

Epilogue

By Bill Bottomley

Mum stayed living in her Villa at Bushland Place, Taree until 2004. Then she moved to the Bushland Place Hostel, where she remained until early 2011. There she continued to make the best of her lot as her eyesight and hearing continued to deteriorate and her mobility was seriously curtailed. She had various falls, mostly minor, some not so minor. She had had severe osteoporosis for over twenty years, and had already fractured her right wrist and her pelvis. Her bones were so fragile that some years ago, when I gave her a farewell hug, I inadvertently cracked one of her ribs. That was tough love!

On March 3rd 2011 she had yet another fall, this time a bad one, in which she broke both bones in her left arm and fractured her right hip. She was taken to Taree hospital, where it took three days to get her into the operating theatre, because medical staff were not available due to a series of motor accidents in the area.

When we heard that Mum was to be operated on to pin her hip, my sister Chris and I were more than a little relieved. We'd both heard of how reluctant the hospital surgical staff were to give a full anaesthetic to very old people, as there was a high risk of them not surviving the procedure. It seemed like the ideal way out for Mum – a painless and gentle departure where she didn't come out of the anaesthesia. (She had often remarked how much she would like to just not wake up one morning, how she felt that she was living too long, and that she had had enough). In fact, I was most impressed by the way the hospital staff ostensibly were trying to help Mum by anaesthetizing her to pin her hip, but knowing that she probably wouldn't come through, thus providing her with an easy exit.

(I have to digress here: Some years ago I was lunching with some old friends from my high school days, who had all enjoyed particularly successful careers in medicine and related fields. I can remember complaining to them about the medieval attitudes in Australia towards euthanasia. One of them strenuously pushed the idea that these days the painful and messy end-of-life scenarios were actually well taken care of, that people in such situations were given palliative care, and in the name of pain management, gradually had their morphine doses increased until they passed away peacefully in their sleep.)

So when we were asked if we agreed that Mum should be operated on, we all -- Mum, Chris and myself – were keen to say yes. I, for one, felt as though I was in an unspoken conspiracy to do the right thing by Mum while at the same time remaining within the letter of the law. I thought it was going to be euthanasia by default, with the “e” word never mentioned. As Mum was wheeled away through the big floppy double plastic doors to the operating theatre we all waved to each other, and smiled, and all of us felt that we were saying farewell in the best possible way. It seemed to be going just the way my medical informant assured me that it would.

Well, so much for that brief burst of optimism. Mum, of course, came through the operation. To say we were all disappointed (including Mum) would be an understatement. Lorraine and I dropped in early the next morning to see her on our way back down south. I’d say that seeing Mum suffering that morning would have to be the most confronting thing I’ve ever had to cope with. The hospital staff were doing things to her to get her ready to face the day, and she was quite out of it. I really don’t want to try to describe this scene in any more detail, it was too harrowing.

There was a physiotherapist at the foot of the bed, waiting her turn to do stuff to Mum, and I asked her if she had any idea how long Mum would be kept in hospital, and where she would go to next. “Well,” she replied unctuously, “we’ll just have to wait and see what God has in mind for her, won’t we? I think that I was a paragon of self-control to confine my response, through gritted teeth, to, “Well, if you’re happy to worship a God that does this sort of thing to innocent little old ladies, we have nothing more to say to one another”. Mum didn’t really know what was going on, and I couldn’t bear it any more, so we left after about five minutes. I was shattered by this experience.

The Rehab Centre at Taree came to check Mum out and they said that they didn’t think they could rehabilitate her. After a week in hospital it was decided that Mum would go to the new Bushland Place nursing home, Karingal Gardens. In the six weeks or so since Mum had The Fall, sister Chris had been visiting her daily – sometimes twice daily, and by this time she (Chris) was getting a bit frazzled. She lived about 30kms from Taree and it was a huge drain on her. But she still was able to help organise Mum’s installation in Karingal Gardens. I can’t imagine how Mum would have fared had Chris not been there to oversee everything.

Back home, I would try to ring Mum. Sometimes the phone was within her reach and we’d talk. Sometimes she would have been wheeled elsewhere as part of her rehab procedure. When I did manage to speak to her on the phone, sometimes Mum sounded like she’d just downed half a bottle of Scotch, other times she was remarkably lucid. She wasn’t at all happy with the way things had turned out, and whenever she got the chance she told the staff that she’d had enough and wanted most of all to die. “But I suppose you just have to grin and bear it” she said to me, in her typically stoical way.

Now, one of the things that most people remarked upon about Mum whenever they met her was how many of her marbles she still had. Sure, she had her senior moments, and had trouble bringing nouns to mind sometimes, but by and large she was pretty impressive in the brain department for a woman only months off 100. Yet the nursing home staff didn’t seem to take her protestations seriously. Worse, they were actively trying to rehabilitate her. I couldn’t believe it. In her condition they were trying to get her to walk again! On top of the pain this

caused Mum, she also had to accept the acute embarrassment and humiliation of being toilet-ed, washed and showered. I found the whole scenario bordering on the bizarre, and I couldn't understand how quite genuinely caring staff could so lose sight of what constituted real "caring". They were caring for her so as to keep her alive, rather than carefully easing her through her obviously imminent departure.

After about six weeks of this treatment, Mum was trundled up to the hospital again to X-ray their orthopaedic handiwork. It turned out that the hip-pinning had not been a success. The pin had worked loose, and would continue to cause unnecessary pain. She wouldn't walk again. The next thing I know, Chris is on the phone, saying that she was being urged to give permission for Mum to be put through the same process once again, to try to fix the pin's shortcomings! The very idea that they could seriously consider subjecting Mum to another major intervention left both of us flabbergasted. It was like a juggernaut hurtling along with no real thought behind where it was going or why.

This was a on a Saturday. Totally frustrated by this stage, I decided that, hopeless as it seemed, in some way I had to try to intervene in what was happening. Without optimism, I put together an email to the Karingal Gardens administration protesting the way Mum was being treated, and I sent it off on the Sunday evening. This is what I wrote:

*"The Chief Executive Officer
Karingal Gardens*

Dear Sir/Madam,

My mother, Mary Bottomley, is currently under your care. Relevant facts about her and her circumstances are as follows:

- 1. She will be 100 years old this coming August.*
- 2. Several weeks ago she had a bad fall which broke both bones in her left arm and fractured her hip.*
- 3. She was subsequently subjected to a procedure in which her arm was put in a cast and her hip was pinned.*
- 4. The procedure was not successful, in that despite pinning her hip, she is extremely unlikely to ever walk again.*
- 5. There is talk of subjecting her to yet another procedure to try to rectify the surgical problem with her hip.*
- 6. She is so heavily sedated that she can scarcely carry on a conversation.*
- 7. She is only partially sighted, considerably hearing impaired, and requires total personal care (moving, washing, toileting etc), and she is bereft of all personal dignity.*
- 8. She herself (quite understandably) wants to die, since, given her age and medical circumstances there is little, if anything, for her to look forward to. Her next of kin (my sister and myself) also want her to die, because what she is going through wouldn't be allowed to happen to a dog. Even if miraculously she were to be rendered mobile again it would be only a matter of time before she had another fall, and the whole unnecessary process would presumably begin again.*

I realize that you and your staff are constrained by professional and legal codes of behaviour, but it is a matter of public record that these can be circumvented if approached in the right way. It is well known that the last days of the life of Kerry Packer were informally “accelerated” and “managed” so that he didn’t have to suffer a painful and attenuated death. Why is this avenue available to the rich and powerful in our egalitarian democracy, but not to my mother? Indeed, it is an open secret that there are many “informal” ways that the last days of terminally ill patients can be managed humanely, so that they don’t have to go through the purgatorial experiences that my mother is currently having to undergo.

I would appreciate it if, as a matter of considerable urgency, you could advise me of the medical strategies you will be following in caring for my mother, when it is abundantly clear that to continue with her current regime is more cruel than kind. This is, after all, the 21st century, and the way she is being treated at the moment is hardly compatible with the time-honoured notion of “do no harm”.

Yours most sincerely, etc.

By 9:30 on the Monday morning Chris rang me to say that the medical staff at Karingal Gardens had been to talk to Mum, and had rung her (Chris) to advise her that, after consultation with Mum’s GP, they were radically changing the regime under which Mum would henceforth be treated. I was encouraged to ring the Nurse Practitioner at Karingal, which I did straightway, and she explained to me that they had taken Mum off all of the many drugs she had been taking in an attempt to keep her alive, there would be no further operation to try to fix the pin, and that Mum would be in palliative care, and would not be in pain. It seemed that we had got things moving in a better direction, at the very least. Mum became increasingly difficult to converse with as her morphine medication was gently increased, and within a week she had passed away. Painlessly and peacefully (we are assured).

The next few days were taken up with funeral arrangements. Some 19 years previously Mum had arranged a pre-paid funeral with a local family-run outfit, and they turned out to be extremely helpful, efficient and friendly. Mum had died in the early hours of Anzac Day, and the funeral was held the following Friday at the local Crematorium and chapel.

Mum had outlived all of her contemporaries, and the funeral was attended by about 35 people, mainly family. The Celebrant had stayed up late the night before reading Mary Bottomley Remembers on the Net, and as a result, her introductory remarks were tailored specifically to Mum’s life and were particularly appropriate. The funeral went off without a hitch and everyone seemed to be pleased with it. The main thing for Chris and I was that we both knew Mum would have been pleased with her send-off. The serenity and aptness of the service had the effect of obliterating, or at least playing down, the horrors of her last weeks.

To round off this account of the life of a most unusual woman, I think it would be fitting to quote from a letter that I wrote to her in 2009, which the Celebrant read out at her funeral service. It went like this:

“Thursday March 26, 2009

Hi Mum:

... You know, you have such a modest opinion of yourself that I think you genuinely have no idea what a positive influence you are on a whole heap of people. I've tried to talk to you about this often enough, but I felt I wanted to put it down on paper so you could take it in at your leisure and chew it over.

I'm hard put to think of anyone I know that is so lavishly loved, and respected for the good person that you are. Think of your kids, your grandkids and all the other friends you have of all ages who still come to see you, or ring you regularly, or send you cards and letters.

You mentioned being guilty about something you did years ago – and that sometimes it preys on your mind a bit. All I can say is that, given that you've been around for almost a century, to have only one skeleton in your closet (and a pretty small skeleton at that) is a remarkable achievement.

You are undoubtedly the most genuinely kind and sympathetic person anyone could hope to have for a mother. All through my life, your basic honesty and decency has been there in the background like a soundtrack to a movie, and your consistency in these things is a beneficial influence on everyone who knows you – but especially so to Chris and I who have known you so closely and for so long. If you had feet of clay we'd have discovered it by now. I know I'm biased because I'm your son, but I know plenty of sons who don't feel this way about their mothers.

Although you often seem shyly surprised when I mention it, you have been a really great role model for me (and I am sure, for Chris too). I've never come across anyone who knows how to make the most of things the way you do. As ageing has constricted the size of your life, as your body has become frail, and inefficient eyes and ears mean that you can no longer do the things you used to love doing, you have always managed to be accepting of your lot. You certainly aren't a whinger. You stoically take the hand of cards that fate deals you and then get on with playing them as best as you know how. I don't want to piddle in your pocket unduly, but as far as I am concerned you're a bloody inspiration in this regard (and others).

*And in your latter years you have discovered the world of ideas and of politics – a world that you were insulated from by your upbringing. Being a woman was a tough job in the times you grew up in, but despite that you've managed to keep an admirably open mind, and it is a joy to see you devouring Talking Books and enthusiastically educating yourself. Think of the other people around you where you live. How many of them would be reading books like *Sophie's World* and *Mr Darwin's Shooter*, and prefer serious books like that to escapist or romantic potboilers or crappy magazines? The hand you were dealt growing up meant that you received only a minimal formal education, and you always seemed to think that you were somehow deficient in intelligence as a result. This, of course, is very much not the case. You read and talked and thought about Big Questions like religion and sex and politics, and had the rare intellectual courage to let in some very challenging ideas. Religious belief had got you through the harrowing time of losing the boys, but later in life you were able to transcend those beliefs, which is something that a good many people, with much more formal education*

than you had, are apparently unable to do.

You chafe at the fact that there aren't many people you can discuss political stuff with that you see on Kerry O'Brien or Jennie Brockie, mainly because they just don't have that breadth of general interest in the world. But you're still very engaged with what's going on at the age of 96!

And how many people your age have such an open mind about sexual matters? I know how broad-minded you are in that regard by the jokes I can tell you, and attitudes to things sexual have certainly changed radically since you were a gel.

There is not a speck of deviousness in you. You are absolutely straightforward. I trust your honesty completely in all big things that matter. The only time I've know you to be less than truthful has been when you've told a white lie to protect someone's feelings.

What I've mentioned here is only the tip of the iceberg, of course. You're bloody impressive, I tell ya. Adam is right: you're a legend... and you've managed it in your own lifetime.

As far as I am concerned, the trump card that I was dealt in life was being lucky enough to have you for a mother."

Vale Mary Bottomley.