

MRS CARDELLINO'S ARM

Everyone in the street knew Mrs Cardellino had only one arm but no one knew the reason and the mystery kept many tongues wagging when there was nothing else to talk about. People who considered themselves polite, could not go up to an elderly New Australian and ask "what happened to your arm?" Not only was it considered impolite but also cruel and no one wanted to appear insensitive enough to bring up something that might be absolutely horrific for her to remember. And they mustn't make her feel any different from the normal two-armed people, either! All these aspects had to be taken into account when they met her on the street, yet how they wanted to know! Going about their business, they would fantasize about maimed people screaming on TV, talk about it in private *tête-à-têtes*, ponder whether her arrival in the sleepy suburban street had anything to do with the amputated arm. Mrs Cardellino's immediate neighbours were the worst inquisitors, but never to her face. They wondered who made her clothes since the 'missing' arm was always covered by a sleeve which flared out like a cape thrown over one shoulder. The dressmaker's identity was also a mystery and they puzzled whether they ever could find the person who made her dresses and whether she would tell if the arm was a withered stump or cut off from the armpit.

When the neighbours met Mrs Cardellino in the street, they would greet her politely, trying very hard to look only at half of her person. The old woman would certainly suffer if she caught them staring at the sartorial discrepancy falling from her shoulder, nor did they want her to spot the morbid curiosity in their eyes. They could never get over the fact that the Italian was capable of doing anything a normal person could. Like the gardening. She could grow any kind of vegetable by digging with one arm; she was so nimble and efficient that they felt a puncture of envy when they compared her luxuriant growth to their own struggling little plots. The neighbour on the right, disliked her.

"Wouldn't be surprised if they chopped her arm off in Italy. The Mafia, you know . . . they are merciless . . . she must have done something dreadful to deserve such a fate!"

The neighbour to the left, liked Mrs Cardellino and told the busybody with the Mafia ideas that "it's God's will. Poor soul, not being able to speak English properly . . . it must be hard to carry on with one arm!"

"Did you see the eggplants she is growing? Foreigners have funny ways! Can't stand the stuff and in the shops they cost the earth! Don't know what they see in eggplants . . . a friend of mine told me it is a delicacy but I wouldn't try it for the world! I even heard they eat squid!"

Her friend wanted to appear kind, yet was beginning to like the twist in the conversation going from amputated limbs to eggplants. She had a chance to show off again. "They are really called aubergines."

"What?"

"Aubergines. A-U-B-E-R-G-I-N-E-S. French for eggplant. All posh restaurants serve them."

"I must go to put out my washing before it rains" said the neighbour of the right, a trifle irritated by her friend's superior knowledge of the world and her own mortification that she could never get any upmanship with her.

Mrs Cardellino had offered them eggplants but both neighbours had refused with profuse smiles. Two purple monstrosities held in the clutch of one hand was a sight that repelled them: The 'aubergine' lady said "no, thank you, I know they taste good but we don't eat them." The 'Mafia' lady stammered "we only like plain veges . . .". It wasn't that they were unfriendly towards her, it was just that she was *different* and they weren't the kind to be attracted to the unusual. They often had seen 'the old bird' (as they called her in private) doing the oddest things like trying to pick mushrooms from under the huge mango tree in her backyard. She would analyze them closely, sniff them till she was satisfied they weren't any good. One day they even saw her nibble one of those pale grey toadstools that come up after the rains. "Any sensible human being wouldn't do that! It's her arm, you know, it must have made her mind go all peculiar . . ."

"I looked up young Tom's Italian dictionary today. Did you know he is doing Italian for Junior? Yes, it is useful to know more than one language nowadays . . . anyway, did you know that *cardellino* is the name of a pretty little bird?" The two neighbours laughed heartily as they could see Mrs Cardellino only as a little brown sparrow, hopping on one leg in the intricacy of her vegetable garden, picking at one bean, tearing the mottled one . . . busy, busy little sparrow, always finding some new cutting to replant or making a new corner for the compost. They laughed soundly as if releasing some pent-up nervousness. Fancy them calling her the 'old bird' when she was really a 'little bird'!

"What does this little bird look like?"

"The book says that it is very colourful with lovely feathers. There's a picture under the explanation. It is ever so pretty! Just like those little birds on Christmas cards." They felt good about this revelation. It was kind to think from now on of the one-armed Italian as the Christmas card bird.

The Mafia neighbour whose name was Joyce said to her friend "You know, Lynn, you get the most unusual information out of books. I haven't got the time to read . . . I am so busy that I can hardly get through the daily papers."

Lynn was quick to spot the implied meaning and condescendingly retorted "I know what it's like, Joyce, the housework is a constant task, isn't it? But I like to be well-informed, particularly about foreigners."

Joyce was put down again; she could tell by her heartbeat getting faster, that uncomfortable feeling which made her feel inferior. "Must go to rake the front yard . . ." and hurriedly left, thinking "one day, one day! I'll put her in her place, snotty little know-all!"

Mrs Cardellino had often seen her neighbours chatting on the front footpath but it never crossed her mind that she was the main gist of their conversation. Had she known, she probably wouldn't have cared since it didn't matter to her what the *Inglesis* thought; if they were silly enough to refuse eggplants, they didn't have any sense, anyway! She was more concerned what her compatriots whispered at the Club. She had forgotten about her strange anatomy and thought that maybe her dress sense was questioned, which made her feel distressed. But these were only fleeting thoughts that went through her mind when she was in the garden, particularly when she admired the new rosebuds. She had too much to do to waste her time in wondering what they were all saying. Sometimes she felt a little lonely; all the gardening day and night (she used to take her torch with her when it was dark) really divided her from people and then there was the problem of the language barrier. It had been embarrassing at the butcher's the other day when she said *basta* to two pounds of mince and the butcher thought she called him 'bastard!' He had taken it good-humouredly but she felt very ashamed when she eventually found out what he thought she had said. But most of all, she was worried by the peculiar atmosphere she encountered on meeting her neighbours. They were always too polite, keeping her at a distance.

"Do they pity me or do I repel them?" she thought in her native tongue. "Maybe they would prefer beans . . ." It was starting to rain so she ran to put her washing out on the line. She smiled at the usual consternation from her neighbours when she did this. "The *Inglesis* don't know that the rain softens clothes!" Let them think her an oddball. She knew she was in the right. It felt good to stand in the rain; getting wet all over as she handled the wash. She enjoyed it immensely just like the times she sat in the bathtub washing her undies. It was difficult with one hand, but she felt that the washing machine could not get them as clean as she liked them and it was fun to bathe herself at the same time. Clean all over, she felt like a fish busy conducting its chores. She had seen those carps on TV lifting tiny pebbles with their mouths to build an underwater nest. "I am a fish with one fin" she chuckled, "an old dolphin!" And lovingly massaged her armless shoulder which always reminded her of Venus de Milo. "I am too old to be a Venus . . ." and she remembered how that old Sicilian widower had eyed her on New Year's Eve at the Club. "Maybe he thinks I am rich . . . let him come near me and I will tell him where to go!"

Suddenly she slipped under the clothesline and tried to grab the laundry basket for support; but everything toppled over and she found herself sprawled on her back with all the washing strewn on the muddy ground. Joyce had been watching from the kitchen window. She was fascinated by the accident and wondered whether she should go to help.

Against her better judgement, she grabbed an umbrella and raced out "Mrs Cardellino, Mrs Cardellino, are you alright?" She tried to help the old lady get on her feet but didn't know where to grab her, since with one hand she held the umbrella and with the other tried to clasp the Italian's good arm. Several attempts did not make matters any better since Mrs Cardellino was rather obese and Joyce wouldn't let go of the umbrella. Finally, Joyce had to drop it and grabbed the smiling Italian from behind, lifting her with a great heave. As she did so, she felt the stump under the wet flared sleeve. A mixture of revulsion and curiosity made her hesitate for one moment.

"I am heavy, hey?"

"Not at all" replied Joyce and patted her on the good arm. Then she was overcome with a feeling of great daring and grabbed Mrs Cardellino by the empty sleeve, her hand groping to decipher what lay underneath. She tried to be nonchalant but was becoming more and more harassed as she was palpating for some shape, some form she could define.

"I have no arm, there," Mrs Cardellino said in broken English and smiled sweetly.

"Oh, I didn't mean . . . I did not mean to be rude . . . I hope I did not offend you . . ." Joyce was very flustered and dropped her arm to quickly retrieve the umbrella.

"We are all wet" exclaimed Mrs Cardellino with satisfaction, "you want coffee? Italian style?"

"What about the clothes? They are all dirty. Let me help you take them back to the washing machine." Joyce couldn't get out of her mind the sensation she experienced in discovering that there was absolutely nothing under the enigmatic sleeve. "I did not mean to be rude . . ."

"Rude? Not rude! See? I have only a small arm." And with this, Mrs Cardellino lifted her sleeve back to show a deformity that made Joyce gasp.

"I was born like this, but I no worry . . . you want coffee?"

Joyce felt like a sleepwalker. She was almost hypnotized by what she had seen. She wanted so much to examine closely the little protruberance called a 'little arm'; she wanted to touch it, even to weigh it and at the same time she never, ever, wanted to see it again. She felt very confused and had to excuse herself in a hurry. Forgetting to help with the dirtied clothes, she raced home like someone possessed. When she got inside, she was overcome with a feeling of great satisfaction. "I have seen it! I know what the Christmas bird hides under her sleeve!" She felt jubilant and went to dial Lynn on the telephone. Halfway through her number she placed the receiver down and thought "no. This will be my secret. Let her rave on about Italian dictionaries, about aubergines . . . I know, she doesn't!"

Mrs Cardellino watched Joyce run home and thought that this time there had been a small chance for friendship. "But I can't fall over every day!" she thought and shrugged. Maybe tomorrow, she would offer her some beans and perhaps she would consent to have coffee with her. "Did I do wrong to show her my little arm?" she said to herself as she piled the

clothes back in the washer. "Oh, well, she wanted to know . . . you could see it in her eyes!"

The next day, the two neighbours were having their daily chat on the front footpath before going their separate ways. Lynn remarked how she hoped the weather would change and Joyce benevolently replied "poor Mrs Cardellino fell on the wet ground yesterday. I went over to help her."

"Did you really?"

"Yes, poor thing! It was difficult to help her since she only has one arm. I didn't know where to hold her." Joyce's eyes glistened and Lynn knew there was more to tell.

"So?"

"Oh, nothing . . . the old lady told me not to tell . . . must go to do my shopping. Bye!"

"Wait!" begged Lynn, "what happened? What did you find out?"

"I am going to buy some aubergines and I might even learn Italian at the evening classes!" and she briskly walked away congratulating herself for her clever presence of mind.

