

# Inner strength

## A Fragile Hold: Living with multiple sclerosis and other uncertainties

by Ruth Cotton, Lightleaf Press, 2023.

*Once I was strong.* A young woman, who rode horses, mustered sheep, and competed in show jumping. Carried her toddlers with ease, helped set up the tent on camping holidays. That's physical strength. I've always had the mental kind – an inner confidence and sureness that seemed convincing, from the outside. It is with me today, softened by life.

Now, in my seventh decade, salute to the sun in my yoga practice is as far beyond me as springing into the saddle. And hauling myself up from the floor is mortifying.

I was in my early 50s in 1997 when the diagnosis was confirmed: multiple sclerosis.

Leaving the neurologist's rooms, I found my way back to my car along a suburban street. In one hour, my world had changed, forever. As I passed each front garden, bright and still in the autumn sunshine, I remember seeing the edges of each flower and leaf limned with light.

As the years passed, the disease stayed close. I called it my watchdog. Step out of line, and it barks. Stress, overdoing it, and heat were the main offenders.

I continued to work for 15 years until my retirement, enjoying a full life. Having my own business gave me control over timelines and commitments, but I still drove myself relentlessly. Periods of high-intensity work and travel often ended in collapse from exhaustion. Stress exacts its price.

Eight years ago, I could walk a kilometre to the Hamilton railway station and back again, with a couple of brief rests. I could stand unsupported in front of a crowd at the launch of one of my books and speak for 10 minutes. Now, I walk nowhere without an aid; 1000 paces with a walker represents my personal best. When I relinquished my driver's licence, I became dependent on my husband and others for transport. I've changed my dentist because I could no longer get up the stairs to his surgery.

Fortitude is part of my heritage. My grandfather was one of Australia's pioneer settlers. I remember the clasp of his workman's hands, so large and muscular, formed by a lifetime wresting productive



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land for sheep and crops from the grasp of forest and scrub. When a hurtling sheep knocked him over in the yards, he broke his hip and never walked independently again.

My grandfather, whom we called Dar, was in his early 80s then. Each morning after breakfast, my father would help him down the back steps of our homestead and settle him in a cane chair. I was about seven and, sliding past my father's legs, I'd quickly take up my position at Dar's side. As the hours passed, we'd tell each other stories, or simply sit, bound in stillness. It was of no consequence that he was old, or immobile – he was there for me. Dar continued to be my anchor, and when I left home to attend boarding school, he was a faithful correspondent. How I seized upon those letters, addressed to me in his trembling hand.

Now, I have grandchildren of my own. I love how unselfconscious they are, chattering as we cross the street, me walking funny. They don't care how we look.

Once, I was a strong young woman, with a confident stride. My losses mount. Yet they connect me to a world of losses. I know how it feels, to be one of those who have lost something, or someone. And I see that youth is no protection.

It doesn't matter, my walking – or not walking. I hold on to my grandfather, to what he left me. The knowing that staying still, being present for someone, is a gift.

This is my life. **RLM**

*This is an extract from A Fragile Hold: Living with multiple sclerosis and other uncertainties.*



**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** Cover image of *A Fragile Hold*; Ruth Cotton, 2023; Ruth (centre) with her sister Jan and beloved grandfather, James Tufrey, 1950s.

### ***A Fragile Hold: Living with multiple sclerosis and other uncertainties:***

**Paperback (\$29.95) and epub (\$6.99), 326 pp, available at all good bookstores. It can also be ordered from Amazon, Apple Books and other online shops.**

*Ruth Cotton grew up on a sheep and cattle property in the north-west of NSW. She was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 1997, at the peak of her career and with three children still at home. A Fragile Hold is the first time she has written about living with chronic disease and its impact on her life. Ruth is the author of five books, including the popular local history series Hidden Hamilton: Uncovering stories of Hamilton, NSW (2014) and More Hidden Hamilton: Further stories of people, place and community (2016).*