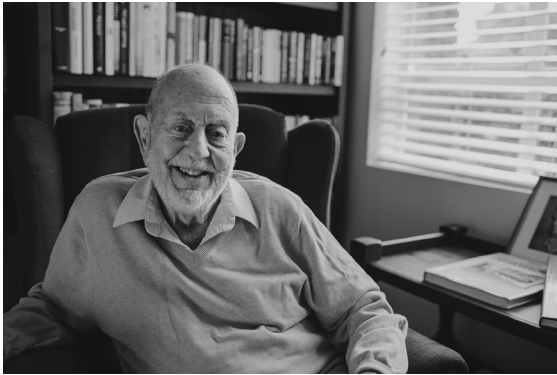


ABOUT THE AUTHOR



J.Crew photography

Peter Yeldham's extensive writing career began with short stories and radio scripts. He spent 20 years in England, becoming a leading screenwriter for films and television, also writing plays for the theatre including *Birds on the Wing* and *Fringe Benefits*, which ran for two years in Paris.

Returning to Australia, he won numerous awards for his mini-series, among them *1915*, *Captain James Cook*, *The Alien Years*, *All the Rivers Run*, *The Timeless Land* and *Heroes*. His adaptation of Bryce Courtenay's novel *Jessica* won a Logie Award for best mini-series.

He is the author of several novels including *Barbed Wire and Roses*, *A Distant Shore*, *Against the Tide* and *A Bitter Harvest*.

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Also by Peter Yeldham

A Bitter Harvest

A Distant Shore

Against the Tide

Barbed Wire and Roses

Glory Girl

Land of Dreams

The Currency Lads

The Murrumbidgee Kid

PETER
YELDHAM

Above the Fold

Where the headlines are

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To the gang of three:

*Lyn who rings every day, Perry who did the first edit and found
a title, and Mary Anne who accompanies me to medical meetings and
interprets what the doctors say.*

ONE

It was a strange time, that summer of 1942 when Claudia Marsden came home. The war was alarmingly close. Soldiers were busy stringing barbed wire barricades along the beaches and installing a gun on the headland. There were ration books, blackouts and a Japanese army already advancing in New Guinea. Perhaps that was why Luke Elliott, thinking of these looming disasters, failed to recognise Claudia, even though her family had once lived next door.

She was just three days younger than Luke. Their mothers had been close friends, and, as a result, he and Claudia shared birthday parties. Luke had hated those parties. At four years old she was fat and wore thick glasses. At six she was not only fatter but bossy, with a loud voice and plaits. To his relief, at nine, the parties ended. Her father, a diplomat, had been transferred to Paris. It was a decade before the family returned home, and by then much had changed. The European war was in its third year; the one in the Pacific had just begun. But the most astounding change was Claudia.

There were no glasses. At nineteen she was slender, with deep blue eyes and soft dark hair that reached her shoulders. She had high cheekbones, a retroussé nose and luminous smile. As for the voice,

when they almost collided in the main street, the voice was mellifluous: he felt sure it could never have been loud or bossy.

“Luke,” was the first word he heard this voice say. “Luke, it’s me.”

He gazed at her. Did he know this gorgeous girl?

“Mental telepathy,” she said, as if reading his confusion. “I woke up this morning thinking of you and our awful birthday parties.”

“Claudia!” He blinked.

“You look a bit stunned.”

“I am. You used to be ...” He stopped himself just in time.

“I used to be fat and bossy,” she said to his astonishment. “My cousin once called me a horror. A fat horror, to quote him.”

“Never,” he said, trying to refute this. “Well, whatever he said, you’re certainly different now.” He found the right words at last. “You’re beautiful.”

“C’ est tres galant, mon cher,” she said.

“What?”

She didn’t translate, just kissed him on both cheeks — a French custom, she said — then impulsively hugged him. Her firm breasts against his chest created an instant frisson. Luke, still searching for words, proposed their reunion be celebrated, but, since there was no pub in their seaside village, he suggested the local milk bar.

“A malted,” she said, as if he’d promised nectar. “I used to dream of them in France.” So, moments later, each with a container and straw, they were busy drinking with their eyes fixed on each other, noisily competing until they reached the froth, Luke wondering if she had a boyfriend — and seriously hoping not.

That afternoon they sat on the beach to catch up with the missing years of each other’s life. Mostly, her life: her family living in luxurious Saint-Germain while Claudia attended a lycée, until Hitler put an end

to it. She told him of their escape from Paris amid streams of terrified refugees, hitching a ride on an army truck to Cherbourg, where a naval corvette took them across the channel.

“It was lucky,” she said. “If we’d been interned my dad might have had a bad time with the Gestapo. He was a military attaché,” she explained, seeing Luke looking puzzled.

Her dad? Of course, he thought. In his reading of thrillers a ‘military attaché’ usually meant a spy. But surely not Gordon Marsden, their one-time neighbour, who took the bus to work each day, and at weekends mowed his lawn and clipped the hedges. Hardly the activities of a secret agent. Or else the perfect cover for one. Luke decided it was probably ridiculous, and her dad’s activities should be a question left until he knew her better.

“How long were you and the family in London?” he asked.

“Nearly two years waiting for a ship.”

“So you were there for the blitz. That must’ve been hell.”

“Not too hellish,” she said, after a moment. “We spent most nights in the Maida Vale tube station. Hundreds of us,” she said with a smile. “It was a good way to meet people and make friends.”

Boyfriends, he thought. *Don’t even go there*, he warned himself, then decided he might as well find out the bad news without delay. “Boyfriends, I suppose you mean?”

She glanced at him with a raised eyebrow. *Wrong!* he decided.

“I know it’s a bit personal,” he attempted to make amends, “but I’m sure there were boyfriends. Perhaps a special one — or, who knows, even a string of the buggers?”

“You are daft,” she said, laughing uproariously. It was a lovely sound, the laughter, and a passing boat crew of lifesavers turned to gaze at her. One gave an appreciative whistle, the others stared amid an exchange of smirks. “Wow,” said the whistler audibly, “what a great sort!”

She waggled fingers at them in a mock wave, then grabbed Luke's hand to join with hers. Their clasped hands, and the loud chorus of disappointment from the boat crew, was a shared moment of pleasure.

"It's not too personal," she replied when the lifesavers had gone by, "but I think you've been dying to ask me that since we met. True or false, Luke?"

"True," he admitted.

"Well, I wasn't a nun," she said, "so there were occasional boy-friends, of course ..."

Of bloody course, he thought gloomily.

"One was special. I cried for two days on the ship when we left England," she said. "I suppose you'll stay in touch," Luke began, when she suddenly added, "but on the third day I decided I was over it." He realised she was gazing at him. "As for my string of buggers — whatever gave you that idea?"

"Just the way you look gave me that idea."

"Oh." The vivid eyes widened. "Goodness! Thank you." She seemed unsure what else to say for a moment, then regained her composure and smiled. "My turn to be inquisitor, I think. So, is there anyone lurking in your life? Some beautiful bird? Or even a flock of them?"

"No," said Luke with a grin.

"Honestly?" Claudia seemed unsure.

"Honestly," he assured her. It was not an answer he'd have been able to give with honesty a week ago. "There was someone, but things changed."

"When?" she asked.

"Er ... recently. Last week, in fact."

"Last week? What happened?"

"I went off her." He hesitated. "No — that's not true. She went off me." He sighed. "In fact, she went off with my best friend. That's what happened." He shrugged, as if to make light of it.

“Your best friend? Must’ve been a blow.”

“A bit of a blow. But I think I’m over it now.”

“I hope you are,” said Claudia. “I mean, the pair of us free and unencumbered.” It seemed a promising comment. A surprisingly hopeful one.

Luke was unaware, but she had often thought of him. When she had known they were coming home, and particularly when they were in the Atlantic, with U-boats hunting freighters like theirs, it had been a nervous time, and she found thinking of Luke helped to ease her fear. She had the advantage of knowing how he looked, for his mother had sent her parents a photo taken on the day he finished school. Now, two years later, he was taller and more mature, but even then she’d thought him good looking, and hoped he’d still be living in the same district, and they’d meet like this. She thought how close the war had come to preventing it from happening.

The ship had reached Ceylon on the seventh of December, the day Japan had attacked the American fleet in Pearl Harbour, and the captain of their vessel planned a hasty return to South Africa. Her father agreed they’d go with him, but then managed to get them seats on the last Qantas flight out of Colombo.

“It was an old Empire flying boat,” she told Luke, “and I was scared we’d be an easy target for fighter planes. I didn’t think we’d reach Darwin, let alone the mooring at Rose Bay. If it had been Mascot, I think I’d have jumped out and kissed the ground.”

Luke was aware of her steady gaze at him. Her words felt like an invitation, so he leaned forward to gently kiss her — just a welcome-home kiss on the cheek, not wanting to push his luck. Then he steered their conversation to other topics. The new house she and her parents had moved into just a few days ago, and how they’d been stuck in Canberra for weeks while her dad attended to various government meetings.

The thought of this started to intrigue Luke; her father clearly had influence. The naval corvette, the last flight out of Ceylon, meetings with government. It was certainly possible he could be like one of those diplomats who were undercover agents. He felt so at ease with her now that he was able to ask: "Claudia, if it's not a silly question, is your dad by any chance a spy?"

She let out a peal of laughter that sent a cluster of nearby seagulls into instant flight. "If he was," she said, "I'm sure I'd be the last to know."

As neat a side-step to the question as I've ever seen on a football field, he thought. That was when he realised they were still holding hands. He had no intention of letting go. Nor it seemed did Claudia.