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Abstract

It is December 1941 and there are six of us in the kitchen. The new baby, Peter, is in his pram being rocked by our father while our mother stirs apricot jam on the top of the wood fire. The apricots have been sent to her by her mother who lives in Angaston in the Barossa Valley where they are abundant at this time of the year. Edna, my mother's red-haired sister, brought them when she came to visit. Edna has caught the bus for her long trip home, and we are left alone with the apricots and the heat.

KATE LLEWELLYN

Apricot Jam

This essay is an edited section of an autobiography in progress.

It is December 1941 and there are six of us in the kitchen. The new baby, Peter, is in his pram being rocked by our father while our mother stirs apricot jam on the top of the wood fire. The apricots have been sent to her by her mother who lives in Angaston in the Barossa Valley where they are abundant at this time of the year. Edna, my mother's red-haired sister, brought them when she came to visit. Edna has caught the bus for her long trip home, and we are left alone with the apricots and the heat.

When my mother was a girl she and her sisters, Nora, Edna and Eva, used to have fruit fights with quinces. 'One day you girls will want for fruit!' yelled Granny. In my mother's case she was proved right because we lived on the edge of a desert with very little rain and the only fruit that grew was a scarlet sour native called quandong.

In fact, our mother never had much fruit after she left her mother's house in 1935. Her sewing machine was lashed to the side of her new husband's Buick for the drive up around the top of Spencer Gulf, and then south down the Eyre Peninsula to Tumby Bay. 'Sit on him!' advised Granny when my father unwittingly tied the sewing machine on upside down and the cotton reels fell out of the drawers. (There was much mirth about this advice in later years not least because my father almost always did exactly what was expected of him. And he did it with good grace because he had a mild and generous nature.)

The new house to which they were heading was one the stock and station company had provided. The car also belonged to the firm, and it was his new appointment to open the first branch of Elders Smith and Company that had allowed my father to propose marriage to our mother in a small park in Angaston in 1934. 'You can kiss me Brink!' she said and he did.

While our mother stirs the apricot jam with a long flat wooden implement, my other brothers, Tucker and Bill, go on eating our breakfast of boiled eggs and toast which our father made for us because of the boiling jam, which cannot be left, but must be stirred continually with this stick which, misshapen like a blade, has a flat end that helps to prevent the jam from sticking and burning on the base of the pot.

Baby Peter is being rocked because he is in pain from an abscess, the result of an infection that he got in the hospital when he was born. Our mother is in pain

too because she has the same infection in her breasts. This child was their fourth in five years and it seems to me now that our parents were bewildered by their fertility. I think they, especially our mother, were at their wits' end. In fact, their close friends who were unable to conceive and who had been married for years had offered to take this baby and rear him as their own. But in the end our mother could not do it. Yet some word must have been spoken, perhaps by Dr. Wibberley, the only doctor in the town and the only doctor between Tumby Bay and Pt. Lincoln which was twenty-five miles south, because Peter was the last baby.

Outside in the hot air, dust rose from the white road that ran along in front of the beach. White daisy bushes grew and behind them tamarisk trees waves with their fronds of pale pink blossom. To the south of the house, which was at the end of the small town, rose white sand dunes clad only in grey fronds of a wiry plant that held the dunes in place. Stretched out to the far horizon, a wide pale bay seemed held down by two jetties like two fingers on a blue piano.

Above the bay, an inverted saucer of pale blue with a few white clouds held the whole world in place.

There were no angles except where the jetties joined the beach. Everything was curved and everything was bright. The light went on all day and the sun bore down peeling our noses, bleaching our hair and, when we played in the sea in our bathers, turning the tops of our shoulders red. My brothers seldom wore shoes and everybody learnt to swim without being taught. One day we could dog paddle and the next we could swim. Day after day it was forty degrees. We had one rainwater tank on that first house and that water was to last us all summer.

Across the bay in front of this our first house, lay Spencer Gulf, then Yorke Peninsula, with its foot shaped like Italy. The land rose in the east and on the eastern shore of that gulf was Adelaide, the State's capital, where our father's parents lived. When we visited our grandparents or had to have our eyes tested, or to visit some specialist for our health, we flew from Pt. Lincoln airport south of Tumby Bay directly across these two gulfs and the Yorke Peninsula on which, in about its middle, lay Minlaton, the town which we had not yet heard of but where our father would be sent by Elder Smith and where we would live for three years.

The names of these towns on Eyre Peninsula were given by Matthew Flinders when he sailed in *The Investigator* charting the southern coast in 1802. He named Pt. Lincoln after his home county Lincolnshire, in Ireland, and he named Tumby Bay after Tumby Island which was also a parish in Lincolnshire. Pt. Lincoln was the town where we sometimes were driven to buy red apples. 'Let's go to Lincoln to buy some shinies!' I would say when the thought struck me. Shinies were red Jonathon apples which had been polished by the fruiter and living as we did with so little fruit they seemed as glamorous as cherries to me. My mother in her white felt hat would buy a pound or two of the apples and we would eat them driving

home. ‘One day I will plant fruit trees,’ she would say. ‘And you children will sit beneath them and eat the fruit while the juice runs down your arms.’

It took another dozen or so years, but that is what she did. And the strange thing is that when that farm was sold, the orchard she had planted in the front garden was dug up and the land was made into lawn that, when I saw it, left me thunder struck. How easily we destroy somebody’s accomplished dream.

Our mother loved Tumby Bay and she loved our father and so, perhaps as a consequence, at least of the former, so did we. When her sisters had heard that she was leaving the Barossa Valley with its vines and orchards to live on the edge of what they thought of as a desert, they told her she would hate it. But she loved it. She loved the daisy bushes on the edge of the beach, she loved the people and their hospitality.

Were we enchanted? Was it all a fable of our mother’s making? Why did she love our father to such a degree? Were we the only happy family in the country? I can’t say, but for whatever reason, there we were the six of us fighting merrily among ourselves but blessed with this strange enchanted felicity within the home. It formed us all.

* * * * *

Here now is my brother Peter making apricot jam in two big batches. It is 28th December, 2006 and we are at his home at Brighton near Adelaide. Last night I watched him cut and stone the fruit which he picked from the big tree in his back garden. He has netted this tree to keep the birds from the fruit. I watched him meticulously weigh the fruit on old scales kilo by kilo using apricot stones laid on the granite bench to number the kilos. Not knowing what the stones were for I had swept them away with a dish cloth into the bin when he was not looking. Patiently, because he has a sweet nature like our father, he went to the bin and lifted them out.

‘You don’t need too much sugar,’ he said. ‘Only use two thirds sugar to fruit. Too much sugar and you lose the flavour of the apricots. See, I’ve got nine kilos of apricots here and I’m only going to use six of sugar.’

He left two big pots of fruit and sugar to macerate overnight and he has brought them out to his barbecue on the back verandah. I see the pots begin to boil and ask, ‘Aren’t you going to use any water?’ Turning to me as he stirs with a huge wooden spoon, he says, ‘You don’t use water in jam! Water makes it go mouldy. The only jam you use water in is quince and it is a buggar because it always goes mouldy!’

Then, seeing two thermometers hanging from the side of both pots, I ask what temperature he is trying to get the jam to reach. ‘You need to get it to 105 or 110 degrees quickly. But it’s almost impossible to get it to that very fast. The quicker it boils to that heat you see, which is the setting point, the better the colour.’

Because the fruit has only been picked yesterday, its freshness seems to make it take a little longer than usual to reach setting point. After what seems to me an unusually short time for jam, a saucer of it laid out on the table beside us shows it has set. The heat is turned off and the pots are lifted into the kitchen where the jars Peter has sterilised in the oven are set out. As he fills the jars he puts a desert spoon into each one, as our mother did, to prevent the glass from breaking with the hot jam. His thumb or forefinger goes in on the inside of each jar and so unknowingly he spoils the sterilised condition of the jars. But I say nothing because I do not want to interrupt or to seem a critical older sister. Also, I can see he knows much more about jam-making than I do, even though I have been making it for fifty years. I know, too, that his jam doesn't spoil and is famous for its flavour. In fact, when I gave a big jar of Peter's apricot jam to my friend, Peri, she gave part of it in a smaller jar to her daughter, Justine, who took it to a café where she had breakfast every Saturday morning. It was left there as their weekly treat and became a thing they talked about because they thought it was so good. I have told Peter this story and he is quietly pleased.

Day after day, as the hot days went on and the evening sea breeze cooled us, the man went on making the jam until he had over fifty jars standing on the kitchen bench. Then he lifted the jars up into a set of glass-fronted cupboards that are lit from within. He had had them specially made to display his jam. There it sits, a memorial to our mother, to our childhood and to all those who made apricot jam at Christmas in the heat among the crying children.