An Olive Branch for Sante

(A novel)

and

The Italian Diaspora in Australia and Representations of Italy and Italians in Australian Narrative

This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of Murdoch University 2006.

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my account of my own research. Apart from acknowledged quotes and citations, the material of this work has not been previously submitted at any tertiary educational institution.

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Abstract

This PhD presentation comprises two pieces of work:

I
*The Italian Diaspora in Australia and Representations of Italy and Italians in Australian Narrative* (Research thesis)

II
*An Olive Branch for Sante* (A novel)

In the *Introduction* of my research titled: *Diaspora: A Theoretical Review*, I look at the evolution of diasporic Studies and how the great movements of people that have occurred in the past one hundred and fifty years have altered our perception of what is undoubtedly a global phenomenon.

In Chapter *One*, which I have titled: *In Search of an Italian Diaspora in Australia*, I consider the kinds of socio-cultural nuclei that have evolved among the Italian population of Australia, out of the mass migration which occurred largely in the post war years. I discuss Italian migration as a whole, the historical and political conditions which brought about mass migration and the subsequent dispersion of Italian nationals, their regrouping into various clusters and how these fit into the patchwork that is the contemporary Australian society. Finally I review the conditions in the host
country which facilitated or hindered particular socio-cultural formations and how these may differ from those occurring in other countries.

Chapter Two deals with, The Narrative of Non-Italian Writers. The chapter looks at the images and myths of Italy perpetrated in the literature written by English-speaking authors over the centuries. I begin with the legacy left by British writers such as E.M. Forster, then move on to Australian writers of non-Italian background, such as Judah Waten, Nino Culotta (John O'Grady) and Helen Garner. In Chapter Three: Italo-Australian Writers, I focus on two writers: Venero Armanno and Melina Marchetta, both born in Australia of Italian parents. This section ties in with the earlier discourse on the continuity of the Italian Diaspora in Australia, into the second and subsequent generations.

In Chapter Four, titled: Literature of Nostalgia: The Long Journey, I will reflect upon my own journey as a writer, beginning with my earlier work, including the short stories and the plays, and concluding with a close look at the present novel, which is a companion piece to the research.

The novel complements the research in that it deals with the eternal issues of migration: displacement, change and identity. The protagonists are two young people: Ira-Jane and Sante. The first is not a migrant, but she is touched by migration, insofar as an old Italian couple play grandparents to her, in the early years of her life. When they return to Sicily the child is left with her neglectful and unstable mother. At age twenty-four Ira-Jane goes to Sicily on an assignment, and there she tries to get in touch with her 'grandparents'. She meets up with eighteen-year-old Sante who turns out to be her half brother. The novel's structure juxtaposes two countries, two cultures, two way of looking at the world. It sets up a series of contrasts: the old society and the new, past and
present, tradition and innovation, stability and change, repression and freedom. The end of the novel proposes a symbolic bridging between two countries, which are similar in some ways, very different in others. It offers not a solution but a different approach to the eternal dilemma of people living in a diaspora, inhabiting an indefinite space between two countries and for whom home will always be somewhere else.
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**Part II**

*An Olive Branch for Sante*  (A novel)
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Thank you to my wife, June Houston, for reading the novel and giving me some insightful feedback.

A chapter from the novel: An Olive Branch for Sante, has appeared in Westerly. My thanks to Delys Bird and Dennis Haskell, editors of Westerly.
An Olive Branch for Sante

By Antonio Casella
Mention of Sicily stirred the waters of memory in Ira-Jane. Long submerged images scattered on the surface of her consciousness like flotsam; Nonnu’s unlaced boots, his knobbly knees beneath blue canvas shorts, Nonna’s thin face with eye sockets like spectacle rims, a swing hanging from an olive tree branch, the shadowy outline of that other woman: the one with the wiry black hair and the terse face. These images threatened to hold her mind captive, so she pressed them back.

Never mind all that stuff now, memories are self-indulgent, a sign of weakness, a wasteful sentimentality. Memories, good or bad, can hold your life to ransom. The bad ones turn you into victim, the good ones lead to a wasting disease called nostalgia; that is, life lived in the past, an illusion of life, life as a mirage. No thanks, not for her. Give her the experience of the present, any day.

To the present, then. The levigate touch of the bar of Dove inside her hand did the trick. She ran it over her breasts, let the water wash off the suds. She wanted to go on this assignment because it would be good for her career. That’s it.

She didn’t want to sound too keen though, or else Bob Woldridge, Rattlesnake Bob, the Editor of The Daily Star, would use it as a lever to get his way. Although what else he might want from her she couldn’t imagine, given that she was right now washing herself clean of body fluids, his and hers, while he snored off the effort with a snooze.
Draped in a white towel, Ira stepped on the bath mat from where she could see his back curled around in a semi-foetal position.

“Bob,” she called through the bath door, “it’s nearly two-thirty.”

“Shit!”

He kicked off the sheets and gathered his things off the floor. He slipped on the jocks, cupping his hand over the precious bulk of his manhood and let it loose into the bulging pocket.

“Aren’t you going to have a wash?”

“No time. Anyhow, I like the smell of a woman on me. Gives me a charge all day long.”

A woman. Not her in particular. Any woman. Fine, it suited her, Ira-Jane, 24 year-old and ambitious, bedding her 43 year-old married editor with the sort of baggage that ensured he would not become one for her. There’s security in knowing that his demands would go no further than the four walls of a bedroom. And of course, there is more than one use for the bedroom. To glean useful information, for example.

“Why Sicily?” She asked.

“’Cause the Boss has gone cuckoo in his old age, that’s why. He is off to Sicily on some religious pilgrimage and wants a journalist to go with him to do a feature.”

“Could be interesting.”

“It’s crap. Escapes is a travel magazine, not a rag for religious nuts.”

“Have you got someone in mind?”

“What do you mean?”

“To do the assignment.”

“Not yet.”

“I speak Italian.”
“Yeah?”

It hardly registered. Despite the perfunctory response his attention had drifted to his foot trying to find a way into his trouser leg. She allowed the conversation to ease to neutral chatter; watched him, as he buttoned up his body shirt over his chest, on which sat a thick gold chain in a curly mat of salt-and-pepper body hair. She waited until they were in the car before she broached the subject again.

“I don’t mind doing it,” She said.

“What?”

“Go to Sicily.”

This time Bob looked straight at her. Although she tried to sound casual his ear sharpened at the intensity in her voice as she pronounced ‘Sicily’. She could sense him waver between dismissal and acquiescence. It’s all in the timing, she should have pursued it when he first mentioned it, as they left the office, then he would have been more amenable. Now her power was diminished, squirted out with the flow of his orgasm.

“Nah, we’ll send a man.”

“Why a man?”

“Those Sicilians are notorious bum-pinchers. Hardly the sort of place for a young blonde.”

He was meant to sound protective, fatherly. It didn’t quite come off, considering that, as he talked, he was surveying the contours of her breasts inside the blouse. As the car came to a stop at the lights he said,

“That was good stuff.”

She waited for the inevitable smirk and patronising wink; instead, a serious change descended upon his face. The bottom lip curled nervously.

“How old are you, Janey?”
Janey was his term of endearment, or rather, a diminutive designed to keep her in her place at the same time. One day, when things changed between them… for now she let it pass.

“You know how old I am.”

“Twenty five next birthday, right?”

She didn’t bother confirming it. She was mad at him for trying to make her seem older.

“The thing is, Janey, I need you here.”

“Nonsense, Rachael can do my job.”

He considered her with a side-glance. His head, whose baldness was blurred by a number 2 haircut, sank between his shoulders. His uncharacteristic nervousness she found disconcerting.

“I mean, I need you.”

She suppressed a terse giggle. What was that about? They had an understanding, an arrangement that suited them both. He was married with two children (or was it three?) Was he now thinking of a trade-in for a new model? If so, he could count her out.

“How are your kids?” she said, dispassionately. She didn’t want him to get the idea that she was asking out of real interest, and for good measure, she added, “Must be hard on your wife, bring up kids when you’re…so busy. Personally, I wouldn’t want the responsibility.”

“They’re not kids anymore,” he protested, “the oldest is nearly eighteen…” then in the tunnel he proceeded to tell her that their marriage had no more spark left, how they have drifted apart…and other such phrases men use to justify leaving their wives.

Ira-Jane listened, allowing him the perfunctory “hm…hm”, even nodding agreement, to keep him sweet. But, as the car came out of the tunnel she had
taken two decisions: that she would go up and see Franzetti herself; and that this would be the last time she would bed Bob. Pity about the latter, though, because Bob had been good value, despite his propensity for admiring his own pectorals in the mirror. Pity he'd gone and spoilt it by going serious on her. This Bob she found decidedly unattractive. She much preferred Bob the bastard, the predator. At least there she felt safe in knowing the limits. Now the situation threatened to crash through the barrier and go into a space she had no wish to enter.

Bob kept silent until the car pulled into the underground car park of The Daily Star, but he must have been thinking plenty, and now he wanted her to do likewise.

“You think about it, Ira. We have now been together...what?...three years?...just about. They’ve been good years. I’m ready to move up a notch, to something more substantial. We could make a good team, you and me. I can feel it. Think about it.”

She said, “These underground car parks smell like a gas chamber.”

She sprang open the car door, nearly hit the new Lancer, in the next bay.

“I need to go up for some fresh air.”

Exasperation made him churlish.

“What's this shit about Sicily, anyhow? Why would you want to go to a place like that?”

As if she would open herself up to him that way. And how could she explain to Bob something she herself barely understood? So of course she looked for a platitude of convenience, to obfuscate.

“I want to do some travel. Experience the world a bit. That's why I wanted to do journalism. ”
Before going up, Ira-Jane tied her blond hair up demurely on the back of her head in a croissant roll, she toned down her lipstick by wiping her lips with a Wet One, closed the cleavage on her cross-over blouse by pinning the collar with a fake pearl broach. She would have liked to wear her spectacles, but removing her contact lenses was just too much of an ordeal.

The oval shape of his real-oak desk encased Clem Franzetti’s long frame rising above the level of the desk and suggesting some unseen, iceberg-sized power below the surface. His face was, as always, unreadable, the expression of someone eating a slice of lemon. Mr Franzetti was not your typical boss, there was no sure-fire confidence about him. He seemed a little tentative, ambivalent. Such ambivalence found expression in his physical delineations. He had a long nose, whose safety-pin nostrils flared like air pumps as he breathed, but his eyes were relatively small and close together, while his eyebrows ran across the full length of his brow. His square chin jutted out, suggesting a pugnacious nature, but a dimple softened the impression. On the phone he had the booming voice of a heavily built man; in fact he was thin and long-limbed, and his stomach slid inwards from his ribs.

Ira-Jane waited for permission to speak. He placed an elbow on the curved arm of his chair and the other hand over his wrist, then nodded looking not at her but at some shadow beyond her. She feigned a decorous degree of nervousness.

“As you know, Mr. Franzetti, next month is the anniversary of the death of Catherine Mc McCauley....” it would please him that she should know such detail about Australia’s first and only Saint “What I had in mind...” she brought out her portfolio of notes and sketches on a design for a feature.

Mr. Franzetti hardly reacted. Ira-Jane took his silence for approval.

“What should I go ahead with it?”
“It looks promising. Just remember, Jane, with material of a religious nature, you’ll need to run the piece past me before it goes to print.”

“Yes of course, Mr Franzetti…”

It was a good time to make her move.

“There is another matter I wanted to consult you about. The assignment on Sicily, I’d be very keen to do it myself. None of the staff speak Italian.”

“And you do?”

“Yes, quite fluently,” and here she hoped that he wouldn’t put her to the test.

Mr. Franzetti, unlike Bob, seemed impressed, though she only had a slight tilting of the eyebrow to confirm it, “You see,” she lied sweetly, “my grandparents are from there, on my mother’s side. Naturally I’ve always had an interest in that part of the world.”

Franzetti’s eyes journeyed forth out of some distant region and came to rest upon her, perhaps for the first time since she had known him.

“I see, how very interesting. “

He got out of his chair. He pulled up his trousers from the waist, leaving one thumb tucked in the waist band, came to the front of the desk and circled once around her, without taking his eyes off her, as if trying to catch the right angle.

“Well, can I go?”

“What?” he recovered from his reverie, "yes, of course, I didn't mean to detain you."

Ira-Jane wondered whether she should persist. Normally she wouldn't dare, but somehow she sensed that she had acquired power in the last few moments.

“I mean, can I go to Sicily?”

A pause. But he wasn’t thinking about her question. Clearly something else was occupying his mind. She had never been so close to him before. Predictably his aura was diminished by closeness. He looked unkempt, absent. Maybe Bob
was right in saying that he had gone strange since the death of his wife and son. The impression was not helped by the fact that a faint smell of mustiness came off him. Finally, he tilted his head, presented his left cheek and said:

“Sicily eh? Did you say your folks are from Sicily?”

“Grandparents,” she corrected him. Even a lie needed to be consistent.

“That’s… very interesting. My mother was born there.”

A bridge, by magic, opened between them.

“Have you discussed it with Bob?”

“I…I’ve mentioned it to him…”

“And?…”

“Well…he is not…he is making it difficult. The thing is… there have been some problems between me and Bob, lately. This might be a good opportunity for… giving each other some space.”

“Hm.”

Clem Franzetti always made it his business to know everything worth knowing about his employees, and of course he was aware of his Editor’s philandering. You might think that an employer who was known for his strong Catholic faith would object. In fact he did not mind it. He didn’t condone it of course. After all lust and betrayal are serious sins, but they weren’t his. As far as he was concerned, the sins of his subordinates merely affirmed their weakness and reflected on his own moral superiority.

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The next day Bob called her in. He was unusually restrained, formal,

“I’ve asked Sarah to book a flight for you, for next month. From October the 9th you’ll be on overseas assignment for 10 days. You’ll need to organize your staff during that time.”
“Where am I going?” She asked, trying not to sound too disingenuous.

His “Sicily” was sullen. He was trying to make her feel guilty. Why should she? She simply claimed her right to do a job she wanted and could do better than anyone else on the staff. As she turned to leave he said.

“What’s the big attraction about Sicily, anyhow?”

Ira-Jane said nothing. It was a rhetorical question anyway. Her silence irked him.

“I know what you’re after. Well, I’d be careful if I were you, Janey, you start getting on a horse that’s too high for you and run the risk of coming a cropper.”

He was seething. Let him. But he was wrong if he thought she wanted to lasso the Old Man. She had other reasons for taking this journey.

For the second time in as many days, Ira-Jane took the lift upstairs to Clem Franzetti’s office. This time the summons came from the boss himself.

“Did you get the assignment you wanted?” asked Clem. He knew she had, of course.

“Yes, I leave in two weeks,” said Ira, sounding bright and interested, but stopped short of gushing.

Clem Franzetti had a long face, tending on the lugubrious, and yet there was something vaguely comical about him. Perhaps it was in his large nose. His eyebrows did a little pirouette over the bridge of his nose, and paused there. They were the telltale signs that he was about to go serious, though the gesture itself was inadvertently comical.

“Has Bob mentioned we’ll be travelling together?”

“No,” she said, instinctively going defensive.

“That’s a bit remiss of him…He did mention I was going to Sicily, though.”
“Oh yes, I didn’t realize we’d be going at the same time, though.”

“Is that OK with you?”

“Of course,” Ira-Jane pitched her tone to a high level of interest, but clipped her enthusiasm just short of gushing, “You’re going on a pilgrimage, I believe.”

Franzetti’s eyebrows did another lilt.

“That’s the official line, however there’s more to it than that and that’s the reason I’ve called you in today… the thing is I don’t want this to go any further than yourself… I mean, even Bob is not privy to the whole story… you see I’ll be going to a clinic… to get some tests. No, there’s nothing wrong with me, strong as an elephant- as you can see by the size of my proboscis, ” here the old man indulged in a rare chuckle, “but at my age, you can’t be too careful…”

She did not ask why he had to go all the way to Sicily to get tested. She sensed that there was more to this than Franzetti was letting on. The prospect of entering inside the private world of another person excited her. Already she was seeing a side of Franzetti that he kept hidden: his nervousness, his tone of familiarity, his humorous self-deprecation. Maybe old Franzetti wasn’t as bad as his reputation, maybe he was one of those people who improved on proximity.

“The clinic just happens to be not far from the shrine of Tindari that you will be doing your story on. I have told Bob to give you a few extra days. I want you around, in case I need you, seeing as you are familiar with the language. I hope you don’t mind.”

Ira-Jane felt shit scared. Having exaggerated her knowledge of the Italian language, in order to get the assignment, now she was caught in a trap of her own making. It occurred to her also, that he might be deliberately putting her to the test, an expensive test, seeing as the company was paying for her trip. And why would he wish to do that, anyway? What was in it for him? Surely Bob’s suspicions couldn’t be correct. Not at his age. Not a waxy religious nut! Still you hear all sorts
of things about priests these days. And of course, she knew what they said about
men with big noses... This thought appealed to her sense of the ridiculous and she
laughed to herself. It relaxed her enough to make the next move. She decided to
go for the near-truth that could pass for sincerity.

"Of course, you realise Mr Franzetti..."

"It’s Clem...please."

“Clem, that I haven’t used the language in a long time. I might be a bit
rusty...”

“I’m sure we’ll be fine. I’m rather looking forward to this little adventure,” he
took her elbow and led her to the door, “Now don’t forget, so far as anyone’s
concerned, my trip is about the spirit, not a word about the body.”

Her spirits were pretty high when she left Franzetti’s office. His unexpected
friendliness did not worry her. Men’s attentions, she could handle OK. Indeed if she
thought about it, she was flattered, even if he was an old man.

Ira-Jane had lied to her boss, technically, but not in fact. Even though they
were not her genetic grandparents, Nonnu and Nonna La Rocca were the only
grandparents she ever knew.

Now that she was going to Sicily she allowed herself to peer into the dusty
frame of her past and saw the picture of an old man in blue and white check flannel
shirt coming in from the garden in cracked leather boots. He took them off in the
laundry and shuffled about the house, calling in a wheezy voice:
“Ira, Ira… unni si?”  

And 4-year-old Ira-Jane, would hide under the table- always under the table- while Nonna, put her index on her lips and called out.

“Nun c’e chiu’ Ira. Si nni iu. Nun c’e”

Then Nonnu would start looking all over the kitchen, in the cupboards, inside the old fridge with squeaky hinges, behind the door, where he rattled the broom and the mop in mock frustration; under the embroidered tablecloth…and all the while declaiming dramatically in Sicilian, ‘Unne’ dda figghia? Ma unne’? Scumpariu.’

Ira-Jane, finally burst out from under the table, in a fit of giggles:

“Cca sugnu”

And she would fly into his arms, burying her face into his warm flannel shirt, taking in the smells of fresh earth, citrus blossom and olive brine.

Nonna, was ever busy in the kitchen, in the laundry, in the spare room, where she had an old sewing machine and made her flouncy little frocks with clover-leaf collar, which she embroidered with figures of animals. In the back veranda she sat on the wooden chair that smelled of linseed oil, plaited her blond hair and tied it with red ribbons which Ira-Jane liked to undo and let dangle over her eyes. In late afternoons she cooked her pasta in the kind of sauce she has not eaten since. Or at least that’s how it seems to her.

“She won’t eat anything else,” she mock-complained to Pina, from next door, but in reality proud that her cooking was such a success with the child. Iretta was even closer to Nonnu because, being retired, he was always there and when Nonna was at work he looked after her. Nonnu never told her off, when they went to the shops he let her sit in the parcel basket and wheeled her around the shops. The

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1 Ira where are you?  
2 Ira isn’t here. She’s gone. She’s not here.  
3 Where is that child? Where is she? She’s vanished  
4 Here I am!
only time she heard him growl was when the pink galahs came and picked at the
soft-shelled almonds of his tree outside the kitchen, then he rushed out shouting as
he flailed a cane stick and his Adam's apple trilled inside his throat and his face
went as pink as the parrot's feathers.

Once, she remembers, when she came home from kindergarten Nonnu was
waiting for her in the drive. He took her by the hand and led her through the house
to the back, talking to her in a mixture of Sicilian and a few words of English that he
knew.

“Looka, Iretta, veni, ti fazzu vidiri nna cosa bedda.”

On the edge of the back veranda a massive passion-fruit vine clambered up
a trellis, Nonnu lifted her up and sat her on his shoulder, then pointed to a little
bird's nest woven in the vine. It took a while for Ira to locate the two tiny eggs,
looking like white eyes in the nest. Ira shrieked with delight. For weeks, while the
birds were nesting, Nonnu barricaded the back door, to get in the house from the
garden they had to go through the garage and use the front door entrance. A visit to
the nest became a daily ritual for her and Nonnu. Sometimes Nonna would yell at
her husband in Sicilian, “Ignazio, let that poor bird be, or it will leave the eggs. Si
peggiu d'un carusu.”

One day when Ira came home, Nonnu was particularly excited. He took her
to visit the nest and instead of two eggs there were two tiny pink birds, with yellow-
rimmed beaks. As they sensed movement in the foliage they stretched their necks
and opened their beaks wide: two helpless beaks, craving food, clamouring for a
right to a life.

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5 Look Iretta, I’m going to show you a beautiful thing.
6 You’re worse than a kid.
These memories were her real childhood, before the rest of it; before her mother reappeared, with her latest boyfriend, to reclaim her, when she was just seven. She never saw her Sicilian Grandparents again. What followed was a six-year ordeal of wandering around the east coast, moving from town to town, from house to house, from man to man. And the smells were stale and the memories nebulous. The food often came in wrappers, in tins and her mother’s breath had the constant sickening stench of alcohol and tobacco. Finally the memories of Nonnu and Nonna were blurred in the murky chaos of her life with Mother.

There was a pattern in the way that her mother, Sheryl Giffen, related to men. She always fell for domineering, violent ones. Afraid of being abandoned, she gave herself to a new man, gave in to his demands, changed herself to his ways and became vulnerable to threats and blackmail. Each lasted a few months, a couple of years perhaps, until the effort exhausted her. The longer the relationship endured the more intense grew her fear that the man would leave her sooner or later. In reality it was she who grew weary, or rather, she tired of bending to her partner’s will.

Then, when Ira-Jane was 13, her life took yet another turbulent turn. Sheryl’s latest boyfriend was Savier, a much younger man who had arrived in Australia as a refugee from East Timor. To be fair he was the best of a bad bunch of boyfriends. At least he wasn’t violent, nor, as far she knew, did he have a criminal record, or do drugs. The problem was that he had a sweetheart back in Dili, to whom he intended to return, when things had normalized there. This revelation should have warned Sheryl off him, instead she became besotted. When the time came for him to go back, Sheryl felt betrayed and abandoned. The night before he was due to leave they went on a river cruise down to Fremantle. On the boat she
drank more than usual, a bad sign, as alcohol made her mawkish. There was salsa
dancing on deck, to the rhythm of a Latino band called Havana Nights. Sheryl
started to argue with Savier, abusing him and swearing. So Savier left her on deck
and went down. When they got to Barrack street jetty, half an hour later, he went
looking for her. Her body was found in the Swan River the next morning.

Ira-Jane’s next-of-kin was her natural father, whom she had never met, or at
least did not remember meeting. Her mother referred to him simply as ‘the bastard’. He
was, as it turned out, Detective Sergeant Russell Toohey, a burly, red-faced
man, with a walrus moustache and potbelly to match. This Sergeant Toohey did not
have the money to support his daughter, but he had contacts. Someone from the
local Rotary Club came to the rescue and awarded the child a one-year scholarship
at an exclusive boarding school, with the proviso that if she applied herself it would
be extended.

This was the break that Ira-Jane needed. In the manicured gardens of Saint
Cecilia, she mapped her future. In that closed, claustrophobic, snobbish
environment where she spent five years of her life Ira-Jane observed, learned,
thought. She came to realize that even though you begin your life inside another
person, the surest way to a life of misery is to depend on other people for your
happiness. This simple realization allowed her to leapfrog ahead of the others. She
saw adults as unreliable, weak, deceptive. The only one you could rely upon was
yourself.

On Fridays, when the parents of other boarders rolled up at school in their
Mercedes, Volvos and BMWs, to collect their daughters for the weekend, Ira sat at
the window of the dormitory and consoled herself with the thought that aloneness is
also freedom. It depended on how you took it and what you did with it. So she
would go to her desk and get stuck into her books. Whilst the others played dutiful
daughters, sisters, best friends, she could get on with what really counted, her studies. She felt superior in her independence. When the daughters were dropped off by their parents, tending bored cheeks to be pecked, she could see their insecurities in their expressions and a kind of stupidity in their guise. She read somewhere that the most pampered domestic animals are often the most stupid. Yes, it was equally true of humans.

She realized too that your power over others is directly proportional to your usefulness. Success in essence meant making people feel that you had, or could get, what they wanted. So, she would take what she wanted from others and give to those who were of use to her. She was comfortable with that deal.

At Saint Cecilia’s Ladies College she didn’t make real friends, just survival alliances. She didn’t play any sport, but she did join the debating team. Her life was hers to make. She was determined to avoid the mistakes of her mother and fall prey to men. She would not fall in love, she didn’t believe in it. Falling in love was merely a pretext for the weak to justify idiotic behaviour or to get what they wanted by stealth. It was an excuse to control another human being, or a need to be controlled. Falling in love was a cop-out for those unwilling to take responsibility for their own life. Falling in love had nothing to do with loving, assuming that such a thing really existed. Her mother kept falling in love. Well, what further proof did she need that the whole love thing was nothing more than emotional self-indulgence! 17-year-old Ira-Jane knew the truth. Her mother, for all her obsession with ‘falling in love’ or ‘being in love’, in reality had never loved anyone, not the abusive men she collected, not her only daughter and certainly not herself.

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A life contained in a box, an old Lindemans cardboard wine cask, the mauve now faded to sepia over the eleven years since it came to her in this very box, sealed with masking tape. At the time she didn’t even want to open it. Whatever
remained of her mother, of a life that contained more pathos than tragedy, she didn’t want to know. She avoided anything that reminded her weakness, her sentimentality, her manipulative personality, her used-up life.

Now that she was going to Sicily she wanted to shed light on a dim childhood connection which time was threatening to sentimentalize. No, this was not nostalgia. Her feet were firmly grounded in the present. She owed a debt to that kind couple from her early childhood that had given her love and security. It had allowed her to survive and grow strong through the tough years. Now sometimes she found it difficult to believe that those early memories were real. Maybe she had made it all up. Had Nonnu and Nonna really existed? Was it possible that her life was constructed on pillars of an imagined reality? This possibility, absurd though it was, gnawed at her. Sometimes she woke up and thought she heard Nonnu’s steps shuffling into her tidy, manageable, busy present. But when she looked up into his face, she couldn’t tell whether the smile on the weatherworn face, was friendly, amused or mocking. Secrets and confusion can devour you slowly. So it was time to act, to connect again with those early years, to reassure herself that her present was not built upon a fantasy castle. The time was right to bring that dusty box out of the drawer, open its secrets, look the demons in the face and strip them of any power they still possessed.

The box did not disappoint. Or rather it confirmed that her mother’s life was as empty as she expected. A few worthless trinkets of jewellery: silver and gold-plated earrings, fake mother-of-pearl pendant, a quartz watch of an unreadable origin, a pair of matching crystals, a silk cerise scarf with black and white yin and yang symbols, several rings with suspect sapphire and opal stones. The one that caught Ira’s eye was a simple gold friendship ring. She held it up to the light and read its inscription: with love Ira 18.6.1979. A lock of blond hair was encased in a glass locket with wooden frames, labelled Ira-Jane, 1981. So there was a time
when her mother actually did not think wholly of herself. And then, an envelope, yellowed by time and – judging by the torn state of its edges – opened by nervous fingers. Inside she found the photo of what looked like a couple and their child.

The woman, she knew, must have been her mother’s friend, Ira. The one whose name she had inherited, the same one who kept wafting in and out of her earliest memories, sometimes as a witch, sometimes as an angel, but mostly just at the far end of the memory lens. She was standing by, watching her husband help the child take his first steps. What struck Ira-Jane was the distant look on the woman’s face, as if she were a mere spectator in this scene of her own life. Even though the child was clearly hers and the man was her husband, she herself was an outsider. What rescued her from pathos was the sense that the choice to remove herself was hers. There was something admirable about that.

Ira-Jane transferred her attention to the man: a heavy, jovial man, wearing a beautifully tailored suit. He was squatting down on his toes, forearms open wide, ready to catch the child. But if you looked closely, there was in his pose a simple eagerness to embrace life. Was it ignorance or tunnel vision?

The child was dressed in a white woollen jumpsuit with attached beanie. Even though the focus was the mother, (who, ironically looked as if she would rather fade into the paper) the viewer’s eye was drawn to the infant whose chubby little face, swaddled in the softness of wool, captured the full light. Ira-Jane read the address on the back of the envelope.

*Ira La Rocca*

*Piazza Chiesa Madre 29*

*San Sisto (Messina)*

*Italia*
La Rocca, that was Nonnu’s surname. Which meant that she was not married to that man, or perhaps that she had kept her name, an attitude that would give support to her reading of that photograph.

Quite without thinking Ira-Jane sat down to write a letter. It was a long time since she had used a pen other than to jot down notes, ideas, agenda items for meetings. The only correspondence she wrote was business letters or email messages. This was something new for her, or rather, the beginning of a new her. She hesitated, bit into the top of pen with such force that she cracked it. Maybe she oughtn't to. Was she ready or willing to enter the murky world of other people? She shivered, then spoke to herself. ‘Take the initiative. Don't wimp out, Ira-Jane, it's just a letter’.

Dear Ira,

I hardly remember you, of course, and you may not remember me…

Nah, appellation too familiar and the opening sentence made too many assumptions, while the self-effacement suggested in the second sentence would convey altogether the wrong message.

Dear Ms La Rocca,

Hmm, too formal for a letter of a personal nature. Anyway, a lot of people these days took offence to the Ms, for the same reason she discarded, Dear Madam.

Dear Ira La Rocca,

(Hardly ideal, but it would have to do.)

My name is Ira-Jane, I'm the daughter of Sheryl Giffen, your friend when you lived in Australia.

Of course I can’t remember much of you, but you might remember me, as I was named after you...
Too many ‘yous’, best not to be too familiar. Besides, should she go into this? Wasn’t there some sort of rift between this woman and her mother? This was getting more complicated than she had anticipated. Then, an idea. She should have thought of it earlier, because in fact the people she did remember, the ones she really wanted to catch up with were Nonnu and Nonna. He, of course, did not speak English at all. Now, her Italian was hardly up to scratch but with the aid of a dictionary she could manage a few sentences. After all, all she intended to do was to make contact and pay them a short visit.

_Cari Nonni,_

_Sono Ira-Jane, vi ricordate di me? Spero cosi. In due settimane, cioé da 10 ottobre, visiterò Sicilia. Sia un bel piacere per me visitare a casa vostra._

_Ecco il mio indirizzo in Sicilia:_

_Albergo Ruggeri_

_Viale stazione 71_

_Milazzo (Messina)_

There, that would do. A brief note that communicated what she wanted to say without giving too much away, or going into risky areas. As she ran her tongue along the glue line of the envelope Ira-Jane wondered at the irony of how easy it had been writing in a language not hers. This was not the language of Ira-Jane the adult, with all the risks and responsibilities, the complications that adulthood entailed. Children are not held responsible and this was the language of her childhood, that part of her childhood when she felt secure and loved. This language gave her the most freedom, as if by reverting to it she was no longer a 24 year old, with all the weighty responsibility it carried, but a little 6 year old sitting at the

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7 Dear Grand-parents, I’m Ira-Jane, do you remember me? In two weeks’time, that is from October the 10th, I will be visiting Sicily. It would be a great pleasure for me to visit you. Here is my address: Hotel Ruggeri, Station Avenue, 71, Milazzo (Messina).
laminex kitchen table in suburbia, smelling the comforting smells of Nonna’s cooking: of ragù simmering in a crock, of garlic browning in sizzling olive oil, waiting for the pasta to be brought to the table, feeling secure in the hands of two old people who had no other ambition in life but to cultivate their own vegetables and take her in their arms, kiss her bubù when she fell, make a fuss of her. 

Ira-Jane took those memories with her, as she walked up to the post box in Mill Point Road, hesitated as she held the letter balanced on the edge of the letter box, fearful of the consequences of such a simple act, until someone came from behind with letters to post. So she had no choice but to resolutely pop the letter in and press at the edge of the envelope with the palm of her hand. She shivered as she walked back to her apartment

On receiving the bad news from his doctor, Clem Franzetti’s dimpled chin had dropped in disbelief. There was no way that he could have colon cancer, not he. He expected to die one day, of course, but not yet, the timing was all wrong, and certainly not this way. That’s not the way it was played out in his mind. Since his wife and son had suddenly been taken away from him, death held no fear for him, just a natural outcome of living. It’s the dying that he feared, or rather, the kind of dying that ravages you slowly. Not for him though. That’s for the bleeding hearts that make a life’s vocation out of the dying. They play out their lives as melodrama, preparing for the arrival of that degenerative disease, a debilitating injury, a breakdown of the mind… whatever. More often it's a chronic ailment which stamps a permanent imprint on their personality and becomes an alibi for failure, before it
morphs into a slow sickness of living. Such people spend their life watching death stalk on the periphery of their consciousness, squeezing out every drop of sympathy and self-pity, before taking the final bow to the slow clapping, and relief, of those left behind. The world is full of bleeding hearts. He, on the other hand, was born to go out with a bang, a splash, a crash, a thud, a blow, the sound of gong, a hiss, a spin or a silent heave. On those rare occasions – prevalently since the death of his wife and son – when he thought about his final encounter, he imagined death stealing upon him in the middle of some frantic activity, in the rush of a freak flood, taking him by stealth, catching him on the run, on the cusp of two major projects, on the way to somewhere else, as an aside, a detour, a distraction. Death, he always thought, would take him before he knew anything about it.

But this was nonsense. He wasn’t going now, not yet. His mission in life wasn’t accomplished. Too many things left undone, needing his attention; too many people depending on him. The young doctor must have got it wrong when he gave him the news, going all unctuous with rehearsed sensitivity. Clem felt quite insulted, he wanted to shoot the messenger.

But even if – let’s just admit for a moment the possibility that they had found something – he wasn’t going to do anything silly or act on impulse. The last thing he wanted was to give it credence by behaving strangely. No, the best course was not to make a fuss, keep it quiet. A man in his position could not afford any suggestion of weakness. Too many vultures out there waiting to take the spoils. Like his useless stepbrother, Danny O’ Rourke, who was positioning himself to feed on his remains.

Then in his moment of confusion the Holy Ghost spoke to Clem Franzetti by means of two, apparently banal incidents. First, his eyes fell on a tiny news item in the paper, one of those fillers easily missed when flicking through the pages:

_Olive Leaves Cure for Cancer Claimed_
A Sicilian researcher, Doctor Emilio Troina claims to have cured patients with advanced cancers on a diet of olive leaves juice from particular ancient trees found in the area....

Clem Franzetti was struck by the coincidence. There was no doubt in his mind that God had moved the hand of the hack in the editorial room to fill in a space with that innocuous news item, so that he, Clem Franzetti would come to notice it. God moves in strange ways. True. Maybe God had chosen a few insignificant lines in a newspaper, to tell him to turn a corner, take the side road and redirect his journey.

Of course, there’s no way of knowing whether this Doctor Troina was telling the truth, or indeed whether he was a doctor at all, or some quack posing as one. After all, Italians are clever little tricksters and, according to his late father, the Southerners are the sneakiest of all, even though he had married a Sicilian. But those were minor considerations. What was significant was the manner in which events came together. What clinched it for him was that, while he was pondering over this news, that girl, Ira-Jane, walked into his office, over some score she had to settle with her accomplice in sin. Her appearance was no coincidence, nor was it the free choice she imagined it was. No, she was part of the plan. Unbeknown to her, she had been enlisted by God to be part of the maze of His intentions.

Clem Franzetti would never admit it, of course, but he was a product of contradictory energies inherited from his parents. His father, Vittorio, was a well-educated Northern Italian from Treviso. He was quick-witted, urbane, agnostic and a snob. His snobbery travelled uncomfortably close to racism. Apart from the Anglo-Saxons and the Jews, both of which he admired for different reasons, he had little time for other nationalities. His greatest contempt was for Southern Italians whom he considered lazy, untrustworthy, uneducated peasants. Their swarthy shortness
offended his aesthetic ideal, their poverty embarrassed him, their sly arrogance infuriated him. Above all he could not forgive them for soiling the Italian coin when millions of them migrated overseas.

Vittorio was no ordinary migrant. There were no economic reasons for him to go to Australia. What moved him was a sense of adventure and a feeling that Treviso was too provincial, too attached to its traditions to offer the kind of space that a young man like him needed. News of a gold rush in Western Australia was all the motivation he needed. So, in the northern spring of 1924, aged just 21, Vittorio set sail from the port of Genoa and headed for the furthest continent.

One might be tempted to read the hand of destiny in the fact that, within one week of his arrival in Kalgoorlie, the mining town on the edge of the Nullabor Plain, he set eyes on a young woman with sapphire eyes and tan-coloured hair. It must have been a proverbial coup de foudre, because even though the girl turned out to be a miner’s daughter, poorly educated and a Sicilian, Vittorio asked her to marry him. It was a case of love triumphing over prejudice. The girl was Carmelina Ribaudo, or Carmel, as everyone called her.

Soon after the wedding, Vittorio left Kalgoorlie, partly to get away from Carmelina’s family, and settled in Perth. Within a year Carmel gave birth to a son, Clemente, shortened to Clem. Meanwhile Vittorio easily mutated into Vic, as he set out to scale the socio-economic ladder and reach the kind of position he knew he belonged to. He bought into a jewellery shop in the city and before long he owned it. He introduced new designs, sponsored top craftsmen from Italy and developed a keen sense for what rich people wanted. Within 10 years he became the State’s biggest jeweller. Success in that field gave him access to some of the most influential people. One of these, a former State Premier, persuaded him to buy into a struggling afternoon paper: The Daily Star.
Vic Franzetti had arrived. He had flair, power, contacts, above all he had the most effective passport into society: money. His opinions were sought by those who made laws. He was courted by aspiring politicians. His wife had no choice but to get caught in the vertiginous climb up the spiral of power and social positioning. A shy woman, she became well adept at playing the role that was required of her: the quiet, demure, dutiful wife. She aired no opinion, for fear of being wrong. She dyed her hair a cool blond and had it set at the hairdresser once a week. In public she just flashed her eyes, without ever resting them on anyone long enough for fear that they might see the desolation inside. Everyone knew her husband had affairs, as did Carmel herself. The trick was not to give the impression that she knew. The important thing was that she be true to her own standards, set in the concrete of a millenarian tradition, to maintain her honour as a woman and her dignity as a mother.

Because Clem loved his mother he would have liked to respect her, admire her fortitude and constancy; be in awe of her. Instead he felt pity for her. He found his mother's submissiveness to her husband obscene. Such contradictions sapped his childhood.

Clem grew up in a whisper-quiet world, dominated by the solitary, timorous figure of his mother. He followed her as she moved about in tentative steps as if she weren’t sure that she should be occupying the space she was. As far back as he could remember he went to church with his mother. Not the flashy St Mary's Cathedral in the city, which they attended on Christmas day and Easter Sunday when his father came with them, but the little parish church in Baker Street. Every Sunday he and his mother sat always in the same place, three rows back listening to Father Murphy intone the Holy, Holy, Holy in his rich Irish lilt. Above them, the Virgin Mary, smiled down from the alcove. Sometimes, if little Clem gazed up for
long enough, the two faces: his mother’s shadowy profile and the lighted visage of
the Virgin Mary, merged into one.

Even though Carmel loved gardening, the garden in their grand colonial
house in Mosman Park was too large for her to tend. And besides, it was so
manicured with its sculptured hedges, bluegrass lawn and flowerbeds of petunias
and marigolds wending around Toodyay stone paths, that it positively intimidated
her. So she left it to the gardener, who came in once a week, to look after it. But
she reserved her own little garden, in a sunny patch on the north side of the house,
where she grew herbs: rosemary, oregano, mint, sage, and annuals like basil, dill
and parsley. One day on one of her frequent visits to the garden nursery she
discovered an olive shrub growing in a pot, its little-finger silver leaves almost
disappearing in the midst of the deep-green broad foliage of the hibiscus. In the
days before the war olive trees were quite rare in Western Australia. To find one in
a nursery was simply a stroke of luck. His mother’s hands were shaking when she
paid for it.

She planted the tree that same afternoon, digging the hole herself in the lawn
between the herb garden and the brick fence on which grew an ivy that threatened
to engulf all surrounding vegetation.

The shrub stood there, some one metre high, looking somewhat puzzled in its
circular bed, in the midst of a closely-shaven carpet of lawn. His mother watched it
from the laundry window at the back of the house, as if afraid that someone might
come and steal it. Some months passed and she noticed that the tree was not
growing any new foliage. Her concern grew to alarm when the leaves started to
change colour to a speckled yellow. She consulted the gardener. He poked with his
spade around the soggy bed and asked?

"How often do you water it?"
"Oh, every day, morning and evening."

The gardener scratched his grey moustache with his index, where a spec of pollen had lodged itself, just below the nostril and said:

"That's it then, the soggy soil is rotting your roots. You killing it with kindness, Missies. No need to water. Gets more than enough from nature and the lawn sprinklers."

The diagnosis was spot on. With spring coming the tree began to grow and within a year it had doubled its height. In time it grew tall enough to provide shade for a small wrought iron table and chair where his mother took her afternoon coffee, sipping quietly and looking remote and contented in her little world.

Some three years later, when he arrived home from school – Clem was about nine then – his mother met him at the front gate, looking unusually excited.

"Come with me," she took his hand and dragged him through the house to the back garden. When they got to the olive, now a sturdy young tree with mushroom shaped foliage, she pointed with her middle fingers splayed out in the direction of the upper foliage and said,

"Look, Clemmy, we are going to pick our own olives this year."

She reached for a lower branch, pulled it down, took her nostrils to it and breathed deeply, "Hm, such delicate fragrance. Smell it darling."

His mother's intensity made him nervous, he put his nose to the bunch of pinpoint beads in the midst of the leaves, he could smell nothing. It was like she was asking him to drink water out of an empty glass.

"Nice," he said.

Had it not been for the fact that Vic Franzetti lost a filling from a left molar as he crushed a bit of ice, Carmel would certainly have savoured the flavour of her
own olives that year. As it was, she had to leave her beloved tree, before she could harvest the first crop.

As a consequence of his mishap Vic Franzetti had obtained an emergency appointment with his dentist. In the waiting room he sat next to Tom Steilberger, the estate agent whose company advertised weekly in the *Daily Star*. As they discussed their teeth Tom mentioned, in passing, that a great house had just come on the market.

"It's in Peppermint Grove," he lowered his voice to a whisper, as if the mere mention of that most exclusive suburb, deserved respect, "five bedrooms, sweeping views of the river, wine cellar, swimming pool…"

"I don't swim," said Vic, "and at my age it's too late to learn."

At this point the conversation was interrupted by the receptionist's call for Mr Franzetti to go in. As he stood up Tom said,

"Joe Downing lives next door."

Joseph Downing was the scion of one of the great pastoralist families. A Senator for many years, he had nearly as much political clout as he had land. Undoubtedly the Downing family were right at the centre of the political and social establishment of Western Australia. In the time that it took to cover the eight paces to the surgery door, Vic took a decision. As the assistant ushered him in, the fate of Carmel's olive tree had been sealed. He turned around and called to the Real Estate agent, "Give us a buzz, Tom, and we'll talk."

When Carmel heard that they were going to move she was inconsolable. She had lived in that house for some twelve years and even though she did not like it at first, it had grown on her. The prospect of going to live in an even bigger house, next door to a Senator daunted her. Meeting important people and making cheerful, inane conversation with their wives was a trial for her. What really distressed her, was the prospect of leaving her beloved olive tree.
Carmel stood between the two Doric columns on the top step of the great stone stairway of the new house and surveyed the view of the backyard. She took in the sweeping lawns, large enough to hold an outdoor party for one hundred people, the kidney-shaped pool, the terrazzo dance floor, the heavy jarrah tables by the barbecue, the gazebo roomy enough for a small orchestra… and wanted to sob. She looked at her husband with misted eyes and said, "There’s no room to plant an olive tree."

Vic gave her a look that froze the flow of tears, and spoke to her in Italian – something he hadn't done for years – "Ma che dici," he sneered "Questo e’ Peppermint Grove. Non siamo mica sulle serre della Sicilia."

There were times when Clem wished he didn't love his mother, so that he could treat her with the same blend of pity and condescension as other people did. In preserving her virtue, his mother had given up on life. This was grimly confirmed when she died suddenly at age 57, slipping away unexpectedly, almost unnoticed. It was the kind of timorous death she would have wished. Less than a year later his father married a woman the same age as Clem, with a twelve-year-old son, Danny. His mother's death left Clem, now a grown man, confused. He loved his mother, always would, but felt let down by her. He thought her pure, constant and virtuous; yet those very qualities that should have made her strong had proven her feeble. Why had she given up so easily?

Clem Franzetti married eventually, at age 43. By this time he was running The Daily Star. His father lasted another 12 years. In his will Old Vic left his widow the house and a life-long annuity. To Clem, begrudgingly, his business.

8 What are you talking about? This is Peppermint Grove, not the wild mountains of Sicily.
Ira La Rocca’s hand shades her eyes from the October sun that stands poised on the Verna peak, its rays slicing the top of the ancient olive tree. She enters the canopy of silver foliage and searches for lime-green beads. There are hardly any. Olive trees, she knows, are capricious bearers, even so she can’t remember one year when this tree has not produced enough eating olives to last them out the year. What portent, such barren season?

The fruit from the other trees in the small holding get crushed at the frantoio in Sant’Arcangelo and fill the man-high terracotta giara with oil. But this, this is the tree of the eating olives. For some inexplicable reason, this tree is always the first to tender its fruit for picking, even though it looks no different from all the others. Perhaps it’s the high position, facing the sun and shading the face of the old stone house, whose white-washed walls are discoloured to a patchwork of ancient maps; and the window frames – that have not had a new coat of green paint for a decade – are now ashen grey.

Of course, this tree could very well be of a different graft from the others. Difficult to tell with a tree several hundred years old, its pedigree lost in the maze of history. This tree would have seen it all, the Ottomans, the Normans and the Bourbons, the wars, the Black Death and the Spanish fever. It would have stood by impassively to the passing of Garibaldi’s one thousand heroes.

This is her tree. As a baby her mother would sit her under it while she put out the washing, fed the grunting pig in the concrete pen below ground, and milked the goats tethered by the blackberry macchia. In spring, when the blossom appeared imperceptibly among the little finger leaves, the pollen slipped into the
house to announce the end of winter. This ancient, gnarled trunk desiccated by
droughts, hollowed out by fire, bent by the wind and marked by time was the tree of
her childhood. From a cross-branch her father had hung a swing: two lengths of
rope falling down to iron hooks inserted into a half a car tyre. There she sat to
dream and listen to the muffled calls of pigeons in the coop: kiwoo! Kiwoo! Kiwoo!
Now, since the death of her father, their nests are raided by rats and their calls are
a sad echo of time gone.

This tree is her past, it has belonged to her family, from the days when
families were bound together by poverty and the will to survive, and households
were alive with children’s voices. Over the succeeding centuries it would have been
a muted witness to the courtships and the dramas being played on the torso of
these mountains. Then, in the early seventies, it was nearly lost to debtors. So they
had to leave to save it. They went to Australia, to make the money to pay off the
debts. It was only meant to be for two or three years. Their exile lasted twelve.
Twelve years of homesickness and longing, to save an olive tree. And now she is
going to lose it to progress, to a bobcat, to a new millennium marching in with the
speed of unstoppable charge, to destiny that presented itself in the unlikely face of
Mimmo Urzì, the strong man from Barcellona.

Some people, like some plants, are not meant to be uprooted. They can
only thrive in the very soil into which their seed is planted; in the same air; in the
familiar landscape that feeds them through memory and stories, ghosts and myths.
Not for them the illusory journey of self-discovery, the headlong leap into the sea-
storm of change. They… (We, she ought to say) bow to the superior force of fate.
They are the hardy, the stubborn, the clingy. Their roots dig down deep through
generations, searching in depths of time. Theirs is the daily struggle of the
unmoveable, the stubbornness of the stay-putters, the unsung bravery of the passive, unafraid to let time flow over them like river stones.

People like her father who, having been torn away from this steep mountain flank, pined away in the suburbia of another country for 12 years, only to come back to die in his plot of land. Like her mother who, though old and sick, has resisted the move down to San Sisto. Like herself, who never wanted to leave in the first place, then brought back a heavy legacy from the other side of the world: a seed, a language, a love, a consuming guilt. Like Sante, her son, who carries the imprints of both worlds, yet fits this landscape, like the olive tree and the fig.

Sante is coming up the steep ramp overgrown with spiky blackberries which threaten to overwhelm this ridge. In his step, light with youth and heavy with the burden of two worlds, you see the contradiction in the way that his sweet temper sometimes – rarely thank God – flares up and then the most surprised person is Sante himself. Not her though. Early in his childhood she was arrested by the contradiction in his eyes, of a steel blue you do not see around these parts, then occasionally they perturb you with stillness.

……………………

He stands on the top step but two and with the long stick lashes at the branches, where a rare bunch of fruit hangs from the highest, most inaccessible branch.

“Be careful Sante, non ti sporgere troppo,” she warns. One year her father fell off a branch during the pruning season and broke several ribs. The way she sees danger lurking around every turn, confounds his placid nature.

For years Ira La Rocca journeyed the eight kilometres from San Sisto to this land higher up the mountain, past the orchards, many of them abandoned. Sante

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9 Don’t lean out too far.
frequently accompanied her to visit his grandparents, pestering them with questions about Australia.

Then, when Grandfather died they attempted to persuade Nonna to move to the Marzano family house in San Sisto, overlooking the piazza. Instead she stayed here with her animals and the memories of her dead husband.

Sante sprints up the track from the gate, waving something in his hand.

"Mammà, look what I found in the letter box."

His voice rings through the air, his face radiates joy. How could she not love Sante? But her love straddles the hump of oblivion. To love him she made herself forget how he came to be. But now she can feel the heavy steps of the past approach with an insistent thud, like heartbeat through an ultrasound.

"Look, a letter addressed to Nonno."

His excitement makes her tense, he raises the letter aloft like some sort of trophy, "It’s from Australia… "his voice is pitched higher with each detail, “someone called Ira, like you. Shall I open it?”

“No!”

She snatches the letter from his hand. Her reaction shocks him, but he recovers quickly.

“I’ll open it later,” she says.

A letter addressed to a dead person does not augur well. She would have liked to destroy it, without opening it, consign the contents to fire, let the words waft away in smoke of oblivion. But of course he would not let her do that.

"Who is Ira-Jane, Mammà?"

“The daughter of someone I knew in Australia, a school friend.”

“So, she called her baby after you. Mammà that is so beautiful. Why did you not tell me before? You are so secretive. When will you open the letter?”
“Sante, this is not my letter. It’s addressed to Nonno.”

Pathetic really, seeing as her father has been dead for 2 years. He’s too kind to remind her of that, instead he comes at her from the flank. It’s all the more effective because she knows it’s done without malice.

“Mammà, can I go to Australia soon?”

Ira feels the tension wind around her head in a tightening spiral.

“Don’t be silly, Sante.”

“I want to, Mammà.”

Sante Marzano has dreamt about Australia every day. He imagines it big, of course, empty, flat, sun-drenched. He sees it in contrasts: young and very old; naked yet inscrutable; vibrant and sleepy; silent and rumbling; a lumbering giant in images of orange, gold and faded green under a canopy of powder blue.

This love of Australia must be encoded in his DNA, given that he was merely conceived in that far-away land. She escaped before he could breathe its air, register its sounds, experience its moods, or take in the scents. Before he could know its inner reality: the insidious tragedy beneath a shell of laid-back jollity. It was a strange connective. Initiated from inside her womb, then stretched across the oceans, in an attempt to break it off. And yet, separated by space and time, draped away by her curtain of resentment, it turns out that he loves Australia, passionately, its mystery only feeding his obsession.

“Why do you want to go to Australia?”

“I love to. I love Australia.”

Love and destiny are a mystery, their workings are a mystery but the effect is too real. So there is no point in resisting them. It would be like resisting the thrust of these mountains which, in pre-history, rose into the sky and stood there as monuments to the power of the gods. Human affairs, by comparison are trivial, a
speck hardly noticeable in the grand rug woven by Nature. The energy that weaves the pattern of destiny is love. Destiny and love. It’s that simple and that mysterious. For Sante part of that mystery is his father, his natural father that is. And to protect him from a destructive truth, she deceived him. One day, she lied, he had set forth for the interior on a safari (a safari, for godsake!) and never came back. He was swallowed up by all that orange, gold and blue, lost in the black of the night, vanished. Not a photo, nothing.

That, he found strange, though he could understand that his mother did not want to preserve painful memories, but where did that leave him? One day he will have to go. Not so much in the hope of finding his father. After all if he were still alive, he would have found a way of getting in touch. If he is dead, better the certainty of a dead father than the possibility that he might be out there somewhere. So, it’s a journey he needs to make, to give form, and sharpness to that spectrum of colour swirling inside his head.

“This could be the best time to go, before I start University. I will try and find a job in Milazzo, save some money.”

With both hands working in tandem she picks the olives that have fallen in the dry brush of grass and remembers a song her grandmother used to sing:

*Mamma mia dammi cento lire*

*Che in America voglio andar*

*Cento lire io te le dono*

*Ma in America no, no, no*

Such sentimental songs folk sang while picking olives, or spreading tomato paste out in the sun, or embroidering pillow cases…. those songs had wisdom and power.

Taking the cue from the song, Ira says,
“You know it’s not the money, Sante...”

“What is it then?”

She knows it’s unfair but she’s only trying to protect him after all.

“You are our only child, does it seem just to you that you should go off to the other side of the world and leave us, does it?”

“It will only be for a few weeks.”

“Australia is not the safe country it looks from outside. How often do you hear about tourists going missing over there? Some disappear never to be heard of again. I do not want this to happen to my son.”

He has nothing to say to this. What could he say?

Time for a sweetener.

“One day you can go.”

One day, when he’s settled, when he is ready, when he’s wise. But Alfio, her husband, sees it differently.

“The boy is nearly eighteen. You will need to tell him the truth about his father. You will need to let him go to Australia, soon.”

That night back at San Sisto, with the olives soaking in water, to wash away the bitterness, Ira is left alone in the house. Her husband, she knows, will not be back from till after midnight. No need to open the letter from Australia. She knew it would come one day. Whatever the content, the past is about to march into her present. And so there is no way of avoiding a visit from her conscience. She first catches its face in the mirror at the entrance as she hangs her coat on the hook, she glimpses the shadow stalking her along the wall of the corridor, she feels its presence behind the turquoise drapes of the balcony door. Ira unlocks the lid of her wedding trousseau. She reaches down underneath the silken underwear she has never used, past the hand-embroidered bed linen, the place-mats, the lace doilies
and tablecloths, the chenille bedspread and the Romeo and Juliet tapestry, whose tragic posturing is never likely to be gazed at by visitors... and takes out a box of carved walnut. There she finds a letter she wrote so many years ago, but never had the heart to send, and reads it again, hoping to find in it inspiration out of her dilemma, or perhaps justification for her shameless deceiving of her only child.

_Dear Sheryl,_

_You’ve no idea how many times I’ve sat down to write you a letter and then gave it away. But now that things have settled, now that I have a father for my baby son, somehow it makes it easier to forgive myself, though I must tell you it doesn’t make it any easier to open up to you._

_But maybe I am being too hard on myself, because one of the reasons why I did not write sooner was to protect you from the knowledge I am about to reveal. And it doesn’t matter that you probably suspect, that’s not the same as having it confirmed. And for that reason I think you might hate me for writing it down as much as for leaving you the way I did…_

Abruptly Ira stops. She folds the letter back into its well-pressed pleats. There, better to keep these things well tucked away, in a trousseau of things that will never be used. Just this much of the letter is enough to add strength to her determination not to expose Sante to all that unhappy past. She lowers the lid and clips the padlock firmly down. She will take a Mogadon and go to bed.
The year before Ira La Rocca arrived at Thornlie High School, Sheryl Jane Giffen had started her first year there. She was a lonely, scarecrow of a girl, with flaxen hair, a stick of a body and freckles that divagated even to her lips. Sheryl was then not quite 13, no parents to love or to blame, just the latest pair of foster parents to resent. Her natural father, she had never known, while her mother had remarried and gone to New Zealand to have more children with a new man.

She spent the first year hiding around brick pillars. It took months to discover that if she gravitated to a group, kept her head down and went with the flow of the throng, none would notice that she was friendless.

In year nine she managed to fit a space on the periphery of a group of girls, whose sole purpose for being together was to sit out their lunch hour near the garden wall that separated the Manual Arts block from the horticultural garden and watch Russell Toohey cavort with his mates. Russell was in the bottom class in year 10, one year up from hers. The kids in his class were referred to variously as the dummies, the morons, the spastics, but somehow these epithets were never applied to Russell. And it wasn’t out of fear that he would have thumped them, although that was certainly on the cards, it was more the fact that Russell was a leader. His total contempt for learning, for teachers, for school rules was seen as liberating even by the studious nerds. To be accepted in Russell’s group was the peak of cool. The requirements were simple, you needed to be male, tough and display contempt for school. The birds, well, they had their uses, occasionally. As for the brains, they were just little pansies that couldn’t crack a hard in a room full of Raquel Welches.
No problem in that department for Russell. As the teacher droned on about formal letter format or explosion charts, his eyes would study the legs of Michelle, or Erin, or Sharon and before he knew it, a lump would rise in his crotch and press against the navel. The frequency of this phenomenon was no doubt responsible for the permanent bulge down the front of his jeans, as physical testament to the kinds of activities going on underneath the zipper.

Throughout year nine Sheryl’s group watched the boys smoke, fart swear, brag, talk tough, wrestle each other to the ground, jostle for the ball and slag off the teachers. The boys hardly knew the girls were there, occasionally they flicked a cigarette butt in their direction posted with a contemptuous leer, that threatened them with unspeakable violence if they dared invade the male space. The girls put gloss on their lips and glitter on their brows, platted each other’s hair and watched. The only time the two groups acknowledged each other was if the ball landed in the vicinity of the girls. Then one of them would try and kick it back, getting a jeering for their pathetic effort.

Then midway through the second year, something happened to Sheryl. She started to fill out and get a shape, ahead of the other 14 year olds. And suddenly she was being noticed from across the graffitied path that separated the boys from the girls. One day Russell had procured a giant size bag of Samboy salt and vinegar potato chips, probably stolen or taken from one of his lieutenants. He held it up and called,

“Hey you.”

All the girls turned astonished.

“You, the skinny one.”

“Me?” Asked Sheryl, incredulous.

“Yes, you. “

“You wanna a chip?”
“Yeah?” said Sheryl.

“Well, whatchyou’re waitin’ for. Come and get it.”

Feeling as if she had just been chosen queen in a beauty contest, Sheryl crossed the divide to take her reward. The other boys, who a moment before would have spat on her, now took notice. The girls too looked at her with envy and disbelief. Sheryl felt her skin pores dilate. She was faint with exhilaration. This was something new for her. Her elation was tempered a little by the fact that Russell held the bag right in front of his crotch, as he sat on the wall. When she put her finger into the bag he made a lewd thrust towards her hand that made all the boys laugh. But Sheryl did not mind, someone at last was taking notice of her.

Around that time an enthusiastic young teacher arrived in Russell's English class. She started the first lesson by introducing herself, then went around the class asking the students to do likewise and give a brief outline about themselves and their interests.

“Whatchyou mean, ‘intrests’? “ asked Russell licking his lips.

“Well, what you enjoy doing best” she obliged, happy to be getting a response.

Russell looked around the class with a smirk on his face, making sure he got everyone's attention then said, “ Right, m' name's Russell Toohey, I gotta big dick and I like playin’ with it.”

The story got around the school and Russell's reputation, already pretty formidable, got another boost. It wasn't long before Sheryl moved into the group, this time uninvited, and sat there, trying to blend, saying nothing, just giving shy, admiring glances towards Russell. After that initial invitation, Russell hardly seemed to notice she was there, but he did not send her away either. If ever he acknowledged her it was to order her about, send her to the canteen to buy him a
coke. Sheryl loved doing this for Russell, it made her feel needed, important – an importance she knew she did not deserve.

And Russell hogged her admiration. This began to change when he noticed that she was looking at a particular part of his belly, where the button had been undone during a tussle with one of the boys and showing a spot of white flesh peering through the opening. Things moved on.

On Saturdays Sheryl worked at an old lady’s house, Mrs Mullens, doing house duties. In the afternoon, Mrs Mullens took a long nap, that’s when she sneaked Russell in from the side gate into her garage. On this particular afternoon she had been able to procure a bottle of sherry from her pantry.

“You beauty Sherl!” Said Russell, snatching the bottle off her.

They drank it in the garage sitting on a blanket that had been used by the dog before it had died a month before, a loss that had caused Mrs Mullens to fall into a state of depression marked by lengthy sleeps.

Away from the gang Russell was a different person. He displayed little of his tough posture, he was quieter, reticent. It was Sheryl who encouraged the necking while he kept saying.

“I gotta go. I don’t want the old hag to find ‘s here.”

“She sleeps for hours, Russ.”

“She’ll hear ’s..”

“She won't she’s half deaf, I told ya.”

“Shut up Shirl.”

Despite all his bravado and his being one year older, Russell had never gone ‘all the way’ before. As for Sheryl, she had been given some unwelcome instruction, by her previous foster-father, who had had a panic attack at the last minute and lost his erection. Scared by the experience, Sheryl had nevertheless been made curious and thought she might like to reprise with Russell.
After a while the sherry emboldened Russell. He started coming on to her. The sight of his tool snaking up her skinny leg made Sheryl panic.

“That’s too big,” she said, “I can’t even get a tampon up there.”

Her resistance made his need greater, his desire more urgent, his advance more pressing. By then she realised that she’d allowed things to get too far, so Sheryl gave in to Russell and the sherry.

This first experience confirmed for Russell his belief that sex was power, that his exceptional virility empowered him not just with girls but with his friends as well. Once word got out that he and Sheryl had ‘done it’, he saw his power grow in the envious, admiring eyes of the boys. It changed Sheryl too but not in the same way. First sex had the effect of a delayed trauma on Sheryl, while his obvious triumph made her feel that somehow she was inadequate and needed to make it up to him.

She had now earned the right to be with him and the gang. He sat on the wall, legs wide apart. Sheryl stood next to him, her hands around his midriff looking up, her eyes submissive and grateful that he had chosen her. Now that Sheryl had broken the spell, other girls were allowed into the group and some paired off with other boys, all of them envious of Sheryl that she had tamed the school stud. Russell bathed in all that adulation.

“You got your chick just where you want her,” they said.

And he did. To further demonstrate his control, he would bully her, ignore her questions, call her ‘dog’, make her jealous by flirting with other girls. This he did, not so much out of cruelty, but to feed his ego. If he treated her badly and still Sheryl followed him around, then it must prove that he had magic between his legs.

During her short life Sheryl had been shunted from one set of foster parents to another and generally she was made to feel like a burden, or ignored, which was
worse. Now she was no longer on the outer, someone wanted her. And not just someone, the spunkiest, toughest boy in the school. It was wild. She had an identity and status. She had a position other girls envied, she was Russell’s girl. What else could a girl ask for?

Of course he could be tough on her, old Russ. The way he flirted with other girls, knowing full well she didn’t like it. And if she complained to him, and started crying, he would retort, “But I always come back to ya, don’ I?”

Well, he had a point there, she had to admit. He always came back to her, that proved that he must have loved her best of all. That made her feel immensely proud. Being a flirt was just part of his nature, of being so virile, of being a male. What right did she have to nag him?

If he slapped her about the ears, and he had done that once or twice, she deserved it because she was so insecure that when she saw him flirting with this or that girl she yelled at him. Then of course he had got angry,

“Don’t you do that ever again, you bitch. Don’t you turn on me in front of me mates.”

So what if he made her do things she didn’t want to do? That was part of the deal. That’s what pleased him and she wanted to please him most of all. What she didn’t like was when he went and bragged about it to his friends.

Once he did go too far though. They were at a party at the house of a boy whose parents had gone away for the weekend. They were drinking and passing a joint around. Then he started looking at this girl. Well he had done that before, and Sheryl had learnt to manage her anger. She pretended she didn’t see anything. She leant back on a pillow and pretended she was falling asleep. She didn’t want to give him the satisfaction of her jealousy. Then the two of them got up and disappeared upstairs, into one of the bedrooms.
And that’s when she lost it. She went to the kitchen and got the biggest knife she could find from the cutlery drawer, one of those big pointy things you cut Sunday roast with. She ran up the stairs and started banging on the door, screaming. Then Russell came out, holding up his unzipped jeans by the buckle with one hand, with the other he reached for the knife she held in her trembling hand, shoved her down with a push of his powerful shoulder and kicked her, yelling,

“What do you think you’re doing, you stupid bitch. What’s wrong with ya?”

Sometimes she too wondered what was wrong with her. Why she lost control like that. Other people didn’t lose it like she did. The next day, when they had both sobered up, Russell was still furious with her.

“You do that again, you mad dog and it’s finished, you know that? Finished.”

“Oh please Russ, I won’t do it again. I promise it’ll never happen again.”

She grabbed his arm and held it tight inside hers, even while he tried to shake her off, clinging to him because she knew she was nothing without Russell. Big, strong, confident Russell Toohey made her feel truly alive.

That prospect of him leaving her... She would rather be dead, she really would. Sometimes she wondered, though, about living. It was hard, it was painful. What was the good of it? What good was she to anyone? Russell would certainly be better off without her. The great wonder was that he still wanted her. Sometimes she thought about doing herself in.

And then, a miracle, a rare incident whose importance you don’t recognise until much later, when you realise how the event lifted the dark and the world was revealed all new.
Don Alfio Marzano, the Mayor of San Sisto, the village shut off from the big coastal town of Milazzo by the mountains and its own medieval traditions, was happy. The day ended very pleasantly, despite his having had to deal with a couple of niggling matters.

He started the day by paying a courtesy call to the shops and businesses along the via Cesare Battisti, to ensure that there would be no problems when Ciccino Cauta, Mimmo’s bagman, came around to collect the monthly dues. Of course he understood perfectly the grievances of the shop owners. In these difficult times nobody relished having the added financial burden of paying what amounted to be protection money, masquerading as insurance. But one had to be a realist and avoid trouble. He did not want a repeat of the previous month’s unpleasantness when, following a fee increase, some restive business owners had started to talk of a collective revolt. In the end Mimmo sent a couple of heavies to make some inelegant visitations. Unfortunately one of the shops, Calzolerie Estetiche, caught fire in the draft. After which all talk of revolt ceased.

Later in the morning, Ciccino, did the rounds and everything went smoothly, much to Don Alfio’s relief. Mimmo Urzi would be satisfied and the likelihood of another fire on the via Cesare Battisti in the foreseeable future had receded.

Then at 1 pm he had gone down to Milazzo and had lunch with some friends at Attilio’s, one of his favourite eateries. Attilio, ever in good form, had presented him with a dish of polipetti alla Napoletana done with tomato, olive oil from Gioiosa Marea, garlic, pine nuts, and capers from Pantelleria, washed down with a litre of
Attilio’s superb dry white from his own small vineyard on the slopes of Castroreale. For sweets, which he normally would pass up, he was tempted by fresh peaches in a mixture of Rosso Antico with a dash of cognac. How could any mortal resist such divine offering!

Unfortunately in the afternoon he had to face that tedious business of Ira’s land. Who would have thought that a strip of steep mountain land, with a few olive trees, such as you see hundreds of in this part of Sicily, should be of interest to the biggest olive-oil co-operative in the region! And yet, this is exactly what’s happened. What’s more, they’re willing to pay a handsome sum for it. Unfortunately this is one of those cases where luck comes to kiss you with barbed whiskers, because Ira does not want to hear about selling. He can understand her being so attached to a piece of land that has been part of her family for generations, although he himself has no such sentimental hang ups. He had no hesitation selling his own family’s much larger citrus orchard on the coast when developers offered him what was a minor fortune in those days. So if it were up to him he would sell. The land is of not much use to them, Sante would hardly be interested in working such a small piece of land. As for the oil and the olives, they can be bought from one of the small local farms. More ominously, the co-operative has the protection of the powerful Urzi family, so rumour has it. His visit to Avvocato Allia, aims to investigate precisely that rumour.

Somehow you knew that Lawyer Allia would not approve of a man the age of Don Alfio wearing a pea green suit, over an off-white shirt with buttoned-down collar, famously worn by the handsome Leader of the Opposition, Francesco Rutelli, at a pro-environment demonstration in Rome some months ago. The suit was matched by a light yellow tie, patterned with tiny blue and red diamond shapes.
He would think it too fashionable, too studied for an older man. Well, let him think whatever, thought Don Alfio as he stepped off the footpath and into his studio legale.

Lawyer Allia’s suit was a safe smoky brown (but no pin stripes, thank God), his shirt was predictably white with the wide, butterfly collar like the ones worn by Berlusconi and his tie was a well-matching, if prosaic, silver with dark red diagonal stripes, as if he were a conservative American politician. Such prudent elegance wrapped the wily, careful character of lawyer Allia.

The lawyer’s responses were likewise, considered and mostly non-committal. Yes, he’d heard the rumour that the Urzì family had an interest in the proposed venture, but could not confirm it for definite. What he could say was that there were moves in high places – as high as the regional government in Palermo – to encourage the buying up of small plots of mostly-abandoned land, which a couple of generations ago had provided a meagre living for thousands of contadini, and create bigger holdings. The idea was to set up modern, commercially-viable holdings, to counter competition from new, emerging producers from places as far afield as Australia and Chile. Lawyer Allia thought it possible that officials might have encouraged the involvement of Mimmo’s interests, unofficially of course. He was, as everyone knew, a man of influence and would be instrumental in convincing the small holders to part with their plots. There was some concern that, once these unschooled, but cunning owners of land realised that the project had Government backing, they would try and hold out for exorbitant sums of money.

“Understand my dear Alfio,” concluded lawyer Allia, taking Don Alfio’s arm and pacing in the direction of the door, in a not-too-subtle hint that the time he had set aside for the consultation had expired, “all of this is still highly speculative, but I would hazard to say that it has a degree of substantive plausibility.”
Uffah, what a bore that Lawyer Allia! Don Alfio had left the office in quite an ill mood, especially as he surmised by his all-too-smug voice, and darting little eyes, that he knew more than he was prepared to tell him, and most probably, he too was on Mimmo Urzi’s payroll. In which case he might as well tell Ira that she had no choice but to sell.

Lucky for him, Don Alfio had a wonderful ability to temporarily tuck away grimness in a remote compartment of his brain, especially when faced with the prospect of pleasurable company. And, as the sun scaled down the walls of the far side of the 13 Century Castello Federiciano that dominated the skyline over Milazzo; and the lungomare began to fill with strollers, Don Alfio’s prospects could not have been more enjoyable.

He found Elia in a high state of excitability.

“Carissimo,” she gushed, in that champagne voice of hers, that for years had seduced audiences not only in Palermo and Catania, but as far afield as Naples, “how sweet you are to come to visit me.”

She kissed him on both cheeks and hugged him affectionately. There was no other woman that gave off such powerful vibrations as Elia. Proximity to her energised him, made him feel euphoric. With her small, slight figure held in a full length, loose, floral number, she positively glowed. Her new play, Martoglio’s L’Aria del Continente, was opening next week at the Teatro Stabile of Palermo. She stretched on the chaise longue where, many years ago, he had savoured the gifts of her body; before it all settled into a life-long friendship.

“Do fetch us some drinks, Quercia, Cinzano for me.”

Quercia, or oak tree, was the nickname she gave him, many years ago, on account of his large size and protective nature. Alfio is just like an oak tree, to shelter under, she would say.
“On Saturday, come what may, I will be in Palermo for the opening.”

“To tell you the truth, my dear Alfio, I am utterly terrified.”

“Why, Elietta?”

“Well, I play Milla Milord.”

“So?”

“How do you suppose the audience will respond to a woman aged… my age, playing the part of a thirty year old?”

“What nonsense. You look no more than twenty-five.”

She took the Cinzano from his hand and brushed the sleeve of his jacket.

“Your flattery is so outrageous, it would annoy me if it came from anyone else. “ They touched the glasses lightly, caressing each other with their eyes, and sipped. She patted the fabric of the chaise by her side and Don Alfio's well-rounded rear filled the space near her feet.

“What brings you to Milazzo?” She asked.

“I've come to see you.”

“At 5.30 PM and dressed like that? I don’t think so, Alfio.”

“Well, I also had some business…”

And because she was his best friend, he told her about Ira's land. Elia listened, from time to time she stroked him on the arm, never taking her eyes off him. She was a good listener, unusual for an actress.

“That's terrible. Your wife is absolutely right in refusing to sell. That land is her past, part of her ancestry.”

“Problem is, it runs in the middle of where they intend to site the frantoio…”

“Well, that's their problem”

“If, as it appears, Mimmo Urzi, has a major interest in the project, it becomes our problem.”

“Oh no, not that grotesque mafioso from Barcellona.”
Don Alfio assented, but added,

“Not quite. His ventures are, strictly-speaking, legal.”

“What about his protection racket!”

“Insurance, Elia.”

“That's despicable. Alfio you can't let them bully you this way.” Elia sat up, looked across the room, to some imaginary figure sitting opposite and declaimed somewhat theatrically “Oh Ira, you poor darling.” She returned her gaze on Alfio, “Quercia, we can't let him do that to her.”

“Well no,” said Alfio, trying to sound resolute to compensate for his lack of conviction, “I'm trying to find a way out. What do you suggest?”

His flushed, well-fed face with the big doubting eyes looked sort of lost. It was a look that women loved, especially women with a mothering instinct and no children of their own on whom to lavish it. Elia would have taken him on her lap and hold him tight against her bosom, had he not been such a large man. Besides, there was still a residue of past feelings, at least for her.

“Don’t worry,” she soothed him, “we will find a way.” And because she had the sort of personality that could not dwell on negatives for long, she turned on a brilliant smile and said, “And how is Sante? He must be…what…eighteen?”

“Almost…just completed the Liceo Classico.”

“Oh he is such a beautiful boy. Beautiful, bright and good-natured. You’re very lucky to have such a son.”

“I know, God must have rewarded us for calling him Sante,” he quipped.

“Is he religious?”

“Not really. Who is these days? Except for Ira. He’s…gentle. Something of a dreamer.”

“Like you.”

“Me!”
“Yes, yes Alfio. Not physically of course. He is slight and dark, like his mother, but his nature is all you: gentle, averse to confrontation, tranquillo…”

Of course, knowing what he did, he could not stop a wry smile sneaking up around his mouth. Elia misinterpreted his smile.

“Of course, you were quite cheeky in your younger days, as we know, but always tranquillo, even when you were deceiving you did it with such style, that I could not be angry with you for long.”

She was getting sentimental. He would have liked to take her hand, stroke her chestnut hair, but if he did that, she would probably get emotional.

“Come,” he said taking her hand, letting the action prevail over emotion, “let’s go down on the piazza.”

The idea brought her cheerfulness back.

“Beautiful idea, it’s time for me to have one of Mauro’s coffees.”

They spent the evening strolling on the lungomare Garibaldi, a bracetto, talking, acknowledging the occasional acquaintance going by, smelling the gentle autumnal breeze blowing in from the dreamy Gulf of Milazzo and luxuriating in the warmth of a friendship that had proved more rewarding, and certainly more resilient, than the passion they shared so many years ago.

……………………

By the time he took the winding, mountain road back to San Sisto, it was after 11 PM. He felt at peace with the world and himself. Yes, the world was in a mess. In the Middle-East they continued to butcher each other, the air of the world was being poisoned and so was the world of politics, Berlusconi had a stranglehold on Italy and Bush-fils had snuck up on the hapless Americans. What a disaster! And yet, so long as you could have days like this, living could still be glorious, tucked away between the Peloritani Mountains and the Tyrrhenean Sea.
As the night mist descended on the mountain, Don Alfio counted his blessings. He was heading back to San Sisto, to Ira, to the woman he loved above all else; more than the food he enjoyed so much; quite as much as the good soul of his mother, whom he had loved like a saint.

Ira had come into his life at a time when his mother's chronic illness had taken a turn for the worse. Twenty-one-year-old Ira La Rocca was hired to look after her. Don Alfio, who was then a strapping 36 year-old with a fondness for big, flouncy women, hardly noticed the dark, waif-looking girl, with the intense black eyes. Just days after her arrival, his mother, a devout woman, called Alfio into her room.

"I just want to tell you that this young woman is pregnant. Now, I don't want you to send her away, I am fond of her. And another thing, you will not take advantage of her, unless that is, you have honourable intentions in her regard"

Alfio, who had not given the young servant more than a second glance, was crestfallen. His mother hardly ever spoke to him about such matters, since he had chosen to live what she called a dissolute life. She understood his weakness, her long-departed husband had been a womaniser, so she could hardly expect anything else from her son. Alfio accepted that his life was frothy, but what could he do? Had he been gifted with artistic talent, or even a head for business then, yes, it would have been a pity to waste it. But Don Alfio knew his only talent was for appreciating life's many pleasures: like food, conversation, good company and women. Ah, women he did love. Of course he had to accept that, in his mother's strict religious code, (her code, not his) he was a sinner. In his defence he could say (to the supreme judge when he got to the other side) that he hadn't just taken pleasure, he had given pleasure to others. So while he admitted that his life was shallow, at least he could not be accused of entirely wasting it. Now that would have been unforgivable.
His sick mother’s words must have planted a seed, or rather given him her eyes with which to look at Ira. And he saw in her a strength he had not seen in all the women he frequented.

Alfio’s courtship of Ira La Rocca was conducted over the fast receding body of his mother, and Ira’s expanding belly. It wasn’t easy for Ira, whose only experience with one man had been traumatic, to accept this man’s attentions. As for Alfio, who had dealt with sophisticated and willing women, adept at the game of love, Ira was a new challenge. Amorous looks, suggestive phrases, subtle physical contact as he walked past her in the corridor – all of these had no effect. If anything it made the young woman recoil from him. And yet the more she ignored him, the more eager he became. Her coldness fed his passion.

He stopped going to Palermo to attend society functions and fashionable salons. Instead he took a personal interest in the family citrus orchard, which in those days was his sole source of income. At night he came home and took his coffee at Ciro’s, where he knew that people were beginning to talk about the delicate situation, because by this time Ira’s condition was beginning to show. The devotees, who went to early morning mass on Sunday, could not help but notice. People naturally assumed that don Alfio was the father, but couldn’t understand why the woman was still in the house or else why he had not married her. It did not occur to them that Don Alfio may not be the father, or even less likely, that she may not wish to marry him, the most eligible bachelor in San Sisto.

Don Alfio’s persistence was making little impression on Ira. If she thought about it, and that was rare – for she was too busy to think at all – she found Don Alfio frivolous and lacking in character. Though she could see how a lot of women might find him attractive, she didn’t. Of course she couldn’t say this to Alfio, there really was no point in unduly hurting his feelings. But some explanation needed to
be aired. One day, while Donna Rosamunda slept on a chair by the fireplace, Alfio came back from Agneddu with a pannier of early figs.

“Figs already!” cried Ira, who had a real weakness for them.

Alfio held out the basket to her and she took a fig smiling. He must have taken her obvious relish as an invitation and Alfio made a clumsy attempt to kiss her. Instinctively Ira recoiled, as the fig fell from her hand and she gave a muffled shriek. Luckily the old woman slept through it.

“Don Alfio…”

“Please, call me Alfio.”

“Don Alfio,” Ira insisted, “I am hired to look after your mother. Please don’t take advantage.”

Don Alfio went red with outrage; that his intentions should be grossly misjudged offended his dignity.

“I assure, Ira, I have the greatest respect for you.”

“You don’t know anything about me,” she said.

“Only that I am in love with you. I don’t wish to know anything else.”

She grabbed him by the wrists — her skinny fingers hardly reached half way around their thickness — and held him at arms’ length. She looked straight into his eyes and said,

“Don Alfio, I’m going to have a baby.”

“I know.”

“You do?”

“Yes, I knew it from the first day,” he lied, “I am sure there is a story. But frankly I’m not into stories. All I want is to be allowed to stay by you, in the same way as you have sat by the bed of my poor mother.”

“Well, “ she said with a burst of laughter which made her seem her age, for the first time since her arrival, “you are not an invalid for a start.”
“I will make myself an invalid, to get me your notice.”

He was so earnest, like a child begging. Ira, who had held herself together for four months, suddenly felt something inside her rupture and tears came gushing out. Then she began to tell him about that night of fear in far off Australia, the hurt and shame. Before she had even got to mention names, Don Alfio placed his index over her lips.

“Don’t,” he said firmly, “I don’t wish to know. If you will have me, I will marry you tomorrow and this child you carry will take my name.”

How could she say no? Ira married Don Alfio, not out of love, but out of his need and her gratitude. Love would come later; this was God’s direction. She could see that. Alfio was a good man, what she lacked in love, she put plenty of care and affection in its place, and in time it became indistinguishable from love. They were married, in Sant’Antonio Abbate the tiny church on the rocky hill in the outskirts of San Sisto. It was a very small gathering, but large enough for the news to get around the village, that Don Alfio and ‘the Australian’ had had a shotgun marriage. Everyone thought that was the best thing, although they found it difficult to believe that Ira, who looked so serious, so devout, could have been involved in that sort of thing out of wedlock. The unanimous agreement was that Don Alfio had seduced the girl, the old lecher, which did not surprise anyone and then had hired her to look after his mother, to get the full measure. But at least he had done the honourable thing and married her.

Not long after the wedding Alfio’s mother died. He was inconsolable, but as his mother’s ornate hazelnut coffin went into the Marzano family crypt, he consoled himself that, partly thanks to his mother, he now had a devoted wife.

It was more than he had hoped for. Soon he became father to a beautiful son. Which was just as well, because following some tests he had for a prostrate inflammation, the doctors discovered that his sperm count was so low as to make
him virtually sterile. This suited him fine, for Don Alfio had one truly outstanding
talent: the ability to enjoy life; the last thing he wanted was to be strapped with the
responsibility of a large family.

As his Alfa reached the Piazza Chiesa Madre - though in the village they all
referred to it simply as Chiazza, because it was not merely the only piazza but the
only flat surface in the area, for that reason it had always been used by the kids of
the town as a sports pitch on which to kick a soccer ball – he looked up at the
window of his home. No sign of lights. Good. He didn’t want to feel that his wife had
been waiting up for him. And Sante was home too, his Fiat Punto was there, parked
right under the balcony with the ornate wrought iron railings, below which was the
commemorative marble plaque with the inscription:

25 agosto, 1854

Durante la Propiziatrice Processione

Il SS. Crocifisso

Miracolosamente in questa casa

Arrestava il passo al colera

Minacciante intera citta’.

Nel 1mo centenario

Al ricordo

Agosto 195410

Don Alfio glanced at the inscription. It made him feel good that the home
which had been in his family for generations should be the famous site of a
documented miracle. Of course Don Alfio considered himself too modern, too much

10 August 25th 1854
During a Propitiatory Procession
The Holiest Crucifix
Miraculously in this house
Arrested the march of cholera
Threatening the entire town
of a free thinker to believe in miracles. Still, it was reassuring to know that other people, especially his wife, did. All was well. All was in place.

He parked the car outside the portone, then walked across to the Bar Ciro for his tucking-in coffee. There were just a few customers at the Bar, Carmine and Paolo, the Borrello cousins who spent their evenings there since their wives had died in an accident at the Forcina, Fausto, the bus driver, who had just done his last run from Milazzo, Ciro the Bar owner, was also sitting down at one of the tables and looked as if he had not had a good night's sleep in months. But, what was that, a hired Lancia parked outside the Albergo Salice. A customer in mid-week was unusual enough for the 8 room hotel. He would have to investigate in the morning.

He downed his macchiato, called out a collective farewell.

“Signori, Buona notte”

“Buon riposo, Don Alfio.”

Once inside, he checked to see that the light was off in Sante’s bedroom. So as not to awake his wife he undressed in the passage, down to his cotton vest and underpants, then he slipped quietly in the bedroom and laid his tired body next to Ira. Carefully he tucked his arm inside her smooth thin one and took her hand to his chest, right in the centre where he knew his very soul resided. And he felt all warm and cleansed. Ira was his port to which he would always return, always. She was his touchstone, his redeemer.

Ah, how he loved his wife!

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On the anniversary of the first century (August 1954)
With Alfio quickly asleep and snoring next to her, Ira was able to relax, but no sleep came. Sleep was elusive for her, she spent most of her nights lying in bed: thinking, fretting, regretting.

She could say, with utter sincerity, that of all the feelings that bound her to her husband, gratitude was the strongest. There were many things she was grateful to him for, many. For being such a good father to her son, of course. For not prying into her past and allowing her to bury large slabs of it. For not demanding from her what she could not give and getting it from other women. For being patient and understanding. Most of all for being so loving, while she...ah, well now... when it came to that phantasm of emotions she was mystified by its complexity and stumped by guilt. To her husband’s uncomplicated love the most that she could manage in return was loyalty and a sort of kind regard that easily passed for love.

Actually, right now she was grateful for his snoring. It provided both a backdrop for her morbid ruminations, and a link to the present, to reality, to normalcy over a night heavy with remembering. Unwelcome ghosts from that ill-fated migration to Australia lighted the dark of the bedroom and walked across the ceiling.

Enter Sheryl Jane Giffen with trademark straw hair and freckles. Ira put the palm of her hand between her and the snoring Don Alfio.

"Don't think for a minute that you're getting into bed between me and my husband."

Sheryl's mouth gave a scornful twist.

"As if... I've come to tell the story my way. I don't trust you after what you did."

..........................
Ira La Rocca came to Thornlie High half way through first term. Sheryl saw her for the first time one sunny lunchtime in winter, sitting alone on the library steps, like she herself had done some two years before. She was a dark, slight figure with a tiny face and black brows over big dark eyes. She sat crouched, her legs drawn up under her chin where her tiny face sat propped up by her knees. With her free hands she was throwing what was left of her lunch to the crows. Sheryl thought she should feel sorry for her, for being foreign in a school where she knew foreigners were given a hard time, and for not having any friends. But somehow the girl didn’t seem to mind. There was such absorption in her face, such calm confidence, despite the fact that she was sitting alone. It suggested certainty about who she was and what she was doing in the world. Her self-assurance belied her fragile appearance. Looking at her you got the impression that she could not be touched by adversities or less still by the antagonism of her peers. How does one get to be like that? Sheryl couldn’t even look at her for fear that she might look back and annihilate her. And yet, at the same time, Sheryl felt an urge to speak to her. If only she had the courage! Besides, she had Russell’s lunch in her hand and he was waiting for it.

Russell was playing around with Moira Austin, the redhead who hung around like crow for crumbs. Russell had her right arm locked behind her back, and she pretended to be hurting:

“Don’t. Let me go, Russ, you big bully.”

But you could tell by the tone of her voice that she was enjoying it.

“Here’s your lunch,” said Sheryl sharply, slapping the paper bag down next to him.

“Where ya been? I been starvin’.”
Actually he looked as if he should go on a starvation diet, thought Sheryl, suddenly feeling aggro.

“I can’t help it, if the teacher keeps us in, can I? Why can’t you get your own lunch anyhow?”

The words were out before she could stop. It shocked her to be speaking to Russell like that and in front of everyone, too. Russell went psycho.

“Fuck off you dog, go on. You don’t belong here.”

“Let her stay,” someone said.

But Russell was resolute. What was at stake was his power, his manhood and they were not to be compromised.

“No, she ain’t stayin’ and that’s that.”

Sheryl spun around and strode off, shoulders stooping. Tears stole into her eyes, but this time they weren’t tears of self-pity and rejection. They were tears of anger. She wasn’t angry with Russell, he didn’t know any better, he acted true to form, he had to assert his power. She was angry with herself for being who she was. She wanted to be someone else: with a different face, different hair colour, of a different nationality. Somehow she knew that the foreign girl she had just seen feeding the crows would never be in her humiliating situation.

Quite without thinking she headed back for the library. The girl was gone. At first she was relieved, had she been there Sheryl would have run scared and hidden somewhere. Then she became angry for being so stupid and she began to sob. Groups of students chattering by ignored her. Sheryl Giffen’s antics were well known around the school. A bit of an attention seeker she was.

After school she would normally go with Russell at the back of his stepfather’s garage, where there were few wrecked cars, to have a smoke and whatever. But that afternoon Russell was still mad at her and went off with his
mates. Sheryl was left at the front of the school wondering what to do. She felt terrible. She sat down by the entrance wall and rested her head on her knees. Someone wheeling a bike out of the cyclone fence enclosure had stopped next to her without saying anything.

“Whatchyou lookin’ at, hey?” said Sheryl to the shadow. Then she looked up and saw that it was that foreign girl. Embarrassed, she got up on her knees then straightened her back up grazing her spine along the wire fence as she did so.

“My name is Ira,” said the girl, in a voice that was unexpectedly deep for such a slight girl, “I'm new.”

She spoke deliberately, as if she were reading the words form a book inside her head.

“Ira? What kinda name’s that?

“Italian. What class are you in?”

Sheryl told her.

“And you?”

“Not sure yet. They’ve put me in C12 for now.”

“That’s Miss Kovic’s class. She’s a dragon.”

“I hope they’ll change me then. Do you live around here?”

“Yes…no, not really. I usually catch the bus, but I’ve missed it today.”

Meanwhile they had started walking in the same direction in Lawson Street.

“I'll give you a ride.” Said Ira.

Sheryl looked at her as if she had suggested something subversive.

“What do you mean? How?”

“Here, you can sit on the rack.”

Sheryl eyed her suspiciously, but Ira had such cheeky, ‘I dare you’ kind of look that she said,

“OK then, but don't blame me if we fall.”
In fact, before they had gone twenty metres, the bike promptly toppled over. They landed on the petunia bed in front of the school and the bike on top of them. Neither got hurt, and probably wouldn’t have mattered if they had. They didn’t care. They were both in stitches over the incident and the giggles lasted until they arrived at Ira’s house, by which time it seemed as if they had been friends forever. It was weird.

Ira lived in one of those chunky, practical ‘Italian’ migrant houses, with high limestone foundations, a garage underneath, wide terrazzo-floored terrace with ornate railing, cream-coloured bricks. It was an expression of cultural disorientation; an ugly allusion to the mountain ‘cascina’ in sterile suburbia. They left the bicycle in the garage then Sheryl followed Ira up the external staircase to the back door and into a dark corridor that smelled stale. Ira opened one of the doors quietly tiptoeing in. A soft, whining voice came from the bed.

“Ira, trasi, ca nun dormu. Apri a finestra.”

Sheryl didn’t understand the words or see the person speaking, until Ira went and drew the curtains to reveal an old man lying in bed, wearing a woollen vest. He had sunken eyes and lots of white hair on his head. Ira went up and kissed him on the cheek. The old man put one hand around the back of her head and held her to him for a few seconds.

“Dad, look how sweaty you are.” She spoke the sentence in English, for Sheryl’s benefit, or perhaps to draw his attention to the ‘Australian’ guest, then continued in Sicilian.

She went to the linen cupboard on the opposite side of the room and got out a clean vest. She helped him sit up, pulled off the sweaty garment, she swabbed him down all over his face and neck with a damp face cloth, all the while chatting.
with him in their own language. Sheryl gathered she was telling him about her new school. Finally she slipped a clean vest on him. When he was done and looking a little revived Ira said in English, “Dad, this is my friend, Sheryl.”

The old man gave her his left hand and squeezed hers without saying anything. Meanwhile Ira, took the pillow that had been under his head and changed the pillowcase.

“He’s been sweating like a donkey,” she said. On the bedside table there were some pills, Ira got one out and held the glass to her father who drank it slowly. Next to the glass there was a twig of silver leaves sitting inside a vase.

“What’s that?” asked Sheryl.

“It’s an olive branch,” said Ira, “Dad thinks it’ll bring him good luck. He’s very superstitious.”

In the backyard they sat at a white cement table over which twisted a canopy of branches.

“It’s a grape vine”, explained Ira, “in summer, you can stand and pick your own. I love grapes, don’t you? Oh, look at the time, I’ve got to go and put the tea on.”

“Don’t you have TV?” asked Sheryl.

“Of course. But we hardly ever watch it. My parents don’t speak much English, and I don’t have time.”

“What do you do?”

“Oh I got lots to do, specially now that my father’s sick, me and my Mum are looking after the garden, feed the chooks, pick the veggies. And there’s homework of course.”

Ira had never taken homework seriously. She had followed Russell’s maxim that homework’s for teachers to show students who’s boss.

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11 *Ira, come in, I’m not sleeping. Open the window.*
“What’s wrong with your Dad?”

“Had an accident at the factory where he works. Broke his pelvis. He’s much better now. Before he couldn’t even sit up.”

“He looks pretty old...”

Ira giggled. It came as a surprise to see her serious face distend.

“Don’t tell him that. He’s 64, he got married late. Mum was pretty old too when she had me, 42 I think.”

A voice from inside.

“Ira, vidi ca to mamma arriva.”

“Vegnu. Better go in, my Mum’s coming. Dad can hear the car coming a kilometre away. I don’t know how he does it.”

A woman came carrying a bagful of shopping. She was quite short and dark, a mousy face like her daughter and hair that was tied back in a pointy bun. A mole stood out on the side of her neck, but otherwise her skin was smooth. What Sheryl found disconcerting was her eyes, they were dark and set in deep sockets, that looked at you out of some unseen depth.

“This is my friend from school,” she said in English.

The woman sized her up and down.

“A frien’? Good. Very good.”

Sheryl thought that the woman was judging her suitability to be her daughter’s friend and felt sure she didn’t like her. And yet, after letting go of her hand she turned to her daughter and said,

“You frien’ she look too pale, make a Marsala drink for her.”

Sheryl followed Ira to the kitchen and watched her crack an egg into a glass, whisk it vigorously with a fork until frothy, then added milk, a dash of Marsala and a sprinkling of cinnamon.

“Is that wine?” asked Sheryl, pointing to the Marsala bottle.
“Yeah, sort of, like a sweet wine.”

“You mean you’re allowed to have it?”

“Why not? Try it, it won’t kill you.”

Sheryl, stepped back, as if she were offered poison,

“Do I have to have it?”

“No, you should try it though, it's good for you.”

Sheryl took a sip. It was just an egg flip with a bit of taste. She drank most of it. Ira finished the rest.

“It'll please Mum if she thinks you finished it.”

Sheryl and Ira became best friends: best friends at first sight, they joked about it. And when Ira was put in the same class as her, the two girls became inseparable. They sat together, worked together, laughed, teased, gossiped. It was fun.

“Sheryl, do you think that the Ram and the Koala are having an affair?”

Ira was referring to Miss Ramsay, the English teacher, and Mr Kawala, the art teacher, who were often seen together.

“You're a gossip, Ira.”

“I know, pass me the protractor, will you?”

“I think Mr Kawala’s too old for her. I think he might be married.”

“Oh I know he’s married, that's why I said ‘an affair’.”

“Honestly Ira, you're such a busybody…”

And they giggled until they were bursting. And Miss Ramsay would call out to them, “Come on you two girls. Get on with your work.”

Having a best friend was wild.

Russell didn’t like Ira from the start. He first saw them together outside of science walking side by side in between periods.
“Who’s that foreign chick you was with today?”

“Who do you mean?”

“The dark runt with the fuzzy hair.”

“That’s Ira. She’s new.”

“Toldya. She’s a dago, aint she?”

“Don’t be awful, Russ. She’s very nice.”

“Oh yeah, and what was you doing with her?”

“Just talking, what do you think?”

“Don’t snap at me, or I’ll sock you one.”

God how she hated Russell when he put on his bully manner!

Pickering Brook was a community of stonefruit orchardists, nestled on the city’s escarpment, where the sand of the coastal plain give way to the gravelly soil of the hills. Here post-war migrants from Southern Europe attempted to transplant what they had left behind, with recombinant replicas of Valtellina, of Sicily, of Dalmatia and so on. They planted orchards of apricots, peaches, apples and pears, built churches and community halls. They replicated festivals.

For the feast of St Anthony some 600 people came together in the paved space in front of the church of the same name in the soft autumn sun. A statue of the saint with his rouged chalk face, bald head, monk’s tunic and sandals was hoisted up on a frame with 4 wooden handles. On a blue silken sash adorning the Saint’s breast, people pinned 5, 10 or 20 dollar donations. As the procession started, the brass band headed off first, playing ‘O Santa Vergine Maria’. A statue of the St Anthony, with rouged cheeks, brown robe, sandalled feet and a silver ring over its small, bald head was carried over the shoulders of four brawny men, others flanked them waiting for their turn to have the honour. They were followed by children dressed as little angels with wings of sky-blue feathers. The dignitaries
An Olive Branch for Sante

came next headed by the Bishop, the priests, the President of the St Anthony Devotees. Finally came the rest of the congregation.

Ira and Sheryl walked together, alone, because Mr La Rocca, though much better, was still not strong enough to last out the length of the procession, so Mrs La Rocca stayed with him back at the church.

A light breeze rose suddenly bringing an orange dust to the nostrils. The people paced behind the statue talking, some older women prayed, children skipped along.

Sheryl felt protected and happy.

"It's nice here." she said.

"I wasn't sure if you'd like it. I mean this is very traditional stuff."

"I do." Without warning Ira tucked her forearm under hers and drew her to her side. The unexpected closeness made Sheryl shiver.

"You cold?"

"Not really... a bit."

Ira pulled her closer. They walked arm in arm, past rows of apple trees with gold and brown leaves. Women had intense, whispering conversations with each other, children held their parents hand. Men in suits, ties and hats, chatted with friends in familiar, subdued tone below the shrill sound of the brass band. The elderly prayed with rosary beads in hand. Men and women, young people and children coming together, for closeness, for comfort.

"This reminds me of my village in Sicily," said Ira.

"Do you still remember it then?"

"Of course, I've only been in Australia 5 years"

"Do you think... you'll wanna go back there?"

"Probably. I don't know. I'd like to go and visit anyway. We can go together. Would you like to?"
“Yeah, I’d love that.”

And they held their arms so close that they nearly tripped as they walked.

Sheryl sniffled as she wiped a tear with the back of her hand.

“What’s wrong?” Asked Ira.

“Nothing, I’m just happy, that’s all.”

A bunch of boys had hurried up the procession and now walked next to the two girls. A boy called Domenic started to speak to Ira.

“What do you know?”

“Nothing much.”

“Where’s your Mum?”

“Back at the church.”

“Who’s your mate?”

“This is Sheryl, my friend.”

Ira was friendly but not overly so. After a while the boy went back to his mates.

“He’s cute. I think he likes you.”

Ira gave a shrug.

“Don’t you like him?”

“He’s alright.”

“Is he your boyfriend?”

“Of course not. I don’t want a boyfriend.”

“Why not?”

“I’m too young for a start.”

Ira had let go of her arm while she was talking to the boy. Now Sheryl slipped her hand back inside her friend’s arm, timidly. Ira bent it, pulled her close. It felt good.
Disaster came on the back of an exotic fruit. Prickly pears made an unhappy journey to Australia. In Queensland their adaptability proved to be their downfall. As they threatened to overrun the newly-cleared land they were quickly declared a vermin. In Western Australia they came to be tolerated, begrudgingly, in the confines of a home garden, so that nostalgic Italians, Greeks or Balkans could add a prickly pear to their olive tree, fig tree, lemon tree and grape vines: essential components of the Mediterranean garden. Her father had planted theirs at the back of the sandy block, tucked away beyond the corrugated iron roof of the tool shed, between the chicken pen and the asbestos back fence.

When Ira took them to school in her lunch box, Sheryl eyed the two egg-shaped fruit – one golden, the other the colour of pomegranate – with the same mix of fascination and caution with which she had regarded all the other strange foods she had sampled, since the friendship had started. “They’re a cactus,” explained Ira, “the skin’s covered in prickles. My father peels them. Take your pick, they’re really nice”

Best friends had to share everything. Sheryl took the golden one. Ira ate the other one, savouring the sweet, seedy succulence.

“What do you think?”

“Mh, they’re different,” she said unconvincingly.

“I love them,” said Ira, “one time when I was little, I ate so many that they blocked me up.”

“You mean…. you couldn’t go?” Sheryl giggled into her hand.

“Mh, mh… my mother had a hell of a job getting me started. It was painful.”

As Sheryl laughed juice ran down the side of her mouth, to her chin.
“Messy too, I bet.”

Ira gave such a hilarious account of the ordeal that it had Sheryl in stitches. They laughed in each other’s lap not caring about who was watching them. There they go again, those two weirdoes, thought the other students.

An hour later Sheryl was sitting in the infirmary, having left the fruit in the toilet bowl. The nurse asked her a few questions, gave her something to settle her stomach, then suggested she should take some tests. When she came out (Ira was waiting for her in the foyer) Sheryl’s cheeks were on fire.

“What’s wrong, Sheryl?”

“I got some’ to tell ya.” Her voice was strangely elated, “not here though.”

All the way home to Ira’s house, Sheryl didn’t say a word. As they walked alongside each other – with Ira wheeling her bike on the footpath – Sheryl gave her mysterious side glances. Her body seemed to be straining to contain some pressure cooker of a secret from exploding out of her. It was scary.

.............................

When they were finally alone in the darkness of the house, Sheryl took her hand and led her down the narrow corridor, through the fly-wire door, out on the back porch. Down the steps they went, over the patch of buffalo lawn and beyond the vegetable garden into the orchard. In the cosy privacy afforded by wall of the shed and the canopy of the juvenile olive tree, Sheryl took both her hands and pulled her close. She was all animated, eyes beady. It felt eerily as if she were about to propose marriage.

“I been dying to tell you all afternoon… we’re going to have a baby.”

So great was the shock that Ira did not think it strange her use of the pronoun.

“Don’t be stupid Sheryl.”

“I saw it, the nurse showed me the red dot on the tester.”
When the truth finally sank Ira felt a great surge of anger shake her. She pulled her hand free from Sheryl's grip. Her face was all twisted up.

“You’re so stupid!…" she screamed, pacing up and down.

"Stupid!…Stupid!….Stupid!"

She knew she should have listened to her mother when she warned her that Sheryl would be trouble. Instead she had defied her mother's wisdom and committed herself to an idiot. There and then Ira would have liked to slap her face. When finally her anger subsided enough to allow other emotions through, Ira's gut reaction was a deeply felt betrayal.

“Does Russell know?”

“No, and I'm not gonna tell him either.”

“Don’t be stupid, Sheryl, you have to. He’s the father.”

“He’s not. He’s just….a bully.”

“You told me you’d stopped doing that stuff.”

“I’m sorry. It’s just that I get lonely when you’re not around. “

“What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know,” her eyes filled with tears. She had expected Ira to be delighted with the news, make a fuss of her. This was big news, this was awesome! This was their baby, living icon of their love for each other. Instead Ira had only made her feel guilty, pitiful, scared. So, prompt came the tears, and then a frightening thought “Russell’s gonna kill me.”

Sheryl was wrong. When Russell was told, in the presence of the school counsellor, his reaction was unexpected. He seemed pleased, already basking in the glory of his mates' acclaim of his prowess. He did not consider the implications, his imagination did not stretch that far. All he could think was that this pregnancy was a further, irrefutable proof of his superior manhood. He imagined himself walking around the school grounds, in the shopping centre, at the bike track – with
Sheryl at his side, her protruding belly a trophy to his unassailable virility. And to show that manly, stiff-dick Russell could also be tender he went straight to the canteen and spent his last 50 cents to buy a diet Coke and presented it to Sheryl.

If Sheryl was undecided as to what to do about the baby, her foster parents had no doubt, if she wanted to have the baby she would have to move out. Their house was a foster home to two other children and they had to think of their welfare too.

“They want me to... lose the baby,” said Sheryl, bursting into tears and falling into Ira's arms. She clung to her constantly in that period, she wanted to be held, comforted, have her tears wiped, her hair done.

“And what did you say?”

“Ira I can’t. I don’t wanna. It’s ...our baby.”

“What about Russell? What does he say?”

“I don’t care about him. I don’t want him around ever again. I hate him.”

Ira had the impression that Sheryl had conspired to have this baby so as to have an excuse to get rid of him and cling closer to her. The pregnancy brought out the fighting spirit in Sheryl. She was a bit like the old hen back in Sicily, the speckled one, that was pecked and put-upon by every other bird in the yard. Then each spring, punctually she went clucky and sat on the eggs for weeks. When she came off the roost with her brood of chicks she had more fight in her than a cock. She puffed out her feathers as a warning and if any hen came near her chicks she would chase it ferociously.

Every afternoon, after school, Sheryl came to her house and stayed there in Ira's bedroom, lingering as long as possible. She was scared of Mrs La Rocca, who saw that this girl was in deep trouble and wasting her daughter's time. Then one day after she had had a good cry and Ira was comforting her, Sheryl said,
“Maybe I can stay here, till the baby is born.”

The thought had occurred to Ira, but the niggling worry that she was getting herself deeper and deeper into a muddy situation restrained her. Now she found the idea suddenly captivating. Despite herself Ira admired the new Sheryl. There was a maturity and softness about her. Ira loved those long embraces, stolen in the privacy of the bedroom. Looking back on it now, with a quarter of a century of hindsight, it was clear that it was the devil tempting her through Sheryl Giffen, and she had caved in.

Ira took her friend’s case to her shocked parents.

“She doesn’t have anyone, Mum. She’s pretty desperate.”

Ira addressed her mother because she knew it was she who would make the decision. Her father, he would do anything to please his daughter.

“What about da boy’s parents?” asked her mother.

“There’s only the father. The mother left when Russell was a kid.”

“Nice set-up,” said Mrs La Rocca, sarcastically. “Trust you, getting yourself involved in that situation. We’ll speak to Father Cassani, they may be able to help at the parish.”

It turned out that Father Cassani was away in Melbourne for a month, his place had been taken by a priest from the Philippines. He was a young man, full of missionary zeal which over-spilled into a plenitude of social conscience.

“This child seems to have lost her way,” said he, “what she needs most of all at the moment is a good, stable, Christian home.” He looked at Mrs. La Rocca. “Yours has the added advantage that she would have her best friend for support…”

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The La Rocca’s house was small, as a consequence Sheryl had to share a room with Ira. Mrs La Rocca was not happy about the situation, especially as it came in a year when her daughter was doing year 11 at school, but once she had
made the decision her sense of compassion prevailed, though she stipulated that Russell was not to call at the house. This suited Sheryl who wanted an excuse to break off with him.

For the last four months of her pregnancy Sheryl did not attend school, she spent her day waiting for Ira. She made lunch for Mr La Rocca, whom she called Pop. The La Rocca household was a busy one. No all-day TV watching, there was too much to do. Mrs La Rocca went to work while Pop, still convalescing from his accident, spent his day pottering around in the garden.

When autumn came Ira and Sheryl picked the green fruit off the olive tree. Ira went up the ladder and picked the upper branches, Sheryl did the lower branches. They squashed them on a wooden cutting board, banging on each individual olive with the bottom of a milk bottle which split and loosened the pith from the stone. They left the olives in a bucket, changing the water several times a day until the lime colour changed to brown. Then her mother seasoned them with garlic, chilly, fennel seeds, bay leaves, slices of lemon and salt. It gave the house a pervasive smell of herbs. Sheryl became addicted to these olives.

“You maybe need da salt,” said Mrs La Rocca.

“It’s not me, it’s the baby,” said Sheryl, and everybody thought that was hilarious; even Pop, who was a sad, distant man, laughed.

Sheryl became a bit of a clown figure, which she enjoyed. Even Mrs. La Rocca warmed to her. Sheryl had never had so much attention, never seemed so happy. Ira too was happy. All day at school she looked forward to going home and tell Sheryl all about the teachers, their friends.

But there were tears too. For no particular reason, and at the most inopportune times, tears would steal into Sheryl's eyes. Then she had to hold them back, fearing that if Mrs. La Rocca noticed she might send her away. She learned a trick that every time she could feel the tears pressing, she would start giggling.
Then she would have to come up with an excuse for her giggling. Sometimes her excuses made no sense. She was sure they all thought her mad.

But at night, in the bedroom, it was different. The girls shared a room with two single beds, separated by a small chest of drawers on which sat a lamp. When Sheryl cried Ira would slip into bed with her. She comforted her friend, running her fingers through her blond hair, whispering soothing words. When Ira made as if to return to her bed, Sheryl held her tight and pleaded, “Don’t Ira, don’t go yet.” Some nights they fell asleep in each other’s arms and in the morning they’d wake up in the same bed.

Ira never mentioned Russell. Russell was the past, a world she wanted to close the door upon. He was probably with someone else now, making some poor girl’s life miserable. It amused her to think how jealous she had been just a few months ago. Now she couldn’t care less if she never saw Russell again.

“Know what Ira,” she whispered one night as they were about to fall asleep holding each other’s hand, “there’s one part of me that wants this to last forever.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, so long as the baby is inside me, nobody can touch it. It can be our baby and we can be together.”

The first time she felt the baby move, an excited Sheryl took Ira’s hand and placed it on her naked belly

“Feel that Ira.”

Ira recoiled as if she had been made to touch hot coals.

“Don’t be frightened, Ira.”

Pregnancy had given Sheryl confidence. She now was someone, someone worthwhile, important. As her belly grew, Sheryl would lie on her bed naked and they would watch the leg or arm push up under the skin and arch across the belly and both would stare and wonder at the miracle. Sheryl’s breasts also began to
enlarge, they were sumptuous. Ira could not stop looking at them. Around the
dilated, pink nipples a circle of follicles had appeared. Sometimes the ends of her
blond hair – which had grown long and unkempt, now that other parts of her body
occupied her mind – curled around her breasts and the nipples peered through
blond strands like big buttons of satin.

Even now, a quarter of a century on, lying next to a man she's been married
to for over seventeen years, the vision comes through so fresh that she can smell
the skin. The devil is surely in her, it visits her at her most vulnerable times. And
yet, never during those recurrent visits have her lips and Sheryl's breasts made
contact. That is her just punishment.

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One night Sheryl went to bed earlier than usual, complaining of feeling tired.
She fell asleep almost at once. Ira, working at her desk could hear her breathing. A
light film of sweat had appeared on her brow, she looked fragile but at peace. A girl
just turned sixteen, younger than herself, hurled into a role of womanhood, long
before she was ready. Suddenly she stirred, wriggling and started to kick the cover
off the bed.

“What's wrong?” asked Ira.

“I’m hot.”

With the palm of her hand she felt the sheet. When her finger came into
contact with a warm, melmous patch she gave out a scream. Maternity classes had
not prepared her for this moment. It was Mrs. La Rocca, awoken by the screaming,
who sprang into action.

The birth was quick. Sheryl barely made it to the delivery room before the
bald, pink head forced its way through the cervix and the slippery body of a baby
girl slid into the world.
“What name are you going to give her?” asked the nurse, who had not been informed that the baby was marked for adoption.

“Ira,” said Sheryl promptly, "Ira Giffen."

Ira was moved to tears. She leant over the bed and hugged her.

“That's so sweet, Sheryl.”

Later in the morning when the nurse brought the baby into the room she added.

“Of course, the name will probably be changed.”

“Why?”

“Well, her adoptive parents might want to give her their own name.”

Sheryl, the child-mother who could never make a decision on even the most mundane matters, this time was resolute.

“Ira, this is our baby. We are the parents. I'll never give her up for adoption.”

Jane, Sheryl's middle name, was added later on the birth certificate. So the child came to be known as Ira-Jane, to distinguish her from the older Ira.

8

A wet October Saturday morning and, once again, his lie-in spoilt by a headache and screaming kids. A couple of Panadols might fix the first, but there's no repair from the kids.

Even Chris, who should know better, is yelling on top of her voice.

“Stop it Mat, leave her alone.”

“It was her that hit me first.”

“Stop it both of you, I've had enough.”

He should never have agreed to move in with Chris. He knew he was no good with kids, not his game at all. And anyhow, he was too busy and too stressed with his job. But then, Chris came along with two kids in tow, wanting a man and he
caved in. Maybe it was the fact that he was getting on, frightened by the prospect of being an old man on his own. He laid it on the line for her though, so as to avoid arguments later.

"They're your kids, your responsibility."

Not that it did any good. He is still expected to be a father to them. Now she tries to hush them with threats and bribes; they take no notice of her. In the end he has to call them into the room.

"Right, “ he says, sitting up on his bed, propped up on his elbows, “listen up, you kids, I'm trying to get some sleep, see. I don't want any more screaming out of you lot. If I have to get out of this bed, I'll let the belt do the talking."

That should do it. In the next few minutes Chris rounds them up and takes them off to the shopping centre. Quiet at last. Problem is that anger has stirred him up and he has no chance of going back to sleep. He is condemned to lie there, thinking, remembering. There is nothing worse than thinking about things you don’t want to remember, just when you’re trying to get back to sleep. It's worse than having to listen to screaming kids.

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He does of course have a grown up daughter, the one with the hoity-toity name and attitude to match. She's going places and keeping her distance. Suits him. He's got enough on his plate. Still, he has to admit, it's good to see her doing well for herself, considering all the shit her mother’s put her through. Good old Sheryl, there's a stuffed-up mind if ever there was one. To be honest she managed to stuff him up too. Looking back, all the women he's had since – and there've been a few– they've just... flitted through his life. Forgettable mock-ups, they've been. The one he keeps going back to is that ticked-in-the-head fifteen-year-old with the whiney voice, that used to follow him around like a mange dog.
He can never figure out what it was about Sheryl. Maybe it's because she was the first and the craziest. It's like her face was tattooed inside the walls of his brain. And it's not as if she was a great looker, he's had plenty better-looking women since. As for brains, old Sheryl was a bit on the thick side, she was, let's face it. Personality? Nothing to write home about either. A bit boring, in fact. Nah, it was something else. Something about her that hit you unexpectedly when you were daydreaming or watching the box. You saw it in a flash sometimes when you caught her profile. She looked kind of helpless, fragile. She reminded him of this picture he once saw of a single garment hanging from a wire on one of them clothes hoists, being tossed about by the wind. It made you want to trap her, contain her in a space, keep her steady, because Sheryl was out of control. Something anarchic about her.. With Sheryl you felt you had to keep a tight lid on things because, if he let that loose-cannon have it over him, she could do some real damage. So, when she whimpered or looked at you with her stupid dog eyes, you were caught between competing urges to either screw her or belt some sense into her. Of course he didn't know at the time the risks he was taking, he didn't think. Just kids getting into adult games, tossed about in a world of anger and desire.

It's weird to think that a chit of a girl like that: without brains or personality, could have left such a mark on him. Maybe it came down to this: he loved Sheryl (and nearly twenty-six year on he is convinced that love it was, though at the time it was just a game) for her weakness, because her weakness made him feel strong. Then, before you knew it, snap! Reality caught up with you, grabbed you by the nuts, wrestled you down. Trouble came in the shape of that foreign girl, the one with the olive skin, the crow-black frizzy hair and the lizard eyes that unsettled you; the one with the threatening name, which Sheryl insisted on giving their daughter. Funny thing about words, they can have a strange power. Even now it was difficult
for him to think of a girl with a name like Ira as his daughter. Thank God for the Jane, it tones it down a bit, makes her just approachable enough.

As he learnt months later, it was the foreign girl who insisted that Russell should be informed about the birth of their daughter.

“Sheryl, it’s only fair,” she had argued, “he’s the father, after all.”

Sheryl laughed.

“He wouldn’t care, Ira. He’s probably forgotten all about it.”

That’s how bitchy she had got and how besotted she was with the dago girl.

From the first time he set eyes on her, he knew she would be trouble, that one. Sheryl wasn’t the same after she arrived at the school, the foreigner took over her mind, changed her personality. Overnight his girl, who had clung to him like a leach, became moody and wilful: a rebel he could no longer control, a resentful bitch that bit back. That dago girl had poisoned her. Well, you can fight off a male rival but a female... it takes a different approach, different method. He knew he would get his chance sooner or later.

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When he was given the news Russell was quite disappointed. A baby girl wasn’t part of the picture he had in his head. Still, he was a father, and just seventeen. That was certainly cause for celebration.

That afternoon he called a couple of his mates, Ronnie and Darryl. The latter had a car and, more importantly, at 18, was allowed to buy alcohol. They drove to the nearest liquor store and bought a dozen VB stubbies, headed for South Beach and got stuck into the celebrations, as any man who had just become a father would.

“It’s not every day, you become a father, hey,” said Darryl, expressing the very thought that was in Russell’s mind.
General agreement accompanied by gulps of beer and appropriate manly burps. Having given due regard to that great feat accomplished by Russell, the conversation soon moved to cars, and whether a MK II was faster than a Mustang. Russell who had always said he would be buying a sporty red Mk II when he had his own business and made heaps of money, said that undoubtedly a MK II was the fastest.

"Ok then, how ya gonna carry your baby in a MK II? Tel me that."

Russell was stumped for a moment.

“What d’ya mean?”

“Well, it’s got no back seat for starters. Where you gonna fix the baby seat then?”

Of course, the baby was going to be adopted anyhow, so the question was purely academic. However that didn’t stop the trio from arguing the point for a long time, as long as the grog lasted, anyway. Then, for good measure, they had a tussle in the sand. When the twelve empty stubbies lay scattered around a sandy mound, it was time for him to face up to the responsibilities of fatherhood.

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When he got to the King Edward Memorial Hospital, with his mates flanking him, the matron: a no-nonsense woman nearly as broad as she was tall, seeing the state they were in, got stuck into them.

“Just where do you think you’re going,” she said speaking to the three of them, “this is a maternity hospital, not your local boozer.”

But Russell was not going to be intimidated by the woman, not in front of his mates, most definitely not on the day when he had become a father.

“I’m the father,” he said.

“It looks to me as if you could do with a father yourself. Whose father are you?”
“Of the baby.”

“Which baby, we’ve got 23 in this ward alone.”

Russell realized, to his dismay that he didn’t know his daughter’s name.

“Sheryl …”

“Sheryl? There’s no baby Sheryl here.”

“Sheryl’s the mother. Sheryl Giffen.”

The matron knew the girl, they didn’t get too many 16 year-old mothers.

“She’s in ward 2.36 down the corridor… Ah! Ah! Just you. Your mates can wait outside.”

Bitch! Said Russel under his breath.

He had not counted on meeting her mate there. They were sitting together on the bed, their heads touching, studying some baby magazine with such an absorption that they seemed insulated from the world. It made him angry to see that. The alcohol was beginning to wear off and that always made him morose. Ira saw him first and nudged Sheryl who, on looking up and seeing him there, gasped as if the devil had walked in on her. Russell had not seen Sheryl for some five months and she had changed. She was not Sheryl but a grown up woman who didn’t need him any more. An impenetrable aura wrapped the two girls. Russell understood that whatever they were sharing – the space into which they were huddled for companionship and comfort – that space would always be denied to him. Being ostracized by those two females, at such a moment hurt so badly, that to stop himself from crying he grabbed a clump of hair from the back of his head and tore at it.

Looking back, he now understands that what he felt, is felt also by millions of men: the desolation of being male. It’s only now, at age 41 and counting, that he has come to realize that – for all the posturing, the physical strength and the power-play of men – the real power resides with the woman. He now knows that
the physical weakness in a woman is a ploy, it’s an appearance of weakness, a
trap. What passes off as weakness in women is a surfeit of that ability to focus all
their energies to love and to submit, not to the man – that's just an illusion, part of
their genius – rather to the strength of their own feelings. This gives them a quality
that men can't comprehend, at their peril. Women have the power to make a man or
to destroy him. Women are witches, anarchic. The weaker they appear, the more
dangerous they are.

Sheryl stonewalled him with an icy stare.

“What are you doing here?”

“I come to see ya,” he felt intimidated and hated it.

“You could have called...”

He was the father, why did he have to call? He wanted to give Sheryl a
piece of his mind, the sharp piece, but with what’s-her-name there, looking on, it
was a case of grin and bear.

“I’d better be going,” said Ira.

Sheryl grabbed her hand.

“You can’t go yet, Ira. They’ll be bringing the baby soon. Don’t you want to
see her before you leave?”

She said ‘the baby’ like it was ‘our baby’, a shared thing between the two of
them.

“I thought you was going to adopt it,” said Russell.

“I’ve changed my mind.”

Russell was stunned as much by her tone, as by the news. It was like, _this
is what I’ve decided to do and you’d better not argue with me._ No by-your-leave.
Such sure-fire decisiveness was not a trait of the Sheryl he knew.

“You mean, you gonna look after her yourself?”

Sheryl looked at Ira.
“Yeah,” she said firmly, “we’re going to.”

She looked him straight in the eyes, confronting him like a featherweight squaring up to a heavyweight in the ring.

Ira said, “I’m going down to the canteen,” and before Sheryl had a chance to protest she whispered, “I’ll call in before I go.”

With Ira gone, he was able to really take a good look at her and he was astonished. When he last saw her, four months ago, she was still the same gawky Sheryl he had always known, now at barely sixteen her teenage body had filled out and she was a strange, self-assured, intimidating woman.

Russell sat on the bed, the way Ira had done. With the weight of his hefty body the mattress dipped and sagged. Sheryl’s lighter body slid forward and her leg came to rest against his knee. Quickly Sheryl hoisted herself up on her elbow and went to rest back against the headboard. Her breasts swelled up from the embroidery of her nightdress. A flush of desire filled Russell’s loins, heightened by a weird kind of tenderness. Russell was almost in tears and found himself saying embarrassing things.

“Sheryl, I want us to get back together. I’ll get a job.”

Russell’s pleading voice disarmed her for a minute. Then her face hardened.

“Would you mind not sitting on the bed. The nurses don’t like it.”

“What about your mate then?”

“She’s not as heavy as you are.”

What really hurt him was the contempt in her voice and the hatred in her eyes. It hurt him so much that it re-lit the fuse of anger inside him. Good thing for her that they were in hospital because, there and then, he would have lost his block.
Of course, he realized it wasn’t her, Sheryl wouldn’t be so hard, Sheryl he could handle. It was the foreign tart that had turned her, poisoned her against him. Russell moved his weight off the bed but he didn’t sit on the chair. He stood up, his laddish bulk towered above the bed.

“Where you gonna live?”

“I’ve applied for a State Housing Commission flat, which I’m entitled to, as a single mother…”

She had it all worked out. Or rather, the other one had it all worked out for her. Sheryl didn't have the brains for it. They had it all planned without him. He knew one thing, Sheryl would not be his again, not the way it used to be, until the dago girl was put back in her place, one way or another. Russell knew what needed to be done, and he was just the right person to do it. It was a case of waiting and getting her all by herself.

Don Alfio went to the bathroom to lighten his body. Normally he would have stumbled back to bed, this being a Sunday, however he sensed that Ira had had one of her nights. The cold of the mattress next to him attested to the fact that she had been up for a long time. So he gave his mouth a rinsing and a quick brushing of what was left of the hair around the crown of his head. His smile, emerging out of the collar of his burgundy shaving coat, brought light and ease into the living room, heavy with Ira’s thoughts.

One look at her and he understood that this was no physical ailment: no migraine or stomach upset. No, Ira was having a very athletic tussle with her demons and she had a plenitude of them. Ira was at the mercy of her thoughts,
her scruples, her guilt, her religion. Enough baggage to make her life more burdensome than that of Sysiphus. Still Don Alfio did not judge or feel pity for her. He understood that all that baggage was as essential to her existence as pleasure was to his. So their union seemed to him fortuitous and, in its own way, perfect. Human perfection, which of course was as illusory as a magician’s trick, was all about balance, about extremes weighing out each other. By the rules of his rudimentary philosophy (he couldn’t cope with anything more complicated) her heaviness was the perfect complement to his frothy approach to life. Likewise her piety counterbalanced his earthiness; his straight-forward nature was a fitting counter-weight to her convoluted psychology. Like a good Prosecco, in which the acidity and sweetness were perfectly balanced, so were Don Alfio and Ira.

Ira had been smoking, unusual for her at this time of the morning. Usually she did not start until after lunch. As he walked in, he caught her with a cigarette in her fingers, over a coffee. Ash and two stunted butts on the bottom of the tray, betrayed her turmoil. He wondered what the stress was, probably that business of the olive grove.

“Have you had your breakfast, Ira?” he said kissing her on the cheek, avoiding the smoke billowing past her shoulder.

“Alfio, I don’t have breakfast on Sunday, you know that.”

Of course, Holy Communion. One must receive the body of Christ on an empty stomach, hopefully Christ does not object to the smell of tobacco, he mused. Don Alfio did not mind the contradiction, he saw it as the rich, mysterious vein that runs through all women and makes them such fascinating creatures. Don Alfio loved women. He liked men too, but women… women are a miracle, thought Don Alfio, as he sat down to his breakfast. They are the reason for his existence, his oxygen, his saviours. Their beauty complement a man’s plainness, their wonder his banality. Women, whether they love or hate, they do so intensely, totally. And
sometimes, at their most miraculous, contemporaneously. Women give of
themselves fully and are equally exigent of their man, hence the eternal conflict.
Men do not have the courage, the dare, the power to give totally of themselves. In
short, men are trapped by their egos. For that reason, thought Don Alfio – happy to
be able to conclude his train of thought with an appropriate aphorism – a man’s
philandering is an escape from his inadequacy, his stronger frame a cover-up for
his moral frailty.

He wanted to share all this with the woman he was devoted to, but how
could he? Would she understand? No, probably not, and certainly not at a time like
this. This was the time for assuaging her fears.

“What’s wrong, Cara?”

Ira stretched out her arm and from inside the sleeve of her dressing gown
she retrieved a single sheet of paper folded up several times and probably
scrunched into a ball at one point – judging by its condition - and placed it in front of
him. Don Alfio understood.

His wife had told him about the other woman in Australia and her daughter.
That whole business stressed him, but only because he knew his wife viewed it with
such intensity. To tell the truth he’d rather not have known about it, but he had to
take on board his wife’s burden sometimes. So he sighed and said,

“I see.”

And because he didn’t know what to say, he drank down his coffee, tilting
his head back and keeping it there for longer than was necessary.

“I am not going to contact her.” she said. Then, because he still wasn’t
saying anything, she added, “I suppose you think I should.”

Of course she knew what he thought. They had discussed the matter
before. Left up to his wife, she would have had Sante still believe that Don Alfio
was his natural father. It was recently, barely 2 years ago, that the boy was told the
truth, or rather, a portion of the truth, seasoned with some syrupy invention to make it more palatable.

“Ira, if I am not mistaken, this girl is Sante’s natural sister…”

“Half-sister,” she corrected him, blowing the smoke away from him.

“Well, he’ll want to meet her. He’s entitled to know.”

“That would mean, having to tell him the truth about… his father.”

“He will find out eventually and it is better that he hears it from you.”

“I can’t Alfio,” she stubbed her cigarette and almost shouted, “I can’t!” then more sedately, “not yet.”

She was pleading with him, as if he were some kind of condemning judge.

Love and pity did a little pirouette in Don Alfio’s heart and stopped him from pressing the point. Besides, he could see that in time she would come round to his way of thinking, all by herself.

At last, with Clem Franzetti dozing behind her, stretched out in his first class sleeper she had time to relax and enjoy the moment. Franzetti had been fidgeting ever since he arrived at the airport. He was morose and ill-tempered; his nostrils flared as if attempting to keep out a bad smell, his double-breast was undone over a retreating stomach, his complexion: doughy. He had hardly looked at her, let alone speak to her. When they had got on the plane he had complained about the seat being too close to the window, the temperature being too hot, the air too dry. When he finally settled down he asked for a glass of water, took something and
promptly fell asleep. Ira suspected he was aviophobic. Flying first class was a waste on Clem Franzetti.

The flight attendant, deprived of the opportunity to spoil his more exalted passenger, was now devoting his energies to her. His frequent visits were disrupting her thoughts. No, she wouldn't like an extra cushion... yes, a Campari and ice would be nice.

ra-Jane loved flying. She loved the whole escape thing, the freedom of zero responsibility, the knowledge that for however many hours her life was taken care of, suspended, literally, and all she had to do was to sit back and let things flow. No need to worry about optimizing her time. Even the niggling anxiety about a mechanical failure or terror attack, spiced the moment with excitement. After all, if something were to happen, it would be over before you knew it.

Her mind, riding the air-currents of her thoughts, surveyed the peculiarity of her circumstances. Officially she was going to do a story on a religious shrine, for Franzetti she was there to assist him, but to herself she was also, and perhaps mainly, on a journey to shine a torch into some opaque nook of her past. Franzetti too was in a similarly ambiguous situation. Ostensibly on a pilgrimage to benefit his soul, in reality he was seeking a miracle cure for his body. And who knows what other dimensions might be unearthed during this short trip! The possibilities excited her.

The attendant brought her the Campari, which now for some reason she didn't want. She got out the notes she had downloaded from the Internet and read:

\textit{When Sicily was still a Greek colony, around the year 300 BC, the city of Tindaris was founded by Diogenes of Syracuse, but it was later destroyed by an earthquake. According to tradition, during the time of iconoclasm (7/8th c) the effigy of the Mother of God was transported by sea to the eastern shores of Sicily. A raging tempest forced the ship to}
land at Tindari where the sailors entrusted monks with the image of Our Lady. This was the origin of Our Lady of Tindari.

The sanctuary was robbed and burnt by pirates in subsequent centuries but was also assiduously rebuilt and restored by bishops and faithful.

Natural disasters, pirates, mythology and, by the looks of the pictures, a stunning location. Plenty of material for a story. Pity about having to do the religious thing, it got in the way. Still that’s what her employer requested, and who was she to argue?

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From the airport, the taxi lumbered along a dirt road, through low-lying bamboo clumps, toward Villa San Giovanni from where they were due to load onto to ferry to cross the strait to Messina. Behind the wheel was a stocky man in his late fifties with a crown of hair that once might have been red, then mutated to dark brown but was now definitely – what was left of it – a few strands away from white. His small, chestnut coloured eyes were quick and lively. He blinked a lot, perhaps a nervous tic, thought Ira. The comparative thinness of his upper lip was compensated by a fleshy pink bottom lip that protruded like a beaker, which he moistened regularly as he spoke.

When they got to the ferry they dovetailed into a queue on a ramp and then a strange ritual began. Each car revved its engine with intimidating thrusts, pushing and lurching forward to gain that extra centimetre over the cars on either side. All this went on while the driver conducted an animated conversation with Ira-Jane, in his basic English.

“Ah, you Australian! Beautiful! Beautiful! I ‘ava …parente, in Australia…many, many long time in Australia he stay.”

The bulk of his chatter, was pretty well incomprehensible to her, though it did not deter the man. Franzetti sat in the back seat, his head slumped back, eyes
closed, suffering the driver’s chatter, finding his familiarity overbearing. Sensing her boss’s irritability, Ira did not encourage the conversation, even though she wanted to try out her Italian on the man.

“Ask him how long it’ll take to get to the other side,” said Franzetti.

As the driver seemed unsure of what she had said she repeated the question in Italian. This delighted him and made him even more loquacious. He told her his name was Rocco Masiti and though his folks originated from Reggio, he was born in Messina itself.

“Messina is a city,” he said proudly, “Reggio is only a town, ‘un paese’ he added with a dismissive wave.

He glanced at Franzetti in the rear-vision mirror.

“Suo padre non sta bene?”

Ira replied that he was exhausted by the journey. She was going to add that, no, he wasn’t her father, but she couldn’t find the Italian word for ‘boss’, so she let it pass. She sensed mutual antipathy between the two men. Rocco Masiti probably found Franzetti’s manner unfriendly and his dress shabby.

“Signorina, your mother, she must be Italian, true?”

“No,” she replied.

The fact that she had no trace of Italian ancestry and yet spoke the language impressed the man even more. While the queue was getting sorted out, Rocco kept firing questions in Italian. He had never heard of Perth, but he knew Fremantle because of the America’s Cup.

With the car finally in place, the driver invited them up on deck for a coffee, Franzetti stayed in the car. Rocco insisted on getting the coffee from the on-board canteen, while Ira sat looking at the sea as the Centauro detached itself from the Villa San Giovanni pier.
Across 3 kilometres of sea, Ira-Jane watched the city of Messina splayed around the sea edge, its back resting against sharply rising hills in a tuft of haze. She felt like an ancient explorer approaching the island for the first time. The land seemed as if it had gathered its folds and stretched skyward, over the sea. Ira-Jane looked for a connection between those mountains and the old people she knew as a child. She thought instead of the other woman, their daughter, whose face she could only capture as a shadow, an outline. What else had trickled through that distillation of time? A voice punctuated by long pauses, a smell left on the bed linen which wasn't her mother's....

Somewhere beyond those inscrutable peaks, people whose breast she had curled up to for comfort and warmth, were sitting down to an evening meal. It was over seventeen years since she last saw them. Then the older couple must have been in their sixties. So that put them in their eighties. Perhaps they were dead. Rocco came back with a coffee, disappointingly in a plastic cup. She thought Italians were particular about their coffee and how it was served. In the other hand he carried two orange-sized rice balls he called appropriately, arancini. It was more than she had wanted at this time of morning, but it would have been ungracious not to accept. A taste of rich, aromatic rice filled her mouth. She wondered at Rocco's generosity. He couldn't have made a lot of money as a taxi driver, yet he was well dressed in shirt and tie. His talk was incessant and though she had problems at times keeping up with his Italian, she understood most of it. He was also surprisingly knowledgeable.

"That rock," he pointed out to the bluish mass rising from the sea, "is Schylla."

He explained that, according to classical mythology, when Ulysses crossed this strait, he had to navigate the treacherous stretch between Scylla and

* Is your father not well?
Charybdis. The latter was a dangerous whirlpool created further up the strait by a sudden dipping in the sea floor, it was powerful enough to devour whole boats. The ancients named it Charybdis.

“But do not worry, Signorina, we are not in danger.” Rocco laughed and put a reassuring hand over hers, “Anyway, for many centuries politicians talk about a bridge across the Strait of Messina, then after the elections they forget about it. Now Berlusconi promise to build one. And maybe he will do it. He is a genius, Signorina, most surely insane, but a genius.”

Ira-Jane said, “I must say there’s a certain romance in knowing we’re crossing the same stretch of water as Ulysses.”

“Not only Ulysses: the Romans, Arabs, Turks and Byzantynes, Normans, Swabians, the Spanyards even the English and Americans…all of them cross this strait as invaders and colonisers, but Sicily still survive.”

“Will it survive the tourists, though?”

“Tourists? Yes of course. Especially when they are as beautiful as you.”

A likely line. Ira-Jane had been warned about Italian men, but Rocco seemed a pretty harmless specimen. And he did wear a wedding ring. There was something reassuring about a man who wore his wedding ring. Actually Rocco wore two other rings, one in each little finger with matching sapphire stones. He caught Ira looking at the rings and smiled.

"I will show you," said he, enigmatically.

From the inside pocket of his jacket he pulled out a brown wallet, worn out and frayed at the edges. Incongruous in such a neat little man. He sifted through various cards until he found what he wanted. He held a photo in between index and forefinger and placed it on the table in front of her.

“My family,” he said, with about as much pride as if he were introducing royalty. It was a miniature studio photo of himself, wife and son, with a green curtain
as the background and a bunch of fake irises on a small round table. It must have been taken some years before, because Rocco’s hair was thicker and rich brown. His wife was a little taller, even though she was wearing flat shoes, no doubt in deference to his masculine ego.

“This is my son, Gianpaolo,” he ran his ringed little finger under the image of a boy of about fifteen, with shoulder length frizzy hair and a freckly face. He told her he was now 29 years old and living in Milan.

“He is a very beautiful young man, very tall, taller than yourself, Signorina. He designs jewellery: He’s a genius, Signorina. I don’t say so myself. His Principale, his boss: offer him a partnership in the boutique jewellery shop, a small share, but he will build on it.”

He placed his hands palm-down on the table for Ira-Jane to admire the two rings. They were his son’s creations, were they not stupendous? He wore them always, always even at night. Only when he showered he took them off. Gianpaolo wasn’t married and he was not in a serious relationship. He was not the kind to indulge frivolous dalliance.

“Yes, yes, when he finally chooses it will be for life,” said Rocco, dramatically. He emphasised with quick flashes of his lively eyes and a pouting of his fleshy bottom lip, which somehow attested to the seriousness of character in his son. Gianpaolo was a very serious, serious boy, committed to his work. He would surely make a wonderful, wonderful husband for a lucky girl some day soon. All this information was delivered at breakneck speed.

It was time to go back. Not a pleasant prospect, given that Franzetti would still be in that foul mood. She would rather spend more time on deck being entertained by the congenial taxi driver. Rocco was not ready to go down either. How long was she staying in Italy? Only ten days, what a pity! Gianpaolo was due to visit next month, it would give him great pleasure, great pleasure if he could
introduce such a beautiful girl to his son. It was here that the penny dropped. She realised, with amused astonishment that, in the twenty minutes or so it took for the ferry to cross the three kilometres of sea that stretched the mainland from Sicily, she had received what amounted to be a proxy proposal, on behalf of Rocco’s beloved son. Must be something about the air of the place.

The Madonna dell’Ulivo Casa di Cura stood on an old olive estate of 6 hectares some 7 kilometres up the slope from the coastal town of Falcone. From the back of the property you can get a glimpse of the sea over the hills, but not from the clinic itself, a nineteenth century villa that was once the property of the Barons of Mammolici, before the Baron sold out and moved his family to Palermo. The property was chosen by Dr Troina, not merely for its imposing 3 storey villa, but because the trees on the estate were said to be the oldest in the region. Tests showed that some were over 500 years old.

The estate was enclosed by a dry-jointed stone wall, along which grew pink and white oleanders for greater privacy. Inside the wrought iron gate a drive led to a granite stone escalade on top of which rose a 19-Century Villa, with stuccoed walls freshly painted in ochre and dark green shutters. By the way that the building and the grounds were maintained it was clear that things were going very well for Dr Troina, at a time when deep cuts were being made to the Italian health system. That was because the Casa di Cura was entirely funded by private patients. Here the patient was also the paying customer and nobody was more aware of this than its director Dr. Emilio Troina. The success of the Clinic was entirely due to the Director’s skill both as a doctor and P.R. man. For years the clinic had struggled financially, until a Tunisian financier was successfully treated there, in gratitude he left a bequest worth millions, enough to bring to the clinic the standard of comfort of
a luxury hotel. And even though its success rate was the same as it had always been, the quality of the patients it attracted ensured that its profits multiplied.

Doctor Troina had left instructions that when the Australian arrived he should be alerted immediately. As a consequence, while the party was going through the procedure of booking in at the desk, Dr Troina came down to the foyer to greet the new arrivals. He appeared at the top of the marble stairs, a brilliant smile on his handsome face and even at a distance you could tell that he fitted his well-appointed establishment like a tortoise its shell. He was quite tall, slender and distinguished. His teeth were white and perfectly straight, but by the time he reached the bottom step, in a poised stride, and he smiled ingratiatingly, you wondered whether his teeth were in fact his own.

“Welcome, Sir, I am very much pleased to meet you,” he said. He bowed to Franzetti as he shook his hand.

Dr Troina was in his early forties, tanned and prematurely balding. This was no disgrace, if anything it served to complement that air of mature elegance that was his trademark. His shoes were English and matt finish, his suit, though of the best frescolana quality, was not of the latest cut. He did not wish to give the impression that he was a slavish follower of fashion. Sobriety, not frivolity, was the proper image for a man in his position. A measured attention to appearance was his preference. His hands were fine and long-fingered, and the flesh was pink under the well-clipped nails.

As Franzetti failed to introduce her, Ira-Jane offered her hand.

“Hi, I’m Ira-Jane.”

“Enchanté” he bowed as if he were going to kiss her hand, but desisted at the last minute, perhaps put off by Franzetti’s abrupt manner, who said,

“Ask him if he knows any English.”
Ira-Jane wanted to say, “you’ve just heard him speak English,” but realised this would have upset him, so she did as directed.

“Not very well,” said Dr Troina self-effacingly.

In fact his English was very good, which he demonstrated as he took his guests around the establishment. The clinic was indeed impressive, more like a well-appointed hotel. The rooms were all equipped with private facilities. There were no patients in the beds, as this was lunch time they were all having their meal in the dining room that through the darkened glass had the appearance of a pricy restaurant.

The only thing to remind them of the nature of the clinic was the radiography room where the patients’ progress was regularly tested.

“Our testing equipment is the best in Sicily,” boasted Dr Troina.

It was difficult to argue with him. The good doctor left no doubt in the mind of his client as to the state-of-the-art quality of his equipment, the comfort of the rooms, the thoroughness of the testing, the efficiency of his staff.

Unfortunately it was not enough to impress Clem Franzetti. At the end of the tour Ira went with him to his room. He looked quite as miserable as the moment he had boarded that plane back in Perth. Ira-Jane wished he’s clip those eyebrows of his, they made him look imperious, unkempt and even older than he was.

“What do you think?” he asked Ira-Jane.

“Very impressive…”

“I don’t reckon, the bloke’s a fraud. He talks too much for a start, and I bet he charges like a wounded bull.”

For a moment she thought he was going to order the luggage back in the car and leave. When they got down to the bottom of the stairs, he noticed a statue of the Virgin Mary tucked away in the alcove. It was small and fine-lined, with alabaster eyes straight nose and perfect lips, and dimple on the chin. Her long
An Olive Branch for Sante
garment was powder blue with a gold lining on the collar. In her right hand, raised higher than her left, she held an olive branch. Franzetti was arrested and stood there gazing at the statue. The taxi driver came into the foyer.
“What would you like me to tell him?” asked Ira.
“Oh well, I suppose having come all this way, I should give it a go,” replied Franzetti, without taking his eyes off the statue.

As always Ira La Rocca was the first one to rise in the Marzano household. She lay in bed waiting for the fluorescent hands of the alarm clock on the bedside table to reach 5.30 before she got up. Any earlier would have made the day unbearably long, filled with too many cigarettes and too much coffee.

At 5.30 she stepped down on the rug leaving her husband cocooned in the duvet. Out of habit, she didn’t turn on the light because the bedroom window looked out onto the Piazza Chiesa Madre and anyone out there at that time would have noticed the light in the bedroom. To her mind there was something weird, even shameful, in her insomniac behaviour. In the dark she ran her fingers along the ribbed surface of the wicker chair, feeling for her dressing gown, the one that Alfio gave her only the year before. She slipped it on and groped her way out of the room. In the corridor she turned on the light and made her way past Sante’s room and into the kitchen to make the coffee. She placed three heaped scoops into the caffettiera filter, filled the container with water from the water flagon marked Acqua Sorgiva di Fichera, screwed the top on and lit the gas burner. Then she went on the balcony to water the pot plants: the geraniums and stocks, that were coming to the end of the
flowering and the large rectangular cement pot with the herbs: the mint, the parsley, the basil (all gone to seed now) and the rosemary, which threatened to take over in the pot.

Beyond the railing the piazza was yet to emerge: a mystery in a double wrapper of dark and mist. Sometimes when it was like this, an absurd notion came to her, that when the dark lifted she would find, not the familiar piazza whose every nook she knew so well, but a foreign world in which she found herself a stranger, unhappy and unwelcome.

The hiss from the *caffettiera* brought her back inside. She poured her first cup, but resisted the temptation of lighting a cigarette and fill her head with smoke so early in the morning. Although, caught as she was between the rock of Sicily and the hard place of Australia, a little confusion, obfuscation, a partial loss of memory might be the way to go. She feared that the past was about to crash once again into the present and there was nothing she could do to stop it. Two worlds: Sicily and Australia, worlds that she thought she had successfully separated by thousands of kilometres of sea and air, not to speak of the years of time... the worlds were about to touch, scrape each other’s edge. Who knows what tremors might ensue?

Why was it all coming to a head like this? The grove at Rovaro would be taken from her. This girl, her namesake and almost-daughter, is coming to stir the quiet waters of her existence. Secrets, painful and jagged will rip through the surface. The landscape will be disrupted, re-arranged. Of course, if she were young or, (crazy notion!) of a different mould, she might welcome this, be energised by the prospect, wonder at the possibilities. At the very least, the bond that attached her to this girl’s mother, to the girl herself, should prevail upon her fears. But, what is she afraid of anyway? Of the truth being known in this town, with its medieval houses banked upon one another, walled in against the march of time?
Does she really fear that, once the mist is lifted from her secret, she will be crushed by a moral code that has changed little in centuries? Whatever the weight of the town’s judgement, it cannot be as heavy as that of her own conscience. Perhaps her fear is that Sante should discover the dark side of his conception. That secret, as Alfio wisely advised, will have to be revealed, now that Sante has grown up. No, it isn’t that either. The truth she does not want to face up to requires uncompromising candidness; and what better time to get down to the rawness of it than now, under the protection of darkness? The truth that lies beneath a carefully choreographed exterior of alibis and deception is… that once upon a time, in a far-off country there was Sheryl, that is, Sheryl and Ira: two girls, a love, a… bed. Ah there, she has said it.

Following the baby’s birth Sheryl was given a low-rent duplex and Ira spent more and more time there, often sleeping over, particularly at weekends. Her mother, who had never really warmed to Sheryl, was now giving Ira worrying looks.

“Why do you spend so much time there?”

“She needs me, Mum. She’s got no family or friends.”

“We’ve done all we could for her. You must think of your future. This is an important year for you.”

“I’m up to date with everything.”

“You must not sleep over, I don’t like it.”

But her father, ever so gently, defended her. “Let her stay over, Agata, Sherula needs conforto, she is only a child herself.”

“Old enough to become a mother, though,” said Mrs La Rocca.

They slept, the three of them, in one double bed. Over the sleeping baby they made plans. Sheryl wasn’t great at organising herself, so it was left to Ira to do it.
“Next Tuesday Babe’s gotta have her triple antigen don’t forget, Sheryl.”

“I won’t, but…”

“But what?”

“Don’t you want to be there too?”

“I can’t, I’ll be at school.”

Pause, then.

“Maybe we can change the appointment to the afternoon.”

Sheryl didn’t want to do anything without Ira. Partly it was lack of confidence, partly because she wanted Ira to share important events in the baby’s life or what she considered important. The baby became the conduit of their feelings for each other. They constantly hugged her, fusscd over her. Each day they noticed something new in little Ira: her first smile, her clasping of the finger, the changing colour of her eyes from alabaster to sky blue, the first down of silky hair, her first tooth.

“They want me to work at the shop this Saturday, can you look after her, Ira?”

“Yeah, ‘course.” Ira gave the baby a passionate hug, looking across at Sheryl.

Sheryl said, “Beautiful isn’t she? “

“Hmm, gorgeous.”

“She’s growing so fast.”

“Yeah, we’ll need to buy a cot soon.”

Sheryl wouldn’t have thought of that. She depended on Ira for just about everything. As for money, she had no idea. Left up to her, there was no way that she would have managed on a single mother’s pension, plus the few dollars she made working as a check out girl at the local store. Ira was thrifty and disciplined, she had the natural home-maker’s instinct for spotting bargains, preparing low cost
meals, making do with few essentials. Unable to take a decision for herself, Sheryl consulted Ira about everything, even the most banal.

“Do you think it’s time to feed the baby?”

“Not yet, She’ll let you know when she’s hungry.”

When Sheryl scooped her sumptuous breast out of her loose bra, Ira looked on fascinated as the baby took the pink nipple into her mouth and suckled. She was a good eater. Sometimes the baby fell asleep whilst feeding, then her little rose-bud mouth slackened and Sheryl's nipple was released and sat there at the end of the breast, all soft and moist. Ira could not stop staring.

If only she had been a better sleeper, things might not have gone the way they had. As it was, even at seventeen Ira was bedevilled by insomnia and had to suffer the consequences.

No such problems for Sheryl. Once she finished breast-feeding the baby, she put her down and fell asleep, sometimes leaving the breast exposed over the loose neckline of her nightie. Sleep was elusive for Ira, blocked by the vision of Sheryl’s breast cascading over the upper arm.

At eight months, the nurse suggested that the baby could be weaned. They got a second-hand cot from St Vincent de Paul and placed it on Ira's side of the bed, as it was she who inevitably got up at night, if little Ira-Jane cried. The toddler adjusted to the weaning quickly enough, the one who felt it more was Sheryl. She had enjoyed the whole breast-feeding thing, it gave direction and purpose to her daily routine, and she got plenty of attention from everyone, not least Ira. Now she was fretting.

“I really miss feeding baby,” she complained, “I miss the closeness.”

Now that the baby was in her cot and the nights grew colder, Sheryl drifted closer to Ira who turned her back to her, hands crossed over her chest, fists
clenched. One night in her sleep Sheryl’s face came to rest on Ira’s back. Her heavy breathing blew hot air on the side of her neck where it meets the shoulder. A tingling lassitude spread all over her body. Ira wanted to move, but couldn’t. Against her better judgement she allowed her body to distend in the delicious glow of that zephyr. She turned and a threshold was crossed. Ira buried her face into the cleavage of Sheryl’s breasts.

Sheryl’s voice echoed drowsily through the dark.

“What are you doing, Ira?”

Silence. Ira held her breath and shivered.

“What’s wrong, Ira, are you cold?”

“Yes, yes Sheryl, I’m cold.”

And they snuggled up to each other, clinging tightly so that they heard each other’s heart. Thump-thump, thump-thump, thump-thump. And then, in the dark, witnessed by God and the ghosts of her ancestors, Ira La Rocca finally gave in to the devil in her.

In the morning, with the sun making a splash into the room through the vertical blinds, darkness did not lift from Ira’s soul. She got up and made some coffee (how life repeats itself through daily rituals!) She wanted to go back home, but her mother would be up by now and the last thing she wanted was to meet her judging eyes. She went into the tiny living room, which also served as her study and pretended to do her work. In reality she was filling in time, she couldn’t work in that house any more. She wanted to go home, to her parents, back to Sicily. She wanted to be as far away as she could from what happened during the night. Sheryl shuffled in, the child in her arms, went and boiled the water, said nothing. She was too intimidated by Ira’s silence to talk. Once the milk was ready she went and sat
down on the sofa, gave the bottle to the child. Every now and then she looked across at Ira who paid no attention to her. Finally she asked,

“What time are we going shopping this morning?”
“I’ve got work to do. I’m not getting any study done.”
“This afternoon then.”
“No, I’m going home this morning.”
“What do you mean? Why?”
“I told you, I got study to do.”
“But…but…we always spend the weekend together. You can study here.”
“No I can’t, it’s too distracting with the baby. I’ve got exams in less than 2 months.”
Sheryl could hardly argue with that.
“OK, OK, I’ll see you tonight then?”
“I’m not coming. I’m studying, I told you.”
Sheryl’s forehead knotted up.
“But, Ira, you always sleep over on weekends.”
“Not any more.”
Sheryl put the whimpering child down on the floor and went to Ira, and though she wanted to touch her, she did not dare.


Sheryl’s pleading eyes looked for Ira’s, but the latter refused to meet them, she was looking down instead. Sheryl took two steps, put a hand over Ira’s shoulder. Ira shook her off, recoiling.

“What’s wrong Ira?” Then a realisation, “Is it because of….what happened in the night? Is it?”

Ira looked away.
“Ira, I loved what we did. I loved it. I love you Ira.”

That’s how she was. Saying the unsayable. No restraint, no prudery at all. Things that nearly a quarter of a century later have the capacity to make her squirm, Sheryl just came out with them. If only she could be like that.

Ira was torn by guilt. What she had done wasn’t right by her religion, by her culture, by her mother… but the one who cried was Sheryl. Down came the tears, easy and copious as the milk in her breasts. Of course they were not tears of guilt. Sheryl was utterly devoid of conscience. They were blackmail tears. Tears designed to melt down resistance and entrap you.

The baby, who had been crawling around in the kitchen, getting pots out of the cupboards, now started to cry. Sheryl was too caught up in her own misery to take notice, Ira went to pick her up, the child’s vest was caught around the table leg. Sheryl spread her arms to form a protective circle around Ira and the child.

“And I thought you loved us too, Ira.”

“I do. Of course I do, but…”

She looked away. Sheryl grabbed her upper arms and shouted into Ira’s face.

“Ira, look at me, what we did was beautiful.”

Sheryl’s face was right up above little Ira’s bottom. Suddenly Sheryl’s nostrils flared and an unexpected grin distended over her face

“Oh, oh! Can you smell something, Ira?”

She put her nose down over the baby’s bottom and laughed.

“Shit, Ira, look what little missy has done. She smells like Pepe Le Pew. Quick let’s get a nappy.”

Sheryl ran to get a clean napkin and they changed the baby, or rather, Ira did, because Sheryl was still squeamish about it and carried on plenty about the smell. After that no more was talked about ‘that business’.
Four years passed. Four years of happiness, well mostly happiness, though punctured by drama. During that time Ira all but moved in with Sheryl, and her parents accepted the situation, her mother made peace with her because she had no choice. As for her father, his emotions never strayed beyond love. Love for his daughter, love for little Ira-Jane, whom he adored, love too for Sheryl. When she turned eighteen, Sheryl got a job at the local tavern as a bar maid, and worked most nights, while Ira studied to be a schoolteacher kept herself busy day and night. She often stayed out late, after the tavern closed and when she came home, often after midnight, Ira was beside her. She worried about Sheryl, worried about what was going on. Each time she thought about Sheryl at the tavern, being ogled at by drunken men, as she poured them a beer and she, no doubt, looking back coyly. Whenever Sheryl returned late they would row.

Then Sheryl started going out at night, even when she wasn’t working.

“What’s the point me stayin’ home when all you ever do is study? There’s nothing for me to do around here.”

“You’ve got your daughter to look after.”

“She’s fine with your parents, she loves it over there.”

That, at least was true. Once she started to walk, little Ira-Jane spent more and more time at their household. They became Nonnu and Nonna and Ira-Jane became irtetta to distinguish her from the older Ira.

The old people had plenty of time and though both dreamt of going back home to retire on their land, there was no more talk about it while their daughter finished her teaching degree.

Russell did not bother contacting Sheryl after that encounter in the hospital. ‘Pissed off’ as he was with the mother, he showed no interest in seeing his child.
Then, nearly four years later, when he finished his Police Cadetship and started earning a wage, the Family Court caught up with him and demanded that he pay maintenance to Sheryl for the upkeep of the child.

No way, protested Russell, it was Sheryl who had decided to keep the kid, now it was up to her to maintain her. Strong point, but the Court didn’t see it that way and he was ordered to pay child maintenance. As a compensatory measure he was given access to his daughter one day a fortnight, to begin with. He was to pick her up at 9 am and bring her back by 6pm every second Saturday.

The first time he arrived at Sheryl’s doorstep at nine a.m. punctually and took the unwilling child (who didn’t know him at all) for the day. However the child was so unhappy, that he brought her back by noon. Subsequently he took her for a couple of hours, usually for a feed of fish and chips at Cicerello’s by the seaside and then brought her back. Sometimes he had to work, so his visits became even less frequent.

On this particular Saturday Russell hadn’t turned up, nothing unusual about that. In normal circumstances the child would have been taken to the Nonni’s, because Sheryl was due to do her shift at the Tavern and Ira wanted to get on with her study. However Mrs La Rocca had rung to say that the husband of a friend had just died and they wanted to go and spend some time with her.

In the afternoon, when Sheryl had gone to work and little Ira-Jane lay down for her afternoon sleep, Ira had just sat down at her desk when there was a knock on the door. It was Russell, eyes glazed and looking none too good.

“Sheryl’s not in,” said Ira, keeping the door ajar, and holding her foot behind it, ready to push it shut again.

“I didn’t come to see Sheryl, I’ve come to get me daughter.”

“You were supposed to be here at nine o’clock.”

First mistake, she should not have engaged him in an argument.
"I was working, see."

He pointed to his uniform with his thumb.

She resisted the temptation of asking him how come he smelt of beer, when he was supposed to be on duty.

"I can have her all day. I got a court order. She's my daughter." He insisted.
"She's asleep."

Second mistake. She should have said she was at the Grandparents.

"She can sleep at my place."

"She's only just gone down. I'm not going to wake her up."

Russell's reaction took her by surprise.

"Ok then, " he gave the door a shove with his elbow, nearly bowled her over as he pushed past her, "I'll wait."

Once inside, he seemed to relax a bit. He crashed down on the sofa, smiled and said,

"Well, do I get a coffee? I been told you make a great cup."

What else could she do? There was no arguing with him in his state. When she came back, he seemed to be dozing off with his head slumped back on the back of the sofa. She put down the coffee on the cane table, turning her back to him. Fatal third mistake. As she went to straighten up she felt the grip on her calf. As she struggled to turn her hand caught the coffee mug and the contents spilled all over the table and ran down on his leg, between the trouser cuff and the upper edge of the sock.

"Fuck," he yelled, "you've just scalded me."

In his predicament she saw a chance to escape. But his reflexes were sharpened by anger and the urgings of the flesh. As she went to turn, he grabbed her wrist. His eyes, bloodshot and dangerous, mesmerised her.

Does she really want to recall the rest?
She went to scream, but he stifled it with his hand.

“Ah, ah. None of that,” he warned her. His voice had an eerie calm.

Ira became a silent participant in an unspeakable act. She remembers his nightmare voice whispering,

“This is whatchyou been wantin’, you little dyke. Isn’ it? Isn’ it?”

As she heard herself groan, she realised that he had taken his hand off her mouth. What stopped her from screaming out was the sight of the child standing there in the doorway, rubbing her eyes with her tiny fists and whimpering.

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The sun heaved itself over the hump of the eastern peak, lighted up the spiral of the Chiesa Madre and a new day was born in San Sisto. The first long rays slanted over the roofs, soon the shadows from the buildings patterned the granite floor of the piazza. The great bronze door of the church, framed by a sandstone portico with double columns would be opened by the wobbly figure of Tazio Monteleone, who lost a leg back in the seventies in a Mafia shootout. Subsequently he 'gave himself up to God' and was appointed Sacristan of San Sisto's main church. The roller door went up on Ciro's and the smell of newly baked pastry invaded the piazza. Ira loved this moment, when she knew her memories would be engulfed by the rush of the day's activities She welcomed the first signs of life, the sounds, the cars crossing the piazza on the way down to the coast for those who worked at Milazzo or Barcellona. Cosimo's boys were leaving to get fresh fish and other 'riforimenti' for his shop. The worshippers would come to the church, fewer and older, for the daily morning service. Ciro meanwhile was getting his Bar ready for the tradesmen, shopkeepers, municipal workers and the teachers calling in for coffee and cornetto on the way to work. Ira drank her coffee and took a decision.

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"Hello, I am looking for Ira-Jane."
It was a deep voice, a little husky, but clearly a woman’s. It echoed as if the person were speaking inside an empty room with bare walls and a hard floor. The younger Ira was stumped. ‘Ira’ was pronounced with the strong Italian ‘r’, while the ‘a’ in Jane was definitely Australian.

“Speaking.”

Silence, a breathless pause. Was she going to hang up? Instead, after a little stir, a rejoinder came slow and deliberate.

“ My name is Ira La Rocca, we have received a letter from you…”

“Oh I see, you’re…”

Now, how was she going to phrase it? Mother’s friend? My namesake? No, better to avoid the possessive at this stage. Again, the other intervened.

“The other Ira,” said the voice, followed by a short, mock-conspiratory laugh, that managed to distend the tension across the line. Perfect. The younger woman took up the cue.

“The original one,” said she brightly, congratulating herself on finding a good repartee line and even throw a compliment into the bargain. A connection was in the making, or was it?

“I’m sorry I had to open your letter,” said the woman, her words flowing freely now, “unfortunately my parents are deceased.”

“I’m sorry, I wasn’t aware.”

Two sorries. Would they suffice to establish a line across a wall almost 20 years wide? Perhaps not, because now a heavy silence weighed over the distance, stretching it by the second. Then, the words fell knife-sharp across the line and sliced through it.

“I hope you have a nice stay in Sicily, good bye.”
News travels fast in the province. When Mayor Marzano left his office at the Municipal Chambers, he had news for his wife. It wasn’t pleasant news, and he wished that he hadn’t been told, or at the least, that he had been told later in the afternoon, so that it wouldn’t spoil his lunch, to which he had been looking forward all morning. Apart from a couple of truly great restaurants, (Ristorante al Castello in Milazzo was one) he knew of no better fare than what his wife served. To try and forget the unpleasantness of having to tell her the news, Alfio tried to imagine what it was that Ira was preparing for him. This being Friday, it would be fish of some sort. Spezzatino di Baccalà’ with potato puree and a few green olives, chillies, followed by a stomach-refreshing verdura, seasoned with olive oil and lemon. But maybe not, the weather was still warm for baccalà. Perhaps a nice steak of sword fish, done in garlic sauce and lemon rind.

When he arrived at the piazza, he saw Sante standing in front of Ciro’s with a couple of his friends. Seeing Sante put him in a good mood. He decided to go across and share an aperitif with him. But just as he set off, the group headed for Sante’s car that was parked just outside, with the left back wheel on the curbing. Don Alfio called him.

Sante turned, strode over in that unhurried, leggy gait of his.

“Ciao Papa’,”

Don Alfio gave Sante a pat on the arm and shook hands with his friends.

“Coming up for pranzo?”

Sante looked at his watch.

“Is it really that time? I’ll be up soon. I’ve just got a get a CD from Leoncarlo.”
“Don’t be long. You know Mammà, she will not start without you and I’m hungry.”

“Fifteen minutes. Anyway, I’m working this afternoon, so I can’t be late.”

Don Alfio went into Ciro’s and ordered a prosecco.

The trout was superb, and he did like being surprised, they hadn’t had trout in a long time. But now, with Sante gone to Tindari, where he held a casual job as a guide for English speaking tourists, he had the opportunity to talk to Ira. He went into the kitchen and helped her put the dishes into the washer.

“A superior meal, as always, my love. “ He gave her a hug from behind, “where do you get all the ideas for such meals.”

“I enjoy it, Alfio, it gives me pleasure to see my family well satisfied. How was the day? Any news from Mimmo Urziì?”

“No, it is better this way. Mimmo is one person, I don’t mind not hearing from. Ever. Actually I have some other news, cara…”

Ira closed the door of the washer, but did not turn it on. She scrutinised him with her dark eyes. There was a nervous tone to his ‘cara’ which alerted her sensors.

“Marsiti, you know Rocco Marsiti who drives the taxi, he tells me that he picked up an Australian girl from Reggio Airport yesterday, a splendid looking girl, by his description. Anyway, she… her father is travelling with her.”

“What?”

His wife jumped as if she had been jabbed on the arm.

“Apparently. I find it hard to believe myself.”

“That can’t be true. So far as I know they have never got on.”
“Things change, Ira, maybe after the death of the mother there was a reconciliation.”

“What’s this man doing in Sicily?”

“Well, according to Marsiti, he has booked into the Casa di Cura at Falcone. He must be seriously ill. What are you going to do Ira?”

“Nothing.”

“Ira, he is bound to find out sooner or later. “

“I don’t want my son to know that his father is a rapist.”

Directness was one of Ira’s most effective tools.

“It’s grim news for any son, I know, Ira. But, isn’t it better that he hears it from you?”

“I can’t Alfio. Not now, not yet, and certainly not while that... man is here. They must not meet.”

Ira went out and watered the pot plants, for the second time that day. Don Alfio proceeded to take his afternoon siesta. This whole affair was stressing him out, it was a good thing that he was such a good sleeper, one hour’s sleep would recharge him and restore his good humour. He went to bedroom, closed the shutters, undressed down to his underwear and lay on the bed, trying to think of something pleasant. Of course, it was Elia’s opening that night, he nearly forgot. She would not forgive him if he did not go. He would have to leave early. It took a good hour to drive to Palermo. Better get a good rest. It would be great to see all his friends at the Teatro Stabile, not to speak of the pleasure of seeing sweet Elia on stage again. And on this very happy image he fell soundly asleep.

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Upon waking Don Alfio realized that quell’affare Australiano had been stewing in his brain during his sleep. Damn it! He was caught between loyalty to his
wife and certainty that Sante, given the choice, would want to know the truth. At the very least, he was entitled to know that he had a sister.

Of course he understood perfectly well Ira’s unwillingness to have to recall that sorry business. He doubted that any man could fully realise what was felt by a woman who had been subjected to such an ordeal. When he thought about it – rarely thank God – his civilised mind became polluted by primeval visions of revenge, like he personally castrating the man who had done that to his wife. But when the anger subsided and he was able to consider his emotions rationally, all that was left was pity. Pity for the victims, of course, but also pity for the perpetrator. To think that there were people out there so unhappy, so inadequate, so profoundly dysfunctional that they had to do that to a woman… it left one numb with incomprehension. Don Alfio just didn’t want to think about it.

Now circumstances were forcing him not merely to think, but to act, something which did not come easy to Don Alfio. Thoughts must have been ruminating inside his head, during the siesta because now, as he sauntered back to the Municipal Offices, for the afternoon meetings, he found himself formulating a plan. There was no point in trying to persuade Ira to change her mind, she wouldn’t, and he understood her perfectly. His only option was to contact this Australian girl and speak to her. Good thing she spoke Italian, so at least there was that much in favour of his strategy. Once he had established exactly how much she knew about the situation, he would then decide whether to arrange a ‘chance’ meeting between the two siblings. He hated the surreptitiousness of this plan, but he excused himself in the knowledge that his intentions were good. Besides, the child in Don Alfio – still very much part of his personality despite his age – enjoyed a little intrigue and, if truth be told, he found the prospect of meeting this Australian beauty a most enjoyable one.
First thing though he had to contact the girl. He remembered reading the name of the hotel in the letter Ira had shown him, but he had forgotten, besides, there was no mention of her father in the letter, so her plans might have changed. If she were staying at the Casa di Cura, which he doubted, he would have to contact Troina, something he would rather not do. Dr Troina, was one of those ambitious men he tended to avoid. Don Alfio did not mind ambition, it’s just that he found most ambitious people so single-minded that they had no other conversation outside their area of operation. In the last few years, the success of the Casa di Cura (regular reports appeared in La Gazzetta del Sud and other publications) had rendered Troina more pompous, more arrogant than ever. Anyway it was the girl he wanted to speak to.

A better option was to contact Marsiti the taxi driver, he would certainly know where the girl was staying. Conveniently, he found Marsiti’s card in his wallet.

“Marsiti?”

“Ah, Mayor Marzano, what honour…”

“Ciao, senti… I need to get in touch with those Australians you were telling me about yesterday – as you know, my wife lived in Australia for many years – so she is eager to make contact. Would you know, where the girl is staying?”

“Yes, the hotel Ruggeri. As it happens I am about to collect her from there, to take her to Tindari."

“What? Tindari? Is her father with her?”

“No, she’s on her own. She has hired the taxi for the whole afternoon, on a charge account I suspect.”

Don Alfio could not believe his luck. This was one opportunity which simply demanded to be seized. Don Alfio, not usually a decisive man, had no hesitation in making another call (what genius, that man who invented the mobile phone!) this
time to his son. However the phone was shut down, that meant he must be taking a group around.

“Send him a text message” suggested Miss Racina, the Municipal Secretary.

Now, this skill was beyond Don Alfio’s limited range, so he enlisted the assistance of Miss Racina who, despite her age (older than himself and showing it) had a surprising talent for absorbing new technologies as fast as those I.T. people were able to inflict on the population.

“Ciao caro. I believe a certain Signorina Ira, from Australia, is visiting Tindari this afternoon. You might wish to seek her out. A presto, Papà.”

There, Don Alfio was satisfied with his little ruse. After all, the gods were pointing in the same direction, they had created the circumstances for the young people to meet. In fact, even if he had done nothing the chances that they would meet were very good. Tindari was tiny and the tourists tended to congregate around the same sites: the church, the Roman ruins, the theatre. In the circumstances a little human manipulation would not go amiss.

So, the old people are dead. She had, of course, considered the possibility. It’s still disappointing though. Now it seems as though that part of her childhood, the only one worth remembering, never happened. Hey, what about this woman, Ira La Rocca, icy or what? Just about frosted up the phone line. Ira-Jane searched her earliest memories for traces of her. All she could find was a smoky outline, a puff of frizzy hair without a face, a pair of dry lips, a close smell.
Maybe it’s just as well they were not meeting. If they had, Ira-Jane would have to be very wary. In her presence, she would be exposed to unknown forces. This woman must have known things about her, secrets unbeknown to herself. She might harbour complex, subterranean emotions and nurse wounds that had not healed. She could tell – by the echo of her deep voice, by the gaps in her sentences – that there was a lot of shit below the surface.

Did she really want to sift through it? Was she being morbid after all? It was comforting to know that, within a few days, she would return to the present, to her uncomplicated life in Western Australia. Meanwhile she got ready for her day ahead: a trip to Tindari for photos and an interview she had managed to line up with an official at the Santuario. She got together her camera, tape-recorder, mobile, organiser and waited for Rocco’s taxi to arrive.

The cliff on which sits the shrine of the Madonna of Tindari grows out of the sea and rises into the sky for some 300 metres. As you leave the autostrada at Falcone the road coils up the incline, giving the traveller ever more vertiginous glimpses of the landscape below: the sharp ridges, the wheat fields and the groves. A dreamy sea in a wrapper of silver sheath invites the eye to the Aeolian islands faintly stamped on the horizon: mysterious monsters looming through the haze of time.

The taxi left her at the car park, from which Ira-Jane proceeded on foot, navigating through the stalls, crammed with assorted paraphernalia. Most common, of course, miniature images of the Black Madonna and child, in a range of materials: resin, plastic, wood, ceramic, metal and stone. If you fancy it, you could have the relic sealed inside a water bowl with imitation snow-flakes. The local produce too is adapted to the religious theme, like rosary beads made from locally-grown hazel nuts. In other stalls the religious and profane mingle in such items as
T-shirts, aprons, hats and sunglasses; chocolates and biscuits; C.D.’s of pop and religious music. Ira-Jane was not surprised by the commercialism, it reinforced her natural cynicism towards organised religions.

The church was packed with pilgrims from all over Italy and beyond, milling around in obsequious confusion. The object of their worship was the black figure of the Madonna and Child enthroned above the altar, or rather, their crowned heads emerging out of a gold-embroidered, stiff mantle. In the distance they appeared remote, surreal, imprisoned within the metal-like texture of their extravagant garb. Ira-Jane felt pity for those figures, trapped in history, myth and religion. Give me the scepticism of Australia, any day, she thought. An English-speaking voice over the whispered hub-hub, caught her attention.

“According to tradition, in the 7th Century AD, this effigy of the Madonna came by sea on a ship from somewhere in the East. When it reach this coast it was caught in a storm. So the ship was grounded at Marinello, which you would reach if you decide to take a jump down the cliff.” The audience laughed. “The local monks believed that it was a miraculous event, they build a shrine on top of this hill…”

Ira-Jane hardly listened to the words. She knew that young man, though she had no idea where from. She knew the timbre of that voice. Weird. He looked not much older than school age, even though he must have been old enough to hold a job. There was a stillness and a poise about him. Quite remarkable for a person so young. Was it arrogance or self-confidence? Probably the former, because, as he spoke, he hardly seemed to look at his audience. They, on the other hand, were focused on him, though not necessarily on what he was saying. The reason for this was all too obvious: he was – she had to admit – irritatingly good looking with raven-black hair, opal eyes and fleshy pink lips. Probably gay, thought Ira-Jane
uncharitably, and vain, I bet. Then, as if he had been aware of her attention all along, the young man turned directly to her. Over the heads of his listeners he asked:

"Do you have a question about this?"

The group fell silent, as the young man kept looking at her, waiting for a response. It was quite disconcerting at first, but then her discomfiture caused her to react, she wasn't about to let this precious little creature intimidate her in front of an audience. So Ira-Jane straightened her back, gaining both height and self-confidence in the process, and obliged.

"Are there any recorded instances of miracles that have occurred here?"

Pause, as if the young man had been somehow stunned by the question, then, “several people claim to have been granted a cure by the Madonna of Tindari, I cannot say, however if this is so.” The group parted to make way as he moved a few paces in her direction, then in a lower tone he added "Some people say that a miracle is only a manifestation of faith."

"In Australia we call it positive thinking."

"Ah, so you are the Australian, I knew it."

Ira-Jane was left wondering. Was it some kind of standard opening gambit he used on foreign women? The very idea that he might be trying to chat her up, despite their obvious age difference, made her smile. He was about to engage her again, but someone else intervened to ask a question, leaving Ira-Jane free to exit the church and visit the profane side of Tindari: its Greco-Roman amphitheatre and the Roman excavations. Strictly speaking not part of her brief but, you cannot really understand the sacred without the profane. Not that Franzetti, or the readers of the Daily Star, would be interested in such concepts.

As she covered the few hundred metres, which separated the church from the excavations, the image of the young guide strode alongside her. She decided
he wasn't gay after all. From the sensuality of his lips to the light in his eyes, his features suggested a male in fine balance between spirit and body. Strangely though, she couldn't decide whether she mostly liked or resented him.

She stood in the centre of the amphitheatre and smelled the stones that someone had carefully manoeuvred into place some two millennia before. In fact there were relatively few stones left. Apart from the archway and the remains of the columns in the arena, the seats were lost to history and its pilferers.

Only two wings remained, the rest had steel strusses upon which wooden seats were bolted during the summer performances. But that did not dispel the sense of timelessness, all the more eerie for the fact that, with a group having just left, she found herself alone in the theatre for a moment. She listened for the ancient voices in the wind declaiming words of good and evil. The silence was soon broken by a shrill voice coming from the top rung of the theatre where a girl was having an animated discussion on her mobile. Her male companion, tired of waiting around, ran down to the arena and called out in Italian.

“Mi senti?”

The girl did not respond.

“Dai, Ennia, parlo con te, mi senti?”

This time the girl called Ennia covered the mobile with her hand and shouted back.

“Of course I can hear you, you’re shouting. Speak normally.”

The man whispered,

“I want to make love with you.”

The girl giggled.
“Don’t be an arsehole Mauro, everybody can hear you.”

“I want them to.”

The girl ended her conversation and ran down leaping over the stones with youthful lack of reverence, to join her companion.

Ira-Jane climbed the steps to the top and took some photos; then she stood by the cypress tree and watched breathless, the view that had brought audiences to this cliff for thousands of years. Beyond the arches of the arena, a patch of land precariously held together by stubbles of cane, prickly pears and ferns, fell away sheer to the sea. What a spectacular backdrop for the great dramas of the gods!

An eagle appeared riding the airwaves over a curling sand bar, that was said to represent the figure of the Madonna and child. Well, if you say so, thought Ira-Jane. Another legend had it that a child falling down to the sea from that height had been saved by the Madonna.

Ira-Jane took several photos of the sand bar then shot a few more inside the theatre. The sacred and the profane, side by side. Though of course the theatre was no less sacred. As she moved the lens around, the figure of the group guide came into focus, looking right into the eye of the camera.

“I’m sorry to afraid you,” he said.

Ira-Jane wondered briefly if she were being stalked.

“I wanted to ask you before, but there was many people around, are you from Western Australia?”

“Yes...ah.”

He leapt up the steps to where she stood stopping just one step below hers. A film of perspiration had appeared on his upper lip.

“Ah, you must be Ira, yes?”

“Ira-Jane...” she corrected him, wondering how on earth he knew her name.

* Come on, Ennia, I am speaking to you, can you hear me?
"Yes, yes, you are she," he opened his arms as if to hug her. Ira-Jane stepped aside to avoid him. "Oh, sorry sorry, my name is Sante Marzano. You have written a letter to us from Australia."

"Oh I see you must be related to….the other Ira."

"Yes, yes she’s my mother."

Ira-Jane offered her hand, relieved. He took it inside both of his.

"Well," she said, "what a coincidence!"

She tried to keep it formal. She didn't cope well with effusion.

"In Sicily we call it fate."

"Let's not get into that again."

He didn't seem to mind her abruptness or perhaps he hadn't noticed.

Maybe, she mused, nuances of tone are lost in cultural interchanges.

"I think maybe in Australia everybody believe they control the destiny."

Ira-Jane felt the stones beneath her low-heeled sandals, she cringed at this kind of talk. She looked into his face for traces of condescension. His eyebrows, perfect like the rest of his features, did not arch. His face, still waiting for the whiskers of manhood, looked open and earnest. He was simply too perfect, too carefully-groomed to be interesting. Life's lines of experience and struggle had not made their mark. The shadows of disillusionment and self-deception had yet to gather around his eyes. Here was a young man molly-coddled through life in the soft wool of love and protection. Did she resent him, like she had resented those private school girls many years ago? No, definitely not, she felt sorry for him for being so naïve, so fragile, so vulnerable. She felt much older than him and, much to her shock, vaguely protective. She said,

"You speak very good English, did your mother teach you?"

"A little, also during summer vacation I have studied in London, in a language school, in Oxford Street."
Just as she thought: a protected, privileged background.

“I must get going,” she said, “I have an interview to do.”

“Yes, my mother told me, you are a journalist. That’s one profession I have considered.”

“And?…”

“Maybe yes, maybe not…I don’t know. Very difficult for me to decide. Also because prospects in journalism are rare in the provinces.”

They were heading back to the main strip, when her eye caught a long inscription on a white marble plaque covering the wall of a building. Ira stopped, curious to know why those words should be given so much prominence.

He said,

“Do you know Quasimodo?”

“Not the character in Les Miserables, I take it.”

“You have read Hugo?”

“I’ve seen the musical.”

“Ah, very modern.”

“Very Australian. We don’t have time to read any more.”

“In Italy also, only students read poetry.”

“Is this a poem?”

“Ah, this is Salvatore Quasimodo, Sicilian Nobel Laureate for Literature. “

“And I gather this is his homage to Tindari?”

“Well, it is more. Sometimes groups of tourists ask me to read it to them aloud. Shall I read it for you?”

She could hardly say no. Sante read in a voice newly-broken but still retaining the schoolboy’s declamatory passion.
Vento a Tindari

Tindari, mite ti so
fra larghi colli pensile sull’acque
dell’isole dolci del dio,
oggi m’assali
e ti chini in cuore…

Sante stopped, his eyes floated back in.

“It sounds beautiful,” said Ira, “I’m not sure I understand though. My Italian isn’t that good.”

“Loss and longing. It speaks to me about Australia.”

“Oh, I see…”

Ira didn’t know what to say. Intensity made her uncomfortable.

“This poem speaks to displaced people.”

“About what?”

“Many people in Europe dream about Australia: all that space, beautiful beaches, clean air…” Ira didn’t correct him about the latter, as a journalist she knew it’s not a good idea to mess about with people’s dreams, “I also have another reason to love Australia. I am half-Australian.”

Then he proceeded to tell her that he was the love child of a liaison his mother had when she lived in Australia. The father, who was some sort of adventurer, had subsequently disappeared during a voyage into the desert, believed dead.
“Soon I will travel to Australia. I want to experience my father’s country. Maybe I can find him. I dream so many times about him, that he is alive. I see him in some vast pastoral property on the edge of the desert with orange soil and open blue sky.”

Ira felt sorry for him, again. He was going to be disappointed. Dreams always disappoint, because reality can never live up to the brilliancy of their colours. She decided it was time to make another one of her quick exits, for his sake, more than hers.

“I have to go I’m afraid or I’ll be late for my interview.”

"And I see my next group is arriving."

In Sicily things don’t work out quite the way you plan them, thought Ira-Jane. No sooner had she finished her interview with Vincenzo, the resident artisan, than, outside the workshop she was met by Sante again. He had finished taking through his last group and was ready to leave, would she like un passaggio back to Milazzo? His reappearance unsettled her a little, not because she didn't want to see him, precisely for the opposite reason: she realized she had been wishing all along that he would turn up again. And she didn't want him to know that. She felt vulnerable. She mistrusted enthusiasms and quick emotions. Her tendency was to ask what exactly was behind them. Inevitably there always were strings attached. On the other hand, if she had to be honest she liked Sante. She certainly had been thinking about him in flashes since their earlier encounter. And this worried her. It was so unlike her to get familiar with someone so quickly. She knew so little about him.

“Actually, you know Sante, my expenses are covered, I have a taxi waiting…” but even as she spoke she knew that she was going to accept his
invitation. She had a few questions to ask herself and besides, he might be useful to her, he might provide her with some quotes for her feature. "Bugger it!" she said aloud, "why not?"

He drove a Fiat Punto, near new. Not bad for an eighteen year old. No doubt a gift from doting parents. Sante got all animated when he talked and talk he did. Sometimes he got so caught up in the conversation, trying to explain himself in English that he went perilously close to the edge of the steep road. Each time they reached yet another sharp turn, Ira-Jane closed her eyes and held her breath. She caught up with her breathing – and regained her thoughts – once they reached the coast. As they turned into the via Nazionale Ira wondered how she would be able to steer the conversation to a subject she was eager to discuss, when Sante, with typical directness said,

“Our mothers were best friends, that makes us best friends too, true?”
“[I] suppose,” said Ira, as she adjusted the length of her security strap, “although…”
“What? It is not possible to be best friends instantly, right?”
“No, no that. Did your mother ever speak to you about… my mother?”
“No, she never talk about her.”
“Well, something must have happened.”
“What do you mean?”
Ira-Jane didn’t want to mention the letter she had found.
“Your mother left Australia suddenly, I know that much. Following her departure my mother went away too. So, it’s a bit of a mystery.”
“But what about you? Where did you stay?”
“I was left with Nonnu and Nonna La Rocca, for some two years…”
“You mean, my grandparents?”
“Well...yes, I suppose.”
“Why, Ira, we are like brother and sister then.”

Sante leant across the seat and planted a kiss on her cheek. His face glowed. Ira was glad he was driving, or else she was sure he would throw himself at her.

“Did you mother say something about my father?”

“No, nothing. I don’t even think she knew about you. I mean that your mother had you.”

“A secret lover. It does not seem like my mother at all. “

“Well, she’s the only person who can answer some of these questions.”

You really had to wonder about that boy, Sante. Was he the ingénue he appeared to be? Or was he furbo, underneath? Did he have more than a pinch of Sicilian foxy guile beneath that exterior of child-like innocence? Don Alfio was beginning to suspect the latter, which pleased him no end, because goodness knows, if he stayed the way his mother wanted him to, he would be all too easy a prey in the jungle of the world.

Later in the morning Don Alfio met him in the corridor, coming out of the bathroom, already showered and about to return to his room to get dressed.

“Ciao caro, to what do we owe such early rise?”

Sante’s face, still damp, glowed with excitement. He grabbed his father’s arm and pulled him close as if to whisper something. Don Alfio said,

“It’s OK, Mammà is out. Did you get to meet her?”
“Yes, yes Papà. I am so excited… I haven’t slept all night. Thanks for messaging me.”

Sante’s exuberance ignited him too.

“Fantastico! And what is she like? No, no don’t tell me, let me guess,” Don Alfio parted his hands in front of his eyes with which he framed the picture of his imagination,

“Let me see, she’s. …tall…”

“Yes.”

“…Blond…”

“Yes.”

“Like…that famous actress, what’s her name, la Kidman.”

“Papà, she’s beautiful.”

“There, I knew it. Australian women are all beautiful and the men are the best athletes in the world. It’s a new country, what do you expect. They breed super humans down there. “

Like a couple of fanatics their arms entwined in a rugby hold and they danced around the room, singing in English, “We are the champions!”

In the process Sante’s bath towel, which he had wrapped around his waist, fell to the floor. Don Alfio picked it up for him.

“Better go and get dressed.”

At this point Ira walked in.

“What’s all this baccano, you are waking the neighbourhood.”

“Ciao Mammà.”

He tucked his towel around his waist and gave his mother a morning kiss.

“Mammà, you will never believe what happened to me yesterday...”
Don Alfio held his breath, the boy was going frontal, no preliminaries, no toe-testing tentativity. He was going to deposit the hot potato right on her lap, with that naive face and the disarming smile, as if he were presenting a bouquet.

“I met Ira, no, my mistake, her name is Ira-Jane”

His mother’s brows pressed together above the eyes.

“I don’t understand.”

“You know, the Australian girl…your friend’s daughter.”

Ira’s bottom lip quivered. She tugged at the tassel of her shopping bag, from which surfaced the head of a brioche. Bits of lace came off and fell to the floor. It made Don Alfio nervous to look at her, but Sante did not seem to notice.

“Why didn’t you tell me this last night?”

Her tone was accusatory.

“You were in bed.”

“You could have called. You know I always stay awake until you come home.”

“Why disturb you? I could tell you in the morning. Mammà, I knew straight away when I saw her that it was she. Isn’t that strange! I’m going to collect her this morning from her hotel. You’ll be able to meet her.”

“What? “ she looked as if she were about to take a fit, but again Sante did not seem to notice, “did you meet her father too?”

“What father, there is no father.”

“No?”

“Oh, I see, the man she travelled with? He is her employer.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course, Mammà, Ira-Jane told me. Why do you doubt it?”
Ira relaxed her grip on the bag. She put it down on the kitchen table and looked as if an enormous weight had come off her. Sante said, “I had better go and get dressed, I am to collect her at 9.00.”

“What about the church service, Sante.”

“I can go to a later session. Maybe Ira will come too. Mammà you will love her, she’s beautiful.”

“There you are, Ira," said Don Alfio, relieved, "you have nothing to worry. Do you know what Faraone was telling me the other day, that in Australia there are barely 20 million people in an area the size of the whole of Europe. Imagine all that space for such few people. No wonder they all look so perfect in those T.V. shows. It’s all that clean air and natural food they eat.”

Sante gave his mother a peck on the cheek and, as she appeared to sway on her feet, overwhelmed by his youthful exuberance, he steadied her, holding three fingers to her elbow, smiled and then left to go. His mother watched his bare torso move down the corridor, Sante turned and said: “I will try to persuade her to stay for lunch. Shall I, Mammà?”

He did not wait for a reply, the door of his bedroom closed behind him.

Don Alfio reeled. He did not know what to think, this was one Sante he had not seen before and he stood there wavering between fascination and apprehension.

Ira La Rocca knew when she was beaten. This girl, stealing upon her from the unseen, sneaky side of the sphere, from a land that had caused her so much pain (and had bequeathed her a child she had never asked for) now demanded a seat at the table of her life. There was little point in resisting. What she feared – and
experience had taught her that her fears were almost always a prediction – was that she had come to deconstruct her life and reconstitute it on her own terms.

And now, as she got dressed for church, she knew that there was no way out, she would have to tell her son some unhappy truths, fill out the omissions she had so carefully guarded to protect him.

She did not want to think about this girl. She resented her coming to stir her world. That resentment prevailed over all other feelings, including a discernible sense of attachment to a child who, so many years ago, had been almost a daughter to her. She could not help but notice a certain curiosity bobbing up in the troubled sea of her consciousness. What was this young woman like? How far did she resemble her mother? How much did she remember?

…………………………

Don Alfio didn’t always attend the church service with his wife. Firstly because she was an assiduous churchgoer, often attending three or four services per week, which made it impractical for him to join her; and secondly because he was an avowed agnostic. Being agnostic of course didn’t mean that he refuted the possibility of a Higher Being, he liked to keep his options open. So he went to church intermittently, as a partial insurance, just in case. Besides, he liked standing in Church next to Ira, he found her utter absorption sublimating. And because he lacked both devotion and the concentration for sustained prayer, he liked to think that his wife’s effort in that department sufficed for both of them.

Don Alfio Marzano was proud of his agnosticism, as any modern thinking person should be. It might surprise that the first citizen of this conservative mountain town in Sicily should wear his agnostic colours so publicly and with such aplomb, when politicians the world over make a display of their religious belief, real or faked. But in the close community of San Sisto Don Alfio’s lack of religious
conviction was regarded with the same degree of condescension as his dalliance. It was just part of his ‘artistic’ personality, though no one in the town could actually point to any artistic achievements, that could be attributed to the Mayor. Others saw it as a sign of enlightenment and modernity. And anyway, even when he didn’t attend the service, he always made it a point of accompanying his wife to the Church door, therefore demonstrating his allegiance to traditional values.

So there was no surprise at the Bar Ciro when Don Alfio appeared in the piazza, next to his wife, in full suit and tie, walking his Signora the hundred paces or so from their house to the portone of the Chiesa Madre. As they strolled past the Bar Ciro, Mayor Marzano called out a collective Buon Giorno Signori, his Signora conceded a smile and a brief nod to the men sitting in the autumn sunshine and taking their coffee, while their wives prayed to God inside the church.

Though no one actually said so, it was accepted in the town that it was a woman’s role to intercede with God for her own sins and for the sins of her man. As for Don Alfio himself, his view was that if God existed, and He was male, He would certainly give the women a more sympathetic ear.

As a result Sunday service was attended by a preponderance of women worshippers. Men had more pressing things to do, like sorting out the political mess of the world to the aroma of roasted coffee in the Bar Ciro. And that’s where Don Alfio headed for, during that Sunday’s church service, to sit at his favourite table, in the autumn sunshine with his friends: Pino Siracusa the retired School Principal, Giancola Vinci the municipal Secretary and Carmelo Radice the surveyor. This morning they had plenty to discuss. What, with the troubles in the Middle East going from bad to worse, Berlusconi defending another charge of corruption and the EU constitution being debated in Parliament.

The four friends had one thing in common, international politics. None of them were interested in Sicilian politics. Perhaps it was their way of fleeing the
An Olive Branch for Sante

claustrophobic world of San Sisto. This was one of the best times of the week for Don Alfio. He enjoyed a good debate, pitting his wits against the sharpest brains in town, particularly Pino Siracusa, whose opinions he really valued, despite his being a Communist through and through. This, when everybody else had abandoned the Party after the fall of the Berlin wall. But then, Don Alfio admired dogged perseverance in the midst of adversity, probably because it was one of the qualities he himself did not have and preferred not to, because martyrdom was just not for him.

Don Alfio, who always bought a copy of the Gazzetta del Sud, never read the articles in their entirety. Mostly he would not get much past the headline, before someone's comment provoked a reaction that sparked off a debate. Sometimes they would refer to parts of the article to back up this or that point of view, but in most cases, the paper was merely a pretext to soap-box their political views. This morning the discussion promised to be more lively than usual, as controversy over Berlusconi's gaffe in the European Parliament, in which he offended a German MEP, was still raging.

“What an embarrassment that man is for Italy. *Che figuraccia!*” lamented Radice, “he brings shame on the entire country.”

“Eh sì,” agreed Don Alfio with a sigh, ironing out the creases in the newspaper with the palm of his hand.

But Giancola Vinci, who owed his job to the good offices of the pro-Berlusconi UDC party, could not let it pass.

“What shame? What embarrassment? *Signori*, let us consider the situation with clarity, the German offended our elected Prime Minister, true or not true?”

“What do you mean? How?”
"How? It is obvious, by suggesting that the Presidente del Consiglio is a crook..."

"That he is, as we all know..." interrupted Carmelo, who was getting very little municipal work since Vinci had been promoted Secretary.

Giancola merely gave him a dirty look and did not deign to address him personally.

"The fact is," he continued, "he had to defend himself, not just from a personal attack, no, no Signori miei," here Giancola's clenched hand rose dramatically, his index finger, slightly curved, lanced through the air, upon reaching the level of his cheek paused, then dipped down and tapped on the relevant article in the newspaper on the table and declaimed, "he was defending the honour of Italy."

"UuuH!" .......Carmelo's hands rose to his forehead, and turned his head to one side dismissively "what drive!!"

The comment would have surely led to a serious spat between the two men, had not Pino Siracusa intervened. His low, steady voice always had the effect of calming animosities.

"What Berlusconi has done... he has put on display before the world the Italian character, more particularly the insecurities of a nation. What is our preoccupation with elegance but another symptom of those insecurities? We are a people who have opinions, too many opinions. We react, we dream, create and fantasise, but we cannot organise ourselves as a nation, unless in metaphor. Real life does not interest us, or perhaps we don't think it important enough to give it our attention...."

"Now listen, Siracusa, what you say has some merit, I don't deny it, but here the matter in question is nothing to do with the Italian character..."

"Do you not agree that this man's behaviour has made Italy a laughing stock in Europe?"
“Absolutely not…. No…”

The furore was suddenly arrested by the appearance in the piazza of a Lancia, with its unmistakable wide, reinforced grill and the bullet-proof glass windows. General silence fell as Mimmo Urzi’s car slid silent and heavy onto the piazza out of nowhere, it skirted the church, circled around the monument to the fallen soldier whose face resembled a young Mussolini, and came to stop in front of the Marzano house. The driver, a heavy man, whose weight seemed to be suspended above the waist, got out of the car and went to ring the bell on the ‘portone’ of the house with its black satin badge in remembrance of Ira La Rocca’s late father.

Don Alfio Marzano winced, but was too conscious of his position to show the fear inside him. He stood up and said, “Signori, I’m sorry, I have a visitor this morning. Please go on without me.” And he left the Gazzetta del Sud on the table. Everyone noticed that he had forgotten to drink his coffee. Something he never did.

Since the death of his father, when he and his bodyguards were blown up inside their car as they left the Catania airport, Mimmo Urzi had found himself at the head of the family’s ‘business’ empire. The many people, whose livelihood depended on the goodwill and protection of old Leone Urzi, were shocked. Prior to this disaster the Old Man had seemed invincible. He was ruthless, shrewd, highly respected and widely connected to people who could make things happen: politicians, businessmen and the enforcers, both inside and outside the law. Unfortunately, as everyone in that highly precarious business knows, you’re only as
good as your luck, when that runs out, all the other power props are of little use and
tend to collapse with it. After the shock people were considering how to best cut
their losses and change allegiance to the new guard from Cefalù.

Initially nobody gave the new boy on the block much of a chance. He was
young and considered somewhat of a *scapestrato* by all who knew him. There was
talk of him being a junkie, a gambler, a womaniser... you name it. Worse still,
everyone agreed that the boy was none too bright. His own father, who had all but
disowned him, was quoted as saying that his son’s brain matter had all drained
down to his penis, presumably in reference to the size of that part of his anatomy.
Be that as it may, once his father was out of the way, Mimmo astounded everyone
by the swiftness with which he took over the reins, pounced on his enemies and
established order. Now at age 31, and after a string of successful operations that
left a few corpses riddled with bullets, incinerated in cars and, in one case, drowned
in a vat of olive oil, he had rightly gained respect. It seems that where Mimmo
lacked in brain cells he was endowed with cunning, swiftness of action and good
old survival instinct.

When Don Alfio arrived, the driver had given up on the doorbell and was
heading back. Don Alfio stood outside the car, on the passenger’s side, where he
knew Mimmo to be sitting, though all he could see was his own reflection in the
bulletproof glass. Already tense, that face in the tinted glass made him feel faint.
“Signor Mimmo,” he called feebly into the glass.

An interminable moment of silence ensued. Finally the glass lowered to
reveal the chubby, inscrutable face of Mimmo Urzì.

“Don Alfio, i miei ossequi,” said Mimmo; despite the obsequious words his
face had a smirk and his voice a tone of contempt. Don Alfio swallowed hard and
touched his hat.

“To what do I owe this pleasure?”
“Nothing,” said Mimmo, in his slow drawl, that made him seem even more dense than his repute, “I was going for a passeggiata to the mountains, to get some fresh air. I’ve heard that your wine this year is exceptional.”

“Oh, signor Mimmo. It would be a great pleasure, but ...my family are all out this morning, “ he said with a quick glance at his watch, “would you honour me...over at Ciro’s...” He looked towards the Bar, like a man desperate to be rescued.

Mimmo dismissed it with a wave of his bejewelled hand.

“You know me, I’m a private man, Don Alfio...” and he looked up to the balcony.

Don Alfio had no choice but to invite him up.

Don Alfio was glad that there was the coffee to be made, it gave him an activity through which to channel his tension. He poured a cup for each, lacing his with a generous drop of grappa. Normally he wouldn’t, not on a Sunday morning. It seemed sacrilegious. But he needed to steady himself. He knew that Mimmo would not be venturing out all this way unless there was something heavy on his mind.

Mimmo put three generous teaspoons of sugar in his coffee then proceeded to stir, as he did his bracelets clanged on his wrist. The sound further destabilised Don Alfio’s unsteady nerves. Mimmo loved jewellery. His Gold Cartier watch on his left wrist was augmented by a matching bracelet of thick spun gold. His right wrist sported a bracelet which strung together little silver bells, whose ringers had shapes of hearts and horns: love and luck, the two essentials in his life. When Mimmo raised his arm and shook his wrist, something he did regularly to emphasise a point or simply to fill in a silence, all those shiny trinkets glittered and jingled like decorations on a Christmas tree.

The luck theme was pursued beyond his wrist to other pieces of visible jewellery. From his left ear hung yet another golden horn, as further bastion in his
barricade against ill fortune. Mimmo felt, with some justification, it must be said, that in his profession he needed to have plenty of luck on his side. And so far it seemed that his lucky trinkets had served him well, given that he had already escaped a couple of serious assassination attempts, by rivals keen to get their hands on his fast growing empire. But the piece of resistance of his collection of jewellery was without doubt his chain. Chunky and solid, its reputation preceded its impressive appearance. Legend had it that it was instrumental, at least once, in the elimination of a rival, by strangulation. So many uses for jewellery.

Having drunk down his coffee, Mimmo got down to business, “Have you considered the offer on that piece of land, Don Alfio.”

Don Alfio cleared his throat, he knew Mimmo had come for that and yet, true to his old habits, instead of preparing for this visit, he had chosen instead to avoid thinking about it. Now he was lost for a reply.

“Yes, of course, it’s a very generous offer… For myself I would sell right now… I could certainly do with the money…”

“You are ready to sell then?”

“Well, no. I mean not yet. You see, the grove has sentimental value for us; it’s been in my wife’s family for... well... forever. So, it’s not really in my hands. I mean, if it were up to me, I would sell. Times change, and one must adapt. We must be realistic, but...”

Mimmo didn’t like talk, he liked even less words that he couldn’t understand. He felt threatened by them. He was sure they had been invented by clever dicks to confound people like him and to let themselves off the hook. So he shook his wrist in a show of impatience. At the sound of all those bells Don Alfio stopped talking, but the ensuing silence felt even more terrible.

“Maybe we can wait until my mother-in-law passes away, “ he ventured, in a plaintive voice, hoping to appeal to Mimmo’s sense of family (too late realizing,
much to his dismay, that he might be giving Mimmo ideas) “She loves it there. She would die if she were forced to move.”

Don Alfio realised the futility of his plea. Clearly death did not have the same import for Mimmo as it did for ordinary mortals.

“Don Alfio, this is an important project, that will bring work and prosp... money into our region. With all respects to you and your family, my clients are not prepared to wait for the good soul of your mother-in-law to leave us; long may she live. The property is required now, or else my clients might take their business to Cefalù.”

Cefalù was under the control of his rivals and that did not suit Mimmo at all.

Silence.

“Don Alfio, al buon intenditore, poche parole.”¹²

Mimmo looked away. Mimmo never looked you in the eye, not out of shyness, rather, so as not to deign you with the privilege of his whole attention. The effect was most disconcerting, because when the light fell obliquely on Mimmo’s eyes it highlighted the yellow specks in his pupils, giving him a menacing appearance. Don Alfio sighed.

“I’ll speak to my wife. I’ll need time to try to persuade her.”

“How long do you need.”

Don Alfio did not want to be held down to a date.

“Well, if I know her, she’ll take some persuading.”

Mimmo’s hand went to his ear, he winced and pulled at the golden horn with some force. Don Alfio saw the ear rip open and the ring come clear of the bleeding ear. Fortunately it was his own imagination playing a cruel trick, but the message was all too real. There was nothing doing but for Don Alfio to cave in, which he

¹² To a good listener, a few words suffice.
would have done, had he not feared his wife’s reaction almost as much as Mimmo’s threat.

Don Alfio, modern man that he was, did not believe in supernatural intervention, but what happened next was so timely that, in the days following the incident, it induced to think that maybe he should reconsider his philosophical position on this point. Just as he was about to sweat out a final shirt, and Mimmo’s impatience was reaching the point of dire consequences, he was rescued by excited voices coming from the corridor, just outside the study where the private interview was taking place. Like a prisoner in a dark tunnel who has just seen a spiral of light, Don Alfio excused himself and went out to investigate. His son’s arrival was always a pleasure for Don Alfio, but now it was accompanied by a huge relief.

“Is Mammà with you?” asked Sante.

As Don alfio replied his eyes fell on the girl next to Sante.

Seeing a beautiful woman would have gladdened Don Alfio’s heart at any time, but at this moment of intolerable distress, her appearance attained the power of a miracle. In his eyes she became a veritable Angel of Rescue. She was, he guessed, the Australian girl, as Sante was about to confirm.

“Papà, questa è Ira-Jane”

Gladness and admiration gelled in Don Alfio, producing impetuous outpouring of affection,

“Ah carissima Signorina, we’ve been expecting you.”

It quite overwhelmed Ira-Jane, but there was no time to react, because Don Alfio had already his arm under hers and led her into the study, where Mimmo sat, miffed at the interruption.
"Vieni, vieni. Ti presento il dottor Mimmo Urzì."

"Oh, hello," she said, choosing to speak in English, even though she didn’t have the foggiest whether the two men understood her, but in the midst of what she perceived to be a tense situation she thought she would retain the shield that speaking her own language gave her.

Upon setting his eyes on the girl a strange transformation took place in Mimmo Urzì. His face twisted and re-set itself in a painful grimace, as if he were being tortured. His brow broke into a sweat and for a moment he froze on his chair, unable to return the girl’s greeting.

To fill the silence Don Alfio said, "Mammà has gone to see Nonna."

"Ah, perfetto. Come Ira-Jane, we shall go and visit Nonna."

Ira-Jane thought she misheard.

"Nonna? You mean my Nonna?"

"Yes, of course, our Nonna, but I cannot say that she will know you."

Ira-Jane was dumbfounded. Just yesterday she had been told that the Nonni were dead. Meanwhile Sante was taking her hand and he started to retreat back towards the door. The prospect of the girl’s departure shook Mimmo out of his paralysis. He now sprang to his feet as if a spider had stung him in his backside. He bowed very low and proffered his chubby hand. Ira took it in passing, for her mind still grappling with the contradiction of what she had just heard, (a contradiction perfectly mimicked in the fact that at one point her hands were being held by two different men pulling in opposite directions) And perhaps to compensate for her curtness, given the funny man’s gallantry, she allowed him a wan smile. Never in her wildest
dreams could she imagine the impact that this perfunctory little gesture would have on Mimmo’s heart and on subsequent events.

Such things only happen in books, thought Mimmo, or rather, he imagined they did, for Mimmo had never read a book in his life. Mimmo’s eyes remained fixed on the door, beyond which that luminous creature had vanished just as quickly as she had appeared, after wreaking havoc in his heart. He wondered whether the apparition was real or whether it was one of those airbrushed things you see on magazine covers. He stared at the door, waiting for it to open again and confirm the reality of the vision.

Don Alfio noticed the change in Mimmo, how could he not? The man had been transformed by a passing spirit, though not quite spirited away, as Don Alfio would have wished. Mimmo seemed immobilised in a space of his own. This was a new situation for him, outside the realm of his experience. He turned his attention to his jewellery, hoping to find inspiration out of his state of bewilderment. But none came. Not the rings or bracelets; earring or chains provided him with a clue. So he just sat there looking at the door. Then as his eyes scanned the room aimlessly they came to rest on Don Alfio. They were little eyes, hazel, the specks of yellow lost in the ample space of his cheeks and the immensity of what he felt. They looked at the Mayor pleadingly, as if to ask, what is happening to me Don Alfio? Of course, Don Alfio, who all his life had loved women above all else, understood perfectly well. He sympathised and commiserated with him, especially as his experience in these matters indicated to him that Don Mimmo was in for a long haul of suffering, as the object of his nascent passion was unlikely to requite his feelings.
Nevertheless Don Alfio was also a survivor and it was this very instinct which prevailed upon him. It occurred to him that this new state in which Mimmo had fallen relieved him of the pressure of having to make a decision now. It was a god-sent turn of events to be exploited to his advantage. For a start he saw a chance to get rid of his uninvited guest and to give himself some respite. Mimmo himself gave him the opener.

“Is that Sante’s girl?”

“Oh no, Sante is merely a boy, she’s a relation of my wife’s, from Australia. The girl’s mother and my wife were very close. She carries the same name as her. Unfortunately, she’s an orphan, the poor girl, and looks to my wife as her mother.”

“She’s a Signorina then?” asked Mimmo and you could feel his heart suspended on the filament of Don Alfio’s reply. Don Alfio, paused, intoxicated by the feeling of power over such a tyrant.

“Certainly, my niece…” imperceptibly he upgraded the level of his relationship to the girl, “will not give up her independence just for any man. When the time comes, she will choose a strong man of character. I feel that a Sicilian man would be just the person for her.”

Don Alfio tried to discern the effect of his words on Mimmo without looking directly at him. Having satisfied himself that he had sown the seeds of hope in Mimmo’s heart, he got up and added,

“Signor Mimmo, I would ask you to stay for lunch, but …”

Mimmo sprung to his feet with such force that his bulk teetered and his jewellery jingled, but this time it played sweet music to Don Alfio’s ears, for it announced Mimmo’s departure.

“No, Don Alfio, I… I am expected somewhere else. Thank you for receiving me.” Suddenly the terrifying bully was bowing respectfully. And Don Alfio thanked unpredictable old Cupid - and Ira-Jane - that Mimmo, who had marched into his
living room with the arrogance of a mafioso, was now limping his way back to the door, wounded by the arrow of love.

On the way to his grandmother's farmhouse, Sante proceeded to explain that after her husband's death Nonna had been persuaded to move in with them in the town. It was the worst thing for her. She spent the day pacing the corridor, fretting and calling her husband. She lasted less than a week. One morning they discovered that she was not in her bed. A frantic search led back to Rovaro. During the night Nonna had sneaked out and walked the 12 kilometres back to her land, guided by a full moon.

“She's much happier there with her animals.”

“It must be lonely for her though,” said Ira.

“No, it is very strange. Nonna believe her husband is still living. When she sit down to eat she put two plates: one for herself one for him. Over meals she tell him about the day. She live in her own world.”

Maybe we all do. Now, that was the kind of thought Ira-Jane never allowed herself to have back in Australia. There the landscape was flat and undemanding, the sky was wide open, her life busy. Her concerns were the minutiae of her day: planning the meetings and activities; meeting the deadlines, setting goals, looking forward. Here among these stony ridges and dips, that intimated at cataclysms, things seemed mysterious, unpredictable. In this landscape of ancient villages that looked like perennial rookeries - past and present moved in unison.
On arriving at the track that led to the stone house on the rise, Ira was in shock, for this was the house of the recurrent dream as a child: the blackened stone walls, the long narrow windows with grey, unpainted frames and cracked putty, the faded roof tiles chipped and broken. Above all the olive tree, whose upper branches cascaded into the gully on the roof. This was not the tree of her childhood in Australia, set in the backyard away from the house, which was young and smooth of trunk. The trunk of this tree was knotted and hollow; marked by centuries of struggles, fire, wars and droughts— all imaged in its crooked trunk. With its gash opened to the sun, it inclined precariously to one side in a gravity-defying pose. A pile of white stones lay at its base. It did not seem possible that any nourishment could get through and yet, on top of the bark-thin trunk a clump of silver foliage thrived. This was nature at its most stubborn, life at its most resilient.

As the car trundled closer over the rough track, Ira-Jane turned to Sante and said,

"This is really strange."

"What?"

"I've seen this house before."

"You mean like... _deja vue?_"

"Yes..." Ira-Jane struggled to explain, "No... it's more like... I don't know, it's crazy."

There was an echo here, a correspondence with her childhood, a recognition. How could that be? Ira-Jane had to concede that there were things in life, in her, which defied explanation.

Sante slammed the break and the car lurched, the back wheels dropped into a dip on the track and stopped. Ira-Jane's face had the absent intensity of a sleepwalker. Sante took his hand to her face, gently stroked the back of his index down the line of her jaw and whispered.

"Ira... Ira-Jane, you were destined to come to us."
As if waking from a dream, Ira-Jane found that finger on her face and gave a start. Sante quickly retrieved his hand. She realised she was afraid of deep, imperceptible forces working inside her, which had brought her here. The possibility that she was not in control, but somehow an instrument of complex energies, beyond her comprehension, was intolerable to her.

Such superstition was for simple villagers because they needed them. Not for her though, she was a modern woman, a woman of the world, an educated, ambitious woman. Through the car window she watched skeins of mist where the land dipped. Did she dare go beyond the mist?

She would have told Sante to turn back, except that she didn’t want to appear irrational. Besides, two figures had now appeared in the courtyard, both women. One, tiny, wearing a brown scarf over sun-bleached white hair, standing by the door step as if unsure whether to come forward or bolt back inside. The other, in a dark blue frock, matching coat and hat, looked incongruous in that mountain setting. Neither woman moved as the car lurched to a stop. Sante approached the house tentatively as if he weren’t sure if he were doing the right thing, turning more than once to ensure that Ira-Jane was following. On reaching the women he embraced the older one, who then ran into the house, before Ira-Jane was introduced.

"Mammà," said Sante, "I have brought you a guest."

The woman stood there under the olive tree, like a bastion defending her territory waiting for Ira-Jane to come to her. Heaviness weighed in the air as a cold wind whispered through the thistles. As the young Australian crossed the space between them she had the sensation of cutting through the ice of time. When she offered her hand the other woman hesitated, before accepting it. It was coarse and her grip, when it finally came, was masculine firm.
“You must be Ira-Jane,” said she in English, surprising the younger woman by conjuring up a smile out of her inscrutable face, and then, even more surprisingly, she gave her the briefest of hugs. Was it of love or betrayal? Ira-Jane dismissed the first, so looked for evidence of the latter.

She noticed that the woman spoke with an Australian accent, unlike her son. This relaxed her a little. The woman spoke again.

“You have certainly grown up.”

“Well, I hope so.”

“You were this big when I last saw you.”

Ira La Rocca set the palm of her hand at knee level.

Ah, but that doesn’t give you licence to patronise me, thought Ira-Jane, more to the point, it doesn’t give you the right to lie to me. There was nothing in the older woman’s expression to suggest embarrassment. Nor did Ira-Jane expect that any mention would be made of that telephone conversation. That piece of deception was now superseded by events. What Ira-Jane wanted to know was the reason for that deception. And while she considered her move, the woman spoke again.

“Your mother… she's… passed away.” Ira-Jane assented, wondering how she knew, "I'm sorry. She was very young. An accident, I believe?"

She would not be surprised if this woman was well acquainted with 'the accident'. She suspected Ira La Rocca knew a lot more than herself. She had a way of looking at you as if she were not seeing you but someone else. Most discomforting.

Perhaps it was the fact that this woman who spoke her language and had known her as a child, knew secrets about her. This made the young woman feel violated. Just how much did she know? What was the relationship between Ira La Rocca and Sheryl Giffen? A week ago in Australia it didn’t matter, now in this
country, meeting her for the first time (though of course it wasn’t the first time at all) it unsettled Ira-Jane. Bad sign.

She picked invisible specs off her dress, “how long are you going to stay in Italy?”

“I leave on Thursday…”

Despite her impassive expression, Ira-Jane just knew that the woman was relieved.

“So short!” said Sante looking truly disappointed.

So this was the woman, whose name she carried, had played second mother to her, changed her nappies, put her to sleep; while she, in turn, could hardly remember her. Ira-Jane felt spied upon, the other side of a one-way mirror. All that long journey to revisit her beloved Nonni only to find resistance and resentment. How could this have come about? It was unlike her to expose herself this way. Something perverse about this journey.

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And then Ira-Jane became her mother, Sheryl. As the wind rose up the valley and the crickets played their exhausted calls through the dry stalks of autumn, Ira-Jane was ushered into the old farm house, whose door was so low that she had to bend down for fear of hitting her head on the cross frame.

Coming in from the midday sunlight into a small rectangular room, Ira-Jane smelt the onion cooking on the stove, but that was merely a surface sensation hiding the feeling that here time was stagnant, measured by the occasional dripping of a tap upon metal. When her eyes adjusted she saw that the room, with lime washed walls and exposed wooden beams, coffee-coloured by smoke. She found herself next to the credenza, whose mirror top was cluttered with religious figures and an amazing array of bombonieri: angels and bridal figurines, silver spoons and crystal hearts, glasses, candles and jewellery cases, miniature violins and pianos.
There were framed photos too among which Ira-Jane spotted one of two old people and a young girl, perhaps five-year-old. Strangely none of them was looking into the camera. Not the child who clung with both hands to the arm of the old man and held a questioning stare in his direction, not the old man who had a look of utter helplessness, and not the woman who stood next to the man, some distance away, as if she were observing them. Ira-Jane studied the photograph, it was only when she noticed the red ribbon that bound the child’s fair hair on top of the head that she understood.

A voice was reaching her through the expanse of time and brought her face to face with the woman in the picture.

“Nonna,” Sante was saying, “a conosci a chista?”

She was tiny. Ira-Jane towered over her. Eighteen years ago, it would have been the other way. She looked for traces of recognition in the frail figure, and could find none. Nonna looked at her severely.

“Ma si, certu, chista e’ Sherula.”

“Sherula?” said Sante to his mother, “ma cosa intende dire la Nonna?”

Ira La Rocca turned to Ira-Jane and said,

“She has mistaken you for your mother,”

Ira-Jane understood. The old woman could not reconcile the little child she had nursed, dressed and put to sleep a generation ago with this blond giant. What she saw instead, standing once again inside her house, was the woman who had brought so much upheaval upon her family.

So, beyond the mist of time and space, Ira-Jane discovered an uncomfortable truth, that despite all appearances she was after all more of her

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14 Nonna, do you know this person?
15 Yes of course, this is Sheryl.
16 Sheryl? What does Nonna mean?
mother’s daughter than she wanted to be. This truth she could cope with, because she could control the Sheryl in her, she had to, or else she would decline into self-contempt.

More unsettling was another truth. The confirmation that the world she remembered, the world of Nonnu and Nonna no longer existed, and much of it was probably constructed out of her need to escape the pain of her later years. This journey to Sicily, to this house, was valuable after all, for it deconstructed a dream castle, each cloud puff lifted, one by one, to uncover the rawness. It was better this way. Now she could be free of the past, free from memories she no longer needed.

But the other Ira did not relent. This dark, inscrutable woman— with the shadowy face that suggested nooks full of skeletons— was setting the agenda. She stood there, looking intent, filling the space with her thought, holding power over Ira-Jane with her silence. She turned to her son and said,

“Go and pick some prickly pears for Nonna. We’ll take some home, you know how fond your father is of them.”

Now it was her turn to stand outside the house in a luminous October light, next to Ira La Rocca, surrounded by a smell of damp wood and in the distance, a breathtaking landscape rising out of a dry riverbed. And how did it come about that two of them, the two Iras found themselves under the olive tree? Ira-Jane felt sure, to her annoyance, that Sante’s mother had planned it. Ira La Rocca was about to eject, volcano like, a rare outflow from long-dormant memories, you could almost hear the thoughts rumble inside her.

Ira held a long cane stick to the frond of the olive tree and shook the fruit to fall onto the ground. She picked up a fallen branch, felt the beads with her fingers and said,
"These olives are not done yet, it will be another month before we can pick them."

What a life! They’re slaughtering each other all over the world, the Amazon forest is receding as fast as you can say the word, people despairing everywhere.... and here the life question is when to pick the olives. Nothing idyllic about this, thought Ira-Jane, rather out of touch. Depressing actually.

Ira-Jane wanted to say something to derail the woman’s plan, something like, “Excuse me, but why exactly have you got me out here?”. She wanted to confront her, to stop her in her tracks, instead a lassitude overtook her. Again Ira La Rocca seized the initiative by turning the dark side of her face to her and asking,

“What do you think of Sante?”

Ira-Jane was stunned, not so much by the question but the look on the woman’s face. It was challenging, as if Ira-Jane was about to steal her son.

“I’ve barely met him… I mean he’s just a boy.”

“That’s true. And he is younger than his age, he knows nothing of the world. I don’t want him to be hurt.”

Don’t want him to grow up more like it, thought Ira-Jane, but decided to play within the set boundaries.

“I have no interest in him in that way, if that’s what you mean.”

“That’s a relief, the problem is he seems to be very fond of you.”

“I can’t help that.”

“No. Tell me, did your mother ever talk to you about me?”

“Only that you were best friends and I was named after you.”

“Did she ever mention that we lived together?”

Ira-Jane felt irritated. She was the journalist after all, she posed the questions.
“Why are you asking me all these questions?”

“I’m sorry. The thing is… “ to her shock the woman was nervous, she was about to make a revelation. Ira-Jane hated revelations, they usually carried the kind of payload she didn’t want to be burdened with.

“You’d better sit down, Ira-Jane,” this was the first time she had called her that, “I have a story to tell you. It’s the kind of story you would prefer not to hear, I’m sure. But now that you have come to Sicily,” she looked at the younger woman accusingly as if, by daring to come to Sicily, she had committed a punishable crime, “I’m afraid the cat can no longer stay in the bag.”

It was the kind of story that should have been told on an evening as the sun descended down the far back of mountain, not now, in the midday sun, with the glare bouncing off the leaves of the olive tree. But if the time of day was all wrong, the tone was adequately set by the tired, monotone voice of one lonely cricket stranded from the passing of summer, playing a terminal tune in the canopy. It left the Australian woman incredulous.

“That means…. Russell Toohey is Sante’s father.”

“Yes.”

“I really find it hard to believe. We’re talking chalk and cheese.”

“Well, luckily there’s not much in him to remind me of that man. But I suggest you take a good look at his eyes.”

This was the sort of melodrama Ira-Jane abhorred, the entangled past she didn’t want to know. Now it snuck upon her like a betrayal. At this moment she felt she would hate Ira La Rocca for the rest of her life. She regretted ever coming to Sicily.

“Does Sante know?”

“No, of course not.”

Again, that anger rising inside her.
“Why not?”

Really she knew why not. Sante was too young, too gentle, too precious to be burdened with such past. The older woman confirmed it,

“I wanted to spare him the details of his conception.”

“You mean… you were raped?”

The savagery of that word shocked Ira La Rocca, but then, she had to admit, there was something liberating about telling a blunt truth. There and then she felt the intoxicating power of it, and she was grateful to this young woman, so much so that she gave in to her game, and said,

“Yes,” but then, as if overwhelmed by this simple admission, she sought to dress it with words. “However I am not without fault, and I have accepted my punishment, though I thank God for Sante, maybe He is not as angry with me as He is entitled to be.”

Did she really believe all of that stuff? Was she just playing it to comfort herself? Was she just using it as a diversion? If so, diversion from what? The more she had contact with these people the less she understood them, their world of guilt and religion; of tradition, customs, of social checks and balances, of appearance and pretence confounded Ira-Jane. She countered it with a simple appeal,

“He needs to be told.”

The other woman stood firm.

“Maybe, maybe not. In these mountains we can live out a lifetime without needing to know certain things. We’re curious but not inquisitive. I can’t see how my son would be better off knowing that his father is a rapist.”

Ira-Jane had to admit, on the face of it, there could be no argument with a mother’s desire to protect her son from the sordid details of his conception. She had constructed her life as a buttress against a reality too harsh to know. But then- this touchy-feely world, this world of mountain villages, of piazzas, of sun-massaged
olive groves, or myth and conventions - all in pursuit of preserving ghosts - this was not Ira-Jane's world. And glad she was too.

Ira La Rocca stared up the track to where Sante and Nonna had disappeared, past the squat building that was now used as a rabbit enclosure, whose stones were blackened by a recent fire and said,

"They're taking a long time."

Ira-Jane, eager to escape, seized the opportunity.

"I'll go and see."

The prickly pears grew at the lower end of the property. Its roots helped to bind the terrain which was falling away in a sheer cliff wall some 100 metres below. Sante, his shirt sleeve rolled up, was holding a long stick at the end of which was nailed an aluminium can. Nonna stood by, directing him as to which fruit he should be picking. Her mind might be gone, but her visceral connection with the land she had known all her life, had not been damaged by the decline into old age. He manoeuvred it over the fruit, gave it a twist to break the stem, then dropped it into the bucket.

"Scientists say that in the future much of Sicily will wash back into the sea," said Sante, "Maybe Mother should say this to Mimmo, he may change his mind about buying the property."

Ira-Jane stood looking at Sante but wasn't listening to his words, rather she had caught his eyes in profile and made a shocking connection: this was Russell Toohey's son. She feared that once this sank in, it would change perceptions forever. Already she detected sensations of belonging and responsibility, about Sante, about this landscape.

Even more strangely, Sante seemed to her to have changed in the past few minutes. As if by telepathy he too heard his mother's revelation. Or maybe the
change was due to the fact that, away from his mother, he was less earnest, not so serious and a kind of self-deprecating humour surfaced.

Across the deep cut, the opposite side of the ravine a mountain stood like a bald giant. That's where Ira-Jane wanted to be right now. Or better still, back in Australia. Nonna's wheezy voice reined her in.

“Fa presto, me figghiu, aiu a ghiri a cucinari pi to Nonnu.”

Sante explained.

“She say she has to go and prepare lunch for Nonno.”

For Nonna La Rocca, her husband would live on till her death.

While Nonna returned to her ghosts, Sante and Ira-Jane took the bucket of prickly pears back to the outdoor table. Ira La Rocca came out of the house, bowl in one hand and clutching two cutting knives and forks in the other. She too was in a hurry.

“We’d better get them done quickly,” she said, pointing the cutlery to the bucket full of prickly pears, “we’ll be late for lunch.”

Mother and son then proceeded to skin the fruit. Ira-Jane watched Sante stabbing it with the prongs of the fork and holding it down, while he sliced off both ends, then slit the skin along the belly of the fruit from end to end. With the point of the knife he curled the skin away from the flesh, inserted the tip of his thumb and fingers into the open slit, he pressed and the skin came away. Behold, out of the thorny jacket came the sweet flesh of the fruit.

She thought, this is a metaphor for something, but what? She watched fascinated as Nonnu’s image flapped by from the dark to perform the same delicate operation. The eye of her imagination moved swiftly from Nonnu’s gentle face to that of Sante who smiled as if he were holding up a trophy. He came to her with a golden fruit pronged upon a fork.
“Provalo,” Ira-Jane wondered if this was a test, “this is one of the authentic
tastes of Sicily.”

Ira-Jane hesitated, what kind of fruit of temptation was this? What intimate
ritual was Sante luring her into? Would she be burdened with this island’s
passions, its secrets, its guilt?

“Try it, “he insisted, “you cannot come to Sicily and not savour its fruit.”

Impetuously, Ira-Jane pulled the fruit free from the fork and sank her teeth
in. The recall did not register until its sweet, fleshy pulp passed through her gullet.
Then the memories flashed by. She knew a point had been crossed, a bridge to her
childhood had been rejoined. Ira-Jane looked at the older Ira, then at Sante and
said in a tone suggesting that a resolution had been reached,

“Sante, your mother has something to tell you.”

Ira La Rocca smarted under the blow, but managed to stand her ground.
This foreign girl was taking control of her world, a world she had painstakingly
constructed over nearly twenty years and protected with a wall of stone-upon-stone
of secrecy. She set her eyes upon the younger woman and said,

“No, I have nothing to say. We are going now.”

For a moment Ira-Jane felt faint under the intensity of that stare. She
understood the woman’s game. Drawing on millennia of superstition, she set the
malocchio upon her, the evil eye to bend her will. But her only weapon was fear
and fear is the weapon of the desperate.

This realization gave her heart. She talked to herself, just as she had done
in the dark years of her childhood: you are a rational woman, Ira-Jane, and this will
only harm you if you let it. The real pity was that this woman—who had been gifted
incredibly beautiful dark eyes, the eyes of a civilization, eyes that should be
conduits of light, form and knowledge—had chosen to convey fear and superstition.
So, there they stood facing each other, the older and the younger, the dark powers of fear and the powers of hope. The impasse was broken by that most intrusive of modern inventions: Ira-Jane’s mobile phone. The interruption annoyed her. This was one confrontation she wanted resolved right then.

Ignoring the persistent, jingling of ABBA’s, *Money Money Money*, Ira-Jane said,

“Why don’t you tell him?”

Ira La Rocca was muted.

Ira-Jane taunted her,

“Why don’t you tell him who his real father is, Ira?”

Sante’s voice cut in, urgent and plaintive.

“*Mammà, che sta per dire?*”¹⁷

Silence, but when the older Ira found her tongue it came sharp as a knife, slicing through years of pretence.

“You tell him then. Go on. Tell him. You’re his sister.”

The words shook Ira-Jane. Amazingly she had not made the connection inside her head. Perhaps there was one part of her that had never accepted Russell Toohey as her father. Now the impact of this simple truth hit her. The three of them stood there speechless. Ira-Jane, desperate for a diversion, instinctively snatched at her mobile that was still demanding attention.

“Yes,” she shouted.

Dr Troina, sounding positively lugubrious, was summoning her to the Casa di Cura, as Franzetti had taken a bad turn.

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His mother always said ‘we’re in the hands of destiny’. Are we mere puppets playing out a script set in stone? Are we locked inside some eternal stillness?

¹⁷ Mother, what is she saying?
Yesterday Sante thought he was the natural son of a romantic adventurer, today he is the son of a rapist. And yet he feels the same, has the same face.

Now this girl says, forget destiny, it's down to you. But then, she comes from a land where there are no ravines and landslides; no rumbling earthquakes or spewing volcanoes to remind you that there are other powers at work, no history to pave the course of your present.

Destiny is you. If she is right, what a huge responsibility to carry! Is he up to it? And what if, after all the doing and posturing, the struggles and the achievements, the dramas and the revelations, the winning and the losing…. what if she were wrong?

Nonna came ambling out of the house, wiping her hands on her apron. She noticed her daughter’s upset, drew her own conclusions. She pursed her lips, shook a threatening hand in the direction of the gate and said,

"Meno male ca si nne iu."18

"Who do you mean, Nonna?" asked Sante.

"Chidda, Sherula."19

"Nonna, that's Ira-Jane," said Sante in Sicilian. But his grandmother proceeded in Sicilian addressing her daughter.

"I have spoken to your father. She must not be allowed her inside our house any more. She’s trouble that one. She will bring us bad luck."

Having delivered her sententious words, Nonna left. Mother and son watched her retreat to her acrostic memories, to the ghost of her husband.

His mother put her hand over his and said,

"Your Nonna would be devastated if you went to Australia, Sante."

"Yes, yes" he said, grateful for her touch.

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18 Thank goodness she’s gone.
19 That one, Sheryl.
"You can go to Bologna or Milan to do your university studies."

"Yes, Mammà."

Ira La Rocca took her son's head and held it firmly on her lap. Sante did not resist, his mother was the goddess that gave him life, whole-nurturing, whole-protective through an umbilicus of love. But a moment ago she looked weary. Not defeated, though, the spirit of a goddess could not be defeated. As much as he loved his mother, Sante could not help but feel a sense of awe at how easily the younger Ira had confronted her. And to compensate for this thought, he knelt down by her side and comforted his mother.

"You can see why I didn't want you to know this sorry business."

Of course, it was just like her, everything she did was for him, for his protection. His mother was a saint for having accepted him and loved him: he, the offspring of a brute.

"Of course, Mammà, I understand. I am sorry about that."

He wished he could erase that horrible moment for her, because, no matter what she said, there was no denying the fact that he was part of the pain and the result of an unspeakable act. Now he sensed that all was not right between him and his mother, that he could have done more to make her happy.

She looked straight at him, was there anything more spiritual, more terrifyingly beautiful than those black eyes? He wanted to immerse himself in them. She rose to her feet, ran her hand over his cheek and said, “Thank God you’re not anything like him. I thank God you’ve turned out the way you have.”

And tears washed her eyes. This was something of a shock, he had hardly ever seen his mother cry. He would do anything, anything to ease her pain. He must make it up to her. This would be his life mission, his peace offering, solemnly undertaken under the canopy of her olive tree.
Ira-Jane could tell that there was an air of despondency at the Casa di Cura. She felt the heaviness of incipient tragedy as she trod the marble steps. She saw it on the face of staff who strained to smile as they greeted her; most of all, it was in the dipping eyebrows of Dr Emilio Troina which seemed to have gone fuzzier and greyer in the 6 days since Ira-Jane last saw him. His efforts to appear calm, were undermined by an involuntary twitching of his upper lip.

“I’m afraid the news are not very good for your father,” he said.

For Dr Troina to go and make a grammatical mistake like that... well, it went to show just how parlous was his psychological state. Ira-Jane resisted the temptation to correct him. Clearly the moment was too solemn and any appeal to accuracy just seemed frivolous.

Then he proceeded to give the news in a mixture of English and the occasional Italian phrase, when the narrative became too convoluted. Franzetti, he said, appeared to have suffered a severe allergic reaction to the treatment.

“It happened before, on some rare occasion. We know some people do not tolerate our juice.”

That did not surprise Ira-Jane, the polished-leather texture of the olive leaves hardly augured well for the palate, let alone the rest of the human body.

“Che peccato! Mr Franzetti was responding so very well in the beginning. For three days... no problem, then Sunday last, " Dr Troina’s cheeks fell closer to his moustache as he recalled the moment, "Mr Franzetti, he have a collapse, all of a suddenly... for 3 days he has been like coma-like state. I frankly cannot
understand, his pulse is a little high, nothing to be alarming for a man of his age, and yet he has such high fever, and perspire, perspire, perspire all the time..."

“Can I see him?”

Dr Troina tilted his head over his left shoulder, in resigned assent, as if to say, 'if you must'. Clearly Franzetti had let him down badly. The old man's threat to die on him was in poor form and Dr Troina was understandably miffed. He led the way to the upper floor and at the end of the corridor, to Franzetti's room, the remotest in the building. No doubt the good doctor did not wish to divulge this impasse to all and sundry.

Clem Franzetti looked peacefully asleep, face up, in a pose of supplication to the heavens. At first Ira-Jane feared the worst, so still and pale he looked, until she saw the cathode attached to his arm and the tube coiling up to a drip bottle. His forehead, still bedecked with a fine crop of hair for a man in his seventies, was clustered with pearls of perspiration. Dr Troina said,

"We have to put him in a drip for fear he might dehydrate."

Ira-Jane just could not believe this enfeebled and prostrated body, belonged to the man of bluster and fury that used to be Franzetti.

“What do you think?” asked Dr Troina, his face pleading for rescue.

A mischievous thought crossed Ira-Jane’s mind, that Dr Troina’s radical method might be a cure by death? But this was no time for cynicism. She felt sorry for Dr Troina, he looked quite pathetic; his little grey eyes reeled as if he himself was about to faint. He unleashed some desperate words on the nurse standing by, which caused her to scuttle away. Dr Troina took out a white handkerchief that had been tortured into a scrunched ball, in the course of the day. First he blew his nose then wiped his eyes. A little filament of membrane attached itself to his left eyelash. Oh dear, he should have followed the inverse order, something he would have surely done, were he not in such distressed state. He was such a clean, well-
groomed man that at the sight of the unsightly worm Dr Troina squirmed and quickly flicked it off his eyelash.

What made the situation unbearable was the fact that this patient had aroused a lot of interest both in the local media and further afield in continental Italy. Not only did his patient hail from the opposite end of the globe- which attested to the growing reputation of Dr Troina’s wonder cure- but he was also a rich and recognised public figure back in Australia. The Gazzetta del Sud had called him Un intellettuale, a term that flew in the face of the jealous spoilers who criticised his Casa di Cura for attracting only the gullible, the uneducated, impressionable new-agers and such discredited riffraff.

And now this. Dr Troina did not wish to think about the effect this would have on his business and his reputation. He cringed at the thought of the headlines that would appear in the Giornale di Sicilia and the Gazzetta del Sud, not to speak of the Telegiornale. Uhh, Madonna Mia!

Dr Troina’s world was growing gloomier by the minute, and Ira-Jane wondered whether he would be able to stop the tears that pressed in a rear-guard assault on his red-sore eyes. Fortunately a diversion was provided by the return of the nurse, carrying a photo album, its cover tastefully decorated with the clinic’s logo of an olive branch woven in lime-green silk. Dr Troina snatched it from her, his eyes were like fiery flints as if, somehow, he held her responsible for the disgrazia that had befallen his clinic. He threw open the album with a wide flourish and placed it right under her chin

“Look, Signorina, how many testimonials we have from patients with terminal illness that we have cured. Read what they say about us. Come, come please read. It’s through the generosity of these patients that our Casa di Cura survive.”
Eager to ease his sorrow, Ira-Jane ran her eyes over the page filled with expressions of praise and gratitude—some of them in English—towards Dr Troina and his staff. They were, she was sure, genuine cases and no doubt Dr Troina’s unassailable belief in his formula, was the contagion that worked the cure. Trust old Franzetti, she thought, to go and wreck a life’s work by perversely failing to respond to the treatment.

When he entered the room, Ira-Jane stood with her back to the door. Sante dreaded that first look. Would she reject him? Would she be angry with him? Was he changed in her eyes? On the other side stood a man, whom Sante assumed to be Dr Troina, flanked by a woman, whose face was even more tragic than his. When Ira-Jane turned, she presented him with the best gift: a private smile he had not seen on her before, one which allowed him inside her private space and said, “Thanks for coming.”

In relief and gratitude Sante placed his hand on her shoulder and stroked it. Dr Troina, found their show of affection in poor taste, given the situation. The thought crossed his mind that they might be lovers, which made it even worse so far as he was concerned. He left the room in disgust with his assistant treading his every step behind.

Ira-Jane and Sante stood by the bed and forgot about the ailing Franzetti. A strange quiet descended in the room but something was stirring outside. A whisper rose through the canopy of the ancient grove and came murmuring through the window. They did not look at each other, there was no need to, in the same instant, they were overcome by the momentous acknowledgement that they were brother and sister.
Drip, drip, drip: a thick liquid entered the vessel of his body, smelling of absinthe, filling him with joy. It had been building up for days, or maybe years, or even centuries in the misty past of his ancestry; reaching the brim of plenitude, flushing through him a complete transfusion of life. Franzetti wished he could stay forever as he was, just this side of consciousness, forever buoyed in this timeless stream.

A tingling behind his ear demanded his attention, but Franzetti resisted the urge to scratch, for fear of breaking the idyll. From somewhere rose whispers. He realised, with profound disappointment, that they had been there all the time, only that they had been muffled by the sound of his urgings. The itchiness became more intense by degree to the level of pain. Still he would have resisted, except that his body gave out a great sigh, his hand levitated to the ear and started to scratch madly. A fiery beam of light invaded his pupils and he began to writhe on the bed as he continued to scratch. Glass fell down and shattered. A foreign voice rallied.

"Fermatelo per carita', se no si fa male!"²⁰

Arms swooped on him and held him down.

“What’s going on? What the hell!…”

He stopped. Now he luxuriated in the comfort of that hold. There was about the figure a golden glow, a sweet smell of jasmine, his arms were powdery butterfly wings. The man, a young man he thought by the strength in his arms, moved out of his range of focus, for Franzetti was short-sighted. All he could see was the outline of a head of very black hair. He sat up and asked for his glasses to be brought to him. He put them on, his eyes scanned the people around the bed. First the nurse came into focus, then Ira-Jane flanked by a young man, the one who had held him down.
“Who are you?” he asked in a reproachful voice.

“Mr Franzetti, “ said Ira-Jane, “He was just trying to…” The old man pointed his index without looking at her. This peremptory gesture stopped her in mid-sentence.

“I am Sante…"

“You’re a Saint?”

Terror and wonder, pulling in opposite directions, twisted Franzetti's face.

Sante laughed.

Franzetti looked down his chest, at his arm, followed the tube up to where the phial of liquid hung from the drip column. His gaze moved around the walls and paused on the framed copy of the Madonna of the Olives, the statue that he had seen in the foyer. He stood staring at the picture as if he had seen it for the first time. After what seemed an interminable pause, weighed down by the silence, Ira-Jane asked,

“Are you OK? “

Was he OK? Franzetti’s hand went to his head, to help him decide. Then,

“Take this damn contraption off me.”

He started waving his arm, while with his left hand he tore away at the bandage that held the tube to his wrist. Before anybody could react he had freed himself of all attachments. Blood trickled down to his wrist, but that he took no notice, busy as he was kicking off the sheets and getting out of bed.

Sante and Ira-Jane looked to the nurse for direction.

“Che facciamo?” asked Sante.

The nurse had hardly recovered from the shock, now she ran around the

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Stop him for pity’s sake, he’ll harm himself.
bed ineffectually, yelling "Madonna mia, fermatelo...fermatelo!" and tried to cover him with the bed linen, while the old man was getting on his feet. At this point Dr Troina rushed in and could not believe that his patient, whom he had left in a coma fifteen minutes before, was now standing by the bed, stark naked, face flushed and, like a man imprisoned for a very long time, was at last escaping to freedom.

“You, Sir, get out of my way,” he warned the Doctor, who could not move for the shock.

“But Sir...Mr Franzetti, you very sick man.”

Franzetti took two resolute steps towards the doctor, grabbed him by the shoulder with his right hand and shoved him aside.

“Nothing wrong with me, let me go.”

And before anyone could stop him he had bolted, hurtling down the stairs, heading for the exit. At the final step, as his foot hit the cold terrazzo of the ground floor the clamp at the end of the tube was caught in the gap of the railing that enclosed the statue of the Madonna of the Olive and he was stopped on his tracks. This enforced pause allowed the pursuers, who had been chasing him down the staircase with a great clatter, to catch up to him. However none of them dared make contact with him, for fear of finding themselves flung to the floor. They stood some distance away, watching him as he sat on the lower step and slowly proceeded to free his body of the remaining attachments.

When he stood up again his face had altered. Gone was the fury leaving in its wake a look of intense contemplation. His face glowed, his tall frame teetered as if he were trying to balance on his toes. The next moment he went down on his knees before the statue and began to cry.

The sight of a grown man sobbing arrested the four pursuers. For Ira-Jane it was positively shocking, for she knew Franzetti’s reputation as a tough, even callous man. Fortunately Franzetti’s trauma was as brief as it had been abrupt.
Soon he was again in charge of himself. Getting up he turned to Dr Troina and asked him to follow him back upstairs, indicating that he wanted to be alone with him.

Sante turned to Ira-Jane, his expression amused and conspiratorial. He whispered to her in Italian.

“Mamma mia, che tipo strano è questo. Ma che gli è preso?”

Ira-Jane simply thought, this is Sicily.

No more than ten minutes later, Dr Troina came running down the staircase, muttering to himself. This time it was he who seemed possessed by the spirits.

“That man, he is mad,” he tapped his temple with the tip of his hooked index, “He say he has been cured by a miracle!”

“What?”

Ira-Jane and Sante looked at each other not sure what to make of this.

“By the Madonna.”

Dr Troina pointed contemptuously in the direction of the statue.

“But, how does he know he has been cured?”

Dr Troina raised the palm of his hands skyward as if to say, heaven only knows.

“He want to ruin my reputation. This is a medical clinic, not a cabal.”

When Franzetti returned his arm was bandaged where the cathode had nicked his skin, but otherwise he looked healthy and vigorous. Even his pasty skin had gone pink. But the real transformation was in his eyes. They positively glowed, so much so that Ira-Jane thought he might be running a temperature.

“Are you alright?” she asked.

“Yeah. Never felt better.”
Dr Troina by contrast looked positively ill. As if the cancer had suddenly transferred from Clem Franzetti’s body to his.

Proud as he was of the empirical basis of his medical training, Dr Troina was apt to dismiss Franzetti’s claim of a miraculous cure, as the ravings of a religious fanatic. The fact that the patient had made a remarkable recovery from his allergic reaction was not of much import. Anyone who had been laid out for days, suffering the most extreme symptoms, would naturally get a lift out of the fact that the pain had ceased. The disease had simply taken a back seat, so to speak, during that phase of crisis.

“But how do you know, Sir, “ asked Sante, ”that you are cured?”

Franzetti turned to him with a smile of bonhomie and said,

“When you’ve been as sick as I have, you can feel the disease working inside you. It was eating me up bit by bit. Well today the Madonna come before my very eyes, she raised her hand over my body- the one holding the olive branch- and I saw the disease, lift off like a black oil slick. Straight away I felt light, as if a ton of sludge had been sucked out of my system. “

Everyone stood around speechless, for who could argue with that?


Franzetti did not waste any time leaving the Casa di Cura, a move that suited Dr Troina also, for he wanted to hush up the whole matter and minimise any disruption to his establishment. A couple of phone calls found him a suite at the Hotel Trinacria, a resort by the sea not far from Milazzo. Sante offered to drive him there.

Clem Franzetti’s revival coincided with a renewed interest in his surroundings, because now everything held out infinite possibilities for him. He

21 What a strange character, what's got hold of him?
hadn’t just been cured of a dreadful disease, he was reborn. He was the chosen recipient of a miracle.

When he was told that the young man he had just met was Ira-Jane’s newly discovered sibling he showed plenty of enthusiasm, but no surprise. The world was full of yet-to-be discovered miracles. This young man, Sante…(and what evocation in that name now!) sitting in the front next to Ira-Jane, had an Australian father. A few days ago he would have been cynical about such coincidence. Now he was willing to accept, because life had become far more varied, far richer than he could have imagined. And yet, in all that complexity there was a core of stillness, an essence that if you managed to reach it, to hold on to it for an instant, life presented itself in all its luminous clarity.

Franzetti took in the tortuous landscape slipping by. Every stone, every tree, every gully seemed to have been there forever and spoke to him in deep tones from way out in the past. His head leant back on the headrest, utterly contented. In this position he caught the profile of the young man. The world was full of miracles, and here was another one, staring at him.

“Why do they call you Sante? “ He asked, just for something to say, because of course he knew why.

“I don’t know,” Sante smiled, “I think because my mother, she’s very religious.”

Everything was clear, everything fitted.

“You gotta a job?”

“Only a weekend job in Tindari. There are no jobs in San Sisto.”

“I’m gonna be sticking around for a couple of weeks. I’ll need a driver, someone who can speak English. You’re interested?”

“Yes, of course.”
The day he was meant to collect the kid was a Saturday morning much like this one, heavy and muggy: the day after one of them nights when hadn't got home till the small hours. A bugger of a headache had made him lie in. Around midday, he phoned to say he had been called up at work that morning and would pick up the kid on the way home. It was the kind of day when the easterlies, coming from the desert, stir the blood and the penis has the fever. It was, in other words, a day ripe for making a move. Or rather, she did, the dago girl. When she came to open the door, he knew this was it. It was all over her face, an invitation written in feint lines of desire around her lips.

"Sheryl's gone to work and I've just put the child down to sleep," she said, giving him an insolent look, her fleshy bottom lip quivered, "you'll have to come back later."

"Nope, I'll take her now. She can sleep at my place."

"I don't want to wake her. She'll be grumpy all day," she was acting like she was the mother.

She stood there, holding the door ajar, her eyes still and dense, looking through him, "I'll wait then," he said, brushing past her, "got some coffee?"

"If you like," she said, like she was doing it out of a sense of hospitality. But he saw, by the way she trailed her skinny arse, that she had an agenda. Inside there was a smell of furniture polish. A potpourri of dried flowers sat on the windowsill and the kitchen smelt of frequent use. This was the house of two women: sterile, clean and ripe for a male.
Through the partition he watched her in the tiny kitchen. She kept avoiding his eyes as the kettle boiled to a hiss.

“It’ll have to be instant.”

Her voice sounded breathless, her movements self-conscious.

“Instant is how I like it,” he said, and made a pitch for her eyes. She managed to evade his stare, went and got the Maxwell House down from the overhead cupboard, poured a heaped spoon into the mug. She looked anxious, glad to have things to do. She opened and shut drawers with a bang, clanged the cutlery, clattered the crockery...

“Do you take milk?”

“Nah, I have it straight.”

“Sugar?”

“Yeah, lots.”

She came into the living room through the arched doorway, with the coffee in a mug lightly chipped at the rim. Her hand was shaking.

“Sorry, “ she said, “we don’t have any good cups.”

She was pretty lavish with her apologies. Sorries at every corner, hiding desire. Something was fermenting the air. He had been in that situation before, when things suddenly converge and you know, you just know, their time has come. At that point you have no control over events. What was about to happen was already spoken for and there was nothing he could do about it. They both knew it.

She put the mug down on the cane table and as she retrieved her hand her finger caught the handle, the mug spun and tumbled over, spilling the contents. Hot coffee ran down the edge and onto Russell's trouser leg.

“Sorry,” she said, “I'll get a sponge.”

“No need,” he said and as she turned, he caught her arm.
It was a stick inside his hand. Her forearm was covered in a down of short dark hairs. Normally hairs on a woman's arm put him off, but in the close, heaviness of the room that arm flashing into the band of light, flagged a signal. Some other energy inside him had taken over, and the small glitch became yet another cog in the wheel of desire spinning ever faster. She shuddered as her body twisted and their eyes crashed into each other. His steely blue ones full of the hunter’s sharpness, hers dark and deep and wanting. The line was crossed.

“Let me go."

Her words said no, but the rest of her body said yes, positively pleading for it. He had been in the police force long enough to know about that point between fear, desire and subjugation. He kept his cool. To her squirming he countered with stillness, though under his arms perspiration ran in rivers. He pulled with a sudden jerk and sat her on his lap. His other hand went to her mouth.

“Don’t,” he said, the throaty sound of his own voice was rousing him to a pitch, “don’t be scared.”

He knew she had wanted it all along. With women the more repressed they looked the more hungry for it they were. He undid the metal button of his jeans, unzipped slowly over the hump of his sex and let the trousers of his uniform fall to his feet. At the sight of it she stopped struggling, as if mesmerised, her eyes glazed. He always knew there was something of a snake charmer about his tool, he thought amused and hoped she didn’t go fainting on him. Ira was beyond the fainting. She looked as if she were a leering spectator in a sex act. Now it was all easy. He sat down on the edge of the sofa without taking his eyes off her, spun her around.

“Take your pants down,” he whispered.

She didn’t respond. So he felt under her skirt, put a stubby finger inside the elastic and slipped down the garment to her feet. She stood there breathless, but clearly enjoying what was being done to her. He pressed down on her shoulder and
got her to bend her on her knees. Through her arched legs he slipped his knees between her skinny legs, parted them wide and her crotch dropped slowly onto his erect head. She shuddered and went to straighten up. He paused, allowing her to breathe, then pressed down on her shoulder again and again, each time reaching in a little deeper, slowly, enjoying the warm wetness over his penis. The sensation was so pleasurable, that he risked ejaculating before he had entered her fully. Then suddenly he pressed right down and at the same time he thrust upward. He was barely through and everything happened: a rapture, a spasm, a flooding. In the rush he let go of her mouth. The girl gave a piercing squeal, pig-like. He said, “this is what you wanted, isn't? Isn't?”

"Yes,' she goes, "yes..."

And then she gasped. Her eyes reeled and darted, as if they had seen a ghost. He looked up and there in the doorway, was the kid. Luckily she was too young to realise what was going on.

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He was tempted to let the mobile ring out, but then it might be an emergency from the station.

"Hello." He snarled

"Danny here..." Oh fuck, not on a Saturday morning, a wet Saturday morning at that. “You coming up to Gingin this morning?"

"Not today."

" I need to see you. Something’s come up."

“I gotta busy day."

"It’s urgent…never mind, it'll have to wait till I see you at the Park this arvo."

"I wasn't planning on going today."

"Russ, we gotta a horse racing today, remember."

“Right then. I'll see you there."
Now what was that all about? No doubt he was in some sort of shit. Danny O’Rourke was nothing but trouble.

Danny O’Rourke was Clem’s step-brother and some 25 years his junior, the result of old Vic Franzetti remarrying to a woman a couple of years younger than Clem himself, with a twelve year old son, Danny. When the old man died he left the wife, Franzetti’s stepmother, the family home, plus a lifelong annuity that would have set her up for life had she not been saddled with Danny O’Rourke for a son. Danny had been sponging off his mother forever, but while the old man was still living and controlled the purse strings, he protected her to some extent from the excesses of son’s demands. With old Franzetti gone there was no stopping Danny. It wasn’t just his lifestyle that she had to fund, also his dodgy business ventures, share market transactions, and, most destructive of all, his gambling. Danny O’Rourke didn’t miss a trick when it came to self-destructive vices. The old woman had no chance. Danny started to run up debts and the mother kept bailing him out by mortgaging the family home. In a few years the house was gone and she was forced to move into a retirement village. So far as Russell knew she was still living there. As for Danny, he was given a job helping to look after his stepbrother’s horses in his Gingin stables. It was probably his first legitimate job ever. To everyone’s surprise he took to it like the proverbial duck to water. Recently he persuaded Russell to buy into a couple of horses with him.

By the time he got to the racecourse it was almost midday and found Danny already at the bar, his leather jacket, dark tie on white shirt. Danny was a snappy dresser. Broke he might be but he always had money to buy good stuff.

“Had lunch yet?”

Danny was in an expansive mood.
“Let’s go and get some decent tucker. It’s on me,” he said, taking the stairs to the restaurant, rather than the food hall.

Well, thought Russell, at least this his problem isn't money, though with Danny you could never tell.

“That daughter of yours” said Danny, “is she still working at the Western Star?”

Sergeant Russell, who was used to being the one to ask the questions, didn’t like being interrogated about his private life.

“Why do you want to know?”

“Russ, I’m in a spot of bother...”

So, what’s new? Russell thought. Somebody was trying to get money from him, money he didn’t have, by threatening to release evidence of his involvement with an Asian money laundering scam. All untrue, of course, he was scrupulously trying to keep his nose clean, to impress old Franzetti.

“I’m his nearest relative, after the tragedy,” said Danny.

The tragedy was of course, the death of Franzetti’s wife and son, a couple of years ago, when the car ran off the road killing both members of the family. The verdict? The son had been drinking, after their horse had won the Perth Cup.

Everybody knew that Danny stood to gain millions if Franzetti left even part of his considerable estate to his stepbrother. On the strength of that, Danny had borrowed big. At least that’s the story that was going around the racetrack, and knowing Danny as well as he did, it was a plausible one, as was the possibility that he was involved in some money-laundering scheme.

“If the story got out, even though it’s all bullshit, it wouldn’t look good with big brother, especially now that we’re making progress towards a family reconciliation. The guys are threatening to take the story to the paper. Big brother wouldn’t be too impressed.”
“Who are we dealing with here?”

“The Yasic brothers.”

Ah, say no more, thought Russell. There was a time, not long ago that the Yasic brothers and Danny were thick as thieves, in a manner of speaking. He had a file as long as his arm on them. Russell’s hunch was that they must have fallen out, and now it was payback time.

“It’s an injustice.”

“Yeah.”

“What’s your leverage with them? Can you help?”

“I could. It’s not gonna be straightforward though.”

“I’m prepared to cover the expenses.”

“How much?”

“A thousand.”

 Wouldn’t even cover the paperwork, mate.”

“Your call then.”

“Try three.”

“Shit, who do you think I am Clem Franzetti?”

“You could be one day. I tell you what I don’t start moving my pieces till I get two thousand in my hand, in cash. The rest can come later.”

Even before he was finished, Russell knew he could have raised the stakes even higher. Never mind. By the time he paid the ‘incidental’ he figured he’d be left with a couple of thousand himself. Not a bad day’s work, even if it got him out of bed.

He remembered the morning, the screaming kids. He might use some of the money to purchase another TV set. Put it in the spare room, keep the kids happy and Chris too, she spent a fair bit of time in front of the box.
The night before she was leaving the Marzano family travelled to Milazzo for a farewell dinner for Ira-Jane. It was a special night out and nobody in San Sisto knew how to turn on the style quite like the Marzanos. Don Alfio looked urbane and patriarchal in a navy jacket (which did not quite manage to camouflage his waistline), white shirt, red tie matched by the red silk handkerchief in his breast pocket. The jacket was coordinated by new-wool trousers made by Lo Bianco one of Palermo’s most exclusive tailors, whose pressed cuffs, sat on the chunky English shoes, his favourite for an occasion such as this.

But the one that surprised Ira-Jane was Ira La Rocca. She wore a cream, three-quarter length evening dress, gathered in a V neckline and tucked at her tiny waist. It was set off by a tangerine scarf tied around her long neck, matching high-heeled shoes that took her height almost to that of Ira-Jane. The most striking transformation was achieved by her hair which she normally wore gathered at the back of her head. Now let free, it sprang into a frizzy mass, opening out peacock like around her ermine face. Her bottom lip was lightly touched peach. Her eyes, large and hypnotic, were black pools hiding a mystery. Ira-Jane was mesmerized by the power of this woman, and yet there were intimations of fragility too, revealed in glimpses, in lightening profiles, in flashes of her eyes. This was the woman Don Alfio loved, thought Ira-Jane.

Ira-Jane herself felt obvious in her short, black dress that might have been fashionable at any time. But then, she could have worn almost anything and still make a splash. Her height and long blond hair would have gained her the
breathless attention of everyone, not least, Don Alfio, who sizzled with pride at the prospect of stepping out onto the tiny stage of San Sisto that was its piazza, with two beautiful women.

The moves of San Sisto’s first citizen and his family always aroused curiosity among the townspeople. Now as they emerged from the portone, in their finery and with the added presence of their glamorous parente from Australia, all eyes were upon them. None was more aware of this than Mayor Marzano, whose success was partly due to his being in tune with the collective consciousness of the San Sisto citizenry. As the three of them waited outside the entrance for Sante to pull up with the Alfa, Don Alfio knew that the family was being watched, whispered about, admired. From Ciro’s bar, to the shoe shop and the alimentari, not to speak of the balconies overlooking the piazza, eyes admired and the minds wondered, what exactly was the relationship between the Marzanos and the beautiful foreigner? The initial speculation that she might be Sante’s girl was dismissed. He was too young for her. Besides, look at the body language, it was not that of lovers.

Community wisdom, or lack of it, is a powerful thing. It can be wildly off the mark or uncannily accurate, either way it spreads with the speed of telepathy. Once the community wisdom decided that they were not lovers, a new rumour had taken hold: that they were in fact brother and sister, a result of yet another dalliance by the young Don Alfio with an Australian tourist he had met in Palermo some quarter of a century ago, during his wild oats sowing days. Now the young woman had come to seek out her natural father and Donna Ira, magnanimous as ever, had come to accept the situation and welcomed the fruit of her husband’s misdemeanour into her house. Consequently Don Alfio, who was biologically unable to sire children, was now the acknowledged father of at least two, and suspected of countless others. The irony of this amused Don Alfio greatly.
Of course Don Alfio was not required to admit to his indiscretions. It would have been inelegant and boastful to do so, and disrespectful to his wife. But to acknowledge some kind of formal relationship, and for the sake of consistency (in view of the fact that Sante had begun to refer to Ira-Jane as ‘my sister’) Don Alfio felt justified in describing her as ‘my niece’.

“Please sit at the front with Sante,” Don Alfio said opening the front door for his wife on the other side of the car, “you’re our special guest.”

He followed his wife into the back seat. In the presence of Don Alfio, who spoke no English, Ira-Jane was forced to speak in Italian.

“Where do you park at night?” she asked, as she took her place next to Sante.

“Here on the piazza. We do not have the luxury of a garage.”

“In Australia a garage is not a luxury, it’s a necessity. If you parked a car like this out in the street there’s a chance it could be stolen.”

“Is that true?” asked Don Alfio incredulous.

“Ah, ah. The insurance business is big in Australia.”

“Here we have something better than insurance,” quipped Don Alfio, “it’s called Mimmo Urzi.”

“Alfio,” said Ira, reproachful, “non dire queste cose.”

As the car took off with a screech, stirred by Sante’s youthful exuberance, Cosimo Spanò, the hairdresser with a roomful of his own artwork adjoining his barbershop, standing outside waiting for customers touched his beret and bowed his head. Don Alfio bowed waved back and felt happy.

Sante and Don Alfio waved at their friends. Ira-Jane sensed, without being attuned to the details of the situation, that in their eyes she had been adopted into the Marzano family. By nature a very private person, normally she would have run away from such scrutiny. But here it did not seem too bad, for it was a shared
scrutiny. And of course, this was not her country, tomorrow she was leaving and there would be no repercussions.

Little did she expect, when she decided to make this trip to Sicily, that she was going to end up playing happy families. She chastised herself for such irony. She was being unfair to them, they were extremely nice to her, especially the males of course, but even Ira was beginning to accept her, though she was still wary of her. Despite herself, Ira-Jane had to admit that she was enjoying the cosiness of the situation.

Come to think of it, there were many things she did not mind here, the same things would have aggravated her in Perth. Here she did not feel responsible. Responsibility fell on the wide shoulders of Don Alfio, who carried it all with aplomb. He liked the attention. He was an exhibitionist. He loved the whole ritual. His enthusiasm was contagious and even Ira La Rocca’s usual bearing of penance improved to one of calm acceptance.

The Ristorante al Castello is situated at the foot of town’s best known landmark: the 13 Century Norman castle. You reach it by a steep, cobblestone street, lighted by subtle, amber-coloured street lamps which add to the medieval atmosphere. The full armour greeting you at the entrance of the restaurant, the ancient walls of pumice stone, blackened by time and paraffin oil attest to its 13 Century pedigree. Despite the electric lighting and the occasional sound of the car horns from the city streets, the stones spoke of medieval jousts, crusades and religious passion. The conversation, conducted mostly in Italian in deference to Don Alfio, fell on Franzetti’s ‘cure’.

“I think he is going senile,” said Ira-Jane, who wanted to make it known that not all Australians were fanatical nuts.

“He seems strong and healthy to me, I have to say,” said Don Alfio.
“Dr Troina is convinced it is all in his imagination,” added Sante.

Don Alfio, who lost no opportunity to show that he was a rational, modern man said, “Of course it is.”

"I would not be so dismissive, Alfio."

An eerie silence followed. It wasn’t so much what La Rocca had said, but her voice, low- pitched and a little masculine, sounded sententious in the close confines of the car. She has the air, thought Ira-Jane, of someone upon whom life has been force-fed. Gloom coiled around her like smoke filaments. How could Don Alfio, so full of joy of living, be so devoted to a killjoy like that? Must be opposites attracting each other.

“Of course, miracles have been known to happen,” proceeded Ira La Rocca

"Perhaps more often than we acknowledge."

“Mammà,” said Sante, “this is the third millennium, I believe the age of miracles is finished.”

“On the contrary, we have never been more in need of them.”

“Anyway,” said Sante, “I too am the beneficiary of his good fortune, Mr Franzetti has paid me a week in advance.”

They all welcomed the news, but Ira La Rocca said,

“He is too generous.”


Sante’s mother, looked at Ira-Jane but addressed the question to her son,

“Then why is he so generous to you, Sante?”

“I don’t know Mammà, I suppose he likes me. He…” Sante hesitated.

"What?" asked his mother.

"He has offered me a job in Australia."

"Sante that’s fantastic," enthused Ira-Jane, placing her hand over Sante’s arm and leaving it there for a moment, “You must come, you must.”
Sante’s mother gave the younger woman an icy glance. Now see what ideas you have put into his head? Words were superfluous to Ira La Rocca. She had a way of communicating emotions, mostly negative ones, without words. Her eyes sat upon you and clung there like claws, stripping you raw. Ira La Rocca asked,

“To do what?”

"He did not say."

"Maybe he wants to make a faith healer out of you," quipped Don Alfio, always eager to bring humour into the conversation.

“Sante will be thinking of his study for now,” said Ira La Rocca in a tone which chilled the cheerful atmosphere around the table, “that’s the most important.”

Sante was silent. He scanned the table, his eyes pleading to be rescued. The sight of two men intimidated by a wisp of a woman amused Ira-Jane, except that she herself was now caught in the emotional web spun around the group. She wanted to say something in support of Sante but felt she could not. It must come from him, she told herself, it’s not my place to. But then a contrary, reactive voice came over louder than the other. He is your brother, it is your place to defend him. She looked across at Ira La Rocca and her words, when they came out, were more in the tone of a plea than a stout defense.

"Surely he can defer university for a year…"

Ira La Rocca, addressed her son, as if it were him who had spoken.

"That is out of the question, your studies are your future and must come first."

Ira wondered what it was about this place. She had now been in Sicily nine days and already was beginning to mistrust that physical closeness, which at first she found quaint, heart-warming even. All that kissing, hugging, holding each other by the arm…was it true warmth or did it hide chronic insecurity? Wasn’t this woman,
after all, guilty of practising emotional bullying on the very people she purported to love?

It seemed to her that these mountain villages, with their dark alleyway, with their traditions and restrictive social mores, provided fertile ground for breeding emotions on an epic scale. In these ancient houses memories, bitterness, rivalries and vengefulness lived forever. From the first day they met Ira-Jane knew that woman did not like her. She now assumed it was because she viewed Ira-Jane as the natural daughter of the man who had defiled her. That provided ample platform on which to stand the column of hatred. Ironically, Ira-Jane had no love for her father. Nor did she hate him. She felt something which in a way was worse, indifference. Ira La Rocca might do herself a favour by watering down her rock-hard, time-hardened intensity with a dash of indifference.

As if by some signal, to which Ira-Jane was not privy, all heads turned to the entrance where a stocky man walked in, followed by three other men, all older than him, all wearing dark suits. It was like the entrance of the male members of a wedding party. Don Alfio winced, Ira La Rocca’s face strained, Sante sat up on his chair as the man headed straight for the Marzano table, followed by his retinue, marching in a single file.

The man took his hat off to Don Alfio, who sprang to his feet and shook his hand. He then bowed to Donna Ira, who responded with a curt acknowledgement. He shook hands with Sante, then turned to Ira-Jane and gave a long, respectful bow without looking directly at her. It was at this point that Ira-Jane recognized the man as the Mimmo Urzi on whom she and Sante had inadvertently intruded two days before at the Marzano house.
A similar procedure was followed by his retinue before the maitre d’ led them to their table. Ira La Rocca was fuming. She turned to the younger woman and said in English.

“I feel stalked. That man makes my blood run cold.”

Sante proceeded to explain the business of the olive grove to Ira-Jane, whose interest in the affair was limited. What was of more interest to her, was that for the first time that evening the older woman had addressed her. Perhaps, she mused, having a worse enemy in the same room, made Ira-Jane less of one.

Mimmo Urzì, meanwhile, kept looking across at their table. The other men addressed him from time to time, but Mimmo Urzì hardly acknowledged them, his whole mind was tuned to the Marzano table.

“Alfio, we really must go.”

But Don Alfio did not seem to be too much in a hurry. A smile sat upon his face as if some amusing thought was tickling it.

“He is trying to intimidate us.” said his wife. Don Alfio placed his warm, chubby hand upon hers.

“I don’t think so, Cara, on the contrary, I think the fearless Mimmo is trying to endear himself to us.”

“What are you saying, Alfio?”

“I think Mimmo has caught the oldest and most affecting bug known to man.”

Don Alfio looked at Ira-Jane and smiled like a child who has a secret and is dying to reveal it.

“I am convinced that la nostra Signorina has an admirer.”

“Alfio, you are talking nonsense,” said his wife.

Sante chuckled and cried,

Ira-Jane, whose limited Italian sometimes caused her to miss the sense was now lost in this quick repartee. She had a general sense that the conversation concerned her, by the way they all looked at her. Sante translated,

"Father say that Mimmo is fell in love with you."

Ira-Jane cringed, but the idea tickled her ego and she fell in with the general cheerfulness around the table.

"It's a good thing I'm leaving tomorrow then."

Sante took her hand and held it.

"Ira-Jane, that is what I said also."

The two parties settled to their fare as the evening sailed on under the watchful eye of the knight. Shadows from the flares lapped at the black volcanic stones of the wall. At one point Ira-Jane happened to look across in the direction of Mimmo's table which made the latter go stiff on his chair and bow. The four suits did likewise in synchronized motion. The Marzano table could barely contain itself. The trick was to make it look like a smile when laughter was pressing to erupt.

Subsequently mischievous Sante kept pestering Ira-Jane.

"Ira-Jane please, look again."

"Sante," his mother admonished him, "lasciala stare, non fare il bambino."23

It was soon time for the party to wind up. The Marzanos left, Don Alfio turned to Mimmo's table and raised his hand in salutation. The four suits jumped to their feet.

The laughter exploded once they were in the car. All the way home the jokes about Ira-Jane and the mobster provided the hilarity, and even Ira La Rocca,

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22 Who? Mimmo? God forbid, it's a good thing you're leaving tomorrow, Ira.
23 Sante, leave her alone, don't be a child.
mellowed by the wine, was caught in the general mood. She turned to Ira-Jane and said,

“Well, you can’t say that your stay in Sicily has been uneventful.”

…………………

Before she left, Don Alfio called Ira into his study. He sat behind a beautifully grained oak desk. Above him a map of Sicily beneath a carved crucifix shiny in brown lacquer. Ira wondered what was the purpose of all this formality, and why Don Alfio needed to sit behind a desk to speak to her. Especially he, who seemed to her one of those rare individuals who consider power and its props a hindrance to the fulfillment of a genuinely humanist agenda.

“I wanted to tell you, how much we enjoyed having you here.”

“Thank you, I enjoyed it too,” a flush of pleasure, then, “I felt very much at home.”

“Well, this is your home in Italy, after all you have a brother here, so I hope you will come back.”

“I probably will, but there is no reason why you can't come to Australia.”

“Ah Australia: so pristine, so spacious, so ordered, so peaceful. Like Sante I have dreamt about it all my life. I am afraid to come for fear of being disappointed. Reality always disappoints, so in this case I want to preserve my vision of your country. Fortunately Sante is too young to suffer from such fears. He is determined to travel to Australia.”

“He is certainly of an age when he should start to venture out a bit.”

“And that is as it should be. Sante has been far too sheltered, too much of his mother’s boy, like so many of our young people. I prefer the Anglo-Saxon way.”

“Of course his mother will take some convincing.”
“Ah Ira,” his eyes filled with tenderness as he spoke about her, “You must not judge her harshly. Life experiences have made her more vulnerable, more insecure than is good for her.”

“Or Sante.”

“Or Sante,” Don Alfio assented, “but after all she is only trying to protect him. Ira is a victim of her past. Perhaps in Australia the past does not have quite the same import as it does here.”

“Yes,” Ira agreed, “wanting to live in the present is our national obsession.”

“In Italy, on the contrary, we revere the past. We capture it in our works of art, we preserve it in our myths, we incorporate it in whatever we do, we display it in our devotion to family and ancestors. It’s our way of courting immortality, our gift to the world. It’s our tragedy.”

It occurred to Ira that nobody she knew talked like that in Australia. And she wasn’t sure if she felt disappointed or relieved. Don Alfio proceeded, “The future is in those new, progressive countries of the world. Sicily is the place for dreaming, for wallowing in the self-indulgent pleasure of decline, for a life folding sensuously into itself. You on the other hand, “Don Alfio went up to Ira-Jane and took both her hands into his, “you have brought us your vigour, a glimpse of possibilities. You have stirred our imagination. Thank you.”

Was she being patronised? With Don Alfio it didn’t matter. Besides, in a couple of hours she would be on the plane. Ira-Jane turned to go.

“Wait, you cannot leave without allowing me a brindisi.”

Don Alfio took down a decanter containing a colourless liquid.

“Have you had this before? It’s called Strega, how do you say that in English, ah, witch. You have bewitched us.”

He filled two liqueur glasses. Ira took one and they touched the glasses,

“To the future then.”
As she drank down the Strega, a warm feeling of well being spread through her body.

The two Iras and Sante took a train to Reggio Calabria to catch a plane back to Rome. Ira-Jane was surprised that the older Ira had decided to come too. Perhaps she’s afraid I might take him with me, she thought cynically. Sante sat next to her, his bare, thin arm touching hers in the kind of physical closeness that their new sibling status allowed him. At first she had found his tactility difficult to get used to. He often touched her to make a point or get her attention, held her arm as they walked, stood very near her when he spoke. It was invasive. A week on, she was beginning to get used to it, his touch on the back of her hand, her arm, the open and unabashed affection in his gaze…it all seemed to go with the territory.

It certainly did not come from his mother. Ira-Jane could not imagine her in physical intimacy with anyone. Try as she might she could not see her making love, strolling around the steep streets of San Sisto ‘a bracetto’ with another woman, like she had seen many do, or embrace her son. Sante, of course, touched her constantly, kissed her, pulled at her arm. His mother was amenable but passive. Forever a receptor of his affection, her coldness was encased in steel.

Now her eyes were fixed on the fast flowing landscape of steep villages rushing down to hug the sea, but her inner eye was fixed upon her. What did this woman want from her?

She waited for Sante to leave the compartment (did he obey his mother's tacit bidding, to leave her alone with Ira-Jane?) then said,

“I suppose you think I’m being over-possessive with my son.”

“Possessive? No…. protective I think.”

“Whatever, but you disapprove all the same.”

“Well, as you say, he is young and very innocent.”
“You’re being kind. I am of course aware that I may be doing more harm than good by watching over him the way I do. I can’t help it. It’s stronger than me…” was she admitting to some inner turmoil, some weakness? Ira Jane held her breath, “I’m sorry too if I’ve been a little …formal with you, it takes me a while to get used to new people, but I assure you it’s nothing personal.”

Was this a confession? This was the home of Catholicism after all.

“You see, your mother was an extraordinary girl, extraordinary. Yes, yes I know she could be unpredictable, impulsive. They talk about Italians being impulsive, but she was exceptional, your mother. I know she could appear to be thoughtless, that her actions might have been selfish at times. But when she gave she could give herself without reserve.”

Ira-Jane was in shock. Was this the icy Ira La Rocca – who could chill you with a glance, or without one – talking passionately about Sheryl? Her mother, for God’s sake! That was not the Sheryl Giffen she knew, the weak, irascible, irresponsible, unstable woman who first abandoned her and then led her on a terrifying slide of ever changing homes and stepfathers.

She had been leaning forward and now, carried by the gush of her own intensity grabbed Ira-Jane’s arm, squeezing it hard. She hesitated at the edge of a personal abyss, “The problem was we became very close, your mother and I, closer than was good for us, for me at any rate. In the end it was the violence that ended it.”

She recoiled back to her seat. As if recovering from some internal tremor, she turned abruptly and changed course, “I know my son will come to Australia one day, I won’t be able to delay him for ever. When he does, please promise me you will watch him closely.”
Dr Troina looked at the X rays on the screen and could not believe his eyes. Where there had been an oval dark stain, like an oil slick, it was now clear. The cancer had simply vanished. Not even a spot, nothing. Dr Troina could feel the onset of depression. He would be the laughing stock of the medical community. Already he had to put up with derision from the sceptics who thought his olive leaves cure was a placebo, despite his string of successes that the clinic had carefully documented. Now this…. Dr Troina searched for a mollifying euphemism, settled on 'mishap'… provided fuel for the doubters. He could just see the headlines: *The Madonna Bests Science at Dr Troina's Clinic.* He would have to face the arched eyebrows of his colleagues, the malicious little smiles, the furtive nudges. And then, worst of all, his clinic overrun by religious nuts.

A feeling of impending doom struck Dr Troina's, like a shark circling its prey. To insulate himself, he refused to read newspapers and kept away from news bulletins. Then, a couple of days later, Dr Troina went to work and found, at the gate of his clinic some dozen or so pilgrims waiting to go in: a couple with a four year old lying on an inflatable rubber bed, a young paraplegic with what looked to be his wife or sister, pushing him in a wheel chair; a group of four women, one in a religious habit. Camera-clutching paparazzi started to click frantically as Dr Troina's car reached the gate. The worst had eventuated, the story had got out in to the regional TV station of the miraculous cure of the Australian. Dr Troina wound down the car window and yelled.

“There is no miracle statue at my clinic. Go home.”

He ordered that the gates be locked.
Alas, Dr Troina had not counted on the power of hope in desperate people. Within the hour someone had arrived with a long extension ladder, a couple of men swung it over the iron gate, they scaled the gate and unlocked it from the inside. The crowd rushed in and posted themselves in front of the Madonna with their hands clasped and their eyes fixed upon their object of veneration. The miracle had taken hold of popular imagination and nothing Doctor Troina said would make any difference.

Dr Troina barricaded himself upstairs and called the Carabinieri complaining that his clinic was being occupied by marauders and what would they do about it, ah? The Carabinieri arrived, with the siren blaring on their blue Alfa and looking every bit that they meant business in their well-cut uniforms. They were met by a most impressive sight. The crowd had swelled, with people pressing at the gate and stretching out on the road. This was more than any two Carabinieri could handle.

"Ma che succede?" they asked.

"Ah, another miracle," said a woman, “the son of the pastry cook from Librizzi has been given back his speech by the Virgin May."

The story of Giannino, was known even to the Carabinieri. It had appeared in the Giornale di Sicilia. A nasty fall had deprived him of his speech. Now at the very first glimpse of the holy statue he turned to his mother, whom he had not addressed for over three years and said, in a voice as clear as a church bell, “Mamma é belissima la Madonna.”

The mother’s cry of joy must have reverberated all over the countryside, for in no time the people arrived in hundreds. Even the mountains were no barrier to the news, thanks to that other miracle of modern technology: the cellular telephone. From all around they arrived: Milazzo, Barcellona, Librizzi, Santa Lucia del Mele and Castroreale,
There was little the *Carabinieri* could do to disperse the crowd. They let it be known that so long as people kept out of the clinic they could stay in the front garden. The compromise was readily accepted by the crowd. They were not interested in anything inside Dr Troina’s establishment. The statue of Our Lady stood in the foyer, guarding over the congregation from its plaster alcove, looking miraculous in her eternally smooth skin, chiselled nose, pencil-lipped mouth, celestial blue eyes, holding forth her olive branch to the infirm and the desperate in a gesture of eternal hope.

Looking through the green shutters Dr Troina scanned the mob which had taken over his manicured gardens. There they were radiating in a semi-circle from the foyer (How he regretted not disposing of the statue when he purchased the estate) with their chairs and inflated mattresses, food baskets, blankets, coolers, wheelchairs, magazines, umbrellas, rosary beads and goodness knows what else. It reminded him of a scene from one of those T.V. news reports on the Telegiornale showing boatloads of newly-disembarked refugees, scattered along the shore of Lampedusa, as if they had never seen a piece of terra ferma before. Dr Troina shivered in his perfectly tailored suit, surf-white shirt with the splayed collar, blue silk tie and Schiavoni shoes. He stuck his thumbs (which only this morning had been manicured, while he was getting his weekly trim) inside the waist of his trousers.

He looked out at that motley crowd and felt the full weight of mob hysteria upon him. He crossed his arms over his chest, his left hand seeking the comforting warmth under his arm and gave a deep sigh, fearing that his depression might be a preamble to an incipient migraine.
Doctor Troina was tempted to pray to the Madonna himself to grant him a miracle—seeing that the Good Lady was so generous in dispensing them—to make that unruly mob and their squalid accoutrements vanish. He realised how ludicrous was this thought, surely a sign of desperation.

After checking that there was no dust on the window sill (these days you couldn’t trust even the cleaners) he rested his elbows down on the sill and leant forward to consider the source of his despondency. With his handsome face slotted in between the palms of his hands, and his butt jutting away from the window sill, Dr Troina did not strike a decorous pose. But, such was his mood that he didn’t care. It was at this inopportune moment that the flustered nurse burst into the room.

“Dottore, are you not well?“ cried she in alarm, thinking that he was having one of his fits of self-doubt. Her breathless voice irritated him.

“What now?“

“A visitor for you, Dottore.”

“Ma insomma,” he exploded, thinking that it was some hack from the Gazzetta del Sud, “did I not say I do not wish to be disturbed.”

“But…”

“But, nothing. I’m not in…oooh!…" Dr Troina dropped his hands down in front of him, a gesture that denoted he had reached the limits of patience, “how many times do I have to give you instructions, Signorina.”

When he called her Signorina in that tone, she knew it was time for a retreat. Just before her quivering figure disappeared, an idea struck Dr Troina.

“Un momento,” he called, putting up his hand as if he were stopping a whole line of traffic, “Get me the Australian patient on the phone.”

If he could persuade the old man to speak to the press and publicly deny that he had been cured, things might just get back to normal.

“But Dottore, it is he who wishes to speak with you.”
“You mean, Mr Franzetti? Why did you not say so? Why?....”

Dr Troina summarily murdered the secretary, with his eyes.

“What is he?”

“Downstairs.”

“Well, bring him in. What are you waiting for?”

In the time that it took the nurse to fetch Clem Franzetti, Dr Troina made a remarkable recovery.

“Ah, Mr Clem, “ said he, his voice suddenly cheerful “I am very eager to speak with you...”

“Listen here, “ Clem interrupted him, in his deal-making voice, “I’m not gonna beat around the bush. That statue of yours, what will it take for you to part with it?”

The use of the idioms confused Dr Troina.

“I don’t understand, you want to take the statue apart in the bush?”

“No, no I want to buy it off you. How much?”

Dr Troina found the suggestion mildly offensive, though at first he did not understand why. The very notion of transacting a religious icon somehow seemed unedifying.

“You want to buy the statue?”

“That’s what I said.”

Dr Troina’s agile mind recovered quickly as he began to perceive an opportunity. An idea flew into the window of his imagination. He was a proud man, but not above seizing a good financial deal. Despite, or rather, because of the old man’s gruff voice and no-nonsense approach, it was evident that he really wanted the statue and was keen to do a deal in a hurry, though he could not imagine what use the old man might have for it. Who knows what logic possessed such a strange
foreigner? For him it was a wonderful opportunity to get rid of a nuisance and acquire extra funds.

“You know, Sir, that is a much valuable work of art,” he said.

But Franzetti wasn’t going to fall for that.

“Nonsense.”

Such directness offended Dr Troina’s sense of decorous haggling, and he pouted his displeasure.

"Look, " said Franzetti, "I want that statue, but I don't intend to be taken to the cleaners."

Dr Troina screwed his nose and his eyes blinked as he tried to make sense of this bit of conversation.

“I do not understand, Sir?”

“Never mind, it doesn't matter. How much?”

The businessman in Dr Troina made a quick dash for Franzetti’s eyes and tried to assess the degree of his desire to own the statue. By the glazed look in the older man’s eyes, he gauged the desire to be very strong, perhaps to the point of obsession. In which case, he figured, the only limit was Franzetti’s ability to pay. On the other hand he was an unpredictable man and if Dr Troina set his figure too high the old man could very well withdraw the offer in disgust. He must not offend him by going so high as to risk bruising his ego. On the other hand he knew he was a man of means. This sort of prevarication, he knew, was bad for the deal, but he still couldn’t come up with a figure. Franzetti shifted his weight from one leg to the other, finally, he lost patience.

“Tell you what, Sir,” he said making it quite clear that he was in no mood for lengthily haggling, “I’m willing to offer one hundred thousand. Take it or leave it.”
Dr Troina was confused. Was he offering Lire or Euros? The first was offensive, the other preposterous. Surely it could not be the latter? Or maybe it was. Such possibility made his ears ache with excitement. In a flash of inspiration he said,

“One hundred thousand euros? I don’t think so.”

Much to Dr Troina’s relief, his opponent did not bat an eyelid.

“Well, what’s your price then?”

Dr Troina took a moment to catch his breath and rein in his galloping heart, then said,

“Mr Franzetti that is a most valuable piece of art. I would not consider less than one hundred and fifty thousand Euros.”

The reply bounced back like boxing bag and just about knocked out Dr Troina.

“OK then, done. But you’ll need to do something about that mob outside, so we can remove it.”

Dr Troina’s first reaction, upon recovering, was that he should have asked for 200,000. Too late, the mad foreigner was already proffering his hand. He took it, but Dr Troina did not feel anything, numbed by sheer magnitude of what had happened. He was already thinking of what he would be able to do with that sum, the improvements he was going to make to his new wing. Best of all he would be able to get rid of that crowd.

In one masterful stroke Dr Troina’s problems would be solved and then some. He just could not believe his luck. But of course, until he had the money in the bank, and the statue removed, he could not rest. His experience of life’s vagaries, made him wary. This was too good to be true and things might go wrong. Still, he would surely be foolish if he did not seize the opportunity.

What a pity, though, he hadn't asked for a quarter of a million.
“Spirited Away” read the headline the in The Giornale di Sicilia, the next day. During the night the Madonna of the Olives had vanished, leaving no traces of its disappearance. The most extraordinary thing was that none of the pilgrims, who had braved the autumnal night and had slept in the garden surrounding the holy relic, noticed any activities, yet incredibly the statue had vanished without trace. There was only one mortal who could work such a miracle... and Clem Franzetti’s money, of course. Because Mimmo Urzi’s services did not come cheaply, especially when those services needed to be promptly rendered. Much of Mimmo’s success lay in the fact he relied on canny instinct and the belief that the solution to intractable problems came down to calling on the right people.

For this particular job he employed the same team that had lifted important records on a rival, from the municipal chambers in broad daylight. The trick was to distract the pilgrims away from the statue by announcing just outside the gate, through a P.A. system at the back of an open truck, that a luminous image of the Madonna, had appeared on the roof of the house of Natalino Tripi, the Calabrese who had been accused of murdering his wife, but acquitted for insufficient evidence. For a few moments the pilgrims deliberated as to whether to remain here, before this solid effigy or fly to its version in pure light some three kilometres down the road. Perhaps they were swayed by the prospect of witnessing a moving spectacle. One or two began to move, others followed in a trickle, then there was a surge and a general evacuation ensued. Some went for their cars, but soon the road was jammed. The crowd then ran down the slope lighted by a full moon, rushing headlong to Natalino’s house. They arrived panting, only to realize that some joker had duped them. Their return, slowed down by fatigue and the fact that it was all the way uphill took a lot longer. Long enough to lift the icon from its place, a simple operation seeing that the statue had been fixed down by a single bolt to the plaster
Ira-Jane woke up as the plane descended over Perth and at first she did not recognise her own city. It looked like a model laid out flat, with straight bisecting roads, toy cars perfectly aligned, in pursuit of each other. The afternoon sun sprayed white light over endless suburbs that stretched along the wide coastal plain between hills and sea. The plane hovered for some moments, as if undecided, then dipped. Ira-Jane felt her heart sink. What was it?

She caught a taxi back to her flat in South Perth. The traffic flowed, the roads were well maintained, the houses distinct and mostly new, the roadside was spotless, the lawns manicured. The taxi driver, an East-European with shaved pink head, chunky chain and an attitude sharpened by thirty years of soapboxing inside a car, complained how the taxi industry was being taken over by new migrants from Asia and the Middle East. Then the conversation inevitably settled on the weather and how the shops had already put up the prices for Christmas. Yes, undoubtedly she was home.

It was good to be back in Australia: so clean, well managed. It was good to get back to order and routine, to go home at the end of the day and look back on what she had achieved in the previous twenty-four hours. Here she could tape measure her existence by the projects she had advanced, problems she had solved, goals she had achieved. In Sicily you are held back by traditions, by rituals, by a complex network of links, of controls and dependence. In Sicily you hoped for
your luck to change, for a miracle to come to your rescue. In Australia you try to make your own miracles, you get on with it, clear your way in the jungle of life. In Australia you cope because, not being able to do so is your fault (or at least it’s a sign of weakness) and bad luck is a result of bad management. In the mountains of Sicily your existence is cumulative. Each day is added on to all the other days of your past, and to that of your ancestors. You exist in the shadow of a past sculptured in time-marked buildings, of mould-splattered rooftops, of trees that seem to have been there forever. Sicily is a mind-set, a continuum, a refuge for stay-putters whose common wisdom is built on ancient proverbs. In Australia, instead, the cliché rules OK. Here your everyman re-invents himself, sea-changes, upgrades, carries no baggage, lives each day as it comes.

She reached the front door of her apartment, smelt the cloying profusion of the lavender in the flower-box and was overcome by an insidious sense of desolation. Once inside, she put down her suitcase and paced around it. She didn’t want to unpack. She’d better knock this nonsense on the head, before the rot set in. On Monday it would be alright, she would be back at work, problems would stalk this mood out of her. Work and its challenges would come to the rescue. Meanwhile she had two nights and a day to get through. One side of her wanted to call Sicily, speak to Sante, Don Alfio, Ira. Ira! Absurd. Having allowed others to enter her emotional chamber, she was now discontented.

She thought of calling Bob, but it wasn't a Bob that she wanted. What she wanted was the comfort of closeness. What an embarrassing admission! To need someone's company seemed to her like a sign of real weakness. Better to be wanting sex. That was acceptable. Like wanting a shower, or a massage for sore muscles. But this…this fretting for other faces and other places…it rendered you weak, irresolute. It eroded your self-confidence, diminished you as a person. Not
good. In Sicily she had picked up a debilitating contagion: nostalgia, with its symptoms of dissatisfaction and desire.

She reminded herself that sometimes when she had treaded those steep hills, a kind of panic overcame her, like a fear of being imprisoned inside, ostracised from the modern world, from change, from getting-on in life. It was important for Ira-Jane to be of the times. Her nightmare was to wake up one day and find herself left behind by a moving world, made irrelevant: an anachronism floating in a sea of memories.

She had to admit though, it was such a pleasure to feel connected to the other side of the world; to the Marzano family. Her visit revealed that the world is both more complex and more accessible than she had imagined; that reality is made up of myriads of glimpses; that one constantly touches others and is touched by them; that each contact can be a risk and a rich experience, that the now is in fact an unreal state of being. The present is elusive, transitional, delicately poised between past and future, birth and death, memory and projection, space and imagination, self and other, body and spirit. What a turnaround! It made living precarious but exhilarating. It meant that each moment could be an act of creation.

Of course Ira-Jane could not put any of this in a feature article that promised to serve up the “Real Sicily” to the reader. She wrote about the mountain villages, the colour of the sea, the breathtaking landscape, the food, the quaint customs, the churches. She worked on it all weekend, losing herself in the task. As she approached the end, though, she began to feel overcome by a disaffection. Having consigned the experience to the page she was struck the inadequacy of the result. Nothing new in that, she never had any illusions about her travel articles, they were a dish to be served up to the readers, to feed their dreams.

This time the formula seemed even less satisfactory. To write it truly she would have to write Ira’s eyes; Don Alfio’s bonhomie and his easy acceptance of his
own failures; Nonna’s farm; the murmur of the wind through the poplars; the sound of tired cicadas on an warm autumn afternoon. She would have to write the head of a green-backed lizard appearing from a gash in a dry stone wall and sit there, still as eternity, observing the world from a stone edge. To write it truly she would have to write Sante standing in the midst of ancient ruins with his youthful face bathed in orange light, speaking of destiny.

With a single touch on her keyboard, she deleted what she had written and started again. The new words leapt onto the shiny white surface of the computer screen.

"You cannot visit the Mediterranean and expect to return unchanged...."

.........................

Bob cornered her in the corridor, waving a draft of her article in his hand, as if it were an incriminating document.

“You can’t be thinking of publishing this.”

“Why not?”

He read.

“You cannot visit the Mediterranean and expect to return unchanged. For the first time traveller to Sicily, or Egypt or Greece or the Holy Land…. it’s like touching base with history, with the past, our very soul. A visit to the Mediterranean is a pilgrimage, a journey of self-discovery. It’s the Western equivalent of the Haj.”

She knew exactly what he meant. And because she felt caught out, she became defensive.

“ What’s wrong with it?”

“Well, you know our readers, they’re interested in real things."

"Real things, what does that mean exactly?”
"You know: what there is to see, what to do, where to stay, what it costs them. There’re not interested in spiritual birthing. We leave this stuff to New Age publications. “

Well, he was right (though she would not give him the satisfaction of agreeing with him). His was the voice of rational, no-nonsense Australia. Any attempt at digging down deeper than paper surface became pretentious. Seeing it with Bob’s eyes, she had to admit that the article was an embarrassment. She hated Bob for it, but not as much as she hated herself for allowing her defenses to come down this far. Yes, Sicily had lighted spaces inside her that were best left in the dark.

Everything fits, everything slots into shape in the tapestry of life. This phrase repeated itself in Franzetti’s mind like a mantra, as his Airbus bound for Down Under, crossed Europe’s sky into Asia’s. He started dozing off, feeling cosy and at peace in the knowledge that the Madonna of the Olive was somewhere in the entrails of the plane. Not the most edifying of places, to be sure, but she would understand.

His life had been a jigsaw with parts missing. Now, in this fortuitous journey to the birthplace of his beloved mother he had found the bits to complete the puzzle. How it all fitted! His illness, the discovery of the Madonna, his cure…every incident led to this. Tragedy too had a part to play. Even the death of his loved ones, God rest their souls, was a necessary link, part of God’s larger plan. So it was futile to pine any longer. God was just, God was wise. All His acts, no matter how unjust they might seem to us, are for the ultimate good.
His recovery wasn’t just physical, the real healing had occurred in his spirit. He had awakened to find a path in the landscape of his remaining years. In that strip of white light he saw clearly his destiny, the legacy he would leave for those who came after him. He was bringing to his spiritually sterile country, a precious icon.

In the somnolence of the pressurised air he began to formulate a plan which had been taking shape in his mind ever since the day of his miraculous healing. He didn’t have to think too hard. The next stage in this spiritual odyssey was there before the invisible eye of the mind, so lucid as if it were already executed. Everything slotted, it was a question of recognising the signs, of reading the pattern.

And what about the other piece, the young man, Sante, who had wafted into his life, at precisely the right moment! Could there be a more eloquent sign? Sante – the name rang inside his head over the hum of the jet engine – was perhaps the concluding piece in the puzzle. Franzetti fell asleep grateful for the plenitude of his blessings.

Of course none of it meant anything in pragmatic Australia. The quarantine officer was being difficult. Afraid of introducing bugs into the country, he was. His manner changed when he realized who Clem Franzetti was, but he insisted that the wooden ‘object’ would have to be quarantined nevertheless. Old World contamination of the New World must be avoided. Well, maybe it was for the best. It would give him time to prepare adequately for her arrival. What looked like a bureaucratic impediment seemed like yet another sign. And the Virgin Mary would forgive him for leaving her temporarily in the hands of the local bureaucracy.

He was surprised to see Danny, at the airport wearing his trademark leather jacket and army boots. Now, there was a challenge for the Madonna. Danny badly needed a miracle, just to keep himself out of trouble. It required a huge effort on his
part, just to remain on speaking terms with his stepbrother. Christian charity had little to do with it, he had exhausted all of that long ago, what stopped him from offloading Danny was a promise he had made long ago to his father that, no matter what, he would look after his step-son. Even so, the sight of him, with that permanent scowl on his face, put Clem in a bad mood.

“What are you doing here, Danny?”

“Come to see you Clem, you’re looking good, brother.”

Clem had to suffer his lengthy handshake.

“Thanks, never felt better.”

He thought he perceived a wince of disappointment. Danny always brought out the cynical worst in him.

“I got great news for you. Stardust’s had another win.”

“I know, Russell’s kept me up to date.”

“He is favourite for the Roma Cup.”

“Congratulations. I must get going.”

“Listen I gotta talk to you, Clem.”

“Make it snappy.”

“Not here. I’ll catch you up at the farm. When are you gonna be there?”

Clem had a fair idea what Danny wanted. Whatever the details, it had to do with the dollar sign. He said vaguely,

“I’m not sure about my moves. Just go and grab me one of them trolleys will you.”

A couple of days later, Danny landed on Clem’s doorstep, with some story about a business proposition. He was going into the racing business in a big way. No, he wasn’t after borrowing money, he had already secured backing from some of the main players in the racing industry. What he needed was a long lease on the
property, so that they could build proper stables, a training track…. add value to the property.

From the veranda of the old house Clem’s eyes were fixed on the large boulder rising from the ground, just down from the irrigation dam. He was thinking what to do about it, the rock spoilt the symmetry of his grove, and that would not do, only perfection would suit the Madonna.

“So what do you reckon?” Danny was saying.

“We’ll have to dig up that rock.”

“What do you mean? “

“It’ll get in the way.”

“No need, Clem, we’re putting the track at the lower end where it’s level. We’ll save on site costs.”

“What track?”

“A training track for the horses… like I been telling ya…”

An aperture appeared in the focused intensity of his thoughts, through which Clem looked at his step-brother, perhaps for the first time since his return from overseas.

“Danny, what are you talking about? I don’t want any more horses. I’m gonna plant an olive grove on the property.”

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The old house, with the rusty, corrugated iron roof and curling veranda hangers, was demolished. In its place he set out to build a new house of reconstituted limestone, in the style of a Spanish cloister with a courtyard enclosed on three sides. At the open end of this courtyard Clem planned to build a fountain, in the centre of which the statue would rise, looking over the sweeping landscape of its domain: its own olive grove.
Meanwhile the land was prepared for the planting. Fortunately there weren’t many native trees on the property, as much of the land was used for pasture or to grow irrigated clover for stock feed. The few trees that were left from the original coastal scrub, were quickly uprooted. What took a while were the boulders, scattered around the property. But just as he watched the explosives gang go to work on the biggest rock, inspiration struck once again. Clem rushed headlong down the slope calling on the men to stop.

The rock, which Clem called my Eyre’s Rock rose 5 metres from the ground and covered an area of some 40 square metres. Perfect. Clearly it had been placed there, millions of years ago, for this very purpose. Everything slotted. He sent back the explosives team and called in the masons.

..........................

Three months later, the Madonna of the Olives stood in its man-made grotto not, as first envisaged, in the centre of the courtyard – such an exalted position was not for the humble Madonna – rather blending with the landscape as it undulated down the slope to the Great Northern Highway. The entrance was fitted with an iron grill door to keep out thieves and vandals. The last thing he wanted was for some heathen to come and steal the precious relic. Blue lights shone down from their concave recesses in the ceiling like heavenly stars. By day sunlight, filtered through tinted glass, softly fanned the flawless cheeks of the Madonna.

This was Clem’s legacy to his country, his path to spiritual redemption But there was to be no grand opening, nor did he publicize his miraculous cure. No, the Madonna would find her way of revealing her presence in her own good time. For now he relished the privileged intimacy of a space for private communion between him and the Our Lady of the Olives. This was their secret. Not quite of course, there was Sante. He was sure that one day the young man would find his way here.
Sante is on his way to Rovaro in early summer and the starlings are in a frenzy of expectation for the maturing wheat. As he nears the gate he is assailed by the smell of old wood burning, then watches the flames lapping out of the front door of the house, licking up the stone wall. A boy, six or seven years old is sitting on the sill of the upper window, his mouth wide open as if he were screaming, but his mother is sleeping soundly under the olive tree outside and does hear a thing. Little Sante (yes, it's himself!) then monkey-leaps on the branch of the tree and hangs there, seesawing and his legs kicking in the air. Then Don Alfio materialises underneath, holding out the folds of an apron-like garment and calls, "Jump, Sante, jump!"

Sante woke up relieved that it was only a dream. What he didn't know was that the real event had taken place at Rovaro. In the damp old house Nonna La Rocca had finally released her grip on the tug-of-war of her life and delivered herself unto death. She had not eaten for a week, easing herself gently into position to go and rejoin her husband.

Don Alfio had to admit, both his parents-in-law had shown commendable grace in their dying. Contadini they might have been, but in their stoical acceptance of death they had been dignified. Unusual, for Sicilians are not good at dying. So focused are they on themselves and theirs, that death, when it arrives, is seen as an injustice, a personal affront. Whatever the Prince of Lampedusa might say,
surmised Don Alfio during the funeral mass in the Chiesa Madre, Sicilians don't think they are perfect, they just toy with notions of immortality. In the pursuit of that goal Sicilians are good at mourning and prolong it as far as form allows. That's why in San Sisto so many front doors are marked by lutto. The Marzanos have only recently taken down their notice of mourning following Mr La Rocca's death. They will need to attach a new one now.

A timid and private person in life, in death Nonna La Rocca was given a farewell fit for a mayor's mother-in-law. The hearse, drawn by two black San Fratellan mares, was covered over with wreaths of harem lilies and carnations. It left the Chiesa Madre and wound its way along the via Tre Novembre to the town cemetery, followed by a convoy of mourners. Out of respect for the Mayor, nearly every family in the village had a representative there. Most of the shopkeepers on the via Roma closed their businesses for a couple of hours. Along the way, women came out on their balconies or doorsteps and crossed themselves, while the men took off their hats and bowed. With Nonna resting at last, in the crypt next to her husband, the Marzanos made their way back to the car, flanked by the citizenry of San Sisto.

Like Ira-Jane, Sante too had been closer to his grandfather. Whenever he spent time at Rovaro he followed Nonno as he went about ploughing in the weeds, mending the fence, pruning the vines. When he had passed away Sante missed him terribly, but the death of his grandmother seemed like an end of an era. Now he felt rudderless, desolate, hollowed out. Sante held his mother, who looked a picture of dignified grieving, her cheeks damp from newly shed tears. With his right hand slipped under her left arm, he felt the dampness of her perspiration through the sheer material of her black dress, and found it comforting. Walking back to the car,
Sante’s eye caught the inscription on an a crypt adjacent to the cobblestone path, dividing the aisles:

>Alla cara memoria di

Lorenzino 1985-1999

Figlio adorato

di Anna e Calogero Danzè

Tragicamente scomparso

Il trenta luglio 1998

Lasciando la famiglia nel più profondo dolore

Riposa fra gli Angeli24.

Lorenzino, his best friend, only son of the Notary Danzè had lost his life to Leukaemia at the tender age of fourteen. It could have been Sante himself. Life is precarious. The lutto in the Danzè household would go on indefinitely. Signora Anna had several times been admitted to a private clinic in Messina for esaurimento nervoso.25 In Sicily the cult of the dead is a form of masochism, an expedient for emotional self-indulgence. His mother would be appalled if she could read his thoughts.

The funeral cortege filed out of the camposanto gates, with the winged angels, their rear to the world, their eyes watching over the dead. Surely another metaphor for Sicily. Sante found himself looking at the world he had known all his life, from the outside, as if one part of him was gone already. Pools of tears flooded his eyes and streamed down his cheeks. The people of San Sisto saw and thought what a wonderful young man the Mayor’s son was. So sentimentale, so affezionato

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24 In fond memory of Lorenzino, beloved son of Anna and Calogero Danzé, tragically passed away, on the third of July 1998, leaving his family in deepest sorrow. Rest among the angels.
25 Nervous breakdown.
And weren't the Marzanos lucky to have him! He was surely bound to be the next Mayor of San Sisto when his father decided he had had enough. Sante’s tongue licked the corner of his mouth and caught the tears. As his brain registered their hot, briny taste, he composed an email to Clem Franzetti.

There were plenty of messages on the machine, but they could wait. She was famished, and she had had better days at work. She turned on the oven and took the pizza base out of the freezer. Over the stiff surface she sprinkled tomato slices, canned chopped olives, button mushrooms (also from a can) and mozzarella. She put the pizza in the oven and turned on the answering machine. A message from the rowing team captain, someone called Tim or Tom (a New Zealander probably) wanted to be called back. Her dentist was reminding her that her six-monthly appointment was now due. Was she interested in selling her house? No thanks, it wasn't hers to sell, but the woman was going to call back anyway. And then, out of the blue.

“Ciao Ira, I’m Sante, your brother. I have a big surprise for you. I will telephone you again later.”

She knew she should have waited for him to call back. Knowing how protective his mother was, she ought to exercise restraint. She mustn't give her the idea that she is chasing Sante. And yet, while her head was reasoning like that, her finger was pressing the Marzano number.

\textsuperscript{26} So sensitive, so affectionate towards his grandmother.
The voice on the other end surprised her.

“Pronto!”

“Don Alfio...”

“Oh, carissima. It’s delightful to speak with you again. Are you well?”

What pleasure to hear his voice, the cadence of his Italian.

“Yes, I’m returning Sante’s call. He rang here today, but I was at work.”

“I see, he must want to tell you about his journey.”

“Journey?”

“Yes, he is coming to Australia. Ira has relented at last.”

“She has?”

“Yes, we have persuaded Ira to let him come for a working holiday. Franzetti has offered him a job on his farm.”

Ira-Jane was trying to get her head around that. Sante working on a farm? And where was he going to stay?

“But, don’t say I told you. He’ll want to surprise you. What about you, cara? When are you coming back?”

“I’m not sure.”

“We miss you already. You must come back soon. You must.”

“Well, we’ll see...oh, shit...”

“What?”

A smell of burnt pastry reached her from the kitchen as smoke coiled out of the oven. Her dinner burnt to charcoal, but that was nothing, Sante was coming. She would have to speak to Russell, her father, his father, their father. She needed a drink.

.................................
Russell's voice thundered over the mobile line, and for a second she was stumped for words.

"Who is it"?
"Ira-Jane here."
"Who?"
"Ira-Jane"

She wasn't going to elaborate.

"Oh, right, I wasn't thinking. I'm at Belmont Park, there's a lot of noise around here...how are you?"

"I've been overseas. Well, I've been back a while now... I was in Sicily."

"Where?"

"Italy."

"Oh yeah. Good."

Nothing had registered with him, as expected. It would have surprised Ira-Jane if he knew of the connection with Ira La Rocca, or that he remembered her at all. This thought brought a flush of anger to her face. She wanted to say, "I've met her, the woman you raped". But that wouldn't help matters at all, so she said,

"How about coffee this week?"

"How come? Is there a problem?"

You could say that.

"Well...I just thought it'd be a good idea to catch up..."

"Yeah, Ok... Good idea..."

They made a date, over some strained breathing. He was suspecting something. He was a police detective after all. Well, let him stew a bit.

She realised that she hadn't asked about his partner. Actually she has forgotten her name. A pretty common name: Susan or something, no...Christine... Chris, that's it.
She hadn’t seen him for nearly a year, though she had spoken to him on the phone a couple of times. Now, as he walked into her apartment he filled a good portion of the door’s width. He had put on more weight…even more weight! He looked tired, but not unwell, his bulk gave him a deceptive air of good health. But she knew otherwise. She knew he had had a few problems. Come to think of it, the last time she saw him was at the hospital, where he had gone in for prostrate tests and refused an operation. He was only 44 and he didn’t fancy the consequences of an operation at his age, especially as it could go on for another 20 years before it came to anything serious. Of course, he had to look after himself, a big ask for him, though he did give up smoking, which may have accounted for the weight increase. You lose some, you gain some.

He was in his uniform. A self-protective device. I’m Detective Sergeant Toohey, don’t mess about with me, don’t you dare come too close. And of course, there was no question of body contact, not even a handshake. Normally she wouldn’t have even noticed, it was only now, having been to a place where physical contact is a social norm, if not an obsession, that this personal fortress seemed weird.

“How ya been?” he said

He slumped down on the chair without waiting for her to ask. He rested his clasped right hand on his hip, with the other he held his overhanging stomach.

“So, how you been?” he repeated.

Good…how’s Chris, the kids?”

“Good…” He scrutinised her with his detective look, as if to say, what are you hiding? What have you got me here for? “You made some coffee?”

She fairly jumped, glad to get away from his inquisitive stare. He kept his eyes on her through the archway into the kitchen. He called.

“Haven’t you got any instant?”
“Yea...h, why? Don’t you like it freshly made?”

“It’s OK. I’m used to drinking instant.”

Oh yes, she understood, there was a spot of inverted snobbery about him. It was his way of saying ‘now, don’t go putting on any airs with me. I am who I am and I’m not gonna budge’.

She could have left it at that, one of the first rules of a successful transaction, give in on the small things, save your ammunition for the important ones. Yet, for some reason she felt that this time she needed to insist on this small thing. She stood there, pot in hand, looking for a pretext when he added,

“Besides, I haven’t got much time. I’m running flat out today.”

Inadvertently he had given her a pretext.

“It’s alright, the coffee is already made.”

He sat back and waited in silence until she came back with the tray and set it down on the kitchen table. He leant forward, she thought to take his cup, but didn’t, instead he pulled the trouser leg up and it gathered towards the crotch, exposing faded black socks with perished elastic. He rested his elbows on his knees, fitted the left fist into the right hand, looked straight at her and said,

“You got somethin’ to tell me then?”

And at this point, quite unexpectedly, her heart started to race, her palms went clammy. The enormity of what she was about to tell him struck her. How on earth had she got herself into this situation? But actually it wasn’t nervousness, it was fear. She was afraid of this man she had invited into her apartment, this man she hardly knew, despite the fact that she was the carrier of his genes. The tinkling of the teaspoon inside the saucer alerted her to the fact that her hands were trembling. Her fault for inviting him into her world in the first place.

But this, she realised, was not her thought. This was a guilt thought, a Sicily thought, an Ira La Rocca thought. An absurd notion crossed her mind. Perhaps she
was experiencing a sense of what Ira La Rocca had experienced a generation ago: the fear of this man's animal force. This thought stirred her fighting spirit. That was just stupid. She could do better. This was another test, one of many she would experience in the course of her life. She’d better stand up to it. She positioned her hands to counter his, resting her right elbow into her left palm so that her right hand was thrust forward and not far from his hands. This physical proximity made him retreat, just ever so slightly. But it was enough to give her the advantage.

“I told you I'd gone to Sicily.”

“Yeah, you said…” his look expressed his real thought, which was, ‘what’s that got to do with me?’ but he said, "how was it?"

“I met Mum's friend, Ira La Rocca.”

His butt shifted on the chair

“She still keeps her maiden name, even though she's married. They do that over there, women, they keep their maiden name. And we thought we were ahead of them in the women’s advancement stakes…”

He locked the fingers of both hands, caught his knee in his interlocking fingers and pulled towards his body as if to rein in his bolting impatience. This position, that spoke of smugness, angered Ira-Jane.

“Actually, what I really wanted to tell you is that there is a child…well he's a young man now, eighteen years old.”

“Oh yeah? ”

His hands stayed on his knee, only they pulled harder, the greater tension applied raised his leg off the floor and now the foot dangled free. She also noticed that his Adam’s apple quivered under the chin. But he wasn’t going to make it easy on her. As a detective he must have learnt a few things from the victims of his interrogation. Now he was on the receiving end and he knew when not to speak. His gamesmanship unnerved her. She grabbed the sugar bowl forcefully, releasing
some of her tension down her arm and onto the object. She put it down slowly, deliberately placing it in the exact same place it was before and said,

“He’s your son.”

Blood retreated from his cheeks momentarily, before rushing back to flood them.

“Rubbish,” he said and squirmed on his bottom, his gaze flitted around the walls of room, as if looking for a crevice to escape into. He picked up the cup to drink, but there was no more coffee left. She didn’t offer to refill it for him. “Rubbish,” he repeated, “I never knew the girl,” it was strange to hear Ira La Rocca referred to as a girl, “I hardly ever spoke to her.”

Deny everything, the first rule of defence, and he knew all about that. So, there was no point arguing with him.

“He’s coming to Australia,” she proceeded, “he’ll probably want to meet you.”

His eyelids, which had kept their droop all this time, now shot up and retreated beneath the brow line. His eyes became menacing.

”I told you, I had nothing to do with this woman.”

“Oh, she’s not coming, don’t worry.”

“I’m not worried. This has nothing to do with me. I gotta go.”

He leapt to his feet, stood hovering over her with his arms crossed over his chest, as if to say: see, I’m bigger than you. But she wasn’t intimidated, rather she was appalled by his utter cowardice. He was pitiful with his heaving bulk, a male trapped inside a cumbersome armour of mock toughness and denial. She did not get up, even though now she was forced to look up to him. But she resisted the temptation of standing, of trying to reduce the difference in eye level between them. She would concede every centimetre of height he wanted, that wasn’t important.
The important thing was inner courage and she realised that this man had less of it than he made out to have, much less than she had imagined.

She looked at him contemptuously, held his stare and spoke quietly, the words echoing inside her head.

“You know what?...” she looked for an appellation: Russell... Sergeant Toohey... Dad... Father. None fitted. She had no name for him. ‘Coward’ suited though, but she wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction of resorting to insults.

Name calling is the refuge of the powerless, and yet...

“I pity you,” she said finally.

He unclasped his arms and let them dangle by his side. Anger made his face crunch between his chin and forehead.

“So you pity me, da ya? Well, don’t bother. At least I know what I’m about. I’m comfortable on the seat of me pants. I can live with who I am. I don’t need to go traipsing around the world looking for shit. If you’re into guilt trips, that’s your business, just don’t come dumpin’ the shit on my doorstep. I don’t need it. If mistakes were made when we were kids – and I’m not saying there’s any truth in this whatsoever – then what’s the point of diggin’ it all up now? People have moved on. Sounds to me as if this woman’s got an axe to grind. They come to the station every day, ageing women, with stuff they claim happened generations ago. The question is, why do they wait all this time? I’ll tell you why, life’s passed them by and they need to blame someone for the fact that nobody wants ’m any more.”

He walked to the door, held the latch in his fingers and pulled the door open. A blaze of sunshine shadowed his frame filling the whole space. His head turned to her, but she could not see his face. His shadow spoke to her.

“As far as I’m concerned she’s dreaming it all up. My advice to her is to move on, like everybody else. “

“Oh don’t worry, she has. She’s happily married.”
“Well then, there’s no problem. We’ve all moved on, and I’d better move on to the station,” he quipped, “before I get moved out of my job.”

Ira-Jane shut the door behind him. She heard his heavy feet treading the steps down the stairs. Fuckin’ jerk! Dickhead! Loser! She was so angry that she imagined him missing a step, tumbling down on the landing. She watched his stomach wobble, his face twist in agony and blood trickle out of his mouth. Before she had time to rein in her vengeful imagination, he slammed the car door and was gone.

It was a rare experience for Ira-Jane to be caught between two contradictory impulses. Her natural propensity for independence, for immunizing herself against transports of emotions, for protecting her privacy — was now jostling with this…indulgence, this tension that distracted her mind. The tug of war manifested itself in anxious waiting for Sante. Just when she should have been planning next week’s edition of Escapes, her head was full of Sante. What was happening?

Provided there were no delays, or worse, (God, how she hated this fretfulness in her!) he would be walking through the door in less than half an hour, the same door through which only days before had exited the man whose genes they both shared. Such juxtaposition made her flinch. How could that man be father to Sante? Never mind she’d been through that before.

To kill some more time she decided to go and scrub down the shower and mop the floor. Not that they needed it, she had only done the bath on the weekend,
it’s just that right now she needed to keep busy. Nothing like physical activity to work through anxieties.

She really wanted to see him again, no doubt about that... he was her brother after all, but she did not want him to be a burden to her, to invade her space, to cramp her style, to get in the way of her career. She was a busy woman. As for the cooking, he could forget that. She hardly ever cooked for herself.

And how would she greet him? Shake his hand? A bit formal. Kiss him on both cheeks all’italiana? That was OK over there, part of the social landscape, natural like the time-grained stones of the buildings, easy like a stroll in the piazza. Here, the very prospect of Sante entering her house, making contact… it felt odd.

And another thing, over there the country had fitted itself around her like a garment made to measure, but how would Australia fit Sante Marzano? Most surely a lot better if it weren't for Russell Toohey's hulking presence. Now, that was a mischievous thought she ejected right out of her head.

When the doorbell rang she jumped. She paced herself to answer the door. In that blurred frame against the sun, her heart faltered as she realized that the man with the suitcase was not Sante.

"Would you like it inside?"

The voice was too strange and the accent too familiar to be Sante’s. A moment’s adjustment to the blinding light revealed the taxi driver, she squeezed past him and then saw Sante, struggling up the steps with another suitcase and a shoulder bag. Instinctively she ran down and reached for his bag. But before she could relieve him of his load, Sante had dropped the suitcase and threw his arms around her. The bag swung and slipped down to his forearm as he hugged her. Ira-Jane found herself squeezed inside his arms. She took in the scents of San Sisto on his skin and felt, once again, the permanence of a world encased in stone-layered time.
"Ira-Jane, at last I see you again," he released her, held her at arm's length, and looked her up and down, "I cannot believe I'm in Australia with you."

He had had a haircut, gone were the strands of hair parted at the forehead, he now sported a trim college-boy haircut. It made his head seem larger and his forehead more pronounced. The effect was a stronger, more masculine Sante. Ira-Jane felt she should like the look, and yet something unsettled her.

"You're loaded," she said abruptly, "are you sure you didn't bring the kitchen sink?"
"What?"
"Never mind."

Inside it seemed to her all of a sudden very dark. She pulled the vertical blinds to one side. Slats of sunshine patterned the carpet of the living room and reached Sante's feet where he stood in his fashionable runners, black denims and tobacco-coloured shirt.

Ira-Jane looked around and felt like she was seeing her apartment with new eyes: the semi-sheen, off-white walls, the low ceilings, the corner of the living room sectioned off by the desk, which she used as office space ... it was, she had to admit, of a Spartan austerity. The spaces, illuminated by the new presence, revealed themselves to be filled with shadows of her insecurities. She had wanted to see Sante, now his presence felt like an intrusion. The apartment, which for years had been her refuge, now looked dingy, sterile, claustrophobic. She pointed to the bed,

"It's the best I can do, there's not much space."

"It is perfect Ira-Jane."

Much to her relief nothing would dampen his enthusiasm. And when she brought the cold drinks and the tray with snacks, he suggested they could go out 'on the balcony'.
No, she thought, better not. The nosy neighbours: the single mother next door with the autistic child and the two New Zealanders who never went out by day, would be looking out through the blinds. Ira-Jane had no time for gossips and neighbours. She said,

"I'll need to get back to work soon."

Sante looked out of the kitchen window. Through a clump of trees in the park a slice of blue water peered beneath the skyscrapers of the city.

“You have a fantastic view, Ira-Jane. Is that the sea?”

“No, the Swan river.”

“A river! It is so big, so blue” he could hardly contain himself, “I think I will love Australia”.

And Australia will love you, she wanted to say, how could it not? But she resisted the temptation to serve him up a compliment. This was a new situation for her and very delicate. It required caution and restraint, she did not want things to get out of control. She showed him around the apartment, where to put his clothes, the bathroom that they would have to share – though she hinted that he might use the washing facilities in the laundry – how to use the microwave and the washing machine. He followed her around only half listening, with that ‘can't believe I’m here’ smile plastered all over his face and never taking her eyes off him. Already she was feeling she needed a break from the intensity of those eyes, Ira-Jane was glad she had return to work.

"I'll be back before seven. I'm afraid it has to be take-away tonight: Pizza, Chinese or Indian. Which do you fancy?"

"What about Australian?"

She smiled, "Ah, good point. Somebody ought to set up a chain of barbecued steak and sausages take-aways. I'll tell you what, I'll pick you up around
7.15 and we'll eat out. Farrell's make a pretty mean kangaroo steak. You can't get more Australian than that."

She looked at her watch again.

"I've got to get going."

He followed her down the steps to the car and when she looked up at him from inside the car she caught the bottom outline of his chin and gave a start: it was Russell’s chin.

People are a spectrum, they change according to how the light falls upon them in a particular space. Sante found it difficult to reconcile this woman with the luminous creature he had set eyes upon in the archeological landscape of Tindari and who had charmed the population of San Sisto. On her home turf Ira-Jane came across as a highly-strung young woman, laden with responsibilities of work and the time-piece she carried on her right wrist that dominated her life. Will he change too, now that he has come to the land of his conception? More to the point, will he have the courage to square up to the man, whose violence made his birth possible?

At Farrell's he wanted to bring up that very item, put it on the table, consume it with the steak, no matter how unpalatable, digest it. But he sensed that of the several anxieties weighing down on his sister's mind, this was one of the heaviest. So, he let her direct the conversation, be the driver. The talk fluttered about from one innocuous subject to the other. Did he have a good flight? Was Don Alfio going on a diet like he said he would? Was Mimmo behaving himself?

"Ah, his comportment is the best. He ask about you many times, when you come back to Italy."

"Not while he's around anyway, “ they both laughed, “at least he’s not pestering you guys about wanting to buy your land."
"No, but now that Nonna is gone, maybe mother will sell."

"How is Ira? I'm surprised she's let you go."

Sante must have interpreted her comment as a criticism of his mother, for he went serious and said, "Mother is not so bad, really."

Or maybe he was feeling guilty about coming away. Ira-Jane moved on to practical matters.

"Franzetti wants you to start on Monday. There's a bus to Gingin twice a day. The earlier one doesn't get there until 9.40 am. You'll need to negotiate with Franzetti a late start on Monday, otherwise you would have to leave here on Saturday afternoon, something I am sure you don't want to do. I feel that Franzetti will be flexible. He's very keen to have you there. He has a room prepared for you."

The waiter came: a young man, mid-twenties, stud in one ear, streaked hair. He addressed Ira-Jane with the familiarity of an old friend, "I haven't seen you for a while," he sounded mildly reproachful, "where have you been?"

"Busy."

"What's new?"

He looked at Sante, then back at her. Ira-Jane introduced him.

"This is Sante."

"Hi Santy, I'm Bailey."

"No, it's Santé" Ira-Jane said firmly.

"Sorry... Sonté,' he repeated with emphasis, "I'll get you the menu."

"I think you scare him," said Sante.

"Well, if you don't insist, you'll become Sandy."

"I don't mind."

She looked disappointed, but Sante had come to Australia to experience, to discover, to find a sister, a country; to view another profile of himself from a different angle. Inherent in that quest was a willingness to change and to grow.
When Bailey returned Ira-Jane said,

"Sante is my brother."

"Oh, I didn't know you had one."

"Neither did I."

To Sante's surprise Bailey's expression hardly changed. Sante wondered whether in this country people were less prone to making a drama of things, as they did where he came from. He handed over the menus and then in an impassive voice he asked,

"What do you mean?"

"It's a long story."

"I'd like to hear it one day."

"When I get some time."

"Is it that long?"

Near the end of the meal, when she had been made mellow by the red wine, she said, "I'm sorry if I sound a bit snappy at times," Sante had the impression that she was apologizing also for words she would use in the future, "things have been stressful at work."

Such a convenient alibi, work. Then she allowed a hint of that brilliant smile for which he had crossed half of the globe and said, "I'm really glad you have decided to come, Sante."

Instinctively Sante reached for her hand, then reconsidered.

At the gate Sante looked up at the long drive and thought he had the wrong place. Even though he had expected newly-planted trees, his mind’s imprint of an
olive grove was of time-gnarled trunks and anarchic fronds, clinging to patches of earth up steep terrain. At Rovaro the trees looked as if they had been gathering all the storms and sunblazes of history. He knew this would be different, but somehow he had not been prepared for this easy landscape of orange earth, punctured with shrubs, in precise rows, separated by a network of irrigation pipes. It looked surreal, like a model plan of identical, plastic bushes exhibited upon a table.

At the far end of the drive, appeared a newly built house, its gleaming silver roof disappearing over the hump of a stone outcrop, set against a vast blue sky. Next to the drive, and separated from it by a wire fence, a parallel track of rammed earth led to a rectangular shed with a corrugated iron roof, surrounded by paddocks. Sante stood there wondering how to open the gate, when he heard a ping, then a whir as the gate pulled away from the metal upright and slowly swung open. A four-wheel drive, trailing a horse float came up from behind, slowed down, turned in and stopped, waiting for the gate to fully open. A man with a chubby face coming down to a feminine, pinball of a chin, put his head through the side window and called,

“Yes mate.”

Sante stroked the animal's head.

“You have a beautiful horse.”

“Who’re you after?”

“I'm coming to work for Mr Franzetti.”

Danny gave the visitor a suspicious glance; saw his white pianist hand with pink knuckles, the soft eyes, the expensive check shirt, the cargo shorts, the Nike runners and settled on a derisive smirk.

“Oh yeah! And what exactly you gonna do for him?”

Sante didn’t understand, but recognised the tone, so he smiled and said,

“Sorry.”
“How come Brother’s hiring you, then?”

“I work here only for some munse.”


“I come from Sicily.”

“Ah, say no more, Mafia country hey?”

Danny gave him the wink-nudge routine. Sante wasn't sure about the gesture, but felt the antagonism.

“I know who you are,” said the man “you’re the foreign kid everyone’s been talkin’ about, with that funny name… Sandy or something…”

“Sante.”

“Santy! What kind of name is that?” he sneered.

“No,” the young man insisted, remembering Ira-Jane's words “my name is Santè.”

“Whatever.”

Danny stopped chuckling, an opaque film passed over his eye,

“I wonder what big brother wants from you? I wonder…”

The man wore a black leather jacket, even though it was going to be a hot day, with frayed cuffs at the wrist. His eyes were sharp and quick, and they looked not at you, but the space around you. The blue of his eyes matched his shirt but there was no kindness in them. He looked a disillusioned man. Sante felt pity for him. He imagined that in his youth he would have been eager, full of promise. But maybe he lacked character to carry out his ambitions. Or maybe circumstances did not favour him.

“I must go,” said Sante.

“Hang on a minute.”

Danny turned off the engine and got out of the car. The horse pounded the floor inside the float.
“I'm not finished yet…” but before he had time to proceed, he looked up and saw Clem Franzetti limping down the drive, leaning on a walking stick. Danny's face altered to fawning submissiveness.

“Morning, Brother.”

Clem ignored him and turned to Sante.

“Ah, here you are, at last.”

Sante proffered his hand, but Clem took him in his arms.

“Welcome, welcome.”

Clem Franzetti's face glowed. Uncustomary light danced around his eyes, for this was the moment he had been waiting for. What really counted in life, were the revelations, that instant when the pod of imagination bursts open and sprouts a vision of astounding clarity. And they did not come often. Men are too inclined to be overcome by circumstances, too distracted by the matter to see the vision.

For months, he had wondered when Sante would be coming, certain that the Virgin Mary would work it out somehow. When the news came, just days after the statue had been installed, that Sante's mother had at last relented, Clem Franzetti put on his dressing gown, got his walking stick, which he had started to use of late, and limped down to the grotto to thank the Mother of God.

So, Sante's coming was no coincidence, it was all written in the book of Fate, but he knew he must not give full vent to his bursting joy. He did not want to frighten the young man.

“Come, come Santy, I was waiting for you.”

Sante picked up his suitcase and followed. The old man asked,

"Where is your car?"

"I don't have a car. I came by bus."

"No car! We'll have to do something about that, won't we?"

He led Sante up the track to the house.
“Take no notice of Danny,” said Franzetti, “he’s a fool. Come I'll show you your room.”

Danny watched them amble up to the house, the old man, taller and unsteady strode with a slight tilt of his frame, from time to time leant on the young man's shoulder to steady himself. Danny revved up the engine and took off in a cloud of dust. The horse pawed in the shuddering float. Danny was worried. What was that all about? Too palsey-walsey for his liking. He liked it even less when, later in the morning he saw the foreign kid drive away through the gate in the convertible that had belonged to Franzetti’s son. Hm!

Sante smelled the mulch freshly laid out around the base of each shrub.

“So, how are things at the clinic? How’s mad Doctor Troina? Still going is he?”

“I think so. And you? Are you well, Mr Franzetti?”

“Me? Never felt better…”

He looked thinner, though, particularly around the neck where flaps of skin framed his Adam's apple. Deep circles had appeared around the sockets, though the eyes themselves shone brilliant with passion. A filament of cotton from the corner of his turned up collar touched the stubble of his chin. Sante glanced at his walking stick and asked,

“You have an accident?”

“A bit of bother with the hip. It’s nothing.”

His room was at the opposite end of the old man's quarters. It was much larger than bedroom back home. The paint was fresh, the door was glossy cream, the same colour as the metal door frame. His bedroom window looked over the farm dam, with its walls of clay and dark brown water. Once they had inspected the
An Olive Branch for Sante

house, the old man presented him a set of keys each marked on white adhesive tape.

Mr Franzetti did not come out of his bedroom again for the afternoon. Sante went and sat on the veranda shaded by a magnificent wisteria coiled around the frame of a wooden pergola, that must have been a remnant of the old colonial structure.

Across the highway the terrain fell to the coastal plane towards the ocean, some twenty kilometres away in a patchwork of stunted scrub and farmland. In that direction, beyond the Indian Ocean, over mighty peaks and deserts was Sicily. From here it seemed a cosmos away, unreal, liable to dissolve in the vortex of memory. What was he to do? What work was assigned to him? He was given no instructions. Everything in this farm seemed in place, under control, newly-built and completed.

He decided to take a walk down the slope, between the rows of olive shrubs. Sante took the tip of a branch in his hand, rubbed the lime-green leaves and took in the scent. It had delicacy and vigour, but lacked time-seasoned texture. A solitary silver-eye came to rest on a branch, disappeared into the foliage, in a vain search for food. It would be a few years before these shrubs would bear fruit.

He reached the newly-laid brick-paved path which wound down some two hundred metres from the house, veered left and swung around a rocky outcrop, falling sharply to a small courtyard, on the lower side of the rock. Sante knew that Franzetti had built a private chapel, Ira-Jane had told him, but he wasn’t prepared for the kind of irrational fear which overcame him on reaching the entrance. The face of the rock was panelled by an iron gate painted black, the bars glaring against the lowering sun. He felt as if he had come face to face with some monster, whose menacing frown was sculptured all over the rock face.
In confirmation of his fears the gate suddenly vibrated and rose off the floor with a subdued screech, disappearing into the rock face above. At the same time a shadow advanced next to his,

“It’s sensitive to the remote in my pocket.”

Sante turned and saw the figure of Clem Franzetti, with a smile that was meant to be ingratiating but made him look a little sinister instead. Sante went to quickly turn away, but Franzetti, who was half a head taller grabbed him firmly, pressing down on his shoulder with his hand.

“There's nothing to be scared of. Come Sante, I'll show you something.”

The chapel was tiny, with a polished wooden floor and one single jarrah pew. From the ceiling, that was cupola-shaped and lined with curved wooden bats, golden lights formed a halo above the head of a statue. At first Sante did not recognise the Madonna of the Olives that had stood at the entrance of Dr Troina’s clinic. In the confines of the chapel the Madonna should have seemed larger, instead it looked forlorn as if, overwhelmed by that gleaming opulence, had shrunk back into itself. A thought played inside his head, over and over: Madonna did not belong there.

“What do you think?” asked Clem, “magnificent isn’t she? You can come here, any time you want. I'll get you a remote. The only thing – this is just between us – I don’t want anyone else to have access to it. People here don’t understand.”

Sante stepped back, he recognized in the old man the burden of fanaticism.

“Mr Franzetti…”

“Clem, call me Clem, Sante. This is not Italy, we don’t go for formalities.”

Franzetti struck a match proceeded to light a candle, then he took it out of its holder and brought it across to the young man, holding it close to his face as if to better study his features.
“You look different,” he said scrutinizing him up close, “what have you done to yourself?”

Sante didn’t know what to say, the old man’s expression perturbed him.

“I know,” said Franzetti, like he had solved the key to a riddle, “you have cut your hair.” His face became serious, damning, “you shouldn’t have done that. You shouldn’t have.”

As Sante was considering what to say, the old man’s intensity dissipated just as quickly as it had formed, the flame-lit eye relaxed, he handed him the candle with what could have been a smile and said.

“Come Sante help me light up all the candles.”

Sante did as he was bidden, while the old man followed him as if to make sure he was doing it properly. When they were finished, the old man stood in the middle to admire the fully lit-up grotto. In the silence Sante found enough courage to ask,

“What is my work on this farm?”

Franzetti gave him a vacuous look.

“What work?”

“Why do you employ me? What do you wish me to do?”

“Oh that. Don't worry, we'll find plenty for you to do. It's not important…”

“Mr Franzetti… Clem…”

Franzetti scrutinised him, perplexed.

“What is the matter, Sante?”

“I don't understand…”

The old man studied him again, for what seemed an uncomfortably long time then, in a low voice, almost a whisper, he said,
"Of course you understand, Sante...It's in your blood. You're not like our young people: pumped up with drugs and alcohol." He turned to the Madonna, "he'll be alright, won't he? Of course he will. He's our hope."

Sante considered the face of this sad, slightly demented man, with his sunken eyes and eyebrows that looked like worn out paint brushes, he saw a kind of energy, a fighting spirit, lasting into old age, that his own gentle, accepting grandfather never had. Sante was unsure whether to pity or admire him, but the old man ended the brief exchange with an abrupt exit from the grotto, as if something pressing was calling him back to the house. Strangely though, he had forgotten to lock the gate.

As he watched him limp back to his solitary house up the hill, regret crawled into Sante's consciousness, leaving a trail of melancholy.

He would have liked to please Franzetti, make him happy. He always imagined that to please others was a major mission in his life. He couldn't decide if it was a weakness or a strength, this desire to please people.

That night, the first that he spent at the farm, Sante lay awake for a long time. When he finally went to sleep he dreamt that he was hanging by his feet, on the end of a hammock-like contraption of rope and wood that was held over a huge vat of olive oil by Clem Franzetti. The more he wriggled to free himself, the more the rope lengthened (as if it had become elastic) and his body was lowered further into the vat. Soon his hair touched the oily surface. Just as he thought he would drown, head-down, he woke up screaming.

The next morning a light truck arrived at the gate. A sign on either side of the cabin door announced: Conway's Stone Work and Retaining Walls. Sante went down to open the gate. A lean man, with freckly skin and wizened features put his
head out and watched silently from inside the truck as the gate swung open, then drove up to the top of the block. Sante followed him up on foot.

"Hello, my name is Sante" he said.

"I'm Ken," replied the man, without looking at him, or attempting to shake hands, "I'm gonna a put a fence right down the middle of this block."

"But there is fence here already."

"I'll have to take that out. He wants a high stone fence."

"Why?"

"Search me. Privacy I suppose.

"It will be a big job."

"I reckon. I'll be here for a couple of months."

Well, maybe he could help this man put up a wall.

Ken was a taciturn man and a relentless, though paced worker. He wore knee-length canvas shorts, army hat to protect him from the implacable autumn sun and cotton shirt done up to the throat. His movements were slow and mechanical, his face remained expressionless as he prepared the trenches and manoeuvred each block into position. Each Monday a truck arrived laden with blocks of limestone strapped in braces of steel, deposited them along the drive near the fence-line. By the end of the week the blocks were lain, the joints neatly filled with matching cement. He stopped only for 2 brief breaks of twenty minutes each to drink tea, which he carried in a thermos flask. He filled the flask's cap and drank his tea slowly, spitting out the first mouthful to wash out the dust, then sipped silently,
sucking through stained teeth, looking ahead as if expecting something to appear out of the mid-distance. Despite the fact that he wore gloves, his hands were leathery. Whenever he removed the gloves, the fingers were crinkled and damp. Sante, quietly slipped into the role of mason’s labourer, mixing the mortar, carrying the blocks, shifting equipment. The wall slowly extended from the back fence downhill towards the highway. Ken only spoke in reply to a question or to give instructions, and then in cryptic style, ending each sentence with ‘Sandy’.

“Just chuck it on the back of the truck, Sandy”, “Give ‘s a hand with this, Sandy”

In a new country first thing that changes is your name, thought Sante. He gave up trying to correct Ken, he knew from his experience with Franzetti that there was no point insisting that his name be pronounced correctly. ‘Sandy’ made him feel different: like some indefinite amalgam that could at any moment change shape and consistency. He was no longer Sante from San Sisto who moved with the sure step of someone surrounded by the landmarks that had always been there. This was an uncertain, ever-mutating, cryptic world.

Ken seemed devoid of curiosity. He wasn’t interested in Sante’s family or where he came from, even though it must have been clear to him that he was a foreigner. Likewise he did not welcome questions about himself or family background.

At first Sante thought that the frequent repetition of his name indicated a desire for friendship, for wanting to do away with formalities and be on familiar terms. In time he understood that this wasn’t so. The familiarity was limited and specific within the boundaries of the working rapport, of the activity in hand. It was accompanied by a guarded stance that warned to steer well clear of his physical and emotional space. Paradoxically, the first name appellation produced a barrier rather than an opening a door. By contrast the Italian ‘Lei’ form, tended to establish a social hierarchy, or at least a formality, within which one could negotiate a
relationship, exchange opinions, information about family, experiences, the world.

In the midst of all that sky and orange earth, he claustrophobic space between
Sante and Ken was a cultural void, in which conversation roamed desultory and
impersonal. It revolved around what was being done at the moment. The solid world
of physical objects was the conduit through which passed Ken’s conversation and
gauged his relationship to the world. It was a relationship minimised down to a
simple request, a transaction, a practical description. The only time his talk
wandered beyond the single sentence was when he explained the workings of a
piece of machinery or an activity they were about to undertake: “See that piece of
four-be-two; when I lift up the water tank off the floor, jam it under. No, not all the
way, it's gotta jut out off the edge.”

It was difficult to know what was going on inside Ken's head, but Sante
sensed a similarity between Ken and the inscrutable scrubland alongside the main
road on the way to the farm. It was a kind of autism, a lack of connectedness. And
yet there was no denying that there was a dignity about him, not unlike the peasant
farmer back in Sicily – also a disappearing breed – though the latter was more
reactive, fearful of destiny, ever ready to swear against God and all the saints, and
blame them for his misfortunes. This worker was more restrained but sadder. What
was common between them was a sense that they lived their life in the absolute,
without compromises. At 4 pm exactly, Ken stopped his machinery, loaded his
bobcat onto the back of the truck and went home. Not directly home, first he called
in at the liquor store and bought himself half a dozen stubbies of Midstrength. He
drank them in front of the box watching the news on every station starting from 5
pm on Channel 10 and finishing at 7.30 pm on Channel 2.

Frantzetti did not object to him spending his day helping Ken. It was as if
Sante had been hired to be Ken's off-sider. In the succeeding weeks the exchange
between the old man and Sante was limited to perfunctory greetings whenever they
met in the house, which was rare enough, for Franzetti stayed in his self-contained
quarters. Sometimes though, Franzetti stood on the courtyard and stared in the
direction of Sante (though not necessarily at him, it was difficult to tell ii the
distance) for some twenty minutes or more. Was he watching the progress of the
wall? If so, why didn't he come over and take a closer look, ask questions, give
directions? Sante found this staring a little spooky especially as he could not tell,
from that distance what expression was on Franzetti's face.

Clem hardly journeyed to the office, it was too impractical anyway. A slicing
pain at the knee joint of his right leg made the travel into the city increasingly
difficult. His daily outings consisted of walks down to the grotto. Morning and
evenings he made his pilgrimage to the shrine, his frail figure, steadied by a walking
stick, cast a long shadow against an orange sky. Occasionally he would ask Sante
to drive him to the city.

Clem sat in the back seat of his 1989 powder-blue Mercedes, the pummel of
his walking stick pressed under his chin and said very little. He looked outside with
a transparent eye, like a detached observer with no interest in the landscape.

Sante, who had recently been told about the death of his wife and son,
imagined that the vacant expression masked pain of that double loss.

Growth comes in tiny, imperceptible advances and, at times, we find
ourselves standing on a new step of insight. And for Sante arrived with the
afternoon breeze which cleaved up the slope and brought the smell of the ocean to
the interior.

This country was his too. This land that knew him even before his beloved
Sicily, seeping to him through the walls of his mother's defiled womb, this land was
part of his being. If he pursued it (not too vigorously though, because of the risk of rejection) if he persevered then, in time, something magical might come out of it.

Because it all came down to the land. Sante suspected that he would have to look to the land and the people it produced. Franzetti's feverish passion, Ken's dignified autism, Danny's poisoned acorns. Most important of all, Ira-Jane's taught loveliness: so strong, so fragile, so driven and yet vulnerable. These were the fruits of this land. This new land would challenge and free him.

There was, of course, another fruit: a worm-infected fruit. No denying that he had come to Australia, also to find him, even after he learnt of the sordid circumstances of his conception. His visit would not be complete without at least gaining a glimpse of this man whose genes he carried. And was Sante ready to confront the rancid side of his bloodline? He considered this and concluded that he must face up to this devil, for to acknowledge it was to control it. Truth has the way to freedom, truth, whatever the cost.

He did not have to wait long for that truth to come scraping its scaly belly against his flank. He was shovelling sand into the cement mixer when, glancing across the fence, he saw two men standing, watching a horse inside the paddock. The shorter one struck a match, ducked down and buried his face in his cupped hands to light a cigarette. It seemed like a lewd gesture. He realised that it was Danny. The other man was altogether larger. He walked through the gate of the paddock, just about filling it, and tended his hand. The horse came to him The man ran his other hand along the belly of the animal, ruffled the mane on its long neck, pressed his own head against the animal's and kept it there in an affectionate hug. The scene struck Sante as touching.

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Before he had time to think further his attention was diverted by the arrival of Ira-Jane come from the city to discuss a project with Mr Franzetti. She stopped and shouted to him over the rumble of the mixer.

"Hello. You've decided to get down to some real work at last."

Sante killed the motor and bounded over to her. It was so good to see his sister. They had only been apart two weeks but it seemed ages.

He wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his shirt and gave her a peck on the cheek through the car window. He took in the full power of her perfume. For a moment it dispelled the smell of his own sweat.

"Look at you, you look like a typical brickie's labourer?"

"I enjoy it. This is good for me?"

"Is it? If your mother saw you, I don't think she'd be impressed."

"What about my sister," said Sante, "what does she think?"

"Well, it's keeping you out of mischief, isn't it? Are you coming into town this weekend?"

Outside the confines of the apartment she seemed more relaxed, warmer.

"Are you missing me?"

Ira-Jane gave him a playful look as she pretended to consider the question.

"No, but I'm sick of eating take-aways."

As Ira-Jane spoke Sante's his eyes fell once again on the figures in the paddock. Danny was now cantering the horse inside the enclosed track, whip in hand, bridle in the other. The heavy man, stood watching, leaning forward on the cross-bar of the wooden fence, his large belly pressed against the lower bar.

"Well? Will you be coming?"

Ira-Jane was looking up at him, but Sante's attention was elsewhere.

"Who is that man?" he asked, pointing towards the paddock.

Ira-Jane looked through the window her Honda.
"That's Franzetti's relative, I can't remember his name."

"Not Danny, the other one...the large man."

Ira-Jane paused, squinted, as if the sun was getting in her eyes, even though she was on the shaded side of the car.

"I don't know. It's too far to see. One of Danny's mates I should think." She revved the engine, "I'd better get going or Franzetti'll go aggro on me."

Sante could not take his eyes off that stranger. As if aware of his gaze the man suddenly turned and stared back. Normally Sante would have raised his hand and wave, but there was about this man, an aura (it was too far to read his facial expression) of angry antagonism that made him quickly turn his gaze up the drive, where his sister had just emerged from the car, carrying a briefcase. Before going into the house, she stopped on the doorstep, turned abruptly and looked back at him. Across the fifty metres which separated them, he could tell that her look was brief and intense, strangely similar to the one he had received from the corpulent man in the paddock, and the space between the three of them was turbulent with unexplained emotions.

The man came up every Saturday morning, took the horse out on the paddock (always the same chestnut mare) and spent a long time grooming it, brushing his coat, hosing the animal down in the sunshine. Sante wished the man would look up from time to time, notice his presence, exchange a greeting. He was jealous of the attention the horse was receiving. And when the man drove off, after lunch, Sante felt hollow for his absence.
On the Friday Ira-Jane who had gone to Northam on assignment called at the farm again to collect him. She was looking forward to having him over for the weekend. The atmosphere in the apartment changed with his presence; his cheerfulness lightened the tensions of a work discipline that she had cultivated over the years. Something must have been churning in Sante’s head, though, for when they had stopped at the Midland railway crossing, out of the darkening blue he asked, "You know that man that looks after the horses? Clem's brother… step brother…""

"What about him?"

"I don't thin' he likes me."

"From what I hear, Danny doesn't like too many people."

She sensed that was a preamble to the real question he wanted to ask. It wasn't long in coming.

"What about the big man. It is him?"

Ira-Jane held her breath, wondering what was the best way to handle this.

"I know it is," he continued, "you don't have to say, " then after an anxious silence, "I want to talk with him."

The train clanked up to the crossing, tooted long and persistent, displacing the rest of Sante's sentence. How fortuitous, thought Ira-Jane, and she proceeded to take advantage of the interruption by veering onto a different course.

"You're the colour of beetroot, Sante, are you putting on sunscreen?"
Sante knew this turn was merely a postponement, so he played along with it.

"Ken does not use sunscreen."

"Never mind Ken. His skin's used to it, yours isn't. And you make sure you always wear a cap."

Sante laughed. His Adam’s apple trilled in his throat.

"Ira-Jane, you seem just like my mother."

Was it meant to be a compliment? If so, she could think of better ones.

"What have you planned for tonight?"

"Some students from the New Norcia Agricultural College have invited me out."

"That's nice," she said, even though she was a little disappointed. This could have been their weekend. It was good though, that he had made friends with people his own age

"Hey Ira," said Sante, becoming animated "I am going to cook for you tomorrow. Would you like that?"

Pleasure always carried for Ira-Jane a whiff of loss; so she tended to rein in its intensity with a little charade.

"Would I like it? Mmh..." she tapped her chin with her left index, hesitated, then "absolutely, please feel free."

The atmosphere in the car distended.

"Sante, " she added with mock-solemnity, "let me state here and now, you're welcome into my kitchen at any time. I hate cooking."

"And I love it. My father, he say creativity starts in the kitchen."

"Yeah," said Ira-Jane, "that just about sums up Alfio. What are you going to cook?"

"I will think about it. Tomorrow I will go shopping. It will be a surprise."
Now that circumstances had brought father and son in such proximity of each other, it was inevitable that they should meet. Ira-Jane wished that she could protect him from the hurt of rejection. She knew all about rejection, by both parents. It wasn't pretty. But after preaching openness to his mother, she could hardly now behave the same way. She would tell him tomorrow night over the dinner he cooked. Although that didn't seem right either. You never know how he might react. She couldn't risk an emotional over-spill, while they were by themselves in the house. Better to take him down to Farrell's for coffee afterwards and tell him in a public place. The presence of strangers would restrain him.

Seeing as Sante was going out she decided she might as well put in a couple of hours at work, catch up on things that needed doing. However Bob called to say that the computers were down at the office, following the detection of a bug, and the technicians were working on it.

"Anyway this is Friday, what's your plans for the night?"

Bob's invitation was fortuitous, for when Sante's friends came to the door to collect him, Ira was confronted by a couple of worrying types with rings in their eyebrows and tattoos on their chests, driving a red Lancer. Had she stayed home, she would have fretted all night. In times like these, she decided, being a big sister was not a role she particularly relished.

They went to see *Lost in Translation*. It wasn't Bob's kind of movie. Actually Bob wasn't into cinema. He might have sat through a good documentary but a made-up story… not his cup of tea at all. He spent most of the time shifting weight from one cheek of his bottom to the other.

"I prefer real-life action," he said, and when he dropped her off his eyes darted hopefully in the direction of her apartment.

"I wouldn't mind a drink. Are you going to ask me in?"
He tugged at the knot of his tie. Other times Ira-Jane might have found that kind of body language persuasive, now it left her cold.

"I'm tired," she said, "I'm having an early night."

Once inside she did not go to bed, she took out a book and did some reading. Though her eyes followed the lines, her mind did not take in the words, intent as it was on listening for a car to pull into the drive and bring back Sante. Around one a.m. she went to bed and lay awake, waiting. She waited a long time because Sante did not come home that night.

When Sergeant Toohey entered he did not see the figure; that is, his eye fell on something, a bundle slumped on the table, but he didn’t want to look at that. What he saw were the four walls. The same four walls in which he had interrogated hundreds, now had got higher and starker; and the space had shrunk. He realised he didn’t want to be here. The space, designed to intimidate and trap suspected criminals, now was trapping him no less. He just did not want to be here this morning. His ulcer, if ulcer it was, made him feel nauseous, a nausea which had not relented for some three days.

For a moment he thought it was a female: the face was buried in the crook of the right arm, the frame was slight. It was only when he looked at the forearm, exposed by the gathered up sleeve of an expensive woollen sweater and saw a down of dark hair all the way down to the wrist, that he realized it must be a male. He moved in a pace or two until he was breathing over him. That’s when the person looked up.
The eyes, blue upon burnt skin in a frame of raven hair, washed with the salt of recent tears looked up pleadingly. A flush of barely repressible contempt surged to Sergeant Toohey's face. He knew the type all too well. The son of a rich daddy and a neurotic, fretful mother. Brought up and molly-coddled in a two-storey, air-conditioned house. A typical spoilt brat. It was all over him, the soft skin, the perfect teeth, the feminine lips. Probably gay, thought Russell. Weak as piss, soft as cheese, someone who would do anything to get out of pain or discomfort. Sergeant Toohey was sure that he would admit to anything, submit to anyone, to satisfy a craving or protect his precious little self from harm.

He looked down at the sheet in front of him:

Marzano, Sante
Born 1984
Nationality: Italian

You can't get away from them, he thought. They crop up when you least expect, insinuate themselves into your life. He asked,

"How long do you intend to stay in Australia?"

"I have a student visa for one year. It's on the passport."

"I can see that. I asked you. You've been found in possession of illegal drugs. Are you aware of the penalties?"

Sante shrugged his shoulders, an expression by which he meant he didn't know, but the detective interpreted to be a dismissive 'I couldn't care less.'

Sergeant Toohey flew into a rage.

"Don't you get smart with me, you little shit," he shouted and thumped his fist on the table. A blotch of water spilt out of a glass and ran worm-like, off the edge of the table and onto the young man's lap, "just answer the question."

"OK, I don't know. I…not sure."
"Well I'll tell ya, possession of illicit drugs with intent to sell it's six years minimum, in this country..."

"I am not selling. The packet was put in my pocket. I did not know it was there."

"Yeah, that's what they all say. You expect me to believe that bullshit?"

He circled around him, like a predator, his step heavy on the floor, his eyes menacing. The young man sat there cowering. New tears appeared in his eyes. Nothing aroused the older man's contempt more than emotional appeal, weakness. Russell Toohey would have preferred it, if the skinny runt had shown some fighting spirit. He would have respected that. Instead all he got was this gutless Mommy's boy, with soft woman's skin and baby blue eyes. Geez, he hated the type, made him want to puke just to look at him.

Somewhere in the deep recesses of Russell's consciousness was the awareness that his emotional reaction to this young man was far in excess of what the situation should have provoked, but the man was not used to looking too deeply into himself. As a detective he considered people's actions, studied their motives, analyzed behaviours. However when it came to himself he never considered 'why' questions. Such questions were left to perish in the too-hard basket, under the weight of other similar questions destined never to be answered. It was Russell's way of dealing with an a personality that seemed at times to be so convoluted, so tightly wound up around itself as to make his existence altogether calcified.

"Sir, " pleaded the young man, " and pursed his bottom lip. Russell noticed with disgust that his red lips had more flesh on them than one of those magazine cover girls, "can I please call my sister. She will worry about me."

"What you need is a lawyer, never mind your sister."

Russell Toohey went out. Sweat was pouring out of him. Damp patches had appeared under his armpits. He needed something to calm his nerves. He went to
his office, got the Panadol packet out of his coat pocket, walked to the water dispenser in the corridor and filled a plastic cup. As he tilted his head back to drink he saw his daughter at the enquiry desk.

“What are you doing here?”

But even as the words were trooping out of his mouth, the penny, which had been dangling precariously over the dark side of his consciousness, dropped heavily on his conscience. He thought he’d better have another tablet.

On the way home nothing was said between them. They did not turn to look at each other for they were ashamed. To find themselves together in the presence of that putrefaction of a man, and realize that they were made brother and sister by his violence, was more than they could adjust to. It was as if they had been divested of their garments and their shame was displayed to the world. Nothing so trifling as a fig leaf sufficed to cover it. They felt violated, singled out in the herd by a freakish destiny. Bad blood united them and shame stopped them from seeking comfort in one another.

A somnolence descended upon Sante and, as he staggered in the apartment he slumped on the couch and promptly fell asleep. His cheek rested on the turkish green cushion, his mouth slack. Let him stay that way, oblivious to pain, to a wasted world of posturing, of rancour and self-hate. Let him escape back to San Sisto, sitting on the balcony overlooking the piazza, shadowed by the baroque façade of the Chiesa Madre with its statue of the Virgin Mary looking as if she were hiding a pregnancy beneath the folds of its elaborate marble garments. Let him retreat to that world where such absurdities and contradictions are granted the gravitas of stone. Let Sante find solace in the jovial face of Don Alfio, sitting outside the Bar Ciro with his friends, beneath mustard coloured umbrellas advertising Digestivo Averna.
No such relief for Ira-Jane. Fortunately she had her own way of staying on course. She remembered that on her desk was a job advertisement seeking an anchor for a new travel show on Channel 10. Someone who had seen Ira-Jane being interviewed on T.V. about some tourist issue, had suggested that she might wish to apply. Of course she would. This was an opportunity to move on and out of a situation. Two moves in one. She took out her laptop and started to work on her C.V. and covering letter. The task absorbed her totally. Once again work was coming to her rescue. Thank God for work.

He woke up around 5pm feeling puffy and moody. He looked out of the window, across the trees and the green lawn to the river that carried incessantly its waters to the sea. A boat was returning from the vineyards of the Swan Valley, with its cargo of casually dressed, well-wined merry makers playing the last charades on a day that had been full of them. Life flows on inexorably. He saw Ira-Jane attacking the keyboard with absorbed intensity and, despite himself, made first contact by way of a whinge.

"You always work, Ira-Jane, always work, also on Sunday."
Ira-Jane did not take her eyes off the screen.
"If I don't do it now, it won't get done. I've made sandwiches for you."
But Sante was not hungry, even though he had not eaten for nearly twenty-four hours. He sat up on the couch, wrapped a rug around his shoulders and looked across at Ira-Jane.
"Are you OK?" she asked, without looking up, making it clear that it was a non-question which required a non-answer. So, he kept quiet, but he wasn't OK. He wanted to hug her and be hugged. It was, of course, the need of a child. Adults were not expected to have such urges, certainly not males and not in this country. And really he could see the advantage in this. Life was a daily test and you were
meant to pass it all by yourself, so it was a practical and wise thing to toughen yourself and fortify your defences. But clearly it was also a question of pride. There was dignity in being independent, autonomous, self-contained. Both his natural father and his sister were fitted with bulletproof armoury, maybe he should consider working on one himself, though part of him warned him against going down that track. Was he too weak? Did he not have the stomach for it? It was a sign of how this new environment was changing him, that he thought this way at all.

Ira-Jane finally looked up from her new career path, fixed him with a stare and said, "I told you he's a pig."

Sante's shoulders raised and his neck sank between them, as if his sister had just landed a whiplash across his back. He knew that he was expected to hate Russell, for what he had done to his mother, for the way he treated his sister and him, for being the person he was. And yet, when he looked inside himself, he saw a man’s tortured face, and he felt no trace of hate, only sadness.

"Now you know why we didn't want you to meet him..." she was saying, still seated at the keyboard. We, so much said in a simple pronoun. Ira-Jane and his mother in a league to protect him. In Sicily such stance was interpreted as an expression of affection, of wanting to look after a loved one. Here it seemed somewhat condescending, lacking in respect, or at least in faith. Or maybe he was at last growing up and acquiring an adult ego, fragile enough to need massaging. Was he glad or sad? Surely it had to be a good thing that he was seeing life from a new perspective.

"I am glad I met him, anyway," he said.

Ira-Jane scrutinized him from where she sat. She looked puzzled and waited for him to elaborate, but how could he make clear feelings which he himself was struggling to comprehend? So he simply added, "I wanted to know."
Ira-Jane wanted more from him. She wanted blood and all she got was milksop. His passiveness, if passiveness it was, exasperated her and she gave in to acrimony.

"Even when he realised who you were, he just walked out. Not a hint of a sorry…"

"He cannot, Ira, he is trapped. I feel sorry for him."

Ira-Jane hated to hear him talk like that. He sounded so bloody sanctimonious.

"I suppose you are ready to forgive him," she said, stretching her neck toward him, her irony fuelled by anger.

"It is my mother who must forgive him."

"Well, not much of a chance of that happening in this life."

She shouldn't have said that, but then he deserved it for taking the high moral ground. Besides, it made him seem so old: a dried-up old man at eighteen. The simple fact was that she didn't want a saint for a brother. She wanted him to be normal, like other young men who reacted and got angry; who defended their space and had ambitions. She said,

"What are you going to do with yourself, Sante?"

"How do you mean?"

"Just that, what career path are you going to choose?"

Ira-Jane bit her bottom lip and cringed. She sounded like a schoolteacher.

"There are many things I want to do Ira, many, but I don't want to burden my journey carrying so much hate."

Surely Sante Marzano was heading for sainthood.

Something was missing in Sante Marzano, he was incapable of hating. Too many other feelings got in the way, distracted him, complicated matters. But then, maybe it was simply an issue of self-preservation: hating just took too much effort.
Maybe he just had a great need to love. Or was it self-love after all? Was he so monumentally conceited that he thought he could rise above ordinary humans and operate in the rarefied air of pure spirit? Ira-Jane was beginning to see his goodness as an obsession, a handicap. Unless he wised up to the ways of the real world, someone, or more likely a mob, would surely crucify him.

30

It hadn't been a great day at the races for Danny, his sure bets had turned out to be duds, so he vented his frustration on the car horn, as the tractor was chugging slowly up the drive and he was stuck behind it. He put his head through the window and yelled,

"Take your time son, I got all day."

Sante sidled to the edge. Danny passed him so close that Sante in trying to avoid him swung hard to his left and nearly slid off the side into the storm-water ditch.

Russell, his arm out of the car, fat and sprinkled with freckles under ginger hairs, said, "Watch it Danny, you just about hit him."

Danny laughed, that nasty little laugh he had that so irritated him.

"Well, why doesn't he get out of the way, the little wanker."

"He was, what's your rub with him?"

"We should have had our stables here, like we was promised, if it wasn't for him."

"What do you mean?"
“I gotta hunch that the idea for planting the olives came from this little shit. What would Ole Brother know about olives?”

Russell spat out of the window, into the gravel dirt outside.

“Don’t be stupid, Danny.”

“Well, you ask around and the people will tell you. Old Clem’s besotted with him. Something sick in that situation, I reckon, he sets him up in the house, lets him use his dead son’s car. What does that tell you?”

"Tells me nothing," Russell wiped sweat off his face with the rolled-up sleeve of his shirt, "what's the point in leaving the car in the garage for years?"

........................................

When Clem summoned him up at the house, Danny thought for a moment, he might have some good news for him. He imagined that the old man had at last come to his senses, acknowledge him as his closest surviving relative and bequeath him his fortune. Danny’s imagination served his strongest desires. When he got to the house he was led to the back where Clem was perched three steps up a ladder, sheers in hand (God knows how he managed to get up there when he could hardly walk) busy pruning the honeysuckle. Danny cleared his throat, but Clem did not turn around, he continued to reach for the branches and cut away. The back of his hand the veins were blue and thick and looked nicked in places. His skin was coarse and leathery. That sort of thing made Danny’s blood curdle, but it was another of the many inconveniences he had to put up with in order to keep Clem sweet. Not that there was anything sweet about Clem. And the fact that he was keeping him waiting now didn't augur well. Danny cleared his throat once again.

“Hi, Clem, you wanted to see me.”

Franzetti made no response. He took his time before he finally turned on the ladder and let the lame leg dangle by the step. He still had remarkable balance.
"Are you any good at reading the signs, Danny. It says 30 k’s an hour at the gate."

“I didn’t do anything?”

“Yes you did, you nearly ran my man off the road. I saw it with my own eyes."

“What do you expect me to do, he goes and parks himself in the middle of the track."

“I expect you to behave like a grown man, Danny. Now you quit fooling around or I’m gonna have to ask you to take your horses somewhere else, get it?”

He got it alright, that couldn’t be any clearer.

Danny O’ Rourke’s smiled. It was a rare smile, because in Danny’s world there was nothing to smile about. The world was rotten. The world had treated him badly. Danny O’Rourke knew he had no power, absolutely no power. People could wipe their feet on him, just like big, mad Clem Franzetti was doing right now. Well, when you’re down that low, when you’ve hit the bottom, you know that there’s only one move you can make, upwards. So you make your move a good one, one that will deliver the result you want. And in the end there’s only one result that counts: power. You know what, Clem, thought Danny through his smile, everybody cowers in the face of the ultimate power. Everybody, including you, including that little runt down there that’s probably been kissing your arse more times than I’ve been broke. These thoughts produced Danny O’ Rourke’s smile.

“Yeah,” said Danny, “I get it.”

Back at the stable, Russell was getting impatient.

“That took you a while. What did the old man want?”

“Nothing. He’s just a cranky old bastard,” said Danny and he spat down and covered the spit pushing a small mound of sawdust over it with his foot, and pressed it down.
Inflight’s third did not satisfy Russell. That wasn’t the way it was supposed to have been played out. Tommy was meant to keep him back with the pack and come home in the straight. Instead he was off like a shot, hit the front early and of course he couldn’t last the distance.

“What was that all about?” asked Russell at the bar. Danny played dumb.

“What’you mean?“.

“It was a lousy ride. You’d better have a talk to Tommy.”

“He reckons he couldn’t hold him back.”

“Crap. What sort of jockey is he? I lost good dollars on that.”

“So did I," complained Zlatan, "I thought your horse was a cert."

"Yeah, this was gonna be Inflight's race."

"You can never be certain, Russ."

The truth was, that was one race Danny couldn’t afford to let him win. He needed money, quick, and Inflight, wasn’t going to get it for him.

“What ‘re you doing to that horse, Danny?’

“Nothing. It’s the rider that’s crap.”

“If you want my opinion, Inflight’s getting' too old," said Zlatan, "about time youse blokes upgraded"

“You need big bucks for that," said Danny

“Yeah…”

“What about old Franzetti?”
“Not a chance. Big Brother's got other interests these days: religion and young men. Bad combination.”

“What do you mean?” Asked Zlatan.

“Seen the new kid he’s got working on that farm?”

Russell ran the back of his finger on the frothy surface of the pint in front of him, then said,

“Don't you start on him again, Danny.”

But Danny put his face to the froth of his beer and continued to address Zlatan.

“Tell you what, he's no farm-hand, if you ask me.”

“What 're you sayin’ ?”

Danny dropped his wrist inside the sleeve of his black leather jacket and cupped his hand.

“I'm saying he's one of them for sure.”

Russell turned a lethal eye on him.

“Bullshit!”

“No bullshit about it. I can tell that sort of thing a mile away. I seen how Big Brother's falling all over 'm, too. Tell you what, Slat, I think there's some' queer about that set up.”

Danny chuckled at his own pun.

“And I think you're full of bullshit, Danny.”

“Ease off, Russell...”

“You're talking a lot of crap. I'm sick of it. I hate the way you go on, always slaggin' off people. People you don't even know.”

Something was bugging his mate this morning but Danny didn't dwell on it. Danny was too caught up in his own shit to bother with other people's.

“What's it to you, anyway, Russ?”
"Nothing. I'm just sayin'. You don't even know this kid."

"Well I know one thing, I'm not about to let anyone cheat me out of what's mine."

The threatening tone made Russell turn away from his beer and look at Danny and he was surprised to find on that usually slack, resentful face, an intensity he had never noticed before. It made Russell nervous.

"What's eatin' you today, Danny?"

Danny drank down his beer, it was time to go and cash his win.

"Well I gotta get going. Got things to do."

As Danny strode off, Zlatan turned to Russell and said.

"I'd keep an eye on Danny if I was you. He can be trouble."

"Yeah, nothing else but. What's he done now?"

"Nothing, might be just...nothing. Me brother Branko and him have been thick as thieves lately. It worries me."

"Well that'd worry me too..."

"Me brother is mad as a rabid dog and Danny ...well, you know Danny. When them two get together... could be trouble."

"Yeah, I reckon..." Russell held his breath and winced.

"What's wrong?" Asked Zlatan.

"Pain in the groin's been bugging me the last coupla weeks. Probly an infection of some sort."

"Yeah, you'd better go and get it seen to."


The thing about doing someone in was that, like everything else, practice made it easier. With Clem's loony kid he had hummed and ahrred for months. His temporising was not over whether to go through with it (he had made up his mind about it months before) but on how to get it done, without getting caught, that was
the thing. The kid was a nutter, so he was no great loss to the world. Not that it was
Danny's responsibility to look after the world anyhow. Ross was on a downhill slide
to self-destruct, all that Danny did was to provide him the means to do it quickly and
put him out of his misery. The fact that the mother was caught in the draught was
unfortunate, but when you got a plan to carry out you can't stop to consider
collateral damage. George Bush couldn't afford to start worrying about how many
American soldiers would die in Iraq or even less how many children, wives, mothers
and daughters got caught in the crossfire. If he did that he might as well give up his
job.

Now this new guy, the foreigner, this johnny-come-lately who's got the boss'
ear and heart... you could tell he had his mind set on big brother's millions. Danny's
worst nightmare was coming true. Senile, obsessive Clem might be contemplating
the unthinkable and adopt the kid. Clem Franzetti was getting more strange and
unpredictable every day. What can you say about a 74 year old who starts planting
a bloody olive orchard, carves out a church from a rock and spends hours
underground looking at a statue. Weird or what! Danny wondered how much that
whole project had cost already. Money down the drain. Danny's money. It was time
to act, before it was all lost.

There was no doubt in Danny O'Rourke's mind that life had been unfair to
him. It wasn't the fact that, so far back as he could remember, he's had to live
under the shadow of someone, be it his own ambitious mother, old Vic Franzetti
and then Clem Franzetti. The galling thing was that he knew he was a better man
than any of them. Not just sharper (Clem was as thick as a brick), he was superior,
with more ideas, more imagination than all of them put together, and yet rotten luck
had persecuted him all his life. At every turn, just as he thought things would
change, he found himself sidelined, cast-off, thwarted, put upon. Yeah, life was a
lottery, or else how could you explain the fact that a dimwit like Clem Franzetti, a lunatic with half his screws loose, was in a position to control people’s lives.

If only he had had a bit more luck, things might have turned out differently for Danny O’Rourke. Luck and people, they were the double bane of his life. People just didn’t warm to him, despite the fact that, back in the days when she exerted that kind of power over his young life, his mother’s dotage left no doubt in his mind that he was special. She made him believe, by words and by suggestion that he could do no wrong, that great things were in store for him, that all he had to do was to locate the store and claim what was his.

He must have been about eight. His mother was dressing him up to meet old Vic Franzetti for the first time. She had him all trussed up in a white shirt which he had outgrown. Danny hated any constrictions around his neck and when his mother went to button up his shirt he had squealed about the stiff collar, which tore at the skin of his neck.

“I can’t wear this, Mummy, it’s too scratchy.”

“Don’t be silly darling, you’re going to meet a very important man, “ she said, “We can’t have you looking scruffy can we now?”

Such reasonableness only served to precipitate Danny’s incipient tantrum. He threw himself down and started writhing on the floor, screaming. His mother picked him up from behind and dragged him back to her, saying, “We’re doing this for you, Danny, it’s all for you.”

She arm-locked his head and held him hard against her belly as she did up the top button. And when she released him he started pulling at the collar with his middle fingers trying to rip it loose, so she slapped his face several times until he stopped.
That night, after the ordeal, as she was helping him undress, she said, “Now, that wasn’t too bad was it, darling? See, you can do anything you want, so long as you set your mind to it.”

It hadn’t turned out quite that way. Danny wanted to do big things, have an important job, make lots of money; but somehow it hadn’t come off for him.

By his late-twenties he knew that there was no store in society but a people-pyramid; and the only way to ease the crush was by clambering over bodies and leave the masses below. Maybe that’s what his mother meant. Her legacy to Danny was to make him believe that he was above the ordinary. And the proof came two years ago, when he had shown to himself (the opinion of the world, on that incident, could not be canvassed, for obvious reasons) that when pushed, Danny O’Rourke was capable of deeds that ordinary individuals would balk at, because they lacked the imagination and the courage to carry them out.

For Danny there was no room for guilt or regret. His amorality was proof of superior breeding. He regarded himself above remorse. Let the middle-class struggle with it. He had better things to do in his life. So whatever action he took to further his ambitions, was beyond reproach, beyond moral judgement. What he had done – or rather organised, for it was Branko who had carried it out – did not cause him any soul-searching. Clem’s idiot offspring was no loss to the world. As for his long-suffering wife, she was not much good to anyone, least of all herself. So his costly little arrangement with Branko, which had resulted in the car plunging into the Swan River, had been worth the expense. Things had worked out, events were slotting into place, big brother Clem was coming round. Then he went overseas and he came back a changed man.

Danny had no doubt that all these changes: the new house, the olive trees and that spooky shrine were connected with that trip and the foreign kid. Clem had always been weird, anyway, but he came back from his trip positively wacko. And
the kid was no fool either, he knew what he was doing, he knew how to play the
game, despite looking as if butter wouldn’t melt in his mouth. Before you knew it, he
would diddle Danny of his rightful inheritance. Like hell he would. He didn’t know
what was coming to him. “You gotta fight for your rights in this world, Danny, “ his
mother said “or else you get trampled upon.”

His mother talked a lot of shit too, like everybody, but some things she said
made sense. Luckily he had a trick or two up his sleeve, all the more lethal because
nobody took him seriously; nobody imagined him to have any interest beyond the
racecourse or the roulette table. Weird thing, his perceived weakness turns out to
be part of his armoury. So it was in his interest to let everyone think that he was
weak, lazy and cowardly; a contemptuous little shit, incapable of doing serious
damage, of carrying out the perfect crime in order to get rid of a nuisance…or two.
Of course Danny was not prepared to get his own hands dirty. That was Branko's
brief. Just come up with the cash and you're on. You can sleep easy in the
knowledge that it would all be taken care of. Sure, with Branko you needed to tread
carefully, he could fly off the handle at any moment, you never knew how he would
take a simple comment, but he was good at his job, he had shown that he could
deriver. Danny O’ Rourke was spoiling for the fight of his life.

32

Every Saturday morning Sante looked out for the big Toyota with the roo
bar, followed him with the margin of his eye as he groomed the chestnut mare,
brushing her down, dousing her with the hose in the warm sunshine, taking her
through her paces in the paddock. Across the distance man and animal
looked...together. Russell never acknowledged him, not a wave, not a glance. Is it possible that he never, never, thought of his natural son, just the other side of the half-built wall?

So close and yet so far. He had travelled half way across the earth to connect with this land and this man, only to be thwarted by a waist-high wall of resistance. And his own sister wasn't being much help either.

"Look Sante, " said Ira-Jane giving him a look of impatience, "he doesn't want to have anything with..." she diluted 'you' with 'all that stuff', "he's in denial and wants to stay that way. I'm afraid there's nothing you can do about it."

"I know, " he said, giving her a wounded-dog look "I know that Ira, but...."

Ira-Jane became exasperated with him.

"Don't let this thing turn into an obsession."

It already was. All obsessions are plugholes, un foro di scarico, to drain away the neuroses of living. Perhaps too, this fixation of his with that stranger-father, came from a need to be approved of, and conversely, from a refusal to accept rejection. In other words, his motives were eminently self-serving.

So really he needed to think less of his needs and more of others. Like his mother, who would be justifiably hurt by his persistence in linking up with the man who defiled her. And yet, viewed from this end of the world his mother's profile had changed too. She was no longer the infallible figure she had seemed. From where he stood, and given what he now knew, her dimensions had been reduced, she seemed not so formidable, decidedly vulnerable.

Guilt and confusion made him mellow.

"Hey," said Sante, "before I leave..."

Ira Jane gave a start.

"Where are you going now?"

"Back to Italy. I only have four more weeks..."
She had forgotten, was it already time for him to go?

"Will you take a holiday with me?"

Ira-Jane had never taken a holiday in her life. She had travelled of course, as part of her job, but no holidays. Holidays were for bored, shiftless people, or retired old couples looking to fill their last years of living.

"A holiday? Where?"

"I don't know. I want to see more of Australia. Will you come too?"

Sante was a child again, how could she deny those pleading eyes?

"Yes, let's take a holiday, " she said and already her heaviness was lifting,

"I'll make time."

The day of the accident, a misty Saturday morning, Sante was on the roof cleaning the gutters that drained into the rainwater tank, when he heard a call coming from the other side of the wall. It was impossible to see who it was through the mist. At first he thought of Danny, because he could not imagine Russell calling out. He scuttled down the steps and ran across to the next block. Just the other side of the wall, he found the big man bending over the horse slumped on the ground, its legs flailing at the air. It must have been attempting to scale the wall and given the poor visibility misjudged the height. Russell had his shirt off and was using the sleeve to stop the blood trickling from a gash in the right foreleg. He took Sante’s hand into his bloodied one and pressed it onto the cloth.

"Hold it there, I'll be back in a minute."

Looking back on this incident in days to come, it would occur to Sante that the first-ever, physical contact with his father was smeared with blood. For the time being he just knelt in the damp earth, with his hand pressing back the blood flow, feeling the animal's belly rise and fall.
Russell came back with an enamelled metal box containing a first-aid kit. He sprung it open, took out the disinfectant and bathed the wound, swabbing away the dirt, starting from the outer periphery of the gash and working his way in to Sante's hand.

"Let's have a look," he said. Sante removed the cloth, the blood flow had slowed down to a seepage. Russell went to work on the wound itself, with quick, gentle flicks of the hand. The horse stirred, kicking the sand with front hoof and attempting to raise its head.

"Sit still," said Russell and thinking that the antiseptic on the open wound must have irritated the animal he stopped.

"Are you any good at bandaging?"
Sante was about to shrug his shoulder, instead he said, "Do you want me to do it?"

"Yeah, you do it and I'll try and settle him."
As Sante wound the bandage around the leg, Russell rested the head of the animal on his lap, stroked it along the neck and he spoke soothingly.

"Easy, easy boy. You'll be Ok. Just…hang in there… the vet'll be here soon."

The horse stopped kicking, giving Sante the chance to quickly wrap several layers of gauze over the wound then he firmed it down with a safety pin.

"That'll do for the time being," said Russell, and looked up across the belly of the horse. Sante felt like he was seeing a new man, or rather the father he had dreamed of for many years. A wave of panic rushed through him. He wiped his cheek with the back of his hand, to hide from the man's gaze. Russell grinned,

"You've got blood smeared over your face. Ira-Jane'll think I hit you."

That unusual smile on the big man's face gave Sante such a rush of pleasure that instinctively he leant across and ran his hand down Russell's naked
arm. The man whose genes he carried shuddered and recoiled away, he could not cope with this much closeness. Sante looked into those faded, tired eyes and saw, to his great shock, only confusion and fear there. Sante felt sorry for him.

At the end of a long, uncomfortable pause, punctuated by the panting of the horse, Russell asked,

"Do you like horses?"

"Yes, very much."

"You own one?"

"No, unfortunately."

"You live in the city, I suppose."

"A small town. We have land too, not big like this, a small land, with olive trees."

Russell glanced across the wall.

"It must feel like home then."

"No, it is different. Our trees are very old. It is different."

The man gave him a blank look, clearly he didn't understand. He said,

"Years ago you didn't see one olive trees around here, now everyone's going mad planting them. Soon they'll glut the market. That's what happened to the wine industry."

No, the man didn't understand and Sante saw no point in trying to explain about the olive tree. New country, different perspective. No, it wasn't that either. He might be connected to this man by blood, but a chasm divided them. It wasn't a question of what he had done, or that they had so little in common, it was simply that they were of a different nature, an ocean separated them, and he wasn't sure that it could be crossed, or that he wanted to. The same ocean had divided him from Ira-Jane, and yet the moment she stood before the old house at Rovaro and said, "I have seen this house", at that instant the ocean had vanished and he
understood the connection between them transcended space. No such moment 
would ever occur between him and this man. They were destined never to connect. 
Sad.

Crows staged an angry palaver on the gum tree, their croaking, intensified in 
the mist. It sounded vaguely like a dirge or perhaps a threat from some unseen 
enemy. It stirred the horse. The eyeballs spun in their sockets. It started to kick 
again, as if attempting to take flight.

"Keep still," Russell commanded, pressing the head of the animal against 
his belly, and inclining his cheek to its nostrils "it won't be long now."

But the horse butted and struggled to be released. Russell let go. Freed 
from the man's hold the animal attempted to hoist itself up by its forelegs, but the 
effort seemed to sap its energies. The next moment it grunted, fell back, gave out 
what sounded like a bovine bellow and stretched itself out on the ground. The eyes 
remained open but they were blank.

Sante looked up at the older man and saw that his eyes had that same 
startled stare as the animal's.

"So..." said Russell, as if concluding a discussion.

Over the drive came the putter of a motor, a silence, the slamming of a door 
and the outline of a figure advanced through the mist, calling,

"You there, Russell?"

Russell did not reply, instead, he turned to the young man and spoke softly, 
like the whisper of the saddest secret, "So, that's it then."
For a take-out job you could count on Branko. By nature a lazy man, he liked the woman to go on top so that he could just lie there and let her do all the work. It got to a point where the girls at Soho Nights Escorts had been complaining that doing it with Branko was exhausting and wanted penalty rates. But that was another story.

The prospect of a new job never failed to bring out the best in Branko. All at once he was energized, his perceptions were sharpened. Qualities, which lay dormant for months in the sensual indolence that dominated the routine of his life, suddenly stirred and a new Branko emerged.

One might speculate that Branko's problems could be channelled through work, artistic expression or, at worst, through addiction or vice. Unfortunately Branko was not endowed with talent, nor was he strapped with conspicuous vices. He was not a drinker, gambling required too much concentration and he had so much contempt for druggies whom he supplied, that the notion of winding up like one of them was enough to put him off for life. It's true he spent whole afternoons (he liked to be in bed by ten at night) in the velvety chambers of Soho Nights Escorts, but even that cloyed after a while, and all that perfume irritated his sinus. So, it was fair to say that the occasional contract job was his secret vice and a handy little earner it was too.

What absorbed him completely was not so much its execution as the preparation. He planned each job methodically, leaving nothing to chance. Of course his was a risky business, a risk compounded by the fact that in dealing with people you could never trust them completely. In fact Branko had little trust in
people. So he tried to minimize the people-factor by working on his own, which was not always possible. Therefore his few failures - and there were some, no use denying it – had largely been the result of people letting him down.

Like the time when he was meant to take out the wife and got the mistress instead. All because the husband – who was meant to fly out to Manila that morning – was rushed to the hospital by the wife, with a burst appendix and the mistress had gone to the house to fetch some stuff for the office. How unlucky can you get! No amount of planning can insure you against that kind of thing. As a result the husband was left with a wife he didn’t want and the tart he was wanting to shack up with got a hole in the head. Of course the lucky thing about that kind of mistake was that there was little comeback for the client. He could hardly go to the law and complain that his screw had been taken out instead of his wife, could he now? Branko apologized and offered to do the wife for free, fair is fair. The silly bugger wouldn’t hear of it and said he wasn’t going to pay up, then started to get personal, “It’s you who should be compensating me for making a mess of it, you stupid numbskull.”

In the end Branko had to take him out. Which wasn’t ideal because he never got any money, but at least he covered his tracks, and in the profession everybody understood that Branko was not the kind you messed about with. Even Slat was impressed with the way he handled the situation, although on the surface he made a big song and dance about taking on a side-job without telling him.

His brother Zlatan would have to be the most scrupulous man he knew. If it was up to him, Branko’d be starving, he really would, because he was only prepared to do score-settling jobs within the business. These were rare enough in a place like Perth and poorly paid. At most a Northbridge job paid five thousand and they expected the extras, like getting rid of the body. The privates, they’ll pay four times that, even more, if they’re desperate enough. The best one was old Duffy, the nifty dresser from South Africa, who used to hire him to take out a number of
diamond-dealing rivals. What a gentleman he was! Fifteen thousand down payment, fifteen in cash within an hour of job completion. They’re the sort of clients you want, they bring respect to the profession. Unfortunately Duffy got into bad company: a big-time dealer from the Middle East. This character tried to hire Branko to do the dirty on Duffy. Of course Branko wouldn’t have a bar of that, but the dapper Duffy got done all the same: his light plane finished up somewhere in the depths of lake Argyle. In retrospect Branko might as well have taken on the job, in his profession scruples were bad for business.

When Danny came to him with this job, he had to think a bit, something he didn’t enjoy doing at best of times. Danny still owed him from the last job when he did some work on the Mercedes – not the best of cars to do that kind of work on. But he did it, and what a beautiful job it turned out to be. Responded like a clock, went flying off the bridge at precisely the moment it was meant to. Of course Zlatan knew nothing about that particular job. He’d go off his head if he knew. Too risky. Yeah right, as if protection and drugs weren’t risky! Anyway, you could limit the risk by going about your job professionally.

He hated doing it though. No, not the jobs, he rather enjoyed them, he got quite obsessive about the process, it absorbed him completely. What he hated was having to deceive his brother, but he had to. The kind of money Zlatan allowed him to have wouldn’t even pay for his visits to the Soho Nights.

Anyway, he didn’t trust Danny and he didn’t like the idea of putting out a guy that worked on the property of his rich relative. Experience had taught him to try and steer clear of family feuds, though you couldn’t avoid them altogether, a lot of private jobs involved a family member. So at first he said no, until Danny came up with $5,000 down payment, in cash. You can’t say no to that kind of money. God knows where he got it, seeing as he was always broke. Anyhow, that’s none of his
business. Branko took the money and so there was no going back, he was committed to it; his professional integrity was at stake.

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For two consecutive Saturdays he watched every move of his subject from the loft of the stable next door, sitting on steel girder some 6 metres off the floor, in front of the louvered window, which looked over the half-completed wall, on to the olive farm. Strange thing, while he was watching, his subject- a skinny-legged kid with dark hair- looked up and stared directly in his direction as if he could see Branko sitting behind the high frosted glass louvers. That was impossible because of the thickness of the glass and the layer of sooty dust on both sides of the glass. The first time Branko thought it was a coincidence, but when he kept doing it, it just about spooked him. Branko, had to remind himself the subject was just a skinny kid in a baggy T-shirt. What business could Danny possibly have with him? Lucky that Branko was not by nature an inquisitive man, so he didn't dwell on that too much. Besides, there were other things to distract him.

As he sat up there on the dusty window ledge (though he gave the area a good sweep up with the brush, it was still pretty unhygienic) the air thick and damp like soup. Worst of all was the stink rising from the floor and wafting towards the roof, it just about scorched his nostrils. Those horses must have been constipated or something. Or maybe they fed them on putrid broad beans. A most uncomfortable experience, anyhow. Luckily the worst was over. The night before he slipped across the fence and into the farm shed, to work on the car. Simple. By the time Danny arrived at the stables to whisk him away to his own car back in Midland, everything was ready.
Franzetti withdrew into himself. He stopped reading even his own newspaper. All that frenzied carrying on, the posturing, the melodrama, the false smiles…all images of a confused and confusing world: insane, self-destructive… it was all a smokescreen to hide the profound state of unhappiness to which the world had dipped.

The past few months had given him a simple, yet profound, truth: that the physical world was an obfuscation, a poor conceit for the real world of the spirit. The body did not matter. So the fact that his body was giving up on him was of no import. There was the Virgin Mary, that was real. And there was Sante. The Madonna of the Olives and Sante Marzano, in his mind the two were bound together. The young man was not aware of his destiny, but for Clem Franzetti there was no doubt: one day soon something in Sante would awaken and then the connection would be made clear to him. It was time to visit the grotto.

He trundled down the track as the sun stood poised atop a purple pyre of clouds and the silver eyes flitted from one silver branch to the other, dispersing sibylline whispers through the foliage. When he reached the courtyard before the gate he stood there contemplating the Madonna through the iron bars. There she was, safe from thieves and marauders, waiting for him, an expression of perennial gentleness upon her lovely face. He pressed the remote with his thumb and the gate rose. He limped in. Her presence filled him with joy.

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A spirit was moving through the Madonna of the Olives. Clem Franzetti had been noticing it for weeks now, the eyes had lost their sky-blue colour, in its place two tiny black pools with a rippled surface. If you concentrated on one eye for long enough, you could see specks of white light gliding along the surface. Mesmerised by the vision, he lost all connection with time and entered the moment eternal. What brought him back was a sudden tremour, though at first he could not tell whether the movement was in the Madonna or the surrounding space. Surely the Virgin Mary was not levitating before his eyes! Memory took him back to 1967 and the Meckering earthquake, when he had been caught standing on a ladder against the external wall of his house, paint brush in hand, reaching for the gutter, when suddenly the brick walls swayed, the ground heaved and sank from under his feet. But this was no earthquake; this was something far too mysterious to be a so-called, natural phenomenon. He looked again into the Madonna's eyes and he felt faint with joy. The eyes were speaking to him with messages more intimate, more eloquent than words.

At last, Clem, the time has come. You are about to witness the final revelation, the moment to which your life has been leading up to: when the matter burns into the fire of the spirit.

Was that it? No time to consider this for presently the Madonna shivered and a flake fell from under her eye. Then tiny specs appeared at the exposed chip and ran down her cheek like tear drops. No, thought Clem, not another crying Madonna! The Holy Mother of his imaginings was a glorious, happy, radiant one. He took a few paces forward, stretched out his hand in a gesture of supplication. The tips of his trembling fingers touched the fold-covered knee, he pressed and his index sank into a hollow crevice.

Clem retrieved his hand, like a man on the edge of a precipice and stood there too terrified to move. A gash had opened on the knee, it was teeming with
tiny, white insects… ants which, caught by the light, went scampering for cover into
the shell. He realized, with horror, that the shell was paper-thin, that the statue had
been hollowed out from the inside by the voracious termites.

Instinctively he braced himself to the Madonna at the bottom with both
hands in a desperate attempt protect it from danger, or perhaps, in an equally vain
attempt to shake off the offending crawlies. More patches flaked off exposing a
fissure where the garment folded above the knee, from which a rill of sawdust
poured out. Other flakes fell away to reveal a hidden world, quivering like sequins in
the sun. Having recovered from shock Clem flailed at the insects with his walking
stick. Sawdust and insects flew off the statue, clouding the air of the grotto. A
paraffin smell distracted Clem. He turned and saw that a candle had fallen catching
the drapes alight. As he considered this danger, the statue, teetered, wavered and
crumbled down on its own pile of sawdust. Millions of ants fuelled the fire, flames
hissed menacingly. Clem stood there paralysed.

35

Ira-Jane felt light and heavy. Light with excitement that she had been
offered a job to produce her own T.V. travel show and she couldn’t wait to share her
good news with Sante. She felt heavy at the prospect of another session in the
editorial room with Bob.

At 4.30pm Sante left a message on Ira-Jane’s mobile: *Wondering what to
eat tonight? Problem solved, your brother will cook for you. Secret dish!* Ira, who
was heading for the editing room with Bob, texted him back: *thanks, my stomach’s
rumbling in anticipation. What will I do when you go back?* To which Sante promptly
replied: *Come to visit me.* Ira smiled into her hand. Bob, who had gone ahead of her, as Ira's pace was slowed down by this communication, called back to her.

"Come on Ira, we haven't got all day."

Ira-Jane ignored his impatience. What was the point, in two weeks' time she would be gone, away from this work atmosphere that had become unbearable, and in the exciting world of television.

"Coming, " she said and hurried to catch up, hoping this would not be another lengthy tug-of-war. A vain hope, as soon as Bob set eyes on the first item: a piece on the marron farmers of Pemberton, he started finding fault.

"I thought we were going to feature the new Indian Ocean cruises."

"We're leaving that for a while, after the tsunami..."

"Nonsense, that's one more reason why we should do it. Our advertisers expect us to push it."

Only two weeks ago he had argued the opposite case, but she let it pass. She just wanted to get home.

"Fine," she said, unconvinced, tucking a stray strand of hair behind the right ear, "I'll come in tomorrow and work on it."

"It can wait until Monday."

"On Monday I won't be here."

"Why? Where are you off to this time?"

He knew very well where she was going. They'd had an argument about it, another one. Now he was pretending not to know, just to irritate her.

"I'm going to the Kimberleys with my brother. I told you that last week."

"How am I supposed to remember that? How long you going to be away for?"

"Just four days. I'll be back at work on Wednesday."

"This is a busy time for us. You could have chosen a better time."
Ira-Jane looked at her watch, in less than an hour Sante would be home.

Sante slipped the mobile in the side pocket of his shorts, he slid the roller door closed and pressed the padlock shut. He headed for the car, thinking of the ingredients he would need for the seafood soup he was going to cook: the prawns, mussels, red mullet, bay leaves, garlic. What else? White wine of course. As for the onions, Ira-Jane was bound to have some, though he had better get one just in case. No need for chilies, though. He got some left over from the previous week’s pasta dish. There was no chance that Ira-Jane would have used it, because she never cooked. That would be his worry about her once he got back to Sicily, how poorly she ate.

He was accompanied to the car by the image of Ira-Jane sitting down to a steaming plate of soup, taking in the scents, her nose twitching in anticipation, giving that emphatic 'Hmm! Hmm!' of pleasure when the first spoonful passed through her lips. That would be his reward. As he backed the car away from the wall and turned towards the drive he was arrested by a voice. At first he thought it might be a white cockatoo up on the gum trees that lined the side of the property, then he saw Clem Franzetti running down the slope, treading on the damp spring weeds growing around the trees and almost stumbled down. He stopped on a mound and waved the stick above his head, as if pointing to some apparition on the horizon which only he could see. Sante stretched his neck through the side window trying to hear over the idling of the engine. He could see by the frantic waving of Franzetti that there was some urgency, and then, further up the slope he saw smoke coiling over the grotto.
Armed with binoculars Branko sat in his car on a rise, the other side of the highway, he saw the old man waving frantically to get the subject's attention and swore. He hated the unexpected interfering with his plans. It was like a bad omen. He regretted having set the timer to seven minutes from the start of the engine. There was a reason for it, had the blast occurred when the engine was turned on, it might have set the store up in flames creating a conflagration. There was no point in being destructive for its own sake. Branko hated messy things. It was better for the blast to occur well away from the farm. Well anyway all that was immaterial now, that crazy fruitcake had managed to sabotage his plan. Less than five minutes left on the timer and the subject was taking the car in the wrong bloody direction. When he reached the grotto, he got out of the car and followed the old man into the cave. Branko realized that the bomb would go off and the subject was no longer in the car.

In the pandemonium that ensued, Branko found time to congratulate himself on the precision of his timing. He waited for the two men to come running out of the grotto, but none did, instead a cloud of dust whooshed through the air like a tornado, blotting out the landscape all the way up to the house. As the dust cloud lifted he saw that the blast had blown a gaping hole on the sidewall of the grotto and the roof had collapsed. The two men must have been crushed under the rubble. This was not his day. However, as he drove away, Branko was gratified by the thought he was still entitled to get the remainder of the money, most of which he had already allocated.
When Ira-Jane walked into her South Perth apartment just before six, expecting to be met by the wafting smells of cooking garlic and herbs, she found instead an empty house, with its all-too-familiar staleness. On the answering machine there were several messages, but nothing from Sante.

She called his mobile. No answer. She texted him “Where’s the food you promised me? Just you wait…. I’ll punish you with my cooking.”

Her jollity masked a deep anxiety. She resisted the temptation of calling around. In the fridge, she found some eggs and a bunch of rocket. She would make an omelette, just to do something, get busy.

As she got to the stove, the phone rang. It was from the New Norcia Agricultural College. Sante had left his watch whilst visiting a student in the boarding house the day before and hadn’t come back for it.

Ira-Jane slammed down the phone. She didn’t like the vibes she was getting. She liked even less the position in which she found herself. Long ago she decided that she would not be a wife, or mother, precisely because she wanted to avoid this kind of situation. Normally she could handle a crisis by self-talk. Ok, so what's the worst thing that can happen here? And the worst had never seemed bad enough to panic over. Because it concerned herself alone she felt, somehow, that she had some control over events. Now things were different, this was her brother, and what happened to him touched her. Her reality was no longer single. Her world had expanded, the whole was segmented and she was struggling to keep together the folds. What's the worst that could happen? She didn't want to think.
By eight o’clock Ira-Jane could no longer wait. An anaemic looking omelette sat in the plate uneaten. She turned her attention to the telephone. As much as she disliked getting him involved she called Russell. She could hear voices in the background, he must be at some pub. No surprises there.

“Hi, it’s Ira-Jane here. I thought you might be on duty.”

“I’m not. Why, what’s wrong.”

“Nothing, I hope, I…. ” and she realized how silly it would sound, too bad, “do you know of any accidents reported in the last couple of hours, up Gingin way?”

“I can find out for you,” he sounded relatively approachable. Probably had a few already, she suspected.

“What’s wrong?” he repeated. This time she noted slight breathlessness.

“Sante’s gone missing,” she said simply.

“What do you mean? Since when?”

“He said he’d be here at six and he’s still not arrived.”

“What time is it now? It’s only…. can’t even read my watch in this light…”

“Past eight o’clock”

“Is that all? He might have got held up somewhere.”

“He would have called…besides… we’re leaving for a holiday tomorrow afternoon. Look can you check for me. I’m worried.”

And she hung up. She was in no mood for arguing with him. But she did note that he too sounded concerned. In the simmer of her anxieties this thought brought a strange frisson of pleasure.

……………………

A quick call to Central revealed nothing. There had been a couple of accidents, one of which was on Great Northern Highway: a semi-trailer had run off
the road and the driver had escaped with minor injuries. Nothing on Marzano. Whilst reporting this to Ira-Jane over the phone, Russell remembered the conversation with Zlatan, earlier in the day. He ran to the car and raced to Gingin. As he crested the hill to the house Russell was met by the acrid smell of burning rubber. His heart began to race. Easy, treat this like any other job. But it wasn't doing the trick. His head spun. Following the scent trail, he veered right along the track in its direction where, over the darker silhouette of the big rock, loomed a half moon. He dipped his headlights and there, next to the rock wall were the gutted remains of a car. He had seen enough wrecked cars to realize that this was something else. Russell got out, leaving the car lights on, and taking a torch with him. Sooty stones, shards of wood and bits of metal littered the courtyard. It must have been a mighty explosion.

The outline of the vehicle appeared like a smouldering blotch upon a dusky background over which sat a halo of blue smoke. Whose car was it? The question was merely a diversion from a thought worming itself upon his consciousness. He didn't want it. He must keep his cool, wear the detective cap. Think, Russ, think. Navigating his way around various bits of debris Russell reached the car and shone the torch. To his relief there was no sign of the driver. Water swirled around the soles of his boots. He followed the flow on the paved floor, skipping over puddles and skirting around litter he reached to where a stream of water was bubbling to the surface from under a pile of rubble. Russell guessed that the source was a burst water pipe inside the grotto, whose entrance was blocked by debris from an imploded sidewall. The light beam revealed a charred mound over which the iron gate had collapsed. Russell felt the immense darkness out there press upon him. A night creature hollered I the dark, and then, from within, a whine responded, like the breathing of an asthmatic. He clambered over rubble, feeling a gash on his knee as
he slipped on a smooth, damp surface; shone the torch over the pile and there, trapped beneath the collapsed gate, he noticed an elbow jutting out of the iron grid.

Russell proceeded to remove the bits of stone, wooden bats and plaster; tossing them over his head into the dark, making strange intrusive sounds. He stopped. As if on cue the body beneath stirred, the whimpering was unmistakable, underneath a wooden beam lay the figure of a man, inclined face-down, as if caught by the collapsing roof, not fleeing, but running in, his head just centimetres away from a ripple of silt washed down by the flow of water, that threatened to drown him. With the face blackened by damp soot it was difficult to distinguish the features, but he knew the shape of the head, the texture of the hair. The recognition overwhelmed him. He took out his mobile and called the Midland Police.

“Send an ambulance and a rescue team,” he yelled, his voice choking.

A renewed wheeze, followed by a stifled cry, gave Russell heart.

“My leg…”

A gash had opened up where the thigh was crushed against the side pillar at the entrance, pinning him to the ground. Just as well, because, had he been able to move, he would have upset the pile above, causing the weight to come crashing down on his head. The beam that trapped him also protected him. First thing he must remove the bits above and around the beam so as to loosen it free. Normally he would have waited for the rescue squad to arrive, this wasn't his job, he had no training in it, it wasn't his responsibility. But this situation was different, the usual platitudes that govern our actions no longer applied here. He had to act to save his son. After spending a life running from what he had done, from himself, he had come to the end of an alley whose way was blocked by a mirror. There was no way out but for him to stand before it and look at himself. The prospect was both as terrifying and alluring as death. Staring him in the face was a pointless, self-
indulgent life trapped within the confines of ego and desire. Regret made him shiver and shook him out of his paralysis.

He sat the torch on the ledge of the cave, and got down to work, removing the bits of bats, the plaster, sheets of wood whose varnish he could still smell beneath the pungency of cinders. Having cleared the top layer, he started digging away with his hands, not caring about the cuts, until his hand struck something sharp, a metal edge and a gash appeared on the lower edge of his hand.

"Fuck it," said Russell, wincing.

No matter, the piece of metal, part of the guttering came in handy for scraping away the dirt. He cleared a space around him. He had the strange sensation that with each item he removed he was unburying a new self: the self he could have been, wanted to be. He felt some damp hair; his fingernails caught in some piece of garment and then the touch of damp flesh, followed by the comforting feel of Sante's breath on the inside of his pulse. He lowered his head and gently placed his ear over his chest, listening to the thumping of his heart. The boy was alive. Tears squeezed out and flooded his eyes. A tremor shook his body, and what seemed like a 44-year weight lifted. Oh what a release! What joy! He wanted to embrace the whole world, just hold it right here in his arms. He wanted to hang on to that moment's triumph forever.

"Drink," said Sante

As Russell came back, water cup in one hand, torch in the other, car beams lit the drive from the highway. It wasn't the ambulance, the lights of Ira-Jane's car spilled across the courtyard, lighting the way to where Russell was kneeling, cup raised before him as if he were about to drink a toast.

"Is he?..."
Ira-Jane could not finish. The words drowned in a sea of emotions, like relief that her brother was alive, shock at the sight of the devastation, amazement at seeing Sante’s head on Russell’s lap.

“He’ll be fine,” said Russell, and his voice had never sounded so calm “the ambulance should be here any minute.”

Caught in the light beam of the car the unlikely trio comprising of Sante held in the arms of a burly man, with a young woman kneeling down over them – her shadow launched across the foreground – the figures formed some kind of synthesis, a symmetrical whole, almost... a family portrait caught by an Old Master.

Ira-Jane and Russell watched the back of the ambulance disappear down the highway.

“Do you think he’ll be alright?”

“Yeah, of course,” Said Russell, “he’ll be fine, he's young.”

Russell sounded regretful. Was he thinking of his wasted life?

He made his way to the car.

“Are you coming to the hospital?”

Russell turned, looked at her surprised.

“Me? I don’t think he’ll want me there. I don’t think so.”

“I think you’re wrong there, Russell.”

Children will always want their parents, she thought, even if it's only to blame them.

Sante Marzano had survived unscathed ‘by the skin of his teeth’, quipped the headline. In Sicily they might have said, ‘by a miracle’. In Australia miracles
were harder to come by, but Ira-Jane, a sceptic by nature, was now inclined to emulate Don Alfio and hedge her bets.

Russell came to the hospital, bulked up with beer-gut and machismo, and a lifetime's attitude fuelled by anger, born out of a long suppressed need for touching and loving, ever ready to transmute into violence. He was there to play the good, brave police officer for the cameras, for the media had appropriated the story and needed a protagonist. And so, Russell Toohey, whose life was precariously balanced, at the outer edge of the law, became, for a few seconds, its icon: a reluctant hero.

He found the role challenging. Out of habit his uniform flagged a warning, 'just you keep off me, the rescue was part of my job. Nothing's changed'. Well, things do change, with or without our approval.

He shook hands with Sante in front of the camera while the presenter gave her commentary on Russell Toohey's bravery. No mention of their convoluted connections. None of them wanted to be outed. To Ira-Jane, watching the story on the evening news that night it seemed like fiction on reality television. The reality? The reality was hidden beneath the pretence, because it was far too complicated for public consumption. But isn't that always the case? She thought.

Russell presented Sante with flowers, so perfectly arranged as to make great T.V. footage. Folk in their living rooms would be gratified to be served a feel-good story. The real story was more subtle, elusive, hidden away in the midst of the anemones and the blood-coloured gerberas. It was told by an olive branch: silver, unassuming, overwhelmed by all that flamboyance of colour. It had been placed there by Russell. The inspiration to put it there came out of knowing that he had less than 3 months to live.

..........................
Danny O’Rourke always knew that he didn’t have much luck in life, though he must have always hoped or else he would not have spent so much time at the casino or the race course. Now, on learning that mad old Franzetti had not left a will, Danny thought he spied Luck’s eyewink at him from the corner of a golden frame. After all he was the Old Man’s nearest relative.

Just when he started counting how many millions and how he was going to spend, the shock news hit him via the media. Franzetti’s empire had debts so large that his creditors would be lucky to receive 20 cents in the dollar of what they were owed. In other words, Clem Franzetti was bankrupt. As a consequence the olive grove would have to be sold, probably to a cooperative which planned to demolish the stables and a modern crusher would be built to service the booming olive oil industry of the region. For Danny it was a final confirmation that fortune was indeed a bitch.

Danny o’Rourke would have cried in self-pity if only he knew how too. Just think a lifetime of sucking up to someone only to be screwed one more time by that person. Yeah, the last laugh went to Old Clem Franzetti, as always.

Carissima,

Manderò una copia di questo messaggio anche a tuo fratello perché...I’m sending a copy of this message to your brother also because what I have to say addresses both of you. I am delighted to hear that Sante has reconciled with his natural father but very saddened to learn that he is seriously ill. No matter what happened in the past he is the link between the two of you. For that reason alone his life has been invaluable and this reconciliation will make your bond stronger.
Actually, one only has to think of you and Sante to conclude that goodness must have resided in this man's heart. And because this is beginning to sound like a homily I will change the subject.

You both may be interested to learn that the whole of the region from the hills of San Sisto to Milazzo and beyond, is abuzz with excitement because the rumour has spread that Mimmo is going to marry Federica Fresina. This is big news because Federica is the daughter of Tindaro Fresina, yes of the rival Cefalu' clan. So, it seems like a marriage made in the mafia heaven, for it is designed to make peace between the two factions. I take little notice of such rumours usually, though I admit to having a weakness for gossip, but this has the confirmation from the protagonist himself. Mimmo has confided in me (yes, thanks to you I have that sort of familiarity with Mimmo) that though his heart for Signorina Ira-Jane beats as strongly as ever, there are certain responsibilities that have fallen upon him which he cannot avoid. He confesses that he cannot love Federica in quite the same way as ‘the Australian beauty’ (understandable, given that Federica is decidedly plain, potentially mamma-sized and with a demeanour tending on the dour). Mimmo believes that what she lacks in beauty she compensates for in character and that kind of love tends to take on an amorphous growth. I am willing to give Mimmo the benefit of my hope.

All of that is a lengthy way of saying that it is safe for you to come back to us, Ira-Jane. Indeed I must reveal to you (Sante already knows) that it will be my birthday next October 21 and we are having a small celebration at Taormina. It gives me absolutely no joy to reveal to you that I am about to reach the unforgivable age of fifty-three. So it’s an occasion for both of you to come and commiserate with me. The years of life’s enjoyment are fast disappearing, what a tragedy! However I promise not to be lugubrious, indeed I have come to the conclusion that it’s all the more reason to make the most of what’s left of them, hence my wish to celebrate
with the people I love. So, Ira-Jane, I give you no choice, you must be in Taormina with us.

Vi attendo,

Vi abbraccio,

Alfio

The tourists milled around the bus, parked on the flat-topped rise, overlooking the gorge. Peaks of ochre, grey and tile-red rose from a fresh water pool under a brittle sun. Around the pool an oasis of tall gums tended skyward, triumphantly over a planetary landscape. A screechy flock of black cockatoos in spear formation lanced through the sky on reaching over the gorge they spread out at the flanks to form a semicircle before coming to rest in the foliage of the tall gums. An elderly man, a Canadian in cargo shorts and a peaked cap, with kangaroo and emu emblazoned on the front, took off his sandals and waded into the pool.

“What are you thinking about?” asked Sante.

“San Sisto.”

“Strange connection.”

Of course they were different worlds, poles apart, and yet there must have been a correspondence. More and more she saw this world in relation to the other, and vice versa. For this reason alone her first trip to Sicily had been valuable. Seeing one place through the lens of the other revealed to her nooks previously unknown, shadings not seen before.

“I too have been thinking about San Sisto,” said Sante.
Ira-Jane held her breath.

"Do you think you'll go back for good?"

“No, I don’t think so, Sicily for me will always be home, but Australia is where I will tend new olive trees. Sicily is the past, but I want to seek out my future here."

And yet, even before he had finished the phrase, he realised how facile it sounded. In real life things were never that simple, life could not be contained in a neat aphorism of time and space, or segmented into definitions of colour. Any one moment of one’s existence contained all the flow of time and all the colours of the spectrum in ever-redefining hues. One’s past: with its joys and hurts, disappointments and illusions, is always in the present as is the future with its dreams, hopes and fears. Sicily and Australia were in him, as he was of them. He was a conduit through which time and space flowed freely, yet precisely, in the chaos of existence. In him Australia came before Sicily – for this was the space of his conception – and yet his earliest conscious memories are of Sicily. Sicily was the land of ancient myths but this remote, galactic landscape spoke of times far more ancient than the Mediterranean.

…………………………

She could see it now. Ira-Jane without Sante was a leaf searching for a tree. Sicily brought them together; it took a pool in the Kimberley to crystallize the significance of that event. This moment was always in her consciousness, waiting to surface. Nothing is ever created anew; it’s merely uncovered, at most remodelled. Everything is already made, always present beneath the surface of time and space. She had now reached a milestone, a marker in her journey, one that needed to be touched, dwelt upon. One that would propel both of them forward, to their own destinies.
The cameras were out, the fingers clicked away in a desperate effort to record the moment, to still time and frame it. He said,

"We forgot our camera."

"It doesn't matter," said Ira-Jane, and she meant it. There was no need. The camera records the image, the impression, the illusion. They would take something far more important: experience, that wonderful conflation of place, time and feeling. This experience was destined to remain etched in their memory, one to which they would return for recognition. Experiences are the signposts of memory. What they shared had no measure nor price, for it was something absolute, permanent. Long after they had moved on, pursued their careers, maybe marry and have a family... even then, each would remain the touchstone of the other. It would suffice for each to know that the other existed and would be thinking of the other from time to time.

People on the bus had initially assumed that they were a couple. A lady, with a perfectly set hairdo remarked to her companion that it was unusual for siblings of their age to take a holiday together. So Sante tried to explain things: that they had only found each other recently, that they were compensating for lost time. But Ira-Jane told him there was no point. Did she care what people thought? Absolutely not. Her euphoria made her daring, mischievous. To live fully one must not be afraid to enter the grey territory. Only in that indeterminate space will one experience the intoxication of true freedom. Above all, one must never be afraid to love, to open up to hurt, if it came to that.

Ira-Jane held out her hand,

"Come Sante, I'll race you down."

They ran hand in hand, leaping over stones and low bushes, raising an orange dust behind them. When they got to the edge of the pool, they knew what to do. They dived in, fully clothed, sought each other in the newly-muddied water, exchanged an embrace and emerged still clinging to each other.
People watched and interpreted, giving each other looks. So let them. For the moment they bubbled with anticipation, because they realized – just knew instinctively, without exchanging a word – that they had come to a tacit decision. In a few days they were going to Sicily…. together.
Part II

The Italian Diaspora in Australia and Representations of Italy and Italians in Australian Narrative
Introduction

Diaspora: A Theoretical Review
Looking for Diaspora

Definitions are notoriously difficult to formulate and attempting to define diaspora is no exception. The plethora of attempts at unravelling the changing nuances of the term attests to the difficulty of the task. The French Larousse dictionary connects the origin of the word to the term ‘spores’: the microscopic seeds by which fungi and other plants disperse and propagate. It likens a seminal phenomenon occurring in nature to the migratory flows which set up colonies of their own kind in other parts of the world. However, this metaphor suggests spontaneous processes of natural dispersion and ignores the coercive nature of the displacement, which often leads to the formation of a diaspora. Tölöyan (1996) on the other hand, traces its phonological derivation from the Greek verb ‘diaspeirein’ which means to scatter or disperse. In an attempt to clarify the discourse of the traditional diaspora, Tölöyan identifies a number of defining parameters:

1. Coercion
2. Single original identity/culture
3. Collective memory
4. Tendency to “patrol their communal boundaries” (1996: 14)
5. Maintain communication with each other
6. Maintain communication with their common homeland
Tölölyan makes the classic distinction between coerced displacement and voluntary displacement. The first, more strongly pertains to the traditional sense of diaspora whose most prominent representations were the Jewish enclaves the world over. What characterises this kind of diaspora is a pervasive sense of loss, uprootedness, dislocation, above all of being different and of wanting to be different, to the exclusion of surrounding groups, including the main host group. Those who belong to this kind of diaspora cultivate differences, accentuate them, celebrate them by maintaining such encoding structures as religion, language and the rituals of their homeland. These become cultural walls, the boundaries whose function it is to keep out ‘foreign’ influences which are seen as a threat to the group's identity and homogeneity.

In a traditional diaspora change and evolution are seen as antagonistic forces that must be resisted to preserve cultural purity. If change is to occur, it must operate within the boundaries of the diasporic space and be compatible with its teachings and traditions. Intra-cultural relations, when present, are usually maintained at a formal or business level, but the non-diasporic subject is not invited to enter inside the walls of the diaspora. Friendships can occur but are not encouraged. Cross-cultural marriage is frowned upon and in some cases forbidden, unless the prospective partner is willing to convert, which means taking on the full load of the diasporic baggage, including its rituals and beliefs.

The second distinction, originating in voluntary displacement, extends the diasporic dialectic to encompass other forms of displaced groups which, for reasons other than overt coercion, have left their homeland. This distinction, while opening up to new interpretative
territory, creates new problems and begs some questions. For instance, can one really speak of voluntary displacement without falling into the contradiction trap? Does not the term displacement imply a degree of coercion either directly (e.g. change of government) or indirectly (e.g. drought, famine)? Just how voluntary is the displacement of a refugee who moves to another country to stave off starvation? Or the child who has no choice but to accompany his/her parents in migrating? Was the Italian child-migrant of the fifties any more able to choose than the Jew who fled from Nazi persecution in the mid-thirties?¹ Nor is the freedom to return to one’s country of origin (or the denial of that choice) a better marker of diasporic territory. If that were the case then one could argue that, with the establishment of the State of Israel in 1949, there is no longer any justification for Jewish enclaves throughout the world to call themselves diasporas, for these people now have a homeland to return to, if they so choose. Tölölyan suggests that the Jewish paradigm, which more closely fits the traditional diaspora, lasted until 1968, after which the accepted notion of a diaspora changed, evolving with the greatly increased frequency of population movements the world over and with the changed landscape of international politics.

On the other hand, Kim Butler (1996) questions the conventional approach to the discourse. He suggests that one ought not to attempt to deconstruct a term such as diaspora by setting it within parameters; more important than the definition is the discursive methodology which is adopted. He makes a distinction between the methodological and theoretical approaches,² echoing Foucault's shift of emphasis from “a theory of the knowing subject … to a theory of the discursive practice” (Foucault 1970: xiv) which he does not mean a
disruption of the original ‘subject’ and the emergence of an entirely different paradigm, rather, as Hall (1996) puts it “a reconceptualization – thinking it in its new, displaced or decentred position within the paradigm.” In other words, Hall believes that we need to re-think the modern diaspora, not so much in terms of re-defining it, rather by formulating a new methodology. Butler, therefore, suggests a diaspora narrative centred around five key areas:

1. Reasons for dispersal
2. Relationship with homeland
3. Relationship with host land
4. Interrelationships within the communities
5. Comparative studies of different diasporas

The virtue of such a methodology is that it widens the geography of exploration, for it is in this theoretical space that we may well find new signifiers in the evolution of the modern diaspora. The weaknesses are to be found in its corollary: that without clear parameters the discourse flounders in a morass of dispersion, obfuscation and incoherence³, or as Hall puts it (in relation to identity) “the manifest difficulties and instabilities which have characteristically affected all contemporary forms of identity politics.” (1996: 2)

Vijay Mishra (1996) too chooses to go down the reductive pathway, by framing the dialectic of the Indian diaspora into just two major distinctions: “the old diaspora of exclusivism and the new of the border”⁴ (189). The first, represented by V.S. Naipaul, is an enclosed, static “fossil world”, in which the memory of the original exiles has been replaced by the imagined world of the subsequent generation, whose individuals continue to practise the rituals of the forefathers without understanding them. The people of this diaspora live neither in
the world of their host country (for most of them the country of birth) nor in the real, contemporary world of their motherland. Inevitably the motherland undergoes a double transformation: by natural evolution occurring in time; and by a process of reconstitution that takes place in the imagination of the exile. This new, reconstituted reality passes through the filter of individual reminiscences, the rituals, the images constructed by the media, including the internet and, in some cases, short glimpses obtained during brief visits home. This closely resembles the kind of diaspora I shall describe later in dealing with the Italians in Australia.

The diaspora of the border is "the site of hybridity, change, 'newness', mobility and almost everything else that goes by the name of post-colonial theory" (Mishra 1996:190). In other words, the diaspora of the border is a more fluid, more dynamic term describing groupings which, though possessing very strong common identifiers, are more open to cross-cultural transactions. The result is a less rigid, more amorphous type of grouping, a diaspora that is in reaction to what Terry Cochran (1996) calls, "The emergence of Global Contemporaneity" (Cochran: 99) that is a world in which culture is packaged and mass-disseminated resulting in a "loss of specificity and identity" in contemporary individuals and societies.5

Finally, Walter Connor (1986) opts for the minimalist definition. For him a diaspora is "that segment of people living outside their homeland."(16) The great virtue of going minimalist is its adaptability; its fault lies in its vagueness. In fact, while the definition may appear simple to the point of astringency, it is by no means superficial. For example, the term homeland used to describe the diasporan's country of origin implies a certain relationship with both the host country and
the country of birth which goes to the core of the diasporic discourse. Likewise the term segment, though in itself not particularly specific, evokes a visual metaphor for the common tendency on the part of diasporans to put borders around themselves, whose aim it is to distinguish and delineate their identity from other groups in society, including the “mainstream”. In some cases, of course, these delineations are imposed externally, by the host society. Such is the case for the gypsies in Eastern Europe or the Jewish ghettos in pre-revolutionary Russia.

Connor’s definition sits well with Mishra’s distinctions of exclusivism and of the border, and avoids Tölölyan’s problematic distinctions of coerced and voluntary displacement. More importantly, as Tölölyan himself concedes, “Connor’s capacious definition accommodates all the multiplying dispersions that have been renamed as diasporas since 1968.” (Tölölyan: 16).

Looking at Identity

The concept of identity, in particular national and collective identity, has received a lot of attention, of recent, from the academic world. American scholars, Brewer and Gardner (1996) distinguish three types of identity: personal, collective and relational. One can see the problems and ambiguities created by adding the 'relational' category to the first two, for the relational aspect is already implied in both the personal and collective categories. Barnett (1999) makes this very point when he writes that identity is, "the understanding of oneself in relationship to others. Group identities, in short, are not personal or psychological, they are fundamentally social and relational, defined by the actor’s interaction with and relationship to others." (9). Italian Piero
Bassetti, (2004) also discusses the central role played by identity in the formation of a diaspora:

Nella situazione di diaspora, l'identità si basa sulla memoria dell'evento catastrofico e del luogo d'origine (reintegrati come miti di fondazione), e su una matrice comune di caratteristiche fisiche e culturali. La permanenza di questa identità, la sua continua reinvenzione, è garantita da un insieme di strategie complesse che definiscono ogni diaspora non come uno stato di fatto, ma come un progetto.6 (Bassetti:1)

Rose Mc Dermott, (2005) an American academic, writes: "Lately, the concept of identity has taken an increasingly prominent place in the social sciences. Analysis of the development of social identities themselves has become an important focus of scholarly research."

(Mc Dermott 2005:2) About time. In a world of huge people shifts, identity (both personal and collective) is challenged and tested, its meaning fluctuates, constantly demanding to be reassessed. Consider the impact on identity of such phenomena as the ideological and religious clashes which seem to have engulfed the contemporary world. Identity, of course, determines such important human constructs as allegiances and loyalty, around which nations and other collectives are founded and preserved. Think of the dilemmas faced by America's millions of Muslims; or the emotions aroused among French Muslims when they authorities decided to ban the wearing of scarves in schools; or the problems experienced by the Chinese authorities in banning the Falun Gong. Identity, in essence, is how people see themselves, as individuals in the first instance, which in turn determines which group they identify with and which cause they
are willing to fight for. Identity can be a hugely powerful force which can be tapped for political ends. Rose Mc Dermott continues:

Scholars using social identities as the building blocks of social, political, and economic life have attempted to account for a number of discrete outcomes by treating identities as independent variables. The dominant implication of the vast literature on identity is that social identities are among the most important social facts of the world in which we live. (2)

McDermott is co-founder of a recent Harvard University initiative, that goes under the title of “Identity as a Variable, Measuring the Content and Contestation of Identity”. The title, and the fact that such initiative captures the attention of such an authoritative institution, is indicative of the growing importance of identity in contemporary scholarship. In a paper, titled "Measuring Identity as a Variable," (2005) McDermott and three Harvard scholars: Rawi Abdelal, Yoshiko Herrera and Alastair Johnston suggest a framework by which collective identity can be qualified and quantified. They define collective identity as "a social category which varies along two dimensions: content and contestation." (2). Content describes what she calls 'the meaning' of a collective identity, which covers four areas:

1. Constitutive norms, that is, the generalities that describe a particular identity.
2. Social purposes, which incorporates the goals of an identity.
3. Comparisons with other social groups.
4. Cognitive models, which refers to the values and beliefs of the group.
In this framework *Contestation*, which refers to the degree of agreement or disagreement within the group over the shared beliefs and values, is given the same weighting as the *content*. This is not surprising, given the fact that the group looks at collective identities from the point of view of Strategic Studies. However, within the diasporic scholarship, I would see constestation- or if you like the degree of cohesiveness of the group- as a fifth area of study under the umbrella of *content*.

In a diasporic framework, the methodology must also accommodate and accentuate a further dimension, the original dispersion of the group and the reason (or a set of reasons) for that dispersion. For the diasporan, identity is founded on the collective memory, with particular focus on a common place of origin and/or a shared dramatic event. This key event could be the act of migration or something even more traumatic like war, or the destruction of one's place of birth.

Identity, according to Freud, (1991) "is the earliest expression of an emotional tie with another person...identification is, in fact, ambivalent right from the very start." (39) Here Freud refers to the Oedipal ties which bind the child to his parents as objects of both love and rivalry. Hence the contradiction and the ambivalence. Whilst Freud was referring to the individual's psyche, the discourse applies to the group also. The ambivalence of which he speaks prevails in the collective identity of diasporic subjects as well, whose identification with a particular group derives out of a common *derachinment* at the point of migration, an act which at once removes the subject from the cultural "centre", formalizes a rupture with the homeland and binds the individuals to each other. This fact alone sets up within a diasporan,
contradictory forces of love/rivalry relationship with the homeland. Moreover, the diasporan subsumes his concept of self to “artificially imposed selves “which a people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common.” (Hall 1996: 4). In other words the identity of the individual within a diaspora exists, to some extent, outside of the self and in denial of it.

In moving to another country the process of identification itself is also transformed. If, prior to translocation the field of self-identification remained largely within the boundaries of what was recognized as one’s society, migration expands the field of self-identification to encompass the space between the physical society in which the subject operates (or host country) and the remembered homeland. This homeland no longer exists in the way in which it is remembered, rather it has undergone an inevitable process of evolution that affects all societies. Agnew, in his article “Place and Politics in Post-War Italy” (1992), argues that identity is a process, “a dynamic phenomenon, a set of practices, interests and ideas subject to collective revision, changing or persisting as places and their populations change or persist in response to locally or externally-generated challenges.” (169) As the displaced person is no longer a part of that process his/her self-identification is not a true identification. Bill Ashcroft (2006) writes, "Diasporas very often construct racist fictions of purity as a response to the trauma of separation." (48) While Hall maintains that identification is mere representation which is “always constructed across a lack, across a division, from the place of the Other, and thus can never be adequate.”(63) In identifying this ambivalence, Hall echoes Freud who stated that identification “ is not that which binds one to an object that exists, but that which binds one to an abandoned
It is difficult to imagine a better description of the ambivalence which pervades the identification process of the diasporan.

In Search of Home

If identity, or more precisely, cultural identity, occupies the central space in post-colonial theory, in diasporic studies that space may well be occupied by the concept of home, intended not as a personal or family retreat, but as a collective sense of origins, a homeland, if you like, that is far away, inaccessible, fondly remembered and longed for. For those living in a diaspora home is always somewhere else, its foundations are the shared values, the walls are the collective memories. According to Ashcroft, "For the diasporic person, for the immigrant, “home” is deeply embedded in memories that are not one's own." (50) The home is maintained and preserved through language (Yiddish for example) and the rituals, even when these make little sense in the new environment. The existence of the diasporan is characterised by a double separation: physical separation from the original home and cultural separation from the society in which the person lives.

The anxiety for a home of his own is what motivates the protagonist in V.S. Naipaul's novel, A House for Mr Biswas. (1985) The book provides us with a strong metaphor for the anxiety of a diasporan for a homeland, that is the home of the collective imagination and longing. Mr Biswas – unhappily married, and living in an extended-family set-up, within the Indian diaspora of Trinidad – longs for a home of his own. He is finally able to break away from that environment and sets up home away from the patriarchal house. At
one level it would seem that Mr Biswas – in rejecting the communal
life of his wife’s large extended family with its strict hierarchy and
rituals – is also rejecting the Indian diaspora. That is not so, even after
he has gone to his own house, he still lives the diasporic life through
the values he shares with other Indians. He moves within the Indian
community of Trinidad, he speaks their language, insists that his
children follow the ancient rituals of India. In his house Mr Biswas is
still not satisfied for he feels that the whole exercise has a sense of
unreality about it, while the house itself, rather than giving him a sense
of permanence and security, seems transitory:

And that was what Mr Biswas continued to feel about their
venture: that it was temporary and not quite real, and it didn’t
matter how it was arranged. He had felt that on the first
afternoon; and the feeling lasted until he left The Chase.

Real life was to begin for them soon, and elsewhere. The
Chase was a pause, a preparation. (147)

The geographical space that diasporans inhabit can never be
their true home, their cultural tabernacle. Even if they have inhabited
that physical space all their lives, their childhood memories, whose
references are to be found in the environment they were born into, are
superseded by the collective memory of the diaspora to which they
belong. For the traditional diasporan home (and the manifold
associations that the term is invested with) is elsewhere, home has
been disrupted, home cannot be found, simply because it has been
relocated in the psyche of the collective diaspora and therefore it does
not belong to the individuals.⁹

From such elusiveness stems the desire in the diasporan to
transmit to successive generations the language, the rituals, the
songs, the customs which resonate of a collective home. That is to say, *home* is in the resonances that these rituals evoke. This is so even when the rituals themselves cease to have any real significance in the every day life of the diasporan. In his famous *Letter to his Father* (1976) Franz Kafka laments the fact that, as a German-speaking Jew living in Prague, he was subjected to the Barmizwah, even though to him “…that meant no more than some ridiculous learning by heart…” (574). In other words, the rituals had ceased to have any real significance, even for the person who insisted in their preservation, in this case Kafka’s father. These rituals and customs functioned as a means of control, a self-serving tool within the diaspora employed at both individual and group levels. Kafka's father used them to maintain a patriarchal hold over the family, while the collective employed them to uphold a repressive cultural hegemony over succeeding generations. Kafka charges his father with lacking true convictions when he says, “At bottom, the faith that ruled your life consisted in your believing in the unconditional rightness of the opinions prevailing in a particular class of Jewish society.” (574) 10

In the well-established Jewish enclaves of Eastern Europe, at the time of Kafka’s writing, the *homeland* was an elusive, non-existing entity, buried in history. The modern state of Israel had not yet come into being, it existed in the generations-old rituals and in the collective yearnings of the groups. For Kafka himself the situation was further compounded by the fact that he was a Jew, born and living in Prague, and writing in German. His identity was as fragmented as the nightmare visions of his writings.

Kafka's real-life case and the fictional one of Mr. Biswas demonstrate that feelings of separation do not disappear with
succeeding generations in a diaspora. Loretta Baldassar is a second
generation Italo-Australian academic. In her ground-breaking work,
*Visits Home: Migration Experiences Between Italy and Australia*,
(2001) she documents her own struggles with identity, growing up in
a household where “home” was always the town of San Fior, in
northern Italy, birthplace of her parents. This notion of her Italian roots
was further inculcated by the family and collective rituals, by the
dialect that was spoken by her parents, by her father’s connection with
the Laguna Club and by occasional “visits home”. In a moving scene
from her book, Baldassar relates the experience of her visit home to
San Fior, as a ten year old:

When I got to the top of the road that led to the old house, I
could not hold back the tears any more. I sobbed my way
down the road to the courtyard of the house. Through the
kitchen window my great aunt saw me approaching. She had
been awaiting my visit and rushed out to meet me. She called
out to her neighbours who shared the courtyard, "This must
be Loretta, Angelo's daughter, she's returned". Several
people came to greet and embrace me. Quite unexpectedly I
felt that I had arrived. I was home. (2001: 2)

The desire to return home is strong in most migrants, though
there are exceptions of course. Some simply take the decision to
make the host country their home and sever all links with the country
of birth. Strangely though, the desire to return may at times re-surface
in the children. Baldassar agrees, “while some migrants refuse to visit
home, many second-generation migrants plan, with great anticipation,
a visit to their parents home town.” (210)
As she rightly puts it, "For the first generation migrants, the visit home often represents a kind of spiritual renewal, while for the subsequent generations it is frequently experienced as a rite of passage involving transformation in identity." (40-5) Baldassar, a Professor of Anthropology, at the University of W.A., is able to look at the topic from a uniquely localised perspective. Her fields of 'excavation' – if I may put it this way – are the two communities: the village of San Fior, in northern Italy and suburban Perth, in Western Australia. These represent the point of origin and the point of settlement. In between them stretches a line of contact along which the author takes her journeys back and forth, seeking to discover her true identity and a cultural home. These journeys have the power to transform the individual's self-concept. As Baldassar admits, "All the second generation San Fiorese I spoke to described their return visits to their parents' home town as transformative." (331) Hence, Baldassar’s reference to them as “rites of passage”.

Baldassar considers the reasons for the diasporan wanting to visit what she calls “the shrine of the home town” (336) and concludes that they can be seen in two ways, "as an act of resistance" … "to the reductionist and marginalising treatment they receive from the workings of the policy of multiculturalism"..."and as a way of ensuring that they continue to be identified as Italo-Australian." (336) Baldassar, Australian born and a successful academic in “mainstream” society is also very much attached to her Italian heritage. Her book engages both the scholarly and lay reader because, though undoubtedly written within the rigour of research scholarship, it is “narrated” in the first-person singular, so it becomes also a narrative of the identity conflicts experienced by the next
generation in the story of migration. In doing so she successfully crosses the disciplinary boundaries, as the personal anecdotes and the detached eye of the scholar blend effortlessly into a thoroughly enjoyable reading experience. Baldassar, herself describes the work as “ethnohistorical and ethnomethodological”, its focus is one of the neglected areas of migration and diasporic studies: that of the return, in particular the return of subsequent generations. Ros Pesman (2003) makes a very pertinent comment on this very subject, “migration is not simply about departure or establishing one’s family in a new country: it is also about ties to the homeland and the influence of such attachment on ethnic identity.” Such statements seem almost too self-evident and yet it is the obvious that is sometimes overlooked. Though migration is often depicted a single, momentous, traumatic action, this work demonstrates that its repercussions are far-reaching and the effects are felt by several subsequent generations. 

This volume is a welcome addition to the field of Italian-migration scholarship. Whilst it is thoroughly researched, it also gives a highly personal interpretation of the dilemmas and contradictions faced by the children of migrants.

Baldassar’s conflicts with her father were happily resolved when she took her trip to Italy, this time on her own, as a young woman of twenty one, in what she called her ‘rite of passage’. Even though she was raised in Australia, she had learnt about her father's village ‘through pictures and stories', and no doubt through the family rituals and customs, through conversations which alluded to some aspect of her heritage and to the village itself. In other words, through the transmission of culture which occurs naturally from parents to their children. It's no wonder that the young Loretta refers to her trip in
terms of pilgrimage. Her recounting of the moment when she Finally reached it is remarkable: "I was unsure of my place and of what was expected of me. I did not know what to do, how to act. I could not understand the quick banter of their jokes. I experienced an acute sense of dislocation. I felt lost, *spaesato*..." (2)

Here we see how an act of return, long desired, and yet demonstrating just how “foreign” the visitors are to the society of their cultural origins. Often a home-coming proves to be otherwise, for it may induce the nostalgic visitor to realize the sad fact that the world has moved on, and the migrant, is not seen as belonging to that society. “For some migrants,’ writes Baldassar, “home is a shifting centre, one that does not stabilise, so that the centre finds itself wherever the migrant is not.” (2)

This sense of dislocation is felt even more acutely by those returning to their birthplace, after a long absence. As Clara – one of the people interviewed by Baldassar – put it, “As soon as I touch down at the airport in Venice and hear the church bells chiming in the distance I start to cry, I'm back home...but then, even as I get down off the plane I'm already missing my other home.” (6) Clara expresses simply the impossible dilemma of the migrant, home is where you are not. Home is elusive, always somewhere else, ever destined to be desired, like an impossible love never to be reached because, once reached, it no longer feels like the object which you have desired for so long.

Strangely though, this disappointment does not cure diasporans of “homesickness”, for as soon they leave, they will begin to miss “home” again. Perhaps the truth is that love for a distant place, cannot be sated by returning and residing in the desired place, even
when that becomes possible. Feelings of love reside within the lover, nurtured by the lover's imagination, which in a sense re-creates the object of love according to personal needs and ideals.

The question arises whether we should distinguish between love of place and love of person. For the poets of the Middle Ages there was no such distinction. In fact there was no distinction between love of place, love of person, or love of God; that is to say, spiritual love. In every case, separation and absence stoke up the fire of love. To the wandering Troubadour poets love was at its strongest at the point of desire, not, as one might imagine, at the point of union with the loved one. The strongest expression of such a love was not its consummation, rather the creative impulses it engendered.

My own experience in this regard is akin to Clara's. I have gone back to my place of birth several times, and once I have "touched base", it's not long before I want to leave again. This is only partly due to practical considerations, like the need to return to work. The other, and more pressing emotion, is the sad realization that I could no longer live in my place of birth, that I have moved on both personally and culturally. And yet, at the very same time, I know that I will want to return there again, to rekindle the flame. This suggests, among other things, that my feelings of love (more accurately, perhaps, nostalgia) are not so much for the place itself, rather for a place created inside my head, by my imagination. In its essence love (whether of person or place) is not so much love for "other", but love of the image that we have created of the other. That is to say, love, as described in Plato's discourse, is of the ideal. Distance and separation nurture that ideal, while physical proximity, paradoxically, obscures it. It should not surprise, therefore, that when we are in the presence of that physical
representation we are often disappointed. The old cliché that “reality can never live up to the ideal” is true in that the physical representation obscures the ideal, or— in the case of the body beautiful often presented on the cover of popular magazines— it literally glosses-over the real in a vain attempt to represent the ideal. In effect what it represents is an empty shell. I suspect that a great work of art allows us a glimpse of the ideal through the physical image. In other words, the picture ceases to be a barrier and becomes a conduit that links us to the ideal. For that reason the nature of the physical representation, the image, is not important in itself. Botticelli’s Venus is conventionally beautiful; Da Vinci’s self-portrait is conventionally ugly; Picasso’s Guernica is visually disturbing; while Van Gogh’s chair is none of these. What makes these objects works of art is that they are able to take us beyond the image and allow us to contemplate some ideal, or touch some emotion, within us.

Life in a diaspora is not too dissimilar, in the sense that it is lived in that space between the physical reality of the present in a foreign country and our object of nostalgia, often referred to as home, even by those who were born in the host country. Indeed the title of Baldassar’s book, Visits Home, speaks volumes about a person living the diasporic existence; if we consider that “home” does not refer to the author’s country of birth (Australia) but the country of her cultural origins. It confirms what we have already said, that for the person living in a diaspora, home will always be somewhere else, and ultimately nowhere. Home is a set of sensations, an ideal firmly embedded in the imagination. For that reason, this home can only be desired, glimpsed at from afar, but it can never be lived in. At most
we can take brief visits to this home, long enough to discover that we are mere guests here, outsiders and, at any rate, this is merely a vague representation of the home we desired. The real home is elsewhere, elusively tucked away in the recesses of memory, or in the case of a diaspora, it resides in the memory and the imagination of the collective. In this paradigm home is no longer in the physical space. I cannot agree with Agnew's notion, as quoted by Baldassar, that "identity is rooted in actual locations, cultural worlds are grounded geographically in the experience of place." (336) Closer to the mark is Baldassar's own contention that, "geographical identity and connections to place can extend over great distances." (337) I will take it further; home for the diasporan, like identity, is to be found in the customs, the images, the memories of individuals. Home is in time, possessing the same elusiveness— and paradoxically the same pervasiveness— as time. In other words— and this is the ultimate paradox of the diasporan existence— home is contemporaneously nowhere and everywhere between the two points of focus: here and there. The groups which inhabit it form configurations that are at once archaic (in the way that they preserve their ancient rituals) and post-modern in their fragmentation.
Notes: Introduction

1 It's not suggested here that the two situations are comparable, merely that the child has no choice but to migrate with his/her parents.

2 A similar “deconstructive approach” is offered by Stuart Hall:
   “But since (the old terms) have not been superseded dialectically, and there are no other, entirely different concepts with which to replace them, there is nothing to do but to continue to think with them – albeit now in their detotalized or deconstructed forms, and no longer operating within the paradigm in which they were originally generated.” (Hall 1995:1)

3 You have to wonder as well, how useful an exercise it is to look at the reasons for the dispersal. One is to assume that this refers back to Tölölyan’s distinction between coerced and voluntary displacement, given the problems with those terms to which I have already alluded. Nevertheless common wisdom suggests that there are degrees of coercion. For example, displacement due to war or political persecution would have a far greater degree of overt coercion– or at least urgency– than, say, a displacement due to lack of employment opportunities in one’s country of birth.

4 My italics.

5 It's no coincidence that one of the great international protesting groups of our age is the so-called anti-globalization movement, whose ideology is rooted in opposition to multinational economic production and consumerism. It also decries what it calls the uniformity of world cultural trends and its corollary: the disappearance of localized, original cultures (touching such cultural signifiers as the food that we eat, the languages we speak, the way we dress and so on.) The movement advocates small-scale methods of production, protection of local dialects and pluralism in its many forms, one of which would undoubtedly be the world's may Diasporas.

6 “In a diaspora identity is based on the memory of a catastrophic event and on the place of origin (re-integrated as foundation myths), and on a common log of physical and cultural characteristics. The permanence of this identity, its continuous re-invention, is guaranteed by a body of complex strategies which define every diaspora not as a fixed entity, rather as (an ever-changing) project.”

7 This should not surprise. Identity, in my opinion, is very much on the frontline of various wars of ideology, religion, culture and even the very real background war for the control of economic resources. If you can influence identity, that is the way that people see themselves as individuals and as a group, you are on the way to controlling people's minds. Hence it's in the interest of the State to spend money, through such establishment institutions as Harvard University, to research such areas of collective behaviour as identity, because it's one of the key forces that makes people act and react. History shows that, if you can get enough people to identify strongly with your cause, revolutions occur and governments are brought down. Identity is what makes people go to war with each other. In 1912, when enough people had been persuaded, initially by the works of Marx and Engels, that they were the oppressed proletariat and that the aristocracy (and the so-called bourgeoisie) were the enemies, a revolution was born. Identity too, and its preservation, is what has created the intractable problem in the Middle East. Identification with– as they see it– the oppressed Palestinian people (and fellow Muslims) is what makes young men blow themselves up. On a less dramatic stage, but no less insidious, identity is the game played by radio talk-back hosts who try to capture the middle ground and get their listeners to identify with a particular line.
An interesting question arises from this point: do contrary forces or conflicting dualities in an individual give rise to creativity or do they hinder it? For Jung there was no doubt that artists are of necessity in a conflicted state: "The artist's life cannot be otherwise than full of conflicts, for two forces are at war within him—on the one hand the common human longing for happiness, satisfaction and security in life, on the other a ruthless passion for creation which may go so far as to destroy every personal desire." (Jung 1933: 195)

This alludes to the central dilemma touching diasporan existence—indeed all collectives—that is, how do you reconcile the communal values, beliefs and rituals—that are the mainstay of any collective—with the needs and aspirations of the individual. Put simply, the question can be posed this way: how can one be part of a collective, such as a diaspora, and yet give force to one's individuality and uniqueness?

For the young Kafka, his father’s teachings were even less convincing because he was acutely aware that for his father the beliefs and rituals which he purported to pass on were: "...flimsy gestures you performed in the name of Judaism....for you they had their meaning as little souvenirs of early times, and that was why you wanted to pass them on to me...since after all for you they no longer had any value in themselves." (574)

I know this from personal experience. Of my four siblings, all born in Italy, one brother has never gone back, and has no desire to. Yet his daughter did, a few years ago, visiting both her father and her mother’s villages.

The use of the word ‘shrine’ ties in well with Baldassar’s description of the visits of the young people to their parents’ town as “rites of passage”. Both ascribe a religious significance to these acts.

The reasons appear to be contradictory, because on the one hand it suggests that the diasporan wants to be part of the so-called mainstream (by refusing to be marginalised) and on the other he/she wants to be different. Of course the contradiction is only apparent. The diasporan in fact, wants to be accepted as a full member of the wider community, whilst at the same time wanting to maintain his/her ethnic origins and the inherited cultural codes. In other words diasporans aim to expand the meaning of the “mainstream” to incorporate themselves.

In cases where people have been forcefully uprooted, like the Jews the sense of original home continues through the generations, as attested by the fact that so many Jews, who had lived all over the world for centuries, returned to Israel in the 1950’s. Another example is offered by the American Blacks who are now calling themselves African-American, and the popularity of such works as Arthur Hailey’s Roots (the story of a Black American tracing his steps back to his African origins) is yet another testament to the enduring power of the “original home” in human psyche.

Following on the Troubadour tradition, the three great figures of pre-renaissance Italian Literature: Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio (all from Tuscany) were inspired by absent loves. Dante had Beatrice, Petrarch loved Laura and Boccaccio loved Fiammetta. These absent, unfulfilled loves provided the inspiration for their writings. Coincidentally, the first two spent much of their life in exile from where they wrote their masterpieces.

Though the Platonic ideal is not something created by the individual imagination, it refers rather to an eternal ideal always present in the human consciousness.

Likewise, art does not depict reality, it could never represent its complexity, nor should it want to. Art at its best, touches us by giving us a flitting glimpse of the ideal, even when it represents physically ugly images, decayed ruins or mad, cruel or corrupt characters.
Chapter I

In Search of an Italian Diaspora in Australia.

I felt completely overwhelmed and was perpetually near tears myself. Everyone was familiar and not familiar at the same time. I was unsure of my place, of what was expected of me....I experienced an acute sense of dislocation. I felt lost. Spaesato (literally out of my town). At some point I had a sudden need to escape... (Baldassar 2001: 2)
Italian Migration in the Twentieth Century

Few nations have provided a greater percentage of their population as migrants to the world than Italy. Estimates vary, but most scholars agree that no less than 26 million Italians left their country permanently in the 100 years spanning 1876-1976. (Franzina 1995:145) Several generations later, the number of those who can consider themselves to be of Italian descent exceeds the Italian resident population today, which numbers some 58 million. Italians and their descendants are scattered pretty well the world over, with greater concentration found in the English-speaking world, in particular: the USA, Canada, Australia and, to a lesser extent, the UK. However, the greatest number of Italian migrants, on a per capita basis, are to be found in Argentina, where it is estimated that nearly half the population is of Italian descent. In Europe itself there are considerable clusters in Germany, in France and in Switzerland.¹

If Australia is anything to go by, Italians tend to marry out, rather than within their ethnic group.² This trend suggests that, in the countries that have been the major recipients of migrants from Italy, there is a considerable proportion of the population who have some ethno-cultural connection with Italy. In other words, the Italian world-diaspora, intended as a loose entity of people who claim to have significant Italian ancestry, is very large.
The Meaning of ‘Italianness’

Surrounded by the sea on three sides and divided from the rest of Europe by the Alps, the Italian peninsula presents the kind of geographical homogeneity not unlike that of island-nations, such as Japan and the United Kingdom. The paradox of the country lies in the fact that politically, historically, economically and sociologically Italy was, and to some extent still remains, one of the most fragmented nations in Europe. In dealing with Italian migration in the twentieth century it is well to remember that modern Italy came into existence only in 1861, and it wasn’t until 1870 that Rome became capital of the newly-formed nation. Prior to that the Italian peninsula had a chequered history of regional divisions. From the feudal system, with its localised power structure, to the Maritime Republics of Venice, Genoa, Pisa and Amalfi in the 12th and 13th century, and the great Renaissance city states of Florence, Milan and Naples “local and regional loyalties prevailed” in Italy. (Baldassar 2001: 63) By the beginning of the 19th century the Italian peninsula was a patchwork of regional states, each with its own centre of political power, its own customs and traditions, and even its own language.3

This reality prompted the statesman Massimo d’Azeglio to famously utter at the time of unification, “We have made Italy, now we must make the Italians.” It was a project that was to remain to some extent unfulfilled. Nearly one hundred and fifty years later modern Italy is not one country but many, despite the unifying force of the Catholic religion, despite its distinctive geographical position and clearly-defined natural borders. Donna Gabbaccia, in her book, Italy’s Many Diasporas, goes so far as to suggest that one cannot speak of an Italian diaspora, rather of
innumerable regional and local diasporas. She writes, “Italians, when they existed at all, lived mainly in the diaspora. And even there, they existed mainly in the minds of the English, Spanish, French and Turkish who employed and traded with them.” (Gabbaccia 1999: 33).

Antonio Gramsci, the communist writer, identified three lines of divisive stresses in the structure of the Italian State, working in opposition to each other: Administrative Italy versus the Italy of the proletariat, the urban-rural division and the North-South division. In the past half a century television, the car and cheaper air travel have brought cities and regions closer to one another in the physical sense, but politically and socially sharp divisions still remain. The North-South divide may have blurred at the edges, but major issues of identity and co-existence still exist – if anything the problem has intensified. The rise of La Lega del Nord (the Northern League), a small political party whose aim is to separate the affluent Northern regions of the Po valley (to which their leader Umberto Bossi refers as La Padania) from the rest of the country, demonstrated that this problem is far from resolved. Only a few years ago in the personal columns of any major newspaper, such as Il Corriere della Sera, many of the advertisers specified that they were not interested in a partner from the South or Meridionali.

This lack of common identification with a national concept of Italy, has been one of the contributing factors to the political instability which has plagued Italy in the post-war years. Prior to Silvio Berlusconi’s Government coming to power in May 2001, the average duration of a Government had been not much longer than one year. The sense of nationhood among Italians is not as strong as you will find among
comparable countries with a longer, more stable history of nationhood such as France and Britain. Disunity has, among other things, prevented Italy from playing a more prominent role in international and European affairs. According to Gabaccia, “Italians rarely had a firm national identity before they left home; national solidarity played little role in constructing or socially maintaining their diaspora.” (Gabaccia/Ottanelli: 74)

Clarissa Clo’ and Teresa Fiore, in their paper on “Italy’s cultural Formations” write, “scepticism towards the Italian State is the most convincing cultural thread uniting Italians around the world.” (Clo’ 2001: 424) This cultural trend – along with other recognised traits attributed to the so-called Italian character such as political pluralism, regional and historical divisions and multiplicity of local “cultures” touching such areas as cuisine and dialects (stemming from a long history of foreign occupations) – have contributed to making that nation “plural, fragile, debated”. (Gabaccia 1999: 75)

The individual-State relationship among Italians remains problematic, “Popular attitudes toward the Italian state have remained hostile, indifferent, and cynical down to the present.” (Baldassar: 63) Such dysfunctional relationship between the people and the state manifests itself in many a subtle ways. For instance, cheating on the national welfare system is relatively widespread in Italy, as is tax evasion that feeds a “submerged” economy estimated to be as much as 20% of the real economy. This has less to do with the degree of personal honesty than the fact that the Italian state is seen, by the common citizen, not so much as a benevolent protector and guarantor of freedom, rather in more adversarial terms, as a high-taxing, corrupt monolith. Consequently,
exploiting the system does not receive the kind of popular stigma or reproach that it may do in some countries, such as Australia. Indeed, if you cheat on the tax system you are more likely to be regarded as *furbo*, (cunning) than a dishonest cheat. *Furbizia* (shrewdness) is a much admired quality in Italy, too much for the good of the nation.

**The Concept of *Paese***

It is Baldassar who describes the word *paese* as, "reflecting various levels of identification." (86) In Italian the word has dual meanings; it means small town or village, but equally it is used to signify the entire country. A similar multiplicity of meanings is to be found in the English term *country*, especially in Australian-English, where we refer to a non-metropolitan dweller as, “someone living in the country”. Similarly we call the rural parts of Australia “the country”, while the word is also applied to the entire national territory. However in English when we say that someone is “my countryman” we mean that the person is of the same nationality as we are. The Italian equivalent, “*mio paesano*” invariably means that the person is from the same town/village. It evokes a stronger, more localised sense of fellowship, identification and commonality with another person. The term bestows the relationship a familiarity not present in the English equivalent.

Language of course communicates a great deal more than surface meaning. The way that words are used and the subtle variations of terms from one culture to another, tell us a great deal about the collective psyche of a people. That a *term like paesano* has the power to bring two strangers into close contact with one another indicates the strong
validation given to personal closeness and to place, in the complex
dynamics of social interaction among Italians. Undoubtedly for the Italian
migrant the sense of place- intended as the village or district of our birth
and early experiences- is, according to Gabaccia, “the most important
source of belonging.” (1999: 73) This is almost true, but for the proviso
that for Italians the family, including the extended family, remains still
today – when families are getting minuscule – the fundamental unit of
self-reference and belonging. One of the most common reasons given by
migrants for returning to Italy is to visit their relatives. Conversely for
many of them the need to return diminishes, or disappears altogether,
once the family members die. The assumption being that unless one has
family to visit then it’s no longer worth the expense of a long journey back
to the country of birth.

That said, the sense of place is certainly very strong among Italians.
To wit, the large number of classic Italian songs which wax
lyrical about a city, region or place, especially if the vast repertoire of
Neapolitan songs are included. Given this strong identification with
place, it is little wonder then that Italians abroad tend to organise
themselves not so much in a single national entity, but in fragmented
groups, based on their region of origin ( Siciliani, Abruzzesi, Toscani etc),
or even in single-town associations such as “Trevisani nel Mondo”,
“Comunità Delianuova”; which group together people from Treviso in
Lombardy and Delianuova in Calabria respectively. As a result, the
Italian club of Perth – which should be thriving, given the great number of
people of Italian birth or descent living in Western Australia – languishes
in relative inactivity, in want of members and supporters.
**Rural Origins**

We cannot hope to begin to understand Italian migration until we take note of the fact that the bulk of Italian migrants comes from villages or small towns. Very few come from the big cities such as Rome, Milan, Naples. Even in those regions where a large proportion of migrants arrived: like Sicily in the south and the Veneto in the north, few came from, say, Palermo or Venice. Loretta Baldassar writes, “Italian migration has always been ‘from the village out’, characterized by chain migration networks and rooted in a hometown orientation.” (75) In some cases inhabitants of the same town or village have “chain-migrated” in such numbers as to deplete the town of its working-age population. Examples of this are Sinagra, in Sicily, and the Valtellina region of Northern Italy, as documented by Loretta Baldassar and Professor Joseph Gentilli. The prevalence of this same-town transmigration gives the Italian diaspora a particular character that distinguishes it from other migratory flows. The phenomenon, though not isolated to Italians, has marked Italian migration to this country to a far greater degree than is the case for other ethnic groups and as such it deserves a full study in itself.

**Hired hands for manual labour**

The vast majority of migrants from Southern Italy, in the 1950-70 period, were unskilled manual workers, with poor education and little or no English. Their recruitment was undertaken with the specific purpose of filling a shortage of manual labour, especially in the period following the
second world war. This was nothing new, Antonio Gramsci, writing about
Italian migration a century earlier remarks that, unlike the German
counterparts, who comprised both workers and radical leaders, the
Italians were composed mainly of unskilled labourers (Gramsci: 263). It is
equally relevant to note that, although there was some government-
sponsored recruiting done, particularly in the north, most migration from
Italy occurred through a system of chain migration conducted via a
personal sponsor. This sponsor often funded the travel expenses of the
would-be migrant, who then paid off the debt by working for the sponsor
for two years. To some this scheme might seem like a temporary form of
slavery, but Italians in the 1920’s, from the impoverished South, who were
used to being exploited by landowners for little or no pay beyond their
keep, saw the scheme as an opportunity. R.H. Hardiman writing about
Italian chain migration in the 1920’s says:

Working for the sponsors for two years or so was seen as a
small price to pay for the opportunity to move beyond one’s
former restriction. This may have offended the egalitarianism of
Australians, who had been used to Government-funded
schemes, such as War Service Settlement farms…. The Italian
saw it as a true favour and tried to shoe his gratitude and pay
that favour by asking his sponsor to be the godfather at the
baptism of his eldest child. (Gentilli: 79)

After the second world war, family sponsorship became the main
form of migration for Italian migrants, although by that time the sponsor
was more likely to be a relative – who took financial responsibility for a
period – than an employer. There were substantial advantages for the
Government (and hence for society) in encouraging this kind of chain migration. Families tended to pool their resources and looked after their members by providing accommodation, companionship and assistance with employment, thereby relieving social services of that responsibility.

Generally the “integration” of Italian migrants into Australian society has been remarkably smooth⁷, thanks to the adaptability of the migrants, the relatively benign policies of successive governments towards migration and the stability of the socio-political environment in the host country.

**The migrant experience in Western Australia**

Italian migration to Western Australia has occurred in waves. The first of these was in the period 1891-1914. Prominent among them were the fishermen, who settled in Fremantle, mainly from Capo d’Orlando in Sicily and from Molfetta in Puglia. The other concentration of Italian migrants was in Kalgoorlie-Koolgardie region where the gold-rush, beginning in 1893, attracted migrants from other parts of Italy and specifically from the Valtellina region in the province of Bergamo, in Northern Italy. As early as 1901, census figures show that there were in excess of 1,300 Italian-born migrants in Western Australia, most of those (over 60%) living in the Kalgoorlie region. These were adventurers and gold seekers attracted by the gold rush which began in Kalgoorlie-Boulder in 1892-3. Nearly all of those migrants returned home to Italy. In the subsequent years till 1914, when World War II put an end to all migration, half of the migrants who arrived in Australia during this period returned home.
The next notable wave occurred in the post second world war period of 1920-30. This period is distinguished for its chain-migration (family groups originating from the same district, such as the people from the Sicilian town of Sinagra, in the province of Messina) who tended to congregate in the same part of Western Australia, giving rise to cluster settlements. One such group settled in Wanneroo, north of Perth, where “69 out of 80 Southern Italian men interviewed by Gava (1978) had settled in the 1920-29 period.” (Gentilli: 81) Other clusters settled in the Kojonup area, (land clearing, cutting railways sleepers) Harvey (potato growing) and Fremantle (fishing).

The rise in gold price and new discoveries brought a new wave of migrants to the Kalgoorlie-Boulder region in the early 1930’s. An increase of the Italian population of that town brought about what was to be one of the few examples of collective resistance to Italians in this State: The Kalgoorlie riots began on Australia Day weekend in January 1929 over the death of a drunk customer at the Home from Home Hotel which was owned by an Italian, Jack Gianatti. The barman, another Italian called Claudio Mattaboni, tried to forcibly eject a drunken customer who hit his head on the curb and subsequently died from injuries. There followed two days of civil unrest and some looting, mainly of businesses owned by Italians and Slavs. The "Home from Home" hotel was set on fire. It was an ugly moment in the history of Italian migration to Western Australia. Despite this, Italian migration continued and in most cases their businesses flourished in such areas as the Perth hills where Italians were instrumental in establishing the stone fruit industry.
It actually peaked in the pre-war years 1937-1939 in which period in excess of 1000 migrants arrived at the port of Fremantle. In 1938 alone 506 males and 125 females arrived. (Gentilli: 94) More significantly – unlike the predecessors at the turn of the century, who tended to be temporary – these migrants were permanent settlers. This was no doubt due to the fact that most of them were not miners, who tend to be short term, but migrants looking for a better life in a country which had better prospects to offer. Australia was by now developed to a point where the city of Perth made a more agreeable home for newcomers. Furthermore, regular shipping between Europe and Australia made the migrants feel less cut-off from their homeland. The final wave of Italian migration occurred in the period 1947-1972, in which some 350,000 Italian-born people migrated to Australia, of these over 60,000 settled in Western Australia.

**Australia in the 1947-1973 Period**

What sort of country did the Migrants from Italy and other places of the world find in coming to Western Australia in the post war years? The political landscape of post-war Australia was marked by a period of strong, stable economic liberalism known as the Menzies Era, named after Sir Robert Menzies, Prime Minister in 1939-41, and again in the period 1949-66. These were years of laissez-faire capitalism, spawning strong economic growth, which in turn fuelled unprecedented migration flows, in particular from southern Europe as well as Germany and Holland, both struggling to recover from a disastrous war.
There are three main reasons why post-war Australia decided to accept a large intake of immigrants from Italy. The first was political: to defend the country from any future aggression (or communist expansion). The second was economic: to provide labour to fuel economic growth. The third was due to what was then seen as a *social imperative*, which was, "to uphold the racial, social and political integrity of Australia" (Iuliano: 80). The first of these reasons was in response to immigration minister, Arthur Calwell's warning in his famous speech to the House of Parliament in August 1945 that Australia must “populate or perish”.

And yet Italians were not at all welcome during this period, even though Australia prided itself in being a fair, liberal society with a strong sense of egalitarianism. The White Australia Policy (dismantled in 1973) was still part of the Australian reality of that period. It was an incongruous stain on a country which just a few generations earlier had displaced the indigenous population and turned them into non-persons. Racism and xenophobia prevailed and it extended to a differentiation of shadings of white. Italians, along with the Greeks, were the least preferred among the Europeans admitted to Australia partly, one suspects, because they were a darker variety of European. It was an Italian, Niccolò Carrandini, consular representative in the U.K. in 1945, who somewhat pragmatically, if not cynically, articulated the Anglo-Saxon view prevalent at the time:

> Australia publicly would still like to preserve its racist provisions above all in favour of those of Anglo-Saxon background or those coming from Nordic countries and preferably from Scandinavia. Nonetheless, in the course of the recent war, it has been forced to confront the fact of having become, so to speak, a front line
country. And, although it would prefer to welcome within its borders citizens who fought on the side of the United Nations, it will perhaps find itself forced to accept an Italian element, if it seriously wishes to reach those population levels regarded as indispensable for its own defence. (cited in Iuliano: 82)

Having been forced by circumstances to accept Italian immigrants, a reluctant Australian Government indicated a preference for the northern Italian, "Australian immigration officials made it perfectly clear that selection for the recruitment program was to be restricted to Northern Italy, an area they vaguely defined as north of Rome." (Iuliano: 83)

The war and an expanding economy had created in Australia a shortage of manual labour in the building industry and other semi-skilled trades and no doubt because of this, these trades were not closely regulated. This, as it turned out, worked in favour of migrants who lacked the language skills to obtain formal qualifications, but had plenty of natural ability to get on with the job. It also worked in favour of the economy because immigrants in general were prepared to work longer hours for less, with the resulting effect of keeping the costs down and production up.

How Australia lived

In terms of lifestyle Australia of this period was very much Anglo-Celtic in orientation. It was the Australia of the Sunday roast, of fish and chips shops and "Blue Hills" – patterned on the British radio drama, "The Archers" – was Australia's favourite listen. Eating outdoors meant having a BBQ. Despite its Mediterranean climate – with long, dry, hot summers –
you never saw in Perth a table outside a restaurant or coffee shop. In fact coffee shops were not part of the Australian landscape of the 50’s. What the migrant found were milk bars, which served milk shakes, drunk through a straw in long metal containers. This was the Australia of restrictive alcohol hours, with pubs closing at 6pm. People drank tea, beer, Fanta. Wine was drunk by the more sophisticated elite or, ironically, by the alcoholics, who obtained it from the infamous plonk shops and took it home furtively in flagons tightly wrapped in newspaper.

The working people’s houses in this period consisted of a single storey cottage, built in weather board and iron. Brick and tile, as standard material of construction for the masses, did not arrive until the mid-fifties and coincided with the mass migration from Europe. The houses were set on a quarter acre block, fenced in by asbestos sheets, and often a tea-tree or hibiscus hedge separated the block from the road. This kind of low-density living, whilst giving the suburban dweller the luxury of a comparatively large garden, and a high degree of privacy, turned suburbs into sprawling stretches of box-like dwellings without a sense of centre, cohesion or character. The era of the large shopping malls was still a long while away. The corner shop reigned supreme, and served as a meeting place especially for women and young people, while the men preferred to meet at the pub. Other means of social interaction were the great variety of sports and social clubs. Public transport was either non-existent or poorly served, as a consequence Australian society was, and still remains, heavily dependent on the automobile.

Assimilation was the Government policy of this time. Migrants were referred to as “New Australians” and they were encouraged to quickly
integrate into the general population. Names like Nino became Tony, Carmelo became Charlie, Salvatore became Sam and so forth. This policy of assimilation was dismantled, at an official level, after the Galbally Report (1978) opened the way for the policy of multi-culturalism.

Integration Versus Diaspora

Faced with a conservative, Anglo-centric population, the newly-arrived migrants were squeezed in an uncomfortable space between a hostile resident population that feared for their jobs, and a government that wanted a mono-cultural, cohesive Australia. Initially at least, the Italians tended to cling together for comfort and support, just like any other immigrant population. And because few people owned cars, they tended to live in close proximity of their jobs. Italians bought houses in the working-class suburbs of North Perth, Tuart Hill or Victoria Park. To Wanneroo and Spearwood went the market gardeners, while the stone fruit growers chose the hills of Kalamunda and Karagullen. The fishermen settled in Fremantle, while the potato growers and dairy farmers headed for Harvey and Waroona. In some suburbs whole neighbourhoods became inhabited by Italians and though they never quite took on the aspect of ghettos, whole areas were transformed to the extent that they became known as 'Little Italy'. The best known 'Little Italy' was in Northbridge, where the most prominent businesses were owned by Italians. Among these were the Re Store in Lake street (still there today); Pisconeri, Merizzi Travel Agency at the corner of William and James streets, Luisini store, Rifici and Erichetti store, Marchesi
Menswear, Torre Butchers, D’Orsogna Smallgoods, Isaia wines and liqueurs and a great number of cafés and eateries.

Their desire to be together was made all the more imperative by the fact that many of them spoke little English and in most cases no English at all. As a result the only employment available to them was in manual labour where little communication skills were required, jobs like cleaning, labouring in factories, building sites, or even the abattoirs. Alternatively they worked on the land as farm hands, market gardeners or even scrub-burners. These were low-status jobs which required back-breaking physical exertion, for that reason they were shunned by the resident population. This was no better illustrated than in the building industry. The very nature of the traditional Australian home of that period, a simple cottage on a quarter acre block, lent itself perfectly as a vehicle for economic improvement for the hard-working, motivated, small-scale entrepreneur. The newly-arrived migrants – mostly subsistence farmers from the rural areas of the depressed, post-war Italy – had no formal trade qualifications. However they proved to be adaptable and, as small-holdings farmers working their own plot of land, they tended to be ‘jacks of all trades’. Within a few years they were building their own homes and many of them made the transition to small-scale builders. As Nick Amedeo puts it in The Sensualist, when he describes the early days of the migrants in the fifties:

No English, no education, but energy by the ton. By gee they could work! They were peasants, subsistence farmers. Overnight they became brickies, tilers, plasterers, carpenters,
stonemasons. We gave the building industry the kick it needed.

(Casella 1991:102)

What occurred in the next couple of generations was a two-way process of cultural transaction. At the same time as the migrants integrated into the Australian society they began to change it. This evolution created a social revolution that changed the face of Australian society. Of course the Italians were not the only group to have contributed to this change, all ethnic groups exert an influence on the host society. Nor did this process of cultural osmosis occur in Australia alone. Writing about Italian migration world-wide, Gabaccia says, “Looking for an Italian Diaspora – even if we do not find one – brings the global and circulatory character of migrations from Italy into focus...would either Italy, or the countries where Italians settled, be the same had this migration not occurred?” (Gabaccia 2000: 9)

Where the Italians made the most visible mark was in the areas of lifestyle. If today’s Australian cooks with olive oil, knows his Merlot from his Chianti, enjoys a cappuccino sitting outdoors on a warm Sunday afternoon, credit is due to a considerable part to Italian migration. It has been a remarkably successful integration, thanks to the adaptability of the migrants and the carefully calibrated policies of successive governments. I believe it has been successful precisely because the process worked both ways, that is to say that not only has the migrant integrated into the so-called mainstream, but the mainstream changed in the process.

There are plenty other examples of this process occurring in Australian society: In the proliferation of restaurants, in the Slow Food fad, the adoption of games like bocce, in the passion for fast cars, in the
design of city centres like Subiaco Centro, which has a strong Italian influence. There is no greater flattery than imitation, as we know; though it must be reiterated that what has occurred is a two-way process, a cross-cultural fertilization, a mutually-beneficial transaction which is at the heart of a modern diaspora, and which has spawned that hybrid cultural map which is contemporary Australia.

Undoubtedly Italians have integrated remarkably well in the Australian mainstream society. Their skills are in demand, their art, design, classical music, fashion and architecture continue to have a profound influence on world culture. Their food and life-style have, to a large extent, been adopted by Australian society. What has occurred in Australia is a process of cross-cultural hybridity that’s given rise to a new society: more varied and more open than the Australia these migrants found in the fifties and sixties. Its members play a full role in the processes of contemporary mainstream society and yet they show a strong desire to maintain links with their country of origin. Often this is transmitted to their children and grandchildren by way of the customs, rituals, and of course through language. It is no coincidence, for instance, that in 2004 Italian was the most studied foreign language among primary school students in Western Australia.

Partly as a result of this process we also find in Western Australia a strong Italo-phile sub-culture, in which both people of Italian and non-Italian origin participate. To cite an example, the Dante Alighieri Society of Western Australia, which was founded in 1889, with the aim to promote Italian language and culture throughout the world, runs courses of Italian language for adults. It has around 250 adult students, over
eighty per cent of the names are non-Italian. Equally telling is the fact that in 2005 its ten-member committee consisted of three Italian-born members; two were of Italian descent and five were of Anglo-Celtic origin. In other words what has emerged in Australia, among Italian migrants, is a more participatory kind of diaspora, in which even some people with no Italian ethnic roots get involved.

In the last ten years we have seen a new phenomenon taking place. The distance between Italy and Australia has suddenly diminished, thanks to the frequency of air-travel, and more importantly, to the electronic communication technologies, especially the internet, satellite television and, to a lesser extent, cheap telephone calls. These days many Italo-Australians own a satellite dish and receive 24 hour television service directly from Italy. Twenty-four hour Italian radio has also been introduced and has become very popular among Italo-Australians and even some Anglo-Australians who are learning Italian listen to it. And of course the internet gives instant access to Italian newspapers and other media agencies. This has had some interesting repercussions. I mention but one. The language skills of migrants who have been away from Italy for some 30, 40 or 50 years had declined to such a point that they tended to use a mix of Italian and Australian when they spoke to each other. Nowadays, daily exposure to Italian radio, T.V. and the internet has had the effect of a refresher course in the use of contemporary Italian. As a consequence the Italian among migrants has been updated and improved. Also, by listening daily to news bulletins, sports and cultural programmes from Italy migrants are very well informed about current affairs and socio-cultural trends in Italy. In other words, thanks to the
miracle of the electronic media, Italian migrants have to some extent re-appropriated their *Italianità*. And since the same radio/TV programmes are beamed across the globe daily, it would be logical to assume that in future Italian diasporas from as far afield as Canada, Australia and Argentina (to name but three) will be more cohesive, more in touch with one another, and therefore stronger.

Another important development has been the recent acquisition, by Italians living abroad (those who have kept their Italian nationality) of the right to vote in Italian elections. Italians who are permanent residents in other countries, now have representatives in the Italian Lower House of Parliament. They also have a Minister to look after their affairs. Such initiatives will ensure that the Italian Diaspora the world over will remain strong in the future, even though Italian emigration has all but ceased. Indeed these days it is more possible than ever to remain Italian, whilst living abroad. Nationalities have become less defined, less circumscribing than ever. While it is true to say that most of Italo-Australians are fully integrated into the cultural texture of mainstream Australia, to the extent that they no longer view Italy as their cultural ‘home’, there undoubtedly exists a nucleus of Italian migrants and their descendants who possess a strong attachment to, and identification with, their country of origin. These individuals identify themselves as unequivocally Italian in origin. By that fact alone they are part of the world-wide Italian Diaspora.
Appendix

Table I: Italian-born persons in Australia relative to other foreign born groups.

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Total for Australia 6 835 171 7 700 064 8 729 406 9 419 542


Table 2: Article in the Kalgoorlie Miner, January 30, 1934.

The Kalgoorlie Miner, Tuesday, January 30, 1934.

FATAL ALTERCATION
YOUNG MAN'S DEATH

ITALIAN CARMAN ARRESTED.

On Sunday night, a fatality of an altercation between a young man and a German at the Homestead Hotel, Kalgoorlie, George Edward Jordan, 23, 125 Law Street, Kalgoorlie, died in the Kalgoorlie Government Hospital about 1 a.m. yesterday morning from a fractured skull. Later in the morning, Charles Mattabossi, 30, barmen, was arrested, brought before Mr J. McGrath, E M, in the Kalgoorlie Police Court and remanded on a charge of having unlawfully killed Jordan. Bail was refused.

From reports made to the police, it is stated that an argument arose at the hotel about 7 p.m. in the course of which Mr T. Mattabossi struck Jordan, decreasing left the premises but returned again at about 9 p.m. The argument was renewed and a fight started on the footpath outside the hotel, during which Mr T. Mattabossi struck Jordan in the face with his fist and deepest fell, striking his head heavily on the pavement. He was removed to the Government Hospital, but his condition was not thought to be serious at the time.

RIOTING ON THE GOLDFIELDS
DEMONSTRATION AGAINST FOREIGNERS
BUILDINGS LOOTED AND BURNED
REMARKABLE SCENES IN STREETS

Scenes that will long be remembered in the history of the goldfields were witnessed last night by a host of excited spectators, when, as a sequel to the death of George Edward Jordan, who died in the Kalgoorlie Government Hospital at 1 a.m. yesterday morning, from a fractured skull, following an altercation at the Homestead Hotel, a body of men took the law into their own hands and formed a mob which continued demonstrations reminiscent of the riots of 1930, when all foreigners were expelled from Kalgoorlie and Boulder, following the death of a young man named Northwood, who was stabbed by a European.

The crowd quickly wrecked three buildings and subsequently set fire to them. In a short while the western end of Hannan street was a blazing inferno. During the wrecking campaign one constable, who, with others, tried to prevent further damage, was injured and taken to hospital.

The destruction in this quarter having been completed, the men marched along Hannan Street and smashed the windows of several shops belonging to foreigners, leaving a trail of broken glass and wrecked interiors. Kalgoorlie was then almost deserted by the crowd, while they turned their attention to Boulder, where similar scenes were witnessed.
Signs of the Italian Migrant Influence in W. Australia.

Above: Card Players in King's Park, Western Australia

Below: Italian women playing bocce. Bocce is an Italian bowls game, which can be played on uneven surfaces, hence it's very popular with picnickers.
Below: The shopping centre becomes the town Piazza. Elderly men gather every day at the Victoria Park Shopping Centre.

Maintaining the old traditions of the old country: Sausage making.
The Re Store, in Lake Street, Northbridge, where the Italian migrants in the 1950's would buy their provisions like pasta, olive oil and other goods from Italy, unavailable in Australia at the time.

Entrance to the ‘Dante House’ the premises of the Dante Alighieri Society, situated at the back of the Italian Club, in North Perth. The Dante Society was founded in 1889 with the aim to promote Italian language and culture, to revive Italian identity around the world and strengthen ties between expatriated Italians and the mother country.
The University Italian theatre group, founded at UWA in 1975 and still Going strong.

'Casa Siciliana' The Sicilian Club of Western Australia, situated in Innaloo, one of the many Italian regional club premises in the W.A.
Advertising poster for the annual ball held by the Delianova group. This is one of several clubs based around people originating from the same town, in this case, Delianova in Calabria.

A replica of the she-wolf, symbol of ancient Rome, at the entrance of the Italian Club, in North Perth.
“Azzurri” (named after the colours of the Italian national team) and Tricolore (named after the Italian flag) were two prominent soccer teams in Perth for some 40 years.

St Brigid’s Catholic Church in North Perth, has been ‘adopted’ by the Italian community. The mass in Italian is celebrated here.

Piazza Nanni, adjacent to St Brigid’s church was named after Fr. Nanni, long serving priest of the Italian communities in W.A.
Undoubtedly, Italian migrants have had the most impact in the areas of food and lifestyle. There are hundreds of Italian or Italianate restaurants and coffee shops in W.A. This one, Barocco, is situated in Northbridge.

One of many streets named after Italians. Torre butchers were for many years a feature of Northbridge.
Notes: Chapter 1

1 Of course part of Switzerland, Canton Ticino, was already Italian speaking, before migration occurred.
2 In my “study group” comprising 69 members of 3 generations of the extended Casella family only four married northern Italians. Eighteen (mostly first generation) married southern Italians. The rest married non-Italians or mixed.
3 Modern Italian stems from yet another dialect, that of Florence. It was chosen because the great Literary giants of the 14th Century: Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio, wrote mainly in the Tuscan vernacular.
4 If you take a region like Sicily, for instance, its history reads like a roll-call of foreign invaders starting with the Greeks (Sicily and parts of Southern Italy were named Magna Graecia by the Greeks), followed by the Romans, the Ottomans, the Normans, the Prussians and the Spaniards, to name but the main ones. This incidentally explains why contemporary Sicilians are so racially diverse ranging from very dark to very fair.
5 Among these are some of the best-known songs in the Italian popular music canon. For example: The Carnival of Venice, Santa Lucia, Torna a Surrientu, Arrivederci Roma and a great swag of Neapolitan songs which celebrate the beauty of that city.
6 It’s not rare for entire extended families to have migrated, en mass, to an Australian city. A case in point is my own family. The first member of the Casella family to arrive in Western Australia was Pietro Casella in 1926. He was quickly followed by his brother-in-law Cono, in 1927. The latter’s family (his wife, Carmela, and sons Santo and Carmelo) were sponsored two years later. Large scale migration then ceased for over 20 years. It resumed in 1949, with the arrival of my cousin, Costantino Casella. In 15 years, 45 more members of the Casella extended family migrated. Only 3 returned permanently to Sicily.
7 That is not to say that there weren’t problems, which sometimes erupted through acts of violence and even social unrest, such as the Kalgoorlie riots of 1919-20, which will be discussed later.
8 The Kalgoorlie Riots were the subject of a 2005 documentary by Italian Director Franco Di Chiera titled: Hoover’s Gold.
9 This was, after all, the early years of the Cold War, Australia was in the grip of a “Yellow Peril” fear and defense strategists were talking openly of a “Domino Effect”.
10 This was and still remains more of a myth than reality. For instance, Australia in the fifties still knighted its more prominent citizens, and even though a knighthood was awarded on merit it sat oddly with Australia’s vision of itself as an egalitarian society. In Southfalia I satirize this aspect of the Australian self-image. The knights may have disappeared from contemporary Australia, however statistics continue to indicate that the divergences between the have and have-nots are deepening.
11 This too worked in the favour of the newly-arrived migrants because they were able to buy into these shops with a relatively small capital and then build them up. Some shops i.e. fish and chips shops became the monopoly of Italian or Greek migrants.
12 To a large extent this is still the case. Australia, including the capital cities, is still one of the most car-dependent societies in the world.
Three members of my extended family: my oldest brother and two of my cousins started their working lives in Australia at the Midland abattoirs.

Harold Holt, Minister for Immigration in the 1950’s, in an address he gave at the fifth annual Citizenship Convention said: "Italians are excellent workers on tunneling and other construction work, as they are also in heavy engineering and industry." (Cited in Iuliano: 82)

In the Berlusconi Government of 2005 the minister for Italians living abroad was Mirko Tremaglia.

Hence a flurry of legislation passed by governments the world over to protect their national boundaries from such perceived threats as refugees and terrorism. The real threats to national identities, in my view, are coming from such unstoppable forces as multinationals and the globalised economies, ever-increasing air travel and the globalised communication networks, most importantly the Internet. Whether the inevitable enfeeblement of nation-states (and the emergence of such supra-national bodies like the E.U. is yet another facet of the phenomenon) is a good thing or bad, is debatable, what is beyond doubt is that it is happening and logic suggests that the trend will continue at a faster rate in the foreseeable future.
Chapter Two

Representations of Italy and Italians in the Narrative by Non-Italian Writers.

When I first started interacting with Australian society, I felt Italo-Australian, and now I feel like an Australian-Italian. Because when you go back to Italy, of course, no-one considers you to be Italian anymore.

(Writer, Anna Maria Dell'Oso speaking to George Negus) ¹

All civilized Englishmen lived in Italy in their minds. Shakespeare did, but his heart was in England.

(Boyd 1957: 79)
An Italian Love Affair

In Martin Boyd's self-indulgent novel, *Outbreak of Love*, published in 1957, the main character, an Englishman called Russell, gives vent to that fascination with Italy that was the mark of the cultured Englishman.²

Up to the early part of the 20th century, no self-respecting gentleman, or lady, would think his education complete unless he undertook a grand tour of the Continent, in which Italy was the ultimate objective of that tour. This was the Italy of the great art cities like Rome, Naples, Venice and Florence; the Italy of Vivaldi, Michelangelo and Botticelli; of the classical and baroque architecture. Turner, the English landscape artist, studied there; Keats and Shelley died there, Shakespeare set a great many of his plays there; Byron set himself up in an old palazzo in Venice; Robert Browning lived in Florence from 1849 to 1861, with his wife, Elizabeth Barrett, and loved it so much that he was to famously write: "open my heart, and you will see, graved inside of it Italy."³ Another English writer, E.M. Forster, set his novel, *A Room With a View*, in Florence. The novel's heroine, Lucy, goes to the great art city, to complete her education. There we find a veritable colony of English expatriates who saw Italy as the home of the Renaissance which re-defined Western art and culture.

In the images of Italy that we get from the Augustan poets, the Romantics, the Victorians, down to Edwardian England, one notices a curious lack of contact with the people themselves. These visitors to Italy wax lyrical
about its art, architecture history and music, about the genius of Leonardo, the
lyricism of Puccini, the passion of the Neapolitan songs, the grandeur of Venice
and the power of Michelangelo, but generally ignore the people out there in the
street. This is not surprising, it reinforces the notion that what they loved was
not the real Italy, but the Italy of their imagination, a myth, part of the fiction for
idle Englishmen, immersed in classical culture, wanting to escape the dreary
reality of cold London winters⁴. In a strange sort of way it could be said that
these people lived in a cultural diaspora, dreaming of Italy.

In the Australia of the 19th and 20th centuries the illusion was just as
necessary for the idle rich, for the conditions were no less harsh, and the reality
no less unpalatable. The distance from Europe made it easier to perpetuate the
myth because few of the colonial gentry undertook the long voyage to Europe
for the grand tour and acquaint themselves with the real Italy.⁵ Such
enthusiasm could not fail to migrate down-under, brought by the early colonial
squattocracy that was to ensconce itself in the prestigious suburbs of Sydney
and Melbourne. This is reflected in the early literature. In Richardson's The
Fortunes of Richard Mahony, (first published in 1917) the protagonist, upon
setting up house in London, takes a grand tour of Europe. In Venice, "He
bathed daily on the Lido, and for the rest of the day he kept cool in picture-
galleries and churches, of which he never seemed to tire." (Richardson: 690)

Martin Boyd articulates this fascination in Outbreak of Love,
through the words of his existential hero, Russell, for whom Italy is not
merely a cultural experience to fulfill the educational needs of a young
person. It is much more than that, the country embodies a kind of
synthesis of Western culture and Christian religion. In speaking to Diana,
a Melbourne socialite he has fallen in love with, he tries to rationalize this
link between the British and the Mediterranean civilizations – especially classical Italy – investing it with a peculiarly mystical and religious significance:

But in Italy we find all the things that have made us what we are-classicism, the basis, and Catholicism fused into one and the effect is tremendous. We find our place in history. That is why we can only live happily elsewhere, when we regard ourselves as a province of Rome. (Boyd: 102)

Such slavish self-identification with another country, has no place in the proud, independent, “multi-cultural”, contemporary Australia. We have come a long way in our self-perception since the nineteen forties. The debate, as to whether we are a European outpost or a part of Asia, seems to have died of a natural death, or at least, has been surpassed by events. The prevailing notion now is that Australia is an evolving nation, geographically positioned on the edge of the Asian continent, whose laws and political structures are based on the British model and whose population is increasingly multi-cultural. However the debate about national identity is a continuing one. Views and attitudes are forever re-assessed, as indeed they need to be because identity, like culture, is constantly evolving.

It is worth mentioning also that culture, like so much of public life, has never been so politicized as it is at the beginning of the third millennium. For that reason alone a Euro-centric attitude would be deemed to be politically incorrect, and untrue, even by those Australians whose ancestors originate from Europe. The current view is that Australia needs to take cognition of the fact that its cultural identity should be encompassing of the various influences that have contributed to its formation, not least of which are its Aboriginal roots.
The Weird Case of John O’Grady (aka Nino Culotta)

It is difficult to believe that They’re a Weird Mob and Outbreak of Love were published in the same year, 1957. A veritable chasm separates the two works in terms of: attitudes to Italy and Italians, its subject matter, the social milieu in which the characters move and the intellectual level of the intended readership. Whereas Boyd’s world is filled with disaffected, upper-class Australians with enough money and time on their hands to indulge in existential ruminations, Culotta’s world is that of working class Australia to which a Northern Italian comes. On first appraisal the latter work more closely reflects the reality of Australia at a period when migration from Italy was cranking up towards the highest levels. In reality They’re a Weird Mob, is no less outlandish in its portrayal of both Australians and Italians, than Boyd’s highly contrived serving. O’Grady reverses the usual migrant-local dichotomy, where the migrant makes the adjustments in coming to a new country (by anglicising his name, for instance). In this case it is the Australian John O’Grady who adopts an Italian nom-de-plume. This, of course is nothing new. Many authors have chosen to write under names other than their own. O’Grady carries the conceit one step further in that the author takes on both the name and the persona of his character. It’s a literary double flip: the Anglo-Australian author is not merely pretending to write from an Italian’s point of view, rather he is saying to the reader: “I, the author, am the Italian migrant of this book”. In other words it is presented as an autobiography. This might seem at first to be complimentary to the Italian migrant, except that the protagonist, Nino Culotta, is himself a pretty xenophobic type who hates southern Italians or Meridionali:
They are small dark people from the south of Italy with black hair and what we considered to be bad habits. We are big fair people with blue eyes and good habits. Perhaps it is a matter of opinion, and an Australian would lump us all together and call us 'bloody dagoes', but we didn't like Meridionali and they didn't like us.

(Culotta: 10)

This could be excused as a piece of characterization. After all, such people do exist, and a writer is entitled to represent them. So, it's not a question of whether such characters ought to be represented in literature, rather it's a question of how it is done. And to my mind the text is problematic. Firstly, Nino Culotta's views are not presented as odd or isolated, but generalized. The captain of the ship, a Venetian, “and quite a nice man” sympathizes with Culotta's strident prejudices and even shares them. More significantly, the main character is constructed, not as an unsympathetic outcast, but as a very likeable, positive character.

This raises the issues of author responsibility, of moral ethics in art and of “political correctness”. For instance, should a writer construct a Jew-hating S.S. officer as essentially a sympathetic character, without incurring accusations of sharing the views of his character or at least, of being dubbed as anti-Semitic? Nor does the book compensate for its biased positioning by acquainting the reader with models of positive southern Italians. Indeed other Italians are pretty well scarce in this book, when references are made to Italians, they reinforce prevailing popular prejudices. Italians, or at least the southern Italians, are seen as poor, uneducated, with large families, prone to gesticulating when speaking (202). The Italian women “sublimate their lives to that of some man.” (158) By contrast Australian women were “independent” and kept “their friendship for
those of their own sex, and appear to be more or less constantly at war with men.” (158) On the positive side, Italians are seen as good musicians, fond of singing over a glass of wine, (or when in Australia, over a glass of beer) and able to have a good time:

We Italians love music. It combines well with alcohol. In Italy when there is wine there is music. There is much wine in Italy, so there is also much song. Most of us sing very well, but I do not sing badly. When Dennis brought a beer for me, I held it in my hand and sang. I sang, "Viva Il Vino Spumeggiante." (114)

The southern Italians of this work, by contrast, are presented as excitable and even violent. When provoked, the Meridionali would not hesitate to pull out the knife. Not so our brave, northern Italian hero: Nino Culotta. “The 'short sword of the Romans’ has never appealed to me.” (54) Soon after his arrival in Australia he broke up a potentially violent clash on the train between an Aussie bigot and a group of Meridionali. When one of the Southern Italians pulled out his knife to fend off a drunk attacker, Nino acted swiftly and courageously:

I said to this man, “you will please give me the knife.” He said no, he would not give me the knife. I bumped him on top of the head. He slid down in his seat. I said to the others, “You will please get the knife and give it to me.” This one did. I threw it out of the window, and sat down again. (55-6)

However such swashbuckling courage bestowed upon our hero, Nino, does not extend to the other Italians and certainly not to the hapless Meridionali. For example, when an Australian former prisoner of war says to
Nino that “you Ities couldn’t capture a bloody grasshopper” is typical of the kind of attitudes prevalent among Australians in the 1950's.

Italy as a country does not fare much better than its people. It was seen as poor, of course, backward, politically chaotic, the North was in danger of being overrun by Southerners and the Communists. It is fair to say that the book is not altogether damning of Italy and the Italians, to the extent that Nino Culotta is meant to be read as a positive character, made to measure to satisfy the requirements of a jingoistic, racist Australian policy. Nino is tall, fair, honest, hard working and, most importantly, very adaptable. He is happy to start at the bottom of the heap, as a building labourer, prefers the friendship of the locals, to mixing with other Italians, he learns the art of binge-drinking with his mates, marries a local girl, learns to speak the language of the host country and in no time blends in perfectly with the local population. Nino Culotta is the kind of migrant assimilationist Australia of the 1950's wanted. At one level the book can be read as propaganda posing as fiction, for it serves the political and social agenda of the government in the 1950's which favoured a quick integration of the migrants.

In the end, as the title implies, the work is not about Italians but about working-class Australians, mateship and sense of fairness, their (supposed) essential honesty and dislike of pretentiousness and snobbery. It is about Australians as they would have wanted to be seen in the 1950's, worts and all, though it must be said that the worts are of the benign kind. And Nino Culotta, being a journalist, does cast a critical eye on the local population, criticizing their strange social habits, like their way of speaking:

Most Australians speak English like I speak Hindustani, which I don't. In general, they use the English words, but in a way that
makes no sense to anyone else. And they don't use our European vowel sounds, so that even if they do construct a normal sentence, it doesn't sound like one. (13)

It's the kind of populist book which played to the gallery, to the average Joe Blow out there, who would rather be drinking with his mates at the pub, or fishing, or watching a footy game than reading a book. It is populist also in that it plays to people's prejudices and reinforces the way that they want themselves to be seen. Your typical Aussie is male, of course, a good mate, loyal, fair, generous, laid-back, has a sense of humour. He dislikes politicians, pretensions, la-di-da talk, formalities. In short the book is a jingoistic celebration of Australia and the stereotypical Australian male of the 1950's. Wilton and Bosworth in their book: *Old Worlds and New Australia*, write, "Often very funny, O'Grady's books were scoured by sexism, the crudest political conservatism, and a rampant nationalism (which at times seems to border on racism)."

(Wilton and Bosworth: 24) The book glorified stereotypes. Culotta/O'Grady told the Aussies of the mid-nineteen-fifties what they wanted to hear about themselves:

This grumbling, growling, cursing, profane, laughing, beer drinking, abusive, loyal-to-his-mates Australian is one of the few free men left on earth. He fear no-one, crawls to no-one, bludges on no-one, acknowledges no master...(Culotta: 204)

Undoubtedly this work is an unashamed promoter of migrant assimilation and advises the newcomer to: "Learn his (the Australian) way. Learn his language. Get yourself accepted as one of him; and you will enter a world you never dreamt existed. And once you have entered it, you will never leave it."

(204) In the Australia of this period there is no room for foreign diasporas.
Naturally the book also berates the migrant who might feel nostalgic for his homeland and sings the praises of the Australian way of life:

There are far too many New Australians in this country who are still mentally living in their homelands, who mix with people of their own language and customs. Who even try to persuade Australians to adopt their customs and manners. Cut it out. There is no better way of life in the world than that of the Australians. (204).\(^\text{12}\)

Jingoism doesn't get any more virulent than that! The book's construction of the Italians is equally superficial, simplistic and prone to confirming some basic prejudices prevalent in that period. Again, O'Grady, as Culotta, was playing to the gallery, telling them what they wanted to hear, confirming their fears and prejudices. Which no doubt explains the book's popularity with the readers of the 1950's. One such readers wrote, "It is O'Grady's intense preoccupation with setting down on paper an exact picture of certain types of contemporary Australians which has made him not only a most diverting writer but an important one as well." (Yeomans: 24).

Italians were acceptable if they came from north of Rome. They were thought to be tall and fair and therefore could easily assimilate with the local population (Never mind the Aborigines, they did not figure in the socio-ethnic composition of Australia) southern Italians, or Meridionali, were short and dark, two reasons why they were regarded as less desirable migrants.\(^\text{13}\)

To the extent that it closely reflected both political and popular thinking about migrants in general and Italians in particular, \textit{They're a Weird Mob}, though hardly a literary masterpiece, has some value as a socio-historical commentary on its times. It shows an Australia fearful of losing its white, Anglo-
Celtic identity, in the face of mass migration from a war-ravaged Europe. This is a practical, hard-nosed Australia, whose booming economy was in need of cutters for its cane fields, bricklayers for its building industry, labourers for its factories. It wanted northern Italians, but reluctantly had to accept Southerners who became those manual workers it badly needed. Nino Culotta was not your typical migrant. Indeed he did not start off as a migrant at all. Initially he came as a journalist to do a series of articles on those much-maligned 'Meridionali' who had migrated. He was relatively cultured, a man of words if not of letters. It is significant that Australia turns him into a bricklayer. This is not as implausible as it may seem. The country was full of migrant professionals—teachers, engineers or doctors—whose qualifications were not recognized—reduced to doing a factory job. Less plausible for the reader is the acceptance that Nino Culotta, the sophisticated European journalist, should find fulfilment in Australia as a hard-boozing, good mate, brickie's labourer. I would suggest that this is rather wishful thinking on the part of an author enamoured with the myth of the hard-drinking, Aussie mate. And that may be just as well.

Judah Waten and "The Knife"

In its own way this story by migrant-writer Judah Waten—with its stereotypes and clichéd imagery—is no less condescending to Italian migrants than the Culotta novel. He too plays to the gallery, except that his gallery is the more politically-correct Left. Here we are invited to “understand” the plight of the unfortunate migrant. In Waten's story we travel to the opposite end of the Italian peninsula to an unnamed “poor village in Calabria”, where the people were, "in daily need of food. Their most constant meal was black bread made of hard wheat, in great round loaves..." (Waten 1970: 134)
The main character, Plinio, is a young man from the rural South, where large families and poverty were common in the post war years. His father “worked hard as a day labourer on the roads and in the fields” and his mother “had carried great weights on her head, bags of sand and even ceiling boards.” (133) One might expect Judah Waten, a Jewish-Ukrainian migrant himself, to empathize with his character; and so he does, to a fault. His depiction of Plinio and of the rural South is sentimental and contrived:

He was one of the best dancers in the district, although he had a heavy, awkward gait from walking barefoot except on Sundays. He was always among those young people who danced to the shepherd’s bagpipes, circling around each other, barely touching fingers as if in a harmonious courtship, or taking hands and spinning round like tops. (Waten: 134)

Yeah, right, if you say so. Clearly this is not the real Italy, not even the Italy of the post-war years. This is the Italy of folklore, myth and pastoral poetry. Unlike the tall, brave, fair-skinned, educated hero of They’re a Weird Mob, Plinio is an uneducated Meridionale, less able, or willing, to fit into the white-Australian landscape and therefore more prone to suffer the prejudice and antagonism of the xenophobic element of the population. Plinio works for another Italian in the Café Milano, he mixes with other Italians, attends the Italian church service. It is when he ventures out onto the wider community that he encounters strife. His nemesis is a 19 year old Australian, Tommy Lawler, who comes laden heavy with a baggage of prejudice and xenophobia, “Old Lawler never tired of saying that dagos could live on the smell of an oil rag; that way back in the depression when returned soldiers were forced off their farms,
they had taken them over, and in cities they had taken the jobs of Australians."

(137)

Add to this a dash of love rivalry and you get that explosive mix of which is the staff of melodrama. Jealous of the interest that his girl, Mavis, shows towards Plinio, Tommy confronts the migrant and roughs him up, humiliating him in front of his friends, "With a quick movement of his hand he sent Plinio's cap flying into the gutter. As he stooped down to find his cap the youths and girls laughed and shouted approval to Tommy, who watched Plinio with contemptuous leer." (139) This public humiliation, more than the physical assault itself, wounds Plinio's sense of dignity and "outrages his manhood". And even though, "gentle, passive and resigned as he was, he felt stirring within him a bitter resentment." (138) This is when the knife comes into play.

The final provocation results in Tommy being stabbed and Plinio, suddenly conscious of the gravity of his action, "kept staring in an unseeing way at the small blade of steel in his hand." (140) The final scene sets up a melodramatic denouement:

People had begun to crowd around, those in front pressing the others back.

"It's a dago!...He's got a knife."

"Look out! He'll use it again."

All their secret images of evil seemed to flow together and take a single shape.

"A knife!...He's got a knife." (140)

Intended or not, this is a ritualistic stabbing in which the migrant avenges his and his country's humiliation, and pays the price. Plinio had to suffer poverty in his own country, he had confronted the hardships and confusion of migrating
to a country whose language he did not speak and whose culture was so different from his. He was prepared to be put upon and despised by the locals. What he was not prepared to take was affront to his dignity as a human being. Any person, no matter how poor or lowly, has his pride protected by a moral space and Plinio's space had been invaded. The knife for him was not a weapon of aggression. He was not in grave physical danger, but his pride had been wounded and he saw the knife as a means to put right a great injustice and regain his dignity.

As we know, different cultures ascribe particular meanings and values to actions, gestures, objects. Migration, which brings cultures face to face with each other, can sometimes act as a catalyst and provoke clashes of values. In rural Italy, within the peasant culture, to carry a knife was regarded in those days as normal, indeed it was a necessity. For a villager working out in the fields the knife was a very practical accessory. He used it for cutting shrubs and food; for opening, repairing, carving and whittling; it was even used by mountain shepherds, for shaving and trimming beards. It's not surprising then, that the knife figures prominently in the rustic cultures. Apart from its practical uses, the knife had associations with such qualities as strength, honour, manliness and passion. It was, if you like, the poor man's sword.

On the other hand, in Australia the knife came to be regarded as a weapon of aggression, akin to carrying a gun. Indeed I would argue that in Anglo-Saxon societies stabbing someone with a knife, arouses more fear and revulsion than shooting with a gun. The gun is seen as "cleaner", more clinical as a weapon. It puts distance between the killer and the victim, in that sense it is less invasive of the personal space. Even though the knife is less lethal than the gun – though of course it can also kill instantly – it is feared more. The knife
is regarded as barbaric, primitive. A stabbing has connotations of cabalistic rituals, of unleashing of primeval forces. Our crime stories are full of gun killings. Even poisoning is regarded as “acceptable”, hence Agatha Christie's sanitized killers make ample use of guns and poison. But if you really want to portray the more elemental human passions such as fear, derangement, revenge and hatred then the knife is your weapon, as that master of fear, Alfred Hitchcock, well knew. In this story it's the sight of the knife which arouses the most terror in the crowd. A gun would have certainly sent people scuttling away for cover, but the knife mesmerizes them, it has the power to immobilize the crowd. It touches something deep, mysterious and terrifying in their collective psyche, so that "all their secret images of evil seemed to flow together and take a single shape." Here the knife transcends its primary function and becomes a symbol of evil. For a population already primed to resent foreigners this kind of scene goes to the raw of their xenophobic bone.

Helen Garner's Consolation

Fifty years seems quite a leap to make between works, but it does afford us the advantage of looking at the Italians, through the lens of time and gauge what changes have occurred in the perception of the host community towards that group. Helen Garner's book, Joe Cinque's Consolation, is the real-life story of the eponymous protagonist, who was given an overdose of heroin by his girlfriend, Anu Singh, then was left to die over a period of six hours. By the time she decided to call an ambulance it was too late to save him. Garner's story looks at the effect of those events on the families involved, and in the process she gives us a glimpse on what might be an average Italian family, two generations after migration. The perceptions are through the eye of the author,
an acute, intelligent, sympathetic eye. The impression received by the reader is not that given by the common view (however that may be defined) prevalent at the time of writing, but the particular view of a very perceptive observer.

It's important to note also that this work, unlike the others we have looked at so far, deals with real events. This puts certain constraints on the author, the constraints of fact, yet part of the appeal of this kind of narrative is that the reader knows that it deals with true events. Because real names are used the facts must be accurately reported, therefore Garner relies heavily on the trial transcripts and real interviews with the people involved. The story itself presents a ready-made adversarial situation of good versus evil. After all Joe, his family and friends, most of whom are Italian, are victims. We know from the beginning that Joe Cinque is dead. The book's dust-jacket announces it, with chilling directness:

In October 1997 a clever young law student at ANU made a bizarre plan to murder her devoted boyfriend after a dinner party at their house... Nobody warned Joe Cinque. He died one Sunday, in his own bed, of a massive dose of Rohypnol and heroin.

So the reader approaches this narrative with certain pre-conceptions: that Joe Cinque is a victim, (and a dead one at that) that he was young and clever, that he was "devoted" to the woman who killed him. Undoubtedly the reader's sympathies will lie with Joe and with his family. Death has the power to erase in the memory of the living any faults that the victim might have had. Conversely, it tends to edify the dead, investing them with an aura of goodness and spirituality. Death is a redeeming, cleansing force. Helen Garner admits as much when she writes, "Nobody is going to say anything but good about their
friend who has been murdered..." (291) Joe Cinque, one suspects, is going to be turned into a hero and a saint. Of course, the baddie in this story is going to be the killer, Anu Singh, together with her “accomplices”.

One fundamental question for the purpose of this research is: to what extent is this family typical of Italian migrant families. Certainly the Cinques appear to be like so many families who arrived here from Italy in the 50's and the 60's, as young working-class people. The father, Nino Cinque, came to Australia in 1967, as a 26 year-old fitter. In 1968 he married Maria and they had two sons: Joe and Anthony. This is indeed a typical Italian migrant family. The parents are working class people from central Italy (Abruzzi) bringing to Australia lots of energy and hope for a better life. When we are first introduced to them their house fits the typical Italian household: "It was a two-storey red brick building with Italian style arches, a balcony, and a façade that included the roller-doors of a double garage. Outside its front door, on a well trimmed buffalo grass, grew a thick, pointed, dark-foliaged cypress tree. " (81)

Later we are told that the backyard consists, among other things, of a vegetable garden and a fig tree. Very much the kind of house and garden you are likely to see in visiting any of the remaining first-generation Italian families in Perth. That however would not be the case for the second generation of Australian-born Italians. For a start their jobs would be different. Joe Cinque is an engineer and he has not chosen an Italian girl as his companion, Anu Singh is in fact of Indian descent. This fits in with the general trend already discussed that second and third generation Italians in Australia increasingly tend to marry outside their ethnic group.
The Family

The legendary closeness of the Italian family is evident in this story, and does not seem to have been affected by the generational change, or the nearly 40 years of contact with the Australian society. When Garner first takes us into the Cinque household we know that this is a culture in which the family is valued above all: "Mrs Cinque led me into the living room, whose brick walls were hung with the family photos and trophies." (81) This closeness is confirmed in so many ways. When the mother talks about her son, who has gone to live with his girlfriend in Canberra, she is surprised that the son has not called, "Usually Joe rang me on Friday." (96)

Faced with the news of the terrible tragedy, the family pull together even more. The father is so distraught that, "Nino didn't believe it until the day after. He was like a Zombie walking around. Anthony comes home. He comes inside. There was all the people in the house. He put his fist through the door. He starts screaming "that bitch has killed my brother." (97)

This is a family whose ties are very strong, so it comes as no surprise that when tragedy strikes each member is dealt a near-lethal blow. The Cinques find it impossible to just move on. The father is described as emotionally numbed by the tragedy. The other son, Anthony, is unable to maintain his job and spends the days chain-smoking. One feels it will be a long time before his wounds will heal, if at all. The mother is the one who, paradoxically, fares better than the others. She talks through her grief, she is angry, she wants justice and all the time you feel that if this family is going to survive this tragedy it will be through her strength.
The family provides the authority, guidance, the care and the protection, as well as being a force of restraint for the young person. The so-called Western standards of social mores and personal behaviour purport to be founded more on the needs and aspirations of the individual. Generally speaking the family plays a less intrusive role. Once the person has attained maturity at age 18 it is acknowledged that he/she has full power of decision in matters that concern that person, who often leaves the parental home. The role of the family has been further eroded in the past half a century in Western countries, by the increasing number of divorces.

In the case of the Cinque family (and again my observation shows this to be true among Italians in general) the family bonds appear to be as strong as they were in the fifties and the sixties, when the parents first migrated to Australia. My recent return to Italy has confirmed that, even though families have become very small, family traditions still hold strong there, particularly in the villages and small towns, children still tend to stay in the parental home for longer than Australian children. This may be due more to economic reasons, or the fact that university degrees take a lot longer to complete in Europe than they do in Australia. Though the Cinques have lived in Australia for a long time they have remained true to their cultural origins. In that sense they can be said to be part of the Italian diaspora in Australia. Garner's description of their living room is a testament to the strength of the family unit in tragedy. This family wishes to maintain the memory of their son and brother alive:

On its table, angled towards the kitchen, stood a large colour photo of Joe. He was seated on a sofa, leaning forward with clasped hands.... A rosary was draped over the corner of the
frame. Each time I came to the house, in the months that followed, Maria would take from me whatever guestly offering I had brought—a bunch of flower, a bottle of wine—and place it quietly on the dining table beside Joe's portrait. (286)

The author, three-times married and heavy with a baggage of marriage break-ups, is envious of the Cinque family ties, "I glanced back and saw the good looking young fellow, with well-cut dark hair and a wedding ring, lean back from their tight group in a burst of laughter. What a strong family they must be." (57) In Italy the family ethos is upheld by the church, in its insistence that marriage is for life. In the past this has been one factor which has kept down the rate of divorce in that country. This is still low compared to Australia's, but growing. Traditionally the family network is further reinforced by the godparenting arrangement. This occurs at the point of christening, when the parents choose a godparent for their child, usually a good friend of the family, who then acts as a substitute in the absence of the parents. The parent and the godparent enter into a relationship called comare in the case of a woman, and compare for a male. This is a liaison that does not exist in English, or at least is not given a name, as the author comes to realize during her acquaintance with the Cinque family. (249)

**The dominance of the Mother**

It has often been said that Italian society, like so many the world over to a lesser or greater degree, is dominated by the male. This is true in as much as males still represent the greater percentage of the workforce, they tend to earn more and hold the more prestigious offices in the power structures of politics, business and the judiciary. However, within the family structure the
Italian mother has always held a special, if not dominant place, by virtue of her emotive pull on the children. Maria Cinque is certainly a power in this family. At home she dominates the interviews that the author sets up with the family, while her husband’s voice hardly features. In court she is the one who calls out to the lawyers and some of the witnesses in defence of her son while her husband, Nino, takes a background seat, "Nino Cinque maintained his place, with few words and a sweet expression, alongside the huge, elemental drama of his wife's persona." (131)

Undoubtedly in this situation it is the mother who narrates the events, expresses her anger, vents off her frustration, takes decisions, urges Garner to write the book about her son and finally persuades her. Given the extent of the tragedy and the injustice that the Australian courts have meted out to her, her outbursts are understandable, though at times she crosses the line of what is acceptable. Like when she condemns Indians as a whole, just because her son's killer happens to be of Indian descent, "I hate Indians now" she said in a calmer voice, I know it's wrong, I'm not stupid." (236) Or when she talks about getting her own revenge, "If there is no justice" she said, "you gotta make your own justice, eh?" (193) Generally though, Maria comes across as a strong, loving mother and a most likeable human being.

There is no doubting the author's growing admiration for Maria, "I was awe-struck by Maria Cinque's composure." (131) And again " Oh, if only Maria Cinque could read out the statement in her beautiful accent, to show her strength of character, to give voice to her family sorrow and rage in a public forum. I glanced at her. She sat silent in the front row..." (114) As their contacts intensify, their friendship grows, as demonstrated in this vignette of warm hospitality and domestic conviviality, "Maria came out looking soignée in
a rose-pink silky top. She took me inside to the lounge room, where Nino was smoking a cigarette in front of the huge TV. They welcomed me with smiles and formal kisses." (287)28 The friendship is fed also by a good dose of Italian cooking, " Maria served a sublime and simple meal: spaghetti marinara, then some squid, a dish of small whiting done in light batter, and a salad from Nino's garden. (287)

Tragedy brings an Anglo-Australian author and working-class Italian migrant mother into close friendship and a total understanding of each other as human beings.29 Again this is a long way from the attitudes to Italians circa 1957, as displayed in the previous two stories by Judah Waten and Nino Culotta; even though Helen Garner’s eye is more intelligent, far more sympathetic than that of the xenophobic characters in those two stories.

A Critique of Australian Society

This book can also be read as a critique of the way that Australian society has developed. This criticism is hardly ever overtly articulated, though Garner comes close to it on a couple of occasions. For instance when Maria Cinque goes to Italy, partly to get an injury seen to, Garner reports it thus, "She gave me a rapid account of the ankle operation she had undergone in a Bologna clinic, another attempt to repair the botched surgery she had had in Australia..." (193) As Australia prides itself in having a high level of surgery standards in its hospitals, this hardly seems a fair criticism. And when Nino Cinque talks about his migration to Australia, he says, with a tone of bitterness, "When I was twenty-six and a half, I prefer to come to Australia. Maybe this was the mistake I done." (114)
For the most part the criticism is implied in her developing admiration of the Cinque family and their close-knit network of relatives and friends. When she describes the way that Italians celebrate family occasions, such as a weddings, she looks on with an admiring eye, "The tables were set, the balloons inflated and the streamers rigged up for a big celebration [...] With a joyful racket of laughter and shouting, the guests streamed up the stairs and took their places at the table." (326)

Implied here is a contrast between the author's own experiences and what she witnesses as she delves into the lives of these migrant families. Helen Garner looks at this world with a wistful, idealistic, even envious eye. In this scene the diaspora becomes the centre and it's the eye of the mainstream that's looking on. Garner sees the closeness, the simple pleasure of other's company; the mutual support, the old-time courtesies and values. This kind of social sub-structure is increasingly rare in mainstream society, where networks tend to be functional, built around a sporting activity, a common interest, work-related, limited. A group may play netball together, have a picnic at the end of the season, but if something goes badly wrong the group is not there as a support structure in the same way as a network of relatives or an old-fashioned network of neighbours in a village environment might have been. In contemporary society these support functions have been institutionalised. 30

The migrant is also seen as the keeper of traditional moral values. When Rebecca, Joe's old girlfriend, confesses to her that she did not give in to Joe's sexual advances because she wanted to save herself for the man she was going to marry, Garner's reaction reveals admiration for the values of the migrants and regret for the way Australian society has gone:
I was thunderstruck, I didn't know such people existed. I thought about myself at that age, straining at the leash, dying to get out there and into it, no matter what the cost or who would have to pay. And contemplating the wreckage that was strewn behind me now, the selfish cruelties, the terrible waste, I was flooded with respect for the clarity of her self-control.... (324)

What we find here is not a simple contrast between the ethnic girl and the author herself, it's more than that, it's the juxtaposition of two worlds: the old, traditional one in which the desires of the self are subsumed to age-old customs and a strict code of community standards. The behaviour of individuals is often guided, if not dictated, by the expectations of the society into which they were born and raised. In the case of migrants the behaviour is conditioned by two societies, the one of their origin, and the one in which they have come to live. The degree to which they fall into one or the other depends on such factors as the age at which they migrated and the length of their stay in the new country. In the case of the Cinques, they do not prescribe to the attitudes to death and grieving prevalent in Australia which, simply stated, maintains that after the death of a loved one, one should try to move on very quickly. Not for the Anglo-Australian character the years of grieving, the visits to the cemetery, for years after the death, the preservation of the memory by displaying photos of the deceased husband (wife, child, parent) on the mantelpiece of the living room, or by wearing the black colour of mourning for months and years after the death. Such attitudes in Australia are likely to be described as "morbid", self-indulgent, a sign of a weak character. In Italy, on the other hand (especially in the small villages and towns of the South) such long periods of grieving and the preservation of the memory of the loved ones, are regarded as a sign of the
depth of one's love for the deceased and the mourner is judged to be deserving of society's respect. There is a feeling in the book that Australian society, whilst giving the Italian migrant the possibility of considerable material comfort, has neglected some of those traditional values, the social courtesies, the human attachments that give solace to the individual and strength to society.

In particular Garner is critical of the justice system. Charmed by Maria Cinque and her circle, appalled by the leniency of the sentence meted out on the killers of this young man, Garner gives up all claim to objectivity in setting down this story. "I bowed to Primo Levi who had deliberately assumed the calm, sober language of the witness… [rather than] the lamenting tones of the victim or the irate voice of someone who seeks revenge." And again, "I read Hannah Arendt's, Eichmann in Jerusalem, I wept over the quiet reasoning of those who maintained that the purpose of criminal proceedings is not to still the desire of revenge in the victim's heart, but "to repair the rest of the social fabric." (280-81)

However Helen Garner is too conscious of her own emotional involvement, of her outrage in the face of such a terrible crime and the suffering of this family. So, even though she "respected Levi's moral dignity, his restraint" she is "unable to emulate it." In short, she has become too close to the grieving family and takes on board all the emotional outpourings that the death of a much-loved son brings upon the distraught family. This is evident in her description of Joe Cinque:

But what bad is there to say, about a firmly brought up Italian boy who respects his parents, whom all his friends' parents adore, who works nights in a pizza shop while studying for his
engineering degree? The sort of bloke everyone wants to MC their wedding because he's so funny and so kind [...] Who never once forgets to bring a birthday and Christmas and Easter present for your kid sister? Who takes your new baby son in his arms and calls him 'my little paesan'?33 (292)

Even allowing for the fact that humans tend to say only good things about dead persons, especially if they die young and in tragic circumstances, this is indeed the portrait of a young man every mother would relish. He is warm, kind, funny, loving and loyal to both family and friends, generous, altruistic to the point of placing himself in danger in order to help others. And as for that little vignette of Joe with holding his friend's baby, wouldn't a politician on the campaign trail give an arm and a leg for that kind of picture in the paper! Joe Cinque has been given a literary canonization by Garner.34

She finally admits, "I longed to write a lament for Joe Cinque." (281) That is, Joe Cinque the son of all-too-loving Italian parents, who inadvertently may have contributed their son's downfall by being overprotective and indulgent. As a consequence he grew up to be too naïve, too trusting of the kind of insane, drug-filled sub-culture which eventually dealt him a horrible end.

Conclusion

The three authors I have looked at present the reader with three constructions of Italian migration in Australia, as seen from a non-Italian point of view. To some extent they mark three stages in the progression of the Italo-Australian consciousness in the past fifty years, of the Italian diaspora in Australia, if you like. O'Grady's Italians fall into two categories: the tall, fair, educated Northerners and the short, dark, uneducated Southerners. This
reflects the fact that, _They’re a Weird Mob_ was written in the fifties, long before political correctness exiled such attitudes to the underground or confined them to the privacy of the home. The book is a product of the White Australia Policy, it came at time when this country was reluctantly allowing darker, non-English speaking Europeans into the country, and Australians were still burdened with the kind of propaganda and jingoism that the recent war had spawned. Australians, who saw their country being “overrun” by migrant workers, needed reassurances and the book gave them the reassurances. Italian migrants, in particular northern Italians, were OK: they worked hard, liked to have a family, drank beer like the locals and would assimilate easily.

Judah Waten, a migrant himself, took the politically-correct line (long before such stance became _de rigueur_) of the compassionate author who, through his story, attempts to open the reader’s mind, inviting him/her to see beyond the action, to show tolerance and understanding. Waten takes us into the background of his character, (at least the way that he perceived it) the rural communities of southern Italy with their poverty, their superstitions, their social dynamics constructed on an age-old struggle for survival. Plino may be poor, but the author highlights his sense of honour and self-respect. Waten’s story is a cautionary tale that speaks directly to the educated, tolerant Australian reader. Just as in the O’Grady tale, this story too has a clear message: whatever you do, you must respect the dignity of the migrant (or any human being for that matter); if you demean people they are liable retaliate violently.

Finally, Helen Garner makes a leap of fifty years and takes us into the life of a contemporary italo-Australian family in the midst of a tragedy. Maria and Nino Cinque are no longer newcomers. They are well-established citizens of Australia, but still very much part of the Italian diaspora. They have worked
hard, educated their children, given them a loving home and a culture to be proud of. Their children, though born in Australia, acknowledge their Italian origins in the way that they dress, in the food that they eat, in their devotion to their parents, even in the music that they listen to. However, they are also open to the wider Australian community. When Joe falls in love with a non-Italian girl there is never any pressure on him (or at least the book does not suggest that there was) to sever the relationship. These Italians as portrayed by Helen Garner are thoroughly decent, even admirable folk. It is unfortunate that, these former-migrants are once again victims, victims of a deranged mind and subsequently victims of a system that does not deliver justice. However, through the eye of the author the reader is invited to feel not pity, but admiration for the Cinque family. Garner achieves this by underscoring the essential goodness of the family and the strength in times of a terrible crisis. She depicts the quiet dignity of Nino Cinque, the fortitude of the mother in her suffering, the way that their friends in the Italian community rally up and comfort the family. The triumph of this book lies in the fact that these Italian migrants, shattered by grief and offended by an unjust court decision, are still able to come through as loving, courteous, dignified individuals. To the extent that the Cinques are a typical Italo-Australian family, this book, though grim in its subject matter, celebrates the Italians of Australia.
Notes: Chapter Two

2 And not just the English, Stendhal, the French writer travelled extensively to Italy, as did Americans Mark Twain, Henry James (from which came the wonderful 'Portrait of a Lady) and Ernest Hemingway; the Russians Turgeniev the writer and Tchaikovsky the composer; the Germans, Hermann Hesse, Thomas Mann (*Death in Venice*) and of course Goethe, whose *Travels in Italy* are probably the best known travel accounts of them all, in which he famously said, “In Rome I found myself.”
3 In his poem, *De Gustibus*, Robert Browning wrote:
   Italy, my Italy
   Queen Mary's saying serves for me
   (when fortune's malice lost her Calais)
   "Open my heart, and you'll see
   graned inside of it, "Italy"
   Such loves old are I and she:
   So it always was, so ever shall be.
4 A film that exploited this very idea was *Enchanted April*. A Merchant Ivory film, directed by Anthony Newell and starring Maggie Smith, (1992) set in London and in Tuscany.
5 This idea of the way the human mind tends to process memories- especially childhood memories- of people and places, and turns them into myths, is a recurrent theme in my novel, *An Olive Branch for Sante*. Both Sante and Ira-Jane have constructed idealized images of Australia and Italy respectively, which are bound to disappoint once they come into contact with the reality. I shall return to this point later when I write about that work.
6 One Australian who clearly disagrees with this is the current Prime Minister, John Howard, as one interview he gave to TIME-Pacific magazine attests, “Never a fan of the ambiguous word "multiculturalism," he also rejects the idea that Australia could build a federation of cultures. "There's no such thing as a nation without a dominant culture," he says. "We have a dominant Anglo-Saxon culture. It's our language, our literature, our institutions ..." (Dusevic: 2006)
7 It needs to be said, however, that despite brave efforts of the seventies and eighties, multicultural Australia at least in terms of its literature has remained a myth. There have been exceptions, as we shall see later, in which visibly Italo-Australian, or for that matter, migrant literature has been made it into the so-called mainstream, but these have been rare and timidly, even begrudgingly accepted. More importantly, those works have remained ethnic in nature. The truth is that there is a real resistance in this country to migrant influences in the arts. The whys and wherefores of this are beyond the scope of this study. In the USA quintessential Jewish writers like Philip Roth and Saul Bellow are mainstream writers. This is true of other art forms as well. The legacy of black music, its jazz and blues is very much mainstream American music.
8 The list of such authors is very long. Names which spring to mind include: Stendhal, George Eliot, George Sands and, more recently, John Le Carré
9 To some extent this is consistent with the various prejudices he displays towards the local population, though this is confined to relatively harmless areas, such as their use, or misuse, of the English language and to some of their social habits.
In the fifties there could not have been a greater insult (in such countries as Australia and America) than to be lumped together with the Communists. This was after all the so-called McCarthy era.

Again, reversing the usual order where the migrant is portrayed as the confused, timid newcomer, grateful for the opportunities offered by the host country.

Presumably Nino Culotta would freak out to see contemporary Australians travelling overseas by the millions, learning Japanese or gorging themselves in “foreign” restaurants, rather than attending cricket matches, or boozing with their mates at the local.

This reflected official thinking of this period in Australia. In 1959, secretary of Department of Immigration, Tasman Heyes reporting to the Minister of Immigration, Downer that:

…the population of the Northern provinces of Italy there is a much greater proportion of people of the type that can quickly be assimilated here. It is fairly common knowledge that the majority of the inhabitants of Northern Italy are of a different type from the majority from the south. As a result of economic factors – particularly poverty of natural resources – there has been a poorer standard of life in the South than in the North over the years, with the result that both the education and physique of the inhabitants has suffered in comparison with those of most of their Northern compatriots...


As for Plinio going barefoot, that is a nonsense. Italians, even the poorest, would never have walked out of the house without shoes, or in shorts for that matter. Only young children wore shorts. I lived in Sicily in the fifties and I don't recall ever seeing a barefoot person in the street. It was just not done. To go barefoot out in the street in Italy was and is beyond the plausible because, apart from the practical reasons, it carries too much social stigma. For that reason Italians, including myself, were quite shocked on first arriving in Australia, to see some children walk to school without shoes, and even adults could be seen down the shop barefoot. Clearly, to go barefoot was not such a social taboo in Australia. To put it in another way, there has always been in Italy more pressure to conform to certain standards of dress – and social etiquette in general – than in Australia. This is so even today.

Think of the difficulties provoked in France when the Government outlawed the wearing of the scarf by Moslems in 2004.

In Mascagni's opera, *Cavalleria Rusticana*, set in rural Sicily, the dallying protagonist, Turiddu, is stabbed to death in a knife duel by his lover's jealous husband.

Alfred Hitchcock staged that famous shower scene in *Psycho*, in which the Anthony Perkins' psychotic character stabs the female hotel guest, played by Janet Leigh. It's not surprising that this scene has been voted the most terrifying in the history of cinema.

That does not mean, however, that there is no authorial discretion in non-fiction narrative. The author is still very much in control of the material and is able to shape the work. She decides what details are chosen and what are discarded, which items are highlighted and which are given little relevance. The author has the power to present the people in a particular way, thereby turning them into constructed entities or characters. She is able to give her material a narrative a tone, a point of view, a shape which has a strong bearing as to how the work- and the people - are perceived by the reader. To that extent a non-fiction narrative can be as much a constructed narrative as a work of fiction.


Cf. my description of the La Rocca house and garden in chapter 7 of *An Olive Branch for Sante.*

This shows the downside of family closeness, or any human affection for that matter. If love for family, or any other person, is so intense that when the object of that love is removed (by death or change of circumstances) it renders the person left behind incapable of getting on with life, then it brings home the fact that love, though
sublimating in itself, can lead to debilitating consequences at times. Of course, being aware of such perils, is no insurance against emotional involvement with others.

22 During my last trip in 2004 I stayed with three families: the Bardo and the Vinci families in Rome and the Romeo family in Sicily. The Bardo have a boy and a girl, aged 18 and 21. The first was in his last year of Liceo and was living at home, the second was boarding at University. The Vincis also have two children, Gabriella aged 30, and Mauro 34. The first is still at home, Mauro, has just got married, but he lived at home into his thirties. Finally Assunta Romeo is my cousin in Sicily. She also has two children. The eldest, Mariella, is 38 and still lives at home. The younger, Rosaria, is 35 and was married 4 years ago. She too lived at home until her marriage.

23 Housing in Italy is scarce and expensive, so that it is much more difficult for young people to find suitable accommodation to rent. Also jobs are not so easy to come by as they are in Australia. These are two major factors which make children dependent on the parents well into their twenties and even thirties.

24 It must be said also that though the family offers love and protection, on the other hand it can entrap the person. (Interestingly, this is a variation of the point made in note 20 above). Helen Barolini in her essay, "Verso un'identita' italoamericana" (Towards an Italian-American Identity) writes, "We feel comforted and reassured by family ties and yet we feel trapped by what Emily Dickinson calls 'the soft eclipse', which means succumbing to the seductive but numbing power of family protection which weakens our will. If we leave we feel lost; if we stay we feel blocked. The ambivalence is permanent, it's ancient like history, it's the stuff of Literature."

25 Several times the author refers to the fact that Maria puts pressure on her to write a book about her son. Helen Garner resists the idea for a long time before she gets down to it. One must assume that Maria sees the writing of the book as a means of attaining the justice that the court system failed to deliver.

26 The traditional Italian society is not the only one in which the mother figure plays such a pivotal role in the structure of the family. See for example the role of the mother in many Irish plays such as Juno and the Paycock. The role of the mother also appears dominant in much of Jewish literature, Fiddler on the Roof being just one example.

27 Contrast this with the outburst of Culotta's xenophobe some 50 years before. "Trouble with this country there's too many dagoes in it. Takin' the bread an' butter outa the mouths of our wives an' children. Can't even speak English. Don' wanna speak English. Yabber, yabber, yabber" (Culotta: 53)

28 This episode also shows the two cultures mingle and feed off each other in apparent harmony. Helen Garner, representing the host culture, accepts the hospitality of the former migrants and relishes the food and their social graces (in the formal kissing). They sit down to a glass of beer (surely a symbol of being Aussie) and talk about an Australian rules footballer.

29 As a side issue one might like to wonder how much this relationship, between such unlikely pair of women, is one of convenience. To put it bluntly, is Helen Garner using Maria Cinque in much the same way as Truman Capote, in the movie of the same name (Miller: 2005), uses the killer, Perry Smith, on whom he will eventually write: In Cold Blood? I would suggest, rather, that this relationship is mutually exploitative, in the sense that the writer is after material for her book, while Maria wants the book to be written for the reason already mentioned (see note 24), but also because she might see it as a “monument” to the memory of her son.

30 For instance, where once the family was expected to care for those who needed it, we have set up nurseries for the very young and nursing homes for the elderly.

31 My own mother and father died in 1977 and 1978 respectively. Over a quarter of a century on, we still visit their grave on the anniversary of their death and also on November the 2nd which commemorates All Souls Day in the Catholic calendar. On this day the Karrakatta cemetery is crowded with Italian mourners visiting the graves of relatives.
It's interesting to note that though Joe is Australian born and raised, he is still referred to as "Italian", given the tone of this page it is used here as a term of endearment. This speaks volumes about how attitudes to Italians have shifted in the past fifty years.

Perhaps the tacit implication here is that Joe Cinque was too good for the grimy world in which he had to live, once he left the protective environment of home. Certainly being brought up by loving, protective parents, within a circle of family friends he could trust, Joe was an easy prey for the machinations of a sick mind like Anu Singh's. This might explain why Joe seemed unable to wake up to what was happening to him, even after she had tried to kill him, a few days before she finally did it.

This is as true today as it ever was. Those who wonder at the psychology of the Palestinian suicide bombers, or for that matter, at the violent Sydney riots in December 2005, between the local youths and the Australian Muslims, might do well to heed this message. That’s not to suggest that such acts of violence should be condoned, only that we should look at the reasons behind them, in order to arrive at a solution.
Chapter Three

Italo-Australian Writers
Introduction

Italian migrants have contributed to Australian writings since the eighteen fifties, though mostly from the sidelines, as they wrote in Italian for their own community. Until the publication of my own novel, *Southfalia* (1980) and Rosa Cappiello's, *Oh Lucky Country* (1984) the only work written by an Italian which had filtered through to the mainstream was Raffaele Carbone's *The Eureka Stockade* (1855). That book deals with the historical events of the title. In this study I limit myself to the period of mass migration of the postwar years to the end of the century, spanning a period of 50 years in all. As one might expect very little fiction was written in the first 20 years of this period by Italians. Most Italian migrants came to this country with little English and the great majority of them were poorly-educated manual workers and tradesmen, though there were exceptions of course.

So far as I have been able to establish, my own novel, *Southfalia*, (1980) was the first Australian work of fiction written and published in English by an Italian-born writer.¹ The other two novelists I have chosen to discuss are both Australian born and a generation younger than
myself. I refer to Venero Armanno (born 1959) and Melina Marchetta (born 1965).

**Armanno's Volcano**

Venero Armanno was born in Brisbane of Sicilian parents. His first publication was a collection of short stories, *Jumping at the Moon*, 1992, followed by a novel, *The Lonely Hunter* (1993). His first international success came with *Strange Rain* (1996) and *Firehead* (1999) which was also published in the USA. Finally in 2001 came *The Volcano*. It is to this latter work I shall refer mostly in this study.

*The Volcano* opens in contemporary Brisbane, where Sicilian-born Emilio Aquila lives weighed down by ill-health and a lifetime of memories. He works as a gardener/maintenance man for Dr Yen-Khe, a Vietnamese surgeon. In just one of many connections between Sicily and Australia, his employment recalls that of his own father who, back in Sicily, had been overseer to a rich landowner. History repeating itself, but never quite in the same way. It is also ironic in that Emilio is employed by another, more recent migrant. There is irony also in the fact that Emilio had promised himself never to do the kind of job that his father wanted him to go into.

For the migrant, the memories are always present, even in the most banal of gestures, "She rubbed the palm across the stubble of his chin, the way Emilio used to rub the side of little Ciccio's sad, long head..." (30) Or in the surrounding sounds, "The budgies trilled together. There was something about their melody that reminded Emilio of the old Sicilian workers' song the women used to sing in Don Malgro's fields." (30)
The casual touch of a woman's hand switches on memories of his beloved donkey some fifty years before back in Sicily; (though one must wonder whether the woman in question, Wendy, would be flattered by this connection!) The song of a bird, brings the sounds of women's voices from a different era and a different continent. Two worlds: the reality of the present (transmitted by sensual experience) switches on the past, ever-present in memory, but nebulous. Memory is ephemeral, changing according to how we feel at any particular moment. Out of this fusion a new reality is born: fragile, surreal but no less powerful.

The novel is constructed on a tapestry of connections between Australia and Sicily, present and past, “The smell of cut grass is so much like the smell of fresh hay in Don Malgro's fields." (299) The present brings up the past, one pervades the other, memories mingle with the stimuli of the present to spawn a kind of hyper-reality, the reality of the exile.2 "Through these layers of sleep he could hear sparrows and the starlings in the trees outside his old stone cottage, singing and calling. That low hum, that's the croaking of the cicadas…" (40)

The stone cottage, the sparrows, the cicadas. Is this Sicily? Australia? The images belong to both worlds, superimposed upon each other, contrasting, filtering through, one illuminating the other. The landscape of his youth in Sicily, on the opposite side of the globe, swathes the contemporary landscape of Brisbane some sixty years on. And vice-versa. A tropical storm in Brisbane in 2001, recalls the war years in Sicily sixty years before:

Flash and jag of lightning in a silent distance and the vista of rushing, streaming, just-now-arriving-and-look-how —black-and-
heavy-they-are midsummer storm-clouds ready to burst with hailstorms and hail. Then they do. Ratatat strafing of machine gun pellets, shake and shudder of white golf ball bombs pounding down from heaven, look at them all slanting and crazy, look at the fuming winds turning those streets of hail – attack after attack after attack!….Hadn’t it been a bit like this one hot mid-summer’s afternoon in Sicily? (299)

This is more than a mere recall, this is the reconstructed reality of the migrant: the new home is superimposed over the old. In Emilio’s head memories and reality mingle, the past and the present fuse. Time is the filter, memory is the creative cauldron in which alchemy occurs and a new reality is born. At times, this altered reality, seen through the eyeglass of time, space and mythology, attains a pastoral aspect, "If you followed the months you could see that in February the land is adorned with the frilly lace of almond blossom; in March and April the beautiful goddess Persephone, who was abducted into the underworld near lake Pergusa, emerges once again to strew all of Sicily with wildflowers of every imaginable colour..." (167) Ancient myths give way to a pastoral idyll, "Quiet pools protected by high surroundings rocks fanned by small waterfalls and still waters." (176) And of course the picture could not be complete without the frolic of nubile, naked nymphs, "They were taking off their dresses and underclothes, draping them where they could, and then all of them bold, timid and in-between entered the water completely naked..." (176) At the centre of this extravagant canvas we find the dominant nymph with milk white skin, rouged cheeks, ample curves and
golden tresses. Her name is “Desideria”, what else! "She fussed at the thick golden ropes of the braids, wanting to let her hair out." (176)

Though there is no doubting the author’s skill with, and love of, words, this chocolate-box painting is as cloying as eating the contents in one go. Vulcan (the novel's hero, Emilio Aquila, who has been living in the caves surrounding mount Etna) meets Desideria, our latter-day Persephone (or Proserpina in Italian) and promptly ravishes her. But though Emilio has the strength of a Vulcan, he is not a brute. He is a beautiful 17 year old, in whom youth, good looks and a rustic toughness mingle perfectly. His character shows the same contradictions of gentleness on the one hand (he cried at the death of his beloved donkey, Ciccio) combined with strength and cruelty. Out of these contradictions comes a great passion for life and a sexuality on a mythical scale. Emilio Aquila embodies not so much Vulcan as the most potent physical landmark of Sicily: Mount Etna, Europe’s highest volcano. Etna in turn symbolizes the ebullient Sicilian character, "All his people lived in the shadow of a beautiful, terrifying, rumbling and roiling volcano, and soon it came to Emilio that their lives were mirrored by that glorious and unmerciful monster?" (14) Like Etna, Emilio can be serene, gentle most of the time, but when he stirs he does so with the violence of an eruption, the passion of a fiery outpouring. Emilio Aquila is the Volcano of the title and by extension a symbol of the Sicilian character, at least as represented in this lavish, unwieldy work of escapist fiction. The same character is expressed, in a more unflattering context, in a book by Australian academic Johannes Lyng who says that "The Mediterranean temperament is emotional. Mediterraneans are passionate and excitable;
loving and hating intensely.” (Lyng: 37). This unflattering sketch – from an academic who presumably respects rationality and a cool head – comes with a warning to the government against allowing the mass immigration of hot-heads into Australia.

Over half a century later, and on the opposite end of the globe, that mythical world of Sicily is never far away from the mind of the elderly Emilio Aquila. Here the world of the migrant, like the aged migrants themselves is a sad, distant echo from the youthful landscape described earlier. Aged 73 and suffering from leaky “waterworks” he spends his day visiting lonely old people, like the woman next door, for whom he sometimes cooks. When he meets his compatriots, their world is a sore one indeed, marked by illness and decline:

Emilio kept going to the old get-togethers and he saw the light in his old compatriot's eyes fading from month to month and year to year… He had stood at more funerals than he liked to count and had helped too many cumpri e cummari\(^3\) move into old people's homes when their children refused to cope (38).

This is indeed the reality of contemporary Australia for the Italian migrant.\(^4\) In an age when there has been no significant migration from that country for some thirty years, the young men and women of the 50's, 60's and the 70's who came to this country with much hope and energy, now fill the nursing homes of Australia. Likewise the various Italian associations are filled with aging people crying out for the younger generation to take their place. Emilio Aquila is different of course. He is not giving in to old age and depression. This hero is going to "Rage, rage till the dying of the day".\(^5\) There is plenty of fire left in Emilio's crumbling
Despite everything, despite loneliness, failed ambitions, dreams that turned him inside out and all for nothing, he'd still rather eat a spoonful of his own shit than give in to age." (39).

The plight of the migrant is given a poignant articulation in the early days of Emilio's arrival in Australia, when he realizes that he has brought with him a haul of experiences and memories, which he cannot share with others in the host countries. For that reason alone his life in Australia is diminished, "deep down he truly believed that no one would either understand or care about what he had to say. In this country he wasn't really a man but an artefact from another time and place. Simple. A foreigner." (30)

And then there are the memories of the early days of migration. Here we get the voice of the bigot in the street, the xenophobe from the fifties, who sees all migrants as a threat to his lifestyle, his job, his daughter:

When another dirty migrant comes offdaboat with a young wife in tow. He's what we call a real fucken dago, to words a English, two suitcases of clothes and bits and pieces between him and the missus, and no bambino, that's strange, they usually got snotty kids by the dozen. (25)

This voice is no less racist, no less disparaging than the one we find in a scene from They're a Weird Mob or in The knife, both of which were written in the fifties. And this local is no less resentful of the fact that Italian men attract the attention of their women."Mate, they're repulsive lot the dagos, but what's a lot more worryen is the number a the women goin' for em..." (25) But then, as we know, prejudice cuts both ways.
When Emilio and his wife, Desideria, finally make it to Australia, as well as encountering prejudice they are no less prone to dishing it out, "Dio mio they were like wild animals! What did the Sicilians call these odd creatures they were now surrounded by? A new word they invented: Kangaroo!" (304).

In the face of so much antagonism on both sides, the Sicilian community stuck to their own kind. There is very little evidence here of mixing between the various regions of Italy, at least for this kind of working class, poorly educated group. Initially work is for the men, in labouring jobs such as construction sites for Brisbane’s sewage works. Armanno’s picture of these gangs of labourers is authentically depicted: "All the backbreaking and dangerous functions of this project were performed by labourers who were without exception migrants." (322).

It’s a kind of paid slavery, to do the work the locals turned their eyes up to. Yet, despite the harshness of the conditions, this is not a squalid situation. Once away from these inhuman conditions, the migrants looked to their own company and rituals for affirmation and to regain their dignity. Food and drink, as always with Italian gatherings, are the oil that makes the social machinery run smooth. Like all groups newly-arrived in a new country there is a great desire to stick together for company and mutual support. Even though initially they live in a boarding house, the Aquilas will have fifteen people over for a meal and everyone pitches in to help. This is a diaspora in the making.

Relations between these Sicilians and the Anglo-Australian community were either non-existent or pretty strained, although there were exceptions. The place where this community came into social
contact with the locals, and to some extent in competition with them, was at the Cloudland Ballroom\(^7\) which looked like 'the holy city of stars, which were the multicoloured lights set high amongst the vast colonnades, the brocaded royal blue and gilt ceilings..' (358). In this dreamland environment to which the people went to escape from the harshness of work and the dismal living conditions of a boarding house, the two groups came into contact, and times clashed.

That was back in the 1950's. Fifty years on we find Italian-born Emilio living, only just, in Brisbane. At 73 years of age, he is in a hospital bed half way between coma and consciousness, dreaming of Sicily. He is nursed back to life by Mary Aquila, third generation Australian also of Sicilian origins. Though they are not blood related, they share a surname\(^8\), and some history – though young Mary is not aware of it. Their initial connection comes by way of a shared background, “Can you play the game called *scopa* with the deck of cards?....the Sicilian card game! Can you play?” (125) So it is the little rituals which provide the links between people who share the same roots. Gone is the xenophobia against people of the Mediterranean, instead there is a kind pride and, despite the relative affluence, a sense that life is empty. (Mary is contemplating suicide and her boyfriend, James Ray, has done so).\(^9\) Characteristic of people living in a diaspora, there is a sense that the present life is somewhat surreal and inferior to life in the old country. The real life has already been lived, by Emilio, and never been lived by third generation Mary. "In this country he wasn't really a man, but an artefact from another time and place. Simple. A foreigner." (30) So, for this migrant, as with so many others, the real life is lived through memory and
in the hope of one day returning home, "He could live here until he had the strength to go and do what he knew was the next thing he had to do in life. Go back to Sicily."  

For old Emilio there is a realization – perhaps universal in people nearing the point of death – that life is after all circular. That, as T.S. Eliot puts it, "In my end is my beginning." For Mary, Emilio's story is her hope. Writing, she concludes, will be her way to redemption. So here is the opportunity to redeem her shattered life, but she won't find her true self in sterile, modern Australia, "Mary was writing. Though she listened quietly, and for such a long time, she didn't write down a single word, except for this one: Sicilia." Australian-born Mary has never been to Sicily, and yet she knows instinctively that what draws her to Emilio is not, as she initially thought, curiosity about the fact that they share a surname, rather that they share the same roots.

So Emilio tells Mary the story of his life, which is largely the story of his youth back in Sicily. In doing so it becomes a journey back for him and a journey of discovery of her roots, or, as Baldassar puts it: a rite of passage. We are in diaspora territory. Two people of different generations, one Australian born and the other from Sicily, finding that their authentic self resides in their common roots. Never mind that Mary has never seen the place and that Emilio's memories are so old as to have little correspondence with the present reality of that country. Migration in the long term, coalesces experience, giving it a time frame and a shape. It fills the landscape of the past with images that in time are rearranged to become signposts of who we are, or will believe ourselves to be. This is so not only for the migrants but also for their descendants.
for generations to come. So when Mary, third generation Italo-Australian, reaches the land of her ancestors, there are dual and contradictory reactions working within her. Mary, the modern Australian girl, collides with Maria, the descendant of an ancient civilization (which encompasses its history, customs, rituals, myths and archaic passions) rooted deep within her and aroused by the images she encounters. The images most affecting for her are the ones not of the city but the stark, raw, beautiful and brutal images of rural Sicily, images which have changed little over the decades. "Brown and grey goats with tin bells around their necks, running as if at a shot. Goat-herders climb after them, clambering the wet verdant green like goats themselves." (508).

The Mary-Maria clash is projected upon the landscape and the people she comes into contact with. These are not so ready to accept her or the connection that binds them. To them she is a stranger, Mary's dilemma is not uncommon in an increasing mobile world. It's the pathos of the descendant of migrants, the identity seeker, who feels herself to be part of a culture, but being rejected by the people of that culture. It isn't enough to feel an affinity with the culture of one's ancestor, there is also a need for reciprocity, for being recognized by the other party, the people who represent that culture. In other words, it's a relationship not unlike one of love. Loving another is only half the journey, for it to be worthwhile one must feel loved or, at the very least, there has to be some gesture of acceptance and recognition from the object of our love.

The tragedy of migration is that it freezes not just the experiences but the person in time and place. It has the power to do so not just for the migrant, but for the children of migrants, so that when the migrants finally
take that journey of self-discovery they find that their own hybrid culture
does not easily slot into a society which, at any rate, has itself moved on
in directions which are 'foreign' to the former migrant. In other words, the
journey back can be just as painful as the original migration.

And yet, paradoxically, migration can also be ultimately a triumph
because it leads the person to find meaning in one's present by seeing it
through the filter of time and space. Events become memories, images
become symbols, relationships attain the mythical power of great loves. It
matters little how true those memories were, what matters is the way that
they empower us to affect not only our own life but the life of others. In
this case, Emilio's story has the power to redeem the life of a young
woman. Mary does find acceptance in Sicily, in the arms of one Santino
Malgrò, grandson of the feudal landowner for whom Emilio's father used
to work. He is an artist, she a would-be writer. At the end of this long and
implausible novel the author places them, implausibly, where it all started
at the folds of mount Etna, where presumably they will live happily ever
after. To my mind this ending is steeped in nostalgia (for a world never
experienced first hand but filtered through the stories and the myths of the
author's ancestors) and married with a pastoral idyll. This novel gives us,
as a good a prose as you are likely to find in contemporary Australian
writing, particularly in the description of the "action scenes" and in the
lyricism of some landscape passages. However the plot is over-elaborate
and contrived, in places. Much the same applies to the prose. Both would
have benefited from a more rigorous editing. The effect is somewhat
cloying, just like the cover design, which uses a painting by Joseph Heintz
the Elder, representing *The Rape of Proserpina*. 
Marchetta’s Search.

*Looking for Alibrandi* is a book for young adults by a young writer (she was only twenty-six when the novel was published). It is undoubtedly the most well-known book written by an Italo-Australian, thanks also to a highly successful film starring Greta Scacchi and Anthony La Paglia. It has neither the stylistic sophistication of *The Volcano*, nor its ambitious scope, but its freshness makes it a very readable, feel-good work of fiction.

The Italians of this novel are an emotional, vibrant, gossipy lot who cling to their heritage and impart it to the next generation, more or less unchanged. The young protagonist is seventeen-year-old Josephine, a third generation Italo-Australian, proud of her heritage and happiest when she is in the company of other *wogs*. "I wanted to go to school in the inner west where all my friends had gone. They were Italian and Greek and we ruled primary school." (Marchetta: 7)

Proud of her heritage she might be, but there is a downside to it. Her ethnicity carries with it a whole baggage of strict moral codes and traditions which puts a modern teenager in conflict with prevailing codes of behaviour, in mainstream society. "They stifle me with ridiculous rules and regulations they have brought with them from Europe, but they haven't changed with the times like the Europeans have." (40)

A major issue in this work is the difficulty (experienced by the descendants of Italian migrants) in reconciling the codes handed down to
them by the parents with those of the contemporary society. To some extent this work articulates the same dilemma as Loretta Baldassar's *Visits Home*. Both young women, the fictional Josephine and the real Loretta, go through periods of doubt and confusion, a confusion compounded by the ordeal of adolescence and the uncertainties it brings:

> We were caught up in the middle of two societies. I think I had it worst. My mother was born here, so far as the Italians were concerned we weren't completely one of them. Yet because my grandparents were born in Italy we weren't completely Australian. (7)

However there is no doubt as to which community she most identifies with, "I have a funny relationship with Sera. As the only two of Italian ancestry in the group we have a thin bond." (19) This bond derives out of a need to identify with people with whom she shares certain customs, beliefs and cultural identifiers which, to her mind, give her an identity and a sense of belonging. These may appear to be at first contradictory. After all, in searching for my identity I am seeking a vision of "me" that identifies me as "unique", that is, different from other people. This process aims to sharpen the outlines of my being, so that I, and others, may see more clearly who I am. A search for identity, at a personal level, is a search for individuality. On the other hand, what we call *cultural identity* refers more to what the individual shares with a particular group. The centre shifts from the individual to the group. In defining cultural identity the tendency is to smooth out the edges around the individual and a process of blending-in occurs, resulting in a person being seen as part of a group with shared characteristics, beliefs, religion, language or any
combination of what might be termed “cultural identifiers”. Cultural identity is essentially tribalistic. Its roots are firmly planted in the acid soil of self-protection and self-preservation. One of its by-product is nationalism, which historically have led to devastating wars. Within the migrant context in Australia the antagonism has been contained, though sometimes we have seen examples where rivalries have resulted in open conflict, such as the already-mentioned Kalgoorlie riots in 1934, the outbreak of violence between the Serbs and Croat fans at a soccer game in May 2005 and the Sydney beach riots of December, 2005.

Fortunately in Australia such incidents are quite rare, though ethnic antagonism does surface sometimes in the playgrounds of our schools, as this book alludes to, through the voice of its narrator-protagonist, "I'm an Italian. I'm of European descent. When an Italian or another person of European descent calls me a wog it's done in good humour. When the word 'wog' comes from an Australian it's not done in good humour unless they're a friend." (88)

Of course, antagonism can also occur within groups of the same nationality. Just as we saw in Baldassar's and Armanno's works. In Marchetta's novel too we get a glimpse of the Northern vs Southern Italian rivalries, told with the directness and over-simplification of a teenager, "I know that proper Italians would pick out my Sicilian accent. The northerners are snobs just because they are blond." (175).

As we have seen, prejudice cuts both ways and never more so than when it concerns the affairs of the heart. When Josephine reveals to her grandmother that she wants to go out with Jacob Coote, the old lady disapproves, saying, "What do they know about culture?" she asks, "do
they understand the way we live?” (37) Prejudice leads to the blame game, played out with equal vehemence by both the migrants and the host population. If the locals blame the migrants for many of their social ills, including loss of employment opportunities, violence and the loss of their “unique way of life”; the migrants are prone to blaming their personal tragedies on the host society. Like the accidental death of a child, “I yelled and yelled,” Nonna Katia said, looking at Zia Patrizia, “Screamed with such anger. I blamed Marcus Sanford. I blamed this country.” (175) And when a mixed marriage breaks up the older generation is very quick to put the blame on the cultural differences, “She (Nonna) tells me about Eleonora Catano who married Bob Jones and now they're divorced. Why? Because he's Australian and she's Italian, of course.” (37)

Given the kind of reception the migrants of the 1950's and 60's received by the local population, it’s not surprising that it left a mark of resentment which persists into the succeeding generations:

The Australians knew nuting about us. We were ignorant. They were ignorant. Jozzie you wonder why some people my age cannot speak English well. It is because nobody would talk to them and, worse still, they did not want to talk to anyone. (78)

The result of this mutual antagonism is that the communities were ostracized, or they isolated themselves, "We lived in our little world and as more relatives and friends from the same town came out to Australia the bigger our Italian community became, to the point where we didn't need to make friends with the Australians." (78)
This cultural auto-focus partly born out of mistrust, partly out of a desire to preserve memories, locations and experiences, can lead, over time, to a great sense of nostalgia for the mother country. Sometimes this is also associated with feelings of lost youth and general disaffection. Never mind that youth inevitably morphs into middle age, irrespective of where one lives one’s life. Nostalgia is a most irrational of emotions. It is within the process of memories-preservation that the migrant repeats the rituals, customs and the language of his/her country of birth and imparts them to the next generation. Though this gives the new generation a certain cultural rootedness that helps to shape their identity, it also sets them apart from the culture and the reality of the host country. The young people are caught in the awkward space between the world of their parents on the one hand and the very different world that they experience through contact with school peers, not to speak of the values imparted through the media. What emerges is often a hybrid culture or, as Baldassar puts it “the development of double culture competences.” 18 The attitudes of young people to their parents’ rituals is ambivalent as demonstrated by that most direct and transparent of characters, Marchetta's Josephine, who describes “tomato day” thus:

Tomato Day. Oh God, if anyone ever found out about it I'd die.
There we sat, last Saturday, in my grandmother's backyard cutting the bad bits off over-ripe tomatoes and squeezing them…
Robert and I call this annual event 'Wog Day' or 'National Wog Day'. 19 We sat around wondering how many other poor unfortunates our age were doing the same. (171)
This is typical cringing by a (second generation) descendant of immigrants, and it is certainly not relegated to children of Italian migrants. It shows the embarrassment of a young person pressured to take part in ancient customs which in her eyes have little relevance to the world in which she lives. After all, it would be simpler, as the character says, to “go to Franklin’s and buy Leggo’s or Paul Newman’s special sauce.”

Clearly the attitude is part of the rebellious phase that young people experience, looking to define themselves by testing not only the limits of parental authority, but also their beliefs, values and customs. Like Josephine of this novel, Loretta Baldassar too rebels against her father’s insistence that she attend the Laguna Club regularly with him. Loretta objected on the grounds that her friends were not compelled to attend such places, rather they were allowed to spend time together with their friends. The conflict arose not so much out of real differences but a misunderstanding. The daughter was not rebelling against her cultural roots, but against having to attend the events at the club in the company of older migrants with whom she had little in common. Naturally she wanted to be in the company of people her own age, doing things she enjoyed. But, “because Laguna represented ‘being Italian’ to my father, my resistance alarmed him.”

Here is a scenario familiar to migrant parents of teenage children, trying to pass on a culture which they have brought with them from across the oceans. The young person, naturally enough, is caught between conflicting cultural calls. Within that space he/she gravitates in the direction of one or the other and eventually finds a cultural point of balance, which owes something to both cultures and to some extent
modifies them. The point is never fixed within the orbit of one of the other, rather it is a moving point along a trajectory separating the competing cultural forces that shape the individual. And yet, curiously enough, when the children of migrants mature, many of them long to “go back” to the land of their forefathers, that way completing an elytpical journey. It happened to Mary, the fictional character of *The Volcano*, and it happened to real person Loretta Baldassar.  

If proof were required that the Italian diaspora in Australia is very much alive, and that it will continue for many generations, it can be found in the work of these two second-generation Italo-Australian writers. A diaspora is of course maintained by the willingness of its members to keep alive the language, rituals and traditions of its original culture; but also to adapt it and keep it relevant for the succeeding generations. In the previous chapter we saw how the Italian diaspora has, to some extent, evolved over the past fifty years and how the representation of Italians has changed as a consequence. In this chapter we are seeing how art, in this case Literature, plays a crucial role in maintaining the diaspora, by retelling the myths, re-inventing its characters and icons and by rejuvenating the whole diasporic edifice for the members of the diaspora. And not only. Just as importantly, since these books are written in the language of the host country, they are able to cross over the cultural boundaries and play a key role in that cultural cross-fertilization that is the mark of any vibrant, dynamic modern society.
Notes: Chapter Three

1 Rosa Cappiello’s *Oh Lucky Country*, was originally written and published in Italian as: *Paese Fortunato*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1981. An earlier work, the self-published, *No Escape*, (1932) was written by Australian-born Velia Ercole, daughter of an Italian doctor and an Australian mother.

2 All diasporans are exiles, insofar as they both feel that their true home is elsewhere. However an exile can only be considered part of a diaspora if he/she is an active participant in the socio-cultural activities of the group.

3 See page 51 for my explanation of these terms.

4 Cf Nick Amedeo’s visiting his old Uncle Basile in *The Sensualist*.

5 Cf Dylan Thomas’ famous poem: “Do not Go Gentle into that Good Night”.

6 My italics.

7 In Perth the equivalent was the Embassy Ballroom, on the site as the present day Hilton Hotel.

8 *Aquila*, which means eagle in Italian, probably alludes to some soaring quality in the protagonist, and in Mary. Emilio is connected to the god Vulcan, by allusion, while Mary attempts to rise above the mundane through her writing.

9 There are strong echoes here of the kind of sick-of-living decadence among the clever young people at ANU, described by Helen Garner in her book.

10 In *The Sensualist* too, the protagonist, Nick Amedeo “returns” to Sicily in the few moments before he dies.

11 T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, East Coker

    Also in *Little Gidding* he writes:

    “What we call the beginning is often the end
    And to make an end is to make a beginning.”

12 Modern Italy is altogether absent from this novel. The Italy we get is “second-hand” played out, through the rituals of the migrants, such as the tomato sauce making or remembered in the recollections of the old grandmother.

13 Notice how a pejorative term like “Wogs”, is later is appropriated by the next generation and becomes a term of pride, a means by which young Italo-Australians distinguish themselves from “ordinary” Australians.

14 Note the young character’s use of “proper Italians” in describing the Northerners, inadvertently acknowledging the superior stance taken by the more sophisticated, affluent northern Italians towards their country folk from the south.

15 This is not entirely true. Loretta Baldassar writes, “Of course, years later, on a trip to Sicily, I was surprised to find so many tall, fair Sicilians- legacy of the Nordic invasions. Clearly, the notion of distinct northern and southern Italian stereotypes is a myth, or at least sustained, in Australia.” (Baldassar: 75)

16 Cf. Mr. Cinque’s comment to Helen Garner, “When I was 26 and a half, I prefer to come to Australia. Maybe this was a mistake I done.” (Garner: 103)

17 Again, refer to Mr. Cinque’s comment on the fact that his son had chosen an non-Italian girl, “We used to say in Italy, "wifes and cows you have to buy from your own town." (103)

18 For a full discussion on “double culture competences” see Bottomley (1992: 123-136)
19 Cf. earlier observations made by the narrator of the novel on the use of the word “wog”. (88) Also Baldassar refers to “the reinvention of the previously defamatory term ‘wog’, now used as a form of resistance to Anglo-Celtic or, to use the equivalent colloquialism, ‘skip’ culture.” (27)

20 This shows how much power the supermarkets and the media have in shaping the culture of young people. Paul Newman is, or was, a Hollywood star, and his sauce is stocked in the supermarkets, that makes it doubly acceptable to the young, and to the not-so-young. Far more so than the genuine product lovingly created over a family-bonding ritual.

21 Later we will see that in my novel, *An Olive Branch for Sante*, both main characters take this journey in opposite directions. Sante travels from Sicily to Australia, in search of his father, his other homeland and ultimately himself. Ira-Jane travels to Italy in search of her *Nonni* and discovers both more and less than she expected.

22 Of course these are contrary forces. The “purists” seek to maintain the diaspora in its original form, while the “modernisers” aim to change it and make it more relevant to the times.

23 American Literature would be all the poorer without major exponents like Saul Bellow, Tom Wolfe, Kurt Vonnegut and Philip Roth, Norman Mailer, to name a few.
"We are trapped by time, and the physical space that encloses us, while the imagination free-ranges through other times and other spaces. That’s why happiness, romance, great moments, idylls are always in other times, other countries. We all want to be someone else, something else, somewhere else: the somewhere else of our dreams."

Antonio Casella, *The Sensualist.* (178)
A biographical glimpse

The Author on the boat, Oceania, on the way to Australia, October 1959.

A writer’s background determines the kind of work he/she produces, for it is my belief that writers write themselves (their alter-egos, foibles, ideals and preoccupations) in their books. And although I also incline to the notion that at any given time there are a few true originators and a preponderance of emulators, it is difficult to disagree with Compte de Buffon’s aphorism that, “le style c’est l’homme lui-même”. Or if you like, imitators too have their own way of imitating. And that is a rather long-winded way of saying that before I begin to discuss my own work I will sketch out briefly my background.

I was born in the mountain town of San Fratello, in Sicily in October 1944, the youngest of 5 living children, but my family originate
from the rural district of Calamaci some thirty-five kilometres away. This made me an outsider in what was my birthplace. San Fratello, even today, is a wild, medieval town perched on top of a ridge overlooking breathtaking views of ravines and steep hills. As a child I hated the town, it was just too wild, too shut in, too hostile; a craggy rookery of red roofs sitting on top of a mountain, famous for its cheeses, horses, its wild Easter-time festival and its strange language.\(^1\) San Fratellano, as it is called, is essentially a language for a population of some five thousand people. When my family “migrated” there, we were regarded as \textit{furasteri} (foreigners) by the very jingoistic \textit{San Fratelani}. As a result my childhood years were marked by a sense of “feeling different” from the locals and conversely, of my being regarded as an outsider by them. This is not an uncommon situation in an era of great people movements such as ours. Members of the Jewish Diaspora the world over must feel that way. So when I came to Australia, I was accustomed to the role of outsider.\(^2\)

The childhood landscape that I identify with is not my birthplace but \textit{Calamaci}, the hillside rural settlement overlooking a steep-banked valley or \textit{Sciummara} where my parents originated. Both sets of my grandparents lived there together with their large families\(^3\) and just about every household on that hillside was related to me. From about age eight this is where I spent many happy summer months with my extended family. I would set off in the morning from Zia Sara’s house, which was my “base” and move up and down steep slopes from one farmhouse to another and visit my various uncles, aunts and cousins. There, they would make a fuss of me and sometimes I would get caught up in the feuding that developed among different members of the family, over
some banal issue. It’s this landscape of memory and myth which features prominently in *The Sensualist* and, to some extent in my new novel. Mine is unashamedly a literature of nostalgia.

When I was eleven years old, a Jesuit priest came to my school to talk about their missionary work in Madagascar. That event determined the direction that my life was to take. I went home and told my parents I had a vocation for the priesthood. The following year I was sent to a Jesuit boarding school in the city of Catania. The education I received there was very traditional and humanist: the classics; lots of literature; ancient history and Graeco-Roman mythology; geography; a little maths and science; some French and Latin. An education tailor-made for eventual priesthood, but totally unsuited for the practical, utilitarian world I was about to embark upon as a migrant to Australia. Nevertheless, they were formative years but not in the way that was intended by my Jesuit teachers. Those two years marked my transition from childhood to puberty, an event which, among other things, re-directed my energies from the spirit to matters of the body, and I promptly lost my vocation for the priesthood. To some extent that was replaced by another vocation: I started writing my first verses. I was just twelve years old.

I migrated to Australia with my family when I was fifteen. I did not want to go, but I had no choice nor, I suspect, do most migrants. Though some are driven by a curiosity or by spirit of adventure, most people would stay in their own country, given the choice. I was certainly one of the latter. Even so, history shows that migration, despite the initial pain and difficulties, ultimately benefits both the migrant and the host country, at least on a material level. Certainly for me migrating to Australia, at the
age that I did, was difficult. When I arrived in Australia I could not speak the language at all. In an interview I gave to Laura Danckwerts, for the magazine *Ulitarra*, I was invited to talk about this period of my life:

It was a fairly traumatic time. At fifteen you have enough problems trying to cope with life and the changes in your body. Then suddenly you're leaving your friends and find yourself on other side of the world, where you don't know what people around you are saying… ⁵

Adopting another language in which to write was a conscious decision: daring, a little presumptuous, even foolhardy. The old advice given to would-be writers to: “write what you know”, may or may not be a truism, but there should be no argument with: “write in your mother language”. ⁶

For me it came down to a practical decision. I was born in Italy but I had migrated to Australia. Italian would soon become the language of my past, a “museum Italian” fixed in the 1950s. English was the future; I would grow up into adulthood with the new language, evolve with it. My everyday experiences would be articulated in the English medium, so really there was no alternative but to immerse myself in the language and culture of my new country. ⁷ I turned my back on the world I had left behind. I made Australian friends, stayed away from ethnic functions. After six months languishing at the back of a state high school, unable to follow the lessons, I left school and went to work. I refused to join my older brothers who worked with other Italians in the building trade, and chose instead an environment where I would be in contact with English-
speaking people. In that sense, the five awful years I spent in a foundry serving an apprenticeship as a steel moulder were not entirely wasted. The experience gave me a chance to learn Australian-English in its most raw, idiomatic form. In 1970, at age twenty-five and exactly ten years after my introduction to the English language, I went to University of Western Australia to do an Arts Degree.

**Literary Influences**

Even before I went to University I discovered Emile Zola. His naturalist novels, *Germinal*, which I read in the original French, *L’Assommoir* and *The Beast in Man (La Bête Humaine)* show life in the raw. His characters, stripped of their defences, are portrayed in their most elemental, emotional states. His work intimates that it is in the suffering of the common people — the miners, the clerks and the station masters — that humanity reflects itself most faithfully.

I found the same intensity in the American William Faulkner, who seemed to be able to conjure up characters and depths of emotion that you knew had been there all the time, but he helped you recognise for the first time. I loved too, the way he could carry the reader by the sheer rhythm and pace of the language. Faulkner was a master of the multiple voice narrative. Nowhere is this better demonstrated than in *As I Lay Dying*, where the different voices intermingle, contrast, reprise and harmonise much the same as a tightly constructed piece of music. Among the Italians I loved the Sicilian writer Giovanni Verga, a major exponent of “verismo”, especially in his masterpiece, *I Malavoglia*, which deals with the struggle of a family of fishermen in a poor Sicilian coastal
village. Also strongly influential for me was the work of Grazia Deledda (Nobel Prize winner 1927) who set her works in rural Sardinia. Another was Cesare Pavese, the tragic writer who committed suicide in 1950. Pavese, a Communist, like so many Italian intellectuals of the thirties, the forties and the fifties, was himself heavily influenced by Ernest Hemingway, stylistically at least, but he was a more ideologically committed writer. His heroes are the working people, struggling in the countryside, close to nature. In fact there exists in his writing a deliberate counter-positioning of country and city. Where the first represents the true life: Nature, innocence, honesty, nobility of purpose; the latter stands for degeneration, corruptedness, artificiality. One tendency these writers shared was their predilection for a rural setting. I can certainly see those influences on my work, none more so than the present one: An Olive Branch for Sante, in which, as we shall see later, the countryside is presented largely as idyllic, wholesome and spiritual. The city is either non-existent, or – when it makes an appearance – is alienating. It is in the countryside of both Sicily and in Australia where the protagonists of the novel go to find spiritual solace and in some cases redemption.

I was also very much influenced by James Joyce and the stream of consciousness style that he made his. This is most in evidence in The Sensualist, where the narrative is conducted by three characters, until we get to the epilogue. Though they narrate in the third person, it is a very restricted third person in which the range of view is firmly reined-in, so that the reader is allowed to go right into the character’s psyche. The Epilogue is narrated by the daughter Nella, whose long soliloquy owes an unashamed debt to Molly Bloom’s in Ulysses.
Like everyone else, I have moved on in my literary journey. Hemingway has long ceased to be an idol and I am not sure I would want to revisit the wordy, sententious Conrad, or the 'oh, so elegant!' Henry James. D. H. Lawrence, in retrospect, leaves me lukewarm, but Nabokov appears as compulsive as ever. Newer writers have given me wonderful surprises, especially the Indians: Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth and Arundhati Roy; and the South Americans: Marquez above of all. How much these great writers have influenced my present work is difficult to gauge. Probably not much. I think I have simply fossilised into my own style, as one tends to do in middle age.

Finally, there is in my writing a tendency, a temptation if you like, to resort to caricature and satire. These are most in evidence in my first work, Southfalia, which owes a large debt to Voltaire's classic satire, Candide. I admit to not being particularly good at witty humour, for that reason I avoid it. Caricature is what I resort to. Southfalia's Sir Marc Martial is just one example. In the present novel there are traces of that tendency to caricature otherwise grotesque or brutal characters. One such example is Mimmo Urzi, the love-struck local mafioso. I have always enjoyed reading Dickens, quite apart from his prodigious imagination I admire the way that he was able to find humour even in the most desperate of situations.

Apart from the prose narrative, I have been greatly influenced by works of drama. My novels contain a good deal of dialogue. Indeed, initially I began to write The Sensualist as a play and the novel still retains some of the conventions of drama. And of course I have written two plays. The playwrights I love the most are the obvious ones,
Shakespeare and the ancient Greeks. Pirandello was a first love especially his *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and *Enrico Quarto*, though Pirandello’s characters are not averse to soap-boxing from the stage. Ibsen and Chekhov are wonderful, especially the former, Eugene O’Neil is depressing. Tennessee Williams at his best is compulsive. Ionesco and Becket I can live without, though I have sat through *Waiting for Godot* on more than one occasion and would happily do it again. Once I drove in the snow from Warwick to Stratford-on-Avon to see *Macbeth*, another time I did a ten-hour train trip from Rome to Siracusa to see a production of *Medea*, performed in the open-air Greek theatre. I would not do that to see a Pinter play. Among the Australians I like Lawler’s *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, I think it has had quite an influence on me.

Clearly my influences have been varied, covering a wide-range of sources, and reflecting the two cultures (Italian and the English-speaking world) in which I have received my education and which have formed me as a human being and a writer.

**Stuck in Nostalgia Land**

Though it took some 30 years of writing before any of my characters 'returned' to the land of my birth, in real time I have made several returns there. The desire to make the journey has not diminished with the passing of time, indeed it has intensified. Some 13 years passed before my first return, another ten before my second, but since 1987 I have made the journey more regularly. This is partly due to the fact that I am now financially able to do it, the real reason I feel goes deeper than
that. As time marches on there is in me an increasing urgency to join the
space between Australia and Italy, my present and my past, spaces
which of course cannot be joined, except metaphorically through the
artistic medium, but that knowledge does not diminish the desire to try. 17

Yet despite what is clearly a fixation with the “landscape” of my
childhood, I do not have any desire to live out my days there. True, I need
to go back from time to time. Each time I am older and come to it with
new experiences that may have changed me further; while the landscape
has undergone changes of its own. The dirt track leading up to the
hillside farmhouses has been sealed, the steep plots of land are now
overgrown with wild blackberries, the olive trunks look more timeless and
forsaken than ever and the old stone cottages are empty. Sadness and
loss sweep through the abandoned groves like endless sighs. After a
couple of days I want to come away again. It's the eternal dilemma of the
migrant belonging neither here nor there, inhabiting an elusive space in
nostalgia land.

**Nostalgia**, as a concept has not had a very easy time among
writers and critics. It is viewed as inhabiting a damp, mawkish region in
which prevails: self-indulgent gloom, lack of dynamism, inability to adapt
and to move on with times, self-absorption, a sense of living in the past
and of being trapped by it. The nostalgic character suggests a passive,
sterile, unchanging type, out of touch with contemporary reality, whose
existence is lived through memories. It has an even worse reputation in
the Anglo world and more particularly in Australia, where the politically-
correct jargon (in praise of a public worthy, a work colleague or
someone's relative) is laden with such terms as: positive, dynamic,
forward-looking, in-touch, visionary, optimistic and any such laudatory terms applied to a person we wish to put on a pedestal. To put it the other way, looking back is a no-no in Australia.\textsuperscript{18} The heroine of, \textit{An Olive Branch for Sante} is certainly a product of contemporary Australian society when she surmises that, "Memories are self-indulgent, a sign of weakness, a wasteful sentimentality." (Casella 2006:1) And yet, I contend that in looking forward, and only forward, can be as sterile as only looking back, which is what the nostalgic person is accused of doing. I suppose what people find objectionable in \textit{nostalgia} is not so much the looking back, but the fact that the nostalgic individual presumes that the past, or a particular event, \textbf{was always better}. In short, nostalgia can simply be seen as: that human sentiment by which the individual links with a place, an event or a period from the past that is judged to be superior to the present condition. For that reason nostalgia is accompanied by a desire to revisit the place (event, or time-period) and to relive the emotions it engendered.\textsuperscript{19}

The fact is that we live with nostalgia all the time. It is found in our rituals, such as anniversary celebrations or re-visits of places which, in the past, gave us certain experiences. Nostalgia is part of that urge that makes us collectively want to preserve certain buildings of significance, or makes us look for that recipe that Grandmother used. It is in people’s obsessions with old photographs, vintage cars or period pieces of antique furniture. We find traces of it in that special item of clothing we still keep in the wardrobe, even though we will never wear again because we have outgrown it.\textsuperscript{20}
Literature, particularly Drama, is full of nostalgic, self-deluding characters whose forays into the past are often a means to escape from the truth of an unpleasant reality. Chekhov’s works and Ibsen’s are strewn with characters who are disenchanted with the present and either look back nostalgically or look forward to a time when they can be freed from the trap in which they find themselves. Nostalgia pervades the plays of Tennessee Williams. Think of Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, who constructs a whole fictional other world to which she escapes from her grimy present. Think Amanda Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* who, in the midst of her world collapsing around her, keeps returning to one particular time when, as a Southern Belle, she received no less than seventeen “gentlemen callers”. Seventeen too is the operative number in Ray Lawler’s Australian classic, *The Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*. In Olive we have the quintessential self-deluding, nostalgic character, fixated on that little *ménage a quattre*, comprising herself and Nancy, meeting up each summer with the two cane cutters, Roo and Barney. After sixteen years of being kept on an emotional leash by Barney, Nancy has had enough and she moves on. Olive is left behind, stuck on the past and unwilling to accept change, nor face up to the reality that things are no longer what they used to be (or more to the point, *the way she thought they were*.) She wants her life to remain the same, just like the life of those plastic dolls that her boyfriend brings at the beginning of each summer. True to form, Olive tries to reconstruct the past by inviting Pearl into the group to replace Nancy. Of course it doesn’t work. Pearl is not Nancy and being new on the scene, she is able to see the reality through Olive’s self-delusion. Here is a metaphor, in a
different context, for the tragic condition of the diasporan: the world has moved on but the diasporan desperately wants everything to remain just like he/she remembers it. There is no doubt that for people living in a diaspora, nostalgia for the homeland is a fundamental, collective emotion which, though it unifies them, contemporaneously it shuts them in and separates them from the “mainstream” of society. In Dario Donati’s, *Australia Australia*, the protagonist, reflects on the existence of the migrant living in a diaspora:

Non bisognerebbe mai affezionarsi alle cose...nemmeno ora, dopo tante traversie ci riesco (a dimenticare)...non è forse da questa impossibilità che nasce ciò che chiamiamo nostalgia? E quale sentimento è più crudele di questo per chi è vittima della diaspora e si accorge di non avere più radici in alcun luogo o, eterno scontento, è condannato alla ricerca affannosa ma vana della proprio identità.  

Such melodramatic depiction of the diasporan condition is not uncommon among migrant writers. It demonstrates an unwillingness (perhaps inability) to view migration as an experience which, though difficult in the beginning, in most cases spawns positive outcomes. More sadly, the diasporan exists in denial of the self-evident fact that our identity will change whether we migrate or not; that time passes and will change everything – including the people and the landscape – in its wake. At one level, then, diasporans live in a vacuum, a fixed time-warp, an immutable unreality; while childhood memories are the fixed point to which they return over and over in order to calculate their position, at any given time, as they navigate through the treacherous waters of life.
Ideology and idealism in *Southfalia*

It has taken me two novels (three if you count *Father Father*, the unpublished novel) before I was able to "physically" return my characters to Sicily. I shall analyse this curious aspect of my journey, both as a migrant and as a writer, during the course of this final section of this study. The main work on which I will reflect upon is my new novel, *An Olive Branch for Sante*. However, in order to put it in context, I will also take a brief look at other published work, including the two novels, *Southfalia* and *The Sensualist*, and some short stories.

Anyone of my generation who might have read *Southfalia* – the few who have – will probably realise that the work was written out of frustration over the sacking of the Whitlam Government. Showing considerable audacity – some might say foolhardiness – I chose the allegorical form for my first-ever work, taking the story of Jesus Christ and re-working it into a cautionary tale about a 15th century radical who tries to alter society for the good, but in the end is crucified by the powers of the establishment. *Southfalia* is an imaginary "island of the South Sea" – clearly a reference to Australia – governed by a corrupt and self-serving power structure, whose four pillars are: the Senate (politicians), the Media, the Judiciary and the Church; all of which have a cosy arrangement with Sir Bart, leader of the business world. The protagonist, Manuel, comes out of the desert and is acclaimed by the oppressed people as their Saviour. This does not suit Southfalia's establishment, of course, who perceive Manuel as a threat to their power, but they are pragmatic enough to see that he is just too popular to be opposed
openly. His refusal to join their ranks makes an enemy of them. So they conspire against him. Eventually the island itself is destroyed by greed and exploitation.

In writing *Southfalia* I deliberately set out to avoid migrant issues, for several reasons. Firstly, I did not want to be distracted from the ideas which had provoked me to write the work in the first place. Secondly, I was still then in a phase of 'rejection' of my migrant roots, briefly mentioned in the introduction to this section. Thirdly, I have a problem with the term “migrant writing”. It conjures up, in Australia at least, biographical or auto-biographical stories about migrants and their struggles to overcome prejudice, hardship and assorted handicaps in a new society. Given those expectations it is limiting for the writer and tends to marginalize the genre. In an interview I gave to Stefania Greco, author of a thesis on Italo-Australian narrative, I said:

> The concept of migrant writing is not without difficulties. Does it refer to migrants who write? Writers whose cultural origins or references reside elsewhere? Is it to do with those who write more or less exclusively about the migrant experience?

> I believe that I would have wanted to be a writer irrespective of whether I had migrated or not… (Greco: 185)

In 1959 Italian migration to Australia was peaking and there was among the host population a palpable antagonism toward migrants in general and southern Europeans in particular. At an official level there was a push for migrants to assimilate. My reaction was "to assimilate externally, but to resist at an internal level". Since I wanted to be a writer "First and foremost I knew how important (the English) language was."
On the other hand, "A contrary force worked in me, that is the desire to affirm my Italian origins and in the process, to hit back at a socio-political environment which I considered antagonistic to my culture". (Greco: 185-6) Ambivalence can be a stultifying state in which to be, and yet, the ensuing struggle can stimulate creativity.

Fifteen years later, even though I had learnt the language, gone to university, made friends and married an Anglo-Australian, the cultural conflict had not altogether left me. When the Whitlam Government was sacked, it left me angry and disillusioned. Out of these various conflicts – personal and ideological – came my first book, *Southfalia*, published in 1980. It was my response to what I perceived as a corrupt establishment. However it was not my intention to use the pen as a weapon, or as a soapbox from which to preach, judge, or condemn. Writing should not serve an ideological agenda. Rather, I sought to find a creative voice through which to sublimate my corrosive anger. "The fact that I chose satire as my medium indicated, apart from a degree of over-ambition on my part, a desire to hit back from the comparative safety which fiction writing and a satirical stance afford." 

In *Southfalia* I was interested in the larger questions about the nature of power and the pursuit of human ideals. When I began writing the work I had not long before completed an Arts Degree at the University of Western Australia with a major in English Literature and an Italian minor. The study of literature had a profound effect on me. I loved the Romantic poets, James Joyce, Patrick White and William Faulkner. These were writers who had an uncompromising commitment to literature as art.
By the time I left university in 1972, I was convinced that the world was heading for a new age of freedom and socio-environmental responsibility. This was, after all, the early seventies, the era of peace marches, of John Lennon urging us to "Imagine all the people/Living for the day"; of Dustin Hoffman rejecting middle-class values and hypocrisy in The Graduate; of director Michelangelo Antonioni’s young couple rollicking naked down a dusty, desert mound in his movie, Zebriskie Point; of the young performers with impossibly large afro hairstyles declaiming from the stage that "this is the dawning of the age of Aquarius", in the musical Hair. The sacking of Gough Whitlam put an abrupt end to all that, in Australia at least. Southfalia, which I began in 1976, was a vehicle for working through my anger not only for the sacking of Whitlam, who was for many an inspirational figure, but for the end of an era which briefly held out the tantalising prospect of a society freed from constraints of material greed and repression. For me at that time, the sacking of Whitlam marked the end of idealism and the beginning of the pragmatic society, which led to the general disenchantment, to the greed of the 80's and the subsequent cynicism.

Southfalia was a “first work” and all that the term suggests: exuberance, naivety and dare on the one hand; on the other: excess of imagination, excess of thematic range (in that it has something to say about far too many topics) and lack of discipline. Southfalia is a work by, and about, an idealist who is obliged to take a reality check. I did not want to be distracted by concerns with migration and its issues, even less did I want the book to be given the “ethnic” label. I just wanted the work to be
judged on its “literary” merits. That stance, coming from a migrant who could not speak a word of English until age 15, seems a little audacious.

Given these premises it should not surprise that in Southfalia there appears to be a conspicuous absence of Italy and things Italian, at least on the surface. In terms of characterisation the Italian presence is sparse. There is Filippo Grassi, the greengrocer, who becomes one of Manuel's disciples. He is a stereotype, as are all characters in this satirical work. Agile of mind, fanciful, working class, he is something of a clown figure with a touch of age-old wisdom about him. When he first appears he is described as “a serf of swarthy appearance ... pulling a cart full of fruit for sale”. (Southfalia: 30) Even though he operates at the bottom of society there is nothing timid or submissive about Filippo Grassi. When a customer offends him, he retaliates by scattering the contents of her shopping bag all over the road.

Though the Italian presence is so lightly interwoven through the tapestry of the work as to appear negligible, Italy is very much part of the landscape of the novel. There is the connection with ancient Rome which structurally ties up the various strands of the work. The nobles are called Patricians and the populace is referred to as Plebeians. The Senate is the governing body of Southfalia and the fact that the “Consul” represents the long defunct Roman Empire (the action of the novel takes place in the 15th century) goes to emphasize the anachronistic nature of this “island of the South Sea”. The arts and entertainment district of Southfalia is inhabited by “imported serfs from Italy” and for that reason it is called Stivaletto, or Little Boot, in reference to the geographical shape of Italy. When some new sculptures need to be done, Manuel discovers an Italian
stonemason called Bottinculo (literally “slaps-on-the-bottom”) and commissions him to do them. There are also references to Dante and Petrarch. Christopher Columbus puts in a brief appearance. Thomas Aquinas is obliquely referred to in the caricature figure of Thomas Equinus, the pompous academic, whose tome is titled De Vulgari Inconsequentia (A corruption of Dante’s Latin treatise, De Vulgari Eloquentia). Italian phrases sprinkle the work because Iscar (a cosmopolitan polyglot and a rogue) breaks out mostly into Italian, whenever he wants to impress and confound his audience. Finally, Manuel himself is portrayed as a multi-gifted, larger than life Renaissance man, who possesses the genius of the artist, the spirituality of the prophet, the instinct of the politician and the courage of the soldier. It’s no wonder they crucified him in the end!

Clearly Southfalia is written by an Italian, steeped in the history and the classical culture of that country. In making fun of Australia’s sacred cows i.e. the judiciary, the church, the political system and the media, it is a subversive work, as a work of satire should be. Re-visiting it after a break of 25 years the book still strikes me as inventive, notwithstanding the occasional cringe, in part due to the numerous errors (of fact, typography and phrasing) betraying the fact that at this stage I was still relatively new to the English language. A critic at the time called it, “a work of complete originality with an underlying message of hope for the world’s disordered communities that are being destroyed by Man’s own folly.” Pity there weren’t more readers who thought like him! As it is, the book was mostly overlooked by the Australian reading public. The establishment would have been annoyed by it. This work, which made
fun of the country’s cherished institutions, was after all written by an immigrant! That caricature of Sir Thomas Equinus offended some academics I know; the lascivious Archbishop would not have pleased the Church (nor would the representation of Mary Magdalene as a brothel Madam) while portraying the island’s self-proclaimed war hero, Sir Marc Martial, as a buffoon, would not have pleased the R.S.L. (Returned Servicemen’s League) at all. As for the migrants, who might be expected to be on side, they were too busy making a living to bother with reading. And yet I would like to think that the work, even though very much a creation of its time, has some useful things to say even for today’s generation. Its cataclysmic vision at the end – showing the island destroyed and abandoned by the people, being reclaimed by the sea – is not too dissimilar to some of the grim predictions we hear today about our planet. The ending may be nihilistic but I prefer to see this work as a cautionary tale, a warning against the climate of greed and exploitation that prevails in the world today.32

The short stories

In the period following the publication of Southfalia and the writing of The Sensualist (which I began in the mid-eighties) I wrote several short stories, some of which have since been published. This is a period of transition, of search and exploration, of journeying forth and back, simultaneously. “Tell Him I’m Dead”33 is one of my earliest stories. It is worth mentioning in the context of the migrant-host country relationship, because the protagonist, Salvatore Fiorelli, is a precursor of Nick Amedeo, the hero of The Sensualist. Fiorelli had migrated as a boy and
at school he had been given a rough time by the school bully. On one occasion a teacher, Mr Lucas, came to his rescue and also helped him out with his English. The two meet again some twenty years later, only this time Fiorelli is a successful businessman, while the teacher is still a teacher. The story shows how the two men deal with this change in their respective status and how this affects their relationship. Again I steer clear of those all-too-familiar migrant issues: the struggles in a new land, identity and discrimination.

Fiorelli is too young and too successful to be burdened by outward feelings of nostalgia for his homeland, but the emotion is very much at the core of San Rocco Comes to Visit. 34 This is a simple tale about a man who discovers, near the end of his life, that he is a prisoner of his past. Even though he has lived in Australia for 52 years, upon the death of his wife Nando Miranda experiences an irrepressible urge to see his birthplace in Casignana in the southern region of Calabria. Our earliest years are like a blank slate on which experiences and the emotions they spawn are indelibly etched to become life-long memories. We may succeed in burying them but they can resurface at any time, sometimes near the end of our life and demand to be dealt with. This is a recurring theme in my writings, 35 which goes to indicate that, despite my stated intentions to avoid migrant themes, my work is driven by this most prominent of migrant preoccupations.

Having been visited by his past, Nando makes feverish preparation for what promises to be a momentous return to his birthplace and revisit those childhood places which he barely remembers. However, a heart attack prevents him from taking the journey. Again we have a
different take on that notion that one can never return. The time as it was, has gone forever, it can only be preserved in the jar of memory, in a form which hardly resembles the original. But Nando is spared the ordeal of having to confront this sad truth. He never gets to return “home”, instead home comes to him. One day he meets a man walking a dog, “with thinning hair and skin so pale and delicate, that he must have been a tourist newly arrived from the winter of the northern hemisphere.” (Antipodes: 24)

Old Nando invites the stranger into his house and asks him to stay the night. In the morning he finds him dead. Nando, who is clearly ripe for some sort of revelation, "rushed to the bottom drawer of his dressing table and sifted frantically. There among the faded papers of personal correspondence he discovered what he was looking for, a picture of San Rocco, Patron Saint of Casignana. Amazing, the same dark beard, the paleness, the big round eyes.” (24) So, while it is not possible to return to the past, the past can always come to you, just as you remember it, no matter how long it has been buried. The past can never replicate itself, it is not an event but a memory; for that reason you own it. The trick is not to allow ourselves to be owned by the past, or become its prisoners.36

One character who is prisoner of the past is Carmine Del Monte protagonist of another story “The Flowering Broombush”. “Surviving an impossible birth was the first of several extraordinary occurrences that marked Carmine’s life.” (Westerly:131) For extraordinary read miraculous, and miracles are another recurrent feature in my writings.37 In this, as in so many aspects, I draw on my cultural origins, home of the Pope and the Catholic church, rather than the secular realism of
Australia. Following another “miraculous” recovery from a severe burning accident, Carmine spends the first five years of his life in a monk’s cassock. But Carmine is a reluctant saint and eventually manages to escape to the more hard-nosed reality of Australia where his name changes from Carmine to Dan, a change which signifies a break with the past and the beginning of a new life. However Australia proves to be a little too real for Dan, for in the end he is brutally murdered. Even after death he cannot escape the miracles, on his isolated farm a magnificent broom bush bursts into flower out of season, on the spot where he had been hacked to death.

I have been a disillusioned Catholic for most of my adult life. That may well be the reason why religion is often treated with a certain irony in my writings. The character of the Archbishop in _Southfalia_, is decidedly irreverent. And though “miracles” are a frequent enough occurrence in my work, in most cases the reader is left with no doubt that the character at the centre of the miracle should not be taken too seriously. One such character is Franzetti, in _An Olive Branch for Sante_, who claims to have been cured by a statue of the Virgin Mary, only for the claim to be undermined some time later when it is revealed that he never had the illness in the first place. Religion, with its repressive nature is summarily condemned in the play _The Nun of Monza_; while it is given the tongue-in-cheek treatment in two other stories, “I’m Bored, Said Lucifer” and “A Misfit in Heaven”. As the titles imply the first is set in the depths of hell and the second in heaven. At least I cannot be accused of being partial to either of these landscapes of the Catholic map in the afterlife!
The first story opens in a thoroughly decadent underworld, with Lucifer decrying the utter tedium of contemporary life on earth. The problem, as the demons see it, is that humans have demoted the idea of sin, to a point where any behaviour is condoned. As Lucifer puts it, "In our efforts to make them commit sin without compunction we have destroyed sin." In other words the devils have been too successful in corrupting the humans, as a result "now they'll murder a neighbour, betray their friend, disown they daughter and they don't even care."

Beyond the easy humour, what is described here is a pretty grim, contemporary world, seen through the anarchic perspective of the demons. This anarchy, incidentally, mirrors the turmoil that I was experiencing during this period of my life. Of this period too is the other story, “A Misfit in Heaven”. The emotional landscape in this heaven may appear to be peaceful, but its dwellers are hardly any less fretful than their counterparts in hell. The dilemma of existence does not cease at the gates of heaven. Indeed beneath the appearance of calm there are undercurrents of petty jealousies and a kind of ennui which is not that different than the one expressed by Lucifer in hell. Only that in supposedly blissful heaven, nobody would dream of admitting to being bored, because after all, if heaven fails humans where else is there for them to turn? Rather than to have to admit that existence is futile, that at the core of the human soul there is a blank, the inhabitants of heaven – like the idle rich on earth – pretend to themselves that their life is blissful. This works until a newcomer arrives on the scene. Newly-dead Norris Brown has lived such a dull, uneventful life that when his soul presents
itself at the reception of the afterlife they don't know what to do with him. Does he belong in hell or in heaven?

At first it would seem that Norris Brown personifies your quintessential migrant asking fundamental questions like: where do I belong? What is my identity? But Norris Brown's situation goes beyond the issues of belonging and identity. His is the most fundamental question of all. The question-with-no-answer is asked, directly or by implication, by some of the greatest characters of literature like: Conrad's Kurtz, in *Heart of Darkness*, or Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*; Meursault in Camus' *The Outsider*; Jude in Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*; and most famously of all by Hamlet. It's at the basis of every thinking individual's existential crisis: *What the hell is it all about, anyway?* When a person reaches the point of asking this, all the other questions lose relevance. What makes Norris Brown truly subversive is that he intimates at this very question on reaching the supposedly blissful state of heaven. It's not subversive for a sinner in hell – or a starving person in Sudan – to experience depths of despair. Those people do not reject life, on the contrary, they are hankering after a better life, denied to them by circumstances. What makes Norris Brown dangerous is his very passivity in the face of privilege. Whilst on earth he didn't care enough about 'the gift' of life to face the challenges and do things. He just existed. He defaulted into heaven but there again, instead of being grateful, he went and had an existential crisis in the very place which all humans aspire to reach and where they are meant to be blissfully happy. Heaven, he suggests, is not all that's cracked out to be. He brings into question the fundamental belief that heaven equates with eternal bliss. That's why he
is considered dangerous by its inhabitants. He represents a threat to the very idea of heaven, all the more so because Norris Brown is your average Joe-Blow (suggested also by his name), and as such purveyor of a general attitude. It's no wonder they pack him off back to earth.

Finally I will mention “Boatphobia”, one of the few stories I have written in which the protagonist is a migrant of non-Italian origins. Maria Kurianis whose migration by boat as a child was a traumatic experience (she was sick every day of the journey) is fully integrated in the Australian society. Her life is guided by a commendable urge to be of use to others and help make the world a better place; an urge which alludes to her being a confident, well-adjusted woman. Maria's Achilles' heel is that she suffers from an obsessive fear of boats, partly explained by her experiences on the ship that took her to Australia as a child migrant. Her phobia transmutes into paranoid fretfulness over her child. When his father takes the child on his yacht for a trip down the river, Maria is unable to join them. Waiting back home she works herself into a frenzy. So convinced is she that the child will fall overboard that she races down to the river to meet the boat at the jetty. In her distraught state she runs across the path of a four-wheel drive pulling a boat and is crushed to death. The story, at a straightforward level, makes the point that the traumas of migration can pursue us for our entire life, sometimes with tragic repercussions.

Because of its brevity the short story is able to bring into focus certain recurrent concerns. These stories, whether ironic and extravagant, like “I'm Bored Said Lucifer”; tragic like “The Flowering Broombush”; or melancholic, like “San Rocco Comes to Visit” express an unsated
longing to be somewhere else. All the characters have experienced loss and now exist in a state of suspended reality, longing for a lost world. This is the literature of nostalgia, expressing the desolation of people who don't know where they belong, like the hapless Norris Brown. For these people there is only the refuge of memory, which is no more than a reality filtered of its dross and reconstructed in such a way as to make it desirable, or at any rate, far more appealing, than the harsh drabness of the present. As Stefania Greco puts it, in describing my characters:

三个月es tra mondi diversi, e legati a realtà ed atmosfere non più reali, questi personaggi colorano il mondo delle short stories di Casella, rievocando secolari tradizioni di miracoli e folklore popolari. Il nostro autore rivisita dunque, attraverso la scrittura, luoghi di una terra, la Sicilia, nota sin dall'infanzia, e, dopo la partenza per l'Australia, impresasi nella memoria in maniera indelibile.'

Existential angst in The Sensualist

This is the story I wanted to write for a long time, through the many years of earning a living as a teacher and helping to rear a family. Given the constraints of time, I began writing the story as a play, thinking perhaps that this would be easier to do and more suited to dealing with the theme I had in mind: the fall of a successful man. In 1987, following a two month period spent in Italy with my family, I came back and started re-writing the story of Nick Amedeo, this time in novel form. However the work adopts some of the elements of classical drama. By restricting the real action of the story over a weekend period I tried to achieve the
compression of drama and unity of time. And even though the narrative follows the main characters as they move around, there is a unity of place, of a sort, in that the setting remains within the city of Perth.

Theatrical also are the set pieces, like the long barbecue scene at which Joyce's sister and her University-educated group, are seated on the balcony and act as both spectators and, if you like, a form of Greek chorus, providing a telling commentary on the drama unfolding in the garden. The introduction to the scene is given in the style of a stage direction, indeed the whole scene is set out like a play:

FLORENCE EWING:

(nee Hathaway… more Hathaway than Ewing this night, by the sound of her) sits with brandy glass in one hand, cigarette in the other. Her wet hair manages to give her a softness that clashes with the coarseness of her language, the harshness of her temper and the loudness of the music…

Harold, sober and in a pose of ascetic contemplation sits next to her at the six-chair patio setting. Four empty chairs look conspicuous and further accentuate the general tone of posed dejection. The conversation too, might be out of a sixties drama.

FLO':

That's it. This is the last time I come to one of that man's bashes. He's got no idea. None whatsoever! Look at them down there, the garden is full of beer-gutted slobs and yobbos of both sexes.

HAROLD: (Superior, condescending, posing)

I don't know, I look on them with a certain envy. There is a certain charm in their naiveté, don't you think? I mean their sins
(call it baseness if you will) are so primary, elemental: food, sex, that sort of thing. We are the really debauched people. That's what education does, it changes the nature of your sins…. (*The Sensualist: 244-5*)

In this scene the goings on of the crowd – mostly of Italian migrants – is focused upon from the outside and commented by university-educated Anglo-Australians, who are as judgmental as a Greek chorus.

Once again we see a reversal at work. In the classic migrant stories the migrant is the outsider looking in on the host society. Here it is the “Anglos” who are on the periphery, commenting on the goings on of the migrants, who are placed in the centre. But in a sense that's deceptive. Though the scene gives us a view of what educated people might have thought about Italian migrants in the mid-eighties, the dialogue reveals more about the speakers than it does about the migrants they are patronising.

In *The Sensualist* I was determined to avoid above all the kind of sentimental migrant story in which sugary characters struggle against discrimination and prevail (or fail) in adversity. Quite apart from the fact that the migrant-triumphs-over-adversity kind of story (*A Fortunate Life* is a good example) has been done to cinders, I have a real aversion to characters who see themselves as victims and make more or less tacit overtures to the reader to like them or feel sorry for them. Migrants may be talented, brave, hardy, admirable even, but their survival is often through adversity and victimisation.40

For me, even the weak characters need some edge, even if it comes down to passive resistance.41 This is the case of Joyce, the
female protagonist in *The Sensualist* who, “although firmly set in Nick’s orbit, she quietly but firmly refuses to play in his noisy and messy playpen.” Whilst at one level Joyce appears to be dominated by her husband, emotionally he is very much dependant on her. Her depressive inwardness is both a form of resistance and, paradoxically, a source of strength, for in shutting herself in, Joyce is able to shut him out, and that is something he cannot accept. Her power lies in the fact that, despite his philandering, he loves his wife and needs her. In the end, it is his wife’s rejection that plays a crucial role in sealing Nick’s tragic fate.

Nick Amedeo isn’t a sympathetic figure. He is not particularly evil either, but there is certainly an edge to him. He won't stand for any nonsense, he is aggressive, he thinks that women are useful for one thing only, though he makes an exception of his wife (and daughter) whom he genuinely loves, though this does not stop him from keeping a mistress. He can be arrogant and a bully, for he is in a position of power over the tiny empire of his business, which includes Australian employees. Steven Lambert, his off-sider in the business, is an Anglo-Australian, whose ancestors go back several generations.

It would seem at first that Nick Amedeo and Joyce Hathaway, the protagonists of *The Sensualist*, are about as mismatched as their names suggest. He is a migrant from Sicily: practical, uneducated, exuberant in his behaviour, extravagant in his appetites, confident and assertive. She is from a family of pastoral landowners fallen on bad times: cultured, sensitive, uncertain and burdened by guilt. But there are similarities between them too. Both hide sizeable skeletons in their cupboards. The
contrast between them is reflected in the way that each handles his and her respective skeletons.

Though the novel focuses on Italian migrants and the way they operate in the context of Australian society, the action never moves to Italy. When the narrative shifts in time and place it does so through the memory or imagination of the characters. So the Italy we get is seen mostly through the long lens of migrants who have been away from “home” for decades. In the case of Nick Amedeo, whose lens we are mostly looking through, it’s the landscape of his childhood that we see: mysterious, mountainous, harsh. This is the poor Sicily of the rural hinterland, in the nineteen thirties, when life was hard, families were large and patriarchal, time appeared fixed, people's lives were governed by the daily struggle to survive and by age-old customs, rituals and superstitions. It was a closed society in which passions attained the intensity of Greek drama and people, who had very little in life except their dignity and honour, and are prepared to kill for them. And yet there is no doubt a certain bucolic charm about this landscape, despite the poverty and the harshness. More importantly, even though Nick spends most of his adult life speaking and acting like a true Aussie, he knows that below the skin of appearances there is a far away place to which he is inexorably drawn as he nears his death. This is Cimarra, the mountain village in Sicily where he lived his first years. It is important to note that Nick has no desire to return physically to his birthplace. This is because he understands instinctively, without rationalizing it (he lacks both the education and the intellectual ability to be able to articulate such concepts) that the places he remembers exist only in his memory. He can
only return “home” by a leap of memory, via the imagination. At its most obvious level the book is Nick’s journey back to his origins. The tragedy of his wife, Joyce, is that in her journey she has nowhere to go. She talks about leaving Nick and going “back” to Melbourne. But Melbourne is no more part of her than is the desolate Binji Cross in the Kimbeley where she spent the first years of her life. If there is one advantage that homesick migrants have is that they have a clear mental picture of home, they know where they belong, they know who they are. Or think they do. That is the triumph of nostalgia.

At the opening of the novel though, Nick Amedeo shows no interest in his past. His self-talk is that of a forward-looking man, a man of action able to work hard and get things done. He is not a thinker but a sensual man attached to present reality by a love of living and fuelled by prodigious appetites: food, drink, sex, company, power. This is one migrant who has no time for nostalgia and all that nonsense. He is not like Oreste, one of his factory tenants, who waxes nostalgic about his youth back in Italy:

Ah, the summer in my town was something altogeter differente.
We ride de bicycle to the mountains, all younghe people join togeter, Sunday, to have a race up the mountains. After we ’ave picnic and maybe play soccer in de piazza...
And de laughs we have, de jokes...It was all differente. Tutt'altra cosa, caro Nicola. (The Sensualist: 40)

Our Nick has nothing but contempt for this kind of migrant. “The country is full of them, disgruntled people. This is a nation of whingers, migrants who can't adapt, never will adapt; always looking back.” (50)
One must wonder about a person like Nick who is driven by an incessant urge to keep busy, who throws himself headlong into the present and does not want to think about the past, what is he running away from? Are his memories too horrible to let into the present? There is a growing suspicion in the reader that beneath the confidence and bluster there is a vulnerable, damaged man, a man in denial.

On this particular morning cracks begin to appear on the armour of Nick Amedeo. Upon waking he sees that his wife is not lying next to him in bed, instead she has gone for a swim in the family pool. As he watches her “cold sprays of regret reach him with the wind”. The unease grows with the climbing sun and the past advances stealthily upon him, "Ahh, this sun! His childhood, he remembers, was white with sunshine, whiter than this even. But the nights were full of ghosts. Ghosts in every corner, every bush, every stone wall. Now why the hell is he thinking of that?" (41) It's not until the end of the book that we will know why. For the time being, Nick does what he has been doing the whole of his life, he suppresses the memories and continues to cheer himself up with self-talk, "a man must live for the present and for the future… His future will be exciting.” But what at first appears to be a vision of the future, (though he Freudian-slips to call it a “mirage”) a second look makes him less certain, There is something there, something…there it is, near the olive tree, a shadow rising towards the foliage, stretching to reach it like breeched pants." (41)

This is no bright future beckoning, but ghosts from the past. The vision of the trousers, which pursues him throughout the three days, comes from a terrible childhood incident when his mother was murdered...
while he was asleep in the bedroom. He was then only four and half years old and all he remembers is the screaming and a figure flashing past the window of their farmhouse, carrying a pair of corduroy pants in the hand.

Joyce's ghosts are no less troublesome. She too comes from a rural background, but Binji Cross, the vast, isolated station where she was born was a different world from the mountains of Sicily. Joyce describes it as "dry, dusty, primitive...that forsaken country in the north-west of the continent ....a drum-roll landscape of hump chasing hump to the furthest horizon."(178)

The crucial difference between Nick's Sicily and the arid lands of Joyce's birthplace is that the people of the former have lived there since time immemorial, they made the land theirs, they identified with it, they knew its stories. Joyce's family, by contrast, do not belong to their land, they are imprisoned in a vast, unknown, forbidding space, dreaming of other places. Joyce's tragedy is that she never received the affirmation from either her family or the land into which she was born. Her relationship with both is dysfunctional. Neither of her parents show her any love, and all the family hate living where they do. It's inevitable that she should grow up into adult riddled with angst and self-doubt. Following the death of her mother, by suicide, Joyce's insecurities morph into paralysing guilt.

While Joyce is frank with herself, even masochistic in her self-appropriation of fault and guilt, Nick has always managed to bury unpleasant memories and got on with the physical life. Self-knowledge is a non-issue with him. His powerful senses have provided a barricade behind which to hide. Up until this weekend, that is, when suddenly he
realizes that his bond with the Sicily of his past has stayed with him through forty-five years of suppression. The landscape – once it breaks through the barrier – holds him spellbound, deliciously captive. We learn this at the opening of Part Two when the memories finally burst through forty-five years of suppression and Nick remembers the world of his childhood with the intimacy, the passion of a never-forgotten love:

The names come back to you with a drum-roll, like a list of long-forgotten friends. Sant'Arcangelo, Dauro, Civa, Sant'Alfio, Filicudi. Names with tastes of dried figs, grapes and prickly pears, of black olives done in brine with chillies, lemon rind and bay leaves; of chestnuts eaten stealthily at night over a winter fire in a brazier of charcoal. Names soft with the softness of dreams and myth, and hard like mule tracks twisting down impossibly steep ridges; names that smell of citrus leaves coming through the hot scirocco, that sound like the calls of cicadas vanishing through sculptured tree limbs. Tsz Tsz! Tsz Tsz! Tsz! Tsz Tsz!... (173)

Nick Amedeo has returned home at last. The Sensualist is what I would call classic nostalgia writing and I don't think that I have written as passionately before or since. In this scene the character is not simply recalling his birthplace he is attempting to recapture a specific, yet elusive feeling, a sensation, an experience buried beneath the accumulation of decades of living. It's as if none of the experiences since then, were as genuine, authentic or pivotal as that one memory. Hence his sudden longing, nearing his death, to experience it once more.
Nostalgia, is no mere sentimental attachment to the past, it’s more an ideology of living that values (some might say overvalues) the importance of the past in order to fully experience the present. Its rationale stems from the belief that present reality is often vague and ephemeral, that few key moments, mostly occurring during our childhood, determine future decisions and define us as individuals. These moments are recognized later, visible only through the lens of time and memory. 47

As the weekend progresses, Nick’s desire to return becomes more urgent, the visions more immediate, the revelations more disturbing and the journey is looking more and more like a personal apocalypse. He learns that his mother was murdered and that he is the natural son of his father’s brother, the mysterious uncle Saru. He sinks further into the past and into himself. By the final section of the book, sub-titled “The Crabs”, Nick is a crab crawling around the depths of memory.

Bridging the Distance in, An Olive Branch for Sante

I have been writing now for over thirty years, always in English, and the characters in my stories have always looked at Italy from a distance. The first character to make the journey to Italy is Ira-Jane, the heroine of my present novel, An Olive Branch for Sante. Paradoxically, she is not even Italian, her only connection with that country is that, as a child she was cared-for by an old Italian couple, Mr and Mrs La Rocca, who became her de facto grandparents. Ira-Jane grew up in the La Rocca household, called the old couple Nonnu and Nonna (Grandpa and Grandma) and spoke to them in Sicilian. In one sense little Ira-Jane was a migrant in her own country. 48
While the structure of the *The Sensualist* is strung around the central duo of Nick and Joyce Amedeo, in *An Olive Branch for Sante* this structure is provided by Ira-Jane and Sante, who, as it turns out, are half brother and sister. Ira-Jane instinctively knows what takes Nick Amedeo an entire life to learn: that our childhood experiences are the most formative, the most defining of our entire life. Remembering the time spent with her Sicilian “grandparents” Ira-Jane says, “these memories were stronger than any, they were her real childhood.” (12) Like the rest of us, Ira-Jane is being selective with her memories. She's a survivor. She has chosen to privilege, in her stash of memories, the few years of love that she got from an old couple. Those memories attained greater salutary force because of what happened subsequently, when she was forced to live a peripatetic existence with her mother and her constantly changing companions.

When the opportunity to go to Sicily comes up, the grown-up Ira-Jane, a self-confessed pragmatist, cannot justify her voyage on emotive lines. Indeed at the opening of the book she resolutely presses back invading memories of her grandparents, “These images threatened to hold her mind captive.” Young, forward-looking Ira Jane has not intention to look back:

Memories good or bad can hold your life to ransom. The bad ones turn you into victim. The good ones lead to wasting disease called nostalgia; that is, life lived in the past, an illusion of life, life as a mirage. No thanks, not for her. (1)
Ira-Jane is positive, ambitious, forward-looking. This is the kind of image Australians like to cultivate. No trace of existential angst in this young woman. And yet a few lines down she is determined to go to Sicily “on assignment”. She simply ignores the contradiction between how she wishes to appear and her action by saying, "She would want to go on this assignment because it would be good for her career. That's it." (1) But in the next scene, there she is opening an old box of memorabilia inherited from her dead mother. "The time was right to bring that dusty box out of the draw, open the secrets, look the demons in the face and strip them of any power they still possessed." (16)

This is a tacit admission that memories are important, that the search for identity begins with the past. By willing to admit that, on occasions, she is visited by ghosts from the past, she comes one step closer to self-truth, "Sometimes she woke up and thought she heard Nonnu's steps shuffling into her tidy, manageable, busy present." (16)

Unlike Nick Amedeo, who lived the life of a crab, buried in the sensual mire of the present experience, Ira-Jane is a young woman of courage. Not for her a life hiding behind a façade of mock toughness. She knows that real strength comes not from burying her ghosts, but by facing them. By opening the box of bric-a-brac left by her mother, she prepares for her journey to Sicily.

If Ira-Jane embodies the conventional view of modern Australians who see themselves as practical, pragmatic and forward looking, Ira La Rocca presents us with the dark side of Sicily: ancient, mysterious, a prisoner of its prejudices and traditions. Our first encounter with these two women is significant. When we meet Ira-Jane she has just had sex with
Bob Woldridge; while our first encounter with Ira-La Rocca is in Sicily, as she stands under a sparsely-cropped, olive tree. "What portent such barren season?" She wonders gloomily. This woman sees the landscape through the lens of time and history, "This tree would have seen it all: the Ottomans, the Normans and the Bourbons, the wars, the Black Death and the Spanish fever. It would have stood by impassively to the passing of Garibaldi's one thousand heroes." (32)  

This tree represents the soul of the island, its long history, its self-absorption, its obsession with the past. Contrast this with the landscape in Australia with which the novel opens. What we see there is a cityscape, modern and functional: a bedroom, offices, a road, a tunnel with cars chasing one another, a car park. This is a landscape moulded to the needs of its inhabitants. And yet there is little correspondence between the people and their surroundings, certainly no identification with it on the part of the characters. The landscape is something out there, taken for granted, relevant only in its functionality. In the Sicily of the book the landscape, both natural and man-made, is part of the identity of the characters, seemingly unchanged for centuries. It affects their attitude and states of mind. The tree is old and almost barren, while the old farmhouse is described thus, "the white-washed walls are discoloured to a patchwork of ancient maps; and the window frames- that have not had a new layer of green paint for a decade- are now ashen grey." (32) Such sad decline well fits the depressing, guilt-ridden nihilism of La Rocca.  

This identification by the character with the landscape is a pantheistic self-projection. La Rocca knows who she is by virtue of the those external markers, which were there long before she was born and
will continue to be there after she is gone. By identifying with the landscape she is a link in the continuum of existence. In a sense she is the olive tree, she is the old house. For someone like her migration is a betrayal of self, something akin to a long dying:

Some people, like some plants, are not meant to be uprooted. They can only thrive in the very soil into which their seed is planted; in the same air; in the familiar landscape that feeds them through memory and stories, ghosts and myths. (30-31)

By contrast, for the younger Ira-Jane what is important is not where she comes from, or where she has lived, but what she does with her life. There is a fundamental contrast of generations, of cultures and personal philosophies between the two women. For Ira-Jane you construct your identity by your actions and your experiences, or to put it another way, you are what you do. Your life is determined by the choices you make. Ira-Jane does not believe that things happen to you, rather that you make things happen. You take credit for what you achieve and responsibility for your failures.

For the older Ira it's not so simple. The choices that one makes are not altogether free, rather they are taken in response to circumstances (both personal and environmental) and conditioned by such factors as culture, traditions and collective expectations. We are not so much free agents as the agents of conditions. Our actions are mere reactions. Destiny determines the course of our life, and individual action takes place within the framework of destiny. La Rocca feels partly responsible for what happened to her in Australia because she should not have gone there in the first place, she should not have uprooted herself from her
surroundings, or attempted to thwart the course of destiny. In effect, the older woman's philosophy is a philosophy of guilt.\textsuperscript{53} More fuel is added to the fire of guilt when her friendship with Sheryl develops into a sexual relationship. Given her traditional, Catholic background the relationship is seen as going against Nature or, in strictly Christian terms, as giving in to the Devil's temptation and adopt a kind of behaviour that would be seen as deviant by her religion, her society and by Ira herself. In this context it's not surprising that, when she is raped by Russell, she interprets it as her just punishment.

Ira-Jane's personal philosophy has its roots in the “ideology” of modern Australia which emphasises individual self-reliance and privileges material progress, career and achievements (measured in terms of society's system of approbation and reward) over more ephemeral achievements like spiritual growth, cultural awareness, contentment or wisdom. She believes that her future depends on her and success is all that matters. It's the kind of philosophy that allows her, for example, to bed a married man she does not love, in order to help her career. In the younger woman's personal code morality may not be entirely absent, it's just subservient to ambition and to the rules of material success.

After her misadventure in Australia, La Rocca takes refuge back in the familiar confines of her childhood. She eagerly embraces a family, a community, a church: all keepers of the collective beliefs, rituals, the traditions and the kind of public identity she is comfortable with. She does not feel bound by the rigid code of the collective, she welcomes it. Its structures give her existence guidance, stability and meaning. She finds safety in the daily rituals. Above all the collective provides the
various alibis she needs to live a “normal” life: a husband, a son, a church. She wants to keep it that way.

Sante is not her husband’s son, and within the cultural context of San Sisto that would constitute a scandal. But Ira La Rocca’s greatest fear is not the censure of the townspeople, rather, “that Sante should discover about the dark side of his conception.” Even though eighteen year old Sante is old enough to know that his genetic father forced himself upon his mother, one can understand her reluctance to tell him. But La Rocca’s own thought-processes hint at yet another, darker secret. Beneath that calm façade seethes a woman of strong passions. But what is her dark, shameful secret? “The truth that lies beneath a carefully choreographed exterior of alibis and deception is... that once upon a time, in a far-off country there was Sheryl, that is, Sheryl and Ira: two girls, a love, a... bed. Ah there, she said it.” (94)

Such intense moral prurience over what is essentially a lesbian affair needs to be looked at in relation to the small, closed society of the village of San Sisto. That society would regard same-sex attraction unnatural, anarchic and a danger to its stability. Yet, Ira La Rocca’s worst enemy is not society, it’s her own Catholic conscience. “Whatever the weight of the town’s judgement, it cannot be as heavy as that of her own conscience.” (106) Yes, she fears the condemnation of society, but even more stultifying is her belief that her attraction for Sheryl is the work of the devil within her.

Nor has she dealt well with the trauma of being violated as a young woman. Her recrimination is understandable, not so her self-blame over the rape. Looking at her account (Chapter 11) we are struck by the fact
that she relates the incident in terms of a series of “mistakes” made by her, not, as one might expect, in a tone of accusation against Russell. The explanation then, is straightforward. The rape is a payback for her sinful nature. In this woman's moral paradigm – circumscribed by the boundaries of Catholic guilt – she has defied the laws of God, she has fallen in sin, and sin carries a punishment. It matters not that the carrier of this punishment commits a far greater sin.

Ira La Rocca needs the rituals of her society to contain her “subversive” sexuality. Her marriage to Don Alfio helps maintain that façade of normalcy and respectability that she craves. The fact that it’s all a bit of a sham, that she is married to a man she does not love, at least in a sexual sense, that he is not the father of her son, that she has repressed her true sexual identity...all of these are of secondary importance. La Rocca is not interested in such notions as being true to oneself, because she considers her true nature an aberration in the eyes of God, that must be curbed. Ira-Jane's arrival threatens La Rocca’s carefully-constructed world of small town respectability. The prospect of having to meet with the young woman attains a cataclysmic significance for her:

Two worlds: Sicily and Australia – worlds that she thought she had successfully separated – putting between them thousands of kilometres of sea and air, not to speak of the years of time- these worlds were about to touch, scrape against each other’s edges. Who knows what tremors might ensue? (94)

Just as damaging is her transference of her feelings of paranoia onto her son. When we first meet eighteen year old Sante we are struck by
his immaturity. He behaves more like a boy than a young man. His desire to go to Australia is stoked by adolescent dreams, partly by an understandable curiosity about his natural father. However, though he never allows himself to state it outright, there is in Sante an implied sense that he must put some distance between himself and his mother, in order for him to grow up. For Sante, Australia represents freedom, away from the protected, but claustrophobic world of San Sisto. Of course with freedom comes also the inevitable risks. Ira-Jane, by contrast, is not looking for more freedom, she is her own woman, what she needs is some emotional anchor in her life, which she looks for by visiting the only people who have ever provided her with love. So, Ira-Jane and Sante set out on a journey in opposite directions: spatially and temporally. Their respective journey is "a right of passage involving a transformation of identity" (Baldassar: 44). Ira-Jane leaves Australia and goes to Sicily to re-connect with her Nonni and in a way, re-visit her childhood. Paradoxically, it is the sheltered Sante who is seeking to leave his childhood behind, for the more risky, uncertain world of adulthood in Australia.

In this intricate paradigm of emotional cross-references, and cultural contrasts the two young people come together, first in Sicily then in Australia. The novel ends with the prospect of yet another journey, this time, however, they will journey together. Of course their relationship has limitations, there can never be a romantic union between them, they are brother and sister, but they have something better: a blood bond and a total identification with two places they love equally. Their journey to Sicily will be brief, they will come back to Australia and will continue to
live there, dreaming of their other home in the Mediterranean. In this process, both the physical/cultural space (between Australia and Sicily) and the emotional space (between brother and sister) have been bridged. A joining has occurred. Metaphorically at least, a satisfactory resolution has been reached. Sante and Ira-Jane may have inadvertently stumbled across a solution, of a sort, to the dilemma of change and loss to which human beings – migrants in particular – have been condemned, since Cain fled from the comparative security of his parents' land and went wondering abroad. It is the kind of resolution which a diasporan might find appealing.

**Conclusion**

Taking a sweeping glance at some thirty years of work, it seems to me that the fundamental tensions that stir the characters in my work, issue from their struggle to reconcile who they were, with who they have become and who they wish to be. That is to say reconciling past and present into an idealised vision of the future. This takes many forms, according to circumstances and to particular characters. It can be a confrontation between the senses and the spirit (in *The Sensualist*); pragmatism and idealism (in *Southfalia*); past and present (in *An Olive Branch for Sante*). Whatever the situation the characters navigate their way through time and space on a journey backwards. Sometimes the aim is not at all edifying as in the case of the seriously amoral Danny O'Rourke, or Russell Toohey who stumbles through dark alleys of his violent personality, to reach in the end a kind of reconciliation with his son.
Fundamental to this journey is the assumption that the past is very much alive in the present and to a great extent determines the future. We behave in a certain way for three reasons: because of the genes that we carry, because of the experiences we have had, especially our childhood experiences and because of the cultural codes which have been instilled in us. A free-will versus determinism dialectic is beyond the scope of this study. More relevant is to consider at this point how far my own cultural codes and early experiences reflect upon my work as an Italo-Australian writer.

In terms of "cultural codeology" it's important to remember that Sicily, and parts of Southern Italy, were at one time Greek colonies. Fatalism was very much at the heart of Greek drama. Their tragic heroes were often the instruments of the gods, they were not free agents. Oedipus was not aware that the woman he fell in love with, and married, was in fact his mother, but that did not lessen his culpability or his punishment. The fallen hero accepted responsibility for the act and in so doing regained his dignity as a human being. Likewise, Odysseus and his crew were tossed and battered all around the ancient shores of the Mediterranean. His journey was imposed upon him by the gods. He accepted his fate and was finally delivered to his beloved Penelope, presumably a wiser man.  

It is significant that my characters seek knowledge of themselves by delving into their past. To some extent these characters parallel my own journey as a writer, for in my work I keep fossicking around into my past. Some are stuck on the past, even while protesting to the contrary. Nick Amedeo appears to be a successful, forward-looking,
grounded man, but in the end he goes back to Sicily (in spirit) which he had not visited, or hardly thought about, for 45 years. La Rocca is stuck on her past, while trying to bury some of the darkest events, and so are Nando in “San Rocco Comes to Visit” and Dan Del Monte in “The Flowering Broombush”. Ira-Jane, like Nick Amedeo, is contemptuous of those who are constantly looking back, and yet she is the very one who takes her journey to Sicily, in order to re-establish links with her childhood. Sante too searches the past in Australia, a country he feels part of, but never experienced.

Like myself, the characters show a desire to cast a connecting line between the two countries in which I have lived my life. Some characters make peculiar attempts at cross-cultural bridging. Nando invites “San Rocco” into his home and Franzetti, brings to Australia icons from Sicily, for reasons which have nothing to do with the Sicilian ancestry of his mother. At one level I would suggest that my work attempts to create a symbiotic union between the two countries which have dominated my life. Such symbiosis finds its ideal in the figure of Sante Marzano, or at least it is meant to do. Here is a young man of Italo-Australian parentage, conceived in Australia, born and raised in hilltop town in the Mediterranean, “returning” to find a future in the more progressive climate of Australia. The link becomes a twinning when he discovers that he has an Australian sister. Both young people are seeking an identity beyond the confines of the space and the culture they were born into. In coming together each adds to the other and by consequence to themselves and that is the ultimate triumph of any relationship.
The past comes to us through memory in the form of images in a conflation of time and space that spawn certain emotions. And since we keep returning to the same images in the course of life they become emblematic of another world, another age. In this sense a memory is not unlike a painting which puts boundaries around an image and elevates it to a level where it epitomises an experience, an emotion or an idealized conception of life. For Nando the past is reduced to a vision of San Rocco in the village church, for Nick Amedeo it is a hillside farmhouse in Sicily, for Ira-Jane it is Nonnu's flannel shirt in suburban Perth which evokes mysterious images of a far-off place. Such images are the signposts in my own journey as a writer; a journey which endeavours to link disparate experiences, feelings and allegiances, to help me make sense of my present and communicate to the reader (I hope) an individual view of the human condition.

The future of the Italian Diaspora

How does the future look for the Italian diaspora in Australia? In 1997 there were 85 Italian associations registered in Western Australia alone. These have played their part in keeping the Italian diaspora alive in this State, mainly through organizing social events, publishing newsletters, teaching of the Italian language, looking after the aged, even organizing trips back to Italy. Unfortunately, due to ageing, the Italian born population of Australia is declining each year and the numbers have not been replenished, as migration from that country effectively stopped in the 1970's.
One might reasonably predict that an excess of integration, an ageing population and lack of new immigrants could spell the end of the Italian Diaspora in Australia, and indeed the world over. I think not. I would suggest that the Italian diaspora will survive precisely because it has opened up to the societies in which it grew. The Italian diaspora fits into Mishra’s paradigm of the “diaspora of the border”, a less rigid, more amorphous, more contemporary form, one in which exchanges and transactions occur both ways, from host-culture to migrant-culture and vice-versa.

The traditional diaspora, by contrast, defined itself by its homogeneity and every effort was made to maintain the purity of its cultural patrimony. Its members built cultural walls around the diaspora to separate it from the mainstream and protect its heritage of language, religion, history and art. The traditional diaspora accentuated its differences from other cultures, it perpetuated them through the celebration of its rituals, through the teaching of sacred texts (such as the Koran or the Torah) or by prescribing particular forms of garments (such as the kapur or the burqa.) The traditional diaspora strove to maintain its ethno-racial purity by discouraging marriage with non-diasporans.

The Italian Diaspora, as we have seen, is a more flexible construct. It lacks the rigid structures of the traditional diaspora, it’s not so prescriptive or limiting. One does not have to speak Italian, for instance, to feel part of the Italian diaspora. As Baldassar and others have pointed out, children and grandchildren of migrants often return to their roots, in a “visit home” which is a rite of passage, an acknowledgement that though they are fully Australian, they regard themselves as “Italian”. The
modern diaspora – of which the Italian is one – survives because its adherents have been willing to change and adapt, rather than striving to preserve intact the original cultural codes. Its members, whilst acknowledging their ethno-cultural origins (by referring to themselves as “Italian-Australian” or more often simply as “Italians”) they are also eager to play a full part in the wider society in which they live. They define themselves in terms of their cultural origins but also – and perhaps more so – by the cultural patrimony they and their fellow diasporans have contributed and continue to contribute to a multicultural mainstream. For that reason the contemporary diaspora tends to build bridges and networks rather than walls. Side by side with a full participation in the everyday processes of mainstream society there is among modern diasporans a consciousness that their “ethnic” heritage is something that bestows upon their identity a sharper definition in that kaleidoscope that is modern Australian society.
Appendix

**Hilltop Towns and Rugged Landscapes.**

A typical Sicilian narrow street. This one is in the hilltop town of Castroreale.

The rugged Sicilian landscape seen From Santa Lucia del Mele.

A view across the mountains from San Fratello.
The cluttered piazza of Castroreale, used as a model in the fictional town of San Sisto, where some of the events in *An Olive Branch for Sante*, are set.

A view of the hilltop town of San Fratello, my birthplace.
The Roman ruins of Tindari, where Sante and Ira-Jane first meet.

Below: The Lungomare at Milazzo, where Don Alfio and Elia take a stroll.

Below: A view from the top of Tindari. The sand bar is meant to represent an effigy of the Virgin Mary holding the baby Jesus.
The church of Tindari, where the ancient Shrine of the Black Madonna is held.

An ancient olive tree on the approach to Tindari. Note the hollow trunk.

Maintaining the old traditions: Women in San Fratello hanging out the effigy of Jesus, with their best linen as a backdrop, for the procession of the feast of the Sacred Heart. Note the older women in black, a sign of mourning which can go on for years.
Yes, I mean language, not merely a different dialect. San Fratello was apparently founded by a group of French-speaking Normans who, following the Sicilian Vespers rebellion of Easter 1282, escaped to this inaccessible part of the island and settled there. The language of San Fratello has an affinity with medieval French.

To be a “fly on the wall”, from which to observe life, is not necessarily bad for a writer. Some writers have deliberately turned themselves into exiles and then went on to write almost exclusively about the country they have left behind. James Joyce is one example. Most fiction writing is done from a distance, both spatial and temporal. That is to say looking back, looking on or looking in, all of which suggest the writer as an outside observer.

My paternal grandparents (Casella) had nine children, while my maternal grandparents (Pintabona) had seven children. Their plots of land were adjacent to one another. Three Casella children (including my father) married three Pintabona children (including my mother).

Ira La Rocca, in An Olive Branch for Sante says, "Some people, like some plants, are not meant to be uprooted. They can only thrive in the very soil into which their seed is planted; in the same air; in the familiar landscape that feeds them through memory and stories, ghosts and myths. In short, the past." (34).

And yet, as with so many writing rules, this too has been broken, most famously by Joseph Conrad, who did not learn English until he was an adult and went on to become one of the great masters of the English language. A journey in the opposite direction was taken by Samuel Beckett. Born in Ireland, he did not achieve fame until he started to write in French.

A similar idea is discussed by Helen Barolini, in, “Verso Unidentità letteraria italoamericana”:
“Come dice il premio Nobel Czeslaw, egli stesso un immigrato: «la lingua è la sola patria». E la patria degli scrittori italoamericani è l'inglese; è l'uso dell'inglese che forma i nostri pensieri e ci rende ciò che siamo. E la nostra destinazione è la letteratura americana.” (Barolini, 2003: 68)

["As the Nobel Laureate Czeslaw, himself an immigrant, says, "Language is the only homeland. And the homeland of the Italo-American writers is the English language which forms our thoughts and tells us who we are. Our destination is the American Literature."]

You can see the influence of Faulkner in the way that, in The Sensualist, I adopt a circular narrative structure in which the three protagonists: Nick, Joyce and Steve, take turns to narrate the events from their own point of view.

Among them we find, Ignazio Silone (Fontamara); Carlo Levi (Cristo Si è Fermato a Eboli) Leone Ginsburg; Italo Calvino and, of course, Antonio Gramsci.

I can't think of a better tale that illustrates the corrupting influence of the city than Italo Calvino's short story “Funghi in Città” (Mushrooms in the City) in which the hero, Marcovaldo, finds a clump of mushrooms in a city flowerbed, hidden under a bush, only to discover, after eating them, that they were poisonous toadstools. (Moloney, 1978: 90-3).
The ideology owes a lot to Rousseau's idea of the “noble savage” and to the Romantic poets such as Wordsworth, who glorified the simple country folk and the healing power of Nature, whilst condemning the corrupting influence of the city. See in particular his Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey” in which he writes:

But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;
And passing even into my purer mind
With tranquil restoration. (ll. 26-31)

There are plenty of examples of this in the novel. When we are first introduced to La Rocca we find her seeking solace under her own olive tree, in the hills. Her husband, Don Alfio, returns to his home in the hilltop town of San Sisto, to find restful peace. And even in Australia, the young people, Sante and Ira-Jane, seal their spiritual union in the Kimberley.

And yet this notion is subverted in, The Sensualist, in which it is shown that the rugged, desolate mountains of Sicily can spawn some very violent and behaviour.

There are books which I have loved, such as the wonderful, The Master and Margarita, by Mikhail Bulgakov, whose influence on my writing was probably negligible.

The debt is openly acknowledged in the title. Which is a variation of, Westfalia, the birthplace of Voltaire's eponymous hero.

I wrote The Nun of Monza, based on a famous episode in Alessandro Mazoni’s classic of Italian literature, I Promessi Sposi (The Betrothed), early in my writing career. Subsequently I wrote, The ghost of Rino Tassone.

Diasporans are not unlike Sisyphus, though he knew that the stone he was pushing up to the top of the mountain would inevitably roll back to the bottom, he could not help himself but to start the struggle all over again. Perhaps, as Camus concludes in his "Myth of Sisyphus", the diasporan is, after all, content for knowing what his destiny is.

It's no coincidence, to my mind, that in the lower-school curriculum of this country History disappeared long ago, in its place they have put something called "Society and the Environment", which incorporates Geography and contemporary social issues. The aim was undoubtedly to make it sound more “relevant” to young people. In effect it demotes the importance of history, its place in illuminating the present, in explaining who we are and who we have become.

Nostalgia need not necessarily be connected to personal experience. One can be nostalgic about places one has never visited or indeed, periods of history from way back. This kind of nostalgia can manifest itself in such phenomena as period museums or even period-theme, dress-up balls and the like.

Strictly speaking this is sentimentality rather than nostalgia, but the two are related, in that they both incline to the past. Both emotions induce us to recall, and often embellish, a particular moment or experience, which gave us pleasure.

Interesting to note that in Italian folklore the number seventeen signifies misfortune, though I doubt that Lawler would have been aware of it.

Which goes to indicate that feelings such as loss of identity, rejection of present reality and desire for another place or another time are not restricted to migrants or people living in a diaspora.


[“One ought to not get attached to things too much… even now, after so many adversities, I am unable (to forget) Is it not from this inability that derives what we call nostalgia? And which sentiment is more cruel than this for those of us who are victims of diaspora and we realize that we no longer have roots anywhere or (eternal discontent!) we are condemned to a ceaseless but futile search of our identity.”]

Nick Amedeo's journey back to Sicily in The Sensualist is not an actual journey but a memory one.
Of course I have made several trips to Italy. Since 1996, when I lived in Rome for six-months as Writer in Residence at the Australia Council's B.R. Whiting studio, I have gone every couple of years.

In keeping with the allegorical form, the characters in this work are representative rather than individuals. Many are given the names of Christ's disciples: James the Red (revolutionary) Iscar, as in Judas Iscariot, (the cynical rogue) Thomas Equinus, (the pompous academic) Black John, (the inarticulate native) Peter, (the sly union leader) Filippo Grassi, (the migrant) Sir Bart, (the rich businessman) and so forth. The gospel schema is extended to other characters like Madam Magdalene, the feisty brothel owner who instructs young Manuel in the art of love making.

The title alludes to Voltaire's *Candide*, which is set in Westfalia, and acknowledges a debt to that great text of satirical writing. It became, among other things, the subject of an opera by Leonard Bernstein.

Satire, in my view, is a great antidote to Governments (which make increasing use of spin doctors) and to a media (which is invasive and owned by powerful figures of the business world). It cuts through the hype and the propaganda, therefore it's both empowering and liberating. Satire at its best can be as effective as a great speech or mass protest. Just look at the popularity of political cartoons, for instance.

Before writing this work I had “cut my teeth” on a few short stories and a play. Some of the stories were subsequently published.

I very much doubt that this book would find a publisher if it were written in the ultra-conservative climate which prevails today.


The work can also be read as a metaphor for the collapse of those ideals of the late sixties and early seventies, which had fired up the imagination of the young people of that period.

In *The Sensualist*, both main characters, Nick and Joyce Amedeo, have buried their past, but it comes back to haunt them. And of course in *An Olive Branch for Sante*, all major characters: Sante, Ira-Jane, Russell and Franzetti have to deal with the skeletons in their past.

I return to this these in the new novel, *An Alive Branch for Sante*, where Ira La Rocca is clearly a prisoner on her past and her counterpart, Ira-Jane, describes Sicily thus, “In the mountains of Sicily your existence is cumulative. Each day is added on to all the other days of your past, and that of your ancestors. You move in the shadow of the past sculptured in time-marked buildings, beneath mould-splattered rooftops, in the trees that seem to have been there forever. Sicily is a mindset, a continuum, a refuge for stay-putters…” (192)

Miracles, or what appear to be miracles, feature in my present work as well.

At the time of writing this story my personal life was in crisis. My marriage of 19 years had ended acrimoniously and for many months I hardly saw my three children.

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[“So, suspended between two worlds, and attached to realities and atmospheres no longer real, these characters colour the world of Casella's short stories; recalling centuries old traditions of miracles and of popular folklore. Our author revisits, in this way, through his writings, locations in Sicily, known since his childhood, and after the departure for Australia, indelibly etched in his memory.”]

Even though I enjoyed Helen Garner's book on Joe Cinque, he and his family are shown to be victims, not only of the neurotic killer, Anu Singh, but of the justice system. I found it irksome that even though Joe had plenty of warnings that Anu was dangerous, he did nothing to escape from that situation.

I do not consider suicide, in general terms, as the action of a victim feeling sorry for him/her self. Suicide in some circumstances can be an act of courage, but even when it's brought upon by an unwillingness to fight on – and therefore deemed to be cowardly – it
is also an act of resistance, an attempt at taking control, a refusal to wallow in a morass of self-dejection.


43 On at least two occasions during the weekend Nick approaches his wife to be helped out of a psychological state that’s threatening to engulf him. The first time is when the pig is roasting, as it rotates on the spit unwelcome memories come flooding back. Nick, trapped behind the iron fence of the barbecue area which has become his prison, calls out to his wife, but she distracts him with small talk about gloxinias. (228) On the second occasion Nick is about to leave for that fishing trip which will result in his death. He invites his wife to dissuade him from going but she refuses.

44 There is no contradiction in Nick’s eyes in the fact that he loves his wife and keeps a mistress. Sex for him is a physical need and an emotional outlet; and because his appetites in this regard are copious, he sees it as his right to satisfy them.

45 Nick Amedeo’s mother, Concetta, who starts a liaison with Saru, her husband’s brother, is murdered by members of the family.

46 At the beginning of the novel we are given a precise date, Friday the 18th of December 1981.

47 This is the kind of premise that is at the basis of Ira-Jane’s momentous decision to go to Sicily at the beginning of *An Olive Branch for Sante*.

48 Echoes of my own situation when my parents moved to San Fratello, where I was born, as described at the beginning of this section.

49 This is also true for Nick in *The Sensualist*, at the beginning of the book he says, “a man must live for the present and for the future; the present to be interesting enough, the future to be exciting, worth waiting for.” (41)

50 Similar sentiments about the island are famously expressed by the Sicilian novelist Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, in his great novel, *Il Gattopardo, (The Leopard)*. There the Prince of Salina, the main character, says:

"Siamo vecchi, Chevalley, vecchissimi. Sono venticinque secoli almeno che portiamo sulle spalle il peso di magnifiche civiltà eterogenee, tutte venute da fuori già complete e perfezionate, nessuna germogliata da noi stessi."

(“We are old, Chevalley, very old. For 25 Centuries at least we have been carrying on our shoulders the weight of magnificent and varied civilizations, all of them imposed from abroad, completed and perfected there, not one of them originating from ourselves…”)

51 Likewise near the end of *The Sensualist*, when Nick’s pretence “of living for the present” has been given the lie, he says, “Over there, the mountains separated your little world form the outside and made it your own. Old people could point out to a certain almond tree, or a house, and there was sure to be a story about it. That’s the important thing, really, the story to help you make sense.” (297)

52 Again, Tomasi di Lampedusa puts it best when he writes: "In Sicilia non importa far male o far bene: il peccato che noi Siciliani non perdoniamo mai è semplicemente quello di fare." (161)

(“In Sicily it does not matter whether you do good or evil: One sin that we Sicilians will not forgive is that of getting things done."

53 Very much like Joyce Amedeo, in fact. Perhaps my alter-ego is a guilt-ridden, middle-aged woman.

54 That’s not unique to that society, or those times, of course. The fact that there are so many repressed homosexuals, of both sexes, who are terrified of being “outed” indicates just how prevalent is homophobia among so-called modern societies, despite official recognition in law. For a tragic portrayal of the dilemma and the difficulties faced by married individuals in a homosexual relationship see Ang Lee’s seminal 2006 film, *Brokeback Mountain*.

55 Nor would she think of blaming God for her “aberrant” nature, because of course that is the work of the devil. The devil is truly an ingenious creation, for it gives believers
someone to blame for all the evil in creation, while God can take all credit for the good. It does not seem fair somehow.

56 There are plenty of examples in literature where a character is frustrated by the need to maintain respectability in a small town environment. Two of the more memorable are Hedda, in Ibsen's, *Hedda Gabler* and Emma Bovary in Flaubert's novel.

57 Wiser, maybe, but not necessarily any less restless. Not according to Lord Alfred Tennyson. See his marvellous poem *Ulysses*, in which he portrays the newly-returned Ulysses as a restive man ever eager to set sail again to seek new adventures and new experiences. We are not told what his wife might have thought of that.

58 Significantly, what I seem to recall most vividly about my childhood are not the particular incidents but the landscape. Hence my nostalgia is not so much for certain people I might have been close to, but the locations, the trees, the hills and the valleys. My nostalgia has its roots literally in the soil of my childhood.

59 This is one attempt which fails. The olive grove is destroyed in a fire and the wooden Madonna is eaten by white ants – an incident which lends itself to symbolic interpretation.

60 Religion is intended in its wider sense as the basis for a society's beliefs, rituals, moral values and, to some extent, lifestyle.

61 The term “members” is probably inaccurate. It implies a formality and a structure that is often absent. There are, as we have seen, formalised associations which group together Italians from a particular part of Italy or having similar social or sporting interests, but most of those who identify themselves as “Italians” (even when they were born in Australia) have no affiliation with any formal group or society.
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