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Opening Extract from...

The Christmas Cafe

Written by Amanda Prowse

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Amanda

Prowse

The Christmas Cafe

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Prologue

Bea stood in the early-evening light and let the warm New South Wales wind lift her long, layered grey hair and kiss her face. It was seasonably clement and the city had an air of expectation about it. As far as Sydney-siders were concerned, the warmer the better, allowing them to enjoy all that the outdoor life had to offer. She stared at the bronze boar in front of her; Il Porcellino stared back as her fingers twitched in the pocket of her funky grass-green linen smock. Commuters keen to get home and make the most of the evening sunshine, either with a trip to the beach or supper in the garden, rushed along Macquarie Street behind her, shedding jackets and rolling up sleeves. Groups of colleagues making an early start on the Christmas party season walked with arms across each other's shoulders, the booze-fuelled banter bringing them closer than any teambuilding around a boardroom table. Bea envied them the ordinariness of their preoccupations. Looking to the left and right, swallowing her shyness, she stepped forward and gingerly rubbed the shiny nose of the tusked creature.

'Please.' She mouthed the one word and closed her eyes briefly before tossing the little round coin with the square hole into the water at its feet. Throwing her head back, she took a deep breath and looked up at the grand arches and pretty green ironwork panels with terraces behind. It was a beautiful building in the city that they loved; that in itself was a comfort. There were far, far worse places for her husband to die.

'Ah, you're back. Did you have a little wander?' The kindly nurse flicked off the overhead strip-light, leaving the room dulled, with only a subdued glow coming from the side light above the sink. It was most fitting; cosy and calming.

'Not really, just went outside for a breather. It's warm tonight.' Bea pinched and pumped the front of her smock.

The nurse nodded. Her shift didn't finish until the morning; the weather outside was of little consequence. She placed her hooked fingers against Peter's wrist and swept her palm over his brow, smiling into his milky eyes. 'I'll be back in a wee while, Peter,' she said.

Bea greatly appreciated how civil the nurses were to her husband. He might or might not have been able to hear or comprehend them, but she was glad they assumed that he could.

She resumed her position in the vinyl chair by Peter's bedside, still in the clothes she had worn for the last seventy-two hours, crumpled and dappled with splashes of

coffee and streaks of mascara that her tired arm had blotted from her tear-stained face.

'If you need anything, Mrs Greenstock, then you only have to buzz,' the nurse said as she made her way towards the door.

Bea nodded. 'Thank you, yes. Do you think he needs anything right now? Should we give him more medicine?'

The nurse smiled and spoke slowly as if addressing a child. 'No. No more medicine. Really, it's best we just let nature take its course.'

'How long, would you say, if you had to guess?' She spoke quietly, averting her eyes, guilty for asking.

The nurse shook her head, her voice equally soft. 'It's really hard to say. Sometimes, when the final decline starts, it can be quite quick; but other people hang on, literally for days. There's no way for us to know, but I would say that with Peter it will be sooner rather than later. It's good that you are here.' She crinkled her eyes in a smile as she shut the door behind her.

Bea was grateful for her honesty and her kindness. She sat forward in the chair with her elbows resting on her bony knees. 'Did you hear that, darling? It's good that I'm here. But actually, I'd rather neither of us was here. I'd rather we were on a little sailing boat in the Whitsundays catching fresh fish for lunch, washed down with a cold glass of wine. Then we could nap on the deck in the sunshine and when we woke up, we'd swim in that glorious sea, go ashore to walk on that fine, white sand and sit and

watch the day pass overhead.' She smiled. 'Do you remember that wonderful Christmas? Just the two of us. It was paradise, wasn't it? The best ever.'

Bea held her husband's hand and leant over his face. His eyes seemed to have fogged, but his head moved slightly from side to side, as if seeking the face that he could no longer see.

'It's okay, my love, I'm right here. I'm not going anywhere.'

There was the slightest flicker around his mouth. She wanted to believe, in the half-light of this hospital side ward, that it was a final smile for her, but it could have been wishful thinking. He was preoccupied with his battle, bathed in a sickly sweet sweat as his body fought the inevitable. It was a cloying, unpleasant scent that she would smell in the future on certain flowers and on the breath of the ill and elderly and find herself immediately transported back to this room at this moment.

Bea thought of the many deathbed scenes that she had witnessed in movies and plays. The laborious last messages of love or confession as violins built to a crescendo. It was of course all utter, utter rubbish. She had seen one man die before, happening across a traffic accident one morning on the corner of Elizabeth Street and Park Street, and he had barely twitched an eyelid before passing. Peter fought for every last second, steely and determined till the end. She wished the movie scenes weren't rubbish, she wished he would sit up straight, look her in the eye, with his palm against her face and a bloom to his cheek, tell her that it

was all going to be okay, that he had no regrets, that he had always loved her. This last fact she knew, but the thought of not hearing it again made her unbelievably sad.

She felt a rush of love and also gratitude for this man who had met the love of his life and been content to walk by her side, knowing that in her affections he came third, after her son and the memory of one she had loved long ago. Even now, in his final moments, he was self-contained, as if considering her needs until the last, making her experience as comfortable as he possibly could. She didn't need violins.

'I was so blessed to find you, Peter. You are a wonderful man, a wonderful friend, and I love you – you know that, don't you?' She sighed. 'What do I do now, my love? Where do I go from here?' She heard his words loud and clear, the mantra by which he had lived. *'Always remember, life is for the brave. This is our one time around the block!'*

'I know…' She nodded. Her many silver bangles jangled together, cracking open the silence with their noise. She squeezed his hand, hard, hoping for reciprocation.

'Oh, my love, your hand has gone cold.' She bent forward and kissed his nose, which was also cool against her lips, but his body was still hot, as though a furnace burning centrally was losing its ability to ignite anything out of immediate reach.

Peter turned his head a fraction and with every ounce of strength left in his body he reached up and past her, seeming to focus on the space to the right of her head. His

thin legs twisted in the same direction, as if he was trying to leave his deathbed.

'Where are you off to?' She cried then, knowing where he was going and that she could not follow. 'You go, my darling; you go wherever you want to. It's okay. Just go to sleep and know that you are loved.'

Peter sank back against the shallow pillow and his breath faltered. He opened and closed his mouth as if trying to speak. She bent low and with her ear against his mouth, she heard the faintest whisper of his final words. 'It's been lovely.'

'Oh, it has, Peter! It really has!'

The gaps between each breath grew longer and longer, until there were no more.

Bea waited and watched, fixated on the waxy skin at the base of his throat, hoping for one more fluttering tremor that would mean he was still with her and she didn't have to start grieving. But there was none.

She'd been told to press the call button when the inevitable happened, or if she needed anything, but instead she sat holding his hand, with her other pressed in the nook of his elbow where warmth lingered. She wanted to stay just like that until the warmth disappeared, like singing a baby off to sleep, waiting for the right moment to shuffle backwards out of the room, leaving the door ajar.

It was way past midnight before she finally left her love and quietly closed the door behind her on nearly thirty years of marriage.

The hospital canteen was quiet, the silence shattered only by the occasional weary medic, wearing creased scrubs and with dark shadows beneath their eyes. They gave small nods in her direction, knowing it could not be happy circumstances that saw her lingering over a cup of scalding, weak, machine-issued coffee all alone at that ungodly hour. She was grateful for their lack of intervention, wanting to be alone with the images that were crystallising inside her mind. His last minutes, engraving themselves on her brain, there for perfect recall whenever she might need them in the future.

She looked around the walls of the canteen that had been her refuge for the last ten days, the place she'd crept to hourly, when nurses invaded the room to 'make him comfortable'. She always gave them ten minutes to complete the chores that she didn't want to witness; not for her sake, but for Peter's. It was strange to think that it would now be someone else's turn to sit on that plastic chair in the dead of night and figure out how to stop feeling numb. Women just like her, going through the same thing, would be scanning the panini menus, scooping chocolate bars from the shallow baskets and searching pockets for small change. She felt a wave of pity for them, because they didn't know what was coming and it was horrid.

'There you are!' Wyatt's voice jolted her from her musings. His short-sleeved white shirt was undone to reveal a little too much chest and his khaki board shorts had wisps of grass hanging off them; he looked like he had

just come in from the garden. He sounded slightly cross, as if she had been hiding, his stance and tone indicating he had been mightily inconvenienced by the whole carry-on.

'I couldn't park the bloody car, even at this time of night. It's 2013, we can send shuttles up into space and we can fit more information than is held in the Canberra National Library on a digital postage stamp, but we can't work out how to allow entry to a locked car park after hours. It's a bloody ridiculous system.' He flipped the bunch of car keys back and forth until they nestled inside his clenched palm.

Bea nodded. It was. Bloody ridiculous.

'So, how's he doing?' Wyatt placed his knuckles on his hips; again, as if angry with her about something.

She stared at her son and twisted the bangles on her wrist. 'He died, Wyatt. He died a few hours ago.' It was the first time she had said it out loud. 'It was actually very peaceful. He just went to sleep. I was holding his hand. He seemed to reach across me, as though trying to head off somewhere. I told him it was okay to go; like giving him permission, I suppose. Permission to leave me. And he went.' She gave a brief smile.

'Oh, Mum,' he offered, neutrally.

She wondered what that meant. *'Oh, Mum, I'm so sorry,'* or *'I wish I'd got here sooner,'* or *'Please, Mother, less of the dramatics.'* It was hard to tell. Wyatt was a man who coped better with the practical than the emotional. He no doubt wanted her to start talking about funeral

arrangements and finances, things to which he could relate, rather than how she was feeling. But that was simply tough shit.

'I didn't know what to do, so I called you.' She felt, awkwardly, that she had to justify the inconvenience.

'Of course.' He nodded. 'I'll take you home, when you're ready.' He placed his hand briefly on her shoulder, pulling away quickly.

She felt the imprint of his fingers on her skin, like a burn. She considered reminding him that neither heart disease nor in fact heartache were contagious. He was safe on both counts. She felt a mixture of disappointment and relief. Whilst it might have been nice to be swept up in an all-consuming hug, it would also have been acutely embarrassing; they were so out of practice.

Twenty minutes later, Wyatt's big, shiny Holden Storm, with its warm leather interior and startling spaceship-like display on the dashboard, swept up Elizabeth Street and turned into Reservoir Street, at the heart of the affluent Surry Hills district. Both streets were almost deserted. The car's headlights raked the walls and she winced, knowing they would wake several residents.

Pulling into the kerb, Wyatt turned to his mother. 'Are you sure you don't want me to come up?' The way he left his seatbelt fastened and the engine running told her all she needed to know.

'No, no, I'm fine. You get back to Sarah and Flora. Thank you for coming all this way, Wyatt, at this time of night.'

'If you're sure.'

'Absolutely. It's a good half-hour's drive back to Manly. You get yourself off, love.'

She sensed the easing of his tension and realised that she too had dreaded the prospect of small talk and long silences over a cup of tea.

Bea climbed the stairs and twisted her key in the lock; the apartment was dark and quiet. Peter had been in hospital for ten days and she had popped back twice for showers and a change of clothes, yet tonight the rooms felt emptier than they had before, as if the bricks and mortar sensed that he was not coming home. She slumped down on the sofa and sat in the shadows, finding solace in the peace and particular hush that night-time brings.

Peter's sandshoes sat side by side on the bathroom floor. His pyjamas were still in the laundry basket and his books were arranged in two small stacks on his bedside table. One pile waiting to be read and the other his favourites, which he liked to keep close. Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, which he had loved since his teens, was among them. Bea's mind jumped back in time, to another Kipling book, another man, another life. A tall man with a green scarf, who had kept time on her heart with his palm. Thirty-four years ago now, and yet she remembered it like it was yesterday.

She picked up a green silk cushion and hugged it to her while she surveyed Peter's things, all now redundant, including the spectacles that sat on top of their case on the

coffee table. She gingerly scooped them into her palm and held them against her chest. It was strange that these innocuous items now held such significance, vaulting the line from everyday thing to precious talisman. She wept, her loss and exhaustion sweeping over her like a wave that left her gulping for air. She was not just crying for the wonderful man she had lost but for the true, unconditional love that she had been unable to give him.

'I'm sorry, Peter. I'm so sorry.'

One

Bea slowly opened one eye, peeking from her pillow at the new morning. The remnants of a dream lurked in her consciousness – she had been taken back in time, to the beat of a drum and the sound of a wide-decked, tall ship pushing through the waves. The wild torment of a younger body that yearned for the touch of her man, a memory of dancing under the stars on a swaying deck, the feel of his cotton shirt beneath her fingertips, his eyes, locked on hers, pulling her in. And his voice, deep and resolute, his words loud and clear, spoken on a still, hot, summer's night as the cicadas chirped and the black flying-fox bats circled overhead. '*I want to take you away. I want to make a home where you and I are free to love each other without judgement, without having to hide. I wish I could marry you, right here, right now. I won't ever let you go. I'll carry you with me, in here…*' His two fingers had patted his chest in the rhythm of a heartbeat.

She sighed. The sun streamed in through the open window, casting spiky shadows of the full-bloomed Queensland lacebark against the wooden floor. She

instinctively put a hand out to the other side of the bed. It was hard to believe that it had been a full year since she had said goodbye to Peter in that dimly lit hospital ward; but the pain was easing, a little. What surprised her were moments like these, when she reached out but failed to find him lying next to her in his stripy blue pyjamas, or when she wanted to call him with some titbit of information.

Bea glanced guiltily at Peter's side of the bed. Even after all these years, an unsettling dream still had the power to do that to her: the flash of a memory, an image, a word. It could transport her back to a time before Peter, a time before her whole world had unravelled. And then, mercifully, he had swept in and saved her with his kindness.

She threw back the cool cotton bedspread and swung her legs onto the stripped wooden floor, letting her silk pyjamas unbunch themselves and slip crinkle-free down her legs, the sleeves falling in neat gaping triangles over her arms. She rather liked the contrast of the cream colour against the faint liver spots on the back of her hand. Deciding against her vintage silk kimono dressing gown, she left it on the bed and stood in front of the tall mirror, where she stretched her arms high above her head, turning sharply to the left as she waited for the familiar click of her neck. Next she bent forward with her hands clasped over her head and hung that way for a minute until her back, like her PJs, was kink-free. These were just a couple of the little rituals that she performed at the beginning of every day.

Bea held her breath and pulled the blind. She was, as ever, filled with joy and relief at the sight of Reservoir Street below, so very different from the dingy bedsit in Kings Cross she and Wyatt had shared for six years. Even after so many decades, the memory of that tiny hot room had the power to make her skin itch. She smiled as she took in the steep street with its pastel-coloured Victorian terraced properties and stunning wrought-iron balconies that sat proudly on either side of the thoroughfare. A runner laboured up the incline on the opposite side of the street, his headphones firmly in place. He raised his hand at the sight of her – funny how everyone knew her because of the business.

She sighed. It was a glorious day full of summer promise, and despite the loneliness that threatened there was something rather lovely about this early hour, the stillness of the place before the ensuing madness of the day. She had always been an early riser and this had proved most beneficial to the success of the Reservoir Street Kitchen. Up with the lark, she would have the lights on, ovens hungry and toasty, kettles filled, bread prepped and deliveries sorted and stowed before Kim and Tait made an appearance.

Bea took one last fond look at the slight dent on Peter's side of the bed, which would never, she hoped, regain its original shape, allowing her to imagine him only temporarily absent, sipping coffee down at The Rocks or fetching the morning paper. That made it easier somehow, kidding herself that he would be back sometime soon.

Radio 2GB babbled away in the background and Alan Jones' unmistakeable cadences filled the room, updating her on the state of the world. It was all she needed to lift her spirits. She still hadn't heard from Wyatt or Sarah with regard to Christmas and at that precise moment she hated her need of them. She tried to remain stoical, tried not to dwell on the fact that she only saw or heard from them once a month, but the truth was, she did mind, especially because this sparse, inadequate contact meant she was kept away from her granddaughter, Flora, a bubbly thirteen-year-old whom Bea adored. In recent years, on Flora's birthday she had made a point of going to the house in Manly twenty minutes early so as to catch a little time with Flora before she went out to play with her buddies. And each year, after Sarah's Christmas barbecue, they would sit together on the sand and chat. Bea would ask Flora what bands were 'in', and Flora would tease her for being an old granny, even though she'd only turned fifty-three this year. It wasn't much of an interaction, but as Bea reminded herself, they had busy, full lives and that little bit of contact was better than nothing.

She made herself a mug of Earl Grey with a large slice of lemon and stood in front of the open windows by the Juliet balcony as she looked out over the warm Sydney morning. The big sky was clear in its azure brilliance, and she allowed her mind to wander back to the same time last year, to a similarly perfect summer's day, which had seemed to spite her sadness. It was seven days after Peter had

passed away and she'd sat on the sofa, resplendent in understated aubergine, remote and aloof, like a queen bee attended by a swarm of fluttering guests. Just like at weddings, everyone had wanted a small amount of time with her, the main attraction. The trick was not to monopolise or talk too much; funerals were all about short, meaningful sentences. 'So sorry for your loss…' 'It's a blessing…' 'A happy release…' 'He was a great bloke.' The offerings had all been pretty much identical in both content and the manner in which they were delivered, heads cocked to one side, doleful expressions, and the volume barely above a whisper.

The only original sentiment had come from Flora, who had seen it as more of a party and had been refreshingly oblivious as to why it might not be appropriate to laugh loudly, sing or throw snacks down to the disinterested little wattlebird resting in the tree below the balcony. Bea had watched Wyatt glare at his daughter from the other side of the room – probably more effective than actually engaging with her. She realised that Flora had always been that way, slightly out of kilter with what was expected by the rest of the pack. And, truthfully, she approved of Flora's attitude: funerals should be about celebrating a person's life. Peter's wake had been far too sedate; the delicate chink of glass against glass and the barely audible hum of conversation had been oppressive. She had watched Peter's sister and brother conversing in whispers behind cupped palms, covertly raising their eyebrows and shaking their heads

between sips of wine, in a way that made everyone in the room feel really awkward, excluded.

It was no secret that they didn't like her and, truth be told, she wasn't overly fond of them; she still remembered the way they had cold-shouldered her when they'd first met, all those years ago. The conversation as to why they held Bea in such low regard had never been had, but she suspected it was because she fell way below the standard they would have expected for someone like Peter. She was his first bride and a lot younger than him – a mere twenty-five years old to his mature forty-seven, which they probably didn't approve of either. Arriving out of nowhere with a young son in tow and no respectable backstory – she had not been tragically widowed in her youth, nor forced to care for an abandoned child that was not her own – she was considered damaged goods. Now, having laid Peter to rest in a quiet grave in a sunny spot at South Head General Cemetery, overlooking the Tasman Sea, their dislike of her had morphed into resentment; this Bea knew was because the bulk of Peter's estate was going to her, the imposter! Not that it was a vast fortune, but it was certainly enough to keep the wolf from the door and to give her choices. This was yet another reason for her to be eternally grateful to her lovely husband.

She had looked around the room and knew that the Bea of her youth would have shouted to the assembled, '*Do you know what? I'd really rather be alone, and Peter didn't like half of you anyway. Please, make your way home via the*

nearest exit and when you have gone, I shall drink wine and dance in my bare feet until I fall asleep!' But this wasn't the Bea of her youth; she was in her fifties and had learnt that sometimes it was best to observe the 'least said, soonest mended' rule. That was precisely how she got through the following hour of further platitudes about how time would heal all of her wounds. She knew from bitter experience that this was a lie. Thirty-five years on and her pulse still quickened as she remembered clinging to her beloved with her bare hands, begging, pleading not to be left alone. Time had not healed her wounds; it had merely placed a thin veneer of anaesthesia over them that dulled the pain, making them easier to live with.

Bea shook her head to clear the memory and lifted the cup of lemony tea to her lips as she wandered over to the sofa. Her wrist gave a familiar jangle. Twelve slim silver bracelets sat haphazardly on her left arm, each one bought by Peter for a particular birthday or anniversary; each one engraved on the inside with a declaration of love or a funny insight. The one he'd given her on her fiftieth birthday read: 'You are now officially old! Welcome to the club!'

She smiled at the memory of his wonderful humour and wished once again that she could have returned to him the same love that he'd given her. She had been happy with him, he had been a good father to Wyatt, and of course he'd helped her set up the Reservoir Street Kitchen, the café that was her pride and joy. But no matter how much she wished otherwise, her feelings for him were measured, a

pale simulacrum of the way she had felt about her first love, her hand inside his as they glided over the wooden deck, the full moon providing the most perfect backdrop as her heart jumped and her foot tapped in time to the music, that night she'd wished would never end. Bea lightly stroked the dark green silk cushion, letting the fingers of her free hand linger on the fabric.

After showering and blow-drying her thick grey hair into its voluminous waves and fastening it into a haphazard knot with a barrette, she applied her scarlet lip stain and brushed a couple of coats of mascara onto her long lashes. As she accessorised her olive pedal pushers with a sleeveless tunic and chunky bone-coloured beads that hung around her neck in three strands, she reminded herself how very lucky she had been. If it hadn't been for Peter, life could have turned out very differently indeed. She then slipped her feet into her trademark petrol-blue Converse and pushed the memory of her dream to the very back of her mind.

Before going downstairs to open up the café, she glanced at the photo on the wall and spoke the same words out into the bright blue morning that she had for the past 364 days.

'I'm sorry, Peter. I'm sorry.'

Two

'Ah, Mr Giraldi. How are you today?' She waved from in front of the grand reclaimed bookshelf, where she was adjusting a miniature wooden rocking horse to sit just so, framed by battered copies of *Little Women* and *Moby Dick*, among others. She groomed the little horse with her fingertips, trying to make the most of his sparse mane and worn paintwork.

'Good, thank you, Bea, apart from the fact there is someone sitting at my table!' He removed the straw trilby that offered shade from the hot Sydney sun and lifted his walking cane, aiming it at the two tourists sitting beneath the bi-fold window. On sunny days the window was opened so that you were effectively dining al fresco, free to watch the goings-on of Surry Hills, one of the most vibrant of Sydney's inner-city suburbs. The couple, oblivious to their blunder, chattered and sipped at iced spiced chai latte. 'How long will they be? Have they asked for the bill yet?' he shouted in their direction.

'Not sure, but why don't you come take a seat over here? We can catch up and then you can always move later,' Bea suggested.

She hoped the enthusiastic couple, she English and he American, who had oohed and aahed as they walked into the Reservoir Street Kitchen for the first time, hadn't heard. 'We love delis and cafés,' the charming red-headed man had explained. 'We have history – it's where I met Megan, my wife.' He'd smiled. 'Shut up, Edd! No one cares how we met!' The woman had blushed and beamed. They were clearly very much in love.

'What's that you've found, more junk?' Mr Giraldi enquired, nodding at the rocking horse as he placed his hat on one of the other bleached and scrubbed wooden tables and took a seat.

The horse was the latest addition to the quirky decor, with Bea's objets d'art sitting in stark contrast to the polished cement floors, exposed steel joists and tempered glass of the premises. In its previous life the building on Reservoir Street had been a textile factory and Bea and Peter had been way ahead of their time in using the harsh industrial materials of the place to their advantage. Rather than dispose of the rusted pulleys that were strung like mini cable-cars across the high ceiling, or try to disguise the weathered brick and replace the chipped green enamelled lights that hung in low clusters, they had simply incorporated them into the design. One critic had described their new venture as 'wonderfully bohemian, daring and eclectic', which had made them chuckle over a bottle of red – they'd thought they were merely being thrifty! That had been twenty years ago.

Bea laughed. 'I keep telling you, Mr Giraldi: firstly, these things are not junk, they are pre-loved. And secondly, I don't find them, *they* find me. I'm like a magnet for these objects, and I think they make the place more beautiful, don't you?'

He simply tutted noncommittally as she ran her eyes over the unusual mix of items that sat on the industrial shelving units. The old European bakers' racks had been shipped over years ago – some still had blobs of flour encrusted on them, as hard as rock; the rusty wheels on each corner must have propelled them across tiled bakery floors, transporting rustic breads and baked goods of the sort that she would almost certainly be happy to serve today. There was an antique sewing machine on an ornate scrolled-iron trestle, nestled in a corner. Defunct brass fire extinguishers were used as doorstops and the vast, high walls were graced with everything from a stuffed kudu head to a child's chair covered in cartoon decoupage.

She smiled; each and every one of those things held a special memory or put her in mind of a happy time. 'Take these photos, for example.' She pointed at a wall, bare brick like two of the others, that held clusters of black and white vintage photographs in mismatched frames. They included a Victorian gentleman in a rather dandy hat, and a blurred shot of shoeless children gathered on the step of a building not five minutes from where she now stood; ironically, the price tag for that step and the house behind it was now in the millions. 'All of these pictures I have found on my wanderings, either in junk shops or on antiques stalls.'

'Same thing,' Mr Giraldi interjected.

Bea gave her little sideways nod. 'That's as maybe, but they amount to so many happy days spent wandering streets, strolling in the sunshine or sheltering from the rain. And the point is I salvage them, the photographs that nobody wants. These people who were someone's father, someone's daughter. I can't bear to think of them discarded, lost, these people who had lives, who mattered.'

'Don't think those scrawny, grubby kids mattered much!' Tait joined the conversation, indicating the picture with his eyebrows, his hands being preoccupied with a large round tray.

Bea watched as he dipped down to the table to deliver the goodies to a group of four girls. A sleek white teapot, white mugs, a 1950s-style glass sugar sifter with a natty chrome dispensing spout, and a shiny metal three-tiered cake stand filled with crayfish and lemon mayonnaise open sandwiches and four chunks of freshly frosted carrot cake. She observed the girls staring at Tait's tanned arms and broad chest. Peter had called her cynical for employing a very handsome young surfer to serve her clientele, who were almost all female; she, however, had thought it might be pure genius, and she was right. *I do miss you, Peter.* There were these moments, during each day, when she would look for him, think of him, want to share something with him, and at every realisation that he was gone her chest caved with a combination of guilt and grief that left her feeling hollow.

'Actually, Tait, I think every one of those little scraps mattered a lot. They were just little children, they didn't choose where they were born or who they were born to, and if you look at their faces, sure they're dirty, poor, a bit thin, but they actually look really happy.' She strolled over to her gallery of pictures – people long dead whom she had never known – and pointed at one about halfway up. A boy of no more than six or seven leant against a doorframe; he was smoking a clay pipe, his eyes peeking out from beneath his cloth cap. 'Look, look at the crinkles around the edge of his eyes. He looks older than his years, but he laughs a lot, I can tell.' *I hope he did. Poor little mite.*

'If you say so.' Tait smiled, revealing his perfect large white teeth that practically shimmered against his golden tan. He tucked the stray wisps of his long tawny hair behind his ears, as was his habit. Bea watched the girls follow him with their eyes as he disappeared through the saloon doors and into the kitchen.

'I don't have pictures of my own family, let alone someone else's!' Mr Giraldi growled.

'Are they all coming home for Christmas?' Bea placed her hands on her waist and her bangles jangled along her wrist, her signature noise. There were only four weeks to go until Christmas Day and plans were being made.

'Giovanni, his wife and their boys, yes, for a couple of hours. Claudia, Roberto and their kids are coming Christmas Eve, but Berta no. She's working, staying in Melbourne. I only have a small apartment and I don't want

to travel. Besides, I like to stay where Angelica slept, and there's no space for everyone. It'd be nice to have everyone in one spot, but that's the way it is. I have nowhere to put them all. But we'll hook up on the computer thing – Gio can fix it up for me. I don't know how.' He batted his large hand across his chest, as if to dismiss the problem and the technology.

'I'm with you on that, can hardly switch my phone on and off, let alone work the computer. Peter used to do all that for me.'

'People still telling you it gets easier?' He leant on the top of his cane as he posed the question.

'Yes.' She nodded. She had marked the first anniversary of Peter's death by walking to the hospital and rubbing the nose of Il Porcellino before dropping a coin into the fountain.

'They're liars, all of them. And I should know, it's been seventeen years.' He pulled a large white handkerchief from his trouser pocket and wiped his eyes.

'You must miss her.'

'I do.' He took a stuttered breath as though even the recollection was painful. 'She was our translator – do you know what I mean?'

Bea wondered if he meant from Italian to English, but that seemed odd, his English was beautifully accented and faultless. 'I'm sorry, I don't,' she confessed.

Mr Giraldi looked skywards, as if that was from where the perfect explanation might be plucked. 'She got me. She

got all of us! Berta is remote, quiet. I remember once asking Angelica, why is Berta so cold? And she clicked her tongue as though I was stupid and said, she is not cold! She is a furnace of passion, warmth and love, but she is so shy, private, that it tortures her, she puts up barriers.' He shook his head. 'I would never have known how to read my kids or they me without her translation. Gio is not angry all the time, he's afraid! Claudia's not as tough as she makes out, but only cries in private, hides any sadness. And me? She told them that no matter how fierce I might sound or how often I might dismiss their crazy ideas, I would die for them in a single heartbeat. And she was right, I would.' He nodded.

Bea considered his words. Maybe that was what she and Wyatt were missing, a translator. 'It sounds like you were a wonderful team.' She smiled.

'Oh, we were. She was our glue. I know if their mama were here, the kids wouldn't find it so hard to get home for Christmas. Space or not.' This he whispered. 'It's not only her wisdom I miss, but also the sight of her! Oh, Bea, she took my breath away. And to dance with her…' He tailed off, collecting himself. 'To hold her hand inside mine and sway with her to the music! I still dream of those moments.'

Bea heard the sound of a drumbeat inside her head, remembered the way her heart had thumped in time to the music.

'Life's just not the same.' He shrugged.

Bea nodded. She knew that for him this was true. 'What

can I get for you today, Mr Giraldi?' She rested her hands inside the navy and white butcher's pinny that she'd wrapped around her tiny frame. Peter had once admired her in her skinny jeans and Converse high-tops, saying that, side-on, she looked like a golf club. She had taken it as the compliment it was intended to be. Even now, she occasionally got sized up from behind by a young man who then found himself disappointed at the sight of her fifty-three-year-old face.

'I'll take a flat white coffee and some of that granola with honey and fruit.' He always ordered as though he were doing her a favour, like a kindly uncle finishing up the last of the cake to avoid waste.

'Coming right up. A flat white and granola for Mr Giraldi!' she called out as she entered the kitchen.

Kim nodded in response as she bent over three slices of granary bread and placed avocado in neat slices on top. Her tongue as ever poked from the side of her mouth as she concentrated. Her high ponytail swished behind her in rhythm with her body as it sashayed from the wooden counter-top to the fridge and back again.

'What are you doing for Christmas?' Tait asked Bea as he stacked plates into the sink. 'Off to your son's?'

Bea grabbed a coffee pot from the rack and thought how best to answer. It wasn't that they hadn't invited her exactly… It was always the same, in the run-up to any occasion, like when Flora's birthday came around: for weeks in advance she would mentally hover, waiting for an invite until finally

she could stand it no longer and called them. Sarah would answer the phone, gushing graciously and laughing as though Bea was a silly old thing – '*Of course* you're invited! Please do come. Can you make it?' – leaving Bea in a quandary, wanting to go and see her granddaughter and spend time with her family, but painfully aware of having practically invited herself. The embarrassment would then linger like a cloud around her at the event itself.

'Yes, I expect so.' The words slipped from her mouth with a false brightness. 'Still four weeks to make a plan. We'll see.' She smiled as she scooped the coffee and filled the small blue tin cafetière, a rare find from the Paddo flea market.

'What about you, Kim?' Tait looked over at the young woman for whom food preparation was an art, her long, cellist's fingers working like a perfectionist.

'I… I… m-my…' She swallowed. 'My mum and dad are coming here and then g-going to my… my sister's on the G-Gold Coast.' She sighed, happy to have got the sentence out.

Tait nodded, tactfully refraining from asking another question, sparing them the minutes they didn't have to lose while she formed a response. He grabbed Mr Giraldi's coffee and swept from the kitchen.

'For God's sake, Bea, what is wrong with me? I just can't talk to him!' Kim threw the dishcloth on to the counter-top. 'I can't get my bloody words out. He thinks I've got a stutter!'

'Because you have when you talk to him,' Bea noted.

'Correction, when I *try* and talk to him! You are not helping, Bea! Jeez, he's just so beautiful; it does something to my brain. He's perfect, just perfect! It's not only that I can't talk to him, I can't think of anything to say.' Kim grabbed the pepper grinder and twisted it aggressively over the sandwiches. 'My friends think it's hysterical. I'm like the biggest chatterbox ever, they can't shut me up, and I'm funny! Really funny! But with him, it's different. Not only is he so out of my league looks-wise, he also thinks I have a bloody speech impediment! Grrr.'

Tait came back through the swing doors. 'Who are these for?' he picked up the sandwich plates and stared at Kim.

'Err… T-table… Table… err…'

'Table twelve.' Bea jumped in.

Tait nodded, smiled at Kim and left with the order.

Bea turned to see Kim bashing her head on the draining unit of the sink. She laughed.

The Christmas Cafe

Amanda Prowse has always loved crafting short stories and scribbling notes for potential books. Her first novel, *Poppy Day*, was self-published in October 2011 and achieved a #1 spot in the eBook charts. She was then signed up by publishers Head of Zeus and her second novel, *What Have I Done?*, became a #1 bestseller in 2013.

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