

Fit, Fifty and Fired Up

One man's witty and inspiring account
of taking a risk to chase a more joyful life

Nigel Marsh

ARENA
ALLEN&UNWIN

First published in 2012

Copyright © Nigel Marsh 2012

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publisher. The Australian *Copyright Act 1968* (the Act) allows a maximum of one chapter or 10 per cent of this book, whichever is the greater, to be photocopied by any educational institution for its educational purposes provided that the educational institution (or body that administers it) has given a remuneration notice to Copyright Agency Limited (CAL) under the Act.

Arena Books, an imprint of
Allen & Unwin
Sydney, Melbourne, Auckland, London

83 Alexander Street
Crows Nest NSW 2065
Australia
Phone: (61 2) 8425 0100
Fax: (61 2) 9906 2218
Email: info@allenandunwin.com
Web: www.allenandunwin.com

Cataloguing-in-Publication details are available
from the National Library of Australia
www.trove.nla.gov.au

ISBN 978 1 74237 918 0

Internal design by Darian Causby
Map by Guy Holt
Set in 12.5/17.6 pt Adobe Garamond Pro by Bookhouse, Sydney
Printed and bound in Australia by Griffin Press

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



The paper in this book is FSC® certified.
FSC® promotes environmentally responsible,
socially beneficial and economically viable
management of the world's forests.

For my darling Mum



*'Your time is limited,
so don't waste it living someone else's life.'*

Steve Jobs

introduction

I'll never forget my first day at work in Australia.

To be fair it's not difficult to remember the date as it was the eleventh of September 2001, or 9/11 as the Americans call it. My wife and I had moved ourselves and our four young children to Australia from the UK four days earlier, and on the morning in question I was so busy getting ready for my job that I hadn't watched or listened to the news.

I was a bit surprised when I turned up at my office. While I hadn't been expecting a brass band or lines of bunting to greet me, I had thought I might at least be met at reception and shown to my desk. Instead, my new colleagues were huddled around TV and computer screens and no one so much as glanced at me. Understandable if you knew they were watching the twin towers collapse in lower Manhattan,

but confusing behaviour if you weren't aware of what had just happened in the US.

That was ten years ago. More recently, Kate, my wife of twenty years, set off for her first day at work in Australia. She too walked into an office to find everyone huddled around TV and computer screens. Turns out news of Osama bin Laden's death was breaking.

It makes me reflect on all we've experienced as a family in between those two cataclysmic dates in modern history.

I often say that people overestimate what they can achieve in one year and underestimate what they can achieve in ten. The last decade has certainly proved that true in my life. I started out my time in Australia with a crusading new-country-new-start-new-improved-Nigel passion. I wanted to get healthy, cut down on my drinking and try to limit the excessive spillover of work into family time. Basically, to be more comfortable in my own skin, have better balance and be happier with my contribution to the world. After a year I realised that I'd still hardly scratched the surface. Yet ten years on it would be no exaggeration to say I'm an entirely different person to the one I was then. In no way perfect, but definitely different. So I'm left to wonder: what will my life be like ten years from now?

More to the point, what will *your* life be like in ten years? Take a moment to think about it. Could you be postponing joy and happiness by waiting for the right opportunity to come along – the one that finally allows you to be the real you?

I remember reading an observation by the author Jane Shilling: 'Turns out that what I did while I was waiting for my

real life to begin *was* my life.’ It was a lesson I took to heart. As I’ve got older I’ve become increasingly convinced not only that we shouldn’t wait to see how life pans out, but that it’s incumbent on us to take personal responsibility for the type of life we’d like to lead – because *not* choosing *is* a choice. To put it another way, we shouldn’t leave it up to others to decide how we’ll spend our one brief period of existence on this planet. Whether we like it or not, we are the people we decide to be. But how do we decide who we want to be? And when we’ve decided, how do we go about realising that vision? And if we do succeed in creating a life we’re proud of, how do we sustain it? As Anton Chekhov noted, ‘Any fool can face a crisis, it’s day-to-day living that’s the real challenge.’

Reflecting on the question of how I can make the second half of my life worthwhile and fulfilling has led me to pick up my pen again ten years after the events I recounted in *Fat, Forty and Fired*. As the title suggests that book describes the year I lost my job at the age of forty. It was a momentous twelve months, during which I turned the telescope around and tried to put the things that were important to me at the centre of my life as opposed to letting them languish at the edges.

Fit, Fifty and Fired Up isn’t as neat as *Fat, Forty and Fired*. Life rarely is. It’s not the story of a life-changing year ‘off’. This time around, I’m writing about a period where I am mostly in work – of one form or another. Rather than having a perfect narrative arc, *Fit, Fifty and Fired Up* is a more messy collection of reflections from my continuing struggle to juggle work, family and life a decade later. I’m not claiming to have

the answers for anyone else – or that my story is particularly dramatic. There are hundreds of books in the shops recording the achievements of remarkable people – this is not one of them. No, what follows is simply the story of how I feel as, with some uncertainty, I face my fifties.

Fit, Fifty and Fabulous?

I should start with a confession. When I began writing this book I was not yet fifty. Nor was I particularly fit. I was actually somewhat chubby. But the thing was, having started my fifth decade fat, forty and fired, I dreamed of ending it fit, fifty and fabulous.

Easier said than done. I could see the potential for my life to become a series of disappointments and compromises. So when a friend of mine quoted his personal trainer as saying, 'At fifty, you are the person you will be for the rest of your life', it was a very sobering thought for me. I decided that if I wanted to have some control over what my old age would be like, I needed to take action straight away – before it was too late.

So much for resolutions. Still, I might have left things to amble along if not for a visit to my father while on a trip to the UK. Dad had been living in a nursing home for the last

six years. Since Dad suffered from both Parkinson's and Lewy body dementia, visiting him was not exactly a laugh riot. It'd been a couple of years since he'd been able to communicate.

Certificates from his distinguished career in the navy lined the walls of his room. I hope they provided Dad with a glimmer of recognition or pleasure in his rare moments of mental clarity; they only served to remind me of the cruel contrast between his past and present situations. But it was the pictures around the room, not the certificates, that reduced me to helpless tears. They showed Dad in happier times, when he was still vibrant, charismatic and healthy. There were pictures of him smiling and handsome, hugging my kids, at a dinner table with Mum, in his naval uniform, with my brother's family, overseas on holidays, larking around wearing a silly hat on a beach with my brother and me. Each of these photos represented a special and unique memory, and had been put there to remind Dad of how loved he was and what a wonderful life he'd lived. They were like a knife to my heart.

By late 2009 his health had grown steadily and distressingly worse. I asked Kate to keep the kids back for a while so I could visit Dad by myself first. Talking to someone who can't respond, who gives no sign that he even knows you're there, is hard enough for an adult let alone a child, so I tended to visit Dad alone or limit the time the kids spent with him.

It turned out to be a wise decision because I took one look at Dad and promptly burst into tears. Great – barely two minutes in and I was already blubbing like a baby.



Dad, Johnathon and me, Mothecombe Beach, Devon, 1966

After composing myself I spent half an hour telling Dad about the family, how everyone was fine and how much we loved him. As usual, Dad showed not a flicker of recognition.

I was so upset after we left Dad that I asked Kate to take the kids to lunch so I could go for a walk by myself. While wandering around the cold wintry streets, I couldn't help thinking that no matter how clever or special we might think we are, we're all headed for the same place. Life really is short and most definitely not a dress rehearsal. It's so easy to meander through life and only realise too late that you've wasted the chance to spend time on the important things.

As I rejoined Kate and the kids I knew something had changed in me. If it was true that at fifty you were the person you'd be for the rest of your life, I couldn't just go back home and carry on as normal. I would have to make some changes.

Spot The Difference

There was little time to act on my reflections when we got back to Australia, with the family returning almost immediately to our normal, busy – and strangely loud – routine.

As is the case for many working fathers with school-age kids (at this point Alex was fifteen, Harry was twelve and both Grace and Eve were ten), my family life often felt like one long noisy blur. At work I was used to being in control; at home it was thinly disguised chaos.

Ten years of getting our four kids to school on time, properly dressed and prepared, had sent me prematurely grey. It never ceased to amaze and irritate me that when I gave them orders, rather than simply obeying me, they debated them. (I suppose I should have recognised the warning signs that were evident from an early age. The first time I enthusiastically threw Harry a ball and said, ‘Catch!’, he responded, ‘Why?’)

And the chaos wasn't limited to weekdays. If anything, the weekends were *worse*. How this could be possible given neither Kate nor I had any work commitments on Saturday and Sunday was beyond me, but the endless round of sport, birthday parties and the like frequently brought the pressure to boiling point.

About the only oasis of calm amid the frantic activity during a typical week in our family came on Sunday evening with our regular weekly walk to the Indian takeaway to pick up dinner. This was one of my favourite times with the kids. We took the dog and just messed around and nattered as we strolled up the hill.

Next to the curry house was a video shop and a corner store, so the kids invariably ended up convincing me to rent them a movie and then buy ice cream or chocolate to round out the movie-going experience.

One of my secret guilty pleasures of these outings was to flip through the stack of gossip magazines on the counter of the curry house as we waited for our order. It didn't really matter if the magazines were a few months – or even years – out of date, because I always found reading about Brad and Jen's relationship dramas or Oprah's weight problems strangely comforting. They reminded me there are some things that just don't change in this world.

One Sunday, after a frantic day of dropping off and picking up kids, I was flicking through the stack of magazines while we waited for our takeaway when I noticed a magazine I hadn't seen before. Intrigued, I chose it over my normal

reading fare of three-year-old *NWs* and *Woman's Days* from six months before.

Cosmetic Surgery was the title of the magazine, which surprised me because I couldn't imagine a whole magazine being devoted to this one topic. Surely it was just an advertising wraparound or a dummy copy? But no, it turned out to be for real. Flicking through its two hundred or so glossy pages of articles, pictures and features on the joys of cosmetic surgery, I was struck by the fact that such a magazine could exist. What did it say about us as a society? Still, it was creepily fascinating – until, on page 43, I came across an ad that truly shocked me. Not, I hope, because I'm a prude, but because of what it said about the lengths some people will go to in order to make women feel ashamed of their bodies and therefore submit themselves, expensively, to the knife.

CORRECTIVE LABIAL SURGERY! screamed the headline, with the rest of the page largely taken up by two close-up photos of a hairy vagina. The photos were arranged side by side, the captions under them reading *Before* and *After*. Now for reasons that I'd rather not go into too deeply (let's just say a misspent youth and a past penchant for porn), I've seen my fair share of hairy vaginas, but no matter how closely I studied them the two pictures looked exactly the same to me. I couldn't spot the difference.

My careful study was interrupted by a loud and disapproving, 'Excuse me, do you mind?' from the elderly lady behind me in the queue. She was clearly disgusted to find the

father of four young kids peering intently at what appeared to be pornography in her local curry shop.

‘What were you looking at, Daddy?’ asked Grace, my eldest daughter and, with her twin sister Eve, one of the sweetest girls on the planet.

‘Nothing, sweetheart,’ I replied, hastily shuffling the magazine back into the pile.

‘Show us,’ said Eve.

‘Yeah, show us, Dad,’ my younger son chimed in.

Fortunately I was saved from further embarrassment by the arrival of our food order.

On the walk home, I thought about the messed-up society we live in. Call me a bluff old traditionalist, but whatever the ads say, cosmetic surgery on your lady lips is not really likely to be the path to happiness. I feared for my daughters – and, for that matter, my sons. What on earth were my boys going to think if, in their courting years, they ever came up against a woman who *didn't* have unobtrusive labia or *hadn't* waxed herself into a landing strip or Brazilian?

If it's occasionally challenging being a man facing fifty, I mused, what the hell must it be like to be a woman, with all the extra crap they have to deal with? Only the week before I'd been buying a bottle of water from a café when I noticed five middle-aged women who looked like they'd had a group discount from the same plastic surgeon. They all sported trout pouts, shiny foreheads and exaggeratedly arched eyebrows, with not a facial wrinkle in sight. Yet none of them (from the evidence of their hands and necks) could have been a day

under fifty. While they looked grotesque to me, I could only imagine the pressure any of them might feel if she were the only one in the group who chose *not* to have surgery and to look her real age.

The American phrase ‘the new normal’ sums up what’s happening here. A good friend of mine who works in the media swears that there is not a single female TV newsreader over thirty who doesn’t have Botox injections as a matter of routine. It’s getting to the stage where it’s normal to look like a plastic doll and shameful to mature naturally.

My encounter with *Cosmetic Surgery* didn’t just make me think about unhealthy female body issues and our increasing inability to cope with ageing gracefully, it also brought me back to the thoughts I’d been having about my work and life. I had worked in the advertising industry for over twenty years and although I had issues with some of the things I’d witnessed, I’m in no way one of those ‘advertising is evil’ people – I’m proud of the work I’ve done, in fact. I’ve spent many wonderful years in advertising and met some truly fabulous people. Indeed, I even married one. But I was increasingly questioning the point of my labours. It wasn’t so much that there was anything wrong with the advertising industry, it was more that there wasn’t enough right with it. While I’d never worked on a corrective-labial-surgery account, I still couldn’t help feeling that the advertising world’s contribution to the overall happiness of society was, shall we say, minimal. The whole point of advertising is to get people to buy more stuff or ‘improve’ themselves and, to be honest, I wasn’t convinced

that either was really the answer to the world's ills. I wanted to be engaged in labour that had more heart.

I spoke to Kate about my misgivings, and she agreed that if this was the type of pretentious self-indulgent musing that a simple trip to the curry house brought on, maybe a change to regain some perspective might be a good idea.