

Celebrity for a Day

by Susan Curry



I loved growing up in a small Australian country town, Birchip, from the age of eight until fifteen, but when my mother re-married and moved to Melbourne, I was able to finish my school education and go on to university. Birchip school finished at ninth grade. I was reluctant to leave my country home but the move turned out to be timely. I only went back to the town a few times to visit my grandparents, but after Pa died Nanna also moved to Melbourne to stay with us.

In 2012 Roy had sabbatical leave in Melbourne and we decided to make the effort to drive to Birchip. (photo of Sue here, standing in open country) In advance I called the school and asked if I could have a tour, expecting that it might have changed in more than fifty years. That phone call set in motion several events which were both amusing and flattering.

It happened like this. We booked into the only motel in town and settled in. Everything is in walking distance in Birchip, so we set off for the hotel restaurant, only to have a woman pull up beside us in her car, roll down her window and ask, "You must be Susan Sicily?"

"Well, I said, I used to be; now I am Susan Curry, but how did you know and who are you?" She wasn't coming up in my mental Rolodex.

"You're the only new person in town...I'm Joan Martin, been here 30



My class photo of fifth and sixth grades, 1956

years so I finally qualify as a local," she answered with a patient look that conveyed the message: "That's how we roll here." I blushed, no longer upset at not having recognized her, but annoyed with myself that I had forgotten how small towns "roll," as she saw it.

She drove off before I could digest the mysterious encounter, with its hint of judgment.

We'd walked only a few more steps when my mobile phone rang. It was the motel owner, Daryl.

"Are you Susan Sicily? I have a

man using the campground who says he knows you." He added, "What are you, a celebrity or something? Joan Martin asks, now this guy."

I smiled into my phone. "Of

course not. And I'm a little suspicious. Who is he?" Daryl had forgotten his name but described him as "tall, said he was at school with you, and looked pretty old." After Roy and I talked it over, we decided to go on to dinner anyway. We weren't sure if the guy was legit.

Dinner was excellent. Afterwards Roy and I were idling back to the motel, feeling full and mellow from a couple of glasses of South Australian wine, when my mobile rang again. This time it was an old school friend Brian, on whom I'd had a secret crush all through ninth grade.

"Can you come to our house for breakfast?" he asked, as if it had been yesterday and not five decades since we'd seen each other. I asked him how he knew I was in town.

"Oh, it was Samantha who



Sue near Birchip



Allan and Emily visit us in our motel room.



Brian

does the books for the hotel.” It was still early Saturday night and Roy asked, “Is this how Birchip entertains itself?”

I suddenly remembered that I’d been referred to Samantha as the source of a lovely picture book of Birchip and surroundings, and I’d told her when I’d be able to pick it up. She’d passed the information to Brian. The school principal had confirmed it.

We were getting ready for bed feeling excited about the next day, when there was a knock at the door. I had a moment of hesitation. But

this was Birchip, not California. Our thoughts were interrupted by a gruff voice.

“Bloody hell Susan, are you going to open up?”

It was a rather disheveled man accompanied by a woman who I assumed was his wife. She eyed me up and down without comment. His sweater had holes and his pants looked as though they needed a drink, as my mother would say. Her hair was messy and her jeans were out at the knee.

They smelled a strongly of campfire smoke. A memory flashed of me on his shoulders at the local swimming pool, trying to upend other couples in the water. Allan Burton, no doubt about that. He’d not been a crush of mine but was, then and now, a fount of funny stories. Over the next hour we all laughed fit to pee, until jetlag curled its tentacles into Roy’s and my brains and we were forced to usher Allan and Emily out the door.

Breakfast at Brian’s was another story-fest. Several things fascinated me. First, that he’d married a girl I’d known who was a few grades below us and that they had four grown children. One, a son had married an American and they now lived in Virginia with their three children. I was surprised but strangely pleased that Brian had been a shearer all his life, following his father. Both Brian and his wife Lorraine had families with deep roots in the district. They seemed to be related to half the town. How did they manage all that when I was completely oblivious? Of course, I was living overseas all that time, but the news took me by surprise. Old childhood friends should stay preserved in amber. I mentioned shyly that I’d had a crush on him. He looked sideways at Lorraine but seemed pleased. He hasn’t lost his charisma, I thought.

After an excellent breakfast comprised of several tasty dishes, Brian smiled and left the room to get something.

“You’ll be surprised when you see this,” he said as he handed over what

appeared to be an invitation, with an embossed gold border on the envelope and calligraphic writing inside.

“Here, you are the first to receive this invitation to our first reunion of fifth and sixth grades.” For a moment I was overjoyed. Birchip had made a strong impression on me and I often wondered as I thought about my classmates, if they in turn would remember me. Then I felt my stomach drop when I realized that it was in only a few weeks’ time.

We had promised to take my mother back to Davis with us for a vacation. Brian thought for a minute, then said, “Here’s a solution. You take your mother back, give her a lovely vacation, bring her home, then come to the reunion?” Roy and I looked at each other with the smile which indicates “YOLO,” you only live once.

Brian told me before we left that I was the only person in the class pictures of fifth and sixth grades who the reunion committee had not been able to trace. In searching for me, they had even put a “missing persons” advertisement in the Melbourne newspaper. Now, ironically, I was the first to register for the reunion, and Roy was invited to attend as well. How cool was that? If I hadn’t shown up on that day in 2012, I would have missed what turned out to be a life-enriching event.

As we were leaving, Brian asked Roy to take a photo of the two of us and gave me a hug.

“Here’s the hug you’ve been waiting for, for over fifty years!” ♦



Sue Curry was born in Melbourne, Australia and has lived in Davis for over forty years. She has imported, published and written books, all with an Australian theme. She recently retired from a separate career as a psychotherapist.

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