny, John would pack me into the station wagon, turn the heater on full blast and take me for a drive. Motoring at a snail's pace through the streets of Eldorado we'd kill time with nowhere particular to be, hoping to come across a 'House to Rent' sign; envious of the lucky inhabitants inside their brightly lit houses, their televisions blinking and smoke curling from chimneys and flues. With my nose pressed against the foggy glass, I'd stare out of the car window and yearn for a home of my own.



Thankfully, it wasn't too long before we struck gold—a weather-beaten, two-bedroom, unfurnished asbestos-clad shack sat in an ocean of wheat stubble in the sparsely populated farming community of Tarrawingee. On our first night in our luxurious new abode, basking in the sauna-like conditions, we slept on the blow-up mattress *au naturale* in front of a roaring log fire. We decorated the place with bits and pieces gleaned from the local tip and stuff we found by the side of the road. The second-hand shop in town gave us a good deal on a wrought-iron bed, a large pine table, four Bentwood chairs and a jarrah spinning wheel. At a clearance sale on the property next door, we won bids on a leather, horse-hair-stuffed couch, a Fowler's Bottling Kit, a hand-grinding flour mill and a box of mismatched crockery and cutlery.

We were officially ready to become 'alternative life stylers'. In the months that followed, my respect for the early settlers, especially the pioneering women, grew as I came to realise what being

self-sufficient entailed. We ground grain into flour and baked crusty loaves of wholemeal bread in our temperamental wood-burning stove. I taught myself to sew, spin wool, knit and crochet. With the help of *The Vegetable Gardening and Animal Husbandry Handbook* we established a thriving veggie garden, cultivating everything from asparagus spears to zucchini flowers. Meanwhile, John became proficient with his burgeoning collection of tools. Armed with the rudimentary skills he'd picked up as a youngster on the farm at Boorhaman, supplemented when necessary with an appropriate reference book, he repaired the house paddock fence, fixed the water pump and built a chicken coop. We raised chickens, bottled fruit, made jam, sauces and pickles from our excess produce. The wizened goat-breeding lady next door showed me how to milk our goat Ellie-Mae and I discovered the instructions for fermenting yoghurt and curdling cottage cheese in a *Grass Roots* magazine.

When our tasks for the day were done, we'd cast off our clothes, spread a patchwork quilt on the ground and practise Hatha Yoga under the gnarled old gum in the backyard—a warm breeze fanning our naked bodies as the sun dropped like a newly minted penny behind the paddock of bleached-blond wheat.

'Get off! This is *serious*. I'm trying to do the downward dog,' I'd say, bum in the air and laughing as John pounced on my lithe, brown-as-a-berry body from behind.

Evenings were reserved for study—Ramacharaka's *Fourteen Lessons in Yogi Philosophy and Oriental Occultism*, *A Guide to the Woodbutcher's Art* and *The Natural Health Book* by the renowned Australian herbalist, Dorothy Hall. Many nights we'd sit around the kitchen table sketching floor plans and elevations of the house we dreamed of building one day.

Yet despite living mostly off the land, and our determination to live outside the mainstream economy, we still needed money—after

all, we couldn't barter for rent, petrol or what had become our weekly treat—a king-size block of Cadbury's fruit n' nut chocolate! We found some seasonal work in an apple orchard nearby, so at first light, we'd be on the road to Beechworth, whizzing past paddocks air-brushed in titanium white, steam rising from the ground like a writhing exodus of bushranger's ghosts. There wasn't a great deal to learn about apple picking. First, you strap a large canvas bag to the front of your torso. Next, you position a three-pronged metal ladder under a laden tree. With your fingers sticking to the freezing steel frame and vapour streaming from your dripping nostrils, you climb the icy contraption and pick the fruit.

All day long, we'd sample the produce—Red and Golden Delicious, Gravenstein, Jonathon, Cox, Granny Smith and the ultimate delicacy: the tiny, snowy-fleshed Roman Beauty—rivulets of the sweet-tart juice cascading down our chins with each crispy bite. By lunch time the mist would lift to reveal a sparkling sunny day and lying prone on our hand-spun crocheted rug, we'd eat our scrumptious home-grown bounty: hunks of crusty wholemeal bread, goat cheese, olives and freshly picked cherry tomatoes, washed down with a strong brew of Russian Caravan tea. Apart from the plump, tortoiseshell cats roaming the grounds on the lookout for parrots to kill, we had the orchard to ourselves. But one afternoon, just as John was struggling to zip up his fly, the boss appeared on the horizon. A moment earlier and the elderly and straight-laced Mrs Christensen, would have witnessed a sight to behold—her lusty young employees locked in an amorous embrace, rolling in the grass beneath the boughs of a Golden Delicious.



Eighteen months had come and gone and we knew what we had to do. Peter Gabriel's lyrics, 'You've got to get in to get out' felt like a

personal message. We needed to find a way to make some serious money and buy our own block of land. ‘Working for the man’ we agreed, with Machiavelli’s logic, was a necessary evil, a temporary means to an end.

Another apple-picker mentioned there were jobs going in Western Australia. You could earn big money on the prawn boats, he’d heard. Breaking our lease on the little farmhouse in Tarrawingee, we gave or threw away our motley collection of furniture and most of our belongings and loaded the rest under the ancient wooden canopy in the back of our EH Holden ute. To the blaring of Neil Young and Crazy Horse on the cassette player we headed west; Rael Imperial Aerosol Kid, our recently acquired Siamese kitten named after the hero in Genesis’s concept album *A Lamb Lies Down on Broadway*, coming along for the ride.



‘*Far out!* What’s with the trees?’ John exclaimed as we came upon a curious spectacle on the outskirts of Geraldton. Neither of us had ever seen anything like it. As far as the eye could see, giant eucalypts stood permanently bent at the waist, their branches spread-eagled all over the ground.

‘Salvador Dali would’ve been rapt,’ I joked as, oblivious to what caused the Surrealist landscape, we drove through the avenue of ‘liquefied’ gums. That evening, we pitched the tent in a clearing in a grove of flowering, camphor-scented melaleuca, the grass carpeted with white petal confetti, but just as we were collecting twigs for a fire, a strong gust of wind (no doubt similar to the one that had subjugated the trees we’d seen earlier that day) snatched up our lightweight shelter and dumped it in a crumpled heap where it stood on the ground. Painstakingly, we unloaded our crates of food and equipment from the back of the ute, wolfed down a meagre

and hastily prepared meal and crawled inside the wood canopy to sleep.

Next day, we headed into town to find the local branch of the Commonwealth Employment Service. We'd arranged for our dole payments to coincide with our arrival in Geraldton so at least we'd have some income until we began making our fortune on the prawn boats. However, as John and I stood expectantly at the reception counter, it became clear the C.E.S. had no record of any such arrangement. The best they could do was to issue us with a ten-dollar food voucher which was only redeemable at the local supermarket. Undeterred, we made our way down to the small fleet of fishing boats moored in the harbour.

Figuring this was men's business, John strode purposefully to the far end of the wharf to ask about work and negotiate the terms of our employment. As I sat on shore, teasing Rael with a desiccated ribbon of seaweed, the whiff of fish guts on the strengthening breeze, I could see, in the distance, my boyfriend and a brawny fisherman engaged in a heated argument. Curiously, every so often the two men would turn to look in my direction and a few minutes later, a furious John marched back up the jetty.

'Well that's that,' he announced angrily, reaching my side.

'Why?' I asked. 'What happened?'

'They can give us a job alright,' he said, seething. 'I can work on deck and you can cook down below. But there's a catch. As part of the deal, you have to have sex with the crew.'

So that, definitely, was that. Homeless and practically broke, we used most of the remaining credit on our food voucher to buy tins of cat food for our ravenous kitten. Fortunately, we had enough tinned tomatoes and sardines, dried pulses, rice, tea, sugar, muesli and powdered milk to keep us from starving to death.

For the next few days, we hung out at the beach with the local Aboriginal community, before deciding on a plan of action.

I would go to Sydney, stay with my mother and look for work; John, along with the Royal Siamese, would head north to Mount Tom Price up in the Pilbara. Rumour had it that there were plenty of well-paid jobs for unskilled builder's labourers up in the mines.

'It'll only be for a few months, max,' John assured me when he saw the tears well in my eyes. 'Until we've saved enough money for a deposit on some land.'

For now, though, we didn't even have the funds to buy a train ticket to take me back across the Nullarbor Plain and up to my mother's flat in Vacluse. We made a beeline for the post office to make a reverse charge call to John's father, hoping he'd cough up for the fare. As John parked the car, I noticed the file of youths, dressed like us in peasant tops, flowing skirts, waistcoats and flares, waiting to use the public phones. Joining the queue, I caught snippets of dialogue as, one by one, the young people made their calls.

'Mum, it's me. Yeah, I'm fine. Listen. Yes, Mum. Listen, Mum. *Mum, listen!* Can you send us some money?' I heard one scruffy desperado beg. Obviously, reports of a 'gold rush' had spread far and wide and it seemed that we weren't the only ones in a precarious predicament.

Eventually, a young man with a ponytail and goatee, possibly a model for one of those Sunday school paintings of an Anglicised, flaxen-haired Jesus, gestured John over to his cubicle; ever so gently placing his receiver down before delicately picking it up again.

'Now you can use it and it won't cost a cent,' he said smiling like an angel as he climbed onto his bicycle.

That morning, someone had super-glued a twenty-cent piece into the slot of the pay phone and numerous mercy calls were made that day.

'Peace,' our young saviour said as, giving us the two-fingered hippy salute, he peddled off down the road.



Our separation lasted all but six weeks. Pining and weepy, unable to bear being apart any longer, I begged John to come back to me. It took my love-sick boyfriend five days driving virtually non-stop from one side of the continent to the other, to reach my mother's door. But by now, John was an experienced brickies labourer; we had a passport to realising our dreams.

John soon found work on a Sydney construction site and we applied for a live-in-maid and gardener/chauffeur position in the salubrious North Shore suburb of Mosman. Lady Hooker, widow of deceased real estate tycoon Sir Leslie Hooker, ushered John and me into her living room overlooking a glittering Middle Harbour. We were barely twenty years old. Although John had tried to conceal his long plait down the back of his shirt and I was wearing a smart and conservative dress bought from the Salvos especially for the occasion, we did *not* look like the usual hired help. However, perhaps softened by the recent death of her husband, Lady Hooker must have taken pity on the babes from the bush perched nervously on the edge of her Herman Miller couch. The kindly old woman with the lavender-tinted, Dame Edna bouffant, agreed to give us and our yowling Siamese cat a three-month trial.

The following day we moved into the servant's quarters, a compact one bedroom flat tucked under the post-modern, Mondrian inspired mansion in Hopetoun Ave—the street recently voted Sydney's Number One by the Australian Financial Review. Greeting us at the top of the garden stairs, Lady Hooker handed John a remote control so he could park our car in the garage next to her shiny silver BMW.

'Is that your car dear?' she asked me, gesturing towards to a late model Golf on the other side of the road.

'No, Lady Hooker. It's that one,' I replied, pointing to the trusty

old ute still wearing its dilapidated wooden canopy and covered in red bull dust from the desert.

‘Oh my goodness!’ she said scanning the street for neighbours. ‘Quickly, dear. Put it in the garage.’

That afternoon, John and I grabbed our swimmers and beach towels and raced down the steep flight of sandstone steps, past the hot pink and orange flowering azaleas, hibiscus, bougainvillea and a bronze plaque inscribed with the words, ‘*Here Lies L J Hooker Kt. who loved this place, this land and especially its people*’, to the water’s edge.

Sir Leslie hadn’t always lived on the North Shore. Of Chinese heritage, he was orphaned at eight and by thirteen had left school to work as a clerk. At the age of sixteen the ambitious and tenacious young man owned his first property and, after marrying a store-keeper’s daughter, Madeline Adella (Delzie) Price and surviving the Depression, his real estate business flourished.

The Depression had obviously left a lasting impression on Delzie Hooker, evident in her passion for recycling. Instructed to wash and dry used bits of Glad Wrap and aluminium foil, I was also directed to scour butter and yoghurt containers before stacking them in toppling towers in the walk-in pantry for re-use as storage containers. Every twelve weeks the three of us would pile into the BMW and head to one of those bulk warehouses to stock up on cut-price washing powder, toilet paper and cleaning products. ‘Waste not, want not’ extended to such utilities as electricity: John and I scolded if we left the lights on.

In those days, with her husband the largest pastoral landholder in Australia, Lady Hooker was the wealthiest woman in the country and could have well afforded to hire caterers for her Christmas parties. Instead, she and I did the preparations for her guests ourselves. I’d polish the silverware, buff wine glasses and decorate the living room

and together we made hundreds of tiny meringues and mini toasted breads smeared with caviar or Camembert. Trussed uncomfortably in pressed trousers, a black satin cummerbund and a starched white shirt, John was the waiter: his task to mingle inconspicuously with the guests and refresh their champagne glasses as required. But as I loaded the dishwasher in the kitchen, I could hear John's voice rise above the subdued conversations in the voluminous living room as he launched into a diatribe against the director of the AMA or some other establishment institution: the words 'fat cats', 'corporate greed' and 'come the revolution' standing out in particular.

One day, Lady Hooker asked if I'd like to accompany her to the ballet at Sydney Opera House. Lady Fairfax had bailed at the last minute and she had a spare ticket. Having never been to so much as a poetry recital at the iconic venue, I was beside myself with excitement. As our chauffeur for the evening, John drove the BMW up to the grand entrance, jumped out of the car, opened my door and with a wink and a grin, bowed as, turning heads in my classic vintage op shop ensemble, I stepped onto the pavement like a Logie nominee on award night. I followed Lady Hooker up the burgundy carpeted staircase to the foyer and after finishing our champagne we joined the smartly dressed throng as they made their way into the auditorium. It was half way through the first act when I turned to Lady Hooker to comment on the grace and beauty of the prima ballerina only to find my elderly employer, eyes closed and head lolled to one side, snoring softly in her seat.

The post-modern, Mondrian-inspired house boasted five bedrooms and three bathrooms but there was only so much mess one little old lady could make, so my cleaning duties were relatively light. To supplement our income, I worked three mornings a week as a checkout chick in a local fruit and veggie barn and Friday nights I washed dishes at pancake parlour on Military Road. Every so often

Lady Hooker would take off on one of her Women's Weekly World Cruises, sometimes for weeks at a time. With little to do and the whole of upstairs to ourselves, John and I could take it easy. On glorious Sunday afternoons, we'd sit on the balcony overlooking Brett Whiteley's dazzling harbour, smoking joints, sipping the champagne we'd appropriated from Lady Hooker's well-stocked wine cellar and, pretending we were rich and famous, waving to the binocular-wielding Japanese tourists on the tour boats if we happened to hear a loud-speaker point out the Hooker house on the right.



After two-and-a-half years of domestic servitude we'd saved enough money to buy a hundred acres of bush on the Far South Coast of New South Wales. At the age of twenty-three, these uni dropout, anti-capitalists were landholders. Sir Leslie would have been tickled pink.

It was time to say goodbye to 'The Hook', as we'd affectionately come to refer to our benevolent boss. She was sad to let us go, she said. I think her young, feral and just-married housekeepers had brought a little joy and a certain frisson of excitement into her life. For the next few years Lady Hooker sent me fifty dollars on my birthday and another fifty at Christmas.

But there was no time for sentiment. John and I had a dream to pursue. It was Easter, 1979. We packed the ute with the cat, a brand-new cement mixer, a Pittsburgh pot belly stove, a giant Stihl chainsaw, as well as a gleaming collection of the finest carpentry and gardening tools money could buy and headed south.