

## Memoirs of Uncle M



“He went peacefully” the sombre, slow talking voice announced, my hand gripping the receiver tighter as eyes strayed to a faded photograph of the one in question; his big toothless grin beaming across the now seemingly much darker room. I could hear the clock ticking down the hall and counted seconds passing before the voice, sounding a long way off, came again;

“He had a good innings”.

Uncle Maurice was ninety three, not a bad wicket although the cricket analogy is not entirely appropriate as it was a game he had precious patience for. The reasons were many but mostly because he was unable to fully comprehend why the players dressed the same or what the meaning of an ‘Over’ was. “The game of life” he would often say, pressing sickly sweet tobacco deep into his Calabash pipe; “now there’s a game anyone can play and you don’t need a uniform”.

He was what you might call a maverick, preferring the on-field antics of lesser known competitive sports such as cheese rolling or Haggis Hurling. Never satisfied with simply sucking the marrow, he enjoyed gnawing life right down to the bone then burying it. Even so, some would argue he was a classic time waster who lived foolishly and wasted his money. It is true he liked to throw the stuff around, once a whole total of sixteen dollars in small change at a Mr Whippy van that had refused to stop. In all though, he was not an angry or mean man, refusing to see the bad side in anyone. In this way there was a kind of endearing naivety about him, perhaps even something childlike; a notion reinforced by his insistence of wearing his sixth grade Boater and blazer pretty much up to the age of forty.

Maurice never married, reasoning there was scant time to be around anyone for any longer than forty five minutes; tops. Even so, his ‘conversations’ albeit truncated due to the forty five minute rule are things of legend, especially the Christmas dinners where Aunt Ginny’s interjections of; “Maurice, I wish you would just shut that big fat trap of yours” seemed only to fuel his enthusiasm for sharing insights on mastication and the habits of grass eaters.

Sure, he was outspoken and a bit of a loner but contrary to the gossip, there were a number of women in his life. In fact, it's no secret that he and Clare Beet, a handsome woman with a terrific nose and a flare for jelly moulds had been quite the item for a time.

"She didn't know much..." he would say looking at a faded photo of Clare posing outside *Wicker World* in her polka-dot swimsuit and balaclava;

"...But she had a nose for jelly".

I do not recall the man ever being sick although once complained about a clicking knee which he contributed to early years abroad in "Situ" which he warned against (in his trademark hushed tones) as a place to be avoided at all costs; especially during the winter months.

Perhaps my fondest and most cherished of memories are of Uncle's last visit where he chose to stay on a while to share insights from his recent solo trekking adventure. In this instance it turned out he hadn't travelled far, just around his garden a few times then onto the mailbox whereupon he became "lost". This sensation he told me had rapidly shifted to one of disillusionment in the discovery there was no mail to be found just the usual collection of pistachio shells he had been storing in there since June 1995.

"It's an experiment, trust me" he would say and wink in that smug sort of Maurice way and would continue doing so for pretty much the rest of the day. I had learnt long ago not to ask too many questions about these scientific studies as there was always an air of secrecy about them and frequently no hard evidence or data to follow them up.

As we settled down to talk some more, Uncle was keen to show me his recent photographic works. Maurice had a great eye, something he attributed to the fact that he only had the one; losing the other several years prior in a horrific accident whilst playing pass the parcel with himself. The images were, as usual, startling in their simplicity, seeing him painstakingly capture what appeared to be the best part of a 1948 Ford Anglia's skirting board with a bunch of muscatel grapes at sunset.

There were so many other stories that day and like a child I could only sit and listen with widened eyes, my enthusiasm further causing him to become more animated and charged with life with each moment. If only I could be more like Maurice I thought, I mean, just to pick up and go, to move outwardly, spontaneously into the unknown. No, I realised watching him mime the crossing of a mine-laden potato patch, how comfortable and routine my own life had become; a safe, dormant, insular and slowly stagnating existence in all. Maurice was like a tree, growing upward, opening its vibrant limbs to the great mysteries of the brilliant world. I was a Petri dish awaiting fungus.

That night I tossed and turned as thoughts of strange and exotic destinations danced in my restless mind, all the while doing my best to ignore the horrific noise emanating from Maurice's room. As in his waking hours, Maurice could be equally restless in his sleep and frequently talked out loud, referring to himself in third person as *Captain Black* before spontaneously bursting into a whistled version of Chopin's E major Op. 62. My Aunt Ruby, famous for her lemon pies and worm charming was the only one to really talk openly about Maurice's "night whistles" explaining they had started in early childhood which was the main reason she no longer kept a parrot.

Then at exactly 3:45AM, the phone rang startling me and picking the receiver up I realised I was shaking. Calls in the dead of night rarely signal good news. It was a long distance call from Maurice which was unusual as he was phoning from the spare room at the end of the hall. When I say room it was actually a wardrobe. He had insisted on sleeping in there as the linen and smell of camphor reminded him of the old world. Our conversation albeit brief was charged with the subtle yet none the less scintillating hint of expectation as he told me he had remembered why he had put the pistachio nuts in the mailbox but could not tell me in account of the telephone line being tapped by his old nemesis Rich Beans who he blamed right up until his death, for stealing the patent on his night singlet with secret hip pocket.

The next morning I found Maurice under the sink fixing the plumbing. He was old school that way, a jack -of -all -trades so when he saw something that needed repair he acted on it. In this case, there was nothing wrong with the sink he just wanted to know where the water went. Then dusting himself off, taking a sip of his coffee he smiled and began telling me his plans for the day.

You never knew what you were going to get with Maurice. Some years ago, standing in precisely the same place he had muttered the words 'time travel' then dashed off in search of what he called 'the last piece of the puzzle'. After disappearing for several days and just as we were organizing a search party, he showed up in an industrial clothes dryer in South Melbourne. Now he was about to embark upon something new; a 'new vocation' he explained; something that had eluded him for years, explaining further that the idea had come to him in a strange dream or maybe in the post.

“I can't believe it. It has been right in front of my eyes all this time.” He said reaching for a battered yellow suit case. I did not need to ask what was inside; with one look I knew it contained the trumpet his grandfather Maxwell had given to him. Maurice had shown me the trumpet previously on several occasions; he enjoyed holding it mostly and was pedantic about keeping it polished as to,

“See your face in it or maybe something else”.

There is good reason for this as on his death bed Maxwell had specifically asked for Maurice and in his dying moments had given him strict instructions to;

“Forget this nonsense you buffoon. Go polish a trumpet”.

In some ways I felt Maurice was never fully able to extricate himself from Maxwell's dominating and ever present shadow which when cast at high noon would not only measure an exact seven feet and three inches but would frequently act idiotic to the tune of *I do like to be beside the seaside*.

And here he was, holding the shiny instrument once more and in that fleeting moment I was filled with a strange, wistful sense of hope as I watched him determinedly hitch his nylon pants up a little higher whereupon he disappeared completely inside them.

Later that day, I found myself wandering the streets of the city in a daze as Maurice had not told me where he would be performing as he wanted it to be a surprise. So it was, with heavy feet I rounded a corner to find a small crowd gathered by a lone figure standing motionless in the centre of the plaza. Even from afar I could see he was deep in concentration so I approached cautiously before joining the others quietly awaiting the performance to commence.

On the tram home I turned to Maurice who seemed far away, looking out at the lonely, shadow-grey figures dashing home in the winter hour.

“What joy to see those smiling faces” he mused quietly to himself.

Even though he had not played a single note of his precious instrument he remained firm in his belief that the audience had heard his masterpiece in brass. He was still holding the trumpet in his freckled little hands, peaceful and content, watching the first drops of wispy rain streaking the clouding window glass. Impulsively I reached over and cupped my hand over his and for a time we sat smiling like children until something outside caught the corner of my eye. A woman was running for a taxi and had now stopped as a gust of wind blew hard at her umbrella turning it inside out. I watched as long as I could as she struggled to close it, at a distance it looked a little like a dance. I turned to Maurice believing his silent song to be true and was about to tell him so but he was fast asleep and had begun to whistle.

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