

HANNY ALLSTON

MY STORY

FINDING
MY
FEET



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FINDING MY FEET

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PROLOGUE

2005: The Perfect Storm

I hesitate, propped somewhere between innocence and maturity. My foot, clad in a white plastic bag, seems glued to the sterilised floor. The other hangs painfully, wrapped in a cast. My head is spinning and I want to sit down. But the Intensive Care Unit does not offer chairs to bystanders.

I don't want to be back in another hospital. Only three weeks ago, I myself lay bedridden in a white room, surrounded by a white curtain. My ankle painfully swollen from an ankle reconstruction. A serious sprain during the World Orienteering Championships in Japan meant my coach, Max, had told me in his gruff, grandfatherly voice, 'Surgery? If you do, you will likely never run again.' The surgeon had a different opinion. 'Surgery? If you *don't* you will likely never run at this level again.' He said my ankle was the worst he had ever operated on. 'And for someone of your age!' I had lain uncomfortably in the hospital bed, wondering how to overcome these lose-lose odds and find my feet again.

Now, as I await the opportunity to visit my father here in intensive care, I feel so, so far from the agile aspiring athlete that I long to be. I am

nineteen. Little do I realise that there is a perfect storm unfolding beneath my one weight-bearing foot. The door to my father's isolation cubicle swings open and the scent of honey, which they use as a burn ointment, wafts out. My safety barrier is penetrated by the rich smell.

Instantly, I am taken back to the laundry at Mole End—my family's farm and my childhood home.

ON A HOT SUMMER'S DAY, the heat inside that laundry would be stifling, producing beads of sweat on foreheads. Gas burners added to the hot, thick air as they warmed the large carving knives that sat in rusted tomato tins atop stainless steel benches. Here, Dad would stand, carefully scraping wax from each wooden frame to reveal oozing honey, its rich golden liquid bleeding from deep within the hexagonal cells. One by one, he would carve the wax and wipe the knife, carve and wipe, until all the wax had been removed. Then he would gently lower the frames deep into the extractor, a simple action releasing a fleeting shimmer of pride across his strongly-defined facial features. As if drawn to a losing battle, bees would bump and jostle outside the windows we had closed to keep them out.

Mum would lean over the metal extractor, spinning the wooden handle with an air of intense purpose. An old plastic-lined apron tied around her waist, her swimming muscles flexing and relaxing, flexing and relaxing with each spin of the extractor. I loved this mother. Her strength both physical and internally complex. A mother who had mastered the art of giving and who always said, 'You can do anything.' A mum who taught me how to swim, then to strive. A mother who showered me with so much generosity and belief, even during the times when I couldn't believe in myself.

With each whoosh of the honey extractor, small droplets of warm honey would flick against the metal sides before sliding into the cavernous depths. Standing back, pressed against shelves laden with preserved fruits, jams, wines—and honey jars waiting to be filled—would be my brother James and me, waiting for the moment when our parents turned a blind eye. Then we would scrape sticky fingers around

the rim of the extractor. Ashling and Ciara, my neighbours and best friends, would love to be there too, helping extract 'Hanny's Honey'. Their family would delicately and sparingly spread the golden nectar across their toast. But us Allstons? We would lather it thickly across our buttery, homemade bread.

THAT HONEY MEMORY RECEDES, to be replaced by a less sweet one from only twenty-four hours ago.

I HOBbled through the same laundry towards the back door, barely noting the shelves still laden with evidence of a rich childhood and the most perfect youth ... wide-open spaces, friendships, family, hand-built cubbies, cheekiness and opportunities. Little did I realise as I reached the back door and patted Flossy-dog—her border collie muzzle resting on well-worn paws—I was closing the door on my childhood as I had known it.

Mum's roses, majestic at the beginning of summer, grew proudly from the rich alluvial soils. Molly, our other dog, an excitable tan and white puppy, ran circles around the garden bed. I wobbled past our cubbyhouse buried beneath more garden vegetation. My foot was throbbing, pulsing, in this unfamiliar ankle. I reached the swing and flopped down into it, partially shaded by the birch tree, a favourite climbing apparatus for this wilder child. I could faintly hear Dad's Jersey cows—Tosca, Carmen and Pavarotti—moving through the lush paddocks behind the nearby hedgerow, accompanied by squabbling chickens and ducks, innocently free to roam. I could not hear any humanness. The adults were deep within the walls of my family home, once an old homestead and now converted into our three-bedroom farmhouse.

I sat on the swing for a long time, trying to ignore my ankle. Flicking sticks to Molly. Fetch and return. Fetch and return. I thought about my university exams now just days away and the piles of medical textbooks

still lying open on the kitchen table from yesterday. Then about my brother travelling in Asia. My mind whirled from one random thought to another, like someone licking the last sticky residues from the jar. Empty thoughts filling thoughtlessness.

Faint movement of shoes on mown lawn. Perfume that was not my mother's. A hand on my shoulder. A shaky breath. The words, 'Your father is alive. He attempted suicide. He is on his way to hospital.'

I HOBBLE towards my father's bedside. Tubes protrude from all angles. He looks so small, fragile, papery. We look at one another. I shuffle closer, now near enough that I could reach out and touch him. I love this father so much. A wonderful father, a patient father, a father curious and kind to the living world. Who has taught me how to give and to seek. A father who has imparted a love for the art of stillness, reflection and writing. He is here. He is alive. Safe. I am so sure of that. Silence passes like unspoken sentences until his hoarse, childlike whisper breaks across the void: 'I am so sorry ...'

His honest words send a sharp pain into the core of my being. It has seeped through the cracks in my internal walls and reached somewhere far within. My soul whispers to me, *I'm not very good at this.*

IN MY FAMILY, we rarely voiced our emotions. Cold, tired or hungry—that was all okay. But during sadness or madness, we quickly left via the laundry door. Our emotions required fresh air and wide-open spaces. A pair of gumboots, a garden, a load of washing, a cubby or tree. I would scale the oak's branches, each ridged limb acting as a rung and allowing me to climb further and further from confusing internal discomforts. From this vantage point I could act like a spy, the watchman of the valley, finding reassurance in the nobility of the position. Time would pass in a swaying oak in a quiet valley.

Surprisingly, it seemed there might be rare occasions when muddy walks across the fields or hands buried in the garden's fertile soils

couldn't cure the emotions. On these occasions, I would stand at the end of our long hallway and stare at my parents' closed bedroom door. It became the chamber of secrets, where adult emotions were kept. I would look at their closed door, wondering what adults did when they were upset, and then I would be out the laundry door, tugging on those gumboots and off to climb my tree.

I LEAN MORE HEAVILY against my crutches. I am hit by a whoosh of truth. From the pastures of the family farm at Sandfly outside Hobart to the reality of hospitals; from the dais of the recent World Championships to the fearful reality that at nineteen I may never be able to run freely again.

I am walloped by the sensation that I am in one almighty, steep-sided hole. I drag my eyes up to meet Dad's and our gazes lock. In this moment of father-daughter intimacy I feel a warmth. A strength beginning to infiltrate the chill of fear and sadness. I feel myself standing taller, the crutches no longer the prop holding me upright. I find myself pulling back my shoulders and lifting my head just a few millimetres higher.

'I am so sorry...' Dad's four barely-audible words of honesty herald the end of the adult secrets. It is over. We have found ourselves collapsed into an unwelcome ankle reconstruction and now an unexpected suicide attempt by a bipolar depressive father. In nothingness there are only the heartbeats of hope.

In that moment, standing at the bedside of my father, I verbalise my own four words of honesty, representing the end of innocence and my transition to adulthood. 'It is okay, Dad.'

As I turn towards the door, I vow to myself, then and there, that I will clamber out of this hole. Mud, twigs, embankments. Fear, sadness, disappointment. No matter what obstacles stand in my way, with honesty and openness underpinned by the determination and discipline I learnt in youth, I will find my feet and flourish.

Crouched low, knees pressed into gravelly sand, young hands clawing into the shimmering grains of granite. Each granule a unique colour. Sunburnt-pink feldspar. Luminescent quartz, white like the flesh of the squid being gutted on the jetty this morning by local children, their BMX bikes propped against wooden railings nearby.

The tide had been lower earlier in the day, exposing barnacles and sagging green sea lettuce clinging to the wooden pier. Now, shadows were shortening as the sun crested overhead. The tide had inched towards us while the wind whipped at hair and hat toggles. Flinders Island, a forgotten paradise off the north-east tip of Tasmania, spreading around us and extending into the horizon.

We dug together. Dad to my left. Mum to my right. My brother opposite. One unit, one family, one hole, digging for rocks.

MY FAMILY'S digging forays on Flinders Island triggered an early interest in rock collecting. A large nugget of Killiecrankie diamond—a colour-

less topaz—became the first precious jewel to be tucked safely into the old boarding school chest my brother and I inherited from my father.

Most of the treasures in that chest were collected through the labour of our dirt-etched fingers and scanning eyes. From the Freycinet National Park on Tasmania's east coast came tiny pink feldspar nuggets and clear chunks of quartz. A little further south on Maria Island we delighted in fossils from the peaks where we sourced dolerite and sandstone. From holidays in mainland Australia in Crumbly—our orange kombivan with a habit for incidental failures—we returned home with pockets full. Year by year, adventure by adventure, our little rock collection grew at a similar pace to us, until we reached a point where we no longer needed to measure our growth against the pencil marks on the doorjamb.

My childhood home sat poised on pillars of stone once collected from the valley's flanks, perched on a gentle slope leading down towards the confluence of the creeks. Our old weatherboard cottage nestled into the slopes of Sandfly—a small rural valley around thirty minutes south of Hobart—surrounded by fertile soils that once hosted berry plantations. This was a childhood paradise, a place of inspiration for my brother, me, and our three lifelong friends—Ashling, Ciara and Andy. Little Andy received my hand-me-downs until he finally overtook me when his growing legs reached college. We were the Famous Five—children of the wild with an extensive playground. Private property laws didn't apply to us.

When the winter rains seeped into even our grandest plans, we sought shelter and adventures in the barn or amongst the dusty cobwebs of the world beneath our home. Torches at the ready, we tiptoed over Mum's flower gardens, sidled between roses, then crawled beneath the stone columns to commando into the gloom. Our explorations revealed that our home was formerly inhabited by a bootmaker. His discarded creations, crinkled with age, were evidence of a story now buried while our own was just beginning.

Emerging from the gloom at the sound of a large bell heralding dinnertime, we blinked in the bright evening light and dusted off our knees. Mum's cooking wafted towards us through a doorway opening onto the deck that we had helped Dad build.

Mum was a phenomenal cook. Her creations, crafted from the plethora of organic produce from my father's vegetable garden, fuelled our childhood adventures and later, athletic endeavours. In these early years, dinner could include the occasional portion of meat buried deep into vegetable matter to obscure it from my brother's tastebuds. However, as frustration mounted and the scars of taking our pigs to market etched deeper into my father's soul, we evolved into a family of vegetarians. From homemade pasta to oven-fresh bread and soups—another desperate attempt to utilise Dad's bountiful zucchinis. My mother became a master at her craft and inspired my love affair with fruit crumbles.

Raspberries. Strawberries. Apples. Pears. Quinces. Gooseberries. Cherries. With nicknames my parents gave me such as 'Possum' and 'Fruit Bat', growing up in Sandfly was more than an idyllic childhood. It was a sublime, fruit-smear-mouth, full-tummy haven. At dawn, Ciara and I wandered up the home-cut bush tracks that terminated on the nearby berry farm. Avoiding barbed wire, electric fences, and moody bulls, we sneaked across the open paddocks before finally reaching the dripping raspberry bushes. Under their drooping limbs we hid, one hand holding the cane, the other grabbing at the rosy-ripe berries. When the smartly dressed city-folk in sunhats and clean, crisp shirts, began to arrive, we sneaked back down the paddocks and trails, two possums united in friendship with groaning stomachs and ruddy-stained mouths.

Summer brought the fear of bushfires. On the hottest days we drew all the curtains to stop the warm air gaining access to our home. Restlessness would inevitably set-in, so James and I would slip outside to locate my father as he paced the farm, his shirt gaping open, suntan lines etched deep into his arms, his eyes scanning the sky for the subtle brown wisps heralding fire. On more than one occasion, we began to prepare the farm for the potential approach. James assisted Dad to empty the gutters, while Mum and I filled buckets to the brim. The radio on, the bath full, we listened with nervous anticipation. Thankfully, the bushfires never arrived.

My childhood adventure ground, while no longer 'mine', still lies in

the depths of a lush valley, the creeks still bubbling through its soul, our home still standing proudly at its heart.

AUTUMN, golden autumn highlighted the beauty of Hobart's tree-lined avenues and the European tree species planted by Tasmania's early settlers. Autumn, when lashing winds swept from the wild, jagged coastline of Tasmania's remote west coast. Autumn, when the beech designated *Nothofagus gunii*—Australia's only native deciduous species—turned on a brilliant display of colour as it clung to the slopes of dolerite peaks. Autumn, with its unmatched tranquillity.

Autumn: this was always the Allston family's time to play.

Autumn 1990 was wildly wet and unusually cold. It was Dad's fortieth birthday and an excuse to embark on our first overnight family bushwalk. I shadowed him, my oversized raincoat hanging low over my face and hands, gumboots clomping alongside his on the uneven rocky terrain, my pack filled with four packets of two-minute noodles, a sleeping bag, and a large toy rabbit. My eyes prickled with emotions as the bold winds swept across this exposed central plateau of Tasmania. We walked together, a family leaning into the landscape. Dad striding in Dad-length paces. Mum strong beneath her load. James proudly trotting alongside. And tiny me, four-years old and not sure she wanted to be there.

After searching for Dad's perfect campsite—a routine that would drive my mother nearly to tears in the coming years—the tents were slowly pitched. A green pyramid-shaped shelter for the boys, and a newer blue tent for my mother and me. I waited beneath a vast log, evidence that a forest once existed on these now-exposed plains scattered with alpine tarns and lakes. As the tents went up and our cocoons were prepared, I watched the rain sheet down, dripping from my wrinkled timber shelter, the log's etchings marking the lifetime it had lived prior to the early settlers and their ambitious farming dreams.

The rain beat down on our tents long into the night before giving way to an empty silence. I lay awake listening to the noiseless sounds. A foreign sensation for a four-year-old who had only known the hushed

farm of her childhood. When darkness finally gave way to a subtle dawn, we unzipped our tents and stepped into dense fog.

As my parents packed down the camp, their backs turned to their mischievous son, my brother ran into the low, scratchy scoparia bushes with a tin of lemon fizz, a treat kept for camping trips. A small spoonful of this delicious lemon powder was meant to be added to a mug of water. When the fizzing and frothing subsided we could sip a tangy, refreshing drink. On this occasion, with a spoon in one hand and the tin in the other, my brother had levered off the lid and began shovelling the innocent white powder into his wide-open mouth. The substance began to fizz and froth, setting off a sneezing fit so intense that white foam began to escape through his nose, spraying out into the grey undergrowth. White graffiti in a grey landscape from a now-humbled artist.

Both James and I expected our normally reserved parents to show dismay. Instead their laughter burst into the still morning, filling the day with a chorus of chortles and jovialness. I loved that I felt so loved as I watched my parents wipe tears of joy from the corners of their eyes.

Over the years to follow, rain would soak our striped thermals as Dad searched for his perfect campsite while the days lengthened into teary pleas for a reprieve, and I would vow never to inflict this torture on my own children. However, with a salty packet of two-minute noodles inside contented bellies and Mum reading to us by the light of a small candle poised carefully in the gateway to the tent, all would be forgiven and forgotten.

BACK IN THE VALLEY, Crumbly the kombivan once again tucked into the entrance to the woodshed, hiking packs replaced by school bags, we would all slip back into the routines of a united family living a rural lifestyle.

Mum would rise early and begin stoking the fire, her swimmer's body-clock chiming the time for slicing dense homemade bread and preparing lunchboxes. Dad always woke early too, rising with the dawn in summer or under the intense darkness of winter. Each morning I would hear him rise and tiptoe down the hallway past my bedroom. I

would snuggle deeper beneath Mum's handcrafted quilts, waiting for the glow of Dad's kerosene lantern to intensify and reflect onto the walls of my bedroom. The perfume of roses and damp earth flowed in through the always-open window. Mum's roses. A small, beautiful part of my parents' immense, labour-intensive organic garden. Soon I would hear Dad pull on his gumboots and flop-flap-slap down the concrete walkway outside the bedrooms, his lantern and milking bucket creating a disco of shadows and brightness wrestling together as he made his way deeper into the night. When darkness returned to my room as he headed towards the stable, I would be left with the essence of kerosene and love for a childhood still evolving.

In June, when the days were at their shortest and the sun's rays were still to creep over valley walls, we scraped ice from the van's wind-screen. We breathed a plume of steam into the depths of Dad's kombi and pulled quilts over scratched knees while we trundled as a family over the foothills of Mt Wellington towards the city of Hobart. Mum left the vehicle first, her employment as a general practitioner beckoning. Then Dad battled through traffic lights and the Bridgewater Jerry—a fog which crept from the mountains to the Derwent River's mouth where it gaped into the ocean. It brought a damp, freezing air that enveloped our school atop an exposed hill in the northern region of Hobart. As we approached the school I would sink deeper in my seat, hoping no-one saw my brother or me as we emerged from the bright orange van, and that no-one heard the loud, joyful Simon & Garfunkel music which blared from the van's speakers as Dad's hands drummed on the oversized steering wheel. If then was now, I would be sitting in the front seat, proudly tall and cranking up the tunes thinking, *How cool are we!*

HOME AGAIN AND UP to the barn I would head, the food-scrap bucket in one hand and an empty pail in the other. Nestled on my belly on top of the hay bales, I could scoop up handfuls of grain from the large forty-gallon drums that stood beside them. We purchased the grain as chicken food from the Cascade Brewery in Hobart, where it was used in the

beer-making process. I would then slowly let the individual granules slip through my fingers, savouring the texture and smell of roasted barley. Even now, on a cold winter's morning when I run past the Cascade Brewery, with its nutty smell of roasting barley and an aroma of fermenting apples, I am flicked back to this childhood task. Pail filled with grain, I would head back down the hill, ducking beneath the birch trees before placing my buckets on the ground to open the wire gate into the chicken pen. Squawks. Feathers. Probing beaks. The chickens' delight at seeing me was chaotic and welcome. Filling a childhood need to be noticed ... valued.

Mum claimed that our frenzied fowls were the most educated members of our family, because the lunches that accompanied us to school each day often returned to end up in the chickens' food trough. The most famous uneaten sandwich came from the fateful day Dad's lunchbox accidentally ended up in my school bag—cream cheese parched by dry bread, watercress from the creek leaking into soggy raisins. I don't know if even the chickens enjoyed their education that evening.

I would leave the chickens and head in search of my father, normally to be found seated on a small wooden stool, gently milking his beloved Jersey cows, each named according to an operatic theme. Tosca's golden hide would quiver as I entered the stable. Carmen and her son Pavarotti gaily munched hay in the stable next door. I'd lean over the opposite gate, discussing the school day while soaking up the smell of the damp hay and sawdust lining the earthen floors of the stable. Old Humphry Horse jostled for my attention while Naughty Nina used the distraction to bury her head in his dinner trough.

Nina was a jet-black Shetland-Welsh pony, four feet off the ground with a girth as wide as she was long—the perfect gift for a four-year-old. When saddled up and bridled, she earned herself the nickname 'Naughty Nina'. She would stomp on our feet, head-butt us in our bellies, and drag me under the scraggly plum tree as it stood proud and alone in the centre of the paddock. She adopted the habit of bolting to the nearest gate, stopping abruptly and sending me—her blonde companion—catapulting over the reins.

JAMES. MY 'BIG BROTHER' in age and physical presence. Two years older with a blond mop of loosely cut hair, broad shoulders, deep chest and feet large like a swimmer. He definitely could have been a swimmer, and for some years we shared this passion. But James' free spirit and poor eyesight made the coaches' whiteboard an unwelcome sight. Even at this early age I felt his discomfort. While he had the body that could pull him effortlessly over the top of the chlorinated waters, he was a wilder child at heart. In hindsight, I probably was too. In James' wake was always Little Andy, his best mate, white-blond hair also cut loosely, narrow shoulders and a shallower chest. Feet small enough to borrow my gumboots. An inquisitively sharp mind. A sense of humour preparing him to be the stand-up comedian that he is today.

The two boys would trek across the paddocks towards the Top Land, a patch of semi-scrubby woodland that looked down upon our home nestled into the fertile soils below. Huckleberry Finn and co. Akubra hat on, spade in one hand and a handful of Dad's tooth-breaking Tararua biscuits in the other. And little me, usually trailing behind, wishing to be seen and hoping to be heard.

On this occasion the boys were on a mission to build a bunker, an underground cubby. Amongst a patch of open grassland with a view over the valley they began to dig, enthusiastically flicking patches of shredded grass, spots of heavy clay, and the occasional rock. Millimetre by millimetre, sweat beaded on foreheads, jumpers were discarded, and the hole grew slightly deeper.

Watching two boys dig to China eventually became tedious. I wandered back down the hill into the vegetable garden with its linear rows of perfect seedlings—beetroot, French Touchon carrots, silverbeet, spinach, and miner's lettuce—an odd green that looked like a lily pad and tasted like very little. Trellises dripped with peas, runner beans and sweet peas. The tunnel house was always a warm haven of thick, heavy air infused with basil, tomatoes and cucumber. Dad would stand amongst it all, an icon of concentration, an individual so at home with his hands in the soil, happy just being himself.

Up through the flower garden I would then weave, skipping over

the large blue-tongue lizard on the rock stairs. Usually, Mum could be found leaning over a flowerbed, a pile of weeds strewn behind her on freshly-mown lawn.

‘Can we go for a horse ride?’ She needed little temptation. We would walk side-by-side towards the stable, a mother and daughter bonded by a love of activity. Friends.

When the rains wobbled into Sandfly, drifting in on an extensive south-east low, they toyed with our little valley, blanketing it like one of Mum’s quilts—a cobbled monotone of grey and white. The two small creeks running through our property would swell with pride, bursting their banks. James and I would stand beside them, two raincoat-clad figures bouncing from foot-to-foot as we poked sticks into the foam.

When inspiration struck, James ran back up towards the farmhouse, returning minutes later dressed like a seal. A black wetsuit clinging to gangly arms and legs, a bodyboard clasped under one arm. I looked on in awe and amazement as my big brother sprinted in his bare feet across the wet paddocks before launching himself onto the ground and skimming across the thin sheet of water that had spread far from the banks of the creek. He whizzed and darted, leaning to the left, skimming to the right, until his momentum slowed and he stood back up, a drowned seal with a swollen grin. He let out a whoop, and I a giggle, and together we played in the soggy paddocks until our screaming fingers couldn’t stand another minute of the damp cold.

Back towards the house we trundled—the seal and I—passing close to the Jersey cows who hung their heads in despair, water sheeting down their shivering backs. As I passed Humphry the Horse and Naughty Nina, I trailed my hand along their flanks in a gesture of apology. Then slosh, slosh, slosh we ran, the seal struggling, ungainly against the friction of his heavy skin, and me? I was dancing along in front. We were united, the seal and I, a sister and a brother, dancing through the rain in search of our family and the fireplace.

But we weren’t always so collegial. A snipe here, an argument over the front seat of the van there. A blind eye to James’ advice on my homework, soap on his toothbrush one evening. Then came the day he climbed a tree and refused to return to the ground until I left. With streaky tears of frustration, I grabbed a book and leant back against the

trunk to play out the game, leaving him stranded high above until penance was paid. Yes, I knew how to push his buttons, and he mine. We bickered without fighting, taunted without arguing.

Finally, Mum and Dad stepped in with a challenge: 'If you two can last three whole months without bickering, we will take you to Cradle Mountain.'

Cradle Mountain, a pristine alpine valley and rocky escarpment in the north-west of Tasmania, was our absolute favourite holiday destination. The challenge was set. James and I barely spoke to one another for three months. If he went to open his mouth, I would shush him. Suddenly, I was allowed to quietly tag along behind the boys. And as days turned to weeks, weeks to months, and finally the months added to three, we found ourselves bundled under sleeping bags in the back of the kombi, heading along narrow weaving laneways through slumbering towns. Fertile grasslands gave way to the winding hills and valleys heralding the beginning of the Tasmanian mountains. The temperature plummeted and our excitement grew.

On this landmark trip heralding the end of our youthful taunts, we pulled up outside our cabin in the dark, a light flurry of snow crystals shimmering down onto the windscreen of the vehicle. After a light dinner, we crawled into the loft and watched as the snowflakes fell quietly into the silent world around us. When our eyes grew heavy and we couldn't watch any more, James and I fell into a deep sleep, side-by-side, a history of bickering long behind us, dreaming of the wonderland that would greet us in the morning.

SNOW DIDN'T ONLY FALL in the highest mountains. At forty-two degrees south, closer than most landforms to the Antarctic, Tasmania is a strong attraction for the cold southerly fronts that sweep in from the southern oceans. Three hundred metres above sea level and nestled into the foothills of Mt Wellington, the Sandfly valley could occasionally catch these blasts of winter snowfall. We longed for those days. We yearned for them! On days with even a remote crispness, Ciara and I would stand in the living room, the fire not yet lit. We danced, jigging around

the room in the hope that our snow dance would create white crystals to flurry from the heavens. Next, we were out the back door, running towards our birch tree to sit in her tops and stare at the sky, willing the dark storm clouds with a hint of the 'duck-egg' blue that Dad said heralded snow. Even better if these rare skies eventuated on a school night so that we might be snowed-in and prevented from attending school. After seeing the first flurries fall to the ground the night before, we would wake before dawn to lie perfectly still, listening for the silence that evidenced a blanket of snow on the ground. Silence? Yes! Bedclothes on the ground, tugging on track pants and woollen socks. Bedroom door open. Back door open. Out onto the landing and ...

On some occasions the silence indeed heralded snow, a thin, white, perfectly smooth layer covering the lawn and gardens. It would usually be spring, the clumps of daffodils just distinguishable as they drooped under the weight of the snow. As Dad's lantern roared into life, it created sparkles across the white landscape. Our world would be transformed. As the sky began to lighten we would pull James' homemade sled from the shed and drag, slide and tug it kilometres to the neighbours' hilltop.

Towering over the valley, we needed to prepare our braveness. The steep slope plummeted downwards towards barbed wire and blackberry bushes. Perfectly white, with all the cow pats obscured, the slope looked so innocent.

We would rocket downwards. Sled tracks would leave vivid parallel lines in our wake. Cow pats were exposed, small flicks of grime ricocheting onto the white perfection. Squeals. Whoops of joy. Veering left. Fence approaching. Tumbling off and sliding downwards until we naturally came to a stop. Pulling the sled out of the blackberries. Giggling. Intoxicated by adrenalin. Then the long plod back to the top.

After breakfast, we would clamp the old metal ski bindings onto the tips of our gumboots. Flap, slop, slide, wobble. We 'skied' our way out across the paddocks, commando-crawling beneath each electric fence we encountered, legs splayed, skis digging stubbornly into the ground. Then teetering back to our feet and sliding off again. We were definitely not naturals and I can now only giggle at the fact that I married an elite skier!

TASMANIA WAS BLESSED with long summer evenings, where the glow of dusk lingered into the night-time. This was the perfect inspiration for 'tent time'. Standing on a chair, then the desk, and finally reaching up into the heights of Mum's sewing cupboard, I was able to pull down the old green tent from our bushwalking shelf. Scrabbling deeper, I could drag out the old Trangia stove, a bottle of methylated spirits, a hefty blue sleeping bag and a foam mat. Then off down the gravel road I would tramp to Ashling and Ciara's house.

On arrival I would be greeted by their frenzied mother. 'You're doing what? I don't think tonight is the night.' However, children can be very manipulative. With gentle coaxing, highlighting the fact that we were already packed and ready, we would slink out the door to find our own perfect campsite. Neighbours' fences meant nothing to us. We saw ourselves as the custodians of the valley, a privileged position that lent itself to crossing borders. Clambering through the barbed-wire strands, helping each other to loosen caught hair or clothing, we would finally reach the perfect spot in the centre of a neighbour's cow paddock, right next to the bubbling creek.

We took pride in setting up our camp, ensuring that each sleeping bag was perfectly placed. We would crawl in and test the sleeping arrangement to make sure that we would not be resting on hardened mud made lumpy by the cows' hooves. Next, we would boil the billy, proud of our independence as we produced steaming mugs of black tea laden with sugar. Hilarity, daring games or lying in the grass watching the light in the trees ensued. But as the light began to fade and we began tugging on our jumpers again, our bravado always began to dim. Lights could now be seen in the houses perched higher up on the hills, and we knew that our mums and dads would be beginning to head to bed. It always felt a little lonely as we clambered into the depths of the down parlour, flicking on our torches and lying face up, feeling damp air from the cooling valley traverse our faces. We would whisper then, the shield of darkness allowing us to share secrets, desires and ambitions for a future unknown. In the quiet of these nights we could sense a world bigger than just us.

A SCHOOL FRENCH teacher once said to me, 'Johanna, it is the naughty ones that we remember the most.' Johanna. My formal name, used only when I was in trouble, preparing for airline travel, or lining up on a start line. Johanna. My alias for all things naughty.

There was no greater recipient of my cheekiness than our neighbours, a couple with grand plans for their idyllic hobby farm. Little did I know that twenty-two years later I would end up on a prominent government board with her, sitting beside one another as equals, with me apologising for the youthful jokes that left them close to despair.

The humour began from their love of moving around their property with minimal clothing. A gaping long anorak and a pair of gumboots. A platter quickly placed across their private areas when we entered their garden asking for milk. A lawnmower left running on the road verge when I rounded the corner on a bike.

Their openness irked the parents of the valley. Their noisy Labradors added to the kerfuffle.

When they began depositing their discarded grass clippings on Ashling and Ciara's side of the road, we decided that we would take matters into our own hands—literally. Handful by handful, we shuttled two acres' worth of lawn clippings back to their property, piling them in front of their carport in the most enormous pile, which nearly obscured the lower half of their small brown hatchback. This left them no option but to reverse through the mess when they headed off to work. Terrible!

On the day the local labourer came to bale the valley's hay, we were allowed to stay at home and help. We sat on the back of the tractor with Dad, jumping down to hoist the heavy bales into a neat pile on the trailer. Once finished, we ran down to Tim and Chloe's, firstly checking that their vehicle was missing from the garage—indicating their absence from the valley. Then we began to create huge towers from their hay, dragging bales from all corners of the paddock to pile them up and up and up. They would be impossible to reach!

It was a very sad hour when, from the heights of our kitchen window, we watched as Tim and Chloe drove their vehicle and trailer right alongside our leaning towers of Sandfly, plucked the bales easily

from the top, and within minutes had disappeared back to their hay shed.

By Christmas time, we had honed our skills. Each year one family hosted a Christmas party in the valley, and this year the honour went to Tim and Chloe. Everyone brought a plate of their favourite festive food, and stood around talking about the weather, gardens and children. Inevitably, youthful boredom kicked in and we began those games: ‘Dare you to ...’

By the end of the party, we had somehow managed to change the time of every single watch, radio, wall clock, wristwatch, car, microwave and oven display. We wound the clocks back thirty precise minutes, conscious that it would be better that our neighbours would be early rather than late to future appointments.

Proud of our impressive feat, we then quietly mentioned this to ‘The Parents’. We expected to be in trouble, but the adults simply burst into laughter. All of them. So we joined in too.

The neighbours eventually found out. But not till two days later when they went to watch the news on television and found a gardening show. It was our parents who copped an earful on our behalf, and we were warned to steer a very long way away from their property’s boundary, which we did ... for a while.

FOLLOWING in the creative footsteps of her own mother, Mum was a wizard in the kitchen. Baking days. Scraping fingers along the sides of the mixing bowls, pleading to be able to lick the spatula before it was plunged into the soapy suds in the sink. Mum’s spatulas ...

While my father was a practical man, he was also a philosophical and sensitive one. His ‘love language’ was the written word, while my mother loved the art of giving. And she loved Christmas!

As a mother-daughter-brother team, we prepared gingerbread houses, Christmas puddings and festive biscuits. We made gifts too: pyjama pants, embroidered jumpers and pots of jam, all mounded beneath the Christmas tree that we hauled in from the front porch—where it lived throughout the year. Then we smothered the poor sapling

in tinsel, lights, homemade decorations and a few extra baubles. Its feet buried in wrapped parcels awaiting their recipients. Stockings were hung by the wood fire and the hearth was cleaned for the arrival of Santa Claus.

When only flecks of chocolate remained in our empty advent calendars, Christmas morning would arrive. The contents of our Santa stockings would be strewn across the homemade quilt on my parents' bed. Then we rushed out to tend to the animals, soaking up the smell of roses that I now associate with this time of year. After breakfast and more presents, we would pile towels and bathers into the van and race towards the beach, arriving in a flurry of goosebumps for our traditional mid-morning Christmas swim with all the families of our valley.

One fateful Christmas, we were down to the last present. Piles of tissue paper sprawled across the living room. Cards read, goofy smiles, a family Christmas photo. Dad handed Mum a carefully wrapped gift. She read the card, smiled warmly and stood to give him a kiss. Then she returned to her place in front of the fire, leveraged off the sticky tape, pulled the paper back to reveal ... a spatula. A red, rubber one with a beautiful wooden handle. A spatula.

Mortified, she looked up at my father, searching in his face for the hint of a joke. But Dad never did 'Dad jokes'.

Our family collected a plethora of spatulas after this day. Dad's birthday—a spatula. Mum's birthday—another spatula. Next Christmas—yet another. The spatula became revered, a red, blue or pink token of humorous love, a gift that said, 'Thanks for all that you do for our family even if I hate bloody spatulas!'

CHILDHOOD. A flurry of scuffed black school shoes kicked off on the porch. School bags dumped inside the front door with a thud. The red-blue chequered school dress discarded in the laundry basket, replaced with baggy shorts, t-shirts, friendship and hearty appetites.

Childhood evenings, a time for running wildly amok before dusk became night. Down the gravel road I would fly, bike wheels spinning below and hair billowing behind, eagerly anticipating the adventures

that could be squeezed in between the 'now' and 'night'. I would provide a polite knock with a hint of impatience. A hasty push of the glass door and an entry into the familiarity of Ashling and Ciara's living room, my second home. Emanating from the kitchen were always the familiar smells of freshly fried potatoes, marinated meat and sautéed greens. I would greet their mum and dad before turning to my friends in dismay, seeing their plates still piled with food. I would sit beside them and talk but my glance would flick to the clock by the back door, counting down the remaining minutes until my own mother would be dishing up dinner. Unable to bear the slow movement of food around their plates, like a puppy I would quietly accept the food offerings they passed to me across the table when their parents were not watching. Yes, I would literally do anything, including eating my best friends' dinners, to be back outside, flying around the hills on our bikes, making the most of a precious evening.

Even at this age, I was well aware that each day, each moment, each second, is sacred.

As I grew bonnie and strong, my best friends accepted my hand-me-downs and played along with my wild ideas. We played hard, worked hard and, at times, fought hard. We were children of the wild.

Ciara put it beautifully the other day as we walked side by side up the Hobart Rivulet marvelling at the complexities of adulthood. 'When I turned thirteen, I actually cried. I just didn't want to grow up. I didn't want to become an adult.'

I recall a flashback: my mother gently carries me along the gravel road behind our home. She whispers in my toddler ears, 'Don't grow up Han, please don't grow up.' At heart, I don't think I have.

SANDBLY WAS the rock underneath our family. Wild adventures with my brother, close ties to my parents, the development of my wild spirit. Base camp for adventures in Crumbly Van.

I could return from a brain-searing day at school then, later, university, kick off my shoes and wander out through the garden, grass on skin—'earthing', as Dad would say. I could close the bedroom door, lie

on the floor and listen to the farm life outside. I had trees to clamber up when I needed even more 'me' time, pathways to roam when my love affair with running began, and neighbours with similar hobbies to encourage me along.

Every element of my youth at Sandfly was complete. The cosiness of our nineteenth-century farmhouse with its central fireplace and Huon pine dinner table crafted by Grandfather. Family memories formed within the uninsulated walls of our home. Wild adventures with enduring friends—or our four-legged friends. Sandfly played host to each important milestone that together sculpted my childhood.

During this childhood, our home in this steep-sided valley was the pillar that held me steady as I found my growing feet. It would soon come to anchor me when the winds of life whipped around me, my father gravely ill and my mother's heart aching for a gentler breeze to return. Little did I know the sense of loss that would then come when the 'For Sale' sign would feature on the property's front fence. No, in my youth I lived buried in the moment of every day, filled with child-like wonder at the sprouting world around me. I was my childhood and Sandfly was my soul.

I recently returned to the valley, rolling my adult-sized bike along the familiar roads and trails. As I whizzed down the hill, wattles budding and waiting for their moment to shine, I couldn't help but marvel that the valley had not aged, with not even one tiny wrinkle line to be seen. Our old family home still sits so proudly at its core, aloof and untouchable. It had outlived my childhood.

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**‘In nothingness there are only the heartbeats of hope.
I vow to myself that I will clamber out of this hole.
I will find my feet and flourish.’**

At 19, Hanny Allston faces a ‘perfect storm’. Her father is terrifyingly ill. Beside his hospital bed, she teeters painfully on crutches after surgery that could end her sporting career. Her future in medicine is in peril because the university cannot defer her studies.

From these depths, Hanny rises, step by step. Knocked back by further tragic losses and a relationship with a false friend—Anorexia—she continues to strive to find her feet.

Despite the times of struggle, Hanny’s story glows. The idyllic, unconventional childhood on a small organic farm in Tasmania. The pre-dawn chlorine fumes of swim squad before school. The spirited beauty of wilder adventures with her parents and older brother.

The rapid rise to athletic stardom. She becomes the first and only non-European World Champion in orienteering, and flirts with her potential for the Olympic marathon. The call Hanny eventually answers, however, is wilder. She becomes a champion ultra-distance trail runner, and a coach to others who seek the wild potential inside themselves.

Finding My Feet is a luminous story of hope, determination and possibility. Hanny Allston shares her life with courageous honesty. Her goal is that her playful spirit and rise above adversity can inspire you, too, to find your feet.

Hanny Allston is a peak performance coach with a heritage in assisting trail and ultra-distance runners to reach the pinnacle of their potential. She is an author, keynote speaker and host of The Find Your Feet Podcast where she shares the voices that need to be heard. She was 2006 World Orienteering Champion and is a past winner of both the Melbourne and New Zealand Marathon Championships. She is the current race record holder for multiple road, trail and ultra-running events, and has achieved many of the fastest known times on remote trails. She is truly a creature of the wild, and Hanny’s feet are at their happiest in a pair of muddy trail shoes ... exploring.

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