What Was I Thinking?

Also by Greg Judkins

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What Was I Thinking?

A doctor's personal scrapbook

GREG JUDKINS

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Good nature and good sense must ever join;
To err is human; to forgive, divine…

But you, with pleasure own your errors past,
And make each day a critic on the last.

Alexander Pope, from *Essay on Criticism.*

Medicine is a science of uncertainty and an art of probability.

Dr William Osler, father of modern medicine.

I

FIRST INGREDIENTS

If you could choose when to be born, I would recommend 1952. During the post-war boom, into a long era of relative peace and stability in the world, with free tertiary education and affordable housing. And Masterton, New Zealand, was as good a place to start as any.

I was also lucky with my choice of parents. Good healthy genes and plenty of affection. A mother who breast-fed, was an early adopter of fluoride tablets for strong teeth, quick-witted and a lover of practical jokes, and creative with a wide range of handcrafts and domestic skills. When peaches or tomatoes were cheap, she would buy them by the case, cook them in a huge preserving pan and fill dozens of quart-sized Agee jars to see us through the year. When I was seven, Mum helped me climb onto her big bike and ran alongside, holding the seat, on the firm low-tide sand of Murrays Bay. When the bike veered down towards the sea, gathering speed, I realised she had been left behind. As I got to my feet among shallow waves, soaked and indignant, she stood up the beach, helpless with laughter.

And a father who progressed, before I was born, from cathedral choirboy to carpenter with a love of cycling and rifle shooting, to Baptist minister. I remember him as a kind, earnest man of faith with fastidious habits and quick humour. His large vegetable gardens were neatly laid and maintained, and in his study every item and book had its proper place. When we lived at Kumeū, he allotted a portion of the garden to me, helping me grow carrots to sell by auction at the local saleyards. He bought the carrot seeds, and I pocketed the proceeds. Dad had been a conscientious objector during the war, a pacifist who never smacked us kids.

Two sisters and a much younger brother were added to the family after me. We were near the poor end of the middle-class spectrum. The church provided a house and a car but the monthly stipend was meagre,

so we maintained frugal habits. I never felt poor, and I never felt well-off. Both parents were liberal with their hugs. They were also strong in their Christian faith, which I embraced early in life but progressively revised after leaving home.

It was as good a childhood as I could wish for, and I feel overwhelmed with gratitude. Being Pākehā and being male were subconscious pillars of my identity that conferred privileges I had no understanding of until much later in life. From this base I launched into study and a career in medicine, early marriage and fatherhood, and a string of adventures shot through with foolhardiness, good fortune and wonder.

HERITAGE

While my parents were alive, I was content to know that Dad's side was thoroughly English from way back, while my mother came from a more interesting mix of Swedish, American and Scottish ancestry. As I age, family stories and threads that span generations have become more compelling, and what I have gleaned from copies of old diaries includes adventures to put my own in the shade.

Yet my growing interest in the past coincides with my parents being no longer here to question, and to tell more of what they knew.

Into the void

With both parents lost
remembered, buried, nothing
stands between being here
and the edge of not being

the incline to the unfenced cliff

the pull of the current
to the cataract.

There were warning signs
of course, but in this time-kept world
there is no pause, no rewind
and where we once saw

the parent interposed
now there is a clear-felled
view into the void.

A SWEDISH-AMERICAN GRANDMOTHER

Nana Mae was the only grandmother I knew. She always seemed to have a serene smile on her wide smooth-skinned face, like Elizabeth the Queen Mother. You wouldn't think that her husband had drowned at the age of 44, leaving her with a farm and four children. The youngest of their children was only eight at the time, and she was to become my mother.

Not long before she died, my mother gave me a packet of old photos including an early black-and-white photo of her parents. Roy Forlong was a dairy farmer from Scottish stock. I carry his name, sandwiched between my first and last. Wearing a three-piece suit and tie, Roy has an arm around his wife, who is resting her head on his shoulder. They are both beaming at the camera. It's nice to have one happy photo, especially as in those times photographs usually captured a formal expression.

I recently asked cousins if they knew why we had always known her as Nana Mae, when the official spelling of her name was May.

She apparently adopted the alternative spelling after Mae West, the American singer, actress and sex symbol of the same age as herself.

In 1931, in a letter to a relative, she wrote this about my mother, nearly three years of age:

> Young Wix is in great form and is a great entertainer, and is everybody's little nuisance, she is always helping with everything, and is always a hindrance, but we cannot help loving her.

And in a letter to her mother:

> Oh it was beautiful, luxurious, exhilarating driving in a car. I just sat back with my arms folded across my old fat chest and enjoyed the beautiful sensation of watching Roy run over the hares and rabbits. Oh I did enjoy myself in the car. Nothing mattered and nothing cared, although we nearly got our noses bitten off and icicles hanging out, but nothing mattered we were in a car … I was never meant to be born into this world to be carted round by a horse.

A LOST GRANDFATHER

It is 2023, we are staying in central Wellington, and I have time to explore. On a calm blue May morning, I walk down Willis Street and follow Lambton Quay around to the Archives New Zealand building. I'm directed to the appropriate counter, provide the name and date and wait half an hour for a thin brown folder to be located and brought up from the dungeons.

I take the folder to a table in the near-empty reading room, and find inside a dozen typed and signed pages of aged paper. These are the original copies. My heart quickens as I start to read.

An Inquisition taken for our Sovereign Lord the King at the Courthouse in Wellington.

…and the said Coroner, having inquired, for our Lord the King, when, where, and by what means the said Roy Gordon Forlong came to his death, doth find that he was lost overboard from the S.S.Wahine while on a journey from Wellington to Lyttelton on 22nd September 1937 and was drowned.

Witness statements follow, amounting to one or two pages each. One by a family friend, others by a passenger on the ship, a crew member and finally by his wife, Elsie May Forlong.

The family friend was travelling with my grandfather to ensure he got to the hospital at Hanmer for inpatient care of his mental health. He described sharing a cabin with Roy to keep an eye on him, staying awake until 4am before dozing, then waking at 5am to find Roy's berth empty.

A crew member reported seeing a man on deck at about that time, in socks, without a coat and with a strange expression on his face.

My grandmother's statement is in restrained language, but it knocks the breath out of me. She stated her husband had been in indifferent health for about six months, often going out to work on the farm but returning soon after, saying he was tired and needed to lie down. He was in a highly nervous state of mind, and had consulted three doctors, the last of whom advised him to go to Hanmer. At the end of her witness statement, she added:

My husband's mother committed suicide by drowning. Her sister also met her death by drowning from suicide.

I wipe the tears from my cheeks with the back of a hand as I read. Suicide by drowning in successive generations. I wonder, was Roy

primarily depressed, which seems to have been the assumption, or could he have acquired a chronic fatigue syndrome, not a recognised condition at that time, his physical inability to manage the farm then leading to despair and hopelessness?

ONE-EYED HIGH ACHIEVER

Grandad Fred Judkins had survived two wives, and must have been 80 when my sister Neralie, and I went to stay with him one school holiday. We would have been about twelve and ten, and travelled by train, ferry and coach from Auckland, unaccompanied. When Neralie became nauseated on the winding road north of Kaikōura, I told the coach driver she was going to be sick and he kindly stopped and waited on the roadside a few minutes until she felt better. I was already familiar with rail travel on my own, having been dispatched on the overnight train to stay with cousins in Ōtaki before, but this was the most ambitious trip our parents had sent us on. We all embraced it as an adventure, and there was no law against it. Nor were there mobile phones.

Grandad was portly with a large round bald head and one obviously blind immobile eye, and we had to speak up to be heard. I recall watching him slowly ride his black bicycle with a leather seat, along his quiet street in Beckenham, Christchurch, and crossing the road to turn right with an outstretched arm but not a glance behind.

Grandad seemed happy to have us kids to stay. I remember him as kind but solemn, and expecting us to make all our own entertainment, his role largely confined to providing meals and warm shelter. In lieu of a toaster, he cooked what he called parched bread by placing white slices against the wire guard of a small heater on the kitchen floor.

Now retired but once the foreman of a large building and joinery firm, he had built this large bay-windowed bungalow himself. He and