

Louise Ross

Excerpted from
Women Who Walk:

How 20 Women from 16 Countries Came to live in Portugal

In one of the indigenous Koori languages of Australia, Korumburra means *blowfly*. It's also a very small town nestled in a rural area of undulating green hills two-hours southeast of Melbourne, and it's where I grew up in the 1960s with my sister and my parents, who had a very happy and traditional marriage.

My mother had been a fashion designer in 1950s Melbourne. She used to tell my sister and me a story that began like this: "When I met your father and married, I gave up my career to move to the countryside to have a family." It was a bittersweet story, laced with loss for a life unlived. Until, toward the end of her life, a writer contacted her with a request to interview her about her work as a custom designer with a fashion house in the epicenter of Melbourne's rag trade. Details of Mum's career were recorded for the purpose of developing the protagonist, Tilly Dunnage, in the revenge-comedy novel, *The Dressmaker*, which was adapted for the screen and starred Kate Winslet.

Dad, who was 11 years older than Mum, had his own stories, which he recorded on a Dictaphone. Duplicate CDs of those recordings were distributed to various family members. I particularly loved listening to the story of his first kiss. As a teen, he'd been sent to Nouméa, the capital of the South Pacific archipelago New Caledonia, to improve his spoken French, and there he'd met a young girl with garlicky breath the likes of which he hoped he'd never encounter again! When aged 12, I holidayed in Nouméa with my parents, Dad's excellent French came in handy, and I loved all the garlicky Creole food.

My father was an only child and his parents divorced when he was 10. He lived with his mother and saw his father on school holidays. Sadly, when Dad was 20 and at an Australian army training facility, he was notified of

his father's death from a burst appendix. Not long after, he set sail for the Middle East and WWII where he was on the front line in the Western Desert, commanding his regiment to "FIRE" their canons into Rommel's German trenches. Later he was sent to fight the Japanese in New Guinea. Mum used to say that in the early days of their marriage, he was still rolling out of and under the bed at sudden loud sounds. We all lived with his post-traumatic stress; so did he, till the ripe old age of 93.

Before he died, we learned from a cousin, who had researched their family ancestry, that Dad's mother's forebears, Jewish shopkeepers in Sheerness, England, were convicted of hiring burglars in 1819 to repossess unpaid goods. The Solomon brothers were subsequently sent to Van Diemen's Land, the name given to the penal colony on Australia's island state of Tasmania. There they worked in Hobart as assigned convicts until, as freemen, they built up their own businesses. As their success and prominence grew, one of the Solomon brothers built Hobart's synagogue, now the oldest remaining synagogue in Australia. Dad was incurious about all this, but the year after his death, my sister and I, keen to learn more, visited Hobart and the Jewish temple built by our ancestor.

In contrast, we learned a lot about our maternal heritage via our mother's mother. Nicknamed "The Duchess," she loved to hold court at family gatherings and tell the story of crossing the Nullarbor Desert with my grandfather, and their four children (my mother was number three), in a 1920s-style jalopy, embellishing the journey of their 3,400 km Perth-to-Melbourne migration with every re-telling.

Both my parents were great readers, conversationalists and grammarians. Mealtimes were opportunities for discussions and we were expected to participate. My father considered an education the most important thing he could give his daughters and it was standard practice in rural communities to send children to boarding school if you could afford to. After two years at the local rural high school, my sister and I went to boarding school in Melbourne. Leaving the comfort and security of home at 13 was hard; I missed my parents and my own bedroom. However, I was determined to be courageous, strong and adaptable.

I was a very shy and insecure teen, but I had an extremely strong will which benefited me when making decisions about my life's direction. My first big decision was to take a gap year after secondary school, to explore the 'next step.' Instead of university, that year I decided on culinary school, encouraged by Mum's comment: "Wherever you go, people have to eat!" After working through my certificate degree at a small woman-owned catering company, followed by second-chef 'ing with Melbourne's doyen caterer, where we cooked for A-list clients, I took my culinary talents abroad. I was 22.

My contemporaries were all heading to Europe, rendezvousing to backpack and travel together. I chose to go it alone and head to the U.S. My first stop was New York. My parents' concerns about this were not entirely unfounded. I saw things on the streets and subways of 1982 New York that I'd only ever seen on TV and in the movies: Unconcealed weapons, open drug use, and homelessness. Kids my own age sleeping on the streets and shooting up. In an ice-cream parlor, with *36 flavors*, a wannabe Broadway actor tap-danced atop the tables while I ordered my double-cone. The distraction gave someone the chance to pickpocket my backpack and I lost all my money. Not easy experiences, but they wised me up.

I spent three months in the U.S. traveling around on Greyhound buses, crossing into Canada and going as far south as Mexico before heading to London where I ran the kitchen of a small private hotel on Hampstead Heath. But my sole intention in London was to find a winter job in one of Europe's ski resorts.

An independently owned, small British ski company with six chalets in Courcheval, France, took me on. A couple of months later the team of a dozen young employees, including one other Australian and me, drove in convoy from North London to Dover, where we caught the ferry to Calais and drove across France and up into the Alps, arriving in Courcheval early November before the season started.

I loved to ski. It had been my outdoor passion from age 18 when my first

love introduced me to the exhilarating sport. In Australia I'd worked at one ski resort during my gap year, and then another when I'd finished my culinary degree. The rhythm of shifting one's weight from side to side, while zooming down a mountain, felt to me like flying.

The guests at my 18-bed chalet in Courcheval were groups of French and British. The French were the most complimentary of my cooking, but well into the season it was a British guest who suggested I should write a cookbook. Twenty-eight years later, during the emergent 'celebrity chef' era, I did just that.

What I discovered about myself during the ski season, particularly when sitting down to dinner with the chalet guests, was that my ability to contribute to bigger conversations was wanting. I'd dedicated time and energy to building my skill as a chef, labor intensive and creative work, but it was never going to be an intellectually challenging vocation. I concluded it was time to go back to school.

At 24, I enrolled as a mature-age student in a BA program at an Institute of Technology in Melbourne. My focus was psychology and philosophy, but very soon I was bored witless. My extra-curriculum reading, however, was not boring, as I'd discovered the works of Swiss psychiatrist, Carl Jung. At the end of my second year, one of my class mates and I applied for student working visas so we could work in the U.S. for our summer break, the winter season in the northern hemisphere. We chose Park City, a ski resort in Utah. Apparently it had some of the best powder!

Early in the season, while strolling through the village, I ran into an Australian friend, someone I'd met in Courcheval. A 'ski and surf bum', Wayne was an avid consumer of New Age literature. He lent me some books, including Marilyn Ferguson's epoch-making *The Aquarian Conspiracy* in which Ms Ferguson explores her theory on personal and social transformation. On the book's resource page, a list of American colleges with graduate programs on this topic caught my eye. I called those colleges, requesting their school prospectuses. Several months later, and back in Australia, I deferred indefinitely from my studies, and applied

to the colleges in the U.S. I was accepted into a small graduate school in Boulder, Colorado to study Jungian Psychology, with an emphasis on dream analysis.

At 26 I left Australia again for the U.S. This time, I was leaving with no sense of when, or if, I'd return.

Boulder is nestled up against the foothills of the Rocky Mountains and in 1986 it was a university town in economic recession. With a stagnant economy, there wasn't much happening. But a lot was going on for me! My studies encouraged endless self-examination via experiential classes and compulsory psychotherapy with a therapist in the field of my research. Thirty years on, I still consult with the same Jungian dream therapist, a woman who has become like a wise older sister and mentor to me.

With all that inner work came personal growth and transformation. In my outer world, I met and married my husband. We were 28. A year later I submitted my first significant piece of writing, my Master's thesis, thereby earning a BA/MA in Jungian Psychology and Counseling. After graduating and building a small private practice as a psychotherapist, I simultaneously worked in a women's clinic for three years as a counselor, later writing a collection of 45 short stories about the experience. It didn't get published. No matter, there was plenty of encouragement from my peers to try my hand at other projects, once I'd resigned from the clinic work.

What I loved about living in the U.S. was the emotional and creative freedom to *live your best life* (an Oprah adage) without the discouragement of being diminished for one's achievements, the 'Tall Poppy Syndrome' so prevalent in Australian culture. I set about making the most of that freedom.

In the early '90s my husband and I went into partnership with my sister and her husband in Australia. They were manufacturing outdoor clothing in a factory outside Melbourne and exporting it to the U.S. and Europe. We were the US distribution office. My role was part-time office support,

which gave me my own time to launch and operate a Sunday outdoor art and craft market over the summers; facilitate dream-analysis groups; and design and co-facilitate with a friend workshops on *Dressing Authentically*; followed by promoting myself to women in small business as a personal and professional development consultant.

All these opportunities in my 30s were marvelous, challenging, and character building. The most difficult of those experiences was the end of my marriage at 38.

Scott and I had traveled well when we went abroad, to Australia and Europe, including a road trip through Spain in 1994 that ended with several magical days on the beach in southern Portugal. But that seemed to be the only time we got along, when we removed ourselves from the self-imposed limitations of domesticity and a conventional marriage.

My parents expected that I'd return to Australia when I divorced. What they failed to consider is that from my mid-20s, I'd steadily built a life for myself in the U.S., and though I didn't love the extreme climate at altitude – Boulder is a mile above sea level – I had community and friends and the creative freedom to *live my best life*, and I wasn't about to give that up.

After my divorce, I worked as a promotions coordinator at a preparatory school for mature-age international students from developing countries. Their governments were funding their graduate and post-graduate studies in business and economics, but before entering U.S. colleges, the students first needed to acculturate into American life and social practices, while also improving their English. In promotional materials, I called the school a “mini United Nations,” a term I also use in the introduction to *Women Who Walk*.

Just shy of my 40th birthday, I was retrenched from that job. A huge disappointment as I loved the students with their culturally diverse stories, and my colleagues, all of whom had lived and worked internationally. Quickly I picked up a mediation contract and consulting work with technology companies that were expanding in the now burgeoning

entrepreneurial community of Boulder and Denver. But in 2000 the dot-com crash occurred, and the consulting work dried up.

On the side in a monthly writing group, I'd been developing a comic fictional character, 39-year-old Tildy Wilson. With sporadic work only, and time on my hands, I decided to write Tildy into a rom-com novel. Nine months later, and with only a rough first draft, a screenwriter and producer in Boulder expressed interest in optioning the novel. With no clue about the film industry, or the ins and outs of having an unpublished manuscript optioned for the screen, I responded, "Maybe, but I need to understand what this might mean."

Over the next 12 years, with a sequel completed, and a business built up around Tildy, I learned an enormous amount about the industry in particular, everyone says, "Yes" until they change their mind and say, "No."

The business I created was branded with a colorful and cheeky illustrated image of Tildy. The products included two novels, the first, I self-published and the sequel, I pitched to literary agents. There was a blog on best girlfriend wisdom written in Tildy's voice, and a website with a store that sold spin-off merchandise that I had made in China after a whirlwind 3-week trip visiting factories in Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen and Hong Kong. And there was a huge outlay of money! Foolishly, I'd invested mostly my money to create a dream too big for me to make real. The business imploded several years after it was launched.

Nevertheless, I kept at it. In 2007, I signed on with a literary agent who believed she could sell my sequel. Six months later she dropped me, saying another client was taking up all of her time. I learned the other client was John Travolta, and Susan was in the process of selling his memoir. Not to be deterred I pitched other agents, actresses with production companies, and Hollywood bigwigs, determined to sell Tildy in all her manifestations: the sequel, a film concept, a TV concept, and comedy sketches. There was always interest ... until the interest turned to, "No."

A man I met, a lawyer who'd helped clear up all my Tildy business dealings, encouraged me to start writing a blog about my other love: food. It was 2008 and the global economic crash was in full swing. Suddenly people had less disposable income to spend on eating out, and less to spend at the grocery store. The timing was perfect for me to launch my book on shopping responsibly, and cooking and eating well on a budget. Steve, my agent, called me one day saying, "This cookbook concept is great Louise, but I can't sell it. The publishers want a rock-star celebrity chef!" (Anthony Bourdain's *Kitchen Confidential* had just topped The New York Times bestseller list.)

When my father died in 2010 – Mum had died seven years earlier – it was a natural transition into the next stage of life. A sobering chapter that had me standing on the precipice of 50 looking back at what had been, while wondering what next?

In 2011, I took myself to Mexico for a weeklong workshop and met a Portuguese woman. We became great friends. Over the next two years, Maria João visited me in Colorado and I visited her. On each trip to Lisbon her family, extended family, and family friends, most of whom had lived in Mozambique during Portugal's dictatorship, were incredibly welcoming and generous, introducing me to their language, food, culture, and life. I was absolutely captivated.

From 2010 onwards, I had been spending so much time traveling outside the U.S. it occurred to me that my residency might be in jeopardy. Consulting with a professional in 2013, I discovered that that was not the case, but after some discussion the attorney commented, "It sounds to me as if you're considering moving abroad." She was right.

Ten months later, I sold my apartment in Boulder and moved to a residence on the doorstep of the Atlantic Ocean. Within a couple of weeks of arriving, I began Portuguese classes and within a month, I'd signed on as a member of the organization International Women in Portugal, volunteering to sit on their executive board. A year later, I began interviewing women for this book.

Where is she now?

I'm still living in São João do Estoril and loving my life on the coast. I'm a Portuguese resident and I own real estate now, so I do feel quite settled and thus it's feasible that I could end up staying longer than I originally planned. In 2019, while promoting *Women Who Walk*, people asked if I would write a similar book about men. In July 2020, I published, *The Winding Road to Portugal: 20 Men From 11 Countries Share Their Stories*.