



Lance Colbert Smith - Preview The Brighter Side of a Death Threat

INTRODUCTION

“ Write the book, dad”

“Tell us another story, pa”

I’ve been hearing it for years. Well, the time has come.

In the process of writing and recording those memories, I am even more mindful of the wonderful journey I have been fortunate enough to travel.

Now, away from all the hustle and bustle, I can reflect on the laughs, the joy, the experiences of life’s challenges and be very grateful to so many for such an incredible innings.

I hope these pages bring a smile to those I really cherish, and I thank all my family and mates for enriching my world. Without you, these pages would be blank. The wisdom of those past and present is my inspiration. I just hope these recollections cause you to keep on dreaming.

I have long believed in those who say in life you only need three bones.

~A wishbone

~A backbone, and

~A funny bone.

To wish is a positive – nothing happens unless we first dream.

The drive to turn it into reality and to do it is a bonus, and a sense of humour is a must.

Many of you know I have taken many leaps of faith without a safety net – hence all the broken bones. Failing is not falling down; it is staying down. When you get to my age, you have made heaps of mistakes if you have lived your life properly.

Over eight decades, and in many countries, I’ve had countless highs, lots of potholes and a wealth of wonderful and character building experiences. Through it all an amazing assortment of friends, family and colleagues have kept this lucky bloke reasonably on the straight and narrow.

Yes – I’ve been blessed! And then some some!

From a father who was one of the lowest forms of life and a beautiful mum who left us far too early, my three siblings and I have survived the many challenges of life and, each in our own different ways, have arrived at the peak of a majestic mountain and being able to soak up the pleasure of those spectacular views.

But it hasn’t been easy. No way.

As the sun is setting on this old fella’s memories, I must pen some of those great experiences, the millions of belly laughs, the many failures, the challenges, some fabulous outcomes and some hair raising moments.

Along the way, one thing stood out. A lesson I was grateful to learn, something that threw the word 'petty' out of my dictionary. For almost 20 years we ran the Children's Hospital express -the unbelievable sister Chrissy, Dr Michael and the doctors and nurses from Camperdown Children's Hospital oncology clinic (later Westmead) and those brave young kids on our annual 10 day Queensland extravaganza, all staring death in the face. Their ability to laugh, their zest for life, and their amazingly positive resilience taught me the 'brighter side of a death threat'.

They will feature prominently in the following pages – and will fare much better than some others. It takes a cast of thousands to complete one of life's greatest ever tales of comedies and tragedies – and some will be miffed. Many will laugh as they remember. Some may even applaud. Yes, there will be the odd exaggeration and filling in the gaps, but, by and large my memories – good and bad – of a wonderful journey, deserve airing. They show a rich tapestry of life.

To those who don't fare too well – forget legal action. There's nothing left. I spent it all having fun and loving life. Now read on...

CHAPTER ONE

FROM THE CITY TO BROKEN HILL

"Imagination is the highest kite you can fly" ...Lauren Bacall

In the beginning-10th January 1943- Sydney.

A son, Lance Colbert Smith, To Albert Smith, Architect And Jean Langham Smith (née Dawson), a bookkeeper.

My wonderful Mum, Jean, was born in Molong, NSW, 26th May 1920. She was a 'premie' baby as my Grandmother, Constance Haldane Dawson, (née Croft) had fallen out of a carriage and brought on the birth. (That might explain things)

As a child, Jean was apparently a tomboy - Broken arms twice, falling out of high trees and the like. She was a great girl.

The family had a large farm at Molong and mum remembers, sadly, standing on the balcony of the Homestead after a drought, watching the bank auction their property and then evict them. When a student at NEGS, Armidale, Mum had her left hand fingers broken- in winter- by teachers to make her write right handed,

After losing the farm, grandfather Lance took on a teaching role at Tudor House, Moss Vale, and later they shifted to Sydney.

Funny story – grandfather Lance. His family were very wealthy and owned a shipping company. Connie's mother was a servant in their household. Grandfather Lance fell in love with Connie. The family disapproved – a commoner. Lance stood his ground, and the family refused to go to the wedding.

On the wedding day, grandfather Lance. thought it appropriate to call-in and say goodbye to his mother and younger siblings before catching the train to their honeymoon destination – Wallacia, south of Sydney. His mother and the two children offered to walk with him and Connie to the ferry. Then they decided to catch the ferry to circular Quay with them, and finally the bus to Central – very strange. Even stranger when mother and children produce train tickets to Wallacia.

Grandfather's mother had steamed open the envelope of the letter sent to the Wallacia accommodation and then booked the room next to them.

Grandfather was very annoyed. He then extended his and Connie's stay on the proviso they did not allow his mother and siblings to stay as well.

Mum often told us the story about Sheila and herself at school. Dorothea Makellar, in those days, lived on Scotland Island, Pittwater. Apparently a real snob, she thought Jean and Sheila were well above the pack, and often waited outside the school in her latest model Rolls-Royce and gave them a lift home – our early brush with fame.

Grandfather Lance died of pancreatic cancer aged 50. Grandmother Connie died at Manly, aged 98, and mum died in Canterbury Hospital in 1972 aged 52, with her sister Sheila and my brother and sisters by her side. Sheila died recently aged 96.

Mum was a very beautiful, loving and caring soul. She and sister Sheila were really close.

I remember mum's funeral at Saint Clements church, Mosman, well, and her mum, Connie, crying and sobbing very loudly and for ages. It was a horrible day.

Perfect Segway – talking of horrible – my father Albert. Mum met my father at Newport surf lifesaving club. The less said the better. A gambler, a drunk and born loser. The only good thing I can say is that he had three siblings – Stan, Isabel (sis) and Harry. All top people. He died at 84, and 7 people attended his funeral. I didn't.

Albert was a government architect and was regularly moved, hence our living in Sydney, Broken Hill, Coffs Harbour, Cootamundra and back to Sydney in those early years.

EARLY MEMORIES.

Where do I start?

My pre-teens at all Saints college in Bathurst? A 17 year old alone in Egypt in the Suez canal? An 18-year-old in the London Fire Brigade? All escaping one thing... A spiteful father. Or do I start with driving tow trucks at great speed in Sydney as a teenager – or as an entertainer on daydream Island? Many choices.

I guess it should start way back.

I am told my first memory should have been the night in Mosman when the Japanese midget submarine torpedoed the nearby HMAS Kuttabul. My parents thought we were being bombed and put me in a box under our heavy dining room table – but no – I do not remember. I was only one year old.

I do remember getting my tonsils out at Mena house, Mosman, at age 3 and all the ice cream and jelly I could eat. But I also remember the stench of the ether mask they shoved over my face to knock me out.

We lived for two years with our relatives in Condamine Street, Balgowlah. We have no money. I can still smell the delicious aroma of the cakes from the Sydney Road bakery – but we were really able to afford them. Mum's sister, Sheila, talks of my father's horrific and brutal treatment of me – a sign of things to come. I was four.

My first clear memory is in Broken Hill. We were living in a government house and mum took me to my first ever theatre – a pantomime- 'Dick Whittington and his cat'. It was in a small hole, and I vividly remember doing at the villain and cheering on the hero. It had a lasting impression on a four-year-old. It sure set my imagination on fire.

My first attempt to escape my father was when I was four I came home from school, I couldn't find mum in the house, so I asked him where she was. He advised, "she has gone to live with the aborigines in the hills". Later that afternoon, mum returned home and ask where I was. Father told her I was playing with friends, so the alarm was not raised until after dark.

I was spotted by a driver in his headlights on the side of a dirt road out of town, heading to the hills and the aboriginal settlement. He took me back to town and the police.

Then – Christmas 1948, aged five – the second time I left home. I recall I took brother Barry – then three – for a walk, before our parents woke up. Along Thomas Street were two buses lined up to take the families of the Broken Hill miners families to their annual picnic, a few hours away, at Silverton.

Somehow I convinced the driver of the last bus that our parents had left on the bus in front, so he took us. Some five hours later we heard the siren as the Broken Hill's police arrived to take Barry and I back to Broken Hill and our parents. We were well fed, looked after, and watered by the miners. We even got a present from Santa and the police gave us ice cream's. I guess we were the 'unstolen generation'.

My third attempt to run away was more successful – in Coffs Harbour – but that's a later story I also remember sister Franny being born in January 1949 in Broken Hill hospital – those big brown eyes – and then 'Bubby Jo', Marcia, completed the quartet in January 1950, again in Broken Hill hospital. The four Musketeers begin their journey and, yes, I do remember stealing the goldfish from our neighbours fishpond and fracturing Barry skull with a rock for telling on me... But he got even. He stabbed me. But I lived – the start of many survivals. I also remember the magnificent Sturt Desert peas – still my favourite flower, along with the Coffs Christmas bells.

The four Musketeers are still great mates – 70 years on.

I must point out our parents never had a car or a license, (mums early lessons in the Braithwaites Ford Anglia were an absolute disaster) and we never had a penny – so we never went anywhere. When we shifted to Broken Hill, my father told mum he had paid the removal insurance. A lie. Lots of their wedding presents were smashed – and no insurance.

Albert was a gambler, very unsuccessful, a drunk, and forged mums signature to get her mega savings to pay for his gambling debts – in between belting me to prove his manliness and power. Mum was allowed to go to the movies once a week. He would give her nine pence- three pence for the bus and sixpence for the ticket. Nothing to eat or drink..

One skeleton from Broken Hill is that we are told mum finally found love, in the form of one John Francis, a local mineworker who lived three doors up. I only found out years later, and I wish we had got to know him. I am just thankful Jean may have had some love/joy in her life. Ancestry DNA tests have now confirmed all the rumours. Great story.

I was eight years old when we left the hill to go to my father's next posting – Coffs Harbour. After Broken Hill, the sand The fishing off the jetty – a new world! Imagine that.

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