

Milk For India

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Life was confusing enough without Maria Zaculla's arrival, bruised and bleeding at our front door. Her husband, a boxer, kitted me up on weekends in gloves the size of my head and taught me to dart and feint, to jab and weave without ever taking my eyes off him.

'Watch my hands,' he'd say.

I watched his hands and I watched his feet dance and skip. He'd let me land a few punches against his iron torso and then he'd dart away and encourage me to come at him. He never hit me, just swayed from side to side like a talking, laughing punching bag. He strangled the English language and I laughed at his mistakes.

Sergio Zaculla worked in the market gardens that still clung to the fringes of our suburb, but he also made money in local gyms and back rooms where men paid money to watch boxers go at each other until one of them dropped to his knees. I never saw him fight, but all the men in the neighbourhood said he was handy.

Serge's wife knew he was handy too, especially when he lost a fight and came home angry. My brothers and I lay in bed in the sleep out and listened to the yelling and screaming next door. Then came the forbidding silence and the knock at the front door.

Maria stood on the porch, her hands covering her face. We kids crowded around before Mum shooed us away and ushered her into the lounge. We listened at the door to the quiet conversation and the intermittent sobbing. It made no sense to us and we wondered how it could happen, that a man could hit his wife. After an hour or so the sobbing eased and Mum walked Maria home in the dark.

In the 1960's Italians like the Zacullas had moved into our neighbourhood to pick up work as concreters and fruiterers. 'Hard workers those Itali's,' I heard the men say outside

the church on Sunday mornings. They joined us on the frontier to beat back the blackberries and snakes, as we slowly claimed the marginal farmland and Chinese market gardens and turned them into lawns and nature strips with driveways and bins that went out on Wednesday nights.

We turned the creeks into drains with concrete pipes, and bare expanses of dirt into recreation reserves that baked hard as concrete in summer and softened to mud in winter. We transformed the dirt roads into bitumen streets with guttering and footpaths of smooth concrete. We cut down the straggly gums and planted beeches and liquid ambers, and we fenced our backyards and filled them with Hills hoists and fruit trees. With our back fences abutting the tussocks and bare boned animals of the shrinking farmland, we felt we were taming a hostile environment.

The neighbourhood kids forged tracks through the paddocks but our parents only came with us into the wild during the blackberry season. This should have been at the height of summer when we had time on our hands to gorge on the jungle of bushes that grew in clumps on the old farms and along the creeks. But the plump black berries didn't ripen until we were back at school so the picking took place in the cool of the evening. We'd pick until dark, wary of the black snakes and copperheads that concealed themselves in the thorny thickets. For days afterwards the house would be full of the sticky, sweet smell of blackberry jam and we layered our toast with it through the autumn and winter.

One warm March night Serg came to help us pick. We walked to the far corner of the open paddocks, close to the dirt road that ran on into the market gardens. It was humid and the berries were sticky in our hands as we filled our buckets. We heard a car approach in the gathering gloom, its motor a loud intrusion into our quiet conversations. In unison we looked up as the headlights lit the bush ahead of us. Suddenly the lights began to lurch from side to side and we heard the heavy crunching of tyres on gravel as the driver lost traction. The arc of light now swerved drunkenly through the scrub that separated us from the road. There was a moment of absolute silence as the car became airborne, followed by the cacophony of breaking glass and buckling metal as it hit the tree.

Mesmerized by the noise and commotion, we looked at each other, kids and adults caught in the instant between event and reaction. Serg dropped his bucket and took off, pushing his way through the blackberries and scrub to reach the car. I could hear the tearing of his clothes and the sharp, pained intake of breath as he disappeared into the night. Dad stayed and shielded us from the reality of what was happening only twenty metres away. We stopped our picking and sat down on the warm ground. I picked up Serg's bucket and began scooping the berries back into it.

He returned about half an hour later, by which time the thick night had enveloped us. By then other cars had arrived and loud voices and crying reached us through the thickets. I could barely see Serg in the dark but I could feel his hot presence. He took Dad by the arm and moved him out of earshot. They stood with their backs to us but I saw Serg's hands go to his face and rake back through his dark hair. He went down on his haunches and pulled a handkerchief from his pocket. He wiped his arms and face then threw it away in the long grass. Dad reached a hand to him and helped him to his feet.

Finally we headed back across the paddock to home. On the way Serg picked me up and carried me on his shoulders. I wanted to hear his joking voice, for him to tell us everything was all right, but he strode silently back towards the lights of the houses. I could feel the heat pushing out through his clothes and when I got home my legs were smeared with blood.

On Sundays our street divided along religious lines between the Prodos, the Presbos and the Micks. The lucky few that professed no beliefs got to sleep in. It was a mile from our house to the Catholic church, a cold and wet mile in the pre dawn gloom of winter and a hot and sweaty one in the heat of February.

Serg and Maria would walk up the front steps of the church and take their seats with the rest of us. Serg would look at me and wink and my father would acknowledge him with a

nod. 'They might be new Australians, son,' he told me once, 'but they're Catholics, so they're one of us.'

At Mass the women, their heads covered by scarves, stood shoulder to shoulder with their stiff, suited husbands. Serg sang the hymns with enthusiasm and, if he'd had a win during the week, made a flourish of dropping a dollar note in the collection plate. At communion time he and Maria would make their way to the railing, kneel side by side and accept the host that had miraculously been transformed into the body of Christ.

I sat across the aisle from Maria one Sunday and realised she was moving her lips to a different language, taking her cues to stop and start from those around her. She looked right and left to mimic the refrains and reflective pauses. Whatever prayers she was reciting I doubted they would bring her any closer to understanding why we tolerated her husband worshipping among us. When the mass finished and the congregation filed out she remained kneeling upright, her head bowed and her rosary beads slipping gently between her fingers.

When my mother volunteered me to be an altar boy, I longed to ask Father McKenzie, as he took off his vestments and lit up a cigarette in the sacristy, if all this ritual made sense to him, this mix of pain and guilt and love we lay at the feet of a God we never saw or heard. I wanted to ask him whether God would punish Serg, and send angels to swoop down and rescue Maria. But I couldn't find the words and he just held the fag between his lips, ruffled my hair and said 'Good on ya, son,' before he walked out the back door to the presbytery.

After mass the men would congregate on the front steps and talk about football and the weather. The odd one would wink at Serg.

'Good fight last week Serg. Probably see you on TV Ringside soon.'

But when Serg was out of earshot he'd turn to the others and add, 'Been practicing on the missus again I see.'

The women would find a spot off to the side and compliment each other on their clothes. They would draw Maria into their fold and studiously ignore the bruises and welts on her face. I overheard them telling her to pray for the Virgin Mary to intercede on her behalf. I pictured the Virgin interceding with boxing gloves on, ducking and weaving, confusing Serg with her grace and speed, easily avoiding his nervous jabs and landing left and right combinations of her own. And in the end delivering the knockout punch that would lay him on his back. She'd unlace the gloves and look down on him in pity.

I was to have my own meeting with Maria not long after. Each month my mother gave me a small cardboard box pasted with pictures of malnourished children and made me go door to door through the neighbourhood collecting money. Milk for India. That's what I was told it was for. I never questioned what was wrong with the cows in India that they couldn't produce their own milk. But I did try to understand the logistics of transporting milk to India and keeping it fresh. I knew it was hot there because all the emaciated children stuck to the box, the Indians and Africans, had dark skin. But India looked a long way off on the map and very dry in the pictures in the encyclopaedia. Not good dairy country I reckoned.

So I braved the neighbourhood dogs to reach the front door of as many houses as it took to reach the target of five dollars. Anything above that was my private collector's margin to be spent on half a dozen potato cakes in winter or an icy pole and a bottle of cola in summer. The cream, I called it. Cream off the top of Milk for India.

That's how I came to be knocking on Maria's door, milk box in hand in the middle of the hot summer holidays. I should have been cooling myself under the sprinkler in the front yard, sprinting in and out of the cold rainbow arches, gasping for breath with the sweet, wet chill of it. Instead I was trawling the neighbourhood looking for the cream.

The house was silent. I knocked a second time almost hoping no one was home, but just as I turned for the front gate, the door opened, seemingly of its own accord. I couldn't see anyone in the darkness inside. I'd never been into Serg and Maria's house. Mum was adamant that no matter what anyone said when I was collecting, I was never, ever to go inside their house.

I stepped onto the threshold and peered in. Somewhere in the humid darkness I could hear a soft whimpering. I took a further step, mindful of the open door behind me. As my eyes adjusted to the gloom I made out the shape of Maria standing in the kitchen doorway. Her silhouetted body was slumped slightly forward but I could tell her face was turned towards me. She was inhaling deeply, trying to draw herself up, but each breath was wet.

Slowly she raised her arm towards me and I saw the five dollar note. She moved her hand up and down, beckoning me to take the money. I stepped towards her and held out the small cardboard box. She tried to push the note through the slot in the top but I knew she wouldn't be able to manage it so I took it from her hand. There was a brief moment when we connected, each holding the folded note. It felt warm and sticky. I pushed it into the box.

I was twelve years old. I'd yet to learn the discretion that would allow me to look away, to see only what I wanted to see, to pretend that our little community was safe for everyone. But I didn't know how to act either, how to respond to someone's need that was so raw. I didn't reach out. I didn't ask if she was okay. I didn't help her to a seat in the kitchen and make her a cup of tea.

'Thanks Mrs Zaculla,' I said and walked out the door into the light.