

Regrets

Every so often in our lives we decide to do something that changes the course of our destiny, like a wave that ripples out and on into the future. The physical and emotional consequences reverberate long after the event.

The regrets will always be there. They just dull over time. Thirty years later, I still wonder how it went so wrong.

Long before it was fashionable, Brendan and I and our nine-month old daughter Heather, sold our house in Sydney, packed up everything and moved to a remote rural community in Tasmania.

After ten years of working in the family business, my husband was desperate to make a break and do something on his own.

Visions of fresh country air and healthy, wholesome living sounded like the perfect ingredients to raise a family and live happy, balanced lives.

We dreamed of growing our own vegetables, canning fruit from our trees, and even spinning our own wool. We would be the perfect country couple; the ones who grace the covers of the country magazines.

We were young and naïve, innocent and idealistic.

Dismissive of our parents' and friends' apprehensions, we forged ahead, confident in the plans for our future life.

The beautiful farm we finally purchased looked perfect for us, and we were determined to succeed. There was rolling countryside, with lush green grass, and a burbling, bubbling creek that meandered from the native forests at the back of the property, through the fields and down into the river flats.

We imagined smelling the new mown hay and breathing the clean fresh air, and welcomed the challenge of us city folks daring to make our way in the country.

What we didn't know we could learn, we thought. We were both good workers and not afraid of hard work. We knew we could make a successful farm. We could fit in.

The farmer who sold us his dairy farm was one of three brothers living in the valley, and each one had married one of three sisters from the next valley.

Everyone was either related or connected through blood or birth. Needless to say, for a young city couple to move into the valley was certainly a novelty and an anomaly.

Especially when we turned up with two German shepherd dogs, two old BMWs and a baby grand piano, and proceeded to turn the generations old dairy farm into a sheep and cattle property.

The challenge of learning farming practices, and surviving on the income was a steep learning curve, and consumed all our time. We were so busy improving our farm and trying to manage one hundred cattle and fifteen hundred sheep, that we were oblivious to any gossip or lack of acceptance in the valley.

The house, although sturdy, had holes in the walls and cigarette burns in the carpet. The only cooking facility was an old wood burning stove that doubled as a water heater.

There was no shearing shed and the yards and barn were falling to bits.

The weeds and clumps of blackberries threatened to take over the whole property and feral animals roamed freely in the hills, preying on newborn lambs.

The fences were virtually non-existent, and tattered strings of electric tape and barbed wire were wrapped around rotten posts and rusty pipes.

It became a regular occasion for the phone to ring with an alert from our neighbours, "Your cattle are out on the road!"

In the odd moment, when I paused from the busyness, I remembered my other life; meeting my friends for coffee or catching up at dinners, movies or other social occasions. I reassured myself that in time it would all get easier and we'd have more time to meet people and make friends.

We were living our dream weren't we? I was busy with a one year old and had just discovered that another was on the way, so I didn't have time to worry about a social life, or lack of it.

We'd been there for four months when my parents decided to visit us and see how we were coping.

I decided that it would be wonderful if my parents and I, and Heather, could have a mini holiday in the mountains. A chance to stay at a hotel and have someone else cook dinner for a change. Brendan said he'd stay and look after the farm.

The morning we set off, I felt a bit queasy but put it down to the left-over casserole the night before.

It continued as we drove through the town and I briefly considered going to the local GP, but dismissed the notion.

We drove for a few hours, through small towns and villages, and started heading into the mountains.

At first I tried to ignore the cramps, but after six hours, I was starting to feel really uncomfortable.

I didn't say anything to my parents; I thought as soon as we reached the hotel, I could use the bathroom and everything would be fine.

Finally, after endless turns and twists through winding hills and steep corners, we saw the sign for our hotel. It was dark by now and I was tired and uncomfortable and so anxious for a shower and a hot meal.

"We have a reservation for two nights," I said to the receptionist. She checked the book.

"I'm sorry but we don't seem to have any reservation," she said looking up at us with concern.

"But, I phoned weeks ago and booked!" I said, my voice cracking. "Do you have any free rooms?"

"We're completely full tonight," she said. "There's a conference booked for the weekend."

My eyes filled with tears.

“Don’t you have anything?” asked my Dad brusquely.

“Well,” she said, “There is a hostel attached to the hotel and I can phone them to see if there’s a spare room.”

She picked up the phone and spoke for a while.

“There are two rooms free,” she said. “They each have a bunk bed in them. I’m sorry,” she said, “but it’s all we have.”

I sighed. I didn’t care where I slept at this point, I just needed to lie down. My cramps grabbed my stomach and I realised how exhausted I was.

“Can we at least book in the restaurant for dinner?” I asked. Even with the cramps taking over my abdomen, for some strange reason I was starving.

Her face fell. “The conference has taken over the dining room and we aren’t open tonight for reservations. But in the hostel there’s a communal kitchen and also a small shop where you can purchase food items.”

Dad and I walked back to the car and I tried to hold back tears. “I’m so sorry Dad,” I said. “I don’t know how it all got stuffed up. I phoned and booked weeks ago.”

“Never mind,” he said. “At least we have somewhere to sleep for the night.”

We checked into the hostel and Heather and I took one room and my parents the other.

I had a shower and tried to go to the toilet but nothing seemed to help the cramps. In fact they seemed to be getting worse. Surely everything would settle down once I ate and had a good night’s sleep.

The little shop was just closing when we finally went across to the building but thankfully they had a couple of cans of baked beans and a loaf of bread.

"How are your cramps?" my Mum asked after we ate dinner.

"They're not really going away," I said, trying to downplay the grinding in my abdomen.

"Do you think you could be in labour?" she asked quietly.

"But, I'm only five and a half months pregnant!" I said. "It's much too early!"

Even as I protested, the awful reality hit me like a sledgehammer. Of course I was in labour and had been for at least ten hours! How stupid I had been not to recognise it!

I groaned. "Oh Mum, I think you're right!"

She phoned the night clerk. "My daughter's in labour and she needs to get to a hospital right away."

A young boy came immediately and took one look. "We've got an old ambulance that we use for emergencies. I'll drive you to the nearest hospital about two hours away."

I lay on a stretcher at the back and my father sat in the front beside the driver. We raced through the black night, around the bends, winding in and out of the mountains.

At last we reached the local hospital and a doctor gave me an IV drip to try and stop the cramps.

"I'm afraid we have no facilities for premature babies," he said. "You'd better drive to Launceston, the nearest centre with proper facilities for obstetrics."

They wheeled my stretcher back into the ambulance and off we went again into the night. This time a nurse accompanied us and she regularly checked my blood pressure. Unfortunately the drip caused a rise in blood pressure so after it became too high, she stopped the drip until it returned to normal. However stopping the drip, started labour again so this cycle continued the

whole way.

I remember hearing the sound of the ambulance siren as from afar, and feeling like I was in some kind of weird nightmare that didn't seem real. It was dark and I was tired and scared and so apprehensive of having a baby born so early.

After what seemed like hours, we finally arrived at the hospital and I was whisked into Emergency.

Over a period of hours, I lay there with the intravenous drip stopping my contractions and my blood pressure soaring. Each time they pulled it out, I prayed that the contractions would cease, but once again my body had a mind of its own and the contractions would grip my belly.

After yet another contraction I saw my Dad standing in the doorway. "I better go back with the ambulance driver, to where your mother and Heather are staying," he said from the other side of the room.

I tried to smile. "Oh, OK." I hadn't even thought about my father, waiting patiently outside.

"You'll be fine here," he said and turned to leave.

The lump rose in my throat and tears trickled down my cheeks. I felt so alone. The young nurses in charge patted my hands and smoothed my hair. "Don't worry," they said, "we'll look after you."

After what seemed like ages, a doctor arrived and picked up the report.

"Are you positive you're only five and a half months pregnant?" he said.

"I'm positive," I replied. I went over the dates again in my head. "I wish I wasn't."

"We're going to have to deliver the baby," he said. "You've been in labour for too long now. Your body can't take it much more. Or the baby. We'll have to use forceps."

I looked at his big meaty hands and involuntarily shuddered.

They wheeled me into theatre and gave me something, I vaguely remember a hand probing and prodding and lots of people rushing back and forth.

At last when they told me the baby was out, I was relieved. I was drained of all energy and emotion.

"It's a boy," they said, holding him up for a brief moment so I could see him.

"His name's Patrick," I said but they whisked him away to be connected to tubes inside a humidicrib.

I was wheeled to the maternity ward where thankfully I had a private room. The nurse in charge came to see me.

"Your baby is all hooked up to a ventilator and breathing," she said. "Babies this young can survive and there's a good chance he'll be all right. He'll have to stay here until he gets bigger, but with any luck he'll be OK."

I was cheered. I pictured Heather and I renting a room somewhere near the hospital and coming every day to see and hold him.

It would be all right, I thought. Things usually turned out well.

I fell asleep after a small dinner and felt confident that everything would be fine.

Around one a.m. I was woken by a nurse. "Mrs Fagan," she said shaking my arm gently, "You need to come down and see your baby."

"What's wrong?" I kept asking as she wheeled me down to intensive care.

"The doctor is concerned about your baby," is all she'd say.

Patrick was the tiniest baby I had ever seen, wearing a woolly cap and tubes coming out of his nose and hand and chest.

"He's not breathing properly," said the young doctor coming over to me. "We think he's had a brain haemorrhage. It often happens when a baby as young as this is forced to breathe. Their lungs aren't formed properly and they can't get enough air."

"What does that mean?" I asked confused.

"We think we should take him off the ventilator," the doctor said. "He probably has brain damage."

I stared at my little baby boy. He was so small. He shouldn't have come so early.

"Oh, Patrick," I whispered. "I'm sorry."

I went into a room and they brought him in, wrapped in a blanket. Holding him in my arms, I stared at his little monkey face, so peaceful looking. I examined his toes and fingers and little arms and hands. He looked like a perfect specimen. But ever so tiny.

A doctor came in and said it was all right to feel sad, to cry and be unhappy. To grieve. But all I felt was numbness. How had it all gone so wrong?

In the weeks following, I couldn't settle. I stayed in bed for a week while Mum minded Heather. I couldn't face getting out of bed.

Eventually Mum and Dad had to leave, so I was forced to get up and try to be normal again. But I felt so empty.

I pictured myself holding Heather in my arms and walking down the country road and never coming back.

When at last I went to see the doctor for a post baby check up, I told myself over and over that I wouldn't cry.

But as soon as he asked how I was, I burst into tears. I said I hated the farm, I hated living in a remote place with no friends. I surprised myself at what poured out. The idyllic fantasy of living in the country had become a nightmare.

We moved back to the city without even telling our neighbours that we were leaving.

Family and friends didn't ever say I told you so.

To this day my husband says what a good experience it was to live in the country and give it a go, if it's your dream. You never know till you try and all that.

But I just remember that dear little baby with his wizened old man face, lying so lightly in my arms, and I whisper a prayer to him, hoping he's forgiven me.