

Preface to the Second Edition

My name is Ross and I'm an alcoholic.

But despite this fundamental fact about me as a human being, I was fifty years sober (free of alcohol and other drugs) on Australia Day, 26 January 2020. This means that I've had fifty more years on the planet than I otherwise would have had.

Fifty Years Sober: An Alcoholic's Journey is an updated version of *My Name is Ross*. In particular, this new book reveals what has happened to me from 26 January 2010 until Australia Day 2020, when I became fifty years free of alcohol and of all other mood-changing drugs.

When I joined Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) in Cleveland, Ohio in 1969, I wasn't at the end of road; I was at the end of the end of the road! The reality is that if I hadn't stopped drinking and drugging at twenty-five years of age, I wouldn't have made twenty-six.

When I was drinking, I thought that I was a writer, but in fact in those days I didn't even write a note to the milkman! Yet since I have been a sober alcoholic, I have published forty-two books, most recently another Grafton Everest adventure, *The Dizzying Heights*. These works may not be *War and Peace*, but they exist and most are still available in libraries, bookstores, or online.

I still attend two or three meetings of AA each week. This includes my local group, South Sydney, which meets from 2 pm to 3.30 pm every Saturday – rain, hail, or shine – at the Ray Williams Centre, Kepos Street, Redfern.

If I stopped attending AA, even for a fortnight, the chances are that eventually, and probably relatively soon, I would revert to type and start drinking and drugging again. Then my life would be all

over, red rover. One of the reasons I know this to be true is that the only time I tried to stop drinking of my own volition, I lasted half an hour!

Apart from the fact that I can be an example of how someone so sick and damaged by addiction can learn to lead a useful life, if I stopped attending AA it would be a sign that I'm sober because of my own efforts, that is, by an isolated exercise of the will.

But I'm not sober because I'm strong or pretty or clever. I'm only free of alcohol and other drugs because I stay close to AA and, each day, try to practise the twelve suggested steps of recovery.

Like every human being, the last ten years of my life have seen many ups and downs. But as long as I continue to have nothing in my blood but blood, and stay close to AA, I am able to cope with whatever happens. And, from time to time, I can also live a fruitful and abundant life.

But, especially when things gets tough, I need to remind myself that nothing can actually damage me like alcohol and other drugs did. Indeed, they still would if I tried to stay sober and clean on my own.

The truth is that, although I'm now fifty years free of alcohol and other drugs, I'm still a day-to-day proposition. There's really nothing surprising about an alcoholic drinking or an addict using. What *is* surprising and fascinating is that there are alcoholics and addicts who are not drinking or using and, in this respect, AA certainly has the numbers in successfully combatting addiction.

But the reason that most AA meetings only have scores of attendees, and not hundreds, is because it's an extremely difficult business for an alcoholic or an addict to get sober, and to stay sober, and to somehow learn to negotiate the world without killing or harming themselves.

That's why at AA meetings I often say, 'We are playing for our lives here, friends. And what value can you put on a life?'

In terms of ups and downs, a huge highlight of my life since I was forty years sober on Australia Day 2010 was the Australian Football

League (AFL) Grand Final replay on Saturday, 2 October of that year. In front of 93,853 spectators at the MCG, my life-long Aussie Rules team, Collingwood, defeated St Kilda by 56 points. This was the Mighty Magpies' fifteenth VFL/AFL premiership victory and our first since 1990.

The week before, on 25 September 2010, in front of 100,016 spectators, the match had ended in a draw, with the Pies and the Saints each scoring 68 points.

How pleased my late father, Bill ('Long Tom') Fitzgerald would have been to learn that in the Grand Final replay in 2010 Collingwood, coached by Mick Malthouse, scored 16.12 (108) to St Kilda 7.10 (52). Although he never played for the firsts, Dad – a lifelong teetotaller who played over 100 games for the Pies – had captained Collingwood seconds in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

My father and my mother Edna would have been proud and pleased that on 3 September 2014 Dame Marie Bashir, Governor of New South Wales, awarded me a Member of the Order of Australia. This was for my 'significant service to education in the field of politics and history as an academic, and to community and public health organisations'. Although not specifically mentioned, the latter primarily refers to my work in AA and to my writings and commentaries about alcoholism and other addictions.

Apart from being sober in AA, the most important fact in my life is my decades-long marriage to Lyndal Moor Fitzgerald. Perhaps appropriately, after knowing each other for two years, we tied the knot in 1976 on Guy Fawkes Day – 5 November.

On 30 June 2012, I finished a twenty-year stint as a community member of the NSW State Parole Authority, and before that of the Queensland Parole Board. My appointment to both bodies was because of my personal and professional knowledge of alcoholism and other addictions. And on 30 June 2012, I became a life member of the Australian Republic Movement.

One of the highlights of my life since 2010 was when our only child Emily (now Emerald), who had been born in Brisbane on 1

October 1982, married the excellent Adrian Gruin in New York on 25 September 2015. Although they actually met in America, Emerald and Adrian had previously attended Brisbane Girls Grammar School and Brisbane Boys Grammar School. The truth is that Adrian is so much better than all of Em's previous suitors put end to end. Lyndal and I are indeed extremely grateful that Em and Adrian have teamed up to form a most successful partnership.

A special highlight was the birth of our only grandchild, Ava Yeats Gruin, in New York, on 31 August 2016, or 1 September 2016 Sydney time. As with observing Emerald and Adrian living a fulfilled life as a loving couple, the exquisite Ava is an utter joy to behold.

In the federal election of 2 July 2016, I was the lead NSW Senate candidate for the Australian Sex Party. Although ultimately unsuccessful, we came close to outpolling the Christian Democratic Party, led by the Reverend Fred Nile. The Sex Party has since been renamed the Reason Party, which is led by the feisty Victorian MLC, Fiona Patten.

Sadly, on 5 January 2018 Lyndal and I had to put down our beloved West Highland White terrier, Maddie. She was thirteen years old. Each and every night when I returned to 'Greystoke', our home in Redfern, Maddie would whirl with delight at seeing me. Surprisingly, the same applied to Maddie's Westie predecessor Belle, who – also for thirteen years – lived with us in Brisbane. Needless to say, such whirling on arrival did, and does, not apply to any human beings.

By far the worst event of my life is the fact that Lyndal, my darling wife of forty-three years, is suffering from terminal cancer. Strangely, and for no obvious reason, shortly before her diagnosis, I sang us these verses of Jimmie Davis' 'You Are My Sunshine':

You are my sunshine, my only sunshine
You make me happy when skies are grey
You'll never know, dear, how much I love you
Please don't take my sunshine away

The other night, dear, as I lay sleeping
I dreamed I held you in my arms
But when I awoke, dear, I was mistaken
And I hung my head and I cried.

Although I was, and am, utterly grief-stricken by Lyndal's diagnosis, it is important to remind myself that nothing can actually damage me like alcohol and other drugs damaged me.

I also need to understand deeply that if, one day at a time, I don't pick up the first drink or drug, I can't get drunk or drugged.

Although coping with Lyndal's imminent demise is hugely difficult, the reality is that I am of some real use and value. Indeed, apart from our close friend Mikey, I am the only person Lyndal wants to be with in the last year of her illness. This is certainly a tribute to AA in action.

And I'm pleased to report that, shortly before this book was written, Lyndal said that, throughout our long relationship, I have never criticised her once.

Professor Ross Fitzgerald
Redfern, Sydney, January 2020

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Life, death, insanity

Genetically and psychologically, I was (and am) strongly predisposed to alcoholism and addiction. Even though my father, Bill Fitzgerald, a rough, tough footballer for Collingwood, never drank a teaspoon of alcohol in his entire life, his father (my grandpa, who I never met) died of alcoholism and squandered all the family's money. That's the reason my father had a life-long, pathological fear and hatred of alcohol.

It seems to me that my father was an alcoholic who never drank. Dad believed, from experiencing his father's alcoholism first-hand, that if he drank alcohol at all, he'd be putting himself at great risk. My guess is that he also believed that booze was likely to get me, his only living child, into terrible trouble. And it did. Until the age of twenty-five, alcohol caused me, and those close to me, enormous damage.

When I was a child, death hovered like a miasma around our house at 41 Charles Street, East Brighton. This was because, in January 1942, my older brother Rodney had died in my father's arms on a Melbourne tram on the way to hospital, when he was only six months old. My mother, Edna, was so distraught that she didn't even go to the funeral; it was only thirty years later, at my father's funeral, that I discovered that my brother was buried at Melbourne's Cheltenham Cemetery in an unmarked grave. After Roddy died, my mother had two miscarriages, and then I was born on Christmas Day, 1944.

'Do you see the brightest star in all the skies?' Edna would say, pointing up. 'That's your brother, Rodney.'

Not surprisingly, as a little boy, I felt like garbage. How could anyone measure up against the brightest star? I now realise that, from

a very young age, I held a burning resentment against my poor dead brother.

To add insult to injury, until I was twelve or thirteen Mum would sometimes remark to strangers, 'This is our only living child, Ross.' Small wonder that these days I still don't attend funerals, unless I absolutely have to, and that over my desk I have a quote from the Hindu holy book, the *Mahabharata*: 'Death strikes every day, yet we live our lives as though we are immortal.'

Although my birth date meant that I was the only star on the Christmas tree, my brother's 'presence' meant that even this special status was ambiguous.

Because of Rodney's death and my mother's previous miscarriages, Edna, and to a lesser extent my dear, long-suffering Dad, wrapped me in cotton wool, until I fled home just before I turned eighteen. I was told repeatedly that I should always wear a singlet so I would never catch a cold, and that I couldn't play with Elizabeth Dowling, the handsome tomboy across the road, and especially not with John and Ron Flowers, the local toughs in our street who once locked me in their garage, started lighting newspapers, and threatened to burn me. This may have been an empty threat, but it scared me, utterly. To compound the fear, a few weeks before this, Edna had said to me, 'If you don't behave yourself, you'll be sent to the incinerator to be burnt.' In those days, there was a huge municipal incinerator in the adjoining suburb of South Caulfield.

From as far back as I can remember, I was scared – of life itself, but perhaps even more of 'finding out' or uncovering the truth, from, and about, Mum and Dad, and especially the truth of Roddy's death and of who, or what, I was or was supposed to be. Of that, I was petrified.

When I was eight or nine, I pooped myself when, in a road adjacent to Charles Street, I saw a huge Alsatian mauling a little bitzer dog. I ran home crying, ashamed that I'd shat myself, but even more ashamed that I'd felt helpless to intervene.

When I was about ten, I took to walking on my own from East Brighton to the Middle Brighton Baths, which were built out from

the shore. Since I seldom had the entrance fee, I would swim out into the ocean, and then dive under the 'shark proof' fence, which I knew had a gap that an underwater tank could drive through. One afternoon, when I seemed to be the only child swimming in the pool, a couple of 'bodgies' yelled out 'Shark!'¹ I nearly shat myself again and frantically swam to reach the side. When I looked up, the two of them were laughing. Even now, when I'm in the sea, I don't go out any further than just above my middle.

Looking back, often I felt utterly terrified. But when I started using alcohol, it kidded me that I was no longer afraid. It's no wonder, then, that *courage* is the name sometimes given to particular brands of beer and of lager.

Illness was a powerful currency in our house in East Brighton, a petit-bourgeois suburb where respectability and 'niceness' were valued highly. Unlike most men of my age, who were taught never to admit to weakness and not to 'give in' to illness, I quickly learnt the opposite. When Mum got migraines, she achieved what I came to long for most – to be left alone; and in my case, often to receive the greatest treat of all – to stay all day in bed. So instead of going to primary school, I would often stay home 'sick' and listen on the radio to 'When a Girl Marries' and then to 'Portia Faces Life', which, if I remember correctly, was the story of 'a woman who has loved ... and can remember.' The truth is that, early on, my relationship with Edna was highly sexualised. I remember as a child regularly brushing my mother's hair. Yet even then, I sensed something furtive and not quite right.

In order to compete with the brightest star, and aided by Mum's contention – probably apocryphal – that I was to be christened 'Rosalyn', for a while I tried to be a girl – by occasionally dressing up, and pulling my penis behind me so that I seemed to have a vagina. When that tactic failed, I decided that when I grew up, I wanted to be an invalid. For years, I thought that I was unique in this childhood aim, until I heard an interview with that grand old British queen, Quentin Crisp, who as a child also had the same ambition.

I pointed the bone at myself so successfully that at eleven, after passing a lot of blood in my urine, I almost died of nephritis and was in the Melbourne Children's Hospital for three months. I had extremely high blood pressure and couldn't bear the light. Given Roddy's early death, it's hard to comprehend just what Mum and Dad, who seldom spoke to each other about 'important matters', went through during that time.

But having had such a serious illness meant that when I came home, I was given almost whatever I wanted. This included large doses of a pink-coloured liquid asthma medicine, which I later found out contained a heady mix of alcohol and ephedrine. Small wonder then that at night, I would sneak into the kitchen for an extra swig of this magical elixir, after which I would return to bed and go on a trip with my toy dog Snowy, and Jumbo the elephant. That trip in bed, night after night, was the real world for me.

I'm not sure of the truth of this, but my deep memory is that, when I was twelve or thirteen, Edna made me give Snowy and Jumbo away to a little boy down the road who allegedly didn't have any toys. Thinking about it now, this seems implausible. Perhaps my parents thought that I was too old to be sleeping with Snowy and Jumbo. All I know is that, one day, my precious friends were *gone*, and that I felt bereft and filled with baffled fury. Perhaps it is not connected, but even then, and until I was sixteen or seventeen, I was prone to terrifying nightmares and couldn't sleep with the lights off.

One of the problems of living with Edna was that she would lie, when telling the truth would have done. This was almost certainly because she blamed herself for Roddy's death. In later life, she claimed she had tried to have the baby aborted. When I was growing up, there was no bedrock to reality, because with Mum it was impossible to know what was true and what wasn't.

If Edna gave someone a trinket, she would claim it was gold. She consistently lied about how many tablets she took, and also about her age. She died in 1999, aged eighty-eight, and took many of those

fibers with her to the grave. Although I have tried (unsuccessfully) not to blame her, I know, without a doubt, that growing up in Edna's presence contributed mightily to my life-long high anxiety and sense of unreality, uncertainty and crisis.

My mother, whose maiden name was Beecher, claimed that she was descended from the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the Connecticut-born novelist Harriet Beecher Stowe. True or false, who can tell? The situation at home was so dire that, even if Edna seemed to be telling the truth, I still couldn't believe her.

In *The Communist Manifesto* there is a line by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels about the destruction of capitalism: 'All that is solid melts into air.' My life with Edna was very much like that. From infancy onward, my life had no foundation, no bedrock of truth. This is why it is crucial, if I am to stay sober, that I be rigorously honest. Is it any wonder that perhaps the most important attributes that attracted me to Lyndal, my wife of forty-three years, are that she always tells the truth, no matter what, and that, in contrast to Edna, she seems solid in a shifting world? Lyndal loathed Edna's constant talk of illness and virtually on first meeting, cottoned on to Edna's 'lies'.

For some reason, when I think of all that is solid melting into the air, I am reminded of WB Yeats's lines: 'Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold ... Surely some revelation is at hand.' Although I did not know it when I was drinking, the latter phrase was to apply when I turned twenty-five.



When I was twelve or thirteen, within the space of a few months, both my parents tried to kill themselves by overdosing on tablets. I can't remember whether it was after my mother's or my father's attempt, but it was probably my father's; my memory is that Edna said, 'Your father's tried to kill himself.' Because I didn't know what to do, or perhaps because I didn't believe her, I went straight to bed. For years, I punished myself for being so unfeeling and uncaring.



Ross and Lyndal, Adrian and Emerald Gruin, Ava,
Sydney 2019



Barry Humphries and Ross at Catalina restaurant, Sydney 2019