

The Solution

They called it early retirement; he called it retrenchment. Words. He consoled himself for the first few weeks with cryptic crosswords. The puzzles soothed. Ambiguity demanded clarity. *Italian sauce for some of the crepes. Tomato base? (5)* Solution: *pesto*.

He was hooked on that small zap of adrenalin when the meaningless clue, a jumble of nonsense phrases, condensed itself into one meaningful word. He could then enter it neatly on the grid. By the time the empty squares were filled there wasn't so much of the day left.

At first his wife, Ruth, had been excited by the prospect of having him home all the time. 'You'll be able to finish off all those jobs.' A flicker of film stills reeled through his head: Donald on the ladder dragging leaves out of the gutter, Donald cruising the shelves in the hardware store looking for the right size bracket to anchor the end where it sagged and overflowed when the rain was heavy, Donald stretching up to drill a hole to attach the bracket, Donald falling off the ladder and spending early and late retirement in a wheelchair. He didn't share these thoughts with Ruth, of course, because that would be to destroy the unspoken pact they shared. He was the handyman: Ruth was mistress of the domestic. Or, at least, she used to be.

For the thirty seven years he'd worked as an accountant Donald had come home to a gourmet home cooked meal. He would decline invitations to get takeaway for lunch or go to the pub on the corner. *Ruth will have cooked a roast, or, it's Monday, Thai stir fry is Mondays, or Friday, Ruth usually does Italian.* He'd limited himself to a single cheese and pickle sandwich or ham and mustard, homemade bread of course lovingly kneaded by Ruth three times a week. His co-workers teased him about being married to Margaret Fulton or Stephanie Alexander and he'd think of the old adage, a way to a man's heart is through his stomach, and just let the jokes flow over him like a delicate wine sauce being poured over a steak, medium rare.

Even before the retrenchment there'd been a decline in Ruth's culinary enthusiasm. He knew it had something to do with the death of which they rarely spoke. The cook books stayed on the shelf; she stopped buying the magazines filled with glossy, mouth watering pictures. They were no longer scattered on the coffee table like a magician's cards or piled thumbed and food stained on the kitchen bench.

The menus had become increasingly mundane. Friday night Italian had narrowed to spaghetti bolognese; Thai Green Curry was out of a jar and the potatoes with the roast were just plain baked potatoes not crusted with crushed rosemary and sea salt and tossed in a glaze of virgin olive oil. He knew all the terms, had the theory because that often formed a large part of their mealtime conversation.

‘This is delicious. How have you cooked this?’

‘Oh, just a garlic and wine marinade, with lemon zest, of course, then I sautéed it in a brandy jus.’ He loved the words: jus, verjuice, mince, sauté, marinate, seep, drizzle, deglaze, wilt; imagined them as the sort of words that emerged from the cocoon of a crossword clue and he loved the way Ruth said them, rolling them around in her mouth as if the taste was there to be savoured and licked away. It made him remember the taut, vibrant skin of Ruth in her twenties. Like a nectarine.

But this was all before the death and now the flavour had gone out of their lives. They lost their zest and Donald felt snap frozen. He slipped into eating the odd pub lunch, indulged in an occasional take-away and even grew to tolerate the supermarket, plastic bag bread. There was a bit of joking about the change but it was a sensitive subject and mostly his co-workers chose not to comment. He would have actually welcomed a return to the old teasing but people didn’t always have the words to offer you solace. Ruth seemed to accept life had punched her cruelly in the jaw; she’d even decided to step back into the ring. He was still waiting for the blow to register.

Ruth had taken up causes. She used her writing skills to righting wrongs. She’d become obsessed with solving the problems of the unloved and helpless. Newspapers were being inundated with Ruth’s solutions to the plight of abused children, aboriginal deaths in custody, the homeless, victims of violence, battered wives. She’d joined Amnesty International, Greenpeace, the Australian Conservation Foundation, Save the Children, Cure for Cancer, Rights for Refugees, Stop the War in Afghanistan. The letterbox was stuffed every day with pleas for donations, catalogues from Women’s Co-operatives in Mexico and their shared email account was swamped with updates on the current crisis in Somalia, Sudan and Burma. The only thing Ruth wasn’t prepared to save was him.

Once the crossword was finished he had trouble knowing what to do with his day. He’d shifted his tools into a more prominent position, made lists of things to be picked up at the hardware store and left them in places where Ruth would be sure to

see them and even dressed in the sort of clothes a man would wear to mend the guttering. He contemplated leaning the ladder up against the house but this seemed to be going too far. After the first couple of weeks, however, Ruth stopped asking him what his plans were for the day. She'd disappear into the study with her mug of tea, then emerge with an expression of urgency, offer him a cursory, 'I'm going out. Do you want me to pick anything up?' Even if he did she would forget to do it and any instruction to buy screws or brackets would bring a price tag of expectation. *Something nice for dinner.* But he let that thought remain unspoken.

Their son, Andrew, had died two years ago. Cancer. It had started with the kidney then galloped through the rest of his body. He had been thirty-four. He would never forget the night Andrew had told them of his illness. Ruth had made a particularly tasty eggplant parmigiana. The air had been pungent with the smell of tomatoes and oregano. The whole family had gathered: their eldest, Sophie, and her husband Gary, the youngest, Elizabeth, still single but happily so she kept assuring them and Andrew's wife, Mae Ling, an inspiration for some of Ruth's south-east Asian masterpieces. They had been a contented table of diners murmuring their gratitude as they forked up the fragrant mouthfuls. Until Andrew dropped his fork abruptly.

Andrew told them later that he'd wanted the sibling support when he broke the news, wanted it to be for the ears of the immediate family only. His son, Kade, was not to be told at this stage. Donald had marvelled at his control of the situation. He'd used all those words like prognosis, malignant, terminal, palliative care, words Donald often came across in his crossword clues. At first these words helped him cope with his son's illness, then his death but lately, they just seemed to get in the way. He could describe it but he couldn't fathom it. Fathom, solace, were these words clues or answers?

Now here they were, two years beyond the death, cut out from the world and saving the world. On top of her other activities Ruth had also given herself the task of helping out with Kade, Andrew and Mae Ling's five year old. He came to them three times a week after school. Donald did not consider himself to be good with children. He had a few special tricks: a disappearing egg, a coin that could move from one hand to another and a range of reading aloud voices. Mostly Ruth took Kade away and kept him amused. He found it difficult to look into those wide brown eyes, not quite

Andrew's, and read the question there, *why didn't his father come home anymore?* Donald scowled when Ruth announced Kade would be coming for the whole day, a curriculum day at school, and she absolutely had to go to a meeting. What on earth would he do with the boy?

Ruth left at 9.30am. She settled Kade with paper and crayons and he seemed happy to draw quietly while Donald worked on his cryptic. The easy clues deciphered, Donald decided to stall any further planning by reading the rest of the newspaper. He worked backwards so he could put off reading the news of the world for as long as possible. He came across the week's film reviews. Perhaps a film would be a distraction for Kade though he thought it unlikely there would be a film he could tolerate that would also please a five year old. *Ratatouille*. Rated G. Anything that had food as its title had to be bearable. He read the review then turned to the session times. If they left now they could make it to the screening at 11 am. Ruth had taken the car but a brisk walk would get them there on time.

Donald had never been to a morning session of a film. It was for people with time on their hands and up to this point he hadn't admitted to himself that he was that very person. There were quite a few other people in the cinema with time on their hands, mostly parent and child combinations or clumps of older children munching popcorn, feet up on the seats. Other products of the curriculum day he supposed. Kade seemed content, declined the offer of popcorn but accepted a small coke. Donald knew Ruth would disapprove but it was his day out with the boy and he'd do as he pleased.

After the film, Donald and Kade walked home, slowly. He liked the way Kade took his hand when they crossed the road. They'd never walked anywhere together before and the feel of that small springy hand placed inside his squeezed away his indifference. He noticed things: the number of children holding an adults hand, women pushing space ages strollers which looked more like tricycles, men in suits sipping coffee at tables on the footpath. He had never been on the streets much during the day – all those lunches at his desk. Around the corner from the cinema was a new eatery, not a word he favoured but it was part of the name, Enzo's Eatery, and as he'd just seen a film featuring a male rat with a heightened sense of taste and smell aspiring to be a chef, he decided they would dine-out. At least the food would be an antidote for whatever Ruth served up that night.

Donald ordered the pan-fried loin of yearling beef with black pepper sauce. The waiter suggested he accompany it with a pea, mint and spinach salad. They even had a child's menu, not hamburgers and fish and chips but real food, a half serve of chicken teriyaki and noodles. He would have liked a glass of Shiraz because it was the sort of place that served wine by the glass but he thought it would make him sleepy. He changed his mind when he realised that it didn't matter if he felt sleepy; he could go home and have a nap. Kade would probably need one, too. He had a comforting snapshot of the two of them dozing on the cream, leather couch, Kade with his head resting warmly against Donald's arm. He finished the steak and the wine just as he spotted Enzo through the servery hatch. Enzo looked up. He had an earring in one ear and a white cap tied at the back of his neck. He looked, to Donald, like a pirate. Donald gave him a thumbs up and Enzo returned his praise with a wink. At this point Donald knew exactly what he was going to do next.

Three doors down from the eatery there was a butcher's shop, the old fashioned kind which had meat displayed in the window, thick blood-red slabs of it overlapping like the petals of a giant rose and thin, pale curves of fat side-framing each portion. Donald described to the butcher exactly what he wanted and the butcher said, *no trouble mate, frenched cutlets coming up*. Donald felt a frisson of excitement as the word rolled off the butcher's tongue. Next Donald went to the supermarket and lingered over the new potatoes, carefully choosing eight almost exactly the same size. He knew they had rosemary growing at home; even neglect had failed to kill the bush. Finally he measured out a handful of beans, rejected one with a brown patch, and dropped them into the plastic bag. He had to ask directions from a young man stacking shelves to be able to find the virgin olive oil but he stumbled on the verjuice by accident in the gourmet section near the deli counter. He had to force himself to concentrate on the current mission; there was so much to distract him, so many possibilities. Tomorrow, he thought, I'll come back tomorrow.

On the way home they passed a large multi-coloured van on the corner near the park. The park had an iron railing and the corner was angled. Lined up on the seat, which had been placed across the angle, were three men and a woman, although it was hard to tell as they all had long, stringy dread locks and crumpled, ill-fitting clothing. Several more were blocking the path. They held plates and were eating a mound of something hot. Kade knocked into the legs of one of the men because he

was busy staring at these weird outdoor diners but the bearded man just said, 'Watch it kid,' and kept on eating.

'Are they having a picnic, Grandpa?'

'No. I think they might be homeless people and the van is bringing them their dinner so they don't go hungry.'

They hurried on. There's just so much happening in the neighbourhood, thought Donald.

That night Donald served rack of lamb with brandy jus, baby new potatoes with rosemary and crushed sea salt and green beans simmered in butter and lemon juice, to a very surprised Ruth. She had reached into the freezer ready to extract the bolognaise sauce when the assault on her senses had made her pause, sniff, stand up and survey the kitchen with the incredulous look of someone who has just won a holiday to Baghdad in a raffle. 'Dinner will be ready in twenty minutes,' he said. 'Perhaps you could fix us a gin and tonic.'

'We don't have any tonic water.'

'Yes, we do. And there's a lime in the fruit bowl. I've been shopping.'

When Ruth had recovered from the shock, downed the first gin and tonic and started to sip the second one, she began to tell him what she'd done that day. As they prised their rack of lamb apart and sunk their teeth into the firm white flesh of the potatoes, Donald recounted the plot of the film, the visit to Enzo's Eatery, the conversation with Damien, the butcher and the outdoor picnic for the homeless.

'I'll take you to Enzo's for lunch, tomorrow if you're not too busy. There's something in his marinade I can't quite recognize.'

'Maybe there's a recipe in one of the books.'

But Donald didn't need a recipe. Cooking, he decided, was just like a cryptic crossword, ambiguous until that one word leapt out at you and you had the solution. He had noticed Ruth lick her lips after she'd finished the lamb, her tongue lingering and searching to capture the last trace of the flavour. Perhaps she had simply grown tired of preparing meals and just wanted to be fed. He looked into her eyes and thought of nectarines.

Donald prepared Christmas dinner for the whole family that year. He let Kade, who had become an accomplished chopper of herbs and garlic, help with the turkey seasoning. He felt a palpitation of pride when Kade picked a handful of fragrant, green leaves in the herb garden, crushed them in his fingers and said, 'Basil.

We can make pesto, grandpa.’ Over the Christmas pudding he announced to the family that he was signing up to do regular volunteer work with the mission in High Street. Apparently, Damien donated off-cuts of meat on a regular basis and he’d mentioned it to Donald when he was in collecting the Christmas ham and turkey. The food donations varied so it would be a challenge for Donald to come up with nourishing and tasty meals. Enzo had told him, in one of their chats over an espresso, that *food reaches the soul. Sharing a meal gives us dignity.* And it hadn’t just been a plug for his restaurant.

Donald hired a handyman to do the guttering and vied with Ruth for the use of the computer to make his lists and menus. Perhaps next year he would set up a second van and take it onto the streets, regular breakfasts for the homeless. Ruth promised to scale back on some of her committees and help out and, of course, they had to be free for Kade after school three times a week and anytime there was a curriculum day. Sometimes, there was more than one solution to the puzzle of life.