

Memories. . .

of
Christmases Down-under
In loving tribute to my wonderful Mum.



by Margot Finke

Mum filled my childhood with love, fun, and a passion for telling and writing stories. She also hated having her picture taken.



Mum, Dad and Rosanne



Mum

The Big Why?

*My mum's maiden name was Thelma Hill, and the central character in my latest book, **The Revenge of Thelma Hill**, has her name.*

While I wrote chapter-after-chapter, the ghost became more and more familiar to me. How come? Then a light bulb clicked on. I had been channeling Mum, and imbuing the ghost with her determination, kindness and wisdom. I could almost hear Mum chuckle. And now, I know she would be ever so tickled at being the title character in my latest book.

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Christmas Down-under

My mum was the heart and soul of our small Australian family. I have lived in Oregon for many years, yet memories of Mum presiding over special Aussie family occasions are tucked away in my mind. Mum was the most honest person I ever knew. She had a true inner compass that made her an excellent judge of people. If she told me a certain person was up to no good, time always proved her right.

During the great depression, Dad moved the three of us from where we were all born in Victoria, the southern part of Australia, up to Queensland in the far north. He was determined to go where the jobs were. My shy mum hated leaving all her friends and relatives behind, but there were no jobs down south. As an only child, with relatives a thousand miles away, for me, family meant Mum and Dad. The three of us became a close knit family in a strange place – until Grandma Kingley, my mother's mum, came to live with us. Then we were four.

Mum was a great storyteller. On days when the northwest wind cut like a whip, or she was sewing me a skirt, or baking cakes and cookies, she would tell stories of what it was like when she was a girl. I learned to appreciate the many wonderful qualities of my long dead Grandfather through her loving tales. My dad had eight sisters and one brother, most of whom I had never met, due to lack of funds and the great distance between us and them. However, the affectionate, funny, and sometimes sad stories she told about them, made me feel I knew each aunt and uncle personally. Mum was not perfect, but over the years, I find myself using her moral yardstick on my own children, and wishing she were here to imbue them with her own unique sense of integrity, humor, and fair play.

If I close my eyes, I am whisked back to my childhood, where on summer nights, fruit bats munched on our ripe mangoes - they are sometimes called "flying foxes" because of their faces. Mum would tuck me in every night, tell me a fun story about the birds that lived in the loquat tree outside my bedroom window, and wake me every morning with a hug. She made my world feel safe.



No occasion in our house was more special to Mum than Christmas. Mum was not religious. To her, Christmas meant forgetting the differences of the past year, and gathering together as a loving family. Aussie Christmases, where hot blue skies and one inch down-pours, made the mosquito net over my bed a must. Now, when I sit by the fire at night, weary from baking holiday cookies, memories flood over me – of how special Mum made those early Christmases.



The cake's yummy almond paste undercoat, and its boiled icing topcoat, came later.

Mum always baked our Christmas cake and puddings early. Assorted dried fruits, drowning in brandy, gave our house a definite alcoholic buzz! After cooking, the cake received a final brandy bath. Then it was retired to the top shelf of the kitchen cupboard, to age gracefully, wrapped in greaseproof paper and an old towel.

The puddings were wrapped in sheeting and then boiled. Mum hung them from the rafters under our house, like so many Halloween goblins waiting to be set free. Cookies and cakes, pies and tarts, all flowed from Mum's fingers to the oven. School vacation time allowed me to help, and listen to a selection of her much loved tales. The aroma of Christmas cake and puddings saturate my childhood recollections. Our table groaned under the weight of hot ham and stuffed chicken with roast side-vegies.



When the temperature rose to 100%, hot Christmas dinner and plum pudding, complete with hard sauce and hidden sixpences, were an effort to eat. Only in later years did Mum agree to have cold meat and salads. *"It isn't Christmassy,"* she would protest.

We lived on a hill above the ocean, and were surrounded by date palms. When the mad-hot sun set, and the sea breeze strengthened, all the windows and French doors were flung wide. This was a time Mum liked to sit on the front verandah, sip hot tea and chat with her mum,

Dad, and passing neighbors. Christmas would have to get along without her for a while.

When money was scarce, and things were tough, Mum's talent for making something wonderful out of nothing was little short of miraculous. She would hand make gifts and handkerchiefs to save money. The handkerchiefs came from the tails of dad's old white shirts, with delicate crocheted edging. Dresses and skirts that had seen better days became gift-wrapped designer aprons. She hand knitted or sewed everything we wore - even my dad's socks. For 45 years she knitted them for him: in the dark at the movies, or while listening to the radio. I can still see her, planning some fun to make Dad laugh, while deep in a flurry of baking, or knitting one of us a winter sweater.

My snippety Grandma lived with us, and she reluctantly helped Mum clean house for special occasions: all this work and effort, in heat and humidity that would curl an elephant's toes. Dad would set up a sparse and scruffy young gum tree in the living room. We would giggle and laugh, while decorating it with well-worn and sentimental trinkets. Mum would hang brightly colored curly paper streamers from the center of the ceiling to the four corners of the room. They transformed our shabby living room into an Arabian Night's affair. By now my excitement and anticipation would be almost too much to bear.

The countdown was ON when the presents began to appear under the tree. Mum frowned on poking or squeezing. One year Mum placed a mystery gift on the top of the tree. She informed us it was to be opened last. Even my grumpy old Grandma got into the swing of things that year. Endless surmising about that gift filled the days before Christmas.

The big day dawned. I don't ever remember opening presents so fast. Dad, Grandma and myself were each sure that tree-top gift was ours. Well, let me put you out of your misery - it was for Peg, our Collie dog. She thoroughly enjoyed her juicy beef bone. Mum laughed at our disappointed faces. We ended up laughing too. Who could begrudge our beloved Peg?



Another year we discovered a huge parcel for Dad under the tree. Again, Mum insisted it be opened last. Dad began by lifting and shaking it. Wow, what weight! Slowly the wrappings came off, and off, and off. . . . the containers became smaller and smaller. Finally, he unwrapped an old boot of his. A pill bottle was nestled in the toe. The bottle held a five pound note – remember, this was another age! An enclosed note told Dad, and I quote:

“For God's sake buy yourself a new pair!”

Dad hated shopping, but he desperately needed new boots, and as there was no money for a gift as well as the boots, Mum decided to give everyone some fun. Dad laughed so hard tears ran down his face. The rest of us were not far behind. What a terrific Christmas. Mum's sense of humor helped us all forget how slim the pickings were that year.

In bed at night, during the days before Christmas, my ears stretched out to catch every mysterious whisper and rustle of paper that came from our kitchen. One year Mum stayed up late every night, hand making me an Indian 'Ramona' doll. That doll was the neatest, softest, most unusual doll in town. I kept it for years, until it finally fell apart.

Late Christmas afternoon, Mum would sit with the rest of us and take a trip down "Memory Lane," as she liked to call it. I hung on every word she said about the Christmases she remembered from her childhood. In the cool of the front verandah, a wine-shandy in hand, my Dad would add his share of reminisces. Even Grandma had a story or two to tell. But Mum had a way of telling a tale that made you see the people and places she spoke about: and she always made Dad and Grandma laugh.



Wynnum Forshaw

Her stories forever addicted me to the fascination of past generations and their doings. As I grow older, Mum's words of wisdom, fun, or common sense, often pop into my head when I need them most. My kids and grandkids know my mum through my memories of her. Today, on the other side of the world with my family, the steamy tropical Christmases of my Aussie childhood have been replaced with the more traditional, 'Christmas Card' variety. Dad is gone, and my dear Mum also. It is now my turn to take our children and grandchildren traveling down Memory Lane. In time, when my children and grandchildren add their contributions, I hope our Memory Lane will become a *Super Highway* to times past, full of memories we will all be able to love and treasure.

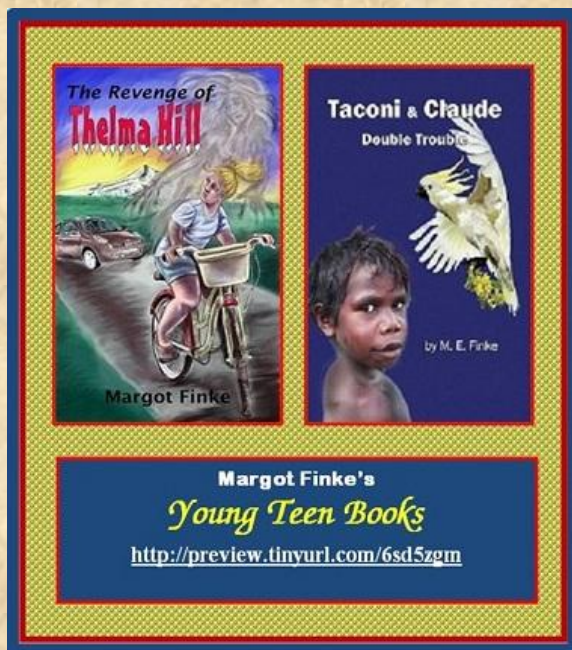
Thank you, Mum.



For your

Christmas Reading Pleasure. . .

from
Margot to you!

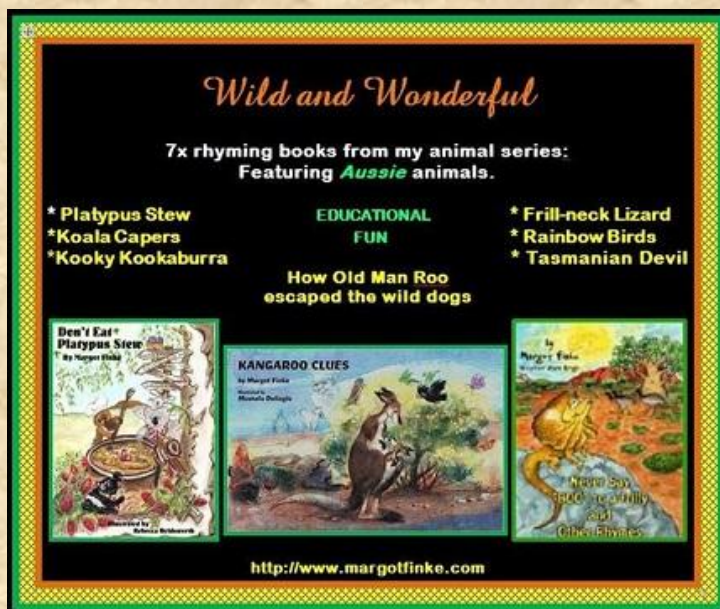


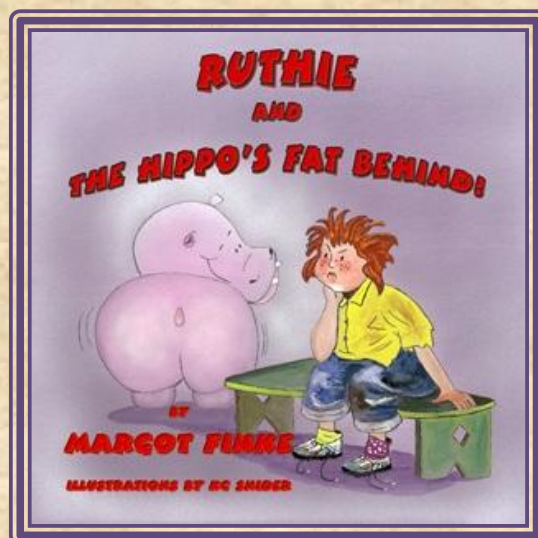
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*Thank you
for reading this memoir of
my childhood Christmases, spent
Down-under with Mum, Dad,
. . . and my grumpy old
Grandma.*

*If you enjoyed the read
half as much as I enjoyed “living” it,
then we are both lucky!*

Margot Finke
An Aussie transplant who calls Oregon home!