

Cilka Žagar

As I grew up in Slovenia during the 1940s, subsistent farmers produced their food, their wine and timber, their tools and utensils, much of their clothes and all of their toys. We washed and swam in the nearby river; we skied on the surrounding hills and skated on the frozen creeks. The cows pulled the wagon with the produce. We stored fruit in the cellar, we smoked meat in the chimney, made lard, ground the grains, shelled the beans, made doonas from home grown chook and goose feathers. Dad read the newspaper and told stories for entertainment and enlightenment.

As I returned home during the nineties, I expected to see everything as I left it but my sister had a computer and a dishwasher, a video and television, a car and a tractor. A tiny village store now sells goods from all over the world much like Australian supermarkets do. Farmers produce cash crops. Even little Slovenia could not escape technology and progress.

We arrived in Australia in 1963. In 1966 I began teaching in Canberra. In 1968 my family went for a holiday to Lightning Ridge and my husband, Joe, found a two-carat opal at Canfells.

Let us stay for a few months, said Joe.

It never occurred to me that perhaps Joe should consider my job or my opinion or wishes. The man had to lead and the woman had to follow. I resigned, found a job in Lightning Ridge School and kept on providing bread and butter.

Joe started mining to bring home bacon. He found a few stones and a few friends. He promised that we will return to Canberra for Christmas; every Christmas for many years until Lightning Ridge became our home.

We intended to keep that first opal Joe found but we needed a roof for the house and this small stone paid for it.

In 1974 Joe decided to start a business venture in America. I quit my job ready to follow. By the time Joe changed his mind another teacher replaced me at school.

In August 1974 I found a job in Walgett Catholic School and intended to work there until Christmas.

Working with Walgett Aborigines became a source of much happiness for me. Aboriginal people liked me and I liked them. I stayed in Walgett for the next twenty-six years.

Dudley Dennis, my Aboriginal friend, once said to me: It doesn't matter where you live, it is people you live with that make you either happy or unhappy. Government can give you all the rights and all the money but if the people around you don't like you, don't need you and trust you, you have nothing.

Dudley was talking about Aboriginal people but this also applied to me. I felt very lucky to work with people who liked me.

When our sons left home I began to study at university by correspondence. This gave me a sense of achievement.

As a young student in Slovenia I used to earn a bit of money by writing stories and poems for publications and now for the first time in Australia I also found time to write.

My Aboriginal students wrote me letters when I had no time to listen to their stories. The way they told about their lives seemed fresh and sincere. I loved their writing so I prepared it for publication. In 1990 Aboriginal Studies Press published our book *Growing Up Walgett*.

In 1995 my book *Barbara* was translated into Slovenian and published in Ljubljana. *Barbara* tells Australian history of the second half of twentieth century as experienced and perceived by Slovenian migrants.

My novel *Magdalena amongst Black Opals* was translated into Slovenian and published in 2000. *Magdalena* tells about the diverse group of people who came to Lightning Ridge to find a shortcut to happiness.

Magabala published my book *Goodbye Riverbank* in 2000. In this book Aboriginal elders tell how they experienced the Transition from their traditional grounds on the Barwon-Namoi riverbanks into the rural towns.

My American connection

I was five at the end of the war and we were extremely poor. Mum found a large brown canvas that fell off the retreating German truck and she began sewing clothes for us children. We had canvas nappies, canvas underwear and overwear. In 1946 I started school in a canvas dress. The school was under the tree because Germans burned the school building. We carried our home made chairs to school every day. The status symbol was the quality of the chair we sat on.

The bright light in our lives at that time were our American relations. My aunt sent us a wedding picture of her daughter Jenny and we looked at fairy like wedding party and admired the people dressed in beautiful clothes. America seemed a magic land of milk and honey to us poor war ravaged Europeans. Most people had somebody in America and we began receiving parcels of clothes from them. We received nylon dresses and nylon stockings and high heel sandals. Clothes and shoes were very important in cold Slovenia. Dad cut off high heels and blocked the toe hole of the sandal with a bit of wood so the snow would not get in.

Somehow the knowledge seeped into my soul at school that people who received parcels from the rotten West weren't as good as people who didn't.

Children of the communist parents received proper shoes from the communist government. I realised that my parents were not communists and that we were not proper people in some way. I loved our rich American aunt but I was made ashamed of my American sandals.

In 1972 I visited my Aunt in Cleveland. She was over eighty but she repainted her whole house for my visit.

My cousin Martin told me the story of my 'rich' relations. My father died in 1942, Martin began. Mum was left with three teenaged children. She went from house to house to work as a dress maker to provide for her family. She sewed me a Jacket so she could send me into the navy at the age of sixteen. She told me to send that Jacket home as soon as they gave me a navy uniform. She wanted my brother Rudi to follow me in the same jacket a year later. I was sent to Pearl Harbour. When Japan attacked I was wounded and sent to hospital but all I worried about was how to send that jacket home.

My cousin Jenny said:

I think we had a happy childhood. We weren't rich; far from it, but we used our imagination and invented things to play with. My father worked for General Motors so mum was the first on the block to have a washing machine, and refrigerator. She even had a television in 1947.

Depression hit us hard. Mum put some saving in the bank but the bank folded and we lost our money. In 1942 Dad died from bleeding ulcers. I was 18 and

had to start working, Martin joined the navy, and Rudi was 16 and at school. Mum worked in the sewing factory.

I got married in 1946. I had two little children when my husband became sick. He could no longer work and I didn't work for a year so mum had to help everybody.

I realised that my Aunt was not rich but hardworking, generous and caring. In 1985 I visited her again; she was 95; she walked with a frame. We leaned on the fence of her garden and admired her roses. I would like to gather the seeds from the lettuce but I can't bend, she said. Next year I will have to buy the seeds if I don't collect them now, she added. I scooped the seeds and packed them away for her for next year. Her face brightened. The weeds are going to take over, she pleaded. I pulled out the weeds. Her garden was her life. On the way to the airport she sang me a farewell song.

My Aunt was my America. I suppose I was her hometown.

Travelling in Pennsylvania we saw a sign saying: Slovenian Association. We told the doorman that we are Slovenians from Australia. He announced it to everybody and people greeted us enthusiastically. Mostly older men and women rushed towards us introducing themselves in a variety of old Slovenian dialects.

When did you come to Pennsylvania? I asked.

We were born here; we were never in Slovenia. It's so nice to meet someone from home, though, they insisted.

They were the children and grandchildren of Slovenian migrants who came to America after the First World War. They learned Slovenian dialects from their parents. We ended singing old Slovenian folk songs.

I travelled with my family on the last road between the northern edge of Canada and the North Pole. There are no sidetracks and few settlements in this virgin country. I stopped to get a drink from the only hotel for many miles. A man came towards me, his eyes alight, his arms outstretched, big smile on his face: I barely recognised you, he said to me in Slovenian. I almost fell into his arms before I remembered that I have never seen the man before. We stood speechless for a moment and then he said in English: I am sorry; I took you for someone else. The smile left his face; the eyes lost the shine, the arms hung beside him.

You are Slovenian, I said in Slovenian. Yes, yes, yes, he came to light again and we shook hands.

My Slovenian face was familiar to him; he mistook me for a Slovenian woman he knew. We hurried with explanations of who we are, where we come from, what we do, where we live, where we were born, when we were last in Slovenia. Soon we discovered friends and acquaintances in common; soon we were sitting in his log cabin discussing history, geography, philosophy, and childhood memories.

As Joe drove through Beverley hills we stopped next to a group of women beside the road to ask for the shortcut to the airport. Joe was telling me in Slovenian to mark the road on the map.

One of the ladies came towards me and hugged me. I was stunned. You are from Slovenia. Please come in, she said in English. I tried to explain that we were in a hurry.

I'll show you the shortcut, she said.

As we drank coffee in her beautiful mansion she told us that her grandmother was born in Slovenia. I always wanted to go to Slovenia, she said. She only spoke a few Slovenian words but she wanted to hear us speak Slovenian.

In Cleveland Joe stopped in a no parking zone for a minute while I jumped out to get something from a shop. A man stopped to talk to our two boys and they told him that we are from Australia. The man invited us for a drink in the club next door. Joe told him that he is not allowed to park the car there. The man bought ice-creams for the boys and called a policeman to look after them while we went to the club. He told everybody that we are from Australia and people came to join us. The man was Cleveland's Traffic Commissioner; he had a brother in Sydney and he wanted to know everything about Australia.

On a trip through Canada we became excited when we met a couple of Australians. We realised that we were homesick for Australia.

I am fortunate to have two homelands but whether I am in Australia or in Slovenia there is the longing for that other homeland.

I lived in the tent sometimes, I slept in the four by six trailer some nights and now I live in a modern, comfortable house.

It is true though what my Aboriginal friend Dudley said: It doesn't matter where you live; it is the people you live with that make you either happy or unhappy.

From my diary by Cilka Zagar

In the box of old papers I find a diary I began forty years ago when Joe and I came to Australia with our two years old son Marko. I open the tattered old diary and start to read what I wrote when I was still a young girl in the Australian autumn of 1963.

May 1963

Joe heard that one could earn good money cutting sugar cane in Queensland. We travelled to Queensland of sandy beaches and everlasting sunshine. The smell of frangipani blossoms, the sight of the blue clear surf, and the clean freshness of the vast fields inspired me to daydream about our better future.

The gang of Spanish cutters was willing to take Joe as a partner if I would cook Spanish food for them. Can you cook Spanish food, a man asked me. Of course, I said. Food is food and it has to be cooked. It is natural that a woman would know how to cook. It comes with the gender like cutting sugar cane came natural to Joe. Nobody needed to know that I never cooked a meal before because I was a boarding school girl.

In return for my cooking we would eat for free. The Spanish sugar cane farmer provided living quarters for his cane cutters. I knew a few English words and so did the Spanish cutters. They told me that everything I would need is in the cupboard. As the men left for work in the morning I inspected the cupboard for provisions. Everything was covered in black. I shuddered and shut the door quickly.

As I recovered I stilled myself for longer inspection. The cockroaches scuttled into the corners as the sun hit them. The butter underneath was all nibbled by them and the jar of sugar still held a few big brave ones that did not feel intimidated by my presence. In the crevices of the bread moved the long tentacles and munched away. I closed the door and took a broom and banged it on the door to scare the living daylights out of them. When I opened the door again the clusters of moving black wings and tentacles hung onto the corners but the food was free. I took everything out of the cupboard and let the sun shine on the monstrosity of black clusters of cockies hanging in the corner of the cupboard from the ceiling to the floor. Like me they were probably considering a new strategy of attack. We knew that we were enemies, deadly enemies.

I took the hose and sprayed hard into every crevice in the cupboard. They ran in their hundreds and I swept them out and brushed them into the bin where they were supposed to suffocate and never return. Luckily I had a hose and enough water to drown the buggers. There seemed no end of them. They kept coming huge and ugly from tiny cracks in the walls. I kept drowning them all day and by the time men returned my kitchen was clean.

It was no use telling men about my predicament. Living with cockroaches was obviously no problem for them. I had to be sensible and find a way to fit into cohabitation with the rest. It was my problem if I couldn't stand the long, fast

moving black monsters. Men just brushed them aside casually. They are all a fact of life. You can never get rid of cockroaches, they have been there before humans and will probably remain after we become extinct.

The climate suits them and there is plenty of food, was all Joe said.

No use crying or waiting for help.

I couldn't sleep at night. As soon as I closed my eyes there came millions of black enemy dancing in front of my eyes. I sat in the car all night. The car was the only sanctuary not yet infested by my mortal enemy.

In the morning I returned to my clean kitchen to prepare breakfast for my men who had a hard day's work in front of them. I opened the cupboard and my heart sank. I could feel tears running down my cheeks. I lost my battle. Either the cockroaches I drowned rose from the dead or their relations replaced them and settled on the clean shelves over the sugar and butter and bread. I closed the cupboard door and banged on it with the wooden spoon to frighten them away. Cockies understood and moved into the corners so I could reach the food.

When alone, I began to consider my future. I could either leave the place and let cockroaches defeat me or find new strategies to attack them.

Nobody ever took any notice of my fear of cockroaches. One has to live with pests one could not destroy.

I remember my early childhood. Sometimes cockroaches could be heard chirping behind the bench around the stove during the day but in the evening they ventured onto the ceiling. As the light was turned on they scuttled to the corners and sat in clusters quietly. Mum crept close to them and in one quick strike killed them with the broom. But others came the next night. Mum insisted that cockroaches came from the neighbours since we regularly killed the ones in our house.

When the floorboards of our kitchen were replaced in 1945 we discovered that cockroaches had a cosy home right under the old floorboards. Mum still insisted that they all came from our neighbours but the horrible masses of black beetles felt quite at home until we so rudely disturbed their dwelling. They began to run in all directions in their hundreds looking for safety and the new hiding places. We armed ourselves with spades and brooms and killed them like fire-fighters kill the fire that is trying to destroy the house. For many months since this assault I had nightmares about cockroaches crawling over my body. Nobody took any notice of my crying at night as I silently watched and listened for the left over cockies. Phobias were not heard of and being scared of the small creatures was considered plain silly.

At school we put our lunches in the drawer under our desks. When I opened the drawer I found them eating my lump of bread contentedly. Other sensible kids just brushed the unwelcome guests away like one brushes the fly from one's eye. I could not eat the cockies' leftovers.

I watched the floorboards while I listened to the teacher explaining that we had to be grateful to the communist revolutionaries who liberated us and brought us freedom and prosperity. I was convinced that under the floorboards rested millions of my enemies contentedly waiting to eat my lunch. I stopped bringing lunch to school and hoped that cockroaches would die from starvation.

We were finally liberated in 1947; our potato crops were attacked by the beetle brought from Colorado. We tried to kill this Colorado potato beetle manually at first. School children were sent on the fields to check for and squash the unwelcome tourist. The village co-op provided a prize for every creature we brought to them, dead or alive. Any prize was welcome in those poor, after war, times, so we, children, swarmed over the potato fields like locust.

Eventually America provided DDT powder that would kill any pest. We dusted the fields but Mum sprinkled DDT powder in every hidden corner of our house as well. Mum was sensible.

From then on we had no more cockroaches. I was so proud of my home and my mum. We looked down on neighbours who did not liberate their homes. I felt superior belonging to the family that lived in the liberated house. We were clean.

People will never destroy cockroaches. They were on Earth before us, said dad.

One day our kind neighbour brought us a jar of cream because our cow was having a calf and did not produce milk. I gratefully dipped a piece of bread into the thick cream. When I pulled it out there were the huge tentacles of the cockroach attached to my bread. I screamed and threw the bread away, the jar tipped over and mum told me not to be silly. Nobody considered my aversion to cockies an issue. It would surely develop into phobia if anyone allowed for it. Or knew about it.

Mum told the neighbour then about the magic of DDT powder in the hope that our neighbourhood would become liberated from the pests. Having pests in the house was shameful to mum rather than terrifying.

Mum considered our family better than people around us. Especially since she cleaned our house of cockroaches.

12.6. 63

I went to the local grocery shop and asked for some kind of pest killer.

Not that it helps much, said the shopkeeper. I spray every evening and I sweep them out in the morning but new ones will come in a few days. They multiply.

Australians are sensible about pests. They continually try to get rid of them but they don't lose sleep over them. I think the cockies became immune to the poisons, they grew stronger than poison. I believe cockroaches figured out how to win against Queenslanders.

What fails to kill you makes you stronger, said mum when she spread the white DDT powder thickly under our floorboards. She made sure that she killed.

My Queensland home became a killing field. If I am to survive I have to be smarter than my enemies. I must not let them grow stronger. They would multiply and punish me for trying to eradicate their species. Every living thing knows there is strength in the numbers. I have to find a better stronger poison.

What about DDT, I asked the grocer.

Not allowed to use it near food. Too dangerous.

I want to poison ants outside, I lied. So I got the magic powder and sprinkled it outside and inside the house. I filled in every crevice on the wall and on the floor. I did not want them to grow stronger. Every morning since then I swept the dead creatures away. After a couple of weeks only an occasional cocky came to die in my kitchen. I did not tell anyone about DDT. I am watching the men for signs of poisoning but the cane cutters survived.

I remain on the lookout for cockies wherever I go. Especially in the sunny Queensland where the food is plentiful and the days are warm.

27.6.63

The grocer told me to call him George. He is an older Greek man well over thirty. He seems used to dealing with people who know even less English than he does. We both smile in places where we can not find a word and we use our hands a lot. I am as foreign to George as he is to me but we are probably closer to each other than we are to most. I can not understand a word of Greek and he does not go to Catholic Church. Actually neither of us goes to any church because I don't know any churches here. I see George every day as I buy all the food from him and put it on the account for cane cutters to fix.

4.7.63

A man came in the shop today with a crate of lemons to sell to George. He gave me a few lemons and said: When life offers you lemons make lemonade.

He was a kindly Italian man over forty years old and must have sensed that life had many lemons in store for me. He left part of himself with me in his little offering of wisdom. I was never short of lemonade.

3.11.64

How is your husband coping, asks George. Cane cutting is considered the hardest job.

George is the only person I come in contact with so I consider him a friend. I keep chatting with him to practice my English. I don't know why he keeps on chatting. He is not busy and I buy lots of groceries for the cutters.

I realise that I never even asked Joe how he is coping. I am too busy coping. Joe does not complain. His hands are blistered but he says that he has to get used to the machete. When the blisters harden they don't bleed any more.

I was so preoccupied with killing cockroaches that I even forgot my son Marko. The farmer's wife, a darkhaired Spanish little lady, takes him almost every day to play with her little boys. Marko began to speak but the words he says I have never heard before. He points to the water but he says aqua. He points to the farmer's house and says cassia. I realise that Marko's first language is Spanish.

29.11 64

In the morning I fry eggs and bacon and make toast. I put a coffeepot and a jug of juice on the table. The men like this breakfast. Maybe it is Spanish, maybe it isn't. As I clean after the breakfast, I smell the fires. The cutters burn the cane fields so that the fire strips the leaves. The blackened stocks are then cut with machetes and chopped into pieces and loaded on train carriages to be taken to the mill.

At lunchtime five blackened men descend into the kitchen and I serve lunch which they wash down with beer. Almost every day they eat soup and steak and vegetables. Every day they have custard with fruit. It is dry fruit, which I soak for a few hours and place on top of the custard. This must be Spanish menu because Spanish lady showed me what to cook the first day and I cook it with small variations every day and nobody complains.

Each of the men takes a waterbag and off they go again. In the evening they return, wash themselves under the tap of the water tank. They eat more slowly. For dinner I roast the meat and bake potatoes. The farmer's wife provides greens for the salad. Sometimes the men go to the pub and have a few beers afterwards but most of the time they just drop onto their beds.

1.12.63

The farmer gave me a chook to kill and cook for the cutters. It had to be done. I remember watching mum kill chooks most Sundays. If you want to eat the Sunday roast you better kill the chook. If mum could do it so could I.

I held the chook between my legs, its head in one hand and the knife in the other. Mum said that the chook dies quickest if you turn the knife into its eye. I poked the little sharp knife into the chook's eye, closed my eyes and turned the knife to squash the chook's brain.

There was an awful pain in my stomach as I stuck the knife into the eye of the chook but I had to pull myself together.

When the blood stopped dripping in the pot and the chook stopped struggling I dropped it on the ground but the chook began to run away with its head to the ground. I panicked and grabbed it to have another go at killing. As I held it between my legs again, it slowly went limp and I knew that it wasn't only pretending to be dead.

Mum used to drop the chook into the boiling water for a minute if she wanted to make the plucking easier but most of the time we had to pluck it dry and save the feathers. During long winter months we picked the feathers for doonas and pillows.

20.12.63

After six months the cane season finished so we moved south to look for a suitable place to settle down. It is going to be Christmas and we sleep in a car.

Joe heard from other migrants that one could earn good money in Snowy Mountains. This great engineering project fascinated Joe. Anything with the name snowy is welcome after the heat of Queensland summer.

Joe began to work in the Island bend-Jindabyne tunnel.

In 1949 the Australian Prime Minister fired the first plug of dynamite to commemorate the start of The Snowy Mountains Scheme. The water from mountain streams was first directed through a series of tunnels to power stations where it generated enormous amounts of electricity. The water was later made available for irrigation.

The first wave of non-English speaking migrants from Europe came to work on the gigantic hydroelectric project. Cooma, the sleepy Anglo-Saxon rural town at the bottom of the Snowy Mountains, soon became the multicultural metropolis of Australia. The smell of the cappuccino and salami wafting in the air on the main street was a welcome reminder of Europe for lonely men who had left behind their country, family and sweethearts. In Cooma one could hope to meet someone from home or at least from the same continent.

Snowy Mountains project became a memorial to migrants of the sixties. Men reminisce about the wild freedom of the bush, the drinking in the pub, the hunting and the fishing. Many travelled to Cooma or Sydney on their paydays to find girls, grog and gambling.

Joe and Marko liked to go fishing along the mighty Tumut River. Sometimes we camped on the riverbank. The chirping birds in the poplars and the sound of the river rushing by, made me feel quite homesick for the river and the village I left behind. In the evenings we sat on the riverbank and watched the moon's reflection in the water and the stars in the brilliantly clear sky.

We fell in love with the wholesomeness of the untouched bush. The ducks scattered as we approached, but the platypus could be seen wading unperturbed in the deep of the cool clear water. The huge white gum trunks hollowed by termites were teeming with life. Termites rarely killed the trees; the birds nesting in the hollows fertilised the shell of the tree with their droppings and the tree survived. The young trees surrounded the healthy mature ones and saplings grew out of the dying trunks. In an everlasting undisturbed cycle of reincarnation they swayed in the breeze. The wallabies and wombats looked for food and white cockatoos and galahs screeched into the silence without disturbing anyone.

Gradually the hills around Tumut became orchards of apples, pears, chestnuts and walnuts. The sheep paddocks along the Tumut River were ploughed into the fields of corn and other vegetables; ambitious hard working Europeans created the little Europe. The weeping willows along the river and

the poplars along the road were planted by Europeans who built houses in the valley nestling among the hills.

Only the few scattered trees were left and their branches were eaten by stock to a metre off the ground. These trees looked like lonely ballerinas dancing over the dead logs that farmers ring barked to clear the land for more cattle and sheep. The farmers cut deeper and deeper into the bush. The clearings, scattered with fallen trunks, looked like a battlefield with massacred tree bodies.

In dry summers sheep and cattle ate into the roots of the new growth and the hills became brown and desert like as the wind lifted the soil that accumulated there through millennia.

The hills covered with snow in winter protected the valley from cold and wind. Skiing in Australia began in the middle of nineteenth century in Kiandra near Tumut. The European gold miners first used skiing as a mode of transport but later it began to be the main entertainment for gold diggers during the long harsh winters.

During the last two hundred years many back-packers walked along Tumut River in search of riches. In the middle of the nineteenth century the nearby Kiandra and Adelong yielded tons of gold. The abandoned mines now blended into the eternity of the bush and add to the picturesque beauty. The waterfalls and over two hundred caves provide the mysterious, sacred spirituality for the countryside.

I was never able to quite separate the memory of the beautiful Jindabyne from the rats and mice I had to live with. And the terrible aloneness.

I read the diary from 5.6.64

I am expecting our second baby. We moved into the five-bedroom old farmhouse in the old Jindabyne. The fibro walls have holes in them but we feel lucky that we have a roof over our heads. We found some old pots and crockery and cutlery abandoned in the shed. We also found an old mattress and some clothes people left behind.

The owners of the houses from old Jindabyne moved up on the hill where they build a new Jindabyne. The old homes are made available to workers on the Snowy Mountains Scheme. They will flood the old town and cover up all the dirt with beautiful blue water when the project will be finished.

There is no water supply. Australia has no water springs like Europe. You can't even dig a well. Joe patched and cleaned the old empty rainwater tank, took out dead birds and cats and smaller unidentifiable animals. He didn't even let me see all the rubbish he took out. I brought buckets of water from the Snowy River to wash the tank and now we are waiting for the rain to fill it with fresh, clean rainwater.

A man passed by as Joe cleaned the water tank.

Any rats, he asked.

No, said Joe.

I never saw a rat in my life so I took no notice.

They come inside during winter for warmth, said the man.

30.2.65

We are waiting for rain. Marko is four and he follows me half a kilometre to the Snowy river to get a bucket of water every morning and every afternoon. As I get water, I also wash our clothes. I rinse them in the river in the morning, soap them and spread them on the branches of the trees to sun bleach them during the day. In the afternoon I rinse them out and hang them on the branches to dry.

On Sunday we went to church and prayed for rain.

We should take a bucket with us to church so God could give us water, suggested Marko.

I found a box of comics and short stories abandoned in the shed. The little Mills and Boon romances are easy to read and bit by bit I learn the words and their meaning. The books are half eaten by rats and mice, they were covered in dust and cobwebs but I cleaned them. These romances saved my sanity. Luckily we brought the dictionary with us.

Jindabyne 17.3.65

Marjan was born beautiful and healthy yesterday at three in the afternoon. Joe had to work a double shift. They wanted him to do the third shift because the man did not turn for work but Joe said that he had to go to the hospital so the supervisor took his place.

Joe was dirty and wet as he slumped onto the hospital bed. He didn't ask about our new baby. He was shaking.

There was an accident just after I left, Joe told me after awhile. Explosion. One man is dead. A man lost his legs. Another man had his chest crushed by a rock. If I stayed a few more minutes I could be dead.

How did it happen, I asked

The detonator didn't explode, said Joe.

What do you mean?

You know nothing about the things I have to do, said Joe.

I know only that Joe works on the face of the tunnel preparing the lights for miners before they blast another metre of the mountain to make the tunnel.

I want to know. I hold his hand. He came to see our baby, he was supposed to comfort me but I know that he needs comforting. He saw it all happen. The

nurse brought our baby and while he suckled at my breast, Joe told me about his work.

There is a two-story platform at the face of the tunnel. The big jumbo drilling rig with about a dozen air drills comes and the miners set the drills to drill about four metres into the rock. There is a big hole in the middle and about sixty or more smaller holes on the face of the tunnel around the big hole. The miners place gelignite and a detonator into each hole. The air pressure pushes it to the end of the hole. Then they fill the hole with the nitrogen powder mixed with diesel. Next they place another gelignite and detonator at the end of the hole.

All detonators are connected to the wires and to the firing switch. The switch is under the lock so nobody could turn it on accidentally.

When all holes are ready, the jumbo drill and the wagon with the gelignite and the miners are taken back about half a kilometre where the firing switch is. The supervisor checks that everything is in order before he turns the switch.

Each hole has a number. The holes around the big hole in the middle explode first, then those next to it and so on. The whole lot crushes and caves towards the middle where a big hole was drilled.

After the explosion the face electrician is the first to go towards the face of the tunnel to install the lights. He can't see in front. Rocks are hanging loosely from the ceiling and can kill you.

After the electrician installs the lights, the man called chip monkey, dislocates and removes the loose rocks from the ceiling.

The loader comes to load the rocks on the carriages and clear the ground for the next drilling.

What went wrong, I ask. It is hard for me to comprehend and visualise every detail of the operation.

There is a strict rule that miners should never drill into the existing holes because the first detonator and the gelignite in the hole may still be live. It rarely happens but it did. One of the miners drilled into the old hole and it exploded into his face. The rocks were flying all over the face of the tunnel.

How could he?

We were all tired. After the miner prepares his set of holes he can take a nap. One miner took a short cut. He was sleepy, I suppose. Drilling into the old hole saved time.

Do you know which miner?

It isn't important; we all learned a lesson. I was on the way out when they called me back to help.

How long ago was it?

Less than an hour.

Go home and have a rest, I said. Joe never asked how long the labour took and how heavy the baby was. Those are the luxuries we will talk about later.

I hate it when Joe is on a night shift. I am scared to sleep in the isolated house. During the day Joe sleeps and I keep the children quiet so he gets his rest. If I am lucky they all go to sleep for a few minutes and I sleep with them.

26.6.65

We had the first frost. Joe cut a pile of wood to keep us warm through the winter. While Joe was on a night shift I put the baby in the basket near the fireplace. Marko was asleep so I took a book and sat near the fire. I heard a sound and looked up quickly. There were two pairs of beady eyes looking back at me. They didn't blink and neither did I. I sat frozen to the chair for a moment. A tail hanging out of the hole in the fibro wall suddenly moved, the heads of the creatures nodded to each other and moved towards the basket with my baby. I grabbed the baby and ran out into the freezing night. I stopped up on the hill, leaned on the tree and cried. I could hear the ice forming on the branches. I shivered. The wind touched my bones. Suddenly I remembered Marko asleep alone amongst rats. I picked a stick and returned to the house. I rattled all the walls to frighten the rats away before I sat in the middle of my bed with my boys on each side. I read out loud to learn English and to frighten the ghosts and the rats away. I read and re-read these books until I knew them almost by heart.

I told Joe but he is not worried about the rats. He bought poison and spread it into every hole.

26.8.65

In the middle of last night I heard the footsteps under the window. I looked out and saw a man. I grabbed the gun, turned the light off and waited. The man went to the back of the house. There is a little slope and the ice formed on it. The man slipped and came crashing on the back door. I had no strength to hold the gun straight, let alone shoot. When I heard the man's footsteps running away I crumpled to the floor. I never again closed my eyes until Joe returned from the night shift.

I told Joe about the man. That scared him.

I am going to resign, said Joe. We saved enough to put a deposit on a little place in Canberra.

1.9.65

I sit in my kitchen sometimes and watch mice play on my wood stove. There would be half a dozen of them jumping from one pot onto another looking for morsels of leftover food. They take tiny crumbs into their dainty hands and nibble like little children. They became my pets.

We are going away, I tell the mice. I am overjoyed. Spring is here, wild flowers sprung out, the rats moved out. Maybe Joe poisoned them and they lay somewhere behind the fibro walls rotting away. I want to believe that they moved out.

7.10.65.

The trip to Canberra was a catalyst in our lives. Joe and I fell in love with Australian Capital Territory. To us it was definitely a promised land.

The cool orderly modern design and the clean, symmetric beauty of Australian Capital Territory overwhelmed me. I believe that Canberra is the most beautiful city in the world.

I want to live here, I say to Joe right then and there.

Land is cheap. We bought the dearest block of land in Pearce for six hundred dollars. The rest of our savings started Joe as an electrical contractor.

Slovenian priest came from Sydney every third Sunday of the month and most Slovenians came to Slovenian mass. We wanted to see each other; even those that dislike each other and those that do not believe in God come to mass. I suppose nobody wants to miss out on seeing a group of Slovenian faces.

Australia is full of foreigners. Even Slovenians in Canberra seem foreign to us. They came from other regions; they have different background and they think differently.

23.4.66

I took an evening job in a local club. As a barmaid I met with Australians for the first time. The men leaning on the bar were eager to talk to me. They introduced themselves as Jack and Sam and Tom and Dave. Jack asked my name and I said: My name is Mrs. Zagar. He burst out laughing.

I know you are Mrs. Zagar but what is your name?

Cilka, I said and felt like a woman who has committed adultery for the first time. I felt completely naked because I revealed my first name to an almost complete stranger.

Men were friendly; I suppose anybody is friendly with a young barmaid while they have a glass of beer in their hand. They came at exactly the same time and left at the same time to go home for dinner and to kiss their kids good night. Joe kissed our kids goodnight while I worked.

Most men spent a couple of hours after work in the club and would have two to three beers. Anything over that may lead into the change of home-going time and trouble at home. They were older men all of them. Any man over thirty was an older man at the time because I was so young. Some of these

older men held high positions in the government but to me they were known only by their first names and by the size of the beer they drank. They appreciated my eagerness and memory. I would see them at the door and by the time they came to the bar their drink would be waiting for them. I liked to talk to learn English. Broken English was not a deterrent for a young barmaid as much as it was for men. Joe complained about Australians who mumbled their sentences so fast that he could not catch their meaning.

13.6.66

Kathy, another young mother, who works with me, invited me to her home. It was the first Australian home I ever visited.

Coffee, said Kathy as we sat down.

Oh, you don't have to, I dismissed the invitation, convinced that she will ask again and at least once more urge me to partake of the coffee with her.

You don't mind if I have one, said Kathy unaware of my expectations. She made herself a cup of coffee and accepted my refusal of her hospitality without a sign of discomfort.

I never again refused a drink of any kind from Australian hosts when I wanted one. You don't get the second chance. I had to learn fast.

2.8.66

On a big dance night in the club a man asked for many fancy drinks and I felt good that I knew how to make all of them. Before he left the bar he asked for the screwdriver. I was glad that I became familiar with this tool. Having an electrician I had to know tools. I brought a half metre long screwdriver that I previously saw sitting at the back on the beer keg. I placed it in front of my customer but he opened his jaws and looked around to his friends. They burst out laughing. The music stopped and everybody looked at me. I was the only dummy who didn't know that vodka with orange juice is also called a screwdriver.

I felt embarrassed but looking back I think people liked the opportunity to laugh. They remembered and retold the story. People are usually grateful to those who make fools of themselves. Gradually I began to laugh with them and at myself and my mistakes. There are millions of opportunities to make a fool of yourself when you are transplanted into another continent and society.