

On the Clifftop

Margot Ogilvie

South Australia had experienced its warmest June for fifteen years, its driest for ten. The farmers were complaining, but not us. We'd made the most of the exceptional weather, reacquainting our dear friend Maureen with the delights of our region. She'd been part of our family for forever, it seemed, and was one special lady.

She was visiting from overseas, having been away for twelve years. She wanted to hug a gum tree, see some kangaroos, walk on the beach, and eat a pie-floater. The weather had been perfect for it all.

Until the end. Late in the month, a cold front brushed the south coast. It didn't matter quite so much the day we did the road trip to Cape Jervis, although the fog made it hard to catch a glimpse of Kangaroo Island. We shunned the outdoor tables at the beachfront café, watching from inside as the grey sea churned and the black clouds rolled in from the west, then dashing to the car before the deluge began.

It bucketed down all night, waking me several times. This was not the gentle patter of rain that makes sleep return easily. This was the noisy pounding that makes you grateful for a solid roof overhead. And I was.

I was equally grateful to get a phone call in the morning, inviting me to join in once again. We'd taken turns to host Maureen. Mine had been last week, in the sunshine, giving Dad a chance to recover from the flu. Now it was Dad's turn, and I appreciated them sharing it with me, especially since Maureen would be going home next week.

Weather permitting, Dad and his wife planned a cliff-top walk after lunch. They'd ring me if it was happening. It was raining as we spoke, so I doubted it would happen.

Weatherzone predicted strong winds and scattered showers.

Staying in and chatting over a nice cup of tea sounded good to me, but the phone call I presumed would cancel the walk, instead confirmed it. I was to be at their place at 1:30 and we'd be back by 3 for that cup of tea. Hopeful patches of blue sky broke through the clouds as I headed for my car, the freezing cold forcing me back inside to dig a coat and scarf out of their summer storage spot.

We left my car at King's Beach, the endpoint of the walk, with the hand-brake firmly on against the slope. Dad drove us all in his car to where we'd start. And drove. And drove. From dirt road, to dirt track, to long, winding driveway, dodging the scattered debris from last night's storm: puddle-filled pot-holes, deep ruts turned to rivulets, small branches tossed down by the wind. And sheep. We were well and truly in the middle of nowhere, the back of beyond, way past the black stump.

We left the car on a friend's property, and walked to the Heysen Trail. Any doubts about the weather were blown away by the view. The wide blue sky, trimmed with white clouds, thin and billowy. The huge expanse of ocean, deep blue, edged with white foam against the cliffs. Sunny. Still.

Majestic.

We headed off, spirits high, with no idea what we were in for. We walked, and chatted, and laughed through thin scrub, admiring native plants along the way. Every time we saw a little trail marker, Dad would say, 'It's good to know we're on the right track.' The track was level and wide, making puddle-dodging easy – either stepping over or around them, even when it meant making a new path through the trees.

The level track soon narrowed to barely wide enough for two feet together, forcing us into single file, and silence. It was cold. That chat over a cup of tea was looking better all the time, except for the incredible view.

The narrow track, barely even a bunny trail, soon turned downward, and with the gentle slope, things got slippery. The scrub was thicker, and came right up to the trail in both sides, leaving us no way to avoid the puddly, muddy, boggy mess. We were forced to navigate loose stones, puddles and overhanging branches. No time now to admire the view. We had to concentrate on each step, striving for a sure footing every time.

Treacherous.

About an hour into the walk, the sky darkened, the wind picked up, and the trail turned steeply uphill. Climbing on slippery ground was difficult and tiring. When we reached the summit, we stopped for a break and Dad undid the backpack.

'Any Fruchocs in there?' I asked, thinking that would be a fitting South Australian memory for Maureen. And a happy snack for me.

‘Just water,’ he said after catching his breath. They’d always been the ones to model healthy eating habits.

Not long after our break, the rain began. This was no scattered shower. This was rain. We kept walking. There was nothing else to do. Wet jeans slapped against my weary legs with every laboured step, the added weight making walking harder.

Miserable.

I was stuck on a cliff edge in the pouring rain, with my father in his eighties still recovering from the flu, and two women not much younger. If one of them slipped and broke a hip, it would be me who’d have to run in search of unseen civilisation, or to find somewhere with phone reception so as to alert the helicopter rescue team. Me who, just two weeks ago had been ambulated to hospital with a rapid and highly erratic heartbeat. More alarming still, no-one even knew we were here.

‘I know exactly where you are,’ God whispered into my heart.

We pressed on. It was just as far to go on as it would be to go back. Each step became a slow and calculated process to avoid slipping. The rain had stopped, but the wind worked with our dampness to chill us to the bone. We stopped frequently to rest, and plan our strategy as the slopes got steeper. With each rise I hoped to see the car, only to have the trail head back down into another gully, no end in sight.

‘Any almonds in there?’ I asked Dad after we’d been walking two hours. Even a healthy snack would be welcome.

‘Just water,’ he said again.

Maureen found some Sesame Snaps in the pocket of her coat. I should have known God would provide. He not only knew where I was, He knew just what I needed.

Energized by our snack, Maureen and I tightrope-walked along opposite edges of the track, which had been sunken by so many feet before us. We held hands across the muddy divide for balance. Dad fell further and further behind, perhaps not as recovered from his flu as he’d thought. We rested often, because we needed to, and to give him time to catch up. And we prayed. Out loud. For Dad. For all of us. For sure footing, and strength to make it to the car.

A mob of kangaroos watched us from a grassy clearing up a hill. Probably thought we were crazy, working our way through mud that would sooner slide out from under us than hold us up, with no foothold, no trees to clutch at for support, and the sheer cliff-face less than a meter away. They were probably right, but we had no other choice. To keep going was the only way out. Any pleasure in the trip was gone. Only perseverance remained. The end was all that mattered now.

Down another perilous hill and up the other side, we saw it. Better than the cliffs, the seascape or the scrub, it was my little green Mazda in the King's Beach carpark, just visible as dusk settled over the coast. It was still a frighteningly long way off, but we at last had something to aim for.

With our soggy spirits slightly bolstered by the vision of our goal, we hobbled on, wretched, weary, wet and freezing. But we were not alone. We had each other, and God was with us.

How do I know?

Because we made it. Exhausted, but whole. Nothing sprained or broken. Even my erratic heart had behaved.

Those final steps to the car in near darkness were the hardest, but oh, how heavenly to sink into its shelter. I drove us back to Dad's car. We'd all sleep well tonight, we said, laughing about it now.

'Was it worth it?' some have asked.

'Without a doubt,' I say.

It gave me so much. Priceless photos of the view. Precious memories of an adventure shared with people I love, people who might not be around to share too many more adventures. Powerful lessons about the walk each one of us takes through life.

And it gave me this story to tell, of walking with God on the cliff-top.