

bespectacled young woman wearing jeans and sneakers entered.

Pete and Nicole got straight down to business. Nicole dealt in conveyancing and knew all about property law. She had a quiet, confident air. Addressing her remarks to Vi she began.

“The agreement between your father and the previous owner of 104 Buck Lane could be argued as an existing right based on history and usage, a boundary having been established by common consent of the parties.” Vi looked pleased.

“However,” cautioned Nicole, “the deeds to your property do not record this arrangement and your new neighbour could and in my opinion, will challenge it and if he does I believe he will win.”

Vi was about to object but Nicole had more to say.

“Mr Lamont has two objectives. He wants to replace the old fence with a new one and to align it on the correct boundary. We are aware of the potential problem if and when excavation work commences on that line.”

Everyone nodded sagely and Vi wriggled unhappily.

She looked even more alarmed when Nicole told her that the cost of party fences was borne equally between neighbours.

“What” exclaimed Vi, “That offer’s going to rob me of me land, put up some swanky new fence I don’t want and then charge me half?”

Nicole hastily resumed.

“You have the right to say what type of fence of you would prefer Auntie Vi and since there has always been a wooden paling fence between the properties, any insistence on Mr Lamont’s part for something more elaborate would be unreasonable. That would mean minimal ground disturbance and no need for deep footings. If you acquiesce over the repositioning I think Mr Lamont would be inclined to agree to this condition. Further, if we organise for Dad to do the work, then ...”

Everyone immediately understood. The atmosphere brightened. But how to arrange it? All the builders they’d previously employed had come from large, expensive companies. How would Pete get a look-in?

Pete merely winked and promised to be in touch. Fred and Hermione returned to their flat, Ted and Raj adjourned to the pub.

Ted was still uneasy as to the outcome of the fence affair. “I mean, that Nicole’s clever but how can she guar-



antee her dad will get the job?” he mused as they downed their first pints.

On Monday, Nigel visited Vi to talk about the fence. He had as little time for her as she for him so he wasn’t looking forward to this conference but urged on by Clarissa, he made the effort. Having been coached by Nicole, Vi was ready for him.

“Oh yerse,” the old lady agreed, when Nigel raised the twin issues of fence condition and fence position. “That was all down to me old dad. He was never much of a carpenter and he did put the fence in the wrong place. Took too much land off of next door,” she agreed.

Nigel was dumbfounded. He’d expected an argument, but getting none he decided to press his advantage.

“And of course it needs to be a proper brick wall.” he declared.

At this Vi demurred saying there had always been a paling fence and she preferred the look of wood to brick. But, argued Nigel, there were perfectly good bricks a plenty lying all over Vi’s back yard. If they were to be used, then that would constitute her half of the cost, Nigel would of course pay for the work to be done.”

“Nice of you.” Vi retorted, “but I got plans for them bricks. I want a nice patio built so’s I can do some sun-bathing.”

Nigel swallowed hard, trying not to envisage skinny old Vi on a banana lounge in swimsuit — or worse, a bikini.

“You can decide on the builder and I’ll pay half but it has to be a paling fence and make sure you get a first class company to do the job,” was Vi’s only stipulation.

This is where Pete and Nicole’s plan came in. Cyril, from Executive Gardening, played darts once a week with Pete. They’d put a bit of work each other’s way from time to time so when the subject of the Buck Lane job came up, Cyril agreed, for a small consideration of course, to put in a good word for Pete. Nicole made up some glossy pamphlets with images of magnificent fences and glowing testimonials from satisfied customers. (Best not to enquire too closely on that score). She also had two magnetic signs made announcing, ‘Peter’s Expert Fencing Company’ in gold and red lettering. These were slapped onto

the sides of a new truck, borrowed for the day from a mate. A smartened up Pete and very business-like Nicole in suit and high heels, arrived to assess the job.

Cyril had laid the ground well. Nigel was ready to swallow any suggestion made by the impressive couple from the Expert Fencing Company. Nicole conducted negotiations and a deal was struck that very day.

Of course, the quote was outrageously high — double what it should have been and another client might have considered other bids but Nigel and Clarissa had more money than sense and were convinced by a persuasive Cyril that the Expert Fencing Company was the best in the business, used only by ‘the top people’.

Nigel and Clarissa departed for their summer holiday and work commenced. The bricks in Vi’s yard were stacked up neatly, the sagging fence removed. Vi and her tenants looked on anxiously from the roof garden as the ground was levelled.

Pete had sent his two workmen home early and was doing this part of the job himself. He’d erected a small awning next to the stacked bricks and had a tarpaulin at his side as he carefully dug away the remains of the rose bush planted all those years ago by Vi’s mother.

Everyone on the roof held their breath as first the remains of a pork pie hat, then a leather belt then a shoe were set down. Pete looked up briefly and dug the spade in further. More clothing fragments appeared. Surely soon ... and then other remains were pulled from the hole; ribs, shinbones and tailbones. Tailbones? Then a skull with a long jaw and large canine teeth was disinterred. Pete held his hands up to indicate there was nothing more to find.

Vi gasped. For once she was speechless. She’d recognised her father’s old hat and belt — so often raised against her poor mother and presumably those were the remains of brave little Bowser, her Mum’s dog which had often valiantly tried to defend her and got a kicking for his trouble.

“I’d forgot all about Bowser”, whispered Vi. “Dad must have done for him finally. “Poor Bowser.” The tears rolled down Vi’s old cheeks. “But where’s the old man?”

Well yes, where indeed?

fence, n. v. an enclosure or barrier ... as around a field, garden, skill in argument, repartee, etc. Colloq. a person who receives and disposes of stolen goods.

offence, n. a transgression; a wrong; a sin. *The Macquarie Encyclopedic Dictionary, 1990*



# In search of a childhood

Sue Doran’s roadtrip to find her grandparents’ country

**T**wenty-fourteen. I’d been away interstate for almost a year and now considering taking up work in the bush. The Suzuki Swift packed to the gills, out I swept onto the Great Western Highway to retrace steps of a sixties childhood, to places I thought I knew.

First stop Newnes. Up over the mountains from Sydney and a right turn at the ready-to-be-decommissioned Wallerawang power station just out of Lithgow. The town is looking so much more clean and vibrant than I recall it in its coal-dust cloaked period of my childhood.

Then, that eye-popping instant when the Wolgan Valley lays itself out below you before the steep dive down The Gap into the walled comfort of sandstone sentinels that protect the ever-narrowing valley and the lilo-perfect Wolgan River.

My grandparents began their marriage at Newnes in its heyday during the first decade of the twentieth century. Sophisticated and labour-intensive shale oil works are still laid out beneath the recalcitrant bush. Bush that a century later has taken over, determinedly routing human progress and actively attempting to delete the evidence. Nanna and Grandad were part of the excitement and bustle of

progress; he building, she assisting travellers at the station boarding house. The strike came, the mine crippled, the market shrank. They left with what they were wearing. The town died.

Nowadays, down at the end of the Wolgan Valley on the edge of the Wollemi National Park, Thomas Ebersoll goes about his daily routine of managing the old Newnes hotel (unlicensed), his lovingly hand-built off-grid cabins and tending his veg and

chooks. All his produce is freely shared with guests. As we bathed in the colours and moods of Mystery Mountain and chatted we discovered that his wife and my son shared a workplace.

Via up-market Mudgee and north to swaggering Tamworth, then via cold climate Ebor, the road plunged into the tropics leading into Grafton. Then up the road a bit to Coraki. I was looking for Meg, one of my mother’s best friends, last one of their generation.



RUINS AT NEWNES.