

So Thin

by Beverley Lello

When it's only us in the kitchen together, when my pesky younger sister isn't around wanting to turn the dough into dolls, or my grandfather isn't reaching across the bench to eat the scraps, my grandmother will offer me bits of cooking wisdom. Today, in a voice as flat as the pastry I'm rolling, she says, 'My mother always told me strudel dough needs to be thin enough to read a love letter underneath.' I want to please her so I press down on the rolling pin. I think I'm succeeding. 'Firm and smooth,' she says.

'Firm and smooth,' I repeat. I'm trying to give the rolling all my attention but I can't help but imagine the words of the letter that will be revealed, hiding on the paper as if they've been written in invisible ink. When the pastry is thin enough, I think to myself, I'll be able to read the words of my imaginary lover.

Did my grandmother ever receive love letters? I pause in my rolling to look at her hands. She's peeling apples and the skin on her hands is mottled and loose. She tells me sixty five isn't so old but her bones and veins dance around underneath the skin and I want to reach out and pinch the loose folds and see if I can make the surface smooth. But I don't because my grandmother is about to speak again and I think I'm about to be treated to another morsel of cooking wisdom, and because I haven't achieved thin enough pastry, I start to press and roll again.

'Your grandfather used to write such lovely letters.' I'm surprised that I've had my unspoken question answered. She finishes peeling the apples and rests the worn blade of the knife on the chopping board. She has removed the skin in a long continuous curl and it sits on the board, a red ringlet like a lock of hair from a female giant. (She showed me how to do this the last time we cooked together).

I keep rolling. Pushing down and leaning forwards. Rising up and pulling back. I think I'm making progress, although the pastry sheet has moved away from the edges of the rolling pin and is beginning to look like a puddle of cloudy water.

'He had a way with words, your grandfather.' The bones of her hands ripple like the keys on her old Pianola as she scoops the peel into the scrap bucket. *Food for the chooks*. Then she begins coring and slicing the apples. The hand holding the knife goes down and up. The blade turns the slices into small neat white blocks. 'He never

said much about the fighting. To read the letters at first you'd think no gun was ever fired, or grenade exploded.'

A small hole appears in my pastry puddle and I think I'd better stop. My grandmother wasn't talking about holes when she said the pastry needs to be thin enough to read a love letter underneath. I'm wondering how I'll patch it up before she sees it, but my grandmother is always one step ahead of me. 'Pinch it together and press down again with the rolling pin,' she says. And I do, but it's like pinching her skin and I do it quickly and keep rolling.

'That might be enough,' she says. 'You can measure out the sugar and cinnamon for me while I squeeze the lemons.'

I'm worried now she won't tell me anymore about the letters. That happens sometimes. She starts telling me a really interesting story – I like the ones about my mother being a wild child - then she gets distracted and the titbit is only about how to get more juice out of a lemon – you warm them up – and the juicy part of the story dries up.

But this doesn't happen now. She's in memory mode and I hear how my grandfather described the men in his platoon and the things they carried on patrol. Some had lucky charms: a penny on a chord, a button from their girlfriend's favourite dress or, and I wasn't sure about this one, the clip which hung from a suspender belt and held the stocking up. My grandmother's hands went still when she came to this one on the list. I hoped it wasn't her suspender clip we were talking about. It made me think that some of the things my grandfather was supposed to have written in the letter were now stories she carried around in her head as she did all the ordinary jobs: washing, ironing, vacuuming, making beds, peeling, chopping.

She concentrates on the lemons for a bit, holding up the clear jug that catches the juice so she can judge whether she has squeezed enough. She hardly ever measures things with spoons or cups. Look and taste are her mottoes.

'Another thing he wrote about was the jungle. He would describe the stench of rotting vegetation: wet black mud, the smell of decay and death, how everything was crumbling and steaming and falling apart like it was overcooked.' She pours the juice over the apples, tells me to stir in the sugar and the cinnamon, and then continues. 'I imagined him stopping at the end of the day, taking his pen and notepad from his pack and sitting on a log to write his letter home. I imagined him looking around and breathing in the damp smell of decaying vegetation and shaping the words in his mind

like he was shaping dough into biscuits. Then writing them down knowing that one day soon I'd read them.'

I long to have one of those letters so that I could open it out, pick up the pastry and place it over the page like tracing paper. I imagine it as something you could eat, eventually rolled up inside a pastry shell like a saying in a Chinese Fortune Cookie. But she hasn't got to the love bit, yet. Maybe my younger sister will come inside and demand she be given the uneven edges my grandmother is carving away with her knife. She will make something useless, like a necklace, out of the curling edges. She also likes to hook the peel over her ears and prance around like a demented celebrity. The moment will be spoiled because my sister will demand we all look at her.

Or maybe my grandfather will finish whatever he's making in his shed and wander inside. She won't go on talking about his letters when he's right there, especially not the love bits. But neither of these things happen and my grandmother is happy to continue her story as she spoons the apples onto my thin pastry sheet. She tells me I've done a good job. She lets me brush the edges with an egg and milk mixture and fold them over the apples. It's like putting a fat letter in an envelope.

'He would say things like wanting to lick the tears from my face because this was the last picture he had of me when we were saying goodbye.' As she says this she hands me the pastry brush and I cover the surface with the left over egg and milk, then she picks up the tray with the strudel and crosses the kitchen to the oven. Before she opens the door and puts it in, she adds, 'He hated the heat. He'd describe how we'd go swimming in the creek when he came home. The water would be clear and cold. We'd dive in, come up for air, then tread water as we kissed.' She pauses. 'Now let's get this mess cleaned up before I'm invaded.'

That's not the end of the love letters though. She washes the dishes and I dry and she tries to remember where they might be. I make suggestions but she dismisses them all.

'They're probably lost,' she says. 'Thrown out with other useless papers.'

'They weren't useless,' I protest.

She says, 'You're probably right. It's things like that, irreplaceable things, that are worth the most. I'll keep looking. If you ever love a soldier and he goes to war, he'll send you emails. It wouldn't be the same.'

I agree because I can't imagine printing out an email and covering it with very thin pastry. Or a text message. You couldn't read one of those under pastry and that's the only sort of love letter I've had so far. Ben, in my English class, texted me and said *I LUV U*. I deleted it straight away. When I think about my grandfather's letters I see them written in a script looping and flowing across the page. Emails are typed with printed mechanical writing, and text messages don't even count.

I don't want to marry a soldier though; I don't want there to be anymore wars.

I think about my grandfather for a bit then. When he is in his shed, hammering away at a book shelf or making toys for his grandchildren, is he sometimes thinking about the things he'd seen in the war? I'd studied the Vietnam War in my history class and we'd learnt how lots of horrible things happened. I thought about the letter he didn't write to my grandmother. He might have said: *This war is a terrible thing. We are in someone else's backyard and we should not be here. People are dying: women, children, old people. Soldiers. I have seen bodies mangled and bloated, burnt and abandoned to rot. There will be no winners, only death and destruction. I should be home with you.* These are not words of love but perhaps he wrote this letter and my grandmother has chosen not to tell me. Perhaps having someone to receive such letters, helped save my grandfather so that he could come home and marry my grandmother.

The oven timer goes off and the strudel is taken out and placed on the bench. The back door bangs and my grandmother looks up. 'Here he is,' she says. 'He always knows when it's ready.'

My grandfather is a big man. His bulk fills the doorway like bread dough which has risen in the tin. He enters the kitchen. 'I can smell strudel,' he says, and smiles a thousand love letters at my beaming grandmother.