Responsibilities

Written by Ayla Melville

I

When I was a child, I desperately wanted to grow up. This was not because I actually wanted to function as an adult, but because I thought growing up meant you could be free – free from a parent or teacher telling you what to do, free from expectations and rules, free from responsibility.

I was told from a young age that I was *wise beyond my years*. I took so much pride in this. The only time I felt confident was around adults. My peers felt so different from me. I was seen as strange. I could be possessive when I did have a friend – and I think it drove people from me. I wanted someone just to be *my* friend. I didn't like sharing and got moody and sulky when a two became a three. Aside from school, I didn't really spend much time with other kids. Most of the time it was just me, my Mum and Dad.

We moved from England to the east coast of Australia when I was five. We rented around for a while, Buderim, Palmwoods, Woombye, before we settled out in Verrierdale - the sticks. I could get the bus home from school but there wasn't one in the mornings. If I wanted to see my best friend on the weekends, it was a thirty-minute drive. When I was older, I was able to catch the bus from the nearest town, Peregian, but this was still a fifteen-minute drive away. The word 'still' in the previous sentence makes me laugh. I was raised to think simply getting in the car was an effort in itself. My parents would complain, not wanting to drop me off somewhere, and not wanting to pick me back up either. I loved where we lived, it was beautiful. We had a big garden and a rope swing in the big oak tree. We had a long, gravel driveway that I could ride my bike on. When the tropical storms came the fields would flood with water, turning them into lakes. It was magnificent. It was also very quiet, and often lonely.

My mum and I have always been close. My Dad and I have struggled more. I'm still unsure if this is because of how different or similar we are. My dad can be a very closed person. He is

calmer now but was once very quick to anger; quick to go into a mood, quick to storm off. It could be the smallest of things. He wouldn't want to wash the dishes after dinner. In his mind he had worked all day and shouldn't have to. My dad wanted to be left to his own devices. The back room of our house was his 'studio', where he had keyboards, multiple monitors, and the latest Apple computer. He would've stayed in there all the time if we'd let him. Aside from maintaining the garden and taking care of his home-grown vegetables my dad's one interest in life is his music.

Each time we would call him to dinner, or ask for his help with something, we knew there would be at least a ten-minute window where he would be 'just finishing something off.' We began to call him earlier to see if we could eliminate the problem, but he caught wind of that quickly. My dad hates cleaning, in fact, I'm not sure he ever does it anymore. I think my mum gave up on that a long time ago. The few times I did see him hoover he would run through the house like an angry rhinoceros, slamming the foot into walls and refusing to move furniture. I don't think I've ever seen him clean a sink.

I feel guilty saying all these things about my dad. But this is how he was. He could also be brilliant. Every so often, he'd be in one of his animated moods. He'd want to go to Coolum Beach and bodyboard or play footy in the garden. When he had his red ute, he'd let me stand up in the tray and hold onto the hang-bar as he tore down the drive. These are my favourite childhood memories with him. The ones where I didn't have to ask him to come outside; the ones where he asked me. If my dad didn't want to do something because he didn't implicitly have to, he simply wouldn't. If something was an inconvenience, it would start a big stink. I didn't see the sexist undertones at the time. I was too young to understand this was due, in part, to the playing out of traditional family roles. I remember him saying once, 'I just don't enjoy doing the dishes. It doesn't feel fun for me.'

II

I used to be very similar to him in this regard, I suppose it was learned behaviour. I would throw tantrums about tidying the kitchen or cleaning the shower. I hated my mum insisting that I learn to speak Flemish so I could talk to my Belgian Nona on the phone. I didn't want to practice Piano. I wanted to be left alone to read in my room with my cat, Sooty, warming my feet.

It's funny to think about how much my dad used to complain about that cat. How hard it was to get a cat-sitter if we wanted to go away on holiday. When he took up too much space in my parent's bed or woke them up hacking up hairballs in the night. How expensive vet bills were and the extortionate price of flying him to England when we eventually moved back after I finished high school. But when Sooty got sick in his eighteenth year, my dad cried harder than my mum and I put together. And we cried a lot. My dad was the one to dig the hole in the front garden, under the Buddleia tree.

This summer, our family dog also got sick. She was an Australian sheep dog. Extremely excitable and full of energy, we'd walked her twice a day since she was a puppy. In twelve years, that's roughly 8,760 walks. I can't count the number of times we bargained with each other over who would take her out. It came down to how busy each of our days had been, how tired we were, if we still had things that needed to be done that evening, and who had walked her in the morning.

When my dad brought her home for me on my fourteenth birthday, I sobbed with happiness. She was gangly and sleepy. She had been sick in the back of his car and was, we soon discovered, covered in fleas and ticks. I remember lying on the floor next to her, falling in love with her, all while feeling a crushing weight in my chest. I had gotten what I'd wanted for years. But I knew her arrival meant change. It meant responsibility. I almost asked my dad if we could give her back.

After we got Maya, every time we left the house we had to consider when someone would be back home to let her out. If we wanted to go away on holiday my parents would have to check if the sites and beaches were dog friendly. If they weren't, they would have to ask around to see if someone could take care of her. I know it bothered my dad; it effected our ability to be as free as we once were. There were always considerations to be made.

All of these things sound so small when I write them out, but when you consider your life, you don't realise all the little accommodations you're making every single day. These could be for you, for a family member, a partner or a friend, or a pet. We each have parts of our routines that we grow tired of or irritated by. We are obligated to do certain things. I catch myself so often, putting off calling my mother because I know she'll have me on the phone

for at least an hour. And when I do call, I'll complain to my partner afterwards about how she went on and on about her olive trees for fifteen minutes. One day, I know I'll miss the endless monologues. I wish I knew how to make myself appreciate them more now. But so often, it is not till we've lost something, that we realise how much we're going to miss it.

When Maya's health started to deteriorate, my parents did everything to help her recover. There were countless trips to the vets, sleeves and sleeves of expensive medications, scans and even an ultrasound. It still makes me smile to think of her lying there with jelly on her stomach. I'd pay good money to know what her face looked like in that moment.

Unfortunately, her sickness wasn't something that could be reversed. My mum Facetimed me from Portugal, where they now lived. My dad was holding cradling Maya in his arms like a baby. They were both crying. Her burial site is beneath a young olive tree. My dad cleared the area by hand and moved some rocks into a circular formation around her. They went away to the seaside for the weekend, somewhere they couldn't go with Maya as dogs aren't permitted on most beaches in Portugal. My dad has wanted to go to the seaside since they retired there, but I don't think he enjoyed it the way he thought he would. My parents still walk every day, but they walk together now. There's no reason for one of them to go out in the morning, and the other to go out in the evening.

III

I spent so much of my life afraid of responsibility. When I moved out, I was so relieved that I could finally be *free.* My idea of freedom being that I could be entirely self-sufficient, responsible only for me. I didn't realise how empty that was going to feel. Empowering, yes. But not fulfilling. I hadn't realised all the things you get only from giving.

Helping my mum cook dinner gave me dance parties in the kitchen. Sitting in my dad's studio, listening to his most recent song, gave me a rare moment of stillness with him. Sooty, waking me up at 6am for his breakfast, had him curling into the curve of my body like a little spoon as I slept. Talking to my Nona on the phone gave me ten blown kisses when she said goodbye. Showing up for a friend in need gave me grateful messages and thank-you flowers. Walking Maya after school gave me beautiful views of sunsets over the hills and gumtrees.

Maybe this is something everyone already knows, and I'm just late to realising it. But learning that all beautiful things must come at a cost took me a long time. I thought love, unconditional love, was free of responsibility. What I'm beginning to realise is that if you can love the responsibilities of life, you'll be a hundred times happier. Your life will be much fuller. This isn't an easy thing to put into practice. It is something I have to actively choose every day. Instead of 'I have to do this', I try to tell myself, 'I get to do this.' I get to hold the hands of friends when they stumble in life. I get to get up every day and work or go to university. I get to go for a run and feel cold air burn my lungs. I get to call my parents and hear about their latest garden project. I get to make dinner for my partner when she is tired. I get to wash the dishes.