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# **Growing Old Outrageously**

A Memoir of Food, Travel and Friendship

Written by Hilary Linstead  
and Elisabeth Davies

Published by Allen & Unwin

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# Growing Old Outrageously

*A memoir of travel, food and friendship*

HILARY LINSTEAD AND ELISABETH DAVIES

  
ALLEN&UNWIN

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For my son, Duncan, with my love,  
and to the memory of Frances McDonald,  
whose spirit was an inspiration to me—*HL*

In loving memory of two great friends and travellers,  
Selma and Nuha—*LD*

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## *Prologue*

### *Undaunted, the dream team steps out*

Had I been wise to answer an unexpected telephone call from Miranda?

Miranda and I had shared a flat in London when we left school and had been best friends from around the age of ten, all of forty years ago. Over the years our lives went in different directions, even though we both ended up living in Sydney. But I was curious to know what had provoked her call.

‘Liz would like to see you,’ she said.

‘Who’s she?’ I replied.

‘Come on, Hilary, you went to school together at Cheltenham Ladies College.’

My mind trawled back over the years.

‘Oh, you mean LIZZIE, with the buck teeth!’

‘How cruel!’ said Miranda, laughing. ‘Fancy not remembering Liz. You introduced us in London.’

‘Fair enough. But you stayed in England and the two of you kept up over the years. By the time you came to live in Sydney I’d gone into film production as well as running the agency. My private and professional lives overlapped totally for thirty years.’

‘Yes, you were always busy,’ said Miranda.

‘Too busy. I didn’t see my family or friends nearly enough. And I haven’t seen Liz since I was seventeen—not even in London on work trips. But I’m really glad you rang. I liked her a lot; she was splendidly eccentric and funny as a circus. Why don’t you both come round for a meal tomorrow evening?’

On the dot of 6.30 pm the next day the two of them arrived on my doorstep. Liz hadn’t changed, even though her hair was now long and grey and worn loosely below her shoulders, giving her a wild, ‘bag lady’ look. But she still had her youthful energy and the inquisitive eyes that I remembered. While she and I tucked into roast chook and potato wedges with garlic and rosemary, followed by apple and hazelnut crumble, tiny reed-thin Miranda picked at peas and a tiny portion of breast. Tongues loosened over a bottle of red and Liz regaled me with stories of her minimalist existence in the civil service in England—‘a sheltered workshop for the inadequate’, she called it. She had taken early retirement at fifty-five.

‘I left my farewell party and caught the first plane to Sydney to stay with Miranda and Tom. I knew they would be the perfect couple to teach me how to retire. Nothing like the tranquillity of leafy Wahroonga.’ Liz beamed in Miranda’s direction.

We had a riotous evening and I felt Liz’s call to freedom, like the dreams of a schoolgirl about to leave school. By the end of the night we had vowed to go on ‘holliers’ (as Liz called them) together at the earliest opportunity.

‘We’ll get up early every day and take a healthy one hour’s walk before breakfast,’ Liz had said.

‘You have to be joking,’ I replied. ‘I’m a late starter. Exercise was never my strong suit. Do you like good food?’

‘Not remotely interested,’ said Liz. ‘If it’s a choice between a good meal and another museum, I’ll choose the museum.’

'I can see I'll be eating alone!'

We embraced each other delightedly when she left. The evening had been a resounding success.

'Remember, you've only got one life,' Liz called out as she wove her way down my garden path.

Six months later I was stressed at work and knew I needed a break. Normally I would have taken off for Bali or some other island, but I thought of Liz. I needed to start practising for retirement and wanted fun with a capital F. Who better to have fun with than Liz? I sent her an email:

How would you like to go to any of the following: Split, Morocco, Havana or Prague? Let me know pronto.

Hil xxx-x

She emailed back straight away.

Prague and Morocco—fine. Any time you like. I've been staying in Ireland with friends who will be delighted if I move on. Lliizzzz

And from that exchange of emails arose the story of two unlikely individuals who reconnected late in life and for fifteen years travelled the world together having fun.

Our decision to travel together could have been a recipe for disaster. We hardly knew each other; our childhoods, life trajectories and our personalities could hardly have been more different.

Holidays are difficult things at the best of times, yet we voluntarily took ourselves away from the familiar and plunged into the excitement and challenges of the unknown. Any sensible person would go with a trusted friend or partner, but we threw caution to the winds.



This is the story of what happened on our travels: how we coped with each other; how we changed; how we discovered other worlds out there; and, above all, how we behaved outrageously and had a ball—almost all the time.

I had been born into an academic family, but didn't want the strain of going down the university path and failing to meet my father's expectations—so at twenty-one I packed my bags and followed Leon, a man I had met in London, to Australia. After three years based in Sydney working as an actor, I married Leon, had a baby and built a successful career in the arts. As an agent I was known for being a tough negotiator who fought hard for my clients. It wasn't long before I decided that I had very little experience of life and was far too immature to sustain a married relationship. I needed to spread my wings and gave little thought to the difficulties of bringing up a child on my own. Duncan, my son, saw Leon regularly, but it was hard having a job and looking after a little boy—in those days there were few childcare centres.

Liz says I have a gargantuan appetite for life and she's probably right.

'Hilary is one huge orifice,' she says, 'always shovelling more and more experiences into her cavernous depths.'

Liz, on the other hand, was brought up in a small town in rural Wales. Her intellectual abilities and the advent of meritocracy in post-war Britain saw her win a scholarship to Cambridge University. After leaving there she idled away thirty years in an anonymous government bureaucracy. She says, 'My emotional life has been equally arid, lacking any sort of commitment even of the shortest duration to anything, let alone a person or a pet.'

She insists that her appetites are restrained and minimal. But I maintain she is irrepressible in her pursuit of knowledge and a veritable cornucopia of brains, wit and humour.

As I planned our holiday in Morocco and Prague, I cast my mind back to our school days. Even then I was practising the art of manipulating people to bring about the result I wanted. When I needed to avoid a bad school report I made an appointment to see the headmistress to point out my failings. She fell for this ploy, hook, line and sinker: 'Hilary works diligently,' she wrote, 'and is aware of her shortcomings. This augurs well for her future.' Winner!—my father was completely taken in and trouble averted. I realised that manipulation was a winning card if cleverly used.

Liz meanwhile was into Defiance and Fun. She pinched the human skeleton from the zoology laboratory and hung it on the school fire escape for the whole town to see; she sewed up the gym mistress's shorts and changed the hymn numbers so that 900 girls in assembly remained silent as the organ played a different tune. And that was in a single week.

Escapades like these were repeated at Cambridge. Judy, Liz's sister, told me that Liz would climb out the window of her ground floor room in college after 'lights out' and go to all-night parties, returning via the window in the early hours. On one occasion it snowed overnight and, climbing in, she realised that the footprints led to her room. So she climbed out of the window again and stepped up to the windows of all the rooms on the ground floor, leaving a trail of footprints so as to incriminate everybody.

As I sent Liz the final arrangements for our first holiday I remembered another holiday we had been on together in our last year at school: in sodden tents in the rain on the Norfolk Broads with three Cambridge undergraduates. Liz had a dalliance with the

amusing intellectual, I scored the doe-eyed romantic with beautiful eyelashes and the poor girl who had organised the holiday was left with her brother. She wasn't amused.

On the third day of that holiday Liz woke at daybreak and suggested that we dump the boys and sneak out for an early morning sail on our own. We'd show those boring macho males who the real sailors were. We ran down to the mooring still in our nighties, pushed the boat out and climbed aboard. We easily got the sails up, but in our simple-minded determination, failed to notice that the wind was freshening and we were gathering speed fast. By the time we reached mid 'Broad' we had lost control of the rudder, the sail was flapping wildly and we couldn't 'come about'. One minute the boat was upright, the next it was upside-down and we were clinging to it frantically, weighed down by our nighties. After what felt like an eternity, and exhausted by fruitless efforts to right the boat, I was scared and convinced that we were going to drown. I was desperate to call out to the boys for help.

'Don't be silly, Hilly. They wouldn't hear us. And we're fine.'

With her own brand of logic Liz had decided that we could not be in any danger.

'We're not sinking, I'm sure of that.'

'Not yet,' I squawked.

It turned out she was right—we were merely stuck in mud five feet below. Once Liz had convinced me that I wasn't going to die we both began to laugh hysterically, our teeth chattering.

'Now all we need is a suitably lurid story for the boys,' I said.

'Abducted by rogue fishermen,' said Liz.

'Perfect,' I replied.

As I continued making plans, Liz emailed me:

## GROWING OLD OUTRAGEOUSLY

I wonder what happened to those four others who were with us on the Norfolk Bs? Any chance of meeting them in Morocco do you think? L

I doubted it, but it sounded like a cheery omen, I thought: both of us remembering the Broads story dating back thirty-five years and with us now living 40,000 kilometres apart.

\*

We wrote this book as a celebration. A celebration of a schoolgirl friendship renewed later in life. A celebration of the excitement of travelling, of the quirky incidents and fun we shared with hundreds of people we met along the way. But above all, a celebration of the fact that two outrageous women of advanced years can still get out and have a bloody good time. We hope our book will inspire others to live their dreams and fantasies, whatever their age.

## *Off to Morocco and Prague*

‘What wouldn’t I give for an icy pole!’ I called out to Liz as I wandered around our hotel room in the nude, fanning myself with the laundry list.

We had arrived in Marrakech the night before. The temperature was 45 degrees, the air thick with insects and the cloying perfume of jasmine, gardenia and lemon. We could hear Arabic voices chattering in the gardens below.

Liz had just wandered in from the swimming pool. Her expression froze in horror as she sighted my Buddha-like stomach.

‘Put something on,’ she said as she disappeared into the bathroom. A few minutes later she emerged covered from head to foot in a hand-woven caftan.

‘I’m going for a walk,’ she said, and made a dash for the door, carefully averting her eyes.

Charitably, I supposed this theatrical response was aimed at setting me a good example. I put on a flimsy cotton nightie—not quite the thing for a would-be nudist. Having had an English upbringing in which nudity was frowned upon (a sign of ‘whore-ish’ behaviour), I spent most of my life trying to overcome shyness about naked bodies and was proud that I had largely

overcome my problem. *Oh well*, I thought, *I'll have to confine nudity to times when Liz is out on her early morning walk. Just as well she's an early riser and is gone before I've even thought about getting dressed.*

I never thought I would have to compromise over nudity in the bedroom! I felt liberated and was damned if I was going to give in to Liz's hidebound approach to the naked body.

By the time she returned from her walk she had put the 'nude' episode behind her and was keen to give me the 'good oil' on Marrakech. Meanwhile, I had secured an upgrade to our room by insisting to management that I had originally booked a room facing the garden. Liz was delighted when she walked into a larger room on the third floor. We now overlooked a tiny courtyard with ornamental tiling and the gentle splash of a fairytale fountain.

'Brillio. What a gorgeous view,' she said.

Despite her change of mood I still had a lingering worry that Liz was going to weigh me down with 'rules and regs'. What would she say in the evening about late-night CNN and BBC World, to which I was addicted? I would soon see.

\*

I had arrived at Heathrow after twenty-two hours of flying. I stared out of the plane window at the drizzling day and thanked my lucky stars that forty years ago, throwing off parental shackles, I had escaped those interminable grey skies and sailed away to Australia, romantically following a man and a dream of becoming an actor. Even though neither of those dreams had proved long-lasting, it had been a good move.

Liz was there to meet me.

'Hurry up, Hilly, the next Heathrow Express to Paddington leaves in five minutes—we'll just make it.'

‘Hang on. I’ve got to wait for my luggage.’ I pointed behind me to a porter who was bent double pushing a low loader with my multiple suitcases.

‘Good heavens, Hilly, you’re only staying four weeks. It’s a holiday, not a lifetime.’

Liz started calling out to anyone who would listen, pointing to my luggage.

‘She’s brought all this stuff—will someone please take it away?’

‘Sure, I’ll take it—and you too,’ said one aspiring wit, peering lasciviously at Liz.

When we finally got into a taxi, Liz said, ‘When we go to Marrakech you must take only what you can carry on and off the plane, because I won’t be helping you.’

‘Charming! I’ll remember that when you’re groaning with Marrakech belly and incapable of carrying even a knapsack,’ I replied.

‘We don’t want to be held up at Heathrow by baggage handlers with their endless stop-work meetings. It’s bad enough enduring the body search at security.’

\*

Liz had a tiny two-storey house in Vauxhall, a working-class area just across the Thames from Westminster.

‘In among the monuments,’ she pointed out. She hardly spent any time there now that she had retired.

‘Sixty-four days last year,’ she said proudly.

Comfort was not her bag. ‘I don’t have a bedroom, I don’t care where I sleep. You can have the big bed in the front room. You sleep all the time anyway, I’ve heard, and you’ll need to get over your jet lag.’ I was touched by her offer and recovered from the flight lulled to sleep by the swish of trains rolling into Waterloo Station.

Her house was very cosy: books and pictures lined every wall. Jars of nuts and fresh ginger mingled happily with strange little sculpted figures on the kitchen bench while the dining table was covered in articles of interest cut out from the daily papers. When I remarked that she was a hoarder, she countered, 'They're not mine. Guests leave things behind when they go. Every time I come back to VW (Vauxhall Walk—she called it vee double-u) I find eggcups, jars of pickled herrings and pot scourers. They assume I cook, when nothing could be further from the truth.'

It was exhilarating to be in London, so after a cup of tea I bussed it into the West End and made for my favourite clothes shop for fatties. Liz was horrified by the number of bags I brought back.

'Not more stuff, Hilly. You don't need it, and there's no room.'

My luggage was to become a constant irritation for her during our travels. For me, shopping is an addiction. I travel overseas with one large and heavy case (which has inside it a large, soft bag that returns to Australia containing presents and the detritus of travel), an overnight bag, a handbag and a haversack (if I can get away with it).

'You can't leave all this here,' she said. 'The Paks are coming while we're away.' (She was referring to her Pakistani friends.)

'Sorry, Liz,' I said. 'This is my luggage. Half of it is pills anyway.'

'You can't be serious, Hilly.'

Well, I was, and I suffered the dressing-down. I am a disgracefully obvious traveller and Liz said that we would not be able to visit what she called RIZs—Robber Infested Zones—with me standing out like a neon sign. Liz travelled light, either with a backpack or carrying a red sail bag held together with a piece of yellow rope.



The bag contained multiple pairs of knickers, notebooks, assorted socks, thick handmade cotton nightshirts and brightly coloured ribbon-covered skirts made to measure in Karachi. And then there were her T-shirts. With messages such as 'Recycle now' or 'Aged for maturity and taste' blazoned across the front of them, I thought Liz, too, might be a magnet in RIZs.

I noticed after a day or two in London that washing did not appear to be high on her list of priorities.

'Unnecessary,' said Liz, 'a waste of water. Why do you wash so often?'

'Once a day is not excessive,' I replied.

'I've been doing my research,' Liz continued. 'You only need an occasional brief shower, none of these vast baths you go in for.'

'Well, I'm not sure that I'm prepared to wait until someone points out that I smell.'

But Liz was unstoppable.

'And what are you going to do about your food? It's all processed, genetically modified and full of poisons,' she cautioned, wagging her finger. 'AND the quantity you eat. Coupled with no exercise and diabetes, you're a recipe for heart attack or stroke.'

'What you fail to grasp, Liz, is that haranguing me is the worst way to get me to change my behaviour. So lay off.'

Liz was quick to discover the topics that got a rise out of me and she quite enjoyed needling me about them. (Over the years I would learn to silence her patronising put-downs with 'Be careful not to fall off your plinth, Liz' or if she started to bang on about my unfortunate food habits, I'd say, 'It's just as well, isn't it, that you will make such excellent compost.' The needling has abated with time—or maybe we have become more accommodating because we are exhausted with arguing.)

Two days later we were off on our first holiday together. As we flew out of London, Liz commented that she had never been on a planned holiday with a proper itinerary before.

‘When I was young I would leave the office at five o’clock on a Friday evening in high heels and a suit and be cycling in Ireland the next morning in the same high heels and suit.’

‘Really! Didn’t the heels get caught in the spokes?’

‘There wasn’t any leisure wear in those days,’ said Liz, quick as a flash. ‘Or I might catch the night train to Paris and see some Goyas in the Louvre and then move on to Madrid to see some more. If I spent a long weekend in New York I would fly back overnight to arrive at Heathrow at eight o’clock in the morning and be at my desk in the office by nine o’clock. My holidays were tough, none of that dotty “chilling out”. I’d be up at dawn and still trucking at midnight. And I’d travel alone.’

‘Why?’ I asked her.

‘I haven’t a clue. Maybe I wanted to get away from everything and everybody. Get off people’s map. It was the heyday of hippiedom, so perhaps I was trying to find myself, plumb my potential, gain wider horizons. Who knows?’

‘And did you find yourself?’

‘I lost interest as I grew older. After a while I ceased to care. That in itself was relaxing. And anyway, who wants to relax? We’ll be dead soon, so we’re better off trucking!’

Liz’s holidays sounded heady with promise, dangerous and quite rarified to me, and I felt a bit envious. I wish I’d been as bold as she had been, but really I’d had so little time for holidays. I’d just tack on a few days to the end of a business trip—like the time I went to Hong Kong with my cabaret group, Pardon Me Boys, and to Edinburgh for the international launch of *Tap Dogs*.

It was incredibly exciting to be part of the whirlwind of openings in London and Los Angeles and then New York and Paris, but for me it was always bound up with the stress of looking after 'the Dogs', which meant picking up the pieces if something went wrong. On the way home I'd stop off at a resort and recline in a bubble bath, with a masseuse at the ready. Or I'd book into a health farm for yet another attempt at weight loss.

When I told her this, Liz looked at me in wonderment. 'Golly,' she said. 'What an adult life you lived.' I, by contrast, saw Liz as a free-spirited, brightly coloured gypsy bird flying on wind currents all over the world, dropping in on friends, stirring the pot, delivering her famous one-liners and catching up on gossip, then taking off again before she could outstay her welcome.

\*

The flight I'd booked us arrived at Marrakech airport at midnight, where Liz was quick to draw attention to my lack of travel experience.

'Not a good idea to arrive anywhere later than teatime,' she muttered as we staggered out into the hot, starlit night, the last passengers to emerge.

There were a few taxis waiting at the kerb. I had asked the flight attendant the cost of the fare into town and was appalled when the first driver I approached mentioned a figure three times higher than the sum she had suggested. I tried to bargain but he was tough and wouldn't budge an inch. Neither would the second driver; they were in cahoots, I was sure. I joined Liz, who was tapping her foot.

'I refuse to let them get away with it,' I said.

'We'll be here all night,' she replied, 'and the airport's closing.' 'Airports don't close.'