

Packing For Something Big

Creative Writing Homework for Wednesday, © June 23, 2015 by Inge Danaher.

When the phone call came, my sister and I were standing at the checkout at the Taking Shape warehouse in Hawthorn. It was early February 1996. I will never forget this moment. We were standing there with arms loaded high with clothes, which we had tried on. They were ridiculously cheap and what's more there were so many items that fitted us that we just went for it and grabbed whatever we could.

The reason for our visit to this clothing warehouse was that I had found out about the sale. The timing could not have been better as I was in the process of packing to leave for Germany in a few days time. This was the first time I was to return to my Heimat since leaving there as an eleven year old in November 1961. I had not been back for over 35 years and I was very excited and looking forward to this trip.

Another person, who was just as excited as I, was my father. Although he had been back for a visit in 1978, he had been working for weeks getting some cassette tapes ready for me to pass on to his sisters. We had talked a lot about this visit and Dad had composed lots of old songs he and his sisters used to sing when they were young and recorded them onto cassettes as well as recording a message for them. Dad's two sisters were still alive and I was definitely looking forward to visiting my aunts as well as my mother's sister. Mum's sister, Anneliese, was only 14 years older than me and as I was born in my grandmother's house and lived there for the first 4 years of my life, Anneliese was more like a sister to me. I remember very well that she spoiled me with lots of lollies. She has an incredible sweet tooth and as a young teenager worked at a grocery shop. Each day she would bring home lollies, which she placed under my pillow and I would be very excited in the mornings when I found them. Then later on Anneliese started her own sweet shop in our house. Now there was a never-ending supply ☺

There was of course some sadness mixed in with my excitement. My grandmother on Mum's side and both grandparents on Dad's side had died long before then and I was very disappointed not to have seen them again. I remember living with my Grandmother the last few weeks before we migrated to Australia and she told me she could not say goodbye to me as she felt we would never see each other again. At the time, although this saddened me, I did not fully comprehend the enormous distance between the two countries and the difficulties in returning for a visit. After more than five weeks on the ship, this became a lot clearer to me. I had always intended going back, however life took over, I had children and had to work to support us so there was never the opportunity.

Then finally the chance arrived and my husband and I decided I would go for a short visit to re-establish contact with my many relatives in Germany. Apart from a honeymoon in New Zealand, I had not been overseas since my childhood. I rang my aunt and she was overjoyed to have me come and said there would be

no problem putting me up and picking me up from the airport. I had to buy luggage. As it was February I had to make sure to take warm clothes. Then there were the copious amounts of souvenirs. Some bought by me and many bought by Mum. My mother loved buying gifts for others. For her it was an extension of Christmas. My bags were quickly filling up.

The Taking Shape Warehouse sale could not have come at a more opportune time and when I mentioned it to my sister she immediately asked me could she come along. Although it was summertime in Australia I was sure I would find clothes suitable to take along with me. So there we were after an hour of fun trying on the most amazingly cheap but very nice outfits, waiting in line at the checkout. Must have been the early days of mobile phones. Mine would often ring just as I was about to pay at checkouts, but usually at the supermarket. The phone rang and I had to dump my armful of clothes on the counter to answer it. At the other end was my distraught Mother: "the ambulance has just been to pick up your father and take him to hospital. He had a heart attack". I told her we would be there immediately.

I don't even remember if we ended up buying any of the clothes. All that was overshadowed by the thought of Dad in ICU and trying to figure out if I should cancel or at best postpone the trip.

It was a minor heart attack. Dad had been lawn mowing and feeling a bit off so he went to see his doctor. The GP organized blood tests and sent Dad home. By the time Dad arrived at home the doctor had rung Mum and told her the blood tests showed that Dad had had a heart attack and that he had ordered an ambulance to pick him up.

Dad didn't look sick and he was adamant that I go on with my planned trip. Here he was all wired up in ICU and demanding I ignore his heart attack and hop on that plane and take those cassettes. I was in a terrible turmoil. If I cancelled the trip Dad would be even more stressed after all the effort he put into this than if I went so I felt I had not much choice but to carry on as if nothing happened.

I arrived at Tullamarine Airport with a 38kg suitcase, which was 18 kg over my allowance. The Qantas lady who checked me in didn't blink an eyelid. I was travelling with Lufthansa but they must have code-shared with Quanta at the time. I can't even remember if any of my new clothes were inside, as I can't remember if we ever bought them. Most of it was souvenirs and gifts for my relatives.

The visit was wonderful. I thought I would end up going home with an empty suitcase but ... I spent the two weeks madly buying souvenirs for the family back home. I arrived at Düsseldorf Airport with a 38kg suitcase. The Lufthansa lady didn't think it was funny at all. I told her well, I arrived with 38kg of stuff so I must leave with 38kg of stuff. She said, no way, no stamp on your ticket that 38kg made it into the plane in Melbourne. She stared at me, I stared at her. Check mate. She wasn't going to budge. I asked her what could I do. She said that the excess luggage came to something like 900 DM (those were the pre-Euro days). I

felt rather ill. I asked if she had any other ideas and she told me that I could check in the excess as unaccompanied luggage, which cost a third of the price. Luckily I was very early at the airport and my aunt had waited around for me until after check-in. So I had to buy a bag and decamp half my suitcase into this overnight bag. Then my aunt drove me all the way to the freight section of the airport, which was miles away. I handed in my new bag and 300 dollars. I doubt that the total value of souvenirs was even close to the cost of the excess luggage but ... I didn't want to return home empty handed.

My aunts enjoyed the tapes Dad had recorded. It was a wonderful visit but far too short and overshadowed by my worries about Dad. But Dad survived the heart attack. However it was the start of years of health issues. He survived another 9 years during which time Dennis and I had many more wonderful visits with our family in Germany. Dad had no wish to return there himself but he always enjoyed hearing about our visits and as a result, relationships were strengthened and both sides of the families, in Australia and in Germany, stayed much more closely in contact with each other.

Since 1996 and my first flight overseas, I have learnt to pack a bit lighter. Our last holiday in Europe, Dennis and I decided to downsize our luggage which forced us into packing less but we still managed to carry far more than we needed. Our next trip we hope to make late in 2016 so we will try even harder to keep our luggage to a minimum.

The next most hair-raising event was when I stepped off a plane in Heathrow airport in January 2005 to the news that my father had stopped breathing and was once again in ICU. I was supposed to be running a Project Management workshop for Project Managers in our London Office. I didn't quite know what to do. Should I jump on a plane and head home? But ... now that's another story.