

Prologue

I fell in love with Sam while eating a pie. She was wearing faded jeans, a white t-shirt and a blue apron dusted with flour; there was even a dab of flour on the tip of her nose. She was small, fearless, and cute as hell.

Sam worked at her parents' Newport Beach bakery on weekends and holidays while completing her nursing degree at the University of Technology in Sydney. Despite a heavy class schedule and long commute, she nonetheless lit up the shop whenever she was behind the front counter. I don't know where she found the energy.

Sam grew up a tomboy. As a kid she was shy and quiet, but she never sat still; probably couldn't. When she wasn't at school or riding her skateboard, she was cleaning houses or babysitting to earn pocket money; even as a teenager her goal was financial independence. Always smiling and hilariously stubborn, Sam was her father's daughter through and through. She was raised to love hard work, abhor idleness, and laugh at pain. To her, a busy day is a good day and Panadol is for wimps.

I can't imagine what Sam's father thought when he realised I had a crush on his daughter. I had no interest in university and left school as soon as I could. At thirteen I'd picked up my dad's old camera and, from that moment on, I knew exactly what my calling was. Three years later I won a surf photography contest for which I received forty dollars and six rolls of film. That's all that was needed for a cocky Australian

teenager to believe he was destined to be the next Max Dupain.

Whether I was learning my trade in the studio, printing images in a darkroom or out on assignment, almost every day would begin and end on a surfboard. It was no coincidence that my favourite break was directly across the road from the Surfside Pie Shop whenever Sam was working there. Having memorised her schedule I would ride my last wave to the beach and make a beeline for the bakery. I'd order a hot beef and mushroom pie, followed by a custard tart and small talk. Then I would stay to eat my scrumptious purchases – dripping wet in my board shorts, teeth chattering, my feet covered in sand – and talk to Sam for as long as she would put up with me, often till closing time.

When my shorts were dry and I was feeling especially brave, I would sidle up to Sam and sit next to her on the counter top, grinning like an idiot. Her dad would be baking in the rear, red-faced and furious in the heat of the giant ovens. His bloodshot eyes implied that open flirting would be dangerous – but I soon learned this was largely due to a flour allergy and that, despite his rock-cake exterior, he was actually a cream puff and very sympathetic to young love. I first knew I had a real chance with Sam when she gave me the unsold sausage rolls and lamingtons that would have otherwise been thrown out. At this point my dog, Bundy, loved Sam almost as much as I did.

Sam was never your average beach girl. When her friends gushed about local gossip, movie stars and Byron Bay, Sam spoke of medical science, books she'd enjoyed and her plans to visit West Africa when she graduated. Apart from being fun and beautiful there was something special

about Sam that I found hard to define – though barely five feet in heels, she exuded a quiet strength; I felt energised by her love of life and warmed by her presence. She didn't always have much to say and never drew attention to herself, but she had an unspoken confidence that made you believe she could do anything she set her mind to. Something I now know to be absolutely true.

We were both nineteen when we went on our first date. After a drink or two at the Newport Arms Hotel, I worked up the courage to let Sam seize the initiative and invite me to a party at Bilgola Beach. And that was it. Sam was my first, last and only serious girlfriend – I knew I'd found the love of my life.

Our wedding was simple. Close friends and family squeezed into our backyard around a fancy chuppah that we'd borrowed from a wedding I had photographed a few weeks earlier. Apart from how stunning Sam looked, I can't forget the incredible flowers and also the giant chocolate mudcake baked by Sam's dad who, with tears of joy, embraced me as a son. Before the festivities got out of control I surprised my bride by arranging a Maori dance company to perform traditional songs and a haka which, I have to admit, was a bit weird seeing as neither of us were from New Zealand, and yet it was also somehow perfect. Hearing Sam's delighted laughter made me want to marry her all over again.

Sam began her nursing career on the neurosurgical ward of the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital in Camperdown. Our first home was a pocket-sized 1900s terrace house in Sydney's inner west, though we never lost our coastal roots and frequently made the cross-town pilgrimage to the

beach. Besides our love of the ocean, we shared a passion for travel. Whenever we could get away to explore the world and experience new cultures we would shrug on backpacks and set off for parts unknown.

We didn't have much money, but that didn't matter as neither of us cared for luxury resorts or packaged holidays. Sam and I are outdoors people – we prefer dusty trails to city streets, mud huts to museums, and street food to fine dining. To us, a ballroom lit by glittering chandeliers seems dull compared to a night sky filled with unknown constellations.

By the time we celebrated our tenth anniversary we'd trekked around the Mediterranean and beyond. Sam's dream to visit Africa was realised five times over, and included journeys through Morocco, Senegal, Mali, Mauritania, Burkino Faso, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Togo, Botswana and Ethiopia. We also explored the Middle East and set foot in places that are now completely off-limits to tourists. The further we went, the more deeply we fell in love. The more deeply we fell in love, the further we wanted to travel.

Many of my most precious and enduring memories were made with Sam during these rugged and joyful wanderings. I'll never forget our pre-dawn climb up Mount Nemrut in Turkey; riding Arabian horses to the Step Pyramid of Djoser, the first pyramid ever built in Egypt; or standing together beside the ramparts of Fakhr-al-Din al-Maani Castle, perched high above the Bronze Age ruins of Palmyra in Syria.

It wasn't all about lost cities and difficult terrain – during a week spent navigating the labyrinthine backstreets

of Rome we ate handmade pasta till we thought we would burst. And then we ate some more. Exotic flavours and ethnic cuisine have always been things we loved and these played a very important part in our lives – after all, food brought us together in the first place.

Sam and I felt blessed to share these extraordinary experiences and only wished that our children and grandchildren might one day enjoy a similar opportunity. We never imagined we'd stop travelling, indeed we hoped to return to Africa as soon as possible, but life had bigger plans for us, plans conceived in a flimsy tent on the plains of Kenya. I was over the moon when Sam found out she was pregnant. Adorably stoic with her enormous belly, almost as big around as she was tall, Sam potted about the house like a determined beetle.

Her first pregnancy was the hardest. Sam wanted a natural birth, but after twenty-two hours in labour things were not going well. It became clear our baby was suffering foetal distress and the obstetrics team scrambled to perform an emergency caesarean. In the rush to deliver our child safely the spinal epidural failed and Sam felt the surgeon's scalpel slice into her tight flesh. This had to be agonising and yet somehow she bore it. Sam's face turned deathly pale but she just gripped my hand tightly and would not cry out. I don't believe anything on this earth could have eased her terrible pain but seeing the tiny, perfect face of our baby boy, Rueben.

After such a harrowing experience I would have understood if Sam had not wanted to endure childbirth ever again, but she loved being a mother and wanted a larger family. Amazingly, when it came time to deliver our

second son, Noah, Sam was so calm and positive she chose to ride with me to the hospital on the back of our silver Vespa – an array of shocked and smiling faces greeted us as we pattered into the maternity car park. Two years later Sam and I welcomed little Oliver into the world, and our family was complete.

By now we had moved to Sydney's Northern Beaches, back to where we both grew up. Sam stepped away from full-time nursing to raise our three boisterous sons and the advent of digital photography meant I could work from home and be a hands-on dad. It was heaven.

With three semi-wild boys to wrangle we couldn't trot around the globe like we used to, but we didn't slow down either. Sam and I surfed and swam at the beach as often as possible. Sam also went skateboarding, running and mountain bike riding, plus she played soccer and, as if that wasn't enough, she regularly worked out at the local gym. It's no surprise that the boys all took after their mum, each becoming avid multi-sport athletes before they could even lace up their running shoes – our garage was cluttered with BMX bikes, surfboards, skateboards, muddy football boots and rugby balls.

As birthday parties came and went, we became increasingly excited about the boys being old enough for us to share our love of adventure travel with them. We dreamt up all manner of international itineraries but we were so busy trying to keep our home in order, stay on top of work, and supervise our children's education and activities that we began to wonder if we'd ever see the inside of an airplane again. But when Sam's father died, we knew that we simply had to make the time. Losing such a beloved role

model hit us hard and reminded us that, as parents, we needed to create as many happy memories with our children as we possibly could.

Egypt was our first choice. We wanted to show the boys that ancient history was living history. Sadly, conditions had deteriorated since we were last in the Middle East – it was no place for foreign travellers, let alone those accompanied by young children. We decided our first major family adventure should be closer to home, so we chose Thailand, a fascinating country about which we had heard many wonderful things.

We made our way to Phuket, which, to our surprise, is now the most popular beach destination in Southeast Asia. The locals were lovely and the beaches were beautiful, but the Thai culture we wanted our children to experience was all but invisible within what was effectively an international party town for teenage backpackers. Having had such high expectations Sam and I were dispirited but by no means defeated. We were very happy for other tourists to have their fun, but we hadn't spent ten hours on a plane so that our impressionable boys could eat cheeseburgers and snicker at offensive novelty t-shirts.

After a refreshing dip in the Andaman Sea to compose ourselves, we considered our options over a meal of chicken satay and rice. Before the sun had set we'd planned our escape. We would head to Chiang Mai and beyond, some fifteen hundred kilometres to the north. There we would seek out Thailand's indigenous hill tribes in the mountainous borderlands of Myanmar and Laos. On the way we planned to make stops along the coast, both to relax and to experience authentic rural Thai life.

The Bloom family bundled into a minivan the next morning and drove east–northeast on the Phetkasem Road, the longest highway in Thailand. Six hours later we had crossed the Malay Peninsula to the South China Sea and pulled into a small, coastal village on the Gulf of Thailand just in time for dinner. It was perfect.

At first light the following day we woke up eager to explore. Other than swaying coconut palms, the beach was empty. The water was calling us so we all dived in and spent the next three hours laughing and splashing about like happy fools – for Sam and I the sense of joy and relief was palpable. Thailand was turning out to be the dream family adventure we'd hoped it would be.

As the boys wrestled and clowned around in the shore-break, Sam slipped on a turquoise t-shirt and a pair of black board shorts over her bikini. Following her lead the rest of us towelled off, threw on shirts and thongs, and strolled over to the hotel's reception desk where I made enquiries about renting bicycles. Our leisurely goal for the day was simply to pedal through the countryside to get a better sense of where we were and what was on offer.

No one had eaten and perhaps it was the heat and humidity but, despite our early start and active morning, we all felt thirsty rather than hungry. The sweet, elderly lady at the open-air bar near the front desk offered to make us fresh juice from hand-picked tropical fruit and crushed ice. It was just what we needed. The boys chose combinations of pineapple, mango and coconut water; the latter primarily so they could watch the petite Thai grandmother deftly wield a massive machete to split open the coconut husk and brittle shell beneath. Sam and I both

ordered fresh papaya juice with a dash of kaffir lime. In an instant the sea salt was washed out of my mouth. I don't think I'd ever tasted anything so refreshing.

While slurping contentedly, we looked across the courtyard and spotted a spiral stairway leading to a rooftop viewing deck, so we headed on up to get our bearings as we finished our juice. We were delighted to find that this elevated vantage, just over two storeys high, offered uninterrupted views in every direction. Sam and the boys surveyed the endless stretch of sand for any promising surf breaks – a rarity in the Gulf. Turning away from the beach, I realised we were far more isolated than I had initially thought, surrounded by coconut and pineapple plantations, as well as several drowsy-looking water buffalo.

By now it was almost eleven and everything felt hot and still. Other than a proudly dishevelled rooster flying up to a perch in the branches of a colossal rubber tree nearby, almost nothing was moving. I spotted a Buddhist temple glinting and shimmering in the distance, so I took a few photos and made a mental note of where we should ride our bicycles after lunch, or perhaps later in the day when things had cooled down.

And then time stopped.

I heard a horrendous crash of broken bells, a violent ringing of metal striking stone.

Sam had leant against the safety fence – parallel rows of steel poles bolted to concrete pillars via sturdy-looking timber posts that, unknown to us, were riddled with dry rot. The barrier collapsed beneath her and it was the spinning poles sparking against the hard, blue, cement tiles

six metres below that jarred my ears and spun me around by my head.

Startled by the fence giving way, Sam was pulled off balance. She stood poised on the edge for a seemingly infinite sliver of time – leaning back over the void at an impossible angle, her slim arms waving wildly, fingers extended as if to find purchase in the air and take flight.

And then she was gone.

She didn't scream. I never heard her hit the ground. My ears were roaring with dreadful silence. My mind went blank, all thoughts but one instantly erased in a blinding flash of fear and horror. I dropped my juice and ran to the edge. Looking down was more terrible than I could have imagined. Sam lay twisted on the tiles twenty feet below.

She was utterly still.

Time and space seemed to fold into itself. Suddenly I was kneeling by Sam's side. She was unconscious but alive. Barely.

The violent impact had thrown off her red thongs, and her sunglasses had also vanished. Her eyelids were not quite closed and I could just glimpse the lower whites of her eyes. This was unnerving enough, but then I saw the hideous bony bulge in the middle of her back, an angry misshapen lump the size of my fist pushing through her t-shirt and I feared the worst.

Sam had bitten through her tongue – her clenched teeth were stained red – and each ragged, gasping breath was a weak and bubbling spectral wheeze. I tried opening her mouth to clear her airway but her jaw was locked shut. I ripped off my shirt and crumpled it into a small pillow, then I tried to tilt her face gently to the side and into the

recovery position. But as soon as my cupped hands cradled her head they immediately felt warm and wet. Blood was seeping through her blonde hair everywhere I looked. Her head had been split open in two different directions. No matter where I put my hands, no matter where I parted her hair or how firmly I held my blood-soaked shirt against her head as a compress, I could not stem the bleeding or find the edges of the jagged wounds that were its source. I glanced down and saw Sam's angelic face at the centre of an ever-expanding crimson halo as her lifeblood pooled onto the concrete. My heart emptied of hope.

I shouted for help. I tried desperately and feebly to comfort my unconscious wife. I shouted for an ambulance. I screamed for help again. I needed someone, anyone, to hold my boys back; I didn't want them to see their mother like this. But when I looked up, all three were standing right next to me; silent, ashen-faced.

Noah made no sound, but hot tears were streaming down his cheeks. The horror was too much for little Oli, who doubled over and vomited. Rueben, the eldest, did his best to be brave but, when he tried to speak, his voice came out a ghostly whisper: 'Is Mummy going to die?' To this day I can't remember what I said in reply. Or if I said anything at all.

Fellow tourists and Thai locals rushed in; some corralled and comforted the youngest boys, while others dropped down beside me to do whatever I asked of them. Rueben sprinted to the front desk to call an ambulance. Within twenty minutes, paramedics arrived and took control – Sam was strapped to a long, orange spinal board and ferried to the ambulance. I stumbled after my beloved wife,

wanting to do anything and everything I could to save her, but capable of doing nothing.

Sam would remain lashed to that orange plank for the next three days, as she was rolled in and out of emergency rooms, and made the long and difficult journey from the local medical centre to a far larger hospital closer to Bangkok. She drifted in and out of semi-consciousness – she was in terrible pain and would sleepily fumble with the restraining straps and try to remove the mask and tubes that were keeping her alive. During fleeting moments when comprehension dawned she would try to call out my name and then start to cry.

A team of surgeons wanted to operate straight away, but Sam's blood pressure was far too unstable to survive an operation. And so we waited. And waited. I was told there was only 'a chance she might pull through'.

The consul from the Australian Embassy drove down from the capital to help me look after the boys and install them in a nearby hotel. At some point I showered and changed, attempted to feed myself and get some sleep, but Sam's critical condition and suffering were all-consuming. I wanted to keep my eyes on my wife at all times, afraid that I would miss her final breath, terrified that I wouldn't.

When finally she was wheeled out of the operating theatre, and her bed was parked in a high-tech life support bay in the intensive care unit, I received a full report: Sam's skull was fractured in several places, and her brain was bleeding and badly bruised. Both lungs had ruptured and one had completely collapsed due to her chest cavity filling with blood. There wasn't an organ in her body that

hadn't been battered, and her spine was shattered at T6 and T7, just below her shoulder blades.

After resurfacing from the anaesthetic, Sam was able to breathe on her own, which was a huge relief, but she still couldn't feel her legs. However, the bruising on her back was so severe that we were told it was likely she was suffering from spinal shock and that nerve signals would return gradually as the swelling receded over six to eight weeks.

Although her tongue was mending, her frightful head injuries caused constant migraine headaches that made it even harder for her to talk. When the boys were first allowed to visit and they saw her badly swollen face, Noah froze, thinking his mother was dead. When at last she finally spoke, it was not to complain or seek our pity, but to repeatedly apologise for ruining our family holiday. Sam's selflessness and courage were extraordinary, but not infectious – I couldn't hold back my tears and soon we all were weeping.

Weeks crawled by with little to no sign of improvement. Sam had lost her sense of taste and smell, and she had no reflex response below the ominous bruising on her back. But she stayed positive and refused pain medication as often as she could stand it, hoping to feel the first tingling that indicated her recovery had begun in earnest. When her condition was deemed stable for travel, she was flown back to a Sydney hospital where she waited patiently for better news. It never came.

In my absence a callous doctor brusquely told Sam that it was obvious she'd never walk again. My brave wife was devastated. How she managed to commit herself to the

rehabilitation process after this ruinous blow I do not know. But she did. With a vengeance.

It was seven months before Sam was released from the spinal ward. The boys and I were beside ourselves to have her home but, for all the bright smiles on show, each of us felt heartbroken and afraid. The veneer of celebration barely concealed our sense of hopelessness.

Sam did her best to seem upbeat for our sake. But we could see her struggling. Every day presented her with a battle she couldn't win. No longer able to follow her heart or commit her restless energy to immediate purpose, she sat at the edge of family life, watching, wishing. Sam quietly mourned the loss of her former self; she would cry herself to sleep and cry herself awake. Whenever the boys came in to see her she would rally; however, I could sense that, for the first time, her inner strength was beginning to fail. She was no longer the force of nature she had always been. Her smiles grew less radiant and less frequent. The time it took her to emerge from our bedroom each morning grew longer and longer. She didn't want to wake up any more.

Sam felt broken and utterly adrift. I saw the light in her eyes grow dim. I knew she was withdrawing from this world.

That such a fiercely free and passionate spirit could now be anchored beyond our love by pain and a steel chair was too much for us to bear.

I sought advice and support wherever I could, but nothing seemed to help.

I was slowly but surely losing the love of my life.

And then Penguin arrived.