**Demonstrating defiance**
Into a new world possibilities

by Anne Richards

I NEVER SAW a key to the front door of my childhood home, though I'm sure my father had one somewhere. Keys were never important in my family. But I loved that front door with its leadlight panels – waves of coloured glass reflecting the light. It sat behind a porch at the end of a short hopscotch path. The small front yard belied the scale of the sprawling, many-roomed house built into the side of a very steep hill. The backyard was my own wild fairyland, with a magnificent view out over the city of Brisbane.

Sometimes I left home by the front door, but I always returned through one of six back doors. Perhaps that says something about my nature, how I fitted into this family as the fifth of eight children. Seven doors that opened and shut, seven siblings who came and went: that demanded great vigilance! Then there were the windows for emergency escapes and the roof door into the turret.

On my last day of high school in October 1968, as I walked up the backyard path towards those doors, I looked inside my head and laughed. Twelve years of Catholic school rules demolished in a day when I left a small brown package tied with string on Sister Mary Benedict's desk as a parting gift: my heavily annotated copy of The Communist Challenge to God (JS Burns, 1961). I inscribed my name in it too, aware of the irony of having just won the school religion prize for an essay on social justice.

That was me: I squirmed, walking in two worlds, keeping the peace while making waves below the surface. But my under-surface was noisy and increasingly demanding. Every night my mind rolled out the contradictions of life in a large family ruled by a business-successful, authoritarian father and a loving, beautifully mannered mother. There were front- and back-face contradictions, inside/outside alternatives, upside/downside dilemmas that could never be solved. Despite my mother's efforts and my father's directives, for me choices were not black or white.

When I was at school, my life had been filled with books, music and sport – it had felt more interesting, and kept me from drowning in the boredom of respectable Brisbane living. With school finished, all I wanted was adventure, the buzz of new and strange conversations, but I suspected it might be hard to find in this town: Brisbane was slow and winding, like the brown muddy river that passed through it. Queensland seemed stuck in a pre-World-War-II bubble, with a myopic government, ignorant politicians and a corrupt police force.

MY SEARCH FOR alternative truths started early. When I was nine, a part of my world had gone missing. The beautiful Aboriginal girl from Cherbourg who did housework for my mum disappeared in the night. Sandra was my first hero, a storyteller from a different world. She left a short note and I cried when I found it. I kept writing to her – Sandra Malone, Cherbourg – but I never got a letter back, never knew if she received my letters. I wanted to find her, but didn't know where this place was, couldn't find it on a map. All Mum would say was that it was complicated, but for the first time I didn't believe her. It seemed simple to me: 'Bring her back because I love her.' My mother remained unusually stubborn. I had no power and the room behind the dining room stayed empty.

Around that time, the Cuban Missile standoff between the United States and Russia was threatening nuclear war. President Kennedy was the hero of the Western world, particularly my small Catholic world, and we prayed as all good people did. But it didn't save him. I was just eleven when he was shot, his golden wife holding his bloodied skull in her arms. It seemed the world went numb, a part of itself lost.

I began paying attention early to the fight for equality in the US. On the black-and-white television in the family lounge, I listened to Martin Luther King Jnr's speeches: strong, blistering words that seared through and into my space. I watched reports on the civil rights marches and the Freedom Riders, which built hope as a young white middle class slowly found its feet in support for black Americans.

In Australia, Charlie Perkins and a busload of student activists staged Freedom Rides in 1965 for Aboriginal rights throughout New South Wales, challenging apartheid policies in country-town swimming pools, bars and theatres. These acts of courage were hidden in small reports in our local paper, but I found and read them.

Other voices of defiance came in an explosive musical charge, raw electric rhapsodies, a powerful infiltration of new-generation head- and heart-space. Songs were unapologetic critiques of Western governments and military power, of education systems, advocating freedom in the streets and freedom to make love…anywhere, really. It was a massive cultural shift and it was shaking up back streets and high streets across the English-speaking world.

But in sleepy Brisbane in the mid-1960s, the radio station 4BH played just one Bob Dylan song at exactly 10 pm every Thursday. One track each week, but that was all I needed to hear for the phrases to be clicking through my brain and scrawled in blue felt pen onto the butcher's paper I used to cover my bedroom walls. This musical revolution bridged oceans and cultures, short-circuiting every type of conditioned response to society.

My two younger brothers, John and David, joined me sitting in the car late at night to tune into radio stations that were forbidden in our family home. They started playing guitars, learning quickly at ten and fourteen, picking out Clapton riffs from early Cream records. The boys would sneak up the street for lessons from an older friend who already played in a band and was getting gigs. This neighbouring family of seven children was viewed with suspicion by my parents: the two eldest were obviously beatniks, and that definitely spelled trouble.

Time and Life magazines did photo spreads of London's Carnaby Street with its swirl of wild fashions and clashing colours showing an awakening in grey London. A similar take came from Greenwich Village, San Francisco and then Woodstock in short film clips at the local theatres. The sounds were loud with a taunting edge. Crowds of young faces buzzed with energy. Their curiosity and eagerness for life were palpable, alluring. I wanted to jump into that.

But away from the colours, that music, those words, Australia was at war, a 'should be small but getting bigger' war that was demanding the allegiance and lives of its young people.

My father used to make us watch World War II movies and documentaries on TV. 'These things actually happened. The world needs to know this,' he'd glower as he sank into darkness, smoking in the corner. He hated war, he hated generals, and his body seeped anger. I hated sitting there, trying not to absorb the fallout of his mood.

But the Vietnam War was somehow different for Dad. He supported this war, he supported the US but I didn't understand why. This immense contradiction became a smouldering fire in the heart of my home, a fire that finally consumed me, rendering me invisible.

Mainstream news sources spoke righteously of the Vietnam War and fighting in a united front against communism. My father also hated communists as an evil atheist threat to society. As supporters of Bob Santamaria and the right-wing National Civic Council, Dad and his friends firmly believed this framing. The conservative mindset that accrued during the long Menzies era had created a passive Australia that didn't challenge government policy and was resistant to change. As an ex-serviceman too, I think Dad just craved stability.

For a few of us at school, though – me, my friend Barbie and her older sister, and a couple of others – these stories about Vietnam and the communist conspiracy made no sense. Barbie and I searched out alternative viewpoints in the papers and books we found at the back of Lloyd's Second Hand Bookstore in Elizabeth Street. This stuffy, floor-to-ceiling shop was where I stumbled upon the distinctive yellow-and-black cover of The Communist Challenge to God. I also found the poetry of Yevgeny Yevtushenko, Roger McGough, Brian Patten, Sylvia Plath and Allen Ginsberg. As well as this world, I heard of the FOCO Club, a radical space to explore politics and culture run at the Trades Hall. Extraordinarily to me, two of my friends even had their parents' permission to go to FOCO on a Sunday night.

Despite its relatively slow pace, even in Brisbane it was possible to find strands of this global undercurrent, to read secret histories of injustice exposed and the latest speeches in pamphlets and underground papers. You just had to know where to look. Activists, writers and artists were claiming a right to speak and be heard. Control over the story was being divested from the scripts read by grey faces on the evening news.

AT THE UNIVERSITY of Queensland, a whole new conversation was starting to take place. In 1966, Brian Laver, a fiery radical student, jumped on a table outside the student refectory and blasted out tirades against US imperialism, the Vietnam War, conscription and civil rights abuses in Queensland. Students were stunned by his audacity; some shouted abuse and threw half-eaten apples. It didn't stop him. In the weeks and months that followed, he became more articulate, more daring. Laver demanded direct action and a solid support group grew around him, organising protests, proposing alternative interpretations of the Western world and its politics. The platform shifted to the walkways and grassed area beside the Student Union building, which was more conducive to open-air debates. These turned into regular forums that became pivotal in the growing student protest movement. The UQ forums were open to anyone who dared to speak, to dissect, mock or defend the government, war, conscription, the education system, capitalism, civil rights. The number of speakers grew to include a quite stellar cast of lecturers and students of various persuasions. The audience grew too, and over time this created an almost communal setting, a public space that belonged to the students and university staff.

In 1967, the right to protest was restricted under a resurrected section of the Queensland Traffic Act that allowed a police superintendent to refuse the required permit to protest ‘as he saw fit’, without requiring any justification. I was still in high school as the disenchanted took to the streets demanding a reinstatement of the basic civil right this denied. Suddenly, my backwater hometown became another stage in a wider political world – not a big one, but compelling nonetheless. On 8 September 1967, people swarmed down University Drive in St Lucia from the doors of every faculty: four thousand students and staff from a campus that only catered to eight thousand full-time students. They marched along the roads, all eight kilometres to the city, with another two thousand students following on the footpaths. Technically, on the footpath, they were not breaking the law.

Queensland’s conservative government responded with a passion that matched that of the demonstrators – except they had the power, the police and the purse, as well as a strong influence on the media. When the march reached Roma Street, the police blocked the roads. The demonstrators linked arms and sat down in peaceful defiance of police orders. This was answered with a violent police response and 114 arrests. My brothers and I watched the news that night wide-eyed, but we quickly turned off the television when we heard Dad’s car pull into the garage.

The demonstration was front-page news, but I heard the personal stories from girls whose older sisters or brothers had marched – some of whom were arrested. A small group gathered as Barbie told of her sister marching with almost the entire law faculty, including its professors. She recounted the long march and the sit-down. She described the violence of the police with their batons and boots, gave us names of students who were arrested – faces I knew. I admired their courage.

It felt like my two worlds were colliding, that a compelling race was underway: protests and the fear of anarchy, tradition and the threat of upheaval. By the time I stepped onto the UQ campus as a student in February 1969, I already knew that I opposed the Vietnam War and conscription. I knew that Aboriginal people were disenfranchised, having heard Sandra’s stories from Cherbourg mission and read Kath Walker’s (later known as Oodgeroo Noonuccal) haunting poetry. I’d read Eric Fromm’s Fear of Freedom and thought that being free was pretty cool.

I knew that radicals had longer hair, tatty jeans and brighter clothes, and I liked that scruffier, don’t-care look. When I saw the spoof film Kelly’s Heroes and the crazy Sergeant Oddball atop a Sherman tank that blared music entering battle, I saw myself standing next to him, chewing my own cigar. Despite any doubts I might have had about the chasm that was opening between my family and me, I was already moving on, cheering myself with the sergeant’s words: ‘Why don’t you knock it off with them negative waves? Why don’t you dig how beautiful it is out here?’

Two of my favourite books during high school were War and Peace and Catch-22 (Simon & Schuster, 1961), the best anti-war novels of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Tolstoy’s exquisite prose and three-dimensional descriptions moved from breathless ballroom encounters to the hardships of peasant life. The complex overflow of characters provided critiques of love and war, peace, sorrow, forgiveness. Alongside this sat the satirical twists of Joseph Heller’s paranoid World War II pilot Captain Yossarian, portrayed as sanely paranoid since he was caught in a war and everyone was trying to kill him. His complaints were routinely answered by the ‘so what’ attitude of his superior who assured him that the bastards were trying to kill everyone. Constantly stymied by the ‘catch 22’ of extended duty serving his country, Yossarian insisted that it didn’t make any difference who won the war to a soldier who was dead. The gut-wrenching horror of war was entwined with the intense character studies presented in both novels, just as it was shown on my television every night in the news clips of the bombing of Hanoi, of razed villages, the bodies of women and children by the side of roads as US troops drove by.

FROM MY FIRST week on campus at UQ, I knew I was in the right place. As I walked towards the refectory for lunch, the cryptic tag ‘Yossarian Lives’ was stenciled in black at intervals along the concrete pathway. Large-lettered flyers denounced war on every pole. The forum near the refectory acted like a magnet. There I could join the conversation, although for the first few months I stood anonymously against the wall, but slowly became more comfortable in this space.

The core crowd at the forums became familiar faces over the next six months. Many became friends. I met my first lover there, sitting under the lone poinciana tree, long branches spreading over the grassed common area, the air heavy with the smell of light and shade and heat. I was enthralled by this place, these people, the driving energy. For the most part I loved it, although I was aware that this world, too, presented contradictions and skewed values that I would have to learn to navigate.

As the movement against the Vietnam War and conscription gained momentum, the crowd at times spilled across the street, students sitting on fences and rooftops to be closer to the action. More than a thousand would

gather in the lead-up to major demonstrations, with similar numbers at the more formal refectory debates. In every way it was a grassroots youth response to contemporary political and cultural life in Australia.

A typical big-crowd Wednesday would have at least six speakers. Since the radicals did most of the organising, they often did most of the talking. But it was an open mic and anything could happen. Lecturer Dan O'Neill unravelled webs of deceit and stupidity according to his own worldview; he was a seductive speaker whose every phrase dripped with passion. Half a dozen hands would grab for the hailer to oppose, clarify or extend the propositions he'd put forward. The philosopher Peter Wertheim, politics lecturer Phil Richardson or economist Peter Thompson would elaborate their favoured line. Conservative speakers David Russell, Bob Katter or Paul Tully stood their ground and grabbed any opening to present the more rational argument they insisted was lacking.

But the conservative argument incited the anarchists, who'd demand their right of reply, with under-breath cursing taking over the airwaves as they condemned sniveling lackeys and fascist reactionaries. The Christian activists consistently put forward their cause, while a thoughtful overview by John Wilkinson reframed the debate along the New Left line.

Rhetorical baiting became a sport, a lunchtime entertainment opening the stage for jesters, street theatre and parodies of politicians and each other. Slogans were thrown around like custard tarts. After one diatribe, the speaker started shouting, 'Fighting for peace is like fucking for chastity', his comrades joining in. This became the refrain of the week.

Dan O'Neill and Brian Laver were the real word spinners, talking without skipping a beat. Just watching the ideas being ordered in their brains and then tumbling from their tongues was enticing. Admittedly some ideas were half-crazy, utopian rambles or socialist propaganda, but the cascade was beautiful. Even their enemies wished they had such wit to elaborate a point and hold a crowd.

Against this dreamed-for backdrop, I discovered Semper Floreat, the UQ student newspaper. It was causing a commotion on campus and contributing random savage articles and letters to the editor to The Courier-Mail. The paper was razor sharp with a satirical twist, its circulation more than ten thousand copies.

I walked the staircase to the Semper offices to volunteer my time after just three or four months on campus, nervous, knowing that this step was crossing another line, moving into forbidden territory. My father would be furious if he knew. I wondered about my multiplying secrets, if there was a quota for the secrets first-years were allowed to keep from their parents. I weighed the pros and cons of this radical move. What skills did I have to offer? I couldn't even type. I just wanted to learn about newspapers.

I was welcomed as an extra hand – an extra skirt more likely – and was initiated into this irreverent and vocal group of creatives. I learnt some basic skills, became intrigued by the mechanics of putting a rather notorious paper together: there was an energy driving every page, but there was no special formula. Every issue of Semper presented a new challenge. Five or six writers and artists gathered to toss ideas and build a theme, a picture palace of alternative viewpoints and humour that presented local buffoons, political hypocrisies and corruption in the same style as the satirical magazine OZ that was challenging the status quo in Sydney.

Naturally, Queensland Police's Special Branch – a political arm of Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen's reactionary government – tapped the phone lines of this hotbed of subversion. And naturally we knew, and played our own games to mess with their heads. Sometimes it worked, and the TV news that night would announce an expected demonstration at Parliament House or the offices of a multinational corporation, as well as outlining the extent of police deployment to keep the population safe. I enjoyed the intrigue, the sense of danger.

In one such prank, the local papers stirred up such angst about the threat of violence that two hundred helmeted police were assigned to guard the parliament steps. One lone demonstrator showed up wearing a white T-shirt that read I am the demonstration. The gutsy student walked up and down the pavement opposite police, then began to address the line of uniforms about his civil right to protest. He was arrested for violating the traffic laws now covering demonstrations in public places.

A letter sent by one radical group to the Viet Cong resulted in an 'urgent telegram' response from Hanoi that was passed on and printed in full in Semper on 31 March 1969, shortly before I started working at the paper:

Wholeheartedly welcome your initiative on enlisting volunteer regiment supporting SVNNFL regarding it as Australian studants' [sic] political fine attitude towards Vietnamese people just struggle against US aggression stop send you willingly NFL flag as present to regiment stop wishing you big success in study and activities stop.

Displayed prominently on the page, the urgent message was surrounded by a long charter outlining the role and aims of the UQ National Liberation Front regiment. The article called for volunteers ‘to help rebuild Vietnam when, not if, the NLF defeat US imperialism’ and to assist in the peaceful reunification of Vietnam. I thought this was rather admirable. But the university was distressed, conservatives horrified, and Premier Bjelke-Petersen outraged at this treasonous initiative. An NLF regiment on UQ campus? Where? It was an affront that threatened the smooth flow of learning to all right-minded students. The telegram from Hanoi caused questions in parliament about the dangerous agitators on campus.

Another publication caused a bigger furore in 1969 when radicals from the Students for Democratic Action group reprinted a twelve-page booklet, How Not to Join the Army, outlining ways to fail the army medical – some practical, some less than feasible. The booklet was in direct contravention of the National Service Act 1964 and was immediately banned. But it was available on campus, and became particularly notorious when people began distributing it to high school students. Booklets were handed out at gates or through fences into schoolyards. Headmasters rang police and culprits were chased across sports ovals, under fences and into the bush. The escapades scored headlines in the news with details of key activists involved, alongside comments from their previous school principals.

These confrontations were intense and the gravity of some conversations needed an outlet. Acts of sabotaging the National Service register soon turned into the false rego-paper parties held at a house in Toowong. Supplied with copious amounts of cheap wine, music blaring – Hendrix, Dylan, Creedence (‘It ain’t me, it ain’t me, I ain’t no fortunate son…’) – students would sit around the kitchen table and sprawl across lounge chairs and mattresses on the floor. Official ballot papers were piled up, collected over previous weeks from post offices across the suburbs. Telephone directories for Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne aided our mass filling-out of national service registrations using false first names and birthdates, but matching surnames with real addresses. The papers would be lodged with the Department of Labour and National Service as seemingly valid applications for the conscription ballot. Anything that might slow down, or preferably shut down, this bureaucratic machine was fair game and this was a sterling initiative. It was recreational release, subversion and party all in one.

IN THE MIDST of this exploration of politics, the world and my place in it, another world crashed in. After a long night’s study in the library, I walked to the refectory for coffee and a cool, calm Neil sat down beside me, smiling a little shyly. We talked, shared a cigarette and a couple of jokes about the glorious refec food. Later he gave me a ride home on his 650 Triumph and rhyme and reason shifted to a different space. Breathless, crushing love.

Neil was tall, with broad shoulders and straggly blond hair surrounding a fair, gentle face with thoughtful blue-green eyes and wide mouth. He was slow to talk, but the ideas were thought through, no bullshit – and a singsong mocking or surprising shout of laughter or profanity often escaped at hypocrisies or conundrums. He loved art and drawing, had failed chemistry but still loved science. This all matched in with a dream smile and beautiful butt. Irresistible.

I would take the ferry to his place after classes or an evening’s banter over a bad wine at the Red Room, UQ’s student bar and radical haunt under the refec. Neil’s flat wasn’t fancy: a small-windowed verandah, a bathroom and bedroom in a boarding house in Dutton Park that he shared with his mate Rod. Other friends would drop by, and we’d spend long nights listening to Jim Morrison and Jimi Hendrix, the Grateful Dead, Big Brother and the Holding Company, Fleetwood Mac, BB King, the Moody Blues.

We rode his Triumph down highways and into the mountains, stopping in little towns like Boonah, Caboolture or Jondaryan, breezing into the ramshackle pubs as assorted locals looked on, disturbed by the strange jacketed couple with helmets under their arms. On one trip, the winding snake roads through Maleny embraced us as we took the long-cut to Nambour to visit Neil’s friend Alan. Quietly polite, we met Alan’s parents, who had fresh sandwiches and beers sitting out on their lawn that overlooked the Nambour valley. I lay back against the grass, watching Neil and Alan talk as they relaxed into that safe space of mind and familiarity, at ease with each other’s joking conversation and silences.

Late nights of sweet love, reaching, taking, falling asleep in Neil’s arms in his too-small single bed, suddenly waking at three in the morning. With Neil only half awake, we’d jump on his bike and ride across town, stopping the pumping Trumpie a couple of blocks away so as not to wake the neighbourhood. Then I’d climb over the garage roof through the bedroom window into the silence of my father’s house.

As the weeks rolled on, Neil and I built our own world, playing spy games across the suburbs through a note left in his brown leather jacket or my novel. ‘Find me at the left door on the right side of the street where we had a beer last Tuesday or maybe it was Wednesday.’ I disguised myself with a straight nylon lime green hair wig from a shop dummy – as if that wouldn’t stand out in the grey streets of South Brisbane. But Neil was there before

me, swooping down as I turned the corner, throwing his leather coat around me, laughing, ‘Got you this time.’

Another time I caught him out with a note, ‘Lab in the chemistry building, green bow handle. “Finding Einstein” chalked on the board. Third Bunsen burner to the east, 5.33pm.’ He walked in and searched the room, checked the message on the board and the five funnel flasks filled with daisies on one bench. Right room but empty. Then I stepped out from a cupboard, an arts student wearing his white lab coat backwards, Einstein’s eyebrows and moustache drawn on my face.

We strolled through the campus to his car, which had broken down by the river. The faded blue Vauxhall needed a clutch start. We angled it out to the road and pushed, shoulders down against the back, front door open so Neil could jump in quickly when the car gained some speed. A heavy car, it took a few tries before finally kicking in. Neil pumped the accelerator while I ran to the other door. We headed for the Royal Exchange in Toowong – a local institution and our favourite pub.

We didn’t get too far before the cops pulled us over. Long-haired students in bomby cars were the latest ‘high alert’ for police keen to intimidate potential radicals. Ordered out, I sat on the curb. Neil was pissed off when they did a complete roadworthy inspection and found a long list of faults to be fixed in the next week.

Under police orders, we abandoned the car on the roadside. There was no way Neil could pay for the repairs needed and the car would have to be scrapped. We scoured the derailed Vauxhall and found some lost coinage, then walked to the rest of the way to the RE for fluid and solace.

There was always at least one table of friends there, and so it was this night. We blew our money on the good brew, swapping stories of vendettas various cops had for hairy youths. As if there wasn’t any crime in the Valley needing their attention, with its clubs and call girls, the bad guys and vice squad working it together. There were always more stories circulating about the corruption. But then, students didn’t have a bankroll to pay off the cops, the drug squad and Special Branch. I wondered if the revolution would be so revolutionary if we had.

Pub doors closed at ten. ‘Sorry Annie, can’t drive you home tonight.’

‘Neil, you can’t drive anyone anywhere just now.’ We hugged, rather wobbly. ‘Just as well you still have your Trumpie.’

We kissed on the corner and headed off at a right angle.

NEIL AND I met at the forums on his lunch breaks, where we’d listen and swap comments and chips. Brian Laver, Mitch Thompson and David Guthrie set up the Red and Black Bookshop in Elizabeth Arcade in the city with the help of Jim Beatson, who also manned an ever-present stall for the store outside the UQ refectory. I read the ‘dangerous’ books they stocked, fell for Jean Paul Sartre, Noam Chomsky, Susan Sontag, Eldridge Cleaver’s Soul on Ice (Ramparts Press Inc., 1968), and later discovered the work of Angela Davis, Germaine Greer and Kate Millet. Such a race to catch up with this world.

The more I learnt, the more sinister the world seemed. It became increasingly hard for the media to put the government spin on war news. While there were early reports of the Mỹ Lai massacre, details of the scale of the attack, with accompanying photographs, accumulated until the facts could no longer be denied. More than five hundred people died in that four-hour rampage by US troops, including 182 women and 173 children, fifty-six of which were babies. Graphic news footage exposed the napalm bombing of villages, the use of fragmentation bombs and Agent Orange.

Increasingly, the war and conscription were driving debate, dividing the Australian population and its families. Conscription was probably the most radicalising element across middle Australia, engaging complacent voters who rarely questioned government policy. It became a source of anxiety to mothers, fathers, uncles, sisters, brothers and priests as every twenty-year-old male was commanded by law to register for the draft. The selection process was a lottery, based on rolling the dice for birthdates. The ‘winning’ dates determined which young men were called, trained and sent to fight in a country very few Australians knew anything about – its people, its history or culture.

A Vietnam War moratorium protest was announced for 8 May 1970, calling for the immediate and full withdrawal of troops from Vietnam and the repeal of the National Service Act 1964. The previous year, a quarter of a million anti-war protestors had marched on the White House in Washington. The Australian moratorium was an orchestrated campaign to mobilise opposition to the war. High-profile politicians such as Labor politicians Jim Cairns, Tom Uren, Senator Lionel Murphy and Queensland senator George Georges joined with anti-war activists, trade-union leaders and the Save Our Sons mothers.

Australian casualties continued to increase. By the end of 1969, 373 Australians had lost their lives in Vietnam and 2,299 soldiers were injured. The anti-war supporters I knew were not angry with individual men and women fighting in the name of their country; these actions were not meant to demean them. The cry was to bring troops home from a war fought in a small, undeveloped Asian country that had not attacked our nation and had no historical links to Australia, or the US for that matter.

It had been an easy transition for me to become part of this campaign, to move into this space of heretical disbelief. Not so for my family. My father forbade me to march in the moratorium. Emphatically. He refused to have a communist living under his roof.

'But I'm not a communist, Dad,' I tried to explain. 'I'm a radical socialist.' He wasn't interested in the difference.

'This is my house,' he said, 'and in my house, you will do what I want and you'll think what I want!' Those words came at me like a strong-arm shove over a balcony.

I thought, this is not going to end well Annie. This is not good.

In my bedroom that night I talked with my little sister Judy, who was just nine. I was her storyteller, just like Sandra had been mine. What would happen if I wasn't there for her, if she couldn't tell me her stories of the crazy nuns with their stupid rules and I couldn't make her laugh about them anyway? What if we couldn't sit on the windowsill, feet on the garage roof examining the day and night skies, listening to the sounds our wonderland made?

My mind raced over family details. My older brother Peter could take care of himself. His birthdate didn't come up in the draft. John would look after David, he always did; but Mum needed help with washing and meals. I watched a hundred versions of what might happen in my head. I sorted and resorted all my playing cards, but couldn't see me winning this hand. If I joined that march, I was finished at home.

Yet the media stories across newsstands, TV and radio in the week leading up to the moratorium only emphasised to me the importance of making a stand. Despite announcing the gradual withdrawal of troops from Vietnam, headlines told of the blitzkrieg bombing by a hundred US planes of two North Vietnamese provinces.

I get it, it's a war.

However, The Courier-Mail front page of 2 May 1970 headlined that Nixon was sending fifteen thousand US troops into Cambodia with proudly captioned photos, as well as announcing the blanket bombing of Cambodian targets. Alongside this news, Nixon defended the need to draft a hundred and fifty thousand more US soldiers for Vietnam.

The next tragedy demanded that I make a stand. On Monday, 4 May 1970, four students were killed and nine injured at Kent State University when the Ohio National Guard opened fire on unarmed protesters during an anti-war demonstration on campus. Riots erupted on campuses across the US. By 5 May, the papers announced that thirty thousand US troops were crossing the Cambodian border. Any angle I looked at it, this was an invasion of another poor, underdeveloped Asian country. Again, the Australian government accepted the invasion of Cambodia unquestioningly. At the forums, around the refec tables, in the library lifts, we asked each other, 'How can our government accept this so passively?'

'Surely there must be some debate?'

The silence, the compliance, was deafening.

By 7 May, four million American students were on strike, there were riots met with tear gas and arrests, and hundreds of universities, colleges and high schools were closed.

In my world, Australian campuses and schools were frontline; we were both audience and participants. I wasn't a leader speaking publicly, making bold or extreme arguments from any podium. I never stood in the spotlight or shouted through a loudhailer. But I was really good at giving out leaflets and engaging with anyone who wanted a follow-on discussion or argument, one on one, or five on one. I was good at that, and it also meant I kept a pretty low profile.

The night before the march, I tried to reason with my father again.

'Dad, the two girls killed at Kent State are just like me. I heard today that they were just walking to class, they weren't even part of the protest.'

'If you were near that anarchy, you'd deserve to be shot too,' he shouted.

'You can't be serious.' My jaw dropped.

'Just try me Anne.' He glared through me and walked away.

But I couldn't turn away. So I took my place in the front lines that Friday as I knew I would, eighteen years old and walking beside my old and new friends. With flags, placards, posters and badges, about three thousand university students and staff walked off the UQ campus through the lines of police who stood back, allowing passage to the open streets. This time the march did have a permit and the streets overflowed with protesters.

I'd been on a few demonstrations before – clandestinely, of course – but none of them compared to this. Looking back as the first lines of demonstrators turned the corner, there will still large groups walking down the hill from campus to join the march. The extent of the support was exhilarating, everyone encouraged. All the publicity, Jim Cairns and company, those forums and guest speakers, the constant stream of leaflets, the passion and dismay behind recent events – that all this garnered support across the whole campus, not just a few factions of activists, was overwhelming.

The fast pace of the early enthusiasm waned as we walked past the Toowong shops and onto Coronation Drive. People mixed and faded into the lines. I moved among the various groupings, catching up on past doings and new plans, finally walking alongside my girl buddies-in-crime.

'How're things at home?' asked my school friend, Barbie.

'Not good,' I mumbled.

'I see you're in disguise, dark sunnies and hat.'

'Well, there'll be TV, photographers. Can't have my photo on the news tonight.' I was getting good at disguises. Those practice runs with Neil helped.

'And you don't think he'll know you marched anyway?'

I shrugged, and this time I had to agree. 'Yeah, I know. What's the point? Just do it and stuff the consequences,' I said.

'Yay,' the group agreed. 'Stuff all the bloody little consequences!'

'That could be our song,' said another friend as she joined us. 'I can see Annie finally taking off the sunnies and fronting a blues band belting out that one.'

It was a cool winter's day, though warm in the sun. Even so, by the time we passed the familiar terrace houses on Coronation Drive, overcrowded homes to some of the more moneyed students, we were getting restless. Everyone agreed politically – all those conversations were done with – and we marched silently, stared across the crowd, at the river, each of us lost in their own world.

I imagined my homecoming later that night. It felt as if that unpredictable river by my side was threatening to jump up and choke me; it felt as if I needed to jump away quickly. Too late now, I thought.

Then an extra buzz moved through the lines with reports of a big crowd of union-members and protesters waiting for us at Roma Street – and estimates of police numbers. We were as excited as we were scared. But as we approached the William Jolly Bridge, everyone started running, racing that last leg, shouting slogans as two of the organisers, Jim Beatson and Jim Prentice, roused the crowd: 'One, two, three, four! We don't want your fucking war!' Hundreds joined in, then thousands as we ran under that bridge, the sounds ricocheting off the walls and back to us. It was pure adrenaline as we raced to meet up with the other protesters.

As we rounded the corner into Roma Street, a large crowd was waiting, spread across the amphitheatre in the park. After welcomes and stirring speeches about the national importance of the moratorium movement, after Brian Laver tried and failed to add his fiery spirit and demands for further action to the measured words of the delegated speakers, we all joined forces to take over the streets of the city – close to six thousand protesters altogether. We marched into the city waving our flags: black for mourning, red for revolution. The NLF red-and-blue flag with the yellow star was deliberately provocative, to scream that Australia shouldn't be in an unjust war. Just to emphasise this point, there was another chant – 'One side right, one side wrong, victory to the Viet Cong' – as we waved the NLF flags across the helmets of the police on the sidelines.

The march took us up Adelaide Street, along the top of George Street and down the main strip of Queen Street. It was almost surreal passing the shopfronts I'd known since childhood: Finney's (now David Jones) with its beautiful old lifts; Prouds; the Commonwealth Bank.

Crowds lined the street, groups of supporters clapped, a few more brave souls held up placards. There were hecklers too, some loud and abusive. They were answered by resolute chants of defiance: 'Hell no, we won't go,' or 'Hey hey LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?' This time, the opposition to our country's involvement in the Vietnam War and to

conscription was united, loud and assertive. Cheers greeted those who broke through the onlookers to join us.

The police stood just an arm's length away, sizing us up, while Special Branch guys wove through the protest lines, grabbing stabs of conversation. I heard voices behind me: 'If there's any trouble, I bet those guys will start it, then blame it on us.' We all knew this could happen; it was a common ploy on their part.

Mainly though, the mood was sombre as we walked through our city. It was a non-violent demonstration as prescribed, impressive numbers and peaceful – an all-round good outcome. And this time, no arrests: the crowd dispersed peacefully after the speeches in Queen Street.

However, the comfort of solidarity paled beside the reality of heading home. After a few drinks at the RE, I arrived home just as the 7 pm ABC news started. The moratorium was the lead story, of course, with footage of more than a hundred thousand people marching in Melbourne and twenty thousand in Sydney. The nation-wide estimate was that two hundred thousand people had taken to city streets – a massive call for change.

I was sitting on the wide arm of the living-room couch watching the news when my father walked in from work. He stood behind me, and Mum stood behind him. I could feel her distress.

'Where were you today?' he asked.

I didn't look up. 'I marched in the protest,' I said quietly.

The wrath of a conservative businessman – head of house, head of a company and used to his edicts being obeyed – couldn't be underestimated. But neither could my commitment to opposing this war. I wasn't uninformed and I hadn't been manipulated: I made my own decisions and followed through on my own convictions. But likewise I wasn't blind to the consequences. I knew that this would bite me.

Dad could have his dark moods, but this was anger like I hadn't imagined. I remained seated as he towered over me, then began whacking into me from behind. He moved in front of me and I protected my face, standing up after he hit me again, yelling all the while. I couldn't look at his face, just knew I had to get away. For the first time in my life, he was dangerous and I was scared. I took a few quick steps to the right and escaped up the stairs to my bedroom as he threatened and shouted behind me. That a Catholic father of eight could raise such a child! That a child could willfully violate the family name by publicly protesting in the streets of Brisbane alongside communists and hooligans!

I was a disgrace.

I gave Judy a tearful hug, stuffed a few clothes into a small bag, grabbed my purse and old red op-shop coat. I headed out the front door into the dark street, down to the main road turnoff and hitched back to UQ. It was deserted except for one lovely girlfriend, who also had a difficult home life but for different reasons. She was warming herself in front of a slow-burning bonfire in the quadrangle. We sat on the damp ground and talked for a few hours. At some stage, she left.

I was shaken, broken in some ways, but I wasn't angry. My father's response was something I'd expected – in many ways I respected it, too, because I knew and loved him so well. But it was also savage in its total denial of my right to be me, to have my own beliefs. And I was determined to go on believing and resisting, no matter how much black-holed pressure was put in my path. I made a clear decision to be true to myself. I couldn't compromise, just as my father wouldn't compromise. He was not a bad person. I think he was just trapped. And I wouldn't let him trap me any longer.

I was on the other side of the door of my childhood home, with its leadlight panels, its welcoming arms.

I WAS ON the streets, with ten dollars to my name and no means of support. Sure, I had a Commonwealth scholarship for study, but not the student living allowance attached. The allowance was means-tested, based on my father's income, and I didn't qualify. There were no exceptions to this, whether a student lived at home or not – although I tried to budge its shaft.

I went to CES to explain the situation.

'No exceptions.'

'Can I speak to a manager?

'The answer won't change.'

'Please, I want to put my case.'

‘No exceptions.’

‘What am I supposed to do?’

‘Go home.’

‘As if that’s a possibility,’ I said, and left. In many ways, I didn’t care. I knew I would have to pay for my sins.

Bunking down where I could, I found myself in some strange spaces, hiding in the uni library or a lecture room overnight, finding a mixture of friends and some frightening fellow travellers. Neil’s shared flat was tiny and he was pretty skint himself, so that wasn’t an option – although I took solace there many times.

Friends wanted me to speak out on TV interviews, but I refused. There was no way I would cause more distress to my family by making myself a subject of gossip around Brisbane’s dinner tables. I didn’t talk about it to my friends much – everyone had such strong opinions and I wanted to work out my own stuff. Some were angry on my behalf; maybe some thought I was a bit gutless. I was sad, lonely and broke, sure – but I wasn’t angry. On the whole, people were pretty generous because no one had much, and a little of not much can be easier to share.

At one house I lived for two months in a large cupboard that had lost its door, and had just enough room to fit a mattress. With no privacy this accommodation choice was, at times, precarious; it was a great house, with a few good friends and assorted others, but nothing more than a short-term solution.

The student protests and information drives kept happening and I was free to participate as much as I wanted – and I relished this freedom. I kept up my studies as best I could, moving around pretty regularly, getting holiday work and getting by. Weeks turned into months with some adventures, some misadventures. Then it was serious cram-for-exam time. I was doing honours through my undergraduate years, as was expected at that time, and the high standards and extra exams were nearly overwhelming. I just kept going, living in the library and reading, reading, head-down naps on the desk, then more reading. But this world of books and good writing was a familiar space where my mind felt free and some enthusiasm returned. I loved modern drama, but wanted so much to ditch the poets Dryden and Spenser. It will be over soon, I thought. Just keep going.

That was another huge lesson. If I kept going, despite red-rimmed eyes and a body desperate to sleep, then time would pass, exams finish, results would be released, fears allayed and life would continue on. Nobody would benefit if I gave up – least of all me. In all probability, nobody would even notice. Except for me.

I continued in this functional way until something happened that flattened my world.

Neil disappeared.

We’d had a couple of arguments in the weeks leading up to it, including one terrible fight that should never have happened. I was drunk and lonely when I should have been light and free. It was very public, at a big party, and I was a fool.

But after the long Christmas weeks when I couldn’t even see my family, Neil had started turning up some nights, just appearing on the steps to my room and everything was gentle again. We’d lie together all night, talking, smoking, slipping in and out of dreams.

This night though, he wasn’t there, and I needed to find him, to say again, ‘I’m so sorry babe.’ I didn’t want to lose his love; I just wanted to say hi, and catch a smile. If I could catch his smile again, it would say, ‘It’s okay. One day we’ll be together.’

I cornered my housemate Chrissie, made her drive all over Brisbane: every pub, every house we knew, every haunt. Hours spent knocking on doors that didn’t open, driving down deserted streets. At 3 am, Chrissie turned the car back. We couldn’t find him.

It was 7 am before the knock came at my door. On edge, I opened the door to a face I knew that told me Neil wasn’t coming around again. Ever. He had died early that morning at about the time Chrissie and I had turned back home. A drunk driver ran a red light, smashing Neil’s Trumpie and his body across the Melbourne Street intersection in South Brisbane. His mate Pete had been riding pillion; he was badly injured and in hospital.

Over the following days, the sun rose as usual; houses stayed safely fenced within the same yards, and people walked down streets as if nothing had changed. Nights fell at the right time and the moon appeared; the smell of cooking floated in the air; music played on the radio. The sounds were the same, but I couldn’t understand them as the world continued on its way. I was drifting and couldn’t see any clear way into the next day.

It wasn’t yet winter, but I was very cold. I had no connection to anything around me. Words were tangled, disconnected in a balloon to the side of my head. Every table I sat at seemed so wide, my arms stretched brittle thin just reaching for the salt, let alone for any comfort, any contact.

My younger brother Johnny came to find me. I sat wrapped in a blanket at one end of a long bench behind a kitchen table.

‘Mum saw the death notice in the newspaper,’ he said.

I stared blankly. Why is Mum reading death notices? I thought.

‘Are you okay?’ Johnny asked.

‘No,’ I said.

‘Mum’s worried.’ He waited.

‘Oh,’ I said. We didn’t talk much, just sat together for a while. I leant my head against his shoulder for a bit and felt his warmth.

Few people looked in my eyes. Not surprising: they were elsewhere. Elsewhere seemed like a better place to be. I felt indecently exposed and invisible at the same time. If I’d had a bed with legs, I’d have hidden underneath it. I missed my bed at home. That tidy bedroom seemed a million miles away, part of a world I couldn’t touch anymore.

I thought about it. In some ways, I knew that the black hood of exile was the best thing that could have happened. I knew I made the right choice. I had to live out being me; I had a too-strong sense of self to remain living a pretend life being my father’s daughter. But these weeks – or had it been months? – were the worst. Deadly. I was inside a dark vacuum that had sucked my guts out and eaten my heart, but hadn’t spewed it out again. It was still missing.

Third-year lectures had started, though I made no attempt to attend. So many bodies in clothes of all colours swirling across the quadrangle, in and out of doors and lecture halls. The thought was dizzying. Too many people talking, so many winding corridors.

Chrissie would give me grabs of news and let me know about assignments and due-dates. Sometimes I thought, I really want to read that novel, but didn’t. A few times I wanted to sit under the forum tree and listen, but I couldn’t.

Chrissie kept encouraging me, trying to get me back to uni. ‘Tomorrow? Or the next day?’

I said, ‘All those people walking around on real legs… How do they do that?’

She smiled wryly, ‘Walking? It’s how ordinary people move around the surface of the air.’

‘Interesting,’ I said.

‘It’s a CS Lewis quote, I think,’ she said. ‘But maybe I dreamt it.’

My dear friend was so patient, but I’d lost my dream of a free life, the colours had faded and the conversations seemed empty. Deep down, I knew I had to reconnect with my university world; that was where I belonged. But the choices I’d made had caused so much pain. It wasn’t supposed to be like this. I’d always imagined it would be beautiful.

I had to move house again too. My friends were moving on, flatmates busy making other plans while I lay on my mattress bed with no underneath. Then Alan invited me to join a house at Highgate Hill with a few of Neil’s friends. Neil had described this place to me in detail, raving about a larger-than-life sketch of Bob Dylan filling a wall. This huge house of many rooms and rooms behind rooms – it sounded like somewhere familiar.

Gathering myself and my few possessions together, I put on my brave face and walked through a new door – a black-on-red back door that opened wide as soon as I knocked. Through it I found my safe place, a different world. And I had my own room with two small double doors that hadn’t been lost – doors that I could shut.

After a few months of living there, I opened out my double doors and found that Neil’s closest friends – from school and uni, his work friends and his hippy friends – had moved into this house of many rooms. This was his gift to me. Neil’s friends became my new family. That was the magic of the black-on-red door bringing us all together.

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