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Non-Fiction

The Divine Feline: A Chic Cat Lady's Guide to Woman's Best Friend

EMBOLDENED

BELINDA
ALEXANDRA



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While this is a work of non-fiction, the names and identifying details of some people have been changed to protect their privacy.



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Extract on page 224 is taken from *The Tales of Snugglepot and Cuddlepie* by May Gibbs, 1918
© The Northcott Society and the Cerebral Palsy Alliance

For Kelly, Catherine and Maggie

A NOTE ON RUSSIAN NAMES

There are a number of transliteration systems for romanising Russian names from the Cyrillic alphabet into the Latin alphabet. I decided to use the way my family members had written their own names in English, which then created inconsistencies with the most common transliteration of the names of some Russian public figures. For the sake of clarity and ease of use for English speakers, the transliteration system employed in *Emboldened* is a mixed one.

EMBOLDEN: to impart boldness or courage;
to instil with boldness, courage, or resolution enough
to overcome timidity or misgiving.

Merriam-Webster Dictionary

INTRODUCTION

Several years ago, I went through a disastrous experience that affected every area of my life. It felt as if I was falling down the side of a mountain. I tumbled, my feet sliding in the gravel as I tried to grab at rocky outcrops and clumps of grass to stop my momentum. At one point I was left dangling by my fingertips on a metaphoric cliff and I thought, somewhat optimistically, *Well, at least I still have my health*. But then that went too and over the edge I toppled, arms and legs flailing.

Because this story involves other living people, and the laws of Australia are what they are, I can't tell you exactly what happened to me: only that one cold winter's night I fled my home in fear for my life, after having gotten my pets and a few sentimental items out the day before. I had only my wallet, my phone and my latest manuscript on a USB stick. I left an entire life behind.

I had to begin again, sitting on a cardboard box in my father's spare room. I was shattered and traumatised. I didn't even know if it was possible for me to rebuild my life or whether I was going to be broken forever. So, I gave myself an image.

'You are a supernova,' I told my crushed spirit.

A supernova is a star that has exploded and splintered into millions of pieces. Although that star is destroyed forever, the material that is

projected out into space from it can be recycled to form another star, or perhaps even another planet or new life forms. The destruction is loaded with positive potential.

By giving myself this metaphor, I was telling myself a powerful story. Not one of a victim, but one of infinite possibilities – even if all I was at that point was a nebula, a giant cloud of dust moving through space.

The other, more elaborate story I gave myself was that I named that spare room ‘Belinda HQ’. From my love of history, I thought of those valiant people who had fought in the French Resistance in the Second World War. The German invasion of France in 1940 hit the country like a lightning strike. Most of the citizens accepted the occupation and many actively collaborated with the Nazis. Only a brave few risked torture and death to hide out in barns, farmhouses and forests to resist. I tried to instil myself with their courage. I wasn’t fighting anyone. The damage had been done, and there was no point avenging the past. I was summoning up the strength to get up on my own two feet again and to slay my fears that I wouldn’t succeed. What had happened to me wasn’t considered a crime in Australia at that time. It was poorly understood and it didn’t even have a proper name. Therefore, I didn’t know who to turn to in the aftermath of triggers and terrifying nightmares, and the hypervigilance that would see me pacing up and down that spare room for hours, trying to calm my nervous system. Nobody gets PTSD from something that doesn’t exist.

I look back on myself as I was then with compassion, but also with a sense of awe. Because I *did* get up. I *did* create a new life – a happy and thriving one. I was doing the very best I could with all the knowledge I had at that time, and nobody can ask more of themselves than that.

Nevertheless, a year after the event, in the midst of this new life, my physical health deteriorated from all the stress. It was only then that I sought help from a psychologist, who looked me in the eye and said:

‘What you have been through is the same level of trauma a hostage experiences in a siege situation. I’m amazed you are still standing at all.’

I knew I was still standing because I had emboldened myself, and I had done it by telling myself true stories of courage and resilience.

~

My mother was a tremendous storyteller. As a child she enthralled me with stories of my ancestors, people of the vast Russian Empire – Russians, Ukrainians, Poles, Latvians, Estonians, Lithuanians, as well as some Finns and Swedes. Their stories were epic and often tragic, but the message was always clear: life knocks you down, you get up; it knocks you down again, you get up again. When I fell off that metaphorical cliff, my heart and mind were smashed. I was sure every bone in my body was broken. I didn’t see how I could possibly stand up. When I did eventually raise myself, tottering on shaking legs, I dusted myself off and lurched forward, not certain of my direction, but moving nonetheless.

It wasn’t pretty, and it wasn’t particularly heroic or graceful, but I felt I was doing what humans are naturally designed to do and what our ancestors have always done. We get up, move forward and try to learn from whatever has happened to us.

That was how life was presented to me. That was the *story* I had always been told. My parents demonstrated that narrative to me in their own lives. My mother reinforced it with the coming-of-age stories she gave me to read – *Black Beauty*, *Little Women*, *Great Expectations*. I reinforced it in myself with my addiction to reading biographies – the life stories of entertainers, artists, writers, human-rights activists and environmentalists, as well as the stories of ordinary people who had overcome some adversity and had gone on to become extraordinary: they became emboldened.

Biographies gave me a certain point of view about life. It seems that many of us have some significant event that occurs in our childhood or youth, some sort of life-changing adversity, and the rest of our life is spent resolving, understanding and overcoming it, and eventually making peace with it. In some sad cases, if the event isn't dealt with, it usually destroys the person involved. It's as if we are all given a divine assignment and the choice is ours about how to complete it.

Most writers are familiar with 'the hero's journey'. But if you haven't heard of it, you will recognise the concept. George Lucas, the creator of *Star Wars*, said he followed this story structure to create one of the most successful movie sagas of all time. Across Hollywood, screenwriters use it to write everything from romantic comedies to horror movies.

In 1949, an American mythologist named Joseph Campbell compared several classical myths and developed the theory that they shared a common structure that he believed came from deep within the human subconscious. A hero or heroine will be given a quest that will require them to leave their ordinary world and overcome various trials and temptations, as well as find a mentor and gather like-minded companions on their journey. They will go through a series of trials and endure many dark nights of the soul. These will cause the hero or heroine to draw upon the strength they need for the final supreme ordeal when they must face their nemesis, whether it be a beast or a mortal enemy. After overcoming these obstacles and being victorious, the hero or heroine is profoundly changed. They may return to their ordinary world, but they are now more effective and happier in it.

There is power in stories, and the storyteller traditionally played an important role in ancient societies. Their job was to create a virtual reality, in which their listeners could try on the courage of heroes and heroines for themselves and also be reminded that, in the darkest of times, the sun will always shine again.

~

There is so much power in the stories we tell ourselves and each other, and in the meaning we decide to assign to certain events. The stories we choose can either frighten us or strengthen our resolve. In emboldening myself, I told my soul stories of resilience, purpose, passion and connection. I was not interested in stories of revenge or anger or being a victim. They would have only made me bitter and unable to transform my supernova dust cloud into a new star or planet.

It is my hope that I can take on the role of the storyteller for you, and that I will embolden you with the stories that helped me find my courage in one of the darkest and most challenging times of my life.

~

Before we begin, I want to be clear that this book is in no way prescriptive. I won't be telling you what you *should* do to be emboldened. I'll be sharing some incredible stories with you and my own responses to them. I hope that you will use your own critical faculties to decide which aspects of these stories may work for you on your journey. It is certainly not a self-help book, or a motivational or philosophical treatise. While I think that self-help books are wonderful on many levels, I also find them overly simplistic when I try to apply their advice to my own life. The subjects of the 'real-life' examples in them *appear* to go in straight lines from A to B to C. They start with a problem, find a solution and end up living a perfect life. I don't believe our human existence is like that. I think we go from A to T, then back to J, before lurching forward on to M or N. Then we catch a quick glimpse of Z, before reversing over W and finding ourselves back at G again.

Life is a bumpy ride. The struggles are real and sometimes relentless.

But the journey can ultimately be a beautiful and rich one. And overcoming the struggles are what will make it worthwhile. You already have everything inside you that you need to live life courageously and boldly. I hope that is exactly what this book inspires you to do.

RESILIENCE

1

If you had to flee your home urgently, and most likely forever, what would you take with you besides your family and your pets? For many it is only a theoretical question, something to muse over, but as I write this thousands of Australians have recently lost everything in floods and bushfires. Many people have lost their homes to a financial or health crisis, and we now know that the leading cause of homelessness for women in this country is domestic violence. Those of us who have lost a home will all tell ourselves a similar thing: ‘My family and pets are alive, and that’s what’s important.’ And that’s absolutely true. But there are moments when the loss of things you treasured, collected or preserved with care pains you. And I believe you must mourn them. There are times, too, when the realisation that you have lost something of a more practical nature triggers you: like when a friend invites you swimming and you remember why you no longer have a costume; you open the cupboard expecting to find a certain baking dish and you recall that it went with your former life; or someone asks to see a picture of you in your youthful backpacking days and you are reminded that all those photographs are gone too.

You might think that we would all take the same items when we flee our homes, but I’ve learned that to be far from the truth. What is true is

those things we regard as precious say everything about us and what we consider to be of value.

Many years before I ran from my home, I had a taste of what that emergency decision-making process might look like.

In January 2002, I was minding my parents' home in a bushland suburb of Sydney while they were away on holiday. I had recently returned from living in New York and was in the process of putting roots down in Sydney again. After ten years of nothing but rejections for my writing, I had just signed a two-book deal and was now a full-time writer. Although I had loved travelling, I had grown tired of the rambling life and having mainly fellow travellers and expats for friends. My plan was to settle down and, as proof of it, I had acquired two kittens, Gardenia and Lilac. The Christmas that had just passed had been particularly hot, with daily temperatures in the high thirties. The yellowed, parched lawn crunched when I walked across it. The trees had taken on that limp, grey look of a dry summer. There was talk of water restrictions.

But inside my parents' house it was cool and peaceful. I was busy working on the edits for my first book, *White Gardenia*, to be published later that year. The kittens were playing with their toys around my feet. They were more like miniature mountain lions than cats. When they went quiet, I never had to look under beds or chairs to find them. They were usually perched precariously at the top of a door or clinging to a light fitting. Since they'd come into my life, there was never a painting that hung straight in the house.

But I had learned to work without letting their mayhem distract me. In fact, I had reached such levels of focus that, as the afternoon wore on, I didn't even notice the thrum of helicopters circling the sky or the wail of fire engine sirens. I had come from New York and those noises were the soundtrack to the city. I was so used to hearing them that they only

existed on the periphery of my attention, although they were foreign sounds in the tranquil, leafy suburb where my parents lived.

Then the telephone rang. It was a friend of mine, Felicia.

'I'm calling because I know you don't pay attention to anything when you are working,' she told me. 'Have you turned the television on?'

'No.'

'Well, you had better. There is a massive bushfire heading your way.'

I turned the television on as she was talking. The images on it were confronting. Helicopters were dropping water on 60-foot flames and residents were filling up buckets from their swimming pools to try to defend their homes. Strong winds were blowing down from the drought-ridden, parched interior, making the spread of the fire particularly fast.

'They are saying you must stay put and that it's too dangerous for a mass evacuation,' Felicia said. 'You can pack your car and be ready to go if you are told to. But you should also decide on the most essential things to take – the things you can carry – in case you have to run.'

That sounded ominous. I took Felicia at her word because she'd once been a volunteer with the New South Wales Fire Brigades. Such strong gusts of wind could make a fire that seemed contained turn ferocious in minutes. At the same time, I wasn't panicked. I had grown up in the area and the fire warnings of my childhood had consisted of the fathers of the neighbourhood sitting on the roofs of their houses holding hoses and listening to transistor radios while the mothers manned the taps. The children played about in their gardens, unconcerned. Usually, the day would turn out to be a non-event and we'd all go back inside and have dinner.

For most people, though, that lax attitude had changed after the horror of the 1994 eastern seaboard fires. I had been away at the time, studying at the University of California. My roommates had to comfort me as I watched the horror unfolding on the television. Sydney

was in flames, many of the fires having been deliberately lit during windy conditions. Thousands of homes were lost, national parks were decimated, and the fires came close to the CBD. My mother was forced to evacuate with my nephew, who was a toddler at the time, driving through the smoke to safety. My father was away at work, and I'd wished I'd been there to help her.

So, while I wasn't particularly scared, I wasn't complacent either.

I saved my work to a floppy disk (remember them?), emailed a copy to a friend, put the cat carrier next to me, and packed my wallet and toothbrush in a small backpack. That was me done, but what about my parents? This was their home, and it contained a lifetime of memories. Where did I even begin? I went to my mother's glass bookcase and took out a photograph album containing pictures of her side of the family, all of them long since dead. It was embossed leather with a picture of a sampan on the cover. It had come all the way from China and had survived many disasters – both natural and man-made. Whatever happened, my mother could not lose it. I put it in my backpack along with other items that I knew to be precious to her: a ring that had been formed by melding together the wedding bands of my grandparents and then set with a stone of amethyst, a favourite Russian gem; a silver icon; and a silver and crystal tankard mug.

I went out into the back garden. The sky was smoky with a foreboding tinge of red. My father was good about regularly clearing out the gutters, raking up dead leaves, and not leaving rubbish lying about, but weren't there other things I was supposed to be doing to protect my parents' house? My mind ran over what I had been taught at school. I began moving the garden furniture into the garage and removing the doormats. I remembered something about hosing the garden and the house, but then hesitated. What if I affected the water pressure from other places in the suburb that needed it more urgently?

The telephone rang and I went back inside. It was my mother on the line.

‘Go speak to Ian at Number 10,’ she told me. ‘He’ll help you. He’s an ex-army captain and will know what to do. He ought to know that you are at the house alone anyway.’

She hung up before I could ask her which items she wanted me to take. I looked back to the television, but I couldn’t tell if things were getting better or worse, so I went in search of Ian. He was a new neighbour who had moved in while I had been away, and I liked the idea of someone who would know ‘what to do’. I probably judge myself too harshly – I have extricated myself from tricky situations while travelling with quick thinking – but I’ve never thought of myself as a particularly practical person. If you need someone for emotional support, a short story or an interpretive dance, I’m your woman, but as for what to do in an emergency situation, I felt I was in uncharted territory.

Ian had a sign on his letterbox to let the fire service know he had a backyard swimming pool, and I glimpsed a figure disappearing around the side of his house wearing a protective suit and guessed it was him. Both were indications that Ian was the right person to help me. But when I stepped into his back garden, I found him grey in the face and trembling. After a strong start, my would-be hero seemed to be floundering. He was trying to take the frame off a large painting. I glanced at his car and saw it was packed so tightly with artwork that the driver wouldn’t be able to see out of the back window.

‘I can’t get the thing off,’ Ian said, aware that I was standing next to him but not particularly bothered that he didn’t know me. ‘I’m not leaving this behind no matter what.’

A twist of my gut told me that Ian may not be the hero I was hoping for, and if we did have to evacuate it might be me saving him. I left Ian

to his artwork and went to see my former piano teacher who lived next door to my parents.

Over the years, Vivienne and her husband had transformed a small cottage into an English-style house with a garden worthy of Gertrude Jekyll: sprawling trees, statues, ponds and thickly planted garden beds. But now that the sky was turning blood red and ash was starting to fall, everything had taken on a strange Gothic atmosphere. I knocked on the door and Vivienne quickly ushered me inside.

‘I was wondering if I should be doing something to protect my parents’ home,’ I said. ‘Am I supposed to be filling the gutters with water?’

Vivienne shook her head sadly. ‘When it gets like this there is little you can do except go.’

We both looked in the direction of her grand piano. It had been a gift from her parents when she entered the Sydney Conservatorium of Music. How many hours had she sat at it, perfecting her Chopin and Brahms? On jasmine-scented summer evenings when I was a child and Vivienne was practising for a recording or a concert, my mother used to turn the television off and we would listen to the beautiful music together: our own neighbourhood concert.

For a worrying moment, I thought Vivienne might have given way to fatalism, and was going to face the bushfire playing her piano the way the stoic musicians on the *Titanic* carried on playing as the ship sank. It would have been easier if Vivienne had mastered the flute or the violin. But everything in Vivienne’s life was big – her house, her garden, even her musical instrument.

We went outside, and she pulled a pair of secateurs from her pocket and took a couple of plant cuttings. ‘I grew these from cuttings taken from my mother’s garden,’ she told me. ‘Perhaps I will be able to grow them again.’

It occurred to me that if we did have to evacuate we would make a funny little procession: me with my kittens and stash of family heirlooms, Ian and his oversized artworks, and Vivienne and her plants.

I returned to my house and rang a friend who had been living in the south of Sydney when the 1994 fires had been at their worst. From what I'd seen on television, not everyone had driven out in their cars in an orderly fashion. Some people had fled for their lives on foot.

'What did you take?' I asked her.

'I packed clean underwear and deodorant.'

It seemed to me those things could be bought on a credit card and I would rather take something irreplaceable. I asked her what her husband Bob had packed.

'All his receipts for the tax year,' she answered. 'He was expecting a big return that year and wasn't going to miss out on it.'

That sounded exactly like Bob. He has a pathological resentment of the taxation department.

After an anxious night's wait, the valiant efforts of the firefighters and community volunteers combined with the wind easing meant that the danger had been averted. I could continue editing my book with my kittens batting pens off my desk, Vivienne could carry on playing beautiful music and watering her garden, and Ian could spend the next week reframing and rehangng his paintings.

But when I took the photograph album and other items from my backpack to put back in my mother's glass bookcase, I remembered that fleeing from their homes in terror, or being dragged out of them, had been a reality for nearly everyone whose picture was in that album. I had never met any of them and yet I knew them all intimately. They had been kept alive by my mother's stories about them, and by the objects they had taken from their homes before they ran from them.