



ENDGAME:
Notes from Above Ground

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I can remember Doug Miles (the late anthropologist who is remembered as much for his puckish sense of humour as for his ethnographies of remote villages in Borneo and Thailand) telling me that it is most important to make a note of everything you notice in the early days of any sojourn at a new and strange place, because once you settle in you don't notice them any more and take them for granted.

Well, here I am in the antechamber waiting my turn to meet St Pete, so I'd better start taking Doug's advice to heart and start jotting down the things that I notice while I'm still new to the place.

It's a pretty well-run joint, I think, given the complexity of the needs of its inhabitants, most of whom have all sorts of special requirements – medical, dietary and mobility-wise. *In the kingdom of the blind, the one-eyed man is king*' is a saying usually attributed to Erasmus and it means that if you are surrounded by people less capable or able, someone who would not normally be considered special can scrub up rather better than they deserve. I think that's a good description of how I feel in this place. Most of my co-inmates are so much further down the track towards decrepitude that I feel a bit embarrassed walking around without at least a stick. The most mobile have walkers, and some of the worse off have wheelchairs and other mobility devices of impressive technical complexity. Then, of course, waiting closest to St Pete's door in the

*A riff on Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground* in case you might have missed it.

antechamber and expecting their name to be called soon, are those who never move from their beds except by electric hoist and seem scarcely to be alive, other than in some technical sense.

The food is considerably better than you would expect in a place like this – and considerably better than the lukewarm, mainly mushy pap that I had to force down when I was in respite at a couple of other similar institutions in the recent past. It's not cordon bleu, of course, but occasionally the cook manages a truly spectacular meal of restaurant standard. Last week we had fried seafood with salad, and the prawns, fish and calamari were wrapped in crisp and non-oleaginous batter, followed by a truly delicious dessert that I could have eaten three of. Usually the food is hot, too, which is a blessing, and if it is sometimes a bit light on in the pepper and salt department, the kitchen staff are very generous when I ask them for contributions for my stash of condiments that I keep in the top drawer of the bedside table. Morning and arvo tea or coffee (with cake or biccies) comes round every day, as does the opportunity for another cuppa before bedtime. On top of this there is a coffee machine on each floor which makes quite delicious coffee, and you can help yourself from them at any time of the day or night and as often as you want. A top-notch coffee and a pipe of Erinmore has already become a mornos ritual for me.

As well as getting reasonable nosh your washing is done for you, and your bed is made for you too, if you ask for it, (though I don't), and the sheets are changed every week.

But it is the general demeanour of the staff that really impresses me. It's not exactly the most congenial environment to be working in, given the preponderance of semi-conscious almost-people in every second room I just mentioned who are well past their use-by date and who need to be wrangled like two year olds. But despite these unwelcome reminders of what could well befall the carers, nurses and other ancillary helpers in the future, the staff are, almost without exception, cheery and friendly at all times. Admittedly, they do tend to bellow at one another down the corridors and generally make no effort to go about their business quietly, but maybe the noises of hustle and bustle and human activity make for a more normal background than if their goings-on were shrouded in a

reverential hush.

Everyone seems to know your name, and are always quick with a bright greeting, and they go about their often mundane tasks as though they get a lot of satisfaction out of actually doing something worthwhile for a crust, even though the crust they get is so diminutive. (Greedy White Men In Suits sit at the top end of town and shuffle paper about and otherwise do fuck-all that's really worthwhile and go on to make yet more millions over lavish lunches, while the overworked staff in an institution such as this are remunerated at a rate that the GWMS would think of as petty cash).

When she was trying to find a place for me in an Oldtimers' refuge Fiona found out that aged care facilities get more money from the government if they take in high care patients than they get for looking after low care ones, because high care patients by definition obviously require more care. What the for-profit outfits do is pocket the extra dosh but don't hire any extra staff, (which is what the higher amount is intended to be used for), and of course this just means even more work for the already underpaid staff. The capitalist system sure finds it hard to put on a human face, doesn't it?

And the Aged Care Facility certainly run a clean ship. This place is hospital-standard immaculate. Unlike many similar institutions the corridors don't smell of urine or decay and there are hand sanitisers at regular intervals along the corridor walls (though I presume this last would be an innovation due to the ongoing Covid crisis). Everywhere you go it feels nice and airy. There must be hundreds of windows in the place, and they are all sparkling clean. Keeping them that way must be the equivalent of Windexing the harbour bridge.

Compared to many of the other aged care joints run by religious outfits this mob also pretty pragmatic when it comes to dealing with terrible vices such as smoking and drinking. There is a special area set aside in a corner of one of the inner courtyards so that nicotine desperates can have a gasper, (complete with after-dark illumination and a fire blanket!). And as long as you're not a recovering alcoholic (or a current one), you can have booze in your room as long as it's locked away and you

don't share it with other inmates. It has to be locked away away because apparently there have been instances in the past where people addicted to alcohol have gone to extraordinary lengths to get their hands on a drop if there is any left lying around and accessible. This makes having a Sundowner, or a glass of wine with dinner a pretty solitary activity though, ruling out, as it does, the social dimension of sharing a drink and a chinwag with somebody else.

Also, they don't -- even the slightest bit -- try to get you to see the world through their eyes or to model your behaviour on their metaphysical beliefs. When the resident Chaplain dropped in to have a yarn with me about my "spiritual needs" I immediately let her know that I was an enthusiastic atheist, and she was totally unfazed, smoothly segueing to talking about what the management could do to make my accommodation more enjoyable and how to make it feel like home. We had a long pleasant chat about all sorts of things, even such things as how scientific thinking encourages questioning of its ideas whereas faith-based thinking doesn't, and it didn't affect the equanimity of the conversation one bit. It will be interesting to find out how these fundamentally favourable impressions might change after I've been here for twelve months -- after I've discovered the dark underbelly that will in all probability exist but is not immediately obvious to the newcomer. I think, though, that whatever might come to light, it will be highly unlikely that any of the administration will turn out to be fiddling with kiddies the way so many senior staff of a still-venerated faith-based corporation have been shown to be.

However much I might think that beliefs based on fairy tales are misguided, I don't question for a nanosecond their sincerity in doing everything they can to help people who are disadvantaged and to try to ameliorate their circumstances where they can. And I don't think you could say that about many of the for-profit establishments, like the ones mentioned earlier. I suppose that's why I haven't bumped into any ex-managing directors among the inmates. The managerial mavens from the top end of town (and their wives) go for much more salubrious Oldtimer accommodation than this, I'd imagine. They can afford to.

I'm also impressed by the way you're looked after medically here.

There are Registered Nurses on duty 24/7. All your medical needs and medications are charted and a doctor specialising in geriatric medical care comes once a week and is always available for emergency consultation at other times. I have had my Webster pack of pharmaceutical goodies set up with the local chemist, appointments with two specialists organised for me and the daily dressing of a minor lesion on my foot, and all that was set up in the first week I came here.

Patients who require more care than I do, through incapacitation or whatever, have carers who take them to appointments, or just out into the real world for an outing. I think this sort of thing is payed for by NDIS. One bloke who is a regular at Smokers' Corner likes to be taken down to Shelley Beach to look at the ocean and watch for whales in season.

As I write this I have been blessedly free from the Black Dog nipping at my heels for a few months now, and I find it relatively easy to acknowledge the good stuff that I notice about this place. Overall I have been favourably impressed, which is nice, because when I was on my way here I had no idea what to expect. This may change with further experience, of course. But in the back of my mind I am a bit fearful about what sort of environment it will be to live in when, and if, the Black Dog slinks back to harass me. It might not be a good place to be under those circumstances, but then again, where would be?

Despite my favourable first impressions, the place does have its downside, and the downside is bound up with the unpalatable but undeniable fact that nobody in their right mind would choose to live in an institution like this unless they had no other choice. There's no avoiding the fact that it is full of people who will inescapably just keep going further downhill. Every old person has little to look forward to except more pain and indignity and a reduced size of their life, whether they are in an institution or not. That's just an inevitable fact of life that we by and large choose to ignore (if we can). It's easier to turn a blind eye to the ravages of ageing when you're "outside" because it's not nearly so in-your-face as it is when you are exposed to those ravages just about

all the time, as you are when you're "inside".

The sight of the worst cases, confined to their room, totally stupefied by a cocktail of who knows how many drugs, needing assistance with just about every daily intimate personal maintenance task and staring blankly at a TV, prompts the passer-by to wonder if that sort of existence really can be called "living". Such patients are a mute testament to our societal inability to treat our humans as well as we treat our pets, horses and other animals when they are in the last stages of life. And we keep 'em alive no matter what, even though the means to give them a dignified and painless exit is readily to hand.

They make me think about my own case. I'm ambulatory, although I can't walk far any more, and I can still laugh. If I compare myself to the zonked out ones then I've got a long way yet to go. But when I look at my likely future there's not a lot to look forward to either, if I'm being honest with myself. I can no longer do any of the things that defined me – that made me an individual different to everyone else (except for pecking at a computer keyboard). I am now just "an old person". One of an undifferentiated group.

Very few (if any) old people manage to stand out from the rest of the oldies as an individual. Old people are treated the way too many people treat "people of colour"; that is, they are treated with stereotyped expectations that are appropriate for "people of age". Old people have little autonomy, dignity, or independence – those are among the first things to go, and the more incapacitated or ill you are, the more you are treated like a child. When you've reached the bewildered stage of having lost most of your marbles you behave like a child and consequently, and quite understandably, are treated as though you are a child (which you have become, in a way). Life follows a sine curve, and when you get near the end of it you are pretty much as helpless as you were when you were at the start of it.

But these are musings on the less pleasant aspects of inevitable existential matters shared by everyone who gets old, and not a downside of this aged care institution.

I suspect that the worst aspect of this place is that, as I have mentioned

before, it is as good as it is mainly because of the efforts of the exploited staff. I have no idea what would represent good staffing levels, but at the moment the media is full of articles about the shameful funding deficiencies for aged care, made especially relevant now because of the Covid virus running rampant through Melbourne Oldtimers' facilities.

Mind you, I look at the desultory games of bingo, and the community singing, the church services on Sundays and the colouring-in sessions that masquerade as painting classes, and I feel that I must be forever an outsider here. The same goes for conversation: I don't have enough knowledge or enthusiasm for the footie to get much out of the few conversations that occasionally occur. Any comments of a vaguely political nature that I might make are usually met with looks of incomprehension, or an ambiguous silence. Maybe I will meet other people here who are also outliers from the majority culture, but the odds are not looking good.

Since it became obvious that I was going to have to bite the bullet and surrender myself to some form of aged care, and since I've come here, I suppose I have been brushing aside any thoughts of what it will be like to make this place my home from now till lights out. A lot will depend on how much I deteriorate, and how fast. But creativity always has to operate within constraints of some kind, so maybe I'd best just see it as a challenge to try to find a creative way to live what's left, and to look on the tightening constraints as simply part of that challenge.

If I can.



A couple of weeks later, and I am beginning to get used to the rhythms of my new existence. It hit me the other day that this place is, in its own way, a completely new culture that I am slowly becoming accustomed to. Or, more precisely, it is a number of subcultures, and which culture you belong to is determined by how decrepit you are. If you are bedridden, you can't belong to the culture of the ambulatory -- obviously. If you have reached the stage of virtual childishness, then you partake of the community activities on offer, such as community singing, church services (if you are so inclined), bingo, simple quizzes and fancy dress occasions, where you are encouraged to wear your pyjamas, or dress up as your favourite superhero and the like, assuming you can be wheeled to the venue by your carer.. This is not a culture that I would want to be part of any time in the near future, of course. I'm finding that I am beginning to filter out from my attention all the bits that don't apply to me. I'm becoming quite good at simply not being aware of what I don't want to be reminded of. But this only works to a degree.

People who can get around by themselves with walkers or wheelchairs can join in the communal activities if they choose, or (Covid restrictions permitting) can go out on bus trips, or be taken out by their carers. In my case, if I need to go downtown to buy a desk lamp or something, I am free to go wherever I want to, as long as I sign out and back in again. I am waiting on some taxi vouchers, which will get me cab rides for half price, which will be a help to the exchequer as a taxi to town and back will set you back \$20.

The group who are regulars at Smokers' Corner are all on walkers, except for Annabelle, who has a wheelchair that she has trouble using by herself, and Michael who is in a rolls-royce-esque wheelchair complete with backing beepers, turning indicators, head and tail lights, and is electrically controlled. And me, of course, without even a walking stick at the moment.

I am gradually picking up on some of the unspoken rules that operate with this group. Here are some examples: Nobody seems to talk about their background – what they did before they came here, or what their ailments are. If anyone has been forthcoming on topics like this it is usually only when the others have left and the situation is one on one, and even then the information is pretty sketchy and brief. No one has shown any curiosity about what I used to do. They know I am doing things on a computer, but so far nobody has asked me just what I'm up to. I have an awful suspicion that maybe an interest in life and what's going on is no longer part of their mindset. And who knows how much medication they might be on?

Most of them have speech difficulties, and it is often frustratingly difficult to understand what they are saying. I find myself nodding, or grinning, or whatever I think is an appropriate response based on their tone of voice, because most of the time I haven't the slightest idea what they are on about. If you ask them to repeat themselves they will, speaking more slowly, but in a way that seems as if they are a bit exasperated at having to do so. It could also be frustration at having to cope with their verbal disability all the time. By and large they are not a talkative group though. It is not unusual for half a dozen of us to sit there for quite some time, puffing away and staring into space, without a word being said. They all seem quite happy to do this for quite long periods, but it is something that I have yet to be able to handle without feeling vaguely uncomfortable. At such times I usually get out my iPad and start reading something.

Let me tell you about Erin, who is one of the regulars, because he sort of typifies the subculture of Smokers' Corner. Erin is unkempt and has tousled thinning hair with unlikely patches of pink tufts here and there. God only knows what would have prompted him to have these bits dyed,

and so badly. And pink? I don't know what his illnesses are, but he has an ulcer on his leg, has a piddle bag, speaks very unclearly and uses a walker. This much I have worked out. He has arrogated to himself the right to sit in a certain chair, and if perchance one of the others of us is sitting in it when he shuffles over, he unceremoniously kicks them out of it. No one questions his entitlement. He also has the habit of lighting a cigarette and promptly falling asleep. The ash on his fag grows longer, and it would not be appropriate to tell him about it, even if it was about to burn his fingers. It would be a sort of intrusion on his independence or something. Once when it was only Erin and me there I asked him how he used to earn a crust. "I worked in a foundry." was his reply. Just that. No elaboration. Erin had a sore throat last week, so they Covid-tested him and quarantined him in his room till the results came back. He was only isolated for two days, and he came out to the Corner about 6:30. His results had come back and they were negative. Normally very taciturn, he was mumbling away almost non-stop. He was like a little kid, so excited to be out and in the clear. He was like a different person. But the next morning he was back to his old laconic self.

Michael is perhaps a better example. He is paralysed down one side, so only has the use of one arm and hand. (BTW, on his good arm he sports a tatt of, wait for it -- Bullwinkle!) He struggles to light his fag with one hand, but somehow we all know that it would not be a good idea to offer to help him. He needs to do it himself. It means that in that respect at least he still has his independence. To do it for him would be to remind him of his dependence I suspect. After all, your independence is one of the first things to go in a place like this.

Alison has severe short term memory problems. She has no recollection of recent conversations. Early on she'd asked me: "You haven't been here long, have you? Are you going to stay? It's not a bad place is it? I came here for the food." And now, weeks later, whenever there is a lull in the conversation she recites the same thing all over again. The rest of the group are aware of this of course, but it always goes studiously unremarked. She has other set pieces about her children as well, and now I can predict them word for word. As Dudley Moore would say: "It's not enough to keep the mind alive, is it, Pete?" Alison is the one who is

easiest to understand, but as these things always seem to turn out, she hasn't got much to say.

If you put yourself in Alison's position, she has no idea that she does this repetitive thing, and nobody would think for a moment to tell her about it. When she launches into her predictable routine the rest of us are at pains to look as though she is doing nothing unusual. Now what scares me about this is the realisation that for all I know, *I could be doing something similar, and I'd be no more aware of it than Alison is!* How could you ever be sure that you weren't?

The management might have come to terms with letting people smoke, and for some to have access to booze (and it's not unknown for some of the blokes to go out with their walkers and wheelchairs in special hi-top taxis and get hammered), but the top bananas have a typically ill-informed policy that cannabis is just not on. An evil street drug. I was talking to another smoker, who I think is a stroke victim, about how nice it would be to be able to smoke a scoob instead of tobacco, and how ironic it is that we are allowed to use tobacco (which is obviously no good at all for you) and yet we can't have a spliff which would actually do us more good, make us feel a whole lot better, give us a feeling of serenity and acceptance and a good night's sleep. (Sounds like good medicine to me). But of course that's not going to happen anytime soon. We then went on to fantasise about beginning a revolution in aged care drug policies, which was amusing for both of us.

(Interlude)

Yesterday there was only Erin, Barney and me at the Corner. (It might sound like I spend all my time there, but I only go there for a pipe at mornos and arvos. It's just that the Corner is just about the only place where there is any social interaction). Barney is a nice bloke, and blessedly free of any speech impairment. He and Erin were swapping desultory remarks about cars when Erin got a sort of sly look on his face, leaned to one side and let go a seam ripper! We all burst out laughing, and I said: "So now you're going to talk about car *exhausts*, are you?" and the laughter intensified. It would be too strong to say that it

was a bonding experience, but in its own weird sort of way it brought us together a bit. And it made me wonder why farts are funny. Little kids find them so from very early on, and here were us three old farts still finding them funny. I wonder if farts are funny across all human cultures?

I feel like some sort of business tycoon, not having to do my own washing any more. But that too has its downside. They have lost one of my favourite shirts. It was a sort of army-green long sleeved cotton job with two front pockets. Every time I pass Chris, the woman who runs the laundry in the corridor she looks vaguely discomfited. I think she hopes everyone will forget about it. 'Cos what is she going to do to look for it? Fossick through the clothes cupboards of eighty inmates? The week earlier I discovered a sloppy joe hanging in my cupboard that wasn't mine. I took it back to Chris, who obviously had no idea who it belonged to. It was quite a nice sloppy joe, and about my size. Maybe I should have hung onto it and accepted the swap. This morning I gave her an armload of shirts and stuff to wash and by 12:30 she'd brought it back, all neatly organised on hangers, even my pyjamas. It was pretty quick service. She might feel guilty.

In between writing this and eating the quite good food, and drinking the morning and arvo coffees, I spend most of my time in my room. There are lots of quite pleasant places to hang around dotted about the place here, but most of the time I'm happy to sequester myself in my room. At the moment I have ABC Jazz on in the background (I put it on when I get up in the morning and leave it on pretty much all day). And I read. I've joined the Port Macquarie library which is only a couple of hundred metres away but as yet I've not been there in person. I was impressed to find that they have a recording studio that local musos can book time in to record their stuff. Geez! The gear that is around these days compared to the almost total absence of anything like that when I was a pup makes me foam at the mouth with jealousy. (People should respect us oldies. We went through school without Google!).

I joined the library over the phone the day after I got here and I get all

my books from them by digital download to my iPad. Their catalogue is extensive, and a welcome change from the one at Lake Macquarie, which I was getting a bit too familiar with. At the moment I'm reading Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*, which is one of the few of his that I haven't read. When I was exploring their on line catalogue earlier I was chuffed to come across the sequel to *Sapiens*, by Yuval Noah Harari, called *Homo Deus*. I downloaded it immediately, and it was as good as *Sapiens*. I'd recommend both of them to anyone who is interested in a book that really exercises the grey matter. (Neither of them is a book I would dream of mentioning to the denizens of Smokers' Corner, alas).

Actually, I'm all in favour of old age – as long as it's in a bottle.

Just now, as I came down the corridor I was met by one of the staff wheeling a decked out little trolley which was playing "Greensleeves". She gave me an ice-cream cone. A nice surprise.

I haven't mentioned the problems I have had with my new computer. My old computer had finally died a few months before I came here. I brought with me a new one, which runs on Windows 10. There was a huge difference between the two. Everything was different, and what was the same as I was used to was in a different place. When I got my old computer years ago Lo's son Mike put Photoshop and InDesign on it for me. (You could pirate programmes back then if you knew how, and Mike did). Those days are no more, and now you have to rent these programmes by the month. InDesign was a bit expensive, I thought, so I signed up for a different publishing programme called Lucidpress. I really struggled with it, and I seemed to spend a lot of time waiting for email replies from their Support Desk in the States. (It was to fill this downtime that I began writing all this stuff).

The WiFi connection to the net here is abysmally slow and was causing me all sorts of problems. I'd become used to turning to Lorraine when I ran into problems with systems that I couldn't get my head around, but now I was on my own. I was a typical oldie who was bewildered by the

intricacies of things digital. I could drive the car, as it were, but I had no idea how the motor worked. So I was feeling stymied.

I ended up paying a nice young computer technician from Port, who I got onto by chance, to have a look at the computer to try to find out why so much wasn't working as it should. It was a bit like finding a good car mechanic to service your vehicle. He worked out that, because Lucidpress was a new-fangled web-based programme, the slow net connection here didn't have enough grunt to run it. To cut to the chase, I signed up to get InDesign after all, even though it was three times as much as Lucidpress. With InDesign, you download it and install it onto your computer, so I was able to bypass the need to use the lousy net connectivity at all. After that, everything went swimmingly.

I had been in respite at another aged care facility before I came here, and there I had met a 92 yr old bloke who had worked for 36 years as a psych nurse in the notoriously bad old days at Morisset (mental) Hospital. He was extremely articulate for his age, and I recorded several interviews with him about his working life on my iPad before I finished my respite stay. I thought what he had to say was unusually valuable oral history, and I was trying to use Lucidpress to put his story into A5 book form. It had taken me three weeks to manage to set up five pages, struggling with the malfunctioning web-based programme, but once I got onto InDesign I finished the whole thing in six hours! So my keyboard-pecking life seems to be running on greased rails now.



I'm well into my fourth week now of my new life. I'm enjoying writing about it. I think I'll keep going for just a bit longer – because after all, it keeps my mind occupied with something to do, thereby keeping darker thoughts at bay – and there be dragons.

I haven't mentioned my room situation. So far I have been in a temporary room. It is a bit smaller than most of the other rooms in the place, and it has a stunning outlook onto a brick wall about ten feet away. It is completely unadorned, and to say that it has a cell-like feel to it would be a bit strong, but not all that much. It has its own ensuite, and all that is fine. Management says I should be able to move into what will be my permanent room in several weeks. I have a very strong suspicion that the move won't happen till someone carks and makes a room available. I'm hoping to get one with a balcony and a view towards Port. There was a rumour that one might become available overlooking the carpark, but I didn't find that an especially thrilling prospect.

One of the rooms across the corridor had its door open the other day and as I passed I saw that it was empty, so I snuck in to have a look around. It looked great, it had a balcony and a view in the right direction. But then I had a butcher's in the ensuite and found that it was shared with the room adjacent. That disqualified it immediately for me. It put me too much in mind of the place I was respiting in before I came here, which had a shared ensuite. One morning I went in to have a shower

only to be confronted by a turd deposited neatly over the drain cover!

While I was ‘in respite’ in that other place I mentioned, I dropped my Dunhill pipe onto the cement and it broke jaggedly at the mouth end of the stem, which had been bitten through over the years and had become quite fragile. I had bought it at the Dunhill shop in Jermyn St in London when I was 25 and smoked it for quite some years before I quit when I was about 40. When I turned 78 I decided Fuck it! I’ve got to die of something, and started smoking it again, and it brings me great satisfaction and a certain amount of serenity. And for a bloke of advanced age “to wind the slim tendrils of his personality round the firm stem of a briar” (*vale* Peter Gittos) is an almost quintessentially Norman Rockwell stereotype. Seems to me that deciding to smoke in your old age is a quite different decision to deciding to smoke when you have most of your life ahead of you. Not everyone agrees with me about this, I hasten to add. (*Pace* Lo and Fi).

It is a superb old pipe. It has a lovely build-up of carbon inside the bowl and consequently is much better than if it were brand new. In a couple of years it will be sixty years old. I had a look on the Web, and a similar pipe today would set you back considerably more than \$800 (which is outrageous. A lot of this is snob value, because of the ‘Dunhill white dot’ on the stem. Trust the Brits). Anyway, it turned out that I could find nobody in Australia who could put a new stem on it, and I ended up having to send it to the U.S, to have it made good. It would have cost me US\$25 to have a white dot on the stem. I told the repairer that I wanted a pipe, not a status symbol, so it will be without a dot. It took three weeks to get there, two weeks to repair, and last week I was advised by the repairer there that it is now on its way back. I suppose it’ll be another three weeks in transit. (The slowness is caused by Covid, apparently). But when it finally gets here I’ll be like a little kid on Xmas morning.

Well bugger me! You wouldn’t read about it. When I finished typing that last paragraph I made my way down to the Corner for a proper coffee and a bowl of Erinmore (in an unsatisfactory old pipe), and as I was passing Reception the girl on duty said: ”Hey Bill. I’ve got something for you,” and handed me a sturdy cardboard box. Yes, you’ve guessed it. It was my Dunhill! If I wasn’t scared of falling over I would have done a

little dance! I got my coffee and lurched out to the Corner, unpacked it and proceeded to get to know my old friend all over again. It was a very special smoke. Sometimes little things can assume an importance way beyond what you might expect.

This morning Margaret the cleaning lady was sprucing my room up, and to make conversation I asked her if she had any kids. “Oh yeah. Two grown-up boys. But one of them committed suicide last Christmas, and his brother, who had been trying to help him with his depression, went into a decline because he hadn’t been able to prevent it.” Then she embarked on a litany of other disasters that had befallen her lately – losing her mother, breaking up with her husband, being chucked out of her rental property and more...Christ! I was going to ask her why she’d killed the Chinaman in the first place but censored myself as I suspected she wouldn’t understand the allusion. It was hard to know what to say, after that. You never know what’s going on underneath someone’s socially-acceptable exterior do you?

At morning smoko today Albert haltingly told us that he’d come across an inmate that morning with a gardening fork and a shovel. Albert asked him what he was going to do with the gardening implements, and the bloke said that he was going to dig his way out! I can’t vouch for the truth of that, of course, given that he could just walk out the front door if he wanted to. I’m just reporting what I heard, but it raised a smile among t’others.

As I mentioned in the first part of this composition, there are so many patients here with different needs that sometimes the staff occasionally get things confused. So far I haven’t come across this confusion with medications, which are handled by the RNs. In fact, mixed upedness has only been evident in the matter of keeping track of people’s bowel movements. Every now and then one of the staff will knock on the door, stick their head in, and yell like a St Trinians housemistress: “Did you move your bowels this morning?” Because I am a low-care inmate I am left to look after my own deposits, banking and otherwise, but there is so much Movicol and Coloxyl handed out almost everyone is on some sort of elimination stimulation regime that the greeting “How’s your bowels” has become almost universal.

(The next bit may be a bit off-topic, but since I'm ruminating I'll include it anyway).

Since I've had enough birthdays to be definitely in the category of "old" I've noticed that my memories of previous events in my life are becoming richer. These days I often remember things complete with how I felt at the time. This is particularly so when what I am remembering was embarrassing, or if I was feeling socially inept at the time, but I also get flashbacks of calmness, or jollity, or awe. The experience comes back to me with a much fuller flavour -- the whole *gestalt*, and not just the event itself. I don't quite know how to adequately express this feeling. The Buddhist-based philosophies of life recommend that we practise "mindfulness", meaning to try to be aware of all the stuff that's going on around you at a given time, how you feel, what is impinging on your senses -- all the stuff you usually filter out when you're concentrating on something. Mindfulness was certainly not a concept that I was familiar with in earlier stages of my existence, but the sort of memories I'm trying to describe are almost as though I am being mindful of all those things in retrospect -- all the richness of the experience that somehow makes the memory more than just remembering the bare bones of something that happened in the past. Being in the right place at the right time meant that I fluked a Lectureship at UNSW when I was in my thirties, and that's pretty much how I remembered it, a fairly spare and unadorned recollection, but recently I was reminded of the time that it happened, and my whole being -- not just my mind -- was flooded with the way I had felt for quite some time after I got the news at the time. I was acutely aware of the feeling of satisfaction, good fortune, lightness of being, latent opportunity and sheer elation mixed with exhilaration that accompanied the event itself.

Related to this different sort of recollection was when it occurred to me not so long ago how much of what I learnt and came to think of as true was instilled into me by chance remarks from Mum. My ideas about what constituted a well-shaped calf came from things Mum had pointed out to me about ladies' legs in passing -- just idle comments. Because she was a dressmaker, Mum had firm ideas about how a trouser leg should fall with a crimp just a bit onto the shoe and not show the sock, and for many years into my adulthood I was always careful not to wear

my pants legs too short or too long. I mean, as if it mattered! For Mum there were “proper” ways to do things, and because these notions were planted very early on in my life, I absorbed them, and unthinkingly used them as yardsticks in my assessment of what was OK and what wasn’t. And lots of these notions stayed with me well into my adult years, I’m a bit embarrassed to admit now. The sociologist in me whispers that this was merely the universal process of socialisation, and something similar happens to everyone. But the other day I donned an old pair of pants and looked in the mirror and thought: “they’re a bit short”. What an atavistic hangover that was! Especially these days where anything goes with apparel! And this realisation ushered in this whole stream of thought about how insidiously “right” and authoritative these childhood ideas are, and for how long they can stay unexamined. So if it’s like that for what length your trousers should be, imagine how hard it must be to examine religious tenets that are drummed into you in childhood from so many directions! I have often wondered how it is that religious ideas can be so tenacious in the face of so much evidence that they are little more than uninformed medieval superstitions – how practising Catholics can live through the revelations about Cardinal Pell, for instance (and all the other stuff as well) and still emerge with their faith intact. Well, noticing how short my pant legs were suddenly explained that tenacity to me with stunning clarity.

But to get back to my life in The Slammer. One of the things Lo gave me to bring here with me was a digital photo-viewer thing that sits on a desk or somewhere and shunts through images at twenty second intervals automatically and continuously. She loaded a thumb drive to plug into it with just about all the photographs we had taken since we’d been together – thousands of them. They included all the duds as well, and the ones that we didn’t pick to go into the Selection files that we usually put together every so often as our sort of “official” photographic record. It sits on my bedside cupboard here and catches my attention a hundred times a day – with a vast array of different images. I get a great deal of pleasure out of this gadget – much more than I ever thought I would. Every image is a memory of a time past. Because of Lo’s and my photographic proclivities very few of them have people in them. There’s none of this: “That’s us in front of the Trevi fountain”-type shots so

beloved by Japanese tourists. They're more likely to be close-ups of bits of seaweed or rocks or something, or a campsite by a river. Many of them I don't remember having seen before, though I must have. With others I can catch a glimpse of a vista, or a shot of a rocky littoral shelf with waves breaking over it, and immediately be able to identify where it was taken, often quite without any other context to facilitate identification. And they very often evoke those richer and full-of-feelings memories that I was trying to describe a bit earlier. Chief among these is a heap of shots of Wirrimbirra, taken in its maturity, when all the timbers were freshly re-oiled, and it was looking at its best. I often stop to gaze at them admiringly, and allow myself to wallow in the many-dimensioned pleasure that I get from having brought into being the single most creative thing I ever did in my life.

Went into Port last week to the Post Office, and afterwards tottered further downtown for lunch. After a modest repast I ambled down to the Town Green, which is a spacious area which has been built relatively recently for the general public to wander around in. I think it is a beaut place. Well-designed, with massive Norfolk Island pines and a huge Moreton Bay fig and very mature *xanthorrhoeas* placed tastefully about the place. The most striking thing about it for me is the seating, of which there is plenty. It is a homage to Australian hardwoods.

Overleaf is a photo of one of the more elaborately designed seats, but also there are just huge squared off slabs of eucalypt about four metres long and 500mm square, beautifully finished.

There are several shops around the edge of the paved area -- a posh fish 'n chip shop, an ice cream parlour, and a pub eatery with a very exotic menu.





Town Green -- one of the many types of seat.

The whole place is like something out of Europe. There is a passing parade of all sorts of people -- leggy ladies with outsize poodles on a leash, families, little kids on scooters, the inevitable joggers -- people just *using* the place. Whoever designed it would surely be very satisfied at how much it was being enjoyed.

I bought an exotic ice-cream from the parlour and found an empty seat to sit on while I slurped it. When I'd finished it, I reached into my shoulder bag and pulled out my trusty Dunhill, packed its bowl with expensive Erinmore Mixture. and proceeded to have a thoughtful and serene smoke. I felt like a *boulevardier* (or perhaps that should be *flaneur*),

but whatever, I was having an unusually good time. I'm an impatient bugger, but in this laid back environment I felt relaxed and sociable.

My mood must have been obvious, because after I'd knocked the ash out of my spent pipe, a nondescript bloke approached me and said: "Did you know that the black stuff that accumulates inside your pipe is a sure-fire remedy against insect bites? Where I come from they always save what they scrape out of the bowl in a little glass jar so they can use it to rub onto insect bites". It turned out that he was from Africa (he avoided saying which part of Africa), and he'd been in Oz for some twenty years. He had a slight accent, and we continued our exchange for several more minutes until, with a friendly wave, he sloped off. Having that friendly conversation seemed entirely appropriate to the place, and topped off my little sojourn in what was in many ways quite an unAustralian place. I shall go back there again, I'm sure, looking for a similar experience, and I'll extend my knowledge of the extent of it, as I noticed while I was browsing the Web for some of the history of the Green that there was a very nice jetty down one end. (Apparently, when Oxley came to what is Port today from an overland route, his first sight of the ocean was from what is today Town Green).

Getting back to Alison and her predictable topics of conversation for a minute. She came out to Smokers' Corner this morning and started off again with asking me if I was here on respite or if I was going to stay, then went on to coming here for the food and all the rest. It made me think about what conversation is all about. It hit me that the actual content of what is said isn't all that important. It really didn't matter what Alison said, but the fact that she said something fulfilled the social expectation that she should talk to me, given the social context. The content was unimportant in the same way that the content is unimportant when you say: "Good day. How're you going?" to someone as you pass. It's just a social nicety rather than anything to do with communication.

I've been here for six weeks now, and still I know very little about any of the coterie that I meet when I go to the Corner for a pipe. I've learnt that Alison's son has "put chemistry up on line. He's science teacher at Dubbo", and that Julie used to live at Orange. But beyond that I know

precious little about the others, though we are all friendly enough to one another. Especially, I know very little about the ailments and disabilities for any of them. Their obdurate silence is just a bit weird. I wonder how much this will have changed after I've been here for six months, if at all. And yes, I have considered the possibility that they don't talk when I'm there because they see me as some sort of interloper, but I really don't think that's the case.



It would be a glaring (and pusillanimous) omission not to talk a bit about death and dying in a discourse such as this, given death's inescapable prominence in my new quarters. As I write this, everyone in this institution is alive, though only technically in some cases, but the prospect of death is everywhere. This is a place where people go to wait to die. I'm here for what's left of my life. Many of the people here are at death's door. Nobody looks death directly in the eye, but its latent presence subtly colours everything.

Dad was not what you might call a very philosophical bloke, and the only vaguely philosophical thing I can remember him saying was that 'life is only a series of experiences'. Not exactly a nuanced take on things, but true enough, I suppose. I don't think I could complain about the series of experiences that have made up my life. When I was a kid growing up in working class Drummoyne, had I any idea how interesting, varied, deeply satisfying and even exotic my life experiences were going to turn out to be, I imagine I would have thought that I was being mixed up with somebody else.

Looking back on that life, I think it would be churlish of me to feel that shuffling off the mortal coil in the not-so-distant future would be something lamentable. After all, we all have to do it, and I've had 83 years so far that I can hardly complain about. In many ways I've been lucky. I was lucky to be born when I was, because I didn't have to fight

in wars, didn't have to experience their horrors, and wasn't killed or hideously wounded. And I have been exposed to enough ideas to know that wars are always futile, with no winners, and always fought in the interests of the rich and privileged classes of society – interests that had absolutely no relevance to the working class social environment that I was born into. And above all, I was born into a family which may have been socially disadvantaged in economic terms, but was a warm and loving environment blessedly free of the excesses of violence and real hardship suffered by many people living at the bottom of the social heap. And, of course, I was lucky to have been born a whitefella – and a bloke to boot..

Dying when you are old and have little to look forward to because of the inevitable wearing out of mind and body is, to me, not something tragic. Death is something tragic when it strikes young people who haven't yet had a chance to experience much of human existence. It was tragic when death took off my two young brothers in their infancy – a tragedy that my mother eventually stoically transcended, but never fully recovered from. So I find it more than a little distasteful when I hear of kinfolk of dying people refusing to give permission for the plug to be pulled on an old relative who has clearly nothing further to experience other than a protracted demise full of suffering and indignities, with nothing in it that even vaguely approximates life in truly human terms. In the same way, I find it inexplicable that some old people will grasp at some medically-induced chance of a further couple of months or weeks of bedridden existence, in what must surely be the worst chapter in their lives.

But it's understandable I suppose, on reflection, because the entire medical Establishment is geared to prolong life at all costs. It doesn't matter how debilitated you might be, if you're still technically alive then the whole machine swings into action to keep you that way, even if they know beyond doubt that you're going to die soon anyway. There are exceptions to this it must be admitted, like withdrawing all drugs and just slowly upping the morphine levels, but these actions are illicit, and not talked about – the smack too much of the dreaded euthanasia.. That's the way Mum eventually went – at the age of ninety nine and three quarters – but it only happened because I sent an outraged email and requested

it. (I have described Mum's unnecessarily cruel death in considerable detail in the Epilogue that I wrote to *Mary Bottomley Remembers* which is accessible elsewhere in the Top Drawer of this website).

What I find worrying, now that I am undeniably old, is not the fact that I shall soon cease to exist, but that the last hurrah before my eventual demise will be long, drawn out, and full of unnecessary suffering. I can honestly say that were I to die tomorrow – preferably quickly and painlessly – I would deem it not a bad thing. Because of increasing incapacity (and probable mental deterioration) I am unlikely to contribute anything of any real value to the world in the time that is left to me. It would be a benefit to my loved ones, too. They are going to have to mourn my passing at some stage, so why not soon, when their memories of me will be more pleasant than if I hang on until I'm gaga and largely unrecognisable as a human being?

When I fall asleep each night I don't much remember my dreams. I do have dreams that I remember, of course, and some of them stay with me for months or even years – quite vivid scenarios, usually of trying to get back home or of trying to find somebody. But most nights I go to bed, go deeply into nowhere, and wake up to reality the next morning. I don't feel like : "Hallelujah! I've been resurrected!" when I wake up. My sleep is just a period of unconsciousness, especially if I've had a joint. I imagine that's what it's like to be dead – like being deeply asleep in nowhere, but you don't ever wake up. So actually being dead doesn't worry me. You simply cease to be, and things like worries or earthly concerns no longer apply. I certainly don't expect to join a big party with harp music and meet all my dead friends and relations. How would they all fit onto the cloud? What age would they be? (Ludicrous though it may be, it would seem that the prospect of that Reunion Party is something that devout Believers really think is going to happen).

When I was, say, middle-aged, I was pretty sure that when I got old and had decided that I had had enough, that I would take things into my own hands in some way, and end it when I wanted to end it. It was my life, I felt, and I should be able to say when I thought it had gone on long enough. But now that I'm old enough to wonder sometimes if the time for life-ending action might be getting pretty close, the issue seems not

nearly so clearcut as it was when I was younger and more arrogantly sure of myself..

I now realise that deciding that it was my right to end my life when I thought the time had come, was being embarrassingly self-centred. It took no account of the effect that my suiciding could have on my loved ones and others. How would Fi feel to get the news? How would Lo? Or my sister Chris? Or Christopher? I've spoken to them about the matter, and I would hope that they would understand that it was a rational decision and not one taken out of sheer mental agony where I could not stand my existence any more and the only solution was to extinguish myself. But even if they understood my reasoning behind the act, suicide still carries with it a fairly hefty stigma. Even if social attitudes have moved on from the way it was in, say, Ireland around the turn of the century (where it was not uncommon to have death certificates attesting to the fact that the deceased had died "while cleaning the barrel of his rifle with his tongue" because people who killed themselves were deemed to have committed a crime and thereby forfeited their property and assets to the State), I think it would be fair to say that even today, anyone who commits suicide is sort of tainted with some element of having failed at life somehow.

And then there's the question of just how do you do it? What a SNAFU it is that a "peaceful pill" exists, which would usher you out painlessly and cleanly, but we're not allowed access to it. This situation is testimony to the fact that the religious lobby is a powerful one. Never mind that the attitudes to death that underpin it are based on a set of unfounded assumptions of breathtaking superstitiousness, the proponents of faith-based belief systems have managed to make it unlawful to decide you've had enough and to do something about it. I can't see why they should be able to stop those of us with different, more rational attitudes from doing things our way, and be forced to wear the consequences of the arrant bullshit that they cleave to. I couldn't give a shit if they think that you shouldn't top yourself, but why should their benighted view be visited upon those of us who think otherwise?

We're denied access to a way of calling it quits that is civilised, and the alternatives are almost all messy. If you "clean the barrel of your gun

with your tongue” it makes an awful mess that someone will have to clean up. The same goes for most of the other ways available to us poor non-believers, like knives, or jumping in front of a truck or a train or whatever—they all make for a traumatic situation for some poor bugger who happens to be first on the scene, even if you open a vein in the bath.. Running a hose from the exhaust pipe of your car used to be a reasonably non-messy way of doing it, but I’m told that this no longer works with the modern petrol that cars run on these days. It doesn’t matter how far away from home you do it by violent means, someone is going to have to confront the mess you make, and that would be a very unpleasant and shocking experience, to say the least. I certainly wouldn’t want to be first on the scene and have to cope with such an awful experience. And someone has to clean it up. In fact, if you don’t take into account the terrible scene you create when you take your life by any of the means available to us, it is a dreadfully selfish act. Even if they are strangers they are still people, after all.

So the problem of a self-managed exit takes on a different cast now I’m old and on the brink than it did when I was much younger, more gung-ho, and more thoughtless. If I were a dog or a horse I’d have no problem, since our society puts them down in a civilised fashion with a pill or a jab.

Some people argue that when you lose your marbles you don’t know what’s going on, but think of the ghastly strain it puts on surviving loved ones. Fi could tell you all about that, because she had to pretty much run the gamut of that circumstance as she had to helplessly watch her mother become someone else for the years that it took for Gill to eventually succumb. And in the event that you don’t lose your marbles, too often you become severely incapacitated and finish up as a stupefied organism, drugged to the gills and dozing uncomprehendingly in front of the ubiquitous television set. Really, who wants that to happen?

People don’t recognise their loved ones when they visit, the loved ones find the visits unbearable as a consequence, and often the decrepit one is left alone as the visits drop off, and the visitors have to cope with their guilt because they can no longer see any point in making the often considerable effort. Whichever way you look at any attenuated passage

through the Pearly Gates it's a bloody awful scenario isn't it?

So what's the answer? I'm fucked if I know. At the moment, I'm just hanging around waiting to see how things turn out for me, and hoping that it's not a drawn out business. It would appear that in practical terms there's nothing one can do to affect the way things are going to go and we have no choice but simply to hope for the best. It's all a matter of luck, not unlike the rest of life, I suppose. But I can't say that I find it a very satisfactory state of affairs. What a difference it would make if we were allowed a couple of Nembutal for emergencies!

Well, now that I've got death and dying off my chest, I think I might call it a day. Talking about this place and what happens in it has its limits, and I think I might have just about reached them.

I got an email the other day from an old friend which included a Danish PhD thesis about the process of preparing for and moving into an aged care facility. Although the respondents in it were all higher care than I am, as I read it I felt like I could easily have been a participant. So much of what he wrote about resonated, not surprisingly, with my experiences. He leant fairly heavily on Erving Goffman's *Total Institutions* for his theoretical orientation, and I got a jolt when I realised that I was now living in one! He also devoted a section in it to the notion of *The Home*, and my impatience to get into a permanent room and put some stuff up on the walls and stamp my presence on it came into focus as a pretty universal human tendency. But compared to the home that I built for myself, any homemaking I might do here can only be a faint echo.

Oh well, as a student once said to me many years ago: "Maturity is just another name for the process of lowering one's sights."



OLD AGE IS A
HIGH PRICE TO PAY
FOR MATURITY