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In 1977, a young woman walked across the Australian desert with four camels and a dog.

It took her eight months to travel the 2,000 kilometres from Alice Springs to the Indian Ocean.

The book that Robin Davidson wrote about that experience, Tracks, became an international bestseller,

and she went on to many further travels from Rajasthan to London.

But the defining event in Robin's life

had happened years before she set off on her trek across the desert.

When Robin was 11, her mother took her own life.

For many years after that, Robin didn't think about her mother at all.

Instead, she grew a little wild,

followed her own curiosities and had her own adventures.

But when she neared the age her mother was when she died,

the past suddenly grew very close.

Robin's new book is a remarkable memoir called Unfinished Woman.

Hi, Robin.

Hello, Sarah.

Robin, you've lived in many different houses over your life.

I want to begin with a house in the Himalayas,

which was very dear to you.

Can you describe it for me? What did it look like?

It was a very special place, that house.

It had a particular quality of sanctuary, I'd say.

It was 8,000 feet in the Himalayas.

It was built by a major stifle, I think in about 1900.

And he was an army engineer, so very meticulous builder.

So it was a solid stone bungalow at 8,000 feet.

In Himalayan oak forest, with a view across to the white peaks,

which then would have led into Tibet and Nepal.

8,000 feet, how would you get there?

It was a long journey from Delhi,

Indian train to the little local sighting,

and then hopping into a jeep with all the servants and the luggage

and driving for two hours up, up, up, up, up through the ranges

and arriving at a little tiny village, I mean like a postage stamp size village,

loading up all the ponies and walking for an hour and a half up to the house.

So everything had to come up by pony or on someone's back.

And what sort of things would he bring up with you?

Depending on who was with us, my partner at the time, Narendra,

he enjoyed his comforts, so often we'd be loaded up with every kind of food

and buckets of flowers picked in Delhi and brought up on the train.

If it was just me, it was a much more simple affair.

What kinds of animals were there in the jungles in those mountains?

Leopards around the house at night, so I had a dog at that time

and the dog had to be kept inside most of the time

because it would be taken by a leopard.

Bears, of course, it's a very, very wild place.

You had a close encounter with a leopard one night. What happened?

Yes, well I was decided to go further into the high mountains on a sort of pilgrimage, I guess.

And I took a couple of my stuff with me and it was a long eight-day sort of climb

higher and higher and higher into the snows.

And the trouble was that, you know, being used to being in the bush on my own

and having freedom to sort of roll out the swag wherever I wanted,

in that situation I had to be locked up each night in a sort of cement bungalow

with big iron doors with bolts.

So not exactly comfortable, but the men insisted that we stay in there.

But on the way back I convinced them that it was all right for us to camp the night.

I had my dog with me and the men were to go on ahead to get some food to bring back

and at last I could be alone in the jungle in the way that I'm used to and that I love.

So, you know, I built a big fire and I had my dog with me and the tent was there

and the stars were in the heavens and everything was right with the world.

The men had been extremely reluctant to leave me, but I insisted.

So I'm sitting there very happily and suddenly my dog leaps into my arms in a state of terror

and I pick up the torch and shine it around and there is a leopard, twenty, fifteen feet away.

So I strapped the dog to my body and sort of crawled out and started to feed the fire

as a way of keeping the leopard at bay.

But, you know, I had to think about whether I was going to sacrifice the dog to the leopard.

Anyway, eventually the men came back and they didn't actually say, I told them so.

It was very gracious of them, but they made me sleep in the tent with them,

with, you know, five men in the tent with me.

This magical house up in the Himalayas, how did you first meet its owner, Narendra?

I went through India quite by chance on my way to England to write tracks.

I wasn't interested in India, it wasn't sort of on my radar at all.

In fact, I was, I think I was slightly antagonistic to the idea of it

because of the old hippie trail, you know, and all the tat and disease that came back

and all the crappy spiritualism.

Anyway, I fetched up there and I was very interested then in nomadism,

particularly because I'd spent time with Aboriginal mob.

And I just happened to come across these nomads in Rajasthan who were absolutely spellbinding.

And I just couldn't believe who these people were.

Anyway, I had two weeks in India and I wanted to find out about these nomads

and someone told me that there was this specialist living in Jodpur who knew all about them

but he wouldn't be able to see me because he was entertaining a French journalist.

And I thought, well, maybe I'll just go and try to meet him at least.

So I flew to Jodpur and there was a French woman on the plane, just a little plane.

So I thought, well, that's got to be the French journalist.

So we got off at this tarmac in the middle of, from my point of view, absolutely nowhere, sort of fairy land.

And she went up to this extraordinary looking gentleman in Jodpur and Kutta and very, very impressive Rajput gentleman.

So I thought, well, that's got to be him.

And I gathered all my courage and went up and said, are you Qatari sub?

And he said, no, but I know Qatari sub very well.

Haven't I seen you somewhere before?

And I laughed and I said, I shouldn't.

And he said, of course, you're the woman who crossed the desert with camels.

I just read about you in National Geographic.

I'm the Minister for Tourism.

You must come home and meet my family.

So I did.

What sort of status did he have in his community?

He was a Rajput, which means that he was of the gruelling caste.

He was raised in Jodpur Castle in this huge castle that looks like a wedding cake.

He was raised there as a boy, one of, I think it was 11 children.

And initially those children were told that the Maharani, the Maharaja's wife, was their mother.

But in fact, only half the children were her real children.

The other half, including Narendra and his sister Minu, were the Maharani's sister's children.

But she wanted all those children, so she sort of pinched the children of her sister and brought them into this castle to be raised.

And Narendra said that they got kind of a sense that they were different because the real heirs got to eat out of gold plates and they only got silver plates.

Whether that's true or not, I don't know, but if he said it's true, probably was.

So then I travelled on to England and forgot all about them.

How did you meet again then, years later?

Ten years past, I'd not given them a second thought, really.

I was living in London at a bit of a loose end and not quite knowing what I wanted to do or just couldn't work out quite what I wanted to be doing.

And I went to supper with some acquaintances and there was Narendra.

And the chances of him being there were cosmically small.

Did you recognise each other straight away?

Yeah, instantly. And he said, you know, you don't look well.

Why don't you come to India and do that project that you had in mind to do?

So I did.

The next step you're at in this house in the Himalayas?

Well, there were a few steps in between.

I did do a project with nomads there. Very difficult, very, very demanding project.

Migration with camel and sheep herders.

And Narendra helped me a lot as a friend.

Then one thing led to another and he became my partner.

What did his family and his staff make of this relationship?

Because he weren't formally married?

No. Look, he was such a genius at managing people, honestly.

That was one of his great skills.

He protected me a lot, particularly from his family.

I didn't have to deal with that.

With his staff, it was more complicated.

But he engineered it in such a way that I became Memsar.

In other words, his wife. I had the status of his wife.

You know, for me, particularly as an Australian, having servants was just so against the grain.

So deeply against the grain.

But the truth is that I became so close to those people.

When I go back to India these days, they're the people I want to see.

But he was part of a whole social world so different from what you'd experienced in Australia.

Yes. Well, it's a feudal aristocracy, essentially.

But he was a bit of a black sheep, actually very much of a black sheep.

An extraordinary person, because he didn't buy into it.

He became a politician, quite a sort of left of centre politician.

I mean, you know, he still had the sensibility of a Rajput Lord, but he was a very thoughtful and good man.

This house up in the Himalayas is very far from the one you were born into.

Where is Stanley Park? Stanley Park.

Stanley Park was near a town called Turum in that Darling Downs area.

So I think of it as the sort of suburbs of the central desert.

We had a cattle property. It was 10,000 acres, which sounds like a lot, but actually by those standards rather medium.

I suspect pretty rundown. I think my father inherited it after the war.

There was no electricity. There was no car. It was pretty rough.

And my little mother, who was a city bread woman, was taken out there and just expected to get on with it.

Your father had spent time in Africa before heading to this cattle property. What was he doing there?

He went to Africa, I think, in his 20s. He was from that country so-called aristocracy.

You know, he'd had the sort of typical boarding school education at a good school, but I think he didn't really want to become a doctor as his father was or any of that. He wanted adventure.

So he went out jackering on stations to earn money and then took off for Africa for the life of the Pith helmet

and the Harpooning crocodiles and looking for gold and-

Boyzone adventure.

On total boyzone adventure, like to the last tee.

So he, as I understand it, he sailed back from Africa when it looked like the war was going to happen and he enlisted.

He was offered an officer's position, but he said,

No, I want to be with my men and look after my men.

So he was that sort of person, very much a man's man.  
Do you know how he and your mother first met?  
Not really, no. The certain sort of shreds of stories like him visiting her.  
So shortly after he'd arrived in Brisbane off the boat, he visited her with a bunch of gerberas.  
And my mother's mother used to tell that story of how this sort of idiotic man,  
because she hated my father, arrived with a bunch of gerberas.  
What's so terrible about gerberas?  
I don't know, but a gerberas is like the last word in stinginess.  
How do they look in their wedding photos?  
They're happy, so happy. I mean, you can't fake that.  
I think it was a grand love. He was much older than she was.  
And she was sort of everything that his family wasn't.  
She was urban, she was tiny, she was exquisite, she was funny.  
She was definitely not a country woman. She hated horses, that sort of thing.  
So I think he was captivated. And she, I think, must have been romantically taken up  
with the idea of this life in the bush, a grand adventure, something like that.  
And of course we can't forget the effect of the war.  
You were very young when you were living in Stanley Park.  
Do you have any memories of your mum there?  
I do. Memories, such a slippery, strange thing.  
When I say I have memories of her, I have pictures.  
But when I look back at them, the pictures alter.  
There's one very clear memory of being on the swing, so I must have been three or four,  
in the backyard, and the smell of dry dust and grass, dry grass and warmth.  
And I'm on the swing and I'm composing a symphony.  
And I'm so pleased with myself. I've composed this symphony.  
And I get off the swing and I remember climbing up the stairs on all fours at the back veranda  
and going into my mother in the kitchen and say, I've composed a symphony.  
And she said, oh, have you darling, and hum it for me.  
And then I couldn't remember the tune.  
So these strange little shreds of memory that of course you, who knows how memory works,  
it's like these little shreds and then you build a narrative into those shreds or from those shreds.  
You later met a friend that your mother had out in the country, Zoe.  
How did Zoe remember your mum from that time?  
It was wonderful meeting Zoe because until then, pretty much all the information I'd had about my  
mother  
was either negative or hugely reticent, embarrassed even.  
And then I came across Zoe, who'd been a friend of hers out in the country,  
and she was a lovely woman and she said, oh, your mother was the funniest woman I've ever met.  
She kept me laughing out there and we'd meet together for a little while outside the school  
and she'd take off the locals and we'd laugh and laugh and laugh.  
So yes, that was very nice to have that sense of who my mother really was.  
It was a very tough place to make a living and there'd been drought.  
So your family moved east to a farm near the coast just north of Brisbane.

When you picture yourself back at that place, Robin, are you more often with others or alone?  
Definitely alone, very, very much alone, but in a kind of joyous, seamless unity with nature alone.  
So therefore not alone.

What sort of nature were you seamlessly joyfully with?

Well, it was, I guess it was really quite ordinary countries, sort of subtropical, green, but from a Charles point of view, it was paradise and filled with magic.

Yes, so the memories of that place are of a kind of magical realm.

Your parents were also part of the social life that went on in the town.

Really?

We have to amend the word town.

What's more appropriate?

Village?

God, I don't think village even gets it.

It was essentially Harry Crack's store, a little tiny two-room school, and the School of Arts Hall, which was this tiny little wooden building with a stage.  
That was it.

What sort of things do you remember happening at that School of Arts Hall?

The School of Arts Hall was the place where the village came together and we'd have concerts and it was such a long time, it was such a fifties thing.

So there'd be someone playing this tinny old piano on the stage, usually my mother, or someone would come from another village and play the spoons or the saw, and everyone would dance and then have cups of tea out in the supper room.

How important was music in your family?

I know it was like blood circulating through a body, something you're not conscious of but that keeps it together.

It's hugely important.

My mother was a terrific musician, as many people were in those days.

It was sort of very much part of cultural life then.

So she played piano, she was a terrific singer, soprano singer, she played the violin, and her role in the family was to bring us all together around music, around the piano.

So we'd have sing songs around the piano.

And neighbours would come and we'd sing around the piano.

And no one was allowed to sort of be too shy to sing.

Who taught you the piano?

Initially my mum, and then our nearest town was Nambour.

There was a Catholic nunnery there, and my mother came across a sister Augusta who taught music there.

So I was taken to be tutored by sister Augusta, who was an absolute darling.

And she and my mother really adored each other, and when my mum and I were there,

she could take off her horrible starched wimple in that tropical heat.

And they'd sit together and talk and laugh.

So many lovely, happy memories.

When did you first, or how did you first become aware of your mum's mood changing?

You know, I don't really know.  
And it's odd to me, she must have been desperately unhappy all the way through.  
I know that she was very lonely out in the bush.  
I think the marriage had its limitations.  
I think she cared desperately about giving her children  
opportunities that weren't available in the country.  
But I didn't really feel or absorb her unhappiness  
until she went away for the first electroshock treatments.  
And suddenly it was like we were without a rudder.  
And I knew something was terribly wrong.  
Whether as a child I had already absorbed something was wrong, I don't know.  
But certainly consciously I wasn't aware until then.  
That would have been when I was about eight.  
And then I think when I was nine, we moved from there  
in order to go to the city to be quote unquote closer to doctors.  
She once shared something with you that one doctor had told her.  
What was that?  
She by then was very ill, obviously profoundly, horribly, painfully ill  
like this drowning woman.  
And we were living on the outskirts of Brisbane  
in this rather miserable house.  
All of us very unhappy.  
And she was on the stairs inside the house  
looking like someone had punctured her and all the air had gone.  
And she said I would have been I guess ten, then or eleven, something like that.  
And she'd been seeing a psychiatrist.  
And she said the doctor told me that I should be happy.  
I've got a husband and lovely children, I should be happy.  
And I knew with, you know, I've just been on the planet for ten years  
but I knew how wicked that was to say to her.  
What do you remember from the day that she died, Robin?  
So what I actually remember of the day itself was coming out of school  
and it was a big school, like nothing like I was used to.  
So I didn't like school.  
But standing outside the school and looking down the street towards our house  
you could see the house from the school  
and feeling this mortal dread  
and knowing that I had to walk home feeling this dread.  
And I often wondered about that dread.  
Sometimes I thought well maybe I'd already gone home  
and found the body or something, I don't know.  
Why would I have felt such dread?  
Why would I remember feeling that dread?  
And then I realised that's what I would have felt every day.

Going home to this terribly ill woman  
and a very unhappy house.  
So the next thing I remember is being at the front of the house  
there's a police car park there, the neighbour is there  
and my dear dad is in his car keys  
and it's as if someone's thrown a bucket of water over him  
and he tries to hold me.  
And my dad was very undemonstrative  
so he'd never done that before and he was weeping  
and he said, Mummy's dead darling.  
And I just withdrew from him and went to the neighbour  
and I allowed myself to be held by her  
but I didn't feel a thing  
and I cried because that was what was expected.  
Truly, it's extraordinary how children just shut down like that.  
Then the next thing I remember is being in the house  
with my maternal grandmother  
and she's holding my hand  
and I seem already to know that my mother's killed herself  
but I don't know how.  
So that's sort of what's left of the day  
and the next thing I know is that I'm to be sent up to live  
with my father's twin sister and I can't take the dog.  
Did you go to your mum's funeral?  
No, no, no, no. It wasn't expected that I would.  
How was she spoken about Robin?  
Remembered in the family in the months, years after her death?  
Never mentioned again.  
My dad never said her name again.  
She wasn't spoken about to me, I think to anyone  
and then later I found out from some of the old family friends  
that there was such shame around suicide  
that her old friends weren't invited to the funeral.  
No one knew exactly what had happened.  
It was like this little person had just been wiped off  
under the earth and silenced.  
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Conversations.

Robin, after your mum's death,  
you were sent to live with your aunt Gillian,  
your dad's twin sister on Mount Tambourine.  
What sort of person was she?

Dear Gill.

Look, she was a wonderful person, really.  
She was a typical country,  
of that old sort of country aristocracy.  
Marvelous horsewoman just lived for horses  
and apparently she was one of the great horsewomen in Australia  
in her day.

She was what was then called a spinster.  
She would then have been in her 60s, I guess.  
And, you know, she knew nothing about children.  
She didn't know how to be with a child.  
It was damn good of her, actually, to take me on.  
But she was quite a fierce old girl.  
And previously, I just adored her.  
She was like my heroine,  
but living with her was a different matter.

And I was obviously a...  
I'd turned from being a little goody-two-shoes, you know,  
mummy's pet, I turned into a bit of a terror away.  
I didn't care about school, I didn't care about coming top.  
All I wanted to do was race around the mountain  
on my friend's ponies and be rude to my aunt.  
So, you know, it wouldn't have been easy for her either.  
You were then sent to boarding school in Brisbane  
and after those years of boarding school,  
what did you think your future might look like?

It's an interesting question.  
I don't think I had a sense of future.  
I didn't have a sense of being a person, really.  
I had an instinct, a drive.  
So lucky.

I think, you know, maybe it's genetic, who knows what it is,  
but some drive to become a fuller human being,  
to build a human being out of these bits and pieces of almost nothing.  
What helped you first have an intimation  
of what that might look like when you were in Brisbane,  
had left school, didn't go on to study,  
were sort of a little lost.  
What were the little flickers of there being a life

beyond what the expectations and boundaries around you were?

Well, first of all, I was extremely green.

Like, I just...

Clueless doesn't even...

Clueless would be a compliment.

And obviously, I think probably in retrospect,  
was dissociated in some way.

So I didn't know anything.

I hadn't read anything.

There's no one I could talk to.

I'd somehow got through boarding school.

I don't know.

I got two scholarships.

God knows how.

But one of the scholarships was to the Conservatorium of Music.

I didn't know what that would involve,  
other than, you know, spending more time at the piano.

What did your father advise you?

Well, he came to pick me up on the last day of boarding school,  
and my father was famously stingy, like all the Davidsons.

And, you know, this boarding school  
was one of those awful posh boarding schools  
that cost a lot of money but didn't educate the girls.

Because your education was meant to land you a man of the land  
or a lawyer.

That's all it was for.

But anyway, I got this scholarship.

But it wasn't a huge scholarship,  
and I knew that I'd need a couple more dollars a week.

Like, not much, but just a bit.

And so I said to my dad, you know,  
with great sort of nervousness,  
because we didn't know each other very well then,  
that I'd got this scholarship,  
but it would require a couple more dollars a week.

I could get a some sort of job,  
and, you know, maybe that's what I should do.

And he, you know, he wasn't an angry man,  
but he was like a mule putting his feet in the ground,  
his hooves in the ground.

And he said, no, you don't want to mess around with that nonsense.

You get yourself a good secretarial job until you get married.

How did you feel hearing that news?

Do you remember? How would that have landed?

Look, I think, again, because I was used to it,  
it wasn't, it was just sort of more of the same, I guess.  
So I wasn't particularly upset or I wasn't.  
And also, you know, truth to tell,  
I didn't particularly want to go to a conservatory.  
I didn't know what I wanted to do.  
You had your first experience of a chosen family, I guess,  
in a big share house at Indooroopilly.  
What was that time like?  
Oh, look, I'm grateful every day  
that I was part of the late 60s, early 70s, honestly.  
What a wonderful time that was to be young, really.  
And to have had the good luck and good fortune  
to have found my way into that milieu quite by accident.  
It was a bunch of students, well, sort of older than me,  
older students, so I was the mascot, really.  
University students, most of whom were in the sciences, in zoology.  
And they kind of took me in.  
So we lived in this huge and wonderful old  
ramshackle wooden house in Indooroopilly.  
And we were like this wonderful, loving, extended family.  
I wish young people now had access to that kind of living.  
It was such a terrific education and a real, real community.  
It must have seemed a long way from your family home.  
Well, yes, it was.  
And, of course, my poor, darling dad, you know,  
who would turn up to visit me in his stockman's hat.  
And there'd be these dreadful, smelly hippies with afros  
who wouldn't get up to shake his hand.  
He was appalled and no doubt horribly worried.  
But, no, I was dead lucky.  
I was lucky in two ways.  
One was to find that milieu.  
And the way I found my way in there was I got a part-time job  
at a library at the university.  
I was in quite by chance.  
And I hadn't read any books at that point.  
But for some reason I just picked up this one book  
and took it home to read, and it was Catch-22.  
And I read it.  
And I called in sick.  
And I read it again.  
And I called in sick again.  
I could not believe that there was that kind of world out there somewhere.

It didn't resonate or strike you so strongly.

Joseph Hell was Catch-22.

I don't know.

I don't know.

It was just this whole other way of interpreting the world,  
which I innately somehow understood was a world I could belong in.

That share house was just the first step out

into an ongoing series of destinations

further and further away, I guess, in one sense.

You were hitchhiked to Sydney when you were 18

with no money and no plans

and ended up living by yourself for a few months in an abandoned house.

Yes.

What was that time about?

What were you doing?

I wish I could remember that girl more clearly.

I know that that's what she did.

But somehow the link between her and me

is mysteriously...

Who the hell was she?

How did she have the oomph to do that?

I don't know.

I just know that, again, that weird drive

to make a person of myself,

to construct a self out of these little bits and pieces.

And to do that, I needed to be alone

and I needed to learn.

What were you learning?

How were you spending your days?

I stole a lot of books.

Where from?

Bookstores.

Yes.

Robbins.

Oh, I know.

I shouldn't have said that.

I read.

Essentially what I did was I read.

And I wandered.

And I wandered town because I knew nothing about cities then.

I didn't know really what they were.

I saw a city as something sitting on top of nature.

So what I noticed in the city were the fig trees

growing up through the footpath

or the oysters on the rocks.  
So the city was like this very flimsy overlay.  
But I needed to learn it.  
And I needed to learn how to survive in it.  
So I walked a lot.  
I explored.  
I found markets where I got food.  
I didn't know how to cook.  
So I just lived on sort of boiled mush.  
But it was kind of,  
it was the beginning of a formation of a person, I think.  
And eventually I did learn how to negotiate the city.  
I learned how to take a bus.  
I learned a lot of things.  
You sound like a, I don't know,  
a little bird just coming out of the egg for the first time.  
Yes, I think so.  
I crawled through the window of that house  
as a sort of nine-year-old.  
And three months later, or however long it was,  
I don't remember how long, I came out as an 18-year-old.  
As an 18-year-old, you ended up working in an underground casino.  
Yes.  
What kind of place was it?  
It was an illegal gambling club  
just across the road from the police station in Darlinghurst.  
We could look out there.  
Exactly.  
We could look out the window into the cop shop.  
What did it look like inside?  
It was vulgar, of course.  
A huge room.  
And the boss, Billy, had put up sort of red Regency flock wallpaper  
and plastic chandeliers.  
And there were the tables, the gaming tables.  
There was a bar along one side.  
And I got a job there.  
How?  
Who introduced you to this world?  
Look, I don't clearly remember who.  
That's by then I'd left the house where I'd lived alone.  
I'd sort of come out into the world.  
I got a job as an artist model at the art school.  
And of course, through that started meeting the old Sydney push

and sort of interesting inverted commerce people,  
like everyone isn't interesting.  
But I was sort of taken up by the push, members of the push.  
Again, I seem to be the young one.  
So I don't know who told me about this place that was looking  
for young women to, you know, essentially to sell drinks  
and to deal with Blackjack.  
But anyway, I fetched up there and met the boss.  
And initially he wanted me to be on the roulette table  
or the Blackjack table.  
But then I sat down at the poker table and instant love.  
Was it your first game of poker or did you play before?  
Yeah, no, no, I knew nothing.  
But it was like, I got that game so quickly.  
I just loved it.  
I mean, I was just the dealer.  
Where did that talent come from?  
Do you think?  
No, some old criminal background.  
But it's a, you know, it's a transcendent game poker.  
And this was five cards stud poker, which is a very elegant game.  
What's the secret to being good at poker?  
Well, what is the secret?  
Well, of course, you've got to know, you know,  
you've got to be smart about the cards on the table  
and what your chances are.  
But then you have to be able to read other people  
what they might be doing or not doing  
when they're bluffing, when they're not bluffing.  
And you yourself have to be able to bluff or not bluff.  
No, it's a marvellous game.  
What did you used to have to wear to work at this casino, Robin?  
Well, I started, for the first time, I started earning money.  
And I remember buying my first beautiful dress.  
It was a sort of two piece chiffon printed thing.  
So that sort of thing.  
So you were glamour in this world.  
I was glamour, total glamour.  
So you were both, as this young woman,  
both a part of this criminal world  
and also standing slightly to one side of it.  
Was it like being an anthropologist or something?  
I guess that's the closest, yes.  
Except that there was something different about the way

I approached those worlds that I found myself in.  
I knew that I wouldn't remain in them.  
But I didn't feel myself to be essentially a different class  
or a different...  
I was in that world, in and of that world.  
And I think even then I realised  
that was a slightly different way of passing the world.  
I guess anthropology is the closest, but it's not quite that either.  
It's more like a complete immersion, trying to be inside the frame.  
Things turned violent in that world  
and you actually reached out to your dad  
in order to get yourself out of that situation  
and you moved away from Sydney.  
A few years later, found yourself walking across the desert  
with camels and a dog  
and entering this global life of exploration and of writing.  
And you spent all of those years not thinking about your mum.  
What changed as you approached your mid-40s?  
Yeah, it's strange, isn't it?  
I just never...  
I wasn't interested in the past  
and I certainly wasn't interested in my mother.  
I didn't remember her.  
I knew she'd suicided, of course,  
and I knew that must have affected me badly, of course,  
but it just wasn't of interest to me.  
And I would have thought that I had very few memories of my childhood,  
but since I'd never gone there,  
it wasn't something that I thought about.  
Then I was living in London.  
At a quite slightly difficult stage of my life,  
you know, uncertain stage,  
and I went to see a documentary about Glenn Gould  
and found myself weirdly, weirdly moved by it.  
You know, quite weepy.  
And it made me think of music  
and what my life might have been if I'd followed that course.  
So I bought a beautiful old grand piano  
because I lived in one big loft space,  
so the piano fitted beautifully.  
It was pretty much the only furniture in there,  
but a beautiful piano.  
And I started to play again.  
But then these strange memories started coming back.

I remembered songs from the family,  
songs from the 50s, songs from my mother.  
I found it quite disturbing or uneasy.  
I felt uneasy about the whole thing,  
but certainly these memories started coming back.  
And the image I had was that the past was like this cement,  
barren cement, concrete area  
with a few little sort of rusted pickets sticking up,  
but something was stirring under that cement.  
And the music was a key kind of factor in that.  
So these memories started coming back,  
and I'm a writer, so I started sort of writing notes about it.  
And then I sort of at some point realised  
that I should write about my past and about my mother.  
Was she there in almost a physical presence?  
Robin, was it stronger than memory?  
You talk about it feeling like a ghost, a ghosting.  
Well, I think if I'd lived in another century,  
I would have thought I was haunted.  
Yeah, but I don't live in that century.  
I think that something was going on in my psyche  
that needed to be addressed,  
and this was the way it happened.  
But I do remember waking one night to the smell of my mother.  
I could smell her.  
How weird is that?  
So yes, you know, the metaphor would be that I was haunted.  
And the sense of responsibility that I needed to speak for her,  
that there was no one else who would speak for her,  
who could speak for her.  
It was like my duty, and it was like this awful kind of fairy tale duty.  
But it was an impossible duty.  
You know, like Cinderella having to pick the peas out of the ashes or whatever it was.  
You know, this thing that you couldn't actually do, but you had to do.  
This impossible task of writing about your mother,  
which first appeared when you reached the age that she was when she died,  
that coincided with you falling into a depression.  
And I mean, depression seems to not be strong enough a word,  
as it never does for anyone who's going through the anguish of that kind of state.  
Did it feel like you were perhaps having a glimpse or an echo  
of what your mum had gone through all those years before?  
I think so, absolutely, yes.  
And, you know, that word depression, it is such an inadequate word.  
I mean, it's a suffering that's almost unendurable,

and it's not something in your control.  
It's a physical, absolute existential despair.  
And I felt even at the time that, in a funny sort of way, didn't quite belong to me.  
It's an odd thing to say, and there's also a very strong part of me  
simply observing it, watching it.  
I knew I wasn't going to suicide. I knew that.  
But the physical and mental anguish was off the scale.  
So yes, I think it is what my mother suffered  
and what obviously a lot of people do suffer.  
So that's sort of how it all began.  
I'd never wanted to write about my life.  
I wasn't really interested in my own life in that sense.  
But I became very interested in my fate, in what a fate is  
and how a fate kind of evolves.  
And out of those first tentative efforts at this fairy-tale task of writing about your mother  
and trying again and again in different ways,  
finally, now in your early 70s, you have done this thing.  
I've written this book.  
I have done that fairy-tale task.  
Has that appeased her ghost in some sense?  
Wow. Interesting question.  
She's certainly not around me.  
So yeah, maybe.  
I guess what I would say about that is that I feel I've done my best.  
I've ticked that box. I've done that duty.  
It's not something I would have chosen to do,  
but it seemed I had to do it.  
I've done it.  
You reflect in the book that an author's role in writing about characters  
is to understand them, not to judge them,  
and that understanding is a kind of love.  
Yes.  
Have you come to love her differently through writing about her?  
I don't think so.  
I mean, she's as lost to me as she always was.  
But I don't mind that.  
It's okay.  
I just feel that I have done my best by her.  
The reflections on fate that you say you were invited into,  
where are they at?  
What is your sense of fate?  
Is there such a thing?  
Well, I think there's a literal fate.  
I mean, I don't mean it in any mystical sense.

There are simply how a life unfurls.  
And it seems to me that it doesn't have a lot to do with our own choices.  
So much of it is what we're given and how that plays out.  
I think my own fate, people made the assumption, for example,  
that I crossed the desert because my mother killed herself.  
And it's not like that.  
It's nothing like that.  
It's not deterministic in that way.  
What I would say is that after she died,  
when I must have been 12 or 13,  
maybe I had this sort of appalling nihilistic vision  
or insight, partial insight into how the world really is,  
that the universe is not aware of us and doesn't give a damn.  
And trying to understand, come to terms with that,  
as a 12-year-old with no one to talk to,  
no one to explain what I'd seen,  
did have a huge effect on how I then operated in the world,  
which is to say that from then on,  
my whole life in a way would be an attempt to refute that nihilism,  
to put the world back together.  
The sense of belonging that you've had in wild and remote places,  
women, that house up in the Himalayas,  
or your time in the deserts,  
have you got that sense of belonging where you live now?  
Somewhat, yeah.  
I mean, it's lovely.  
And I feel so grateful to be in a place, you know,  
to have reached the age I've reached,  
to be in reasonable good health,  
to have a dear old stone tumble down the house,  
to be in a good community of people,  
to be in a country that isn't quite fallen through,  
like so much of the rest of the world.  
So yeah, I'm happy enough to be there.  
Do you have a piano?  
I do.  
It's not as grand as the other one.  
I don't play much anymore.  
Really, because when I sit down, I'm so rusty,  
I can't bear to hear myself.  
Robin, I loved your book and I've loved speaking with you.  
Thank you for being my guest.  
Thank you so much.  
You've been lovely.

Thank you.