

The chestnut

Nonno's property starts where the sealed road ends. The descent into it is steep and dusty.

Some of these olive trees are hundreds of years old, Maria says, as we wind our way through grove after grove.

They remind me of the desert oaks at Uluru, I reply. They take 50 years just to get their tap roots down.

I'll stop in a minute, so you can open the windows without the dust and get a feel of them.

Gnarled and sculpted by the weather, I can tell these trees have withstood eons.

If you listen you can hear them talking to each other, Maria says and stops the car right next to one.

It's got a shrine inside the trunk, I say, behind the glass.

Of course, Our Lady watches over everything.

But what's with the plastic flowers on the altar?

That's who she is, Maria laughs, the Virgin of the plastic flowers.

I stare at her. She's certainly young and she's partly smiling.

She's got a Mona Lisa smile, I say.

There's a lot she knows but can never tell.

How mysterious.

Look down there, Maria points below to a number of very large, loosely connected sheds. That's where we're headed and that's where we'll find Nonno under his favourite chestnut tree.

We park in the tree's shade. Nonno is seated at a small timber table piled with nuts. He doesn't seem to notice us, even as we walk towards him. When Maria touches his shoulder he partly rises. She kisses him on both cheeks.

I've never seen a pile of raw chestnuts and say so. Maria translates. This seems to please him. He thoughtfully selects one and presents it to me on his open, unsteady palm. His skin is thin; his touch soft. I hold the shiny smooth object in my hand, turning it over.

Grazie, I thank him and put it in my pocket.

Looking bemused he takes another from the pile, peels it and insists I eat it.

I nod approvingly as I savour the soft flesh.

Un altro?

No more, Maria tells him. It's nearly time for lunch.

Inside the rustic shed there's a freezer, a drying room for meats and salamis and a cave-like cupboard for cheese, as well as a fully equipped kitchen with a gas propelled stove and a wood fired oven. Two huge pots are steaming away. A long table is spread with sheets of hand made pasta; some rolled out ready for the lasagna trays and others for the spaghetti making gadgets. Aromatic piles of fresh basil and flat-leafed parsley sit on the bench near a large fridge.

Meet my cousin, Maria introduces me. Nunzia's face is lined from life and laughter; her eyes speak of hardship and loss. As she leans forward to peck my cheeks, I inhale her cooking smells; pasta, garlic, onion, oregano, tomato and the very earthy aroma of fungi.

Bella, she greets me.

Something uplifting happens to the heart, when you are

called beautiful in the Italian language. *Bel lah*: *Bel* is solid, like the heart, blood filled, alive and beating; *lah* flicks upwards like hair, wild in the wind. The pronunciation of both syllables together transfers love, not flattery. And several times a day, every day...

On the other side of the kitchen, and under the same roof, a massive space generously accommodates two long tables, numerous chairs and a drink machine. There are no walls to this part of the building so the summer breeze gently ruffles the plastic table cloths, strategically weighted with cutlery, glasses, water jugs, bottles of home made beer and wine; jugs of green olive oil and large earthen-ware platters of prosciutto, boiled ham, salami, cheeses, round loaves of bread and bowls of large, green olives: all covered with long veils of flimsy fabric.

Looks like a scene from an Italian wedding, I joke with Maria. It may as well be. Wait till they all arrive.

We are the first guests. We take our places opposite Nonno while his great-daughter-in-law unravels cling wrap plastic from the meats, telling us who made what, where.

All this food comes from the family?

Of course.

A bus like vehicle parks close by, releasing a flock of chattering children, who race straight into the kitchen and open the drink machine.

This is their lunch time, Maria explains. They'll eat first because they have to go back to school.

With cans in hand, they surround the Nonno, kissing him and dancing about.

Calmo, he tells them.

They plonk themselves next to us and start asking Maria how

long she is visiting and when they can come to Australia. She introduces me and they try out their English. Australia good, Kangaru, etc, their mouths full of bread.

When bowls of steaming Pasta Pomodoro* appear at one end of the table, they are passed down the children's assembly line. Mounds of grated Parmigiano cheese and piles of basil are added and forked into mouths, with little effect on the babble.

A few more vehicles arrive and a long line of adult well wishers greets the Nonno. Some disappear to the kitchen to offload their fare: home made tiramisu, ice cream and a number of other desserts I've never seen before. Soon the other long table is prattling, sharing, tasting, praising, complaining.

What's the occasion? I ask Maria.

There doesn't have to be an occasion. This could be a regular family lunch. But there is some business in the air. Olive business.

Are they olive farmers?

Only a couple, but they all have interests and they are saying that because of the blight that has struck this year, some farmers will be importing from Spain, pressing and bottling in Italy and passing off the liquid gold as Italian.

Nonno doesn't join the conversation. His back is turned to their table. He stares out through the missing wall and sips his beer.

He's miles away, I whisper, unsure who amongst us can understand English.

That's why I wanted to come. I think it will be my last time.

He lifts his gaze and smiles at her.

I reach into my pocket to check the chestnut is still there. I roll its smooth hardness between my fingers. Inside it, is a tender heart. I know. I've tasted it.