

## CHAPTER ONE

# A Family Who Loved to Celebrate (1966–1982)

**I** COME FROM A large Italian family, and I remember my childhood as a time of festivities and family celebrations. I am third in line of the pecking order, with two older sisters and a younger brother.

My mother was one of eight siblings, as was my father. He came to Australia with his family in 1950 and my mother in 1954. Like many migrants, they had an amazing work ethic and a spirit of optimism, which they instilled in their children. I grew up with a sense that life, with all its opportunities, was going to be fabulous.

I had twenty aunts and uncles so there was always a party going on; there seemed to be cousins everywhere we

looked. Family and friends, but mainly family, were always around. Many of our relatives were called Frank, Joe and Billy. My brother, Ben, even inherited the name Billy for a while. Despite feeling lost in the crowd at times, I had a sense of belonging and of being loved. There was always a lot of noise, loud voices, loud TV, music and laughter. Amongst the ordered confusion there was plenty of food and an expectation that we would all contribute to the conversation. There were definitely no rules that children should be seen and not heard. We all competed to tell the best joke. Jerry Lewis was our favourite actor.

In between parties, we would sit for hours on a Sunday afternoon watching movies: *The Three Stooges*, *The Nutty Professor* and, of course, *Epic Theatre*, *Variety Italian Style* and the wrestling. I still recall the name Mario Milano, which is interesting given I tend to forget people's names. My mother would be in the kitchen cooking pasta and schnitzel, the smell of delicious food wafting through the house. Life was good.

Mum came to Australia with her mother and siblings when she was nine. She made the journey by boat after her father had been here for two years, working to save enough money for the rest of the family to come over. My grandmother was forty-six when she arrived in Australia. I can appreciate now how much courage that journey must have taken.

My maternal grandparents had five girls and three boys. Sadly, two of the boys passed away in Italy, one from diphtheria at twelve months of age and the other of peritonitis at age twelve. Their third son died in Australia at age nineteen from rheumatic fever. I don't think my grandmother ever recovered.

She was a character, that's for sure, a bit mischievous and always on the go. She would walk for miles every day to buy groceries for the family. She separated from my grandfather in the early 1970s as she wasn't willing to stay in a marriage that clung to olden-day rules and that hadn't evolved since she left Italy in the 1950s. She lived until she was ninety-four and always remained a strong matriarch in our family.

My father came to Australia with his family when he was fifteen, also by boat. He told me about his visions of grandeur when he arrived. He knew Australia was the lucky country, compared to the devastation of post-war Italy where everyone was starving. His parents arrived here broke but ambitious and open-minded, with a plan to give their children greater opportunities in life. I never met my father's parents; they passed away before I was born.

My father's courage paid off. He re-invented himself many times over the years; he worked hard and was successful. Necessity, after all, is the mother of invention. He raised

us with a work ethic that only develops within someone who has been in need, and he instilled in us values of humility, love and joyousness.

My parents met through my paternal aunty; she and Mum were school friends. At age thirteen, Mum was betrothed to Dad, so their marriage was only a matter of time. They married when Mum was sixteen and my father twenty-seven. The arranged marriage was typical of many Europeans of the time; it was not questioned, just simply arranged, as it had been for generations in Italy.

By the time my mother was twenty-one she had four children. Her life was hectic, to say the least. My brother, Ben, was the youngest of the four siblings, with Bettina the eldest and Teresa in the middle. We were all very close growing up; also very close in age, five years between us all. My mother tells stories of us all getting sick together. She would quarantine the house for weeks on end, with one of us giving a bug to the other, and then the chain of contagious ailments would start again. At times she found herself throwing up in tandem with the rest of us.

We grew up on a large property in Brighton, a bayside suburb of Melbourne. The home had once been an orchard, so our backyard was huge and lined with fruit trees, vegetables and roses. It was set on a train line but, strangely, I can't remember the sound of the train going by. The noise

was probably drowned out by the rowdy chaos inside the house. There was enough room for all the cousins to play, a vegetable plot and chickens in the back coop. We had fresh eggs every morning and chickens for Sunday lunch, which my grandmother would cook. Having loved animals from a young age, I was disturbed that my grandmother could transform the life of a chicken into a Sunday roast, and I couldn't eat chicken for many years. Moreover, the smell of a freshly plucked chicken boiling in the kitchen was not very appealing—though no-one else seemed to mind.

One day the chickens escaped from their cage. Us kids went into the backyard as usual, but this time we were met by angry chickens that chased us around. It had never happened before and we were terrified. As we climbed to safety on the swings and up in the trees, I realised we'd been ambushed and now we had to work out how to get back inside. Mum came out flapping a tea-towel, shooing the chickens away, commanding us to 'Run!'. I was impressed by her fearlessness. 'Mum, why are the chickens chasing us?' I remember asking, but never worked it out. I was told some theory about them being fed meat, which had made them eat their own eggs and therefore become aggressive.

The next day the chickens were gone, replaced a week later by two rabbits. Perhaps my parents weren't aware of the saying 'breeding like rabbits'; needless to say, within months

there were so many rabbits in our backyard that we couldn't count them. There were rabbit droppings everywhere. Rabbits everywhere. I can't recall how or when we got rid of them, but I'm sure our rabbits accounted for the entire rabbit population of Melbourne.

We had moved into that property when I was three years old. I vaguely recall the day we moved in. I was in trouble for drawing stick-figure pictures on the wall with texta and for energetically jumping on the couch with my brother and sisters. It was an activity we all loved, and my mother had to replace our couches frequently; the 1970s spring system just didn't seem to hold up. I still have images of large silver springs poking out of 1970s upholstered fabric.

Our weekends were endless fun. We would go for long drives with the family, which usually meant a convoy of cars, each boot crammed with enough food to feed a village. We'd arrive at our destination, either the beach or the country, the car boot would open and release into the air the aroma of gourmet food. It didn't matter whether you were hungry; no-one could refuse an offer of schnitzel, pasta, lasagna, stuffed peppers, stuffed eggplant, roast chickens, salads and, of course, all the desserts: cannelloni, watermelon ... the list goes on.

It was all about food; we often set out on an adventure to go cherry- or strawberry-picking, or we'd end up in the

country where the men could shoot quail. I much preferred picking berries as the sight of dead birds distressed me.

Christmas was always the most fun; I especially loved Christmas morning. The routine was the same year after year. My sisters and I shared a bedroom, and my father, who had a super-8 camera, would film us getting up, walking from our bedroom to my brother's bedroom and then running to the Christmas tree, tearing paper and excitedly piling up our presents. The night before, we'd leave milk and cookies and a note for Santa. As the years rolled on, at my father's suggestion, we'd leave out beer instead of milk, thinking Santa would enjoy a drink. This was my first experience on camera. Looking back, I can only say that no-one will ever see my hair that messy on film again.

My favourite Christmas gift was a large doll in a pink dress, which strangely had ash-blond hair that looked suspiciously green and smelt like nylon. So I called her Nylon. Quite insightful for a five-year-old to know about nylon; but, after all, the 1970s were all about nylon and plastic. So my next favourite gift was a large yellow plastic kangaroo that, when decapitated, yielded a belly full of chocolates. The smell of plastic-infused chocolate is still with me.

The relatives would arrive in the morning. The party would begin with platters of food and the exchange of gifts; there'd be music, more noise and cousins everywhere.

I always had a sense that anyone who visited who wasn't family was somehow orphaned and had no relatives to celebrate with.

Easter was also a lot of fun. There was a stronger religious focus at Easter than at Christmas which tended to be swamped by gifts and good. Easter was the only time of year that I was aware I was Catholic. We'd go to midnight mass and were given gifts of religious significance, such as a cross or a medallion with the head of Jesus wearing a crown of thorns. The movies we watched were also strong reminders of the meaning of Easter, such as *Ben Hur*, *The Ten Commandments* and *Jesus of Nazareth*, all courtesy of *Epic Theatre*.

I loved having a young mother and large family, but the demands of young kids so close in age took its toll on my mother who became exhausted. I'd hear my father tell her, 'Anita, snap out of it.' At the time, I didn't understand what he meant. Was he was trying to get her to stay calm amongst the chaos? He wanted her to be able to cope, but she simply ran out of steam. The strain of four pregnancies from age sixteen had compromised her health. As a young mother she hadn't had the opportunity to finish growing.

Boarding school was the remedy. 'Let the nuns look after the children for a while,' I heard my father say. 'After all, Prince Charles goes to boarding school.' I was six years old at the time and found this very confronting.

My time at boarding school is a bit of a blur, but several episodes stand out. It felt like a lifetime, but I was only there for six months in 1973 while my mother had a well-earned rest. Being pulled away from a life of celebration and abundance to live with nuns who prided themselves on martyrdom, scarcity and discipline was certainly a shock to the system. Being in the country, several hours away from home and family, made it all the more unbearable.

We arrived in winter, mid-year, at what felt like the middle of the night because I had fallen asleep in the car on the way there. It was probably only around six o'clock in the evening but it was dark and cold, a typical Ballarat winter. As we pulled up I looked over to Bettina and Teresa who were embarking on the same journey. The boot was full of luggage and we were already dressed in our new school uniforms, which included a woollen beret. Glancing ahead, I saw a school that was set behind a huge eight-foot red-brick cloistered wall adjacent to a red-brick convent of enormous proportions. I can't recall if Mum was with us, I just remember my father trying to coerce me out of the car and then pinching me on the arm to get me through the front gate. Needless to say, I didn't want to be there at all. I had come from the local primary school where Mum would pick us up every day in a fabulous car, wearing a fabulous outfit. But life was about to change.

I started to cry. I knew I had to pull myself together as I didn't want to be teased by the other girls. There was no way out of this; my father was leaving without us. So I walked through what felt like prison gates into the convent: my first bite at courage. I couldn't indulge my fear or protest any more. I had to deal with the situation. For the first time I had to 'snap out of it'. Suddenly the words my father had said to my mother made sense.

The front door led into a large old entrance hall with heritage tiles and a heavy wooden staircase. It was freezing cold. I clung on to my beret. The students had just finished dinner and were in the kitchen washing their dishes. I met some of the older girls who I never recall seeing again. They distracted me for long enough to allow my father to slip away unnoticed—but only temporarily. I started to run towards the front door to find him, but the girls pulled me back. This was it. Sink or swim. I remember that I stopped talking, as though I was in shock that he had actually gone through with it. He had left.

My sisters and I were taken upstairs to our dormitory. Thank God we were all in the same dorm; I was terrified that we'd be separated. The room was large with lots of windows and housed boarders from Prep to Grade Six. I was in Grade Two, Teresa in Grade Three and Bettina in Grade Five. Bettina was nine years old, Teresa was eight and I had

just turned seven. There was a large statue of Our Lady next to a small cubicle where our dormitory nun slept. We were required to sit at the foot of the statue and practise saying ‘Hail Mary’ prayers every night as part of our rosary. This was my first significant encounter with religion.

Every morning Sister Damian would walk into our dorm, booming the ‘Our Father’ prayer in her loud voice. She was our alarm clock. We were expected to get out of bed immediately and go to our allocated basin to wash for breakfast. Showering was done the night before. Lights went out at around eight o’clock and no-one was allowed to make a sound. The only light you could see was the lamp in the nun’s cubicle as she unveiled. I was fascinated by the image of her shadow as she removed her veil. She was a rotund lady with long black hair. I learned very quickly that she shouldn’t have been caring for children as she delighted in meting out physical punishment and spiritual fear.

One night one of the students, who suffered epileptic seizures, talked in her sleep. Suddenly all the lights went on and as punishment we were made to strip our beds, pull the mattresses onto the floor, remake the beds on the floor and kneel beside it reciting the ‘Hail Mary’ prayer fifty times. Then we had to strip our beds again, put the mattress back on the base, remake the bed and go to sleep. Most of us didn’t know what was going on. We had been asleep so hadn’t heard

the talking. I mistakenly thought it was morning so I put on my teddy-bear slippers with the googly eyes and little pink tongue, and as I pulled on my pink quilted dressing gown, the rotund dormitory nun strapped me for not standing to attention. Bettina looked on in horror. Not at all harsh, don't you agree?

I became friends with the only other girl in Grade Two. She was from New Guinea and was boarding with her older sister and cousin. I had never met anyone from New Guinea but had heard there were witch doctors, cannibals and head-hunters there. She reassured me that neither she nor her family was any of the above. Apart from one other girl in Prep, we were the youngest boarders at the school.

There were many day-scholars in Grade Two, but not enough to fill a class so we shared our classroom with Prep and Grade One students. Unfortunately my class teacher was the same nun from our dormitory. For the sake of not identifying her, I'll call her Sister Psycho. Her abusive approach was relentless. She'd find any excuse to strap me in the evening and humiliate me during the day.

One day at school, my friend was hugging me and saying, 'Gina is my best friend.' As Sister Psycho walked in, she started yelling, 'Lesbians! You are lesbians!' My God, what did that mean? Such a big word that I'd never heard. She aggressively pulled us apart and told us that as punishment

we had to stand in the corner and kiss the wall until recess. We stood there rocking backwards and forwards for two hours kissing the wall, confused about what a lesbian was and why kissing the wall was the remedy.

My experience at boarding school was an endless series of horror stories. I felt terrorised. I learned about hauntings, how students and nuns had died and where their spirits loitered. A small toolshed behind the school was where a nun had allegedly been hammered to death. Staying in the shed for fifteen minutes with her unrested soul was part of an initiation into a group of Grade Five students. On the wall of the piano room hung a framed picture of a young girl; apparently she had died at the piano in that room. We were told that if we misbehaved, Satan would come and take us from the stairs leading up to our dormitory. We were told that a student had been knitting in the sickbay when she reached over and pierced her lung with a knitting needle. We heard that the ghost of a nun who had died in the convent was often seen walking around with black thread on her lips that had been stitched closed when she died. My God, where was I?

I decided that I would never go anywhere alone and stuck by my sisters like glue. We were often heard whispering to each other in the middle of the night to come to the bathroom. We had to be extremely quiet. We didn't want to strip beds again.

The staircase leading up to the dormitory was always scary. Despite our fear, we would often play there. One day Teresa and I were enthusiastically sliding down the banister, as children do. Teresa stood at the top of the stairs and said, 'Watch this.' I watched her jump from the top step onto the old shiny wooden balustrade. With her belly sliding along, slipping freely, she said, 'No hands!' As she picked up momentum, her legs flew up in the air and she slipped straight over the top of the handrail head first onto the tiled entrance hall below. Her head hit the concrete with a mighty thud. In a panic, I ran to the top step and screamed at the top of my voice. Then I ran down the stairs to find her lying on the floor, her head bleeding. There was dirt everywhere from a pot plant that had fallen off its stand. Fortunately, the plant had broken Teresa's fall. She jumped up and started running and screaming. I chased her. No-one came to our aid. The students nearby thought we were just having an argument so they didn't react until they saw the blood.

Teresa was taken to the hospital that night. I was so happy to see Mum and Dad and wanted them to take me home. I hated that staircase even more than ever. I hated the school. I felt like I was in an orphanage with children who had been rejected or abandoned by their parents. Teresa came back that night. She was okay. A case of concussion with a small cut on her forehead.

We were desperate to leave. We were not having a good time at all. Teresa and I would sit for hours clapping hands together and making up songs. We would sing:

I had a boarders' fever, I had it really bad.  
They wrapped me up in blankets and put me in a van.  
The van was very shaky, it almost shook me out,  
And when I got to the boarding school, I heard a boarder  
shout,  
'Oh Mummy, Daddy take me home from this awful boarding  
school,  
I've been here a year or two and I just want to be with you.'  
Here comes Sister Angela, sliding down the banister.  
Even though she's mad with me I asked her for a cup of tea.

The college, which was established in 1881 by the Sisters of Mercy, felt haunted with dark corners and shadows cast by dim lighting. It was always freezing cold, inside and out. There was a distinct smell of old carpet and wooden floorboards created an orchestra of creaks and echoes. The building was described as one of the most clandestine buildings in Ballarat; it was a labyrinth of rooms and staircases with a rich history. These days it's an abandoned place of worship and forms part of a local 'Ghost Tour'. I hear the locals pride themselves on its haunted history.

The fear I felt in that school compelled me to pray. I would often go to chapel with the nuns before breakfast. We were required to wear a mantilla—a piece of lace cloth—to cover our hair. Mine was black; some of the girls had white lace.

Teresa and I made our Communion that year. I auditioned to sing solo and got the gig. My parents came to school with Ben and I sang my heart out in the haunted chapel.

Mum and Dad visited most weekends. Sometimes my cousins would come along and we'd go out for Sunday lunch. It was a welcome relief from the bland convent food. The nuns were very strict about our diet. We were allowed Vegemite on toast only once a week. The older students would hide jars of Vegemite under the tables in the dining room and the younger students were rewarded with a pat on the back for finding the hidden jars. The nuns loved pies. Shepherd's pie, fish pie, mashed-up mystery-bag pie. Teresa would dry-retch at times. But apparently vomiting was not a good enough excuse to forgo your dinner. We were punished for not eating, and Teresa was forced to carry a plastic container with her for a week— Sister Psycho thought it was a good solution. I wonder if she ever saw the movie *Oliver Twist*?

Watching my sisters being abused by the nuns was really tough, almost harder than managing my own abuse. Teresa

had exchanged letters with another boarder and each letter was signed off with 'X' for kisses, as girls do. The letters were found by Sister Psycho. With her spirit of perversion, she counted up the number of kisses combined in the letters and strapped the girls with a leather belt, delivering one strap for each X (kiss). Now I was getting angry. I think we were all getting angry. Bettina was more proactive in her responses. She pelted a tin of Cool Mints at the head of a student who made me cry, calling out 'Merry Christmas Christine!' as each mint struck the girl's forehead. I wanted to run away, but for the first time we were becoming very protective of each other. I couldn't leave my sisters behind. In the past we had argued, pulled each other's hair, fought like girls, like sisters. Now we were a team. We had arrived as children and were going home as girls. Little did we know this would not be the last time we'd have to look out for one another.

Christmas came and we went home for the school holidays. And we were told that we were not going back to Ballarat; Mum had had her rest. No doubt she saw how traumatised we were. Apart from coming to terms with being away from family, we had to digest the deranged, abusive and perverted thinking of Sister Psycho. We had lost our innocence and unfortunately had been shown a terrible side of Catholic education that was marked by relentless abuse. This experience impacted on my religious views and on my

innocent faith that had been nurtured through *Epic Theatre*. My mother spent many years trying to repair the damage. She would talk about God all the time and read the bible to us. She gave me a bible when I was twelve. I was so curious about faith that I read it from cover to cover and realised that Sister Psycho was simply evil and had nothing to do with God. She was a fraud, posing as a nun in a convent. She never once taught us about the doctrine of Christianity: love and forgiveness.

Happy to have that chapter of my life behind me, I decided to never look back. I loved being home. I was so relieved to be with my family again that I appreciated everything.

\*

IN 1974 WE started a new school: Sacre Coeur in Glen Iris, Melbourne. The school was founded by the French order of nuns, the Society of the Sacred Heart. I was relieved to learn that it had nothing to do with the order of nuns in Ballarat. It was a happy and positive school, so for a change I was happy and positive. Once again, Mum would pick us up each afternoon. My parents had a Chrysler dealership so Mum would drive a different car from the car yard most days. She would turn up in a range of convertibles and sports cars, dressed like she had just stepped out of Italian *Vogue*:

high heels, hairpieces, sometimes turbans, even a blonde Afro. She always looked fantastic and the world seemed to stop when she arrived. She often wore plush colours like chocolate-browns and navy blues with suede boots, coloured hosiery and nail polish to match.

Business was booming. At twenty-nine, my mum was driving a Rolls Royce and all her children were in private schools. She loved shopping and every Friday night she would take us into the city. We would come home with bags of clothes and excitedly spill them out onto the bed.

As well as being beautiful, my mum was very strong and forward-thinking. She raised us to believe that the world was ours for the taking and we should go out, work hard and get what we wanted without fear. She was a visionary who taught us that we had only ourselves to rely on, that no-one would come to our rescue, that if we wanted something we had to go out and get it. ‘In life you need faith, wisdom and success,’ she’d tell us. These were her guiding principles.

Success was very important. It could only be achieved through hard work and determination. We weren’t allowed to indulge in being emotional, tired or weak. Even when we were sick she would get us out of bed. She didn’t want us to become fragile or frail. She wanted to see strength and resilience at all times. She admired people who were street-smart and down to earth, and she had no time for

snobs, show-ponies or flirts. She strove to raise sensible, intelligent, composed children who would one day become high-achieving adults who looked good. We weren't permitted to wear jeans, sneakers or tracksuits. We wore 'liberty' dresses and imported shoes. Mum's influence no doubt formed the foundation of our love for fashion and our drive to succeed.

Practising what they preached, my parents worked hard in their car business, which they'd named Tina Motors after Bettina. Everyone knew Nick and Anita: the Italian man with the young beautiful wife. Influenced by his Italian heritage, my father also wore suits tailored from the best imported fabrics, custom-made by his own full-time tailor. In all honesty, he probably needed a tailor given he was only five-foot-seven with a belly that one can only develop from a good life. Australia at that time wasn't known for its fashion. In fact, it was four seasons behind European fashion—which I discovered from flicking through Italian *Vogue* and European fashion magazines that my mother imported to the local newsagent.

As a result of Tina Motors' booming success, in 1975 we moved from our big property to a house on the beach in Brighton. It was a stately two-storey home with bay views all around. For the first time, we each had our own bedroom. My mother furnished our house with gilt mirrors, antique

furniture, crystal and Venetian glass chandeliers and plush fabrics from Italy and France. Anything she could find that was gold-leaf embellished she would buy. Huge gold mirrors hung in our bedrooms. We had gold bedheads with silk damask bedspreads and curtains in pale blue and pale pink. Our home felt a bit like the Palace of Versailles, with Louis XV furniture everywhere; it was opulence at its best.

My mother's bathroom was furnished with white carpet and stained-glass windows. She would sit on a large French gold-upholstered footstool in front of a gilt mirror to apply her makeup and blow-wave her hair. She wore beautiful sleepwear: I remember a flowing cobalt-blue crushed velvet silk robe with matching heeled slippers and baby pink negligees with matching robe and slippers. Her nails were always perfectly manicured. I would sit and watch in awe of her beauty. She smelled divine.

I loved living on the beach and spent the whole summer in a bikini, swimming and sunbaking. We made a lot of friends in our street; there were children in every house. At the end of the street was a laneway that lead to the beach. Ours was the corner house opposite the laneway. It was the perfect stretch of footpath for skateboarding and riding bikes. With Abba, the *Grease* soundtrack and the Bee Gees' *Saturday night Fever* playing in the background, we straddled the border between disco and dagsville. We learned to disco

dance and would endlessly practise renditions of 'Mamma Mia', Teresa being Anni while I was Agnetha.

One year, we were thrilled to have an opportunity to wait backstage at an Abba concert. But I mean really far back—like behind the chicken-wire fencing at the back of the concert hall where the band climbed into their limos to be whisked off. I recall a huge crowd behind us waiting for a glimpse of the band. I was there with Teresa, my aunty and two cousins. We were so excited to be in the front row at the back of the stage at the back of the carpark at the back of the chicken wire. As the band members emerged, the crowd pushed forward and Teresa's face was mashed into the chicken wire as she tried to avoid triangular dissection. We all left with chicken-wire indentations from head to toe. It was risky business being an Abba fan, but we loved it. We collected every Abba fan card we could find and accumulated enough bubblegum to last us a lifetime.

\*

WE MOVED SCHOOLS again in 1976 when I was in Grade Five. This time we attended a grammar school a few suburbs away from home. It was my first co-ed experience. I was at school with my sisters and my brother. My two younger cousins, with whom we were very close, also attended the school. They lived with my grandmother, their mother and their

younger brother. My grandfather had passed away earlier that year and my aunty had separated from her husband while we were at boarding school. Her husband was a dishonest man who had done jail time for embezzling money from my parents' business. The two girls were like my little sisters. I was very protective of them, as we had all become of each other over the years. We spent a lot of time together at school and after school at my grandmother's house.

My grandmother didn't speak English, despite being in Australia since 1954. We learned a very old-fashioned way of speaking Italian with her, a blend of dialect and broken English. In fact, we made up our own language, inventing words such as 'supermarketa', 'milkybarro' for milkbar, 'ticketa' for ticket, 'la keka' for the cake, 'undundies' for underwear. She seemed to understand us just as we understood her.

My grandmother was an amazing woman, entirely selfless. She was up early every morning cooking for the family. She never drove a car so walked everywhere and caught public transport. She wore black every day in perpetual mourning for the sons who'd died. She was never counselled and never spoke about losing her boys. She took her loss in her stride, like so many women of her generation who had lost children. The only thing she ever taught me about her loss was that you should never question how someone copes

with grief. She believed that if you asked the question, the universe would come to test you. She remained Italian to her core, steeped in the traditions of the village where she grew up. She practised Italian home remedies, followed her superstitions and cooked copious amounts of food every day. She was the ultimate Italian grandmother. She never missed out on anything to do with her grandchildren or great-grandchildren. It was clear to me that you can take a woman out of a country but you can't take the country out of a woman.

Teresa and I were probably the closest growing up and spent a lot of time together. We were the middle children so we never got the attention of the eldest or youngest child. Being one year, one month and one week apart, we were also the closest in age. In 1976 we were in a composite Grade Five–Grade Six class. Teresa was much more disorganised at school than I was. I kept all my pencils in a pencil case, which was named, all my books were covered in contact plastic and I strived to be the model student. Teresa was too arty and creative to bother with such things. We would start the school year with the same stationery but within weeks, she'd be borrowing my things because hers were lost or she'd left them at home.

We had the same sense of humour and would laugh for hours about anything—the way Mum pronounced a word,

a piece of fluff on someone's nose. It wasn't even the fluff that was funny; it was noticing the same thing and seeing each other's reaction. We were especially amused when we got into trouble. At times we would react as though we were being tickled, laughing so hard that there was no noise, only a clicking at the back of our throats—which would make us laugh even harder. Whenever I was in trouble with Mum, Teresa would stand behind her while I was being told off and pull faces. She'd push up the tip of her nose and poke out her tongue. The more I laughed the angrier Mum got. We often used humour as a way of coping with stress. We were so close that despite having our own bedrooms I always slept in Teresa's bed. She understood that I was still traumatised by our boarding school experience, plus my bedroom was at the top of the stairs which made me the first port of call for an intruder, or if Satan came to visit.

Bettina was a couple of years ahead of me at school so she always felt like one of the 'big' girls. I would invariably go to her if I needed help or if I was worried about something. She was more reserved than Teresa and very focused on her friends at school. I was the annoying little sister who would tell Mum everything. As an older schoolgirl, she was in a different wing of the building so I didn't see her often, but when I did I was always so excited. She and her friends fascinated me; they were just becoming interested in boys

and were dressing up and painting their nails. Every Friday night they would go to the local disco at the YMCA. Bettina would wear disco pants and high heels, her mouth covered in lipstick—either hot-pink or black. Her cutting-edge fashion was inspired by Olivia Newton-John in *Grease*. I couldn't wait to join her. Turning twelve seemed to be taking forever.

One day Bettina was in an art class next door to my classroom. I saw her through the glass door and started waving enthusiastically. Her friend said, 'I think your sister is waving at you.' Bettina, as cool as she was, gave me a reluctant wave. I went skipping off, thrilled that I had seen her. As I approached the heavy door at the end of the corridor, one of the students let it go just as I was walking through. When the glass door swung back, I raised my hand to stop it, but my arm went through the glass, resulting in a deep cut below my elbow. I called out to Bettina, 'I've cut my arm, I've cut my arm!'

Bettina later told me that she heard, 'They've cut my heart, they've cut my heart!' She didn't come to my aid as she was paralyzed with fear so I ran to her and she looked away, expecting the worst. Relieved that I was holding my elbow rather than my heart, she rushed me down to sickbay and waited until my aunty arrived to take me to the doctor. I ended up having ten stitches and a respite from school for a few days to recover.

Ben, in Grade Three, was in the little school. I would go looking for him in the playground at recess and lunchtime and always found him in the sandpit. He was a sweet little boy who kept us frequently amused with stories he'd been telling since he was in kinder. How Miss MacDougal had drunk ten bottles of milk 'but she didn't die'. I had a warm affection for him as a big sister. We had an interesting connection, often dreaming the same thing or saying the same thing at the same time. He loved tomato sauce sandwiches and bananas and we would sit together after school watching *Gilligan's Island*, *Bewitched* and *I Dream of Jeanie*. We spent hours playing with Lego and had been known to play in the mud as children, then run through the white sheets hanging on the clothesline. I think we swung on a few clotheslines and broke them along the way. He was quieter than my sisters. He probably couldn't get a word in so sat back and observed a lot.

\*

IN 1977 WE moved schools again, this time to the local girls' grammar school which was walking distance from home. This was my fifth school and I was only in Grade Six. I really hoped this was it. I could feel myself becoming more socially awkward. Was this due to my age? Entering adolescence is never easy. I felt the girls to be very cold in their approach.

Was it the grammar influence? Maybe I preferred a Catholic influence, minus the nuns. There was one girl in particular who thought calling me a ‘wog’ was okay. The taunting started in Grade Six and continued into Year Seven. I didn’t care about the word; I was more upset by her level of contempt for me for no reason other than my nationality. I had never been called a ‘wog’ before, nor had I ever been teased. I might have been looking more like a wog as I was growing out of my baby face.

One day I’d had enough of her. We were standing in the bathroom at the washbasin and she started the taunting. I turned around, picked her up, put her in the plastic rubbish bin and rolled her down the stairs. I never said a word. I went back to the classroom, retrieved my schoolbag and walked out of the school to the sound of girls cheering in the background. Evidently, she hadn’t only picked on me. I had been pushed too far and I’d lost my cool.

It was my first experience with a bully. I knew that if such a thing were to ever happen again, I would have to bend a bit longer before I broke. I wasn’t proud of my reaction. I didn’t like that this girl, who was irrelevant, had affected me to the point of making me snap. I promised myself that I would never again let an idiot get the better of me.

When I got home I told my mother what had happened. Like a good Italian mother, she thought the girl deserved it.

She probably did deserve a serve of my wrath, but nevertheless, I was embarrassed. I had become a bully like she was and there was nothing about her that I wanted to emulate. Then and there, I decided that I would never let anyone dictate my standard of behaviour. I was going to be me, and if someone didn't like it, it was his or her problem.

At school the following day, suddenly I was very popular. I was a tough girl who had earned a lot of respect, and no-one ever picked on me again. I didn't have to say much, the girls just knew what I was capable of. I became the go-to girl if anyone was being bullied. All I had to do was walk into a situation and it was immediately diffused. I was completely intolerant of bullying and would make bullies apologise for their behavior. Although I was only in Year Seven, my calling in life was already beckoning. Despite my plan to study medicine, I was destined to defend the underdog.

Things were not great at home. My parents had been arguing a lot and were having financial difficulties. They say that when money goes out the door, love flies out the window. The recession of the 1970s was affecting businesses across Australia and we were feeling it too.

We spent more and more time at my grandmother's, sometimes staying there overnight and on weekends. It was an escape from the arguments. Despite living in the beautiful surroundings of our home, life was becoming less beautiful.

After fifteen years of marriage, my parents decided to separate. I was thirteen years old. It felt like the world was caving in.

\*

DAD MOVED OUT for the first time in January 1978, taking only a small colour television with him. From memory, my parents were still working together in their Chrysler dealership. A staff member alerted my mother to a woman who was spending a lot of time with my father. My mother found out where this woman lived and went with my aunty to visit her. They knocked at the door but no-one was home. Peering through a gap in the front window, they got a glimpse of the front room and noticed the colour television; Dad had been caught out. Anxiously, they waited in the bushes for someone to come home. Sure enough, there Dad was, driving up the street and parking in front of the western suburbs flat. Mum jumped out of the bushes and ran towards him. In a panic, he took off.

Ignorant of the goings-on at her home, the woman turned up with her young daughter. Mum confronted her about my father, and it was on. The woman attacked my mother and my aunty had to come to her aid. They arrived home with scratches and cuts and with a big story to tell my grandmother who had been babysitting us during

the fiasco. They didn't appear to be at all concerned that we could hear everything that had happened. Shielding us kids from the perils of life was never a priority for my parents. Our mother wanted us to be aware of the ways of the world.

My father denied having an affair. My mother didn't believe him but, like a lot of women who discover their partner's infidelity, she weighed up the loss of the family unit and the impact of separation on her children. My mother had worked so hard to give us a beautiful life; she wasn't going to let another woman interfere with that.

Although she did not protect us from the world and people's behaviour, my mother was very vigilant of our safety. We were not allowed to go out the front gate on our own, sleep at friends' houses, and school camps were only reluctantly permitted later in school life. She wanted us to be streetwise and, as a good Italian mother, thought fear and the occasional dose of superstition were an effective deterrent. My father was the protector; she wasn't going to relinquish that in a hurry.

I became confused about my parents' marriage. My father's betrayal had warned me to never trust others. My mother had grown up in the 1950s and was hardwired to believe that a woman is defined by her husband. According to this mindset, a woman is nothing without a man; she's

a spinster—in other words, a failure. But my mother was simultaneously influenced by the 1960s generation of free love and women's rights, so she was not prepared to put up with anything that impinged on those rights. How could she ever be happy? She was nothing without a man but she could never trust the very thing that defined her.

I pondered this dilemma for a long time, wondering how I could reconcile this apparent contradiction and eventually find the man of my dreams. Ultimately, I decided it was easier to never allow a man to define me. This meant I should not be financially dependent. I would have to run my own race. It was a defining moment for me. I started to think about how I would achieve this independence. Eventually I realised that the solution was to pursue a career that would make me financially self-sufficient. I became very focused on my schoolwork, believing this to be my ticket to happiness and success.

My parents reconciled for a short time. Mum was trying to negotiate with the finance company to trade out of debt. They took out a second mortgage on the house to finance the business. Despite their efforts, Chrysler had suffered a global loss from the oil crisis in the late 1970s and, as America plunged into recession, the car industry fell into depression. My parents couldn't get stock to sell from overseas and had to close down Tina Motors.

Eventually Dad moved out again. I learned that it is very difficult to recover from resentment. Dad went to live in Perth; his cousins were there and worked in the car trade. He went chasing a buck and to start again. I missed him terribly and would speak to him regularly on the phone after school. In his Italian accent, he would tell us that he missed and loved us, saying, ‘I love a-you.’ Then he’d complain about the hot weather. It was the first time he ever wore thongs—not the underwear, but the type you wear on your feet.

After Dad moved out we changed schools again. This time it was mid-year and we turned up in the uniform of our former school as without much notice of our crisis, we hadn’t had time to get new uniforms. It was an interesting experience going to a co-ed high school wearing a private school girls’ uniform; the taunting started quickly and I was called all sorts of names. ‘Hey, did you catch the wrong bus to school?’ This was school number seven and I was in Year Eight. Fortunately, our old uniforms were quickly replaced, although not forgotten.

On the positive side, my two older cousins were at the school, both of them avid Collingwood football supporters and very popular boys. They were hilarious guys with big personalities whom everyone loved—the village idiots, but no-one’s fool. Pat was the older brother. His large stature commanded respect and his sense of humour was infectious;

he was the Jerry Lewis of the family. As a young boy, he'd gather all the cousins and get us to follow him around the backyard chanting, 'The king of the world is Pasquale'—and we believed him. He was a born salesman and a lifesaver at our new school. Word got out that we were his cousins and life was sweet.

As in every school, there were different categories of students. There was a clique of cool kids, a group of daggy students, and loners who would get teased because they had acne or ate bananas for lunch. I often found myself defending anyone who was the victim of teasing. I deliberately befriended the students who were shunned and I did it with the bravado of the younger cousin of the popular boys. No-one challenged me.

At this stage of my life I had started to develop resilience. It became survival of the fittest. Dad was gone and so was our beautiful life. Mum valiantly tried to hold things together, but our regular family gatherings started to fall away and we seemed to be growing apart from our relatives. My mother and her younger sister grew closer and we spent a lot of time with her and her children. She was a strong woman with a loud voice who loved to sing and go to discos. She taught us how to disco dance and we would all get together, including Mum, and dance for hours to blaring music. We would watch Molly Meldrum's *Countdown* on the

ABC every Sunday night and music and dancing became our escape.

Mum starting selling women's clothing from home, assembling most of the designer labels that she could find in Australia. Brighton women flocked to our home to buy and soon the front room was turned into a clothing store. Mum hosted fashion parades and did photo shoots for newspapers with models wearing some of her creations made from coloured silk scarves with gold thread. She eventually moved her wares into a retail store in the local street, naming the shop Anitella which means 'little Anita'. With her great eye for fashion, her store was very successful. We were quickly trained as salesgirls. Mum was excellent at delegating. We had grown up with her list of chores, from washing and ironing, to doing the dishes, sweeping the floors, dusting, cleaning mirrors, cooking and being at her beck and call for anything she couldn't reach. We were expected to step up to the mark at all times. If we didn't do it properly, she would stand over us, pointing, until we got it right.

Eventually we had to sell the house. Dad wasn't having much success in Perth and the mortgage, which was security on the business, had been called in soon after the business closed. Every time the house was open for inspection we would clean frantically in an effort to achieve the best

possible price. My aunty and her three children would come over to help.

One day the agent arrived a bit early for an open for inspection. When the front doorbell rang, we all ran out the back door, my aunty still holding the vacuum cleaner. We hadn't worked out where we were going and it was raining, so we all piled into her car in the driveway—seven children, one adult and a vacuum cleaner. The car started to steam up, which concealed us from the passers-by who were coming to inspect. In fact, my aunty, who was always a bit mad, told us to breathe heavily onto the glass to create more fog so we couldn't be seen. I still laugh at the memory of us squashed into a car, potential buyers seeing us breathing heavily at the windows.

The house was purchased by one of our neighbours. His wife and Mum were best friends and Teresa and I had become best friends with their two daughters. They had an older brother who was extremely good-looking; he was a surfer with long blond hair and drove a kombi van. Through him we discovered the world of surfer culture. He listened to Pink Floyd, Tubular Bells and a lot of music from Virgin records.

We started to invest in our own music collection. We'd go to the local record shop and buy vinyl albums. We were trying to be cool, collecting any album that was charting well. We also tried to buy albums that were less known and

part of the surf culture. Unfortunately, we couldn't always remember the names of the bands so we'd go home with a Deep Purple album instead of Pink Floyd. We knew it was a colour; we just couldn't remember which one!

We also got our first look at German pornography. Although it was soft pornography, like *Playboy* magazine, I was amused that one of the girls became fascinated by a photo of a naked man when she discovered that a man's testicles are not anatomically placed above his penis.

Our neighbours were a German family who had done exceptionally well in their export business of meat supplies and abattoirs. The father drove a gold Mercedes Benz and the wife drove a matching one in silver. They had a grand backyard with a swimming pool and built-in trampoline. Beside the pool was their pool house/cabana where they would often throw parties and light up the garden with open-flame totem poles. We learned all about German cuisine, apple strudel and goulash. They had three Corgis and a Rottweiler named Prince, all fed eye-fillet and morbidly overweight. The Corgis would sleep on the kitchen chairs and snore loudly.

In 1979 we moved into another house in Brighton, around the corner from my grandmother's house. It was a large old two-storey home with the internal staircase boarded up and crammed with furniture from our larger home. Other people

lived upstairs. The house had not been renovated since it was built in the 1940s. Strangely, a cupboard in one of the rooms still contained old photos belonging to past residents. That room still seemed to house those residents, and there was always a cold swell of air in there. We refused to sleep in that room; instead, the four of us slept in one room and Mum slept in the front sun-drenched bedroom. It was a terrible, spooky house with lots of noises, but we drowned out the creepy ambience by playing music and watching television. We would dance all weekend and after school.

Our public high school education was short-lived. Mum couldn't cope with the change in our disposition, our language, our smoking, our focus on boys and the fact that the schoolteachers were not at all interested in anything she had to say. So, almost predictably, we started at another school, the local Catholic girls' school. The nuns at Star of the Sea College were from the order of Presentation nuns so I was hoping they'd be different. I was still in Year Eight, and at a new school wearing my former uniform. Dear Lord, when was this going to end?

Sure enough, the taunting began again, 'Did you catch the wrong bus to school...?' By this stage I was so over it, I just ignored the girls and stayed focused on going to class. It was very different from my last school experience where I had said 'sorry' that many times on my first

day that the girl sitting next to me eventually told me to stop apologising.

As I sat in my Year Eight class, for the first time in a long time I felt calm and at peace. My class teacher, Miss Godfrey, had a gentle approach and didn't push the students around. She gave us the time we needed to complete the work at hand. I felt very stable and comfortable in her class and I hoped that I was there to stay. I started excelling in my studies, putting in a tremendous effort to please her. I was so thrilled to be given an A+ for a Christmas project that I have kept the assignment to this day.

A few months after we sold our home, our German neighbour who'd bought it offered it back to us for rental. We were thrilled and moved back in. Unfortunately, the move was short-lived as our neighbour became embroiled in a meat scandal that ultimately closed his business and saw him flee to Germany to avoid a jail sentence. He had been selling kangaroo meat, passing it off as beef. Sadly, he took off with his wife's best friend and his children never saw him again. I wasn't surprised that he'd run off like that; he had often made advances at my mother who was a loyal friend to his wife.

Mum sold off most of her beautiful Louis furniture. Our next home was a two-storey house around the corner with a swimming pool. We were okay with the move but we loved

our old house and I was very sad to leave. I loved living there and vowed to work hard when I grew up so that I could move back there one day.

Mum was still selling clothing but had relocated the business back home. One weekend she decided that we would get up at four o'clock in the morning to set up a stall at a country market to try to sell off the balance of her stock. Reluctantly, we agreed to go with her. She always made us feel like we had a choice, even though we knew that saying no was not an option.

We arrived at our destination and unpacked the car. As we waited for some customers to turn up, I decided to take a look around this market full of bric-a-brac. In my travels I came across a pet store. There were kittens, puppies and rabbits in cages. I walked straight past the rabbits—wasn't going there again—and over to the puppies. Wiggly fur bodies jumped and yapped excitedly at anyone who passed by; and then I saw her: a little golden Beagle cross Cocker Spaniel puppy asleep at the bottom of the pile, a white diamond marking on her forehead. She was covered in dog piddle and the faeces of her sibling pups; I fell instantly in love and wanted to rescue her from the bottom of the pile. I picked her up and hugged her. Gently, she licked my chin and then yawned, her puppy breath in my face. She was sixty dollars and I was determined to keep her.

I ran back to my mother at the stall and excitedly told her about the gorgeous puppy. Dragging Mum to the pet store, I lifted the puppy out of the cage and hugged her to show the mutual love. I think Mum realised that she wouldn't manage to prise the puppy away from me so she paid for her and I walked out of the pet stall with my new best friend. All the money Mum had made that day went towards the purchase.

Teresa and Ben were thrilled. They loved her. Bettina was a bit indifferent, never a dog lover. We went home broke with another mouth to feed but deeply satisfied that we'd rescued a puppy in need. On the way home we decided to call her Honey, given her colour and that she was so sweet, a little honey.

\*

IN 1980 OUR financial situation deteriorated. When our lease was up we had to move again. Our new home was close by—an old, olive-green, federation-style home with ugly chocolate-brown carpet and linoleum kitchen floors. It only had three bedrooms so Teresa and I had to share. The house was nestled behind a chemist on the corner of a main road opposite the beach. It had a wooden return verandah at the front with a high wooden fence and front gate. We loved that it was across the road from the beach, so the location made

up for the ugliness. All our friends lived close by. We were growing up and our friends started driving cars.

I wanted to help Mum financially, so that Christmas, when I was fourteen, I got a job during the school holidays at the local dog-wash salon. The dogs were so cute when they were wet. They loved a good scrub, and having their ears tickled always made them shake off the excess water, which regularly showered me in the spray. The tough dogs were the cutest. Despite being aggressive towards other staff members, they always seemed to be obedient with me. I would make strong eye contact and they'd immediately retreat.

I wanted Christmas morning to be fun so I spent every cent I earned on Christmas presents for my family. We put up the Christmas tree that was still decorated with ornaments from our childhood. Mum was touched by my effort. By Christmas morning I had managed to fill the area under the tree with gifts. We spent Christmas Day at my grandmother's, celebrating with all my cousins. We were still adjusting to Dad being gone. It's amazing how the absence of one person can have such an impact. The world felt different without him.

We spent that summer on the beach with Honey, the same beach we'd played on when we were living with Dad. I felt at home there and loved that we were living near our old house.

Bettina was in her last year at school and Teresa was contemplating leaving school while I remained focused on achieving high enough grades to study medicine. Mum was working hard to look after us. Dad hadn't helped her out financially for a long time. He had come back from Perth and set up another car yard with his brother. He had a new partner and it looked like marriage was on the cards. He'd moved in with the woman and her daughter and he was making a fresh start.

After my parents separated they never spoke again. Despite the distance between my parents, I remained very fond of my father and always looked forward to seeing him. He was fun to be around, invariably loving and affectionate. Every Sunday he'd pick us up and take us to lunch at the local pizza parlor. To me it seemed that his lack of help for Mum was because he was trying to get back on his feet. He had suffered the same loss after the marriage breakdown as my mother, although he didn't have four children that he had to clothe and feed.

I remember visiting him at his apartment when he lived alone. He seemed sad and lost. He once told me that some weekends he would go home from work and not talk to anyone until he went back to work on Monday. I felt disturbed that he was lonely and would often call him during the week and on weekends to say hi. I was relieved when

he eventually found a partner; I never wanted him to be lonely again.

Mum had taught us that no-one is going to rescue you; you can only rely on yourself. In her determined way, she found an empty shop-front around the corner from home and opened another clothing store. It was both disappointing and inspiring to see my mother practise what she preached. Disappointing in that she was in such a difficult position; yet inspiring in that she took control of her situation. It was a hippie-type store across the road from the beach. We took it in turns working there after school and on weekends. Mum still had a good eye for fashion and the shop was successful. We had sold clothes before, so we knew what to do.

I was now in Year Ten; I had managed to stay at Star of the Sea. It was the first time in my school education that I had been at a school for longer than a year. Mum—who seemed to have got lost in all the stress of getting divorced, adjusting to being a single mother, moving house and moving schools—was finding herself again. She was only in her early thirties and had developed a strong social network. She went out frequently and hosted dinner parties with friends. We were still friends with our German neighbours so would go with them to the German club for lunch. One weekend we had photos taken by the in-house photographer who presented them to us in cardboard frames. We took the

photos home and placed them on the mantelpiece in the living room.

Mum had also started socialising with my cousin Mara who was studying law. She had moved out of home with her boyfriend who was also studying law. One afternoon they came over to our house with a friend. Mum wasn't home so Ben let them in and they waited for Mum to get back. While they were waiting, they noticed the photos on the mantelpiece. The uni friend pointed at the photo of Mum and enquired who it was. 'That's my mum,' said Ben. The friend challenged Ben saying, 'No, that's not your mum, she looks too young.'

I don't know when my mother met the uni friend or how that meeting went; all I know is that she married him the following year and is still married to him. Needless to say, her decision to marry him created some chaos. He wasn't about to move in with four teenage children so in order to plan a life together she decided to close the shop and move out of our home. I was in Year Eleven and very suddenly had to make some serious decisions about what to do next.