



Source: [Craig S. Smith, 'In Baghdad, Chinese is takeout only', New York Times in International Herald Tribune online, 11/08/05.](#)

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A young woman, about 25, sits on a plinth in a photographic studio. London, 1936. Draped over her body is a shimmering, gossamer wrap. Shoulders bare, she leans towards the camera, elbows resting on a bench. Smiling shyly. Her skin has that milky, filmy quality of a young starlet. The look is glamour, sophistication. Maybe an imitation of a famous stage actress she's seen on a poster.

Why did she do it? Did she find herself, with an afternoon to spare, and flush with cash to pay the photographer? Did she use money wired to her from home? Did she pose like this to say 'Look at me now. I'm different to how you know me.'

She's not so different though. She has forgotten to take off her watch, with its plain leather band and ordinary face. And worse, she's still wearing her wire-rimmed glasses. She may be in London, but she still looks like the girl from Ballarat, country Victoria, Australia.

The young woman is my grandmother. We share the same eyes, the arc of our cheek makes the same shape when we smile. We share the same short-sightedness, but I would have taken my glasses off. You get a more romantic vision that way.

I didn't know this young woman in the photograph. I knew her only as grandma. Sensible, with a husband and four children, one of whom I know as my mother. I sat on her grandma's lap and didn't notice how we looked alike, too distracted by her papery skin and the stories she read me.

When I knew her, she once gave me \$1000 as a gift. Again, she had some money. I think I should have travelled with it, like she did. But instead, I did something silly with it, bought something I no longer own. I regret that. She regretted the photograph, and hated me framing it.

I look at the photograph most days and I wonder why she's wearing her glasses and her watch. Was the shoot just an impulsive way to fill in time before rushing off to find one of the typing jobs she did in the new city? Did she have to run off to read the timetables and make it to the interview on time? Or was it because even though she was on the other side of the world, a million miles away from Ballarat, she didn't know how to transform herself into a London sophisticate?. She looks beautiful, but mostly she looks like a girl from Ballarat.

Transformation must have held her captive. Being in London meant that she could pose for shots like this. She could reinvent herself as someone sophisticated, worldly, experienced. On the luck of inheritance, the young girl who used to climb Black Hill, look over the old gold town where she'd lived her whole life, and wonder whether she'd ever get as far as exotic Melbourne, finally got to London. And so she became the woman she could only be in London in 1936.

She learnt to type and boarded a ship, beckoned by fantasies. Fantasies about England. Fantasies about Europe. Fantasies about places and experiences on the other side of the world. London became her base, but there were other places to see. There's no journal, no letters home left. Only tiny black and white photographs of her travels around Europe. Tiny photographs with tiny, cursory notes scribbled on the back in her scrawly handwriting. They aren't preserved in an album, there's no order to them any more. They're just filed away in some of the boxes of her many treasures. I like to look through them now, and read the notes on the back. Those names seem so romantic, so distant, on the back of the blurry, badly framed shots.

I've visited some of those places myself, battling crowds, taking my own holiday snaps, buying souvenirs. They seem entirely different places to the ones in her photographs. A different time, a different place.

She had a boyfriend on her overseas trip. Eric—the cousin of a friend. He looks like a 1930s spy, but he was a plumber. They met again 60 years later, when she visited him after the death of her husband. He was so excited that he couldn't open his front door to her. They spoke for half an hour through the wire screen before his fingers could finally work the latch. He'd fallen in love with her in Europe, and had never quite let go. Was it her, or was it Europe and her?

Not only did she have romance, she had the romantic's disease: tuberculosis. She used to tell the story of lying in a field in France and feeling, quite suddenly, that perhaps she might just stop breathing. That was the beginning. She caught the disease in 1938, and wrote to her brother Bill, still in Ballarat, swearing him to secrecy. It doesn't sound to me like real-life. More like an old Greta Garbo film. But he told their parents. They, who'd never left Australia, went to pick her up and take her home, just as the war was beginning. I still have the dresses my great-grandmother had made by Georges in Melbourne for the voyage over. The great adventure of her life.

The tuberculosis came back in grandma's old age, and we watched it kill her. But the romance of her travel, of her love affair with the plumber who looked like a spy, her stay in the sanatorium, and my great-grandmother's dress of black and gold quilting are the essence of the story. They seem somehow unrelated to the woman I knew coughing and spluttering, struggling for breath in her last years.

The dresses, the love-affair, the sickness. The scribbled notes and the crumbling black and white photos. Not much, but together they make up her travel tale. A tale that means that the wire-rimmed glasses in the studio shot don't matter at all.

'I'm different to how you know me.'

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Sophie Townsend.