

A LIFE UNTOLD

SUSAN BUTLER

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CHAPTER 3

CHILDHOOD

DESCRIBE YOUR CHILDHOOD IN 3 WORDS

Travel, flew-by, fun

WHERE DID YOU GROW UP?

Sydney mainly, with many summer holidays in Dublin visiting my grandfather Ben

WHAT LANGUAGE DID YOU SPEAK AT HOME?

English and a little Irish

DESCRIBE THE NEIGHBOURHOOD YOU GREW UP IN.

I grew up in Newtown. In the 60s it was the sort of area where you'd walk down the street and everyone would say hello to each other. My parents knew all the families in our neighbourhood, but I can now only remember the Schwartzes who lived to our right, the Cullens to our left and Wongs across the road. The Wongs had a big scary German Shepherd who barked at me whenever I walked past their house – I remember almost jumping out of my skin every time!

WHAT WAS THE HOUSE OR APARTMENT LIKE THAT YOU GREW UP IN?

I lived in a three bedroom house with my mum, dad and sister. It had a little backyard, a hills hoist out the back and a beautiful, big Jacaranda tree out the front of the house that my sister and I loved to climb. The quintessential Australian home.

WHAT'S YOUR EARLIEST CHILDHOOD MEMORY?

Eating frozen grapes on a hot summer's day in our backyard. I think I would have been around three years old.

WHAT'S ONE MEMORY FROM YOUR CHILDHOOD THAT MAKES YOU SMILE?

My parents were both big fans of the Rabbitohs. I remember them taking us to matches in Redfern Oval on the weekends, all of us dressed in red and green like it was Christmas. After the game dad would always buy an ice cream for my sister and I. I can't tell whether this memory makes me smile because I loved watching the games, because it was one of the few things we always did as a family or because it involved ice cream. Probably a bit of all these things.

CHAPTER 3 – CHILDHOOD



Left to right: Ellie and Me (1958)

This was taken on my Aunt Elise's farm in Bowral. I still remember the day this was taken – we'd gotten into trouble for forgetting to shut the chicken pen and letting them all escape.

DESCRIBE A TYPICAL FAMILY DINNER – WHO COOKED, WHAT DID YOU EAT AND WHAT WERE YOUR FAVOURITE FOODS?

Mum always cooked and dinner usually involved a combination of meat, vegetables and bread. When we had friends or family over she'd make a delicious Irish stew. But my favourite meal by far, was her Sunday roast. We'd have lamb, gravy, potatoes, pumpkin and baked apples for dessert. Whenever there was a birthday in the family, we'd get roast dinner as a special treat. I remember my sister broke this tradition one year and requested KFC – it was the first year the chain had arrived in Australia. Mum was a bit upset at the time but admitted to us when we were much older that she thought the KFC that night was delicious.

WHAT WAS YOUR FAMILY MOTTO GROWING UP - SPOKEN OR UNSPOKEN?

Love one another (unspoken)

WHO TOOK CARE OF YOU WHEN YOU WERE LITTLE? HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THOSE PEOPLE?

My mum and dad took care of me. Until I was about 15 my parents owned a clothing store called Patty Lou just two streets away from our house. They worked long hours so I remember spending much of my childhood in the back room of the store playing with a big wooden dollhouse. Sometimes we'd also take an arm or leg off the store's mannequins and chase each other around with it. Needless to say our parents hated this and we always got into trouble.

WHAT'S THE MOST VALUABLE THING YOUR PARENTS TAUGHT YOU?

My mum is a big believer in karma so she always told me to be kind to others. My dad has always been a 'family first' kind of man and that has somehow rubbed off on me too.

CHAPTER 3 – CHILDHOOD

WHAT DID YOUR PARENTS DO FOR WORK?

My parents owned a clothing store together. Business was great for many years but then a few other stores opened up nearby and competition became fierce. They closed the shop in 1967 and my dad took up a new job as a sheet metal worker in a nearby factory. My mum worked part-time as a medical receptionist at a surgery in town.

WHAT'S ONE THING YOU COULD NEVER AGREE WITH YOUR PARENTS ON?

Politics. My parents were both very conservative. It wasn't until I started university that it became apparent how much I disagreed with them on political issues. It probably didn't help that I was an Arts student, discovering social justice for the first time and all the causes I wanted to fight for.

IF YOU HAD ANY, HOW DID YOU GET ALONG WITH YOUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS?

I got on really well with my sister Ellie, who is two years older. We would talk all the time and I don't really remember ever fighting with her. We'd just talk and talk until mum would come into our bedroom and get really angry with us for not being asleep. Then we'd wait for her to leave and whisper some more.

WHAT WAS YOUR FAVOURITE FAMILY TRADITION GROWING UP?

When Ellie was about 10 she really got into magic. She later taught me a few tricks so we could put on a magic show for our parents. The first time we performed for them, they were so impressed. They eventually starting inviting their friends over to watch too, and we ended up doing these shows in our living room about once a month for family friends, school friends – even neighbours. It felt like a tradition of sorts. I loved seeing everyone's faces when we'd pull off a trick. Ellie was really the star – she was very good because she practised all the time. I was more like the assistant.

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Mum and Dad (2000)

This was taken at a surprise party I organised to celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary.

CHAPTER 8 – CHILDREN



Katherine and Daniel (2002)

This was taken moments after my daughter Katherine and son-in-law Daniel tied the knot. One of the happiest days of my life.

A LIFE UNTOLD – SUSAN MARGARET BUTLER



Amelia and Henry (2015)

My beautiful grandchildren on Aunt Elise's farm. I love this photo because it captures them getting up to mischief just the way I used to with Ellie.