

PART I

# FOOD IS A SOLID FACT



## MILK

In the beginning, I thought my mother was a book. A paperback, with a cream and orange jacket, and a picture of a small milk-bottle-shaped bird. The book just happened to have a mass of golden, wavy hair. It ate packets and packets of chocolate digestive biscuits. It regularly heaved and shifted and made low rumbling sounds, and sometimes sharp high barks.

But I was happy: I was getting all the milk I needed, I wasn't cold, I wasn't hungry.

Sunlight came through my eyelids. The book had a comforting heartbeat. Its pages turned with a papery *whoosh*, *whoosh*.

And then Mother yawned and the book fell from her face.

I broke off from the breast and wailed. Mother was not a book at all and she was enormous. Her colours weren't orange and cream and black; they were pink and gold and grey. She had a big mouth and small, sharp teeth. Her face contained nothing that was familiar, nothing I could get a purchase on. She was utterly, utterly strange.

And I never got used to her strangeness. Mother never settled into a reliable shape. She's always been unfathomable: woods I can't see on account of all the trees.

You won't believe any of this, Ornella. You don't think it's possible to recall things from such an early age. But it pays

for the brain to be forgetful, or maybe we wouldn't recover from the trauma of being born.

And I remember that too: being born is unbearable. It's terrifying, the worst thing that ever happens to us. The weight, the terrible squeezing weight, and then, just when you think you can't take it anymore, the sudden paralysing weightlessness. The massiveness of space and air. And the *cold*, it's so *cold!*

Better to be a marsupial, born into a pouch, always able to climb back into a warm pocket of fur. Humans just get spat out into cold white nothingness and can't ever go back.

But you've never imagined being a marsupial, Ornella. You've never imagined inhabiting anything except your own brain and body, plain and simple. Your first memory, you say, is of your mother yanking a pair of tights over your nappy, propelling you across the floor on your backside. From then, there is nothing in your memory banks until a Grade Three skipping contest. Before you knew it, you were an adult. In between, I imagine lots of grey bitumen, greaseproof paper and orange peel.

When it comes to my earliest memories, the only one I concede to you is the one about Mother being enormous.

'Owen,' you say, shaking your head. 'Your mother was not a large woman. She was *peteet*. Pe-*teet*.' When you say this, you bring your thumb and forefinger together, like you're pinching out a lateral from a tomato plant.

Yes, you're right about her size, I give you that. In the one photo I've got of her from this time, she's small and compact and wearing a chequered dress with buttons down the middle. I'm in a carry-cot but Mother isn't holding the carry-cot,

she's holding a tiny leather suitcase. She isn't going anywhere – not yet – and the suitcase is not full of clothes, it's full of her poems. Unfinished mostly, but lots of them, on scraps of paper and half-filled notebooks. Her legs look long for a pe-teet person. But her hands are little paws; the fingers don't properly wrap around the suitcase handle. They're an embarrassment, those hands, those fingers. It makes me sad to see them now, even in a photo. She was supposed to have a piano-player's fingers. 'It doesn't matter,' said Papa, 'it's what they write that needs to be elegant.'

Soon after this photo was taken, Mother says I became her enemy. I didn't mean to be her enemy. It was not something I planned on or decided. But I had discovered my arms and legs and I climbed onto couches and ripped pages out of books that were lying there. I did the same to those on the bottom shelves of the bookcase, chewing their corners til they were moist and soft. When Mother settled down to a quiet afternoon read, the only thing I wanted to do was *eat her book*.

Which leads me to Papa.

My early interest in eating, and the iron constitution that allowed me to digest, unharmed, seventeen pages of Balzac's *Cousin Bette* (a book that goes on too long anyway, Mother always said), was a source of great pride to my Papa. He boasted of how he'd opened my mouth one day and pulled out a lump of orange rind, a three-inch-long piece of hessian, and a £2 note. After that, he removed the washing powder from the laundry floor, and put all his penny pieces up high on a shelf.

Papa kept my very first baby romper suit too. I don't know why. It's very dirty and not really worth preserving. It's in a trunk with his father's war medals and a miniature silver-plated soup-ladle he was given for charitable services 'undertaken under the auspices of the Salvation Army, Bourke Street, Melbourne, December 1966,' says the soup-ladle.

I've got a million memories of the kitchen where he cooked this charity meal. These are bigger and more colourful memories than the ones about Mother. They feature what seem to be *vats* of olives and anchovies (though surely they're only large tins); slabs of bacon and orange freckled ham hocks that look like orthopaedic shoes.

There I sit, pinning olive eyes to a potato with toothpicks.

I loved the smells in that kitchen, the height of the ceiling, the way the steam covered people up when the lids came off pots. No one took any notice of me when I was in there. I got to do just what I liked, just be a person among other people, everyone doing jobs of their own. The kitchen was my invisibility cloak.

There were actual spaces you could disappear into in the kitchen. There was a gap between an oven and a fridge that I discovered when a marble rolled in there and I crawled in after it. In that gap, puddles formed and dried and formed again, and a curious cottony mould grew on the lino. Once in there, I didn't want to come out again. There was cold steel on one side of me, humming gently, and warm steel on the other, still. And I remember how secret and safe I felt, pressed in between those two contraptions. I unrolled the curious cottony mould from the lino and made it into a ball and wedged it between

the bottom of the fridge and the floor. I peeled off another and did the same. But then, prodding and wedging and blowing my breath against the metal, I suddenly felt the fridge begin to move. I caught a glimpse of white shoes and felt the wheels grating on the floor. There was a slow clamping pressure against my stomach and my ribs, a great squeezing that grew more and more intense. I had to suck in my breath and jam up my shoulders, and I suppose I must've made a squealing sound, for suddenly the fridge lurched violently away, and the white shoes were upon me. I had *light* again, and I had *space*, and I was lifted into arms that smelled of oranges. And the person who belonged to those arms rocked me and pressed me into her neck and said, 'My *God*, Oh my *God*!' and that was you, Ornella. My first memory of you.

#### **MILK PIE**

Garlic was just an exotic word before 1956, says Papa. Sausages were fat and bread and offal scraps, wound through Grandma Blanche's mincer and stuffed into intestines. Milk pie is the way Papa describes the culinary world he grew up in: spongy, creamy, white.

Starting out in life, Papa knew the following dishes off by heart:

*Boiled Rabbit*, which required 1 rabbit, 2 onions, 1 carrot and half a turnip, and could be served with a parsley or white sauce;

*Brown Stew*, which had a similar list of ingredients, but also stewing steak, and dripping;

*Marmalade Pudding*, which he still cooks in wintertime; and *Roly Poly*, which involves something called *Suet*.

These four dishes came from a book of Grandma Blanche's called *Teach Yourself to Cook*, published by The English Universities Press. Also in the series were *Teach Yourself Household Electricity*, *Teach Yourself Astro-Navigation*, *Teach Yourself German* and *Teach Yourself More German*, and last, but not least, *Teach Yourself To Fly*.

Papa possessed none of the more applied and manly volumes, but with *Teach Yourself to Cook* in his swag, he lurched around the countryside after Grandma Blanche's death, laying bricks, killing rabbits and stealing vegetables from gardens. He got too much creek-water in his system and was so skinny you could hook your hands up under his ribs.

When he came to Melbourne, the city was getting ready for the Olympic Games. There were going to be fencing competitions in St Kilda Town Hall and weightlifting at the Royal Exhibition Building. On Swanston Street all the street-stalls had been vacated, or relocated, or put out of business via fines. It was a time of flags and gloves. Queen Elizabeth was everywhere: in profile on penny pieces, in touched-up photos in *Women's Weekly*. No one could say she wasn't lovely: the hint of blue in her eyes; her pale, smooth English skin.

On St Kilda Road, the plane trees spewed out their spores and made the commuters sneeze. Papa went for a walk and saw little inscrutable changes afoot in Melbourne. Places that looked suspiciously like art galleries (Papa was not sure) were popping up in buildings that had been haberdashers or dental surgeries. A woman in a black skivvy and green-and-red peasant skirt swished past on ballet slippers. A door banged



open in the side of a wall and three men came laughing down some stairs, carrying musical instruments.

One day in late October, at the ripe old age of nineteen, Papa approached a restaurant called *la Coccinella*, having haltingly translated the half-English, half-Italian advertisement for a kitchenhand taped to the glass. He had applied a large quantity of hair oil. He had borrowed a suit from the Salvation Army. He knocked. A tram clattered past like a centipede in lead boots. The door opened. 'Then my real life began,' says Papa.

You were fifteen, Ornella, and you didn't like the new kitchenhand; you hated it when Nonno promoted him to first courses and desserts; you hated it even more when your parents decided to 'adopt' him. Papa says this like a fact, but surely a nineteen-year-old boy's too old to be adopted! In 1956, a nineteen-year-old boy was a man. They must've felt sorry for him. He was small, and a little bit dirty, and he looked like he needed caring for.

The whole situation made you miserable, Ornella. Papa even got his name changed by deed poll and he called your parents *Nonno* and *Nonna*, which were *your* words for them – because they were so old, so grey, their English was so bad, (so embarrassing).

But what kind of Italian family has no son? Papa was a prime specimen of native Australian-ness rolled up in unfulfilled filial longings.

Papa didn't forget his other life though. He didn't forget camping under Princes Bridge: the sound of water lapping at the pylons, the smells of brick-dust and clay and possum

droppings, the violent rattle of traffic overhead. There was a scar on his wrist from a piece of glass or a razor blade. He was always, at heart, a small man, hoping for the best, never quite despairing.

**WEST BRUNSWICK PROGRESS ASSOCIATION HALL**

It was you, Ornella, who begged Papa to attend that fateful dance of 1958. Nonno wouldn't let you go on your own. A girl had to be chaperoned. Once through the door of the West Brunswick Progress Association Hall, you abandoned Papa. Naturally. (Who could blame you? He was not your keeper. And Carlito was waiting for you, with his full repertoire of masculine wiles.)

Papa made his way to the refreshments table. He took a fruit punch and rolled a cigarette one-handed, which he proceeded to suck on, propped up by a wall. I imagine him like Humphrey Bogart, with his top button done up and the waist too high on his trousers.

Mother, sitting a few feet away, also smoked. But while she smoked, she scribbled in a small book in her lap. In between attacks of writing, she sat almost entirely still, inhaling and exhaling cigarette smoke.

Papa had never seen a woman writing so publicly, in a notebook. It shocked him.

Mother didn't notice him until her cigarette went out. Then she looked up, waved her dead cigarette at him and he obliged. The flame went *poof!* between them like a French movie, and his metal lighter made a click as the apparatus fell back into place. In that moment of illumination, Papa saw Mother's eyes,

a bit yellow in the reflection of the flame – ‘tiger’s eyes,’ he says – which always embarrassed me, for in reality Mother’s eyes were a very boring grey.

‘What are you writing?’ Papa asked.

Mother glared at him and stashed her notebook back into her purse.

‘Do you like to dance?’ he persisted.

‘No,’ said Mother. ‘I’m here with my friend.’ She brushed away some ash that had fallen into her skirt and pointed to a plump woman in a green dress, whirling on the dance floor. ‘That is Esmeralda,’ my mother said. ‘She’s a pharmacist’s assistant.’

‘And what are you?’ Papa didn’t mean it rudely. He didn’t really know how to talk to girls, let alone women. And Mother was definitely a woman.

Mother puffed her smoke in a different direction to let him know she wasn’t impressed. ‘I’m a girl at a dance. Talking to a very short man who is dripping his fruit cup all over his shirt.’

And then she got up and left, and Papa discovered she was right and went immediately to the Gents to clean himself up.

That might’ve been the end of it, but later in the evening, outside, Papa saw her again and this time she and her friend were having an argument.

Esmeralda was yelling something at Mother about a ‘blue fox’. She was shaking a decrepit-looking wet fur article in one hand, and angrily smoking a cigarette with the other. What Mother had done to her blue fox stole – for that’s what it was – Papa was never sure, but he had to intervene, he says.

He had been taken in by those yellow ‘tiger’s eyes’. He needed to be gallant and valiant or, at least, memorable. He stepped in front of Mother just at the moment when Esmeralda threw her cigarette at her. It missed Mother but it got Papa in the chest, then fell to the ground. Papa put it out with his foot, glared at Esmeralda, and took Mother’s arm.

The two of them proceeded haughtily up Sydney Road, not looking back, Esmeralda shouting out behind them.

‘I didn’t put her stole down the toilet,’ Mother finally said. ‘I dropped it in. Accidentally. I was trying to wash it.’

Papa said nothing, so Mother took a silver decanter out of her purse and offered him some whisky. ‘My name’s Veda. What’s yours?’

They walked together for hours that night, Veda and Jo. It was not a cold night, so there was no good reason to huddle together, but at last Papa got his arm around Mother’s waist. ‘What were you writing, back there at the dance?’ he asked.

She took out her last cigarette and lit it. ‘A poem,’ she said.

Papa had never read a poem in his life. Even at school (he left at the age of twelve) he had apparently missed the classes where poetry got read.

When Mother said she was writing a poem, Papa’s mouth made the shape of an ‘O’. He didn’t quite take his arm from around her waist, but he was suddenly too nervous to kiss her.

Some days later, Papa attended Mother’s first poetry reading.

The venue was a private apartment at the Aquarius Hotel. It wasn’t a grand hotel, but it had been once: little flakes of

gilt came off the plaster and there was a marble entrance hall. Now the third-floor rooms were rented out for dubious purposes, and the second-floor rooms for such curious events as poetry readings.

Mother had to learn her poems off by heart because her hands shook too much to hold the paper. When she finally stood up to read, she reeled slightly. But then she cleared her voice and looked straight out at the audience. ‘This first poem,’ she said, ‘is called “Just My Type”.’

Do you remember her voice, Ornella? It wasn’t like anyone else’s – not like you imagine a poet’s, that’s for sure. It wasn’t like *cream*, or *honey*, or *liquid gold*. It was like a high-quality rasp – it filed away your defences. And her poem, when she began reciting, was all on the ascent – a crescendo of feeling, and rhythm, and momentum, and then a sudden capsizing that dropped the audience and left them momentarily hanging, all those fluttering, hapless poets Papa immediately resented for their educations and vocabularies. When she finished, Mother made a mock-bow, and the audience clapped, and, after several more drinks and congratulations and offers of other reading opportunities, Papa steered her to a taxicab.

He took her home that night to her flat in East Melbourne and put her under the covers of her unmade bed. She reached out to undo his trousers, but he avoided her and went instead to inspect her kitchen. There was half a pint of off milk in her refrigerator and a can of baked beans in the cupboard. Mousetraps littered the floor. Papa poured the milk down the sink and washed out the bottle. Then he walked the five miles back to Coburg.

**REAL ESTATE**

Papa had been part of your family for two years and you'd got used to him. He had become the quintessential Italian son, and he'd started bringing Veda to family lunches. Veda had a skinny chest like a griddle pan. She lived on custard and butter-beans and cigarettes, Papa says; she ate her peas one by one. Nonna must've desperately wanted to feed her.

Nonno wiped his big grey moustache with his napkin and nodded. You could see his singlet through his shirt. Mother smoked and wasn't paying attention. Nonna pursed her lips and ladled seconds onto plates.

They were very boring. They were talking *real estate*.

'Where exactly is it, this place, Joseph?' said Nonno.

'Acland Street. St Kilda. Right near the seaside. Luna Park.'

Nonna poured an inch of grappa into her husband's black coffee. 'You cook Italian food, Joseph?' she said.

Papa nodded again and shrugged his shoulders as if to say, what else? Nonna beamed. Ornella scowled. Mother looked wistfully into the deepening dark of the garden.

**123 ACLAND STREET**

123 Acland Street was a steaming fishbowl in summer and a brick of ice in winter. Papa opened lunchtimes Monday to Friday and for lunch and dinner on Saturday. People came. A trickle, never a rush. Papa alternated between 123 and La Coccinella. This went on for a year. It was tiring, but he loved it. His days were full. His life was busy. He had a *girlfriend who was not only beautiful, but smart too!*

Mother still lived in her flat in East Melbourne. She had a secretarial job at Goodwin & Franck Solicitors on King Street. The transformation this job had wrought in her, said Papa, was amazing. She was now a wearer of straight grey skirts and pale pink seersucker blouses. There still wasn't much food in her one-person-sized Frigidaire Mini, but there was fresh milk, and usually a couple of eggs and a plastic dish of butter. She loved typing, she told Papa. She loved punching the keys into their necessarily lexical (and yet strangely numerical) patterns. Mother could plant seventy-five words a minute, without error, from the keys of her Optimat Portable onto the archival-quality paper of Goodwin & Franck. *Ding!* For lunch, she fished into her beige Glomesh cigarette container – filled half with Menthol and half with Peter Stuyvesant – and drank a cup of coffee. Sometimes, she bought a tuna salad sandwich from Corn's Deli. The afternoons rolled on tediously, and sometimes – when her in-tray was empty – Mother rolled a piece of 100 gsm cream stock with embossed gold and red letterhead into her Optima and wrote some lines of poetry, just because she could; because no one was watching, because occasionally she became terrifyingly aware that being a secretary was being *paid to waste her life*. Sometimes, said Papa, Mother made poems purely out of chopped-up legal terms and phrases. 'My gobbledegook poems,' she called them.

*Equitable estoppel,*

*Libel libel libel*

*Limitation of liability*

*Nonfeasance, reasonableness, nonfeasance*

Mother earned £9 a week; she paid a considerable sum to have new curtains hung in her flat and bought herself a chest of drawers made of cedar, which she lined in paper sprayed with Arpege perfume. She and Papa had become engaged, and with that notion of herself as a *fiancée*, she had trimmed her wild edges. She still had a temper (she had thrown several desserts at Papa in their time together) but she was doted on now by Nonno and Nonna – even though you, Ornella, always suspected her of fraud. She was *as fit for marriage as a porcupine for a carriage*, you said.

Papa continued to live out the back of Nonno and Nonna's in Coburg. A man and woman, unmarried, might not live together in 1959. Besides, if Mother married Papa, she would have to leave her job. She didn't want to leave her job. She enjoyed her financial independence and the way Mr Goodwin deferred to her on issues of spelling, punctuation and syntax. Once a week, on Sunday mornings, Papa and Mother had sexual relations in the too-soft double bed in Mother's East Melbourne flat; she assured him she had everything in place to prevent conception. Papa asked no further. He says Mother seemed to like the arrangement, though he could never be sure as, at the end, as a general rule, she sat up, opened the curtains and brushed her hair vigorously for about half an hour, saying nothing but looking very cross.



Demure in her work guise as Miss Gray, at home Mother said exactly what she thought: she nicknamed Mr Goodwin ‘Cane Toad’ on account of his acne scars and Franck ‘Cherry Ripe’ on account of his repulsive red mouth.

Ultimately, when the time came, she was happy to get married and leave Goodwin & Franck, because of Mr Franck. Franck criticised her handwriting. He commented on the cuts and colours of her outfits. He liked to dally in the office out of hours and find ways to prevent Mother from leaving. Once, he patted her on her bottom when she stood next to him taking dictation. Papa always said the name ‘Franck’ like he was eating something disgusting and needed to spit it out.

#### **ROSA**

123 Acland Street was slow in finding its clientele. People wove from the beach to the streets and sometimes made it to the restaurant, where the fan whirred overhead in summer, turning the hot air round and round, and the icy wind from the sea filtered through the many draughts in winter. But often it was empty.

Papa employed one waitress.

Much to your disappointment, this waitress was not you, Ornella. You would’ve liked the freedom. Instead, you were holed up at home being Nonna’s *slave labour* in the kitchen and learning the arts of marriageability. A marriageable woman needed to know how to cut and pin and tack and reinforce seams. Nonna had an overlocker. She could alter a pattern to ‘fit like a glove’. She knew high-quality store-quality. She had worked for Manton’s, even if it was as an underpaid

piece-worker. So Papa left you in Coburg to sew and hem and instead employed Rosa Ferros, squat as a toad, plain as a chicken-house (until she smiled, and then you were dazzled by her beauty).

Rosa was an Italian Ashkenazi Jew who spoke an obscure Italian-Judeo dialect as well as English and Italian and Yiddish. She bustled into the restaurant as though evaluating it for higher purposes of her own. She proved an ultra-efficient waitress, passionate about food and generous with her smile. She smiled and nodded approvingly at her diners, and called out their orders to Papa through the hatch-window as though each were a declaration of good taste. She never picked them up on their bad pronunciation and forgave them when they used the wrong cutlery, added too much salt, cut up their spaghetti with a knife and fork. She smiled and they fell in love with her and ate whatever she recommended. Though 123 had no coffee machine, she brewed strong, dark coffee in the French way on the kitchen stove for them.

Rosa Ferros was also an artist.

A peasant artist, she called herself; she was self-taught and a bit folksy. But her images were moving. They caught your attention. She mainly drew scenes from Southern Tyrol where her whole family had been exterminated in the Bolzano Transit Camp in 1944. She had escaped long before the atrocities. In 1938 she had been freighted off to Melbourne as a proxy bride. It was soon after Mussolini had published his Charter of Race and her father had lost his job as a government official. Now she couldn't look at a picture of the Dolomites without breaking into tears. She loved her proxy husband,

Michele Ferros, as soon as she saw him from the porthole on the *Jervis Bay*. They had no children and he died of stroke only three years into their marriage. She would never love a man again, she said.

That was the story of Rosa's survival and freedom. She never saw the landscape of her childhood again, she never remarried, and she never located a single relative. So she painted out her personal losses in oils and watercolours and harsh charcoal line-drawings.

It was Rosa Ferros who got Papa onto the subject of Art. It was Rosa Ferros who took Papa to the *Antipodeans* exhibition and introduced him to James Parish.

#### THE ANTIPODEANS

The Antipodeans Exhibition was held by the Victorian Artists' Society in East Melbourne. Papa didn't know anything about art, knew only from Rosa that *abstract art threatens the future of art and civilisation*. The only artwork Grandma Blanche had had in her house was a reproduction image of a boy and girl, in eighteenth-century dress, holding a dead chicken in their cupped hands.

Rosa yanked him by the arm. 'Come and meet my friend, Mr Parish,' she said.

With his widow's peak, beaked nose and crest of greying hair, James Parish resembled an owl, thought Papa. A wise owl. An educated owl. An owl from the very top of the tree. He enthusiastically shook Papa's hand as though Papa were the very person he had hoped to meet that day. 'Lovely,' he said over and over. 'Lovely! How lovely!' He hooked Rosa and

Papa into an arm each and off they went, through the exhibition, James Parish giving them his commentary.

‘Are you an artist too, Mr Parish?’ Papa asked finally, when they seemed to have come to the end of the show.

Mr Parish disengaged himself. ‘Oh lord, do I look like an artist?’

Papa stumbled. ‘I don’t really know what an artist looks like.’

‘An artist can look like anyone,’ confided Mr Parish. ‘A door-to-door salesman. A vacuum-cleaner repairman. A taxi-driver. But no, *I’m* not an artist.’

‘He *is* an artist,’ said Rosa. ‘Mr James Parish is a poet, like ... what do you say? Like Alfred Lord Tennyson.’

‘I’m no such thing,’ said Mr Parish.

But Papa could tell Mr Parish was very important. Only the very important could pretend so well that they were no such thing.

‘Ah! *There’s no money in poetry,*’ said Mr Parish, ‘*but there’s no poetry in money, either.* Robert Graves. I’m happy with my slender little volumes and my handful of reviews, thank you.’

‘You’re a poet?’ said Papa. He started to say something along the lines of, *my wife is a poet*, but didn’t. They weren’t married yet and, *my fiancée is a poet*, didn’t have quite the same ring. (And then, after all, *was* Mother a poet? Or was she a legal secretary? He wasn’t sure.)

‘Indeed, I am a poet,’ said Mr Parish. ‘In spite of myself. I *wanted* to be an artist, did I not, Rosa? I tried valiantly. I studied. I primed my canvases. But no, unfortunately I had no talent. I am not a brother of the brush. I have to be content to be an avid collector of paintings. In the meantime, I write

my little poems and publish them and hope I can capture in words some of what these gentlemen capture in paint.'

He turned back to the walls where Arthur Boyd's *Phantom Bride* hung.

'See!' he said. 'Look what Boyd can do! This is the difference between the art-forms. A painting can be apprehended at once, in its entirety. A poem cannot. Boyd's painting is both beautiful and painful to look at. Don't you find that?'

Papa strained his eyes at the painting: an ugly little flower-girl was offering flowers to a floating bride whom an unpleasant-looking gnome tried to hold down. What was the meaning of this painting? *Men are so ugly*, was Papa's instant feeling. *And they are forever trying to hold down their women*. He thought of Mother, only five hundred yards or so away, in her East Melbourne flat. What was she doing now? Filing her nails? Warming milk in the saucepan? Penning a line or two that expressed, obliquely, her own hopes – as a woman, as a bride? What did this painting mean? What was he, as a man, in the face of this painting?

He wanted to ask but Mr Parish steered them on.

'There's good art and there's bad art,' Mr Parish continued. 'That's the end of it. Figurative art is art of the human condition, that's why it speaks to me. But there's no reason I won't, one day, be moved by a Pollock or de Kooning. Then again, my wife achieves the same thing with her bloody *icky-bana*. Anyone who can do a bit of flower arrangement is uttering a prayer of sorts. Don't you think, Rosa?'

'Mrs Parish makes a beautiful flower arrangement,' said Rosa soberly. (She felt an urge to defend her sex. There were

no women artists in the Antipodeans exhibition, and Mrs Parish's flower arrangements *were* beautiful.)

'My problem ...' continued Mr Parish, 'is that non-figurative artwork makes the ordinary viewer feel stupid.' He considered a moment, 'It's undemocratic, in fact. That is my objection. It is *undemocratic*.'

Papa had never had a conversation like this before. Now he felt his inadequacies, the terrible gaps in his education, his country stupidity.

'Abstraction,' nodded Rosa, 'is just decoration. It is an American fashion and will pass.'

This then was their uniting theme, Rosa and Mr Parish. Papa couldn't otherwise make sense of their connection. Although he wasn't quite clear what *abstraction* amounted to, he understood that on this point they were allies.

In the end, Rosa had the better reason to resent the abstractionists. She was an immigrant female artist in post-war Australia. She would not be exhibited alongside the men. Not the big men nor the small. She would have to make an entirely new category for herself. But Papa would let her paint a mural of the Dolomites on the southernmost wall of 123. Soon. They would talk of it in weeks to come, in fact. And it would prove a drawcard for the restaurant.

In the meantime, when she went home that evening, Rosa selected six art history books from her shelves and brought them in a string-bound package to 123 the next morning. Papa eagerly untied the string.