

Title: Another Harvest

Word count: 2449 words

The invitation arrives in the mail, hidden between a credit card statement and the telephone bill. It is printed on stiff cream paper with a gold border. There is a note in her mother's uneven hand on the back, *I know you are busy, but I will expect you for the family dinner the evening before*. She knows that this time she cannot avoid going home.

She works in the city, and catches the train every morning, another blank face in the morning throng. As she walks from the station she can see the company emblem, like a mandala high up on the roof. It catches the first rays of the morning sun, sending out a flash that temporarily blinds her and leaves a corona of light over everything. From her office she can see the panorama of the city and the harbour, the view a prize for her promotion. There is much she has to organise to allow a three day absence. She works while the sun navigates an arc across the dome of the sky, and walks home from the station to her darkened flat along streets blurry in the evening gloom.

On the morning flight to Adelaide she is seated next to an elderly man who has a skin condition. Small pink flakes of skin shed from his face and neck and settle on his shoulders like dry, dead petals. Lulled by the drone of the plane she closes her eyes and remembers her father's vegetable garden. When she was a child it would feed the whole family year round. Tomatoes grew every summer, which her mother made into a thick red sauce. They were skinned, blended and mashed by

the bucketful, until the kitchen looked as if a great beast had died a frenzied death among the pots and pans. She wonders if the garden is still there, tended by a woman grown old alongside her grief.

When she arrives at the airport she catches a bus, as she avoids driving whenever she can. She takes a seat among the pensioners and small children, and leans her check against the glass as the bus begins the long drive north. The plains spread out around her, hot, brown and barren. The road takes her past stone farmhouses disintegrating in vacant paddocks, abandoned before she was born. Later, when the bus reaches the foothills of the ranges, it chugs its way through the gears as the road tilts upward. Phrases from half remembered geography lessons about this ancient mountain range dart like small birds across her thoughts; Precambrian, mesomorphic, sedimentary. They flit about, never landing to roost in snatches of memory.

She arrives on the edge of town in the soft afternoon glow. Tall gums line the road, their bark a gentle palate of white and grey. She passes the general store, the war memorial, and the church. Every Sunday, she went to church with her parents and her sisters. They sat in a row on the shiny wooden pews, sweating in summer and shivering in the winter. Once, she let a stumpy tailed lizard she had caught in the wood shed loose in the middle of the sermon. It scuttled down the aisle, its dry lumpy belly making a loud rasping sound as it sought refuge under the pulpit. Her father did not see the joke. He was silent all the way home, until they had turned in at the front gate and clattered over the cattle grid, then in a quiet voice

he banished her to her room. His tacit disappointment in her was a far greater punishment than missing out on the Sunday roast.

Lost in her memory, she realises she has arrived. The house sits white and peeling in the front paddock, just as she left it. As she walks down the long driveway through a shimmering sea of wheat, the dogs stretch on their chains and lean towards her with excited yaps. She finds her mother in the vegetable garden, tying tomato plants to thin bamboo poles. Together they sit in the kitchen and her mother pours tea for her from the same yellow, chipped teapot she remembers. She sits at the brown wooden table and runs her nail along a familiar groove. She looks around the room. The clock with its fat and jolly farmer and his wife, who reveal themselves, one at a time, with the striking of every hour. The ruby red glass bowl that had belonged to her grandmother, too precious to be used, glows on the shelf. But although most things are unchanged, the house is different, impoverished, in small and quiet ways. The linoleum on the floor is worn in the spot where her mother stands to cook and there is a country shaped stain, high up on the ceiling where the roof needs fixing.

For the rest of the afternoon she sits in the kitchen while her mother bustles around her. Her family arrive all at the same time, tumbling in like clowns. She is an aunt now. Dishevelled nephews and nieces revolve around her, soiling her clothes as they touch her with small grimy fingers. Her sisters talk excitedly to her with their mouths full of food. They want to know so much, so she tells them of her success. The labour of her studies and of the markets she controls. The manner in

which she lives, the opulence of her life. She tells them of the cities she has seen, the crush of people on London streets, and the lush clean beauty of Singapore. They are happy for her success. They ask her if she has anyone in her life. She tells them she does not. They joke with her that she had better hurry up if she wants to have children. She tells them she does not. As if by reflex, her sisters stroke their children's tousled hair and their questions cease.

Her mother has prepared a meal for them all. To the potatoes and onions she has dug from the garden, she adds meat from the sheep that has been slaughtered by the farmhand and stacked into neat pink parcels in the deep freezer. They all eat at the table, children at the corners, babies on laps. She sits within this circle, elbows touching, a link in a chain.

Later, after everyone has left, as she lies in her narrow childhood bed and remembers how, at her mother's insistence, she once went to the Saturday night dance. It was held at the local hall, a relic from the boom days of farming at the beginning of a century now over. She stood against the wall, staring up at the ornate, crumbling ceiling, while local boys with red ears and crooked teeth sidled up to ask her to dance. Later in the evening she slipped out the back door of the hall kitchen, where her mother was busy with the other women preparing sandwiches and sponge cake. She ran until she was safe in the black shadows of the pine trees that grew behind the hall, sat down on a decaying carpet of pine needles and smoked a stolen cigarette. The next morning she packed a small bag and caught the bus to Adelaide, and from there a plane which took her to the clamour and din of the city.

The wedding is at the church, which has been decorated with enormous vases of roses and lilies. They droop in the heat, exuding a fetid perfume. Before the service starts, she stands outside and watches the guests arrive. She recognises her friends of childhood summers. They have grown from slim, brown barefoot girls, to women lumpy from childbirth, with lopsided breasts and meaty hips squeezed into badly made dresses.

The reception is held at the football club where gold and white streamers are hung from photographs of grim looking men with crossed arms and muddy knees. The women she knew as girls stare at her as she takes her place at the family table. After the speeches, fortified by champagne, they sidle over to talk to her in groups of two and three. She sits with them, apart and elegant in her silk shift and Italian heels. They talk to her of children and husbands, farms and marriages and funerals. Their lives have travelled a linear path from the tumble of the schoolyard to the creak of the marital bed. They seem happy, even when they tell her about the drought and how they have had to shoot lambs starving in bare paddocks. They laugh with open mouths and heads flung back at the remembered practical jokes she played on their teachers, the trouble she would get them all into. Later, when the band plays its last song, she slips off her shoes and dances in a circle with them.

The day after the wedding she wakes late in the morning. The corrugated roof is doing its daily grumble, heating up and expanding under a sun already bright and hot. For a moment she can almost believe that she is twelve again and when she goes down to the kitchen her father will be there drinking his morning cup of tea. Reluctantly she lets her mind steal along a darkened path, to the day of her father's

funeral. The wake was held at the house. Men, uncomfortable in Sunday suits on a Wednesday, stood on the veranda and sweated into their warm beers. The kitchen was full of women, making tea and consoling her mother. Her sisters, always the good girls, handed around slices of cake on the good china. She had crept upstairs, away from the low hum of grief, and changed quickly out of her blue dress and into her everyday clothes. Crawling out the window, scurrying across the roof, sliding down to solid ground via the veranda railing, and darting across the yard, she made it unseen to the dam. Crouching among the reeds, she checked the yabby traps her father had helped her bait only a few days before. They had used soap, tied with pieces of string hung in the curls of chicken wire. He taught her that it did not matter what you used for bait, because the yabbies were not eating it because they were hungry. They were just trying to keep the water they lived in clean.

Now she finds her mother outside in the vegetable garden wearing her father's old slouch hat. She watches her moving slowly among the rows of vegetables, checking underneath leaves, occasionally tying up a plant reaching its green fingers toward the sky. The fabric of her faded dress strains across her shoulders as she leans forward with the stoop of an elderly woman. Occasionally she pauses to pick grubs off the tomatoes, carefully, as if she is caressing the soft fruit.

Her mother makes her breakfast; eggs collected from the chicken house in an old dented saucepan with the handle missing. They are served on fat slices of bread fried in bright yellow butter. She helps with the dishes after they have eaten, and places the leftovers in the squat fridge. It is an old fashioned appliance, all

rounded edges with a large chrome handle like a bonnet emblem from an old car. Soon it will be time to leave.

After packing her bag she lets herself out the back door for a last walk around the yard. Past the vegetable garden and the henhouse there is a large shed. It was built before the house, its supports made from huge tree trunks, cut just above the fork of the branches which now cradle beams hewn from solid timber. The shed is divided into six large bays, all accessed from a corridor which runs along the front. The light comes in through narrow gaps in the timbers where time and weather has softened them. She walks along looking into each bay. Once they would have held carriages and horse drawn ploughs, now there is old farm machinery, coils of fencing wire and bags of seed stacked neatly ready for sowing for another harvest. In the last bay, behind the tractor, her father's utility sits covered in a mantle of dust like a shroud. She had only been thirteen when she had driven it home across the paddocks after the accident, the gearbox screaming in second because she could not get it to change into third, while her father bled out in scarlet plumes across the dusty vinyl seat. By the time she drove into the yard and fell stumbling out of the car screaming for her mother, her father was dead.

She stands quietly in the dusty shafts of light and weeps as memory gathers around her. She returns to the kitchen and her mother where, after a final cup of tea, it is time for her to go. Her mother presses a paper bag of tomatoes into her arms as she is leaving. When she gets to the airport, she opens her suitcase and secrets the tomatoes away between layers of silk. Arriving home, the apartment is still.

Leaving her suitcase by the door she takes off her shoes and lies down on the couch in the silence and soon she is asleep. She does not wake until the next morning, stiff and weary from a sleep dislocated by the sounds of children and flashes of crimson.

The next day she leaves the office in the early afternoon, cancelling a meeting with an important client. She buys a bottle of red wine on her way home, then stands at the granite bench in her kitchen and pours the wine into an enormous bell shaped glass. Above the vibration of the evening traffic she can hear a dog whining in a lonely back yard. Reaching into the cupboard she takes a wooden bowl from the shelf and places her mother's tomatoes into it one by one. The scarlet orbs gleam in the recessed lighting, and when she holds them to her face, they smell like sunshine and earth.

This time on the early morning flight she has all three seats to herself. She hires a car at the airport. As she begins her drive it is raining heavily, but as she travels north the clouds evaporate and the air becomes luminous. She finds her mother in the garden, filling a bucket with tomatoes warm from the sun. There is work to be done, much fruit to be picked before the sauce is made. She stands alongside the vines, heels sunk into the earth, and takes the bucket from her mother's hand and begins to fill it.