

'Why can't more people write like this?' – *The Age*

KIM KELLY

Wild Chicory



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 **brio**
BOOKS

GOOD WHITE BREAD

The good white bread comes in tubes, from town. Pipe loaves, they're called. My grandmother carefully slices down the faint pipe lines in the circle crust with her feather knife. The handle of the knife is the colour of a dog bone, and the feathers are steel teeth – they will shred your fingers, if you're not careful. The house is quiet downstairs; it's just me and Grandma here, up in her flat, in her kitchen.

'How do they get the bread out of the pipe?' I ask her. I'm wondering at the lines in the crust: they bump along the loaf like the pipe might be made out of corrugated iron – tiny corrugated iron, though. I can't work it out. 'Wouldn't it get stuck?'

'Don't addle me,' she says, slicing, slicing. Her hips sway at the kitchen bench, her elbow sawing, sawing. Every slice is exactly the same size; I can't imagine ever being able to do that.

She's making toast, for lunch. She always has two slices, which she butters and then squishes a whole banana between with the back of a fork, but she doesn't usually have the pipe loaf bread, the good white bread, just for this sort of everyday lunch if it's just us, and she's up to slice number eight now. I don't think we're expecting anyone to come round today. Maybe she's hungry. But I can't imagine that, either: she never eats more than what she calls an 'elegant sufficiency'. Mum says that just means she doesn't want to get fat. Mum always teases Grandma for being so vain, for being so slim and dyeing her hair. 'There's nothing wrong with taking care of your appearance,' Grandma would always laugh back. She is beautiful, my grandmother: she piles up her red curls so that squiggly tendrils frame her face and make her eyes bluer than blue, and she makes all her own clothes – she makes all of mine, too. She's always the most fashionable lady at mass. Today, she's wearing her lolly-pink skirt with the white stitching, and her pink-and-white-striped blouse. Normally, she giggles a lot, even at mass. It's the only time you can really see her wrinkles, when she giggles at something silly – especially when it's at something Father Jovanovic has said, but Mum says that's just because he's too handsome. Grandma's

not even smiling now, though. She's very sad at the moment, so I'm not going to addle her. I'm trying to be quiet.

Granddad's never coming home again, that's why she's so sad. He had a stroke three Tuesdays ago, on his way home from work. He didn't have to go to work – he's retired. He only goes in to help the new man make sense of all the orders when it's busy. They work in a huge refrigerator, making sure that all the thousands of bottles of flavoured milk and cartons of yoghurt get on the trucks and into the shops and all get paid for. Well, Granddad used to, anyway. He used to bring home strawberry milk and apricot yoghurt – my favourites. That's not going to happen anymore.

I sleep in the big bed with Grandma now to keep Granddad's side from getting cold. No-one asked me to; I just do. I don't want her to read in bed alone. She reads doctor-and-nurse romance novels from the library, 'to give her brain a rest,' she says; and I read *Nancy Drew* detective mysteries – I'm collecting them. I love the name Nancy, it's so pretty. My name is Brigid, and I don't always like it. Bridge. Bridgety. Brigid. It's an old-fashioned name. 'A big name for a little girl,' Mum always says. It's a name I have to live up to. It's my grandmother's

confirmation name, and my great-grandmother's Christian name, apart from being Saint Brigid's name in the first place. Brigid stands for being kind to the poor, healing sores, and, most importantly, being good at making cakes. I'm much more expert at licking the bowl clean – that's the fault of my middle name, Danielle, Grandma says.

I wish I could make her laugh right now.

I can't imagine how much she is missing Granddad. I miss him. I miss the rough way he rubbed my hair with the towel after Grandma washed it on Saturday afternoons. 'You'll rub her scalp off her head one day,' she would tell him from the kitchen. I would say, 'Ouch!' But I didn't mean it. I loved the way my head would bobble about in his big, rough hands, cigarette in the corner of his mouth, ash falling off the end and onto the carpet. Grandma says it's good for keeping the moths away – cigarette ash on the carpet. Mum says cigarettes killed Granddad. I heard her whispering it to Dad in the bathroom downstairs, when she went in there to have a cry.

I look down at the carpet now, into the orange-and-brown swirls under the chair I'm sitting on. It's Granddad's usual chair. He would sit here, on this side of the kitchen table, where there's lounge-room

carpet on the floor, reading the newspaper, smoking his cigarette. I wonder how much cigarette ash is in there, in this bit of carpet. I look right under the table: there's not a speck of dust in the tiny lines that go along the strip of golden metal that divides off the lounge-room-carpet side from the kitchen-vinyl-tiles side. It's one long room up here in Grandma's flat, a lounge room with a kitchen at one end, where the stove and the sink and the cupboards are – she designed it all this way herself. When I sit up straight in the chair again, a line of sunlight is going across my knees, coming through the open slits in the blinds behind me. I swing my legs out from under the chair. My legs are skinny and brown; bruised and spotted with mosquito bites.

It's hot. I should go and play outside in the shade of the house, maybe see who's home over the road, see if Sharon is back from the shops yet, but I don't want to leave Grandma alone, not now while she's being so strange about the toast. It's school holidays, luckily, so I can be here at home with her. I don't normally like school holidays that much. It's so boring, especially the long summer holidays. It's too hot to think properly. But I'm glad it's holidays this time. Shane and Tim, my brothers, are at Aunty Jeannie and Uncle Vic's

in Campbelltown, on the farm, probably playing cricket with our cousins there, Matt and Jason. I'm glad they're not here – they're too loud, always smashing around inside or outside. The yard is too small to get away from them, and they just get bigger and teenage-stinkier every day. Anyone would think there were ten of them, not two. I never want to go to high school, where there would be more than a hundred of them.

Over my shoulder, through the blinds, I look out past the back fence and across the iron rooftops all the way to town. We live up on the hill, in Marrickville, so we can see right into Sydney. Australia Square is round, a pipe loaf standing up out of the ground, with its corrugated bumps gone all wobbly in the heat – the whole city looks like it's melting. It's 1976, January something. Wednesday. Mr Whitlam made a sticky mess of things before Christmas and he's not Prime Minister anymore – he got the sack. Dad told Mum maybe that's what made Granddad have such a bad stroke.

'Oh you stupid—' Grandma's suddenly rousing at the sink. I turn back around and see the smoke curling up from the toaster. She's burnt the first lot of toast, and now she's grabbing it out to scrape off the charcoal into the sink with the flat back of the

feather knife. She's angry as she does it: scraping, scraping. Scraping off the black.

'No, I am not wearing black,' is what she said on the morning of Granddad's funeral. She was angry then, much more angry. She said to the crucifix on the wall above the bed: 'Steven would never approve of my wearing black in any circumstance – we go our own way, always have, always will.' She didn't know I was watching as she prayed there on her knees at the end of the bed that morning; she was having an argument with God, it sounded like. I don't think she saw me at all for a couple of days. She probably didn't look at God, either. I wasn't allowed to go with her to the funeral, but I wish I could have. We always sit together at mass.

I wish I could make her happy again. Happy in her eyes, like the way she used to look at Granddad. We were all so happy at Christmas, just when the holidays started – Grandma bought Granddad some smart new handkerchiefs, and he really loved them even though they're only handkerchiefs. That was only five days before – it just doesn't seem fair.

'I don't mind the burnt ones,' I tell her now in a rush, and it's true, I like the burnt ones best – I like them with vegemite and no butter, so that Mum says I'm too fussy and Grandma says it's not being

too fussy to know what you want. ‘Save them for me. Please.’

I don’t know if she heard me, though. She just stands there at the sink, staring at the wall, like she’s looking for something in the daisy tiles there. She’s looking for Granddad – I might be only nine years old, but I know that. I’m looking for him, too.

I’m looking for something to make Grandma turn around to see me. Something not silly. Something to take us away, somewhere else, far away. I know . . .

‘Tell me the story about the little boy and the fire,’ I ask her, and if she tells me to be quiet it doesn’t matter. ‘Tell me about little Pete, tell me the fire tale,’ I ask her again, and I do want to hear the story. I’ve heard it ten times, probably, the fire tale. Fire tail: it makes me think of a dragon’s tail right now, swirling orange and brown through the air, over the rooftops, swirling us backwards in time, to the days when she was a girl. A little girl called Nell. ‘Tell me about when you were small. Please, Grandma?’

But still she doesn’t say anything. She puts the kettle on, and then she lights her cigarette. I think maybe I should make lunch for Grandma, rather than the other way round, but before I go to get

up off the chair to do that, she turns to me, and she smiles. It's sad, but it's a smile, and I smile back at her.

ALSO BY KIM KELLY

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'It is uplifting to know that there are people who can write like this, with clarity, a bit of devilment and a hint of a smile.'

- *The Age*

An immigrant journey from Ireland to Australia in the early 1900s, along threads of love, family, war and peace, *Wild Chicory* is a slice of ordinary life rich in history, folklore and fairy tale. And it's a portrait of the precious relationship between a granddaughter, Brigid, and her grandmother, Nell.

From the windswept, emerald coast of County Kerry, to the slums of Sydney's Surry Hills; and from the bitter sectarian violence of Ulster, to the tranquillity of rural New South Wales, Brigid weaves her grandmother's tales into a small but beautiful epic of romance and tragedy, of laughter and the cold reality of loss. It's Nell's tales, tall and true, that spur Brigid to write her own, too.

Ultimately, here is a story of finding your feet in a new land – be that a new country, or a new emotional space – and the wonderful trove of narrative each of us carries with us wherever we might go.

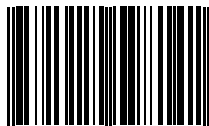
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