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### CESARE

IN CARLTON I WAS HAPPY, proud of my handsome Italian husband and our fine terrace house. While I worked in Camberwell all was well; Eliseo and I shared many household tasks, shopping together, and cleaning and washing on weekends. But then we made a decision that would exaggerate our cultural differences and cause serious problems between us.

Eliseo was forty-four. It seemed to me that if we were to have children together it was better to do this sooner rather than later. As the eldest of seven brothers and sisters in my own family, I did not want Elise to be an only child. Eliseo was also one of seven. His first wife had lost three baby boys during her pregnancies in Australia and this loss caused them both much grief. She blamed her new country. I privately thought that, as they were first cousins, a multiplication of a genetic defect was more likely. After three months together I decided to go off the pill and quickly became pregnant. Nervously, I rang my mother.

‘Eliseo and I have decided to have a child together and make a real family. I’m pregnant.’

‘You’re pregnant? You hardly know this man. He’s Italian, and you’re having a baby? What were you thinking? That a baby will make this all right? What about Elise?’

‘I want Elise to have a brother or sister. And Eliseo loves children. His first wife had miscarriages before she went back to Italy. He’ll be a wonderful father. Much better than Mick, who had no interest in

either of us. He looks after us well. We'll be fine.'

I knew that Mum could not resist babies, and hoped that eventually she would begin to accept Eliseo and the new child. I was well, as in my first pregnancy, but the long travel to Camberwell began to take its toll.

After several months, Eliseo decided that it was not necessary for me to continue to work, so I put in my resignation. But when I resigned and spent my days at home, there was trouble between us almost immediately in the kitchen. Confident in my ability to serve a good meal of chops, boiled vegetables and pudding, I did so. Eliseo looked at his plate. 'What is this?'

'It's food, Eliseo.'

'This is not food. Take it away. I won't eat it. *And learn to cook.*'

'Of course it's food. This is what I grew up on, and look how healthy I am.'

'When my first wife gave me food I did not like, I put it under the table and put my feet on it.'

I was shocked, and I realised that I needed help from our Italian friends. At the same time a small feeling of resentment niggled at me. Surely good cooking in any culture would be recognised as such, even if it was not to the taste of those from a different background. Our standard fare of meat, four or five fresh vegetables from my father's garden, and a pudding for the sheer pleasure of it, was a balanced meal. My mother was a fine cook who won prizes at country shows. How could Eliseo reject the tradition of hearty country cooking responsible for all those blue and gold awards denoting first prize?

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Another marvellous roast! Lamb, swimming in hot fat, the skin brown and bubbly, encircled by baked potatoes and pumpkin, in a cast iron dish.

My mother lifted the lamb onto a spiked carving tray with a moat around it to catch the juices. She poured excess fat into a tin then stirred flour into the meat juice to make a thick gravy. She chopped

and infused fresh mint in boiling water with a little vinegar to make an instant mint sauce. Meanwhile, tomatoes and onions were baking in a separate dish with a thick buttery crust of breadcrumbs. Orange carrots, purple or green beans and pale cabbage, all grown in the garden, were piled onto the plates in a puddle of gravy.

The meal was hugely satisfying, the colours and the aroma irresistible. We ate as though we hadn't eaten for days. The main course was followed by dessert, dumplings in golden syrup. The size of apples, hot, glistening gold, with a spongy texture and rich yellow centres, they lay in the bowls in a swirl of sweet syrup, under a torrent of farm cream and a heavy dollop of ice-cream.

The farm provided us with all our fresh food: lamb, beef, chicken, duck, eggs and abundant vegetables and fruit. Although we were always critically short of money for items that required cash payments such as electricity, groceries, shoes, clothes, dentist, school uniforms and books, we ate well and lived in a beautiful environment.

My mother believed that we should always have a cooked family breakfast to 'keep us going'. A heady mix of smells greeted us in the kitchen in the morning: sulphurous eggs, salty bacon, smoky toast. The wood stove was doing its job with the heavy kettle puffing steam, the frying pan spitting fat from the bacon and some clothes 'airing' underneath in the warming drawer. My mother used this drawer to warm pyjamas in winter, and sometimes gently placed sick lambs or piglets on a bed of newspaper there. The laminex table was surrounded by hungry people and covered with sticky plates, jars of homemade apricot and plum jam, and cups of tea.

The kitchen was the heart of the house. Visitors always came in from the back verandah, to be enveloped by the aroma of cakes or biscuits baking. Souvenir tea towels from trips Mum and Dad had made, or given as gifts by friends, hung around the walls. Several calendars from local businesses, often featuring smiling farmers, filled the remaining spaces. On the mantelpiece over the stove, the cream canisters with red and green roses squatted, full of sugar, flour, rice

and tea. Some things never changed, and the kitchen was always comforting.

Mid-morning we stopped whatever we were doing for biscuits and tea. Lunch was sandwiches or cold meat and salad, and we ensured that we would not run low on energy by having cake and coffee in the afternoon.

Tea [dinner] was whenever the work was finished. Meat and boiled vegetables were followed by hot pudding with custard and ice-cream. This kept us going until about ten, when we had some tea and cake to sustain us during the night.

My mother's cakes were famous in the district. Her lemon, ginger, chocolate or walnut sponges, made with four eggs from our own happy chooks, were exceptionally light, of a rich colour and filled with real cream. Her fruitcakes were heavy, fragrant and moist. Her puddings nestled in piercingly sweet sauces, lacking only the bland counterpoint of custard and cream to achieve sensual perfection in the mouth.

The local women turned out any day of the week to support community activities, creating afternoon teas and suppers worth waiting for. At short notice they could provide a magnificent array of tomato, sausage and cheese sandwiches, yellow butter cakes, light chocolate or walnut sponges, seductive cream lilies with red jelly and cream oozing from spongy lips, fragile pink or chocolate lamingtons rolled in coconut, dense dark fruit cake, glistening caramel and chocolate slices and enormous pots of tea.

We had no electricity until I was fourteen, therefore no television, so we spent our days outdoors, riding our bikes, running, climbing trees, and riding the pony. The exercise and fresh air guaranteed hearty appetites, and we were robust and strong.

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'When you're living together you discover the hidden aspects of each other, including the weaknesses,' Eliseo said later. 'On top of all that, we had an ocean of cultural differences to cross. She had never

worried about the housework. She did not know how to save, or cook, or clean, all things an Italian woman can do almost by instinct, but which Australian women seem to regard differently. She would look after the child, read books and chat with her friends. The house for her was not so important, but it annoyed me to see it neglected.'

I have to admit this was true. This was the life. Eliseo was away working for eleven hours a day. Elise and I had fun. We walked all over Carlton, and sometimes to the city or the zoo. I read numerous books from the Carlton library where I had previously worked, and borrowed scores of picture books for Elise. I made friends in the street and did jolly visiting and wine drinking at any time of day. When Eliseo returned from work he did not always find the table set, and two courses ready to eat.

'Am I asking too much, wanting to be greeted by pleasant cooking smells when I come home after a day's work?' he said. He expected dinner at six p.m., but I was not used to meals being served at a set time. On the farm we ate whenever dinner was ready. In summer, because of daylight saving, that could be as late as eight in the evening, and Dad had his meal even later. There was no structure or routine in my life with Mick; we ate when or if we felt hungry. I didn't appreciate what a departure from tradition it was for Eliseo to cook for Elise and me while I was working, whereas my approach to cooking for him was, 'It will be ready when it's ready'.

I naively thought – if I thought at all – that I could do no wrong. That because Eliseo loved and desired me, everything would be fine. But trouble was brewing. Now that I was home all day Eliseo expected me to perform my wifely duties, to do what his mother and all Italian wives did. I didn't know how to be Italian. I was impulsive, emotional and unstructured, and I kept stubbing my toes against rules and traditions I was unaware of. Eliseo assumed that I knew what must be done. Maintain a spotlessly clean and polished house. Prepare a two course evening meal for six p.m. Shop wisely and prudently to stock our kitchen. Save a little money for extras. Darn socks, wash and iron. Clean windows and windowsills.

One evening he came into the kitchen, his index finger aloft, and announced dramatically, ‘There is dust on the windowsills.’

‘So?’ I said.

‘Clean everything,’ he replied, and strode angrily into the garden.

As months passed Eliseo realised that I was *deficiente* in many aspects of life, especially homemaking. A disturbing pattern was beginning to emerge where he reeled off a list of areas where I was lacking. My refusal to learn anything practical from my mother now became a liability.

‘You are *inutile* (useless),’ he would say. ‘Italian women are better than you at cooking, cleaning, shopping, saving money, even in bed. Why is the house not clean? Where is my dinner when I come home from work? There is too much reading and talking, not enough work in the house.’

‘Find yourself an Italian woman then,’ I replied, stung by his sweeping criticism. ‘There are plenty of good Italian widows around.’

I was puzzled by Eliseo’s inability to appreciate the tremendous efforts I made to learn to cook and to learn the language. My standards of cleanliness had risen greatly since my years with Mick – fortunately Eliseo had not seen the bath full of dirty nappies in our flat in Elwood – but much, much more, was expected of me. He had told me that his ex-wife Anita disliked Australia; she refused to learn English, claimed that work outside the home tired her, and spent each afternoon resting on their bed, then writing to her mother in Rome. Although she longed for them, she had no children to care for, no job, so nothing too onerous to do each day, yet it seemed to me that she satisfied Eliseo simply because she was Italian. She knew, and was, what I couldn’t learn or be. I resented her.



Eliseo had said that the three miscarriages she suffered while she was here only confirmed her dislike of this country. She constantly reproached Eliseo for coming to Australia, saying that he had made a big mistake. She told him that their friends in Italy had done very

well in their absence and urged him to return and start again, but Eliseo was making good money, had a wide circle of friends and was happy to be his own boss. He knew that the farmer in Leeton who had first employed him had worked non-stop for years to purchase his piece of land, was at times short of food, and unable to afford to send letters home to his family. Eliseo was already better off than he was.

He and Anita lived in Moonee Ponds for four years and then bought their first house in Essendon. A year later, because Anita was so homesick, Eliseo paid for her to go home to her family in Rome for a holiday. She never returned. Despite his phone calls, telegrams and letters, she vowed that she would never again set foot in Australia. He told me that he bought her a ticket valid for a year with Alitalia, so she could leave whenever she wanted to. Finally he lost patience and told her to 'Find another man, I'll find another woman'. She responded by making a claim for maintenance and Eliseo was called to the Italian Consulate to explain the situation. He took in all the letters Anita had written, having decided to divorce her. Unfortunately, the legal proceedings dragged on for years and were very costly. Each time the divorce papers were translated into Italian and sent to Italy, they disappeared without a trace. Anita could not be divorced, as the law stood at that time, without acknowledging receipt of the papers. This stalemate cost Eliseo his house and all his possessions, the lawyers reaping the benefit of his hard work. To relax and forget these troubles he went to Tahiti for a holiday.

When he returned he lived for a while as a boarder with an Australian family, but he was terribly lonely and uncomfortable shut up in his small room; he didn't enjoy the food and saw his money dwindling. He decided to buy another house and live on his own terms. It was in this handsome terrace house that Mick and I met him, when we rented the first floor.



For as long as I could remember I had dreamed of a career as a singer.

As a child, the only thing I was sure of was that I wanted to sing and travel. I had a strong soprano voice and was inherently musical. Singing energised me and gave me joy. After Mick left us, in a feeble attempt to reclaim the person I had been, I began the lessons I had given up when we married. But money was tight. I worked long hours and I had a small child to care for. I lived in a flat with no piano and was embarrassed that other tenants could hear my practice, a repetitive string of exercises with not a sign of a song. I had imagined that Eliseo would happily support me in what was essentially a harmless preoccupation, but he said, 'No. You have a family. I will not pay for singing. You have a husband and child to care for. Much better learn to look after us.'

In comparison to what Eliseo had endured during his life, the wartime traumas and later losses, my desire to resume my singing lessons, abandoned when I married Mick, must have seemed trivial to him.

One evening, after Elise went to bed, we were cuddled together on the couch in the front room watching a documentary on the Third Reich, with vivid descriptions of the fate of the European Jews.

'Isn't that ghastly?' I said. 'Who could treat other people that way? What terrible cruelty.'

'They were right to destroy the Jews,' Eliseo replied. 'They had too much control over the economy of Europe.'

A chill swept over me, a sudden feeling that I was in the wrong place, with the wrong person. How could I spend my life with someone who believed that the Holocaust was justified? I was five months pregnant, vulnerable, unemployed, with a dependant child and another on the way. I was silent and shocked.

I began to think about Eliseo's background. I knew his father had been a career soldier with Mussolini's forces, decorated for action in Spain while fighting for General Franco. He was a lifelong fascist. Although he was opposed to his father's politics during the war, Eliseo had probably absorbed some of his father's attitudes. But he was a moral person, honest, generous, kind. I would simply have to

focus on his virtues, and do the best I could in my situation. The baby we were expecting meant everything to him. Elise and I loved our new home, and I loved her new father. It was too late to change my mind. Four lives were at stake. It was time to prepare for the new baby.



With all the staircases, even a dangerous door upstairs that led without warning directly onto the steep roof, the house we lived in was not suitable for small children. We sold our magnificent terrace house for \$26,500, just before the start of a huge property boom in Carlton. Years later we realised that we could have, by simply sitting at home enjoying our lives, made a million dollars.

We quickly found a solid brick house with four bedrooms in Park Street, North Carlton, belonging to a Jewish couple who had survived the Holocaust. Timidly, they showed us around. The weather was warm and they were in short sleeves, the tattooed blue numbers on their arms still visible. The house was locked down like a fortress. The windows were painted shut. The benches and sink were covered with newspaper to protect them; clear plastic runners saved the carpet from dusty feet. On the table, also protected by plastic, was a memorial candle, perhaps burning in memory of lost loved ones. This protection of hard-won household goods was typical of those who had either lost everything in war, through forced emigration or natural disasters. Many covered their best furniture or kept a special sitting room for important visitors only. They explained that the husband worked as a plasterer; they had signed a contract on an apartment in St Kilda so the sale needed to be quick and uncomplicated. Before they left the house, the wife gave me some advice regarding my pregnancy.

‘Only eat white meat,’ she said. ‘Indigestion means that the baby is a boy, with a lot of hair.’

As both my mother and I had continued to work and eat normally during our pregnancies, I dismissed this advice as superstition.

On moving to the house in Park Street we discovered that there was no water pressure at all. It was impossible to fill a kettle, have a shower or use the hose. A slow, feeble drip was all the clogged, rusted pipes could produce. Eliseo, sweating in a heat wave, struggled to replace the obstinate plumbing, while marvelling at how the previous couple, with their son, managed to live without water.

When I told my Italian GP that my first child had been born by emergency caesarean section, he advised me that he wasn't prepared to risk a normal birth and suggested that I return to the obstetrician who delivered Elise. I was disappointed to learn that Dr De Garis, my obstetrician, also recommended an elective caesarean.

'Couldn't I try a normal delivery?' I asked him. 'I really don't want to have surgery again. It took me weeks to feel better, and my stomach looks terrible.'

'Because of the unusual circumstances of your first labour, I would not risk you or your baby in a normal delivery. Surgery will give us the best outcome for you both.'

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Eliseo's family in Italy were excited about the baby. They wrote regularly to see how I was and rang us from time to time. We suggested to them that we may be able to marry under Australian law. As Anita was living in Rome and was not divorced from Eliseo at this time, it seemed to me an implausible story, but the Achias tactfully asked no questions. Eliseo, even with his own family, was secretive and evasive. His mother, Anna, wrote that they would like us to name the baby after her, or her husband, Fernando.

'We can't call a baby boy Fernando,' I said. 'Imagine how he'd suffer at school. He would get Ferdi, or be teased about the bull in that children's picture book. We'd better hope the baby is a girl.'

In the midst of all these changes in our lives, Eliseo's friend and partner, Battista, and his wife Matilde, missing their son who lived with family members in Italy and their elderly relatives, sold their house in Fitzroy, put their possessions in a shipping container and

boarded a ship at Station Pier. When we went to see them off, they laughed and shouted, 'As soon as we leave Port Phillip Bay these Australian passports will be thrown into the sea. Australia will never see us again, we promise.'

Our parting was highly emotional. Matilde cried and held her brother, Ezio, tight. It was at her insistence that he had emigrated to Australia. From the mountains of Trento he had arrived loud, happy, red-cheeked, hoarse-voiced, tall and handsome. In Melbourne he married Giovanna, an Italian girl born here. Now his sister was leaving him again, perhaps forever.

'O, Dio, Ezio, Ezio.' Matilde cried repeatedly.

We cried, and they held Elise and cried. Then they waved for a long time as their ship drew away from the quay.

Less than a year after their dramatic departure, one of their letters to us included a telling passage from Battista, with some advice for Eliseo:

*Impressions of Italy – Stay in Australia where all is well. Here everything has changed. The cost of living is twice that in Australia. People greet you willingly but afterwards, in my opinion, they are not real friends. Even family cannot wait until we leave.*

Two years later they returned to Melbourne, still using their Australian passports. The narrow, restricted life of their alpine village had become intolerable to them. They missed the freedom of Melbourne and the inner city life. Soon they bought a house in Brunswick and rejoined their circle of friends, Battista working with Eliseo again in a solid partnership.

