A Taste of Dreams

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# Table of Contents

Abstract iv

*Dollar Bill* 1

*Mezzaluna* 16

*Beauty Point* 28

*The Dry Storm* 41

*Three Pots Red* 53

*Friday Night, Party Night* 69

*The Dance* 80

The Exegesis 101

Works Cited 152
Abstract

Food, as a social signifier, is an important device in literature that has been used skilfully by writers like Woolf, Proust and Carver. My short story collection, *A Taste of Dreams*, employs food as a theme across the collection to reveal details about characters and the relationships between those who come together to cook and dine. The essay that follows examines suburban fiction and domestic routines including the preparation and consumption of food, food-related spaces such as the kitchen and dining table and the significance of meals beyond the food itself.

Domestic fiction set in the Australian suburbs had a late and uncertain beginning. The image of the Australian bush and frontier dominated both art and literature through the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, well after the cities and suburbs were established. It was only after the Second World War, with the great post-war land boom, that artists and writers turned to the suburbs. Initially, this residential space, where the majority of Australians lived, was derided and spurned, viewed as homogeneous, status-oriented and uniformly conservative. Intellectuals attacked the architecture of the new landscape and concluded that the residents who bought into this lifestyle were conditioned by their streetscape.

In the 1970s, new writers like Garner, Winton, Malouf and Updike emerged. They looked beyond the streetscape, front fence and lawns to reveal the details, the diversity and complexities of lives within the suburban milieu. Domestic situations were explored against a background of iconic symbols and signifiers—the backyard, shed, garage, bedroom, laundry and kitchen—to reveal the unique details of characters’ lives within the suburban home.

*A Taste of Dreams* is a contribution to the genre of short story writing set in the Australian suburbs. Food links the stories and provides an avenue through which the reader can gain an understanding of the characters, their homes and their relationships.
He couldn’t sing. He could barely play guitar. He was short and, as if to make a spaghetti western of the whole thing, he was Italian.

But it wasn’t a spaghetti western. It was one of the best Country and Western gigs in town: Groovy on drums, Hank on guitar, Tex on bass and himself, Dollar Bill, up front, in a tallboy, trying to keep tune with Miss Melody’s honey-altro voice. They came from all over the state to hear The Cactus Cowboys with Miss Melody. She teased the crowd with her Texan twang, cascading brunette curls and ski-dip nose, wrapping her lilting drawl around lines like *My Baby Don’t Dance to Nothing But Ernest Grubb*. Dollar Bill more than met her match with his showmanship on numbers like *Guess My Eyes were Bigger than My Heart* or *Smoke, Smoke, Smoke that Cigarette*. The way he curved that Lucky Strike through the air as if caressing a woman, swept a wide hand out

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**Dollar Bill**

**Maccheroni alla chitarra (Guitar Macaroni)**

*Lay a sheet of fresh pasta on the guitar strings and run a rolling pin over it to produce fine, ‘square’ pasta strands. Boil the fresh pasta for 3-4 minutes, serve with a sauce or meatballs and grated pecorino.*
on the long notes or shook a subtle finger-clicking wrist to one of Junior Brown’s classic lines: *I’m a slap-happy, gear-jammin’, coffee-drinkin’, truck drivin’ fool.*

But he was no Junior Brown; didn’t write the songs, couldn’t play more than three chords on the steel guitar and sure didn’t have southern man height. He grew the handlebar moustache, spent big bucks on the boots and borrowed his mama’s sewing machine to make the finest chaps in town. But it was his timing, rhythm and magnetic stage presence that brought the whole act together.

The stage backdrop, painted by the four urban cowboys in Dollar Bill’s backyard one BBQ Sunday, while band molls hung around and loads of kids ran crazy in and out of the spare Holden sunk into his lawn, featured saguaro cacti and the famous butte of Hollywood westerns.

It was at the scene–painting BBQ that Groovy announced that another bun was in the oven. The group congratulated him with handshakes and backslaps, a clink of beer bottles and muttered well-wishes to be passed on to the expectant mother. Groovy’s wife never came to band meets after she went at Hank with a broken bottle and the marriage itself often operated on a level of police involvement, but his band mates never grilled him.

“Got a name yet?” someone asked.

“Nope. Any suggestions?” Groovy scanned the company slouching in front of the scene of Arizona that seemed to have dropped from the sky into the Australian backyard.

“Call it ‘Nothin’,” Dollar Bill wisecracked. Those who knew Groovy’s off-stage name, Dan Owen, fell about. “Nothin’ Owen!” The showman’s hands opened out instinctively.

It was a smooth action and a neat chance for one of the girls to dump a phone in his hand with a muttered “Bennie” through a jaw set with foreboding.

He took the call behind the tangled mass of Strelitzia reginae that had begun life as a dehydrated clump by his back door but spread through the whole garden bed, down the west side of the house, and now threatened to overtake the lawn.

He tried to take it all in and calm her as she rasped her fantastic story, his mind swirling through her surreal world of post-injury shock. He looked up, eyes widened around pinprick pupils. Dozens of Strelitzia flowers rocked silently around him as if they were trying to listen in on the conversation or spear him.

In a haze, he took off, walking around the bay, ashen and stumbling, looking
back along the path whenever he recalled her hoarse, pleading, wild voice as if the perpetrator might be out for him too. He stopped by the Bay Rowers Club and downed two schooners in quick succession, his mind spinning behind the chit-chat he kept up with the barman about local music gigs. He spread his elbows along the bar a little to quell the shudder in his hands and drew long gulps.

If he raced to the hospital now he risked walking in on family members. He suddenly realized he knew nothing about her family. She’d talked about the towns she lived in around the state but nothing about her parents or siblings. In fact, as he grasped the wider story, he knew little about the whole game. Would he be permitted to see her? Would he even be allowed in? Would she allow either man to see her? What were the rules of the game after a husband bashes a wife because she has a lover? As the one with no status in the game, Dollar Bill did the best thing he knew.

“Another schooner thanks, mate.” And the barman obliged.

The fiddle started his love of music, the lure of stage performance entering his blood the day he found a violin on the edge of a junkyard, aged nine. It was a relief to escape the itchy ruffled shirt and tight black pants of Italian piano accordion tradition. Sweltering in the heat, Sicilian families gathered on Saturday afternoons at the Trocadero club to gossip and hear their bambinos squeeze out the tunes from home. By nightfall, back in his bedroom, he stretched nylon guitar strings down the fingerboard of the violin and performed for hours in front of his own reflection as the old 78 player dutifully scratched out Beethoven’s concertos. He took deep bows and thanked the conductor magnanimously as the applause played on and on, while his accordion spent longer and longer intervals in its case in the corner.

Dylan and Clapton took him through the teenage years until he emerged at eighteen, a long-haired, unwashed ruffian, brooding at home, wired in bars, turning out roughshod riffs on guitar. Despite the dishevelment, the Italian heritage meant perfect skin and childhood chocolate eyes that remained through adulthood along with a velvet style that drew the girls.

His father stood wailing on the driveway of Begonia Crescent, a man of immaculate dress but, on the morning of his son’s departure from home, his dressing gown was open, the cord hanging loose. Mama pleaded with both men as her only son, Domenico Bertolino, took off in an EH Holden for Surfers’ Paradise and Spanish Rita of 66 the Sunset Strip, the first of many.
Bennie’s face was ok. Thank God. Tubes carried clear liquids into her and coloured liquids out. A blanket covered a frame that seemed to encase her lower half. The white sheets set off her tanned arms, her hair had been washed and brushed and her face had a beautiful sheen. But her immobility was the greatest shock. After years of stage performing, Dollar Bill had an eye for good movement and Bennie certainly had it. Her whole body usually accompanied her grand, charismatic tales with smooth hand movements, a sway of her hips, her eyes looking everywhere. She often held her hands to her face as she talked, not quite fiddling with her hair but twisting her fingers around her facial expressions, increasing the humour and allure of her tales until the listener was as bewitched by the physical as much as the verbal.

Bennie’s childhood was one of bubble ‘n’ squeak for breakfast, hand-me-down clothes from older brothers, and few treasured possessions as the family followed Daddy from town to town, abattoir to abattoir. She would be well into her thirties before her father came into the big money, managing a pork slaughterhouse on the outskirts of Sydney, favoured by the big names of Chinatown for top-range suckling pig. By then, Bennie was married to her own cash-money millionaire, a marriage already pushed to its limits the night she first walked into Dollar Bill’s act.

The Cactus Cowboys were into their eighth year, crisscrossing the state with regional gigs. January was always a jam-packed month, culminating in Tamworth. They were all into the swing of it that summer—everyone working hard and playing hard. Dollar Bill turned forty-five at the end of the month, the night they did a regional saloon for a mishmash of winos, cowboys and divorcee line dancers. There was no theme to the mix except all that was lost in an Australian regional city.

Into this mix walked Bennie.

Perhaps it was the arresting combination of a neatly pressed magnolia print dress against well-worn cowboy boots and hat or the way she held her mouth, laughter itching her lips, but few failed to notice the tall, black-haired dame with the scarlet painted mouth. The crimson magnolias were a shout on their white background, the battered boots and hat and the grimy, beer-smeared door behind her accentuating the spanking fresh look of a woman who would ace all women in Dollar Bill’s life.

She stood framed by the heavy pub swing door that took an age to complete most of its closing, slamming the last two inches in a violent temper. The screech of its hinges was drowned out by the band as Bennie cast a roving eye around the venue. She
had a star’s ability to engage a whole crowd yet no one in particular and a pub crowd was her territory. A pub bub from birth, Bennie gained two survival skills watching her mother produce standard fare in hotel kitchens from Cobar to Coffs: how to cook for a multitude and how to sparkle for the men folk in order to keep them hungry well after they’d eaten their grub. A pretty dress was only the start. City girls might don a frock to catch a boy but in the hardened rural towns across the state, your mouth was the tool that reeled them in, made them feel warm and needed but also kept you safe.

Lying in the hospital bed, six months after that first meeting at the saloon, sedated and swollen, she would break from sleep to rant, in a voice more ocker than usual and recite those hotel chores from childhood:

“... chook for dinner, mate, do those in slices, thin, the peeler there, julienne ya dingbat, and wash ya flaming’ hands ... hands off me, you bastard ... the bat ... used his bat, the bastard ... then back to bed ... kitchen floor to mop, sweep, get a rag from the pantry ... here under the table, a good wipe, down here with me, on your knees ... lie here, lie with me, hours, hours ... back to bed with him, me down here on the floor, broken on the floor ... back broken ...”

Dollar Bill’s mind swam between her raving and an attempt to understand the paperwork at the end of her bed: Patient, D.O.B. 3/8/60, has sustained fractured right femur (undisplaced), crush fractures of L4,5 and S1 vertebrae, extensive bruising to buttocks and lower limbs, anaemia (Hb 7.5), hyponatraemia

Wafts of chemical and human fluids drove Dollar Bill back onto the street. For the bus ride home he was a figure sunk into the window, face flashing pale under yellow and white city lights.

He hadn’t caught a bus in years and didn’t like the journey any better for it. As the maniac driver threw his vehicle and its four passengers around tight city corners, Dollar Bill remembered his last trip on a bus, twenty-seven years earlier in Surfers Paradise. Ah, Rita, my Spanish Rita.

At twenty-two, she was four years older and four inches taller than her Mediterranean lover. They were the Surfers set: Rita of the high Spanish cheekbones and Domenico with his Sicilian eyes. She made a great Singapore Sling (free) every afternoon at the Sunset Strip Club and he grew to love the ritual of ending his day, busking, and heading for that cocktail made by his girl. Then he would leave her to finish her evening shift and next see her when she woke him, drunk, on the lounge or the floor beside her bed or at her front door, key in hand, passed out.
It was Rita who ended the relationship. She wanted to make her way in the world, she said, and came to tell him at his busker’s spot in the mall. He noticed the legs that went forever before realising it was her. He was singing “Alice’s Restaurant” when she arrived with her break-up news, but he’d only just begun, so, by the time it was over, all twenty stanzas, she was late for her shift and cranky. She made it a quick dumping, handed over his second guitar case (containing all his worldly possessions) and glided back down the mall. He sobbed on the beach all afternoon; then lay all night in the arms of Trixie who worked the juice bar in the mall. As he danced captivating stage acts around her room, and performed cheeky acts under the covers, Domenico grasped that the girls loved him when he was new, with a lick of danger about him, and a hint of the family man that kept them believing in a future. He left Surfers with his two guitar cases and a harmonica in his back pocket.

Entering his house so early in the evening was as rare as bus travel for him. He wanted to shake the hospital scene with Bennie right out of his life so dived into his usual routine: TV on in the lounge room and bedroom, 24 hour news radio blaring from the kitchen and bathroom radios, beer from the fridge, chuck a chop to the dog. Noise was the best antidote to loneliness as he sat out the back on a milk crate watching his dog slop its chop and listened to the cacophony of media issuing from inside. The girls had cleaned away the party well enough and someone must have taken the backdrop. The only backdrop now was the moon splintering itself on the pines and casting Strelitzia shadows at his feet.

He looked across his backyard. The kikuyu was a trampled mess after the BBQ, after all those weeks of growing it. He had mowed regularly when he first moved in, seven years ago (bought a Jackie Howe singlet just for the job) and had kept the edges trimmed until he ran out of trimming line. He had planted citrus trees and a herb bed outside the backdoor. But the herbs were smothered now in kikuyu and he only mowed a regular path to the hills hoist and back, letting the kikuyu go wild either side. Yesterday this ‘jungle’ of grass had been almost waist height but the party had turned it into a thick, matted carpet. As long as the landlord stayed away, he could ignore it.

The night was balmy, too damn sweaty if you moved much, so he limited it to a return to the fridge for another beer and some carvings of good sopressa—paring the salami with a huge chef’s knife while standing at the kitchen bench. On his way back out to the whining dog, pacing for a back scratch, he noticed Hank’s harmonica on the
kitchen table. It was years since he had wrung a tune himself.

“No prison music here, lovey.” He recalled the Macksville barmaid as soon as he blew the first notes. Old enough to be his mother, she’d levelled a mordant eye at his harmonica as soon as he’d entered her hotel.

Hitching out of Surfers had been fairly easy but once he got into the Northern Rivers, the truckers wouldn’t stop for him. He was swooped by hawks and could barely put one foot in front of the other in the stagnant heat of the land of sugarcane. He took to walking at night, a cap pulled low to shield his eyes from the headlights. By Macksville, he was dead keen for a shower and a feed.

With his tone-deaf voice, he knew only Dylan covers were going to get him a night off the highway so, against Mama Macksville’s rules, he belted out a rotten version of “Maggie’s Farm.” It got him half a bed, the barmaid in the other half, where he snored the last four free beers off until she kicked him onto the floor. He pressed a buck into her hand in the morning (for accommodation? beer? sex?).

“Geez. I won’t spend it all at once;” she snorted. “I’ll keep it in a locket to always remember the dollar bill boy who sang to me.”

And there it was. The Italian childhood name was left by the side of the Pacific Highway and Dollar Bill hitched a ride out of town.

“Well, I did it,” Bennie announced. “I rang him and told him his time was up.” She was packing the last of her cosmetics with the small selection of hospital products she’d ‘saved’. “He said nothing. What could he say? Anyway, his mother said it all for him: ‘Don’t you take my grandchildren away from me.’ ” Bennie’s painted ruby lips curled into a snarl.

Dollar Bill tried, fleetingly, to get his head around the term ‘grandchildren’ knowing that in a few hours his house would be the home for these very kids, the grandchildren of someone he’d never met, who already hated him. Getting his post-operative woman to his home, pouring her a gin and joining her in the rickety old banana chairs he’d washed, hosed and oiled for her arrival, seemed far less complicated.

“Stay,” he’d said. “S’long as you like.”

She never responded. Just moved in. Action took the place of conversation. Dollar Bill never knew if she sat the kids down to explain their new life to them or what answers she might give to their questions: For how long? Why can’t we go to Grandma’s instead? What’s the name of the man we’re going to live with?
But he helped her as she walked gingerly up his driveway, he did the shopping and took her kids to school and even tried to cook until she was well enough to boot him out of the kitchen in the name of digestible food. Previous women in his life—depressive, folk-singer Annie, ceramicist-Buddhist Jenny and valley-girl Frances—had all tried to domesticate him but walked out when they discovered they weren’t the only girl. In walked the next and he always found the freshness of the new relationship kept him from feeling too guilty. The acts of vengeance by those exiting were reasonably tame—international phone calls on the next bill, LPs stolen from his collection, or a pair of his favourite jeans cut through the groin—but they roused enough anger to convince him that building a home with a partner was not his bag.

But the early days with Bennie, fresh from damage, were blissful. She couldn’t walk far so he took time off work to get a handle on the new arrangements in his house and the regular pattern that emerged: he dropped her children at the bus stop each school morning, shopped for exotic food items from a list she handed him and returned home to intense aromas from her cooking.

If the lunch menu was paella, Bennie dressed her hair with frangipani and hibiscus and greeted him with a glass of sangria, chatting constantly while she stirred the sauce. If it was Tex Mex, they drank margueritas made fresh from his lemon tree. If she did clams with squid ink linguine, he made campari aperitif; home-brew washed down a solid steak and kidney pie; moussaka was followed by ouzo from Lesbos.

The kitchen was Bennie’s security. Whereas others went to pieces trying to coordinate chatter and chopping, Bennie felt safe and complete behind a stove. She was visual and verbal entertainment at a chopping board, a smooth, proficient act. He sat like a visitor at his own kitchen table while they talked languidly across steam from the boiling rice, or over herbs that erupted with damp, heady smells under a bruising mezzaluna.

Occasionally, she handed him a lemon and the grater, with never a hiccup to her story about mad Phil Free and his penny-farthing down the Riverina or old Sam of Roma with his collection of hubcaps. He handed back zest as they laughed at the fact that he’d passed by Sam’s two years earlier, seeking hubcaps for his Dodge truck.

The end of the school day would roll around too soon but not before he’d played her his song list to match her menu. Sometimes he’d strum a tune himself but more often it was Sinatra with pasta, blues with Cajun or free jazz with tapas. For her bangers and mash, with rhubarb and onion marmalade, he chose Slim’s “Isa Rodeo.” Her
knowledge of all the nooks and crannies of Australia’s eastern states could match his experience of Western Europe, so he chose a good, strong ballad for a tough, Aussie gal. Before they became threatened by each other’s past they collapsed laughing into shared anecdotes.

“When you’re in Paris, right,” having never been out of Australia, she soaked up his stories, “you don’t pay for accommodation. Basta, a waste of money. You go to the major stations—Gare du Nord, Gare de l’Est—check the departures, go to the platform as if you’re early for your train and bed down until it comes. Train arrives, you don’t get on, just choose another platform for a further kip. You can get a decent night’s sleep with as few as three moves. You’ve got your bag with you and as long as you comb your hair and keep your clothes neat, the guards don’t hassle you. How do they know you’re not catching the next damn train?”

“Gabby was my best friend,” she’d respond. “Lived out of town about forty minutes by bike. I’d walk home from school, grab some fruit cake fresh out of the oven and ride over her house. I remember my part on my head would get sunburnt ’til it peeled. No hat, honey, don’t want to miss out on getting that tan! But one day, I remember, the locusts had come. They were bad out her way because the wheat was between town and her place. So I rode out and spent the usual two, three hours hanging ‘round her joint and, on the way back, no kid, the locusts were that thick on the road I had to get off and push my bike through them. It was like walking on . . . shit, a road of locusts! Didn’t matter. Meant you had a good excuse for being home late for dinner. ‘Grey death,’ I called my mum’s food. Just sat there turning it with my spoon, ‘grey death.’ Must’ve got a belly rise out of my brothers for it ‘cos my ma walked past me and pushed my face straight into my dinner.”

The anecdotes were edits, of course. She left out the pregnancy at fourteen and he left out how many women he actually had going at any one time in Europe.

“I didn’t have the money to buy shoes but the football club said I could play,” he doubled over with laughter. “Hey, it was my father’s Sicilian village. Anyway, I scrounged some, but they were two left shoes! I could kick the ball, fine, but I loved sending the team crazy running in left-hand circles all the time. They’d pass the ball to me and I’d kick it round and round, left-left-left.”

She squinted through tears of laughter at the Trapani football team photo, circa 1974. Having thought she’d met one of the sexiest and most entertaining men alive, she was amazed to see he had once been even more stunning with a full head of hair and a
ski tan.

She listened to his adventures before Italy: the overland trip through Britain, living in the back of a van, stoned most nights, listening to Floyd; the stint in Spain where you could sell your blood at the hospital for a good meal and if you kept two different names going, to evade the one-pint-a-week rule, you could get as many as four free feeds a week; and the six months in Paris in the lesbians’ share house—his longest stint without a live-in lover—where the girls spent the early hours reading passages from de Beauvoir by candlelight.

“Seventies stereotype? I lived it!”

But it was the three years in Tuscany as a farmhouse manager, fetching wood, wine and newspapers, driving the artists-in-residence around town, cooking and shopping for them that really got Bennie going.

“How the hell did you cook? You can’t slice bread,” Bennie was aghast.

“The maestro Giulietta! I paid her to make meals for the artists.”

Bennie burst out laughing.

“Hey, she even called me ‘Capo’. You want the translation?” He patted his puffed out his chest. “ ‘Boss.’ ”

“Yeah, right. I bet she never let you in her kitchen,” Bennie levelled at him.

“Hey, I was busy working the property. Don’t look at me like that. Anyway, I typed up all her recipes. Yeah, now you’re interested. Homemade vino, sunshine, me: type-type-type. By lunch, she’d have the meal done, the bread baked and I’d be driving the fiat back up to the farmhouse, the pot keeping my legs warm, the wine keeping my belly warm . . . .”

“Fiats, Beetles, Minis,” nodded Bennie, “they’re all the same, great mileage from the dollar, run on the smell of an oily rag but damn cold in winter! Anyway, goddamn it, where are these recipes?”

Dollar Bill disappeared and returned with his creation from those days: a book of all the recipes Giulietta had cooked for the Tuscan farmhouse residents, 1974-77.

“Four pig’s trotters, two pig’s shanks and half a calf’s head.” Bennie was bent over his treasure in awe. “Beauty, I can order all this from the old man.” And she left Dollar Bill turning the pages of his book.

In the recipes, he saw the village in all its seasons, every pothole in the road between Giulietta’s house and the farmhouse, her doorway on the bend in town, a bend so tight that dust from passing trucks blew over his typewriter while he sat in the sun.
recording the cook’s recipes. All the while Giulietta mashed and stirred and pureed and pummelled, her small, fierce frame tied tight in an apron hand-printed in Sundays of flour.

Long-stay artists paid extra lire for specialty dishes so Giulietta began experimenting with recipes from other regions. She wrote to her sister-in-law in Emilia Romagna for instructions on how to do fennel in egg sauce correctly and her ‘capo’ tried to recall all the essential ingredients in his father’s Sicilian recipes.

“Ring him,” Giulietta bossed when he couldn’t remember every ingredient for *crocchetti alla palermitana*.

“No.”

“Afraid,” she proclaimed. “You are afraid.” She had seen enough during her sixty-three years to know why people wouldn’t return her gaze. “You will never settle until you make peace with him.”

“Bah!”

“Bah to you. He’s your papa, stupido.”

Instead of phoning home, he tried to write his own version of the family recipes but all his memories were of the preparation: nailing the eels to the paling fence, slicing below its head and pulling the skin away from the slimy body; watching the men flaming the pig’s skin to remove the bristles until he was old enough to be trusted with the torch; or simply fishing from the rocks at night. The slaughtered animals were then delivered to his mother and aunts in the kitchen and the rest of the morning was spent fixing the car, repairing shoes and belts or playing music. By lunch time, dishes began emerging from the oven and everyone gathered at the table to taste the recipes that Grand Nona had passed down to Nona and to all the daughters. He realised he would have to phone his mother, not his father, for the Sicilian recipes. And, when received, he would have to return to Giulietta, to her wooden spoon, her questions and her dogged advice.

“How much cinnamon?” he asked Giulietta, trying to record her recipe for panforte.

“If you keep throwing away all the lovely women, one day you will have none. And don’t throw your arms at me, basta, all you’ll have left is your memories and nothing else. You probably won’t even have your hair.”

“Dio mio, the cinnamon!”

Once the Sicily of his father and Giulietta’s Tuscany were consumed, they
moved onto Umbria and down through the Marches. Then his mother posted her family's Venetian recipes, copied in her delicate handwriting (the originals never left her house), and Giulietta returned from a visit to an in-law in Naples with ingredients and new ideas. So emerged the cookbook; from a borrowed Olivetti Lettera 32, sextodecimo, stitched through the folds.

“Your mother is a good woman. She keeps what is important.” Giulietta leafed through the recipes from the Veneto via Australia. “I knew a Venetian man once . . . .” And she told her love story in fragments while basting roasted tomatoes, salting eggplants and washing herbs. When Capo was critical of the lover, she defended him.

“He was an adventurer. I was too plain for him.”
“So why you pick on me about women and life?” he cried.
“Because you are no adventurer. You just run, run, run.”
“So did he!”
“He ran to the good things, not away from them. He didn’t want a cook for a wife, he wanted an explorer.”
“So do I.”
“You? You want a cook, you want a cottage, you want bambinos but you run, run from it all.”
“Bah!”

But they hugged each other tight on his last day, three years after he had arrived in the small town. He promised to write and send postcards. She didn’t promise and didn’t write. On parting, she gave him a jar of lemon spread and he gave her a copy of his cookbook. She kept it for a while, but returned to her own regional cuisine, now that the drunk typist was gone. The compendium gathered dust on her shelf and when she came across it a couple of years later, she simply tutted, shook her head and smiled, remembering the crazy boy and his running feet.

“Trouble, that one.”

Bennie’s father’s pork business meant the porchetta recipes in the cookbook could be followed exactly and her mother’s waste-not-want-not way was paid homage as she set about working through an entire pig and the cookbook.

“You can eat everything but the squeal,” she instructed her gagging children as, over the days, she produced fegati dolce, pig liver with honey, fegato insane, pig liver with hot pimentos and moved onto recipes for the lungs, cheek, spleen, heart, tail and
trotters.

After a winter of meats, spring brought a good yield of vegetables and herbs from the backyard. While bringing the kikuyu under control again, Bennie had discovered the remains of the old herb garden, along with trellises attached to the side fence where she could grow peas and beans. Good mulching through winter also produced the best crop that the citrus trees had yielded in years.

Once the garden was tended, Bennie spent the heat of the day indoors, making pasta. She rolled, curled and twisted the dough, drying rows of farfelle and tortellini on trays on the dining table, the benches and on top of the fridge. In the back of the pantry she discovered the chitarra and after a few attempts, following the hand-drawn (pen and wash) instructions in his book, produced the fine, square spaghetti. She draped the best strips over broom handles, suspended between chairs, until the kitchen was a maze of edible ribbons.

“Guitar macaroni,” he exclaimed when he entered the kitchen and bent to inspect the square edges. He opened a bottle of Chianti to celebrate and promised her a serenade on his Gibson after dinner but took up the grappa instead and she ended her hard day listening to a drunkard’s reverie while he caressed the chitarra.

“The sky is so soft in Tuscany, the air so crisp. In the morning, the bread is made... coffee... walk back home with the paper, up, up the hill.”

“It was twenty years ago, honey,” she flicked him with the tea towel.

“I should never’ve come back to this hell hole.”

“What, stay as a servant on some rich bastard’s farm?”

“Better to be a bum in Europe than a pensioner in Australia,” he groaned.

“Your dad wouldn’t agree.”

“Of course he wouldn’t,” he snarled. “He chose to come here! Bloody émigré. And now he doesn’t even know he’s here. He thinks he’s in Calabria. What the hell? Calabria! It’s not even his region!”

“He’s losing his mind, babe. He’ll probably think he’s on Mars next.”

“Ah, you don’t understand,” he moaned and murmured into his recipe book.

“No, you don’t understand, buster. I gotta get up in the morning to get my kids off to school.” And she left him stroking his book. He woke at two in the morning with a dry mouth and the recipe for Polpi all’aceto stuck by his spittle to his cheek. Bennie slept soundly and in the morning made herself a promise. Only when she’d booked the admission to hospital did she tell him she was having her tubes tied. He drank, she
shouted; they fought. She swore; he drank.

“So where does that leave me?” he shouted, arms waving in fury.

“Hey, mate, the ex don’t pay maintenance on the ones I’ve got. I sure can’t support any more.”

“Who said I can’t pay?”

“You? You’ve been renting all your damned life and you’ve never got any money in the bank.”

By the next summer’s end, the simpler recipes in his book had the most cooking splats as Bennie learnt if she took too long to get the meal to him, he was too drunk to hold the plate.

“If we ate at the table like normal people, I might try something more creative,” she snapped.

Dollar Bill just turned up the volume on the TV.

The Cactus Cowboys scored less and less bookings in rural towns. They played Tamworth again but by March the bookings seemed to be only city pubs that had a fad interest in the cowboy theme. Most weekend nights turned into mere rehearsals at Hank’s joint. Sometimes Bennie waited up for him but Dollar Bill just came home later and later.

“Where the hell have you been?” She was a silhouette in the hall against a weak winter sunrise coming in the back door.

“Out.”

“Well, don’t wake my kids,” she barked over her shoulder before slamming the bedroom door in his face.

The next day she was gone. At band rehearsal someone said Doug had heard she was headed north of Grafton after dropping by her parents for a while.

“That right, Dollar?” Groovy asked.

“All’s I know, the dame owes me a coffee machine and a VCR.”

But later that night, in the lounge room, he sobbed large, full tears. He should have followed her, joined her in a large rural town beyond the great divide where it is flat, hot and dusty. ANZAC biscuits straight from the oven, still warm and chewy, the kids loitering around the yard with the dogs, while he fixes a part of her sewing machine and everyone comes together at sundown to watch him spin her across the veranda boards to good bluegrass. He sat in reverie for a long time, seeing majestic images of hard times down to the blanket and days of gain when a buck comes as easy as lickin’
butter off a knife, until he was a long way from remembering the heart of what he wished for: just someone to ride the river with.

He dragged out the heavy instrument case from behind the lounge and opened its clasps. They were rusty but still opened with a snap. He lifted the accordion to his chest and let the squeezerbox sigh. Decades of stale air rushed out the baffles and continued to fan his face as he slowly fingered the notes, laboured at first, but still a faithful rendition of “Amore a Palermo.”
Mezzaluna

Spring Herb Frittata

8 large eggs
Cup of chopped fresh herbs: chives, parsley, tarragon, chervil and thyme
Cup of roughly chopped rocket leaves
Dash of cream
Chopped, caramelised Spanish onion
1/2 cup of grated parmesan
Salt and pepper
Extra virgin olive oil

Beat eggs lightly, add chopped herbs, cream, onion rocket and parmesan. Season.
Heat oil in a skillet, add frittata mixture. Gently drag spoon through the mixture from edge to centre, letting the raw mixture fill the spaces. Turn if desired.

“Can you actually read anything through that curtain of hair?” Beth looks at her son’s dishevelled tresses dangling over his cornflakes as he flicks through one of her magazines.

“That bloody hammering next door. First it’s his ancient classical music and now he wants to renovate his bathroom. Can’t he do it on a friggin’ weekday?”

Beth moves to the window, towards the noise. She wants to share the blue above and the morning breeze across the garden with him.

“What are you up to later?” she asks.

“What’s a floor cleaning tool in four letters?” Vaughn studies the crossword.
“You could come with me this afternoon. I’m not going until after lunch.”

“Gotta ring the guys, see what they’re doing. God, that hammering.” He glares out the window, his hair flopping back to reveal a rash of pimples across forehead, nose and neck, and golden stubble where a beard might one day grow. His blue eyes, glowering at the day, have the same darting spark from childhood, now encased in slothful, messy adolescence.

“I thought you might like to come. You haven’t been since the funeral. It might help.”

“Dunno. Maybe.” Vaughn says hurriedly then lurches from the table, his six-foot frame lolling to the sink, and runs water into his bowl. Milk sprays in all directions. He swishes water around trying to wash the milk away but manages to flick water all over the bench. He gives up and leaves the room.

Beth stares at the floor a while then switches on the kettle and returns to her view out the window. The shasta daisies are bending under their own weight and the ivy geraniums have completely covered the rockery. Again, she promises herself she will prune today. The water rumbles behind her, the kettle cuts off with a sharp click and she realises the neighbour’s hammering has stopped too. The silence is just as shattering. She pours the hot water into her cup. The green leaves whirl, then slowly sink to the bottom of her cup.

“Japanese may be more suitable,” the lady in the teashop had opened a tiny pot and Beth remembers leaning forward to take in the scent. “You can re-brew this leaf.”

Tea had been on the shopping list on that last trip into the city along with a toy for a niece and some specialty stationery.

“And buy something for yourself today, Dan,” Beth had pleaded to her husband.

“I don’t need anything.”

“This shirt is so old and you have no decent pants. Why don’t you take some tips from your trendy son?”

“You call him trendy? C’mon we’ll have a nice lunch in our rags. Unless I embarrass you too much.”

They went to their favourite—the ducks glistening in the window, the tetchy waiters and the regular Asian diners suck-sucking enormous soups. As usual they ordered too much and took the leftovers home to Vaughn.
Beth tries to recall that last lunch but it blends with all the others spent at table number four under the kitsch, dusty red lantern: Dan’s eyes scanning the restaurant, the way he studied the menu and poured Beth’s green tea for her, the tiny Chinese teacup lost in his big hands. He always moved with ease, was never fidgety or restless, but, after twenty years together, Beth could detect when he was on edge. He wasn’t that day.

A year later, half the packet of Japanese tea remains. It might last forever now that there’s no one else to drink it besides herself.

She wanders up the hall and pauses outside Vaughn’s room. She leans against the doorway and tries to ignore the smell emanating from the drink stained carpet, dusty electronics and used sport socks.

“I want to visit Aunty Dot afterwards. You could drop me at Dot’s then have the car.”

“Yeah, good, that suits. The guys are all making pizza. How you gonna get home?”

“I’ll get a cab back . . . or you could pick me up later. Aunty Dot would love to see you,” Beth smirks.

He appears in his doorway, nose and eyes screwed tight in imitation of his aunt. “Did I ever tell you about the time the cannon ran over my Frankie’s leg?” He slaps his lips and sucks his teeth. “Just as well he was handsome in other ways because a limp could set you back in the dating game. But limp or no, he was still my darling Frankie, I’ll tell you that for nothing. My Frankie.”

For just a moment his eyes are alive. She laughs as he mimics Dot’s walk down the hall to the bathroom, a precise rendition despite his lankiness. She returns to the kitchen, starts mixing ingredients for biscuits and still feeling good when she removes them from the oven an hour later.

“Do you want to take some to Phil’s? I’ve done too many.” He launches himself onto the kitchen bench, reaches over and devours two of the misshapen apple and oatmeal lumps and then inspects a third.

“What happened, Ma? Lost your technique? Don’t matter, the guys will eat them.”

“So you can take me to the cemetery?”

“I can’t hang around long, Mum, I’ve gotta buy the ingredients for the pizzas. So hurry.”
“We’ll leave when you want,” she says to his slouching exit as tears well in her eyes. Why cry now? You got what you wanted. For the first time, he is coming. Just like that. She looks at the biscuits—too small, too dark. Too many. Always too much food these days. Too much of everything—his slouching, her lethargy, his pain, her pain. One step at a time. He is coming.

The day is too bright for him after a morning spent online in a dark bedroom. He reaches into the glove box and pulls out her spare sunnies. They sit at the traffic lights in silence, Beth trying to subdue her smile; he wouldn’t be seen dead in a basic t-shirt or runners, everything had to be a sporting or fashion label, but he thought nothing of donning his mother’s overly large spare sunglasses.

“D’you think many people will be there?”

She turns to respond. ‘Worried about being seen in your old ma’s sunnies, eh?’ But her little boy is beside her, within the body of an emerging man with fidgety fingers, blushing cheeks and shifting feet. He isn’t worried about being seen in the sunnies; just being seen.

“I don’t know,” she says as the lights change

The pathway is so narrow at times he finds it easier to fall in step behind her. He watches her as they walk—her back slightly rounded, her hair tied in a loose bun, strands stragglng down her neck. A few hairs have fallen onto her jacket. He has never liked her hair—always the same, tie-back style.

“Get it done real short, Mum,” he has told her often enough. “Like that woman from your favourite TV show, you know, the one in charge of the company. Get your hair done like her.”

“She’s an old lady, Vaughn!”

“Yeah, that’s what I mean. She’s old but her hair’s like somewhere this decade at least.”

Beth would roll her eyes, mouth agape, and look at Dan who smiled a quiet smile, enjoying his family’s banter. But Beth’s hairstyle stayed the same and now Vaughn wonders how much tint hides the grey. Some white and silver hairs have fallen onto her jacket. He picks one off and lets it fall behind him.

Suddenly they have arrived: a clean, bronze plate on a granite block; not ostentatious; not even a foot high. Vaughn looks at the soil, still fairly raised; from a
bloodly great hole to a hump.

Beth brushes leaves away and sits down.

“Vaughn’s here, Dad. Came to say hi. We’re doin’ ok. He went really well in squash the other day. Won both games. You’d be proud. They all ask about us. We’re going ok. Grace left work this week. Gracie, hey. Can you believe it? And Tony and Simi are pregnant. The baby will be gorgeous, don’t you think? His eyes and her skin.”

Vaughn wanders away. As in his father’s last days, he gives space and time for them to be together. He strolls past fancy, architectural tombstones, solemn and self-important. Beyond is a stretch of manicured lawn, ready to take more people, more rows of holes, more repulsive effigies of angels, birds or cherubs atop more humps. Down the back, a guy is driving like a maniac, mowing the great expanse of greenery.

“Follow an S-shape,” his dad had instructed. “That way you won’t mow in an ever diminishing circle.”

“Sugar on the pizza stone makes the crust even more crisp,” Dad whispered to his son, perched on the kitchen stool sneaking shards of mozzarella. “And never too many ingredients on the one—today it’s just mushroom and cheese, maybe a little rocket at the end.”

“As soon as the omelette is poured, begin to pull the egg mixture gently to the centre of the pan. And never let it brown. A good omelette should still be a little runny.” The boy had tried to be interested but he mainly hung around the kitchen to lick the beaters or the spoon, to taste test and eat the discarded bits: the mushroom stalks, the ends of beans, left over bits of celery and carrot.

The mushrooms, beans and other vegetables came from the backyard. It started as two long beds then became four raised box beds on a rotating system with a timed watering system. Dad spent the cool hours before and after work snipping, de-bugging, tilling and feeding. As a little boy, Vaughn sat on a tree stump driving trucks in the dirt. His dad would hand him caterpillars, beetles and moths—passengers for his little cars and tractors—or sticks and leaves would become trees and buildings for a mini-city.

“Some say this flower is the death of Christ.” Dad held up the passionfruit flower which little Vaughn loved using as traffic lights for his cars. “The five anthers here are the five wounds, this part is the crown of thorns and the three stigmas are the three nails of the cross.”

“What happens when you’re dead, Dad?”

“Well, we’re all made from stardust, so I think we go back to being stars.”
If any yield was small, father and son just sat beside the patch and ate the entire crop: dwarf beans or sweet peas or strawberries. But the tomatoes were always bountiful.

“Cut around the stalk in a circle.” His dad would lean close over the tomato instructing Vaughn when he was old enough to be allowed a knife. “Run the knife around the top and, see, a little hat comes out, just like that.”

“It’s all too fussy for me,” Beth would chide. “Chop it in quarters and bite off any green bits as you go, I say.”

“Well I reckon, just eat ‘em like an apple,” Vaughn said.

Dad grew Green Zebras, Black Russians and Romas and persisted with his methodical cutting and slicing whenever a salad was needed. Mum continued to quarter and Vaughn just ate them whole. Then one day the knife just wouldn’t go in. Dad’s hand hovered above the tomato while Vaughn ate his toast and read the soccer scores aloud from the paper. Vaughn didn’t notice that the hand holding the knife was stiff, too stiff. But from far away he heard his mother say ‘Dan’ in a small voice, then saw the knife spinning, turning on its centre on the chopping board while his dad was down on the floor jerking with his mouth clenched.

Dan’s head was opened, a tumour excised and he was well for a while. The family of three came home to a clean kitchen and fresh bed sheets. They helped the sick man settle into the chair in the sunroom and Vaughn even joined them both for afternoon tea that first day back. But you can never go back once a new life arrives.

Everyone and everything suffered, including the vegetable garden. But one half-moon night in June, Beth found herself staring at the vegetable patch, with its tangled bean runners, shrivelled tomatoes, and zucchinis the size of rolling pins. It took many nights to get it back to something manageable but it became her routine: straight in from the hospital to the garden, leaving Vaughn to close all the doors, turn on the lights and try to assemble a meal from the mishmash in the fridge. As long as there was bread or crackers, he could put something together.

Beth returned from the garden and devoured whatever Vaughn served. She ate, her puffy eyes staring into the food. Only when he reached to take her plate would she realise Vaughn’s presence and she would suddenly stroke his arm and kiss his hand. He would stand there, letting her love him for a moment, then head for the sink.

One night the platter featured peanut butter on poppy seed crackers, sliced banana, salami, yoghurt and pickles. Beth ate in her usual haze but Vaughn thought it
such an awful mix that he left his father’s bedside early the next day and headed for the main street in search of new food.

Mezzaluna Deli was in an ugly arcade, wedged between a cake shop staffed by lazy teenagers and the supermarket. But its location didn’t dampen its reputation as the best deli south of the bay. On that first visit, on a late Saturday afternoon, Vaughn stood for an age in front of the bread stand trying to choose: black and biscuity; crisp and white; hard and chewy? Then he moved to the cheese section trying to guess which one wouldn’t ‘knock his back teeth out’, as his father liked to say.

“Yes, sir?”

He looked up to see a stout, olive-skinned man staring directly at him. Boss-man.

“Just looking, thanks.”

“Gorgonzola, ricotta, fetta.” the man’s hand gestured across the display, ignoring Vaughn’s statement, his accent rolling the cheese names around in the air.

“Yeah. No.”

Suddenly, there was a slice of Provolone on the end of a knife before Vaughn could move away. The teenager dutifully took the piece and ate while the man looked up and down the arcade—a look that actually took in everything in front of him. It was superb cheese, not at all sharp. The teenager bought a great wedge of it and some sourdough and, that night, sat on the lounge with his mother tearing pieces off the loaf and carving chunks of cheese off the block. In the half dark, mother and son sat in silence, chewing and gnawing the oily, dense bread and the fresh, sharp cheese.

The next day, Vaughn headed for the supermarket and only glanced at the piles of splendid foodstuffs of Mezzaluna Deli as he passed. The supermarket was ugly, mainstream and mass-produced but at least you didn’t have to talk to anyone.

“Sir!”

Vaughn saw the boss-man beckoning, and he looked around to see who the man was summoning.

“Young man.”

In the near-empty, Sunday morning arcade, Vaughn now realised the shout was for him.

“I have fresh gebna for you,” announced the delicatessan boss with the exotic accent, standing proud in his white, buttoned chef’s shirt. As a red-faced Vaughn arrived at the counter he had to reach quickly to take the cheese ball the man presented
atop pita bread. “Gebna makleyah, my wife, Madeleine, made it fresh this morning. Oven baked cheese. Eat.” His manner was severe but severe in generosity. “Good, yes? You take some home to your family.”

The warm cheese was wrapped and handed to him before Vaughn could consider other foods. And that night Beth broke from her usual distracted thought patterns to notice the velvet texture and the hint of citrus. She left the table to collect some new baby rocket shoots and wrapped both the cheese and rocket in pita bread. They smiled at each other as she handed him a little pocket of bread.

“This is good,” she said.

“Mmmmm,” he responded with a mouth full, then he let her stroke his cheek.

“Now try some of this ham with it, Mum.” He pushed slices towards her but she remained looking at him. “C’mon Ma. Eat.”

Initially, Vaughn only bought breads and cheeses from Mezzaluna but each time gruff boss-man, Bob, made the teenager try something new: thinly sliced sopressa, mascarpone with mango jelly, quince paste on pumpernickel, fig mustard with sliced beef, a slice of olive mortadella or a spoon of couscous citrus salad.

“What’s Bob short for?” Vaughn asked one day.

“Bob is the name Australia gave me, mate. I come from all over this world—Egypt, Macedonia, Umbria. Every place I live it gives me a new name. Here, I’m Bob.”

That day Vaughn sampled lentil rissoles, pre-cooked by Madeleine.

“She cooks maybe two, three dishes each day . . . always fresh. Come try them here and you’ll travel the world in a week.” That night Beth picked chervil and radicchio to accompany Madeleine’s rissoles, yoghurt and baba ghannouj carried home by Vaughn in his backpack. As the boy and his mother dipped and ate in their usual silence, Vaughn thought about Bob and his produce, surrounded by great food all day, proud of his fare. Beth thought only about her dying husband and tried to grasp a future without him.

“I don’t know what’s best for you with school. I don’t know what subjects you should choose.” she said.

“It’s OK, Mum. I don’t really care.”

“I do. I care. But I’m tired.”

As spring began, Vaughn learnt to cook couscous at home while Bob suggested extra
flavours.

“Add spices, Vaughn,” he ordered. “Cinnamon, cloves, some cardamom. Not too much! A pinch or less.” After weeks of rich cheeses and olives, Vaughn was keen to switch to the spice world. He attempted rice-stuffed tomatoes and peppers and bought Moroccan curries and spicy pilaffs made by the unseen Madeleine. Bob was extra proud of the pork dish made with pear, dried apricot and Ras el Hanout.

“It means ‘top of the shop’,” Bob translated. “In Cairo, this spice blend is more expensive than seafood! Of course, when I bought it from the market there, it had ingredients that would get you arrested today!” Bob winked and Vaughn saw, for the first time, that the gruff look was a façade, a merchant’s persona, inherited from generations of his family living by the shores of the Mediterranean and the Nile.

In October, Dan improved a little. He sat up in bed, weak but smiling. Vaughn picked chervil, tarragon and thyme from the garden and entered the ward lighter, happier. But he was confronted with dark eyes, groaning pain and drugged, confused conversation. In two weeks his father would turn yellow and Vaughn would lose him forever.

“Go for a walk, Vaughn.” Beth tried to take the bag of herbs from her son and lead him gently out the door. “Just go.”

He headed up the street, away from the moaning, still carrying the herbs and, without a plan, found himself at Mezzaluna’s counter, distracted and fractious.

“Chervil, lemon thyme,” Bob inspected the contents of the bag. He pulled out a bunch and buried his face in it, the proud purist. The tiny leaves fell about the old man’s face. “Wait ’til you see what we make with this. Tonight, I will ask Madeleine . . . .”

The deli man stopped when he caught Vaughn’s silent, strained expression. They looked at each other—dark brown eyes staring into the blue of agony and wild pain.

“Soup for you and your mum tonight,” he commanded. Vaughn did not move while Bob ladled the bean soup. He came from behind his counter to hand the package over and put a strong hand on the boy’s shoulder. “Take it.”

That night, Bob sat in his house, three blocks from the deli. Since the days when he started a mixed food business, the house had increased in value ten times over and the business had become famous around the region. The business meant few holidays over the years so most of the profit was spent creating paradise at home. A great outdoor
room had been added that enclosed a second kitchen, lounge area and a table for twenty. From here, diners could look onto a night-lit garden with water features and statues. This room was the place where Saturday night family dinners and birthdays were held, the place where he fought with Madeleine over the right time to sell the shop, the place to gather after the stillbirth of a grandchild, a ferocious hailstorm or, after midnight, the place to sit alone, brewing over arguments won and lost.

Tonight he sipped Turkish coffee at the table and chopped Vaughn’s herbs.

“His father is sick. In the hospital. That’s what I think,” he told Madeleine. “At first I thought the bastard had left them and that was why the kid suddenly turned up shopping for him and his mum. But he looks like all the others who come—always during hospital visiting hours. Never relaxed. I think it is bad sick. And today the kid did not look good, Lina. His eyes were all puffed and crazy.”

“Ask him,” Madeleine said. “Just ask him.” She came to the table with the saucepan and scooped up the chervil and tarragon.

“My Lina, my Lina,” Bob put his arm around her hips and buried his head in her stomach. “Would you bring Spring Herb Frittata to me in hospital?”

She nudged him away. “I’d be too busy running the damn shop to cook for you. You’d get chaos antipasto—crazy leftovers from the day.”

He helped her strain the cream, onion and chervil stems and later, when they blended it with the leaves and eggs, he draped his arm across her shoulders and together they admired the delicate green. He looked out across the yard and sighed.

“Just talk to him,” Madeleine said.

Vaughn never returned for a piece of the frittata. Bob served all the unsold pieces to his staff at the end of the day, knowing the boy would not be back. Then spring was over and the deli started gearing up for Christmas, ordering good hams and panettone. The regulars came with Christmas gifts and he ran the usual raffle for the hospital charity.

But at night Bob sat for hours after dinner in the great outdoor room while Madeleine cooked in the kitchen around him. He chopped or whipped or kneaded for her while he sat at the great table, all the time staring out at the waterfall, the fountains and the statues. In silence they both knew this was the last Christmas with the business. They prepared quietly for the end of their working lives.

On New Year’s Day, down by the bay, Bob sat at a picnic table, surrounded by food and
the loudness of his family. The grandchildren ran about while he and his brothers discussed the newest additions to the European Union and a family trip to France next July.

Suddenly, at the waters edge, he saw Vaughn, watching the windsurfers out on the point. He made his way to the boy, sand spilling into his good shoes. Away from the deli, Vaughn did not recognise Bob initially—the dark, casual suit in place of the white chef’s shirt. Bob looked more like an exotic foreigner on the beach than he ever had at Mezzaluna.

“You didn’t come back, Vaughn,” the deli man said gently. “We made a frittata from your herbs. It was delicious, yes?” Vaughn smiled but did not feel pressured to respond. “Come join my family now, eh? We’re loud but we have good food.”

Vaughn looked at the windsurfers working the waves out the back. He promised to visit Mezzaluna when it re-opened after New Year, promised to see Bob before the new owners took over completely, said he would be sure to come back to the deli with more herbs. Both men stood for a while longer, admiring the surfers carving the water.

“Fadil,” Madeleine called from the picnic table. “I think you’re about to get a parking fine, you goose.”

“I have many names,” Bob smiled, seeing Vaughn’s quizzical look. “Fadil is from long ago, long before Australia. But you come by and visit us, yes?”

Madeleine was furious later when she heard.

“I did ask him to join us,” her husband placated. “And, no, Lina, I didn’t get his number. It’s up to him. He knows where I am.”

“Ready to go?” Beth is suddenly beside Vaughn, glowing.

“Yeah. Let’s go,” he says and links his arm in hers. He leads her along a wider pathway this time, one where they can easily walk abreast between the graves. She looks around at the unfamiliar route and then at Vaughn several times. Has he been here without her?

“I didn’t know this exit even existed,” she says. “I always thought that narrow path was the only way in. I’ve been coming here for a year and you find it on your first visit.” She glances back along the path again then follows his gaze up into the plane trees above. They both walk staring up, up into the branches. When they reach the gate she notices the practiced way he flicks the latch and nudges the small gate open with his knee.
“The guys just rang,” he announces. “They got crap salami for the pizza so I have to stop off and get some good stuff. We gotta get a move on, Ma.”

He is bending over, returning the knee-high gate to its latch. Her eyes follow him as he rights himself, his hair flopping in his face. She stares until she can see the blonde tips of his eyelashes around eyes that won’t look back at her. Then she squeezes his arm into her side, pressing it against her ribs, before releasing him.

“When did you get to be so tall?”
**Beauty Point**

**Old Fashioned Cocktail**

- Sugar Cube
- Dash of Bitters
- Dash Soda
- Whiskey
- Ice

*Garnish with a twist of lemon peel, one slice of orange, one maraschino cherry.*
*Serve with highball spoon.*

Her ears woke before her eyes. She tried to identify the scraping and scratching that had broken her sleep. There it was again—*clank-tink*—and Rose suddenly recognised Stan Field’s trowel: metal-on-rock as he turned the strip of garden bed three floors below her bedroom window. She made a mental note to raise the irritating clatter at the next body corporate meeting. Of course, she could not complain about the trowel per se but she could insist, well, propose a motion that all gardening maintenance be carried out during business hours.

Irritating as Alf (Unit Two) was, she could rely on him to second the motion and some biscuits should get Mauna Fredericks’ vote (Unit Five). The couple upstairs should also come her way. After all, she had lent them her doormat the day they moved in. They hadn’t requested the mat, admittedly, but Rose knew she had the body corporate’s best interests at heart by protecting common area floor coverings. The young man had accepted the mat politely but his fiancé seemed aloof, almost rude.

“I grew up in the units on the bay.” The girl was all crossed arms and tight lips.

“We know the drill, Mrs . . . your name is . . . ?”

“Blake, Mrs Roger Blake. Secretary, body corporate, Unit Thirteen . . . directly
below you.” Rose gave the list that she believed qualified her forcing a doormat on a new occupier while she tried to gain a glimpse at their choice of interior furnishings. But the girl kept the front door close to her body and a tight grip on the handle.

The lass really did have a rather unattractive face when pulled tight, Rose noted, but her engagement ring certainly was large and he wore smart suits to work. Overall, Rose felt they presented well enough—a pleasant change from most young people’s dress sense these days.

The trowel scraped again, causing Rose to open her eyes and glower at the window. Beyond Stan Field’s pathetic burrowing, she heard the peak hour traffic in full swing, society’s morning rumble circling the bay. Out there, somewhere in the daily crawl, she pictured her number two son, Martin, his gifted surgeon’s hands steering his new car through the chaos. This latest asset had bi-xenon headlights, leather interior (including a leather gear knob) and a sunroof. Rose wasn’t sure what bi-xenon actually meant but it sounded impressive and provided a conversational angle for her to remind her friends at bowls of the acquisitions of her talented son.

“Bi-xenon. That’s what he said. Bi-xenon. You probably know what that means, Charles.” Rose always sat at the opposite end of the club lunch table from Charlie Mathers, retired auto electrician, so all the senior bowls group were made aware of Dr Martin Blake’s new car and its modern features.

Stan’s trowel continued to grate on rock and Rose’s nerves, as she lay stiff-limbed beneath her floral doona. But it was the concentrated odour of fried meat that actually hoisted Rose out of bed and jammed her feet into her slippers.

“What are you doing, Peter?”

“Chops, Mum. You want chops?”

“For breakfast? I don’t eat chops for breakfast, for goodness sake. The smell will go all through the building. What will the neighbours think I’m up to?”

“Bacon and eggs then?”

“No, I don’t want bacon and eggs. Why are you frying at this time of day? What will the neighbours think I’m doing? Anyway, why should I care? S’pose it doesn’t matter. I won’t be here much longer. I may as well leave now, seeing as you’ve taken over the kitchen.”

“Steady on, Mum. I’m only trying to do the right thing by you. Anyhow, you wanted to move.”

“Not to a cell.”
Rose was fond of dramatic labels for her future place at Beauty Point Retirement Village. Words like ‘cell’ and ‘kennel’ or ‘death row’ were usually delivered as tailorenders to another row with son number one.

She plonked a teabag into her cup. Unable to read the ‘use by’ date on the milk carton clearly, she turned her back to Peter and sniffed. It was a little rank but a good shake would do the trick.

“I’ve been perfectly all right during all my years here,” she snapped. “I don’t know why I need to leave.”

“Mum, we’ve been through this. You can’t climb the stairs.”

“I get up the stairs just fine.”

“You stop twenty times. You’re like a prisoner here.”

“I get lots of help from the neighbours, thankyou very much.”

“Mum. They’re older than you! You’d be waiting days. Jan, upstairs, her Parkinson’s is so bad she shakes the building. Bert’s dead, Joan’s gone round the twist. So who’s left?”

“There’s Mrs Than.”

“What? The Asian lady with the five parrots? When did you last talk to her?”

“You should feel sorry for her, Peter. She has that mentally deranged child.”

“He’s thirty, Mother. And how many times have you called the police on him? You call that sympathy?”

Peter slid a spatula under two rubbery, grey slices of sheep flesh. Basic coordination had never been on his A-list of talents. As a child, tying shoelaces, bowling a ball or buttering bread made him anxious. All these tasks, however, were mastered effortlessly by his younger brother, Martin, who then went on to outstrip everyone in the fine motor department by becoming a leading urological surgeon. Peter managed to earn the phrase ‘well-meaning but useless’.

Now, in his mother’s kitchen, aged fifty-six, he was faced with the transfer of two slippery chops from pan to plate under the critical eye of his eighty-two-year-old mother. He wondered if urological surgery might be the easier task to perform, as long as his mother wasn’t in the operating theatre.

“I could call Ron if anything went wrong. He’d help me.” Rose clattered her teacup onto its saucer.

“Your brother’s miles away and, anyway, he’s too busy looking after that naturopathic wife of his.”
“Don’t call Martha pathetic.”
“Well you call her plenty of names. Anyway, I said nat-u-ro-pathic.”
“And make sure you wipe the stove. The fat’s splattered everywhere.”

While chop grease coursed through Peter’s arteries, Martin rolled over in bed and groped for aspirin. He downed two, then a third, when he remembered whiskey had followed the wine. He reached for a remote control but kept his eyes closed while the curtains opened to unveil his water view. The blast of morning light did not have the effect he wanted so he hit PLAY on another remote and turned up the volume.

Limited ability to concentrate urine is the most notable of the tubular abnormalities. The hematuria is most often unilateral in origin and in some patients has been severe enough to require nephrectomy.

This tactic worked and the doona heaved beside him.
“God. What’s the time?” the bedclothes asked.
“After nine. You late for work?” Martin kept his eyes on the screen.
“Shit. You got a phone I can use? God, I need the loo?”

Martin watched her little arse wiggle around his bed to his ensuite. After bellowing a dramatic excuse for lateness to a work colleague, she took him by surprise, springing across the bed to press her lips against him.

“I won’t bother to ask you to call,” she said. “But here’s my number if you want to catch up some time.”

Up close, he was confronted with too much perfume, thin lips, and a dye job that didn’t look good in the morning. He gave her cash for a cab. After she’d slammed the door, he rang his secretary to confirm the morning theatre list.

Speeding around the bay to the hospital, he caught his first red light at the boulevard, only three blocks from his mother’s apartment. But Martin wasn’t thinking about his mother. He was trying to recall something. His eyes spotted “Howard’s Showers” in the row of shops along the bay and he suddenly remembered:

Howard. John.
John and Janette Howard.
Her name was Janette!

Now he could phone her . . . if he was ever interested again.
“What’s going to happen to all my things?” Rose sat opposite her two sons at the dining table, the remains of lunch between them.

“Well, you know you can’t take it all with you,” Peter spoke with his usual volume control problem.

“Oh yes, remind me I’m downsizing, Peter.”

“You’ve got to replace things anyway. Start afresh.” He waved his arm at all the furniture he had lived with through his childhood.

“Like what? My furniture is in excellent condition.”

“For starters, you can’t take your bed.”

“Why not? It’s a perfectly good bed.”

“It’s forty years old, Mum, but the main thing is, it won’t fit. We’ll get you a single.”

“I can’t have a single,” Rose was aghast. “I fall out of those things. When I was in respite last year I fell out all the time.”

“Did you?” Martin asked surprised.

“You wouldn’t know,” she snapped. “You never visited me.”

Martin recalled booking her in and reviewing her obs daily but didn’t bother to present his case.

“You fell out once, Mum,” Peter exclaimed. “And that was probably after Ron smuggled the red wine in for you.”

“Speaking of whiskey,” Martin made his way to the drinks cabinet. “Anyone want a small one?”

“What time is it?” Rose asked the clock. “I can’t see the . . . does that say two o’clock? Oh, all right, I’ll have my usual.”

Martin took his time at the bar mixing Rose’s standard: one sugar cube, a dash of bitters, a maraschino cherry and generous whiskey. Finally, a dash of soda. Martin remembered, as a child, cocktails being mixed with the very same soda maker. His childhood home was a brick bungalow several suburbs away but the soda maker had come to this unit along with all the other furniture that Peter and Rose now argued over. The sugar dissolved into the whiskey as Martin recalled his mother playing tunes at Saturday night parties after golf, her cocktail at one end of the keys and all the friends from the club crowded around her piano singing their favourites into the wee hours.

At three o’clock, Rose requested her third top-up. Martin obliged and blessed his
own with a splash. Rose never noticed.

Rose observed little about her sons: Peter’s gait just like hers—protruding rear end and splayed feet as if compensating for a crook back—or the way Martin jingled the ice in his whiskey like his father. Nor did Rose notice that, as Peter aged, his glasses became less and less stylish until they were as large as hers, with similar heavy brown frames. The nose and ears that supported the frames also grew until, facially, he was a male version of his mother.

Rose noticed no similarities in her eldest because she noticed little about her own image. She could see well enough in the mirror to brush her hair or approximate her mouth with lipstick but she was blind to her changes of the last eighty years. At fifteen, she did not see the eyes of a young girl harden after the drunk that was her father abandoned his family. At twenty, she did not see her mouth tighten in readiness for marriage to the first man she dated. At forty-nine, after the death of her husband, she missed the slump in posture and the setting of the bones into the slouch of grief. At eighty-two, she saw the eyes, mouth and stance but did not connect them to life events. Life was today and the invasion by Peter and Martin.

“Do you want the lounge, Martin? Peter’s says he’s taking the television.”

“Yes,” Peter declared. “This is the TV Dad won at the golf tournament.” He patted the enormous beast, never contemplating how he was going to get it down the stairs.

“It was Grandma Blake’s lounge, remember, Martin? She gave it to your father and I when we first set up home.”

“I thought Angus might want the TV,” Martin said without conviction.

“Ahh, sorry, mate, I promised it to Catherine.”

“I think it’s incredible,” Rose interjected, “that two grandchildren, who never visit me, are squabbling over my things. Young people just don’t appreciate how people sweat and toil to own what they have.”

“They don’t know you’re moving next month, Mum,” Peter turned to her. “How can they visit you, anyway? Catherine’s in Brisbane and Angus is . . . where is Angus these days, Martin?”

“They’ve just sent him to Islamabad,” Martin said. “Three months.”

“Where’s that, for heaven’s?” Rose asked.

“Pakistan.”

“Oh my God, is he one of them?” she shrieked.
“If, by ‘them’, you mean Muslim, Mother, no . . . he’s working on the oil pipeline that runs through Pakistan.”

“Do they have any Christian churches he can go to? You wouldn’t want him converting, especially in this day and age. They’d never let him on a plane.”

“I don’t think he goes to any church.” Martin presumed his son was not religious.

“But he wanted to be a priest.”

“That was your son, Mum,” Peter guffawed, nearly spilling his whiskey. “In the seventies. But you came to your senses, though, hey, Marty?”

“You should have gone into the priesthood, Peter,” Rose snapped. “You would never have been retrenched then and ended up a security guard.”

“I had a wife and kid by twenty-one. What was I supposed to do with them?”

“Yes, that’s right. She stopped you getting a decent career in the church.”

“But I never wanted to be a priest!”

“Oh, Peter, you never stuck at anything. You quit cricket, piano, your marriage.”

“When did you last go to Mass?”

“I kept in contact with Father Brien for years.”

“I bet,” Peter snorted. “He was after your dollars that’s why.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Peter.”

“Father Brien?” Martin woke to the conversation. “He did Dad’s funeral, didn’t he?”

But Rose and Peter continued bickering about which priest had wanted more than Rose’s godliness.

Martin pictured Father Brien’s ruddy face and large sallow nose. He felt a far-off anger, way down inside, packed away in a corner of himself. It had never matured beyond the teenage years, so now, returning in memory, it presented as a young man kicking doors in, getting drunk on bottles of rum and screwing loads of girls. He couldn’t recall any of the faces of those girls but Father Brien’s suburban, ugly authority was as clear as yesterday:

I’m sorry, Martin. I cannot give you communion because you haven’t been to Mass for so long.

And, thus, the Father left the son kneeling empty-handed at the altar while he dispensed Christ’s body bits to the wife, elder son, brothers, sisters, nieces and nephews of Martin’s dead-as-a-dodo dad.
Martin’s mother, kneeling beside him, heard Father Brien’s decree to her young son but said nothing. The man who had ignored her for thirty years, whose dinners she had reheated night after night because he was never home in time; who, when home, silently drank and drank through a grief that consumed his final years, was now dead himself. He had left her. Alone in mid-life and alone until her dying day.

Standing for the hymn, after communion, Rose had mouthed the words with the rest of the congregation whilst recalling thoughts from her wedding night: I do not love this man but a girl must have a provider. A widow at forty-nine, she had fixed her eyes on the Anthurium stamens projecting from the coffin arrangement like grasping fingers and promised herself she would not waste the rest of her life on another man. Now, more than three decades after the death of the provider, she could remind herself that she had kept her original promise. And the original furniture.

“So, we’ll get you a plasma TV, Mum.” Peter cracked his knuckles and headed for the bar.

“All very well for you to say,” Rose barked. “It’s not your money. And don’t take all my whiskey as well.”

“You can mount a plasma TV on the wall. That’s all I’m saying. Saves you space.”

“I still don’t know why I can’t take my own TV.”

“You’ve already got the fridge and the built-in cupboard next to the kitchenette.” Peter had it all planned and didn’t have time for detail. “So if you want your old TV there’s no floor space left for a chair. It’s either your old TV or a chair, Mum, you can’t have both.”

Martin tried to picture his mother sitting in an armchair staring at nothing or standing to watch the television. He felt a burst of laughter and hurried to the drinks cabinet.

“Anyway,” Rose waved her empty glass in the air towards Martin. “I just don’t know what to do with the sideboard and this dining table.”

“I thought Ron and Martha’s daughter wanted it?” Peter asked.

“No.” His mother’s mouth tightened. “He rings me yesterday and says she doesn’t want it now. He wants it for himself. ‘I’ve never had a dining room set’, he says, ‘I’ve always had to eat at the kitchen table.’ I couldn’t believe it. I announce I’m moving and the vultures move in for the kill. That Martha is not having my furniture.”

“All right. We’ll give it to Vinnies.”
“How much do you think I’d get for it if I sold it second-hand?”
“You can’t sell it, Mum,” Peter said. “Nobody wants 1950s stuff like that.”
“Listen to you two: throw away all my possessions then spend all my funds. I suppose you’ll cremate me instead of burying me, just to save dollars. Why don’t you just bury me on top of Dad to save you money? But he probably doesn’t want me now either.”

While Peter and Rose spent the late afternoon in the electrical store, arguing over cordless kettles and plasma TVs, Martin downloaded recent property sales for her postcode. The market had slumped so he knew any prospective estate agent was in for a battle convincing his mother to sell her apartment for a realistic price. But hers was one of the few remaining heritage blocks in the area.

After phoning a few agents, Martin agreed to Clive popping in on his way home. His voice had that senior estate agent’s silken tone that Martin was confident would appeal to Rose.

“See, Mum, these saucepans have a Circulon Steel base. Titanium—it’s the new Teflon.” Peter rotated one in his hand then pushed it into Rose’s face. The polished coating reflected back her scowl, intensified by the dazzling fluorescent lights of the store.

She pushed the pan away. “There’s nothing wrong with my saucepans.”
“They’re aluminium, Mum. It’s dangerous to cook in aluminium.”
“Oh, what are you talking about, hmm?”
“Aluminium. It gets in your food and affects your brain.”
“What rot. There’s nothing wrong with my brain.”
“Jury’s out on that one, Mother.”

And so the squabbling continued. The more Peter bombarded her with cutlery, coffee percolators and clock radios the more Rose vehemently defended her mismatched silverware, chipped teapots and tea towels with faded imprints commemorating Pope John XXIII’s reign (threadbare and smelling like boiled socks, Peter later discarded them behind her back).

“Ordered an LCD screen instead, Marty,” announced Peter as he struggled in the apartment door with bags and boxes. “Plasma cost way too much.”
“What’s happened with the real estate agents, Martin?” Rose was hardly in the door.

“One’s due here any minute.” He stood aside as they shuffled their way up the hall.

“Goodness. I have to clean the place. Why couldn’t you book him for tomorrow?”

“We’re not here tomorrow, Mum. Anyway, I’ve cleaned up for you.”

Rose tutted and strutted around her apartment, then started to set the table with her best china for afternoon tea. Suddenly, drilling sounded from below and she nearly had a fit. The boys were sent to investigate; they reported that Stan Fields was hanging a painting. Rose stormed to the phone.

“Stan Fields, you will stop that noise at once. I have visitors here and you should check with the executive committee before you go drilling all about like that . . . Well, you didn’t inform me . . . I was not frying smelly chops this morning. I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

By the time silver-haired Clive of the double-breasted suit arrived, Rose was strung out and exhausted, although the drilling had finished. But he soon relaxed her with a conversational style that had earned him state awards for clientele liaison.

“What a charming apartment, Mrs Blake.” He pressed a warm hand into Rose’s.

“Isn’t it wonderful there are still buildings like this in the area? I’ve always loved the original ‘Bay’ style.”

He’d hit the mark. Rose was transported back to the days when she first moved in: times of high hopes and a fresh start before tragedies like the six-lane freeway around the foreshore or the death of her husband from an aneurism in the exact armchair that Clive now settled into.

“Thirty-four years next March we’ve been here . . . well, I’ve been here. My husband died only four months after we moved in. He promised me we’d only be here two years but then he up and left like that . . . and, well, here I am.”

“But you must have very special memories after spending so many years here.”

They chatted on, Clive identifying Rose’s difficulties over leaving, while Martin and Peter busied themselves in the dining room, putting her new flat-pack lounge chair together.

“I only installed the air conditioner last year,” said Rose, patting Clive’s arm. “I haven’t run it very much, so it’s as good as new. And the curtains were put in at the
beginning of summer so they have only really been through one season of hot weather. And I always lower this blind of an afternoon to keep the sun off them, so I’d appreciate it if you would make sure it’s down in the afternoons if you’re showing anyone through. You must pull the cord like this and let the right hand side down first. It’s a little stiff but there you are.”

“I’m sure I can do that, Mrs Blake. Isn’t this just a gem of a television? I grew up with the same one, you know.”

“My husband, bless his heart, won that in a golf match. He was a very good golfer you know. Played off single figures.” Rose suddenly saw herself on the balcony of the club, a stiff breeze blowing across the fairway, and Roger teeing off from the 18th for a hole-in-one. She was the envy of the ladies that day when all the men of the club loaded the brand new HMV into the back of their Wolseley.

After signing a preliminary ‘Sale Agreement’, Rose was eager for Martin and Peter to follow in Clive’s heels of departure. They struggled down the stairs with the furniture box and foam wrappings, leaving Rose to tut-tut at the newly assembled armchair—so at odds with her original furniture that she worried it would put buyers off the unit altogether.

As soon as they were all gone, she went to the hall cupboard and took out the step ladder. Slowly she made the perilous journey to the top step and grasped the handle of the dusty suitcase. She had to sit down quickly, after descending, to stop the dizziness. But she had the suitcase.

The catches were rusted and stiff and the lid wouldn’t sit upright of its own accord. She let it fall backwards onto her knees and rifled through the contents. She was sure the TV manual was in here. Clive had shown so much interest that being able to produce the instruction manual would surely increase the chance of a sale to him. Personal items could be sold second hand . . . one just had to find the right buyer.

But Rose never found the manual. She didn’t get past the first few papers on top: certificates summarising a lifetime of family achievements, old photos and the odd newspaper clipping.

There was Roger and herself at the staff Christmas party before he moved to BGE: he striking in his pinstriped suit, albeit a little weighty; she in her angora twin set. Smoke from Craven As swirled around them like a romantic haze.

A small print of a picnic at Warragamba, one Sunday, had so many people in it that Rose could hardly make them all out. Nora was easily recognisable by her callipers
and John Stokes with that silly beard and moustache he always paraded. He had been keen on her, she remembered, but, of course, he never did anything untoward while ever she was Mrs Roger Blake.

The picnic was the last photo before Roger’s death. Everyone was lounging across rugs and cushions. Roger leant against a basket with his head on Daphne Norris’ shoulder. Daphne, too, was dead now, so Rose would never know if there had been anything more than those looks between them. Of all those she recognised, from the twenty or so squeezed within the space, Rose realised she was the only one alive. June and Dick Lawrence killed in that horrific smash; Joan, who ended her life emaciated because she couldn’t swallow . . . .

The remaining photos in the case were of the children. Always on special occasions when someone brought a camera. There were only six of Helen. In each one, her eyes were bright and her hair flattened against her head to cover her slightly stick-out ears. Rose still thought it a most unbecoming style.

“There’s nothing wrong with your ears, Helen. God gave you everything for a reason.”

“You don’t know anything, Mum.”

Raising children in the rebellious Sixties had not been easy.

Rose imagined her here today. She would be understanding, much more than the boys. She would visit more often and would help Rose select nice curtains for her new place. Her last place. She wouldn’t force new saucepans on her mother or covet the furniture.

She looked back at the photo of the long-haired, barefoot teenager squinting in the sun, her shapeless dress printed in oversized hibiscus flowers. The happy-hippie phase never seemed to fit the exasperated sixteen-year-old.

“Vegan, Mum,” she had shouted. “Don’t you get it? I’m not eating quiche. It’s got eggs in it.”

Rose recalled throwing Helen’s meal in the bin and yelling at her to go beg for her meals if the family food was beneath her. Every day was a fight.

And then she was gone: all her anger and fight and strength and joie de vivre wrapped around a telegraph pole by a boy who should never have been given a driver’s licence.

Rose looked around her apartment. From where she sat on the new chair in the corner of the dining room, she could see down the hall to the lounge room. Everywhere
there were chairs: the dining table with its seating for six, extendable to host eight; the lounge room with the three-seater and two armchairs, the one from which she watched TV worn paler than the rest. And, beyond, three bedrooms, should anyone come to stay.

Too many chairs . . . and now, this new one. She noted the contemporary style, wondering how Peter had ever convinced her to buy it. It didn’t even have arms and the legs curved back under the seat so you could rock back and forth. But she stayed seated, settling into its rhythm and remained rocking lightly back and forwards. The back was broad and the colour complemented her bedspread, which was important, as the small space she was headed for needed to be colour coordinated. The interesting style would certainly be noticed by prospective Beauty Point neighbours.

Rose returned all the papers and photos to the suitcase and closed the lid. The clasps slid back into their sockets easily. She drew her hankie from her bra and wiped the dust from the lid. Then she climbed the step ladder and returned the case to its shelf. With a bit of a push it slid back quite easily between the crochet rugs and the big casserole dish that she had always cooked tomato soup in, when the first days of winter arrived.
The Dry Storm

_Adobong Manok_  
_(Chicken Adobo)_

*Chicken, jointed*

½ cup soy sauce

¾ cup white vinegar

Garlic

Bay leaves

Peppercorns

*Bring all ingredients to the boil and very gently simmer until well cooked.*

*Remove chicken and grill for ten minutes.*

*When the sauce is reduced by half, add salt and pour over served chicken pieces.*

*Variations: try adding pineapple pieces or coconut milk.*

The farmer tossed the remains of his bread onto the grass for the cat. The cat fixed a green-brown eye on the prize, watched the food uncurl from the shape of the farmer’s grip and begin to dry out in the morning heat. It contemplated the walk from under the veranda but knew today was already more fierce than yesterday. Instead, it lay down and the sunlight fired through the cracks in the boards to burn slats on its back.

“If you choose sleep over food, you die in your sleep,” the farmer said to the cat.

The cat closed its eyes and panted, its pink tongue bright in the blanched landscape.

The farmer’s wife opened the screen door. The hinges were well oiled but the heat-cracked timber frame groaned on opening. She took a few steps out into the heat and stretched a white arm against the veranda post. Her rouge was fresh but her hair and
dress came with her from yesterday. She followed her husband’s gaze down the valley as he roamed his eyes around the home paddock. He felt a dull ache start in his stomach and sipped his black tea to stop the ache turning to acid.

The woman rubbed her neck with a dry hand and squinted, following the line of the fence until it disappeared into the black glass of the sun’s miasma.

“Today you sell the cattle.”

“Today I go to town, to the sales.” He spoke to the pelvises and backbones of the cattle down the valley. Already pressed within the marginal shade of two colossal, ragged gums they stared back at the man on the veranda and the white lady resting against a post. They chewed cud and whipped their tails lethargically around their rumps. Of their fate they knew nothing.

Galahs passed musk overhead, kissing the air. The farmer rose from his hard chair and threw the last of his tea onto the yard. It scattered amongst the yellowed runners of kikuyu and trickled away across the grey dust soil. Later, the woman would tusk over it, like the galahs, but for now she lent her head on her arm and felt the blood pump through her temples.

The farmer took his cup to the kitchen, his braces swinging like loose reins around his knees. He turned off the radio so as not to hear the temperatures and fire bans that would be the same as yesterday, the same as every day this month. He pulled his braces to his shoulders, ran his thumbs under them, back and forth, then checked his hat, off, on to settle just so on his forehead. All the while he was thinking of town, of the sales. The creases at the corners of his mouth made a wide line of gravity and his lips, mere suggestions, mouthed silent mumbles to himself.

He felt in the pocket of his coat hanging behind the front door. He removed his wallet, shiny brown, whose stitching he had replaced once already. He checked its contents—a stolid stare into the cavities.

“The only thing that’s good for now is my sewing basket.” His wife, now standing in the open doorway, was a black outline framed by white heat. “I can store my needles in it.”

“You’re letting in a valley of flies,” he muttered through brown, stained teeth.

She let the screen door sigh to close and turned back to the veranda post. The air rasped her throat as she inhaled the dry day. Her eyes followed the Willy-Wagtail scratching out a frantic whistle for a mate. It danced feverish antics along the fence,
shuffling its fantail on every landing. The cat watched too, with its green-brown eye.

The farmer edged his truck out of the shed, leaning out his door, as he reversed, to be sure the wheels stayed on the blonde driveway tracks. Next month, when the westerlies finally whip the paddock grass clean away, it will not be possible to distinguish the driveway from where the grass once grew. The farmer’s wife shaded her eyes as she surveyed the fields, empty now of stock. The cattle had gone ahead of the farmer.

As the truck protested in first gear, scraped and lurched away, the farmer’s wife bent to pick a caterpillar from the plumbago. She prised the sticky creature from its chrysalis as the truck swayed down the rutted access road. She mashed the bug and lifted her foot to confirm its death: bright, juicy green glistening on the gravel. Only when the row of melaleucas along the road had swallowed the vehicle did she look to check the dust of his departure and return to the house.

The farmhouse was in a broad valley with a wall of forest on the other side of the dried river bed. All other land around was cleared, save for the ridge that rose behind the house, struggling to support a scattering of young eucalypts that quivered their dry, fire-fuel leaves whenever the afternoon winds roared.

The house had an iron roof that juddered under thunder that brought no rain, and went off like a gun in the mornings when the temperature climbed twenty degrees in an hour. The farmer’s great grandfather had built the oldest part of the house, last century, and each generation had added a room or two. When an electrician came to repair the stove and saw that some rooms in the house had a door in every wall, he said the house was like a Tardis.

The farmer’s wife shivered as she returned to the dark day inside the house. It was strange to tremble and perspire at the same time. She stood silent just inside the doorway, waiting for her eyes to adjust from the white stinging and for her hips to want to move her.

She entered the bedroom, removed her clothes and lay on the bed to watch the daddy-long-legs stagger across the ceiling. Her pale, flaccid breasts hung from her chest. She thought of the only living creatures now left on the property: herself and the insects. She felt her flesh drape. The smell of dying jasmine and lavender came in waves from the vase beside her bed. She had picked them last week on a morning that held the daybreak coolness a little longer than usual but the heat soon stole their water and shrivelled the life from them.
The woman slept and dreamt. She dreamt of her husband returning from the sales with the hind legs of the cattle hung like umbrellas along hooks inside the truck. They ate like kings for days, laughing between sips of warm beer that rushed over rotting teeth. The priest came, the doctor came. All was peaceable and light. The debts were paid and the cat grew fat from the leftovers.

When she woke, even the crickets had left. The sky was harsh outside the window. From her nakedness, she watched the blind scratch the sill and the light enter and exit the room with each inward sway. She heard the ute on the drive long before she smelt the dust and rubber.

Her lover entered with his strong boots. She smelt the hay and the age of his neck as he lay his bony brownness beside her.

“You must rub me first. I am ill,” she said.

“You heart is ill, not your body.” But he listened to her account of her ills. The cat slept under the veranda, one eye open to the world.

Later, they ate the food he had brought: sour pickles and slices of roast pork. Chunks of dripping pineapple followed, the aching sweetness cleansing their mouths. She cut rough squares from the plum slice in the fridge and poured tea.

They moved to the veranda—she to her chair, he to lean against the rail. In his jeans, no shirt or shoes, she hungered for him. Her body had once been young and smooth like his but now she was the aged one, desiring their constant nakedness. His face was more aged than the rest of his skin, giving him a wiser look when dressed. Shirtless, he was a paradox.

His eyes scanned the landscape, the crush and the dam. Finally, he returned her stare and pulled her to him. She took them both to the bedroom.

“I dreamt we cooked and ate the cattle.” She lay on her back, afterwards, his arm draped across her, heavy and burdensome. “But, when you came, all had been eaten.”

“But that is life. I find you and you are already eaten.”

“You are so naïve,” she snorted and rolled away from him, her breasts slapping angrily together.

The farmer moved amongst the cattlemen, his boots carving imprints in the dust of the yards. The auctioneer yelled fast through the microphone while bidders swapped cattlemen’s niceties—one ear to the gossip, the other to the prices. Wives fanned themselves with the Day of Auction Listings, in rhythm with their chatter, only stopping
to record the better prices. Perspiration appeared along hairlines where it dried, leaving fine dusty salt traces waiting to be washed away at the end of the day in bathrooms with cool green tiles.

“More storms due tomorrow,” a young cowboy told the group. All knew he meant storms of dust and cruelty.

“The sooner I can get my lot out of this cursed valley the better,” someone said.

“What to do then? Go home and watch your paddocks blow to the coast?” A faint spray of beer flew from the cowboy’s beer and vaporised before it hit the ground.

“Worse than ’64?” They turned to the farmer to gain his veteran’s knowledge but he knew they would pay scant regard to his history.

“All the Bloodwoods along the river were uprooted in the winds of ‘64.” He spoke with a civil tongue, quiet and even. They looked in various directions, away from the man of three generations on the land, the man whose wife never came to the sales, the man who went everywhere alone.

When the woman woke, her lover had gone. A westerly had risen that howled hot through the bedroom window and, finding itself trapped, raged around the room. She looked down her body. She believed it had aged in her sleep as it lay old in the folds and ran transparent over her bones. The sheets were coarse under her body, no matter which direction she lay. Only the click-tick of the ceiling fan and a stale scent of sweat told her that her lover had stopped by.

In the wake of the storm, her husband returned. He reported the poor prices to his wife as he picked stones out of his boot soles. He was a hazy figure through the screen door, the mail under his arm.

“How can anyone expect success in this godforsaken season,” she said. She passed by him out onto the veranda, indolently taking from him the letter he held out to her. He inhaled the scent of her soap and the coolness about her. She was all citrus and sweet: her thick hair, a blend of auburn and grey and her white, freckled skin, clean and clear. She settled into her chair and sipped from a tall glass, condensation dripping onto her chest as she drank. He watched it trickle down her skin and disappear beneath her dress, leaving a path of goose bumps in its wake.

The cat emerged from behind the piano now that the farmer was home. It followed him into the kitchen where he placed tomatoes in the fruit bowl. He fixed himself the same drink as his wife: soda, lemon slices, a dash of angostura, then sat at
the kitchen table recording cattle prices in his pocketbook.

His wife opened the letter. A postcard and two photos dropped onto her lap. She held them firmly against the last gusts of the westerly. The sarong, draped across the back of her white, cane chair, released days of dust from its folds as it flapped in the wind. The other pieces of mail—bills and brochures—stayed on the hall table.

The postcard showed market stalls beneath arching Jacarandas, city skyscrapers beyond the verdant greenery. Market-goers, turned to the camera, were broad-smiling mothers, bejewelled socialites and the blank faces of Westerners.

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**Tagalog ‘hi’: Magandang tanghali po**

*Front shows a pic of the markets. Last Saturday I found a stall with the freshest mussels and made a delicious soup of ginger root and spinach with them. Did you try the ox tail recipe I sent? It really isn’t that different to the recipe we grew up with, is it, except for the peanut sauce. If only I could post the accompaniments to you—manggang hilaw (unripened mangoes) and bagoong alamang (fermented tiny shrimps). Anyway, I finally got beyond the main section of Salcedo this Saturday and found a stall selling Pampanga dishes. (Do you remember the card last xmas from Pampanga and the giant lantern festival up in San Fernando?) Well, we all had panara from this stall—deep fried rice flour cakes stuffed with papaya and blue crab. The empanadas were bigger than your hand and there were huge pans of paella but we couldn’t eat another thing!*

*Love Jen*

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This card would be stowed away in the recipe box beneath the farmer’s wife’s white, cane chair on the veranda. The box had spent its first life in town, on her father’s headmaster’s desk. Once, while waiting in his office for a lift home from school, his daughter had peeped inside. She loved to run her hands over the smooth wood—the dark heartwood of walnut, the pale sapwood sides—lifting and dropping the lid to hear the wood-on-wood *thwack*. On the day she peeped further in, her heart thumped in her throat when she saw each index card scribed with a teacher’s name in her father’s spidery, perfect cursive. Each name had several ticks and dashes.

“Too many slash marks means he sacks them,” she announced on the walk to school next morning.

“You can’t sack teachers,” laughed Jen, her big teeth making her laughter seem bigger. “They go on strike if you sack them.”

“Do not.”
“Do.”
“Not.”

When she finished high school, the box came home with the headmaster as a graduation gift for his daughter. It remained empty for years, its traditional purpose redundant, even when she married, because all recipes of her marriage came from two cook books: the Commonsense and the Women’s Weekly Basic.

Then one day it became useful, a personal use that continued for twenty years so that now the walnut box bulged with postcards and more than one hundred letters from family and friends, most of them from Jen.

She located and withdrew the “Lanterns of San Fernando” card and closed the box, the lid making its delicious snap-shut sound. The scratchy, shambolic handwriting was the same across all the postcards, the same as decades ago when writer and reader had sat together in school, uninterested in geometry, passing senseless notes to each other instead.

_Hate that Jim Dooley. He’s a stuck-up and a bore._
_Hardly know him._
_And you never will. Not while I’m around. December = outta here._
_Yep, Big Smoke here we come._
_Everywhere, babe. We’re goin’ everywhere._

The San Fernando postcard described the giant dancing lanterns, up to five thousand globes apiece, of the Christmas capital’s festival. Jen had sent photos of all twelve lanterns from that year’s festival. Against the night sky they were like stained glass windows and the ‘golden sun lantern’ had been snapped fully lit, like an elaborate, plaitted Easter bread, its brightness almost painful to the eyes.

The girls had tried making plaitted bread together, the Easter after school finished. It was Jen’s idea, of course—always the one for experiments. The interweaving of the dough was hard to distinguish after baking but they gorged themselves silly on it and lay on banana chairs on their front lawn groaning for hours afterwards.

The draughty pioneer’s cottage on a main arterial road exiting the big city, with its pocket handkerchief yard, was to be the start of the rest of their lives. For one, though, it was merely a hiccup in a lifetime spent in the same rural shire.

After twelve months in the ramshackle, inner city, two-bedder they called
‘White Ant Shack’, Jen abandoned her arts degree, announced her save-the-children plan and bought a backpack. Her best friend’s questions were dreary heel-draggers to her excitement.

“What shots do you need for a country like that?”
“Dunno, dunno but check this out.” Jen held up magazine pictures of purple and gold sunsets, women in vibrant robes and wraps.
“What has there been any unrest?”
“Nah, don’t think so.” Jen packed books on traditional basket weaving and fabric dyeing.
“What about a visa?”
“What are you, my mother?”
Attempts to control and arguments between them increased as the departure date dawned, Jen’s room filling with thermals, sarongs, an oil jacket, poncho, mats and maps. Then the travel mate appeared.
“You’ll never guess,” she screeched. “Jason was gonna do northern Africa so we’ve decided to go together and do north and central together.”
Both girls gave notice to the landlord but only one went to the airport. Stone, frigid silence descended two weeks before take-off and lasted six years.

Back at the family home, the headmaster’s daughter found her brother had moved into her old bedroom so she set up camp in the backyard bungalow. She didn’t miss the traffic or the pollution or even the night life. In fact, the harder she thought about it and the longer she let her perspective take root, she found she missed nothing.

“Back from the big smoke madness, then.” Jim Dooley was running his father’s two thousand acres. He seemed a stable kind of fella and not at all stuck up. Jen had been all mouth, too quick to judge.

The four year engagement was longer than most but the sun shone on the wedding ceremony after an unseasonal frost at daybreak. All the usual friends and relations came, including Jen’s parents.

“She sent this for you.” Jen’s mother handed the bride a large, flat package. “It’s from Africa I think but she’s in the Ukraine right now. I don’t think she’ll ever come home. You’re a lucky girl, darling, Jim is so honourable.”

The present was put away for later opening. Three weeks after the honeymoon, the only holiday Mr and Mrs Dooley would ever have, the delicate tissue paper wrapping was opened to reveal a glorious sarong enfolding an object that had,
astonishingly, passed customs.

On the back of a postcard was written, ‘Hooley, Dooley, Mrs Magooley! I never would have predicted that one! Enjoy this very important kitchen item—something every cook needs.’

The flat wooden object opened into a cross position. The serrated metal tongue protruding from the end was bewildering but underneath was the final explanation.

‘Still no idea? It’s a Coconut Grater Stool!’

Had she opened it at the wedding, Jim’s deadpan disdain would have been plain, but alone now in her new marital house she laughed and straddled her new stool. Simple suns and stars, stick figures and misshapen triangles were carved into the wood. Tears suddenly followed the laughter, shocking her, but she remained on the quirky seat letting them fall and fall and fall.

The stool was packed away but the thank-you letter was warm and open with news of good cattle prices, folks around town and a bit of gossip. She asked in return for travel stories, anecdotes, the ins and outs of any wild romances, ending with ‘you are very brave’. Only on proofreading did she realise she had made no mention of her married life.

The reply postcard was from Turkey, describing long waits at bus stops, no shade from the searing heat but the delightful apple tea. A sample of tea powder was enclosed and so began many afternoons for the reader on the white cane chair on the veranda, sipping the same beverage, imagining a far-away friend astride her backpack, a thousand cheap bangles up her arms, her short hair sticking in all directions. When the postcards came from Sri Lanka, Ceylon tea became the afternoon drink and the card of the city lights of Tokyo brought a change to green leaf Bancha. Green tea became the permanent beverage for both as the traveller settled down in the Philippines.

The cards that came from the land of seven thousand islands contained everyday stories—the clammy weather, the children sweeping the roads, rice drying on sheets by the roadside—that became exotic and mysterious when delivered into a milk-can letterbox at the end of a dusty drive in Australia.

There were dramatic stories too: the Habagat season that lasted longer than usual and brought the monsoons at unusual times—early, then again late. While the Australian drought sank its teeth into the earth, tearing with its viscous red and yellow
Some days, when I think I’ll never conquer Asian cooking, I just return to Adobo which no one can fail! I mean, how hard is it to gently simmer chicken in equal soy and vinegar, garlic, bay leaves and pepper? A great staple and it’s the national dish so it makes me feel I can at least achieve something culturally authentic. Jen

Some days, when I think I’ll never conquer Asian cooking, I just return to Adobo which no one can fail! I mean, how hard is it to gently simmer chicken in equal soy and vinegar, garlic, bay leaves and pepper? A great staple and it’s the national dish so it makes me feel I can at least achieve something culturally authentic. Jen

It was the simple ingredients, nearly all in the Dooleys’ pantry, and the idea that ‘no one can fail’ that made the farmer’s wife ask her husband for a lift into town.

“And a few dollars.”

Her husband handed her a five dollar note with a banker’s hand-click.

There was only one bottle of soy sauce on a high shelf of the town store. The red cap and glass shoulders of the bottle were covered in dust and the price was hard to decipher but its size meant it could fit in her handbag to avoid questions from folk along the main street.

Back at home, she phoned her son, suggesting he bring his new girlfriend to lunch tomorrow. Then, on impulse, she also rang Jen’s parents, now in their eighties.

“Nothing special,” she told them all. “Just Sunday chicken.”

The leghorn flicked its head in all directions as she held it under her arm. She stared down the valley from the shade of the pecan tree and hummed while she stroked it. She wondered how dark the soy sauce would stain its flesh. She knew this dish could bring sullenness and annoyance from her husband but she finished her song and lay the hypnotised leghorn on the block.
The hot water bath took all the feathers and she removed the innards quickly to let the gizzard, heart and liver cool in a separate bowl. After her reverie in the yard she was now eager to cook.

When the sauce came to the boil, fizzing around the joints of chicken, it released an acrid smell. She sipped a spoonful when the meat was done and broke into a fit of coughing.

By the time the table was laid, the guests arrived, and her husband had entered and washed, the vinegar scent had disappeared. Everyone awaited the white-of-all-white meats beneath a crisp, golden skin. But no one said anything as the dish of grey-brown meat arrived at table.

“Looks interesting,” Jen’s mother faltered.
“Geez, mum, what happened?”

Everyone gazed at the caramel coloured joints of chicken piled on the platter dish.

“It’s one of Jen’s recipes actually—Chicken Adobo. I’ve got cold cuts of silverside if you don’t want to try it.”

“That’s the National dish or some such isn’t it?” Jen’s father asked. “I can’t remember tasting it when we were there but I’ve heard about it. Always up for a go.”

“Yum,” the new girlfriend announced, receiving a gobsmacked look from her boyfriend.

“But what’s in it, Mum?”

“Nothing too strange. Just a little vinegar.”

“Tastes great, Mrs Dooley,” announced the girlfriend, tucking into a wing.

The cook did not look at her husband. From the cold stillness at the other end of the table, she knew only the vegetables would be selected from the platter and, later, before bed, in the hour of stillness when even the cicadas slept, more than his usual amount of bread and jam would be eaten.

When she heard about the Chicken Adobo, Jen wrote excitedly and sent a flurry of recipes for lentils, spices, exotic vegetables and wild rices but no other recipe from overseas was ever cooked in the little kitchen in the farmhouse in the valley that stretched forever under a cruel sun.

But the recipes were a delight to read and store in the box, the farmer’s wife imagining the sweet/sour/bitterness of all the ingredients. After two decades of correspondence, the box was bursting and the cane chair on the veranda was bedecked
with cushions from Indonesia and India, a silk bolster cushion from Morocco, sarongs and a fringed alpaca blanket. Above her chair, a mobile of coloured glass from Spain dazzled the rafters with tiny rainbows at sunset. The farmer’s wife settled her tired and ageing back into her chair and rested her feet on the coconut grater. From her spot of comfort within a hard and vicious valley, she was able to ponder the endurance of a friendship, an extreme, forever closeness where the momentous change you wish for the other person is the unspoken ingredient, as integral to the friendship as that which is declared.

*Everywhere, babe. We’re goin’ everywhere.*

When the westerly had breathed its last breath and departed, dinner was tomato sandwiches with white pepper and beer in bottles, husband and wife opposite each other at the kitchen table. She studied him as he chewed his food. His ears were large and creased, his eyes sunk in his skull, his lips an imaginary line.

“**You are old,**” she said. “**But I can still see the young man behind those years on your face.**”

“I am surprised you can see anything through your tiredness.” He stared into the tablecloth. “I chose you when we were young but I never knew you would become so tired.”

They returned to their eating, their rhythm broken only by their sipping from beer bottles. The cat appeared in the doorway and their eyes turned to follow its skulk from the doorway to the table. It would not return their gaze.
Three Pots Red

Tom Kha Gai

2 cups coconut milk
6 thin slices young galangal
2 stalks lemon grass, lower portion, cut into 2cm lengths and crushed
5 fresh kaffir lime leaves, torn in half
250g boned chicken breast, sliced
5 tablespoons fish sauce
2 tablespoons sugar
1/2 cup lime juice
1 teaspoon black chilli paste
1/4 cup coriander leaves, torn
5 green Thai chilli peppers, crushed

Combine half the coconut milk with the galangal, lemon grass and lime leaves in a large saucepan and heat to boiling. Add the chicken, fish sauce, and sugar. Simmer until the chicken is cooked. Add the remaining coconut milk, heat to boiling. Place the lime juice and chilli paste in a serving bowl and pour the soup over them. Garnish with coriander and crushed chilli peppers.

The doorbell’s first note sings slightly longer than the second, the sound transporting Carla back to summer days and the rare occasion when visitors came to this door. But, today, she is the visitor and finds the door is left unlocked for her.
“Did you lock the door behind you?” will be her mother’s greeting.
“Aah, here she is,” her father will say, emerging from a back room, “did you lock the front door behind you?”
Carla spends a moment in the hall letting the roar of the freeway in her head dissolve and the hush of her childhood home encircle her.

The smell of onions simmering on the stove, and the cleaner-than-clean odour of the hall, remind her of frantic seconds spent in this very spot, picking paspalum seeds and sticky beaks from her winter school tunic and tights. While her first boyfriend walked home from their passionate meeting beside the canal, to his cheery, messy-haired mum, Carla would quickly prepare for her own mother’s emergence at the end of the hall.

“What train did you catch?”
The teenager always answered the narrow eyes with a look of stubborn boredom.

“What train did you catch?” Her father is a gentle, bowd figure at the end of the hall. His blue eyes, within the folds and folds of his face, are luminous.

“No. I drove. Hello.” Carla walks towards him and kisses his thin cheek. “Are you cooking?”
She follows his soft toddle in worn leather slippers.
“Soup and rice. How does that sound?”
“But we’re going out for lunch. I don’t want you cooking for me when I visit, Dad.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Where are we going?”
“The Sands, remember, on the beach. We spoke about it when I rang. Don’t worry, forget it, we’ll eat in.”
“It’s no problem. We can save this. We’ll go out if you like.”
Don’t worry.”
“It’s quite a simple task to stop this.”
“Please. Don’t worry about it.”
“I’m not worried, not worried at all. Did you want a snack beforehand?”
“No, I’m fine. Where’s Mum?”
“We have some fresh bread there if you want to make a sandwich.”
“I just had a chai tea. I’m ok. Where’s Mum?”
“Lovely peaches here in the crisper.” He rummages in the fridge. “Your mother? Ah, she’s gone . . . she’s gone . . . um . . . to the shops to swap some . . . what do you call it . . . you know, goodness, what is it, clodhopper-things . . . .”

“Shoes.”

“Shoes! The very word.” He closes the fridge, squinting at two small bottles in his hands. “Pineapple or V8? Very good for you this V8.”

“No thanks.”

“You should try it—made from eight vegetables, very good for you.”

“I know. I’ve had it before.”

“You’d like some?”

“No, I don’t like it.”

“But it’s very good for you. Keeps the engine running.”

“I’ve just had a chai tea.”

“Had a chin what?” Her father leans towards her across the bench, cocking his head as if to improve his hearing.

“A cup of tea,” Carla shouts. The room seems suddenly hot.

“Rightio, keep your shirt on, matey.” Her father springs back and retreats to the sink. Carla cringes inside.

“What soup are you making?”

“Soup? Yes. Soup. Aaah . . . .” He scrutinises his cookbook. “Chicken and . . . what do these Chinamen call it? I can’t pronounce it.”

“Tom kha gai. Yum.” Carla leans into his recipe book with him. His whiskers are the stiffest of steel wool, sprouting from all parts of his ears. “Thailand, Dad, not China.”

“Thailand is it? Your mother wanted us to try making it but I don’t know about all this coconut milk. The cholesterol could kill you in one bowl. Now, where am I up to? Dum tee tum dum.” He whistles as he pads to the pantry.

“They’ve nearly finished the widening for that third lane before the turn-off.” Carla perches on a stool. “Do you think it will really make a difference? Maybe on weekends, like this, but in peak hour, what d’you think?” Carla addresses her father’s back as he stands stock still gazing into the pantry. “What are you looking for, Dad?

“What am I looking for? Good question. A bottle of . . . bottle of . . . vinegar stuff . . . no, what am I, it’s . . . ah, you know, dark brown . . . goodness, what’s the word I’m looking for?” He returns to the recipe, his nose screwed up under the large
glasses, a wizard inspecting his spell.

“A sauce?” His daughter suggests.

“Yes, sauce. Ah, the very name escapes me.” A bony finger runs down the list of ingredients. “Why can’t I find . . . .

“Is it fish sauce?” Carla points at the words

“Is that it?” John wonders. “Maybe. Maybe that’s the ticket. Fish sauce. Do we have any fish sauce?” And he’s back at the pantry.

He measures carefully, the sauce dribbling into the tablespoon. Carla notices his hand is steady. One or two fingers have awkward, permanent bends in them which she does not remember from her childhood. But they still have the banker’s smoothness, the gardener’s stamina, the same hands that gently shook the shoulder of the crying child who longed for an enveloping bear hug. Instead, she received a stern “C’mon, buck up.”

“Give me something to chop, Dad.” And they organise themselves either side of the bench with wooden boards and knives.

“Like this?” she asks.

“A little thinner, please,” he instructs.

They fall into a quiet rhythm of paring, dicing and slicing.

“Are you cooking it in this pot?” She indicates the four-quart cast-iron soup pot.

“I can’t believe you still have it. Remember you used to do that beef and barley soup in it? All those chunks of meat that sank to the bottom. I hated that smell. You used to simmer it all day, yeah?”

“For a few hours, yes.”

“But it tasted great. And you always served it with that seed bread that I didn’t like.”

“Good fibre, my dear.”

“Mum used to say it was cardboard.”

“She still does. I try to get her to eat it but she prefers that white rubbish.”

“After dinner, you always used white for your bread and honey, didn’t you?”

“Nope, gave that up some time ago.”

Arriving home from late-night dates in her last year of high school, Carla found her father spreading fresh, white bread with ample butter and honey, a glass of milk next to the plate. She once took a photo of him biting into the bread, his eyes closed dramatically. On the back of the photo, she wrote, “My Dad’s Supper.”
It is the only photo, in her possession, of the family meal table: oval, faux wood-laminate. Coming upon her father, up late, eating solo under low lights, was to encounter a tranquillity she had never known around that table. It was suddenly a place where you had space to spread out, to indulge in loads of butter, extra jam or honey and just one more serve before bed.

Until the bread-and-honey discovery, the same table was a place of little conversation where everyone gathered to concentrate on one task: the job of eating.

To compliment the faux wood-laminate, the chairs were orange vinyl above a splayed chrome leg base. They were great chairs to spin around.

“Stop spinning and eat!”

There were other rules besides the grand command Eat!

*No elbows on table.*
*No cutlery pointed upwards.*
*No licking the knife.*
*No burping or passing wind.*
*No musical soup.*
*No wiping of hands on the tablecloth – use your serviette.*
*Chew with your mouth closed.*
*Knife and fork together to indicate you have finished.*
*Only wipe your plate with bread at home, never out.*
*It doesn’t need more salt.*

Carla’s seat, through all her years in the house, was opposite her mother, whose long fingers, nails in three coats of polish, stretched down the utensils, engaged in a tidy rhythm of cutting, piling, consuming dinner. Her father was rough with his meat, less fluid than his wife, but both turned their food and stacked their forks.

Her mother, straight-backed, turned a little sideways as the forkful entered her mouth, as good manners required, and, while chewing, continued to cut and pile her beef or pork or lamb, creating a neat package, constantly remaking and moulding the next mouthful until the previous had been swallowed and the new could be inserted.

Her father leaned dramatically over his plate, to avoid any spillage, gaping mouth to mouthful. While chewing, he left his utensils on the plate and rested one forearm plate side, his fingers quietly beating the table: *thud thud . . . thud thud . . . thud thud . . .* staring off into a place far, far away, just above the pepper.
“What time did you get here?” Joan enters, breathless, with a heaving, angular walk.

“How’s the soup going, John? Did you add the lemongrass?”

“Added the lemongrass.”

“The lime leaves. Did you tear them beforehand?”

“Tore up the lime leaves.”

“I don’t want it too chilli hot.”

“You have to add the chilli yourself,” John says.

“What?” his wife snaps. “What are you talking about?”

“It says here,” John’s reads with deliberation. “Place lime juice and chilli paste in serving bowl and pour the soup over.”

Carla watches: father preparer, mother inspector. While the child learnt most kitchen lore from her mother—how to test a cake, whip egg whites, carve a roast, grill pork crackling—her father had been the daily cook. Yet he had passed no lessons down. Food preparation was a side duty while reviewing maths homework.

“Now, question five,” John would pause while buttering sandwiches before school and point to the maths textbook with his knife. “If you had eighteen oranges and you gave six each to two friends, how many left?”

“Yeah,” the sleepy fifth grader answered to her cereal. “Did I get it wrong?”

“Well, how many friends does it say you have?”

“Two.”

“And you give six to each of them. So, how many do you give away.”

“Six twos... ten... no, twelve?”

“Right, and how many did you have at the beginning?”

“I dunno.”


“Ok, ok. Six. It’s six.”

“So there’s two parts to the workings out.”

“Just give me the book. Where’s my rubber? Just cross it out and write six.”

Little Carla would reach across the bench, across her father’s tea and marmalade toast, exasperated but not wanting the attention to ever end. Yet all she gave him was exasperation.

“We’re waiting,” Joan directs her annoyance to the kitchen and John’s dallying. He
finally joins them, sitting with a great outburst *aaah* of exhaustion which startles Carla. Joan doesn’t even notice.

“Have you had this before?” she asks Carla. “It’s chicken and coconut milk soup.”

“Sure have, it’s one of my favourites.”

“Oh, you’ve had it, then,” says Joan. “Well, *we* discovered it at our local Thai restaurant. Then I came across the recipe in my Thai cookbook. Have you ever made it?”

“No,” Carla lies.

“It’s quite easy, really. You can buy all the ingredients from the supermarket these days. You could take a copy of the recipe if you like.”

They fall silent, except for the tinkling of spoons, the soup steam casting its spell. Joan waves her spoon through the liquid; John meditates, above the vapour. Carla looks slowly around the room, between her own spoonfuls, at the cabinet full of cut crystal and precious ornaments in the corner display case, collectibles from the big trip of early retirement years: small, blown glass ornaments from Venice, a painted plate from Turkey, a demitasse from the Picasso Museum.

The table and chairs have been updated since Carla left home, fifteen years before. The old oval table has been replaced by a round, carved extendable one and the Queen Anne dining chairs have floral cushion seats stuffed so hard there is no give at all. Carla thinks of her own table at home with its cold glass top and chrome legs, chosen to suit her studio apartment.

As she surveys her parents’ furniture she suddenly thinks what a bother it will be to inherit anything . . . not so much for the annoyance of having to sell the items but the dilemma over what to do about the furniture that held memory and nostalgia in its glue. The whole household of furniture simply did not suit a modern apartment. What to do with the phone table-seat, still covered in the original gold velour, that Carla had spent hours sprawled across chatting to friends?

“Feet off the wall,” her father said as he passed.

“Get off the phone,” shouted her mother standing over her. “Now!”

What to do with the Jason recliners? They could be recovered, perhaps with a Moroccan textile, and only one would be needed. But even one was too big for her apartment. Did the selection depend on the exact chair she had spent most of her childhood in? One foot dangling over an arm of the chair, the other foot resting on the
dog watching Basil Fawlty or The Two Ronnies do their slapstick or, alone with a bowl of popcorn after school, the Goodies, the Banana Splits, the Six Million Dollar Man.

She glances at Joan and John in their soup reveries. Her mother lifts neat spoonfuls, facing a little to the side and, while chewing, absently swirls her spoon through the soup. Her dowager’s hump, as she refers to it, is the only structural change to a lifetime’s eating style.

The soup is not too chilli but Joan recurrently clears her throat, the sound instantly transporting Carla back to afternoons after school when she handed her mother the requested Women’s Weekly and ‘fixed her a pot of tea’. The tea was for calming but the throat-clearing seemed to worsen. Perhaps it had been the biscuits. One Monte Carlo for Mum, two for Carla. Once they had shortbread, all the way from London.

“Put your nose to the tin here so you’re ready to breathe the air of Scotland.” Joan had a twinkle in her eye and little Carla was sure she smelt a distinct aroma.

“That’s the Highlands and the chilly winds of the moors,” her mother promised. “Right, now, off for your homework.” And the daughter retreated, to the sounds of her mother turning the pages of her magazine and clearing her throat between sips of Earl Grey.

John gives three sustained, steady blows across every spoonful of soup, suspended above his bowl. Carla watches the large droplet dangling underneath. As a little girl she thrilled to watch the big droplet . . . would it fall or make it into his mouth? After decades of soup, he doesn’t lose a drop. His other forearm rests beside his bowl, making his whole body lean a little to the left. The eighty-year-old skin of his forearm is dry and mottled; there are scars where skin cancers once were and a whole section above his wrist is a shallow dish where ‘they had to cut deeper.’ His fingers quietly beat the table thud thud thud while he stares off into a place far, far away, just above the pepper.

“Yes, it’s quite a fascinating combination isn’t it?” he says suddenly, inspecting his soup. “You’d never think citrus and milk would be a good combination but this lemon peel and ginger business certainly balances it all well, doesn’t it?”

“Is it galangal?” Carla responds, trying to ignore her mother’s pained look at her husband who continues to inspect his soup like a scientist. “Yep, you can taste everything behind everything—the chilli, the milk, the citrus, the coriander.”

“Too true. Ah, yes, very clever these Chinamen or, what did you say, Malaysians, Burmese or some such?”
“Just eat, please.” Joan pleads, pushing her husband’s spoon back into his bowl and the bowl closer to him. “Just be quiet. Just eat.”

“What is this combination again?” Carla asks Joan across the lounge room. “I always forget.”

“Orange Pekoe and Earl Grey. He does the mix. I think it’s . . . what are the proportions, John?” Joan turns to her husband at the far end of the room.

“He’s asleep,” says Carla and they both look at John stretched out in the recliner, mouth agape, pale and thin.

“Yes, yes. Always asleep,” sighs Joan. “Sleeps all the time. The doctor’s told him he must get six hours straight at night to stop these daytime naps. But he can’t do it. He sits down like that and instantly falls asleep. Oh dear, I haven’t told you what happened at the dinner the other night?”

Joan throws her head back and stares at the ceiling, shaking her head. Carla chews a fingernail as she waits for the story to begin.

“It was a Probus dinner, the big annual dinner and they gave out raffle tickets as you entered, you know, at the door. Anyway, the tables were circular, about eight people to each and after the meal, there was a trivia game. Well, this one over there, my husband, along with another man at our table, were calling out answers to other tables’ questions. The questions would be asked and these two blokes were shouting out the answers. I kept telling him to shut up. Others were telling him to shush. But he kept doing it. The other man at our table, who was shouting out the answers as well, eventually got the message from his wife and kept quiet. But this one, over here, your father, kept doing it. And the people at our table were not happy.”

“He’s probably never been to a trivia night,” Carla tries to sound nonchalant. “But it was the other teams’ questions. And he’s shouting the answers out.” Joan’s face is tight, grey eyes squinting at Carla. “Mind you, he didn’t get any of their answers right, let alone ours.”

“Well, he was excited, I guess. He would be goofy in that situation.”

“Goofy?” Joan’s eyes are wide now. “It was embarrassing. But that’s not all. You haven’t heard the rest of it. After the trivia game, they pull the raffle. Guess whose number is called?” Joan points a sharp fingernail at her own chest. “I have never won anything in my life. Nothing.”

She pauses and looks away, shaking her head, eyes closed.
Carla waits.

“No, he didn’t. We get back home. It’s in the breast pocket of his shirt. Two bottles of champagne.”

“Huh?”

“That’s what we lost—two bottles of champagne.”

“Oh, Mum, it doesn’t matter. Go to the shop and buy some. I’ll buy them for you.”

“But, Carla, he’s getting worse. It’s thirty degrees and he’s got his jumper on. I come into the kitchen and all the cupboard doors are open.”

“You need to separate yourself from this, Mum. What does it matter if he wears his jumper?”

“But it’s thirty degrees!”

“Let him wear it. Let him leave the cupboard doors open.”

“But then he bangs his head on them. He’s got scabs and sores all over his head because he runs into the same doors he leaves open!”

Carla cannot help exploding with laughter. “He’s eccentric, Mum. You’re living with Professor Potts from *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*.”

Even Joan manages a wry smile. “He’s a danger to himself. Look at him. He looks awful. Look! Look at him, Carla.”

“He’s asleep. Who looks good asleep?”

“But he looks like he’s dead with his mouth open like that.”

“Let him go. Let him sleep when he wants.”

“But he’s sleeping his life away.” Joan shakes her head.
“He’s probably exhausted from cooking all morning. He shouldn’t have cooked.”
“Oh, he likes to cook for you coming. He likes to do something nice.”
“But it wears him out.”
“Let him be. He likes to cook. He always sleeps at this time. But it certainly makes for a lonely life for me, I’ll tell you that.”
There is silence, except for John’s rasping snore.
“Well, the soup turned out all right.” Joan looks at the dinner table.
“I can’t believe you still have that pot,” Carla says faintly.
“I have all three,” Joan corrects, her tone accusative. “You probably don’t remember the set, I suppose—the three red pots.”
“I remember. You always did tuna mornay in the small one and . . . .”
“I did lots of dishes in all of them. Not just tuna mornay. I did that smoked fish casserole in white sauce. Delicious. And the middle-sized one was just right for corned beef. I never used that large one much except for the big dinner parties.”
“But Dad did the beef barley soup in it, every winter.”
“He did it all year round.”
“Smoked fish casserole,” Carla repeated. “Love to give that a go.”
“I’ve got the recipe inside, but it would be no good to you, it’s in all the old measuring system.”
“I know pounds and ounces.”
“But you can’t get the old measuring utensils anymore.”
“Anyway, you still have the three pots. That’s amazing,” Carla says.
“I’ve kept most of my good cooking pans. The other two from the set are in the cupboard over there. In fact, you can have the set.”
“Don’t be silly, Mum.”
“When am I going to entertain, Carla? My entertaining days are over.”
“You’re using it now.”
“No, we don’t entertain and our cooking days are coming to an end too. I really want to streamline the food situation around here. There’s just too much shopping and cooking. And he’s too old. No, you take those pots?”
Carla thinks of her father and his tasks: shopping, cooking, cleaning; of the long ago time she last saw her mother drive or clean or grocery shop; the recent replacement of the entire front garden with buffalo grass and the giving up on the computer club; the
hundreds of frequent flier points they had no plans to use. She looks at her father and tries to guess how many more hours a day he would sleep if he stopped cooking as well.

“You’ll use them.” Joan is saying. “They can replace the old, rubbish ones you have. You’ll find lots of uses for them.”

“Rightio,” she says to her mother.

“Good, then take them with you today.”

As the light moves across the veranda, the tea grows bitter in the teapot. Joan sends Carla into the study to fetch some books and a quarto notebook from the second shelf on the left. Nothing remains of her childhood bedroom. The computer is where her bed once was and bookshelves line the wall that had been covered in posters of pop idols. Even the door has been replaced but the gigantic gum still stands sentinel outside the window.

Its distorted, mottled trunk soars forever, its limbs once a warm hug to the child who drifted asleep every night in the bed under the window.

The tree sent her father up the ladder to constantly clear the gutters; it stained the back deck with its leaf imprints and dictated a shady garden theme for the entire side of the house. Everyone seemed to curse Carla’s night time friend.

Three owls sat one night along a lower, white bough. The neighbourhood came out onto their decks to shine torches, to ‘ooh’ and ‘aah’. On another night, of vicious screaming winds, a higher branch broke, leaving a jagged wound of fresh, pink timber. Its crashing brought down half the paling fence so the local council member was brought around to inspect the potential danger that the whole arbour presented. Carla stared at the shiny, grey suit of the important person. By her twenties he’d made it into federal parliament and onto her TV, then left a sterling career under the scandal of corruption and an affair. ‘Tree killer’ she always called him, even in the year when the media called him far worse names.

The tree was crudely lopped but Carla continued lying the wrong way in bed, feet on her pillow, looking up into its crown, its canopy lit by the front streetlight as it swayed to the chatter of the little girl.

How she had longed for a bedroom whose door she could close. Before the teen years she had done as she was told and left the doorstopper in place. Then, she made two attempts to close it, for what reason she no longer remembered . . . To try make-up? To write love songs? To dance naked in front of the mirror?
The first time her mother opened it, her voice was quiet but dire.

“Why is the door closed?”

“Dunno,” the teenager spoke to her cassette player.

The second time, the door was flung back with such force it left a permanent dent in the dressing table.

“Doors are kept open in this house at all times.”

When her bedroom was to be repainted, Carla packed her books, cassettes and ornaments into her wardrobe, to give the painters access. At the same time, she packed a bag. It was three months after final school exams and on receipt of her first pay from work, she signed a lease on a depressing one-bedroom box beside a four-lane arterial road and snuck away from home.

The following morning she approached her father’s fishbowl office at the bank. The intimidating effect of the dark timber desk, the leather waste paper basket and the executive chair paled against his manner. On previous visits to his office, he always greeted her with a smile and happy eyes.

But on this day, the first day of her future as a tenant, a flee-er, a runner, he kept her waiting while he finished his chat with a colleague. In the past she had walked straight in, her father interrupting his meeting to introduce his daughter. But, his look today made her hesitate at his door before he returned to the conversation with the colleague. She hung around outside like a junior in his department.

When he finally let her in, she stumbled through her reasons for leaving, while he fixed his eyes on his pen, turning it slowly in his hands . . . sad, defeated eyes, weary from being open all night listening to the grief of an angry, defiant wife.

“Right,” he said when she had slid to the end of her story. “Well, your mother and I agree that if this is your decision, then, so be it.”

With that, the eighteen-year-old walked out into the world.

“Yes, that’s the one,” Joan takes the quarto notebook from her. “Are my glasses on the bench?”

“What is it?” Carla says

“It’s a record of all that I cooked over the years—dinner parties, christenings, Christmas . . . the smoked fish casserole is in here somewhere.”

“Wow, let me look. This will be a flashback.”

Her mother’s neat copperplate displays brief lists of lively, raucous parties.
Dinner: Lyons, Cobbs, Campbells and Wilsons

Pate
French Onion Soup
Hungarian Goulash
Sour Cream Carrot Cake

Lunch for Work Ladies

Sandwiches: curried egg, salmon and cucumber, cheese and lettuce
Boiled Fruit Cake—Aunty Mary’s recipe

Xmas 1971

Pork (+ crackling)
Chicken—cold joints
Ham—slices
Salads: cucumber with sour cream, sliced beetroot, slaw, potato salad.
Pudding
Xmas Cake

If it was a wintertime party, Carla was sat down with the Brasso to burnish the fondue set. In summer, she was off to the markets with her father to find the best pineapple, watermelon and grapes, then back home to scoop endless balls from the watermelon. The back deck table was washed down and spread with a tablecloth of brilliant poinsettias, the salads placed in order of descending wooden bowl size along with the pepper, salt and mustards.

KB Gold flowed for the adults, red cordial for the kids. After dinner, kids were sent to the rumpus room to watch TV or play Twister, while upstairs the women shrieked with laughter because John’s trousers fell down again or Mr Lyons put his arm around Joan’s shoulders and slurred, “Go on, Joanie, sing us another. Give us Goldfinger.”

Then a lull, followed by the concentrated smell of percolated coffee. The women gathered around the stove discussing new kitchen appliances or home renovation dreams; the men remained on the deck talking politics and sport.
“Whatever happened to the Lyons?” Carla asks.

“Don’t know,” Joan replies. “She was a pain and he didn’t want to have anything to do with us. He was a snob.”

“But you saw them heaps. Look at this book. There’s loads of dinners they came to.”

“Mmmm. Lots of entertaining on our part, little reciprocation. In the end, I gave up. Your father kept up some contact for a while but I couldn’t be bothered.”

“What did I do?” John blurts across the room, bleary-eyed and already looking sleep-deprived.

“Nothing, nothing. Come on, let’s clean up.” Joan is struggling to her feet, trying to get hips, knees and ankles working to heave herself out of her chair. John ejects himself from the recliner, too fast, his back refusing to unbend, causing him to stagger across the room bent over. Carla remains seated, not knowing who to help, as Joan and John shuffle and hobble away from her down the hall.

“Well, let me know what happens with the handyman. If he doesn’t come, I can phone some others,” Carla kisses the soft cool of her mother’s cheek and turns to embrace the skeletal frame of her father.

“Got enough petrol?” her father peers in at the dashboard.

“Oh, goodness, John, leave her.” Joan flicks his arm.

“Thanks for soup, it was scrummy.” Carla smiles.

“The pots!” Joan gasps. “Quick, John, go back and get them.”

“What pots?”

“The pots, the three red pots. Go and get them. Carla’s taking them.”

“You’re giving them away? Hell’s bells, we’ll have nothing left soon.”

“Hurry, hurry. Just do as I say.” Joan waves him up the drive.

“You’re not hurrying anywhere!” Carla calls to her father’s scuffling figure. “Go slowly.”

John raises his hand in proclamation. “Three pots red!”

Two editions of the Saturday paper are used to wrap the pots for their journey to their new home, then multiple plastic bags.

“Not on the back seat,” says John. “You have an accident and they become a flying missile that could kill you instantly. Open the boot.”

“Use this to pack them in place,” says Joan, directing John to the picnic rug on
one side of the boot. “Just wrap it around, like this. Here, let me do it.”

In her rear-view mirror, as she descends the hill, Carla watches her parents at the bottom of their driveway. Two people who, across all the years, waved goodbye enthusiastically, with hankies and wide sweeping arms. But as she looks this time, her father wanders distractedly towards the letterbox as her mother stares absently across the road at the house opposite. Carla stops at the T-intersection at the bottom of the hill, turns right, and disappears from their sight.
Friday Night, Party Night.

A Picnic

One rug
One roast chicken
Coleslaw
Thermos of tea
Aerogard
Blanket
Hat
Daydreams

Sweat flows from Paul’s armpits on these muggy nights. It flattens pathways through his chest hair, collects above his belt and spreads across a waistline that has widened over the past decade. Perspiration beads along his upper lip where he once sported a moustache. His daughter dogged him about the look for months and his wife screwed up her face when he kissed her, so he removed it. With the mo now gone, he looks a regular guy again and his ash-coloured hair, brown eyes and pale skin make him melt back into the suburbs.

The sky is a sweep of soulless yellow, whitewashed from the day’s heat, so different to the winter walks home when there is usually an early evening bite to the air, casting damp smells and crisp winds around his face. The liquidambars flaunt their perfect, happy green tonight, with leaves that will submerge the footpath when the first drop in temperature comes this May.

The residents of Morton Avenue are always indoors when Paul passes their houses, front curtains not yet drawn for the night. Bob O’Connor, number 72, tucks into
his six-on-the-dot meat and veg, stable-table across his knees, eyes glued to the trots on Sky, his wife a screaming tirade in the kitchen. The Campbell boys, number 36, are glued to Homer and Bart, nibbling sausage rolls, spread-eagled on the floor in their pyjamas.

Tina and Frank Lovell’s bed, in the bay window of number 24, is clearly visible with its Sheridan doona pulled neat, bedside lamps on, by timer, and the front door illuminated by an ornate carriage light, blasting two hundred watts about the porch for an always-late-home husband. Paul once glimpsed Tina in the bedroom, bent over a bedside drawer, her camisole a patina in the warm lamp light. Did she catch him with the gaze that sees all even if the eyes do not intend to see? Even now, months later, the dreaded hope of it occurring again rushes through him as he passes the lifeless room and approaches his own house.

Number 22, the last house before Paul’s, is the only wooden bungalow in the street. He opens his neighbour’s timber gate, swollen in its frame and stoops to avoid the rambling potato vine above. He raps on the screen door as he takes a few slow steps down the hall to the sound of a Stan Getz solo.

“Hey, Mister Green, how goes it?” Simon is in his armchair as expected, cigar smoke circling his beard and mop of hair.

“Can’t stay.” Paul smiles handing over a CD. “But I’ll leave you with this.”

“Marsalis, great, you got it. Come by later and we’ll listen together. I’m just chillin’ tonight.”

“I’ll try,” says Paul. “Gotta see what’s happening with dinner.”

“What’s on the menu tonight, Sir Chef?”

“Tuna Mornay.”

“Man, why’d you get rid of that mo? With that and your Mornay you’re the dinky di seventies guy. The real McCoy.”

“Hey, don’t knock my Mornay,” Paul laughs. “I do a mean white sauce. I’ll bring you some ’round if you put on that CD.”

“Marsalis and Mornay. What can I say?” Simon laughs his late-night, whisky-and-jazz laugh.

“Yeah, that does sound corny,” Paul agrees. “No, no whisky for me now. Gotta go.”

“And you say a hello from me to your missus, sir.”

Paul’s driveway is steeper than all the others, his house more entrenched in the
The hillside. Much has been done to control the yard’s slope with tri-level terracing dividing the garden into sections of annuals, perennials and small, deciduous trees. The best view of the garden is from the master bedroom and as Paul’s wife chooses all the plants and advises where to place them, he feels it is only right to give her the side of the bed closest to the window. But she hates the glare from the streetlight so the blinds remain closed most of the time.

Paul enters the air conditioned interior of his house and feels his sweat quickly turn cold against his skin.

“Shut the door,” his wife shouts. “There’s a fire at Bell’s factory. It’s been on the news and I don’t want any chemical stink in here.”

“OK. Quick sticks then.”

He places his bag under the phone table and removes his jacket. The kitchen is dark but the living room is lit up by the television. Paul crosses the room to kiss Faith on the forehead. She does not stir in her TV chair.

“You smell nice,” Paul says.

“See what Tory’s doing, will you?” she waves her hand towards the stairs.

“She’s been up there for hours. God knows.”

“OK. How was your day?”

“Foul.” She speaks to the TV. “Had the meeting with Bob. He spent the whole time crapping on about how he was going to refer the matter to District and how we didn’t have to deal with it anymore. Which is rubbish, because we will.”

“Will he send your report to District?”

“Why would he do that?” she snaps. “He’ll just write his own and lift all our concepts.”

“Right.” Paul moves towards the door. “I’ll just get changed.”

“God, don’t listen then.”

Paul climbs the stairs, incense enveloping him as he approaches his daughter’s bedroom. He is used to the blue hair now, but the gum slapping and the screaming headphones still make him uneasy.

“How are you?” Paul asks from the doorway.

“Brooke’s getting to the station at quarter-to, so I want to go in twenty.”

“Sure. I’ll just get changed.”

“Changed? Dad! I’m ready now. What’s wrong with going in those clothes?”
“All right. OK. I’ll go like this. How was your day?”
“Whatever.”
“What about dinner before you go?”
“I’ll get a kebab after. And, I need money.”
“Where am I dropping you both again?”
“Shit. The Imperial for the fifteenth time. Hurry.”
“Mind the language. And we’re picking Brooke up from Wilden Station?”
“Hello? Yes.”

“Do we have any more penne than this?” Paul holds up a large container to his wife.

“Why?”
“I need more than this for the Mornay.”
“Mornay?”
“For dinner tonight.”
“Mornay? This morning you said you were going to do stir-fry.”
“You don’t want Mornay then?”
“You don’t remember?”
“Remember what?”
“This morning . . . stir-fry you said.”
“This morning, did I?”
“You announced we’d be having stir-fry and I suggested you wash the bok choy this time so we don’t have a dish full of grit from the unwashed leaves.”
“Yes, yes. Now I remember. OK. So, what would you prefer?”
“Are you going to use the tuna in the vacuum pack?”
“For the Mornay? Probably. Yes. I think so.”
“The tuna you hate?”
“What do you mean I hate it?”
“I used the same brand of tuna in the salad when Rosalie came and you turned up your nose saying it was poison.”
“I don’t think I said it was poison.”
“You pulled this dramatic face and carried on.”
“Did I? So you don’t want the mornay?”
“I don’t want anything. I’m having a shower. Cook what you want. Just try to turn the exhaust fan on this time. It’d be nice to get up in the morning for once without
being hit with last night’s cooking smells.”

“What was all that crap about?” Tory is settled in the front seat of the Ford, feet on its dash, picking blue polish from her nail edges. “She going on about the car again?”

“Don’t you worry about it. You just have a good time tonight. You look nice. Mind your feet there.” Paul backs the XP out of the driveway.

“She’s always saying your car’s crap but she never drives me in hers. I’ve always got to go in this heap o’ shit”

“Now, don’t be taking the XPs name in vain, young lady.” Paul is mock-indignant. “Your mother does not think it’s, as you say, ‘crap’.”

“Yeah, right. You just keep dreamin’ your dreams in fairyland. She wouldn’t be seen dead in it.”

“This car has been with us since your Mum and I started dating. We had some wonderful times—picnics, the drive-in. We brought you home from hospital in it . . . . ”

“I don’t wanna hear it. I’ve heard that ancient story all my life!”

“All I’m saying is your mother and I had some wonderful outings and holidays in this car. It’s sentimental to both of us.”

Tory casts her eye shadow and lip gloss at him in disdain. “She’s right. You have lost it. You’re somewhere in the last century, man, and goin’ backwards.”

“Hey! It’s Friday night, party night! What put you in a mood?”


She hangs up and stares out her window. “You gotta drop me straight there now. Brooke’s missed the train. I’m going straight to The Imperial. You go back and get her. She’s on the next train but it doesn’t get in ’til eight-fifteen.”

“Are you sure you’re safe in here?” Paul squints at the concert venue, worried that poor lighting is not the only safety issue. “How many people do they pack into this place?”

She slams the door of the XP in response and disappears inside. Six years ago, she needed all the strength in her two little arms to swing the car door shut. If she bounded out too eager to join the others at ballet, the door would fly from her hands and her temper right after it.

“Stupid car.” Ballet bag dragging on her arm, hair ribbons flying in the wind around her eyes.
“Leave it, honey. I’ll close it.”

She would flash him a furrowed look, a precursor to the scowl she carried permanently now, and free herself from the battle with the door.

“Hey!” he would call after her.

“What?” she cried, turning her eleven-year-old exasperation on him.

“Kiss?” Paul tapped his cheek.

“Urgh.”

But she would return, dramatically scuffing her shoes and dragging her bag along the ground, huffing at his time wasting. When he finally let her go she was back to her excited self, scuttling down to class, racing her childhood away from him, the anger gone as quickly as the wave she threw him.

“Bye, Daddy!”

Now her father sits at traffic lights in the same car, in the same town, and wonders why the anger is around his girl morning, noon and night. The car engine purrs beneath him, sending its rumbling up his back. He winds down the window, leans an elbow out and stretches his neck from side to side. Coloured lights from street and store advertisements flash around the intersection, a congested streetscape of gustation: Lip Smacking Coffee, Devil’s Chocolate, Kingdom Chips, Naughty Noodles.

A young man stumbles what he believes is a straight line out of the pub, his girlfriend laughing under the weight of him leaning on her shoulders. As they wait for the ‘walk’ sign they dive into a deep embrace, the girl disappearing into his inebriated kissing.

“Thanks, mate.” The guy waves a crooked arm in Paul’s direction as they swagger past the car to cross the road. “Sick car, mate.”

Paul lifts his arm from its comfortable stretch across the bench seat and gives a sensible, paternal wave—a man, in a marriage and middle-age, watching young, drunk love pass by. He looks across the bench seat and wonders how he could have ever lain across it all those years ago. Still, when you’re young and keen for petting . . . .

How the windows steamed in the winter: window tinting 1960s style. She loved to heart outline their initials on the steamed glass: F.L. 4 P.G., her plump index finger inscribing the letters between giggles in response to his kisses on her ribs and waist.

Faith had loved the car as much as Paul, although she never wanted to know
about engines or mechanics. Instead she bought him leather driving gloves to match the steering cover, a real chamois and sturdy floor mats. She named it Felicity Ford and planned picnics to national parks out of town, enjoying the winding, hairpin roads down to valley floors or cliff hugging routes along the coast.

Her talent with a sewing machine produced his-and-her outfits to complement the cream-and-blue leather interior. At first the clothes were muted mauves and lavenders but after his proposal and her acceptance (on the bench seat while driving rain lashed the windscreen), she became more daring, presenting him with an orange-spotted shirt, white cuffs and collar, the spots repeated in the sleeves and waistband of her dress.

Paul remembered her smile as she gave the shirt to him, remembered changing into it there and then in the car, making her laugh as he pretended to be tangled in his own clothes. He always believed her laugh was the sound of her at her most free, beginning deep in her throat behind a closed mouth but quickly exploding. But the laugh faded as the years of marriage unfolded, slowly replaced by tense quietness. Quiet became cautious became wary became vigilant became suspicious and now any discussion about dinner or shopping or an outing was a conference of unending detail.

After the traumatic birth of their first, their only child, there had still been times when all positives coincided, before one hard and rigid way of seeing things overran and dictated the family. These were days of impulsive picnics: when you could pack a box with choc-caramel slice and a thermos of tea; when dad could leave the engine running and his ‘girls’ waiting in the car while he dashed into the chook shop to buy the last ‘family size’ and a loaf of bread. The blanket was old and ugly, a worn, pink chenille bedspread but so wonderfully big there was room for everyone to lie down without touching a blade of grass. A triangle of connected bodies—heads on thighs, legs across stomachs—they listened to stories the little girl told that went round and round in circles if she was left to chatter on; or long-winded tales he told about camping trips ‘up this very river’ with his own father. ‘That grumpy old coot’, Mum would call him. But she didn’t really mean it because those were the days when words were connections passed to others simply to remind them you were there, in the conversation, in each other’s lives, taking the journey with them.

“Where are you?”

Paul can hear the TV at home, in the background, behind her question and knows she is in bed, headband in place, propped against her many pillows. He pictures
his routine later: turning off her bedside lamp and the TV static, sliding quietly in beside her. The tussle to retrieve his pillow and the frown on her brow when he will kiss her forehead.

“Hi,” he replies. “I just dropped Tory and I’m just waiting to collect the girlfriend. . . Brooke is it? I might grab something to eat. . . .”

“We’re out of butter.”

There had been more pregnancies but no life came of them. He had tried to hold her, back at home after the curette, her body curled away from him, curled in on itself, unmoved. She recovered well physically but she buried her spirit with the unborn babies and spread the misery out around her family until the triad became separate creatures in a raw, muted home.

The Tandoori Kitchen had seemed inviting as he drove past, but now, inside, the dishes seemed to only differ by colour.

“I’ll have one yellow, one orange, one green and one white,” Paul imagines himself ordering but the dark-ringed eyes of the server do not seem partial to a gag. The neat, perfect turban and white chef’s coat run counter to the old man’s creased and jaded skin that forms into a face having long ago given up expecting enough sleep. Lids hang dark-grey over aqueous eyes that watch the TV whilst turning the butter chicken in front of Paul.

“What’s on?” Paul motions to the TV high on the wall above the fridge.

“Rice?” the man asks, his sluggish hand turning dehydrated grains.

“Yes. Rice.”

There is no quiet spot to eat in the takeaway. The three tables with swivel seats are between the door that opens to the corner of the busy intersection and the noisy fridge and bug zapper. So, Paul sits with his back to the fridge and TV, looking out onto the traffic, trying to ignore the sound of flies and moths being electrocuted above him. The Sikh stands flicking through the channels, round and round the stations, spasms of dialogue erupting at each channel change. Eventually, he settles on a Bollywood music video—a doe-eyed beauty teasing and chastising her older, sleek love interest. The Sikh watches for a minute then disappears out the back through a curtain, leaving Paul alone with his dinner and Bollywood’s James Bond.

The beef vindaloo has good chilli heat but is tough and grisly. After gnawing
through a few pieces, Paul just mops the grainy, greasy sauce with naan bread. The white, lifeless bread in his hand changes from green to orange to blue as the city lights flash around the diner. Outside, the pedestrian button beeps for the blind and a right-hand turning car receives a horn blast from behind. The shop fills with exhaust each time a bus accelerates on the green light.

Now and then, people arrive at the lights to cross the street, young, solo men, starting the night, repeatedly hitting the ‘Walk’ button. Have they eaten? Paul wonders. Even chewy vindaloo and dried rice would be a healthier start to the night than just beers. He imagines these men, hungry at midnight after too many beers, queuing behind his daughter at the kebab van. Would she be sassy? Give them lip if they burped or swore? Or would she join in the usual drunken bloke pranks? He could not let his thoughts go further: to when the kebabs were finished; to what the group might do next. *Hope-to-god* she at least stays with her friends.

The refrigerator roars into another round of cooling, causing Paul to glance around the too-bright, tiled diner. As he does, his eyes catch the Sikh through a gap in the curtain. A little girl, his grandchild, is swaying and twirling around him as he sits on a small metal chair. Her chocolate skin is gleaming against the red and orange scarf that swishes with her as she dances around her grandpa. Like a capricious fire, she twirls the scarf before his face, teasing and tormenting him.

But the old Sikh is in no torment. His face still has the lines and sallow skin that he presented at the servery but his near toothless mouth is now stretched into a smile, pulling his wrinkles and creases into a thousand years of happiness. At that moment, he catches Paul’s stare from out in the dining area of his ugly, white-tiled takeaway—a no-good business he has owned for ten years, that will forever own him. His customer’s stare comes at him from a blank face; a lonely, empty, tired face. The Sikh returns his customer’s stare with a strong and graceful nod, a salutation to the delight and joy of little children everywhere, spreading his wide grin even wider before returning his attention to his spirited dancing queen.

“Hey, Mr Green. Sorry, I missed the train. Wow, I get to ride in the groovy car though.”

“No problem. I dropped Tory off to get the tickets.”

“Yeah, sorry about that. The earlier train just didn’t come or I got the time wrong, I dunno. How great is this! Did they always make white steering wheels in the old days? Oh, sorry, I’m not saying you’re old.”
“No offence. Yes, they paid more attention to interiors in those days. Everything was a matching style package—the radio, the dash, even the glove box.” He points to the various coordinates as they ride along. “And the side panels match too so it’s an overall effect.”

Brooke takes hold of her window winder.

“Oh my God, two turns and the window is down. How cute is that! And I lerve the Venetian blind on the back window. Does it open and close?”

“Sure does.”

“And this seat is great. Imagine, blue and white vinyl. How retro, but this is, like, the real thing.”

“Leather actually. Stuffed with horsehair.”

“Wow. Is that why it’s so bouncy?” Brooke bounces and cheap, sweet perfume fills the air.

“My wife and I spent all our dating years in this car and that was one of her favourite features—the pure comfort that comes with well-made bench seats. In fact, the back of this bench seat can be unlocked to make a bed. Great if you’re stuck on holidays without a caravan! Goodness I’m prattling on. No one usually shows such interest.”

“Yeah, we went to Dubbo Zoo in a Campervan once when I was little. It was heaps of fun but it’s a pretty, like, not cool way to travel. I mean, this’d be so great because it, like, looks good and you can sleep in it too.”

“Well, we don’t use it anymore for accommodation. That was just in the days when we didn’t have much money. Just an emergency back-up really.”

For the first time since the railway station, Paul concentrates on his driving.

“Gosh, now, which street is this? This is Saltash isn’t it?” Saltash is a through street but instead they find themselves in a cul-de-sac, a solitary streetlight in a desolate playground on their left. On their right, a park and canal lie in darkness.

“I don’t know any streets out here.” Brooke leans into the windscreen; her large earrings catch and flash the streetlight.

“Oh dear,” Paul says.

“Oh don’t panic, Mr Green.”


“In trouble?”

“Ooh, gosh, big trouble from Tory’s mum if I take a wrong street!” Paul tries to
make light of it as he begins the three-point turn.

“Yeah, Tory says her mum really dishes it out.”

Paul puts the car into neutral and turns to her.

“Sorry, Mr Green, I shouldn’t have said that.”

“Is Tory ok, Brooke?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. She doesn’t like how her mum . . . I dunno . . . sort of screams and stuff.” Brooke is not sure where this is coming from now. “I dunno, she wants to move out but she thinks her mum will anyway. I mean . . . I dunno . . . maybe she just wants to live by herself or something. I . . . I can’t remember.”

Paul looks out front. Reflected in the windscreen he sees his unfit body, inert and sagging into the bench seat. He sees a pallid face and defeated eyes.

“I don’t know either,” he says, inaudibly.

Brooke runs her eyes around the window frame and chews her lip. She picks at the cuticle around her thumb, finds a slither of skin and rips it.

“Maybe we better find the street. I mean if we just chuck a U-ey. Hey. are you alright Mr Green?”

Paul’s shoulders are limped forward, his head and work tie droop over the steering wheel. For a moment, Brooke thinks ‘heart attack’ before she sees his neck and shoulders begin to shiver and hears wet, weeping gasps for air spill from his mouth.

“Geez, I didn’t mean to upset you.” Brooke feebly pats his shoulder but he remains, draped across the white wheel coughing his despair into the dashboard. On and on he sobs, Brooke staring at his shaking shirt. Then, from out of nowhere, she feels a giggle rise within her. My God, how embarrassing! I can’t tell anyone this at school on Monday. This guy’s, like, crying.

And then he is clinging to her, leaning all the weight of his years on the shoulders of her new, white singlet top, sobbing his salty, middle-aged sweat into her Friday night glowing. He is licking her neck, taking her fragrance into his mouth, clasping her hair and covering her mouth with his. His other hand is pulling her hips down, down onto the bench seat, her slim body fitting so easily along it. She is struggling, as in the old days when it was taboo, but he knows she wants it, wants him. She really does want his love. Yes, she wants him to devour her, to pluck up her short, short skirt, to hold her tight buttocks in his strong hands, to rock ‘n’ roll inside her, to make the windows steam, to have her on the horsehair, the horsehair that makes it all so bouncy and alive. Alive without restraint. Their love outlined in a steam-carved heart.
The Dance

Kourabiethes

250g butter, softened
2 1/2 cups icing sugar
2 teaspoons vanilla essence
1 orange, rind finely grated
1 egg, at room temperature
2 1/2 cups plain flour
1 teaspoon baking powder
1/2 cup almond meal (ground almonds)

Preheat oven to 160 degrees. Line two flat baking trays with baking paper.

Beat butter, 1 cup of the icing sugar, vanilla and orange rind until pale and creamy.
Add egg and beat until well combined. Sift flour and baking powder over mixture.
Add ground almonds.

Use your hands to bring the dough together.

Take a small amount of the dough and roll into little sausage shapes.

Bend to form crescent shapes and lightly pinch the ends.

Place on baking trays, allowing room for spreading. Bake for 20 minutes or until light golden.

Stand for 5 minutes on trays until firm.

Coat the warm biscuits with the remaining icing sugar.
Autumn

“You take the bags to the car,” Michael tells her with a soft pat on her shoulder. “I’ll go back and get the potatoes. Have we forgotten anything else?”

“What if your phone rings while you’re at the cash register?” Joanne shrills. “How can you take the call standing in the middle of the store? Why don’t you take the bags to the car then you can concentrate . . . .”

But he is already retreating, moving away from her.

Michael clutches the knot in the potato bag. It is slippery in his grip and beats his thigh in a counter-rhythm to his walk back to the car. He can see Joanne in the front seat, straining towards the rear view mirror to apply lipstick. As he approaches, he decides not to tell her about the phone call.

“Did he call?”

“Yep,” he responds too brightly, readying himself to lie.

“And . . . ?”

“And . . .” and in that moment, wanting to hold the knowledge forever, he sees her stretching across the front seat, wanting it too, forcing him to share what he knows. He looks at her mouth, outlined in the autumn burgundy lipstick, twisted and ugly, a helix ready to take the bad news and bite back. He knows there is no choice. She must own the knowledge too; make of it what she will. In giving into the moment, this new direction, he hopes it will not be all bad. Nothing is ever all bad. Perhaps she will provide some of the strength he has already lost on the walk back to the car. So he tells her, leaning against the car, speaking through the driver’s window to her on the other side.

She imagines he is falling towards her but it is only her vision, plunging, tearing into him as he tells her. Her periphery darkens as she zeroes in on his fingers, trembling across the lips that dispatch the news. One sentence, brief in the telling, vast in the imparting.

She must get out of the car, walk around to where he is standing, staring out across the car park. The short steps around the car, to his side, take forever.

When she reaches him, she tries to hug him but his body is against the car and she cannot squeeze between. She settles for one arm around his waist, her head bowed
into his chest. He droops one arm across her shoulder, the other across the car roof. They are suspended a while before she moves out of the embrace. She says something neither will recall, then tries to hold him again. He continues to look away, fighting the tears. She stares into the road, every piece of gravel plain, separate, cruel.

They are silent on the drive home. A P-plater gives her the finger as he overtakes.

“Go back ta drivin’ school,” he screams as she continues under the speed limit, watching him pass by as if in slow motion.

Dinner is olives and bread, shared in silence. Afterwards, she finds him sunk in the old brown armchair in the bathroom. She had put the silly thing there on a style whim after flicking through a magazine.

“What if we move that armchair we never use from the porch to the bathroom? Like in this picture. Here. Look.”

He had responded with a grunt, moved it, then used it as a place to dump his clothes. She badgered him; neither sat in it.

Now it is the right place to sit, to collapse—when your neck feels hot but your face is white and pasty, when your arms feel heavy and your mind is still back at the supermarket, getting change out of your pocket while trying to absorb what is being said to you over the phone.

“I’m pretty positive about it, you know.” She feels this is an honest assessment as she perches on the arm of the chair, her toes pushing into the groove between two floor tiles, her entire body supported by a sliver of grout. It is a horrible position from which to wrap her arms around him but it is a good position for delivering positives and reassurances.

“I’m not sad about me,” he says. “I’m sad for you.”

For the first time, he looks into her eyes, strong and defiant.

“That’s what saddens me.”

The weeks unfold. He slows almost to a standstill. She finds him transfixed over the stove, watching the rice return to the boil, or taking eternity to slice vegetables. He opens exotic, complex recipe books, wanting to try new things.

“What’s ‘mirin’?” he asks but doesn’t hear the answer.

He tries making *nasi goreng* but forgets to buy the shrimp paste and kecap manis, discovering only after he has started. He substitutes with extra soy sauce. Having
never used a wok before, the glug is stuck in a heap and they need to drink litres of water to recover from the saltiness.

He continues to makes his own versions of recipes, spending hours in the kitchen only to produce something too dry, too greasy, too bland. She fights back tears as yet another awful dish is served, her chest tight and heavy with anger, rage and grief.

“Well?” he levels at her after she battles through a too-tough stir-fry made from cheap beef cuts. “Did you like it?”

“What sort of nuts were they?”

“Hazelnuts. The recipe said slivered almonds but I didn’t know what slivered meant. Did the hazelnuts wreck it?”

“No,” she says as she takes their plates to the sink, turning the tap on full and rinsing away the bitter juices and bitterness.

Wanting to scream and banish him from the kitchen, she grows frenetic instead, writing draft ‘to do’ lists in pencil, then a final copy in black texta in priority order, before magnetizing it to the fridge:

HANG WASHING
BRING IN WASHING
SQUEEZE ORANGES FOR JUICE
TAKE OUT THE RUBBISH!

Neither refers to it. Neither completes the jobs.

Moods rise and sink, never dually timed, so that what they imagined would hold them together begins to pull them apart.

I love you. It means so much that you are with me.
I hate you. Why did this have to happen?

Tell me what I should do. I don’t know.
Stop telling me what to do. I’ll work it out for myself.

Leave me alone.
Hold me.
I need you.

Go away.

Over time, they learn some steps, trying to listen to the music, letting it reveal in which direction to move. But most of the time they feel out of sync with each other.

“For me it’s like this, Michael” she wants to tell him but sees his vacant gaze. Instead, she asks, too many times, “Are you ok?”

“Yeah,” he responds but wants to say, “I don’t know how I feel.”

“Let’s go for a drive,” she suggests, with an over-bright, tight smile one shiny Autumn day. She longs to focus on a road trip, to escape yet another day in the house sliding around his moods.

He brightens in return, slowly, softly, his brown eyes focusing like the ‘old days’, the days so recent, yet so many emotions ago. She chooses the dress with the olive-green flowers and restocks her make-up purse with new colours from the bathroom drawer. A quiet coral replaces the autumn burgundy.

“Such a dark colour. What possessed me?” She tosses it in the bin. He drives; she lets him choose the route. He takes the usual road out of town, over the railway bridge and along by the river. As the car starts to climb into the hills, she presumes they are headed for the Berry Farm Tea Shop but he takes the first left instead.

“Remember when we looked at a block out this way?” She feels it is safer to mention the more distant past.

“That was some view.” And they recall the wild plans they had dreamt for the sloping block covered in scrub: a pole house, a gigantic deck, a landscaping bill more than the house price.

Joanne feels comforted re-visiting an unfulfilled dream, to look back on something that meant so much but which now seems absurd. He had refused to go ahead with the purchase and she had refused to talk anymore about it. Now, on post-mortem, she feels any leftover resentment has evaporated.

The road descends, leaving the mountain bush and entering cleared farmland. A tilting sandwich board by the roadside announces “Tastings Open” and he turns into the dirt road.

They are the only customers but the vigneron still describes the wines as if
addressing a crowd.

“And this is our chardonnay. You’ll probably notice it is green straw in colour. It has a buttery, melon-like bouquet underpinned with oak aromas. You can either enjoy it now or it will continue to develop under maturation.”

Michael studies the wine list intently; Joanne inspects the chutneys and jams along the wall. Anything to avoid collapsing together in hystericis.

A *Weekend of Wine* tour group issues from a bus outside, the gaggle filling the tasting room as they enter looking all clean, white and sensibly-shoed. Michael and Joanne retreat to the deck. The poplars along the creek brandish their autumn leaves and toss them to the breeze. Some fly up the hill to flutter and dance around the solitary couple leaning against the railing.

“To us.” He tilts his glass gently towards her.

Joanne looks into his eyes, sees the sadness but does not ask this time. The green straw wine catches the afternoon sun and flickers gold as their glasses meet. She is the first to withdraw her gaze as she raises her glass to her lips and looks back at the shimmering trees.

**Winter**

“I thought I’d phone Mum and Dad when we get back home this afternoon.” Joanne says.

“Right.”

“I thought I’d tell them.”

“Oh me?” Michael does not look up from his meal.

“About you. About us.”

“Right.”

“Do you mind?”

“No.” He looks across the road to the café opposite. “I guess you have to do it some time. You ok about it?”

“Nope. I’m nervous. I can’t imagine what they’ll say. Dad will say, ‘That’s no good. No good at all.’ That’ll be the extent of it anyway.”

“How are you going to say it?”

“Don’t know. Keep it brief, I guess. How did you tell your mum?”

“God, you know, I can’t remember.” His sunglasses hide the surprise in his eyes.
“Can’t even remember where I phoned her from.”

“From the apartment. I remember you were in the kitchen,” she recalls. “I came in later, you were on the phone in the kitchen.”

“Was I?”

“Yep. Sarong lady in the opposite unit was juicing her crazy fruit juices, don’t you remember?” Now they look at each other with keen eyes. “Ha. You were trying to tell your mum and you kept wincing every time the juicer screamed.”

“That juicer,” he hoots. “All the health food she used to stockpile everywhere yet she lay around all day watching crap TV.”

“She knew we could see all her life from our kitchen but she never bought any curtains.” Her voice rises and falls in an easy rhythm.

“And her talking alarm.” He monotones while she groans, “Eight-forty-five, eight-forty-six, eight-forty-seven. TURN IT OFF.”

“We never did yell out to her.”

“Nah. We sold the place instead.”

The waiter appears.

“Desserts, sir, madam?”

“A little later, perhaps,” she says.

“Are you glad we did?” she asks after a time, after the waiter has cleared the plates and departed.

“Glad we sold?” he clarifies. “Had no choice. You wanted to live here.”

“That’s unfair,” she says.

“Hey, I mean it in a positive way. I wanted to be with you.”

“Yes, but there’s other ways of saying it.” How quickly the tears well. Days are a succession of moments led by moods. “So you wouldn’t have moved here if you were on your own?”

“No.” He clears his throat.

“Too provincial?”

“I just wouldn’t move here without you.”

“You know what I mean,” she says. “If you were on your own, you wouldn’t live here?”

“Not by myself.”

“Where then?” she asks. “Where would you live if you were ever alone?”

“We both know that’s not an option now. Unless, of course, you leave me.”
“The specialist was pretty positive about things, you know,” she says. “I could get hit by a bus tomorrow and by what he said, you would be ok for a good length of time.”

“You didn’t want dessert, did you?” Michael gestures to the waiter for the bill.

“How’d it go?” He asks quietly.

“I only told Mum. That was enough.” She collapses into an armchair.

“Why? What did she say?”

“Well, to begin with, she answered the phone eating: slop, slop, like a cow. ‘Oh well, slop, slop, that’s bad luck.’ That’s all she said. God, what’s the point.” She stares with narrow eyes at the ceiling. “Anyway, who gives a rats, it’s out there now. Let them deal with it.”

He says nothing for a while, then speaks in a low voice. “It’s not out there. It’s in here. In me. In my blood.”

“You just don’t get it, do you?” She is up again, pacing. “It’s you, it’s me, it’s all of us. Even the people who can’t say anything except ‘Bad bloody luck, cobber’, even they’re in it. I know it’s in you but it’s out here too. We’re all floating in it, all of us together, unconnected. That’s what you don’t get. Everyone out there is in it, too.”

Spring

“So, remind me again, why has he gone overseas?”

“I told you, Mum”

“I’m old, Joanne, I forget these things. Please don’t sigh like that.”

“He wants us to go for an extended time at the end of the year. And I don’t want to simply arrive and spend three weeks scouting around for a place to stay. So I suggested that while he was at the conference he fly over to Greece and perhaps find a place for us.”

“Why would it take so long to find accommodation? Surely, you’ve both been overseas enough by now to be experts?”

“Because he’s looking for the right type of island.”

“What does that mean? No olives on my pizza, please.”

“Can’t you just pick them off?”

“What does the ‘right island’ mean?”
“I don’t know, Mum, authentic tavernas, a decent plaka, beaches . . .”

“What did you say? Parka?”

“The square, Plaka. Like . . . like piazza. The Greek word for piazza.”

“I’ve never heard that word before. But then, we haven’t travelled like you two.”

The box grater tears skin from Joanne’s knuckle. Twisted shafts of mozzarella tremble above the pizza.

“So,” her mother exhales on the word and Joanne knows the maternal summary is on its way, “this trip is about finding an island suitable for you both later this year, where he wants to sit in a plakka, plaika . . . whatever it is . . . for how long? Six weeks?”

“A few months.”

“I see.” An unbelieving seeing as her mother moves to the window. “You should give those callistemons a light prune all over, you know, it’ll encourage another flush of blooms.”

Later, when Joanne is scraping her mother’s discarded olives into the bin, slices that had been individually lifted by nails painted in sunrise blush, she contemplates her own summary . . .

*Cancer, Mum. Incurable. Remember? I explained it all very clearly. Chemo and radio no good. Get it? Cancer. Drugs in five years just to slow the cell change down. Right? Between now and then, before the new life of tests, bloods, weight gain, weight loss, anaemia, lymph swelling . . . he’ll be fine physically. But, the pain’s already started, Mum. For both of us.*

Instead, she had again stood with her mother, as on the edge of a lake, refusing to dip into the waters of plain speaking, constantly stepping back from the lapping.

Alone, in the warm afternoon, she stretches to relieve a sore back. The phone line connection from Serifos had been terrible, which Michael blamed on her mobile, saying the call to his brother had been crystal clear. Tears run into the carpet under her cheek as she tries hard to resolve the sick, leaden load when two people cannot connect over a long-distance phone call.

“We’ll try again tomorrow,” Michael shouted. “I’ll ring from another phone. I
think there’s one down at the port.”

“OK. It’s no big deal. Pizza, I said . . . I just said I made pizza for her for lunch and she hated it.”

“OK. About six then. Sounds good.”

“Ridiculous, if you ask me,” Joanne’s mother proclaims to her husband that night. “Sit on his bum for months on end navel-gazing. How’s that going to help things for heavens’ sake?”

“Each to his own, I guess,” her husband says to the weekend paper.

Joanne’s finger traces a ferry line out from Piraeus to Serifos. She studies the island’s shape and locates the town of the terrible phone connection. The road from the port to the main town is a meander on a map that reveals nothing. Is it steep or flat? Is the landscape dry and rocky or a lush pine-covered terrain? She imagines Michael disembarking from the ferry, in sunglasses and a cap, only a daypack for his three weeks away. While he waits for the other tourists to dissipate he scans the port town and the hills, before approaching one of the locals leaning against the truck—an olive farmer whose pension is a little up the hill behind the noise and pollution of the town. The old man will drive the traveller up the mountain and they will share an ouzo or two before agreeing on a price.

Joanne’s eyes move across the sea, to the north, and she is enlivened by cartography of their last trip to Greece together. Flora and landscapes are conjured simply by light pink shapes, scattered across a pale-blue background like ink blots: Skiathos and its gross nightclubs and overpricing that had sent them on the next day’s ferry to Skopelos with its cosy port town, beaches and pine forests. And Skyros, alone to the east, seemingly exiled by the Sporades family group.

_Sporadic:_

*Occurring at irregular intervals; having no pattern or order in time*

*Appearing singly or at widely scattered localities*

*Isolated*

*Unique*

How Joanne had hated Skyros. Even now she did not know if it was the
barrenness after quaint, pined Skopelos; or being tired of the whole damn Mediterranean; or simply sick of Michael’s love of Greece.

After the plane had departed and the German tourists had boarded their chartered minibus, Joanne heaved on her backpack and squinted out the door of the airport—one room in the barren landscape.

A single colossal mountain rose out of the heat-shimmering plain before her. Had it been Australia, she would have presumed the mountain was leftover rubble from a mine but she had seen enough to know this was simply another Greek mountain on another Greek island.

While she scowled in the sunlight, Michael studied the maps on the wall, trying to estimate the cost from airport to town via taxi.

“How far Chora?” she asked the three loitering taxi drivers who were waving cigarettes and talking at each other. “Walk to Chora? Perpato?”

The drivers fell about laughing, not in a nasty way, so the couple climbed into the front cab. Michael sat in the front seat while Joanne wound down the back window and let the searing wind turn her skin as dry as the stone fields and rocky slopes they passed. Through clefts in the bleached, forsaken landscape she caught glimpses of the Aegean—mint, turquoise, azure.

The daylight was closing when they arrived at the Square of the Eternal Poets which meant the supermarket was just opening for the evening. He left her there to choose between the wilting okra, shrivelled cucumbers and succulent tomatoes in rough-sawn wooden boxes on the floor and returned to her biting into her second tomato under a broken, neglected tree on the edge of the square.

Michael was energised and excited about the authentic Skyrian house he had rented and over described the unique mezzanine bedroom. But Joanne’s interest had slowly slid since Skopoles. Skopelos was where she had wanted it to end but he wanted to do “all the Sporades,” so here they were, further out to sea, on a lump of rock where she couldn’t give a damn about traditional architecture. She followed him to a small door in the mountain, nearly a kilometre south of the square. She kept her eyes down most of the way because of the uneven stone path and ate two more tomatoes as she walked.

It took a few sleeps to get used to the ceiling being so close to the bed. She couldn’t understand why an island that was entirely uninhabited further south needed to employ such space-saving designs, causing everyone to live on top of each other.
“The cliffs are so steep they need to build into the mountain,” he explained.
“Look at Santorini,” she argued. “They have normal size rooms and they’re on a crater’s edge.”

She spent the first days on the balcony looking out over the Aegean. Below them lived the owners, Fortini and George. She often spied George making his way down his steep steps to his concrete slab way below, his donkey dozing at the fence, waiting for tidbits of bread. From her balcony seat, Joanne heard Fortini’s cooking clamour in the kitchen below; whenever George was not around, she leaned over the railing and inhaled the oily, heady scents wafting from the open shutters below.

Michael read the history of the island aloud over their lunch of goat’s fetta, olives, okra and bread. Joanne tried to be interested but couldn’t care less that Thetis, goddess mother of Achilles had hid her son on Skyros to avoid him taking part in the Trojan War, or that the island had survived the successive occupations: Athenians, Romans, Venetians, Turks, Russians. She fixed her gaze on the higgledy-piggledy roofs snuggling below the cliff and breathed in the scent of slow-cooked garlic, onion and herbs, imagining the face and hair and hands of the invisible cook.

“Come for a walk down to the beach. It’s beautiful,” Michael pleaded.

Once on the sand, they were exposed to the afternoon wind and strode the length of the beach with little talk. Just before the ascent back, Joanne paused to let the great archipelago deliver its little laps at her feet, knowing she would not make the trek down again. By the time they made it back to the pension, there was little light left in the sky. They found George sitting in the half dark on a stool, the only furniture on his crumbling concrete slab, looking out over the majestic cove.

“Moon. Beautiful.” Michael smiled at George and pointed to the moonrise at the horizon.

“Nai.” George nodded.
“Alonissos that way?”
“Nai, Alonissos.”

“Ah, I thought so. You live on Skyros since little boy?” Michael waved his hand at his thigh, indicating the height of a child.


Joanne stood by, smiling, silent. George made motions to join him and, without waiting for a response, trotted to the back steps of his house to bellow in Greek to Fortini. She soon descended the stairs with a big smile, a small carafe of ouzo, ice,
baklava and a glass. Joanne flashed Michael a dark look over the gender segregation but Fortini grabbed her arm and guided her to the stairs. The big lady went ahead, chatting and puffing as she climbed the stairs like a mountain goat, her large behind swinging in Joanne’s face as she ascended.

“We let the men talk and talk. You come and sit, yes?”

At the top of the stairs she stopped abruptly, turned and yelled back to George. Joanne tumbled into Fortini’s enormous breasts and stomach but the big lady caught her in a bear hug and held onto her while yelling down to George. The Greek words blasted into Joanne’s face and she smelt wafts of cinnamon, citrus and lemon in the dark-blue dress.

Michael was all attentive, smiling vacantly up at Joanne and Fortini. George looked out to sea while Fortini kept bellowing her Greek as she threw open the door and thrust Joanne into the kitchen.

The cook headed straight for her stove and briki, chatting constantly. Placing a demitasse of coffee for Joanne on the wooden table, she returned to her culinary task. Long strips of filo pastry stretched away from her as she folded them into a perfect triangle pocket:

Her hands glistened with oil and the flesh of her upper arms jiggled as she folded. The air was heavy with the smell of olive oil, coffee and decades of cooking.

“You wrap tight.” Joanne pointed to the triangles.

“You make Spanakopedes?” Fortini looked at her with excited eyes.

“My husband. He makes it.”

The big woman exploded with mock-shock; then, tutting, she spread a strip of filo in front of Joanne and a dollop of filling at the bottom. Just before the cooking lesson began, Fortini upended her tenant’s now empty demitasse.

“See here, a woman, tall. She carries something, maybe a pot.” Joanne watched
Fortini’s large fingers and smooth unvarnished nails follow a ribbon of grains down the side of her cup.

“My mother?” Joanne asked.

“Not your mother, maybe your aunt. Your mother has a sister, yes? Now I see a boy, two boys. See, here. You think you will have a boy?”

Near the end of the *kafemandeia*, Fortini had forecast Joanne’s family plans and gathered much information about her past as well.

“Your English is so good, Fortini,” Joanne said. “Where did you learn?”

“Aha! You will never believe it. I live in *Ostralea* when I a little girl.”

“Australia. When? Where?”

“When I was nine, we move to Sydney. My father, my mother they wanted to live there but . . . ah, things happen . . . we come back to *Athena*.”

“How long were you in Australia?”

“Oh, nearly ten maybe years. I love it. Botany. We live at Botany. Yes, darling. Now, your coffee reading . . . I see something about your work. I call George in now. You come back next time, we do the coffee again. Something there about your work. Maybe a change coming. We do it again and see.” And off she went to bellow and beckon her husband from the top of the steps.

One or two times a week, the two couples separated along gender lines, Joanne joining the big lady in her small island home, her thunderous laugh exploding in the tiny room.

“Botany,” she bellowed. “We would get a boat, down at the end, you know, where the river comes in and we go up the river, up, up to fish. The men, they’d fish. My mother, my cousins, we go into the forest, wild mushrooms, wild greens. We pick them. Delicious.”

“What a great picnic,” Joanne said.

“Picnic?” Fortini was mock-haughty. “You Ossies. Picnics! We go back home, table, tablecloth, cook fish, eat, siesta. We’re not peasants! Picnics, ah!”

“Where were these wild mushrooms?”

“In the forest, I say. Right there, you get out of the boat. You live there, you don’t know?” Joanne smiled at Fortini’s operatic, maternal disgust with her. “What you call it, the bush? You should go there. My sister, she goes there still.”

“Your sister?”

“*Nai.* My sister. She lives there. Don’t look at me like that. She lives in Botany.
Anyway, I don’t talk to her, she doesn’t talk to me. That’s how it is. We all came back—my mother, my father, my other sister. But, Despina, she stay. Her husband was the only one who made it as new Ossie: money, house, big front door, the pool . . . all the others, aah, hated it, like George. George, he hate Sydney. We come back.” Joanne tried to capture any sadness or regret but Fortini looked straight back at her with sharp brown eyes surrounded by a heavy face.

“But you were only a teenager when you left? How did you know George then?”

“I came, I went, I came, I went. It’s a long story. Now, the kafemandeia.” And she turned over the demitasse to reveal a new pattern of grains. It was her kitchen; it was her narrative.

“Look here, see, the ladder. A ladder going up.” Joanne looked and only saw a cup that needed washing. “A good change. The boss, he likes you. When you go back, good things will come.” Joanne thought back to work and how far away it was from tonight’s lesson: egg and lemon soup.

After delivering bread and olive oil to the men downstairs, Fortini returned to show Joanne how to stop the eggs from curdling when added to the hot stock.

“Stock to the eggs,” she decreed. “Always stock to the eggs, not other way. And a little, little, not all quick, quick. That is it, is right now, slower now, that way, better. Then, now, away from the stove and more, little more stock. Mikros, mikros like this and keep beating. Tarasso. You see. Tarasso, keep stirring. Don’t stop. You say your prayer, you stir and stir and now breathe and you give out love. Breathe in the food, breathe out all the love. And look, the eggs have blended and disappeared. Good girl.”

Joanne imparted to Michael the kitchen wisdom she learnt. After they climbed the ladder to their mezzanine bed and lay close to their ceiling, she told him about stirring eggs, twice baked meat, kneading pastry, olive oils, marinating fish, tenderising squid and collecting wild greens. When she slept she was a spirit flying after Fortini, up over the bald rubble mountain, the air warm and scented with nutmeg. She chased Fortini’s laugh, always ahead of them racing out across the Aegean. The tiny woman from the tiny kitchen laughed like she lived in a house of many rooms, her voice carrying centuries of the rhythms of storytelling despite hours and days and years spent in a kitchen on an island.

“D’you know the writer Rupert Brooke?” Michael asked, after they had been on the island a month.

“Oh, right. He’s buried here.”

“What?” she turned from the sink where she had been trying to revive lettuce leaves under poor water pressure.

“Says in the guidebook that his boat was anchored here during the war. I’d have to read more to tell you.”

But she didn’t want him to be the expert this time. She deflected him to lunch and, later, during siesta, she stayed awake reading the story of Frances Cornford’s ‘young Apollo’ who had succumbed to high temperatures and a Diplococcyx infection while moored off the island. Only the Saturday before, Brooke had received the letter and the article from *The Times* describing how the Dean of St Paul’s had read “The Soldier” on Easter Sunday. Recognition had finally arrived.

By Tuesday he was bedridden, by Friday dead. Officers arranged for his grave to be dug in an olive grove on Skyros and twelve Australian officers carried the coffin onshore for burial. The next morning, the troopship sailed away for Gallipoli.

When Michael awoke, the bag was packed with pita bread and shavings of last night’s lamb. Their mopeds had only forward and backward gear-shifts and there was a wind whipping up from the south but they drove off into the hot afternoon, in search of the poet’s grave.

The guidebook advised them to ignore the military signs along the road as the restricted zone was well after the grave. A rattling few kilometres out of Skyros town, Joanne directed them left towards the village of Kalamitsa, the southernmost town on the island. Once through the village, the road rose through wild, desolate mountains above monstrous currents sweeping the archipelago, played out below them as dark, mammoth shades.

A bee fell in Michael’s boot and caused him to leap from the moped like a man possessed, the machine teetering driverless for a few more metres. She laughed wildly at the view she had from the rear. Then the winds coming down from the mountain were so strong that they could only manage a top speed of twenty. The constant drone of the moped and the wind’s roar made Joanne’s ears sore.

They arrived at the grave above Tris Boukes Bay, a sheltered location below an olive grove. They read the inscription on the grave and “The Soldier,” carved into the headstone. Then they looked east towards Gallipoli, out across the Aegean and contemplated Brooke’s pallbearers—ANZACS who had dug the poet’s grave. They
wondered how many of his bearers lay in graves themselves, out there beyond the horizon.

Back at home, the map across her lap, Michael over there, hard to hear, Joanne takes a long view of their arguments and happiness and wonders, as Cornford did of Brooke, if they, too, are “unprepared for the long littleness of life.”

“Ah, loukoumades.” Fortini smiled when Joanne announced the last recipe she wanted to learn before heading home. “My mother make them when we lived in Ostralea. Special occasions of course. My baby brother, Dimitri, he love them too. We give them to him every birthday.”

“Does he live in Athens too, now?”

“He died, darling. The big Pacific Ocean take him away.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Fortini.”

“He beautiful boy. Beautiful.” Tears were instantly in her eyes. “We go Bronte beach. Sit under the trees. All the family, everyone. We have food, the little ones play. They find him later, just there, face down, just some clothes floating in the water. Only it was his clothes. And he in them.” She wiped tracks of tears from her cheeks with a large, flat hand and continued slicing the fetta.

“Is this why your family came back to Greece?” Joanne asked quietly.

“We come back to Athena for my wedding. My mother always say they find husband for me when I turn sixteen but when little Dimitri die, they say to me, ‘we all go now and get your husband.’ So back to Athena we go. I marry George. My parents stay in Athena, George and I go back to Australia.”

“So how old were you?”

“I have my son when I was sixteen, at Crown St Women’s Hospital. You remember it? You know, on the corner there, Crown St and what is the name of the other one?”

“But you were underage, Fortini. Did anyone say anything?”

“The nurses, they were very kind to me. But I have my daughter back here on Skyros. George and I only in Australia one year. He hate it. Oh, he hate it. Ha ha! I have no family while we are there, oh, well, my sister, but in the end, she and me, we not

1 From “Youth,” poems (1910) by Frances Cornford.
talk. She get the clothes, the big pool, she have the little hips, the big ‘bazukas’. Ha! She get the implants! But George say he want to go back, so we come back, here, to Skyros. Better to be here on this island than with him all big and sad on big Australia island.”

“Did your parents arrange husbands for all your sisters?”

“My oldest sister, she lucky, she fall in love first. Well, that what she say. My other sister, up north, in Volos, she not lucky. He drink, drink, spend the money. But George, he is a good man. You can be lucky, unlucky. George, he is a good man.”

Joanne learnt how to cook loukoumades on her last day on Skyros. Fortini served a lunch of local foods: creamy mizithra cheese and marmarita—pumpkin and cheese pie. Joanne crushed the yellow beans and dill to produce the fava and they all dined under the grapevine that shaded the concrete slab, husbands and wives together for the first time. After lunch, Fortini and Joanne climbed the stairs to drop spoonfuls of dough into hot oil and watch the loukamades turn golden and puffy. The honey was from beehives in the shadow of Mount Olympus, the tallest peak on the island, and when mixed with cinnamon it became a wildflower syrup that glistened in the sun.

Joanne felt disoriented watching Fortini eat and relax in the yard, interrogating Michael with the same questions she had delivered to Joanne, while George talked intense, quiet Greek with his friend from the port office. Occasionally, Fortini broke off her questioning to interject loud Greek into their conversation. They ignored her. She didn’t care.

At the end of the meal George brought out the retsina and three glasses, for the men only. Michael and Joanne started to help Fortini clear away but George shoved a glass of retsina into Michael’s hand and commanded him to sit.

As Joanne climbed the stairs after the cook, she glanced down at the men sipping the homemade wine. She thought of the first night of ouzo when she had also been excluded and contemplated the person she had been when she first arrived on this scraggy, lump of an island. As she entered the kitchen, carrying plates and glasses, Fortini was humming a quiet, soulful tune.

There is another staccato, white noise phone call from Serifos, Michael and Joanne tripping over each other’s words trying to hint at new beginnings.

“It’s nothing like the guidebook says.” Michael’s shout is small and distant. “Yesterday I caught the ferry over to Sifnos and I think that was better. But maybe it’s
not right. Maybe the whole country is not the place to be.” He laughs a free, light laugh. “I’ll explain when I see you. I’ve had lots of time to think.”

“Me too . . . .” the line goes dead.

On the day of his return, Joanne stands before her bookshelves pushing her recipe books one by one along the shelf, peeking between for a bundle of loose leaf papers. She finds them pushed to the back, stained and crumpled, but still legible. When she finds the page she is seeking, her fingers trace its torn top edge and she remembers tearing it quickly from the pad while Fortini raced ahead with her instructions. The recipe’s title is crossed out twice but Joanne’s hand traces the final, correct version. She sounds it out aloud and, suddenly, Fortini’s booming voice is enunciating each syllable: Kour-a-bi-eth-es.

“Like this, darling. Watch my lips. Koo-ra-bee-YEH-thess. YEH not YEAHZ. Oh my saints, you lazy tongue!”

As Joanne’s eyes scan her own scribbled writing, she sees Fortini’s hands lifting the crumbled mixture and letting it scatter back into the bowl, a rhythm perfected over many winters preparing traditional Christmas food. Then her fingers curve the dough into the traditional crescent shape and, after baking, her large, smooth hands sprinkle the icing sugar across the warm, golden biscuits. As Joanne slides her own kourabiethes out of her oven the smell fills the house, a smell of friendship, of happiness, of loud love and bold care. Carefully, she lifts each crescent shape onto the cooling tray and wonders where she and Michael will eat them tonight—at the airport café over long black coffees? In the car watching the jumbos take off? Or during the drive back home, the crumbs falling into their laps.

She needs a sieve to sprinkle the icing sugar as evenly as Fortini. The street lights come on outside and her reflection appears in the windows. While she combs her hair in the bedroom, the box of dusted goods sits on the kitchen bench, waiting to accompany her to the airport. Just before turning off the lights, she tries one. It crumbles into her mouth and she waits for the taste beyond the dusty, sugar coating. Slowly the citrus flavour emerges and, behind it, the cinnamon and almond. She probably should have crushed the nuts more, but the orange peel has blended perfectly. For once, in her imagining, Fortini is silent. The big woman, in her kitchen on a stony, windswept island is sending a big, bountiful smile.

Joanne squeezes through families waiting for loved ones and private drivers with
placards announcing the names of their arriving customers. She is jostled amongst flamboyant hugs, excited children, tears, backslaps and handshakes.

Suddenly Michael appears, making his solo way down the ramp. Joanne is way back in the crowd and realises she will have to push through quickly to reach him, to show him she is there.

But, in that moment, she pauses and watches him make his way around the tarrying crowd, alone. He looks worn and airplane-rumpled. Yet behind the flight tiredness, in the way he moves, she sees some restfulness, a harmony she wants to share.

She steps forward, around trolleys, bags and reuniting families, into their future.
The Exegesis

Part I – Australian Suburban Fiction

Inside and Outside 102
Domestic Stories and Tales of Suburbia 103
Writers Who Looked Outside: White and Johnston 108
Domestic Diversity and the Writers Who Looked Within 117

Part II – Food in Fiction

The Kitchen 130
Who Serves?
   The Female Provider 131
   Culinary Trends 135
Food as Escape 138
Food and Togetherness 142
Works Cited 152
Part I

Inside and Outside

*A Taste of Dreams* explores suburban characters’ reactions to common but significant life events such as illness, death, loss, dementia, marital failure and infidelity. These experiences still carry a sense of disgrace or awkwardness in today’s society and discomfort over these traumas often thwart people from dealing with them effectively. Many of the characters in *A Taste of Dreams* struggle to come to terms with their situations and this is depicted through their thoughts, conversations and actions. The conversations, usually with family members within the home, are often strained as the individuals try to navigate through their dilemmas, managing inner turmoil and outward behaviour.

Outside the home, in the public realm of the suburb or town, the characters present different behaviours—they may ignore their problems, avoid or deny them, despite attention or empathy from friends and neighbours. This conflict—between private and public behaviour, inner thought and conduct—is an appealing and popular notion for writers. It is especially useful for the short story as the pressure of this conflict builds towards a climax in which the protagonist reacts with resignation or harms others or experiences an epiphany.

The short story is an excellent genre to explore domestic drama. Judah Waten and Stephen Murray-Smith maintain that the Australian short story, with its singularity of setting or plot, has been concerned “principally with revealing human behaviour in quite ordinary situations” (ix). These ordinary situations are the regular domestic routines and rituals which organise and schedule time and place. The human behaviours revealed may include common life events such as illness, death, marital stress, ageing and the emotional reactions of sorrow, anger and grief. These events, experienced by characters amidst daily, domestic routines provide the short story writer with compelling themes.

For the reader to see the pressure and tension in characters’ lives we need to get “behind the front fence, past the tidiness of the front garden and into the secrecies of the house” (Oakley 9). Most of the action in *A Taste of Dreams* takes place in the domestic milieu because the home is the private setting, integral to the tension, where the reactions to the acute or chronic life events are more likely to be expressed. In Marion
Halligan’s “Belladonna Gardens,” the protagonist watches his neighbour become weighed down as she tells her life story inside her house on the edge of Canberra: “Frank saw the little box closing round her. The grim beige room was almost defeating her but then she straightened and her spirit flashed out again and the shabby walls fell back” (23). The setting adds a physical, tangible dimension to this woman’s stress making the strain and pressure “all the more powerful because of their confinement within four walls” (Oakley 9).

In *A Taste of Dreams* I aim to present the struggle between private thought and public behaviour and the tension between characters in the domestic situation, aggravated by the confinement of the internal setting and the realities of the world outside.

**Domestic Stories and Tales of Suburbia**

Australian artists and writers largely ignored suburban life as a theme for their art until the 1950s when the spotlight turned from the bush to the suburbs on the city fringes—“a middle landscape . . . a place that is forever in between” (Healy xvii). However, it is important to remember, as Chris McAuliffe explains, the majority of Australians have always lived in the suburbs: in 1881, over half the population; in 1921 this rose to 62%; in 1954 to 79%; and since the 1990s approximately 85% (43). This exegesis concentrates on suburban fiction from the negative representation in the 1950s to the acceptance of the suburbs as a legitimate place in writing today.

In nineteenth-century Australia, when the bush loomed large and exotic to those living in the crowded, coastal cities, tragedies and hard-luck stories from the outback were enticing fodder for literature. The inhospitable bush was a formidable character for the pioneer to conquer, providing writers and artists, in Murray Bail’s opinion, “an immediate aura of sorrow to an otherwise ordinary incident” (xiii).

During the decades when the outback/bush was idealised and, more significantly, regarded as the ‘real’ Australia, the suburbs were often seen as the dull place. Once the bush lost this charm and the post-war housing boom was underway, “the silence that Australian [artists] had imposed on the suburbs had become increasingly untenable” (Sowden 79). Criticism turned fully on the suburb, deriding and satirising it well into the 1960s: George Johnston saw opacity, Patrick White saw the great Australian emptiness and Barry Humphries saw a larger-than-life housewife with
purple hair, a weak/absent husband and a suspicion of ethnic minorities. Just as rural folk had been portrayed as stereotypical products of the bush and outback—tough, resilient loners—suburbanites were considered to be fully conditioned by their landscape; if the street was homogeneous, conservative and banal, then the residents must be too. However, such criticisms did reveal Australia to its inhabitants, encouraging them to reflect on the way the majority lived. As Bernard Smith explains, few writers and artists had done this before the 1950s, despite the fact many were born and reared in the suburbs. The suburb was their environmental reality but few, if any, chose to depict, describe or reflect on it (87).

Post-war 1950s saw Australia’s second largest land boom, the beginnings of mass media and consumerism that propelled Australia onto the global stage. Urban observers, such as Fiona Allon, explain how words like “suburb,” “suburban” and “suburbia” described an architecture of regulation, “a kind of blueprint for . . . an ideal way of life” (45). Roger Webster distinguishes between suburb and ‘suburbia’, the latter referring to a cultural or social zone, an ‘other’ zone (2). Garry Kinnane takes this further by differentiating between the suburb as a place where people live and suburbia as “a generalised place in the imagination, rather than an actual geographical space” (18.4-42). Australian post-war families, pursuing a life in the new housing areas on the edges of the cities, saw the promised lifestyle as an escape from the awfulness of the outside world. Yet these new suburbs were not seen this way by most artists and writers who were negative and scathing of the homogeneous architecture, the uniform streetscapes and, ultimately, the residents themselves who, they believed, possessed a “state of mind associated with living at that site” (McAuliffe 58).

David Nichols describes artists’ view of the suburb as the “same beige graveyard of the imagination” (67.3 31). Many Australian writers and commentators raised in the suburbs (Johnston, Humphries, James, Greer, Malouf) fled to urban or rural places: Balmain, inner city Melbourne, London, Tuscany and the Greek Islands. Suburbia came to be seen as a life-sentence that one must escape from and, viewed from afar, as a “morass of indistinguishable places” (Nichols 67.3 31).

The suburbs of 1950s Australia were settled by young married couples, many of the husbands having returned from the war. Most of these new parents had also lived their childhood through the Depression and it is this history (economic downturn followed by war) that largely contributed to them desiring a safe, spacious and secure environment for their families. These new zones were away from the crowds and noise
of the cities that the returned soldiers must have found hard to bear. The suburban home became the source of security and status (shown by the statistics of those who took up this lifestyle—80% by the end of the 1950s) and was at times seen as a right for which returned soldiers had fought. With the possibility of home ownership, unheard of for most families prior to this period, interior accessories and the car became additional parts of the package. By the end of the 1950s, Australia became a leading car-owning nation and consumerism was born.

The design of the suburbs and the accessorising of homes offended intellectuals. They viewed the streetscapes as “inauthentic” (neither rural nor city) and the surge in consumerism as empty. The critics viewed suburban planning as unimaginative and believed the environment “signified ugly moral choices” (Siegel Wall Street Dec. 2008). They felt the inhabitants were indistinguishable from their streetscape and their lives were ruled by material pursuits. This universal attack was mounted by writers, artists and intellectuals as the majority of Australia were now pursuing a dream of home ownership that followed a specific pattern of development: single-family, detached houses in a geographic subdivision on the outskirts of the city. It is this physically recognisable space that caused post-war writers and intellectuals to be “lit up from within by their shared opposition to a single place” (Siegel Wall Street Dec. 2008). The suburban, built environment gave artists a physical, tangible, brick-and-mortar landscape to vent their opposition to consumerism, material choice and a lifestyle that they perceived to be uniform and mundane.

The significant concern for Australian society came when the anti-suburbanites claimed that the lifestyle was adversely influencing, possibly threatening, Australian identity. Such writers portrayed suburban characters and streets crafted to fit a grand narrative of banality and spiritual suffocation. Paradoxically, this was where the majority of Australians lived; hence, the implication was that ordinariness and homogeneity was quintessentially Australian. The artists decried where and how the majority lived, yet, through their stereotypes and summary depictions of the lifestyle, they implied that Australian identity was an extension of home ownership. Well-educated, young intellectuals saw only the post-war prosperity, without connecting it to the previous Depression and two world wars which the new homeowners had experienced. They saw only the housing boom and ignored what life was like prior to the war. James Patterson writes:
Those who lambasted suburbia . . . tended to ignore several basic facts: the boom in building energized important sectors of the economy, providing a good deal of employment; it lessened the housing shortage that had diminished the lives of millions during the Depression and war; and it enabled people to enjoy conveniences, such as modern bathrooms and kitchens, that they had not before. (340)

Prior to the war, writers had depicted the bush as a place of extremes—as a wasteland or a wilderness, passively resistant or actively destructive—but when they turned to the residential districts, they flattened the suburb into what Andrew McCann calls “a two dimensionality” (56). It was not only residents’ pursuit of a normal, regular life that affronted critics but, as McCann explains, the intellectuals objected to the everyday itself: domesticity, routine and regularity (vii).

Despite there being various types of suburbs in existence since 1900—garden, coastal, inner city and outer fringe—intellectuals focused their attack on the new suburbs of the post-war boom and generalised that all suburban life exerted a negative influence on the inhabitants or, at the very least, created an alienating sameness that only worsened an individual’s dilemma. The comfort, space, and calm of a suburban life was seen as deadly. Middle-Australian, domestic life was a place that emphasised public façade over private issues, a built environment that fostered, then buried, any feelings of personal isolation, social withdrawal, family tension and dysfunction beneath an outward appearance of conformity and aspiration.

In 1976, Bernard Smith published Antipodean Manifesto, questioning the view of the suburbs held by artists. He outlines the problems that resulted from typecasting this built environment: that it created a “false consciousness about what it is to be an Australian” (87) and that if one’s character is influenced by one’s environment then to understand our surroundings is to know more about oneself (94). Literature and art should move beyond typecasting and explore the complexities and variation within the suburbs (where the majority lives), and, in doing so, can contribute much to our understanding of the Australian lifestyle, our culture and identity. To present typecast views of inhabitants of the suburbs is to contribute to the alleged stereotypical image.

A Taste of Dreams is a collection of stories set largely in middle-Australia but it is not the imagined dystopia of the anti-suburban tradition. Some of the characters are isolated and socially withdrawn, some conservative and others driven by consumerism
and status. But within the homes we see a variety of reactions to life’s problems; there are some who work hard at building close relationships and friendships or react to life’s problems with anger and resentment. A Taste of Dreams reflects a diverse, contemporary suburbia—multicultural, multi-use, less uniform and homogeneous than earlier versions of suburbia. Kinnane describes the reality of the suburbs when he declares: “there is as much suffering and happiness, as much crime and passion, as much art and industry going on in the suburbs as anywhere else, except that it is often beneath the surface or behind the deceptive facades of tranquil streets and respectable houses” (18.4-45). My short story collection aims to present this reality of emotional life events beyond the everyday façade: Paul Green’s marital unease behind an apparently conventional home, the problems in Dollar Bill’s life as he confuses idealism with reality or the family stress and tension between Rose Blake and her sons despite her façade of status and control. Throughout these domestic dilemmas and discords, the daily routines continue. Cooking and the provision of regular meals is an example of an everyday task that gives the appearance of a quotidian routine despite crises and other emotional events.

Australian suburbs were established in various locations but the architecture was generally uniform: separate dwellings with backyards along streets that radiated from a small business centre. Today, however, modern demographics are so varied that architects and planners have responded with a range of home designs and town plans. Households now contain young, professional singles; active, busy seniors; empty nesters; and the new suburban household—the “nonfamily.” Couple-only households comprise 37% of the population and the 1950s post-war family—married couples with dependent children—is only a third of all family types¹. And in response to these various demographics, the physicality of the modern suburb has changed. There is now a greater mix of land use and primary employment centres are found within residential districts. The new suburbia is a diverse, urban-style community.

With this greater diversity in household demographics, architecture and streetscapes, it is all the more imperative that creative artists reflect this. Kinnane puts the challenge succinctly when he says: “Suburbia is not a desert but a rich field of opportunities for narrative, character, drama and action. It is up to our writers to see them” (54).

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006 Census of Population and Housing
Paintings by Howard Arkley present a mixed view of suburbia and his biographer, John Gregory, states that Arkley painted a “celebration of suburbia’s decorative foibles and appalled fascination with them” (185). *A Taste of Dreams* aims to present Australian suburbs in a similar way—without judgement or satire, possibly with affection, while acknowledging the loneliness and isolation in the suburban, domestic setting, felt all the more when crises occur. Readers are exposed to the private thoughts of the characters and their varied responses to life’s problems, hopefully giving their humanity more depth and lessening the status of otherness. This otherness consistently puts suburbia out of reach, encourages caricature and makes Nichols’ claim all the more poignant: “perhaps suburbia’s greatest misfortune was that it was given a name” (31). Webster observes that suburbia “occupies a space as much defined by what it is not as by what it is, constructed by difference and imitation rather than possessing innate and original features” (2). *A Taste of Dreams* is a collection of domestic stories that recognises and acknowledges this and aims to focus on the difference and diversity within the dailiness of suburban living.

**Writers Who Looked Outside: White and Johnston**

The importance in examining key anti-suburban literature of the second half of the twentieth century is to recognise that “it was symbols developed by artists that sustained the image of the suburbs as a cultural and existential wasteland” (McAuliffe 15). In literature, the key anti-suburban writers were Patrick White and George Johnston who presented the suburbs as a world of entrapment and spiritual suffocation. White’s play, “Season at Sarsaparilla,” subtitled ‘A Charade of Suburbia in Two Acts,’ encapsulated White’s view of 1950s suburbia: empty, lonely, repressed and banal.

In examining “Season at Sarsaparilla,” Peter Pierce notes that Julia Sheen’s suicide, following her discovery that she is pregnant to her married lover, is soon forgotten by the neighbours “in order for the proprieties and priorities of Sarsaparilla to be maintained” (108). By including this and other domestic ordeals in the play (infidelity, infertility), White is showing us that significant events occur in the suburbs but points his finger at the suburban way of life as pressuring residents to ignore, forget and deny distressing experiences. Mr Erbage, father of Julia’s unborn child, refuses to accept any responsibility even after her suicide when he says: “it don’t seem fair if a little bit of pleasure goes wrong” (*Four Plays* 170). His position on council could be
threatened, should this private matter be revealed, but Roy Child reassures him: “Don’t worry, Mr Erbage. We are not the kind that suffer. That’s our trouble” (171). Mr Erbage is preoccupied with status while ultra-conservative Girlie Pogson is a classic suburbanite motivated by conformity. Her daughter, Pippy, constantly threatens the status quo with her questions, however, she is a lone voice of dissent in the play as the main theme is the exposure of the limited suburban sensibilities that drive most of the characters.

White, with his partner Manoli, farmed six acres at Castle Hill throughout the 1950s and modelled Sarsaparilla on this region north of Sydney. Castle Hill was semi-rural in the 1950s but by the 1980s had the outward appearance of the key criticisms that are levelled at suburbia: conservative and homogeneous. Indeed, White states: “In 1964, submerged by the suburbs reaching farther into the country, we left Castle Hill, and moved into the centre of the city” (Nobel Lectures 94).

Just two years after White left this region, I was born ten kilometres away in one of the very suburbs he blames for ‘submerging’ the hobby farms of Castle Hill. White lived in London, rural New South Wales, semi-rural Castle Hill and inner city Sydney but not in the suburbia he satirised.

The ‘Sarsaparilla’ of my upbringing, in the seat of Bennelong (John Howard’s electorate from 1974 to 2007) had all the apparent ingredients of prescribed, middle-class, nuclear families, later lampooned by the arts for its apparent sameness: Christian, heterosexual, white Australian and conservative. David Marr suggests John Howard might be from the Pogsons of Sarsaparilla and that Howard “appealed to something in Australians that White knew, feared and fought all his life: our yearning for small comfort and respectability” (The Monthly April, 2008). Both Howard and White presented their grand, broad views of Australian society, opposing ideologies which contribute to the development of this nation’s identity. In A Taste of Dreams, characters at times opt for external status and ideals to avoid their problems but I have tried to look at the detail of individual lives, the variance and range within Australian households, avoiding generalised views of Australian life and the suburbs.

As a teenager, I was bored like Pippy Pogson and, like her, was reprimanded for using words inappropriate for a “nice girl.” These reprimands carried an element of middle-class, cultural control but swathes of rural, inner city and beachside teenage girls were likely given the same message at the same time.

My parents were hard working public servants who sent us to Sunday School
and the usual hobbies for suburban children: ballet, tennis, piano. Our grandparents lived in nearby suburbs and we visited them on weekends. My mother was critical of the messy house next door and occasionally spied on the neighbours on the other side. My father left school at age eleven and worked in a bank for the next forty-nine years. At the end of his working life he totalled the kilometres he had commuted between our outer Sydney suburb and the CBD and calculated he had circumnavigated the globe one and half times. He ended his retirement speech with the exact maths to prove this and the statement: “I may not have gone up the tree far, but I’ve certainly gone around it a considerable number of times.”

Although our family appeared typical of white, middle-class Australian suburbia, I do not see my parents as a pair of Pogsons. And our apparently uniform neighbourhood housed very different families—heavy drinkers and wowser Protestants, a builder who eventually became a wealthy developer in Queensland, an organist from Austria and one of Australia’s founding rock artists (his house frequently filled with major Australian rock celebrities).

In our peaceful, foliaged neighbourhood, I followed the significant life events and reactions to them: the man across the road who accidentally drove over (and killed) his toddler in the driveway; the suicide (by carbon dioxide in the garage) of a classmate’s mother; domestic violence next door; ‘Christmas’ in the home of my Jewish friend down the hill, then his coming out, as a young, gay man; and the grip of alcoholism on the man and woman three doors down and its impact on their daughter, especially after her mother died of a brain aneurism. “She was dead drunk, of course. Fell and hit her head. That’s what killed her,” my mother said.

My mother was prone to such conclusive judgements, like Nola Boyle and Girlie Pogson, but I believe her blunt summations of life came more from her own style of parenting than the built environment around her. My mother was raised west of the Great Divide, in desolate, dusty Moree and did not enter White’s suburbia until she was thirty.

Since leaving the suburbs, I have lived in the inner city, beachside and in rural New South Wales and conclude there is more universality than difference in human experience of and reaction to life crises. Life’s complexity is in every family, regardless of where they live, and sorrow, pain, grief and anger are normal, albeit uncomfortable, feelings. It is not a peculiarly suburban trait to ignore, deny or try to escape from problems as the people of Mildred Street in Sarsaparilla. Wherever they live, people
wear masks in public and at home. Families on farms, in fishing communities or in the inner city do not commonly discuss serious events outside the home. There is always an element of public persona during times of stress and suffering that is universal to Australians, indeed, to humans. In writing domestic stories, some of which are set in suburbs similar to the conservative, Castle Hill region of Sydney, I acknowledge the effect of the built environment but do not see it as a controlling factor.

The suburbia of White’s Sarsaparilla was partly born from Menzies’ 1942 Forgotten People speech, including his belief that “one of the best instincts in us is that which induces us to have one little piece of earth with a house and garden which is ours; to which we can withdraw, in which we can be amongst our friends, into which no stranger can come against our will” (Menzies).

The “forgotten people” of his speech became the post-war middle-class who pursued home ownership, categorized by Menzies as homes material, homes human, and homes spiritual. “Season at Sarsaparilla” is the drama of three families who sacrifice the third for the first and this is how Australians and Australian identity seemed to the artists of the 1950s and 60s.

Rose Blake, in my story “Beauty Point,” is a 1950s Sarsaparilla suburbanite with her narrow view of the world and her criticism of anyone who breaks the unwritten rules of civilised conduct. She rails against her sons’ different lifestyles, is judgmental of neighbours; she is a snob like Girlie Pogson, sees life simplistically and is bitter about her past. While we may have sympathy for the losses in her life—daughter and husband—and understand her anxiety about her impending move to a retirement village we also know that, like Girlie Pogson, she “wears all the marks of anxiety and a respectable social level” (*Four Plays* 79). Rose Blake, John and Joan, from “Three Pots Red,” are representatives of Menzies’ Forgotten People who raised children in the post-war boom on quarter-acre blocks in new, outer suburbs, a positive improvement over the housing conditions during the Depression and the war.

But *A Taste of Dreams* features more than “homes material” aspirants. In “Mezzaluna,” Vaughn and his mother suffer a loss but try to face their grief, occasionally trying to escape it but never dismissing it. In contrast to the inhabitants of Sarsaparilla, Vaughn and his mother do not try to continue life-as-normal. They react naturally to the sudden illness of the father—food runs out in the fridge, housework is neglected, Mum grows absent-minded and Vaughn has episodes of anger. Similarly, Paul Green, who lives in a traditional, foliaged, well-ordered suburb, appears to play the
role of a conforming suburbanite—unable to discuss his personal problems with his neighbour or family, overly happy in order to cheer others up, avoiding the anger of his family. Yet, he is worried and sad about his family life, struggles to resolve the issues and eventually collapses. While the crime he commits at the end is extreme, he has struggled throughout to try to understand his situation.

Since the 1960s, writers have produced a range of more nuanced, complex, sensitive works about the Australian suburbs but “Season at Sarsaparilla” continues to be played in theatres today. While it is a significant twentieth-century literary work it is worrying when a recent performance of the play is reviewed thus:

[White] would be appalled but probably not surprised to see how contemporary his lives lived in endless “variations on monotony” appear to audiences in 2007. The only obvious variation is the size of the glorious homes: if written today the modest brick home would be an obese Macmansion with terrazzo in place of lino and ducted aircon instead of endless sighing over the summer heat. That aside, you could move straight in and not notice the difference (Simmonds).

The derision of suburbia continues wholeheartedly in popular media—in films such as *Muriel’s Wedding*, *The Castle* and on TV in serials such as *Kath and Kim*. While these employ humorous satire, and film or television is the usual medium for portraying suburbia, we must balance the scale with works that do not reduce the suburbs to parody and simplified lives lest viewers believe that such sitcoms “provide evidence of prevailing ideas and attitudes” (Smith 86). The presentation of stereotypes is impersonal and, occasionally, brutal but comedy is usually protected from such criticism. While Kath, her family and friends are a different class to the suburban characters of *Kingswood Country* (1980s), the sitcom follows similar directions and comedic storylines. Such sitcoms, and characters like Dame Edna, are popular with Australian audiences who are likely to believe they are personally not like those characters but know someone who is, hence, perpetuating the idea of suburbia as a place where other people live.

Television soap dramas are another popular medium that present the suburban lifestyle and the long running *Neighbours* uses a similar streetscape to *Kath and Kim* but with a different intention. This soap’s success in Britain may be attributed to the
streetscape and lifestyle displayed: sunshine, spacious backyards, built-in swimming pools, large homes in quiet tree-lined, safe streets. The characters are involved in dramas similar to British soap dramas but the suburban setting is unique to Australia and aims to maintain an image of external bliss. The dramas within are seemingly contrasting to the external order and peace but, in fact, the dilemmas are rarely intricate or complex so that suburban soap operas are ultimately quite similar to suburban sitcoms in their theme, plot and characters. Sitcoms and soaps set in the suburbs provide entertainment but they contribute little to a sincere examination of Australian lifestyle, culture or identity. Instead, such shows may only perpetuate the simplistic, narrow image of where the majority of Australians live.

Patrick White’s 1964 collection of short stories, *The Burnt Ones*, includes seven domestic stories set in the conservative world of Australian suburban families. Cultural, middle-class restraint is evident throughout, not least in the humorous “Willy-Wagtails by Moonlight” in which a couple, invited to dinner, are left alone to listen to their hosts’ birdsong recordings, only to discover the tape has recorded the illicit sexual exploits of the host husband with his secretary. But middle-class propriety prevails and the guests will not let on to anyone nor will they interfere in their hosts’ marriage. The implication is that suburban social status is the driving force behind the silence.

“Clay” (dedicated to Barry Humphries) presents similar middle-class, suburban restraint with more serious overtones, as we follow Clay’s life through childhood, marriage and the death of his mother. The mother is a larger-than-life suburbanite and Clay’s wife, Marj, is an average housewife. When Clay and Marj argue, “Marj stuck to the carpet-sweeper, she was glad of the fluff under the bed, she was glad of the pattern on the lino, the cartons of crispies that she bought—so square” (*Burnt Ones* 123). Earlier in life, Clay was a teased, odd, sensitive, fatherless boy and became an eccentric adult husband much to the shock of innocent Marj. Eccentricity, fantasy and delusion are presented as escape for the suburban man rather than confronting problems truthfully.

The collection ends with the longer story, “Down at the Dump,” again set in Sarsaparilla, where detached, middle-class characters are contrasted with a rough and lively working-class family. However, while these two classes can easily dismiss each other with predictable prejudice, it is Daisy Morrow’s relationship with destitute Ossie Coogan that affronts all middle-class sensibilities because Daisy herself comes from a middle-class background. As the sister of arch-conservative Myrtle, the owner of a
“liver-coloured brick home” (289) and wife of Councillor Hogben, Daisy’s death “in that pokey little hutch” (289), brings to a head all the shame and embarrassment that her free and open life had caused Myrtle. Preparation for the funeral and the actual burial provide an ideal event for the reader to be shown private thoughts and public behaviour. While Myrtle obsesses privately over who will attend or what people will think and is overwhelmed by the “teeming injustices” (297) of it all, the men are publicly dutiful but privately ambivalent. Les Hogben fleetingly recalls making a pass at Daisy, despite the fact he didn’t like her, and his councillor colleague, Horrie, “had often felt he might have done a dash with Daise Morrow on the side” (292). These private thoughts are not in line with expected suburban marital behaviour, thus, are never revealed. Yet, Myrtle speaks to her husband of her stress over Daisy’s damage to social standing and, although she gets little response, her thoughts and speech remain fixated on image.

Bruce Bennett notes White’s theatricality in his writing and believes his contribution to Australian short fiction is “perhaps more in the realm of style than in ideology” (174). However, White’s plays and stories, like Humphries’ Edna, clearly reveal his view of middle-class suburbanites: as people who stifle emotions for the sake of civilised behaviour; they gain solace from conformity and base their aspirations on shallow ideals. He does not criticise other classes as banal and soulless to the extent he does the middle-class (the working-class Whalleys are three-dimensional and portrayed with sympathy by White). White’s fiction expresses not only an opinion of suburbia but contributes to the elitist view of it as a place with a “single, unchanging meaning” (McAuliffe 14). His characters, especially the women, are a collection of signifying behaviours. McCann observes, White writes less about a place than “an aesthetic practice” (59).

In A Taste of Dreams, characters may display signifying behaviours but I have tried to balance this with private thoughts and conversations that reveal more than suburban concepts. Rose Blake dwells on her long held sadness and when confronted with the reality of moving into the retirement village, via the agent and the new chair that her sons assemble, she begins to reflect on her past. In contrast, Myrtle Hogben from “Down at the Dump,” thinks the way she talks: privately she remains embarrassed about her sister’s behaviour and worries what the neighbours will think of the funeral. By revealing characters’ thoughts to be the same as their dialogue, White keeps them two-dimensional and we do not see beyond the public mask.

George Johnston is the other significant Australian writer critical of suburban
life. From the first paragraph of the largely autobiographical *My Brother Jack*, the narrator, David Meredith, proposes that the built environment fashions its residents: “My brother Jack does not come into the story straight away . . . because a person doesn’t begin to exist without parents and an environment . . .” (1).

Despite declaring vague memories of childhood, we are given remarkable detail of the childhood home’s “fusty wallpapered hallway upon which the front door opened in that undistinguished house . . . in a flat and dreary suburb far away in Melbourne, Australia” (1). Both the family home, Avalon, and the suburb, which “spread forever, flat and diffuse, monotonous yet inimical, pieced together in a dull geometry of dull houses” (29), are burdened with more responsibility for producing the narrator’s angst than his parents or even his own choices in life. The monthly physical abuse meted out by the father on the son is a disturbing section to read, especially in contrast to the conservative, mundane, external environment, yet the end notes reveal these violent episodes were fiction “in order to provide an element of conflict, and a harsh environment in which to gain sympathy . . .”(368). David Meredith constantly rails against the mediocrity and monotony of suburban life but the inclusion of fictional violence by Johnston suggests the author is also unable to see beyond dullness and tedium when describing his suburban upbringing; he was compelled to add fiction to enliven the narrative. This view is continued when the protagonist compares the middle-class suburban lifestyle with the slums, which he felt “lacked the grim adventure of true poverty” (35). This view of poverty as adventurous and thrilling, as representing real life, was often expressed by the elite, post-war intellectuals who upheld an inner city, urban lifestyle of Balmain, Fitzroy, St Kilda, Kings Cross or London as physically and spiritually invigorating.

When David Meredith climbs onto his roof to install an aerial, he looks out across the “red and arid desert” (273) of the new subdivision, Beverley Grove Estate, where he has moved with his first wife, Helen. He not only sees the landscape as uniform but he cannot separate his opinion of this environment as dull and suffocating from his view of his marriage and future. Landscape and relationships are intertwined in the narrator’s mind as he likens himself to a Stylite of the suburbs (272). From the roof, David looks over Beverley Grove’s car-washing and mowing rituals and concludes that behind the neatness and scheduled housekeeping, the residents are suffering “desolation or anxiety or fear” (272). It is this conviction—that his neighbourhood contains people who feel the same as he does—that leads him to conclude that different
neighbourhoods, like the slums, provide opportunities for bravery and adventure.

Lee Brotherson remarks on the many references to flatness of place and the denuded landscape in *My Brother Jack* (18.1 86). Meredith believes “[Beverley Grove] could have been really beautiful . . . before Bernie Rothenstein came in with his bulldozers and graders and grubbed out all the trees and flattened everything out so that the subdivision could be hammered in . . .” (274). The flatness is an example of the way a writer reduces the suburbs into a two-dimensional suburbia. Melbourne is indeed flat, but, in this novel, flatness equates with a dull and limited life, a suburban topography that imprisons its inhabitants and stunts their development. In his biography, Kinnane refers to Johnston’s notes for the novel, showing that he believed Meredith’s flaws “had their roots in childhood—not as an inherited condition, but virtually imbibed as a disease of mediocrity from the very atmosphere of his dreary Australian suburban boyhood” (218). As discussed in the beginning of this exegesis, post-war intellectuals saw a link between the built environment and the behaviour, attitudes and morals of the inhabitants.

But the alienation and disaffection that Meredith believes is all around him is, in fact, within him. He decides “there had been more things of true value in the shabby house called Avalon, from which I had fled, than there ever would be, or could be, in this villa in Beverley Grove” (273). Yet, even as an older man, on a return visit to Avalon, he is struck by the “horrible flatness . . . the unmitigated melancholy of those suburban streets” (29-30) and the first half of the book centres on derision of the childhood suburb. Meredith’s habit of blaming the current suburban environment for his sense of isolation and rejection ultimately exposes a character who avoids confronting the real source of inner turmoil and anger. He has a brief moment of insight when he admits to a behavioural “pattern of evasion . . . I was setting out to side-step a world I didn’t have the courage to face” (58) but most of the time Meredith blames outside forces for his life’s direction. He blames the stultifying landscape for the fact that he feels a social misfit in comparison to the gregarious, larrikin, quintessentially Australian Jack, who seems content with suburban life. Silent suburbia also becomes the space for the narrator to vent resentment and hatred against his father. As a young boy he loves reading but does so in secret to avoid his father’s criticism and ridicule and, later, writes newspaper articles under a pseudonym. Although he detests his father, he cowers, avoids and lies to him in order to keep the peace. His anger is directed against the suburban image; yet, he is, in fact, railing against a perceived suburbia and
must maintain a generalised view in order to perpetuate his anger. Through the detached viewpoint, by constantly describing the landscape as uniformly dull and mundane and through portraits of the inhabitants as simplistic and undeveloped, he is able to reject his childhood suburb for the middle-class Beverley Grove Estate; then for the same reasons, he rejects that too as stultifying. Once the landscape and the architecture are rejected, it becomes easy for Meredith to reject the domestic life within the home, leave the marriage and pursue, without guilt, a life of adventure with Cressida in Greece.

But, before leaving Helen, he tries to sabotage the marriage: “From that moment of revelation on the roof of the house I was in conflict with Helen, but there was no open declaration of hostilities. Subterfuge, rather, was to be the pattern” (278). The act of rebellion he plans is against the suburban ideal—planting a fast growing eucalypt tree in their small front yard. Its roots lift his neighbour’s driveway who demands it is pulled out; Helen supports the removal. Helen plays straight into David’s hand so he can easily dismiss her as conforming to “their rotten dreary suburban sameness” (282).

External factors in A Taste of Dreams such as environment and notions of idealism do influence characters but are not the overriding thrust or premise of the collection as in anti-suburban literature like My Brother Jack and White’s short stories and plays. Characters in A Taste of Dreams present a variety of demographics: single-household apartments (“Beauty Point”); two-person-professional households (“The Dance”); seniors (“Beauty Point,” “Three Pots Red”) and traditional suburban plots (Paul Green, “Mezzaluna”). Within these various suburban households, behind the façade and scenography, are diverse, expressive human lives. Paul Green grieves over the demise of his marriage; teenager Vaughn reaches out to his mother at a time when many young people might flee; Dollar Bill has no stereotypical suburban traits yet he lives in the suburbs. Despite living in middle-class, residential districts on the outskirts of the city, the inhabitants are emotionally responsive to life events and struggle with their own dramas.

**Domestic Diversity and the Writers Who Looked Within**

A more mature, less polarised presentation of suburbia started to emerge in the 1970s. This could be attributed to the emergence of second-wave feminism which focused on the domestic, drawing attention to inequalities in the home but also bringing respect and
admiration for the suburban routine. This trend continues as diversity within the suburban lifestyle is recognised, perhaps even celebrated. The awareness of Australia as part of the global village and part of Asia, increased awareness of the unique flora and fauna and indigenous and migrant history are other factors that have brought greater focus on Australian identity, culture and the diversity within our cities and suburbs.

Glen Tomasetti’s *Thoroughly Decent People*, published in 1976, is a feminist’s compassionate portrayal of two generations of a family set in 1930s Melbourne suburbia. Tomasetti is occasionally ironic in portraying the suburban lifestyle and adherence to perceived standards but empathy for parents Bert and Lizzie’s situation is always present.

Their daughter Vera, twenty-seven, married with two children, is captivated by the wealthy Leonard family (next door) and especially their forty-five-year-old bachelor son, David, who “played with women, intentionally alternating neglect and attention so that a state of extreme anxiety was induced . . . ” (94).

Bert and Lizzie’s suburban sensibilities are affronted by this relationship: Bert is thrown into turmoil and Lizzie thinks her daughter is behaving “citified rather than domestic and looking quite unlike her usual self” (84) when Vera gushes about the lift she was given in the unmarried man’s flashy car. Lizzie’s concern for Vera hints at suburban aspirations for her daughter when she looks at her “for proof that she had done a good job . . . sure that something around the corner would transform her into the being of her aspiration” (86). However, both Bert and Lizzie display a range of feelings and reactions, not just stereotypical suburbanite behaviours, and the reader feels empathy for them in their anxiety, that all their efforts as parents might be undone.

In White’s “Down at the Dump,” Les and Myrtle Hogben communicate in similar ways to Bert and Lizzie—the men are rude and dismissive of their wives who communicate only a small amount of their suburban worries and anxieties to their husbands. But the conversations between Les and Myrtle are typical suburban talk and the reader is not shown the sort of detail that Tomasetti reveals in the inner thoughts and actions of Bert and Lizzie. Bert and Lizzie reveal a variety of reactions to their stress over Vera and the conversations show a range of emotions—tenderness, irritation, stony silence and confused feelings about each other even after years of marriage. We see their struggle with Vera’s ignorance of risk and their attempts to make sense of why she is acting in such contrast to the suburban ideal of stability and routine; yet their opinions are not limited to simple offence at a forsaken ideal. Although they are influenced by
suburban status and conservative values, they are less rigid; they are more realistic characters than White’s portrayal of the equivalent social class, in which the dialogue is often short and clipped and the characters are flat. Bert and Lizzie’s concerns for Vera’s behaviour invoke sympathy, given the vulnerabilities of the times (1930s Depression) and the disastrous financial outcome for Vera should she lose her marriage as a result of her infatuation.

Tomasetti’s style of suburban writing is an example of the next phase in suburban fiction through the 1970s and 1980s. In 1985, David Malouf published 12 Edmondstone Street, his memoir about his childhood in South Brisbane. Each section of the title story focuses on a room of his childhood home as he retracts the lives within the house. Indeed, the flow and rhythm of the story are so refined that the narrative moves effortlessly from a piece of furniture to the deepest feelings of childhood, encapsulated in the line “first houses are the grounds of our first experience” (8).

This story is not a celebration of suburban life—it frequently presents its limitations and incongruities—but it recognises that a childhood home cannot be viewed separately from the childhood and that both are multi-layered and three-dimensional. A child’s first home contains all the initial experiences of life—both positive and negative—that are the most influential and often profound: bonding with family, first fears, first encounters with strangers who ‘invade’ the home, patterns of domestic life, adult management of the child’s immediate environment and life crises and development of identity. Malouf’s home, as James Tulip observes, is always “drawn backwards towards the consciousness of the perceiver” (xxii), showing the influence of the environment on the child’s perception but no generalised conclusion is drawn; “the house is allegorised, but not towards some universal significance or as a symbol” (xxii). The combination of a child’s viewpoint and adult observations of the same events enables Malouf to avoid broad judgements and generalisations of the environment as the reader travels with the narrator on the journey through the house and its associated memories. This is in contrast to Johnston’s adult perspective which presents, unforgivingly, a spiritless, lonely childhood and his first marriage as tedious and dreary. Johnston’s perspective conveys a sense of “adolescent rage against authority” (Siegel Wall Street Dec. 2008), an unsympathetic rejection of his upbringing which was a common attitude of many young intellectuals of the 1950s and 60s in post-war Australia and the United States—rejection of suburban home-building values and aspirations of their parents’ generation. Key anti-suburban literature from post-war United States
includes Richard Yates’ *Revolutionary Road* (1961), Sloan Wilson’s *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* and John Keats’ *The Crack in the Picture Window* (1956). Richard Yates’ book has been recently released as a film starring DiCaprio and Winslet, another contribution to popular media’s collection of anti-suburban rhetoric which already includes *American Beauty*, *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, *Bewitched*, *The Brady Bunch* and many more.

America’s post-war suburban expansion/land boom was similar to Australia’s but the suburbs were often established along racial divides creating mono racial areas over the ensuing decades. However, American cultural commentators are more accepting of their nation’s social history and less likely, for example, to link uniform architecture and aspirational behaviour to a negative moral outcome. The pursuit of home-building—the ‘American Dream’—is a cornerstone to the very development and cultural creed of the United States and while the Beat generation loudly condemned the values and beliefs of aspirational behaviour, there are other writers who look beyond the suburban façade to the intimate lives of middle-America. Updike and Cheever are writers who did not see the suburban lifestyle as “a determining environment, but an unpredictable one of unfolding circumstances” (Siegel *Wall Street* Dec. 2008). They consciously probed domestic scenarios to try to understand human nature, identity and relationships more fully.

Updike’s short story collection *Too Far To Go: The Maples Stories* presents the Maples marriage in chronological order from the beginning, through the decline to the separation and finally the divorce. Mainly set in suburbia, the stories do not denigrate the environment like Johnston. Suburbia, in fact, is the ideal setting for a long-term marriage and a growing family.

The first half of the collection situates the Maples in uncommon situations outside their home—blood donation at the hospital, a holiday in Rome, marching for civil rights—but the everyday, suburban routine is never far away. In “Giving Blood,” Richard is struck afterwards by his wife’s appearance against the “eggshell light [because] it was unusual for the Maples to be driving at eleven in the morning. Almost always it was dark when they shared a car” (54). Delighting in this journey outside the home, outside the normal routine, they spontaneously go to lunch after giving blood. Although the meal is dominated by the ever present marital tension, the meal is pleasant until Richard pulls out his wallet to pay and finds a single dollar inside:
“Look at that.” He waved it in her face. “I work like a bastard all week for you and those insatiable brats and at the end of it what do I have? One goddam crummy wrinkled dollar.” . . . her gaze stayed with him, her face having retreated, or advanced, into that porcelain shell of uncanny composure. “We’ll both pay,” Joan said. (57-58)

Emotional retreat by Joan is succinctly captured through Updike’s descriptive detail as the grind of everyday responsibilities surfaces easily to take them both back to their regular, resentful, fatigued positions.

When the marriage develops into a routine cycle of negativity, the Maples discuss separation but despite “burning to leave one another, they left, out of marital habit, together” (60), on an impulsive trip to Rome (“Twin Beds in Rome”). Once again, commitment to a habitual life has held them back from exploring personal dreams beyond middle-America; it is unsurprising that the holiday only briefly relieves the marital tension. In fact, Joan has a more positive experience than her husband, who observes: “She was happy and, jealous of her happiness, he again grew reluctant to leave her” (72).

The Civil Rights movement, explored in “Marching Through Boston,” has a similarly rejuvenating effect on Joan who as “a suburban mother of four . . . would return late at night . . . with rosy cheeks and shining eyes” (73). Again, Richard, more resistant to the everyday routine of marriage, is disturbed by this fresh vitality to her appearance and spirit and tries to sabotage her passion by drawing attention away from civil rights to his own sense of oppression in marriage.

Richard’s jealousy is a theme through the stories (even when the children are older he is jealous of their bond with Joan) and intensifies in the second half of the collection which concentrates on the home setting and explores greater psychological depths of the marriage. For example, Richard’s contradictory emotions about Joan are revealed when she arrives home late and he resists his impulse to embrace her because of her “total, disarming familiarity” (118). Joan, whether passionate or ordinary, will never regain intimacy with Richard.

Richard is a conceited, cruel husband who psychologically injures his wife. However, the reader is likely to lose sympathy for Joan when she reveals her own extramarital affairs which have run parallel with her husband’s affairs. Richard feels cuckolded but shows an absurd fascination with her sexual exploits, to which Joan
protests: “Stop trying to make me more interesting than I am! All I am is a beat-up housewife who wants to go play tennis with some other tired ladies!” (111). While Joan elicits sympathy for her commitment as wife and mother, this victim outburst puts her on the same weak, but interesting, level of her husband. The decline of the marriage now becomes reality as each adopts an aggressive, antagonistic position.

In the first half of the stories, we often see the couple in settings outside their suburb/suburban home. In the second half, Updike sets the stories within the home and gives us extended marital conversations, rather than the short arguments and petulance of the earlier stories. The stifling nature of the everyday landscape is evoked through detail such as “the ashen light of dusk and the watery blue of a distant street lamp” (133), “the muted hubbub of television” (136) and when they finally announce their separation, the beautiful weather “mocked the Maples’ internal misery with solid sunlight—golden shafts and cascades of green in which their conversations had wormed unseeing, their sad murmuring selves the only stain in Nature” (192).

Throughout the collection, staying faithful to an everyday life and the institution of marriage is clearly a struggle for this couple, encapsulated in Richard’s distorted view of his rights and responsibilities when he claims: “Surely a suburban man . . . has the right to dance with his mistress” (156). Yet the suburban grind does not produce mundane, banal, predictable people; rather we are given an extended portrait of a couple engaged in both commonplace and significant events, displaying a range of emotions and asking questions about life, commitment and identity. This conflict is expressed plainly by Joan after eighteen years of marriage when Richard asks her why they shouldn’t get divorced: “I hate your ego . . . and our sex is lousy, but I’ve never been lonely with you. I’ve never for an instant felt alone when you were in the room” (163). The stories that follow focus on giving up marital sex, then separation and divorce. Yet, after their separation, it is Richard who wishes to escape his new found, post-marital health and happiness because it all “seemed negligible, compared to the consecrated unhappiness they had shared” (234). In his epiphany, when he begins to let go of all the angst and pressure he has carried, he becomes aware that the battle of the everyday sustained him and connected him to a rhythm of life.

It is interesting to compare Johnston’s and Updike’s portrayals of the suburban domestic marriage, considering both works were published in the same decade. Both suburban male characters grow resentful of their domestic situation and are critical of their wives. Both approach marriage with relative immaturity and obsess over issues of
identity, status, marriage and intimacy; they spend scant time on personal introspection. Both see themselves confined within a suburban social code which they try to rebel against and undermine; yet they frequently feel duped in marriage and compare themselves with other men in their social set, seeing them as freer and more fortunate (David of the Turleys, Richard of divorced male friends). Both experience an epiphany at the end, feeling that they had been too harsh on those they criticised for committing to the suburban lifestyle—Richard of his wife Joan, David of his brother Jack. The women in these marriages, Helen and Joan, spend much of their marriage not understanding their husband’s angst and disgruntlement but, ultimately, Helen is a more conservative suburbanite than Joan or, as Kinnane observes, Helen’s character is “an attack on bourgeois Melbourne” (Johnston Biography 222).

Overall, Updike portrays suburban life more honestly and at a much more intimate level than Johnston. My Brother Jack, written in the first person, places the ‘I’ character so firmly at the centre of the narrative that many of the other characters remain under-developed and two-dimensional. This may have been deliberate but Johnston misses an excellent opportunity to explore suburban, post-war marriage and family relationships which could reveal more detail about the narrator’s journey. Instead, too much time is spent on external details—the house, the physical environment—and the contrast between Helen’s pursuit of suburban status and David’s frustration with the same is too forced.

In contrast, Richard and Joan, although dysfunctional and depressed about their marriage, are bonded in their discord. Joan’s involvement in the Civil Rights movement triggers Richard’s sense of abandonment and exclusion and it is this corresponding action/reaction that makes the collection a fascinating portrayal of a marriage in chronic demise—partners together in opposition.

Updike uses telling detail by revealing the sense of entrapment and anger at everyday responsibilities, such as Richard only having a dollar to pay for lunch. In contrast, Johnston resorts to overstatement: David smashes up his whole study in explosive response to his desire to live a life like Gavin Turley. A scene of violence is an easy way to portray anger and resentment but Updike is more subtle. Richard Maple sabotages the marriage by being verbally cruel to Joan and relentlessly nit-picking which slowly but effectively wears away the marriage. Carefully crafted dialogue and intimate detail are used by Updike to portray climactic stress and anger. Johnston’s approach is more direct but less effective; David exclaims: “For Christ’s sake go away
and leave me alone!”(265)

Through the 1980s and 1990s, the suburb comes to occupy a prominent position in Australian fiction. This period saw the emergence of short story anthologies exclusively about the suburbs such as Out West and Behind the Front Fence.

Tim Winton’s earliest publications, Scission and Minimum of Two, are short-story collections published before the beach/ocean image was fully developed in his writings and contain great detail of suburban life: houses are surrounded by air “congested with the sounds of birds and cicadas” (Minimum of Two 43); gardens are “thick with trees and shrubs, every kind of creeper, rockeries, retaining walls, small pools of lawn” (Minimum 61) and people sit or stand on verandas and look out across their suburb “with its close-set houses and smudges of smoke from the spring burn-off” (Minimum 46). Winton’s inclusion of seasons and the cycle of life, and interactions between inhabitants and their environment shows how far suburban writing has come since White’s stereotypical, flat middle-class characters’ in bland, dull homes.

In his story “Neighbours,” a young couple move from an expansive fringe suburb “where good neighbours were seldom seen and never heard” (Scission 299) to a multicultural suburb that is less salubrious but has a warm, close community where everybody’s life becomes everybody’s business—the young couple build a chook pen that falls down but a neighbour comes, uninvited, and re-builds it for them; the women knit clothes for the couple’s impending baby and the whole neighbourhood assembles around the paling fence for the announcement of the birth. The protagonist experiences a feeling of community that he has never felt before and the neighbourhood is the catalyst for getting in touch with his emotional growth as a man and a new father.

Neighbourhood and community are fundamental elements to the plot and structure of Cloudstreet, Winton’s seminal novel. But the “enormous, flaking mansion” (47) itself, at Number One Cloudstreet, is the central stage and significant symbol for this small universe in West Leederville, Perth. The house, “with eyes and ears and a look of godless opulence about it” (47), is as much a character as the Pickles and their tenants, the Lambs, who inhabit it. Lack of money, familial pressure and the era that the story spans—through the Second World War and Menzies’ term of government—force the family members to stay on in the house. As a result, the house is the backdrop to major events and a conditioning environment for the characters’ personal journeys. Brain-injured Fish Lamb is attracted to the piano room and is dragged there after becoming distraught over the burning of the Guy Fawkes effigy on the bonfire. He
bangs on Middle C all through the night (the same note that the previous owner fell on when she died) while the rest of the house “all lay in bed, tossing, askew, asleep, awake” (120). This is often how the reader experiences the house—through the ears and eyes of the inhabitants, especially Rose, Quick, Dolly and Fish. They lie in bed listening to the sounds in the house and the suburb, they stand in rooms meditating on the silence, or look out from the veranda over the other brick and tin houses of the street, or simply daydream on the back stoop beneath the forgotten fruit trees.

Quick Lamb has a transforming experience, as a young teen, when he witnesses the death of Wogga McBride. But rather than run to the railway line or escape into the city, he “goes home and gets into bed and pulls the sheet over his head and stuffs his ears with notepaper” (92). He lies there for three days listening to the “grinds and groans of the house” (93) and compares its noises with the quiet inside himself. It is in Quick’s bedroom, as a result of his retreat into bed, that his father finally says the unspoken: that both father and son have a mutual responsibility to face life’s difficulties because they were both present at Fish’s near drowning and owe their debt to him.

While many of the inhabitants find the house claustrophobic, there are rooms for escape and refuge so that the house serves both practical and emotional/spiritual purposes.

On a happier occasion, Lester impulsively buys a boat on a family picnic and suggests that Quick and Fish row it home; their mother Oriel vents fury over the risk of the two boys being on a boat again, by scouring and scrubbing the kitchen. She “slapped dishes onto the draining board” (111) and “hefted the big china gravyboat and swung it with a backhand sweep that caught [Lester] square in the belly” (111). Oriel is a staunch matriarch who runs her side of the house like a military camp and views the house as she does life: something to be simultaneously feared and conquered.

When alcoholic Dolly is found overdosed by the railway line, the house becomes a hospital as Oriel cares for her and takes the opportunity to clean the Pickles’ rooms. Rose Pickles, now a teenager, inspects the clean kitchen and bedrooms, the polished mirrors and mopped floors and is enraged. Rose’s anger is not over the cleanliness but the failure of her parents to take care of their family and home properly and her lifelong embarrassment of having a drunk for a mother and a gambling, one-handed, pathetic father. She “kicks the door shut and begins to destroy her room” (125). Later Rose will turn from taking her anger out on the house to her own body as she becomes anorexic and lies “on her bed planning ways of escape” (141). Both Rose and Oriel carry a suffering demeanour and anger at life’s unfairness. It is not surprising they
take their resentment out on the house as it embodies the disappointment and failure of their lives. But these are the two women who make peace with the house—Rose marries and gives birth in it, Oriel dramatically moves out of it, into a tent in the backyard, and her moving back in is the novel’s resolution.

The library room has no books in it and remains shut for years but it is the place where Rose and Quick unite the two families with their sexual union and it is the room where their child is born months later. All the Lambs and the Pickles are present at the birth and gather around Rose and the baby “like a two-up school, peering down” (384). The building itself is not forgotten in the dramatic narrative as, after the birth, “the room sighs, [and] the house breathes its first painless breath in half a century . . . ” (385).

Oriel moves out of the house but, because of the marital codes and monetary restrictions of the times, she moves into a tent in the backyard. There are several factors that drive her from the house but the fundamental reason is a mystery even to herself and the thoughts inside her head on her first night in the tent concern the house, not her husband or children. She believes the house is asking her to wait, to not move too far from it or the people and “Oriel wasn’t the sort to argue with a living breathing house” (134). After the death of Fish at the end of the novel, the fence that had divided the yard for the two families is finally removed and Dolly steps across the gash it leaves in the ground and breaks her long silence with Oriel. Both women fold up Oriel’s tent and carry it back into the big, old house. This action captures the characters’ emotional closure, letting go of anger and friction and suggestive of a new, more harmonious era for the families in the house.

Cloudstreet spans the war, Menzies era and Kennedy’s assassination but these world events are far in the background as the novel remains domestic throughout. The novel is about belonging and identity of each of the inhabitants but the house follows a similar path too as it goes from being “a great continent of a house” (41) sheltering lonely, disparate people—stolen aboriginal children, a wealthy, lonely aristocrat—to being a home for a group of people who grow beyond their prejudices and form a special bond of acceptance. Fish seeks unity with his former whole self and achieves it when he drowns in the river while everyone picnics. At the same time, the two families unite and discover a sense of belonging revealed at the picnic where “even the missing are . . . the gone and the taken are with them in the shade pools of the peppermints by the beautiful, the beautiful the river” (2). While the majority of action is set in the “big, old rundown eyesore” of a house at Number One Cloudstreet, the inhabitants are finally
able to leave the building, to let go of their prejudices, tensions and battles and gather for food, laughter and music, united “in a good world” (1). Perhaps this is the archetypal domestic story, one where the characters are able to leave the home setting and go into the world together, taking with them all the positive values of domestic life.

Helen Garner is another Australian contemporary author who has written many stories centred on domestic life, notably My Hard Heart, published at the end of the 1990s. The title story explores the conflict between outward peace and inner turmoil. Garner is ironic about suburban ideals and the lifestyle but not dismissive. After the husband leaves the marriage in the title story, the narrator is lucid and accepts the change:

The smell of the house changed immediately . . . The front of the house was festooned with great twining loops of wisteria. People walked slowly past, gazing up . . . and when I sat on a cushion on the doorstep and played my ukulele I saw that the lower clumps were full of bees. (2)

The narrator experiences euphoria at having ‘shed’ her husband, described via her views of her suburb: “Crowds parted as I approached, old men and boys and babies smiled at me in the street” (2). Upon returning from a short rural stay, it is the simple domestic routine with her daughter that brings forth the sadness: “I cooked a meal and we tried to eat it elegantly, facing each other across the white tablecloth . . . We washed the dishes together. I put my forehead on the windowsill and cried with my hands still in the hot water . . . ” (3-4). This scene, full of domestic detail, shows an attempt to maintain ritual and order despite the narrator starting to break down. Her return to domesticity, after viewing her neighbourhood with fresh eyes, evokes the stark reality of the future she faces, now that the marriage has ended.

Garner focuses on the domestic details that reveal the emotions and reality of situations. She unveils the true story behind the façade, the system, life’s expectations and illusions. In this way she acknowledges the limitations imposed on behaviour by environments but also includes those scenes in her stories that reveal the characters’ struggle with their dilemmas.

Another story from the collection, “Little Helen’s Sunday Afternoon,” depicts a child’s loss of innocence in a suburban backyard. Little Helen stumbles upon her cousin and his friends engaging in secretive acts in the back shed and, as a punishment for
spying, is forced by her cousin to look at the photographs of maimed children.

The Australian suburban backyard was originally designed to keep children safe when urban community populations were removed to ‘model’ garden suburbs such as Daceyville under the recommendations by the Royal Commission for the Improvement of Sydney. Critics were appalled that children played on the footpaths and in the gutters of the inner city and felt children needed a protected environment off the street (Hoskins 5). Yet, Garner’s story suggests that the suburban backyard, garage or shed can also be an unsafe place as little Helen discovers. The apparent serenity and safety of the aunt’s suburban house and backyard contrasts with the unsafe acts the young people engage in. The suggestion is not that suburban design is dangerous but that even within the safety of the backyard, events and activities may result, sometimes traumatically, in loss of innocence. Through this single afternoon episode the reader is given a glimpse into real events behind the suburban façade.

I have used the contrast between the tranquil suburban façade and dramatic events within in my story “Friday Night, Party Night” when Paul Green explodes under the weight of loneliness and marital despair. Crimes like sexual assault are extreme events made all the more disturbing and powerful when set in a conventional world “of manufactured tastes, of pristine domesticity and social conformity” (Sowden 78). The homogeneity and predictability of Paul Green’s suburb aggravates the disappointment and emptiness of his marriage and provides dramatic tension for the impending crime.

Similarly, “Dollar Bill” begins with a traditional suburban scene—the backyard BBQ—and we could be back in the 1960s. But subsequent events are not conventional as the protagonist is a second-generation Italian, engaged in an affair with a married woman who is bashed by her husband before moving into Dollar Bill’s home with her children. Dollar Bill’s character subverts suburban stereotypes but also points to the diverse lives behind the façade, further confronting the traditional position of anti-suburban fiction. All kinds of fictional characters, full of faults and foibles, can live within apparently serene and tranquil streetscapes that not only add to dramatic tension for a story but reflect the reality of suburban life.

In “The Dry Storm,” domestic life is pitched against a harsh rural landscape but the feelings and reactions to life’s losses are not dissimilar to those of Paul Green’s or Dollar Bill’s. This story is not set in a traditional suburban setting but I believe it fits suitably within the collection as it demonstrates that domestic hardships occur wherever there is a home. Farming life in Australia has followed similar domestic patterns to
post-war suburban development: when infrastructure, like child-care services and quality public transport are not locally available, women are more likely to stay at home to raise the children, resulting in increased genderising of space—male public domain/female private domain. This has been the case for both rural and suburban environments on the edges of cities and this is explored in “The Dry Storm.” The story stays firmly within the domestic setting, despite the vast landscape outside the home which represents the male domain of cattle sales, farming and agribusiness. The external environment is harsh and barren while the internal setting is quiet and still, more consonant with the woman’s contemplations and feelings.

Australia has produced a range of suburban fiction, from the post-war period where the suburbs were criticised and parodied to more detailed narratives that look within the home, at the private thoughts and emotions of the inhabitants. Once we step behind the façade, we find a legitimate setting for fiction, one that is not determining but complex and varied. While film and television have been the dominant form for presenting ‘suburbia’, contemporary fiction allows a more complex exploration of personal journeys, place, family and identity in a more realistic suburban setting. Australian domestic fiction has matured, shown by the development of fiction from White and Johnston to that of Garner and Winton. There is now increased affirmation of the validity of domestic and suburban situations as a legitimate theme and setting for fiction.
Part II
The Kitchen

Various symbols for suburbia have been used by artists over the decades. Artists like Howard Arkley and Robert Rooney have used individual objects from the suburban home to celebrate the ‘ordinary’ while John Brack, Mandy Martin and Lin Onus have manipulated domestic items to comment on the whole of suburbia. The iconic objects portrayed have changed over time: from the paling fence or shed or hills hoist, to the pool and (sunburnt) lawn, the project home and accompanying landscaped garden.

A writer can also use domestic detail to suggest a broader environment and perhaps the most fitting and flexible image of suburbia is the kitchen, its dining table and the shared meal.

In a meal we can discern a range of social, cultural and political meanings. To cook for others or to share a meal is to invest “a basic activity with social meaning” (Mintz 7), to transform food into an entire social system and give meaning to what and where we eat and who we eat with. Food is a “social signifier, a bearer of interpersonal and cultural meanings” (Sceats 125).

Food, cooking and dining are routine activities of the suburban home that enable a writer to reveal and reflect on the idea of home, its residents and their lives. Cooking is a domestic routine that brings order to the day, the week and the seasons: the weekday breakfast, the ‘Sunday’ lunch, the Christmas dinner. Similarly, Marion Halligan believes that the inclusion of food in fiction can be “structurally necessary to [a] book’s shape” (95) as it assists with the form and organisation of the story.

As well as providing structure to our lives, the process of handling food to create a meal and the consumption of it, is imbued with emotions. Deborah Lupton identifies the emotions relating to eating food as ranging from “disgust, hate, fear and anger to pleasure, satisfaction and desire” and that they “are central to individuals’ subjectivity and their distinction from others” (36). Because food is so closely associated with our bodies and fulfils such a basic biological need it is an extremely personal experience yet we usually cook for others and share the food with them.

The emotions associated with the provision and consumption of food are effective avenues for a writer to explore the deeper emotional responses to life events
inside and outside the home. Halligan believes this is because we all know so much about food and “indeed have an intimate relationship with [food] several times a day, it’s a language we all speak, so it is a good way of expressing human relations” (93). Food in fiction can help reflect emotions like love, grief, aggression or joy; the acts of cooking and eating can evoke relationships between friends and family members and be a deep sensual experience that reflects our humanity. To cook for others is a tactile, physical act of creative giving, an expression of our feelings for others. Indeed, to place food preparation and consumption within the context of fiction is, as Dianne McGee observes, to present a metaphor for writing itself, where “the process of preparing and serving the meal corresponds to the literary or artistic treatment” (23). Just as a character may create a meal for others, the writer creates a work of art for readers.

There may not need to be extensive details of geographical placement of the home and its physical features because the “conversation at the kitchen table [can] suggest to the reader the type of kitchen, and the kitchen in turn suggests the nature of the house and suburb” (Falkiner 57). Nora Seton captures the significance of food and meals in the family home when she says that it is around the kitchen table that “the contours of a family are reckoned” (148). Lupton observes that it is not the actual food served that is important but “the ritual of sitting down to eat the meals” and that “the ‘family meal’ and the ‘dinner table’ are potent symbols, even metonyms, of the family itself” (39). Significantly, Patrick White’s set directions for his play, “Season at Sarsaparilla” state: “The stage is set with three platforms representing the three kitchens of three homes in Mildred Street, Sarsaparilla” (78). The fourth walls of those kitchens are the windows through which the audience views the whole of Sarsaparilla.

At its most basic level, food in fiction enables the writer to present realist fiction. If the aim of contemporary fiction is to capture the everyday, then, as Gian-Paolo Biasin argues, such writing should feature fundamental parts of reality such as “food, nutrition, meals, [and] the various rituals that surround and accompany the fulfilment of an elementary, biological need like hunger” (3).

**Who Serves?**

**The Female Provider**

In the depictions of suburbia in Australian fiction and art, there is a “gendering of suburbia as feminine” (McAuliffe 60). Traditionally, the public domain was male-
dominated (politics and industry) and the private domain was female (child-raising, cooking and cleaning). Consequently, when suburbia (the place for home and family) emerged as a subject for the arts it was genderised as feminine and a significant element of this femaleness was encapsulated in the kitchen. Women produce food for babies with their own bodies and have traditionally been the providers and preparers of food for the family/tribe. Lupton, like other gastronomy sociologists, refers to the emotional link between food provision and love—romantic or maternal love—and the tradition of the supply of food as the “wifely concern for the well-being of one’s husband” (37). In Food, the Body and the Self, she includes interviews with families about food, meals and dining. One interviewee, found it difficult to cook for herself when she eventually lived alone because, as she explains, cooking for the family had involved “so many restrictions around cooking that I tended to cook meals which were the sort of median of what people could eat, to save myself work, and it wasn’t really based on my tastes much at all” (61). This suggests, if not a loss of identity, then loss of awareness of one’s own preferences when finally given complete choice of foods for oneself.

One of literature’s famous meals linked with the female provider is Mrs Ramsey’s boeuf en daube in Virginia Woolf’s To the Lighthouse. The meal provides a dramatic setting for the reader to enter the private thoughts of those around the table, to delve deeply into Mrs Ramsey’s place in the world and to reveal the intensity of a personal, emotional experience that can arise from dining rituals. The coming together of men and women (in an era when the most daily activities were separated along gender lines), the celebratory way the characters prepare for and partake in the dining experience (heightening expectations and the drama), the ceremonial manner in which the meat is served and consumed and the departing of the guests after the meal all contribute to creating a highly stylized scene with spiritual and religious allusions.

The dinner party for fifteen begins with an intimate scene where Mrs Ramsey allows her two youngest children to select her jewellery for the evening dinner. This episode triggers Mrs Ramsey’s thoughts of her own mother and her children’s futures—their pains, their triumphs. This is the private, familial moment before the very public gathering of all for dinner “when the great clangour of the gong announced solemnly, authoritatively, that all those scattered about, in attics, in bedrooms . . . must leave . . . the novels on the bed-tables, and the diaries which were so private, and assemble in the dining-room for dinner” (Woolf 76-77). The gong is a dramatic way to summon guests, an aural command that they must join the group. Woolf’s reference to leaving private
activities to join a group sets the tone for the inner thoughts and public behaviours that gives rhythm and structure to the entire meal.

Descending, “like some queen who, finding her people gathered in the hall, looks down upon them” (76), Mrs Ramsey takes her place at the head of the table. She becomes the archetypal mother/wife/friend, the “provider of understanding, sympathy and compassion” (Knapp 31). Although Mrs Ramsey does not physically cook the meal, her role as host transforms the experience of eating into an experience of love, warmth, community and inclusion. Yet, the chapter begins with Mrs Ramsey’s inner thought: “But what have I done with my life?” (77). Woolf is depicting a wife/mother figure like Lupton’s interviewee: an eternal giver and provider whose identity is derived from those she serves. This role became a focus of second-wave feminist critics who defined the provision of the meal by the female as not only a service that satisfied a biological need but the provision of security, comfort and closeness for others. Halligan believes the daube “is an emblem of the will of Mrs Ramsay, the hostess, to make people happy” (103). She and Lily experience the meal as a profound spiritual experience and Mrs Ramsey’s main aim in life is to love and be loved. At the end of the dinner, when all have departed, she reflects on the boeuf en daube as the medium through which she has achieved this.

As the host of this dinner party, Mrs Ramsey has been likened to the Divine Host of a religious ritual, and the lighting of the eight (the symbol for eternity) candles prior to the serving of the boeuf en daube and Woolf’s use of the words ‘eternity’, ‘peace’ and ‘rest’ certainly add weight to this argument (Knapp 32). The candles are also a symbol of inclusion/exclusion as the candlelight falls inside the room where all is “order and dry land” while “outside, a reflection in which things wavered and vanished, waterily” (Woolf 90). A meal and its associated rituals, whether formal or informal, have the power to include or exclude people. The more ritualized the meal, the greater the control the host has over the guests conforming and confirming those rituals.

A Taste of Dreams does not feature highly stylized meals but there are dining rituals throughout the collection. In “Three Pots Red,” Joan’s role as dinner party host was a significant part of her past until she begins to begrudge her efforts and feel unappreciated by her guests and stops. Yet she keeps the book that records all guests’ names and meals served and she reviews it in old age, on the other side of second wave feminism to Mrs Ramsey. Yet Joan is not at peace with her life.

Carla’s father was the cook throughout her childhood but Joan selects the tom
*kai gai* dish and supervises John cooking it; thus, she is still playing ‘host’. She wants to teach her adult daughter about the dish but instead gives away the three pots that have cooked food for the family for decades. This behaviour reflects her continuing struggle with her status. I am interested in exploring the resentment that housewives like Joan felt when feminist critics started to question the unpaid labour of the housewife and her role as carer and nurturer of the family. Joan seems to have embraced this critique by relinquishing her role as cook/server.

Given the long-standing association between women and the provision of food, it is not surprising that feminist literature has used the kitchen and dining experience as a setting for stories that address gender politics. Margaret Atwood’s novel, *The Edible Woman*, features multiple scenes with food but the major episode is the protagonist Marian’s rejection of particular foods followed by her creation of an extraordinary cake.

Marian gives up meat when she becomes engaged to the macho, sexist Peter. She lets him order for her at the restaurant and he selects beef for both of them. As she watches him slice and eat it she begins to see his actions as violent and savage and visualises the cow that once “moved and ate and was killed, knocked on the head as it stood in a queue like someone waiting for a streetcar” (151). She is overwhelmed by the flesh and blood and cannot finish her own meal, in contrast to Peter who, when done, announces: “Christ I was hungry . . . A good meal always makes you feel a little more human” (152).

Marian is also unable to eat eggs after “she opened her soft-boiled egg and saw the yolk looking up at her with its one significant and accusing yellow eye, she found her mouth closing together like a frightened sea-anemone” (161). Sarah Sceats points out the connection between eggs and ovulation/reproduction when, shortly after the engagement, Marian’s breakfast egg sends out “a white semi-congealed feeler like an exploring oyster” (84).

It takes a home-baked, sculptured cake to restore Marian’s appetite. She bakes and cuts it in the shape of a woman clothed in pink and brown icing, with eyes of green food colouring. As it lies on the bench looking up at her she addresses it: “‘You look delicious . . . Very appetizing. And that’s what will happen to you; that’s what you get for being food’ ” (270). Atwood’s short story presents gender politics through food, a world where women must eat or be eaten.

Similarly, Doris Lessing’s *The Good Terrorist*, set in 1980s London, is the story of Alice who tries to flee her middle-class upbringing by moving into a squat with
revolutionaries, including malicious boyfriend Jasper. They call themselves the Communist Centre Union and are a mix of naïve anti-capitalists and misguided youths who become entangled in the very serious world of terrorism with the Russian/IRA squatters next door.

Alice tries to be a good comrade for the cause but is drawn to playing housemother, cleaning the filthy squat and cooking for her pseudo-family—“Proper food, all wholemeal flour and brown sugar and vegetables grown without insecticides” (18) or vegetable and lentil soup which she perfects throughout the novel, culminating in hocking a rug of her mother’s in order to buy a pot big enough to cook for all the squatters. Vegetarianism and organic produce are further politicised when set against what Alice observes as the food of the workers “fuelling themselves for a hard day’s work with plates of eggs, chips, sausages, fried bread, baked beans” (44).

The themes of rebellion and domesticity come together at the end of the novel when, alone in the squat, Alice recalls a story she often told as a child:

> Once upon a time there was a little girl called Alice, with her mother Dorothy. One morning Alice was in the kitchen with Dorothy who was making her favourite pudding, apple with cinnamon and brown sugar and sour cream and little Alice said, “Mummy, I am a good girl, aren’t I?” (368)

Atwood’s gender politics and Lessing’s cultural politics both present the kitchen as a rite of struggle and rebellion. The kitchen is where these female characters explore and express their feelings about their relationships and their place in the world. The decades these novels span (1960s-1980s) saw not only a change in women’s roles but a change in suburban streetscape and traditional family life. Communities became more mixed in our suburbs and “the interplay of personal, psychological and political realities within the suburbs” (McAuliffe 103) helps to weaken the gender bias within our homes.

**Culinary Trends**

Just as the architecture and design of our suburbs has changed, Australian cuisine has evolved. What we eat and how we dine in Australia has changed, yet culinary practices still reveal much about our relationships, culture and attitudes.

My story, “Dollar Bill,” contains a variety of meals and styles of dining that
provide insight into the main characters. Food is closely linked to Bennie’s sense of self and she is able to draw on the skills she acquired watching her mother work as a commercial cook. In the early days of their relationship, Dollar Bill and Bennie enjoy creating and consuming various cuisines. These foreign meals give different meanings to Dollar Bill, who has travelled extensively but does not cook, in contrast to Bennie, who is from rural Australia and has never left the country but is a versatile and adventurous cook. Her efforts to cook the meals from Dollar Bill’s Italian cookbook reflect her desire to keep their relationship alive, to use food to translate his nostalgia into a shared experience, but the fact that they are consumed in front of the TV reveals the demise of their relationship.

The meals in “Three Pots Red” which Joan cooked in her earlier days as suburban ‘hostess’ shows traditional Australian eating habits in contrast to the tom kha gai they prepare for their daughter’s visit. The fact that John is the main household cook also reflects modern suburban roles in the kitchens of Australia today; he is one of four male characters who cook in A Taste of Dreams. It is difficult to obtain information on Australian men’s role in the domestic kitchen but Rebecca Huntley gives evidence of increased interest in home cooking—Ben Dalton’s ‘He Cooks’ classes in Sydney and Melbourne and the increased interest by male students in secondary school cooking subjects (59). Men, of course, have long dominated commercial cookery and are popular TV chefs, entertaining those who enjoy cooking or at least watching TV personalities cook.

In “Friday Night, Party Night,” Paul Green is the main cook in a household where food is a source of conflict, a power struggle, an opportunity for the wife to argue and be verbally aggressive. Here the emotions connected with food are irritation and friction, echoing Rhian Ellis’ essay “Food in the Violent Home,” which shows “the purchase, preparation and consumption of food form a significant . . . factor in many violent marriages” (164). This connection clearly shows the emotions embedded in meals within the home and suggests a craving for food to satisfy more than our bellies, the demand that a person, through cooking and serving a meal, transport us away from the mundane routine. When the person to be served is not provided with such an experience, the reaction may be violent and destructive.

Food, in Paul Green’s world, is associated with loneliness, separateness and rejection of the cook in the home. This suburban home has an adequate kitchen to prepare food but the cook is driven from it, to an ugly, sterile diner that mirrors his
soulless marriage and faltering relationship with his daughter. The physical environment, including the taste and texture of the food, reflects the emotionless, spiritless state of this marriage.

This is the most negative food story in A Taste of Dreams, where the bleak, processed food environment underscores the mental state of the lone diner. John Updike’s short story “Wife-Wooing” (1962) also uses the takeaway food environment as a trigger for a husband to reflect on himself and his life as he sits with his family at home eating takeaway hamburgers:

We eat meat, meat I wrested warm from the raw hands of the hamburger girl in the diner a mile away, a ferocious place, slick with savagery, wild with chrome; young predators snarling dirty jokes menaced me, old men reached for me with coffee-warmed paws; I wielded my wallet, and won my way back (30-31).

The burger is a solo, all-in-one meal, allowing this man to reflect on his family while in their midst. In Writing the Meal, Dianne McGee suggests that the modern takeaway or casual diner meal is a reaction to the highly ritualized dinner party of the past and that dining out alone or the modern takeaway offers freedom but a freedom “without either direction or content” (7). Gian-Paolo Biasin observes that modern, processed food results in reduced consumption time, simplification of table manners but “a leveling of tastes” (12), while Suzanne Skubal notes that characteristic ‘American’ food such as hot dogs, fries, burgers, chips, coke and popcorn are all eaten without cutlery (50). The benefits of the takeaway or diner meal are convenience and anonymity but it may also create feelings of homogeneity, separateness and loneliness. Kate Kane takes the Diner experience further, examining the social alienation between the waiter and consumer: “imagine complimenting the lady behind the counter for the delicious meal or asking if you can help with the dishes” (141).

The matriarch of food writing, M.F.K. Fisher, speaks of three basic human needs—food, love and security—and her inability to think of one without the other. This intermingling is summarised in her statement: “So it happens that when I write of hunger for [food] and the love and warmth and richness and fine reality of hunger satisfied, it is all one” (187). Love (via family) and security (via architecture and landscape) were two original aspirations of the suburban dream and, as part of that
dream, the kitchen was seen as a physical space where meal provision and eating rituals could enhance love and security. Despite the vast changes in Australian dining over the years, including the struggle over who serves who and how much of themselves they invest in such an activity, the kitchen and meal table remain integral to households. The meal and dining are compelling details to include in contemporary fiction as they offer an opportunity for an exchange between diners. The food that characters consume and the ways they dine can also become a language for their relationships, culture and the social environment.

Food as Escape
Escape from domestic routine or strife is endemic to suburban and anti-suburban fiction. Even before the creation of Australia’s post-war, middle-class suburbs, Marjorie Barnard’s short story “The Lottery” (1943), explores the condition of the housewife in flight from domestic routine. Images of a tranquil marriage are presented through the peaceful scenes of husband Ted’s journey home from work via ferry. We glimpse his suburban life and thoughts when he learns from friends that his wife has won the lottery: he reflects on his modest home, his good housewife who has been a little ‘woody’ lately and considers various house improvements to spend the winnings on. The suburban ideal is smashed at the climactic end when Ted discovers that Grace had sold her mother’s ring to buy the ticket and has left the family, taking the winnings with her.

The characters in A Taste of Dreams also flee but it is not always clear that they escape to a better life. Dollar Bill flees Boronia Crescent, first for Surfers Paradise, then Europe. He flees throughout the story, without plan, only to end, alone, in the Australian suburbia from which he originally fled.

Both the teenagers and adults in A Taste of Dreams flee from confrontation or problems to unfulfilling alternatives: to nightclubs, overseas, into alcohol, affairs, the TV, music or dreams. Food and cooking offers characters the opportunity to flee from problems towards something positive and fulfilling. Further, food can provide both an escape and communal activity. Cooking is usually a solitary endeavour and the cooking process is often hidden away in the kitchen but in the sharing of food the individual steps into a shared space.

In “Mezzaluna,” Vaughn uses cooking as both a means of escaping the intense
emotions of his situation and as a way of reaching out to his mother. Food is also a creative escape for Fortini in “The Dance,” where, as is often the case in poor communities, life’s basics are cherished so that Fortini is almost ceremonial about food and imbues her whole kitchen with a spiritual approach to cooking. Kafemandeia (the Greek word for reading coffee grains) is the theatrical example of this: connecting food with the purpose of life and reinforcing her connection with others and her culture.

The Farmer’s wife in “The Dry Storm” is not able to escape through cooking but, instead, reads and dreams about food to transport her away from the harshness of her situation and the regret she feels about her life choices. The food of the Philippines represents the rich, fulfilled life the friend lives in contrast to the conservative, hard life the farmer’s wife has chosen by marrying a local boy and never leaving town, despite the promise the girls made to each other to travel the world together. Finally, dreams and desire turn into reality when she cooks chicken adobo in place of the regular Sunday roast. The stealth she employs in order to cook the meal and the reaction of her husband to the new food reveal much about the inner core of this married couple. The farmer sees food as an institution with rules, boundaries, patterns and routine. His wife longs for the vibrancy of life, variety, experiment and a way to reconnect with the dream of her youth. She immerses herself in cooking the national dish of the Philippines, absorbing the information about food through the letters and postcards. The usual fare this couple eats, the wife’s one attempt to try a ‘foreign’ dish and her husband’s reaction, reveal rules and codes that govern not only domestic eating habits but underpinning assumptions about the marital relationship.

As well as food being a pathway into dreams of how life could be, it has also been used by writers as a means of escape into memory and the past. The narrator of Proust’s In Search of Lost Time takes one bite of a petite madeleine, sips his tea and is instantly transported back in time:

And soon, mechanically, dispirited after a dreary day with the prospect of a depressing morrow, I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of the cake. No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shudder ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary changes that was happening to me . . . .

It is plain that the truth I am seeking lies not in the cup but in myself. (48)
So ensues descriptive reminiscences of Sunday mornings in Combray as a little boy with Aunt Léonie, who had given him a little bite of madeleine soaked in her lime-flower tea. Food provokes an epiphany as many memories from childhood surface, released by the taste and texture of the tea and cake.

Similarly, Marie, the prostitute in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, recalls a childhood meal:

> And every Saturday we’d get a case of beer and fry up some fish. We’d fry it in meal and egg batter, you know, and when it was all brown and crisp—not hard, though—we’d break open that cold beer. (46)

Such food detail is followed by Marie’s silence as “just such a meal sometime, somewhere transfixed her” (46). The exact memory of the food, while not recalling the place or time, suggests that memory of taste and smell may be more powerful than memory of time and place and that the senses are strongly linked with emotion as Marie recalls a childhood that was innocent and free.

Food, for Marie and Proust’s narrator, is a tactile experience that may transport them back to a place or people but, most importantly, back to a deep feeling or sensation. Food memories are pathways back to the self. A whole segment of the past can be revealed in one bite, enabling food to open up our memory banks and recall times we believe were better or less complicated than today.

Food as an escape, via memory, is fundamental to Primo Levi’s *Survival in Auschwitz*. After a four-day journey by freight train without food or water, Levi finds himself in a world obsessed with acquiring food for both “physical survival and as the yardstick of morality and humanness, necessary for spiritual salvation from the hell of the Lager” (Biasin 135). The level of starvation is powerfully illustrated in the scene of the work gang watching a bulldozer, on the other side of the road, shovel earth:

> Its mouth, hanging from its cables, opens wide its steel jaws . . . then rushes upon the soft, clayey soil and snaps it up voraciously . . . Then it rises, turns half around, vomits backwards its mouthful and begins again.

Leaning on our shovels, we stop to watch, fascinated. At every bite of its mouth our mouths also open, our Adam’s apples dance up and down,
wretchedly visible under the flaccid skin. We are unable to tear ourselves away from the sight of the steam-shovel’s meal. (74)

This scene prompts the prisoners to remember past meals and Levi himself recalls the last meal he ate with friends before they were taken away to the camp. Biasin observes that the prisoners “see reality literally in alimentary, edible terms” (138) as lack of food goes beyond biological and emotional needs and affects them psychologically. Life in the camp revolves around food and the guards’ and prisoners’ reactions to hunger reveal the desperateness and absurdity of the situation: the Germans sell spoons to the prisoners for half a ration; after the liberation, a warehouse is found to contain thousands of spoons. As Levi himself states: “The Lager is hunger; we ourselves are hunger, living hunger” (74).

Hunger is the theme of the book as starvation becomes a principal method of torture used by the Nazis: “Before dying the victim must be degraded, so that the murderer will be less burdened by guilt” (Drowned and Saved 101). Degradation and dehumanisation enabled the Nazis to create non-humans or beasts, a behaviour Levi observes in the starving prisoners’ habit of eating while standing: “the way of eating of animals, and certainly not . . . the human way of eating, seated in front of a table, religiously” (Survival 160).

Food and the prisoners’ lack of it become the measure of everything in the camp. Rations are currency, exchanged for clothes or tools, while stolen objects and materials are exchanged for rations. But most of all it is the measure of morality as Levi explores survival and the loss of so many emotions in the desperate craving for food; when the prisoners are forced to witness the execution of a fellow inmate they are apathetic and docile, but when the soup pot arrives, they become functioning and active again. Shame comes upon them as they realise that being unmoved by the death of man and driven only by the need to satisfy hunger, they have been broken.

Levi owes his survival mainly to the extra food smuggled to him every day for the last few months by the civilian, Lorenzo. But much more than the food itself, it is Lorenzo’s act of generosity itself that Levi thinks saved him because it reminds him that there are still good people in the world.

Survival in Auschwitz ends with the last ten days before liberation, when Levi and a small group are spared because they are in the camp hospital. The other hospital patients later thank Levi for attending to them by giving him a slice of bread. Levi
writes: “Only a day before a similar event would have been inconceivable. The law of
the Lager said: ‘eat your own bread, and if you can, that of your neighbour,’ and left no
room for gratitude. It really meant that the Lager was dead” (160). Food in this novel
ultimately becomes a concrete, physical symbol of salvation.

**Food and Togetherness**

In fiction, food can bring characters together at critical moments in the narrative and
provide the setting for significant scenes. It can move the action, advance characters
through the story and capture the essence of important moments when dialogue may not
be possible. It can also be a powerful opportunity for deep communion and trigger a
pivotal moment in a story.

Amy Bloom’s “Love is Not a Pie” uses food to advance the plot, mark time and
articulate the emotions of joy, grief and consolation. The story recalls summer holidays
enjoyed by the narrator’s family, concentrating on the later times when family friend,
Mr DeCuervo, joined them without his wife. It is during these summers that the
narrator, as a young girl, discovers that this man is the third person in the *ménage a trios*
of her parents’ marriage.

The attitudes towards food and eating reveal the characters’ personalities: Mrs
DeCuervo, on holiday in the early years, is considered a “professional mother” because
of her insistence that the children wash fruit before eating it, rest after lunch and make
their beds. In contrast, the narrator’s mother had few holiday rules: “don’t eat food with
mold or insects on it [and] don’t swim alone” (47).

The food details help to evoke the children’s world, their regimes and daily
routines: “We’d get up early . . . and make ourselves some breakfast: cold cereal or toast
if the parents were up, cake or cold spaghetti or marshmallows, if they were still asleep”
(49). Each adventure the children have is accompanied by food; their activities are
marked by meals or snacks, delivered through brief but effective descriptions—“Rainy
days were basically a series of snacks, more or less elaborate, punctuated by board
games, card games and whining” (54). On hot nights, dinner is followed by the adults
washing and drying the dishes, then lounging on the porch, chatting, cracking peanuts
and playing cards. The types of food and eating habits evoke the relaxation and freedom
of holidays. Meals determine the vacation’s routine and often set the mood for the
activities that follow.
It is the search for a midnight snack of strawberry shortcake that leads the narrator to the sight of her mother hugging Mr DeCuervo intimately. The child, sensing something is not quite regular, manipulates her mother as she is led back to bed:

“Sleep well, pumpkin pie. See you in the morning.”
“Will you make blueberry pancakes tomorrow?” It seemed like a good time to ask.
“We’ll see. Go to sleep.”
“Please, Mommy.”
“Okay, we’ll have a blueberry morning. Go to sleep, now . . . .” (52)

In the morning, it is Mr DeCuervo who serves the pancakes: “He knew what I liked and pushed the butter and the honey and the syrup toward me” (53). Butter, honey and syrup on pancakes are foods forbidden in a child’s regular diet just as the strange new world of relationships she has discovered also lies in the realm of the forbidden. This idea is continued when the young girl has to go to the bathroom in the middle of the next night due to stomach cramps “probably from all the burnt popcorn kernels I had eaten” (56). She discovers all three adults asleep in bed together.

Food also plays a significant role in the finale. At the wake, following her mother’s death, she observes her father and Mr DeCuervo grieving, reminiscing and laughing together. She shares her childhood discovery with her sister and her forgiveness of her mother is complete. They sit together in the kitchen and “eat everything sweet that people had brought over: brownies, strudel, pfeffernuss, sweet potato pie, Mrs Ellis’ chocolate cake, with chocolate mousse in the middle” (58). As adults, the two sisters consume the forbidden foods of childhood but it now carries a very different meaning—forgiveness, togetherness and release.

Forgiveness is also a main feature in Raymond Carver’s “A Small, Good Thing,” which uses food as a narrative and thematic device: initially, there is a misunderstanding over a cake, then it triggers a resolution. This is the story of a baker and the parents of an eight-year-old boy who is killed when hit by a car. When the parents do not come to collect the birthday cake they had ordered (because of the accident), the baker rings and leaves anonymous, nasty messages. The parents eventually identify him and visit the bakery full of anger. The baker is shocked by the death of their son and begs their forgiveness:
“Let me say how sorry I am,” the baker said . . . “God alone knows how sorry . . . I'm just a baker . . .

“You probably need to eat something,” the baker said. “I hope you'll eat some of my hot rolls. You have to eat and keep going. Eating is a small, good thing in a time like this,” he said.

He served them warm cinnamon rolls just out of the oven, the icing still runny. He put butter on the table and knives to spread the butter. Then the baker sat down at the table with them . . .

They ate rolls and drank coffee . . . Then he began to talk. They listened carefully. Although they were tired and in anguish, they listened to what the baker had to say . . .

“Smell this,” the baker said, breaking open a dark loaf. “It’s a heavy bread, but rich.” They smelled it, then he had them taste it. It had the taste of molasses and coarse grains. They listened to him. They ate what they could. They swallowed the dark bread. It was like daylight under the fluorescent trays of light. They talked on into the early morning, the high, pale cast of light in the windows, and they did not think of leaving (351-352).

Food in this story is a small, good thing that performs a great task—bringing traumatised, imperfect people together, providing comfort symbolically and tangibly, creating a shared experience and enabling characters to reach out to each other deeply but simply. The intimacy of the scene (only three people), the setting (the bakery) and the recent trauma all contribute to create a depth of intimacy.

The breaking of the bread by the baker adds a religious overtone to this story: communion, blessing, redemption, forgiveness through death. The Eucharist is often experienced as an austere, formal, public ritual of bread-breaking; Carver places the religious act in a very private, humble setting from which great depth of communion results. McGee draws attention to the satisfaction of basic needs—food which quells hunger, drink which quenches thirst—used as powerful symbols of the Eucharist (flesh and blood). The satisfaction of a physical need (hunger) is linked directly with satisfaction of a spiritual need (McGee 11).

In my story, “Beauty Point,” a traditional Eucharist is described—a highly
staged act at the father’s funeral three decades earlier where Martin is refused communion because he has not attended mass. On the day in which the story is set, when the three family members gather to discuss Rose’s impending move into a retirement village, Martin recalls being denied communion and his own angry behaviour after the death and funeral of his father. He grew up in a conservative suburban environment where certain behaviour were expected of him both within the home and the wider suburban community. Martin, Peter and Rose are a disparate, dysfunctional family who, like Carver’s characters, have experienced the death of family members yet they have not achieved harmony or resolution. Instead they drink whiskey throughout their afternoon together (lunch is not detailed), bicker and argue over minor issues, and avoid the more profound emotions associated with loss, change and forgiveness.

But *A Taste of Dreams* also contains scenes with food and drink that enhance social intimacy. In “Mezzaluna,” Bob the deli owner, talks about food with Vaughn as an alternative dialogue to the crisis in the boy’s life. Behind the discussions about spices, exciting flavours, adventure and delight in cooking, Bob is also communicating matters of the soul to the boy—the importance of rituals in our lives, the role of the meal as social discourse and its potential to affirm family ties. The relationship between man and teenager triggers Bob’s own life review.

Food and its activities in this story—the way it is prepared and provided—offer many possibilities for characters to express themselves, to reach out to others and communicate about the inner life or reflect on it alone. Food unites the characters and becomes a language between people when dialogue is not possible, providing an effective way for the teenage protagonist to care for his mother. Food placed strategically in a fictional story operates as a tactile activity for characters and articulates “in concrete terms what is oftentimes vague, internal, abstract” (Schofield 1).

In my story, “The Dance,” Fortini is another character who understands food and its social and familial significance. Her cooking gives strength to Joanne who reflects back on the time spent with the Greek woman on the island, while trying to work through her current life events and future. Joanne remembers the detail of Fortini’s cooking methods but it is the overall experience with Fortini that teaches her about separateness and togetherness, about creating much out of little, about the mystery and the cycle of life.

Giulietta, in “Dollar Bill,” is another Mediterranean woman whose food is a
central focus of her life. In this story, cooking is a commercial exercise and as soon as
the financial arrangement with Domenico is over she stops cooking the various Italian
regional dishes and returns to her own recipes. Daily food for her is strongly regional
and traditional. Yet the cookbook stays in Domenico’s life as a symbol of a time when
he came close to the tranquillity he seeks. Bennie cooks from the book, both because
she enjoys cooking but also to keep her relationship alive, but to no avail. Dollar Bill
has idealised the recipes to the extent that simply reading the book evokes idealised
nostalgia and increased disgruntlement about his life in Australia.

In an Australian short story collection with a central culinary theme I felt it was
vital to include cuisines from countries significant to Australia’s immigrant past. While
Australia’s British immigrants established the meat and wheat industries to feed the
nation and the world, it was the Mediterranean and Asian immigrants who tilled the soil
to provide the fruit and vegetables. In traditional Mediterranean or Asian villages, food
consumed is home-grown and the cuisines have developed through hundreds of years of
glut and famine. But, as Michael Symons reveals in *One Continuous Picnic*, when these
immigrants brought their market gardens and strong agrarian history it had little impact
on Australian agriculture. Tilling a plot of land, loading a cart with a supply of
vegetables for the markets or running a shopfront to sell your produce is a very different
food-growing tradition from droving herds across vast outback areas or broadacre
sugarcane and wheat farming. While Australia’s historic role as a world provider of
food and fibre may seem to have little relevance to home-cooking, Symons notes that
“the sacrifice of family farms to agribusiness left us with hard tomatoes, pale eggs and
stale apples cosmically coated with wax” (283). The Australian suburban backyard is
an ideal place for growing a household’s fruit and vegetables (and even small animal
meats) but this space has, especially since World War II, usually featured water-greedy,
swimming pools and/or a water-dependent English-style lawns and gardens. Ronald
Conway believes that this lack of good land use stems from our origins—the first white
Australians came from the overflowing industrial cities of Britain: they were not
farmers or crofters, and “from the very outset the dominant desire . . . was to soften their
environment rather than respond to its challenges” (19). Australia’s only successful
indigenous crop has been the macadamia, which the Americans discovered. Symons
notes: “With typically sardonic humour, unable to take this society seriously,
Australians hold up the meat pie and tomato sauce as their national dish. It has
everything: it’s borrowed, it’s crude; its contents are dubious; it’s portable; it’s factory-
made, and even the manufacturers are now mostly foreign” (299).

Many Australian short story writers have featured non-western countries in their writings, such as Beverley Farmer’s short stories set in Greece. Food production and cooking are an integral part of these stories; they provide order and rhythm to daily life. In “Milk,” the narrator is taken, aged nine, by his father to Greece, his homeland. The rural village, where he stays with his Yiayia (Grandmother) and Papou, is subsistence living. Village life revolves around farming—lucerne, hay, tobacco—and the child’s daily life centres on the farm animals: cows, goats, sheep, dogs, cats and the *lykanthropos*—the wolf that attacks the farm animals for food. The boy, against the unsentimental attitude of the village, bottle-feeds a donkey calf after its mother is taken by the wolf. Similarly, Yiayia wants to care for a dying friend by feeding her but is prevented by the patient’s daughter-in-law and the prejudices of the villagers. Through food production and provision Farmer gives us a story about the life cycle, captured in Yiayia’s statement after her friend dies and the boy must leave the village before the donkey calf has been weaned: “What can we do? It has to be so. We all have to die. We die and donkeys die, even wolves die” (14). The boy’s time spent in this rural village is a rite-of-passage and food is part of the great cycle of birth, growth and death.

In Farmer’s story, “Melpo,” the dominant Greek matriarch refuses to accept Kerry, a single-parent Australian, as the future second wife of her son Jimmy. Kerry is summoned to the sick woman’s bedside to meet her for the first time. Jimmy’s sisters are pleasant to their brother’s fiancé but her arrival in the kitchen triggers a clash between the close-knit, traditional Mediterranean home life and Kerry’s outsider status: “Eleni and Voula, exchanging looks, have served Kerry iced water, a dish of tough green figs in syrup, a glass of Marsala, then Turkish coffee . . . Flustered, Kerry waits, avoiding Jimmy’s eyes. She feels gruff and uncouth, awkward” (19). The kitchen, the sisters and the food they serve represents the greater cultural landscape that Kerry will marry into. She defends herself against the future mother-in-law’s accusation that she is not to be trusted but returns to a kitchen that is “full of shrill chatter” and “saucepans hiss, bouncing their lids, gushing sunlit steam” (23). Although Kerry may have opposed the matriarch and won the verbal argument, she will have to confront an entirely new cultural world when she marries Jimmy, represented by the sisters and the three children who are “suddenly silent, stare with identical eyes like dates; stare up in alarm” (23).

Farmer speaks of her own experience living in Melbourne with her Greek partner, his brother and a male cousin: “I had to become fluent in Greek, since I had
three Greek men living in the house at one stage and I never got a word in unless it was in Greek . . . It was like a ghetto—we went to Greek houses, Greek weddings, Greek parties. We bought from Greek shops, went to the Greek cinema‖ (Willbanks 73). This may be Kerry’s future, suggested by the food and the extended family she returns to in the kitchen. In a simple scene of two generations of young Greek people, silent around a table of traditional food, we see a stronger force facing Kerry than anything the old mother has said. It is this strength of endurance in ethnic cultures, despite famine, war, diaspora and migration that I try to capture in my stories “The Dance,” “Mezzaluna” and “Dollar Bill.”

Culinary cultural traditions reveal beliefs and values that have universal relevance. When including ethnic cuisines in my collection, I was mindful of Ghassan Hage’s criticism of cosmo-multiculturalism—Australia’s experience of ethnic foods as an inner city experience focusing on the diner’s enjoyment and rarely including the ethnic cook or grower. I wanted to acknowledge, in my stories, Hage’s concept of the “culinary practices of home-building” (119), to demonstrate that ethnic foods and feasts indicate more than a nationality. Bob, Fortini and Giulietta are characters based on my own Mediterranean friends whom I have known both in Australian suburban homes or villages overseas. These villages are agrarian societies that trust in food’s ability to heal, connect and sustain lives, physically and spiritually. When Dollar Bill enters Giulietta’s culinary world or when Joanne enters her landlord’s kitchen, they are served both food and life advice. Joanne is embraced strongly by Fortini whose relationship with her tenant is through cooking. Bob shows strength and compassion for Vaughn via advice about food, while Giulietta wields her wooden spoon and her admonishments at Domenico for his inconsistent lifestyle. In the latter case, the encounter is more harsh and critical, perhaps because Giulietta is speaking to someone of her own race.

David Malouf records his experience of living in Italy in “A Place in Tuscany” from 12 Edmondstone Street. The main character is Agatina, the narrator’s landlord. Here, like Fortini and Giulietta, is the fierce, verbal Mediterranean woman: “powerfully plain . . . bossy, bad-tempered, humorous, shrewd . . . passionate defender of family and of all friends, and in the village much respected and feared‖ (74). Agatina is Malouf’s protagonist, and her family members, the food-growing landscape around the Tuscan village and the kitchen are her supporting cast. Food preparation and mealtimes are “serious social occasions, prolonged and formal both in shape and in the rituals they follow, but the fare is simple, healthy, boring.” (72). Time is measured by the food
cycle—seeding, harvesting, picking, ploughing—and produce is cooked in multiple ways until it is all used. Against the background of these routines and patterns we are given the history of Agatina’s four siblings and her parents through two world wars, village rivalries, grief and grace. What appears to be a simple life is in fact a deep, connected, sustaining network of relationships and community via ritual and cycles. When life is physically challenging and resources are sparse, perhaps ritual provides a rhythm to life which helps consumers avoid waste and transcend their difficulties and hardship.

Inhabitants of agrarian societies live in close proximity to the food-growing landscape. At times this has been idealised in cookbooks and food travel books that use narrative and photography to present only the glorious side of the landscape—we do not see the labour-intensive work, the sweltering heat or severe cold inside the homes, the poor quality soils or lack of infrastructure and public services. Halligan believes the glossy, quarto books that present the ‘filtered’ view simply make the reader covetous of the peasant lifestyle and, as a result, concerned only with the differences in a western lifestyle such that the reader is unable to enjoy the ‘earth-connectedness’ that the author/photographer is trying to present (50).

Hage writes that “multiculturalism in Australia is, or at least ought to be, above all about migrant lives and intercultural interaction” (118). Similarly, ethnic food and the western consumer should not be the centre of the narrative in fiction but rather the focus should be on the interconnection brought about by shared food and the rituals of life. Krishnendu Ray, in his essay “Meals, Migration and Modernity,” explains “Bengali Americans’ project of finding a place of their own by way of the kitchen garden” (171). This place is the land around the modern American home that produces the foods of the homeland. Just as Italians in Brooklyn have vegetable gardens instead of flower gardens, Bengali Americans laid out their gardens not only along produce lines but according to ancient, cosmic, sacred patterns and diagrams from folk art. They looked out from their modern, American homes onto their Bengal landscape.

It is this intimate connection between food and identity that is absent from many Australian suburban homes and the lack of which impacts both on our obesity levels and overall lifestyle. Huntley notes that “it used to be that the skill of a domestic cook was measured by what she could do with scant resources . . . but the more scant resource nowadays is time” (58). Huntley’s book is concerned with the way the restriction of three elements—time, suburb and money—shapes the diet of Australians. When time is
continually restricted, quality of life decreases, including quality of food consumed. Parents may become too tired to cook or shop for quality food, let alone attempt to grow it or consume it leisurely. In agrarian societies, home-building begins with food and radiates from the hearth. The suburban yard is an ideal piece of land to provide fresh produce and promote better eating habits and possibly provide a meaningful connection amongst families and communities through the rituals of growing, cooking and providing.

In *A Taste of Dreams*, foreign food is cooked and consumed in the Australian home to reflect the entry of ethnic ingredients and meals into suburban life (usually via the supermarket). In “Three Pots Red,” Joan and John make *tom kha gai* (chicken and coconut soup) just as they have made beef and vegetable soups in the past. The recipe is new to them but fish sauce and coconut milk are already in their pantry despite a conventional culinary history: bread and honey after dinner, Monte Carlo biscuits whilst reading the *Women’s Weekly*, and the recipes in the dinner party record book. This reflects Australian society over the last twenty years—while our nation does not have an identifiable cuisine of its own, the adoption of recipes from the ancient cuisines of our neighbours has expanded our gastronomy.

When including foreign foods, I was mindful not to not over emphasise ethnic meals or ingredients at the expense of the Australian characters, lest the writing become self-conscious and cause the food to take centre stage. Nicole Mones’ *Last Chinese Chef* is an awkward read as the naiveté of the American protagonist, Maggie, contrasts jarringly with the culinary depth of the Chinese-American-Jewish chef, Sam. Maggie is a competent journalist sent abroad to profile Sam in China yet she hardly moves beyond the ‘innocent abroad’ status and remains a cultural cipher in awe of the great Chinese cooking traditions and the Chinese chefs. Mones presents the cultural contrast via an immature, under-developed narrator against a larger-than-life, serious, Chinese chef imbued with the history of his clan.

In her preface to *Cooking by the Book*, Schofield writes: “Food cooked, eaten and thought about provides a metaphoric matrix, a language that allows us a way to get at the uncertainty, the ineffable qualities of life” (1). *A Taste of Dreams* features food and its cycles of growing, cooking, serving and sharing—rituals that can provide opportunities for interconnectedness and community. The concrete, tangible nature of food and the human interaction with food via cooking and consumption can also provide an opportunity for connection to the intangible parts of life: emotions,
relationships and identity.

Domestic fiction set in Australian suburbs can be successful when we look beyond the external to the detail of life within. Inside suburban homes there are people who live full and varied lives, regardless of the external façade, social class or lifestyle of the inhabitants. *A Taste of Dreams* is a contribution to the genre of Australian suburban fiction through the depiction of the domestic environment, including the rituals associated with food, which provides structure and symbolism to stories and gives characters a sense of place and identity.
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