

Orsolina

By Nick Iadanza

Outback South Australia, 1957

When Orsolina was younger she heard the story of a woman in the next village who walked into the local reservoir on Christmas Eve carrying her baby and drowned them both. Local gossip rippled for months that gypsies had charmed Paola Andretti's family, or La Befana had visited bringing bad omens (her husband's corn crop had also failed a season earlier for no apparent reason). But as she stood there rocking her screaming child in the crackling Australian heat, alone and bone-tired in the cramped backroom of the fabric store, Orsolina understood how Paola could look into the murky depths of the lake and see respite from the soul-swallowing position the young mother had found herself. Her body knew the same sick-tired feeling.

Rudolfo thrashed in her arms. His thin limbs pushed against her bony frame. He was feverish with the sweating sickness that had been making its way through the town. Frazzled hair fell over her eyes that were holding back tears as she tried to soothe the small boy. It had been weeks since she had someone else around. Alone, she looked after the poor straining boy. Alone, she manned the store. And, alone, she faced the impossible



demands of the townspeople who, despite not wanting to patronise the family's store, knew that their options were limited. Plus, "you had to give it to that Dago girlie, she does do a cracker hook stitch."

Usually, absence from her father's chilling shadow was a relief. However, he had taken her husband on his latest business dealings and, without warning she was left, again, abandoned in a town with people who, at worst, actively

heckled her in the post office and, at best, held a casual disdain for the wafer-thin presence she attempted to disguise at the edge of the towns behind the glass, counter and register of her father's store. Didn't they know she didn't want to be there either? More than once she felt like yelling back to them, "If I knew how to get back to where I came from, I would!" More than once she fought off the mania-inducing compulsion to drop her needle and thread and walk, Paola Andretti-style, into the sizzling expanse of the Outback until she arrived at a coast, any coast, where she would then swim until she hit Italian shores. Or until her arms gave out and she sank down, down into the deep blue churning of the very same sea that took her brother.

"I tried, Flavio. I really did." She would gurgle as her lungs filled with saltwater and she seized up in compassionate release from the new life to which she had been shackled.

Orsolina rocked the boy. Despite their meagre meals from the meagre cashflow, his frame was growing and at two years old he was far too big for her to hold, let alone wrestle like a large wire cage collapsing inside his ripped t-shirt and shorts.

"La luna, la luna tua, la luna, la luna tua . . ." Her stammering voice whispered the song she had heard from her own mother. It brought memories from under the olive tree; the cool breeze of a Mediterranean summer whistling past gnarled hands plaiting her thick black hair. Flavio lying next to her making a harmonica from

wheatsheaves. Peals of laughter from them all as it blared out a squeaky note like the baby goats three paddocks over. Her heart eased at the warmth of the memories and, like a genetic imprint, Rudolfo settled in her arms and eased into a clammy sleep. She lay him down on two chairs butted up against the wall in a makeshift bed. Her back creaked under the freedom from his weight. She probably had five minutes to eat something before he woke.

A curl of loaf crust and two chunks of hardening cheese sat under the tea towel on the table. Not enough. She had her tin of biscuits sitting in the top cupboard, wrapped gently in greaseproof paper and tied with string. They were to be saved for her visitor. She was sure that today would be the day she finally came back, and she needed to be ready. She had overheard a customer say to another that with the springtime lambs arriving that *the Yank vet lady would be here within a week*. Orsolina's heart leapt at the prospect. Finally, she would be back and have someone to talk to. For nearly a year she had been holding out for a friendly face. Not just another woman who could see her, truly see her, but a person who didn't avoid her eye contact like the townsfolk, eat in silence next to her like her husband, or stand over her like her father. In the strange bespectacled woman from the other side of the globe, she had pinned her hopes of something she hadn't had in a long time: a friend. Someone who might sit opposite her with a coffee in hand, a buttery smile and kind words exchanged of how

they *really* were. Her stomach might have craved the biscuits she was saving for that moment, but what her soul hungered for was the company.

Her famished eyes turned to the ceiling. Suspended from cane sticks that ran the length of the ceiling were their homemade sausages. Blood-brown and slick, they hung on cheerful links. Upside down rainbows of preserved meat that signalled their industry from the cooler months. Now, the meaty smiles beaded with grease in the heat and Orsolina reached up to grab one. She stopped, remembering the rules. She had her monthlies. If she touched them during this time, they would all spoil. It was her father's dictate and had been like this since she first came of age. Same rules for her mother. The tomato sauce when it was bottled, the trees when fruit first ripened, bread when it had just risen. The impure hands of Eve's descendants made all these bounties forbidden for a stretch of days every month. All the while her father slurped, crunched and chewed with impunity. Once, he saw her skim a fava bean with her arm as she slowly followed two butterflies in the garden behind the cowshed. He beat her with his belt until her legs blossomed with blue stalk-like welts. He 'sensed' she had her period. She did not. But Orsolina quickly learnt what was for her and what was not. In her father's eyes, much of what could be enjoyed in life had been annexed from her grasp. She sat down at the table and gnawed on the bread crust.

As she sat chewing and listening to the soft

puffing of her son's snores, she kept glancing through the curtain to the main shop and out to the section of the front window that gave a sightline to the main road. How eager she was to see the rickety ute gliding into town like a comet surrounded by a plume of dust; of possibility.

She thought back to their only meeting. She had replayed the brief encounter in her mind all year. Orsolina had been filling the small display tins with different coloured studs and buttons. When she turned around, a six-foot woman in red overalls was standing in her doorway.

"Well, hello there little lady," the stranger said.

Orsolina jumped in fright and clutched her heart with one hand, placing the other on the counter to steady herself. The woman stood ramrod straight in between the bolts of fabric, like a heron patiently surveying a pond. Orsolina had not heard her enter and she tried to catch her breath at the unexpected customer. Although the newcomer was silhouetted against the daylight streaming in from the front window, Orsolina could tell she had a towering beehive of wayward red curls swept into impossibly high mounds. Orsolina had become accustomed to the hairstyles of Australian women, much more whacky and wild than the plaits and low buns of her homeland. But this woman seemed like she was not from around here either. A suspicion which was confirmed as she approached Orsolina, hand outstretched.

"Now where are my manners? You betch'ya I should know better than to sneak up on a tiny

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little thing like you.” She stopped with her giant hand across the counter, inches from Orsolina’s apron.

“My name’s Miss Moriah Fox and it is a pleasure to make your ‘quaintance.’”

Orsolina tentatively shook her hand, dumbstruck by the American twang, which brought back memories of the black and white movies that used to show once a month in the *paese* when she was little. Cowboy films that transfixed the packed village—children and adults alike—with other worldly images beamed straight into their provincial existence.

“My name . . . Orsolina.” After a year in Australia, English had taken root inside her and silently spread its tendrils. With so few people to converse with, her inner monologue had been forced to take over. The funny thing about keeping silent for so long is that the words you share with yourself have space to grow and flex. Most nights Orsolina sat alone around the beat-up radio listening to the serials and radio plays that were imprinting their vernacular and fluency on her tongue. More often than not she would talk back to the static that would never judge her garbled attempts at English, then match it with the few scattered words she could learn in context from her father’s interactions with customers and the wider world he brought into her orbit.

“Well young lady, with a name like that, it seems you aren’t from around here neither. I grew up three licks south of the Chattahoochee but it’s been near-on five years since I last set eyes on it.” Her pupils flashed with a spark of recollection at the name from her homeland. Orsolina knew that look well. It was the same every time she recalled the rolling hills and *fiume* back home. Moriah stared at the young girl, awaiting a response.

“I from Italia. I be here one year, two month.” She hung her head in equal parts shame at her lacklustre English and equal parts lack of practice talking about anything at all to do with herself.

“*Prima . . .*” she halted the flow of her mother tongue and concentrated on conjuring up the right words. “Uh . . . first, my papa come Australia . . . *per . . .* 10 years.” Nervously, she fiddled with the scarf fastened around her neck. She had taken to wearing it to hide the murky blue thumbprints that often dotted her throat—a seemingly weekly gift he left her with while her husband stood back and watched. Like her, he was afraid of Carmine.

“Well.” Moriah stamped her big work boots and dusted her overalls with her large, wrinkled hands. “My daddy taught me a thing or two about hogs and sheep. I travel these parts as a veterinarian of sorts. Try call in to Foxwood

every Springtime to help with lambing and what not.” How old she was, Orsolina could only guess. Forty? Sixty? The piles of crimson curls had the odd grey streak, but she seemed sharp and spritely. Orsolina became aware she was staring at this formidable figure as if she were an enchanting creature cut out from a book of mythology and pasted here in the pages of the dreary storefront. Moriah shifted.

“When I drove by, I saw in your yard that you keep your own sheep and,” she glanced at Orsolina’s bruised neck, exposed by her fiddling with the scarf, “thought you could do with some . . . help.” Reaching into the large pocket of her overalls, she pulled out a pile of folded papers. She held them toward the tiny shopkeeper.

“It’s not much, just some information on what diseases to look out for. Ticks, worms, flyblow etcetera. And there are some numbers for local animal services.” Moriah didn’t break eye contact.

Orsolina wrung her hands.

“I no read.” Then, realising she was being rude reached for the papers anyway. “My papa. He read for me.”

Moriah quickly yanked the folded papers back to her chest and let out a small tentative laugh. She looked out the window, then to the door to the backroom, then back to a confused Orsolina. Had she misunderstood what this strange apparition-like woman was saying to her? The language barrier was already being stretched to its limits. Moriah smiled.

“No sweetie. This is just for you.” Then in her own attempt at simplifying her tongue: “You keep.” She placed the pamphlet in Orsolina’s hand again and placed her other hand on top, like she was sealing a box shut. Orsolina’s palms quivered. It felt so nice to be touched tenderly that she could almost cry.

“You see, I travel up and down these parts, helping the little lambs I come across.” Moriah paused and smiled with closed lips. The moment was held.

“It can be a mighty harsh place for anything to thrive out here. Man, oh man, don’t I know it.” Moriah stepped back and slid her hands into the straps on her overalls. A curl fell from the squirming mass of hair and she blew it away from her eyes. It snagged in her copper eyebrow and stayed there.

“So, you just take that, keep that chin up, that neckerchief on tight and remember ol’ Miss Moriah Fox will be here again with more papers and what not if you need next Springtime.”

With a quick step she swept through the door, bowing her head so the mound of hair faltered, then sprang back up as her towering posture was restored. Before Orsolina could cobble together another broken sentence, the woman was back in her busted-up ute and off down the road in a cloud of orange dust. Orsolina stood in the silent shop wondering if the last five minutes were some sort of waking dream. The weight of the pamphlets in her hand told her that, no, it had in fact happened. Slowly she placed the papers on

the counter beside her. She separated them one by one—each covered in letters she knew but arranged in foreign orders and patterns she was yet to decipher. There were diagrams of breeding cycles of tiny drawn lambs and what looked like a series of phone numbers. She separated the final papers and in between what looked like images in an advertisement for animal feed, sat ten crisply flattened one-pound notes.

But this was all a year ago now. Orsolina sat at the table still working the tough crust between her teeth. The heat of the back room still clung to her like a second skin. She thought back to that money and how bit by bit it had been nibbled away in secret. For one reason or another the men in her life did not quite grasp the quotidian needs of keeping them all fed and a shop running, and she couldn't ask them for more. Once, when she brought up with her father that Rudy, a hungry breastfed child, needed formula as her supply had run dry, she came away from the conversation with what she suspected to be two fractured ribs and the need to dip into her benefactor's secret stash for the first time. Now it was all gone, and while money was not as pressing a concern as it had been in the early months of the shop, the realities of daily life continued to press on Orsolina in ways that felt insurmountable.

Instead, she fashioned the memory of Moriah's practical and personal goodwill into twin threads that formed a potential lifeline. So, when the first spring lamb appeared in the McCullen's paddock, Orsolina raced home and

cooked a fresh batch of crostoli biscuits and almond cake. Along with another small token she had made with painstaking pride hidden inside, the biscuit tin would be ready to host her first visitor. That and the coffee powder she had nestled in a spare jar behind the radiator where her father wouldn't find it. She would entice Miss Moriah Fox with her delicacies and hopefully show her that she need not worry about giving any money, just the gift of a coffee between two people, restorative to heart and mind.

As she worked through the final pebble of bread, she saw the plume of dust rise from the road beyond the window. She jumped up nearly bumping her sleeping son. Excitement bubbled within her. She smoothed her apron and tried to tame her unkempt hair. Inhaling a calming breath, Orsolina reached into the top cupboard and brought out the tin of hidden treats. Rudy was in a deep sleep in the draining heat and she made her way to greet her long-awaited visitor.

Miss Moriah Fox was exactly as Orsolina had remembered her: a monolith of sky-high hair and red corduroy. She was striding toward the front door when Orsolina opened it and stopped her in her tracks.

"Guh-day, Miss Fox." She had wanted to try this phrase out for months and had been practicing with a shy smile to the radio most nights. Now that it had come out to another person it felt awkward and strange. The guttural opener had seemed to startle Moriah rather than delight her.

Orsolina did not understand the last few words but she did understand “do not mix.” She had heard this plenty of times. “Why won’t they learn how to mix with our ways.” “We simply do not mix with Wops.” “I’m all for them being in Australia, but do they have to mix in our town? That’s what Melbourne’s for.”

“Oh, hello there little lady. You scared me, but G’day to you too, I suppose. I’m more of a ‘howdy ma’am’ ma’am but ten points for tryin’.” Moriah stepped up onto the porch where Orsolina stood and the height disparity, previously levelled as she stood on the dusty road below the porch, suddenly reappeared. Off balance, but unperturbed, Orsolina seized her moment.

“I want to thank you for your big money last year.” Orsolina held out the opened tin. From between the folds of grease-paper sweet smells of icing sugar and almond essence wafted up.

“Please, come in. I make for you and I have Italian coffee. Best in Australia.” Orsolina smiled, proud that she had stuck the landing on the semi-joke she had worked on for many weeks. Moriah must not have caught it.

“Well first of all, your English is coming along real nice Miss Orleana.”

“Orsolina,” she corrected.

“Ah yes, Orsonina. It’s mighty nice of you but I got a few errands to run today and just wanted to check on you and give you this.” She reached into her overalls as she had done the previous

year.

“There’s word of drought a-comin’ and the information in this here pamphlet might come in handy. I know how things get when the weather turns.” She waved her long fingers at Orsolina’s neck. “Things turn sour inside the house just as they do out in the fields.”

She thrust a small pamphlet toward the biscuit tin. This time Orsolina could make out the heading. The papers had a slight bulge indicating the presence of several crinkled notes. Orsolina smiled.

“Thank you Miss Fox, you keep. But please come inside for coffee. Just five minute. I show you the shop and my son.”

Moriah’s neck stiffened and she shifted uncomfortably in her work boots.

“Why thank you all the same Little Miss, but I make it a habit not to mix streams: philanthropy and acquaintance.”

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Australia, but do they have to mix in our town? That's what Melbourne's for."

This was not going how she had imagined and despite the confusion and anger bubbling inside her, the thought of another interminable year in this place, alone and isolated made her chest feel like it was being pressed outward from the inside.

"Please, you come in. A quick coffee or if you no like coffee, un biscotto." In her panic, her English was slipping. She held the tin back up with a hopeful smile. "This just like I make in Italy with my mamma. She died when . . ."

"Buh buh buh . . ." Moriah cut her off. "Well hold on now. I appreciate the thought and I will take the offer of thanks." She reached out and snapped the tin shut placing it under her arm. "There was no need, but, like said, I thank you all the same."

Orsolina was stunned. What was she doing? Couldn't she see how desperate she was for a friend, a confidant, someone to give her more than sixty seconds of their time? The anger was simmering to the surface. Her eyes hardened.

"I just want a someone to talk . . ."

"Honey if you knew how many . . ." she looked up and down the street to see if anyone was around. They were alone. ". . . lambs are out here needing help you would see why I try to keep, shall we say, a healthy distance." With that, she took a step back and held out an outstretched arm with the pamphlet. "Now, take the papers and . . ."

Orsolina burst. She reached out and smacked

the packet to the ground. One-pound notes fluttered softly down.

"I no want your *fucking* money." The word stunned her coming out her mouth. She had heard it since she arrived and more than once rolled it around in her mouth when all alone to feel the spiked edges of it against her tongue. It felt good to say it aloud and it felt good to finally shout with anger. Moriah gave a small smile and put her hands behind her overall straps like she had done in their first encounter. She looked almost calmer being yelled at than when offered a kindly invite of coffee and cake. She stared at a shaking Orsolina with a friendly tilt of the head.

"This place," she looked around her before settling back on the young woman, "is an unforgiving hellscape of a wilderness. I should know, I been stuck here nigh on two years, seven months, one week and three days since my husband kicked the bucket. Damn that bastard to hell. Some days I can barely keep my head above the water line for fear of drowning myself." For the first time, the statuesque woman seemed to shake. A barely perceptible slumping of the shoulders and a quiver in the voice.

"So, excuse me if I can't get weighed down in anyone else's stories when I can't even outrun my own. I've got the cash and I get it to the many hands that seems to need it." She knelt down and began collecting the notes.

"I won't . . . I can't do the little things. I can only do this." Stuffing the money back into the paper, she folded it up and tucked it in her

Slowly and gently she tugged it out from beneath the sweets and examined the fine cross stitching. It was a small fox sitting upright, staring straight ahead, elegantly wreathed in a halo of curly red swirls.

pocket.

“I hope you find what you need out here in this strange land, but I don’t like your chances.” The tower of curls walked toward her car and the biscuit tin was placed on the passenger seat. Orsolina stood, alone, on the porch of the shop in front of the looming words *Carminé and Sons*. She didn’t even move as the ute quickly pulled away into a cloud of orange dust that settled around her.

She breathed slowly and steadily despite her heart shaking inside her. She smoothed down her apron and calmly walked inside the shop. Its darkness swept around her. Rudolfo would be stirring soon and as she quietly returned to the backroom, she wiped the tears from her cheeks with resolute and proud movements. Her head tilted upwards, eyes snagging on the sausages. Without pausing or stopping for the consequences or the fear, she stepped up onto the chair. She ripped down a small link and peeled back the layer of skin with her nails. It felt greasy in her hands. Getting down from the chair she sat at the table and thought of what her father would say if he saw her. She bit into the side knowing that it was time to take what was hers.

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Dust plumed behind the car for many kilometres until Moriah Fox pulled over along a vast stretch of open road and came to stop underneath a towering eucalypt. She breathed deeply, calming herself from what had just happened with the small Italian woman. She reached to the tin and opened it. The strange looking biscuits looked like perfectly laced twirls of yellow crust and icing. She lifted one and placed it in her mouth. It was unlike anything she had tasted before, either in Australia or in the United States. Glancing back in the tin, the empty space where her biscuit had been revealed a dark black eye staring back at her through an orange burst of colour. Moriah shifted the other biscuits and saw that the tin had been laid with a small white napkin. Slowly and gently she tugged it out from beneath the sweets and examined the fine cross stitching. It was a small fox sitting upright, staring straight ahead, elegantly wreathed in a halo of curly red swirls. The needlework was incredible and made her breath catch in her throat. A fox for Moriah Fox. She folded the napkin and placed it in her top pocket, tears prickling in the corner of her eyes. The sun began to slip toward the horizon. Alone she sat under the gum tree as she thought of just how much distance there was

between her and everyone else in this strange land.

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One year later, when driving that same road back toward Foxwoods, her body would be pulled from the twisted wreckage of her ute that had collided with an oncoming semitrailer that had

lost control. A metal biscuit tin had been upturned in the crash, destroying the Key lime pie folded gently within a napkin inside. Cream and crust smeared across an embroidered lamb that had been stitched to the side. Another napkin would later be found in her top pocket, the cross-stitched image of a fox perfectly pressed against her chest when it had finally stopped beating.

Image: "[Outback](#)" (CC BY-SA 2.0) by [John Cooke](#)