

A MUSING BAG-LADY

A stout woman in shapeless clothes and sturdy men's sandals plonks her ample bottom onto a park bench. A floppy hat is crammed on her silvery mop and powerful, expensive binoculars are harnessed to her chest. A grubby cloth shoulder-bag holds all she needs for this soul-soothing outing: her flute, a murder mystery from the Op Shop, her I-phone, three home-baked shortbreads and an insulated drink-bottle of milky iced-coffee.

Two hours she allows for these birding walks, once or twice a week, but she usually stretches it for an extra half hour at least. He'll be OK in bed for a bit longer, she tells herself. Like her dogs, she's now too fat, lazy and arthritic to spend hours walking briskly along the tracks as she used to, and this bench at the foot of the steep, disconcertingly-slitery path down from the gate is where she spends the bulk of her respite time.

She loves this seat; it's just perfect. Sheltered by the quarry cliff and maturing bushland from harsh sun and hot northerlies, it looks south across both the main lakes, divided by giant stepping stones, with the roosting trees in the foreground and the island rising from the south lake beyond the causeway. Reeds rim the lakes and bush-covered slopes rise steeply beyond them, with only a Telecom tower betraying the fact that she's in the middle of suburbia. From here she can see most of the birds the park offers for her monthly record, if she just sits quietly and enjoys herself.

Two coots chase each other in a noisy chattering race across the lake, running on the surface of the water. A young grebe cheeps insistently until its father bobs up from a dive and hurries to feed it. Black Ducks dabble along the shore to the right and the ringing call of Pied Currawongs echoes from tall tree to the left. Right in front of her, Superb Fairy-wrens hop delicately in scraggy growth along the water's edge, twittering to each other, and Red Wattlebirds squabble in the branches overhead. The early morning sun lights red underwing patches as shrill Spitfire-squadrons of Rainbow Lorikeets streak high over the lakes. The passage of the resident Brown Goshawk through the forest is heralded by the machine-gun-fire call of New Holland Honeyeater look-outs. All the usual suspects doing all the usual things.

Her roving gaze is caught by a white streak in the roosting trees and she lifts her binoculars and smiles with delight.

Well, look at that. A Little Egret. It's been ages since one of those dropped in. No, not a Little Egret, not with that bill and neck. It's a Cattle Egret, only the second one sighted in four years of regular watching. Not a true rarity, but rare enough. Probably here because the water is so low that the little lagoon is nothing but a few puddles in a clay-mud pan. That's why the spoonbills were here last week too.

The expert birders tend to snort when she excitedly reports her really rare sightings – the flotilla of Plumed Whistling Ducks, the stately Great Crested Grebe, and best of all, that tiny shining gem, her Scarlet Honeyeater – but they also drop everything and hurry down, hoping to add to their personal lists. Let them snort; she knows what she's seen and records them on her charts.

She fishes out the mobile phone her daughter reluctantly gave her for Christmas.

“They’re very expensive and you’ll never use it. You haven’t worked out how to use the simple one yet.”

“Yes, but aren’t I-phones supposed to be intuitive, and much easier to use? And I’m down in the park so much - what if something happens? What if I get bitten by a snake, or fall and break my ankle, or have a heart attack? What if Dad needs me urgently? And I could take photos to prove my rare sightings.”

Her daughter was right of course. She still gets in a dither receiving or making calls, her photos are hit and miss with the bird long gone and there has been no emergency, but she has learned how to play on-line Scrabble with her sister, her good friend and the idiot machine itself. It’s her latest obsessive time-waster and she puts on her glasses to have a few turns with each of them. She munches on biscuits and sucks up coffee as she plays.

It’s a beautiful, still morning and there’s no-one around now the joggers have gone off to work and the children have mooched on to school. She pulls out her flute rather than the book. Nothing soothes the soul quite so well as playing inspiring songs by sparkling water, with dappled sunshine warming your shoulders and your belly filled with comfort food, even if they are played indifferently, her versions. She runs through old songs her father played by ear on the piano – ‘Believe Me if all those Endearing Young Charms’; ‘Silver Threads among the Gold’; ‘Danny Boy’ – and some favourites more of her own vintage – ‘To Dream the Impossible Dream’; ‘Bridge over Troubled Water’; ‘Tammy’ – and winds up with some stirring hymns, the ones she wants at her funeral.

She should write them down somewhere; best to be prepared. You wouldn’t want them singing hymns you didn’t like at your funeral. She packs away the flute and fingers the small bronze plaque on the top rail of the seat-back as she drifts into gentle musing, one of the joys of old age. She didn’t go to Di’s funeral in far off Queensland, but the plaque on this seat is always a reminder. So many funerals, and more to come.

To farewell her dearest Geraldine she went to three celebrations: the first in the White Ladies Funeral Parlour – for family, colleagues and the many friends she had made in the gay community in a few short years in Adelaide – before her body was flown home to Williamstown; the second in the Town Hall for the hundreds of people who wanted to pay their respects and reflect on her remarkable achievements, and to share their sorrow at a life ended too soon. (She spoke at that one, told stories of amazing exploits, and helped carry the coffin. There wasn’t the pomp and ceremony, nor the overflow crowds, of dear Joan’s memorial service at the Town Hall last year, but then Geraldine was the first woman Mayor of the City, not the first woman Premier of the State, and she didn’t live on to become a revered Grand Dame as Joan did) ; and the third one here, when good friends gathered in the amphitheatre for the unveiling of the large commemorative plaque on a huge basalt boulder, that Di had organised to recognise the role Geraldine played in the development of the park.

This enchanting park, or at least the land it occupies, has been part of her life since she was eleven and came to live nearby. It was an active quarry then and at 4 pm explosions would rip the air, shake the houses and shower their roofs with stones and dust. Cement-mixer trucks rumbled in and out in a noisy procession throughout the day. When quarrying stopped some years later, the vast fenced-off site became an adventurous place for dare-devil youngsters and she went on some exciting ‘expeditions’ amongst the dusty boxthorn,

rugged cliffs, industrial debris and the derelict rock-crushing tower in a pit of murky water. But it was with Geraldine that the bigger adventure and involvement began.

As a young mother, she moved to Williamstown. As a professional active in the community, she was roped in by the Party as someone who could just possibly win a seat in South Ward. Geraldine, already a veteran Councillor though only in her twenties, brought her enthusiasm and energy to the campaign committee and, what a surprise, she was elected. For six years in the eighties, they had the numbers, and could actually do all the exciting social-development things they had promised in the election pamphlets ... if they could get them accepted by the cautious, crusty men on Caucus with them.

What crazy, heady years they were! So many meetings, so much late-night reading, so many committees and commitments. How she fitted it all in around caring for her family and home, working part-time and all her other involvements, she can no longer even imagine. It must have been a trying time for her husband, and a strain on the ever-supportive Nan. But they achieved things: a Social Planner, Children's Development Officers and community child care facilities. There were constant battles to fight, if not within Caucus, with other councillors and the community. Plans for a Woman's Refuge, for supportive housing for people with mental health problems, for low-income housing and for Community Homes for people with an intellectual disability were met with bitter not-in-my-backyard hostility from residents in the leafier parts of the city, and they had to attend meetings of angry rate-payers and try to allay their fears and overcome their prejudices. Most of the proposals went ahead eventually and the world didn't end. Geraldine was a tireless and powerful fighter for these causes, never giving up, and she was her off-sider, always ready with support but without Geraldine's ability to make fervent, persuasive speeches.

The quarries now belonged to the City and their future had been debated for years. Councillors and the community were divided. One camp argued that the holes were dangerous and filling them with garbage would bring in enough income to keep the rates down and build a nice park on the plain that would be created. The other view was that the local residents had put up with years of dirt and disruption and should get a beautiful urban forest with lakes and wildlife. At a big public meeting, she made her only good speech as a councillor, waxing lyrical about using this opportunity to create something unique on these flat basalt plains, an environment with a vertical component: cliffs and steep walking paths; forested slopes; lakes with stepping stones and reedy banks, alive with birdlife; a bird-hide and lookouts; picnic areas and restful park-benches. She wanted to take her children to such a park, where they could have adventures like she had as a child. She wanted to take her grandchildren there ... and now she does. Not that her eloquence convinced anyone, but she was proud of her effort.

Things came to a head: Caucus voted to fill the holes with garbage. She and Geraldine were bound by Party rules to vote as Caucus had decided but, if they did that, the opportunity for an urban forest would be gone forever. Sometimes you just have to take a stand. They defied Caucus and the motion was defeated. For their disobedience, they were reported to head office by their fellows. At State Headquarters, they sat before a bench of suited men while their accusers argued that they should be expelled. They had to explain why they had broken rules they had sworn to obey. All very stern and serious, and afterwards they sat in a bleak corridor, naughty schoolgirls outside the headmaster's office, while their fate was

decided: a smack on the wrist of some sort, a letter of official reprimand perhaps. She can't remember now. Whatever it was, it was worth it.

In Geraldine's Mayoral year, a little boy wandered off, crossed two roads and climbed through a hole in a fence. His body was found at the base of a sheer cliff. Such a tragedy for the family. The whole situation had to be reviewed from a community-safety perspective. The perimeter fence was replaced and the fledgling park was closed until it was made safe.

A compromise was reached: the large deep hole would be filled with garbage and the cliffs around the other holes would be reshaped and the pits partially filled using clean fill from the old power station which was being demolished. Maarten, a landscaping genius with an absolutely clear vision of how it would all look in twenty years, supervised the reshaping, the design of the lakes and the paths and undertook the massive revegetation required. Tipping-fees funded earthworks, the spreading of a clay base for the shallow lakes, the laying of huge stepping stones and the purchase and planting of giant dead trees in the lake floor to provide roosts for water birds. Before too long, the locals had a park and Maarten's vision was becoming a reality. People and birds flocked in. A miracle! A triumph!

Her friendship with Geraldine continued after their time on council ended. They got on so well; there was so much to talk about and share. Her daughter, now a teenager, teased her about the nature of their 'relationship' but it was nothing like that. Geraldine was just so good at friendship, so caring and loyal, so stimulating and interesting, so giving and concerned, so passionate about issues and people. She had many friends who felt the same way about her and she brought them together in friendship groups. Life was good in those years.

Then Geraldine met Di and she was no longer alone. Di talked about it once, in Argentina.

"I couldn't believe what was happening to me. I'd been married. I had a son. All my relationships had been with men. Yet there she was, buying her morning cappuccino, and there was I, smitten. Our eyes met and I knew that she was what I wanted, and that I would have her. I pursued her shamelessly."

They moved into a little house, just down the street from Nan, and made it beautiful. Their happiness together didn't mean old friends were cast aside. They both had such a capacity for loving relationships that the friendship groups just expanded. Your friends and family became their friends and family.

Alas, bleak winds of change were blowing across Victoria. Employment in the community-development sector became untenable and they moved their love-nest to Adelaide, refugees from Kennett and his competitive tendering madness. Suddenly, an insidious brain tumour started to steal their darling Geraldine away. It was a terrible year of relentless decline, and she visited as often as she could to support them both as they struggled to cope with progressive loss of the person she had been. So hard for them, so cruel.

When it was all over, Di moved back to the house they had shared. She became great mates with Nan and a good friend of all the family. They travelled together to South America, a trip she and Geraldine had been planning before it all went wrong, and she learned of Di's early life and her pre-Geraldine relationships, and of course they talked of Geraldine. She felt privileged to get to know Di so well, to share her confidences.

Then that bastard, cancer, struck again. Breast cancer, advanced, but Di was convinced, misguidedly, that she could beat it. She would try whatever might help, her faith was unquestioning, and there were people out there ready to supply the remedies, at a cost. She was so vulnerable to quackery and so unwilling to listen to doubters that she had to get away from them. The pristine forests of tropical Queensland, with meditation, running, juice diets, cleansing regimes and the support of a holistic specialist in Brisbane, would surely heal her, so she sold her house and left her friends and spent those last months in a beautiful but very isolated house in the rainforest. She put herself through so much, although nothing made any difference to the ongoing ravages of the cancer. She never stopped hoping and cut herself off from people who were negative. It was the way Di chose and that was her right, but it seemed a sad, angry, unresolved way to go.

Two special best-friends lost in a few years, and it's especially sad as she's not good at making and keeping friends. Not good at all. What she's good at keeping, is committees. Hard to believe, but she's still on some of those community committees that made her a promising candidate for election to Council 35 years ago. She's been on the committee of the Friends of the Park group since its inaugural meeting.

Di left \$4000 to the Friends group, as Geraldine had loved the park so much. She lobbied for bench seats in select locations for contemplative rest breaks, and argued successfully with the Rangers that four little bronze plaques would not turn the park into a mausoleum. This seat was originally up near the gate but it had to be removed when the storm-water drainage work was done three years ago. When the works were finally finished, the Ranger asked where they wanted the seat. Put it in the little clearing where the pipe comes in, that's a perfect spot, she suggested. When she was building her dream home for their retirement across the road from the park, she'd wished there was some way the rain water falling on her new roof could be channelled down to refresh the lake water. Then the engineers had the same idea and made it happen. So when it rains, she can sit on Di's seat and watch the water from her roof gushing into the lake. Brilliant!

She checks her watch. Goodness, ten-thirty! He'll be wondering if he's ever getting breakfast today. Still, she should have a walk; that's what she's here for, a healthy walk. She stows everything, slings the bag on her shoulder and plods towards the stepping stones. In the amphitheatre a Ranger is checking the pump. They discuss the water level. The Ranger points out a Nankeen Night Heron on a branch hanging over the water. Half-way up the hill she stops for a breather, then takes a shorter path back to the gate. Can't dilly-dally, there's caring to be done.

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