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How Nellie saved OUR FAMILY



It all began like this:

Then this crucial event happened:

It ended like this:

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Sitting on my bedroom floor, tears rolled down my cheeks. At 10 years old, I'd just spent a wonderful week at my Aunty Nellie's house. She was loving and kind, always surprising me with small gifts, but now I was home, I missed her dearly. Curling her arm around me, my mum, Clare, pulled me into a tight squeeze. 'I know how you're feeling,' she said. 'I missed Nellie when I stopped living with her, too.'

As I stared up at Mum, she gave me a loving smile. She was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. Mum had told me about her upbringing in Nyngan, NSW, with two older sisters, Nellie and Kath, and younger sister, Millie. When they weren't helping their eccentric mother, Eliza, around the house, they would spend hours roaming the countryside.

When four sisters were torn apart, one made a promise she'd never break **Leonie Binge, 60, Mordialloc, Vic**

Mum had a particular soft spot for her dad, Paddy. 'He was always excited to see us when he got home from work,' she smiled. 'I remember cuddling up in his lap as he smoked his pipe.' But when Mum was six, Paddy passed away and Eliza struggled to care for her young girls on her own. Looking for comfort, she quickly fell for another man, Fred Masters. Mum rarely spoke about him. 'He wasn't a nice man,' she'd tell me before quickly changing the subject. All I knew was that shortly afterwards, Eliza married Fred and then something shocking happened. Mum and Millie were sent to an orphanage – where they stayed until they were both 16. As I grew up, Mum told me about the eight years she endured under the strict care of nuns. 'I ran away from the orphanage once because one hit me across the brow with the

cane,' she told me. She gave a nervous giggle as she explained she was caught the next day when she snuck back to find food. 'I should write a book about you,' I always joked to Mum. I went on to marry and have three kids of my own – Lauren, Marcus and Jordan – making Mum a doting grandmother. But when we talked about her childhood, she always reminded me, 'Don't forget to write that book about me.'

Five years ago I had a reason to act. Mum started getting confused. My heart sank as I realised something wasn't right and before long, my brothers, John and Les, and I decided to seek medical help. That was when we realised our precious mum had the early symptoms of dementia. I knew I needed to write her story before all her memories were lost forever. Telling her my plans, she was touched. So I interviewed Mum, Aunty Nellie and Aunty Millie. Sadly, Aunty Kath

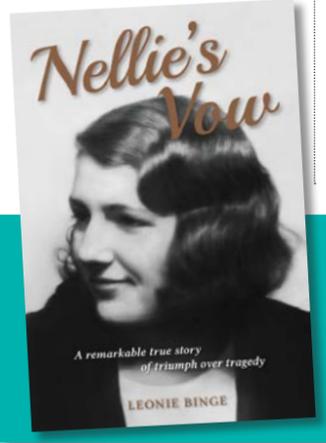


I was puzzled about why my grandmother had sent the girls there

anything as I heard stories of their hardship, was Aunty Nellie's enduring efforts to look after her sisters. As the eldest, she saved every cent she could to visit them. When she married a lovely man, Coolie, they worked tirelessly to get a place of their own so that Mum and Millie could stay with them. 'I made a promise that I would always look after my sisters,' Nellie told me. It was a vow she kept. For two years, I worked furiously to research and gather every detail possible for the memoir. I felt I was in a race against the clock as Mum and her sisters aged. As I was working on the final copy, I got a call from my cousin's wife Marg, saying Aunty Nellie was gravely ill. 'We don't think she'll make

it through the night,' she told me quietly. Devastated that Nellie, 94, might never see the memoir, I urgently printed a copy and raced to her bedside. I had been keeping the title a secret until then. As she stared down at the cover with the words *Nellie's Vow* printed across the top, tears welled in her eyes. She was speechless as she saw the photo of her at 16 years old on the cover. 'This is amazing,' she beamed. Incredibly, the book gave Nellie a new lease of life and she battled on for six more months before passing away in 2013. Soon after, *Nellie's Vow* was finally published. Not only could my own family pass down this incredible story to younger generations, but other people could read about the unbreakable bond between these four amazing women. Now 92, Mum has advanced dementia. Although she

doesn't recognise us anymore, she feels our love and returns it wholeheartedly. I spend hours by her bedside re-telling stories and laughing about times gone by. Even in her old age she is still the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. I just hope this book means her memory will live on forever. ●



Nellie's Vow by Leonie Binge is published by Arbon Publishing, RRP \$29.99. Available in bookstores or online at arbonpublishing.com

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