

# Words fall like seed

Janine McGuinness-Whyte August 2012 (Victoria)

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On the back step, Sharna sits close, so she can place the ruler under the line of words in *The Gardener's Guide*. I stumble over some words, but others are now familiar, *ap-ri-cot* is easy. The sun is warm, but not too hot on this summer afternoon, and I feel her leg gently touching against mine like an old companion.

'Paul, you're drifting.'

'Sorry, Sharna, I was thinking what a good friend you are.'

'We've come a long way in twelve months, hey. Time for a coffee?'

'Yes, coffee, for sure. Yes, we have earned a coffee.' I rise from the step; my knee joints have stiffened and I need to grasp the rail. I smile at Sharna, 'Old age, it's a bugger.'

'We're not so old, Paul; just mature, like fine wine. Speaking of which, how did your last batch turn out?'

'She's good. I'll give you a taste before our coffee.'

My eyes adjust to the dim light of the kitchen and I pour my latest bottle into two glasses and hand one to Sharna. The grape vines travel across the verandah, where I've been learning to read.

I arrived in Australia forty-six years ago, with my wife, Sofia. I left Malta, following my cousin, Jo, to get a good job and better opportunities for me and Sofia. When I was twenty-one I didn't know any English, except for basic words: yes, no, thank you, hello and goodbye. I worked as a gardener, and the plants didn't say much, so I learnt English very slowly. In Malta I planted the fields with my father, I didn't go to school much, because there was much work to do and I preferred to be outside, in the sun. The only book in our house was my mother's blessed bible.

On my father's farm I planted tomatoes, potatoes, cucumber and so many vegetables, I was never hungry. I was born just as the war was ending, after the big Malta Conference; as Prime Minister Churchill and President Roosevelt were leaving our Mediterranean island, I was arriving. I was sad to leave my father and mother, but every time I eat a big red tomato in summer I think of them. Sofia and I took our kids to visit Malta in 1979, but we were happy to return to our home in Brunswick. My daughters, Carmen and Olivia, are real Australian girls, with good jobs and education, and I now have six grandchildren.

We stayed at my cousin's place after Sofia and I first arrived in Australia, Jo was working on a farm in Werribee and got me my first job. We were planting and harvesting cabbages and cauliflowers; I worked hard and saved the money to rent our own place. Sofia was a dressmaker, and was sewing beautiful wedding and christening dresses. We



both started to make good friends, and were learning to speak more English. Sofia knew I could not read, and she could only read Maltese, so she took our letters to work where her Australian friend, Angela, translated our bills, she was a clever woman like Sharna.

In 1968, after the birth of our first daughter, I heard about a job in Melbourne city. They needed a gardener in the Fitzroy Gardens, and the pay was much better. That is when we moved to Brunswick. I had experience, and I had knowledge; I didn't need papers then. Not like now, when you have to have certificates, diplomas and degrees. I have none of these. I worked at the Fitzroy Gardens for thirty-five years. It was a good job. I made many friends; they didn't know I couldn't read.

When I turned sixty-five I retired, from my job, but not from gardening. I have my own garden, and I grow grapes, tomatoes, zucchini, eggplants, and ... the lot. Then my Olivia tells me about a community garden starting in Brunswick, and she takes me there the following week. They need help building a vegetable plot, and I say to them, 'No, no, no, tomatoes don't like to be close to the corn, maybe plant cucumber there, or peas, or beans.' And they listen. And then they make me work.

If I'm not at home, in my garden, you can usually find me at the community garden. That's where I met Sharna. She collects the seeds, packages them, so we can plant them again next season.

One day, I'm working with Sharna, and we run out of carrot seed.

'Hey, Paul, could you please grab a packet of carrot seed from the drawer in the shed? My boots are all muddy. Thanks.'

I go into the shed and flip through the seed packets in the drawer. But there are no pictures, the seed packets are brown and Sharna has handwritten all their names and the date of collection. I know the numbers, but Sharna's careful handwriting may as well be scribble. I feel ashamed, and try again.

'No carrots left? I'm sure we had more carrot seed.' Sharna appears in doorway, taking off her boots before she enters the shed.

In my embarrassment, I stutter a little as I cover up, 'I d-don't know, you look.'

Sharna looks into the drawer, all her seeds are orderly; so she finds a pack easily.

'Da, dah! Magic!'

Then she looks at me. I look down at the floor. Sharna used to work as a teacher and says she spotted the signs. She says nothing about it at first.

'Back to work. Wanna go for a beer at the pub after this, Paul?'

'I didn't bring my wallet. But come back to my place, for some of my olives and Azzopardi wine.'

'You make your own wine? Of course you do! I'd love to try some. What a treat.'

On the back porch, Sharna holds her glass of wine towards mine, 'Cheers, Paul.'

'Sahha.'

'Sahha?'

'It means *cheers*, or *good health*, in Maltese.'

'When did you come to Australia, Paul?'

'In 1966.'



'You must have been very young.'

'I was just twenty-one, and my wife Sofia was even younger, she was only twenty. She cried a lot when we first arrived. She missed her family, and when her father died she brought her mother out to Australia to live with us. My wife has been gone six years.' My eyes still want to fill with tears.

'And you have two daughters?'

'Olivia, who you've met at the garden, and Carmen, who doesn't like to garden so much. She likes the pretty clothes, like her mother.'

'Pretty clothes and gardening don't go so well together. Just look at me!'

Sharna stretches out her oversized jumper and shows all the stains, today's mud and yesterday's beetroots. She wears khaki pants and steel-capped boots, but still looks beautiful. Sharna is not my girlfriend, she has her own girlfriend.

'This wine is fantastic, Paul. Better than any I've tasted.'

'It's the grapes.' I point to the vine hanging over our head.

'It's delicious. Can I have your opinion?' Sharna reaches into her bag and draws out a pack of seed; a bought packet, one with the pictures. Beans.

'Have you grown these before, Paul?'

It's a variety of purple variegated. 'No. Did you want to try them in the community garden?'

'I was thinking about it. The kids might like the colours. Such a strange name for a bean...'

'Hmm,' I start to feel at a disadvantage.

'Paul, do you mind if I ask you something personal?'

A little bit of panic is clawing like a cat my throat, just say 'NO', but Sharna is a good friend, so I say, 'Okay, Sharna, but not too personal.' I have a big gulp of wine and fortify myself. Ready.

'Excuse me for asking, but do you know how to read?'

Forty-six years in Australia and this is the first time someone has asked me this question. I feel suddenly stupid. 'I need to check the watering system.' I walk to the back of the garden where choko is climbing the fence. I find comfort amongst the plants. They don't ask questions. I bend to smell a tomato.

'I'm sorry, Paul. I didn't mean to offend you, sorry. It's just that when I was a teacher I met lots of kids from migrant families who couldn't read English; it was part of my job. You know, some teachers can't stop being teachers. Still friends?'

'Friends.' I hand her the plump ripe tomato I've just picked, and smash it in a handshake. The red pulp and seeds slide between us.

Sharna laughs, 'You cheeky bugger, there's no sympathy now.' And she wipes her tomato hand down the front of my overalls.

'You're right, Sharna. I confess, I can't read. I just garden.'

'I can teach you, if you want?'

'Don't know if I can learn now, I'm too old.'



'Never too old. And it's never too soon to start.' Sharna still has the seed packet in her left hand. 'Let's make it relevant. You know these are beans, so just look for the word starting with *b*.'

I look closely at the seed packet and seek out the most likely word from the heading. I point at a word with five letters.

'Right. You see, it's not so hard. Let's have another glass of your fine wine, Paul.' And then we sit on the back step, *Dragon Tongue Beans* was my first sentence.

In two months I graduate from seed packets to gardening magazines, and now, twelve months later, I'm reading a book, *The Gardener's Guide*. My daughters didn't even know I couldn't read, or maybe they did know and didn't want to embarrass their father. Sharna makes reading easy. Even in winter we read outdoors, usually with a glass of wine and a plate of olives or tomatoes and cucumber.

'Maybe we could make a label for your wine, seeing it's been a whole year since you started reading?'

'A label? How would I do that?' I have been practising my writing, but it's not great.

'I've seen your drawings, Paul. All you have to do is draw something that represents your wine, give it a name and write down its vintage. I'll scan it into the computer and then we can print off some labels. Easy.'

'You always make things sound easy, Sharna, like you do with those kids at the garden. I'll think about it.'

'Fair enough. I better make a move.'

There's nothing on the television in the evening; I begin to sketch a grape vine between the columns of the TV guide. In a couple of days I've designed a wine label. It's Wednesday, our regular morning at the community garden. I take the piece of paper to show Sharna. When I arrive there's some big discussion happening in the shed, I decide to head to the vegetable patch instead. I feel the weight of a capsicum, as it grows shiny and green, and pick a little parsley to taste.

'G'day, Paul.'

'Hello, Sharna. How are you?'

'Trouble's brewing. You heard?'

I shake my head.

'We might be losing our funding. No funding means no education programme, unless we can raise the dollars ourselves.'

'It's possible; especially with smart women like you.' I dig in my pocket, to show Sharna what I've drawn. 'Maybe the label could look something like this?'

'Perfect. I love it.'

'But this one's all creased and dirty. I'll draw one fresh.'

'No, it's better this way. It's earthy and real, and what a great name: *Brunswick Garden*. I'll scan it tonight. How exciting, your own label.'

Sharna looks happier than I feel. This year has been good to me.



It's seven in the evening, and I hear someone knocking. I open the front door, and there's Sharna, with glue, two brushes and a small box.

'I couldn't wait, Paul. I wanna see how the labels look on a bottle of your wine. Are you busy?'

'No, I'm not busy. Just finished dinner. You want something to eat?'

'No, I'm right, mate. Should we get started?'

Sharna puts the box on the kitchen table. I look down and see my label, a stack of my labels in the box. 'How did you do this so quickly?'

'The miracle of technology. Have you got a bottle ready to go?'

'Sure.'

Sharna's squeezing glue into an old ice-cream container when I return with ten bottles of wine. She passes me a brush. 'You do the first one. It's your wine, after all.'

Carefully, I put glue on the back of the label, my hands shake a little. I feel like I'm all thumbs as I position the label on the bottle. 'Bah! It's crooked.'

'Show me.'

I pass the bottle to Sharna.

'It's only a tiny bit crooked. It still looks great. Try another one, and I'll do one.'

So we sit at the kitchen table, and I bring in ten more bottles. Before an hour has passed we have twenty bottles of wine, wearing my label. This time last year I couldn't read, or write.

'We should celebrate.' I put on some music, and then get two glasses. I open the bottle with the crooked label. 'A toast. Thank you, Sharna, for being a good friend, and teacher.'

'My pleasure, Paul. And, thank you, my friend. Here's to *Brunswick Garden* wine.'

We had barely clinked glasses, when Sharna just about explodes out of her chair.

'I just had a brilliant idea!' Her face lights up like a lamp. 'What if we sold some of your wine to raise funds for the kids? We could have a market day on a Saturday morning. Sell some surplus fruit and vegetables, and your wine, and keep the education programme running.'

'Who would want to buy my wine?'

'Lots of people. I'll run it by Barry in the morning, if I can wait that long. But what do you think, Paul? Would you be okay donating some wine to the community garden?'

'Sure. I have plenty.'

'You do?'

Outside, I lift up some flooring boards and show Sharna the space under the porch, where it is dark and dry. 'My cellar.'

'Incredible! You're amazing, Paul.' She hugs me like a bear.

On the second Saturday in February the community garden has its first market day. Sharna and Barry have organised permits and all the permission required to sell fruit, vegetables, eggs, flowers, cakes and my wine. I have a bottle open so people can sample, and even though it is early in the morning there are no bottles left at eleven o'clock. Lots of people come and buy. Nice people and families.



'It's a hit, Paul. And we've made five hundred dollars by selling your wine alone. Can you believe it?'

'No, I can't believe it.'

Market day is held once a month, and the education programme is kept alive. Twice a week the kids from the local school visit the patch, and after school we have our regulars. I'm planting seed from Sharna's collection, and this little kid, a boy about seven years old, wanders over.

'Hey, mister, whatcha planting?'

I show him the packet.

'I can't read.' He looks at his feet.

I stop making furrows and bend down on one knee, so we can see each other.

'Ah, but this is an easy one; the easiest vegetable word to read of them all. Do you know what letter this is?'

'P.'

'Exactly! See, you can read. Just like me'

He runs away, 'Mum, mum, I can read.'

One little letter, one little word, is like one small seed, it can grow, and spread its own story. Next birthday I'm sixty-eight, and I'm thinking of going to school.

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