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Phd Thesis

**Recovering a Sicilian Family: Researching and Writing a Story of Anger, Shame and Family Breakdown in the Ingham-Halifax Area of North Queensland (1926–1945)**

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**RECOVERING A SICILIAN FAMILY: RESEARCHING AND WRITING A  
STORY OF ANGER, SHAME AND FAMILY BREAKDOWN IN THE INGHAM-  
HALIFAX AREA OF NORTH QUEENSLAND (1926-1945)**

**Submitted by:**

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**A thesis submitted in total fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of:**

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**Recovering a Sicilian Family: Researching and Writing a  
Story of Anger, Shame and Family Breakdown in the  
Ingham-Halifax Area of North Queensland (1926–1945)**

Comprising:

**Letters from Sicily**

(novel)

and

**An Act of Remembering**

(exegesis)

### **Statement of authorship**

This thesis contains no material that has been extracted in whole or in part from a thesis that I have submitted towards the award of any other degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgment in the main text of the thesis.

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The story in this novel largely took place on the traditional lands of the Warrgamay, Bandjin and Nywaigi peoples. The writing of the thesis took place on Awabakal land. I pay my respects to the elders of these lands, past present and emerging.

(Kerry Boyne)

16/08/2023

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## Abstract

This PhD research project comprises a fact-informed historical novel and an exegesis. The novel tells the story of the emigration of a Sicilian family to the Herbert River district of North Queensland during the interwar period. It is loosely based on the life of my anti-Fascist grandfather who arrived in Queensland in 1926, his wife, who never left Italy, and his two children, who emigrated a decade later. This family was fractured from the beginning by geographical separation, but catastrophic events in their lives in both Sicily and Queensland only deepened the fracture. The research reveals how becoming a canecutter in Queensland and the hardships, politics and prejudice that accompanied that choice, particularly in the Ingham area where there was a concentration of southern Italians, led to further family breakdown, exacerbated by the weight of secrets and shame. It also addresses the hardships experienced by the women who remained in the home country.

Italian immigration in Queensland is inextricably tied to the sugar industry and the canefields culture, which contributed enormously to the economic, social and cultural development of Queensland and its non-Indigenous settlement. Chain migration to the sugarlands saw the growth of concentrated communities of Italians as they found work with established, land-owning *paesani* or *parenti*. This led to a steady rise in land ownership by Italians in North Queensland, which in turn triggered deep resentment in the wider Anglo society of their economic success and perceived domination of the sugar industry, culminating in the injustice of internment of naturalised Italians during World War Two.

The exegesis reflects on the creative practice-led narrative inquiry research method adopted for this project and reviews a previously overlooked subgenre of Australian literature and popular culture I identify as ‘canecutter narrative’. A second literature review of the archival primary sources on which the semi-fictional story is built provides a hermeneutic analysis of these sources in their historical and cultural context. The exegesis establishes how the novel belongs in and uniquely contributes to the canecutter narrative subgenre.



## Exegesis

### An act of remembering



*Fig. 1. Sicilian family, circa 1926, shortly before the father left for Australia.  
Private collection.*

## Chapter 1: Preface, background and introduction

*“After all, it is the act of remembering that honours those who came before.”*

*~ Kelsey McNiff (2012)*

With *Italianità* in many areas of life – fashion, furniture, food, film – being aspirational in the modern world, it may be surprising that some of the most widely read Australian publications of the early twentieth century, such as *Smith’s Weekly* with a circulation in excess of 200,000 (Osborne 2008), regularly ran headlines such as ‘TOWN OF DREADFUL DAGOES LOOKS CALM IN MAIN STREET BUT – Foreign Scum Oozes From Its Highways’ (*Smith’s Weekly* 29 March 1930, p.12). Less surprisingly, in the heated climate of World War Two, racism and paranoia peaked; as an example, ‘MAKE NO MISTAKE ABOUT THE DAGO MENACE!’ (*Smith’s Weekly* 6 July 1940, p.1). Beneath the headline was a cartoon of a Mediterranean-looking gentleman standing over Queensland on a map of Australia, holding a cane knife aloft in a gesture reminiscent of the Nazi salute. Of course, the term ‘dago’ preceded ‘wog’, the latter a word now happily owned by established migrants but once pejorative and racist. ‘Dago’, however, never did gain the affection of those it was directed at and largely went out of use (Piperoglou 2022).

We all exist in this world within a cultural and historical context. Political and social influences impact on all our lives – most often in indirect ways that might only show their weight later. Some are to good effect – I received a free university education thanks to the politics of the time and that had a strong influence on my ongoing path in life. Some are not so good: at the same time as I was receiving a free education, a few friends were conscripted for national service and experienced the awful effects of the Vietnam War. The official records and family artefacts relating to my Italian grandfather form a picture of a striking set of experiences – some you might describe as iconic, certainly representative of his immigrant cohort – that were a product of the politics and social influences of Europe and Australia between the wars. They had direct and destructive impacts on his life, Greek tragedy-like in the combination of events that were out of his control and the flaws in his own ability to deal with them. As with many family records and artefacts, those of the Italian side of my family hold cultural and historical value that extends beyond their worth to surviving members and future generations.



Fig. 2. 'MAKE NO MISTAKE ABOUT THE DAGO MENACE!', Smith's Weekly 7 July 1940 page 1.

## The letter in the jacket pocket

'... *what the son wishes to forget the grandson wishes to remember.*'

~ *Marcus Lee Hansen, 1938*

Perhaps the most precious of my family artifacts and memorabilia is a certain letter to my father from my Italian grandmother whom I never knew. As a child growing up, I knew only one grandparent, in fact: my widowed nanna of Irish descent on my mother's side. When I would ask my father about his family he would simply say, 'Never mind about that; you're my family now.' I soon learned it was a no-go zone for questions and answers. Over time, however, he did reveal tantalising bits and pieces: that the three little round scars on his left upper arm were from vaccinations for immigration; that the big scar on his lower back was from the removal of a rib to save his life as a small child in Sicily; that he spoke no English until the age of ten when he moved to Australia with his older sister – without their mother. He had a way of warning us off asking for detail about the last bit with a firmly closed look.

My father occasionally reminisced about the sugar country around Ingham, North Queensland, where he grew up, and his scholarship-funded boarding-school years in Charters Towers where, after many punishments, the Catholic Brothers allowed him to smoke as long as he did so out of sight. He surprised us by telling us about his studies at the University of Queensland and his bitterness at missing out on his first choice – medicine – due to wartime quotas. It was a surprise because we had always known him to be a self-employed tradesman who read a lot. The photo of him aged eighteen sitting proudly at a table spread with his many trophies and prizes as Dux of the school, lit cigarette in hand, now made sense. It also seemed to encapsulate the unfairness of the rejection by the Medicine faculty. We learned he had a sister and cousins we hoped to one day meet.

My siblings and I accepted all this without too many questions until Dad died suddenly in 1997, aged seventy-two. Helping our mother sort out his affairs, my sister and I found among his possessions a mysterious and devastating letter from his northern Italian mother, postmarked La Spezia, which he had carried in a jacket pocket since 1948. He never wore that jacket, but he never threw it out, either. The letter expressed overwhelming grief. Suddenly, this Ligurian *nonna* we had never known, and were not allowed to ask questions

about, became a tragic and ghostly presence in our lives. As far as we could make out from questioning our mother, 1948 was about the time Dad had cut contact with his father and refused all pleas for a reconciliation. Translating the letter, my sister and I were gripped by the realisation that for half a century and the whole of his adulthood, and perhaps much longer, he had carried within a secret personal space a profound and silent grief.

Realising the significance of the letter and Dad's sad estrangement from his father, we placed an advertisement in the Ingham local paper seeking contact with his sister, the Sicilian aunt we had never met. Although she had long ago moved to Atherton, she responded by phone the very day the ad appeared in print, such is the Italian network in North Queensland. We flew to meet Zia Rosa, who was deeply saddened by her brother's disappearance from their lives but thrilled to meet his children and wife. From then, it was as if we had always been her nieces and we were able to get to know her and several cousins. We learned much more of the family history but, again, the mystery surrounding our grandmother remained. There was no asking our grandfather, who had died in 1967. Rosa did give us a lot of information about her but not the reason she never emigrated.

Rosa had resumed and maintained contact with her mamma over the years and saved many letters and postcards, which are now held in a family collection along with other memorabilia such as passports, shipping tickets, school reports and trophies. We were thrilled when she gave us family photos, the earliest of which was a beautiful portrait of our *nonna*, aged fourteen. Several trips to Sicily ensued over the following years, where we were able to meet more cousins. When my sister was about to take a trip to the Italian Riviera, Zia Rosa dropped the bombshell that she and my deceased father had two half-sisters and two half-brothers living in and around the Ligurian port of La Spezia. More family to discover – and startling implications about our grandparents.

We were not, however, able to discover much about our Italian grandparents because my father's half-siblings had the same attitude of 'it's best to leave the past in the past'. I thought often about them, though, and began to feel it was important to find out why my *nonno* emigrated and my *nonna* did not. I visited cousins in the sugar country around Innisfail and Ingham and all they could tell me was that their father, my grandfather's

youngest brother in Australia, had told them that my grandmother was a devoted mother, a pretty woman and always well-dressed; that she was from La Spezia in the northern province of Liguria and was educated; a schoolteacher, in fact. Again, my interest in her was piqued. I came upon William Douglass's seminal book on Italians in North Queensland, *From Italy to Ingham* (1995), and, once I had read it, I felt I had a better understanding of the probable reasons my grandmother did not accompany my grandfather – at the outset, at least if not later like many emigrant wives. They more or less boiled down to the canecutter lifestyle of living in barracks with the rest of the gang during the cutting season and in boarding houses or camps near other types of itinerant work such as timber cutting or fruit picking during the off-season.

A decade later, the next thing to open out this story was a casual name search of my grandfather's name in the National Archives of Australia (NAA) when I became aware of the kinds of records it held. There were several concerning my grandfather and his brothers, the most arresting being the fifty-two-page dossier relating to his 1942 internment as an enemy alien, along with two of his brothers, who also had dossiers. His file contained digitised official documents along with personal communications. These included poignant letters from my teenage father, alone at boarding school, seeking the help of their sympathetic state MP to secure his father's release. There were also communiqués from that MP, C.G. Jesson. In what seemed a contradiction, there were the documents proving his naturalisation as a British Subject in 1934 (how could he be an Enemy Alien if he was a British Subject?), as well as his passport and immigration records. In all the visits with cousins and aunts, no one had ever mentioned what seemed to us a very noteworthy incident in the lives of the pioneering men in our Sicilian family.

The NAA findings then led to an online search of Trove, where I discovered newspaper reports of my grandfather's brushes with the law and the Australian Workers Union as well as what appears to have been a failed attack by the local gang of the Black Hand mafia in 1934. With further reading, I began to see my grandfather's story in the wider context of mass Italian immigration to the sugarlands of North Queensland, Fascism and anti-Italian feeling during the war, the mafia enemy within their community and the prejudice my father encountered throughout his youth. I better understood Dad's obsession with being as

Aussie as the next bloke and his legal adoption of an anglicised version of his surname, but I also felt keenly a lack in our lives. I wanted to reclaim our Sicilian family heritage, which by then was not the social disadvantage it had been for my father and grandfather. As Hansen (1938) wrote in his seminal work on migration to America about the following generation that was American born:

They have no reason to feel any inferiority when they look about them ... Their speech is the same as that of those with whom they associate. Their material wealth is the average possession of the typical citizen. (p. 16)

So it was for me and my siblings. I began to form a deeper understanding of the sacrifices made by the preceding generations and how I had benefited from them. I felt their story needed to be told, if only for following generations to know something of their origins. However, I could also see it was the story of so many in their immigrant cohort. So, I decided to write it as a historical novel, filling the gaps in the records with fiction but keeping the real events as non-negotiable fixed points. The detail of the findings that led to and formed the framework for this story, and their meaning in the wider social and historical context, are examined in this exegesis, as is the somewhat ragtag but culturally significant body of fiction that sheds light on the sugarlands culture in North Queensland and its place in Queensland's historical, social and economic development.

I also learnt through further family history research that my grandfather had served in the Carabinieri, an elite branch of the Italian army, throughout World War One and that the village he left, Mascali, was completely buried under a lava flow from Mount Etna in 1928, while my grandmother was still living there with their children. Reading works by historians such as Linda Reeder and Donna Gabaccia, I realised it was then unusual for a woman of her background to marry a Sicilian man. My grandfather's experiences made him rather like an immigrant version of *A Fortunate Life's* (1981) Bert Facey. Inspired by works such as Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* (2005) and Hannah Kent's *Burial Rites* (2013), the solution I came to was to use speculation or fiction to give the work the drama and structure of a novel, while representing as faithfully as possible the lived experience of the people on whom it would be loosely based; and to undertake this within the framework of a PhD by research. The resulting creative work is a fact-informed historical novel in

which some characters and events are fictionalised or are composites of real people and events. For that reason, all names in the novel are fictionalised, except those of public figures. In addition, while the primary sources in Chapter 4 are in the public domain, surnames have been redacted to an initial. First names do not necessarily correlate with those in the novel due to fictionalisation.

This PhD thesis comprises the creative artefact and an exegesis. Written in tandem with the novel's development, the exegesis records and reflects on the process of researching and writing the novel and the textual form it takes. It reviews the relevant literature, outlines and analyses the historical data in the broader historical context. It explains the research methods that inform the novel and positions it in terms of genre and a subgenre that is identified and analysed in the main literature review. It demonstrates a twofold contribution to knowledge including the significance of the research question and sub-questions.

### **Research aims and objectives**

The aim of this project is to shape and present an understanding of what life might have been like for this fragmented Sicilian family in both Sicily and the Ingham–Macknade–Halifax area of North Queensland between the wars as the basis of the project's contribution to knowledge. By writing into the lacuna (Banks and Andrew 2012), it aims to retrospectively give voice to this family and community, recovering their forgotten lives (Baker, Brien and Sulway 2018). Situating this family story within its wider social and historical context meant exploring the difficulties that led to family breakdown on the one hand and community cohesiveness on the other. How the novel makes this contribution to knowledge is articulated in the exegetical component of the project, which as Batty and Holbrook (2017) comment, may not be apparent to the reader/examiner without such scaffolding.

A further objective was to make a contribution to knowledge in the area of literary criticism by defining and analysing a subgenre of Australian popular culture and literature, which has been my interest since completing my Honours dissertation on the Australian author, Charmian Clift. The literature review focuses on this body of fiction and non-fiction I



consider significant and extensive enough to constitute a subgenre of Australian writing that has not been comprehensively analysed or even previously identified. I use the umbrella term, ‘canecutter narrative’ (Boyne 2022) to label this subgenre, which I have uncovered gradually in the search for material to inform the novel and existing works among which I can count my creative work.

## Research questions

The research questions that will be addressed to achieve these aims is:

- How can creative practice led research guide the writing of a fact-informed historical novel focused on Sicilian migration to North Queensland in the interwar period, resulting in family breakdown?
- How will this novel uniquely contribute to, and be situated in, a subgenre of Australian writing that can be identified and analysed as ‘canecutter narrative’?

The answer to the first question is significant because, as we will see in the Literature Review, little creative writing has been published about Sicilian immigration in North Queensland between the wars, and nothing on the effects on family life of the occupation that drew the immigrants in their numbers – canecutting. In the 1920s and 1930s there quickly developed in the sugar districts a well-established community of Sicilians originating mostly from the two provinces of Catania and Messina (Douglass 1995, Henderson 1978) who settled in and around the Herbert River region, encompassing the main centres of Ingham, Macknade and Halifax, and to a lesser extent, Innisfail. Their descendants figure prominently in the present-day demographics of the sugar country, which can be seen in the latest census (Ingham 2021 Census All Persons Stats).

The answer to the second question is significant in Australian literature and popular culture criticism. The Literature Review chapter lays out the breadth and depth of the works of literature and popular culture that elevate the figure of the canecutter to legendary status, at least in the Queensland context. Arguably, the iconic appeal of the canecutter can be compared with that of the shearer or the drover in historical Australian culture. The iconic settings found in canecutter narrative, i.e. the cane farms and crocodile-infested waters of

North Queensland, are seeing a renaissance of interest from film-makers and audiences in contemporary visual media, which are discussed later. These settings lend themselves readily to stories of secrets and danger.

### **Thesis structure**

As to the presentation of my research, a clear structural model is valuable when it comes to integrating the components of the thesis, and a number of different structures have been suggested by academics who have a special interest in the purpose and structure of the exegesis. I have chosen to follow the below plan, which is derived from Brien's (2017) structural model in which the creative work is framed by the exegetical text. For this project, Brien's model suits the placement of the creative work from a reader's point of view as some of the exegesis chapters contain 'spoilers' for the novel, which has a reveal in its ending, so it works well for the novel to be read immediately after this introduction to the project as a whole. Alternatively, it could be read immediately after the Literature Review chapter for a sense of how it fits into the larger body of work, but certainly before the Grey Literature Review chapter where spoilers first appear.

Therefore, the thesis follows this structure:

- Introduction, background and research question
- Creative work
- Literature review
- Grey literature review
- Research methods
- Discussion and conclusion

### **In conclusion**

This chapter has explained my initial interest in and motivation to pursue this research, beginning with a purely personal impulse to find out more about my own family history, which led to online searching of archives and background reading of seminal texts,

culminating in a realisation that this was a very representative story with appeal well beyond that of a family history. I could also see it was a particularly Queensland story, set among the iconic canefields of the tropical north. It outlines the research aims and objectives encapsulated in research questions that evolved over the course of the project development, which is often the case in a creative practice-led research project. Finally, it lays out the structure of the thesis, clarifying the preferred order in which to read it so that the following chapter, the creative work itself, can be read next and opened up to discussion in later chapters. Those chapters that follow the historical novel establish its position in a wider body of work and its contribution to knowledge.

## Chapter 2: The Novel

# Letters from Sicily

**(for my father)**

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This story is based on real events. Certain characters, names and experiences have been fictionalised for the purposes of dramatisation

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## 1945 Macknade, Australia

Two men, one young, the other middle-aged, faced each other outside a small weatherboard house perched on high piers. Behind, and either side of it, tall sugarcane waved gracefully in the breeze that also caught the home's canvas verandah curtains and made them flap occasionally.

The distant aroma of burning sugar wafted on the currents, but the men were oblivious of the charred sweetness in the air. It was not a peaceful scene. The young man forcefully waved a letter in the older man's face and shouted in Italian, "You've lied to me all my life!"

"I know you think that, son, but..."

"No! Don't call me that. You have robbed me and my sister in the worst way imaginable. It's monstrous."

"Please, my son. Try to understand and forgive."

"How can I? Look what you have taken from us."

"But ... if you let me explain ... it was a long time ago. It was a different world. There were different rules. They were not my rules. I know now it was wrong. And I have paid, believe me."

This only made the young man angrier. He turned his back and slowly shook his head, then suddenly rounded on the other. "No! This is something that cannot be explained away. Or forgiven."

The young man's shoulders slumped and he shook his head again, staring at the letter in his hand.

"My uncles ... they went along with your lies? My aunt who brought me here ...?"

"They were doing it for your own good. We all were. So you could leave the past behind and have your life here. As an Australian. Isn't that what you've wanted since you started at that fancy college?"

“I went to that fancy college to make you proud. For the memory of my mother, who valued education so much.”

“My son, the past cannot be changed. Things happened. Things I had no control over. We must leave those terrible things in the past and go forward together.”

The young man said nothing for what seemed like minutes while the older man looked at him anxiously. The heavy, hanging silence was broken only by the occasional flapping of the verandah curtains.

Then, looking coldly at the other, “Yes, I will leave the past behind. But that includes you now. We are not going anywhere together. “I am leaving for Brisbane tomorrow.”

He picked up his suitcase that had been resting in the grass and turned to walk away. At that moment a young woman ran down the lane and reached them out of breath.

“Please ... don’t go. Not like this.”

“Goodbye, sister. I don’t know when I will see you again. I’m heading back to Brisbane. Give your bambino a kiss from his uncle”

“But wait ...” She was gradually catching her breath again. “Wait ...”

“No, there is nothing more to say. What our father has done is unforgiveable and he will never talk his way around it.”

Again, he turned to leave.

“No! Stop right there! Now, listen to me, little brother. If I can forgive, so can you. I could argue it this way: as a woman, I have lost even more. I am older, and I remember more. And now that I am a mother, I have a greater need.”

She was clearly holding back tears, not very successfully. “But with all that, I forgive him.”

“Well, I’m very sorry for your pain, but I don’t. And I won’t.”

“But you *can*. Talk to Zia Caterina. Talk to our uncles.”

“No.”

Facing his father again, in a lower voice and with a tone of finality, he shut it down. “Tonight, I will stay at the hotel in town. You will not see me again.”

As they watched their son and brother walk out of their lives, the tearful woman looked at her father, who no longer held back his own tears.

She had never seen this hard man so broken before. It was more than she could bear.

## 1926, Messina, Sicily

Ilda would not be there to watch the *Citta di Genova* pull away from the dock in Messina. Giuseppe didn't want that. He didn't want his pretty wife seen by men who would know he was going away. He well knew the filthy thoughts some people had about women who were without the protection of a husband or father. Just one more thing to torture his feverish mind.

And he didn't want her to leave their children with Caterina, either, even for just a night. Little Sebastiano was still a baby and Caterina had her own baby, his little nephew, to worry about. They'd said their goodbyes at home and he now held in his mind and heart the sweet faces of his wife and children.

He could still picture baby Sebastiano in his mother's arms in their kitchen, his plump little arms stretched out, sobs shuddering his tiny chest, tears wetting his cheeks. He never wanted to stop seeing it, even if it hurt. His children's love was one of the few things that could bring a flush of warmth to his heart and a smile to his face.

Thank God there had been time for Ilda to get the photographs done before he left. Now safe in their tin container inside his brown leather suitcase, the pictures would be his most treasured possessions for a very long time to come.

The tot hadn't understood why his father had not reached out to take him like he always did. He was only a little over a year old, but he seemed to see this was a sad time. Soon, his sister, who was trying her best to soothe him, let go and joined him in his distress.

Little Rosa was not even five but she knew her papa was going away. Who would love her now? Mamma would read books to her and teach her the words and numbers, yes, but she was too busy cooking and cleaning and looking after Sebastiano to play games and go for walks, like Papa. She would only walk to the *giardino* where they grew their food, or hurriedly to the village shops and post office where not everyone was friendly to them.

Her papa could sometimes get angry and sad, but little Rosa had learnt to be very quiet when he was like that, and soon he would relax.



How can a small child be so knowing, Giuseppe sometimes wondered. He called her his *bambina saggia*. His wise little girl. But Rosa was like that with everyone. She wanted to help – even her brother when he was being annoying. Rosa wanted everyone to be happy. It was a blessing she slept too soundly to hear her father in the night.

∞

“What will people think if I don’t come with your parents to say goodbye?” Ildagonda had asked.

“I don’t care what people think. Who are they to think anything about us? They’ll think something mean either way,” was her husband’s reply.

“If you come, they’ll say you shouldn’t be out in public. They will use it against you, and me as well. You know better than anyone how small-minded they are.”

She was aware he’d become hardened to the gossip and snide comments from some quarters about her background, but he was proud of her and their two children. Even after seven years, though, she was still trying to fit in.

Some people were kind, but they had their own lives to live. Others were mean and cold. Why? What had she done to them? Were they jealous? But jealous of what?

“Jealous of your pretty face and your nice clothes,” her friend Carmela had said, with her usual certainty about everything. “So elegant. And because you married for love. You got one of their men, Ilda! And he was considered quite a good one, from a respected family.”

She had come straight over to Ilda’s house to comfort her as soon as Giuseppe had left for the train to Messina.

Carmela wandered over to stir the pot simmering on the stove. She couldn’t help herself when there was food being prepared, even if she was not the one cooking it. The aroma filled the air of the small home.

“My God, that smells so good, Ilda. I do love a rich ragu.”

Carmela's curves were voluptuous on her firm young body, but they would soon betray her love of good food. There was never any shortage in a village doctor's house. Her husband was forever coming home with gifts – sometimes part payment – of this or that signora's caponata or cassata. Carmela knew nothing of the rumours that he had once or twice accepted other sorts of payment in kind.

“I made it specially for the last meal Beppe and I would have together, not that I could enjoy it,” Ilda said sadly. “Now what's left of it will just be for me and the children. Unless you'd like to stay and have some.”

“Thank you, Ilda, but my dear Felice will be home soon and wanting a nice meal, so I must not stay too long.”

Carmela's parents were quite well off. They had an orange juice business like some others in Mascali and had done well with it. They had spoilt their only daughter, providing her with many comforts when she got married and set up her own household. Still, she liked to be the good wife to her hard-working husband, although her mother had the cheek to ask how good a wife she was when the babies were not forthcoming.

Carmela gazed indulgently at baby Sebastiano asleep on a large cushion and sat down again, returning to their discussion.

“You know, these village women resent you because not only can you read and write but you have your teaching certificate. You can earn money from being educated. Whatever happens, you will never have to stoop to fieldwork to survive. They might be able to stand all of that if you were Sicilian. They might even admire you then and address you as *Donna*, as you should be.”

Sipping the cold lemon drink her friend had made her, Carmela was warming to her subject. “*And ... you speak beautiful Italian. You know a lot of them can only speak *dialetta*, some only the village dialect. *Lingua brutta*.”*

“Carmela! Don’t say that. You sound like you agree with Mussolini. Why shouldn’t we use the languages of our parents and grandparents? Don’t forget I speak my dialect, too, and don’t tell me it’s ugly.”

“Spezzino?”

“Yes, of course, because I am from La Spezia. But Genoese, too.”

“Genoese? Isn’t that a bit French? A little pretty-sounding?”

“I like it, but I have no occasion to speak it these days except sometimes in letters.”

“Ha! *Na lingua n’abbasta mai*. One language is never enough,” Carmela laughed, trying to lighten the situation, as always.

“Poor Giuseppe will have to learn English. That language really is ugly – and so difficult. I studied it a bit back in La Spezia.”

“Poor Giuseppe indeed. If you found it hard, Ilda, he will find it even harder because you are educated and smart.”

“Carmela! He is my husband – of course he’s smarter. Anyway ... what clothes were you talking about before? I only have a few – we’ve had no money since Giuseppe felt he had to leave the carabinieri. But I don’t begrudge him his views. He’s right. I don’t like how things are going in this country, either. Bullies and spies. Even here in Sicily.”

“Yes, yes, all that,” Carmela said impatiently and with little conviction. Then, “Well, anyway, the clothes you do have are nice and your jewellery is tasteful, too. You always look elegant around these *contadini*. Compared to them you are practically upper class. They don’t know what basket to put you in and that’s why some of them are mean to you.”

Carmela always steered clear of any talk of politics, but clothes and jewellery were topics she loved. She was a striking woman with her auburn hair and sea-green eyes. She knew she looked good in nice clothes and impressed herself whenever she caught her reflection in a

mirror or window. Nevertheless, she was a good ally to have because she and her husband were respected in the town, and Ilda genuinely loved her company.

Carmela held up the newspaper Giuseppe had left on the side table. “You know how they get their daughters to read out these romance stories in the newspapers? Well, you are like the women in those stories. Ladies to be admired. Women who look good but are also perfect wives and mothers.”

“Carmela, my beautiful friend, I love you. You’re so kind – but, mother of God, so naughty.” They both burst out laughing. “My jewellery is from my husband and my parents ... when they were indulgent towards me ... before I became a Sicilian wife. There’s nothing very expensive, you know.”

“And also, they’re jealous that your husband is brave enough to go across the seas, Ilda. To make some money and build a better life for you. But, my dearest friend ... I’m so glad you’re not going yet. I would miss you so much. You’re the only one I can really talk to. Well, the only one I want to talk to. The others just want to gossip. Always the nasty gossip. It’s their life. They must spend all day looking through the curtains.”

“I would miss you, too, Carmela. But let’s not speak of that. Who knows if that will ever happen, or when?”

Tears lurked behind her warm brown eyes as she thought about what life would be like without her husband. He was not always an easy man, but she had loved him enough to leave everything she knew – her family, her town, and her beautiful province. Her teaching work. And her feelings for him, though tempered by the changes in him, were still strong.

“When Giuseppe makes enough money, he will come back and buy land and some kind of business here. I may never go.”

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No, Giuseppe didn’t want an emotional scene. Not here among all these people at the port. He didn’t trust his own passions however much he buried them beneath a dour exterior. He’d seen so many men break down during the war. They cried for their mothers, for their wives,

for their babies ... they cried for themselves until they were too weak to cry. It was a hard thing to see dying and wounded men like that.

And now it was hard to say goodbye to his ageing parents, standing with him on the wind-swept dock, so small and vulnerable looking. Even his father, who had always seemed so able to take care of anything, was becoming diminished by age.

Giuseppe tried to convince himself it would be all right, though, because his brother was going with him and soon the next brother nearing conscription age and another older one would join them, when they had the fare and the required capital in hand.

Their anxious parents had decided that if their sons were to go across the world to improve their finances, they would go two at a time, an older one who had already done his military service and a younger one whose conscription time was approaching.

They would all keep each other strong. They would help each other to know always who they were and where they came from. Where their real home was and where their hearts still were.

Carlo was the brother going with him. He was young and unmarried, so for him it was a big adventure. He could hardly contain his excitement, which was dampened only a little by the downcast faces of their parents. For a young man, that sadness was easily addressed.

Standing on the dock with their parents, Giuseppe looked over at his younger brother deep in animated conversation with some friends from their village. How handsome he is, he thought, with his thick dark hair and finely drawn features.

Carlo carried himself with ease. He had the confidence of one who was the natural favourite in a large family yet never seemed arrogant. He was warm and funny to anyone he liked, which seemed to be most people.

Giuseppe knew his brother would easily find a wife. He was nearing 20 and for some time the village girls had been finding excuses to put themselves somewhere in his orbit whenever possible. Yes, he will land on his feet, even in a strange land, thought Giuseppe.

Carlo was mingling excitedly with those on the dock who were also setting out for Queensland to cut the sugar cane. How strange that felt to Giuseppe. He'd never done much fieldwork except for helping out in the family's vineyard and orchards as a youth. Most of his adult life he'd been in the army and the Carabinieri.

Yet he'd been advised to put farmer as his occupation on his passport because that was what Australia wanted: people to work the land.

It was laughable to call himself a farmer. But he would learn. He'd have to, or fail. He'd heard that the sugar work was harder than any farm work in Sicily. They also said the heat in Australia was much worse, especially in Queensland. He wasn't sure whether to believe the stories about the snakes and crocodiles, but who knows what could be on the other side of the world?

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"Don't worry about anything, Mamma," said Carlo, rejoining them and throwing his arm around his mother's shoulders. Even in his excitement he could see her unhappiness. He squeezed her bony shoulders so enthusiastically she winced..

"We will write, we will visit, we will come back! We will earn plenty of money and be able to do all those things. And we're going to send money to you, Mamma."

"I don't want the money. I want my sons," the elder Rosa cried.

"You will be happy to get the money, you'll see. It will help us as we get older," her husband soothed. "And you heard Carlo. When they have made enough money, they will be back for good. We all agreed to this. You as well."

It was no comfort to Rosa. She felt like she might never see her sons again. In fact, she was sure of it. Seeing her eldest go to the war was bad enough, but Giuseppe came home – only now to go again, this time across the seas. She wished she had put up a fight about it.

Raising six sons and two daughters had made it a life filled with challenges, especially when they lost most of their vineyards thanks to debt after the phylloxera went through, but it was

also one of joy and love, and to watch two of them leave at once, maybe never to return ... no, it didn't bear thinking about. Her only consolation was that Carlo would avoid his military service, unlike some of his brothers.

Lorenzo, too, would go before he was due for national service. He would go with Rosario, who had just served his time. She did not ever want to see another son put on that uniform.

Rosa the elder was tiny but she had a strong presence. Dignified, dressed in her best clothes to make her sons proud in front of the other Sicilian families, as usual mostly just the men, she cut an imposing figure despite her small frame.

When she could speak again without breaking down, she looked hard at her sons, locking eyes with them in turn. "You must promise me that whatever happens you will always look out for each other. You will care for each other like your papa and I care for you. Will you promise me?"

Murmurs came from the men, who shifted and dropped their gaze, uncomfortable with their mother's distress. How could they know what a mother feels? Carlo's head was too filled with excitement over the adventure they were undertaking. He had no inclination to think about anything going wrong. If, alone in the night, he felt some anxiety about going to live in a strange land where everything would be different, it was gone by morning, overlaid with optimism and excitement.

Giuseppe, on the other hand ... his emotions were more akin to his mother's. He had seen how wrong life could go. What dreadful things humans can do to each other. How wretched and hopeless any man could become, even the strongest of men.

Caporetto. That battle haunted him still. He saw men praying for death to come quickly. Cadorna, he thought with disgust, the worst general Italy had ever seen. So much blood on his hands. So many deaths.

And now he had much more to lose, leaving his little family behind, even if only for a time.

"Promise me!" their mother cried, louder now, her anguish raw and on display. It startled her sons. "Promise me that, at least!"

“They promise you,” her husband reassured her, equally startled. Then, looking sternly at his sons, “Don’t you?” A soft-hearted man like him had to make an effort to look stern, especially when it came to his family.

“Yes, Mamma, of course we will,” chimed in Carlo with some discomfort. He had no need to feel embarrassed, though. Similar scenes were going on all around them.

Amid the hubbub of the crowd on the docks, appeals of “*Write to me*” ... “*Send photographs*” ... “*Don’t forget about your poor, poor parents*” could be heard. So many young men leaving Sicily. Sometimes it seemed like their beautiful island was losing the best of its youth. Especially their province of Catania. The Australians and Americans had a term for it: “chain migration”. Well, chains can be very strong. Like families.

Before, it was to America they went in their thousands, but then Italians were no longer welcome there, especially southern Italians. Now it was to Australia, but even still there were those who believed they were going to America. The lengths those lying, cheating immigration agents would go to so they could swindle trusting illiterates out of their money. Wicked.

Some people even said the exodus was what made Etna angry these days. But the volcano had always been angry – since ancient times and long before. Was it anger, though? Or was Etna more like a giant dozing tiger, calm for a while then ferocious. Even asleep, Etna saw everything. Giuseppe had felt the blunt force of its indifference the whole time it was visible from the train.

So much of his life had been spent under the powerful influence of the volcano. He and Etna, two brooding presences, one small and touchingly human, the other magnificent and elemental. How he had missed it when he was away in the north. A Sicilian from Catania province always knows he’s far from home when he cannot see Etna.

Now, he stared towards Messina’s cathedral clock tower as the campanile struck noon. It was one of the few buildings that had survived the earthquake. Almost two decades later, there was still evidence of that deadly event. He could remember the vibrant place it was before with its wonderful seafood market and old centre.



Now they called it “the city without memory” because it lacked historic buildings. God didn’t even spare his churches. Poor Messina. Poor Sicily.

Giuseppe had met some Messinesi during the war. They told him that nothing of their war experience was as devastating as that earthquake, the worst in living memory, maybe ever. When it struck there was no escape. Those who had run to the seafront to flee the collapsing buildings were smashed by the terrible waves that followed the withdrawal of the water.

Now that same water threatened with its cold, grey opacity. The passenger liner carrying hundreds of souls to their unknown destiny sat huge and heavy on it, yet it warned of the greater depths to come.

It seemed symbolic somehow that this unlucky port was where they were departing their fatherland.

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“And you, Giuseppe? You have said nothing,” said his mother. “You are a married man and a father. You know truly what family means. And you are the oldest, so it falls to you to always see to this.”

Now his thoughts dissolved to Mascali and the modest but cosy home he and Ilda had created. He prayed they would be safe there without him. He could picture his wife reading to little Rosa or rocking baby Sebastiano to sleep when he was restless and fussing.

They had few possessions but what they did own had been carefully chosen by Ilda for quality and comfort. He had always admired her good taste and the naturally elegant way she carried herself. He sometimes wondered what he had done to deserve her love.

He hadn’t always thought that way. Once he had been brash and confident; even, yes, a little arrogant, full of great expectations for his life ahead. During his army service he had even learnt to think of himself as an Italian man as well as Sicilian and Mascalese. But war has a way of knocking a lot of what’s good and young and strong out of you.

Giuseppe snapped back to the present. It was unbearable to leave the warmth and love of his family, but he had to raise the money to set them up for the future somehow. He had five brothers and two sisters. There just wasn't enough family land any longer for them all to build comfortable lives on.

He wanted more for his own little family than a frugal existence. Ilda had been used to a better life and he was going to see that she and their children had it again.

"Yes, Mamma. I promise you," he said looking into her intense black eyes. His own were the steel grey of the winter sea around them. He knew he should not have to ask this next thing, but he did, anyway.

"And will you promise me, Mamma and Papa, to look out for Ilda and the children and see that no harm befalls them?"

"Oh, yes, I will be keeping an eye on that one." Rosa could never hide the hostility simmering just below the surface. Why couldn't he have married a girl from their village? She had even chosen a nice one for him.

"I have heard what happens in some families when the husband is far away, slaving to send money back to a faithless wife."

Giuseppe felt his anger rising, but this was his mother whom he adored and he could not disrespect her by showing it. She sensed it, anyway, and immediately regretted such harsh words at this time of terrible tenderness.

"Oh, I don't mean your wife is faithless, but I grant she is an attractive woman and there are always many temptations and dangers for anyone left alone for too long. You know what they say. A match held too close to the fire will eventually light."

"There is another saying." Giuseppe couldn't help himself. "He who leaves succeeds. And that's what I must do. So, please, Mamma, don't make it so much worse."

“All right, my son. But now, Beppe, I ask you again to reassure me that you will not forget where you come from – where your home is – and that you will look after your brother no matter what. Both of you. Tell me you will care for each other. Always.”

Gulls overhead squawked their insistence that he comfort his mother.

For the second time in two days Giuseppe had to push through a spasm of grief and give the appearance of calm in the midst of turbulence.

“Yes, Mamma. You know we will. Family is everything.”

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## 1926 The Voyage

“*Madonna!* When will this sickness stop?” Giuseppe had been ill since they got out to open sea; too sick to dwell so much on his anxieties about leaving Sicily. The cocaine lozenges his mother had given him were not helping. His thick, dark hair was lank and damp with sweat, his intense grey eyes bloodshot from lack of sleep and seasickness. He hadn’t shaved in the days since they’d left home and looked a bit frightening.

“Why am I so sick, Carlo, when you are not?”

“Don’t worry, brother, we’re coming into port and you will get some relief, at least for a while. Look! Look! You can see the lighthouse. Now some fun begins!”

Giuseppe regarded his young brother with indulgent affection. Clean-shaven as usual, Carlo had put on a clean white shirt and jacket and was looking more handsome than ever. He had even slapped on a little of the cologne Giuseppe bought for him last time he was in Milano. Not only was he the best looking of the brothers, he was also quite noticeably the tallest.

That height would stand him in good stead in the new land. Giuseppe had heard that Australian men were much taller than Sicilians. And arrogant about it. Like the damned northern Italians and Germans. So ridiculous. War had shown him that courage and strength had nothing to do with height.

“I don’t know about fun. Why do you think it will be fun?”

“Because it’s different. Because it’s on land. This is Egypt. Gee, brother, where’s your enthusiasm?” Carlo flashed his dazzling smile.

Giuseppe had seen how the village girls dropped their eyes and blushed at that grin, with sneaky little smiles on their own faces. He’d seen more than one slapped for it by a vigilant mother.

“Surely there will be bars and cafes. And women! I wonder what the women will be like.”

The brothers disembarked with the other passengers and crew into pilot boats that ran continually between the ships and the shore, Giuseppe in the hope of some respite from his oppressive nausea, Carlo excited for any bit of adventure after the monotonous days at sea.

Giuseppe had made a feeble attempt at shaving and had put on a clean shirt and jacket, too. No cologne, though. Any sudden aromas were likely to bring on the nausea. He was as ready as he could be when feeling so off-colour.

Some of the Italian passengers were too afraid of the foreignness of Egypt, especially bustling Port Said, and stayed on the ship. If it wasn't for Carlo's joy at the prospect of being in a foreign land, Giuseppe might have done the same.

"They say it's so hot here that when the locals die and go to hell, they take overcoats with them." Carlo laughed at his second-hand joke, but Giuseppe wasn't really listening.

Everywhere they looked there was activity. The Egyptians in their strange flowing clothes hurried about their business. Carlo was startled to see some of the women covered from head to foot in dark robes. There were camels pulling carts laden with all sorts of goods, a small herd of goats making their way down the dusty backstreet the brothers had wandered into, and half-starved children here and there, in danger of being trampled or knocked over by scurrying adults.

As he struggled with the smell of animal dung in the streets, something made Giuseppe's mind go to Palermo; he wasn't sure what because nothing resembled Palermo. Except perhaps the Arabic red domes on what looked like a place of worship. Yes, that's it, he thought. They're just like the ones on the church of San Cataldo. Even picturing Sicily in his mind brought on wounding pangs of regret.

Following a couple of the ship's crew who knew their way around the port, the brothers came to what appeared to be the main street of business, looking more civilised and familiar, with people in European styles of clothing mingling with the locals.

Their sailor guides asked them if they would be able to find their way back to the ship and promptly left them to their own devices when they said they probably would. As the crew

members took their leave, they warned them to be careful and stay well away from any women, not that they would see many. Probably none except for foreigners.

Carlo looked surprised at the warning. “That’s disappointing. Oh, well, at least we can look.”

“Don’t even look – that could get you into very bad trouble.” The crewman was adamant. “There is not much worth seeing here, anyway. Better to stay on the ship.”

“You may be offered women,” said the other sailor. “You could be offered boys. But they will all be prostitutes. Be careful. Some things are not worth the risk.”

With that the brothers were left to wander by themselves. Giuseppe noticed there were a lot of shop signs in English and French. The buildings were timber, two, three or more storeys high with verandahs overlooking the streets on each level. There were odd little towers on some of the buildings and Giuseppe wondered what their purpose was. They reminded him of lookout towers. It was really like nowhere the brothers had ever been.

The two men walked around for some time, nimbly avoiding the many touts, including those offering the taboo services, dodging the tram that ran up and down the dusty main street and peering into the shop windows to see if there was anything they could buy.

They weren’t sure about the exchange value of the money, though, and thought it safest to hang onto the little spending money they had in case they were cheated.

They eventually decided it was best to return to the ship, empty-handed. It felt a little cowardly.

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Giuseppe loved to smoke but had felt too sick most of the time on the ship to indulge. The first good day back onboard he went out on deck to light up. An Italian he didn’t know personally, but knew he was a countryman by his dress and his looks, appeared nearby and, in Italian, introduced himself.

“So, you are one of those onboard who are going to live and work in Australia?” the man asked.

Giuseppe nodded without looking at him.

“You don’t want to converse? I have no wish to bother you.”

The stranger was perhaps ten years older, probably from the north, Giuseppe judged; a little taller than Giuseppe and slender. Quite handsome and intelligent looking with dark hair and dark eyes. He was elegantly dressed for a steerage passenger; compared with the Sicilians, anyway.

Giuseppe smoked in silence while the stranger gazed out to sea. Oh, maybe the northerner would be more interesting than the *paesani*. He decided to crack through his mood and speak. It was an effort.

“Yes, I am going to Queensland with one of my brothers. We will work for my cousin on his sugar farm. You are going to live in Australia, too?”

“Oh, I have already lived there and am returning. Perhaps I’ll stay this time. I even fought in the Australian army in the war. I volunteered to serve in the medical corps. I was a stretcher bearer in the Somme – Pozieres it was. But then Italy conscripted me. It was a surprise.”

“I fought in our army.”

“Oh, I know how bad that was, too. I became a conscientious objector as a matter of fact. I refused to take the *giuramento formula*, the military oath. I was even imprisoned for it. I hope you won’t think me a coward for that, because fear was not my reason. My whole family are pacifists.”

“After the things I have seen I judge no man, and I avoid most.” Giuseppe half laughed drily at his own joke.

“I understand. Where are you from?”

“Catania province.”

“Ah! One of my brothers has named his farm in Western Australia ‘Etna’, even though we are not Sicilian. He is fascinated by the volcano and says that’s what makes the soil in Eastern Sicily so fertile and productive.

“His farm is where I am headed at first until I re-establish myself. We are originally from Tirano in Lombardy, but most of my family have now settled in Australia. They have been there many years and have become quite Australian.”

“Your brother is correct about Etna. My family has always had vineyards and orchards near Mascali. Very productive, but they lost a lot of land through debt after that horrible disease went through all the vineyards of Europe. I have no memory of it; it was probably before I was born. By the grace of God, they still have some orchards and a small vineyard.”

“Oh, yes, the phylloxera. Terrible. What havoc it wreaked.”

“Your background is on the land?”

“Not really. Actually, I am an artist, a painter, but I will become a farmer with my brothers. Also, I am a follower of Rudolf Steiner. Have you heard of him?”

“No, is he a politician? I dislike politics and politicians. Especially those who wear black shirts.”

This stranger had declared himself a pacifist, so he was very unlikely to be a Fascist. Usually more guarded in these things, Giuseppe felt his frankness was safe enough with this man. What did he care, anyway? He was out of their reach now.

“No, not a politician. He is many things but mainly a philosopher. I should say was, as he sadly died last year. He developed brilliant theories about a way of farming in which you pay attention to the forces of the cosmos – the moon phases and other things. Not just the seasons.”

“That sounds like the old men farmers. I have heard some of them talk about the moon when they planted or harvested. But I don’t think they would have heard about this Rudolf Steiner.”



“Yes, it’s true that it’s not a new thing, but Steiner made it into a system and a philosophy. There are natural preparations to fertilise the plants and make them very healthy. You could look into it for the sugar farming. I believe they use a lot of nasty chemicals in growing sugar where it is not a native plant.”

Giuseppe had to admit he didn’t really know much about how the sugar was grown, only that the fields of cane were quite big and the crop looked beautiful; tall and straight with feathery tops bending in the breeze.

He only knew this much because he had seen photographs and felt quite drawn to it without understanding why.

“I have some pamphlets – I can give you one. I don’t know anything about sugar farming but you can tell your cousin this: if you follow the Steiner way you don’t need to use unnatural so-called ‘remedies’. Chemicals will kill the world, you know.”

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The next stop was Port Aden with its backdrop of rocky mountains, but the brothers decided to stay onboard. They were convinced by others that there was little of interest to see and do there, and it would be good to have a rest without the ship’s motion.

What they could see from the ship looked spectacular, though. The rocky formations were part of a volcano, but this volcano was sound asleep, out to it. Not like Etna. Etna only had naps and took you by surprise when she woke.

For Giuseppe, staying onboard meant taking the opportunity to write to his wife while he wasn’t nauseous. He was already missing her and the children terribly and having monstrous doubts about the decision he had made. It was existential torture that plagued his sleep at night and clouded his days.

It couldn’t feel real to him to be leaving them to cross the seas and live in a new country where he would not be able to speak the language or understand the laws or how society worked.

He knew he had to put aside his pride and trust that the *paesani* and *parenti* already living in Queensland would guide him until he became familiar with those things. He understood it would be a much more dramatic change than moving from Sicily to northern Italy.

Giuseppe was so absorbed in writing his letter that he barely noticed when the *Citta di Genova* moved away from Aden until the nausea overcame him once more and sent him back to his bunk. God, how he was beginning to hate that hard, lumpy bunk and the stifling cabin.

For the several days it took to arrive in Colombo, Giuseppe mostly stayed in the cabin, only going out on deck to smoke a few times. He made little further progress with the letter, even though it took his mind off the sick feeling when he did write a bit more.

Carlo coaxed him to come out to look at Colombo's beautiful palm tree-lined port as they approached it and succeeded in getting his brother to agree to go ashore. There were so many coconut palms and other trees that many of the houses and other buildings were hidden in the intense greenness.

As they drew into port, the ship was surrounded by little tugboats and rowboats. Dozens of dark-skinned arms stretched out to haul the passengers into the boats and soon they were on the quay where native dancers in vivid costumes were performing energetically. It was quite a show.

"Now it's hot, Carlo. This is what I call hot. I wonder if this is what we are in for in Australia."

The brothers were sweating in their jackets and long-sleeved shirts. The local people seemed better dressed to suit the climate, or maybe it was just that they were used to it. The women, especially, looked so serene and colourful after Egypt and Aden, and the men flashed their brilliant white smiles in greeting.

Everywhere, beautiful brown-eyed children held out their tiny hands for anything the travellers might give them. It was a colourful, seething mass of humanity.

The brothers became anxious for a bit of clear space where they could discuss what they would do while ashore.

“I must get a postcard to send to Ilda and the children,” said Giuseppe when they finally freed themselves of the smiling faces and outstretched hands of those selling and those begging.

“Perhaps one for Mamma, too. I know they have them on the ship, but I want something authentic from the place we are in. Something with a good picture. Ernesto says there is a store called The Travellers Mart that sells such things. Maybe they will have a toy elephant for little Rosa. You know they have real elephants in this part of the world?”

“Is that a place that sells medicines and cures? They will probably have something for your seasickness, brother.”

As they walked around the town their senses were overpowered by the strange, fragrant food aromas and the colourful clothes and tinkling jewellery of the local women. They had heard these were the smells of dishes known as curries, which used spices not found in Sicilian cuisine. There were other perfumes from the tropical flowers and the smouldering powders they later learned were called incense. It was all a revelation to the Italians.

The brothers found the Travellers Mart where they were able to buy pills for seasickness, though Giuseppe had his doubts about how well they would work.

He chose a postcard of the beautiful clock tower on the gas-lit lighthouse, which was Colombo’s highest building. In the foreground were the rickshaws and wagons that were used to transport people and goods. This one would go to his mother.

For his wife he chose one with the title ‘Fruit Sellers, Colombo’. It depicted two dark-skinned ladies with wide, flat baskets of fruit on their heads and another sitting at their feet. They wore long-sleeved white shirts and long vividly patterned wrap-around skirts. He could only guess at how different their lives must have been from those of Italian women.

He was happy with his purchases and knew they would give some small pleasure to the two most important women in his life.

“Giuseppe, why are you always looking at that damned map? You must have memorised it by now.” Carlo had been out on deck with some of the *paesani* and had come looking for Giuseppe to join them in a few hands of cards, even though he knew his brother would decline, as he usually did.

“Because, little brother, I like to understand where in the world I am at any time. I don’t like this feeling of just being somewhere but nowhere.”

“Does it matter? When we arrive at ports we know where we are. Why not just relax and go with it? The feeling, I mean. I don’t mind it at all.”

“That’s because you’re young and adventurous. You look forward.”

Carlo was about to leave the cabin but he hesitated and turned back to his brother. “Who is your new friend? Where is he from?”

“Oh, you mean Ernesto? He’s from way up north near the Swiss border. Near Milano.”

“How odd that you have become smoking pals with a stranger when there are so many *paesani* on board. They are all wondering why you spend time with this northerner and not them.”

“Well, brother, he’s a very interesting man. He has lots of modern theories about farming and he has had an interesting life. He was a conscientious objector during the war, though he did serve in two armies. He served for Australia and for Italy.”

“I can hardly believe that! You, a former career soldier, befriending a pacifist! It’s too strange for words. Don’t you think him a coward?”

“Not at all. I consider him an intelligent man. And the army was never my career, even though it took seven-and-a-half years of my life and all of my youth. In truth it’s quite brave to be a conscientious objector when their motives are so misunderstood and they are so ostracised and punished. You tell me, what is so great about killing or being killed? You think it’s exciting to put on a uniform and carry a weapon?”

He didn't wait for any response from Carlo. "Don't *ever* think that. Do you hear me, little brother? Don't ever think fighting other men in a war is a good thing. War is the worst thing men do to each other."

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The brothers woke to excited voices around them. "Giuseppe, Carlo, come. There is to be a burial at sea."

Carlo was instantly up and pulling on his clothes. "What do you mean a burial? Of a person? Who died? Was it someone from third class? Anyone we know?"

"No. Some fat rich fellow from first class. His wife is distraught, apparently. She wanted them to keep his body onboard so he can be buried respectfully in hallowed ground with a proper funeral service in a church. With all their rich friends in their expensive clothes and cars. But they will not carry a dead body for all that time, so to the sharks he goes. With his size, he will make a fine feast for them."

The *paesano*, another of the many Giuseppees onboard, laughed coarsely.

"She is threatening them with the law and all kinds of punishment, but the funny thing is, at sea they are the law. Sometimes – almost never, as we well know ... but sometimes – these rich *stronzi* don't get what they want. And don't they make a great fuss when that happens?! Ha!"

"Will there be a priest or does the captain do the service?" Not that Carlo really cared about the religious arrangements.

"There is a chaplain, I believe. We can't attend the service ... but maybe we will see the body go over. We don't want to miss that."

Giuseppe hadn't moved from his bunk. "No thanks, I've seen enough bodies disposed of." He had no intention of watching the corpse of a stranger go overboard.

“Really, you make yourselves look like stupid fools, getting excited about some poor fellow dying far from home. You have no idea. No brains ...”

“*Minchia*, you’re a miserable pain in the arse, Gio. *Ammuni*, Carlo, let’s leave your brother to his foul mood.”

The two younger men rushed off to get as close to the proceedings as they could. As they left, Carlo looked back over his shoulder, but his brother, disgusted at the other Giuseppe’s glee over a death, had already turned his back to them.

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Apart from the onboard funeral, the rest of the trip to Fremantle was uneventful. The crew turned on the traditional Neptune-themed celebration as they crossed the Equator. Neptune’s Journey. Giuseppe was unenthusiastic, racked by homesickness and still feeling nauseous on and off. Carlo, on the other hand, got into the party spirit at every opportunity. It seemed like anything thrilled him.

“Come, brother, have some wine,” Carlo would say. Or, “Come, come. There are dolphins. They are really putting on a show.” One time, it was, “Come and see these English fools throwing deckchairs overboard.”

“The English and the Scandinavians and the Germans,” said Giuseppe in a sneering tone, “they really have no tolerance for boredom. No forbearance. And they drink too much beer. Then they want to fight with each other when they get drunk.

“We Sicilians may look like we’re having big arguments when we are merely discussing something, but we don’t make idiots of ourselves by throwing clumsy punches at each other.”

He had to admit to himself, though, in this longest part of the journey spent purely at sea, the tedium really set in for everyone. Even the children became fractious and whiny. They all wanted it to come to an end now, including those who, like his brother, found the voyage an exciting adventure.

As the magnificent liner ploughed through the Indian Ocean, Giuseppe felt like everything he loved was slipping away in its wake, further and further out of his reach. He could only think about what was behind; Carlo was excited for what lay ahead.

It was a blessed relief to finally arrive in Fremantle with its bustling dock. The day had only just dawned and the passengers were not long out of their bunks. They scurried to the decks to get the first sight of their new country.

The port itself was flat and unimpressive compared with those exotic stops they had made, but there was an enormous amount of activity. And the light. It was bathed in the bright, warm light of an Australian autumn.

Immigration and customs officials, baggage handlers, photographers and representatives of companies spruiking for labourers to recruit made up a writhing mass of movement, like an ants' nest. There were ladies in blue and red hats who seemed to be there to assist anyone who needed help or directions – government employees, perhaps.

People moved in every direction, some purposefully, some searching apprehensively and others roaming about in a kind of daze. It was a buzzing hive and it felt good.

There were lots of Italian fishermen who had made Fremantle their home – now on the dock to meet newly arriving relatives and *paesani*. Giuseppe spotted Ernesto affectionately greeting people who must have been his brother and sister-in-law.

He caught his eye for a goodbye salute. He would miss their chats. Ernesto was an interesting and personable man. Giuseppe hoped they might cross paths again one day, as unlikely as that might be.

He didn't yet have a clear sense of the distances in this country, but he knew it was vast. He had read somewhere that you could fit more than 25 Italys into one Australia, but most of it was empty except for the native people and the strange animals. No wonder it needed agricultural workers. Surely there was enough land here for every citizen to have a great estate.

It was now the end of May, almost winter, but surprisingly hot with brilliant blue skies and sparkling clear seas. So different from the cold grey water they left behind. The strong, clear light made everything look fresh and very alive. And there was a clean, botanical smell to the place, probably from the native trees.

Giuseppe had been told that winter in Australia was no colder than summer in many countries. It was good to feel the warm sun on his face and breathe in the sea air without the sickening motion of the ship.

“Passports, *please*.” The voice was courteous but brusque with a sing-song tone that suggested the phrase was said hundreds of times a day.

Giuseppe knew to have his ready, but Carlo was in a small panic trying to think where in his luggage he had put his. They knew these were important documents they could not afford to lose. Carlo suffered the embarrassment of opening his suitcase there on the dock to find it.

The now-impatient official looked over their passports, stamped them, then put them in a box on the counter behind the glass. He gave them a little piece of paper each. The brothers were puzzled. They waited for the man to hand back the passports, but all he did was gesture to them to move aside and shout, “*Next!*”

This felt wrong. And unsafe. Their passports were the proof of who they were and of their permission to travel. They were sure they would need them for many things yet, but they had no idea how to get them back without creating a fuss.

Giuseppe looked around, hoping Ernesto might still be there. He had good English and would be sure to help. But there was no sign of him or his relatives.

He raked through his brain for the little English he knew.

“Excuse. You give me. Please.”

“Give you what, mate? You’re holding things up.”

“Passport. Thank you.”



“No, mate, you don’t get it back. We hold onto it. You’ve got your receipt,” the official said loudly and slowly, shaking his head from side to side in an exaggerated manner.

“*Ma*, is my passport. *My* passport.”

“Look, I’m sick of this. I don’t have to explain this over and over. You dagos don’t understand the bloody language, anyway. The government keeps your passport, see? You are in Australia now and it’s our rules. You just do what you’re told.”

With that he waved Giuseppe aside again, but Giuseppe wasn’t budging.

“No! My passport. You give me please.”

The official started to lose his temper. “God struth, mate. If you don’t do what I say and move out of the way, you’ll get yourself in a lot of strife.”

Giuseppe didn’t understand the word “strife” but by the tone he sensed it meant something bad for him. He felt his anger rising and was trying to think of what to do next, when a familiar voice just behind him told him to stay calm. Giuseppe spun around. It was Ernesto. Thank God.

His friend explained that this was the rule for everyone, even the English, whom the Australians favoured by a long way, and the brothers would just have to accept it and move on.

The official had no idea what Ernesto was telling Giuseppe, but assuming he was explaining things he nodded his head and said, “That’s right, mate. He’s fair dinkum. Now, I’m only gonna say it one more time. Get off the line and let the other dagos through.”

Ernesto gently guided his countrymen away from the immigration queue and asked them if they would be OK. His relatives were standing near the edge of the dock about thirty metres away, looking a little amused and concerned at the same time. When the brothers slowly nodded, Ernesto wished them luck and rejoined his group. Giuseppe and Carlo turned to go back onboard the ship, which would continue on to Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane.

So that was the brothers' first experience of their new country. Their only identity documents were wrested from them. No arguments, no explanations.

OO

*Via Ingham*

*Queensland*

*Australia*

*10 September, 1926*

*Ilda my darling wife*

*Thank you for your dear letter. I am happy you and the children are well and healthy – as am I.*

*After a long and unpleasant journey we are now in Queensland and are lucky enough to have work with our cousin Vincenzo. At first we stayed at a hotel in a nice seaside place called Halifax. The hotel is owned by a man named Giovanni – he was born in Queensland to Sicilian parents – so it was a good transition before we moved to the barracks where I and the other canecutters live during the cutting season. Giovanni is a goldmine of information.*

*The sea voyage was very rough in the last part off Western Australia. I had seasickness from the beginning, however. It was terrible. Sometimes it settled down and I was able to enjoy what could be enjoyed – card games and trips to shore. But more often I was ill and took to my bunk. That last bit before Melbourne I thought the ship would be wrecked and we would all be eaten by sharks.*

*I don't remember much about the Melbourne or Sydney stops except that Sydney has the most beautiful harbour I have ever seen. It was a mercy that Vincenzo kindly sent one of his workers to meet us when we got off the ship in Brisbane because we understood nothing about the official processes or the*

*money or travel on land. Also, our passports were taken from us when we landed in Fremantle. We endured the long, horrible train trip to North Queensland. The distances are not to be believed.*

*This is a strange but beautiful country. Not beautiful like Sicily, although the seaside is not far away and nice mountains surround the sugar farms. But there is nothing old. No history. There is a lot of dislike towards Italians – especially those of us from Sicily and Calabria. Even our northern countrymen despise us but that is nothing new. Many of the Britishers as they are called – those from the stock of the British Isles – become friendlier as they come to know us. They call us ‘dagos’ and ‘eyeties’. Sometimes it is good-natured but other times it is a form of abuse. You have to work it out from their mood when they say it.*

*Sometimes ‘bastard’ is not abuse but friendly. The men swear a lot: ‘bloody this’ and ‘bloody that’ and ‘silly bugger’. I don’t know if I should be writing these English words for your eyes. Confusingly the English word for mucca, ‘cow’, so nice an animal, can mean something bad. Like “loading the cane is a cow of a job”. I think I will learn all the swearing and slang before anything else because I am spending all my time with working men and farmers.*

*Carlo is learning the language faster and he is also faster at the work – probably because he is so much younger. At almost 33 I am already old to be starting as a canecutter.*

*The Britishers call me Joe – like Gio but with their spelling. I don’t mind it. The ignorant ones who hate Italians call every Italian man Luigi. It’s an insult. Maybe not if your name really is Luigi, I don’t know.*

*The work of cutting the cane is very hard – the hardest I have ever done. My hands were bleeding every day at first until I got used to it. We must be careful of the big knives around our legs also – they are very sharp. Loading the cane is even harder and by the time we finish each day we only have enough energy to eat our night meal and fall on our bunks.*

*The food does not have much taste – but there is so much of it! You could never go hungry in this country if you have work. We work in gangs and each gang has a cook. They feed us five or even six times a day. And so much meat. We eat meat every day – not just on special days. And more than once a day. Believe it. Big steaks like I have never seen in Italy and the meat from the sheep – but we need a lot of food because we work so hard and sweat so much in the heat.*

*It's very hot where we live – even now in our springtime. And there are many insects and very large spiders. We have to be careful of snakes in the sugar cane – some are very poisonous. People have died from their bites. There are crocodiles too but we don't have to worry too much about them unless the rivers flood. You cannot swim in the rivers or even at the seaside or you might be eaten. It has happened. We cool off with makeshift showers and there are some places where we can swim safely.*

*They give us tea to drink – which we don't like very much. The Britishers love it almost as much as they love beer and drink it many times a day. When we stop work for tea and food the Britishers call it 'smoko'. Of course everyone smokes. We don't mix with Britishers too much. This is good and bad. We can still speak our language and keep our Sicilian customs but it makes us slow to*

*learn their language. I think the Italian men are drinking more beer than they do at home. Like the Britishers.*

*Some of the Italian canecutters have their wives and children here but it is a very hard life for them in the heat and mostly without proper houses of their own. I would give anything to have you and the children here – but not to live like that. Some Italians own farms with decent houses on them and their children learn to speak English quickly and become like Australians. A lot go to the new Catholic school where there are many other Italian children, so they are treated well. They even play the British game of cricket.*

*I will finish now as I am very tired (always) but I will tell you more in my next letter. I am sorry it has taken me so long to write a proper letter and I promise to be a better correspondent. At least you received the telegram telling you of our safe arrival.*

*I have no words for how much I pine for you and the dear children.*

*Kiss them for me,*

*Your devoted husband*

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## 1927 Macknade, The Flood

Giuseppe was in a state of dumb disbelief. The things he was hearing and seeing made no sense. They were too extreme. But he was beginning to understand this was a land of extremes. The rescuers had just found the body of poor old Charlie, the Malay, washed away inside his house, which had lifted off its stumps and floated with the boiling torrent until it was nothing but broken-up debris.

*Not Charlie*, he thought. Such a harmless figure, always with a wide smile and a kind greeting in whatever language he decided you might speak. Or perhaps it was always his own.

Giuseppe recalled the day he was walking to Halifax when Charlie appeared on his doorstep, holding out a pannikin of tea and nodding his head with that big grin of his. Giuseppe wasn't fond of the beverage, but he couldn't refuse it and at least Charlie's tea didn't have milk in it.

That sweet old man had nothing but his ramshackle little hut and his simple life, and now it would be like he'd never existed.

Carlo and Giuseppe were finally on dry land, camping out with others at the back of the railway station until the boarding house where they were spending the off-season was made habitable again. They weren't there when the cyclone struck and brought with it torrential rain and flooding of the entire region. They were visiting *paesani* in Bemerside to talk gang arrangements for the coming season.

At the height of the flooding, they were among the large number of people who had congregated on the roof and in the ceiling space of the Seymour Hotel. At some point, someone did a head count so they could keep track of who was still safe. One hundred and twenty. Many of them Italians. If only old Charlie had been with them.

It was disconcerting to be in such intimate contact with so many Britishers the brothers hardly knew – or didn't know at all. As it was for the Britishers to find themselves clinging to safety among the migrants. But in these circumstances, the general feeling was they were all in it together.

Giuseppe knew that natural disasters were great levellers. In Sicily they didn't have cyclones but they had volcano eruptions and earthquakes. In those times people pitched in and helped each other.

Here, in Bemerside, those present had willingly shared around what little food and water the pub had in its stocks. It was the kind of generous community spirit non-British migrants rarely came up against in Queensland. Usually it was 'them' and 'us', but Giuseppe knew too well that hardship could bring out both the best and the worst in people.

From the vantage point of the hotel roof, they were able to see some of the devastation as it was happening. The spectacle of buildings sweeping downstream; of people clinging to the roofs of houses until they struck shallow water, probably miles from their original location; of the despair of those who lost everything they owned; of dead horses and cattle strewn around the place ... it was too much to process.

Houses went over into the torrent like packs of cards. Several immediately behind the hotel found the same fate as poor Charlie's little home. Giovanni Sciacca's refreshment rooms were gone without a trace. The sugar farms as far as they could see were submerged beneath a muddy lake and still the rain had kept falling. They all agreed it was lucky the weather was hot because they had been in sodden clothing for days.

They heard about poor Signora Tisano grabbing onto a piece of her house and being buffeted a quarter of a mile in the flood waters before being anchored against a tree, where she was eventually hauled into one of the several boats of rescuers who were doing their heroic best to help those in trouble.

Those rescuers also had the grim task of conveying any news to those who, like the brothers, had been trapped by the flood waters. They would gradually get to them all, but it would take time. It's not easy to be patient when you're starving and wet, though.

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"My god, I have never seen such rain, brother!"



Carlo and Giuseppe were sitting in the tattered tent they'd been assigned. At least they were out of the rain and a little up off the ground. They could even wear shoes and socks again. The wet swampy smell all around them was overpowering, though, and the humidity was unbearable.

“I think this is what tropical means, Carlo. Not just hot – but wet. Very, very wet. There is a cyclone in the north not far away, they say. I have seen flooding in Palermo and Catania, but not like this. Besides, our buildings in Sicily do not get blown or washed away. It takes a proper big earthquake to turn them into rubble. Here, the buildings seem no good for flood or fire or wind. They are built as if they are temporary. Why?”

“So much is temporary. The buildings, the people. The people move around so much, chasing the work.”

“Yes, people like us, too, Carlo. We will return to the civilised world one day, the real world, when we have the money. But I know now it must be a long-term plan. Longer than I thought it would be.

“We must be patient. We must hope that the things that have just happened to our *paesani* and others here don't happen to us. When we build on the land we buy, the houses will be built high off the ground. Like the rich people's houses I don't ever want to wade through stinking mud again.

“I suppose we should be relieved we don't yet own any property to be destroyed, just our few clothes. I thank the saints that we stored our documents and photographs on top of that wardrobe. They almost went under ...”

Giuseppe's most precious possessions, the photographs of his wife and children, were unharmed, even though the wardrobe that held them on its very top was horribly water damaged.

Ingham township, they learned, had been hit badly. The Herbert River had broken its banks and formed a new branch to meet the Stone River, which was already in high flood – there had been fifty-four inches of rain in four days.

Then the Herberton waters moved down, with both the Herbert and Stone overflowing badly, and the great mass of water rushed towards Ingham. The brothers heard that at the height of the flooding, the water at the Ingham pump station was over forty-six feet.

Farmer Street, a few blocks back from the Shire Hotel, had nine houses washed away with nothing of them left behind to show they had ever existed.

Almost comically, like flimsy toys, they had floated across the showground and over the railway embankment, empty of their residents, who had all evacuated except those in one house. It travelled five miles with four men still inside it, hanging onto whatever they could until it came to rest.

Miraculously, they survived and were rescued by boat three days later. Needless to say, they were in quite a desperate state.

The locals who had lived in the Herbert all their lives and were used to cyclone weather and floods were saying over and over there had never been anything like this. “Unprecedented” was the word everyone kept using.

In the Hinchinbrook and Central hotels, the water had risen to the level of the bar counters. The stocks of most main street businesses were utterly destroyed. The water had run through the town in waves, making rescue work impossible at first. It was all everyone could do to find some place of safety and hang on tight and wait. The brothers knew at least three Italian-owned businesses that lost everything.

“That was a day-and-a-half we were on that roof, Gio. A day and a half!”

“You think that’s bad...” Filippo had entered their tent and was settling himself on the apple crate that was a makeshift seat.

He continued “...there are some we have been hearing about who were stranded on a roof on roofs for up to three days! That’s three days without without food or clean water. Think about it.”

Giuseppe and Carlo both shook their heads in agreement with Filippo's sense of horror. Worryingly, they were all hearing that at least fifty per cent of the new sugar crop around Macknade and Bemerside had been lost. Some of the crop had been washed away and some was buried under sand that had washed down. There was talk that on one farm over at Long Pocket the sand was ten feet deep.

What would all this mean for cutting work when the crushing season came around?

"We need to get whatever work we can as soon as possible, Carlo. And you, Filippo. We don't even know whether we will have a place in a gang this year."

"Yes, you're right, brother. There will surely be a lot of clean-up and rebuilding work after this. So many houses and businesses gone."

"We must ask everyone we know and even people we don't know who can point us to some paid work."

"Well, you have your gun now ... we could go rabbit shooting in the bush."

Giuseppe scowled at that. "I don't really want to use the thing. I don't even know why I bought it."

Carlo snapped his head up and met his brother's eyes. "Yes you do."

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Perhaps most heartbreaking of all, apart from the loss of human life – forty-seven and still counting – was the loss of over fifteen hundred working horses and two-and-a-half thousand head of cattle. They knew that in itself would break some people.

Without the money to replace both their homes and their animals, and without the animals to carry out their work, there would be those who would have to walk away and find employment in towns or cities until they could come back to their farms and rebuild. Some were saying they would never come back.

At least the mills at Macknade and Ingham didn't fare too badly. The whole industry depended so much on them. It all worked back from there. The crop had to be crushed and processed soon after it was cut or it would begin to lose sugar content. Transport to the mills would be fixed quickly. The tram rails were always moved around, anyway.

Everyone praised the rescue workers who, it was fervently agreed, were wonderful. They had kept going beyond exhaustion, beyond hunger and thirst, with only one thing in mind: to find and help everyone they could, and even small animals when they could fit them into the boats.

Naturally, in their usual opportunistic fashion, the politicians had immediately begun to associate themselves with rescue and assistance, announcing this and that relief package for everyone with a hardship claim. They were calling for people to submit their claims, saying each would be considered on its merits, with the most urgent receiving first consideration.

One particularly pompous MP was quoted widely in the papers: "The recuperative power of the Australian soil is only equalled by the recuperative power of the Australian soul."

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Poor Signora Tisano was still in hospital suffering from shock and exposure, but soon she would receive the terrible news that almost everyone in her household had drowned; seven souls, the youngest a baby, the oldest about forty. Only two other members of that large family had survived.

Of course, it wasn't just Italians who had perished. Or that the brothers and the rest of their gang cared about. They heard of many others from their district, the Ambulance Superintendent, Hal McCoy, among them.

A Kanaka mother and her three children had drowned, along with two other very young Kanaka kiddies and an Aborigine named Bob, who had done his best to save the two little ones but had perished trying to hold them above the raging torrent.

To the Italians and Britishers alike, the circumstances of Bob's death had made him visible to them; it had given meaning to his disregarded life.

Many bodies had been recovered, but there were still several people missing. They heard the shocking story from Grasso, a *paesano* who had built a rough platform on top of his shed to shelter on.

Some of his poultry had joined him, but a few of the chooks had been swept off – straight into the gaping jaws of two crocodiles.

No one would say it out loud, but everyone wondered whether the bodies of those missing would ever be found.

∞

*“But pigs will play pianos – and chooks will chew their cud – “Ere Ingham will forget about the '27 Flood.” – Dan Sheahan*

## 1927 The Crocodile Hunt

### TOWNSVILLE MORNING BULLETIN

15 September 1927

#### **CROCODILE TAKES HORSE.**

The latest attack by a crocodile took place at Hawkins Creek on Thursday, when a horse was taken from cane farmer Pietro Grasso, when he was swimming in the Herbert River there. Mr. Grasso, who was swimming alongside the horse at the time, lost no time in getting to shore, but the horse was not seen again, showing that the crocodile must have been a big one, as a horse is not easy to hold under water without a good struggle.

It was early morning on a spring Saturday, when the men in the barracks approached their afternoon in a more leisurely fashion. Some washed their clothes and aired their bedding while others liked to go into town to the pub. In the warmer months they sometimes organised a group to go for a swim at one of the safe creeks. It was September and already hot enough for swimming and picnicking.

Now in their second cutting season, the brothers were more familiar with the rhythms of daily life in the canefields. Even their English had improved, especially Carlo's, although their vocabulary mostly comprised words about the weather, work, food and other things to buy in the shops.

They'd been lucky, getting a place in a gang this season after so much of the year's crop had been destroyed in the February floods. Giuseppe, especially, was relieved and thankful. He knew Carlo would get a start – he had proved himself quite spectacularly in his first season.

The gang that sought him weren't as keen on Giuseppe, mostly because of his moodiness, but they knew they wouldn't get Carlo without his brother. They stuck together like glue. They'd made a pact to work in the same gang at least until they had their own farms.

Giuseppe had been able to send a small amount of money to his wife, while Carlo sent a few pounds to their parents now and then. They couldn't afford much, though, as they were both trying to save as much as they could to eventually buy land and become farmers.

The plan was to buy a plot together and employ *paesani* to work it with them until they'd made enough profit to buy more land and each go off on their own. Eventually, they would all have their own farms, they hoped. It was the Sicilian way in Queensland.

The weekends were usually peaceful, at least before anyone had drunk any beer. This blue-sky Saturday was typical.

Giuseppe sat on the verandah writing a long letter to his wife, while his younger brother was out on the grass teaching Ivan the Russian and Tommy the Yugoslav their modified version of bocce.

Sometimes, the cane gangs had a few nationalities – Spanish, Russian, Yugoslav mostly. The mix of backgrounds was usually harmonious as they were all bonded by their shared goal of building a good life in a new land where their disadvantages were many and their one advantage was their capacity for hard work in this gruelling climate.

The sultry atmosphere was suddenly shattered by the excited voice of Filippo.

“Carlo, Giuseppe, come, come! We're going on a crocodile hunt. Everyone with a bloody gun is coming and some of the cutters will bring their bloody knives, too. Quick, load your bloody rifle and come with us.”

Filippo liked to swear like the Australians and funnily enough the Aussies liked to hear it. They would laugh their heads off at 'Phil' and his “bloody this” and “bloody that” in his thick Italian accent. He even mixed the English swearwords into his native language. They knew it was a way to try to fit in and be like them, and they couldn't help warming to him for it.

Most of them, anyway. There were always those who wanted to hate ‘dagos’ and ‘abos’ and ‘chinks’, no matter what.

Giuseppe wondered how Filippo knew about his rifle, but then who can keep any secrets from the other Italians? With them it’s a point of honour to know everything about you so they can pass it along the *paesano* grapevine. Especially those with wives. “Is this about the attack on Pietro and his horse?”

Giuseppe had not thought to ever hold a gun in his hands again. But, apart from hunting, there were many reasons for having one in this new country. It was unsafe in so many ways. The wildlife was dangerous enough, but he also didn’t feel entirely safe in the broader human society yet. Without more English he was unsure about so many things, even everyday matters like complying with union rules, tending to the horses or driving the farm truck.

These things could get you into trouble if you made an error. It was like being a youth again, unaware of consequences. So, in an impulsive moment, he’d bought a rifle from a *paesano* who was returning to Sicily.

It wasn’t simple paranoia on his part. There was a lot of anti-Italian feeling in North Queensland, stoked by newspapers like *Smith’s Weekly* and *Truth*.

Giuseppe could read a bit of English now and he knew what words like “filthy dagos” and “Mediterranean scum” meant. How were they allowed to print this garbage? In headlines, too. It wasn’t a Catholic country like Italy, but he thought a Christian country should not allow such hatred in the public forum.

At least he’d felt safe and even relaxed in the cane gangs he had worked in since he arrived. Some of the cutters had been in the new country a long time and the Italian gangs were hired mostly by Italian farmers, although even the British farmers were realising what hard workers the Italians were. So, there was a strong feeling of brotherhood and community.

Besides, he would soon have three actual brothers here. They’d had word from Mamma that two more would be coming next season. Rosario and Lorenzo. With the four brothers and



several cousins, two of them owning farms, the family would have a strong foothold in this challenging land.

Giuseppe knew he was not well liked among the cutting gangs, but he was cranky enough to not care. At least he was respected for his age, his war service and his level of education, which was better than most.

Giuseppe didn't care much about liking or being liked. There was love, like the love he had for his parents, his wife and children, and his brothers and sisters, and there was respect. Those things mattered.

In contrast, Carlo was a born charmer and a favourite with the other men, so Giuseppe benefited a little in the afterglow of his brother's popularity, but a more brooding, serious man was hard to find.

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Giuseppe had heard about 'Pazzo Pete', as Pietro had become known, getting his horse and almost himself taken by a crocodile because he was crazy enough to take his horse through the river. He must have decided Hawkins Creek was far enough inland to be safe, Giuseppe thought. No, you can't trust those buggers in any water.

Filippo was waiting somewhat impatiently for an answer. He didn't have to ask Carlo twice but was still expecting a response from Giuseppe.

"*Va bene*. I could do with a little shooting practice. I'll come along."

"Excellent! You beauty!" Filippo said in English. He and the others knew Giuseppe had been a marksman in his service days, so if they could find that monster it would be one dead croc, that's for sure. They didn't have to wait long before the truck pulled up with the other men already onboard, mostly *paesani*.

The other participants in this dubious enterprise had brought a few dead things with them to use as bait: two chickens (*what a waste*, thought Giuseppe), a few steaks they'd pinched from the barracks kitchen (Cook would find out, but they would come back conquering heroes by

then) and some fishing bait. They didn't know whether crocs liked bread, but they brought some just in case.

As usual, they had to have an argument about it all beforehand; they even argued about whether it was a crocodile or an alligator they were hunting and in the end agreed it was a croc.

So here they were, all prepared, or so they thought. They crowded into the tray of the truck with a few standing on the running boards, holding on for dear life as the truck made its erratic way along the bumpy red-dirt road to the river. It had even more potholes after the flood. They were all in an exuberant mood and looking forward to a bit of big-game sport Queensland style.

Someone struck up a Sicilian song and most of the other Sicilians joined in. It was a surprisingly tuneful rendition that rang out into the countryside as they moved along at a slow enough pace to prevent any road casualties. The trip in the truck was not meant to be the most dangerous part of this endeavour; no, the danger would come when they found the offending saurian.

The Russian and the Yugoslav had piled into the truck, too, but now they seemed to be having second thoughts. The only language all of them could speak a little of was English and every now and then Ivan the Russian would yell "*Not to sing!*", while Tomislav ('Tommy') the Yugoslav sang out "*Slower!*"

Tommy spoke quite a bit of English and enough Italian to be helpful to those who, like Giuseppe, spoke their national language and not just dialect.

Before coming to Australia Tommy had been a gum digger in the north of New Zealand. Dalmatians had flocked there to make their fortune in the gum fields in the late nineteenth century, but that industry was in deep decline now. Tommy had decided to try his luck across the ditch.

He'd heard that canecutting work paid well and felt certain it couldn't be as hard as gum digging. Besides, a warmer climate would be a massive bonus, and he liked the barracks lifestyle.

No one knew Ivan's back story because any time anyone asked him personal questions he would go into a fury, shouting *zamolchi, dostatochno* at them. Someone said it was "shut up" in Russian, a bit like *basta*.

There were several rumours about him: he was a Bolshevik, he had killed his wife's lover, or her brother, or sometimes her, but that could all be stupid gossip. They didn't even know if he had a wife and by now they all knew not to ask.

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Finally, they made it to the Hawkins Creek area and parked the truck beside a section of the river near where the incident had occurred. They all got out to discuss strategy.

Once they had carefully placed some of the bait among the fallen and low-lying tree branches, reserving some in case they needed to make another attempt at luring the crocodile, they found some shade to sit and wait. You could cut through the sense of anticipation.

Salvatore (Sam), always the convivial one in any circumstance, broke the silence to start up a conversation. "Giuseppe, you served in the big war. Why don't you join the Ex-Combattenti that the vice-consul Count has established? You are entitled and it might give you some good contacts."

Surprised, Giuseppe looked at Sal with irritation. "You know why. They support the Duce and his band of Blackshirt thugs."

"You mean they are *Fascisti*? Are you sure?"

"Yes, of course they are. And, as Filippo would say in his best English, 'Fuck the Fascists.'"

They were all a little amused at Giuseppe's outburst of dark humour, but also a little uncomfortable to go near political topics, especially when they were enjoying the camaraderie of the outing.

Most of them had no interest in Italian politics, even though they remained firmly attached to the fatherland. They felt they'd left the never-ending ideological arguments behind when the ocean liner pulled away from the Messina dock.

After a few chuckles they fell back into awkward silence until Carlo, who had been walking around having a general look at the area, restarted conversation.

"So, this is Hawkins Creek. There's nothing much here except for cane farms and a few badly built houses."

Filippo had worked on one of the farms and knew the area well. "Yes, small population, but a lot of things seem to happen here. There was that big dispute with the Britisher gang. They wanted a higher rate because the cane was trashy and full of weeds. Plus, the ground was all uneven for laying the tracks. They bloody got it, too, the buggers. Imagine if it had been an Italian gang. We would have been told, "Piss off, ya whinging dagos. Just be glad ya got any work!"

The others energetically agreed. Then Carlo piped in with, "We should pay attention to how the Britishers get what they want. We should copy them."

They all nodded in furious agreement with that, too.

"Then there was the drowning," Filippo continued. You know, what was his name? Vincenzo Armerina. Drowned trying to cross the river to get the bloody mail. He was with a *paesano*, who said he just disappeared underwater and never came back up.

They all knew what that could mean but it was Sam who voiced it. "I wonder if he was taken by a bloody croc ..."

Filippo got excited again. “Yes, yes. And there was that fellow who was killed by his own wife. Also Italian. Calabrese. More dangerous than a croc if you ask me! It was a big, big story in the news.”

Carlo wanted the details and Filippo was happy to oblige. His tone became conspiratorial. “He wanted to send her back to the old country but she wouldn’t go. He just got fed up and shot her from behind but the bullet just grazed her ear.

“Still on her feet, she turned around, saw the bloody pistol in his hand and rushed at him. She managed to turn the gun right at his chest ... or maybe it was his throat ... anyway, it was just as he pulled the bloody trigger for the second time. He staggered off and was found dead a few hundred yards away.

“What a woman! That’s bloody Calabrese for you.”

Carlo had a look of sheer admiration. “Mother of God, I don’t know whether to admire her or despise her. I think ... at least it seems to me ... our Italian women toughen up when they get out of the village and all its rules about how they should behave. They’re capable of anything.”

“You think that’s a good thing, Carlo? I prefer women to be traditional.” Not surprising coming from Angelo, whose heart remained in the village.

“Well, how can they stay traditional here, Ange? It’s a different world with many difficulties for them. They don’t have their mothers and aunts to depend on when they have the babies. Everything is so far for them to get to – the shops, the schools, even each other’s houses. You can’t expect them to stay the same. They have to adapt.”

“But I do, Carlo, and that’s that. I will go back to Sicily to find my wife and I will make sure she stays at home with the children and does not become like the Australian women.”

Carlo doubled down. “Then you will be making life harder for her *and* for yourself. And even for the children you might be lucky enough to have.

“I have seen how some of the children here have to speak for their parents and become like little adults while the mother or father stands helplessly like they are the child, hoping to God the kid is understanding properly.”

Seeing they had come to a stalemate on this matter and not wanting to take it any further, the men turned their attention back to the reason they were here.

Sam said, “It would have been better to have a boat. Then we could go looking for the monster.”

“No! What if it tipped the boat over?!” Angelo was always the *apprensivo*, worrying about this, afraid of that.

Filippo rolled his eyes. “*Madonna!* Don’t be such a scaredy cat. They can’t do that ... can they?”

Suddenly, Sam was on his feet and stabbing the air with his cane knife. “Look! Over there, behind that tree where we left the chicken. I saw something big rear up then dive back under!”

They all jumped up and started to run over to where Sam was pointing, even Ivan and Tommy who had both given up trying to pick up on any of the Italians’ chatter. Then as they all remembered what they were dealing with they slowed down and moved forward very cautiously, cane knives and various other weapons wielded, ready to strike.

Giuseppe had his finger on the trigger but in the general confusion he would not have a clear shot if he spotted the croc. The last thing he wanted was to accidentally put a bullet in one of the *paesani* or his own brother. He had to take the lead to make sure they were all safe.

“Right, all of you behind me. Alfio, you, and your revolver beside me. Someone get that other chicken. We’ll move very quietly to the spot and toss the chicken to the edge of the water. Then the moment it appears we will shoot. So stay behind me and Alfio at all times. If you don’t and you get yourself shot, we take no responsibility. OK? Understood?”

Giuseppe had spoken very quietly, just above a whisper, but Tommy, who more or less got the gist of what Giuseppe had just said, burst out with, “I should have my skelton – my gum-digging spade. What good cane knives? We will not get so close.”

The others barely understood what he had said because it was in English and they had no idea what a skelton was, but they were nodding their heads, anyway.

“*Shhh*, Tomislav.” Carlo grabbed the other chicken carcass and drew up almost beside Giuseppe and Alfio. The others fell in behind and they slowly and quietly moved towards the river’s edge.

“OK, *now*, Carlo!”

The chicken sailed through the air and made a perfect landing just in the shallows. They all froze and waited. What felt like minutes went by. They waited.

*Whoosh!* There it was, the terrifying beast! They didn’t just see it; they could smell its foul odour. The stink was like swamp mixed with fish and rotten meat.

Giuseppe took aim and squeezed the trigger but let it go when the croc disappeared again. They waited for it to reappear, all eyes on the general area where they had seen it. There it was again! Giuseppe fired two shots into it, but it disappeared once more.

They were pretty sure the shots had squarely found their target and waited – for what they were unsure. Blood in the water? The reappearance of its head? But the river held the secret tight. They waited.

A few became impatient and broke ranks, wading into the shallow water.

“What are you doing, you idiots?! It’s probably still alive.” Giuseppe had his finger on the trigger ready to fire again when *whoosh* ... to everyone’s great surprise and horror the animal’s terrifying head came up between Filippo’s legs. Dear God, that horrible smell again!

Filippo reeled backwards and screamed like a banshee. Giuseppe made the split-second decision to fire again, this time straight into its head. Alfio got one off into its body half a second later.

No one knew how they missed shooting Filippo.

The thrashing in the water – it was hard to tell who thrashed more, Filippo or the beast – came to a stop and the monster saurian, which had rolled over showing its eerily white belly, was finally motionless.

They all stood there dumbstruck, then slowly began to whoop with excitement. “We did it, we did it! We killed the buggler!”

“How do we know this is the one?”

“We don’t.”

“Doesn’t bloody matter.”

Giuseppe stopped them in their tracks. “Now what will we do with it?”

“Should we cook it?” wondered Sam only half seriously.

“Cook it? Are you crazy? Who would eat that detestable creature?” Angelo was appalled.

“Not us maybe. But I know who likes this meat,” Tommy piped up in English. “We take it to the camp and let those blackfellows have it. They know how to cook it. Camp is not too far from here.”

“Don’t they camp at Mungalla Station?” asked Sam. “We can’t go there, can we?”

The others were all talking at once about how to get the beast on the truck, but Tommy heard the question.

“*Si*, most of the ones who are left camp there. That Cassady fellow, the owner, treats them better than other white people. Most of the blackfellows were pushed out of their hunting



places and sent to that Palm Island place, but there's one group that camps at the creek a lot of the time, so we'll take it to them."

Somehow, they managed to manoeuvre it and tie its now harmless carcass to the running board of the truck and set off to the Aboriginal camp at Palm Creek. As appalled as they were at having to handle the beast, they weren't about to leave a major kill like this to rot in the bush. Wasting food that someone would eat did not sit comfortably with any of them.

They all felt jubilant, even poor Filippo, who was still a little in shock at his near demise. And a bloody one it would have been.

A good day for the men. A bad day for the crocodile.

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## 1928 Two More Brothers

No gang wanted two ‘new chums’, as the Australians called newcomers. It was too much of a risk. So, Giuseppe and Carlo had decided to request that fifteen-year-old Lorenzo, the younger of their newly arrived brothers, be allowed to join their gang – virtually the same gang they’d had the season before.

They were worried that little Enzo – he was small as well as young – would not be able to hold his own with the grown men and they wanted to help him get up to speed quickly. They would cover for him if necessary.

The brothers were sitting on the stairs of barracks verandah after a day’s work, enjoying the feeling of being clean. Giuseppe was rolling a smoke and Carlo was working on a small wooden carving of a crocodile. If it was any good when he finished it he would send it to his little nephew, Sebastiano.

“Rosario – he’s how old? Twenty-something ...?” Giuseppe couldn’t remember the exact age of his own brother.”

“Yes, he’s twenty-four. He did his military service.”

“Not like you, Carlo, eh? You avoided it by coming.” Giuseppe cracked a brief, sly smile as he said it.

“I wouldn’t have minded. It was Mamma who wanted me to avoid it.”

“Yes, her golden child. Everyone’s golden child, you. But don’t ever wish to do it. It was right for you to come here instead. Well, anyway, Rosario will have a good chance of keeping up with the other men once his hands stop blistering and bleeding, but it’s better if we keep little Enzo under our wing. It was wrong of our parents to send him.”

Thus, they decided it would be best for Rosario would move on to Innisfail and join cousin Mariano’s gang and Enzo to remain under their protection.

Suddenly, the cook boomed, "Food!" and they straggled in with the others.

A gang's earnings were calculated according to their output then divided equally among them, including the cook. So, whenever anyone was a bit slow or clumsy with injuries, it affected every gang member's income. It was a good system in that it made them all competitive and so pulled the best out of every worker, but it was very tough on beginners.

They were cut a little slack at first but not for long. Soon the pressure to go harder would be applied in no uncertain terms. Some gangs could be quite ruthless on novices, but being the brother of the gun cutter, Carlo, and the hardest man in the gang, Giuseppe, would afford some protection for Lorenzo.

There were a couple of protests around the table as the men ate their evening meal, mostly from Ivan and Alfio, the cook. The rest were a little hesitant but they all knew everyone had to start somewhere.

“Just when we've got used to the cranky buggers and we're working so well as a gang,” observed Filippo. “But, yes, we all had to get our start and so does your little brother.”

The others nodded with varying levels of enthusiasm and it was done. “More bread!” someone called out. They all agreed with that, too.

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“Brother, how was your voyage?” Carlo was trying to engage Lorenzo so he wouldn't feel sad about waving Rosario off as he was driven out of Ingham township to head north in Mariano's truck. The voyage together from Sicily had bonded Lorenzo and Rosario just as it had Carlo and Giuseppe.

Carlo understood this. He had always been in awe of his older brother but seeing his seasickness and homesickness on the voyage had brought him into focus as a vulnerable human, instead of the tough and silent man who had fought in a terrible war and then served in the carabinieri. Carlo had also witnessed Giuseppe's occasional night terrors.

Carlo and Lorenzo were at the Day Dawn pub in Ingham, but they were on the upstairs verandah because Lorenzo was too young to be in the bar with all the men. The Day Dawn

was a favourite drinking hole with cancutters from all around the district, so the atmosphere was even more masculine than the average Australian pub.

It was rare for the Italian brothers to drink there and they did not go to any pub as often as some. When they did, it was usually to the Lion Hotel in Macknade or the Seymour in Bemerside. Many more of their Sicilian *paesani* lived in the Bemerside-Macknade-Halifax area.

The pub atmosphere could be very enjoyable with all the free and easy joking and the interaction with the Anglo cutters and farmers, but it could also be intimidating, especially to a young fresh-off-the-boat dago boy.

And, really, regardless of the job he was about to take on, Lorenzo was just a boy. Scrutinising him thoroughly with no little apprehension, Carlo could see he was almost as slight as a girl of his age.

Carlo wondered if he should have bought him alcohol, but the boy was clearly relishing sitting at this rough timber table, drinking beer among all these working men, even if it was a little quieter on the verandah. Lorenzo kept looking out over the small Australian town, so strange to his Sicilian eyes, but now so familiar to his brothers.

He sensed he would grow to love it and the bright light and unfamiliar trees. He couldn't wait to see the sugarcane.

Carlo had met his cousin Mariano and two brothers at the station and they all had a drink together at this table before Mariano and Rosario set off for Innisfail.

“The voyage? On the train, you mean, or the ship? I suppose it was much like yours but a different ship. The *Caprera*. Not as modern as the one you came on, they say.”

“Oh, the *Caprera*. Didn't its captain die at sea last year? Yes, we heard about it. They didn't bury him at sea, though, as they were only one day from Fremantle.”

“Yes, we didn’t have any strange incidents on our trip. It was really quite exciting, though. But I didn’t like saying goodbye to Mamma, Carlo. She cried. I’ve never seen our mamma cry before.”

“Don’t worry, Enzo, you’ll feel much better the first time you send her some of the money you earn.”

The brown-haired, brown-eyed boy, who usually had a cheeky grin, emphasised by dimples in both cheeks, felt a quiver of excitement at that thought. He had only recently finished his school education and had never earned much more than a few lire for odd jobs, certainly not enough to make any difference to anyone’s finances.

“Mamma wants you to go home to take a wife, Carlo. She has a village girl in mind for you. One of the Rossi girls. Nice. Pretty. Mamma made sure to find out that she likes you. Of course, she likes you – they all do.”

“I need a brave girl if she is to be one from home. To leave home and family, to walk away from all that protection and support ... it’s a hard thing for a woman to do. Very hard.”

“I don’t know much about the ladies, Carlo, but this one – Anna – stands out.”

“It’s not up for discussion, Enzo. I have nowhere decent for a wife to live. You will see the barracks soon – that’s where we live during the crushing. Last year at the end of the season we moved to a boarding house, but this year we will see if we can get other kinds of farm work and stay at the barracks all year.

“It’s an OK life for men, but a hard one for women. But the worst thing for the men is the lack of women. You will see what I mean.”

“Maybe you are right, but I think Giuseppe must bring his wife and the *bambini* soon because I don’t think Ilda can be very happy without him. Our mamma loves the children, but a daughter-in-law is not so loved.”

“Brother, you are fifteen. Do you really think you should be advising your elders on matters of marriage and children?”

“Of course not, but I don’t like how some of the village men look upon our brother’s wife. Mamma sent me to accompany her on her daily errands and I saw what those dirty wolves were thinking when they dared to look at her.”

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The sign-on day, when all the cutters in the district jostled for their places in a gang, had passed quite smoothly and Lorenzo had been accepted into the gang with his brothers. Without his two older brothers cementing their own places in the gang over the past two seasons, such a young boy with no experience would not have had a chance. He considered himself lucky.

Carlo was the gun cutter, but Tommy was the ganger due mostly to two things: his linguistic ability meant he could talk to other cutters, farmers, union reps and cane inspectors equally, and he had a calm nature that set a peaceful tone in the gang. Besides, he was the only one who didn’t mind doing all the paperwork, recording tallies and time sheets, negotiating with the farmer and the cane inspector and so on. With his tall frame, blue eyes and light hair and skin, he was not given the dago treatment by Britishers.

Tommy was particularly kind to young Lorenzo, perhaps even more than the boy’s own brothers, but that didn’t stop the boy’s slight stature and youth playing on Tommy’s nervous mind now that Enzo would be working among grown men.

Most of the other gang members greeted him with pleasantries, but Ivan made no attempt to hide his resentment at having not only a novice but one who was very young and of such a small build.

Carlo dismissed his little brother’s concerns about Ivan breezily. “Don’t worry about him, brother. He’s always resentful about something. This week it’s you; next week it will be something else.”

“Well, I will just have to show him that I’m no baby.”

“If he gives you any trouble, we will sort him out – or Tommy will pull him into line.”

“No! I must look out for myself. Like Mamma says, I have to be a man now.”

“Mamma really has no idea how hard this work is or she wouldn’t have let you come yet.”

They were back at the barracks and waiting for Giuseppe to return with all the necessities for Lorenzo, who was both excited and a little apprehensive about starting work. The thought of owning and using one of those big knives that looked like weapons was thrilling. He couldn’t wait to hold one in his hand and get the feel of it.

The two older brothers had also told Lorenzo they would get him an Australian Workers Union ticket – “and not one of those counterfeit ones, either,” Carlo said. “That’s asking for trouble.”

They explained what union membership meant and told Lorenzo it was a good thing. They said it was the easiest way to avoid being pestered and threatened by union representatives. They had a policy of having every member of their gang up to date in their union membership. That way, the union mostly kept its nose out of their business.

“It’s better for dealing with Britishers if they know you are in the union,” Carlo explained drily.

“They have this stupid idea that we work for longer hours and less money. OK, it is true of a few, but most of us don’t do any of that. We don’t want to draw attention to ourselves or aggravate them in any way. We like to be out of sight and out of mind.”

Giuseppe arrived back at the barracks with all the things Lorenzo would need for his place in the gang: a near-new cane knife and sharpening file he had bought from a fellow who was giving up cutting and moving on to fruit farming down south; two grey flannel canecutters’ shirts in the smallest men’s size; two pairs of work pants; a bucket-shaped canecutters’ hat; a pair of sandshoes; and a canvas water bag.

Lorenzo couldn’t contain his excitement at this bounty – more things than he had ever received at the one time – and ran to the room he would now share with Carlo to try them on. Giuseppe would move in with Tommy so Lorenzo would not have to bunk with a stranger.

When the slight boy re-emerged dressed as a canecutter, wielding his big cane knife, they all laughed uproariously except Giuseppe, who scowled at the others. Lorenzo laughed with them to hide his embarrassment at their good-natured mockery.

“Oh, brother,” Lorenzo suddenly said to Giuseppe, smacking his own forehead. “I’m sorry I forgot something so important. Mamma gave me a letter to deliver to you. She said it would be no faster to post it.”

He went to his suitcase to find the letter in the pink envelope and gave it to Giuseppe, then returned to his room to change out of his cutter’s clothes, which he folded and left on his bed.

That night, the youngest member of the 1928 gang carefully placed his new possessions in a neat pile on the low wooden fruit crate beside his bunk and, once he had pulled his mosquito net around him, silently mouthed a vow to St Joseph the Worker that he would prove himself a man worthy of the sacrifices his parents and brothers had made to get him to this moment.

He fell asleep dreamily visualising himself in the tall sugar, amazing the other men with his strength and endurance. The intimidating Russian man, in particular, gaped in surprise at the boy’s performance.

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The reality of the workdays was nothing like Lorenzo’s happy imaginings. For the first few weeks, his hands were blistered and cut and he was sunburnt for the first time in his life, quite savagely on the back of his neck and ears. The others told him to piss on his hands to toughen them up, but the boy thought they were mocking him again.

He decided to risk asking Filippo. “Is it true that pissing on your hands toughens them up, Filippo?”

“Too bloody right!” Filippo said in English, which he spoke fluently when it came to colloquialisms and swearing. Then back to dialect, “Do it, Enzo! It will help. I don’t lie to you.”



The first time he was able to put aside his doubt and disgust and urinated on his hands, they all sat gaping at him at the meal table.

*“Jesus Christ!”* said Ivan in English with a thick accent. He muttered something else in Russian, slowly shaking his big bullet-shaped head from side to side.

“What is it?” Lorenzo asked meekly. They all looked at each other, none of them wanting to be the one to tell him.

Finally, Tommy spoke up. “Well, lad, you don’t do the pissing on your hands thing just when you’re about to eat. You do it earlier with enough time to let it work and then wash your hands before you come to the table.”

Lorenzo could see they were all suppressing their laughter and thought he would die of shame. Again.

He came back to the barracks starving every evening but barely had the energy to chew, some nights preferring to drag his sore and weary body straight to his bunk. It wasn’t just the hands. All the bending to chop the stalks at their base and the loading of the cane into the little trains made every muscle in his body ache. His skin was angry with all the little scratches from what they called the trash.

This must be what it’s like to be an old man, he thought.

Keeping his body and his clothing clean was like having another job, it took up so much time. He hadn’t expected all that extra effort. He didn’t really know what he had expected. Clearly, his brothers had not told their mother in their letters what life was really like in the canefields. They would not have wanted to worry her or seem weak.

And it wasn’t just the work. On his third day, when Lorenzo was watching the other cutters more than he looked at the ground, without warning Ivan violently pushed him aside and brought his cane knife down hard. Lorenzo jumped back in terror, thinking the man was about to attack him with the knife.

“Good work, Ivan!” Tommy shouted in English. Lorenzo looked at Tommy, then at the spot on the ground he was pointing to and saw the two halves of a large brown snake lying motionless in the cane trash.

As for the big Russian, he’d already gone back to cutting the cane without so much as a backward glance. Lorenzo was in a state of shock and confusion. His tormentor was now his saviour.

After the first few weeks of the season, Giuseppe was marvelling to Carlo at how well Lorenzo was taking to the life. He felt like their anxiety over their little brother had been hardly necessary. After some early stumbles and terrible technique in the beginning, the boy had surprised them all by keeping up and even matching the performance of the weaker gang members.

“I will tell you this, Beppe, and no one else. Our dear brother cries himself to sleep every night.”

What? What do you mean? I don’t hear anything.”

“Oh, no, he does it very, very quietly. He must think I don’t hear him ... but I do. And I can *feel* his anguish. It’s like small, sad vibrations in the air. I’m not sure how I should help him.”

“We won’t let on that we are aware of this, Carlo. If we leave him to manage it in his own way, he will learn to absorb the pain and sadness and use it as a strength. I saw this during the war.”

Carlo agreed, but his little brother’s nightly sorrow haunted his own dreams.

OO

*Via Ponte Minissale*

*95013 Fiumefreddo di Sicilia (CT)*

*20<sup>th</sup> March 1928*

*My beloved son*

*Your father and I are in good health, as I hope are you and your dear brothers.*

*Here I sit, entrusting my youngest child into the care of my oldest. I know you will look out for him as you do for Carlo. Or is it the other way around? I don't know – I am not there to see how well and happy my sons are.*

*We are grateful for the money that has been sent, as is your wife. She is the reason I send this short note with Lorenzo and Rosario.*

*It will break my heart into many more pieces to lose my precious grandchildren to that far-off country, but my son, if you are not returning soon, you must bring them and your wife to you.*

*It is almost two years since you left and you know there are those who take advantage of a woman on her own. There are also those who despise her for her situation. She refuses to come and live with us because she thinks it would be a bad thing for both her and me.*

*I have heard about the difficulties but really this is not a good situation. I fear for all of you, including my daughter-in-law.*

*That is all I need to say to you for now and I apologise for worrying you, but it is up to you to address this problem.*

*With kisses, Your loving mother*

*P.S. Papa sends his best wishes and we both send our love to Carlo.*

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## 1928 News from Home

“Giuseppe, Giuseppe! Where are you, Gio? It’s your town, Giuseppe! It’s gone!”

Salvatore was breathless from running through the cane farms to tell his friend the terrible news.

“What do you mean gone? What are you talking about, Sam, you maniac?” It was Carlo, not Giuseppe, who came running out of the barracks in answer to Salvatore’s yells.

“Where is your brother? I have to tell him what has happened.”

“Wait, wait. He’s not far away. He’s having a shower out the back. He won’t be long. Now sit down on the steps and tell me what the hell you are yelling about. And where did you get this information? How do you know it’s correct?”

“I got it from the priest. Father Murphy. Priests don’t lie.”

Sam was still struggling to catch his breath. “He translated the newspaper story. For us at the pub. Etna has blown again. But this was a big one. A really big one. They say the biggest in centuries. The lava swallowed Mascali. The whole town. Everything. A few of the small surrounding villages, too.”

Giuseppe came around the corner of the building at that moment. “What is all the shouting about? Sam, what are you doing here? Why are you looking so crazy?”

“Because, Gio” ... more measured now ... “Etna has erupted and destroyed Mascali. The whole town is buried under the lava.”

Giuseppe felt the blood draining away and his legs turning to liquid. He made it to the verandah and sat down in time.

“What? *What!*? Are you sure?” Giuseppe’s face had all colour leaked out of it and his voice was barely there, trapped in his throat. “But ... how do you know this?”

“Like I said, Father Murphy translated the newspaper story to us at the pub. There have been telegrams, too.” Sam was sombre now, realising the full extent of what this meant for Giuseppe.

“Deaths ...? Have people died?” Giuseppe could hardly bring himself to say those words. His voice was more like a whisper.

“The newspaper says loss of life has been small.” Salvatore’s attempt to comfort him did not help. Giuseppe jumped up and started to raise his voice in anguish and frustration.

“How do we find out more? Where do we go? Who do we speak to? Damn this foreign language!” Giuseppe’s frustration with being an alien was crushing his chest. He felt like he couldn’t breathe. In Sicily he would know instantly how to get any information he needed, but here ... it was like having all your power taken from you.

“Father Murphy will find out more. He wants to have a meeting tonight in the hall in Halifax for anyone with family or friends in Mascali and the region around it. We will all go.”

Salvatore felt happier he could be more helpful now. “I will get the farm truck and come back for you.”

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*My God, how can I wait until tonight?* thought Giuseppe. If anything has happened to Ilda and the children, how can I live on? What do I do? God has cursed me for leaving them.

He missed them so much it clawed at his soul, especially at night, alone in his bunk. It was only the overpowering fatigue from the work in the cane and the vivid fantasies of a more prosperous life with his family all together that allowed him to drift off to sleep.

In his fully awake state, he couldn’t quite grasp whether those fantasies had them all together in Sicily or here in Queensland. Try as he might, he could not will an answer to that question. It drove him crazy.

He needed to know what he was working towards – land and a farm in Queensland, or land or some kind of small business in Sicily? All his life he had been disciplined with clear goals, but now he felt like his mind was flapping in the breeze.

He sat staring at his rough, scarred hands, looking at them as if they weren't his. How did they get like this? Calloused and rough like those of a labourer. Dammit, I am a labourer. Worse, I am a dago labourer. I am nothing in this country. But I have them. I have my family. I cannot lose them. If I lose them, I truly am no one.

It seemed like hours before Sam returned in the truck, which was already full, but Giuseppe and Carlo squeezed themselves into the back tray with the others from their province. So many of the immigrant canecutters and farmers in this area were from Sicily, mostly from Catania and Messina provinces.

Lorenzo reluctantly stayed behind because there wasn't enough room and he still struggled with Italian and had almost no English yet.

“Does anyone know anything more?” someone was asking. They were all speaking at once with no one making any sense. They were behaving like the ridiculous, over-excited ‘eyeties’ the Anglos thought they were. Giuseppe was the exception. He was deathly silent, not wanting to put his fears into words in case it made them true. He had to believe his loved ones were spared.

Amid the general chaos in the truck, the gentle voice of Geraldo the baker penetrated Giuseppe's feverish thoughts. Something about a telegram saying only three men died in the eruption. *Men!* thought Giuseppe. Men. Not a woman, not children. *Men.* He knew they would be someone's family and that it would be a tragedy times three, but he was quietly ecstatic, thanking all the saints over and over.

He was not a religious man and the superstitions of his *paesani* normally irritated him, but he was willing to call on any powers for mental and spiritual strength at a time like this.

Still, they couldn't know for sure what the death toll might be until they saw that damn priest. Actually, the padre was not a bad fellow – an Irishman who had learnt Italian. He was very

helpful and sympathetic. More than most, for sure. He had received some of his religious education in Rome, in the Vatican, and often expressed his admiration for Italy and Italian culture. Especially the food.

The truck pulled up at the hall in Halifax and the men began jumping off the tray and hurrying inside. As they took their places in the remaining folding canvas chairs set in rows on bare floorboards, Father Murphy spoke, slowly in Italian.

“Ah, I hope that is all of you. I was about to read out what news we have so far. If anyone comes late or can’t come at all, the rest of you will have to relay the news. I will translate as best I can from the London news service.”

He looked around the room and put his spectacles on to read out the news to them. With all his experience giving sermons in churches of all sizes and building materials, he could project his voice well enough so that even those in the very back row could hear him. His Italian wasn’t perfect and a lot of them weren’t themselves proficient in Italian, but Giuseppe and several of the others were. The padre cleared his throat and began reading aloud, the light shining on his bald patch ...

*“A graphic picture of Mt Etna’s desolation is contained in a special message to the Evening Standard from Sicily.*

*“This disaster has rendered five thousand families homeless; it has wiped out three towns and 760 houses, 2700 acres. Seven years’ wine crop, and one of the world’s richest lemon tree valleys is buried; bridges, railways and roads have been overwhelmed.”*

He looked up at their anxious faces and, seeing their apprehension and perhaps lack of comprehension, read that same paragraph again, then continued ...

*“The eruption continues unabated. Great clouds of smoke and fire are coming from the new crater far from the summit.*

*“The correspondent followed the lava stream for six miles, starting a few hundred yards from the crater, where the intense heat brought him to a standstill. He says: ‘A smoke pall a mile high hangs over the crater. Now and again a gigantic wall of fire sweeps skywards. The air*



*is thick with small pellets of hot rocks. The red wave spills over the edge and forces its way downwards. Each gust adds thousands of tons to the stream, which means that it progresses at least five yards further. After five hours' walk I reached Mascali. Here there is a solid wall one hundred feet high vertically across the one-time town square. Only seven houses are left. Meanwhile the stream is flowing on the eastward of Mascali. The roar and smoke are unceasing as the trees and isolated houses are devoured.*

*“Carraba is yet untouched, although its doom is sealed. Lava is to-day on the outskirts, but it is with the utmost difficulty that the peasants can be induced to leave. The evacuation is a more pathetic sight than the desolation.*

*“It is impossible to forecast the cessation of the eruption. Last night the crater was quieter, but to-day it is more active. The township of Giarre must be saved at all costs. Happily the danger is not immediate. The stream will probably reach the sea and form a new headland, just as the neighbouring headland was formed four thousand years ago.”*

The priest finished reading and looked around. He had never seen such a large group of Italians making so little noise. It was eerie. They were as quiet as death, to a man sitting frozen and pale as if made of stone. Then the shuffling in their seats began and the looking around at each other, then the murmuring, which soon grew into a nerve-wracking din.

The padre knew they would only get comfort from each other, not from him, but he had a priest's job to do. His booming voice crashed through the hubbub. “That was from London November 12th, but I have a little more from a few other news services. This short one comes from Rome ...

*“Professor Ponte estimates that Mt Etna has yet to disgorge twice as much lava as has hitherto swept the country. He regards the disaster as being the worst since 1669, when the eruption lasted nearly a year. Nunziata is now blotted out.”*

A strangled cry of “No, no, no” rang out from the back of the room. The priest peered over his reading glasses to locate the utterer, respectfully waited a few seconds, then continued ...

*“A feature of the eruption is its electrical nature. On Saturday terrific explosions occurred among the clouds of cinders, and these were followed by whirlwinds.”*

At this point the collective anxiety of a room filled with tough men was like a thick pall hanging over the large space.

The priest was infected by it. He paused for a drink of water, wiped the sweat from his high forehead with a handkerchief, adjusted his collar to loosen it a little and continued ... “I have one more report, then we will have to wait for further developments. Once again, this is from Rome ...

*“Reports from Catania state that despite the eruption the population of Sicily loyally celebrated King Victor Emmanuel’s birthday, which coincided with the armistice on the Italian front.*

*“Meanwhile religious fervour in the devastated regions has redoubled. Votive offerings at altars include precious stones and workmen’s tools. Pious processions, carrying images and relics take place amid awe-inspiring scenes lit at night by torches and the glow of molten lava ...”* my God, picture it, thought the priest ...

*“In such an atmosphere a statue of the Madonna of the Annunciation was brought out at midnight and placed facing the advancing lava. Members of the procession knelt on the ground imploring the Madonna to intercede with the Almighty and pleading for a miracle to stop the incessant eruption. But their efforts were unavailing and finally the statue was hurriedly loaded onto a lorry and driven off to escape destruction.”*

The priest put down the papers and looked around at the anguished faces. He desperately wished he could reassure these hard-working men whom he knew had never felt so far from everything they loved.

“I cannot tell you any more yet. We don’t know about casualties or how much property is lost. It seems the eruption has not finished, but as news comes to hand, I will do everything I can to keep you informed.”

The men gathered around the large table where the priest had arranged for tea and cocoa to be laid out, with biscuits and scones to snack on. It was not much to their taste, but they made short work of it nonetheless. There were anxious questions and discussions cutting through the general noise.

“It’s Etna. This is nothing new. It is nothing we have not seen dozens of times in our lives.”

“I don’t know. This sounds to me like a very bad one.”

“There’s no point in panicking when we don’t know the death toll.”

“Death toll ...?”

“If ... if ... that is if there are any deaths. There may be none at all. Stop worrying.”

This annoyed Salvatore. “That’s all right for you to say. You have most of your family here. What about someone like Giuseppe here? He has a wife and children in Mascali and his parents are not far from Mascali. Isn’t that right, Gio?”

Giuseppe showed no sign of even hearing the question. His thoughts had turned to the little blue house at the end of their street, almost on the edge of town. Would it really be gone? Would he never walk through its front door again?

That house contained everything he and Ilda owned. And it contained *them*. His beautiful wife and children. They’d been so happy when they moved in with hardly a stick of furniture. They had gradually furnished it as they could afford things.

His mother had given them some kitchen items – a coffee pot, saucepans and some dinnerware. He knew it would have been a lot more if he’d married someone she approved of, a village girl. His soft-hearted father would bring some useful item every time he visited ... a hammer, a pair of scissors, cleaning cloths. Giuseppe was pretty sure his mother had no idea about these small missing items. Or perhaps she did and chose not to make a fuss.

The elder Rosa had softened somewhat when baby Rosa was born. The only way for an unloved daughter-in-law to gain some respect from her husband’s mother was to produce a

grandchild. It was a special kind of redemption that gave her full membership of the tribe. And then she had borne a son as well to carry on the family name.

“I say, isn’t that right, Gio?”

Giuseppe snapped back into the moment in this bare timber hall on the other side of the world and stared at Salvatore.

“Yes, my family. My family. I must know if they are OK. They are everything to me. Without them I am nothing.”

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*Via Ponte Minissale  
95013 Fiumefreddo di Sicilia (CT)  
January 10, 1929*

*Beloved husband*

*I hope you are well and living more comfortably with your brothers and the other men. The children and I are healthy and well, as are your esteemed parents.*

*I think you must have heard all about the Etna eruption of November just past. Perhaps your newspapers in Queensland reported it or you have heard something from your countrymen? I hope you received my postcard telling you we were all well and I'm sorry for taking so long to write a full account, but things have been so topsy-turvy.*

*Husband, it was frightening and, in the end, truly devastating. It was a raging monster that devoured everything in its path. All of Mascali was destroyed. Our pretty town gone. The vineyards and orchards, the olive groves, all buried. Yes, our little blue house, too, is no more. But I was able to save some of our furniture, clothes and books. That was thanks to the help of the soldiers who were sent to evacuate the town and help transport all to safety. We left in military vehicles, which was very exciting for the children. Little Sebastiano's eyes were popping out of his head.*

*Old Signor Avolio was refusing to leave his house. He told the soldiers he would rather die than "leave it to lava and looters". The soldiers were surprisingly kind and gentle with him, eventually persuading him to go with*

*some neighbours to Giarre, where his married son lives. You know his son, I think.*

*The streets were filled with people taking as many possessions as General Scipione's troops would allow. Those young soldiers kept everyone calm. They were calling out, "There is time; stay calm. It has only just entered the Vallonazzo River." The lava flow, so silent and fast at the end, followed the riverbed. We were lucky it was a gradual process for the first five days.*

*We held the ceremony to celebrate 10 years since the war ended at the new memorial four days early and I made sure I placed some flowers on it in your honour. Your name was there with the others who served, but, alas, it is now buried under the lava, too.*

*We heard that in Sant'Alfio the parish priest offered his life if God would save their village. His prayer was answered, S. Alfio was saved and now poor brave Monsignor Nicotra is dead. He died last week. The survival of his village is being called "a miracle" and something big will come of it.*

*Just before the Mascali church tower went down, it swayed and the bells rang out. Many people thought it was a sign from God and fell to their knees to pray. There were many religious processions. All the relics and statues of S. Lorenzo Abate and S. Agata were brought out to appease God's wrath, to no avail. The lava kept coming. People were saying, "It is God's will. It is God's anger for our sins." You know how the Sicilians are.*

*The Riggio sisters even got permission to have their parents' coffins disinterred to be reburied in another cemetery! No one thought this strange and others even wondered if they should do the same.*

*Now there are many “grief tourists” coming from other parts of Sicily and rich foreign holidaymakers coming down from Taormina to see the destruction. Some are interested in the power of the volcano, but others just want to gaze on the misery.*

*The government is providing all the money for rebuilding by private citizens and they are building a lot of new public housing. Even the Pope sent 25,000 lire to the Bishop of Acireale to help out.*

*It is being said that all the new houses will have running water, piped sewerage and electricity. Imagine that, Giuseppe. In Sicily! The new Mascali will be the most modern town in all of Sicily.*

*We are staying with your parents in Fiumefreddo for now. I don't know how long it will be. It's in God's hands. It's safe and they adore the children, but you know, Giuseppe, your mother is very stiff with me. Your father is always kind, as you know. In any case I am very grateful to them for the help and shelter they are giving us. Your brother and sisters are helping, too. Little Sebastiano loves them all, but Rosa asks often, “When is Papa coming home to find us a new house?”*

*There is work here, Beppe, in building, railway track work and even farm work, all organised by the government. All this is changing people's opinion of Mussolini and he is making sure Italy and the world know all about it. He even sent Edda to visit.*

*I know how you feel about “things”, but could you think about coming home and working here? I know that most likely means manual work, but surely the*

*work of cutting the sugar cane is much harder? And here you would have your wife to cook for you and care for you.*

*I enclose a leaf from our olive tree, now gone. I saved it for you to remind you of our home. Keep it always with you.*

*I am always thinking of you.*

*With many dear kisses,*

*Your loving wife, Ilda*

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## 1929 The Cook and the Cat

Alfio, the gang's cook, was impatient. He was always cranky these days, and worse. Sometimes he took it out on the pile of firewood he had to chop to keep the hungry fuel stove going all day, every day. At other times, he was unnecessarily noisy with the pots and pans as he fought a constant cleanliness battle with them.

Those well-worn pots were never going to win. He had them obediently stacked on their rusting pyramid stand in the corner. No matter how much he hated this work, the barracks kitchen was his domain and everything and everyone would conform to his rules. He took enough pride in the job to wear a crisp white apron every day and kept everything in the kitchen spotless.

He wasn't a big man, though he had a large belly and a square-shaped head, but he had the sort of presence that could halt a conversation when he came into the room. His manner was gruff at best, furious and red-faced at worst. The other men in the gang were becoming tired of his foul moods and his annoying rules around mealtimes. They were starting to grumble among themselves.

"Is your brother back yet? He's holding everything up. He's got no right. He knows the rules."

Carlo didn't hide his frustration. "Just serve it up, Alfio. We're all starving. If it's cold when he gets here that's his problem."

"No! I don't change my rules for any of you. You can all wait. Then you might not do this yourselves because you'll all know how much it annoys the others."

Carlo waited until Alfio had gone back into the kitchen at the other end of the rough barracks building before muttering to the other canecutters. "This bugger has to go back to cutting. His food is horrible, anyway. It's time we got a new cook. Why don't we get a woman cook? Yes, that's what we should do! What do the rest of you think?"

Carlo was possibly the most affected by the cook's foul manner. Young and upbeat, he was always buoyant until he came up against someone's bad mood. He could make allowances

for his older brother because he knew where Giuseppe's gloomy states were coming from, but not this miserable pain in the arse. Mealtimes should be enjoyable – God knows they all worked hard enough to earn some relaxation at the end of the day. Including the cook.

Not getting much response, he went on. "That meat he cooked last night ... it was grey! Disgusting. And the vegetables were mushy and tasteless. It has to change. We should not stand for it. We should get ourselves a woman cook. An Italian woman."

Angelo sighed. "A woman cook? My god, I go to sleep thinking about my mother's cooking every night ..." Angelo was afflicted with terrible homesickness and the lack of decent Italian food wasn't helping. His father was a *stigghiularu*, too, selling those succulent skewers of lamb offal on the streets of Catania, so he was used to tasty food. Before leaving Sicily, he didn't know there was any other kind.

His expressive young face was so downcast it was almost funny. Like the sad clown face. "But, no, we cannot. The union doesn't allow it. It must be a man. I don't understand this stupid rule. What is wrong with these union people?"

The others were murmuring agreement with Angelo as Giuseppe came around the corner of the barracks building.

"At last." Lorenzo was relieved to see his oldest brother. "What kept you? The cook is angry because you have been holding everything up by being late."

Giuseppe ignored his little brother and the others and, instead of going inside to take his place at the table, sat down on the verandah and started stroking something furry he held cupped in his other hand. He was making soothing little sounds with a strange, tender half-smile on his face.

"Brother, what's got into you? Are you coming inside so we can all eat? That idiot won't serve the food until we're all at the table." In the fading twilight, Lorenzo's eyes went to Giuseppe's hands and his chest. "What have you got there?"

“I found her in the canefield when I was finishing up. She’s a tiny kitten. She’s scared but she purrs when I hold her. I’m going to keep her and don’t any of you even try to tell me no. I’ll look after her and keep her out of everyone’s way.”

For the moment, they all forgot about the evening meal and stood gaping at their friend and brother. They’d never seen him soften like this except when he talked about his children, which wasn’t often because he hardly talked anyway. They were looking at a complete stranger.

“I am giving her the name Gioia. She is mine.”

Giuseppe then stunned his brothers and the other men by kneeling on the verandah floor, playing with the tiny scrap and talking affectionately to her. “Come, little Gioia. We will find you some dinner.” Like he was talking to a baby.

At that moment Alfio appeared at the door. “What the hell is going on here?” he bellowed. “Get that thing out of these barracks. *Now!*”

“Go to hell, Alfio. You don’t run this show. We are all equal here.” Giuseppe knew he’d be up against it with the miserable cook.

“Well, if you think it’s eating any food from my kitchen, think again. I will not allow it.”

As usual, they all started protesting at once. “Come off it, Alfio” ... “Why are you such a mean bastard?” ... “You don’t own the food – it belongs to all of us. We all pay!” ... “Let the little cat eat something, you testicle.”

Alfio was red-faced with rage, like he was about to explode. “That’s it. I’ve had enough. Get yourselves another cook. You can serve yourselves the meal. It’s on the stove. I’m going to talk to Vincenzo about getting back in the other gang. I can’t stand you bastards another day.”

Carlo couldn’t help himself. “Good! Fantastic! We can’t stand you, either. You’re an evil-tempered turd and your cooking shows it. We should never have agreed to you having the job.”

“You think I wanted this woman’s work? I only agreed to it because I respect Vincenzo. He begged me because it had to be a man. I’d rather cut cane any day, and that’s what I’m going to do. But not with you lot of no-hopers! I’ll be back to get my things as soon as I’m signed to another gang.”

With that, Alfio ripped off his apron, threw it and the dishcloth hanging over his shoulder inside the door to the kitchen and stormed off, his stocky bulk shaking the floorboards.

As soon as he left, they all went inside and grabbed their plates and pannikins, except Giuseppe who was fussing around, finding a small tin dish for Gioia and cutting up some of his meat for her.

The tiny feline hoed into the food like she hadn’t eaten for weeks. Carlo brought her a little dish of milk. Lorenzo protested, “No, brother. Water is best for her, isn’t it, little one?”

Once they’d all eaten, including Gioia, the other men each wanted a turn at stroking the little creature. The barracks life – working with men, eating meals with men, going to the pub with men – starved them of tenderness and this little orphan was the willing recipient of any amount of affection from their hungry hearts.

Giuseppe was irritated by their need to lavish their affection on his pet, but he knew it would be better for Gioia if he indulged them. He grudgingly admitted to himself that it would be good for them, too. As it already was for him.

“Enough now. I’m going to bed and she will sleep on my bunk. That’s the end of it.”

With that, Giuseppe scooped up the kitten and took her to the room he shared with Tommy, his customary scowl back in place.

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The next morning, when the men realised Alfio wasn’t joking – he really had gone – they managed to put together a rough breakfast of charred sausages and leftover fruitcake instead of bread, but they knew they needed to solve their problem, and quickly.

“The widow Russo,” said Sam. “She is getting desperate for some way to support herself and her child. She has been doing bits and pieces – small jobs with her needlework and child minding – but she needs more than that with a young son to raise.”

Carlo looked puzzled. “I thought she was going back to Sicily.”

“No,” said Sam. “She doesn’t want to be a woman alone in the village. Better here. At least here she has a good chance of finding another husband with so many good men on the loose. She has been learning the language a lot faster than most of the women, too.” The men murmured their agreement.

“Her son is going well in the school. He speaks English like a native. And I have sampled her excellent cooking. I’ll go and see her before I start work if you can all cover for me. I’ll clear it with Vincenzo, too.”

“But the union ... the British Preference League ... the boss can’t agree to it without getting offside with them.” Angelo was always the worry wart. “And even if he does, how are we going to get her past those bastards?”

“Stuff them,” said Giuseppe. “They don’t have to know. Who will tell them as long as we keep our heads down and keep up our daily quota. We’ll just tell them the cook isn’t home if they turn up to poke around. But they won’t. We’ll tell Vin that we’ll take the blame as a gang for employing our own cook.”

The others mumbled their agreement and it was settled. Carlo and Giuseppe explained their plan to Tommy in a mix of English and Italian. Tommy in turn, passed this information on to Ivan in his basic Russian. A low, gruff “*Da da*” was Ivan’s version of wholehearted approval and Tommy said he was game to take the risk.

The union be damned, they all agreed. What did it do for dagos except take their money? They would have a woman cook. And a Sicilian one at that.

They all knew better than to ask where and when Sam had sampled the signora’s cooking.

For a time, the barracks became a happy place. With little Gioia to fuss over and Signora Rosso coming to the barracks to prepare delicious Italian food, there was a visible softening of these toughened men.

Her young son came after school and they were kind to the boy, listening to him recite his lessons, even though they didn't understand much of it. They often played football with him in the fading light.

They grew kinder towards each other, too, asking if one's knife wound was healing or whether another had news of his dying father. Instead of going to their bunks as early as they could, they would play something on the accordion; or enjoy a few hands of *briscola*.

They even occasionally sang a little opera — *Vesti La Giubba* from *Il Pagliacci* was the favourite with those who had the voice for it. There was joking and laughter every day. They were like a family. Three of the nine were brothers, anyway.

The men ignored the warnings and grumbles of the other gangs when they met up at the pub. They told them to keep it to themselves, or else.

“Or else what?” Their former cook was as obnoxious as ever.

Carlo looked at Alfio with contempt. “Or else you'll get a hot soup ladle up your arse if we're reported, that's what. Or maybe the spiky end of a pineapple.” Laughter all round. In this country you could afford to waste a pineapple.

“We'll know it was you and, even if it wasn't, you'll deserve it anyway for making our lives as miserable as you could just because yours is.”

“I won't say anything. I don't betray my own. Even you pack of bastards. But what will you do when the cane inspector comes or if any of the Aussie cutters go out there, maybe spying or looking for work?”

“Why would they, Alfio? Unless someone alerted them. It's Italian-owned farms all round in our parts, and the Aussies who *are* out there are all right, I say.” Carlo was calmer but still imparting a veiled warning to their former cook to keep his trap shut.

“That’s what they hate, you young fool. They hate that so many of us own land and give employment to our *paesani*. They aren’t built like us. They’d rather spend all their wages on drink and gambling. And women, of course. Can’t blame them for that.

“And, my God, do they hate us when any of their women smile at us or flirt with a handsome *ragazzo* – even the barmaids who are merely doing their job. They really hate us when we save enough money to get ahead.”

Lorenzo nodded his head in furious agreement. This was only his second season but he was quickly catching on to the nuances of the social structures in the sugar country.

“Yes, you’re right about that. We’ve taken land they couldn’t do anything with and turned it into successful farms with acres and acres of tall sugar waving in the breeze. I swear it’s as beautiful as the vineyards back home.”

“Oh, how I miss the vineyards ... and the Sicilian wine ...” Poor homesick Angelo was crying into his beer again.

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One particularly hot day when the air was steamy and everything seemed to be wilting, including the men when they came into the barracks for their lunch, they noticed that Angelo was missing. It was no problem for their hunger, though, because Signora Rosso did not have the stupid rule about waiting until everyone was at the table to serve them all their food.

She was a kind and soft woman. She knew horror and heartbreak after losing her husband to the bite of a venomous snake. It happened when he was at work cutting cane and there was little help the other cutters could give him. They simply had to watch their friend die.

They did their best with the usual treatment – applying a ligature and scarifying the site – while one ran to the farmhouse for help and brought the farmer back with him. But the husband and father passed away en route to the hospital.

An agonising death it was, too. It started with the awful vomiting, but he became so drowsy he was unable to hold his head up. His eyelids drooped and froth formed around his mouth.

The poor man tried to speak but his breathing became so ragged they couldn't discern the words. They made out his wife's name and at least could tell her that he thought only of her and the boy at the end.

No one wanted to say anything more about her husband's last moments, but she knew what death from snakebite would be like. Everyone in North Queensland did.

No, the widow was not embittered by her tragedy. On the contrary, she had become even more nurturing with her fatherless son to care for. She knew it was up to her now to give him the life his papa intended for him. She had to work towards that.

The men looked at the big pot of minestrone on the stove, the homebaked bread and the fresh fish the brothers had caught the evening before. The mix of aromas could transport them to Sicily if they closed their eyes. They still couldn't believe their luck to be eating better than they would back there, because here there was such abundance and the cook to do it justice.

They were halfway through their soup, discussing the quality of the cane they were cutting, when Angelo arrived, his brow knitted in a look of concern.

Carlo was the first to react. "What is it, Angelo? Is it about the cane, or have you injured yourself?"

"I did have a little cut from the trash and I was wrapping it in my handkerchief, which made me late. But that's not bothering me at all."

"Then what?" Carlo again.

"Well, maybe I imagined it, but I could swear I saw someone hiding in the canefield close to the barracks. I saw his head poking out of the cane because he had a hat on, but then he ducked down. Not a canecutter's hat, but the sort of hat we wear to town when we dress up. I think he must have seen me and didn't want me to see him."

They all fired questions at once. "What did he look like?" "Was it someone we know?" "Was he Italian?" "A canecutter ... or a farmer?" "*Minchia!* What was he doing? Spying on us for some reason? *Stronzo!*"



Angelo was suddenly overcome by the rich aroma of the minestrone and had to eat some before he could answer. They all waited somewhat impatiently while he fed his face, although they understood how that raging hunger after a morning's work had to be appeased first and foremost.

When he had finally attended to the demands of his stomach, Angelo was able to speak again. "I don't know who it was. I only saw him for a second, but I feel very suspicious because I know he didn't want me to see him."

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Almost three months after his tantrum over the kitten, Alfio had let go of his hostility to his former gang and was back cutting with another mob. Even though it was physically harder than cooking, he was happier doing what he considered men's work. He'd come early to the pub because he'd been sent into town by the gang to catch the post office before closing.

He ordered a beer, took the city newspaper he had bought and looked around for one of the Italians with better English to help him read the main news. They weren't in yet, so he idly flipped through the pages, scanning the pictures, when a tiny item caught his eye. He couldn't quite follow the English but he could read the names all right. And he knew the word 'cook'.

He glanced around again. The bar was quiet and the barmaid was polishing glasses and humming a tune. He knew she couldn't speak Italian, but maybe she could help him understand it. Silvie was always nice to everyone. She didn't care where you were from.

"Please, Signora, can you help me with this? What it means? It is only little ..."

"Sure, Alfio." She stretched out her hand with its bright-red-painted fingernails to take the paper. A smile lit up her pretty middle-aged face. "Give us a squiz."

He had no idea what those words meant but he handed her the newspaper and pointed to the small notice between the advertisement for 'Chamberlain's Guaranteed Remedy for Colic & Diarrhoea' and the results of the Railway Stations Gardens Competition.

**FEMALE COOK.**

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**INGHAM GANG FINED.**

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**INCREASED PENALTY**

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INGHAM, November 1, 1929. For employing a female cook contrary to the sugar award nine Italian cane cutters, C Busacco, L Busacco, G. Busacco, P. Russo, A Grasso, S. Romeo, L. Papallardo, T. Cindric, and I. Petrov through an interpreter, pleaded guilty at the Ingham Police Court yesterday and were each fined £5, with costs. The Police Magistrate, when imposing the fine, recalled the fact that when dealing with similar cases last year, he intimated that he would treat future cases of this nature as defiance of the award, and the fine would be £5 for each individual.

“Oh, I see ... it’s a gang of canecutters and they got caught with a female ... a lady cook.” She said the words slowly with emphasis on ‘lady cook’. “You understand?”

Seeing him nod, Silvie went on. “They were fined five pounds each. Strewth! That’s a lot.”

She moved the paper back under his nose and pointed. “Here. You can see their names. Mostly Italian by the looks – ya know ’em?”

Alfio had seen the names. That was precisely what had got his attention. He startled her by bursting out laughing. He laughed so hard and loud he wheezed and coughed. Then he got up off his stool and did a little dance. With his big belly and funny little legs, he looked ridiculous. Silvie regarded him disapprovingly.

“That’s not very nice, Alfio. They’re your countrymen. Your mates. Don’t you care about them more than the bloody union?”

“*Diu ti binirici!* God bless you. No! They are no good. Thank you. Thank you.”

Silvie shrugged and walked off to serve another thirsty customer. Who can understand these Italians? They stick together like glue but then they suddenly erupt into arguing and yell abuse at each other.

Still, they are unfailingly charming to barmaids, so it was no skin off her nose. But, gosh, five pounds was a lot and there were no doubt other expenses that went with it. Poor buggers, she thought, and threw another dirty look at Alfio.

Alfio grinned back at her.

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## 1929 In Court Again

The public gallery of the Ingham courthouse was jam-packed with Italians. The proceedings hadn't started yet and the din was deafening. It was a stiflingly hot and steamy December morning, and all that body heat and noise was making the atmosphere unbearable.

The observers were more or less divided into two sides, like at a wedding, except it was the supporters of the Calabrian accuser on one side and those whose loyalty was to the Sicilian accused on the other. So, it was no coincidence that one lot were mostly Sicilians and the other mob largely Calabrians. That distinction alone was enough for some to decide on guilt or innocence.

There had already been a fight outside the courthouse among supporters – nothing serious, just a bit of clumsy pushing and shoving – and a man from each group had been detained and taken off to the lockup, loudly protesting in their respective dialects.

“Struth, these dagos go off, don't they?” The florid-faced, corpulent sergeant was speaking to a young court reporter wearing a pale-blue dress and matching hat, carrying white gloves along with a sheaf of documents, as they waited at the back of the courthouse for the Police Magistrate to arrive.

“These cases where it's one eyetie against another, ya can't believe a word they say, can ya?” The court reporter avoided answering, shifting uneasily and wishing she could move away without seeming rude.

At that moment, they were distracted by the arrival of Giuseppe with his lawyer, who led him to a seat next to the interpreter. Giuseppe felt anxious. Being on remand hadn't helped. It was humiliating to be locked up like an animal and fed horrible food when, in his mind, he had done nothing wrong.

He glanced around nervously, trying to spot Tommy's tall frame and fair hair. Even though he'd been told the court would supply the interpreter, he trusted Tommy above anyone appointed by the authorities. This interpreter wasn't known to him and his community, so for Giuseppe it felt like a gamble.

The lawyer, a Mr. Blackburn, seemed friendly enough when he introduced Giuseppe to the interpreter, a Mr. Seraglio, and explained how they would make sure Giuseppe understood everything throughout the proceedings. Blackburn said a few words about the order of things to the court-appointed interpreter and waited for him to explain to Giuseppe.

Seraglio was a northern Italian, Giuseppe guessed, just by his appearance – tall and blue-eyed with thinning light-brown hair and expensive-looking glasses and clothing. When he opened his mouth and spoke, it was confirmed. He seemed less friendly than Blackburn, but he diligently, if stiffly, explained what the order of the proceedings would be and warned Giuseppe not to speak unless he was asked to and only after he, Seraglio, told him what he was being asked.

In his perfectly adequate Italian, Giuseppe replied that he understood and had been in courtrooms in Italy due to his occupation as a *carabiniere*. That, and his facility with proper Italian, caused Seraglio to relax a little. With a wry grimace, he explained, “No, you must understand that here it is more orderly and they do not tolerate anyone speaking out of turn.”

Giuseppe said he understood and would be careful to express himself according to courtroom etiquette. Seraglio, who had the same superior attitude to southerners as most northern Italians, half smiled, knowing he was at least dealing with someone with some education and common sense. Perhaps they would get through this ordeal with the best possible outcome.

“It is not my place to pass judgement on you or, indeed, to have any opinions. My job is strictly to translate what is necessary for you to understand the proceedings. We are not *paesani* and we are certainly not *amici*, but can I say that I hope you have a good reason for striking this woman? That sort of thing is judged more harshly here than in Sicily.”

Giuseppe felt his temper rising and pointed to the knife wounds on his shoulder and arm. “*This!* She attacked me. What I did was defend myself.”

“Maybe so, but your lawyer will need to make a good case. You southerners have a reputation for violence. You must know that.”

Conscious of his reduced status as a labourer, Giuseppe wanted to explain to this man that his province, and especially his picturesque commune of Mascali, was not like the rest of Sicily. It was wealthier and more law-abiding. It had far less of those dark forces that were intimidating and murdering people on the rest of the island. He bitterly resented it being given the same delinquent reputation. If only this educated – but ignorant! – man could see its beauty, he would shut his mouth about southerners. But this was not the time or place for that kind of discussion.

As they waited, Seraglio apparently couldn't help asking the question. "May I ask why you were carrying a gun on the day?"

"Rabbit shooting."

Seraglio's expression turned to one of faint distaste and Blackburn, who didn't understand what they were saying but was concerned there might be discussion of the case going on between the two Italians, threw them both a meaningful look and held up his left hand, palm facing them. They fell silent.

Giuseppe finally spotted his Dalmatian *amicu* and his two brothers in the front row of the public gallery and smiled weakly at them. They had jostled hard to get a seat as close as possible to their brother and friend. Tommy had told Giuseppe they wouldn't be able to sit with him but had assured him he would get a fair hearing. "Gio, this is not like Italy where you can pay for a result."

Giuseppe wasn't convinced, though. "Everyone will side with her because she is a woman. It doesn't matter how much that crazy witch lies. You saw the newspaper reports. You read them to me. They made it sound like I attacked her first."

"Try not to worry so much. You have the wounds to show she was not a helpless victim. *Madonna*, you came out of it with worse injuries, my friend."

"Yes, but she will claim self-defence. And possibly other things."

"What other things? Are you holding back ... keeping something from us?"

“Never mind, Tomislav. It may not come to that. She is a married woman, after all.”

That conversation had ended with Tommy feeling like there was more to this than Gio had told them, but he could see there would be no more information offered. Giuseppe had a way of ending any uncomfortable conversation so it left you feeling like a door had been slammed shut in your face. Still, he hoped things would go well for his Sicilian friend.

Now that the courtroom was uncomfortably full, they were not allowing anyone else in. Giuseppe felt a jumble of emotions: anger for even being in this position, anxiety about how much of the truth he should reveal – how much would she say? – and crushing frustration at having no facility with the language. He knew a lot of *paesani* were there to support him and he should feel grateful, but the shame of it was overwhelming.

*I can't go through this in a foreign language*, he thought. How will I be able to tell if what the interpreter says is correct? I know how bastard lawyers can confuse and misrepresent. It would be bad enough for this to happen in Sicily, but here ... with all these dago-hating Britishers. They think we are all violent killers and thieves, that we don't believe in the rule of law. We just don't like stupid laws, like having to employ a man to cook instead of cutting cane.

Giuseppe couldn't believe he was back in court not even a month since the last time. He had never been in trouble in his life. He'd been a member of *La Benemerita*, the Carabinieri, for godsake. He knew this was more serious than the cook business, though, and it would cost a lot more money. Money he would not have for buying land, for bringing his family to Queensland ... money he might even have to borrow if it was more than he had saved.

His thoughts were interrupted by the interpreter telling him to rise to his feet as the Magistrate entered the room. He understood this was to show respect but at that moment he felt like everyone was the enemy. The only people he knew he could trust were out of reach.

For the first time since he had left Mascali, he felt glad that his wife and children were so far away and wouldn't have to endure the humiliation of seeing him in this situation. The children were too young to understand, of course, but for Ilda it would be painful to witness his shame.

The worst thing that could happen now would be for Ilda to find out about this and why it happened. Even his brothers didn't know the whole truth. But what would this woman reveal? The police told him she was claiming he tried to steal her vegetables and, when she confronted him on her husband's farm, he hit her with his rifle butt. They said her friend backed up her story.

Ridiculous! *Strega!* Why would he be stealing vegetables when the cook gave them all plenty to eat? Absurd!

But wait, he thought. Maybe it was best to go along with that, even though it was rubbish. That might be better in his wife's mind than the truth ... No, pleading guilty would lead to a terrible outcome. He would have to say she attacked him first and that he held his gun up to fend off the knife. Sam could vouch for that much. He just didn't want to say why they had come into contact. Surely she wouldn't want to, either. She was a married woman.

With these thoughts swirling in his head, Giuseppe wasn't taking in much of the preliminaries. They talked too fast, anyway, and his English wasn't good enough to string together the words he did understand. Even the translator talked too fast. He already knew what he was being charged with and recognised the English words even before they were translated. "Grievous bodily harm." Suddenly he was being prompted to speak in answer to, "How do you plead, guilty or not guilty?"

A moment's silence. The interpreter nudged him.

"Not guilty, Worship."

The interpreter told him he could resume his seat and the magistrate called for the first witness, the policeman who had made the arrest.

Giuseppe recognised him as that nasty Sergeant Kemp. He was saying he took a statement from both parties after he received the complaint from The Woman. This was what Giuseppe was calling her in his mind now. He did not want to think of her by her name. She meant to ruin him.



Red-faced and sweating profusely, Kemp read out both statements in the pompous tone he always used with immigrants. It was a slow business with the interpreters for both parties translating each bit. The complainant only spoke Calabrese dialect, so it was a cumbersome process for everyone to have the correct information.

Giuseppe was not at all surprised that she had claimed he assaulted her first, but he was a little taken aback that the friend she had produced to the police as a witness – who was not at the scene until afterwards – would lie to the police and probably now perjure herself in court to support The Woman. She must be a relative, he thought.

He knew the next witness well enough. It was the young doctor with the kind face and gentle manner who worked at the Ingham hospital. He had treated both Giuseppe and The Woman that day. Everyone knew him to be a good man and an excellent doctor. He was kind towards all migrants – everyone, in fact, regardless of race or status – and a man of principle, already highly respected in the district.

Then Giuseppe’s lawyer, Blackburn, was speaking. According to the interpreter, Blackburn was asking the doctor if the woman’s injury was minor enough for her to go home only a couple of hours after being seen at the hospital.

“Yes, she was quite well and suffered no ongoing damage.”

The lawyer, then the translator: “She did not lose consciousness, is that correct?”

The doctor again: “No, she did not.”

Then the doctor was being questioned about Giuseppe’s injuries. His lawyer was speaking. “My client’s injuries were one serious knife wound and a second superficial knife wound on the same arm in the shoulder area, is that correct?”

“Yes.”

The doctor then went into some detail about the location and length and depth of the stabbing injuries, the number of stitches, the length of Giuseppe’s stay at the hospital and his

disapproval of the sergeant taking the patient from the hospital straight to the lockup. Everyone in the courtroom turned as one to look at Giuseppe several times.

The doctor told the court about calling at the police cells to check on Giuseppe's wounds, then sending a nurse twice to change the dressings and make sure there was no infection. Then he had to return a week later to remove the stitches. It was certainly sounding like Giuseppe had come off far worse in the encounter. He hoped that would go to his advantage, though he knew some would admire the woman for it, and that was galling. No use thinking like that, he told himself.

The doctor was allowed to leave the witness seat and The Woman was called. She was dressed up for the occasion with her dark, glossy hair expertly styled and a slash of colour on her pouty lips. The slightly dowdy farmer's wife, who normally wore a messy apron and working boots, was replaced by this smartly turned-out woman with a neat figure and dark-haired, dark-eyed good looks. Not beautiful, but certainly striking.

Giuseppe had an instantaneous recognition of his former attraction to her. He felt a stirring of it now. He told himself it was understandable that he'd been tempted by her flirtatious signals all the way to that line he'd vowed never to cross. It was not a flirty look she was throwing his way now, though. He thought of the old saying "if looks could kill ..."

It was all too predictable, just what he expected. She was spinning a bizarre tale of finding him stealing vegetables in her farm garden and then him attacking her with the butt of his rifle when she ordered him to leave. With a meaningful look, she claimed he said, "I will take whatever I want."

*My God*, he thought. Without saying it in so many words, she was giving the impression ... putting thoughts into the minds of those present ... that he would forcefully have his way with her if he felt so inclined. *Stronza!* What a wily one she is. This was a salacious tactic to discredit him in people's minds as a predator.

She was speaking quite fast now, playing to her audience, and the interpreters were working flat out to maintain clarity, but Giuseppe wondered if they had got that right. It was a complete fabrication. But he well knew what she meant to achieve by it.

His lawyer was cross-examining now, putting it to her that her account was false from start to finish and that, in fact, she attacked his client, who merely tried to fend her off by holding up his gun, which accidentally made contact with her head as she rushed at him.

“No, you are wrong. He hit me first. He knocked me to the ground and stood over me. He was menacing. I did what I had to do.”

“If you were knocked to the ground with him standing over you, as you claim, how was it that you were able to get up to your feet and stab my client, not once but twice? You. A small, slender woman against a strong man – a canecutter – with a gun. How do you expect the court to believe that?”

“Because it is true. My friend will tell you. She was there.”

Giuseppe couldn't hold back. In a savage whisper he told the interpreter, “She lies! Her friend was not there, but my friend was and he saw what happened.”

Finally, she was allowed to step down. She threw Giuseppe a theatrical look of triumphant nonchalance and flounced out of the witness area. Then the next witness, her friend, was called to the stand.

Giuseppe was so rigid with a silent fury clouding his senses that he barely took in what was said by this witness. But he got the gist of it. Again, he whispered savagely to the interpreter. “A pack of lies!”

Like The Woman, she was a Calabrian farmer's wife and, like The Woman, had dressed up for her appearance in court. She wore a defiant expression on her face. Every now and then, she stole a contemptuous sideways look at Giuseppe. He glared back.

Giuseppe was well aware that the theatrics of it all were just confirming the odious stereotypes of Italians held by the Britishers, but what could he do about that? He could only hope it would go as much against The Woman and her lying, shameless friend as it would against him.

Once the friend had given her evidence, the magistrate gave his decision. He said there was a case to answer but that in view of the lightness of The Woman's injury and the conflicting statements to the police, the charge would be reduced to one of assault occasioning bodily harm. He committed the accused to trial at the first sitting of the Supreme Court in Townsville, which would be February 10th, 1930. He allowed £50 bail and one surety of £60.

Giuseppe's heart sank. This was only the beginning of the costs.

Then the interpreter told Giuseppe to rise to his feet while the magistrate left the court.

"What? That's it? I don't get to tell my side? How is that fair!?" Giuseppe was clearly agitated.

"Calm down. This court is merely to see if you have a case to answer ... if you have to be tried in the criminal court." The interpreter then began to tell the lawyer why Giuseppe was angry, but Giuseppe interrupted.

"Criminal court! I am no criminal. If anyone is a criminal, it is The Woman and her friend for lying to the police and perjuring themselves in the court. And for attacking me. *Porca puttana*, she is a crazy witch!"

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Christmas Eve, Christmas Day and St Stephen's Day – *Il Giorno di Santo Stefano*, which they call Boxing Day in Australia – came and went. The Italians made quite a fuss celebrating St Stephen, the first Christian martyr, who endured a trial only to be stoned to death. Although Giuseppe spent much of this holiday time with friends and his brothers, he found no joy in it. He was being eaten up by uncontrollable anxiety.

The nightmares from his wartime experience had returned and the horrible dreams were a confused montage of battlefield and courtroom. It was all terrifying. He woke every day feeling and looking like he hadn't slept. His brothers were worried about him, but he brushed aside their concern and pretended he had nothing to fear.

Then came the awful train trip to Townsville and the terrifying atmosphere of that place, the Supreme Court of Queensland, where they had to go through the evidence all over again. But at least this time he was able to tell his side – the real story – and have his friend Sam confirm it.

The Woman and her friend gave inconsistent “evidence”. One said he was in the vegetable patch, but the other claimed she saw him in the canefield, pulling at the cane, then corrected herself. Their description of the knife was different, too. The friend mentioned a hunting knife, but The Woman said it was an ordinary table knife.

Giuseppe’s lawyer asked her to explain how that kind of knife could slice open a man’s shoulder and cause a wound that required a good number of stitches, as well as a second smaller wound. All she could say was it was “very sharp for cutting cabbages”.

After all the anguish, all the expense, all the lies, what was the finding? The judge weighed up her tale of vegetable theft leading to the attack by him, and his description of her jealous rage at his change of mind after three illicit encounters – which he finally had to reveal, saying he came to his senses – and found there was no good evidence to convict.

“Not guilty.”

Of course, the only official reports of his innocence ... well, that’s what he was calling it ... were in the Police Gazette, which no one reads. There were no sensational accounts of his trial outcome like there had been of his charge and the false allegations. Some of those headlines were burnt into his brain.

**HALIFAX FRACAS. KNIFE VERSUS GUN. WOMAN SHOWS FIGHT.**

A few words under Return of Prisoners tried in the Supreme Court in the Police Gazette could never have the impact of those headlines. They would be what people remembered about him for quite some time. Being found not guilty would be neither here nor there.

He swore Sam to secrecy and decided to never speak again about the whole sordid business, no matter how much the busybodies would pester him for the details, as he knew they would.

It was the biggest, most traumatic drama in Giuseppe's life since his war service and it was over and done with just like that. It came to nothing. But now he would have to work like a dog just to get back to where he was financially before all this madness.

Bearing a big angry scar, too.

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*Via Ponte Minissale  
95013 Fiumefreddo di Sicilia (CT)  
23 June 1930*

*My dearest husband*

*I hope you and your brothers are well, as are we, and I thank you for the money you and your brother sent. It will be greatly appreciated by your parents and children. And, of course, by me, your wife. There is no need to apologise for it being less than usual.*

*We are all managing quite well in these strange times. Your father is slowing down a little, but he enjoys having the children under his roof. They are such a delight. Your mother is as fierce and busy as ever!*

*I know you want us to go to Queensland and I did apply for and receive our passports but there is not the money for the fares yet. Also, there is an opportunity here.*

*I have been approached by the education authorities to return to teaching. There are so many extra children in the school in Fiumefreddo they do not have enough teachers. There are many children from Mascali and some of the other villages, including our own little Rosa, and it may be like this for some time while Mascali is being rebuilt. Then they may need teachers there, in our town. I hope I can say our town – that I will return to it and that, God willing, you return to your family.*

*It is no one's fault, believe me, but I feel like I am in your mother's way being here all the time. We are both so accustomed to running our own households*

*and, as it is not my home, I am the one housewife too many. I try to help your mother but she likes everything just so and I seem to always be doing things the wrong way and annoying her. Naturally, she is the reggitrice, the head woman.*

*Also, she feels she must watch over me all the time. I cannot discern whether it is me she cannot trust or the men of the village. If I want to go to a store or the post office, she summons a brother or cousin to go with me. It was Lorenzo before, but now it's usually poor Isidoro. He is a sweet boy and doesn't seem to mind, but I am sure that at 14 he has other things to do.*

*I miss Carmela very much. She and Felice have taken an apartment in Acireale until the new Mascali is built, so I never see her any more. But we write and exchange postcards. I think your mother does not approve of my friendship with Carmela. She thinks Carmela is 'flighty' and untrustworthy.*

*Felice is still our doctor – I don't feel confident to see any other. But we are blessed in not having any health problems that might require a doctor's attendance. I hope I am not tempting fate in saying that.*

*Therefore, dear Beppe, with your blessing I will say yes to the offer of employment. There is no shame in it during these times of great need and I believe it will be good for all of us. I will be out of your mother's way during the day and I will refresh my skills. Also, as I will be earning money, there will be less need for you to send us so much of your earnings, especially when there is no sugar harvest. Maybe you can save faster and even spend a little money on yourself.*

*Please write back to me as quickly as you can.*



*With many kisses,  
Your loving wife, Ilda*

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*Macknade via Ingham*

*2 August 1930*

*Ilda my darling wife*

*Thank you for your dear letter and I am happy to tell you that after a hard year my brothers and I are all well and working hard to earn as much money as we can. I trust you and the children are still healthy and that your life is becoming more normal after the terrible eruption.*

*You have my blessing to take up the teaching work if that is what you really want. However, you gave me no details of how you can get to the school. Will you walk? And how much will they pay you? Will it be full days? Every day? Please inform me of all the details so I may be able to picture you and the little ones in your daily life. And please be safe. I think you know what I mean by that.*

*I beg of you dear wife – have some more photographs made and send them to me. I cannot bear to not know how you all look now – especially my children.*

*This is now my fifth year at the canecutting – and away from my beloved family – but it feels like a hundred years. I must not complain – I know it is very hard for you. Am I the only one here with that sadness? No. Many of the canecutters miss their parents and sweethearts. Yes, some have children there.*

*Our brother Lorenzo has now moved further north to work this season on our other cousin's farm, so it is just Carlo and me again. The rest of our gang are mostly the same. Lorenzo's replacement is a paesano from Acireale. I think Lorenzo and Rosario became close when they sailed together. That was how it was for Carlo and me.*

*Lorenzo has grown a little and is able to hold his own with the other men. He becomes agitated if anyone treats him like a boy or speaks to him disrespectfully. He stands up for himself very well – I am proud to call him my brother. Also, Carlo is beginning to speak about taking a wife. There are many, many Italian men here but so few Italian girls. I believe he will have to find a wife in Sicily if he wants her to be a marvellous cook who speaks the same language and honours the same customs. Of all the unmarried men, he is the one who could take an Australian wife. He could attract one. I hope not. We will see.*

*Although we are a long way from Europe and America, the economic depression has also visited us here in Australia. There are many men without work. Some travel the roads looking for any work they can get – sometimes even for just a meal they fix a fence or a gate then move on. Prices for wool and wheat and sugar are lower, and our work has been reduced. Times are hard.*

*I know you said don't apologise but I truly am sorry I still cannot send as much money to you as I would like. There have been some incidents that have cost me a lot of money, but I will not trouble you with those. You do not need to know the bad things – only the good.*

*Please give my children hugs and kisses – and also my parents.*

*I am your loving husband,*

*Beppe*

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## 1932 Carlo Wants a Wife

“Oi, you! Dago boy!”

Every Italian in the public bar of the Lion Hotel, and a couple of Spaniards, turned around to see where the shouting was coming from. They’d all heard the term of abuse more times than they could remember, but it always rankled.

The quietly convivial atmosphere of a minute before was shattered by the raised voice and angry demeanour of a red-haired, freckle-faced man the locals had not seen before. Like the others, Carlo didn’t know him but, unlike the others, he knew who he was. He felt a cold stab in the pit of his stomach at the sight of him here in their happy gathering place.

Stan, the publican, recognised him straight away. He put down the cloth he was using to polish glasses and held both hands up, palms forward in a peacemaking gesture. “Steady on, Bill. There’s no need for that sort of talk. Not here in Macknade, mate. What seems to be the problem?”

Stan was trying to put out the fire before it got going. He himself might have used the word ‘dago’ now and then in private, but he would never call eyeties that publicly. There were a lot of them in the Bemerside-Halifax area and they were some of his best customers – always respectful to the barmaids and rarely obnoxious drunks. In fact, they didn’t seem to get drunk, yet they were usually quite jolly with a ready joke or funny comment. In all fairness, you’d have to say they were a pretty good lot.

“Don’t you bloody tell me what I can and can’t say, Stan. That young dago bastard over there in the corner has been sniffin’ ’round my Mary. I’m not havin’ it, I tell ya. She’s too good for the likes of ’im.”

Bill’s daughter Mary was the young court reporter at Giuseppe’s first court appearance, in Ingham. Carlo had caught her eye that day – and he could barely take his eyes off her. He wasn’t the only one. He asked a few of the fellas if they knew anything about her. They weren’t sure, but they thought she was seeing the real estate agent’s son. Or was it the

lawyer's boy? Whoever it was, you could bet they had the kind of social status Carlo – or any canecutter, let alone an Italian one – could only dream of.

Outside the courthouse after Giuseppe's case, she'd dropped a pile of documents near where Carlo was standing alone, waiting for his brother's bail paperwork to be done. The hot wind was blowing the papers around in the dust and she was visibly distressed. Carlo rushed to help her pick them up and, as they smiled at each other, a bolt of electricity had passed between them.

"Thank you. Thank you. They are very confidential. I must get every page and not lose any or I will be in trouble."

Carlo didn't understand every word, but he had a good idea of what she was telling him and he could see she was flustered. "You are welcome. No trouble."

There was that dazzling smile again.

"All right, that's enough. Go and catch up with your dago mates now. I'll take care of this." It was voice of the corpulent sergeant breaking through this magic moment between two beautiful young strangers, huffing and puffing as he bent over the obstacle of his own enormous middle section to pick up the one sheet of paper remaining on the ground.

Carlo reluctantly moved away, looking back over his shoulder at the lovely young woman who was still smiling at him.

Instantly smitten, he thought she was the most beautiful girl in Queensland. In her turn, Mary later told her closest girlfriend about the handsome Italian whose brother had been on trial and who had picked up her documents and handed them to her with a gorgeous smile. How she'd felt an instant attraction to him.

Her girlfriend was shocked, but also a little amused. She knew that just about every eligible bloke in the district had his eye on sweet, pretty Mary. Her father was only a barber, but he had his own shop, a neat house on the edge of town and lofty ambitions for his adored only child.

Those ambitions didn't include any canecutters, that's for sure. And they certainly didn't include any migrant men. Carlo knew where people like her father would put him on the social scale, but he didn't believe in it. No, he believed anything was possible in this land of opportunity – if you had the courage to go after it.

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Over time, Carlo found the nerve to speak to Mary in the shopping street a couple of times. It was courteous and respectful – he didn't dare say too much lest he come across as some sort of Casanova. He knew instinctively that would put her off. Besides, he was self-conscious about his English, which only made him study the language more whenever he had the time.

That led to him visiting town more often than he ever had and being careful about his appearance, keeping his hair neatly trimmed and his face clean shaven. Whenever he went anywhere that he might run into Mary, he always wore a clean white shirt with a collar, sometimes a tie, and he even bought a smart new hat and kept his going-out shoes polished. He wasn't ashamed of being a canecutter, but he didn't want to look like one.

He certainly wasn't ashamed of being Italian and never would be.

A long time and several shy exchanges later, this led to him self-consciously – and, you'd have to say, clumsily – inviting her for a milkshake or coffee in the rebuilt Sciacca Refreshment Rooms. He mentally cursed his English not coming out as well as it could have, but to his rapturous amazement, she said yes.

Their meeting over a milkshake in the almost empty café boiled down to a brief but intense appraisal of one another and they both clearly liked what they saw. Carlo's English sufficed and Mary kept her side of the conversation simple for this first encounter. They were both painfully aware of the shocked stares from the other three customers and each secretly hoped there would be no repercussions.

Faint hope.

Carlo found out which church Mary attended and eventually there were some planned encounters after mass on the odd Sunday. It was all very discreet because both knew what disapproval would erupt, more on her side than his, of course. Although they never discussed it, she didn't even seem to mind that his brother had been in trouble.

All this took place over many months. It was hardly a whirlwind romance, or even a romance at all since they couldn't get much time together, and there was always the question of whether she was being pursued by anyone else.

Carlo didn't know how to ask, and she said nothing of any other suitors. Also, he told himself often that if she was interested in anyone else, that lucky fellow would definitely have married her by now. You don't take your time with someone as admired and desired as Mary.

She was not just nice and kind; she was also very easy on the eye, with a shapely figure and glossy chestnut hair styled in perfect waves. The hair set off her jade-green eyes perfectly, and when she smiled, she had deep dimples that gave her a sweetly cheeky look. She wore feminine pastel-coloured dresses and co-ordinated them with dainty shoes and hats. Her perfume reminded him of the Sicilian orange groves in flower.

Carlo was completely cow-eyed over her.

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Giuseppe was the first to react to Bill McLean's tirade in the bar.

He stood up and confronted the man in his best English. "You don't talk to my brother like that. You don't call us those things."

Conscious that Giuseppe had been in trouble twice now, some of the other gang members and Carlo straight away signalled to him to calm down.

They were all speaking at once in a mix of Italian and English. "Gio, don't rile him. You won't win with these Britishers ..." "Calm down, Gio. Your brother can handle his own affairs ..." "Stay out of it and let Carlo speak for himself ..."

With a deep scowl, Giuseppe reluctantly sat back down and glared at Bill.

Bill ignored Giuseppe and addressed his words to the publican. “You know how it is, Stan. Ya dunno know what’s true with these dagos. Prob’ly got a wife and kids back in Italy. A lot of ’em do, ya know.”

“Come on, Bill. Look at him. He’d be lucky if he was twenty-one. How could he have a wife and kids already? Geez, mate. But I understand you wanting to protect your girl. She’s a prize for any bloke.”

Carlo heard all this clearly. He stood up and faced the angry man. “I am almost twenty-five and I have no wife and no children – in Italia or anywhere. I am hard worker. I am building the house.”

Those words and the Italian accent only enraged Bill all the more. “You can just shut your trap and stay away from my daughter. Stay away from *all* Australian girls. Yer not fit for ’em and don’t ever think you are. You hear me? Bad enough you dagos are takin’ our good farmland. Yer not gettin’ our girls.

“Especially my girl – ya get me?”

He was virtually spitting the words, the jowls on his scrawny weather-beaten face wobbling crazily as he shouted.

Filippo understood the bit about farmland and he wasn’t having any of it. It made his blood boil. He jumped to his feet as well. “Take good farmland!! *Good farmland?! We buy bad bloody land full of weeds, we work hard – harder than you buggers – and make it good. We pay high price. Too bloody high. You Britishers sometimes cheats.*”

By now Bill had said what he came to say and suddenly became aware that he was riling up a gang of canecutters and maybe he should back off. With a final jab of his index finger at Carlo, he spat, “You watch yerself, mate, cause I’m not the only one keepin’ an eye on what you get up to.” With that he walked out of the pub.



Back in the barracks, sitting on the verandah step, Giuseppe felt he had to take charge of this mess. What was Carlo thinking? He indicated for him to sit beside him so they could talk privately, albeit in lowered voices so none of the others would hear. Gioia climbed onto Giuseppe's lap and purred, oblivious of the anguish in the air around the two men.

"My God, brother, why do you want to chase after an Australian girl? This can only end badly. Can't you see that?"

"Why, Gio? Why don't I have as much right to love her as any man? I am Australian now. I am here for good. I am naturalised. I have the paper to say I am a British subject."

"You know the answer to that. Britishers like that man don't want any canecutters going after their girls, let alone dago canecutters. They think we are the lowest of the low. They will never think of us as Australian if we're here for a hundred years."

"Come on, brother, they're not all like that. Some of them are decent and polite."

"Yes, but her father is not one of those. Surely he made that clear. He probably believes the garbage he reads in the *Truth*. Truth?! *Ha!* Besides, even the good ones can change their tune when it comes to their women."

Gioia twitched at her human's abrupt change of tone. He stroked her gently and absent-mindedly looked into the distance, calmed by her purring.

"But, brother, she is lovely and kind. I don't care what her father is like."

"You will eventually. If you are serious about her and marriage is on your mind, you will care. When you marry, you bring two families together. It should be in love and friendship. If they are hostile to each other, it will be a very difficult situation. Believe me, I know. Do you think Ilda's Ligurian family welcomed me, a Sicilian, into their fold? No, they most definitely did not. And you know how Mamma is about her. It is all very hard on Ilda, especially with me gone."

Giuseppe softened a little at the crushed look on his brother's face. "Brother, if you are ready to take a wife, you must marry a Sicilian girl. If you can't find one here you must go back

home and find one; all the better if she's one from our village, whose family is known to us. You know very well that Mamma will have someone picked out for you."

Giuseppe had the latest letter from their mother in his hand. In it she mentioned one of the village girls from 'a good family' they knew well. He held it out to Carlo, but the younger man didn't even want to look at it and shrugged it off, which sent Giuseppe into one of the domineering rants he tried to suppress these days, but which were always lurking just below the prickly surface.

"As your older brother and head of the family here in Queensland, I am telling you ... *advising you strongly* ... to do this. Now that you are building your own house, you have somewhere to bring a wife and have the babies ... well, that's what you must do."

Gioia twitched again, stretched and moved over to Carlo's lap.

The thought of his younger brother having a home to bring a wife to made Gio feel more than a little resentful. If he hadn't had all those legal bills to pay off, and time off work being locked up and going to court, he too might have a home by now. Still, he was catching up financially and maybe in a year or two he'd be able to build something and move out of the barracks.

For his part, Carlo intuited his older brother's shame at falling behind financially and wished his brother could be happier and regain his self-respect.

Perhaps his war service was something that could bring him a little pride in his achievements, Carlo thought.

"Brother, why have you not joined the Ingham Ex-Combattenti?" Some of your fellow war veterans have."

"What? Not this again. Join that mob!? I might as well put on a black shirt and sing *Giovinezza!*"

"The Comitato Anti-Fascista dell'Herbert River, then?"

“No! Not them, either. Listen, little brother. It is best for those of us with loved ones in the Fatherland to stay out of politics altogether. You know very well I don’t support the regime, but to publicly speak against it is to endanger those we love back home.

“That big mob who flew their communist red flag and denounced Mussolini and Fascism at the grand ball in Trebonne ... well, let’s just say their careless noise will not go unnoticed by the Blackshirts, who may well take it out on their families in Italy. Mussolini has spies everywhere.

“Do you want Ilda and my children – or our parents, for that matter – to pay the price for that sort of thing? No. We must put all our energy and determination into our quest to become land or business owners. No politics. None.”

Neither of them would have the money to buy a farm for quite some time to come, but Carlo had kept his nose clean – apart from the cook business – and saved enough to buy a small block near the Lion Hotel.

He was having a house built on it, high off the ground like they had discussed after the flood of ’27. He would make it a home fit for a wife and children.

Good-natured at heart, even though his brother’s words were not what he wanted to hear, Carlo understood that Giuseppe was looking out for him and only wanted what was best for him. But the heart wants what the heart wants.

He wanted Mary.

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Riding his bicycle to church one blue-sky Sunday, Carlo was humming an old familiar tune and feeling on top of the world when he was knocked over by a passing car.

He lay in a ditch beside the road, stretching his neck around to get a glimpse of the vehicle to see if he could recognise it, but he felt sick with pain and shock. When he tried to move, he thought he would faint, so he lay very still. The car made no attempt to stop. It didn’t even slow down but sped off into the flat distance in a cloud of dust.

Carlo knew in his gut this was deliberate. He also thought he knew why.

Eventually, a *paesano* came along and found Carlo in this state. By then, the faint feeling had passed and he had got to the point of sitting up but hadn't yet tried to stand. With the help of the *paesano*, he gingerly got to his feet and was relieved to realise nothing was broken, just some savage skin grazes. He was lucky he didn't hit his head.

Carlo's bicycle wasn't fit to ride back to the barracks, and he still felt stiff and in pain, so his Good Samaritan offered to get Vincenzo to come in the farm truck to pick him up. Then they both remembered it was picnic day and most of the family and their friends would probably be at their regular picnic spot by the creek.

So, they sat together on the side of the dusty, rocky road, waiting for someone in a vehicle or cart to come along. The other man, who Carlo knew only by his first name, Mario, asked Carlo what had happened.

"I was knocked over by a black car."

"Who was it and why didn't they help you?"

"I don't know who it was, but I have a fair idea of why they didn't stop. It was because they meant to do it."

"But why? How have you angered someone enough to do that to you? Please tell me you have not been visited by *La Mano Nera*.

Carlo had been shielding his eyes from the sunlight but at that he dropped his hand and looked at his companion in shock.

"No! Why would you bring up that name? Nothing like that ... although it could be that someone paid the Black Hand to do it."

"A *paesano*?"

"No, a Britisher."

“That cannot be correct. The Black Hand do not do work for Australians. They only attack us Italians, and only on their own behalf. Whoever it was – what do you think was their motivation or is that something you don’t wish to tell?”

“I believe their motivation was my interest in an Australian girl.”

“Oh.”

**THE NORTHERN HERALD**

**13 November, 1932**

The engagement is announced of Miss Mary (only daughter of Mr. and Mrs. W. McLean, Halifax), and Wilfred Scott (son of Mr. and Mrs. A. Scott, Ingham), advises our Ingham correspondent.

Giuseppe and Carlo were alone in the barracks. The others had all gone to the bocce and cards day that had been organised by a rival gang. They had badgered Giuseppe to come, too, but he silenced their good-natured pleas with a scowl and something about “important family business”. No one wanted to push him.

“Do you have your documents in order?”

“Yes, brother.”

“Do you have your cash safely contained?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have your tickets for the train and the ship?”

“Yes, in the same wallet as my cash.”

“Just one more thing ... the gifts for Ilda and the children ...”

“Yes, yes, Gio! Why all these questions? I can organise myself.”

“I am just trying to help you. I know this is hard for you – I understand it is not what you want. But what you want is now out of reach forever. It will be a good thing to sort this out in Sicily and I am certain you won’t regret it.”

“How can you know that?”

“Because I know that marriage is more than an attraction. More than an infatuation. It is a shared life.”

“Well, you are not sharing your life! The little sharing you are doing is with a bunch of men! How can that be normal or natural? What are you going to do about that? When are you going to give your wife the life she needs? You need it, too. You know you do. Do you even remember what your children look like?”

Giuseppe gaped at him and realised what he was saying was true. At that moment he could not bring the dear faces of his children into clear focus in his mind. *Dear God, what is happening to us?*

Later, he would get out the most recent photos his wife had sent, which were safe in the carved box of treasures beside his bed, and stare at them long enough to sear every feature of their beloved faces on his feverish brain.

“You talk to me about marriage in your high and mighty terms, Gio, but for all you know you may be letting yours wither and die.”

Carlo instantly regretted his harsh words. He knew all the reasons his brother had held back from bringing his wife and children to Queensland, but he couldn’t help feeling it was now becoming foolish. Other men had families in the sugar country. They managed to make a life, and their wives were made of strong stuff. They supported their husbands. Most of them, anyway. He was pretty sure Ilda would be the same, even if she had come from a comfortable background.

Lost in his moment of personal regret, Giuseppe felt no anger at his brother's wounding words. He knew Carlo was broken-hearted and he felt deeply saddened to see his handsome face transformed by it.

"I'm sorry for my hard words, Gio." Carlo looked so forlorn. "No wonder you were tempted by that Calabrese woman. It's not normal to live only among men for years, like this. I cannot wait to get my house built."

Carlo looked glum. "I just wish it was for Mary."

OO

### 1933 Young Sebastiano's Illness

The sun's first gentle rays broke through the bedroom window where Ilda slept in her small house in the new Mascali. She stretched out for one languid second, then woke with a jolt, remembering what had kept her awake for half the night and caused what little sleep she did have to be fitful and restless.

She looked around the room and reminded herself how lucky she was to finally have a home of her own once more. It was a relief to get out from under the weight of her mother-in-law's disapproval and constant complaints and breathe freely again.

It was something of a blessing that the sudden death of her beloved father-in-law, Nonno Sebastiano, coincided with the offer of a government-built house in the new Mascali. She couldn't have stood living in Fiumefreddo any longer with him gone. He'd been so kind to her and the children. Such a sweet, sweet man.

Now she mentally chastised herself for her ingratitude. But it's true, she argued with herself. She was the pure stereotype of the mother-in-law. Discourteous for no reason. Harping and controlling. Well, the distance between them now was helping. Perhaps, over time, they would be able to get on a more even keel. She felt genuine sadness for Rosa's widowhood.

Her thoughts went to the children, still asleep in their beds. They, too, loved their brand-new house with its tiny courtyard where they played the games Rosa always chose. They delighted in the modern appointments not seen in Sicily except in the houses of the rich: their own inside water supply from taps; and, joy of joys, electric lights.

For Ilda, though, these wonders did little to quell her profound loneliness. After eight long years, she knew her husband's absence was something she would never grow accustomed to.

Now that she was back in Mascali, she was occasionally seeing Carmela again. Carmela and Felice had moved back, too, but into their own newly built home, not government housing. Ilda's happiness at being able to see her friend again was tempered by the change in Carmela, who had her own little baby now and seemed to be struggling with her new situation.



Ilda offered her help more than once, but Carmela had become withdrawn and only seemed to want her own mother with her. Sometimes, when Ilda dropped around to her house, she saw the curtains twitch and knew her friend was at home but not answering.

Never mind, she'll come good again, Ilda thought more than once. She didn't take offence because she knew this happened with some women after childbirth, but most eventually made their way back into the society of their female friends and family. Still, Carmela's nervous and distant manner only added to Ilda's loneliness, and she so loved to cuddle tiny Angelina whenever Carmela gave her the chance.

Ilda wished Giuseppe could see how they lived now, how much easier life was with running water, electricity and modern sanitation. The wide streets and large public buildings of the new Mascali made getting around and doing things easier, too. She knew that would appeal to Giuseppe's sense of discipline and order.

The town had a Fascist efficiency about it that was good in some ways but bad in others. Everyone knew that efficiency could turn to ruthlessness and cruelty in a moment, but many people felt good about so many things running smoothly for a change and agreed it was down to the regime.

The townspeople had mostly celebrated the new Mascali, which was carefully planned and sited one-and-a-half kilometres east of where it had been before the eruption. The residents were inordinately proud of being so far ahead of the rest of the island, of all the *Mezzogiorno*, in fact. For the Fascist authorities, it was a model town. Many former doubters had come around to admiring Mussolini for what his regime had accomplished in the rebuilt Mascali.

But there was one flashpoint for those who still opposed the regime, and even some supporters: the positioning of the Fascist torch high above Jesus on the cross at the front of the cathedral-sized village church. It was blatant sacrilege and a visible symbol of the Duce's megalomania.

These things could only be whispered, though. There were always spies about, ready to report you. They were even sent out into the diaspora and a bad report could cause serious problems for family still in Sicily.

Ilda had written to her husband about the new town more than once, but it seemed nothing could tempt him to return to Sicily. This scared her. Of the five brothers now living in Queensland, only Carlo had made the trip back home and that was for his own reason: to marry the lovely Anna and take her to Australia and the home he had built. He was so proud when he showed them all a photograph of the house. How strange it looked perched on its high piers. Even stranger, it was made of timber.

As for Giuseppe, he was still trying to accumulate enough capital to buy land. Still trying to build the new life – or a house at least. His wife knew it wounded his pride that his younger brother had achieved this already.

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Ilda now had a most pressing reason to write to him. But how? Normally such a practised communicator, even if it was sometimes just a quick postcard, her mind was frozen. She paced around the house, trying to think it through. She sat down at the small dining table to make a start three times but had no idea how to begin.

How do you tell a husband his only son almost died? That the boy now has a visible dent in his lower back where the doctors had to remove a rib. That it was a new reason she could not even think about moving the children from Sicily.

*I must just come out with it*, she thought. Just tell him what Felice explained to her about their son's condition. Thank the saints for friends like him and Carmela. Felice was helping her through this most terrible time, making house calls to check on Sebastiano's recovery and giving her medicine to calm her nerves. Carmela was still distant, but Ilda was patient.

She picked up the pen and started to write. This time she would get it done. She couldn't afford to waste paper like this.

*Beloved husband*

*I write to tell you bad news, but you do not need to worry. The worst is over.*

*Our precious son has been critically ill with an infection, double pneumonia.*

*He almost died. The doctors at the hospital in Catania had to perform surgery to save him. It's a miracle that he not only survived but is improving by the day. We are back at home in Mascali and Felice comes regularly to check on him. I am so grateful to him and Carmela. I have missed you so much through this terrible time.*

*Please do not worry. He is much improved and will soon be running and kicking his ball around again. I thank the Lord he was so healthy before this happened and his young body was able to withstand the shocking affliction.*

*Little Rosina and I are well, as, I trust, are you and your brothers. Your mamma is managing but we all miss your papa, as I know you must. We were all thankful he lived long enough to attend your brother's wedding, which was beautiful, and he has a wonderful wife in Anna.*

*Please write soon.*

*Your loving wife,*

*With many kisses*

Ilda was still writing the letter when there was a knock at the door. She opened it to find not just Felice but Carmela and baby Angelina at the door.

“How wonderful to see you all,” Ilda said, opening her outstretched arms to take the baby from her friend. Carmela held back for a second then somewhat reluctantly handed over the smiling infant. Carmela had a tight, polite smile on her own face, which Ilda could only imagine was due to the strange moods after childbirth.

“Yes, I persuaded Felice to allow me to accompany him. You know he doesn't like me in the way when he is doctoring.”

“That is an exaggeration, my love. I just do not want you to see distressing things. Especially when children are involved. But young Sebastiano is doing well, so ... where is the young man?” Looking at Ilda, “May I see him?”

“Of course. He is resting after doing some lessons with me. I don’t like to tire him, but he must not fall behind. I do not wish to boast, as he is my son, but speaking as a teacher I know he is very bright and has a good future if he keeps up his education.”

Felice looked surprised. “Surely, he’s not back at school yet. Yes, he is doing very well, but he is still too frail for the school yard and those long hours of book work.”

“No, no, no. I am still home-schooling him. I know the curriculum and I have taken leave to care for him. It’s very hard without the pay packet but we are making do. My Rosa is such a help. She is like a little nurse and mother to him. Excuse me while I fetch him.”

As she returned a few minutes later, she heard the couple speaking to each other in quiet but tense tones. As soon as they saw her, they stopped. But she’d distinctly heard Felice say, “You’re imagining things.”

Then a little too loudly, “Ah, here’s my patient. How are we today?”

Sebastiano was always happy to see Felice because he gave him so much attention but never hurt him like the other doctors had. It was mostly fun and games with Felice.

“I’m good. I’m good. Will we play a game today, doctor?”

“Of course. I brought you something. A junior bocce set. We can play a game in the courtyard.”

Ilda was startled. “Oh no, Felice. That is too much. Too generous.” But she could see the boy was beside himself with joy. Rosa, too, was paying attention now, her young mind ticking over at the thought of how much fun she and her brother could have with this wonderful gift. Ilda glanced nervously at Carmela, who was smiling indulgently at Sebastiano.

“Look,” said Carmela. “Look how excited he is. He must have it. Thank you, my dear husband, for being so kind to my dearest friend’s son. You really are such a good man.” Felice stood with folded arms, smiling smugly at the looks of admiration from both women.

Ilda felt she had no choice but to reluctantly accept. Anything else would be ungracious. “Then you must let me make lunch for you both as a thankyou. I have some nice salami and cheese and I baked bread this morning. The olives should be ready, too.”

“Yes, thank you! Your bread is the best!”

Carmela threw her husband a quizzical look at that sudden outburst and, startled by his own enthusiasm, he at least had the grace to look a little sheepish.

Felice was quite a good-looking man, even if his lips were a little too full, which he couldn’t hide under the thick reddish-brown moustache, and his brown eyes had a lazy, louche look about them. Carmela made sure he always had crisp white shirts and collars to wear with his elegant dark suits.

His shoes were highly polished and always the latest fashion, unlike Giuseppe, who had to be persuaded to give up the out-of-date spats he habitually wore before he left Sicily. Giuseppe cared about grooming but not so much about fashion.

Carmela was lovelier than ever, even though she looked tired. Only those who knew her well could see the anxiety beneath the beautifully turned-out surface.

Ilda had already fed the children, so the three adults sat at the table while Rosa taught Sebastiano to play bocce out in the courtyard and baby Angelina slept peacefully on Ilda’s bed.

“What news of your husband, Ilda? Has he made his fortune in Australia yet?” Felice knew very well that he hadn’t, and Ilda wondered why he even asked the question.

“I have just written to him to tell him of his son’s illness. It was a very hard letter to write.”

Carmela suddenly looked warm and sympathetic. “Yes, Ilda, now that I am a mother, I really do understand how hard everything must be for you. You do so well to handle it all on your own. I admire you for it. The men don’t understand that being a wife and mother is not easy, especially alone.”

“What are you talking about, my dear wife? What do you know of this? You have a beautiful new home and a healthy baby daughter. What do you know of hardship?”

“Not hardship ... loneliness ... worries ... You work such long hours and are away from home so much.”

“Well, my dear, my hard work is what allows you this comfortable life you have. Come, come. you cannot possibly compare yourself with Ilda here.”

“No, no. Of course not ...”

The rest of the lunch conversation was mostly about what was happening in the town, just good-natured chat and gossip to lift the tension that had taken hold of them. But Ilda couldn’t help feeling unnerved at being so carelessly pitted against her friend.

After her visitors left, with Felice promising to stop by again in the next few days, Ilda checked on the children and put the letter in its envelope. At least it was written now. She had stopped short of begging her husband to come home, but that would be the only thing in her prayers now, other than the health of her beloved children.

OO

## 1934 The Bomb Attempt

Giuseppe tossed the latest letter from his mother onto the table just inside the door and settled into the only armchair to read the newspaper; to try his best to, anyway. He knew there would be no news of Italy, but he was always hopeful for some small snippet. It was understandable that Ilda's last proper letter contained no general news as its purpose was to inform him of his son's illness and – thank all the saints – his recovery.

Giuseppe had been so upset to learn of the crisis and still suffered agonies of guilt over being so far away in his family's hour of greatest need. A postcard or two from his wife since that shocking news had reassured him to a point, but the gap in her letter writing was starting to worry him.

Still, it was peaceful having a house to himself, where he could go over everything in his mind with no distractions by well-meaning people. Living with Carlo and his new wife in their house was a great help financially but they knew his woes and tended to fuss over him a little too much.

Now that he was settled into this strange house, he could also take the time to translate the words in the newspaper slowly and carefully.

He looked around as he made himself comfortable in the threadbare velvet armchair near the window with the brass ashtray stand beside it. He very deliberately placed the unlit cigarettes he had rolled and some matches on the small circular tray halfway down the stand, along with a glass of water. He knew he had to re-read his mother's letter, but he couldn't face it just now.

The furniture was basic, as was the house itself, but he could tell everything was scrubbed clean regularly. *The difference it makes to have a woman in the home*, he thought.

There was a plain unvarnished timber table, probably homemade, and five chairs – an odd number, it occurred to him. An old kitchen dresser held mismatched china, some of it chipped or cracked, and some bits and pieces of glassware. A couple of pretty plates of quite good quality took pride of place on the open shelf in the centre of the dresser.

On the wall was a faded poster of a Greek temple. For a minute he thought it was the one in Segesta in Sicily, but then he realised it was in the province of Cosenza in Calabria. On another wall was a picture of the Virgin Mary holding a well-fed, unclothed baby Jesus. Where were the family photographs? he wondered. On the dresser was a framed photograph of *Il Papa*, Pio XI.

The dresser drawers held mismatched silver cutlery with yellowed bone handles, and small miscellaneous items that had no place of their own – a slate pencil, a rubber band, a matchbook from the hardware store with only two matches left on it, and various unidentifiable parts of things. In Giuseppe's mind, everything should have a proper place. *What was his proper place?* he often asked himself.

Giuseppe didn't know the owners, the Belcaminos, very well, but he had decided that, from everything he had heard about the family, they were honest enough for him to enter into a transaction with them, even though they were Calabrians.

They owned a small cane farm but needed money urgently for the whole family to visit Italy and Giuseppe had enough cash to lend them in a lien arrangement on their cane crop. He did not have enough money to buy a farm yet, but he thought he could increase his capital by selling this crop.

They all agreed it would be best if he stayed in the farmhouse so he could keep an eye on the cane. He had only been there a few weeks and was enjoying the solitude and privacy of being in a proper home without having to compromise with anyone. The years of living in barracks and boarding houses, and now sharing with his newly married brother, were beginning to get him down. The memories of the cosy home with his wife and children were fading.

*That letter. Oh, God.* No, it can wait.

Giuseppe shook the newspaper to turn the page and thought he heard a sound on the verandah. Probably those wretched curlews, he thought. The haunting banshee cries of those damned birds had scared him silly when he first came to Queensland. They did sometimes come close to humans, scavenging for any food rubbish. They had surprisingly pretty faces but were awkward looking with their long bodies and stalky legs.



There it was again. No, not birds. Footsteps. Going down the stairs and receding up the garden path, he guessed. What in God's name?! Irritated at this rude interruption, he jumped out of his comfortable chair and ran to the front door. By the time he opened it, all he could see was a dark figure cycling erratically down the dirt road and disappearing behind the tall cane.

Puzzled at why they had not knocked, he turned to go back inside when he spotted something out of the corner of his eye. It was a rock that he knew was not on the bare verandah before because he had swept the rough floorboards clean only an hour or so earlier. He picked it up and found a piece of paper under it. The corners of the paper were poking out enough that it would be noticed, so he sensed this was something deliberate; and ominous in its secrecy.

He knew the things that had been whispered in Ingham and even up in Innisfail where Lorenzo lived. His heart sank as he unfolded the paper.

It was written in poor English, most likely so the recipient would not be able to guess the origins of the person who had written it. Giuseppe felt sick and sweaty at once as he looked at it, translating the simple words.

“£500 or the house blows up. Sunday. Under rock. You do not be here.” In the top corner was a crude stamp-like depiction of a small hand. A black hand.

Mother of God! *Mano Nera!* Those black-hearted, thieving, murdering dogs! *But who is this meant for?* Giuseppe wondered, Belcamino or me? He thought about this for a while and decided it was meant for whoever they thought had money. If they knew he had the lien on the crop, then it was likely meant for him.

He had told a few people about the lien when he sought advice on whether it was a safe thing to do with his money, but surely they were all trustworthy. Of course, Belcamino could have told anyone, and Giuseppe knew the men who were being blamed for the outbreak of this mafia filth in Queensland were Calabrese like Belcamino. Mammone, Femio, D'Agostino and their lot.

Those parasites, those fleas, will get nothing from me, he thought.

A week later, the day before Christmas Eve, Giuseppe was back at the house where he boarded with Carlo and Anna to spend the holiday season with them before returning to the Belcamino farm. Lorenzo was down from Innisfail to spend Christmas with his brothers and sister-in-law. He had thought twice about it because he knew he would be sharing the verandah with Giuseppe and he wondered whether his older brother still had the night terrors.

Giuseppe was pleased to be with his brothers but even more pleased to be reunited with his beloved cat, Gioia. He'd been missing her while he was at Belcamino's and had even thought about taking her with him. Now he was glad he'd left her in the care of Carlo and Anna. Those *Mano Nera* scum thought nothing of hurting innocent animals to make their evil point. They were known to poison horses and dogs.

The brothers were sitting on the verandah drinking coffee when Giuseppe casually, and silently, passed them the horrible note to read.

Carlo's benign expression changed instantly to one of horror, his handsome face now dark with anger and concern. "Mother of God, brother! This is the worst news you could give us. Will you pay these filth?"

"I will pay those bastards nothing. They are too cowardly to show themselves. I don't believe they are real *Mano Nera* – just poor, dumb imitations. Stupid peasants who would shit themselves if the real thing came anywhere near them." He quickly checked that Anna had not heard his coarse language.

Not that she would be disapproving towards him. She was a good woman and he was immensely satisfied that she had waited all that time for Carlo and now they were clearly very much in love. He felt vindicated for having applied the pressure on Carlo to forget the nice Australian girl and get himself a Sicilian wife.

Giuseppe had quickly decided Anna was everything a Sicilian wife aspired to be, and now she and Carlo were blessed to have the first baby on the way. Petite and serene-looking, she had filled out a little as her pregnancy progressed, and her beautiful hazel eyes glowed with

love for her husband whenever she looked at him. Any time she was at rest for a moment, she absent-mindedly stroked her swelling belly as if the life growing in it was always reminding her of its presence and she was reassuring it.

The best thing for Giuseppe was that Carlo had gone from being heart-broken and resentful to the happiest man in the district once more. And this time his happiness rested on the solid ground of generations of two families knowing and respecting each other, having the same values and customs.

“I don’t know, Gio.” Lorenzo was reluctant to argue with his older brother, but he was anxious about what could happen to him if he ignored the note. “These criminals can be very serious in their intentions. Up in Innisfail last year, di Salvo ignored a letter and was shot. He got better, but they poisoned his horses and terrified his poor wife. Then, this year, that couple got attacked again. Both of them this time. But di Salvo was armed.”

Carlo brought a little plate of almond *biscotti* and a fresh pot of coffee to the wooden fruit box they used as a little table and nodded his head furiously as he poured and the coffee aroma settled over them. “Yes, yes, we all heard about that down here. There was plenty in the papers about it.”

“But even more horrible was the business with the ear. Did you hear about *that*?” Lorenzo made a squeamish face as he asked the question and took another biscuit. “Your wife makes the best *biscotti*, Carlo. They are even better than Mamma’s. Do you know what she is cooking later?”

“She is making roast beef but not with the vegetables the Australians like, cooked in the beef fat. She cooks it in olive oil with the caponata vegetables – onion, garlic, eggplant, capsicum, tomatoes, olives, capers. And she throws in a couple of anchovies. Cooked for many hours. It’s the best.

“Now, what was the ear business?”

“Oh yes, the ear business. Surely you heard or perhaps it was when you were in Sicily. Mammone’s filth attacked Giovanni Iacone when he refused to deliver their extortion letters to some farmers. They held him down while Mammone cut off his ears.”

“*Madonna!* Did he survive?”

“Oh yes. Not only did he live but when he got out of the hospital he shot Mammone dead in broad daylight – right in town, in the street. In Innisfail. He brought that pistol with him from Italy. He told the police, “That man cut my ears off and I shot him. He made a job of me, but I made a better job of him.” They all laughed uproariously at this.

But then Lorenzo looked serious again as he continued, “He and Mammone’s men are in jail now and will probably be deported to Italy. It’s wrong that he will get the same punishment as those criminals after what they did to him.”

Having been back to Sicily so recently, Carlo had a good idea of how they would be treated back home. “I wouldn’t like to be dealt with by Mussolini’s government. They see anything like that as shaming Italy. I’d rather take my chances with the Queensland government.”

“But this is the kind of scum Gio is being hounded by!”

Giuseppe stood up and reached for another biscuit. “Look, some say all this is just feuding families with old-world grudges. Like the bombing in Ingham a couple of months ago. Killed poor Signora Bachiella. Everyone said that was Black Hand because her husband wouldn’t pay, but he’s just a young canecutter – why would they target him?”

“Anyway, these animals don’t scare me. I keep my gun beside my bed when I sleep. Loaded, too.”

With that, Giuseppe closed the topic and moved on to asking Carlo to tell Enzo all the family news from his trip home. His brothers knew better than to push it any further and enthusiastically launched into a happy discussion of all the family matters Carlo could report to them. He showed them the photographs of himself and Anna in their wedding clothes.

They all laughed tenderly at the one of Mamma and Papa on the wedding day – Papa holding back his permanent grin to look formal for the camera and tiny Mamma looking fiercer than ever despite her unbridled joy at the union she had helped orchestrate.

They all thought it but didn't say it: how much they missed dear Papa and worried whether Mamma would cope.

Later that day, after an early evening meal of the promised roast beef with caponata and polenta, the brothers and a couple of neighbours played bocce in the empty paddock next door instead of the more traditional card games they would normally play late into the night. It was a pleasant way to spend the day before Christmas Eve.

They had arranged with a *paesano* to deliver them some seafood for Christmas Eve – crabs and fish – which Anna would cook in a traditional way. The brothers were even less religious than they had been in Sicily, but they nevertheless saw it as a vague mark of respect to avoid meat on Christmas Eve.

They played bocce again, enjoying the holiday time in this land with such different customs, where Christmas is in summertime with long days and warm evenings. In the Australian way, they even drank beer while they played their Italian bowls game.

Christmas Day came and went, with the brothers relaxing and discussing world events while Anna quietly fussed over them with cake and drinks. They talked excitedly about Italy's mid-year win against Czechoslovakia in the World Cup, and expressed their disgust at Mussolini's politicisation of it. They could talk freely against the Duce among themselves.

Then came St Stephen's Day – Boxing Day – which Sicilians usually celebrated in great style. This only made them all nostalgic for their homeland, but they knew in their hearts that Australia was their home now.

Carlo was already naturalised and Giuseppe had his application underway. Lorenzo wasn't sure, though. The thought of renouncing the country of his birth, where his mamma still lived, was something he could not quite come to terms with. He held back to see if it would make any difference to his brother's lives.

“You will have to be naturalised when you want to buy land in your own right, Enzo.” Carlo had been through this and had few qualms about renouncing his Italian nationality, especially now that he’d been back and seen how the country was under the dictatorship of Mussolini and his Blackshirt thugs. He was happy to call himself Australian – a British subject, actually – and now his own children would be born Australian.

There would be no question hanging over their citizenship. As sad as he knew that was for his mamma in Sicily, the thought that his coming child would have that certainty made him a very happy man.

Once the St Stephen’s Day festivities were over, Giuseppe had no further desire for companionship or celebration and could not be persuaded by his younger brothers to stay on for a bit. He packed his things and threw his bag onto the back of his bicycle seat, secured it, stroked Gioia and kissed his brothers and sister-in-law goodbye. They looked genuinely saddened by his departure.

Giuseppe did enjoy seeing his family, but he also had a compelling need for solitude so he could think about his own little family and what he still needed to do to get them to Queensland. Since that letter from his mother, it was more pressing than ever.

*Oh God, the letter.* He’d said nothing of it to his brothers and wasn’t going to.

Giuseppe’s desire for solitude was a kind of wallowing in his problems but he needed to turn everything over and over in his mind without input from anyone else. For him, it was a process that led to some small clarity of thought.

On his ride back home, he ran through his vague plans for increasing his bank balance in ways that would give faster results than canecutting. Sure, he talked to his brothers about these things, but he always grew impatient with their enthusiasm for silly ideas and he inevitably cut them off as they spoke.

As he pulled up at the Belcamino house, he snapped out of his reverie when he saw that the front door was open. What in God’s name ...?

Three days later, Carlo was idly leafing through the daily newspaper while he waited in the doctor's rooms for Anna to have her check-up. He wanted to do everything right to make sure she and the baby got the best of care. The *paesani* women advised giving birth at home with a good midwife present, but Carlo wanted her in the Italian hospital in Ingham with a proper doctor bringing his baby safely into the world.

Some of his countrymen could not understand why he would go to that expense and, as he flipped the pages, he told himself it was the modern way and reassured himself that it would be worth it. There was no way to measure the value of safe passage for mother and baby.

He knew enough about his own mother's close encounters with death during village home births, particularly that of himself and his twin, Caterina. If he had the money he would pay it, and right now he had it.

An item on page 6 made him sit upright and gasp.

**TOWNSVILLE DAILY BULLETIN**  
**29 DECEMBER 1934**  
**INGHAM NOTES**

What seems to have been an unskilful attempt to blow up a house on a farm owned by Carmine Belcamino took place during the Christmas holidays. The house was occupied by Giuseppe Busacco, the holder of a lien over the crop, the owners being absent in Italy. He left it on Sunday and, on his return on Wednesday, found in a downstairs room three plugs of gelignite and a burnt-out fuse leading to one of the plugs. The person responsible for this seems to have been unaware of the necessity for a detonator, which was not provided and the gelignite, in consequence, failed to explode.

The failed attempt by those idiots shocked Giuseppe but it was really the least of his cares. Unlike many other Italians in the Herbert, he had no fear of those thugs and no qualms about going to the police to report the event. Let that filth see he didn't scare easily.

In going to the police to show them the note, he'd found out something else to give him anxiety. That stinking Sergeant Kemp was trying to stop him getting naturalised. Kemp

wasn't in the Herbert now, but the local police knew all about Kemp's letter of protest because they were the ones who had to answer the questions about an applicant's legal record.

"But ... but ... no crime. Not guilty," Giuseppe had stammered, wondering why the hell Kemp had held onto his animosity for five years. Didn't he have much worse people to hate?

The young officer behind the desk, who was greatly exercised by all the Black Hand business, was not without sympathy for a man who had the courage to report against them. God knows, they couldn't get any of the other dagos to say even one word about the goings-on. He looked at Giuseppe with a light flash of admiration. "Yeah, mate, but just so ya know, it could go against ya."

Giuseppe's worst fears and insecurities came from a source deep inside him. They writhed amid a horrible tightness in his chest, like he needed to work to take deep breaths ... to remember to breathe.

The letter from his mother was the trigger. He cursed the distance between him and his wife. He cursed the way a Sicilian mother was about a daughter-in-law. The suspicions Rosa hinted at in her letter could not have any substance to them; he knew this in his heart. That didn't soothe the ache in his chest, though. He knew now that nothing would until he and Ilda were together again.

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Police Department  
Queensland

Roma Station  
12th June 1934

Relative to: Giuseppe Busacco (Italian) applicant for  
naturalization through the Commonwealth Investigation Branch

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Sir:

I beg to report vide your B/C of the 9th instant on report from the Criminal Investigation Branch, Brisbane, of 1/6/34 in reference to Giuseppe Busacco (Italian) of Ingham, who has made application for naturalization, that I arrested applicant on 30th November, 1929 on the charge of "Doing grievous bodily harm to one Vittoria Falco", and he was committed for trial at Police Court, Ingham, on 10th of December, to the Criminal Sittings of the Supreme Court, Townsville, on a date to be fixed, and the charge on which he was committed was - "Unlawfully assaulting Vittoria Falco and thereby did her bodily harm." The Sittings of the Court commenced on 10th February, 1930, and applicant stood his trial the following day, when he was found not guilty.

The circumstances relating to applicant's arrest were, that on the morning of 30th November, 1929, Mrs Vittoria Falco in company with an Italian lady friend went to the garden on her husband's farm situated between Ingham and Halifax, when applicant was seen carrying a shot gun in an area of young sugar cane, and at the same time Mrs Falco saw applicant taking hold of the cane as he walked along, and at the same

time he pulled at several stools in such a way that he loosened it and the growth would be impaired. Mrs Falco had previously found cane treated in the same way, and she decided to speak to applicant and ask him to keep off the farm. Applicant appeared to have resented being told to keep off the farm and approached Mrs Falco and her friend in a defying manner, still carrying the shot gun, and after a short argument, he brought the barrel of the gun down on Mrs Falco's head, and, according to the evidence given he used considerable force with the result that Mrs Falco had to be medically attended for some time afterwards. Mrs. Falco at the time was carrying a knife to cut cabbages in the garden, and when applicant struck her with the gun she endeavoured to protect herself, and inflicted a wound on applicant with the knife, with the result that he also had to be medically attended.

The circumstances went to show that applicant by his aggressive manner was acting in defiance of Mrs Falco's request, and, unless he has considerably improved in his demeanour since then, I would beg to state that there would be a doubt in regard to applicant being a suitable person to be recommended for naturalization.

Applicant is referred to in Police Gazette page 593 of 28/12/1929 under Apprehensions, and again in page 88 of Gazette of 1/3/1930 Return of Prisoners tried at Supreme or Circuit Courts.

(Sgd.) Thomas A. Kemp.

Sergeant No.925.

The Sub-Inspector of Police

ROMA

*Via Ponte Minissale*

*95013 Fiumefreddo di Sicilia (CT)*

*9th October, 1934*

*My dearest son*

*I expect you and your brothers are well. I am fine although I miss my husband so much. I don't want you to worry because there is nothing you can do.*

*There is a matter that should concern you, however, and that is your wife and children whom I love so much and miss having in my house now that they are living in the new Mascali.*

*I don't wish to make you angry but there is gossip because she is a woman on her own. You know how it is in Sicily. A woman who is not under the roof of a man is suspected of everything. In today's Italy, more than ever.*

*Also, she is working, earning her own money. You will be blamed for this. The gossips are saying her husband is not looking after his family and the undesirables around the town see her as prey.*

*I know she is very smart and capable and she has been educated to be independent – but this is Sicily, my son. I am not sure she understands, and I can see she does not want me advising her. It falls to you to address this problem as soon as you can.*

*Thank you for the pounds*

*I live to see my sons again*

*Mamma*

## 1935 The Children Arrive

Giuseppe stood on the railway station platform more nervous than he had ever been in his life. It was the day he'd been looking forward to, planning for, fantasising about. The day he would see his children for the first time in nine years.

*Would they know him?* Would he know them? How do you bridge that terrible gap, he wondered. It's one thing to read about them in letters and look at photographs, but quite another to have them in his arms; in his life.

It was a hot September Sunday and he wondered if they'd be dressed for the heat. The Queensland heat was different from the hot season in Sicily. In North Queensland, the sweat stayed uncomfortably damp and the wrong clothing could make it worse.

For first impressions it was much better to arrive in winter, as he had. He didn't really have much control over the timing. It was all hurriedly arranged, before Ilda could have second thoughts.

They were travelling with his younger sister, Carlo's twin, Caterina, and Salvatore, their young cousin. Her husband Giovanni had gone all the way to Brisbane to meet the *Ormonde* and escort them by train to the sugar country.

Giuseppe was plagued by doubts and questions. Should he have gone himself to meet them? Would they want to be with a father they barely knew? Would they cry for their mother?

He decided it was no use torturing himself with his anxieties. He would just have to wait and see. In any case, he was their father, they were his children, and that was the end of it.

Yet he could still hear that small voice in the back of his mind telling him, "You want them to love you." He couldn't silence it.

The train was running late, which added to his anxiety, but it gave him a little more time to compose himself. Why was he so nervous about meeting children? *His* children. He was their father. They had to honour and respect him, no matter what they felt. Damn it, he would make it clear to them what they were to feel.

He worried about thirteen-year-old Rosa the most. He felt he would know how to raise a boy, but a girl, especially one approaching womanhood, he was not so sure about. How well had her mother prepared her for life as a young woman? He knew he would need a lot of help from the aunties. They were kind-hearted women, so he was confident his Rosina would get love and guidance from them. We will take it as it comes, he thought.

He would keep Rosa safe by having her at home to keep house for him and her brother. Her mother had given her an education and she could read and write fluently – she had even been writing to him in the past couple of years. How he treasured the first letter she wrote to her papa in her own hand.

So, he thought, there was no need for her to go anywhere without her father or aunties. Sebastiano would go to the local school and become educated to the highest level his father could afford. Ilda had begged Giuseppe to make certain of that.

“He is an intelligent boy who learns quickly. Promise me you will push him to achieve great things in his education,” she had written in the letter that came with the documents that released the children from her care.

Giuseppe had already been to the schoolhouse and enrolled him at the small government-run school in Macknade, which was within walking distance from where they would be living in a tiny three-room house Giuseppe was renting.

He would get Sebastiano his own bicycle when he could afford it so he could quickly and safely get to where he needed to, but in the meantime he would let him use his own when he didn't need it to get to work.

He knew all this meant his son would have to learn to speak the language quickly or be left behind. Still, he had seen how speedily other migrant children became bilingual and felt confident his own son would, too.

As for Rosa, she would marry and have children when she was old enough, of course, but while she was living with him and her brother, Giuseppe would see to it that Sebastiano taught his sister whatever he was learning at the school, especially the English language.

As these thoughts churned through his mind, he was snapped back into the moment by the sound of the approaching train. The slight breeze had caught pungent wafts of the aroma of the steam engine, too. It was close.

There were a few other Italians now on the platform to meet it. He recognised a couple of them and nodded in their direction but quickly looked to the side in a way that said, “Don’t come over, and don’t ask any questions.” They nodded back, restricting the question marks to their faces.

All but one *paesano*, that is, who missed the subtle cues and came bowling over. He had come on the same ship as Giuseppe and Carlo and was from Giarre, also in Catania province. He’d done quite well for himself and now owned a small cane farm in partnership with his brother-in-law.

“Gio, who’s coming? More brothers? How many you got? Or is your wife finally coming to live with her husband?”

“If you must know, Valerio, and you will soon enough, my children – my son and my daughter – are arriving with my sister and brother-in-law.”

“And your wife ...?”

Giuseppe cut him off tersely. “You don’t need to know about my wife. None of you do. *Fatti gli affari tuoi!* Mind your own business and you will live for a hundred years.”

The slow approach of the train into the station brought an end to the awkward exchange as Giuseppe’s eyes anxiously ran the length of it, searching for those beloved faces among the passengers and railway personnel.

A familiar voice from behind startled him and he spun around. “Brother, I have the precious ones safely delivered to you.” But Giuseppe wasn’t looking at his sister. He could not take his eyes off the well-dressed young girl holding his sister’s arm. The girl stared back with

big brown eyes and a serious expression – just like that composed look she wore as a small child, but now with the intelligence and awareness of a young lady.

His first thought was, *Her mother has done a wonderful job. I can see it.*

His eyes moved to the boy. Also intelligent and thoughtful looking and perhaps quite tall for his ten, almost eleven, years. Sebastiano held his father's gaze for some seconds, then said, "Papa, we are very glad to see you." *His mother must have coached him*, Giuseppe thought.

His feelings of love and pride were threatening to burst through the dour surface and even succeeded somewhat. He became more effusive than he would normally allow himself and wondered if it would be acceptable to give them greeting kisses. No, it's too soon, he thought and held back while they both stared up at him waiting for him to take the lead.

"My son, my daughter, I too am glad you have arrived safely. How was your trip? Did you like the ship? I hope you were not seasick like me ..."

Caterina, who had been standing between and a little behind the children with a bemused expression, wondering how her cranky older brother would react, said, "For heaven's sake, Gio, kiss your children. I can see you want to."

Her brother hesitated, looked from one to the other, then leant forward and gave each a light kiss on both cheeks as they stood compliant as statues. Then he noticed that his brother-in-law Giovanni, who had been showing his young son Salvatore the steam engine, had rejoined them. Sensing the awkwardness and suppressed emotion, Giovanni dissipated it with everyday friendly greetings and small talk about the train journey.

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When they arrived at the tiny house they were to live in, the children got out of the carriage and stood gaping at their surroundings. The small weatherboard structure on stumps looked like it could easily blow away in a big wind. Some bits of it were a little crooked and paint had peeled away in many places. They were not used to houses made of wood, topped with these strange, steeply pitched roofs of crinkly metal. On the ride home they had seen many of them, all different sizes, and not one built with masonry.

“Papa, is this the house or an outhouse? Where is the proper house?” Rosa asked the question in total innocence, but it triggered a flush of anger in her father.

“This is our house, Rosina. It is what I can afford for now. I realise it is less than you are used to, but I assure you that you will both be comfortable here until we are in a position to build a better one. I have the plot of land secured but I don’t yet have the funds for the building.”

“I am sorry, Papa. I did not mean to be critical. It is just all so different! But not in a bad way. It will be an adventure getting used to everything.” She tried to sound enthusiastic, but it was not hard to see she was trying to convince herself as much as anyone.

“You will have your own small room and your brother will share with me. There are just three rooms. It was originally two but a section of one is screened off to create a private spot, which as the only female in the house, you will have.

“The kitchen area will be your domain in the daytime. There is not much to it and you have to carry water in, but the stove works well. Sebastiano will learn to chop the wood for the stove. I don’t know what meals you are able to cook, but I think you will work out a menu when you see what pots and pans and cooking tools we have.”

“They are called utensils, Papa.”

“What?”

“Cooking tools are utensils.”

“It seems you are well-schooled in the things women must know. Were you taught by your mamma or your nonna?”

“Both, Papa. But sometimes their ideas are very different. Mamma still wanted me to have further schooling, but Nonna said I had enough already to make a good wife and mother. She was rude and cruel to Mamma. She told her that under the circumstances it was no longer her business what happens to me. Why would she say that? What did she mean?”



“You dare question what your nonna says?”

“No, no, Papa. Sorry.”

Her expression, like that of a startled small animal, gave him instant pangs of regret. Why did he have to react with anger to so many things? He didn't care so much when it was to people he had no love for, but surely, he told himself, he could go easy on this sweet girl. His own sweet girl.

He spoke more gently. “Go and unpack your things and put them where you can, then come to the kitchen. I will make us a simple meal of bread and cheese and salami this evening and you can watch to see where things are and how the stove works. From tomorrow it will be your job to cook and clean for me and your brother. He will be starting at the school soon and as he learns he will teach you, especially the English language. You will make his lunch to take to school each day.”

“Yes, Papa.” Rosa was overwhelmed but did not want her father to see it. At least looking after her brother's needs would come easily. She was already like a little mother to him.

“And Rosina ... I don't know how to put this ... if you have any lady problems or questions, you can take them to Zia Anna or Zia Caterina. You understand what I mean? They will help you with anything. I have spoken to them about this. You have no need to worry.”

“Yes, Papa.” But Rosa didn't want her aunts for these things. She wanted her mother.

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It was finally Sebastiano's first day at school and Rosa was as excited about it as he was. Giuseppe even took part of the morning off work so he could be the one to take Sebastiano to school on his first day. Rosa begged to go along and, after saying no several times, her father decided there would be no harm in it and agreed to her request.

The two aunties were coming, too, and their young cousin Salvatore, so it was a small gang of excited well-dressed Italians who left the house and walked past the Lion Hotel on their way to the small government primary school half a mile down the road towards Bemerside.

Sebastiano wore a crisp, white, long-sleeved shirt, knee-length grey pants and polished shoes with grey socks. In the small bush school, the shoes alone would mark him as newly arrived from Italy. Fortunately, lots of Italian children attended the school, but even they liked to lord it over the new chums.

As they passed the Lion hotel, Giuseppe reminded the others of the photograph he had shown them of the hotel in the year of the big flood, 1927. In it, he and other locals stood posing out the front, floodwater up to their knees. He told the children they had to be very careful about crocodiles when it flooded like that.

Imagine telling people back home in Sicily that you had to look out for crocodiles in your own yard. He'd paid for the print as a postcard to send to Ilda but had never written on it. He'd hoped to find one with a croc in it, but that never happened, and in the end he didn't send any. And now there was no more sending things to Ilda.

The hotel burnt to the ground in October 1929, that horrible year when everything had gone wrong for Giuseppe, when Etna had erupted, and he'd had all those fines and legal bills to pay after the business with the lady cook and the much worse business of the assault case.

The Lion had been rebuilt after the fire and now it looked as if it had always been there. Would he ever feel like that? Like he'd always been here? He doubted it, though it might feel more like home now that his children were with him. He knew in his heart, though, there was no way he could cover the gaping hole in their family that should be filled by their mother. By his wife.

Only a few years after that terrible year, when he'd finally paid off all his debts from those events, he'd had the cane sickness spread by the rats and couldn't work for some of that season. He had even been taken to the hospital. What a nightmare that was.

He wanted to go to Dr Piscatelli's Italian hospital – L'Ospedale Cardarelli – where he would understand what was being said, but they were doing all the work on the disease at the Ingham Hospital, so that was where he had to go.

Again, he'd found himself in a serious situation where the handicap of language had driven him into deep despair. Being that ill – several canecutters died from the disease, some he knew personally – was so much more frightening when you didn't have the words for it.

At least he recovered with not too many bad after-effects, not like poor Lorenzo who still suffered with his kidneys, which the doctor believed was caused by the rat fever. Weil's disease, they called it in English.

Thank God, anyway, all that bad fortune was behind him now and things were looking up. Some things. He was settling on Macknade as the place where he wanted to be. He felt he might be able to put down roots there. It was a peaceful little pocket; even the Lion was quiet for a pub. There were many *paesani* and other migrants, so prejudice was not felt daily like it was in districts that were predominantly Anglo.

And now he finally owned a small piece of Australian dirt – the vacant block in the same street as Carlo's home – and was negotiating with an Italian builder to construct a house that was similar to Carlo's. Like Carlo's, it would have a wrap-around verandah and stand on very tall stumps to allow for flooding, which they all knew would be inevitable from time to time. He didn't have the money for it yet, but, with luck, it wouldn't be too long.

He had become naturalised the year before in anticipation of two things: buying land and bringing his family to Australia. He would be able to include his children on his own naturalisation, at least that was how he understood it.

That bastard sergeant who had arrested him for the assault business had tried to prevent his naturalisation with a wretched letter to the authorities. Imagine that. Five years on and he still fumed at losing to an immigrant.

Oh, yes, that sergeant was careful to always write "(Italian)", the unspoken meaning being *and therefore violent and untrustworthy*. Well, too bad. Not guilty meant it could not be held against him. Still, Giuseppe was stunned to think a poor immigrant like him could win anything against someone with power.

That wily she-fox had reeled the sergeant in with her charms, too. She expected men to bend to her will. The sergeant's letter made it clear that he believed her version of events, even though it changed several times.

To have this pop up in his life again years after the gossip died down was an affront. No matter, for once in this new life he came out on top and the truth of the matter was recognised by the courts. It was done. He was officially a British citizen and therefore an Australian. And his children would become Australian.

If one more person asked him whether his wife would be coming with the children, he would explode. They could all mind their own business. His own family knew the situation, especially Caterina, who had brought them from Sicily along with her own boy.

Caterina made sure they had some fun on the ship. As much as she could afford from the money her brother had given her, anyway. She understood that it would set them on an optimistic course into their new life.

A life without their mamma.

Giuseppe marvelled at how much they had grown in the decade since he had left. He put aside the regret over how much of their childhood he had missed. Their childhood belonged to their mother. She had that much. Now, Rosa was almost on the brink of womanhood and Sebastiano was a strapping lad of ten-and-a-half. Later, his father would see the deep scar on his back where the Sicilian doctors had removed the rib to save him from dying.

Getting them to Queensland had been quite a complicated business and now he wanted calm and clarity. He wanted a clean start for them all. Including Ilda.

OO

## 1936 Life in Queensland

“But no one wears shoes to school, Papa.” Sebastiano’s tone was whiny. Father and son were in the cramped kitchen area of the small Macknade house, the boy finishing his breakfast of toasted bread made by Rosa, the father packing his bag of work things that would be slung on the back of his bicycle. The aroma of the toast filled the air.

“My son will not look like a poor beggar. My son will wear shoes when he leaves my house. I don’t care if the Australian children don’t wear shoes.”

“But it’s the other Italians, too. No one wears them. Only the teachers.”

“Besides, you may not know this as you have not lived in Queensland long. There are very dangerous snakes. If you trod on one you would be dead in seconds.”

“I do know about them, Papa. The other boys have told me. You have told me. Many times. I will be careful and watch the ground at all times. And it’s a bit more than seconds.”

“You will wear your shoes! That’s what you will do. And you will wear a clean white shirt. And you will comb your hair.” At least do these things to honour your parents, even if you don’t care.

“But Dad...”

“Dad? *Dad?* Did you just call me Dad? Are you no longer Italian?”

“I am. But you said you want me to learn to speak English. So, I do. And ... Dad ... everyone at school calls me Sebastian because it sounds more Australian.”

Giuseppe stared at him as the realisation of what his son was saying penetrated his mood of irritation.

“*Va bene*. Dad I will be. And Sebastian you will be. But you can still call me Papa when you want to ...”

Giuseppe was wearing one of his grey flannel canecutter shirts, worn and faded from constant washing. Rosa had skilfully mended a corner tear at the front. After all this time the shirt still felt a little shameful to him. He should be a farm or business owner by now.

Once he had sweated into a shirt, he could never put it back on the next day like some men. His service in the army and carabinieri had trained him in the discipline of cleaning his clothes and grooming himself. Ilda, too, was fussy about cleanliness and grooming. She had tried to teach the children to be the same. It came naturally to young Rosa, but Sebastiano, like most young boys, had to be forced every inch of the way.

People were not so poor in this country, but they didn't seem to mind looking shabby. Is it that you only care about looking poor if you are poor? Or does all this open space and heat and light shake everything loose? When people have so much space around them, they can live like no one is watching, not like in Sicily where many eyes are on you.

In any case, having taken the children from their mother, Giuseppe was not about to let them drop the standards she had set for them. He would have no one say they'd be better off with their mother.

He handed the boy the lunch Rosa had made for him from last night's leftovers packed in brown paper and wrapped in a tea towel.

“What is it today ... Dad?”

“It's macaroni, some cheese and a little piece of cold meat. And an orange and the bread your sister made. Don't swap it with your Britisher friend – what's his name ... Jack? Yes, your teacher told me what you do with the lunches your sister makes for you.”

“But Jack asks for it, and he's the only Australian boy who doesn't turn his nose up at Italian food. The others say it smells. They have bread with jam or honey. Sandwiches. Some have salty black stuff called Vegemite. I tasted it and I didn't like it. It's disgusting.”

Food was one area in which Giuseppe – and most of the Italians – felt superior to Australians. “They think our food smells because it has so much flavour. These Australians don't know

much about that. They eat like the English, though they have tons of food, but the way they cook it makes it taste so plain.

“We are lucky your mother, God forgive her and keep her, taught your sister to cook so nicely. Rosina will make a good wife, and I have heard on the grapevine that there are several young fellows with ideas about marrying her already.”

Giuseppe’s thoughts turned to the daughter who made him so proud. With the scarcity of Italian women for the number of Italian men in Queensland, she will be a good catch, he mused, but she must marry a *paesano*. He knew that without her mother to watch over her the safest thing would be for her marry young. Younger, probably, than she would in Sicily. But she must marry a man, not a *ragazzo*; one who is established and can give her a home for the children they will have.

Giuseppe was glad there was no dowry custom in Australia. Of course, there were still those who clung to the tradition, but in a much watered-down way. There had been no negotiations over such things when he and Ilda married in the shadow of parental disapproval on both sides. But they were in love and in the full heat of their youthful passion cared nothing of things or money being brought to their marriage.

No, Rosa herself would be enough for any man who wished to marry her, but at least Caterina had brought her to this country with some nice things for her *corredo*. What did they call it in Australia? Glory box. He had thought these small beautifully made items must have been woven and stitched by Ilda and was surprised to learn that Rosa had made them. She was only thirteen when she sailed from Messina, but Sicilian girls, and their mothers, look towards a future in which marriage is inevitable for all but the unluckiest.

He was also glad Rosa was not likely to argue with her father but would respect his advice and decisions for her, not like his son perhaps, who was already showing little signs of rebelliousness. But he was a good and loyal boy. Clever, too. Giuseppe could see all that.

The boy interrupted his thoughts. “My teacher says Rosa should be in school, too. He says if she is as bright as I am she could do well.”

Giuseppe turned away as he struggled to stop another angry outburst. “Your teacher knows nothing of us and our traditions. Your sister can read and write very well. Your mother was a good teacher. She does not need to leave this house without me. And she will not leave the house without me unless it is one day with her husband, whoever that lucky fellow is.

But I have someone in mind for when the time comes, he thought to himself. Then aloud, “For now, she can continue to look after us and the garden.

“And you know what you must do for your sister in return. You will teach her what you learn at school as you learn it. Especially the English. When she goes out into the world as a married woman, she will need to speak the language to shopkeepers and the like. I will not have my daughter being treated as an ignorant dago girl. That is not what she is.”

“The priest who visits the school is asking about her, too, Dad. He wants to know why she’s not coming to mass.” Sebastian, as the boy now insisted on being called, was too scared to tell his father the priest was asking why he, Giuseppe, wasn’t coming to mass, too.

“She is a good girl without going to the church. What is the point of going when we can’t follow what the priest is saying in his sermon? No, she doesn’t need to show what a good girl she is by getting down on her knees in front of people.”

“Who is ‘she’?” Rosa walked into the room carrying a pile of clean-smelling washing just as Giuseppe was finishing his impassioned rant. She looked so young and slight, but so in charge of herself and everything around her. “Are you talking about me?”

“Never mind. I have just been straightening your brother on a few things. He is getting too big for his boots – the boots he doesn’t want to wear. You will help me enforce my rules for him. He must wear shoes and a clean white shirt to school. He must eat the lunch you make for him. He must do the lessons with you when he gets home from school. He must do his homework.”

“Yes, Papa, but can you tell me ... I know you said not to ask you again ... but when is our mother coming to Queensland?”



Giuseppe flashed a furious scowl at his daughter. “That’s right!” He raised his voice. “Do not ever ask again!”

Rosa’s eyes filled with tears, which she quickly wiped away, but not before Giuseppe saw them. He didn’t like to upset her, but he had no answer to her question. How could he tell them anything of their mother?

He went straight to a safer topic. “Rosa, can you make a *muffulettu* loaf today? No, better yet, make a *guastidduna*, the big loaf. Your brother is eating like a wolf these days. We need to fill his belly with plenty of bread.”

“But Papa ... it is May second ... it will bring bad luck to our house.”

Her father’s agitation surged again and he raised his voice. “Haven’t I – and your mother – told you many times that those old beliefs are silly, especially here, all the way across the world. Where do you get it from, anyway? Not from your mamma, I know that much.”

“No ... no ... it’s from Nonna,” Rosa replied, her voice meek and hesitant, but she knew she must answer the question, even if it annoyed him further. Fortunately, he said nothing – Rosa knew he would never speak against his mother – so she said no more about it, but it concerned her that her father was losing so many of his Sicilian ways. And any religious beliefs he’d had, too. As for her brother ... he already wanted to be Australian.

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Once her father had gone to work, Rosa set about her usual mothering of Sebastian. “Here is your clean shirt ... try not to get it so dirty. Have you put your homework in your school bag? Have you pumped the tyres on your bicycle?”

Sebastian didn’t like her fussing because it made him think of his mother, whom he missed so much. He couldn’t talk about that to anyone. His school friends would think he was being a sook and his father would just get mad.

“Yes, yes, everything is good. Stop it. You are not my mamma. Listen. I think my friend is coming after school with his brother to learn some English, too. Don’t worry, see? They are Sicilian.”

“What? Have you asked Papa if this is permitted? You know he hates anyone to come to the house when he is not here.”

“No, but I will. They will be gone before he gets home. You don’t need to say anything. I will tell him. He knows their parents, anyway.”

Sebastian buttoned up the shirt and tied his shoelaces. Rosa knew he would take the shoes off when he got through the school gates. Oh, well, what could she do about that? She couldn’t be there to reprimand him. How she wished she could go to school, though.

The boy stuffed the packed lunch into his bag and threw his sister a glance. “Bye,” he said in English.

With that, he was out the door and jumping down the front stairs two or three at a time, leather school satchel slung over his shoulder. Standing on the verandah, fighting off her feelings of envy, Rosa watched him throw his leg over the bike and pedal away past the Lion Hotel.

She was instantly gripped by a paroxysm of anxiety over what Sebastian had just told her. She didn’t want to get into trouble for it, but she couldn’t bear to see her little brother being punished, either.

Alone in the house, Rosa got the *Australian Women’s Weekly* magazine out from under her bed. Her father had bought it for her in a moment of – in his own mind, later – weakness. His sister had talked him into it, but when he saw how Rosa turned the pages over and over, it annoyed him until he told her he would burn it if she didn’t stop looking at it.

At first, she was using it to learn more English, slowly and painfully, with some help from her brother, working out what many of the words were and what they meant. It was easier where there were pictures.

The pages were tattered from being constantly handled by the lonely girl. She would spend some of her time each day pretending the women and girls in the illustrations were people she knew. She gave them names if there were none, as in the anonymous advertisements. She imagined being friends with some of them. She daydreamed about going to the shops with them, stopping at a milkbar for an ice-cream or a cold fizzy drink, then telling her family all about the amusing day she had spent with her friends.

As if that would ever happen. Any of it. Or anything like it.

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Rosa passed the day as she did most days, washing clothes, baking bread, weeding her vegetable garden and tending the chickens, which she loved. They followed her around and would have come up the stairs and into the house if she'd let them. Most days, they were her only company, except for Gioia. But the little cat slept on the shabby armchair most of the day.

Occasionally, one or two of the Italian wives Giuseppe had asked to give her guidance in shopping for women's items and other feminine issues would drop by to check on her. They included her two aunties, Zia Caterina and Zia Anna, whom Rosa had known in their village.

There were many things a daughter could not talk about with her father, but the big one, her most important question, was never answered by any of these lady *parenti*. Whenever she would ask about her mother, they would give the same answer: "It's in God's hands."

But what? *What was in God's hands?*

"She may never come," Anna said once, her expression sad and thoughtful, before being told to "shush" by Caterina. Rosa could see they knew something they weren't telling her. But why? Did she not have a right to know everything about her mother? She was not a child. She was fifteen, almost sixteen – nearly old enough to be married.

She knew she could not ask her uncles. They left the answers to all questions to the womenfolk. For Rosa, it was unbearable to be kept in the dark like this. It didn't seem to

affect Sebastian in the same way, even though he missed Mamma terribly. For him, this new life was a never-ending boy's own adventure.

Her mind drifted back to the sea voyage where the excitement had begun. They had been told there would be games for them and all the other children, and all kinds of other fun. And it was like that. Zia Caterina was kind to them, always making sure they had enough to eat onboard, as well as daily bathing and clean clothes.

Rosa wondered now how her aunt had managed this with three children in tow – them and their young cousin. Conditions in third class were far from easy, not like first class, which she had glimpsed briefly before being told she didn't belong there and to return to her part of the ship. How glamorous it was. Was it a crime for a young girl to look?

The voyage was just four weeks of freedom and fun. Once they were met in the city of Brisbane by her uncle Giovanni and endured that long, hot, horrible train trip to the sugar country, the hard work began. And it had been all hard work for her ever since. But she would never complain, especially to her father.

There had been arguments among the adults over where Sebastian should go to school – the new Catholic school in Halifax or the government school close to home in Macknade? Her uncles and aunts had many heated discussions about it before it was settled in Giuseppe's favour. Her little brother would go to the closest school. Religion would be saved for Sundays.

There were no arguments about her future, though. They all accepted without discussion that she would keep house for her father and brother, then one day for a husband and, if God willed it, children. Even fiery, independent Caterina raised no ideas of Rosa receiving further education in the new country. They all knew Giuseppe would not want her to be out in the world without his eyes on her, even if it was just in a small bush school half a mile from home.

It was hard, and very, very lonely, with her brother and father gone all day, but Rosa understood that her papa couldn't be sure who would be keeping an eye on her and how. Village life in Sicily was more ordered in that way. Neighbours, friends, teachers and

relatives all played their parts in the informal supervision of a child or young person, but not in this wild country.

Rosa knew her father's protectiveness was old-fashioned. She'd seen the young Australian girls in the streets and at the shops without parents or aunts or older siblings, buying ice-creams or lemonade. She understood it was normal, but she also knew it would never be that way for her.

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Rosa gazed dreamily at the giant smoke plumes curling their way out of the tall chimneys of the distant sugar mill, savouring the sweet molasses aroma that filled the countryside. Some found it cloying and oppressive, but she loved the sweetness of it. The sky was clouding over and she could see rain was on the way, so she returned to unpegging the washing. Suddenly, she heard voices coming towards the house.

They were close now. She felt instantly anxious and scooped up little Gioia, putting her in the basket with the clean clothes. Who would they be? What would her father say? She could make out Sebastian's voice explaining that he had no mother here, but there was more than one other. And one voice sounded deeper, older.

"Sister, this is my friend from school, Matteo, and this is his brother, Gianni. They want to be in your English lesson. Mr. Gardener says Matteo – Matty – is almost bottom of the class, and Gianni – Johnny – is cutting cane in a Sicilian gang, so he doesn't get much English practice."

Rosa felt herself blushing hotly. She knew who they were from the few times their father took them on picnic days with the other Sicilian families. She did not want Gianni to see her blushing, so she quickly turned away, calling over her shoulder, "I'll make some drinks."

The two young boys and the older one sat at the small bare wooden table and Sebastian and Matty pulled out the English readers Mr. Gardener had given them.

Rosa brought a jug of lemon drink and some tin mugs to the table, then quickly shuffled off to her tiny bedroom where she could be out of sight but still hear what was being said.

“Rosa, we are going to start. Are you coming to the table?” Sebastian slid another chair over for her. The young boy had no idea his sister was dying of shyness, embarrassment and anxiety all at once. There was something else she had felt when she saw Gianni, but she could not let him guess it. She sat on her bed quietly, gathering about her the youthful poise she wore like fragile armour.

In a small voice ... “In a minute.”

Sebastian started without her. “Let’s open the book at page fifteen. Johnny, can you look over Matty’s shoulder? Rosa can look at mine. Rosa? *Rosa!* Are you coming?”

From the other room ... “I said in a minute.”

She sat wishing she had her other dress on, the pink one, instead of this old blue one, but she couldn’t change now. Gianni would guess it was for him. She wished she had pinned her hair into gentle waves instead of its natural smooth straightness. She didn’t know Gianni would think her lovely in a flour sack. Nor did she know he was only here to get a better look at her without her father glaring at him.

Neither did Rosa have any inkling that, when Gianni learned who was going to give his little brother an English lesson, he had cooked up a plan to get away from work early to come with him. He had deliberately spilled his morning coffee on his canecutter shirt so he could wear a normal one. Knowing how fierce and intimidating Rosa’s father could be, it was a daring enterprise, one that could get them all in trouble.

It had gone to plan so far, but if the girl stayed in the other room the whole time, the risk would be in vain. There wasn’t a lot of time before the fearsome father would be in from the canefields; tired, hungry and in no mood for what he would see as defiance by both his children, and no doubt disrespect on his part. Gianni knew the man would be as mad as a hungry dog.

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Sebastian called out to his sister a couple more times and she finally took her place at the table, her big brown eyes modestly downcast and a look of palpable discomfort on her serious

young face. She tried hard not to look directly at either of the visitors and focused her attention on what Sebastian was saying.

As the youngest of the group, Sebastian's tone of authority was almost comical. It soon became apparent to the others, though, that he knew what he was talking about. Rosa didn't mind, but Gianni seemed a little offended at having this young boy tell him what's what about anything at all.

Gianni could see that the book they were using for the lesson was a children's book. He could tell by the illustration on the cover. Why should he care about little kids named Bob and Judy? It was making him feel annoyed that he could read some of the words but not enough to understand the stupid story.

How would knowing what Bob and Judy were doing make him earn more pounds cutting cane? To make things worse, he could see the girl was ahead of him in this reading business, even though she was shy about it and trying not to show him up as a dunce.

At the other side of the table, Rosa could see Gianni's gathering annoyance but didn't know how to make the situation more comfortable. She was used to reading her father's moods and was becoming adept at heading off outbursts and soothing him. But this was different.

As much as she liked having a boy nearer her own age in the room, she just wanted the lesson to end. She wanted the two brothers to leave before things became any more awkward. She sat absent-mindedly twisting her hair with both hands. Her mother would have recognised this as nervousness, but she was not there and no one else understood Rosa's body language.

Her brother's voice cut through the stiffness that hung over them all. "Johnny, I asked you if you know what 'chase' means and if you know that it is a verb."

In Sicilian, Gianni suddenly burst out with, "That's it! I've had enough. Come on, Matteo, we're going. This was a bad idea."

Sebastian and Matteo looked startled at the angry outburst, but Rosa felt instant relief despite the discomfort.

“Yes, it’s getting late and we must pack up, now, little brother. Papa will be home soon and I need to think about what I will cook.” Turning to the visitors, she spoke quietly but abruptly.

“Please, go now.”

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For the hundredth time, Rosa wished she had a girlfriend her own age to talk to about her feelings and fears, to confide in and giggle with, like she had back in Sicily. In fact, in Mascali she had several friends. She couldn’t talk freely to her aunts about these things lest they think her a silly girl. She didn’t realise they would be happy for her to be a silly girl sometimes, and not always so serious and anxious to please.

They worried to each other that Rosa was missing her girlhood, the gradual coming of age as a young woman. Instead of having a few years of fun and flirtation, she had been thrust into the duties that normally belonged to a wife and mother. They knew her father had in mind to see her married young, so she would go from being the little temporary mistress of one household to the permanent mistress of another.

Here in Queensland, there was no *passeggiata*, that happy time in Sicily when everyone strolled in the streets and piazzas, gossiping and joking, eyeing off prospective boyfriends and girlfriends, seeing and being seen. Here, there wasn’t even anything you could call a village centre. Everything was so spread out, so far apart, so unfamiliar and uncaring.

The tall, beautiful sugar cane made it impossible to see into the middle distance.

It wasn’t just her adored mother Rosa missed so desperately. It was also the village and Sicily itself. It was Etna and the beach. The olive groves and the orange orchards, and their sweet perfume. The hillside vineyards. The prickly pear, the cypress trees, the puffball fennel flowers and the red poppies. It was like a constant pain deep in her chest, sometimes not so bad, sometimes terrible. Would she ever see Etna again? Her friends? Her *nonna*? She was the only grandparent Rosa really knew since her beloved *nonno* died.

She had begun to think marriage would be her only way out of this constricted tiny world of her father, her brother, the cat and the chickens. If she married the right man, it might even



be her way back to her homeland, her fatherland. The land that birthed her. The land that held her mother.

One thing had become clear to her, though. Without her mother, she knew her future would depend entirely on a man.

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## 1938 Important Events

For the little family of three, 1938 was a big year.

Now that the children were settled with him, and adjusted to life in Queensland, Giuseppe felt further and further away from Italy. The ties were fraying. Of course, he still missed his mother and had his secret torments over his wife, but did he care about Britain recognising Italy's control of Ethiopia or the Vatican's recognition of Franco's government in Spain? Not really.

He knew some of his countrymen had strong opinions about those things. They followed European news as closely as they could, as he had, and it was concerning to them all that the Italian racial laws had been passed and the regime was increasingly aggressive in its totalitarian ambitions.

But he was now so intent on building his children's lives in Queensland, he hoped the political movements in Europe could no longer affect him. In fact, he was glad to be so far from it. Everything was for them now. His very life was for them.

He did feel an unexpected flutter of patriotism when Italy again took home the football World Cup, defeating Hungary in Paris, but some of the strong teams had not entered the competition in protest at it once again being held in Europe. Spain, of course, was too busy waging a civil war.

Little brother Lorenzo kept them discussing Italy and European politics – and football – whenever they met up. Even he was a bit less passionate about it now, though. He had married eighteen-year-old Luisa the year before and was as proud and happy a man as he'd ever been. Luisa's pregnancy with their first baby had him bursting with excitement.

Like Enzo, Luisa arrived in 1928 – with her parents and brother. Her family was also from their town but not well-known to the brothers. It was often the case that emigration threw together families and individuals who might not have had cause to interact back home.

Now that Giuseppe's two younger brothers were happily married and had reputations as good workers that any gang would want, and his son was doing well in school – better, even, than his Australian-born classmates – he needed to turn his attention to his precious daughter.

For himself, he would have been happy for her to run his home forever, cooking and cleaning for him, but he knew that would not be the right thing for her. She deserved to live the full life of a woman and experience all that came with that. Besides, he wanted to grow his family with grandchildren and a son-in-law who would be *simpatico*.

Relaxing for the short time after their evening meal when the little family would swap any news of their day, most of it coming from Sebastian, Giuseppe put down the scissors he'd been trying to fix and looked at his daughter as she sat quietly doing her needlework by the barely adequate light of the kerosene lamp.

“Rosa, my dear girl, there is someone I want you to meet. I have arranged it for Sunday here at our house and I would like you to prepare a light lunch for five people. That's four adults and your brother. Dress nicely and make the table as elegant as you can with the little we have.”

“Who is it, Papa? Is it people I know? Are they *paesani*?”

“They are, but I don't believe you know them. They have been here almost as long as I have and they are from our commune back home, but they are hard-working men you probably have not met.”

“*Men!*” Rosa threw down her mending and leapt to her feet. “Why am I meeting men? Are you going to make me marry one? Please not an old man, Papa, I *beg* you. Not an old man, Papa, *please*.”

Rosa knew this could happen sometimes when parents thought their daughter would be better off with a man who had property and was established. She twisted her clenched hands and held back tears, which she knew would only anger her father.

“Of course I won’t make you marry anyone if you don’t want to. Do you not believe I have your best interests at heart. Do you not trust my judgement as your father? Do you think you can run your own life better?”

With each question he raised his voice a little more. He told himself to remain calm.

“I just want you to meet someone I like, that’s all ... and his father. The young fellow is older than you, for sure, but he’s a man in the prime of his youth.”

Rosa had stopped listening. She felt the prickling sensation of her inward panic. She could barely breathe her chest was so tight. Then the words “his father” landed somewhere in the edge of her consciousness. So maybe he’s not an old man if he’s coming with his father, she thought.

“Yes, Papa, I will do as you say. But I cannot think of marrying someone I don’t like. I would rather die a barren old maid.”

“Rosa! Don’t say such things. You will marry and you will give me grandchildren.”

Grandchildren. That new thought struck more terror in the poor girl’s heart. Did she want to have babies? She thought she might. She did like other people’s babies. But the thing you had to do with the man ...

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That evening, when Giuseppe came home from work, Sebastian couldn’t wait for him to wash up and relax before the evening meal. He was practically bursting out of his skin with sheer undisguised excitement.

“Dad, Dad! I got it! I got it, Dad. I got the scholarship. I can go to Mt Carmel College in Charters Towers and it will all be paid for with the scholarship. I’m the only one from our school. My teacher is really happy. He says I did the school proud. He wants to see you to explain everything.”

Giuseppe's irritation at the interruption to his usual after-work routine dissolved as he took in what his son was telling him. He felt a mix of pride and gratitude wash over him. This country that had treated him so mercilessly for the first few years was starting to feel like the place they could call home. Yes, that's how a place becomes home: when good things happen to you, and your family flourishes.

Certainly, in only a short few years, the boy was becoming like a native-born. Soon, his surname and his dark good looks would be all that would set him apart from the Anglos. He was even as tall as the average Australian boy his age. Could it be this environment of big open spaces, or had he inherited some height from his northern mother?

Then the realisation of how far it was to Charters Towers hit him like a punch in the gut. One-hundred-and-sixty miles! When would they see each other? Of course, they would write letters and Sebastian would catch the train home in school holidays. He would soon be old enough to do some paid work in the school break.

On the plus side, it would relieve dear Rosa of the responsibility of caring for her brother like a little mother. She could marry and live with her husband – and care for her own children, *a Dio piacendo* – if Sebastian was in boarding school.

He sent Sebastian running to Carlo's to let him know he would be late to the canefield in the morning because he would go to see the teacher and find out more. He was not naïve enough to think everything would be paid for like Sebastian was suggesting.

That night, after a simple macaroni meal that was not quite up to Rosa's usual standard, they all went to their beds with varying levels of excitement and apprehension. Thirteen-year-old Sebastian could feel the world opening up to him, while his father felt both proud and sad.

Rosa took the longest time to fall asleep. The poor girl was not only terrified, but she was also alarmed at the thought of losing her little brother. He had his own friends and interests, but sometimes he was good company for her. He still gave her lessons occasionally. She tried to calm herself by planning the Sunday lunch, but she could not shake off the overwhelming feeling of dread.

The next morning Giuseppe put on his good white shirt and a collar to go and see the teacher. He decided to wear a jacket and tie as well – the one with the horse head framed by a horseshoe that Ilda had bought him for luck. At the time he'd thought it a bit silly for her taste, but after more than a decade it was still a treasured possession, fashionable or not.

Despite everything that had happened, he knew Ilda would be immensely proud of her son on this day, and that tie held a hint of her presence that only Giuseppe would understand.

He combed his thick dark hair – still no grey, even at forty-five – and rolled a cigarette. There was just enough time to smoke it while he waited for Sebastian.

Giuseppe picked up his jacket and hat, Sebastian his schoolbag, and they said goodbye to Rosa, setting off towards the little school on their bicycles.

Giuseppe resented feeling nervous about meeting the teacher. The language barrier was humiliating and having his young son interpret only made it worse. 'Gardener' was tricky to pronounce, too. Still, he'd found the teacher to be respectful enough.

When they arrived at the school, Mr. Gardener was greeting the children and ushering them to their classrooms. He beamed at Giuseppe and Sebastian and walked straight over to them holding out his hand to greet Giuseppe with a handshake.

“Good morning Mr. Busacco. And you, too, young Sebastian. I'm very pleased you could spare the time off work.”

“*Buon ... er ...* good morning, Mr. Gardener. I am pleased to come.”

Gardener relaxed a little as he could tell the boy's father was not going to dismiss this opportunity out of hand with the usual “No need for too much education – he will come to work canecutting with me.” No, he could see this Italian father was ready to hear what possibilities his son's future might hold.

“Please come into my office, both of you. Another teacher will watch my class while we talk.”

He gave them a glass of water each as he tried to make them feel comfortable.

“So, Mr. Busacco, we are very proud of Sebastian and you must be, too. He has told you about the scholarship?”

“*Si*, yes, yes. I am proud. My son is a good boy. A ... s-mart boy.”

“Yes, indeed he is. This is a wonderful opportunity – a great chance for him to get a high-quality education. You understand?”

Sebastian discreetly translated just the few words he thought his father may not know so it didn't seem like he was speaking for him. This was not the time to anger him. Giuseppe nodded in furious agreement, “Yes, yes, I understand. A good chance for him. A good school. A college.”

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Rosa sat at the table leafing through her tattered magazine. She looked for anything about marriage, weddings or engagements. She knew she'd have to talk to her aunts again, but she ached for her mother. Mamma would know what to tell her and how to dispel her nameless fears.

How could she talk to her father about such things?

Gioia climbed on her lap, trying to position herself between Rosa and the well-worn pages, purring and rubbing the side of her little face against the back of Rosa's hand.

“Yes, little one, I know I have you to comfort me, but what do you know of men and marriage and babies? How can you help me with this? *Mi spaventa, bedda mia.*” In English, *please*, she reminded herself. “I am scared, Gioia.”

Surely her father would not make her marry yet. She was not yet seventeen. But he was starting the process – of that she was certain. There would be – possibly already had been –

discreet meetings between fathers. Normally, mothers would have their say, too, but not in this case, she guessed.

She tried to think of the *paesani* they knew. Who could it be? Was it that fellow Serio who was friends with Zio Carlo? She hoped not. He spoke in a high voice as if he was trying to act the part of a woman in a pantomime. She told herself not to be so cruel.

Maybe it was the baker's son – what was his name? Fabio. It might be good to get away from the canecutting business, though she knew a baker's work clothes would need washing just as much as a canecutter's. No, somehow she knew this man she was to meet would be a sugar worker like her father and uncles.

“How am I going to practise the Tarantella and the Siciliana, Gioia? I wonder if he will be a good dancer? Whoever *he* is.”

Rosa suddenly wondered if it might be Gianni, the boy who had come to the house to learn English that day. She'd felt a delicious attraction to him at first, but she remembered how his bad attitude at being behind her and the two younger boys with the English had turned her off him.

Still, she wouldn't mind having another look at him. She blushed inwardly at the thought and again reprimanded herself for being silly. At least this time she would have the forewarning to make sure she looked her best.

She wondered whether she was even pretty enough to appeal to any suitor. She actually had no idea. In the village in Sicily, the hints from her girlfriends and the whispers of her male and female peers would have helped her know exactly where she sat on the desirability-for-marriage scale.

Here, there was only the kindness of her aunts telling her how lucky any man would be to have her as his wife. It wasn't the same.

At least Rosa had no doubts about her skills in keeping a home. She was already doing the job of a wife and mother, except it was for her brother and father.



She looked at the girls in the magazine and then looked in the mirror. She liked to do her hair like some of them, pinning her straight shiny locks into soft waves. She knew her father would never let her wear lipstick – even her aunts hardly ever wore it. Did she want to be like Australian girls? She secretly envied their easy freedom to come and go without someone chaperoning them.

But was she still a village girl? A Sicilian girl? She felt that was slipping away. Her aunts tried to guide her in traditional customs, but they were themselves becoming more like Australian women all the time. They all had husbands with a more modern outlook than many of their *paesani*.

Zio Enzo and Zio Carlo were happy for their wives, Luisa and Anna, to become more independent. They encouraged them to learn English and to go to the shops without their husbands. Even to the school and church. Rosa didn't see Luisa often but each time she did see her, Zia Luisa seemed more confident and outspoken than the last time.

Zia Caterina was adapting to Australia very well, too. She even did some tailoring work for Australian ladies and spoke better English than her husband, Zio Giovanni. He didn't mind – it made him proud.

All three aunts were becoming like northern Italian women used to be; like Rosa's mamma had been before the regime changed their lives in Italy, taking their situation backwards to the time when they were more subservient and strictly limited in their rights and roles. More like southern women, Ilda had explained to her girl.

The emigrant women had escaped all that – the ones who wanted to, at least. There were always those who felt safest in their traditional roles or were kept in them by their husbands and fathers.

Rosa could already see that the women of this family were happy to loosen those restrictions and move about more freely. They even spoke more freely. She wondered if she should try to be more like them. *When I am in a husband's house and not a father's*, she thought.

Rosa heard footsteps coming up the front staircase and rushed to shove the magazine back into its hiding place under her bed. It was her father returning to quickly change into his work clothes and head to the canefield.

“How was your meeting, Papa? Am I to lose my little brother?”

“It was good, Rosina. I will tell you about it tonight when I come home from work. Don’t forget about Sunday lunch.”

Forget about it? How could she forget something so terrifying? “No, Papa. I won’t forget.”

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Sunday morning dawned bright and warm. Rosa woke with a fright, and all the things she knew she had to do came crowding into her mind at once. *Stop!* One thing at a time, she told herself.

Once she had washed and dressed in the clothes she would cook in, and pinned her damp hair into neat waves, she set about preparing the table. She did not want to use anything from her modest *corredo*, so she shook out their best table linen. It was a little threadbare in spots but very clean at least; some pretty flowers and small table decorations would distract from its flaws.

When her father and brother made their appearance, she asked them to please have their breakfast on the verandah so they wouldn’t mess up the table. Giuseppe was pleasantly surprised at the stylish look of the table with the plates, cutlery and water glasses laid out.

Rosa sent Sebastian out to get some wood for the stove, while she chopped her homegrown eggplant for the *pasta alla norma* she would make. She had already used some in the *caponata* she’d prepared the day before. The *pollo alla contadina*, chicken with tomatoes, onions and herbs, would feature her homegrown tomatoes – hers were the best in the district, everyone said – and whatever fresh herbs she could pick.

She didn’t have what she needed to make a cold dessert, but the lemon biscotti she had baked the day before would suffice, with coffee and some of the sweet marsala Giuseppe kept for

special occasions. It would be a simple Sunday lunch by her mother's standards, but for this wild tropical place, a festive, very Italian meal.

Once she had completed as much of the food preparations as she could in advance, it was time to get herself ready. She changed into her favourite dress, the deep-pink crepe one with white embroidery on the left shoulder, took the pins out of her hair and carefully combed it so that it held the waves.

She put on the gold earrings and signet ring her mother had given her, along with the gold locket necklace that had been a christening gift from the Ligurian grandparents she hardly knew. She consulted the small mirror and decided she looked her best. Now she must try to relax and be welcoming but not too friendly. Yet.

Soon, she heard a mix of male voices as the lunch guests approached. Giuseppe and Sebastian had gone to the corner to meet them and escort them to the house. She tried to quell the fluttering in her stomach and sat waiting, her serene exterior disguising the turmoil within.

That youthful poise was the quality most admired by everyone who knew her.

The men and Sebastian came up the stairs and through the door, chattering all at once. Giuseppe quickly made the introductions before settling their guests in the most comfortable chairs. They were all talking enthusiastically among themselves, but the younger man with the shock of curly light-brown hair looked furtively in her direction several times.

She felt more than saw his eyes on her, so reluctant was she to have him see her looking at him. It was excruciating. She really wanted to have a good look before she made the decision to derail her father's plan. It was only fair.

They sat snacking on the olives she had cured in oil with chilli and lemon, discussing local and world politics. They were particularly concerned about what was happening with Hitler's Nazis and Mussolini's Blackshirts.

Giuseppe ambushed himself with some strong opinions about it all. He realised now, in this discussion with *paesani*, that he'd been unrealistic to think they wouldn't be touched by it.

The father, Calogero, was adamant that Mussolini would not support Hitler's actions but Giuseppe wasn't so sure. Hitler had threatened war if he didn't get the Sudetenland back from Czechoslovakia, so the British and French caved and he got his way.

*"Il Duce will not support Il Führer if he takes his aggressions too far,"* pronounced Calogero with great confidence. "Mussolini does not hate Jews – the Racial Laws are just to appease Hitler. And he will not want to spend what war costs after the Great War. Besides, we fought on the side of the Allies in that war. He will remain neutral."

Giuseppe looked unconvinced. Not wanting to directly contradict his guest, he took a hesitant approach. "I am not so sure about that. Hitler once admired Mussolini, but now they say it's the other way around. The Duce is filled with admiration for the German leader. It's pathetic. He's like a puppy dog. No, Mussolini has sold his soul to the devil."

More worked-up now, he continued, "My one brother at home tells me the Duce has been building new military bases – in Libya, in Sicily, in Rome itself. And don't forget they signed the Rome-Berlin Axis. So they are engaged to be married."

Giuseppe kept his argument going. *How can Calogero be so confident and so naïve?* he wondered. "I can tell you this. If Mussolini does support Hitler's aggression it will be bad for Italians – inside and outside Italy – because Hitler is a dangerous monster greedy for territory and power."

Antonio, the son, took the opportunity to give his opinion, glancing towards Rosa, who was stirring a pot on the fuel stove. "Well, anyway, it will not affect us over this side of the world on a big island that no one knows anything about except those of us who live here."

"Again, I would not be so sure," said Giuseppe, who had felt the same until his brother's letter. "The Australians and New Zealanders were famous for their brave fighting in support of the Allies in the Great War. The English sent them in to die first."

"If Britain opposed Hitler, Australia would fight again. And that would be very bad for us. We would be the enemy here in our own home, my friend. Think of it."

Rosa felt a little alarmed at what she was hearing. Sadly, she didn't have to worry about her mother's safety any longer because, some months back, Papa had finally blurted out the answer to all her unasked questions.

"Your mother has been taken from us."

"How? What happened?" she had asked at the time.

"It's very sad and I do not want to talk about it." He would not tell them any more than that, but she vowed through her tears in private that she would one day know everything.

For now, as far as she was aware, and Papa had not told them anything different, three of her grandparents were still alive, and she hated the thought of them having to cope in a war-torn Italy.

She put an end to the men's discussion by announcing that their pasta was ready. They all pulled their chairs to the table and looked very happily at the expertly presented dish in front of them.

The lunch proceeded just as Rosa had planned and she could see by the looks her papa gave her now and then that he was pleased. In fact, he was nearly bursting with pride.

Now that Rosa could observe Antonio more closely, she felt confused. She sensed he was a kind and gentle man, but she did not have the feeling she'd had in the presence of Gianni. Disappointingly, there was no instant attraction. She dreaded telling her father she wasn't interested. Still, her inside voice was not saying a clear no.

After lunch, before coffee and biscotti, the men decided to play a little bocce while she cleaned up. She could hear the low murmur of their amiable chatter until suddenly it was pierced by what sounded like a cry of pain.

She rushed to the verandah to see Sebastian lying on the ground and writhing in pain. It seemed to be his ankle or foot. Antonio picked him up, carried him up the front staircase and gently placed him on a verandah seat with his leg elevated on a box. Rosa rushed to get a pillow to place under it.

Sebastian was moaning now and Antonio was reassuring him the pain would settle soon, with the two older men agreeing. Giuseppe was annoyed with him for acting the fool on the staircase but was trying not to show it in front of their guests. He would have that discussion later.

Something shifted inside Rosa when she saw how kind Antonio was to her little brother. Her mother had told her how important it was to marry a kind man. She had said some men thought they should reprimand a wife by hitting her and those men were to be avoided, even if you felt an attraction to one. Rosa certainly did not want to live with a man who might hit her. As stern and moody and difficult as her father was, she was sure he had never hit her mother, may she rest in peace.

Now, as she wrapped a cool, wet bandage around her brother's ankle, she decided Antonio's thick upright curls were not so odd looking. It wasn't so bad, either, that he was not much taller than Rosa and her thirteen-year-old brother. He was clearly very strong; he carried the boy up the steep stairs with little effort.

When Sebastian had stopped moaning and everyone was relaxed again, Rosa served coffee and biscotti while Giuseppe poured the marsala. Eventually, Calogero and Antonio said their goodbyes, thanking her and her father for the excellent meal.

Antonio looked straight at her as he spoke. "The chicken especially was delicious. And the lemon biscotti were the best I've ever tasted. I could eat them every day." He looked meaningfully at her as he uttered that last comment.

The two fathers nodded silently to one another.

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## 1940 War

*“It seldom happens that a man who starts a war is still in power to sign the peace treaty.”*  
— *Benito Mussolini to British journalist and MP, Vernon Bartlett, reported by AAP 11 June 1940.*

**The Courier-Mail, Brisbane, Wednesday 12 June 1940, page 3**

**ALLIES READY FOR CHALLENGE FROM ITALY**

**Mussolini Joins Germans In War**

Australian Associated Press

**LONDON, July [sic] 11.** — “The preparations of the Allied Governments are complete; they will know how to meet sword with sword,” said an official announcement in London last night following Mussolini’s declaration of war on Britain and France.

A crowd of 100,000 people outside the Palazzo Venezia, in Rome, heard Mussolini’s speech in which he announced yesterday at 5 p.m. that war had been declared on Britain and France, “the plutocrats of Western Europe.”

“Our destiny has arrived,” he said. “It is a grave hour for the Fatherland — an hour of irrevocable decision. Italy is now in the field with Germany.”

June 10, 1940, was a fateful day. Giuseppe was sickened by the knowledge that everything had now changed for Italians everywhere. Italy declared war on her former allies: Britain and France. Now aligned with the axis powers, Germany and Japan, and still tight with Franco, Spain’s strongman dictator, Mussolini had his covetous eye on territory in Africa and the Middle East.

Of course, it was no surprise to Giuseppe or anyone else, Italian or Australian; the lead-up had been ugly enough with anti-Italian feeling infecting Western countries everywhere, including Australia. Especially in the tropical north. Even Ingham, surely the most Italian-friendly town in Queensland, saw instances of Italians being spat on, sacked from jobs and refused service in shops and pubs.

But now it was official. Mussolini had betrayed his promise to the Allies of Italy’s support of the League of Nations and commitment to peace in Europe. Where once he’d had his

admirers among non-Italians, even in Australia, he was now widely seen as the coward and bully Giuseppe had always known him to be.

There was so much happening in Europe and Britain in June and July that Franco's Gibraltar grab barely raised an eyebrow.

Italians in the sugar country were nervous and defensive. How could they not be? One of their most prominent citizens, Dr Piscitelli of Italo-Australian Hospital fame, was captured and interned the very day Mussolini's declaration of war was reported in the press. Piscitelli was rumoured to be strongly pro-Fascist, but was there proof?

He wasn't the only one, either. Some were calling for the imprisonment or deportation of all Italian doctors in Queensland. Dr Castellano was another one they scooped up in the first batch. Even Count Lalli could not evade capture.

The government did not go so far as to grab all Italian doctors, but it was clearly marking high-profile Italians for internment, no doubt to neutralise their influence in the community whatever their ideological position. Known communists, anarchists and anti-Fascists were being equally targeted and locked up with known Fascists. It made no sense to the Italians.

Giuseppe felt anxious and disappointed. He was ashamed of his country of birth and the preposterous narcissist who led it. Anything good Mussolini had ever done for Italy was now neutralised by this unholy alliance with the Nazi monster, *Il Folle Tedesco*.

Just when life had finally settled into a good pattern and Giuseppe's little family was becoming settled, forces beyond their control threatened to poison and destroy what they had achieved with hard work and forbearance in the face of prejudice and tribulation.

Sebastian was excelling at the college, even in their Australian sports, and rapidly becoming a young man of enthusiasm, energy and talent.

Rosa was now married to Antonio and content in the new house they had built. Antonio had hired the Italian builder his father-in-law had used and, as a result, the two houses looked almost identical except the young couple's home had a turn in the front stairs where Giuseppe's was straight up and down.



Antonio had taken a photo of Rosa standing proudly on the front stairs and had a copy made for Giuseppe, which now, in its handmade wooden frame, took pride of place on his sideboard.

Giuseppe felt vindicated in helping her choose her husband, and in the end, it truly was her choice. The three-day wedding celebration made quite a splash in the district, especially as Giuseppe was normally so frugal and given to keeping a low profile in most things.

Now he quietly awaited *la nonnità*. Grandfatherhood. He dare not say it out loud for fear of jinxing it, but it would be the cherry on the *torta* or, as the Australians would say, the icing on the cake.

Giuseppe was expecting Sebastian to arrive home for the holidays to arrange a meeting with his brothers, cousins and son-in-law. He felt Sebastian was old enough to understand what was happening in the world and how it might affect them all. It could be dangerous now for Italians to meet in large groups, but how else were they supposed to understand their situation and what it might bring?

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Giuseppe sat smoking and flicking through the *Cairns Post*. He didn't often spend money on newspapers, but these were volatile times. He was thinking about how much Sebastian had grown last time he saw him and wondered whether he'd be even more cocky now he had turned fifteen. A lot of boys were already working at that age, but Sebastian was deeply into his books and his sports.

The train should have come in over an hour ago and Giuseppe was starting to worry. Maybe it was not a good idea to let him make his own way from the station. But there were always *paesani* meeting the train from the south; surely he would catch a lift with someone.

He got up to go to the verandah where he'd be able to see to the corner when the door flew open and there stood his son, breathless from running from the main road shouldering his canvas duffle bag and excited to be home. Giuseppe did a double take when he noticed how

disheveled Sebastian looked. His school tie was carelessly pulled undone and the hat he was carrying was filthy.

“Dad, thank God I’m home. I thought I’d have to walk here from Ingham. There was no one I knew at the station.”

“How did you get here then?” Giuseppe was startled.

“A Calabrese bloke I didn’t know helped me. He saw some of the louts hanging around the station calling me names like ‘filthy dago’ and ‘Nazi scum’ and throwing things at me. They took my school hat and stomped on it in the mud. Will we be able to get it clean? I can take it to Rosa.”

“Who was this Calabrese? Is he from around here? Surely you’d know him if he was.”

“No, he was going to Trebonne after dropping his brother off at the station, but he came to my rescue and drove this far out of his way to get me home safely. I only know his name is Vito.”

Well, I must find out who this Vito is so I can thank him. It’s only right.”

“They tried to get my bag, too, but that was when Vito stepped in and threatened them.”

“Threatened them? With what?”

“I think he said something about ‘Italian justice’... but I’m not sure.”

Giuseppe suspected the reason Sebastian couldn’t find anyone he knew at the station was that most Italians were keeping a low profile. Normally there would be lively greetings and gossip around the platform, but probably not these days.

“May the Duce burn in hell for the grief he is bringing to us all.” Giuseppe had stronger words in mind but did not want to say them in front of his young son.

“Always remember, Son, you have every right to be in this country. You are a British subject through my naturalisation. If you were old enough, they would expect you to serve in their army as many sons of migrants are doing.”

“Yeah, Dad, but it’s hard to say much when three of them – bigger and older – surround you like that.”

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Two days later, Giuseppe and Sebastian were preparing to go to Rosa’s for lunch. Sebastian was down under the house fixing the front tyre on his father’s bicycle. He needed to get the bike working before they could go.

Giuseppe was upstairs in the house writing panicked letters to his loved ones in Sicily, though he wasn’t sure if he would even be able to post them. He knew the government would at the very least be monitoring any civilian communications they allowed to go through to Italy. They’d be on the lookout for spies all the time now. He was pretty sure that sending money would be heavily frowned upon, too, if not prevented altogether.

Some *paesani* had started sending letters and money home via relatives in America, but Giuseppe had long lost touch with any family there. Those he had known were only distant cousins, anyway.

He decided he would speak to the priest and get a proper take on it rather than listen to all the wild rumours going around.

He looked at the clock on the sideboard and realised it was past time they should be setting off down the lane. They were going to be late. He wondered what was taking Sebastian so long.

He stepped out onto the verandah to call down to him but, before he could get anything out, he heard Sebastian calling in a hoarse half-whisper, “Snake, Dad. There’s a snake.”

Giuseppe reacted instantly, going back in as silently as he could to get his rifle. When he came back out and crept down the stairs to get Sebastian in his field of vision, he could see

the boy was frozen on the spot and the snake with the telltale bands of a death adder was less than three yards away.

The adder was tightly coiled with its head raised and was vibrating its tail – an ominous sign. But from where Giuseppe crouched he couldn't tell if its attention was on his son or Gioia the cat, who had followed Sebastian down.

No time to hesitate. He took aim, squeezed the trigger and, with a deafening bang, blew the snake's head clean off.

Gioia leapt through the air and raced out to the backyard, while Sebastian dropped to his knees in tearful relief. He was scared to death and thought his father would never come. He was stunned by his father's action. What a marksman. His own dad was a hero.

Outwardly, Giuseppe was eerily calm as he quietly and carefully put his still-loaded gun back in its place in the bedroom cupboard, but his mind was tortured by thoughts of what he couldn't protect his children from. He wondered if he should keep the rifle at the ready.

No, that was exactly what was expected of Italians; that they were knife and trigger happy. Besides, he couldn't risk anyone seeing he had the gun, even other *paesani*. It wouldn't matter that he'd only ever used it hunting and now the snake. That business with The Woman would always go against him, too. No Italian or German would be allowed to own a weapon now, not even for normal farming purposes.

There were already rumours of Italians reporting other countrymen to the authorities out of revenge for some vendetta or because they had designs on others' farms. It was hard to believe, and Giuseppe was sure no one he knew would do a thing like that, but nevertheless it wasn't worth taking any risks.

He knew he wasn't universally liked in his community, but he thought he didn't have any enemies, either. The Woman's family had long since left the Herbert. Those close to him, his brothers and son-in-law, were all popular and respected and, besides, his modest house on stilts with very little land was not worth anyone going after.

No doubt someone would have heard the gunshot but the houses and farms were so sparsely spread out in this area he hoped no one could tell exactly where it came from. It was just the one bang and could easily have sounded like a truck backfiring.

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That evening, as father and son sat reading after their evening meal of ham and pea soup, which Giuseppe had learnt to cook from a woman's magazine, he asked his son the question that had been playing on his mind.

“At school ... do the other boys and teachers treat you differently ... badly, because you are Italian?”

“Some do, for sure, but the brothers and the priests reprimand any they know about. They are mostly pro-Italian, you know. Even the Irish ones. The Irish aren't in the war, anyway.”

He changed his voice to a booming imitation of the school principal. “‘We are all Catholics and we are all Australians here,’ they say.”

Giuseppe laughed at his son's vocal impression of the head brother and nodded. “Good.”

“I am captain of the cricket team, so that helps. The Italians who are no good at sport cop it badly. But, yes, sometimes I get picked on.”

“I'm sorry to hear that, but it seems like you might be safer in the school than out on the streets. Be careful when you leave the school grounds. Always watch your back.”

“If anyone asks me about you, Dad, I tell them what you told me to say. That you are a proud British subject, a citizen of this country, and that you have no interest in wars and politics, especially European ones.

“And that you are too old to enlist.”

“Good.”

“Tell me again why I shouldn’t say you are anti-Fascist? Because you are, aren’t you? Wouldn’t it be better if people knew that?”

Giuseppe was irritated by this but gave the boy an answer. “Yes, of course I am. But you can’t go around making a noise about that because the bloody Blackshirts might punish our family at home. We know of instances. We are in trouble if we are on either side. It’s much better – *necessary!* – to be on no side.”

For the next few days, Giuseppe took Sebastian canecutting with him. He was not officially in the gang, but his father thought it important for him to learn the ropes in case there might be a need in the coming months. No one knew how long the war might last, but Giuseppe still had very clear memories of the Great War.

What if this turned out to be as bad or worse?

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As it edged into 1941. Giuseppe and the other Queensland Italians he knew had no political affiliations continued to keep their heads down and their homes clear of anything that might throw suspicion on them. The government had closed the local Italian newspapers, but everyone knew of someone being led away just for having books in the Italian language; books they had owned for years that had nothing to do with politics. Pirandello, Verga ... Dante, for goodness’ sake.

Now, Italians were not allowed to own radios, cameras and even boats. Some, like fishermen, could no longer earn their living because of the restrictions. They certainly weren’t allowed firearms of any kind, though most, Giuseppe included, simply kept some of these things well hidden.

The news from Rome, picked up by those who owned short-wave radio sets, flew around the migrant communities almost daily. Often there were personal good cheer messages to those “loyal Fascists” who were interned in Australia, sometimes mentioning a few by name.

All this sent publications like *Smith’s Weekly* into furious rants about the “dago fifth column” with them referring to Mussolini as the “Master Thug” and frequently calling for the arrest

and deportation of every Italian, including those born in Australia to Italian-born parents. Even those who were serving in the Australian armed forces. Their service got them no sympathy: “they might be spies”; “they should not have weapons”.

There were ever more rumours and even threats among the migrants themselves, as well as worse and worse treatment from the general community and the media. It began to feel like no Italian’s job or farm was safe.

Of course, it wasn’t just Italians. Germans were copping it as well along with some Eastern Europeans. By the end of that year the Japanese and those from places under Japan’s control, such as Formosans, would also be targeted for internment.

Still, there were some small joys. Sebastian was performing well at school in both his academic work and all the sports the college offered. He was even a soloist in the school choir, much to the surprise of his father, who had no idea the boy could sing so beautifully.

Sebastian’s excellent results in the statewide Junior exams were published in the newspapers, making his father and sister glow with pride. Even his uncles bragged about him to anyone who would listen.

Giuseppe was starting to relax a little, but Carlo was always worried now that he had a wife and two small boys to support. An unusually optimistic mood came over Giuseppe when he and Carlo were having a quiet beer on Giuseppe’s verandah one afternoon. All the pubs were too unpleasant for Italians now.

“We may avoid capture and humiliation yet, brother. If we keep our noses clean and just do our work and pay our taxes, what can they have against us?”

Carlo looked doubtful. “I’m not so sure, Gio. Did you hear about poor Pietro? They took all his beloved books and his anti-Fascist newspapers and made a bonfire out of them in his front yard. Do they not know the difference between a Fascist and a Communist?”

“No, they don’t. And they don’t care. This is why I say we can’t be seen to have any politics, any beliefs. We are damned for everything, any which way we go. Our families back home can suffer for our careless words here.”

The mention of families back home threw Carlo into another state of anxiety. “Mamma is so old now. Surely they will leave an elderly widow alone.”

“I hope so. She is no danger to anyone. But there’s more to our family in Italy than just our mother.” Giuseppe looked desperately sad as he said this.

“I like to think it’s just empty threats from those Blackshirt thugs, but we can’t know for sure. We must proceed as if there are spies and informants everywhere.”

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## 1942 Captured

The 25th of March 1942 was Sebastian's seventeenth birthday. Falling on a Wednesday, it was a school day for him and a workday for his father, so there was no celebration by either of them.

However, in the canefield that day, Carlo and a few of the other men offered to come to Giuseppe's the following Sunday to toast the boy and have a game of bocce. They knew how much it meant to Gio that his son was fast becoming a young man.

The next few days passed unremarkably with a few of the gang members doing fieldwork on the farm. Others had gone south to pick fruit or out bush to the timber cutting. Preparing the fields for planting was easier work than cutting the mature cane, but the early autumn days were stifflingly hot and humid. By the end of the week the men were ready for cool drinks in the shade.

Carlo arrived first on Sunday morning. Giuseppe could tell by the stony look on his brother's normally relaxed face there was something very wrong.

"What is it, brother. *Brutte notizie?* Has something happened?"

"Yes, and it's very bad. Our dear brother Lorenzo has been captured. I have had word from Mariano."

"Captured! You mean he is a prisoner of the government?"

Carlo nodded meaningfully.

"But why? What has he done? What the hell has the government got on him?"

"Nothing very important. But his friends think this was down to a spiteful, jealous neighbour, a *paesano*. This neighbour has been trying to buy Enzo out for months, but Enzo isn't interested in selling.

"So, this bastard neighbour's wife noticed Luisa was not wearing a wedding ring – she's expecting again, you know, and her fingers swell when she's in the family way.

“Well, anyway,” Carlo continued, “this neighbour – I hesitate to call him a *paesano* – he told the authorities that Enzo and Luisa had previously donated to the Gold for the Fatherland campaign and therefore were great supporters of *Il Duce*. So that was it, pure hearsay – a filthy lie! – and he’s ripped away from his farm and his family.

“Do you think it’s because he’s not naturalised yet? He tried to apply recently but it was too late.”

Carlo looked thoughtful. “That wouldn’t help, I suppose. But also, they’ve been looking at everyone who took part in the protests about the British Preference League’s demands years back. You remember how they wanted it made law that seventy-five per cent of cutting jobs went to Britishers?”

“Of course. It was a stupid idea and never worked out, especially in the Herbert where so many who work in the sugar are Italian. My God, they had trouble even finding any British cutters. I think there were less than 20 of them.”

“Well, now they’re saying that anyone who protested then is anti-British. They want to imprison us all and they’re scratching around for anything that can be held against us. They’re stepping it up because they think we will join with the Japanese now they have started their invasion.”

Carlo was becoming heated. “We, who are building this industry – this state! Law-abiding citizens who just want to build a life for our families. They hate us for it. Bastards.”

Giuseppe felt like he’d been king hit. “My God. But ... Enzo and Luisa ... What can we do? How can we help them?” He was looking at Carlo.

“She’s OK for now, Gio, as Mariano was not taken, so he’s helping her. We believe Lorenzo is in Stuart Creek gaol and, from what people are saying, the conditions there are terrible. Maybe we can take him some decent food and some clothes and blankets. And coffee. You can be sure they won’t supply coffee.”

Their discussion was interrupted by the arrival of Sam and Filippo. “You’re on the list!” The two friends laughed, almost in unison. “Pack your bags, You’re on the list.”

It had become a jokey greeting among Italians in the sugar country, but on this occasion it hit hard. Had they too heard about Lorenzo?

“No, I have heard nothing.” Sam looked at Filippo. “You?”

Filippo looked shocked. “No, nothing! I was just making the usual bloody joke. Poor Enzo. He doesn’t deserve this. Those bastards! Fucking Mussolini.”

Giuseppe looked worried. “No, no, you don’t understand. This will be very bad for him. He’s only just got over the kidney operation for the problem the rat disease left him with. He will suffer more than most in a prison because his health is still fragile.”

Filippo went with dark humour, as usual. “Well don’t worry, Gio. There will be plenty of Italian doctors in there with him. I heard the buggers were after all the Italian doctors in Queensland. I think there are quite a few already locked up.”

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A month later, when the inevitable happened and it was Giuseppe and Carlo’s turn, they were ready for it. They had their suitcases packed and had put aside blankets and a mosquito net, along with a little cash so they could buy cigarettes and the like. Giuseppe had even got Rosa’s assurance she’d come and pick up Gioia if the worst happened.

They were captured on the same day at their homes in Macknade under Master Warrant, as was Rosa’s husband. When Giuseppe asked the police sergeant why they were being imprisoned, he was told to shut up and get in the truck.

“I don’t have to give you a reason, mate, but you know what the reason is. Because you are filthy dago scum and you don’t belong in my country. That’s why. You’ll all be sent back to where you came from soon, and this country will be white again.”

They were picked up by police they’d never seen before, brought there, Giuseppe guessed, from one of the cities to round up Italians like they were wild animals.

The packed ride to the station was something of a reunion, though no one was celebrating. Those with wives and children were most worried about how long they would be gone and what would happen to their families and sugar crops. No one knew anything, and no one was made available to tell them anything.

When they got to the train, they were herded into special carriages with the windows barred and blacked out so no one could see them. They knew, though, that outside the carriages was a rowdy throng of angry and grieving family members mingling tensely with those who came to the station purely to jeer at the prisoners.

Every man felt the injustice of it in his very soul. No matter how much they expected it and knew the reasons of national security and all the rest of it, this did not feel like the Australia they knew and loved. The country where they had put down deep roots and watered them with the sweat from their hard work and tears over the separation from loved ones.

Forbearance, thought Giuseppe. That state of being he had learnt to value so much. If ever there was a time for it, it was now.

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To: The Consular Agent of Switzerland

From: BRISBANE INTERNMENT CAMP, GAYTHORNE

7<sup>th</sup> April 1942

Dear Sir,

We the undersigned internees wish to lodge a protest against the arrangements and the manner of treatment of us at Stuart Creek gaol. Our complaint is based on the following facts.

1. That the gaol is not a proper and fit place to house internees who are not criminals but only civilians detained for national Security purposes.
2. The food was detestable and consisted only of little boiled rice mornings and afternoon, and little gravy stew at midday.
3. We were there for eleven days, and they did not give us a bath or sufficient drinking water.
4. The place where we were was very unhealthy.
5. Some things we bought there, we were made to pay four times more than they are worth.
6. We definitely protest against internees being locked in cells as in our opinion this puts them on the same level as internees detained therein.
7. Lastly, we urge you to recommend to the Commonwealth authorities that an internment camp be made in Townsville as a receiving depot.

Hoping to receive an early, and successful arrangements from you,

Thanking you in anticipation,

We remain, Yours faithfully,

Etc etc

The way Sebastian learnt of his father's fate was much kinder. Brother Basil, the college principal, summoned the boy to his office. With him was the priest who usually said mass at the school, Father O'Flaherty. The two men looked imposing, the tall, grey-haired principal and the stocky, balding priest both in their black cassocks. They stood either side of Brother Basil's document-covered desk and looked serious.

Brother Basil did the talking. "I am very sorry to have to inform you of this terrible news, Sebastian, but your father and your uncles have been arrested and taken to Gaythorne. They will in due course be moved to an internment camp more permanently, perhaps until this war ends and the Axis Powers are defeated."

"But, Sir, excuse me, but how do you know this? Is it true? It can't be. He has nothing to do with Fascism. He hates it." The young man then remembered he was not supposed to say things like that, but he was perplexed.

Father Flaherty nodded. "Father Murphy from your home parish has informed us. He knew through your old teacher at the Macknade school that most of the men in your family have been taken. Your father and his brothers. Your sister's husband and his brother. But not the women and not your other uncles. We don't know why they have been spared."

"What do I do? Will I be allowed to visit him?"

"No, son. That won't be possible." Brother Basil sounded much kinder than usual. "They are internees now, which is similar to being prisoners-of-war, except they are civilians. There won't be any visiting. But you will be able to write letters to him, of that we are quite certain."

Both men could see the anguish in the boy's face.

"You are not the only one in this school community to have a loved one interned. You can probably guess who the others might be."

Father O'Flaherty piped up, "This may not have happened had our Japanese brethren to the north not entered the war on the side of the Nazis, but they did. And they stupidly attacked the Americans, as you probably know."

“Still,” interrupted Brother Basil hopefully, “This might end the war quickly. The Americans are rich and powerful. And there are so many of them. The Nazis and Fascists will be no match for the Yanks.”

Then he suddenly remembered he was talking to a student and dismissed him with, “You may go, son. If you need help writing letters to your father, come to the office.”

As Sebastian walked into the hallway, Brother Basil called after him, “Sebastian, do you have relatives you can go to in the school holidays? Your sister, perhaps, or one of your aunts? They may need your help.”

“Yes, Sir. Thank you, Sir. Thank you, Father.”

That night, after lights-out in the dormitory, Sebastian silently fought off the tears he would never want his classmates to see. During the morning mass there were prayers for those fighting and dying for their country. *What about those whose country had betrayed them?* Sebastian wondered. Who will pray for them? Who will help them? He resolved he would do everything a schoolboy could to get his father home.

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When the three brothers were reunited the following month in the purpose-built internment camp in Cowra, New South Wales, those tough men let their guard down and embraced each other. They even shed a few tears.

Their tears were not for themselves, though; they were for those left behind to fend for themselves without husbands and fathers. Pregnant Rosa and Enzo’s Luisa, who already had a toddler, Carlo’s Anna with their two small boys, and their sister Caterina with her young son. Then there was Sebastian, young and alone, with all those books and uniforms to buy and fees to pay, not all covered by the scholarship.

“It’s good that you took your son canecutting with you, Gio. He will have to leave college and get out to work. There should be plenty of it with so many of us locked up.”

“No, Carlo. No. He does not have long to go to finish his studies. Then he will go to the university to study to become a doctor. It is what he wants to do with his life, and he has worked hard for it. From speaking no English when he arrived to scholarships and high marks, you must see he has the potential to make something of his life in this country. I did not bring him here, away from his mother and grandparents, to become a canecutter like us.”

“Understood, brother, but these are desperate times.”

Lorenzo had been quiet but now spoke up. “Desperate indeed. Have I told you that I am one of the parties to a formal complaint to the Swiss Consul about our treatment in that rotten Stuart Creek?”

His two older brothers shook their heads and looked at him with admiration.

“Oh, yes. I sure did. A large number of us signed that petition. We cannot take this lying down. They cannot treat us however they want to. This is supposed to be a civilised country. In that horrible place they treated us worse than animals. Women even! Their treatment of the women was shocking.”

By the time Giuseppe and Carlo were taken to Stuart Creek things had improved a little and they were not kept there for long. So their experience was not as bad as their brother’s. They were surprised and disgusted to hear there had been women locked up in that dreadful place. Without the most basic hygiene arrangements, too.

Giuseppe thought out loud, “We will find out who to talk to about appeals and the like. Surely they won’t keep us imprisoned for long. How will Australia have any food with all the Italians locked up?”

Carlo laughed loudly at this. “Good point, brother. We filthy dagos grow all the fruit and vegetables they eat, not to mention the sugar in their bloody tea. God, I hate that drink. It was all we got in the police lock-up. At least here we have coffee, thanks to our wives.”

Enzo laughed, too, then stopped abruptly. “They are saying, though, that most of the Italians are from Queensland. The Germans and Japs are from all over, but the other states haven’t interned all their Italians, like Queensland. Mostly just the known Fascists.”



As he spoke, Lorenzo looked meaningfully around at the men in their section of the camp. Many of them were canecutters and farmers they knew from the Ingham and Innisfail districts. Filippo, Sam, Pazzo Pete ... they were all there. They'd even seen Seraglio, the interpreter, around the camp where he was kept busier than ever. Others they knew had gone to South Australia.

“Of course. *Queensland*,” said Carlo heatedly. “The state where we have been discriminated against, abused, taken advantage of and outright cheated. Why? Because of the success of Italians in the sugar, that’s why. Maybe we should move to another state when we get out of here. I really think Anna and I will be doing that.”

Item on Official Visitors Report, Cowra, 30 December 1942

Q.30086 BUSACCO G. Was interned on 20th April 1942. Has no wife. His son, aged 18, had to leave school and work as a cane cutter as he had nothing to live on. He was injured while cane cutting and has been in Hospital. The applicant asks that his son, who has now recovered from his injury, may receive a maintenance allowance to enable him to complete his secondary education.

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Commonwealth of Australia  
Security Service  
Brisbane  
8 Apr 1943

Deputy Director of Security  
Sydney, N.S.W.

SUBJECT: Visitor's Report December 1942

Re Q.30086, Giuseppe BUSACCO.

REFERENCE: Your D.20457/5 of 7 January 1943

1. As a result of enquiries into the complaint of the above internee, it is advised as follows:-
2. BUSACCO'S son was incapacitated for a period of only two weeks, during which time he received compensation at the rate of £3.5.0 per week. During the remainder of the Christmas vacation his earnings amounted to £51.8.0.
3. As the son is capable of earning, no consideration will be given to the internee's application for maintenance for the purpose of providing him with an

advanced education. Moreover, as the son has turned 18, early action will be taken for his call-up for some form of national service.

*Deputy director of Security  
for Queensland  
Macknade  
Via Ingham  
12th July, 1943*

*C.G. Jesson  
Parliament House,  
Brisbane.*

*Dear Sir,*

*I have never known you personally, but from what I have heard I am sure that you will do a great favour for me, if possible. Please allow me to introduce myself: I am the only son of Mr. G. Busacco, widower. I have been going to the Charters Towers college for three years already, this being my fourth and last year. I will be doing the Senior Examination at the end of the year.*

*Unfortunately my dad was interned fourteen months ago, but was released four months ago. He was at the State Nursery, Macedon, New South Wales, for a while, and then he was transferred to the place where he now works: Underbool, Victoria. Before he was interned my dad was a cane-cutter, so that, I think, you must now be able to see how the situation has been in the past, and is at present, with all my college expenses – and there are only two in my family: Dad and me.*

*You understand that we are, what you might call, somewhat financially embarrassed. I have been very lucky to have been able to continue my studies till now, but if dad cannot come back home, and, will, I am sorry to say, work for me, I am afraid that all this has been in vain. I have the ambition of studying for a doctor after I have passed my Senior, and maybe with the help of the Government and Dad's help, if he is home, my ambitions may be fulfilled.*

*Now, the favour that I am begging of you is for you to try to get dad back home in Macknade. You see, where he is working now, in some salt works, he only earns about £3.- per week. He cannot do much to help me while he is getting these wages.*

*I entreat you to do me this favour not only from the business standpoint, but also from the personal element existing. I long to see daddy again. He means everything to me. He is my only support. You must excuse me here for being a bit sentimental, but if you were in my place I think you would feel the same.*

*At present I am at home on Midwinter holidays. For me they have not been exactly holidays, these few days, because I have been cutting cane. I have to strive to keep on going, but if dad was to come back home everything would be, well, different.*

*I do not know whether I have made myself very clear in what I have been trying to tell you because, when I set out to write this letter, I did not know where to start from, nor what to say. But I do hope that you have understood in the proper light. This matter, you realise, is very important, for my whole future depends upon it.*

*You cannot imagine how grateful I would feel towards you if you succeeded in getting dad back home, or even if you did your best. I would never be able to repay you in full.*

*I will be going back to college on the 20th instant, so that on the back of this page you will find my address, and also my dad's address. Please let me know as soon as possible what you can do about the matter.*

*Also please remember that I am still longing to see daddy again. Is Life worth living away from your dad? I ask of you, kind Sir.*

*Praying to God for help and success,*

*I am, dear Sir,*

*Yours sincerely,*

*(Sgd.) Sebastian BUSACCO*

*My address:*

*Master S. BUSACCO,  
c/- Mt. Carmel College,  
Church St.,  
Charters Towers.*

*My dad's address:*

*Mr. G. BUSACCO,  
C/- E. Jones,  
Union Salt Works,  
Underbool,  
Victoria.*

Parliament House Brisbane

16<sup>th</sup> July 1943

Brigadier W.G. Simpson  
Director General of Security  
Box 46 P.O. Canberra

Dear Mr Simpson,

I enclose copy of letter from Master Sebastiano Busacco, C/o Mt Carmel College, Church St, Charters towers, which is self explanatory.

You can see what a difficult position this lad is in. He is now in his fourth year of studies for a Doctor. I understand he was born in this country and is to all intents and purposes an Australian. He is not in a good financial position and if you can see your way clear to have the Father return to cane cutting, it would help considerably, or even if you only allowed the Father to return to Brisbane where he could get into an occupation that would be remunerative enough, it would enable the lad to carry on with his studies until he passes his Examination at the end of the year.

Trusting you will give this matter your sympathetic consideration.

Yours faithfully

C.G. Jesson

1<sup>st</sup> Nov 1943.

Mr. F. E. Walsh  
Deputy Director General of Man Power,  
99 Creek St  
Brisbane.

Dear Mr Walsh,

Mr G. Busacco, Underbool, Victoria, wires me as under -----  
-----

"Released by Security. Man Power will not give clearance  
please see what you can do."

Will you kindly look into this matter and advise me the  
reason for this non-release from Man Power.

Yours faithfully,

W.G.Simpson



*Union Salt Works  
Underbool, 4 November 1943*

*To  
Security Service*

*Dear Sir,  
Re yours of 9<sup>th</sup> October Ref No 30287 of Mr C.J. Jesson, Esq., M.L.A. on my  
behalf*

*I wish to advise you that the manpower at Mildura will not grant me  
permission to leave for Queensland at present. As I've been released by you  
on certain restrictions which I'll follow as I've done in the past, I don't see  
why manpower should hold me here. I would be very grateful if you could  
contact manpower on this matter as I wish to leave for Queensland to see my  
son as he is entering the university. Hoping a favoured reply and thanking you  
in anticipation*

*Yours faithfully  
G Busacco*

Parliament House.

Brisbane

16th November, 1943

Brigadier W.B. Simpson,  
Director General of Security,  
G.P.O. Box 46,  
Canberra.

Dear Brigadier,

I am enclosing copy of letter written to Mr Walsh, Deputy Director General of Man Power, Brisbane, also two telegrams received from S. Busacco, Charters Towers, and G. Busacco, Underbool, Victoria.

This further shows the anomaly that has cropped up re manpower, and I think it is time there was a conference between the Parties concerned to straighten the matter out. I consider that if you say a man should be returned to Queensland your instructions should be carried out.

Yours faithfully

C.G. Jesson

Parliament House.  
Brisbane  
8th December, 1943

Brigadier W.B. Simpson,  
Director General of Security,  
G.P.O. Box 46,  
Canberra.

Dear Brigadier,

I am enclosing letter received from the Man Power dated 29th November with reference to Mr. G. Busacco at present employed at Underbool, Victoria. You will remember this is the man whose motherless son has been at the Charters Towers School for two years and is at the mercy of any friends or relatives willing to take him in for the school holidays or other times. I wrote to you several months ago regarding this man and you told me that you would revoke his restriction order and allow him to return to Queensland where his son could join him and go to school here.

The Man Power request his Alien Registration Number - there is some mistake as this man is a naturalised British subject. However, I would be pleased if you would take the matter up with the Director General of Man Power in Melbourne and forward at the same time his Registration Number here.

Thanking you,  
Yours sincerely,

C.G. Jesson

*Macknade,  
Via Ingham,  
9th Dec. 1943*

*To the Director General of Security,  
Security Service,  
Canberra, A.C.T.*

*Dear Sir,*

*Referring to your letter (Ref. No. 30287) which you sent to C.G. Jesson, Esq., M.L.A., and which was then forwarded to me, it is understood that a new Restriction Order has been issued which permits my father, Mr. Giuseppe Busacco, to return to Queensland, south of the Tropic of Capricorn. The matter has been left in the hands of the Manpower Authorities, but hitherto nothing has been accomplished.*

*If it is not asking too much of you, I would beg of you that you may inquire into the matter and see what can be done towards obtaining the necessary permission and information concerning arrangements from the Manpower Authorities.*

*I have not seen my dad for close to three years now, and you know how it is, <sup>living</sup> away from your dad. Furthermore, I have no mother, so you understand that I would like very much to see my dad again.*

*I sat for the Senior Public Examinations this year, and if possible I wish to continue at the University, my idea being of taking up Medicine. Well, as I am by myself here, you must realise that it is not possible to fix up things. You see the necessity of my father's presence. If it is not possible for a permanent*

*release from the place in which he is now working, a short release of even one month would be – well, it would be wonderful, and we could fix up things, and talk over possibilities, and careers.*

*Well, dear Sir, I pray that you will do your best, and that may [sic] be able to attend to the matter as soon as possible. It would be simply wonderful to have dad home for Christmas. But, if things come to the worst, let us always sing that song, "Let's keep a smile on our lips".*

*My father's address is c/o E. Jones, Union Salt Works, Underbool, Victoria. On further developments will you please notify him? And now I will wish <sup>^you</sup> a very hearty happy Christmas, and all the best.*

*I am, dear Sir,*

*Yours very faithfully,*

*Sebastian E. Busacco*

**TELEGRAM**

UNDERBOOL 12-30

REPLY PAID ... C J JESSON

PARLIAMENT HOUSE BRISBANE

RELEASED BY SECURITY MANPOWER WONT GIVE CLEARANCE PLEASE

SEE WHAT YOU CAN DO ... G BUSACCO UNDERBOOL VIC

OO

## 1945 The Wash-Up

The war left Giuseppe a broken man. Not in the way he had been after the First World War. There were no nightmares or angry outbursts. It was his faith in life that was shattered. The hopes for the future, for building a good life for himself and his children, that he'd dared to quietly nurture after so many years of struggle, were all but gone. He could barely call them to mind, he felt so numb.

He couldn't tell any more whether it was his own poor management of life's unexpected challenges, or extraordinary forces conspiring to punish him for leaving his homeland and everything he held dear. Or was he just destined for a lifetime of bad luck?

No, that was not right. It was not all bad. He had a little grandson and Rosa and Antonio had another baby on the way. Miraculously, Rosa had kept up the payments on her home until Antonio's release, mostly by selling her exquisite crochet and needlework to an Ingham shop whose owner had connections to another shop in Cairns. Between them, they were able to sell the items as fast as Rosa could make them. For good prices, too. Even in wartime, there were those with the money to buy pretty things.

The other blessing was that Sebastian had been accepted into the university on yet another scholarship, not to study medicine as he'd hoped, but dentistry. Wartime quotas on university places combined with the time and effort he had put into advocating for his father, not to mention canecutting whenever he could get back home, took an inevitable toll. Sebastian's academic performance slipped to just below the entry score for medicine that year. It was a savage blow.

Even so, he won many accolades in his final school year – even the prize for first place in religion, a solid, ornate crucifix to display on the mantel shelf. A leather-bound volume of *The Complete Works of Shakespeare* was his prize for first place in English and he was also awarded prizes for Maths, Physics and Chemistry. The one subject he got a lowly C in was Italian.

His end-of-year school photograph depicted a confident young man, lit cigarette in hand, sitting at a table covered in his sporting trophies and academic prizes. Rosa had ordered three copies – for whom she was not sure. Antonio, who was released much earlier than Giuseppe

and his brothers, had framed one that now sat on the sideboard in Giuseppe's house, along with the boy's actual trophies and prizes.

Sebastian's demeanour had changed since that photo was taken, though. He was bitterly disappointed at not gaining entry to medicine, maintaining that boys he knew who got poorer marks than his, but were from wealthier families, had been accepted into the desired faculty. It was further evidence of the unfairness in this life.

He still felt strong pangs of resentment at not being able to secure his father's release for almost three years, despite the help of the kind politician, Mr. Jesson, and the willingness of the Security Service to release Giuseppe. The injustice of his father's internment gnawed at him as he moved into adulthood.

It had been Manpower that prolonged their degradation by not allowing Giuseppe to return to Queensland for an unconscionable length of time. In view of the Security Service's more relaxed rules regarding Italians once Italy was no longer an enemy nation, it seemed that Manpower was acting out of pure spite in not letting Queensland Italians reunite with their families and get their lives back on track, especially those who had lost their farms and homes.

Manpower could order any Australian resident to work anywhere in the country, though it mostly exerted this power over ex-internees. Giuseppe was compelled to work at a salt mine in Underbool, Victoria, while Carlo was sent to work in forestry, also in Victoria, and poor, unwell, one-kidney Lorenzo was forced to camp with his gang of charcoal burners in the cold, damp bush in Mendooran, NSW. Somewhere in the middle of nowhere, north-east of Dubbo.

Although his anger simmered, Carlo maintained his customary surface equanimity throughout his enforced absence from home, joining in activities in the Cowra camp and volunteering for outside farm work. As they'd jokingly predicted when they were first captured, it was soon realised that the internees were needed for agricultural labour with so many farmers' sons away at war and the many thousands of Italians, Germans and Japanese taken captive.



His brothers were not so equable. For a long time, Lorenzo nursed his anger over the Stuart Creek treatment and behaved as if he were indeed captured by the enemy. He expressed it in silly ways, like trying to get Luisa to correspond with him in ‘secret writing’ using lemon juice. He urged her in letters to hide objects in tins of coffee and the like. Luisa thought it all idiotic and ignored the requests.

Lorenzo was annoyed by her impassive response and expressed his irritation in his letters: “After a long while I received your parcel which contains trousers, coffee, sugar, soap, tobacco, cigarette paper & tea — which please do not send any more — & biscuits which arrived in powder form. You told me that you had understood everything but I see you have understood nothing.”

Luisa, in turn, revealed her agitation in a reply letter in which she asked him “please write clearly, and not like that ...”, which did not dissuade him in the least. Almost comically, he tried a few more times. Struggling with a toddler and a new baby daughter born three months after her husband’s capture, Luisa was chronically exhausted and her patience with him was wearing thin.

She eloquently showed her love and concern, however, when he was sent to the charcoal production, writing a number of poignant letters to the authorities, begging them to move her husband to a warmer climate “on account of the trouble with his kidney”. Meanwhile, Lorenzo, too, wrote on his own behalf, enclosing doctors’ certificates stating he was “in terrible condition”, but he was callously refused by Manpower over and over.

Although he was unwell and unhappy, Lorenzo stoically tried to pull his weight in the charcoal burners’ gang. Carrying his share, or better, had been a point of honour with him since that first day of canecutting with his brothers and the frightening Russian. In fact, most canecutters had a strong ethic around pulling their weight. It went with the territory.

Giuseppe, on the other hand, expressed his resentment by not co-operating and not joining in activities. Those in the Cowra camp who already knew him were not surprised and left him be, while others initially tried to coax him into making the best of things with their games, music and vegetable gardening. Some even accused him of being a Fascist, but his brothers angrily protested.

“You fools. He left Italy to get away from the regime,” declared Carlo. “He hated it. He is anything but a Fascist, and I should know. I came with him on the ship in twenty-six.”

His reputation for being a moody loner was generally accepted in Cowra, but when he was released to Manpower and sent to the saltworks rather than home to Queensland to cut cane and care for his son, his moodiness flared to naked bitterness. In short, Giuseppe was far from a model prisoner and detainee.

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The brothers had not seen each other since Cowra and had not been able to celebrate so many events in the family – the birth of Rosa’s and Luisa’s babies, Sebastian’s academic success, their own and their wives’ and children’s birthdays ... all the happy milestones that had passed by while they were in their various hellholes.

The Macknade-Halifax women of the family conferred with each other and decided the best way to cast off the pall of subdued sorrow that hung over everyone once the excitement of reunion had dissipated was to have a party; a gathering of the full extended family and all their close friends and *paesani*. They knew Luisa would be up for it, too. A happy, noisy feast with music, dancing, games and children’s amusements.

Caterina, Anna and Rosa went as a delegation to speak to Father Murphy about using the church hall. The dear padre, always a true friend to Italians and all migrants, had been saddened by the treatment of all those hard-working family men and women for whom he felt a deep respect, so he could think of no better use for the little hall. He was adamant they would have it for the full day for free. He even insisted on personally contributing the cost of whatever they wanted to drink. Of course, they invited him to come and, of course, he happily accepted.

Between them, the women worked out who would make the *antipasti* and who made the best *dolci*, with all of them contributing dishes for the main course. They planned a date, transport to the hall for everyone and weekend billeting for those coming from Tully and Innisfail. They got the word out to everyone who played a musical instrument to bring it and be prepared to play and sing. They invited Antonio’s cousin, a professional photographer, to bring his camera.

Anna was excited. “This is just what our Sicilian community needs. We want to rejoice in our origins, not feel ashamed and cowed by what has happened to us.”

Caterina agreed. “I will never be ashamed of being Italian, but I worry that the young ones like Sebastiano have been scarred by this business.”

Rosa’s ears pricked up at this. “Yes, my brother is very angry at what happened to Papa and my husband. My uncles, too, of course. Poor Sebastian tried so hard to help, but it came to nothing. He ended up in hospital from the injury he got from canecutting in the school holidays, too. And his marks went backwards. He is still smarting from that.”

“Do you think he will be coming up from Brisbane for this gathering?” asked Caterina. “I ask because we would all love to see him, but also because there is something I have to give each of you, but I must give it to you at exactly the same time.”

“Now I am curious. Can you not give it to me now?”

“No. I am sorry, Rosina, I can’t tell you more than this, but when you get it, you will understand. I made a promise I must keep.”

Caterina looked nervous rather than mysterious.

“OK, then. Well, yes, my brother will come. Antonio telephoned him at the university college and they had a discussion. It ended with him agreeing to come to the party.”

“*Bene*. Good, good.”

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Father Murphy walked up to Anna and Rosa, who were slicing up bread and cakes at a large table. They both wore flower-printed dresses and white open-toed shoes as if they had arranged to dress the same, even though they hadn’t and thought it quite funny.

“Ladies, you have done a brilliant job. I have never seen the hall look so festive. And clean!”

The walls were hung with colourful streamers and bunting, with lanterns for later. There were tables spread with plates, glasses, white napkins and cutlery, jugs of soda drinks, bottles of wine and a large bowl of punch, all ready for the wonderful array of dishes that would be brought out of the little kitchen.

The women had thought about putting up the Sicilian Trinacra on the walls but decided it was still too soon to show any obvious patriotic feeling for their homeland. Framed photographs of *Il Papa* and *Padre Pio* were the next best thing.

Anna laughed. “Well, it won’t be clean for long, Father. We will mess it up good, won’t we, girls?”

The revellers had started to arrive and there was already a din of excited greetings and exclamations over how much the children had grown and how beautiful and fat the babies were.

Giuseppe was among the last arrivals, although Sebastian’s train was not in yet. He would be met by his uncle Rosario, one of the men of the family who had not been interned, although no one knew how or why he had been overlooked. Gio looked grim but no one could tell if it was more so than usual. The set of his expression seemed tinged with sorrow.

Caterina approached him nervously. “Brother, welcome. We are glad you were able to come.”

“Yes, but will I be able to stay?... I don’t know.”

The party gradually settled into a noisy but happy round of activities, some traditional, some more Aussie, with plenty of music and dancing. The mountains of food were effortlessly disposed of, and the children ran about playing hiding games around the church and hall. The tinier tots managed to fall asleep in various corners once the party spilled out to the grounds between the church and the hall.

Carlo made a short speech before *dolci* and coffee in which he urged everyone to put the heartbreak of the recent past behind them and do what they had always done: work hard and rebuild a happy and prosperous life for their families. Although there was a little disgruntled murmuring at this, no one would openly contradict him because they knew his and Anna’s lives had been shattered as much as anyone’s by his internment and detention.

Sebastian arrived to a warm welcome from all his relatives. As the first family member in Australia to go to university, aged twenty and dressed in fashionable trousers and a bright-blue open-necked shirt, he was their own celebrity and they were happy to give him the star

treatment. A couple of teenage daughters of *paesani* smiled shyly at him every time he was anywhere close.

His father was strangely awkward towards him, though. They had not crossed paths very much at the party as both had been talking to other people, especially Sebastian, who sang a couple of numbers to uproarious applause. Finally, towards the end of the day, they found themselves standing under the same tree.

Giuseppe spoke first. “Why are you not wearing a white shirt and tie? Do you think you are a movie star now?” He immediately regretted it and mentally chastised himself. What was *wrong* with him that he couldn’t just be loving towards his son who had tried so hard to help him?

“No, Dad, but why is a tie necessary at a party?”

“I wore mine for the photograph that was taken of me, Carlo and Lorenzo. The three jailbird brothers. Together again.”

They both laughed drily at this but were suddenly interrupted by Caterina, who looked nervously at Giuseppe before turning to Sebastian.

“Sebastiano, I need to speak to you and your sister in private, please.”

Giuseppe began to vaguely protest, but Caterina censored him with a steely look as she led Sebastian back into the hall where Rosa was waiting for them.

“My dear nephew and niece, I have some important letters to pass on to you. One for each of you. I beg you not to open them here because you will need privacy and quiet to digest the contents.

“I made a promise to a woman who has been horribly wronged by many people in her life, and today I honour that promise.

“Now, can we say no more of this until next we meet? Please keep the letters safe until we finish up this celebration of our family and friends, which will be in the next hour or so.”

OO

*La Spezia*

*1945*

*My beloved son*

*How I wish I could say these words to you in person, but we are separated by half a world and half a lifetime.*

*If you still believe me gone from this world, I am afraid this letter will come as a great shock. I believe you will now know the truth, however, thanks to the goodness and beautiful heart of Caterina. She loves her brother, but she agrees that now you are a young man you need to know the truth. May God bless her and keep her.*

*There is not a single hour of the day that I don't think about you and Rosina. I am so proud of you both. I know you have earned a place in the university, which is what I always hoped for you. Your sister has a different path as a married woman (with my first grandchild!) and I am equally proud of her.*

*I released you to your father because I did not doubt the strength of his love for you both. I signed the document allowing it, and I can only hope for understanding and forgiveness from you both. I cannot put into words the pain it caused. The pain never leaves me.*

*What happened to me, to our family, was not of my choosing, but it is what fate handed me. I can never look upon my daughter, your little sister whom you have never met, as a sin or a crime. She is a blessing. All my children are blessings. Now there is also another sister and a brother. I can hardly believe it myself!*

*This is a difficult thing to tell you. There is also another husband. A good man I feel affection towards for his kindness and love for a disgraced woman.*

*The man who was your little sister's father, the doctor who was kind to you as a little child, is no longer in our lives and never will be. His wife Carmela, who was my much-loved friend, also rejected him and lives with her mother and daughter. It was such a terrible blow for Carmela that our friendship could not survive it. Nor could her marriage. He tried to take their daughter, and mine, but when his sinful secret life came to light, he left the island in disgrace.*

*I grieve every day of my life that I have borne four children but can only kiss two. I am here for the others in body, but a part of my heart and soul will always belong to you and Rosa – and now her little boy whom I can know only in photographs. It will always be with you, even if you don't care to have it.*

*As you can see at the top of this letter, we live in my birthplace of La Spezia now. Even though what happened was not my fault but his, I could not stay in Mascali. They blamed me for everything. They said I should never have allowed him in our home, but what can I say? I trusted him as a friend and a professional man.*

*Do not be angry with your father. He is not a bad man. Perhaps he tried to understand, but the distance between us made it hopeless. He was crushed by the things that happened. The Great War affected him badly and then the news of my disgrace. Now, through your aunt, I know about his experience in this latest war. I feel sad for him and can only imagine what all of you have been through.*

*I will finish now and pray to God that you will find it in your heart to write to me. I pray also that this will not bring trouble between you and your father.*

*Please forgive us both.*

*With all my love*

*Mamma*

*Ilda Busacco*

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## Chapter 3: Literature review – the canecutter in Australian writing and popular culture

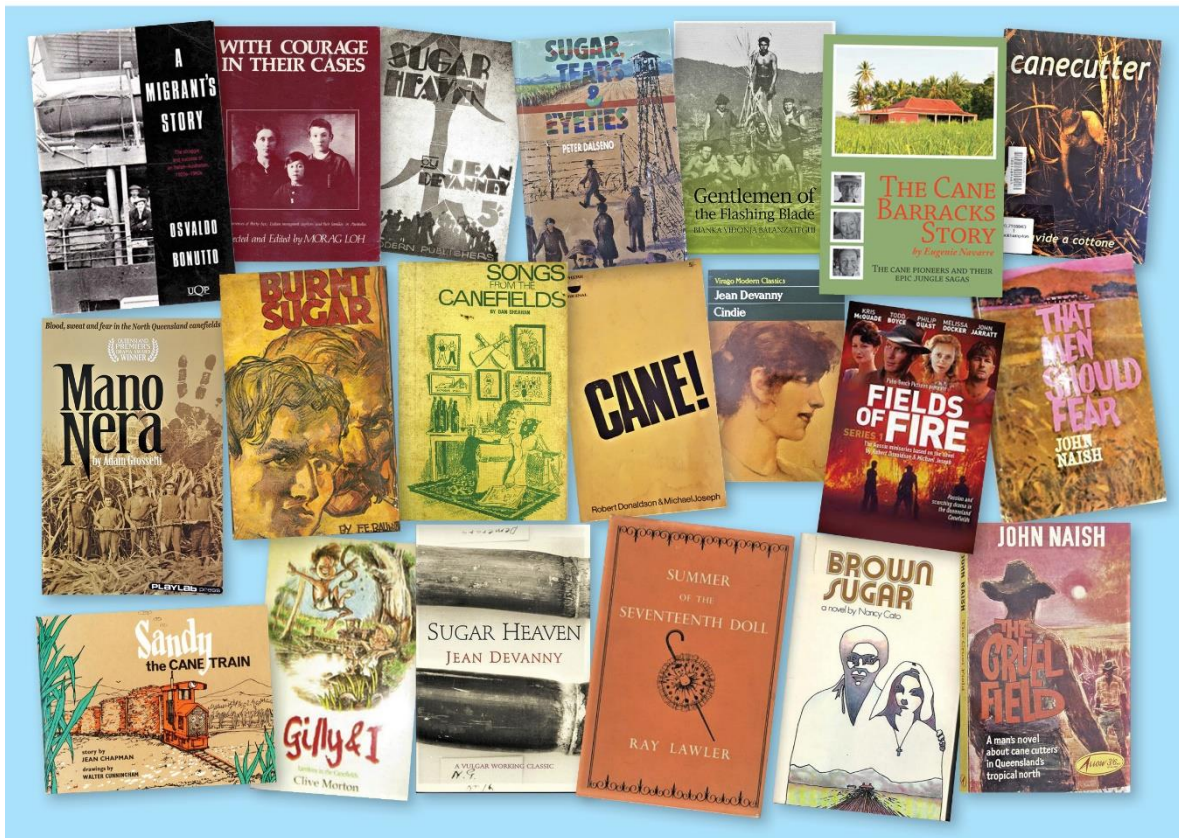


Fig. 3. A selection of canecutter narratives.

The first chapter of the exegesis mentioned the significance of a large body of work I have identified as ‘canecutter narrative’. This chapter examines the scope and content of this previously undiscussed subgenre, further explains its significance and explores the literature I have been able to locate and read. My novel is informed by and belongs in this subgenre, which is characterised by common subject matter, figures and motifs (Smith 2007) particular to the pre-mechanisation sugar country culture. The review has a strong focus on novel-length works, which are grouped into historical fiction, contemporaneously written fiction and creative non-fiction. However, to show the breadth and diversity of the subgenre, and indeed the legend of the canecutter and the sugar-country culture, which was often depicted in the popular culture of the time, it also includes a selection of memoirs, plays, short stories, cartoons, verse, song, film, television and radio, and even children’s

books. These works address the racial, cultural and industrial politics of the sugar industry and its unique position in the economic, social and cultural development of the state of Queensland and its population. There is commentary on the part played by Italian immigrants in this peculiarly Queensland story, as they formed a subculture within the subculture of the sugar country. Their participation in the sugar workforce both inherited the racism of the nineteenth-century South Sea Islander period and paved the way to build a white workforce and transition from plantation culture to an economic landscape of small holdings, with hostility, racial prejudice and the ultimate injustice of internment as the consequences for them as a group.

## Background

The lead-in to any appreciation of the iconic nature of the canecutter, which I would suggest is easily comparable with that of the shearer, the drover and the swaggie in the Australian literary imagination, demands at least an overview of the often illegal ‘recruitment’ of South Sea Islanders in the latter half of the nineteenth century, followed by the Italian mass migration to Australia and how it played out in the north, as well as its part in the story of Queensland itself. Both these ethnic influxes occurred to service the development of the sugar industry. It was the industry that accelerated the economic development of the state and its non-Indigenous settlement. It largely determined the early multi-ethnic makeup of Queensland, particularly the far north, and substantially laid down the class, colour and socio-economic strata of the state’s population. It was the industry that in its early days relied on employment arrangements that were very close to legitimised slavery. It later provided ready employment to non-English-speaking, unskilled and even illiterate migrants wanting to quickly progress to being land-owning farmers (Douglass 1995). And, as a highly unionised and politicised industry that was sensitive to both local and world markets, it rapidly introduced the newcomer to aspects of Australian culture and social expectations such as mateship and class solidarity (Douglass 1995). For Anglo Australians it provided well-paid seasonal work with a long lay-off to men with the necessary physical strength and stamina, many of them what could be described as itinerant ‘square-peg’ types looking to make quick money at unskilled work.

During the White Australia Policy debate of the late nineteenth century, the large plantation owners were forced to consider an alternative workforce to the South Sea Islanders (known then as ‘Kanakas’) who had been the labour supply since the 1860s. The Queensland government looked to Mediterranean countries for white workers who could withstand the North Queensland heat, eventually settling on Italians, who were ambitious for a higher living standard (Henderson 1978). The Italian peasant class, particularly impoverished southerners, had an obsession with land ownership that grew out of the unfortunate combination of large families and partible inheritance laws, which saw landholdings in rural Italy reduced over time to meagre plots that could no longer support families (Templeton et al. 2003). In Australia, this led to a steady rise in land ownership by Italians in North Queensland, which in turn led to deep resentment by many in the wider Anglo society (Brown 2008, O’Brien 2016).

With the sweeping changes from plantation culture in which the indentured South Sea Islanders came to be known as ‘sugar slaves’ – evident in historical media such as *Sugar Slaves* (1995), *Australia’s Sugar Slaves Remembered* (2013) and *Australia’s Hidden History of Slavery* (2017) – to a landscape of smaller holdings, the canecutter, usually with the ambition to own a farm, became the iconic figure of the industry, as seen in public canecutter memorials and murals in the sugar towns of Innisfail and Ingham. As we find in the literature, that image embraces many stereotypes, from the ultra-masculine, hard-drinking, gambling, womanising Aussie bloke to the hard-working, thrifty, land-obsessed, family-oriented immigrant, and much in between. Somewhat like the shearer in colonial literature and art, the canecutter was romanticised by writers like Jean Devanny, Ray Lawler and John Naish, the latter coining the phrase ‘gentlemen of the flashing blade’ (Balanzategui 1990, p.6).

The mantra, ‘Stoop, chop, straighten, top’ (McInnes 1948), describes the monotony of the work, often for up to twelve hours a day, relieved only by swapping to the even harder work of loading the cut cane onto cane trains. As a result, the figure of the canecutter represented strength, endurance, determination, raw masculinity and a brand of mateship based on the cohesiveness and competitiveness of the cutting gangs, who lived together in barracks, worked together and drank, gambled and often brawled together in the towns on

weekends. The Italians practised a different kind of mateship that was usually based on being *famiglia* (family) or *paesani* (from the same village, commune or province) (Douglass 1995). Italian cutting gangs frequently pooled their resources to buy land for one of their number, who would then employ other Italians to do the same for another member (Douglass 1995).

The economic and social success of the Italian canecutter immigrant is evident in the ethnic makeup of those sugar towns today. In the 2021 Commonwealth Census, for example, 28.3 per cent of Ingham's population stated Italian ancestry, compared with 3.0 per cent for all of Queensland and 4.4 per cent for all of Australia (Ingham 2021 Census All Persons Stats). There was a dark side to their success, however, especially when the crisis of war arrived. Racism, inflamed by resentment of the Italians' success in the sugar industry, which in turn was fanned by institutions like the British Preference League, Australian Workers Union, and the Returned Services League, and constantly voiced in publications such as *Smith's Weekly* and *The Truth*, led to the internment of a disproportionate number of Queensland Italians (Ricatti 2018). For example, even though the number of Italians in Queensland and Victoria was similar, according to O'Brien (2016), 'Queensland interned roughly 15 times as many people of Italian origin as did Victoria' (p.75). Further, of more than 5000 Italian internees Australia-wide, over one-quarter of them were from the two sugar towns of Ingham and Innisfail (O'Brien 2016). In short, an Italian canecutter or farmer in North Queensland was far more likely to have his and his family's lives shattered by internment than an Italian labourer or fruit vendor in Victoria. We can see this history played out in the canecutter narratives.

### Historical fiction: plantation novels

Europeans were not the first non-British sugar workers. Between 1863 and 1904, an estimated 60,000 South Sea Islanders were brought (many kidnapped) to Australia as cheap labour to perform work considered unsuitable for white men (Douglass 1995). So began the racialisation of the sugar industry. In fiction, we see this in novels set in the time of the big plantations, which can all be described as historical fiction according to an accepted definition of 'a fiction that is written about events in contexts that are fifty years or more in

the past' (Owens 2018, p. 274). They are relevant as they portray an industry and a way of life built on racism, which would be inherited by the next wave of labour, the Europeans, most numerous of whom were the Italians. As Dewhirst (2008) explains, the 'Kanaka' era was the gestation period for anti-Italian feeling because of the mistaken belief that they, too, would be indentured labour threatening hard-won wages and conditions, not to mention the mystifying belief in some quarters that they were not quite white (Andreoni 2003).

New Zealander and Communist Party of Australia (CPA) member Jean Devanny became deeply interested in Queensland and its sugar workforce when she embarked on a speaking tour during the big industrial strikes of 1934 and 1935 (Devanny 1986). She wrote several fictional and non-fictional books set in, or about, Queensland. Her novel *Cindie* (1949, 1986), set in the decade 1896–1906, saw her frozen out of the CPA because members viewed it as presenting the Islanders as 'living under a benevolent feudalism, when actually they were slaves and brutally treated' (Devanny 1986, p. 297). Its main theme was 'the changeover from semi-feudal estates worked by semi-feudal labour to small-scale farming under individual ownership' (p. 298). Basing her argument on historical accounts and interviews with descendants, she claimed the cruelty to Islanders 'lay chiefly in the recruiting' (p. 300) and that, in the main, they did not want to return to the primitive living and cannibalism of their original cultures. As Devanny's biographer Carole Ferrier (2008) writes, 'To some extent, it is an idealized picture of progressively minded white settlers...' (p. 213).

Nancy Cato's meticulously researched novel *Brown Sugar* (1974), a two-family saga set in the Maryborough region, gives a similar picture of the brutality of the recruitment methods and the somewhat more benevolent Queensland lifestyle the Islanders adapted to and, in many cases, wanted to maintain. Cato provides different voices, however. The plantation culture is condemned by the character of missionary clergyman, Andrew Duigid:

'He will need to be strong for the canefields, which is where he'll be set to work. All so that the grand families o' Maryborough can hold their balls an' drive out in their carriages, never mind that their plantations are built upon ruined homes and martyred black men.' (p. 22)

The book reveals the depth of the racism in the South Sea Islanders being forced to speak Pidgin: 'It was "cheeky-fella" to speak like a white man. He had to submit to being lumped into a faceless black mob' (p. 54).

By contrast, David Crookes' *Blackbird* (1998) is a tale of relentless cruelty, swashbuckling heroism, true love and violent rape, with race and racism as pervasive themes. Although set in Brisbane where the labour companies (the blackbirders, as those who kidnapped Islanders were called) administered their exploitative trade, it briefly explains the reasons for bringing the South Sea Islanders to Queensland. When naïve Englishman Charles asks, 'What type of work do they perform on the northern plantations, sir?' the answer is: 'Mainly cane cutting and other field work that God never intended white men to perform (p. 45).' In fact, the Queensland plantation culture had much in common with that of the pre-emancipation southern states in America (Douglass 1995).

Similarly, John Smith's *The Sugar Slaves: A Novel of the Queensland Kanakas* (2002) is a fictional story of South Sea Islander, Kissaway, whose experience is also far more turbulent than that of Devanny and Cato's Islander characters. His life is one of exploitation, escape and capture, suffering and fear, including fear of deportation ultimately, pervaded by the kind of extreme racism that saw people of colour as little more than farm animals to be traded and treated in any way the 'owners' saw fit.

Together, these novels portray the violent and racist origins of the sugar industry and its economy of large plantations owned by wealthy white men and, in particular, the labour-intensive character of it, which required a vast workforce compelled or willing to take on work that was considered well beneath white men.





*Fig. 4. South Sea Islanders photographed on a sugarcane plantation with the overseer at the back of the group, Cairns, c. 1890. Creative Commons.*

### **Contemporaneous fiction: canecutter novels**

A group of canecutter novels written earlier than those above but set in the period of the twentieth century my creative work focuses on reveals the flow-on to Italians and other Europeans of racism built on ideas of cheap labour and, in the case of southern Italians, colour. They were seen as swarthy and primitive, and not quite white, despite immigration documents held in the National Archives routinely describing them as white. They were called ‘eyeties’ and ‘dagos’ both cheerfully and abusively, but always with negative racial undertones. Andreoni (2003) makes the colour connection, drawing on a number of examples from popular culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Interpreting a cartoon in an 1891 issue of *The Bulletin* depicting an Italian as an organ grinder and a South Sea Islander wielding a cane knife under a leering sun, she writes ‘The

sun beating down links the Italian and the South Sea Islander in the context of their capacity to provide cheap labour. Both were migrant groups competing for the bottom rung of the employment ladder' (p. 82). Filippo Saachi, a visiting Italian journalist who lived in North Queensland long enough to later write (in Italian) a well-reviewed novel set in Ingham, expressed his scorn in an article titled 'The Olive Peril' (1925) and another titled 'Italians in Queensland: The Olive Peril' (1925):

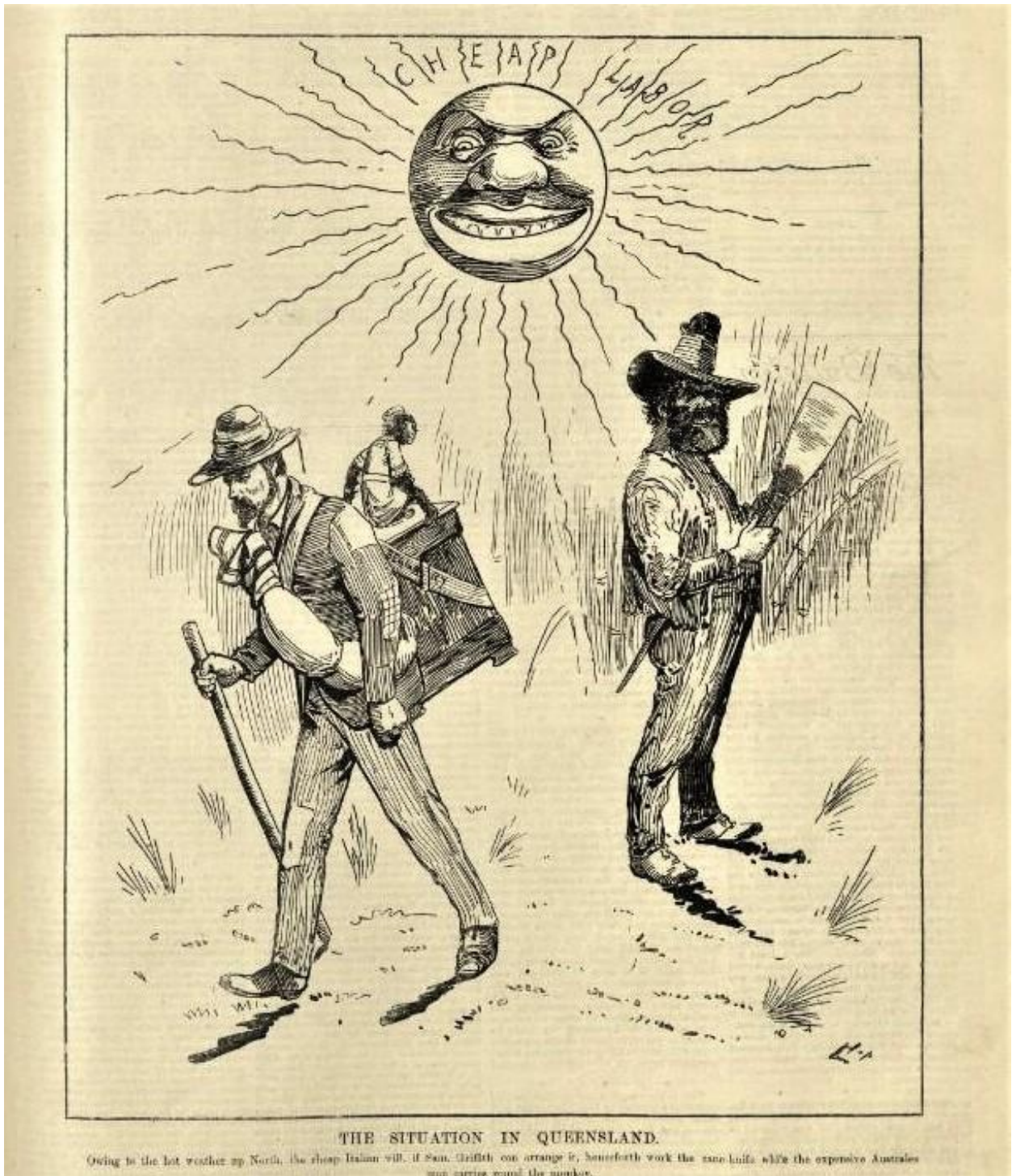
But why all this fury against Italians? I shall explain it to you: to keep Australia 'white'. Keep Australia white is the real catchcry of this crusade. In fact, we are not white, we are 'olive'. Olive-skinned influx, it is said. (p.16)

In writing about the historical phenomena that led to racism against Italians and how prejudice against southern Italians began in Italy itself and travelled with migrants into all parts of the diaspora, Ricatti (2018) states, 'For a long time Italian migrants, especially those from the south of Italy, have occupied an ambiguous position between the racialised dichotomy of black and white' (p. 55). This was easily taken up by Australians, who were already obsessed with whiteness in the lead-up to and establishment of the White Australia Policy. Whiteness was indeed fundamental to the national identity (Ricatti 2018).



*Fig. 5. Italian canecutters, Innisfail, c. 1908. Queensland State Library.*





*Fig. 6 Cartoon on front cover of The Bulletin 22 August 1891.*

Eric Baume's novel *Burnt Sugar* (1938) recounts a two-way antagonism, the protagonist's pro-Fascist Sicilian mother being even more contemptuous of Anglo Australians than they are of Sicilians because one had kicked her ten-year-old child. This is the only novel in this review with Sicilians as the central characters, though it contains nothing about their lives before coming to Australia. The protagonist, Mario Zorbelli, is hell-bent on reinventing himself, changing his name to Mark Zobler, seemingly preferring a Teutonic image even at that time. 'I was born in this country and not in Italy. My friends are not Italian. I'm not one of your bloody canefields tribe' (p. 90). The novel was glowingly reviewed by writer and journalist Dame Mary Gilmore and poet Kenneth Slessor (Johnson 2019). Baume himself saw it as his first novel of any consequence (Manning 1967). It offers an insight into the tensions between Italians and Anglo Australians, or 'Britishers', as they were known. It explores industrial and race politics, with one union boss telling another, 'If you fight an Italian cane-cutter who joins your union – if you try to keep him out – then you're sticking a knife into the vitals of your own solidarity as a class' (Baume 1938, p. 129).

Baume's countrywoman Jean Devanny, mentioned earlier, would have approved of that sentiment. She delved deeply into the politics of labour in her novels written more than a decade before *Cindie – Sugar Heaven* (1936, 1942, 1982, 2002) and *Paradise Flow* (1938) – which contain minor Italian background characters, except for Tony in *Sugar Heaven*, the Socialist Italian lover of Dulcie's married Anglo friend, Eileen, their affair scandalous far more for their ethnic difference than her marital status. Set in Silkwood, *Sugar Heaven* tells the story of conservative Dulcie who moves from Sydney to join her canecutter husband Hefty just as the Weil's disease strike of 1935 is getting underway. As Dulcie's sympathies slowly come around to the strikers' side, her sexual desire for her husband burgeons. In both novels, sexual and labour politics merge and feed off each other with race as a background issue; even the titles have connotations of passion. Historian Pauline Cahir writes of the men's sensual longing for 'the cut', their love-hatred for the cane (Cahir 1975). "'Look at it," exclaims Hefty, "there it is. Hot for the knife. How a man hates it, begad!"' (Devanny 1982, pp. 9, 14, 45). Devanny described *Sugar Heaven*, in particular, as 'fact in the form of fiction' (Devanny 1986, p. 190).

*Paradise Flow* is more a futile love story, with Yugoslav ganger (leader of a canecutting gang) Toni as leading man for Laurel, wife of Big Mac, a wealthy and influential cane farmer. With a more multicultural flavour, this novel is populated by Italians, Greeks, Spaniards, Russians and Yugoslavs as well as members of the long-standing Chinese community and old Islanders. The novel acknowledges the Italians' obsession with land ownership and the insidious exploitation of it by the wealthy farmers like Big Mac:

And you know how these things take the Italians! They're not like us. They can't see themselves rolling their swags. We British hate being pushed off, too, but after all land is no problem to us. We can always get another bit if we want it...But the Italian peasant hasn't this outlook. To him his bit of land is the burning question. He will fight like the devil for a bit of land he's worked. They are mad, too, as you jolly well know, because so many of them have been squeezed by the terms of their agreements. (p. 50)

English writer John Naish had an advantage over the above authors in that he worked as a canecutter while he wrote three books in quick succession (1961, 1962, 1963), an autobiography and two novels, all of which were critically well received. Kylie Tennant wrote of Naish's gift for character portrayal and the 'verve and pace' (Tennant 1962, p.507) of the first novel, *The Cruel Field* (1961). Its central character is a 'Pommy' (English) writer who is accepted into a canecutting gang as a new chum with no experience in the work. The mostly Anglo and very macho characters have a lot in common with those of Devanny's *Sugar Heaven*. The novel provides a detailed portrait of the barracks culture that reconstitutes anew each cutting season ('the Crushing').

It was the same old annual dumbness that came with the Crushing months away from women and radios and conversationalists; the months that seemed to cleave away the civilised half of him. (p. 91)

The social status of the canecutters is brutally summed up by one of the old hands: "Human," said Jeff, laughing. "You ask the Nagonda socialites whether we're human. Canecutters are bloody animals, Danny" (Naish 1961, p. 61). The Canegrowers Executive representative has many colourful terms for the canecutters: 'industrial pirates', 'quick-money boys', 'fortune-hunters', 'industrial blackmailers', 'a bad and savage breed whose

notoriety was everywhere acknowledged' (Naish 1961, p. 205). If that image was not bad enough, the Italian and other non-Anglo cutters also had racism to contend with.

Reviewer for *The Bulletin*, Olaf Ruhen (1963), captures the novel's usefulness for my project:

The writing is exact in communication, flashing with bright, original simile. The country and the alien work spring life-sized to attention: you can smell the sweet smoke of the sugar-fires, you are conscious of the grime of sweat and carbon; and the knife, the file and the water-bag guerdon every field scene, as they should. (p. 41)

A fellow reviewer for the same publication agreed: 'His story is set in the Queensland canefields as firmly as Jean Devanny's *Sugar Heaven* ... In John Naish's prose the cane and the men who cut it merge and become one: as a writer of toil he compares with the best in Australia' (Martin 1962, p. 39). Ruhen adds: 'Nothing written to this length has ever before pinned down the canefields for such exact analysis' (p. 41).

Like *Paradise Flow*, *That Men Should Fear* (Naish 1963) portrays an ill-fated love story with the 'paddock camaraderie of the men' (p. 115) and sugar work as background. The novel refers to canecutting as 'the violence' and, as the hopelessness of the love affair dawns on the protagonist, he embraces 'the violence' obsessively (p. 151). As in Naish's earlier novel, his evocative descriptions of the landscape and its flora and fauna reflect his own engagement with the lifestyle he writes about and make his novels useful resources for informing my project. *That Men Should Fear* also signals that pervasive Italian land ownership is the future.

The place would go ahead now, he thought: that was the trend on the land, Italian for Australian. People were surprised if an Englishman stayed in the country, but the Italian took to the jungle oven like an Australian youth to a tennis racquet. (p. 173)

Naish's cast of characters could easily step into *Cane!* (1967), co-written by Robert Donaldson and Michael Joseph and published in the UK. There is little information on these authors, and errors such as bumble bees in Queensland lead one to wonder whether

they spent much time there. Yet historian Bianka Balanzategui (2016), who grew up in the sugar country, finds the novel, set in Innisfail just before World War Two, useful for its ‘detailed and unmatched descriptions of canecutting despite a style rather highly-coloured’ (p. 34). The descriptions of the work and the barracks lifestyle are indeed detailed and precise and, if the writing is patchy, perhaps due to being done by two authors, and the book and its authors are unremembered in our literary pantheon, it made enough of an impression to inspire the three-part television series *Fields of Fire* (1987) two decades later. Only the first part of the series is based on and true to the book. The second and third parts go on to portray the lead-up to war, internment and their aftermath.

The novels in this section play an important role in informing my creative work and stand as rich resources of the detail of daily life, the canecutting work, the now historical sugar country culture, the toughness of its population and the beauty of the landscape, especially as they are set in the period my creative work spans, or soon after.

### **Creative non-fiction: novel devices**

These works, while primarily non-fiction, are included here because they use fictional devices in significant ways. *Gentlemen of the Flashing Blade* (Balanzategui 2016), a well-researched history of the post-war refugees who migrated to the sugar country, is inhabited by a fictional canecutter everyman, a Yugoslav named Branko. A composite of the author’s interviewees, he is a fully drawn character with a backstory and the presence of a character in a novel. Balanzategui references not only scholarly work but also works of fiction that describe the canecutting work and lifestyle. For her, like fellow historian, Pesman Cooper (1993), fiction offers another dimension in understanding lived experience of the past. Balanzategui draws heavily on the novels of Naish, Baume and Devanny. Set in the same region as my novel, but in the post-war period, and portraying another category of immigrant – the post-war Eastern European refugee – the book is a complement to the novels mentioned above and an invaluable resource.

*Canecutter* (Cottone 2012) is a memoir by ‘a canecutter’s son’. The life story of the author’s Sicilian father, it employs an engaging narrative device that clearly belongs in the

realm of fiction. The heterodiegetic narrator is the stillborn sibling of the protagonist, Carmelo Cottone, who finally meets his ‘biographer’ after death and names him Sotto, derived from the term *sotto ego* coined by the author to mean ‘the secret self’. Sotto has no agency in the story other than as an observer-narrator but, as a family member, he is able to express an emotional investment in the living characters. While this memoir has the Sicilian origins in common with my creative work, it is set in a different region, is a creative non-fictional work and has a strong theme of family unity and cohesion, whereas my work addresses family breakdown exacerbated by the canecutter lifestyle.

### **Memoir and biography: how they remember it**

‘I have been interned, dishonoured [and] damaged morally and materially ... under your Government’ (NAA A367, C68814 cited in O’Brien 2016, p. 85). These were the words of Luigi Danesi of Innisfail, who was interned in Cowra. The experience of internment was such a source of shame and pain in many Italian families, including my own, that it was not spoken about and later generations often knew nothing of it. For others, it was exactly what motivated them to go public and write about it as the event that lifted their lives out of the ordinary. By early 1942, when there was a mass round-up of Queensland Italians, most were expecting it and had their suitcases ready – they even had the jokey greeting ‘You’re on the list!’ (Dalseno 1994, p.192). Many, like my grandfather, were naturalised British subjects or even born here of one or both Italian parents and very many, perhaps the majority, were either anti-Fascist or apolitical, focused as they were on the basics of life and establishing themselves in a new land (Brown 2008). What they had in common was a North Queensland address and an Italian background.

Unsurprisingly, the experience has been a major focus in memoirs, whether it was an account of the former internee’s own life experience, as in the case of Peter Dalseno’s *Sugar, Tears and Eyeties* (1994), Osvaldo Bonutto’s *A Migrant’s Story* (1963, 1994) and Claudio Alcorso’s *The Wind You Say* (1993), or a descendant’s tribute to parents or grandparents, as more recently in the case of Zoe Boccabella’s *Joe’s Fruit Shop & Milk Bar* (2015) and Rebecca Huntley’s *The Italian Girl* (2012). Indeed, one could look at internment narratives as a subgenre of memoir writing. In Dalseno’s memoir the

protagonist is Peter Delano, although the reader is encouraged to read it as transparently autobiographical because of the similarities to the character of Peter in the book (Carniel 2016). Both came to Australia with their northern Italian single mothers when aged two and grew up in the Herbert River canefields region. Tertiary educated and fluent in English and Italian, Dalseno writes about the local Italian community in a less-than-flattering light, while he is quite impressed by his own success.

Historians Mia Spizzica (*Hidden Lives* 2018), Margaret Bevege (*Behind Barbed Wire* 1993), Klaus Neumann (*In the Interest of National Security* 2006), Peter Monteath (*Captured Lives* 2018) and Bill Bunbury (*Rabbits & Spaghetti* 1995) have published internment histories, some with profiles and vignettes of individual internees, often in their own words, as in Spizzica's book. However, it is rare to find much written about Italians in Cowra, where my grandfather and his brothers were interned. An exception can be found in fiction: Tom Keneally's *Shame and the Captives: A Novel* (2015), based on the infamous Cowra breakout by Japanese prisoners, with Italian characters featuring as well, notably the anarchist prisoner Giancarlo who has a steamy affair with farmer's wife Alice under the nose of her father-in-law while her husband is serving overseas. Most of the information I have found about the Cowra camp is from the same source Keneally mined: the National Archives of Australia official documents detailing day-to-day comfort and security issues, complaints from prisoners, reports on correspondence between prisoners and their relatives and so forth.

Looking to memoirs focusing particularly on the canecutter lifestyle, two works stand out as valuable records of this extinct way of life. Journalist Eugenie Navarre documented what she could glean about canecutter culture by interviewing elderly sugar pioneers and their children. The result was *The Cane Barracks Story* (2007), a collection of short vignettes with barracks life as their focus. The fondly remembered barracks buildings were once synonymous with the culture of the sugar towns and also represented the authority of the union to set housing standards for the workers. Each building accommodated six to twelve men, including a cook, usually male. The buildings had a characteristic timber and corrugated iron vernacular and linear layout. Often the cane farmer and his family, like the Cocos and the Santolins in this collection, lived in them in the off-season, moving out to



the stables or shed in the cutting season so the cutters could move in. In a cruel irony, some barracks buildings were used to billet soldiers during World War Two (Navarre 2007) when so many men who should have been occupying them were languishing in internment camps. This book is a valuable cultural artefact because very few barracks still exist, most having disappeared with the lifestyle itself or fallen victim to wild cyclonic weather.

*With Courage in Their Cases* (1980) is an anthology of thirty-five personal stories narrated by Italian immigrants in their own voices, collected and edited by writer and scholar, Morag Loh. Only one of the stories is specifically about life as a canecutter and cane farmer in North Queensland, but the entire anthology provides valuable insights into the migrancy experience for Italians through the different periods of twentieth century Australia. The narrator of the canecutter memoir came from the island of Elba and the rest came from various regions of Italy and settled in many different parts of Australia, so it is a charming and informative first-hand account of Italian migration and settlement in Australia. The voices of the subjects bring to the work a certain rawness that is appropriate to the overarching theme of endurance and determination in the face of hardship.

### **Drama: setting the scene**

In describing the canecutters from North Queensland as a group within the Loveday internment camp, and their canecutting lifestyle, Claudio Alcorso (1993), who had not lived in the cane country, offers a rare indication in print that the migrant sugar workers were adopting (un-Italian) aspects of Australian masculinity from their association with Britisher workers and their participation in the physicality of the sugar country subculture. He wrote, 'I did not know that I was listening to variations on the theme of Ray Lawler's yet unwritten play *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*' (p. 31). Lawler's timeless play, which achieved international success and continues to be produced from time to time as well as turning up frequently in Australian literature studies – Russell McDougall (2001) notes its 'profoundly canonical status in Australian theatre history' (p. 52) – has no Italian characters, but as Alcorso (1993) explains:



They [the Italians] had adopted the habit of drinking large amounts of beer at the pub and with it the peculiarly Australian institution of the fight, that seemed to be the inevitable follow-up to the drinking ritual. They spoke of the respect, bordering on mateship, in which their Australian counterparts held the strong-fisted ones. (p.31)

The last play in a trilogy, and by far the most successful, *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* (1955) portrays that brand of Anglo Australian masculinity we see in the novels by Devanny, Naish, and Donaldson and Joseph: male bonding cemented by working and playing hard together and relying on each other for society, income and moral support. Barmaid Olive, off-season girlfriend of champion ganger, Roo, connects their masculinity and freedom to their occupation and is horrified by the idea of Roo taking a city job, which she sees as emasculating. However, Roo is losing his virility and is being rivalled by younger cutter, Johnnie O'Dowd, while Roo's mate Barney is a fading 'Cassa' (Cassanova), another important facet of masculinity. According to an *Australian Women's Weekly* (4 January 1956) review by staff reporter, Barbara Wallis, who interviewed Lawler, he had observed two Queensland canecutters wooing chorus girls in a production he was working on while in Brisbane for a year and was struck by 'their magnificent self-confident masculinity' (p. 19). In the play, Olive's description of the men as wild birds of prey is even more colourful: 'two eagles flyin' down out of the sun and coming south every year for the mating season' (Lawler 1955, p. 48).

*The Doll*, as the play is known, was produced as a movie in 1959 with the main characters played by mostly British and American actors. The jarring attempts at the Australian accent, the removal of Australian slang to cater to the American market, the change of setting from Melbourne to Sydney and, perhaps most offensive of all, the alteration to the plot to give it a Hollywood-style happy ending made it a critical flop in Australia. In America, where it was not released until 1962 with the title changed to *Season of Passion*, it was also poorly received, while in Britain it was blacklisted for not having enough Britons hired for the film, which was made in Australia about Australians (*Canberra Times*, 17 January 1959).

Though mostly performed by community drama groups such as Douglas Theatre Arts Group (in 2011), *Mano Nera* (2005) by Adam Grossetti, a native of the sugar country, won the Queensland Premier's Drama Award in 2004–5 and was first performed by the Queensland Theatre Company in 2005. Its subtitle, *Blood, sweat and fear in the North Queensland canefields*, refers to an enemy within afflicting the sugar towns of Innisfail and Ingham during the late 1920s to the mid-1930s. It appears, however, to have directly touched only the Italian community, although it further damaged the image of Italians in the broader society. *Mano Nera*, or Black Hand, was purported to be a North Queensland branch of Calabrian mafia that extorted money from cane growers and cutters under threat of blowing up their houses, burning their farms to the ground or poisoning their horses. A note demanding an amount of money and signed with the ominous black hand symbol would be left in a prominent spot.

Grossetti's three-act play, set in 1935, is based on real characters and events. Canecutter DeMartini is murdered while checking his horses, while cane farmer Capra has his ear cut off. Sacked canecutter Vincenzo DiPalmi dies from his injuries caused by an explosion in the bakery where he is working as a baker. The real-life Vincenzo D'Agostino, who was believed to have been a leader in Black Hand activity in the Ingham area in the mid-1930s, died after an explosion in his bakery in 1938. My grandfather, who had a lien on a cane crop, came home to three unexploded (undetoned) sticks of gelignite just after Christmas in 1934 because he refused to pay. Interestingly, the play includes the character of Stiletto Jean, transparently based on the real-life Jean Morris, a sex worker and mistress of d'Agostino's *sotto capo* Francesco Femio, nicknamed Stiletto Jean for her habit of carrying a stiletto knife on her person at all times. The real Stiletto Jean was savagely murdered, possibly by her own stiletto knife (*Truth Sunday Magazine*, 30 July 1950).

In his foreword, Grossetti, who grew up in the cane country, writes that he saw the infestation of rats in the cane and the sickness and even death (from Weil's disease) brought by the rodents as a metaphor of the plague that was the Black Hand crime. In 2016, Grossetti also produced *The Black Hand Gang*, a two-episode podcast for the ABC's *Earshot* program. In it he interviews people who lived in the sugar country and were aware of the legends surrounding the phenomenon and the code of silence that accompanied any

knowledge of it, however indirect. More recently, ABC Television has screened the three-part series *The Black Hand* (2023), co-written and co-produced by Grossetti, a dramatised documentary featuring real footage and photographs along with re-enactments of events not visually recorded. The series conveys a strong impression of the terror felt by ordinary hard-working Italians when that version of mafia came calling.



Fig. 7. Truth newspaper report of Black Hand Gang, 1937. Queensland State Archives.

### Short stories: slices of life

Cane grower/journalist Clive Morton wrote (with Geoff Burrows) *The Canecutters* (1986), a history punctuated by personal anecdotes that begins with the South Sea Islander period. *Canberra Times* (18 October 1986) reviewer Ron Winch concluded: ‘Amongst other things, the book is an important social study of a class of workers which has become a legend, helped along by Barney and Roo and their 17 dolls and summers. We may not see their like again’ (p.3). This book is yet another resource informing my novel, but it is Morton’s quietly hilarious short stories, many originally published in *The Bulletin* in the late 1950s, that Central Queensland University Press saw fit to collect and publish in *Gilly*

& *I: Larrikins in the Canefields* (1997). The slim volume is dedicated to a real-life Gilly who died aged 18 and is narrated with bone-dry eloquence by the 'I' of the title. The Ginger Meggs-style adventures of the two banana-leaf-smoking eleven-year-old sons of cane farmers offer a boys'-eye view of life in the sugar country as they dodge or embrace characters like the terrifying Pawpaw, Otto the Stormtrooper, Alec the Balt and the Old Testament Gang (cutters from the local Aboriginal mission with biblical first names) – “‘Maybe they got boomerangs and spears and that,’ I worried, hopefully’ (p.26).

*The Bulletin* published canecutter short stories by other writers, too, such as Les Such's 'Canecutters' Conflab: They Bred 'Em Tough' (4 April 1960, p.32), an essay lamenting the passing of the good old days of canecutting – and the passing of many of the cutters once well-known to the narrator. Such's captioned cartoon illustrations depict huddling under an umbrella to roll a cigarette for smoko in Tully, 'the wettest place in the world in those days, when you cut for six weeks and the rain never ceased for an hour of that time' ('To roll a cigarette!'); going off in a line to start the day's cut ('Into it!'); and surreptitiously leaving a lit candle in the canefield to burn the crop ('When it was illegal!'). Interestingly, this last practice features in Naish's *The Cruel Field* (1961).

Occasionally, the women's magazines delved into canefields life, especially when there were women in the stories. Les Such illustrated S. Conever's 'Cane-cutter' Cook', published in the *Australian Woman's Mirror* (22 October 1947, p.48). Written by a cutter's wife who becomes the cook for a gang who could not find a decent male cook, with another wife as her offside, it is an engaging article that details the copious amounts of food cooked for the gang, including half a pound of steak per man along with pork sausages for seconds – and that was just for breakfast. The work involved cooking five meals a day, chopping wood, heating water for showers, fending off snakes escaping the burn and living in the barracks.

In a 1939 issue of the same publication, 'Battlers in the Canefields' by Dorabella, illustrated by Rice, is narrated by a horse-mounted 'townie' who comes across a family on their way to burn their cane, which she is invited to watch. She describes the 'impedimenta' packed by 'little Mrs. Cane Battler' for the family's picnic meal, the man's 'murderous-looking cane-knife slung in his belt' and the widow from next door who considers herself

the equal of any man in working her cane farm. After sharing their picnic, the narrator rides off 'feeling as though I had seen some little part of the lives of the toilers who fill our sugar-basins' (p.36).

An anonymous essay with the title 'Continental Cooking Among the Cane' was published in *The Australian Women's Mirror*, 25 April 1951. It tells the story of a multicultural gang teaching their female cook, who is accomplished at British-style cooking, various dishes from their cultural backgrounds. Even the Irishman shows her how to properly cook an Irish stew.

Cooking became new to her. She learned the uses of bay leaves and peppercorns, of paprika and dry cheeses. She learned to buy shell spaghetti for certain kinds of pastas, and the long thin type for the spaghetti. Instead of the stews and braises she was accustomed to make she turned out goulashes and ragouts. She baked her fish to Mario's recipe, or cooked it in light white wine in a casserole to a French recipe given her by the Estonian. (p. 6)

With the cook, who had been mystified by the gang's lack of enthusiasm for her renowned cooking in the beginning, now finding herself enjoying her own cooking, and with the mixed but harmonious cultural makeup of the gang, this piece can only be read as a celebration of the multiculturalism the migrant canecutters brought to Queensland.

Les Such also published *Cane! A Book of Drawings by a Canecutter* (1932), a collection of his canecutter cartoons. Such sees the canecutter in legendary terms. In his preface he wrote:

In publishing these sketches I believe I am breaking new ground. To my knowledge cane cutters and cane cutting have never been dealt with before in this manner. Everybody is acquainted with Dad and Dave of the dairy farm, also the shearer, the miner, the stockman and the rabbitier. So I offer here a few drawings of the cane cutter.

Each cartoon has a caption, some quite wordy and humorous, telling a story in word balloons, others short and pithy. The burly-looking cutters, who look like the Anglo characters in *The Doll*, are portrayed often with their knives and water bags, dressed in singlets, shorts and sandshoes, wearing hats unless they are drinking around the pub bar.

The cartoon titled ‘Northern Tourists A.D. 2032’ depicts tourists looking at a statue of a canecutter on a pedestal (not unlike the one that stands today in Innisfail) with the inscription ‘THE CANE CUTTER 1900 – 50’. One tourist exclaims ‘Splendid animal what?’ Another, ‘But how gorgeously savage!’ with her male partner explaining, ‘I’m afraid he’s rather misrepresented my dear. According to all accounts the cane-cutter was a big hairy fellow who lived in the cane and in hollow logs. He never walked erect and subsisted chiefly on roots and grass.’ The date on the inscription suggests Such’s prediction in 1932 that the manual canecutter would be extinct by 1950.

Not a short story in genre terms, but a slice of life nonetheless, children’s book, *Sandy the Cane Train* (1966), by children’s author Jean Chapman and illustrator Walter Cunningham earns a place here for its sweetly rendered snapshot of the sugar country subculture and some of its workers. In the tradition of *Thomas the Tank Engine* (1946) (Sandy has a face, too, and, like Thomas, is anthropomorphised), the little old petrol-driven engine that is seeing out his days doing light work at the mill saves the day when five bigger, more modern steam locomotives are blocked between the farms and the mill. Sandy appears at the right moment, driven by the mill manager and young Timmy Jackson who lived near the mill and liked to watch old Sandy going about his work each day. A children’s book it may be, but there is metaphor in it that calls to mind the redundancy of the manual canecutter, which was a poignant fact of sugar country life by the time of its publication.

In the same vein, *Diggle Diggle the Cain Train* (1977), by one-time children’s author John Kenney and illustrated by Lois Simpson, tells the story of another little old cane train engine, Diggle Diggle, who also saves the day, and most of the town, during a flood, just when he’s about to be sold for scrap. The description of people sheltering in trees and on roofs echoes the record-setting 1927 flood in the Herbert region, which features in a chapter of my creative work. With a more homespun presentation than the former children’s book, it too evokes the poignancy of the end of manual canecutting, which by the time of publication was a distant memory, although as you’d expect of a children’s book, it has a happy ending in which the engine is refurbished and memorialised for its brave effort.

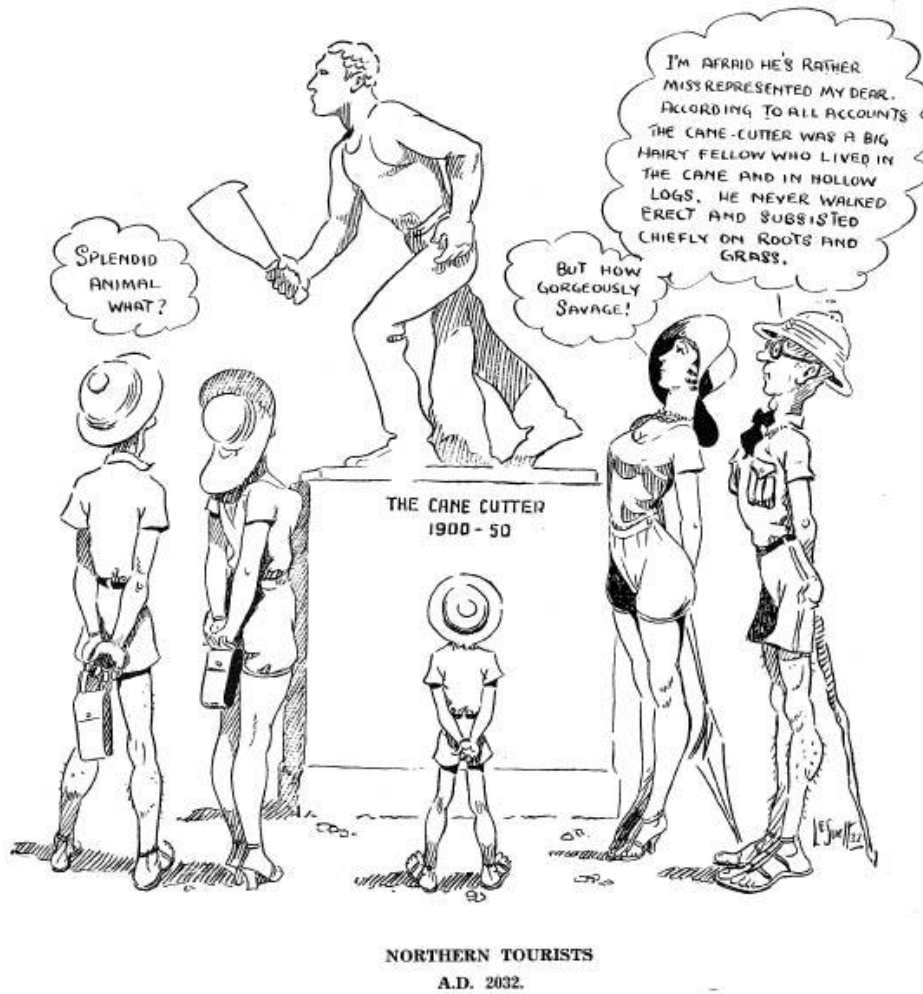


Fig. 8. Cartoon by Les Such published in *Cane! A Book of Drawings by a Canecutter*, 1932. State Library of New South Wales.

## Verse and song: celebrating the life

Irishman Dan Sheahan worked as a canecutter in Ingham, writing a prolific amount of verse as his ongoing commentary on many facets of his life experience. His daughter-in-law collected and published his verse in *Songs from the Canefields* (1972). In the bush ballads tradition, Sheahan's verse takes a humorous approach to topics of daily life, from council meetings, to the life and death of a cane beetle, to serving in the war and toiling in the cane. Sugar politics are represented with a playful touch in poems like 'Rats' (p. 100) in which the strike-inducing rodents are 'Communitic mad' with Ivan Ratski in command, a reference to the 1930s strikes over Weil's disease (transmitted by rat urine). More than a few are about pub culture, 'A Pub Without Beer' (p. 71) being perhaps his best known thanks to the song 'Pub with No Beer', adapted by Gordon Parsons using some of Sheahan's words, and made famous by country musician Slim Dusty. The Day Dawn Hotel was the venue of the disaster, which occurred in late 1943 when American troops stationed in Townsville descended on Ingham and drank the pub dry of beer. Sheahan and other cutters had to drink wine instead of beer. Sheahan sat in the bar with a warm glass of wine and penned his poem, which was published in the *Townsville Daily Bulletin* on 30 December 1943 and *The North Queensland Register* on New Year's Day 1944. Poems like 'Long Pocket' (Wongarobba) (p. 64) sing the praises of the migrant settlers, while 'The Days We Cut It Green' (p. 79) voices the theme of the over-confident new chum. However,

'Tis no place for a sissy – a warm summer's day

Beside the Herbert River when knives go into play. (p.79)

Among the plethora of folkloric lament poems and songs of unknown origins – 'The Saddler's Lament', 'A Miner's Lament', 'The Sheepwasher's Lament', 'A Shearer's Lament' and so forth – there is more than one version of 'The Canecutter's Lament'. Two completely different laments, both anonymously penned and impossible to date, can be found online, one with the hapless canecutter mourning the loss of the attentions of the beautiful barmaid along with all his cash; the other bemoaning both the terrible food and foul disposition of the cook. The latter was set to music by Australian punk Celtic band Rum Currency (2014) and can be found on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rPWMG1kwZSQ> 2014).



## Significance of canecutter narratives

This body of work, taken as a whole and as a sub-genre, demonstrates that the culture of the sugar country can claim its place in the settler colonial mythology and iconography of Australia as a whole and of Queensland in particular. Australia is a settler colonial state and, like others such as the US, Canada and New Zealand, has had to develop its own unique cultural mythology in relatively modern times. The image of the canecutter, alongside such masculine figures of strength, endurance and courage as the shearer, the drover, the ANZAC and the lifesaver, for example, speaks to the legend of the building of white Australia, clearly with no acknowledgement of – in fact, papering over – its origins in the theft of the land and violence against and dispossession of the original inhabitants.

Settler colonial states have historically drawn immigrants wishing to improve their economic and class status by taking on usually unskilled but physically demanding work and ultimately settling in the ‘new’ country. In countries like Australia and New Zealand, international migrant labour has been a key component of rural economies. The immigrant waves who came, willingly and unwillingly, to cut cane in Queensland, particularly the South Sea Islanders and Italians, somewhat like the German Lutheran vineyard workers in South Australia, the Japanese pearl divers of the Torres Strait and Kimberley, and the Dalmatian gumdiggers of New Zealand, for instance, are noteworthy examples of cultural groups who emigrated for work and became integral in the socio-economic character of their communities. Hence terms such as ‘Little Italy’ in reference to Ingham in Queensland or ‘Dally Alley’ in New Zealand’s north.

These immigrant communities and their cultural contributions and adaptation to the host culture would make interesting case studies of everyday multiculturalism with its inherent paradox of giving equal weight to conviviality and racism. Everyday multiculturalism is a field of study that explores how cultural diversity is experienced and negotiated on the ground in everyday situations (Wise and Velayutham 2009). Everyday racism refers to casual prejudiced or racist behaviour embedded in ordinary situations and interactions. A simple example here would be the casual, uncritical use of the word ‘dago’, often without a conscious intention to insult. Acknowledging that ‘Rural spaces in Australia, referred to colloquially as “the bush” and “the country”, have long been assembled as synonymous

with whiteness and heterosexual masculinity and idealised as sources of national identity and belonging' (Bryant and Pini 2011, cited in Butler and Ben 2020, p. 2184), the latter authors contend that settler colonialism research could well be centred in studies of historical and contemporary rural multicultures, especially in understanding how their ongoing legacy shapes social relationships and structures in rural Australia of today.

As some historians have acknowledged, seeing the past through the lens of the literature and popular culture of the time, including fiction, offers compelling insights into social history because 'it faithfully and thoroughly "records the minutiae of everyday living" in a way other kinds of writing cannot' (Pesman Cooper 1993 p. 67). And, as everyday multiculturalism in the settler colonial and post-colonial context takes 'a grounded approach to looking at everyday practice and lived experience of diversity in specific situations and spaces of encounter' (Butler and Ben 2020, p. 2182), relevant literature and artefacts of popular culture such as those reviewed here offer a detailed and authentic portrait of that everyday lived experience and interaction.

The spaces of encounter in everyday multiculturalism include neighbourhoods, shops, schools and, importantly, workplaces. Anthropologist Werbner (1999) theorises about the differences between 'elite cosmopolitanism' versus 'working class cosmopolitanism'. The former refers to middle-class white people who gain cultural capital from celebrating ethnic cuisines and other cultures while actually having little to do with the other in daily life. The latter refers to the ethnic person's growing intercultural competence through working and living side by side with those from the dominant culture and other cultures. Social work academic Raees Begum Baig (2019) writes on the previously unexplored role of union and labour activists in facilitating everyday multiculturalism. The involvement of the Queensland Italians and other European canecutters in the strikes of the 1930s over the burning of the cane and their organised protests at British preferment would, again, make a good historical case study for further research into everyday multiculturalism and everyday racism. Fiction such as Baume's *Burnt Sugar* and fact-informed fiction such as Devanny's *Sugar Heaven* and *Paradise Flow*, for example, offer commentary on solidarity with the Italians and other non-Anglo cutters, suggesting a leaning towards egalitarianism and class

solidarity arising out of doing the same work, having the same labour values and belonging to a union.

In conclusion, while the canecutting culture was clearly Queensland-centric and integral to the socio-economic development of that state, the canecutter narratives reviewed here align with and contribute to the broader colonial settler narrative and iconography of both Queensland and Australia as a whole and, in particular, the egalitarian values so often propounded in this narrative. They are even more pertinent to settler colonial research that is centred in historical everyday multiculturalism and racism in rural communities.

### **In conclusion**

This review has collated and explored a selection of narrative forms that are linked by common themes, figures and motifs. I identify it as canecutter narrative and propose it is a valuable body of work detailing the nature of a lifestyle and its iconic figure, from the minutiae of daily life to the local and world politics. It makes a contribution to knowledge in that, taken collectively, as it is here, it mythologises the historical figure of the canecutter, who was so important to the economic, social and cultural development of Queensland. I propose the usefulness of this subgenre in informing areas of scholarship such as settler colonialism and everyday multiculturalism. I draw on much of it in my creative work, along with other literature to inform the wider historical context. While Ray Lawler's Roo and Barney may be the only canecutter characters familiar to most, this literature review chapter finds there is much more to the canecutter legend. The plantation novels tell the stories of the South Sea Islanders' experience as the precursor to the Europeans' experience in the sugar country, while the canecutter novels, plays films and TV series focus wholly or largely on the 'Britisher' sugar community with Italians often as background figures or stereotypes. Memoirs, biographies and other personal vignettes written by Italians on the whole celebrate the successful-against-all-the-odds migrant. While the hardships of being an immigrant and taking on this physically exhausting seasonal work are acknowledged in many of these works, long-term family breakdown and unjust internment as direct consequences of living, working and succeeding as an Italian canecutter or cane farmer in Queensland between the wars requires a more focused and in-

depth exploration. The hindsight afforded by this body of literature in combination with scholarly work in fields such as history, politics and literary criticism, along with digitally preserved artefacts of popular culture such as magazines and newspapers, provides the opportunity to contextualise a relatable family story that represents the untold outcomes of immigration undertaken to work in the sugar industry.

The following chapter turns toward the more personal aspects of this story in a review of the so-called grey literature that forms the skeleton of my creative work, detailing the public domain records found in researching my family. The review places each record in the broader historical context to both understand its significance in individual lives and reveal the representativeness of those lives within their immigrant cohort.

## Chapter 4: Grey literature review – the facts informing the fiction

“The reality of the past does not lie in a collection of data but in an accumulation of stories.” ~ Rocío Davis, Jaime Aurell, Ana Delgado (2007)

As I have already outlined in the general introduction, this project was inspired by my curiosity about my paternal Italian grandparents. I had not known them because my father, now deceased, became estranged from his father before I was born and never saw his mother again after leaving Italy at the age of ten. Small step by small step in uncovering records and undertaking background reading of several seminal works such as Douglass’s *From Italy to Ingham* (1995), I would eventually understand more of what lay at the heart of this and piece together the stories of people who meant a lot to me despite never actually knowing them. I knew already that my grandfather had come with a brother to Australia from Sicily to cut sugar cane in the 1920s, and they were followed by four other brothers, all but one settling permanently. Nine years after their father emigrated from Sicily, my father and his sister were brought to Australia by their aunt, apparently posing as, or assumed to be, their mother. The reason my grandmother remained in Italy was never spoken about in the family (‘the past is best left in the past’, I was told by my father and other relatives); nor was another big secret that I was to unlock, not from conversations with the family members I have come to know, but from the National Archives of Australia (NAA).

My family research began with a simple NAA name search, leading to the discovery that my naturalised (in 1934) grandfather was interned as an enemy alien during World War Two. A dossier of documents contained reports on his behaviour, poignant letters from my teenage father (then in boarding school in Charters Towers) to their state member of parliament advocating for his father’s release, letters and telegrams of response from the politician, and more. The experience of reading them was like going back in time to meet a grandfather I had never known and my own father as a teenage boy in a dire situation.

The NAA discoveries inspired a search of Trove, where I found more information to add to the sketchy picture formed from the archived documents. These public domain records, combined with personal letters, postcards, photographs, passports and tickets of passage

held within the family, along with the NAA files on my great uncles' internment, are the primary sources, or so-called 'grey literature' informing my story. Some of the epistolary elements are embedded in the novel, albeit with fictional names, complemented by purely fictional epistolarity. As explained in the next chapter, in which creative practice-led narrative inquiry is identified as my primary methodology, narrative inquiry is generally based on interviewing subjects to then analyse and interpret findings within the research framework. In the absence of living subjects, primary sources and artefacts, by necessity, take the place of interview.

The following sources provided many of the clues from which to construct a bare-bones story of a family that became fractured and fragmented due to a lifestyle and subculture that is now part of Queensland's history. It has been accumulated somewhat like a police evidence board. As the creative practice component of my project is in the umbrella genre of fact-informed fiction, the primary sources provide the facts that are re-storied into a historical novel, re-storying being an important narrative practice in narrative inquiry methodology (Connelly and Clandinin 2006). The key primary sources are reviewed here and placed in historical context, or the larger story wrapping around my family story, to demonstrate how the family story is, to a great extent, representative of the emigrant experience of many Italians in the sugar towns of North Queensland. Names are redacted to first names and last name initial. Except for historical figures, all last names and many first names were changed in the novel due to fictionalisation of their characters and some of their experiences.

### **Giuseppe B.'s birth record 1893**

In the creative work, Giuseppe is the character loosely based on my grandfather, who emigrated to Australia in 1926 to cut sugar cane in North Queensland via the chain migration arrangements that were operating at the time. The digital photo of Giuseppe's birth registration in the online *Registro Degli Atti di Nascita* of Catania province confirms (and occasionally contradicts) later information about his age, birthplace and parentage. The birth entry, completed according to the custom of the father presenting the newborn at

the local registry within three days of the birth (Reeder 2003), was annotated to add the date (1919) and place of his marriage (La Spezia) and the name of his wife, Ildegonda C. The annotation indicating a legal union is significant because Giuseppe remarried in Australia in 1952, well before divorce became legal in Italy in 1970 (Seymour 2006), and long after Ildegonda had repartnered back in her northern hometown of La Spezia and raised four more children. Their respective repartnering almost bears out the overblown but popular belief among Italian politicians and social critics of emigration in the early twentieth century that...

by separating sexually active married men and women, migration would unleash the destructive power of sex. The absence of men would transform women into prostitutes and men into bigamists. (Reeder 2001, p. 375)

When Giuseppe was born in 1893, Sicily had only been part of Italy since the creation of a united Italy in 1861 and Sicilians still considered themselves Sicilian first and foremost, many speaking only their village dialect, most speaking Sicilian dialect. Literacy rates were comparatively poor; the 1901 census recorded 71 per cent of males and 77 per cent of females over the age of six were illiterate (Ciccarelli & Weisdorf 2019). The year Giuseppe was born was one of great civil unrest in Sicily, particularly his province of Catania, with the rise of the socialist democratic *fasci* workers' organisations and their 'brutal crushing' under Prime Minister Francesco Crispi (Carter 2010, p. 5). It was no doubt Sicilians' turbulent history of invasion and conquest, then the domination by Rome, that had long instilled in them a belief that they could only really rely on that 'tower of strength against the social and economic insecurity often endemic in the history of this region due to exploitative, inept, and corrupt governments' – the family (Rando 2008, p. 158). Other Sicilians might be trusted, though not always. Anyone else was regarded with some suspicion until they proved themselves worthy of trust. Sicilians also adhered to the well-known code of *omertà* (Cerami 2009), or silence, which not only meant not speaking about mafia in particular, but a general taciturnity (Cronin 1970).

In Australia, these cultural traits would contribute to an image of Sicilians as clannish, untrustworthy and unable to assimilate (Cronin 1970). Even northern Italians saw them in this light and did not identify with them as fellow Italians (Douglass 1995). Giuseppe's

marriage to an educated northern woman was uncommon at that time; indeed, such was the antipathy between northern and southern Italians in the early twentieth century that, according to Douglass, in Australia a northern Italian was more likely to marry an Australian than a southern Italian. Analysing the St Patrick's church (Ingham) marriage records from 1904 to 1920, Douglass (1995) notes there were no unions between northern and southern Italians. Borrie (1954), too, in his analysis of North Queensland demographics finds marriage between northern and southern Italians in Australia rare. This image of southerners as separate and clannish, particularly Sicilians, is portrayed in some of the canecutter narratives, such as Baume's novel, *Burnt Sugar* (1938), and less pejoratively in Sacchi's *La Casa in Oceania* (1934). It is discussed at length in American social anthropologist Douglass's seminal work on Italian immigration to North Queensland, *From Italy to Ingham* (1995), and was entrenched in the public consciousness via the headlines of nationalist publications of the time, such as *Smith's Weekly*, *Truth* and *The Bulletin*.

Writers who hail from a Sicilian background have been able to give more rounded portrayals of Sicilians in novels, such as Venero Armanno's *The Volcano* (2001) and *Black Mountain* (2012), which suggest that harsh economic conditions incited brutal cruelty in some and touching kindness in others, all against the background of a mythical and magical landscape. The settings in Armanno's novels are the landscape of Giuseppe's home region. The translated works of Sicilian author Giovanni Verga, including *Little Novels of Sicily* (1883) and *Cavalleria Rusticana and Other Stories* (1884), offer clear-eyed, unsentimental vignettes of life's hardships on the island, such as being widowed or, worse, orphaned by the malaria epidemic of the late nineteenth/early twentieth century, and the constant struggle against hunger.

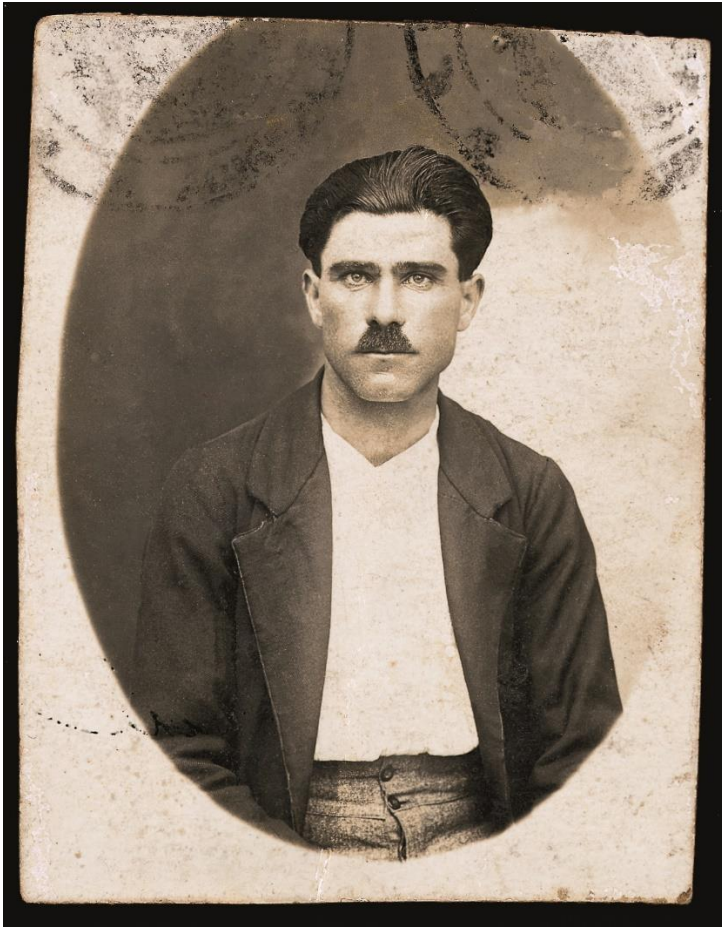
Useful resources for an overview of Sicilian history, culture and the collective nature of the people include *Sicily: A Short History, from the Greeks to Cosa Nostra* (2015) and *Sicily: An Island at the Crossroads of History* (2015), by British peer and historian John Julius Norwich, who wrote about Sicily for half a century. For an understanding of immigrant Sicilians, American archeologist Constance Cronin undertook an ethnographic study, published as *The Sting of Change: Sicilians in Sicily and Australia* (1970), which combined field research in Sicily with data gathered from interviews with first-generation Sicilian



migrants in Australia. In it, Cronin builds a picture of the changes in public presentation, private life and family values that settlement in the new country necessarily brings. Its limitation for my purposes is its focus on urban Sicilian migrants spread around Sydney, whose experience differed in significant ways from that of Sicilians in North Queensland, who were somewhat more ghettoised and widely resented for 'taking over' the sugar industry (Dewhirst 2014). However, it is a useful resource in that it deals with life before emigration, albeit that of people in one regional town. One of the interesting points Cronin makes strongly is the primacy of the nuclear family in Sicilian relationships and the belief that a married couple should have their own home and be independent of extended family. For my creative work this makes the breakdown of the original nuclear family all the more poignant, and the fragmentation of the extended family, which might not be abnormal in the Sicilian context, sadder in the Australian context because extended-family solidarity helped to offset the loss of traditional community.

As for the role of men in Italian society during the period in question, a significant stage in their adult development was the obligation of every male to undertake compulsory military service (conscription) at the age of 20 and the influence this had on them in certain cultural and educational aspects. Conscription was unpopular in the peninsular south (Carter 2010) and Sicily (Cotugno 2011), and many families found ways to avoid it, such as (looking ahead) registering male children as female, young men deliberately injuring themselves to become medically unfit, and many taking the dramatic step of emigrating (Reeder 2003). Giuseppe's conscription period of two years segued into actual war service (World War One) which then segued into his stint in the Carabinieri in the wake of the war, when Carabinieri numbers needed to be boosted significantly (Gooch 2014), until shortly before he emigrated. He spent a total of seven-and-a-half years in the Italian army, according to his Australian internment file (NAA: A367, 778203), although the breakdown into conscription period, war service and carabinieri service is not known. In any event, according to family history, he fought in World War One in the north where the only battles on Italian soil took place. It is significant, then, that when he emigrated, the brother closest to conscription age, Orazio, aged 19, accompanied him.

## Giuseppe B's passport 1926



*Fig. 9. Italian passport photo, 1926. Private collection.*

It was surprising to find a digitised copy of my grandfather's passport in one of his NAA internment files (NAA: MP1103/2, p.2), although his internment record notes he was not in possession of his passport when he applied for naturalisation in 1934, and that he told officials it was taken from him and kept by the customs authorities when he landed in Fremantle in 1926 (NAA: A367, C25865, p. 3). This was routine practice by the Australian immigration authorities until 1927 when it was decided that the practice caused too much extra work for Customs authorities for no good purpose and there were strong objections from British migrants (NAA: A367, C3075AK, p. 27). The date of issue shows he acquired it in April 1926, only one month before setting sail to Australia. It also shows that, although he was born in Fiumefreddo, when he left Sicily he had been residing in nearby Mascali, which would be totally buried under lava from a Mt Etna eruption in 1928. My

grandmother Ildegonda and their two children Sebastiano and Rosa were still living in Mascali at the time of the eruption.

As family breakdown is at the heart of my story, it is important to gain an understanding of how family structures might have been affected by the emigration experience, the geographic distance and the inevitable influence of the host country's culture. Linda Reeder's illuminating work on this topic, *Widows in White: Migration and the Transformation of Rural Women, Sicily, 1880–1928* (2003), examines the lives of Sicilian women who stayed behind when their husbands emigrated to America, as in the case of Ildegonda, although her husband went to Australia. Reeder's findings throw light on the experience Ildegonda likely had in being viewed with suspicion purely for being a woman alone, and doubly untrustworthy for being from a northern Italian background. Her experience of sexual assault by a trusted doctor, resulting in pregnancy (fictionalised in the novel), would not have been unheard of, and a husband's inability to see the pregnancy with another man's child as anything other than betrayal of the worst kind would also have been a common response. However, as Reeder points out, there were husbands in the same unhappy situation who forgave and accepted the new child into the family, even when the wife had willingly had an affair. If the husband was urged on in this regard by his mother's hostility towards her daughter-in-law, that, too, would have been unsurprising given the usual tense dynamic between a young wife and her mother-in-law (Reeder 2003), especially when one is from the north and the other from Sicily.

Other work by Reeder such as her article 'Women in the classroom: mass migration, literacy and the nationalization of Sicilian women at the turn of the century' (1998), has been useful in direct ways in the creative work. For example, I drew on this paper to write a fictional conversation between two women in the first chapter of the novel in which the main female protagonist is sketchily drawn through a conversation with her only close female friend in Mascali. Reeder's article mentions the romance novels and short stories consumed by Italian women around the turn of the century (a factor that encouraged some to learn to read), which becomes part of their conversation in my story.

Carmela held up the newspaper Giuseppe had left on the side table. 'You know how they get their daughters to read out these romance stories in the

newspapers? Well, you are like the women in those stories. Ladies to be admired. Women who look good but are also perfect wives and mothers.’ (p. 27)

Reeder’s writing on the topic of women at that time reveals literacy to be a key issue in the lives of peasant and working-class women in ways it had never been before, largely due to the emigration of their menfolk. Suddenly they had to undertake dealings in the public sphere that had always been men’s business, from registering the birth of babies to purchasing property and seeking official help – often in chasing down absent and errant husbands to have them honour their obligations to their wives and children back home in Sicily. For my grandmother, who was educated and trained as a schoolteacher, dealing with bureaucracy was not so daunting, but being without her husband in a province far from her own family likely was.

As for Giuseppe, he emigrated at a time when there was growing prejudice in Australia against Italians, particularly southerners (Ferry 1925). In 1924–25, community fear that a large influx of immigrants would threaten Australian labour standards led to the Australian government entering into agreements with European governments to restrict the flow by imposing conditions of entry. In the case of Italians, passports would be issued only to those who could prove they either had at least £40 capital (on top of the £50 fare) or a guarantee to be looked after by someone already in Australia (Borrie 1954) under the guarantee known as *Atto di Chiamata* (Ferry 1925). Thus, to apply for his passport, Giuseppe or his family would have needed to raise £90 to be granted the passport; so too the brother who accompanied him. The total of £180 would have been a substantial amount of money in Sicily at the time, and two more brothers would follow only two years later. This suggests that they, like most emigrants who could raise the funds to leave, were not ‘the poorest of the poor’ but small landholders wanting to improve on what they already had (Borrie 1954).

While all of Italy was going through economic difficulties in the 1920s, the south particularly, which was largely rural, was in the grip of *la miseria* (poverty) and there was a conscious rejection of the new social order, which condemned them to political and economic subordination (Vecoli 1995). Overwhelmingly, it was people from rural areas

who emigrated to Australia, largely due to two factors, discussed by historian Jacqueline Templeton in *From the Mountains to the Bush* (2003): large families and partible inheritance traditions. This meant that family-owned land was divided between heirs of each generation until the ever-reducing parcels people owned were not enough to support them and their families. Economist Stefano Jacini described this as the ‘pulverisation’ of land ownership (Templeton 2003, p14). As Borrie (1954) asserts, the opportunities in Queensland were more for the agriculturalist with the ambition of owning a farm, who could rely on help from family to achieve that. Like America, Australia sought migrants who would work the land, so it was usual for Italian men emigrating, including Giuseppe and his brothers, to have *agricoltore* (farmer) on their passports, regardless of their true occupation, even those who had no experience or idea of farming (Reeder 2003).

A file of papers in the National Archives with the title *Immigration of Italians to Australia*, dated 1926 (NAA: A1, 1926/9494), indicates that not only did the Italian government not discourage emigration, but it actually needed it as Italy had basically run out of economic room. One report gives the 1925 census figure for the Italian population as 42,115,606 and goes on to say that the country could only reasonably accommodate 30,000,000. Furthermore, the remittances by the 10,000,000 Italians ‘already scattered the world over’ (NAA: A1, 1926/9494, p. 5) to family back home were essential to Italy’s economy, as were the opportunities to create markets for Italian products abroad. ‘Italian settlements “en bloc” mean new markets in a new Italy’ (NAA: A1, 1926/9494, p. 5). The other reason to encourage emigration was for Italy to be peacefully rid of those who were disaffected with the Fascist political order. In other words, emigration ‘provided an essential safety valve for popular discontent’ (Vecoli 1995, p. 120) that was far preferable to revolt or brigandage.

## Newspaper reports: fine for employing female cook 1929



*Fig. 10. Reconstruction of a typical cane barracks kitchen on display in the Herbert River Museum in Halifax, Queensland, 2019. Private collection.*

Giuseppe came up against authority in his third year in Australia. Both the *Cairns Post* (2 November 1929, p. 5) and the *Brisbane Courier* (2 November 1929, p. 13) reported that nine Italian canecutters were each fined £5, with costs, by the Ingham Police Court for ‘employing a female cook contrary to the sugar award’. Three of the nine were Giuseppe and his brothers, Orazio and Leonardo. The Sugar Field and Sugar Mill Workers’ and Cooks’ (State) Award covering employment conditions for cane gangs did not allow them to employ female cooks unless the gang constituted no more than three and, oddly, the

cooking was carried out in a farmhouse, not a barracks. This was a contentious issue among the southern Italians who saw cooking as women's work and considered it demeaning for a man to have that role. In fact, there was a large number of prosecutions of Italian gangs for employing female cooks. As Henderson (1995) posits, this 'exemplified an Italian value system at odds with that of the dominant Anglo-Australian culture' (p. 39). In early 1929, an Ingham deputation of Italian canecutters presented a petition with 643 signatures to the Australian Sugar Producers' Association requesting an alteration to the relevant clause in the sugar award because...

it bore very harshly on their values. In Italy it was the obligation of women to do the cooking; for men to cook meant a loss of status and dignity. The Italians lost on the union's adherence to 'one family, one job'. (Henderson 1995, p. 39)

In addition, there was an unsuccessful test case challenging the definitions around 'woman cook', which was widely publicised in October that year. The three brothers were fined in November, so they were clearly acting in defiance of the decision. This may be why it was such a hefty fine; even 20 years later, fines were less than half the amount. Interestingly, in *Sugar Tears & Eyeties* (Dalseno 1994), the writer's mother, an unmarried patrician Venetian who was abandoned in Australia by the father of her child, was 'only too readily' employed by Ingham cane gangs to cook for them, sharing in the gang's earnings (p. 45, 125), as would a male cook. However, Henderson's article (1995), in a table headed 'Breaches of industrial awards by nationality' (p. 39) notes there were 29 offences for 'failing to share earnings with cook' in the period when there were 81 offences of 'employing female cook', suggesting that many of the unpaid cooks were wives and/or daughters of the cane farmers or cutters. Interestingly, the figure for both offences among non-Italians was zero, which is not to say that Britisher gangs never committed this breach, but it does bear out Henderson's claim that the gender of cooks was a particularly Italian issue. (The 'nationalities' in Henderson's table are simply 'Italian' and 'non-Italian'.) An article published in the *Australian Woman's Mirror* in 1947 (22 October) was written by an Australian cutter's wife who became the cook for a gang who could not find a decent male cook. In it there is no acknowledgement of this being a breach of the award, yet a report of

an Italian gang being fined for the breach appeared as late as 1952 (*Cairns Post* 10 September, p. 5).

The frequent prosecutions for this kind of breach occurred because the sugar industry in Queensland was highly unionised and cane gangs were heavily policed by the union, going so far as to have representatives hide in paddocks for hours on end to discover a breach. As immigration increased in the 1920s, there was a general belief that sugar workers' hard-won wages and conditions would be threatened by migrants accepting less money and poorer conditions. Migrant workers were compelled to join the Australian Workers Union (AWU) and abide by industrial awards and regulations, which favoured British workers. The cooks issue aside, Italian workers, in general, did what was required of them by the union while they were establishing themselves, without necessarily understanding the content of the award to the letter, but eventually came to understand that industrial awards and a strong trade union offered everyone protection (Borrie 1954).

Apart from the breaches mentioned above, the most common industrial offence by Italians and other migrants was working longer hours than allowed by the award. In their desire to earn as much money as they could to ultimately buy land, the temptation to work more to earn more was always there and often acted on. There were also reports of Italian farmers exploiting their newly arrived countrymen by pressuring them to work longer hours, sometimes starting at 3am to avoid being spotted by union representatives (Elder 2023). Still, by and large, the Italian canecutters not only complied with union requirements but lent their support to industrial action such as the strike at the South Johnstone Mill in 1927, when the canecutters went out in support of the mill workers, and the industrial action over Weil's disease in the mid-1930s. In fact, they were often at the forefront of such action (O'Brien 2016, Elder 2023). After all, trade unionism and industrial action were not unfamiliar to Italians, especially those of Giuseppe's age, as the era of Liberal Italy saw the growth of trade unions and other labour organisations, and the right to strike recognised (Carter 2010).



## Newspaper reports: assault on a woman 1929

Giuseppe had a more serious encounter with authority the next month of 1929. The incident, for which he was put on remand, was grave enough to attract widespread newspaper reporting, from Cairns to Brisbane to Echuca. He was alleged to have assaulted an Italian woman with a rifle butt and she to have attacked him with a knife, resulting in both being treated in hospital but only Giuseppe being charged. Some reports carried sensational headlines such as ‘HALIFAX FRACAS. KNIFE VERSUS GUN. WOMAN SHOWS FIGHT’ (*Cairns Post* 4 December 1929, p. 5). According to one newspaper, ‘The public portion of the Ingham court was crowded with Italians’ (*The Telegraph* Brisbane, 12 December 1929, p. 9), which sets the scene in one short sentence. Giuseppe pleaded not guilty, evidence was heard, the charge of grievous bodily harm was reduced to assault occasioning bodily harm and he was committed for trial at the next sitting of the Supreme Court in Townsville. Bail of £50 and one surety of £50 were allowed, a significant amount when legal representation and travel cost were added. At Townsville, where all the evidence and accounts from both sides were heard, he was found not guilty (NAA: A367, C25865, p. 4).

Family lore holds that the woman attacked him in a fit of jealousy over his involvement with another woman and that he was defending himself from being stabbed by using his shotgun (sometimes said to be a rifle) butt as a shield, hitting her with it in the process. Both scenarios, i.e. that reported and that believed by family, play into the popular tropes of Italians as lotharios and, especially in the case of Sicilians, knife or gun wielding and given to committing violent crimes of passion in jealous rages. If the racist rhetoric about southern Italians in the popular press was not enough – *Smith’s Weekly* categorised them as ‘Black Italians’ and northerners as ‘White Italians’ (Henderson 1995, p.37) – even the Ferry Report of the 1925 Royal Commission into the social and economic effect of increased numbers of Aliens in the sugar towns racialised southern Italians as an inferior type of immigrant (Dewhurst 2014). Ferry commented in his report, ‘Unfortunately, the majority of the new arrivals in Queensland appear to be from the south, many of them Sicilians’ (p. 16). In fact, Ferry suggests that the increasing numbers of southern Italians emigrating to the US was a factor leading to the introduction of severe US immigration

restrictions from 1924. Australians associated southern Italians with crime largely because of the exaggerated reputation of mafia-style groups, such as the Black Hand and the Camorra. Sicilians, in particular, had an international reputation for violence, originating mainly in the US, even though some of the criminal groups were from the mainland south. The truth would seem to be, as Borrie (1954) found in analysing court records, that Italians generally were, on the whole, law-abiding citizens with ‘a high reputation for honesty, sobriety and sexual morality’ (p. 116), notwithstanding the occasional blood feud or crime of passion. Giuseppe’s arrest and charge occurred not only soon after the fines over the female cook but also immediately in the wake of the late November news of the Etna eruption that destroyed his hometown where his wife and children still resided. The year was ending very badly for him.

#### **Newspaper notice: intention to apply for naturalisation 1934**

After eight years in Australia, Giuseppe advertised his intention to apply for naturalisation. Naturalisation represented the migrant’s commitment to the new country as it meant renouncing their Italian citizenship. However, there were other factors driving applications for naturalisation around the time of Giuseppe’s application. Land tenure rights was one of the issues dominating Australian-Italian relations in the early to mid-1930s. There was a longstanding practice among foreign nationals in the sugar districts to lease farms through British owners. It must have been widespread as migrants had to be resident for five years to qualify for naturalisation but the average period before immigrant canecutters became cane farmers was only three years (Henderson 1978). However, when leasing arrangements became a contentious issue, there was extra motivation to become naturalised by those who intended to become farmers and might have to purchase land in their own names should the leasehold/trust practices come to an end.

Giuseppe’s naturalisation was granted on 28 August 1934. His brother Orazio was naturalised in 1932, his other brother Leonardo not until after the war, in 1946. Giuseppe, like most applicants for naturalisation, stated as his reason for applying ‘to have the rights of a British subject’ (NAA:A367, C25865, p. 3), which for migrants aspiring to become

farmers or already farming through a leasehold arrangement meant first and foremost the right to own land freehold. Australian citizenship did not exist until 1949, when the Nationality and Citizenship Act 1948 came into force, so naturalisation meant becoming a British subject. It did not mean that in a full sense in the sugar industry, however. In a foreshadowing of what would happen with internment during the war, the 1930 British Preference agreement between the Australian Workers Union, the Australian Sugar Producers' Association and the Queensland Canegrowers Association, which was designed to guarantee employment in the canefields and mills would be 75 per cent British, excluded naturalised migrants from the definition of 'British'. This occurred in the face of protests and legal challenges (O'Brien 2016). The naturalised Italians' opposition to British Preference in the early 1930s would come back to bite them a decade later, when it would be interpreted as anti-British feeling, especially when the security authorities were scratching for a reason to intern an otherwise upstanding citizen, such as well-known Ingham community leader, Joe Cantamessa (O'Brien 2016). I incorporated the protests into the novel through the character of Lorenzo, whose participation in the protests became part of the reason he was selected for internment.

Notwithstanding the comments in the report on Giuseppe's application supporting the granting of naturalisation, including proof he could read, write and speak English fluently, was in good health and was well known in his community, his application did not proceed completely smoothly. The police sergeant who had arrested him on the assault charge five years earlier, now at Roma Station, lodged a formal written objection to Giuseppe's naturalisation application, describing the events of 1929 as told to him by the woman Giuseppe was charged with attacking, ending his objection with:

unless he has considerably improved in his demeanour since then, I would beg to state that there would be a doubt in regard to applicant being a suitable person to be recommended for naturalization. (NAA:A367, C25865, p. 4)

It is not known whether anything came of the sergeant's objection, but Giuseppe's naturalisation was granted two months later. The report questioned only whether the applicant had been *convicted* of an offence, not charged with one, so there may have been no formal ground for pursuing the objection.

This was the same year Giuseppe had a lien on the sugar cane crop of a property that did not belong to him. Since having a lien meant he had lent money against the sugar crop, it is possible that his finances were improving enough for him to consider purchasing property; and to own land freehold he would need to be naturalised. It was also the year before he arranged to have his children brought (by his sister) to Australia from Sicily, suggesting he was committing to becoming citizen for the long term.

### **Newspaper report: failed attempt to blow up house 1934**

The *Townsville Daily Bulletin* of 29 December 1934 reported on ‘What seems to have been an unskillful attempt to blow up a house’ (p. 3). Giuseppe was named in the report as the occupier of the house in question while its owners were holidaying in Italy. He had a lien on the property’s sugar crop, so was staying there to manage the crop. A lien was a formal legal agreement under the *Liens on Crops of Sugar Cane Act 1931* whereby a crop was legally registered as security, or collateral, against a loan. South Australia had the similar *Liens on Fruit Act 1923*. Giuseppe had been away for a few days over Christmas and returned to find inside the house three unexploded sticks of gelignite with a burnt-out fuse leading to one. According to the report, ‘The person responsible for their [sic] seems to have been unaware of the necessity for a detonator’ (p. 3). Had he refused to pay an extortion demand and was therefore either genuinely attacked in a failed plot or was he merely given an ominous warning?

The infamous Black Hand, a Calabrian version of mafia, was believed to be operating in Innisfail and Ingham from the mid-twenties to the late thirties, using extortion methods that included bombing or setting fire to homes, poisoning horses and burning crops. There were murders committed as well as non-fatal attacks on people; one man had both his ears cut off then went on to shoot dead his assailant in broad daylight in the main street of Innisfail. Some authors such as Douglass (1995) and Borrie (1954) maintain, however, that it was never clear whether such occurrences were related to feuding between individuals or families, or mafia-style crime, due to the oppressive code of *omertà* practised by southerners. The detonator bungle might bear out Douglass’s comment that some attempts

at extortion were ‘crude in the extreme’ and ‘scarcely qualified as the strategy of an experienced criminal organisation with international connections’ (p. 227). Adam Grossetti, who wrote a play (*Mano Nera* 2005) and produced a two-part radio podcast about the Black Hand in North Queensland in the 1920s and ’30s, and who himself grew up in the region, interviewed many of the old residents who confirmed the stories about the extortion notes signed with the black hand symbol (Grossetti 2005, Grossetti 2016). More recently, Grossetti was a co-writer and producer of three-part television dramatised documentary *The Black Hand* (2023), which brings together the recorded and anecdotal threats and attacks attributed to the Black Hand in the 1920s and ’30s. In any case, if this incident was the work (or imitation) of the Black Hand, it is not known whether the failed attack was directed at Giuseppe or the absent property owners. As this was not spoken about at any length within the family and there were no further records, I kept this ambiguity in the novel.

But who is this meant for? Giuseppe wondered, Belcamino or me? He thought about this for a while and decided it was meant for whoever they thought had money. If they knew he had the lien on the crop, then it was likely meant for him. (p. 139)

## Newspaper item: home ownership 1939



*Fig 11. Four-roomed house, Macknade, 1942. Private collection.*

A small item in the *Townsville Daily Bulletin* (13 March 1939) outlining the finances of a bankrupt Italian carpenter of Halifax mentioned that said carpenter had erected a home for Giuseppe B. in Macknade for £200 and allowed a discount for cash payment. The materials had cost £160. The carpenter was Italian but not Sicilian. One of Giuseppe's internment files documents his ownership of a four-roomed wooden house in Macknade, and furniture, value £400, at the time of his capture (NAA: MP1103/2, p. 1), probably the same house and the one in the family photo collection. This suggests that by this time he was settled in his own home, now with the children, who arrived in 1935, with Sebastian attending the government school close to home at Macknade rather than the Catholic school at Halifax. (Sebastian appears in the Macknade school yearbooks, held in the museum in Halifax, until secondary school.) Macknade, and nearby Bemerside, was an area with a concentrated pocket of east coast Sicilians, mostly from Catania and Messina provinces, who tended to group together as a support network, as did most southern Italians, at least more so than their northern compatriots, probably because southerners tended to have scant financial resources to begin with (Borrie 1954). Indeed, both Giuseppe's brother Orazio and his

*paesano* son-in-law Antonio owned houses in Macknade at the time of their capture. However, this does raise the question as to whether he owned a previous home when the children were brought to Australia four years earlier and, if not, why they might have emigrated before he owned a home and how they might have lived – in barracks, with relatives, or in rented accommodation?

### **Newspaper notice: Leonardo's kidney surgery 1941**

In a brief item in the *Cairns Post* (10 June 1941) Giuseppe's brother Leonardo thanks 'very much' Doctor Cotter, of Innisfail and expresses 'all my gratitude for the very difficult operation performed successfully on me' (p. 4). His very difficult operation was the removal of a diseased kidney, as mentioned in his internment file (NAA C123, 21505, p. 20). Along with Giuseppe, whose internment file also mentions kidney problems (NAA: A367, C25865, p. 30), Leonardo had possibly suffered a bout of Weil's disease (leptospirosis), a haemorrhagic illness spread by contact with rat urine in the cane. Giuseppe's son-in-law's father died from Weil's disease in 1938. Canecutters inevitably had cuts from their knives and scratches from the cane trash (the tops of the cane stalks) that made them vulnerable to infection with the disease, which could be very serious and sometimes deadly. Indeed, the disease became endemic in North Queensland throughout the 1930s. During an outbreak in 1933–34, the incidence among canecutters rose to 18 per cent with 19 deaths (Smith & Leggat 2007). Weil's disease was at the centre of ongoing conflict between government, the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) and the AWU, and was highly politicised, even by Dr Raphael Cilento, a high-profile Fascist sympathiser who believed communist sympathies lay behind the drive by canecutters to address the problem by burning the cane. In his position as head of the Health Department, Cilento was able to influence public policy as well as industrial court and ministerial decisions (Penrose 1998).

It seems counterintuitive that the AWU did not side with the workers on this serious health problem, but the issue of the disease was clouded by arguments about its cause and effects, and a power struggle between the conservative union and left-wing groups (Menghetti 1982). When the panicked canecutters, fearing for their lives and at the least their very

ability to work, staged unofficial strikes supported by the CPA, it was seen as a challenge to the authority of the AWU (Menghetti 1982, Penrose 1998). For its part, the AWU maintained that the campaign to eradicate the disease should be in the hands of impartial medical experts. Unfortunately, the expert called in was Dr Cilento, many of whose views were ideological. Cilento had strident opinions about migrants, malingerers and anyone with communist or anarchist leanings (Penrose 1998), his sympathies firmly with the industry producers. He appeared to show more concern for the monetary value of Australian sugar on the world market, thinking burning the cane might lessen it, than for the effect of *not* burning it on the lives of the canecutters. Cilento revoked the Health Department's support for burning cane and pushed for restrictions on workers' compensation where claims centred on Weil's disease. He even tried to have highly respected local doctor Gordon Morrissey removed from his position. Morrissey treated canecutters with Weil's disease at Ingham hospital and advocated for them, causing him to clash with Cilento in a way that was potentially more damaging for the compassionate young general practitioner. Cilento would not shift in his policies, rather doubling down again and again, even in the face of increasing industrial unrest and further deaths of cutters (Penrose 1998). The whole issue of the disease and the strike action by the cutters so captured the imagination of the public at large that card-carrying CPA member and novelist Jean Devanny toured North Queensland during the big strike of 1935 and based the setting, action and characters of her novel *Sugar Heaven* (1936) on the sugar town of Silkwood and the striking workers.



## Giuseppe's internment files 1942–1944



*Fig. 12. Cowra Internment Camp, 1943. Australian War Memorial.*

The disproportionate numbers of Queensland Italian internees compared with those of other states has been widely researched, analysed and documented by historians and other writers. Of the approximately 20 per cent of Italian-born Australians interned, half were from Queensland, and half of those, i.e. one-quarter of the Australian total, were from the towns of Innisfail and Ingham and their surrounds alone. As an example of the discrepancies between states, with roughly similar Italian-born populations, approximately 15 times as many Queensland Italians were interned compared with Victoria (O'Brien 2016). In short, internment impacted most heavily on canecutters and cane farmers from Queensland. However, all Italian immigrants, even those who were naturalised as well as Australian-born citizens with Italian heritage, were seen as enemy aliens with Italy's entry into the war in 1940. At first, mainly those strongly suspected or known to have Fascist sympathies were interned. This changed when Japan joined the axis powers in late 1941.

The bombing of Darwin by the Japanese in February and March 1942 incited a general panic that Queensland would be most vulnerable to attack and that the Italians, who were widely believed to all own guns, would join forces with the Japanese against Australia.

Such theories were boosted by the general resentment of the success of migrants in the sugar districts, but perhaps even more difficult for the migrants to counter was the attitude of some in high positions of authority. The detention orders came from the Army, but the arrests were carried out by the civil police. Their leader in Queensland, Police Commissioner Carroll, at a conference of police commissioners and intelligence sections of the fighting forces, stated in March 1942 that the Queensland internees were 'nothing but the scum of the earth' and called for far more power to be given to police to detain aliens (Saunders 1993, p.50). Within weeks, a mass roundup of North Queensland Italians occurred, scooping up Leonardo in Innisfail in March and Giuseppe and Orazio in Macknade on the same day in April. In fact, by March, virtually every Italian household had bags packed because no one knew who would be next (Dalseno 1994, Douglass 1995). They were arrested under master warrant, an omnibus warrant that replaced individual warrants and contained many names. In fact, local police commands, having to meet internee target numbers sent from Brisbane, drew up lists. The Innisfail police admitted to Police Chief Carroll that often it was impossible to find anything concrete against those on the lists 'but there is not a shadow of a doubt they are disloyal and would be a definite danger' (O'Brien 2016, p. 83). As Klaus Neumann (2006) writes:

The onus was on the internees to prove their innocence, rather than on the government to prove their guilt. Internees did not have the right to have their appeal heard. They did not know how best to defend themselves because they were not told exactly why they had been interned. And detention orders, which authorised a person's internment under the National Security Regulations, did not provide a time limit for his or her detention. (p. 17)

All three brothers, along with many of their *paesani*, including Giuseppe's brother-in-law Giovanni, served most of their internment time (approximately one year) in the purpose-built Cowra, NSW, camp and were then released to the Manpower Authority to work wherever directed. Giuseppe was not allowed to return to Queensland until May 1944.

Giuseppe's internment dossier appears to bring together much of what the authorities knew of him to that point, including his passport, his application for naturalisation and another application to include his son's name on the naturalisation certificate (notably not his daughter's); his seven-and-a half years' service in the Italian army, '1912/1920', i.e. from his national service throughout and post-World War One; the assault case and the police sergeant's objection to his naturalisation; his conduct in the Cowra camp, noted as good, although he never volunteered for work while there; his failure (along with a number of others) to lodge an objection to his detention due to the influence of a well-educated Italian man known to them all who convinced them 'their appeals would be quite hopeless and very expensive in any event' (NAA: A367, C25865, p. 55); and his conduct while working in the Underbool Salt Works under the authority of Manpower, following his internment, where his objection to the further loss of freedom became very apparent.

The Manpower Authority was established in early 1942 with a remit to direct and co-ordinate all labour resources throughout the country. 'Its powers were both dictatorial and comprehensive' (Saunders 1997, p. 83). It can be seen in Giuseppe's file how comprehensive its powers were in the bureaucratic merry-go-round involving the Manpower Authority, the Security Service, the Swiss Consul-General and the sympathetic Member for Kennedy, C.G. Jesson, in parallel with the personal pleas written by Giuseppe himself, his teenage son Sebastian and Jesson, which make for interesting and poignant reading. Manpower was able to simply ignore or flat-out refuse requests from Parliament House Queensland and even from the national Security Service. An example can be seen in this telegram from Sebastian to Jesson in November 1943:

THANKS A LOT FOR EVERYTHING. HAVE BEEN ILL. SECURITY WILL  
RELEASE DAD. MANPOWER WILL NOT. CAN YOU HELP FURTHER.  
(NAA: A367, C25865, p.22)

The letters from Sebastian and replies from Jesson are embedded in the novel, not least because they have the distinct flavour of the time, but also to capture the feelings of powerlessness and futility of those affected, even at times the politician. A short quote from one of schoolboy Sebastian's letters, written in December 1943, almost two years after

Giuseppe's capture, while at home alone cutting cane on school break, evokes sympathy then and now.

I sat for the Senior Public Examinations this year, and if possible I wish to continue at the University, my idea being of taking up Medicine. Well, as I am by myself here you must realise that it is not possible to fix up things. You see the necessity of my father's presence. If it is not possible for a permanent release from the place in which he is now working, a short release of even one month would be – well, it would be wonderful, and we could fix up things and talk over possibilities, and careers. (NAA: A367, C25865, p. 19)

Jesson followed up with the Director General of Security more than once, becoming more insistent about the 'anomaly' of naturalised Giuseppe's internment:

You will remember this is the man whose motherless son has been at the Charters Towers school for two years and is at the mercy of any friends or relatives willing to take him in for the school holidays or other times. I wrote to you several months ago regarding this man and you told me that you would revoke his restriction order and allow him to return to Queensland where his son could join him and go to school here [sic]. (NAA: A367, C25865, p. 15)

A general Cowra camp security file contains documents relating to Giuseppe's request to the Official Visitor to the camp in December 1942. Official Visitors were representatives of the International Red Cross, overseen by justices of the Supreme Court, who regularly inspected the camps and received the complaints and requests of naturalised prisoners, as per the Geneva Convention. Giuseppe had requested a maintenance allowance to support Sebastian to complete his secondary education at Mt Carmel College, Charters Towers. He informed the Official Visitor that Sebastian had nothing to live on so was cutting cane and had sustained a work injury which had put him in hospital. Bearing in mind that only a couple of years earlier, Sebastian had been awarded a scholarship and a renewal of it for his education at the college in Charters Towers, the response from the Deputy Director of Security for Queensland bears quoting:

As the son is capable of earning, no consideration will be given to the internee's application for maintenance for the purpose of providing him with an advanced education. Moreover, as the son has turned 18, early action will be taken for his call-up for some form of national service. (NAA: SP1714/1, N45633, p. 75)

Sebastian did subsequently present himself for military service, as directed, but was sent home after four days because he was pronounced medically unfit due to his missing rib and the large scar and indentation the childhood surgery had left on his lower back.

### **Leonardo's internment files 1942–1944**

Leonardo's main dossier contains documents mostly relating to two issues: the use of secret writing in the correspondence between him and his wife, and his health problems after release from the camp while working as a charcoal burner in Mendooran, western NSW, as directed by Manpower. The file opens with Cowra camp internal mail reporting that he appears to be annoyed with his wife for not understanding the message he sent her in 'secret' writing, i.e., to enclose letters in parcels. Quoting from the translated letter from Leonardo to his wife:

After a long while I received your parcel which contains trousers, coffee, sugar, soap, tobacco, cigarette paper & tea – which please do not send any more – & biscuits which arrived in powder form. You told me that you had understood everything but I see you have understood nothing. (NAA: C123, 21505, p. 3)

The suspicious Leonardo also asked his wife to number her letters and to mention the dates when acknowledging receipt of his letters.

Leonardo had come to Australia at the age of 15 to cut cane with grown men. In his first cutting season he had cried himself to sleep every night, according to family accounts, but had then gone on to work extremely hard to establish himself independently of his older brothers. He moved to another sugar town (Innisfail), became entrepreneurial in small business, married and fathered two children before internment (and one more afterwards). He was more than a little indignant to find himself a prisoner of the country he had not only

adopted but embraced. He first registered his protest as a signatory to a letter of April 1942 addressed to the Consular Agent (Consul-General) of Switzerland, who advocated for Italians during the war. It detailed the Italian detainees' objections to the arrangements and treatment at Stuart Creek gaol, where they were held in very bad conditions until they were transferred to a camp. Their list of complaints included 'detestable food', no bathing for 11 days, insufficient drinking water, no bedding at all, insects, rats and overflowing latrines close to the women's accommodation. The protracted detention of so many internees at a place unfit for purpose was a product of the cumbersome arrangements between civil and military police during wartime. As mentioned, the Army generated the detention orders and the civil police made the arrests, then the Army assumed custody. This meant detainees could be kept in substandard conditions for an unspecified period of time without appearing before a magistrate. It was controversial enough to bring about an official inquiry. The inquiry dossier, which lists Leonardo as a signatory, is held in the National Archives (NAA: MP508/1).

Leonardo also corresponded with the Swiss Consul-general when he was out of the camp but still under the authority of Manpower, which directed him to work as a charcoal burner in Mendooran in western NSW. The German and Italian internees working in this remote place lived in a camp in the forest where they processed the charcoal, which was needed as a fuel source when there was petrol rationing during the war (Curby & Humphreys 2002). This time, Leonardo's complaint was that his poor health (due to having only one kidney) was being made worse by the cold climate and the difficult working conditions (NAA: C123, 21505). Despite doctors' certificates confirming his poor health, and a letter from his wife to the consul specifying the problem was with the kidney operation site, his pleas to be moved to a warmer climate were refused for most of that year, until he was finally allowed to return to Queensland.

Orazio's internment file is unremarkable, meaning there are no reports on his behaviour, health or politics, but it does reveal that he revisited Italy in 1932, the year he applied for naturalisation, and returned in 1933. It also reveals that by this time the father of the three interned brothers was deceased. Orazio's birth registration in the *Registro Degli Atti di Nascita* of 1907 is annotated with a record of his marriage to Angela R. in Catania province

on 12 August 1933, so he probably returned to marry. In any event, it may be inferred that Orazio was a less troublesome prisoner than his brothers. Orazio's birth record also reveals their sister Venera was his twin.

### The children's arrival

There are two files under Sebastian's name in the NAA. The first is a two-page Personal Statement and Declaration by his aunt Venera on arrival in Fremantle in September 1935 (NAA: BP9/3). Orazio's twin sister brought Giuseppe's children along with her own son to Queensland from Sicily. A family-held hand-written certificate of Sebastian's birth in Mascali states that it is *per uso di emigrazione all' estero* (for the use of emigration abroad). It is dated 18 December 1928, i.e., three years after his birth but just a month after the Mt Etna eruption that destroyed Mascali, suggesting there was an intention for the children and possibly Ildegonda to emigrate then, yet the children did not come until 1935 and Ildegonda never came. The reason for the change of plan is unknown.

Writing about the migrant condition as represented in New Zealand author Yvonne du Fresne's work, Nina Nola describes the disconnects and dislocations experienced by migrant children. 'As it is for most children of ethnic minority cultures in New Zealand, life ... is punctuated by dislocations between home and school, between private and public, individual and communal experience' (Docker & Fischer 2000, p. 205). Borrie (1954), too, comments on the different worlds migrant children had to negotiate daily and how they rapidly became bilingual. Even when their Italian parents remained essentially unassimilated ... 'Their children quickly adopted a dual role: they were Italians at home and Australians at school' (p. 95). This would prove true for Sebastian's life, especially once he was enrolled on scholarship in a Catholic boarding college 260 kilometres from home and was less influenced by the Italian community and more by Anglo Australians. In addition, he had the added dislocation between life with his mother in Sicily and life with his father in Australia. Had he left school earlier, gone to work with his father and uncles and married within the Sicilian-Australian community, or even within the North Queensland community, he may not have felt the need to shake off his migrant background



and consciousness, as he would do eventually, like Eric Baume's character Mario Zorbella in the novel *Burnt Sugar*, who reinvents himself as Mark Zabler (Baume 1938).

### Sebastian's public examination results 1940–1943



*Fig. 13. Macknade public school, 1936. Private collection.*

Published results (*Cairns Post* 25 January 1940, p. 3) show Sebastian was among the Ingham group of students awarded a State Scholarship in 1940 (aged 15). This was quite an achievement for a student who had arrived in Australia aged 10 speaking no English at all and having been home-schooled by his schoolteacher mother in Sicily. The published State Junior Examination results of 1942 (*Cairns Post* 26 January 1942, p. 2) show he was included in the Mt Carmel College Charters Towers group with good grades (a mix of As and Bs). However, the published Senior Uni Examination results of the following year (*Northern Miner*, 24 December 1943, p. 3) for Mt Carmel College show a marked decline in his grades, with no As and only one B. This is telling, as it was the year he was



advocating for his father's release and was spending what time he could cutting cane so he could buy books and uniforms, as he explained in his letters to MP C. J. Jesson and the Director General of Security (NAA: A367, C25865 pp. 18, 42). Sebastian did gain admission to university but was accepted into dentistry rather than realising his dream of studying medicine.

### **Sebastian's alien file 1945–1949**

The larger (19-page) file on Sebastian (NAA: BP25/1) is all related to his status as an alien under the Aliens Registration Act 1939, which mandated that all aliens report to their local police. It opens with two 'Return to Sender' envelopes containing letters reminding him of his alien status and obligation to notify police each time he changed employment and/or address, which as a young single student almost 1500 kilometres from home, taking on temporary labouring jobs, he was doing quite often. Although the Act was repealed in January 1948 after the passing of the Aliens Act 1947 (Australian Government Federal Register of Legislation at [legislation.gov.au](http://legislation.gov.au)), they are dated 1949, when he was long gone from Queensland and living in Sydney under the impression that his inclusion on his father's naturalisation certificate in July 1945 had exempted him.

Other contents of the file include police reports of interviews at his various places of residence and correspondence chasing him up over this issue, along with officials' decisions not to take any action for the perceived breaches. These pursuits by the Immigration Department continued until 1949, despite the repeal of the Act and even though he was made available for military service by Manpower and in his Mobilisation Attestation Form had stated that he was a naturalised British subject by virtue of being added to his father's certificate (NAA:BP25/1, p. 10). This file reveals how a young man who had come to Australia aged 10, received almost all of his education to tertiary level in Queensland, had presented himself for military service in the Australian armed forces and had been added to his father's naturalisation certificate, was constantly reminded by police that he was an enemy alien up to four years after the war had ended and six years after Italy had surrendered.

## **A final note ... A Grateful Nation Expresses its Thanks 2005**

A frame-worthy certificate signed by Prime Minister John Howard and Federal Member for Kennedy, Bob Katter, along with a covering letter from Katter, with no shred of irony, thanks a long-dead Giuseppe ‘for your service in contributing to Australia’s effort in World War II’. Rosa B. received the same certificate thanking her ex-internee deceased husband.

## **In conclusion**

The primary sources documenting significant events in this family story of almost a century ago, some of which was kept secret at the time due to ongoing resentment and shame, along with a cultural tendency to ‘leave the past in the past’, have been presented here accompanied by snapshots of the broader historical context wrapping around the family story. Taken together, these sources demonstrate the representativeness of their experiences in the history of Italian immigration to North Queensland as well as revealing something of the research process in putting together the facts of the story, i.e. the gathering and interpretation of data. These grey literature sources stand as real-life markers around which to build a historically informed narrative, a restorying, that necessarily also relies on fictional in-fills and character rendering to create a whole. They bring raw evidence of personal experience to the broader, impersonal historical narratives about the era and place. They also demonstrate how public records, together with family oral history, epistolary records and memorabilia, can be placed into a historical context constructed from scholarly work to support the creative retelling of a bare-bones story with broader meaning than merely a history of one family. The next chapter explains the creative practice-led narrative inquiry research methods and describes the project development as an emergent process in which the novel and the exegesis were written in tandem.

## Chapter 5: Research Methods – an emergent process

*“Instead of being caught up inside the machinery of your own thinking, you can stand outside it, and see the process happening one step at a time.” ~ Kate Grenville (2001)*

This chapter explains the methodological framework and process behind gathering data and the creative crafting of this data into a historical fiction while simultaneously recording and reflecting on the relationship between the research, the data and creative storying. As a life writing project, it adopts a qualitative, creative practice-led/based research method to develop both the historical novel and the exegesis. As with any life writing project, the novel aims to express subjective reality and meaning in an account of lived experience with rich description at its heart. The project’s ontological position is therefore one of relativism (O’Leary 2017) in which meaning emerges and evolves as it is shaped by context and character. Relying on description, engagement and immersion, as might be expected of a novel, it takes a subjective, emic epistemological approach to reality (Harris 1976), i.e. arising from the perspective of cultural insiders, allowing for multiple realities (O’Leary 2017) to be expressed through the ways in which characters experience life and deal with those experiences. As the primary driver of the project is to relate the lived experience of individuals, a family and community in a particular time and place, the creative practice and the exegetical work focus on generating knowledge, insight and understanding through conscious restorying (Connelly and Clandinin 2006). In restorying past lives, it explores subjective experience with relationships as the primary focus.

As a creative practice-led/based project, with these terms used more or less interchangeably (Niedderer and Roworth-Stokes 2007), realised through narrative, the development of both the creative work and the exegesis has been able to evolve and to be emergent (Marshall and Rossman 2014, Connelly and Clandinin 1990) through a sustained symbiotic relationship between data gathering, research and creative practice. The creative component, a fact-informed historical fiction set in Sicily and North Queensland between World Wars One and Two, seeks to convey some understanding of what life was like for immigrant families like my own ancestors as they endured protracted separation from their loved ones and traditional culture, racist treatment by the host community, economic struggle and other hardships. The narrative relies on a set framework of factual records of

events in their lives, seen hermeneutically in context in the previous chapter, along with artefacts and epistolary elements. These set data are complemented by fictional infills that serve to create a seamless narrative structure that brings the characters to life on the page.

The project's ontological position is based on demonstrating, through an account of the research process and the creative production, that this story, while not entirely 'real', is not unrepresentative of the era, locale and community. As for fictional data contributing to truth in such a combination of fact and fiction (truth and untruth), the epistemological nature of fiction is complex and multi-factorial, as discussed by Kafalenos (2011), in that a third person narrator's commentary may be considered 'true' by an immersed reader in a way that fictionalised or purely fictional characters' comments may not. In seeking truth through a historical novel such as this, the story needs to do more than earn the narrative trust of the reader; it must also be faithful to what we know as historical fact. To be not so much true as not untrue to historical evidence. Wiklund-Gustin (2010) takes a slightly different but related slant: 'Narrative truth is something different from empirical truth ... narratives could be described as "truthful fictions" linked to making sense out of an experience rather than corresponding to empirical facts' (p.35).

### **Narrative inquiry: storying and restorying**

As with any historical novel, whether about historical figures or unknown people in a historical context, the aim of my creative work is to tell a story of lived experience. While narrative inquiry is a common methodological choice for researchers in the social sciences, history, medicine and law (Bresler 2006, Clandinin 2006, Kim 2015), for research-informed novel writing it is, of course, especially appropriate. At its most basic it is a story-telling methodology (Clandinin & Caine 2013, Mitchell & Egudo 2003) as a way of understanding experience. As narrative inquiry pioneers Connelly and Clandinin (1990) write, '... humans are story-telling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. Thus, the study of narratives is the study of ways humans experience the world' (p. 2). Bresler (2006) states '... what distinguishes the aims and processes of qualitative inquiry from other forms of research is the quest for ... empathic understanding' (p. 25).

According to Mitchell and Egudo (2003), narrative method ‘is said to be well suited to study subjectivity and the influence of culture and identity on the human condition’ (p. iv). As a story of major life changes brought about by emigration, separation from loved ones and from the culture of birth, change of citizenship, and rejection and betrayal by the adopted culture, there is in this story a strong theme of the influence of culture and identity on the human condition, albeit expressed through a semi-fictional lens.

On the use of storytelling in research, Kim (2015) writes, ‘Metaphorically speaking, each narrative inquiry is a quilt made out of pieces of personal and social stories that may be collected from any walk of life’ (p. xv). An education academic and practitioner, Kim discusses the narrative mode of thinking in opposition to the paradigmatic mode, which is influenced by positivism and pervades quantitative research methodologies, seeking unambiguous answers by testing reasoned hypotheses. Narrative mode, on the other hand, in seeking to understand human experience through storytelling and locating the story or stories in a time and place – as with a historical novel – embraces all the complexity and ambiguity of human experience. It accommodates differing and conflicting values, feelings, goals and perceptions. While the paradigmatic mode is rigid and looking for certainty, the narrative mode is flexible and open to interpretation – by the reader or audience in the creative arts. Rather than a provable, reproducible and transferable truth produced by the paradigmatic mode, narrative mode seeks to produce ‘rich nuances of meaning’ (Kim 2015, p. 11), which is exactly what a novel seeks to do. Kim also discusses the use of ‘interdisciplinary interpretive lenses’ (2015, p. 11). In my research these include literary studies (both fiction and non-fiction), history, ethnology and popular culture studies.

In disciplines such as education and sociology, narrative inquiry is usually grounded in a co-operative relationship between researcher and subject (Connelly and Clandinin 1990), developed predominantly through interview, whereby the researcher draws out the subject’s story and works it into the research framework. The motivation is the desire to understand the other’s perspective (Bresler 2006). Interview can certainly be a method used in creative writing research that is not historical, both fiction and non-fiction, such as LeClerc’s (2018) PhD project on refugee narrative that resulted in her novel *All the Time Lost* (2018), for which she interviewed people from refugee backgrounds. Interview is also partially

applicable in a historical novel such as Owens' *Woolloomooloo Bad* (2019) for which the writer was able to collect data via unstructured interviews (chats) with surviving family members who had a good knowledge of the person the protagonist is based on. For this project's historical novel based on the stories of people who are no longer alive, with those who, as adults, knew them during the relevant period also no longer alive, the inquiry relies heavily on hard data such as surviving personal correspondence, official documents and other artefacts, along with soft data such as family and community lore.

Without access to living interviewees, the creative process involves a kind of imaginary 'interviewing' of the dead. If, as Mantel (2017) says in her BBC Reith lecture (*Can these bones live?*), the dead have something to tell us, beyond what is on record, we must interrogate them in our imaginations. Jones (2001, p. 3, cited in Leavy 2014, p. 31) argues that all qualitative researchers engage in a visualisation process as they assemble their participants' stories, creatively building a story with sets of visual impressions. The historical novel-writing process involves delving even further into imagination and 'living there' when writing. When I imagine my grandfather leaving everything he knew, including those he loved most dearly, I 'meet him looking alive' (Mantel 2017) only in my imagination to contemplate how that might have made him feel and then do my best to represent that on the page. When I 'ask' the brother he travelled with how crossing the seas for a new life felt for him, the 'answers' from a younger man with no wife and children to leave behind are, in my imagination, very different. Similarly, their experiences of the canecutting work, language difficulties and even internment are quite different, all of which is reflected in the novel.

To borrow Kim's metaphor of the quilt, my project is made out of pieces of personal and social stories (Kim 2015) that were lived experience and are on record. The pieces of pure speculation/fiction/imagination written to fill in the gaps in the narrative are created out of what Rodwell (2013) characterises as 'the deficit motivation for writing historical novels' (p. 136); simply put, the need to fill in the gaps in knowledge. They are what brings the narrative together in a cohesive whole and in doing so brings characters representing people who lived in the past alive on the page so the reader can understand and empathise (or otherwise) with them. The deficit model allows the writer to create interiority in the

characters well beyond the boundaries of known and recorded facts. As Mantel (2017) in her lecture puts it, ‘Evidence is always partial. Facts are not truth, though they are part of it – information is not knowledge.’ The knowledge a novel seeks to discover goes beyond the facts and the research results, to insight. In pursuit of insight and a coherent narrative, the deficit mode allows the writer of historical fiction to imaginatively create whole characters, settings and events while abiding by the unspoken contract to remain true to the known characters and events.

The methodology of narrative inquiry, then, of gathering small stories to form the larger story, and restorying to draw out thematic threads that lead to insight and empathy, is the most utile methodological approach to writing an account of lived experience of individuals, a family and a community from a past era, as in this project. Kim’s metaphor of the quilt is on point in describing how this story is put together using patches of known data, which are interpreted and worked into a whole by linking what is known and filling knowledge gaps with credible fiction, or ‘truthful fictions’ (Wiklund-Gustin 2010, p.35), while remaining as faithful as practicable to what is on record.

### **Practice-led/based research: in symbiosis**

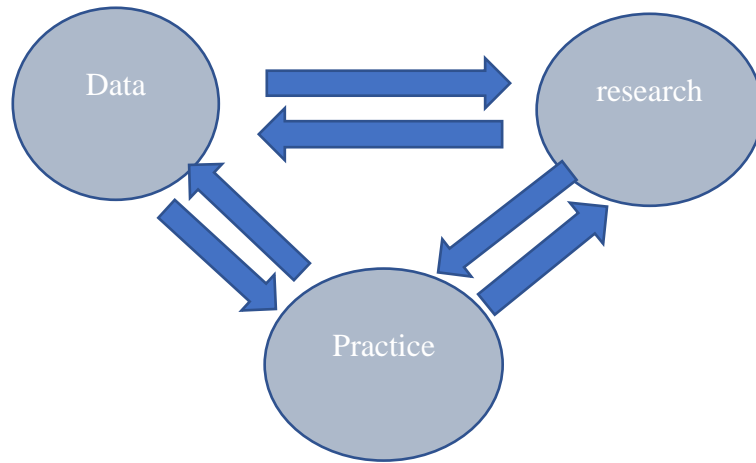
This is a creative practice-led project insofar as decisions about data gathering, research and its direction have arisen from developing the creative work; that is, ‘research *for* art practice’ (Owens 2018, p. 105). Similarly, with data discovered and generated along the way taking the creative practice in a particular direction, it is also research-led practice or ‘research *through* art practice’ (Owens 2018, p. 105). This reflects ‘the bidirectional influence between the process of research and the process of creative writing’ (Owens 2018, p. 117). Both imply creative practice *as* research when it leads to new insights. In discussing the relationship of practice and research in general, and the role of practice within research in particular, Niedderer and Roworth-Stokes (2007, p. 7) maintain that the terms ‘practice-based research’ and ‘practice-led research’ are used ‘more or less synonymously’. Arnold (2012) contracts the term to PL/BR (practice led/based research), stating that PL/BR research methodology ‘shows clearly that there is a dynamic relationship between theory and practice through recognising as academic knowledge the

practicum as well as the analytical' (p. 241). Another useful term is 'reflective practice' (Doloughan 2002, p. 60). Practice has its own momentum as it develops into a product, but in the academic context it is also reflected upon in parallel via textual analysis in the exegesis. The practitioner-researcher's task is to communicate the results of a process of inquiry that involves both the creative practice and the textual reflection in tandem.

Examples from the novel such as the volcano eruption and the flood show the workings of the relationship between creative practice-led research and research-led practice in a historical novel. I wanted to put historic events into my story both because my family members experienced them firsthand and for credible historicity, but not as impersonally voiced narrative constrained by the known facts. In the Etna eruption example, it made sense that a woman who was a prolific correspondent would write in detail to her absent husband about how they experienced such a significant event in their lives, which led me to gather data on the eruption. Together, the constructed narratives of scholarly literature and scratchy old film footage provided the raw material for creating a new narrative (a restorying) in which the detail of the data, in turn, advanced the creative practice, thus illustrating the symbiotic relationship between creative practice, data gathering and research. Similarly, I wrote the flood chapter in that same two-way process, working between the records of the event and how I was imagining my characters experiencing it. I fictionalised their part in it by having them shelter in the roof space of the Bemerside hotel and be thrown together with the Anglo Australians they would normally have little contact with, let alone such intimate contact. The character of Charlie the Malay, who is lost in the floodwater, is purely fictional to imbue the narrative with a poignant touch of 'these are real people this is happening to', which can be lost in the wave after wave of dramatic reporting and statistical analysis of such events. A further dimension to the writing of the flood chapter was that, as I was tackling that part of the novel, the 2022 record-shattering floods were occurring in the NSW Northern Rivers region, and through modern media we were all witness to the all-too-real and devastating effects of such a natural disaster; effects that are still being felt. (Coincidentally, the 2022 record-breaking rise of the water levels in Lismore was equal to that recorded in the 1927 Ingham flood: 14 metres.)

The symbiotic relationship between data, research and practice can be represented simply:





*Fig. 14. Symbiotic relationship between data gathering, creative practice and research.*

Data discoveries advance the narrative (the practice) but the narrative also leads to further data searching. Both lead to new insights. This dynamic relationship between data, practice and research, when it leads to new insights, can result in narratives of difference. My novel, as an example, building on the canecutter narrative sub-genre, offers insights into the hitherto largely unexplored experience of Sicilians in the sugar country. This sets it apart from the canecutter narratives in the Literature Review chapter, which overwhelmingly portray the experience of Anglo Australians or, in the case of historical fiction, South Sea Islanders. Many of these Anglo-centred narratives do not contain a single reference to Italian canecutters or famers, whose numbers even dominated in areas such as the Herbert and who were so successful in the industry. Sometimes, they include Italians as stereotypes and Southern Italians, in particular, as bearing out the racist tropes portraying them as violent and untrustworthy, when police and court records of the time do not support this (Borrie 1954, Henderson 1995).

The above examples, among several others in the novel, such as the voyage or the mafia-style attack, demonstrate the symbiotic relationship between creative practice, research and data collection, establishing its methodology as a creative practice-led/based project and a narrative of difference.

## Capturing truth: a moveable feast

If the aim of all research is to ‘capture truth’ (O’Leary 2017, p. 60), it begs the question, where can truth be found and what form does it take in a fictionalised life writing project where there can be no single valid truth since everything is nuanced and shaped by context and character? In responding to this, I suggest that representation of the lives of individuals must consider a multitude of variables and influences, a multitude of individual truths. As Mitchell and Egudo (2003) state, the postmodern constructivist view is that ‘reality is multiperspectival’ and ‘truth is grounded in everyday life and social relations’ (p. 1). The purpose of my novel was to capture and express, through character development, multiperspectival authentic truth, or natural truth (Banks and Andrew 2012) that emerged from a synthesis of imagination with methodical data collection and interpretation, including public and personal records, mixed with memory and personal understandings of character and relationships. My intention was to create a credible account of my characters’ experiences and emotions (Banks and Andrew 2012) according to what recorded data I have been able to uncover and lore that has been passed on within the family, blended with what I could produce from imagination and express in narrative restorying.

In historical fiction, characters, situations and events can be created from, for example, a fragment in an archival document, a photograph that tells a story or purely from imagination, providing they are authentically rendered within the historical context. As Brien (2006) argues, readers will soon identify a historical novel as flawed if it is historically or factually incorrect, or at least inauthentic. For the reader to sustain interest and faith in a historical novel, its representation of the historical context needs to satisfy in the terms of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability, which Lincoln and Guba (1985) prescribe as the gold standard in research. This is ‘the truce that historical fiction has negotiated between fact and creativity’ (Alghamdi 2018, p. 123) and reflects ‘the duality of purpose that is inherent in the genre – to depict a version of fact, and to tell a compelling story’ (Alghamdi 2018, p. 124). Rosenstone (2003) writes on the mixing of fact, near fact, displaced fact and invention in a historical film that it is

... not an attempt to reproduce a specific, documentable moment of the past ... it is a historical moment, one that claims its truth by standing in for many such

moments ... it serves to open out the story of one man to encompass those of others like him. (p. 16)

Arguably, the same can be said for this mix of fact, near fact and fiction in the historical novel genre.

Here I use the words ‘fact’ and ‘facts’ while acknowledging they can also be problematical, especially the facts of official records and reportage. Facts may be true epistemologically – as a simple example, Australians have 2.4 children on average – but not ontologically ‘true’, as there cannot be 0.4 of a child. Thus, facts are also limited, often need to be qualified and are very often contradictory. For example, in my data gathering I found that internment records, which can be considered fact to the extent that they are official records, quoted Giuseppe’s year of birth as 1903, when both his Italian passport and birth record taken directly from the online *Registro Degli Atti di Nascita* of Catania province show clearly it was 1893, which had to be true as the entry was made days after the birth. Facts may also be influenced by bias. For example, one internment official’s report on Giuseppe’s behaviour painted him as unco-operative, bad-tempered and difficult to manage while another official report commented that there were no complaints about him. In short, as ‘pieces of the quilt’, not all records (primary sources) can be considered truth in any absolute sense.

For the narrative to work as a realistic novel, the aim was for the ‘pieces of the quilt’ to be so integrated that there is no obvious division between what is on the record and what is fictionalised. For the reader or viewer, separating them in a novel or film should be as difficult as separating mayonnaise back to oil and egg (Mantel 2017). Banks and Andrew (2012) write about ‘fictionised truths in a factual framework’ and about writing in the ‘porous borders’ between fact and fiction, which they describe as ‘a rich interstitial zone between nonfiction and fiction’ (p. 1). In this project, writing in those ‘porous borders’ is demonstrated through the examples of the eruption and the flood mentioned in the previous section. In writing the letter about the eruption, I drew on my grandmother’s postcards and letters and my own imagination to invent or ventriloquise (Jeffries 2012, cited in Alghamdi 2018, p.121) her voice. I also mined a rich vein of data about the event found in scholarly literature (Chester et al 1999, Duncan et al 1996) along with actual film footage (Etna in

Eruption 1928, 2014) and a modern animated 3D reconstruction (Vecchia Mascali 2013) to fashion her account to her husband half a world away. In the letter, she describes the behaviour of neighbours, other townsfolk and the soldiers sent by Mussolini to help with evacuation during the disaster. Fortunately, Chester et al. (1999) and Duncan et al. (1996) relate anecdotes and eye-witness accounts of the reactions and behaviours of the townspeople, and the response of Mussolini's government to the historic disaster. This provided narrative data I was able to fictionalise and restory in the letter. In the writing process I had the strong sense of working in the 'interstitial zone between fact and fiction', toing and froing between my imagined grandmother's account and the scholarly narratives and film footage.

Similarly, in the chapter that describes the record-setting (to this day) 1927 flooding of the Herbert River region of North Queensland, real-life accounts are woven into the fictional experience of my characters only a year after they arrived in Queensland. As mentioned, there is extensive newspaper reporting of the disaster digitally available in Trove and my grandfather's black-and-white snapshot of high floodwater outside the Lion Hotel, Macknade, kept for half a century, suggests it was a big event in his life. It was not too much of a stretch to imagine my characters sheltering on the roof of the Seymour Hotel in Bemerside among the reported 120 people who were in real life marooned on that roof and in the ceiling space for at least a day and a half ('THE INGHAM FLOOD DISASTER. EYE-WITNESS TELLS GRAPHIC STORY. FEARFUL LOSSES AT BEMERSIDE. MANY THRILLING ESCAPES RECORDED', reported in *The Northern Miner* 23 February 1927, p. 4), and to have my characters fictionally witness from that distressing vantage point some of the reportage of the time. These examples illustrate how natural or authentic truth, or 'truthful fiction', may be sought and expressed in historical fiction. They also illustrate the faithful use of recorded data restoried with 'fictional truths' while maintaining the factual framework and sustaining for the reader 'the truce that historical fiction has negotiated between fact and creativity' (Alghamdi 2018, p. 123).

## **Ethnology: the personal in the cultural**

Writing this family story, albeit semi-fictionalised, and its framing theorisation, the exegesis, has an ethnological impulse at its heart. Agnidakis (2018) writes, ‘Ethnology’s focus on individuals as cultural beings implies a focus on culture as a connecting link between single individuals, who are united more or less consciously. This, according to ethnologists, creates a sense of belonging and togetherness’ (p. 3). In researching and writing this project I have experienced quite strongly this sense of belonging and togetherness with my deceased grandparents, whom I never knew, and my father in a period of his life well before I was born. While it is a story based on them, the process of researching and writing it has also been a personal exploration of cultural and social identity indirectly or by extension in the creative work and directly in the exegetical component. My experience of discovering family secrets, conducting further investigations to gather data, interpreting this data by putting it into historical and cultural context, as in the previous chapter, and realising a representativeness in the immigrant experiences of my family in the North Queensland sugar-country culture, as well as how these experiences impacted on the following generations, was the impetus for the project. Discussing the stories passed on through families, Goodall (2005) states that this ‘narrative inheritance’ (p. 492) provides us with a framework for understanding our own identity through the stories of those who preceded us. I would add that recovering their forgotten lives (Brien & Eades 2018) to find new insights through a historical and ethnological lens provides an opportunity to pay unsentimental homage to their sacrifices that benefited so greatly the generations who followed.

There is also a focus in the novel on the cultural values of the emigrant community my grandfather belonged to in North Queensland, including how those values sometimes worked against them. An example in the novel of the conversion of traditional norms and values into shared beliefs embodied in social interactions and situations (Agnidakis 2018) is the chapter about the cane gang’s flouting of the union rule that cooks must be male, and the consequences of their recalcitrance. As Henderson (1995) argues, it went against their cultural norms to have a male doing the cooking, which they saw as women’s work, when he could be cutting cane. I have also written into the chapter their preference for not only a woman cook but an Italian woman cook. On the Sicily side, I have explored some

differences in cultural norms between the south and the north of Italy. As an example, the character loosely based on my grandmother, a northerner, becomes mired in a life-changing situation due to her trust in the professionalism of a doctor, who was also the husband of her best friend. As a woman from the ‘progressive’ north (Gabaccia & Iacovetta 2002), she welcomed his house calls to attend her convalescent son, when in ‘backward’ Sicily (Gabaccia & Iacovetta 2002) it was unacceptable for a respectable woman to be alone with a man who was not family. The consequences were seen by her Sicilian mother-in-law and village locals as her own fault, although it must be said that in Fascist Italy generally, with its return to conservative values, women who were victims of sexual assault were automatically regarded as provocateurs (De Grazia 1992).

Ethnology focuses on the micro levels of societies ... ‘the mundane and trivial cultural expressions in the everyday lives of individuals’ (Adams et al 2017, p. 10). Clearly, a realistic novel deals in moments of everyday experience as well as out-of-the-ordinary experiences that can help to make it a compelling read. A captivating novel evokes visual images, smells, sounds, facial expressions and, most importantly, feelings. Readers are interested in what characters look like, how they see, hear and think, and how they feel about it – their anguish and their excitement; for many readers, all the more so if the characters exist in a historical setting. Rosenstone (2003) contends that ‘... most people now get their knowledge of the past, once school is over, from the visual media’ (p. 10). Similarly, historical fiction in print media plays its part. The enduring hunger for historical series, films and books is clear evidence of a common desire to know how people behaved, where they lived, what they wore and ate – all the everyday cultural minutiae as well as the big events in their lives. The ethnological dimension to the portrayal of an ethnic group in this project is the interpretation of not just the everyday personal values of individuals, but also the ethnic values they share within their cultural group (Ubaydullaevna 2021).

Thus, as a representation of a cultural group that my own family were part of and, and as an attempt to reclaim their forgotten lives and, with them, my own cultural heritage, this project was inspired and propelled to some extent by an ethnological impulse.

## Genre: narrative form

A primary methodological consideration for the project was the selection of an appropriate creative writing genre through which to tell the story as well as a suitable investigative process to identify, organise and integrate relevant historical data and evidence. The chosen, perhaps obvious, creative form was historical fiction, not least because it is a genre I enjoy reading and viewing. Hilary Mantel (2017) said in her BBC Reith lecture (*Can these bones live?*, ‘...if we want to find the dead looking alive we turn to art’. She went on to say ‘... we sense the dead have a vital force still – they have something to tell us, something we need to understand. Using fiction and drama, we try to gain that understanding.’ While definitions of historical fiction abound among scholars such as Lukács (*The Historical Novel* 1937), Fleishman (*The English Historical Novel: Walter Scott and Virginia Woolf* 1971) and De Groot (*The Historical Novel* 2010), I rely on that by the Historical Novel Society:

To be deemed historical (in our sense), a novel must have been written at least fifty years after the events described, or have been written by someone who was not alive at the time of those events (who therefore approaches them only by research). (Stocker 2017, p. 74)

My creative work satisfies this definition as it is set in the period between the World Wars and I was not alive at that time so can only write about it by research. It also bears other characteristics said to typify the genre by theorists such as Fleishman: for example, that it should include real events and historical figures. Or, as Fleishman (1971) puts it, ‘When life is seen in the context of history, we have a novel; when the novel’s characters live in the same world with historical persons, we have a historical novel’ (p.3). Althea Reed (cited in Brown 1998), on the other hand, characterises fictions *about* historic figures, i.e., those wanting to reveal the true character of important figures of history, as ‘historic fiction’, distinguishing such works from ‘historical fiction’ that does not include or is not predominantly about historically important figures. A generic or subgeneric distinction may be useful, although there is clearly a scale of fame or infamy. For example, the Tudor king and queens of Hilary Mantel’s trilogy tower over Hannah Kent’s anti-heroine Agnes Magnúsdóttir (Kent 2013), who achieved infamy in her native Iceland. However, there is

not yet clarity around how a scale of fame/infamy could inform decisions distinguishing historic and historical fiction, and perhaps it would be a good topic for investigation.

In line with Fleishman's comments about 'historical persons', my novel includes references to figures such as Italian Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini, not so well-known but nonetheless infamous Italian general Luigi Cadorna, and certainly less known but reported in many records, Queensland MLA Cecil George Jesson, even embedding in the novel real letters written to and by Jesson. I have also included real people who were not famous but have been written about in more obscure arenas. An example is Ernesto Genoni, a follower of Rudolf Steiner and pacifist who went to the World War One front in both the Australian and Italian armies, serving as a stretcher bearer in Pozieres (Paull 2014). He later made a name for himself as a pioneer of biodynamic agriculture in Australia (Paull 2013). In a search of shipping passenger lists I discovered that Genoni travelled to Australia on the same voyage as my grandfather (NAA:K269 1926), so I restoried him as the man named Ernesto who befriended Giuseppe on the ship and helped him out of a tense situation on their arrival in Fremantle. I have also fictionalised some well-known local figures of the time in North Queensland, so the Irish priest who did much to help the Herbert region Italian community, Father Kelly, is written into the story as Father Murphy, and the compassionate young doctor in the novel is based on Doctor Gordon Morrissey, who served the Ingham community for almost half a century.

These historical events and figures, well-known and not so well-known, help to form a scaffolding of historicity. Writing real people like the biodynamics philosopher, the priest, the doctor and the politician into this semi-fictional story also pays homage to their benign influence in the real world of their time, and as characters in this story of hardship, hurt and shame. They are figures of genuine compassion in difficult times and represent a fictional strategy to invest human kindness as a moral balance to the cruelties and misfortunes that many of the characters experience at the hands of individuals, groups and institutions such as the media and officialdom. While working as an immigrant canecutter was a harsh existence, life was by no means joyless. These real historical figures were selected as characters in the fiction to attest to their positive historical influence and to reflect the



psychological and moral complexity of human existence that is a central objective of all life writing. In this, they satisfy both an historical and an artistic imperative.

### **Subgenre: particularity of narrative form**

My creative work is also situated within a subgenre of Australian writing and popular culture that has been hitherto unexplored. I have identified and analysed this subgenre as ‘canecutter narrative’ in my Literature Review chapter of this thesis, which has been adapted and published as a journal article (Boyne 2022). Taking in novels, plays, memoirs, verse and song, as well as visual arts, it is a cross-genre subgenre characterised by common themes, subject matter, figures and motifs (Smith 2007) particular to the pre-mechanisation sugar country culture and lifestyle. My characters are typical Italian migrants who came to North Queensland through the well-established system of chain migration to work as canecutters and who experienced all the hardships common to so many in their cultural group. These hardships included, first and foremost, separation from loved ones due to the canecutter lifestyle of seasonal and sometimes itinerant work, along with family-unfriendly accommodation in barracks during the cutting season, and boarding houses and work camps in the off-season. The nature of human relationships lies at the heart of all life writing (Brien and Eades 2018) and it is certainly the primary focus of my novel. The story offers insight into how not only emigration generally but the canecutter lifestyle, in particular, affected families. It explores the impact of the geographic separation they experienced, both in establishing themselves and later due to the disproportionately high rate of internment of the sugar-country Italians, in inevitably changing the nature of their marital and family relationships, sometimes to the point of breakdown, as in the experience of my family.

The genre of historical fiction and subgenre of canecutter narrative thus make up the overarching framework for the development of the creative component of this thesis. Insofar as historical fiction is associated with the aforementioned paradigmatic assumptions, it defines the macro-level framework of the project’s approach to the research question.

### Data collection: snowballing discovery

Owens (2016) argues, ‘...narrative inquiry offers a “bower-bird” methodology that embraces manifold sources and forms of data for the purpose of developing an engaging and credible story’ (p. 139). Arnold (2012) uses the cabinet of curiosities, which was the precursor to museums, as a charming metaphor for the world wide web and its potential as an academic research tool. She discusses the perceived value of hard (formal, serious, reliable) and soft (informal, personal, unreliable) data, and hard and soft methodologies (i.e., traditional scientific method in contrast to more exploratory method), and the legitimacy of a certain degree of chaos and messiness in research that can lead to serendipity. In a small way, the collection of family memorabilia that became some of the data for this project is a cabinet of curiosities containing materiality such as photos, postcards, shipping tickets, passports, school yearbooks and trophies won long ago. In addition to and complementing (sometimes explaining) these personal ‘curiosities’ is a trove of data discovered on the internet. To my knowledge, no one in my family has ever connected this data to form a coherent narrative. In fact, I found that living family members were unaware of most of it until I accessed those digitised records that included government archives (Australian and Italian) and vintage newspaper reports of academic achievements, criminal charges and a presumed mafia-style attack on my grandfather. My soft data, i.e., that collected informally, is largely family lore passed on by my Italian-born father, his now deceased sister and contemporary cousins who are descendants of my grandfather’s canecutter brothers. I have taken some of the personal letters and postcards as well as newspaper reports and the archived official government communications from my mini cabinet of curiosities and embedded them in the novel.

The data involves both primary and secondary sources. The empirical data are considered in detail in my Grey Literature Review chapter of this exegesis, where they are contextualised in the wider historical setting and so endowed with a degree of cultural representativeness in both the Sicilian and North Queensland settings. These are the fixed points of the story and help to form images of the real people on whom some of the fictionalised characters in the novel are based. The National Archives of Australia is a rich source of information about both immigration and internment, with the files of my grandfather and his two brothers filled with documents, letters, commentary by government

officials and records of appeal attempts. There are also large dossiers of more general documents and photographs relating to the Cowra internment camp and its day-to-day operation. I gathered much of this data before I began writing and have sourced more during the creative writing process as the need has arisen to advance the narrative, again reflecting the flexible and emergent nature of qualitative research and the synergetic relationship between creative practice, data gathering and research.

In a narrative, the setting – the ‘where’ and ‘when’ – is as important as the ‘who’, ‘what’ and ‘how’ (character and action), especially for context and atmosphere in a novel.

COVID-19 restricted my intended site visits to Fiumefreddo, Mascali and Messina in Sicily; fortunately, however, I have visited those towns in Sicily a number of times in the past, and tools such as Google Earth have been helpful in refreshing memories. However, Fremantle in Western Australia, Macknade, Halifax, Ingham and Innisfail in North Queensland, Cowra in New South Wales where my grandfather was interned, and Underbool near Mildura in Victoria where he was sent by Manpower on his release, have been more accessible. Web-based research has been something of a substitute for some travel, complemented by impressions from past visits to Sicily. Site visits (or their online equivalent, along with remembered impressions) have contributed to descriptions of place and understanding of cultural traits and aspects, albeit at a distance in time of almost a century and coming from a different cultural background. While the original village of Mascali, my grandfather’s house in North Queensland, the Cowra internment camp and the Underbool salt works no longer exist as they were in the relevant period, there has been a strong impulse to gather any information and experience any remnant ambience first-hand.

Literature about social, political and historical contexts informing my novel is extensive and accessible, some of it analysed in the canecutter Literature Review chapter of this exegesis. In order to ‘meet the dead looking alive’ (Mantel 2017), the novel also benefits from data on the minutiae of daily life in the period, place, community and family. Apart from newspapers, magazines and periodicals of the time, film and sound footage, photographs and museum exhibits, a valuable and very specific resource for my project was the Herbert River Museum & Gallery, a small community museum in the sugar town of Halifax, near where my grandfather built his house. In the museum tradition, it is a genuine

cabinet of curiosities crammed with tableaux, implements, clothing and furniture of the period as well as historical literature, all dedicated to the canecutter lifestyle.

The process of data gathering has thus preceded and continued in tandem with developing the creative work. It has been largely carried out bower-bird style, putting together artefacts held by my family with what I have discovered using the internet. As a research aid, the internet has allowed the outward-opening serendipity of one discovery leading immediately to others, a process that pre-internet was grindingly slow and cumbersome.

### **Epistolarity: embedding data**

As mentioned, some of the primary sources have been embedded in the creative work in this project. Epistolarity advances the story in different ways. It is not an epistolary novel in that the story is not all told through letters and other epistolary elements (Schweiger 2020), but rather these elements are scattered through the novel. The epistolarity in my novel is not limited to letters. As Schweiger (2020) states in discussing epistolarity in contemporary novels, ‘... they can be diverse and occur in a variety of forms, such as e-mails, post cards, posts on social media webpages, notes, telegrams, chat entries, memos, diary entries, transcripts of records, etc’ (p.7). The epistolary elements I have written into the novel are mostly in the form of letters, both personal and official, fictional and non-fictional, but I have also included telegrams and newspaper reports.

Real and fictional letters cover jumps in time, as the action of the novel takes place over twenty years. For example, the period between the protagonist leaving Sicily and working his first season cutting cane in Queensland is dealt with in a letter to his wife describing the voyage, his accommodation, his work and his impressions of his new country. The letters also allow the novel to pull back from omniscient narration and give direct narrative voice to characters, especially those not involved in the North Queensland action, such as the main protagonist’s absent wife and mother. Schweiger (2020) notes the change in narratological layers brought about by a novel’s use of epistolary elements in that ‘the external reader and the external writer of the letters are in a similar communicative situation as the characters in the novel’ (p. 18), which she characterises as meta-discursive.

Fictional letters can be a narrative technique that allows the introduction of ambiguity and mystery by making implications without clarification and by dropping hints that build over time. As examples from the novel, in Rosa senior's letters to her son she hints at the possibility of infidelity on the part of his wife, while his wife in her letters builds in the reader a low-level sense of suspicion and even dread around the narcissistic doctor's frequent visits and charm offensive directed at her and the children, even though she is ostensibly writing about what a good friend he is and how she trusts him. There is a certain symmetry in the final letter from Ilda to her son and daughter solving the mystery that has been building largely through the earlier letters.

Genuine letters sourced from archival records and family memorabilia add historicity because they were created at the time the novel seeks to portray, so provide a distinct flavour of the era. They also bring authentic voices into the story. As an example, I would not have imagined my somewhat macho-presenting father to have written the poignant words '...please remember that I am still longing to see daddy again', even at the tender age of eighteen, yet that is a direct quote from one of his original letters held in the National Archives and reproduced in full in the novel. The letter was a plea written to C.G. Jesson (MLA), his local member of parliament, advocating for his father's release from internment. The exchange of correspondence between the schoolboy (my father) and the politician (Jesson) is also an example of what Joy Damousi (2019) asserts in discussing the centrality of private letters in opening up and exploring the wider question of what ignites compassion towards others. The vulnerability and desperation of the teenage schoolboy, and the understanding and compassion they trigger in the politician, come through strongly in their respective missives.

Epistolarity has a particular function in historical fiction in the truth-versus-untruth (fact-versus-fiction) argument. It's a dichotomy that inevitably tends to be attached to the genre and can undermine its appeal to readers and potential readers. On the one hand, letters and other types of documents, through their self-revealing textual qualities – i.e. they are conscious textualisations - 'disclose themselves as words on a page' (McMullen 1990, p.407) and so act as signposts that the whole work is, after all, words on a page. Further, they also signal that this is one person's perspective, which may or may not hold truth. On

the other hand, letters ‘feel like’ truth because they present as something direct and spontaneous, unencumbered by interpretation or unreliable reporting, and were not created for posterity or even perhaps for other eyes. In this way, as a narrative technique, a letter has value over impersonal/omniscient narration because it is ‘a mimetic textual substitute for an absent past’ (McMullen 1990, p.407). In other words, it appears to be the past reaching through time to the present reader and so creates the impression of an uncontaminated authentic truth, whether its content was ever actually true or not.

Another effect of epistolarity is it allows the reader freer rein to interpret and ‘read between the lines’ without the narrator’s influence as mediator between the writer and the reader (Alber & Fludernik 2009). It also allows the narrator at times to not be present in characters’ lives, just as we are not present at everything that happens to the people we know. Often in the past, we discovered by letter or postcard that someone had become engaged, had a baby, died and so forth. These days, of course, it is more likely by email, text message or social media posts – modern epistolarity. The insertion of a letter or report in the novel provides a break from continuous narrative to a method that allows looking backwards to catch up, further enhancing realism in the historical novel. Epistolarity also utilises primary sources in a way that they remain primary, losing none of their original immediacy by being reported on or interpreted, but rather staying intact, frozen in time. They retain their materiality (Schweiger 2020) – albeit now in digital form.

In summary, the use of epistolary elements, both real and fictional, is a narrative method I decided to make good use of at the outset of the project. It has embedded in the novel historicity, materiality and diversity of voice. It has also covered jumps in time and provided relief from continuous omniscient narrative.

## **In conclusion**

This chapter has identified a methodological framework that comprises creative practice led/based research, expressed through narrative inquiry in the form of a fact-informed historical novel with an accompanying exegesis. It has described the data collection process and the use of some of that data as epistolarity within the novel to provide different voices,

bolster historicity and allow jumps in time. It has justified historical fiction as the genre that supports the creation of a realistic story of past lives, including a family history, albeit semi-fictionalised to provide a coherent structure and dramatic appeal. It has also discussed ideas of truth in historical fiction. The creative work has been identified as belonging to the canecutter subgenre, which is reviewed and analysed in detail in the Literature Review chapter of this exegesis. Importantly, this chapter has demonstrated the symbiotic relationship between data gathering, creative practice and research that has allowed a flexible, emergent research design and process to produce the novel and the exegetical reflection in tandem. The following chapter discusses what has been achieved in this thesis according to the original research aims and question, confirms the production of knowledge and identifies gaps that may be addressed in future research in this topic area.

## Chapter 6: Discussion and conclusion

Previous chapters have introduced this project as a thesis comprising an exegesis and a fact-informed historical novel. As a magazine journalist for most of my working life – apart from a few years of writing reports on industrial disputation for federal government – I, like many others, found the exegesis to be the most daunting aspect of undertaking this creative writing PhD. A vintage Honours degree in Australian Literature was no preparation. Predictably, I initially struggled with the purpose of the exegesis in the project, but as I completed chapters intermingled with the writing of the novel, it settled into its place in the thesis as a whole. Cosgrove and Scrivener (2017) elegantly encapsulate its place and purpose in a creative writing project:

The exegesis places a creative work within an academic context and demonstrates the reflective thinking that underpins a creative project. It provides a place where the creative author can critically situate their work within a broader context, demonstrate analytical tools and then argue for their work to be considered within those paradigms. It offers a clear site where the creative writer can make a case for the inclusion of their work within a larger creative canon. (p. 3)

The evolution of the exegesis over time has been described as shifting ‘from reflective text, to parallel text, to plaited text’ (Krauth 2011, p.7). My project has developed more or less as ‘plaited text’ in its two components, admittedly not so much out of conscious choice as out of the university requirements for mid-candidature and final year reviews and a preferred (rather than prescribed) choice of the two chapters presented at each review to be one from the creative work and one from the exegesis. Not only has this assisted in that ‘plaiting’ process and so has been helpful in understanding and developing the thesis as a whole, rather than having a separate or parallel focus on the two components, it has also initiated more constant toing and froing between the two components than might have occurred without the review protocol adopted in consultation with my wise supervisors. Similarly, within the novel, there is a gradual ‘plaiting’ of Sicilian and Queensland culture.

Chapter 1, which introduces the project, provides background and poses the research question and research aims, grew out of the original research proposal for consideration as



a PhD candidate. Chapter 2, the historical novel, *Letters from Sicily*, is the creative production. Chapter 3, the Literature Review, surveys the relevant reading undertaken before even beginning writing. It also brings the literature together to form a subgenre group characterised by common motifs (the sugar cane, the cane knife), figures (the cane cutter, the cane farmer, the cook) and themes (the hard work of canecutting, masculine strength and endurance, racism, mid-century politics). My historical novel belongs in this subgenre and occupies a unique place in it due to its main theme of family breakdown as a direct result of the canecutter lifestyle that drew immigrants to North Queensland in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Some of the works inspired and informed my own creative work. Chapter 4, the Grey Literature Review, opens my own cabinet of curiosities (Arnold 2012) to reveal and contextualise the existing public domain records that formed the hard data for my research and the backbone of my story. The purpose of the hermeneutic presentation in historical context was to implicitly show the representativeness and therefore the broader appeal of a family story. Soft data such as family lore and memorabilia does not get its own chapter, but it helped to form the story, filling some of the gaps in the preserved records and in some instances contradicting them; for example, in the different versions of how Giuseppe's assault charge came about.

This chapter, as the section for critical reflection on the project as a whole, is where I address '... the question of the justification for the very premises on which problems are posed or defined in the first place' (Mezirow 1990, p. 8). It argues how this thesis has posed and responded to the research question and how it has met the above criteria articulated by Cosgrove and Scrivener, while identifying the knowledge contributed along with suggested areas in which further work might be done. Here, it is useful to revisit the research question, which has itself evolved and devolved over time from a question that was accepted in the original research proposal, to one the review panels found lengthy and unwieldy, to one that is more succinct but still addresses the same issues and requires the same solutions. Thus, it went from:

- How can family breakdown, anger and shame be represented in a historical novel that brings together the lived experiences of Sicilian migrants, the wider historical and cultural context of both Sicily and the Herbert River region of North

Queensland between the wars, and fictional speculation to fill the gaps and provide dramatic structure?

Investigating this question will involve exploring two further sub-questions:

- How will this novel uniquely contribute to, and be situated in, a sub-genre of Australian writing that can be identified and analysed as ‘canecutter narrative’?
- How can a creative practice-led research methodology support the development of a convincing fact-informed fictional account of this rural multi-ethnic community, and further develop scholarly knowledge of this sub-genre of Australian writing?

To:

- How can family breakdown, anger and shame be represented in a historical novel that brings together the lived experiences of Sicilian migrants, the wider historical and cultural context of both Sicily and the Herbert River region of North Queensland between the wars, and fictional speculation to fill the gaps and provide dramatic structure?

*(With the same sub-questions)*

To:

- How can creative practice-led research guide the writing of a fact-informed historical novel focused on Sicilian migration to North Queensland in the interwar period, resulting in family breakdown?

*(With one sub-question)*

- How will this novel uniquely contribute to, and be situated in, a sub-genre of Australian writing that can be identified and analysed as ‘canecutter narrative’?

I include this to explain, in part, how the question developed from one heavily centred on the artistic content as the basis of the project to one focused on the connection between research method and creative practice. The evolution of the question also shows the broadening of its scope to a more generalist, inclusive and less specific focus, which was also a concern expressed by review panellists. However, I would note here that the combination of characters' eastern Sicilian origins and the area in North Queensland (around Ingham, Macknade and Halifax) where they and their *paesani* clustered are factors in the knowledge produced by the project as it shines a light on this little-researched community, who contributed so much to the culture and history of the Herbert River region.

### **History, lore and fiction**

Writing this story has involved finding the ideal balance between historical fact (the broader historical context wrapping around the family story); so-called grey literature (the existing public domain records of individuals); family lore; and fiction. The initial driving impulse was to write a family story, triggered by the discovery of long-held startling secrets on my father's side of my family. There was too much information missing to write it as a purely factual family history or biography of my grandfather but, beginning with the National Archives of Australia and the Trove website, I gradually uncovered enough to set myself a brief: to write it as a historical fiction with some freedom to invent characters, events and situations, while remaining faithful to what was on record. A significant part of my reasoning was the realisation that the experiences of my Italian ancestors were representative of their wider immigrant cohort in North Queensland and so it would be more than a family story. I also wanted to be able to analyse the workings of the project, so undertaking it as both an academic and creative project, with scholarly guidance and encouragement, appealed. The challenge was to form the skeleton of the narrative from those known facts and flesh it out to make it an engaging story while being aware of how I was achieving this. Thus, there has been a running relationship between data gathering, creative practice and research (as shown in a simple graphic on page 289).

The choice of historical fiction eliminated other genres that might tell the same story differently. For example, speculative biography would likely have put all the focus on the

main character, Giuseppe, with the other characters being limited to those who were actually in his life. It would not allow the creation of purely fictional characters such as some of the other canecutters – Ivan the Russian and Tomislav the Yugoslav, for example. Nor would creative non-fiction without some sort of technique to point to that which is fictional or creative, Cottone's unborn narrator, Sotto (Cottone 2012) being an example. Taking a cue from writers such as Jean Devanny, particularly in her novel *Paradise Flow*, I brought these characters into the story to give a sense of the multiculturalism of North Queensland at that time, particularly among itinerant workers. Indeed, it was then one of the most multicultural parts of Australia (Douglass 1995, Henderson 1978). Gruff, mysterious Ivan the Russian also represents the 'square peg' type who often chased itinerant and seasonal work in regional settings where his strength and endurance for the work mattered far more than his back story.

There were several rumours about him: he was a Bolshevik, he had killed his wife's lover, or her brother, or sometimes her, but that could all be stupid gossip. They didn't even know if he had a wife and by now they all knew not to ask. (p. 64)

Yugoslav Tommy, who also chases itinerant work, is multi-lingual to represent how gangs of men of different nationalities might have coped linguistically. Although the gangs mostly comprised men of a single nationality (Elder 2023), multicultural groups existed, too, as depicted in the short story, 'Continental Cooking Among the Cane' (*The Australian Women's Mirror*, 25 April 1951). Having originally emigrated to New Zealand to work as a gum digger, as did large numbers of Dalmatians, Tommy also represents another example of occupational mass migration. Broadening the scope of the story to include such characters, along with other fictional elements to set the scene in a show-don't-tell manner, contributes to the sense of the representativeness of my family's emigrant experience.

### **Cultural identity**

Cultural identity and cultural difference are implicit issues in any discussion of emigration, especially in the context of two such different national cultures with many subcultural

nuances within both; for example, northern Italy in contrast to the Mezzogiorno or the sugar districts of North Queensland as opposed to Canberra, where life-changing decisions were made. In the Research Methods chapter, I write that the ethnological impulse to recover something of my family's Sicilian and North Queensland cultural identity was an important driver and focus for this project. In the novel, cultural values in everyday life are explored, such as Rosa's Sicilian superstitions, for example. As are the more significant clashes in cultural values that resulted in serious problems for people, such as the fictional attack on Carlo for his romantic interest in an Australian girl. Of course, in this case and others, racism on the part of 'Britishers', as Anglo Australians were known, often coloured issues that manifested as cultural difference. A more thoughtful and less racist explanation of the problem of cultural difference in romance and marriage was offered to Carlo by Giuseppe when, as a man not fully accepted by his northern Italian wife's family, he characterised marriage as a union of two families, not just the star-crossed lovers. He was speaking from his own experience and a desire to protect his brother from making what he felt would be a mistake. Including this in the story raises the issue of nuance in cultural difference; that expressions of difference do not always have naked prejudice behind them.

Cultural difference within a national culture is explored through the female characters, in particular. The traditional tension (Reeder 2003) between mother-in-law Rosa senior and daughter-in-law Ilda is exacerbated by their regional difference, with Ilda having more liberal and educated northern values and Rosa senior adhering to the strict southern mores. The unhappy culmination of this difference is Rosa and others blaming Ilda for the sexual assault by the trusted friend and doctor, which resulted in her pregnancy and, ultimately, the breakdown of her marriage and family. This tendency to blame the woman for her own downfall was supported not just in the south but in Italy generally at that time by the Fascist regime's reversion to traditional roles and rules for women (De Grazia 1992). The older Rosa tried to pass on the old ways to young Rosa, her granddaughter. An instance in the novel is the superstition around baking the *guastidduna* loaf at a time of year when it would 'bring bad luck to their house'. It annoys Giuseppe that his daughter has brought her nonna's old-world superstition to this new-world country, and he chastises her for it.

“Haven’t I – and your mother – told you many times that those old beliefs are silly, especially here, all the way across the world. Where do you get it from, anyway? Not from your mamma, I know that much.” (p. 163)

## Language

A very large part of cultural identity is, of course, language. I had to decide at the outset how I would handle the issue of language in the novel. I did not want to attempt to write stereotypical Italian accents that could come across as parodic, but clearly there would have to be a difference in the text between the language of the Italians when speaking their first language and when they were speaking English. I believe it becomes immediately apparent to the reader that when the language is fluent and grammatically acceptable, the characters are speaking their first language among themselves. On the rare occasion when they have to say something in English, their difficulty with what is to them a foreign language is indicated by halting, grammatically awkward, short sentences that express the bare minimum. Instances in the novel of the painful feeling of being completely locked out by language include the seizing of the brothers’ passports on arrival in Fremantle, the trial over the alleged assault of ‘The Woman’ and the detention for internment. During all these events, Giuseppe was powerless to ask the right questions and understand what was happening to him and why, and what action he needed to (or could) take.

Language and other cultural discrepancies allowed the creation of a bifurcate world in which ‘dago’ is alienating and pejorative while ‘*paesano*’ is warm and reassuring; relative independence in women is desirable in the new-world culture but undesirable in the home culture; a woman cook is the solution to an industrial logistics problem but trouble in the context of industrial regulations; a child has to take the lead for the parent and the parent relies on the child when there is a situation requiring fluent English; the child is Italian at home and Australian at school; and political inclinations to either the left or right can lead to exactly the same devastating effects on lives. In short, meaning is not fixed but changes according to context and which side of the cultural fence one is on.

## Narrative styles and techniques

With narrative inquiry as a basis of the research method, I have consciously chosen to develop the novel narratively with enough descriptiveness to give a sense of place, what people, objects and landscape looked like, and atmosphere. This has been commented on in a positive light by a panel reviewer and a supervisor, both historians, interestingly. (What is history if not narrative?) In fact, it was often helpful to have historians' input via supervision and review, particularly that from my Co-supervisor whose special interest is Italian history, given the creative work is a historical fiction about Italians set in the Mussolini era. As I was writing a story largely from a man's point of view, dare I say it was also useful to have male input from my Co-supervisor in noticing small details in the novel such as how much beard growth a man would have at the end of his first week on a sea voyage? The (his)story of the characters' lives in Australia, and how the canecutter lifestyle leads to first the fragmentation then the breakdown of their family is the focus of the research. However, the novel is also character driven to what I hope is a satisfying extent, including their physical appearance, dress etc. While Giuseppe is the main character and his point of view is the most preponderant in the novel, in the end it is a family story rather than that of one individual. By extracting fragments of their story from the records, adding in family lore and locating it in the wider historical and cultural context, I have traced the life choices they made and the situations and events that were not of their choosing but dramatically affected their lives, while employing fiction to create interiority in the novel, i.e. the characters' feelings around these choices and events. Examples of family lore that contributed to the portrayal Giuseppe's character were drawn from informal discussions with cousins who knew him from a distance when they were very young:

'He lived like a monk until he remarried. Didn't drink or gamble, rode his pushbike everywhere and always repaired everything. He never threw things out.' ... 'He was stern ... he looked cranky ... but he could suddenly be kind and friendly.' ... 'When we wanted to get married, Dad made us all get in the car and go down to Macknade [from Innisfail] so Uncle Joe could meet our intended. Dad always had to get his approval.'

In telephone conversations with two former canecutters of Italian descent, both in their nineties (so Sebastian's cohort) they told me:

‘Yeah, Joe, he was always workin’ for that boy. He wanted him to have the education, see? ... Always workin’ for the boy, he was.’

Embedding certain grey literature, particularly epistolarity, as a narrative technique performs several functions in this project. Reproduction of newspaper reports and government documents, for example, adds historicity and authenticity while driving the narrative forward as a kind of reportage. Placing them into a family story has the restorying effect that is characteristic of narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin 1990) and makes them an important contribution to the project's ‘patchwork quilt’ (Kim 2015) that is made up of historical record, family lore and fiction. Personal letters allow sudden, sometimes quite dramatic changes in voice, tone and writing styles. From Ilda's erudite and articulate letters to Giuseppe's slightly stiffer communiques, to the matter-of-fact, straight-to-the-business-at-hand missives from the elder Rosa, and finally to the utterly poignant pleas of a teenage boy (Sebastian) desperately trying to advocate for his father, my intention was for these material means of characters voicing themselves to contribute significantly to both character development and narrative progression. Given this is a short novel spanning two decades, embedded epistolarity also provides the opportunity to skip ahead a few years by looking back at what has happened in the interim via succinct summaries, letter-style. Some of the letters are purely fictional, but I had models for their voices in the postcards and letters kept in the family collection.

The grey literature and epistolary elements in the chapter that deals with internment are reproduced directly from the National Archives (NAA) records. I chose to write that chapter as one missive after another unfolding the story, to mimic how the people involved got their information at the time; i.e., a letter to a politician followed by a reply, followed by a wait, then further unsatisfactory official information; another advocacy letter, a telegram, a blunt governmental reply and so forth, with spaces in which no information or progress was forthcoming. I selected items from the various dossiers and files that record the next step (or lack thereof). I also endeavoured to represent the mix of heartfelt advocacy letters; perfunctory, bloodless government responses; succinct telegrams



voicing alarm; and brief but sympathetic replies. The use of typefaces that slightly mimic those in the original documents signals what type of communication each is. These archive documents also determined some language choices. For example, I use the words 'capture' or 'captured' rather than 'arrest' or 'arrested', firstly because 'capture' was the word used in the internment documents. It was, after all, an act of war rather than an act of law. 'Arrest' suggests a crime was alleged, but they were not charged with any crime; and 'detained' seemed soft, almost polite. I also chose to use 'capture' to convey something of the rawness of being suddenly taken, where they stood, in the clothes they were wearing, and held against their will for unclear reasons (given they were naturalised British subjects) and for an unspecified period of time.

### **Sugar, the canecutter lifestyle and cane country culture**

As I was writing this chapter (July 2023), I came upon two articles by PhD candidate Elizabeth Smyth, who is currently writing a thesis exploring 'literary depictions of human and non-human life and things on sugarcane farms in the Wet Tropics Bioregion' (The Cairns Institute, <https://www.cairnsinstitute.jcu.edu.au/phd-intro-elizabeth-smyth/>). At virtually the same time, I discovered a Social Sciences PhD thesis by Janice Reta Elder (2023) examining historical racism in North Queensland, focusing on South Sea Islanders and Italians in the sugar industry. In the same month, ABC television screened the new three-part series *The Black Hand* (2023), which documents and dramatises the mafia-style attacks on Italians in the sugar towns of Ingham and Innisfail. Yet another timely television series that exploits the beauty and mystery of cane country is Stan's six-part murder mystery *Black Snow* (2022), so named for the burnt trash from the sugar cane that flies through the air to land on you or your line of clean washing. Its story centres on descendants of the nineteenth-century South Sea Islander community brought to Queensland to work the cane and pays homage to their place in Queensland's cultural diversity and history. Other recent series include the ABC eight-episode series *Troppo*. While the focus of its visuals is more the crocodile-infested waters around Cairns, there are many scenes of secretive anti-heroine Amanda Farrell furiously riding her bicycle through the canefields. Additionally, Netflix's ten-part comedy series *Irreverent* (2022), also driven

by themes of secrets and deception, is set against a backdrop of North Queensland's canefields and crocodile-inhabited waterways. Still screening as I write this is Amazon Studios' darkly Gothic television miniseries *The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart* (2023), based on the eponymous novel by Holly Ringland. Its harrowing story opens in an isolated old cottage hidden in canefields where deadly domestic violence is taking place. In all these series, the tropical beauty of the canefields harbours or implies secrets and danger. Indeed, the theme of terror and guilty secrets hidden in the beauty and order of the cane would make an interesting focus for a popular culture article. All this suggests my project is tapping into a zeitgeist of fresh interest in this chapter of Queensland history and the sugarlands regions and culture.

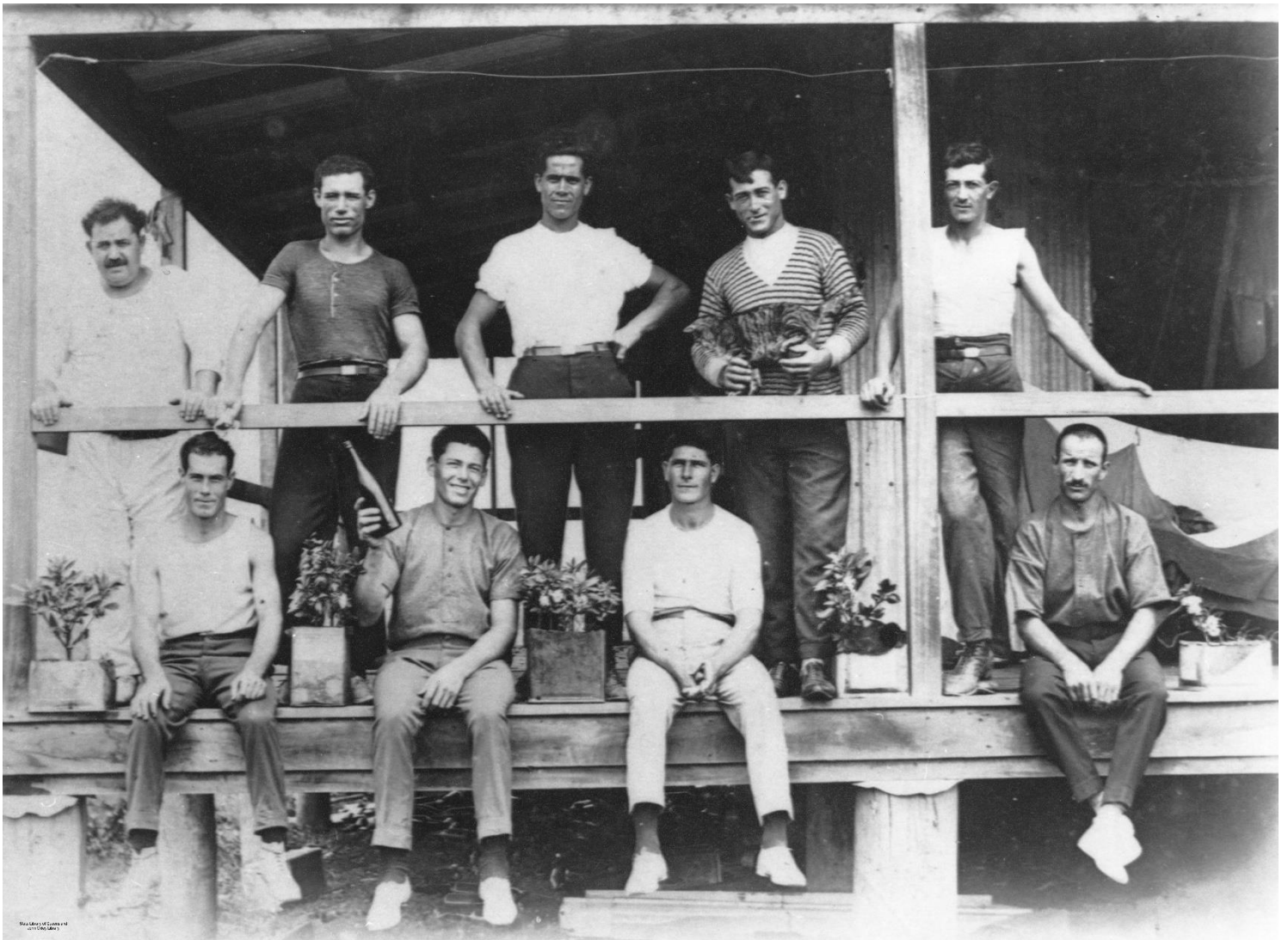
In my novel, which has its own theme of secrets and deception, the tall, expansive fields of cane physically block out the middle distance, acting as a metaphor for the uncertainty of what is coming next in people's lives, especially lives that have been upended and moved across the world to a completely different landscape and culture. It is virtually spelled out in the case of young Rosa, who wonders what her future holds and who will decide it while she looks out over the tall cane to the mysterious mountains beyond, softened by the sweet-smelling smoke rising from the sugar mill chimneys. The sugar is also a place of danger in the novel, as seen in Lorenzo's encounter with the snake and the widow Russo's husband's tragic death from snakebite. The huge flashing blades of the cane knives are an ever-present hazard, as are the rats that carry leptospirosis (Weil's disease) in their urine. It is also a place where people can conceal themselves, like the sly union reps who hide in the tall cane looking to catch the Italians contravening their award by, for example, working longer hours or, as in the novel, employing a female cook. And yet the sugarcane can also offer up sweetness and tenderness in the form of a tiny, orphaned kitten named Gioia.

While the beautiful sugar landscape, along with its racist and sometimes violent history, has been revisited in these recent works, *Letters from Sicily* is particularly concerned with the canecutter lifestyle and its effect on family life, especially for the family-oriented southern Italians. 'The Cook and the Cat' chapter encapsulates the lack of tenderness in the men's lives, partly addressed by turning their affection and gentleness on the orphaned kitten and the widow Russo's boy, which softens them enough to be kinder and more social towards

each other. In many of the canecutter narratives in my Literature Review chapter, the tough Anglo canecutters are either single men who spend their layoff time pursuing women, like *The Doll's* Barney and Roo, or they have a permanent home and a wife keeping the home fires burning in a town or city while they spend the cutting season in barracks, such as some of the gang members in Naish's *The Cruel Field* (1962). Memoirs by Dalseno (1994), Bonutto (1994) and Cottone (2012) ultimately celebrate the long-term success of the migrant workers against all odds, including internment, whereas my intention in this project was to show how that lifestyle also alienated and fragmented some families, using a semi-fictionalised version of my own family as a sort of case study.

Wives like Ilda stayed behind, first because it was often meant to be a temporary emigration, and also because there was not enough money for fares for the whole family and no home to settle them into on arrival in the new country. The migrant canecutters, by and large, lived in boarding houses and work camps in the off-season and in barracks during the crushing, as the cutting season was known. Back in the home country, the women left behind struggled to raise the children without their husbands' presence and were often vulnerable to male predators who saw a woman on her own as fair game (Reeder 2001). Ilda was particularly vulnerable on a few counts: she was an attractive woman on her own with small children; her mother-in-law felt a responsibility towards her on behalf of her son, but was not her ally; as an educated northerner she did not see danger in allowing a professional man, a doctor, into her home unchaperoned to make professional house-calls; and she trusted that doctor as the husband of her best friend. Reeder (2003) cites cases of women who, in their loneliness with their husbands gone, often for many years, succumbed to temptation and engaged in affairs that sometimes resulted in pregnancy, either changing the composition of their family if the husband accepted the new child or breaking up the marriage if he did not.

As a final flourish to this section, I discovered the below photograph in the State Library of Queensland archives after finishing the novel, yet it could be used to illustrate ‘The Cook and the Cat’, one of the early chapters. The slightly portly man in his whites (top left), no doubt this gang’s cook, bears quite the resemblance to my character of Alfio. Three of the men are wearing the grey flannel canecutter shirts described in the novel and one man is holding a pet cat. As I found this image long after writing the chapter, I propose it is a serendipitous illustration of my argument about the project’s ontological position regarding truth and untruth in historical fiction, which I detailed in the Research Methods chapter.



*Fig. 15. A group of Italian canecutters, 1927. State Library of Queensland.*

## Limitations

The first limitation to overcome, and one which I feared might hinder the project far more than it did, was my lack of fluency in the Italian language. While I did take the trouble to translate a few works – Sacchi's novel *La Casa in Oceania* (1934) was the only large example – it was far too time-consuming and therefore not practicable to continue with more translation, so I resolved to limit the Literature Review and background reading to texts in English, particularly as my creative work would be in English. I have peppered the novel with small Italian phrases and words for flavour. There is certainly scope for novels and other works by Italian speakers to be discovered, reviewed and perhaps even compared to the English texts. As for the texts I did review, COVID-19 made access difficult in some instances in the first few years because I could not go to the National and various State libraries and some texts are not for loan.

COVID-19 also thwarted the plans to revisit Sicily during the course of my research, so I had to rely on memories of my several trips in the past along with the internet. However, I was able to revisit North Queensland and immerse myself in the sugar country, just at the time of year when the cane was tall and bearing its graceful feathery flowers. The mills were working, too, so I was able to take in not just the landscape sights but the distinct molasses-like aromas of cane country as well. Unfortunately, a bout of COVID-19, the effects of which lingered for about three months, meant the cancellation of a further trip to the sugar country to consolidate sensory impressions.

The enormity of the major historical components of this story – the effects of emigration on families, political issues of the time, racism, cultural difference, war, internment and so forth – became more daunting the more I read, so I had to make decisions on how to contain it all and tell a coherent small story that would do some justice to the larger story in representing those significant aspects. As a few examples in the novel, cultural difference is encapsulated in 'The Cook and the Cat', racism in 'Carlo Wants a Wife' and the unfathomable geographic gulf caused by emigration is felt through the letters to and from Sicily. Loss of culture is represented in 'The Voyage' as the ship draws further and further from Sicily until Giuseppe worries that he does not know where in the world he is; as is, literally, loss of identity when the brothers' passports, i.e. their only identity documents, are

taken from them by the Australian authorities. In these ways, chapters of the novel act as vignettes in their own right, while also advancing the overarching narrative.

An important consideration is the dispossession and displacement of the Indigenous peoples of the story's setting in North Queensland. To write this into my story in depth proved beyond the scope of the project. However, as land acquisition is a theme in the novel, this issue should not be ignored. By the time my family emigrated to North Queensland, the state's ongoing establishment of Aboriginal reserves was well underway, and the Native Police and settler hunting parties had long done their work of 'dispersing the Blacks' ('dispersing' was Native Police code for killing Aborigines, Marr 2023, p.350). To make way for sugar cultivation and cattle grazing, the Warrgamay, Bandjin and Nywaigi people had been killed, had fled further inland or had been forcibly relocated to Palm Island (not part of their traditional lands), which in 1914 was formally established as an Aboriginal reserve under the *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897 (Qld)* (Tedmandson 2008). Some Nywaigi continued living in camps on Mungalla Station until around 1940 (Grice, Cassady & Nicholas 2012). This is referenced at the end of the crocodile hunt chapter with a mention of Mungalla and the Cassady family owners, who were well-known for accommodating and advocating for the local Indigenous people from the late eighteenth to the mid twentieth centuries (Mungalla Aboriginal Tours 2023). Mungalla Station was acquired by purchase on behalf of the Nywaigi Aboriginal Land Corporation (NALC) in early 1999 and has been managed by the Mungalla Aboriginal Corporation for Business (MACB) on behalf of the NALC since 2001 (Grice, Cassady & Nicholas 2012).

In *Killing for Country* (2023), David Marr writes,

Language keeps shifting. In the times I am writing about, Aboriginal Australians were called blacks, natives and Aborigines. The language of today and the values it represents were not in the minds of colonists then. To be true to the history, the politics and their thinking, I have used the language of that time.  
(p.9)

The terms Marr quotes were the more polite labels, which I also have chosen to use. Thus, in the chapter that records the 1929 flood, where I have written into the story an Aborigine

called Bob, who drowns while trying to save a mother and her three children, I do not identify his group as that was not how Aboriginal Australians were generally described at that time. This chapter was informed by newspaper reports of the day, which also described the mother whom Bob tried to save as a ‘Kanaka’, in common usage then. Rather than use Aboriginal mapping (Butler 2017), the white community generalised with topographical references such as ‘Burdekin River Blacks’, ‘Palm Creek Blacks’ etc. (Marr 2023). Further, in the chapter I make the point that Bob only becomes ‘visible’ to the White community due to his heroic deed. Thus, with an intentionally light touch, I have brought into the story what were possibly the vague understandings a historical migrant group may have had around the lives of any Indigenous people still living in the area, using language of the time.

### Knowledge

As discussed, the knowledge this project has generated is twofold. In the exegesis, via the Literature Review, I have identified and analysed the hitherto unacknowledged subgenre of Australian writing and popular culture, which I refer to as ‘canecutter narrative’. As a body of work in literature and popular culture, the subgenre well and truly establishes the iconic status of the historic figure of the canecutter in the settler colonial mythology of Australia. I have proposed its relevance to areas of scholarship such as settler colonialism and everyday multiculturalism in the rural context. I recast the Literature Review into an article with the title ‘The Legend of the Gentlemen of the Flashing Blade: the canecutter in the Australian imagination’, which was published in *The Australasian Journal of Popular Culture* (2022). With canecutter narrative identified through that article, I am currently working on two more related articles. One is about representations of masculinity, homosociality and sexuality in the canecutter narrative subgenre with particular reference to Lawler’s *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, Naish’s *The Cruel Field* and Devanny’s *Sugar Heaven*. The other looks at class, race and mid-century left-wing politics in the canecutter subgenre with reference to Devanny’s *Sugar Heaven*, Baume’s *Burnt Sugar* and Sheahan’s *Songs from the Canefields*. I consider this subgenre significant in its breadth of forms, from novels and drama to verse and song, to cartoons, films and television series. I suggest there might also be a subgenre of ‘internment narrative’ waiting to be identified, taking in memoir and at least one work of historical fiction in Keneally’s *Shame and the Captives*.

My novel belongs in this canecutter subgenre and, as such, occupies a unique place in it. The knowledge it offers is an understanding of what life was like for a migrant cohort of Sicilians from Catania province when they emigrated to the sugar districts of North Queensland between the wars and things did not necessarily go well for them. While a couple of works such as Cottone's biography of his father and Baume's sugar novel are about Sicilians, they are ultimately about personal success. Memoirs have been written by Italians from other provinces with cultural values that differ from those of the south in both significant and nuanced ways. Dalseno's patrician mother was from the more liberal north, as was Alcorso, who never worked as a canecutter and lived in Tasmania. The family memoirs by emigrant granddaughters Zoe Bocabella and Rebecca Huntley celebrate families who survived the challenges and happily did not become lost to each other. My novel portrays the hardship for families due specifically the canecutter lifestyle that began with protracted geographic and economic separation and made women at home vulnerable, their situation sometimes ending with family breakdown.

While women's perspective is addressed in both Devanny's and Cato's novels (Anglo women in the work of both), the vast majority of canecutter narratives, including mine, are grounded in men's perspectives, which is not surprising given it was a job almost exclusively done by men. However, many women experienced or were affected by the lifestyle and some even helped out in the canefields or barracks kitchens. Indeed, it is well-known that many migrant wives and daughters had to do the work of canecutting and replanting when their menfolk were interned. Often, too, the sons of internees were enlisted in the Australian armed forces, as was expected of Sebastian by the authorities, so the women did not have their sons to help, either, in those circumstances. The town of Ingham honours the women's heroic efforts in one of its Mercer Lane public memorial murals. Clearly, there is a significant gap that could be addressed with English-language historical fiction or speculative biography written from the viewpoint of a migrant woman or women. Of course, research into the Herbert district could inform such a work, but Innisfail, Cairns and Mossman would also be ideal settings. Alternatively, a fictional setting might work.





*Fig. 16. Mural of migrant women canecutters whose menfolk were interned or away at war, Mercer Lane, Ingham, 2019. Private collection.*

The project research has also resulted in new personal knowledge in the form of an intimate understanding of the extreme sacrifices my ancestors' emigration entailed and a deep appreciation of what it is to be a beneficiary of those sacrifices. Reading all the data on the racist attitudes towards Italians, particularly southern Italians, that prevailed at that time has triggered a new admiration for those who not only did not subscribe to those attitudes but saw southern Italians as equal enough to marry one. I refer here, of course, to my mother who always fondly and with pride recalled going against the wishes of her father and three adult brothers to marry a Sicilian, happily with the support of her mother, who encouraged her to marry the man of her choice. Sadly, however, although my father was accepted into her family once they married, their union did not bring two families together in the way Giuseppe explains to his brother in the novel. And perhaps that is often the case with modern families everywhere who do not live in a village setting any more.

The personal knowledge does not only refer to the data gathering as research, but also the creative writing as research. When you write a story about people who have been 'living in your head', encountering new and difficult situations, as you picture the scenario, as you imaginatively meet them 'looking alive' (Mantel 2017) to discover what it is they have to tell us, the 'something we need to understand' (Mantel 2017), you cannot help but feel an emotional connection with and investment in your characters, especially when they are based on not-so-distant ancestors.

## In conclusion

In the end, there are many rewards to be found in researching and writing a family story. It has been personally fulfilling for me and, I believe, could be for any researcher. There is a multitude of such stories waiting to be told, including as I have suggested some grounded in women's perspectives. The research for this story, which started as a quest to understand what factors contributed to the breakdown of my own emigrant family, has transformed into an act of remembering and ultimately to an act of family recovery. Tracing their life experiences from Sicily and Liguria to North Queensland in as much depth and detail as was available, along with all the background reading to achieve some understanding of the world they lived in, has also enriched my own cultural inheritance immeasurably. In one of the milestone reviews, a reviewer asked if the creative work would have a happy ending. Of course, the theme of family breakdown does not make for a happy ending to a novel, but the 'happy ending' in real life is the incalculable benefits to me and my siblings and those who come after us that derive directly from my grandparents' courage and sacrifice. I hope I have honoured those who came before.



*Fig. 17. Monument in Innisfail, 2018. The inscription in both Italian and English reads, TO THE PIONEERS OF THE SUGAR INDUSTRY DONATED BY THE ITALIAN COMMUNITY OF INNISFAIL DISTRICT ON THE FIRST CENTENARY OF THE STATE OF QUEENSLAND 1859-1959. Creative Commons.*

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*Fig. 18. Canecutter memorial, Lannercost Street, Ingham, 2019. Private collection.*