

Crossing Bridges

Fran Collings

Our horses, Nellie and Mabel, always shivered and balked at the bridge. It would take all Dad's horsemanship and patience to coax them across the river.

'Spooked!' Dad said. 'No solid earth beneath their feet and they sense it.'

By the tail-end of summer the river had dwindled to a trickle and the autumn rains had not arrived. The sky remained a clear, blazing blue and summer-gold grass dried crisp, shattering into straw as our merinos munched their way through paddocks, leaving only furrows of red Mallee sand behind. We were reduced to handfeeding and relied on our two draught-horses to haul the bales home in the dray.

One night we set out for a local 'do', just Dad and I, with Mabel pulling the Jinker. Mum was in Melbourne, down in the 'Big Smoke' visiting her sister, Vi, who was unwell. The party was in the Mechanics' Institute hall in Meringur, and we were looking forward to a rare night out.

As we jogged the twenty-two miles into town, dark clouds began building in the east, grey mountains of clouds, copper-tinged, as the sun slunk behind them.

'Might get a drop or two, tonight,' said Dad. It was the only hope he allowed himself. Storm clouds had built up before, thunderous, purple rolls of clouds, only to disappear, like deflated balloons, by sun-up. We reached the hall as the first fat drops of rain fell, soaking into scorched red earth.

The party was in full swing as we stepped inside. Bench seats and hay bales were scattered around the hall but everyone was dancing or toe-tapping to the music of Mavis Lumley's band. It was usually just a trio, Mavis playing piano, old Merv on the fiddle with Jimmy hammering the drums. Sometimes Gus Molloy played along on his trumpet. Gus was there tonight, cheeks bulging like Jonathan apples as he launched into 'Lullaby of Birdland'.

I sidled over to the supper table laden with dainty sandwiches, chicken platters, passion-fruit cup-cakes, and, yes, Edie's feather-light sponge lilies. As I leaned across the table, hoping to swipe a sample, I became aware of an insistent drumming, drowning out even Gus. At first I thought it was Jimmy, giving his best on

the drums. Then I realised it was rain, fairly pelting down on the galvanised roof – deafening as a barrage of shotgun pellets.

Soon everyone heard it and the hall fell silent. We hugged and cheered, for the drought had broken and tanks and dams would be full by morning. Suddenly the roof began to leak, right over the supper table. The CWA ladies whisked the supper out of the way real quick and I checked that Edie had rescued those sponge lilies in time.

That's all I remember of the party. I loved those lilies, folds of golden sponge filled with whipped cream and quivering raspberry jelly. I made myself real sick, eating so many and I didn't feel so good on the way home. The jolting of the Jinker over the corrugations didn't help any and Dad made me sit close to the side in case I threw up. The rain was teeming down, bouncing off the hood Dad rigged in wet weather, and cascading over the sides like a waterfall, so I didn't stick my head out too far.

'Don't want you spewin' in the Jinker,' Dad said.

I must have dozed off but woke just as Mabel reneged at the bridge. She drew back, shivering and shaking, the whites of her eyes rolling sideways.

'Gee up. Gee up Mabel!' Dad clicked his tongue and coaxed but Mabel drew back between the rails of the cart, trembling and snorting.

'Garn, Garn, Mabel,' Dad yelled and cracked the whip across her broad rump. Mabel, usually the most placid of horses, reared up, forelegs clawing at the sky, head tossing, mane flying and her whinnying like a banshee.

'Here girl, c'mon now girl.' Dad cajoled, whistled softly as he calmed Mabel down. She remained, haunches backed firmly against the Jinker, quivering all over. When she had quietened, Dad grabbed the hurricane and handed me the reins. We needed to get home before the track to our farm became a quagmire of slushy red mud. Dad dismounted and squelched over to inspect the bridge, craning to see by the flickering light of the lantern. And that was just it. There was no bridge. The old red-gum posts had collapsed, swept aside by the swollen, surging river in full flood, ready to burst its banks. There was nothing left of the planks or rails, just a dark gushing torrent, where the bridge had once stood.

'Must have been raining up country for a good few hours before it hit us,' Dad said. 'It's rushed down the river bed, sweeping away everything in its path.'

We made a big fuss of Mabel then. Patted her and rubbed her nose, and I hugged her and gave her the apple I found stuffed in my pocket. We turned and jogged back

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into town to spend two nights at the pub. Once the roads were passable, we travelled home the long way, over the highway bridge, which had survived the flood.

That night we learned to trust Mabel's intuition, her gift of Horse Sense that all horses seem blessed with. That extra sixth sense, shared by some, when we sense familiar foundations are being swept away, leaving dark waters of the unknown ahead.

Several years later, Dad sold the farm and we moved to Melbourne.

'It was high time I left the land,' Dad said. But I think he only did it for Mum – after years in the Mallee she missed her only sister and I was happy to be re-united with my city cousins.

Dad didn't last long after the move. He died of a brain tumour a few years later, but I think he really lost heart, missed the farm, for the Mallee was in his blood.

Strange then, that I didn't sense a shifting of foundations, sense a sweeping into unknown waters. But I was only twenty-one at the time, and possessed no sixth sense to speak of. Dad's illness came on suddenly and I simply didn't see it coming.

Some fifteen years later, Mum moved in with us, for I was now married with a growing family. All went happily until, one day, Mum complained of a boring pain in her hip. She suffered from arthritis and we visited the doctor to seek his advice.

'Arthritis,' the Doctor said. 'Bound to happen at your age after all those years of heavy farm work.' He prescribed some pills, which must have worked, for Mum didn't say any more about the pain.

Within a few months Mum began to limp while going about her chores. She limped when sweeping her small front porch, limped as she inspected her vegetable garden and walked more slowly as she shopped.

'Old age,' she said. 'I'm eighty-five next month, so what can you expect.'

I had the first twinges of misgiving. A gut instinct that something wasn't right.

'We'd better get you checked by the doctor, Mum,' I said, and made an appointment. On Wednesday morning we sat before Doctor Lovell's polished wooden desk as he listened carefully, made notes and handed Mum a prescription for new pain relievers.

'These should make you feel more comfortable,' he said. 'But I'm sending you off for a bone scan just to make sure.'

Make sure of what? I wanted to say, but shied away from his possible answer. My sixth sense was really starting to kick in. I felt that first shift from the familiar into the unknown.

The results, when they came, were non-specific. The scan revealed nothing abnormal. There were scars from old arthritis damage and evidence of a fractured rib some years back, which helped explain the pain.

'Your mother does not have bone cancer,' was the firm diagnosis. So we relaxed and shared New Year's Eve, 1988, with friends.

We celebrated the good news of Mum's benign bone scan. Mum was the belle of the ball in her elegant lilac gown and her freshly permed silver hair. But the effect of the pain killers began to wear thin and by April Mum was in considerable pain.

Then it happened. As Mum hobbled up the drive one afternoon her hip suddenly gave away. She could not move and stood, swaying, half-way along, like a valiant ship run aground. Mum listed to one side, grasping the rocks lining the drive for support. She did not complain of any pain and yet, looking back, it must have been intense. Libby, our daughter, almost fourteen, showed remarkable strength and care as, together, we managed to pull and support Mum up the seven steps to our front door. Once inside, she collapsed into the nearest armchair.

We had no idea what had happened to Mum. As I phoned the Doctor, there it was again, that sense of unease. The first steps onto a shaky bridge across unfamiliar waters.

Things moved quickly, became a blur of X-rays and emergency appointments with a kindly but serious bone specialist. A late-night phone call from him chilled me. No specialist would call after ten o'clock, just for a chat.

'Your mother has a tumour in her hip, causing the bone to break,' he said.

'A benign tumour, getting bigger?' I asked naively, stupidly.

'It doesn't look too benign to me,' he replied. 'She'll need surgery, a hip replacement and then chemotherapy or radiotherapy. I'll refer her to a cancer specialist but right now I'm booking her into the Freemasons' Hospital for surgery this Friday.'

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I checked Mum's bedroom, hoping she was asleep. She was in bed, snug on her sheepskin under-blanket, pink doona drawn over her shoulders, but her eyes were wide open as I came to her bedside.

'Who was it?' she asked.

I think she knew the answer already. I sat by her bed and we talked then shared a pot of tea as the rest of the family slept. When I switched off the soft amber light of her bedside lamp, Mum was already asleep, her face turned towards me, a strand of silver hair across her cheek. As I brushed it away, her face looked smooth and soft, peaceful as a sleeping child.

When I went to bed at last, in the stillness of the early hours, I felt, again, the shift away from the familiar, the uncertainty of more small steps into the unknown.

At this time, a bedraggled grey Tom cat entered our lives. He had been lurking beneath the fire-bush hedge, in our front garden, for a day or so. I offered him a bowl of milk, which he seemed to regard as an open invitation. He took up residence by our front door and his rumbling purrs resonated like a two-stroke motor. We named him Tommy and his torn ears together with a scar beneath one squinting green eye revealed his past as a street fighter. His only dislike was visitors. He would roll onto his back, at their approach, revealing a snow-white expanse of belly and stretch out his paws languidly.

'Don't do it,' I'd say, for if anyone dared stroke his tummy he would slash at the offending hand with devastating swiftness. We tried to warn visitors but sometimes we were too late. He didn't ever try this trick on the family and perhaps he considered himself our protector.

Mum's surgery went smoothly; she managed well after the operation, was soon walking with the aid of a four-pronged stick and returned home. The fee from the surgeon was surprisingly modest, but his account read like a builder's hardware list, with its array of nuts, bolts, screws and rods.

With Mum walking again and her pain eased, my fears lessened – the trembling of the bridge to the unknown quietened, and twice weekly trips to St Andrew's Hospital for her radiotherapy became routine. Radiotherapy, together with tamoxifen tablets, kept her pain at bay.

However, visits to the oncologist re-awaked my unease, as he explained that Mum had breast cancer that had metastasised to the bone. Over the next few months,

Mum appeared to remain stable. We managed small outings and visited Daylesford, with its fresh air and bubbling springs, treasuring each moment we shared.

Before long, I felt a shift, a sense of things changing, as Mum began to lose her appetite, experienced difficulty eating and was steadily losing weight. The cancer was working silently, making inroads and I now needed the help of the Royal District Nursing Service to bathe her. She was no longer heavy, but weak and losing the strength to roll over.

The district nurses were kind, firm and practical. The alleviation of pain and thirst was becoming difficult. Ice cubes helped with thirst, keeping her mouth cool and providing some liquid, and Prolodone, an internal medication, was prescribed to relieve the pain. It was surprisingly effective and almost as soon as I administered it Mum would drift off to sleep. I was shocked to see that it carried a toxicity warning of S8.

One night, just past midnight, I had settled Mum down in her bed when she became violently ill. I suddenly realised there was no one to call for help. There was no 'Nurse on Call' service then, and the 'Doctor on Call' service already had a three-hour wait. An ambulance would have taken her to hospital but she did not want to go there, so I cleaned Mum, re-made her bed and gave her a Prolodone.

'You're my comfort,' Mum said, as she drifted off to sleep, and I've always cherished her words as a blessing.

I called Doctor Lovell as soon as surgery opened. He was supportive of Mum's wish to remain at home and had been visiting each week over the past few months. He arrived within the hour, examined her carefully, then turned and patted my shoulder.

'She probably won't last the day,' he warned.

I sat by Mum's side after he left. It was close to mid-morning, the time when we had always shared a cuppa.

'Cup of tea, Mum?' I didn't expect an answer and started when she murmured, 'Cup of tea.'

Mum seemed to be dozing and I decided she had sub-consciously echoed my words.

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She stirred, tried to pull herself up on her pillow, fixed me with blue squinting eyes and repeated, forcibly, 'Cup of tea!'

I rushed to the kitchen and made tea, but by the time I returned she had slipped into a deep sleep and remained so for the rest of the day.

The district nurses arrived around noon and bathed Mum, minimally, without disturbing her, and left. All was still and quiet. So cold inside, despite the November sun shining brightly on the garden. The house felt chill and remote, an island, set apart from the real world. I fled outside to eat my sandwich. I suddenly craved warmth and recall pressing the sun-warmed, soft green leaves of a camellia tree against my cheek. This camellia still stands – apple-blossom pink, single-flowered – and was transplanted from Mum's garden when she moved in with us.

Once back inside, I sat by Mum's bed again. Her breathing was quiet, shallow, barely there at all, yet the pink cover over her chest gently rose and fell.

She waited, I'm sure of it. Waited until the family returned from school and Graeme came home early from work, ready to take Libby to a pre-exam music lesson.

Mum's eyelids fluttered, she opened her eyes slightly and focussed on each person in turn, then closed them, as if she was very, very tired.

Graeme backed the car down the drive, taking Libby to her lesson, and Mum's room suddenly became deeply quiet and still.

Mum had gone. Crossed her bridge quietly, alone, once she had seen the family together.

Eleven-year-old Andrew took off on his bike, alerting neighbours, for many had known Mum. Some told me, later, that he did the rounds, leaving tears in his wake. He returned and I found him sitting in a corner chair near Mum.

'It's okay,' he said, swinging his legs backwards and forwards. 'It's just like she's asleep.'

I called Graeme and Libby and they arrived home just as Tommy took up his post by the front door. He seemed to know what had happened and I am certain that cats have a sixth sense, just as horses do.

He greeted each visitor on arrival; Doctor Lovell, first of all, as he came to verify Mum's passing, followed by our minister, a humble man, who had visited Mum several times. He blessed Mum and prayed with our family. We sat with Mum quietly after his visit before calling the funeral home.

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Tommy was waiting for the two gentlemen as they arrived. He followed them through the front door and miaowed plaintively as they wheeled in a narrow, high-legged trolley. We watched them carefully wrap Mum in a sheet, place a light cover over her and then negotiate the front door. Tommy was ready for this moment.

He followed the two bearers, fluffy grey tail erect as a plume. He supervised them negotiating the seven front steps down to our drive. Tommy then impeded their progress every step of their tricky descent of our long, steep drive. He wove in and out between the spindly, wheeled legs of the trolley, in a prolonged farewell.

We watched from Mum's upstairs bedroom window and couldn't help smiling through our tears. The thing was, Mum hated cats and had always disliked Tommy. We didn't see much of Tommy again, but that night I felt he was acting as her guardian, escorting her across the bridge between this life and the next.

Fran Collings' Mallee childhood is reflected in much of her writing. She has won several short story competitions and her work appears in *Imagine Maroondah Anthology 2015*, *Brio FAWQ Anthology 2015*, Elyne Mitchell Writing Awards 2016, AWAW 2015/2016, *Women's Ink! 2018*, *[untitled] issue 8*, 2019, and *The Lawsonian* 2019.