

Overcoming tragedy

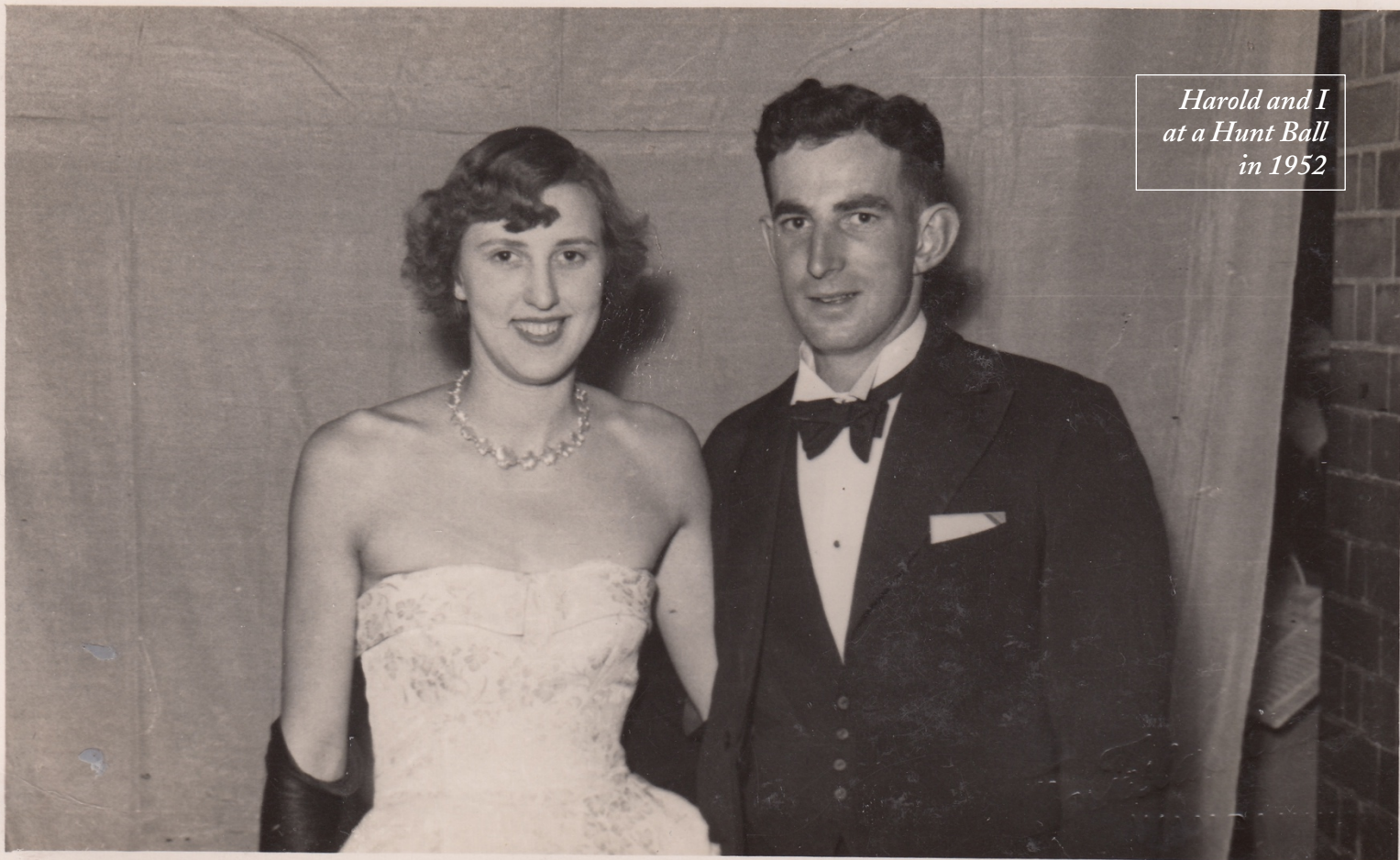
On 14 August 1960 I won the Tirau Golf Championships and returned home to the farm and my mother who was there to babysit the kids. Harold and I were going out that night to a farewell event in Putaruru for our doctor who was moving to the States to set up practice. We planned to leave the party reasonably early to listen to a cricket game on the radio at home as no one we knew owned a television set. We left at midnight in our Ford Zephyr car and were driving right outside the doctor's surgery in Putaruru at thirty miles an hour (the speed limit at the time) when a car came flying towards us from the opposite side of the road. It hit us head on. I can remember every detail of it; the headlights coming towards us, the almighty BANG I heard followed by a horrible sensation. 'This is it,' I thought as I put my hands up to protect my face and smashed through the car's windscreen. There were no seat belts in cars then.

The impact killed Harold instantly and the other driver died at the scene too. My golf clubs were still in the back of the car and they weren't even touched, it was only the front of the car that was impacted. Somebody came to help and once they found into an ambulance asking where my husband was. I was very confused and thought that Harold and I were at home and needed to kiss the children goodnight. The ambulance driver said Harold was following behind us in another ambulance. I can remember everything even though it's nearly sixty years ago; truly it was just unreal.

We arrived at Waikato Hospital and I was still asking where my husband was. You wouldn't believe it, but I was wearing a red astrakhan coat which had soaked up and disguised just how much blood I'd lost. By this stage I'd lost such a quantity they thought I was going to die! A young doctor on duty operated straight

away on my injuries and gave me a blood transfusion which saved my life. I'd suffered serious injuries to my back, multiple lacerations to my face, all tendons on both hands were cut and both arms broken (the tendons were cut because I put my hands up to protect my face). I couldn't move either hand, I received masses of stitches in my face and hands and both arms were in plaster. The senior doctors at the hospital told me

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*Harold and I
at a Hunt Ball
in 1952*

that the young doctor made an excellent job of the operation.

When I woke up in the ward after the operation, the doctor told me Harold was dead. To say it was traumatic is an understatement. I was only twenty-nine years old and I'd been through the mill; lost a husband, a father and - here I was left to rear three kids. It was just awful. I was pretty down before I was told the news; I wasn't good and obviously this just made me worse. I didn't want to live. On the morning of the accident, the police knocked on the door at the farmhouse where my mother was babysitting the children, to tell her that her daughter was in Waikato Hospital fighting for her life, and that her son-in-law had been killed instantly in a car accident. She was devastated.

From then on, the families on both sides rallied around to help with whatever they could. With two arms in plaster and no mobility in my hands whatsoever, I needed help, and while in hospital the nurses fed me. My older brother Ted visited me every day for the first two weeks in hospital and he became

like a father to me. I couldn't see the kids as children weren't allowed in hospitals in those days. It was Ted who told the children their father wouldn't be coming home, which was pretty traumatic when you think about it. My mother never really got over the shock.

I progressed through the stages of grief and I remember I was full of anger; this guy was drunk...we were doing the right thing on the road...and it still happens in today's society. Up until this point, life had been tracking along happily living on a beautiful farm, wonderful kids, a lovely husband then all of a sudden, BANG! I was only a young girl really, who had met a farmer, got married, had three beautiful children and was living without problems; we had everything. I wouldn't wish such a tragedy on anybody. I was depressed and didn't want to exist. I knew this was selfish, but I didn't care anymore.

My inspiration

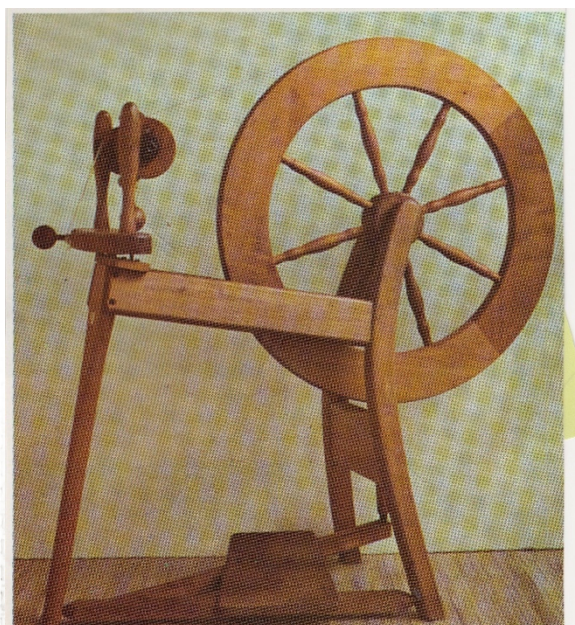
After two weeks in the hospital my brother Ted told me he was bringing the kids over to see me. I knew I had to, but I didn't really want to see them, and I was very nervous. I'd lost teeth, had stitches all over my face and massive bruising and was still with two arms in plaster – what a fright! Frank was nine years old; Richard was seven and Kaye just five. Ted came to pick me up and I was wearing a pink quilted dressing gown; he'd brought the kids over to Hamilton Lake as they couldn't come to the hospital. I could only just walk at this stage and with the doctor on one side of me and my brother on the other, they dragged me down the corridor of the hospital and loaded me into the waiting car; the exact same model as we had the accident in. It was a huge hurdle for me to get into a car, any car, let alone the same model. The problem was that I had remained conscious during the impact and remembered everything. Every fibre in my body resisted the attempts to get me in that car but somehow, I managed it and we drove to the lake nearby.

From the minute I saw those children I decided to live. A voice inside my head spoke loudly and said, "Barbara you've got to get your act into gear, this is what you've got to do now. Look after these beautiful children – you are all they've got." I looked at their little faces and it was, "Come on, get on with it!" I was left alive to rear them, there was no other option – I had to. Getting into that car and seeing those children was a major turning point in my life. It was the difference between me living or dying. I made the choice then and there in the depths of despair to carry on and to be positive. They inspired me to fight for my life. It was the best thing to have done at the time and it just changed things totally. I returned to hospital and started to get better.

After four weeks in hospital, I returned home to the farm with my arms in plaster and my face was still ghastly. I couldn't do anything for myself of course with hands that wouldn't move, and a housekeeper helped for the first few months. One of the treatments involved dipping my hands into a hot wax bath for a time each day, which I continued for six weeks after my stitches were removed. I've had

problems with my hands and back all through life since that accident.

Years later my friend who was a spinner suggested it could be good for my hands and showed me some items she had spun. I'd never even seen spinning of wool, apart from in magazines, and during the discussion we decided to visit Ashford Handicrafts in Ashburton the next day – I was ready to try anything to improve the movement in my hands. We visited the spinner's shop and came away with a traditional spinning wheel for twenty-five pounds in the back of the car. As soon as we were home, I found some wool and sat at the spinning wheel. I couldn't use my hands very well as all the tendons were ripped but I'll never forget the moment I knew I could do it – it was a genuine Eureka moment. 'I've got it!' I became very excited. Perseverance is a very tough word. It took about six months before I started to feel the benefits; it was a gradual process, but I did notice more movement in my fingers each day. I knew then that spinning was going to be a fantastic therapy for my hands and the more I did it, the more I wanted to do it.



The Ashford Traditional Spinning wheel that I bought for twenty-five pounds in 1963