

**“Something to keep”
For Shannon on your birthday**

Preface

The idea to write this book came to me just before your 21st birthday. The idea of coming of age at 21 is nowadays more an excuse to have a party than an important milestone. It was a much bigger deal as I grew up, a very special birthday that signified the transition from childhood to adulthood. My mother strongly believed that having 21st presents we could keep was far more important than having things we actually liked. I didn't plan to go that far but to me a 21st is still a bit different to other birthdays and I would have loved to give you something you could keep and forever remember your 21st birthday as something special.

Those who know you are probably already laughing. The idea of getting "something to keep" for a person who can't keep anything, is hilarious. I have never in my life known some-one to lose so many things (and believe me I was pretty bad myself). My earliest memory of you losing things was about two weeks after you started school. We went to the lost property section to find a windcheater you had misplaced during the day. We found it! We also found about four other articles of your clothing, taken off, left and forgotten, already in that time! That was just the beginning. I'm sure you remember the famous Bali incident. You had bought a lot of peak caps, they were cheap as chips and you enjoyed bargaining as much as the purchase itself. You left one by the pool, it must have been a favourite because you were quite upset at having lost it, from memory it was the tweety bird one. So off we went to lost property. Happily we found it, amongst about another eight or nine of your caps, in fact as I remember most of the contents of that lost property bin belonged to you. Sadly, it's not something you've grown out of, windcheaters and peak caps have become mobile phones, driver's licences and bank cards, countless replacements.

I was so nervous when you went to the US, begging Steph not to let you hold your passport unsupervised at any stage. Thankfully you returned with passport intact, you did manage to leave your driver's licence behind ☹. It even happened the last time you stayed here, I checked your room carefully to make sure you didn't leave anything behind, I was determined you wouldn't this time. I remember you saying "I will for sure" with such an air of calmness as if to say, leaving stuff behind is part of life. Well you were right. Of all things you left your driver's license at home. "not possible" I thought, I had checked everything, then we realised, left it on the bloody boat ☹. It had been raining when we came back from Great Keppel Island and you had ditched your track suit pants with your driver's licence safely tucked away with your money. Lucky you wanted to buy something or we wouldn't have known until you were checking in at the airport. It was too late to make it back home and out again in time for the plane, particularly with my plane missing anxiety disorder. Lucky Rocky is a small country town where people aren't too fussed about checking ID or we'd have been in a real pickle, so you got on the plane and all was well. Big learning curve for me though, now I don't only need to check your room, but indeed every part of the house and surrounds where you have been, and quite possibly left your trail behind you ☺.

So what do you get for the boy who maybe doesn't have everything but has trouble keeping what he does have? As creative as I can be I couldn't think of anything, until this, a book about you.

So this book is my story about you, for you. It is not your biography. Even though I've known you longer than anyone else, writing a biography would involve a much deeper knowledge of the things about you I don't know (yes I admit there are things I don't know)

and I am sure many things I would prefer not to know. Of course I will refer to times and events in your life but not necessarily in sequence. The timing of events is not as important to me as the impact you've had. The things I most remember and the impact you've had on my life.

In thinking about baby boota, the irrepressible, who made a presence even before he was born into this world, and who took his time doing so, this story is about you, the person you are (at least to me), the things about you that are unique and special and particularly the things that are funny, that have given me so many laughs and so much happiness over the years. You have been such a gift to me. This is my gift to you.

Of course you may well lose the book I give you but the electronic age has provided a solution. This book can live in the cloud forever, not even you can lose it Shannon. Hmmmm maybe that's a challenge I shouldn't issue 😊.

Chapter 1

Baby Boota – a presence from the beginning

As your mother I know you arguably better and definitely longer than anyone else. So where do I begin in the story of Shannon? I knew you were beginning your journey of life within 48 hours of the time you were conceived, actually I think it might have been 24 but I don't think anyone would believe that. I knew the symptoms of pregnancy. I was profoundly tired and my breasts were hard and tender (too much information I know ☺). Many people thought it ridiculous that I could know so soon but I have never been more certain than I was that I was pregnant. The positive test only confirmed what I already knew but it was now official, I was having a baby, your dad and I were so excited (I don't think he believed I could know that soon so was very excited by the test results). We couldn't wait to meet you.

Apart from the profound tiredness in the first three or four months I was incredibly healthy, no morning sickness to speak of. I didn't cope well with strong cooking smells and went completely off pasta, a previous favourite. Apart from that I felt fantastic. Oh yeah there was that thing about garlic, not my favourite smell at the best of times but I couldn't stand it. Unfortunately I worked with a man at that time I came to refer to as 'garlick man'. He had strong garlic breath and tended to stand really close when he talked. It made me feel so sick. Well, it's a bit rude to rush out to vomit so I held my breath for as long as I could, when I started to feel faint I would turn my head to the side and take the biggest breath I could, literally filling my lungs with air, before turning back again. I warned your dad off garlic too, most of the time he was careful and avoided it, but there was one time ... I came home from work and jumped into bed to get the strongest whiff of garlic. "What have you been eating" I demanded, and got some sleepy reply about a European feast at school. Tough night that one!

I'd never been convinced that cravings during pregnancy were real, seemed like a good excuse to eat things that would normally be considered on the forbidden list like chocolate and cakes in huge quantities and without any need to feel guilty. Just blame the baby ☺. After all who is brave enough to say no to a pregnant woman? I honestly don't recall any cravings until the later stages of pregnancy. I developed a great love of ... no not chocolates, not lollies, not icecream but ... oranges. Of course I'd eaten oranges before but not in any great quantities, they definitely weren't my favourite fruit, often time they seemed too messy to be worth the bother. Goodness knows how many oranges I ate during that time. I'd ring your dad at school and he'd come to the phone saying: "I know you want more oranges." You loved hearing that story and we would often joke that it was you who craved the oranges with me eating them for you. Could be you are now much more fond of oranges than I am and you certainly love orange juice. Well it could have been worse, thank goodness it wasn't chocolate, I put on enough weight as it was.

Every one becomes an expert when you're pregnant, particularly those who've had children of their own. So many people claim fool proof methods of determining if you're having a boy or a girl. My sister was convinced you were a girl. She based that on my lack of morning sickness, boys she believed made you sicker, because she had three boys and lots of morning sickness. Your dad also tended more towards thinking of you as a girl, he joked that all his life he had been surrounded by nagging women, his mother, his sister and now me, he couldn't see how he would get out of yet another one.

I always thought of you as a boy, it would be nice to claim that as a mother's institution but I did have 50 per cent chance of being right either way. Later I would joke I was determined to have a boy to prove my sister wrong. Your dad and I agreed that we wanted a surprise, we didn't ask your sex at the ultrasound. The feeling that you were a boy stayed with me and although as a girl you'd have been most welcome, I did have a very slight preference for a boy and I was pretty sure your dad did too.

It was about half way through my pregnancy that I became much more aware of you and gained the first insights into your personality. The gentle flutters that were the first feelings of your movements soon gave way to kicks and jolts and other signs of the life within. So what did I learn about you in those early days? You were busy, active and certainly made your presence known. Your dad and I referred to you as "boota" or "baby boota". I loved it though, at the time it was a constant and wonderful reminder that you were alive and well, looking back it was pretty obvious I was carrying a child who would never be a shrinking violet and would make the world a different, a better place by being in it. How true!

Oh boy you were active, at some stage during my pregnancy I remember reading something written for mothers concerned about whether their unborn baby was still alive and well. I don't remember the details now but there was something about counting how long it took to feel 10 kicks, I remember thinking "10 kicks" gosh I feel more than that before I've got the energy and motivation to open my eyes in the morning.

You did send me hurriedly to the toilet on several occasions following a decent kick to the bladder, but I loved you being so active. I loved the feeling as your foot or hand went from one side of my belly to the other. I recall many times sitting in boring meetings and on the rare occasions when you were quite, wishing you'd wake up and start moving around to keep me confused. Ok I confess, there were times when I would gently poke a protruding limb to get you moving, it was a wonderful, amazing feeling and I loved every minute of it. I didn't even mind it when you got the hiccups and I would feel these small jolting movements. One time I remember in a meeting when you moved in what felt like somersaults, a lady must have been looking at the right time and called out with a tone of disbelief: "I saw that", oh yes you were being noticed already.

I know lots of women out there will hate me for this, but I really enjoyed being pregnant, I felt ridiculously healthy and I looked it too, my hair had never been so shiny or my skin so clear and soft. Having struggled with pimply skin for much of my life it was fantastic to be free of them. Had I known him then, my friend Rik from Holland would have told me I was definitely having a boy, he believed that women who look fantastic during pregnancy are having boys and those who look drawn, with lank hair and dry skin are carrying girls (very embarrassing to be with him when he told a woman she was having a girl, particularly if he explained how he knew ☺). Not that it was all beer and skittles, I did get indigestion, swollen feet and haemorrhoids (too much information again I'm sorry) but they were in the much later stages and overall I really did enjoy the experience. Being healthy wasn't all, I was also much better natured, less stressed and happier. Hard to imagine from your stress head mother I bet ☺.

I kept working until the day before you were due. I did start to get rather large and found it tiring moving around but I was happy to keep working. I (we) provided entertainment for my colleagues, many of whom liked to rub my belly, supposed to bring good luck. Not sure if any good luck was forth coming, but whatever floats their boats. We didn't mind.

I sat exams about 10 days before your due date. I remember squirming my seat to make myself comfortable, might have been the haemorrhoids playing up, or more likely you kicking in me in the bladder ☺. I looked up and saw the anxious face of one of the teaching staff, I smiled and shook my head, seeing the “oh no I hope you’re not going into labour” look. It bothered other people a lot more than it bothered me or you apparently.

After a week at home I was already bored and anxious for you to arrive. I don’t think I could have coped with leaving work two or three months before hand or even six weeks before as most women seemed to do. I was so big by then (we were later to find out why), I remember going shopping with your dad for a microwave, I think I was four days overdue by then. I don’t know how many times I was asked: “When’s the baby due”, one sure way to silence them was my reply: “last Saturday”. There is something about the thought of a woman going in to labour in their presence that puts the fear of god into so many people. If only they’d known how long my labour would be, definitely no cause for panic there.

So I had a child who had already and would continue to make a presence, the next thing I would learn was that punctuality was not your strong point ☺. Not only were you born 8 days late (not unusual after all I was about 10 days late myself), it was the length of time you took to be born that I could have done without. Finally labour started, it was exactly midnight, your dad and I were sitting up in bed reading a book. I felt my first contraction, not too painful but I knew it was there, after a couple of hours it seemed like the real thing. The contractions were regular and started to get a bit stronger. The pain was far from unbearable (I do pride myself on having a high pain threshold) but we lived in Yarra Glen at that stage, a long way from the Royal Women’s Hospital, so we decided to get in there early. There was probably also the hope that you weren’t too far from making your entrance to the world.

What was the next thing I learnt about you? You like to take your time. It took 40 hours and 26 minutes of labour before you were finally born. I spent a lot of that time in the shower, it seemed to work the best when the contractions came. You were laying the wrong way around with your spine against my spine, so oh yeah I sure could feel those contractions particularly across my back. Now that was pain, I was physically unable to lie in bed through a contraction, I had to get out of bed and lean over the bed with my head on my arms and swirl my body around until it had passed. I couldn’t sit either, I learned that when we all went for a cup of coffee in Lygon Street, you, me, your dad, my sister and my mum. The midwives suggested getting out and about to “get that baby moving”. So here I was resembling a beached whale, getting up from my seat every few minutes, leaning on your dad, and making movements that wouldn’t have been out of place on the Rocky Horror Show. The reactions of the other patrons were a combination of intrigue and fear. Oh well bad luck, I was the one having the baby after all.

After about 24 hours with very slow progress and a couple of worrying (not too worrying but worrying enough) signs, we were transferred from the Family Birth Centre into the labour unit. Some of the things I had desperately wanted to avoid were then to happen, my waters were broken, a drip put in. Sorry to say son but exhaustion has a way of making you live with imperfections, I probably didn’t sleep more than 10 minutes at a time during that whole period, so I was becoming rather keen on things that might speed up the process, not that I was given a lot of choice.

Apart from that you were born naturally, I was so pleased to avoid the forceps on your beautiful head. There was one doctor there (a man by way of coincidence) who looked ready

to pounce with them at a moment's notice, but you just beat him to it. The midwives were fantastic, good humoured and consideration, except for one. Oh she meant well I'm sure but she was way too cheery for some-one who had been in labour as long as me, there were times when I could have cheerfully strangled her. My humour left me at that point. Overall they did a great job of gently resisting the doctor with the forceps though.

Finally at 4.26pm on November 27th 1988 you were born, Australia's bicentennial year. A boy! Nine pounds, eight ounces (sorry I still think in the 'old' scale for baby weights), an uncharacteristically large baby on both mine and your dad's sides of the family, particularly for a first child. You were the largest baby born in that labour unit that day so they told me. Well I guess that was some of the reason you took so long to arrive. You were long, well covered but not too chubby, you had almost no hair (like the babies on both sides of your family) but all of your fingers and toes, you were perfect and you were a boy, I was right all along, thanks Shan ☺. You always did support me, right from the very beginning ☺.



I would love to say I feel in love with you from the moment you were born and put into my arms, but you know me, honest to a fault. It was and still is very hard to put into words how I felt. For one thing I was exhausted. After carrying you for nine months (and 8 days), feeling you grow, feeling your movements, and then going through the birthing process you were suddenly here. A person, no longer a pregnancy or a foetus, you were real ☺. My baby was born with all his bits in the right places, it was amazing and wonderful but there was also an element of shock, it took a while for the reality to sink in that I was now a mother with this tiny (ok well not so tiny) baby who was totally dependent on me.

As people do they talked about who you looked like. Most seemed to think you were much more like your dad's family, I didn't see a resemblance to either side at first. I was a little surprised by that but I didn't mind, you looked like you and that was what mattered. It wasn't too long until I could see I could see the resemblance to your dad's family. I particularly remember a baby photo of his sister which could have passed for a photo of you. The shape of your eyes was more like mine, though with your dad's blue colour. I was so happy to have a blue eyed boy.

We named you Shannon Stephen, not only was Stephen your dad's name (and my brother's) it had always been my favourite. After lots of discussion, a couple of arguments and a few changes of mind, we had decided on Shannon Stephen if you were a boy and Kate Ashley if a girl, but decided to wait to see if you looked like a Shannon or Kate before the final decision. Your dad said yes you did look like a Shannon. To be honest I have no idea what a Shannon should look like but I saw no reason we should change our minds, so Shannon it was and is and yes I do now think you look like a Shannon but then again I've never known you as anything else ☺. I'm also happy that you always have and still do like your name, although you insist on referring to yourself as Shanrad, or even Shanrad Midas Amadeus (your facebook name)! Remember when I told you I had thought of calling you Dylan? You were not impressed I am glad now that I didn't call you Dylan though, you are much more a Shannon, Shanrad or whatever ☺.

