

**Breakfast at Tildy's  
The Misadventures Continue**

**A Novel  
By**

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# Introduction

## Memories

(Reminiscing about the delivery of best girlfriend's first baby.)

It's been a month and a few days since Isa gave birth to Christopher-Greg Rubenstein-Roberts. And still I can't get my head around that name. What on earth were they thinking? I mean two lots of hyphens, God, how pretentious! Worse still, Greg has reduced "my boy's" name to CG – sounds more like crop fertilizer than a baby boy!

Cripes, and what a performance the birth was. It sure upstaged the day when barely eight weeks preggo, with no visible protrusion, best girlfriend turned up at the Denver Gay Men's Chorus spring fundraiser wearing an attention grabbing, billowy maternity ensemble. Hello! She might as well have stuck a Post-it to her forehead saying something along lines of *Look at me everyone I'm pregnant!*

Oh, oh and then a few months later in June, she organized a surprise fortieth birthday party for me, but on the summer solstice. A whole week before my actual birthday! She did that just so she could use my party as an excuse to do her woo-woo solstice dance howling-at-the-moon thing, on the pretense that she was calling in the goddess of birthdays (who also happens to be the deity of pregnancy) especially for me.

Yeah right!

Those showy incidents aside, the real drama happened in the birthing room.

Due to Isa's forty-three year-old bod, a cesarean delivery was scheduled, but best girlfriend went into labor shortly after I – at Isa's side as the anxiety-ridden stand-in doula – talked myself into a total state and then passed out from hyperventilating. Seeing me out cold caused Isa to panic, which triggered abnormal fetal heart rate activity, which prompted an emergency C-section then and there, with me slumped in an armchair in the corner.

Poor girlfriend. There she was about to deliver junior while the handyman, father-to-be, had had to dash off to work in response to a frozen pipe and flooded basement maintenance emergency; but not before calling me, the loyal and maternal (though at Isa's birthing bed, I seriously questioned that Cancer-Sun trait) friend who naively volunteered to "help out" if, when the time came, they should need support.

Did I say naively? I should have said "stupidly" because I had no idea what I'd be getting into "helping out." Pre-hospital, post-hospital help, I was prepared to manage things along the lines of cooking and dropping off a meal or two, running an errand or few. Stuff like that is doable for a squeamish type like me. The bit in between the pre- and the-post is not exactly what I'd bargained for. It's um ... it's very, well ... intimate.

Isa's sudden-onset contractions caused her to flip-flop between making wild-animal noises and then flashing enormously rotund bare-body bits at me. Not on purpose though – it's just when she rolled around in discomfort, her maternity robe got all caught up under her Willendorf-like bosoms. I had to totally disregard our Decorum at All Times pact. No point insisting that she refrain from sniffing, spitting, farting, peeing or in any way behaving uncouth à la jock-like since it was apparent that that was all she was capable of doing.

Even though I felt sorry for Isa that Greg responded to a work call when his eagerly awaited baby was on the verge of emerging, I actually felt sorrier that she was

relying on me as her stand-in doula. It was all too obvious my presence at her birthing bed was all about the verification of me as an incompetent weenie.

Up until that day, Isa's pregnancy had been a part of my life in as much as it was actively growing over there in Isa's body and thus very separate from me. I liked that. It meant I could be objective, versus the gooey romantic that I tend to be. I could observe it up close – as in experience Isa's pregnancy vicariously, but from a distance – as in be thankful that it wasn't me dealing with the stretch marks, gastric reflux, then later the feeling of being about to burst and the subsequent sleeplessness.

Too much detail can be a deterrent and over the months before the birth, Isa had freely volunteered waaay too much to the degree that I'd concluded, loudly and directly, "A baby is definitely not in the stars for me!"

But then in contrast to her ballooning bod, and the icky ramifications and my fear and loathing of such, was the fun bit. Boy oh beaut, the couple October Saturdays in her eighth month we spent shopping for baby clothes and nursery items, I attempted to commandeer those events. As the former Nordstrom personal shopper with a flair for both style and price, it was only sensible that Isa, as the former computer programmer and daggy geek, acquiesce and let me take charge and pick where to purchase the baby's gear.

Naturally, our first port-of-call was my online second-hand kids clothing store LostNowFound.com. However, Isa said she'd prefer new over used for her boy. I can understand that. I might have sold it, but I wouldn't have bought it. But lots of parents did.

And then I really got on her goat suggesting we go to K-Mart. She didn't laugh. I think she's sick of me teasing her about the reluctance of good Jewish girls to shop at America's biggest discount corporate stronghold. So then I suggested Wal-Mart, but that fell flat too.

In the end I acquiesced and let her pick where she wanted to shop. My rational: an adult tantie involving short and stocky Isa Rubenstein throwing around an extra fifty pounds is not a pretty sight.

I also let her pick where to eat when we punctuated our shopping with a best-girlfriend lunch, copious cuppas, and lots of chatting about the joys of becoming a mum. The discussion that sticks in my mind is the one when Isa got all misty-eyed while suggesting how much fun it would be if I had a baby too.

"We could be moms together," she'd said.

"Oooh, yes that would be fun." I'd said. "Hmm, Nikov and me, and baby makes three."

That comment had been fed by the fact that my uber-euro honey and I had by then been dating for about six months. Nikov, who never failed to call me *Tildy my beauty my love*, was undeniably head-over-heels for me, which meant by my next birthday, if I so chose, I too could be about to pop.

But Isa grimacing while massaging the varicosities in her legs and maneuvering her donut cushion under her hemorrhoid-inflamed bum had caused me to plummet out of Cloud Romantic back to Ground Reality.

"On second thought, that'd mean I'd have to be pregnant," I'd said.

Not missing a beat, Isa slammed me with, “Human see-saw Til, that’s what you are. Obviously you’re still conflicted about being a mom. Listen, you gotta make up your mind soon. Think haywire hormones now you’re forty!”

Girlfriends! Grrrrr, they can be so in your face with the obvious.

But after what happened in the birthing room, it was easy to cut Isa some slack. Gawd, I was so grateful that one of the attending labor and delivery nurses revived me from my hyperventilated fainting spell. I really did feel awful for best girlfriend, falling face down on her bed like I did, and then slumping to the floor with a thud, apparently.

The nurse who revived me insisted I take a mild sedative, wrap myself in a blanket and sit in an armchair in the corner and “not move or say diddly-squat.” I know she was concerned that if I had a repeat panic episode it might cause Isa, and thus CG, further unnecessary upset.

Apparently Greg appeared precisely as Isa’s pubic line was being incised and immediately passed out as well. Net result, he and I shared adjoining corners, recliners and matching baby-blue birthing-room throws.

By the time we were fully conscious and functioning, Isa’s parts and pieces were stapled back together and she was nursing successfully and not inclined to indulge Greg, or me, in talk about our wellbeing. Rather, she scowled disapprovingly at the both of us and then re-engaged with her gorgeous new boy, whose blotchy pink face nuzzled into his mummy’s boob.

Yes, it was a scene of total bliss. So blissful, I wasn’t sure why I had sobbed with greater heaving action than Greg, whose quietly shed tears streaked his grubby worker’s face as he stood gazing in awe at his two babes.

I put it down to the fact that birth is an emotional experience, like death.

Birth and death, that’s big stuff and warrants a full on howl.

But for me there was more to it than a normal, emotionally charged response to new life.

I’d lost the undivided attention of my best girlfriend to motherhood ...

**Melbourne, Australia**

## Airborne

(December 18th: On board UA flight 839 to Melbourne.)

“Ma’am, excuse me ma’am, do you need a tissue?”

An in-cabin crewmember is leaning over the aisle seat trying to get my attention. Her fake platinum blonde hair and blue uniform are evident out of the corner of my eye. And I can smell her – she smells like the perfumed hot towels they’ll hand out before they feed us.

I’m intentionally ignoring her, focusing instead on the marshmallow clouds dancing about outside my window seat. I don’t want to have to engage with anyone while I have a bit of a weep.

“Ma’am, are you okay?”

**Private Thought:** Bugger, bugger, bugger, go away! Go away, please ... *shit*; she’s not going away.

I wipe my cheeks with the back of my hand. “Oooh, thanks but I’m okay, just having a *private* bawl over some things I was remembering, stuff I’ve left behind.”

“Oh darn, did you forget to pack ...”

“So what have we got there?” I quickly change the subject, making a visual beeline for the beverage cart, which is parked behind her wide blue hips.

“Would you care for a cocktail, wine, beer, juice?”

“I think something alcoholic would be perfect.”

She hands me my requested beverage: a mini bottle of red wine, and some salted munchies. My gangly young neighbor requests beer. He immediately pops the top and chugs it directly from the can. The crewmember moves on just as my neighbor licks froth from his top lip, emits a stinky beer burp, and splays his long limbs.

“Um, excuse me, would you consider relocating your elbow into the side of *your* chest rather than mine?” I say, attempting a smile.

“Sorry mate, ‘aint much room in these bloody seats, eh?” He maneuvers himself about while smiling nicely back at me. His shaggy mop of sandy blonde hair reminds me of a Golden Retriever.

“No there isn’t, which means you shall have to be conscious of where you put your elbow.” This time I scowl at him.

Elbow-boy ignores my defensive unpleasantness and segues straight into a let’s-be-friends chat.

“Go’n ‘ome are ya? I noticed even though ya sound kinda like a yank, ya still ‘ave a bit of an Aussie accent.”

“As a matter of fact this is my annual trip back to the home country.” I’m suddenly aware that my accent isn’t anywhere near as thick as his. “Sounds like you’re heading home too.”

“How’d ya guess?”

“Oh. Psychic. It’s a genetic predisposition. Frank says I inherited that handy trait from Beaty.” I’m toying with him. “The parental pair, they’re thrilled about my

visit. We haven't seen each other for a couple of years. I didn't make it back last Chrissie. Had to cancel my trip."

"Yeah?"

"Yep. I'd been laid off from my job at Nordstrom, economic downtown, etcetera, etcetera. And I was in *huge* transition! That happens you know, around the time you turn forty. My astrologer calls it the Uranus opposition cycle ..."

I pause, wondering if he'll say something along the lines of, *forty; you look too young to be forty!* But he doesn't, just guzzles his beer and crunches his nibbles all the while giving me a receptive ear.

"Gawd, it really was a huge transition," I say. "Around the time I got laid off, my divorce from Eric had come through. Eric's an American, originally from San Diego but he moved out to Boulder to work on his sculpting, which is the why and the how of my living in the middle of America squashed up against John Denver's Rocky Mountains. We were married about five years. Then as I said, I was on the verge of forty, divorced, unwaged, felt like my life was falling apart, so much so that all I wanted was to run off to Italy, like Diane Lane in the movie adaptation of *Under the Tuscan Sun*, marry a handsome Italian and become a fecund country housewife."

I take a sip of red wine.

"Bloody hell, 'ow 'bout that."

I read his minimal response as an invitation to continue.

"What a year!" I let out a big sigh. "It was all about me finding the color of my parachute, which included lots of dating and employment experiments. Ended up scooping dog poop for pay, actually I had a doggy daycare thing going with my neighbors. Then I set up my own online store, and in between I met a hunky man." I stare out my window wistfully. "War refugee, you know. He's from Eastern Europe. Oh, hang on; I have a photo of him on my cell phone."

I plonk my wine down on Elbow-boy's tray-table, reposition my tray, and rummage in my carry-on.

"Here it is," I say, excitedly re-emerging with cell in hand. And flipping it to camera mode a photo of Nikov appears. "See, isn't he just scrummy!?" I hold my cell phone up so we can both see. "He's swarthy, debonair, and despite that head of thick hair, he doesn't have feral nostril or ear hair! I mean, you know, middlescent men sometimes skimp on the facial grooming." I scrutinize my neighbor's smooth face, "As I thought, you're too young to concern yourself with that."

"Bewdy," he says.

"Also, he has this unbelievably syrupy-rich voice that is sooo seductive. Gawd, when I first met him that voice made me want to offer myself up with words of encouragement along the lines of *take me, take me*, which of course he eventually did. Well, once we got to know one another. Oops, bit of an over-share there," I say in response to some loud spluttering from the seat behind.

But my neighbor is unperturbed and suddenly breaks into a winning grin, thinking he's hit the jackpot. "I git it! Ya miss 'im already, don't ya? That's why ya were hav'n a bit of a bawl early on."

"Yes and no," I say stony-faced.



“Come on, don’t be shy,” he chortles. “Ya been spill’n ya guts for the last ten minutes. Giving me all the ammo I need to figure out ya love this bloke and ya miss ‘im. So why the hell are ya go’n back to Oz without ‘im then?”

“Listen, Elbow-boy,” I say in characteristic Cancer-the-soft-shell-crab defensive mode, “you think you’ve got it all figured out, but you’re wrong. Yes, I’m going to miss Nikov while I’m in Melbourne visiting the parents, but that’s not why I was upset before.”

And off I go again, ear-bashing the poor boy to death about how over the past month Isa was so absorbed in her new job mothering that I felt at a loss since our friendship had been such a big part of my life. “In fact,” I say, “I’m glad to be visiting Beaty and Frank for a few weeks. I mean sometimes you just need to get away.”

Responding with youthful wisdom along the lines of a gormless male version of Sunshine, my hippie-dippy Boulder neighbor who goes to parentally funded therapy, Elbow-boy says, “Yeah, well that’s what happens, eh, mate. Ya friends git partnered-up, ‘av kids, and life changes, don’t it. And there ain’t no run’n away from that. But eh, what’s this Elbow-boy shit? Ya better not be tak’n the piss outta me!”

## Happy Landings

(December 20th: Flying into Melbourne, Australia.)

I can see dry brown earth below.

That’s my sunburnt country!

Oooh ...feel suddenly very sentimental and teary.

My country ...

When I speak everyone will understand me. I won’t cogitate about how on earth I could look in anyway masculine, because no one will call me “man.” Nor will I feel as though I’m too fast encroaching retirement age, because no one will refer to me as “ma’am.” Instead, I will hear the familiar “mate,” “darl,” and “love.” Oh, and “madam” if I’m out somewhere swishy.

I will enjoy a morning cuppa and a biccie or a piece of cake with Beaty because morning tea – that midway spot between brekkie and lunch is a religious experience for my mum.

I will feel incredibly sexy wearing my summery frocks and femmy skirts with heels and *bare* legs. (Only the likes of my beige, lawyerly, completely sans sex-appeal sister, Sara, wear clear pantyhose.)

Grrrr, Sara. Not looking forward to picking up where we last left off.

Frank will insist that I join him some afternoons and watch the test cricket on the telly. And I will, because that’s what Melbournians do on their summer hols, fall asleep in the heat in front of the cricket content with the knowledge that not much action will happen during a quick forty winks.

Oh, and thank God I won’t have to reel back thinking someone has just farted because no one will politely say, “excuse me” when they walk in front of me or bump

into me. It's not that my fellow country people are ill mannered; rather, it's that we don't pretend to be polite.

Nope, political correctness hasn't made it to the Southern Hemisphere. Phew!

The aircraft touches ground.

Oooh ... Exciting.

The captain's voice crackles, "Welcome to Melbourne where the local time is 11:30 a.m. and the temperature is a balmy, 25 degrees Celsius ..."

Tuning the rest out, especially the bit about "de-planing," (I mean what sort of made-up word is that?! Wait till I tell Beaty, the grammar and Scrabble master will have hysterics), I undo my seat belt.

Grabbing all my stuff, I dump it on Elbow-boy's seat. It's been empty since Sydney where he disembarked for Queensland, the tropical state where everyone speaks his type of vernacular. Thank God he slept most of the way. Not sure I could have stood more than a couple of hours listening to his nasally flat vowels and home-spun wisdom.

Now that we've landed and I can turn on my cell, I check to see if Nikov has text messaged me.

And yes he has:

mizz u Tiddy ... N

"Tiddy." Oh that's sooo sweet. A new pet name – I like it! It sounds like a kitty-cat. How could I not want to gobble that man up? He's just adorable. Never mind that he can't spell, after all text messaging is a language unto itself and besides English is his second language.

Fortunately, I can't imagine Beaty having the opportunity any time soon to play Scrabble with him. This is a very good thing because my uber-euro honey will thus be spared total humiliation at the hands of my Oxford-English-dictionary obsessed mum.

mizz u 2 ... Tiddy

Whoopee, we're finally disembarking. I note that my legs are doing what they're supposed to do, i.e. I can walk. This is no small feat after being squished for seventeen hours into a single sandwich box masquerading as a seat!

Hmm, I have an idea. I should send a customer complaint letter to United along lines of:

**Dear Customer Service:**

**It has come to my attention that your airline has mistakenly identified their economy fare customers as doughy human sandwiches of the squish-able type.**

**Though my sister Sara travels business class where,**

she boasts, there is greater space and thus more comfort, we of the general public are not my sister Sara.

Perhaps to you we, the GP, are merely the great unwashed and thus not worthy of basic human rights, like comfort.

I should rethink this policy if I were you, as forthwith I shall be notifying Human Rights Watch and alerting them to your discriminatory attitude.

However, I could be encouraged to refrain from such activity. For instance, if when I next fly with United I discovered that I'm eligible for an upgrade I can imagine having only the most generous things to say about your airline.

Oh, and did I also mention I have contacts high up in People Magazine.

Your most loyal customer,

Tildy Wilson

## Homecoming Fanfare

(Walking through the international arrival gates at Melbourne airport.)

Oh my God! *Oh my God!* I want to slink away and die.

“DARL! DARL! OVER HERE!”

Beaty is yelling and jumping about, waving her arms like a mad person. I can't miss her because she and Frank have brought along folding beach chairs, which they've erected and which they're standing atop so that they're waist, chest, and heads above everyone.

Furthermore, in the effort, I expect, to welcome me with a reminder that it is summer here, they have on matching Hawaiian floral shirts (predominant colors: yellow and pink); matching turquoise-blue French legionnaire hats (excellent for keeping the sun off your neck and face); and they've plastered their noses and cheeks with pink zinc cream!

And then just in case I haven't heard Beaty yelling over the crowd and missed the both of them in their Darby-and-Joan, welcome-home outfits, Frank repeats the chorus, “LOVE. LOVE. OVER HERE!”

But the icing on the cake has to be Frank pulling out a paper party horn from his breast pocket and tooting like crazy!

“Friends of yours?” The bloke next to me smirks.

“Ah, no,” I say to my feet, “never seen them before in my life.”

I push my luggage trolley forward, my head down in embarrassment. However, it’s too late to hide my identity as the offspring of such a loony parental pair, because they’ve dismantled their chairs and are moving at a very rapid pace toward me.

“Here we are darling! Did you see us over there on our chairs waving and tooting? How are you? Oh, darl, let me give you a big hug.” Beaty wraps her arms around me so tight I think I’m going to expire. Still in the hug position, she prattles on. “Dad and I were up early this morning getting ready for your arrival. These shirts just arrived in the mail late yesterday. We thought you might find the loud Hawaiian-American theme fun and familiar. Dad bought them on Australia’s eBay. Didn’t you Frank?”

She stands back and nudges Frank, who goes in for an even bigger hug simultaneously whispering in my ear, “Don’t mind Mum, love, she’s just a bit over-excited to see you.”

“I bought these great little hats last summer,” Beaty continues excitedly. “They’re all the rage now you know, because of the hole in the ozone.” She pulls the back flap around her neck, then pointing at her face, “And your sister left Baby’s pink, zinc cream at the house last weekend after they’d popped over on their way home from the beach. Darl, you haven’t said boo, are you okay? You do look tired...”

Frank interrupts with, “Lemme get your bag, love. Your mum’s right, you look absolutely knackered.”

He bends down for my suitcase, smudging his pink zinc as he wipes the tears from under his bi-focals.

“It’s okay Dad, we can just wheel everything out to the car on this trolley.”

As he stands, I put an arm around him, burying my head in his shoulder.

“Big family hug,” says Beaty, choking up as she envelops both Frank and me.

## **Kitchen Dance**

(At the parent’s home in the bayside suburb of Port Melbourne.)

“Here we go, love, park ya carcass and Mum’ll make us a bit of lunch,” says Frank, motioning that I sit at the kitchen table while Beaty busies herself preparing some food.

“Think I’ll stand. I’ve been sitting for almost a day and a night now,” I say, feeling fidgety and a bit strange about being home on the other side of the world in such familiar surrounds where everything, except me, seems unchanged.

“I think we’d better all go for a walk to the beach after we eat. Dad could do with the exercise and for that matter me too!” Beaty beams at me over her shoulder, “water aerobics doesn’t seem to be doing the trick anymore. This old bottom of mine is going to droop down to Antarctica soon if I don’t ... ooh, Frank you’re naughty.”

Frank has his hands firmly around Beaty's bum and he's jiggling it as though he has hold of two big blobs of jelly. Beaty turns and faces Frank and suddenly they're doing the kitchen waltz, they're favorite mealtime prep activity.

"It's a wonder you ever managed to produce those gourmand meals of casseroled offal, Mum," I say teasing, thinking in particular of her potted sheep kidney concoction. "What with Dad interrupting your endeavors at creative-cooking; demanding that you dance."

"Ah, but she did, love, and aren't we lucky, because all that good gourmet tucker ya mum fed us put hair on our chest." Frank glows at Beaty.

"Maybe *your* chest, Dad, but last I looked that wasn't the case for me!" I say screwing up my face in mock horror.

Frank twirls Beaty around one more time, and then let's go her hand, picking up mine for a bit of a twirl with me.

"Well isn't this the perfect happy-family moment," says Sara appearing out of the blue.

"Hello sweetie-pie, are you going to join us for lunch?" asks Beaty, chopping tomatoes.

"Can't Mum. No time. Just wanted to drop in and say *ciao* to Tildy and ask her if she can *you know what*."

Sara is talking to Beaty as though I'm not in the room.

"Hi, Sara," I say with an air of detachment. "And yes, thanks, my flight was fine. I'm tired but not overly so. Gawd, don't know if you've noticed, but business class is not what it used to be."

Even though it was six months ago that Sara made that comment to me when she called from Denver en-route to Guatemala, I still remember and can't resist the opportunity to fling it back at her.

"How can you afford to fly business class, love?" intervenes Frank.

"She can't, Dad, she's just having a go at me," says Sara. "Anyway, Tildy, let's move on shall we, so I was wondering ..."

"I see you've updated your blend-in-beige suits to business-blue Armani, Sara, though I also see you're still wearing clear pantyhose, despite the warm weather. And *ciao*, aren't we sounding very hip for a conservative adoption lawyer."

"Now girls," says Frank, anticipating a scuffle.

Beaty ignores us, washing lettuce in the kitchen sink.

"Boy, it is a while since you've been home, isn't it," says Sara, "I guess you didn't know that Melbourne is now sister city to Milano." She says Milan with a fake Italian accent. "I'm simply doing my bit to uphold the honor of being recognized by the Milanese as a city of style and culture equal to their capital of said stature. I should think you'd be proud of my attempts, you the queen of *What Not To Wear*."

I'm not sure if she's upping the sarcasm ante relating me to Trinny and Susannah, the British duo also known as the fashion witches for their golden rules to perfect dressing or if this is her way of finally thanking me for introducing her to European designer wear when during her disastrous visit to Boulder early last year, I gave her several purged items from my closet.

"Yes, well, there's nothing overstated about me today, I'm afraid."

I gaze down at my comfy flying outfit that consists of ... actually, I won't mention what I have on because I'd rather be dead than caught wearing what I'm wearing by anyone other than close family members.

"I can see that," says Sara. Looks like something I'd wear!" She laughs, and eat-my-hat, I realize my sister is laughing at herself!

"Can't you stay, Sara?" says Beaty, flinging salad ingredients into a bowl. "Frank, pop the cork on that bottle of champers in the fridge. Tildy grab the glasses from the cupboard and let's have a quick toast in celebration of being together for the first time in a couple of years."

"Mum, I can't, I have to get back to the office and besides ..."

"Now come on Sara, don't try and tell us you and your lawyer mates don't have a bit of a grog with ya lunch," says Frank popping the cork, which flies across the kitchen hitting the ground just in front of Sara. "And it only takes this side of fifteen minutes to get back into the city from here. Come on," he cajoles, "you've got time, honey." "Oh, what the hell, alright then," says Sara picking up the cork, which she hands to me as if extending the olive branch – either that or she wants me to do something with it, like, put it in the bin.

## **Ulterior Motive**

(The following day.)

I'm up, hung-over and jetlagged. Nevertheless, it's down to the beach for a morning stroll this my first morning in Melbourne in two years.

Beaty called after me as I left the house, "will you be back in time for morning tea, darl?" I said yes. Though, after our predominantly alcoholic liquid lunch yesterday we had copious strong cuppas attempting to sober up from the champers to the degree that I shall probably float away within a day or two, waterlogged from beverage over-consumption. However, it's important to participate in the rituals that punctuate the parental pair's lives; it lets them know I love them.

So quick stroll it is, then back for a cuppa with Beaty.

Sara had a very good reason for staying for lunch, even though a splash of champers and mini plate of salad barely constitutes lunch. Participating at the lunch table as a congenial family member meant Sara successfully positioned herself to pop her question.

"When I made that remark earlier about wanting to ask if you can you know what," she said, "I was alluding to something I'd like to propose to you."

And off she went reminding me that my adorable adopted niece, Baby, goes to crèche five days a week while Sara and her hubby Phil earn a small fortune at their respective careers as a lawyer and pediatrician.

"From Christmas day through mid-January, however, crèche is closed for summer holidays," she said, eyeing me keenly. "Could you help out Tildy? Starting the beginning of January, could you look after Baby for two weeks?"

She asked without effort, thereby revealing her motive for being sisterly friendly and affable. I took a gulp of champers, and without blinking an eyelid I'd said that I'd think about it.

Now a day later, out walking, breathing in the lovely salt air, enjoying the sun, I have a chance to think about it.

**Me:** The thing is, I don't feel able to say no because I'm perfectly capable of carrying out the task. After all, I did work part time last year at friends, Max and Jeff's, daycare in Denver.

**Fearful Sub-personality:** Although daycare duty was only for a few hours each afternoon and it was harrowing, on a good day! *Remember.* Peanut-butter fingermarks on trouser legs, apple juice stains on blouses, snot balls in hair, kiddie wee on shoes, need I go on?

**Me:** But you coped! The snot came out with a hair washing and you'd paired down the designer wardrobe to jeans and hemp in anticipation of grubby fingers, food and bladder spillages. Besides, I'd feel a crappy selfish heel if I said no. Moreover, I love my adopted one-year-old niece, and I'm thinking it'd be fun to spend time with her.

**Fearful Sub-personality:** Yes, but this will be every day from eight a.m. till six p.m. for two weeks? *Cripes*, that's a chunk of effort! The two weeks after Christmas is most of the time we're spending here, which means, *bye-bye* freedom.

**Me:** Max and Jeff's charges were active toddlers. There was no space to think looking after them, that's for sure. But Baby is still a baby. At least she'll probably sleep lots. In which case, I vote yes.

**Fearful Sub-personality:** But what about my needs, don't they count?

**Me:** 'Fraid not. Your needs have been vetoed this time, end of discussion.

Hmm, so much for escaping all the baby stuff, apropos Isa, since it seems I've flown right back into more of the same! Only now it will be me who is preoccupied and frazzled with feedings, up-chucks, nappy changes, uncontrollable wailing episodes, etc., etc. Suspect it will give me a whole new appreciation for best girlfriend's experience though.

Wonder how Isa is doing? Must email her that I've arrived in one piece.

Oooh, but here I am at the beach. Love the gritty hot sand on my bare feet, squishing between my toes, and the salty sea breeze in my face. And yes, just as I remember, lots of almost naked men in tiny little tight Speedos promenading along the water's edge.

Think I'll just stretch out on the sand for a while and do a bit of perving.

## Beach Nap

(A couple of hours later.)

“Is that you, darl? Darr-ling. Wake-ee, wake-ee, you-hoo, wake-ee, wake-ee. Heavens, you can’t lie out here on the beach without a hat and sunscreen. Don’t you remember the ditty from the telly, *Slip, slop, slap on your sunscreen and slip on a hat.*”

“Hi, Mum,” I drone, face still in the sand. “I wasn’t intentionally sunbaking.”

I look up and reflexively squint. The sun is much brighter than it was an hour ago. Beaty is standing above me in her beach outfit. It closely resembles the ensemble she wore to greet me at the airport. Today she’s matched her turquoise-blue French legionnaire’s hat with light blue peddle-pushers, the loud Hawaiian shirt over the top, and on her feet she has bright pink sandals out of which are poking painted fuchsia toenails that match the pink zinc smeared on her face.

“I must have fallen asleep dreaming about ... actually never mind what I was dreaming about.”

“A dream, what were you dreaming about? Come on, let’s share our dreams.” She opens up the yellow canvas beach umbrella, erects her beach chair, and settles in beside me.

“Believe me, Mum, you don’t want to know what I was dreaming about.”

I pull myself up to sitting position and rifle through the beach bag she has brought with her.

“There’s a thermos of hot tea in there, so we can have our morning cuppa together here on the beach. Never mind that it’s hotter than yesterday, tea is such a great thirst-quencher. I’ve got a hat in here for you too.” She grabs the bag from me and starts to rummage. “Put it on and make your mum happy.” She pulls out Frank’s Legionnaire’s hat and hands it to me. “Oh and here’s the pink zinc. While you apply that why don’t I start and tell you about a dream I had recently.”

Beaty gets distracted playing mum pouring tea into two cups she holds steady between her knees.

“Okay, I’ll tell you what I was dreaming about,” I say, feeling cheeky, since I know she won’t really want to hear this. “There were a couple of blokes over there before in very brief Speedos.” I wave toward an empty patch of sand. “I was having a bit of a perv at their bods when I guess I dozed off. Anyway, they must have made quite an impression, because even though it seemed real, I know I was dreaming watching them strip off their Speedos. I mean this isn’t a nudie beach, so it couldn’t have really happened. And then they walked toward me starkers, oversized penises flapping about in the sea breeze, left to right, right to left. Gawd, I was totally transfixed, staring at their centerfold-sized genitals.”

I look at Beaty ready for a reaction.

“I think that’s more of a fantasy, don’t you?” she asks. “I sometimes sit here under the shade of the broolly staring out at the fellas in their tiny togs and have thoughts like that fully awake. I mean let’s face it, darl, Speedos don’t hide *anything!*” She swipes at a couple of flies before taking a sip of tea. “One would have to be, well, a blind vegetable to not notice the shape, size, position and whatnot of the penises under the



Speedos and then fantasize about what they might look like without the skimpy cover-up. Do you want a piece of fruitcake with your tea, darl? I just cut it this morning and I must say, I think it looks like one of my better batches of Chrissie cake. I added more dried fruit and mixed peel this year.” She fossicks in her bag for the sliced cake.

“Mum, that’s gross.”

“What! My fruitcake?” Beaty sounds indignant.

“No. I mean that was a total overshare! I don’t want to know about you perving at and then fantasizing about blokes’ penises.

“And why not! I’m human, just like you ... they call them budgie-huggers now, you know.”

“What, penises?”

“No. Speedos. Sara was right, you have been away awhile.”

“Cripes, Mum, I can’t believe we’re having this conversation. And how do you get budgie-hugger out of Speedo?” I think a moment. “On second-thoughts, let’s not go there.”

“It is clever the visual images we create with the English language here, isn’t it?”

I make the most of this as an excellent transition spot and mention the airlines unselfconscious replacement of “disembark” for “de-plane.” As I anticipated, that one gives Beaty plenty of mileage and she goes on ad-infinitum about “Americans and their made-up words.”

Then her tone shifts, and she wavers a moment.

“Now, tell me, darl ...”

I sense she’s about to segue into a serious chat, which means it’ll probably be about me.

“Dad and I know you’re settled in Boulder, but it does make me so sad. For instance, that email you sent us back in June, just before your fortieth birthday? The one in response to Dad and me offering you a one-way ticket home; I had Dad print it out for me. I have it here. I’ve been carrying it about with me.”

She produces the old email from a side pocket on her bag and reads it:

Subject: **Coming Back vs. Staying Here**

Date: Thursday June 9<sup>th</sup>

From: “Matilda Wilson” <TildyWil@aol.com>

To: FrankBeaty@aussieol.com

Dear Mum and Dad,

What a lovely birthday present, but it’ll need to be a return ticket. You see I’ve created a life for myself here, and it looks like this:

Five mornings a week I walk my pooches, and even though they can be unruly buggers, it’s my own business and I love it. Starting up doggy daycare inspired me to grow solo as an entrepreneur and I’m doing just that. LostNowFound.com is my

latest initiative. I'll send you the link when it's up and running. In the afternoon, I work for a friend. Max hired me when I needed a job. He's the best, and he makes a damn good cuppa.

Every couple of days I call or get together with Isa, whom I've mentioned before. She's pregnant and a real whiny-butt lately (that's a whinger Mum). But I love her anyway coz she's like a sister to me (minus the *nitwit* behavior).

Sometimes I go over to my hippie-dippy neighbor and she tries to feed me tofu. Despite her food preferences and hairy armpits, she's really a great neighbor. We look out for each other.

On Sundays I spend time with Nikov, he answered the phone a few weeks ago when you called. He has a hairy armpit fetish (at least it's more normal than Eric's fetish). He has all his bits, is not celibate, and has a killer, radio announcer's voice. He thinks I'm the bee's knees. I can tell, coz he calls me, Tildy, my beauty, my love.

Occasionally Eric and I get together and talk fashion, manicuring, waxing etc. etc. I tell you, everyone should have an ex-cum-best-friend like Eric.

So you see, I have friends and a home here. I can't leave this life I've created. I love you, but the pull of this near bloody desert is stronger than the call to come home.

[] and =^\* Tildy ☺

“And there are all these funny emoticons,” she holds up the email and points.

“They mean love and hugs,” I say, hoping that will jolly her along.

“But this bit about the pull to stay there being stronger than the pull to come home. I've tried to understand, darl, but when I sit here looking at the sail boats, spinnakers billowing, and the windsurfers zipping across the bay, with our glorious Melbourne behind us ... I have to say, I really don't understand.” Beaty looks at me confused, “Darling, how could you give all this up? How could you live over there?”

I'm silent a minute. We both stare out at the bay. The onshore breeze generates white foaming caps and the sun's glare catches the water in spots and it sparkles.

“It is gorgeous, the beach, and the city right there.” I gesticulate back at Melbourne’s skyline. I love it here in summer. And I do miss it, Mum, but as we discussed in those emails, I have a life that’s somewhere else.”

“Yes, well, email isn’t exactly talking now is it? So what I want to say while we’re sitting side-by-side, rather than in front of a computer, is this,” she looks straight at me, “what about you bring that life back here?”

“Ah, ah ...” I make deep-thought non-committal pondering noises not really wanting to engage because Beaty and I have been over this before, to the degree that I thought it was a closed book.

“I mean to say, darl, given that you’re divorced and just dating, and with no real career or direction ...”

“MmmUM!” I say, escalating. “I’m not *just* dating. I’m very much involved with Nikov. He’s head-over-heels for me, I’ve told you that!”

“And what about you, are you head-over-heels for him?” she asks.

“As a matter of fact, I think I am,” I say.

“You *think* you are! That doesn’t sound very convincing. So tell me about your career,” she says, quizzing me on the next topic up for grabs.

“I don’t have a fixed career. How’s that! These days, I simply do what moves me and feels right at the time and as you bloody well know up until I left Boulder two days ago I was running my online business selling second-hand kids clothing while thinking about the next step.”

“What happened to your doggy daycare?”

“I told you! Once the online biz got busy I let it go. I had too much on my plate to walk the pooches everyday. *Cripes*, what is this, thirty-bloody-questions?”

“I guess it is!” says Beaty, sounding as testy as me. I’m your mother and I have a right to enquire after your welfare.”

“And I’m your eldest daughter who is fast encroaching forty-one, i.e. I’m not a kid anymore, Mum! I can manage my own life, you know.”

“Of course you can, I’m not disputing that. It’s just your father and I would like to see you settled with a good job, a loving husband, friend or partner, whatever you call a significant person in your life these days, and a family, that’s all. It’s very normal for parents to want that for their children.”

“Yes, yes, I know. But my life doesn’t seem to be heading down that particular track ... crikey, get a load of him!” I say staring at a bloke just ahead of us, who, stripping down to his togs, offers some much needed levity.

“My word, that’s quite the pair of budgies in those huggers now isn’t it?” says Beaty enthralled.

## Life Line

(Back at the house.)

Subject: **Have landed, barely**  
Date: Wednesday December 21<sup>st</sup>  
From: "Matilda Wilson" <TildyWil@aol.com>  
To: Isa\_Rubenstein@aol.com

Howdy Isa,  
I'm joining your club. I'm going to be on duty for two weeks looking after my niece while Sara and Phil work. So much for hanging out on the beach for a couple of weeks perving at half-naked men. Fortunately, Beaty and I did get to do some of that this morning. Excellent distraction for Beaty, who might otherwise have been rendered extremely *ordinary* by her loving daughter, moi, and turned into a lump of sinking seaweed. Is there such a spell in that pagan, witchy book of yours?

You know, I think while I'm here I'll post blogs. It'll be like a group email to you, Nikov, Eric, and all the friends and it will help me feel as though I'm connected to something ... bigger than the familial unit ☺

Til

"Where are you, darl?" Beaty yells from somewhere in the house. "I want to talk to you about Chrissie day and food."

I yell back from the den, "I'm lost in cyberspace, Mum."

"Goodo. Well, when Mr. Spock buzzes you back down, let's rendezvous in the kitchen."

"Mum's enjoying having you home, love," says Frank, poking his head around the den door.

"I got that, Dad, I mean it's barely thirty hours since I arrived and I'm ready to ... oops, hang on, it's an email from my honey, Nikov!"

Subject: **To Tiddy**  
Date: Wednesday December 21<sup>st</sup>  
From: "Nikov Nikovic" <NikNikovic@BolderNet.net>  
To: TildyWil@aol.com

Dear Tiddy cat,

I like this name for you  
And all ready I do mizz you very much  
I tell you this in the text  
But I am glad I will hear you soon  
I have the cell phone in the pocket  
in case my Tiddy does call me  
I am at the restaurant late but I can talk any time to you  
I have sometink to tell you  
Love Nikky

“Sometink to tell you, eh?” Frank startles me.  
“Fair go, Dad. Cripes, hovering around reading personal emails over my shoulder! You and Mum are gunna drive me batty!”  
“He’s foreign, isn’t he, love?”  
“Yep. Don’t you remember me telling you that he’s a war refugee from Croatia?”  
“Muslim then?”  
“Are you going somewhere with that Dad, coz if you are, not sure I wanna go there with you.”  
“This is ya ole dad here, love,” he puts a hand on my shoulder. “No need to be defensive. If this fella’s Muslim, Seventh Day Adventist, Presbyterian, it makes no difference to me. The fact is love is not easy today. There’s a lot that can get in the way of two people making a commitment. Blimey, case-in-point with your ex, Eric. Nice bloke that one. Took your mum and me a while to get our heads around his ... his ...  
“You mean his active bi-ness and cross-dressing fetish.”  
“Yeah, that’s it.” Frank scratches his head, looking a bit lost. “As I was saying, life is complicated nowadays and well, two people from very different backgrounds and different religions that can make things even more complicated.”  
“Right you are, Dad. But when love knocks on your door, you don’t say *piss off* because it’s packaged a bit differently. Now do you?”  
“You girls!” says Frank chuckling. “Guess I’m not doing the best of jobs keeping up with how sophisticated you’ve become.”  
“What do you mean, *you girls*? Has Sara said something to you recently?” I ask, curious.  
“Not recently. A while back she did give me a bit of a talking to, but then she’s the lawyer and it’s no secret she’s been running circles around me for years. Anyway, she ticked me off for making some comment or another about her and Phil adopting a Chinese baby girl; said something about love for an abandoned child not discriminating between color, ethnicity and religion. Of course, she was bloody well right! And so are you, love, I mean to say, whatever package love comes in, you don’t turn around and stamp it return to sender, eh!” He chuckles again. “But now, promise me one thing,” says Frank conspiratorially.  
“What’s that, Dad?”  
“Just don’t tell your mum about him being a Muslim.”

## Guess Who's Coming to Dinner

(That afternoon.)

I'd forgotten how full throttle the parental pair could be in person. Full on to the degree that they remind me of what it might be like to have two Jewish mothers. Though I guess they're that way because of my six-year absence living in America. But from my perspective they try to capture all the missed moments in the same greedy fashion as kids shoving too much food into their mouths for fear that if they don't bog in immediately they might miss out. As far as I'm concerned there's plenty of time to share what needs to be shared; after all, I have three whole weeks here, although two of those will now be chock full caring for Baby.

Beaty and I spend the afternoon in the kitchen making dessert for Christmas day, she asks if I've made a decision about Sara's request. I tell her that I can look after Baby and she's thrilled because it sounds as though she and Frank have done the lion's share. Apparently they've been available at the drop of a hat due to the demands of Sara and Phil's professional lives, caring for Baby when Sara has had to dash overseas on behalf of her clients. I'm glad my support will give Frank and Beaty a break.

Because of our active afternoon cooking, Frank insists on taking Beaty and me out to our local Chinese restaurant for dinner. He says something along lines of, "Can't have my girls wearing themselves out over a hot stove."

Of course Beaty fails to mention that making the Wilson family fave, ice cream plum pud, requires no stove activity whatsoever; she didn't want to deter Frank from fussing over us.

We arrive at the Golden Orchard dripping sweat. It's still 30 degrees Celsius, even though it's 7:30 p.m. Despite the heat, I feel very fresh and cool – in both senses of the word. I have on a Gigi-in-Paris, spaghetti-strapped frock with bare, lily-white shins (unattractively contrasted with a red sunburn stripe down the back of my legs, acquired during that nap on the beach); and a pair of my strappy sandals with a pretty little beaded purse that does not match. Pigs and Bugger!

But that's what happens when you travel – you think you've packed cleverly such that this will go with that will go with this, and inevitably you stuff up to the degree that there'll be a pair of shoes or dress that doesn't go with anything!

Beaty looks very chic for our first family dinner out in a couple of years; fortunately she's washed all remnants of pink zinc from her nose and lost the loud, "welcome home" American/ Hawaiian look. She's replaced it with a florally, Wayne Cooper, organza frock. I suspect he's her designer-of-choice because all girls Beaty's age love Wayne. He's Australia's answer to Isaac Mizrahi but he's a blonde, Brit transplant with wife and kids. So really he's not that much like the dark-haired, gay Israeli transplant other than they both project a sort of golden-boy image, vis-à-vis the surrogate son-type. And for mums like Beaty, who don't have sons, that's all it takes for them to think the Waynes and Isaacs of the fashion world are the bee's knees.

The details of Frank's outfit are not worth sharing; suffice it to say that he has scrubbed up well for an ole, retired dad who, after our chat this afternoon, I'm beginning

to see as very forward-focused and progressive, albeit a tad bit prejudiced à la Spencer Tracy at *that dinner*.

“Come on my gorgeous girls, let’s get into the air conditioning and get some tucker,” says Frank, arm wide in an attempt to herd Beaty and me into the restaurant. “I can see where you get your fashion sense, love,” says Frank admiring me in my summery outfit. “Chip off your ole mum’s block, I’d say.” He nuzzles Beaty, running his hand down the back of her Wayne Cooper, grabbing his favorite bit, her bum.

“Yes well, let me tell you,” I say lightheartedly, “at the airport yesterday, there was no way in hell I would have agreed to the notion that Mum had passed her fashion-finesse gene onto me. I wanted to disinherit you both!”

Frank and Beaty take my razzing well, laughing not at themselves, but at me for taking their parental antics too seriously.

We order a selection of delicious dishes from our Chinese-Australian waitress who punctuates our every request with, “not a problem.” I wonder if in fact there have been a few problems this evening and her repetition of “not a problem” is her way of de-stressing from those apparent problems.

The parental pair sees me furrow my brow when for the umpteenth time our waitress says, “not a problem.”

“It’s the new ‘no worries’, darl,” whispers Beaty, patting my hand.

“Used to be ‘no worries’ up until a couple of years ago,” says Frank. “Don’t know how the change came about, but now it’s ‘not a problem’ wherever you go.”

“Right,” I say, realizing that I am a bit out of touch as Sara, then Beaty have suggested.

So even though when I have spoken, thus far, everyone has understood me, it appears that when everyone else speaks, I may not always understand them, which is a very odd possibility. Actually, it’s very disconcerting because it means that I am starting to lose my mother tongue, the very thing that identifies me as part of a culture with a wonderfully colorful vernacular – will diligently tune in to all new colloquialisms as if learning a new language.)

We finish up with green tea and fortune cookies. Beaty reminds me of the caterer’s-size bag of fortune cookies I sent to Sara and Phil almost a year ago when after hearing from Sara about their decision to adopt Baby, I felt compelled to send a congratulatory gift.

“I knew they’d love the little inserts,” I say sheepishly. “Either that or I thought they’d pop the cookies in one of their Ming Dynasty coffee table bowls and present them to their dinner party guests as, well, you know, as post-dinner party favors.” Beaty and Frank do not look amused. “Give their guests something to talk about, like the fortune on their cookie insert, or the price of antiques in China. Okay, okay,” I say, giving up. “I can tell I’m digging a deeper hole with every word. *Whatever!*”

“Darl, Dad and I are hoping you and Sara might mend that silly nonsense between you while you’re out here, which is why I was so pleased to hear you’ve decided to help out with Baby. I think that will be an excellent bridge-builder.”

“Let’s not go there this evening,” I say, not feeling up for another of those challenging deep and meaningful chats. “So what does your fortune say, parents?” I crack my cookie with anticipation. “Oooh, maybe I should read mine first.”

“Go on then, love,” says Frank.

“It says, *You or a close friend will be married within a year.*”

“Not on my nelly!” says Frank with certainty.

“*Excuse me?*” What was that conversation we had this afternoon all about? I fix Frank with a frosty glare as he fast-fades as the Tracy-esque icon of fatherly love.

“What conversation? Was I there?” Beaty chimes in, determined not to miss out on anything.

“Nothing, love, nothing. Let’s get the bill and be on our way. There’s some coverage on the late news about the upcoming test-cricket match. You know me, can’t miss that.”

Frank motions to our waitress, who, when he asks for the bill says, “Not a problem.”

“That could get bloody annoying after a while,” I say, feeling a foreboding sense of huge problems.

“I think you’re both behaving very strangely,” says Beaty. “Something fishy is going on, and I intend to get to the bottom of it.”

“Good on ya, love,” says Frank. “Let’s talk about that beaut bottom of yours later.”

## Fortune Cookie Musings

(Late that evening.)

Despite the tension at dinner over my fortune-cookie insert, I’m now having trouble calming down, not because of Frank’s behavior but because I’m sensing something.

Between Nikov’s email: *I have sometink to tell you*, and the fortune cookie’s fortune, I’m wondering ...

Think I’ll go ahead and call Nikov now! Maybe, just maybe, I’ll have some happy news to share at Christmas lunch over the ice cream plum pud.

“Yees.”

“Nikky?”

“Tiddy, my kitty, of course it is me. And that is you, I know, because it say so on the cell phone window. How is you? How is your mama and papa?”

“Everything is fine, Nikky. I just feel strange, that’s all. Acclimation issues, you know. Different climate. I mean it is summer here, and humid. I’ve been sweating like a pig since I arrived. I never sweat in Boulder. It’s too dry. It’s a high tundra desert there. Strewth, it’s weird.”

“What is weird, Tiddy?”

“Sweating like this. Makes me feel like a babushka or something.”

“Is not possible, you are too young to be a babushka, and besides, I like the sweat. It smells ripe and sexy, like you my beauty.”

“Oh you, it’s *you* that’s weird,” I laugh. “First your hairy arm-pit fetish and now I’m finding out it’s that *and* smelly sweat. I can’t believe I’m not totally grossed out, well I am, but I can cope because I love you.”



“You do Tiddy? I love to hear this because you know I love you too. Ahh, we are the lovebirds, yees?”

“Yep, that we are!”

“And your mama and papa, is good to see them, yees?”

“Yes, it is. But they’re driving me batty, but that’s to be expected, I guess.”

“Of course! This is because the mama misses you and she just want you close. Is this why you be batty?”

“I ‘spose. And then there’s Frank ... Cripes, he said something that’s really bothering me. I mean I thought I knew my father, but this comment ...”

“Tell me, what did he say to upset my Tiddy?”

“Lets just say he expressed concern about my future, you now how fathers worry about their daughters. Anyway,” I say, changing the subject, “what were you wanting to tell me? Remember your email, *I have sometink to tell you?* Well, I’m all ears.”

“I am laughing. This *all ears* is funny saying. What it mean? You grow big ears since you fly to the land down-under?”

“It just means I’m listening. Now come on don’t be cagey, what did you want to tell me?”

“I have this idea how we stay close while you are gone, you know?”

“No I don’t know, but we do have email and the phone.”

“Yees, we have the phone and you know what we can do on the phone?”

“Are you suggesting what I think you’re suggesting?”

“Is good idea? I know you think so, because I can hear you giggling. You think it will be fun. I think it will be too, and this way we don’t get out of practice.”

“You’re serious aren’t you? Cripes, lemme tell you how thin the walls are around here, okay. I mean not literally, it’s a solid brick house, but think parents that suddenly appear out of nowhere when you least expect it.”

“Excuses, excuses. You find a way. Think about it, okay?”

“Right, tinkin as we speak, mine honey.”

As we hang up, I am smirking with amusement at how pleased Nikov is with his suggestion.

Instead of my initial fantasy along lines of announcing my engagement on Christmas day to the seated familial unit, I’m now envisioning clanking the side of my champagne class with a spoon, pushing back my chair, and standing tall in preparation to toast my happy announcement to the effect of:

*“Family. Lovely day. Wonderful prezies. And Mum, yummy lunch. You excelled yet again. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to slip off to the bedroom where I’ll need privacy. In other words do not disturb me for at least thirty minutes. No popping your head around the door to see if in fact I am in my bedroom. No standing outside my room listening for sounds of life. No yelling for me from the other end of the house demanding an immediate response. You see (eyeballing each family member individually), Nikov said he would call me at approximately three p.m. our time, (build anticipation with very big pause) because, well, we’re scheduled to have phone sex.”*

Here I am in the southern hemisphere, where it's hot and it's almost Christmas!

Yes, we have Chrissie day in the heat here, which means dessert along the lines of pumpkin pie is not *de rigueur*.

Let me just say, when a certain festive season roles around in the northern hemisphere and pumpkin pie begins to appear on menus, in deli cases, boxed at the supermarkets, something odd happens to me ...

I start to yearn with the longing of a misty-eyed émigré for familiar, southern hemisphere holiday food.

I mean for God's sake what kind of celebration is really being had when canned, sweetened, spiced, and mashed vegetable is served up hot in a pastry case masquerading as Christmas dessert?

None of that mashed-up pumpkin à la mode for me – bring on the ice cream plum pud!

FYI: If you've happened upon my blog and you are not an American, *à la mode* on a dessert menu in the U.S. means *with ice cream*.

Really, I kid you not!

And if you are an American and you have no idea what ice cream plum pudding is imagine a heavy, rich, dried fruit filled, steamed pudding in the tradition of an English winter Christmas dessert. Let it sit for a day or two – until it dries out – then chop it into bits, add vanilla ice cream, mix it all together, shove it in the freezer, and voilà, stodgy steamed pudding morphed into an excellent frozen, summer dessert!

And now that you're all lov'n the idea, here is my mum, Beaty's, fave plum pud recipe:

### **Ice Cream Plum Pudding**

1 container (2 pints) of good quality vanilla ice cream

½ cup toasted almond slivers

½ cup chopped red & green maraschino cherries (*My note to Americans:*

*For the best quality, buy imported ones from either the UK or Australia)*  
½ cup sultanas (*My note to Americans: Sultanas are smaller than raisins and lighter in color*)

1 cup mixed peel (*My note to Americans: For the best quality, buy imported ones*)

1 tblsp cinnamon

1 tblsp nutmeg

1 tblsp ginger

½ cup Bailey Irish Cream

½ cup Contreau

**Method:**

Soak raisins, mixed peel and cherries in Contreau overnight. The following day, soften the ice cream, and empty into large bowl. Add the soaked fruits, nuts, spices and Bailey's. Mix well so that all ingredients are sufficiently blended, then spoon mixture into a freezer tray and pop in freezer.

**Old fashioned Brandy Sauce**

(It's old fashioned, coz Beaty inherited this recipe from her mum, granny Ethel, who inherited it from her English emigrant mum, and so we're talking a few generations old.)

2/3 cup water

1 rounded tblsp sugar

1 rounded tblsp cornflour

1 ½ oz. brandy

**Method:**

In a pot mix cornflour and water until smooth. Add sugar. Using a wooden spoon, stir over low heat until thick. Add brandy. Continue to stir over heat, but don't allow to boil. Add water, and or a dash more brandy if it's too thick. Serve hot over ice cream plum pud.

## **Christmas Day**

(The familial unit gathers around the fake Chrissie tree.)

“Do you know, we've had this tree since the girls were toddlers,” says Beaty, to any family member who might be listening.

I hear her, but Baby is hanging onto my leg wiping her nose on my bare skin, which does have a tan now since I've managed a couple of days on the beach with my legs sticking out from under the broly. In other words, I'm too busy eyeing the damage Baby is doing to respond to Beaty's nostalgic comment.

"You okay there, Til?" asks Phil, my brother-in-law. "Want me to grab her?"

"No, no. I'm really quite okay being a human nose wipe, Phil. Makes me feel useful."

Sara and I have talked about me doing my bit as the useful sister, a.k.a. stand-in Baby-minder. She offered to pay me, which of course I balked at. However, just after they arrived today, I did suggest that if she had any transferable miles, she might consider donating them to me so I could upgrade on my return flight. She agreed. I hugged her! Arghhh, I can't believe I did that. But, it is Christmas day.

And then once she had agreed to the miles, I didn't have the heart to suggest she lose the clear panty hose, live a little, and go barelegged. Cripes, who knows, maybe she has scabies or something under those things.

I know about that. I once had the worst leg-wax rash. It was last spring when I was dating dickhead Banks, my celibate *boyfriend* of six weeks. I canceled our planned hot springs romp because of concern that my scabby legs would cause the other bathers to react negatively.

The rash, I thought it would freak everyone out such that they might think I had a highly contagious disease and run screaming, stark naked, from the hot springs pool.

Ewww, maybe Sara does have some weepy skin thing going on. Not a pleasant thought on Chrissie day, yet another hot and humid, summery one.

"Mum and I thought we'd hand out prezzies first, then lunch," says Frank, herding us around the decorated placcie tree, eager to play Santa.

"You know China has been marketing their fake Christmas trees to the U.S. using the destruction of the Amazon and other forests, and global warming as their selling tool," I say, feeling very up on current events.

"Good on ya, love," says Frank. "Here, since you've mentioned that part of the world, give this one to Baby. It's a little bit of China for our little China doll."

I take the gift from Frank and hand it to Baby, who is sitting in my lap merrily tooting composting odors into the fabric of my skirt. We open the gift together and she grabs hold of what appears to be a stuffed toy made in the image of ...

"Um, Dad, what's this Santa's given Baby?" I ask.

"Let me see," butts in Sara. "Ah, well done, Dad! You went to the Victorian Art Center's gift shop as I suggested, and found them. It's a fabric, terracotta warrior doll, Tildy."

"Oh, of course ... *nice*. Cuddly too," I say, watching Baby shove the little faux-terracotta man-doll into her face. "She'll appreciate the thought behind that one. I mean it's far more appropriate than a Barbie, that's for sure."

"She was *born* in that area of China, Tildy, in the valley of the river Wei. She will appreciate the thought behind it soon enough. That doll is a significant part of her heritage!"

"Right, yes you're absolutely right," I say, determined not to ruffle any feathers on Christmas day, particularly not those of my niece's mother, since clearly she knows more about her daughter's country, birthright valley, and terracotta men, than I do.

At this point, I pop Baby down on the floor, swish my skirt about to eliminate the odor, and reach for the gifts I've brought for the family members. I give one each to Beaty, Frank, Sara, Phil and Baby. In turn they open them to find respectively an Isaac Mizrahi spotted silk blouse; a Ralph Lauren Polo shirt; a subscription to *O Magazine*; a pair of neutral tone Dockers; and mix 'n match Baby Gap cotton tees, shorts, pants and a dress.

Ooohs and thank-yous ensue which makes me feel as though I've done a very good job picking gifts until Beaty pipes up and says, "Darling, you are on a China-kick aren't you! I have this habit of checking the inside label of everything these days, you know just to see where it's been made, because I like to try and buy *Made in Australia* or at least *Made in New Zealand* but it looks as though all these things were made in ... well, in China!"

"Probably made in factories where Baby would've been working in fifteen years," says Sara scrutinizing her subscription card. "Where's *O Magazine* printed? In the basement of RL's Macau factory?"

"Okay, can we have a bit of a sense of humor about all the American labels being made in China? Cripes, don't know why I bothered shopping for gifts," I say feeling very annoyed.

"I love my Dockers," says Phil. "And you picked my color." He looks very pleased as he holds them in front of his gray, pressed-linen shorts that bag around his knobby-kneed skinny legs. Even though Phil is a first-class dog, which is why I bought him neutral-colored Dockers, everyone ought to have a champion diplomat as a brother-in-law.

And directing my next remark at Beaty in the hope of winning her over, "And you know, Mum, spots are the new stripes, I mean they're totally today-tomorrow!" There's a collective familial silence. I move right along, "Oh, I have a story to tell everyone about Oprah."

I successfully direct the attention away from Dockers, spots and *Made in China* by telling about my incredibly exciting opportunity to appear on Oprah a couple of months ago. The actual Oprah talk show, with Liz Milton my astrologer that is, until O's people called Liz and said they'd re-considered. Liz was more disappointed than me, since I was only going to appear in the audience as a waving arm and happy face and not on stage as the Guest Astrologer.

"Well, that was awfully big of you to be accepted then rejected and then still want to buy me a subscription to her magazine," says Sara with a smidge of empathy.

Of course, I neglect to tell Sara that the subscription was an apology gift from O's people and that I had them make it out to her so I'd have one less gift to buy.

"I can be big when the need arises," I say.

"And so you can, love. And this Polo shirt's a beauty," says Frank, jumping in as second-place winner as diplomat-of-the-day. Then scooping another couple gifts up off the floor from under the tree, Frank continues with, "So now, looks like we have a couple of gifts to ... *Tildy, and Sara, love from Mum.*"

Frank hands two small boxes of the same size and shape to Sara and me.

"Something for my girls," says Beaty, looking on. "Passed down to me by your gran and now I'm passing them onto you because I think it's time you had these."

Sara and I accept the small boxes and unwrap them. All the while I'm thinking about granny Ethel, who died a few years ago. Beaty still misses her mum. They were close, sharing similar traditional choices and conventional lifestyles as married, stay-at-home mums devoted to homemaking, their hubbies and their children.

On one wall in the den, Beaty has family photographs arranged in such a way that they create a visual family tree. There are newlywed shots, and just-born baby, toddler, young adult, et al., photos going back two generations. Sprouting off newer branches there are baby, toddler, teen, and grown-up photos of Sara and me, and photos of the both of us newly married.

Now there is an even newer Sara-and-Phil branch that includes Baby at the orphanage in China; an emotional Sara and Phil holding Baby at the orphanage for the first time; Baby at six months, seven months, eight months, and next month there will be new photos posted of Baby, Sara and Phil at Baby's first Christmas.

My branch has been pruned back. There are still a couple photos of Eric and me around the time we got married, but not the sub-branch arrangement there used to be – before the divorce, that is. And obviously there are no new offshoots with me as part of a happy family threesome. That part of the family tree is empty.

“Oh, fabulous!” exclaims Sara, lifting a string of pearls from the small gift box.

“Let me see, sweetie-pie. Put them on.” Beaty fiddles at Sara's neck, helping her with her string of pearls.

“Aren't you putting yours on, love?” asks Frank.

“Um. Yes. Right. Granny Ethel's pearls,” I say, doubting that they'll fit. Well, I know they'll fit around my neck. And I know pearls are Cancer's birthstone, but the thing is, I've never thought of myself as a pearl kind of girl.

They look lovely on Sara, who is making an enormous fuss over inheriting the matrilineal jewels. I can't help notice that they match her expensive pearl earrings. With her straight, washed-out hair pulled back with a tortoise-shell clip, and wearing her Country Road, navy-blue linen princess-line frock, she's the perfect neutral canvas for pearls.

While Beaty and Sara bond excitedly, I do my gracious best to share in their enthusiasm, which means I reluctantly put on the pearls. Frank insists on taking a photo of his three girls. Beaty stands in the middle, flanked by Sara and me.

I wished I were somewhere else.

The Chrissie celebrations stretch into a sweltering afternoon encouraging us all to eat way too much ice cream plum pudding. At one point, our familial over-indulgence extends to plopping scoops of iced pud into chilled glasses of champagne for an over-the-top version of a root beer float, minus the root beer.

Frank sojourns to his comfy armchair in the front of the telly for the latest update on the test cricket match, which starts tomorrow, and for a bit of a snooze. Despite the heat, he put on his long-sleeved, blue, white, and green-stripped RL Polo shirt, just for me.

Sara and Beaty lounge on outdoor recliners under the trees in the back yard and talk about ... I don't know what, probably pearls. I did notice that Beaty, madly waving off the flies with a white hanky, had convinced Sara to air her legs – and from my vantage point, there was no sign of any skin issues.

Phil and I pop Baby in her stroller and head down to the beach for a late afternoon swim and a play in the sand. To encourage Baby to keep her hat on and not fuss about the pink zinc on her nose, Phil and I wear Beaty and Frank's turquoise French legionnaire hats and smear pink zinc on our cheeks and noses. Baby insists on carrying her fabric terracotta man-doll, which has quickly become her new best friend. She bursts into loud wailing tears when I smear pink zinc on its face demonstrating the importance of *everyone* having to protect their skin from the ravaging effect of the Australian sun.

I had no idea small children could be so particular about the aesthetics of a beloved stuffed toy.

Phil forgave my error, but by the time we arrived at the beach, Baby was still sulky and not at all inclined to accept her auntie's hand for a wade in the water. I hope that little incident does not portend difficulties for me looking after her.

As Phil and Baby head to the water's edge to do their thing my cell phone sounds from my beach bag. Second to his crooning, "Happy Christmas my Tiddy cat," Nikky said in a terribly seductive voice, something so naughty it can't be repeated.

I promised I'd call him tomorrow.

## Boxing Day

(December 26<sup>th</sup>.)

I'm sitting in front of Frank's computer in the den eating a breakfast of fresh fruit and leftover ice cream plum pud while at the same time googling *Christmas beetles*.

Frank and Beaty aren't up yet, which is surprising since it is eight a.m. and stinking hot, yet again. Expect they're having a bit of a sleep-in because Boxing Day, the day after Christmas, is a national holiday. Except for professional sports people, i.e. cricketers, who are readying for a day of entertaining the masses with their heroics.

When I told Nikov that I would call him on Boxing Day, he'd sounded confused. He'd not heard that term. I explained it was a carryover from the days of British influence and had found its origins in the tradition of the manor house landlords giving their staff boxed gifts the day after Christmas.

"Is odd, Tiddy, this name of Boxing Day," he'd said, and I agreed.

But some names stick and some traditions and names mutate, "like my name and plum pudding," I'd told him. Then I directed him to my Blog for further clarification on morphed puddings.

Apparently I was channeling theme mutation because last night I had a particularly restless sleep due to too many champagne floats probably, and to the heat and the humidity, and to a very odd dream.

I dreamt that I had tried to give granny Ethel's pearls back to Beaty. But Beaty didn't see or hear me. She was oblivious as I held out my palm in which sat the string of pearls, even when the lustrous little beads caught the light and shimmered for a moment before metamorphosing, right there in my hand. In their place appeared a ring with an iridescent beetle as its centerpiece. End of dream.

So here I am researching the Christmas beetle because the one on the ring in the dream reminds me of said beetles that appear during the summer months to feed on the leaves of Eucalyptus trees in the parents' backyard.

I'm surmising the beetle ring is a metaphor for receiving a summer Christmas piece of jewelry, but somehow that analysis doesn't feel very satisfying.

Google comes up with a picture of a Christmas beetle along with its genus name, "scarab beetle." I shove more ice cream in my mouth, google scarab beetle and see that they are also known as dung beetles. Those worker insects that spend their busy little lives breaking pats of animal dung into tiny balls that they then roll away and bury in soft earth for the purpose of creating a nice moist spot in which to reproduce.

Oh great! Sara accepts the matrilineal pearls because they go with her twin-set image and way of life and I try to give them back because they don't fit, and what do I get in return, a ring that presumably represents me.

"That'd be bloody well right ... Tildy, the shit shover. And why not, after all, I've scooped doggy poop for pay, so why wouldn't I dream about giving up pearls for a beetle that cossets bits of dung. Crap!" I slam my breakfast bowl down.

Beaty overhears me talking to myself as she bypasses the den on her way to the kitchen. "Morning, darling, who are you chatting to?"

"Nothing, just ruminating over a dream I had last night," I sing out.

"More penis dreams?"

"Actually no, it was about shoveling shit this time."

"What are you girls talking about?" queries Frank on his way to the kitchen.

I follow Frank to the kitchen table.

"Gawd, I feel a bit rugged this morning," says Frank, plopping down into his usual chair. "I think we overdid it yesterday."

"Yes we did indeed," agrees Beaty. My tummy doesn't feel the best and it sounds as though you're bowels are a bit troubled, Tildy. Didn't you sing out that you have the shits?" She looks at the empty bowl I've brought in with me from the den. "I think we all ate too much ice cream, that's the trouble."

"What were you doing in front of the computer so early, love?"

"Googling scarab beetles," I say, feeling sorry for myself.

"Let me see, the scarab beetle?" Frank's brow furrows as he ponders hard.

"Didn't the ancient Egyptians think it a symbol of rebirth? Out of the dung come the newly hatched young?"

"Resurrection then?" chimes in Beaty popping bread in the toaster.

"No, it's just an ordinary old shit shover," I say despondently.

"You're wrong, love, it's more than that. I think the scarab probably had significance because it took base matter and turned it into something else."

"Transformation!" cries Beaty. "That seems more appropriate than resurrection, doesn't it? But hang on ..." she grabs the side of the bench and leans into it.

"We're hanging on, Mum. Do you want to finish that thought?" I say, wondering if she'll come up with any more bright ideas about the symbol of my life as crap.

"Don't think I feel well. Touch of over-indulgence. Frank, make me a cuppa would you, my love? Strong and black, that ought to help. I think I'll just pop back to bed for a bit."



Beauty takes her crummy tummy back off to bed. Frank makes a strong pot of tea and I potter back to the den and the computer.

### **www.Tildyblog.com**

There once was  
a feline named  
Tiddy  
who for Christmas  
received a  
dung beetle.

Due to her taste for the  
best,  
she disliked her  
bug gift  
feigning horror at the  
pooh 'tween its back feelers.

Over breakfast next morn  
her father, no less,  
said there's more  
to your gift  
than you  
realize.

What more? cried she,  
could there be to a beetle  
other than bug,  
insect,  
or  
creepy-crawly.

Much more indeed,  
said her father  
displeased  
for the Egyptians  
saw the dung beetle  
as Godly!

Like the sun  
during the day,  
the dung beetle  
rolls away  
balls of pooh as  
life-giving as sunrays.

But what does this mean  
for a girl cat that's keen  
on clothes,  
ice-cream  
and her sweet  
euro-beau?

Like a dream it's unclear,  
except that it seems  
the habits of  
dung beetles  
might mean  
transformation.

## Gut Rumbings

(Boxing Day unfolds.)

“Love,” says Frank, walking into the den as I finish up on the computer. “There’s no need to be alarmed, but I’ve insisted that your mum let me take her to the hospital.”

“What!”

“I told Mum I think it best that we have someone listen to her gut. She’s in a lot of discomfort and I know I’d feel better if we had a professional assess her.”

“Cripes, Dad, you’re kidding? Is her crummy tummy that bad?” I ask feeling concerned.

“It’s probably nothing, but I as I said, I want someone to take a look at her.”

Shortly thereafter we pile into the old family car. I sit in the back on the driver’s side behind Frank, where I always sat when I was kid. Beaty sits in the front and rests her head against the window. She refuses my lightweight cardie when I suggest she shove it under her cheek.

“It’s too hot,” she groans. “The glass is nice and cool on my cheek.”

Frank pats Beaty’s knee then looks over and smiles at her. Without turning her head from its resting spot on the window, Beaty’s left cheek wrinkles upward.

Several metallic-blue blowflies are clustered in the upper corner of my backseat window. They thrive in the heat and humidity; it’s conducive to them breeding and then growing to a size easily described as obese for a small flying insect. I mean the blowies in front of me are about three quarters of an inch long and at least half that around!

Every summer – when the flies are out in droves – Frank loved to tell the story about how the Chinese eradicated their flies by mandating all citizens with full swatting rights. He was certain that if Australians exercised their swatting rights – exterminating every fly in their vicinity – the national summertime fly problem would be eliminated. In response to Frank’s comments, Beaty would express concern for the birds, who without an important member of their food chain, might not survive.

I open the window and let the blowies escape. A gush of sticky hot air whooshes in from Royal Parade, bringing with it a whiff of eucalypt from nearby Royal and Princes Parks.

When we were kids, Beaty used to take Sara and me to Princes Park for Saturday morning tennis lessons. Our dog Pug came too, to keep Beaty preoccupied with walkies while Sara and I failed miserably to connect racket to ball. Afterward, we often had a picnic out of the sun under one of the native gums, but not out of reach of the pesky blowies. Annoyed by the flies swarming around her food, Beaty would wave her napkin about and in sheer exasperation occasionally thump one to the ground, finishing it off with a resounding whack administered by the heel of her sandal.

“Got it!” she’d exclaim triumphant, and then she’d feed the dead fly to Pug.

Picnics were the one occasion when Beaty’s love of eating, particularly outdoors, outweighed her concern for the birds.

We pull into the Royal Melbourne Hospital, and check Beaty in. Frank and I wander into a waiting room in the emergency area, prepared to kill time until we have word on Beaty’s condition.

“Well at least they’ve got the cricket on the telly,” says Frank, sounding relieved at the prospect of losing himself in front of his favorite sport.

“Nothing like a bunch of blokes swinging a bat at a ball to keep your mind occupied during times of crises,” I say facetiously.

“What was that, love?”

“Dad, don’t worry, Mum’ll be fine,” I say, falsely assuming that Frank wants to get lost in the cricket so he can distract himself from worrying about Beaty. “I’m sure it’s just a bad case of indigestion, heartburn or something. I read somewhere that big eating days like Christmas and Easter – you know, religious holidays – well apparently, emergency rooms admit the most cases of gastric-type issues because of people eating too much.”

Frank pays no attention.

“Wonder if it has something to do with food being life giving,” I say. “Like the idea that eating is bliss and thus a direct path to God and hence the reason we have such big meals at times like Christmas.”

I stare hard at Frank wondering if he’ll engage.

“Right, I can see you’re not interested, I say tersely. “I guess discussions about the symbolism of beetles and food, etcetera are on the agenda only when *you* feel like it.”

I watch and wait for a response.

Nothing.

“DAD!” I yell at Frank to see if he’s still alert and present, or if he has in fact, completely severed all connections to this planet.

“Sorry, love, what are you saying?”

“I was saying, well never mind what I was saying. Do you want a coffee or tea?” I stand, preparing to perambulate the hospital café.

“Coffee? That’d be beaut, love, make mine black, two sugars. Do you need some change? Strewth! You beauty!” Frank yells at the telly, forgetting he was about to dip into his wallet. I leave him to it.

Beaty has been under observation for about forty-five minutes now. Meanwhile, I've had a cappuccino and Frank has had his sweet black coffee and conducted an ongoing intimate affair with the TV.

In the manner of a dutiful daughter, I'm sitting by him pretending to be equally enthralled by the cricket. But I'm wondering how much longer I can keep up the charade of interest, and how long it will be before we can collect Beaty and head home. At least I have my cell phone with me, which I'm punching a text message into in the effort to occupy myself.

N  
at hospital  
mama has pain  
papa has TV  
wish I had u  
T

About thirty minutes later my phone sounds. And as I hoped it's Nikov responding to my SOS message.

"Nikky?"

"Is me, my Tiddy cat. What is wrong with the mama? This message I read, it does not sound good."

"I don't know what's wrong. I'm a bit worried, Nikov. Everything was going along fine and then wham! Beaty winds up in hospital with gut pains."

"Love," Frank jabs me in the arm.

"Hang on, honey," I say to Nikov. "Dad is nudging me." I look at Frank. "What is it, Dad?"

"Go outside and talk, would you? You're nattering is interrupting my concentration."

"Oh for God's sake, you and that bloody cricket!" I sound off in such a way it's clear I'm totally annoyed with Frank.

"*Tiddy*, is no way to talk to the papa," says Nikov.

"Oh yes it bloody well is, I can't believe him!" I say, walking out of the waiting room. "He's obsessed with the frigging cricket and right when I want to talk to him about ... about. I mean Beaty is having tests and stuff done for who knows what and ... and ..."

"Is okay, is okay, you are stressed," he croons. "You talk to me then if the papa is busy. Maybe you find a nice quiet room there in the hos-i-pital," he says, "a room with the walls thicker than the walls at the mama and papa's house. Yees?"

"Oh cripes, how can you think about sex at a time like this?" I say in a hushed voice so that any persons about won't be able to hear.

"The sex is a very good way to de-stress, my Tiddy. Hmmm?" He purrs in my ear and I find myself wandering around looking for a vacant room.

## Room Service

(Fifteen minutes later.)

“What am I wearing? Well, today ... gawd, I can't believe I'm carry on like this while Beauty's having her tummy prodded.”

“Tummy! Oooh, yees, my beauty, tell me about that soft, round tummy of yours.”

“Okay, okay. But hang on. First, I was going to tell you what I'm wearing. Oops ... shush ... don't talk for a sec.” I listen for sounds of footsteps outside the empty hospital room. “Coast is clear. Now, give me a minnie while I look around for one of those Do Not Disturb signs.”

“What you doing? Is not hotel room, kitty.”

“Hello, I know that!”

“So just lean against the door so no one come in, and then tell your Nikky what you take off.”

“Off? Um. Okay. So I'm leaning into the door, well I mean I'm pushing my bum up against it and I've just kicked off my stilettos sandals, you know those lovely little strappy ones.”

“Yees, I remember. The one's you wear the day you pretend to be the model of the underwears by Victoria? I like this day. You look very, very sexy in the heels, the panties and nothing else. So you are naked now except for the shoes and the panties?”

“Not exactly,” I say, staring down at my azure and orange frock. “I have bare feet though, and well, as you know I don't like to wear a bra with the Versace coz it has that bodice that fits bra-snuggly around the boobs,” I say. “Ooh, and honey,” I croon, “I haven't shaved my underarms in three whole days!” I know the image of a bit of underarm hair will stir him into a frenzy.

“Hmmm, I can see you, my beauty. The naked feet, the naked legs, the tummy, the large bare breasts ...”

“Stop! Don't ruin it and mention *large*,” I say peeved. “I've been eating pig-at-trough fashion since I've been here and I've put on pounds. Cripes, all my flabby bits are jiggling more than usual, it's just gross.” I'm momentarily preoccupied inspecting my flabby flesh.

“Tiddy, don't do this. I love the best, the wobbling parts. You know this. Is the most beautiful part of you, the tummy, the thighs, the bosom, is what make you such a woman.”

“Oooh, you're lovely, you really are, honey. And you know the bits about you I love the best, hmmm?”

Right about here I lose myself in wonderful lewd images of a naked Nikov rolling around in my bed, caught up in my crumpled RL sheets looking every bit the uber-sexy manly-man that he is. As if spontaneously manifesting that very image, all at once I find myself rolling around in the white hospital bed sheets – albeit nasty starched, thin cotton sheets – phone adhered to my ear, and having abandoned all caution moaning like the kitty in heat that I am ...

“So what's seems to be the trouble? Sounds like you're in quite a bit of discomfort.”

“What?! Whoops! Hello,” I say, peering at a woman standing over me in hospital skivvies.

“Who is it Tiddy? What is happening?” asks Nikov, sounding concerned.

“Nothing, I mean the nurse has just arrived, so I better go now. Bye.” I hang up the phone and pull myself together. “Discomfort? Yes, you’re right. There was. But now there isn’t. It’s gone. All gone. Sudden fleeting episode, I guess.” I smile innocently at the nurse.

“Well you pressed the call button so it must have been bad enough that you felt you needed immediate attention. So let’s have a look.”

“Call button?” I look about puzzled.

“Right here, by the bed,” she points.

“Oh, *that* call button,” I say. “Huh, I don’t remember pushing it, but it’s highly possible, I mean I was squirming around quite a bit.”

She stares at me oddly. “During that sudden episode no doubt. Where’s your patient chart, love?”

“Patient chart? Oh, right. My chart! You know, I think I remember the last nurse taking it with her when she left,” I say nonchalantly.

“Tell you what,” she puts her hands on a pair of matronly hips, makes direct eye contact and stares at me knowingly. “I’m gunna wander back down to the nurses’ station and ask about the patient chart for this room. And if no one knows anything about it, well then, neither do I. Get my drift?”

“Absolutely!” I say, matter-of-factly. “I think we’re on exactly the same page.” I pull the scratchy white sheet up over my bare shoulders.

“Nice shoes,” she says looking at the floor as she heads toward the door. “And pretty colors in this dress.” She picks the Versace off the floor, tosses it on a chair close by, and then she’s gone.

## Prognosis

(Shortly thereafter.)

Fully clothed, composure reinstated, but nevertheless slightly unhinged, I quickly head back to the waiting room and Frank.

“Love, whereyabeen?” asks Frank, apparently frazzled.

“Oh ...chatting to a nice nurse.”

“‘Bout Mum?”

“Um, no. ‘Bout other stuff.”

“What stuff?”

“*Girl* stuff, Dad!”

“It was about Mum, wasn’t it?”

“No, actually it wasn’t.”

“Now come on love, don’t be like that, I’m starting to get worried. I’ve been sitting here waiting and no one has come to let me know what’s going on.”

“Maybe someone did, but you didn’t notice because of the cricket!”

“You’re a smart one aren’t ya,” says Frank not smiling.

I feel like a heel for being cheeky since Frank really seems edgy now.

“Look,” I say. “I had a brief interlude with a nurse who made pleasant remarks about my shoes, dress and ... that’s it! So let’s go and see if we can’t find out where Mum is and what’s going on, shall we?”

Frank and I start to head off in search of information when a familiar face appears. “That dress is just as pretty on you as it was on the floor.” She gives me a wry grin before continuing, “So love, are you Beaty Wilson’s daughter?”

“Yep, she is, and I’m Frank Wilson, the husband. How’s my wife?”

“Holding up,” she says, army-nurse fashion. “She had a mighty bout of Christmas gut. We see a lot of that this time of year. Extreme indigestion and heartburn from over-indulging.” She glares at us as though we’re a family of gluttons. I fold my arms over my bulging tummy.

“So then that means she’s okay,” I say, deciding not to mention what we ate yesterday, i.e. the champagne floats.

“Yep, she’s fine. But the doctor has advised her to watch her diet.”

“What does that mean?” asks Frank, needing it spelled out.

“It means we all need to cut back, Dad,” I say, and then my phone sounds.

While I answer it, army nurse imparts the finer details of the suggested diet for Beaty to Frank, and I speak with Nikov. “Can’t talk now, honey,” I say. “I’m busy ... We’re talking to the nurse ... Yes, the same nurse ... No, different room ... The *waiting* room ... Absolutely not! ... Because this is a public waiting room and I’m *busy*. I’ll call you later ... *Yes, later.*”

I turn to Frank and army nurse ready to reengage.

“Different room. Same man?” enquires army nurse, not missing a beat.

“Actually, different man,” I lie.

“My, my, you are busy!” she says.

## **www.Tildyblog.com**

As the year recedes, I’m busily purging the parental pair’s fridge and freezer, their cake and biccie tins, of rich and tempting edible treats.

Here at the Wilson family home in Port Melbourne, we are on a fast!  
And I don’t mean a *fast track*. After all it is the summer holidays, which means no one does anything fast, hence the popularity of cricket.

Instead, I mean fast in the sense of a diet of food abstinence, also known as nothing to eat.

That’s right, nothing. Except for water. Warm water spiked with a twist of lemon.

Frank, Beaty and me, and all the warm, lemony-water cocktails we can guzzle. Doesn’t that sound like a recipe for a rollicking good New Year’s Eve wingding?

Throw in my panty-hosed sister, Sara, her Docker-wearing hubby, Phil, and Frank's paper party horns, and what have you got?

A veritable rage-a-thon!

Speaking of recipes, remember the ice cream plum pud blog? If you haven't already made it, don't!

I repeat, Do Not make and then eat that gut-clogging, artery-blocking, non-digestible, ice cream dessert. Unless, unlike my familial unit, you can consume food in moderation. The "Healthy Heart" definition of moderation: one scoop of ice cream per sitting, once per day.

The Wilson family definition of moderation: four scoops of ice cream per sitting, twice to three times a day, washed down with several glasses of alcohol during at least two of those sittings.

It's easy to see why we're on a fast.

And why have I chosen to share this with you, dear readers? Well, the countdown to New Year's Eve has begun. When I next log onto to this Blog it will be 2006.

At that time, I do not want to see your musings posted on *my* blog site about the frigging fab food you ate, the great parties you threw or attended, nor the incredible distances your champagne corks popped!

I don't want to know. Okay!

Cripes, you'd be bloody grumpy too if all you had to look forward to on the eve of December 31<sup>st</sup> was a glass of ruddy lemon water!

Subject: **Feeling deprived**

Date: Saturday, December 31<sup>st</sup>

From: "Matilda Wilson" <TildyWil@aol.com>

To: Isa\_Rubenstein@aol.com

Isa,

Where are you? You haven't responded to my last email. If you don't email and tell me what's going on then it will be your fault entirely that my emails will be choc full of gos all about me.



Anyway, the breaking news is I haven't had food in days.  
Frank and Beaty are starving me.

But don't worry.

I'll be okay.

Til

## **Baby On Board**

(January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2006: At Sara and Phil's house for Baby daycare.)

Sara has just dashed out the door with Phil in tow. As she was leaving, she tore off her full-coverage apron, shoved a list of to-do's and what-not-to-do's as well as a cereal bowl at me.

It's eight a.m., breakfast time. Baby is in her high chair staring at me. A look of consternation plastered across her sweet little face. I'm supposed to feed her the remains of her soggy cereal. It appears that most of the kiddy swill is over Baby's face, on the floor, and I see bits on the wall and floor to her left. Noting this, I make a mental note to stand to her right.

"Here comes Auntie Til with a spoon of yummy brekkie," I say, going for Baby's mouth.

She giggles and squirms at my silliness. And sure enough, her right hand hooks left, intercepting the spoon, which flies out of my grasp splattering on the floor, just missing my feet.

I grin at my niece who is clearly very pleased with having foiled my plan to feed her. "Yummers! Floor just loves cereal, doesn't it?!"

Topping that effort, she then wipes all evidence of cereal from her tray table also onto the floor.

"Cripes, that's the stuff, fling it everywhere so auntie Til has to bloody well clean the yuk up."

Realizing this could be a long day I take a deep patient breath.

"I know, let's call Porka, shall we. He'll Hoover this up nicely."

I fling wide the French doors that open from the kitchen onto the landscaped backyard and sing out for Porka.

Sara's pet Beagle is a tubby dog, reminiscent of our childhood family dog, Pug, whom Sara fed from her dinner plate when Beaty wasn't looking. Feeding the family dog human food outside of regular pet meal times is a long-standing, Wilson family tradition.

Porka comes bounding in, nose leading him straight to the breakfast remnants on the floor and the wall.

"Beautiful. Who needs a vacuum cleaner when a porky pet will do just fine."

I put the bowl of cereal aside and lift Baby out of her chair, turning her so that her back cradles into my tummy and her food-coated front is clear of contact with me. But she's a squirmy girl, and she swivels in my arm managing to wipe her globed-up bib across my abdomen.

"Huh! I know you, you did that to test Aunty Til."

Baby grins a gummy, two-tooth smile at me.

"You thought that just because I'm a fashion-forward clotheshorse, unlike your mum, that'd I'd get upset by a bit of food smeared onto my clothes. Well I tricked you, because I borrowed one of granny Beaty's Target tees in anticipation of a dirty day."

I toss her into the air playfully. Another glob of cereal loosens from her bib and splats onto my forehead.

"Shit!"

I wipe my face with the side of my arm while holding Baby between my hands. She's within grasping reach of my hair and of course she grabs it with her caked fingers.

"Okay, okay, I give up. Aunty Til doesn't want to play food-fights anymore. Let's move on to something less grotty."

I've been at my sister's house less than one hour and already I have food adhered to my clothes, knotted in my hair and fast drying on my arm. The kitchen floor, wall, and Baby's high chair are a disaster area, despite Porka's best efforts at Hoovering. And now the greedy Beagle is retching as though he's going to redeposit onto the kitchen floor that which he's just guzzled down.

I'm about ready to pack it in when the phone rings. "Hello, Sara and Phil's residence, Human Food Scrap speaking."

"That bad, is it darling?"

"That it is, Mother. Here, listen to this for some peace of mind. *Not.*" I turn the phone toward Porka, who is on the verge of throwing up. "Can you hear that?" I ask.

"I do wish Sarah would refrain from feeding that dog chocolate, it never agreed with Pug. Why she thinks Porka will fare any better is beyond me."

"It wasn't chocolate, just breakfast scraps, but let's not talk about the ruddy dog and its digestive problems. Instead, why don't you tell my how your digestive track is doing this morning," I say.

"Well I had my glass of warm lemon water shortly after you left and I'm going to try some solid foods later, but darl, I didn't call to talk about me, I called to see if you were managing. I know you've been thrown in the deep end over there and you do sound a bit stressed, which doesn't really surprise me since you were never even able to manage your dollies when you were a little kid."

I shove the phone against my ear with my shoulder, reposition Baby on my hip and look around for something to wipe down the walls around the high chair; I can tell Beaty is winding herself up for one of her big chats.

"Even though your dolls were soft, mute and toilet-trained somehow you still got yourself into a terrible stew caring for them when really all they needed was a nice spot on your bed and the occasional cuddle. Heavens above, I remember once you pretended to bottle-feed your rag doll and because it wouldn't burp, you became inflamed and frustrated and subsequently tried to flush the thing down the toilet. I discovered you,

head in the bowl, yelling at that dolly that if it didn't do what it was supposed to do and burp, you'd keep pressing the flusher."

"Gee, thanks for remembering that, Mum. Sounds like what you're saying is that my general incompetence with kids goes waaay back."

Baby starts to grizzle with boredom, then lurches back and lets out blood curdling, banshee scream. I jolly her about, coo pacifying noises and generally do my best to calm her. Porka is taken off-guard by the sudden racket and starts to bark in unison with Baby's wailing.

"That's sort of what I was trying to say," says Beaty, apparently listening intently to all the carryings on in the background. "But doesn't mean you can't change. Darl, what you need is to settle down and have one of your ..."

Bloody hell. Here we go. Next thing she'll be on Sara's doorstep with my Chrissie pearls insisting I wear them and at least *look* the part.

"Gotta go Mum, Baby and Porka need my full attention. Bye."

## Market Outing

(Two days later: Walking to South Melbourne's undercover market.)

Baby is nestled in her stroller looking heavy-lidded and finally ready for her afternoon nap, which for the past hour she refused to settle into, despite rigorous coaching from her grumpy aunty. In other words, I put her in her cot, shut the door to her bedroom, and stood outside listening to ceaseless crying, until it got the better of me.

I decided a stroll would lull her into the sleep she needs, and soothe my nerves. True to my preparedness-type self, I have one of Sara's mummy-totes attached to the stroller and it is filled with all manner of paraphernalia that will help me deal with Baby's every demand. Really, this is all quite familiar, since it is reminiscent of the doggy daycare days when I couldn't take the girl pooches anywhere without loading up with doggy accoutrements along lines of jerky snacks, Frisbees, water (for me), Tidy Dog poop bags etc., etc.

Of course walkies with Baby doesn't require a whistle around my neck, a leash in my hand, nor dried pigs' ears – that's because I've left Porka at home scoffing up some stale chocolate.

Sara suggested this trip to the market because she needs her shopping done and because there will be lots to look at both for Baby and me. Frankly, I thought an afternoon at the beach might have been more entertaining, apropos half naked men to perv at while wadding Baby at the water's edge. But the sister feigned total panic at the idea of having to pick up groceries on her way home from work. So I acquiesced with an ulterior motive in mind. I reminded her of those frequent flier miles she's going to transfer into my account.

At this point we're negotiating how many. I said enough for an upgrade on the return flight to Boulder, plus another 60,000 for an international flight. I'm thinking some sort of exotic vacation later this year. Maybe Nikov and I will fly to Switzerland to visit his family.

I'm so glad that after leaving Croatia they chose to live in such a neat, tidy and economically civilized county like Switzerland, versus, say, Boulder, where they might have done that new émigré thing and all squeezed in with Nikov. I do appreciate that Nikov and I can have private time at his house without his father, mother, brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, et al, hovering in the background. I mean, really, forget having a romp on the kitchen table, when come the next mealtime, twelve people have to sit down to eat off the spot where naked revelry just happened.

But Sara balked when I asked for the extra miles, suggesting an upgrade or miles, but not both. Nonetheless, round two of negotiations will continue when she proposes that I pick up the dry cleaning that she dropped off on her way to work this morning. And if we have to go three rounds, it'll be over her musty Ming dynasty antiques that she had the gall to insinuate I give a bit of a dust while Baby napped.

The market is about a twenty-minute walk from Sara and Phil's house. They live in a very upscale and desirable neighborhood. It has been designated that because it's close to the beach and the general business district of Melbourne's inner city; in addition, the two-hundred-stall market is close by. On top of all that, they're only five miles from the parental pair – the free help when I'm not about.

I can see a hub of activity up ahead. Crowds of people are milling about taking in the afternoon scene. I peek over the top of the stroller's sun canopy and see that Baby is soundly sleeping from the motion. She has her stuffed, Chinese terracotta man-doll wedged in her armpit. The pink zinc still smeared across his fabric face. I'm hoping she'll stay asleep for a little while longer as I suspect the market buzz will cause her to wind-up in the manner of a jack-in-the-box such that at some point my pint-size niece will explode from over-stimulation and I'll have to cope with another episode of arched back behavior and banshee wailing.

Oooh, Sara was right. There is a lot to look at. Melbournians are out in droves sporting summer tans and an air of holiday repose. Can't say that I have a sense of our sister city, the style-capital Milan, influencing the cheery populace's choice of outfits. Shorts, T-shirts, and flip-flops and an interesting selection of sun hats seem to be the fashion-statement of the season. Suspect that has to do with the fact that most of these bods are on their annual holidays and not inclined to wear anything more than beach-cum-casual wear.

Personally I can't understand that. I've made the most of this outing and changed from my daggy, frau-at-home outfit into a very chic skirt, and a matching, cleavage-enhancing micro-fiber tee. I'm hoping no one here will notice that I've made a very scary fashion statement by walking here in Sara's Nikes. Next to feminine chic, Nike runners are not a good look!

Must remember to throw back in Sara's face that many of the babies her clients won't be adopting will grow up to a life working in Nike factories – in other words, will make her feel guilty for being unconscious about her choice of footwear labels.

Now, as fate would have it, I'm standing in front of a shoe vendor. I think it's destined that I'm to buy a new pair of shoes.

“Excuse me, where are your shoes made?”

“Italia,” says the octogenarian market stall owner with an accent.

“Milano?” I ask.

“No. Outside Milano in the hills. There we have the best leather craftsmen.”

“Excellent! Because I want to steer clear of anything that might be made in a sweatshop,” I say.

“Not a problem,” he says.

“Right, well as long as it’s not a problem,” I say.

“Is not a problem!” he says gesticulating and raising his voice slightly. “You like a shoe, you try it on and then maybe you buy it. This is good for me. So is not a problem.”

Baby grizzles in her stroller. The animated conversation with the Italian shoe vendor has stirred her. I bend down to see if she’s awake. It appears she’s not.

“Is your bambino?”

“No she’s my niece.”

I can see him thinking hard. “You take her around the corner there,” he points down the row of stalls, and beyond I see the food vendors. “To the take-away. Is very good dim-sim.”

“Dim-sim. Right, you mean the food of her tribe?” I say.

“I don’t know what you talking about,” he says, raising his voice again. “But you see, the kids love the dim-sim.” And then he rests his aged gaze on me. “So, young lady, you buying my shoes or not?”

## Briefly Preoccupied

(A little while later: Wandering in the direction of the take-away food vendors.)

I’m terribly pleased with myself. I have on a very smart pair of made-in-the-hills-outside-Milan soft leather, urban walking shoes. At the market’s retail price, they were an absolute steal. So I’ve bought Sara a pair too, with her grocery money. A different style and color than mine so we won’t look like twins if we walk anywhere together.

I’ve also taken the liberty of tossing her Nikes. I just can’t get my head around her supporting greedy corporate strongholds, vis-à-vis *that* brand. But once I bring her awareness to the higher road of choice making – that is, supporting Italian leather craftsman in the hills outside of Milan – I know she’ll realize I’ve done her a favor.

I mean who needs groceries when you can wear lovely and comfy Italian-made shoes!

Oh, but it is fun here. The whole place is bustling with energy and a multi-cultural feel. Love how Melbourne is the southern Europe and Asia of Australia. And the delicious variegation of aromas now emanating from the ethnic take-away stalls is just divine. I’ve taken my shoe vendors advice and I’m steering Baby’s stroller toward the Asian food area.

Whoops, there’s my cell phone ... “Hello.” I put the stroller brakes on and then turning around, I prop the stroller handle into the small of my back.

“It’s me, girlfriend. Happy new year!”

“Oh my God! Oh my God! It’s sooo good to hear from you. How are you mummy-Rubenstein?”

“Til, I’ve told you not to call me that, it’s so totally nerdy.”

“And your point being?”

“That I’m not a nerd!”

“Are so.”

“Not.”

“Are.”

“*Not*. And shut up Til, I’m not wasting my minutes doing this.”

“Damn, you always get the last one in. But you’re right. Let’s talk about sensible, grown-up, and mature things. So, what’ll we talk about?”

“Well I got your pathetic, call-for-help emails. Geez, Til, you’re on vacation! It’s summer, you can sleep in, nap whenever you want. For God’s sake, what’s your problem ya big whinny-butt?”

“Not sleeping, Isa?”

“How’d you guess?” she says, sounding despondent. “CG is an eater, but not a sleeper. I’m going round the twist.”

“Hmm, that’s not good.”

“You’re tell’n me, girlfriend. I don’t get enough sleep, my nipples are killing me, my scar still hurts, I have some bladder incontinence, and then when Greg comes near me all I want to do is chop it all off!”

“Bloody hell! Overshare, Isa! Total overshare!”

“Overshare! You haven’t heard the half of it,” she yells.

“That’s okay, I got the general picture. So tell me about the good stuff. How’s your cute boy doing? Besides that he’s not sleeping.”

And off she goes, prattling on about CG and his daily progress. All the while I’m leaning back into the stroller handle gazing around at the sea of people, feeling slightly hypnotized by the smells and colors, the warm breeze, the droning sound of the surrounding voices, and Isa’s voice droning in my phone ear.

“How am I doing? Oh, we’re switching gears and talking about me now?” I say.

“Yeah, I’m switching gears. Did you think I didn’t care that you’re fading away to nothing on lemon water,” she chuckles.

“Well, it wasn’t funny at the time.” I say. “But I’m eating again, and that’s what I’m about to do, once we hang up. Baby and I are at this fabulous market and we’re going to have some yummy dim-sims. Aren’t we Baby?”

I walk around to the front of the stroller and bend down to see if she’s awake and ready for a snack.

“Shit! Oh shit, shit, shit! FUCK!”

“Til, what is it?” says Isa.

“Fuck, Isa, she’s not in the stroller!”

“Who?”

“Baby my niece. She’s not in her stroller! Oh Christ, Isa, she’s gone. I’ve got to hang up and call for help.”

“HELP.” I yell on the spot at the top of my lungs. Everyone within my immediate vicinity stops and stares. “Has anyone seen a pint-size Chinese girl? She’s a one-year old, probably clutching a fabric terracotta man-doll with pink zinc smeared across its face. She’s my niece.”

I start to cry.

“She was in her stroller, asleep.”

I'm really blubbering now.

"Did anyone see anything?"

I look out at the faces staring back at my wracked-with-panic-and-guilt, tear-streaked face.

"Don't worry, love, we'll find her," says a man stepping forward. I'll call market security right now; we'll get someone over here ASAP." He flips open his cell phone and in seconds is talking to someone.

A couple of women are suddenly by my side. An arm goes around my shoulder and one around my waist.

"I was only on the phone for a minute," I say, totally bawling now.

One of them produces a Kleenex and says kind and comforting things.

A security bloke arrives and asks twenty questions. He shoots instructions via his cell phone to additional security staff. I get the sense they're really on the ball. And from what he tells me, it sounds as though it's not uncommon for parents to find themselves separated from their tots at Melbourne's markets, which means they're very much used to searching out and finding tiny lost people in huge crowds.

Because Baby is only a year old and just walking, security bloke suspects that some creep plucked her from the stroller while I wasn't looking.

This piece of information horrifies me.

In fact I don't think I will ever be able to talk on my cell phone in a public place ever again. I will forever have terrible guilt feelings associated with such activity. Now, as I think about Baby in the arms of a creep, I don't feel guilty as much as totally and completely sick.

I will just die if anything happens to her.

If I don't die, Sara will flail me, chop me into tiny pieces and feed me to the seagulls. And chances are the seagulls will refuse to eat me because I'll be rank, untouchable meat, which means she'll turn around and sell me as fouled shark bait.

Vivid images of bits of me being feed to hungry sharks with lifeless eyes flash through my mind as security bloke puts his hand under my elbow and leads me through the lingering onlookers.

"Where are we going?" I ask.

"Back to our offices, love, we'll need to call the parents, have them bring over a recent photo."

"The parents!" I choke. "No! I mean let's not call them yet. Um, let's call the grandparents." I say, anticipating that Beaty and Frank's wrath will be a little easier to deal with at this moment.

"Not a problem. We'll call the grandparents then."

"For fuck's sake," I spit, "this is one instance where that bloody idiom is bloody well idiotic! Wouldn't you agree?" I direct my question straight at him. "Wouldn't you agree that what we've got here is a HUGE problem? And thus quite the contrary to NOT a problem! Huh, huh?"

"Now come on love, calm down. I know you're upset."

"Upset!" I wave my arms about and people stare unashamedly. "Shark bait, mate, I'm shark bait! Now that's the kind of problem I'm anticipating, *especially* if we call the mother, my sister."

“Yeah, love, heard ya the first time. We’ll call the granny, not a problem.”

We walk by the dim-sim vendor and I burst into tears all over again.

“We were coming over here to have dim-sims. This is where the Italian shoe vendor said I should bring Baby for a snack because apparently the kids love these dim-sims.” I wipe my tears on my micro-fiber tee. It has tearstains all down the front and now fresh ones on the shoulder.

“They do, love, best in Melbourne.”

“Really,” I say, “well I think I’ll get a couple, for when Baby turns up. She’ll want a snack. It’s her afternoon snack time, you know. Cripes, I wish I could stop crying.”

“That’s okay, love. Have a cry; get a dim-sim, whatever you need to do.”

I order several dim-sims from the Chinese take-away food vendor. I tell the woman what’s happened and she seems to understand, though her English is not the best. Nevertheless, I describe baby and her terracotta man-doll with the pink zinc face and suddenly she smiles a knowing smile.

“Ah, Chinese baby with doll. She go by. She crying and screaming. When I look up and see her, I think, she need dim-sim!”

“Go by? Go by when? Who was she with?” I can’t contain my need for this woman to tell every detail she can remember.

Security bloke is right there with even more questions. Our Chinese dim-sim vendor says Baby was throwing herself about and really screaming. I cry and smile at the same time, because I know for certain that she’s talking about my niece. It’s unclear who was holding her, but it doesn’t matter exactly, at least wherever she is, she’ll be making her presence felt with those terrifically healthy lungs.

Ranting into his cell phone, security bloke gives direction to his staff apropos this latest information. I’m clutching a brown paper bag containing three dim-sims. They smell awfully good. They’re a bigger version of Chinese dumplings. I asked for them to be steamed because I suspect they’ll be easier for Baby to gum in her nearly toothless mouth than the crispy, typically fried version.

Now that there is a renewed sense of urgency to move fast, security bloke asks that I call Beaty and Frank immediately and have them meet us as soon as they can.

I do what I’m told, but with some trepidation.

Frank answers the phone and despite what I tell him, he’s cool and collected to the degree that I think there’s something wrong with him.

“Are you okay, Dad?”

“I’m fine love. You’re mother and I, we’ll be right there. I have a couple of shots from Chrissie day, Baby hugging the doll we gave her,” he pauses and I detect an emotional moment, “the other shot is a close-up of Baby on Phil’s lap. Do you think they’ll do?”

“Perfect, Dad. Love you.”

“Love you too, love. See you shortly.”



## The Longest Wait

(Sitting in the market's security offices.)

From the vibrant colors, smells, and open-air experience of the market to a small, claustrophobic white room; it doesn't help being on my own in this dim space with only six scratched-up aluminum chairs with gray plastic bucket seats for company. So I stand at the one open window, willing the shuffling hordes two-levels below to distract me. It doesn't work. The backdrop of a quiet room has incited Fearful Sub-Personality into a frenzy of loud negative chatter to the degree that I suddenly shriek, "Would you just shut up about the bloody shark bait!"

"Who are yelling at?" asks Beaty walking toward me, arms outstretched for a hug. "Myself."

"I do that too, when I'm mad at myself." She hugs me extra tight. "Dad's talking to the security people; he's showing them the photos you asked him to bring."

A few minutes later Frank appears looking grim. We sit and stare at each other until Beaty breaks the silence.

"Darling, what happened?"

I relay the details for the parental pair.

"What was your friend from Boulder doing calling you at three in the afternoon our time?" Beaty asks fretfully. "That must have been late at night over there. She should have been in bed asleep."

"She's a new mum, Mum. Her baby isn't sleeping, so she isn't sleeping."

"Why couldn't she have called someone else? Doesn't she have any other friends?"

"Love, let it go," says Frank, patting Beaty's hand.

"No, I don't want to let it go," says Beaty, slightly hysterical. "If that woman hadn't called Tildy, then we'd have Baby. She wouldn't be missing, Frank!"

"You mean if I hadn't been talking on the phone everything would be okay. Isn't that what you're trying to say, Mum?"

"Let's not start blaming one another, that'll get us nowhere," says Frank. "We're sitting here and not at home, because the security blokes have made it pretty clear they'll find her in no time and they want us to be here when they bring her in. They've called in the South Melbourne police ..." Frank is suddenly distracted. He sniffs the air. "What's that smell?"

"Dim-sims. They're for Baby," I say miserably.

"They do smell good," says Beaty, showing interest.

"They're steamed," I say. "Apparently they're the best in Melbourne."

"I don't like them steamed," says Beaty.

"Doesn't matter, you can't have them anyway. I'm saving them for our girl," I say. "She'll be hungry."

"Let's have a little something to eat," says Frank, "it'll take our mind off things."

"I was preparing the ingredients for a fruitcake, for you to take back with you, Tildy, before we dropped everything to rush over here," says Beaty.

"Fruitcake? You don't need to make me a fruitcake, Mum."

“I know I don’t *need* to, darl, but I *want* to. I’m making it with extra glacé cherries. I know how much you love those.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because there are little holes in the fruitcake I made and sliced for us for Christmas. Looks like a mouse has nibbled at it.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying you picked the cherries out.”

“That wasn’t me!” I lie.

“Yes it was darl, that’s why I’m making you your own Chrissie fruitcake with extra cherries.”

Beaty smiles over at Frank knowingly.

“Christ, I can’t believe at a time like this we’re obsessed with food. Something is wrong with us. Do you know what I’m saying?” I glare at the parents.

“There’s nothing wrong with any of us. We’re a very normal, very stressed and anxious family filling in space with food chat in an effort to not think about things. Just like your father said.”

Beaty pulls a Kleenex from her bag and pretends she’s blowing her nose as she mops up a couple of stray tears.

Why don’t you go and buy us some dim-sims,” says Frank, positioning himself closer to Beaty and giving her hug. “We’ll stay here. They seem to want us to be here, so we’ll stay put.”

“Fine. Food it is. Fried for you, Mum, and what about you, Dad?”

“Your mother shouldn’t have fried.”

“Oh Frank, I’ve been following my diet religiously, I’m sure one fried dim-sim won’t hurt.”

“I’ll just get a combination, some fried, some steamed, and you can figure out what you can and can’t eat when I get back.”

## Angst Driven

(Trolling the market for signs of Baby.)

Beaty and Frank can stay put and wait it out, as instructed by the security bloke, but there’s no way I can join them in a family circle of hand-wringing and mind-numbing chat about bloody fruitcake and damn dim-sims. Sure, I’ll get them their snack; however I’m going to seize this opportunity to search for signs of Baby independently of the police and the security blokes.

Strewth, this place is teeming with sweaty, stinky humanity! Even so, I must not allow myself to be deterred. If I can just focus, maybe scan every small person I see. It helps that Baby has a shock of fine black hair that stands on end as if she were plugged into an electrical socket, though I’m noticing a lot of like-hair on Asian kiddies sitting in strollers and perched on the hips of their Vietnamese and Cambodian emigrant mums.

Good thing I changed her into one of the mix ‘n match Baby Gap Chrissie outfits. It’s certainly more striking than the food-stained, utilitarian romper-suit thingy Sara had in her when I arrived this morning.

So I'm looking out for two little plump, bronze-skinned legs poking out from pink and chartreuse checked gingham roll-up shorts, and little arms extending from a bright pink cotton tee emblazoned with brighter pink and chartreuse print butterflies. I left her tootsies bare because of the heat and because I didn't think she'd be out of her stroller tottering about.

Oooh, wherever she is, hope she doesn't have to hobble barefooted. But she'll be doing just that if whomever she's with has put her down on the ground.

Surely they won't have her walking. Because I mean she's only been walking on her own for a couple of months and thus she's still very much in need of a big helping hand.

"Darl, are you okay?"

A young woman is by my side. No doubt she couldn't help noticing me standing deathly still, anguished face scrunched up tight, staring at her toddler.

"Actually, I'm not okay. I've lost my baby niece and I'm fast-forwarding to complete and utter hysteria because ... well you'd know why, you're a mother." I look at her toddler again and then back at her.

"Jesus, darl, did you alert the security fellas?!"

"Yes, yes, did that. But I have to do something other than wait on them to do their job. It's the waiting it's bloody dreadful ... Ohmygod, is that her? I think I see her!"

I ricochet off in the direction of a bloke with a dark-haired bronzed tot in a jogging stroller. I catch a glimpse of what could be a dolly with the baby, or maybe it's a teddy, I'm not sure.

"Excuse me!"

Grabbing the back of the bloke's T-shirt, I pull him to a stop.

"Hey, fair go!" he snaps.

Ignoring him I peer around into the stroller where a little boy is slumped in sleep, a teddy nestled by his side. "Sorry mate. False alarm."

"Listen, ya gunna git yourself in trouble grabbing at blokes like that."

"I wasn't grabbing, I was *looking!*"

"Felt like a grab to me," he says, staring at my boobs.

"Don't go there, mate," I say.

"Yeah well, it wasn't worth it anyway."

"Oh, and excuse me. Pig!" Disgusted, I walk off.

I start to feel a headache coming on. The heat, the humidity – my senses are overloaded. Despite the feeling of complete overwhelm, I continue dashing about in a harried fashion, accosting complete strangers asking them if they've seen Baby, desperately trying to hold onto hope when everyone I speak with stares blankly back at me.

Not wanting to give up, I do wonder if in the bigger scheme of things my efforts are useless and that perhaps my time would be better spent doing what I initially set out to do.

## Family Meltdown

(Returning to the security offices with a bag of fried and steamed dim-sims.)

“Darling, you’re back!” Beaty announces my reappearance as I walk into the security office waiting room. “We’re all here now.”

“Yes, I can see that,” I say, looking nervously from Sara to Phil and back to Sara. And before I can say anything else, Sara leaps to her feet and rushes at me.

“Why didn’t you call me *immediately!*” she snaps loudly. Her face is within inches of mine. It’s contorted in the manner of a madwoman hell bent on exacting revenge. “You know, you’re bloody unbelievable, Tildy. You’re so ruddy self-absorbed it doesn’t surprise me that something like this happened!”

“Now girls,” Frank intervenes.

“Shut up, Dad!” yells Sara, glaring at Frank.

“Sara, don’t speak to your father like that,” retorts Beaty, standing up.

“Come on Sara, let’s step outside for a while,” says Phil, sounding drained.

“NO!” She pushes Phil off brusquely. “Everyone, stop treating me like a tragedy victim!” She runs her hands through her hair. “I don’t need anything to eat. I don’t need a ruddy Kleenex. I don’t need any fucking fresh air. I ... I just want my Baby.”

She starts to cry. Little sobs at first, then her body shakes and she’s heaving and sobbing, heaving and sobbing. Phil grabs her and hugs her tight. I go to put my arm around her too and she thumps my arm with her fist.

Beaty grabs for Frank and begins to weep silently onto his shoulder.

Each of my family members has a partner to hold tight.

I’m holding tight to the bag of hot dim-sims.

I feel sick again.

“I don’t know what to say,” I mutter. “I just feel terrible.” I glance over at Sara and Phil, hoping to goodness that I’ll see some sign of forgiveness that might allow me to forgive myself.

And then my cell phone rings.

“Don’t you dare answer that bloody phone,” growls Sara. “If I see that damn thing I’ll chuck it out the window.”

“FUCK the phone!” I bark. “Hell, let me just chuck it out the window myself.” I rummage in the mummy-tote hanging off the back of the stroller. “Here it is the goddam culprit.”

I take one last look at my phone and see that it was Nikov who just called, and marching over to the open window, I stand a moment, and then with the motion of a top cricket bowler, I throw it with all my might.

Frank, Beaty, Sara and Phil watch transfixed.

There’s a momentary eerie silence after all the weeping and shouting. And in that moment it’s as though the Wilson family has been collectively released from our despair such that with the apprehension and destruction of the perpetrator, justice must prevail: Baby will be safely returned to the bosom of her family.

All at once the silence is broken. From below the window someone screams at the top of their lungs, “FUCK! Who the fuck threw the phone!”

## Redeemed

(Within minutes of hurling the phone out the window.)

There's a commotion outside the office where we're gathered, in particular loud voices. The family glares at me and I at them.

"Oh shit," I spit. "Now the stupid bugger who caught the phone on his head is here to press charges."

Sara ignores me, and suddenly, as if driven by instinct, she races for the office door and rushes out into the hallway. Shortly thereafter, we all hear what she must have heard, a whimpering sound, building into a wail.

Phil follows, then Beaty, Frank and me.

Next to a burly police officer and a security bloke, a petite Chinese family of four huddles close together. The youngest of the group – a girl of perhaps sixteen – holds Baby whose back is arched in preparation for the banshee yowl that's been on the build.

Sara grabs Baby from the young girl and buries her into her flat chest, weeping tears of relief into Baby's tuft of wiry black hair. But loving and protective mummy-arms do not stop Baby from discharging the biggest screech imaginable.

"Cripes, this baby really screams a lot," says the young Chinese girl with an Australian accent. "A man walked by our veggie stall with her, and she was screaming so much and so loud that he stopped, put her down on ground and then he ran off, leaving her behind."

"That's my girl," I say, breaking into a soft smile. "She's a screamer."

Nobody acknowledges my comment because everyone is preoccupied by the happy reunion. And so no one appreciates how truly grateful I am for the healthiness of my niece's lungs, her inbuilt survival mechanism – her saving grace.

We assemble in the dim, white room again, this time with Baby. The Chinese family is ushered into another room with the police. Security bloke assures us that their story is correct. That once the market stalls closed at four p.m., about forty-five minutes ago, they packed their remaining vegetables into their van and went in search of someone to help them find Baby's family. One of the police officers found them first and briskly ushered all four to the security offices. Now they must officially relay their story before they can leave.

Upon hearing this, our relief is so enormous there is not a dry eye amongst the Wilson family unit.

There is no denying it, we Wilsons are weepers and screamers.

Security bloke has his secretary bring us a round of teas with milk in Styrofoam cups and finally it feels like the right time to crack open the two bags of dim-sims.

After all, we're also good eaters.

"Darl, did you get the fried one for me?" asks Beaty.

"Listen, my love, I really don't think you should have anything fried," butts in Frank.

"Dad, it won't kill her. If Mum wants fried, let her have fried, I mean we are celebrating," I exclaim. "Sare, I bought Baby steamed, I thought she'd be able to gum steamed easily."

“You haven’t called me Sara since we were, well ... since we were kids.” Sara is kissing Baby’s head and I can feel her soften as her moist eyes focus on me.

“I haven’t, I guess. I must admit, names aside, mostly we just jab at each other these days.”

“Now girls,” says Frank, imagining he’s going to have to intervene.

“Oh my,” says Beaty ignoring Frank’s comment, “they’re cold. I’m not at all fond of cold dim-sims. In fact, I think I’d prefer a piece of my fruitcake with this cup of tea.”

“Well we don’t have your fruitcake with us, Mum, so cold dim-sims it is.” I say, taking charge.

“As far as I’m concerned, it’s the best afternoon tea I’ve ever had,” chips in Phil, and picking up Baby from Sara’s lap he nuzzles her tummy with his head. She giggles and shows us all a two-tooth cheeky grin.

“Yes it is,” says Frank. “And here’s to many more of the same.”

## **[www.Tildyblog.com](http://www.Tildyblog.com)**

When I return to Boulder from the home country, I’ll be carrying excess luggage in the amount of at least eight pounds.

That’s approximately a pound per thigh, two around the tum, another two stuck to my bum, one per boob; and my underarms appear to be wobblier than when I left.

Don’t laugh! This is not funny.

Oh, and all that extra poundage does not include the ruddy tin of heavy-weight fruitcake Beaty is insisting that I bring back as carry-on.

Bloody hell, what a pain! Navigating four airport terminals lugging a five-pound fruitcake is not my idea of a good time.

Not to mention the trans-pacific schlepping will be a waste because guess what? I’m not eating any more fruitcake. Well, not once I’m back in Boulder, that is. By then, I’ll need high-caloric food like I’ll need a hole in the head.

I mean for God’s sake, you’d think Beaty would have noticed that her shapely, well-proportioned visiting daughter has, since visiting, come down with *fat cow disease*.

I kid you not.

After a few weeks holidaying with the parental pair, scoffing food like

a hungry pig-at-trough, I have turned into a fatty.

I can hear it now. Best friend, Isa, will greet me with one of her comments along the lines of, "I see you've transformed your hormonal cow disposition into fat cow disease."

Strewth, do I sound like *Bridget Jones* or what?!

Gawd I hate that, blathering on about one's weight in the manner of a neurotic chubby person obsessed with the misnomer that less body fat equals being more lovable.

Nikov won't even notice that he'll have to stretch further to get his arms around me. The mere suggestion that I've become a large chunk of jiggling jello will simply cause him to stand back and admire my new additions with the fervor of a man in love with all of me.

I must remember this next time Fearful Sub-Personality plays havoc with my self-esteem drawing unwanted attention to my flabby bits thereby insinuating that I define myself by my fat parts, rather than the greater whole that is me.

Oooh, I feel a ditty coming on:

Post-Chrissie pounds abound  
So what's new?  
They turn up every year  
Just about now.

No point lamenting being fat  
That's not cool  
Self-doubting Bridget-types  
Are misguided dupes.

Wear your new additions  
With great aplomb  
Confidence in your body shape  
Reaps just rewards.

## Backyard Barby

(The following weekend.)

Sara and I discovered that with a bit of effort, we're quite capable of being civil to one another. Not only that, the additional piece of good news is she loves her made-in-the-hills-outside-Milan, urban walking shoes.

I thought she'd be furious that I spent her grocery money on footwear. But it seems I can't upset my sister these days. (Although I haven't told her I binned her Nikes. Nor have I told her that because I sacrificed my cell, I've used her home phone to call Nikov several times and Isa once). I won't take any credit for her good form however, I know it's because Baby is healthy, happy, and safe.

Actually, we're all happy. The Wilson family good cheer is so full on that Beaty suggested we celebrate. And so we are. In fact we've invited Baby's finders, the Wongs, to a backyard barby and it's this evening.

As the party commencement hour draws closer, Beaty is terribly worried that Mr. and Mrs. Wong and their two children, Jill and David, won't eat barbequed lamb chops. Never mind that it's a sweltering 35-degrees Celsius with 80-percent humidity and that hot lamb chops are probably not a good menu-choice in such conditions.

Sara wanted to have the Wong barby at her house, so she could showcase her musty Ming dynasty antiques to people she feels will fully appreciate them. But Beaty thinks that as emigrants who have an Asian vegetable stall at the South Melbourne market, the Wongs might find Sara and Phil's obvious wealth (as indicated by an adopted Chinese daughter and a house filled with valuable Chinese artifacts), a bit in-your-face along lines of *look at what we could afford to buy from your country*.

I decided not to enter into that debate. What would I know? I mean my place in Boulder is filled with made-in-China Pottery Barn stuff, which is probably what the average home in China is filled with too: cheap, made-in-China stuff.

Instead, I've chosen to debate the menu for this evening.

"I think we should have some sort of fish thing instead," I suggest to Beaty. "Fish with salad, maybe some boiled white rice, followed by fresh fruit and ice cream. But you can't have any ice cream, doctor's orders, remember?"

"Fish you think?" she says in response. "Well I'm not going to do prawns on the barbeque so we end up looking like an advertisement for the average Australian family. I don't like the way Paul Hogan and that other crocodile bloke from Queensland have represented us as a nation of people with a peculiar accent who spend their weekends hovering around the backyard, throwing shrimp on the barby. Really, I mean to say."

"What are you saying?" asks Frank.

"Dinner this evening, Dad, I think fish would be a good idea. We can't go wrong with fish for the Wongs."

"Good on ya, love, that's a beaut idea. What about I drive across town to our favorite spot and get an extra big helping of fish 'n chips."

"Crikey, no," I say, feeling short-tempered by the parent's lack of appropriate menu planning. "It's too hot for greasy fried fish 'n chips. What about you pick up some nice *fresh* fish, Dad, and we barbeque that? I mean we do live right on the ocean."



“I think that’s a good idea, darl. Off you go then, Frank,” says Beaty, waving him toward the front door. “I’ll call Sara and let her know we’re all organized and that we’ve decided on something light and fresh and Chinese-friendly.”

Sara, Phil and Baby arrive around five. For some ridiculous reason, Sara has decided to wear a plum-blossom, silk brocade Chinese-styled dress with her new urban walking shoes. At least the tan color of the shoes picks up something of the color in her dress. And of course she’s wearing granny Ethel’s pearls.

But the killer is she has Baby in a miniature version of the same dress. This gives the odd appearance of Sara, as the Caucasian mother, trying to emulate the culture of her Chinese daughter. I decide this is Sara’s attempt to make an impression on the Wongs.

“You know the funny thing is, I couldn’t find my Nikes,” says Sara catching me staring at her feet.

“Ah,” I say, nonchalantly. “So you were thinking you might wear your *Nikes* with that dress?”

She doesn’t catch the disdain in my voice.

“You don’t like our dresses, do you?”

Sara kisses Baby’s cheek and I sense she really doesn’t care what I think.

“To be honest, you both look, um ...” I struggle a moment, “very Chinese-friendly. In fact the whole evening will be Chinese-friendly. The Wongs will feel right at home,” I say. “Pity none of us speaks Mandarin.”

“Well I do,” says Sara in all seriousness. “I’ve picked up some basic greetings and phrases.”

“Right, of course,” I say, deciding to edit a smart comment that’s on the tip of my tongue.

“Tildy, I’ve gone ahead and deposited the miles you wanted into your frequent flier account. I really am grateful for your help with Baby and the house ...” she pauses.

I don’t want to interrupt her train of thought because I can’t believe she’s actually come through with the miles.

“I have noticed that you haven’t done the dusting I asked you to do, though,” she smiles. “But with the shock of almost losing Baby, something happened to me: I realized the importance of family, and the importance of setting aside pettiness, and well, I just want you to know that I love you.”

“Whoops,” I say, losing my balance. “Ugh, these heels.” I look down at my strappy stilettos searching for something to say in response. “That’s very generous of you to give me all those miles, and really, I’m loving looking after Baby. I think she’s just the most adorable screamer.” I smirk at Baby, poking her in the tummy.

“You know,” says Sara, thoughtfully, “why don’t you go to China with those miles. See where Baby is from.”

“Who’s going to China?” Frank walks through our conversation, loaded down with barbecuing equipment.

“I’ve just suggested Tildy think about it, that’s all,” says Sara.

“Let’s not talk about Tildy going anywhere,” says Beaty butting in. “She’s only with us for another week before she goes back to Boulder. This evening, I’d rather focus on my family being here, and being together.”

## New Family Friends

(The Wongs arrive.)

The Wongs pull up in a Mercedes. Mrs. Wong and Jill are wearing incredibly colorful outfits, emblazoned with Australian bush motifs, by Chinese-Australian designer, Jenny Kee.

They both make odd faces when they see Sara and Baby in matching plum-blossom mandarin collared, silk brocade dresses.

We sojourn to the backyard for drinks and getting-to-know you chat. Over champagne, and a soft drink for Jill, we come to find out that Mr. and Mrs. Wong are very successful market gardeners and business owners. Their son David is at Melbourne University studying Political Science; and daughter Jill goes to an expensive private school and has her heart set on studying law also at Melbourne University.

Sara, of course, is all over this. I suspect she feels she is in the presence of a suitably well-heeled surrogate family for Baby.

“You know, I’d love to have you over to our place next time,” she says, looking directly at Mrs. Wong. “Phil and I have the most superb Ming dynasty antiques.”

The Wongs are very responsive. Apparently their other business is importing fine Chinese artifacts for exclusive clients, like Jenny Kee. Mrs. Wong says Jenny has several exquisite pieces including a late, nineteenth century hand-carved mahjong set, which she acquired on Jenny’s behalf.

Frank and Beaty are a bit dumbfounded by the business savvy and acumen of our guests. Beaty pulls me aside and whispers that she’s concerned we might appear very ordinary and unworldly to the Wongs.

I suggest she not worry because Sara, who keeps throwing in the occasional word in Mandarin, and Phil who’s up on all things Ming, are doing a beaut job of representing the Wilsons as more than just your average, bay-side suburban family.

“If you play your cards right, Mum, maybe Mrs. Wong might be willing to expand your horizons, you know, teach you mahjong or some such game.”

I say this in the hope that Beaty will consider extending her Scrabble game-playing to something new and different in particular, something non-spelling and non-grammar-related.

The barbequed fish is a huge hit, and Frank is elated that he has been able to impress our guests with such a simple meal.

“To tell you the truth, the menu was Tildy’s idea. Wasn’t it, love?” he says, responding to the generous and flattering comments made by the Wongs about the dinner.

“And Tildy,” says Mr. Wong focusing on me. “Tell me, where do you live and what do you do?”

I volunteer something of my story, the more industrious side. I want to uphold the impressive impression Sara has projected with her list of accomplishments and semi bi-lingual talent.

“And are you married with children?” asks Mrs. Wong.

“Ah, no.”

“Boyfriend?”

“Yes,” I say, glad that I can in fact report that this is something normal about me. “As a matter of fact I’m involved with another very hard-working individual, an Eastern European emigrant who owns and runs his own restaurant in Boulder.”

David pipes in with: “War refugee?”

“You’re right,” I say, realizing that not much will slip by these folks.

“So he’s Muslim then?” says David.

“Right again.” I say, knowing that if I tell a lie, David will probably challenge me with an informed perspective.

All at once there’s the sound of plates shattering. Beaty, who has just cleared the table and headed indoors along the concrete garden path, has dropped everything.

“You okay, Mum?” I sing out. And getting up from the conversation I race over to her.

“What did I just hear you just say?” She stares at me aghast.

“What you heard me say is exactly what I said, *Mum*.”

“Yes, I feared that. Frank,” she sings out over my shoulder, “would you help me in the kitchen, my love? I need an extra pair of hands to dish up the fruit and ice cream.” Then looking at me: “If you wouldn’t mind picking up this mess from the garden path, I’d be most grateful.”

Sara and Phil are busy entertaining our guests. Their conversation has segued back to the topic they all have in common: China.

I busy myself clearing the mess from the path, dumping the shards of plates in the outside bin, electing to steer clear of the kitchen and the parental accord, which is no doubt brewing on the dangers of inter-religious relationships and the resultant threat of globalization by non-Christians.

Within a short period of reintegrating into the discussion at the outdoor dining table, Beaty and Frank appear with a tray of plated fruits and a large tub of rich, vanilla ice cream.

“This is so very kind of the Wilson family to host a dinner for my family,” says Mr. Wong graciously. “We are very happy your Baby cried so loud that she found her way into our care and that we found you through her. Our home is always open to the Wilson family, both here in Melbourne, and in Hong Kong.”

Mr. Wong lifts his glass of champers and we all follow with a round of *cheers*.

“And,” he continues, “I would like also to apologize on behalf of my son David,” Mr. Wong looks directly at me, “for any unhappiness that he might have caused by intruding upon your privacy and asking our kind hosts’ daughter personal information about her boyfriend.”

“Ice-cream anyone?” asks Beaty, brusquely changing the subject and handing out individual plates of tropical fruits.

Everyone has ice-cream and I notice Beaty scoops three spoonfuls onto her plate.

“Mum,” I whisper, I don’t think you should eat that.”

“Oh shut up, Tildy,” she snaps.

## Parental Accord

(The days following.)

The mood when I'm around Beaty and Frank is one of tension and dis-ease.

Bottom-line, since Saturday night's barbeque, they have been sidestepping the big issue, which they might as well have emblazoned on neon Post-it notes stuck to their foreheads as "disapproval." That's what my sensitive Cancer antennae are picking up. That, and the fact that Beaty really hasn't said anything to me since she snapped, "Shut up, Tildy," has led me to believe that Nikov's ethnicity and affiliation with Allah are causing the parental pair great consternation.

Even though Frank was apparently coming through as the all-loving and tolerant father, it seems Beaty has swayed him to reconsider and join her side.

Additionally, it appears they think that the silent treatment, a.k.a. withholding of parental affection, will cause me to rethink my wayward ways, fall out of love, and dump Nikov.

Yeah, right, like that's gunna happen!

At this point, I have no doubt they're suffering more than me, Beaty in particular. I mean I only have a few more days before I leave to return to Boulder, and I just know she wants to have some last minute, quality mum-and-daughter time on the beach under the brolly, drinking tea, eating fruitcake and perving at budgie-huggers.

But wayward daughter that I am, because I happened to fall in love with a man who escaped being ethnically cleansed – never mind that he's wonderful to-boot – I've decided to let them anguish for a bit. My philosophy is that children should always let their parents learn the hard way, i.e., by making poor judgments and suffering the consequences.

Baby and I have been having a great time, though, well sort of. On Monday, I washed her fabric, terracotta man doll. The pink zinc I'd applied to its face had collected so much lint he looked like a dust rag I'd used on Sara and Phil's Ming dynasties. Unfortunately, having applied some stain remover, he came out of the wash without a face. All his painted-on facial features, and the pink zinc, had been rinsed away.

Baby screamed bloody murder when I deposited man doll back in her possession. I guess she didn't recognize him. And true-to-form, at the sight of a stranger, her in-built, fear-based survival mechanism kicked in full throttle, which set off Porka to the degree that the only thing I could find to settle them both down was some stale Cadbury's.

I'm not stupid. I know why Sara keeps the moggy old bits of choccie in her pantry.

On Tuesday afternoon Baby and I met Jill Wong at South Melbourne beach. Jill is very fond of Baby, and babies in general. And bless her heart, having listened to me tell a story at the barbeque about the market dim-sims, on the way to meet us at the beach, she picked up a bag of three and some mineral water. Over dim-sims and Perrier, Jill told me she thinks I'd be a great mum. I told Jill I didn't see myself the way she did.

"Why?" she asked.

I didn't have much of an explanation for her.

But I did say, “I’ve noticed that Sara has this instinctual response to Baby. For instance, when you all turned up at security with Baby, Sara leapt to her feet moments before anyone else realized you were outside. It was as though she had a pre-conscious sense of Baby’s presence. And whatever that is, I don’t think I have it.”

“Is that why you lost Baby?” Jill had asked naively.

“Not exactly,” I’d said, thinking that Beaty was more on target with her insinuation that my cell phone call had been too distracting. “But in a way it might be part of what happened,” I’d continued. “I guess if I was just more tuned in to babies in general, I wouldn’t have let happen what happened.”

Jill picked up on my sorry-for-self comment and suggested that despite what happened, and my feeling that I wasn’t wired for motherhood, I would still make a good mum.

I responded by saying that I would leave being a good mum up to the likes of her and Sara, since obviously they both had that special something that Isa also had: an unquestionable desire to be a mum.

It’s now Wednesday evening and Beaty is obviously bursting to break the silent treatment, so she does: “Your father and I need to have a serious chat with you, Tildy.”

“Okay,” I say. “When and where?”

“Right here and now,” she says, serving up dinner and motioning that I sit.

Frank joins us. He sits close to Beaty and they both stare at me through the top of their bi-focals. I notice feral, wiry gray hairs on Beaty’s head angled toward Frank’s wiry grays in the manner of antennae transmitting and receiving.

“So, have you come to your senses,” I say, cheekily. “Do you see the error in your judgment?” I fully expect them to say *yes*.

“Darl, I’m sorry, but your father and I feel you have made a grave mistake falling for this fella.”

I don’t hear much beyond that.

Over the last few days, Frank had obviously defected and that meant the parents had paired up against me on the one thing that I had hoped they would be pleased about: their eldest, divorced daughter was happy because she was loved and in love.

## **Sudden Departure**

(Thursday January 12th: The early hours of the morning.)

None of us sleeps well after our difficult dinnertime conversation, no doubt due to emotional stress and once again, the bad food combining.

Beaty had tried to soften her authoritarian mode by producing her all-time best dessert: dark chocolate-covered meringue Pavlova topped with lashings of clotted cream and strawberries. And that was after creamy, spaghetti carbonara.

My mother should not have eaten all that rich, heart-attack-in-every-bite food.

But she did.

And so did Frank.

And so did I.

In fact, we three gluttonous Wilsons managed to scoff every string of the prepared spaghetti, and then the whole pav. In the pav alone there are approximately six egg whites, one cup of sugar, one big block of chocolate and a twelve-ounce jar of double fat cream.

And we ate that between us. Cripes, how disgusting. I think we have some food issues, such as we eat too much of it.

Is it any wonder then that we are all up at three a.m. feeling incredibly bilious?

“What are you doing?” I say to Frank, wandering bleary eyed into the kitchen.

“Mum needs a strong black tea,” says Frank, putting on the kettle.

“Another bout of crummy tummy? I can just see that army nurse rolling her eyes at us if we end up at the hospital again.”

“Don’t think it’s that bad, love. She’ll be right after her cuppa.”

Frank and I sit at the kitchen table, waiting for the kettle to boil. We don’t say anything, nor do we hear anything other than the kettle. When the kettle boils, Frank makes a pot of tea and then he sits again while it brews.

“I won’t ask you if you’d like a piece of fruitcake with your tea.”

“Oooh gawd, not funny,” says Frank. “Look, love, this is all very difficult for your mum.”

“Yes well, it’s not my fault she doesn’t have any will power.”

“I’m not talking about her over-indulging, although I’ll give you that, her will power isn’t too good. What I mean is that she’s having a difficult time coming to terms with the choices you make.”

“You’re not wrong there. But why didn’t you stick up for me? I thought you were getting your head around Nikov. Hmmm?”

“I tried, but your mum, well she’s a hard one. And I love her, and hate to see her so upset. She needs me, we need each other.”

“You mean you don’t want to rock the boat on my behalf.”

“Got me there,” he says, looking at the pot of brewing tea. “Crikey. What a mess, eh? Well, I better get that cuppa to Mum. You go on back to bed.”

Frank leans over and kisses my forehead. He then pours Beaty’s tea and shuffles off. I follow him out of the kitchen and head to my room.

Flopping down on my bed, I’m hopeful I’ll fall asleep. But my mind is busy with thoughts about getting back to Boulder, to Nikov especially, and Isa and the other friends, all of whom I’ve missed.

Only a couple of days before I leave, and now that I have all those extra miles, I might just upgrade to business class for the return trip.

Imagining the comfort of those very roomy partial recliners, the impossibility of my neighbor’s elbow intruding into my space, and the extra special in-cabin crew attention is lulling me into a state of blissful semi-consciousness from which I have a sense of distant ... yelling.

“Love! Love!”

With the second “Love,” I’m fully awake. Frank’s voice is filled with alarm.

“Call an ambulance!” he yells.

“Ambulance?!” I yell back.

“Don’t bloody well ask questions! *Christ*, just do it! NOW.”