



# RUN, BABY, RUN

There are few moments in life you can point to and say, *That's it. That's when everything changed forever.* Some are unmissable – this person is born, that one dies, two cars collide. But others are subtle, sly even. A breeze shifts and you lift your eyes to discover you're sailing in a new and exciting direction.

I was in London on a dreamy summer's evening visiting a friend who was hosting an end-of-exams drinks party in her university's ancient walled garden. It was so far from the classic student piss-ups in Australia, I jokingly dubbed it the Philosopher's Ball. Under a darkening sky criss-crossed by apricot vapour trails, studious young things gathered together into human bouquets discussing – I don't know, philosophy, probably. I don't know because I'm a film maker by trade, a professional bullshitter and these people were uncharted territory to me.

My friend handed me a drink and sat me between two young men before disappearing into the crowd. My new companions were intent on their conversation, so I could stare at them shamelessly while pretending to be interested in what they were saying. As they spoke, an occasional word or phrase snuck into my cranium and bounced around. *Sheep. Barn. Gettier. Knowledge.*

The most handsome of the two men turned to reveal deep brown

eyes with an enormous welt blossoming above them. ‘What do you think?’ he asked, oblivious to the fact he looked like a magnificent deer, struck in the headlights by a piece of 4B2.

I thought he had a lovely face and searched it for clues to the right answer. ‘Sheep and barns,’ I said, taking a stab at what I’d heard, ‘I guess there’s a limit to what you can know.’

He laughed, and time slowed like it does when the adrenaline is pumping. Blood rose to my cheeks. My fingers tingled. Every detail – the shifting breeze in his hair, the sparkle of light behind him, the smell of grass giving up its moisture – they were all preserved in the amber of first contact.

And that was my moment.

The handsome man laughed like I was beautiful and for the first time in a long time my life zipped when it could have zagged.

‘Is that an Australian accent?’ he asked. ‘Are you visiting, or do you live here in London?’

‘Technically, I’m driving across America.’

‘Then technically you’re lost’

‘I am, but don’t worry, it’s my default setting.’

He smiled again, ‘You’re a long way from home. What brings you here?’

‘My life is in flux.’

I would have liked to tell him more, pour my life story into his gaze, but it was complicated and I didn’t know where to start. Eventually British reserve got the better of him, so when I didn’t add more, he smiled and resumed talking with his friend.

Fate planted her flag and moved on.



So why was I on the move? Lost on life’s highway.

The source of all this complication, the ‘flux capacitor’ in my

life, was a soon to be ex-husband. Mine. Or rather, *was* mine. I returned home from a business trip to discover the man I was married to had changed. It wasn't a vague thing – there was a stranger in my bed.

When pressed to define his problem, he relented, saying he couldn't stand the thought of sleeping with only one woman for the rest of his life – and that was that. A bubble of black despair. A cancerous belch of true emotion. Our lives changed forever.

Months later, while stewing over this in the middle of the night, I could see it would have been better to take this way too lightly – ride his tsunami of pain saying, 'I know, I know, isn't it awful?' But in the moment of impact my emotions were raw and I couldn't do that. Instead, I descended through the three stages of betrayal:

Forensic: Sifting through our lives for incriminating evidence, I found a single strand of yellow hair, a new shirt and a phone bill with lots of calls to an unusual number.

Judicial: I confronted him with the hair, the shirt and the bill. He wanted to deny it, but his body betrayed him. He went white with horror.

Postal: Using a fork, I shredded the shirt, which had been a gift to him from the blonde. I stabbed it in the pocket, in the back, in the chest, in the stomach. I dragged the fork through the white loose weave (a lovely Egyptian cotton) until the tines twisted, the head bent back and there was nothing left but a sad, tattered flag of defeat.

He moved out.

They say it takes half the length of a relationship to get over it. I don't know if that's true, but I definitely spent the same amount of time in agony that I spent in ecstasy.

*Burn in. Burn out.*



My soon-to-be-was husband and I met eleven years earlier when I was working on a kids' TV show. It was one of those MTV-type things where everyone was under thirty and over-sexed. To say it was a 'hotbed of talent' would be to go two words too far.

At the time, I was the worst researcher the show ever hired. I had no experience, no aptitude and no stamina. What I did have, and I hesitate to call them qualifications, were big tits and a ballsy approach. I think that confused the producers, because they promoted me to an on-camera position.

The first time I saw *him* was on television. I was watching our show go to air when onto the screen came this beautiful man being funny. Slapstick. He fell over and I fell for him. The French call this a *coup de foudre* – struck by lightning. I fell in love with a complete stranger on TV.

I looked up the program rundown to find out who he was, but all it said was 'vox pop'. My friend Michele, one of the film editors, explained that 'vox pop' means 'voice of the people'.

'So do we know who the people are?' I asked.

'No, they're mostly randoms off the street. Why?'

The thought, *I've missed my destiny*, went through me so violently it actually came out my mouth, but instead of offering consolation, Michele laughed at me.

Turned out I hadn't missed a thing. Sometimes when stuck for people to interview, the crew roped in friends and family. The funny man was Michele's flatmate, and she offered to introduce us.



It is a truth universally acknowledged, that an Australian in possession of good character, must be in want of a nickname. This man was in possession of a particularly good character. He was patient, funny, gracious – so noble, in fact, I nicknamed him 'The

Pig Dog Bastard’ in the hope others might imagine him to be a little tougher than he seemed. I even had the name embroidered onto a cap for him, but the first day he wore it to work, everyone laughed so hard the only name that stuck was ‘Pig’ – because he was such a Babe.

By the time I left the show we’d become the perfect piggy couple. He was Pig and I was Piggy and we were nice to each other, even when no one was looking. He was my best friend, my heartland, my home, and I had no immunity against him leaving.

Eleven years later, while he was trying to find himself in Thailand, I was fumbling around our kitchen cupboards trying to find some Horlicks – at four in the morning. You know that story about some butterfly flapping its wings in Tokyo making a banker weep in New York? My crisis started like that.

The Horlicks was in an overhead kitchen cupboard – one of those four-door jobbies that’s undivided out the back – so when my blind hand reached in, it pushed some tea bags to one side, which pushed a can of peaches, which nudged a pack of muesli, which pressed a wine glass against a cupboard door, opening it. Out onto the sink leaped the wine glass ...

... snapping the stem in two

I stood there blinking in disbelief. How, while being *so* reasonable, could I end up with such a disastrous result?

It was all connected. Even the particular glass – a wedding gift from Sparkles, my first boyfriend ever. I picked up the two pieces and considered if they could somehow be fused back together.

Who was I kidding? The glass was ruined. We were ruined. It had been a beautiful thing, but now it was ruined. With first the right and then the left hand, I threw the pieces to the ground where they smashed to smithereens.

*Hmm. That felt good.*

In the kitchen was a whole drawer dedicated to broken crockery – shards of love waiting for Araldite.

*Not anymore.*

The first thing I saw was a birthday present from Pig, a willow-patterned Burleigh Ware cup that had lost its handle. It fitted so neatly into my hand.

I pitched it into the floor where it created a most satisfying shatter.

*Oh yeah – this is doing it for me.*

I pulled the drawer out and one by one methodically smashed the lot. Even now I can feel the shiver of pleasure that rose from deep within my guts. Opening cupboard after cupboard, you could hear cups and saucers quake as I stormed through my own Kristallnacht. Anything chipped, crazed, ugly or his. *Smash. Smash. Smash.*

An adorable Carlton Ware cottage milk jug we bought in Murchison on our honeymoon – now crazed, like us. *Smash.*

A Wedgwood breakfast teacup, a tender something from my matron of honour, its pretty Picardy pink flowers chipped from washing it in the sink with other cups. *Smash.*

A large white Shelley plate, an anniversary present from Aunty Patty in two perfect pieces.

*No regrets.*

By the time I'd cleaned out the cupboards I was exhausted, and piled back into bed for the best sleep I'd had in months.

*Je ne regrette rien.*



The next day was sunny and soundless as though a strong wind had blown all the noise away. I padded into the kitchen. You should've seen how much bone china was smashed on the kitchen floor. There were even shards in the bathroom. That's like, ten metres away, around a corner. I actually laughed when I found a piece of yellow

Johnson Brothers (Made in England) embedded in the opposite wall. It took all morning to clean up, and, with a deep spiritual calm, I stepped onto the landing holding a garbage bag full of remnants ...

... and into my neighbour, who seemed to be waiting for me.

‘So, how are things?’ he asked with unusual tenderness.

‘Good,’ I said, squinting sincerely. ‘Really good.’

‘You’re getting along alright by yourself in there?’

‘Yeah. No. Good. I think I’m doing alright.’

‘Okay. Well, take it easy then.’

What was I thinking? I lived in a block of flats and I’d broken every plate, mug and cup in the apartment at four in the morning.

My life had completely stalled. And through the emptiness of this moment floated the word ‘America’. It was as far away from Australia and my current life as I could imagine.

*America.*

I had wanted to run away from home when I was little, only my childish brain couldn’t work out how to convince my mother (the love of my life) to come with me. America was where we would have gone. It was the land of sitcoms with happy endings and weekly comedy shows. It was Disneyland, the Muppets, and sandwiches made with that most mysterious combination: peanut butter and jelly.

Growing up in Australia, everything seemed to focus outward. I could recite the American Declaration of Independence by heart. I loved Lucy. I knew the excitement of prom night and Halloween even though they weren’t celebrated in my country.

As the youngest of five kids my world was about long fights and short showers. I never saw that on TV. All I saw there was America – the real world. If I could just get there, everything would be all right. Like the memory of an old friend, that idea washed through me, *Run away to America.*

I felt the dull weight of the garbage bag of broken lady crockery in my hand. Pig and I had been trying to conceive using IVF, which had proved as fruitless as my other ventures. I worked in a production company developing television shows for executives who didn't buy them. I was in my mid-thirties and I wanted more.



There are some things you can do which strike a chord with everyone. Buying a flash American tank of a car and driving across the United States is one. The only person who couldn't see the romantic majesty of this gesture was my mother, Joy.

'Darling, if you insist on letting this problem devolve into full-blown crisis, can't you at least do it closer to home where I can keep an eye on you?'

Mum and I are good friends. I love her (according to my birth certificate I'm contractually obliged to) but, more importantly, I like her. She's courageous and generous. She used to be in Marketing and can put a positive spin on almost anything – but running away from your problems isn't one of them.

When she started out in business in the 1950s, there was such a shortage of female leadership that her role models were limited to Lucille Ball and the Queen of England. Accordingly, she is both imperious *and* hilarious, with the sort of love of language that can only come from swallowing a dictionary.

'This mad peregrination – you simply haven't thought it through. Where will you go? What will you use for money? Scotch may be the same in every language, but a woman can't live on whiskey alone.'

Mum knew a lot about money and whiskey. Dad died a decade earlier after a long and tempestuous relationship with them both. My father, Harry, a brilliant advertising copywriter, won the Johnny



Walker account in the late 1970s. Their marriage and fortunes went downhill from there, but Mum worked hard to keep the family afloat.

When I was nine years old she devised and produced a television program called *Cooking with Sheri*. It was screened nationally during the first wave of celebrity chefs. I had the dubious distinction of holding the Guinness World Record for the youngest host of their own TV show.

Being on telly made for a chaotic but highly entertaining childhood. What I lost in school holidays (spent filming the five-minute episodes with my granddad, Poppy) was more than made up for in the pleasure of playing grownups. I grew up thinking that work and life were the same thing. The experience taught me that to be happy you need to do something you love with people you like. Or, to quote my mother, ‘Bite off more than you can chew, then chew like buggery.’

It’s generally good advice, but hard work wasn’t going to save my marriage. The way I saw it, Pig left and I was taking his cue to do the same. If Mum wanted to convince me of the folly of my plan to run away and drive across America, she’d need to helicopter in the cavalry.

She went one better and called Sue.

Sue came to Sydney from Wales as a ‘Ten Pound Pom’. She was younger than Mum, but not young enough to be her daughter. I was younger than Sue, but also not young enough to be her child. The same was true of Sue’s sons and me. Between us we formed an intergenerational chain of friendship that spanned four decades.

‘So what’s this about going to America and killing yourself in a car?’ Sue asked over Mum’s signature pea and lettuce soup. (I knew I was in trouble when Mum broke out the Royal Worcester *and* ironed her good linen for lunch.)

‘Well, the plans are pretty ad hoc,’ I told her. It was an exaggeration – there were no plans. ‘There’s family in LA so I’ll stay with them.

I've got a school friend outside of New York – she'll put me up for a few days in Connecticut. Then I might visit Michele from the kids' show. She's studying philosophy in London. Qantas is doing this great deal where you get two cities in America and a free trip to Europe.'

'See,' said Mum, 'that's not a plan. It's barely an itinerary.'

'Where does the car come in?' asked Sue.

'I'll drive from LA to New York. Americans love cars. I bet I can buy a good one for under five grand.'

'Five *thousand* dollars,' said Mum. 'Where are you going to get that sort of money?'

'I figured I could sell the car at the end ...'

'The world doesn't work like that.' Mum was getting agitated, because Sue seemed to be crunching numbers on the back of an envelope and not contributing to the argument. 'You can't swan off to the Grand Canyon and then – what? *Drive* to New York? That's thousands of miles of deserts, and ... I don't even know what's in the middle of America. What if you break down? What'll you do then?'

'Meet people?'

'What sort of people?' she continued. 'What if you break down in Washington or New Orleans or the Alamo? Who will you meet there?'

'Harry Connick Jr? He's from New Orleans, isn't he?'

Mum looked at me and then to her friend for support. 'Sue!' she said. 'Say something.'

'Fuck it, I'm in.'

We both looked at Sue in surprise. *You what?* In choosing her friend to be the weapon of choice in this fight, Mum had forgotten one small thing – Sue can't say no to adventure. It doesn't matter how small. If you want a cohort in calamity, say skinny dipping or a midnight picnic, Sue's the one you call.

‘Sorry, Joy,’ (she apologised for the swearing, not changing camps) ‘we’re too old to be frightened and too young to die.’ She turned to me, ‘I’ll lend you the five grand.’

I think I squealed. I certainly hugged her. ‘I’m going to America!’  
‘And I’ll *give* you half if you let me drive back with you.’

‘You’re going too?’ Mum’s voice rose like nails on a blackboard.  
‘What about the restaurant?’

‘I love the restaurant, but do I own it or does it own me? If Sheridan can pick me up in New York, I’ll drive back with her.’

Mum was waving her soup ladle in an attempt to stir up some counter-argument. Droplets of pea soup and flecks of lettuce were splattering everywhere. She seemed to have run out of ideas.

‘Whaddya say?’ I asked Mum. ‘Why don’t you do the first leg with me? Las Vegas? The Grand Canyon? You can say hello to Pipi and Charlotte.’ Pipi was my girlfriend from high school. Her flagrantly youthful mother, Charlotte, was the same age as my eldest brother. Mum had always viewed Pipi and Charlotte as sisters.

‘Don’t be absurd,’ Mum said petulantly. ‘Someone in this family has to keep working.’

She thought about it for a moment before sighing in defeat, dropping the ladle back into the tureen, ‘Well, if you insist on playing Thelma and Louise, you’re not allowed to carry a gun.’

I cashed in my meagre savings, took leave from the film production company where I worked, and before you could say ‘Phuket’ I was in Los Angeles with a bloody big ocean between me and my problems.