

Affirm_{press}



Susan Berg never imagined she would write her memoir until she embarked on a spectacular solo journey: riding her motorbike on a round trip from Melbourne to Byron Bay. Since writing her book, Susan has established World on Wheels Motorcycle Tours (wowmotorcycletours.com), a motorbike touring company that encourages others to appreciate the beauty of the world and to live a fulfilling life. She lives in Melbourne with her son, William, and their dogs, Rusty and Ella.

the girl
who lived



WHEN I WAS fifteen years old, I was receiving hundreds of letters a day. Here is a sample:

'You fucking bitch! Your brother went in aid to help your parents, and you left them for dead – you little whore ...'

I would never have received this letter if things had turned out differently two weeks earlier. It's hard to imagine that life as you know it can be torn away from you in an instant, a flash, a heartbeat. It can be. Mine was.

Sunday 27 October 1985

It was a crisp morning – a perfect day for fishing. I'd been looking forward to the family outing all week. I wanted to give church a miss so that we could spend more time out in the boat, but there was no point suggesting the idea to Mum and Dad. I only ever remember missing church once in my fifteen years, on a day that we'd forgotten to turn the clocks forward for daylight saving. Dressed in our Sunday best, we marched down the aisle to take our regular place in one of

the front pews. I sat through the usual Sunday sermon, bored and itching to go fishing.

Back at home we ate a light lunch and packed the boat. Dad ticked off his checklist as we loaded each item: fishing rods, tackle box, bait, knife, bucket, life jackets, flares, food and water. Mum had only one thing on her checklist: the camera. It was strapped to her wrist almost everywhere we went, ready to record life's precious moments.

It was just the four of us going – Mum, Dad, my brother, Bill, and me. My seventeen-year-old sister, Julie, had decided to stay home and study. It was her final year of school and, being the perfectionist of the family, she had her head buried in a textbook. My eldest sister, Danni, was not joining us either. Nineteen-year-old Danni had been living away from home for the past year. When she first moved out, Dad was heartbroken – he felt like he'd lost his little girl. I, on the other hand, was envious of her independence, and seeing her carefree lifestyle prompted me to start my own glory box. But at fifteen I was the baby of the family, and I knew it would be several years before I could leave the nest.

As Dad connected the trailer to the LandCruiser, I noticed the boat wasn't honoured with a distinctive name such as *Wind Dancer*, *King Fisher* or *Evening Star*. Instead, it was numbered. *Our home and boat are the opposite of what they should be*, I thought. Our boat was numbered TK279, and our property was named Living Waters.

We launched the boat into Western Port Bay from Warneet, a small fishing village in Victoria at the south-eastern tip of Australia, just after four o'clock in the afternoon. Bill and I laughed at the sight of Dad encasing his body in waders, an

ugly all-in-one outfit of rubber overalls and gumboots. Mum smiled while she snapped another photo for the family album.

As Bill steered the boat away from the shore, I asked Mum whether she was feeling nervous.

‘No, I feel quite safe.’ She smiled. ‘The boat builder assured Dad the boat’s in A1 condition.’

Dad had bought the sixteen-foot wooden boat from a neighbouring farmer two years earlier. Mum had not approved of the purchase, knowing it was going to be costly to get the boat to a seaworthy condition. But Dad had been so excited about the project that Mum eventually relented. The boat was sent to a qualified boat builder for assessment and repairs, and to have an outboard motor fitted. Once it was fixed, Dad and Bill spent many happy hours painting the boat inside and out. Mum had to admit that it had been a rewarding father–son project.

It was only the second time we’d taken the boat out. On the first occasion, the boat had broken down in the middle of the bay and we’d had to get towed back to shore. Bill and I had been terribly embarrassed. Dad took the boat straight back to the boat builder, furious that we’d been stranded out at sea and demanding the fault be fixed.

Dad was protective of our family. Sometimes I felt he was incredibly over-protective, but I knew it was only because he loved us and wanted what was best for us.

The sun was shining and the water was calm. I was eager to throw out a line and catch a fish.

‘I bet I can catch more fish than you,’ Bill challenged.

At sixteen, Bill was fiercely independent. He was the lovable larrikin of the family – the one who played practical

jokes and kept us all laughing.

‘You’re on,’ I said, grinning.

Dad tapped Bill on the shoulder.

‘Head towards the right of that marker. I know where there’s a good fishing spot,’ he said.

I don’t think Dad really had any idea – it had been years since we’d had a family boat – but he sounded confident. I hoped he was right, because I was determined to win the bet.

‘Okay, here’s a good spot,’ Dad said.

Bill cut the engine and Dad dropped the anchor. I cut bait as Bill attached a hook and sinker to each line. Dad had taught us how to rig a line from a young age. We’d spent many happy holidays at our beach house on Phillip Island, where we’d walk to the local pier with our rods slung over our shoulders.

Surprisingly, Bill handed me his favourite rod. ‘Here, loser,’ he said playfully. ‘See if you can catch at least one fish.’

We eyeballed each other’s progress for what felt like forever as we held our rods over the side of the boat, but Mum was the only one to catch a fish. After reeling it in, she put her rod down and picked up the camera; she was more interested in capturing the family photograph than the family dinner.

‘There’re no fish here,’ Dad finally declared after another hour without a nibble. ‘Let’s move further around.’

We travelled slowly, trawling a line off the back until an aluminium dinghy carrying three young men raced past. They laughed as they sped over our line and snapped it. Dad was fuming. He rose to his feet, screaming and waving his fist in the air, ‘You hooligans!’

Bill and I were stunned – it was rare to see Dad angry – but then we burst out laughing.

‘You go, Dad!’ Bill teased.

Dad grinned sheepishly as he pushed his glasses back up onto the bridge of his nose.

‘It’s getting a bit chilly now, Edwin,’ Mum said. ‘Do you think we should head back soon?’

The wind was picking up as the sun went down, and waves were breaking fiercely against the boat. *I wish I had a jumper*, I thought.

‘Sossy,’ said Dad, using his pet name for me. ‘Do you want to drive the boat back to the ramp?’

Dad moved over as I jumped eagerly into the driver’s seat.

‘Head towards that marker,’ he said.

It was a confusing directive – I wondered whether he had a scratch on his glasses, because I was unable to see a marker – but I smiled like a Cheshire cat as I drove the boat at full speed in the direction he had pointed. The boat rocketed across the waves, spraying water up over the sides, and I hoped Bill was getting the drenching he deserved in the back. Then, without warning, the acceleration unexpectedly cut out.

‘Pick up the pace, Sossy,’ Dad said. ‘We won’t be back before dark if you drive this slowly.’

I put my hand on the throttle to try to move us along, but it didn’t make any difference: it was already on full speed.

‘There’s water in the boat!’ Bill screamed, suddenly, jumping to his feet.

Dad told me to turn off the engine, his tone firm. Water was gushing in through the bottom of the boat. Bill grabbed

a bucket and began bailing frantically, but the level was rising faster than he could empty it. Mum, realising the boat would be submerged in seconds, hurled life jackets at us, but we only just had time to throw them over our heads.

‘Mum! I’m scared! I’m scared!’ I screamed, paralysed with fear and standing knee-deep in water.

‘Calm down, Susan. Everything will be okay,’ Mum reassured me. Nothing ever rattled Mum. She never panicked, not even now.

As the boat sank deeper, Dad told us to jump clear. ‘Flip it over,’ he said.

In less than thirty seconds, we’d lost the security of our boat. We were up to our necks in freezing cold water, and I was terrified. I looked to Mum and Dad for comfort, fearing for our safety.

Clinging to the overturned hull, we fastened each other’s life jackets. Even though there was no storm, the natural force of the evening waves was overwhelming. Again and again they swept us off the hull, making our fight more difficult.

Dad lost his grip and splashed around frantically. The waders he was wearing were filling rapidly with water, threatening to drag him under. He grabbed at the buckles, his head dipping beneath the water. It looked like he was drowning. When the buckles released, the waders vanished, and I was relieved to see that Dad had regained his grasp on the boat, but I noticed he was no longer wearing his glasses.

I looked around, hoping we’d be rescued, but there wasn’t a single boat in sight. *Where did they all go?!*

‘My money!’ Bill cried.

We followed Bill’s gaze to see several notes floating out

to sea. He wanted to swim out and retrieve them, but Mum told him to stay with the boat, promising him she'd replace the money when we got back home. Mum's composure made me wonder if our situation wasn't as serious as I feared. But my feeling of assurance was short-lived. Our eyes were glued on Mum as she unfastened the camera from around her wrist and released it into the depths of the bay. That camera was her most prized possession. It took all my strength to remain calm.

As the sun went down, our fingers began to cramp in the freezing water.

'It's nearly dark, Edwin,' Mum said. 'What should we do?'

We looked around. There were no longer any boats in sight, so there was little chance of being rescued. The hours it would take to swim to the distant shore made that a petrifying option, but Bill and I both understood it was our only chance.

After some coercion, Dad reluctantly agreed, instructing us to meet on the beach if we became separated.

We swam towards a dark silhouette in the distance, but after several minutes Dad was struggling. Bill swam over to help him.

'Bill, you need to keep going,' Mum pleaded, desperately wanting her son to save himself.

'No, Mum. Dad needs my help.'

If anyone could save Dad, it was Bill. A competitive swimmer, he'd been training with a private coach for years. Swimming was his strength.

Secure in the knowledge that Bill was with Dad, I told Mum to keep up with me.

'We'll swim together,' I said.

But as the minutes passed, the distance between us grew. I was not sure whether Mum was trying to keep up, or whether she was lagging behind to stay with Dad. Mum, Dad and Bill had remained in close proximity to each other but I was now out on my own. The thought of swimming alone in the darkness terrified me, but it became clear that there was more chance of us all surviving if I went ahead and found help.

I lost sight of my family in the darkness and could only hear Mum's voice. For the next hour, I guess it was, we kept in contact by yelling out to each other.

'Sossy, are you okay?'

'Yes, Mum, I'm okay.'

And then a few minutes later ... 'Mum, are you okay?'

'Yes, Susan, I'm okay.'

'Mum ...' I yelled out, desperately wanting to tell her that I loved her.

'Just keep going, Susan.' She didn't need to hear the words. She already knew.

My life jacket kept choking me, and I struggled with it, placing both my hands near my throat and pulling it down, while kicking as hard as I could to keep moving forward. I was desperate to find help before Dad lost his fight for life.

The force of the current was dragging me parallel to the shore. The tide was going out and there was only a small window of opportunity to swim to land before being sucked out to sea. With every passing minute I became more fearful that I would miss it. The waves splashed continuously in my face, the salt water stinging my eyes and making me thirsty.

The battle with my life jacket and my fight to breathe had

been dominating my attention, and I realised I hadn't heard Mum's calls for a while.

'Mum! Mum!' I screamed. 'Mum, are you okay?'

I turned around, hoping to see her close by, but all I saw was darkness. The moon provided no assistance as the swell of the waves swallowed up any light.

'Keep going, Mum,' I yelled. 'You have to keep going!'

Fear consumed me. The thought of losing Mum, Dad or Bill was unbearable. We'd always been a close family – closer than most. Family dinners without even one of us would change the family dynamic. Each of us was such an important contributor. I had to keep going. I had to save them. I had to keep our family together.

I swam in the darkness. It didn't feel like I was making much progress. The water was freezing and my body tingled as numbness set in. There were short-lived moments of warmth when I peed – the heat floating up my shorts towards my chest was bliss. If only the warmth could last longer than a few seconds.

I kept swimming, praying my family was still alive. The only sounds I could hear were the waves crashing in my ears and the birds squawking above. The presence of the birds was confusing. It was dark. *Shouldn't they have been nesting for the night?*

The flock circled above me, and the loud screeching noise they were making was terrifying. *What the hell are they doing?* A feeling of dread came over me.

'Fuck off, birds!' I yelled. 'I'm not dead yet!'

My fight to remain calm was lost, and I was overcome

with panic. Western Port Bay, with its nearby seal colony, was infested with sharks. I thrashed around from side to side, looking for a fin. I could see it in my mind, the ferocious look in the shark's eye as it attacked. Razor sharp teeth ripping my limbs from my body, pools of blood attracting more ... *Stop it! Just keep swimming ... keep swimming ... keep swimming ...*

Childhood memories swirled in my head, guiding my focus away from the stabbing pain of swimming in what felt like a sea of ice cubes, the calmness of my mother's voice in song distracting me from my fear.

*I wuv you
I wuv you
Said the little blue man
I wuv you
I wuv you
I wuv you to bits*

Dad had said a prayer before we'd let go of the hull of the boat, asking God to watch over and protect us in our battle to reach land. I hoped that God had listened to his plea, and that He was shielding Mum, Dad and Bill from danger until I could find help. *Maybe if I sing a religious song, God will hear me and save us.*

*Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me
I once was lost but now I'm found
Was blind, but now I see ...*

Are you there, God? Can you hear me? I made a deal with God. I promised to commit my whole life to serving him if he saved my family. I'd become a nun, live in a monastery and pray all the time. *And I'll never have sex*, I promised. *Ever!*

I passed the hours in prayer and song, my body engulfed in the icy water. Swimming in darkness, I felt something beneath my feet. *What was that?* I kept moving, but I felt it again. I stopped swimming, my heart pounding with hope that I'd finally made it. My feet sank down into thick, sticky slime. *Mud!*

The water was still too deep to walk, so I continued to swim, checking the depth every few minutes. At knee-deep I tried to walk, but I was sinking in the mud. Crawling was the only way to move forward. On hands and knees I counted each movement – *one, two, three, four* – until I reached one hundred, then I turned over and sat with my back to the land, pushing my body backwards with my arms, again counting to one hundred. I continued on, rolling over and over until eventually the mud gave way to solid ground.

The elation of finally reaching land pushed my exhaustion aside. *Now I can find help!*

But as I looked out towards the trees in the distance, my heart sank. I was still surrounded by water.

'Mum! Dad! Bill!' I yelled. 'I'm on a sandbank. Keep going! You can rest here!'

I knew there would be no reply. It had been hours since I'd last heard Mum's voice. Even if they were still alive, the deafening sound of waves crashing in their ears would drown out my cries.

I continued to yell out hopelessly, my desperation to be

heard surpassing the voice of reason. *Maybe they can hear me, but they're just too tired to respond.* I knew if they could make it as far as the sandbank, they could rest until I came back with help.

Water lapped at the sandbank. I knew I had to keep going. Tiny pebbles cut into my feet as I ran to the water's edge, then I was back on all fours, crawling, my knees skinned by the rocks and prickly seaweed.

My arms and legs felt like dead weights as I rotated ... *ninety-eight, ninety-nine, one hundred* ... I'd lost count of how many times I'd rolled over.

When the water was deep enough, I started to swim again. I estimated the shore to be only a few hundred metres away now. I swam as hard as my body would allow.

The closer I came to land, the more my surroundings changed. The swamp ahead of me was scary – it looked like a witch's haven. Tall, dead trees cast dark shadows across the black mud, their spiky branches devoid of life. It was dark and gloomy, and I was terrified of going in there.

As I entered the shadows, I found myself back in mud. This time it was like quicksand, and I was sinking further and further. I grabbed onto roots and shrubs that poked up through the thick slime, but they snapped off in my hands. Panic started to rise again. The mud, sucking me downwards like a vacuum, was now up to my thighs.

I cried out for help, but only the crabs could hear me. They scurried away, burying themselves deep in the mud. If they were nipping at me, I couldn't feel it. I was too terrified that my fight for life might nearly be done. Exhaustion was

taking over as I sank further. But I knew I couldn't give up. Mum, Dad and Bill were relying on me.

I fought on, fearing the mud would never come to an end. Eventually, I was able to crawl, and then finally walk.

As I moved forward, the swamp became denser, and the shrubs intertwined to form a hedge. I brought my arms up to protect my face, forcing my body forward. With each step I took, the branches ripped at my skin like thousands of razor blades.

Then suddenly the bushes were behind me.

My eyes widened as they adjusted to the moonlight. What I saw ahead was not what I had expected. I thought that I'd reached the mainland, and that there would be houses, cars and streets bustling with people. I couldn't have been more wrong. No sign of human life anywhere.

I looked back at the vicious hedge that I had just pushed through. On the other side of it was the icy cold water, the quicksand mud, the predator birds and, somewhere out there, my parents and brother. On this side of the hedge was nothing but black swamps and dense bushland. Welcome to French Island.

Until a decade ago, French Island had been home to the McLeod Prison Farm. Many prisoners had tried to escape the island, but due to its remoteness and treacherous surroundings, only a few were known to have survived.

For me – a fifteen-year-old girl feeling exhausted and alone, and wearing nothing but a T-shirt, shorts and a life jacket – French Island was a terrifying place to be.

In the moonlight I made out a thin sandy pathway

running alongside the mud. I hesitated, unsure of which way to go. I prayed to God for guidance and turned right.

I wanted to drop and rest but I couldn't. I had to find help before Mum, Dad and Bill reached the quicksand mud. I was sure they wouldn't survive in there.

I jogged along the sand, my arms flopping by my sides. The soles of my feet were bleeding, but I felt no pain. Soon enough, I came across an overgrown track that led away from the mud. As I ran down the path, a long, dark tunnel ahead became noticeable. It was made by tea-trees that lined either side of the track and intertwined overhead.

Entering the tunnel, I was unable to see the ground beneath my feet. I prayed I wasn't heading for a cliff as I ran towards the small light that marked the far end. When I reached the end, wide-open paddocks spread before me, and rabbits darted across in all directions. As I rounded a bend, there it was – a farmhouse in the distance, with a light on.

Oh, dear God, thank you, thank you, thank you!

I didn't think I could run any faster, but somehow I did. I ran across paddocks and jumped a post and rail fence. When I reached the house, I knocked frantically on the window, startling an elderly couple who were quietly reading.

The man put down his book and opened the door, ushering me inside without question. It was obvious where I had come from. I looked like a drowned rat, covered in mud and wearing a life jacket. 'I don't know where my parents and brother are,' I cried. 'We need to get help! *Please* get help!'

The man, a retired doctor, briefly examined me before calling the local ranger. He then drove down to the mud flats where I had come ashore.

I was left with the doctor's wife, Mrs Forbes, who led me to the bathroom, insisting I have a shower. But instead of enjoying the warmth of the water as it thawed out my body, an overwhelming sense of guilt engulfed me.

Oh my God, what have I done? I shouldn't have left them. I should have stayed with them instead!

Resting my head against the shower tiles, I sobbed. 'I'm sorry, Mum. I'm so sorry!'

'May I ring my sister?' I asked when I came out of the bathroom, dressed in a borrowed pink tracksuit. 'She was expecting us home hours ago.' It was now well after eleven o'clock at night.

I choked up as I spoke to Julie. Mrs Forbes took the phone from me and repeated everything I'd told her. Then, after hanging up, she made me a cup of tea and a slice of toast. I felt guilty as I nibbled away. I was safe in a warm house while my family was missing out in the freezing cold sea.

I sat miserably, noticing that my muddy clothes and life jacket were in a bag by the front door.

'It's a blessing you found us,' Mrs Forbes said. 'There isn't another house around for more than thirty kilometres. And if you had come out of the mangroves and gone that way,' she pointed to the left with a shudder, 'you would have been lost in the national park. There would have been little hope for you in there.'

Percy, the ranger, arrived and listened intently as I told him what had happened over the previous four hours.

'You're a very lucky girl,' he said. 'Very lucky, indeed.'

As I finished my cup of tea, a helicopter touched down in

the back paddock. The pilot, Bruce, shook hands with Percy before escorting me back to the helicopter.

Bruce checked my headset, then the helicopter lifted slowly, and within minutes we were hovering over Western Port Bay. He switched on the spotlight, but with the vast size of the bay it was just a tiny white dot in a huge sea of darkness. With my heart full of hope, I searched the water, desperately longing to see arms frantically waving at me. But I couldn't see them – no Mum, no Dad, no Bill, and no upturned boat. All I saw was pitch-black water.

'I shouldn't have left them,' I cried. 'This is all my fault.'

'No!' Bruce yelled into the headset to be heard over the sound of the whirling blades. 'If you hadn't gone ahead for help we wouldn't be out here searching. You did the right thing. You're lucky to be alive.'

We searched the area for some time before Bruce said I was required back at the police station.

'Please don't take me back,' I begged. 'I have to find them!'

But Bruce swung the helicopter around and we returned to the mainland in silence. I had failed.

Had Mum, Dad and Bill seen the helicopter hovering in the distance? Had they been waving their arms frantically at me, thinking they were about to be rescued? Had they watched in desperation as the helicopter turned around and disappeared out of sight? Or were they already dead?

Sergeant Nicholl ushered me into Hastings Police Station when I arrived a little after midnight. He had already notified the necessary parties. Nine official search boats had been deployed to perform a creeping-line search, along with two

helicopters assisting from above. Percy had also asked two French Island locals to help out.

I don't remember how friends and family were notified. I only recall phoning my best friend, Caz, who initially thought it was a prank call. When I hung up the phone, one of the officers guided me to a room with a red vinyl mattress and urged me to get some rest. I was exhausted both mentally and physically, but I couldn't sleep. I lay staring at the ceiling, replaying the accident in my mind and questioning what I could have done differently.

I should have steered the boat towards land. I should have stayed with them. I should have swum harder. I should have run harder. I should have looked harder. I should have ... I should have ... I should have ...

My heart pounded so hard my chest hurt. I couldn't breathe. I jumped off the mattress and ran out of the room.

For the next hour, I made the police officers coffee and toast. I walked up the stairs to make it, then down the stairs to deliver it; back and forth until the bread had run out. *What am I going to do now? Someone ... anyone ... HELP ME!* I dropped to my knees, my face buried in my hands, and cried. Finally, spent, I rose to my feet, dried my eyes and went back to the kitchen to make more coffee.

Danni arrived by police escort a little after two o'clock. She'd brought a change of clothes for me that fitted better and looked nicer than the bright pink tracksuit from Mrs Forbes.

'Are you okay, Soz?'

She hugged me tightly and then held me at arm's length, her eyes resting on the bloodied scratches on my arms.

'I'm okay,' I said. 'But why haven't they found them yet?'

‘It’s okay. They will.’ Danni was always strong.

To pass the time, I smoked Danni’s cigarettes. I was worried I’d be grounded for a year if Dad walked through the door and caught me, but my need for distraction was greater than my need to stay out of trouble. I hoped he’d understand. When we ran out of cigarettes, a policeman gave us another packet, courtesy of a prisoner being held in the cells.

Over the following hours, numerous family members and friends arrived at the station – Julie at around four o’clock, her anxious expression mirroring the way we were all feeling. Caz arrived with her parents, followed by our local minister, Reverend Harry Munro.

Time ticked away, and the sun eventually rose. At seven o’clock, we phoned Nana and Papa to tell them that Mum, Dad and Bill were missing – the media had picked up on the story, and we didn’t want our grandparents learning about it on the morning news.

As I sat outside on the second-storey balcony overlooking the parklands and marina, Reverend Munro came out and sat down beside me. He placed his hand gently on mine.

‘They’ve found your mum. It’s not good,’ he said softly.

‘She’s dead?’ I whispered.

‘Yes.’

An hour-and-a-half later, I was told the body of my father had been recovered, and thirty minutes after that, the body of my brother.

In just one evening, my life had changed forever.