

## Crostoli and Jasmine

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*Certain things weave through the past, wrapping you in long-ago places. It's the giant cutlery that pulls me back from a sunny July day in a too-empty house to the mingling scents of jasmine and grappa.*

*The kutkukin, that my Pinoy sister-in-law tells me are a sign of family, sat proudly over the kitchen bench through all my memories. A Filipino artefact for a woman who travelled across a planet but never went to the Philippines. I never found out where they came from.*

The September school holiday sleepover. This time, we were lucky to have three nights. Even though I had my own room at Nonna's. With my old bed and a fluffy pink blanket, I had slept, snuggled up to her warmth each night. Tony, already too old for that, stayed in his room with the stiff yellow teddy bear and the brown and yellow '70s bedspread.

*There is a photo on my genealogy site. A group of Italian miners grin at the camera in grubby singlets, sweating under the outback sun. The ground is a shade of red you can see through the black-and-white print. There is one, young and strong, who I am sure is my grandfather. He came away from there with enough money to bring his family back to him and with a set of knives acquired from a cafeteria in a tent that gave no break from the heat.*

We stand at the counter on either side of Nonna. In my mind's eye, we watch wrinkled hands scattered with age spots slowly work eggs and marsala into the flour. Of course, they are not those hands. She is still in her early sixties, newly retired, the smiling, vigorous woman who walks everywhere and considers bingo her new job.

*In the garage built by my grandfather, there is a freezer and an old trunk, but no car. Nonno died the year I was born, and Nonna never did learn how to drive. Instead of ever-newer cars, it housed neatly labelled containers of chicken soup—the one with tomatoes that must have come from Rodi because I've never seen it anywhere else — along with boxes of ice cream and the trunk she carried back to my grandfather.*

Nonna pulls out two knives and a wiggly pizza cutter—a pizza cutter for her and knives for us. She hands us the knives and deftly slices crinkled strips of pastry. These same knives still sit in my mother's cutlery drawer. Big, silver things that might be a butter knife or might be a steak knife. B.H.P. stamped across the blade.

I take my knife and carve shapes out of my dough that are not really shapes. My brother is carefully carving the spikes into Bart Simpson's head. She scolds us for the mess, even though she laughs. Although she really does hate the mess.

Once we have turned the bench into an array of shapes, Nonna places the battered aluminium pan on the stove and heats the oil. When the test piece sizzles, she takes the perfect strips, the somewhat stars, the not really hearts and Bart, and turns them golden.

*Above my bed was a light. Flat, round, gold trim with diamonds cut out. A picture of Madonna Della Libera – the holy mother, our lady of freedom – holding the infant Jesus. She follows you across the room. I am later told this is called lenticular, but I still think it's a hologram.*

While the crostoli cools, we head to the corner shop. Out the back door – only salespeople and Jehovah's Witnesses use the front door – into a cloud of parsley and jasmine. Only the jasmine has a scent. At the little shop that will somehow survive the death of the corner store, I pick a Bubble-o-Bill. Tony and I race ahead, back to Nonna's. Our heads filled with ice-cream and jasmine.

*There are no jasmine flowers in July when she dies. Only the kutukin and the hologram of Mary. In the too-empty house with my mother, Libera, we take Mary and the kutukin from the wall.*

On a bright September day, I stand beneath the kutukin at my own kitchen bench. Mary beams from the opposite wall. I slice crinkled strips of crostoli. On either side, my daughters carve wonky stars and Bluey heads. The first flowers of a young jasmine float through the window.

Note: Kutukin is a Filipino word referring to junk food, chips, peanuts, and other finger foods that are put inside a small container.