

MAHOGANY

I hadn't thought about him for a long time. It had been years, at least. He just wasn't part of my life anymore. He'd been a massive part of my life eons ago, but then one day he just disappeared. Of course, I was devastated when I realised he was gone. It broke my heart. He was so special to me. But life had moved on and little by little I had forgotten him. Well, until now.

The postie had delivered the mail. Dressed ready for work I dashed out to get it before I left. Bill, bill, charity wanting donations and...a hand written envelope with my name on it. I could feel my face frown as I flipped over the envelope, slipped my finger in the corner, and tore it open. I briefly noticed there was no return address before I pulled out a piece of paper. I didn't recognise the writing, but my heart sank as I read the words:

*Long ago I was part of your life
Despite that you've forgotten my name
So now it's your turn to save me from strife
And a friend whom you love, reclaim.*

Travel back to where you found yourself to find me who was always there. You knew me by a woody name. I will be waiting on the street of your obsession, in a little store that travels the world. You have from starting to ending time 5 days of the week. Fail to arrive in time and you may find that I am gone.

Memories flashed through my mind. I hadn't thought about that place in a while. In fact, it had been 4 years, 2 months, 1 week and 6 days. That had been the day I left, never looking back. That was the day of the funeral. And 4 years, 2 months, 2 weeks, and 3 days had been the accident. I certainly hadn't forgotten that. Did I really want to return to such a mournful place just to see him again?

I don't know how long I sat there lost in memories, but I was jolted back to reality when my phone started ringing. Usually, the Muppets ringtone would make me smile, but today I barely registered it. Answering, I heard my boss' voice. In a monotone voice I let him know I was ok. "Frank, I need some time off." Then I hung up.

The flight from Tassie to Melbourne was uneventful. I wasn't a particularly keen flyer, but I was so preoccupied with the task ahead that I was surprised we were already landing. The airport was bustling, and I scooted round several groups of people. I made the 8-minute walk to the airport exit

(seriously, who designs these places?), headed straight to the rental car desk and then hit the road. I had a 3-hour drive ahead, so I flicked on the radio and settled in.

I let my mind wander back to a time before the accident. Both my parents were still alive. We lived in a cute 3-bedroom house. Our neighbour, Margaret, was the worlds best neighbour and we had enjoyed many drinks on the back deck. There was a Hog's Breath Café across the street, Hungry Jacks on the corner and Harvey Norman on the other side. The highway thronged with caravans and trucks on their way towards the coastline.

A green road sign caught my eye – 75km to Traralgon. The name made my heart skip. I hadn't been to the Latrobe Valley in an age, but I remembered every inch. Traralgon was a large town that had all the conveniences you needed. It was rare that you needed to travel to Melbourne, and that suited me just fine.

Noticing I was not far from arriving, I began to take notice of my surroundings. The big open-cut mine was still a feature. I had heard mumblings of plans to fill it with water, but it hadn't been done yet. The empty space on the horizon signified the Hazelwood power station that had been demolished before I'd left. Unless you knew it had been there, you wouldn't have known it existed. I could see in my mind the eight stacks and watching them tumble in the controlled explosions. It was a shame to lose such a landmark.

The road signs started indicating Morwell was the next town. 'Exit here for Morwell.' I knew there were 5 signs and...one, two, three, four and five...yep, still here.

The next sign heralded the beginning of Traralgon. The big sign warned of the freeway ending and that I should slow down. The road bared to the right, and we merged into traffic. A few metres down the road was a Uniting servo and I stopped to fill up the car. If the petrol station was anything to go by, then Traralgon had barely changed.

A kilometre or so further along revealed the hospital. Mum had worked here until the accident. With barely a thought, I turned left into the hospital grounds and turned right into the carpark. Turning into a car spot I turned the engine off and stared at the building. I'd read that new sections had been opened but the old entrance looked the same. It had a tiny drop-off circle leading to the automatic doors. I could see the reception desk in my mind, remembering being directed around the hospital by their excellent directional signs.

My phone flashed with a notification, and I was pulled out of my reverie. I was surprised to see it was already 3:30pm. Between catching a flight from Tasmania to the 3 hour drive the day was almost over. I had no time to sit. I needed to follow the instructions on the letter to find him before it was too late.

‘Travel back to where you found yourself.’ Well, that was easy – I was already here. I’d been living in Traralgon when I worked out who I was and who I wanted to be. It had been the start of a fresh, new life.

‘I will be waiting on the street of your obsession...’ What was my obsession? Grey Street? Seymour Street? Well, I’d had a fish called Seymour, but I didn’t think that was an obsession of mine. Franklin Street? Church Street? Breed Str...wait! Church Street! I had been obsessed with Christianity in my early 30’s, trying to use the religion to fill a hole in my soul. Right, Church Street it is!

Keen to make it in time I pushed away memories of the many churches and focused on the next clue. ‘...in a little store that travels the world.’ What on earth?! A store can’t travel. I was stumped.

Glancing at my phone again I realised it was 4 pm. The note had mentioned ‘starting to ending times 5 days a week’ so I assumed that meant opening hours. Most shops shut at 5pm weekdays so I was running out of time.

Still perplexed on ‘a store that can travel’ I decided the best thing to do was drive to Church Street and see if I could find the store that answered the clue.

Leaving the hospital grounds, I continued down the highway, counting landmarks as I went. The Century Inn – a lovely hotel and a very decent restaurant. The lush green lawns of the Golf Club. The local vet on the crest of the hill. The many consulting suites of every health specialty you could want. And KFC, busy as usual.

I turned into Church Street. Rolling slowly, I peered at the shops passing. Stationery shop...not really. Post office...my brain lit up like a carnival ride. ‘A store that travels the world’ was a post office. I pulled into a parking spot – 4:45pm. It looked like I made it in time. There was a small line up and I fidgeted waiting for my turn. As the lady called me up, I realised I could see him. He was still here. I gestured to him and told the lady I was here to pick him up. Once my ID was checked, we were able to leave. I unfolded the letter that was given to me when I picked him up.

I knew you were the best of friends so when I needed to move out of the area, I had to contact you to rekindle your friendship. With love, Margaret.

I checked the time as I exited the post office – 4:55pm. As it was summer the light would continue until nearly 9:30pm. We had ample time to take a trip down memory lane, so I grabbed his hand. “Let’s walk”, I said, and moved towards the road crossing.

I didn’t know what to say to him, so I gave a commentary as we passed through the town. “That used to be a Chinese take away. Three of the four big banks are here – Commonwealth, ANZ and NAB. This is the cutest high tea café. I won \$100 at that newsagent. That bakery has the best cinnamon scrolls.’ It was nice walking and chatting to him. My memories of this beautiful place rushed back.

We paused next to another post office and looked up at the big town clock. I smiled to myself as I realised it still wasn't working. I couldn't remember ever seeing it work. Feeling hungry, I bought some hot chips from Schnitz, and we walked over to Victory Park. The beds of roses were stunning, and the grass was a lovely expanse of green. The marble heads were still displayed on their stands. A couple of people were sitting in the rotunda, so we moved to the back of the park to sit in the sound shell. I couldn't hear the trickle of water from the creek.

As I ate, I recalled events that turned the park into a hive of activity. There had been carols, bonfire night, Australia Day brekky, concerts featuring the local community band. It was a real hub of Traralgon entertainment.

The light had dimmed a bit by the time we reached the car. I decided to have a glance at our old house on Riggall Road. It used to frustrate me having to spell it out every time but then I had to do that with the town too. 'R-I-G-G-A-L-L road, T-R-A-R-A-L-G-O-N, Victoria.

The house ended up looking the same, and my mother's glorious roses were in full bloom. She had loved nurturing her roses into the best in the street. But it was too painful to stay here so we moved on, driving around for another hour or so. I pulled into the Bridges on Argyle hotel. I was well ready for a rest. It had been a long day. I decided we should turn in for the night.

I talked about my many happy memories of Traralgon and how I had blossomed here. If the accident hadn't happened, I wouldn't have sold up and moved. He continued to listen as I droned on. I lapsed into silence and contemplated the viability of moving back here, where my soul felt at rest. Running away from the events and hurt hadn't fixed my pain.

I switched off the lamp and lay in the darkness. "I'm so glad I've found you again. I've missed you so much!" We cuddled in together and my heart felt full of love for the first time in years. He had always been there for me, from the very beginning. From that first day at the hospital, we'd always been together. I had been careless to lose him. I planted a kiss on his head, squeezing him tight. I drifted off to sleep in the comfort of his presence, knowing he would keep me safe.

'Mahogany!' That was his name. A girl was always happiest when she was with her best friend. And the best friend I had ever had was Mahogany. My heart rested as I hugged him tight. My brown-eyed teddy bear was home at last.