

Memories of the Lucky Country

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Roger Allen takes a drive down memory lane to look at the changes that have been wrought on two of Brisbane's oldest suburbs and finds some he likes and others he does not.

Yesterday being Saturday I did the domestic errands; a pleasant change from seeing patients. I see how the world revolves outside the narrow confines of my consulting room.

My first job was the produce store for 'chook' and dog food we buy in big sacks. I always love the produce store and was saddened when there was talk that it could be going the way of all great Australian icons. This store is quintessential prewar Australia; the one my parents grew up in ... a time machine back into the days of my boyhood (not pre-war but a baby-boomer). There are rows of open wooden bins of grains, dog biscuits you never see in supermarkets, tell-tale signs of mouse and rat droppings, a cockatoo in a cage who says 'Hello cocky', rows of dog food in bags a woman shouldn't lift, bails of lucerne, sugar cane mulch, ancient wooden shelves laden with horse products like salves and poultices that I remember my grandfather talking about, a rusty but dry galvanized iron roof way above and an overweight Labrador who sniffs my jeans with interest because they bear the olfactory signature of my two large dogs. There are some witty signs in the old Australian style of Dad and Dave. I always go away feeling happy. It is like I have been in touch with something real: genuine, unpretentious, fair dinkum, no bull.

I then drove to the dry cleaners to pick up a doona, an item of bedding we did not know as a child. The closest was an eiderdown and they were not standard issue. An elderly man with a bad chest was manning the fort single-handed. He was Greek. 'Are you from Kithra?' I asked. His face lit up. 'How you know?' he retorted in a moderately thick Greek accent. I took the doona and said thank you in Greek (my few words). It was hard to explain to him but my barber (a dying breed like produce stores) and butcher also come from Kithra. So I guess I sort of cheated.

I drove down Racecourse Road, Ascot. It once was a street with tramlines and rows of elegant Queenslanders and quaint wooden cottages, a few shops, and a church. The tramline led to the tram terminus up the road at Oriel Park where my father and I once played. It was where my father and some Grammar School boys (according to dad) had rocked the little tram off the rails at the terminus. My father had worked at the grocery store after school but it is now a trendy gift shop for mothers or fathers in search of the last minute gift.

Racecourse Road epitomizes modern urban upwardly mobile middle class Australia. It is now lined with about 1.6 million coffee shops that spill onto the footpath (soon to be called a sidewalk after the ratification of the Free Trade Agreement). À la mode parisienne, the tables are inhabited by the beautiful set, mainly women or couples, sipping coffee in bottomless cups, usually 'skinny chino' (a low-fat version of cappuccino named after the brown and cream habits of the Capuchin monks), and talking. Their preoccupation is with the ephemeral, materialism and kids if they have had time to undergo reproduction. There is never mention of Iraq, the impact of the Free Trade Agreement or logging of Tasmanian forests.

A mobile phone rings and everyone reaches for handbag, coat pocket, or left hand. People talk as if not really there. They are filling in a void in wait for something better. They are the 'call waiting' generation. 'Sorry I have to go... call waiting, I must interrupt this conversation as the God of Call Waiting has beckoned. I can always text you back. This may be important. It could be Sally...' The anxiety produced by the call is uncontainable. 'I must hang up.' The present tense is far less alluring than the future, more promising and so much more stimulating to conjugate.

Our society lives this way. We all long for the weekend. We live in the future missing the simple joys of the present. We need some mindfulness about the present ...a *satori* in Zen ... an awakening ... a new way of looking at the present tense. We are all narcotized by the future or overcome by the past. Politicians promise us a call waiting future ...just vote for me and trust me ...more porkpies. A job is just an interlude before the next visit to the coffee shop, the football, the surf, or the races on Saturday afternoon where young people play dress ups and put on the glad rags people once reserved for church on Sunday. And there is always coffee after the stroll down Racecourse Road from the racecourse - once home to about a million American troops and a nation hard pressed by war, death and rationing where coffee was drunk only by Yanks.

I go to the best bakery in the area run by a Vietnamese family, full of delights and next door to an Indian health food shop. The baker's shop has kept its French name and the bread tastes like the stuff in St Germaine in Paris but not quite as good as they can't get the same flour. I drive home, past the Italian supermarket where they sell good olives and Parmesan, to Clayfield Market to buy fruit and greens. This whole area is run by Italians. It also has an Italian restaurant and next door a coffee shop that sells exquisite freshly baked Italian biscotti (biscuits). When I was a kid Mum was regarded as a connoisseur because she used anchovies on veal when my uncle came for dinner. Things have changed.

Sadly our sophisticated taste for exotica and our reduced xenophobia has not been paralleled by sophistication at the ballot box or in the media where things are 'dumbed down' and where we are generally content with predigested content like baby birds whose mothers vomit food for quicker consumption to fatten baby faster. Don't ask questions...just swallow the vomit.

We are unwilling to undergo the effort of challenging the system. Even opposition parties are effete. Change in governments here, and in the USA, are more akin to a change in queen than any change in the ants' nest. We are increasingly unwilling to speak out lest we be labeled unpatriotic. We have not quite reached the lamentable situation that exists in America where criticism of the status quo is regarded as un-American but we are not far behind. The Free Trade Agreement with that colossus will bring us closer to total alignment - eventually becoming a vassal state or, in a hundred years, the next State. Woe betides the terrible French (those *bêtes noires*) for singing a different tune from Yankee Doodle during the Iraq *affaire* or can we still call it the Invasion of Iraq?

I drove home down Sandgate Road through the Clayfield Shopping Centre, called 'The Termo' when I was a boy because it too was a tram terminus like our rival and snobbier suburb, Ascot. Clayfield had shops, a supermarket, a picture theatre and The Ohio Café which has stood the test of time and is the only thing I recognize from the past. Clayfield is different from Ascot. It too has a growing number of places to eat ... Vietnamese, Mexican and Italian. It also has a bar but not the coffee shops. The street is not cool enough. The traffic has seen to that. The supermarket has gone and the main attraction now is eight (or is it nine) real estate agencies all promising the good life in the Lucky Country, and selling a seemingly limitless number of houses.

Prices start in the \$500,000 range for a simple three bedroom wooden home 50 years old 'For Auction, Gentleman's residence (bad luck girls), blah blah blah, for private inspection only ...blah blah ...' sounding

increasingly like Double Bay and with prices increasingly out of reach of most mortals let alone our children in 20 years' time. The Tuscan Villa is now trendy ... built on a pocket-handkerchief piece of land or a subdivided tennis court, air-conditioned, with no garden maintenance and just enough room in the garage for the Porsche and one sail board. This is ideal for the dual income couple planning to reproduce by IVF after they have 'traveled'.

I pull into my drive. The rosemary is doing well. I purposely planted silver beat amongst the petunias and pansies I put in the front garden a month ago. This should raise a few eyebrows among the beautiful people. I wonder if there is a Council ordinance about this? Anyway, if we don't eat it all, our four chooks will.

The Garden Seat

I am working in my front garden,
In the warm sun
Of a Brisbane winter's day.

The garden faces north,
To the view of passers by
And the background blur
Of a main road,
Noise a few houses away,
Anonymous cars
On a Saturday afternoon.

I am planting in peace
Breathing in the rosemary
And childhood's memories
Of garlic and roast lamb.
The basil has turned woody,
But the mint
Is lush from the drip
Of the garden tap

I ease my charges,
From small plastic tubs
They nestle in the soil
Alongside a growing family
Each one unique and fragile
But with the life force
That pushes upward,
To the waxing sun
That passes ever higher
Across the northern sky.

The solstice has passed
And the earth is warming.
The sneaky grape vine
Plays dead on its trellis.

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I plant lettuce, rocket and silver beat
Amongst the flowers and herbs
An unseemly mixture,
In a neighbourhood of manicured lawns
And middle class topiary.

A straight brick path

Leads past herbs
And ripening tomatoes
Hanging from wooden stakes.

It leads to a lone granite seat
A simple square plinth of stone
For one man.