



WILD THING

She chatted to platypuses, had “big talks” to a lake and apologised to a wallaby before eating it. Gina Chick, winner of Australia’s first *Alone* TV series, has long done things her own unconventional way. And, as she discovered in adulthood, so did her famous grandmother.

STORY BY *David Leser* PHOTOGRAPH BY *Tim Bauer*

Left: Gina Chick on home turf at Jervis Bay on the NSW South Coast. As a child, she used to walk to the beach with the family’s three pet ducks.

NEARLY HALF a century before Gina Chick became a celebrity for surviving 67 days alone in the Tasmanian wilderness, she ate her first book. She was six years old and it was Rudyard Kipling’s *The Jungle Book*, about a skinny little Indian boy named Mowgli, raised in the jungle by wolves.

Chick didn’t eat the entire book, just the corners of the more enchanting sections where Mowgli – and other favourite characters like Bagheera, the black panther – roamed wild across the page.

Read. Tear. Chew. Swallow. Gulp the characters, ingest the magic, allow the wonder to inhabit you. That was the pattern. Not just with *The Jungle Book*, but with all the childhood books that landed in her lap – *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, *My Family and Other Animals*, *The Dreamtime*, *The Clan of the Cave Bear*, *Storm Boy*, *The Lord of the Rings*...and then the thousands of teenage and adult books that followed.

If the story was good enough, Chick would rip the chosen page and chomp, letting the bears and panthers, the birds, geckos, bats and butterflies, the elves and dwarves, the Indian boys and storm boys, the trees and rocks as well, find a place in her roiling tummy, then her heart.

Anything to salve the aching loneliness.

Gina Chick was the strangeling from Jervis Bay on the South Coast of NSW, who would sing to the whales, capture and befriend the blue-ringed octopus, walk with her family’s three pet ducks down to the beach, rescue the birds – rosellas, magpies, finches, honeyeaters – talk to them all, tend their bruised wings, stroke their tummies, feed them from her lips by spitting the chewed-up seed down their gullets.

“You’re the bird girl, right?” locals would ask her, and not just because kookaburras and parrots seemed to randomly land in her hair. She had no friends – she couldn’t understand human ways – but she knew the look and language of birds and would often tell them how beautiful they were, particularly her favourite white-bellied sea eagles that would regularly circle in pairs over Jervis Bay.

“The interesting thing about the sea eagle,” she says now, sitting on the promontory of her favourite childhood beach, “is that it is an incredibly majestic bird. It’s got a two-metre wingspan...but it quacks like a duck.

“*Wachwachwachwachwachwachwachwach.*”

Yes, that’s the sound of Gina Chick quacking like a duck on the shoreline.

IN CASE you don’t watch television, or the moment simply passed you by, Gina Chick is the bare-footed woman in the full-length possum-skin coat who more than one million Australians saw win the first *Alone Australia* series on SBS last year.

As one of 10 contestants dropped into a desolate corner of south-western Tasmania to test her survival skills, the then 52-year-old bushcraft teacher from Jervis Bay endured more than nine weeks of brutal deprivation to emerge, not just as the last person standing, but as the person – *the woman* – most intuitively in kinship with the natural world.

From the first episode, she was the one we saw talking, singing and praying to the earth, as though she’d been doing this her whole life, which, of course, she had been. “Hello lake. Hello trees,” she said, surveying the beautiful bleakness of her new winter home.

“This moss feels amazing,” she added, looking like a Norse goddess as she danced shoeless on the edge of a dark lake. “This isn’t about defeating nature or conquering the wilderness. The only way to truly be at home in the wild is to have humility and to realise that nature is going to break every single one of us open.”

And it did. Week by week, one by one, as each contestant was crushed by the harshness of trying to subsist alone in winter, right in the path of the Roaring Forties, with little or no food, limited survival equipment and no one to turn to – except a rescue team – if

and when it became time to “tap out” with an emergency satellite phone.

Since 2015, the American version of *Alone* had enjoyed huge ratings as it documented these kinds of struggles in places as forbidding as Patagonia, northern Mongolia and the Arctic Circle. Individuals were allowed to select 10 items of survival gear from a pre-approved list of 40, a standard kit of clothing and first aid/emergency supplies, plus a set of motion-activated trail cameras to record their exertions and torments.

It made for gripping television and it was this formula that the producers adopted for the first Australian season on SBS last year, with Gina Chick, colder, skinnier and hungrier than she'd ever been in her life, becoming the oldest contestant – and only the third woman worldwide – to win the competition, along with \$250,000 in prize money.

“No f---ing way,” she cried, whooping and hollering when she realised she'd won. “What the f---. Holy f---. What the actual f---.”

All of Chick's fellow contestants had also been highly skilled, resourceful and, in their own singular ways, crazy-brave. They knew how to fish, dive, hunt, track, stalk and shoot. Or they'd been practising bushcraft all their lives. Or they'd grown up camping and living on country. Or they'd been in the military and been pushed beyond their limits, or they had faith in a higher power, or an extraordinary self-belief, as was the case with runner-up Mike Atkinson, who'd done solo expeditions into the deserts of Saudi Arabia, as well as in far north Queensland in a self-made dugout canoe.

Chick outlasted them all, and she did so with a combination of determination, joyousness, creativity and vulnerability that would turn her, if not into a household name, then certainly into a celebrity for our times: a woman at home in the wild whom we could marvel at without ever hoping to emulate.

She'd arrived carrying 19 kilograms of excess weight and we began to love her for that fact alone. “I'm so fat I can't stand up, I have to rock,” she said, guffawing at the camera and herself, before explaining that this deliberate surplus flesh was a key survival strategy because it added about 630,000 kilojoules to her body's energy reserves.

On social media, she instantly became the dancing hippie, the weird “fur woman” who talked to the platypuses and sang “fishy fishy” songs to the lake. Some gave her 24 hours at most, a week at best, before leaving the competition. Others intuited immediately that she was the one to watch.

She was the only participant who didn't include a sleeping bag in her 10 items of survival gear, just that possum-skin coat made from *lutruwita* [Tasmanian] pelts which she included as part of her clothing allowance. This allowed her to bring another survival item that no one else thought to bring – a block of salt, full of electrolytes for maintaining fluids and blood volume, but also to flavour food, if and when she decided to eat.

“My strategy is still to not even worry about food, just to work on this shelter,” she said four days into the competition. Sixteen days later, she'd still not eaten, but her shelter was something to behold – a fire-warmed nest with a swinging door made of sawsedge which she'd constructed while asking permission from – and singing to – the land. Plus, she'd built an elevated bed and rock stove.

On her 20th night in the wild, Chick went to bed dreaming of fish, then promptly snared a brown trout in the lake the next morning. Then the next morning, and the morning after that...six fish in four days. “Whenever I needed anything,” she says now, “I would go out and I



Above: Chick prioritised building a shelter over food in her first days on *Alone*. Right: eating a wallaby she caught on the show after telling the lake she needed to consume fat.



would say, ‘All right Big Mama, I know you've got me here to tell a story. But I can't tell it if I'm not here, so I'm going to need some food.’ And, like, there's a fish. *Doink*. There's another fish. *Doink*. There's an eel. I caught so much food, and it wasn't because I'm particularly skilled. But I'm receptive. I could listen.”

And by that, she means listen to the land, tune into its “symphony of information”, follow nature's instructions, which she'd been doing all her life. Gina Chick had entered *Alone Australia* not just to win – which she firmly believed she would – but to make a point. “I'm making a stand,” she said, “for a way of being human that I don't see in the modern world, like how to live in relationship with the natural world and get all my needs met.”

Fifteen days later, she had “a big talk” to the lake and told it she needed fat, that the protein from the fish and eel was simply not enough for her needs. That same night, after peeing in the bushes, she remained on a log to gaze at the moon. She was there for about an hour when a wallaby suddenly appeared beside her. She jumped on it. “Sorry, sorry, sorry,” she told the stunned creature, before smashing its head with a rock. “Oh darling, I'm so sorry. Holy shit. Oh wow. Oh you beautiful thing. Holy f---, I'm sorry.”

Chick could sense victory in that animal's dying breath because, after 35 days of having consumed no more than 1.5 kilograms of protein, she now had almost 8 kilos of wallaby meat to feed her starving body. She also had the ingredients for a stew that she now says she would happily pay good money for in a Michelin-starred restaurant.

“I put the liver and lungs in that stew. I even squeezed all the poo from the top of the intestines into it, as well as the blood, and because I had salt, it was probably the most incredible stew I have ever eaten.”

“I will probably be dreaming about that wallaby offal stew for the rest of my life.”

GINA CHICK and I meet on a glorious sun-kissed winter morning at Plantation Point, on the northern edge of Jervis Bay, a few hundred metres from where she grew up with her teacher parents Suzanne and Doug Chick, two sisters Danni and Kristin, and a small farmyard of rescued animals.

This was the childhood playground of an odd but remarkable little girl who dreamed of turning into a

dolphin and being able to speak the language of the ocean, who saw baby whales do cartwheels in the bay and who – at low tide – played on exposed rocks that looked to her innocent eyes like a giant crocodile.

“This is where I would walk with my dad when I was having a rough time at school, literally this beach,” she says now, “and he would explain the stars and the moon to me.”

This is where she would also come in the dead of night, running headlong into a ferocious storm, her hard-as-leather feet knowing their way to the beach, telling herself, “I am not human. I am a storm wrapped in skin.” And then asking herself plaintive questions like: “Does a planet have a heart?”

“I was the weirdest kid,” she tells *Good Weekend*. “Oh, my god, I was such a weird kid.”

So weird that other kids avoided her, refused to sit with her (the nerds as well), and once, after a high school excursion, even signed a petition – all 150 students – pronouncing both her crime and punishment: “Gina Chick Should Wear A Bra.”

“Gina, like, you're just too big,” one girl told her. Chick thought she was talking about her body. “No, not literally,” the girl said. “You just...sometimes you're, like, too much.”

“Too much?” Chick replied. “Too much what?”

“Too much *everything*,” chimed in another girl. “Even ya cheekbones are too f--in' high. And ya mouth is f--in' enormous, ya could fly a f--in' plane into it. And ya sing all the time, like, really loud. Like ya think yer Madonna. And yer always doin' weird shit like pukin' in birds' mouths. Yer not...normal. No offence, but ya know what I mean?”

So Chick reverted to talking to birds and butterflies. She intuited the language of ants and their stories of rain and perseverance; she listened to the tales that trees could tell from their rustling branches, and she drowned herself in music by learning the piano, even trying to play *Für Elise* with her toes.

Thankfully, she had a deeply loving family to ease the loneliness, along with the characters she'd met in her favourite books: Mowgli, the orphan boy raised by animals; Jonathan Livingston Seagull, the outcast bird who sought to transcend the limitations of his flock; Storm Boy, the solitary child who befriended a pelican and could hear the earth sing; and Ayla – especially Ayla – the Stone Age woman from *The Clan of the Cave Bear* who could survive on her own by hunting with a sling and making fire with rubbed sticks.

Read. Tear. Chew. Swallow.

“I think with the eating of books,” she explains,



Above: with her daughter Blaise, who was born despite Chick developing breast cancer. Blaise died, aged three, after her own cancer diagnosis.

“every sense was so alive in me, these characters were so alive, that I needed them inside me. Like these characters were my friends, still are, but I couldn't see them in the world, I couldn't touch them, so by consuming that little bit of paper I was building that character as an actual physical presence.”

Her mother told her: “Gina, you will find your people and follow your enormous talents,” which she did once she left school and moved to Sydney.

By her late teens, she was studying communications at the University of Technology, Sydney and meeting people such as Hugh Jackman after having collided with him in the cafeteria on day one. They became instant and – it would turn out – lifelong friends. By her early 20s, she was discovering the queer community and, on a dare one night, shaved her head while tripping on LSD. She then began going to gay picnics, queer pool parties, sex parties, dance parties, any party where she could feel a sense of oneness with other strangelings, fellow misfits who not only accepted her for all her “freakish edges” but also loved her for them.

She danced with abandon wherever she could, in ways humans have been doing since the dawn of time. She danced as communion but, more so, to purge the years of wretched solitude that had collected in her body. She danced to return to herself, to find pure freedom in flight, not unlike Jonathan Livingston Seagull.

And now, here on the beach, on a perfectly scripted blue-sky morning, she offers me a spare set of headphones and invites me to join her in a bare-footed dance on the water's edge.

There's a pelican on a rock shelf nearby, a few cormorants drying their wings in the winter sun, and Chick's favourite white-bellied sea eagle soaring above us. I take the headphones and for the next 30 minutes “bird girl” and I sway and turn to the music as the red-beaked oyster catchers come in to land.

IT WASN'T just Gina Chick's ability to survive – nay thrive – in the wild that captured the Australian public's imagination when she won that first season of *Alone Australia*. It was the fact she allowed us to see her vulnerability.

In her late 30s, and after the bitter disappointment of a relationship that almost destroyed her, Chick had finally found the love of her life in Lee Trew, an English-born exponent of hunter-gatherer practices such as hunting, trapping, stalking, building fires and constructing shelters.

The couple had met at a wilderness survival school in New Jersey and, at the age of 40, Chick fell pregnant, just a few days before finding out she also had aggressive breast cancer. The doctors insisted she terminate the pregnancy to save her own life. She refused.

“I'd called out to the edges of creation that I'd wanted a child,” she would later say. “The gods had called back... ‘How bad?’”

Chick changed her doctors, meditated through the gruelling rounds of chemotherapy and somehow went into remission. Her “perfect precious miracle” of a child was born in 2010 and she was named Blaise, after another of Chick's literary heroes, Modesty Blaise, the fictional master thief turned British spy.

Blaise was perfectly healthy for the first two years of her life. She lived deep in the Australian bush with her parents, trusting nature as she would a friend. Just like her mother, she knew the names of all the morning birds, recognised their dawn chorus, even heard her own laughter echoed in the lyrebird's song.

Then “the unbearable, the unspeakable, the unthinkable” occurred when – at the age of nearly three – she was diagnosed with cancer, 200 tumours about to grow inside her small frame within the space of 10 weeks.



Clockwise from top: dancing on the rocks at Jervis Bay; playing the flute with an avian entourage; Chick (left) with sisters Kristin and Danni; her loving family helped ease the isolation of being a “weird kid”; with her mum Suzanne and photos of her grandmother, author Charmian Clift.

In October 2013, after nine days in intensive care and barely four months since first being diagnosed, Blaise's respirator was turned off as her devastated parents looked on, her father kissing his daughter's fingers, telling her softly that her body was now going back to “Earth Mama” and that “Grandmother Moon” was waiting for her.

Chick gives heart-rending voice to this shattering moment in her upcoming memoir, *We Are the Stars* (to be published by Simon & Schuster on October 2): “Blaise dies in my arms with Lee wrapped around us both,” she writes. “We sing to her as she flies, our voices strong and true, singing her out of the world as we sang her into it: together. It's just a normal hospital room and in it a child is dying and somewhere another is being born and another is eating breakfast and another is weeping and another laughing, playing, growing, falling...there's nothing unusual in any of this, we're part of a great dance, and this is... what... pure fluke, grand design, cosmic joke... that our dance floor is lined with mourning bells and ravens while a breath away a family cavorts on a carpet of butterflies. We're all connected. Death to life to death.”

A decade later, we see Gina Chick on our television screens, out in the Tasmanian wild, sitting vigil by a fire on the night that would have been her daughter's 12th birthday. She begins to weep, then howl, and in that moment we all hear the ancient lament of a lioness grieving her lost cub.

EIGHTY KILOMETRES north of where we now sit contemplating the blue curve of Jervis Bay, there's another beach, called Bombo, where Chick's grandmother grew up, a similarly high-cheekboned, rebellious spirit who loved the freedom of nature and ran from any kind of conventional life.

Chick never met this famous grandmother of hers because, at the age of 45, Charmian Clift killed herself with an overdose of barbiturates. It was 11 weeks before Chick was born.

Even if Clift hadn't died so tragically, it is inconceivable these two women – grandmother and granddaughter – would have found their way to each other, at least not until the NSW *Adoption Information Act* was introduced in 1990, allowing adopted children to access their original birth certificates.

That's when Gina Chick's mother Suzanne found out she was Charmian Clift's daughter, born on Christmas Day, 1942 at Crown Street Women's Hospital in Sydney, then given up for adoption to a kindly, childless couple three weeks later.

According to Clift's biographer, Nadia Wheatley, she had desperately wanted to keep her baby but given that Clift was an unmarried 19-year-old, her own mother Amy wouldn't hear of it. Quoting one of Clift's friends, Wheatley writes in *The Life and Myth of Charmian Clift*: “Charmian never forgave her mother for making her give up the child” and, by various accounts, lived with the guilt and sorrow of this abandonment for the rest of her life. Another version of events had Clift sometimes searching the faces of little girls in the street, wondering whether one might be her lost daughter.

Charmian Clift, of course, went on to become arguably the most interesting literary figure of her generation, author of numerous books on her own – as well as in collaboration with her famous war correspondent husband George Johnston, author of the Miles Franklin-winning *My Brother Jack* and its sequel *Clean Straw for Nothing*. (A new documentary on Clift – *Life Burns High* – directed by Rachel Lane, premiered at this year's Sydney Film Festival and is now on Foxtel's Famous channel.)

Clift also became Australia's most prominent female columnist, a celebrated and beloved figure who wrote for *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *Melbourne Herald* each week for four-and-a-half years, up until her death in 1969.

She wrote with great intimacy and an unflinching gaze on issues both political and personal – everything from Indigenous rights, the Vietnam war and the evolving role of women to the “magic of learning” and “the pleasure of leisure”. Her last collection of essays was called *Being Alone with Oneself*, a title of eerie circularity given the path her granddaughter would one day tread.

During the early 1950s, Clift and Johnston had fled the stultifying conformities of Menzies' Australia for the Greek island of Hydra, where they wrote books, raised their three children and partied long into the night with other artists and writers captivated by their brilliance and generosity.

The young Canadian poet Leonard Cohen had been among them and in 1980, 20 years after first stepping foot on Hydra, he dedicated his first Sydney concert to the Australian couple, claiming it was Clift and Johnston who'd taught him how to write.

He later said: “They drank more than other people, they wrote more, they got sick more, they got well more, they cursed more, they blessed more, and they helped a great deal more. They were an inspiration.” Just as Charmian Clift would eventually prove to be for the daughter and granddaughter she would never know.

Gina Chick was 21 when her mum Suzanne discovered the name of her own biological mother. Chick immediately raced to the nearest bookshop with her sister Danni to find books such as *Peel Me a Lotus* and *Mermaid Singing* sitting on the shelves, the author’s photo on the back looking almost indistinguishable from their mother.

Something shifted inside Chick as she ran her fingers along the spines of her grandmother’s books. No, she didn’t eat the pages, but, as she would recall decades later in *We Are the Stars*, she did breathe in the crisp smell of paper and ink and “the hidden jostling of words”.

And then a tiny voice inside her head said: “Well that’s all right, then. This explains everything.”

A FEW weeks after the filming of *Alone Australia*, Chick travelled to Hydra to thaw out in a Greek autumn after the deprivations of a Tasmanian winter. She went “searching for Charmian” (the title of her mother’s bestselling book, published in 1995) because she now felt ready to have a relationship with her grandmother’s ghost.

In the 30 years since discovering that Charmian Clift was her grandmother, she’d refused to read her writings, fearing it would influence her own unique writer’s voice, one she’d been developing since she was a child.

“This was the first time I had wanted to hunt her down,” she tells *Good Weekend*, “to find the essence of her, almost stitch that part of her into myself. Because, up until then, she’d really been Mum’s story, not my story.”



Above: Chick’s grandmother Charmian Clift with Leonard Cohen on the Greek island of Hydra in 1960. Right: Chick at the same tree in 2022, during a quest to “hunt Clift down” and meet her ghost.



sang and played his guitar. It’s a moment engraved in popular culture’s collective imagination.

Chick leant against that same tree and wept for her grandmother who, like her, had lived with the soul ache of having lost a child. Chick began to play her guitar and sing for her departed daughter and grandmother, two ghosts she imagined now dancing – coming home to each other – under the olive tree.

Chick returned to Australia and was forced to sit with the secret of having won *Alone* for nearly eight months, until the final episode was aired in late May 2023.

Then the dam burst. Suddenly, people started coming up to her in the street, thanking her for her courage and fearless authenticity. Her social media profile exploded. From 1000 Instagram followers before *Alone Australia* screened, she now had 30,000, then 80,000. Saxton Speakers Bureau snapped her up as a keynote speaker, SBS’s *Great Australian Walks* invited her to become one of their three presenters, then co-host a new SBS podcast on the second *Alone Australia* season.

All this at the very time she’d been commissioned to write a book about her extraordinary life. In August

last year, she flew to Berlin to begin the writing process from an old warehouse. Hugh Jackman, her friend from university days in Sydney, flew in to join her.

“Gina taught me how to read people,” he tells *Good Weekend* via email. “She taught me how to see below the surface...she was just instinctive and smart and observant and understood people...and I can’t wait for people who obviously feel they know her from the show

Alone to get an even deeper understanding of who she is and what she has to offer.”

After a six-day writing spree in the German capital, Chick returned to Tasmania to attend a forest economics congress at the Museum of Old and New Art, where she was invited by its founder David Walsh and his wife Kirsha Kaechele to use their beach house at Marion Bay as a writing den.

Chick wrote in a preternatural white heat, almost finishing the manuscript in three weeks. “It was an outpouring from my heart,” she says, “and while I was writing it I could really feel the presence of Charmian and my mother. I could feel the wild, creative genes just singing and ringing and having their own storm inside me.

“I pretty much just had to hang on when the words started coming, because they were not coming from a cognitive or rational place. It felt like I was sticking my finger up into the clouds and I just had to ride the lightning to get whatever was coming through.”

A FEW years ago, Gina Chick was walking through a forest in northern NSW, looking for a cave to sleep in, when she saw a black cockatoo with magnificent feathers high in the branches of a turpentine. “Hey little sister,” she called, “will you give me a feather?” and, according to Chick, the bird looked at her for a split second, stretched her beak to her tail, plucked a feather and then spat it out.

The feather landed in another branch, too high for Chick to reach, so – next thing Chick sees – the bird is lifting from its branch, flapping its wings next to the feather and the feather is falling like an “autumn seed pod” at Chick’s feet.

“That was the closest thing I’ve ever seen to magic,” Chick says now, completely aware of the disbelief this



Left: with long-time friend Hugh Jackman, who visited Chick in Germany as she began work on her memoir. The pair first met in a university cafeteria.

After a year as a workhand on an island resort in the Great Barrier Reef, however, she decided she wanted to live, and she began reconnecting with nature and her deepest longings: running wilderness programs, rewilding camps, leading dance and meditation retreats, getting in touch with her body once more and the fierce creativity she’d inherited through her maternal lineage.

We never saw this on *Alone* but during her last 10 days, she survived the relentless rain and sub-zero temperatures by writing songs and giving imaginary concerts to pretend audiences, dressed in her signature possum-skin coat.

Two years earlier, during COVID-19, she’d lived in a bus on the side of a mountain, awaking many winter mornings before dawn to write a song and, of course, now she has an album ready for release because there’s nothing, seemingly, that Gina Chick can’t do.

She can play music, as well as sing and dance. She can hold an audience in rapt attention and can write like a born-writer writes. She can hunt, stalk and kill, while also grieving the death of the animal she has just slain. She can survive on her own in the wilderness, communing with the land, reminding us of our lost connection to nature.

And she can do all this because, beyond her physical survival skills and ability to tune into the deep intelligence of the natural world, she has forged a friendship with all the untamed voices and characters – both real and fabled – that have lived inside her since she was a little girl.

“I spent so long as a child wondering how to leave my strangeness behind,” she says, “and it turns out that was the wisest part of me.” ■

“If you spend enough time out in the wilderness, your idea of what’s rationally possible shifts.”

anecdote will cause. “But if you spend enough time out in the wilderness, out in nature, your idea of what’s rationally possible shifts. Just look at First Nations people’s connection to country and their experience of cause and effect. There are very clear descriptions of this sort of thing

happening – people saying, ‘This is something I need, and it comes. And that was my experience on *Alone*.’”

Show me the girl at seven and I’ll show you the woman. From the time Gina Chick was a little girl, she lived in a world of magic, her senses all a tiptoe. She spoke to birds and ran headlong into tempests. She learnt about the atoms and elements of the universe, and everywhere she looked there was wonder to behold, but also a throbbing sense of isolation.

At the age of 30, she briefly contemplated suicide. All the pain, rejection and confusion she’d felt trying to fit in a box, trying to be human, left her feeling life was not worth the struggle.