
SYLVIA AND THE BIRDS

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CONTENTS

THIS BOOK is about AN AMAZING WOMAN who has helped over 140,000 SICK, INJURED and LOST BIRDS.

No wonder so many people call her THE BIRD LADY.

This book will show you lots of ways you can LOOK AFTER BIRDS, too.

LET'S GO MEET HER! But first we have to get past a couple of CHATTY KERERŪ...


So how do you become a BIRD LADY?
YOU SEW A CAPE AND A SUIT, STUDY MARTIAL ARTS & LIFT LOTS OF WEIGHTS
NO, YOU GOTTA BE SMART! READ A LOT OF BOOKS!


YOU FIGHT ALL THE BADDIES— BANK ROBBERS, MEGALOMANIACS, CATS
YOU READ EVERY ORNITHOLOGY BOOK EVER PUBLISHED
YOU SLINK DOWN DARK ALLEYWAYS
YOU SPEND A LOT OF TIME IN LIBRARIES
YOU GOTTA BE FIERCE
YOU GOTTA BE SMART
FIERCE!
SMART!
CAN WE AGREE ON ONE THING? YOU'VE GOT TO HAVE A LOT OF BIRDS. ALL THROUGH YOUR HOUSE THERE SHOULD BE AVIARIES FULL OF EXPENSIVE, EXOTIC BIRDS
AVIARIES! *SHUDDER*
I HOPE I NEVER END UP IN ONE OF THOSE!
YOU'D NEED A SIDEKICK TOO!
TO BUST YOU OUT OF THE AVIARY?
TO DO MARTIAL ARTS!
I BET YOU'D MAKE A LOT OF MOOLAH SELLING THOSE BIRDS!
HI-YA!
WHOA!
NEVER MIND A SIDEKICK— YOU'D NEED A GOOD ACCOUNTANT!


LOOK, YOU FELLAS, I DON'T SEE MYSELF AS A SUPERHERO
I CERTAINLY DON'T HAVE A LOT OF MONEY
AND I HAD NO IDEA WHEN I WAS YOUNGER THAT I'D END UP WORKING WITH BIRDS & PEOPLE WOULD CALL ME THE BIRD LADY
OR THAT I'D HAVE MY SIDEKICK, MISSY, THE THIRD OF MY BIRD DOGS. SHE USED TO HERD MY RECUPERATING PENGUINS!
SO WHAT EXACTLY IS A BIRD LADY?
SOMEONE WHO FIXES SICK & INJURED BIRDS - I SPENT 35 YEARS WORKING WITH ALL KINDS OF BIRDS


I PROBABLY MENDED ABOUT 4000 A YEAR!
THAT'S 140,000 BIRDS!
HA HA HA HA
SQUARK!


SO NOT A SUPER-HERO?
AND NOT RICH?
OH, WE WERE POOR WHEN I WAS YOUNG! I WAS BORN ON A FARM IN MATAMATA IN 1933, DURING THE GREAT DEPRESSION.
LIKE A LOT OF FARM WORKERS AT THE TIME, MY FATHER DIDN'T EARN VERY MUCH MONEY
EVERY NIGHT, WE ATE THE SAME DINNER BECAUSE DAD COULD GET THE MEAT FOR FREE.


BUT I DON'T WANT RABBIT STEW
YOU'LL EAT THAT STEW OR FEEL THE LASH OF MY BELT


WHEN MY LITTLE SISTER, FRANCES, WAS STILL TINY, MY MOTHER PACKED A FEW BAGS...


TICKET OFFI

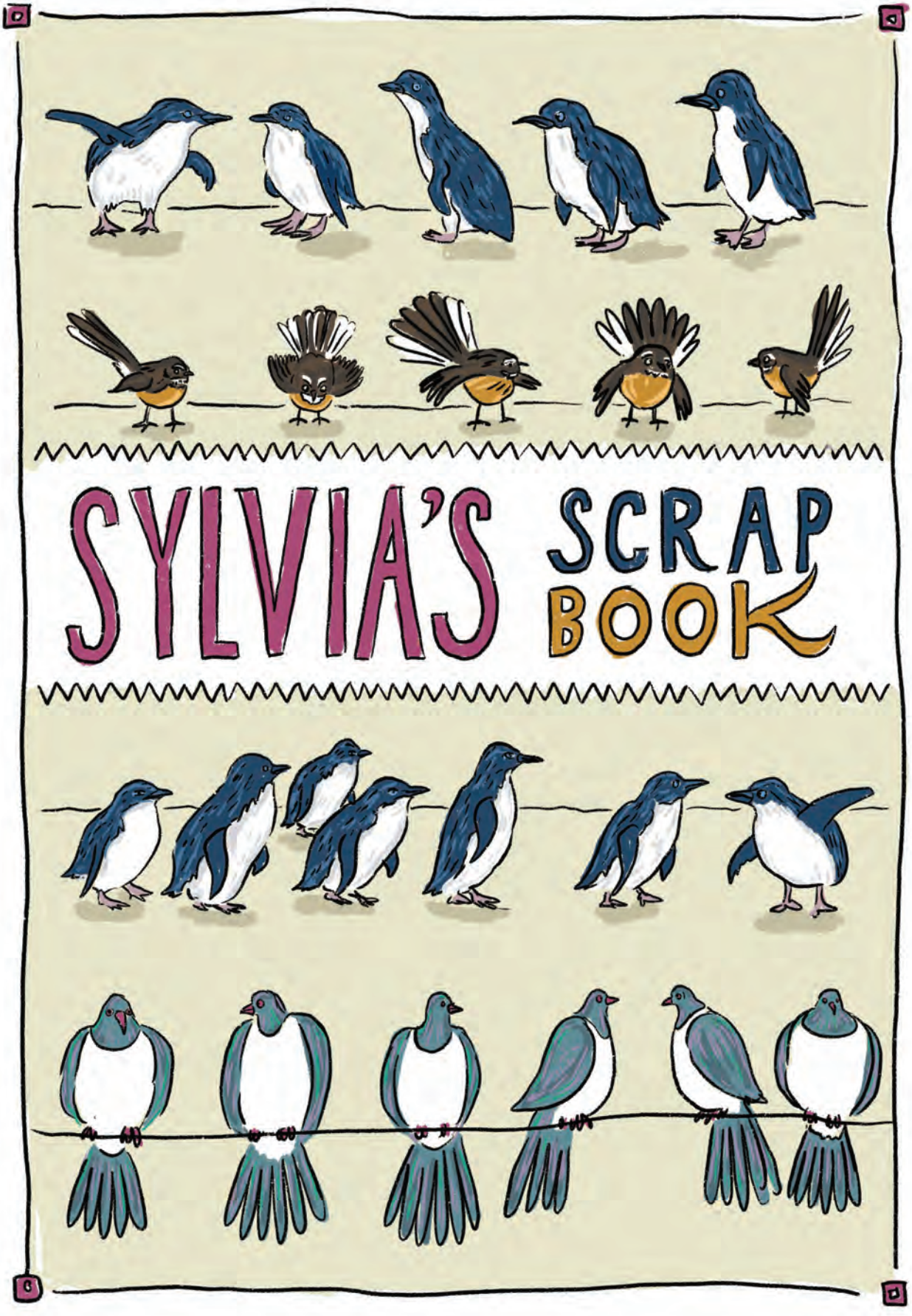

...AND TOOK US TO AUCKLAND


... TO LIVE WITH HER PARENTS. SHE'D BEEN UNHAPPY ON THE FARM WITH MY DAD FOR A LONG TIME, I THINK.
SHE WANTED A FRESH START.
NOW WHAT ARE WE GOING TO FEED YOU?
THERE ARE A LOT OF YOU
YOU KNOW THINGS ARE TOUGH AROUND HERE, LIL—THE PENSION IS ONLY ENOUGH FOR YOUR FATHER AND ME. CAN'T YOU TRY AGAIN WITH YOUR HUSBAND?
I CAN'T, MUM. YOU KNOW WHAT HE'S LIKE.
WE HAD ONLY BEEN AT MY GRANDPARENTS' A LITTLE WHILE, THOUGH, WHEN MUM LEFT ME, BOB, AND ALAN THERE, & TOOK FRANCES.
WE NEVER FOUND OUT WHERE SHE WENT.

OUR GRANDMA & GRANDPA WERE OLD, AND THEY DIDN'T HAVE THE ENERGY—OR THE MONEY—TO BRING UP THREE CHILDREN.


OF COURSE, WE DIDN'T EVEN MAKE IT ONTO THE TRAIN
YOU DIDN'T?!!
PEOPLE GOT WORRIED ABOUT THREE KIDS SITTING THERE ALONE
THE POLICE GOT INVOLVED AND WE WERE MADE WARDS OF THE STATE
THIS MEANT WE WOULD BE LOOKED AFTER BY FOSTER PARENTS.


I CAN'T IMAGINE THAT
LEAVING CHICKS BEHIND BEFORE THEY FLEDGE?
UNTHINKABLE!
RAISING OUR CHICK TOGETHER— THOSE WERE THE HAPPIEST 40 DAYS OF MY LIFE!
IT WOULD BE NICE IF SHE FLEW BY
I MISS HER, TOO
WHAT'S THAT YOU'VE GOT THERE, MISSY?
SYLVIAS SCRAPBOOK
IT'S MY SCRAPBOOK
SYLVIA'S
CAN WE SEE? CAN WE SEE?


SYLVIA'S SCRAP BOOK

CUCKOOS in the NEST

Sylvia, Frances, Betsy and Johnny at the 'Borehams', 1939

In this photo I am at the first foster home I was sent to with my brothers, Bob and Alan. Wards of the state like us were given to foster parents because our real parents couldn't take care of us properly. Mr and Mrs Boreham were old, and they already had 10 kids at their place when we arrived. They made us feel as if it was all too much work for them. Perhaps we seemed like baby birds, our mouths always open for food.

I'm six in this photo. By that time we had been with the Borehams for a few years. It was 1939, just after the Second World War with Germany had begun. We listened to all the exciting and frightening things happening overseas on the radio. We saw the soldiers marching in the streets as everyone waved them off to go and fight, but the only real change in our lives was the food we ate. You had to go to the shop with a ration book to collect your little bit of meat and sugar and so on for the week; there was never enough of it to go around.

Now, see that girl in the middle with the same haircut as me — that's my sister Frances. One day she turned up out of nowhere, a skinny little thing with bright red hair. My brothers and I were so happy to have her back — once we realised who she was, that is. My mother must've just dropped her off and left again. The other little girl is Betsy. We were together in the foster home for many years, and she was like another sister to us. The little fellow is Johnny. When new children came to the home, we just accepted them as our new brothers and sisters.

You can see that I have quite a few holes in my jumper. Because we were state wards, the government was in charge of what happened to us, and we only got two sets of clothes a year — one for summer and one for winter. I look a bit of a scruff here, but I did try very hard to take care of my outfits. I even walked barefoot to school to try to keep my shoes intact for as long as possible. I left home with them on, then stopped a little way down the road and put my socks and shoes in my bag until I arrived at the school gate. But I grew like a runner bean, so nothing ever lasted a whole season.

BIRDS of a FEATHER

Frances, Betsy and me

Frances, Betsy and I mostly hung about together. We played outside because apart from meal times we had to stay out in the garden until we went to bed. We could play in the washhouse if it was raining, but if the weather was fine the Borehams would say 'Kids, outside!' We girls did a lot of chores, though, so there wasn't a lot of time for games. We looked after the little ones and washed all the clothes — that took ages.

Bob and Alan got to do chores like chopping wood and mending fences. I thought those jobs looked much more fun.

Although we had to work hard, we still thought we were lucky because we had been kept together as brothers and sisters, and a lot of the other state wards we knew had been split up. But our luck was about to change.

ON THE WING

MISSING BOY, AUCKLAND

Since 30th ultimo, Robert John (Bob) Mitcheson, age sixteen, height 5 ft 6 in., school boy, native of New Zealand, medium build, sallow pimply complexion, dark brown hair. At 7pm on above date he left his home at [redacted] to attend a parade of the Home Air Force Training Corps. He was in uniform, and is believed to be in possession of a grey tweed suit coat and a pair of long navy-blue trousers. Later that same day, the uniform was found in a neighbour's garden, under a hedge. The following morning, a note stating that he had run away to work on an orchard in the Far North was found under his pillow. Robert normally resides with Mrs Elspeth Boreham in whose care he was placed by the Education Department.

By the time Bob was a teenager, he and our foster mother clashed more and more. The stricter she got, the bolder he became. Although she was quite old, she could still pack quite a wallop. There was no way Bob would hit her back. So, one night, he just ran away.

It was years and years before we were reunited.

This is me at Northcote Intermediate. We moved schools, and foster homes, after Mrs Boreham died suddenly, and Mr Boreham couldn't take care of all the children on his own. We lived with the Hills, just down the road from our new school.

Even though I was 10, I was put in the class for nine-year-olds. There had never been time or space to do proper homework or to go over what we'd learned at school and so, back then, I just thought I was stupid.

Later, I realised that my brain worked just fine.

FINE FEATHERS *make* FINE BIRDS

Did you notice that my year group didn't have a uniform? That made it very easy to pick out the state wards like me because we wore the same thing every day, and our clothes became shabbier as the term progressed. When I moved up a year and needed a uniform, we had to go to the Social Welfare office in the city. We were taken into a room where there were big cupboards full of uniforms and we could pick our sizes. It was exciting, even though we felt second-best.

No one at school wanted to be friends with us. We didn't have nice things to share because we didn't have mums and dads to buy them for us.

We even had to get our books and pens from the headmaster, while everyone else brought theirs from home. It always felt a bit shameful, as if we had done something naughty.

It was the same at Sunday School: the only friends we had were our brothers and sisters and the other foster children. However, there was one super thing about Sunday School for Frances, Betsy and me, and that was singing. We were told we sounded like little songbirds.

One day the popular radio station 1ZB came to our church to record children singing for their Sunday programme, and we were the ones who were chosen. It was exciting to have microphones and recording machines placed in front of us. We tried our hardest to sing without mistakes. People couldn't see our tattered clothes on the radio; they could only hear our voices.

BIRDS of PASSAGE

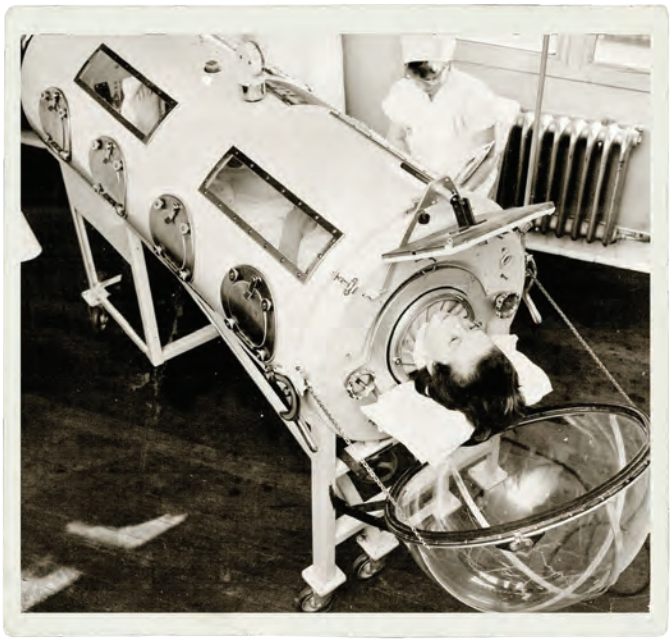
Frances and me, 1947

Some big changes came when I was 14 and Frances was 13, which is when this picture was taken. I think the baby must have been one of the foster children at the Hills' place. It doesn't surprise me that I am the one holding the baby. I was always chosen to look after the little ones. I liked taking care of them — but changing their nappies wasn't nearly as much fun as cuddling and playing with them.

Around this time, an unexpected visitor turned up at the Hills' house: our father. He was renting a house nearby, and working as a plumber. He also had a new wife. He asked us to come and live with them, which was the last thing we wanted because all we could remember were the bad things about him — mostly from our brother Alan's stories.

Frances and I had no choice. We moved almost immediately, leaving Northcote High School for Takapuna Grammar School. Alan refused to go. He found a job as a mechanic's apprentice instead.

CAGED birds



The iron lung for polio patients

Not long after we had moved to our father's house, a polio epidemic broke out and all the schools in the North Island closed early for the year. The radio constantly blared out the news that children could die or end up permanently disabled by the disease.

There were pictures in the newspapers of girls and boys in coffin-sized machines called iron lungs, terrible-looking boxes which breathed for you by changing the air pressure around your body. We were home-schooled until the end of Easter 1948. In a way, this was similar to the Covid-19 lockdowns.

When the four-month school closure was over, my father told me it was best if I didn't bother going back to school, because I was too stupid. He said I should get a job instead. So, I began work at a local clothing factory. It was a very boring job, but a lot of other girls my age did the same thing, and I liked earning money.

Frances and I did not enjoy living with our father, though. He felt more like a scary stranger than a parent. We vowed that as soon as we turned 16, we would leave his house.

Like a DUCK to WATER

In 1949, I was playing for the Devonport basketball team.
It wasn't the type of basketball you'll be familiar with today.

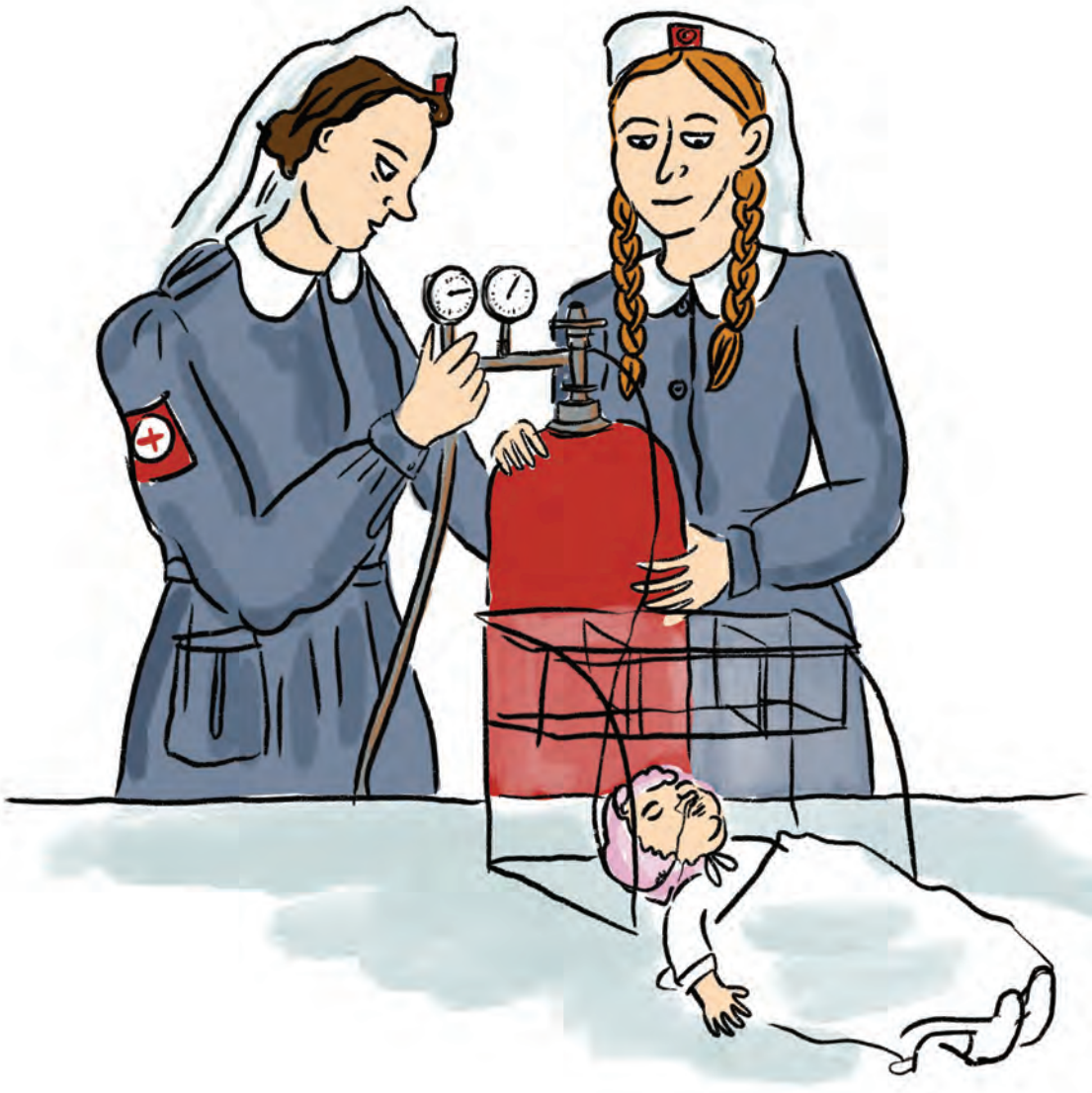
For a start, it was played outdoors, nine-a-side. Over the years, it transformed into what we now call netball. It wasn't until 1970 that the game received its name-change. Luckily, in the late 1970s, there was a change of uniform, too. The gear we are wearing in this photograph is what we wore on court. It was awful on a wet day, with all those heavy clothes sticking to you.

The winning North Shore Division of Nurse Cadets

Every Friday evening, Frances and I trained as St John Nurse Cadets at the local hall. I won lots of certificates, and my instructor said that she thought I should be a nurse. It was hard to believe her words after a long time of being told that I was not intelligent enough to be at school.

In our last year as cadets, we were two of four girls chosen for the North Shore division to compete against other teams. We were given imagined accident scenes or nursing scenarios, and the most medically correct responses received the highest points.

Winning that competition was one of the best things that had ever happened to me. It made me believe in myself. Today, girls and boys can join the St John Penguins (ages 6 to 8) and the Cadets (ages 8 to 18).



I began my formal nurse training as soon as there was a vacancy at Cornwall Hospital in Epsom.

Nurse training in those days was a lot like an apprenticeship. You learned on the job, watching experienced nurses. Cornwall was the only hospital for old people in the whole of Auckland, so it was very busy.

I also trained at Middlemore Hospital, where most of the patients were soldiers who had come back from the war injured and in need of ongoing care and rehabilitation.

I spent some time at the Wilson Home (then called the Wilson Home for Crippled Children), too, working with girls and boys who had polio, cerebral palsy and other conditions that made movement difficult for them.

This photograph from the 1940s shows children from the home being taken to the local beach, St Leonards, for swimming and physical therapy. It really helped their bodies and their minds.

Taking Wing

By the time I was 17, I was almost a fully trained nurse. I could clean, suture and dress wounds, splint broken bones, administer medication, and make sure my patients were bathed and comfortable.

LOVE birds

One evening on duty, I met a young orderly called Allan Beaumont, who was working at the hospital while he was studying to be a teacher. We became boyfriend and girlfriend pretty soon afterwards.

In 1951, when I was 18, we decided to get married. Allan had been offered a job in Piopio, near Te Kūiti, and I agreed to go with him. I didn't feel upset about having to give up nursing. It was just what happened in those days: when you became a man's wife — often very young — your husband usually chose the direction your life together would take.

Nesting

At the age of 19 I gave birth to our first child, Clifford. I found being a mother easy after having looked after so many babies and having been a nurse.

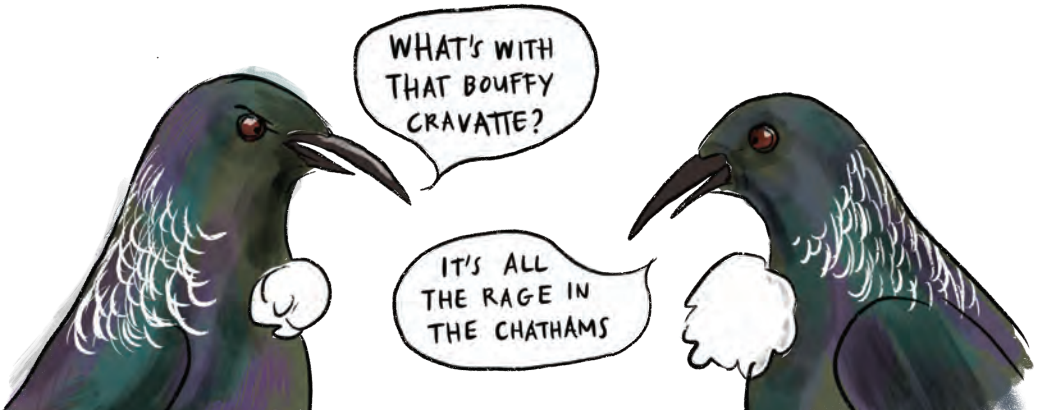
Piopio wasn't famous then for being the location of the Trollshaws in *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* — it was a farming town. My favourite thing about Piopio was that it was named after the extinct native thrush, and the streets were all named after birds native or endemic to New Zealand: kākā, kea, kiwi, ruru, tūī, huia and moa. Huia and moa are extinct, but in this special place, you can still see them — on the street signs, at least.

Cliff, Greg and David in Maruia

Next, we went to Christchurch, where our sons Greg and David were born, then to Maruia, near the Murchison Valley on the West Coast.

For the next three years we lived on Wharekauri Chatham Island, where our fourth son, Llewellyn, was born. There were so many extraordinary things about this place. Did you know that Chatham Island is 45 minutes ahead of the rest of New Zealand? So Wekas (that's what Chatham Islanders call themselves) always welcome the new year ahead of Kiwis!

The birds on Chatham are different, too. Tūī are larger and have a bigger, tuftier poi at their necks. The parea or Chatham Island pigeon looks like a big, fat kererū, but has a paler back and an orange tip to its beak.



For the next 12 years we lived on the West Coast of the South Island, on a farm at Houhou, near Hokitika. My youngest son, Andrew, was born there. The boys spent their free time building ponga huts and canoes out of wood and calico, hunting possums and selling the dried skins for pocket money. It was a rough-and-tumble kind of existence, but they seemed to love it.

Godwits Return

One day my husband told me he didn't want to be married to me anymore. It was a big shock, but sometimes things like this happen. I was very sad but I had to move on. I decided to go back to Auckland with Greg, David, Llewellyn and Andrew. Cliff stayed behind to go to teachers' college in Christchurch.

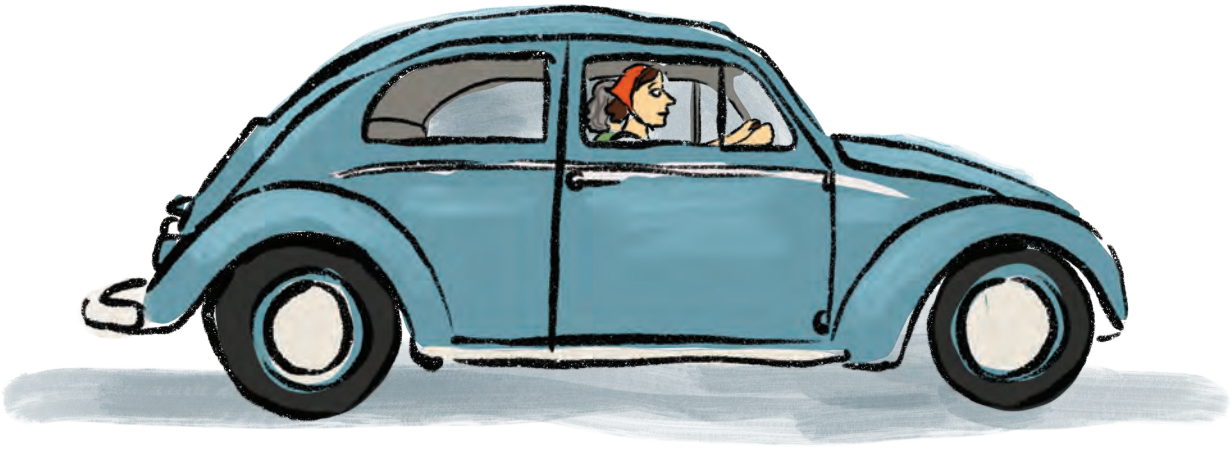
I was very lucky because my brother Alan bought a little dairy in Takapuna with a house at the back so that my boys and I would have a place to live and work. The boys all helped me in the shop. Quite a few of the customers were children from the Wilson Home, across the road, where I had done my training as a young nurse.

The dairy gave us a good income for a while, but it wasn't long before the new supermarkets and malls took away a lot of my customers. The business was failing and we had to shut down.

I didn't need to think long about what to do next. I walked over to the Wilson Home, asked the new matron if she had any positions vacant, and just like that, I was back doing the thing that I enjoyed most. The young matron, Elaine Dow, made it a very happy place for the children. Because many of them didn't have a full-time home and family of their own, Elaine tried to provide them with the next-best things: care, security and lots of experiences similar to daily family life. We took the children to parks, camping, climbing and swimming at the local beaches — we even had a trip to Disneyland. Do you know, I'm still in touch with some of those children I cared for back then.

Migrations

After about 10 years, I left the Wilson Home and began caring for people in their own homes. I'd help some of them get out of bed and get showered and dressed in the morning; I took others shopping or made them something for lunch.



I liked one of my first clients the instant I met him. His name was Cliff, and he was a widower and retired teacher. He had broken his back when he fell from a ladder. Cliff needed help getting around and with doing the chores. On some days, after my shift, he would invite me to stay for a cup of tea. Over time we came to enjoy each other's company so much that we decided to get married.

One morning after we had been married for a little while, I saw an interesting advertisement in the local paper. The Bird Rescue Centre was looking for people to feed baby birds, every two hours, from daylight to dark, for the next month. Once they had their full feathers and could feed themselves, they would go back to the centre and could then be released into the outside world.

Well, I must have done a good job with the little blackbirds I was given, because the centre asked me to take on some baby starlings. I was totally hooked. I loved helping birds just as much as I had loved helping people, and so I just kept doing it!


I LOOKED AFTER BIRDS FOR 35 YEARS, BUT I'M GETTING ON A BIT, SO I DECIDED TO RETIRE. LUCKY FOR ME, I HAD PLENTY OF YOUNG HELPERS WHO HAVE NOW TAKEN ON THE MANTLE OF BIRD RESCUER...

CHARLIE COMES TO VISIT