



Secrets of Sydney

Talaloc Takuda put his foot on the gas as we sped away from the toll gate in his battered Toyota. He was a marvellous man. I loved how his name rolled off the tongue. He turned to smile at me as we resumed our travel, re-uniting with the four or five lanes of traffic streaming across the iconic bridge. Morning peak hour in Sydney.

“Works every time,” he said, concentrating on the car up ahead. *“You’re supposed to throw a dollar into the basket to cover the toll fee, but I go through the motions without releasing the coin. So far no one has twigged ... or even if they have, I’m back in the stream before they can even think about catching me.”*

I laughed out loud ... *“That’s amazing! But you’re denying the state its taxes Talaloc. How can you justify that to kids in your class?”*

“Jesus George, get a grip. This oversized ‘coat-hanger’ was brought out from ‘Pommyland’ 60 or 70 years ago; so if they ain’t paid for it by now, I doubt they ever will. And if it’s for the paint, then in my book that’s a pretty expensive paint job. You know how many cars cross this bridge every day? No mate, I pay enough taxes from my wage packet; with this they’re just after the cream on the cake. And you know what? I for one do not have a sweet tooth.” As he said this, he turned towards me again, with a big toothy grin, to emphasise the point.

We were both educators. At this stage in my life, I was working with one of Australia's major Non-Government Organisations. He was Sydney based and I was visiting from Adelaide. My job was to produce a magazine for primary schools, focusing on social and environmental issues. As a part of this, I would visit other states, to gather hands-on material from the classroom that could appeal to the target 7-to-11-year-old age group, on a country-wide basis.

Sydney was my favourite, for a number of reasons. One was that I loved the place: the ambience around its magnificent harbour has to win gold medal for world cities. Second were those wonderful green and yellow commuter ferries: I could ride them all day, if time allowed. And third, was that I got to work and stay with Talaloc, which kind of revisited number one and two, due to the fact he had a beautiful home, a short steep walk from the Mossman Ferry quay. So, I got to ride the ferry home to one of the top spots on the shores of Sydney harbour. I had hit the jackpot!

As a study of humankind, the man was a wonderful, but quite unique example. He was a fit guy of Japanese-American extraction, with smiling eyes and straight jet-black hair that fell to his shoulders: a tall but tender man in many ways. Children in the classroom loved him, perhaps more than I have ever witnessed, before or since: he exuded an instant vitality that was in itself very childlike, but which came enveloped in the guise of a wise and somewhat mystical sage. After work, he took on a second, voluntary role as Tai Kwando trainer for kids in the local neighbourhood, including his own seven-year-old son. And naturally, the boys and girls in that class all adored him too.

Even before Talaloc, I already had a history of valued times in Australia's most populated city. The earlier memories go back to holidays at a local guest house, on the harbour at Neutral Bay. But to describe the place as simply being *on the harbour*, does it an injustice. At high tide, the waters encroached across the pebbles of a tiny beach and lapped at the wall outside our room, while on the quarter hour a ferry came and left from the quay, a short walk away. It was just a 10-minute boat-ride, past the recently completed, white-sailed *Opera House*, to the central ferry hub at *Circular Quay*. Steven, my five-year-old boy - and his dad of course - loved to find those flat skimming stones to

see who could produce the most 'hops'. Then we'd wander over to the jetty for a spot of fishing. I remember his exuberance after reeling in the first catch: a six-inch *Leather Jacket*, which the staff was only too happy to cook for him in the hotel's kitchen.

It was a simple two-story, cream-coloured building, with an entrance door opening directly onto the narrow street, which ran downhill to the quay. Viewed from afar, the place boasted a location worthy of being next to the Taj Mahal or Pyramids, but at heart it was a very simple Bed & Breakfast establishment, with lodgings. Here and there paint was peeling from the ceilings; the dining room was a magnificent study in living standards from a bygone era, with well-worn floral carpets, wood-panelled walls, chrome and formica tables and upholstered chairs, also worn with wear. I treasured it all. It was a place which took me back to my childhood roots.

But it wasn't until I'd lived in these lodgings for a few days, that I began to appreciate a very special quality, even more enticing than the proximity to the water, or period piece dining area. For although it acted as a temporary holiday home for guest such as myself and family, it also provided shelter for an intriguing range of permanent and semi-permanent residents. This was – to repeat Talaloc's phrase – *the cream on the cake*. It was the thing I loved most of all about the place.

I recall one day on my first stay, coming early to the breakfast room. It was a self-service arrangement, so one could pile the plate high with a mountain of English breakfast goodies, dripping in cholesterol, with crispy bacon on the summit. On that morning, each of the tables were occupied with at least one guest, so I chose to sit opposite a man with long greying hair and a rather straggly beard. I was still unaware by that stage that not all the guests were itinerant holidaymakers.

We made the usual introductions after he had beckoned towards the spare chair, inviting me to join him. I noticed that his faded paisley cravat and brown tweed jacket had seen better days. There was a pair of gold-framed pince-nez glasses and a burgundy-coloured handkerchief (to match the cravat) poking from his top pocket. He surveyed me for a while, then between mouthfuls of sausage and egg, began to talk.

“On holidays are ya laddie?”

“Yes,” I replied. “Here from Adelaide with family for a few days.”

This was enough to set him going:

“Oh, I remember once when I had a family.” He said, stabbing another sausage. “Then they all up and left me. I’ve been here for over ten years now.”

“Ten years?” I said, with an upward questioning inflection in my voice. “You’ve been living in this place for 10 years?”

“Yes laddie. I’m a doctor; or was a doctor is perhaps more correct. They struck me off, then things went downhill a bit after that. I lost my house and ended up here. I specialized in organ transplants. I was one of the best.”

Faced with that, what could one say? The obvious line would have been to question why he had been de-registered. But I stepped back from the brink, onto another tack.

“My wife and young boy are in our room; they should be here soon. Is it OK if they join us for breakfast? Then you can tell us more.”

“Yes, of course,” he replied between mouthfuls. “I don’t get a chance to talk with people much, nowadays.”

On a subsequent early morning breakfast, once again ahead of the crew, I happened to set down my small mountain of *English*, opposite a middle-aged lady with what looked like a *Marilyn Monroe* hairdo, betrayed only by an inch or two of grey-brown roots at the center. I estimated the lady to be in her fifties, and though she now wore a long floral dress, I had noticed her the day before, wearing a bikini while sunbathing on the small beach outside our room. I remember thinking at the time how attractive she looked for her age. Sometimes maturity brings a new sense of beauty.

Again, like the doctor a couple of days before, after just a short while we got into conversation, and I quickly worked out that some years before, the lady had been a star on stage in *King’s Cross*: Sydney’s red-light district.

“I was well known ... even famous you might say. An exotic dancer: Australia’s answer to Marilyn Monroe, the film star you know... who incidentally had just topped herself.”

Then looking directly at me, she added: *“I worshiped that lady.”*

She continued on, while gazing into space, consumed with days gone by:

“Of course, there comes a time when you’re no longer flavour of the month. First, I was pushed back to the chorus line, then out the door, reduced to doing striptease for a handful of horny men, in seedy joints around ‘The Cross’. After that I was in a brothel, then on the streets. I started taking drugs. It was a vicious fall from grace, I tell you.”

We’d only been talking for a few minutes and already there were tears in her eyes. A family of four at the next table had obviously overheard the lady and were beginning to stare. I was becoming desperate to steer the conversation on to a better track.

“Yes, but you’re here now, and from what I can see, it’s a great place to be,” was all I could muster.

“My God! You think this place is good?” It was a rhetorical question. Her voice getting louder. *“it’s a gathering of has-beens, that’s what it is: de-registered doctors, de-frocked judges, disgraced headmaster’s; they’re all here. I’m not sure if its heaven or hell, but its where we’ve all ended up.”* Then looking down at her plate she added: *Just like this fucking breakfast: bad eggs in a grotty frying pan!*

With that the next-door family hurriedly tabled their serviettes and left the room.

“Jesus,” I thought to myself. “What have I started here?”

But in some ways what my Marilyn look-alike had said, was true. On subsequent visits I made it my business to talk with the long-stayers, and indeed I did find judges and headmasters, as well as people from a variety of other professions amongst their number. They were indeed nearly all professional types (excluding striptease artists perhaps) and almost all happy to talk about their past and the circumstances that had conspired to point them towards their present Neutral Bay existence. In general, they were not bitter; they acknowledged their mistakes and now desired only a long and peaceful retirement. Even *Marilyn*, on getting to know her more, was not really so angry, acknowledging that she too – from the depths of despair – had managed to find a much better world in which to spend her days.

Looking back, I often wonder what happened to all those colourful characters, whom I met and talked with over three or four holidays in Sydney. A few years after my last stay there, the guesthouse was bulldozed to make way for a tiered arrangement of gleaming new – Japanese funded – apartments, with I presume, astronomical price tags. The old place held such a wonderful atmosphere, with a glorious mix of short, medium, and long stay residents. It was such a pity to see it go: a period piece from the early 20th Century, lost to the wrecking ball. I guess all things have their time ... or as George Harrison famously said: *All Things Must Pass*.

.....

And so it was, that Neutral Bay, the City of Sydney, and the expansive harbour with its glorious inlets, together came to hold such allure for me, that I composed an assortment of poems, which today help me recall the magic of that urban landscape ... and its people. One short set of verses in particular, reflects the dichotomy of short-term sightseers alongside long-term residents; not dissimilar to the juxta positioning of the folk I had discovered, during those treasured summer holidays in Neutral Bay.

Secrets of Sydney

*It's strange that in a city
That can boast the size of Sydney,
Atmosphere's so tranquil
Around the harbor, at the hub.
What does it hide?*

*The ferry saunters over
Towards the wharf at Neutral Bay.
Clank and thud on the landing,
Then back to Circular Quay.
Let's go for a ride.*

*Off-hand look of the workers
Seems to conceal an inner pride,
While sightseers appear so casual
When merging with the crowd,
(But alas) they sit outside!*

Neutral Bay 1979