

In Pastures New

As a girl brought up in the Dowanhill area of Glasgow, from an infant I was taken to church and nurtured by its family of believers. Later, in my early teens, my objections were overruled and I was compelled to attend, like it or not. As most of my close friends were there too, my truculent rebellion was half-hearted.

It was a thriving Church of Scotland establishment busy every day and night of the week with group meetings and before the competition of television, church provided something for everyone.

My Gran had been a founder member and both my mother and grandmother were members of the Women's Guild and sang in the church choir. My father and grandfather were very occasional attenders. Although not strident atheists, they were not fully signed up members of the Kirk. 'Adherents' was the term used. They never shared their views of God and religion with me, preferring to chat to each other about football and the fortunes of *Partick Thistle* and *Rangers*.

In our large extended family, the Seymours, singing was important, especially at family gatherings around an upright piano. Everyone was encouraged to do a turn and join in. I was expected to sing ditties but my party piece was reciting poetry, majoring on works by Robert Burns.

These gatherings always ended with my Gran singing *The Lord's my Shepherd* to the tune Crimond, singing solo until the last verse when we all joined in.

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At Jordanhill College I met Angus Smythe. He was a PE student, captain of the men's hockey team. His father was a Bank Manager, his mother a Speech Therapist. They lived in a grand house in a much posher area called Kirklee, near Botanic Gardens. Angus and his brothers had attended Kelvinside Academy, a fee-paying school. He was the third son of five boys and was very sure of himself. I think it was his 'certainty' about everything which attracted me to him originally, and I was flattered when he picked me from our crowd to take to the pictures to see Julie Andrews in *The Sound of Music*.

Later, standing inside his garage with the door locked from the inside, I discovered he had wandering hands which, after a token resistance, I was hooked, using this memory of being touched intimately to fuel my secret 'under the bedclothes' fantasies. We went on quickly from there and met at every opportunity. On our third time in the garage, he guided my hand down to encourage me to explore inside his underpants. My head was buzzing and everything was zinging.

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From David, an older married brother, Angus had a supply of Durex and whenever he could get the use of his mother's car, an old Rover, we found a quiet spot and canoodled on the rear bench seat.

Angus was my first real boyfriend and I was besotted.

The day after my graduation as a Primary Teacher we got married. It was Angus's idea that we call ourselves Seymour-Smythe. He said it would help us to distinguish ourselves, help us both in our careers.

My entire family were against our plan to emigrate but despite acrimonious rows, tears and protestations, we signed for a long flight to Perth in Western Australia, travelling on a "ten pounds Poms package".

Prior to my departure, my older brother Robbie (Robert) asked me to pray with him. Years earlier he had been to a Billy Graham Rally and had become a committed and enthusiastic Christian, joining our church as a full member, much to the delight of my mother and grandmother. He was very earnest and pleaded with me to reconsider my decision. When I refused, he prayed for me, asking The Lord to watch over us and to bring us into His fold when the time was right.

Angus was furious when I told him about Robbie's intervention and snapped, "all religions are nonsense, complete twaddle".

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When we arrived in WA, we became close friends with Alex and Sandra. Like us, they had no close relatives in Perth. Sandra was from Sydney and Alex was from Hobart in Tasmania. They were buying a new build house with the money from wedding donations, their savings and a massive bank loan. They had met at college and they knew how everything worked, helping us to settle at the temporary hostel accommodation provided free, showing us the sites and attractions of Perth and Freemantle. They had an old Holden estate car but Angus and I rode everywhere on our bikes.

With their help, we found an affordable older property, a rambling run-down market garden miles from the city centre which they called a "do-er-upper". They were very generous with their time and skills, helping us to re-wire and re-plumb the house, fix up the roof and re-paint throughout. Alex was an excellent DIY enthusiast and Sandra had a fancy sewing machine and made us curtains, duvet covers and pillow cases.

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The property came with a small flock of chickens which provided us with a ready supply of fresh eggs. There was a duck pond and three old scraggy ducks but no eggs. We learned how to organise a Barbie and to drink ice-cold 'tinnies' of beer and fizzy white wine. Angus experimented with home brew wine and beer but we soon gave that up after a horrible bout of diarrhoea.

Sandra was a primary teacher too although we taught in different schools. Her Alex had a degree in Electrical Engineering and taught Maths and Science in a technical college. There were no openings for PE teachers and my Angus taught Geography in a high school a few miles away.

Like others around us we planned to start a family. Sadly, I had a miscarriage at six months. Secretly, I called my lost boy Robert, after my father. I blamed the heat. It was in the high forties for weeks and we had no AC. I suffered a deep depression and was off work for many months. Sandra and Alex rallied round, sharing their new baby and gradually I recovered and returned to school after the winter break.

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We had been in Perth three years when Alex disappeared. He had been on his bicycle riding on a familiar early Sunday morning circuit but did not return. By late afternoon, Alex and I had driven round his expected route several times before calling the Police. They mounted a full-scale search but found nothing. They brought in sniffer dogs, borrowed some of Angus's clothes but still nothing.

Days turned to weeks. We waited and waited, hoping Angus would somehow find his way back to us. I remember our hens stopped laying and wondered if they could sense the tension in my body when I fed them.

Then a bush walker found Angus's fancy racing bike, the one he had ordered from America. The location was miles from Angus's usual cycle route. The bike had been mangled, probably by a hit and run driver the Police said. They searched all around the area but there was no body, just dried blood and fingerprints on the bike which proved conclusively it was his. One theory was that his corpse had been eaten by dingoes but no clothing scraps were ever found.

I was five months pregnant and the shock of this confirmation that Angus was dead caused me to lose my baby, a girl. Secretly, I called her Ann, after my mother.

In the months which followed I suffered a recurrence of the depression which had followed my earlier miscarriage but this time it was much more severe. I was a zombie,

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swirling in a downward spiral in a fog of greys and blacks. I stopped eating and had to be hospitalised, drip fed. They injected pick-me-up drugs but they did not work.

Letters and long-distance phone calls from Glasgow urged me to come home but I was too ill to travel.

Sandra and Alex were my rocks, visiting me in the psychiatric ward. After a month or so, the visits by Sandra stopped. Alex explained that their small children, (Tommy was four and Shawn was two), needed a fixed routine in the evenings centred around a light meal followed by playtime, bathing, bedding and stories. As a result, it was Alex who came to see me alone, usually on his way home from college where he was now Head of his department. Eventually, his emotional dam burst and he told me that Sandra had left him for a work colleague called Eloise and that they had moved to Sydney with his kids to make a new life together. He was distraught, devastated, shattered, sitting beside my bed, his head in his hands, tears flowing.

I suppose that is when it started in earnest, our affair. Although I had suppressed it, I had always been attracted to Alex by his quiet, thoughtful manner, his warm secret smiles when Angus had started on one of his familiar rants about Vietnam, the Ozone Layer, illegals from Indonesia or whatever topic was in the news with Sandra responding vociferously, determined to have her say.

Oddly, Alex's need for my reassurance made me reach out to him, pressing his head to my bosom, stroking his hair and pecking his cheek. Perhaps it was inevitable. We were both desperately lonely and needy. One evening we locked the door of my room and drew the blinds to kiss and cuddle. Using a condom, we found an amazing release. It was wonderful, far slower, gentler and more satisfying than it has ever been with Angus.

This new found intimacy helped me recover. When I was discharged, we became a couple, quite openly. Angus's body had never been found and I would have to wait at least seven years to have my marriage annulled. There was also an issue with his pension and death-in-service payment.

'Living in sin' as we did was a huge mistake but we were deeply in love. Our openness attracted criticism. Friends and colleagues began to shun us. I planned to return to my school but they had filled my post and I was out of a job. Invitations to weekend Barbies petered out and stopped. We were social pariahs.

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After many discussions, we arrived at a mutually agreed decision, a thing that would not have happened with Angus who had always decided for both of us. We sold both houses in Perth, sent Sandra her due share and moved to Hobart where we made a new start. Alex was originally from Devonport in the north of Tasmania but had studied in Hobart and knew the area well.

I had decided not to return to teaching but devote myself to Alex and hope to start a family of our own. He was sending money to Sandra in Sydney to support his sons and this was a big drain on our budget. Our capital was dwindling. Then we saw an opportunity and bought an existing business from a couple who were divorcing, a small bed and breakfast hotel with six double rooms. Alex said he had stayed there years earlier, under a previous owner, when he had first moved to Hobart to study. 'Harbour View' turned out to be a Godsend, always busy with people travelling on the road to and from the ferry terminal.

Wonderfully for us, the B&B came with a woman in her thirties called Melissa who taught us how to run the place and did most of the breakfast cooking and laundry. She was an unmarried single mother, an eighth-part Aboriginal. Her teenage daughter Melinda helped by serving tables, washing up and helping with the housework. Melinda was 'slow' but reliable and always smiling. The previous owner had built two identical wooden-framed cottages in the grounds. Melissa and Melinda lived in one and we lived in the other.

When our B & B was fully up and running, Alex got a part-time post at his old college teaching computer science. We began to pay off the mortgage and save for the future.

Now money was easier, we stopped using condoms and started trying for a baby.

It took a while but when our beautiful boy was born, we named him Bertram after Alex's father. Sadly, my wee Bert had severe gastric problems and died after ten weeks in an incubator. We had been thinking of applying to have my marriage annulled to allow us to marry so our baby would not be illegitimate but we cancelled everything and I was still Harriet Seymour-Smythe.

Alex volunteered to have a vasectomy. I agreed and set my mind to live a life without children of my own.

Then, out of the blue, I received a settlement from the school authorities in Perth who had eventually acknowledged Angus was dead. There was no explanation why this had happened: we had long ago given up on this and stopped writing to them. Their offer was a lump sum to cover 'death-in-service' and the 'accrued unpaid pension' for Alex with the

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offer of a 'final settlement' to buy out my future pension entitlement. After a long discussion, we decided to accept the entire package amounting to \$127,850 Australian.

Alex who had been dabbling in stocks and shares in a small way for years, invested this money for us and it soon began to grow steadily.

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Five years later, we got word from Sandra, a long, rambling, heart-rending plea for help. She had breast cancer and after a double mastectomy, she had been given a maximum of three months to live. Her partner Eloise had moved to Christchurch in New Zealand with her new girlfriend, a young woman of Japanese heritage.

We left Melissa in charge of the B&B and flew north to Sydney to help Sandra through her trauma. She lasted only three weeks. Tommy and Shawn were big boys by that stage, both at high school, adolescents trying hard to hide their fear of what the future might hold for them. Although reserved with me, they were very pleased to see their father.

With the help of a solicitor, the three of us signed all the papers and Alex and I adopted the boys, a situation made slightly more difficult because Alex and I were not married. This solicitor, an older man called Gerald Lewis, was recommended to us by the attending nurse who cared for Sandra during her last weeks to administer painkilling injections. Gerald was very kind and patient, sitting with the boys for ages answering their anxious questions with tact, explaining how the legal process worked and why it was a good idea that they should accept me as their adoptive mother, in case anything should happen to their father.

I had never been religious in my life to that stage. As a girl I had been sent to Sunday School, Brownies and Girl Guides but I had never believed in God or Jesus. In Youth Fellowship Bible studies, the whole idea of Jesus dying on a cross and coming back to life had seemed too fantastic to be true. I had quietly sided with other more vociferous objectors who claimed that if there was a Loving Heavenly Father looking out for us, why did we have diseases and wars and all sorts of other suffering.

Gerald helped us to arrange the funeral and cremation. The service was led by a lady, a woman of my age called Shona MacVicar. Her entire body was tattooed with intricate and colourful tribal designs. Shona was keen to share her story, explaining she was fifty percent Aboriginal. She openly confessed she had been addicted to drugs and alcohol before Gerald and his wife Mary had helped her to find Jesus.

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As a teenager, her mother had told her that her father was Scottish, from Inverness, a geologist who had worked in the outback finding mineral deposits. He was already married with two children and had moved back home shortly after Shona was born, leaving her mother with a bank account containing \$10,000 Australian, topped up each year by a further \$5,000. This situation had continued for twelve years then stopped, without explanation.

Although John MacVicar had never been part of her life, when Shona became a Christian, she wrote to the address her mother suggested to discover her father had named her in his Will. With Gerald's help and after DNA tests and a signed affidavit from her mother notarised by Gerald and accompanied by a letter and photographs explaining her situation, Shona eventually received her share of his estate amounting to €124,500 Australian, a sum sufficient to support her through Bible College. On gaining her diploma, she had set out on a career Living by Faith as a freelance preacher and an authorised funeral celebrant.

It was Shona who suggested we include Psalm 23, *The Lord's my Shepherd*, sung to Crimond. She had a lovely speaking voice, sincere and persuasive. She had spoken to many people who knew Sandra and to Tommy and Shawn. Her homily contained many funny and poignant anecdotes, most of which were new to me.

It was at the close of the service we discovered Shona's other gift, her pure, pitch-perfect singing voice. Standing there in the funeral hall on the outskirts of Sydney on that day all those years ago, led by Shona behind her pulpit singing in her high soprano voice, with us standing in front of the coffin laden with flowers filling the air with their perfume, Tommy and Shawn between Alex and me, all holding hands, I felt strangely 'connected' to my past. I closed my eyes; I was back in Dowanhill, listening to Gran singing, tears running down my face, dripping off my chin.

Two days later, back in Hobart, Alex admitted that he too had been deeply moved by the occasion and told me for the first time that before he moved to Sydney and met Sandra, he had been an active Christian in his Methodist home church in Devonport and also when he moved to Hobart to study.

Late that same evening, when the boys were asleep, Shona rang us from Sydney. She had noticed that we had both been affected by her singing at the funeral. She said this was not the first time she had seen what she called "The Lord's Hand touching lives".

On our speakerphone we talked about how we felt, opening our hearts to her. After a Bible reading and a short homily from Shona, she invited us to kneel with her before the

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Throne of Grace and accept the Lord Jesus as our Saviour. On the following Sunday we drove across Hobart to the Methodist church where Alex had been a member before moving to Sydney. We were most warmly welcomed and soon became members, setting out on a new phase of our lives. Sadly, Tommy and Shawn refused to attend with us but we knew it was difficult for teens, especially boys, to come to The Lord after years in the wilderness. But we prayed for them day by day, asking The Lord to 'touch their souls' and bring them into His fold.

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I am now living in St Andrews, in Scotland. Three years ago, my beautiful, kind Alex faded away after a brave decade-long fight against prostate cancer. I have been here several months and have decided to write down this account of my life, before it all slips away as it did with Alex during his final years. I intend to leave this epistle in a sealed envelope with my Bible as a testimony to how The Lord has worked in my life, saving me from my sinfulness and deliberate unbelief.

After a spell of study in Melbourne our Tommy moved west to Perth where he is a GP, married to Verity, a local girl who had been a classmate in primary school. They have twin girls, Amber and Amelia and a son called Anders. Shawn is a Solicitor in Sydney, living with Pierce, his long-term Partner. They own a thriving florist shop. They would love to have a family and have listed themselves with several agencies as potential adoptive parents. We are still in contact as a family, a monthly chat room on *Skype* but I can sense my adopted sons are drifting away from me and from each other, caught up in the busy whirl of their own separate lives.

After a long *Skype* session with Gerald, Mary and Shona, I sold up everything in Hobart and 'came home' to Scotland to visit my brother and his family. I gifted the cottage to Melissa and Melinda who now work for the new owners. Gerald has set up a Trust which contains \$100,000 Australian; this will provide them with a small steady monthly payment.

In the back of my mind, I think I might stay here now, if that is what The Lord wants me to do.

My brother Robbie is a farmer near Crail. He is married to Allison who inherited her family's business growing soft fruits and vast fields of vegetables and cereals. They have a son, Jamie, who lives in Aberdeen and works for Shell as a Lead Engineer designing and managing offshore oil installations. Andrew is married to Elaine, a software developer; they have two boys Rob and Dave.

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Robbie's daughter Amanda teaches Maths and Science at the local high school in Anstruther. Still single, she is a dedicated marathon runner and has two border collies who compete in flyball and agility events.

Robbie and Allison are members of a thriving evangelical church called St Andrews Free Church with an active ever changing student group at their heart. It is a very welcoming community with many different nationalities and I feel very at home there.

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It is now October, my seventh month back home. At present I have no plans to return to Hobart. I am renting a small flat in St Andrews near the Free Church. I tried hiring a car: I was terrified by the heavy, aggressive traffic and parking was a nightmare. I now have an e-bike which I use on dedicated cycleways but usually I walk or use local buses. A few miles away there is a rail link from Leuchars to Dundee, a hub from which I can travel to the rest of Scotland.

I used the train to visit Glasgow but, to be honest, I was disappointed by the city centre and its litter and graffiti. My old church in Dowanhill is still there and, like the St Andrews Free Church, it has a good sprinkling of student members from Glasgow University. Standing outside my old red sandstone tenement, I looked up at the windows of my childhood home and that of my grandparents. To me, everything seemed smaller and grubbier than I remembered when I was in Australia.

The best part of this short visit was a morning spent in the *Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum*, which is still popular with locals and tourists. After a snack lunch I sat in the auditorium area listening to an organ recital. Entry is still free although a donation is requested. On the spur of the moment, I made a complete circuit on the Subway from Hillhead to Hillhead, a ride which brought to mind the Scottish word 'shoogle'.

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At the Free Church we had a visiting outreach preacher called Andrew Mulenga. His parents are originally from Zambia where, we learned, the majority of the population is Christian. Andrew has been in the UK since he was eight years old and has a degree in Theology from St Andrews. Andrew is four years younger than me and speaks perfect English like a posh local. His father (now retired) was a consultant oncologist at Ninewells Hospital in Dundee. Funded in part by a local authority grant topped up by charitable donations, Andrew runs a family support group of volunteers called 'Linlathen Helping Hands' which serves one of the most deprived areas of Dundee.

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Like Shona MacVicar in Sydney, living day to day by Faith, Andrew has recovered from his addictions. And, like Shona, he is a powerful and persuasive preacher and has a pure, note-perfect baritone singing voice. He also plays piano, keyboard and a full church organ with stops and foot pedals.

Since we met at the Free Church around four months ago, we have enjoyed a lot of time together. Most weekdays I go to Dundee on the bus, usually early, to help in the kitchen where a group of us prepare simple meals for a pensioners' free lunch club which runs Monday to Friday. Each afternoon, after washing up, Andrew leads our volunteer group in a Bible Study and 'cohesion session' where we are invited to discuss our concerns and invite others to share in our 'open prayers'. Some of us stay on to help run the after-school club where we serve snacks and juice and organise table tennis, snooker, board games (and darts for the older children who can be trusted!).

Recently, I have started a homework class in a nearby Methodist Church with the aim of helping 'recover' struggling Primary 6 and 7 children to help them get a leg up before they go to high school. (Only after Sandra died and Shawn had moved to Hobart with us, we discovered he suffered from undetected dyslexia. After treatment and coaching he gradually regained traction on his studies.)

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Andrew Mulenga has a lovely flat which his parents bought him. It is part of the redevelopment of the former Dundee Infirmary and has wonderful views over the city towards the Tay bridges and the *RRS Discovery* museum. Andrew is a gifted cook and has a wonderful selection of music CDs which he plays on an expensive stereo system, another gift from his parents. During the last few weeks, I have stayed overnight twice, using his spare room. I had sensed we were edging towards a more intimate relationship and then it happened in a rush. He asked me to tell him my story, everything about my life from the very beginning right to the present day.

(I think it was this that sparked me into creating the fuller unedited version I am typing now.)

I began by telling him about my primary school years and it went on from there. He let me tell it in my own way, at my own pace, filling in long forgotten details when they came back to me but leaving out the most sinful parts.

I told him about defying my parents and emigrating with Angus and about Robbie's prayer for me before I left. I told him of our close friendship with Sandra and Alex, about

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Angus's tragic death, about my lost babies and my long spell in hospital. I told him of my move to Hobart with Alex and my common-law marriage, of Sandra's demise and our adoption of Tommy and Shawn.

When I told him about Shona singing the 23rd Psalm at Sandra's funeral, he fired up his laptop and found a recording on *YouTube* and played it through his fancy sound system.

It is the archived version by the long defunct *Glasgow Orpheus Choir* led by Sir Hugh Robertson, singing SATB in their distinctive familiar Kelvinside accent.

Listening to it the tears fell freely, remembering again those special musical evenings with my Gran singing to us.

As they sang the last chorus, Andrew moved across to join me on the settee, putting his arm around me for the first time. We kissed and moved to his bed. During long years in twin beds with Alex drugged to manage his pain, I had lived the life of a celibate. Our slow love-making ended in a wonderful explosive release with more tears. Later, watching him sleep, praying silently, I knew with certainty this is where I am meant to be, back home in Scotland, doing The Lord's work in Dundee.

Since that night, I have met his parents three times. The first time was a stilted affair, in *Costa Coffee* at a shopping mall, neutral ground. On the second occasion we met for a meal at an upmarket Indian restaurant. This went better. On the third occasion they invited us to visit them in Arbroath where they have a huge stone villa with a massive well-stocked garden.

Later I learned they had checked up on me to be sure I was not a 'gold-digger'.

(Later still his mother confided he had been stalked three times by single mothers on the lookout for a man who had a nice flat and rich parents.)

Andrew apologised, explaining they had hired a private investigator to rummage into my past, to confirm as best they could what I had already told Andrew and which he had explained to them after the Indian meal evening.

Then, in his flat, Andrew knelt before me, took my hands in his, kissed me and asked me to marry him.

I accepted, certain it was The Lord's hand at work in my life.

There is to be a get-to-know each other family celebration at Robbie and Allison's farm next Saturday ahead of our wedding in a month's time. Andrew has suggested we call

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ourselves Mr and Mrs Seymour-Melunga. I like the idea. We have discussed it with both sides of our family and they seem happy about it too.

I am already living full-time with Andrew.

'Yes, this is where the Lord wants me to be, 'in pastures new', in Dundee, the City of Discovery.'