

# MY UNEXPECTED JOURNEY

A Memoir of Fandom

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Stichting  
De Wereld Leest

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# INTRODUCTION

## A Tale or Two to Tell

In a leafy North Brisbane suburb, there lives a *Hobbit* fan. Peter Kenny's single storey home is painted a cheerful green, his lawn and garden well-tended. It's the house of someone who delights in making things grow. In front of the door, a doormat proclaims: 'Welcome to Hobbiton!'

I turn to my wife Kelly and our kids, who are accompanying me on my first visit to Peter. 'I reckon we're at the right house.'

The kids smile a little nervously as I ring the doorbell. They've come here on the promise of seeing Peter's amazing collection of Tolkien-related treasures. That and the jam-and-cream cake Kelly has tucked under her arm.

Peter greets us at the door with a friendly grin and a wave. 'Welcome, welcome. Oh, cake! I love cake—don't get to eat it very often these days, though. Hang on, I'll pop it in the kitchen and show you around.'

Later, Kelly will tell me she never met anybody who so reminds her of Bilbo Baggins. Peter is not particularly tall, with a round smiling face and mop of grey hair. If first impressions are anything to go by, Peter is a kindly soul. He is clad in light green slacks, a bottle-green

## CHAPTER 1

# The Slopes of Mount Sunday

*'We pulled over, of course, to discover the grey wizard was our  
"alpine" guide for the day.'*

New Zealand, March 2010.

Far ahead, to the west, snow-capped mountains loomed.

The van we travelled in had pulled to the side of the road at the top of a hill. The sight before us was breathtaking: the broad Rangitata Valley, with tall mountains at its sides, the valley narrowing as it stretched towards the Southern Alps in the distance. The wide Rangitata River ran from the mountains left of the valley's centre, with several small tributaries joining its swift waters. Right of centre in the valley stood a solitary hill. Steep rocky cliffs were on three sides. The side facing away from the Alps was a steep grassy slope. This was our quest, to climb to the top of Mount Sunday.

As I looked upon the object of my quest, I could not help but feel a sense of trepidation, but also the excitement of adventure. Thanks to a horrific car accident forty years beforehand, one of my legs was (and still is) shorter than the other. After many surgeries, bone infections and years of recovery, some memories still haunted me. Sometimes

the trauma was a terrible weight around my neck, pain a constant companion. Recently retired from teaching, I was no longer young and the way seemed so long. Here I was, at the bottom of Mount Sunday, staring up at its sheer slopes.

Mount Sunday is a rocky hill whose summit reveals an unrestricted view of the vast surrounding landscape. It also happens to be the location Peter Jackson selected to build the exterior sets for Edoras, capital of Rohan and site of the king's golden hall. Standing like a sentinel over the Hakatere Conservation Park, with silver streams at its feet hurrying to join the nearby Rangitata River, I believe Mount Sunday is the perfect natural location for Edoras as Tolkien describes it in Chapter Six of *The Two Towers*.

One of the more remote locations from the *Lord of the Rings* movies, it is accessible to the public only along a dirt road over ranges and rivers. Carved from a glacial valley and buffeted by winds, to me Mt. Sunday seemed the ultimate physical challenge.

Right in that moment, my precious books and comfortable chair were far away, yet the thrill and wonder of exploration leapt up inside me. This was not my first trip to New Zealand, but was my first visit to this location. Reaching the top would be a challenge to overcome. Still, I had come far and through many adventures not only to see this mountain, but also to climb it. Part of me has always yearned for rugged expanses, snow-capped mountains, the sigh of pine trees and the rush of water. Had the accident quashed that side of my nature? I was determined to prove to myself that it hadn't.

Fortunately, I had my very own fellowship to aid me: some of my favourite Kiwis, the James family. They run the fabulous Lord of the Rings Red Carpet Tours. I have travelled with them on seven separate occasions. A family-run company, the James family are the most welcoming and helpful tour guides I have encountered in all my years of overseas travels. They have taken me to the magical Hobbiton movie set in Matamata, the beautiful Mavora Lakes and other unique places. Their tours take you to remote movie locations

surrounded by stunning scenery, not all of which are accessible to day tourists. During the tour there are organised activities to enjoy, artists and actors to meet, as well as visiting the Weta Workshop and other places of interest. Accommodation in hotels and meals provided are excellent. Each time I have travelled with the company, there have been new experiences to enjoy. Perhaps the greatest is the life-long friendships I have made with fellow travellers. How highly do I recommend the Red Carpet tours? I have travelled with them seven times and am making new plans to travel with them again in the not too distant future.

The trip to Mount Sunday was not for the faint of heart. To reach the mountain, you drive across the Canterbury Plains and on into the Rangitata Valley. The last part of the drive is on dirt roads. After spending the night in Christchurch, we were off. My fellow pilgrims that day hailed from Poland, France and the United States. A fellowship made up of strangers from distant lands, united by our love of Tolkien's world.

The driver of our van and tour guide was a delightful, jolly fellow named Vic James. Passing through the small town of Mount Somers, he chuckled that he sometimes picked up hitchhikers there. 'Day trekkers, you know. If you see one and think we should give them a lift, let me know.'

Minutes later, who should we spot on the side of the road? Gandalf the Grey, with his long snowy beard, rough-spun cloak, pointed hat and gnarled wooden staff, was waving us down to stop.

We pulled over, of course, to discover the grey wizard was our 'alpine' guide for the day. His name was Derek, a local, who had been an extra for the Edoras scenes in the films. If anybody knew the area, it was him. Now well into his sixties, he had the physique and muscular legs of a mountain climber, or perhaps a soldier of the many-levelled Minas Tirith. For the record, the beard was not false.

After you park your vehicle, you have to ford streams which flow past the base of Mount Sunday. There is a footbridge over the largest

stream nowadays, but when I first went there you had to wade across the knee-deep water. It was icy cold as it flowed past my bare legs. Derek made sure we stuck to the path, as it cut through an area of spiky thorn bushes.

With the sun shining down upon the expanse of grassland and craggy mountains on the horizon, it was easy to imagine the Riders of Rohan sweeping across the plain or ten thousand Uruk-Hai marching with pikes in their hands towards Helm's Deep. The establishing shots for Helm's Deep were also filmed in this valley, not far from here.

The way up was arduous for me. Climbing the first part of the grassy slope is quite steep and then you follow a well-trodden path along a ridge leading up to the summit. Each side of the ridge falls away steeply to the bottom of the hill. My stamina was not what it used to be. But I would not give up, knowing the glory that awaited me atop the mountain. I trudged on, not letting weariness hold me back. Ahead, Derek tirelessly led the way, encouraging us to keep climbing. We stopped for a short break halfway up and took the opportunity to drink some water. As I looked around me, I was aware how high we already were and even from this height the view was amazing. Looking up ahead, the top did not now seem far away.

Following Derek, I felt the courage to go on and a yearning for the freedom of standing atop a mountain, far removed from anything but nature, out in the world with nothing but the silence and calm of the wilderness.

At last, we reached the top, the wind roaring in our ears. Peter Jackson, one of the world's greatest film makers, could not have captured a more perfect view. From the top, it was a three hundred and sixty degree view of a flat, grass-covered plain surrounded by snow-capped mountains. This was the most stunning panorama imaginable.

Weary and footsore, a grin still spread across my face as I looked down upon Middle-earth. I had been swept out of the mundane world and into the realm of Rohan. This was where, in the *The Two*

*Towers* movie, Eowyn stood as she watched a flag tear from its pole and flutter down to the plain below, where she saw riders approaching. This was where Merry Brandybuck kneeled before King Theoden to pledge his fealty; a humble traveller, who had nothing to offer but his service.

The flag in my hands depicted a white horse on a green field. As I raised the flag of Rohan, the wind from the Southern Alps rose in strength, doing its best to rip the flag from my grasp, to send it flying into the air and down to the valley floor. I clung onto the flag with all my strength and lifted it overhead.

This is a poem I wrote, inspired by my climb:

## WHERE HORSES RUN AS FREE AS THE WIND

*Riding across the open lands;  
Riding through a sea of grass;  
The horizon never comes near.  
This land never seems to change.  
To the northern mountains they ride,  
Seeking the king of the golden hall,  
The king of this wide vast land,  
Where horses run as free as the wind.*

*Where mountain peaks pierce the sky;  
There where great rivers are born,  
Sits the king in his ancient hall.  
The hall of legends long told;  
Age old legends of mighty lords;  
Who drove all evil from this vast land.  
The lords of this wide vast land,  
Where horses run as free as the wind.  
Riding hard from the southern lands;*

## CHAPTER 2

# Never Got to Wedding

*'His name was Geoffrey and he was to give me strength of spirit and hope.'*

The trauma of the accident has never quite left me.

It was August, 1970, and I lived in Stafford with my mother and father.

I was twenty-one and my friend Marilyn was getting married. She was the sister of one of my best mates, Mick. Their family lived in the same street as mine, and we were quite close. My mates and I had knocked about quite a bit in the sixties, tinkering with cars and playing records. Marilyn was a little older than I was, and we had bonded as teens over a mutual love of the Beatles. When the Fab Four came to Brisbane, I went to their concert at Festival Hall. I recall seeing George and Paul head-butt each other on stage (accidentally) and hearing the continual screaming of the nearly all-female audience. When Marilyn and her fiancé asked me to emcee at their wedding reception, I felt deeply privileged. It was a real honour to be given such a special duty to perform.

It was a typical August day for suburban Brisbane; blue skies, a light westerly blowing, a nice day for a wedding. The church in

Appleby Road was less than a ten-minute drive from my parents' house. My parents and I were sitting in the church with my girlfriend Bernie, waiting for the bride to arrive, when suddenly my mother realised she hadn't left a key for my sister to get into the house.

My sister, Elaine, was playing in a netball final that day and was unable to attend the ceremony, but would be back home to be picked up on the way to the reception.

"No worries," I said. I took the key and left the church and walked to the car park, but my car was parked in. Just as I turned back toward the church, I saw my mate Crowie about to leave in his own car. I jogged over and asked if he could give me a lift home so I could drop off the key.

"Hop in," said Crowie.

We'd be back in plenty of time for me to not miss the wedding ceremony. Crowie's car was an older model and didn't have seat belts. They weren't compulsory in those days, of course. I hopped in beside him and we took off.

I never made it back to the wedding.

On our way back from my parents' home, we drove down the street and then turned left. At the first intersection we came to, a car on our left came screaming down on us.

I remember looking at Crowie. He gunned his car to try and get away.

Too late. The other car smashed into the passenger rear side of ours. We spun one hundred and eighty degrees.

Next thing I knew, I'd been hurled out of the car like a rock from a sling and slammed into the bitumen. When I came to my senses, I was lying in the gutter, the wreckage of Crowie's car on the footpath above me. It had crashed into a post on the corner, now facing opposite to our previous direction.

I checked my hands first. They were okay. Maybe it wasn't too bad?

Then I went to move my legs, only to meet a wave of excruciating pain. When I looked down, my left foot fell sideways. Compound

fractures to both legs, below the knees. They were a mess, my trousers slick with blood.

Oh, God.

I screamed. People rushed out of their houses. I don't remember much after that, except the ambulance arrived. Bernie showed up, I'm not sure when. She rode in the ambulance with me. All the way to the hospital, I remember her holding my hand and her crying. I was also bleeding from the head, I felt pain all over. Everything became hazy and I have no memory of arriving at the hospital.

Suddenly I was in a trolley bed at the Royal Brisbane Hospital. Throat raw, everything was agony. I was lifted up and taken into surgery.

My memories of the next two weeks in ICU are quite sketchy. Nurses came to check on me often. Others later told me that I wasn't a particularly pleasant patient. Lots of yelling and swearing, I was in so much distress. Both legs were shattered, and I was in plaster up to the hips. One of my arms was strapped up as well.

Later I would learn, apart from my badly injured legs and elbow, I had a skull fracture and cracks in bones of my lower back, pelvis and neck. Although these were not as serious as my legs, they did mean I had to be restricted from any movement for a few weeks. I was immobile.

A few weeks later, a local newspaper ran a small piece about what had happened, with a picture of me looking despondent in the hospital bed. The headline: 'Never Got to Wedding.' The article related the facts of what happened, but not my story. At that time, there was a big push to make seat belts compulsory in cars, and I was made an example of why they were necessary. I not only appeared in a couple of newspapers, but I was also interviewed by a couple of TV news channels. Looking back now, I believe it was pretty insensitive of them, considering my situation.

I ended up spending eleven months in hospital. Most of my time at the Royal Brisbane Hospital was spent in Ward Three D and its