

Praise for Cheryl Koenig's work

An overwhelming personal narrative about the strength of one woman, her family, enduring love and caring. When blood ties are strong, family is key and no one more than Cheryl Koenig can show us the incredible importance of living a fulfilled life with family. The fragility of life as experienced and documented so beautifully in this book is never to be underestimated. *In My Blood* is an honest look at how one woman faced tremendous health issues, the power of fate, and how this resilient family unit has continued to care, love and laugh in spite of all they have experienced.

In My Blood is Cheryl Koenig's best read yet!

— Elena Katrakis, CEO, Carers NSW

I heard Cheryl speak at an author talk and was interested from the outset. After purchasing her book, *With Just One Suitcase*, I couldn't put it down. Was intrigued by the wonderful storyline and the hardships the characters endured both before, during and after World War 2. Then the story came close to home with their emigration to Sydney and the new life they created in their new country. Still find it hard to believe the two families were brought together thousands of miles from where the two boys (grandfathers) grew up. Great writing and well worth the read.

— *Booktopia* Review

Like so many stories of survival and escape during World War II, this tale of two Romanian families, one Jewish, the other Catholic, is gripping. The principal figures are Frici (Frederic) Löw and Istvan (Steven) König, who knew each other in their home village of Timisoara. Through a combination of bribery, quick wits and caution both children and their families survived the Germans only to face the task of fleeing the Russians. Cheryl Koenig dramatises their plights in much the same way as a novel, life in an occupied town as well as their escape making dramatic reading. Eventually they all fetch up in Australia, Istvan mesmerised by the sight of

Sydney Harbour one autumn morning in 1950. Remarkably, in Australia, the two families merged when Frici's daughter, the author, married Istvan's son, rounding the tale with an almost Shakespearean final act.

— *Fairfax Review*

Cheryl Koenig's account of the life challenges thrown at her reflect a unique combination of humility—she radically underestimates her contribution to her son's recovery from a catastrophic brain injury—and stoic resilience—she's one of the few who can truly claim to have “beaten” cancer. This is *the* textbook in overcoming adversity.

— Nick Rushworth, Executive Officer,
Brain Injury Australia

Cheryl Koenig OAM is a carer. Her advocacy for carers and in particular our community organisation, Sutherland Shire Carer Support Service, is as extraordinary as she is. Cheryl has donated tens of thousands of dollars to SSCSS through book launches, book sales and personal donations. I have witnessed Cheryl at deaths door yet she still finds breath to fight for the needs of carers. The most consistent words I hear from Cheryl is 'what can we do!' I am honoured to call her not only a colleague but importantly a friend. It was an honour to read her inspirational book. On behalf of carers in our community, thank you. You will never know the true impact of your work but carers you support do.

— Tracy Sami, Manager, Sutherland Shire
Carer Support Service, NSW

In 2009 Cheryl was named NSW Woman of the Year and last year she received the Medal of the Order of Australia for services to the disability sector. Reading her enthralling family memoir [*With Just One Suitcase*], it is easy to see where she has inherited her skills and her determination.

— *Toowoomba Chronicle*



Cheryl Koenig OAM is a Sydney-based writer and motivational speaker. *In My Blood* is her fifth book; her previous publications are *With Just One Suitcase* (Wild Dingo Press, 2015), *Paper Cranes* (2008), *The Courage to Care* (2007) and *There's always hope: just alter the dreams* (2006).

In 2009 Cheryl was named New South Wales Woman of the Year, and in 2014 received the Medal of the Order of Australia for service to people with disabilities, their families and carers. Her involvement with disability services arose out of caring and advocacy for her son, Jono, who was severely injured in a vehicle accident. Cheryl continues to volunteer her time to improve health care services, which she combines with her passion for writing

Cheryl has developed a high profile as a speaker to a diversity of organisations and audiences from community groups to keynote speaker at the University of New South Wales Graduation Ceremony. Cheryl devotes much of her public speaking to advocating for the disability arena and the rights of carers.

Cheryl is married with two adult sons and is the devoted grandmother to two grandchildren.

In My Blood

A memoir

Cheryl Koenig OAM



Published by Wild Dingo Press
Melbourne, Australia
books@wilddingopress.com.au
www.wilddingopress.com.au

First published by Wild Dingo Press 2019

Text copyright © Cheryl Koenig

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

Except as permitted under the Australian Copyright Act 1968,
no part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system,
or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording, or otherwise without prior permission of
the copyright owners and the publisher of this book.

Designer: Catalin Furtuna
Editor: Catherine Lewis
Printed in Australia by Ovato

Koenig, Cheryl, 1960– author.
In My Blood / Cheryl Koenig.



A catalogue record for this
book is available from the
National Library of Australia

ISBN: 9781925893021 (paperback)
ISBN: 9780987381170 (ebook: pdf)
ISBN: 9781925893038 (ebook)

Dedicated to my little angels, Summer and Olivia.

May the poetry of genes that flow through
your blood fill you with the necessary courage
to do the things you think you can't.

To never give up.

Acknowledgements

Success in any arena is rarely attributable to any one person. More often than not, it is the coming together and the strength produced by teamwork. I was, and still am, fortunate to have the support of a wonderful team.

My love and gratitude, as always, to my sacred circle of family. Humblest and sincerest thanks to my friends, colleagues and expert clinicians, who each played a major role in enabling me to write this chapter of my life (literally or otherwise).

Warmest thanks also to Catherine Lewis and Iris Breuer from Wild Dingo Press for their insightful editing and continued support of my writing and my charities. Iris, who recently and very suddenly passed away, will always be remembered with special affection for the sensitive and thoughtful soul she was. I feel blessed for having known someone who lived such an accomplished life with quiet dignity and humility.

Special mention to Matthew Cooper who gave his time and expertise bringing my website into the twenty-first century; and to a dear friend, Christa Farrell, for her meticulous eye for detail as she proofread the manuscript.

As with *Paper Cranes*, making money out of personal tragedy goes against my ethical compass, so proceeds personally made from the sale of this publication will be donated to Sutherland Shire Carer Support Service.

Acknowledgements

Finally, and most importantly: Rob. Thank you for giving me your best when I was at my worst. And thanks for picking me up as I continue to stumble my way through this thing called 'life'. People live better when they are surrounded and connected to people who are important to them. You make me feel important. And knowing I am important to you is a powerful antidote to feeling sorry for myself.

As we often toast one another in our quiet moments of reflection: 'My darling, it's been a blast!'

Foreword

Early in 2011, I had the honour and privilege of meeting Cheryl Koenig and her son, Jonathan, at a function where both Cheryl and I were Australia Day Ambassadors. I knew immediately that she wasn't an 'ordinary' person and as I came to learn more about her and her story, I realised she was, in fact, an extraordinary person! We've kept in touch since that luncheon and when she asked me to write a few words for her new book I felt extremely flattered; although when she asked me to write about finding 'inner strength' I immediately thought that despite my degrees in psychology she, really, is the expert on this! Nevertheless, despite my protestations, Cheryl persisted and noted that my contribution would be valuable, so I humbly submit the following thoughts.

We all have inner strength. Some easily know what this is and find ways to use it; some (maybe those like Cheryl) are forced to discover theirs and use it to combat adversity; while others never know what wonders are hidden within their minds and hearts. I feel sad for this last group because their ignorance (and I mean this in the purest sense of the word) impedes their ability to be their best and to live their best life. Because how can we be happy and successful without knowing what it is we're best at; without finding ways to capitalise on what energises us; without knowledge of those inner attributes and positive qualities we all have?

Foreword

I spend almost every minute of every day thinking about how to promote the principles of positive psychology, and at the heart of positive psychology is the belief that we all have core strengths and, that by becoming more aware of and better at using these strengths, we can live happier and more fulfilling lives. So, if you're reading this now and want to know where to find your inner strength ... look in the mirror and look deep inside because what you'll find will be all you'll ever need.

Professor Timothy Sharp

Founder and Chief Happiness Officer of The Happiness Institute, lecturer at the University of Sydney and the University of New South Wales. Bestselling author of The Happiness Handbook and The Good Sleep Guide, the latter being published in ten countries world-wide, and is a sought-after corporate consultant and speaker.

Author's Note

'I can shake off everything as I write;
my sorrows disappear, my courage is reborn.'

— Anne Frank

When my 12-year-old son, Jonathan, was in hospital two decades ago, and I decided to keep a journal of all the microscopic improvements he was making, little did I realise that from the tattered pages of an exercise book, my emotionally charged bits of scribble would go on to become a published book that would offer hope and inspiration to thousands. And, despite repeated requests from friends in the literary world, as well as from medical colleagues, to write something in a similar vein about what I was then—some ten years later—experiencing, as 'it would help others going through comparable journeys', I politely but emphatically refused, blaming a lack of physical strength and expressive ability.

'What's the point', I would say. 'I don't want to write about this nightmare. Writing it down makes it all real. I don't want to remember this part of my life. All I want is to never again feel this way. No reminders of how ghastly it was!'

However, my main excuse, when pressed further, and one about which I was genuine was, 'There's nothing special about me, nor what I'm going through. Don't you know that one in three people are affected by cancer?'

Author's Note

I have now relented but not without feelings of trepidation, as I know from past experience I will need courage to undertake a writing project that will see me embark on another rollercoaster ride of devastating lows and exhilarating highs, giving life to thoughts and feelings that lurk in the recess of my mind, neatly compressed, compartmentalised, and possibly best forgotten. To share the language, the expressive thought needed to describe that ride, will give an authenticity to what has been. And, to be authentic I need to not only reveal my weaknesses but put quite simply, have the audacity to write at length about *myself*.

My first foray into memoir was *Paper Cranes: A Mother's Story of Hope, Courage and Determination*. It, however, firmly shone the spotlight brightly and rightly on Jonathan and his amazing strength of character, with us, his family, taking up the supporting roles. In writing this story, the spotlight unfortunately shines on me. I only hope I portray half the dignity and grace as that of my son. Most of all I hope that in writing my audacious truth of what challenges confronted me, perhaps *Paper Cranes* will once more flutter into your thoughts, your hearts—perchance fragmented, possibly temporarily, but effectively giving certainty to the importance of hope. In my humble opinion, 'hope' is the most important word in the English language. A word without which none of us can move forward. History has shown how great leaders have used it to inspire nations, and I have had the great fortune to meet inspiring people who trust in hope daily and use it to move forward in their own lives.

And so, a year after *Paper Cranes* was published, who would have foreseen what lay ahead only eight weeks after all

IN MY BLOOD

the hype, buzz and media interviews that came from winning the prestigious award of 2009 NSW Woman of the Year—and brought about the elevated platform from which I could raise real community awareness of one of the most hidden disabilities of all—acquired brain injury (ABI)? Who would have foreseen that as I stood in the kitchen one morning opening my mail in the usual fashion, there was going to be nothing ‘usual’ about that day nor the previous week, or even the last two months?

As dozens of get-well cards fought for space along my polished teak dining-room cabinet, and sweet-smelling floral arrangements and vases filled to their brims adorned every table and sideboard, I let my exhausted and trembling fingers pause before tearing open the next card. I noticed the official emblem of the stationery of the Premier of New South Wales (NSW). I opened it hesitantly and slowly unfolded the crisp white paper bearing the same formal motif as the envelope. As I read and re-read the words of the Premier’s touching letter, sheltered thoughts of mortality which up till now were neatly contained in the corners of my mind, surfaced unwittingly, giving rise to a self-pity that brought with it tears. Silent tears at first, but which quickly turned to irrepressible gut-wrenching sobs, wracking my already frail physique with a ferocity that surprised me.



Premier of New South Wales
Australia

Mrs Cheryl Koenig

Dear Mrs Koenig

I have just been told about your illness and am writing to wish you well. And really, what can I say? There are times when even politicians are at a loss for words.

It seems only yesterday that I was with you on that proud evening in Sydney, congratulating you on being named NSW Woman of the Year, hearing how you cared for your son through all those years in the aftermath of his cruel brain injury, how you wrote your book about your experiences, a book that has inspired other parents and carers, how you raised funds for other victims of brain damage and have continued your crusade for the relief of suffering.

It's a wonderful story. And what terrible irony, what mysterious working of fate or divine will, has singled you out for this latest misfortune? People used to tell us that suffering ennobles. And perhaps it does. It certainly tests our strength. And if anyone is capable of coming through this trial and emerging stronger it is Cheryl Koenig.

The subtitle of your book says it all: *A Mother's Story of Hope, Courage and Determination*. You have those qualities in abundance. The mother's story is now truly your own story. And with your countless admirers and friends, I am confident that hope, courage and determination will see you through. Keep fighting. We need our Woman of the Year. We need more like Cheryl Koenig.

Stacey joins me in wishing you the very best of recoveries.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Nathan Rees'.

Nathan Rees, MP
Premier

Prologue

‘Are you ready, Chez?’ Rob’s gentle voice trailed up to our bedroom.

‘No, not yet, honey,’ I called back with contrived control. I stared down at my small suitcase which lay empty on the bed. I knew I should be packing but, somehow, I just couldn’t begin. For to begin, might be to end. It was that simple. *Is this how my father and father-in-law felt when they packed to leave everything familiar to them—their homelands, cultures, families and friends, to flee a war-torn Europe and savage Communist regime, and travel halfway around the globe with just one suitcase? If this was the last suitcase I ever packed, what would I want it to contain?*

As my white tulle curtains billowed in the gentle breeze, I stared at the adjacent wall filled with happily framed faces. *They are all that I need, that I want ... Rob, Jon, Chris ... my boys.* I selected a frame that held the four of us on holiday in Hawaii, smiling naïvely as we clinked glasses; toasting the captivating sunset as it sent hues of amber spilling across the waves of Waikiki. An empty hook now exposed itself on the dove-blue paint of my bedroom wall. *That’s how I feel: empty, exposed, holding onto thin air.* For a few moments I held the picture against my chest then I carefully placed it in the suitcase. I had begun.

As I continued quietly packing my thoughts drifted back to where everything had begun. Not when I was born. No. It had begun generations before that.

Prologue

'Magical,' some said; 'Meant to be,' said others.

Whatever it was, the beginning of my future was certainly mystifying. As though an imperceptible hand had somehow intervened, guided, led me to here and now. A hand which had serendipitously woven a thread between three generations of two families and across two continents.

Then I remembered what needed to be inside my suitcase. The Letter. Reaching inside the white timber drawer next to my bed, I found the envelope. I opened it, slid out the paper and unfolded its fresh creases to read through it one last time.

Darling Rob,

When our eyes met and locked across that crowded room in 1975, in that instant tiny sparks illuminated the path to our coming together—to a conversation that would change the lives of both our families. You were 19 and I was only 15 when we met 34 years ago. Nevertheless, I remember it like yesterday. I remember how tall and handsome I thought you, with your smiling hazel eyes and burnished black hair that fell to your shoulders ... perfectly in keeping with the look of the '70s!

I remember the moment I fell in love with you. It wasn't gradual, but rather a feeling of being hit by lightning. I remember our first kiss and how it set my soul alight. There was so much about you to love: your wonderful sense of humour, your smile that told me all was right with the world, your knowledge of where you wanted life to take you and your unblemished perception of the world itself; plus, a confidence and pride that was tempered with an unassuming nature. And when your hand held mine, I had a feeling, a certainty, that all that I would ever need was in the palm of my hand.

Perhaps if I had known then, been given a crystal ball to show me what lay ahead, what heartbreak I would put the one person in the

IN MY BLOOD

world that I have loved longer and more than any other through, perhaps I would have walked away. I doubt it though; the attraction was too strong. Since the moment in time when we stole a glance in each other's direction, since you first took my hands in yours and guided me in the dance of life—a star-crossed lover's dance perhaps, but as inevitable as night following day. Just as in love during our early years when the future stretched innocently before us, unmarked and full of promise, as when dark skies loomed to threaten and test us. And despite having had our fair share of troubled times—the most definitive being Jon's accident which shaped our world into two terrains ... the 'before' and 'after'—things have one way or another always worked out.

But in case this happens to be the one-time things don't work out, I need to thank you for being the most perfect husband and the best father to our beautiful sons. I need to thank you for all the wonderful times we've had—how you've made my life complete, kept me smiling, made so many dreams come true. And most importantly, I need to tell you that I would never be who I am today, had our eyes not met, had you not held my hand.

All my love forever,
Cheryl

'Chez honey, we'll be late.'

'I'm coming.'

Yes, I thought as I zipped the suitcase closed, *sometimes it's from yesterdays that we find our tomorrows ...*

Contents

1	Teardrops to the sea	1
2	Through a glass darkly	22
3	My winter of discontent	30
4	Keys of my blood	36
5	Labour of love	50
6	Who are you, said the caterpillar	59
7	Wings that don't fly	68
8	The best bad luck I've ever had	74
9	The gift of today	83
10	Not over till the final whistle blows	88
11	One step forward, two back	97
12	<i>Ubuntu a Nguni Bantu</i>	102
13	My considered life	108
14	We all fall down	114
15	The imposters of triumph and disaster	121
16	More lucky than gifted	129
17	Minted gratitude	150
18	'We travel not to escape life but for life to escape us'	154
19	Stubbornly glad	175
	Postscript	179
	In Memoriam	193

1

Teardrops to the sea

Three days earlier: Friday 12 June 2009, 5:45 p.m.

‘**N**o way!’ I jumped up indignantly from the chair that sat beside the doctor’s well-ordered desk to move in front of the square incandescent light that illuminated my ribs, lungs and other parts of my diaphragm. ‘I’m *not* having that! Have another look, because there is *no way* I’m taking that!’

‘I’m sorry, Cheryl,’ Dr Peter said, ‘but there is no other way to tell you. You have lung cancer.’

‘What the ... I don’t understand, Peter,’ I said as I stared at a large white blurry mass on the otherwise dark image of my lungs. I had taken to calling him by his first name as he has been my family’s very capable general practitioner since we first moved to this leafy suburb of southern Sydney the week before Jonathan was born, 24 years ago.

Peter’s hands came up over his face and he rubbed his eyes. As he slowly brought his hands down and stroked his strong jawline, he grimaced as if in pain. His gentle brown eyes appeared dewy, and in that moment, I actually felt sorry for him. He cleared his throat in an attempt to shuffle through the deck to find the right card to play, all the while trying to remain composed. ‘Cheryl, sit down, *please*. I’ve faxed the CT¹

1. Computerised tomography (CT) is radiography in which a 3-dimensional image of a body structure is constructed by computer from a series of plane cross-sectional images made along an axis. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/computed%20tomography>

Teardrops to the sea

scan report and been on the phone to a respiratory specialist, who has confirmed the diagnosis—'

I leapt to my feet again, cutting him off: 'But it's impossible, Peter! I don't smoke, I rarely drink, I cook fresh vegetables with my meals every night of the *frigging* week ... I *can't* have cancer! I am *not* accepting it!'

The rest of our conversation was a blur. I stopped caring about what cards he was dealing me, I just needed to get out of his rooms. I vaguely recall Peter telling me about an appointment with a respiratory specialist for a needle biopsy. However, I don't know whether I paid, signed, or even acknowledged the receptionist on my way past the front desk. I do recall, conversely, exiting the surgery in the crisp night air of winter and seeing my own breath before me in rapid little bursts of heated vapours. I recall getting into my car and feeling suddenly cold. I don't have any memory of driving the three or so kilometres home—I must have navigated the familiar route on autopilot.

Without thought, without tears, somehow, I arrived home. I calmly manoeuvred the family sedan into its precisely fitted space in the double garage of the Georgian-brick home where my heart was held captive by tender memories of innocence and privilege—life before the evening that changed the dynamics of my little family; the house whose common brick walls had become anything but common, but rather a castle, a haven, a place where special blessings, or miracles of a sort, had since transpired.

Seeing Robert's car already garaged jolted my mind back from the distant place where it had retreated, and confirmed what I had already known: that he was home

with Jonathan, just as he was meant to be that day—a day that had begun like so many others...

‘Don’t forget I’ve got to help out at the ‘Carers NSW’ conference today, Jon. I’m dropping you at work this morning, Granddad is picking you up and then Dad will pick you up from Granddad’s place on his way home—okay?’

‘Okay, Mum,’ came his compliant reply as he slowly dressed. There would be no rushing him, this much I knew, he was going as fast as he could. Always amenable and an ever-present blessing in my existence, my precious rose had blossomed into a charming young man—albeit with some slight imperfections—or ‘mild physical and cognitive impairments’ as the real world would recognise. But handsome he was, with his cobalt blue eyes and beaming smile that melted hearts. And despite a challenging life other than that he was born into, he possessed a wonderful sense of humour, keen intellect and charismatic personality that not only fulfilled my every aspiration, but most significantly, had managed to touch and positively affect, so many others.

As I drove to the conference I thought about the previous night, and how I had not slept a wink, as had been the state of play for the past few weeks, due to a feeling of drowning each time I lay flat; of literally not being able to get my breath and of a horrible rasping noise that was emanating from somewhere within. The previous night, when I had managed to doze off for a few minutes, aided by three pillows under my head and upper body, Rob had gently woken me to say, ‘Cheryl, what’s that noise? Can you hear it? I think it’s coming from your chest. It sounds dreadful. Are you breathing okay?’

Teardrops to the sea

I checked my handbag to see if I had that scrap of folded paper Dr Peter had given me a week or so earlier: a request for a chest X-ray. Yes, it was there. I had been to see Peter, or one of his colleagues, a few times over the course of the previous months with various symptoms, the main one being the breathing issue at night. However, as soon as either one had placed their cold stethoscope on me and said, ‘Can’t hear a thing’, I had practically galloped out, glad that my intuition that something untoward was happening had been misguided. I wasn’t eating well, had lost several kilograms and I had a lower leg rash that, even after seeing a skin specialist three times and several expensive creams later, wouldn’t clear up. My lower legs were also swollen with fluid, especially around the ankles.

But as fate would have it, the weekend prior to the carers’ conference, Chris (my 22-year-old second son) was playing soccer when he was ‘headed’ in the face by an overly eager opponent. He came home with a badly swollen eye which I thought looked serious enough for me to suggest he go to hospital.

‘Nah, Mum, don’t overreact—it’s nothing,’ he laughed it off in his typically laid-back manner, as he brushed my hand away from tousled brown, sweaty hair that framed his tanned face. I had tried to hold his hair back so that I could take a good look into and around those perceptive hazel eyes, one of which was gradually closing, its surrounding socket red and swollen—eyes that knew too much about life, about loss.

Two days later when he began to lose feeling down one side of his face, Chris agreed to see Peter, who immediately booked him in for a facial X-ray. Afterwards, Chris rang to tell me that it showed he had fractured his eye socket.

‘Bloody hell, Chris, that’s serious.’ I replied. ‘You had better pick me up on your way back through to the doctor’s so I can sit in on the discussion.’

The GP confirmed what was in the report and sent us straight to the emergency department of the local hospital, where the two of us spent the entire day waiting for expert opinion on the best course of action, finally, getting to see a maxillofacial surgeon who said it was borderline for surgical intervention. He advised that it would be best to wait it out and see if the numbness subsided over the next few weeks.

Sometimes fate works in mysterious ways. Had Chris not broken his eye socket and had I not gone with him that day to see Peter, I wouldn’t have ended the appointment about myself, boldly insisting on having a chest X-ray. I was beginning to not only worry about the rasping noise, but I was so very tired from endless nights where sleep was becoming an elusive memory.

* * *

‘I’m sorry, Mrs Koenig,’ came a soft male voice through the thin cubicle door simultaneous to the sound of a light rap, ‘but don’t dress just yet—you’re going to need a CT scan of your chest.’

‘No, I can’t, thanks. Not today, anyway. I’m on my way to speak at a conference and I’m already running late. I’ll come back another day,’ I replied chirpily.

‘You don’t understand, Mrs Koenig,’ he went on. ‘We’ve just spoken with your GP and told him we’ve seen something untoward on your chest X-ray, so he’s ordered a CT scan be done immediately.’

Teardrops to the sea

‘Oh,’ I said, perplexed, wondering how I was going to get to the conference on time and not let Maeve down. Maeve was a colleague and Communications Manager for the ‘NSW Agency for Clinical Innovation’—otherwise known as ‘ACI’ (an advisory body to NSW Health that works with clinicians, consumers and key stakeholders to design and promote better health care for the state).

‘Okay, then, if you think it’s important.’

‘It is.’

Pulling the thin cotton robe around me and folding my arms tightly across my chest in an attempt at modesty, I followed him down the busy hall to the CT scanning room. I was taken inside immediately, the radiographer oblivious to the disgruntled expressions of several people already seated in the narrow hallway.

‘Is the room freezing, or is it just me?’ I asked to no one in particular, as the contrast agent travelled through my veins.

Without waiting for the results, I hurried out and drove as fast as legally possible to the conference function centre. My mobile began ringing almost as soon as I buckled up and drove off, but I refrained from answering—pulling over would waste more time. It rang twice more. Fifteen minutes later I was parking my car in the basement and my phone began ringing again. When I answered, a frenetic female voice told me that Peter had been trying several times to get me—he wanted to see me straight away.

‘Sorry. Can’t be done,’ I apologised. ‘I’m a guest speaker at a carers’ conference and I’m already running late. I’ll call by on my way home—but it won’t be till around five.’

That was how the day began. It ended quite differently...

'Hi, guys,' I said feigning as calm a voice as I could muster. 'Had dinner? That's good.' I put my briefcase-style handbag down on the granite kitchen bench and turned to look at Rob and Jon at the dining table. They had stopped eating and were looking up at me bizarrely from their dinner plates.

Silence filled the air; my voice had abandoned me. I stared mesmerised and lost inside Jon's deep blue insightful eyes, then turned my attention to Rob's furrowed expression. 'What's up?' Rob said, concern in his voice, query in his eyes. Still no words would come. Rob stood and approached me tentatively, 'Chez, honey—what's wrong?'

'I...I...' *Don't cry. Don't upset Jon.* 'I just saw Peter.' *Gather yourself; don't be a baby!* 'He said...he said...' I fumbled with something inside my handbag, trying to stall for time. I couldn't say it. I couldn't find the words.

'What did he say? Come on, now you're scaring us! He's left several messages on the home phone earlier today. What's going on?'

Minutes seemed to pass as I stared through Jon's eyes and into his heart. We had always been truthful with each other and I knew I could be nothing less at this time. Then, like the distant whimper of a small child, I heard myself say, 'He said...I have...lung cancer.' There it was, out.

Jon's jaw dropped and he gasped out loud before slowly asking, 'Not like that lady on the TV ad?' In his tenor, the sound of fear.

'No, honey, don't panic. Not like that, I promise.' I looked from his shocked face to the other—my childhood sweetheart, my love, my life, my Rob. His perfectly handsome face and

Teardrops to the sea

usual wide smile that still made my heart skip a beat when he entered the room, was compressed into a million creases by the weight of what I'd just revealed.

Without even realising, I had been crying. My face was wet, my chin was dripping. Rob leapt towards me and his strong embrace cradled me as all the cards of our carefully re-stacked deck in the 'new' game of life which we had so painstakingly rebuilt, came tumbling down.

'How can that be? *Jesus Christ!*' As he held me, I felt our tears meld together, and in a voice filled with anguish, his heart cried out my own thoughts, 'Not you. Not us. Not now. Just when we were beginning to see the light of day.'

Yes, we were just finding ourselves, our lost intimacy; filling in the empty spaces of our changed hearts with soft hues of tranquillity and joy as we settled in and adapted to our new roles in this disproportionate world. Roles and selves that had been altered by over a decade decorated by the stain of blood, sweat and countless tears as we worked tirelessly, sometimes eight to ten hours a day on Jon's rehabilitation, placing all else aside. Somehow, despite the enormous strain on our relationship, we had managed to put our two shattered hearts back together, leaving the broken bits on the floor. Over the ensuing years, we had formed an even deeper understanding, or closeness, that came from the shared experience of knowing what it felt like to be broken and hollow from the devastation of losing the essence of our bright, boisterous and 'normal' little boy. They say time heals, and it does, only never *completely*. You just get more adept at carrying on as the tendrils of time grow over the scars. Of course, the heartache

IN MY BLOOD

never ends but it changes... It's a passage ... and it's the price we all pay for love.

* * *

Did I have dinner that night? I don't think so. My next memory is of coming out of the shower, still in the same continued state of disbelief in which I had left Peter's surgery. A state of denial—a condition I recognised well as it bore semblance to how I had reacted 12 years prior when the emergency doctor had informed me that Jonathan's medical state was critical, and he wasn't sure if he would make it through the night. It's where you just want to bury your head under a pillow and slip under a thick blanket of defiance. You simply can't accept what you're hearing, because in your mind what your hearing is completely unacceptable.

Here I was with another dire prognosis, trying to keep my emotions in check. A pitiful and futile attempt to stay in control, because you see, that's who I was—Cheryl Koenig: wife, mum, carer, daughter, sister, friend, author, volunteer, guest speaker and *frigging* NSW Woman of the Year, whose ego had led me to think that my life was in control, that I was always in control, and that I controlled my circumstances. Never too upset, too sad, too angry, too satisfied. Knew to keep my chin up, not look back, only forward. See the glass half-full, smile even when I felt like crying. Hadn't I learned life's lessons the hard way? Isn't that what I'd written about in *Paper Cranes*? Didn't I infer that I understood the fragility of life and have the audacity to lecture others on how we should never let ourselves get too caught up in drama or we may fail to capture how magical life can be? *If that's who*

Teardrops to the sea

I thought I was, how the hell did I let the magic slip through my fingers once more? And how was I possibly going to control the outcome this time?

Walking towards the top of the staircase I heard Chris's key turn the metal lock of the front door to the house where Rob and I had spent the last 24 of our 29-year marriage. All but the last 12 years—since Jon was hit by a speeding car—had been as near to perfect as possible. Chris who was only ten years old that fateful evening, was now in his last year of a five-year degree in civil engineering. He had grown into a tall, striking young man whose self-sufficiency, independence, and innate common sense seemed to suit his quietly sociable personality. Chris lived and shared his life without flamboyance. A quiet achiever. An especially good son.

Whispering urgent voices trailed up towards me as Rob spoke to Chris at the bottom of the stairs. *Oh, no...don't tell him...don't hurt him.* I hurried backwards, away from the hushed tones of distress and back into the bathroom. Mindlessly, I began brushing my hair. In the mirror I saw Chris approach me from behind. He wrapped both arms around me and laid his head down on my shoulder. The arms that encircled me felt at once powerful yet shielding, as strong as the keen sportsman he had become; his embrace broad, protecting, emitting a need to keep all harm from his mother. However, his head upon my shoulder felt as delicate as the little boy he once was.

'You'll be right, Mum, don't worry. If anyone can beat this, you can. You're the strongest person I know,' he said in a voice that was anything but familiar.

'Thanks, darling boy.' I patted his head, then quickly turned away to hide my unwanted tears. 'Don't you worry

about me, okay?’ *Christ, why did he say that? Doesn’t he know it’s all a façade. I’m not really that strong. Now what will I do? How can I live up to his expectations?*

Rob rang his parents. More hushed tones of urgent anguish. Next, he rang his work—Alpha Flight Services—where he had worked for the past three years as a cabin service attendant, or catering despatcher, on international flights. A job at times frenetic and stressful due to the nature of airline schedules, but with his inherent work ethic, a vocation he had come to enjoy, and as such, had not had a day off sick since starting. He told Ramon, his boss, that he wouldn’t be in the next day (Saturday), nor the next week, and in fact wasn’t sure when he’d be back, if at all. Ramon told him to take as much time as he needed. *What irony, what craziness, I thought, would give cause for Rob to give up his work, his identity, for the second time in just over a decade? Hadn’t he already proven his allegiance to family over work? Why, again?*

I went to bed, desperately wanting this day to be over. Perhaps if I went to sleep, I would wake to find it all a bad dream? Before long I got up again. I found the CT scan report, picked up the phone and dialled my elder sister, Amanda’s, number. She was a radiographer. As casually as possible, I said, ‘Hey, what do you think this person has?’ and proceeded to read out the report:

The heart size is normal. The pericardium is thickened or there is a large pericardial fluid. There is a soft tissue mass surrounding the aortic arch, the left vertebral and left subclavian artery. There is a mass noted occupying the left upper zone anteriorly surrounding the bronchi

Teardrops to the sea

and causing distal consolidation. This mass is continued past midline and continues into the sub-carinal region. Urgent respiratory consultation is recommended. And, the plain chest X-ray says the same, except they have the mass measurement at 7.5 centimetres.

‘Oh, no! Don’t tell me Steven’s got lung cancer?’ Steven, Rob’s dad, was now 80 years old and, although once a smoker, had given up some ten years ago and fortunately, had never had a sick day in his entire life.

‘No. It’s not Steven. It’s me.’

‘That’s not funny. Not even close!’

‘I wish it was a joke.’

Suddenly my body began to tremble. I had had a low-grade fever on and off for weeks now. ‘That’s just what the doctor told me earlier and I just wanted to check it out with you.’ My voice was coming in quickened breaths now, and I suddenly remembered all the recent times I had answered the telephone, only to hear the person on the other end ask me if I’d been running.

‘I’m coming over,’ Amanda said. I protested, saying it was too late; that she should go home to cook dinner for her 15-year-old daughter, Georgia; that I was going to go to bed. Before hanging up the phone, I said to her softly, ‘Can you ring Dad for me and, you know, explain it all without the drama? I’ll only cry and I don’t want to upset him.’

I got back into bed and stared into the blackness. A few minutes passed and the silence was broken by the ringing of the phone. Knowing I wouldn’t want to answer, Rob came into the bedroom and picked it up.

‘Hello? Yes...yes. Okay, I’ll put her on.’ Passing me the cordless phone he whispered, ‘It’s Maeve.’

‘Hi, Maeve,’ I said, in my best controlled voice.

‘Just rang to see how you got on at the doctor’s on your way home?’ she asked in her bright Irish brogue.

‘Not so good,’ my control suddenly waning. ‘Apparently, I’ve got lung cancer.’

‘Cheryl... No!’ her voice changed from bright to stunned. We talked some more, then she told me she was going to ring Kate, who also worked for ACI, and was Maeve’s senior colleague. Within minutes, Kate rang. There was obvious concern in her voice as she questioned me, and I answered with as much precision and clarity, due to my shortness of breath, as I could muster. Finally, she gave me her number on which to fax a copy of both the plain chest X-ray and CT scan reports. Several minutes later she rang back. This time her tone was more officious as she relayed a time and address that I was to see a Professor Brian McCaughan.

‘He’s the best cardiothoracic surgeon in New South Wales, if not the country,’ she said, ‘and his rooms are near the RPA (Royal Prince Alfred Hospital). He’ll see you at eleven on Monday morning.’

All we had to do now was somehow get through the weekend.

That night, sleep was never going to happen—not for me, nor for poor Rob. He held me tightly all night; and my thoughts and silent sobs were for him and for my boys. *Why the hell was I doing this to them? How could I have let this happen?*

‘Hey, Rob?’ I whispered against the strangeness of the night. ‘Do you remember our wedding song?’

Teardrops to the sea

‘Of course, I do,’ he whispered back. ‘*Moon River*. Why?’

‘I can’t get that silly old tune out of my head,’ I replied. ‘I remember Mum suggesting it for our wedding waltz and me arguing with her, saying it was too old-fashioned. But she talked me into it, saying it would be easy to waltz to, and she was right. It was easy to waltz to all those years ago, and it’s been an easy waltz with you holding my hands, leading me, even when we’ve stumbled...’ I began softly humming, then singing:

Moon River, wider than a mile;
I’m crossing you in style, some day.
Oh, dreammaker, you heartbreaker;
Wherever you’re going, I’m going your way.
Two drifters off to see the world...

‘*Moon River* is like...our love...wider than a mile,’ my off-key singing had turned to halted words and stifled sobs, ‘*We were* like two drifters, weren’t we Rob, 34 years ago when we knew we’d see the world together...and we have...and I’m so happy that we have—’

‘Stop it, Chez,’ he cut me off. ‘Don’t upset yourself, honey.’

‘No—listen—I just need to tell you this. We’ve always been after the same rainbow’s end, haven’t we? Nothing fancy, just together, you and me, till we’re old and grey. And—this is the last thing, I promise—thanks for being my best friend.’

‘We’ve got lots more to do and see yet,’ he said, softly ‘*and* I’m not grey yet! But I promise you, I will hold your hand through whatever happens.’

* * *

So many questions over the ensuing two days would come from family and friends. Stephanie and Steven, Rob's parents, came first thing the next day. I knew they would. They've always been there for us—the most supportive parents and grandparents one could wish for, especially since Jon's accident. They both hugged me tightly, pain obvious in both sets of speckled hazel eyes, as each brimmed with tears.

Dad rang from Melbourne, where he had recently moved to be closer to my youngest sister, Susan, and her three young children. I had encouraged him to move from the home he had shared with Mum for more than 50 years, as after she died in 2004, he had cycled in and out of depression.

'Cherie, baby—' he began, but couldn't go on. Hearing his voice stilted, wounded and cracking made me cry. I didn't want to hurt anyone, least of all my family. To think that Dad and Rob's parents had to go through this type of family torture, yet again, at what should be a peaceful time—the autumn of their lives—absolutely gutted me, as I knew I was the source of their pain.

Only a few months earlier I had sat down separately with my dad, Fred, and then my father-in-law, Steven, and asked them to recount the story of their lives. My purpose in so doing was my belief that just as our proud Indigenous Australians pass down their ancestral stories to keep history alive, so, too, must we—if we are to do justice to our label as a 'proud multicultural society'; to share the revelation of uncelebrated post-World War II immigrants whose lives were lived out with success, grace and moral purpose. Lives from which I have, and others could, significantly learn.

Teardrops to the sea

As well, my father and father-in-law's stories as they reconnected in Sydney was an amazing tale of serendipity. They actually knew each other as boys before the war, in their town of birth, Timișoara, in south-west Romania, close to the Hungarian border. They each considered themselves Hungarian, both having Hungarian mothers who, typically, loved to indulge their sons and nourish them with heart-warming Hungarian cooking. Goulash with *nokedli* (egg dumplings), capsicums stuffed with meat and rice, and other such traditional dishes were their usual fare at home. Both mothers instilled in their sons a strong sense of family.

Hungarian was the language they were raised with, and although from different religions and social backgrounds, their family paths crossed on a few occasions. However, as the war deepened and the boys grew into the troubled skins of their adolescence, their paths dramatically separated—with each waging their own battle for survival in different ways. They didn't reunite until 25 years later in Sydney, five months after Rob and I had met and thought it was about time to introduce our parents to one another. Naturally that day turned out to be an unexpected momentous occasion for both families. One of those unusual experiences in life where you feel something mystical has just occurred; a synchronicity beyond logic.

When I finally had time to mentally travel back almost a century to where this mysterious hand of fate had intervened, to piece together two families' separate yet combined stories, it was just before my unwelcome diagnosis. Each father was then aged almost eighty. Each narrated their individual stories of survival and escape, over several sessions. Their personal

IN MY BLOOD

narrations revealed considerable dissimilarities and contrasts in both their experiences and recollections. My father's memory for obscure detail about people, names and dates was elephantine. Yet until pressed, he didn't want to recall or discuss what must have been a terrifying and highly traumatic time for a Jewish child growing up in an era of intense prejudice, hatred and then the 'final solution'. Whereas, Steven was able, as if telling a tale about someone else's life, to recount close to a step-by-step journey of his escape and was able to paint the dark portrait of his life in Russian slave labour camps as easily as an artist takes colours to a canvas. Yet comparatively, he was not as precise on names, dates and places.

Memory is as perceptual as it is subjective. We each hold our own truth on history. Our ability to file away particular scenes and retrieve them many years later varies from person to person for a multitude of reasons. Despite the sometimes faded and differing appearances of both my patriarchs' recollections, in the end they each proved to be as reliable as the washed-out colours that eventually come together to form a rainbow and forge a reality of what has once rained down.

At our third attempt at the interview and note-taking process, I was eager to get to the nuts and bolts of Dad's story: 'That's great, Dad,' I interrupted, as he wandered off topic yet again about minor superfluous details, 'but I really want to know more about your experiences growing up as a young Romanian Jewish boy in the era prior to the outbreak of the war'. There was a reason behind my eagerness—I had a premonition that time would not do us any favours. Little

Teardrops to the sea

did I realise then that it was *my* time, not his, as I had thought, that would be in question.

‘Yes, yes, I understand,’ he replied, pensively rubbing his hand over the top of thinning silver curls as he was apt to do throughout our conversation, his precious little poodle, Coco, snuggled cosily around his neck like a collar. *It’s hard to see where the dog’s fur begins and Dad’s hairline ends*, I silently mused.

As I searched his furrowed brow and awaited his response, part of me wondered if I was asking too much from him. I knew, though, that despite being in his eighth decade, and his arthritis played havoc with his mobility, he still possessed a razor-sharp mind and prodigious memory. Nonetheless, as I looked at his weary gestures, I silently questioned where the years had evaporated and where the young energetic father, who worked around the clock to put food on the table for his five children, had faded?

* * *

Saturday, the day after my ominous diagnosis, when visiting family and friends finally left, I went upstairs to my small office, switched on my computer and began to read through the prologue and initial chapters of my manuscript, *With Just One Suitcase*, the working title I had already framed in my mind. I read, re-read and edited—exactly what I needed to do to take my mind off my own woes. Writing had always been my place of escape; a friend with whom I could lose myself for hours whenever I chose to delve within its creative space of spontaneous thoughts and sculptured words. An outlet for my imagination, I suppose, like those who turn a blank canvas into colour, song or shape.

My love of reading was ignited by my mother from a young age. However, my love of writing came much later, in midlife, through my desire to share stories of inspiration. Through my need to let others know to never give up, that there is *always* hope—although sometimes we have to alter our dreams.

Sometimes it feels as if I write when I'm at my worst. Not only do I experience a sense of catharsis from a release of negative energy, but the process of writing is something I can control. And, more importantly, I have control over the end result. I deeply believe that reading and writing are essential to how our lives interconnect, in forming part of the conversations we have with ourselves and with others; where we can share our deepest connections, relationships, dreams, desires, losses, and sorrows.

Memoir, more than any other genre, is about handing over your life and saying: 'This is who I am. This is what I experienced. Maybe you can learn something from it.' It is where you share what you think, how you feel, and what you have gone through. And if you can do that well enough, perhaps somebody out there will get the wisdom and benefit of lived experience.

Furthermore, shared stories—as in *With Just One Suitcase*—bridge the gap between past and present. Shared stories are what link us to our common humanity by giving us empathy for others and what they have endured. Being the narrator of my family's sweeping saga, the more I wrote the more I realised I was, after all, just an outsider, carried along by the energy of the people and their stories of survival, whilst captive to a paradox: the allure of living a 'less than ordinary life' against a backdrop of fear and danger. Yes, I was an

Teardrops to the sea

outsider, an intruder into a community bound by a dread that I struggle to truly understand because I have not lived it. The more I heard from Dad and Steven about the horrors of this almighty war, and its brutal aftermath, the more I realised that adversity certainly teaches resilience; that unfortunate challenges are life's greatest teachers. And, I understood more circumspectly, that families from both sides of war were profoundly affected as they were torn apart—men unwillingly recruited to fight, whilst others scrambled for life from the sanctuary of their communities, or even their homes. World War II radically altered the pattern of family existence, altered societies on a global scale, probably more than any other historical event. The separation, the fear and the loss were evident in the familial suffering across the globe.

Documenting family history is not just important, it is necessary, because insights from other eras take current generations beyond their experiences of life today. More significantly, I believe we have an obligation to *not* forget what went before. For every single life has meaning, yet each becomes invisible unless shared.

* * *

Once, being alone with my thoughts was something I craved, especially when my ideas merged and linked to form prose. Yet this particular Saturday my thoughts were disjointed, unformed fears that flitted around like leaves in the breeze—timorous, exhausting, resolving nothing.

My mind drifted to the title of the story and the implications for me who was about to travel to a foreign place—a hospital—alone and frightened, *with just one suitcase*. Certainly, the

IN MY BLOOD

association of comparing my own journey to that of Frici and Istvan was extreme, however ... *how would the contents of my suitcase compare?* Like theirs, mine will contain forgettable memories, but ... I knew what I needed to do: draw from their example, find the same inner strength, the resilience to face what lay ahead. From them, I had already unpacked an invaluable lesson: hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things. *I must find hope.*

There was a fervour to my writing that day, that as yet in my previous works, I had never experienced. I now knew I faced a very real, yet unspecified, deadline. I kept transcribing my written notes well into the night until I heard Rob, and felt exhaustion, calling me to bed.