

Chapter One – A sunburnt country.

It is a constant surprise to me that I have ended up living so contentedly in a small, isolated, country community in Umbria. I was born, spent my childhood and much of my early adult life in a small outback town in Southern Australia. I loved the feeling of belonging to a close knit community - the freedom this gave to develop as an individual, not to be formed into a type as happens in big cities where social stratifications and tribal mores count for so much. Nonetheless there comes a time when a small town becomes just that - when the thought of living one's whole life there is frightening. Ending up in the cemetery on the hill after a lifetime of small town conversation (so predictable that I could almost mouth it in anticipation), the tedium of bridge parties, golf days, sad little scandals, and singing in the choir. Country life and a small town had a lot to recommend it as a start to life but there was a whole world to be explored and it couldn't be done from Barmera or Cobdogla in South Australia. I fled to the city and caused my own small scandal.

My children had moved on - after spending their early years at a small country school they, like many middle class children of their day, were in boarding school and so I went to university and spread my wings. I had been married at the age of seventeen, became the mother of three bright girls, was happy and busy but I hardly knew what life was about. At the age of thirty three it was time for me to find out.

I took up two professions - radio and academia, and in between took a degree in political science and history. I enjoyed theatre, music, art, good food and a circle of friends who were young, vibrant and, like me, thought they and their ideas and actions were helping the world go around. We protested against the war in Vietnam, lobbied for changes to the law on abortion, and for the legalisation of homosexuality. I campaigned for equal rights for women. I found sexual discrimination bizarre and was determined to live as a testament to the right of women to have equality with men, yet to be valued for being women.

I hardly knew about, let alone yearned for, olive groves, sites as ancient as the myths they sheltered, happy peasants, or even the glitz of Rome and the international circuit. The craze for things Italian was not yet born in Australia and I had no time to think about travel or any life outside my family and friends, work and university.

Italy, Italy

Yet traces of Italy were already in my life. My father's mother was born to Italian parents, although her birth certificate says she was born in South Australia. My grandmother certainly was like an Italian mamma in her dominance of her four sons - she expected them to put her first until the day she died and in return she adored and petted them, but she did not treat my gentle, self-effacing grandfather with the respect due to an Italian husband. He was marginalised in that household. He was English. Perhaps had he been Italian, things would have been different.

Then there were the Italian prisoners of war who were held in camps in Barmera, my home town in the South Australian Riverland, during the second world war. I was only a child at the time but I remember the camp built next to the great tower that supplied our little town with household water and the cheery, robust men who went out each day to work in our vineyards and citrus groves and who put on weekly concerts for us all. It was a local joke that if any of the prisoners were late back, they would good naturedly call the guard to let them in. Where after all could they go? Australia was 12,000 miles from Italy.

After the war many Italians migrated back to Australia, and returned to the Riverland to pick grapes in the summer. On our vineyard at nearby Cobdogla we always had a gang of four well settled in to our pickers' quarters by the time the fruit was ripe.

In those days the bunches of grapes to be sent for wine were cut and dropped directly onto big hessian bags that were then picked up by the four corners and tossed by our Italian pickers into a slowly moving truck. It was my job to stand on the pile of grapes in

the back of the truck, catch the end of each bag, twist it so that the grapes fell into the existing pile, and twitch the empty bag through to the next unpicked row.

In the tea breaks that refreshed us we Australians drank tea and ate cake, the Italians drank water and wine and ate fresh grapes.

These Italians first introduced me to the Italian diet.

Of course, they had no decent olive oil - it was for medicinal use only in Australia in those days - but on the day they moved into the pickers' quarters they planted tomato and basil plants. Each day they cooked and ate great pans of pasta and even made their own bread. They were generous in their habits - asked me only to shop for the best meat available for their pasta sauces and invited us often to join them in their meals. They made their daily salads from the ubiquitous Great Lakes lettuce that we all grew and added the wild herbs that we scorned and eradicated but that they would leap upon and add to their salad bowls for flavor. They ate huge quantities of fresh fruit, but as we did too, that seemed unremarkable.

One of them married a friend of ours, and although many of her neighbors privately believed she had "married beneath her" - Giovanni, or Jack as he was soon known, became one of our most beloved companions.

He would make a dramatic entrance wrapped in a black cloak that he favored, wearing a pair of wellington boots that later tragically caused his death when he fell overboard from a boat into the deep lake. Under each arm he bore a bottle of his home made red wine which we named "Guidi 90".

"For you" he would declaim with a flourish and hand over the bottles that we gingerly placed in a cupboard and took outside when he had gone because of their propensity to explode and stain all adjacent carpets and furniture a deep blood red. He would "forage" a large sweet watermelon from the Greeks who lived nearby and put it to one side for afters before cooking up great pans of pasta that tasted nothing like the miserable tins of Heinz spaghetti that, until then, were all we knew of pasta. Most of our neighbors despised this "wog" food and muttered when Italian was spoken publicly "Why don't they learn to speak English?" Fraternisation forty years ago was not encouraged.

Recently I watched a video of a television series made in Australia about Italian migrants and their wonderful influence on Australian food. The programs were filmed in Mildura - an outback town where the Murray River runs wide and deep and the desert blooms with vineyards, fruit and citrus groves and vegetable crops. Comfortable houses and an abundance of homemade produce illustrate the ease with which Italians from poor regions of Italy have made a good life for themselves in this truly outback river town. I like the idea that the formerly despised "wog food" should now be elevated to the chic and desirable. How things change.

The river, the lake

The scenes of the muddy, slow-moving river, the great gum trees and the dusty horizon that surrounds the green oasis of the fruitgrowing centre of Mildura take me back to my Riverland. Barmera, the place where I was born, or my "paese" as one's birthplace is called in Italy. That strange strip of irrigated abundance in the middle of the harsh outback desert is a landscape that I have only seen duplicated in Egypt where the Nile nurtures green trees and crops cheek by jowl with great sandhills that sit on the edge of an infinity of desert. Only in the dry desert in Egypt have I felt again that bone-warming heat of a Riverland summer I miss it in the chill and cold of European winters, and I miss it also during the hesitant, humid, rheumatism-encouraging heat of European summers.

As a child and young woman I loved the wide, brown rambling river Murray, the calm expanse of the adjoining Lake Bonney that was to us just a large swimming hole, the great river gums, and the robust Australian sun that shone down on a quiet unruffled never-ending summer day. Immersed in this imagery I remember the day I burnt down a gum tree.

I was about 10 years old.

Barmera was surrounded on three sides by endless saltbush and mallee plains but blessed on the other by Lake Bonney - later to become famous when Donald Campbell attempted the world water speed record there. The nearby River, one of whose tributaries fed the lake, provided water for the irrigated fruit "blocks" set up after two world wars to provide a livelihood for returned soldiers and their families. So, although we lived in an arid desert with its dry heat and constant climate, our little settlement was a flourishing oasis and we enjoyed literally the best of the fruits of the earth.

In retrospect it was an ideal childhood. In those days we had no fear of lurkers and lechers and our parents were not concerned when we took off on our hikes with a sausage or two, a few potatoes, some bread and butter and a bunch of grapes or a handful of vivid orange mandarins to wander and swim and make up adventures to pass the long summer days. They confidently expected that we would come home safe and sound. Perhaps they were foolish, but I can't recall any event that caused them to regret their carelessness. My brother and I would often spend the long summer days exploring the bush around the lake.

Summer in outback Australia is unremittingly harsh but it can also be magical. Our summers were enhanced by the lake that wafted the damp, muddy scent of fresh water through the still air, this stillness broken only by the warbling of magpies and the swishing of gum leaves in random breezes.

One summer morning my younger brother and I set out on such a day long hike. We packed a few potatoes and a couple of sausages intending to cook them over coals from the little fire we would make of sticks and leaves while we swam and played in the cool water.

After walking for several miles, we passed our time exploring a small creek that entered the lake through a tunnel of gum trees, low growing mallee bushes and wild tobacco plants. These came from an illconceived government scheme to establish a tobacco plantation to provide a livelihood for the new settlers when they first came to this land. The scheme failed, but the plant survived and grew willowy among the more robust and gnarled bushes and the pretty little yellow flowers were a welcome diversion to the eye so surrounded with grey and ochre.

The mallee bush was native to the zone and covered large swathes of the arid country that surrounded us for miles in every direction. As schoolchildren we all, at one time or another, had come to grief on mallee root. Smoking cigarettes in those days was considered a glamorous sign of sophistication and adulthood. All the film stars did it. Unable to buy or filch real cigarettes each aspiring smoker among us would fall into the trap of thinking that the porous mallee root would provide the same deep satisfaction as a Craven A.

The ritual introduction to smoking was always a surreptitious event. I remember how my group excitedly passed the grey twigs among us, how we lit the end of our twig, puffed and began to ponce around, highly pleased with ourselves. But not for long. The mallee root sent off a peculiarly obnoxious odor and one by one as we inhaled and tried to look nonchalant we were driven to discard our "cigarette" and slip behind a bush to be quietly sick. When we arrived home, our parents said not a word, but one look at our grey and drawn faces must have left them in no doubt as to what we'd been up to that day. I never smoked again.

My brother and I both swam well, even at a very young age. I can't remember having swimming lessons but I remember that we all jumped without fear off the deep end of the big, wooden jetty that thrust out into the water and we seem to have been born with the ability to paddle and kick our way back to shore before taking another run and another jump.

The river was something else. That, we were warned, was treacherous. Sandbanks that gently sloped could suddenly disappear and deep currents and thick muddy water posed dangers best avoided. The river was for fishing with parents in close proximity and

supervision at a maximum. The lake on the other hand had clean sandy beaches, large gum trees to give shade, sloping banks that never betrayed one's confidence and water that was welcoming and cool. We took boats out into its deep water, we swam from the shore and jumped from the jetty and played around submerged trunks of trees and wallowed in the water like porpoises.

Many years later when highways linked this isolated paradise to the outside, its population expanded, tourists came, yachts and speedboats and clubhouses became ubiquitous and fashionable. The trees were cut down, lawns were planted and regattas were held. As the town grew to accommodate more people, the sewage outlets were put under pressure and the lake water became polluted at the edges. The carefree bathing we had enjoyed was no longer possible.

Occasionally on our childhood hikes we would come across an old majestic gum that had seen its day. The trunk would stand but the leaves were gone and only the roots, held tightly in the heavy clay, would prevent the collapse of the old tree. One such trunk was standing where we intended to cook our sausages that day and because it had a large recess in it with a sandy floor at a height that seemed to make a natural fireplace, we decided to make our small fire within it. We gathered sticks and leaves, using the greaseproof paper in which we had wrapped our sausages as a touch light, and soon had a nice blaze.

It was only a little fire - we had no wish to make a spectacular event of this every day operation. For our purpose we wanted coals, not flame. We cooked our sausages until they were crisp and juicy, then put the potatoes in the remaining damped down coals and went off to do a little more exploring.

I don't remember any formal "bush lore" being given us, yet perhaps it must have been, as we knew such laws as "always look at the ground when you walk, particularly if you walk in grass", "don't swim for an hour after eating", "don't eat berries you don't recognise", "be home by late afternoon", "always have water on hand", "always put a fire out after you've finished using it" and "don't enter the river without an adult being present" and we observed them faithfully. This took care of snakes, poison berries, deep treacherous water, cramp when swimming, and we thought, bushfires. These were the hazards of those days.

In due course we scratched our blackened steaming potatoes from the coals and enjoyed the sweet, floury flesh, burning our mouths in our eagerness to finish them. Prudently we covered the now quiescent coals with a layer of sand. Content with our day and its little adventures, we set off for home, the cool lake on one side and the fierce, desolate saltbush and mallee plain on the other.

Before the irrigation schemes were established this plain was the only means of livelihood for pioneering settlers. Initially pastoralists had run sheep on vast holdings leased for their cover of saltbush and blue bush. The pastoralists were badly named as they never invested in pasture for their animals, only allowed them to eat out what existed, and were responsible for the degradation that followed. Later, wheat farmers (known as "poor Mallee wheat cockies") owned or leased great expanses of sandy, mallee covered land, cleared it with huge effort and then suffered the hard labour of sowing grain and the excruciating disappointment when the crop seldom came to maturity and was either shrivelled at birth by hot, dry winds and cutting sandstorms or strangled in mid growth when the rains that were hoped and prayed for never came. Those who prudently sowed naturally regenerating pasture were also able to keep flocks of sheep that saw them through when the grain crops failed, but often the price of wool dropped, mutton was never more than cheap, and eventually a real drought would strike and the sheep had to be sold. They couldn't win.

Our town was a verdant contrast to this and the vineyards, citrus groves and vegetable crops established under a War Service Settlement Scheme did provide an economic base for families who, buttressed by the security of reticulated water, brought a

new life and vigor to the isolated farming communities.

We were all migrants - but our ethnic roots had long been wiped out by several past generations of Australian nationality. We were dinkum Aussies. Our parents all shared the experience of being "in the war", we grew up together, shared the isolation of a little town miles from anywhere, were dependent upon each other for the form our community took and how we coped when trouble struck. We all knew each other and each other's strengths and weaknesses. Even today these links return with the force of tribal recognition when names are mentioned in conversations or old memories are rustled over. I still have somewhere some old photographs taken of the daily arrival of the ice truck in the main street of our town that show women, men and children in loose cotton clothes and sandals, each with a small handcart, chatting companionably away while the blocks of ice are bought and distributed to be taken home and used in the ice chests and cool safes in which we kept our butter and meat and milk.

Everybody grew grapes. This was before grapes equalled only wine - in our day grapes also equalled dried fruit and our region was famous for the quality of its golden sultanas, sugar rich raisins, fat black currants and astringent and delicious dried apricots. We also grew acres of oranges and grapefruit that were liquid sunshine. The juice always dripped down our chins as we ate our daily intake. Most of us grew peas, tomatoes and pumpkins as annual crops and we all had the freshest of fruit and vegetables in abundance.

In those far-off days there was little in the way of sophisticated entertainment but we seemed to lack nothing of importance. Electricity was provided by a pumping station on the lake. It generated enough current for the town proper and if we didn't have refrigerators, we did have radios and could listen to the soap operas and quizzes of the day. Hagen's Circus, Missus 'Obbs, Doctor Mac, the test cricket heard during the night as it was beamed from far off England, Jack Davey and his quick wit - all booming out of our large ornate radio sets. We children were all members of the Argonauts club - the Australian Broadcasting Commission's contribution to our childish activities. I was Silvanus 45 - and never missed a broadcast, nor an episode of "The Search for the Golden Boomerang" which was the nearest any of us got to the aborigines who had formerly been the occupants of the land and the lake.

We had a good school where we were taught until we were 12 years old and after this we were sent in busses to a high school a few miles away, a very good hospital where most of us were born, and a "picture theatre" that showed matinees every Saturday afternoon and general films in the evening. In the evenings, of course, we sat with our parents in the dress circle, not in the "spits" that cost sixpence a seat and from where we roared and cheered our matinee idols on in their swashbuckling adventures. I saw most of the great Hollywood films in this picture theatre and remember them well.

Books, books, books

We also had a library in the cellar of the community hotel. My mother was librarian there for some time and I made good use of its eclectic resource. George Bernard Shaw was my first introduction at about the age of 13 to intellectual argument and I took to him like a duck to water. But Frances Parkinson Keyes and Howard Spring, Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh also filled my reading hours as did Agatha Christie, Ngaio Marsh and Anne of Green Gables and Seven Little Australians. The world of books, - travellers' tales, biographies, letters, memoirs, thrillers, ideas and theories, classics, writers from Eastern Europe, Asia, America, migrants, expatriates, nomads and stay-at-homes, - the unfolding of the lives and stories and the knowledge I gained entranced me and continues to do so.

Books were and are my defence against the world. I retreat to books when things get too tough or too boring, when I want to find out about people or the world, and with great pleasure when I find an author who writes with elegance and skill. When I can't sleep at night, the insomnia is sweetened by the opportunity to read more of the books that sit by

my bedside.

I learned to read when I was three years old and can't imagine life without a book in my pocket or handbag, by my bed, or on a table nearby. I never went sailing or boating without a book, never travel without more books than knickers, and can't learn a language unless I see the words written down. When all our belongings were stolen from our house I grieved more for my lost books than anything else, and now that many have been replaced I dread their loss when friends forget to return borrowings and I take elaborately neurotic evasive action when asked to lend.

Not returning a book diminishes the borrower. Two authors who went down in my estimation were Bruce Chatwin who borrowed a book from Robyn Davidson and deliberately went off with it, and Vladimir Nabokov who took offence and walked out of a house he was to rent because the owner locked his study where he kept his precious books and asked Nabokov to respect his privacy.

Perhaps it was because most of our fathers were off fighting the second world war - some in the Middle East and some (like my father) in New Guinea - that we had such freedom to roam. Our mothers were left with the responsibilities of their children, the shortages of food, petrol and clothes due to rationing, the need to fill some of the jobs left vacant by absent men and even the regular task of plane spotting to keep them occupied in "war work". My mother used to set out when it was her shift to take up her post in a nearby house where, with a pair of binoculars, she was bound to rake the skies for enemy aircraft and telephone the nearby army headquarters when any appeared. None ever did. I suspect she also took a good book and spent the time pleurably deep in the throes of the latest novel.

The nearly bushfire

My brother and I didn't think to tell of our novel fireplace when we returned from our hike on that long ago summer day and we went off to school during the week with no thought of it ourselves.

The following weekend we decided to return to the same spot. The creek still promised more exploration and an old submerged gum tree trunk just off shore had been fun to use as a diving and ducking platform. The day was hot and still - a perfect hiking and swimming day.

When we at last recognised our creek we stopped in horror. The majestic tree in which we had cooked our picnic was no longer upright. The coals had reignited sufficiently to smoulder through the circumference of the trunk and bring it crashing to the ground. There it lay, charred and crumbling. Oh, what horror.

We did not stay. We were home early but nothing was said. We dreaded every knock at the door. Would it be the police to arrest us for being so careless? Bushfires were a much feared hazard and, but for some extraordinary luck, we had all but caused one.

That guilt stayed with us for years, and we never lit a fire again in or near a tree.

Strangely enough a searing personal experience of bushfires did not blight my Australian life although I saw plenty from afar and felt deep shock and pity at the devastation and human tragedies we saw when, on a government mission we travelled through burnt out forests and communities after a large part of the hills near Adelaide and the grazing land and forest of South Eastern South Australia were dramatically destroyed.

The flood of '56

My great adventure was that of flood. In 1956 exceptionally heavy rains in Eastern Australia led to a flood of biblical proportions building up in the River Murray and its tributaries. Our property at Cobdogla was part of a little settlement only three miles from Barmera. It sat on an isthmus between the river and the lake and the channel from river to lake curved in just above our boundary.

As the river and lake levels rose, our fear of inundation rose too. Everyone in the district was called on to do what could be done to safeguard the lakeside and river towns with sandbanks. We all sweated and slaved to fill bags, get them to the danger spots and

make sure the walls of sandbags continued to rise in balance with the water pushing from the other side. We were on guard night and day - sirens would sound when a breach or leak occurred and gangs would rush to the crises.

Many breaches led to realignments of the defensive banks and it was pitiable to help load furniture and possessions onto trucks and help dispossessed families to refuges provided by friends. The water would flood in, covering precious vines, swirling around fruit trees, and invading houses and sheds with the promise of destruction and detritus when the waters receded. We women worked with the men but we also had the task of providing food and drink to keep everyone going. We baked scones, cakes, biscuits and meat pies and made pots of strong tea and loaded up our cars and delivered our goods every few hours and worried internally about our own homes and families. It was dangerous work. The river and lake rose many metres above the normal level and the river current, in particular, gave the water a force that was devastating when even the smallest chink was found in the precarious defences that were all we had to put against its might.

Each night we would go to bed, packed up ready to leap out and escape if necessary. We considered moving out anyway as our position would be extremely dangerous if there was a breach in the banks - with water on all sides it would be difficult to get out as our only exit road would be rapidly covered. Perhaps because we were young and optimistic, we stayed and we were lucky. By some miracle our little piece of the isthmus was saved although we had a ring of defences all around us.

I am grateful that here in Umbria, fate has directed us to a house on a hill and that all the nearby rivers are deep below us in valleys. I still worry about bushfires, but as my neighbor says "Noah's flood would have to happen to put us in danger of water". I cross my fingers.