

Photographs and Memories

A Taggerty writer

Third prize, Non-Fiction: 2025 Marysville BookNest writing competition

Life, as we remember it, often appears as snapshots, like glimpses of time into our past...bound by a common thread of belonging. Often, memories include special events and celebrations, yet everyday happenings and interactions are just as significant. People and place shape us from an early age, sometimes in ways we haven't ever considered. Writing provides the perfect opportunity to reflect upon our formative childhood experiences.

Travel along as I indulge in recollections of my past, a kind of mud map of my early life...

It's the late 1950s in a suburban brick veneer in Melbourne...my parents are going out for the evening, but I'm blissfully unaware as my sister and brothers push me around in the old wicker pram. Our parents shout 'Goodbye!' I'm squealing excitedly, almost choking with laughter, as the pram careers past the two adult figures, speeding up the hallway towards the front door. Oh, the joys of being the youngest child!

This was such an ordinary event, so why is it cemented in my memory? It is probably my earliest recollection, and the only one of my father. We should never underestimate the significance of such small moments in our lives.

My school life began as a five-year-old in 1961 when I entered 'Bubs'. My father died, aged 49, about one week later. My memories of the early years at school are scant, but I recall a large classroom with tables and a large floor area, with a rug over the wooden floorboards. I do remember, with fondness, the compassion of the teacher, and the quiet times...

We've just come inside after lunch, and the teacher is reading a story as we lie on the floor with our heads on soft cushions. The air is heavy with the heat of tiny bodies, a smell that I will come to know, but the wooden floor is raw and earthy, offering cool relief; I sink down...Heavy eyelids are drawing me closer and closer to sweet slumber. The feathery pillow, together with the soothing tones of the teacher's lyrical voice, lulls me to a place of tranquillity as I drift off into a dream state. There is a peace, a friendly face; the pages of a book turn slowly, a gentle voice tells the story, and I'm so tired, I sleep.

I did come to know this place and, over time, felt more comfortable. The reassurance and understanding of the new adults in my life made such a difference. Friendships, however, and a sense of belonging, surpassed any academic learning along the way.

At primary school in the 1960s, play outside involved a wealth of group games, many of which involved some kind of rhyme or chant to decide the roles of the players...

*'Red Top Taxi,
One, two, three,
Red Top Taxi,
You're not he!'*

Looking down on the circle of feet, we're all anxiously waiting to see who will be chosen as 'It' in the chasing game. With each round saying the rhyme, one person is eliminated from being 'He'. I cross my fingers . . .

Numerous games would follow such as Tiggy, Chain Tag, Shadow Chasey, Giant's Treasure, and 'What's the time, Mr Wolf? There was never any shortage of outside activities at primary school. Elastics, Hula Hoops, Knucklebones, Marbles, and Yo-Yos were always popular too. They were so much fun, and I loved them all, but more importantly, these moments in time with others created a strong sense of acceptance and kinship.

The games didn't stop at the school gate. Growing up in suburban Melbourne in the 1960s was certainly a social affair. No formal playdates, just meet in the street and have fun! On weekends the street was a-buzz with laughter, yelling and squeals of delight! Cricket and footy were regular favourites, with all the local children meeting in the middle of the road. The steep hill provided the perfect slope for bikes, bilycarts and roller skates. Starting at the top of the hill, we would fly down the steep footpath. Luckily, the house at the bottom of the street was unfenced, so we could cut the corner and spin across the grass, hopefully before we reached the intersecting road at the bottom!

Our street had a wonderful sense of community. Properties were much more than a piece of real estate. They were places to share and enjoy with other families. Once a year, the whole street would come together for the annual bonfire to celebrate Guy Fawkes night...

Standing before a massive pile of branches, we look up in anticipation. First, there is a gentle orange glow...the fire begins to crackle; we're mesmerised as we watch the flames flicker, then spread, rising higher and higher, escaping into the night sky. Sparks and embers light up the darkness like fireflies, and the flames twist and turn, dancing in the breeze. Gasping in wonder, we can see the excitement of those around us in the bright orange glow. The warmth of the bonfire and the drama of the flames are alluring, but there is something even more enticing.

We retreat to our houses to find our special stockpiles of firecrackers. Back on the street, this is where the fun really begins. Letterboxes provide the perfect space for testing the ferocity of firecrackers...

First, we carefully place the Tom Thumbs in the letterbox to get the maximum effect. My brother lights the end firecracker. Within seconds, the string of small explosives fills the air like a succession of gunshots, and we're all laughing uproariously! Time for the big artillery; a large red Penny Bunger is next. 'Hissssssssss...BANG!' The back of the letterbox is completely blown off. Mission accomplished! We squeal with glee as we run back to the bonfire to celebrate our triumphs.

I think I must have been quite young, perhaps around seven or eight years old when I found a photograph in the bottom of the hall cupboard . . .

A tall, lean figure sits in a relaxed pose on the grass...he is smiling at the camera and his face looks youthful and carefree. His hair is parted in the middle and neatly slicked back, for that sleek and polished look! He is wearing a loose, single-breasted jacket, with a pocket square or handkerchief, neatly folded into a triangle, and placed open side up in the top pocket. Beneath the jacket, he is sporting a vest, a tie with large stripes, and a shirt with cufflinks. His high waisted, wide leg trousers have single pleats which are cuffed at the bottom over striped socks and smart, lace up shoes.

I study the photograph in great depth, looking for a hint of familiarity, but I'm at a loss to identify this stranger with the friendly smile. I swing around from the hall cupboard with the photo in my hand. 'Who's this?' I ask my mother. 'It's your father,' she replies from the kitchen. This is not the answer I'm expecting.

I don't recall any more conversation. I did wonder though, how someone who had been such a significant person in my life could be totally unfamiliar to me? As I grew however, my mother would often comment on how much I was like my father – the same passion for gardening; the obsession with healthy foods; the same 'dark' sense of humour; the perfectionist streak – thanks for that dad!

I do wonder though, if there are connections in life that we don't fully understand and cannot explain. How is it that two people can be so similar without contact throughout their lives? And the photograph? I placed it back in the bottom of the hall cupboard, closed the door, and life went on...

Our growing years are marked by celebrations of one kind and another. They create a sense of belonging through shared experiences.

Christmas is such a huge event in a child's life, and my recollections bring back the happiest of memories. Every year, the tree would go up at the beginning of December and stay up for twelve days. For the trimmings, we spiralled various colours of tinsel around the branches, then carefully added the decorations, most of which had been passed down through the family. The electric lights had to be tested every year before we put them up. Once they adorned the tree, the flashing sequence was totally mesmerising. At the top of the tree, the special angel would be placed very carefully, taking care with its delicate porcelain body and tulle wings. I remember that sweet smile looking down on all of us...

The Christmas tree stands in the corner of the lounge room. Christmas cards decorate the walls, hanging from strings across doorways and the mantelpiece, with extras on top of the pianola piano, and the black and white TV.

It's time to mix the Christmas cake, after the fruit and nuts have been soaking for at least two days in a generous amount of brandy! There'll be no mixed peel or glace cherries in 'our' fruit cake. We all have a stir of the cake mixture for good luck and next, we all get to lick the bowl – that's the best part! The sweetness of the sugar,

combined with the tang of the brandy, together with the added texture of slivered almonds and dried fruits, makes a gooey, delicious concoction. Of course, the old wooden spoon adds so much to the flavour experience.

I remember the excitement of finding my very full pillowcase in front of the mantelpiece in the wee small hours of Christmas morning, and the extra presents under the tree were the icing on the cake! Gifts to be treasured for so many years...a special set of coloured pencils; a wooden descant recorder; *Winnie-the-Pooh* classic books, and my precious rounders bat! Dress ups featured as well. My 'Nurse Nancy' outfit, complete with headpiece and bib apron, both featuring a large red cross, plus my 'Annie Oakley' cowgirl costume, with a straw hat, and leather fringed skirt and vest. Presents weren't grand, and they weren't showy, but they were so special.

Christmas was, and still is, an important date on our calendar to catch up with family and friends, to share a home cooked meal, laugh together, and just feel the love. It's somewhat like a punctuation mark at the end of each year. A time to take a deep breath and reflect on what was, what is, and what will be. Meaningful relationships truly matter.

After Christmas, summer holidays were the next highlight. Rosebud was our destination always. A walk to the foreshore beach was almost a daily affair...

The smell of salt water and seaweed overpowers the senses as we approach the beach. I can feel the sandy soil between my toes, as my thongs flip flop along the tracks that meander through campsites nestled amongst the tea-tree. It's time to kick off the thongs and go barefoot, so we can feel the soft, warm sand squeaking between our toes as we make our way towards the water. The sea sparkles as the water glistens in the sunlight. There's nothing quite like a swim in the sea on a hot day. That tranquil, calm feeling as the water slowly engulfs your body...so cooling and refreshing. Snorkels and masks on, we explore beneath the surface, seeking out shells and jellyfish in the shallows.

Out of the water, a crusty dryness signals the saltwater evaporating on our skin. The salt crystals begin to itch as we seek the shade of the beach umbrella and reach for a towel. Usually, when the food and drinks are exhausted, it's time to head back up to the house, but tonight, we are treated to fish and chips on the beach. As the sun sets over the water, brilliant pinks, reds and orange colours transform the sky as the gentle lapping of waves onto the sand signals the changing tide. The clear night sky lights up like a Christmas tree. We count the number of satellites and falling stars. The clarity and depth in the dark sky is truly beautiful to behold.

These moments in nature stay with you – there is a closeness to the Earth that cannot be explained.

There is a very different night time activity, however, that is also a must on our annual family holiday. The Rosebud Carnival is an absolute highlight...

Whirling colours light up the night sky. The atmosphere is electric...children shriek with excitement and squeal in sheer delight! The sights and sounds of the carnival on a summer evening are every child's joy. We're surrounded by movement, lights

and noise. The Ferris Wheel is turning high above us and, as the swinging carriages pass by at eye level, the faces of the people tell of wonderment at the marvels they have seen, looking out over the water and the scenes of the carnival below. And then it's our turn...from a rocking start at the bottom, we make our way to the top where a gentle breeze blows through our hair, and we can see for miles and miles... it's magical!

Back on the ground, we gravitate to the dodgem cars. I jump in with one of my brothers. He manoeuvres the electric car around the arena, wholly focussed on bumping into my other brother. Every time we connect, we all burst into wild laughter! The game continues until our time is up, then we look for the next exciting adventure.

I try my luck on the spinning wheel. I can't believe it when my lucky number comes up...number 13, and my prize? An inflatable pink elephant! It seems almost as big as me!

I kept that pink elephant for years and years, and absolutely treasured it! Sometimes, it's the smallest things in life that give the most pleasure!

My birthday is in January, and often celebrated at Rosebud, so it was another highlight for me. My two brothers would plan a treasure hunt, with clues placed around the old beach house. I remember my excitement as I read and followed each clue to eventually find a present. Funny, I don't recall what I was given, but the memories of the treasure hunt are still vivid. I loved the fact that my brothers created something for me which was so special. How lucky was I to belong to a family that nurtured and cared for me.

Ballarat was another favourite holiday destination for our family, where we were invited to stay with relatives...

Winding down the car window, the wind rushes at my face, and as I take a long breath, the air is heavy with the scent of Eucalypts, a refreshing minty tang, tinged with the sweetness of honey...aah, nectar for the soul. I always look forward to revisiting this landscape. It lifts me out of my suburban bubble and gives me clarity, purpose and a true sense of belonging. Looking out over acres of green pasture, dotted with sheep and cows, the distant hum of a tractor gives way to the wind in the trees and the slow, mournful call of a raven, 'Ah-ah-aaaah...'

Our arrival at the farm is marked by the strange rattling and rolling sensation as we drive over the cattle grid, and we start the long haul up the driveway to the old farmhouse. As we round the bend at the top of the garden, the house comes into view. There is a sense of both excitement and contentment, akin to that of meeting up with a lifelong friend after a long absence. How I love this place!

There is also a wonderful sense of freedom here, to be able to explore the landscape, where wonders and secrets abound. Venturing beyond the farmhouse and surrounds, there is so much to explore. As well as the attraction of several

dams, there's a large area of natural bushland. We spend hours exploring this magical place, full of mystery and movement...

Sunlight filters through the trees, as the branches and leaves sway and dance in the breeze. The bark on the Eucalypts, with its cracks and lines, tells stories of long ago, and the sticky blood red sap oozes out onto the trunk and limbs, a tasty treat for passing wildlife. With each step, the dried leaves and twigs crackle and crunch underfoot, uncovering the earthy smell of the forest floor. Knobbly tree roots twist and tangle across the earth, and closer inspection reveals a carpet of soft green mosses, lichens, and fascinating fungi. These hidden gems display their curious colours and forms, with intricate gills and delicate frills capturing our attention as we pass by.

A mob of kangaroos moves from its resting place in the bush to gather in the open where they can feed on the lush green grass into the night. Back at the house, we gather too for an evening meal...a time to listen, share and laugh with family.

It's these memories that we hold dear, and we carry with us. They inform and remind us of the importance of connections to people and places.

Childhood farm and beach visits with family made me feel content, yet so alive! I can see why I yearned for a place in the bush in my early adult years.

I found that place, on beautiful Taungurung Country, surrounded by family, community, bushland and a vast starry sky.

People matter, place matters, belonging matters...