

# Introduction

I was going to write a business book – a career journal filled with clever learnings, sage advice and world-changing missions – but I was struggling, big time. By struggling, I mean I hated every word. I spent more than two years producing bursts of word count, then rereading and deleting them.

Then I was invited to speak at an event for Arianna Huffington and I met her sister Agape. She said to me, ‘Don’t write a business book, my dear. Write the stories you want to leave for the people you love.’ And so I did. I didn’t set out to write a memoir, but that’s what was spilling out when I met Agapi Stassinopoulos on a sunny Tuesday in Melbourne in June 2017. I’d been at it for two years when she told me just to write my stories. And so I kept going. I wrote what I want my favourite people to read, stories that many have never heard. And while I have written it with my nearest and dearest in mind, this book is also for you.

Buckle up. Here comes my book: a big, colourful and, sometimes, downright awful word-vomit of love, fun and survival with a side order of WTF. Honestly, I can’t make up the stuff that happens to me.

After the first, each big-arse chapter is arranged by a theme based on a quality I admire in the people I’ve worked with, lived with, travelled with or battled alongside. I share with you the life-

changing lessons I've learned from those remarkable people and their unspoken invitation to do life in a way that is richer than anything I knew before they crossed my path.

My deepest wish is that reading this book makes you want to do cool stuff, make plans, launch that business, pack your bags, shave your head, ride that horse, date that hottie, apply for that job, chuck that party – and, most of all, get your girls out, whatever that means for you.

## **A Kick Where It Hurts**

I broke my coccyx playing ping-pong at the pub.

I had been trying to slam home a win with a killer serve, but instead I came crashing down on my arse and lost the game. This is a metaphor for my life: going out with a bang.

It was 2016. A few days after breaking my bum, high as a kite on Endone, I was booked to present a keynote speech in Canberra to a room full of women leaders. Open mic: I could speak on whatever I liked, as long as it somehow fit the conference's theme of 'transformation'. At the time, I was the boss of a kids' charity in Cambodia and often spoke at events like this. Courtney, the event manager, emailed me to ask for confirmation of my speech title. With oxycodone hydrochloride and savvy B dancing through my veins, I typed, 'The title of my speech shall be: "How to Turn a Kick in the Vag into Flying High Like a Boss".' Courtney came back to me with an apologetic email about Canberra, corporate, public servants,

conservative thinkers and how she honestly thought we would not get away with such a strongly worded title. High on my next dose, I emailed her back: ‘C’mon! Read this article by your very own master of ceremonies, Jane Caro, then get back to me.’

Jane had written the article for *Women’s Agenda*, an online feminist publication, the previous year. Its headline had caught my eye: ‘It’s nice to be nice but much more important to be brave’. In it, Jane articulates how bold communication is a risk but also more likely to be heard than niceties. She discusses how toeing the line and being politically correct produces rubbish results. Nobody listens to super-cautious tiptoeing – that kind of communication just gets swept away with all the other noise. Jane gives a campaign example that she worked on as a copywriter: a poster designed to encourage horse-mad girls to wear helmets. They give you helmet head and totally mess up your hair, so I get the issue. The image on the poster was a girl with long, dark brunette hair, taking her horse over a jump, looking beautiful without her helmet. The headline was just one word: ‘BLONDE’. That might offend a lot of blondes, and feminists in general. But it hits the point home like a galloping Clydesdale: if you are not wearing a helmet when you ride, you are not very smart. This is bold stuff. And Jane is blonde.

I love Jane’s no-bullshit boldness. After I read that article, I went on to write some of the best communication I’ve ever produced. I wrote Facebook posts that were quoted in the mainstream media and reached ten times my usual audience. I wrote campaigns that hit home hard. Eventually I wrote this book. You’d better saddle up then.

Goodbye, nice. Hello, brave.

A day after I sent Jane’s article to Courtney, she replied: ‘Lucy, I have fought the good fight with the powers that be ... and I won.’ I screamed – I’d been sure she would say no! Go, Courtney, you trailblazing Champion of the Vag. You box fighter, you. I laughed so hard my arse hurt.

A year had passed since the biggest kick in the vag I have copped to date, so I figured it was time for me to reflect on it and talk about it with strength, forgiveness and humour. Most of all, it was time for me to take stock, really work out what I’d learned from that low blow and share that with others.

A kick in the vag is just like a kick in the balls. It’s the chick equivalent of a painful knockdown. A hit in the weak spot, a take-down that truly hurts. You don’t see a kick in the vag coming – or, if you have an inkling of it, you shrug it off as impossible because no one could be that cruel or stupid, surely. But it’s not always horrid humans who make life suck so terribly you can’t breathe: a health crisis, the death of a loved one, a horrible accident or a monumental financial loss.

Every woman I know has suffered a shocker setback at some point in her life: an unexpected sacking, an unkind split with a partner or friend, or a brutal loss. It’s a part of life we all have to endure, but a tough one to prepare for. We never really know when or just how a kick in the vag is going to take us down.

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In April 2015, I was the chief executive officer of an international

aid charity. Its founder is an elderly Australian obstetrician who created a network of childbirth-injury hospitals in Ethiopia. Dr Catherine Hamlin was her name. I'd been the CEO for almost three years when I was fired by text message by a board of three volunteers.

Catherine was told I had resigned and called me in hysterics from her mudbrick home in Ethiopia. She had picked me out of the ranks of volunteers to champion her work in Australia, and together we'd raised millions and put the issue of smashed-up vaginas on breakfast TV.

On the day she'd asked me to be her Australian-based CEO, I had promised Catherine that I would never resign – and so here I was, with tears shooting out of my face, reassuring her that this departure was not my choice. 'They just don't appreciate you like I do!' she shrieked down the phone, crying her eyeballs out.

Catherine lived in Ethiopia on the grounds of her much-loved hospital. I was based in Sydney and reported to a board that governed a separate charitable entity in Australia.

I'd known about Catherine for ten years, since I first saw her on my TV screen being interviewed by Oprah Winfrey. Catherine had lived in Ethiopia for most of her life, treating women with horrific, preventable childbirth injuries known as an obstetric fistula. A fistula is a hole between two organs that's not meant to be there; an obstetric fistula is a hole between bladder and vagina or bowel and vagina, or holes connecting all three – the trifecta of horror.

When Catherine sat on Oprah's couch in 2004, she was

eighty years old. I was thirty, sitting on a grotty suburban couch breastfeeding my newborn baby. Catherine was in Chicago, and I was in Sydney. Her words hit me in the feels like a freight train. Still walking like John Wayne after giving birth, I was hormonally disadvantaged when it came to a heartbreaking story about women and babies suffering in childbirth.

Catherine quietly and gracefully told the tragic story of the patients she was treating in Ethiopia. About five per cent of women worldwide have an obstructed labour: the baby gets stuck. In Ethiopia, without a doctor's help these babies almost always die, and the mother is left with life-changing internal injuries that leave her incontinent, grieving and excluded from her husband, her family and her village. All these women need is access to a good hospital, but most live too remotely to get the help they need.

I had just given birth in a squeaky-clean hospital ten minutes' drive from my house. With obstetricians on tap, midwives by my side and a doula cheering me on, I also had ice for my sore tush, antibiotics for my mastitis and a lactation consultant on speed dial. All for free.

I was so pumped to see an Aussie on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Catherine's unusual story made me cry all over my baby and love him a little bit more than before. A few days later, I decided to hunt Catherine down and become a donor.

Never in a million years did I think I'd end up spending the next chunk of my life travelling to Ethiopia and working alongside her. I would never have dreamed that, thanks to Oprah Winfrey, I would stand in a theatre next to The Great

Dr Hamlin and photograph her steady hands closing up the holes that had almost destroyed her patient's life. And I'd never dreamed of being a close friend to her son, Richard, and her Ethiopian staff.

When I became a donor, it cost A\$450 to fund a standard fistula operation. I had just started working as a doula, or birth attendant, so I set my birth-attendance fee to the same price as a fistula operation in Ethiopia. Every time I went to a birth in Australia, I funded an operation in the Horn of Africa. Warm fuzzies left, right and centre: babies born, women healed, happy days. I didn't tell my doula clients what I did with their fees, but with each donation to Catherine's charity I included a note that said something like, 'This donation comes thanks to the birth of a healthy baby at Royal North Shore Hospital in Sydney.'

When you become a donor, you start receiving stuff in the mail, and the stuff that landed in my letterbox from Catherine's then-fundraisers in Australia was so bad it hurt my head. So, I called the charity and said straight up, 'Your communication is doing you damage – let me help you.'

There was a long pause over the phone. I had found the author of the ugly newsletter.

After that painful pause, the elderly man at the other end said, 'My dear, I have been praying for someone like you for ten years.'

Soon, Catherine's work in Ethiopia was a pro bono client of the ad agency I had been building for a decade. Her hospital became my favourite client, and we didn't bill a cent. It was kind of crippling to the business, but I didn't care. Purpose does

that to ya.

By the time Catherine asked me to head up a new charity for her in Australia, I had worked with her former fundraisers for a number of years, cleaning up their communication and boosting their fundraising. I had been to Ethiopia many times and got to know Catherine well. She is gracious and polite, hardworking, and one of the few people I've ever known who makes me want to be a better person.

When she asked me to be her CEO, I didn't need any thinking time. Yes, of course. I'll slog it for your patients, Catherine. When do we start?

Fast-forward three years to that miserable day in April 2015, when I was fired by that teeny-tiny board of volunteers. I loved and admired Catherine, but I didn't report to her. Though she is the organisation's founder, she had no power to prevent what happened to her CEO in Australia, even though she asked for me to be reinstated. After three years of slogging it to raise millions for the patients in Ethiopia – and only half of that time being paid a salary – I was given the boot.

I had grown the charity from zero to hero so fast that I'd pissed some people off. There were well-meaning supporters in other parts of the world who'd been plodding along for decades, limiting the charity to the faith market. This made no sense to me – surely non-churchies would want to help cure smashed-up vaginas in Africa, too?

Well, I was right, and in six months we'd gone from fuck-all to the single largest stakeholder in the hospital by making this story a secular one. I had done an outstanding job, but the

board had other plans.

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Exactly thirty days before I was fired, I sat in the witness box at the Knox Grammar Hearing of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sex Abuse. My face was on the front page of the papers for a week after I testified against the headmaster of that elite Uniting Church boys' school for groping me as a teenager. When asked by the media pack if I would be watching his testimony the following day, I said, 'No, I have millions to raise for patients in Ethiopia.' But I soon had nothing to raise, and it stung.

Two weeks after my testimony hit the news, on a sunny day in mid-March 2015, I was called in to another shouty, impromptu meeting with my board. They told me I'd be given a graceful exit over the next few months. Being fired is never graceful, no matter what they tell you.

On that day, I was sitting in my car in a back street of Paddington, letting it all sink in, when I took a call from a number I didn't recognise. It was HarperCollins offering me a book deal.

'Err, I don't think you want me to write a book,' I said. 'I won't be a CEO for much longer.'

'*Ooooooh*, yes we do,' said the best publisher in the universe, whose name just happens to be Catherine.

I cried like there was no tomorrow. I had no idea what I would do next.

At least I knew what I had to do that day. Straight after that awful meeting with the board, I was scheduled to go to the USA on business for two very long weeks. When I landed back home and the plane was still on the tarmac in Sydney, I received a text message saying the board had changed their decision. There was no 'gracious exit' on offer after all – today would be my last on the payroll. Goodbye. A box of things from my desk was couriered to my house before I'd even walked through customs.

Working on a cause that mattered had given me purpose. I would miss my chief financial officer, a big softy named Alex, and our loyal volunteers and interns. They were the best. When I left, the vollies threw me an unofficial farewell at the pub, and they all wore pink wigs and we cried like idiots. I would miss the daily chats with Catherine, our Ethiopian staff and working for the beautiful patients – I would never sit on the grass in the sunshine and chat with fistula patients ever again. I would go from high-performing CEO, surrounded by a busy, noisy team, bolting on and off planes and stages, to sitting at home looking out the kitchen window, literally watching the rain trickle down the glass. It sucked so bad. Everything ached.

Professionally, I had to accept that I would never meet another Catherine Hamlin. There really is no one else like her. No one as gracious, grateful, selfless and hardworking.

My friend Julia checked in on me often. During one teary conversation, she gave me some precious advice: 'I have had wonderful jobs before, Lucy, and I have had rubbish jobs. You will find another job that makes your heart sing.' The way she

referred to ‘jobs’ in plural caught my attention. The thought that I would work in lots of different jobs made this current agony seem less important, less earth-shattering. This wasn’t my one and only chance to do good work.

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But that wasn’t all. Another blow was about to be delivered.

Just a month after I was fired, my husband of twenty years asked me for a divorce. A man of impeccable timing.

These events combined into one massive, dirty smackdown, like I was Muhammad Ali’s speedball. No job. No husband.

The end of my marriage felt like a monumental failure. There would be other jobs, but this was my family. It felt like a funeral. Our little family suddenly died. My husband and I had been together our whole adult lives, but he had plans for a new life and was done trying to fix up this one. He wanted a quiet life and a quiet wife, he told me. He had become more conservative; I had become more adventurous and free. If I’m honest, he’d been hinting at this for a year, but I’d been busy zigzagging to and from Ethiopia, being adored by the Hamlins. Now my husband was actually saying it: ‘I want a divorce. I don’t want to be with you anymore. I have seen a glimpse of a life I would rather live with someone else.’

I felt so damn sad. I felt so sorry for my three kids.

But after a while, I also felt a sense of relief – I’d been trapped for a long time, and now I had the freedom to create a new life. I just wanted to do this in a way that was right for my children.

Divorce is an utterly shit business model. You take a family, double their expenses, and add a whole lot of grief and conflict. It sends everyone broke except lawyers, so I refused to go down that path, at least not immediately. Instead of establishing a second home in the most expensive city in the world, I decided to live lean, coming and going from the house they lived in, so my kids could go to the schools they loved and I could earn a living. Because the kids were my priority and my husband was unemployed for a while, it was me who had to move out. I was well practised at living from a suitcase. It was a horrible decision but the best one for the kids. It also gave me the freedom to live somewhere other than a quiet suburb in Sydney, tripping over my ex-husband’s new lady friend, so I found a spot by the beach.

The next six months were the most challenging but healing in my whole little life. I grieved for that job like a lost love. But I grieved for my kids more. Their idea of a family was gone in an instant, and they cried and cried and cried. I would drive away from them and sob my head off. Then I’d crawl into bed at the other end and cry myself to sleep.

Soon after losing my job, I was adapting to the end of my marriage and a whole new life governed by words such as ‘child support’ and ‘shared parenting’. At least I was well. I kept saying that inside my head. At least I am well. At least I am well.

Early in the process, I made an appointment to see my lawyer. I’d known him for more than two decades, and when I explained it was my turn in the family to file for divorce, he stopped and looked at me over his glasses.

‘Why on earth did he leave you?’ he asked me.

‘We were miserable for a while, but then he met someone else,’ I said. He just stared at me.

‘Was she pretty?’ he asked. That question floored me. My guts churned and my heart pounded in my ears. I started to cry, and he apologised for asking such a rubbish question.

Although my job and marriage were gonski, my skills and my rad hair stayed with me. And my sense of adventure. Anxiety would try to take hold before my sense of adventure could, but I knew I’d be all right in the end. I just kept moving forward. Time heals but time also reveals.

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Midway through 2015, the worst year in my life, I met Doc. We met on Twitter first, then in real life just a week after I was asked to saddle up the divorce horse. Doc made a very difficult year much easier than it might have been with his steady reassurance, epic cuddles and non-judgemental openness. He was my landing pad.

Doc is a big softie. He looks like Chopper Read but sounds like Barry White. His back is one enormous tattoo. In the centre of the design is a huge, gnarly portrait of Neptune, the Roman god of the sea. Neptune’s beard often gets itchy.

When I first met Doc online, I had just testified in the Royal Commission. He posted a flurry of tweets about my testimony. He seemed articulate and kind, so we started chatting.

Doc knew I was hurting after losing my job. I confessed I

was super depressed and looking for the answer at the bottom of all my wine bottles, commencing at midday each day. I told him I needed daily excursions to distract me from myself. ‘Make me an excursion,’ he said. ‘Come over to Clovelly and we can have a coffee.’ He doesn’t even drink coffee. I drove to the eastern beaches on a sunny Friday in May and pulled up outside his house. I texted a friend in Canberra so she knew where I would be and could come to my rescue if something went wrong. Canberra – what was I thinking?

Doc invited me in to his little apartment, lined with boogie boards, surf magazines and qualification certificates for PhDs. He welcomed me in, sat me on his couch and let me blurt out all my sorrows for two solid hours. Then he finally said, ‘What is it you need from me?’ He was probably busting for the loo or a surf and needed to wind things up with this teary woman he’d only seen before in the newspaper or on Twitter. #timetogocrazypants

I had been grinding my teeth, watching the lights on his PlayStation twinkle, wishing he’d just give me a big hug. He had the kindest, deepest voice I’d heard in a long time. ‘I need cuddles,’ I said.

‘Well, I’d better take my shoes off, then,’ said Doc.

We lay on his couch and cuddled, and that was the start of that. We were together on and off for the next three years, and we are still good friends. Doc, my big, soft, bourbon-drinking, ciggie-smoking, wave-riding, sun-seeking landing pad.

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Right at the time I was doubled over from the swift kick of divorce, my friend Davinia was running the same gauntlet. I'd been her doula about eight years earlier, and we had become good friends. Her birth was hideously long. Her partner and I took micro-naps on the floor of the labour ward while Davinia closed her eyes and waited for the next contraction. I can still picture her: with such grace, eyes closed, breathing deeply between contractions. She looked like a patient queen awaiting a cavalry charge – straight out her wazoo.

Davinia and I lived in the same conservative Sydney suburb, but she had purple hair sometimes and wore Birkenstocks and hippy clothes. Weirdos like me and Davinia can see each other a mile off, and we gravitate to each other. She's a country girl who's travelled widely, and she does not possess a judgemental bone in her body. Her kids have Afghani blood and a free spirit about them. Davinia was always the first person to volunteer for my charity events, and she feeds my kids when they wander into her house.

We navigated that first year of our marriage separations with daily text messages, dancefloors and white wine. She laughed at my jokes, listened to my rants, soothed my grief and reassured me of my next steps. I did the same for her. I'm not sure how I would have survived without her.

There was another really important person in my life: my mum. From the day I was born, Rosemary has been captain of my cheer squad. When I was chewing on the epic shit sandwich of 2015, Mum would talk to me in the car as I drove away from my kids. Living away from them was a painful ache that had

swiftly replaced any longing for Ethiopia. Mum would let me rant and cry. She would soothe my fears and give me something practical to do next, even if it was just instructions to take a hot shower when I got to where I was going. Mum always listened, never judged.

Mum, Davinia and Doc became my triple-strength safety net for the years ahead as I adapted to a whole new life landscape. Three people who loved my guts, and I loved theirs.

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This was not my first monumental setback and it wouldn't be my last. My first big unexpected smackdown happened in my first year out of high school.

When I finished school, I worked as a jillaroo on a friend's family property. It was the best fun: riding horses, cutting cattle, building fences and driving tractors. A row of fencing will always be a thing of beauty to me, because I know how much bone-crunching effort goes into digging just one post hole. When I am prime minister, all school leavers will have to spend that first year working in primary industry: picking grapes, digging holes and getting a farmer's tan. I had so much fun after being chained to my desk for six years in high school. I turned eighteen on the farm, and it was a much better place to be than at schoolies on the Gold Coast. And no way were my parents letting me go to schoolies. Too dangerous! So jillarooing was my ticket to adventure – because, you know, that's not dangerous.

I learned how to gallop a horse downhill, how to drive a big-arse tractor (where the clutch is so huge you have to stand up and use all your weight to engage it) and how to shuffle cards like a pro. Playing cards was all there was to do when it got dark. I flew home for my school formal with scratched legs and broken fingernails, and had too much fun in my \$79 off-the-rack dress to care that I wasn't one of the pretty, rich girls. I can't even remember who my date was.

After jillarooing, I came back to Sydney and went on the expected, privileged path to university with a visual communication degree at the University of Technology, Sydney. Going back to study after yahooing on the farm was like a whiplash of boredom – like when a roller-coaster slams on the brakes at the end of the ride, and the momentum hits you on the back of the head but stillness feels weird and you just want to join the queue and go on the ride again rather than be still and slow and quiet. University was dull compared to saddling up and chasing cattle all day. The theory of design was so boring; we spent a month discussing the meaning of design, and I couldn't bear it. At the month's end, our lecturer told two hundred first-year design students that there really was no definitive meaning of design – and I walked out, never to return. I was too young and dumb to see that the learning was in the exploration of the meaning. Just tell me the damn meaning, and let's get on with it.

I dropped out on the same day I accepted an award from the Premier of New South Wales for academic excellence in the HSC. My life is always one of contradicting connections.

Drop out of uni and shake hands with the premier for being academically inclined. Be told you'll soon be fired and sign a book deal on the same day. Get fired from the job you love and, just when you need family support, suck on the shit sandwich of divorce.

Uni would have to wait. I eventually studied law and then finished a fine-art degree. But back then I was full of beans and couldn't sit still in air-conditioned lecture theatres when there was a whole life out there waiting to be lived.

After I walked away from the design degree, I had the most glorious eight months of my life to that point. I landed a job as a junior creative at an ad agency, I moved into an apartment with a friend, and I bought a shiny black motorcycle. Then I got a job in a nightclub to pay for the bike. My housemate and I had the best time being proper grown-ups with our own apartment, jobs and boyfriends. We had a pink bathroom and a little balcony overlooking a roundabout. Life was grand.

During this time, I learned a huge amount about the advertising industry, while working mainly for charities such as World Vision and Amnesty International. My boss said to me, 'Lucy, you got this job because you can type fast and you can talk fast. Keep it up!' I got my first email address in that job and my first full-time pay packet.

I also met my first workplace idiots. One told me I must be anorexic because I was slim; another asked if I was dyslexic when some of my work had typos. I didn't find this particularly distressing, I just knew they were idiots. There were also some creative gems in that agency, and I learned a lot from them.

It was there that I worked on my first fundraising communications, and I still use so much of that knowledge today. The agency had launched the very first 40 Hour Famine for World Vision, and I worked on the hugely successful doorknock appeals for the Salvos. It always irritated me that we could persuade Australians to sponsor a child in Africa but we couldn't get a successful sponsorship program off the ground for Indigenous communities right here in Australia. We could send a celebrity to a refugee camp in Kenya or a slum in India, but celebrity endorsement seemed to have no effect on home turf. I realised then that I am a lefty.

I had a ball working there. I learned my way around a film set, a recording booth and an art studio. I was only eighteen and thought I was such a lucky duck to land a dream job like this. But a serious smackdown was waiting in the wings.

My life came crashing down on a warm Saturday night in November 1992, when a gold Mercedes swerved across the lanes approaching the Sydney Harbour Bridge. I slammed my motorbike into the passenger side of that car, breaking lots of fingers and my right leg. The lights of North Sydney swirled as I flew over the car and landed on the road. Then I slid on my stomach across three lanes of traffic, my bike skidding with me. I stopped when my busted leg hit the gutter.

This was the start of a very bad year. I had fourteen reconstructive operations and was in plaster for a year, a week and a day. I had bone grafts, tissue grafts, artery grafts and skin grafts. I now have spectacular scars from surgical experiments as doctors tried to re-establish the blood supply to my right leg.

I had never lost a scar competition until the day I met burns survivor Turia Pitt more than two decades later.

My year of recovery was 1993 – before the internet really took off. It was even before decent daytime TV: all I had was the cricket and *Oprah*. The talk show was on at 2.30 p.m., which always seemed to be when I was dragged off for another X-ray. I nearly died of boredom more than anything in that year. Car loads of friends would come to visit me with sand on their feet from the beach, and I felt so ripped off. Life had only just got started and the brakes were being slammed on again. The roller-coaster ride of life was coming to another rude and unscheduled stop. The whiplash from fast paced to a screaming halt was agonising.

My faithful mum visited me almost every single day. She brought me bags of Apricot Delights, and they still remind me of her persistent love. Sweet treats to soothe the pain. When I was little and grazed my knee or fell out of a tree, my mum would slip a teaspoon of sugar into my mouth to help me feel better and stop me screaming. Now I was almost nineteen and she was doing the same thing, but with little squares of apricot joy while 350 stitches were being whipped out.

Fast-forward to 2005, and I was at a charity ball for families who had suffered the loss of a loved one by murder. I heard Ebony Simpson's father speak on his horrifying lifelong grief. Ebony had been a happy nine year old in 1992, just three months before my motorbike accident. She'd stepped off a bus and been snatched by a stranger who raped her then tied her up and threw her in a dam to drown. In 2005, Ebony's father

stood behind the lectern and reminisced about his daughter's little acts of love and kindness. He spoke of her life, not her death. And he told a story I will never forget: whenever he'd argued with his wife in the car, Ebony would quietly unwrap a Minty and pop it into his mouth. A little sweet injection of shoosh, Dad. Some sugary love. That reminded me of my mum's Apricot Delight Love.

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My right leg was saved by cross-leg surgery, an old-fashioned technique pioneered in World War II. My left leg had to supply my right with blood and to patch up a huge hole in my shin, so my left calf was peeled back and stitched to my right shin. My legs were literally sewn together, which is not very funny when you're a highly promiscuous teenager. I was a mermaid for a month before my legs were surgically separated, and I was lucky enough to keep my badly damaged limb. It looks hella funky, but it's mine.

During that time in hospital, I did a lot of daydreaming. I could have lain there, freaking out about what was happening to me – but, instead, I accepted that I couldn't do anything to control it except be an advocate for my own health. During the other twenty-three hours in the day, all I had were my thoughts and the buzz of the cricket on the radio in the background. I perfected the art of fantasising rather than worrying about the worst-case scenario. I looked beyond the surgeries, dressings, stitches and painkillers towards my life after hospital.

I had so many cool fantasies. Most of them were funded by the settlement I hoped to win from the insurer of the driver who smashed into my life that night. One adventure was to ride a motorbike across America. Another was to buy a big old rambling house by the beach and have all my friends come to live with me, and their rent would fund my travels – I'd dreamed up Airbnb back in 1993, without knowing it. I also planned and schemed and dreamed about starting my own ad agency. Because, you know, I had had eight months' experience and totes knew the whole industry inside out. That's the fantasy I went on to do first.

As soon as I left hospital for the last time and had my tenth plaster cast chopped off, I started freelancing as a graphic designer and photographer, then steadily built the business into a boutique creative agency with a team of four, a million-dollar annual turnover and some loyal clients.

Ten years in, a client asked me to deal with art patron and Sydney legend Wendy Whiteley. I'd had a thing for Wendy ever since high school, where I'd studied her husband Brett Whiteley's artworks and life story. My art teacher was a huge fan and it was infectious.

In 1992, Brett died of a heroin overdose in a South Coast motel, and their daughter, Arkie, died nine years later. Wendy lives in what I think is the best house in Sydney, at Lavender Bay. It's where she and Brett lived when he painted some of his most famous landscapes and self-portraits. And it's where they lived when heroin hit the Sydney streets for the first time.

My client was building a block of million-dollar apartments

that they wanted to call ‘Alchemy’ after one of Brett’s most famous works. The client also wanted to use his handwriting of that word in marketing material. I was sent in to negotiate a deal with Wendy. The artist in me hated the idea, but my client had asked and I didn’t want to say no to meeting the famous Wendy Whiteley.

What the client had failed to mention was that they’d already asked her. One of their development managers had popped round to her house, knocked on the back door and asked. She’d told him to fuck off and slammed the door in his face.

I called her up without knowing this had happened. ‘Hi, Wendy, my name is Lucy, and I’m working on behalf of Blah-Blah developers. I’d like to talk to you about *Alchemy* and whether we can use the name of that mural in the marketing of a new building in Lavender Bay.’

‘It’s not a mural,’ she replied, deadpan.

‘Oh,’ I said.

‘How about you go away, do your research and come back when you’re not talking like an idiot? I’m tired of being the village explainer.’ She hung up on me.

I went back to the client and said I needed time to do the research, so they paid me to immerse myself in the life and works of Brett Whiteley for a solid week. I read every book, watched every documentary, stood in front of *Alchemy* for hours at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, and mooched around the Whiteley Studio for a whole day. I had a picnic under the giant matchsticks sculpture *Almost Once*, behind the AGNSW. That week I became a Freaking Brett Expert. I also found it

profoundly sad that he had died so young, at fifty-three. He was a genius, a brilliant artist, and there’s never been anyone else like him.

I called Wendy back. This time, I asked the question using the right lingo.

‘All right, then,’ she said, ‘come see me, and you can tell me what you’re offering.’

I went for tea at Wendy Whiteley’s house. I wanted to find my high-school art teacher and tell her about it. I stood on the balcony where one of Brett’s famous series was painted from. I stood in front of originals you can’t see in a gallery because they’re in Wendy’s living room. And I stood in front of a magnificent, enormous carved wooden lion that Wendy had found in Bali many years earlier.

Then Wendy took me for a wander around her Secret Garden. It’s famous to Sydneysiders but not so well known to visitors: a little slice of heaven between a row of heritage houses at Lavender Bay and the edge of Sydney Harbour. Since forever, that land had been used by State Rail as a dump and a place to park train carriages. After Brett’s death, Wendy and Arkie started clearing it up and slowly turned it into a magical, captivating, rambling garden paradise. They started at one end and just kept going. Wendy employed gardeners, planted thousands of natives and tropical plants, and got stuck in herself.

‘The garden helped me work through my grief,’ Wendy told me once.

After Arkie died from cancer just a few years later, Wendy poured her whole self into the garden. She continues working

## LUCY BLOOM

on it to this day. She didn't ask anyone for permission – she just did it. The State Rail land was eventually given to North Sydney Council on a 99-year lease. It is one of my favourite places in the whole world. It's not overly manicured; it's creative and interesting, with little nooks, sculptures and places to hide. 'Get a room!' holler the gardeners when they come across couples having a lunchtime smooch.

I took Catherine Hamlin to meet Wendy once. They are very different women but both so resilient, determined and interesting. There's so much life experience between them. Wendy had spent time in Ethiopia, and both women are mad-keen gardeners. So despite their wildly contrasting backgrounds, these famous women got on like a house on fire. 'She's so terribly bohemian,' said Catherine after they met.

Wendy had channelled her grief into something spectacular, a beautiful corner of nature that she adores and the rest of the community loves, too. She channelled a heartbreaking loss into a gloriously creative and constructive experience – a purpose and an outlet. I filed away Wendy's approach to grief, not realising I would need it so soon.