

## MEMOIR

## In the last days of Joh

News in unmarked brown envelopes

Phil Brown

ALL THIS HAPPENED in the last days of Joh.

I was working – if that’s the right word for it – as a journalist on the *Daily Sun* in Brisbane’s seamy Fortitude Valley.

The Valley was then the spiritual home of everything rotten in the state of Queensland. With its crummy nightclubs, tawdry brothels and sly gambling dens, it was a seedy playground that was literally on our doorstep. It was full of ‘colourful characters’ – a euphemism for crooks and loonies, some of whom occasionally made forays into our building. We had no security to speak of and any nut could just catch the lift up a couple of floors to seek out and berate a particular journo or just to rave incoherently at us, the esteemed fourth estate, slaving away over hot keyboards in a cool, gloomy world. The windows of our dowdy newsroom – I recall dull hues of grey and brown – were constantly fogged with grime and condensation from the air-conditioning that protected us from the fetid humidity of our corrupt, subtropical city, with its crumbling democracy and its cynical politics.

After a brief stint on *The Australian* next door – a nice gig where we often enjoyed a cocktail hour complete with cheap bubbly and antipasti from a local deli – I went to work at the *Daily Sun*. I hadn’t realised it at the time but I’d actually been hired as assistant political reporter. An old chum, Wayne Sanderson, was the head man. This was a terrifying prospect because I knew nothing of politics and was much too fragile at the time for the hurly burly of that news round. Also, I rarely ventured outside my home or the office and its environs – partial agoraphobia may have been an appropriate diagnosis and was just one of the conditions I suffered from at that time. The prospect of following barnstorming politicians around the state was something I didn’t relish. I was afraid of flying as well so I was, as they say, crapping myself. But,

at the last minute, the condemned man was reprieved.

It happened like this: the chief of staff called me over, usually a bad omen but not in this instance. ‘Mate, we’re going to make you a star,’ he said.

How does one respond to such a statement? ‘Okay,’ I said, a little gingerly. ‘Do tell.’

Being the debonair man about town that I was – a front I cultivated to obscure my slow disintegration – I was, apparently, to be the newspaper’s daily columnist, with my own page: ‘A Place in the Sun with Phil Brown’. This was a job that suited me; this was something I could make up as I went along, something that didn’t require me to leave town. I could start late, finish late and as long as I filed my copy by a certain hour everyone seemed happy. I threw myself into my new role with gusto or a pale imitation of gusto at least, fuelled by a cocktail of tobacco, alcohol and benzodiazepines in my bloodstream.

I worked devilishly fast when I worked, a cigarette constantly burning in a foil ashtray by my keyboard, a cup of sludgy coffee on the other side and a small snuff box full of pills in my pocket.

Each morning after arriving at work it became my habit to depart again, almost immediately to partake of ‘elevenses’ at the Cosmopolitan Café a few hundred metres down Brunswick Street. The street was a traffic thoroughfare in those days, not the tatty mall we see today. The Cosmo, as it was known, became my field office. It was a hub for arty types, heroin addicts and shady characters, as well as the odd journo, and I was a pretty odd journo.

I drank flat whites and ate baklava in an attempt to stabilise my blood sugar, while sucking on a Benson & Hedges, often sharing a table in the tiny, cramped interior. There was a coffee roaster at the rear of the shop and the smell of freshly roasted beans pervaded the joint.

IT WAS HERE I met Gerry Bellino, the most notorious of the Valley’s colourful characters. I often shared a table with Gerry, whose vice-like handshake seemed as much a statement as a greeting. His friend and associate Vic Conte was sometimes at the table too. Vic’s husky wise-guy voice was pure Hollywood. The Fitzgerald Inquiry was still a year away, although revelations about Queensland’s underworld were well known and would

become even better known thanks to the pioneering work of journalists such as Phil Dickie and Chris Masters.

Gerry and Vic, accused of running a network of illegal casinos and brothels, were high on the list of significant names in what would come to be called 'The Moonlight State'. Each morning I was, it seemed, having coffee with the two Mr Bigs. I became friendlier with Gerry and sometimes, when the tables were full, we sat side-by-side at the counter imbibing caffeine and chatting. We really didn't talk much about the elephant in the room. Gerry talked about his family mostly and I was fascinated by his early career as an acrobat and kind of circus performer. He exuded physical strength with a touch of menace, accentuated by that handshake and a barrel chest. I happened to like him.

Occasionally, however, I noticed people looking at us, wondering perhaps what the relationship was. Was he feeding me stories? I didn't write that sort of stuff anyway. Or was I feeding him information? Giving him a heads up? I didn't know enough about that serious political stuff to give him a heads up about anything. My beat included the social whirl, celebrity gossip and other inanities.

I had, it must be admitted, a reputation as an eccentric though and perhaps consorting with underworld figures was par for the course.

As daily columnist I manufactured the image of a remote dandy. I often wore a natty double-breasted suit and signature red socks, which I wore on a daily basis. This meant I was definitely gay according to one of my colleagues. This view wasn't helped by the fact that I was once seen having my nails done at a Fortitude Valley beauty parlour. A tough police reporter had been walking by one morning when he spotted me as the beautician was giving my nails a final buff. The look on his face was an exquisite mixture of horror and surprise.

Most of my colleagues preferred to do their socialising at the Empire Hotel which was, rather conveniently, next door to the newspaper building, a mere stumble away. Our building, on the corner of Brunswick and McLachlan Streets, was a proper newspaper building too, the presses rumbling away in the bowels of the structure giving it the feeling that we were sailing in some tramp steamer en route to nowhere. I preferred The Cosmo to the pub.

It was a tiny snapshot of the demographic of the Valley. Besides, I was never able to face a drink before the afternoon.

My daily chats with Gerry Bellino went on and soon drew the attention of a rival columnist from our competition, the *Courier-Mail*. He spotted me one day at The Cosmo chatting with Gerry and Vic and the next day wrote that I had been seen consorting with them in Fortitude Valley, implying some sort of impropriety, I guess. I was kind of chuffed about that. I could have retaliated in print but I didn't. I couldn't care less and besides, in the Valley everyone seemed equal. The seediness was just part of daily life and even today, despite years of attempts to gentrify the place, it retains a satisfying unsavouriness.

MY FRAUGHT LIFE at the *Daily Sun* was unsustainable, but fun while it lasted. I lived in a bachelor flat in Paddington when I first started there. And by 'bachelor pad' I mean a pad with hardly any furniture and one tomato in the fridge. I survived on Heineken and takeaway pizza.

Later I moved to New Farm, to an old federation building in Bowen Terrace, rather grandly named Hampton Court. It was just a five-minute walk to work, which was handy since I had lost my licence for drunk driving.

I occupied a third-level, top-floor apartment facing westwards. At night my view was stupendous, the Story Bridge, lit up like a Christmas tree. I had the best view in Brisbane. I sat at the dining room table there in the evenings smoking, typing out poems on my old Remington, listening to jazz and keeping the Beat generation dream alive as I watched the traffic on the bridge dwindle into the wee small hours.

At work I was increasingly becoming what used to be known as 'tired and emotional'. Writing a daily column tended to frazzle. I burnt out and moved on to become a feature writer and general reporter, living in fear of my daily assignments.

All this was, as I said, in the last days of Joh.

It was a time of change: something was coming to an end, something was beginning but we didn't quite know it yet. Revelations of corruption led to the establishment of the Fitzgerald Inquiry in July 1987. What's the refrain from Yeats... 'a terrible beauty is born'?

While I dodged work, the Inquiry got under way in Brisbane District Court No. 29. The collusion between the criminal underworld, the police and various government ministers rocked the very foundations of the state and pressure was mounting on Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen, the 'Hillbilly Dictator', to resign. In November it looked like his time had run out, though he didn't see the bus coming until he was under it.

Towards the end, the embattled Premier went home to Kingaroy to consider his future. In those last days I was sent to stake him out, to get one last interview before the axe fell. Photographer Bob Fenney and I waited for Joh to return to his property at Bethany. A job that was supposed to take a day turned into several as we cooled our heels waiting. We were so unprepared we didn't even have a change of clothes with us. We booked into a local motel and had money wired for expenses, food and, embarrassingly, to buy a change of underwear.

Sir Joh finally flew himself home by helicopter on Friday, 27 November, 1987, at 4.30 pm. We were at the entrance to his property, blocked by his bodyguard, a certain Detective Sergeant Tom Lunney. We looked like the loneliest paparazzi in the world. Nobody else had bothered to come to Kingaroy as far as we could see. We were hoping for a scoop but were not too confident about getting one until, surprisingly, Dt Sgt Lunney waved us up.

'Gee, you blokes are lucky,' he said.

Sir Joh, it seemed, couldn't resist feeding his chooks, as he called the journos who made up his court.

'You boys have been very patient,' Sir Joh said. 'But I haven't got anything else to tell you.' Just then his wife, Lady Flo appeared and said sternly, 'Joh, I thought you weren't doing any more interviews!'

But Joh couldn't resist a chat and though he was all but finished he was unrepentant and he described his parliamentary colleagues to me as 'babes in the woods'.

'They think I'm a ghost you can just chase away. But I'm still there.'

He took us for a walk around his garden and Bob Fenney, ever the wily photographer, asked if he could take a picture of him on the road leading to Bethany.

'Oh no, that would make me look alone,' Joh said. He posed instead on

a seat on the front porch. I am looking at that photo as I write. It adorns a yellowing copy of the front page of the *Daily Sun* for Saturday, 28 November, 1987. 'Lone Retreat to Bethany' the headline, and the caption reads: 'A solitary Sir Joh ponders his future at his Bethany homestead near Kingaroy yesterday'.

By the following week he was gone, resigning on December 1. It was the end of an era and the beginning of a new one.

GERRY BELLINO AND Vic Conte became less frequent visitors to The Cosmo, which remained my field office. I left the paper and started working freelance, writing for everything from pulp magazines to the fashion bible *Mode* as their Queensland correspondent. I covered the opening of World Expo 88 for that publication and have always been rather proud of the fact that I did so without ever leaving my apartment. I sent a photographer over to South Bank to catch the Queen doing the official opening but I stayed in, watched it all on TV and wrote my piece on the basis of that. I was told later my report was tantamount to actually being there. Go figure.

Research was a problem though, not being at the paper any more. It's always handy to have access to a newspaper library. In those days, before the advent of the internet, we did our research ourselves by going through the newspapers files or looking stuff up in books – yes, actual books.

In the newspaper's library fat compendiums of news articles were contained between bland cardboard covers and were recovered for the journos by the people who toiled away in the Dickensian depths of a place where no natural light ever shone.

Since I wasn't an employee anymore I didn't have access, but I figured out a way of getting in anyway. A young colleague, who had been a copy boy before rising to the giddy heights of junior reporter, helped me out. He would do research for me for various pittance or, on many occasions, I would furnish him with the subject I was writing about and he would fish out the cuttings files and photocopy the relevant pages for me.

Once that was done he would secrete the material in a brown manila envelope and leave it with Eddie, the bloke who worked behind the counter at The Cosmo. The envelope remained unmarked.

When my colleague made his drop he would ring me and I would leave my Bowen Terrace eyrie and walk to The Cosmo where I would take delivery of the envelope with a nod and a wink.

This raised eyebrows. After all, wasn't I the guy who was friendly with Gerry Bellino? What was I up to now? What was in those brown envelopes? I would often sit with the envelope in front of me on the table, sipping coffee and smoking with some satisfaction. Surely on the basis of that it was worth calling me before the Fitzgerald Inquiry? With my connections was I not, at least, a person of interest? But the call never came.

Ministers of the Crown were jailed, along with the police commissioner, the government eventually fell and Gerry Bellino was sent to jail for seven years for official corruption.

When I walk the streets of the Valley today it has changed a lot but there are some things that remain the same. The Cosmo is still there, bigger and bustling in the hot, grimy Brunswick Street Mall. The newspaper office is now an apartment building. Working there was bad enough and I shudder to think of actually living there. It retains too many bad memories for me, from a time that was, in so many ways, fraught with angst. All this was years ago, of course – in the last days of Joh.

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Phil Brown is the Arts Editor of the *Courier-Mail*. He has written for a variety of other national newspapers, magazines and periodicals. He is the author of two books of poetry, *Plastic Parables* (Metro Community Press, 1991) and *An Accident in The Evening* (Interactive Press, 2001) and two books of humorous memoir, *Travels With My Angst* (UQP, 2004) which was shortlisted for the Arts Queensland Steele Rudd Award at the 2005 Queensland Premier's Literary Awards and *Any Guru Will Do* (UQP, 2006).