In Australia I will…

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(For this short story the names of family and friends have been changed.)

I'm looking down the wrong end of a telescope to fifty years ago. In the tiny disc of glass, I see my 27-year-old self, my husband, twin babies and three-year-old daughter. We're standing in 40-degree Celsius heat on the tarmac of Perth airport in W.A. on 12th January 1975. When we left London, the previous day, it was four degrees Celsius. We are five ten-pound Poms about to embark on a new life in Australia.

Once, as a teenager, I saw a black and white newspaper advertisement that I never forgot. It showed a small family looking at a map of Australia, and above them the words: *In Australia I will…* And here we are, determined to fulfil that pledge.

In 1974, strikes, IRA bombings and electricity outages had severely damaged the British economy. Married with a three-year-old daughter, I was pregnant and due in October, 1974. We decided to emigrate to Australia. At seven months pregnant, I found out I was expecting twins. One twin, Andrew, was born with a cleft in his soft palate that would require surgery later. Our doctor assured us that Australia had skilled plastic surgeons who could operate on him. My husband, Ian, having just finished his university degree had a teaching job waiting for him.

'We're going, we'll manage,' I said.

We chose to travel by plane, and spend a final Christmas with family and friends.

Pointing to the children my dad commented:

'Future Australian taxpayers. That's why Australia wants you.'

We boarded Qantas flight QF08 on 11th January, 1975. Our twin boys, Andrew and Paul, were three months old and Emily was three. We had a block of four seats in the bulkhead, but

only one bassinet. The twins were small enough to lie top to tail. The flight seemed endless because we landed to refuel in India.

On the descent into Perth, we caught a first glimpse of Australia. White beaches stretched along a coastline of azure water and sparkling surf.

Ian turned to me, 'It's summer!'

We walked carefully down the aircraft steps with our family; the heat intensifying our feelings of exhaustion. I smoothed my hand over my baby's sweaty little head—I hadn't brought hats for any of the children. With Emily between us and a baby on each hip, we arrived in Australia.

A friendly immigration officer stamped our passports. He stepped out from behind his desk to look at Emily. I stared at him—he was wearing shorts and long walk socks. In 1970s Britain, only soccer players wore shorts. And here was an official of the Australian Government dressed for the beach.

We re-boarded the plane for the last leg to Sydney.

'Apologies, ladies and gentlemen…' the captain announced. 'We'll be an hour late getting into Sydney because of a technical problem.'

An attractive, suntanned air hostess was standing next to our seats.

'*Shit,*' she said.

I blinked; casually dressed officials and swearing beauties. What had we come to?

We landed at eight in the evening. A chirpy mini-bus driver was waiting for us. Our fellow travellers were all teachers recruited from Britain, most with young families.

'No going back now,' the driver quipped as hot humid air fanned through the bus.

He dropped us at a two storey Victorian-era mansion in Dulwich Hill, Sydney. We collected our keys and trudged upstairs to our rooms in a utilitarian brick complex behind the

Victorian house façade. The two rooms had interior brick walls. They were stiflingly hot and sparsely furnished with a wardrobe, two cots, a single and a double bed. Thick grey vinyl covered the mattresses; we sweated through every night. We shared washing and kitchen facilities with half a dozen others.

The following day, my husband joined the other new teachers on a two-week orientation course with the Department of Education. Jet-lagged and exhausted, I felt overwhelmed. How could I manage in this spartan accommodation alone with three little children? The other English women came to the rescue. Between us, we had seven children under eight years old; more future taxpayers.

At the weekend, the men took off to 'kick some tyres.' They returned at lunchtime with a second-hand car each.

'This is the life,' Ian said from the open window of a huge Holden station wagon.

At $700.00, the car put a hole in the $2,000.00 we'd brought with us.

The next day, we drove out to Camden High School where he'd been placed. It took two hours to get there on the Hume Highway—the M5 motorway didn't exist in 1975. It was Saturday afternoon and there wasn't a single shop open in Camden. We peered in the Real Estate windows, but there was nothing to rent.

I was desperate to get out of the two rooms, and the Education Department found us a furnished government flat in Riverwood, an inner Sydney suburb. It was over an hour's drive from Camden, but we had our own space. I soon found my way around and wheeled the double stroller—and Emily—up to the shops every day, leaving early to avoid the heat. Every day there was a new cultural difference: the postman delivered mail to a box outside the flat, instead of pushing it through the front door. Emily was curious.

'What's that?' she asked, lifting a post box flap outside some Seniors' villas.

'Leave that alone—naughty little girl!' an old lady called out from a balcony. Emily ran.

The food in the shops was better quality and cheaper than the UK. I got used to taking ice cream, butter and milk home with me because of the heat. The shop assistants stacked home delivery groceries, in named paper bags, on the footpath, *outside the shop.* A man in his own station wagon delivered them later to the flat.

A couple with three primary school-aged children whom we'd met in the hostel, moved to the flats at the same time. Their children went to the local Catholic School.

'We had to pay fees,' Pam said. 'It was free at home. But I'm not saying anything,' she added. 'Don't want to be called a whinging Pom.'

All English migrants knew about whinging Poms. Starting a sentence with, 'In England…' got you labelled pretty fast.

My days settled into a pattern. The twins slept through the night, but woke at 5 a.m. It took two hours to feed and change them every four hours. There were endless wash loads of cloth nappies. Between looking after them, I tried to give Emily some attention, clean the flat and prepare dinner.

Then out of the blue, in early February, I had my first bout of homesickness. It was like a mist of misery rolling out of nowhere. The children were having an afternoon nap, and a heavy silence engulfed the suburb. I looked around the flat; at the second-hand fridge in the old-fashioned kitchen, and the Formica-topped metal-edged table with matching chairs.

I sat down on the yellow-covered vinyl sofa in the living room and put my head on my knees. A wave of wretchedness engulfed me and wrenching sobs wracked my body. I wept for my lost family and friends, our comfortable modern flat in Manchester, the furniture we'd sold; even the cold weather. No one in Australia cared for me, except my husband. It was my darkest hour.

My life turned around when I saw an advertisement in the local paper for a business studies teacher at Bankstown TAFE College; the job I'd had in Manchester. Loading the

children into the stroller, I phoned from a stuffy phone box and after a quick interview, I got the job. It was two evenings a week and paid $12.00 an hour—riches.

So, I was back in society again. Ian ran in from work at 5.30 pm as I ran out. He'd fed, bathed and put the kids to bed by the time I got home at 9.30. My days of child care continued, but the TAFE job was a blissful change.

Managing the twin with the cleft palate, was a challenge. He loved rusks, but sometimes crumbs got lodged in his gaping soft palate and he choked. The doctor suggested I hold him upside down to dislodge such food particles. I did it once, and all hell broke loose. He screamed, his sister screamed and his easy-going twin joined in. Sometimes when I gave Andrew his bottle, the milk poured down his nose. The misery mist descended again. The local GP referred me to a specialist plastic surgeon. He said he would operate when Andrew was fourteen-months old—next year.

One evening a sales agent came to the door, selling house and land packages. He had a block for sale on a recent development in Tahmoor, only half-an-hour's drive from Camden. The three-bedroom house cost $24,000.00, and he offered to arrange a deposit for us.

'*Tahmoor?* That's out in the sticks,' a TAFE colleague said. I wasn't sure what she meant.

Eager not to miss out as we'd done in Britain, we signed up to a $20,000.00 mortgage and a personal loan of $4,000.00 for the deposit.

The house was due for completion in July and Tahmoor was a long way from any city. As we came down the Razorback Mountain, my spirits sank. We drove through Picton then turned off the Hume Highway and onto the development site. The roads were finished, but the street ended in virgin bush. Our block had piles of bricks on it tied with tape.

Before we had children we'd lived in a foreign country for two years and learned the language. I could manage Tahmoor; I had no choice.

‘Let’s look at the railway station,’ Ian said cheerfully. In Manchester we’d had city trains every twenty minutes.

We piled the children back into the car, crossed the Hume Highway without being flattened by trucks, and found the station deserted. There was no timetable, no ticket office, nothing. The express to Melbourne shot through once a day, we learned later.

The centre of Tahmoor comprised a Post Office, an Indian GP, a general store and the CWA hall. Ian needed the car to get to work, and there was no money for a second one. I had to leave my job, and busy suburban Riverwood for a life in *the sticks.*

Winter in western Sydney was a shock. Freezing mornings, clear bright days and chilly nights. It was mid-July and the project home had no heating, our small fan heater was barely adequate. We could only afford garden furniture for the living room, and a barbeque table for the kitchen-dining room. The last of our money went on beds, cots and a fridge. We couldn’t afford to have the phone connected.

Our ocean shipment arrived and with it our living room carpet. It looked spectacular on the polished wooden floor; we bought small rugs for the other rooms. It was exciting to unpack toys for Emily and the twins, our long-forgotten clothes, crockery and my grandmother’s wooden rocking chair. But when it was all unpacked, there was less than we remembered and we felt deflated. We were still broke, but at least we had our own house.

The next-door neighbours were a young couple with a three-year-old boy. They were locals and invited us to a BBQ with their friends.

‘Could you bring a plate?’ Chris asked apologetically.

I felt sorry for her, young couple, new house…so we took two plates with knives and forks. Our hostess and her friends exchanged glances when I put the empty plates and cutlery on the bench top. Chris looked embarrassed then another woman explained what ‘bring a plate’ meant.

‘My mum was English; she made the same mistake…’ she said kindly. I escaped outside to the BBQ and more embarrassment.

‘G’day,’ the host said. He jerked his head towards the house. ‘The girls are in the kitchen.’ My husband was with the all-male gathering around the BBQ. He made a signal for me to leave too, so I re-joined ‘the girls’ at the sink.

Shortly after this, one of my husband’s colleagues from Camden High School invited us for a meal. A caring couple with four young children, they took our three in their stride. They introduced us to boxed wine—amazing. Their house was warm and comfortably furnished—a proper home. Back in our project home with the garden furniture, and cold uncarpeted floors, I felt like a pioneer settler and mourned what we’d left behind.

The nearest TAFE college was miles away, so spurred on by economic necessity, I advertised in the local paper. I promised to teach people to type in ten weeks, one lesson a week. Ian rented a hall for me in Camden. It was a BYO typing course—students brought their own portable typewriters and paid me $30.00. That first night twenty people showed up.

I taught my first lesson, then went home with $600.00 in cash. Those lovely people trusted me to come back. When they graduated to course two, I enrolled more beginners and taught two nights a week. But I hated driving home at night down the tortuous Razorback Mountain Road and Melbourne-bound trucks.

Tahmoor Post Office was a local hub. I was often in there, buying aerograms to write home and sending birthday cards. The women who worked there loved the twins.

In late August, a post office lady knocked on my door. She was holding a telegram.

‘I’m so sorry, luv,’ she said.

The telegram was from my brother telling me my father had died.

‘Will you be okay?’ she asked, taking my hand and squeezing it before she left.

I stood at the open front door in the bright winter sunshine. Kookaburras and magpies swooped from the bush at the end of the street. I felt bereft and crushed with homesickness. My dad was sick before we left, but this was a shock. His only sister had emigrated to Australia in the 1930s and he never saw her again, and now his only daughter had done the same thing. I phoned my mother from a phone box on the Hume Highway. We both cried a lot.

Life became easier as the twins got older. A friend in the street took Emily to pre-school two days a week. She was a self-entertaining child, but I felt guilty about the time the twins took up. In October Ian applied for a government media job in Canberra and went for an interview. He got the job. We spent a weekend in Canberra and loved it. But when the Whitlam Government fell in November, the job was axed.

On the way to Canberra, we stopped at the village of Berrima. By now, I'd taught nearly everyone in Camden to type, but we still needed a second income. Ian is a talented guitarist and singer. He approached a couple of Berrima restaurants asking if they wanted live music on Saturday nights. He got a gig and started the following week at $35.00 a night. We employed a babysitter on Saturday nights, and I worked as a waitress in the same restaurant. The land of opportunity had delivered again.

The bistro was opposite Berrima Jail, an open prison for non-violent offenders.

'We've come down from Sydney to see our friend, Jeremy,' a fashionably dressed woman diner confided in me. 'He's over the road,' she jerked her head towards the jail and sighed.

'*So* unfair,' her friend added. '*For God's sake,* a couple of shaky signatures on a few cheques and they called it forgery.'

They raised their glasses.

'To Jeremy and an early release,' they chorused.

Crikey, I thought, no one in England would tell a waitress that their friend was a criminal. Poor Jeremy, locked up in prison while his friends across the road got drunk. Working in the restaurant was better than an orientation course on Australian life and culture… I loved it.

Ian was a great success as an English and Drama teacher at Camden High School. At the end of the year, he directed the school play: *Hay Fever* by Noel Coward. The star was a Year Twelve student who eventually became a famous Australian actor. She has never forgotten her first 'director'.

In early December Christmas gifts arrived from England. Nick and Liz, fellow migrants from the hostel, invited us to stay with them. They were house-sitting in a suburb called Beacon Hill on Sydney's Northern Beaches. After sleepy Tahmoor it was a revelation: shopping malls, cinema, beaches… We caught the Manly ferry to the city and saw the Opera House for the first time.

We toasted absent friends and family. Liz and Nick said they were going to return to the UK for family reasons. But we were in Australia for the long-haul. In our second year, Ian got a job in the media and we moved to Wollongong, NSW.

Six years later, he was working at the Australian Broadcasting Commission in Sydney, as a radio producer. We moved to Sydney's Northern Beaches. I graduated in English from Sydney University and taught English to migrants and refugees. In my retirement I ran a walking tours business and became a writer.

All the children *are* good taxpayers. Paul, twin one, served eighteen years as an officer in the Australian Army Nursing Corps. Andrew had his palate repaired at fourteen months, speaks fluent Japanese and teaches at UNSW. Emily works for a multi-national company. In 2016, the Australian Government awarded my husband an AM for services to media.

Each year, around Christmas, we get together with a group of ex-pat British friends. The toast is: ‘Australia—thanks for having us.’ Our children add: ‘And thanks for bringing us here, Mum and Dad.’

And to the Australian taxpayers of the 1970s; thank you for paying the fares of five ‘ten-pound Poms’.

In Australia…we did.