

Stone Fruit Season

Eight kilometres out of town, just as the road makes an ambitious ascent, the house leans into the hillside. From a dust-streaked window, she gives a cautious glance. This town is too quiet a corner to settle in. Too still a landscape to occupy. Laden with expectations she has no idea how to satisfy.

She draws her eyes back into the kitchen and reaches for the next apricot. Orbs of fuzzy gold, they still hold the sun from yesterday's picking. She halves the fruit and slices through its flesh, releasing the stone as the fruit slides from her hands into the pot. A muslin pouch sways in the pot's steam, lemon juice dripping into the clammy abyss below. Her lip forms a moustache of sweat. Nectar sticks to her skin like gold dust. Five empty buckets beside her, four remaining. Stone fruit season has begun.

Since they'd arrive, she'd watched the trees bulk up in growth and battled the will of local wildlife. The opportunist in her couldn't bear to witness the property's ripe offerings lay themselves open to the crows' pilfering. She'd set herself a task. Her husband had watched with thinly veiled relief as she meticulously worked her way through each tree. She knew she was offering him a fruitless sense of hope, and she smiled to herself at the irony of her choice of thought. He loved this place. Just loved it. Ever since that day on a weekend of meanderings, when they had taken the turn, wondering where the track led would end up. He'd had found his Nirvana. Hi place of peace and passion.

She'd indulged him at first; 'It's a lovely dream, one day we'll do this.' Secretly she felt he wasn't capable of making the leap from desire to decisiveness. But their road trip dust had barely settled before they found themselves owners of this sentinel of silence.

She'd approached the house that second time with the giddiness of a digger bewitched by gold fever. The hillside of peppermint gums pressed in close, dreams and promises stirring

in their leaves. She wanted to chase Wal's riches, she truly did. But the abrasive wind chaffed her lips, exhausting her with its relentless pursuit of skin, unfurling her scarf and her resolve. Above them, crows stained the sky.

It took Wal a good twelve weeks to convince her this was more than an occasional weekender. Then another month and a depleting bank statement for the economics of their decision to become apparent. Five blustery Sundays later and she was dragging the herb planters from the car and watching him pull beers out for removalists. The trees tilted toward her, swooshing limbs in time to her reluctant mantra, 'This is home, THIS is home.'

Wal had jollied her along, crowing about the future they were free to create. All the platitudes and promises. But his words settled like sifted dirt onto the floor of the creaking cottage, and across the leaning porch which tethered the house to unkempt bushland. She saw no riches here. They were simply excavating loneliness.

The kitchen smells like earth. She bends into the oven, retrieving the warm sugar still setting on the baking tray. A syrup bubbles on the stovetop. Jen leans her moist forehead toward the window to catch the yawn of a breeze. Another two buckets hoisted on to the bench, another thought to dissect.

She adjusts her apron, tucks a sticky curl behind her ear and peers at her mother's brittle recipe pages. Seasons upon seasons of jam making have left their mark on this weighty tome. Splashes of golden toffee syrup have formed into a kaleidoscope of exclamation points and hearts across the page, connecting her with memories. Burning tongues on a too-hot metal spoon, crunching teeth on the hardening ooze. Rows of sterilised Fowlers jars warming on oven trays. That impatient wait for the first lumpy spoonful of heaven on fresh moist bread. The looping penmanship diligently documenting efforts on floral bordered labels. Her mother's stone fruit season had always been a time of industry; a methodical application as

children marked the outdoors with their play. Jen hoped, wished, that by executing this sense of order she could establish her own pattern to mark time.

The stench of rotting fruit brings her back to the now and she rummages in the last bucket, hands deftly discarding and selecting. How naively she'd cast-off the life that came before. She thought she'd be a natural for it. But there were no speciality shops with a taste of all things organic, rural and rustic. And the frequent Post Office visits kept her at arm's length from occupied lives. Where were they, these locals she longed to link to?

The village here was more of an outpost. The last stop for petrol, snow chains and directions. Locals undertook errands with rigour, allowing for idle chatter in accordance to sporting fixtures and the daily demands of the land. Locals looked beyond her, for children, and school gate gossip. She came empty handed.

Wal though, he'd adapted and played his 'useful skills' card. Jen felt exposed. Unwrapped in this new terrain. What was she thinking playing at her paper doll cut-out of country woman? Who DID she think she was? Not *her* dream. Not *their* brethren.

The hiss and sizzle of the pot commands her focus, reminding her to brush down the sides of the pan with her pastry brush.

'Dip and brush, dip and brush. Let that sugar completely dissolve,' she heard her mother reciting as the liquid slowly thickened. Jen runs an adhesive finger down the page, halting where her mother's pointer would invariably stop each time. Yes, increase the heat, bring it to the boil, and then simmer again.

'Have that slotted spoon ready. You don't want the scum to settle on the surface or you'll wasted your efforts. And don't let the jam catch or you'll forever a bitter, burnt bride,' her mother's voice warns her memory.

If she turns now, perhaps Jen will catch sight of her face. As red as the sturt dessert peas on her apron, fanning herself with the crossword pages as she keeps a watchful eye on the stillness beyond the farm gate. How did she do it? How did she carve out contentment, this mother of hers? How *did* she stay?

Jen wished she'd thought to ask her mother in the more lucid years when conversations weren't of specialist's opinions and buttonless nightgowns, or the rumination of a 12-year-old asking after her long deceased brothers. She looks back down at the recipe book as though her mother's answer may be captured forever amongst the ingredients. All she finds are reminders for handfuls of rind, cups of sugar, liberal splashes of lemon juice. And stone fruit, kilos and kilos of stone fruit. What would her mother tell her if she saw her faltering now? Stay? Settle?

Outside Wal's chuckling, celebrating his latest victory with the generator. His capabilities build him up, swell chest to rise with clouds over the ridgeline. While each morning presents defeat before the sleep is wiped from her own eyes, Wal leaps into the day as though onto a podium to claim his prize. The next challenge. The next victory. The next beer raising cheer, recalled with enthusiasm and self-admiration each evening on the verandah. Watching the sunset fold itself across the hills, he'll wonder aloud if tomorrow he'll drive down Billy Goat Ridge to check the fences before logging into Zoom for his afternoon round of conference calls. Even that, this transition of contract work with 'man on the land' pride is a seamless conquest for him. Years later she'll marvel at herself during this time. Surprised that she had let Wal's capacity render her inert, how she's allowed herself to simply wallow and dissolve. That Wal transitions well stirs something unsettling within her.

The distant grumble of a vehicle gathers momentum as it tackles the abrupt climb of the track. She's mildly surprised to see a car from her kitchen. Not a Ute or a delivery van, or

the local mechanic's rusty four-wheel-drive, but a small modern vehicle. It turns into the property, dragging the valley dust beneath its tyres.

'How you doing?' Wal calls a hearty greeting to the occupant, who waits till the dust settles before opening the door. A 40-something woman with close cropped hair and a wide smile steps from the car. A visitor to break the quiet.

Inside, Jen turns off the stove top and sets the jam aside to cool. She pushes the screen door open; it slams wildly against the wall as she steps forward. She knows what's expected. Heads lean towards one another, and turn as Wal's words bring careful selection.

'This is Adele,' he announces, drawing Jen into their conversation. 'Apparently she's our official welcoming party.'

'Hi, I'm Jen,' she hesitates. 'Cuppa?'

Adele nods, 'Hello there, you must have thought the cavalry was never going to arrive. Love a cuppa. We thought we'd give you a bit of space to settle in first.'

Adele presents a basket of scones and breads, herbs wound with wax paper and twine, the clink of chutney and jam jars tinkling. Jen's dream re-assembles itself.

'Smells like I may have some competition in the jam department though. Bloody fantastic to see someone has finally come the love this apricot trees up here more than the wildlife,' says Adele, stepping onto the verandah.

Jen senses the house sit up straight as Adele enters, commenting with admiration on the positioning of sun-watching sofa and the bulging shelves of books. She welcomes the glow of womanhood. The teapot is still brewing as she offers a condensed version of their departure from urban life to the hills. Adele's questions come in rapid fire.

'Smells like you've got jam settling, did you stir the sugar?'

Jen feels the warmth of her mother's hand settle on her arm as this morning's bitterness dissolves.

'It's so great to see fresh face our way. I reckon we'll exhaust you as we gorge ourselves on your newness, about as much as I'm devouring this jam.'

Adele's smile comes easy, 'Anyway, how you settling in?'

Jen shrugs. 'Oh well, you know, it takes a while to find your feet.'

'God, I know! I reckon I took a whole year to stop scowling when we first moved here,' says Adele.

'I kept telling my partner that he'd dragged me to a pit of despair. How I couldn't connect with anyone. It took 8 months before I could even drive back up over Flynn's Gap and call this home. God knows how those bloody pioneers did it way back when, especially in a windswept place like this. I remember feeling so lost when I first moved here. I just didn't know where to start.'

It's Adele's voice not Jen's, but she's sure she recognises it. Knows it, lives it.

Adele pats her stomach and spoons more jam onto her scone.

'A little bit of comfort cooking does wonders though, and sharing it around, even better'.

Jen's fingers relax around her cup. Outside, on the apricot tree the last of the fruit gathers haphazardly on its branches.

Come sunset cups and sticky jam spoons compete for space in the overflowing sink. Jen's kept pace with Adele's download; her hand steadying the calendar as she recorded events and gatherings ahead. Wal places an arm around Jen's shoulder and gives it a hopeful squeeze.

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Adele toots as she backs up the lane, ‘See you next week, and bring some of that jam, it’s a ribbon placement for sure.’

Sugar fills the kitchen, its sweetness settling on the walls. Jen ladles the last of the jam through the funnel. Yes, now it just needs to settle. The warm jars stand proud and resolute. Her conquest. The first of the stone fruit season.