

Last Season

Along the back fence rows of tomatoes ripen red and plump on their vines. The area under cultivation has increased with each year of Joe's retirement. Now, except for a circle of lawn around the clothes hoist, the entire backyard has been turned over to food production.

The tin roof on the garage creaks. Inside, Lucy swishes a broom across the floor, her silver hair piled into a bun. Bunches of freshly picked basil wait in a bucket of water on the windowsill. Breathing heavily, Joe slides a scrubbing brush across the work bench where he'll place the tomatoes he'll pick and wash in the cool of the evening. They'll keep this batch of sauce for themselves. They've already made several batches from shop-bought tomatoes for their stall at the showground.

'Best tomatoes we've ever had,' Joe says bolting the stainless steel tomato press to the workbench beside the huge cooking pot that Lucy has scrubbed within an inch of its life. 'It'll be a good vintage.'

'Just like you 'ey Joe,' Lucy giggles.

'Still the cheeky one, you're lucky I can't run so fast anymore,' Joe says.

'And you're lucky you've still got me to remember the salt,' she quips, heading towards the kitchen to fetch it.

'And you're lucky I let you cook in my garage,' he yells after her.

A silky terrier jumps up as she opens the screen door to the kitchen.

'Down, Nicky,' Lucy says. Nicky slumps to the floor and whines. 'Sorry girl no time for walking today.' She tosses a handful of dog biscuits into a bowl and turns on the laundry tap to wash her hands. Through the window, she catches Joe's profile hunched over the tomato bushes. This once strapping man seems suddenly old. Sunlight speckles his hair with silver and his trousers swerve below the paunch of his belly. She smiles, looks down at her hands and twists her

wedding ring. Perhaps it's just as well there are no children to pass it on to. 'It's enough that we have each other,' they eventually agreed.

Lucy packs jars into cartons and carries them to the garage while Joe harvests and washes the tomatoes. After dinner they sit on the back stairs peeling garlic to a chorus of frogs and crickets rising from the creek behind their house. They discuss last year's vintage and whether it needed more, or less, salt and argue over whose family has the best recipe. Lucy mentions the lovely new townhouses for sale near the showground. Joe elaborates on his plans to extend the vegetable garden.

Eventually they decide it's time for bed and Joe turns off the outside light. The night sky opens into a million twinkling stars.

'It's such a beautiful night.' Joe grabs Lucy's hips and swivels her around. 'Look so many stars.'

'Wow! It's beautiful,' she says.

'See there's the Southern Cross and the Scorpion.'

'And what's that really bright one over there?'

'Ah she's very special. They call her Airoplaneo.'

'Enough of your nonsense Giuseppe, I'm going to bed.'

By five o'clock next morning Joe has boiled the first batch of tomatoes and is feeding them through the press. Lush red liquid pours into a metal bucket. Once Lucy is happy with the consistency she adds some salt and garlic and a dash of pepper. Joe adds more salt while Lucy is busy stuffing basil into jars. Finally the jars are filled with sauce, sealed and stacked into a water-filled tub on the barbeque for another boil.

With at least half a dozen batches to make there is little time for talk. Finished jars begin to line the shelves along the back wall and they stop for a brief lunch of bread and cheese under the olive tree. Back in the garage, the temperature soars. Lucy adjusts her apron and wafts air down her blouse. Joe splashes water over his face.

By late afternoon a cool change breathes fresh air through the doorway and Joe empties the last jars from the preserving tub. Lucy gathers pots and utensils and heads into the kitchen while Joe rinses tomato splattered buckets under the outside tap.

'You OK?' Lucy asks, looking up when Joe shuffles inside. 'You look pale.'

Joe sinks into a chair. 'I'm all right. Just a bit hot.' He gulps the glass of water Lucy hands him. 'Stop fussing. I'm fine.' Nicky races down the hallway and jumps onto Joe's lap. He strokes her silky fur. 'All right girl, time for your walk.'

'I'll do it Joe. You don't look well.'

'Some fresh air will do me good.' Joe carries Nicky into the laundry to fetch her lead. 'Come on Lucy. We'll clean up later.'

Lucy unties her apron and they slip out the door. Nicki jerks at the lead, eager to explore the scents that have accumulated since her last outing. Joe stumbles to the ground.

'See! I told you,' Lucy says. She ushers him back inside and helps him into bed. 'Rest!' she commands tucking the sheets around him. 'I'll clean up.'

Five minutes later she's back to check on him. Joe is hot and clammy and sweating profusely. When she returns with a glass of water, he's clutching at his chest and struggling to breathe. She races down the hall to call an ambulance. Back in the bedroom Joe has curled into a ball. She lies beside him, stroking his forehead. Her hands tremble. His eyes track hers but he can't speak.

'Hang on Giuseppe, they'll be here soon. Please! Hang on!' Her heart is pounding. Joe is breathing in rasps. Lucy's face is streaked with tears.

An ambulance siren screeches down the street and she races to unlock the front door. Back in the bedroom she grabs Joe's hand and squeezes it. He doesn't respond. An animal sound rises in her throat. Then another.

It's a patchy crowd at the farmer's market, quiet for a Saturday. Usually by four o'clock the pavements are crammed with shoppers seeking bargains and inspiration for evening meals. Today people shuffle past in dribs and drabs. Lucy

carries on, undaunted. Hard times wrap around her like a second skin. Sadness lives comfortably on her face along with whatever other emotion happens to be passing by. Now, in the market, encouraged by the late afternoon sun, she smiles.

'Best tomato sauce in the southern hemisphere,' she calls out in an exaggerated accent that would have made her husband proud. Joe had always said that an authentic Italian sound attracts more customers. The familiarity of her routine is comforting. She can almost feel him standing beside her, though in truth, he's never very far away. His picture hangs in a gold locket around her neck. Every hour or so she draws it up and presses it to her lips.

Soon it will be time to plant a new tomato crop. The backyard is still full of the withered skeletons of last year's bushes, the last crop Joe ever planted. People tell her to sell up and move somewhere smaller but she still feels Joe in every corner of the house.

A young woman wanders up to Lucy's stall with a baby grizzling in a sling against her chest.

'Yum!' she says glancing at the jars turned tangerine by the afternoon light. 'I'd love to be able to make sauce like this.'

'Is easy once you know how,' Lucy says.

'My kitchen's way too small, maybe when we buy our own place. We've just moved here, renting a town-house near the showground. I'd love somewhere with a backyard and a vege garden.' The young woman makes 'shushing' sounds to her baby as she rocks back and forth.

'Beautiful baby! What's her name?'

'Zetta.'

'Ah! It means olive. She will keep the peace.'

'She's not very peaceful at the moment. I think she's teething. It's ages since I've had a decent night's sleep and I have no idea what to cook for dinner tonight.'

'Why not try some sauce? It's good with pasta. Easy! Just heat up and pour over the top.'

'Sounds good, how much?'

'Ah, so what! I think Joe would like you.' She dives into a wicker basket behind her stall. 'Here, take these. No charge. This vintage is extra special.'

'No, please at least let me pay,' the woman protests.

Zetta's grins at Lucy as she wraps the jars in newspaper and places them in a bag.

'Enjoy!' Give some to the little one. It might help her sleep.' Lucy brushes Zetta's rosy cheek. The baby giggles. 'Ah! She is so beautiful.'

'Are you sure I can't pay?'

'No, it's all right.'

The woman turns to leave, then swings round again. 'Thank you so much.'

'No worries. Come to my place next year when the tomatoes are ripe and I'll show you how to make sauce.'

'You're on. Will you be here next month?'

'Of course.'

Zetta twists around and waves a tiny hand at Lucy as the woman walks away.