

KINTSUGI

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*There is a truth that
I'm going for, but I can only sketch
its contours. God knows
I am still waiting for an answer.*

Maggie Nelson, 'The Canal Diaries'

FIRST CAKE METHOD

... more unsubstantial, more persistent, more faithful, the smell and taste of things remain poised a long time, like souls, ready to remind us, waiting and hoping for their moment, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unfaltering, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection.

Marcel Proust

Girl stands on a brown vinyl patchwork pouffe, dragged from the lounge room. It's unsteady beneath her feet, but without it she's too short to reach into the mixing bowl from the linoleum floor. Dimpled hands buried in flour, she picks up cubes of butter that are ice-cold and golden, precision cut.

'You have to use chilled butter for this sort of stuff, love,' Mum says. 'Otherwise it'll just splat.'

Girl listens carefully to instructions. She always does, determined to get things right.

The *Golden Wattle* lies splayed open on the formica bench, just beyond the bowl's halo of flour. This cookbook's emerald-green cardboard cover is burred and greying at the edges, and the creamy spine, with peeling bands of old glue and webbing, has long given up holding it all together. A large brown lackey band now does the trick. Loose papers crammed inside—torn from *Family Circle* or *Woman's Day*—offer recipes with exotic names that Mum will probably never make: quiche, guacamole, chow mein. Their glossy pictures make Girl's mouth water. But for now she's only interested in one of *Golden Wattle's* good old standards and scrabbles through the cupboard, searching for mixed peel. Rock cakes are the way to Dad's heart. It has to be the first recipe she masters.

'Rules for the First Cake Method' instruct to 'Rub fat into flour with tips of fingers.' Girl lifts and rubs, lifts and rubs, lower lip folded under front teeth.

Mum's at her shoulder, and in between puffs on a Winfield Blue reminds, 'Don't press too hard, or your butter won't get all the way through.'

Girl looks back to the 'Rules'. Then back to Mum. 'Does this look right? Have I made it crumbly enough?'

'Yes, love, that's pretty well spot-on. You want it to look like breadcrumbs. Or damp sand.'

Girl thinks of damp sand. Sinking her toes into the cool of the beach and diving into blue with Dad. Bliss.

We shuffle into place around Nonna's dining table. Us kids get to sit on the long bench that normally lives in Nonno's shed; the bench carried in and covered with a woollen blanket, for all big family lunches. My hands knead the wool, enjoying its familiarity, rough yet yielding to the touch. Crammed around that table, talking, I catch my sisters' eyes. Our faces, now, are miraculously blotch-free: smiles, Sunday best and 'Merry Christmas' all round. It's as if the morning never happened.

Onion, garlic combines with the heat from the oven that clicked on just after 5:30 a.m. this morning, making for a heady, aromatic atmosphere. Almost cloying. We wait for Nonna's gnocchi, the marker of all special occasions, mouths watering. I watched her once, rolling all those little potato dumplings by hand, faded red scarf on her head, apron around her waist, flour all over her hands and swiped on her cheek. When she finished, the gnocchi were lined up in rows on a wooden board, under clean crisp tea towels, left to sit. On the big day, they are tumbled into an enormous silver pot full of boiling water, the pot with two handles. Nonno has to carry it to the sink for draining, because it's so heavy. The kitchen is full of steam and the sweet smell of tomatoes.

I spike a piece of gnocchi swimming in the bowl of veal ragu. It springs against my teeth as I take a bite, smooth and slippery with sauce. Nonna stands by, ready to pile on more as soon as anyone finishes. '*Mangia! Mangia!*' Her eternal catchphrase. *Eat! Eat!* A plea, a command, a query, a direction. Dad obliges and I happily let her fill and then

refill my plate. Us girls get to use her nice dinner set, the one painted with an old-fashioned cottage and flowery garden. I watch Dad hack a slice of bread from the loaf, smearing and swiping it round his plate, removing the last trace of ragu.

Nonna doesn't eat much herself, but watches us all, asking if we like it, if the gnocchi is as good as last time. Moving between kitchen and table, she delivers roast chicken and potatoes, roast pork belly, bean salad awash with oil. Piling Dad's plate high for a second time, she steps back, hand on his shoulder.

Hours later, overstuffed and unable to carry on, we claim couch, chair and any spare inch of carpet to stretch out, digest and doze. Snuggling into Nonno's armpit, I inhale his sweet scent of leather and sweat, his jacket creaking every time I moved in closer. I watch Dad sleep, wondering what dreams fill his head as he snores, muscles soft, unaware of the family around him.

*

When Girl becomes Woman, her dinner parties are legendary; she's known as quite the cook. 'Domestic Goddess', some even say.

'It's the wog in me,' she'll joke. 'If I care about someone, I need to feed them till they burst. Just like my nonna!' All day Saturday (and some of Friday) will be given over to the preparation of a four-course meal that disappears in minutes.

Cooking + Feeding = Love.

That's one equation she learned to solve long ago. And she loves to love. Needs to be loved.

Her children's birthdays step things up a notch. Hours pass baking, shaping and decorating home-cooked slabs of golden butter cake into favourite cartoon characters, animals, rockets, trains—whatever they ask for. She's trusting that her love will be ingested along with all that sugar, vanilla and lurid shades of icing.

The day her son asks Grandma to make a pavlova instead, she feels a lump rise in her throat that takes months to settle.

*

The first few times Dad dozes off in our presence, we think it's the medication slowing his system. Lithium has damped him down, almost beyond recognition, his body's hard lines softened until he's almost blurred at the edges. But when Dad cancels his birthday dinner we know something's amiss. He wouldn't give up a plate of garlic prawns for anything or anyone.

Plagued by unexplained pains in his ribs, too soon, Dad's words of complaint become flesh—we can see the lump in his side. As our family calendar fills with specialist visits—times scrawled in crayon, pencil, whatever is to hand—I learn the sneaky places to park at the hospital. Work out who makes the best coffee.

Mum's at my house to mind all the grandkids. I lean in to kiss her cheek goodbye, and she stops, midway through

making a sandwich. ‘You know, you’d be within your rights to leave him to it. What did he ever do for us? Never had time for anything much but his mates and girlfriends.’

I look at her clutching a knife smeared with butter, salty tang of Vegemite in the air. ‘No, he probably doesn’t deserve it, Mum. But we want to be there.’ A raised eyebrow, pursed lips, as Lisa and I hurry out the door.

Thirty minutes later, father and two daughters huddle close, shoulders rubbing, sweaty legs gripping plastic seats. There’s an easy flow of chat as we flick through waiting-room magazines.

‘God, her hair looks awful! And that dress. Yuck.’

‘Mmm, look at that. Pork belly with sticky Asian sauce ... Remember that recipe your mum used to make?’ Heads nod, agreeably. Mouths water.

‘I could make that for dinner Sunday if you like, Dad? I’ll need to nick the recipe though. Create a distraction.’ Throats are cleared in unison, but that first slow tear is still unmistakable.

Giggling like a kid, Dad says, ‘You just have to do it quick. Like ripping off a bandaid. On three.’ His cough almost smothers the sound. But he keeps coughing. Can’t stop until he’s scarlet-faced and almost out of breath.

Bookend daughters rub his back, his newly bony knee. ‘You okay, Dad? Want a drink of water?’

‘Nah, don’t fuss, I’m fine. Bloody lungs. Should have ditched the ciggies years ago. Wouldn’t be here if I had. Idiot.’

Tears well. ‘Come on, you don’t know what news the doctor will have for you yet. Here’s a sudoku, Dad. You like them, don’t you? Do that to kill some time. Can’t be long now.’

In the coming months I won’t be able to protect him from the dark blooms spreading through his body. But I can feed him, delivering roast dinners, soups, casseroles and cake. Always, cake.

Cleaning out the house after Dad’s funeral, I will break down on discovering a freezer full of those carefully stacked and labelled containers.

‘Love me,’ that heavy Tupperware says. ‘Just love me. And let me love you.’

But it wasn’t enough. Never enough. There was no recipe for what I needed to make.

*

It’s Dad’s birthday today. He would have been seventy-four.

The marble bench is cool beneath my elbows as I sip at tea and flick through the pages of my own *Golden Wattle*. Presented by Mum, year 2000, it’s in as-new condition (one careful lady owner).

Pot-roasted beef is on the menu tonight. Dad’s favourite. The delicious fug of meat, onion and garlic makes my mouth water.

But suddenly I detect that other smell, pumping from the oven vents. It permeates flesh and blood; short-circuits

memory. That tangy undercurrent of sultana and lemon in the air. It liquefies me. Time folds on itself. Crowds in. Unsettles.

Girl peers with a torch through the oven window, watching and waiting. So hard to tell if they're done: the years of splats griming the glass give everything a dusky hue. As the minute hand clicks into its calculated resting spot, Girl jumps off the chair. 'M-u-u-m. They're ready!'

Folded tea towels padding her hands, Girl's mouth waters as she reaches in for the battered aluminium tray. Sultana, lemon, sugar: it smells just like that cake Nonna makes; the only cake. Desserts aren't really Nonna's thing, but she could win a battle to the death over roast chicken, potatoes or gnocchi. Girl fills the kettle, gets Mum to put it on and rushes out the back door, flyscreen slapping behind her.

From the sloping driveway leading to the shed, maybe she can hear the injector machine whirring. Girl might be skipping her way through the engine parts littering the ground, inside to the little workroom where Dad could be seated, bent over the calibrator.

Perhaps she says, 'I made some rock cakes, Dad. My first ever. Want to come in for a cup of tea?'

Chances are, he doesn't look up, barks, 'In a minute.' Girl will most definitely stand quietly a few moments more and wait.

'Get 'em while they're hot, Dad. They taste best then,' she could chirp, a too-bright smile making her face ache.

'Jesus, stop nagging,' he probably snaps.

Girl's crestfallen slope back to the house is a certainty. There she will sit at the kitchen table, biting the edges of her fingers, legs jumping, staring at the stewing pot of tea and cakes, whose glittering sugar crust is cooling back to a dull white. Mum will light another cigarette.

Girl will hear the screen door smack, the rush of water from the laundry tap. Swear she can smell the abrasive rub of Solvol from here. By the time he sits on the kitchen chair, lifts the cake to his lips, her smile will be back.

‘What do you think, Dad? Pretty good for a first go, hey?’

‘Delicious, love. I better watch out or you'll do me out of a job,’ Mum will laugh, crumbs trembling on her lips. Compelled to fill the uneasy silence, she'll shove another cake towards Girl, who'll grab at the sweet promise it holds.

He'll reach for another rock cake but say nothing. Minutes later, narrow-eyed, he'll sneer, ‘What are you sitting here for? Why don't you go and rake up some of those bloody jacaranda leaves? Place looks like shit.’

And his words will bite and sting. But oh, they can't outweigh the delicious feeling of seeing his hand go back for a third, a fourth rock cake. The satisfied smack of his lips, the half-closed lids as he bites and chews thoughtfully, washing it all down with a swig of tea—this little girl could live off that silent endorsement forever.