

Postcard from...

Guest columnist Naomi Arnold, Nelson



It'll be a year ago this Saturday that Bob died, at 10 to five on a Friday afternoon in the first few days of autumn. He came home to Golightly Farm on New Year's Day 2012, lying in the back of a friend's converted red postal van. They picked him up from hospital and drove him up the Motueka Valley, and he and Kate spent the next three months at home together, watching the golden queen peaches – the absolute best for preserving – ripening outside the bedroom window.

Kate and Bob had met quite late in life, she 36 to his 55. By then, Bob Anderson was a Nelson institution. In the mid-60s he and his first wife started ABC Bookshop in Trafalgar Street, in a building next door to Chez Eelco, the heart of the city's flourishing new cafe scene. They were vigorous times, and Bob wanted change. In 1972 he got involved with the world's first environmental party, Values, and the next year moved to rolling hill country between Oamaru and Dansey's Pass. There, with his new partner, he started Tapui Books, New Zealand's first alternative mail-order bookshop. They posted catalogues of titles all over the country: *The Hazards of Being Male*, *I Want to Change but I Don't Know How*, *Vagabonding in America*, *Wild Fare for Wilderness Foragers*, *The Vegetarian Epicure*, *Soap: Making It and Enjoying It*, *Build Your House of Earth*, and *Earthworms for Ecology and Profit (Vol. 1)*.

But Nelson was his heart country. He returned in the late 1970s to live communally at Todd Valley, and then, with Values Party mate Alan Stanton, set about saving Fairfield House, a grand old building at the top of Trafalgar Street South. It was there, several years later, that he met Kate Burness. She was an artist tucked away in Australia's Blue Mountains, with waist-length blonde hair. She'd



Bob and Kate at their wedding in 1984.

taken a trip to the D'Urville Island home of a mutual friend, Roger, hopping off the float plane and wading through the surf with her five-year-old son Morgan clutched in her arms.

Roger told her he'd met her soulmate, that it was destiny; she didn't believe him. A year later, Bob wrote to her. She wasn't impressed. Later still, they chanced upon each other at Fairfield House – not interested. Then he arrived at the train station in Katoomba on the way home from a belated OE, and she cooked dinner and they sat on the floor and ate together and fell in love. When he left five days later, they realised everything had changed.

Kate talks about Bob for nearly two hours one afternoon at Kush, a coffee

shop just down the road from Fairfield House. Her long blonde hair is now short and grey. She wears a silver ring shaped like two clasped hands, and a golden ring in the shape of a rose. Her eyes redden only once: when she brings out their first tender love letters, handling the envelopes as she might a small, frightened bird.

She didn't think he'd want to return to the woman in the mountains with a nine-year-old son. But on February 17, 1984, he was again waiting at the station in Katoomba. He was 56, with \$50 to his

name, and was strong and brown from working outdoors all summer, his hair hanging in salty locks. Nine months later they were married.

They started a card company, Blue Moon Cards, and spent the next decade turning it into a million-dollar business – until, in 1994, Morgan died while travelling in Sri Lanka. Kate and Bob sold the company and moved to Akaroa with their grief, living there until Bob was diagnosed with his first bout of cancer, and they returned to the mountains and bush and sea of Nelson. They moved to a farmhouse on 35 acres up the Motueka Valley, in the shadow of Mt Crusader. There was a river, and a walnut grove, and a peach tree grew outside the window.

Friends had gone outside to pick its fruit on the day nearly a year ago when Kate sat on the bed and watched Bob and heard his breathing change. Alan built his coffin from macrocarpa, rough-edged and lidless, like a boat, or a cradle. At the crematorium in Atawhai, the attendant handed Kate the small box containing his ashes. "Well, here's Robert," he said. It was still warm.

They scattered Bob at Nelson Lakes and planted a rata in his memory at Fairfield House. A year on, and Kate is just beginning to surface. She is back in the Blue Mountains for the first anniversary of his death, visiting the place she cast Morgan's ashes, and seeing if the wooden cross Bob built for him is still there. At home in Motueka, the golden queen peaches are ripening again.

Naomi Arnold is a feature writer and columnist for the Nelson Mail. Lynda Hallinan is scheduled to return from maternity leave on March 31.

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