

- Epilogue -

**All the Parts
I Try to Hide**

*Someone who will look at me
At all the parts I try to hide
Who sees it all
Yet loves me just the same*

Every Single Question

For longer than I've dared to ask
I've nursed a question in my heart
A hope, a dream of something more
Someone who will look at me
At all the parts I try to hide
Who sees it all
Yet loves me just the same

For longer than I've dared to hope
I've hoped to look inside a soul
To find a trusting spirit there
Someone who would seek to share
All that I would give of me
Who'd hold my heart
And I could love the same

And if I can ever quell my fears
Enough to give such hope a voice
I'll whisper with this trembling heart
Could it be true, could it be you?

*Will I ever dare this question?
Will my soul be met by love?
Will my pain be touched with kindness, with trust?
Will I find a path to travel
With compassion by my side?
Will I ever find belonging, find my home?*

Then you came into my life
With such patience and such love
You heard every single question
Till I finally found the only one to ask



Scan to download
song with password:
findinghome

*With your eyes you give your answer
In your smile I see your love
In your touch I feel your kindness, your trust
As we walk this path together
To the future, side by side
In your arms I find belonging
Find my home
In your heart I find my answer
Find my home*

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A mad virus has taken over the world. My television is locked to the news channels to monitor the spread of COVID-19 throughout my neighbourhood, city, country, world.

I am fifty-one years old.

Like so many others, I feel unsettled by what is going on. Quite apart from the overload of mainstream and alternative medical viewpoints, a sense of suspicion and wariness pervades society. Everyone seems polarised in their positions, and I brace myself before engaging in conversations with most people, lest we suddenly find ourselves in uncomfortable and conflicted ideological territory.

Casual conversations now involve arguments about the nuances of different premiers' approaches to handling the pandemic, despite many people having barely known the names of those in power in state politics before now. Billboards instruct us not to touch each other, to remain separate and isolated. Just in case we're unsure, scowls and masks abound to remind us to keep our distance. It feels surreal.

It has been over two years since my bariatric surgery and I have managed to maintain a healthy weight for over six months. My body is transformed, and my mind is scrambling to catch up.

I feel at odds with my new body. It, too, feels surreal. The bathroom scales tell me that two-thirds of my former self has evaporated. Where has it all gone? Where have *I* gone? Whilst my new clothes are many sizes smaller than my old ones, I still seek to hide my body. After losing so much weight, I have layers of hanging skin that will never tighten or be lost naturally. The amount of excess skin seems to contradict the extent of the loss. The disparity confuses and discomforts me.

A couple of months after leaving my relationship with Ryan, I start seeking new ways of meeting potential partners. As COVID

escalates, in-person gatherings decrease so I register for an online ‘speed dating’ event.

Twelve of us sit in our own mini-squares on the screen – just like *The Brady Bunch*. I peruse the virtual room, jotting down the names of the others. Sizing up the faces from an anonymous distance, I write a large ‘NO’ next to one man’s name, John, on the page in front of me. There is just no way!

The process of speed dating, however, involves everyone talking one-on-one with each of the others for eight minutes.

In my eight minutes with John, all my biases and presuppositions are shattered.

John is a recovering drug addict, clean for eight years after being in active addiction for 30 years. John’s life has been vastly different from mine, experiencing homelessness, violence, crime, jailtime, mental health crises, and coming close to death on a number of occasions.

John talks honestly and in an unembellished way about the realities of his life and also the hope he finds in facing his demons and taking responsibility for positive change in his life.

In our eight minute conversation, I am stunned to glimpse a man of deep integrity, commitment to change, insightfulness and courage. He has a solid and steady fire in his belly that lights up his personality. My first impression is overturned – you really can’t judge a book by its cover!

I am drawn to the flame, and there’s no going back.

The next week we meet in person and tentatively decide to try to develop a relationship.

Following the speed dating, COVID restrictions also accelerate John’s and my relationship status. We are not afforded the opportunity to get to know each other in broader social contexts or on dates outside the house, and find ourselves defining our relationship as ‘intimate’ so that we can be inside the house together.

In the last year I have had two plastic surgeries. Weeks before my niece Anna’s wedding was my first procedure, a breast lift and reduction. A few months later, approaching Christmas, I underwent a 7-hour abdominoplasty procedure, where 5kg of skin was removed.

After excessive weight loss, Medicare deems plastic surgery to be 'medically necessary' rather than just 'cosmetic', hence subject to a rebate. Despite this, the out-of-pocket costs for several more surgeries are beyond my means.

I am referred to a program for low-income earners which draws on the goodwill of well-established surgeons. These benevolent individuals seek to support those who require plastic surgery after massive weight loss by offering the bulk of their services pro-bono. I am accepted into the program. The sticking point is that most of the surgeries take place in Sydney, 10-12 hours' drive from my home town of Melbourne.

I decide to meet one of the surgeons in the program, with a view to travelling to Sydney for one or two of the surgeries at a later date. An appointment is made and I book my flight.

COVID numbers are escalating daily and I hear that some states are requiring interstate visitors to quarantine or isolate for 14 days upon arrival.

One day, I go to the pool for my usual early morning workout. During my aqua-running I realise it's only 16 days until my appointment with the surgeon. What will happen if I get to Sydney the week after next and I'm not allowed to even see him? They might even end up closing the state borders and not let anyone into the state!

I get out of the pool with my mind set. I am aware that I may well be over-estimating the likelihood of such extreme measures, but something compels me to act.

I drive home and tell John what I have decided to do. Within 24 hours, I manage to: organise a couple of strangers to move into my house and mind my dog; arrange a place to live in Sydney, also with a stranger; arrange with my workplace that I will work remotely for a while; book a one-way flight; pack; say good-bye to John, my friends, family and puppy; and move.

My fears are realised and I am relieved that I acted with boldness. I am allowed to see the surgeon, but only because I've been in the state for one day longer than the required 14 days of isolation. Within a matter of weeks the borders are closed. Fines and the threat of jail are imposed on those who try to cross state boundaries.

In Sydney, with no idea of when I might return, my relationship with John becomes even more unusual. In the space of a few months, we have shifted from being total strangers, to part-time live-in partners, to being in a 'long-distance' relationship.

In some ways, this becomes the making of our relationship. We have time to build a solid friendship with daily phone calls and video-chats. The pressure of living in close proximity is removed, and we can adjust to each other at a more 'normal' pace and in a more 'normal' way. We have the opportunity to build a slow and solid emotional and psychological base for an intimate relationship.

Not much is 'normal' in the crazy 2020 world of COVID. John struggles with his perceptions of overbearing authority and unreasonable, ungrounded public health rules. Following his sense of civic duty, he attends protest rallies and raises questions about mainstream views about COVID, mask-wearing, isolation, government restrictions and, in time, vaccination requirements. He is sacked from one of his jobs when his boss sees him on the news attending a rally and peaceably voicing his disagreement with the 'party line'.

John feels alienated from the rest of society, which fuels his anger. He tries to ground himself in the 'Serenity Prayer', one of the primary 12-step addiction recovery principles: 'God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.' His frustration increases, as he perceives most of society huddling under an umbrella of unbased fear. He feels on the outer – isolated, hated, different, at odds with the rest of the world.

I too find myself struggling with a feeling of alienation, living in another state, away from friends and family, with just a single suitcase of possessions. I repeatedly face a surprising sense of wariness from Sydney-siders who look askance at me when they hear that I am from Victoria. The last thing I hear before being knocked out for five hours for surgery, is the sarcastic question from the PPE-clad anaesthetist: 'Don't you have surgeons in Melbourne?'

After the first surgery, the wound on my back bursts open, which is very debilitating. The surgeon re-stitches it, but it splits again. The modified treatment regime is to allow the wound to heal

by ‘secondary intention’, slowly over time from the inside out, with daily dressing changes from a home-visiting nurse.

Despite being permitted to choose to travel back to Melbourne to recuperate, I am conscious that current COVID restrictions would then prohibit me from returning to Sydney for the foreseeable future. I decide to stay in Sydney, waiting for the wound to heal and to go through my next surgery.

John and I talk each day on the phone, but we are in different worlds, both physically and emotionally.

Three months later, I return to Melbourne, in the throes of ‘stage 4 lockdown’. No-one is allowed to travel more than 5km from home, or leave their house for more than an hour a day. Everyone is wearing masks – an uncommon sight in Sydney. The streets are deserted and a 9pm curfew imposes an eerie silence on the whole city.

John and I try to pick up our relationship where we left off; to be present to each other physically on the basis of what we have been building emotionally through our long-distance conversations. John tells me that while I was away he realised that he loves me – an experience that is quite foreign to him, and one he finds very hard to understand or trust. I throw myself whole-heartedly into our relationship as I do with most things in my life. I embrace and accept John’s love, and feel overwhelmingly that I want to reciprocate it and to make our relationship work.

On a physical level, I am pleased with the results of the surgeries, but feel vulnerable when I look at myself in the mirror. Much of the excess skin is gone, but it is replaced with very visible scars right up both legs, under both arms. and around my lower back.

One day, when I am looking at my scars in the mirror, John makes a joke: ‘You look just like Frankenstein!’

I swallow my tears and don’t let John know how much his words have hurt me. A week later we have a video-session with a couples therapist, talking through some of the issues in our relationship. I raise my hurt at the joke. John can barely remember the comment, but he is appalled to think that he said something so thoughtless. He apologises unequivocally – but the damage has been done. The

scar from hearing the person I trust and love describing me as a 'monster', feels more tangible than the long and jagged physical scars. I descend to a black space, and start hating my body.

John is also struggling with monsters from his own past. The last time he was in a long-term intimate relationship was decades before now, when both he and his partner were in active drug addiction. In John's family of origin, sex was a commodity. His parents ran an adult bookshop and brothel from his childhood home, his mother pimping John's sixteen year old sister as part of the family 'business'.

John does not know what it is like to be intimate without drugs being part of the equation. He struggles with physical or sexual contact as part of an emotionally-close relationship, so intimacy in our relationship is fraught.

I try to remove the sense of pressure for him by taking sex off the table altogether. Being naturally very tactile, and still recovering from nearly a year of the effects of government-mandated 'physical distancing', I am daunted by the prospect of the absence of physical affection in a close relationship.

Over time, the negative effects of John's struggle to be physically close to me and feeling him flinch whenever I touch him compound my difficulty in coming to terms with my changing body and being comfortable in my own skin. John finds it hard to be constantly confronted by his inability to be physically intimate in a committed relationship of trust.

Eventually, John calls an end to our relationship. It is intensely painful for me, because he is the first person I have been in a long-term relationship with, whom I deeply respect and admire – indeed, whom I love. I always knew that there would be significant challenges for us as a couple, but I felt that we had each navigated such complex and difficult territory in our lives, that we would be able somehow to make a relationship work.

Ultimately, I feel very sad but also grateful for all I have learned and the ways I've grown over the last nine months. I recognise John's wisdom in calling it quits and feel blessed that there is no animosity. We move naturally from being partners to being just friends, with love and respect for each other intact.



COVID continues, and so does my search for a life-partner.

I have now had several experiences of being in a relationship – for three, five, nine months at a time. I am still not sure how I would go being with someone for the long haul, or them with me, but I have a much clearer idea of what I am looking for.

I am fifty-two years old.

Over the course of the next year I throw myself into the process of finding a life-partner, even though I don't feel the need to be in a relationship to be happy, fulfilled and whole. While remaining focussed in my search, I feel free to be more discerning in what I look for and the choices I make.

I join an online dating site for people over 50, and am surprised to find that there are many quality people out there, sincerely seeking a relationship of substance.

I exchange messages with many men, speak with several on the phone, and go on 23 first dates! Dating in the ongoing context of COVID means many of these dates are mask-clad walks within 5 or 10km of home, depending on the restrictions at the time.

My standards rise and I become far more attuned to whether or not I am suited to someone.

With some meetings it is clear on both sides that we do not want to take things any further. Others I am not afraid to say 'no' to – men who want to pursue things further with me but with whom I feel a niggling sense that it wouldn't work long-term. I also feel disappointment when some men decide not to pursue things with me even though I feel we could potentially work as a couple, but I recognise that it has to feel right for both parties.

Gone are the days when I am flattered into a relationship just because the other person likes me! I reflect on my relationship with Ryan and now see that we were different in many fundamental aspects of our approaches to life. I do not regret my time with him, or think badly of him – I recognise that the experience helped me develop a clearer understanding and to know which values and attributes are worth compromising on and what is non-negotiable.

Several of these encounters extend beyond one date, and one

partnership with a man called Gerry lasts three months. We discuss long-term options, including marriage, and I start to think that I will soon be entering a new chapter of my life. The anticipation is exciting to me.

I end my online dating subscription membership several months before it comes due for renewal – and assume Gerry has done the same. I feel no need to keep my options open, and am surprised when he says that he is maintaining his membership until it expires. He says he is not actively engaging with or talking to anyone else but that it is wise to keep it there in case things don't work out for us, to avoid having to pay a membership reconnection fee. Gerry's work at a CFO level means that this just makes sense to him.

I am stunned to hear this and tell him that he may be more financially savvy than me, but this action demonstrates a cluelessness about relationships I did not anticipate. He disagrees.

In the end this is a symbol of the ambivalence he has been feeling about our relationship. When the issues are brought to the fore, he acknowledges his ambivalence and we decide to spend a couple of weeks apart to reflect on our relationship and future.

During those weeks, Gerry faces an exacerbation of cancer necessitating surgery, and I face the death of a dear and long-term friend and mentor of over 30 years. I consider offering practical support to Gerry after his surgery, and he offers to provide emotional support to me during the funeral, but neither course of action feels right to me. I would be happy to put my life on hold to care for someone with whom I'm in a committed relationship, but I'm not interested in serving the role of an unpaid live-in carer for someone who will soon move on when his days as a patient come to an end. Equally, I do not want to cry on Gerry's shoulder in front of my wider community, only to then tell my friends that I have split up from the man they have just met.

After two weeks, we meet and talk. Gerry makes it clear that he does not want to proceed further with our relationship.

I am heartbroken, but have spent the last couple of weeks anticipating this outcome. We formally part ways and I recognise that it is the right thing, though it still hurts.

I rejoin the dating site. I am conscious this may mean that I will

end up in a 'rebound' relationship, but my aims are clearer. I am now not primarily looking to find a life-partner. Rather, I am wanting to start connecting with other people, to remind myself that there are many other men out there with whom I can engage and find points of mutual interest. I choose a six-month membership option to allow myself time to be discerning and to choose to say 'no'. I've never believed in there only being one 'Mr Right', but I am clear that I am no longer just going to settle for 'Mr Right Now'!

As fate would have it, I exchange messages with only one man, David. We talk on the phone for an hour, then meet for dinner a few nights later. I consider cancelling the date as I wonder if I'm being rash in meeting someone so soon after my breakup with Gerry. I am not sleeping well as a result of heightened anxiety and am not sure how I will go meeting a new person while not feeling on an even keel.

The night before our first date, I have my first good night's sleep in weeks, and feel ready to face the date.

We meet and talk for three hours. It is a comfortable and interesting exchange. David is an engineer by day but also pursuing interests in music and creative writing. He plays cornet in a brass band, and also the flügelhorn for his own enjoyment. Without telling him the extent of my musical background, I share with him that I have produced a 'few' CDs and play him one jazz song, *Walk a Mile*¹⁵ which features a flügelhorn solo.

We shake hands after a very enjoyable evening of broad-ranging conversation, and arrange to meet again the following weekend for a walk. I am glad to have made the effort to go on the date, and am looking forward to seeing him again. I *think* I am right in believing that he also likes me.

When we meet the following weekend, I am surprised and delighted to hear how much he engaged with our last conversation and to feel him translate that into a very romantic gesture. David found and purchased one of my albums online. He had been particularly drawn to the lyrics of the song *Eyes of Grace* and

15 See song recording for *Walk a Mile* in chapter 6.

transcribed the melody line. Having practised it on the flügelhorn, he now asks if he can play it to me.

I am deeply moved as David serenades me with a song that I wrote for a very different purpose and in a very different context, but which ends up being a perfect description of the relationship he and I are soon to develop.

EYES OF GRACE¹⁶

You see the courage throughout my fears
You see the hope behind my tears
I cannot recognise the way you see my face
You see through eyes of grace

Where is this beauty within my pain
To hold my head up through my shame?
You find what's good in me in all that I'd replace
Extravagance of grace

Love so wasteful, absurd and true
It captures me in you!

*I can finally see what you can see
I can hold my pain when you hold me
I can trust in hope to set me free
I can see my beauty
Within your eyes of grace*

Your boundless mercy, my life reclaimed
My heart lies naked, unashamed
You hold my brokenness, redeemed in your embrace
Transforming love and grace

16 Words by Monique Lisbon, Music by Monique Lisbon and Roger Nicholson
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Once again, finding myself in a close and trusting relationship, my issues bump up against the issues of another person. However, a key difference is the fact that David and I can talk – honestly, clearly, robustly, vulnerably and tactfully – about what each of us carries into the exchanges, and to work it through together. Kindness and forgiveness reshape difficult exchanges, diluting conflict and resentment.

After five and a half weeks – actually, after fifty-three years – I know that I have finally found the person with whom I want to share the rest of my life.

I propose to David and am delighted when he says ‘Yes’.

We recognise that our relationship is still young, but settle into the hard work and joy of working out what this kind of commitment means in a day-to-day sense.



David and I set the date for our wedding in just seven months’ time.

I am fifty-three years old.

Quite apart from the ongoing reality of working out all the relational and emotional implications of our decision to get married, there are many practical details to negotiate in the leadup to the big day.

After the extraordinary and healing experience of reconnecting with my family through my niece’s wedding just two and a half years ago, there is no-one else I would consider asking to be my bridesmaids other than my three nieces – Anna, Diana and Gabriella. I am thrilled when they agree, and I willingly place myself in their highly competent hands to help with all the practical details. Being very capable and knowledgeable young women, and having recently negotiated the territory of organising Anna’s wedding, they are more than qualified for the job. It is also a delight for me to turn to and trust them for emotional support.

One of the first details to think about is the wedding dress. Finding a suitable gown for the occasion is both exciting and daunting.

I've never done anything like this before! Though I've been a bridesmaid several times, including for Grant and Margaret, all those weddings were 30 years ago, and many things have changed.

One of the biggest things that has changed, is me – inside and out. I think back to the discomfort I felt in the olive green satin dress I wore for my brother's wedding, and realise that my discomfort at that time was as much about my struggle to accept myself, including my body, as it is was about that particular gown.

Having lost 130kg, and also having had six plastic surgeries to remove excess skin, I have no idea what style will work for me. Anna suggests visiting some bridal boutiques to try options, with a view to perhaps hiring something appropriate.

Time is short, and all my nieces work or study full-time. We endeavour to organise a Saturday booking with a bridal boutique, but find they are booked out for fittings for months ahead. We decide to go shopping one weekend anyway, without an appointment, in the hope we might be able to at least look at some dresses, if not try them on.

We ask at two boutiques in the fashionable strip of wedding dress shops in High Street Armadale but they can't accommodate us.

Then we step into Shehzarin Batha Couture. Fortuitously, they have just had a cancellation and are able to see us straight away.

Over the next hour, I try on two dresses, before stepping into a sample of the most incredible gown I have ever seen. To say I am bowled over is an understatement.

With the intricate design and all the detailed work involved in custom-making this gown, it is beyond my wildest dreams.

I gaze into the mirror and see something I have never seen before – a mature and beautiful princess. She is not pretending to be anything she is not – the wisdom-lines from her years of life experience are clearly visible in her face and neck – but she is strong, confident and beautiful. Rather than being white, the gown is made from a soft pink embossed silk – a magnificent and subtle statement of sophistication, glamour and style – with a slight sheen that demonstrates the high quality material.

The most striking thing to me is the fact that this dress is strapless

and has an entirely fitted bodice. Prior to my weight loss, my bra size was 28H.¹⁷ After losing the weight but prior to my first plastic surgery, my breasts mostly consisted of saggy, loose skin, and the surgeon needed to lift my nipples by more than 15cm to get them to sit in an appropriate place.

I have always tried to hide this part of my body. In the past, looking into a huge floor-to-ceiling mirror like this, with half of the top part of my body bare, would have sent me into an emotional and psychological tailspin.

Now, as I look in the mirror and see a mature woman – strong, confident and beautiful – the tears begin to flow.

I tentatively ask the owner of the shop, also the designer of the dress, the cost... and my heart sinks. Understandably, the dress is extremely expensive. The stunning material and hours of work involved in making it to measure, justify the expense. But I also know that there's no earthly way David and I can afford to buy this magnificent dress.

The dressmaker is kind enough to give me a swatch of the material to take home, even though this is outside the usual practice unless a deposit is paid. Photos are also not permitted until a commitment is made to purchase the dress – but I don't need a photo to remember what I have just seen in the mirror – the beautiful image is burnt into my heart and mind.

Over the days ahead, I nurse the hope in my heart that it might be possible to buy this dress, but eventually have to accept that it is just not a financial option.

With sadness and gratitude I sit down to write a letter to the designer and owner of the boutique. I explain why it was so moving for me to try on their beautiful gown and tell some of my previous life experience. I return the swatch of material, explaining that I took it in the hope that I would be able to purchase the dress, but that I have since realised I can't.

I also enclose a copy of the first edition of this book, *Inch by Inch: Finding a Home within My Skin*.

17 US bra size 50H.

As I drop the parcel into the mailbox, I let go of the dream, and start looking at hire shops and second-hand dress options instead.

A week later I receive a call from the chief dressmaker, Harry, nearly in tears. He says, ‘we knew there was a story when you came to see us – we just had no idea that this was your story.’

Then they offer me the gift of a lifetime.

The team of dressmakers at Shehzarin Batha Couture offer to make my dress – more than 200 hours of work – at no cost. They say they will only charge David and me for the material.

They also stipulate that if we accept this extraordinary gift, we will not be able to let the story be known publicly, as they don’t want word to get out that they are doing this, lest others approach them for something similar.

I am stunned.

David is facilitating a training session for work, so I have trouble contacting him. By the time he finally gets my message and calls back, I have already spoken with my family who have offered to cover the cost of the material in an extraordinary gesture of love.

David’s words to me when he hears the news are, ‘I’ve already been turning myself inside out for the last week trying to work out how to get the money together to buy it for you at full-price! What an incredible gift!’

I am thrilled beyond words to ring the team back and ‘say “yes” to the dress.’¹⁸

In the months that follow, Shehz and her team form a book club to read my books and listen to my music while making the dress in their own time, after hours. I am delighted when they finally give me permission to share the full story publicly after the wedding.

On my wedding day, rather than feeling like I need to cover up my nakedness, I feel clothed with love beyond words.

I am clothed with the love of a community of hundreds of people – many of whom I have known for decades, and who have walked beside me through some very dark places.

18 cf. Reality TV series, *Say Yes to the Dress*, Executive producer: Grace Inge, Production company: Half Yard Productions, original TV network: TLC, 2007.

I am clothed with the love of my family with whom I have reconciled after years of having felt the need to pull away to protect myself.

I am clothed with the love of estranged and distant friends who have found it in their hearts to put aside tensions from the past. They are now happy to witness the magnificent opening of this new chapter of my life.

I am clothed with the love of my newly-enlarged community of family and friends who have accompanied David through his own life-struggles and challenges, and now extend the same love, warmth and welcome to me.

I am clothed with the love of God, which is given a voice in the words, songs, prayers and readings in the ceremony, but all the more so in my day-to-day real life experience of hope and healing.

I am clothed with my own self-love – accepting who I am and all that it's taken me to get here, including the many mistakes I've made along the way.

And I am clothed with the love of my husband, David.

David was not immediately privy to the decades of pain and struggle that have preceded this day, but he has got to know me very deeply over the last eight months – the 'me' who I have grown to be. He has seen me at the end of my tether, literally screaming and crying in his arms from the effects of stress. He has seen me barely sleeping for nights on end from anxiety. He has seen me in all my capable, administrative glory, planning to a 'T' every detail of the event that is our wedding, whilst also trying to work nearly full-time. He has seen me, tired and grumpy. He has seen me, laughing and free.

David has seen all the parts of me I have tried to hide for so long. He sees it all – the good, the bad, the ugly – and loves me just the same.

When I remove my wedding gown that night, and David sees and holds me in all my raw, vulnerable nakedness, I know that I no longer need to hide.

In his arms I find belonging, find my home.



