

JUST FAMOUS ENOUGH NOT TO BE NOTICED

As told by
Michael Donovan

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3.

1975 - 1980 Marriage | New career(s)

*Good judgment comes from experience,
and a lot of that comes from bad judgment.*

I wed Carol Barker on 15 November 1975. We'd been living together for almost two years and family pressure to conform to the norm pushed us to make the decision. Douglas, Carol's brother asked me, "What are your intentions with my sister?" He had been put up to it by their mum Ruth. I told him to mind his own business.

Both Carol and I agreed a wedding service would make little difference to our feelings.

Neither of us were the least bit religious. I had easily and completely walked away from Catholicism. Carol's family had tried both Church of England and Christian Science, the latter being the influence of her dad's mother on her father. Our feelings about religion were very similar so to please family a civil service

at the Wayside Chapel was as close to any God-bothering content as either of us was prepared to venture.

Doug gave his sister away in marriage, their father, Herbert Kenneth Barker, having died a few years prior. Ken was a decorated airman from WWII. Commonwealth of Australia Department of Air documents show that Flight Lieutenant Barker was awarded Campaign Stars for service in Europe 1942-45 and the Pacific. He was also awarded the Defence Medal and the War Medal.

Carol's grandmother's sister was Aunt Elsie. A real wag; tiny, opinionated, funny and full of life. We visited Elsie at her Blue Mountains home and the subject of the pending wedding came up. In practical direct fashion she simply said, "Why? It won't force you to stay in love. You will either be in-love or not." This is true. I joked all being well we could perhaps expect say ten years. So far we've tripped over nearly four times that quantum and I am all for continuing. Convention and contract play no part in what we feel for each other. Elsie was right.

We had many a good luncheon with Aunt Elsie at a Blue Mountains Restaurant known as *The Rooster*. The maitre d' would wait until after coffee when he would treat all customers to a piano recital. Elsie loved it, as did we. But for Elsie it was an especially wonderful treat and always made her very happy when we visited her.

Elsie had been married to a leading US bandleader Wynne-Jones. When he fell sick, quack cancer cures took their fortune. Aunt Elsie became governess to the Hurst family. Hurst provided a small stipend to support her in old age. As a soprano she had sung at Carnegie Hall in her opera career heyday. I am told a prospective New York Met debut was cancelled due to nerves. This feisty lovely lady knew life from all sides. Sage advice indeed.

The Wayside Chapel minister, Ted Noffs, did a great job keeping the service to individual commitment and honouring each other and low on Supreme Being guidance or religious conformity. Our wedding reception was hosted by the Doel family, friends in

Hurstville, Sydney. In Carolyn and John's large back-yard we had some thirty guests, including Moya along with my brother Terry who had the foresight to put Moya in a large and well pillowed deck chair on the veranda with the instruction, "Only speak when spoken to. And be polite." She did just that.

I was to become godfather to a Doel sibling Natalie. She and husband George named their first-born Michael.

Our honeymoon was in Port Macquarie, New South Wales camping with friends Annette and Robin Holmes. On day one, I stupidly got my back very badly sunburnt taking some of the amorous intent out of what was otherwise a wonderful time.

Robin and Annette, a brilliant Tresillian nurse, settled at Laverty's Gap near Mullumbimby in the Northern Rivers district of NSW. Some years later we stayed with them for a few days. One morning at breakfast Robin stormed in swearing and yelling someone had partially trampled his current crop of near-to-harvest marijuana. We were all shocked. Robin explained he'd planted along the creek sides so if police raided the property it looked as though the crop was upstream wash down and wild. It certainly seemed that way to me as I walked the creek at dawn looking for platypus. Fully grown marijuana is a tall weed blocking one's view but is easy to bend. I kept my mouth shut and allowed him to put the blame on local kids.

During the drive north to Brisbane to visit my family we called into the Australian agent for a faux mirror product called Spectrolite, not to be confused with the mineral labradorite. I was curious as to whether a sub-agency might be a good business move.

Spectrolite is a WWII invention for fogless/frostless bomber sights made by stretching a thin skin of Mylar plastic surfaced with three microns of aluminium across a rigid frame. Whether the invention was called that name back then, I don't know. The result is an ultra lite high quality mirror surface which doesn't fog or frost and any wrinkles can be repaired with the heat of a hairdryer. A US company was making 1x2m panels which weighed under a

kilogram. Now this may seem only mildly interesting except for two reasons.

On an overnight stay, the guy with the agency and his girl friend propositioned Carol and me to join them in a foursome. We were newlyweds, please! I agreed to take samples as we hurriedly exited next morning having slept with at least one eye open given the forcefulness of the offer from our hosts. I was moderately interested in supplying large retail chains with ceiling panels and product displays.

When we got back to Sydney ten days later, we planned to renovate the master bedroom and felt a big Spectrolite mirror on the high ceiling would be interesting and safe. About a year later I awoke one night to a crackling noise and shook Carol believing the house was on fire. As I sat up one end of the mirror released from its adhesive bond and sliced downwards in an arc held by just one corner of double-sided adhesive tape. Something like a pendulum swing. My scalp was opened from crown to brow.

Now, one's scalp is very rich in blood supply so I was a horrifying mess in seconds. I issued treatment instructions to Carol as I held my scalp together with fingers and applied palm pressure evenly. I thought I may go into shock. My last directive was for her to call a taxi for a relatively short run to emergency and to make sure the driver spoke English. This was 1978. It seemed only short minutes until the doorbell chimed and Carol opened it to see a tall Indian gentleman in a Dr Ben Casey (TV serial) jacket.

In perfect Oxford English this saviour said, "Excuse me madam but I believe you have an emergency and wanted a taxi driver who spoke English?" They dressed me and I was delivered to emergency where after five hours of surveillance but no clean-up, sutures or dressing, we left. Whoever you are 'old boy' I am very appreciate for your assistance. The wound has never completely healed. We didn't remount the mirror.

Around this time Dr Deepak Malhotra, a medical friend of a friend of Carol's, Judith Brooks, asked if I was interested in being a participant and an escort for one-half of a test subject group

travelling to London and back as part of a medical trial. The experience would be all expenses paid but just for me. As Carol had lived for some time in London she was thrilled for me to go.

Two groups of twenty, each with an escort were assembled and briefed around the strict travel and drug administration regime. We would be away for a week. Travel to the UK, stay five days then back. The drug was NORMISON (temazepam). I had not been to London so I read up on it extensively and became the unofficial tour guide while also making sure the medication schedule and tests were all done by my group and me. The tests were a set of response time challenges to see whether the drug countered jet-lag effects (flight dysrhythmia) of disorientation and *out-of-sorts* behaviour.

London was wet and cold. On Wednesday in the middle of the week of the trial, we had no report-in so I suggested we go to Paris, overnight and get back for the drug ramp up doses on Thursday prior to the return trip home. About half the group agreed so we did it. We had a fantastic experience. One chance event sticks in my mind during the Paris excursion.

I heard familiar music coming from a cathedral and quickly ducked in to find a rehearsal of Camille Saint-Saens' great work *Symphony #3, the Organ Symphony* underway. I ushered the group in under some protest from a few but by the climax of the work, they were captivated by the power and majesty of this wonderful composition.

While Carol and I had some funds in the bank, I still needed a job to add to our earnings as partners in life. Carol was working as PA to the head of Orrefors Crystal importers which held sales events and demonstrations for wholesale clients in its Chatswood premises. I submitted for and won a regular catering contract.

Professional celebrity '*hand-bag*' Johnnie Baker also worked for Orrefors. A study in sartorial elegance, a wonderful raconteur and confidante of serious royalty, people of power and A-list celebs, Johnnie was much in demand for social partnering. Social writer Janise Beaumont put Johnnie at the top of the well-connected

list of 'must invite'. But he didn't have a connected stove, oven or refrigerator at home as he simply had no need for them and a self-admitted terrible cook. He was however extremely helpful in mentioning my new business in the right circles once he tested and endorsed the menus.

Through Johnnie we met celebrity travel agent Warwick Viner; a man with a permanent spray tan. If you had Johnnie and Warwick in the same room you had a function worth attending. Johnnie was very discreet; a trait much admired by his many friends.

Warwick could tell a story or two, many of which were self-deprecating, such as when he was about to return to Australia from London. He'd purchased an elegant white linen suit with his last few pounds and during the Air India flight the aircraft hit an air pocket and dropped like a stone. At that precise moment Warwick had pressed the flush in the toilet. Back then the disinfectant mix was an indelible blue. He stepped from the toilet covered in dye from top to toe. His suit was unwearable. Being gay he had little embarrassment wearing a bright sari, donated by a flight attendant, off the plane and home in a taxi.

Good words about my catering came in and our barely adequate small kitchen in the Doris Street apartment was turning out a continuous line of interesting and new food for an array of clients like Munich Re, Concrete Constructions, Channel Seven, Burns Philip, AHG Insurance, Time Life and Barclays Bank, all of which we serviced for several years. In addition to board-room lunches, cocktail parties and some formal dinners, I was invited to do private home functions at Christmas and New Year for a number of executives.

The grandest party was the 1977 product launch and soiree for the Estee Lauder Elizabeth Bay House soiree for some 200. Lots of glitter, fashion and fab food. Generously, the 'Thank you' was not only a nice tip but plenty of sample stock and a crate of lovely French bubbly to take home.

Channel Seven's contract included design, fit out and supply of the full dining service for the executive dining room at the studio

in North Ryde. Through my introduction, Orrefors won the contract for all glassware, crockery and service. It looked impressive and attracted the attention of the Barclays Managing Director Michael Bato. He was a guest at the first Channel Seven executive lunch in honour of Bruce Gyngell who had just been appointed as the first CEO of SBS.

A similar fit out at the new top floor Barclays executive dining room followed. The inaugural lunch was for the board, senior executive team and a number of big wigs from a top Japanese bank. The Australian and English contingent had rather pedestrian palates so an entree of fresh black mussels was pushing the boundaries but with the Japanese love of seafood the recommendation was agreed. Cautiously.

By now, given the volume of work coming in, I'd employed waiter and bar staff. The entree was duly placed before each guest. The steaming bowls of mussels looked inviting. I had prepared two versions – one barely cooked for the Japanese and one done for a few more seconds for the local palates.

Bato's face beamed when the guests of honour expressed their delight with the choice. Until, from a mussel on the top Japanese guest's bowl, a small crab which is a common symbiotic partner to the mussel emerged and crawled around the rim of the semi-flat bowl. Bato's expression was apoplectic as he started to rise from his chair and get my attention. Simultaneously, with the horror scenario, the guest swiftly picked up his chopsticks expertly secured the tiny crustacean and delightedly popped it into his mouth with a broad appreciative grin.

The collapse in tension and the ensuing relish with which the Japanese consumed their portions set the scene for a great lunch. I did note however the locals checked each and every one of their mussels for live occupants. Michael and I joked about the lunch many times. Meals for a good number of the top business people who were clients of the bank followed. Business was good but my hobby had become my work.

One other story worth mentioning to illustrate the spectrum of experiences encountered was a New Year's party for Graham Sloane the head of AHG Insurance. We arrived at his Point Piper residence to prepare only to find Christmas dinner left overs uncovered and green in the refrigerator. What a cleanup job it was!

By 1977 we also had good business aboard about a third of the privately owned cruise boats on Sydney Harbour. 'Eve' owned by Qantas pilot and frequent Sydney-Hobart Yacht Race participant, Jeremy Whitty, was our busiest charge along with *Zane Gray*, *Venus II*, *Vagabond* and *Tambourine Bay*.

One winter's lunch for Sir Lennox Hewitt, the Chair of Qantas, and his guest Lang Hancock, two things were interesting. Firstly, Hancock liked goose with which you will recall I had some experience cooking at TAFE and he liked butter. We forgot the butter. I called Peter Doyle at his south head restaurant and with guests having cocktails 'Eve' charged up Sydney Harbour on a sparkling winter's day. Collecting a kilo pack from the head chef, I ran back to the 'Eve' as she had to pull away for the public ferry to dock on schedule.

With 'Eve' moving away and the ferry closing I leapt from pier to boat landing lightly on Sir Lennox. While surprised, he was unhurt as I had called, "Watch out!" ahead of becoming airborne. I explained the background and a good laugh was had by all except Hancock. His butter, specially obtained and delivered, was frozen solid.

Anther boat story was a 'prepare and deliver only' service three times one summer to a cruiser in Pittwater. There was an envelope with cash on the table. Not a soul around and clear instructions not to stick around once the delivery was made and to do the pick-up at the next specific time. One day I drove away only to stop a ways off to change my shirt and walked back. The guys and gals getting on board looked familiar from newspapers of the day. This was many years before the notorious Love Boat Affair but perhaps I was feeding a practice run.

Jeremy Whitty certainly took the award for top class clients. The other boats were volume weddings, parties and celebrations – bulk eats, cheap booze and awful cleaning up. However, the money was spectacular in top season. But, margins were best for the exclusive small groups funded by corporate expense accounts. Over time, overages on alcohol alone funded a pretty good cellar in a converted bedroom at our house.

One particularly lavish night cruise was dinner for a group of top Arab and Australian business executives. The best of the best from caviar to lobster and a range of the top wines were ordered. All guests were on board and after an initial round of drinks with most of the Arabs sticking to sparkling water, 'Eve' ventured into the main harbour. The host asked all staff to go forward and stay there until called. Jeremy shrugged ignorance of any reason and closed himself in the wheelhouse.

The isolation lasted some forty minutes. Jeremy was instructed to proceed back to the drop off point and all guests departed. I enquired if anything we had done was not to form and was told definitely not. I was paid in cash with a one thousand dollar tip and asked to not talk about the night's happenings. I easily agreed as I had no idea what was discussed or who they were.

Mobile phones were non-existent so I had to go to the call box on the wharf. Jeremy also used his radio to gather our closest friends on board about an hour later to eat and drink what was left. I do remember the hangover.

Ian Hurst of Sydney Hilton was a mate from the cinema years and a dedicated foodie. He invited me to one of his quarterly luncheons at the San Francisco Grill to test the new menu. A group of notable winemakers, chefs, executive staff and others put the new menu creations to the test. We did this twice a year. Another memorable experience was with multi-award winning chef Jacques Reymond who was great fun and his food was wonderful.

The Hilton sommelier was similarly put to the challenge to match the choice of wine with each dish. These lunches were great fun, serious, constructive and well received by the head

chef and his team. We all respected each other's contribution. I was a member of these events for several years, gained a critical palate and tuned my taste buds which served me well as a NSW Restaurant and Catering Awards Judge also judge for the Australian Hotel Association Annual Awards for Excellence for many years to come.

By 1977, Carol and I had sufficient funds to buy a house. Carol found an ideal terrace cottage in West Street, North Sydney. Close enough to the CBD for business and well priced for our needs. With the 'first home owners' grant we purchased in August and did a commercial refit of the kitchen including built-in wall-to-wall refrigeration to catering standards of the day and to meet anticipated business growth. However, the so-called stagflation of the later '70s caught up with our business. I had to diversify and augment.

Still we had our own home and it too comes with its own story.

Fred Kelly and his sister Cathy had inherited two single level terrace cottages from their father who built five in a row each the reverse mirror image of the other facing the traditional east / west for a design which came straight from the old country, England. A single hallway ran the length of the building from front door to kitchen at the back and down several steps into the laundry and then into the backyard. In all a length of 167 feet (50.9m) to a width of 18 feet (5.5m) in the original measurement units of the construction period which was estimated as mid to late 1890s.

Nothing spectacular in any of this except old-man Kelly was the renowned tyke Tiger Kelly of the cartoon strip Ginger Meggs fame. This is well documented in the historical archives of North Sydney. We did not know this until trouble started with Fred. At close to 150+kg but only 161cms tall, Fred was almost spherical. A delight when sober or only drinking beer or spirits separately, he changed to a vile aggressive and belligerent individual when he mixed his drinks.

Leering at schoolgirls over the low front fence, Fred usually wore stained and smudged y-fronts only in summer. To suit his

pugnaciousness he and Cathy took to breeding pit-bull terriers in their spare room. Cathy was Fred in a frock but harmless.

The deterioration in the neighbourly relationship with the Kellys grew over time as Fred pined to return to his own house which we now owned. He wanted us out but used little sense in trying to motivate us to move, and lacking any understanding of our stubbornness and our preparedness to push back.

Over the next five years we summonsed Fred five times, one for trying to burn us out by lighting rolls of carpet which was awaiting disposal on our front porch. Yes, Fred and Cathy's attached terrace cottage would also likely have gone up in flames had I not put the smouldering heap out in time. Another occasion, Fred continuously walked all night up and down the common wall hallway between the residences tapping his side with a hammer. The second night most of the wall plaster on his side fell off having been effectively fragmented and come away during the day.

Fred had a successful compensation claim for a back injury. But it was a fictitious back injury. This butter ball would regularly climb up a ladder to do roof repairs. I filmed him and kept the images just in case. One day he caught me doing this and next minute waved a gun at me over the fence. He was interviewed by police and given a warning. One has to assume he had a gun licence. Carol was escorted to work for a week by police as a precaution.

Fred stayed low for a while until his next binge when he dislocated both his sister's shoulders in a fit of rage. Cathy was found helpless on the hall floor by a passing neighbour and taken to hospital. Their dogs were roaming free but close to home. Fred physically dragged her from the nearby Mater Hospital back to their house, about 700m. Enraged, he waved the gun around again which sent him to prison for six months. On the first night of conditional release he drank again and drove his jalopy around the block in first gear until the engine exploded. As Fred had been banned from driving for life he was back inside quick as a wink.

In the months following Carol and I worked on Cathy to sell her house and move along with the dogs. Finally, she did. Fred

was forced to join her on the breeding farm near Gosford. It was rumoured the dogs hindered his getting prompt help when he had his fatal heart attack.

After all this history with Fred Kelly, a neighbour who worked for North Sydney Police, and who assisted us with prompt police attendance when we had trouble with Fred, then told us he had served a term for manslaughter in Cairns in his younger days. Bloody hell! How did he even get a gun licence?

By 1978 corporate hospitality costs were under review and our business shrank especially the winter harbour cruise segment. I was contacted by the manager of the Five Bells Restaurant at the Hermitage Estate Wine Centre in Sydney's Rocks area on a recommendation from Brian and Faye McGuigan. Their chef had walked and they were in need of help to get them across employing a new one. This was June 1978.

Mainly due to the parent company going into administration it took them seven months to find a replacement. The restaurant was like a club environment. It served only lunch of unimaginative meals and no suggestion of matching of wines to food. Taking what I had gained through the Sydney Hilton experience, we changed the menu, matched wines to courses, refreshed the style and retrained the staff. It worked well. I had a small write-up in *Gourmet Magazine* that year.

Several wine makers approached us to do evening wine and food events around specific vintages. I suggested matching our luncheon menus on the day to local Hunter Valley produce. Now this was years before marketing created food and wine symbiosis which we now regard as normal. This experiment also worked well and every Thursday and Friday night was by invitation from the customer lists of the wineries or from our own membership expressing interest based on the lunch promotion.

Murray Robson, owner of Squire Cottage and so named, we were told, after his connection to the Anthony Squire Shop line, was a guest one evening. Following this introduction, Carol and I were regular guests of his Hunter Valley hillside cottages when

we could take a break. One such time in February 1987 we invited Lindeman's, Tyrrell's, McGuigan's, Drayton's and others to a seafood night and served a mud crab each. This dinner went from dusk to the wee hours and started some fine friendships.

Back in Sydney, casual acquaintances Des and Fiona Lamacraft had an idea for a gift shop which also served food. I liked the restaurant environment and so we agreed to open *The Eatery* in High Street, North Sydney in the ground floor of a 300 unit apartment block just up the hill from *HMS Platypus* Submarine Base. I saw a partial captive audience for good reasonably priced food. The kitchen fitout met the health and logistical requirements for the catering business to move from our house. This was something we wanted to do in order to separate work from home.

Des and Fiona would run the shop and I'd run the restaurant and use it as the preparation base for my catering. A year before the North Shore Village Times had offered me a food column which I wrote monthly. I used the column to promote the new venture. Letterbox drops promoted us and provided simple food suggestions to all unit residents. The restaurant did well. The catering did better. The gift shop did not. The restaurant took over all of the gift shop space lease and we parted on less than friendly terms with our partners.

I wanted to engage more with our resident clients during summer so we offered a plate of food and a glass of wine on the spacious lawns of the apartment block from midday Sundays until three. It went brilliantly until stopped by Council who, even though the owners of the apartments technically also owned the verge inside their fence, we were not licensed to serve outside of the walls of the premises. Still, while it lasted for about six weeks, we brought people who lived there closer together over a nice meal but who didn't know one another previously.

Every Thursday night at about 10pm as we cleaned up a lanky lad from Birmingham would arrive and order our hamburger. Never anything else. He lived upstairs. Over time we learned he

was the Assistant Sous Chef from the Sydney Wentworth Hotel. He reckoned we served the best burger in town.

By late 1979 I was worn out and sick of food. I did not renew the restaurant lease and told the staff I would sell the catering business and offered them first refusal. A deal was struck and I was paid in \$5 and \$10 bills in the toilets of a school on the upper North Shore where our last job had just taken place. I asked no questions as to the source for the funds pooled by five people. I lay awake all night expecting to be robbed but uneventfully deposited the proceeds from sale in the bank next day.

I offered to assist the new team if they needed to settle in and to coach them where needed. I was never contacted again and later learned they fell out with each other without a strong leader. The business closed a year later.

Carol and I went to Fiji for a break. The accommodation experience was less than thrilling so I wrote a report on our encounters along with suggested ways to improve service quality. I sent it to the Fiji Minister for Tourism. I received no formal reply but in early 1980 Sean Mills of the Regent of Fiji wrote and told me the report had been tabled by the Minister and had received wide media coverage. Apparently my comments had considerable effect on the industry and facilitated much change at the time.

During this holiday we stayed at the time-share resort of Club Natasi. I wanted to go fishing and was referred to a local who picked us up at sunset. The sea was choppy, the fishing average but we kept meeting up with other similarly small boats all without lights. I worked out we were participating in a small smuggling racket with us as the excuse if nabbed. We did get a decent haul in due course and were safely dropped off on our beach in the dark.

I set about cleaning the fish on rocks at the end of the beach where our assumed smugglers had dropped us off. As I scaled and filleted I asked for sea water to rinse and clean the catch. Carol obliged and under torch light made multiple journeys back and forth from rocks to surf. With the catch prepared for cooking next day, I walked back with Carol towards our beachfront bure.

I reached out to grab her away from stepping on a sea-snake. The reptile was crisscrossing her line of footprints from her water-carrying efforts. By the overlay of snake waves and Carol's footprints, she and the snake had been crossing each other's path in the dark without connecting. How fortunate is that?

Next day we met a group of just-graduated young veterinary students sharing the accommodation next door to us. They were skint and without food. We invited them in for a fish lunch cook-up. Carol went to get flour from the kitchen. Despite the best sign language she only succeeded in getting flowers from the garden. Hilarious, as she tells the tale. Anyway we all ate well.

Back home and needing a new job I answered an advertisement for a consultant to work in a government employment programme with a difference.