

# TRANSCENDENCE

## Three Plays

*on the use of Virtual Reality  
in Aged Care*

by Caleb Lewis

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## ORIGINS OF THESE PLAYS

Over 2021-2022, a team of Australian researchers from QUT, Griffith University, the University of Melbourne and La Trobe were awarded a philanthropic research grant from Facebook, to engage and educate the aged care sector about the potential of virtual reality – and to use digital, visual, and arts-based research methods (e.g., short digital stories, photography, narrative, poems, cartoons, sketches, and drama) to guide providers through the process of integrating VR into their aged care facility. These resources are freely available online: <https://research.qut.edu.au/designlab/projects/transforming-aged-care-with-virtual-reality-vr/>.

As they argued in their grant application, if there was ever a time to intervene and introduce technology into residential aged care – also known as nursing homes – it is now. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a disproportionately negative impact on older people (aged 65+) in aged care: as well as being more likely to die from the virus, older people in aged care are more socially isolated than ever before with non-essential visits banned to mitigate the spread. The impact of COVID is likely to continue for months, if not years, for older people in aged care and their families. And, even before COVID-19, the day-to-day lived experience of aged care was often challenging, with research continually showing that residents tend to become inactive and sedentary, spending their days sleeping, watching TV, waiting, and simply doing nothing at all.

One way of improving the lives of people living in aged care may be to embrace new technologies. Virtual reality (VR) has the potential to connect people living in aged care to the outside world. Such connections can provide social and emotional enrichment for people whose lives may be constrained by mobility impairments and the structures of aged care homes. In recent years, providers have begun to introduce technology-based activities into leisure programs, including immersive VR, enabling residents to experience new freedoms and encounter new worlds.

Led researcher, Professor Evonne Miller (Director of the QUT Design Lab) commissioned the play series, *Transcendence*. The purpose of the playscript and performance is to communicate a few of the project's findings to audiences in a form which emphasises how the technology might touch people's lives. Following discussions with the research team and visits to aged care facilities, I was interested in the experience of three distinct stakeholders, namely:

- residents;
- family members; and
- carers and nursing staff

After interviewing representatives of each group, the following themes emerged:

- autonomy;
- memory and connection; and
- care

*Transcendence* consists of three monologues exploring the impact of VR in aged care from three different perspectives. Each monologue explores a key theme from the point of view of a primary stakeholder. In *Life on Mars*, a woman who feels trapped in aged care is a gifted pilot (FRANKIE - A woman in her late 60s. She has her wits about her but is suffering Parkinsons). In *After Aleppo*, a daughter conjures a lost past with her father, triggering recognition and reconnection (ALEEA - A Syrian-Australian mother and daughter. Somewhere in her late thirties or early forties). And in *One Last Swim before the Sun Sets*, a young man working in palliative care helps to realise a new friend's dying wish (EDDIE - A young carer. Early to mid 20s). All three are inspired in part by the stories of those who so generously gave their time to speak with me, so thank you to the project team and aged care residents and staff. Thanks especially to Prof Evonne Miller and Leonie Sanderson for their support and feedback and to Shane Pike for directing the play's first public reading.



*Transcendence* premieres in May at the *Big Anxiety* festival in Brisbane in 2022. All three monologues are available for performance, either together or separately. To licence the works, please contact [mkm@mollison.com](mailto:mkm@mollison.com)

## FRANKIE – LIFE ON MARS

It was the Rocket ride that did it. We grew up in Goondiwindi, north of Moree, and every year my Dad would take us up to Brisbane, to the Ekka. We never went on any rides; we'd just look at the cattle and head home. And yet mum insisted I had to wear a dress. And then one year I snuck off on my own and then I was free. I remember being lost in the hubbub - because the Ekka is loud - but under all that din, I could hear this voice calling me.

### Ground Control to Major Tom

That was the first time I heard him. Bowie. And it was him that led me to the Rocket Ride. There was this big neon sign, and a mural with Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin, and Yuri Gagarin, with little Laika in his arms, and all of them were gathered round the earth, smiling down at it, like gods.

It was a steel tower, and what happened was they'd buckle you in, with your back to it, and there was a countdown, and then nothing... And, just when I thought, maybe it's broken - then BAM!

It only went thirty feet in the air, but when you're a kid from Goondiwindi, and the tallest thing in town is the two-storey pub ...

here  
am I sitting in a tin can  
far above the world

And then it was over.

When I came down, Dad was waiting, and I knew I'd be in for it, but I didn't care. That's when I fell in love, I think. Not just with the sky, but also the chariot that had carried me. Technology.

There's a line by Da Vinci. "Once you have tasted flight, you'll forever walk the earth with your eyes turned skywards, for there you have been and there you will always long to return."

That's how I got into Bowie too. Obviously. Yes, of course, I'll keep it down. Before you go... It was Cheryl, wasn't it? Who complained. I know, you don't have to tell me, just clap: once for Cheryl,

twice for Beryl and three times for Dorothy. Just a wink then? I know it was one of them. Pack of bitches, the lot of them.

That's okay for you to say, you get to go home. Some of us are stuck here!

Friends? The thing is, I don't like old people. I understand I'm not young, I'm not delusional, but compared to the ones in here... it's like they've all given up. But I've still got plans, or at least I did.

After the ekka? Oh, let's see. I looked up everything I could. This is before the internet, mind, I had to wait til after school, then straight to the Goondiwindi library and borrowed every book they had. Both of them! I remember, the first was on the moon landing, and the second was on Mars. And I guess that planted the seed. I figured Neil might have beat me to the moon, but I could still get the jump on Mars. Besides he was getting on and I had youth on my side! But first, I decided, I'd better learn how to fly.

Sorry, was that a wink? So, it was Cheryl! Oh, a twitch! I'm so sorry, I thought you -

Five years.

Trust me, I remember!

I earned the money castrating bulls. You tend to remember a thing like that! Not a lot of jobs in the country. I took every shift I could. Yes, every weekend, and after school, and spent every dollar I earned on flying lessons. Oh, believe you me, I'd have done anything to get back into the sky, to ride that chariot again. And then, the first time they handed me the wheel - it was like shaking hands with God.

I wanted to never come down.

And then the day came that they handed me my wings, and I thought I'd never have to.

Oh, you don't want to hear about this. I sound like an old goat, chewing on the past. Really? You're sure? Okay, well, let's see. I got my first job crop-dusting fields for a "friend" of dad's. Of course, I found out later he was paying me half what his other pilots earned. A trend which continued. I tell you, it's no wonder they call it a cockpit! No hens in there. Some days it seemed a wonder they even let me board the plane.

How long? About a year, I think, then I tried out for Hazelton, running charters out of Toogong.

Then after that I moved to Brisbane, studied engineering at UQ – aeronautical. And the whole time

I'm sending letters to NASA, listing my credentials, writing papers, offering to fly up to Florida, just say the word. But the call never came.

That was hard. Years I'd worked, all those nights at the library, I even topped the honours list - but it wasn't enough. Meanwhile others were being courted like princes. I suppose I was stubborn, really, had to learn the hard way. Women can only fly so high before they hit the ceiling.

Then, uh, let's see, after I graduated, I took a job with Kendell in South Australia, and once they got bought out, I was flying for Ansett. I did that for ten years, then made the jump to Qantas and that's where I stayed. I was happy. Not euphoric, like Bert on his meds, but content. I guess I figured no one's going to Mars in a hurry, anyway. I mean, who'd have thought that fifty years after we kissed the moon, we'd still be hugging earth's orbit?

I was happy. I was. I would have stayed there for life, I think, if not for the Parkinson's.

Oh, don't act surprised, you've seen my hands. Good thing you're a nurse, because you'd make a terrible actor.

Tried to hide it at first  
But as the shakes got worse  
Anyway,  
that's how I got my wings clipped.  
And five years later  
Here I am.

I did all right, I guess.  
Logged two hundred thousand kilometres.  
That's halfway to the moon.  
But it doesn't touch Mars.

...

No,  
I never married.

And before you get the violin out

I like living on my own.

Always have.

The independence.

It's just this body

which betrayed me

I dreamed of walking with Gods

And now I'm stuck here with Cheryl and Beryl.

Listen

I tried to fit in

I did.

Thinking I could make this work.

That Da Vinci was wrong.

And then Bowie died.

...

I know it was loud,

And I'm sorry

But

I wanted to hear his voice

Really hear it

One more time

So you tell Beryl to shove it!

her and her harpies.

I won't be intimidated by a woman in clogs.

I'm okay.

I know you're worried about me.

That you want me out of my room more.

Mixing with the others

I feel like a butterfly

trapped in a box filled with beetles

And you keep on telling me we're the same, but we're not  
because they never looked up.

But I did

And now I can't forget.

Don't you see?

I don't belong here.

Yes?

Andrew?

He's the entertainment coordinator?

He's all right.

A bit earnest

Yes, he spoke to me.

That's why I wanted to talk to you.

I've been looking it up.

This VR thing

And it says you can go anywhere

That once you put on the visor

it's like you're really there.

At the bottom of the ocean

and Mount Everest

And I guess I was wondering

If there's still room

In the group

If you'll have me

that maybe

I could see it for myself

Life on Mars

You see it occurred to me.

That the race might not be over

It's just another kind of chariot

\*\*\*

ALEEA – AFTER ALEPPO

ALEEA            Tablet off.  
                      ...  
                      Zahra, now!

Pull into the car park. Seatbelt off. Grab the bag.

ALEEA            Come on, we're going to be late.

I know she hates coming here. Tries to duck it each week, pleading headache or homework, but it's important.

ALEEA            Hurry! Baba will be waiting.

Catch her smirk and my heart collapses.

Bite my lip.

see the shame in her eyes

ALEEA            It's okay.  
                      Pass me the bag.

\*\*\*

I remember as a girl in Aleppo, him lifting me in his arms, spinning me around until I'd beg him to stop. And then he'd wink and I'd shriek, as he spun me round again, until I was dizzy with joy. Baba was a spice merchant at the Al-Madina souk. It spread like a maze throughout the old city, filling its cracks, spilling out of alleys into plazas; over twelve square kilometres of food and music and laughter under brightly coloured awnings; a place to get lost in. And Baba's shop was the busiest of them all. I'd spend whole days crawling amongst bulging sacks of peppers, sumac and spearmint, spilling a thousand bright colours - listening to dad laughing, then bartering, then laughing – the air heady with scent.

\*\*\*

Up the steps  
bag swinging  
jars clinking  
then the door  
check in with QR code  
press the buzzer  
then wait

Zahra looks at me, eyes worried.  
Last time he scared her, I know.  
I should have warned her  
what he's like now  
I forget  
how much is gone.

ALEEA            We won't stay long.

Poor thing  
She's being so brave.  
Turn to tell her  
then the door unlocks  
squeeze her hand  
and pull her inside.

\*\*\*

My first day at school  
Here in Australia  
Everything so different  
I remember clutching dad's hand  
And Baba, kneeling beside me,  
whispering - It's okay, Aleea.  
Him, who'd lost everything.  
Here, you can be anything.  
You just have to be brave.

\*\*\*

ALEEA I'm here to see Baba.  
Sorry.  
Sharif El Din.  
Doctor Lim is expecting us.  
Aleea.  
I'm his daughter.  
And this is Zahra

\*\*\*

After Aleppo  
When we first came to Melbourne  
And all we had now were memories.  
But there was kindness too  
People donated furniture  
A man helped dad find a job.  
Not in sales  
Not yet with his English  
In a factory  
He smelled different then.  
sharper  
less vivid  
  
But on Saturdays  
We'd go to the Victoria markets  
That was his favourite day of the week  
Mine too.  
Watching him haggle over a lettuce  
or barter down the cost on a DVD.  
Baba was in his element.  
It wasn't home  
Not like before  
But some days it felt close.

He had this big booming laugh  
It was embarrassing.  
And now  
I'd give anything to hear it

\*\*\*

Turn left  
down the corridor  
then the second on the right  
and we're here.  
Take a moment to compose myself  
Check Zahra's okay  
Love that girl  
Take a breath  
Knock  
Pull the door open

\*\*\*

By the time I finished high school, Baba had started his own business  
Importing spices and selling them to restaurants in the city.  
It wasn't easy, but Baba was tenacious  
By the time I finished uni, he had six staff  
And by the time I got married, twelve  
And just after Zahra was born, they had to move to bigger premises.  
We used to visit him at work  
Back then  
he was unstoppable.  
I know it doesn't seem that way now,  
but -

\*\*\*

ALEEA          Hello Baba

He sits by the window.

ALEEA            How are you feeling?

Kiss his cheek. Hold him

ALEEA            Look, Zahra's here as well.

He nods

But I can tell he doesn't recognise us.

Poor baba we have lost you by degrees

Each day a little further away,

The eyes less bright,

The mind more distant.

Shake it off

It's the disease

Not him

Keep talking so Zahra won't notice.

It was her tenth birthday when I first knew something was wrong.

Dad had always been forgetful.

Car keys

That sort of thing

But tonight

I watched him

try to cut his steak

with a spoon.

I thought he was joking with Zahra

The two of them always thick as thieves

But the look

on his face

And now Zahra's nearly twelve

And Dad ....

ALEEA            Are you thirsty?

Pour the cup

Hold it up to his mouth

Dab his chin.

As Doctor Lim enters.

ALEEA           Hello Doctor.

                  I brought Zahra as well, I hope that's okay.

Of course, he smiles.

She can give me a hand setting up.

I watch him unpack the headsets, explaining to Zahra, how they work, and her eyes come alight.

This she understands. I sit with dad by the window, holding his hand, and talking about the past, except it's only me talking, because Baba's already there.

Look up at Zahra laughing as she tries on a headset.

And almost miss the smile on baba's face

so there's something.

I wish she could see him

like I do.

I mean the man he was.

because our past is our story

but each time we come to visit

another page is torn out.

The disease takes everything

First Zahra,

then my wedding,

the business

All of it gone

Until all that's left is Aleppo

Funny in a way.

Back in 2012, when the souk was destroyed

Dad wept for days

But since then, he's forgotten

And Aleppo still stands

\*\*\*

Doctor Lim approaches with a headset.

He's explained before  
how it works  
But Dad won't remember  
We're going to use this  
to go on a trip  
he says  
I thought you might like to come.  
Baba nods.  
And Dr Lim helps him put it on

When we talked on the phone,  
he tried to explain it to me,  
what it was,  
how it would work.  
But he needed my permission  
he said  
To take Baba home.  
I said I'd like to come too.  
But first  
I have an idea

\*\*\*

Dad and I wait  
As Doctor Lim synchs the headsets  
And Zahra takes out the jars,  
Like I showed her

First the chilli  
Then smoked paprika  
cumin  
and coriander seeds  
sea salt  
and garlic  
Grinding them down

Like we practiced  
The sound  
of the mortar and pestle  
and the smell  
of Harissa  
Breath in deep  
as Dad's grip  
tightens in my own

It's dark.  
Can't see  
anything  
I think maybe it's not working  
About to tell Doctor Lim  
then  
Is that?  
Candles?  
No  
Arabian lanterns,  
I forgot how pretty  
And then  
a ray of sunlight  
slips in  
through the awnings.  
Illuminating everything  
And I hear my father gasp.

ALEEA            Baba?  
                      Can you see it?

Do you know how many photos were taken just last year?  
Over a trillion  
That's a million, million memories.  
And Doctor Lim explained  
What this company had done

Is trawl through thousands of photographs on Instagram.

All the ones of Al Madina

Downloading them

Sorting them

Compiling them

To rebuild what's been lost.

BABA            Aleppo.

He's shaking now.

ALEEA            Yes Baba.

And we both start to cry.

Because It's home

Just as we left it

A gift

of something thought lost.

ZAHRA            It looks amazing, Mum!

She's watching on the tablet.

And then -

BABA            Zahra?

And she says

ZAHRA            Hello, Baba.

And he asks

BABA            What are you doing here?

And she smiles.

I hear it in her voice.

And says,

ZAHRA            We've come to see you at work.

And the room shakes with his great booming laugh.

\*\*\*

**(1) EDDIE – ONE LAST SWIM BEFORE THE SUN SETS**

I'm Eddie

My pronouns are he/him.

I met Allegra at Restgarden

I started off as a carer there

then after Amanda left

I took over as entertainment coordinator

Yeah, I was stoked!

And so were the residents

They were pretty sick of bingo

And I had all these plans

I've got a mate at uni

with access to all this stuff

So I'm thinking we get in some Playstations;

Lasertag

I thought - they're not dead yet

Let's kick it up a notch!

Then they showed me the budget

So yeah

It's mostly trips to Westfield.

And bingo.

Oh, plus Aquacise!

We take a bus to the pool

where I work as a lifeguard on Saturdays

And get them in the water.

Nothing major.

Mostly stretches

Chuck a ball around.

That's how I got to know Allegra.

She never got in

I think she just came to watch.

Then one week  
she stopped coming.  
I went to see her  
to ask why -  
and she said she was dying.

...

Hard to know what to say to that.  
It's weird  
My sister's having a baby  
And she won't shut up about it  
You'd think she'd invented birth  
But when someone's dying  
we all lose our tongues

"Go," she says  
"Back to your pool.  
And count yourself lucky to be so handsome and dumb"  
- Which, I don't think you can say that.  
"Eduardo, you're still young," she says  
That's what she calls me.  
"You've never been touched by death. Not really."  
And I tell her about Mum.

We were in the garden  
when Mum told me.  
This was one of her good days  
I was helping rake up leaves  
when she told me to stop.  
She'd got a call from the doctor  
And they had the results.  
ALS  
They used to call it Lou Gehrig's disease

She said we have to be brave now  
all of us  
that we all knew this day might come.  
I remember she picked up this leaf  
and said how beautiful it was.  
How in Summer  
when the days are long  
Every leaf is the same  
but it's only in Autumn  
when all the chlorophyll begins to break down  
that all the other colours,  
the yellows and oranges and reds  
get a chance to shine.  
She said that's what the leaf always looked like  
But you just couldn't see it.  
And I reckon if things had of stopped right there  
In the garden  
I could almost see what she was getting at  
But they didn't  
And instead  
this thing destroyed her.  
It took her freedom, her dignity,  
until all she had left  
was a view of the garden  
and then it took that too.

They reckon when we're born  
That we all come into this world alone  
But that's not true, is it?  
Because your mum is there too.

She held on til next Autumn  
And I knew all she wanted  
was to be out in the garden

but by then ...

*(might start to break down)*

Sorry.

One night

After she'd gone to sleep

I filled her whole room with leaves

If she couldn't be out in the garden

I'd bring the garden to her

Came back in the morning

To see the look on her face

and the room was empty

...

Can't do anything right

When I told Allegra

About mum

She pats my hand.

"Good boy," she said

"Now, we can be friends".

After that, we got pretty tight

She started coming back to the pool

And helped me curate movie nights

Cinema Paradiso

La Dolce Vita

And Avengers

That was my pick!

Allegra grew up in Lerici

It's this little town

on the coast in Italy

She said it's sort of like Adelaide

but people are much better dressed.

That's when I got thinking  
that maybe there was something I could do for Allegra  
Like she might have something  
on her bucket list  
Learn to knit or something  
Or I could help her write letters to grandkids  
But she couldn't think of anything  
And then one day  
"Eduardo, I know," she said  
"Delfini  
"I want to swim with the dolphins"

Back when she was a girl in Lerici  
there was a boy she liked  
"Lorenzo"  
And he asked her to come out on his boat  
to swim with the dolphins at sunset  
But she'd been too afraid  
And then he died in the war.

I said, Allegra, this is –  
"My dying wish"  
She knew how to lay it on thick.  
I found a place that did dolphin cruises  
There's nowhere you can swim with them in Adelaide  
But she could always "fall in"  
I'm joking.  
The hardest part was convincing management.  
They said what if something happens?  
I said she's palliative.  
They said, exactly!

In the end she had to sign something.  
And in the days leading up to it

She's got this matching pink swimsuit and bathing cap

She looked cute

like a Kewpie doll

but wrinkly.

And then on the afternoon

we're supposed to go out

There was a storm

and the whole thing got cancelled

Allegra took it pretty hard.

I said, don't stress, we'll go next week

But then management got cold feet

And after that she took a turn.

stopped coming to Bingo

even movie nights

which she loved

They had to feed her soup in her room

And she looked so frail

just like Mum at the end

when all the light was nearly gone.

So a few nights later

I wait until the end of my shift

Get a wheelchair

wake her up

She said, "Eduardo, what are you doing?"

I said, "No one puts Baby in the corner"

Dirty Dancing

She hadn't seen it either.

When we got to the pool

Brittany – she's another lifeguard - let us in

And Matty was already waiting.

my mate from uni with the gear

So I introduce everyone

Then Britt helps Allegra get changed  
And when she came out  
She looked  
so thin  
and I thought this is a mistake  
But then she struck this pose  
Hand on her hip  
like a movie star  
Invincible

Then me and Britt helped her into the water  
and Matty showed her how the goggles work.  
They look like a regular diving mask  
Except instead of clear glass  
There's a screen  
Then we ask her to float on her belly  
And Britt and me  
are on either side, holding her  
And then Matty starts up the VR  
And I hear her  
Delfini

[From this point we might project Dolphin VR footage on screen,  
allowing the audience to see what Allegra is experiencing]

And for the next half an hour  
A part of her is immersed in the pool  
and another part  
is immersed in the ocean  
swimming with delfini

We got her home that night  
Smuggled her back to her room  
like ET in reverse.

And for days she's just glowing  
right up until she died last week

My main memory

This was on the way back from the pool

And she's still got the imprint of the mask on her forehead  
which took a bit of explaining

And we go through the drive-through at Maccas

And all of us are singing.

\*\*\*