

Chapter 18

Underwater Sailors

Gil and Glasson were in Paris in August 1963. Their holiday was almost over. My holiday as an idle student was almost over too when a letter arrived from them. I had evidently spent so much of my time being a Scot that Glasson edged towards dialect:

‘...we feel we have time to wish Davey all the best for his exams. Of course the results will be low “Davey boy”. That is the idea of second term- to give you the chance to revise & so scare the hell out of you for the last term. Don’t let the brutes intimidate you, laddie. Remember: “Blesseth is he who expecteth nothing for he shall not be disappointed”. I can sure help you with your Scottish history. It is one long tale of fights & feuds. There were two kinds of Scots. The Dead crafty & the dead’.

They were clearly in high spirits. My parents had decided that history was one subject I might do well in. It did not occur to any of us then that I’d eventually turn to them for a personal history. Real history belonged to the old world rather than the new and to people who mattered, not the likes of them. As to the biblical reference to expecting nothing, that was a family joke. It was the response we often got as children when we asked for money. Gil and Glasson had come to allow themselves a mildly subversive laugh at biblical sayings. When, as a student of modern comedy, I intoned the portentous phrase Essau was an hairy man I was guaranteed a laugh.

Gil retired when he turned 65 in 1973. He and Glasson were both fit and alert and keen to continue their overseas travels. They had perfected the art of travelling light. By the 1970s, they were down to one suitcase, drawing envious comments from travelers burdened with bags. They were not tempted to join those who thought the world had gone to the dogs. Travel had become faster, lighter and more comfortable. Gil embraced the convenience of the drip dry shirt. He could travel the world with only two shirts. They went overseas in 1977 and were off again two years later. They started out in Hawaii and loved it. It was the last word in tourist comfort. They had not learnt that part of the purpose of travel is to complain at the number of tourists and how inauthentic the world had become. If their hotel

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had a waterfall in the foyer, as one did, so much the better. The rows of tourist hotels, the crowded beaches, the limousines only added to their experience, to the luxury of being waited on and pampered. Glasson's diary shows them heading off each day for a new sight or performance. They returned in 1979 knowing that a trip to New Zealand and a tour through central Australia awaited them. Then they would be off again to see the wide world. Their health was good and they were more relaxed and financially secure than ever.

We had just moved into a new house in Coogee, Sydney when Gil and Glasson came by to see Veronica, the new arrival, who had appeared in August 1982. Glasson was seventy one. We'd been in the living room having a coffee. Glasson volunteered to clear away the cups. Several minutes later I happened upon her standing in the bathroom, cups in hand, looking lost. She laughed it off. It was after all her first time in our Coogee house. That explained everything. She could see now that the kitchen was over there: 'Move aside my lad', she instructed, 'or lose a limb'.



Glasson and Gil in Coogee, December 1982

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On the same visit, Glasson was explaining something to my wife, Karen, when she suddenly hitched up her skirt and pointed to a bruise on her upper thigh. She was at the window in full view of the street. That was not at all like her. But perhaps it was her age and growing eccentricity. She'd always been a bit odd.

Gil had just turned seventy four and was in fine fettle. He had taken up lawn bowls and brought to it his usual quiet competitiveness. He would head off every Saturday, dressed in his whites, wearing his 'Gil Walker' name tag. He had tried to persuade Glasson to join the women bowlers. She referred derisively to them as 'white leghorns'; old hens all decked out in their whites. She threw in a cluck or two for emphasis. That was very unfair. White Leghorns are fine fowls. 'When', I can hear a quizz master ask, 'was the White Leghorn admitted to the American Standard of Perfection?' Too easy: 1874. Glasson may not have known that. On the question of bowls, Gil finally prevailed. At this point Glasson saw an opportunity to become a new person. She got herself a name tag reading 'Jill Walker'. When I looked sceptical she said I had to move with the times.

Gil tried to coach 'Jill' in bowls. He carefully explained that the ball could be bowled 'forehand' or 'backhand', either way it was imperative to hold it correctly. He demonstrates the art of correct ball holding in the living room. Jill struggles to keep a straight face. Gil provides further instruction on short and long, slow and fast greens. It was vital to study the cut of the grass. He bends down and feels the carpet as if testing the green. Another snort from Jill. After listening to all this I soon became a world authority on lawn bowls. When Gil wanted some comic relief he'd ask me for advice on how to approach his game. As for 'Jill', it all went in one ear and out the other. It just made no sense at all to her. What was the point of spending an afternoon trying to get a large black ball close to a small white one? Fast greens, slow greens, it was all gobbledygook. Jill's bowls cannoned into ditches left, right and centre. They surrendered half way down the green, marooned in no man's land. After one of the shortest careers known to the club, Jill retired. Gil continued his bowling and Glasson went back to her knitting.

Glasson was also having problems with thinning hair. Time for a wig. She hit upon a tawny coloured creation. The 1970s will not be regarded as the high-water mark of wig making.

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Wigs were hair-like objects that did as much to advertise hair loss as to conceal it. Gil was having similar problems. He elected for the combined hat and comb-over (the 'barcode' hairstyle) rather than the wig. That was something to be thankful for. The barcode was quite enough. I was still decidedly hirsute with more than enough hair for family and friends. When it came to hair, our family presented a textbook case of unequal resource distribution.

It became more clear over the next year or so that things were not quite right with Glasson. She grew more forgetful. My sister was on the spot in Adelaide and noticed the change, an accumulation of small things. Gil acted as if it was business as usual. They were just getting older and a bit vaguer. There were several flaws in this argument, one being that Gil was still on the ball. If the ageing process alone explained what was going wrong, why wasn't he falling apart at the seams too? It was not a subject Gil and Glasson cared to discuss. Whenever I rang from Sydney they were as good as gold. Privately, both would have known this was hardly the case. While Glasson didn't have much time for doctors, she had always been tempted by alternative therapies. It was back to the Bernarr MacFadden era and the belief that nature held the key to recovery. Glasson saw a naturopath who encouraged the hope that all she needed in order to feel better was a pinch of this and a few drops of that.

I can understand that hope. Years after Glasson's death I still had an occasional dream of being back in the family home. Glasson has small lapses of memory and a hint of perplexity at a world grown slightly awry. But the point of the dream is that she is doing pretty well. There are the old jokes, the old sayings. I am puzzled and want to talk to Gil about how this can have happened. I find no opportunity to raise the subject. There hardly seems any need to do so. There is really nothing to discuss. The dream re-writes Glasson's last ten years, providing the better ending we all wanted her to have. Gil had steadfastly resisted the idea that Glasson was slipping into her own strange, disconnected, unrecognizable world. He and Glasson had always travelled together, following Frommer, Glasson sitting on their blue suitcase while Gil located a budget hotel. Her last and longest journey was like no previous trip. Glasson took this one on her own without so much as a farewell. Who knows what borders she crossed and through what haunted landscapes she moved?

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There was not much doubt that Glasson was 'losing her mind'. For my parents' generation that conjured up awful visions of the asylum. When I finally got my father to admit there was a problem, his fear of the asylum leapt at me. He was desperately worried that Glasson might be sent to Parkside and begged me to keep her out of that awful place. The Parkside Lunatic Asylum had been a forbidding Adelaide landmark from the 1870s. It was surrounded by a high stone wall surmounted by broken glass. The wall has since been lowered, the glass removed and the name changed. The dark history remains. I did not know then that Oswald may have been admitted to a mental institution. As bad as it was to be jailed as a criminal, it was worse to be locked away as a lunatic. Gil had been so proud of Glasson, so impressed by her calisthenics and her way with words, it was more than he could bear to think that she might end her days in Parkside asylum. I could see why he wanted to shelter her from officials with the power, as he saw it, to have her carted off to the madhouse.

As the youngest in the family it was not clear what my role should be. My brother was in New Zealand and I was in Sydney, leaving my sister trying to figure out what was going on. Glasson's doddering GP actively discouraged any attempt on our part to learn more about her condition. It was increasingly plain to us all that managing Glasson was pushing Gil towards a breakdown. I was elevated up the chain of command. I had not dealt with the hopeless GP and the complications he had caused and as I was thought to be closer to Glasson than my brother and sister it seemed logical for me to see what could be done. This was Gil's thinking too. Glasson might just listen to Davey boy.

When I heard that Glasson had fallen over and that Gil had also fallen in trying to get her upright, it was clearly time to get to Adelaide. While Glasson recognized who I was, she asked no questions about what I was doing back at Glynburn Road. Like the toaster, I just happened to be there. I found Gil rattled and exhausted. He had the haunted look of a beaten man with nowhere to turn. Glasson had to be watched all the time. Everything electrical was a hazard. She was much better at turning the stove on than in turning it off. She would stand before the open refrigerator wondering why she was there. She picked up the phone, not knowing how to answer it. The phone rang a lot. It turned out that the home number was very close to that of the local family planning clinic. There were callers seeking

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contraceptive and family planning advice, not a long suit of Gil's. What at any other time would have been a laughing matter was now just another insoluble problem.

Getting Glasson dressed had become very frustrating. More often than not, when Gil asked what she wanted to wear, Glasson had no idea. On other occasions she might start with very definite ideas only to change them almost immediately. Having eventually got her dressed, she would often ask where they were going and why she wasn't wearing another outfit. While it would have been easier for Gil to have opted for the dressing gown and slippers, he knew that Glasson liked being properly dressed. He owed her that.

The TV drama, 'Mother and Son', coincided with Glasson's accelerating decline. Ruth Cracknell played Maggie Beare, an elderly woman in the early stages of senile dementia. It was a program we did not always succeed in avoiding. While it appeared that Maggie was losing her marbles, she consistently came out on top. The shrewd old thing was still in command. The problem, as the program presented it, was not that Maggie was in a serious way, but that those around her failed to recognize her resilience. The message was clear: 'this is one feisty woman, show respect' etc. Glasson Maude Wallace Bourne Walker had always made it clear that she didn't want to end up in a vegetative state, kept alive on feeding tubes. She was as strong as old Maggie, but her condition could not be wished away: the loss of memory and the systematic collapse of mental and bodily functions was irreversible and devastating. Maggie didn't have Alzheimer's as we came to know it. She had a script writer. It makes all the difference.

I had to tell Gil that he could no longer look after Glasson. We'd have to find respite care in the short run and a nursing home longer term. He gave me a defeated look and said nothing. 'Father and Son, the sequel': shoot close up of an old fellow trying to cope with the news that he has done as much as he can for his wife of nearly fifty years. Pan to wife carefully placing her wig in the oven. Show impractical academic son. Canned laughter. What to do next? Wait for Gil to let me know what he is thinking, as I know he will. He is a good old stick. Although he was a good old stick my plan worried Gil. He did not want to tell Glasson that it was no longer possible for her to stay at home. How could he tell her that and how might she react? While Glasson seemed pretty docile, Gil feared that she might become

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argumentative, accusing him of wanting to have her locked away. He would hate that. Although there had been various plans about where they might go when it became necessary to leave the house, nothing had been done. There was no next step.

I told Gil I would talk to Glasson about respite care. 'Would you', he asked? He still had serious misgivings, fearing ... who knows what? That Glasson would scream or sob with grief? Would my little talk just make things worse? While I was far from sure myself, I could see that the only humane course left to us was to talk to Glasson in the hope that she would understand that we wanted her to be cared for, not locked away. We had to hope that she was still capable of comprehending enough to be reassured. It was late afternoon and Gil and I were both emotionally exhausted. We'd sleep on it and if, in the morning, my talk still seemed a good idea we'd go ahead. We could hear the birds in Hazelwood Park, discussing the activities of the day, planning their evening meal. What a noisy crowd they were. I went off to sleep in my old room.

Gil and I were both secular in outlook. He took the view that death was the end of the road, not the start of a new journey. There would be no reunions, no heaven or hell, no celestial choirs. He was stoic on that score. So there we were, Gil and I, with none of the comforts that religion can provide and without resort to God's mercy or Christ's forgiveness, unconsolated by any hope that Glasson was preparing to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. There was a family Bible in the house somewhere, not that we thought of opening it. Neither of us would have known what passages to read had we done so.

Next morning Gil was no less troubled than before about the talk. We settled Glasson into the living room with a cup of tea. Gil had got her nicely dressed in the autumnal colours she seemed to prefer. Gil disappeared. He travelled up and down the hallway at regular intervals, glancing our way to see how things were going. The glass sliding doors were shut. He could not hear what was being said. The room was Glasson's creation and expressed her taste. She and Gil had moved from Robert Avenue at the end of 1963 after their trip abroad. They had graduated to Hazelwood Park, one of Adelaide's older, leafier suburbs. You could see the tops of the majestic old gums in the park from our kitchen window. Waterfall Gully was not so very far away, a regular stop on Pop Bourne's itinerary for the water supply company. I

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would go there as an adolescent when Glasson was having one of her nervy turns. Gil and Glasson had bought a new house, made of basket range stone. That was a sign that they had found their way into a modern home in a good suburb. The soil was much better than at Robert Avenue. Gil had a fine lawn interspersed with silver birches, flowering cherry trees and two liquid ambers for autumnal colour. They were not far from Glasson's family home in Marryatville.

On sweltering summer evenings, Glasson would listen for the 'gully breezes' that came down from the Adelaide hills. At the rattle of a window she'd be outside, hoping for some relief from the heat. These zephyrs were part of a pantomime in which a tormented soul, Glasson Maude Wallace Bourne Walker, near death from heat exhaustion was brought back to life by the merciful arrival of the Gully Breeze. And not a moment too soon. It was a cliff-hanger. James and Maudie would have experienced those breezes at a time when there were fewer houses between them and the hills. I wonder if the pantomime of the Gully Breeze was something Glasson remembered from her childhood, a game she played with Blanche, two little dancers, egged on by their parents.

The room we sat in had a bay window, further evidence that Glynburn Road was something special. Glasson had chosen the furniture. I always thought it looked too large and ornate for the room. It gestured towards a French past, a world of elegance and sophistication, of liveried servants and string quartets. A large painting in a handsome frame depicted a wooded scene, a lake in the foreground rimmed by a curve of narrow pathway. In the background, there were all the rich colours of a European autumn. An alabaster lamp stood near the bay window. Gil and Glasson had bought it in Pisa after much bargaining and banter. 'You know lad', I remember Glasson saying, 'as I was walking towards the tower I felt quite dizzy. I grabbed Gil by the arm and he said, "thanks for doing that, I was feeling quite unsteady". He thought I was helping him when all I was doing was steadying myself. We both laughed'. The lamp was a favorite, a reminder of their days as world travellers.

I had spent some time wondering how to start the conversation with Glasson. I began by telling her how Karen and I were going in Sydney and what the kids were up to. I showed her some photographs of them with our two Maltese terriers, a mother and son

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combination, Tessa and Elf. Elf was a tiny fellow. Glasson looked at the photographs and, while she asked no questions, seemed to follow what I was saying. We had always been a cat family. I asked her if she thought it was a terrible betrayal for us to become dog owners. She smiled uncertainly and shook her head. I reassured her that we still had Sukey, our ginger cat, and showed another photograph of Tessa and Sukey looking entirely at home on the sofa. She studied the photograph closely and then turned to me and asked: 'You wrote a book on three underwater sailors didn't you?'



I was taken aback. While I had not written a book on underwater sailors, I was impressed by the idea. I paused before replying and in that pause Glasson shook her head, laughed a little, and said 'that's not right is it?' I admitted that it wasn't quite right, adding that underwater sailing would certainly be a great subject for a book. Where had such an idea come from? What tangled cerebral processes had linked me to such an enterprise? I had written a book about the Melbourne writers I had studied at the ANU, Vance Palmer, scourge of the drapers, among them, so the book part was right, but the subject matter had been scrambled beyond recognition. Although this exchange was hardly encouraging, Glasson and I were talking, even if words and topics kept slipping away. I sensed the watery world she inhabited, a murky zone of odd shapes and strange marine animals.

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I mentioned that I had heard she had fallen over and that Gil had also taken a tumble trying to get her on her feet. I tried the comic path with her, knowing this to be the advice she had once given me. She smiled at the picture I painted of them both prostrate on the bathroom floor. I told her that Gil was worried that he would not be able to look after her at home, adding that he was not at his best crawling around on the floor. Glasson agreed and laughed, a rather wintry laugh, but a laugh all the same. I could see Gil pacing up and down the hallway, trying to get a sense of how things were going. My sense was that Glasson was taking it in. I explained to her that Gil would need to have a rest and that we'd find her a place to stay where she'd be well looked after. We'd all visit her there. She'd be more comfortable and Gil would be able to recover his strength. Glasson listened. I asked if that would be alright and explained that we didn't want to do anything that she was unhappy about or did not understand.

Our talk was coming to an end when Glasson asked me, quite out of the blue, whether I'd 'got rid of that blessed dressing gown'. I was not sure what she meant until she pointed towards the letter box in the front garden. Her arm shook as she pointed. She was old and terribly frail, almost to the point of transparency. A number of years earlier a photograph of our house had appeared in a glossy magazine. It might have been a proud moment but for the fact that I was standing at the letterbox in a tatty dressing gown. It is clearly well into the afternoon. Glasson had often reminded me that on the only occasion that 'her' house had been displayed in a home beautiful setting, I had spoilt the whole effect. When so many memories had been scrambled or erased, Glasson still recalled this episode. We both began to laugh at the silliness of it. The relief on Gil's face was something to see. He joined us. Everything looked brighter.

After a lot of ringing around, we found respite care. I again explained to Glasson that we'd take her to the new place where she would be looked after, while Gil had a rest. We arrived at our new location. The atmospherics were not good. It was too like a hospital, too officious. I could see Glasson looking uneasy, so I ran through my speech of reassurance again. A nurse appeared and asked her if she was Glasson Walker. Glasson stood up, looked straight at her and replied, 'I am'. There was real courage and dignity in that action and in

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those two words. I could not have been more proud of her. She had heard what I'd been saying and had made a special effort to play her part.

The nurse took us to Glasson's new home. We followed her through many doors until we ended up in a little house of horrors known as the dementia ward. It was nothing like the reassuring place I had told Glasson about. A disheveled old woman screamed at us and pointed mockingly to Glasson as the new arrival. Others simply lay where they were, oblivious to the world around them. All my reassurances turned cold in that stark place. We stayed as long as we could. We were told there was a lot of theft there so everything had to be locked away. Glasson could see where she was, see what had become of her, but there was no anger, no reproaches, none of the reactions we had feared. Her quiet submission seemed worse than all the disturbed reactions we had anticipated. I felt that I had betrayed her. Gil and I drove away from the hospital feeling depressed. That night I cried for Glasson Maude Wallace Bourne Walker, for what had become of her, for the proud way she had stood there before the nurse and for my failure to find her a better place.



Glasson in the nursing home

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After many phone calls and lots of visits to some depressingly bad nursing homes, Gil and I eventually found a place that could take Glasson. Someone had to die first and there was no knowing how long that might take. We were grateful for the offer. It proved to be a very short wait. Glasson was finally accommodated in a pleasant nursing home, or as pleasant as they can be, in her own room. The staff were thoughtful, the grounds well-maintained. Cherry blossoms were in flower. Glasson seemed happy enough to be there, surrounded by photographs of the family. Even when she had still been at home, sitting in her living room, surrounded by familiar objects, she would sometimes ask to be taken home. Gil made it a point of visiting every day. He got to know the staff and would bring them flowers from his garden. They thought he was a lovely old gentleman, full of consideration for Glasson. Unlike the fictional Maggie Beare, Glasson's Alzheimer's followed the medical script. Her decline was steady, predictable and painful for those watching on though not, it seemed, to her. Her presence grew fainter and the old Glasson was rarely seen or heard. She did not see her Glynburn road home again.

My mother spent her last three years curled up in a foetal position, recognizing no-one. She may have heard our voices or they may simply have merged with the echoing sounds and sonar signals from the depths. She was way down there where great banks of seaweed swayed and flowed and dumb marine beasts nudged this way and that along the dark ocean floor. Glasson had left the mundane world behind her.

Gil remained mentally alert into his nineties. He formed strong bonds with his grandchildren. As he grew older a lot of the strictness that I associated with him as a Headmaster dropped away. He was never a great grumbler and while he no doubt had plenty to complain about he kept all that to himself. I am sure there was an element of calculation in this. He could see that being a cranky old man was unlikely to have people flocking to see him. Unlike many old men, he did not drone on about the dreadful state of the modern world and the special awfulness of modern adolescents. He was unfazed by grand-daughters with spiky hair, coloured hair or no hair at all. If they were up for a talk or a game of billiards he was more than happy. He had long ago stopped being a Headmaster charged with maintaining discipline.

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When we took Gil to Burra in his eighties he was alert and clear-headed. Glasson was in cloud cuckoo land unable to recognize anyone let alone communicate with them. The last ten years of her life were increasingly consumed by Alzheimer's. Her flow of stories dried up. Glasson had virtually gone from our world by 1985. Had she lived longer there would have been more chat about the dancing Bournes, more family stories and more curiosity on our part about those people in the photographs and the names in the family Bible. Who were they again?

While we have any number of photographs and memories of Gil growing older, memories of Glasson's decline are at once painful and powerful. It became increasingly difficult to remember how she was before Alzheimer's. Even Gil struggled to recall the old Glasson. Alzheimer's not only destroyed her memory, it had all but destroyed older memories of her. The last three years were especially grim as she lay there, day in and day out, gaunt, barely moving, seeing nothing, recognizing no-one. It was pointless asking how she was. Gil would always go with us to the nursing home on our visits to Adelaide. We would all climb into his car, trying to strike a hopeful note, each of us dreading that short drive, the slow climb from the car on arrival and the dreadful walk through the car park, past the roses to reception and on into Glasson's ward. She was no longer in her own room. It hardly mattered what room she was in now. It was a journey Gil had taken many times. We tried to talk to Glasson, but each word hung awkwardly in the air and none reached her. She was so old and thin. Her grey, wispy hair had been combed by the nurse. Gil would occasionally slip a jelly bean into her mouth. 'Here you are Glasson', he would say tenderly, always hoping for a response 'you like jelly beans don't you dear?' Barely a sound came from her, no gesture, no movement, not the faintest sign of recognition. Glasson had gone, lost now, far beyond the end of the town.