

## The road to Jacksons Landing Winton Higgins

My first remembered home, as I was turning four in 1944, was my parents' 6,000-hectare sheep and cattle station (well) outside Walgett. We had no running water (or much of any sort of water most of the time), and neither electricity nor neighbours. We did have a huge short-wave wireless set with which we listened to the drawn out death throes of the Second World War. A few years later I was attending Tennant Creek Public in Central Australia – the best school I ever went to by a country mile. But my best mate at school was black, and the next thing I know I'm uprooted (because of his skin colour?) to board at a posh and miserable Anglican boys' school on Sydney's north shore.

All bad things come to an end, so I ended up at Sydney Uni studying arts (life-affirming) and then law (don't ask). After graduation I actually practised law in Sydney for a while but I felt under pressure to live like a middle-aged person, which wasn't mentally hygienic. I needed a clean break.

A very clean break. I moved to Sweden to start retraining as a social scientist at Stockholm Uni. Sweden was heavenly, and I dreaded leaving it because I'd begun to discern a hell-to-heaven-to-hell-to-heaven pattern in my life. The next move – to study at the London School of Economics – wasn't hell at all. It was just as exciting, in fact. So I'd broken the curse. In spite of seeing that exposé of Australia's demonic side, *Wake in fright*, just before leaving London, I dared to wash up in Adelaide to begin an academic career in 1972. This city, too, was very kind to me. Don Dunstan was premier – enough said. So you can imagine how cross I was when Macquarie University made me an offer I couldn't refuse (without even the courtesy of an interview) in 1976, forcing me back to Sydney.

In those days universities were still communities of scholars, and students and staff inspired each other, enriched each other's lives, and got a lot done. They were good times, too. But when my first study leave came up I realised I had unfinished business back in Stockholm, and returned there for seven months to work in a research institute and strengthen my grasp on the Swedish language.

Soon after my return in 1979, during a political-economy conference at Sydney Uni, I staged a performance as the southern hemisphere's foremost expert on Swedish affairs. At the end of the session a comely blonde woman started probing the less plausible things I'd said. She had a slight Swedish accent and said her name was Lena. She raised points that clearly required further consideration, so we headed for the nearest Newtown pub. Along the way, somewhere on King Street, we switched into her language.

Forty-three years later (spoiler alert), here we are, Lena and I, living in Jacksons Landing. At home we never switched back into English so we have two bilingual, dual-national daughters and three grandchildren, two of whom are also bilingual.

First we set up shop in Eastwood (a bike ride from my workplace) where our children were born. Then briefly in North Ryde, before deciding that east Chatswood was the best child-raising bet because it was close to a good Steiner school. We bought a renovator's delight during a God-sent brief collapse in the housing market in 1987. The agent encouraged us by telling us about Australia's greatest invention, Bondcrete – an embalming fluid for old houses that can be applied with a paint brush to stop them falling down. Available in quantity from all reputable hardware stores.

Megalitres of Bondcrete later, we could offer the girls a seemingly structurally sound and respectable home (a must in Chatswood), a loveable cat with a strong personality, and a happy schooling that was the extreme opposite of the one I had endured.

Sweden hadn't finished with me, not by a long chalk. It had become a major research focus for me, and each study leave we returned to Stockholm (Lena's home town where her parents, siblings and burgeoning extended family lived) for six months or a whole year at a time. The girls formed lasting relationships with their Stockholm mob. In the early days Lena's parents also spent months at a time living with us in Castel Bondcreto.

As is the way of the world, the girls grew up and flew the nest, bound for the inner city; and the wondercat died of old age. In the meantime an invasive species called managers had overrun Australian Academe, turning it into a corporatised export industry, no longer a community of scholars. Just as the mental-hygiene problem manifested anew, the university offered many of us bags of money to go away. Along with half my department, I took the money and ran.

It was time to up stumps. Lena and I had become empty-nesters. Besides, we could now see that Chatswood was way too far out of town – the boondocks, to be quite frank. Castel Bondcreto was no longer fit for purpose. During one of the recurring God-sent feeding frenzies on the Sydney housing market, in 2010 it went under the hammer for a pretty penny. Following a tip from a good friend, we turned our eyes to Pymont. We found our new home here within the settlement period in our contract of sale.

So it was that we settled into Jacksons Landing, close to our children and grandchildren, and within walking distance of all our favourite city haunts. And we enjoy Pymont's communal life, which sparkles like the waters of Elizabeth Macarthur Bay that we look down on from our balcony.