

BOB.

I love Gumtree.
Every room in my home is filled with Gumtree purchases.
Twenty years of it.

There's very little wall-space left for any more artworks in any of the rooms, including the kitchen, the laundry, the dunny and every passageway in-between.

As well, every surface throughout the house is festooned with trinkets, bric-a-brac, knick-knacks and other such doodads. One of my lovely friends calls me The Curator. But, I digress.

My greatest two finds on Gumtree were my gardener Sam, otherwise known as The Garden Guru, and my handyman Owen, otherwise known as Mr. Everything. This tale involves Sam to a large extent, but latterly, it involves Bob, Sam's Dad, and this is how it goes

After a series of failed attempts at finding a suitable gardener for my small courtyard garden, and being 'Sleepless in Springfield' at 3 one morning I noted a simple little advert including a phone number on Gumtree.

This was it:

'Easy-going male offers caring gardening services in and around East Gosford and Springfield area at reasonable rates'. Since it was FAR too early to immediately call, I refrained, but at 9am Sam and I spoke and he arranged to visit me to check out my requirements at 4pm that very day.

At 4pm the doorbell rang and when I opened the door there he was; bloody handsome and the spit-image of someone I once loved (he had turned out to be unkind to the extreme, but that's another story).

After perusing the courtyard area Sam and I agreed on an hourly rate and a two-hour gardening visit once a month starting there and then.

This arrangement continued for close to four years during which time Sam and I became warm friends and after each monthly stint in the garden we shared our hopes, dreams and struggles over a bottle of wine and nibbles.

And then, about six months ago. Disaster struck. Sam confided in me that his relationship was in crisis and he was packing up and that week going home to Mum in Queensland (don't we all go home to Mum if we can?!).

I knew that Sam's Dad, Bob suffers from dementia and is living in a local Nursing Home Facility, so I suggested to him, that in his absence I visit Bob from time to time. We agreed that this decision would be beneficial for both Bob and myself.

And so, a week after Sam upped and left for Queensland, it came about that I made my first visit to Bob. It was immediately evident that Bob's dementia includes a deep-seated distrust and paranoia, especially when faced with anyone new in his life.

At this first meeting these were some of Bob's questions:
Are you from the FBI? Are you from the KGB? Do you work for ASIO?
Do you have any ID to show you are who you say you are?
How do I know you're REALLY Sam's friend?
Are you recording this conversation?

My responses were insufficient to allay his fears and Bob became increasingly agitated so I called Sam in Queensland.

After much whispered discussion with his back turned away from me, Bob was assured by Sam that Jay was indeed totally trustworthy, that she was neither an FBI agent nor a KGB agent, nor ANY such under-cover entity and was indeed Sam's caring and trustworthy friend.

Thankfully, that initial discussion allayed Bob's fears and he trusts me totally, from then on until now.

I have visited Bob once a week for many months and this is the procedure:

I arrive at Reception and present my Covid-free test-kit which allows me entry to the facility; then I walk to Room 22 and knock on Bob's door. No matter what time I visit, be it morning, afternoon, or early evening, Bob is lying on his bed; I find this extremely sad.

Then, "Hello Bob, it's Jay; I'm here to visit"
He leaps up from his bed and, visibly animated, says
"Jay, hello!!"

From time to time he's not been fully dressed and I've waited in the corridor only to find after a lengthy wait that I have to again knock on his door to remind him I'm there, and the whole scenario is repeated
"Hello Bob, it's Jay; I'm here to visit"
And again, Bob says
"Jay, hello!!"

Then, once he's ready, with shoes on, I admire his T-shirt and we walk arm in arm through the corridors and head for the cafeteria.
En-route, at each of my visits, as if it were the first time, Bob comments on the many fine artworks hanging on the walls.

We also always stop and chat to the throng of budgies flitting freely in and around a ginormous aviary at Reception. (Out of his earshot, the Staff never fail to comment on the miracle that Bob always remembers my name. I find that deeply moving.)

At the aviary, we greet Grace, one of the few residents Bob occasionally engages with. Grace has a budgie on her shoulder and she's knitting a scarf. Grace is constantly knitting.

Including Bob, just about every person in the Facility sports one of her little woolly scarves; and when I say little scarves, I mean just that. The scarves are about 12 inches by 3 inches (you can tell my age by those measurements, and I'll leave you to convert to centimetres) Believe me ... it's a SMALL scarf.

We say our goodbyes to Grace and the budgies and head for the cafeteria. Once there, Bob finds it impossible to manipulate the simple latch on the thigh-high door at the entrance to the little kitchen, yet expertly navigates the complicated coffee machine with its multiple drink options and which I personally find difficult to manage - go figure?

Bob makes for himself a hot chocolate, and for me, my usual flat white. If there are others seated in the cafeteria he resists sitting there for fear our conversations are being overheard or worse, recorded. His suspicions are unbridled, and if there are others seated in the area we need to seek out a private area elsewhere to appease his fearful agitation.

My visits are never hurried and usually include around two hours of quality time where we discuss all manner of subjects. Sometimes I even forget that Bob has dementia, but then, of a sudden, he might lean forward and in a whisper ask me if I've seen the evil 'little people' in

the garden. Over time I've assured him that though I can't see them I am sure the little people are harmless. He now refers to the 'little people' as his friends and I consider it a major milestone reached!

I once asked him what he thought about my blue hair and he said 'its who you are Jay and it helps me to remember you; I found this so refreshing; I usually get comments such as "WHY?"

We always phone Sam when I visit. Bob thinks Sam is still living around the corner. Together, they discuss Bob's 'investments and portfolios' and where his personal possessions are being kept, and 'don't forget to look after the gold watch' and 'have you mowed the lawns at 13 Atherton Street?' (a home he lived in 30 years ago and remembers with intense clarity)

Sam allays his fears and there's usually an upbeat goodbye.

When its time for me to leave, Bob always walks me to my car that has a sticker on the rear window which reads LONDON. PARIS. NEW YORK. GOSFORD. He never fails to laugh out loud as if seeing it for the first time. It delights me that he still sees the humour in that. As well, each time we approach my car he recognises my numberplate JAY and animatedly reads it out aloud.

We share a hug and he says he loves me. I tell him I love him too; and I do. He opens the car door for me and closes it once I'm seated inside. He reminds me with gestures to fasten my seatbelt. He delights in directing me out of the parking space with expert hand-signals. Stop. Turn the wheel, and then he points ahead to the exit and waves me a fond farewell till next time.

Next time was last Tuesday. As usual I found Bob on his bed at 3pm. After rousing him, he donned his shoes and we were about to start heading to the Lounge for Happy Hour (such a civilised daily occurrence at the Home) when he frantically started searching for something.

Every drawer and cupboard were opened and closed. All contents thrown to the floor or onto his bed. His wardrobe was ransacked. Even the bathroom cabinet was emptied. He became extremely frustrated and upset. I asked him "what are you looking for Bob? Can I help you ?", but he just kept on agitatedly searching for some unknown object and muttering to himself.

Fifteen minutes later with his belongings in total disarray I suggested we discuss what he'd lost over a glass of wine and that we look for it together later. He reluctantly agreed and off we went to the cafeteria.

Fortunately we had the cafeteria to ourselves and were served a small glass of excellent Pinot Grigio together with cheese and crackers.

Bob immediately said Grace before we commenced eating; in all the months I have known him he has never failed to pray before any meal we have shared, and I find it remarkable that he prays faultlessly, easily and readily. On this day during our mini feast he unexpectedly proceeded to tell me in minute detail of the day he was baptised when he was a young schoolboy at the age of eight. He's 72 now.

Minutes later we chatted about the 'little people' and gardening, and then, leaning forward and whispering conspiratorially he told me that there is a secret train station behind the Reception desk and that the train transports anyone who wants to go to a brothel situated behind the sheds in the gardens.

(He certainly keeps me on my toes conversationally!)

And then, quite suddenly, and mid-sentence, Bob jumped up and raced away. I thought he urgently needed the bathroom.

Ten minutes later he returned and thrust a parcel into my hands. This was obviously the item from his room for which he'd earlier been searching.

The awkwardly-wrapped parcel was in a plastic bag and bound with a makeshift bow; the bow was a piece of orange wool he'd no doubt cadged from Grace at some point. "This is a present for you Jay". I opened the parcel to find in it the T-shirt he had worn the previous week. This is it. (I stand up and display the T-shirt, which I'm wearing) This is Bob's lovingly wrapped gift to me. It's His T-shirt depicting The iconic Kombi Van 1988. For countless people it's a global memory of days gone by; an era passed.

I'm overwhelmed with emotion as I recall briefly remarking on his T-shirt the week before and him animatedly telling me as we walked the corridors: "It's my favourite T-shirt Jay. It's twenty or more years old Jay. I love it Jay"

I remember him being so chuffed that I'd remarked on it at the time. I remember his beaming smile when I'd said how much I liked it.

And now, I am humbled. Not only did Bob remember for a full week that I'd said I liked his T-shirt, he remembered to disrobe, to then wrap it, to then find Grace to ask for a length of her wool and to then tie a bow around my gift.

And then, he remembered he was looking for something when I arrived that day, but not what it was he was looking for.

And then, he remembered it all.

When I consider all this now, my heart is full.

Bob's gift to me is by far one of the most precious I have ever received.