

## The Education of John Brown

John Brown woke and had no need to look at the clock. It was 4.30 am. He had woken at that hour for the past month, to lie there in the dark, thinking.

A time for introspection. Was this the dreaded cliché, a mid-life crisis? He had not turned to drink, women or religion. He had not abandoned his job or taken up jogging, but he had been reviewing his life, aware that there was a void.

He thought about his life as an accountant and of what he had achieved – a middle-class house, car, children, dog, and a wife who dictated the style into which they were slotted in Surbiton society.

On this wet autumn morning, however, his thoughts were of his sister, Marion, and his mind went back to Australia, and the family conference held after his father's early death. It had been decided that the modest amount of money from the estate should be put to a use he would have approved of – the education of John Brown.

Next in priority was the retention of the family home and the comfort and welfare of Mrs Brown, who had fading elegance, mild arthritis and chronic hypochondria. Doubtless Mr Brown would have been concerned for his daughter's welfare too, but he had thoughtlessly died intestate. Mrs Brown hoped Marion would marry well.

John Brown finished his studies at Camberwell Grammar and went to Melbourne University to gain a degree in commerce. Marion, when someone asked, said she would like to study for an Arts degree, but money did not grow on trees, her mother told her sadly, and when the girl was sixteen, she had an inspired thought for her. The milk bar in the small shopping centre, known to all as "The Village" needed a capable girl. Marion was capable, certainly, already she had taken over some of the tasks of her late father.

She scaled the extension ladder and scooped handfuls of rotting leaves from clogged gutters. She sparrow-proofed, fixed loose slates and painted the wrought iron that ornamented the roof and eaves of the late Victorian house on its corner block. Twice a year she cut the cypress hedge which soared above her head. Neighbours were loud in their admiration for her pluck.

“Where’s your big brother?” they would tut as she wrestled with a man sized job.

John Brown would have given a hand if someone had asked. But no one did, so he didn’t. He was rather busy himself, not only with studies but with squash, rowing and other aspects of social life so necessary for the young intellectual. He drove a battered red sports car which always had young people calling to each other as they clambered in and out. Marion would give a friendly wave from her perch on the ladder, and watch as they roared off, the tinny horn blaring.

He did not feel a twinge of guilt as his sister went to work at the Golden Daffodil Milk Bar. In fact, he thought it was an admirable arrangement. She was able to go home at mid-day with anything her mother needed from the chemist, where lunch was waiting for her and a tedious recital of the morning’s aches and pains.

Marion’s employer was an elderly spinster who had run the milk bar with her sister until she died. Miss Tugood had been a great one for mottoes and several illuminated and framed texts were placed around the shop walls for the inspiration of her customers. Her favourite, however, was for the benefit of the current girl working for her and was pasted on the till, where the customers could not see and the staff could –

*A little ahead is clean,  
A little behind is dirty*

Marion took it at its face value and could see its good sense, so she was always a little ahead. The shelves never gathered dust, the windows sparkled, the Laminex was glossy, and the seats were safe to sit on.

Marion was such an asset, not only for never lagging behind, but also for her honesty, happy smile and the number of young men who found it necessary to buy cigarettes and soft drinks in such quantities that the turnover increased delightfully.

Relieved of the necessity to pay Marion's school fees, Mrs Brown was happy. She had her clever son, her daughter from whom she took only a token amount for board, and a doctor who listened to her, his eyes glazing only occasionally. Whether her daughter was happy or not never occurred to her, for Marion never complained, not even when her brother announced that he would like to go to Europe for post-graduate studies with two friends. His mother willingly sold some shares to finance the trip. He promised to write to them often. And that was the last they had seen of him.

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John Brown groaned and buried his head in the pillow. He thought of the letters that went unanswered and of the lovingly wrapped presents that he had been too busy to acknowledge. Over breakfast he told his wife of his idea. Marion should have her chance. How thoughtless, how selfish he had been. He had so much, and she so little. His wife said nothing. His "much" did not amount to much really. They had a second mortgage and most of their friends were far better off. Poor old John had no initiative, never being able to risk branching out on his own, being content to pick up a salary instead of profits.

As she munched on her muesli he explained that they should take his mother off Marion's hands. He knew how demanding she used to be. Marion had probably never been away from her, not even for a holiday. Mother could live with them and his sister could have a life of her own. Marry even, if it was not too late. How old was she, forty-one? She'd be matronly now. Over the hill, in fact.

“Am I over the hill?” snorted his wife, who was the same age. She dismissed the subject by addressing the immediate one of their bickering adolescents.

Then by one of those stunning coincidences that convince us that we are the playthings of a mischievous Fate, John Brown’s firm decided that he should go to Sydney with a team assessing the feasibility of opening a branch in a land that had strange but most alluring tax laws. The trip would be a short one but nevertheless he would have time to go home and make arrangements for Marion’s release.

Had they bothered to read those letters from home they would have followed the fortunes of Marion. When Miss Tugood died, new people took over. Each time the milk bar changed hands, as milkbars do, Marion stayed with the new owner because she knew the business so well. And none of the young men who chatted to her over the counter succeeded in taking her away from all that. Her mother had strong views on those suitable for her daughter, who occasionally tried to stand up to her, but was a victim of what Noel Coward described as “the tyranny of tears.”

In fact, when she told her mother she was going to Adelaide with a friend who had been invited to take over his family business, she responded by completely losing the use of her limbs for several days. She asked how could she possibly run the house and garden on her own? She might as well not have had a son, they saw and heard nothing of John and now Marion wanted to leave. If their father knew how little his children cared about her ...

“I won’t leave you, Mother,” said Marion.

The next day she looked hard at one of the mottoes that still hung on the wall and made an offer for the milk bar.

***If you can’t do great things  
Do small things in a great way***

urged the maxim and with the help of the sympathetic bank manager in the village, she did so.

Knowing that the village appealed because of its old-fashioned air, she capitalized on it. Instead of modernizing the milk bar she back-dated it, so that older people felt nostalgia at seeing the round Iced Vo-Vo jars and large bottles of sweets that were weighed, not pre-packed. Trendies loved it, the café lates were superb. The chromium and Laminex were replaced. The low shop windows carried glass cake stands with doileys and home-made cakes from a group of energetic young mothers who were glad of the money.

Suddenly business boomed in the village. It had one great advantage over the large supermarkets that sprang up in nearby suburbs – there was ample parking. Marion rented two adjoining shops, opened an art gallery where the work of local potters and painters was sold on consignment, and still later a stylish restaurant which was so discreet that no one could see even a shadow behind the bamboo blinds. Reservations were made first through curiosity and then word of mouth spread that Marion's good looking William Angliss chef was imaginative and diet conscious. Although the prices were terribly steep, didn't one pay for quality?

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John Brown drove his rented car with delight through the eastern suburbs. Things had not altered greatly. Apart from the trees being bigger, he might never have been away. However, near his old home he saw mansions which had been built on tiny blocks of land where two or three houses had been demolished. Land values must have soared, he mused as he rang the doorbell.

Marion came to the door, elegant in slacks and shirt, shushing an elderly dachshund which barked at the stranger. He was greeted fondly, if somewhat reproachfully by his mother, and his sister seemed happy to see him. Both were mystified by his sudden appearance. He in turn was intrigued by the good order of the house and garden. The paintwork was fresh, the drive well-gravelled, drapes and slip covers were crisp and the rooms had been recently recarpeted. How could they afford it?

That evening he explained his plan over dinner, pleased that his mother had not forgotten that steak and kidney pie was his favourite, disappointed to find that she still overcooked the vegetables. He became aware that his idea was not being met with a great deal of enthusiasm.

“Go to England, John?” whimpered his mother. “I couldn’t leave Marion on her own.”

“Well, of course, the place is far too big for you, isn’t, old girl? he said, patting his sister’s whitened knuckles. “We could sell this. Get quite a good price I should think, being a corner block. You could buy a unit and I imagine Mother would be happy to put the rest into a larger house in Surrey that we all could share, eh, Mother?” Both women stared at him, his mother puzzled, his sister comprehending only too well.

“This property is worth over three million, John,” she said, “and it’s mine. I bought it from Mother before the values rose, and I have no wish to sell. I’m happy here.” John Brown looked incredulous. Marion smiled.

“But of course, if you wish Mother to live with you, it’s only fair that she should do so, you’ve seen so little of her over the years. You’d like to go, wouldn’t you, dear?” she asked gently. Mrs Brown’s face brightened as she said, “Well, perhaps for a holiday, and then, if we fitted in well, perhaps I could stay, couldn’t I?”

Her silent son was making a rapid calculation as he poked absently at a brussel sprout, grey and felted, like a tennis ball left out in the rain.

“Mother’s invested in a company I’ve formed to establish a chain of health food and diet restaurants,” said Marion, leaning down to pat the dog, growling at her brother’s ankles. John Brown dropped his shoulders and folded his napkin.

The next morning, after his mother had brought him breakfast in his old room, he looked at the shaft of sunlight across his bed and wondered why he had been away from Melbourne for so long.

After kissing his mother goodbye he called in at The Slim Door restaurant, where his sister was filling bowls with spring flowers in readiness for the bridge club's permanent Monday booking. He told her that their mother had changed her mind when he felt bound to point out the inadequacies of England's National Health system. Then, almost as an afterthought, he said, "Of course, I'd be happy to come home and help you with the business. A woman alone has to be careful."

"Yes, John," said Marion, "people tend to take advantage of a woman – but not this woman!" She smiled at the good looking young chef who was listening as John Brown kissed his sister and then drove away, his education complete.

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