

## PEPPER AND SALT

MARGARET VISCIGLIO

The storm clouds gather over the salt lake, darkening the sky. She almost thought she could feel the sweet sulphurous scent of rain in the back of her throat this time, but she knew it was only the memory of rains past. The clouds would pass over, leaving the land as thirsty as ever. They always did. The sheep herded in the pens that Robert had built, awaiting shearing and their expected release to the empty paddocks where the limestone rocks lay among the dust.

Emma, kneading the bread on the rough wooden table, thought that the animals would not be too impatient to be shorn if they knew they would be slaughtered when the shearing was over. It could not be helped. The drought had dried up all the water, desiccated the fields, and even evaporated her tears. This shearing would be her last. Even the sale of the skins and tallow from the sheep would bring in enough to take her family to Adelaide.

“What are we going to do in the town, Robert?” she whispered. “The children will hate the city. They have only ever known the bush life. They know how to work, they are good children, but after the farm it will break their hearts to be labourers or servants. And what if I can’t keep them all together?”

She slapped the bread dough hard on the table, angry that they would have to leave this small stone cottage she and her husband had built with their own hands. So many dreams, so many tears, and yet so much joy in this small house.

The birth of their first boy had been the beginning. In those days they were still living in the canvas tent. They had not finished building the cottage when he arrived. The day he had been born she had carted three loads of limestone rocks for Robert to cement together with the lime they had burned themselves to make cement. The kitchen was half-built, she remembered, and the bedroom almost finished when her back began to ache and her water broke and Robert told her that her time had come. She had known so little about life then. Now she knew it all. Joy and sorrow, birth and life and death. She had thought it so right, so appropriate that the land had given them the materials, the stuff of their lives. “Clear the paddocks and build the house, build a future,” Robert had said. The land would provide. Now the land was taking it back. All that was left was rocks and children. They had plenty of both.

She had twelve children, born and reared successfully. She had the reputation of being a good nurse, of knowing how to cope in a crisis and the families in the district called her when they were in need. She brought babies into the world, nursed the sick and laid out the dead. What would they do when she had to leave?

But there would not be many families left in the area if this drought continued. They would have to manage as best they could, as she had managed that first birth in the tent in the rain with only Robert there. You did what you had to do.

And now another birth was upon her. The thirteenth child. This would be her last child, it was fitting that it should be born here where her first had been born. At least she would have that to remember. The last shearing and the last child. She remembered this child’s conception – that memory would always be with her. The joy and the despair of it.

The drought had already begun, but there was still hope that rain would come before they were quite ruined. It was a hot summer night, and the cottage and the

children drowsed in the moonlight. It had been a Monday, washing day, and with the help of her daughters, she had spent the day stoking the copper, scrubbing the clothes and boiling and mangling them. It was exhausting work.

But after the clothes were clean it was time for the family to bath in the water. It was the only time she ever felt clean. Clean body, clean hair, and clean clothes. First herself, then Robert, then the children splashed in the suds. She put the children to bed, but she felt curiously alive, restless, unable to settle. She felt she needed to get out of the cottage, to be alone for a while.

The magpies were carolling in the trees. She wandered down to the edge of the salt lake and sat under the pepper tree that she and Robert had planted. She had hoped there might be a breeze. There was only a hot wind. The moon, white as a skull, reflected in the white lake, seemed to radiate almost as much heat as the sun had done during the day. Robert was there, playing his mouth organ in the moonlight. A slow sad waltz mingled with the sound of the grasshoppers and magpies in the night. She sat beside him.

“What are you doing? I thought you were tired. You know you are supposed to rest. Have you had any more pain? Let me look at your leg.”

“Don’t worry about the leg, love. Just enjoy the moment. Listen to the magpies and the grasshoppers, and listen to my music. Do you know why the magpies and grasshoppers are singing? They are calling to their mates, they are making love. It’s a wonderful night to make love, to celebrate life. Renew the earth.”

“They must be mad. They see the country is dying from drought? How do they think they can bring new life to it when it’s dying?”

“They know that in the midst of death we are in life,” he answered, beginning to play again. She sighed. Just like Robert to say something like that. He was the

dreamer, the spice, and the pepper of their marriage. She was the salt, the down to earth, practical one.

She never knew why she did it. Suddenly she found herself in the middle of the salt lake, bare foot dancing to Robert's music, lifting her arms to the moon like some pagan priestess. His music grew faster and she twirled and leaped, her white nightdress damp on her sweat drenched body. Then they were making love in the dry grass under the pepper tree, the pungent berries crushed beneath them.

She knew they should not do it. So many reasons not to make love. They already had so many children, so many mouths to feed. And the drought, how long would it last? And most of all, Robert's heart was failing. She knew the signs of dropsy, the shortness of breath, the fluid that collected in his legs, the blueness around his mouth, his exhaustion. She felt that he and the land were one, both failing under the hot sun. But she could not help it, the moonlight and the music had bewitched her.

The only light now came from the flickering flames from the grate of the wood oven. Outside the clouds had thickened and the small window gave no light. She was surprised when the waves of pain began. She had thought the child would not be born for another week or two.

The pains became stronger and she struggled to continue her work, but the yeast was risen and the bread must be put into the oven. The shearers must be fed. She had just put the last loaf to bake when her waters broke and she knew that she must give all her attention to the coming child.

“Robert,” she whimpered, but she knew he could not come. Better that no one comes, she thought, bolting the door. Hopefully the children would all be busy chasing the sheep and helping with shearing. They were country children, accustomed to seeing animals give birth, but they should not see their mother in this state. She lay down on the floor in front of the stove, suddenly shivering. Knowing the processes of birth, having done it so often did not make it easier, and she was no longer young. The child burst out of her as she heard thunder outside.

She cut and tied the cord with string, tossed the afterbirth into the fire, wrapped the child in the floury cloth that had covered the rising bread, and put it in a horse-collar someone had left in the corner.

“If you had come when you should have come you would have had a better reception,” she told the little one. “It won’t be an easy life, but you’re a fighter. We are all fighters here. We have to be.”

“Mother! Mother!” cried her eldest boy, banging on the door. “The rain has come, can’t you hear it on the roof? We don’t have to kill the sheep. We don’t have to leave the farm!”

She opened the door and looked at him, sodden and joyful. Across the yard the exultant children danced barefoot in the red mud, their shouts almost covering the mournful sounds of the sheep and the curses of the shearers who struggled with the wet animals.

The head shearer came to the open door and glared at her.

“Tell these kids to get to back to bloody work, Missus, we've got to finish up here so we can get our next contract. If you want us back here next year they are going to have to stop their nonsense and get these bloody sheep into the shed before they are too wet to shear.”

“Next year, we'll still be here next year,” she sang. She swept the baby into her arms covering it with her shawl against the rain.

“Did you have the baby, Mother? Is it a boy or a girl?”

“I'll tell you after I have told your father. Get your brothers and sisters back to work.” said Emma, running across the muddy yard down to the edge of the salt lake where an iron cross, rusted prematurely by the salt air, stood under the pepper tree.